



Kingdoms of Tides and Twilight

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Category: Romance, Fantasy

Description: Forced to leave Grayden for her own safety, Renya still finds herself captured by the ruthless Shadow Queen. Yet in the face of mortal danger, Renya's full powers are finally unleashed – awakening a fated bond with Grayden that transcends worlds.

As Renya struggles to master her newfound abilities, she and Grayden must navigate their intensifying connection while preparing for an inevitable confrontation with the Shadow Queen. With dragons at her command and dark magic at her fingertips, the queen will stop at nothing to claim Renya's power for herself.

War looms on the horizon as an ancient prophecy unfolds. Renya faces an impossible choice between love and duty, two worlds, light and darkness – with the fate of an entire realm hanging in the balance.

Return to this richly-imagined world of fading magic and epic destiny in the spellbinding second installment of *A World of Sun and Shadows*!

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Chapter One

Grayden didn't wait for the portal behind him to permanently close before turning his back on it. He couldn't shoulder the pain of seeing it destroyed and evaporating into the cool, thin air. The portal was his only link left to Renya. The finality of watching it disappear was unbearable. While he understood it had to be done to protect Renya, it didn't make it any easier. He'd never be able to find her again or bring her back. Even if his full powers were restored and he defeated Cressida, he wouldn't know where in time and space to retrieve her from.

Grayden knew Renya would come with him in a heartbeat if he could reach her. Seeing her Aunt Agatha gave her the closure she needed to stay in their world. But no. That evil witch of a queen had once again ruined his life.

He hated her. Grayden's jaw clenched, his hands balling into fists at his sides. The lump in his throat dissolved as heat crawled up his neck, flushing his face. His vision blurred for a moment, not from the tears that had threatened to fall, but from the red haze of fury that now consumed him. His chest heaved with each ragged breath, his pulse pounding in his ears like drums of war. Defeating Queen Cressida was previously the means to an end for him, not something he was looking forward to. He had to destroy her to save his world. But now...it was personal. Grayden would be the one to end her. He imagined the satisfaction he would feel, plunging his knife through her black heart. But even as he visualized it in his mind, the horror on her pale white face as he stopped her beating heart, there was no relief. Her death would never bring Renya home, the one thing he desired most.

With one last fleeting glimpse at the shimmering portal, he directed Lightning

towards the lodge and took off, fighting the urge to look over his shoulder as he rode.

Grayden should have spent the ride back to his home planning and strategizing, trying to figure out how to keep his lands safe, but his mind wouldn't cooperate. Every time a solid idea came to him, it slithered away before he could catch it, like a slippery eel avoiding the net. All he could do was mourn the loss of Renya and the future he had been foolish enough to imagine for them. He had envisioned them safely at the lodge, her preparing for some gala ball. They used to hold balls all the time before his parents died. Renya would have been happy, conspiring with Selenia and reading by the fire in the library. At night, his bed would be hers and they would have fallen asleep in each other's arms.

Grayden scolded himself. He needed to stop that line of thinking. It would only lead to madness and irrefutable heartbreak.

He rode on, his eyes unseeing. However, as he approached a large snow drift, something black caught his eye. He stopped Lightning and dismounted, eyeing the strange parcel half-buried on the hill. Grayden sank to his knees and brushed the snow off it. His nose picked up the faintest trace of Renya. Heart pounding, he pulled a black leather bag out of the drift. This was hers. He examined the strange bag. It had a tag on it with her name. Renya Solaris. Grayden never knew her surname. Of course it was Solaris; it was obvious which fae line she belonged to.

She must have lost the bag when she came through the portal, before he found her in the forest. He crouched down lower and looked at the odd fastener on the satchel before realizing it slid down. He carefully opened it and saw some snow-white parchment with blue lines all over it, and what he assumed were writing utensils in the human world. There was a pocket mirror and some cosmetics. The bag still felt heavy after he emptied it, so he searched inside until he found a hidden pocket. Tucked safely away was an old and aging book. He lifted it carefully out of its hiding spot and read the cover. The Tale of Peter Rabbit. He flipped through the pages,

reading bits here and there as he thumbed through it. It was a book of children's tales. The book must mean something to Renya if she brought it with her and hid it away so securely. Grayden carefully tucked the book inside his shirt next to his chest and threw the bag over his shoulder. He'd take these with him; there was no way he could leave any part of Renya in the forest. Grayden would hide the items in his room and remember her at night in the quiet moments he spent alone. He would mourn her loss for as long as he had breath in his lungs.

The journey home was a blur for Grayden. He couldn't remember seeing any of the trails and had no recollection of even passing through the village on his way up to the lodge. Luckily, Lightning knew where he was going because Grayden was not an active participant in getting them home.

When Grayden approached the near-empty courtyard, he saw Selenia waiting for him, her scarlet ringlets whipping around in the chilling wind. She ran over to him, tears wetting her eyes. Grayden slid off of Lightning and stood in front of her wordlessly, his eyes hollow and his strong shoulders sagging.

Selenia reached out her arms to him, and he let her pull him into a tight embrace. Grayden was afraid to speak, fearful his emotions would betray him, and he'd break down right there in the courtyard in front of his sister.

Yet he was grateful for Selenia. She shared his pain and would mourn the loss of Renya as well. The pair had become quite close while she was here, just as he had hoped and imagined.

Selenia lifted her head and looked at him.

"I'm so sorry, brother," she said, the tears in her eyes threatening to overflow. "I'm sorry Brandle took her instead of me. I'm so sorry you had to send her back to her world. Jurel and Charly told me what transpired in the Sunset Land and I feel like it's

all my fault.”

She tipped her face up to Grayden's before dropping it back to the ground. The snowflakes collected in the hood of her purple cloak. Grayden recognized it as the one Renya had worn to the Sky Lights Festival. His mind flashed back to that near-perfect evening as a ghost vision of Renya, resplendent in her midnight blue gown, flashed across his mind.

“You can't blame yourself, Selenia. Either way, the Shadow Queen was going to find out about Renya.” Grayden's voice caught in his throat, the single syllable of her name scraping against his vocal cords like sandpaper. He swallowed hard, fighting to maintain his composure as the taste of her name on his lips sent a sharp pang through his chest. His fingers curled into his palms, nails biting into flesh, as he forced out the rest of his words. Each syllable felt like a shard of glass, cutting him anew as he spoke aloud the name he'd only dared to whisper in his mind since she vanished. “I was a fool to think I could conceal her. I should have never taken her outside of the lodge. I should have sent her home the moment I found her. I shouldn't have stopped until I found a way to open a portal for her. I should have written to Queen Kalora and begged—”

“Grayden, you don't mean that,” Selenia said gently. “If you had sent her back sooner, you wouldn't have fallen in love with her.”

Grayden looked down at Selenia's sweet face. Her button nose was pink from the cold. “You know how I feel?” He kicked a piece of gravel in the yard, feeling a bit awkward about discussing his feelings towards Renya with Selenia.

“It was obvious to me,” she said. “Tumwalt and the others were too blind and busy to see it. But I could tell. What you felt for her was real. I know it hurts now, but you don't regret loving her, do you?”

Grayden thought of the way Renya's golden hair had rested softly against his chest in the tent after she'd stitched him up. He remembered their passionate kiss in the hallway before Selenia had interrupted them. He reflected back to their final moments together in the snow cave and the desperation he had felt to make her his. No. He wouldn't take those moments back for anything.

Selenia smiled at him sadly, understanding the memories brought him both happiness and despair. Grayden put his arm around his sister, and they walked into the lodge together, large flakes of snow drifting around them.

"How's Phillippe?" Grayden asked, eager to try and get his mind off his emotional turmoil.

"He's doing a lot better," Selenia replied, taking off her cloak and hanging it on a slender hook by the solid oak door. Grayden's eyes fixated on the purple cloak for a few seconds before looking back at his sister. "He's already been in the yard practicing. He said he's incredibly out of shape and it's your fault."

"Of course, he'd blame it on me." Perhaps he'd spar with Phillippe tonight. He needed to throw himself back into ruling his lands. He was willing to give it all up for Renya, but now she was gone, and he must protect his people at any cost.

A rush of guilt suddenly rippled through him. Grayden had been ready to sacrifice his birthright for her life in the Sunset Land. Is that what love was? Did it make you foolish and impulsive? But even now, he knew he would still make the trade.

At least she was safe, back with her aunt. Agatha said she was going to take Renya somewhere warm. They couldn't go back to California, she told Grayden, but she mentioned some other place that was warm and tropical. He imagined Renya in the bikini she described to him, at the beach, warm sand between her toes and the sun shining down on her. The thought brought him some relief, thinking about her safe

and loved in the human realm. He'd cling to those images of her and write stories about her life in his mind, just as she did in the nightmare dungeon to keep herself sane. Perhaps it would save his sanity, too. She had already saved him in so many other ways.

Grayden gave Selenia another warm embrace before heading up the stairs. No one followed him, and it seemed odd to him that Tumwalt wasn't there to greet him as soon as he returned. Tumwalt always had words for him and papers to sign. Grayden wondered if Selenia told everyone to give him some space. He was grateful for it, no matter how it came about. Grayden wasn't willing to talk about it with anyone who didn't know how truly painful it was.

He stopped in the hallway outside of his room, turning toward the bedchamber that was Renya's for the short time she was here. He looked up and down the hall, feeling embarrassed about intruding. But she wasn't coming back to claim it, and at some point Doria would have to go through the room. Before that happened, he wanted one last glimpse of it. It would hurt, but he wanted to get the pain over with so he could attempt to move on.

The second he pushed open the door, the sweet smell of lilacs and vanilla hit him. He saw the cream blanket she slept with, and a nightdress Doria laid out that Renya would never wear. He reached out his hand, and with nimble fingers he followed the line of pink ribbon at the collar. Swallowing hard, he tried to compel himself to walk out of this room and summon Doria to clean it out. But he just couldn't help himself, no matter how painful it was.

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His feet carried him over to the wooden wardrobe in the corner. He opened it and looked inside. The gorgeous gown she had worn to the Sky Lights Festival hung gracefully inside. Another pang of sadness threatened to choke him as he wondered what he should do with her belongings. Keep them in this room? Bring them to his chambers and hide them away, a reminder of what he lost? Grayden turned towards the center of the room, preparing to leave, acknowledging the decision should be made later when everything wasn't so raw.

A rainbow prism caught his eye, and he gravitated towards the small table beside her bed and saw the pair of snowflake clips, sparkling in the light from the large windows.

He took them into his palm, closing his fist around the clips and fighting back the wave of emotion that came over him. He held them tightly, the shape leaving a snowflake imprint in his hand. Grayden walked out and closed the door behind him, leaning against it for support.

Once in his bedchamber, he carefully put the clips on his desk and started to undress. As he removed his tunic, the book he found in the woods fell to the floor with a soft thud. Grayden picked it up and tenderly stroked the cover. Without thinking about it, he took the book over to his inner chamber and stashed it underneath his pillow and moved the clips she had worn so prettily on top of his side table. With a deep, soul-shattering sigh, Grayden sank to his bed, closing his eyes and wishing for sleep to take him and ease his heart of the pain.

Chapter Two

Renya's fingers clawed at the scorching sand, each grain searing her palms as she gasped for air. Her chest heaved, lungs burning as they struggled to expand. The world spun violently, her stomach churning with each labored breath. Two portals in mere minutes—it was too much. Her body, still weak from the nightmare dungeon's torments, trembled with exhaustion. The raw ache in her heart, fresh from leaving Grayden behind, only amplified her physical agony.

A salty breeze caressed her face, carrying the strong scent of seaweed and brine. Without opening her eyes, Renya knew she was far from the Snow Lands. The oppressive heat pressed down on her like a heavy blanket. A violent cough tore through her throat, the briny air scraping her raw lungs. She retched, but only thin strings of saliva dribbled from her lips, leaving a bitter taste on her tongue.

Cold, hard hands pulled her up and forced her to her feet. Renya squinted against the bright light and gingerly opened her eyes. She tried to wiggle away as the Shadow Queen peered at her intensely and with disgust. Renya's eyes met her violet ones and she thought she detected fear. What could Cressida possibly be afraid of? It made no sense, but Renya would use any vulnerability she could exploit. She stood strong and stared at the Shadow Queen, threatening her with a look of contempt. This monster was the reason she had to leave Grayden behind.

For the first time, Renya got a good look at Cressida. Deep lines ran the length of her forehead, with heavy make-up caked into the creases. Renya noticed she was older than she had originally appeared, maybe in her fifties. Much too old for Grayden, Renya thought. He deserved someone young and full of life. Someone willing to make the sacrifices necessary for his lands and his world.

Cressida's lips were thin, and Renya could tell now that she enlarged them with the blood red lipstick she wore. While her raven black hair was indeed shiny and full, up close it was evident that streaks of gray had started at the roots.

Almost as though she felt Renya's scrutiny, the Shadow Queen suddenly released her. Renya fell to her knees and sank into the soft peach-colored sand, her tired legs unable to support her in time to brace her fall.

"Take her away. I don't want to look at her until I'm ready for the ritual," the Shadow Queen said, wiping her hands on her dress as if Renya was carrying some kind of contagious disease.

A wave of fear passed through Renya and bile threatened to make its way up her throat. A ritual? What was Cressida going to do to her?

Another pair of hands grabbed her, but this time they were gentle. She looked up and met Sion's warm brown eyes. He instantly put a finger to his lips, reminding her she wasn't supposed to know who he was. Renya could never forget her savior in the Sunset Land and the respite he provided from the nightmare dungeon.

Hands on Renya's shoulders, Sion roughly led her away from the shore back into a line of tropical trees. Similar to palm trees, only shorter and a brilliant green, they loomed in the background. He motioned for her to sit and she did, grateful to no longer be on her aching legs. Renya cast her gaze out towards the horizon. Not even a wisp of cloud cover protected her from the brutal glare of the sun, which felt much more intense here, hotter than she'd experienced in California. Renya tried to scoot back farther into the protective shade of the palm trees, but they were scarce on the beach and couldn't shelter her from the cruel rays of the sweltering sun. She felt like a minuscule ant trapped under a magnifying glass, waiting to burn. There was nothing in front of her but water and sand, and the lone portal reflecting over the sea. The ocean was a beautiful seafoam green, turning into a dark emerald closer to the horizon. The color reminded her of Grayden's eyes.

Grayden's face flashed in Renya's mind, his green eyes filled with worry. Was he desperately searching for her, aware of her second abduction? The uncertainty of her

location gnawed at her—was this still his world, or had she been thrust into yet another realm? Sion's presence kindled a flicker of hope; if he was here, perhaps she remained in Grayden's time and place. A warm surge of relief coursed through her as the realization struck—Sion could be her lifeline to Grayden. He would come for her, she was certain. Her thoughts then pivoted to Aunt Agatha. Renya's eyes darted around, searching for any sign of her aunt's familiar form. The absence was confusing to Renya; why would the Shadow Queen risk leaving such a formidable opponent behind?

Unless...a chill ran down Renya's spine as she considered the implications of her aunt's disappearance, her mind racing with possibilities and fears. Would Cressida go back and kill her when this was over?

Renya heard a thunderous crack roar through the humid air, and she turned toward the source of the noise. The shimmery portal that she was pushed through combusted. Tiny pieces of sparkling silver dust floated through the air before a breeze took them out to sea. Cressida lowered her hands, pleased with her handiwork.

The shimmering gateway that once linked this world to her own had vanished, leaving only empty air where hope had been. Her heart sank as realization dawned—the Shadow Queen had severed all connections. Aunt Agatha couldn't follow, and Renya...Renya was trapped.

The finality of her situation should have crushed her. Instead, a strange numbness settled over her, her mind too overwhelmed to fully process the weight of her new reality. Survival now took precedence over grief. She clenched her fists, forcing herself to focus on the immediate danger rather than the deep chasm of loss threatening to engulf her.

Renya watched Cressida inspect the place where the portal had stood. The Shadow Queen had changed her attire since they met in the Sunset Land. She wore a dark red

halter dress with another large slit. It was tight and form fitting with tiny black snakes embroidered all over, with ruby colored gems acting as eyes for the snakes. Her hair was braided into elaborate coils. The crown she wore was made up of two golden snakes twisting together before meeting in front. Red and black stones sparkled under the bright light. The effect was grotesque, straight out of a low-budget horror film.

Renya was sizzling in the heat. She slipped off her cloak, carefully removing the elkten pin and began transferring it to the front of her dress. It was all she had left of Grayden, and she wouldn't leave it behind.

Sion stood over her, his bulky shadow offering her a brief respite from the scalding sun, and spoke out of the corner of his mouth in a low-pitched voice.

"She'll take it from you," he said through clenched teeth, looking down at the pin. "Grayden is a sore spot for her. His refusal of her has wounded her pride. She'll hate you for it and punish you."

Renya frantically tried to find a place to stash the elkten pin. She started to dig a hole in the blistering sand before Sion held his hand out to her from behind his back.

"I'll make sure it's returned to you," he said to her quietly, the sorrow for her predicament evident in his calm voice. Renya hesitated before placing the treasured pin into his open hand. He quickly shoved the pin into the deep pockets of his golden robes as if nothing happened. He was wearing the same garb he donned in the Sunset Land, and Renya wondered if it was a uniform of sorts.

The Shadow Queen turned back towards Renya, while Sion feigned boredom, looking around at the beach like someone waiting in line at the grocery store. "Where's Brandle?" she snapped at Sion.

"My queen," he said, sweeping into a low bow, "He was still tending to his...injuries

the last I heard. He knows you have summoned him, though.”

