



From the Mouths of Sirens

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Category: Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: Win the Tournament. Kill the Prince. Take the Crown.

Since childhood, Princess Saoirse has trained for the sole purpose of being chosen for the Tournament, a gladiator-style competition in which four enemy nations compete for the right to rule. An angel-like people known as the Aura have won the Tournament for a century, enacting exploitative treaties and ruling the continent with a merciless grip. If Saoirse survives the three infamous trials, she will win the Crown of Revelore and overthrow the nation responsible for her mother's death. But when Saoirse is denied entry into the Tournament by the Mer king, she makes a bargain with an imprisoned sea witch. In exchange for entrance into the competition, Saoirse agrees to kill the Auran prince and bring back the witch's stolen dagger. But while fighting for her life in the arena, the last thing Saoirse expects to do is fall for her greatest enemy, the arrogant Prince Rook. When Rook and Saoirse uncover the sinister secrets of their ancestors, they realize the animosity between their people is rooted in long-forgotten lore. What once was a competition for the Crown evolves into a perilous ancient game in which Saoirse and Rook are both pawns. As twisted truths are revealed and myths become real, Saoirse must decide if she should kill the man she is falling for and avenge her people, or spare his life and face the wrath of the Titans.

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SAOIRSE

The abyss was as dark as spilled ink, pressed into the seafloor like the footprint of a Titan. Saoirse leaned over the opening of the trench, watching as a foreboding stream of bubbles drifted out of the chasm and into the clear sea above. Her dark curls rose around her face, floating upward as she looked over the rim. The water was ice cold, nothing like the sun-warmed waves of Kellam Keep.

Saoirse readied herself, adrenaline humming through her body. High above, the sun was a distant speck of light, almost blotted out by the dark waves bearing down on her. She reached into her satchel and pulled out a crumpled piece of parchment. She smoothed out the creases and scanned the faded words:

As the moon, I shine full and round; my mysteries of creation abound. I am impenetrable as stone and ancient as titan's bone. In a deathless cave I hide, biding my time for the right eyes.

This had to be it.

Saoirse shoved the parchment back into her satchel and looked over the edge. It was now or never. She flexed her webbed toes, preparing to descend into darkness. With a deep breath, she pushed herself over the edge of the trench, cool water rippling over her as she dove. She swam along the ridge of the pit, fighting the fear that crawled up her skin and surged through her blood. As she descended, the walls of the abyss shuddered with the rhythm of the sleeping beast within. Saoirse slowed her dive and

hid herself in a patch of tall sea grass, praying that she couldn't be seen. In the darkness, she could just make out the hulking form of the sea dragon at the bottom of the pit.

Curled up at the bottom of the trench lay the infamous Kaja, more massive than Saoirse had dared to imagine. Huge fins jutted out around the beast's head like a crown and menacing spikes protruded from her giant skull in a lethal cascade. Kaja's colossal tail was wrapped around her body, twitching slightly in sleep. The sea dragon's body glimmered as Saoirse drifted closer, her deep scars and chipped scales looming in the shadows. Saoirse eyed the enormous teeth that stuck out from Kaja's mouth, knowing that each ivory spike was sharper than any blade. She tore her gaze away from the beast and narrowed her eyes at the treasure below.

Just as she predicted, the dragon had collected a trove of incalculable wealth. Thousands of gems and pieces of gold lay beneath Kaja, collected over hundreds of years. The gleaming jewels shone in the murky light, whispering of long-forgotten histories. The items had belonged to kings and royalty, scavenged from shipwrecks over centuries. The piles of wealth shifted as the sleeping dragon turned, softly tinkling as stray coins rolled against the floor.

Saoirse slipped from her hiding spot and ventured closer to Kaja's treasure. She leveled herself with the dragon and stilled, waiting to see if she would wake. But the dragon's eyes remained tightly shut, her scaly face still soft with sleep.

Saoirse sank to the floor carefully and did her best to leave the piles of jewels untouched. Her heart thundered in her chest. Up close, she could see the dragon's numerous scars, evidence of her countless battles with other beasts of the ocean. But there was a reason why Kaja had survived all these years. She was one of the most lethal dragons to ever dwell within the waters of the Maeral Sea. To steal from Kaja was a death wish.

She scanned the treasure mounds, eyes searching for the greatest prize of them all: a Málmr pearl. She had heard whispers that one was hidden in the mire of the trench. If her suspicions were correct, the riddle confirmed that the dragon had one in her possession. If any beast might possess the rare pearl, it would be Kaja. Only opening once every six hundred years, the tooth of a sea dragon was the only thing sharp enough to penetrate the immortal shells of the Málmr. She searched with an urgent gaze, eyes roving over blood-red rubies, glittering moonstones, and golden candelabras as if they were mere trinkets.

Saoirse's heart stopped.

Hidden under a rusted old mirror, a milky white pearl shone in the light. As she swam over to it, her heart hammered louder in her ears. Saoirse lifted the gold mirror with a feather-light touch and set it aside as silently as she could. Gleaming up at her sat a Málmr pearl, perfectly smooth and ethereal in the mirk and mire of Kaja's Trench. Her hand trembled as she reached down to pick up the treasure, her fingers shaking with anticipation. She gingerly held the Málmr pearl in her hand, turning it over in her palm. A satisfied smile tugged at her lips. It seemed she had accurately interpreted the riddle.

Saoirse looked up at the distant speck of sunlight above, anxious to leave the abyss and never return. But something made her look back down at the piles of wealth one last time. Like a whisper against her skin, she felt a pull she couldn't deny. Unable to resist its call, Saoirse sifted through the treasure with a hunger she didn't understand, searching for something nameless.

The breath left her lungs. Laying amongst the glimmering precious gemstones was a second Málmr pearl, this one as black as obsidian. Saoirse was sure that her eyes betrayed her. But the dark pearl was there, shining with otherworldly light. Even in the court of King Angwin, a dark Málmr pearl couldn't be found among his riches. She picked up the pearl and held it to the light, her mouth going dry.

Saoirse was abruptly thrown across the chasm, slamming into the opposite wall. A deafening roar filled the chamber and the piles of treasure trembled as Kaja rose from her nest. The hulking outline of Kaja unfurling in the deep was enough to make her blood run ice cold. The dragon's piercing yellow eyes possessed a rage that promised death. Saoirse pushed herself up from the rocks and narrowly missed the massive claws that swung at her. Kaja's outraged roars echoed through the chasm as she snapped at Saoirse's feet, her teeth mere inches from splitting her bones in half. Clutching the dark pearl tightly, she swam faster than she had in all her life.

She was flung to the side again as Kaja's tail struck her, sending her tumbling through the darkness. Momentarily blinded, she tried to regain her bearings as blood pooled in her mouth. Kaja lunged, her jaws widening with a vengeful snarl. She pushed away at the last minute, hot pain surging through her arm as one of Kaja's razor-sharp claws sliced through her shoulder. She swiped at Kaja with her sword, but the metal slid off of the dragon's tough scales as easily as water against rock.

Saoirse was painfully aware that to outswim the enraged beast using her own strength was impossible. So she lifted her hands and desperately called the waves to obedience, reaching for the tendrils of power that lurked in her veins. The sea answered her summons, rising up from the chasm and pulling her through the abyss in a swell of living seawater. But even as the sea lifted her in a powerful, churning grasp, Kaja was right at her heels, snapping and roaring with fury. Saoirse urged the waves to rise faster, terror coursing through her blood. As if the sea sensed her distress, it pushed her toward the opening of the cave in an urgent rush of swirling waves. The ocean launched her from Kaja's Trench just as the dragon lunged again.

Loose rock exploded around Saoirse as she was launched from the trench. Kaja burst through the opening with a roar that sent ripples through the sea. Saoirse summoned another wave and sent it hurtling toward the dragon with all of her strength. The water swelled against the beast and shoved Kaja back down into the cave. Even with Kaja's great strength, the weight of the ocean was more than the dragon could bear.

Saoirse brought her hands together and sent another ripple toward the seafloor, energy now humming through her body as the sea obeyed her commands. The force of the blast shattered the ocean floor, splitting rock and coral apart with violent shudders. Kaja roared as the stones crushed her, sealing her within the dark abyss below. The weight of the Maeral Sea bore down on the dragon, holding the rocks in place as she raged against them.

And then all went still.

Saoirse stared at the ocean floor, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She knew the barrier wouldn't hold the beast forever, but it would give her enough time to take refuge within the protective walls of Kellam Keep. Slowly, she opened her palm and grinned. In her hand lay the dark Málmr pearl. Her blood tinged the water pink as it leaked from her arm, but she felt no pain. She began to laugh deliriously, unable to contain herself. She had done it.

A horn abruptly cut through the ocean, pulling Saoirse back to reality. It was a call she would know anywhere. She turned to the regiment of Mer soldiers swimming toward her, bracing herself for the scathing words she knew would come.

“What have you done, Saoirse?” Captain Sune Kresten's voice boomed.

“I retrieved my Token,” Saoirse replied curtly, looking Captain Sune in the eyes without fear. She tucked the dark pearl into her satchel before he had a chance to look at it. He gave her a hard stare for a moment, a shadow of surprise barely concealed behind his piercing eyes.

“Why are you trespassing in Kaja's Trench?” he demanded. “You know that to venture this far from Kellam Keep is forbidden. You know the reports,” he admonished. “You of all people should know not to leave the safety of the city.”

“I have seen no other beasts other than the one now trapped in the Trench,” Saoirse countered, tossing a glance toward the now-sealed abyss below. The sea floor was still settling, clouds of dust and silt floating through the waves. “Besides, if there was a real threat to the Maeral Sea, why would the Elders have scattered the Tokens throughout these waters?” Sune said nothing at that, his frown deepening. She was right, and he knew it. He shifted his gaze to the vast expanse of ocean beyond, as if searching for the destructive beasts that the reports spoke of.

She had heard the rumors of merchant ships going missing, filled with goods from Aurandel to be shipped to the desert nation of Tellusun. The sea had been unruly as of late, and whispers of mysterious creatures from the deep had run rampant through the city. With growing pressure from the nations who relied heavily on maritime trade, King Angwin had been locked away in his study with the Elders for weeks. Saoirse herself had gone out on numerous occasions with her battalion, scouring the sea for the missing merchant ships and the supposed beasts who had destroyed them. But apparently the Elders did not believe such rumors to be of any merit, for they had hidden the Tokens far from Kellam Keep, just as they did every Tournament season.

“We must return to the Keep at once,” Sune finally said, turning back to her. “If I catch you beyond Kellam again, you’ll be suspended from the Torqen for the foreseeable future.”

Her cheeks heated with rage. His condescending tone was enough to send her blood boiling. “I have as much right to enter the tributary as any other Mer,” she retorted, balling her hands into fists. “All potential tributes are required to present a Token of great value, and I chose mine. If I choose to put my own life at risk, then it is my risk to bear. My choices have nothing to do with you.” She swirled away from him with a scowl.

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“Are you hurt?” Sune’s voice called as he swam after her, finally seeming to notice the huge gash in her arm. “How did you manage to survive Kaja? Hel’s teeth, you’re bleeding everywhere.”

“Captain Sune,” Saoirse spat as she spun around. “I am safe. No need to play the part of coddling soldier with me.” She turned to him and glared, her dark curls rising around her in a plume. “You will not stop me from submitting my name into the tributary. No one can.”

Sune tried to argue, but she dove away before he had the chance to scold her further. She summoned a blast of water to push her forward, and a surge of waves obediently swelled around her. The sea whisked her toward the city, leaving Sune and his regiment far behind. Sune’s protesting voice grew distant, his voice quickly replaced by the peaceful, churning silence of the Maeral Sea. Shafts of sunlight cut through the choppy waves, spilling through the shallow waters and warming her skin like a promise.

In the distance, the soft glow of Kellam Keep beckoned to her. Her place in the Revelore Tournament was as good as guaranteed with what she had just managed to pull off. She didn’t know what her father would think of what she’d done. But she wouldn’t see him until nightfall, when the tributary ceremony would begin at the amphitheater. She banished him from her mind, refusing to worry about his response until the time came. She continued swimming toward Kellam, a satisfied smile unfurling on her lips.

She had really done it.

ROOK

Rook wiped the sweat from his brow, pushing away strands of damp hair from his forehead. He lifted his sword once more, facing Eros across the pavilion. He lunged, unfurling his wings as he swung at his opponent from above. Eros blocked his sword and their blades rang out across the sandstone courtyard. Rook altered the angle of his blade, swiping up and knocking the glittering weapon from Eros's hands. Eros's blade clattered unceremoniously on the stone, signalling his defeat. Rook spun away, his wings catching an upward draft of wind. It was a glorious day, the azure sky cloudless and clear.

"That's enough for, now," Eros called from below, grinning up at him. "You've proved your point, princeling."

"I said I would best you," Rook called down to his old friend. "Besides, we should save our energy for tonight."

"Indeed," Eros called up to him, sheathing his sword. "When should I expect you back?" he asked, scanning the expression on Rook's face.

"I'll see you tonight," Rook called down, his wings pumping upward through the brilliant sky. He grinned as the sun warmed his skin and the wind tousled his hair, his heart soaring as high as his body was. His loose tunic billowed in the wind, sending cool whispers of air across his skin.

Rook climbed higher, shooting passed birds and tendrils of pale pink clouds. He closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling of being weightless in the heavens. He breathed in deeply as he held his position in the air, floating above it all without a care in the world. Fresh air filled his lungs, smelling of spring water and lavender. If he

continued to fly higher, he knew it would grow cold, snowflakes soon clinging to his dark lashes and stinging his cheeks. But here, the weather was magnificent and golden.

Rook opened his eyes again and hovered in one place, looking across the vast kingdom unfurling beneath him. His heart swelled with pride as his gaze swept over the stunning city of Coarinth. His eyes roved over the smooth, sloping architecture that proudly shone from the highest mountain in all of Revelore, cut into the cliffs themselves. Several other Aerials flew through the city, dodging buildings and weaving through archways as gracefully as doves. From up here, they were tiny specks that flew in and out of view.

His gaze traveled down the twisting roads of Mt. Thalia that spilled from the city, following the undulating green hills dotted with wildflowers at the mountain's base. He drank in the powerful, churning river that ran down from the mountain, cutting through clusters of trees and rocks like a great serpent. His eyes traced the roads that cut through the craggy cliffs of the mountain, weaving up the bluffs in a dance only known to those who dwelled there.

He left his vantage point, soaring over the rolling hills at the base of the mountain and flying over the great expanse of land that stretched beyond. An endless sweep of woodlands fanned out across Aurandel, carpeting the earth in a sea of green. The roaring Adonis River churned through the woods with white-foamed rapids, flowing down from Mt. Thalia like an the unbound hair of a maiden. The land was barely inhabited down here, mostly home to wildlife and nomads. For the people of the sky, to live on flat earth was nearly unthinkable.

Rook looked down, watching as his shadow passed over the earth in a flash. He spun in the air, twisting through the clouds with a flourish. Years of intense Aerial training had paid off. His body was one with the sky and air, fluid as a leaf on the wind. He didn't think as he flew, simply absorbing the sunlight and crisp breeze that flowed

over his skin like silk.

He caught an incoming breeze, hot and humid. He stilled in midair, detecting hints of salty ocean wind and the brackish tang of sea brine. Distantly, he squinted at the thin coastline at the edge of his kingdom, merely a streak on the horizon. Hatred flared in his chest, his mood souring as he stared at that distant stretch of white sand. He would do anything to be rid of that view. The Sea glared at him, the unending waves of green and blue shifting like a great hungry beast. Where the Aura drifted through the clear skies of Revelore, the Mer swam in the murky depths of the Maeral Sea. Rook turned away from the ugly smear on the horizon, despising the briny air that drifted inland.

Mer, he thought with a smirk. He didn't know why they were still invited to the Revelore Tournament year after year. After the rift that had exploded between their two nations a hundred years ago, his ancestors should have banished them from taking part long ago. Moreover, the Mer were cunning, greedy, and obsessed with shining trinkets. But a part of him was glad they showed their scaly faces on the continent. The Tournament offered Aurandel a chance to solidify its superiority over the Mer in a public display of bloodshed. For that was the legacy the Mer themselves had caused: bloodshed and betrayal. It was a curse they had brought upon themselves a hundred years ago.

And curses were not easily broken.

Rook flew back to Coarinth with a sigh, his wings gliding gracefully over turbulent winds like a ship cutting through unruly waves. This was the first Tournament he'd been chosen to compete in. Alongside Eros and Veila-the most talented soldiers in the Aerial ranks-he would lead the Aura to victory. His people would remain the uncontested rulers of Revelore as they had for the past century.

Rook drifted back to the familiar treacherous mountain paths of Mt. Thalia, soaring

upward to the magnificent heights of the city of his birth. The familiar rise and fall of the sandstone buildings loomed closer as he drew near with each pump of his wings, their brilliant shining domes catching the sunlight like blazing torches. Scattered throughout Coarinth, floating pavilions and gazebos drifted through the clouds, tethered to the earth with glittering gold chains. The wealthiest among the Aura lived in beautiful floating manors, complete with open-air courtyards and breathtaking windows that allowed the wind to blow through the rooms with ease.

The city was especially beautiful during the Tournament season, with ceremonial banners and lanterns hanging on every lamppost and doorstep. Though it was only the second time in his life that he would witness the Revelore Tournament, he still remembered the electric energy that had pulsed through Coarinth during the last one ten years ago. As a child, he had participated in the parade that had woven through the streets of the imperial city, watching with fascination as the three Auran tributes were honored with garlands and jewels. One of the tributes, his older sister, Raven, had only been seventeen at the time. Just as her ancestors before, Raven had been the last tribute standing, thus winning the Crown and leading the Aura to victory.

And now it was his turn to bring Aurandel glory.

He glided back towards his own home at the highest point in the city: the Citadel of Auarandel. Rook descended to a roofless sky bridge between two quarters of the Citadel, his boots gently hitting the bridge. He walked through the corridor, dodging several hanging plants and their curling vines. He tucked his wings against his back and swiftly cut through the corridors, making his way toward Raven's private quarters across the main courtyard.

Climbing up a set of stairs, Rook finally entered the receiving courtyard of the Citadel. Most of the servants were in a frenzy, decorating for the upcoming banquet that would take place in three days' time. The marbled courtyard was glorious in the soft afternoon light, the grand staircase that led up to the castle's enclosed throne

room spilling into the pavilion like a waterfall. Tables were being set up for the foreign ambassadors and their tributes across the courtyard, all furnished according to the traditions of their countries. Set in the darkest corner of the courtyard, where the sun drifted in only minimally, the tables of the Terradrin were tucked away. An overhang of fabrics formed a tent-like covering over the table and further obscured the sun. Knowing that the ground-dwellers' sensitive eyesight would still be adjusting to the world above, Rook himself had ordered that they not be put in direct sunlight. If he was to compete with them for the Revelore Crown, he wanted his rivals to be in peak condition. It wouldn't be fair to compete against people who were practically blind, and it wouldn't be right to refuse them time to properly acclimate themselves to the abrupt change in light. When he bested them in the arena, he wanted a fair fight.

Rook walked swiftly past the tables assigned to the Mer, cringing at the bulky barrels of salt water that sat on the delicate blue tablecloths, seeming completely out of place in the splendor of the courtyard. Like the Terradrin, the Mer also required special provisions for them to adjust to the world above the sea. Their bodies were equipped to breathe seawater, not the air on land. But their lungs could acclimate to the surface if they drank titansblood, an elixir made of mangrove and willowherb that allowed them to oxidize the air. Rook shivered with disgust as he thought about their strangeness, wishing for the thousandth time that the rest of the kingdoms would just cut them off from the continent. A hundred years ago, the Mer had made it clear they were not interested in unity. And when his people tried to make amends and seek reconciliation with Elorshin eight years ago, their negotiations had collapsed in a disastrous assassination plot that killed both his parents.

Rook grimaced at the thought, knowing that keeping their painstakingly arranged peace treaties with the Mer were of the utmost importance, regardless of his feelings or not. The vicious courts of Revelore had made the last century Hel for Aurandel, but at least they had managed to keep things under control through the use of the Tournament. To preserve his kingdom's rule, Rook would silence his complaints of Elorshin and hold the Mer at arm's length, as his ancestors did before him.

Rook strode up the grand staircase two steps at a time. Though it would be faster to fly through the airy Citadel, he had to balance his time between walking and flying in order to maintain his carefully conditioned strength. His boots echoed through the spacious throne room, his footsteps muted by the wind that whispered through the huge floor-to-ceiling windows lining the room. Transparent, gauzy curtains drifted softly in the warm breeze, its woven flecks of gold catching the light. A breathtaking view of the sapphire-blue sky and the brilliant sweep of distant mountaintops swept in through the window.

“Ah,” a voice called from an alcove, “I was just coming to find you.” Raven strode out from a corner of the room, her dark, waist-length hair shifting in the breeze. She was wearing a simple lilac tunic and loose breeches that tapered at the ankles, the traditional style of Auran commoners. She grinned at him, her dimples identical to the ones that graced his own cheeks.

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“I was thinking we should discuss some more trial strategies,” Raven began, her eyes scanning over the various cuts and bruises from his earlier training session with Eros. “You promised to save your strength,” she scolded him. “Eros and Veila know better. No more training sessions.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Rook mocked with a grand flourish. “I do as my Queen commands. But if you’re about to tell me not to fly, your sisterly advice will fall on deaf ears,” he said with a smile, unfurling his pale grey wings for effect.

“After all these years, you seriously think I would get between you and the clouds?” she teased, pinching his cheek. “I know how to pick my fights, little brother. You would never let your feet touch the earth again if you had the choice.”

Raven grew serious, as if remembering why they were meeting in the first place. “Let’s go somewhere private. We need to talk about the Tournament.”

Raven pulled him into a hidden corridor connected to the throne room, heading for the private quarters of the royal family. The passageway snaked into the mountain, sculpted into the rock itself. Although the Citadel looked huge from the outside, the private quarters within Mt. Thalia were even more impressive, tunneling deep into the mountain. The stone corridors were surprisingly bright, lit by golden flames in elaborate sconces. They headed down a familiar staircase, the steps time-worn and smooth after centuries of use. They entered the great common room at the heart of their mountain palace, a roaring fireplace at the center of the room. The enormous chimney curved up the bare stone walls, climbing through the mountain and releasing the smoke through a hatch at its surface. The cavernous room was one of Rook’s favorite places in the Citadel, despite it having minimal views of the sky. Plush

lounge chairs and velvet pillows crowded around the fireplace, and countless shelves of books lined the walls. Rook had spent many hours of his childhood curled up on the thick rug before the hearth, lost in a book and transported to another world. Other than the sky, books were his closest companions.

Raven sat in one of the upholstered mahogany chairs in the firelight, its dark velvet cushions sinking gently as she sat down. Rook took a seat next to her, leaning back in the chair and staring up at the glittering chandelier that hung above them, filled with flickering gold candles. When they were younger, he and Raven would pretend that the little flames were harnessed stars, shimmering in the candelabras above them. He lowered his gaze back to Raven, watching as she anxiously tapped her fingers on the side table.

“Did you see anyone on the way here?” Raven asked, her eyes darting to the shadows in the room.

“You’re scaring me, Rave,” he observed. “Whose ears are we avoiding in our own palace?”

“The Tournament is in three days,” Raven replied, her voice growing somber. “Secrets regarding the upcoming trials are worth more than gold. And harder to come by,” she added, scanning the dark corners of the library with a hawk-like gaze. “Do you have any ideas of what you will be up against in the trials? Any theories will be valuable for your survival.”

“I’ve heard a few rumors, but I doubt any of the whispers hold merit. Not even my charming smile has made the Master of Trials crack,” he added with a smirk.

“Of course not,” Raven replied, a smile cracking her serious exterior for just a moment. “High Elder Korina Petrakou was selected for her stoicism and staunch resolve. She wouldn’t risk the entire outcome of the trials because you flashed her

one of your dimpled grins.”

“Well then besides you, she is the only one who can resist,” he teased in return.

“I don’t think your charm will be much help in the trials,” Raven said with a sigh, twirling a dark strand of hair between her fingers thoughtfully.

“Tell me what will, then,” Rook said, leaning in. “Tell me what you know.”

“Up until today, I’ve heard no rumors of what each trial will require,” Raven answered. “However, I stumbled upon an interesting bolt of fabric in the Master Seamstress’s wards.” She pulled something out of her pocket and presented it to him in the candlelight. In her hand was a scrap of cloth, slightly iridescent in the soft glow. She turned it, and Rook could see the almost imperceptible pattern of a silvery thread.

“Avgi silk,” Rook breathed, watching as his sister held up the scrap to the light. “To collect silk from an Avgi spider must have taken ages,” he mused.

“I have a couple of theories as to why this material might’ve been in the Seamstress’s quarters,” Raven began. “For one, Avgi silk gives off an iridescent glow. I believe the Master Seamstress may have used it to create uniforms that can be seen in the dark.”

“You think one trial may take place at night?” Rook asked, lowering his eyebrows in thought.

“Either at night or underground,” his sister replied. “The most valuable property of Avgi silk is its ability to glow in the dark, and it is primarily harvested in the Terradrin caverns of Natassa.”

“Alright then,” Rook sighed, running a hand through his hair. “So the Terradrin will

likely have an advantage in one of the trials if it is hosted underground.” Thinking of being trapped in the earth with no open sky to flee to felt like his own personal torture.

“It’s just something you might want to think about,” his sister encouraged. “At least you can mentally prepare for it, if not physically.”

“Thank you,” Rook told her genuinely. “Thank you for helping me through all of this. I know it probably hasn’t been your favorite thing to re-expose yourself to the Tournament after all these years.”

“I’m fine,” Raven said quickly, averting her eyes. “It hasn’t been so bad,” she lied. “Most importantly,” she continued, “I would do anything for you. If saving your life and helping Aurandel achieve victory means returning to that time in my life, then it is worth it.”

She looked back at him sincerely, her dark blue eyes filled with concern. “Tell me you’ll win this, Rook. Tell me you’ll show no mercy.”

“I will win,” Rook replied, taking his sister’s scarred hands in his own hands. The rough skin had been burned ten years ago in one of her trials. “I will show no mercy. I will make sure we keep the Revelore Crown.”

Rook gazed over his sister’s shoulder, his eyes catching on the golden object he spoke of. Displayed in a crystal-encrusted glass case was the Revelore Crown, glimmering in the torchlight as if it were alive. Four glittering gems were set against the polished gold, each precious stone wrought from the four corners of Revelore. The Crown was forged thousands of years ago, during the Great Peace. It had once been shared by the rulers of Revelore, a metal symbol of unity and triumph. But when their alliances collapsed into the ravenous, all-consuming fire of war, every nation clambered for ownership. It had been a bloody, vicious struggle. But when the flames

of war finally burned low and the chaos had subsided into burning embers, Aurandel had emerged with the Crown, their enemies vanquished and sentenced to obedience. For that was the ultimate prize of the Tournament: the right to rule over all the nations of the continent. Whoever possessed the Crown possessed Revelore.

“You must win,” Raven said, following his eyes to the Crown that served as the focal point of the room. “You must win for our ancestors’ honor. You must win for our people. You must win for me.”

“I won’t let you down,” Rook said genuinely, standing up from the chair. “I promise.”

Raven stood with him, smoothing out her tunic as she stood. She smiled at him, but not before he caught the faint shadow of fear in her eyes. He was all she had left in the world.

“We should get ready for the parade tonight,” Raven said, turning away from him. “I have at least three-hours of torturous primping and beautifying to endure that I’d like to get over with.” She looked over her shoulder at him, a wry smile on her lips. “Perhaps you’ll see the lovely Flora tonight. Maybe she’ll give you some measure of enjoyment before the Tournament,” his sister teased.

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“Don’t think for a moment that I’ll be sharing any stories of my dallying with Flora with you,” Rook replied with a chuckle. “That’s something I’d like my elder sister not to know about.”

“I’m the Queen,” she quipped back. “I hear and see all. Nothing is hidden from me.” She laughed, tossing her silky, dark hair over her shoulder and leaving the common room.

Rook let the smile fade from his lips as his sister left, pacing over to the hearth. He leaned against the solid wood mantle, staring into the crackling flames. A seed of doubt had begun to wedge itself into his heart. He wasn’t afraid to die for his people, that much was certain. He was, however, afraid to die and leave Raven with no one. He chewed on his lip anxiously, worrying for the first time about the Tournament.

“I will win,” he said decidedly to himself, pushing off of the mantle and crossing the room. He gazed at the ancient Crown on display, shining in the firelight like a beacon of hope.

“I will win.”

3

SAOIRSE

Saoirse approached the outer gates of Kellam, nodding at the guards who were stationed in the towers on either side of the ancient doors. The breathtaking gates were hundreds of years old, built to withstand the might of sea creatures and attacks

from the neighboring Revelorian nations. The carved granite gates were smooth and worn with time, moss and other soft corals growing up the walls. On each side of the massive doors, giant open lanterns hung like stoic guardians, burning with enchanted blue flames that gleamed as if on land. Throughout Kellam, the crackling flames hung in doorways and on street corners, lighting the city with eternal warmth.

Saoirse stopped before the gates, looking up at the dome that rose up from the top of the protective wall. Rising high above the city, the defensive dome stretched out across Kellam and kept out any threat. Intricate shapes were cut out in the dome, casting brilliant patterns of light and shadow onto the city. Below the arched web of granite, buildings unfurled across the city as far as the eye could see, built from vibrant sea glass and glittering stone. In the windows, glowing orbs lit the streets below in a swath of colors that shifted with the waves above. Lush gardens of coral and greenery sprung up from the seafloor and crawled up buildings in vibrant veins, connecting the city like a living beast. Her heart swelled with pride as she looked out upon her home. This was what it was all for. She would've stolen a thousand pearls for her people.

Saoirse swam purposefully through the city, heading toward the training arena of the Torqen, the elite protectors of the sea. The undying flames at every corner cast the city in a stunning blue hue, and the buildings seemed to undulate with reflections of the sun. With the upcoming ceremony only taking place once every ten years, anticipation was palpable in the faces of every person Saoirse passed. Energy pulsed through the streets as the city held its breath, expectation and hope looming around every corner like a tangible force. Garlands of ceremonial flowers lined the streets and banners of Eloshin's crest drifted proudly from rooftops. Though only the wealthiest Mer would be able to attend the Tournament and witness the trials in person, even the lowest-born Mer hoped that this would be the year Elorshin won.

When Saoirse passed through the vibrant coral gates of the Torqen training arena, her heart finally slowed to a normal pace. She swam through the familiar training

grounds with ease, passing by several dueling Mer. She watched as one pair clashed swords, their weapons ringing out through the arena. Another duo fought with tridents, their agile bodies fluid and lithe in the water.

“Where have you been?” a female voice called from one end of the training ground. Saoirse turned to sound, grinning as she faced Aurelia. The Torqen captain stilled when she saw Saoirse’s expression, a frown tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“I don’t like the look on your face,” Aurelia said wryly. “You’re up to something, and by the looks of it, it can’t be good.” Her blonde hair drifted around her face as she moved, pooling around her shoulders in a cloud.

“You won’t believe what I found as my Token,” Saoirse whispered, lowering her voice as other members of the Torqen looked over at them curiously.

“Out with it, then,” Aurelia ordered, her turquoise eyes bright with interest.

“I found my Token in Kaja’s Trench,” Saoirse answered, still barely able to believe the words coming from her own mouth.

“What?” Aurelia breathed, her eyes growing even wider. “You what?”

“I found a Málmr pearl,” Saoirse continued, grinning as shock erupted across Aurelia’s face. “And it’s my ticket into the Revelore Tournament.”

Aurelia blanched. “But the Elders wouldn’t dare hide a Málmr pearl in Kaja’s Trench,” she retorted. “They scattered the Tokens in dangerous places, but that seems extreme even for the Elders.”

Saoirse dug into her satchel, searching for the crumpled pamphlet that the Elders had given out weeks before. Anyone interested in becoming a tribute had gathered in the

Elder's temple, listening as High Elder Adda Carew had explained the rules of entering in the tributary: "The Tournament of Revelore is a sacred event, one that only occurs every ten years," she had said, her unnerving eyes passing over the crowd of young soldiers. "It is an enormous honor to be selected as a tribute. Therefore, you must prove yourselves worthy of representing our nation. Decipher our riddles, and you will be led to great treasures. Those of you who find our Tokens shall be considered in the tributary in three weeks' time. Three of the most worthy among you shall be selected as tributes."

The High Elder had given each of them a pamphlet of riddles that described where the Tokens had been hidden. Saoirse had poured over the words by candlelight every night, trying to piece together the puzzling clues. Each verse was arranged from the least valuable Token to the greatest. Saoirse's eyes had darted straight to the final riddle, the one that described the most valuable prize among them all. If she was to enter the tributary, then she wanted to be the best.

Saoirse unfolded the crumpled parchment, pointing to the final riddle. "This describes the pearl," she explained breathlessly, tracing a finger over the words she had read at least a thousand times.

Aurelia's eyes widened as she read over the verse, her eyebrows furrowing as she turned the words over in her head. Slowly, a grin crept across her face. "You really did it, didn't you?" she breathed in disbelief. "I don't think any Mer has ever stolen from Kaja. The Elders would have to be mad if they didn't choose you as a tribute."

Anticipation fluttered in her heart at the words. After years of training with the Torqen, her dream of being chosen as a tribute and representing the Mer in the Revelore Tournament would finally be a reality.

"Tonight, you and I will both be selected," Saoirse assured her. "You're the most talented warrior I know, and your combat abilities are unmatched."

“My Token is only a crown of silver though,” Aurelia replied doubtfully. “I claimed it from the wreckage of one of the Tellusun ships off the coast. I know for a fact that the riddle I deciphered was one of the simpler ones. You know I’ve never had a talent for verse.”

“Only a handful of Mer are clever enough to make sense of the Elder’s riddles,” Saoirse assured her. “The fact that you found one of their Tokens in and of itself is remarkable. Moreover, you hold the highest rank in the Torqen. You’ve proven yourself worthy a thousand times over.”

Aurelia sighed and said, “We’ll see if all my training has paid off tonight. Sune will no doubt be a pain in my ass,” she added. “There is not a Mer in Kellam more unsavory than him.” Saoirse laughed, trying to imagine them becoming tributes together. Their constant bickering would likely result in disqualification before the first trial even started.

“You’ll be fine tonight,” Saoirse promised. “Don’t worry about Sune. Don’t let him get in your head.”

“I’ll try not to,” Aurelia replied with a half-hearted shrug. Sighing, she said, “I suppose we’d better get ready. It’s nearly time.” She looked up at the waters above, watching the golden rays of sunset drift down to the city. At dusk, the potential tributes would gather for the tributary at the heart of the city, where the Elders would select three of them to represent Elorshin.

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“Did you see any of the missing merchant ships from Aurandel while you searched for your Token?” Saoirse asked as she followed Aurelia from the training arena.

Aurelia’s expression turned dark at the mention of the mysterious disappearances. As captains of the Torqen, she and Sune had been charged with investigating the missing shipments. Even after weeks of searching, they weren't any closer to knowing which rumors were true, and which were false

“No,” Aurelia muttered wearily. “Even near the coast, I expected to find something. Wreckage or bodies-anything that could indicate where they’ve gone.” She sighed, pushing her blonde waves away from her face. Her eyes were heavy, dark circles forming under them from sleepless nights. “Aurandel and Tellusun are breathing down our necks, waiting for answers. If we don’t figure out where the ships are disappearing to and who-or what-is behind it soon, I fear tensions might unravel into accusations.”

“What do you think is behind the disappearances?” The rumors had run rampant through the Torqen ranks, each theory more wild than the next. From giant squids surfacing from the deepest parts of the Maeral Sea to whirlpools spontaneously forming right under the ships, she had heard them all.

“If I had to guess, I think Aurandel has something to do with it.”

“Bold of you to suggest. Are you saying that they are sabotaging their own ships in order to frame Elorshin?” It wasn’t entirely out of the realm of possibility. Aurandel had proven themselves corrupt time and time again.

“Possibly,” Aurelia replied. “I have a hard time believing in giant monsters and ancient curses being behind it all. It is more likely Aurandel is employing shoddy craftsmanship and sending their merchant ships off to wreck in the sea so that they can accuse the Mer of interference.”

Saoirse frowned as they entered the barracks. “Do you think this will impact the Revelore Tournament?” The vibrant coral hallways were lit by eternal flames, shadows cast along the walls’ organic ridges and holes.

“Perhaps,” answered Aurelia. “I don’t think it has escalated into anything serious yet, though. In the span of several months, only five ships have gone missing. If the Auran merchants carried goods of higher value and more ships were disappearing, I’m sure it would be a different story. But you know how Aurandel is,” she grimaced. “They take every opportunity to undermine our trustworthiness and use every incident as proof that Elorshin violates their trade agreements,” she scoffed. “As if Aurandel doesn’t drain the life of every other country in Revelore, taking almost all of their earnings and crops for themselves. I’m sure if they gave even a fraction of their tithes to Tellusun, the missing merchant ships wouldn’t be as significant a loss.”

Aurelia sighed, opening the door to her private quarters. Saoirse’s own assigned quarters were across the hall, only a few feet away. Saoirse remembered how the older girl had taken her under her wing when she had begun training, acting as the older sister she never had. They had whispered to each other across the hall on countless occasions, watching each other grow into young women over the last ten years. When Aurelia had been promoted last spring, Saoirse couldn’t have been prouder.

In the torchlight, the shadows under Aurelia’s eyes seemed more gaunt, echoing the intense pressure she was enduring. At just twenty, Aurelia held a vast amount of weight on her shoulders. “We’ll have to continue the investigation after the Tournament,” she continued. “Winning it is our top priority right now. If we win, we

could change everything.”

“Whatever happens tonight, I’m glad to be a part of it with you by my side,” Saoirse said softly. “There’s no one else I’d rather compete with. I know that together, we can win.”

“Flattery won’t help you in the arena, you know,” Aurelia teased as she turned into her room, a smile finally cracking the weariness on her face.

* * *

The great amphitheater was filled from end to end with Mer, all dressed in their finest robes and pearls. Hundreds of circular rows sank deep into the sea floor, all trimmed with ceremonial garland and flowers. Huge open lanterns hung in the arches of the amphitheater, the bright blue flames illuminating the spectators below. Tiny lumis squid drifted through the open ceiling, the glowing orbs casting ethereal light throughout the venue.

A horn cut through the whisperings of the crowd, signifying the arrival of the Torqen. Hundreds of Mer twisted around in their seats to face the entrance of the amphitheater, their eyes alight with excitement.

Unease mingled with anticipation as Saoirse moved into formation with the rest of her Torqen regiment. The dark pearl was tucked away in the small purse attached to her belt, silently waiting for its debut into the light. The horns continued to bellow as the Torqen moved into the amphitheater, echoing through the building. Saoirse’s stomach twisted into knots as she followed the row in front of her. As they passed the endless rows of Mer spectators, the onlookers tossed leaves and flower petals at them in euphoric celebration. Children stared at them in awe, their rounded eyes gleaming in the torchlight.

When her regiment finally arrived at the sloped center of the amphitheater, Saoirse allowed herself to look up at the magnificent throne that commanded the entire venue. She lifted her eyes slowly, scanning the massive staircase that led up to the king's chair. At the top of the elevated coral throne sat King Angwin, the mighty leader of the Mer. Flecks of gold shone against the deep red coral throne, shimmering like a waterfall of molten metal. The king gazed down at the Torqen proudly, his gold armor gleaming in the blue torchlight. Angwin's dark curls fell past his shoulders, threaded with strands of silver. His brown skin was warm in the light, glowing with translucent scales tinged with gold. He lifted his trident and swept it across the crowd in a graceful arc, eliciting hushed exclamations from the onlookers. The king brought his trident back down with a muted thump. As he struck the throne, a ripple of sea water shot out across the pavilion and the crowds became silent.

"Welcome, great warriors of Kellam!" King Angwin's voice boomed across the amphitheater. "You have served us faithfully, and we honor you. The time has come to select our tributes for the Revelore Tournament," he began. "Over the course of a hundred years, we have kept the tradition of sending three of our strongest warriors to compete in the Tournament."

Saoirse mouthed the words as he spoke, knowing his speech by heart. Ten years ago, she had heard the same words as a child. She could still vividly remember twisting in her chair and squinting at the Torqen soldiers standing before the throne, her heart racing in her chest.

"This marks the tenth Tournament in our history," Angwin thundered, causing the crowd to erupt in applause. "I declare that this is the year we will be triumphant!" the king exclaimed, gesturing to the Torqen below. "We will finally possess the Crown and rule over Revelore!" The crowd roared in approval, wildly clapping. "Elders, please rise," the king ordered.

To the right of the throne, six Mer stood from their chairs. The Elders wore identical

dark purple robes that billowed around them as they stood. The six members were the brightest and wisest of all Merfolk, some former warriors and others renowned scholars. The Order of the Elders had been installed during the Great Peace thousands of years ago, charged with protecting the nations of Revelore and preserving the old laws. The High Elder stepped forward, a middle-aged woman with vibrant red hair. She wore a thin gold circlet at her brow, indicating her role as representative of the Elders. Adda Carew, Saoirse recognized as the woman slowly approached the Torqen.

“Warriors,” Adda addressed them, her commanding voice filling the amphitheater. “The Elders of Elorshin have scattered nine items of great value throughout the Maeral Sea, selected by hand from the Vault of Wonders. Only the most worthy among you have the strength and determination to recover these treasures.” She paused as her green eyes swept over the group of soldiers. “However, strength is not the only characteristic required of a tribute. You must also display wit and intelligence in order to decipher our riddles and find the hidden Tokens. Only the most cunning among you are fit to represent our people in the Revelore Tournament.”

Saoirse’s heart pounded and her blood sang in her ears. She had envisioned this moment in her daydreams countless times, and somehow it was still hard to wrap her mind around it all. Her palms were slick with nervous sweat, despite knowing that she had found the most valuable Token among them all.

This was it.

“Warriors,” Adda said with a slow pause, “who among you has collected Tokens? Please step forward.”

Saoirse watched as several soldiers broke from their ranks and swam up to Adda at the foot of the dias. Sune and Aurelia made their way to the front, their armor gleaming in the torchlight. Saoirse took a deep breath and slipped from her row, her

hands trembling with anticipation. She took her place next to Aurelia at the end of the row of Torqen soldiers and lifted her chin confidently, forcing herself to appear calm despite the nervous energy now pounding through her chest. She dared to glance at King Angwin above her, noticing the shadow of a frown on his face. She quickly averted her gaze, watching as Adda moved down the line of soldiers, her robes flowing through the water like a cloud of spilled ink.

“Please present your Token,” the High Elder said, stopping before the first soldier. The warrior, a tall Mer named Tormid, handed an emerald encrusted dagger to Adda. She held the Token up to the light, looking for the distinct markings that would prove it was authentic.

“Where did you find this?” Adda asked, still inspecting the dagger.

“In the reefs of Miread, Your Excellence,” Tormid responded proudly.

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“Indeed, this was one of the treasures we took from the Vault of Wonders,” she confirmed to both Tormid and the crowd. Hushed whispers of approval shifted through the amphitheater as Adda continued moving down the line of prospective tributes.

If her memory served her correctly, Tormid’s Token was among the easier treasures to find. She clutched the dark pearl harder, blood thundering in her ears as she watched Adda prowling down the line.

“Please present your Token,” Adda ordered Sune, looking up at him with sharp eyes. Sune bowed, presenting a jade mirror to the Elder. His normally arrogant face was surprisingly humble, his eyes lowered in respect as the High Elder surveyed his Token.

“And where was this Token retrieved?” Adda asked, inspecting the mirror in the light.

“In a reef off the Coast of Delore.”

Adda raised an impressed eyebrow, the only indication of her emotion. “Indeed, this was taken from the Vault of Wonders,” The High Elder nodded. A faint smile of satisfaction flickered on Sune’s face as Adda moved to the next soldier.

The High Elder moved further and further down the line, examining the presented Tokens with meticulous precision. Every minute inched by like an eternity, the whispers of the onlooking crowd numbing out Adda’s voice. The High Elder’s words blurred together as she spoke with Aurelia, who stood only a few feet away from her.

Saoirse suddenly felt like she couldn't breathe. The numbing silence of the amphitheater filled her ears with a dull roar. She could feel thousands of eyes upon her, watching expectantly. Her heart was racing so fast that she barely noticed when Adda Carew was suddenly standing directly in front of her. Saoirse blinked several times, trying to get a hold of herself.

"Please present your Token," Adda demanded through the haze.

Saoirse slipped her fingers into the leather pouch, feeling the cool pearl. Heart pounding, she pulled the treasure out and presented it to Adda. The Elder's eyes grew wide with shock, as if she had never believed anyone would actually try to find the final Token. The crowd grew restless in the silence, craning their necks to see what Saoirse held.

Adda collected herself, cool composure quickly replacing her initial shock. A faint glimmer of approval shone in her eyes as she asked, "Where was this Token retrieved?"

"In Kaja's Trench," Saoirse answered, trying to ignore the collective gasps that reverberated through the amphitheater. Adda carefully took the dark pearl from her hand, handling the fragile treasure as though it were a serpent that could strike at any moment. When she held it up to the light, the crowd erupted into whispered conversation as they finally saw the dark pearl for themselves.

"This is more valuable than any treasure in all of Kellam," the High Elder stated. "I confess that I did not expect it to be found. Unlike the rest of these Tokens, this pearl was not taken from the Vault of Wonders," she explained.

Saoirse's eyes widened, sudden confusion blossoming in her mind. If it was not from the Vault where did it come from? Panic seeped into her heart. If the pearl was not one of the Elder's hidden treasures, the possibility of being selected as a tribute was

hopeless.

“This pearl was lost a century ago, during the War of the Age,” Adda continued. “It has long been foretold that the pearl would one day be found.” Adda began reciting the riddle, her commanding voice echoing across the restless crowd: “As the moon, I shine full and round; my mysteries of creation abound. I am impenetrable as stone and ancient as titan’s bone. In a deathless cave I hide, biding my time for the right eyes.”

Adda turned back toward the rest of the Elders questioningly. One by one, each Elder nodded softly in affirmation. A chill crawled up Saoirse’s spine. When she had deciphered the riddle and ventured to Kaja’s Trench, she knew that the treasure inside was the most valuable on the list. But she certainly never expected this.

“That riddle was taken from one of our ancient texts, in hopes that the pearl might be found. Every decade, we have hoped that a tribute would one day present it. It seems that day has finally come,” Adda declared. “You must be one of the three tributes.”

Triumph and elation erupted through Saoirse, all apprehension melting away at the High Elder’s words. Excited exclamations flitted through the crowd as she proudly held up the pearl high above her head.

“Enough!”

The voice cut through the amphitheater like the crack of thunder. Saoirse went cold, her skin prickling at the sound of that voice. It was the voice that had told her no her whole life. Her father’s voice.

“No,” King Angwin continued, rising from his throne. The room grew dark and the ocean turned cold as the king rose from the elevated platform. The crowd gasped as the once-smooth waves around them grew choppy, the sea mirroring the king’s barely

contained fury.

“She will not go,” Angwin ordered as he drifted down, his glowing gold eyes betraying his anger. Adda didn’t so much as flinch as the king sank to her level, her gaze unwavering.

“With all due respect, King Angwin, the Elders have decided,” Adda retorted. “It has long been tradition for the Elders to decide the three tributes of the Revelore Tournament. Saoirse has more than proven herself worthy to compete in the Tournament.”

“My daughter will not go to the surface,” Angwin’s voice boomed, the water around them trembling. “I don’t care how valuable that ancient pearl is. Run your games however you like High Elder, but my daughter shall not be a tribute in the Tournament. She is the sole inheritor of the crown and the hope of Elorshin’s future. She will not be slaughtered in some foolish game,” he commanded, turning his piercing gaze towards Saoirse. “And you,” he yelled. “What were you thinking venturing into Kaja’s Trench alone? You could’ve gotten yourself killed.”

Saoirse felt her skin flush with anger as she stared up at her father. “There is no one else better suited for this than me, Your Majesty,” she replied, fighting to keep her voice controlled. “I will represent my people well. I would give my life for Elorshin.”

“This is over, Saoirse,” Angwin murmured decidedly, his eyes suddenly distant and cold.

Without warning, her father launched several blasts of sea water at the undying torches strung across the amphitheater. The room suddenly went dark as the lights went out and the lumis squid scattered. The crowd screamed as the amphitheater darkened, scrambling out of their seats with haste. With one final sweep, her father blasted the dark pearl out of Adda’s hands, sending it hurling across the amphitheater

and into the crowd.

“Come with me,” Angwin ordered, yanking Saoirse away from the group of Torqen soldiers. She tossed her head back around as he pulled her away, searching for Aurelia. She found her as the massive crowd dispersed, her blonde hair barely visible in the stampede of Mer. But just as she made eye contact with Aurelia, Saoirse was pulled into one of the long corridors behind the king’s throne, whisked away into the darkness.

4

SAOIRSE

“What were you thinking, Saoirse?” Angwin demanded, putting a hand to his forehead. “You could’ve gotten yourself killed.” He suddenly straightened and paced around his study in frustration. The cavernous room was huge, the ceiling dripping with giant mineral formations that hung like petrified icicles. The study was carved deep into the sea floor, lit only by bioluminescent algae that clung to the ridges of rock and coral. Saoirse stood at the center of the study, doing her best to keep her head held high. She didn’t regret stealing the dark pearl from Kaja. She would not be intimidated by the King of the Maeral Sea. She would stand her ground.

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“I have wanted to compete in the Revelore Tournament my whole life,” she answered, watching as her father paced around the room, leaving trails of bubbles in his wake. “You know that I trained with the Torqen so that I could become a tribute one day. Did you think I wouldn’t try? That I wouldn’t give it my best?” Her father cursed, balling his hands into fists.

“I didn’t think you would skirt the rules and put your life at risk,” Angwin replied, his voice a mixture of fear and anger. He turned to her, his eyes softening when he saw the determined look on her face.

“You know that I can’t let you do this,” he said, coming closer to her. “I can’t let you risk your life. You’re too precious to me.” He cupped her face between his hands, his voice pleading. “You must understand why you cannot become a tribute.”

“Father,” Saoirse said slowly, her heart slightly going soft at his expression of concern. She felt like a child again with her father towering over her.

“I lost your mother to her idealism and wild beliefs of reconciliation,” her father interrupted, his eyes filling with sorrow as he looked down at his only daughter. “I won’t lose you too.”

“I don’t seek reconciliation,” Saoirse countered. “I only seek to overthrow Aurandel. I thought you’d want Elorshin’s prowess to be known throughout Revelore,” she seethed. “It’s time for Aurandel to pay tithe to the Mer.” Her father said nothing, a scowl plastered across his face.

“I wanted to prove myself,” Saoirse continued, shaking her head. “I found the most

valuable treasure in all of the Maeral Sea. I did what no other Mer has ever done before. I stole from Kaja.” She looked at him, trying to read his face. “Aren’t you proud of me?” Her father frowned and spun away from her in a rush of seawater, his gold eyes flashing.

“Proud of my daughter for almost getting herself killed by a sea dragon? Proud that although I explicitly told her not to try and find the Elder’s Tokens, my daughter went directly against my orders?” He turned back to her, the glow of the algae sharpening the harsh angles of his face. “To which of these are you referring to? Which of these actions should I be proud of?”

“I will represent our people well,” Saoirse bristled. “I will bring back the Crown of Revelore and we will finally earn the respect of the other nations.”

“Impossible,” her father fumed. “We lost the respect of the other nations a hundred years ago, when our ancestors declared war against Aurandel. When your great uncle was betrayed by that winged creature he called a wife,” he spat.

And there it was. The legacy of the Tournament. It was a brutal competition intended to keep the nations in their places after all these years. The courts of Revelore had been forced to swear fealty to Aurandel for a century, forced to bow their knees before the victors of the Tournament every decade.

“If we don’t try, then Elorshin will always be misunderstood, banished to the depths of the Sea for eternity,” Saoirse argued, her voice rising in anger. “If we don’t try, we have no chance at redemption. Aren’t you tired of tithing to the Aura year after year, tired of offering them our best crops and precious metals? It is vile that they consume so much and give back so little,” she seethed. “These missing merchant ships only prove how low they will stoop.”

“Watch your tongue,” her father warned. “Be careful what you accuse Aurandel of,

daughter. Every time you voice your suspicions, you put yourself in more danger. They will not stand for dissenters.”

Saoirse pushed on, ignoring him. “Our people give their earnings to a Queen whom they’ve never even seen before! You know as well as I that there are only two options for the losing nations: grovel and try to win the volatile favor of the Aura or hide away in isolation and silently comply.” She turned to him, anger rippling from her like a tangible thing. “I want neither option for Elorshin.”

“It is better this way!” Her father snarled, his face twisted with rage. “After a hundred years, our people have been isolated from the people who hate us. We no longer have to pretend that we are anything like them. The Tournament keeps the peace. It keeps us safe.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Saoirse breathed in disbelief. “You can’t mean that.”

“I do mean it, Saoirse,” her father yelled back, slamming a fist on his desk. “If Elorshin somehow won the Tournament, we would never know a moment’s peace. We would live in never-ending fear. Aurandel would plan our downfall, whether by assassination plot or by corrupting our people from within. They would scheme until Elorshin was defeated and conquered. Until they had the Crown back.”

“You’re afraid,” Saoirse scoffed in disbelief. The waves around her grew choppy and harsh, sensing her rising emotion. A realization dawned on her, and horror swept through her body. “You’ve been sending all those tributes to compete in the Tournament for years,” she accused. “If you never thought they would win-never wanted them to win-their lives have all been forfeit!”

“I don’t expect you to understand,” Agwin countered softly. “You don’t know what those beasts have done to our family. This is the only way to reason with them. This is the only way to have peace and protect our people. We mustn’t jeopardize our

kingdom for some trivial Crown.”

“If you never believed in the Tournament, then you’ve been lying to all of us. You’ve looked warriors in the eyes and deceived them. Made them believe that they stood a fighting chance in the arena.”

“Their lives were still spent to ensure our peace, even if they did not fully understand the part they were chosen to play,” her father’s voice boomed.

“You can’t stop me. I won’t be another martyr for your cowardly cause,” Saoirse whispered darkly, her heart burning. “I have been chosen by the Elders. Their word is law.”

“They do not command the Sea,” her father shouted, raising his hands. “You may have great power over these waters, daughter, but they obey me above anyone else,” his voice reverberated through the chamber. Saoirse could feel the waves rush around her, following the king’s summons. “I forbid you from taking one step on the continent,” he declared, opening his palms and rallying the ocean. “Any effort you make to leave the Maeral Sea will be conquered by the very waves you seek to escape. You shall not leave these waters until I command the sea to release you.”

A powerful ripple of seawater shot out from his hands, moving across the room and out into the palace like an oncoming tide. Saoirse braced herself against one of his bookshelves as the swell of water continued to surge hungrily from his hands. The seafloor shook under his command, shuddering as the ocean rippled and churned. Glasses fell from the shelves and shattered against the floor, and picture frames rattled on the walls in a chorus of chaos. Pages of parchment went flying, floating through the waves like leaves on the wind. The fire in the hearth went out, the eternal flames winking into embers and casting the room in shadow.

And then all went still.

Already, the waves around her felt different and hostile.

Saoirse was horrified. “You can’t do this! You can’t just trap me here!”

“My word is final, daughter,” her father replied swiftly. “It is for your protection.”
Saoirse turned from him, storming out the room in a plume of bubbles.

“Saoirse,” her father called distantly.

She ignored him, swimming away as fast as she could. Her head was spinning, futilely grasping at the unraveling threads of her life. Everything she had been training for seemed like a lie. All her life, she had believed that Elorshin had a chance at redemption. But her father was content to bow to the might of Aurandel without so much as fighting back.

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The city was dark now, the last rays of sunlight disappearing below the horizon. The only lights that flickered through the dark streets of Kellam were the undying flames at every corner. Saoirse's eyes burned, filling with hot tears of anger. She pushed upward, leaving the city in her wake. She swam through the beautiful dome that enclosed the city, slipping through one of the open windows and into the cool sea above. As she rose to the surface, more moonbeams cut through the water and cast ripples of silver through the ocean.

She pushed to the surface, kicking hard as the Maeral Sea tethered her below. The ocean clung to her, pulling at her body with hunger as she continued to rise. But she resisted the imprisoning waves, her muscles burning as she strained against her father's entrapment.

Saoirse burst through the surface, sending silver droplets scattering across the waves. She gasped as her lungs filled with the dry air of the world above. She choked and sputtered, the foreign wind drying her throat and mouth almost instantly. With her head above the surface, she could feel the pull of the ocean tethering her in place. It took all of her effort to resist its pull, her legs burning as she fought against the invisible chains that held her down. A huge wave rose up before her like a wall, pouring over her head. Again and again, the waves continued to rise and push her back below the surface, forcing her down every time she tried to keep her head above the water. Like a living entity, the Maeral Sea stood between her and the surface like a soldier guarding its prisoner.

Saoirse sank back below the waves in defeat, finally inhaling the seawater her lungs craved. She drank in the warped night sky above her, a crystal veil of waves sending ripples across the stars. She would never leave the hold of the Sea, not with her father

turned against her.

The waves began to churn with her fury, building momentum like a vengeful maelstrom on the horizon. The water swirled as it sensed her rise of emotions, beginning to form a whirlpool. But no matter how enraged she became, her powers could never rival those of her father's.

"I will win this Tournament," she vowed to the stars above. "I will change the fate of Elorshin. I will break the curse." She would not grovel before the sandaled-feet of the Aura. She would not remain hidden, cowering in the Maeral Sea while Aurandel forced her people into submission.

She would fight.

Breaking away from the view of the velvet-dark sky, she dove down into the depths of the Maeral Sea, fresh determination coursing through her veins. The harsh pull of the ocean relented as she dove back down, seemingly satisfied as she descended back into its watery hold once more.

Saoirse swam towards the great library at the center of Kellam Keep, where all the knowledge of the known world was housed. If she would find any information on the Tournament, it would be there.

The streets surrounding the elegant library were completely empty. Eight towering pillars of marble sat guarding the entrance of the library like stone giants. Saoirse entered the silent hall, her eyes scanning the four levels that housed thousands upon thousands of books. The halls were completely still, no other Mer in the building at such a late hour. Shafts of moonlight drifted in from the enormous skylight, casting beams of silver through the shadowy halls. Scones of undying flames cracked on the walls, ice-cold and bright. Saoirse drifted upward through the water, passing each level of the library with quiet stealth.

In the wan blue light, the fourth floor looked haunting with its hundreds of dark isles and hidden alcoves. Sinewy vines and carpets of algae covered most of the shelves, broken by patches of coral and sea grass waving in the gentle current. Staring down at her, ancient volumes and archaic texts sat preserved on the shelves, all protected by enchantments to keep them dry. Although the books were completely submerged in water, they never dampened or deteriorated thanks to various spells cast upon them.

Saoirse ran her fingers along their spines, searching for any books on the Tournament and the history of Elorshin. She selected a few promising volumes, clutching them against her chest as she hurried to a hidden alcove covered in shadow. Tucking herself against a cushioned chair, she began to read. She poured over the pages, flipping as she scanned every chapter. She searched for any loopholes or exceptions to the trials, any hidden rules that might allow her to bypass her father's unbending will. But even as Saoirse searched, she knew it was hopeless. No one could overcome the sea king's might. Not even her. Sighing, Saoirse kept flipping as her eyes grew weary in the dim light.

She stopped on a page that depicted a beautiful woman. Saoirse stared at the brilliant white wings that unfurled from the woman's shoulders, knowing exactly who she was. She was Princess Yrsa of Aurandel, the one who had betrayed her great uncle a hundred years ago. She scanned the page opposite of the image, reading as it discussed how Yrsa had been sent by Aurandel on a secret assignment. The Auran Princess tricked the king into marrying her and used dark magic to transform herself into a Mer, sacrificing her wings as a show of devotion to him. Residing in Kellam as his bride, Yrsa fed information to Aurandel about the Mer's coastal trade and spied on their military movements. She secretly oversaw Auran raiding parties, watching from afar as her soldiers destroyed Mer storehouses and trading posts. Elorshin began to starve, their trading routes demolished and their weapons broken.