“He’s a fool,” she spat, pacing up and down the beach, clearly agitated. Her pointed heels dug into the powdery sand and she kicked at the tiny dune in front of her angrily. “I can’t believe he allowed not only Snowden to get away, but the girl as well!”

“Well, at least we have her back,” Sion said, trying to placate Cressida. “If you let it be known you have her, Snowden will follow. He fancies himself in love with the girl, if the rumors are to be believed.”

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Cressida sneered. She bent over and undid the ankle strap on her ridiculous shoes before launching them towards the tide. Barefoot, she strode back towards Sion, like a panther after its prey. “I no longer care about the Snowden Prince. I’ll watch him die when the time comes and be glad of it. I’ve got my sights set on bigger things now.” She looked over at Renya, a cruel smile forming on her thin lips. Renya was a sacrificial lamb, waiting to be slaughtered. Whatever Cressida was planning, Renya was undoubtedly a big part of it.

“Did you find out why your powers faded?” Sion ventured carefully.

Cressida looked at him with both loathing and desire. It was strange to see the two conflicting emotions cloud the Shadow Queen’s face. “I have yet to find the culprit, but I have my suspicions,” Cressida said, almost as if trying to bait Sion into a confession. He held steady under her intense scrutiny.

“It appears they returned rather quickly,” he said calmly. “So, thank the Fates for that. What are you going to do with the girl?” He nodded towards Renya.

The Shadow Queen sauntered back over to the fleeting shade where Renya sat. She bent down and grabbed Renya’s chin, yanking it up to look in her eyes. Renya tried to wrench away, but Cressida dug her nails deeper into her flesh.

“She’s going to help me change the world.”

Sion raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. The Shadow Queen released Renya and walked back towards the beach, feet sinking into the sand.

Near the shoreline, a spinning funnel appeared, signaling Brandle's arrival. The cloud spun faster and faster and Renya could see his dark shape taking form. The smoke disbursed and Brandle rushed up to his queen, groveling at once.

"My queen! I'm so glad you made it out of the castle! I—"

Black smokey tendrils reached out from Cressida's fingers and slowly wrapped around Brandle's neck until his face was red.

"Your majesty!" he choked, desperately clawing at the insubstantial gray smoke wrapping tighter and tighter.

Renya turned her head, unable to watch. As much as she hated Brandle, the scene before her made her queasy. Suddenly she heard him gasp for breath as Cressida released him. He was rubbing his throat and had fallen to his knees.

"If you ever—ever—think about abandoning your queen again, I will have you killed," Cressida said, eyes flashing red. "You left me alone in that castle, powerless. You chose to save your own hide. You do it again, and I will obliterate you."

Brandle crawled towards her on his knees, sand clinging to his trousers. "My merciful queen! Thank you! I will never abandon you again!" He bent down and kissed Cressida's bare feet, hands grasping her hem. The sight made Renya want to gag.

Cressida snatched her dress away from Brandle, disgusted. "If it weren't for the fact we share a bloodline, I would have banished you to the human realm a long time ago."

Brandle stood up and moved to stand next to Sion. Renya recoiled, not wanting to be anywhere near Brandle. For his part, he seemed to ignore her, his brush with Cressida's malice seeming to diminish his haughty attitude.

“Bring her!” Cressida commanded, walking off the beach and into the tropical forest behind them. Sion grabbed Renya and helped her to her feet. Brandle strutted ahead, trying to stay close to Cressida. Sion hung back with Renya.

“What happened after you left the Sunset Land?” he asked her in a low tone, keeping out of earshot of Brandle and the queen.

“After we left the castle, Grayden, my aunt and I headed back towards the portal I originally came from. The plan was to send me and my aunt back through, and then my aunt was going to destroy the portal behind us. My aunt went through first, leaving me time—giving me time to say goodbye to Grayden.” Renya's voice faltered, her eyes fixed on the ground. When she finally looked up, her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, a muscle twitching in her jaw as she fought to maintain her composure. “And when I went through, the Shadow Queen was already there. She had my aunt bound and then pushed me through this portal. Where are we?”

“We’re on the outskirts of the Tidal Kingdom,” Sion said, holding back a large palm leaf that blocked the path before it hit Renya. The foliage was getting dense and the humidity increasing with every step they took deeper into the jungle. “It’s the only other known portal to the human realm.”

“Do you know what this ritual is?” Renya asked, trying hard to mask her fear.

Sion looked at her with sympathy. “I don’t, I’m afraid. But I’ll do whatever I can to help you, even if it costs me my life. I know what you mean to Grayden. I’ve never seen him quite so desperate as he was in the Sunset Land. I know that’s what he would want from me.”

Renya's throat tightened, a warmth spreading through her chest as she absorbed Sion's words. Her eyes met his, searching for any hint of deception, but found only steadfast determination. As she considered Sion's unwavering commitment, her mind drifted to

Grayden. She pictured him in the Snow Lands, surrounded by people like Sion—faces etched with resolve, bodies poised for action at his command. The image of such devotion made her heart swell, reaffirming what she already knew about the man she'd left behind.

They continued their path through the jungle. Dark dirt lined a slightly worn path and Renya saw an enormous locust jump from one branch to the other. She was sweltering in the riding outfit. Renya had been wearing it for days and the leather clung to her legs. Sweat dripped down the small of her back and she longed for a cool shower. She knew there were bigger things to concern herself with, but the heat was making her head feel thick.

Huge roots, purple and orange, sprouted up all over the path, nearly tripping Renya. The jungle floor was hard to maneuver, with the long skirt of her riding outfit catching on branches and fallen logs.

Sion kept behind Renya, playing the part of the dutiful guard for the Shadow Queen. Renya thought about running, but there was nowhere for her to go. She had no idea where the Tidal Kingdom was in reference to the Snow Lands and had no way to travel over any great distance. Renya was trapped. She was so tired of feeling helpless against Brandle's and Cressida's magic. Renya wondered if this was how Grayden felt all the time. She understood his desire to restore balance to their world even more. She wanted Grayden to get his magic back and destroy the entire Shadow Realm. She would help him however she could. No more hiding. Renya would be whomever this light bringer was supposed to be.

Just as Renya wondered how much longer they were going to walk, Brandle halted in front of her. Sion reached out and grabbed her arms and held them behind her back. "Sorry," he whispered, though his touch was gentle.

Directly ahead stood a large megalith. Two stone columns held up a giant rock slab,

and underneath it, Renya could see only darkness. She was sure that it was the entrance to a mouth of a cave. Sion guided her just next to the slab and Renya sighed inwardly, glad they didn't appear to be going into the cave. She had developed a fear of dark spaces after being confined in the nightmare dungeon.

Brandle and Cressida stopped at the very front of the cave and Sion gave Renya a little push forward. Cressida nodded to Brandle, and Renya was bound with the black shadow magic he possessed, hands behind her back. She tried to scream but once again, she was paralyzed. Anger replaced her fear and she felt her whole body trembling with rage against the invisible bonds. Against her will, Renya stood still as stone while Cressida and Brandle lit a fire and started mixing a concoction.

Renya had not been raised to be a helpless damsel in distress. She had fought off a grown man in the human realm and managed to escape from him. She had even killed a tygre in the woods of the Snow Lands. As soon as Renya was able, she would make Cressida pay for the helplessness she made her feel.

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Renya had never wanted to accept the destiny of being the light bringer, but at this point, her second time being captured within two days, she wished the role came with power. She was tired of being pushed around, bound and silenced. She was finished with things being done to her.

Renya vowed that if she managed to get out of this mess, she would never allow anyone to use her again.

Cressida stood over a large cauldron and passed her hands over it. Brandle drew some ingredients from his robes and dumped them in. Bright orange flames erupted from the cauldron, swirling and hissing in the thick air.

“Will the power source be enough to draw from?” Brandle asked, glancing up at the rock slab.

“It should be more than adequate,” Cressida responded, the fire illuminating the snakes on her crown, their eyes seeming to glow.

Brandle was silent as he watched the flames lick the bottom of the giant cauldron. Renya wondered if they brought it here with them before retrieving her from the portal, or if it was left here long ago. It looked as ancient as the daunting rocks standing beside it.

“It’s ready,” Cressida said, eyes gleaming with excitement. The flames in the cauldron went out instantly and Brandle reached in, pulling out a handful of golden ashes. He placed them in a small urn and passed them to Cressida. She grabbed the container, her blood red nails glistening as she looked inside.

“Sion!” Cressida bellowed. “Pull back her filthy hair.”

Confusion came over Renya. Her hair? What did they want with her hair?

Sion walked over and moved her hair, damp with sweat, away from the nape of her neck. The Shadow Queen approached Renya’s back, and she suddenly felt naked under her scrutiny. Cressida traced the line of freckles along Renya’s back with her pointed nail and Renya’s head exploded with pain.

“Is it what you thought, my queen?” Brandle asked, sauntering past the cauldron to gawk at Renya’s neck.

The Shadow Queen turned her stare from Renya to Brandle. “It is,” she said, her eyes wide with exuberance. “She’s locked, just as I suspected. In order to claim what’s rightfully mine, I’ll unlock her. We’ll only have a few minutes to act once the power has been severed.”

Brandle nodded his understanding and pulled out a tiny stone box from his pocket. It was covered with shimmering runes and tiny images of the sun. Renya could feel the importance it held just by looking at it. It reminded her of a field trip she’d taken in high school to the Getty Center to see one of Vincent van Gogh’s paintings. The entire class had fallen into a hush as they squeezed around the painting of purple irises. The same silence seemed to settle around the jungle the second Brandle withdrew the container from its hiding spot.

“I’m ready,” he said, breaking the silence and glancing at Renya.

“Sion, hold the girl still. Once the power has been freed, the shadow bonds holding her will break. The timing of this needs to be perfect. If we don’t make the transfer quickly, all will be lost.”

Sion nodded and came over to Renya, wrapping his arms around her. While Cressida and Brandle conferred, Sion whispered into Renya's ear. "Listen closely. We have one shot at this. The second you feel your power flow, pull it inside, as quickly as you can."

"What?" Renya whispered frantically, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Cressida and Brandle finished their conversation and Sion went quiet. Renya was confused. What did Sion mean about her power? She had no power. How was she supposed to pull something inside she didn't possess?

The Shadow Queen crossed back behind Renya, hardly bothering to acknowledge her. She was only interested in the patch of freckles along Renya's neck. Renya could feel her intense stare before she blew the golden ashes against Renya's neck.

Renya grew hot all over the second the ashes touched her. Heat bloomed from her neck and something inside her clicked. Her freckles. They weren't normal. The heat she felt from them since coming into this world...it meant something.

Cressida pressed her fingers against her neck and they felt like white-hot knives against Renya's skin. Then, all at once, she felt something move within her body. Warm tremors coursed through her skin, and she felt like everything was being pulled in the direction of the freckles on her neck. It started in her fingers and toes, and all rushed to that concentrated spot, like a dam about to burst.

"It's working!" the Shadow Queen shouted excitedly. Brandle clapped his hands and watched Renya closely with his beady, charcoal eyes. Renya wanted to close her eyes against the sensation, but she heard Sion whisper to her, barely audible and hardly moving his lips. She thought he said to pull. Yes, that was what he said. And then he began counting, his breath hot against her ear. 10, 9, 8...

“Ready the vessel!” Cressida shouted. Brandle opened the carved stone box and approached Renya.

A thundering noise assaulted Renya’s ears. She wasn’t sure if the noise was coming from inside of her or not. But she could hear Sion continuing to count in her ear. 7, 6, 5...

It felt like an explosion was going to occur at the base of Renya’s neck. Sion continued his near silent counting while Renya tried to prepare herself. 4, 3, 2, 1...

White-hot light erupted from Renya’s neck. Golden rays burst through the palm trees before concentrating in a tiny ball, floating in the air between Renya and the box Brandle held. They all cast their glances downward, protecting their eyes from the ball of power that burned brighter than the sun.

“Now!” Cressida shouted frantically and Brandle moved towards the physical manifestation of Renya’s magic, opening the lid of the box. The golden orb slowly started to head towards it.

Renya looked back at Sion, and he nodded. He let go of her and pretended to fall backwards. Renya had no idea what she was doing, but she focused on the bright light and tried to imagine it coming towards her. The ball of magic continued its slow trail towards Brandle’s outstretched arms. It was almost to the top of his hands. Renya shut her eyes and as if by instinct, she felt the warmth of the orb radiate to a place inside her. She felt where her magic belonged and concentrated on that feeling, her body getting warmer and warmer.

“What’s happening?” Cressida said, looking between Brandle and the floating orb that had stopped moving in his direction. She glanced at Renya and saw her eyes closed, almost as if in a trance. “Get up and grab her!” she yelled at Sion, realizing too late what was happening.

Cressida went to move forward from where she sought shelter at the mouth of the cave, but at that moment Renya started to seize, shaking. She threw everything she had at capturing that little ball of magic. She thought of how desperate Grayden had looked when he explained how he was losing his magic and unable to save his lands. She pictured him in front of Cressida in the Sunset Land, begging for Renya's life. She thought of the nightmare dungeon and the horrors she had endured there. And finally, she remembered the agony of being ripped away from Grayden, only to be captured once again. Her fury rose and her determination tripled.

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The orb shot towards Renya and flew to the spot at the base of her skull where it had been pulled out by the Shadow Queen.

Cressida's screams echoed throughout the entire jungle as a piercing white light blinded them all and Renya collapsed.

Chapter Three

Grayden bolted upright, his heart thundering against his ribs. Sweat plastered his tunic to his skin as he gasped for air, the echoes of his dream still pulsing behind his eyes. Renya. He'd seen her, felt her presence as tangibly as the twisted sheets beneath his fingers.

The darkness of his chambers pressed in around him, but in his mind's eye, he saw flashes of vibrant green—a jungle, dense and sweltering. Renya's golden hair, a beacon amidst the foliage. A daunting cave mouth, ominous and ancient. And there, like a poison seeping into the vision, the Shadow Queen's cruel smile.

Then came the light—blinding, searing, a nova of pure energy that sent tremors through Grayden's body even now. What was happening? How could a dream feel so visceral, so real? And why could he still sense Renya, a phantom warmth against his skin, a presence nestled somewhere beneath his breastbone?

His chest constricted, a surge of emotion squeezing his lungs. The need for Renya crashed over him like a tidal wave, more intense than anything he'd ever experienced. It was as if she'd become essential to his very existence, her absence leaving him gasping like a man deprived of air.

Grayden stumbled from his bed, legs shaky, and fumbled for the wardrobe. His fingers, usually so sure and steady, trembled as he pulled on the first dry tunic he touched. Exhaustion weighed on him like lead, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except Renya.

As he moved, realization struck him with the force of a physical blow. The inexplicable connection, the overwhelming need—it could mean only one thing. Somehow, against all odds, he had become fate-bound to Renya.

Joy surged through him, a burst of warmth amidst the panic and confusion. Fated. He was fate-bound to the woman he loved. It was a miracle he'd never dared to hope for, a gift he'd thought forever beyond his reach.

But even as elation flooded his veins, fear gripped his heart. He reached out with his mind, searching for that place where Renya's presence had nestled moments before. Nothing. The connection had vanished, leaving only an aching void.

Grayden threw open his chamber door, his boots slapping against the cold stone as he raced down the hallway. He needed to find Tumwalt, to organize a rescue. Every second felt like an eternity, every breath without Renya a knife in his chest.

“Grayden!” Selenia's voice cut through his panic. He skidded to a halt, nearly colliding with his sister. She stood before him, a tray of food balanced precariously in her hands, concern etched across her features. “What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“It's Renya,” he gasped, the words tumbling out in a rush. “She's back, Selenia. Here, in our world. And Cressida has her.”

Selenia's forehead wrinkled, disbelief clouding her eyes. “But...how? The portal—

“I don't know how,” Grayden interrupted, his voice tight with urgency. “But I can feel it. I can feel her.”

“Brother, you're not making sense. Your magic is gone, and Renya doesn't have any. How could you possibly—”

“We're fate-bound,” Grayden blurted out, the words hanging in the air between them.

Selenia's eyes widened, the tray in her hands wobbling dangerously. “Fate-bound? But that's...you're both well past the age. How is that even possible?”

“I don't know,” Grayden admitted, running a hand through his disheveled hair. “But it's happened. I saw her in a dream, Selenia. She's in danger. I have to find her.”

Understanding dawned in Selenia's eyes, quickly followed by determination. She set the tray down on a nearby table with a clatter. “Where is she? What did you see?”

“A jungle, near a cave. I think...I think she might be near the Tidal Kingdom. There have been rumors of another portal there.”

Selenia nodded, her mind already racing. “Jurel and Charly left hours ago with Phillippe, heading north. We could send a hawk—”

“No,” Grayden cut her off, already moving towards the stairs. “There's no time. I have to go now, alone.”

“Grayden, wait!” Selenia called, hurrying after him. “You can't just rush off unprepared. Let me help. I'll pack supplies for Renya, food for the journey.”

Grayden paused at the top of the stairs, gratitude mixing with his urgency. “Thank you,” he said softly. “I'll take Damion—Lightning needs rest. Can you meet me in the

courtyard? And find Tumwalt, let him know what's happening.”

Selenia nodded, a small smile playing at her lips. “Of course. Go, get ready. I'll take care of everything here.”

As Grayden rushed down the stairs, Selenia's voice floated after him, tinged with wonder and joy. “Go get your mate, Brother.”

The word 'mate' sent a shiver down Grayden's spine. His mate. His Renya. Somehow, against all odds, the Fates had blessed him with this miraculous gift. And there was no force in any world that would keep him from her now.

Chapter Four

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Gentle hands lifted her head. “Renya, can you hear me?” the voice ventured nervously. She felt something cool against her forehead. It smelled salty, like the bays in California. Was she back home? She felt so discombobulated. Renya had been rendered unconscious and woken up in strange places more times than she could ever have imagined since coming to this world.

She sat up and opened her eyes. She was in the jungle, where the Shadow Queen had...done something to her? Tried to take her power?

Sion sat back on his knees next to her with a wet scrap of fabric that he had been holding to her head.

“Oh, thank the Fates! Grayden would have killed me if I let something happen to you,” Sion said, relief evident in his kind eyes.

Grayden. She needed Grayden. It was like a hunger awoke within her and she needed him more than anything. She wanted to cry because he wasn’t next to her. She didn’t know where he was and how she was going to get to him. Renya choked back a sob, the pain from being separated too great.

“Sion, what happened? I need to get to Grayden.” She looked around, eyes frantic. There was rubble everywhere and it appeared the megalith had collapsed over the cave.

“You have your powers back.”

“I never had powers,” Renya said, utterly confused.

Sion continued. "You've had powers all along, they were just trapped within you. Someone put a locking spell on you so you couldn't access your power. Queen Cressida broke through the magic, with the goal of taking your power, but it backfired. When it was free, you pulled it back into you and it formed some kind of powerful surge."

Renya flexed her fingers. She did feel different. Her skin felt tighter, as if there was an electrical current constantly running through her.

"Your ears..." Sion started. "You're fae?"

Renya reached up and traced the outline of her ears. Sure enough, she found a pair of ears identical to everyone else in this world. "My glamour...it must have broken when she unlocked me."

He nodded, taking her in as if for the first time.

"What happened to the Shadow Queen and Brandle?" she asked, looking around for them. The jungle seemed empty except for the rubble everywhere.

"They fled into the cave when the megalith fell. I heard commotion and arguing from inside, so they are both alive. But the spell she used to unlock your powers weakened her. I'm guessing she's trapped until she can manage to use her magic to travel out of the cave."

"She's trapped in there? Oh my god, I can get away. I need to get to Grayden. Now!" She looked at Sion. "Please, how can I get to the Snow Lands?"

Sion glanced around the clearing. "The Tidal Kingdom," he said. "King Triston hates Cressida almost as much as Grayden does. They should give you shelter and perhaps assist you back to the Snow Lands. If I can, I'll send a message to Grayden and let

him know where you're heading."

"You're not coming with me?"

"I'm afraid not, Renya. I have to work on freeing the queen. Luckily a bit of rubble hit me," he pointed to a spot that was bleeding on his forehead, "so she'll assume I was knocked out. I've got to keep up my double role for right now."

"I understand." Renya was prepared to stand on her own two feet and accept her role in this world. The sooner she started relying on herself, the better. "Which way do I go?"

Sion looked around, trying to get his bearings. "Go back to the shore, that will be the quickest way to the Tidal Kingdom. As soon as you hit the shoreline, go east. I think the gate to the Tidal Palace is about three hours from here, maybe four. You've got a walk ahead of you, but I'll try to give you as much of a head start as I can." He walked lazily over to a large tree and picked a fruit reminiscent of a banana.

Renya nodded. "Thank you so much, Sion. I don't think I can ever repay you." She moved over to where he stood.

Sion looked at Renya and held out his hand to her. Tucked carefully in his palm was Grayden's elkten pin. She grabbed it with nimble fingers. "Just make Grayden happy. Fate knows he needs something good in his life. That's enough for me." Sion gave her a peck on the cheek and turned towards the blocked cave entrance.

"My queen! Are you alright? I'm trying to free you as fast as I can!" Sion looked back at Renya one last time and gave her a wink as he sat down on the jungle floor, his back against a large rock, slowly peeling his fruit and taking a leisurely bite.

With a final farewell nod, Renya headed back towards the beach, avoiding the pile of

rocks and dodging huge palm leaves. The vegetation was enormous, far bigger than anything she had ever seen at home. The tips of the palm trees sparkled green with large veins of silver throughout. A giant butterfly flew through the air, its size larger than Renya's head. It landed peacefully on the palm leaf and fluttered its delicate wings. It really was beautiful here, Renya thought. A gentle breeze tugged at her hair, and she sighed. She was safe, for now at least. But she needed to get to Grayden. She couldn't fathom this strange new desire for him. She wanted him before, and she was certain she loved him. But now, she was so certain of her feelings for him. How could she have left him? The decision seemed so crazy now. She didn't care if she lived or died, as long as Grayden was beside her. Why did he make her go back through the portal? Sion told Cressida that Grayden loved her. Yet, he was still able to send her away. Maybe he didn't love her as much as she loved him.

Realization swept over her while she struggled through the hot sand. She loved him. She hadn't been willing to admit it fully to herself, but she was deeply, madly, irrevocably in love with Grayden. She longed to see him again, to continue the delicate dance they started in the snow cave. Heat rushed through her, and she wasn't sure if it was the memory of Grayden's mouth against hers or the tropical climate. At any rate, she unlaced the top of her riding outfit and slid it down her shoulders. Luckily, she wasn't wearing one of the more scandalous undergarments Selenia had made her buy.

She felt instant relief as the cool ocean breeze hit her sweat-covered body. She was dressed for the Snow Lands, definitely not for a tropical beach. She smelled the salt air, so reminiscent of California, and continued her slow pace down the beach. Driftwood blocked her path every fifty feet or so and she climbed over it, dragging her thick skirt behind her. She tried to detach the skirt from the leather pants underneath, but Doria had done a magnificent job sewing the outfit together. Sand trailed along the hem and the dress was covered in grime, blood and sweat. She hoped whomever she met at the Tidal Kingdom would take pity on her and let her in. Without thinking, Renya brought her hand to grasp the elken pin outlined in her

pocket. Sion knew it was given to her by Grayden when he found her in the nightmare dungeon, and she hoped it was enough to grant her safe passage back to the Snow Lands and keep her safe from the Shadow Queen until she could be reunited with Grayden.

Her body burned with an intensity that rivaled the tropical heat, every fiber of her being aching for Grayden. Renya's mind was consumed by vivid images of him—his strong, muscular arms that had held her so securely, the broad expanse of his chest where she longed to rest her head. She could almost feel the roughness of his calloused hands against her skin, a testament to his years of training and combat.

The memory of his scent engulfed her senses—that intoxicating blend of pine and cinnamon that was uniquely Grayden. It was a scent that spoke of strength and comfort, of snowy forests and warm hearths. She inhaled deeply, as if she could somehow capture that aroma from the humid jungle air.

Her lips tingled with the phantom sensation of his kisses. Those kisses that were a contradiction—rough with passion yet tender with care, exploring and tasting her with a reverence that made her knees weak. She brought her fingers to her mouth, tracing where his had been, desperate to recapture that feeling.

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Their last night together replayed in her mind with startling clarity. The heat in his gaze, the trembling of his hands as he touched her. Renya's cheeks flushed, her skin prickling with desire at the memory. They had both wanted more, the air between them charged with unspoken longing. Yet Grayden had held back, his honor a shield against his desires.

His restraint, his careful treatment of her, stood in stark contrast to the men she'd known before. Men who saw her as something to be conquered, not cherished. Grayden's gentle touch, his constant concern for her comfort and consent, was like a soothing balm to her soul—as refreshing and welcome as a cool breeze on a sweltering day.

She recalled the look of shock on his face when he realized he was her first. At the time, she hadn't understood his reaction. Now, she wondered if some part of him had sensed what she was only now realizing herself.

Yes, she'd had boyfriends before. But she'd always held back, always pulled away when things became too intimate. It was as if some hidden part of her had been waiting, reserving herself for someone special. For someone who would see her, truly see her, and love her completely.

The realization hit her with the force of a physical blow, leaving her breathless. All this time, she had been waiting for Grayden. Her body, her heart, her very soul had been waiting for this man from another world, a man she hadn't even known existed.

The longing for him intensified, a desperate, all-consuming need that threatened to overwhelm her. It wasn't just physical desire, though that burned hot within her. It

was a soul-deep yearning to be in his presence, to feel the security of his arms around her, to lose herself in the depths of his green eyes. She needed his strength, his kindness, his unwavering support. She needed his love.

Renya's steps quickened, driven by this new understanding. Every moment away from Grayden now felt like an eternity. She had to find him, had to tell him how she felt. No more hesitation, no more doubt. She would give herself to him completely—body, heart, and soul. And this time, nothing would tear them apart.

Her boots were full of sand, and she decided to take them off and walk barefoot along the beach. Losing the tall boots helped cool her off and she walked in the surf, the glistening water lapping at her toes. A pink crab scurried past her, making its way out to sea, tapping its powerful claws as if to challenge her. She looked ahead and saw her path along the beach was blocked by an outcropping of rocks. Renya frowned. The tide must be coming in. She pondered if she should try and climb over the rocks, take her chances in the ocean, or find another way around. She was a strong swimmer, having grown up swimming in the warm ocean waters framing California's coast, but she wasn't sure how the water was here. If she got caught in a riptide or if there was a drop-off, she could find herself in big trouble. Renya hadn't survived tygres, the nightmare dungeon, and the Shadow Queen just to be taken out by the ocean. She licked her parched lips and glanced at the rocks and looked at her bare feet and the tall boots she carried. Renya trusted neither to help her traverse the sharp rocks. She sighed and walked back towards the jungle, figuring it was the safest path forward.

Renya's feet sank into the damp earth with each step, vines and branches clawing at her clothes as she forged ahead. Her lungs burned, desperate for air in the thick, humid jungle. Still, she pressed on, Grayden's name a silent rhythm matching her heartbeat. Her fingers curled into fists, nails biting into her palms—a physical promise to never let him go again.

As she ducked under a low-hanging branch, a bead of sweat trickled down her temple, carrying with it a memory of her Aunt Agatha. Renya paused, her hand instinctively reaching out as if to grasp her aunt's arm. She could almost see Agatha's fierce expression, hear the quiet determination in her voice. She visualized Agatha, free from her bindings, hands weaving complex patterns as she searched for a way to open a new portal. The image was so vivid that Renya's own fingers twitched, mimicking the intricate gestures she'd seen her aunt perform.

For a moment, Renya stood still, caught between two worlds—the one where Grayden waited and the one where Aunt Agatha was trapped. Then, with a deep breath that filled her lungs with the earthy scent of the jungle, she pushed forward. Her path to Grayden was clear, and with each step, she dared to hope that Aunt Agatha might be blazing a trail of her own, one that could reunite them all.

Renya passed more palm trees and saw the same type of tree Sion picked a piece of fruit from earlier. Her stomach gurgled in hunger as she appraised the strange produce. Renya pulled the long, yellow fruit off of the tree and examined it as she continued to walk. Its skin was tougher than a banana, but other than that, it looked comparable. She peeled it and took a tentative bite; it was akin to the taste of a banana, only juicy instead of mushy. Renya could tell she was getting dehydrated and was thankful that it helped to satisfy her thirst.

She heard a bird chirp near her and looked to her left. Perched on a branch was a tropical bird with a large purple beak. He stared at her, turning his head as if to figure out what she was. His bright plumage was every color of the rainbow and Renya couldn't believe how brilliant-hued he was. In fact, she noticed, looking around her, everything seemed more colorful. Was she just used to the muted colors of the Snow Lands? Or was this area more colorful?

The exotic-looking bird shook his wings and flew off as she continued walking. The bottoms of her feet were sore and starting to blister. She thought about putting the

boots back on but the humidity threatening to strangle her changed her mind. Renya debated going back towards the shore and taking a quick dip in the ocean, but she didn't want to waste any more time. She needed to be in Grayden's arms. Focusing on her one goal, she picked up the pace, eager to get to the Tidal Gate before sunset.

Chapter Five

Grayden's muscles screamed with every movement, a testament to the grueling hours spent in the saddle. The last time he'd ridden this long was during his military training at fifteen, but youth had been kinder to his body then. Now, every joint ached, every muscle burned. Yet, as he urged Damion forward, a spark of hope ignited in his chest, overshadowing the physical discomfort. The connection to Renya pulsed stronger now, guiding him like a beacon through the snow-covered landscape.

The icy wind whipped against his face as Damion's hooves thundered across the ground, kicking up plumes of snow. Grayden leaned forward, his body moving in sync with the stallion's powerful strides. The world blurred around them, trees and snow melding into a dizzying white canvas. It felt as if they were flying, the ground barely solid beneath them.

As he rode, unbidden images of Renya flooded his mind. Her golden hair catching the sunlight, her warm smile that made his heart skip a beat, the feel of her in his arms - soft yet strong. A giddy laugh bubbled up in his throat, surprising him. The realization of their fate-bond still felt surreal, a miracle he'd never dared hope for.

His mind raced with the implications. Political marriages, once a looming possibility, now seemed laughably distant. He imagined the faces of those who had pushed for his union with Cressida, how they would react to this twist of fate. The sacred nature of the fate-bond would protect them from any who might try to separate them. For the first time in years, Grayden felt truly free.

As he rode, his thoughts drifted to Renya's Aunt Agatha. The memory of fear in Cressida's eyes when confronted by the older woman in the Sunset Land was vivid. There was history there, he was certain. A curious mystery he'd dismissed in the anguish of parting from Renya. He made a mental note to unravel that mystery once they were reunited.

The landscape gradually shifted as Grayden pressed on. Snow gave way to patches of grass, then to more lush vegetation. He was nearing the borders of the Tidal Kingdom. Memories of his childhood visit surfaced—a diplomatic mission with his father, a young princess named Esmeralda. He remembered his father's not-so-subtle attempts at matchmaking, a plan that never came to fruition. Had his father somehow sensed the possibility of this fate-bond?

Grayden's senses heightened as he entered unfamiliar territory, alert for any sign of Renya or potential danger. The humid air clung to his skin, a stark contrast to the frigid climate he'd left behind. Exotic scents filled his nostrils—unfamiliar flowers, damp earth, and the distant tang of salt air.

When the jungle became too dense to ride through, Grayden dismounted. His legs wobbled, unused to solid ground after so long in the saddle. He patted Damion's flank reassuringly before tethering him to a sturdy palm.

“I'll be back, old friend,” he murmured, steeling himself for what lay ahead.

As Grayden pressed deeper into the jungle, the foliage grew denser, the air heavier with moisture. An eerie silence fell, broken only by the occasional drip of condensation from broad leaves. His hand instinctively went to the hilt of his sword as he pushed forward. A sweet scent filled the air, almost dizzying in its intensity. Grayden's eyes widened as he took in his surroundings. Massive flowers, easily the size of dinner plates, dotted the landscape. Their petals were a riot of colors—deep purples, vibrant reds, and sickly yellows—all glistening with an odd, viscous fluid.

As he watched, a large insect, drawn by the scent, landed on one of the flowers. In a flash, the petals snapped shut, engulfing the hapless creature. A chill ran down Grayden's spine as he realized the nature of these plants.

Carefully, he began to pick his way through the field of carnivorous flora. Each step had to be measured, deliberate. A misstep could mean disaster. Vines hung from the canopy above, swaying gently despite the lack of breeze. Grayden ducked under one, only to jerk back as it suddenly lashed out, barely missing his face.

“Fates,” he breathed, heart pounding. These weren't mere plants—they were hunters. He pressed on, hyper-aware of every movement around him. The ground beneath his feet squelched, oddly soft and giving. Looking down, he realized with a start that the earth itself seemed to be slowly shifting, as if trying to pull him in. A loud snap to his left made him whirl around. One of the giant flowers had just missed clamping onto his arm. Sweat beaded on his brow as he quickened his pace, careful not to show fear.

These plants, he realized, could sense it somehow. Halfway through the thicket, a tangle of vines suddenly dropped from above, wrapping around his legs. Grayden's sword was in his hand in an instant, slashing through the writhing tendrils. Green fluid sprayed as the vines recoiled, a high-pitched keening filling the air. The entire thicket seemed to come alive at once. Flowers snapped, vines whipped through the air, and the ground itself began to quake.

Grayden broke into a run, dodging and weaving through the botanical onslaught. His breath came in sharp gasps, muscles burning with exertion. A gap in the foliage appeared ahead—the edge of the thicket. With a final burst of speed, Grayden lunged forward, rolling as he hit the ground beyond the reach of the murderous plants. He lay there for a moment, chest heaving, before pushing himself to his feet. With renewed determination, Grayden turned back to the path ahead. Setting his jaw, he pressed onward, leaving the carnivorous jungle behind.

The beach came into view, a strip of golden sand stretching as far as the eye could see. Grayden's steps faltered as a wave of sensation washed over him. He spun around, drawn back to the jungle's edge by an invisible thread.

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There, half-hidden by fallen leaves, lay Renya's cloak. Grayden's hands trembled as he lifted it, bringing the fabric to his face. Her scent overwhelmed him, so vivid he could almost believe she was there. His heart raced as he scanned the ground, years of tracking experience kicking in.

Boot prints materialized in the soft earth—small, delicate indentations that could only belong to Renya. Alongside them, larger prints and the unmistakable mark of high heels. Grayden's jaw clenched, recognizing the implications. Cressida had been here, along with at least one other person—Brandle, most likely.

He followed the trail deeper into the jungle, every sense on high alert. The path led to a clearing where a collapsed megalith blocked the entrance to a cave. Grayden's fingers traced the rough stone, mind racing to piece together what had transpired. He noticed a small passage carved out, stones stacked neatly beside discarded fruit peels. Someone had escaped the cave—but who?