Saoirse flipped the page, knowing what came next. King Lorsan discovered his wife's treachery and sought to send Yrsa back to her own people, grief stricken and

betrayed. But before she was arrested, Yrsa murdered her husband in cold blood. Lorsan's brother Isandros became king and oversaw Yrsa's extradition back to Aurandel. But Aurandel never admitted to what they had done, choosing to let Yrsa take the fall as a lone agent. Her own people sentenced her to the gallows, framing Lorsan and the rest of the Mer for her death. All of Revelore came to the Aurandel's aid, declaring war against the Mer without question.

Saoirse tore her eyes away, unable to read the gruesome details of the War of the Age that followed. She didn't need to read further. She knew the story well. It was the story of her people, the story of her own family.

"You won't find the answers you seek in there," a voice broke through the silence.

Saoirse nearly jumped out of her chair at the sound. She slammed the book closed, tucking it onto a shelf before the hidden figure could see. High Elder Adda Carew stepped out from the shadows, her purple robes billowing as she drifted over to Saoirse's alcove.

"I know what you're doing here," the woman said. "You're trying to find a way out of your father's orders."

"I would never go against my father's will," Saoirse retorted.

"You can be candid with me, Princess. I know you are disappointed in his decision. No one has ever stolen from Kaja and lived to tell the tale." A smile of admiration unfurled on Adda's lips. "Only a very determined Mer could ever summon the courage to even try. And moreover, no one who found a dark Málmr pearl would give up so easily. Especially one with so much to lose."

"What should I do?" Saoirse asked, looking up at the woman warily. "My father has turned the Sea against me, and I cannot leave."

“The Elders chose you, Princess Saoirse,” Adda said slowly, her eyes glittering. “I will do whatever it takes to ensure that you compete in the Revelore Tournament. You will bring Elorshin glory; I am sure of it.”

“While your support is appreciated,” Saoirse began, rising from her chair, “no one can stand up to my father.” She left the alcove and drifted down the row of bookshelves.

“There is one who possesses powers greater than those of your father,” Adda whispered carefully, watching her with a hawk-like gaze.

Saoirse stilled. It wasn’t possible. Her father would never allow such a threat to exist in Elorshin; not when their enemies sought chinks in their armor and weaponized their weaknesses against them. It was hard to imagine that anyone could have powers rivalling her father’s. If Aurandel knew that there was someone in Elorshin who was more powerful than King Angwin... Saoirse shuddered at the thought.

“Impossible. You must be mistaken.”

“Ah, but that is where you are wrong,” Adda replied, gently taking Saoirse’s elbow.

The woman led her down the staircase, passing under cool shafts of moonlight that drifted through the skylight of the library. “The King does not know of her existence,” the High Elder explained. “She resides in the Fretum. In a place much worse than Kaja’s Trench.”

Saoirse’s mind began to race. She had read about the treacherous depths of the Fretum and its notorious black waves that were as dark and opaque as wet ink. She’d been told of the horrid beasts and ravenous sea creatures that lived within the haunting abyss, contained there by an ancient wall that was built by her ancestors. It was a cursed prison that no one dared enter.

“No one could ever live in such a place,” Saoirse breathed. “No one could survive there.”

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“The Sea Witch does,” Adda replied in a whisper, leading Saoirse past the final level of the library and out into the streets of Kellam.

“She will help you.”

5

SAOIRSE

Saoirse stared up at the enormous wall that served as the barrier between the Fretum and the rest of the Maeral Sea. The ocean was cold and dark here, and if not for the torch of undying flames that Adda held at her side, Saoirse could barely see in front of her. She scanned the ugly slab of stone that jutted out from the sea floor and extended upward as far as the eye could see.

From the view of a ship floating on the unruly waves above, the barrier would still reach high into the sky, bursting from the sea like a mountain in the middle of the ocean. Though she had never seen it in person before, Saoirse knew that the wall was several feet thick, impenetrable and unforgiving. Carved upon the surface of the stone, crude markings and indiscernible graffiti littered the great wall. There was a gravity about the boundary wall, a pull that was both seductive and mortifying. There was no escaping once inside.

“Here we are,” Adda said coolly. Saoirse wondered how many times the High Elder had been to the Fretum. A twinge of suspicion flickered in her chest as she watched Adda from the corner of her eye. But she was desperate to be free. She couldn’t afford to be cautious now.

Adda swam to the base of the wall, leading Saoirse all the way to the sea floor. The water pressure grew as they descended into the depths, and Saoirse's head began to pound. They stopped just above the sea floor, where an enormous trench dove even further into the earth. The ravine was completely black, bleeding like an open wound in the sea floor. Heart thundering in her chest, Saoirse watched as Adda felt around the stone wall. Mumbling something under her breath, Adda smiled to herself, seeming to find what she was looking for. Adda placed a hand to the wall, fitting her fingers into an indentation in the stone. Saoirse gasped in awe as the stone around Adda's palm began to glow with ethereal light, spreading out in a ripple across the barrier. Gradually, the shape of a door became pronounced in the stone, outlined by the threads of light that shot out from the keyhole. Adda looked over her shoulder at Saoirse, a calm smile on the High Elder's lips.

"Only the Order of Elders is able to access the Fretum," Adda explained. "Not even our great King Angwin may open these doors. Our handprints are remembered by the stone, every curve and wrinkle. This is by far the securest prison in Revelore." Saoirse only nodded with acknowledgement, her eyes fixated on the glowing door that seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Adda pushed on the door, and it opened with a rumble of stone that reminded Saoirse of thunder on the horizon. The mouth of the Fretum was as black as a starless sky. Adda glided through the doorway, her robes trailing in her wake. Saoirse followed her, looking at the doorway overhead as she passed through. The dense stone walls of the prison were at least six feet thick. As the cool waters of the Fretum enveloped her, an eerie feeling pounded through her blood. In this darkness, the ocean felt different. Ancient. Evil.

The door abruptly swung closed, melting back into place as if never there. A chill went up Saoirse's spine. There was no turning back now. Adda clutched her hand, perhaps because she sensed how terrified Saoirse was or simply because she was the only one who knew the way. The Elder pulled her downward, descending into the

abyss with a confidence that suggested she had been here many times before. With the torchlight's illumination, sharp ridges of rocks and cliffs slowly came into focus, haunting shadows following as they passed. All around them, Saoirse detected shifts in the water as huge forms drifted through the waves above and below. Every now and then, she glimpsed a huge tentacle or spiked tail gliding through the darkness. Although she couldn't see the beasts that made such ripples through the water, she knew that they were massive, bigger than the whales she saw near the reefs. She was thankful she couldn't see them, for if she could, she would probably turn back.

"Don't worry," Adda said over her shoulder, "they won't come near. They are afraid of the light," she added, gesturing to her torch. "Some have never seen flames before."

Although the ridges and cliffs of the Fretum seemed nonsensical at first, Saoirse realized that a set of crumbling stairs wove through the craggy landscape. It seemed that Adda was following the deteriorating steps, keeping close to them as they swam through the darkness. Skeletons of creatures and the bones of Mer seemed to be scattered on every surface, evidence of the terrifying beasts who dwelled in the Fretum. The gnarled bones accumulated on the jagged sea floor like piles of fresh fallen snow. Saoirse prayed Adda knew what she was doing.

Gradually, the crumbling steps led to the ugly mouth of a cave, yawning open like the jaws of a hungry beast. Stalactites hung down like teeth, wickedly sharp and sparkling with minerals. Rotting vines dripped down from the ceiling, decaying in the dim waters. Saoirse wondered how the plants could even survive down there at all. There was something sinister about the cave as they swam inside, and a chilling feeling of dread crept along Saoirse's shoulders. She couldn't place why, but the cave felt alive. And angry. For the thousandth time, she wondered what she was getting herself into.

They swam through the tunnel, narrowly missing hanging stalactites and rocky

overhangs. A cloying scent of rotting fish and decay filled the chamber, and Saoirse struggled not to gag. Adda seemed completely unbothered, her face serene and composed as they drifted through the horrid cavern. Bones were littered on the floor of the cave, stark white against the black water. Gradually, she could make out a dim light at the end of the tunnel, casting the chamber in a sickening green hue. Gooseflesh crawled across her skin as they drew near, and the stench grew overwhelming.

“You mustn't be frightened,” Adda whispered in her ear. “You must show yourself to be brave and worthy,” she added with an encouraging squeeze on her shoulder. “You must make her like you.”

Saoirse nodded, straightening her spine as best she could as they swam around the corner and into the green glow. The doorway was covered by a curtain of hanging vines, tangled together in a rotting web. Adda pushed through the vines, holding them up for Saoirse as they passed through. Much like the tunnel, the cavernous room was framed by huge hanging rocks and overhangs as sharp as teeth. At the center of the room, a great bowl of undying flames burned with green fire, flickering on the cave walls. Huge stone shelves were cut into the walls of the cave, vials of liquid and glass containers crammed on every surface. Thousands of books lined the walls, protected by enchantments.

“What is this place?” Saoirse breathed.

“This is my home,” a rich voice boomed from the opposite side of the cavern. Out of a dark pool of shadow, someone rose up.

Still covered by darkness, the voice called, “What have you brought me, Adda Carew?” The voice that echoed through the chamber was low and full.

Adda brought Saoirse forward, a gentle, reassuring hand at her back. “Princess

Saoirse, daughter of King Angwin,” she declared.

Saoirse didn’t know where to look, her eyes fixed on the dark shadow at the corner.

“Ah,” the voice purred. It was a predatory sound. The figure drifted out of the shadows, green light spilling over the body of a beautiful Mer woman. The woman’s long, raven-black hair drifted around her like a cloud, hanging nearly to her knees. Her elegant dress shimmered in the light, woven with glass beads that chimed as she moved. The woman smiled at them, her bright red lips glossy in the firelight. Saoirse thought it looked like blood.

“And what does this offspring of King Angwin want with me?” the woman crooned. Her beautiful voice was laced with poison. She swam slowly over, prowling like a beast stalking its prey. The Sea Witch was morbidly captivating, her eyes framed by thick lashes and rimmed with coal. Her irises were black, blending into the dark center of her pupils.

“I have come to ask for help,” Saoirse willed herself to say, managing to stop her voice from trembling. She lifted her chin defiantly, hoping to convince the Witch that she wasn’t afraid of her.

“And why, pray tell,” the woman laughed, “would the daughter of the King want anything to do with my dark powers?” She was now floating directly in front of them, her black eyes all-consuming. “Surely your father would grant you whatever you wished.” She cocked her head to the side curiously, a movement more animal than Mer.

“I wish to compete in the Revelore Tournament. Elorshin must possess the Crown and conquer Aurandel once and for all.”

The Sea Witch blinked in surprise, then grinned. Her teeth were pearly white and

sharpened to points. “Let me guess,” she drawled lazily, circling her with an evaluating gaze. “Father won’t let his precious princess become a sport for the Aura?” She traced a long, claw-like fingernail across Saoirse’s shoulder blade. She tried not to flinch as the woman ran her nail across her collar bone.

“He has forbidden me from becoming a tribute,” she admitted. “The Maeral Sea will not allow me to leave its waters. My father has ordered it to contain me.”

“Well, then,” the Sea Witch breathed, “you’re smart to come to me for help.” She turned her gaze to Adda, smiling at the Elder. “Thank you for bringing her to me, old friend.” Adda bowed, almost reverently. “Some call me Selussa,” the Witch offered, turning back to Saoirse. “Though you may call me whatever you like.” She placed a hand on her back, pushing her to the green flames at the center of the room. Her touch was cold, her fingertips like jagged shards of ice.

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“Tell me why you want to become bird food so much,” Selussa murmured in her ear. “Surely you’re aware that the Kingdom of Elorshin has not won the Tournament in a century. What makes you believe that you can win?”

Selussa’s question wormed its way into her head, suddenly making her doubt herself. There was something about the Witch’s voice that made her feel uneasy and insignificant.

“I have trained with the Torqen for ten years. And I am gifted with the powers of the Sea,” she answered. She lifted her hand, forming an orb of seawater in demonstration. “I could be the first Mer to win in a hundred years.”

There was cold hunger in her eyes as she watched Saoirse manipulate the orb of water. “Impressive,” Selussa conceded. “A determined little thing, aren’t you? I like that.”

The Sea Witch left her side, swimming to a shelf of books. She ran a long nail across the spines, searching for a volume. She grabbed one off the shelf and flipped through the pages.

“It won’t be too difficult to break your father’s command over the Sea,” Selussa said confidently. She went to another shelf, grabbing several glass vials. “The difficult part will be slipping my mind-altering serum into his cup,” she added, her red lips catching the light of the fire.

“You can do that?” Saoirse marveled, watching as Selussa gathered all of her materials across the room.

“Why yes,” Selussa replied proudly. “I can alter minds and change thoughts with just a drop of my elixir. I am a potions mistress, among other things. I was the one who first discovered the properties of mangrove root and willowherb, you know. Have you ever wondered where the Elders get their supply of titanblood elixir? Without my potion, the Mer could never breathe on land.” She glided through the water to a stone table, laying out all of her containers and jars before her.

“What is the price you demand for your services?” Saoirse asked. She wasn’t naive enough to believe that the Sea Witch’s help came without cost. She watched as Selussa began measuring out the liquids and pouring them into a crystal-encrusted bowl. She swirled all of the ingredients together, her eyes lighting up as the liquid melded into a homogenous potion.

“To receive your heart’s desire, worthy prizes you must retire,” Selussa recited. “To win a gift and acquire, three sacrifices are required.” The potion she stirred in her pot began to glow with otherworldly light and hiss with heat.

“In short,” the witch explained, “I require you to willingly give me two treasures of great value. Oh, and you must also fulfill a bargain.”

“But I don’t have anything to offer you,” Saoirse replied, looking down at her Torquen armor and the empty purse at her waist.

“Oh, but you do,” Selussa purred, coming across the room with the now-completed potion. “You have great power over the Sea, as you just mentioned. Power you inherited from that father of yours,” she said, gesturing to Saoirse. “Power said to have been passed down from the Titan of the Sea.”

“I can’t give you my powers,” Saoirse breathed in disbelief. “I need them to win the Tournament.”

“Don’t worry, love,” Selussa replied, “You’re more than equipped to handle yourself without control over water. As you said, you are a warrior of the Torqen.”

“Will I ever get them back if I allow you to take them from me?” Saoirse asked, looking down at her palms and imagining what it would be like without her abilities.

“I promise you,” Selussa nodded, “as soon as you win the Tournament, your powers will be restored.”

Saoirse narrowed her eyes at the Witch. “How can I trust you? I’ve never heard of you before. There must be a reason why you have been banished to the Fretum,” she added suspiciously.

“Thanks to a minor crime long ago,” Selussa replied with a casual flick of her hand. “I was once the potions mistress of the royal family, hired to concoct various elixirs to treat ailments. On occasion, I even developed truth serums for interrogations.”

Potions mistress? Saoirse had never heard of such a position in the royal household, at least not in recent years.

“Fine. Keep your secrets and don’t tell me what you did to wind up here.” Saoirse looked around the cold room, trying to imagine living in such a lifeless place for decades. “If High Elder Adda can open the Fretum, why haven’t you left after all this time?”

Selussa frowned, as if annoyed by her questions. “It doesn’t work like that, child. I was banished here by blood, sealed into this tomb with ancient magic. Even if Adda can enter, I can never leave.” Her eyes darkened with memory, the first real sign of emotion in her black eyes. “I was banished a long time ago and certainly well before your time. Enough about me, love,” the Sea Witch said dismissively, “all you need to know is that I never break a bargain once it has been made.” Her black eyes glittered

in the green light.

It was clear the topic of Selussa's origins was off limits. Saoirse relented, deciding it was for the best not to push the Sea Witch. She wasn't here for Selussa's secrets. "And what of the second requirement? I must offer you two valuable items. But I have nothing left to give."

Selussa smiled gleefully at Adda. The Elder reached within her long, flowing robes, pulling something out of the hidden folds. The dark pearl shone in Adda's palm.

"I retrieved it after your father's dramatic show at the ceremony. Angwin didn't stop and think about how valuable this is," she breathed, holding it up to the light. "To think it could've been picked up by a child or swept into the dust of the amphitheater, never to be seen again..."

"Take it," Saoirse said abruptly, turning to Selussa. "I have no need for it. I stole the pearl because I believed it would win me a place in the Tournament. And it appears as though it still can."

She took the dark pearl from Adda's outstretched hand, anxious to get the bargain over with. "It's a worthless trinket," she said, tossing it to Selussa unceremoniously. The Sea Witch caught it in mid-air, her claw-like fingernails flashing in the torchlight with unnerving speed. She grinned, her black eyes seeming to grow darker. It reminded Saoirse of the black eyes of sharks when they tasted blood in the water.

"A fine bargain this will be," Selussa murmured, utterly transfixed by the pearl in her hand. Her gaze snapped back up, narrowing on Saoirse once more. "You have offered two gifts," she told her, moving across the room again. "Now you must make a deal."

"What do you want?" Saoirse asked warily. She had already taken everything she had to offer. What was one more promise in exchange for changing the lives of her

people?

“What do you know of the Aura?” the Sea Witch asked slowly, her eyes darkening with something like wicked glee.

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“I’ve studied everything there is to know. Auarandel is ruled by Queen Raven Adonia, The Champion,” she answered. “And her younger brother, Rook Adonia, rules alongside her. He is captain of the Aerials.”

“I suspect that you know Prince Rook will be competing in the Tournament, then?” Selussa asked, carrying the crystal bowl over to the cauldron of green flames at the center of the room. “He was chosen just like his sister before him, you know,” she added. Saoirse said nothing, waiting for the Sea Witch to continue. “I want you to kill the prince.”

“You want me to kill Prince Rook?” Saoirse repeated. “Why?”

“I want to see Aurandel fall just as much as the next Mer in Elorshin,” Selussa replied, her black eyes glistening in the light of the flames. “What better way to overthrow our enemies than by killing their beloved princeling? By silencing their sole military leader? By crushing the heart of their mighty Queen?” She tossed the contents of the crystal bowl into the flames suddenly. The flames hissed, exploding up to the ceiling and changing into a pale blue color. The flames receded just as fast as they had stretched upward, settling back into a small fire after a moment.

“It will be easy,” Selussa remarked. “You’ll already be fighting for your life in the arena. Anyone would understand an accidental death in the name of self-defense. Bargaining with your life is the price to pay for glory, and everyone who chooses to compete in the Tournament knows that.”

“But what do you have against the Auran royal family, besides the general hatred we all harbor for them?” Saoirse asked. It didn’t make sense. For someone locked up in

the Fretum, she would've thought Selussa would hate those who imprisoned her, not some outside enemy kingdom.

"Prince Rook possesses a blade that can only be taken from his fingers in the event of his death," Selussa explained. "It is bound to him, you see. Only when his heart stops will the blade be free for the taking."

"Why do you want this dagger so badly?" Saoirse probed, crossing her arms.

"The blade is not rightfully his," Selussa snapped, her patience fraying with every word. "If you keep nagging me with all these questions, our deal is off. You came to me for help," she pointed out. "I don't have to do this for you. I owe you nothing."

"Fine," Saoirse conceded. Killing him would mean one less Auran royal to worry about. She was so close to having everything she wanted. "I'll kill the prince in the trials and bring you his dagger," she promised. She balled her hands into fists, growing more anxious the longer she stayed in the cave. "I have met all your requirements. It's time for you to return the favor."

The Sea Witch turned to her, shadows moving across the sharp planes of her face. "Blood," Selussa barked, directing her gaze to Saoirse's arm. Before she had time to react, Adda sliced a blade across her forearm and blood clouded around her skin. Adda pressed a glass vial to the cut, trapping blood inside and sealing it with a cork. She brought the vial over to Selussa, presenting it with a bow. The Sea Witch took the glass carefully, and Saoirse could've sworn she licked her lips. In a flash, Selussa slid a dagger-sharp nail against her own skin, dark red blood pooling around her. Adda captured Selussa's blood the same way she had just captured Saoirse's, closing it in a vial. Adda handed the glass vial to Saoirse.

"We have a deal," Selussa murmured. "Blood is more valuable than gold. It can unlock doors and seal promises. It can bring great fortune and favor, but it can be

spilled so easily. Now I have a piece of you, and you have a piece of me. We are bound together now.”

“If I fail to kill the prince,” Saoirse suddenly asked, “what then?”

“Should you fail,” Selussa answered slowly, “your life shall take the place of Prince Rook’s. And if you tell anyone of what I’ve done for you,” she hissed, “you can be sure that I’ll end your life before you step foot on shore.”

Saoirse was silent for a moment, the gravity of the bargain she had just made finally sinking in. “Why would you take my life in his stead?” she protested. “I am not a suitable substitute.”

“This bargain requires a life in order to be fulfilled, whether or not I acquire the dagger,” Selussa snapped. “Enough games. No more questions. Do you wish to continue or not?”

“So be it,” Saoirse finally said. “I will fulfill your bargain.”

“Forgive me for doubting your word,” Selussa chuckled, a dark malignant sound. “But I have always struggled to believe promises from the mouths of sirens. If you make this vow, you cannot break it. Do you understand?”

Saoirse flinched at the derogatory term. Siren. That demonizing word was what the rest of Revlore called her people behind their backs and in the shadows. It was a word that embodied years of prejudice and hatred. Saoirse straightened, refusing to show Selussa weakness.

“I do,” she countered. “I want this more than anything. I will fulfill the bargain.”

“Wonderful,” Selussa replied, her voice edged with something like hunger.

The Sea Witch began whispering incantations under her breath. She opened the glass vial containing Saoirse's blood and let a tiny droplet fall from the jar into the flames. The flames rose up once more, burning brightly and shifting with color as the blood made contact with whatever else was brewing in the heat. Saoirse squinted as the blinding light lit up the dark cavern, shielding her face as the hot flames swelled. Selussa was laughing now, a harsh and delirious sound that made Saoirse's skin crawl. Abruptly, Selussa grabbed her arm, her long nails digging into Saoirse's flesh.

Before Saoirse even knew what was happening, the Sea Witch shoved her into the fire pit with unnatural strength. Saoirse screamed in horror as the flames enveloped her, barely registering the searing pain that flooded her senses. But instead of burning, the flames were bitterly cold and stinging, surging through her blood like the frozen claws of winter. Saoirse couldn't see anything as the fire raged around her and obscured her vision of Selussa and Adda just on the other side. Her body felt like it was pulling apart, her muscles and limbs ablaze with the ice-cold flames. Though she didn't understand how, she instinctively knew that her powers were being drained from her, ripped away from her body like liquid poured from a cup.

Just when Saoirse nearly fainted from the pain, the churning fire suddenly went out, leaving Saoirse limp in the dying embers. She was shaking, her body trembling as she lay in the charred remnants of the flames. She felt hollow. Empty.

A delicate hand touched her shoulder, and she looked up to see Adda standing over her. Saoirse let the High Elder lift her upright, her legs wobbling as she stood once more. Though her vision went in and out of focus, she could just make out the form of Selussa in the corner of the cave. She was grinning.

"I've given you what you want," Saoirse rasped. "Now you must fulfill your end of the bargain."

"Your wish is my command, Princess," Selussa murmured, sweeping forward from

the shadows. She bowed before her in a gesture of mock-respect, presenting an onyx flask. With shaking hands, Saoirse took the black stone vial from the Sea Witch. “One drop in your father’s cup should do the trick,” Selussa told her, rising from her bow. “Tell him what you want within the first few minutes of its consumption, and his mind will obey.” At the doubtful expression on her face, Selussa added, “I give you my word.”

“I will kill the prince and win the Revelore Tournament,” Saoirse vowed, clutching the flask to her chest and leaning heavily on Adda. “You win and I win.”

“I look forward to your return,” Selussa purred, her black eyes as dark as the depths of the Fretum. “Do not fail me.”

ROOK

Rook squinted in the morning sun, tossing an arm over his throbbing head. He twisted onto his stomach, shielding his eyes from the bright window above. He couldn't remember how much he'd drank at the celebration last night, but judging on how much his head hurt, it had been too much. He groaned, remembering the jugs of ale that had been pressed into his hands over and over again, seeming to be refilled at every possible opportunity. Following the evening tributary parade through the city, the nighttime celebrations had been filled with dancing, laughter, and drinking.

Cracking his eyes open, Rook blinked in the hazy morning light. Still draped across his shoulders, a crushed sash of ceremonial greenery remained, looking as haggard as he felt. Fortunately, he was still fully clothed. He took that as a sign that things hadn't gotten too out of hand the night before.

He rose from the bed, pulling off his ceremonial tunic and sash with a sigh. He tossed his wrinkled clothing in the corner, striding to a bowl filled with fresh water. A muffled groan sounded from behind him, making Rook nearly jump out of his skin. He turned around, grinning as he found Eros's crumpled form in the corner of his room. His friend was laying on the stone floor in a heap, his head buried in a pillow.

"What time is it?" the muffled voice hissed, barely discernible through the pillow.

"Why, it's the first day of the Revelore Tournament," Rook replied with a grin.

"What?" Eros yelled in a daze, shoving himself up from the ground in a clumsy jump. Rook laughed and then immediately regretted it as he clutched his pounding head.

“Relax,” he assured Eros with a wince. “We’re still three days away.” Eros threw the pillow at him, scowling.

“Why’d you let me pass out on the floor?” Eros demanded, stretching his back as he stood. “My neck isn’t going to recover for months.”

“I didn’t even know you were in here,” Rook replied, tossing water over his face. “I don’t know when we got back from the parties last night,” he added, running a hand through his hair. “I couldn’t tell you a thing about what went on after the parade, to be honest.”

He tried to remember what had happened, but the fragments of hazy memory evaded him. Bright colors and music. Laughter and stale ale. The breathy whispers and silken kisses of Flora Tasos. He smiled to himself, tossing another handful of water over his head. Flora. She had given him a night to remember, that much he was sure of. He could vaguely remember whirling her around in a wild dance, her red curls flying behind her as she threw her head back in laughter. Rook smiled again, still tasting her kisses on his lips.

“What are you grinning about over there?” Eros called as he limped across the room to the balcony. “I don’t trust the look on your face.”

Eros threw open the long, gauzy curtains that draped across the balcony, sunlight pooling into the room. Rook grimaced as the sun lit up the darkened room, shutting his eyes against the blinding rays. He cracked his eyes open again, watching as Eros leaned against the smooth balcony railing and squinted at the palace grounds that unfurled beneath.

“Hel’s teeth, it has to be noon already,” Eros called out, scanning the bustle of activity in the courtyard. “Aren’t the Tellusun tributes arriving today?” he asked, running a hand through his dark hair. “Shouldn’t you be down to greet them or

something? Performing your princeling duties and the like?”

“Yes,” Rook grumbled, pulling on a fresh tunic over his aching shoulders. He thought of the ancient ruler of Tellusun, King Ohan Yerimya. The last time he had seen the old man was on a tour of the Shujaa Desert and the Clay City five years ago, when he was on assignment to inspect the Auran occupation there. The sand-dwellers of the south were a hearty people, finding ways to thrive in a sea of endless sand despite the intense heat of the sun burning down on them. The desert kingdom relied heavily on maritime trade through the Maeral Sea as they had little access to agriculture in the endless expanse of dunes. To reach Coarinth, the Tellusun tributes had to travel through the Shujaa Desert and across the Isles of Mythos, a collection of heavily-jungled islands that connected them to Aurandel.

An abrupt pounding on the door scattered Rook’s thoughts. He looked over at Eros with a smirk, knowing exactly who it was.

“I’m coming in!” a muffled voice yelled from the other side. “You’ve been warned.”

Veila strode in, throwing open the bedroom door without hesitation. She placed her hands on her hips, glaring at Rook and Eros. She surveyed them, her bright green eyes flashing. “All finished with your beauty sleep, I gather?” she asked in a dull tone. She prowled over to Rook, her short stature surprisingly intimidating as she crossed the room. Veila looked up at him, narrowing her eyes. “You look awful,” she said bluntly.

“I guess the beauty sleep didn’t work this time,” he retorted. In sharp contrast to him and Eros, the short woman in front of him was the very image of self-discipline and precision. Her red hair was tied at the nape of her neck, not a single stray hair out of place. She wore a crisp, clean blue uniform that indicated her high rank among the Aerials, swirling patterns of silver embroidery curling around her shoulders. Unlike the dark circles that likely pooled under his own eyes, her face was bright and her

eyes were clear with awareness. Veila had always been like this, more self-disciplined and organized than anyone he had ever met in his life.

“When will you both learn to hold your ale?” Veila tiskied, brushing past him into the room. “If it wasn’t for me, you two would be passed out in some alleyway covered in your own spilled drink. You don’t know how hard it was to corral two drunken men up three flights of stairs.” She picked up the crushed ceremonial garland from where it lay crumpled on the ground, raising an eyebrow. “So, this is how our honored tribute treats his sacred garments?”

“We could die in that Tournament, you know,” Eros called from the balcony. “We honored tributes have to enjoy our lives while we still can. Who knows when the next time we’ll be able to celebrate will be.”

“At the end of the Tournament,” Rook answered, folding his arms across his chest. “We’ll celebrate when we stand victorious before all of Revelore, the Crown in our hands.”

“Aye,” Eros replied, his face growing somber as he swept aside the curtains and strode into the bedchamber again. “With any luck, no one will die,” he said softly, half to himself and half to his fellow tributes. Veila placed a hand on both of their shoulders, looking up at them.

“With the two of you by my side, I have no doubt that victory and glory shall be ours,” Veila said softly. They stood in silence for a moment, the weight of what they were about to do feeling heavy in the air. Although the aim of the trials was not to battle to the death, casualties happened in the Tournament. Yet for those competing as tributes, the risk was worth the prize.

Rook met the eyes of his companions, taking in their determined expressions and allowing himself to fill with pride. Veila and Eros had served with him long before

they became guardians of Aurandel. They had learned to fly together as children, their wings still downy and new.

“Rook,” Veila finally said, breaking the silence. “You’re to greet the Tellusun king in an hour.” she looked him up and down, cocking an eyebrow. “Though you’re going to need much more than an hour to get ready.”

* * *

An hour later, Rook climbed down the great staircase that connected the Citadel to the open-aired courtyard below. The afternoon was beautiful, with the warm wind of the south rippling across the city of Coarinth and whispering through the arched openings and floating buildings that hovered in the clouds. Scents of jasmine and fresh herbs hung in the air, the smells of the city wafting on the breeze. He straightened his back as he hit the last step, smoothing out the wrinkles of his tunic one last time before bowing before the newcomers.

The Tellusun entourage spread out across the sandstone courtyard, clad in robes of bright reds, oranges, and yellows. A flag pole jutted out from somewhere within the crowd, displaying a huge banner that unfurled in the hot breeze. The beautiful red sun depicted on the flag seemed to brighten the courtyard, swirling rays of sunbeams spiraling across the fabric. Rook stopped before Sahl Tariq, Tournament Ambassador of the Tellusun people. He bowed in respect, keeping his wings tight against his back as he lowered his head. When he rose again, he smiled at Sahl.

“My how you’ve grown,” the man said, his eyes sparkling. “Five years ago, your head only reached my shoulder,” Sahl continued with approval. “How old are you now, Prince?”

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“I reached my nineteenth birthday last spring,” Rook replied, grinning at the middle-aged man. While Rook himself had grown nearly a foot, Sahl had not aged in the years gone past, his dark hair only shining with only a few strands of silver. A surge of nostalgia washed over Rook as Sahl pulled him into a hug. Though they were the same height now, Rook immediately felt like a young boy again.

“It’s good to see you again, old friend,” Sahl breathed as they stepped apart. Rook nodded in agreement, genuinely happy to see the ambassador who had once spent several days training with him under the heat of the Shujaa sun.

“Where is your King?” Rook asked, gazing beyond Sahl and into the crowd. Sahl’s eyes darkened.

“Our King is gravely ill,” he replied, his voice heavy. “He is bedridden and unable to travel in his condition.” Rook sucked in a breath, unable to imagine the ancient king in bad health. He was seemingly eternal, older than any other ruler on the continent.

“I’m sorry to hear that. May the stars be on his side,” Rook replied sympathetically. “Ohan has sent you in his stead, then?” he asked the Tournament Ambassador.

“Indeed,” Sahl answered with a short nod. “Myself and the Princess of the Clay City,” he added, stepping aside. Rook looked beyond him, noticing the palanquin held up at the center of the crowd for the first time. The mobile tent-like carriage rested on the shoulders of six tall warriors, hoisted above the Tellusun entourage. The vibrant fabric of the palanquin was fine, embroidered with gold and flecked with jewels. Rook squinted, just barely making out the silhouette of Princess Hasana through the soft curtain. Rook lowered his head again, bowing just in case Hasana

was watching him through the gauzy curtain.

“You and your party are most welcome here,” Rook told Sahl, rising from his bow. “All of your rooms are prepared, so feel free to refresh yourselves after such a long journey.”

“Thank you, Prince,” Sahl said gratefully. “After our three-weeks of travel, the thought of sleeping on a solid bed sounds too good to be true.” He paused, surveying Rook one last time. “I am pleased to see you again, Your Majesty. May glory be given.”

“May glory be given,” Rook answered in return.

His heart twisted in an odd way at the sound of the phrase, something like sadness mingling with yearning. A small, secretive part of himself wished that Sahl was there under different circumstances. He wished their nations weren’t reunited after years simply to compete in a cut-throat competition. For as close as he might be to Sahl, there was still a canyon of tension between them. They could never truly be friends. Not when their countries battled for the Crown. Rook crushed his thoughts abruptly.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Rook said, spreading his wings as a gust of warm air whispered through the courtyard. “I’ll see you for supper,” he told Sahl, letting the wind gently lift him from the ground. With a few pumps of his wings, Rook flew from the palace grounds and into the city, fighting his treacherous thoughts with every beat of his wings.

The Tournament was necessary and needed. It sealed Aurandel’s right to rule and silenced those who would take the Crown. He had the privilege of fighting for glory and redeeming the curses of the past. There was no other nation more suited to rule than Aurandel, that much he was sure of. As he soared through wisps of clouds, Rook slowly became lighter, his traitorous thoughts slipping away. He closed his eyes,

letting the sun warm his skin and melt into his wings. After a few moments of clearing his head, Rook finally let himself open his eyes once more. Far below, he watched as a sea of color moved through the courtyard and into the lower depths of the Citadel. The brightly colored robes of the Tellusun people were beautiful, even from such a great distance away.

As he often did when he was anxious, he pulled his dagger out of its sheath at his waist. It was an ancient family heirloom, passed down for generations. He held it to the sun, looking at his own reflection in the mirror. When he looked at the shining blade, he saw his mother's eyes looking back at him. Something about imagining her face always settled his fears. He remembered how she never left the Citadel without the beautiful dagger at her hip, how she always held it close by in case she needed to protect her children. But on the day she had died, even the dagger hadn't been enough to save her. Rook sighed, running a hand down the familiar the black opal that sat squarely on the pommel.

He could vividly recall the moment his mother had pressed the blade into his small, childish hands. It is yours now, she had rasped, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth as the carriage was overrun by assassins outside. I did not intend for you to have it so soon, she had confessed. But now I bestow it upon you in the hour of my death. Protect it well, she told him as her heart gave out and her eyes closed for the last time. His mother's death was what drove him forward, what constantly reminded him of why Aurandel must rule Revelore. Without the order that Aurandel established, the continent would collapse and more rulers would be assassinated. Rook abruptly slid the dagger back into its sheath, unable to bear the painful memories any longer.

With a sigh, he dove back down to the sprawling city below. With the Tournament so near, there was no time to lose himself in the clouds.

SAOIRSE

Saoirse stood before the doors of her father's study, tension coiling in her stomach. She clutched Selussa's obsidian flask in her hand, her knuckles going pale as she tried to keep from trembling. She turned her free hand, reaching deep inside of herself to try and grasp the tendrils of power that lurked in her veins. She summoned the sea, calling out to it with bated breath. But just as Selussa had promised, nothing happened as she flexed her fingers and called to the waves. The water around her didn't so much as stir. The weight of her bargain settled on her shoulders with a note of finality.

One chance. She had one chance to get this right. Carved into the silver door, an intricate mural of Mer warriors in an ancient battle stared back at her. Their fearsome eyes seemed accusatory as she lifted a hand to knock, looking like they knew what she was about to do. Taking a deep breath, Saoirse rapped on the door and braced herself.

The door quickly opened and light spilled into the hall. King Angwin stood in the doorway, his expression softening as he looked down at her. Dark shadows pooled under his eyes, suggesting that he hadn't slept at all the night before.

"Saoirse," he whispered, relief in his eyes. "You're well."

"Why wouldn't I be?" she demanded, a spark of fear shooting through her. Had he found out about her midnight journey to the Fretum? Had Adda betrayed her?

"I just thought-" Her father began, his eyes scanning her face. "I just thought that after our conversation last night you might never want to see my face again." He gently touched her cheek, his face more tired than she had seen it in years. "And I wouldn't blame you for it, Saoirse," he added. "I know how much this means to you. And I'm sorry that I was harsh last night. I said things I regret, and for that I hope

you'll forgive me."

"I understand, Father," she replied. She slipped past him into the room, her churning stomach threatening to revolt at any moment. "I know why you did it," she continued, walking to the glass cabinet in the corner of his study. At least a dozen bottles and bejeweled flasks glittered behind the glass, amber liquids glowing in the blue light. She opened the cabinet slowly, fighting the urge to turn around and swim from the room. She grabbed a bottle from the shelf and turned to face him, fighting not to avert her eyes.

"It was foolish of me to even dream of becoming a tribute. Selfish even." She set the bottle down, pulling two crystal glasses from the lowest shelf. Her fingers trembled as she uncorked the bottle, betraying her fear and guilt. She poured the fine drink slowly, watching as the smooth liquid shimmered in a tiny stream from the mouth of the bottle. She glanced over her shoulder at her father, eyeing him from across the room. He stood before the hearth, his large form silhouetted by the blue undying flames that burned within. She exhaled a shaky breath, thankful that his back was turned from her.

"I know Elorshin needs me," she continued quickly, hoping he wouldn't turn around. "My duty is to my country, and the Tournament is just a childish dream." She slipped the onyx vial from her pouch and untwisted the crystal lid in a fluid movement. She watched as a drop of the elixir rippled through her father's glass, fizzing with bubbles as it hit the surface. But after a fleeting second, the bubbles melted away and the surface of the drink went still as glass. She shoved the vial back into her purse and turned, presenting both glasses in her hands. Her father was still standing with his back toward her. She crossed the room slowly, taking a seat before the hearth.

Her father was not gazing at the undying flames that crackled in the hearth, but rather at the portrait that hung above the fireplace. A beautiful painting of a young woman in finery surveyed the study, a tiny infant tucked in her arms. Dark curls framed her

mother's face in delicate tendrils, her pale blue eyes identical to Saoirse's own.

"You look so much like her," her father said wistfully, his voice thick with emotion. "I vowed to your mother that I would keep you safe, you know." He paused, letting the words settle in the room.

"The night before she left for Terradrin, the last night I saw her alive..." he trailed off. Memories streaked across his somber face. "I promised her that I would keep you out of harm's way. That I would protect you from the politics and court gambles that have cost Elorshin so much." His golden eyes glittered with tears. "I can't lose you, daughter," he pleaded. "You are my life. The one thing I treasure most in this world. To lose you would be to lose everything." He looked back down at her, tears now flowing freely from his eyes.

"You must know that," he pleaded. "I have no doubt in your abilities. In fact, I am certain that you would win. But I cannot let you go. There is more to the Tournament than you know."

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“I-,” she began. She fumbled with her words, unable to find anything adequate enough to say in response to his display of raw emotion. Frozen and wordless, she opened her mouth to speak, but her father had already taken the cup from her hands with a smile. Paralyzed, she watched as he brought the cup to his lips and drank from it. She took a sip from her own glass and choked down the sweet burn of the alcohol, trying to resist the sudden sting of tears that threatened to well up.

Her father’s eyes dilated slowly, hazy with the effects of the serum. His expression went blank, all thoughts vanishing from his mind like the calm after a storm. He stared at her with an empty gaze, awaiting instruction. The blanket of guilt she had come to adorn grew heavy on her shoulders, but it was too late and far too dangerous to turn back now. She was enchanting the king after all, and the price of such magic was death.

“You will allow me to compete in the Tournament,” she ordered him, following Selussa’s instructions. “I will become a tribute for Elorshin. I will represent the Mer well.” Her father slowly nodded, his eyes still blank and cloudy. A single tear spilled down her cheek as she spoke to him. As much as she had burned with rage and fury the night before, it was painful to deceive him. As an afterthought, she quickly added, “You will not accompany me to the Tournament. You will remain here in Kellam, awaiting my return.” She didn’t know whether or not she’d be able to go through with it under the heat of her father’s gaze. Even if Selussa’s potion worked, she couldn’t risk his presence at the Tournament for her own mental clarity. Saoirse quickly wiped her eyes, straightening in the chair. What was done was done. This was what she wanted, after all.

After a moment of absorption, her father slowly returned. His eyes were bright and

clear once more, completely free from the stupor of the Sea Witch's potion. It was as if he had never been in a trance at all, his features completely aware.

"Saoirse," he calmly told her, "You must be a tribute for Elorshin."

"Are you sure?" she asked, fighting the guilt that seeped into her voice.

"Yes. You will bring glory to our people. You have been well-trained for this, daughter. You will win and return with the Crown of Revelore, that much I am sure of. The Elders chose Sune Kresten and Aurelia Eleni as the other two tributes. It is only fair that you should join their team as they set out for the trials. I shall remain here in Kellam, continuing the investigation of the missing merchant ships." He gently wrapped her hands in his own, pulling her up from the chair. She buried her face in his shoulder, fighting back the urge to cry.

"Last night, I spoke out of fear and selfishness. Now I see that you must do this," he whispered, gently stroking her head the way he used to when she was a child. "Forgive me for wronging you, Saoirse."

He pulled back from the embrace and lifted his hands, brows furrowed in concentration. The water around his fingers began to hum with life and tremble as it rallied to his summons. He released a ripple that shot across the room and out across the Maeral Sea, surging with a force that nearly swept her away. Immediately the water felt different, softer and less hostile as it whispered around her. And then all went still.

"You are free to leave," he assured her, lowering his hands. "The Sea does not cage you any longer."

Saoirse bowed, the weight of what she had done settling over her with the force of a thousand stones. Her chest felt compressed, her heart thick in her throat. She lifted

her head again and met his penetrating gaze. “Thank you, father. I will miss you.”

“Bring us honor, Saoirse,” King Angwin ordered softly. “May glory be given.”

8

ROOK

“You must be quicker than all of them. Mentally and physically,” Raven said. “You can use your swords and wings, but do not forget to use your minds first,” she told them, leaning forward in the candlelight.

Veila was scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment, writing everything down religiously. She dipped her quill pen back into her pot of ink in a flash, immediately returning to the paper without a break in her writing. Eros leaned back casually in his chair, arms crossed as he processed Raven’s advice with cool resolve. Rook toyed with his dagger and ran a finger around the black, glittering opal at its center.

“My second trial took place in a cave.” Raven shivered at the memory. “We were tasked with finding a key that would unlock the door to the cave. But that was the easy part. What we didn’t know was that to try and use the key, white hot flames burst from the keyhole and seared the flesh of anyone who held the key.”

Rook winced, imagining Raven at only seventeen fighting for her life in that cave. He still remembered watching her from his family’s private box above the arena, her flash of ink-dark hair standing out against the sand. He had only been eight years old at the time, still in his adolescent Squab training days. He hadn’t understood the stakes and political implications of the Tournament then. Back then, he needed Raven to win for selfish, childish reasons: so that she could continue sneaking him out of the palace to fly with him past curfew; so they could sit on the roof and point out the sparkling constellations in the night sky; so that she could make faces at him across

the dinner table while their father lectured them on matters of state.

“What we also didn’t know,” Raven continued with a grimace, “was that each time we tried to turn the key and failed, flammable gas would slowly be leaked into the cave, creeping closer and closer to the flames. With enough gas in the air, the entire room would combust. And it did for two groups of tributes: the Tellusun and the Mer.” Her eyes darkened with the gruesome memory. “Only one team knew how to avoid the flames. The Terradrin tributes realized that the cave was made of memordium stone, a kind of living rock that is sensitive to enchantment. There was a pool of water in the cave, deliberately placed there by the Master of Trials. From there, the Terradrin tributes determined that the keyhole would not release a plume of fire if first dampened with water. They were able to unlock the door quickly without being burned. We didn’t know it then, but water was the true key. It was the ultimate tool that would open the rocks for us. And it was right there under our noses.” She looked around at all of them, her eyes full of memory and sorrow. “But that is all in hindsight. We didn’t figure out that the stone had to be dampened with water. I fought through the flames and turned the key, my hands burning. If I had only stopped to think and use the resources at my disposal, one of my teammates would still be alive today. But we were anxious to complete the trial as quickly as possible, believing that blunt force and sheer willpower would get us through to the next trial.”

Rook knew the story well. In the end, one of Raven’s fellow tributes had burned alive in that cave. Raven blamed herself for his death, even after ten years. Every time she looked at the twisted flesh of her hands, she was reminded of that cave. Sometimes, when Raven’s carefully-fortified guard was down, Rook could glimpse the same seventeen year old in her eyes. He had seen the subtle signs of her lingering fear, from the slight twitch in her fingers when a fire came roaring to life in the hearth, to the wide-eyed look she’d get when she felt cornered. But when Raven caught him watching her, she’d harden back into impenetrable stone, any cracks of weakness quickly sealed back up like a tomb.

“Now do you understand why it is best to use your heads before your swords?” Raven asked them, looking each of them in the eyes. “Utilize your mind above anything else. Look around at your surroundings. See what tools are in plain sight. The trials rely half on strength, the other half on wit and mental clarity.”

Everyone nodded soberly, saying nothing. The room was heavy and foreboding, like a storm rumbling on the horizon. Rook looked around the darkened library, resisting the urge to stare at his sister’s mangled hands. He couldn’t imagine how she must’ve felt when the flames tore through the cave and ignited the room behind her. But he would soon find out. There were sure to be horrors in his own upcoming trials. His gut twisted at the thought of losing Eros and Veila, and nausea suddenly churned in his stomach. He hooked his dagger back in its scabbard at his waist, swiftly rising from the table. Following his lead, Eros and Veila rose from their places at the meeting table without a word.

“We’re to dine with Princess Hasana of Tellusun,” Rook murmured, looking over his shoulder at his sister. She didn’t need to ask to be alone; he simply knew. Raven remained seated, completely lost in thought. Haunting shadows played against her face as the candle flame flickered before her. She merely nodded at his comment, barely registering what he had said. It was always like this when she brought up anything relating to her experiences in the Tournament. Rook’s heart broke for her. But he was grateful she would relive her traumas in order to help him. To help save his life.

For his life was what hung in the balance.

Rook led Eros and Veila back through the stone hallway that led to the private library at the heart of the mountain, his mind racing with thoughts of the Tournament. Judging on his friends’ lack of words, he guessed that they too were lost in their own thoughts. Silently, they wove through the intricate labyrinth without speaking. Eventually, sunlight began to brighten the corridors, indicating that they were near

the surface of the mountain.

“Well, that was encouraging,” Eros finally said when they reached the throne room of the Citadel. Though it was meant to be a jest, there was no humor in his voice.

“It was helpful, if not a little intimidating,” Veila mumbled, clutching her notes to her chest as wind blew through the open windows of the throne room. “We’ll win, I know it.”

“We must win,” Rook added, crossing his arms and looking out across the city. “We must keep the Crown and the throne of Revelore.” He turned to them, his eyes softening. “And keep our lives, too.”

Eros and Veila nodded in return, coming to join him at the window. Coarinth spread out wide below the palace, beautiful as it always was. Smooth sandstone buildings and levitating breezeways stood proudly against the azure sky, the stunning feats of architecture echoing the creativity and genius of the Aura.

“How much do you think the other tributes know about the trials?” Eros asked, interrupting the silence.

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“They have their mentors just like we do,” Veila answered. “Their Tournament Ambassadors have analyzed every past trial and memorized every game, I can assure you. Our rivals will be well-prepared. Don’t think for one second that we have the advantage here. The arena will be unlike anything we’ve ever experienced before.”

Rook squinted, scanning the distant rolling hills beyond the mountain. If not for the sheer size of the arena at the base of the mountain, he wouldn’t be able to see anything other than the blur of green woodlands that spread out below Mt. Thalia in a sea of shifting treetops. The Stone Circle towered above the trees, crouched in the forest like a beast preparing to strike. From Coarinth, the menacing arena was a mere streak of gray against the forest. He had gazed at the ancient amphitheater all his life, but had never seen it as a palpable force. Until now.

“Have all the tributes arrived yet?” Eros asked. “The Tournament begins in two days.”

Rook knew the real question hidden between his words. Eros knew perfectly well that the tributes from Terradrin had arrived during the night, hidden in the cover of nightfall as they climbed out of the underground depths of their kingdom. The only people missing now were the people of Elorshin: the Mer.

“No,” Rook answered, turning from the window. “We’ve not had word from the Mer. If they aren’t arriving sometime today, they’ll be here tomorrow at the latest.”

“Not that it matters,” Eros said with a wry grin. “I’ll be surprised if they last through the first trial.”

Of all the nations that arrived within the city for the Tournament, the presence of the Mer created the most tension. On top of the bitter political history between their nations, this would be the first Tournament since the deaths of Aurandel's former rulers eight years ago. Rook himself didn't know if he could remain civilized around the enemy kingdom once they arrived.

* * *

"Tell me, prince, what do you recall of the Shujaa Desert?" Hasana asked, taking a sip of her noori tea. She poured herself some more, the hot amber shimmering in the afternoon light as it drained from the pot. A gentle breeze drifted across the table, the scent of jasmine and spiced noori on the wind. The princess had invited Rook and his companions to dine in a floating pavilion above the Citadel, one of the most beautiful views of Coarinth.

"It was hot," Rook replied bluntly. He mentally cursed himself for making such a slow-witted remark.

"Obviously," Veila snorted. She leaned back in her chair, strands of red hair pulling from her tight braid in the wind. Beside her, Eros was grinning.

Hasana merely smiled at Rook, a glimmer of humor in her golden brown eyes. There was a peacefulness about the princess, something about her calm demeanor that made everyone in her vicinity relax. Her dark hair was piled high on her head, twisting in intricate braids and threaded with beads of gold. Despite being high in the clouds, Hasana still wore her traditional desert attire. The crisp, white fabric of her tunic was loose and billowy, her wide sleeves tapered at her wrists with gold cuffs. Tinkling hoops and spiraling cuffs capped her ears in brilliant spills of gold. But her physical appearance was not what captivated everyone at the table. It was her soft voice and the carefully-chosen words that slipped from her mouth. When he had trained in the Shujaa Desert years ago, she had only exchanged a few words with him. But even

then, he knew that there was something special about her.

“It is quite hot,” she acknowledged. Surprisingly, her tone was not mocking in the slightest. “And very dry,” she added with a wry smile.

“I remember the people the most,” Rook continued, watching as a flock of birds flew past the pavilion, darting in and out of the clouds. “Everyone was so kind and attentive. The generosity of your people is a rare gift in these lands,” he added honestly.

“Indeed,” Hasana replied, taking another sip of her tea. “Hospitality is greatly valued in Tellusun. I’m glad you noticed.”

“I’ve never been to the Shujaa Desert,” Eros said wistfully. “Though I’d like to go one day.”

“Perhaps after the Tournament,” Hasana offered. But as soon as she uttered the words, the air in the pavilion grew heavy. There was little promise in the statement. They all knew that half of the tributes could be dead after the trials. Those who survived would return to their own lands, broken and scarred beyond recognition. The winning kingdom would possess the Crown, accepting their newly-granted power without any thought of the losing nations. For ten more years, they would hold each other at arms’ length until the next Tournament season. There would be no casual traveling or frivolity. Not after the Tournament.

Clearing his throat, Rook said, “A marvelous idea, Princess. How are you enjoying your stay here in Coarinth?” he asked, changing the subject.

“I like it quite well. Hasana gazed out across the sprawling city below them. The gauzy scarf draped around her neck caught on the breeze, flowing in the gentle wind. “Everything I have seen is beautiful. I know why your people love the clouds so

much. If I lived among the birds, I'd likely never touch foot on land again." Something darkened in her expression as she gazed out beyond the pavilion. "My father spoke highly of the city. All of his memories of this place were lovely. I begged him to tell me about Coarinth over and over again when I was a child," she said wistfully. "Though I doubt he will ever return. He would not survive the journey."

After a beat of silence, Rook offered, "I'm sorry to hear that your father is sick." He had met the ancient ruler during his tour of Tellusun in his youth. From what he remembered, the King of the Clay City had been kind to him. "I pray he recovers swiftly. Something tells me that he will step foot in Coarinth again. In the meantime, you should gather your own stories to tell him when you return," he added. "Is there anything else you'd like to see while you're here?"

She hesitated, peering at him as though he was some kind of oddity. "I'd love a tour of your family's famed library sometime," she finally told him. "Though it is my understanding that no one but the royal family may gaze upon your treasure trove of books. I understand if it is a request you cannot meet." It was silent for a few minutes, nothing but the movement of the wind and the call of birds to fill the air.

"I suppose we can make an exception for you, Princess Hasana," Rook replied with a swift grin. "Few eyes have ever seen our collection of books in the mountain, but it would be an honor to show you." Hasana's golden eyes lit up, pure delight on her face. "If you would please follow me," Rook told her, standing up from the tea table. He gave her his arm, and she took it carefully. Out of the corner of his eye, Rook watched Veila give him a look of warning, her mouth twisting into a disapproving frown.

"Tell me, princess," Rook asked, "have you ever flown before?" Hasana shook her head, eyes widening as he wrapped a hand around her waist. He pulled her into his arms and unfurled his wings, striding toward the edge of the levitating pavilion. Hot

air rushed in from the south and tugged on his clothes and feathers. “Hold on tight.”

Without another word, Rook leaped off the side of the building and caught a draft of wind. Hasana, to her credit, merely gave a wordless gasp as they fell through the air. Rook swept his wings upward, pulling them higher into the sky. As always, a rush of adrenaline filled his chest as he soared through the clouds, the familiar breath of wind whispering across his wings like the greeting of an old friend. Though Hasana clutched at his collar, she looked out across the city with wide-eyed excitement. He held her firmly to his chest, knowing that if anything were to happen to the Princess of the Clay City, the Revelore Tournament would be the least of his problems.

Rook flew them straight to the Citadel, weaving between towers and floating homes with ease. He smiled as Hasana took it all in, pure awe etched across her face. The Citadel loomed before them, washed in golden light and marbled with the shadows of clouds that drifted overhead. Tucked into the mountainside at the highest peak in all of Revelore, his home sat like an ancient monarch proudly surveying her land. He glided down to the open courtyard where the banquet would be held later that evening, spiraling downward. With as much grace as he could muster, he landed gently onto the grand staircase.

“That was incredible!” Hasana exclaimed breathlessly. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

Rook set her down carefully and folded his wings against his back once more. “I’m glad it didn’t frighten you too much. For those who have never left the surface, it can be terrifying.” Inwardly, he was impressed by the princess. She was curious and brave, possessing a rare hunger to understand his world. Not many in Revelore would be so open-minded. He offered her his arm and she took it eagerly.

They strode into the throne room, heading for the secret corridors that were buried in the mountain. Hasana stared wide-eyed at the huge open windows, taking in the

stunning view of the mountain range. Rook led her to the inner wall of the throne room, guiding her behind the throne and into the private hallway that led to he and Raven's personal chambers. Hasana said nothing as they descended into the darkness, merely absorbing everything they walked past with quiet wonder.

After weaving through several dark hallways, they reached the great oak doors of the library. Rook smiled as he pushed open the doors, watching as Hasana gasped in delight. As always, a roaring fire was burning in the hearth, making the room glow with a soft, inviting light. The floor-to-ceiling bookshelves stood like soldiers, protecting the invaluable texts. Hasana wandered between the shelves, touching the book spines as she walked past. Rook followed a few paces behind her, his heart swelling with pride. He could count on one hand the number of outsiders who had seen the heart of Mt.Thalia. Though he couldn't say why, he was glad that Princess Hasana of Tellusun was now one of them.

"Incredible," Hasana whispered as they made their way through the library. "I've never seen so many books in my life."

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“They are the pride of our family,” Rook explained, picking up a volume. “Some would say they are the most valuable treasures we possess.” Hasana was silent, merely walking through the endless rows in slack-jawed wonder. Rook followed her around the corner, stopping abruptly when he saw what she was staring at.

He went cold with regret.

Hasana stood before the great glass case at the center of the room, gazing at the Crown of Revelore displayed within. It suddenly occurred to him that it had been insensitive and even foolish of him to show her the library. Why had he thought it a good idea to show her the Crown that all Revelorians envied?

Hasana was staring intently at the jewel-encrusted crown, something like amazement and terror on her face. “I’ve never seen it in person before,” she said slowly, as if in a trance. She placed a finger on the glass, trying to touch the Crown. “Each jewel represents a nation,” she breathed, her eyes tracing the four points of the Crown and the distinctly-colored jewels on each tip. “Forged for the continent of Revelore during the Great Peace thousands of years ago. It is said that the Crown was created as a weapon to protect the continent if the Titans of legend were to ever resurrect and return to take their revenge.”

“Yes, it was forged during the Great Peace,” Rook agreed, desperately trying to end this conversation and herd Hasana out before anyone discovered how foolish he had been to take her there. “But the rest of the rumors are meritless folklore, stories told to children to keep them from misbehaving. The Crown isn’t a weapon, it is merely a political symbol.” He tried to take her hand and steer her away, but she jerked away from him.

“Whoever possesses the Crown, possesses Revelore,” Hasana was saying, still mesmerized. Her eyes caught on the gleaming points of the Crown, shining like the spires of an ancient temple in the sunset. An eerie feeling crept up Rook’s neck as he watched her expression change from awe to hunger.

“Yes,” Rook interrupted, taking her hand and pulling her away from the display case. “And every nation has an equal chance of winning it fairly. The worthy are rewarded.” She reluctantly followed him, her eyes never leaving the glittering Crown.

“That’s not true,” she countered softly. Rook’s grip on her hand slackened, and he took in the sight of her form silhouetted by the blazing fireplace.

“There is no fair chance,” Hasana continued firmly. “Not while my people are starving and my lands are dying. Not while this continent is plagued with disunity and secrets. There is only ever one winner, and the rest suffer. The Crown doesn’t belong in the hands of one country. That is not how our forebears intended it to be. Do you really think that the Four Kinsmen would be proud of how Revelore has deteriorated into something so unrecognizable and divided?”

“What are you talking about?” Rook asked. “I-”

“What are you doing here?” a voice boomed from across the library.

Rook cursed at the sound of his sister’s commanding voice. He looked toward the doorway, watching as Raven strode in with a grim expression on her face.

“Raven,” Rook began, trying to calm his sister. “This is not what you think-”

“Get out,” his sister growled. She leveled a glare at Hasana that was so chilling that the Maeral Sea could’ve frozen over. “Get out!”

Hasana said nothing, merely returning Raven's searing gaze with a polite nod. The Tellusun Princess exited the library with her back straight and her chin up, defiant and dignified. Raven whirled around to face Rook, her billowing robes pooling around her feet.

"What the Hel do you think you're doing?" she snarled. "Bestowing generosity upon the poor girl because her father is dying? Offering one look at the Crown before the Tournament, so that she can go tell her tributes that it's real?" Raven clenched her fists, her wings flaring with a fury so palpable that it made the library shudder.

"Why can't we share this place?" Rook retorted. "What's so wrong with finding an ally in Hasana? What are you afraid of?"

Raven narrowed her eyes at him. "We can't afford to form alliances. To have friends," she answered in a poisonous tone. "Having friends and trusting strangers gets you killed. That is not how things work, little brother."

"Is it not true that the Crown was intended to be shared? What changed over the centuries to make us fight like animals for the right to possess it?" Rook asked, surprising even himself by the question. He knew the answers. He had been taught them his whole life. So why had he asked?

Raven's eyes darkened like an unforgiving squall on the horizon. That look never failed to make the hair on the back of his neck stand on edge. It was the look that she had come to be known for, the look of a merciless monarch that struck fear into the hearts of the greatest warriors in Revelore. There was a reason she was called the Iron Queen, the Champion.

"Why must the Tournament draw Tellusun, Elorshin, and Terradrin here like lambs to the slaughter every decade?" Rook continued brazenly. His words were blasphemous.

“Because,” Raven replied, her voice like daggers, “the Tournament keeps the peace.” She looked over his shoulder at the Crown, her eyes shining in the firelight. “You were there the day mother and father were assassinated by those rogue Terradrin Revolutionaries. I will do whatever it takes to ensure that you and I don’t face the same bloody fate.” Her eyes softened as she looked at him. “You have such a good heart, Rook. But to win, your heart mustn’t be good. It must be impenetrable. As strong as this mountain,” Raven added, gesturing to the cavernous walls around them.

“I’m sorry for bringing Hasana here,” Rook answered, lowering his head. “ I know why we must keep our treasures secret. I know why the Crown must be kept safe,” he said, half to Raven and half to himself. Something in him was stirring, and he didn’t like the direction his thoughts were taking.

“This is just the way things are,” Raven said softly, the hot wrath in her eyes slowly melting into their usual cool reserve.

“Understood,” Rook acknowledged. He strode from the library, unable to talk any longer. He expected to feel shame as he wove through the mountain tunnels. He wanted to feel guilty for bringing Hasana to his family’s sacred quarters. But instead, all he felt was anger.

There is no fair chance. Hasana’s words echoed through his head as he rose through the mountain towards the surface. There is only ever one winner, and the rest suffer.

Hadn’t his own family suffered enough? Hadn’t they fought tooth and nail to get where they were now? Didn’t they deserve to rule? But even as the questions burned through him, a part of Rook wondered why he hadn’t known that the Tellusun people were starving. Did Raven know?

Rook emerged from the hallway, entering into the sun-lit throne room. The afternoon light shifted to pink and purple as the evening sunset bloomed along the horizon like

spilled ink. He strode toward an open window, looking out on the courtyard below. There was a frenzy of activity as servants readied the pavilion for the upcoming tribute's banquet. He watched as they strung up garlands of leaves and twinkling lights, unfurling silk panels and set out stunning bouquets of exotic flowers on every table. He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. All of the fanfare and lavish display suddenly seemed cruel in light of what Hasana had shared in the library. They decorated the palace and fed the tributes fine food to mask the horrors to come and hide the tension brewing between the nations. But Rook could do nothing.

He didn't even know if he wanted things to change in the first place.

SAOIRSE

They traveled through the Maeral Sea for a day, touring the neighboring villages along the winding eastern road that led to Aurandel. Their entourage was composed of palace servants, members of the Torqen, and ambassadors of Elorshin. They paraded from one town to the next, a flurry of color and finery.

At the center of the caravan, the honored tributes were displayed in an open carriage for all to see. Six horse-like kelpies pulled their carriage, connected by glittering gold chains that caught the shifting light of the sun. Strands of seashells and pearls chimed together on their harnesses as the aquatic creatures dove over the crowds in a brilliant show of grace. The kelpies' iridescent manes streamed behind them in a shock of deep green, mimicking the sway of seagrass in the current. The onlookers erupted into applause as the kelpie-drawn carriages left cascades of bubbles trailing behind them like banners.

Dressed in their freshly-polished Torqen armor and crowned with laurel wreaths, Saoirse, Aurelia, and Sune waved as they passed through crowds of Merfolk. Grinning children tossed golden beads and flower petals over them as they passed, staring up in wonder at the great warriors who would redeem their nation. The purple-robed Elders swam behind the tributes, led by Adda Carew.

Though Saoirse waved and smiled, every moment was surreal. She could hardly comprehend that she was a tribute in the Revelore Tournament, traveling to the famed Mt. Thalia. It was all beyond her wildest dreams. It seemed only yesterday that she had watched the tribute procession as a child, awe-struck by the tributes sent to represent Elorshin. Although it had always been her dream to compete in the

Tournament, she hadn't really believed it was a possibility. And yet, in the flurry of flowers and ceremony, a seed of guilt had taken root in her heart. Every time she lifted a hand and called to the ocean, she was reminded of what she had done. There was no power in her touch now. Not even the slightest ripple of seawater answered her call. She felt hollow without her powers. She felt even emptier knowing that she had made a deal with a criminal witch and deceived her father. Even as she waved to hopeful Merfolk and accepted countless gifts that were shoved into her hands, shame seeped into her mind like an incessant poison. She was glad she had forced her father to stay behind. With how guilty she felt, she might not have been able to go through with it had he traveled with them.

It is for the best, she told herself.

But her father's hesitation to let her go had haunted her. There is more to the Tournament than you know. What had he meant by that? What was he not telling her?

Saoirse forced a grin, sending a beaming smile out into the crowd and effectively closing the door of her own thoughts. They sped across the crowd in a crisscross, the kelpies whinnying as the spectators roared their approval.

"He's loving every moment of this," Aurelia mumbled in her ear. Sune's arms were outstretched, waving to the crowd as if he were the sole tribute sent to Aurandel.

"And I'm loving every minute that he gets under your skin," Saoirse replied. She could remember when the three of them had trained together as young soldiers, competitive even then. Three years ahead of her, Sune and Aurelia had always been at each other's throats, battling for the right to lead the Torqen. But although they were rivals, Saoirse was secretly grateful that Sune had been chosen. Though Aurelia would never admit it, every soldier knew that she and Sune were like two sides of the same coin. Together, the three of them actually stood a fighting chance in the arena.

“How far are we from the Coast of Delore?” Saoirse asked, squinting into the great expanse of crystal blue waves ahead of them. Twinkling lights of more Mer villages shone in the distance, strung together like a necklace of pearls.

“Only a few more hours,” Aurelia replied, looking skyward at the waters above them. The eastern road stretched out through the Maeral Sea like a great serpent, cutting through underwater ravines and valleys as any road on land might. “I’d imagine we’d reach the harbor by the late afternoon.”

“And we are to be ferried by the Aura from the harbor to the mountain?” Saoirse asked, trying to remember the detailed itinerary that had been given to them by Vangelis Mitrou, Tournament Ambassador of Elorshin.

“Yes,” Aurelia answered. “And I suspect our Auran hosts will want to boast their technology while they’re at it.”

She wondered how they would be transported across the vast woodlands of Aurandel in such a short time. They were expected to arrive in time for the tribute banquet that evening, and it would take at least a week to travel by foot. As much as she despised the winged people, Saoirse had to admit she was curious to see how they lived. Centuries ago, the four nations of Revelore would travel across the continent often, conducting trade and exchanging goods with each other regularly. But now, finding a Revelorian who had ever ventured beyond their own nation was rare. Aurandel’s strict trade sanctions and embargoes made it impossible for merchants to sell their wares beyond their borders, except only under strict Auran supervision. Saoirse herself had only stepped foot on land a handful of times, journeying to the neutral islands that hovered over the Maeral Sea to train with the Torqen.

“I’ve heard they have flying carriages,” Sune offered, looking over his shoulder at them.

“Eavesdropping again, are we Captain Kresten?” Aurelia asked, tossing Saoirse a look of annoyance.

“We are a team now, are we not? Any words you have to share with Saoirse are to be shared with me too.”

Aurelia smirked. “Feeling left out? There will be plenty of time to talk in the arena, you know.”

Sune frowned, clearly unamused by Aurelia’s banter. “How could I forget that my life is in the hands of my greatest rival?” he mumbled to himself. “Don’t kill me before we get there.”

* * *

Several hours later, Saoirse stared up at the massive dock columns that jutted out from the sea floor. Countless docks stretched out from the embankment, with huge ships chained along the length of planks. From her vantage point, the rows of wooden columns stood like a great underwater forest, spilling out through the shallow waters for as far as the eye could see. Shafts of golden sunlight cut through the turquoise waves, casting patterns of shadow over their entourage. The sand floor was marbled in orange and shadows, shifting as the waves churned above.

At the very far end of the harbor, an ancient set of stairs emerged from the sand. The cracked stone staircase was covered in algae and moss. Two stone statues guarded the stairs, standing on either side. Vines curled along their marble bodies, growing there after years of neglect. On the left side, a Mer woman stood with outstretched arms, her hair flowing around her head as if she was a real being standing in the water. On the right, an Auran male stretched out his stone wings, a soft smile on his stoic face. Saoirse shuddered as they swam to the staircase. Crafted centuries ago, the staircase represented a union between the people of the sea and the people of the air, a gateway

for all people to cross. Now, the bridge that once unified the kingdoms was crumbling and worn, the faces of its stone guardians chipped with jagged edges.

Stepping from the kelpie-pulled carriage, Saoirse and her fellow tributes swam to the staircase. She gulped in fresh seawater, anxiety knotting in her stomach. It was the last time she would breathe in the familiar waves until she returned home from the Tournament.

Until we return to Kellam Keep with the Crown in our hands, she told herself.

Their entourage of Mer began climbing the grand staircase, most of the younger servants and attendants staring in wonder at the marvelous feat of architecture. Saoirse felt the pull of the sea as she rose step by step, as if it was begging her to stay in its safe, watery embrace. She continued to climb, the feel of the algae-soft steps strange on her webbed toes. She suddenly realized that on land she would have to wear shoes. In the cool waves of the ocean, she had no need for boots or covered feet. It was such a minuscule thought compared to what she was about to face in the Tournament, but the mere notion of something as simple as clothing represented so much more.

Everything was about to change.

The water warmed as they neared the surface, the afternoon sun filtering through the clear water in beams of gold. Saoirse looked up, her eyes widening at the sight of the sky just beyond the wall of waves. With one more gulp of seawater, she broke the surface of the ocean, a rush of hot air quickly enveloping her. She choked in the dry wind and gasped for air. She fumbled for the vial of titansblood elixir in her purse, given to her by the Elders right before they departed from Kellam. Uncorking it quickly, Saoirse choked down the foul potion in a swift gulp. Since training on the Isles of Mythos every summer with the Torqen, she had long-since learned to splash it down her throat as quickly as possible. She could feel her lung capacity adjusting,

the willowherb and mangrove concoction slowly enabling her to breathe on the surface. Her insides twisted painfully and her throat went as dry as the Shujaa Desert. But then she could breathe, her lungs taking in the air as though she had always breathed on land. She opened her eyes, taking in the sight of white sand. The other Mer in their party were choking down titansblood, gasping for air like fishes out of water. Without the elixir, none of them would have been able to last long on the surface.

Saoirse looked to Aurelia, who stared at the sky as if she had never seen it before. Of course they had ventured onto the Isles many times, but for some reason, this felt daunting and different. The vibrant blue sky swept across the horizon, dotted with tufts of white clouds. And beyond the beach, a swath of deep green unfurled across rolling hills. The great woodlands of Aurandel swept across the land in a blanket of trees for as far as the eye could see. And beyond the woodlands, Mt. Thalia stretched into the clouds, a gigantic wall of stone that seemed to grow out of the earth and into the sky like a living creature. Rising above the endless sweep of trees, the great beast of a mountain stood like a faithful protector of Aurandel, a titan guarding its people and lifting them into the clouds.

“Hel’s teeth. It’s quite something, isn’t it?” Aurelia breathed beside her, nodding to the impressive mountain that loomed in the distance.

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“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“And to think we’ll dine at the top of that mountain,” Sune added after he had downed his titansblood elixir. He shook out his own dark hair, sending droplets flying everywhere. Saoirse squinted at Mt. Thalia, as if she could make out the infamous sky Citadel that nestled in the heart of Coarinth.

“Tributes,” a voice interrupted. Saoirse turned, seeing Vangelis approach them from the ocean staircase. The ambassador was tall and lean, his slightly-transparent scales a deep blue against his skin. As the Tournament Ambassador of Elorshin, he represented the throne from afar.

“I have a salve for you all,” Vangelis said, pulling out three glass jars from a satchel at his waist. “Put a thin layer over your scales every morning and night. It will prevent your skin from drying out and cracking. The air up at the mountain’s peak is swift and unforgiving.”

Saoirse took the jars from his outstretched hands, giving one to Sune and Aurelia. She dipped a finger into the soft salve. It was cool and rich to the touch.

“Never go anywhere without your titansblood elixirs,” Vangelis warned them. “You must carry it with you at all times. One dose wears out after five hours. If you are without it, suffocation is sure to follow.” The three of them nodded, tucking their vials of titansblood into their satchels. Just as a surface dweller might drown in the ocean, drowning on land was a very real possibility for them.

“Before we arrive in Coarinth, you also must prepare yourselves for hostility,”

Vangelis continued gravely. "I've visited the capital several times over the years. Though I was treated cordially by the palace officials for the most part, do not expect to be welcomed as equals. There will be whispers behind your back, and perhaps even direct threats to your face. Every Auran has been taught that Mer are the cause of every evil that has occurred on the continent, including the Revelore Tournament itself."

"So we'll be hated, whether secretly or blatantly," Aurelia huffed, crossing her arms.

"I wouldn't expect anything less of their kind," Sune added. "They're a prejudiced lot. They think that just because they rule the skies, they can look down on everyone else."

"Not just the Aura," Vangelis continued. "The Tellusun and Terradrin too. They've all been taught that we can't be trusted. In their eyes, the Mer are deceptive and cunning."

"Good to know," Aurelia replied with a snort. "I'll return the favor, I can assure you. If they want to treat us like animals, I'll treat them like sea scum," she spat.

"I don't think we should do that," Saoirse offered quietly. They all looked at her skeptically. "We should get to know them. The closer we are to our enemies, the more likely it will be that we can uncover their weak spots. They won't let us close if we are hostile."

"I'd rather be kept at arm's length than be a submissive servant, groveling at their sandaled-feet," Aurelia countered.

"I am not one to grovel, nor do I readily submit myself to someone else's prejudice," Saoirse returned. "But I believe we should approach this with a different strategy. We should make them think they can trust us. Make them think we are weak and passive."

It will be unexpected.”

“Perhaps she is right,” Sune said thoughtfully. “They expect us to return their hostility. They’d be taken aback by our openness. We can use that to our advantage.”

“Unless they suspect us for acting kindly,” Aurelia shook her head. “I’ll play along, but only so far. I won’t put up with slander. I’ll speak up if I hear any words against our king and our people.” She stomped off, her Torqen armor catching the light of the sun as she headed for the treeline.

Saoirse followed her, their party trailing up the beach behind them. It was true that she needed to be close to her enemies. If she wasn’t familiar with their weaknesses, she didn’t stand a chance in the trials. But there was more to her strategy than that. With every step forward, she was reminded of her bargain with Selussa. I want you to kill the prince. The words echoed through her head like the pounding of a drum. Prince Rook was not only a closely-guarded royal and fierce competitor, he was an enigma she didn’t understand. She needed to think like him, study his moves, and predict his choices. And if she ever had a chance at gaining such information about him, she needed to get close.

Sighing, she trailed after them, her feet sinking into the white sand. As she walked through the sloped hills, her neck prickled with the sensation that someone was watching her. She glanced over her shoulder, quickly averting her eyes when she spotted Adda staring at her from afar. She could feel the Elder’s piercing green eyes boring into her, following her every move. She shivered in the haunting feeling of Adda’s gaze. The High Elder would be there every step of the way, following in her shadow.

You made this choice, Saoirse chided herself. Now it's time to follow through.

They halted at the treeline, gathering together under the towering branches. Saoirse

stared in awe at the mighty canopies of green woven together high above. This world was so different from the vibrant coral walls and jungles of seagrass in Kellam. She looked down at the white sand that merged together with rich brown soil, mingling seamlessly. Little pink seashells were scattered throughout the soil, small reminders of the sea stretching beyond.

The trees began to rustle above them, shuddering in a chorus of shifting leaves. The sound of distant wingbeats filled the air like the rumble of thunder. Saoirse glanced up and shielded her eyes as a strong gust of wind swept across the sand.

Six white carriages emerged from the clouds, spiraling down as gracefully as doves. Teams of winged horses sped through the air, pulling the carriages along behind them. The horses moved as one unit, lifting their wings in unison.

“Titans,” Aurelia breathed, her eyes widening as the horses galloped through the clouds. They were all different colors, some speckled gray and others as dark as the night sky. The winged horses were hitched together by shimmering silver chains and painted with crushed gold flecks. They dove down, spiraling to the earth in a swirl of feathers.

The carriages halted before the crowd of Mer, sand spraying everywhere as the horses landed on solid ground. The first carriage opened, and a striking woman emerged from the cabin, her silver-grey hair catching in the afternoon light. She was clad in the traditional robes of the Aura. Her dress were gathered to one shoulder, clasped together by a gold medallion. Her sandals were tied intricately across her ankles, curving up her calves.

“Ambassador Cresta,” Vangelis called with a bow. “A pleasure to see you, as always.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Cresta replied with a bow in return. “I trust your travels went

smoothly?” Her eyes scanned the crowd behind him, sizing up the entire Mer party. While pleasantries slipped from her lips, her mouth seemed to be in a perpetual frown.

“Indeed,” Vangelis answered. He took a step back, gesturing to the tributes. “I present to you the tributes of Elorshin. Aurelia Eleni and Sune Kresten, captains of the Torqen guard,” he offered, directing Cresta’s gaze toward the pair of leaders.

“And-” he paused, “Princess Saoirse Kellamheart, daughter of King Angwin.”

Cresta gazed at Saoirse, assessing her with hawk-like focus. But she said nothing, merely blinking at her. “Welcome, tributes,” the ambassador said with a nod. “It is a great honor to be selected for the Revelore Tournament. You bring your country immense honor.” She looked at each one of them slowly, as if she could see right through their silver armor. “If you would please follow me to our raeda, we shall ferry you to Mt. Thalia.” With that, she swiftly turned and walked back to the carriages.

The rest of their entourage followed behind, carrying their various chests and trunks to the awaiting carriages. Aurelia stepped into the raeda without a second thought, reaching a hand out to Saoirse. Saoirse paused and stared at the huge horses connected to the carriage. They kicked at the ground impatiently, their hooves spraying sand. Saoirse tore her gaze away and grabbed Aurelia’s outstretched hand, hoisting herself up. Inside, the interior of the coach was decadently lavish. The cabin was surrounded by windows so large that every occupant had a breathtaking view even while seated. The walls were framed by polished gold paneling, and plush cushions lined the booths. Placed on each seat, a pair of boots sat waiting for them.

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“I suppose this is their way of telling us our feet are horrid,” Aurelia laughed, sitting down to assess the shoes. They were made of soft leather, laced in the front with silver thread. The boots were wider at the toes, custom-made to accommodate their webbed feet.

Saoirse slipped a foot in, immediately hating the unnatural confinement. Lacing up her boots, she sunk into the plush cushions and leaned back. She was already sore from the effort of walking on land. She gazed out the window, taking in the turquoise waters of the Maeral Sea beyond the beach. It shimmered in the light, undulating as if it were alive. It called to her, beckoning her to return.

The raeda jerked forward, sending Saoirse’s stomach twisting into knots. She clutched Aurelia’s hand as the beach and treeline blurred. They were moving impossibly fast, wind swirling through the open windows and tangling Saoirse’s curls. She couldn’t help but laugh as the carriage rose and lifted off the ground. She felt weightless, her abdomen churning with something she could only describe as light. The sensation of flying was similar to the feeling of rising through water, but there was something more terrifying and uncertain about it. She gasped when they began to ascend, rising above the trees and into wisps of clouds. Sune was cursing, his normally calm demeanor cracking as they rose higher and higher. Aurelia clutched her hand tighter, her knuckles going white. She shut her eyes tightly and grimaced as they continued to soar upward. But Saoirse’s eyes were open. Warmth and light filled the carriage as they soared through the sky. The Tournament was the farthest thing from her mind as she gazed out at the breathtaking view of the world below.

SAOIRSE

The capital city of Coarinth was more beautiful than Saoirse could've ever imagined. From the view of the flying carriages, the sunset was breathtaking. The sky was streaked with rich hues of purple and pink, the whisper of night on the edge of the horizon. She didn't know what she had expected in coming to the capital of her nation's greatest enemy, but it certainly wasn't this. She understood now why many believed Mt. Thalia to be the birthplace of Revelore, the home of the Titans.

They sped over the city like a flock of birds, their raeda drivers expertly navigating the sprawling capital. Coarinth gradually sloped up the mountain, its roads leading up to the highest peak in all of Revelore: The Citadel of Aurandel. Saoirse marveled at the sky bridges that hung in the air, twisting like branches over the buildings below. The bridges connected to different doorways and towers through the air in a dance only known by those who inhabited the floating pavilions. Though she didn't want to admit it, the innovation of the Aura was impressive. She wondered how the levitating buildings managed to float in the air without any legs or pillars. But even more impressive than the architecture were the winged people who soared through the clouds, seeming as weightless as birds. Several Aerials sped by their raeda carriages, weaving between the floating courtyards and open bridges with ease. Saoirse watched as the flying soldiers glided through the air, spinning and diving in a thrilling display of coordination and strength.

"Showing off," Aurelia huffed, throwing a pointed glance towards Sune. "Are we supposed to be impressed? How tasteless." Sune ignored her, merely brooding in the corner of the cabin with his arms crossed.

Their carriage soared towards the Citadel, the topmost circle of the city of Coarinth. Saoirse tried not to gape as they drew nearer to the highest building in Revelore. She had studied illustrations of the impressive structure in her lessons, but seeing it in person was another matter entirely. The Citadel was stacked in several tiers, each

wing of the building leading up to the grand throne room at the apex. Saoirse recalled that the topmost hall of the Citadel was almost completely open, its floor to ceiling windows washing the throne room in sunlight as though directly connected to the heavens. As they flew closer, the Citadel slowly came into focus. Menacing spires of sandstone jutted out from the magnificent building, piercing through the clouds that shrouded it. Pristine, golden domes caught the light of the sunset, blazing like torches in the sky. The towering palace looked down on the rest of the world like a malevolent god in the heavens.

Saoirse hated that she felt a twinge of envy. Though Kellam Keep was impressive in its own right, the capital of Aurandel was displayed for all to see. There was no question about who held authority in Revelore.

Their carriages dove down to the lowest level of the Citadel, carefully navigating between sky bridges and levitating buildings. Saoirse clutched her seat, stifling a scream as they shot straight down and nearly clipped a building. She slammed her eyes shut as they plummeted towards the mountain, her body going weightless. The raeda carriage abruptly slowed just before it made contact with the ground, its wheels clattering along the street. The three of them jolted forward as the horses galloped across the stones. When they finally settled on solid ground, Saoirse opened her eyes.

The walls of Citadel loomed proudly before them. Ancient tangles of vines snaked up the walls, nestled between the stone as though they'd grown there for an eternity. She looked up, her eyes scanning each floor of the Citadel that rose through the clouds. Although the grand throne room at the very top was shrouded in mist and obscured from view, she still felt intimidated.

Their raeda carriages halted before the gates of the Citadel, rumbling to a stop. Ambassador Cresta suddenly appeared in the window, her eyes bright with pride. "I shall escort you to your rooms, now."

The Auran woman opened their cabin door, gesturing for them to step outside. On unsteady feet, Saoirse carefully stepped out of the raeda. She felt lightheaded, her lungs struggling with the great change in elevation. She stood still and waited for the dizziness to dissipate.

“It's beautiful in a terrifying sort of way,” Aurelia said beside her. She was looking up at the Citadel, her turquoise eyes gleaming with admiration and wary caution.

The rest of their attendants and courtiers clamored out of their own carriages, unloading their trunks and lugging them to the gates of the Citadel.

Ambassador Vangelis strode over to them, seemingly unruffled by their rapid landing. “It is a bit disorienting your first time up here,” he apologized. “It takes a few days to get used to the altitude, but you'll acclimate soon enough.”

“We have two days to acclimate,” Aurelia mumbled, grabbing a traveling case from one of the passing attendants. “Two days until we are fighting for our lives in the arena. I'll be impressed if we can even walk upright, let alone spar with swords.”

“We'll be fine,” Sune countered flatly. “We have titansblood to help us through. The elixir will help acclimate us quickly.” But despite his confidence, Sune was clearly winded and fighting breathlessness with each word. Aurelia rolled her eyes and shoved past him.

“Unfortunately, I must leave you to Cresta's care for the time being,” Vangelis apologized. “I have a few matters to attend to in preparation for the banquet tonight. I shall escort you from your chambers in a few hours. In the meantime, I advise against wandering off to explore. Your legs are weak and your lungs are still adjusting.” He leaned in, lowering his voice to quiet whisper. “And you never know who might be lurking in the shadows, biding their time to attack.” With that harrowing statement, Ambassador Vangelis left them alone with Cresta.

“If you would please follow me,” the Auran woman ordered.

The three of them trailed after Cresta as she led them through the gates of the Citadel. Several Aerial soldiers melted out of the shadows and followed behind their party, their hands resting on the swords at their waists. Perhaps they were there to protect them, should some rogue Auran extremist decide to attack. Or perhaps it was to keep the Mer in check should one decide to wander off and sabotage the Tournament. Saoirse suspected it was the latter.

Cresta guided them through a stone archway and toward a separate wing of the Citadel. The impressive building was carved into the mountain itself, each level winding up higher into the clouds like a snake curved around rock. Cresta directed their servants and courtiers to an adjoining building to the north, while the four of them continued deeper into the mountain.

“It is traditional for every kingdom to be granted a wing of the Citadel. The Tellusun and Terradrin are being housed on the level above this one,” she informed them, gesturing upwards.

“Figures,” Aurelia whispered. It was unsurprising that the Mer would be granted the lowest chambers in the Citadel, tucked away from the rest of the visiting tributes like punished children.

“Your private chambers are deeper in the mountain,” Cresta told them. “You’ll find that your rooms are perfectly tailored to the unusual accommodations you require. I’m sure you’ll enjoy our hospitality, even if we are a bit more lavish than you’re used to.”

Every word from her mouth was measured and crisp, balancing somewhere on the edge of haughty and condescending. Saoirse couldn’t tell where the backhanded compliments ended and where her prejudice began. The Tournament Ambassador

seemed unconcerned with hiding her hatred for Mer.

Cresta led them into a shadowed corridor, more of a tunnel than a hallway. As they descended into the mountain, the dry climate of the mountainside was replaced by a thick dampness that hung in the air. The stone walls were slick with condensation and mineral water. Familiar blue torchlight lit the way, casting the stone in a wash of pale blue.

“Undying flames,” Cresta told them when she noticed their expressions. “They burn even brighter up here than below the waves, you know. You didn’t think you were the only ones who enjoyed their eternal light, did you?” she asked haughtily. Aurelia murmured something under her breath, rolling her eyes at the ambassador’s remark.

They finally stopped in a stretch of empty hallway, three doors looming in the shadows. Each door depicted different scenes that were carved into the wood.

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“Are these rooms always given to the Mer tributes?” Saoirse inquired, surveying the intricate murals that were etched into the mahogany.

“Yes,” Cresta answered. “These chambers were designed centuries ago, before the War of the Age. They were once used for visiting members of your court, in fact. When the Mer frequently visited our great city, these rooms housed them for long periods of time. Now, they are only used during the Tournament season every decade. Here is yours, Captain Kresten,” the ambassador informed Sune matter-a-factly. She fitted a massive silver key into the keyhole, clicking it open. Curves of flowers and delicate animals were carved into the wood, creating a woodland scene on the door. At the center of the mural, a woman stood with an arrow notched against her bow. Saoirse identified her as the Tellusun huntress Vasia, one of the founders of Revelore.

“Your attendants will be with you shortly,” Cresta continued. “Your belongings have already arrived for you.”

Sune nodded, pushing inside the room. “See you in a few hours,” he mumbled. Without another word he shut himself in his room.

“Someone is anxious to be rid of us,” Aurelia whispered with feigned incredulity as Cresta led them to the next door a few paces away. Saoirse smothered a laugh.

“And yours, Captain Eleni,” Cresta said, unlocking the next door. Another exquisite scene was etched into the door, this time depicting the Mer Queen Basilia. The fearsome ruler was mounted on the back of a kelpie, her sword raised to the heavens as the ocean rallied behind her.

“I’ll see you soon.” Aurelia gave Saoirse a reaffirming nod before stepping into her chamber and vanishing behind the door.

Finally, Cresta led Saoirse to the last chamber at the end of the hallway. Saoirse paused at her door and traced a finger along the faded mural. An array of clouds floated across the wood, creating a view of the sky. At the center of the mural, the Auran king Aris was depicted drawing his dagger from its scabbard. Saoirse frowned disappointedly. Out of all the chambers, she had to stay in the room with one of Aurandel’s greatest legends splayed proudly across the door. She had no doubt Cresta had deliberately chosen this one, subtly undermining her in any way she could.

Cresta pushed open the door, bowing slightly as Saoirse stepped into the chamber. Sconces of undying flames lit the room in a familiar glow. The reassuring blue light undulated across the stone walls as the flames flickered against the shadows, reminding her of home.

“If you need anything, simply ring this bell and someone will come to your rooms,” Cresta paused, gesturing to a mechanism on the wall. A silver bell was attached to a series of intricate levers and pulleys, vanishing into the stone ceiling and connecting somewhere above. “Your attendants will arrive shortly. Rest while you can, Princess. The banquet will begin soon.” Without another word, Cresta stepped out of the room and shut the door.

For the first time in days, Saoirse was finally alone. She gulped in the cool air of her chambers, her lungs still adjusting. She realized that her titansblood elixir was wearing off, her breathing becoming more laborious by the minute. She hastily retrieved the vial from her satchel and quickly uncorked it. She braced herself for the foul burn of mangrove and willowherb, downing it quickly.

After a few agonizing moments, the potion finally settled. She walked slowly through her chamber and drank in all the stunning details. Elaborate tapestries hung on the

walls, weaving stories out of fabric that were born from myth and legend. Gilded pots housed plants of all shapes and sizes, delicately arranged through the room. Thick, ornate rugs of purple and gold covered the floor and cushioned her steps.

As Saoirse explored her room, she heard the sound of water trickling faintly behind the wall. Spying another door, she strode over and gently pushed it open. Inside, she was met with a small bathing chamber. She grinned when she smelled the familiar scent of briny salt water. Crisp towels were folded neatly on a shelf that was cut into the stone wall. Countless glass jars containing scented soaps and fine salts glittered on the lower shelves. And at the center of the chamber, a giant pool sank into the floor. The dark waters of the bath rippled softly, inviting her in.

Unable to deny the call of the water, she unhooked the pouch at her waist and cast it to the side. The dull clink of Selussa's vial within made her hesitate for a moment. She slowly pulled the obsidian flask out, staring at the shining vial containing the witch's dark blood.

This was why she was here. The bargain.

Blood is more valuable than gold. It can unlock doors and seal promises. It can bring great fortune and favor, but it can be spilled so easily. Selussa's words echoed through her head as she stared at the vial. She hastily tucked it back into the pouch, unwilling to face the memory of Selussa. She didn't need to worry about her deal with the witch just yet. The time of reckoning would come later. Now she simply needed to rest and mentally prepare for what was to come at the banquet.

She stripped off her Torqen armor and the tunic underneath, peeling off her seaweed-woven trousers as quickly as her aching hands allowed. She hadn't realized how dry her skin had become in the wind and high altitude until the cool water slipped over her toes. She lowered herself into the pool, following the stone steps that descended into the water. As soon as the saltwater met her scales, she felt instant relief. With

each step lower, her body became loose and relaxed, the tension of the day dissolving into foam. Water lapped at her shoulders as she sank lower, and a smile flitted across her face. The familiar touch of brackish water was like the hand of an old friend, pulling her into an embrace. She sunk deeper, letting the water rise above her head and enclose her. She breathed in blissfully and closed her eyes. Under the water, she could almost pretend that she was still in the Maeral Sea.

She never wanted to leave.

* * *

Hours later, Saoirse could make out muffled voices beyond the water. She slowly rose, only just enough to see above the pool. Beyond the bathing chamber, she could hear soft conversation and furniture being moved around in the sitting room. Someone knocked at the door.

Saoirse cursed under the water. She could've stayed submerged for several more hours. But she was grateful for the measure of comfort and privacy she had been granted, even if it hadn't been long enough. She found the steps at the bottom of the pool, forcing herself to rise up and out of the water.

"Come in," she called out, wrapping herself in one of the towels she'd plucked from the shelf. The door swung open gently, the light from the sitting room spilling into the bathing chamber. Her attendant Isme, stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"It is time to prepare you for the banquet, Your Highness," Isme told her apologetically. "I know you've only just arrived, but we've much to do."

"It's good to see you, Isme. Thank you for being here." She grabbed Isme's hands, looking into her familiar eyes. Isme had watched her grow up, serving her faithfully for almost seventeen years. After her mother had died, Isme was as close to a

maternal figure as she had.

“It is an honor.” Isme gave her hands a squeeze. “I’ve waited for this day just as long as you have. Shall we begin?”

Saoirse nodded, her blood began to race. Her stylists and attendants were opening her travel trunks, spreading out the clothing and decorative jewelry they had packed for her. A sting of regret burned in her chest when her eyes found the fine jewels that her father had given to her just before she left.

Make us proud, he had said when he sent her off from the palace. Wear these family heirlooms with pride. She longed for him to be here. She was painfully reminded that this was not how she wanted her first time in Aurandel to be. She wanted her father to be at her side, his eyes bright with pride. But this dream had come at a steep cost, and now all she could do was make the best of it.

“We will do your hair first,” Isme told her, helping Saoirse sit in a cushioned chair at the center of the room.

The attendants swarmed around her in a frenzy, hovering like moths to flame. Her attendants had planned out her banquet attire the minute they had found out she’d be competing in the Tournament, working tirelessly to create a wardrobe befitting of the Princess of Elorshin. Each person in the room had been chosen for a specific purpose, many of them training their whole lives for a moment like this. The tribute’s banquet was an event that, like the Tournament itself, only took place every ten years. The banquet provided her stylists the rare opportunity to showcase the unique fashions of Elorshin.

Appolon, one of her favorite stylists, braided her dark curls. He wrapped the intricate twists over the crown of her head. The lower half of her hair fell across her shoulders, loose curls spilling down her back. He tucked flowers into her hair, somehow

immaculately preserved throughout their entire journey. The native blue flowers of the sea seemed to glow in the light, their petals slightly translucent. Finally, he pinned tiny white pearls and smooth seashells throughout her hair, weaving them into the braids and curls seamlessly.

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“You look stunning,” he said with an appraising smile. “Isme, she's all yours.”

Isme grabbed a few glass jars from one of her trunks, sitting in front of Saoirse. She first dusted flecks of gold across her cheekbones, the fine powder sitting on her skin like stardust. Isme then swept strokes of shimmering paints across her eyelids and lined her lashes with dark kohl. Nodding to herself and dipping her brushes into various pots of color, Isme continued meticulously, as detail-oriented as any artist. As a finishing touch, she painted Saoirse's lips with a deep blue paint, one that matched the stunning hue of her gown. With a nod of satisfaction, Isme helped her stand.

Two more attendants came forward, holding the beautiful dress she would wear to the banquet between them. Saoirse's breath caught in her throat. The gown was adorned with the same pearls that were pinned in her hair. Intricate lace detailing trimmed the bodice, hand-sewn by her attendants. Sewn into the dress, small flowers and seashells represented the beauty found in the Maeral Sea. The plunging neckline was trimmed with shining strands of pearls and shells. Delicate sleeves billowed out from the shoulders, almost sheer in the light. The gown fell to the floor in a cascade of blue and green, mimicking the movement of waves.

They carefully slipped it over her head, smoothing out the fabric and unfurling the small train at the back. It fit her like a glove. Saoirse turned to look at herself in the mirror, smiling when she saw her reflection. She had never been more proud to wear a gown in all her life. She wore the Maeral Sea draped across her body, the flowers and pearls adorning her acting as small reminders of home. She stepped forward, mesmerized by how the gown shimmered and rippled like the surface of glittering azure waves. Under the translucent sleeves that cinched together at her wrists, the pale blue scales on her arms seemed to glow in the light. In her finery, Saoirse was

proud of who she was.

She was proud to be Mer.

Her attendants stood smiling before her, tears in many of their eyes.

“You’re radiant,” Isme said proudly, a glistening tear sliding down her cheek. “You represent our people well, Princess Saoirse.”

“There’s just one more thing,” Appolon interrupted, pulling something out from one of the trunks. He unwrapped a delicate silver crown. The air in the room seemed to change as he approached her. Saoirse’s chest tightened at the sight of the beautiful diadem.

Her mother’s crown. He carefully placed it on her brow, tucking stray curls around it. Saoirse turned back to their mirror, her heart softening at the sight of her mother’s diadem on her own head. Metal leaves wove together like a laurel wreath, only a few small jewels scattered across the crown. It was a small, simple piece of craftsmanship. But it was somehow the most beautiful thing she wore.

“Perfect,” Isme breathed, more tears leaking from her eyes. “May glory be given,” she added, a shadow of darkness passing over her face.

“May glory be given,” every attendant repeated solemnly, their chorus of voices echoing across the room. Then they began bowing, lowering their brows to the floor.

“You will win,” Isme whispered, taking Saoirse’s hand in her own and squeezing it tightly. “You will survive,” she assured her, her voice thick with emotion. “You will restore Elorshin’s former glory.” Murmurs of agreement shuddered through the room.

May glory be given... May glory be given...May glory be given.

ROOK

Rook downed his third glass of wine, wincing at the smooth burn. The day of the banquet had not gone at all how he had planned. Hasana's brazen words still rattled through his head, churning through him like the unruly bluster of a storm front. He hated how much her words had broken him, how much they had continued to form cracks in his beliefs hours later. He gazed out at the sweep of brilliant stars against the dark night sky, refilling his glass again. Gazing up at the bright clusters of stars, he quickly identified several constellations. There was the Tellusun huntress Vasia, her bow raised to the heavens. It was her arrow that was said to have pierced the heart of Ouran, one of the mad Titans of Old. Then there was the great basilisk Ventus, his jaws glittering with rows of star-studded teeth. His eyes caught on his favorite constellation of them all: the warrior Aris, his mighty feathered wings spread across the sky. He and Raven had memorized the constellations as children, sometimes flying as high as they could so that they could touch them.

"Take it easy," Eros ordered, coming up to the window beside him. "Save some drink for the actual banquet, brother."

"Why do we do this to ourselves?" Rook asked quietly, staring out at the glowing courtyard below. "Why do we pretend like we aren't going to be after each other's throats in a day? Why must we look these people in the eyes, knowing that they will be our enemies in the arena?" He set the glass down, crossing the open throne room and striding to the grand staircase. Eros grabbed his arm, stopping him.

"What are you saying, Rook?" he asked, looking him squarely in the eye. "We've trained for this our whole lives, and suddenly you're getting cold feet? You sound like those bloody Terradrin revolutionaries," Eros muttered with a hint of warning in his voice.

“You know exactly what I’m saying. We go down those steps and greet them with false smiles across our faces. We share drinks with them, watch each other eat tiny pastries and chat about the weather. We pretend that we can be friends down there. But on the inside, we are all plotting how we might slit each other’s throats, should the chance present itself in the trials,” Rook stated darkly. “We smile, acting like we don’t have a century of bad blood and political rivalries between us.”

“We do it to offer Revelore the promise of hope,” Veila interrupted, stepping out of the shadows. She was wearing an exquisite dress of deep green, so different from the traditional Aerial attire he was used to seeing her in. She came up beside them, looking down at the banquet tables spread out below.

“The banquet shows the other nations that they are our equals. It shows them that we can all converse and be cordial with one another. We dance with them, serve them a feast, and extend our hands in peace. Without it, our rivals wouldn’t feel like they have a chance of winning the Tournament. The banquet gives them hope. At this feast, we all eat from the same tables. Who is to say who the next champion of Revelore might be? Under the same stars, it could be any of us.”

“And do you believe that?” Rook demanded in a near whisper. “Do you believe they are our equals and that they have any chance of winning? This hope we give them—it’s nothing but a trick. If one of the Terradrin or Tellusun tributes won, do you really think we would step aside and give them ownership of Revelore?” He paused, letting his words sink in. “No, we would continue fighting for the right to rule, even past the arena and the trials.”

“An interesting opinion, to question the sanctity of our games,” Veila murmured. “For the sake of gamesmanship, I suggest you keep these musings private,” she warned darkly. “If your words become treasonous, we would be powerless to stop any punishment that might befall you.” A foreboding gust of wind whipped through the open-aired throne room, whispering through the halls.

“Let’s go,” Eros said to Veila, heading for the grand staircase. He gave Rook a disappointed glance. “See you down there.”

Rook watched as his friends descended down the stairs, Veila’s dress spilling down the staircase as she strode beside Eros. He sighed, feeling suddenly guilty for burdening them with his questions. He gazed back up at the stars, the clearest view of them in all of Revelore.

Enough of this, he ordered himself. Hasana had poisoned his mind with little arrows of doubt. He would not give in to her deception and lies. He knew the truth.

“Little brother,” Raven’s calming voice called from behind him. Rook turned, watching as Raven emerged from the throne room. She was dressed in a magnificent gown, a brilliant crown on her brow. Her deep violet dress was pulled to one shoulder, clasped together by a glittering medallion of gold. Her black hair was piled high on her head, intricate braids woven throughout. She wore gold circlets around her bare arms and shining metal cuffs on her wrists. She was the very image of a regal monarch.

“I trust you haven’t been getting into any trouble tonight?” Raven said with a wink. Gone was all the darkness from their conversation in the library earlier. Now, only warmth seemed to emanate from his sister. She tucked her arm under his, leading him to the stairs.

“Come now,” he answered her, “you really think I would turn down a bit of trouble if the opportunity arose?”

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He looked down at her and grinned, choosing to abandon all the cynical thoughts that plagued him. He unfolded his wings, allowing them to spread out in the wind. Raven did the same, her own wings adorned with delicate gold chains that shimmered in the light of the moon.

“I suppose that would be too much to ask for,” Raven replied, her eyes glittering in amusement.

They took several steps down together, arm in arm. The guests grew quiet as the pair descended, their guests holding their breaths as they made their entrance. Against the ink-dark sky, the courtyard glowed with ethereal light. Twinkling lights were strung across the pillars at its entrance, shining like little stars on strings. Huge sconces housed warm flames that drifted into the sky, illuminating the courtyard below. Long dining tables were spread out across the center of the courtyard and stunning floral arrangements were piled high in the middle of the tables. But more captivating than the spectacular decor were the people that crowded at the base of the stairs, staring up at them.

Rook swept his gaze across the crowd as they continued down the stairs, taking in all of the different people gathered before them. In the darkened corner, pale-skinned people stared up at them, most of them with bright white hair and huge, luminous eyes. The Terradrin people. Earth-dwellers.

Next to the Terradrin, people dressed in vibrant robes and flowing clothing gazed up from the center of the courtyard. Standing in the middle of the group, Princess Hasana stared at him from behind a glittering veil, her piercing eyes bright even from a distance. Beside her, Ambassador Sahl gave him a warm smile. The Tellusun

people. Sand-dwellers.

And to the right of the desert folk, his own people stood proudly, their chins raised to their queen and captain. Sky-dwellers. Wings of many different colors fanned out in the wind, their feathers shifting on the breeze.

And there, at the back of the crowd, stood their greatest enemies. Hailing all the way from Elorshin were the Mer, freshly arrived from the sea and late as always. They were dressed in blues and greens, shimmering dresses and sheer tunics. He took in the thin layer of scales on their cheekbones and shoulders, nearly translucent against their skin. Sea-dwellers.

Along the edges of the courtyard, the Order of Elders stood watching over the banquet like soldiers. Despite hailing from different countries and holding opposing loyalties, they all wore the same crisp purple robes that symbolized their sacred service to Revelore. Their vows were the same, even if they advised countries that hated each other. The Elders of his own people had always made him feel uneasy. With their secretive gazes and low whispers, he always felt like they knew something he didn't.

He and Raven descended to the final few steps, now level with the crowd. The onlookers parted for them, stepping aside while they strode toward the Auran table. Rook could feel a thousand eyes burning into him, scanning his body from every angle and measuring his worth. He raised his chin even higher. When they finally reached their table, Raven took her place at a large throne centered in the middle. She turned to the crowd, composed and regal as ever.

“People of the sky, sea, sand, and earth,” she called out, her voice echoing across the open courtyard. “Welcome to Coarinth, the City of the Titans. We are honored to have you as guests.”

Rook watched as his sister surveyed the crowd. She was no longer his older sister, but rather the ruler of Revelore, the Iron Queen.

“The Tournament is a beautiful thing. It brings us together every decade, generation after generation. The Tournament heals our past and restores our hope. It makes us equals.” Raven paused, letting a smile unfold across her lips. The crowd was silent, a sea of expectant eyes all staring at her. “Let us feast tonight,” his sister continued with a smile. “Let us celebrate how far we have come in a hundred years. Tonight is for you.” She reached down to the table, picking up a golden goblet. She lifted the cup to the star-filled sky. “May glory be given,” she called out.

“May glory be given,” the crowd echoed across the courtyard, a chorus of different voices mingling together. But despite the volume of voices, there was something hollow about the sound. The clinks of goblets and glasses filled the air.

“Let the Master of Trials be welcomed,” Raven ordered, taking a seat in her throne.

She looked up at Rook, giving him a soft nod. He left her side and headed for the far left wall of the pavilion, where Eros and Veila stood waiting. At every corner of the courtyard, the tributes of the other nations gathered in their respective places, waiting to make their formal entrance. He headed straight for his companions, barely sparing a glance at any of the other tributes. Eros clasped his shoulder and gave him a reassuring smile, seeming to forgive his cynical words from the balcony.

“Ready?” Eros asked with a steady gaze.

Rook nodded and turned back toward the crowd, his heart racing. All of the foreign ambassadors and court members had taken their seats at their assigned banquet tables. The crowd went quiet again, the stretch of silence louder than any roar of applause.

The Master of Trials appeared at the top of the grand staircase. High Elder Korina

Petrakou stood above them all, her face lit with warm, golden light. The woman was at least seventy years of age, but she stood with strength and vitality. Unlike the majority of Aurans, she had no wings. But Rook knew that her sharp mind and quick wit made up for her lack of feathers tenfold. The old woman took a few steps down the stairs, a long cape trailing behind her. Instead of wearing the traditional purple robes of the Elders of Revelore, she had been given a gown so black it seemed to absorb the colors around it. The Master of Trials was stoic and emotionless as she continued down, observing everyone in attendance with a keen eye.

“People of Revelore,” Korina said when she left the final stair, “you have sent your finest to compete for the Crown. The Tournament is a long-held tradition in Revelore, one of the most time-honored events in all of history. As you all know, the Tournament was established centuries ago by the Order of Elders. This year, I have the privilege of presiding over the trials.” She paused, letting her words hover above the crowd. “In the days of old, the only prize to be won was pride and the mere title of champion. Now, the stakes are much higher and more befitting of the death-defying trials you will compete in. The country who wins the Tournament wins the Crown that was forged in the heart of Mt. Thalia.”

Her voice drifted through the courtyard, amplified by some unseen magic. Everyone in the courtyard watched her intently, hanging on every word she spoke. “Your tributes have proved their worth to your country, but now the time has come for them to prove themselves to the world,” she continued. “Through three trials of strength and wit, one nation shall emerge victorious. That nation shall earn the right to rule Revelore and possess the Crown.” She looked at all of the tributes carefully, seeming to look into their very souls. “Which one of you shall be named champion?”

Her words hung in the air, heavy as a stormcloud swollen with rain. Rook shivered under her gaze, his skin prickling. Her eyes were dark and swimming with secrets that he’d give anything to know.

Korina turned to the Terradrin tributes to her left, her black robes pooling around her. “Adresin Vasalor, Neia Landum, and Diru Balran of the Under Kingdom,” she announced, gesturing to the ground-dwellers with a sweep of her hand. “Honored warriors, please take your place at the tribute table.”

The three Terradrin tributes emerged from the darkness, all of them tall and lean with muscle. They bowed to Korina, turning toward the table at the center of the banquet. One of the men, Adresin, wore his long hair loose around his shoulders, a shock of pure white against the dark sky. The other male tribute wore his white hair in a braid down his back, so long that it almost trailed past the sword at his hip. With a start, Rook recognized the female tribute as Neia Landum, Captain of the Terradrin army. He was surprised that she had been chosen to represent Terradrin, given her status. He had many dealings with her in recent years, and none of them were pleasant. With the controversial Auran occupation in Terradrin, the last person Rook wanted to face in the arena was the Under Kingdom’s military leader.

Rook watched as the ground-dwellers made their way to the table, their white hair bright in the moonlight. Twelve chairs sat behind a long table at the courtyard’s center, giving the tributes a view of the crowd before them. The Terradrin warriors claimed the first three chairs at the table, hidden under a soft covering designed to reduce the amount of light that filtered through the courtyard.

Korina then turned to the Tellusun people, directing her piercing gaze to the shadows. “Numair Majid, Ramin Naseeba, and Noora Mir of Tellusun.” The three Tellusun tributes stepped into the light, bowing to the Master of Trials.

“Please take your place at the tribute table, honored warriors,” she told them. They strode through the courtyard proudly, their signature desert clothing loose and airy in the wind. Rook spared a glance at Hasana, noticing how she glowed with pride as the tributes wove their way between the tables. When they had seated themselves next to the Terradrin warriors, Korina turned to Rook.

“Veila Stjarna, Eros Morningstar, and Prince Rook Adonia of Aurandel,” the Master of Trials called out. Rook and his companions stepped forward and bent into their customary bows. As he lowered his face to the earth, it suddenly dawned on Rook that it was all real. Like a bucket of ice cold water thrown over his head, the reality of what he was about to face washed through him in a biting sweep that sent his fingers tingling. Though he had trained for this moment all his life, the Tournament had seemed like a distant dream up until now. He rose from the bow, his gaze finding Raven’s across the crowd. She smiled at him encouragingly.

“Honored warriors, please take your places at the tribute table,” Korina ordered. Eros strode forward first, Veila and Rook following close behind. It was surreal, walking through the crowd and heading for the tribute’s table with his closest friends. As Rook lowered himself into a seat, a sacred weight seemed to settle on his shoulders. There were now only three empty chairs left.

Finally, Korina directed her gaze to the far corner of the courtyard. There was a heaviness in the air as everyone in attendance held their breaths and waited for the Master of Trials to call out the names of Elorshin’s tributes.

“Aurelia Eleni, Sune Kresten, and Princess Saoirse Kellamheart of Elorshin.” Everyone in the crowd craned their necks, trying to glimpse the Mer tributes. Ice ran through Rook’s blood as he watched the sea-dwellers emerge from the darkness and bow to Korina.

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Princess Saoirse.

He had not expected the daughter of King Angwin to be chosen as a tribute. He stared at the princess, something like intrigue tugging at him. He had never seen her before. She was beautiful, her bronze skin covered by shimmering, transparent blue scales that caught the light. Her glossy dark curls fell to her waist, and tiny seashells and pearls glittered in her hair as she rose up from the bow. But under the fine dress and shining jewels, he could tell she was a warrior from her stance alone. The other two tributes, a man and a woman, were equally stunning, their clothing seeming to shift like the waves of the Maeral Sea as they rose from deep bows. If they were this graceful on land, he couldn't fathom their grace underwater.

"Warriors of Elorshin, please take your places at the tribute's table," Korina told them. The three Merfolk walked forward, their chins lifted in pride. Rook had seldom met Mer in his lifetime, but these proud warriors were not what he had expected. The crowd whispered as the three tributes wove through the crowd and headed for the tribute table at the courtyard's center. And then suddenly, they were only paces away, pulling out their chairs and sliding into the seats to his left. He tore his gaze away, staring straight ahead at the crowd. Beside him, he could smell Princess Saoirse as she moved. She smelled like sea brine, rose, and something unfamiliar.

He was frozen. He hadn't known that he would be seated next to his greatest enemy.

"Let the celebration begin," Korina declared, lifting her arms to the sky triumphantly.

SAOIRSE

Saoirse's back was ridged as she took her seat. She glimpsed Rook from the corner of her eye, taking in every detail of his face. She had seen paintings of his likeness on occasion but had never seen him in person. It was obvious that he was tall, even sitting down. His legs seemed far too long for the chair, his ankles crossed casually as if there was not enough room to stretch out. His jaw was clenched, the muscles in his cheeks tight. For some reason those little details-like the way his eyes were framed by thick, dark lashes-hadn't seemed like things he possessed. Until now, she had simply known him as an enemy. Different to her in every way. Not as an actual person who breathed or moved or spoke. Even so, she felt nothing towards him but resentment. She knew virtually nothing about the prince, save for the details of his activity in the military and his family's political exploits. And that knowledge alone was enough for her to hate him.

She was under no illusions that she was somehow better than him in combat, nor did she believe she could surprise him in the trials. He was a highly-trained captain of the Ariels. She needed to know how he fought and reasoned if she was to be successful. She needed to gain his trust.

Saoirse stole glances at him, trying to see if he preferred his left hand or his right. He was left handed, she noted, watching as he picked up a goblet and brought it to his mouth. She tucked her observations away for future use. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a beautiful dagger at Rook's hip. Her gaze caught on the gleaming black opal on the pommel of the blade. The dagger was timeworn and the gemstone cloudy, but it was still a thing of beauty. Instinctively, she knew that this was the blade that Selussa hungered for. The dark vial of Selussa's blood seemed to hum against her skin, hidden under the bodice of her gown. She couldn't risk one of her attendants finding the flask in her chamber, so she had tucked it away at the last minute as they shuffled her out the door. She tore her gaze away from the dagger, busying herself with taking a sip of wine from her own glass.

She looked down the chairs of tributes, fascinated by each of their differences. Beside the Auran tributes sat the three Tellusun warriors. They wore the loose, airy clothing of the Shujaa Desert. Gold cuffs shone on their arms and colorful beads were woven in their hair. Saoirse recognized the female tribute as Noora Mir, the famed archer from Princess Havana's personal guard. Nora's kohl-rimmed eyes never stopped scanning the crowd, constantly looking for hidden threats.

Saoirse's eyes moved onto the white-haired tributes that sat beside them. Out of everyone there, she knew the least about their kind. Their skin was a pale grey hue, nearly translucent in the soft torchlight. All three of them had impossibly large eyes, pale and colorless after living their entire lives below the surface of the earth. Neia Landum, Captain of the Terradrin Army, caught her staring and smiled. The smile was neither friendly nor hostile, which made Saoirse uncomfortable. She tore her gaze away, forcing herself to look at the tablecloth. After surveying her competitors, Saoirse suddenly felt out of her depths. It was clear that they were all talented and highly-trained, just as she was.

A charming quartet of stringed instruments began to play a soft chorus in the background. A line of servants appeared from one of the corridors from the kitchens, silver platters in their hands. They dispersed into the crowd, bringing platter after platter of food to the tables. Her stomach was twisted with nerves, and the last thing she wanted to do was eat. Someone came up behind her, placing a covered dish right before her plate. The servant lifted the lid from the dish, exposing some kind of savory pie. She watched as several more servants placed silver platters along the tribute's table, uncovering the exquisite dishes one by one. Steam rose from several loaves of fresh bread, and delectable scents wafted across the table. Bowls of olives, fine cheeses, and salted meats surrounded the bread, intended to be eaten together. Though the spread seemed appetizing enough, Saoirse had rarely tasted any of the surface-dweller's food, let alone Auran cuisine. Mer preferred to eat oysters, fish, and fresh greens from the sea. She looked at Aurelia from the corner of her eye, watching as she curled a lip in disgust. Saoirse hid her smile, choosing to carefully fill her plate

with food without complaint.

Saoirse felt her neck prickle. She looked beyond the table and caught a glimpse of Adda Carew watching her. The High Elder had moved away from the outskirts of the courtyard and was now sitting beside Ambassador Vangelis and the rest of the courtiers of Elorshin. Though she lifted food to her mouth, Adda's eyes never left Saoirse. She stared at Prince Rook too, her sharp green eyes following his movements just as closely as she watched hers. With a shiver, Saoirse looked away and busied herself with piling more food onto her plate.

The tribute's table was quiet, tension hanging in the air. No one spoke to each other, the tributes either unwilling to talk amongst themselves or unsure how. The silence was nearly unbearable, only broken by the scrape of silverware against dishes and the dull crunch of food. Saoirse had enough of the awkward silence. At this rate, she would never learn anything of value about the prince.

"Prince Rook," she said carefully, turning towards him. "Your kingdom is more glorious than the stories I'd been told as a child." It felt so wrong to speak with him as if his kind weren't responsible for her peoples' suffering.

Prince Rook looked surprised that she had spoken to him, his dark eyebrows twitching. Judging from the look on his face, her attempt at conversation was just as strange to him as it was to her. "I'm glad to hear it," he replied roughly, clearing his throat. He took another gulp of his wine, turning directly to her with a guarded smile.

Much to her annoyance, Saoirse felt uncomfortable when she felt his direct gaze on her. He had the kind of eyes that could read a person with merely a few glances, like a predator stalking prey. But she couldn't tear her gaze away from the clear blue eyes that surveyed her. Her breath locked in her throat. There was something strange and unnerving about staring into the eyes of her greatest enemy. Hatred and curiosity mingled together, churning in her pounding heart like the unruly tides of summer.

Unable to help herself, her eyes drifted to his mouth, spying a pair of deep dimples on his cheeks as he smiled.

“Is this your first time on the surface world?” Rook asked casually, making forced small talk.

“No,” Saoirse replied. “I trained on the Isles of Mythos, just like the rest of the Torqen. Though I have never been to the continent itself.”

“You’re a member of the Torqen?” Rook seemed surprised. “That is quite an honor. I didn’t expect you to...” he broke off.

“Didn’t expect me to be a warrior?” Saoirse finished his sentence, her words coming out a bit more defensively than she had intended. She forced her tone to soften. “It’s understandable. I’m the only heir of King Angwin, and the life of a soldier is fraught with danger.” She raised an eyebrow, testing the waters. “Or perhaps you thought that I would simply be a sheltered princess, locked away with fine dresses and jewels without a thought toward swords and combat?”

“I meant no offense, Your Highness,” Rook answered, an amused smile on his lips. Saoirse couldn’t tell if he was mocking her, or if he was genuinely enjoying their conversation. “After all, I myself am Captain of the Aerials,” he went on. “I suppose you could say that the Torqen are Elorshin’s version of the Aerials, in a way.”

We’re nothing like you, Saoirse thought to herself.

“Then I guess we hold more in common than I would’ve thought,” she chose to say. Rook gave a disinterested nod, seemingly finished with their conversation.

“I’d wager that the Aerials wouldn’t stand a chance against the Torqen,” she stated quietly, innocently wiping her napkin along her mouth. To her left, Aurelia choked on

some food. But just as she hoped, the prince turned back to her, his eyes bright with amusement.

“How much would you be willing to wager on that, Princess?” Rook said in her ear, his voice teasing and oozing with confidence. Much to her annoyance, her stomach flipped at the sound. She had heard tales of the prince’s conquests and charm. She wouldn’t give in.

“I’d wager every last one of these,” she answered tactfully, gesturing to the shining pearls in her hair. “Each one is worth at least a thousand pieces of gold, you know.”

A grin uncurled across his face. He was enjoying this spar of words. Evidently this Auran prince was fond of games. “No. You must wager something more valuable than that, I’m afraid. I can tell those pearls are meaningless to you, or else you wouldn’t have offered them so quickly.”

He was toying with her, testing her.

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Saoirse felt herself frowning as he grinned, waiting expectantly for her reply. His charm was infuriating, and his eagerness to not only play her game, but to attempt to beat her at it, was unbearable. It would have been far easier to tolerate him if he had been another cold and distant aristocrat. But beat him at this game, she would.

“You’re right, they hold no sentimental value to me,” she admitted, looking up at him with a forced smile. “Beauty alone does not make something valuable; it must have purpose, usefulness. Though they are beautiful, are they not?” His eyes scanned her hair, his fingers twitching as though he wanted to reach out and touch the pearls.

She lifted her gown and slowly revealed her bare leg. She slid the fabric up her thigh, displaying a blade she had strapped to her leg before the banquet. “I’ll wager this dagger. It was given to me by my mother,” Saoirse lied, hoping that he’d take the bait. “Weapons are far more valuable than silver or gold,” she said, following his eyes as they scanned the blade. Approval danced across his expression. And just as she predicted, his gaze moved to his own waist, catching on the dagger that hung from his belt. To the dagger that Selussa craved and demanded her to procure.

“Much better,” Rook returned with a smile. “I’ll take you up on that offer, princess.”