A large stone cauldron caught his eye, its presence ominous in the clearing. He approached cautiously, peering inside. Golden residue clung to the bottom, shimmering faintly in the dappled sunlight. The air felt charged, remnants of powerful magic lingering like static electricity. Grayden's skin prickled, recognizing the telltale signs of a ritual site. Ancient fae dwellings were known to amplify magic—it was no coincidence Cressida had brought Renya here.

Crouching low, Grayden studied the ground around the cauldron. Scuff marks told a story of struggle, of bodies in motion. His heart clenched as he identified Renya's prints, imagining her fear, her determination. He pictured her standing here, facing off against Cressida, and felt a surge of pride mixed with worry.

Relief flooded through him as he traced her path away from the cave, back towards the beach. She had escaped, had left here alone. The realization propelled him into motion.

Back on the beach, Grayden's keen eyes picked out Renya's trail heading east. The Tidal Gate lay in that direction—had someone guided her, or was it mere chance? He remembered the reclusive nature of the Tidal Fae, their preference for cave dwellings carved by centuries of tides. Once, they had lived in underwater palaces, but the fading of magic had forced them to higher ground.

It didn't matter how Renya knew where to go. She was ahead, and he would find her. With a sharp whistle, he called Damion to his side. In one fluid motion, he swung himself onto the horse's back, ignoring the protest of his sore muscles.

They took off down the beach, hooves pounding against the wet sand. Each stride brought Grayden closer to his mate, to the future he now dared to imagine.

Chapter Six

The gate to the Tidal Kingdom was not exactly a gate, Renya realized as she approached the monstrous opening on the side of the cliff. It was a massive canyon venturing back farther into the land, cutting a path through the terrain. Roughly carved structures surrounded it, partially submerged in the sea. The mouth of the inlet was full of water as well, with two rope bridges connecting one side to the other. Four guards stood on the bridges next to a platform holding two small canoe-type boats. Renya guessed the only way into the kingdom was to be ferried across the inlet. The rest of the bay was filled with more tall buildings, winding their way up to the darkening sky. They looked abandoned, like dark gravestones stretching up towards the heavens.

She approached the rope bridge and made her way to the center of the cave where the

guards stood. The bridge swayed slightly under her weight as she stepped carefully on the sea-worn planks. Renya was nervous, hoping the guards would be sympathetic and provide her shelter. Her heart raced, a mix of exhaustion and anxiety. What if they turned her away? The thought of facing Cressida again made her stomach churn. She longed for Grayden's reassuring presence, his steady gaze that always seemed to say, "I've got you." Taking a deep breath, she steadied herself. She'd come this far on her own; she could handle this too. The journey to the Tidal Gate took longer than she thought it would, and she was desperate to get indoors and away from anywhere Cressida could spot her, especially with the sun starting to set and darkness slowly encroaching upon the land. Plus, she was so tired. She wanted Grayden, and then to sleep. As exhausted as she was, she knew sleep would be difficult unless Grayden was with her. She felt protected in his embrace and within the circle of his arms.

As Renya approached the center of the rope bridge, two of the guards turned towards her. Renya noticed one was a woman, and she was hoping she might get more sympathy from her. The guards wore tight sleeveless tunics with scaled leather crossing diagonally on the front like armor. The scales were black and deep green and reflected the light, giving the effect of fish scales distorted in the water. They each carried a wooden spear with a sharp metal tip. The male nearest Renya had spiked black hair, and the female's was cut short to the scalp and slicked back, dark like licorice and coiled tightly.

As Renya moved forward, both guards tensed up on their spears. She raised up her arms in what she thought was a friendly, non-threatening greeting.

"Hello," Renya started nervously. "I need help, I was kidnapped by the Shadow Queen but managed to get away. I was told you might offer me shelter and safe passage to the Snow Lands. I'm a...friend of Prince Grayden's," she finished lamely. She was much more than a friend, but they never put a label on what they were. Boyfriend and girlfriend? It sounded foolish, even in her head.

The guards looked at each other and began communicating rapidly in a language Renya didn't understand. The tones sounded a bit more guttural than Grayden's speech when he was talking to his men, but she couldn't tell for sure if they were the same tongue. The male seemed surprisingly more sympathetic than the female, Renya thought. He gestured at Renya and said some words in a soft tone, but the female crossed her arms and shook her head.

“Please...” Renya began, sensing the exchange was quickly turning sour. “Look, I have his pin to prove I'm a friend of the Snowden family.” She held out the elkten pin and the female flinched as if Renya was going to attack. The male glanced at the pin and then back at the female guard. The woman threw up her hands as if to say that she was exasperated and gave up.

The male looked Renya up and down once more, as if checking to make sure she wasn't dangerous, then gestured to one of the small canoes. “Come,” he said, with a thick accent.

Renya looked at the tiny boat and stepped inside as the guard held out his hand to help her. She dropped her boots on the floor of the canoe and sat down on a wooden bench straddling the two edges of the little boat. The canoe was hardly wider than Renya.

The male guard carefully put his spear behind the last seat in the boat, and gracefully slid in the back. He grabbed a pair of oars and began to row.

The canoe moved through the glassy water, creating a small wake as it sailed farther into the cave. The sides of the cave were covered in green seaweed and barnacles from high tides, but instead of getting darker as they voyaged inside, it became lighter. Beautiful crystal stalactites hung from the ceiling of the cave, illuminating it with a glowing green light. Torches lined the walls, further lighting the vast and dark cave.

The guard silently continued to row across the mirror-like water.

“What's your name?” Renya asked.

“York,” he responded in his gruff voice.

“Thank you, York, for taking me in.”

“I'm just taking you to the king,” he said, his muscular arms continuing to propel the canoe through the water. “It's he who will decide what to do with you.”

“Still, I appreciate you taking me to see him. I need to get to the Snow Lands as soon as possible.”

York didn't reply, but gave a slight nod. They were approaching a dark bend in the cave and it narrowed significantly, perhaps only a dozen feet across in some spots. Renya held her breath as the ceiling lowered and the sides of the cave seemed to box them in. The lights from the stalactites were gone. York continued to row, and Renya lowered her head, afraid she was going to hit the top of the narrowing passage. She saw a pinprick of light ahead, and then suddenly the canoe was thrust into another enormous cavern.

Renya had never seen a natural space so big. There were multiple docks lining a stone outcropping, with numerous canoes tied up. Fishing nets and anchors lined the dock, and there were shops and shanties just steps away from the noisy harbor. Beyond the docks, more and more buildings came into view. High above, in the farthest recesses of the cave, Renya saw an elaborate palace carved into the rock. She couldn't believe anything like this existed in any world.

York looked pleased at her reaction. “We house six hundred Tidal Fae in this cave and mountainside,” he said proudly.

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“It's magnificent,” Renya complimented as York tied the boat to a free pole in the harbor. She quickly slipped on her boots and accepted York's hand as he helped her out of the tiny vessel.

The cavern buzzed with life, a symphony of voices echoing off the stone walls. The pungent scent of fish mingled with the sweet aroma of fresh bread, making Renya's empty stomach growl audibly. Her fingertips tingled as she brushed past rough-hewn stone buildings, the texture so different from the smooth surfaces of her world. Despite the lateness of the hour, the air thrummed with energy, as if the cave itself was alive with possibility.

Dozens of fae bustled in the streets, buying bread and selling fish, trading and bartering. The men dressed in similar fashions as the guards: dark tunics with scaly leather pieces fashioned over the chest. The women mostly wore dresses, but the skirts were thin and looked easy to manage. Renya spotted a little girl holding a doll while grasping her mother's skirt, watching an entertainer play some kind of stringed instrument Renya didn't recognize.

The cave floor was smooth like onyx, and Renya hurried to catch up with York as he made his way through the winding road, taking them past shops, stands, and houses. Renya couldn't believe how much activity there was going on, especially during the evening hours. But with the light coming from the crystals in the ceiling, she supposed there might not be a real difference between night and day here.

Renya could smell more bread baking and fish being fried. Her mouth watered. Her clothes felt loose on her, and her stomach was so empty it hurt. She yearned for a meal, even if her hosts didn't allow her to stay overnight.

“Keep up, please,” York said, leading her up a slight hill. There was a series of switchbacks carved into the stone, with houses and buildings on each side, weaving up to the stone palace. They quickly made their way further up the cave and into the side of the mountain. Renya wanted to stop and look at everything, but York's pace was quick and efficient. They continued to make their way up higher and higher, until they rounded the last corner. Two more guards, dressed identically to York, stood in front of a large stone and tile archway. They saw York coming and parted, allowing them to pass through.

Renya followed York into another cavernous room, with a tranquil waterfall along one side of the cave wall, ending in a fast-moving stream that cut a path through the floor. A stone bridge passed over the miniature river, and York crossed it. Renya looked up and saw the top of the cave opened up to the natural sky. She could just make out a seagull circling high above in the midnight sky.

There were enclaves carved into the walls, some holding large crystals and others displaying statues. Renya recognized a large conch shell in one, and perhaps a whale in the other. Several chairs were arranged around a large carving of what Renya thought might be a mermaid, and York brought Renya over to the seating area.

“Please wait here,” he said, before disappearing through another tiled archway. After he went through the archway, water cascaded down the opening, blocking what was on the other side. Renya wanted to walk towards it to see how it worked, but decided she better sit still since she was currently an unwelcome guest who desperately wanted to stay and at the very least, have a meal.

After a few minutes, the water cascading down from the archway stopped and York came back through. Renya stood up as he beckoned for her to follow him.

“King Triston and Princess Esmeralda have agreed to see you,” York announced.

As soon as Renya passed through the archway, the curtain of water started to flow again, but she didn't have time to study it before York hurried her along.

A long corridor stretched before her, and Renya noticed that instead of doors, all of the archways contained the same cascading waterfall system. At the very end of the hallway another room opened up before her. Sitting directly ahead were a man and a woman, both regally poised on thrones made of some kind of iridescent material. The effect reminded Renya of the swirls coating freshwater pearls.

York stood off to the side, near a giant table full of carvings. Renya stepped forward and gave what she thought was a proper bow. The man glanced at her before speaking.

King Triston leaned forward, his eyes suddenly sharp. "These are...troubling times," he said, his voice low and measured. "We've heard whispers of the Shadow Queen's movements. Her quest for power is...concerning." He paused, studying Renya intently. "And now, you appear at our doorstep, claiming to have escaped her clutches. You must understand our...caution."

The man's voice was as smooth as silk and his gray eyes looked at Renya intensely. He wore a fine blue tunic with tiny shells sewn delicately around the waist, and a pearl-handled sword rested at his side. He had long blonde hair and a short brow ridge. Resting on top of his head was a simple gold crown engraved with what Renya thought might be eels. His face was stoic, and he seemed devoid of any emotion. This would not be a man to play poker with, Renya mused to herself.

"Yes, I would greatly appreciate any hospitality or help you could give me," Renya said politely, bowing her head again in the most respectful way she knew how. She looked to the woman next, but instead of looking at Renya, Princess Esmeralda just glanced at the man sitting next to her. She too had long blonde hair, but while King Triston's stopped at his shoulders, hers cascaded freely down to her waist. She wore a

dusty rose-colored gown made of satin, and it fit her like a glove and clung to her every curve. There was a cutout at her side which trailed to the front of the dress, displaying several inches of her toned stomach. Pearls were sewn into the dress every few inches, and Renya imagined the ensemble must be heavy to wear. Princess Esmeralda also had on matching satin shoes and a crown made of the largest pearls Renya had ever seen. They were woven together in a net-like pattern over her head, and it was the perfect complement to the fishing nets in the harbor Renya saw earlier.

“York said you have proof of your connection to Snowden,” the king said, acting almost disinterested, as if she was the most boring thing to ever come into his throne room.

“Yes,” Renya replied, moving forward to show him her elkten pin. He took it from her and examined it, while Renya's heart raced. She wanted the pin back immediately, but she pushed the feeling down as he continued to turn it over in his fingers.

“I've heard the younger brother's animal guardian is an elkten,” he said, handing the silver pin to the princess. Esmeralda held it in her hands and eyed it briefly before offering it back to Renya. Renya snatched the pin quickly, heart hammering. Princess Esmeralda raised an eyebrow but didn't comment on her reaction.

“Yes, his is an elkten, and his brother's is a snowy owl.”

“I seem to recall that too. I think you're telling the truth,” he said, and Renya's heart leaped. They would help her get to Grayden, she was sure of it. “What's your name, girl?”

“Renya,” she replied, annoyed at being called 'girl', especially by a man only a few years older than her, but she didn't allow her anger to show. At this point, help was more important than her pride.

“I'm concerned about this rumor I've heard about the Shadow Queen,” he continued, locking eyes with Esmeralda. “It's been said she is scouring the lands looking for a large power source and will stop at nothing until she has it. Why would she abandon her quest for power to kidnap you?”

Renya gulped. This man was extremely intelligent. She wasn't sure how to answer. Renya was pretty sure the power source was her. However, she didn't know if this was information she should willingly share. She stayed quiet, hoping they wouldn't ask any follow-up questions.

Esmeralda spoke this time. “She is clearly exhausted,” her voice came, high and even. “Don't interrogate her now. You'll have to excuse my brother,” she said, apologizing. “I can see you're dead on your feet.”

Instant relief came over Renya. They were going to help her. She almost cried at the thought of a meal and a bed, and maybe even a bath. If she only had Grayden beside her, life would be looking up.

“York, please escort Renya to one of the rooms overlooking the coast,” Princess Esmeralda asked.

“Thank you so much,” Renya replied, dipping into another bow before backing away from the thrones. She looked over her shoulder, but King Triston had already risen and walked away from his throne.

“If you'll come this way, please,” York said, guiding her back to the main room. The waterfall door stopped just in time for them to glide through it, and York marched her down an opposite hallway. They passed several doors before York halted and pointed to the waterfall doorway at the end of the hall. “You can rest there,” he said. “Someone will be along with some things for you, I'm sure.” He didn't sound so sure, but Renya didn't care. As long as there was hot water and a bed, she felt like a

princess.

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Renya approached the glistening waterfall in the doorway, and as soon as she came close, it stopped and allowed her to pass, falling once again as soon as she fully entered the room. It provided more privacy than she thought it would; she couldn't see anything from the outside or hear anything.

The room was carved out of the stone rock, just as everything else was. It wasn't as large as her room at Grayden's lodge, but bigger than her studio apartment. A large bed stood against the wall in the middle of the room, windows framing it on either side. Renya crossed and looked out of them, surprised to see no glass blocking her from the elements. Rather, the thick rock was carved out and she looked towards the dark horizon as if through a short tunnel. She could smell the marine air and a gentle breeze drifted in. The effect wasn't unpleasant. Renya wondered if they ever got tropical storms and how the open-air windows would function with storm-like gales. She shuddered, thinking of the rain back in Seattle.

Renya turned and made her way to the side of the room, where a bathroom stood. Renya spotted a tub and delight coursed through her body. She started shucking her clothes at once, only stopping when she saw the waterfall at the doorway stop.

A young girl entered the room and Renya covered herself with a towel hanging from a hook on the wall.

No older than fourteen or fifteen, she had pretty auburn hair that hung around her shoulders. She wore a simple green dress that stopped at the knees, and there were satin fringes hanging off the hem, resembling seaweed. Her skin was darkly tanned, as if she spent very little time in the palace but instead, out underneath the sun. The girl carried a large parcel and dropped it on the bed, before turning on her golden

sandals and walking out of the room. Renya didn't even have a chance to thank her before she disappeared through the archway.

Renya dropped her towel and crossed over to the bed. The girl had brought a simple periwinkle dress, cut a bit too low for Renya's taste, but infinitely better than the dirt and sweat-covered dress she had been wearing. She loved the riding dress and the sweet gesture from Grayden, but after being through the nightmare dungeon, she wanted to be rid of the outfit Grayden had Doria make for her. The bundle also held some soap and flat blue sandals that tied up the leg. Renya was most excited about the soap. She didn't think she'd ever feel clean again.

She went over to the large tub and turned the handles. Hot steam rose up and Renya shivered in anticipation. She sank down into the warm water and pleasure shuddered through her body. She rested against the back of the tub and let her hair float in the water before lathering it up with the soap. The soap was a cream color with strange petals mixed in with it. It smelled heavenly and Renya couldn't place the scent but it was familiar.

She had just finished rinsing the soap off her body when she heard a frightening roar from down the hall. It was so loud it passed through the water barrier at her doorway. Startled, she quickly got out of the tub, wrapped a towel around her, and moved towards the back of the room, as far away from the watery archway as she could get. She heard commotion coming from the hall and looked for a place to hide. The water in the doorway wasn't going to keep out any intruders. Fear gripped her and she wondered if Cressida had found her. Renya instantly felt guilty for bringing the war here into this peaceful kingdom. Could she use her magic to defend herself? She was mad she hadn't even attempted to use it yet.

A scuffle came, and it sounded like there was a brawl happening in front of her room. A dark shadow passed by her door before instantly coming back. Renya trembled, knowing this was about to be the third time she was taken against her will and her

anger mounted.

Renya's heart pounded so loudly she was sure it would give away her position. The footsteps outside grew closer, heavy and determined. She closed her eyes, summoning whatever newfound power lay dormant within her. As the watery curtain began to part, she braced herself, ready to face whatever came through—be it friend or foe.

The tall figure broke through the screen of water, dripping wet.

Renya looked up and met Grayden's emerald-green eyes.

Chapter Seven

Grayden would later look back at his behavior at the Tidal Kingdom and realize he might have slightly overreacted. He probably shouldn't have pushed the guards at the mouth of the cave inlet into the water and stolen their canoe. He shouldn't have forced his way into their harbor and dodged all the guards that tried to stop him as he raced up towards the palace. He also probably shouldn't have punched King Triston and accused him of keeping Renya from him. He also probably shouldn't have forged a path of destruction through the palace until he found his way to Renya's room.

When he had pushed his way through the waterfall blocking her door, he saw Renya and he had frozen, momentarily forgetting he was being pursued by numerous guards. His heart had pounded, a deafening rhythm in his ears, and the desire to make her his had overwhelmed him like a tidal wave. He had made a move towards her, arms outstretched, fingers aching to touch her, as if to sweep her up and never let go. However, at that moment the guards had finally caught up with him, their heavy footfalls echoing in the chamber. They had tackled him to the floor of Renya's room, the impact knocking the breath from his lungs. Hands pinned behind his back, he had looked up at Renya, his piercing green eyes meeting hers.

“Renya!” he had roared, his voice raw with emotion, as two guards yanked him upright and out of her room. Renya had tried to follow him, her bare feet slapping against the stone floor, but she was in nothing but her towel and Grayden saw two more guards holding her back, their hands gentle but firm.

“Grayden!” she had exclaimed, her voice a mixture of relief and confusion, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Don't you dare touch her!” Grayden had yelled frantically at the guards, his protective instincts flaring. “Renya! I've come for you!” The words had been torn from his throat, desperate and primal. He then managed to overpower both guards, muscles straining as he broke free, but another three guards came around the corner and pulled him back. It had taken all five of them to subdue him, their combined strength barely enough to restrain him as they dragged him to an empty chamber.

Now he sat there, seething in anger and nearly trembling with desire, so close to Renya yet unable to claim her. The frustration was maddening, like an itch he couldn't scratch, a hunger he couldn't sate.

He looked around the room they had shoved him into, taking in his surroundings with sharp, assessing eyes. There was a bed, its sheets rumpled as if hastily made, a small opening in the wall which he assumed was supposed to be a window, letting in a sliver of moonlight, a plain wooden chair, and a tiny bathroom. Still, better than a dungeon, he thought to himself, a wry smile tugging at his lips. He sat on the bed, its frame creaking under his weight, and removed his sword from across his back. The familiar weight of it in his hands was oddly comforting. He was surprised they hadn't taken it away from him. Of course, he didn't draw his sword at all in his pursuit of Renya, instead resorting to his fists. He might have head-butted one of the guards too. His forehead felt a bit sore and, in his desperation, he had used whatever force he needed to.

Now that his mind had cleared a bit and he saw Renya was unharmed, he started to reconsider his actions. The adrenaline was fading, leaving behind a growing sense of chagrin. Punching King Triston in the jaw wasn't the most diplomatic move he'd ever made. The memory of his fist connecting with the king's face made him wince. Of course, when Grayden had asked him where they were keeping Renya, Triston had glanced at his sister and taken way too long to answer. Still...he realized he might not exactly be thinking clearly at the moment. In fact, he was beginning to think he had acted like a ruffian, a far cry from the composed leader he prided himself on being. He never resorted to physical violence unless it was absolutely necessary. He hadn't even tried to explain to the guards at the cave entrance what he was there for. He had just shoved them as hard as he could into the still water and taken off with their canoe like a thief in the night.

Grayden stood up, his muscles protesting after the night's exertions, and checked the door. Unlike Renya's room, this door was metal, solid, and locked tightly. Fair enough. He had thrown quite the punch at their king. He went back to the bed and sat with his head hung low, the weight of his actions settling on his shoulders. Renya was unharmed, he kept repeating to himself, forcing his fists to unclench and his shoulders to relax. Grayden laid back on the bed, boots still on the floor, and stared at the stone-cleaved ceiling.

The memory of Renya's face swirled before him, as vivid as if she were there. She had been clad only in a towel, and the recollection of her so skimpily dressed, or rather, undressed, gave him a rush of pleasure, followed swiftly by a surge of jealousy that the guards had seen her like that. She was his and his alone to worship. Her face had been so lovely, pink and clean and...her ears. Her ears were now like his! He pictured her in his mind again, mouth opened in surprise as he had tumbled through the archway. His hair had been wet, and water had sloshed down his face, but he was sure of what he saw. What had happened to her? Had Queen Cressida done something to her? Or had her aunt?

Another realization struck him like a ton of bricks, leaving him breathless. Their fated bond. Was this the reason it appeared all of a sudden? Had he been fated to her all along and just hadn't known it?

He thought back to the time they had spent together before she went back through the portal with her aunt. He remembered finding her in the forest and cradling her limp body to his before he even knew her name. The memory was so clear, he could almost feel her weight in his arms again, smell the crisp scent of snow mingled with something uniquely her. Grayden hadn't wanted Dimitri to touch her, and even at the time, he hadn't understood his own reasoning. He should have left her at the inn when he went back to the lodge, but instead he had risked them both by taking her with him. He had told Charly he wanted Almory to meet with her as quickly as possible, but he also hadn't wanted to leave her behind where other men could stare or talk to her. He had wanted her by his side. Even when Almory had grabbed her hands to get a read on her, or when Jurel had taken her arm to escort her and Selenia to the village, he had felt a rush of possessiveness that he had struggled to control.

Fates. It had been there all along. Just muted, like Selenia had said Renya's magic was. What had Selenia said exactly? That Renya's magic was like a painting with gray over it?

This entire time he had been with his mate and hadn't realized it. All those times he had felt guilty for kissing her or when they were together in the snow cave. The whole time she had belonged to him, and he had belonged to her. He had felt horribly selfish, taking her when she wasn't his, but in those moments, how could he have possibly fought the bond that was there?

And then there were the elkten. They had appeared not once, but twice when he was with her. Gods, how could he have been so blind? His own animal guardian, thought to be extinct, had appeared to him twice, and he still hadn't put it together. He couldn't decide if he was dumb or just oblivious.

Or...maybe this was how it was to have a fated bond. His thoughts and judgments were so clouded by her. Every thought and action he took had Renya factored into it.

For the second time in the last week, Grayden wished his father was here. He had so many questions about the bond and no one to ask. To his knowledge, there wasn't anyone within his lands, and maybe even his world, that had a fated mate. Grayden exhaled loudly, the sound echoing in the quiet room. He and Renya would have to figure it out together.

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Together. He smiled at the thought, a warmth spreading through his chest.

He heard footsteps approach his room, the sound growing louder with each passing second. The heavy door opened with a groan, and a guard strolled in. Grayden vaguely recalled tripping this guard on his way down the hall earlier. The guard's wary glance confirmed the memory. Behind the guard was King Triston himself, his presence filling the room despite his calm demeanor.

The Tidal King strolled into the room, his movements graceful and measured. Grayden sheepishly noticed the swelling along Triston's lower jaw from where he had punched him. For his part, King Triston remained calm, his face betraying no emotion as he sat opposite Grayden in the chair. Once Triston sat down, he motioned for the guard to leave them. The guard hesitated for a moment, clearly reluctant to leave his king alone with the man who had assaulted him, but a firm nod from Triston sent him on his way.

Grayden waited for him to speak first, the silence stretching between them, but instead Triston just stared at him, face unflinching and impossible to read. The quiet became oppressive, pushing down on Grayden until he could no longer bear it.

“When can I see Renya?” Grayden asked, breaking the silence, his voice rough with emotion.

King Triston looked at him with scrutiny, his gaze sharp and assessing. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he spoke, his voice low and controlled.

“You come into my kingdom unannounced, steal a canoe, force your way into my

palace, strike me, injure my guards, and then break into my guest's room.” Each offense was listed calmly, but the weight of them hung in the air between them.

Grayden looked anywhere but at the swollen side of Triston's face, shame coloring his cheeks. “I guess I should apologize,” he said, the words feeling inadequate even as they left his mouth.

Triston ignored the hypothetical apology, his gaze never wavering from Grayden's face. “I don't care about any of that. I want to know what caused Prince Grayden, the supposedly calm and cautious leader of the Snow Lands, to come into my territory and start a spree of violence?”

It was a fair question, one that Grayden knew he had to answer carefully. He knew what had driven him to the wake of chaos he had created, but he wasn't sure if he should keep the bond private or not. He hadn't even explained to Renya what was going on. Had she felt it as he had? Or would her feelings be muted until he claimed her? Grayden tried to remember his parents' stories. Had his mother felt the connection to his father right away? He wished he would have paid more attention.

Triston looked at him, waiting, his patience seemingly infinite. Grayden decided that only honesty would work here. Besides, as soon as Triston saw them together, he would suspect it anyway. His desire to forge an alliance with King Triston was strong, and he should be privileged to all the facts before any decision was made.

Grayden sighed deeply before he began, the words coming slowly at first, then faster as the story unfolded. “When my men and I were on our way to the southern borders of my land, I came across a human woman, passed out and near death in the snow. I took her back to my tent and realized she was marked with fae magic. Her sudden appearance was the result of a portal opening up in the Snow Lands.”

If King Triston was surprised to hear about a portal in the Snow Lands, he didn't

show it. Instead, he just continued his stoic stare, encouraging Grayden to continue with a slight nod.

“I took her home to the lodge with me and our seer sensed power in her. I had my suspicions she possessed some kind of fae lineage.”

At this, Triston spoke, his voice thoughtful. “You said she was human when you found her on your borders? The girl who came to my palace asking for shelter was not human.”

So, Grayden had been right. Renya had changed. The glamour hiding her fae features was somehow broken. “She appeared human at the time,” Grayden replied before continuing with his tale. “I kept her with me at my lodge and...we grew close.” The words felt inadequate to describe the connection he had felt with Renya from the start.

King Triston raised his eyebrow and Grayden saw the first hint of a reaction from the king. He supposed it was common knowledge throughout the lands that Grayden didn't entertain marriage offers.

“Queen Cressida's idiot cousin Brandle saw me with Renya in the forest, and he kidnapped her to get to me. I'm sure you are aware, the Shadow Queen has been looking for a marriage alliance to sire an heir. Brandle took Renya to force my hand.” The memory of Renya's abduction still made his blood boil, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

Now that got a reaction. King Triston looked repulsed, his mask of indifference slipping for a moment. Grayden would have commiserated with him if he wasn't so desperate to finish his tale and find his mate.

“My men and I, along with Renya's aunt—who is a very powerful ally—managed to

get Renya back from the Shadow Queen and Renya and her aunt went back through the portal with the intention of destroying it so Cressida couldn't follow. After that, I don't know what happened. I woke up at my lodge and sensed Renya was back in our world. I set out to find her and when I tracked her here...I guess I got a little carried away."The understatement of the century, Grayden thought ruefully.

"A little?" King Triston snorted derisively, a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"Okay, a lot," Grayden conceded, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips.

King Triston stared at Grayden again and then shifted uncomfortably in his chair. A long moment passed; the silence heavy with unspoken questions.

"You love her." King Triston stated it as a fact and not a question, his perceptive gaze seeing right through Grayden's facade.

"When she came back into this world, I..." Grayden sighed. It seemed hard to tell people about their connection, given it was so odd that he had been around her without it developing before now. "She's my fated mate." The words hung in the air between them, powerful and irrevocable.

At this, King Triston's mask of indifference finally slipped from his face entirely. "Fated mate?" he asked, his disbelief apparent. "You're far too old."

"I know, and so is she. I think we've been fated this whole time, but something happened recently to make the bond snap into place. The same thing that altered her appearance. The last time I saw her, her fae features were glamoured." Grayden's voice was filled with wonder as he spoke, still barely able to believe it himself.

"Well, with this confession, I can at least start to comprehend your intolerable behavior since stepping into my kingdom," King Triston said, a slight smile on his

lips. “Who would have ever thought, Prince Grayden fate-bound?”

Grayden could hardly believe it himself, the reality of it still sinking in.

“It seems to me that a reunion is in order,” Triston said, rising and patting Grayden heartily on the back. “Just try to keep it down. Remember, the water doorways aren't completely soundproof.” There was a twinkle of amusement in his eyes as he spoke.

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Grayden didn't even have it in him to pretend to be embarrassed. All he could think about was seeing Renya again, holding her in his arms, and never letting go.

Chapter Eight

Renya's heart thundered against her ribs, a wild rhythm that matched the surge of magic tingling beneath her skin. Grayden was here. The realization buzzed through her like sweet wine, leaving her light-headed and almost giddy. Safety, power, and Grayden—she had all three within her grasp. Or at least, she would soon enough.

Throwing her towel on the bed, Renya quickly dressed in the light blue gown, the silky fabric cool against her skin. She laced up the sandals, the leather straps snaking around her ankles. Her damp hair clung to her neck as she tossed it in a quick ponytail. With a deep breath, she left the room, her sandals sounding softly on the stone floor as she searched for Grayden.

Surprise flickered through her as she found the corridor outside her room empty. Earlier, when she had tried to run after Grayden, two guards had blocked her path, their firm hands holding her back. Now, with Grayden gone, the hallway stretched before her, silent and uninhabited. She started down the passage towards the main entrance, but something tugged at her consciousness, an invisible thread pulling her in the opposite direction. Following this inexplicable instinct, Renya turned on her heels and began retracing her steps, moving past her room.

As she rounded a corner, she spotted King Triston ahead, his regal figure emerging from one of the doors. He strode towards her, and Renya's keen eyes caught what seemed to be the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. As he drew closer, the subtle

expression became more apparent. A knot of fear twisted in Renya's stomach, her mind conjuring images of Grayden in distress. Had the king done something to him? She held her breath, muscles tensing in anticipation. However, as Triston passed her, his smile morphed into a knowing grin that lit up his usually stoic features.

“He's all yours, Renya,” he said, his voice tinged with amusement. With a conspiratorial wink, he continued down the hall, leaving Renya standing in bewildered silence.

Heart racing, Renya sprinted the rest of the way to the door from which King Triston had emerged. Her hand trembled as she grasped the knob, her breath coming in short, rapid bursts. She forced herself to inhale deeply, trying to calm the tempest of emotions swirling within her.

She pushed the door open, and in an instant, she was engulfed in a frenzied embrace. Grayden stood before her, his presence overwhelming her senses. His lips were everywhere at once—her face, her hands, her eyelids—showering her with lavish attention. Each kiss left a trail of fire on her skin, igniting a desire that threatened to consume her. She wanted to ask him about his encounter with Triston, but his mouth claimed her lips, swallowing her words before she could give them voice. She barely had time to kick the door closed behind her before Grayden scooped her up in his arms, cradling her against his chest as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

As he carried her to the bed, Renya sensed a shift in their dynamic. Before she had left through the portal, Grayden had been hesitant, always holding back as if fighting some internal battle. But now, there was no resistance as he lowered her onto the soft mattress, his body hovering over hers. She could feel the evidence of his desire pressing against her thigh, hard and insistent. His kisses continued their passionate assault, trailing down her neck and leaving her breathless.

“Grayden!” she exclaimed, her voice a mixture of desire and confusion. She placed her hands on his chest, gently pushing him back. “Honey, look at me.” The endearment slipped from her lips unbidden, surprising even herself.

Grayden lifted his head, his jade eyes meeting hers. She could see the struggle for control etched on his face, his jaw clenched with the effort of restraint. It was so unlike the Grayden she knew—the serious, calculating leader. The few times they had gotten carried away with their mutual attraction, he had always been able to pull back. But now, as she gazed into his eyes, she saw a consuming lust that threatened to overtake them both.

“Honey...” he murmured, his gaze fixed on her lips as if they held the secrets of the universe. “Renya, say it again,” he groaned, his voice rough with need.

“Honey?” she repeated, uncertainty coloring her tone. She tried to sit up, but Grayden's weight pinned her to the bed.

“Yes, that's it,” he breathed, his lips descending to capture hers once more.

Renya turned her head, denying him the kiss. A flash of hurt and confusion crossed Grayden's face, and regret washed over Renya in waves. His fallen expression was heartbreaking, and it took all of her resolve not to give in to his passionate advances. Desire coursed through her veins, making it almost painful to resist him.

With huge effort, Renya managed to sit up, gently pushing Grayden back. “Grayden, what happened? How are you here?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

He looked at her, his eyes dark with desire, lips swollen from their kisses. “I think the better question, Little Fawn, is how are you here?”

Renya could see his hands twitching, longing to reach for her. Taking pity on him,

she grabbed them, entwining their fingers. The contact seemed to soothe him somewhat, though she could still feel the tension thrumming through his body.

“The second I went through the portal, I saw my aunt bound in a corner,” Renya began, her voice soft. “Before I could do anything, the Shadow Queen pushed me through another door and I ended up on this beach. Brandle and Sion were there too, and they took me to this outcropping of rocks—”

“I saw it,” Grayden interjected, his grip on her hands tightening. “I tracked you to the jungle and then back here. When I couldn't get to you fast enough, I went...a bit primal.”

“A bit?” Renya raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement in her voice. “You looked crazed when you came into my room.”

Grayden had the grace to look embarrassed, a faint blush coloring his cheeks.

“She did something to me,” Renya continued, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Some kind of spell or ritual that unlocked my power. Sion helped me, he told me what to do and as she tried to take my magic, it backfired and caused the cave-in. I got away and fled here.”

Grayden reached out, his knuckles tracing feather-light circles up and down her bare arm. Renya shivered at his touch, her skin tingling everywhere his fingers brushed.

“Grayden, what's going on?” she asked, her voice thick with emotion. “You're so desperate...I'm glad to see you too, but it's like you're possessed.”

His eyes roamed over her, drinking in every detail as if committing her to memory. Renya felt his body tremble with barely contained desire. “Renya, my Little Fawn, don't you feel it? Don't you want me?”

“Of course I do,” she responded, her cheeks flushing. “I can just control myself.”