“And what will you wager?” Saoirse asked. “Perhaps your own blade at your side? A dagger for a dagger?”

He gave a hollow smile, something like suspicion flashing in his eyes. “I think not,” he answered, placing a protective hand on the dagger’s pommel. Rook stared up at the sky for a moment, twirling a strand of his dark hair between his fingers thoughtfully. His eyes lit up and he turned to her. “I’ll wager my favorite book,”

Rook told her. “There is only one other copy left in the world. It has to be worth at least a couple thousand gold coins.”

Saoirse swallowed her disappointment and raised her glass to her lips, only giving him a slight nod of approval. Really? A book is the best you can do?

“My father used to read it to me at night,” Rook began, his eyes growing soft. “I begged him to read it so often that he probably hated that story...” his words trailed off and he uncomfortably laughed.

“A truly sentimental prize then,” Saoirse replied with feigned satisfaction, raising her glass in a toast. “To an even wager.” She couldn’t turn away now, even if she wasn’t fighting for the dagger. For one, it would give her an opportunity to see how he fought, to see where his weaknesses were. If he wouldn’t wager the blade, she could at least gather more information about it from him. But most importantly, her pride was now at stake.

He stared at her raised glass for a long moment. His piercing blue eyes met her gaze, sending a shiver down her spine. After a painstakingly long moment, he clinked his glass on her own.

“Then we have an arrangement,” Rook said, giving her one of his dimpled grins. “You’ll bring your two teammates, and I’ll bring mine. We’ll see just who are the better warriors-the Torqen or the Aerials.”

“Do you think it best to duel on the eve of the Tournament? Shouldn’t we be saving our strength?”

“Not if your warriors are as good as you claim them to be,” Rook answered with a grin that made her blood boil. “Besides, it might be good to brush up on my swordplay before the Tournament.”

“If you say so,” Saoirse replied, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “Where are we to meet, Your Highness?”

“Meet us at the eastern sky bridge at dawn,” Rook readily replied. “You’ll have a stunning view of the sunrise,” he added with a wink. “That should console you when you lose the wager.”

“I think you’ll be the one who’ll require a consolation prize, princeling,” Saoirse countered, crossing her arms. If Aurelia was listening to their conversation, she didn’t say anything. Saoirse half expected her to jab an elbow in her ribs.

Behind them, the music suddenly swelled, the beginnings of a waltz echoing through the courtyard. Rook turned to her questioningly, his face the very picture of confidence.

“Care for a dance, Princess?” he asked, cocking one dark eyebrow up. He offered her his hand, rising from his chair with a bow.

She nearly choked on her wine. She stared at his outstretched hand in disbelief, half wanting to throttle him and half wanting to accept his offer. It was truly the last thing she expected to spill from his mouth. Their conversation had been a series of moves and countermoves. This was merely the next phase. Before she could talk herself out of it, she took his hand and rose up from the table, her heart pounding. She steeled herself as she followed him, trying not to look at the tables of stunned attendees. Their game had already gone this far. There was no turning back now.

He stopped at the center of the dance floor and gave her a deep bow, a zealous smile curving his full lips. “Princess.”

ROOK

He didn't know why he had asked the Mer princess to dance. When she first sat next to him, he'd expected her to be hostile, ignoring him all night long. That was how he would've treated her had she not spoken to him. He was content in never saying a word to her, in fact. But that was until she opened her mouth and initiated the conversation. From there, his interest in her piqued. Her fire and boldness surprised him. Something had compelled him to extend his arm, to rise from the table and escort her to the center of the courtyard.

I'm merely curious, he told himself as he led her to the dance floor. He wanted to know more about this mysterious princess, wanted to understand who she was and why she was here. Merely sizing up the competition, he reasoned. Nothing more. But he felt the warmth in her touch, even through the sleeves of his jacket. He couldn't help but notice that when she moved, her translucent scales caught the light and shimmered like iridescent stardust against her skin. The scent of the ocean seemed to waft from her hair.

They stopped at the center of the courtyard, where the majority of the hanging lights glimmered overhead. She stared up at him brazenly, her gaze unwavering as he placed a hand on her waist. Rook took her hand, lifting an eyebrow and daring her to refuse. She lifted her chin defiantly, seemingly unbothered by the dangerous game they were playing. But she wasn't intimidated by the crowd of people surrounding them, who now stared with open mouths and whispered amongst themselves. She was fearless.

The quartet began a charming waltz, and Rook swept her into his arms. Her pale blue eyes never left his own, her gaze piercing and assessing. She was observing him the way a warrior would observe their opponent before a duel. He had seen that look in many fighters' eyes over the years.

They spun around the room in time to the music, a wordless challenge growing between them. Behind the polite smile plastered across her face, her eyes were guarded and glittering with hatred. Though they were being as cordial, the tension was palpable in the air. A century of history rose up around them as they twirled, and they both knew it. The world around them seemed to melt away, the sea of observers a mer blur as they swirled in silence. The music swelled and grew, urging them to dance faster. The shadow of their nations' violent past hung over their every move.

Rook's ears burned, and he glanced up to see Raven staring at him. In the flurry of swirling skirts and rising music, he had somehow forgotten she was there. The disapproving look on his sister's face confirmed that it was more than a meaningless dance. As they waltzed in silence, Rook could see his sister's expression grow darker. Evidently, she didn't enjoy the sight of her little brother spinning the daughter of the enemy kingdom around the dance floor. In the volatile courts of Revelore, where the nations were held together by frail peace treaties and paper-thin alliances, every move acted as a political statement.

Even a dance.

Rook sensed movement all around him, and he realized he and Saoirse were no longer dancing alone. Courtiers were leaving their banquet tables and bringing their partners to the center of the courtyard. They were tentative at first, but eventually the floor was flooded with twirling pairs of Terradrin, Auran, Tellusun, and Mer.

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“You are a fine dancer, Princess Saoirse,” Rook whispered, bending down so that she alone could hear him. She was at least a foot shorter than he was, her head only reaching his shoulder.

“What you mean is that you didn’t expect a siren to dance, right?” Saoirse answered, spinning around. He flinched at the derogatory word, even though he himself on occasion used it to refer to the Mer. Though her voice sounded polite, the glow of indignation in her eyes suggested otherwise.

“You think so little of me?” Rook asked innocently, catching her as she spun back to him. “Let me guess, you think I am prejudiced and ignorant in my lofty palace in the sky? That I can’t possibly be open-minded or willing to learn how you live?”

“Yes,” Saoirse said bluntly, her fingers clutching his own. Her hand was ungloved, her palm against his own bare hand. For some reason, he had expected her hands to feel cold and clammy. But they were warm and smooth, just like any other person’s. His eyes traced up her arm, noticing how the translucent scales that dusted her skin shone like moonlight. “I’ll be the first to admit that I have never spoken to an Auran before,” she continued. “Nor have I ever had the desire to.”

Rook gave her one of his signature grins. “You weren’t the least bit curious?” Instead of returning his smile, however, she only grew more hostile.

“No,” she replied quietly, candid fire burning in her eyes. “Your people believe themselves to be better than everyone else in Revelore. You look down on those who don’t have wings,” she paused, taking a sharp breath. “Oh, and must I remind you that one of your kind infiltrated my kingdom and betrayed my great uncle in exchange for

political secrets?”

The air between them grew stale. Rook silently bristled at her pointed insults and reeled from the sudden shift in her demeanor. Gone was the banter and flirtation of earlier.

So, the princess is done playing games, he thought, spinning her around and catching her waist again. He realized then that their conversation at the tribute table was simply another tactic, an enticing exchange of words meant to disarm him. She was toying with him, playing with his curiosity so that she could slip a knife through his ribs when he least expected it.

“You forget that your kind murdered my great aunt,” Rook hissed in her ear, spinning her again in a sudden burst of irritation. “And your people have taken every opportunity over the years to sabotage maritime trade routes and fund the exploits of rogue pirates who have murdered Aurans all along the coast,” he added. “Elorshin has made it a nightmare for the rest of us,” he seethed. “You encourage political uprisings and whisper lies in the ears of anyone who will listen. These recent missing merchant ships only prove my point. ”

“You make baseless accusations,” Saoirse countered. “Besides, do you even hear how frail that logic sounds? Why would the royal family deal with marauders when we have our own soldiers to do our bidding? And any sabotage of those trade routes would hurt our own economy as much as your own. You are gravely mistaken if you believe we have violated any trade agreements. We are conducting an investigation into those missing merchant ships, I can assure you. My own father remained in Kellam Keep to continue looking into the situation.”

Their movements had devolved from graceful to sporadic and uneven, nothing like the fluid twirls of earlier. Rook stared at her, secretly wondering if what she spoke was true. The Mer were cunning and ambitious, never content with swearing fealty to

Aurandel. It was a known fact that Elorshin sought to undermine his family's rule every chance they got. But though he would never admit it, a part of him began to question his understanding of the Mer. What were the odds that both Saoirse and Hasana would challenge his worldview in one day? Surely she had to be lying about the merchant ships. Wasn't she?

"And, you would also do well to remember that this is all Aurandel's doing, princeling," she added, looking around at the banquet with disgust. "We gather in your city year after year and compete in the Tournament, never to win. Tell me, why do you think that is?" her eyes glimmered triumphantly, as if she had uncovered some massive conspiracy he could not refute. "I think Aurandel has won every decade because they've sabotaged the games and rigged them in their favor."

She was trying to fluster him. And it was working. An ember of rage burned in his stomach, building into a crackling flame of resentment. But before he could find the words to respond, she hurled more accusations in his face.

"Your kind has brought the rest of Revelore humiliation every decade for the last century," she went on. "Your people have twisted a once beautiful tradition into a manipulative, self-serving game. We are all at your mercy, and you know it," she spat, her face flushed with anger. He twirled her again, momentarily cutting off their conversation. "All my life, I naively believed that the Tournament offered every nation an equal opportunity to rule. But this is clearly not the case. Even my own father knows this to be true." Her voice hitched, edged with something like sorrow. "There is a poison spreading through these lands. Your people thrive while the rest of us suffer. You're just too blind to see it." She stared at him brazenly, her eyes unwavering and taunting. "Which is why I will do anything to win." She was practically yelling now. Several twirling couples spared them curious glances, whispering amongst themselves.

"What are you accusing me of?" Rook asked, his tone dropping to a lethal edge. "Are

you suggesting that Aurandel has not earned the Crown fairly?”

“Yes,” she replied, challenge in her eyes.

Rook took a deep breath and tried to contain his anger. He was acutely aware of the countless eyes upon them. Already, he could hear the speculations whispered through the crowd. It would do him no good to erupt in front of these people.

“You have as much of a chance to win the Crown as I do,” he said through clenched teeth. He had listened to her conspiracy theories and baseless accusations for long enough. “Only the worthy may possess it. If your people have not won it, then it is no fault of Aurandel. But I wouldn’t expect a simple sea-dweller to understand how things on the continent work. You believe that your isolationism has harmed Revelore. But I can assure you, you do us a favor by hiding away in your little coral castle,” he paused, his face tightening with anger. “We have no need of your kind here, and if I had it my way, we’d never let Mer out of the ocean and onto our shores.”

Saoirse’s lips tightened into a thin line, her face darkening with anger. He delivered the final blow without thought, crossing a line he shouldn’t have. But they were sparring now, warring with words rather than with blades. And if there was one thing he would never back down from, it was a fight.

“Your mother is the reason my parents were killed in that carriage eight years ago,” he whispered in her ear. “If she hadn’t arranged that meeting-if she hadn’t pushed her foolish ideas of reconciliation-they would all still be alive.”

As soon as the words spilled from his lips he regretted them. It may have been Saoirse’s mother who first offered to meet with his parents in the name of negotiation, but she had lost someone too. But even if he felt somewhat guilty, he would never take back his scathing words. Not now. Not when the truth had come out

and the curiosity had waned. He didn't trust the Mer. And he certainly blamed them for the fracturing of Revelore. This Mer princess might as well face the facts.

Saoirse said nothing in response, her eyes dark with hatred as they continued to swirl through the courtyard. For the rest of the waltz, they said nothing to each other. As they finished the dance, he realized that any possibility that they might have been friends was now gone, evaporated like spring rain on the mountainside.

Rook bowed to her, effectively ending the waltz. She bowed in return, sweeping her stunning dress across the floor. He knew his expression was likely as grim as her own. He felt no sense of triumph as he turned away from Saoirse, striding toward Veila and Eros. His entire body was rigid, fire running through his blood.

14

SAOIRSE

Saoirse pulled herself out of bed with a groan. She had slept poorly after the banquet, strange dreams waking her up every few hours. The stone floor felt deliciously cool under her feet as she padded across the bedroom and into the bathing chamber. She slipped into the pool quickly, sighing as the soft saltwater covered her. Her dry skin absorbed the water, hungry for moisture and craving the familiar embrace of total submergence. Under the surface of the water, Saoirse allowed herself to finally think about the banquet.

It had been a disaster. Her plan from the beginning was to gain Prince Rook's trust, to get close to him and defy his expectations. It had gone smoothly at first. She had even started to enjoy his charm. But their promising conversation had turned sour the moment they began to dance. She couldn't say why she had turned hostile so quickly. Something about his arrogance and his teasing had triggered something inside of her, had uprooted some deep-seated hatred within. She had lost all control, her loose

tongue itching for a fight. Perhaps all those staring people had ignited the tension between them, their whispers and gossip fueling her rage. Perhaps her father's words had bubbled to the surface and reminded her of why their people were forced to compete in the Tournament. Or perhaps her resentment stemmed from what happened eight years ago, when her mother was killed in that carriage with the Auran rulers. Seeing the arrogance on Rook's face was enough to send her blood boiling.

Aurandel won every decade, and it seemed like that vicious cycle would never be broken. She didn't understand why the talented warriors of Tellusun, Elorshin, or Terradrin had never once won the Crown. Being here and seeing the hopeful faces of the other tributes had started to make her father's perspective seem sensible. Where was the harm in remaining hidden in the Maeral Sea? She balled her hands into fists, her fingernails biting into her palms. She felt as though she was a pawn in an elusive game, swept up in a trial she couldn't begin to understand. But her traitorous mind recalled Rook's scathing words and any thought of retreating back to Elorshin dissolved like sea foam.

"Your mother is the reason my parents were killed in that carriage eight years ago. If she hadn't arranged that meeting-if she hadn't pursued her foolish ideas of reconciliation-they would all still be alive."

In that moment, she decided Rook was nothing more than an arrogant, privileged prince who was used to getting his way. And she would enjoy defeating him in the trials. It would be easy to fulfill Selussa's bargain now.

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Saoirse reluctantly emerged from the pool, water dripping down her body and pooling on the floor. She towed herself off, spreading some of the salve that Vangelis had given her over her scales before slipping on her clothes. She chose a plain tunic and breeches, deciding that the looser and more breathable the better. She took a dose of titansblood, the familiar shifting of her lungs no more comfortable today than yesterday.

After dressing, Saoirse clasped her belt around her waist and hooked her sword on her hip. She then strapped the dagger she'd wagered to her thigh, making sure it was visible. She felt foolish. Here she was, on the eve of the Tournament, fighting over some stupid dagger that meant nothing to her. She didn't even know if Rook and his companions would show up at sunrise after she had so thoroughly offended him last night.

A soft knock sounded at the door, and Saoirse opened it to see Aurelia and Sune standing in the dim hallway. Aurelia grinned at her, something like glee in her turquoise eyes. Sune merely frowned as Saoirse left the chamber.

"I still don't think this is a good idea," Sune said as the three of them headed down the hallway. "That wager was foolish, and I didn't even agree to it."

"And yet here you are," Saoirse retorted. Of course she agreed with him, but she would never admit it.

"Any chance we have to best those arrogant birds is a chance worth taking," Aurelia assured Sune. "So what if it was a reckless move? I've never been afraid of a little recklessness."

“It’s dangerous to let your pride get in the way,” Sune replied, opening the door of the hallway and leading them out into the open courtyard. The sun was only just beginning to rise, still a mere blur on the horizon. The moon was still visible against the dark sky, shrouded by a blanket of clouds.

“Think of this as an opportunity to assess the enemy,” Saoirse said, striding purposefully through the lower half of the Citadel. “We’ll observe how they fight and what tactics they use in combat. We can use that to our advantage in the Tournament.”

Sune merely gave a disapproving scowl as the three of them entered the empty city streets. They headed uphill, striding toward the eastern sky bridge that hovered high in the clouds. Saoirse’s legs burned as they walked up the inclined roads, her muscles unused to the feeling of walking. Even in the darkness, the city of Coarinth was as beautiful as it had been when they first arrived. The open-aired buildings and floating pavilions were so different from the coral architecture in Kellam Keep.

As they headed east, the roar of pounding water slowly grew louder. At the far eastern border of Coarinth, a brilliant blue waterfall cascaded down from the mountain, shimmering in the wan morning sunrise. The water flowed downward through the city, cutting through the beautiful sandstone streets and spilling across the slopes like a maiden’s unbound hair. In a few places, the river branched off into different canals that connected various quarters of the city. Small boats used the waterways as a mode of transportation through the city, floating downstream. The river ran all the way down the mountain, providing water to many towns along the way. At the top of the cliffs, the sky bridge hung over the waterfall, framed by two towers on either side.

“You couldn’t have chosen somewhere lower to the ground?” Aurelia huffed as they reached a long set of stairs that was carved into the mountain itself.

“It wasn’t my decision,” Saoirse mumbled as they began to climb upward. She hoped that after all this, the Aurans would actually meet them there.

The three of them trudged up the treacherous stone staircase in silence, sparing the occasional glance downward as they continued climbing. As they rose higher, the view of the city below grew even more breathtaking. Still soft and unfocused on the horizon, the rising sun silhouetted the city skyline in gold. Every few steps, a soft mist drifted towards them from the roaring waterfall, dampening their dry skin and scales in a rejuvenating spray.

After what seemed like an eternity, they finally reached the top of the staircase. The sky bridge was anchored to the two towers that framed the waterfall, hung above the roaring waters below. They were so high up that tendrils of clouds drifted across the bridge, tinged a pale pink in the sunrise. Tangles of vines hung along the railing of the bridge, hanging down in strands of lush greenery. Birds dove around the sky bridge, flying under and over it in a sort of dance. Saoirse had to admit that even if Rook and his companions didn’t meet them, the spectacular sight was worth the effort.

“More bloody stairs,” Aurelia muttered, leading them to the tower that stood beside the waterfall. Through the rounded doorway, a spiral staircase curled upward through the tower, meeting the sky bridge at the very top.

“By the time we get to the top, we’ll have no strength left,” Sune cursed.

Suddenly, a breeze blew in from above and the beat of wings filled the air. Much to Saoirse’s relief and annoyance, Rook and his two companions flew down to meet them, shooting through the clouds. The prince landed softly on the ground, his fellow tributes right behind him.

“Good morning, Mer,” Rook offered with a mock bow of respect.

Memories of their searing exchange of words the night before surged into her mind. “Thank you for honoring our wager,” Saoirse replied, giving him a slight nod.

“I never turn down a wager,” Rook answered, giving her a dimpled grin. Though he smiled, Saoirse could still see a flare of hostility in his eyes.

“Allow me to introduce my companions. This is Aurelia Eleni and Sune Kresten, captains of the Torqen and my fellow tributes in the Tournament.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Rook said with a flourish, bowing elaborately to Sune and Aurelia. Through his forced smile, it was clear he was guarded. “Veila Stjarna and Eros Morningstar,” he told them, turning back to his companions. “The greatest warriors among the Aerials.”

Eros was tall and broad, his wings as black as a raven’s feathers. He nodded to them, offering a friendly smile that made Saoirse uncomfortable. Beside Eros, Veila merely crossed her arms and gave them an assessing gaze. Her white wings were pristine in the sunrise, her feathers unruffled. For a woman of such small stature, she was possibly the most intimidating fighter there.

“Shall we head up?” Eros asked, his ochre brown hair tousling in the wind as he looked up to the sky bridge.

“We’re ready when you are,” Aurelia replied confidently. A grin tugged at her lips. She was enjoying this entirely too much.

Without warning, the three Aurans strode up to each of them and grabbed them by the shoulders, hauling them into the air. Saoirse squirmed against Eros’s arms, unprepared for his crushing hold. But as they rose upward, Saoirse stopped her flailing and clutched his shoulders, her stomach dropping as they ascended. She might have found it amusing to see Rook carrying an offended-looking Sune upward

through the clouds had she not been deathly afraid of plummeting to the earth herself. Eros dove through clouds gracefully, dodging birds that drifted beside them in the hazy morning light. He flew parallel to the crystal-blue waterfall as they continued upward, and soft mist clung to their skin and clothes as they shot upward.

Just as fast as they had risen into the air, they suddenly landed on the sky bridge. Saoirse quickly scrambled out of Eros's arms, scowling when she saw Rook giving her a satisfied grin. Veila landed gently onto the bridge next to them, releasing Aurelia in an unceremonious heap.

Saoirse's head was spinning with the change in altitude. Though she wanted to collapse in a heap and wait for the dizziness to pass, she staggered over to the railing of the bridge, trying to hold onto what little scraps of dignity she had left. The pounding of the water was deafening, roaring like a beast. She stood at the edge of the sky bridge, realizing that she had never been so high in her life.

"How do you like the view?" Rook asked beside her, taking a place at the railing. If he noticed how flustered she was, he didn't say a word about it.

She looked up at him, noticing how the golden warmth of the sunrise caught on his dark hair. She hated herself for noticing such a small detail. "I'd like it better if you hadn't hauled us up here without warning," she retorted. "Let's get this over with. The sooner we win this duel, the quicker we'll be able to prepare for the Tournament tomorrow."

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“Lest you forget, Princess,” Rook drawled smugly, “it was you who challenged me to this wager. Don’t be so anxious to get it over with,” he purred. “We’ve agreed to go easy on you. We don’t want you to struggle in the Tournament tomorrow.” His eyes were glittering mischievously, and his condescending tone made her want to punch him as hard as she could.

“What rules must we follow in this duel?” Saoirse asked, ignoring his teasing. He was merely trying to get under her skin, using his charm to unsettle her. It wouldn’t work.

“No drawing blood,” Rook began slowly, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “No using any special abilities. As much as I’d love to use my wings, it would be an unfair advantage,” he added, spreading his pale grey wings out for emphasis. “Flying would guarantee our victory, and we want this to be a fair fight.”

“Thank you for lowering your standards for us Merfolk,” Aurelia hissed sardonically. “You wouldn’t stand a chance against Saoirse if she wielded her powers.”

Saoirse smiled uncomfortably at the mention of her lost abilities. She felt guilty for not telling her companions about such a critical loss. It felt so wrong to hide her bargain with the Witch from Aurelia, who knew her every secret. Her skin prickled as she felt Rook’s gaze on her, his assessing eyes filled with curiosity at the mention of her unseen power.

“Alright, then it will be a simple duel. No spilled blood and no using special abilities.” Saoirse was anxious to change the subject. She pushed her hair out of her face and tied it into a knot at the nape of her neck.

Rook stepped away from the railing, moving into the center of the bridge. Veila and Eros followed suit, standing on either side of him. “The first fighter who surrenders loses,” Rook added. “May the best soldier win.”

Saoirse unsheathed her sword. “I agree to your terms. Let’s begin.”

Aurelia and Sune moved into formation beside her, unsheathing their own blades as they faced the Auran tributes. Saoirse eased into the familiar combat stance that had been drilled into her after years of training. The ways of the Torqen were a faint whisper in her muscles, natural and instinctive.

Rook lifted a dark eyebrow, drawing his own blade in response to her challenge. Save for the roar of the waterfall below, all was silent. Saoirse sensed her opportunity and lunged at Rook with a snarl. He countered her charge, bringing his sword to bear against her own as he blocked the strike. Behind them, the ringing of metal against metal sounded out across the bridge as Sune and Aurelia faced their own opponents. Saoirse tore her blade away from his, spinning as Rook brought his first blow towards her. She ducked to her right as his sword sliced through empty air.

They moved away from their dueling companions as they fought, side stepping down the walkway with each blow. The way they circled each other was akin to dancing, and Saoirse was reminded of their spinning on the dance floor the night before. She much preferred sparring with blades than with words.

Her hands ached from each reverberating blow Rook either blocked or delivered. She grew agitated with each seemingly effortless block he produced, the smug smile never leaving his face. Fury built inside of her like a churning maelstrom as Rook countered each of her attacks easily. Sweat beaded on her brow as she parried each blow. With every swing, they locked eyes. Tension grew between them like a building wave, rising with the biting clang of metal. Breathing heavily, Saoirse kept pushing him forward, dodging his blade all the while. She feigned a strike to his left

and swept his legs out from under him with a deft kick. Rook's eyes widened in shock as he toppled over, barely catching himself before hitting the ground. Saoirse didn't have time to gloat as he straightened again, lunging for her with a growl.

The dull roar of the river filled her ears and all distractions slipped away. The sun was rising now, golden beams of light marbling the bridge and catching on the rising droplets of mist. As they moved into the center of the bridge, the sound of Sune and Aurelia's own battles behind them dissolved into a distant cry.

She focused on the prince like a predator locked onto its prey. Just as she had noticed the night before, Rook favored his left side. She used this knowledge to attack on his right, forcing him to block her powerful swings with his weak arm. He was sweating with the effort, his thin tunic clinging to his skin and his dark hair damp with perspiration. But even as his breathing grew ragged, he continued to decisively parry her every swing. Saoirse herself was growing weary, her sore muscles and aching lungs slowing her down. But she refused to back down, pushing through the pain with each strike and parry. She was determined to see the blade fly from his hand.

Memories of his scathing words returned to her, his cruel taunting twisting in her gut: "If your people have not won it, it is because the Aura are the only ones with enough wit and strength to come out triumphant. We have no need of your kind here, and if I had it my way, we'd never let Mer out of the ocean and onto our shores."

Fresh energy surged through her at the thought of his insults, her blood pumping as loudly in her ears as the soaring waterfall below. She leaped forward with each new strike, forcing Rook backwards to the railing of the sky bridge. But her burst of energy quickly evaporated, leaving her legs trembling and her chest heaving. Saoirse gripped her sword tighter, squinting through the beads of sweat. Saoirse could barely think as the world became a dizzying blur of odd shapes coming in and out of focus, but she glimpsed her chance and twisted her blade beneath his. With strength she didn't even know she had, Saoirse shoved his blade out of his hand. The sword went

flying, skittering across the sky bridge.

Rook seemed dumbfounded, completely shocked by her prolonged and vicious assault. But the Auran prince did not surrender. Instead of ending their duel, he merely raised his fists in a wordless challenge. Saoirse tossed her own blade to the ground, raising her fists in response.

“Just give up,” she urged. “I’ve bested you.”

“Never,” Rook smiled.

They continued fighting, swinging their knuckles instead of swords. Rook suddenly kicked her legs out from under her, leaping on her the instant she hit the stones. Had she not been burning with anger, she may have blushed as he wrapped his legs around her, pinning her to the ground. His face was mere inches from hers, and their ragged breaths mingled together as they struggled on the bridge.

Saoirse managed to roll out from under him and force herself up from the ground. She pressed her back against the railing, bracing herself as Rook lunged at her again. Saoirse dodged his blow and rolled to the side. As he stumbled forward, a sudden gust of wind ripped across the bridge, catching his wings and sending him crashing head-first into the railing. A sickening crack sounded as Rook hit his head against the stone. His tall frame sent his momentum over the railing, his eyes rolling back in his head as he plummeted down towards the waters below.

“Rook!” she screamed over the wind, watching helplessly as he dropped like a stone into the river.

Without thinking, Saoirse leaped off the side of the bridge and dove after him. She was only second behind him, but he had already hit the surface of the rushing river. She dove into the biting cold waters, icy chill seeping into her limbs. Under the water,

her body took to the current easily. Her eyes readjusted to the darkness, and she gasped as she spotted Rook's paralyzed form being carried towards the edge of the waterfall. She grabbed him, hauling one of his arms over her shoulder. His head lolled to the side, still unconscious. She kicked against the water, trying desperately to make it to the nearby embankment. She cursed the boots that were still laced up her calves, confining her webbed toes and preventing her from catching the water. The waterfall was too powerful, too fast. Above, she could see Veila and Eros diving for them, terrified looks on their faces. Saoirse opened her palms and willed the water to halt. But the churning current kept pushing them farther, ignoring her summons.

"Titans!" Saoirse cursed, regretting all that she had relinquished to the Sea Witch. She clung to Rook and tried to keep his head above the water as they hurtled toward the edge. Eros and Veila were now only a few paces away, their wingbeats sending ripples across the water.

But it was too late.

Saoirse felt the water push them over the side of the cliff, their bodies going weightless as they pitched over the side. Saoirse held onto Rook as tightly as she could, wrapping herself around his body as they fell through air and water. She knew that the impact below would be the worst part, and if she couldn't absorb most of the blow, Rook's bones would be crushed under the pounding waves. She covered Rook's body with her own, praying that she could protect him once they hit the bottom.

The waterfall pushed them into the river below, water churning over their heads. They were tossed through the foaming waters like leaves on the wind, helpless as they were pounded over and over again by the incessant waves. Saoirse clung to Rook, fighting to hold on. She kicked against the river, pulling him up to the surface. She could barely see through the waterfall, bubbles and foam rolling over them in droves.

At some point, they broke the surface of the water. Saoirse gasped, clutching Rook's shoulders as the water lapped at him and threatened to pull him under again. His wings were heavy, catching in the current and holding them back. Saoirse continued to push, her fingers digging into his shoulders as she struggled against the waves. She carried him to the embankment at the river's edge, using her last dregs of energy to kick them both to shore. By some miracle, she managed to reach the embankment. She collapsed in the shallow water, her back pressed against the soft sand.

She turned to Rook, who was laying beside her with his eyes still closed. Pressing her lips to his mouth, she pushed air into his lungs over and over again, stopping every few moments to push on his chest. If she had access to her power, she could've called the water out of his lungs and set his heart beating again. But her panic was replaced by relief as Rook choked up water, his chest slowly beginning to rise and fall. She scanned him for any injuries, touching his ribs to feel for anything broken. She swept back his dark hair from his face, wincing when she saw the dark bruise that was forming on his forehead.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. The water lapped at them softly, tiny ripples rushing over the sand.

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“What happened?” Rook asked raggedly, his eyes cracking open.

“You went over the bridge,” Saoirse answered. “You almost drowned.”

Rook leveled an unsteady gaze on her, confusion on his face. “You saved me? Why?”

“I would’ve lost my ability to compete in the Tournament if I had let the heir of Aurandel drown,” she quickly replied. “In fact, I most likely would’ve been sentenced to death.” Though that was partly true, she was just as puzzled as he was by her actions.

“You chose to come after me,” Rook said, half to her and half to himself. He sat up with a groan, placing a hand on his head. “And for that I thank you.”

“I should’ve never let it go that far,” Saoirse argued. “That was so reckless of me.”

“We’ll call it even,” Rook said with a pained grin. “Let’s call it a truce and forget it ever happened.”

Saoirse fumbled with the dagger that was strapped to her thigh, her hands trembling after so much exertion. “Here,” she offered, handing the blade to Rook. “Take it. You deserve to win the bet.”

But Rook only shook his head wearily. “It was never about the dagger,” he said softly. He leaned back in the water, looking up at her inquisitively. “I know that blade means nothing to you, I can see it on your face. It was never about the wager,” he repeated, almost to himself. “You know that as well as I do.”

“You didn’t even bring the book you wagered, did you?” Saoirse asked.

“No,” the prince replied. “I didn’t need to.” At her raised brow, he confessed, “there is no book. My father never read to me as a child. I made it up.”

The arrogant bastard. Why hadn’t she just let him drown?

Wingbeats filled the air from above as Veila and Eros circled them. Sune and Aurelia weren’t with them, likely abandoned on the sky bridge as soon as Rook had gone over. Eros hit the sand, running towards them. Veila was close behind, an expression of horror on her face. The two of them kneeled next to Rook in the shallow waves.

“You’re alive,” Veila breathed. She ran her hands along his face, her eyes catching on the ugly bruise that grew darker by the second.

“You,” Veila snarled, directing her gaze at Saoirse. She rose from the water, her gaze burning with fury. “You tried to kill the prince!” She lunged at Saoirse and pinned her to the ground, her hands curling into a fist.

“Get off of her,” Rook ordered. “Veila, stop!”

Veila shoved away from her reluctantly, rising from the sand with a vengeful look on her face. “It was as much my fault as it was hers,” Rook offered, sparing a glance at Saoirse.

“Let me at least take him to an infirmary,” Saoirse began.

“No. You’ve done enough, siren,” Eros hissed.

Saoirse flinched at the derogatory word. She was suddenly grateful that Aurelia had been left on the sky bridge, otherwise she might have killed him.

Eros slipped an arm under Rook's shoulder, helping him stand. Veila held him up from the other side, her eyes dark with hatred. "See you in the arena." And without another word, the three of them rose into the air and vanished on the wind.

15

SAOIRSE

After she nearly killed Rook at the sky bridge, Saoirse made Aurelia and Sune swear their meeting with the Aerials to secrecy. She didn't feel like inciting the wrath of the Elders or earning a scolding from Ambassador Vangelis on the eve of the Tournament. And the last thing they needed was the rest of the tributes finding out that she had almost killed the Auran prince. They already believed Mer to be cunning and deceptive. She didn't need one more stain darkening her reputation.

But although Sune and Aurelia promised to keep their duel on the sky bridge a secret, Saoirse was powerless to stop Rook and his companions from telling the world what she'd nearly done. She didn't trust the Auran prince for one second. She wasn't foolish enough to believe that her saving his life atoned for her reckless behavior. Aurans were slow to forgive and quick to collect their enemies' debts. She had no doubt that one day he would demand retribution.

Sitting across from Vangelis in a small meeting room near their private quarters, Saoirse fidgeted in her seat as she thought of the events of that morning. Aurelia and Sune sat on either side of her, their expressions dark. A part of her felt guilty about dragging them into the feud that was blooming between her and Rook, but a smaller, secretive part of herself was proud that she had bested him in front of her companions. Though their skirmish on the bridge wasn't anywhere near the level of savagery that would take place in the arena, all her years of training seemed to have paid off. She had earned the right to gloat some, hadn't she? Beating the Captain of the Aerials in his own turf and saving his life by her own hands was no small feat. She

allowed herself a small, hidden smile.

“In the arena,” Ambassador Vangelis was saying, “you must follow your tasks exactly as the Master of Trials commands.” Thick candles sat on the table between them, puddles of wax pooling along the wood. The flickering flame glimmered against his deep blue scales. “There is no trickery in the Master of Trials’ tasks, but that doesn’t mean the challenges are straightforward,” he said, looking at each of them sternly. His long fingers were entwined carefully on the table before him. Saoirse watched as a melted glob of wax dripped threateningly close to his folded hands.

“In the seventh Tournament of Revelore, during the second trial, each group of tributes were tasked with obtaining a feather from a griffin. Griffins are notoriously hard creatures to tame, as you know. They are proud of their feathers above all else, and to pluck one from their shoulders is as difficult as threading a needle with a frayed string.”

Saoirse remembered the first time she glimpsed one of the magnificent creatures flying over the Isles of Mythos. Its white feathers looked as though they had each been dipped in a pot of gold on the ends. The beast’s lion body had been corded with muscle, its tawny coat catching the light of the sun as it sped through the clouds. She shuddered at the thought of facing one in the arena.

“The Tellusun tributes defied the odds and plucked not one, but three feathers from the griffin,” Vangelis continued. “Naturally, the Tellusun tributes believed that they had executed the second trial perfectly. But they were disqualified because they did not adhere to the Master of Trial’s task. They were instructed to collect a single feather, and no more.”

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“That doesn’t seem fair at all,” Aurelia retorted. “The Master of Trials was a fool.”

“Fair or not, the Tellusun tributes did not follow the rules, and therefore they failed,” Vangelis explained. “All three of them were disgraced and sent away from the arena immediately. You must follow the trial instructions exactly, you see. No more and no less. Do not think yourselves to be above the rules. Do not seek to impress the Master of Trials. You must strictly accomplish the tasks at hand. Do not try to outdo your rivals. Stick to the rules. And ignore the other tributes, even if they hurl threats and insults at you during the trials.”

They were all silent, the ambassador’s words settling over them like cloaks on their shoulders. Agreeing to his suggestions was easy enough. But it would be an entirely different matter in the arena, seeing the sneering faces of the other tributes a few feet away.

“So what happens at the end?” Aurelia asked, raising a blonde eyebrow. “What if all twelve tributes complete each trial? How will the Master of Trials determine the champion if we have all survived?”

Vangelis’s folded fingers twitched slightly and his expression darkened. “That is an unlikely possibility,” he paused for a breath, as if reluctant to continue. “We will be lucky if two nations even make it to the final trial, let alone all four.”

A chill crawled down Saoirse’s spine. Memories of the Tournament she watched ten years ago flashed before her eyes, the resounding screams and suffocating smell of blood still visceral even after all these years. She was only seven, barely tall enough to see over the ornate railing of theirboxed chamber. She could remember the

dismayed look on her father's face when the last Mer tribute had fallen, effectively ending Elorshin's bid for the Crown. But out of all the memories, she recalled the blood the most. There was so much of it. The last remaining tributes were from Aurandel and Terradrin. The Tellusun warriors who were left alive were gravely wounded and unable to compete in the final trial. She remembered looking down on the arena from the private box she and her parents were comfortably settled in. The metallic scent of blood was hot on the wind.

When dawn broke on the final trial, Raven of Aurandel faced two well-seasoned Terradrin tributes on her own. Though she was easily the youngest at seventeen, she was the most savage of them all. It had been a bloodbath, the fearsome young princess showing no mercy.

Even at such a young age, Saoirse understood what was at stake. She knew what the loss would mean for her people. There, in that sheltered royal observation deck, Saoirse vowed that Aurandel would never again win the Tournament. Not if she could help it.

"If more than one nation manages to accomplish the final trial, there will be a duel," Vangelis continued. "It will be a fight to the death. The last warrior standing shall win the Crown. But the Blood Duel has only ever occurred once in the last hundred years. It is unlikely to occur ever again."

"We will be the last tributes alive. We won't need a Blood Duel," Sune growled out. "We will accomplish every task precisely as the Master of Trials commands, and we will be the last nation standing."

"Agreed," Aurelia chimed in, her turquoise eyes flashing. It had to be one of the first times she and Sune had ever agreed on anything.

"I admire your confidence," Vangelis smiled weakly, "but be wary; the other tributes

will try to prey on your confidence and bluff you into showing your hand.”

“Anything else you wish to tell us before the first trial tomorrow?” Saoirse asked. A prickle of anxiety had begun to bury itself in the pit of her stomach. She was ready for the arena. She’d prepared for it over the last ten years. But that didn’t mean she wasn’t afraid of what she might face.

“Don’t make foolish mistakes,” Vangelis offered as he rose from the table. “In that arena, you’ll be facing the worst monsters imaginable. But the greatest threat to your lives will be the tributes around you. Do not be distracted by your rivals. Do not concern yourself with their actions, and do not act upon personal vendettas.”

Once again, he cast an accusatory look at Saoirse. She raised her hands in innocence.

“I did not hear what you discussed with the Auran prince last night at the banquet, but it was obvious to everyone in attendance that your words were threatening. It is a dangerous road you walk towards, Your Highness,” he said in a tone that was not quite scolding, but rather cautionary. “Do not let your personal feuds distract you in the arena, and don’t let the other tributes get under your skin. Just focus on what you need to do and come out alive.”

With that, the Tournament Ambassador turned from their meeting table and left the darkened rooms. His shimmering robes flashed in the candlelight, strands of seashells swaying as he strode back into the hall.

Once he was gone, Aurelia slouched in her chair and looked up at the uneven stone ceiling. Just like their private chambers, this small meeting room was hollowed out from the mountain. Mineral-rich water dripped down from the ceiling, splashing on the candles below. The flames hissed on the table.

“We must promise each other that no matter what happens, we will remain a team,”

Sune abruptly broke the silence. “Vow to me that you will both put Elorshin first. If something were to happen to one of us, we must each be willing to leave the others behind in order to win. Do not jeopardize Elorshin’s chances of victory just to save a teammate.”

“You assume that I’d try to help you if you fell in the arena?” Aurelia scoffed. “I’m flattered that you would think so highly of me.”

“I’m serious,” Sune retorted. He rose from his chair, his head nearly colliding with the stone ceiling. “Vow to me that you will both remain unflinching. Promise that you will finish the trials, whether or not I perish.”

“Yes,” Aurelia agreed softly, growing somber. “We vow to complete the trials no matter what may come of us.”

Sune gave a satisfied nod and turned to the door, as curt and formal as ever. “We must fetch our weapons from the armory,” he reminded them matter-a-factly, disappearing into the shadowed corridor. With a dramatic roll of her eyes, Aurelia pushed up from the table and followed him out. Saoirse followed close behind, Vangelis’s words still lingering in her thoughts. For the first time since they arrived, reality had finally set in.

The mountain halls were silent, the whisper of their footsteps echoing through the darkness. The sound of leather against stone was foreign in Saoirse’s ears. In her palace in Kellam Keep, she was used to the sway of waves and the gurgling of bubbles as she swam through the halls, her feet seldom touching the ground. She was reminded again of how different this world was from her own.

They emerged from the Mer quarters, stepping out from the mountain and into the late afternoon sunlight. Outside, a troupe of Torqen soldiers moved into a protective formation around them. The Mer warriors moved as a unit, staying in step with them

as they left the courtyard and entered into the city. After the incident at the sky bridge that morning, Sune had insisted that they never leave the Citadel unaccompanied. Saoirse didn't doubt for a second that a dagger might be plunged into her back if she wasn't careful. She wouldn't be surprised if Prince Rook had placed a bounty on her head after nearly killing him.

The armory lay several blocks away from the Citadel, nestled near the Aerial barracks at the heart of the city. The entourage of Mer warriors stood out like a streak of blood against fresh snow as they wandered through the crowded streets. They were not the only foreigners traveling through the winding sandstone roads, but they were undeniably the most hated. Saoirse tried to ignore the eyes that peered curiously at them from open windows and shadowed alleys.

The Aerial armory came into view as the three of them rounded a corner. The round building curved into a sandstone dome, fragments of multicolored stone embedded into the walls like a mosaic. A plume of smoke drifted from an opening at the top, thick with the scent of tangy metal and charred wood. No windows were cut into the smooth, sloping walls. Only a single iron door flanked by heavily-armed Aerial guards marked the entrance to the building. With a slight wave of his fingers, Sune gave a silent command to the Torqen soldiers surrounding them. As the Mer warriors stepped back, the three of them headed for the iron door at the center of the armory. Though the Aerial soldiers stationed on either side of the entrance surveyed them with a hostile gaze, they were allowed inside without question.

The room was darkened save for a roaring fire in one corner of the building, where new weapons were forged and added to their stockpile. Aerial blacksmiths pounded away at hot metal in the corner, repairing damaged weapons and smoothing out dented helmets. All along the curved walls, weapons of every make and model shone in the light of the fire. Although the flames in the forge crackled and hissed, the room was cold.

“Undying flames,” Aurelia whispered.

Blades formed within the fires of undying flames were the most sought-after weapons in Revelore. To think that all the Aerial forces were vested with swords and armor forged by undying flames was staggering. The wealth and prestige of the Aura was truly unmatched.

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“Over there,” Sune noted, nodding at a group of tributes who stood before the forge. Saoirse recognized the white hair of the Terradrin tributes instantly. In the light of the undying flames, their pale skin and colorless eyes looked translucent.

Saoirse reluctantly followed Sune and Aurelia as they strode toward the other tributes, her eyes catching on the walls of endless weapons. Shelves of glittering knives and elegant swords shone in the light. Chains, spikes, and gleaming shields. It seemed that any weapon a soldier could ever dream of was housed within the armory. The warrior’s heart in her chest began to stir with hunger. She could spend hours here.

They halted behind the protective gates of the forge. In front of them, the Terradrin tributes collected their weapons from the Aerial blacksmiths. Each tribute was allowed a knife and a simple longsword in the Tournament. Those who preferred archery rather than a sword were granted a rudimentary bow and arrows. The tributes' weapons were forged in unison, to prevent any direct advantage of one tribute over another. Most importantly, the blacksmiths at the armory ensured that there were no enchantments or charms of deception placed upon the weapons. In the past, tributes had cursed their blades so that they always found their marks, or they had enchanted their arrows to be invisible so that they could surprise their enemies.

Saoirse watched as the ground-dwellers sheathed their weapons. The Terradrin tributes turned from the forge, their milky eyes luminous in the soft glow. Saoirse immediately recognized Captain Neia Landum of the Under Kingdom.

Neia cocked her head curiously as she caught sight of Saoirse staring at her. “Mer princess,” she acknowledged with a bow. Neia was lithe and willowy, her unbound

white hair appearing silver in the light of the forge. Saoirse could easily imagine the warrior climbing through the dark tunnels and hidden caverns of the Under Kingdom, leading a battalion to war beneath the earth.

“Captain Landum,” Saoirse replied with a nod. She scanned the male tributes beside Neia, watching as they instinctively placed hands on the swords at their hips. Clearly they expected a fight, if their wary expressions were any indication.

“You are brave to compete in the Tournament, Your Highness,” Neia observed in a tone that was neither mocking nor impressed.

“I serve my country the same as any other warrior,” Saoirse replied. “To be selected as a tribute is an honor.”

Neia nodded, her long white eyelashes casting shadows on her colorless cheeks. “I dare say it took more bravery to dance with the Auran prince last night than to enter the Tournament.” There was a challenge in her voice, though Saoirse couldn’t say why.

Her skin prickled under Neia’s gaze. Of course she knew that people had been watching. But on the dance floor across from Rook, the last thing on her mind had been the eyes upon them. She suddenly realized how foolish it had been to accept that dance. It was even more foolish that she had displayed such a lack of self control when she had stormed off in a rage. Her reckless behavior had sent a message to the watchful crowd and invited unwanted speculation. She should’ve been more careful.

“I would wager an enormous sum of money to see that look of disdain on his face again,” Neia chuckled. “What did you say to him to draw out such anger?”

“Whatever words Princess Saoirse shared with the Auran Prince is none of your concern,” Aurelia hissed between her teeth. Neia narrowed her eyes at Aurelia and

Sune, as if she had forgotten they were standing there.

“You compete with noble companions, Princess,” the Terradrin captain noted coolly, leveling her gaze at them. “How do your Torqen soldiers fare? Even in the Under Kingdom, we have heard of your impressive leadership. How admirable it is that you are both so young and open to untested methods of training.”

Aurelia didn’t so much as flinch at the backhanded compliment. “Our battalions are well,” she answered briskly. “We must always be open to new methods of training. The Torqen always strive for improvement.”

“We just finished our season on the Isles of Mythos,” Sune added. “Our army is taking to our new untested methods well.”

“So I’ve heard,” Neia replied, continuing to assess them with a disconcerting gaze. Her eyes were cold and calculating.

It was no secret that every nation of Revelore kept watchful eyes on the movements of their enemies, even if fragile peace treaties existed between them. Secrets and spies were abundant in Revelore, that much was certain. The thin puppeteer strings that held the nations together were in the hands of Arundel, strings that could snap at any moment if they weren’t careful. It was wise for the Terradrin Captain to keep tabs on the Torqen.

“How do your armies fare in the Under Kingdom?” Sune asked dutifully, the very picture of a cordial captain. “I’ve heard there have been challenges with the Wyrms infestation.”

Saoirse shuddered at the mention of the subterranean creatures that buried into the earth like parasites. She had heard the reports of the Terradrin army battling the giant worm-like creatures in recent months, losing entire units to their teeth-filled jaws.

Something like a shadow passed over Neia's pale face, the corners of her mouth tugging to a frown that was quickly concealed. "Our forces are well," she answered briskly. "The infestation is nothing our people haven't faced before. We know the tunnels just as well as the Wyrms do, and we know how to keep them at bay."

"And how goes the Auran occupation?" Aurelia asked. "I imagine it must be difficult to have Aerials surveying your every movement?" Saoirse winced at the insensitive question.

Neia gave Aurelia a long, weighted look. She pursed her lips, folding her hands across her chest. Saoirse wondered if there was more tension in the Under Kingdom than she knew of. After Terradrin revolutionaries had killed Aurandel's leaders eight years ago, the presence of the Aerials was constant. Though Neia's soldiers fought for Terradrin in principle, they were under the thumb of Aurandel in every way. Perhaps Neia's selection as a tribute held more weight than Saoirse could see on the surface.

"The occupation fares well," Neia finally said, choosing her words carefully. It was one thing to tease Saoirse about dancing with Rook, but it was an entirely different matter to speak treasonously of Aurandel.

"I wish you well in the Tournament, tomorrow," Saoirse decidedly said, sensing Neia's discomfort. She bowed to the Terradrin captain and her companions, forcing a courteous smile. A look of relief seemed to briefly flicker across Neia's eyes before unreadable neutrality returned.

"May glory be given," the white-haired woman offered. The Terradrin warriors brushed past, leaving the three of them before the blazing forge alone.

"I can't tell if I like her or not," Aurelia smirked.

“We shouldn’t like anyone,” Sune retorted, striding toward the awaiting Aerial blacksmiths. “Not when any one of those tributes might slit your throat in the arena tomorrow morning.”

Saoirse stepped up to the forge, watching as the blacksmiths gathered their assigned weapons. She openly stared at the wings that sprouted from their backs. She still wasn’t used to the sight of the winged people standing before her in the flesh. The blacksmiths wore leather aprons that extended past their abdomens and hung to their knees, protecting them from the ice cold flames that could burn flesh just as harshly as any other fire.

“We are here to collect our weapons for the Tournament.”

The tall Auran male nodded, reaching for their custom-made swords and daggers. He laid the weapons out on the sandstone counter between them.

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“These blades have been fortified against enchantments,” the blacksmith warned. “Do not attempt to put any wards on them, for it will be futile.” Saoirse had no doubt that they’d inspected the weapons a thousand times since they’d been forged, but one could never be too careful where the Tournament was concerned.

Saoirse grabbed a blade from the table, testing the weight of it in her hands. The blade was heavier than she preferred, sluggishly responding with each flick of her wrist. Where her Torqen-issued blade was curved and light, this iron sword felt bulky and far too long. She swung it expertly, sending a whoosh of metal through the air that sang through the armory. It would have to do.

She had no other choice.

16

ROOK

“You should’ve gotten much worse than a bruise from your stupid game with that Mer princess,” Raven chided disapprovingly. She dabbed Rook’s forehead with a damp towel, a frown on her face. “You could have died.”

“I know it was foolish.” Rook sat on the ledge of his windowsill, gazing out at the eastern sky bridge across the city. It was risky to tell his sister what had happened, given that she hated the Mer more than anyone else in Aurandel. But it would be no easy feat to lie about the huge, dark bruise that crept along his forehead. His sister could see through his deception as easily as looking through a glass window. He prayed that her sense of duty to the Tournament would outweigh any of her urges to

punish the Mer princess.

“And on the eve of the Tournament,” Raven added, her tone sharpened to a lethal edge. “What were you thinking?”

Rook jerked his head free from her grasp and turned away from her scolding eyes. It was a question he had been asking himself the whole morning. Unspoken or not, he and Saoirse both knew that the wager had been made in jest. At any time, either one of them could have declined the invitation. And even still, they had both appeared at the sky bridge at dawn. She was determined to prove herself to him, that much was certain.

“I know the history between our people,” Rook sighed, leaning back against the window sill. “But there is more, isn’t there? All of that hate and malice. There has to be more.”

Raven narrowed her eyes at him, putting the damp cloth back in the bowl. “You can’t evade responsibility that easily. Don’t try to change the subject.” She shook her head, running a hand through her hair wearily. “Why did you agree to something so foolish? How could it have been worth your time and strength?”

“My pride was at stake,” Rook retorted. “If you had heard the insults she threw at me during the Banquet, you would’ve done the same.” He realized how childish he sounded. Of course he hadn’t flown up there with Veila and Eros over a mere argument. But if he hadn’t wanted to simply defend his honor, why had he felt so compelled to see the Mer princess?

Just as he predicted, Raven seemed to see right through his pitiful explanation. “You’re more reasonable than that, Rook,” she said, arching an eyebrow skeptically. “I know you wouldn’t risk your life over a stupid wager.” She frowned, dipping the cloth back into the water and ringing it out. Clouds of his blood seeped from the cloth

and into the clear water. She scanned his face, her eyes surveying his forehead. “Don’t tell me you are attracted to her,” she warned, her voice dropping low with astonishment.

“Rave, don’t be ridiculous,” Rook snapped entirely too quickly. “Of course not. Even I wouldn’t be so foolish as to dally with the princess of Elorshin.”

“You would do well to stay away from Princess Saoirse and her kin,” she warned. “If you aren’t careful, she will try to deceive you and undermine Aurandel’s reign. The Mer are crafty sorts, unafraid to stoop low in order to win.”

“Why do they hate us so much?” Rook asked, trying to steer the conversation away from Saoirse and back toward the root of the tension between their people. It was a fair question, and one he had been wondering about the past couple days. But he was also desperate not to discuss Saoirse and their fight on the sky bridge any more. “We rule fairly. We allow them to indulge in their isolationist policies. We hardly ever ask anything from them. We have been most gracious to them over the last century, offering them forgiveness for the War of the Age that they caused.”

“The Mer have always been power hungry,” his sister assured him. “We have seen that time and time again. They were the ones who declared war on our people a hundred years ago, not us.”

“But should be be so quick to condemn them? Wouldn’t we have done the same thing in their position?” he shrugged. “Princess Yrsa married their king and turned on him. She gave our people their secrets and tried to corrupt them from the inside. Surely that would give them cause to hate us.”

Raven was looking at him as though he were a stranger, her frown deepening with every word he spoke. “That is what they believe,” she retorted. “They have their own version of the story. You know that as well as I do. They see what they want to see,

nothing more. Princess Yrsa didn't kill Lorsan," Raven went on. "Lorsan's power-hungry brother was the one who ended his life. But the Mer would never believe that. They chose to blame her instead, to blame our people."

"Where is the truth?" Rook asked, pushing away from the windowsill and striding across the room. "I despise the Mer as much as the next Auran, but I want to know what really happened all those years ago. We have one account, and they have another. But where is the truth?" he asked again.

"The truth is all around us," Raven replied sharply, flinging her hands out in frustration. "The Tournament exists so that the Mer and any other dissenters stay in their places. The Order of Elders proposed the Tournament as a fair solution in the wake of the war. It exists so that no one else is killed because of their hatred and greed."

"Is it true that the Tellusun lands are dying?" Rook asked, unable to help himself. It had been a question weighing on him ever since Hasana had mentioned it. "Are they starving?"

Raven's eyebrows lowered, something like anger flickering across her face. "What lies have you been told?" she asked darkly. "If the Tellusun are starving, then it is due to their leader's incompetence. We aren't responsible for the health of their land."

"But we trade with them," Rook argued. "Their food supply and harvest affects us, doesn't it? They tithe to us every year, giving us their best products. Surely we could give them more goods if they did not have enough to eat?"

Raven gave out an exasperated sigh that bordered on annoyance. "Our tithes have nothing to do with this. You know as well as I that Tellusun has struggled to receive imports in recent months. I shouldn't have to explain that the Mer have been interfering with our maritime trade routes and refusing to comply with our treaties.

You know that several merchant ships have gone missing in the Maeral Sea. Your little Mer princess could've told you that," she barked a bitter laugh. "Or have you been listening to her lies?"

"Have you seen the destruction of these trading ships with your own eyes?" Rook dared to ask. "Can you prove their interference without the shadow of a doubt? What if there is something else going on?"

"Do you even hear yourself?" Raven spat in disbelief. "Don't you ever think for a second that Elorshin isn't plotting their revenge against all of us. It is foolish to believe otherwise. Even something as small as a missing merchant ship could suggest a potential rebellion. Where the Mer are concerned, there is always more to the story."

"Saoirse denies having knowledge on any attacks to our trading ships," he countered. "In fact, judging from her own accounts, the Mer themselves are barely able to provide for themselves. If Elorshin was disrupting maritime trade, don't you think they would take the goods for themselves? There must be another reason why the merchant ships are disappearing and the Tellusun lands are not receiving enough food."

"You would believe that Mer princess over your own queen?" Raven asked, her voice lethally still. A shadow of distrust passed over her face. "Over your own sister?"

"I never said that. I don't know what to believe anymore," he replied, throwing up his hands in frustration. "In the past few days, I have met more foreigners than I ever have in my life. They are all people, with motivations and dreams just like our own." He thought of Saoirse and her companions, their faces still fresh in his mind. He thought of Hasana in the library, and how sad she looked. Rook stared Raven directly in the eyes, barely comprehending the words that came out of his own mouth. "Surely the Tournament only fuels our hatred even more. Why do we continue it, if it causes

such discord and distrust?”

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“You speak blasphemously, little brother,” Raven said in a near whisper. Her hands were curled so tightly into fists that her knuckles went white. “You are toying with things beyond your control. Things you could never understand,” she paused. “If you must know, I have it on the Order of Elders’ good authority that the Mer are scheming to overthrow us by sewing seeds of chaos and disrupting our trade routes. Korina Petrakou herself has informed me of their plotting.”

“Since when has the Order ever concerned themselves with matters of state? They never advise our peace laws and treaties. They hide away in their temples until the next Tournament.” She turned her back toward him, refusing to look into his eyes.

“It is a good thing that you are not Queen,” she said over her shoulder. “You are a military captain because I made it so. I can easily take your position from you if you continue to fraternize with the enemy.”

Her words stung like frozen chips of ice. For a moment, it felt like he hardly knew the woman standing before him. She had never so blatantly put him in his place.

“You’d better keep yourself in check, Rook,” she warned. “The Tournament begins tomorrow morning and you must be prepared. No more talk of disunity or of secrets. No more conversing with the enemy or challenging them to childish duels. You know the truth,” she said, looking over her shoulder at him. “It’s time that you choose what to believe.”

Rook watched as his sister left the room, her robes billowing as she turned the corner. He didn’t know what to think. He certainly wasn’t on the Mer’s side. But it was becoming increasingly clear that there was more to the story than he had been told.

He sighed, pushing back his hair in defeat. Raven was right. Now was not the time to think about secret deception and conspiracy theories. Hel, he was competing in the Tournament in a day's time. Three days ago, he hadn't given a second thought to any of the other nations, and now he was talking like a revolutionary.

Pull yourself together, he told himself. Your team needs you.

He left his rooms in a cloud of confusion. He wandered through the Citadel without purpose, walking through the sunlit halls absent-mindedly. It suddenly struck him that these might be his last moments in the palace should he die in the arena. But he couldn't focus on the familiar halls he strolled down, nor could he reflect on his life within these ancient walls. His mind was racing with questions he had never thought to ask. As hard as he fought, his thoughts kept slipping back to the Mer princess. Something about Saoirse and her people captivated him. He hated that he was intrigued by her.

Rook found himself outside the Citadel, walking down the grand staircase that emptied into the courtyard. Courtiers and court diplomats passed by him in a flurry, but he barely registered them. The wind shifted his feathers, calling him to take to the skies. He closed his eyes, feeling the reassuring warmth of the sun on his face. He unfurled his wings and leaped into the air without a second thought. He soared above the courtyard, flying between the floating towers that were tethered to the Citadel below. He headed for the Order Temple, a levitating building that jutted out above the palace. Spires pierced through the cotton-white clouds, capped by shining gold domes. Just days before, Rook, Eros, and Veila had been chosen by the Auran Elders in the Temple, crowned with laurels and blessed with victory.

The floating pavilion was covered in curling ivy vines, its thick pillars nearly obscured by tangles of green. As long as he could remember, the Order Temple had remained tethered in place above the Citadel, reminding everyone of the Elders' place in Revelore. The ancient Order of acolytes had served the continent since the Great

Peace, when the Crown was forged as a symbol of unity between the nations. The Order was charged by the founders of Revelore with preserving its people, protecting every nation and tongue and race. Supposedly the Elders of each court watched over Revelore and upheld the old laws with unbiased neutrality, but it seemed that each branch had developed their own ulterior motives in recent years. But though Rook didn't trust the Elders, he respected them.