Grayden's face fell, hurt once again readable in his eyes. “It has nothing to do with control,” he said, his fingers finding their way to her waist, stroking her sides through the thin fabric of her dress. “When the Shadow Queen unlocked you, it unlocked something in me, too.”

Confusion swirled in Renya's mind, an ocean of questions and half-formed theories. What could be driving Grayden to this obsessive need for her? As she pondered, a realization began to dawn. She thought back to the moment after she had claimed her powers, to the desperate urge she had felt to find Grayden. The need to get back to him had been her first coherent thought after Cressida's ritual. And hadn't she sensed him earlier? When she had left her room, she had started towards the other side of the palace before changing her mind and heading back towards this room.

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“Grayden,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Are we...is it like with your parents?”

Grayden's warm hands continued their exploration of her body, sliding down to the top of her thighs. His fingers traced slow, maddening patterns up and down her leg, finding the bare skin exposed by the slit in her dress.

Renya shuddered with pleasure, a soft sigh escaping her lips. She knew the answer before Grayden even spoke, the truth of it resonating in her very bones.

“Yes,” Grayden confirmed, his voice low and intense. “Renya, I believe we're fated to be together.” His eyes locked with hers, and she could see the struggle within him, the battle between his desire to claim her and his need to explain. As his fingers continued their sensual dance along her skin, Renya felt something else emanating from him. It was a cocktail of emotions—wild exhilaration, profound joy, and an underlying current of fear.

Renya focused, allowing herself to open up to this new connection between them. Suddenly, she could feel what Grayden was feeling, his emotions washing over her like waves on a shore. Yet, somehow, she knew these weren't her own feelings. There was no denying it now—a bond had formed between them, invisible but undeniably real.

“Renya...” Grayden's voice was hesitant, a stark contrast to his earlier passion. “If you're disappointed or if you don't...don't want me...we can look and see if there's some way to sever our bond. I don't know if it's possible, but I'll do anything to make you happy.” The devastation in his eyes as he spoke tore at Renya's heart.

“Grayden, no,” she said firmly, cupping his face in her hands. “That's not what I want at all. I'm just trying to figure this out and you touching me is making it hard to think because...” she paused, gathering her courage, “I do want you.” The admission left her lips without a hint of embarrassment, a new confidence embroiled in her words.

Grayden's eyes shone with emotion, a myriad of feelings playing across his face. “Gods, I want you too,” he breathed, his voice husky with desire. “I want to take you in this exact moment, however and wherever I can. I need to make you mine, and soon.” His words sent a shiver down Renya's spine, but he wasn't finished. “But I also want to wait. I want to wait until we aren't in a borrowed room in someone else's palace. I want you on a bed of lotus petals with a fire burning in the hearth. I want you on my bed, under my furs where I can claim you and make you mine forever.”

Renya trembled at the intensity of his words, each one striking her like a physical caress. They were both a promise and a prophecy, painting a vivid picture of their future together.

“I want you however I can have you,” Grayden continued, replacing his fingers against her thighs with his lips. The heat of his mouth against her skin sent jolts of pleasure through her body. Renya pressed her thighs together, acutely aware of the growing moisture there. She choked back a sob of desire, and Grayden looked up at her, his eyes heavy-lidded with need. “So, what do you want, my sweet Renya?”

Before she could answer, a sharp knock at the door shattered the intimate atmosphere. The young girl who had brought Renya's clothing earlier appeared in the doorway, her expression impassive. Grayden let out a low growl, reluctantly pulling away from Renya's legs.

“None of that now,” Renya admonished playfully, finding her voice. “You can act like a beast later, in private.” The words left her mouth before she could stop them, and she flushed deeply, knowing the effect they would have on Grayden.

The girl, seemingly oblivious to the charged atmosphere in the room, announced that King Triston and Princess Esmeralda requested Renya and Grayden's presence for dinner. Having delivered her message, she turned on her heel and left without waiting for a response.

“Well, she's efficient,” Renya mumbled, still flustered from their interrupted moment.

Grayden, for his part, couldn't tear his eyes away from Renya. His gaze was so intense, so full of heat and longing, that Renya felt as if she were naked despite being fully clothed.

With a deep breath, Renya stood up, smoothing down her dress. Grayden remained seated on the bed, his eyes following her every movement. She could sense his desire to close the distance between them, to take her in his arms again, but he was visibly restraining himself.

“I don't know about you, but I'm starving,” Renya announced, trying to inject some normalcy into the situation.

“Me too,” Grayden replied, his voice low and husky. “I could feast on you for days.” His gaze darkened as it focused on her exposed thighs where the slit in her dress revealed a tantalizing glimpse of skin.

Renya rolled her eyes, a mix of exasperation and affection coloring her expression. “Seriously, Grayden. Can you handle a civilized dinner?”

He looked at her, swallowing hard before nodding. “Perfect,” Renya said, “because if I don't eat soon, I'm going to get cranky.”

She moved towards the door, and Grayden followed, rising from the bed with fluid grace. As they walked down the long corridor, Renya noticed him flexing his fingers

repeatedly, as if trying to keep them from reaching for her. Taking pity on him, she offered her hand. Grayden grasped it like a lifeline, his fingers interlacing with hers as they walked side-by-side.

When they reached the main hall, a guard led them to a formal dining room. They passed through another waterway, the curtain of liquid parting to allow them entry. Grayden's grip on Renya's hand tightened as they stepped into the room, as if afraid she might disappear if he let go.

The dining room was a marvel of nature and architecture combined. It was better lit than Renya's guest room, everything bathed in a soft, seafoam green glow that gave the impression of being underwater. Against the back wall, the stone cliff that the palace rested on towered overhead, its rough surface a stark contrast to the polished floors and furnishings.

From the very top of the cliff, an impressive waterfall cascaded down, its crystal waters rushing towards a bed of rocks below. The waterfall fed into a large reservoir, its surface rippling with tiny waves. On each side of the pond, a steady stream branched out, running along the sides of the room before converging and plunging down another waterfall on the opposite side of the room. This second fall disappeared over a cliff, presumably flowing into the sea below. A small, ornate bridge arched over the rushing stream, allowing access to the dining area. The overall effect was breathtaking, making Renya feel as if they were dining in an underwater grotto.

Sitting nearest the waterfall at a table covered in gold place settings was King Triston. He had changed for dinner and now wore a grand pair of dark green robes that shimmered in the watery light. His sister, Princess Esmeralda, sat beside him, resplendent in a dress of fine orange silk. It was crafted in the same style as the one she had worn earlier, but instead of pearls, this gown was adorned with tiny reddish gems. As Renya and Grayden approached, she found herself captivated by the jewels. They seemed to glow from within, pulsing with an inner light that might have been a

trick of the flowing water behind the princess, or something more magical.

Esmeralda caught Renya staring at her gown and smiled. "It's aragonite," she explained, her fingers lightly touching the tiny gemstones. "It's found naturally here in our kingdom."

"It's beautiful," Renya responded, remembering her manners and giving a slight bow.

"You think so?" Esmeralda's smile widened. "Well then, you must have a necklace made of it. I have dozens."

"There's no need to do that," Renya protested, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. She was acutely aware that they had already benefited greatly from the Tidal Kingdom's hospitality, not to mention the chaos Grayden had caused in his desperate search for her.

"Nonsense," Princess Esmeralda replied with a polite but firm smile. She gestured to the chair on her left. "Please, sit beside me."

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As Renya moved to take her seat, Grayden moved to follow, clearly intent on sitting next to her. However, King Triston's voice cut through the air, halting Grayden in his tracks.

“Prince Grayden,” Triston called, his tone brooking no argument. “Let the two women talk. You and I have an alliance to discuss.”

Grayden hesitated, his eyes flickering between Renya and Triston. Renya could feel his reluctance through their newfound bond, a mixture of frustration and anxiety at the thought of being separated from her. She gave him an encouraging smile, trying to project calm reassurance through their connection. With visible effort, Grayden nodded and made his way to sit beside King Triston, though his eyes never left Renya.

As she settled into her seat, Renya couldn't help but think, 'Honestly, it's like having a toddler.' Immediately, she felt a pang of guilt for the uncharitable thought. She knew Grayden was struggling with their bond, fighting against instincts he barely understood. She wasn't sure why she was able to stay so clear-headed while he seemed lost in his desire, but she was grateful for her relative composure.

Princess Esmeralda turned to Renya, a knowing smile playing on her lips. “I've heard from my brother that you and the prince are fate-bound,” she said, her voice low and conspiratorial. “I hope you don't mind that he told me. I've always found fated couples to be incredibly interesting and have studied the lore a bit.”

Renya smiled shyly, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the ornate tablecloth. “I have to admit, I'm really not sure what it entails exactly,” she confessed. “I don't

know how much you've learned about me from your brother, but I grew up in the human realm. Grayden told me his parents were fate-bound, and I understand the general idea but..." she trailed off, unsure how to articulate her confusion.

"What is it, Renya?" Princess Esmeralda prompted gently, her eyes warm with understanding.

Renya took a deep breath, steadying her tone. "He seems to be feeling much more than I do," she admitted, guilt evident in her voice. "I feel like I'm disappointing him somehow."

Another kind smile graced Esmeralda's face, and she leaned in closer, lowering her voice to ensure their conversation remained private. "I take it that you two haven't... sealed the bond yet?"

Renya's brow wrinkled in confusion. "No, is there another ritual or—"

Princess Esmeralda chuckled softly, the sound like tinkling bells. "Sorry Renya, I didn't mean to confuse you. I know how new this must be to you." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Not much is known about fated bonds, and our memories and stories have been lost with the fading, but from what I've learned, I do know that until the bond is sealed, your prince will feel quite desperate to claim you." She gave Renya a pointed look, her meaning clear.

Renya's eyes widened as understanding dawned. "Oh...oh!" she exclaimed, heat rising to her cheeks.

Princess Esmeralda reached out, placing her hand gently atop Renya's. "Given his...outbursts...I figured he hasn't made your bond official. Once he does, he should be...less possessive of you. That is one of the few things I've learned throughout the years. With each subsequent mating, he'll feel more confident in his claim to you. It

varies for each person, too. The physical side could be more demanding on him than on you.”

Renya's blush deepened, but before she could respond, servers arrived bearing trays laden with an array of mouthwatering dishes. The aroma of freshly cooked seafood and exotic fruits filled the air, making Renya's stomach growl in anticipation. Grateful for the distraction, she began filling her plate, suddenly ravenous.

As she sampled the various dishes, Renya couldn't help but glance over at Grayden. The moment her eyes found him, he stopped mid-conversation with King Triston and returned her gaze. It was as if he had sensed her attention, their bond allowing him to feel her eyes on him. The look he gave her was smoldering, filled with such intensity that it would have melted the hardest of hearts. His messy dark hair, chiseled jaw, and those piercing green eyes would have made any woman want him. A thrill ran through Renya as she realized that no other woman could ever have him. He was hers, and hers alone.

As the evening progressed, Renya could feel Grayden's urgency growing. Even when engaged in conversation with Triston, his eyes would constantly drift back to her, filled with desperation and hunger. She knew what he needed, but she also knew he didn't want to claim her in someone else's home. And if she was honest with herself, she didn't want it to happen here, either. She was nervous and hadn't had much time to get used to the idea of what was happening between them. While she loved him, everything was still raw, from the pain of their separation to the surprise of their mating bond.

After the meal concluded, King Triston excused himself and left the hall, his robes swishing softly against the polished floor.

“Take care of yourself tonight, Renya,” Princess Esmeralda said with a meaningful look, before she too departed for her own quarters.

Suddenly, Grayden and Renya found themselves alone in the grand dining room. The only sounds were the gentle rushing of the waterfalls and the pounding of Renya's heart in her ears.

Chapter Nine

Grayden rose from his seat, his movements slow and deliberate. He stalked towards Renya, his eyes never leaving hers. She felt like prey being hunted, her breath catching in her throat as he approached. He didn't take his eyes off her as he crossed the distance between them, each step measured and purposeful.

Renya took a deep breath as he reached for her, strong arms encircling her waist and pulling her close. But instead of claiming her lips as she half-expected, Grayden planted a chaste kiss on her forehead. The tenderness of the gesture, in stark contrast to the desire she could feel radiating from him, brought tears to her eyes.

Taking her hand in his, Grayden led them back through the winding corridors towards Renya's room. The journey seemed both endless and far too short, tension building with each step. When they finally reached her door, Grayden paused, his hand hovering over the shimmering water curtain.

Renya looked up at him, her voice barely above a whisper. "Aren't you coming in?"

At her invitation, Grayden didn't hesitate. He stepped through the watery barrier, pulling Renya gently along with him. As soon as they crossed the threshold, the curtain of water reappeared behind them, sealing them off from the rest of the world.

Grayden's eyes roamed the room, obviously taking in details he had missed during his brief, chaotic visit earlier. But his gaze always returned to Renya, drawn to her like a moth to the flame. He moved towards her with the grace of a predator, tilting her chin up with gentle fingers. His lips met hers in the softest of kisses, a stark contrast to the

passion that had consumed him earlier.

“Are you going to stay here with me tonight?” Renya asked, her voice trembling slightly with a mixture of anticipation and nervousness.

Grayden's expression softened, a look of tender concern replacing the hunger in his eyes. “Renya, I know this is a lot and what I'm feeling is...intense. I'm sorry if I've scared you or made you feel uncomfortable. I don't know why I'm feeling so lost without you.” He moved to the bed and sat down, his gaze dropping to his boots. “But if you'll let me, staying in here with you would be less painful for me. I'll even sleep on the floor. I just need to know you're here and you're safe.”

Renya's heart swelled with affection. She crossed the room to stand before him, taking his face between her hands. Grayden's cheeks were flushed against her palms, his skin warm to the touch. She gently forced him to look up at her, meeting his gaze steadily.

“Esmeralda said that from what she'd learned, it's normal for you to feel like this until...well, until we've been together,” Renya explained, a blush creeping up her neck.

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Grayden's eyes widened, a mix of relief and curiosity crossing his features. “Really?” he asked, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. “My parents never mentioned anything about that...”

Renya couldn't suppress a small smile. “Can you blame them?”

Grayden laughed, the sound rich and genuine. “No, I guess not. As a child I would have been mortified...hell, even as an adult I wouldn't have wanted to hear about it.”

Renya giggled, trying to imagine how awkward that conversation might have been. She was embarrassed enough talking about it with Esmeralda.

“Renya,” Grayden said, his tone serious once more. “Are you sure it's okay if I stay here with you tonight? I promise, I won't do anything to make you uncomfortable. I meant what I said, I want this to be right for us. But...I don't think I could leave you alone in this room tonight.”

Her face softened with understanding. “Of course,” she replied, her voice warm. “In fact, I need you too.”

“You do?” he asked, relief evident in his voice.

“Yes,” she said, looking into his warm eyes. “I just...this is a big step for me, and I'm a bit nervous.”

Grayden nodded, understanding written across his features. “About what happened the night before you went back through the portal—I'm so sorry. I should have

never—I mean, I thought—”

“Grayden, please don't apologize,” Renya interrupted, placing a finger gently on his lips. “What happened between us was just as it should be.”

He smiled, a genuine, heartfelt expression that lit up his entire face. She could sense his nervousness too, but there was also a deep certainty that they would face this new chapter together.

“So, if it's okay with you...can I just hold you tonight?” Grayden asked, his voice soft and full of emotion.

“Just let me get dressed into a nightgown or something,” Renya replied, glancing around the room. Her eyes fell on a nightdress hanging on the back of an ornate chair. As she approached it, she swallowed hard. The garment was far more revealing than anything she had worn in this world. In the human realm, it might have been considered tame, but she imagined Grayden might struggle to maintain his control. The nightgown was made of white silk with delicate straps at the shoulders and a plunging v-neckline. The hem stopped mid-thigh, leaving little to the imagination.

Feeling suddenly shy, Renya moved to the other side of the room to change. She debated retreating to the bathroom, but that felt strange given their connection and all they had experienced together. Grayden watched her cross the room, his gaze intense. Just as Renya was wondering whether to ask him to turn around, he made the decision for her. He moved to the far side of the bed and began removing his boots, his back to her.

Grateful for his consideration, Renya quickly slipped off her dress and sandals, then pulled the flimsy gown over her head. She released her hair from its ponytail, running her fingers through the strands in lieu of a brush. Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she took a deep breath, preparing herself for what felt like a monumental

moment.

Barefoot, she turned back towards the bed, her stomach fluttering with nervous energy. Even though Grayden had promised nothing would happen tonight, it still felt charged with significance. Maybe it was the pure white of the nightdress, or the fact that this was their first night together in a real bed. Or perhaps it was the knowledge that they were now bound and promised to each other for life.

As Renya approached the bed, Grayden finished removing his shirt, his back still turned to her. She watched the play of muscles across his shoulders as he set the garment aside, admiring the strength evident in every line of his body. Then, slowly, he turned to face her.

The moment their eyes met, Renya could see Grayden's desire, evident in the tightness of his expression and the way his gaze raked over her form. A thrill of power surged through her, knowing she could elicit such a reaction from him.

Grayden moved towards her, his steps slow and cautious. Rather than feeling like prey being stalked, as she had earlier, Renya now felt like a delicate creature he was trying not to startle. When he was close enough to touch, he reached out, brushing her hair back from her shoulder. His fingers grazed her skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

"I'm sorry about the nightgown," Renya began, gesturing to the revealing garment. "It's the only thing in here, but I know it must be hard on you—"

"Renya," Grayden interrupted, his voice low and husky. "One day soon you'll be completely mine. I can handle the temptation now. At least, I'm going to try." He sighed, resting his hand over her heart. "I might be desperate to claim your body right now, but my connection to you is deeper than anything physical. I love you. Even before you became my mate, I loved you. I think a part of me has always loved you,

even before you came into my world. I was hollow and empty, just going through the motions in life. When you finally came to me, my entire existence changed. My lands, my magic, my title—they're not my priority anymore. Your health, your safety, your happiness—that's what I care about.”

Tears welled up in Renya's eyes, threatening to spill over. She had been certain of his feelings, but hearing him declare his love so eloquently made her heart swell with emotion. The analytical part of her brain, the one nurtured by her independent aunt, wondered if it was too soon for such intense feelings. But her heart recognized the truth in his words, feeling the depth of his love through their bond.

“Oh Grayden,” she said, moving into his arms and resting her head against his chest. The steady thump of his heartbeat was comforting, grounding her in the moment. “I love you too. Even before the bond, I wanted to be with you.” She looked up, meeting his gaze. The love shining in his eyes was almost overwhelming in its intensity.

Grayden leaned down, pressing his lips to hers in a kiss that was both tender and passionate. His hands caressed her shoulders as she parted her lips, deepening the kiss. Slowly, he guided her backwards until her knees hit the edge of the bed. Renya allowed herself to fall back onto the soft mattress, pulling Grayden down with her.

He settled beside her, his muscular chest just inches from her. Renya turned to face him, drinking in the sight of him. His face was marked with stubble; he obviously hadn't shaved for many days. Unable to resist, she reached out, running her fingers along his jaw, feeling the coarse hair beneath her fingertips.

Grayden leaned into her touch, covering her hand with his own and pressing it more firmly against his cheek. After a moment, he brought her hand to his lips, placing a gentle kiss on her palm before setting it on the bed between them. Propping his head up on his elbow, he gazed at her with an expression of wonder and adoration.

Renya stared back, feeling the deep connection between them humming like a live wire. She wanted to break the silence, to express the surge of emotions swirling within her, but found herself content in the quiet moment. Slowly, her breathing evened out, and she felt Grayden relax as well. This is good, she thought. Grayden seemed more in control of himself the longer they spent together.

“Grayden,” Renya said softly, breaking the comfortable silence. “What are we going to do about Cressida?”

Grayden rubbed his chin as he considered her question, his fingers tracing patterns on the sheet between them. “I’m not sure yet,” he admitted. “I imagine that not only unlocking your power but losing it is a huge blow to her. She desired your power and now you have it, and she doesn’t.”

Renya frowned, a flicker of worry crossing her features. “What good is my power? I have no idea how to even use it.”

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Grayden reached out, his thumb gently smoothing the crease between her brows. “I’ll train you,” he promised. “Selenia can help, too. When she could control her magic, she was really quite astounding with it. We’ll teach you all you need to know. Hopefully Cressida’s fear of you with your magic will be enough for her to take some time to regroup.”

Renya chewed her lip, still nervous about the prospect of wielding magic. But Grayden’s reassurance soothed her fears somewhat. “I’m so thankful you’re here with me,” she said softly, her eyes meeting his.

Grayden’s expression softened, his hand coming up to cup her cheek. “Renya, there is nowhere in the world I’d rather be than here with you. Being in bed with you is nice too,” he added, a playful glint in his eyes.

She laughed, the sound light and carefree. It was a welcome return to the playful banter they had shared before she went back through the portal. Everything between them had intensified when she returned, and while her feelings for him were strong and sure, she had missed the ease they once enjoyed together in their travels. She supposed once he claimed her, his intensity would drop, and he would once again be free to joke and laugh with her without the constant undercurrent of desperate need.

Renya yawned, the events of the day finally catching up with her. Grayden noticed immediately, his protective instincts kicking in. “You have to be exhausted, Little Fawn,” he said, moving the blankets so she could crawl under the covers. “You’ve traveled through two portals and walked all the way here. Your strength is unmatched, just as your beauty is.”

She smiled brightly at the compliment as he gently turned her to face away from him. Once she was situated with her head on the pillow, he wrapped his arms around her and pressed himself against her back, comforting her in his warmth.

Renya snuggled deeper into his embrace, feeling safe and secure for the first time in days. She was nervous about what the future held, but it was the kind of nervousness that came with unexpected joy, the anticipation of something wonderful on the horizon. Grayden kissed the shell of her ear, his hot breath making her shiver. “Goodnight, my love,” he whispered, and she felt herself drifting off to sleep, cocooned in his arms and their shared love.

Chapter Ten

Grayden watched the gentle rise and fall of Renya's chest, her breath warm and sweet, mingling with the salty sea air that permeated the Tidal Kingdom. The sight of her in the revealing nightdress—scandalous by Snow Lands standards but commonplace in this tropical realm—had ignited a fire in his blood that refused to be quenched. He shifted uncomfortably, torn between his desire and his duty, the weight of leadership warring with the primal urges of the bond.

Every time he closed his eyes, he felt himself searching for her in his arms, opening them again to make sure she was still there. Renya shifted a bit in her sleep, and he tightened his hold on her, his fingers splaying protectively across her waist. He was glad she fell asleep so easily in his arms, especially after his behavior earlier had frightened her. But it was difficult to hold himself back. Every minute he wasn't beside her or inside of her drove him mad.

The bond thrummed between them, a constant reminder of their connection and the promise of what was to come. He couldn't imagine his father going through this. Had he struggled as well? Grayden's life had changed so quickly, the world shifting beneath his feet like the sand on the Tidal Kingdom's beaches.

His primary concern had been restoring balance to his lands, but now he had Renya to protect and train. She was the most important thing to him now, and he didn't care if it made him selfish. When it came to Renya, he would choose her every time.

He found himself wondering about her magic, the potential of it both thrilling and terrifying. It must be strong if Cressida desired it enough to track Renya through the portal. So far, he hadn't seen her use it, but he could definitely sense it, a subtle current of power that seemed to dance just beneath her skin.

Maybe, with Renya's magic on their side, they would have a chance to defeat the Shadow Queen. He was certain Renya was the light bringer in the prophecy. Although, he had spent a lot of time worrying about the last lines. The idea of making a sacrifice in order to restore balance to this world scared him immensely. No matter what, he wouldn't sacrifice her.

Grayden tried to remember what Agatha had recited back before they went to the Sunset Land. Wasn't there something about lust in the prophecy? Power flowing and lust burning? So far that part had come true. Once Renya's powers were unlocked, Grayden felt nothing but lust and desire for her. But what happened next? Gods, he hated prophecies.

As dawn broke, painting the sky in hues of pink and gold, Renya stirred from her slumber. For a moment, disorientation clouded her face as she tried to place her unfamiliar surroundings.

“Good morning, Little Fawn,” he murmured, his voice husky with sleep.

“Good morning,” Renya replied, returning his smile.

Grayden's arm tightened around her waist, pulling her closer. “For a moment, I thought yesterday might have been a dream,” he confessed, his free hand coming up

to caress her cheek. “But you're really here. You're real.”

Renya leaned into his touch, and his heart swelled with emotion. “I'm here,” she confirmed. “And I'm not going anywhere.”

The look of pure joy that lit up Grayden's face at her words was breathtaking. He leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. It was tender, unhurried, a stark contrast to the desperate passion of the night before.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, searching his face.

Grayden took a moment to consider her question, his eyebrows furrowing slightly. “Better,” he said finally. “More...in control. Being near you, holding you all night, it's helped calm the bond somewhat.”

Renya nodded, relieved. “I'm glad. You seemed so...overwhelmed yesterday.”

“I was,” Grayden admitted. “The intensity of it caught me off guard. But I think I'm adjusting.” He paused, his eyes growing serious. “Renya, I want you to know that while the bond may have heightened my feelings, it didn't create them. I loved you before, and I love you now. Nothing will change that.”

Tears pricked at Renya's eyes at his heartfelt declaration. She opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, a knock at the door interrupted them.

Grayden groaned, burying his face in Renya's hair. “I swear, the timing in this palace is impeccable,” he muttered, drawing a giggle from Renya.

“Come in,” Renya called, sitting up and making sure the blankets were pulled up to cover her nightgown.

The water curtain parted, revealing the same young servant girl from the day before. She entered carrying a tray laden with food, her expression as impassive as ever.

“King Triston requests your presence in the throne room after you've broken your fast,” she announced, setting the tray down on a nearby table. Without waiting for a response, she turned and left, the water curtain falling back into place behind her.

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Renya and Grayden exchanged a look. “I wonder what that's about,” Renya mused.

Grayden sat up, running a hand through his tousled hair. “I'm not sure, but I have a feeling it has to do with the alliance we discussed last night.”

Renya nodded, her stomach turning. Despite the peaceful night they'd shared, the reality of their situation came rushing back. They were still in a foreign kingdom, with a powerful enemy potentially on their trail, and a host of unanswered questions about Renya's newfound powers and their bond.

Sensing her unease, Grayden reached out and took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “Whatever it is, we'll face it together,” he promised.

Renya squeezed back, drawing strength from his touch and the unwavering certainty in his eyes. “Together,” she echoed, a small smile tugging at her lips.

They rose from the bed and began preparing for the day ahead. Grayden padded across the room, examining the items the servant had brought. It looked like some fresh clothing for them both. Triston was gracious enough to supply them with things for their journey.

Grayden picked up the black trousers and the tunic; it was more open than he usually wore his clothing, but he was thankful for the fresh set. As he riffled through the towels and things, he saw the girl brought some items for Renya as well. He swallowed hard as his fingers touched the lacy undergarments, picturing Renya's tanned skin contrasted against the pure white fabric.

He turned towards the wall and pulled his trousers off, tossing the old ones on the floor before slipping the new ones on. The heat and intensity of Renya's blush was almost palpable as he felt her stare. He grinned, knowing when he turned back around he would be greeted with crimson in her cheeks.

When he turned back, just as he anticipated, Renya was noticeably flustered. Her entire face was scarlet and he watched her swallow hard, her eyes darting away from his bare chest.

“Ummm...I'm going to go get changed in the bathroom,” Renya squeaked quietly, gathering up the clothes left for her. Before she could turn away, Grayden reached out and circled her wrist softly, his touch gentle but insistent.

“Renya, you can change in the bathroom if it makes you more comfortable. But please know, you have absolutely nothing to hide from me and nothing to be ashamed about. You could be covered in scales and I would still love you.” His voice was low and earnest, his eyes never leaving hers.

The red from her face started to fade and she looked at him, both embarrassed and touched. “Thank you,” was all she said before retreating to the bathroom, the door closing softly behind her.

He strolled over and talked to her through the door, hoping to make things less awkward. “I mean it, scales, boils, and pox marks. I'd kiss them all.” His voice was light, teasing, trying to ease the tension that had suddenly sprung up between them.

At this, Grayden got what he was trying for. He heard her small giggle from the other side of the door, the sound like music to his ears.

“I don't think that's very hygienic,” she said, her voice light and airy, a hint of laughter still in her tone.

“I mean it. There's no part of you I will leave untouched.” The words came out more intensely than he'd intended, heavy with promise and desire.

Silence fell, and Grayden cursed inwardly. One step forward, two steps back. He was angry at himself for scaring her with this intensity, for letting his need overshadow her comfort.

The door opened, almost hitting him in the face. He looked down at Renya, surprised to see a subtle smile on her face. The dress she wore was a deep eggplant with a gauzy skirt and thin straps holding it up, the fabric floating around her like a cloud. He felt like his heart was going to burst when he saw his elkten pin proudly displayed on the front of it. Grayden reached out and stroked it with his fingers, the cool metal a stark contrast to the warmth of her skin. Nothing had ever looked so provocative as Renya wearing his pin, a visible sign of their connection.

She met his eyes, knowing exactly what he was thinking. Renya reached for the hand still absentmindedly stroking the pin, and held it to her heart. He could feel the steady thump of her heartbeat beneath his palm. She stood on her tiptoes and placed a slow and sensual kiss on his mouth before dancing away from him, back towards the center of the room, eyes sparkling mischievously.

“I'd like to head back to the lodge if you feel well enough to ride,” Grayden said, grabbing a handful of dates from the platter. The fruit was sticky and sweet against his fingers, a reminder of how far they were from the crisp apples and tart berries of his homeland.

“Yes, as kind as King Triston and Princess Esmeralda have been, I miss Selenia and Doria. I even miss Jurel and his surly ways,” Renya replied, her voice tinged with longing. “I'd also like to go past the portal in the Snow Lands and see if there is any trace of my aunt. Did you see if it was destroyed too?”

Grayden couldn't meet her eyes, shame and regret washing over him. "I left once you went through. I couldn't bear to see it destroyed." The memory of that moment, of watching her disappear, still felt like a physical pain in his chest.

Renya moved over to him, setting down the pastry she held in her hand. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his jawline, the stubble tickling her lips and chin as she made her way to his ear. "I'm here now," she whispered, her breath warm against his skin.

Grayden nodded, but the fear that something was going to happen to take her away from him again didn't dissipate. It clung to him like a shadow, a constant companion to his newfound joy. He hoped claiming her would alleviate his fears. Feeling this way all the time would be misery.

"Let's get going," she said, breathlessly. "I'm ready to go home."

Home. The word filled Grayden with a warmth that rivaled the Tidal Kingdom's tropical heat. His home was going to be her home. As they prepared to meet with King Triston, Grayden's mind raced with plans for their return to the Snow Lands. They needed to check on the portal, reunite with their friends, and begin preparations for the challenges that lay ahead.

The Shadow Queen was still out there, and they had a prophecy to fulfill. But with Renya by his side, wearing his pin and carrying the promise of her magic, Grayden felt ready to face whatever came next. They would return to the Snow Lands not just as individuals, but as a united force, ready to fight for their future and the balance of their world.

Chapter Eleven

Grayden took Renya's hand, their fingers intertwining naturally, and they stepped out

of the room together. The cool stone of the hallway was a stark contrast to the warmth of their joined hands. Before the couple could make it completely down the hall, they saw Princess Esmeralda approaching, her arms full with a rather large bag. She swung her hips as she walked gracefully, her sandals barely making a sound on the hard floor. The sight of her brought a mixture of gratitude and guilt to Grayden's heart.

Grayden instantly felt remorse when he recognized what she was carrying. Damion's saddlebag. Fates, he left the poor creature on the beach to fend for himself. He needed to pull himself together and focus. His single-minded pursuit of Renya had led him to neglect other responsibilities, and he vowed to do better.

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“Is Damion alright?” he asked Esmeralda timidly, bracing himself for her response.

“The horse?” Esmeralda guessed, her eyebrow arching elegantly.

Grayden nodded, feeling a flush of embarrassment creep up his neck.

“Yes, the horse is fine. We have a small stable on the west side of the beach and he is housed there. Some guards found him wandering the beach. We managed to get him into a stall before he caused too much trouble. He's a wild thing, that one.” Her voice held a note of amusement, and Grayden felt some of his tension ease.

Grayden looked at Esmeralda with such sincerity, gratitude welling up inside him. “I have much to thank you and your brother for. First and foremost, for offering Renya shelter when she needed it most.” The words felt inadequate to express the depth of his appreciation.

“It was no trouble at all,” Esmeralda replied, eyeing Renya carefully. Grayden caught Renya looking back at her meaningfully, but he wasn't sure what it meant. There seemed to be an unspoken understanding between the two women, and he made a mental note to ask Renya about it later.

“My brother would like to have a word with you, Prince Grayden, before you depart. I'd also like to visit with Renya as well.” Esmeralda's tone was casual, but Grayden could sense the importance behind her words.

“Of course,” Grayden replied, his mind already racing with thoughts of the alliance. “King Triston and I have much to talk about. Is he in the throne room?”

“He is, and he's waiting for you,” Esmeralda replied, linking her arm through Renya's and pulling her down the corridor. Grayden watched them go, his eyes following Renya until she disappeared around the corner. Only then did he turn and head in the opposite direction towards the throne room, his steps echoing in the empty hallway.

Rather than sitting in the large pearly throne like before, Triston was casually perched in a straight-backed wooden chair at a large table off to the side of the room. Grayden remembered the war table from visiting as a small child. The entire surface of the table was carved into a map of their world, a masterpiece of craftsmanship and strategy combined. The dark wood rose to form mountains; canyons were depicted by large indentations where the wood was carefully shaped away by master hands. It was as much a work of art as a strategic tool, a tangible representation of the world they were fighting to protect.

Grayden tried to hold on to the calm he felt after spending the entire night beside Renya. Now that she was out of his sight, the anxiety crept in and put him on high alert. He suppressed his rising panic and urged himself to think rationally. He knew, however, that whenever Renya was concerned, reason often left on a lengthy journey and he was left with nothing but erraticism. He breathed deep and focused, needing this conversation with Triston to go well. The future of their kingdoms, and perhaps the entire world, could hinge on this alliance.

Triston gave Grayden a nod of acknowledgement as he approached the other side of the war table. The gesture was small, but it carried the weight of mutual respect between rulers.

Grayden studied the table, vaguely recognizing certain aspects of it that lingered in his memory. The Tidal Kingdom, of course, was in the center of the map and all the other realms, kingdoms and lands spiraled out and away towards the edges. Grayden found his own lands on the maps, admiring the minuscule carving of his lodge at the foot of snowy white-painted mountains. The word 'Snow Lands' was scrolled, the

faded letters curling around the minuscule model lodge. With a pang of sadness, he read his father's name there, and then his own name, superseding him. The sight was a stark reminder of the responsibilities he now carried, the legacy he had to uphold.

Phillippe's name was written in and burnished out. Like most of the other noble houses, the Tidal Kingdom went by magic for inheritance and succession. Once it was common knowledge that Grayden wielded magic and Phillippe did not, his brother was removed. Grayden despised that kind of prejudice, especially when his people got along fine without magic until Cressida came along and destroyed the balance of things. The thought of his brother, and the unfairness of their world's reliance on magic, sent a surge of determination through him. He would change things, make their world better, more just.