As he flew near, he could see that the Elders of every nation had gathered in the floating Temple. Every decade, the purple-robed Order would come together to pay homage to the old ways and meditate on the history of Revelore through sessions of oral history and primeval chants. The Elders were mostly silent about matters of state, leaving the volatile politics to the rulers of the continent. Though the Order ultimately bowed to the ruler of Revelore, their authority held a sacred weight that was seldom questioned. The Tournament itself had been conceived by the Elders thousands of years ago, and had since been preserved generation after generation. Though only in the last century was the Crown of Revelore chosen as the grand prize for whomever won.

Raven's words in his room returned to him: "I have it on the Order of Elders' good authority that the Mer are scheming to overthrow us by sewing seeds of chaos and disrupting our trade routes. Korina Petrakou herself has informed me of their plotting."

Since when had the Elders ever cared about missing merchant ships and the economics of Revelore? And why would they have information on trade routes in the first place? None of what Raven had said made any sense.

He flew by the open pavilion, drinking in the sight of hundreds of candles shining brightly in the archways and flickering on the steps leading up to the Temple. Countless purple robes shifted as the Elders of Revelore continued to light candles and move about the ancient hall, singing their ancient chants to the heavens. He

watched them from the sky, both intrigued and intimidated. High Elder Korina did not hold the highest rank in the order, but she was certainly the oldest one alive. It was an honor to be selected as Master of Trials, and every Elder across Revelore pined for the position. He knew in particular that High Elder Adda Carew of Elorshin had hungrily sought the position for the last few decades. But the last time a Mer had been selected as Master of Trials was centuries ago, before the war between Aurandel and Elorshin had fractured the continent's unity. And it would likely stay that way for a very long time.

He swept by, sending a rush of wind across the candles on the steps. They flickered in the breeze but continued to burn. He pumped his wings harder and soared through the clouds, trying to rid himself of the mysterious and disconcerting view of the Temple.

But just as he passed the ancient steps of the pavilion, one of the Elders looked over her shoulder at him. As if time stopped and the world shifted, he could feel her bright green eyes burning through him. Just for a moment, the wind seemed to still.

High Elder Adda Carew smiled at him.

17

SAOIRSE

At dawn, Saoirse and her fellow tributes were escorted to the courtyard of the Citadel. Their attendants crowded around them, waving banners and flags in celebration of the Tournament. It was the last time they'd get a glimpse of their champions before they'd watch them from the stands.

As they were led through the crowd of Mer courtiers and toward the awaiting chariots, her stomach churned. The voices of cheering Merfolk filled her ears, reminding her of why she had dreamed of this day her whole life. But instead of

excitement, apprehension seeped into her heart like a slow-acting poison.

Through the dull roar of the crowd, Saoirse managed to pull herself out of her thoughts and focus on reality. Sune stepped into the chariot first, holding out a hand for Aurelia as she climbed in behind him. Elaborate golden cuffs wrapped around their wrists and forearms, more stylistic than protective. In addition to the gold cuffs, the three of them wore matching uniforms of deep turquoise, tailored perfectly to each of them. The flexible, light fabric was soft against Saoirse's skin, perfect for mobility and combat. The fitted breeches were flesh against her legs, as tight as a second skin.

Unlike the raeda that had taken them to Coarinth from the coast, their chariot was open to the air for everyone to see. Chained to the front, three winged horses waited anxiously for flight, pawing at the street with silver-painted hooves.

Saoirse began to step into the chariot, but a cold hand suddenly grabbed her arm. Nails dug into her skin as Adda Carew pulled her back.

"Do not forget your bargain," she hissed in her ear. Saoirse went cold, the world blurring as Adda tightened her grip on her arm. "Selussa is watching." The High Elder let go of her, melting back into the crowd as quickly as she had appeared.

Saoirse tried not to appear rattled by her words. She forced herself to look ahead, even though her hands were shaking. Saoirse took Sune's outstretched hand and climbed into the carriage, the burn of Adda's fingers still lingering on her skin.

"This is it," Aurelia noted in disbelief, staring out into the fray of cheering Merfolk.

"We've trained for this, and worse. We'll manage," Sune added, grabbing the crossbar attached to the front of the chariot for balance. But Saoirse couldn't hear their words as Adda's warning reverberated through her head and blotted out all other sounds.

Selussa is watching.

She didn't need to be reminded of what she had to do. She had thought of the bargain all night, tossing and turning in her bed as thoughts of Rook plagued her mind. He was infuriating and arrogant, and his charming smile sent her blood boiling. But the act of killing him had become much harder to think about. She had gazed at the vial of Selussa's blood for a long time the night before, trying to think of ways to do it. She could sneak up on him. She could take him by surprise when he least suspected it, attacking him while he was distracted. But no matter the strategy, Saoirse couldn't help but feel disgusted with herself. Eventually, she decided that she would just wait until the first trial was over. She needed to get a feel for what she was up against before she could make a solid plan. The decision to wait gave her a measure of peace, finally allowing her to sleep.

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Without warning, the chariot lurched forward, its golden wheels clattering along the smooth sandstone before gracefully ascending with a soft whoosh. Her thoughts scattered as the chariot moved, all concern about Selussa's bargain shoving to the back of her mind. The crowd cheered even louder as the tributes began gaining speed, proud voices mingling into a chorus that reminded Saoirse of rushing waves. Her heart fluttered as the chariot slowly began rising, the feeling of weightlessness tingling through her body as they lifted upward. But she held her back straight, trying her best to be the proud champion her people wanted her to be. Who they needed her to be.

Before she knew it, they were in the air and soaring high above the city of Coarinth. The huge silk banner that was attached to the back of the chariot unfurled in the wind like the spill of a waterfall. Deep turquoise and silver streamed behind them like the ripples of the ocean. Saoirse closed her eyes in the light of the soft sunrise, her heart thundering in her chest as they cut through the clouds and wove through floating pavilions. She could feel Sune and Aurelia beside her, their solid presences reassuring even as her body felt untethered from the earth below.

When her breathing stabilized, Saoirse willed herself to crack open her eyes. They descended Mt. Thalia, spiraling down jagged cliffs and treacherous mountain paths. Her stomach twisted as they flew, fear tearing at her frayed nerves. But even as trepidation ate away the edges of her heart and the wind tore at her curls, she caught her breath at the beauty below. Mist clung to them as they left the windward side of the mountain and soared above the fertile earth below. A lush forest unfurled across the rolling hills at the base of the mountain, watered by constant precipitation. Heavy clouds gathered above, plump with water and dark with the promise of a thunderstorm. Swift breezes blew in from the Maeral Sea, misting the wilderness in

fog and sea brine. Saoirse dared to look back as they sped over the woodlands, taking in the ominous mountain that now loomed high above them like a great giant of stone. They whispered over the forest, the shadow of their chariot flitting across the treetops like a wraith.

And then it was before them. The arena.

The amphitheater was a stark sweep of gray against the forest, like an accidental smear of paint on a beautiful canvas. The walls of the arena rose high above the towering trees, ancient and covered in vines that curled up the stones like vipers. In some places, the arena crumbled with age and rot, thread-like cracks flooding it with sunlight. The amphitheater had been built long ago, before the Crown was even forged. The Stone Circle had once been a gathering place of the nations. Now, it was a place of bloodshed and competition.

Their Auran driver tilted the reigns down, driving the chariot toward the arena. The winged horses cut through a thick tangle of trees and descended into the clearing, soaring for the ancient road that encircled the amphitheater. The walls of the arena loomed closer and came into focus with every wingbeat. Each carefully laid brick was nearly double the size of the chariot. It was menacing somehow, lurking in the shadow of the woods like a crouched predator waiting to strike.

The Auran driver expertly led the horses to the earth, their hooves pounding the ground in a muted thunder. The amphitheater towered above them. Each row of arched windows were open to the air, much like the pavilions in Coarinth. Saoirse's heart raced as they drove steadily toward the great beast, her eyes scanning the open archways that climbed upward. The countless tiers looked like teeth lining the jaws of a stone monster waiting to devour them all. A dull roar gradually filled Saoirse's ears as they drew closer, the cries of thousands of voices echoing through the arena. From the outside, the spectators within the amphitheater were mere specks in the open corridors, moving along the edges like tiny ants. Four flags waved in the wind,

sprouting from the spires of four towers that jutted out from the arena. Saoirse's eyes locked onto the proud flag that represented her own nation. Fear leached into her blood and pooled in her stomach.

This was it.

"We're here," Aurelia breathed. "I can't believe it."

Saoirse clutched Aurelia's hand, trying to keep herself from trembling as they entered through an enormous curved archway. Much to her surprise, Sune also offered her his hand, his composed demeanor only showing a hint of apprehension as she took it. The three of them stayed like that as they entered the hollow outer ring of the Stone Circle. The corridor was larger than Saoirse imagined it to be, its ceiling rising into the darkness well beyond view. The outer wall was lit by giant sconces that lined the empty hall, broken up by shafts of sunlight that pooled in from the archways. Tangles of vines and ropes of ivy crept up the dark walls, curling around stone and rock in a protective embrace. Toward the inner wall, stone steps were carved into the amphitheater itself, leading up to the soaring upper levels where the people of Revelore would observe the trials.

The muted chorus of cheering onlookers above had become a faint buzz in Saoirse's ears as Vangelis Mitrou met them in the empty hall. The Tournament Ambassador wore a deep turquoise tunic that laced up all the way up to his neck. Threads of silver wove around his shoulders and formed the crest of Elorshin on his chest in an intricate tapestry: two kelpies rearing up in unison, foam-capped waves cresting their shoulders.

The ambassador bowed to them with a flourish. "Tributes," he addressed them, rising from the bow. Even through the muted clamor of spectators, Vangelis's voice was crisp and clear. "Welcome to the Stone Circle. This arena will determine all of our fates. If you would please follow me to your tribute chambers."

The air was stale within the corridor as they followed the ambassador, thick with humidity and suffocating with each step. Perhaps it was merely nerves, but Saoirse felt as though she could hardly breathe. Vangelis led them to an inner wall that was embedded into the amphitheater, his robes swishing across the floor. They climbed up a set of hidden stairs in silence, all of them lost to their own thoughts. As Saoirse followed the ambassador, she wondered how many tributes he had led through the arena and watched die in the end. She grimaced and prayed she wouldn't be another tribute lost to the trials.

The staircase was lined with a thick blanket of dust, lit only by a scattering of dim sconces. Spidery cracks ran through the stone walls and cobwebs clung to the broken stairs like forgotten memories. It was obvious that the secret passageway was scarcely touched, only used every ten years and no more. Saoirse would've thought that the hosting nation would've at least put in a little effort in sweeping up ancient cobwebs here and there, but evidently Aurandel didn't feel the need to make their chambers hospitable.

Vangelis finally stopped at a shadowed landing and led them through a doorway. Above them, the dull roar of the crowd and the soft pounding of boots against stone sent shivers up Saoirse's spine. They entered a simple chamber, lit only by torches that cast foreboding shadows on the walls. In comparison to the dingy staircase outside, this room was clean and tidy. Fresh flowers encircled the room, displayed in shining gold vases. Banners of deep blue and silver hung from the ceiling, fanning out across the chamber. Strands of polished sea shells and pearls hung like vines from the rafters, cascading down the walls.

A small handful of their Mer attendants had gathered in the tribute chambers, their faces full of pride. Many of their eyes were glossy with tears that caught the light. It wasn't just about her childish dreams anymore. What happened within the arena would determine the fate of her people. All fleeting thoughts of Rook and the Sea Witch's bargain dissolved from her mind, melting into an insatiable hunger to win the

Tournament, no matter the cost. Not just for her own pride. Not just to prove her father wrong. But to redeem Elorshin and restore her people's former glory.

"Welcome, tributes," Isme said, stepping forward. Saoirse couldn't help but smile at her attendant's familiar face as she strode toward them. "You've donned your tribute attire," Isme said with a nod to their garments. "Now for the finishing touches."

Another attendant stepped forward, holding three swaths of fabric in her hands. Isme took one of the folded garments, unfurling it in the center of the room. The cloak was perhaps the most beautiful garment Saoirse had ever seen, its shimmering silver threads catching the torchlight as Isme gently unfolded it. The silky surface of the cloak was smooth and iridescent, like the silver ripples of moonlight against the sea. It was embroidered with delicate patterns of glowing thread, forming the familiar crest of Elorshin across the back.

"We may have no say in your uniforms," Isme explained, "but we are allowed to tailor a cape for you." She stood behind Sune, lifting the cloak around his shoulders and fastening it in the front. Something about the moment felt sacred, the gravity of the trials heavy in the air. Tears pricked in Saoirse's eyes as she watched Isme fasten the next cloak to Aurelia's shoulders.

She held her breath as Isme stood behind her, the moment feeling as rushed and chaotic as it was sweet and momentous. Isme's gentle fingers settled the cloak on her shoulders, clasping it tightly. Despite the cloak rising just above her ankles, it was impossibly light and airy, spilling down her back in a cascade of weightless silver. Wearing the cloak, she felt assured of herself and steady, as if the blessings of her people were woven into the fabric itself.

"This cloak was spun with threads of bioluminescent algae," Isme said proudly, taking a step back and surveying them. "You'll find that in the dark, these cloaks will keep you close. Wear them proudly, tributes." She gave them a short bow, stepping

back into the crowd of attendants with an encouraging smile on her face.

Vangelis appeared by their sides again, ready to escort them to the next phase of the trial. Instead of leading them back down the stairwell, the Ambassador escorted them to a parallel staircase that ran adjacent to the tribute chambers. The stone steps descended beyond the first level, tunneling into the earth itself. The air grew moist and cool as they lowered into the ground, the sound of the cheering crowd absorbed into soil and rock. Saoirse couldn't tell how far down they had climbed, darkness and shadow enveloping them from all angles. The shadows were broken by flickering scones of blue flame, casting splashes of murky light on the ancient steps. Just as Isme described, the delicate embroidery of their cloaks glowed in the dark, its silver threads curling across their backs in the inky darkness.

They were silent as they climbed down, only the sounds of their shallow breaths and the whisper of their cloaks against steps mingling together in the quiet. With every step into the underbelly of the amphitheatre, Saoirse's chest constricted. She felt as though they descended to the underworld, slowly being swallowed up by stone and soil. Palms sweating, Saoirse fought to keep her breathing calm as they finally hit the bottom of the staircase. She would've preferred the piercing roar of the crowd over the unending, numbing silence that proliferated this subterranean level.

At the base of the steps, a large hallway unfolded in the darkness. The walls were lined with metal bars and locking mechanisms. With a start Saoirse realized they were cells. Her skin crawled as they walked past endless rows of rusting cages, unwilling to imagine what horrors had been kept inside them long ago. Dark stains on the stone floor looked suspiciously like blood in the torchlight.

As if sensing the direction of her thoughts, Vangelis offered, "live animals and creatures have been contained here throughout the centuries." Saoirse didn't have to ask why the beasts were kept down here. The trials had frequently featured challenges that required tributes to survive the hungry jaws of bloodthirsty monsters. She didn't

know if she felt worse for the poor beasts or for the people who were shredded by their claws.

After what seemed like an eternity, they reached the end of the hallway. The anticipation that had built up in Saoirse's heart threatened to spill over as Vangelis led them into a small cell. He pried open the iron door, a haunting creak cutting through the silence. Instead of stepping inside first, the ambassador gestured for them to enter without him. After a moment of hesitation, Sune slipped through the doorway, his boots scuffing along the stone floor. The dark room was cramped and bare, metal bars lining the walls just as the other cells in the hallway. The minute she crowded in behind Aurelia, the cell door slammed shut. The lock clicked behind it, and something like guilt flashed in Vangelis's eyes.

"Hel's Teeth," Aurelia cursed, putting her face up to the bars. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I apologize," he told them through the cell bars with a wave of his hand. "You were selected to represent Elorshin, and there is no way out of it. Though I'd never expect any of you to betray your country, I must guarantee that each of you will compete in the Tournament." He folded his hands across his chest, surveying them from the other side. "You'd be surprised how many tributes have attempted to escape their fates over the years."

Aurelia glared at him through the bars, her lip curling in disgust and humiliation. "You think so little of us, Ambassador?" she asked, wrapping both hands around the bars.

"Like I said," Vangelis replied sheepishly, "It is just part of my duties as your representative. Drink your titansblood elixir now, if you haven't already. It could be a while before you get another chance."

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Aurelia glared at him, uncorking her vial of titansblood and downing it in a single gulp. Saoirse drank hers quickly, choking down the disgusting concoction. But despite being able to breathe easier, she still couldn't calm her racing heart.

Just as they all finished their dose of titansblood, a clicking sound suddenly echoed underneath them. Grinding metal pierced the stale air and cut through the silence from below. Saoirse's stomach flipped as the floor began to move, shifting upward and rumbling with ancient mechanisms. She braced herself against the floor, falling to her knees as the ground lifted. The platform inched closer to the ceiling with agonizing slowness. Vangelis's face twisted in concern before being obscured from view. Aurelia screeched, crouching next to Saoirse in a panic. They would be splattered across the ceiling, squished between two slabs of stone like insects.

But instead of meeting their end beneath the Stone Circle, the ceiling abruptly opened, the stones growling as they slid away to reveal a long tunnel. They continued to rise, the platform breaching the ceiling and gliding past the lower level. The tunnel resembled a well reaching deep into the ground. In horror, Saoirse realized that there were deep scratches on the walls around them. Desperate scratches from the fingernails of people who tried to stop themselves from rising up to the arena. Her blood ran cold.

"We stay together," Sune ordered, his voice steady as they climbed toward the surface. "If we are to survive this," he added, "We must be a team." He looked up, taking in the bright azure sky that grew closer with every second. His jaw worked in concentration, the muscles in his cheeks tensing. Then the captain looked down, extending a hand to Saoirse. She took it, allowing Sune to pull her up from where she was still splayed across the platform. There was no room for petty pride or

haughtiness in the arena. From here on out, Sune was an ally.

“Believe in your abilities,” Aurelia said in a tone reserved for leading troops to battle. “We have been trained with the mighty Torqen,” she continued, her voice carrying on the wind as the air roared through the tunnel. “We shall win, don’t doubt for a second that we won’t.”

The cheering of onlookers was deafening, nearly blotting out her voice. Saoirse nodded in reply, squeezing Aurelia’s hand. They crested the top of the tunnel, sunlight pooling around them and the wind ripping at their cloaks. Saoirse straightened and lifted her chin when they finally stopped moving, halting abruptly in the air. She could feel the weight of thousands of eyes stabbing into her.

Bring us honor, Saoirse. May glory be given.

“Welcome tributes,” a voice boomed across the crowd.

“Let the Revelore Tournament begin.”

18

SAOIRSE

Blinking in the sunlight, Saoirse dared to look around at the arena. On all sides, the towering Stone Circle enclosed them. Thousands of spectators were seated in the stands, all shrieking and cheering at the tops of their lungs as the tributes finally entered the arena from below. From her vantage point, the onlookers above were mere blurs of color and movement, undulating like waves. Her gaze moved along the ridges of the arena, eyes wide with awe at the sheer number of people crammed into the historic structure. Vaguely, she recognized the blue and green swaths of color on one side as the small section assigned to the Mer. In each corner of the arena, the

different nations of Revelore sat in distinct rows of color, each unique and separated from the next.

Four towers stretched into the sky, stationed at every corner of the arena. She identified them as the private viewing towers reserved for the most wealthy and elite members of Revelore, where royals and aristocrats watched them in comfortable, cushioned rooms. Within the boxes, Saoirse knew they'd be fed sweet grapes and succulent meats as they watched their tributes slaughter themselves below. It was where she herself had watched the Tournament ten years ago as a child. And at the very top of the boxed viewing quarters, the Elders of every nation sat above the crowds, watching the events unfold below with a meticulous gaze. Somehow, Saoirse could feel Adda's piercing eyes on her, even from the sky.

Her eyes moved back down to the arena itself, focusing for the first time on what spread out before them. The platform was raised above the sand floor of the arena, elevated only about six feet up from the ground. She had expected to see obstacles and barriers, perhaps even chained beasts reeling to fight. But there was nothing but pale white sand across the expanse, smooth and unbroken.

Across from where they stood on the platform, four other raised podiums stood on opposite ends of the arena. Though they were distant and out of focus, Saoirse recognized the other tributes. To their left were the Tellusun warriors, their garments identical to the ones they now wore, save for the color. Their custom capes were bright orange, with small silk tassels lining the bottom.

On Saoirse's right, the Terradrin tributes rose up from their platform. Their deep charcoal capes flowed starkly against the white hair that tangled around their shoulders. Neia Landum gave her an unnerving grin when she caught Saoirse staring.

And there, directly across the great stretch of blinding white sand, the Auran tributes stood proudly. Saoirse's heart thundered as she glimpsed pale gray wings. Rook. She

couldn't see the details of his face from such a distance away, but she could somehow feel the heat of his gaze on her. The crowd grew hushed as a voice boomed across the arena.

"Your first trial shall begin in one minute," High Elder Korina Petrakou called, her voice amplified by magic. Though Korina sat within the top of one of the towers, her voice was as loud in Saoirse's ear as if she stood right behind her.

"Your task is to pierce your javelins through the center of a circle," Korina explained. Saoirse stared at the blank canvas of sand, squinting in the sun as she tried to find the circle Korina described. On the opposite wall of the arena, she could see a gold hoop mounted on the stone paneling, a turquoise flag identifying the ring as the Mer's. She could see identical gold hoops hanging on all four corners of the arena, color-coordinated banners waving above them.

"Shouldn't be so hard," Aurelia murmured, her hand already flexing around the blade at her hip.

"Find your way through the labyrinth, and do not lose your spears," the Master of Trials warned. "Good luck. May glory be given to the most worthy among you."

The crowd roared, the swell of clapping nearly deafening. Confusedly, Saoirse looked to the flat stretch of sand. There was nothing.

"What-" she began to protest. But just as she began to speak, enormous stone walls erupted from the sand in a spray of earth. Sand exploded over them as the walls jerked up and clicked into place, sending ripples of wind through the amphitheater.

And then all was abruptly still.

The labyrinth cut through the sand and stood higher than their platforms, weaving an

intricate maze from end to end of the arena. Where the great walls had been hidden away, Saoirse couldn't fathom. Like a giant tapestry, stone threads wove together to form tight passages and corridors. Vines crawled along the ridges of the walls, clinging to the ancient stone as if they had grown there for all eternity. From their seats high above, the spectators could see every exit. But from where the three of them stood, there was nothing but a great tangle of walls and paths, an impossible maze standing between them and the golden circle.

"Hel's teeth," Sune breathed, his jaw going slack.

Ceremonial trumpets suddenly wailed from somewhere in the sky, bright and cheerful. The crisp, jaunty tune felt out of place as they stood in the shadow of the giant labyrinth. As if echoing her fear, a rumble of foreboding thunder whispered across the distant horizon, dark clouds creeping across the sky.

"Begin!" Like some malevolent goddess from the heavens, Korina's voice resounded across the amphitheater. As soon as her words rippled through the air, the three of them leaped down from the platform, catching themselves on the sand below. Blood pounded in Saoirse's ears, her movements frenzied and singing with adrenaline.

Three javelins sat mounted on the wall near the entrance of the maze, their bright metal tips shining in the sun. Each of them grabbed a spear and turned to the labyrinth. Several different paths opened to them, all equally menacing. Aurelia charged for one of the paths, passing between the walls easily. But as Sune followed behind her, he abruptly ricocheted backward, as if he had been shoved away by some unforeseen force. Saoirse tried to enter the corridor, placing a tentative foot to the entrance. But just as Sune had propelled away, she was knocked to her knees by an invisible barrier.

Aurelia stood on the other side, frowning as they continued pushing against the barricade. She stepped forward, reaching out a hand to the entrance of the path. She

placed her palm on the surface of the shimmering, invisible wall, pushing against it with all her might. Her feet faltered in the sand, sliding back as she helplessly bore down on the transparent barrier. She shook her head. There was no leaving once they entered. The labyrinth wouldn't allow it.

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“Only one of us can take this route,” Aurelia observed, her eyebrows lowered in thought. “We must each take a different way, it seems.”

Sune and Saoirse rose from the sand in defeat, giving her affirmative nods of dismay. Gone were the promises that they’d stick together. Sune sprinted to the next entrance, entering the shadowed passage without resistance.

“She’s right. We have to find the end of the labyrinth on our own. I’ll meet you both at the golden circle,” Sune added with one last look over his shoulder. Then he hurried down the path and vanished around the corner.

Saoirse was all alone.

Already, strange noises and terrified screams rose above the maze, echoing through the arena as tributes wove their way through the labyrinth. Fear tore through Saoirse as she waited on the edge of the maze, her feet refusing to step foot into the tangle of stone and vines. Her stomach twisted into knots, she selected a path and forced herself to stride forward. As she passed through the invisible barrier, a hum whispered across her skin and tingled in her chest.

And just like that, she was on the other side. Blood pounded in her ears as she stood in the empty corridor. Whatever enchantment that had settled over the maze seemed to act as a shield from the outside world. The raucous crowd outside seemed to dim to a dull, muted roar. The sound was similar to how voices above the sea warped underwater, distant and muffled. Saoirse pushed back against the translucent blockade to no avail.

She had no choice but to continue onward.

The eerie silence of the maze was bewildering, and the feeling like she was being watched prickled over Saoirse's skin as she jogged down the stone passage. Every so often, the numb silence of the labyrinth was broken by a scream or an explosion. But Saoirse didn't stop to listen, refusing to slow for even a moment as she turned corner after corner, sweat pooling on her forehead. After what seemed like an eternity, she finally slowed down and gasped for air. Even after several days of being on the surface, her lungs still burned with the effort to inhale the air on land.

As Saoirse lowered her head and caught her breath, she felt a stirring from one of the paths to her right. Her head snapped up and her gaze shot to the empty corridor. She heard a distant thump on the sand, and she clutched her javelin tighter. Squinting at the passageway, she watched as a single brick fell to the ground, a cloud of sand rising as it thudded down.

Instinct told her to run, but she took a step toward the path, narrowing her eyes as another stone fell from the opposite wall. Another stone leapt from the wall, almost like someone had pushed it from the other side. Another fell, and then another. The wall shuddered. Soon, bricks tumbled down like a torrent of rain, moving down the path and heading straight toward her. Saoirse turned on her heel and ran, the sound of collapsing walls and hurling stones nipping at her heels. Clouds of sand and dust rose behind her as she careened down the passageways, the ground rumbling as the stones hit the earth in a rain of rock. The walls disintegrated around her, forcing her forward as the stones flung violently.

She kept running, her legs burning as she tore around corners and stumbled through the maze, fear singing in her blood with each stride. She could feel the collapsing walls tumbling behind her, suffocating anything caught beneath them in a cascade of rock and rubble. As she barreled through the labyrinth, Saoirse dared to look to her left, watching as several parallel corridors collapsed beside her own pathway. But

farther down, she could see that more stone walls stood intact, seemingly unaltered as random ones caved in. She realized that each portion of the maze contained different challenges, threatening the tributes in their own torturous ways.

A stray rock pitched from behind her, slamming into her right shoulder with agonizing force. Saoirse bit back a cry as pain rippled through her body. She forced herself to keep running, summoning strength from deep within herself. Threads of white-hot pain lanced through her back and arm as she leaped over fallen piles of rock, her shoulder screaming with every jostle.

And then as quickly as it had began, the shower of stones abruptly halted, leaving her in a cloud of loose sand and dust. She leaned against the wall and looked up at the sky above, now framed by thick rain clouds. She wondered if the crowd outside considered her survival a display of great skill, or dumb luck.

With a grunt, she pushed the bone back into its socket, hissing through her teeth. Her eyes stung with tears as searing pain burned through her. She pushed off the wall, forcing herself to continue down the path.

It felt like she ran in circles, constantly backtracking and retracing her steps. All the while, anxiety hung over her like a fog, knowing that at any moment the maze could erupt into chaos around her. A desperate plea for help echoed down the pathway towards her. She continued pushing forward, the tribute's cries growing louder as she rounded every corner. Her shoulder burned, and she could hardly lift her spear, but she had no choice but to continue towards the other tribute.

As she turned down the path, she halted abruptly in her tracks. There, the familiar torso of a Terradrin warrior flailed in the sand. The rest of his body was consumed in the earth, wet sand clinging to his body as he writhed against its pull.

Diru Balran, she recognized. She remembered the white-haired warrior from the

Aerial armory. With every second that passed by, the sand crept up Diru's body and sucked him under. The shiny metal tip of his spear melted into the earth, pulled under by the quicksand.

"Help me!" Diru screamed, his huge colorless eyes wide with fear. His fingers dug into the sand around him as he clawed at the ground. "Pull me free!"

Saoirse was frozen, her eyes locked onto the struggling man. She should let him be sucked under, never to be seen again. He was a rival for the Crown. But Saoirse's heart stirred at the rawness in his voice. For a brief second, she turned around, making for the other direction.

One less competitor to worry about, she told herself.

"Titans," Saoirse cursed, spinning back to face Diru. The sand had crept up to his shoulders so that only one of his arms was visible. She sprinted over to him and kneeled just before the dark sand, stretching out her hand. But she was too far away from him, her fingers just out of reach. His eyes flared with panic as the sand continued to pull him, his free hand flailing helplessly above ground. Saoirse stretched out her javelin, offering the end to Diru. He wrapped a pale hand around the spear and tucked his arm around it.

"Stop moving and relax," Saoirse ordered, putting both hands around the javelin and pulling up. "You have to stop struggling."

She tugged on the spear, groaning with pain as it pressed into her sore shoulder. Diru complied, letting his body go limp as she dragged him out of the sand.

It was a long and slow effort to pull him from the clinging grip of the sand pit. For a moment, the resistance felt too great and Saoirse nearly lost her grip on the javelin. But gradually, the sand loosened on his body and he slowly emerged from the

quicksand. Saoirse's feet dug into the earth as she pulled up, her legs trembling. The spear gave way as Diru fully escaped the sand, an ugly slurp of liquid gurgling into release. Saoirse collapsed backward onto the ground, gasping.

Beside her, Diru scrambled to his feet. "Why did you save me?" He pressed his back to the wall, keeping as much distance from Saoirse as possible. "You should've let me die."

"I don't know," Saoirse answered. She pulled herself up from the ground and picked up her spear. "Just go," she urged Diru. "Just find the end of this bloody thing."

Without another word, the Terradrin warrior pushed off the wall and sprinted away. With an exhausted sigh, Saoirse turned from the quicksand and took another path.

She guessed that an hour passed as she wove her way through the maze, though it was impossible to know for sure. At every curve in the path, she imagined the finish line. Every corner she passed felt closer, and yet she continuously hit dead ends. She trudged through the sand numbly, the sun bearing down on her. Her scales and skin ached with dryness, her lungs burning with dust and hot air. But she pushed onward, praying that Sune and Aurelia had found the gold hoop without harm.

A yowling beast cried from somewhere further down the maze, something so inhumane it made Saoirse's skin crawl. She wondered who the unlucky tribute was that had stumbled on the creature. What if it was Rook? She hated the way she felt a twinge of fear when she thought of him between the jaws of some bloodthirsty monster. She forced herself to close off that part of her mind. She couldn't think about Rook right now. All she could do was concentrate on surviving this trial.

Saoirse gasped as she turned her hundredth corner and glimpsed the golden hoop glimmering in the center of the path ahead. The ring shone beyond the maze, hanging on the internal wall of the arena. Her heart began to race with anticipation. She had

made it to the end. But just as relief flooded her senses, her frail hope collapsed in an instant. There, at the end of the passage, a figure stood guarding the exit. She stopped dead in her tracks, unsheathing her sword. She slowly stepped toward the figure, silhouetted in the light at the end of the path. Saoirse felt a droplet hit her cheek, sliding down her face in a cool trail. Another drop kissed her shoulder, instantly cooling her dry scales. The rain began tumbling down from the sky, soaking her clothes as she stood in the pathway. Sweet relief hummed through her body as the water soothed her. A crack of lightning burst through the sky, illuminating the maze.

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“If you’re going to stop me,” she challenged, “then do it.” The figure lifted its blade in wordless response, its eyeless face brooding behind a dark veil and drawn hood.

“So be it,” Saoirse hissed, bringing up her sword and charging for the figure. She was done letting the labyrinth have its way with her. It was time she had her way with the damnable stone walls. She’d give the spectators a real show.

She ran toward the figure, her blade in one hand and the spear in the other. Her eyes widened as the figure slowly came into focus. It was neither man nor beast, simply a humanoid body. The ancient vines that curled around the walls had reached out tangles of leaves to form a person, wrapping around each other in tight knots. The vines wrapped together to form limbs, tendrils of leaves and roots woven into a body that clutched a sword made of greenery. The living vines sent out probing coils of leaves, creeping through the damp sand like snakes. One of the vines brushed against her boot, curling around her ankle in a soft caress. She yanked her foot away, and the vine recoiled.

She stepped closer to the plant-warrior, daring the labyrinth to face her. In a rush, the wild vines lunged at her, shooting virile roots at her sword. Saoirse ripped her blade away, the metal hissing as it broke free from the greedy hold. She spun, her feet dancing in the sand. Coils of leaves shot at her from all angles, spiraling around her legs. She swiped at them, cutting through the mess of tangled roots with a snarl. The warrior of vines continued to advance, parrying her blows perfectly. She could barely focus on her attacker as vines exploded from the walls, sending fingers of green to wrap around her arms and torso.

“Hel’s teeth,” she gasped as her arm was held fast, spiraling vines picking her up and

crushing her to the wall. She held onto the spear with all her strength, but the roots slowly wrapped around her hand and began to loosen her grip. With her free arm, she lashed out her sword, still blocking the plant-warrior's blows as she was pinned to the wall. Heart pounding and forehead drenched in sweat and rain, Saoirse fought, tearing at the relentless onslaught of vines. Vines began wrapping around her feet and slithering up her thighs, coiling around her waist and chest. Panic bloomed within as breathing became difficult, the warrior of vines still thrusting its sword at her even as she was tied down.

The javelin fell to the sand, her fingers unable to keep it secure as leafy tendrils curled around her hands and tightened. She gasped, fighting to keep breathing as her vision went in and out of focus. Water poured down from the sky, blinding her as she struggled for control.

This is not how you'll die. You must bring glory to Elorshin.

A fresh surge of energy raced through her blood like a rush of sea foam, and she ripped through the roots that had begun to weave around her right arm. Her sword hand now free, she abandoned any effort to block the plant-warrior's blows. Instead, she focused on slashing the leaves that held her in place, sprays of vibrant green liquid exploding as her blade sliced through them. She hacked at the roots and vines, roaring in triumph as they withered away and shrunk into the shadows of the wall.

Breathing heavily, she stood face to face with the warrior, curling her lip in wordless challenge. The faceless figure lunged at her, thrusting its green sword at her heart. She ducked, sending her blade cleaving through its legs. The vines that tangled around each other severed and hissed in pain, snaking away as they cut in half. The body dissolved, roots and leaves whispering back into place as if nothing had just happened.

Dripping with green sap and soaked to the bone, Saoirse stood at the center of the

path, her chest heaving. She picked up the fallen spear and slid her sword back into its scabbard, facing the end of the labyrinth wearily. A flash of lightning streaked across the dark sky, casting the labyrinth in strange shadows. She strode down the path, wet sand clinging to her boots. She nearly wept to see the golden hoop that hung at the edge of the maze. Relief flooded her senses as she crossed the threshold of the labyrinth, the familiar hum washing over her skin as she left the invisible barrier surrounding it. As she emerged from the quiet of the maze, the roar of the crowd deafened her.

Below the gold circle, Aurelia hurled her spear upward with a grunt. The javelin found its mark, piercing the wall at the center of the hoop. Aurelia turned back around victoriously, grinning when she spied Saoirse emerging from the maze. She sprinted toward her, meeting her halfway.

“You made it,” Aurelia breathed, her turquoise eyes going soft with relief. A long, bloody gash ran across her forehead, lacing down to her cheek. Her blonde curls were plastered to her head, hanging in rain-dampened tendrils around her face. The menacing wound on her face only enhanced her fierce demeanor. Another clap of thunder shuddered across the sky and temporarily silenced the roaring arena of onlookers.

Saoirse broke from Aurelia’s embrace, gripping the javelin hard. She strode toward the hoop, hoisting her javelin over her shoulder with a grimace. She charged at the circle of gold, thrusting the spear up as hard as she could. It flew high and true, the metal tip embedding into the stone wall next to Aurelia’s. The stretch of Mer spectators erupted into praise, waving flags of blue and turquoise wildly.

Saoirse fell to her knees, tiredness replacing adrenaline with dizzying speed. Deep fatigue settled in her bones, but she willed herself to stand once more. Coming to stand beside Aurelia, she stared at the endless sweep of the labyrinth.

“You didn’t see Sune, did you?” Aurelia asked, her voice rising to overcome the torrential downpour. She crossed her arms and anxiously chewed on her lower lip.

“No,” Saoirse replied, thinking back to the maze. Memories of the horrified expression on Diru’s face suddenly overwhelmed her. “I did see one of the Terradrin warriors though,” she said softly. “One of the males, Diru Balran.” Aurelia turned to her, arching an eyebrow.

“Did he try to kill you?” she asked. “Or did you try to kill him?”

“No,” Saoirse answered. “Quite the opposite in fact. I saved him from quicksand.”

“What?” Aurelia asked in disbelief. Suspicion etched on her features. “Why would you do such a thing?”

It was a question Saoirse had been asking herself the entire time. She hadn’t understood the decision, not when everything in her desired to win the Crown and see her enemies fall. And yet, she had instinctively reached for the man, risking her own life in the process.

Before she could answer, Aurelia yelled, “Sune!”

Sune stumbled out of the labyrinth. Blood leaked from his side, spilling down his legs and pooling in the sand. His dark hair was damp with blood and rain. Aurelia nearly dove towards him as Saoirse numbly followed behind. He began to fall, his trembling legs giving out. They caught him just in time, absorbing his weight as he doubled over in pain.

“What happened?” Saoirse breathed, eyes scanning his gaunt face.

“Later,” Sune rasped. Saoirse looked down, realizing that his spear was also darkened

with blood. The two of them lifted him on their shoulders as he nearly collapsed at the feet of the golden hoop.

“Just a little closer, Sune,” Aurelia urged him. With every step towards the ring, Saoirse felt sick.

Sune threw the javelin into the air, groaning with pain as the motion ripped open his injury even further. The spear struck the wall, right at the center of the hoop. Sune collapsed, spilling to the sand as Aurelia and Saoirse managed to slowly cushion his fall.

“Steady now,” Aurelia whispered as she tore a strip of cloth from her cloak and dabbed it along his forehead. “Keep your eyes open.” Blood stained Aurelia’s fingers as she covered his wound, applying pressure to stop the bleeding. Saoirse nearly balked at the uncharacteristic sign of affection, but she was too weak to give any meaningful reaction.

“We made it through. We survived the first trial,” she assured him, laying his head in her lap. Sune’s eyes rolled back in his head, his body going limp in Aurelia’s arms.

Saoirse stood, squinting into the crowds above. “Can someone help him?” she cried out frantically, her voice barely audible through the pounding rain. “Don’t just sit there and watch him die,” she yelled, hurling her words up to the towers that looked down on them in snobbish contempt. “We passed this bloody trial like you wanted, he needs help!” But her words were lost in the roar of thunder overhead.

“We won’t receive aid until the trial is over,” Aurelia muttered. “We have to wait.”

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They sat clustered together in the wet sand for what seemed like an eternity. It was agonizing, waiting there as Sune continued to bleed out. Anxiety and exhaustion dulled to a distant buzzing in the back of Saoirse's mind. She had no idea of how the other tributes fared or how they progressed through the maze. Each team exited the labyrinth in four different corners of the arena, her view of the other tributes obscured by the tall walls of the maze. Saoirse leaned back against the sand, closing her eyes. All she could do was wait.

After an unbearable stretch of time, the jaunty tune that had played at the start of the trial filled the air from above, the cheerful trumpets blaring across the arena. The stone walls quivered, lowering back into the earth the same way that they had emerged only hours before.

"Tributes," Korina's voice cut through, "congratulations on surviving your first trial." The Master of Trials's booming voice was mirthless and devoid of any excitement, remaining neutral even as the crowd went wild. "Healers will arrive shortly. Those of you who have completed your tasks shall be granted the right to move toward the next trial. The second stage of the Revelore Tournament shall begin in one day's time. May glory be given."

Vaguely, Saoirse was aware that several white-robed healers had suddenly swarmed them, emerging from one of the doors of the arena. But as they began speaking to her, she couldn't understand a word that they were saying. Her mind was fraying at the edges, her head pounding.

"Princess Saoirse," a voice called. "Princess Saoirse."

She tried to turn her head at the sound, but her vision had begun to darken at the corners. She could feel assessing hands on her, could feel expert touches as they evaluated her for injuries. She stared up at the cloud-covered sky as she was lowered to the ground, her back resting against the soft white sand. Rain spattered across her cheeks, caressing her with a soothing touch.

She thought she could see the dark figure of a winged-man silhouetted against the clouds, lowering down to her in a graceful spiral.

Then everything went dark.

19

ROOK

Rook collapsed on his cot, soaked to the bone and weary beyond belief. He looked up at the tent ceiling stretched above, listening to the patter of rain against the fabric. He closed his eyes, trying to process all that had happened in that cursed maze.

Memories of the beast he had faced within the labyrinth flashed in his mind, its bloodied jaws mere inches from his face. Rook hadn't expected to turn a corner and come face to face with the horrifying chimera, its serpent's tail flicking through the sand. He could still feel its hungry yellow eyes upon him, glittering with a predatory shine. A shiver went up Rook's spine when he remembered the mangled body of a Tellusun tribute at the chimera's front paws, his orange cloak in tatters. But the worst of the chimera hadn't been its dagger-like teeth or its massive lion's claws. It had been the onyx ram horns that curled from its head, wickedly sharp and glistening with fresh blood. He remembered the raw terror that had washed over him as the beast lowered its head and charged at him.

Rook opened his eyes and wiped his damp forehead, trying to scrub the memory of

the chimera from his mind. He couldn't afford to be haunted by nightmares this early on. Not when it would only get worse. He fidgeted on the cot, restless as the rain pattered above. He'd forget the face of the fallen Tellusun tribute eventually, perhaps even by tomorrow. What mattered was that Veila and Eros had been waiting for him on the other side, whole and alive.

"Rook," a frantic voice called from the tent entrance.

Raven swept in, her face flushed with fear. She tore the dark hood from her head, casting off the soaked cloak from her shoulders in a heap on the floor. She sat beside him on the cot and grabbed his hand

"You made it out," she said in a near whisper. She touched his cheek, as if to make sure she hadn't conjured him in a dream.

"I assume you watched it all," Rook said roughly, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Up in that comfortable tower of yours." As soon as he spoke the words, he regretted them. He hadn't meant for them to come out in such a biting tone.

"No," she replied, "as a matter of fact I didn't." She looked away from him, her eyes haunted. The guilt Rook felt grew tenfold and his heart softened towards her. Of course she hadn't watched.

"I'm sorry, Raven," he apologized. "I'm tense, that's all. I saw things in that maze I never thought possible." He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling his sister against him.

"You're all I have," Raven whispered. "I know we haven't been on the best of terms as of late, but I can't lose you, little brother." She pulled away from him, her frown deepening as she looked at the bloodied gash on his face. "I don't take any pleasure

in watching you suffer.”

“I survived one trial,” Rook sighed, touching the sticky liquid that clung to his face. “Only two more left.” He looked at his hand, now stained with his own blood.

“Your Majesties,” a voice interrupted from the doorway. A soldier stood in the entrance, a scroll clutched against his armored chest. He gasped for air, his wings shuddering as he sucked in deep breaths. Rook and Raven abruptly stood, instantly on edge.

“Captain Aderyn? Did you fly the entire distance from Southeastern border to Aurandel? Alone?” Rook asked.

“What is it?” Raven demanded. “Whatever your qualms, certainly a scout could have informed me.” Gone was the sisterly concern in her voice. Now, only a queen stood in the tent.

“I’ve come from the Terradrin border,” Aderyn explained, his voice coming out in a rasp. “There’s been an uprising.”

Rook went cold, long-repressed memories bubbling to the surface. He prayed the uprising wasn’t where he thought it might be. “Explain,” he ordered, dread pooling in his stomach.

“The trade city of Meysam is in an uproar,” Aderyn told them.

Raven exchanged a glance with Rook, a knowing expression on her face. Their parents had been killed in Meysam. Aderyn handed the rolled up parchment to Raven. She took it from him and quickly scanned the letter, her dark brows furrowing in concern.

“What happened?” Rook asked, his mind racing. The city stood just before the Aurandel border, one of the few major Terradrin towns that lay on the surface world. The most populous Terradrin cities were found in underground caverns and cut into rock deep within the earth. But Meysam served as one of the only points of trade to the outside world. It was also one of the most closely regulated cities of the country, occupied by several thousand Auran troops at all times.

“Revolutionaries ambushed several Auran patrols in the Eoin Market,” Aderyn explained, a distant look in his eyes. "They gathered at the Elder Temple peacefully it seemed at first, but it quickly devolved into chants to overthrow your rule, and the Elder's authority. They marched on the market and rapidly gained numbers, easily out-muscling our skeleton regiment assigned in the early morning. They were murdered, storefronts ransacked, and livestock slaughtered."

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“The border is rife with violence, Captain Aderyn,” Raven interrupted. “How were the securities of our city so overlooked?” She shook her head. “Meysam is under military control to prevent such chaos in the first place. To protect our people and their trade routes.” Raven paused. “How were they so bold, and so successful?”

“The mob grew too quickly to have happened organically as the city slept.” Aderyn rubbed his temples and averted his eyes. And-” he broke off. He looked at the floor, as if second-guessing what he was about to say.

“Out with it, Captain,” Rook ordered, crossing his arms.

The man looked up, something like fear in his eyes. “And I have reason to believe they were not alone in their efforts, or sympathies.”

“Elaborate,” Raven snapped.

“It looked to me like there were,” he stumbled on his words, “like there were Tellusun members.” The words filled the tent like a fog, heavy and tense.

“Are you insinuating that Tellusun organized this assault with Terradrin?” Rook stared at his sister in disbelief.

It didn’t make sense. The desert kingdom was across the continent from the Under Kingdom. Anyone passing from the Shujaa Desert to Terradrin would have to travel by land across the jungled islands of Mythos and through the treacherous mountain pass of Aurandel. Either that or sail through the unruly waves of the Maeral Sea, which was possibly the most challenging route to take. Aerial spies would’ve noticed

any unsanctioned merchant ships and land trade being conducted almost instantly.

“You are implying that they have formed some kind of alliance behind our backs?” Raven hissed. “In direct defiance of all sacred beliefs, no less. If this conspiracy has any merit, those responsible face high treason punishable by death, Captain Aderyn.”

“I would not wager my life on it yet, Your Majesty. Still, I cannot imagine their goals in pretending to form an illicit alliance, unless someone else entirely wishes to turn us against each other,” Aderyn answered. “We’ve captured several of the rebels and taken them for questioning. We’ll get answers soon enough,” he assured them.

“Speculation,” Raven began, “is of no use to me. You will interrogate these prisoners yourself, and return to Meysam with double the original garrison. I need answers immediately.”

Rook cursed, pacing across the tent. “Hel, I should be there,” he swore, balling his hands into fists. “I could leave tonight, fly in and question the damned radicals myself. Assess how severe our losses are with my own eyes.”

“You can’t,” Raven retorted. Of course Rook knew that it was impossible to leave the Tournament. He was bound to the trials now, and if he left his place would be forfeit. He wouldn’t be able to leave until the last trial ended. He continued pacing around the tent, his wings itching to take flight.

“Captain Aderyn,” Raven ordered, “return to Meysam with haste. Your first priority is to gain control back over the city. Take fresh soldiers with you. Show the people of Meysam that we are still in control and that this skirmish does not pose a threat to the Auran occupation. Enforce a strict curfew. Any groups gathering after the curfew are to be arrested and questioned.”

“What of the captured radicals?” Aderyn asked.

“Use whatever means necessary to get them to speak,” Raven replied quickly. “If they don’t talk, send them to the salt mines.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Aderyn replied with a bow. “I will report back as soon as I can.” He turned to Rook, concern on his face as he surveyed the bloody gash across his forehead.

“May glory be given, Prince Rook.” With that, the captain unfolded his wings and stepped into the torrent of rain outside the tent, leaping into the dark sky as a flash of lightning tore through the clouds.

The two of them stood in the tent in silence, the pounding of the rain echoing the rhythm of Rook’s heart. Of all the times to have an attempted uprising, it had to be in the middle of the Revelore Tournament. Rook looked at his empty hands, feeling completely useless.

As if sensing the direction of his thoughts, Raven said, “you’re needed here too, Rook. Winning this Tournament is just as important as quelling a rebellion. If we lose this, there will be a dozen more rebellions within the week, each larger than the last.” She crossed the room, taking his hands in her own. “Keeping the Crown and maintaining order are the most important acts of leadership and sacrifice you could make.”

“Understood,” Rook replied numbly. Emotions swirled in his chest, tangling together in a confusing knot. Memories of receiving a similar rolled parchment ten years ago flooded his mind, telling him of the uprisings that followed in the wake of his parents’ deaths. He remembered the chaos that had ensued for years. For chaos was what became of the continent when Aurandel wasn’t there to maintain the peace.

“We must summon a meeting with Princess Hasana and King Grivur as soon as possible,” Raven added wearily, running a hand through her dark hair. “They’d better

have answers.” She pulled her hood up again, her glittering eyes shadowed. “Find Hasana. I’ll pull Grivur out from whatever rock he’s hiding under. Meet me in my tent in ten minutes.”

“Shouldn’t we summon Princess Saoirse too?” Rook asked without thinking. He winced as his sister turned around slowly, a disapproving frown etching its way across her smooth face. “This involves all of Revelore, does it not?” he quickly added. “King Angwin did not attend the Tournament. His next of kin should hear whatever the other nations have to offer. Our reputation is soured, so we must invite the Mer princess to appear judicious and respectful.” Raven turned to glare at him, as if she knew his true motives for demanding Saoirse to be present.

“So be it,” she replied simply, her voice unreadable. Raven swirled out of the tent, the roar of the rain filling the small space as she flung open the fabric doors.

Shrugging his tribute’s cloak back on his shoulders, he pulled the hood over his head and made for the entrance of the tent. The deep purple fabric was tailored to him perfectly, providing him with carefully cut holes that allowed his wings to expand even as he wore the cloak over his back. Rook pushed open the tent, taking a step into the rain. His boots sank in the mud as he strode through the tribute’s camp, slurping with every step. Beyond, the silhouette of the arena stood against the horizon like a menacing beast. The mere sight of it left a bad taste in his mouth.

He wove his way through the tent rows, nodding to several other tributes who stood watching in their tent doorways. They had all been given their own private quarters, made of unique swaths of fabric that represented the nations they came from. Though Rook would’ve preferred to return to the Citadel each night, it was customary for the tributes to sleep next to the Stone Circle until the Tournament ended.

He headed for a cluster of gold and orange tents, where the Tellusun were likely mourning their fallen tribute within. The one who had died in the claws of the

chimera. Rook grimaced, stopping just before the tent given to Hasana. Though the princess had been offered comfortable chambers within the Citadel, she had preferred to stay near her country's tributes in her own tent. The tent was beautiful, even in the dreary downpour. It was lined with intricate threads of gold along the edges, golden tassels and beads hanging in ropes at the entrance. Above the tent, the flag of the Tellusun lay limp against the central pole, soaked in rain. Rook inhaled, already dreading the discussion. He hadn't spoken to Hasana since their conversation in the library.

There is no fair chance, she had said. Not while my people are starving and my lands are dying. Not while this continent is plagued with disunity and secrets.

Rook straightened and cleared his throat, preparing to call out to the princess. But before he could say a word, the tent flaps opened and warm firelight spilled out over the mud.

"Prince Rook," Hasana acknowledged, as if she had known he had been standing outside for some time. She wore no veil, only a gold circlet framing her brow. Her dark hair was pulled into an intricate braid that twisted over one shoulder. Rook looked to the fire behind her, spying the two remaining Tellusun tributes sitting in front of it. Their cheeks shone with tears in the firelight, their shoulders hunched over in defeat. The female tribute, Noora Mir, stood quickly at the sight of him. She grabbed her bow, ready to protect Hasana should the need arise.

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“I’m sorry for your loss,” Rook told Hasana, bowing slightly. “I’d heard stories of Numair Majid’s great leadership in battle. He was a well-respected warrior, Your Highness. His death was an honorable one.” Hasana’s honey-brown eyes flashed, as if she had something to say. But she said nothing, merely inclining her head at him in thanks.

“I apologize for the intrusion,” Rook continued. “However, my sister has organized a meeting that demands our collective attention to resolve a matter of great importance to our lands and peoples.”

“What is this meeting about?” Hasana asked, folding her arms across her chest. There, in the doorway of the tent, Hasana looked impossibly weary and aged beyond her years. It was the face of a young leader who had borne too much weight and seen too much. Rook had seen that expression on Raven’s face too many times to count.

“I can’t say here,” Rook said in a hushed voice, glancing around at the neighboring tents. Hasana sighed, turning back to her companions and giving them a short nod.

“Allow me a moment to collect myself,” she told him, wiping a sleeve against her damp face. “I will join you in the Queen’s tent momentarily.”

“Do you require an escort?” Rook asked, eyeing the mourning tributes.

“No,” Hasana replied. “I don’t believe that would be the best decision. Judging from your face, you’d like to keep this meeting rather discreet. Am I correct?” She looked up at him, cocking a dark eyebrow.

“That is probably for the best,” Rook admitted.

“You Aurans never want to make a scene,” Hasana murmured, her intelligent eyes never leaving his face. “Not when your power is in question.”

Rook was taken aback, his jaw clenching. Her discernment was eerie, and even worse, frighteningly accurate. He said nothing, merely giving her a nod and turning away. There was something about Hasana that got under his skin and made him uncomfortable.

Mud squelched under his boots as Rook headed for the blue tents on the north side of the camp, where the Mer tributes had made their homes for the next three days.

“She isn’t here,” a voice called out from behind him. Rook turned to see the blonde-haired Mer tribute stomping through the mud. Aurelia, he remembered as she strode toward the tent. She was soaked to the bone, her tunic clinging to her skin in the downpour. But her pale scales shone in the rain, more vibrant than they had been before.

“One of our companions is in the healer’s tent,” Aurelia explained, shoving past him. “He barely made it out of that damned labyrinth in one piece. It will be a miracle if Sune heals enough to compete in the next trial,” Aurelia said, pulling open the tent angrily. She whirled around, fury written on every part of her face. “What do you want with Saoirse?” she demanded, her turquoise eyes flashing with a challenge. “If you touch her, I’ll gut you.”

“The rulers of Revelore are summoned to a meeting,” Rook offered. “Her presence is required.”

“Since when did Aurandel ever include Elorshin in their negotiations?” she asked, her lips curled in disgust. “How benevolent of you to invite a lowly Mer princess to your

stately gathering.”

“Where is she?” Rook asked, ignoring her. “It is of great importance.”

Aurelia said nothing for a moment, her eyes roving over his face and stopping at the gash that streaked across his forehead. She stared at him for a long time, determining if he could be trusted. Something like resolve softened her features, and her shoulders slumped in surrender.

“She’s in the river,” Aurelia told him. She pointed to a clearing in the trees, where the great Adonis River cut through the vast sweep of woodlands. The churning, white-foamed rapids were not for the faint of heart. But for someone hailing from the wild waters of the Maeral Sea, Rook supposed the river was mere child’s play. Rook gave her a thankful nod, turning toward the roaring Adonis River north of the camp. An odd thrill whispered through his chest at the thought of seeing Saoirse again. It was the same feeling that Rook felt just before a brawl, when adrenaline hummed through his body and prepared him for battle.

Where the Mer princess was concerned, he might as well be preparing for a fight.

20

SAOIRSE

Saoirse invited the biting cold of the river gladly. The roaring waters swelled around her, ushering sweet relief to her dry skin and enveloping her in a familiar, weightless hold. Saoirse drifted through the river, allowing it to carry her over eddies and around rocks that sprang up from the riverbed. She closed her eyes and let the rapids churn and swirl around her body.

She had been unconscious only for a moment, waking up in a healer’s tent an hour

after completing the first trial. Here on land, it felt as though she could never get enough air to breathe, could never quite find her balance the way she could in the sea. The emotional and physical toils of the maze had overtaken her, forcing her into unconscious submission. She had awoken to prodding fingers and unfamiliar faces looming over her, a ceiling of white fabric stretching above her. But what she needed was not in glass vials or contained in healer's jars. What she needed was water.

Now, the Adonis River claimed her, its cold rapids revitalizing her with every push and pull. Surrounded by water and inhaling it on each breath, Saoirse began to heal. But even as she tumbled through the foaming rapids and felt the friendly sting of rain above, she knew it was not the end.

Surviving the first trial was only the beginning.

She turned in the water, her strength renewed. She kicked and dove, dodging jagged rocks and swimming with the current. Her heart soared as she flew through the river, her body remembering strokes and kicks without reminder or instruction. She broke the surface of the river with a leap, diving back under as soon as the air kissed her skin. She missed the feeling of diving next to dolphins, missed the call of seagulls as they flew overhead.

But at the back of her mind, Selussa's bargain gnawed at her. Here in the water, Saoirse was reminded of where she belonged, of what she was fighting for. The absence of her power was a constant reminder of what she had sacrificed to be in the Tournament. A reminder of what she would lose if she failed. Thoughts of her father suddenly filtered into her mind as she swam, seeping into the water around her until she could hardly breathe. Guilt and obligation warred inside of her, tearing her heart into shreds. Saoirse shoved her emotions down, letting out a scream underwater.

You will finish what you started, she vowed to herself. Her lies and deceit would be worth it in the end. They had to be.

As she launched out of the river in a graceful leap, she caught a glimpse of a shadow on the river bank. She dove under once more, taking a deep breath before rising to the surface. With only her eyes above the water, she took in the form of a man standing at the river's edge, the familiar outline of his wings unmistakable. Her heart pounded faster at the sight of Rook, something like relief pooling in her stomach. He had survived the first trial.

Reluctantly, she swam over to him. Her feet caught on the soft pebbles that were embedded in the slope of the riverbank. She hated how her body was pulled toward the earth, anchored to solid ground as she trudged up the bank. Already, the energy she'd gained from the river was fading rapidly, leaving her limbs aching and her muscles sore. Her skin felt suddenly hot as she felt Rook's gaze upon her. But she merely lifted her head, giving him an unwavering gaze as she strode toward him. They said nothing to each other, both warily assessing the other.

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Rook's normally bright eyes were dark, his thick lashes clumped together with raindrops. His raven-black hair was plastered to his skull, wet tendrils creeping across his high cheekbones. His loose tunic was opened at the neck, revealing warm olive skin dampened with rain. A fresh gash on his forehead glistened, red and angry. But beside the ugly streak of crimson, he appeared whole and relatively unscathed. There was an electricity to the air around them, a slight humming that was not from the lightning in the clouds. The emotions swirling inside of her were a tangle of contradictions, warring to be dominant. Hatred. Admiration. Curiosity. Contempt. They stood across from each other in wordless challenge, daring the other to speak first.

"Princess Saoirse," Rook stated with a nod, finally breaking the silence. His voice came out in a rasp, betraying the exhaustion he felt. There was something in his eyes that hadn't been there before, something weary and haunted she hadn't seen in their previous interactions.

"Prince Rook," she returned, giving him a bow. It was a ridiculous gesture in the pouring rain, with her clothes plastered to her body and her hair in knots.

"I-" he began, his eyes scanning her face. His hand twitched, as if he wanted to reach out and touch her. A flash of lightning streaked across the sky, bright and burning. He straightened, instantly transforming into the regal prince of Aurandel. Any softness in his blue eyes hardened into stone.

"You are summoned to a meeting in the Queen's private tent. It is a matter of great importance, and all four rulers of Revelore are to be in attendance."

“What is it?” she ventured to ask, her heart beginning to race. “What’s wrong?”

Rook’s hard exterior was unmoving, his mouth set in a firm line. “Follow me,” he simply said, turning on his heel. His wings were tucked tight against his back, the downy gray feathers damp with rain.

Instead of arguing, Saoirse followed him without a word. She was too tired to fight with him, and too curious to ruin the moment with questions that wouldn’t be answered. They trudged through the forest in silence, the roar of the Adonis gradually melting away as they drew nearer to camp. Had she visited in any other circumstances, Saoirse supposed that the woodlands might be beautiful. The towering trees were cast in vibrant shades of green, soft moss clinging to their trunks and roots. White mushrooms dotted the rich forest floor and sprigs of fern bubbled up from the soil. Even in the torrential downpour, birds called to each other from the tapestry of branches high above. But the Stone Circle loomed even taller than the trees, a smear of ugly stone that marred the brilliance of the forest.

The tribute campsite slowly came into focus as they continued walking, tents sprouting up through the forest and clustering together in little pods. At the sight of the white healer’s tents in the center of camp, Saoirse’s heart dropped. The mere thought of Sune lying helpless on a cot sent a stab of fear through her. Although it had always been a possibility that one of them could die in the Tournament, it hadn’t felt real until now. She now understood why there had been fingernail marks on the sides of the tunnel that opened into the arena.

“This way,” Rook said as they wove their way through the camp.

They passed the Mer tents, and Saoirse spied Aurelia standing outside. She exchanged a worried glance with her as they strode past. Saoirse trailed close behind Rook, watching as the cloak hanging from his shoulders became splattered with mud. Two slits cut down the swath of fabric, allowing his wings to freely extend out from

the cloak. Just like her own tribute's cloak, the crest of his people was embroidered into the rich fabric. A winged horse reared up on powerful hind quarters, surrounded by twisting vines and wreaths of laurel. It was a crest she had learned to hate, a symbol of oppression and tyranny.

Her heart began to race as they gained sight of Queen Raven's tent at the center of the camp. Like the rest of their tents, the Queen's quarters were adorned in the colors of her country. In the rain, the deep purple tent almost looked black, delicate threads of silver stitched across it by expert hands. But unlike the small, personalized tents of the tributes, the queen's tent was made up of three different extensions that stretched outward like a miniature castle.

Saoirse straightened as they approached the soldiers on either side of the tent opening. She was sure that the personal guards of the queen wouldn't hesitate to slit her throat if she so much as gave them the wrong glance. She nearly bumped into Rook as he abruptly halted, taking a step backward just before she collided with his broad back.

"Your Highness," one of the guards acknowledged with a bow. When the soldier rose, he gave Saoirse a withering glance from beneath his iron helmet. It took everything in her power not to return his hateful gaze.

"Has everyone arrived?" Rook asked the soldier.

"Yes, Majesty," the guard replied, moving his gaze from Saoirse back to Rook. "They're waiting inside." He pulled back the curtain of the tent in a graceful sweep, revealing the luxurious space within. Much to her surprise, Rook offered his arm to her in a gesture of civility. But she ignored his arm and pushed inside the tent first.

The room dripped in finery, the floor cushioned with lush carpets and plump pillows. Glowing candles sat on several mahogany sitting tables that were scattered

throughout the room. At the edges of the sitting room, two more doorways opened into separate quarters within the tent, separated only by thin panelings of sheer fabric. Everywhere Saoirse looked, gold accents and luxurious upholstered chairs seemed to glow in the candlelight, a stark contrast to the dreary world outside the tent. A glossy wooden table sat at the center of the room, surrounded by six chairs.

Saoirse stiffened as she took in the guests before her, her heart pounding. The rulers of Revelore all turned to them expectantly, their eyes burning in the soft light. She had never met these strangers before, only ever studying the cultures of their courts and the political alliances formed between them from the safety of the Maeral Sea. Seeming to sense her apprehension, Rook placed a gentle hand on the small of her back, leading her to the table with a reassuring touch. She pulled back an empty chair from the fine table and eased into the seat with as much grace as she could muster. Rook left her side and took a seat next to Queen Raven, all the way across the table.

Saoirse took in an unsteady breath, daring to peer at the foreign rulers around her. To her right, a pale-skinned man sat squinting in the light, his white beard standing stark against the dark tent. King Grivur of Terradrin, she recognized as his colorless eyes passed over her in an assessing gaze. His snow-white hair fell past his shoulders, twisted in elaborate braids and fastened silver beads. The monarch was near her father's own age, she remembered. Behind him, Commander Neia Landum stood against the back wall of the tent, concealed by shadows. To Saoirse's left sat Princess Hasana of the Tellusun people, her rich orange robes complimenting her golden brown skin. To her surprise, Hasana gave her a soft smile of welcome.

"Rulers of Revelore," a cool voice called from across the table. Saoirse stared at the dark-haired woman at the head of the table: Queen Raven of Aurandel. The closest she had ever been to the Auran Queen was at the tribute's banquet, and even from that distance, she was impossibly frightening. Raven's face was angular and sharp, almost cat-like. Rook's face was softer, his mouth ready to grin at a moment's notice. But they shared the same eyes, piercing and bright blue.

“I apologize for interrupting your evening,” Raven said, her dark eye lashes casting shadows on her cheeks as she looked down to her hands. “I know that the events of the Tournament are occupying your minds, but I must draw your attention elsewhere.” She looked up, something like anger and annoyance flickering across her beautiful face. “Each of your nations has sworn fealty to Aurandel. Every decade, you renew your vows to my people. Now, I must demand that you make good on your oaths.” The air filled with tension, the tent suddenly growing hot as they all looked around at each other. “To that end, I must ask that every word you utter in this tent be truthful. You have been summoned here because of a rapidly evolving conflict at our border, which may prove to be deadly for our alliance and mutual security.”

Everyone shifted in their seats. Saoirse tried not to fidget as she felt the weight of Raven’s accusatory gaze. The Queen’s presence was like an imploded star, all consuming and relentless.

“A bloody and thoughtless uprising has taken hold of the Terradrin border,” Raven revealed to them, folding her hands in her lap. King Grivur sucked in a shocked breath, his colorless eyes widening in surprise. “This uprising threatens to disrupt our already over-burdened supply lines and merchants. Aurandel has little skin in the game—mostly lost coin and murdered soldiers. But you all collectively face greater disfunction if this uprising goes unquelled. Your lands will be wanting in food and supplies, your peoples will starve and become desperate, and the thrones you occupy will grow hot with rumors of uprisings and rebellions as your subjects turn to actions of their own.”

“I’ve received no word of such an uprising,” Grivur hissed defensively, leaning forward. Behind him, Neia’s expression darkened.

“We just learned of it,” Raven replied. “It occurred in Meysam this morning.” Grivur huffed in surprise once more, his white eyebrows furrowing in confusion. “It is our assumption that these radicals took the opportunity to attack during the opening trial,

when the governors are absent and the garrisons are allowed to sleep in for the holiday,” Raven continued, her eyes flashing.

“The border is a messy place,” Grivur declared, crossing his lean arms across his chest. “There are skirmishes all the time. This uprising will be dealt with, I can assure you. He looked back at Neia, as if willing her to defend Terradrin’s honor.

“It’s true,” Neia confirmed with a prideful lift of her chin. “My generals and I have prevented the rise of any serious radicalized groups. I would’ve heard word of such plans to revolt.”

“Yet Meysam burns,” Raven countered. “And here you are, none the wiser. Perhaps your control is slipping, Commander.” Outrage streaked across Neia’s face, and her lip curled with rage as she began to speak. “My commanders at the border suggest this is a new radical group,” the queen continued. “Perhaps they have found a way to conduct their scheming under your soldiers’ noses. Perhaps there is a rat in your court of spies, Commander.”

“What makes you so sure?” Grivur interrupted before his commander could speak. His already pallid face somehow grew paler. But where Neia was outraged that her honor was at stake, Grivur appeared sheepish and embarrassed in front of the queen.

“This insurrection was not a natural overflow of frustration, but an organized attempt to overthrow local governance,” Raven answered. “According to my commanders, they were led by Tellusun radicals.”

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“Impossible,” Grivur replied in horror. He turned to Hasana, his eyes wide. “What do you have to say, Daughter of the Shujaa Desert?”

Hasana’s gold eyes glinted in the candlelight, betraying nothing. “I know just as little as you, King Grivur,” she answered calmly. “It is well known that trade between the Terradrin and Tellusun is only permitted during the spring monsoon season. My people have no reason to venture so far during the autumn months, nor would they dare to enter a city under Auran occupation so recklessly,” she added. “And how they could manage to sneak into a city so well protected by the Auran legions is beyond me.” The slightest of smirks twisted at the corners of her mouth as she met Raven's gaze. "Perhaps your commanders do not know the Tellusun well enough from the Terradrin? After all, our trade, as you put it, is a bigger issue to us than to you. Why would we sabotage ourselves?"

“Tread carefully girl,” Raven all but growled, her cool demeanor showing the first cracks of frustration.

Brazenly, Hasana said, “Perhaps your commander’s eyes were mistaken, Your Highness. Are relations between our people not cordial?” Hasana continued, lifting an eyebrow. “The peace between our nations has been maintained for over two decades, has it not? Can you truly imagine my people attempting an uprising with the Terradrin?” She lifted her chin definitely, the very picture of confidence.

“I do not dare grow too comfortable, Princess Hasana,” Raven replied darkly. “You are a fool if you believe I do not watch every nation with scrutiny at all times. Nothing is beyond the realm of possibility.”

“I can assure you that I have no knowledge of Tellusun rebels in Meysam nor in my own city,” Hasana retorted coolly, unbothered by Raven’s biting words.

“We will be sending more Aerial troops to Terradrin and Tellusun,” Raven stated, seemingly finished with the conversation. “I expect there to be no resistance.” Her word was final. “We will continue this meeting in two days, when the Tournament is over. Until then, I am stationing extra guards with both of you at all times. I am suspending all diplomatic rights until the end of the Tournament. There will be no messages between your cities that I do not read first,” Raven ordered. “Any attempts of communication shall be intercepted, I can assure you.”

Grivur balked, his eyes wide with disbelief. If Hasana was bothered by the Auran Queen’s suspicions, she didn’t reveal it. Saoirse clenched her fists. How Hasana could withstand such treatment was beyond her. Each nation held their own power, their own rights to govern. None of this affected her, and yet she was furious. Never before had she witnessed Aurandel’s iron grip on the continent so close.

“You can’t do that,” Saoirse began, the words slipping from her mouth on their own accord. “If there are uprisings in their cities, Grivur and Hasana should be the first ones to know. Their peoples’ lives may be at stake. And, if what you have said is true, you should have consulted Grivur immediately instead of seizing the opportunity to demonize Terradrin’s leadership in front of all of us.”

The room was deathly silent as her words hung in the air. Raven stared at her, a slow contemptuous smile creeping across her face. “Mer Princess,” she told her condescending, “you have much to learn. You are sitting here on a mere formality because of my younger brother’s misplaced sense of honor. The Mer have long kept this table at arms length, yet at your first gathering, you expect to unravel the rules that have governed it for over a century?” Raven smiled condescendingly, raising her arms in some kind of peace-offering. “What else should a queen do, but protect her lands and her people from violence and chaos?”

“It isn’t right,” Saoirse argued, heat burning on her face. “You speak of your people, but you consolidate power and weaken your allies.” She turned to Rook, half expecting him to side with her. But he was staring at his feet, his mouth twisted into a frown. Hasana gave nothing either, training only an unreadable gaze on her. “I may not have much experience in these matters, but I see this injustice clearly.”

“What do you know of right?” The Auran Queen hissed between clenched teeth, slamming her fists into the tabletop so hard that the hastily laid goblets bounced into the air and onto the floor. “What do you know except treachery and backstabbing?” The Auran Queen swept a finger across the room, landing on Saoirse. “Eight years ago, your mother destroyed my family to undercut our power. And therest of you stood by!” Raven shook her head. “You should be grateful I allowed you to compete at all, yet you question me with no remorse,” she said poisonously. “You should be grateful that I have allowed you to compete in this year’s Tournament. If you question my authority again, you shall be banished from the trials and sent back to the Sea immediately.”

Saoirse clenched her jaw, fighting the urge to rise from the table. But she knew that Raven would make good on her promise.

“Leave me, all of you,” Raven commanded. “This meeting has been adjourned. Return to your tents and prepare for the second trial.”

With that, the rulers of Revelore stood from the table, the atmosphere heavy with tension and unspoken words. As she rose from her chair, it had never been more clear to Saoirse that whatever fragile treaties had been formed over recent years hung on the edge of a knife, able to collapse at any moment.

Saoirse left the tent quickly, her head spinning. Outside, the incessant rain had finally stopped, leaving behind shining puddles and slippery patches of mud. Saoirse headed for her private tent, listening as the other leaders filed out of the Queen’s quarters and

out into the tribute encampment. In light of political uprisings and tangled histories, the Tournament seemed trivial.

Hearing squelching boots behind her, Saoirse watched from the corner of her eye as Rook slipped from the tent and stared up at the now-clear sky. Saoirse's heart panged in her chest at the sight of him, hot anger searing through her at the apathy he had shown in their meeting. But even as disdain burned in her heart, something like longing prickled at the back of her mind. What might have been if their nations had never gone to war a century ago? Saoirse struggled to imagine a world in which their kind saw each other as equals, a world in which the Mer and the Aura were allies. Rook spread his wings, lifting them to the air in a graceful sweep. His gray-feathered wings were impossibly beautiful, each one as long as his own body when fully extended. Saoirse tore her gaze away from him just before his piercing blue eyes found hers. She hurried away from the center of the campsite, her skin hot and her heart conflicted.

Saoirse was beginning to understand why her father was content to remain isolated in the Maeral Sea. She couldn't deny that Elorshin was safest when it conformed to the authority of Aurandel. She ought to just compete in the Tournament quietly and stop asking questions. But at the edge of her mind, traitorous thoughts swirled in a reckless dance. Would Revelore be better off without the Tournament, better off without one ruling nation to uphold the peace? She would've scoffed at the notion a week ago, when she had stolen from Kaja and risked her very life for the chance to compete. When she had betrayed her father and made the bloody deal with Selussa, she had been more than willing to fight in the arena for the Crown. But now...

Something unknown churned within her, whispering of more. There was more to the Tournament, more to the Crown. She was sure of it. And then there was that damned bargain she had made with Selussa, hanging over her every move. Fulfilling her end of the deal was the last thing she needed to worry about with uprisings and secrets filling up every space around her. Saoirse sighed, feeling more lost now than she had

in the labyrinth. She wanted-needed-the Tournament to be necessary. If it truly was pointless, she didn't know where the future of her people stood.

There was one person here that held answers.

She abruptly halted in her tracks, turning to face Rook. The prince hadn't moved from the center of the camp, his head simply inclined to the shafts of sunlight that peaked through the dissolving remnants of storm clouds. His eyes were closed, his expression soft as he raised his face to the emerging sun. Lifting her chin and straightening her back, she strode towards him.

"Prince Rook." He opened his eyes and looked down at her, something akin to relief delightfully appearing at the corners of his mouth. Rook's sapphire blue eyes sent a jolt through her as his gaze passed over her face curiously. "I need you." Rook narrowed his eyes in confusion, and she cursed herself for blushing at her own blunder. "I need you to explain something to me. About the nature and fairness of the games."

"What do you require of me, princess?" Rook asked, his eyes glowing brighter. "Don't challenge me to another duel," he added, his lips quirked flirtatiously.

"We need to talk," she said. Rook's wry smile slowly faded as he understood the implications of her words. He knew as well as she that conversations between a Mer and an Auran had been unheard of since the deaths of their parents eight years ago. But just this once, Saoirse was willing to break the cycle. If only so she could understand why the Tournament benefitted them all. Saoirse hated herself for being so weak, for practically surrendering her pride for this Auran prince she wanted so desperately to hate. If there was no way for her to avoid killing him, she would at least understand him first, know the inner-workings of imperial prejudice that he no doubt harbored. She desperately hoped that if he cared to answer, her task would be made easier by some brutish answer. She needed him to be the monster she believed

him to be.

“Our peoples hate each other, from commoners to royal families.” She paused. “Certainly we have each inherited these prejudices whether they are warranted or not. But why do we allow them to continue? What reason do you and I have to hate each other?”

Rook pondered her request, those blue eyes boring into her. "I will entertain your question, but elsewhere." His eyes scanned the campsite before returning to her. "Somewhere safe, where we can be alone." Without warning, he wrapped his arms around her and hoisted her to his chest.

Before she could say a word, the Prince of Aurandel shot into the sky.

21

SAOIRSE

As Rook lifted them into the sky, Saoirse could hardly breathe. Crushed against his chest, she gasped for air as they grew weightless together, suspended in the scattered clouds. Her stomach flipped when she glanced down, watching as the campsite below grew smaller with every pump of Rook's powerful wings. She clutched his tunic with a death grip and scrambled to wrap herself closer for fear that he'd drop her. Visions of plummeting back down to the earth and shattering on the ground suddenly filled her mind, and she shut her eyes tight against the gory images. The wind tore through her hair, whispering through her clothes and pulling on her dangling legs. Rook, to his credit, seemed to realize how terrified she was. He pulled her closer and tightened his grip around her shoulders. Fleeting, Saoirse imagined how many lovers he had swept off of their feet in the same way, dazzling them with his graceful wings.

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When the terror had worn away into a dull fear, Saoirse dared to open her eyes. They were now soaring high above the trees and speeding toward Mt. Thalia at an alarming rate. Gone was the Stone Circle and the tribute encampment that surrounded it. For as far as the eye could see, the azure sky enveloped her vision, streaks of purples and oranges creeping up along the horizon like the strokes of a paintbrush. Around them, fluffy tendrils of clouds had become tinged with pink in the setting sun. The scent of rain and lush greenery filled the air. Though her fingers still dug into Rook's tunic for fear of falling, Saoirse was now enjoying herself. The sensation of flying was similar to that of floating with the tides of the sea. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine being suspended in the ocean, untethered to the earth. It was a place of in-between, a weightless state of freedom. Saoirse looked up at Rook, taking in the soft, appreciative expression on his face. She could see that he thought of flying the same way she thought of swimming. Though their realms were so different, they held them in the same regard. Saoirse couldn't help but smile as the wind brushed her cheek and tugged on her tousled curls. Where she had imagined the breeze to be harsh and aggressive only minutes ago, she now thought it was playful and light.

She looked over Rook's broad shoulders, watching the powerful movements of his wings as he navigated through the sky. The graceful sweep of his wings echoed his years of training with the Aerials, his muscled limbs perfectly toned with intense conditioning. Saoirse allowed herself to lean against him, clinging to him more out of curiosity than for self-preservation. He smelled of jasmine and cinnamon, with a touch of old parchment. She enjoyed the feeling of his arms around her, one hand braced against her back and the other tucked under her legs. Though she should've been appalled to be so close to the enemy, disgust was the last thing she felt in his arms. She frowned, disturbed at her reaction to the prince. He was simply another tribute, an enemy that she needed to conquer.

Regretfully, she lifted her head from his chest and tried to put as much distance between them as possible. It would do her no good to fall victim to his beauty and allure. She had so many reasons to keep Rook at arm's length, the most important of which being Selussa's bargain. Saoirse grimaced, a bad taste pooling in her mouth as she thought of the Sea Witch. Tournament be damned, if she didn't fulfill her end of the bargain she wouldn't be able to return to the Maeral Sea even if she won the Crown. She would be dead in Rook's place.

Rook gently lowered them into a floating pavilion, slipping between elegant pillars of marble. A single gold chain tethered the pavilion to the city below, shimmering in the setting sun. Rook carefully lowered her down until her feet met marble stone.

Saoirse admired the stunning piece of Auran architecture, spinning in a slow circle so that the rays of light between each pillar filtered across her hair. Each pillar that encircled them was carved with expert detail, the little stone flowers and vines curling around them as if they were alive. Greenery snaked along the ceiling and hung from the rafters, creating a lush canopy of leaves and flowers above them. In the haze of the sunset, the pavilion was washed in buttery warm light, setting everything ablaze in gold.

"Will anyone see us up here?" Saoirse asked, wandering leisurely through the small structure. She stood against the railing, looking down at Coarinth below. They were so high that a few clouds crept along beside them, droplets of water clinging to the marble.

"No," Rook assured her. "Only an Aerial flying by might glimpse inside, and even then, their view would be obscured by the plants," he said, gesturing around to the beautiful vines that cascaded around them like a curtain.

"Thank you for indulging a lowly Mer princess," Saoirse finally said, leaning over the railing and admiring the rolling mountains below. She could feel his intent gaze from

her right, but she refused to turn. "I imagine talking to me is the last thing on your mind, especially with an uprising to manage."

"My sister tends to those matters alone it seems," he scoffed. "Raven never really intended me to rule alongside her I suppose." He came to stand beside her, placing his strong hands on the ledge she leaned against. "I don't even know if I want the power she should be sharing, but siblings shouldn't belittle each other." But even as he gave her a wry smile, his eyes were still guarded. They both knew that hostilities still remained between them, even if they had come to an understanding.

"I'm sorry Rook, I really am." He smiled back, but it was shallow and forced. "I understand the weight you carry: to desire change yet to be denied the chance to try." Her father's image flashed across her mind and her confidence vanished. "I...I want to understand the true darkness behind our conflict. I want to at least know what wrongs need to be righted." She knew them, yet she didn't. Saoirse wondered if he thought her strange for asking. "I wanted to talk to you about our histories," Saoirse continued slowly, choosing her words carefully. She didn't want to accuse him or put him on the defensive. "The first trial has given rise to some... questions." It was an understatement to say the least. She fidgeted with the sword at her hip, suddenly feeling nervous. "Being involved in this Tournament has made me more aware of the legacy of the War of the Age than ever before." She paused, trying to find the right words. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I want to understand why this is happening. I need to know why we are here, fighting for the Crown." She trailed off, realizing how ridiculous her words sounded. Of course she knew why they were here. She had trained her whole life for the chance to win the Tournament. She above anyone knew the reasons why the Tournament was necessary.

"Forgive me," she said, suddenly feeling foolish. "You must think I am some dull-witted Mer who never studied a history lesson in her life. I know why, but I don't understand." Her mind raced, trying to find the words that would fully encapsulate how she felt. She was on the precipice of something, grasping at frayed edges of a

truth she couldn't quite see.

"You don't mean history, do you?" Rook asked. "You wish to know the truth, without the twisting of politics or forced interpretation. You simply want to know what really happened."

"Yes, exactly!" Saoirse spun around to face him, but he was deep in thought.

"I wish I could answer you, but despite my rank, my sister withholds truth from me," he said. "But perhaps together we can discover what really happened."

In that moment, Saoirse realized her plan had backfired. She wanted him to be hostile and close-minded. She wanted him to be the Auran monster everyone said he was. But here he was, offering her unparalleled honesty and vulnerability.

"It seems to me that we have very different interpretations of what occurred between our ancestors," she began. "Perhaps we should start there."

"You would be correct in that assumption, princess." He crossed his arms and said, "Tell me what you think of Aurandel."

Saoirse scanned his face, trying to read his expression. But his features were set in stone, stoic and indecipherable. "Would you push me off the edge of this pavilion if I were fully honest with you?" she asked. It was a very real possibility, even if she meant it as a joke. For a moment, neither of them said anything, only the whistling of the wind and the call of birds breaking the silence.

"No, I wouldn't," Rook replied after a beat of consideration. "Nothing could surprise me at this point. I already know that you think we are monsters."

"Why do you say that?" Saoirse asked, gripping the pommel of her sword even

tighter. She had no idea what his next words would be.

“Because that is what many of us think of your kind,” he told her bluntly. “Nothing you could possibly say would surprise me, even if you claimed that Aurans were monsters from the underworld. My people have said as much about yours countless times, and I know that isn’t true.”

“Fair,” she ventured to say, cocking her head curiously at him. This Auran prince was full of surprises. She took a deep breath, gathering the courage to speak.

“Go ahead,” he told her. “Tell me what you think of my kind.”

“The Aura hold themselves in high regard,” Saoirse began. “Aurans believe themselves to be better than the rest of Revelore. Where the rest of us live below, you live high above in the sky,” she said, gesturing around. “You think Mer are so different from you. In your eyes, we are sirens from the deep, come to destroy and corrupt. But these assumptions could not be farther from the truth,” she added. The words spilled from her mouth, and she couldn’t stop. She kept going, voicing every last thought aloud: “One of your own killed my great uncle, an innocent man whose only crime was to love an Auran woman. Yrsa betrayed him, used him. And yet your people still deny that you had knowledge of Yrsa’s deceit. You are too cowardly to admit that Yrsa was given that assignment, too proud to admit that it was your scheming that caused the War of the Age and the proceeding Revelore Tournaments,” she breathed. “To declare Yrsa as a rogue free agent was truly cowardly. Aurandel betrayed their own daughter as much as they betrayed Elorshin. It is shameful.”

The air grew chilled in the pavilion, Saoirse’s words heavy in the air. She expected Rook to retort, to unsheathe his sword and stick the blade in her heart. But the Auran prince was silent, his mouth set in a firm line. He merely stared at her, his bright sapphire eyes assessing her with a penetrating gaze. The silence grew between them, evolving into a solid entity that hovered around them. She lifted her chin definitely,

challenging him to prove her wrong, daring him to defend his people.

“You have proved all of my expectations of the Mer wrong,” Rook said wistfully, his black hair tousling slightly in the wind. “I will be the first to admit that, Princess Saoirse. The Mer are a proud people. From the look in your eyes, I can see that you would do anything for Elorshin. I respect that pride,” he assured her. “However, Yrsa was not directed by anyone to spy on Elorshin. My great grandfather, King Duris, did not assign her to that position, nor did he ever seek to sabotage your people through a fraudulent marriage. Yrsa was acting on her own accord. We never received any secrets from her, and we have no records of any correspondence with her at all.”

“What do you mean?” Saoirse asked skeptically.

“We never received any secret messages from Yrsa. There are no records indicating that she was acting as a spy at all.”

“But my great uncle uncovered her treachery,” Saoirse argued. “It is why she killed him.” None of this was making sense.

“I can only tell you what I have been taught,” Rook answered distantly. “Aurandel halted trade with Elorshin far before Lorsan was murdered. While we do not have records of any secret information passed to us from Yrsa, we do have several letters of correspondence between Lorsan and the rulers of Revelore.”

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“Impossible,” Saoirse breathed, her mind suddenly spinning. He was lying. He had to be. “Perhaps it was all Yrsa,” she pleaded, trying to make sense of it all. “Maybe she forged the letters and sent them in his stead. Maybe she convinced the other nations of Revelore that such reckless orders came from Lorsan when she herself was behind their conception.”

“Lorsan met with my great grandfather in person several times,” Rook assured her. “They dissolved the treaties together. It would be impossible for Yrsa to impersonate him in that way,” he said.

“So you’re saying that Yrsa was innocent?” Saoirse asked, her voice pitching to disbelief. “You’re saying that the Mer made everything up so that they would have a reason to declare war against Aurandel?” She began pacing around the pavilion anxiously. “You believe the Mer to be warmongers searching for a fight, a people who would kill their own king in order to start a war?”

“I’m not saying that at all,” Rook answered. “I am just stating what I know. I’m sure there was deception, but on whose end I am not sure.”

He stopped her pacing, putting his hands on her shoulders carefully. “I want to understand as much as you do,” he said quietly.

Her world was shattering, everything she knew about her people crumbling into ashes. The Auran betrayal was the driving force behind everything; it was the cause of the Tournament, the fracturing of Revelore, and of the enduring animosity between the four kingdoms of the continent. If Yrsa was not working for the Aurans, then who was she working for?

“Start from the beginning,” she said in a near whisper. “Tell me what you know. Give me your account of the War of the Age.”

He paced around the pavilion, just as restless as she was. His cloak caught in the wind, rippling as he strode anxiously around the marbled floor. “My great aunt married King Lorsan, ruler of the Mer. It was believed to be a love match, at least at first,” he added. “We had no knowledge of Yrsa’s intentions to spy, and we never received the information you claim that she gathered.” His eyes darkened, something like an accusation blooming on his face as he turned toward her. “Your king had plans to dissolve our trading treaties and break away from Revelore long before Yrsa. He sought to destroy the unity between our nations and obtain the Crown for himself. That was why Yrsa killed him. She had no choice.”

“Hel’s teeth,” Saoirse cursed. “You can’t truly believe that.” She wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until he admitted that he was wrong.

“What makes you so sure that what I’ve told you is false?” Rook asked, taking a step towards her. He was so close to her that she could feel his breath brush across her cheek. “Why is your version of the story correct and mine is a lie?” he said in a softer tone.

“Where is the truth?” Saoirse breathed. She gazed up at Rook, half wanting to throttle him and half wanting to press her lips against his. It would be so easy to kill him now. She could slip her dagger between his ribs right here in this pavilion. She could fulfill Selussa’s bargain and be done with it. But she couldn’t move her fingers to the blade at her hip. She was frozen.

Heart pounding, she tried to understand, tried to wrap her mind around a history she had never questioned until now. He was right. She had been so confident that Aurandel was to blame. But Rook felt the same way about the Mer, and who was to say that his suspicions were unfounded?

“What if we are both wrong?” Rook asked, his voice barely a whisper as the evening wind rushed past them. He lifted a hand to her cheek, and time seemed to warp and slow down. If not for the warmth of his finger tips, Saoirse would’ve thought she was dreaming.

“We could determine the truth together,” he said gently. There was something so sincere and unguarded in his tone that Saoirse couldn’t help but be taken aback.

She stared at his lips, soft and inviting. She could almost feel fate drawing them to each other with an invisible thread, compelling them to press closer. The gravity between them was undeniable, so palpable that she could almost taste it. It had been like that from the moment she’d sat next to him at the tribute’s banquet, she realized. She lifted her chin, their breaths mingling he lowered his mouth to hers. She began to shut her eyes, her skin tingling with anticipation as she felt the lightest brush of his lips on her own.

You have to kill him.

The thought broke the moment completely, shattering any seed of hope into a million pieces.

“Take me back to camp,” she said roughly, pulling away from him. “The second trial is tomorrow. We had better rest while we still can.” Rook stepped away from her quickly, as if he had been scalded by hot water. Of course he hadn’t wanted to kiss her. He’d be mad to desire a Mer. To want the enemy.

“Agreed,” he simply said, heading for the edge of the pavilion. She trailed after him, feeling hollow and more unsure of herself than she ever had before. There were so many questions and so little answers. And she was running out of time. She balled her hands into fists, her nails scoring little crescents into her palms. Without a word, Rook pulled her into his arms and leapt off the side of the pavilion, launching them

into the air.

You have to kill him. The thought echoed through her like the toll of an execution bell.

* * *

Saoirse pushed open the flaps of her tent, her heart thundering in her chest. Titans, she was going mad. She had almost kissed the man she was supposed to kill, the man who was her enemy. She kicked off her boots, shoving them to the corner of the tent.

What is wrong with me?

“What happened?” A voice cut through her thoughts. Saoirse turned, meeting the gaze of Aurelia, who was sitting on the corner of her cot.

“Stars above, I didn’t see you there.” Saoirse nearly jumped out of her skin at Aurelia’s presence.

“Where did you go? Why are you so jumpy?” Her blonde eyebrows knitted together in concern and her mouth tugged into a frown.

Where to even begin? Should she tell her about the uprising in Terradrin that held countless implications for their future? Should they discuss the horrors they both faced in the labyrinth that morning? Or, most alarmingly, should she confess that Rook was now making her question everything she knew about Revelore? And on top of everything, she had made that bloody bargain with Selussa, a woman who she knew practically nothing about.

Saoirse sighed, her own mind unable to process it all. She sat down beside Aurelia, her shoulders finally slumping down after standing rigid all afternoon. The adrenaline

of flying with Rook was wearing off, replaced by weariness that settled deep into the marrow of her bones.

“When we came to Aurandel, I thought the goal was simple,” she began, staring at the floor. “I thought we just had to survive the trials and win the Crown. But it all seems so much more complicated now. The political entanglements and the nuance of it all...” she trailed off, struggling to find the words to describe how she felt. She longed to tell Aurelia about Selussa and the bargain. But she couldn’t see how that conversation could end well. She wasn’t just gambling on Rook’s life, she was putting her own life at risk. And knowing Aurelia, she would try to hunt down that Sea Witch herself and take Saoirse’s place.

“I know,” Aurelia agreed, her voice going soft with sympathy. She put a hand on Saoirse’s shoulder, solid and comforting.

“How is Sune?” Saoirse asked.

“He is getting treatment for his wounds. The healers have been working on him all afternoon,” Aurelia answered, something like relief edging her voice. “He will live.”

“Thank the stars,” Saoirse muttered. Though Sune could be condescending and hard to bear, he was one of them. He could’ve easily fallen victim to the arena just like that Tellusun tribute had.

“But it will just be us from here on out,” Aurelia continued. She pulled her hair away from her face, tucking the blonde strands behind her ears. “You and I will face the remaining trials alone.”

The prospect was daunting. One less tribute on their team meant one less opportunity for Elorshin to win. The weight of victory now rested entirely on Saoirse and Aurelia’s shoulders, and if anything happened to either of them in the second trial, their chances of winning would grow even slimmer.

“We’ll be fine,” Saoirse said decidedly, despite the uneasiness in her chest. “We’ve always had each other’s backs. This is no different.” She sent Aurelia what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

Aurelia returned her gaze, her eyes filled with gratitude and fresh determination. “You’re right. How many years has it been? Nine? Ten? I still remember when your prim little face showed up in the Torqen barracks,” she laughed, her eyes dancing with memories. “You were so determined to train as one of us, and we were all amazed that such a spoiled princess would want to be a soldier.”

Saoirse batted her in the arm playfully. “I was not spoiled. I was merely headstrong and obstinate. There is a difference,” she argued with a laugh. “Surely it wasn’t the worst thing to have me, even if I was a little stubborn.”

Aurelia grew serious as she said, “I’m glad you decided to join us. You’re the only family I’ve ever known, Saoirse.”

Saoirse took Aurelia’s hand and smiled. Aurelia was just as much a part of her family as her own father was. It was Aurelia who had taken her under her wing and taught her the ropes of life all those years ago. Aurelia had comforted her when her mother died, letting her climb into bed with her and cry through the night. And it was Aurelia who would give her the strength to see the rest of the Tournament through.

“Do you miss your father?” her friend asked. “It must be hard to be here without him.” She lowered her eyebrows thoughtfully and frowned. “I still don’t understand why he had such a change of heart. The night of the tributary, he looked ready to kill every last Elder in the amphitheater. Why did he suddenly decide to let you go? What did you say to him?”

Saoirse racked her brain, trying to find something to say to that. She knew the question would inevitably come up, but she hadn’t figured out how to explain it in any rational way.

“He saw how important this opportunity was for me,” Saoirse said wistfully. “I think that deep down, he always knew I would choose this path.”

“Still,” Aurelia countered, “I’ve never known Angwin to let anyone change his mind once he has made a decision. It took him months before he finally relented and allowed you to train with the Torqen. Why was this different?”

Saoirse’s heart twisted, and the seed of guilt grew. She missed her father terribly, but

she didn't know how she could ever face him again. "I guess he saw how much this meant to me," she finally said, the lie slipping off her tongue. "And perhaps I convinced him that I actually stood a fighting chance in the arena."

"Why do you think the Elders wanted someone to find the dark pearl, anyway?" Aurelia went on. "Did Adda Carew ever explain why it was so valuable, or why it had never been found before?"

"No. She never told me why it was important, or why it was lost in the first place," Saoirse sighed. "Lots of artifacts were lost during the War of the Age. Aurandel burned so many of our treasures. My guess is that the pearl was some kind of symbol tied to the Order. You know how the Elders are. They are obsessed with ancient relics and the old ways. They probably just wanted to add it back into their collection to preserve the past," she said, mimicking Adda's stern voice.

"Titans, I don't miss their lessons. When the Elders came to lecture us in the afternoons, I wanted to die of boredom," Aurelia laughed.

"Those lessons had their moments," Saoirse admitted with a grin, thankful for the change in subject. Every minute she spent talking about her father made her miss him more. "But it was enjoyable to hear their old stories, was it not?"

"I suppose so," Aurelia conceded, a glimmer of humor still in her eyes. "I would've preferred to spend those afternoons sneaking in extra training, though."

They sat together in comfortable silence for several moments, both lost in the memories of the past. Saoirse didn't want the moment to end. Here, reminiscing with Aurelia, the world outside the tent didn't matter. She wanted to freeze time and stay this way forever. In this tent, she wouldn't have to face Rook or the bargain, or think about the uprising in Terradrin. She knew all of the thoughts she kept putting off would eventually come crashing down on her, like a wave folding in on itself. But

she wouldn't let the wave collapse just yet. The countless decisions weighing on her could wait.

Saoirse twisted to face Aurelia, propping her head up on her arm. "Promise me that we will win this Tournament," she said softly. "Promise me that we will both make it out of this alive."

Aurelia turned to her, eyes scanning her somber expression.

"I promise."

22

ROOK

"Where did you disappear to yesterday?" Eros demanded, fastening his sword to his hip. They marched down the corridor together, heading for the center of the arena. Veila kept pace behind them, her short steps brisk as they hurried down the staircase.

"I had matters to attend to," Rook said dismissively, adjusting his cloak over his shoulders. "Uprisings do not calm themselves."

Eros scowled, his eyes dark with disapproval. He knew that Rook wasn't telling them the whole truth. Rook ignored him, striding through the labyrinth of stone hallways and descending into the underbelly of the arena in silence.

Even if he were to tell Eros and Veila the truth, he didn't even know where to start. He couldn't begin to explain his conversation with Saoirse. He certainly couldn't find the words to describe how he felt about her. Hatred and admiration mingled together in a confusing haze, clouding his already-scattered mind. Worst of all, longing seeped into his blood and hummed through his heart when he thought of the Mer princess.

Thoughts of Saoirse had seeped into his mind, tormenting him when he should've been focusing on the next trial. He was haunted by her pale blue eyes, so full of intelligence and ferocity. His lips remembered her too. He couldn't escape the memory of their fleeting kiss, as much as he tried to run from it. He was like a schoolboy, fawning over a woman he hardly knew and didn't dare trust for a moment.

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“Whatever happened yesterday is in the past,” Veila offered as they continued down the ancient staircase. “We focus on this trial and then figure out the rest. Right now, we put our minds to whatever awaits us in the arena and nothing else.”

“Of course,” Rook replied flatly, trailing behind Ambassador Cresta as she led them into the final chamber. Rook didn’t think being in the dark corridor surrounded by metal cages would ever get easier. Centuries of memory were housed within each rusted cell, locked away to time and forgotten by nearly everyone. Perhaps one day his name would be the only thing that preserved his memory, a name that children studied with their tutors.

“Welcome to the second trial, tributes,” Cresta told them as she unlocked the final cell. With a hollow smile, she gestured for them to step inside. “May glory be given on this day,” she said when the three of them huddled into the cell. She gave them a sympathetic grimace as she locked it behind them. “You’re nearly there, just one more trial after this one.”

Rook felt nothing but cold resolve burning through his limbs, his skin prickling with fear as he felt the floor beneath them begin to rumble. There was nothing reassuring about what they were about to do. Veila put a hand to his shoulder, looking up at him. There was certainly fear in her green eyes, but there was also a glimmer of unwavering strength. She gave him a nod and squeezed his shoulder as if to remind him that he wasn’t alone.

Rook looked up at the ceiling, anticipating the slow rise into the arena like the first trial. He shut his eyes, preparing for the harsh daylight to flood their cell. However, the platform began to sink instead of rise, slowly falling into the earth below the

arena.

“Hel’s teeth,” Eros cursed as the floor began to lower into the tunnel. “We are going down.”

Rook braced himself as the platform tunneled into the earth, descending deeper than he had thought possible. Eros and Veila’s eyes were wide as the darkness swallowed them whole, the faint torchlight from above slowly dissolving into pitch black. The growl of stone grinding against stone and their own breaths were the only sounds to be heard in the darkness.

“There’s no light,” Veila whispered. But just as she uttered the words, a soft glow began to illuminate the tunnel. The faint light came from their uniforms, a self-generated glow that emanated from within.

“Avgi silk,” Rook recalled, remembering that their clothing had been woven from the spider’s silk. He looked at the glowing fabric on his chest and trouser legs, his eyes widening in disbelief.

“We will be able to see each other,” Eros noted wearily, “but what else will be able to see us in the dark? We stand out like candles in the night.”

His words echoed through the tunnel as they continued to lower into the earth. Eros was right. They were like beacons standing against a night sky, drawing the attention of whatever beasts might be lurking below. The platform abruptly stopped, depositing them into an enormous cavern. Save for the faint dripping of water, the cave was utterly silent and devoid of any sound from the world high above. Just as the tunnel had been, the cave was as dark as night. Rook dared to step from the platform, the soft glow of their uniforms just barely making the room visible. The cavernous space was enormous, tunneling around them for as far as the eye could see. Huge stalactites dripped down from the ceiling, shining with water that leaked down through the

ground. Mineral formations rose up like the shadows of strangers and loomed ominously in the dark. Puddles of water gathered in the rivets of the stone floor, glinting with the reflection of their Avgi silk uniforms.

Never had Rook felt so trapped before, so caged in. There was no glimpse of the sky, nowhere to escape. Their wings were useless down here. The darkness was suffocating, the air thick and putrid with the stink of rotted earth.

“I had no idea this was down here,” Veila whispered, following Rook as he wandered through the chamber. “It looks like an abandoned mine,” she observed.

“I think these caves are natural, not built by anyone,” he replied, narrowly avoiding a stalactite that hung in front of him like an icicle. “These caves must be ancient.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Eros called out from behind them, cursing as he splashed through a puddle. “We’ve been given no direction.”

As if on cue, the Master of Trials herself began to speak. Korina Petrakou’s disembodied voice filled the cave and echoed around them.

“Welcome, honored tributes,” Korina’s eerie voice called. How she could project her voice in the damp caves, Rook couldn’t fathom. “You are now ready to compete in the second trial of the Revelore Tournament,” she continued. “Each one of you has been given a uniform that can aid your sight underground. You are tasked with collecting a stone that glows similarly to that of your uniform,” she said. “This glowing stone should be brought up to the surface whole and in-tact. As a team of tributes, you must protect this stone at all costs.” Rook scanned the cave in search of the stones she spoke of, but he was met with only a constant, unending blanket of darkness.

“There are four exits, each with a ladder that will lead you up into the arena on the surface,” she continued on. “You must climb out with your stone, or else you will be

disqualified from the Tournament. There is only one ladder available to your team, indicated by your country's banner. If you fail to climb up the ladder assigned to your nation, you will be disqualified. May glory be given," she finally said, her voice vanishing abruptly.

"Alright," Veila said matter-a-factly. "Let's find this bloody stone and get it over with." she charged forward, leading them through the cave.

"I'm sure the Terradrin are thriving down here," Eros grumbled as they trekked through the cavern. "They can see better in the dark than in the daylight," he scoffed. "And here I was thinking no one would have any advantages."

"Don't worry about the other tributes," Veila scolded, "just focus on the task at hand."

Unease crept along Rook's skin like the cool breath of winter as they hurried down the sloped pathway. Though they were already farther underground than he had ever thought possible, the slanting rock under their feet descended even deeper into the earth. As they journeyed through the dark, Rook noticed eerie markings on the stone walls. He slowed for a moment, surveying the crude drawings that littered the corridor. The faded paint strokes and charcoal on the cave walls were faded and worn, almost imperceptible in the darkness. Giant-like figures towered above smaller figures, clutching enormous weapons in their great hands.

Titans, Rook recognized, his gaze sweeping over the images of the gods. He identified Deinos, the mad Titan who had ruled from the peak of Mt. Thalia, his wings unfolding across the stone in smeared strokes. It was said that the four Titans had created the nations of Revelore at the dawn of time, each one crafting unique beings in their own image. These primitive drawings had to be thousands of years old. He couldn't recall the last time someone in Aurandel had worshiped the Titans or studied their ancient lore.

“Hurry,” Veila ordered from up ahead. “Stop gawking at the scenery.”

Rook reluctantly pulled his eyes away from the artwork and joined up with Eros and Veila. They continued down the craggy passageway, stringy cobwebs clogging the crevices of the stone path and hanging in clumps from the ceiling. Rook stared up at the ancient tangles of webbing, wondering how long they had sat undisturbed in the deep caverns. Faint light up ahead caught on the sticky webs, making the silken strands appear wet. Distantly, he could hear voices whispering in the shadows.

“Tributes,” he hissed, ducking behind an overhang. Eros and Veila crouched behind a stalagmite that grew upward from the ground, vanishing from sight. The soft light from the other tributes’ uniforms cast a murky glow on the cave wall, their shadows growing larger as they drew near. Rook squinted in the darkness, trying to glimpse the warriors ahead. Though they were difficult to make out, he recognized the two Tellusun tributes as Ramin Naseeba and Noora Mir. They clambered over the jagged ridges of the cave floor, their faint orange cloaks whispering over rock as they hurried through the cavern.

“They found the stone already,” Veila whispered. Sure enough, a large glowing rock was nestled underneath Noora’s arm, emanating a deep blue light.

“Hel, that was fast,” Eros cursed, shaking his head.

Rook watched as the Tellusun tributes sprinted through the cave, leaping over puddles with frantic footsteps. He stared at their expressions, shadowed in the dark. There was something wrong with their hurried, jerky movements. It was not urgency that drove them through the cavern, but terror. A prickle of fear ran up Rook’s spine as the tributes vanished around a corner, their faces tense with unnamed fear. After a few moments, their frenzied footsteps melted away, replaced by the numbing silence of the cave.

“Let’s go,” Veila whispered, rising from where she crouched. “The other stones must be close by.”

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Eros and Rook followed her as she traced the Tellusun tributes' path back from where they had emerged. They continued through the shadowed passageways in silence, their boots splashing through mineral-saturated water. With every step forward, Rook's heart thundered in his chest.

"There." Veila jerked her head toward the soft blue glow.

The three of them abruptly halted just before the opening of the adjoining cavern, tucking themselves against the wall. They listened for movement beyond the wall, waiting to hear any hushed voices. But there was no rustle of clothing or whispers to be heard. Veila gave a quick nod, and they inched cautiously around the corner. Rook caught his breath when they came into full view of the cavernous room. A sea of glowing orbs were scattered across the floor, bright with otherworldly light. They were impossibly smooth, almost transparent-looking in the soft blue glow.

"Hel," Eros breathed, his mouth dropping open as he stepped forward into the cave. "There must be at least a hundred here."

Eros dropped to his knees before a cluster of blue stones, reaching out a finger and tracing the edge of one. He wrapped his arms around one of the larger stones, cradling it as if it might shatter if he wasn't too careful.

"Something's not right," Veila whispered, narrowing her eyes at the surrounding walls. "This is too easy." She didn't move from the edge of the passageway, her hand tightening around the curve of her sword pommel. Rook glanced around, taking in the shadows that framed the room. He had to agree. It felt as though eyes were upon them, watching them from all angles.

A thick tendril of sticky goo squelched when Eros pulled the stone away from the floor. A clump of silken threads lay empty where the glowing orb had sat, dented with the shape of the stone. A shiver went up Rook's spine as he finally noticed the web of glistening threads that crisscrossed across the ceiling like an ugly tapestry.

"Hel's teeth," Veila hissed with horror. "This is a damned nest." She stepped backward into the passageway, her eyes wide. "Get over here now," she ordered Eros, unsheathing her sword. Eros quickly sprinted back to them, narrowly missing several clumps of blue orbs.

"That isn't a bloody stone," Rook whispered. "It's an egg." Eros held it out for them to see, his hands coated in glistening slime. There was only one creature that produced such eggs, only one beast that lived so far deep in the ground: the venomous Avgi spider.

"We need to get out of here," Veila said frantically.

Before, Rook had been so focused on finding the stones that he hadn't noticed the thick tangles of webbing knotted all around them. He realized now that they were surrounded by webs, plastered to the floor and ceiling.

There was a whisper of movement behind them, and the three of them instantly crouched to the floor. Rook dared to look around the corner, squinting into the glowing cavern. At the edge of the room, two figures emerged from a neighboring passageway and stumbled into the room. He froze.

Saoirse and her companion Aurelia stopped before the glowing spider eggs, their eyes round with surprise. The other Mer tribute had evidently not been well enough to compete in the second trial. Sudden trepidation crept along Rook's spine as Aurelia crouched to the floor and picked up one of the orbs. She looked up at Saoirse, a grin on her face as she wrapped her arms around the egg and hauled it up from the ground.

“We need to leave,” Veila hissed, narrowing her eyes at him. “Now.” She reached down and tried to haul him up from where he crouched paralyzed on floor. But Rook couldn’t tear his eyes away from the pair of Mer tributes, watching in horror as a dark shadow emerged from the darkness behind them and crept forward into the light.

23

SAOIRSE

Saoirse watched as Aurelia picked up the beautiful glowing stone, anxiously standing guard. When the stone released easily from the floor, relief flooded her chest. Even without Sune, she and Aurelia had found the stone. They’d be out of the caverns in no time at all.

“Let’s go,” Aurelia whispered, standing quickly. The stone was sticky with glistening slime, strings of silk clinging to it from the floor. Aurelia wiped the stone clean with the edge of her sleeve, lifting an eyebrow curiously. “What is this stuff?”

Just then, Saoirse heard faint rustling from across the room. She jerked her head toward the sound, instantly on edge. She could see nothing but dim shadows and craggy juts of stone.

“Let’s leave,” she said hurriedly, taking a step back from the sea of glowing orbs. “I don’t like this place.”

A choking sound slipped from Aurelia’s mouth, her jaw going limp. She stared at something beyond Saoirse’s shoulder, terror in her eyes.

“What?” Saoirse whispered, fear suddenly crawling up her flesh. But Aurelia was paralyzed with shock, her lips twitching as she tried to form words. Saoirse slowly turned her head, looking behind her shoulder. Her blood went cold.

A huge, ugly beast crouched in the shadows, mere paces away from where they stood. Spindly black legs crept from the wall, unfurling from the darkness like hideous flower petals. The creature emerged from the shadows like a silent phantom, an enormous, bulbous body slowly illuminated in the light of the orbs. Saoirse couldn't move, her eyes fixed to the monster that crawled towards them. Eight glistening eyes caught the light, each one as large as her own head. Two dreadful fangs jutted out from the spider's red mouth, dripping with venom. The spider was covered in coarse black hair, making it appear even larger as it crept across the floor. She had heard terrifying stories of the giant spiders, who lived in subterranean caves in the Under Kingdom. She knew that to come across one was more than just deadly; it promised certain death.

Fear sliced through her body like a knife as the spider ambled over to them. Her hand instinctively reached for the sword at her hip. She slid the blade from its scabbard with an eerie hiss of metal that echoed through the silent chamber. The repulsive spider crawled towards her with predatory silence, its fangs clicking together as if readying itself for battle.

"Aurelia," Saoirse whispered, her voice coming out in a rasp. "Run."

As soon as she uttered the words, the world exploded into movement. The great spider lunged at her, shrieking as it snapped its fangs hungrily. Saoirse rolled out of the way, just barely missing the hairy front legs that darted out. The creature hissed as Saoirse swung her blade, retreating for a moment as the sword sang through the air.

Behind her, she could hear Aurelia clambering through the clusters of eggs. The spider abruptly jumped onto the ceiling with uncanny grace. It scurried along the ceiling and hissed, all eight of its eyes fixed on Aurelia.

She bolted towards them, horrified as the spider chased Aurelia through the room. It didn't care about Saoirse, not when Aurelia sprinted through the cave with its egg in

her arms.

“This way!” A voice cried from the opposite end of the room.

Rook.

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She jerked her head towards his voice. There, on the edge of the cavern, Rook stood in the mouth of a passageway, flailing his arms frantically. Aurelia saw him too, and she immediately changed direction and ran towards him. The great spider shrieked above them, her spindly legs moving at a frightening speed.

But it was too late. The spider was almost level with Aurelia, crawling right above her head. She made the decision without much thought, panic consuming her body as the spider prepared itself to jump on Aurelia. She stomped on one of the eggs, screaming as acid burst from the orb and splattered on her boots and calves. The spider instantly halted, spinning around to face her with murder in its eyes. Aurelia kept running, looking back over her shoulder with terror-stricken eyes. Beyond Aurelia, Rook went utterly pale as he watched her at the center of the room.

The spider lurched forward, fury glistening in its bulbous eyes. Saoirse gripped her sword tighter, spinning on her heels and running for a nearby passageway. She kicked several eggs as she ran, grimacing with pain as the acid erupted from the collapsed shells and burned through her shoes. Heart thundering, she ran as fast as she could, pushing forward even as the shadow of the spider loomed above her. She was limping now, her feet stinging with acid. She was so close to the passageway, the stone archway only a few paces away. But the spider leaped over the entrance to the passage and blocked her way with its round body.

Saoirse cursed, stopping just before she ran straight into the hideous spider. The beast lashed out a hairy arm, knocking her to her knees. Saoirse lifted her sword just before another leg came crashing down, blocking the spider's blow. The spider screeched as it collided with the sword, reeling back. But before Saoirse had time to get to her feet, it reared up and lunged at her once more, its venomous fangs snapping at her. Sprays

of venom leaked from her repulsive mouth, just barely missing Saoirse's head. She crawled away from the spider, clawing at the ground and pulling herself toward the entrance. She rolled away as the spider hovered over her, jabbing its ugly fangs into the ground instead of her flesh.

Miraculously, she managed to climb through the entrance of the passageway, just barely missing another blow. The spider screamed in frustration, its slender legs pushing into the passage behind her. But the beast was too big to fit in the cramped tunnel, its plump body dwarfing the passageway. Saoirse got to her feet and sliced through one of its probing legs, leaping back as another spray of acid splattered across the stone. She didn't stop to watch the spider retreat as she limped down the tunnel, feeling her way through the darkness. Distantly, she could still hear the spider shrieking in the nest room, but she didn't allow herself to stop for a breath.

The tunnel ended, opening into another cavern. Even with the glowing silk of her uniform, she could barely see two feet in front of her. Saoirse collapsed to the ground, suddenly feeling impossibly lost. Only her ragged breathing filled the silent cave, echoing through the hollow cavern. She dared to look down at her legs, sucking in a breath. Her trouser legs had shriveled up around her knees, the singed holes in the fabric exposing her skin and scales. The acid had eaten through her boots too, burning her feet and the protective scales that covered them.

She cried out in pain as she eased the tattered boots from her feet, almost vomiting at the seared flesh. The webbing between her toes looked like burnt parchment, shriveled like the charred edges of paper. Tears pricked at her eyes as she stared down at the mangled burns. She wouldn't be able to swim as easily without the webbing that acted as paddles in the water. Her flesh was raw and reddened, but the acid seemed to have halted before reaching any deeper. Tears pricked in her eyes, half due to the pain and half due to the implications of her maimed feet. In the darkness, she cried alone.

A skittering sound echoed through the cave, sending gooseflesh up Saoirse's spine. She looked up and wiped the tears from her face. Fresh anger churned through her blood, quickly replacing her sorrow with murderous heat. On shaking legs she rose once more, clutching her blade as she turned toward the rustle of noise. She bared her teeth at the shadows, daring whatever creature that lay hiding to come forward and face her. Her heart nearly stopped as she squinted into the darkness.

Impossible. For a moment, she thought she saw her own face in the shadows, staring back at her with familiar pale blue eyes. She blinked rapidly, sure that she was dreaming. But when she looked back into the darkness, she could see nothing at all.

She was going mad down here.

But just as she let her guard down, a whoosh of movement swept in from behind her. She spun around, terrified to see another monster. At the sight of white hair, Saoirse lowered her sword.

"Neia," she breathed.

The Terradrin captain stood in the darkened corner of the room, her cloak in shreds. A glowing orb was tucked under one of her arms.

"Mer Princess," the woman acknowledged, breathing heavily. She strode over to Saoirse and sheathed her sword. Neia was alone, her two companions nowhere to be seen.

"Hel, what happened to you?" Neia asked, eyeing Saoirse's mangled feet.

"Avgi acid," she replied, shoving her feet back into the tattered boots. She nearly screamed at the pain, but she bit her lip to stop herself from crying out.

“Where is your companion?” Neia asked. She scanned the cavern, clutching the egg tighter as if Aurelia might leap out and steal it from her. “I swear, if this is some kind of deceptive Mer trick, I will gut you like a hog-”

“I don’t know where she is,” Saoirse assured her. She shoved her tangled curls from her forehead and tried to stand. When she couldn’t get to her feet on her own, Neia offered her a hand. Saoirse took her hand gratefully and pushed off the floor, a muffled cry escaping from her lips as she gained her footing.

“If it brings you any comfort, I lost my fellow tributes in these passages a while ago,” the Terradrin woman told her with a bitter laugh. She turned her pale eyes to Saoirse. “I could kill you right here, you know. I could end your bid for the Crown with one swipe.”

“If you wanted to kill me,” Saoirse challenged, “you would’ve already done so.”

Suddenly, a screeching spider darted across the ceiling.

The beast dropped before Saoirse could unsheath her sword, its hideous teeth bared. As the spider leaped, a blade shot through its plump abdomen from behind. The spider let out a blood-curdling scream as it reeled in pain. It managed to crawl away from her, scampering off into the darkness to die. Neia stood there, her blade dripping with dark blood.

“A life for a life,” Neia breathed. “You saved Diru from the labyrinth yesterday. It’s the least I could do,” she said. “But do not think that just because I saved you, we are allies.”

“Thank you,” Saoirse replied, her heart racing.

Neia merely nodded, sheathing her sword. She spun on her heels, heading for a

jagged passageway. “Do not follow me. You’re on your own now,” she threw over her shoulder.

Saoirse watched as the white-haired woman vanished around the corner without another word. She stood there for what seemed like an eternity, feeling utterly alone. She could follow Neia, but she had a feeling the Terradrin military captain wouldn’t hesitate to kill her like she did the spider. Saoirse chose a different passage, wincing with every painful step forward. She had no idea where she was going, but it wouldn’t do her any good to stay in one place.

To her horror, she heard more distant skittering echoing through the surrounding tunnels. But she forced herself to keep moving, trying her best to ignore the horrifying sound.

“You won’t die here,” Saoirse told herself through gritted teeth. She limped through the cavern as fast as she could, each step agonizing as she lurched toward another passageway. All around her, the nimble skittering of spiders rumbled through the cave. She forced herself to put one foot in front of the other, agonizing pain splintering through her with every step forward.

Hearing movement behind her, Saoirse took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She was ready for the end. She opened her eyes and unsheathed her sword, whirling to face the next monster. She nearly sent her sword into Rook’s heart.

“Rook,” she gasped. It took all of her strength not to collapse to the ground. “What are you doing here?”

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“I came to find you,” he replied, his eyes assessing her for injuries. His gaze stopped at her feet, where the acid burns had torn through her boots and trouser legs. “Saoirse-” he began.

“I’m fine,” she said, interrupting him. She looked around frantically, eyeing the countless tunnels that opened into the cave. “They’re coming for me. You can hear them everywhere.”

“I know the way out.” He began to stride for a nearby tunnel, but Saoirse remained rooted to the ground.

Do it now, a voice told her in her head. They were alone down here, and it would be so easy to kill him. His companions were gone, and there was no one to stop her. Saoirse’s fingers twitched, going to the scabbard of her blade. Her heart was thundering more loudly than it had when facing the bloodthirsty spider in the egg nest. Kill him and fulfill your bargain. She suddenly couldn’t breathe, the weight of her task feeling utterly impossible.

“Why are you helping me?” she asked suspiciously. “You should just let me die. Save yourself.”

“Do you trust me?” He asked instead, avoiding her question. The sound of skittering spiders grew louder, like the swell of a great wave about to collapse and flood the chamber. “Do you trust me Saoirse?” he asked again, his voice coming out in a rasp.

“No,” Saoirse replied honestly. Do it now, she told herself. But she was paralyzed to the spot. She stared at the dagger on his hip, everything in her screaming for her to

take it from him and fulfill her oath. She couldn't explain why the thought of killing him made her nauseous, when only days ago she was perfectly prepared to do it. Before she could gather the courage to act, a wave of spiders launched out of the darkness, crawling along the ceiling and emerging from holes in the ground.

Without another thought, she grabbed his hand and bolted. They ran together, stumbling over mounds of stone and splashing through puddles of mineral water. Saoirse dared to look over her shoulder as they ran, watching as a swarm of shadows grew behind them like a storm. Hundreds of spiders poured from above and below, clambering over one another and rushing forward in a thunderous stampede. Saoirse whipped her head back around and tightened her hold on Rook's hand like a lifeline. They turned a corner in the tunnel, racing faster as the flood of spiders inched closer, their clicking fangs hot on their heels.

Up ahead, dim light pooled at the end of the passageway. Four ancient ladders sprouted from the floor and climbed up through the ceiling, disappearing into a tunnel that led up to the surface. Identifying banners hung beside each ladder, exactly as the Master of Trials had described. Saoirse immediately recognized the turquoise and silver flag on the far right, hanging in the soft light like a beacon of hope. She broke away from Rook, sprinting towards it. From the corner of her eye, she could see Rook hurrying to Aurandel's ladder at the far left end. She threw herself onto the rusted bars, biting back a scream as she hooked her acid-burned feet onto a rung. The spiders poured out of the tunnel, scampering to the ladders as she and Rook began to climb.

Saoirse didn't dare stop moving, pulling herself up as fast as she could. She felt spider legs brushing against the ladder below, trying to gain footholds. The repulsive sounds of their clicking fangs filled her ears, their ugly cries chasing her up the ladder. She felt a tug on her tribute's cloak, and she quickly shrugged it off her shoulders, letting it drop into the jaws of the spiders below.

Rung after rung, she ascended through the endless tunnel without ceasing. Even as the sound of the spiders vanished into the earth and the light from the surface grew brighter, she never stopped climbing. Her feet were numb with pain, her fingers rubbed raw as she grabbed rung after rung. As she climbed, she prayed that Rook was pulling himself up the Auran ladder, that his body hadn't been torn limb from limb by the bloodthirsty spiders below.

Soon, the roar of the crowd began to reverberate through the small tunnel, rattling the ladder as thousands of onlookers stomped overhead. But the cries of the spectators brought her no relief. The last thing she wanted to see were the faces of Revelorians shrieking with excitement, completely ignorant of the horrors below the arena. Sunlight flooded her vision and the searing light from the world above momentarily blinded her. Muscles burning and her feet in shreds, Saoirse crested the ladder and collapsed onto the sand floor of the arena. She went limp with exhaustion, wincing at the painful roar of the crowd that echoed through the amphitheatre. Breathing heavily, she stared up at the clear blue sky, eyes adjusting to the brightness of the surface.

Someone gasped a few paces away from her, and she turned her head to see Rook burst from the hole. He fell to the sand, his chest rising and falling as he caught his breath. He looked at her, his blue eyes meeting her gaze. Suddenly, the world around them seemed to blur, the clamour of onlookers melting away into a dull ring. She returned his stare, unable to look away from him. He had risked everything to turn back and help her. He could've left her in the darkness, could've let her be surrounded by spiders and consumed whole. No one would've looked down on him for it. In fact, that sort of behavior was expected in the Tournament. She wouldn't have blamed him if he had abandoned her without so much as a second glance. But he had come back for her, fully aware that in doing so he jeopardized his own chances of winning the Tournament. And she had failed to kill him. She had her opportunity down in the caves, and she had been too cowardly to go through with it. But even as she cursed herself for her weakness, a part of her felt relief. He was still

alive.

“Saoirse,” Aurelia cried, falling to her knees beside her. She tucked her hand under Saoirse’s back, helping her sit up. “You’re alive. I thought I’d never see you again.”

Aurelia leaned forward, crushing Saoirse against her chest. She kissed her forehead, tears glimmering in the corners of her eyes. “You reckless, reckless fool,” she continued. “You should’ve let that bloody spider crush me. You almost died.”

“But I didn’t,” Saoirse replied, clinging to Aurelia. “Did you get the egg to safety?” The colors and sounds of the arena suddenly felt so overwhelming, ringing through her head like a hammer on her skull.

“Yes,” Aurelia replied. “I did.” She paused, looking around at the wall of people cheering above them. “We made it to the third trial.” But there was no mirth in Aurelia’s eyes. Her eyes were haunted, whispering of monstrosities that no one besides a tribute could understand. How the light in Aurelia’s eyes had dimmed over the course of a few days. There was no glory in the arena, only death and terror.

“Titans,” Aurelia breathed, finally seeing Saoirse’s burned flesh. Her eyes widened in horror as her eyes traveled down her legs and settled on her webbed toes. “Saoirse,” she said, her voice breaking. “Saoirse, your feet.”

Saoirse hadn’t gotten a good glimpse of her acid-burned legs down in the darkness of the caves, and upon seeing them in the daylight, she wished she never had. They were much worse than she could’ve ever imagined, tinged a sickly green color that mirrored the hue of the spider acid. Sure enough, the webbing between her toes looked like the burned edges of parchment thrown into a fire.

Saoirse turned toward the other ladders that emerged from underground. The two remaining Tellusun tributes were huddled together, the glowing spider egg between

them. Aside from the shredded cloaks that hung limply at their shoulders, they appeared unscathed.

At the Terradrin ladder, only Neia Landum was leaning over the edge of the tunnel, squinting into the darkness below. Her face was twisted in anguish, her hands digging into the sand.

“Her two companions haven’t surfaced yet,” Aurelia whispered under her breath, giving Neia a sympathetic glance.

The crowd suddenly erupted as one of Neia’s fellow tributes finally pulled himself from the ladder with a moan. His white hair was stained crimson, hanging in clumps along his back. He collapsed in the sand, his clothing soaked in blood from garish wounds. Neia helped pull him up the rest of the way, horror and relief mingling in her eyes. Her lips were moving, but her words were obscured by the roar of the crowds. The warrior, Adresin, gave a pained shake of his head.

Neia’s face fell at the news, her welling with tears.

“Gone,” Aurelia surmised. “The third tribute is gone.”

Sympathy washed through Saoirse like a wave lapping up the beach. Diru, the man she had saved from the quicksand in the labyrinth, was gone. How fleeting his life had been. Saoirse was glad she had given him one more day to live. She leaned back in the sand, feeling oddly defeated. She should be glad that she had one less competitor to deal with. But her heart ached for the Terradrin tributes. It ached for Neia, who saved her in the caves when she could’ve been looking for her lost friend and potentially saving him instead.

“Congratulations, tributes,” Korina’s booming voice interrupted, resounding through the air like the clap of thunder. “You have survived the second trial. I am pleased to

announce that every nation shall be moving forward to the third and final trial, beginning in a day's time," she said, her voice sounding anything but pleased.

"Healers shall arrive for you, should you require treatment. Rest while you can, tributes," she said from somewhere high above. "The final trial shall determine the winner of the Crown of Revelore."

With that, the familiar peel of trumpets and ceremonial songs filled the air with a jarring sweetness that left a bad taste in her mouth. Saoirse glanced to where Rook sprawled in the sand, where he was now surrounded by Eros, Veila, and Ambassador Cresta. In the flurry of activity and the rush of healers, his blue eyes found hers.

She tore her eyes away from him, unable to bear his penetrating gaze. She wanted to despise him and burn with hatred for him. But instead, her heart pounded when he was near, fluttering with an unknown emotion. Time warped and slowed down as she was loaded onto a stretcher, her eyes going in and out of focus as her body finally allowed itself to feel the pain. She stared up at the clouds, her head swimming with thoughts of Rook and her unfulfilled bargain and of the trial to come.

SAOIRSE

The cool waters of the Adonis River washed over Saoirse in a cleansing rhythm, the waves lapping up the sand and whispering across her scalded legs. The touch of water stung with white-hot fire, but the sweet torture felt good. She waded into the river, wincing in pain as the water rose to her hips. She could feel her flesh mending, her scales slowly knitting back together under the water's healing touch. But even as the waves eased her pain and made her whole, she knew that her legs would never be the same.

Saoirse closed her eyes, trying not to think about the hideous spiders and their foaming mouths. Even when she had been nearly skewered by Kaja's jaws in the Trench, she hadn't known fear the way she had known it in the underground caverns.

Saoirse sank deeper into the water and let it ripple over her head. Under the surface of the river, she scrubbed at her arms and hair, trying to wipe away the spider's dark blood and the memories of its venom. But even after she scrubbed herself clean, she still felt the spider acid on her. When she had stood proudly before her people only days ago, she never imagined what kind of horrors would befall her in the trials. But the doubts and questions that swirled in her mind were almost worse than the secrets of the labyrinth or the jaws of the spiders.

Saoirse dove deeper into the river, tears stinging her eyes. She longed for her father's reassuring arms, longed for his gentle voice as he held her like a child. Of all the people she wished for, he was the one who wasn't here. She struggled to kick, the

webbing between her toes failing to catch the water and propel her forward. How would her father feel about her when he learned the truth of what she'd done? What would he say when she returned home, her feet in tatters and her secrets exposed? If you ever come home at all, she thought.

Saoirse broke the surface of the water, unable to face her thoughts. She stared at the great expanse of green surrounding her, scanning the enormous trees that bloomed from the earth and erupted into endless branches overhead. Huge roots dove into the river's edge, tangling in and out of the sand with probing, hungry fingers. Carpets of moss clung to the great roots, soft and studded with white mushrooms.

A rustle of movement caught Saoirse's eye as she gazed at the treeline, and she narrowed her eyes at the shadows. Sinking lower into the water, she watched as someone walked between the columns of trees.

Her heart nearly stopped.

There it was again. In the dim shadows, she could see her own face. Her blood ran cold as she tried to make out the obscured figure. Blinking rapidly, she watched as the figure melted back into the trees, vanishing into darkness. Without thinking, Saoirse leaped from the water and ran up the riverbank.

"Stop!" she yelled, sprinting through the sand and into the tree line. "Who are you?" Up ahead, she heard footsteps crunching through fallen leaves, the rustle of clothing whispering across the forest floor.

"Stop!" Her feet flew over knotted roots and twisted vines, burning with every stride. But she could no longer see the person diving between the trees. Instead, the forest was utterly still, shafts of sunlight spilling through gaps in the treetops above. Saoirse stopped, spinning around in confusion. There was nothing in the sprawl of trees except for the call of birds and the gentle stirring of leaves in the breeze. Heart

thundering in her chest, Saoirse took in the shadows looming all around her, desperately searching for the pale blue eyes that matched her own. But whatever she had seen from the river was gone.

She fell to her knees, sinking into the soft earth of the forest floor. She was going mad, seeing things that were impossible and hearing voices that weren't there. She screamed in frustration, digging her fingers into the soil. She was becoming another delusional tribute, her mind lost to the arena and her heart eating itself alive in her chest.

"Saoirse," a voice broke through the silence. No. Not that voice.

Gooseflesh rose on her neck as she lifted her head from the ground. Adda Carew stood in a shaft of sunlight, her purple hood shadowing her face. The High Elder stood as still as the trees surrounding them, her robes flowing down through the ferns like a statue cut from marble. Her eyes glittered with malice, nearly black in the shadow of her hood.

"So far, you have failed to fulfill your end of the bargain," she continued, her voice dripping with disdain. She lifted a hand from the folds of her robes and extended it to Saoirse. She frowned, pulling herself up from the ground without touching Adda's hand. Adda folded her hand back into her robes, a grimace on her mouth. "Follow me," she ordered, striding forward through the forest.

Saoirse remained rooted in place, and a sinking feeling knotted in the hollow of her stomach. She willed herself to move, unable to resist any longer. As she trailed after Adda, she was suddenly reminded of how the Elder had led her into the dark the first time, guiding her through the forbidden waves of the Fretum. She felt the same dread wash over her, the same feeling of an invisible chain shackled around her neck. Adda said nothing as they strode through the forest, never once turning back to look at Saoirse.

After several minutes of silence, Adda led them into a clearing. Here, there were no bird songs floating through the air or shafts of sunlight pooling on the soft earth. The trees surrounding the clearing were barren, as if touched by the fingers of winter. Dried leaves were scattered across the uneven ground, a sharp contrast to the vivid greens of the rest of the forest. Where the woods had smelled of moss and fresh rain only moments before, it now smelled like decaying flowers and rotting fish.

Adda strode to the center of the clearing, raising her hands above the ground. Saoirse watched as Adda slowly pulled droplets of water from the earth, her hands trembling with the effort. The little orbs of water quivered in the air, growing weightless as she extracted them from the soil. Saoirse realized that Adda had done this before, if the dead trees surrounding them were any indication. One by one, the little beads of water melted together, joining into a single orb of floating water. The orb kept its shape, shimmering and moving as if it were alive. As the water remained suspended in the air, Adda reached into her robes and pulled out a glass vial. Inky liquid sloshed in the small glass, as black and consuming as a starless sky. She uncorked the vial and held it up to the orb, sending a single drop of ink swirling into the water. Saoirse watched as the black droplet surged through the orb like a parasite, rippling through the glass-like water and transforming it into something else entirely. The now blackened orb was glowing with otherworldly light, shimmering with something just below the surface.

The ritual now complete, Adda stepped back and grabbed Saoirse's arm, anchoring her in place should she choose to run. Saoirse was transfixed by the glowing orb of water, unable to tear her gaze away even as unease prickled over her skin.

"Great One," Adda began, bowing her head. The floating orb bubbled and hissed, as if something was fighting its way outside from within.

"Yes, my faithful servant," a voice rumbled from the orb.

Saoirse instantly recognized that beautiful, poisonous voice. Selussa.

“I brought the Mer girl,” Adda told the Sea Witch, jerking Saoirse’s arm.

“Ah, Princess Saoirse,” Selussa said from whatever dreadful place she was watching. “How lovely it is that you were able to join us.” Somehow, Saoirse could feel the Witch’s gaze upon her, even if there were no eyes to be seen.

“Tell me, Princess,” Selussa called, “Where is my dagger? You compete in the tournament, yet your payment remains unfulfilled and the prince still breaths.” Saoirse could say nothing in response, her mouth going dry. “Two trials have come and gone, two trials where the Auran prince was weakened and distracted,” Selussa drawled, irritation flickering in her garbled voice. “And yet, you have been too cowardly to finish what you promised. Must I remind you that you made an unbreakable bargain with me?” she asked incredulously. “Have you truly forgotten what is at stake, Daughter of the Sea? Should you fail to bring me the dagger of Aris, your life shall be taken in the prince’s stead,” she bellowed, her voice rising. “Even if I do not take your life, you would be a disgrace, unwelcome in the House of Angwin for eternity.” The witch paused, dark laughter bubbling up from the orb. Saoirse could practically see Selussa grinning with her sharpened teeth. “Perhaps I should let you live,” she suggested with wicked glee. “Perhaps facing your people as a failure will be a worse punishment for you than death.”

Saoirse didn’t have to be reminded of the cost of her bargain. It had haunted her footsteps through both trials, never allowing her a moment’s peace.

“Do you wish to dissolve our bargain, Princess?” Selussa cried from the orb.

Saoirse was silent for a moment, considering the question. Did she?

“Ah,” Selussa’s warped voice purred from the darkness. “Has the little Mer’s heart

warmed to the handsome prince? Surely a Daughter of the Sea would not stoop so low as to make the same mistakes as her ancestors did.” Saoirse’s skin flushed, shame and embarrassment rushing through her like a great wave.

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“Would you sacrifice your chance to return to your father to protect the life of your enemy?” Selussa hissed, contempt returning to her voice. “Would you sacrifice your own life?”

“No,” Saoirse whispered, clenching her fists at her sides so hard that her nails dug into her palms. “I would never do such a thing. I will fulfill the bargain and bring you the dagger.”

“Prove your honor, then,” Selussa spat. “Uphold your end of the bargain and you shall be rewarded. You have one more chance to kill the prince. Do not waste it.”

The orb suddenly collapsed, splattering dark liquid across the forest floor.

Saoirse stood numbly, unable to move away from the dark stain that dampened the ground. Adda left her side without another word, vanishing into the shadows once more. Saoirse looked at her palms, realizing that her nails had broken the skin. She wanted to cry, wanted to feel the sting of tears wash down her face. But her eyes remained stubbornly dry. She had brought this cursed fate to herself. There was no other to blame.

“Hel’s teeth,” a horrified voice said from behind her.

Saoirse’s heart dropped.

She slowly turned to face Aurelia as she strode out from behind a tree. Fear and disgust was plainly etched on her face. She halted before the black pool, looking at Saoirse as if she were a stranger.

“What have you done?” she breathed, her eyes so full of distrust that it broke Saoirse’s heart.

“Aurelia-” Saoirse began, trying to grab her hand. But Aurelia flinched, pulling away from her touch.

“Tell me what this is about,” Aurelia asked, avoiding her eyes. “Tell me what is going on.”

“The night of the tributary ceremony, my father forbade me from competing in the Tournament,” she confessed. There was no use hiding the truth now. “Not only that, but he revealed his true feelings about the Tournament to me,” she went on. “He admitted to me that he never wanted Elorshin to win. He believes that while the Crown is at stake, there can be no alliances between our nations. He is afraid to lose me the way he lost my mother.”

“No, that cannot be true,” Aurelia rasped. “He is our king. He would never be so callous with our lives.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Saoirse replied sadly. “That is why I made a deal with the Sea Witch. I thought I could prove him wrong. I thought that I could save Elorshin if I won the Tournament.”

“So your father, knowing the Tournament meant certain death, forbade you from competing?”

Saoirse nodded.

“And your great plan was to use the powers of a witch to turn his eyes blind?” Aurelia muttered curses under her breath as she began to pace anxiously.

“Adda Carew convinced me it would work,” Saoirse admitted. “She told me to bargain with Selussa so I could gain entrance into the Tournament. I traded my powers for the chance to win the Crown,” she added regretfully. “So I could redeem our people and prove my father wrong.”

“You deceived your father and gave up your powers,” Aurelia stated, more of a statement than a question. “You deceived all of us?” The hurt in her eyes was more painful than the sting of any blade.

“Yes.”

“What did the Sea Witch require of you?” Aurelia asked, her voice breaking. “What did you promise her in exchange for the chance to compete in the Tournament?”

“I vowed to kill Prince Rook,” Saoirse said slowly. “He possesses a dagger that Selussa desires, a blade that can only be stolen when its bearer is killed. I promised to kill him and bring back the dagger in exchange for her help.” She hated herself with every word.

Aurelia cursed, beginning to pace. “When exactly were you going to inform me of this, Saoirse? Whatever you decide to do in the Tournament affects me, affects all of us.”

“You don’t think I know that, now?” Saoirse whispered. “I know how foolish the bargain is. I know what is at stake should I fail.”

“What is at stake?” Aurelia asked, narrowing her eyes.

“If I fail to bring the dagger to Selussa, I will never be able to step foot in the Maeral Sea again,” Saoirse replied hollowly. “Selussa will take my life instead of Rook’s.”

“Titans,” Aurelia replied. She ran a weary hand through her hair, now looking more afraid than angry. “What if the Sea Witch is lying? What if this dagger doesn’t mean anything? What if Rook figures it out and kills you first?”

“I’ve had those same thoughts. It’s true that I have no reason to trust her. I don’t know why she wants the dagger. I was so blinded by my own desire for glory that I made that reckless bargain with her.”

Aurelia’s eyes softened for a moment, and she finally took Saoirse’s hand. “No. It was more than just a selfish decision. You did this for our people. Your heart is pure,” she assured her. The two of them were silent, the gravity of Saoirse’s bargain heavy in the air.

“What now?”

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“There is only one thing to do. I don’t have any other choice,” Saoirse replied. She took a shaking breath in, cold resolve settling in her bones. “I have to kill Rook. It’s either him or me.”

Aurelia was silent for a long time, her eyebrows furrowed together in thought. Saoirse chewed on the inside of her mouth, trying to imagine killing Rook. She couldn’t think about it without getting nauseous.

“What if I did it?” Aurelia finally said, breaking the silence.

“What?” Saoirse asked.

“What if I killed Rook? If you don’t think you could go through with it, then let me,” she offered. “I can’t let the witch take your life in his stead. And I don’t want you to be haunted for the rest of your days if your blade is the one that ends his life,” she said softly. “You may try to hide it, but I know you, Saoirse. I’ve seen the way you look at him when you don’t think anyone is watching.”

“No, I-” Saoirse began, her cheeks flushing.

“Don’t deny it. I know there is something between the two of you. It’s not that I believe you couldn’t do it. I know you could find the strength to,” Aurelia assured her. She grasped Saoirse’s shoulders, leaning in to face her. “But I don’t want that decision to follow you around for the rest of your life. Let me do it. You can still fulfill the bargain and avoid killing him yourself.”

“Aurelia, I could never ask that of you. I was the one who vowed to bring the blade

back to Selussa. I was the one who promised my life to her. It is not your burden to bear.”

“I know you would do the same for me,” her friend said softly.

Saoirse felt both relief and horror at the prospect. Relief because she wouldn’t be the one to take his life. Horror because her best friend would kill the only man who had ever captured her affections. For that was who he was to her now. She wanted to run from the ugly truth of it, but it sat there like a stone in the middle of a path, unmoving and undeniable. The unnamed emotion that sent her heart racing at the mere thought of him could only be affection.

“I’ll consider your offer,” Saoirse finally whispered. “I’ll tell you my decision in the morning. Give me the night to think it over.” Aurelia nodded, her mouth set in a grim line.

“Tomorrow then.”

* * *

Saoirse and Aurelia returned to the tribute encampment in silence. Saoirse was numb to it all, her heart just as shredded as her burned legs. Tonight, she told herself as they trudged through the forest. Tonight you’ll decide what to do. But she knew that she was just putting off the inevitable. The decision would be no easier later than it would be now. In this world everything had a cost, a price to pay. For the Crown and the throne of Revelore, she had to make sacrifices. She had always known that. But why was it so hard now?

They crossed the threshold of the camp, heading to their final meeting with Tournament Ambassador Vangelis. Saoirse was grateful that their tents were so far away from the other tributes. She didn’t know if she could look at any of them

without feeling guilty. A few days ago, the other tributes were nameless faces she could care less about. But now, they were thoughtful and complex individuals who clearly loved their countries. In that regard, they were more similar than Saoirse had initially understood them to be. She hated herself for that weakness. She was a mighty Torqen warrior, hardened into impenetrable stone long ago.

Wasn't she?

They made for Aurelia's tent, where they had agreed to meet Vangelis. Aurelia pushed into the tent first, tossing off her cloak in a heap. The Tournament Ambassador was sitting in a crotchety wooden chair in the corner, his spindly fingers meshed together on his lap. To Saoirse's surprise, Sune was also sitting next to him. The Mer warrior was still bandaged around his abdomen, his face going pale as he forced himself to sit up in the chair.

"What are you doing here?" Aurelia barked. "You should be recovering in the healers' tent."

"I'm offering my support in the hour of Elorshin's fate," Sune offered through tight lips. "We started as a team, and we shall finish it as one."

Aurelia said nothing in reply, sitting on the edge of her bed in silent disapproval. There was no use in arguing with him. Saoirse took a seat beside Aurelia, folding her arms across her chest.

"Congratulations on passing the second trial," Vangelis said somberly. "It is an impressive feat to survive a nest of Avgi spiders. I commend you for your strength."

For some reason, Saoirse couldn't bring herself to thank him for his praise. She should've felt proud of herself for surviving. Instead, she felt nothing. Deep down, she knew that without Neia and Rook's help in the caves, she wouldn't be sitting in

this tent at all.

“The third trial will take place at dawn,” Vangelis told them. “It will be the most challenging one yet, I can assure you. You must see it through to the end. You are so close to triumph.”

“Do you have any predictions of what we might face?” Aurelia asked.

“I’ve heard rumors of a beast,” the ambassador answered, leaning forward on his chair. “It is said that the Master of Trials traveled for a time, searching for a creature worthy of the arena. But I should warn you that this could just be empty speculation. The Master of Trials has been known to trick spies in the past, leading prying eyes down a rabbit trail just to throw them off.”

“What kind of beast?” Saoirse asked. She couldn’t imagine facing anything worse than giant bloodthirsty spiders.

“I’m not sure,” Vangelis replied. “My sources say that whatever this creature is-if it is even real at all-could’ve been found in the Northern Wastes.”

Aurelia sighed wearily, leaning back on her bed. “Beast or no, we shall win tomorrow.”

“Do you have any last pieces of advice to give us?” Saoirse demanded impatiently. She was so unbearably tired. All she wanted to do was sleep this nightmare away.

“Remember who your enemies are,” Vangelis offered. “And remember what you are fighting for.”

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The tent was heavy with foreboding silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Their whole lives had led up to this moment, and yet there was no mirth or euphoria to be seen. The tension in Saoirse's heart had been building like a vengeful squall on the horizon, the kind of storm that promised death and destruction to any sailor who bobbed helplessly upon the waves. At any moment, she knew the storm would erupt in a fury of wind and merciless rain. But she wasn't afraid of what she might encounter in the arena. She was afraid of what she had to do and the consequences that would come after.

25

ROOK

After the second trial, Rook slept in his tent until the sun had descended and the moon had taken its place in the sky. While he slept, he was tormented by feverish dreams of giant spiders and unending labyrinths. He dreamed of his ancestors, King Lorsan and Princess Yrsa. And throughout his restless sleep, Saoirse's beautiful face haunted him.

Rook abruptly woke up, soaked in sweat and tangled in his bedsheets. His room was dark, only a sliver of moonlight drifting in from the small opening at the top of his tent. He rubbed his face, pushing wet tendrils of dark hair from his forehead. He had never been so exhausted in his life, so utterly drained of energy. He swung his legs over the side of his cot, flexing his sore wings as he sat up.

There was only one night standing between him and the final trial. Only one night until all of their fates were sealed and a victor was declared. It felt like he had been

competing in the Tournament for weeks. But it had only been two days. Two days that had somehow changed everything. The only team with three tributes still standing was his own, as was expected. But it was unusual for all four nations of Revelore to be represented at the third trial. Dread pooled in his stomach. He wanted to win, didn't he?

After his head stopped spinning, Rook stood and peeled off his sweat-soaked uniform and kicked off his boots. He had been so exhausted after climbing out of that spider-infested hole that he had collapsed in his bed without bothering to wash his face or hands. He filled his hands with fresh water from the basin at the corner of his tent, wiping it across his dust-coated body. He scrubbed his hair as best he could, using the lavender soap beside the basin and lathering it in his palms. But no matter how many times he splashed his face with water, he couldn't seem to get clean. With a sigh, he gave up and toweled himself off. Slipping on a simple tunic and breeches, Rook left his tent and wandered into the night air.

There was little movement in the tribute's encampment, only a few guards patrolling the camp's edge. Rook walked through the silent campsite, beams of moonlight illuminating his path like pools of molten silver. He looked up at shining stars above, his eyes catching on the familiar constellations that swept across the night sky. Warriors and creatures of old battled through the heavens, echoing the ancient mythologies of Revelore. Rook felt insignificant under the blanket of stars, as inconsequential as an insect. He scoffed and looked away from the legendary stories glittering above.

He continued walking aimlessly through the campsite, not sure of where he was going. A strange peacefulness had settled over the camp-dark and inviting. In the daylight, the roar of the arena blotted out all sound and the cries of emphatic onlookers was nearly unbearable. But now, the world stood still, gilded in silver and silent with sleep.

Rook found himself wandering toward his sister's tent at the center of the camp. He wasn't surprised to see torchlight from within the thin walls. Raven was known to keep strange hours, staying up until the early morning almost every night. As Queen of Aurandel and ruler of Revelore, there was always something for her to do, a never-ending list of things she had to investigate and look into. Rook had almost reached her tent when he heard faint voices trickling out and into the night breeze. He stopped, leaning in against the side of the tent.

"-And ransacked the streets and raided the palace," an urgent voice was saying. Rook pressed closer, raising an eyebrow curiously. There were few conversations Raven had without his knowledge- or so he thought.

"How is that possible?" his sister was saying in a tight-lipped whisper. "The city is heavily guarded."

"The revolutionaries were far more organized and armored than we could have anticipated," another voice responded. "Our soldiers are reforming outside of the Clay City and preparing to take it back."

"Titans," Raven hissed. "I told you to get this under control. Are your captains so incompetent that a band of rebels can easily overcome trained Aerials? We cannot afford to appear weak. The final trial is in a day. The continent will be in an uproar," she seethed. "The Tellusun king is bedridden, and his daughter is here in Coarinth. It is up to Aurandel alone to gain back control."

Rook listened in silence, absorbing all the information like a blow to the stomach. The revolutionaries had somehow managed to overrun the Clay City of Bezhad and the Terradrin city of Meysam in the span of a few days. The attacks had been planned, carried out strategically during the Revelore Tournament while the nations' rulers were all away. Rook almost pushed open the tent to join the meeting, but he stopped when he heard Raven continue speaking.

“It seems that our attempts to quell tensions in Tellusun with the sabotaged merchant ships has failed,” Raven went on. “If things had gone according to plan, Tellusun should have turned against Elorshin and put their trust in us. I should’ve known it was a foolish move from the start.”

Rook went cold. Titans above. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Raven was behind the lost shipments of food? Saoirse had been right. Elorshin had nothing to do with the missing ships. He felt nauseous, his stomach churning with sickness that threatened to come up any second. Raven had let the Tellusun people starve all for some political agenda? She could’ve told him the truth in the library, but she had instead blamed the Mer for her own treacherous scheme.

“Do not tell Hasana Yerimya of this,” his sister commanded. “She must not know of this attempted uprising. She will do something brash and reckless. She must remain in Coarinth until the final trial is over.”

“Surely she will find out on her own, if she does not know already,” the male’s voice urged. “A messenger will arrive within the day, I’m sure of it.”

“Then intercept it,” Raven snapped. “That is what the Aerials do best, is it not? That is what we have done for the last century.”

“Yes, Majesty,” the voice relented. “I shall return to the Shujaa Desert tonight. We will gain control once more.”

Rook pressed his back to the tent, slipping into the shadows as the entrance rustled open. An Aerial captain strode out of the queen’s tent, a lowly officer trailing after him. They both pushed off the ground and leaped into the sky, their wings carrying them up into the night air. Rook’s heart pounded as he watched them vanish into the darkness, hardly able to comprehend what was happening. His stomach twisted in knots. How could Raven keep something like this from Hasana? From him?

He closed his eyes, his mind wandering to dark places he didn't want to face. How many secrets had been suppressed over the years? How many messages had been intercepted by the Aura? How many attempted uprisings and periods of unrest had been kept from him?

He curled his hands into fists, heat suddenly burning through him. Hasana would have to be informed. As one ruler to another, it was only right that he told her. He strode out of the shadows, circling the tent to the entrance. But before he found Hasana, he had to confront his sister. He stretched out a hand, about to pull back the fabric and push into the tent.

"You are right to hide the uprising from the princess, Your Highness," a voice said from within. Rook went cold as all the anger suddenly drained from him. Veila. He was frozen in place outside the tent.

"If Eros and I can aid in any way, please let us know."

Rook felt sick. He lowered his hand and took a step back. He could understand why Raven kept secrets from him, but this...this was personal. He stepped away from the tent slowly, forcing his stunned body to move.

"Thank you," Raven's faint voice was saying as he backed away. "But you know what it is I require of you. That is all I ask from you both, for now. Finish the job tomorrow, and that will be enough. The Elders expect you to succeed."

The words were meaningless in Rook's ears. He felt numb all over, impossibly cold and yet flushed with warmth at the same time. He didn't stay to hear the rest of their conversation. He fled from the tent, slipping through the shadows of the camp in shock.

His own sister didn't trust him. How many other secret assignments had she given to

Eros and Veila over the years? Did she simply let him parade as some hopeful-eyed commander merely to inflate his ego? Was his position so hollow that he had been blind to years of missions taking place behind his back? His world was spinning out of control, the threads of his life unraveling into confusion. Rook unfurled his wings, readying to take to the sky. He would find clarity among the stars.

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But he stopped just before his wings caught the breeze. A turquoise tent glowed in the moonlight, silver fringe drifting like sea grass in the night air.

Saoirse's tent.

He didn't know what compelled him to move forward, or what hands of fate pulled him toward the tent. But he found himself standing before the entrance, his hand reaching to the bell that hung on the doorway. He had only known her for a short time, and yet he yearned to talk to her about everything, to pour his heart out to her. But before he touched the bell, the fabric pulled away slowly.

Saoirse stood in the doorway, her face illuminated by the glow of the moon. The transparent scales on her cheeks glimmered in the light, as if she had been dusted with stardust. She stared up at him with somber eyes, only the barest hint of surprise looming within her gaze. She wore her hair in a long braid down her back, tight curls pulled back from her face. Though she wore only a simple tunic and dark breeches, he had never seen her look so lovely. Suddenly, he didn't know what to say, words completely failing him at the sight of her.

She took his hand without a word and led him into the tent. In a daze, he followed her inside the small space, his heart beginning to beat rapidly. The simple tent was similar to his own, scattered with only the basic necessities. Tendrils of sea shell ropes hung from the center beam of the tent, swaying softly with the breeze. A wash basin and side table sat near the bed, a mirror balanced on the edge. A soft carpet lay across the floor, woven from sea grass and threaded with glowing strands of silver pearls. A single candle burned beside the bed. Saoirse sat down carefully, patting the space beside her. He took a seat where she gestured, sinking into the soft blankets

beside her. Her hand never left his own, her fingers interlocking with his the whole time.

“Why did you help me today?” she asked after a long moment. “You should’ve left me to die down there. You should’ve turned around and fled the moment that spider started after me. Why did you put your own life in danger, Rook?” Her voice turned urgent, pleading even. “Tell me it was just so you could have the upper hand. Tell me you did it for the games, to even the odds and make yourself appear nobler when you win.”

He stared at her, dumbstruck. She genuinely couldn’t fathom a world in which an Auran would help a Mer. Then again, neither could he.

“So there always has to be an ulterior motive behind my actions?” he asked gently, reaching a hand to a stray curl. Her hair was silken and smooth between his fingers. She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes. “My whole life I’ve been noble, loyal to a fault. To my country, my people, my sister.” He paused before turning to look back at her. “I suppose I have never truly considered myself or what I want. I saved you because I wanted to. Because...” he trailed off. He leveled a gaze at her, trying to read her face. “You must think so little of me, Princess.”

“No,” she whispered, so soft he could barely hear the word. “I do not think little of you.” The words echoed between them, unnamed possibilities drifting through the air.

“I don’t know why I stayed behind,” Rook replied genuinely. His own heart was cloven in two, one half tethered to his people and the other half flying to realms he had not dared to dream of. His fingers wandered to her cheek and touched the soft scales that covered her skin. The tiny pebbles of transparent scales were as silken as flower petals, nearly indiscernible from the warmth of her flesh underneath. He was transfixed by her beauty, mesmerized by the way her cheekbones caught the light and shimmered. Her lips parted as she inhaled sharply, his fingers trailing across her

cheek and down to the curve of her jaw.

“I am drawn to you, Saoirse,” he whispered, barely understanding the foreign words that came from his own mouth. “Everything you do captivates me. There is great animosity between our people,” he admitted. “But perhaps that should change.”

“Your words are blasphemous,” she gasped as he traced her jaw. “How could you be drawn to a Mer-to an enemy?” she asked, her pale blue eyes full of disbelief and unmistakable longing. “We do not belong together. We come from worlds that are so different, from histories that are so embittered.” She paused, letting the words settle between them like the stones at the bottom of the Adonis River. “And we still don’t know the truth. The sins of our ancestors may be much worse than we realize.”

“I know,” Rook admitted. He knew as well as she how foolish it was that they sat together exchanging such tender words. It was treasonous for him to be there at all. But Rook suddenly didn’t care. He felt nothing but stinging betrayal from his own sister and raging anger toward those who lied to him. Saoirse was the only one that made any sense. Her honesty was so refreshing in the broken world of shadows and secrets that threatened to consume him.

To his shock, Saoirse leaned in and pressed her mouth to his. Her lips felt as soft as they looked. His heart stopped for a moment as she leaned closer, wrapping her arms around his neck with gentle strength. Her fingers wove into the hair at the nape of his neck, curious and probing. Rook cupped her chin, drawing Saoirse even closer as their lips moved together. He had shared countless stolen kisses with women. But never had a kiss made his blood sing and his heart soar to the heavens before. The woman curled around him was neither Mer nor Aura.

She was simply Saoirse.

She gave him a shy smile as they gazed at each other in the candlelight. He wrapped

his arms around her, fingers tracing the curve of her back and trailing against the elegant column of her throat. Their lips met again, this time more assuredly. Passion rose around them like a mist, spicing the air with sparks that ignited into fire. Rook pulled at the loose bit of yarn that held her long braid intact, watching as Saoirse's dark curls spilled around her shoulders in a cascade.

They broke apart for a moment, gazing at one another as though seeing each other for the first time. He stared at her in wonder, emotions he didn't understand swelling inside of him. Her eyes were bright with astonishment.

"Saoirse," he began raggedly.

"Don't speak," she said, running a finger down his cheek. Though her eyes were full of awe, sorrow lingered at the edges like frost on a flower petal. The look on her face broke his heart, though he couldn't say why.

Instead, she pressed her lips to his again, silencing his words with a kiss of fire. But the kiss was searing and quick, gone almost in an instant. She untangled herself from his lap and stood abruptly. She smoothed out the wrinkles on her tunic and straightened quickly. She walked to the edge of the tent, her slender back to him.

"You need to leave, Rook," she said regretfully. Her voice was choked with emotion. "This will all be over tomorrow. Life will return as it always has, if we aren't dead by the end of the trial," she whispered.

"Saoirse—"

"You must leave," she interrupted, looking over her shoulder at him. Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Alright," he conceded, rising from the bed. He strode across the tent, never taking

his eyes off of her.

“This is a dream that will fade in time,” Saoirse told him roughly. “This could never be, and you know it.” A silver tear trickled down her cheek, betraying her true feelings.

“How will we know if we never try?” Rook asked, doing everything in his power not to reach out and pull her into his arms.

“You don’t understand,” she breathed. “I don’t want to hurt you. Please. Just leave,” she begged.

Rook thought his heart had been torn in two before, but it was nothing compared to the pain he felt now. He nodded quickly, giving her one last meaningful glance as he turned toward the tent entrance. She was right, of course. They had no hope to ever explore the budding feelings between them. He pulled open the fabric of the tent, slipping into the night as if he had never been there at all.

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She would be the one to kill Rook.

Saoirse had made up her mind in the forest with Selussa and Adda Carew, even after Aurelia offered to do it in her stead. She was the one had made the bargain, and she alone had to live with the consequences.

The knowledge of what she had to do had sunk to the pit of her stomach, sitting there as cold as the bones at the bottom of the Fretum itself. And when she had found him standing in the moonlight outside her tent, the knife in her stomach twisted further. His face was so wide-eyed and hopeful that guilt had seeped through her blood like a poison. He never asked to be wrapped up in this selfish scheme of hers. He didn't have any choice in the matter. And because of her actions, she didn't have any other choice either. And so she had allowed herself a single moment to indulge in his taste, to find passion in his arms. For that was all the time they would be granted. It was a fleeting moment that would be engraved in her memory forever.

After he left, Saoirse sank to her knees and cried. She sat there for what seemed like hours, until her legs went numb and the tears had dried on her cheeks. But as she lay on the cold ground, she felt no pity for herself. She had brought this fate to herself, to Rook. But the truth that stung the most was that both she and Rook had been pawns in the game of Revelore long before the Tournament, long before the bargain with Selussa. Even if she had never vowed to kill him, she would've been sentenced to a life that was not her own regardless. There was no world in which they could be together, bargain or not.

And so there in the quiet of the night, she decided her own fate.

She had no right to take Rook's life, no right to determine his fate for him. She would not be a pawn in Selussa's game, nor in anyone else's ever again. When the Tournament was over, she would find somewhere else to live, even if it meant wandering aimlessly until her last breath. She would escape the bargain, living on the run for eternity. But she would find rest knowing that she hadn't allowed Selussa to win.

Saoirse rose from the ground when the sun began to rise, the dim light trickling in through the tent and warming her skin. She slipped quietly from her room and headed for Aurelia's tent nearby. The horizon was streaked with pinks and oranges, soft clouds creeping across the sky peacefully. Saoirse pushed through the tent entrance and stopped abruptly.

To her utter shock, Sune was sleeping in the cot at the corner of the room, Aurelia tucked underneath his arm. Though he was still bandaged around his bare torso and covered with painful bruises, he looked much improved. Aurelia's legs were tangled with his, her head resting on his chest. Saoirse smirked at the sight of them, turning to give them some privacy.

But as she took a step back, Aurelia cracked open an eye. Mumbling a string of indiscernible curses, Aurelia untangled herself from Sune and sauntered over, a flush creeping across her cheeks. Saoirse had never seen the fierce warrior so flustered. Sune didn't stir as Aurelia threw a blanket over him, his head lolling to the side in sleep. Aurelia shoved her out of the small room with a huff.

"How long has this been going on?" Saoirse asked when they stood outside the tent, a grin unfurling across her face.

"A few months, give or take," Aurelia muttered, looking down at the ground.

"I would've never thought you could stand each other's company for longer than

necessary,” Saoirse replied, raising a teasing eyebrow.

“If you tell anyone, I’ll kill you before this damned trial even begins,” Aurelia scowled.

“Your secret is safe with me,” Saoirse promised, hiding her smile. She grew somber after a moment, the grin slowly falling from her face.

“What?” Aurelia asked, reading her expression. “What is it?”

“I’m not going to kill Rook,” she confessed, lowering her voice to a whisper. “And neither are you.”

“What do you mean, you’re not going to kill him?”

“I won’t fulfill my bargain with Selussa,” she told her. “I can’t do that to him, and I can’t do that to his people. There are secrets at work here, Aurelia. Secrets I can only uncover with his help.”

“Saoirse, you can’t be serious,” Aurelia breathed. “You’ll lose everything. Selussa will take your life in place of Rook’s.”

“No she won’t,” Saoirse replied confidently. “After the Tournament, I shall leave and never return to the Maeral Sea. I’ll go on the run. Selussa will never find me. Rook and I will both keep our lives,” she vowed. “I won’t be a pawn in Selussa’s game. I don’t know why she wants that dagger, but I’ll never give myself the chance to find out.”

Aurelia was silent for a long moment, her eyes scanning her face. But she lifted her chin defiantly, a familiar look of determination settling across her face. “Then I will come with you,” she said. “You will not be alone.” She dropped into a low bow,

catching Saoirse off guard. When she rose again, she gave her a nod. “You are my princess, and I will follow you to whatever end.”

Saoirse threw her arms around her, fresh tears pooling in her eyes.

“I will come too,” a voice called from the opening of the tent. Sune stood in the doorway, clutching his bandaged side with a grimace on his face. But he was as determined as Aurelia, his mouth set in a firm line.

“Thank you,” Saoirse breathed in disbelief. “Both of you. But I can’t ask that of you. Elorshin is where you belong. I must do this alone.”

“Nonsense,” Aurelia argued. “We have a duty to protect our princess. We are oathbound to remain loyal to you through whatever trials may come. We shall remain at your side, no matter the cost.”

“Thank you,” Saoirse whispered again, taking Aurelia’s hands in her own.

“We could hide in the Isles of Mythos for a time, and then move on to the Shujaa Desert,” Aurelia mused, her captain’s mind already calculating the quickest means of escape.

“We’ll figure out the details later,” Sune added with a grunt. “Just focus on surviving this last trial.” Aurelia gave him a look, but relented with a nod of understanding.

With one last squeeze to Aurelia’s arm, Saoirse turned back toward her tent, feeling only slightly more at ease. She would’ve given so much to gaze upon the Maeral Sea one last time, to speak with her father again and to tell him the truth. Sighing, she pushed into the tent, mentally preparing herself for the last trial. In the midst of bargains and political secrets, her focus on the trials had dimmed. In light of all she knew now, the Tournament had never seemed so pointless. And yet, her very life was

at stake today. It was only by a miracle that she had survived the last two trials, and the third and final one would be the most challenging.

She dragged her fingers through her hair, trying her best to untangle the unruly curls. Her heart began to race at the thought of Rook untying her hair the night before, caressing her curls with reverence. She flushed at the memory of his touch, of his soft kisses here in the tent only hours ago. Saoirse busied herself with dressing, pushing away the thoughts that sang through her blood like a childish love potion.

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She slipped her uniform over her head for the final time, fitting the breastplate over her chest and locking the shoulder plates in place. She pulled the familiar golden cuffs over her forearms. She then sat on the bed, wrapping her damaged feet tightly with swaths of bandages. Though her acid-burned feet didn't hurt any longer, they were still tender to the touch. Gingerly, she slipped her feet into the new boots that had been left outside her tent by Isme, easing them slowly up her calves. She pushed off the bed and stood, testing out the feel of them. Though the boots were uncomfortable with the bulk of the bandages, they would serve their purpose well enough.

Saoirse picked up the small mirror on the dressing table, staring at her reflection. Without the silver tribute's cape cresting her shoulders, she felt exposed and unprotected. But it had fallen into the jaws of hungry spiders, torn to shreds down in the caves. A wry, cynical smile crept across her face. It was almost poetic that she couldn't represent her nation in the final trial, that she couldn't don Elorshin's colors as she went to battle for the last time.

After it was all over, she would belong to no nation at all.

She heard the rustle of the tent flaps behind her, feeling Aurelia's presence. She didn't turn around as her friend entered the tent, still staring at her reflection in the mirror.

"I can't believe this is almost over," she sighed. "After waiting my whole life for this, I thought I'd feel different." Aurelia said nothing behind her, and she turned around curiously.

She froze.

Though the mirror clattered to the floor, she still saw her own reflection. There, standing across from her in the tent was her. The tent entrance abruptly shut on a phantom wind, pulled closed by an invisible force. The tent darkened with threads of creeping shadow, like black clouds blotting out the sunlight in a clear sky. She stared at the creature, watching in terror as her identical body prowled slowly over. It had been real. That glimpse of her in the caves and in the forest had been real.

“Sweet little Mer,” a low voice slithered out from between her lips.

No. Fear clenched in her abdomen.

“Selussa,” she whispered, taking a step back. She hit the dressing table and the wood dug into her back. She stared as the creature that lurked over, both terrified and amazed. In every way, the woman was identical to her. The same brown skin with shimmering blue scales. The same dark curls, braided down the same slender back. The same blue eyes that she stared back at in the mirror everyday.

“How-” Saoirse stuttered. She pressed her back harder against the dressing table, trying to put as much distance between her and Selussa as possible. “How do you look like me?”

“Don’t you remember?” Selussa asked coolly. “You gave me your blood the night we made the bargain. A simple shape-shifting potion, my dear. You were so eager to win this Tournament that you gave up your most valuable asset without question. I had to have an alternative plan, you see,” she continued, prowling toward her.

“You’ve been watching me,” Saoirse breathed.

“When were you planning on informing me of your decision to break our bargain?”

Selussa hissed, sending a chill up her spine. “You know I cannot allow this bargain to go unfulfilled, Princess. Not when there is so much at stake.”

The Sea Witch stopped just before Saoirse, their eyes at the same level. Selussa brought her hand up to the curve of her jaw, her fingers digging into her chin. “I suspected this might happen,” the Witch said darkly, her voice as cold as ice. “I should’ve known you’d be too weak. Your family has always struggled to keep vows, you know.”

Saoirse shoved away, pushing out from under Selussa’s grasp. She lurched toward her sword, stumbling over to where it lay on the bed. She grabbed the pommel, unsheathing it in a fluid movement. Selussa’s eyes flashed, but she didn’t move from where she stood at the center of the tent. “You know nothing of my family,” Saoirse seethed, pointing her sword at the Sea Witch’s heart. Selussa’s identical eyes glittered with predatory hunger.

“Oh don’t I?” she purred. “I thought you would’ve put the pieces together by now, clever little Saoirse. But I should’ve expected nothing less from Lorsan’s great niece,” she laughed cruelly. Saoirse tried to grasp her words, but her mind was spinning with a thousand possibilities that didn’t make sense.

“A hundred years ago, I was locked in the Fretum,” Selussa said slowly, the shadows in the tent growing darker with her words. “My crimes were great. You see, it was I who killed King Lorsan.” Her words reverberated through the air and rang through the tent. Saoirse gazed with horror as the Sea Witch’s eyes turned black, giving her a glimpse of Selussa’s true form beneath Saoirse’s own skin. “Selussa is just one of many names people have called me,” the Sea Witch continued. “Yrsa is another.”

“You’re the Auran princess?” Saoirse whispered in disbelief, her sword trembling in her hand.

“In some ways, yes,” Selussa murmured cryptically. “It is true that a hundred years ago I traded my wings in exchange for a Mer body to prove my devotion to Lorsan. But much in the same way I have taken on your form and adopted your body as my own, I took Yrsa’s. She bargained with me just as you did,” she recalled wistfully. “Her love for the Mer King was so great that she surrendered everything to me. But in the end, I took on her flesh and married Lorsan in her stead. But I am not Auran by nature.”

“What do you mean?” Saoirse asked, a sickening feeling growing in her stomach. “What are you?” A hideous grin unfolded across the Sea Witch’s face.

“You’ll have to determine that on your own, Princess,” Selussa replied, her black eyes shining with malice.

“Why did you do it?” Saoirse asked, raising her sword higher. “What purpose did you have in killing my great uncle and sending our nations to war?”

Selussa smiled again, her eyes flashing. She pulled on a silver cord around her neck, lifting the chain from between her breasts and holding it in the light. The dark Málmr pearl shone against her palm.

“Because of this,” the Witch answered. At Saoirse’s blank expression, she asked, “You truly have no idea what this is, do you?” She threw her head back and laughed, a hideous barking sound that sounded like gravel. “What do you know of the Myths of Old, child?” she taunted.

“I know the stories,” Saoirse answered cautiously. Gooseflesh rose on her neck.

“The Titans were defeated by the Four Kinsmen of Revelore,” Selussa told her. “Four rulers, one from each nation.” She held out the Málmr pearl. “This is the heart of Charybdis, Titan of the Sea. When she was defeated by the queen of the Mer, only

her cold heart was left behind.”

“Impossible,” Saoirse breathed. “None of the myths are real. They are just stories told to us as children,” she protested.

“I can assure you that they are real, child,” Selussa retorted. “I was there when that foolish band of Revelorians challenged the Titans and defeated them, binding them within the Stone Circle and burying them under the mountain.” The Sea Witch straightened, slipping the dark pearl back under her clothing. “Four Relics now remain, all scattered to the different corners of Revelore.”

“The dagger,” Saoirse whispered, finally understanding. “The dagger is one of the Relics, isn’t it? You’re collecting them.” Selussa merely grinned in answer.

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“I was close to claiming the dark pearl as my own a hundred years ago,” the Sea Witch told her. “Until your great grandfather Isandros hid it from me and enlisted Kaja to guard it in her Trench,” she spat with disgust. Saoirse blanched, her jaw falling open.

“You made it so easy, Saoirse,” Selussa chortled. “You did all the work and brought it right to me in the Fretum. As the moon, I shine full and round; my mysteries of creation abound,” she recited. “I am impenetrable as stone and ancient as titan’s bone. In a deathless cave I hide, biding my time for the right eyes.”

“Even if you tried, you never would have gotten it, would you?” Saoirse asked, realization dawning on her.

“You are correct. Thanks to an enchantment, the pearl could only be retrieved by an offspring of Lorsan; it was simply waiting for the right eyes,” Selussa offered. “But your lineage was not only useful in freeing the pearl from Kaja’s Trench. Your blood also freed me from the Fretum,” she laughed. “When I was banished for my crimes, Isandros made it so that only his heirs could release me. When you give your blood to me, you practically handed me the key.”

Selussa’s words all those weeks ago rushed back to her, suddenly making sense: “Blood is more valuable than gold. It can unlock doors and seal promises. It can bring great fortune and favor, but it can be spilled so easily.” Selussa had truly manipulated her as easily as a puppet dancing on strings. She was so blinded by the desire to win the Tournament that she gave everything she had without a second thought.

“Will you go after the Crown?” Saoirse asked contemptuously. “That will be the

ultimate prize, will it not?"

"Of course not," Selussa scoffed. "That Crown is meaningless. It's just an empty symbol. The rulers of Revelore have always possessed the Relics, but never knew what valuable items they truly had. You've all been blinded by desire for a hollow Crown, when the Relics of power have laid right under your noses." She smirked, a hideous twist of her mouth. "But I would expect nothing less from your kind, mere shadows of your creators."

Saoirse lunged, unable to contain her fury any longer. She raised her sword and swung it at Selussa's heart. Selussa moved faster than lightning, deftly avoiding her blade and whispering across the tent like a wraith. She moved in the shadows, her black eyes shining. Saoirse lunged again, swinging her blade at the Sea Witch once more. Selussa spun on her heels and grabbed Saoirse's arm, twisting it with the otherworldly strength of a Titan. Saoirse screamed as the Witch threw her to the ground, her sword falling from her grasp. Selussa snatched her weapon and effortlessly snapped the blade in two. She gasped as Selussa held her down with an invisible wind, struggling against her unyielding hold. She struggled to break free, but her muscles were petrified like stone.

"Your companions will die in that arena," Selussa whispered in her ear, her voice venomous. "The Titans demand a sacrifice, and their blood shall be spilt by the end of the trial. My Order shall ensure that I possess all the Relics."

"Order?" Saoirse managed to choke out, even as she writhed on the floor. "What Order?"

Selussa grinned, pinning her to the floor even harder. Her snaking shadows curved around Saoirse's feet and wrists. "The Elders serve me, Princess. Their ancient Order was founded by those still loyal to the Titans, not by the Four Kinsmen," she cackled. "The Elders support the old ways and wish to see the Titans restored to power. The

blood spilled in the Tournament makes them more powerful. It feeds them. That is why there must be a sacrifice, why there must be death. They must rise.”

Saoirse tried to scream, but her voice was frozen in her throat. The world began to grow dim as Selussa’s shadows crept forward and consumed the edges of her vision. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t fight against the weight that squeezed her lungs like a serpent curling around her chest.”

“Haven’t you ever wondered why Aurandel wins the Tournament every year? It is because the Elders make it so. They have spilled the blood of tributes for a century now. And their faithfulness will finally pay off.” Saoirse continued to struggle, trying to break free of Selussa’s shadows.

“I will kill the prince myself,” Selussa vowed, wrapping invisible fingers around her throat. “But though I may kill him, he will feel the sting of your blade in his heart. He will see your face as he dies.”

“No,” she rasped. “He will know it isn’t me. He trusts me.” Peels of ugly laughter erupted from Selussa’s mouth, sending shivers up Saoirse’s spine.

“Oh, this is rich. You believe that Rook has developed affection for you? That he has slipped under your spell with your words and your professions of love?” Selussa laughed, tightening her grip. “Who would believe anything from the mouth of a siren?”

The last thing Saoirse saw before the shadows consumed her were the Witch’s black eyes, delirious for vengeance.

Then everything went dark.

ROOK

Rook stood outside Hasana's tent, gathering his thoughts. In the dizzy haze of passion that had followed him from Saoirse's tent, he had forgotten to warn the Tellusun princess of the uprising in Bezhad. Until the golden light of the sunrise had spilled across the camp, he hadn't thought of anything else other than Saoirse. Even now, his heart began to race at the thought of her, an aching, unbearable sensation that brought simultaneous euphoria and sorrow. He had repeated their encounter in her tent over and over again in his mind, trying to imagine how he could make things work between them. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't make the pieces fit together. She had been right. There was no room for them in the paper-thin web of political alliances that built up their world.

But if he couldn't control what happened between the Mer and the Aura, he could at least do the bare minimum to aid Princess Hasana. He cleared his throat, trying to get her attention from inside the tent. A gust of wind swept through the campsite, rustling the tents around him. Hasana's tent drifted open in the breeze for a brief moment, giving him a glimpse inside. The tent was completely empty, the bed at the center untouched. Rook frowned and turned toward the neighboring Tellusun tents in confusion. Perhaps she had gotten an early start to the day, already taking her place in the Stone Circle with her attendants.

Rook strode over to Noora Mir, one of the remaining Tellusun tributes nearby. Noora was securing a wickedly sharp knife to her thigh, a grim expression on her face. Her once glorious tribute's cloak fluttered in the wind, marred by unidentifiable stains and frayed along the edges. She glanced up to see him approaching, tossing her long black hair over her shoulder. Her face was instantly guarded as he reached the outside of her tent. She turned her attention back to fastening a curved sword to her hip, saying nothing to him.

"Where is Hasana?" Rook asked, surprised that the personal guard of the princess

would let her out of sight. Noora looked up at him once more, her face impassive and unreadable. He realized with a start that this was the first time he had ever spoken to the warrior, despite them being tributes together all this time

“She is gone,” she stated flatly, busying herself with preparations for the trial.

“Where?” Rook asked. Was it possible that she had found out about the uprising in Bezhad?

“To the arena,” Noora replied. “She left sometime ago.” Rook narrowed his eyes at her, watching as she avoided eye contact. Something told him that Noora wasn’t telling the truth. But instead of pushing her further, he simply bowed in thanks.

“I appreciate your time,” Rook told her. “I wish you luck today,” he added. “May glory be given.” It was the first thing he had said that seemed to catch the stoic warrior off guard. Her eyes softened, and her hardened exterior melted away somewhat.

“May glory be given to you, Prince Rook,” she answered with a slight bow. She strode off toward her companion, Ramin Naseeba. Ramin stared at him curiously, clutching the pommel of his sword as Noora hurried over. She whispered something in his ear, her gaze never leaving his own. Rook averted his eyes. Something about their whispers made him feel uneasy.

Rook strode through the campsite quickly, wanting to leave the sea of tents as quickly as possible and never return. He passed the stretch of dark Terradrin tents, made of opaque fabrics that blocked out the light of the sun and shielded them from being burned. From the dark shadows of his tent, the Terradrin warrior Adresin stared at Rook, his luminous white eyes rimmed with red. Though there were no tears on his pale face, his emotion was evident. He was still recovering from the loss of his companion, Diru, in the second trial yesterday. Neia Landum was nowhere to be

found, likely mourning away from prying eyes and wagging tongues.

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Adresin was sharpening a curved sword across his lap, the hiss of metal against stone cutting through the somber campsite. Rook's skin prickled under his watchful gaze. Something told him that Adresin knew of the uprising in Meysam, and that given the chance, the warrior wouldn't hesitate to slide that blade into his heart. He knew that the Auran occupation in the Under Kingdom was not a welcome one, even if the Terradrin warriors would never admit it. Rook hurried past the last row of Terradrin tents, finally ridding himself of the burning gazes of his fellow tributes.

He headed for the Stone Circle, anxious to begin the final trial. Even at a distance, he could see Revelorians spilling into the arena, climbing up the endless steps and taking their places in the seats high above. Auran spectators swooped down into the amphitheater from the sky, darting to their seats within. Already, the voices of thousands of onlookers rose through the Stone Circle and echoed through the treetops.

Rook felt only apprehension as he pushed off the ground and flew toward the ancient arena. Only a few days ago, his heart would've swelled with pride knowing that he had made it farther than most. He would've anxiously anticipated that final moment when the champions were crowned and the winning nation was declared. But now, his heart was cold and hollow. He felt anything but excitement as he sped through the clouds toward the great stone structure that loomed in the shadows of the trees.

He hadn't spoken with Veila or Eros since he had overheard them in their secret meeting with Raven. The thought of fighting beside them in the arena as if nothing had happened made him sick. But now was not the time to ponder loyalties. He forced himself to focus, pushing his wounded heart to the side.

Rook soaked in the sensation of the sun on his wings, allowing the wind to calm him as he neared the great arena. He gazed at the sweeping woodlands that unfurled in a blanket of lush green, shifting in waves as the wind swept through the treetops. His eyes trailed to the craggy stone roots of the mountain that emerged from the ground and gradually climbed into the sky, its slopes and ridges twisting up through the clouds like the fingers of the earth. Finally his eyes met the distant, beautiful city that sat washed in golden sunlight at the top of Mt.Thalia, the place of his birth and the home of his people. He wasn't afraid of the final trial, nor was he afraid of another nation winning in the end. No, he was afraid of what would come after. He was afraid of the political unrest that had been brewing just below the surface of Revelore for years, threatening to bubble over in an explosion of chaos. He was more terrified to face the hidden truths of the past than any beast or challenge in that bloody arena. Heart pounding, Rook descended down toward the Stone Circle for the final time, flying toward the entrance in the outer ring of the amphitheatre.

Veila and Eros stood just outside the hallway that wrapped around the arena. The pair of them were dressed in their tribute finery, their deep purple cloaks billowing out behind them in the wind. Rook dropped to the earth in front of them, his boots finally hitting the ground with a muted thump. Behind them, Tournament Ambassador Cresta stood with her arms folded across her chest, her face grim. Rook forced himself to look into his companions' eyes, as painful as it was. Eros gave him the faintest shadow of a forced smile, while Veila frowned with obvious disappointment. Rook realized that the three of them had never gotten the chance to discuss the events of the second trial, when he had stayed behind to help Saoirse out of the tunnels. As if sensing Rook's thoughts, Veila's frown deepened and her eyes glowed bright.

"Don't you dare abandon us to help some pitiful fallen tribute again," she warned, her voice sharpened to a lethal point. "We are supposed to make decisions as a team. We can't afford to make impulsive choices on our own that put the rest of us in harm's way," she went on, her eyes glittering with distrust and rage. "You may be playing the part of the merciful, sweet prince now, but you are bound to your kingdom just as

much as we are.” Her eyes narrowed. “Whatever game you are playing with the Mer princess, it has no place in the arena.”

“Understood,” Rook replied with a short nod. He had no energy to challenge her. The storm between them would break soon, but it wouldn’t be now.

“Tributes,” Ambassador Cresta interjected, cutting through the tension. “Let us prepare for the final trial.”

The three of them followed her in silence, the dim halls surprisingly quiet and empty. Farther down the corridor, the rest of the tributes would be making their way down the staircases for the final time. The arena rumbled above as thousands of Revelorians moved up the stairs and wandered to their seats. Their enthusiastic cries should’ve sent his heart racing with pride, but Rook only felt cold resolve as Cresta led them down the staircase that tunneled into the earth.

The ambassador lifted a torch from the wall, holding the flame high as they descended into the darkness. Rook trailed behind Eros and Veila, lost in thought as they ventured deeper into the ground. Gradually, the roar of the crowds vanished, replaced by mind-numbing silence that seemed to seal them in a tomb. A lifetime had passed since he had been led down into the ancient chambers before the first trial, back when hope still fluttered in his chest and arrogance beat in his heart. That first day, the rough stone steps had whispered of those who came before him, had spoken of the glorious legacy he must fight to uphold and sustain. But now, the dingy staircase held nothing but cobwebs and empty promises of archaic tradition.

They reached the end of the staircase, and Cresta’s torchlight seeped into the empty chambers that opened up under the arena. Much to Rook’s surprise, Raven stood in the dim shadows at the end of the hall, her chin lifted high as they approached. His mouth went dry at the sight of his sister, fresh betrayal churning in his blood. She seemed so out of place here, with her immaculate finery pooling at her feet and her

jewels glittering in the torchlight. Surrounded by the ancient cells of monsters and crumbling stone walls, Raven looked like something out of the mythologies of old, an ethereal goddess trapped in the underworld. It was clear she remembered this place, if the haunted look in her eyes was any indication. Rook tried to imagine her as a naive fifteen year old, waiting to be lifted into the arena with her fellow tributes, not knowing if she would live or die.

Cresta folded into a graceful bow, Eros and Velia following suit as they reached their Queen at the end of the hall. But Rook couldn't bring himself to bow to her, his back stiff with tension and distrust. Raven narrowed her eyes at him but said nothing.

"I am here to wish you success," his sister said, her voice echoing through the chamber. "You've made it this far, and you will finish it to the end."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Veila replied with a grateful nod.

The knife in Rook's stomach twisted further as they exchanged a knowing glance. Raven pulled out a crystal-encrusted bottle from her sleeve, handing it to Eros. "It is customary for Auran tributes to drink the wine of the gods before the final trial," Raven told them, her eyes glittering in the darkness. "Vinum is pressed from the golden grapes of Coarinth, said to have been planted there by the Titans themselves at the dawn of time. I myself drank it before my final trial ten years ago."

It was traditional for vinum to be served at Auran funerals, in order to protect the dead as they passed onto the next life. Rook could remember the buttery, burning taste of it in his throat on the day they buried their parents. It seemed fitting that they drink it now, here at the edge of death.

Eros uncorked the crystal vial, the golden liquid within shimmering in the torchlight. He put the glass to his lips, taking a sip. He handed it to Veila, and she took a careful sip of the vinum in return. Finally, Veila turned to Rook and offered the crystal vial to

him. Rook hesitated for a moment, before taking it from her and holding it to his lips. He braced himself against the sweet burn, taking a sip and forcing the wine of the gods down his throat. At the taste, memories of his parents' funeral procession invaded his mind as if it had been only yesterday. He handed the vial back to Raven, grimacing as the taste lingered in his mouth.

"The Elders have blessed Aurandel with victory, just as they have for the past century. May glory be given," she said quietly, taking a step back into the shadows.

Cresta gestured for them to step into the cell that would raise them through the tunnel and deposit them into the arena. Following Eros and Veila, Rook stepped into the familiar cell last, feeling Raven's piercing gaze upon him. Cresta swung the iron door closed, locking it with the deft click of the key. Rook looked up at the stone ceiling, preparing for their final ascent into the arena. Below, the floor began to rumble and shift as the platform loosened from the stone and began to rise.

"Fulfill your oaths," Raven offered as they began to push upward. The ceiling opened with a growl, sunlight streaming down into the chamber. "Just as your predecessors, do not leave a single one alive." Rook gave Eros and Veila a swift look, gooseflesh rising on his neck.

"What does she mean?" he demanded, his hands curling into fists. Something was not right. He turned back to Raven, crouching to the ground as they continued to rise. "What do you mean?" he screamed. She vanished below the platform as they entered the tunnel.

"Tell me what the Hel is going on," Rook snarled at them. "This has something to do with your secret meeting last night, doesn't it?"

"We must kill the other tributes," Eros replied calmly, refusing to look at him. "We must ensure that Aurandel is victorious and that no others are left to challenge our

reign.”

Rook gripped the pommel of his sword, his wings flaring like the hackles of a wolf. But before he could react, Veila pressed a blade against his throat with lightning speed.

“You will not get in our way, Rook,” she hissed. “This is how it has been done for a hundred years. After the War of the Age, it became clear that no other nation must possess the Crown. We must maintain the right to rule Revelore. It is necessary.”

“This is madness,” Rook spat. “In what world is this fair or just?” He tried to shove her away, but her blade only pressed closer to his skin. Something like regret flashed in her green eyes, but it vanished just as quickly as it appeared.

“This is why Raven never told you about it,” Eros told him, his expression dark. “You would’ve never gone through with it. You’re too soft. You always have been.”

“Just let us do our job,” Veila urged. “You don’t have to lift a blade to the other tributes. We will handle everything.”

“How long have you known about this?” Rook rasped, his shoulders drooping in defeat.

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“Since the night of the banquet,” Eros answered wearily. “We met with Raven after it was over, and she informed us of our duty. It was clear that you’d never understand, with the way you began to talk. After you danced with that Mer princess, you proved that you couldn’t be trusted,” he added with a grimace.

“I can’t let you murder them,” Rook said quietly. The platform was nearly at the end of the tunnel, the roar of the crowds filling the air.

“Rook, you don’t want to do this,” Veila answered softly, her voice lethal. “You can’t stop this from happening. This is how our ancestors always intended it to be. Salvation demands a sacrifice, and the blood of these tributes must be spilled to maintain the balance of peace. If you get in the way, I will not hesitate to hurt you,” she vowed darkly.

“Who told you that? What madness possessed our ancestors to start killing their rivals?” Rook asked, his voice now pleading. How was any of this real?

“The Elders,” Veila answered. “A hundred years ago, after the war, they determined that Aurandel alone should rule. It was the Elders who first instructed your grandparents to kill all remaining tributes in the Tournament. Aurandel is a chosen people, divinely appointed to rule the continent.”

Rook balked, barely able to register such madness. Why had the Elders established such a secretive procedure? How had he not heard of this barbaric practice before? But the sickening part of it was that it made sense. He had been daft and naive to think their perpetual victory was solely based on merit and fairness. But he couldn’t do anything now, not as the platform slid into place and halted in the middle of the

arena. Thousands of eyes were upon them, observing his every movement. Deep down, he knew he wouldn't be able to stop the two of them together; they were both too well trained for that.

"Raven lied," Eros added over the roar of the crowd. "It is not customary to drink vinum before the last trial. He unsheathed his sword, adopting a defensive stance as the horns blared above them. "Vinum wards off many different kinds of beasts. Those who drink it are protected."

"What kinds of beasts?" Rook asked, fear suddenly dawning in his chest. It was not fear for himself, but rather for the tributes who were now rising into the arena on their own platforms.

"Hydras," Veila replied.

As if on cue, a bone-chilling roar reverberated through the arena, rumbling the ground like an earthquake.

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ROOK

The tall metal gate at the north end of the arena trembled as the beast within continued to screech and strike the other side. Rook could only make out shadows shifting behind the small gaps in the entranceway, the beast obscured from view. He tore his gaze from the northern gate and quickly searched for the Mer tributes.

There. Saoirse stood poised on the platform beside Aurelia, her eyes determined and emotionless, her sword held at her side. There was a wild ferocity in her gaze as she faced the creature behind the gate. There was no way in Hel that he'd let Eros or Veila touch her. He willed Saoirse to look at him, so he could somehow communicate

the danger she was in with his eyes. But she didn't turn her head, her gaze set on the iron gate.

"Tributes," the booming voice of the Master of Trials called out. "Welcome to the third trial. I congratulate you for making it this far. Those who have survived this long have proven themselves more than worthy of the Crown," she continued, her voice seeming uncharacteristically somber. The Revelorian onlookers went mad, erupting in applause and shouting praises from the stands. "But the champion among you must defeat the great beast behind these bars. Only then shall you be crowned triumphant."

Rook wanted to scream. If what Eros and Veila said was true, then Korina knew what was about to happen. The High Elder had been in on it since the beginning. Korina was about to watch six Revelorians be murdered in cold blood.

At the north end of the arena, the massive locks restraining the iron gate were released, prompting another excited eruption from the full stands above. Rook exhaled deeply as he wiped a sheet of sweat from his forehead. The gate groaned in protest as it was hoisted upwards, ancient chains clanging together as it rose. The crowd cheered even louder, waving their banners and flags wildly as the enormous doorway lifted. Rook couldn't tear his eyes away from the gate as the sunlight spilled into the darkness and rattling chains shifted in the sand. The ground trembled as the monster within let out another earth-shattering roar.

"May glory be given!" High Elder Korina cried, eliciting another roar of applause from the onlookers.

Rook stood paralyzed as a colossal clawed foot edged out of the darkness, obsidian talons shining in the sunlight. A hideous dragon head crept out, wickedly sharp horns crowning its head. Two enormous eyes glinted in the darkness as the beast entered the sunlight. A forked tongue slipped between its sharp ivory teeth, tasting the air like

a snake. Even the crowd grew hushed as two more heads slipped from the darkness and into the arena. The hydra's necks were long and muscled, impenetrable black scales covering every inch of the dragon's skin. Rook gazed with horror as the great beast crept forward through the sand, a thick chain wrapped around one of its clawed feet. Enormous leathery wings unfurled from its back, each one capped by two sharp spikes on the ends. The hydra surveyed the tributes, six eyes in total blinking down at them. An ugly hiss rumbled in the dragon's chest, its three heads swinging as it surveyed the tributes.

Rook gaped in disbelief. Hydras were rare, only found in the uninhabitable Northern Wastes beyond the continent. They were said to be as ancient as the Titans, some of the last remaining beasts from old lore. There was no way that any of the remaining tributes would be able to defeat the hydra, not when Eros and Veila were picking them off one by one. It would be a bloodbath. Just as the Elders wanted, apparently.

The trumpets above blared the ceremonial song, and the trial suddenly began. The hydra swerved at the jaunty music, screeching hideously as it focused its attention back to the tributes. Several people in the crowd stood from their seats. The dragon prowled forward, its mouths shrieking and its teeth glistening with venom. Noora was the first tribute that leaped down from her platform, fearlessly running toward the hydra. She unhooked the bow from her back, fitting an arrow to it and pulling it back deftly. She let the arrow fly straight for the hydra, a battle cry on her lips. The iron-tipped arrow simply bounced off the hydra's scales and fell to the sand. Noora was undeterred, continuing to run toward the great beast. Rook leaped into the sky, unable to stand there and watch the Tellusun warrior be eaten alive.

"Rook!" Veila yelled from behind him. "Get back here!"

Rook ignored her and continued to fly, swooping toward the beast. He had nothing to fear if the vinum truly did repel hydras. He dove between two enormous heads, trying to find any weak spots in the beast's armored scales. One of the hydra's heads lunged

for Noora, its jaws snapping as the warrior rolled in the sand. The beast's barbed tail swung through the sand like a slithering serpent, heading straight for Noora. But before the tail ripped through her legs and brought Noora down, her companion Ramin swung his blade, hacking at the tail violently. The hydra roared in irritation, pulling its tail back into the shadows. Noora notched another arrow, this time aiming for one of the hydra's eyes. Rook swept down, dodging the writhing dragon heads. He grabbed Noora just as one of the hydra's clawed feet swiped at her in the sand. He lifted her in the sky, his grip hooked under her arms.

"Put me down!" she ordered, sending an elbow flying into his stomach. Rook nearly lost his grip on her as the wind was knocked out of him.

"Aim for an eye," he choked out, flying up to one of the heads. The beast lunged at Noora, venom spraying from its mouth as its enormous jaws opened. Noora stopped struggling and notched another arrow, pulling back the string and aiming for one of the hydra's black eyes. The beast roared in pain as the arrow met its mark, embedding into the dragon's skull. The other two heads swung over to where Rook hovered in the sky, hissing with rage.

But before the dragon could strike, Rook was hit from behind and knocked from the air. Eros wrapped his arms around him and tackled Rook from the sky. He struggled as Eros brought him down, his grip on Noora loosening. She screamed as she fell from his arms, completely helpless as she dropped through the air like a stone. Without thinking, Rook unsheathed his sword and sliced through Eros's right wing. He twisted out of Eros's arms, diving for Noora.

Just as she should've hit the ground, he caught her, her head only inches from the earth. His boots hit the ground with a jolt, spraying sand with the impact. He set Noora down carefully, spinning to see Eros diving straight for them. As soon as she stumbled from his arms, Noora sprinted back to where her teammate was fighting the hydra, a battle cry on her lips.

“I don’t want to do this,” came Eros’s voice from behind. “But you can’t get in the way of our task.” Rook turned to face him, regret pooling in his stomach at the sight of the blood on his right wing. The sword hadn’t gone clean through, but it had injured him enough that he wouldn’t be able to fly. Eros drew his sword, his feet planted firmly in the sand.

Rook grimaced, unsheathing his own sword in response. “So be it,” he said, swinging his blade over his head. Their swords crashed into each other, ringing out across the arena. They had sparred like this countless times in training, but for the first time, they were now enemies.

“Just give in, Rook,” Eros roared, sending a counter swing toward him. Rook parried his attack, blocking the blade easily. Chests heaving, they circled each other slowly. Rook bolted forward, attacking on Eros’s left. His friend spun, missing the blade. Eros lunged at him, and Rook saw his opportunity. He side stepped as Eros stumbled forward. Rook slashed through Eros’s uninjured wing, and his friend fell to his knees.

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“I’m sorry,” Rook apologized. As much as it pained him to leave Eros crumpled in the sand, it had to be done. “I hope you’ll someday forgive me.”

Rook turned his attention back to the hydra and the rest of the tributes. The male Terradrin tribute, Adresin Vasalor, was now fighting side by side with Ramin, charging at one of the hydra heads. Beside them, Noora loosed volley after volley, only felling one of hydra's eyes. As one head lurched toward Ramin with snapping jaws, Adresin side stepped, narrowly missing the dragon’s foaming mouth. He raised his curved sword over his head with a cry, bringing it down as hard as he could. The blade sliced through the hydra’s neck, blood spraying across his white hair as he brought it down again and again. The hydra screeched in pain, the now-beheaded neck writhing and twisting in the sand. Ramin and Adresin retreated for a moment, watching as the neck recoiled back, dark blood soaking the sand. The crowd applauded wildly.

But the sickening crunch of bone cut through the applause. Rook watched with horror as the neck stump seemed to move and shift with fresh muscle and flesh, foaming with a strange liquid. Something began to grow out of the hydra’s shoulder, the rippling flesh warping and contorting into a new limb. Ramin and Adresin stood motionless as the new flesh emerged from the dragon, slithering out like a second tail. At the end of the new limb, a head slowly began to form, sharp teeth rising from the flesh like some hideous clay creation. Black scales jutted out, forming across the new neck like armor. Rook’s heart sank as two more heads replaced the one Adresin just chopped off.

“This is impossible,” he breathed in disbelief. They would never be able to defeat it.

“Rook,” a voice said from behind.

Rook’s heart fluttered at the sound of her voice. He slowly turned around, already knowing who he would see.

Saoirse.

“You have to get out of here,” he pleaded, taking in her familiar eyes. “It’s not safe for you or Aurelia. Eros and Veila are going to kill every last tribute so that Aurandel is victorious.”

“And you’re not?” she asked coldly.

“No, of course not,” he replied confusedly. He took a step forward, reaching for her open hand. She pulled away, giving him a hostile stare.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, scanning her expression. Just the night before, they had been tangled in each other’s arms, their lips pressed together. She was staring at him as though he were a stranger, like she could hardly recognize him. She was staring at him like she had the first night they met, when he was simply an enemy she wanted to see dead.

“Saoirse, what’s wrong?” he asked again, this time more urgently. Behind them, clashing metal and cries of pain resounded as the other tributes fought for their lives against the hydra.

She stepped closer and cocked her head curiously at him, as if she were a predator assessing her prey. Something twisted in Rook’s gut, his instincts telling him that something was very wrong. She stood only an inch from him, looking up at his lips.

“Rook,” she said slowly, “surely you know that this is all a lie?” Rook could hardly

comprehend what she was saying as her lips inched closer to his, her breath on his skin. “Did you really think I enjoyed your company? That I could ever reconcile with an Auran?” she asked with a cruel smile. “You’re more foolish than I’d thought if you truly fell for this naive princess act.”

Rook stared at her speechless, his face twisted in confusion. “But last night-”

"I made a mistake," Saoirse interjected, stepping towards him and nearly closing the gap between them. "I let my guard down to an Auran prince trying to trick me so that I would be easy prey in the final game.”

Rook’s heart twisted at her words, sudden understanding dawning on him. He tried to take a step back, but she grabbed his wrist with an iron grip. He stared at her in confusion as he tried to pull away. Saoirse grinned, an eerie, otherworldly expression that sent a chill down his spine. He yanked his arm away from her again, but her hold was relentless.

“Thank you for falling for my trap so easily, Princeling,” Saoirse whispered, a grin still on her lips. “That great grandfather of yours would’ve been so disappointed in you.”

Abruptly, a deafening noise filled the sky. The explosion was so loud that it drowned out the cries of the onlookers and the roar of the hydra. The arena trembled as another explosion rocked the earth. Rook went still and the crowd suddenly grew quiet. Eyes wide, he turned to the sound. Smoke and debris drifted through the sky, emanating from the top of Mt. Thalia in a plume.

Emanating from the Citadel of Aurandel.

Yet another explosion reverberated from the mountain, sending ripples of force through the ground. The arena shuddered with the shockwaves. The crowd’s silence

was instantly shattered by shouts of fear and screams of terror. Several Aerial soldiers patrolling the arena suddenly sped into the sky, flying back toward the mountain with their weapons drawn. It was sheer madness as Revelorians fought their way back down the stairs, trampling each other to get out of the amphitheater. And through the chaos of it all, the cries of the hydra still echoed through the arena, followed quickly by swords ringing and tributes fighting for their lives.

Rook stared at the shattering world around him in a daze, unable to comprehend what was going on. He turned to Saoirse, who appeared completely unmoved by the explosions in Coarinth and the wails of the hydra.

“I-” he began.

But the words died in his throat. Pain suddenly splintered through him like a thousand shards of glass. He looked down at his abdomen. A knife was embedded in his stomach, blood seeping through his clothing at an alarming rate. Saoirse yanked the blade back, and waves of pain rippled through him. Rook clutched his ruptured stomach, warm blood pooling over his fingers and painting his tunic red.

Saoirse merely smiled.

29

SAOIRSE

“Saoirse.”

She drifted in endless darkness, enveloped by shadows that were as black as night.

“Saoirse,” a voice called again, reaching into the depths of shadow that clung to her skin, to her clothes, to her mind. Saoirse’s heart began to pound again, the breath

rushing into her lungs once more. She fought to swim through the darkness, her limbs heavy and slow.

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“Saoirse,” the voice called again, like rays of sunshine breaking through storm clouds. She followed the sound of the voice, grasping it like a chain in the darkness. It pulled her up out of the Sea Witch’s mire, wrapping around her with golden strength.

Gradually, sensation returned to her fingertips, moving up the lengths of her arms and spreading through her body. The light returned slowly, harsh at first. Saoirse blinked in the sun, looking up at the voice that called her name. Princess Hasana Yerimya peered down at her, sunlight pouring in around her.

“Saoirse,” Hasana whispered, “are you alright?”

Saoirse forced herself to sit up with a groan. Hasana helped her up, putting a strong hand on her back. She was still lying on the floor of her tent, her things undisturbed. She placed a hand to her head as memories of Selussa rushed back to her in waves. It hadn’t been a dream.

“I apologize for the rush, but we need to leave as soon as possible,” Hasana was saying, helping her stand. Saoirse noticed that the Tellusun princess was wearing full warrior’s garb, a shining gold breastplate strapped across her chest and a sword on her back. Around her neck, a shining ruby amulet hung between her collar bones. She wore a bulky leather satchel around one shoulder, tucked close to her hip.

“Where is Rook?” Saoirse demanded. “We need to stop her!” She grew frantic, throwing open the tent and storming out. She gaped at what she saw outside, her jaw falling open.

Dozens of winged horses were clustered through the tribute campsite, some pulling raeda carriages and others only carrying single riders. The crowd of warriors was composed of Tellusun and Terradrin alike, all armed to the teeth as though they were on the brink of war. Saoirse took a slow step forward, bringing a hand to her mouth.

Revolutionaries. So the reports of a resistance made of Terradrin and Tellusun rebels were true. She turned back toward Hasana, her eyes wide. The Tellusun princess gave her a grim nod, confirming her wordless suspicions. Saoirse looked toward the sky, catching a glimpse of smoke trailing through the air. She followed the line of smoke and soot, inhaling sharply as she saw where it originated. Even from far away, she could tell that the smoke billowed out from somewhere within Coarinth, indicating that the city was burning. Saoirse's eyes trailed down to the satchel that Hasana clutched protectively, somehow knowing what was inside.

“What happened?” she breathed, trying to wrap her mind around it all. “Are you responsible for that?” She gestured to the smoke that emanated from the mountain. “What did you do?”

A monstrous roar ripped through the air, interrupting anything Hasana was going to say. Saoirse instinctively looked to the arena, where streams of panicked Revelorians were pouring out from the Stone Circle.

“Hel’s teeth,” Saoirse breathed. “What was that?” Another hideous roar echoed from the arena, the sound of it like the grinding of a thousand daggers against stone.

“It’s time to go,” Hasana told her, striding forward to a winged horse. She leaped deftly into the saddle, gesturing at the band of revolutionaries around her with a wordless command. Their horses extended their wings and began to lift into the sky, soaring toward the Stone Circle. Hasana held out her hand, offering Saoirse a seat on her pegasus.

“You can join us or remain here,” Hasana told her. “The choice is yours. I cannot explain everything now, but you should trust me when I say that you’re in danger here.”

“Just trust her, Saoirse,” a voice called from the crowd of revolutionaries. Much to her surprise, Sune sat on the back of a great pegasus, still bandaged from his injuries.

“It is a cause worth fighting for,” another voice offered. Her eyes found the form of Neia Landum, her white hair shining brilliantly in the sun. Just as the other warriors, the Terradrin captain was seated on the back of a winged horse.

“Show me what is in the satchel,” Saoirse demanded, her heart pounding. Hasana’s eyes darkened, and her arm went around the leather bag protectively. But the princess seemed to understand that Saoirse wouldn’t be joining her if she refused to show her what was hidden inside. Hasana relented after a moment of consideration, carefully unhooking the gold clasp at the front of the bag. Saoirse held her breath as Hasana gingerly reached inside, preparing to lay eyes upon what she knew would already be in there.

The Crown of Revelore rose from the satchel, glinting with otherworldly light as Hasana held it out for her to see. Four gems were embedded in the metal arches, each one representing a nation of Revelore. It looked just like every illustration she had ever seen in her history books, more beautiful than she could’ve ever imagined.

“What are you going to do with it?” Saoirse breathed.

“I’m going to destroy it,” Hasana replied swiftly, tucking it back into the satchel and clasping it closed. “Are you coming or not?”

“Let’s go,” Saoirse said, grabbing her outstretched hand. She didn’t know why she allowed Hasana to pull her up on the horse, or why she somehow trusted the princess

with her life. All she knew was that if she remained here in the camp she'd never be able to stop Selussa or prevent the coming storm that was sure to erupt once the witch collected all four Relics.

Saoirse settled behind Hasana, wrapping her arms around the princess tightly as the pegasus began galloping through the campsite, its wings outstretched. The horse began pumping its wings, its feathers catching the wind and slowly rising. Hasana guided the horse expertly through the sky, urging it to the arena.

Fear churned through Saoirse's stomach, tearing through her insides like a ravenous beast. She could be too late. If the trial had already begun and Selussa had made good on her promise to take her place, Rook could be lying dead in the sand. Revelorian onlookers raced from the arena, screaming in terror. Saoirse braced herself for the worst as they flew over the side of the amphitheatre, diving toward the arena itself.

A monster unlike anything she had ever seen was tearing through the sand, six heads writhing with rage and dripping with venom. Her heart dropped at the sight of Aurelia slashing at the dragon's leg, blood flowing down the side of her face. Several rebels on horseback were weaving between the hydra's serpentine necks, narrowly dodging its dagger-like teeth. Neia swooped down to Adresin Vasalor, hauling him up on her horse just as the hydra's spiked tail nearly impaled him in the chest. Other riders dove for the rest of the tributes, plucking them up from the sand with expert efficiency. Hasana signaled to a diving rider, pointing to where Aurelia fought one of the hydra's heads. The rider scooped her up from behind, throwing her over the saddle. Saoirse scanned the arena, fearing for the worst.

She caught sight of his gray wings first, crumpled in the sand. To her horror, Selussa was leaning over Rook, still wearing her skin. The dagger she clutched was dripping with dark blood. Hasana saw her too, and she urged her pegasus toward Selussa with haste. The horse dropped lower to the ground, flying only about a foot from the sand floor. The horse barreled into Selussa on Hasana's command, its powerful hooves

sending the Witch flying from Rook's body. Selussa flew several feet away, thrown against the earth in a spray of sand.

Saoirse leaped from the horse's back and sprinted to Rook, falling to her knees. Tears sprang to her eyes as she cupped his face in her palms. His head lolled to the side, his eyes rolling back into his head. Blood pooled at the corner of his mouth, leaking to the sand in a stream. A dark bloodstain bloomed on his tunic and flowed freely down his stomach. She pulled him up, shoving her shoulder under his arm as best she could. She waved frantically for help, praying that one of the rebels could save him.

Sune galloped over to them, and together they pulled Rook onto the saddle. Sune positioned himself behind Rook, wrapping his arms around him to stabilize his unconscious body. Blood poured everywhere, staining the white sand. So much blood.

"Go," Saoirse told Sune. "Take care of him."

Sune gave her a grave nod, kicking his heels against the horse's side. The pegasus galloped away and launched into the sky. Rook was lethally injured, but at least he was now safe.

Slowly, Saoirse turned around to face the Sea Witch. From where she had been thrown to the ground, Selussa pulled herself up with a groan. Gone was Saoirse's familiar hair and shimmering blue scales. The monster that rose from the sand was both hideous and beautiful, her black eyes shining with murderous rage. Selussa looked just as she had in the Fretum, her raven-black hair hanging to her waist and her claw-like fingernails twitching at her sides. She stared right at Saoirse, her all-consuming eyes glittering with malice. She smiled, revealing her sharpened white teeth.

Selussa held Rook's dagger.

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Saoirse went cold. There was only one way Selussa could possess the blade. It was hers only when Rook was dead. Saoirse shattered, her heart wrenched from her chest at the sight of the Witch sheathing the dagger of Aris. But instead of charging for her, Selussa ran toward the hydra, sprinting through the chaos of diving horses and riders.

Hasana appeared next to her, her pegasus rearing up on its heels. The Tellusun princess offered her a hand and hoisted her onto the saddle.

“We have to get out of here!” Saoirse yelled, watching in terror as Selussa headed straight for the hydra at the center of the arena. Hasana’s pegasus leapt into the sky, catching a gust of wind and soaring up to the clouds.

Below, Selussa broke the hydra’s chain, shattering the metal with a mere touch of her hand. Darkness and shadow emanated from her like a fog, wrapping around her body as she pulled herself onto the hydra’s back. The dragon seemed to sense the Sea Witch’s dark power, for it immediately submitted to her will. It reared up and shrieked, the sound ripping through the air like death incarnate. Upon the back of the great dragon, Selussa was more terrifying than Saoirse could’ve ever imagined.

“Titans. Who the Hel is that?” Hasana looked over her shoulder at Saoirse with a horrified expression.

“Fly faster!” Saoirse yelled through the wind. The hydra was unfurling its leathery black wings, obeying Selussa’s command. The dragon’s six heads roared in unison, a deafening sound that shook the forest around them. It took to the sky, hurling its gigantic body into the air with a mighty battle cry. Hasana’s pegasus soared through the clouds with frightening speed, urgently darting through the sky as the hydra flew

from the Stone Circle. But instead of following the band of winged horses, the hydra turned from the arena and changed direction.

The dragon headed for the Maeral Sea. For her people.

“We have to turn around!” Saoirse screamed. “We have to stop her!” But Hasana kept pushing forward, steering her pegasus toward the cloud of riders ahead of them. They were headed south, to the hot winds of the Shujaa Desert.

“Please,” she pleaded, watching in horror as Selussa and the hydra swept over the Aurandel woodlands and toward the Coast of Delore. Here on the back of the winged horse, she was completely helpless. She would fall to her death if she jumped, and she didn’t dare try to override Hasana’s control over the pegasus.

“No,” Hasana replied firmly over the wind. “Whatever that thing is, she isn’t our concern right now.”

“You don’t understand,” Saoirse yelled back, “Revelore is in danger. We must stop her!”

“Even if we turned around and followed her, we wouldn’t be able to stop the hydra.”

“That thing is more dangerous than you know,” Saoirse tried to explain over the roar of wind. “She is going to destroy my home. She is going to take revenge. We have to warn my father.”

“We can’t,” Hasana retorted. “It is too late.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as Saoirse watched Selussa over her shoulder. The witch was now a speck on the horizon, the hydra soaring over the blurry sweep of coastline in the distance. Tears streamed down her face and the wind stung her cheeks. Rook

was dead and now her kingdom would be too.

She had brought this fate to Elorshin. She had broken the bargain and in turn ignited Selussa's wrath. And her people would pay the price for her treachery.

There, on the back of the winged horse, Saoirse vowed to save Revelore with everything in her power. She wouldn't allow the rest of the continent to endure the same fate that her people would. She would make this right. She would take ownership of it all. Until her dying breath, she would fight to stop Selussa from gathering the Relics and awakening the Titans.

She would see the Witch fall.

30

ROOK

Rook drifted through the night sky.

He passed by constellations, so close that he could feel the heat of their flames on his skin. The endless sky was eternal, stretching for as far as the eye could see. Stars burned against the blanket of dark velvet, blazing brighter than they ever had before. The familiar constellations moved and shifted as he drifted by, undulating through the night as if they were alive.

There was the Tellusun huntress Vasia, her bow raised to the heavens. Rook watched as Vasia pulled back her bowstring and launched a shimmering, star-tipped arrow across the cosmos. There was the queen-warrior Cira, her star-studded sword lifted to the Titan of the sea, Charybdis. He passed the great soldier Aris, unsheathing his dagger and leading the rest of the constellations to battle. The mythological figures danced around him, shimmering with splendor.

He didn't know how long he drifted through the night sky. For all he knew, he might as well have been a constellation himself, tethered to the dark horizon for all time. Perhaps he had died in the arena, his soul ascending to the heavens as the blood drained from him.

Saoirse.

The memories returned to him slowly. He felt the sting of her dagger in his side, saw the hatred in her gaze as she laughed at his pain. Fractured pieces of consciousness began to fit together like shards of broken glass, none of them making sense but hurting all the same. He heard the cry of the hydra in his ears, and the stars around him shuddered.

Rook opened his eyes, now painfully awake. He was lying on something soft and cushioned. He felt the soft sheets beneath him and slowly inhaled. The air smelled of spices and warm earth. He tried to sit up, gasping in pain as searing heat surged through his abdomen. He looked down, wincing at the bandages wrapped tightly around his stomach. So it had been real. Saoirse had truly stuck a dagger in his side. Hatred warmed his skin.

Rook looked around the foreign room. He was sitting on a large canopied bed. Four tall posts stretched to the ceiling, sheer white fabric draped around the bed like a tent. Hazy light drifted in through curved windows beyond, filtered through by gauzy curtains. The terracotta floors were tiled with colorful, hand-painted squares of ivory, marbled by the golden afternoon sun. The walls were a burnt orange, smoothed with expert care. Gold accents were scattered through the luxurious room, and vases of ivory filled with green, leafy plants were settled in every corner.

He pushed open the fabric canopy, forcing himself up from the bed with a groan of pain. His wings were stiff as he rose, uncurling from days of disuse. He strode over to a window, clutching at his bandaged stomach with every labored step. The window

was open, letting in a swift breeze of hot air. He already knew what he would see as he pulled open the delicate swaths of curtains.

The Clay City. His gaze swept out across the sea of terracotta houses, taking in the familiar rise and fall of Behzad. Shining gold domes stood high above the smaller buildings and Tellusun flags waved in the breeze. The sun was bright over the city, searing and intense. And beyond the city, a sea of endless sand. He didn't know how he had gotten here. He had no memory of traveling through the Shujaa Desert.

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“You’re awake,” a voice said from behind him. Princess Hasana stood at the entrance of his room, her arms crossed as she leaned against the ornate doorway. Rook turned to her, instantly on the defensive. He instinctively reached to his hip, searching for his dagger.

“I’m sorry,” Hasana said sadly. “It is gone.” Sure enough, his dagger was nowhere to be found.

“How did I get here?” Rook demanded, narrowing his eyes at the Tellusun princess. “Where is my blade? What happened?”

“It’s a long story,” Hasana answered, completely unbothered by his biting tone. “You almost didn’t make it, you know. You lost so much blood that I thought you’d never wake again. I would’ve left you in the arena, but Saoirse insisted we take you.” His heart burned at the sound of her name.

“Tell me she isn’t here,” he seethed through tight lips. “You shouldn’t trust her. She tried to kill me.” Hasana gave him a sympathetic look, her eyes flashing.

“She is here,” the princess answered.

“Don’t let her near me,” Rook growled.

“It wasn’t her. The creature who tried to kill you was only wearing a disguise. Her name is Selussa. She used magic to take on Saoirse’s form.”

“She is a witch,” a voice called behind Hasana. The Tellusun princess stepped back,

letting someone else into the room. Saoirse entered his chamber, her eyes bright with relief at the sight of him. Rook's heart twisted with resentment as the Mer warrior strode forward.

"She is behind everything," Saoirse continued softly. She began to take another step closer, but she hesitated when she sensed his hostility. Hasana vanished from the doorway, giving them privacy.

"I made a bargain with Selussa," Saoirse admitted. "My father forbade me from competing in the Revelore Tournament. He turned the Maeral Sea against me and trapped me within Elorshin. So I did what I believed necessary. I turned to the Sea Witch so that she could break my father's hold."

Suspicion crept through Rook's heart. He knew where this conversation was leading, but he didn't want to face it.

"Selussa gave me the ability to overcome my father's will and compete in the Tournament. In return, I had to fulfill her requirements," she said slowly.

"What were her demands?" Rook rasped. His heart hardened into stone as Saoirse averted her eyes.

"I promised to kill you," she whispered.

And there it was. The truth was out. It didn't matter that Selussa had been the one to stab him in the arena. Saoirse had planned to kill him all along. She had known the whole time. It might as well have been her blade buried in his abdomen.

"Hel's teeth," he ground out. "All this time, you were planning on killing me. Every secret conversation we had, every exchange of affection; was it all done in the shadow of this bargain?"

“Yes and no,” Saoirse confessed. “At first I agreed to it easily enough. You are the heir of Aurandel. I was raised to hate your kind. Killing you wasn’t the worst choice,” she said candidly.

Rook scoffed, anger flickering in his heart like a growing flame.

“But, as I grew to know you, the last thing on my mind was fulfilling the bargain,” she continued. “Deep down, I knew I couldn’t go through with it. Not after I realized that you’re not some faceless evil. You’re a person just like me. A person whose ancestors and history do not define you.”

“When were you planning on informing me of this, Saoirse?” Rook seethed. “After we were tangled in each other’s arms in your tent? After I bore my soul to you? After I went directly against my instincts and defied my Queen’s orders?”

“I broke the bargain with Selussa on the morning of the third trial,” Saoirse tried to explain. “I was going to find you. I was going to tell you everything. But she appeared in my tent and silenced me before that could happen.” Rook began pacing the room, unable to keep still as her words stung him with each sentence.

“Why did she even ask this of you?” he asked. “She doesn’t know me. I’ve never even heard of this witch in my life.”

“She wanted your blade,” she answered. “It cannot be taken unless its bearer is killed.”

Her words hit him like a physical blow. Memories of his mother rushed forth in his mind, her face so calm as she died. “I did not intend for you to have it so soon. But now I bestow it upon you in the hour of my death. Protect it well.” It all made sense now. She had given it to him in her final moments, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to possess it until she was gone.

“Why would she want it?” Rook asked, emotion thick in his voice. “It was my mother’s dagger, a simple family heirloom. And where is it now? How did she steal it from me if I am still alive?”

“You died, for a brief moment. Before Hasana healed you with her restorative magic, your heart stopped beating for a minute. That is how Selussa stole it.”

He straightened, forcing his hands to stop from trembling. “You didn’t answer my first question. Why would this Selussa want my blade in the first place?”

“She believes it is the dagger of Aris,” Saoirse said softly. “The blade that stabbed the heart of Deinos in the great battle between the Titans and the Four Kinsmen thousands of years ago.” Rook let out a bitter, barked laugh.

“Do you even hear yourself?” he scoffed. “The Myths of Old are just that: myths. This dagger isn’t anything special.” My mother would’ve told me, a small part of him said. If she had known, surely she would have informed him of the blade’s importance.

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“I’m inclined to believe Selussa,” Saoirse argued. “I witnessed her do things that are only described in the legends. She knew things about King Lorsan and Princess Yrsa that no one alive today would have known. She has already collected one ancient Relic, the heart of Charybdis, Titan of the Sea. Her heart now takes the form of a dark Málmr pearl. Selussa would’ve acquired it a hundred years ago, had my great grandfather not imprisoned her in the Fretum. But I unknowingly retrieved it for her when I entered the Tournament. And now she possesses the dagger. There are only two Relics remaining.”

Rook wanted to believe that her ridiculous notions were fantasy, the delusions of a mad witch. But a part of him wondered if what she spoke of was true. He turned her words over one by one, trying to fit them together and make sense. He knew the legends, of course. Like every child in Revelore, the myths were told to him. Every time he looked at the night sky, he was reminded of the old stories of Revelore’s foundation. But never before had he considered them to be real.

“What does your great grandfather have to do with Selussa?” Rook asked.

“Selussa is a shapeshifter,” she began. “She bargains with people, taking their blood to solidify their agreement. She did the same to Princess Yrsa a hundred years ago. Selussa killed Yrsa and impersonated her, marrying King Lorsan in her stead. Just as she did with me when I failed to fulfill our bargain.”

“What?” Rook breathed. His mind was racing, unable to process her words. If what Saoirse was saying was true, then all of the animosity between Aurandel and Elorshin stemmed from the Sea Witch’s trickery, not from simple selfishness and greed from their ancestors. They had all been misled, convinced of a warped reality that had been

conceived by some ancient monster.

“It will make sense if you stop to think about it,” Saoirse told him. “You and I both have different versions of the story. Your people claim to have no knowledge of Yrsa’s secret messages or her assignment to kill Lorsan. And my people also cannot prove that the raids on our trading posts were carried out by Aurandel. It seems to me that Selussa spoke the truth.”

Rook stopped pacing and the room seemed to spin. If he had thought his understanding of the world had shattered before, it was now being completely rewritten. The information Eros and Veila had disclosed to him before the third trial flooded his mind: “A hundred years ago, after the war, the Elders determined that Aurandel should rule. It was the Elders who first instructed your grandparents to kill all remaining tributes in the Tournament. Aurandel is a chosen people, divinely appointed to rule the continent.”

It all started to connect, like the bright stars in a constellation that formed a greater picture. If High Elder Adda Carew had taken Saoirse to the Sea Witch, then it was undeniable that the Order knew about the bargain. But what dark purpose did they have in enforcing the procedure of killing off the other tributes?

“What happened after Selussa tried to kill me?” he asked darkly. If what the witch claimed was true, Revelore was truly in danger.

“She fled with the hydra,” Saoirse answered. She sighed warily and closed her eyes. “The last I saw of her, she was heading for the Coast of Delore, toward the Maeral Sea.” Her voice cracked with emotion as she said the words.

“Hel’s teeth,” Rook cursed. “She is going to take revenge on your people, then?”

Saoirse nodded, saying nothing.

“And after that, she will come for the rest of the Relics. Scattered to the far corners of Revelore, right?” he asked. “One is here in Bezhad with Hasana, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Saoirse answered. “Selussa will likely come here next.”

“What is she doing with these Relics?” he asked. “What twisted purpose does she have in collecting them?” It had to be connected, all of it. The Order of Elders and the Tournament. Eros and Veila’s orders to kill all remaining tributes. The Relics and the Crown.

“I don’t know,” Saoirse replied. The emotion in her eyes hardened into anger. “But I’m going to find out before she gathers them all.” She curled her hands into fists, her fingernails biting into her palms.

“What happened to my sister?” Rook suddenly asked, his heart thundering in his chest. The last time he had seen her was within the underground chambers below the arena. “Is Raven alright?”

“She is still in Aurandel. She returned to Coarinth right after the hydra escaped and the revolutionaries left the Stone Circle.” Saoirse hesitated for a moment, her mouth opening as if she wanted to say more. But she shut her lips and averted her gaze.

“Tell me,” Rook demanded. “Whatever it is you have to say, just tell me.”

“Raven has declared war on Tellusun,” Saoirse reluctantly admitted. “Aurandel is preparing for battle.”

Rook breathed slowly, attempting to steady himself. “Why would she do this?”

“Hasana and the revolutionaries stole the Crown of Revelore.”

Rook let out a string of foul-mouthed curses, resuming his anxious pacing around the room. It all made sense now. The uprisings in Meysam and Bezhad should've told him all that he needed to know. Hasana had likely planned the heist for months, maybe even years. And he had led her right to the Crown. He remembered her face when she first saw the Crown in the library. He had shown her where it was hidden and revealed how she could access it. And then the Tellusun princess used the cover of the final trial to break into the Citadel and claim it for herself while everyone was distracted. It was all his fault.

"What will she do with it? Claim to be the rightful ruler of Revelore?" he ground out.

"She's going to destroy it," Saoirse replied.

Rook ran his fingers through his hair wearily, the weight of everything suddenly settling on his shoulders like a thousand stones. He couldn't believe it, and yet the truth seemed impossible to deny. "So what happens now?" he whispered, finally daring to look her in the eyes. The tangle of emotions between them was complicated and indiscernible, muddling the chaos of the world around them even further. He hated her. He wanted her. He couldn't trust her.

"We prepare for war. And hopefully you will join us."

"You expect me to stand aside while the world challenges my sister and crushes my people?" he breathed. "I don't trust Hasana or the rebellion, and neither should you." He swept across the room again, his feathers agitated and his wings itching to take flight. "Don't think for a second that Hasana does not have other plans for the Crown. There are always ulterior motives at play. There is always more." He stared at her with heat in his eyes, heat like the burning coals of a fire. "You above anyone you should know that."

She said nothing, merely crossing her arms. She didn't so much as flinch at his

loathing tone. After a heartbeat, she said, “I’m sure that Hasana is keeping secrets from me. No cunning ruler would lay all her cards on the table.” She stared back at him, her eyes bright with intensity. Bright with challenges and secrets of her own. “But I must take the risk. Even as we speak, Selussa is preparing to lay waste to my country and seize the remaining Relics. I can’t afford to hold Hasana and the radicals at arm’s length.” Her bright eyes grew cold and haunted. “I have lost everything. There is nothing holding me back.”

He believed her. In the depth of her eyes, sorrow churned like the white-foamed rapids of the Adonis River. If she wasn’t careful, those waves of despair would pull her under. And what she might become if she gave into the pull of that maelstrom gave him pause. A warrior with nothing to lose was someone to be afraid of. Someone incredibly dangerous. At that moment, he decided to relent. He would go along with her plans, align himself with the Princess Hasana of the Clay City and her radicals. He was alone here, a prisoner in a foreign land. He had little other choice.

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But just as the courts of Revelore had many secrets, so too would he. He warned Saoirse of Hasana's ulterior motives, but she'd be a fool not to consider that he might harbor his own. He would find a way to make this right. No matter how many people he would have to deceive.

"Alright," he said in a flinty tone. "Let us gather a war counsel. We will go to battle."

31

SAOIRSE

Saoirse hurried from Rook's rooms, the cold look in his eyes chasing her out like the frigid whisper of winter. She could still feel his hostile gaze on her back. Her clipped footsteps echoed through the terracotta halls, echoing the pounding of her frantic heart.

When they had flown to the city of Bezhad in the Shujaa Desert, Saoirse held onto the tattered shreds of hope that he might be able to forgive her. They had traveled across the continent for several days, soaring high above the jungled Isles of Mythos in a long train of winged horses and carriages. If they had been on foot, they would've been wading through treacherous, python-filled swamps and tangles of roots for weeks. They arrived in the Tellusun capital in a matter of days. Saoirse had expected to see the city in ruins and the streets ransacked after the uprising. Instead, Bezhad was celebrating, its people singing songs of Tellusun and praising Princess Hasana for leading them to freedom. The Aerial soldiers who had occupied the city for the last eight years had vanished, seemingly called away by their Queen in Aurandel.

While Hasana periodically tended to Rook and kept him clinging to life, Saoirse had tried to prepare herself for the worst. But his disdain for her once his life had been restored hurt more than his death ever could. Gone was the tentative familiarity that had bloomed between them over the Tournament, easing out of their hearts like the new buds of spring. Whatever had begun to grow was now silenced, shriveled up and shredded like a trampled garden. The hardest part of it all was that she understood his change of heart perfectly. She had vowed to kill him, and even if she never planned on following through with the bargain, the truth of it had now wedged itself between them.

It is for the best, she told herself as she slipped around the corners of the foreign palace. There was no point in cultivating their feelings or engaging in stolen dalliances now. Revelore was on the brink of war, and it was better not to have complicated entanglements to deal with. Even so, it stung to see his eyes shift from admiration to hatred and mistrust.

Saoirse stopped and leaned against a stone wall. She closed her eyes, trying to catch her breath. Today marked two weeks since she had first stepped foot on the surface. Her lungs were sore and ragged, and her skin never seemed to get enough moisture. In the dry heat of Shujaa Desert, she had never longed for the Maeral Sea more. Tears suddenly pricked at her eyes at the thought of home. Kellam Keep was likely destroyed now, if the reports of the Tellusun scouts were to be trusted.

She slid down the wall, her back pressed against the hardened clay. She collapsed, and tears burned down her cheeks. Although it had been days since Selussa had disappeared from the Stone Circle on the back of her nightmarish hydra, she was still in a state of horrified disbelief. Memories of home crashed against her like the vicious waves of a hurricane, haunting her every step. She didn't know what had become of her people or what Selussa had done to her father. She almost didn't want to know. Her fingernails dug into her palms, scoring them with crescents.

“Saoirse,” a soft voice called. Hasana stood in the hall, bathed in the warm light of the afternoon. The golden glow that crowned the princess reminded Saoirse of the healing power that had pried her out of the Sea Witch’s stupor and restored Rook back to life.

It had been a shock at first, to learn of Hasana’s incredible power. Saoirse had known that descendants of the Royal Yerimya line possessed the ability of Healing in the ancient past, but it had been a complete surprise to learn that the heir to the Tellusun throne was a Healer. Courtier spies should’ve reported her abilities to the other nations of Revelore, but somehow Hasana’s powers had gone unreported and unknown. Saoirse had thought she knew all there was to know about the monarchs of Revelore. She had studied every political movement and every distant relative of the major Revelorian ancestries. The knowledge that such secrets still remained terrified her. How many other nations hid secret powers and weapons to be used against them when they least expected it?

“Come with me,” Hasana demanded, offering her a hand. Saoirse took the princess’s outstretched hand, pushing up from the ivory tiled floor. She wiped the tears from her face and followed Hasana through the sunlit halls, her eyes catching on the scenery outside. Open windows dazzled her with stunning views of the Clay City, composed of twisting streets and buildings of various shades of reds, oranges, and golds. Towering palm trees fanned across the terrain, lush and green against the clay houses. Sloping beyond the sprawling city, ripples of sand dunes rose and fell like the shifting tides of the sea. For as far as the eye could see, they were entombed in endless waves of sand.

“How did Prince Rook take everything?” Hasana asked over her shoulder. Her loose desert robes billowed as they turned a corner, stark white against the terracotta halls.

“As best as anyone could have in his situation,” Saoirse answered honestly. “I believe he will join your cause, if that is what you’re asking.”

Hasana nodded. “Good. His presence on our side will be valuable. Perhaps he can even negotiate with his sister for us.”

Does he have a choice? Saoirse thought to herself. She had no doubt that the cunning princess would hold Rook as a prisoner if he didn’t agree to join the resistance. Raven was no doubt already scheming ways to rescue him, and he was too valuable a bargaining piece to be allowed to leave. She and Hasana weren’t exactly friends, but they were allies. Even so, Saoirse knew that the Tellusun princess would use her to advance the cause whether she went willingly or not. It had been a deliberate choice to take her with the rebels, that much she was certain of. It would’ve been much simpler to leave Saoirse, Sune, and Aurelia behind to die. Hasana needed them.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t inform you of the rebellion’s intentions sooner,” the Tellusun princess offered as they rounded a corner. “But I couldn’t risk the mission. And I didn’t trust you yet. But now you are here. You are one of us now.”

They abruptly stopped before a huge stone door. Interlocking cogs and wheels covered the entire surface, forming an intricate lock at its center. A burnished metal locking mechanism glinted in the light, shaped into the blazing sun of House Yerimya. Hasana reached out a hand to the metal insignia, glowing threads of light racing to her palms. Saoirse tried not to balk as light radiated from Hasana’s hand and seeped into the lock like molten gold spilling from her fingers. The bronze cogs began to shift at her touch, spinning against each other and prying the door apart. The door opened slowly, swinging with a gentle hiss of metal against stone.

The darkened room was shadowed, only illuminated by burning sconces of eternal flame that flickered along the walls. The light from the hallway was blotted out as the door locked into place behind them, sealing them within. Saoirse grew wary, her fingers instinctively resting on the sword at her hip as the world outside vanished. Though she knew Hasana wouldn’t harm her, that didn’t mean she could be trusted yet.

The room gradually brightened as Hasana's glowing palms flooded the shadows with golden light. Their footsteps echoed through the windowless room and the swish of their desert clothing whispered across the clay floor. Saoirse kept her eyes on the darkened corners, still on edge. The walls were covered in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that housed hundreds of ancient texts and aged scrolls of parchment. Various shining artifacts sat amongst the books, including a large telescope with several adjustable lenses. Her eyes roved over rolled maps of Revelore, cracked pieces of terracotta pottery, and a collection of ancient weapons. Glittering jewels sat displayed in crystal-encrusted cases, likely centuries old.

"No one outside of House Yerimya has ever beheld the Huntress's Relic," Hasana whispered. Shadows were cast on the sharp contours of her face, her eyes glowing with the same molten gold that shone in her hands. "Until the final day of the Tournament, I didn't understand the significance of it," the princess went on, leading them through the vault. "I thought the Huntress's Relic was simply a family heirloom, an echo of the Great Peace thousands of years ago. But it all makes sense now. The Four Kinsmen left behind the Relics of Old on purpose. Each kingdom of Revelore was given a piece of living history."

Hasana stopped before a glass case that was wrapped in shining gold chains. Saoirse looked over Hasana's shoulder, gasping at the object before her. Within the display, an arrow glinted in the torchlight. The arrow was as solid as a gemstone, made entirely from vibrant red ruby.

"This is the arrow of Vasia, Great Huntress of Tellusun. It is said that the arrow turned to solid diamond when she pierced a star and shot it from the sky," Hasana recalled wistfully. "But it was actually cut from ruby in the great forges of Behzad. This arrow was created so that Vasia could defeat the Titan of the Desert, Nasoor the Cunning."

"It is real," Saoirse breathed in disbelief.

“In truth, until I saw Selussa with my own eyes, I didn’t believe in the divine nature of this arrow,” Hasana confessed. “I was told the folklore, just as you were. But it never crossed my mind that such mythology was real history.” She looked over her shoulder at Saoirse, her dark braid slipping down her back. “Selussa will come for this. We must protect it from her at all costs. I may not understand what she needs the Relics for, but I do know that if she collects them all, Revelore is doomed.”

“We must send word to Terradrin that Selussa will come for their Relic,” Saoirse suddenly realized. “King Grivur must secure it as soon as possible.” Hasana lowered her gaze, a frown etched on her face. “What? What’s wrong?” Saoirse asked.

“My informants tell me that Grivur has chosen to ally himself with Aurandel,” Hasana answered with a grimace. “Though Neia Landum has joined our cause and recruited several thousand Terradrin soldiers, the remaining army of the Under Kingdom is still loyal to Grivur. They will fight with Aurandel.”

Saoirse’s heart fell. With the might of Terradrin and Aurandel against them, the odds of triumph were growing slimmer by the minute.

“I’m guessing that the Under Kingdom is sealed up now? And Grivur will never listen to any messages of warning we might send him. Terradrin is vulnerable to Selussa’s attack,” Saoirse sighed.

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“Correct. Even if we tried to make contact, Queen Raven’s Aerial spies would no doubt intercept our messages. Terradrin and Aurandel do not know of Selussa’s intentions, and they would never believe us if we tried to tell them,” Hasana said darkly.

“We can’t let Selussa get that Relic.” Saoirse paced around the vault. “There must be another way.”

“Neia Landum has proposed a heist,” Hasana offered, crossing her arms across her chest. She raised a dark eyebrow and surveyed Saoirse’s doubtful expression before continuing. “Though it is dangerous, it may be possible to steal the Terradrin Relic from the Under Kingdom. It could be hidden better if it is always on the move in the hands of the resistance.”

“How will the rebels get to Terradrin? We cannot pass through Aurandel skies unnoticed, and traveling by foot is out of the question. We don’t have time to make a months’ long journey.”

“There are still details to work out, of course. We can travel by sea and arrive on Terradrin shores quickly.”

“I don’t see how that could work,” Saoirse countered, putting her hands on her hips. “Aurandel and Terradrin will have their eyes on Tellusun and the Maeral Sea. But even if we were to arrive without detection, it still won’t be fast enough. Selussa could be heading there as we speak.”

“Selussa has not been sighted since she entered Elorshin a week ago,” Hasana

explained. “It is my understanding that she has not yet departed from Kellam Keep.”

Saoirse’s heart wrenched at the thought. She couldn’t imagine the horrors that Selussa was putting her people through. Fresh fury churned through her blood. She would do anything to save Elorshin and the rest of Revelore from the Witch’s malice.

“If Selussa has not been sighted, then we must take the risk,” Saoirse said decidedly. “We’ll need to create a diversion. If we can draw Aurandel and Terradrin’s forces elsewhere, we can sneak into the Under Kingdom before Selussa arrives. But we need to depart quickly.” She continued to pace, her hands closing into fists. It was dangerous. One wrong move could end in disaster.

“It is a risk the rebellion is willing to take,” Hasana conceded. “Our priority has shifted from overthrowing Aurandel to protecting our world from Selussa and the Titans. We now share the same purpose that our ancestors once held at the dawn of time. And just as the Four Kinsmen were triumphant in banishing the Titans from Revelore, so too shall we be victorious against Selussa.”

She was so confident, her glowing eyes bright with hope. Saoirse could see now why Hasana was the leader that the resistance had rallied around. Merely being in Hasana’s presence gave her a measure of courage that hadn’t been there before.

“Can you instruct your rebels to gather any materials about the Myths of Old?” Saoirse asked. “We should learn what we are up against if we want any chance of winning. Now that the Elders of Revelore have made their intentions known and serve Selussa, they will be of no help to us. We have to find the answers on our own.”

Hasana nodded. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but she pursed her lips in hesitation. After a beat of silence, she said, “There is one who may be able to help us. He is a scholar of ancient history and a former Elder of Terradrin. His name is Tezrus, and he resides in the Soundless Oasis. If there is anyone we could consult about mythology, it is him.”

“Then we shall travel to this Soundless Oasis at once,” Saoirse said. “We can leave as early as tomorrow.”

“It is dangerous,” Hasana warned her. “The Desert may be unforgiving, but the Oasis is merciless.”

“I will do whatever it takes,” Saoirse retorted. “If there is even a chance that Tezrus can help us, it is worth every risk. I will go myself.”

“Then it is decided,” Hasana said approvingly. “You shall seek out the Oasis at first light. Unfortunately, I must remain here to plan out the heist with Neia and guard Behzad. I will send a guide with you in my stead.”

She turned from the Huntress’s Relic, guiding Saoirse back to the entrance of the vault. As they walked through the cavern, her heart began to race. Once she started down this path, there was no turning back. Hasana stopped before the door, looking over her shoulder at Saoirse.

“Are you ready?” she asked, her golden eyes radiant in the shadows.

“Yes,” Saoirse replied, more sure of this than anything in her life.

A slow smile crept across Hasana’s face. She nodded and pushed open the door. Light flooded the darkness, and Saoirse stepped forward without fear.

Epilogue

SELUSSA

Selussa stood before the open gates of the Fretum, gazing up at the prison walls with a smile on her lips. For a hundred years, she had planned her escape, waiting for the day when she would be free.

“Whatever you are planning, it won’t work,” a voice rasped. Selussa looked down at the huddled form of King Angwin and smirked. The thick iron chains that coiled around his body dug into his flesh. She yanked on the chain, and he hissed with pain as the metal tore at his bruised skin.

He had fought hard, considering the odds. When she arrived at the gates of Kellam Keep with her army of imprisoned monsters long starved in the Fretum, he stood his ground and refused to flee. But armed with the dagger of Aris and the blood thirsty creatures she had feed, he and his army hadn’t stood a chance. She had savored the feeling of crushing Kellam, the city she had grown to hate almost as much as those who had banished her to the Fretum all those years ago. Screams had resounded through the city streets as her ancient army destroyed the capital with their tentacles, teeth, and spiked tails.

“Stop your pitiful protestations, little king,” she ordered. “It is unkingly of you. Besides, who will stop me, Angwin? Your daughter abandoned you here,” she cackled. “No no one will save you now.”

Selussa summoned a blast of seawater, and the ocean obediently obeyed her command. She never grew tired of the power that now lurked in her veins, stolen from the Mer Princess. She ordered the swell of waves to carry Angwin into the endless black water of Fretum. The Mer king was helpless as the ocean rallied against him, sending him tumbling into the darkness in a torrent of churning water.

“Just as your grandfather Isandros banished me into this Helish prison, so too shall you be banished within these walls until the end of your days,” Selussa vowed. She raised her hands, calling the sea to herself once more. The might of the Maeral Sea churned and foamed like a maelstrom on the horizon, shifting the gates of the Fretum closed. The stone rumbled through the ocean, shaking the sea floor as the great walls were sealed closed. When the gates were sealed, the sea finally stilled and all was quiet. Selussa smiled to herself, her fingers curling instinctively around the dark pearl that hung from a chain around her neck.

How her siblings would praise her when they finally woke from their eternal slumber.