“What a mess that monster has made of things, eh, brother?” Triston asked, his voice pulling Grayden from his thoughts.

Brother. That was a good start. It seemed Triston was going to work with him to unite their kingdoms against this threat from Cressida. The use of the familial term gave Grayden hope for the strength of their potential alliance.

Grayden sighed, still not taking his eyes off the table. The weight of what he was about to share settled on his shoulders like a physical burden. “I need to confess something if we are going to move forward with this alliance.”

Triston just stared, his face a mask of impartiality. But Grayden could see the curiosity burning in his eyes, the slight tension in his posture betraying his interest.

“Renya is most likely pertinent to this upcoming battle. I don't want the information widely spread, because I'm terrified someone will try to use her as a weapon or turn her over to the Shadow Queen. But there's a prophecy—”

“The Sun Realm Scrolls?” Triston interrupted, leaning forward slightly, his composure cracking to reveal genuine intrigue.

“Yes, you've heard of them?” Grayden was surprised their existence was known outside of the Sun Realm and the spies who reported their findings to his father many years ago. The revelation made him wonder what other secrets Triston might be privy to.

“I thought they were a myth, but as times get more desperate, I've started looking for hope in what I thought were hopeless places,” Triston answered, his voice low and thoughtful. “What do they say about Renya? I'm guessing she plays into this?”

Another heavy sigh escaped Grayden's throat. The burden of knowledge weighed heavily upon him, but he knew sharing it was necessary for their alliance. “Yes. Her aunt confirmed it before she left—Renya is the last known descendant of the Sun Realm.”

“I should have known,” Triston said, closing his eyes as if searching deeply for a long-forgotten memory. “Renya...it's a Sun Realm name.”

“Yes. Bringer of light. The prophecy states she will bring magic back to our world. But beyond that, I don't know how it will occur. But if you are offering to unite against the growing threat of the Shadow Realm, I wanted to make you aware of what I know.” Grayden's voice was steady, but inside, his emotions churned like a stormy sea.

Triston looked thoughtful, his eyes darting to the model map before glancing off into the distance. The silence stretched between them, filled with the weight of possibility and danger. “Well, if nothing else, this gives us hope, does it not?”

“Hope can be a dangerous thing,” Grayden said, thinking of how Tumwalt always

dismissed the fanciful rumors that often made their way to the snowy gates of the lodge. But even as he spoke the words, he felt the spark of hope in his own chest, burning bright and unquenchable. “But in this case, I will bet everything I have in favor of Renya.”

“Because you love her?” Triston's question was direct, his gaze piercing as he studied Grayden's face.

“Because I believe in her. She has strength and bravery I’ve never encountered before. She has more courage than most of my men. She survived the nightmare dungeons in the Sunset Land and even killed a tygre. She’s the most...singular woman I’ve ever met.”

Even Triston looked impressed. “Well then brother, should we talk about strategy?”

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“Definitely,” Grayden responded.

An hour passed as they pored over the map, discussing troop movements, supply lines, and potential battlefields. The complexity of their situation became increasingly apparent as they delved deeper into the strategic implications of their alliance.

“The Shadow Realm's influence is spreading faster than we anticipated,” Triston said, pointing to several small villages near the border. “These buffers have fallen in the last month alone. We need to establish a defensive line here,” his finger traced a curve across the map, “to prevent further encroachment.”

Grayden nodded; his forehead wrinkled in concentration. “Agreed. But we can't just play defense. We need to strike back, disrupt their supply lines here and here,” he indicated two key points on the map. “If we can cut off their resources, we might be able to slow their advance.”

“A bold move,” Triston mused. “But it could leave our own territories vulnerable. We'll need to coordinate with the Spring Lands. Their archers could provide cover for our strike teams.”

“And what of the mountain villages?” Grayden asked, his eyes scanning the northern regions of the map. “They've always been fiercely independent, but they hate the Shadow Realm as much as we do. Their knowledge of the terrain could be invaluable.”

Triston stroked his chin thoughtfully. “It won't be easy to convince them, but if we could...it would give us a significant advantage. Perhaps we could offer them

autonomy in exchange for their support?”

“It's worth considering,” Grayden agreed. “We should also look into the possibility of naval support. The Tidal Kingdom has the strongest fleet in the realm. If we could use your ships to blockade the Shadow Realm's ports, we could cut off their sea trade.”

“A sound strategy,” Triston nodded. “But it would stretch our island forces thin. We'd need to train more sailors, and quickly.”

They continued to discuss various aspects of their military strategy, from troop deployments to siege tactics. They also delved into the political implications of their alliance, considering how to approach other potential allies and neutralize threats from within their own ranks.

“We can't ignore the possibility of Shadow Realm spies within our own kingdoms,” Grayden said grimly. “We'll need to establish a network of trusted informants to root out any traitors.”

“Agreed,” Triston replied. “And we'll need to be careful about how we disseminate information. The fewer people who know our full plans, the better.”

By the time they finished, the sun had risen high in the sky, its warmth seeping through the windows of the throne room. The map before them was now covered in small markers and notations, a testament to the complexity of the task that lay ahead.

“I think we have the beginnings of a solid plan,” Triston said, straightening up and stretching his back. “Of course, much will depend on how quickly we can mobilize our forces and convince our potential allies to join us. We'll need to send out envoys immediately.”

Grayden nodded, feeling both exhausted and invigorated. “Agreed. And we'll need to move quickly. The longer we wait, the stronger Cressida becomes. We should establish regular communication channels between our kingdoms. Perhaps a system of encrypted messages?”

“An excellent idea,” Triston approved. “We'll need to set up relay points to ensure swift and secure communication.”

They spent a few more minutes discussing the finer points of their alliance, including trade agreements to support their war effort and plans for refugee management should the conflict escalate further.

Triston clasped Grayden's shoulder, a gesture of solidarity between rulers. “Remember, the success of our alliance could very well determine the fate of our world.”

Chapter Twelve

Esmeralda's room was a tranquil sanctuary perched high above the cave, awash in natural light and caressed by ocean breezes. As they ascended several spiraling staircases to reach her suite, Renya was reminded of a crow's nest atop a ship's mast. She imagined Esmeralda surveying the vast expanse of sea from this lofty vantage point, privy to every ripple and wave. The air carried the crisp tang of salt, and Renya envisioned the serenity Esmeralda must feel, ensconced in her solitary refuge.

As if plucking the thought from Renya's mind, Esmeralda spoke in hushed tones. “I cherish my sanctuary. My brother can be...intense at times. I need a haven to retreat to. There are chambers on lower floors far more opulent and befitting my station, but none could bring me the contentment I find here.”

“I understand completely,” Renya murmured, taking in the room's ambiance. A soft

lilac hue decorated the space, lending an unexpectedly feminine air to the rough-hewn rock walls. The delicate scent of jasmine intertwined with the briny ocean air, growing more pronounced as she ventured deeper into the room, yet never overwhelming—a perfect equilibrium. The bed, if Renya's eyes didn't deceive her, nestled within an enormous seashell, its curved back forming a natural headboard. It shimmered with iridescent hues, casting pastel reflections across the chamber.

“Is that seashell genuine?”

Esmeralda glided towards the circular mattress and settled onto the ivory bedding. “Indeed it is. They once grew to such mammoth proportions, with pearls larger than your head nestled inside. But over the years...”

“They vanished with the fading?” Renya ventured, recalling the disappearance of the elkten from Grayden's lands.

Esmeralda nodded, then gestured towards a pair of chairs overlooking the ocean. Renya sank into one of the plush seats as Esmeralda tugged a cord on the wall before joining her.

“I thought we might converse before your departure. I suspect that in the near future, you'll be assisting Grayden with his plans for ruling and revitalizing the Snow Lands. We should become better acquainted.”

Renya had never considered this aspect before. She knew she and Grayden were fated, but the notion of helping him govern the Snow Lands? She could scarcely wrap her mind around the concept of being fae.

“Did I say something amiss?” Esmeralda inquired, treading carefully.

“No, not at all. I'm simply embarrassed that I hadn't pieced these things together until

now. Of course he'll want to involve me in his plans.” With her role as light bringer, she'd undoubtedly play a pivotal part in whatever decisions lay ahead.

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Another kind smile graced Esmeralda's features. Renya found herself growing increasingly fond of and impressed by the Tidal Kingdom Princess. She exuded intelligence, thoughtfulness, and kindness.

“There's no cause for embarrassment, Renya. You've weathered numerous changes. It's only natural that you'll need time to absorb everything and adjust. But enough of that. Tell me about last night.” Esmeralda winked conspiratorially.

“Nothing happened.”

“What?” Esmeralda exclaimed incredulously. “Nothing?”

“Well, not 'nothing', but we didn't seal the bond.”

“How did he manage to resist? He looked ready to devour you at dinner.”

Renya chuckled. “He's rather intense right now. But before the bond, he was much calmer and just...simpler.”

“He will be again,” Esmeralda assured her.

“I hope so. The intensity is a bit much for me, but I do love him. We'll seal the bond when the time is right for us.”

“I'm happy for you. There's no need to rush before you're ready. That's the beauty of being fate-bound. He'll wait an eternity for you.”

Renya detected a note of wistfulness in Esmeralda's tone. Before she could inquire further, a chambermaid entered bearing sweet tea and biscuits.

Renya helped herself to a biscuit, slathering it with the thick, jam-like substance as Esmeralda did. She took a bite, and an explosion of sweetness danced across her tongue. It was like savoring the ripest berry, the flavor lingering long after she'd swallowed.

Esmeralda observed Renya's enjoyment of the jam and suddenly rose. "That reminds me," she said, moving to a wardrobe against the side wall and rifling through the drawers. "I want to give you a necklace made of aragonite."

Esmeralda continued her search while Renya protested. Finally, Esmeralda found what she was looking for and extended her hand. Renya examined the exquisite necklace. The reddish stones, polished and shaped into fine round beads, evoked the image of a pearl necklace. "I can't accept that," Renya said.

"Nonsense," Esmeralda insisted, placing the necklace on the table before Renya's small plate. "It's more than mere ornamentation. Aragonite is said to possess magical properties."

Intrigued, Renya scrutinized the necklace more closely. She yearned to learn more about her own magic and the mystical forces that permeated this world she now called home.

"Legend tells of aragonite's power to help locate lost treasures. Our ancestors spoke of a mother with several young children. Her mate would be away for days, fishing and clamming to provide for his family while she tended to their home and offspring. One afternoon, exhaustion overtook her, and she succumbed to slumber beneath a tree in the rainforest. Upon waking, she discovered her youngest son had vanished. She scoured the area, as did all the fae in her village, searching for hours to no avail.

Eventually, they feared the boy had drowned. The mother, devastated and enraged, approached the ocean's edge, intending to rail against the sea gods for claiming her child. As she gazed upon the waters, a small, sparkling gem caught her eye, glinting in the moonlight. Then another. And another. An entire trail of those beautiful crystals materialized, and the mother followed them along the shore. At last, the magical stones led her to a small ocean cave where her sweet son lay peacefully asleep.”

Renya absently twisted the beads between her fingers. “What a beautiful legend. I'm deeply grateful for this gift. I'll treasure it always.” She fastened the necklace around her neck, its weight nearly imperceptible.

“One never knows when they need to find something they thought was long gone.”

Renya blinked rapidly at her words. Where had she heard that before? Someone had recently uttered something similar about lost items returning...She grasped for the memory, but it slipped through her fingers like wisps of a fading dream.

Esmeralda sipped her tea, her gaze fixed on Renya as if sensing her momentary disquiet.

“I wish I had something to offer you in return,” Renya said, filling the awkward silence.

“There is something...” Esmeralda said quietly.

“What is it?”

“Details,” she said with a grin. “I long to know more about fated bonds. I...I had hoped to find my own one day but abandoned that dream until I met you and your prince. Perhaps, someday, it will happen for me too. Just hearing your story and

knowing it's still possible gives me hope. Will you write to me?"

"Yes, I'd be delighted to. How should I send messages to you?"

"Your mate will know. I suspect my brother and your prince are forging an alliance even as we speak. They'll maintain regular correspondence, so we can easily stay in touch as well. I tend to be rather shy, so I don't have many friends. All that remains of my family is my brother, so it can grow lonely here."

"I understand more than you might imagine. Before I came to be with Grayden and his siblings, I lived in near-total isolation. It becomes wearisome very quickly."

"So, we are friends then?"

"Of course we are," Renya answered with a warm smile.

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“Wonderful,” Esmeralda said as Renya finished her tea, a soft yellow brew that tasted strongly of lemon and citrus.

“Shall we go find the men?”

“Lead the way,” Renya replied.

As they entered the throne room, it was evident both men had been hard at work. Bits of parchment littered the floor, and though his back was turned, Renya could tell Grayden's already unruly hair was even more disheveled than before, a sign he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly. Renya knew he did this when frustrated or deep in thought. She smiled to herself as she approached, but before she could draw near, Grayden spun around, sensing her presence.

Renya rushed towards him, feeling the bond tug at her now that they shared the same space. Grayden opened his arms wide, and she collided with his strong chest. She could feel his broad frame through the thin shirt he'd been given. Grayden's arms covered her in a tight embrace, and she felt simultaneously tiny and invincible in his hold, as if together they could conquer any challenge.

Renya gazed up at him, brushing his soft hair from his face before placing a tender kiss on his jaw. He cradled her cheeks in his hands and kissed her full on the mouth, his tongue seeking entrance. She matched his fervor, their kiss starting soft but quickly growing urgent, their brief separation having intensified their longing.

Triston cleared his throat loudly, jolting them back to the present.

Renya glanced back at Esmeralda, who looked pleased but also faintly envious. Renya fervently hoped Esmeralda would find her match. Guilt crept over her; she hadn't even been searching for someone before stumbling upon Grayden. It was pure serendipity. Or perhaps, she mused, it was fate. Was he the reason she felt so drawn to the door in the library basement? Was it their bond that pulled her through and delivered her here?

Grayden reluctantly broke their passionate kiss, but he kept Renya tucked close, his arm draped around her shoulders.

“Do you have everything you require for your journey back?” Triston asked.

“Yes, and thank you again for your hospitality,” Grayden said, briefly releasing Renya to shake Triston's hand. The moment their grasp parted, his arms encircled Renya once more.

“It was our pleasure,” Esmeralda said as they escorted Grayden and Renya from the throne room and down the passage. “Renya, don't forget to write to me.”

“I promise.”

“Grayden, the next time you decide to pay us a visit, please ensure you've bedded your female so no more trouble darkens my door,” Triston said, a smile playing on his lips.

“That's a promise I'm more than eager to keep,” Grayden replied with a wink, and he and Renya departed the Tidal Kingdom Palace to seek out Damion.

Chapter Thirteen

While appreciative of the hospitality Triston and Esmeralda had shown them,

Grayden felt a sense of relief as they journeyed back to his lodge. An urgency coursed through him; plans needed to be set in motion. He and Triston had engaged in lengthy discussions, strategizing on how to vanquish the looming threat of the Shadow Queen. Now that the two leaders stood united, they sought to forge alliances with other lands and kingdoms.

A strong, unified front was their only hope of defeating her.

Grayden's thoughts drifted to the Twilight Kingdom, their enigmatic neighbors beyond the snow-capped mountains. He would need to focus his diplomatic efforts there, while King Triston and Princess Esmeralda prepared for their own mission to the verdant Spring Lands. If fortune favored them, a summit of leaders would soon convene, laying all their cards on the table in a concerted effort to bring Cressida's reign of darkness to an end.

Yet, as crucial as these alliances were, Grayden found his mind constantly returning to Renya. Beyond his eagerness to claim her officially, he recognized the pressing need to begin honing her magical abilities. The raw power she possessed was both awe-inspiring and daunting; without proper training, it could prove as dangerous to her as to their enemies.

Grayden made a mental note to confer with Tumwalt on the intricacies of presenting Renya to his people and crowning her as his consort. Though he had long denied the title of king, he now wondered if a unified monarch might strengthen their position in negotiations with other lands. Any diplomatic missions would undoubtedly involve Renya; the mere thought of separation from her again sent a chill through him that had nothing to do with the frigid air.

“You're awfully quiet,” Renya murmured, leaning back against his chest. Grayden rested his chin atop her head, inhaling deeply. Her scent had changed subtly, likely due to the Tidal Kingdom's unique herbs and oils, but underneath it all was the

essence that was uniquely Renya.

“I'm contemplating our next moves in this war,” he replied, his voice a low rumble. “Triston and I covered much ground in our discussions. There's a huge mountain of tasks ahead.”

Renya tilted her head up, placing a gentle kiss on his chest where his tunic parted. “The Tidal Kingdom's attire suits you well,” she observed, a hint of mischief in her tone.

Momentarily distracted, Grayden loosened his grip on the reins. Damion, sensing the slack, broke into a spirited gallop of his own choosing.

“Oh, Little Fawn,” Grayden chuckled, regaining control of their mount, “just wait until we're home.”

A visible shiver ran through Renya at his words, equal parts anticipation and the biting cold of their surroundings. Grayden guided Damion back to their intended path, his mind now split between strategies for war and the promise of peace in Renya's arms.

Hours passed, the landscape gradually transitioning from the lush coastal regions to the familiar, snow-blanketed terrain of the Snow Lands. As they approached the spot where Renya had first entered their world, Grayden felt her tense in his arms. The portal stood before them, a shimmering anomaly against the pristine white backdrop.

Renya dismounted, drawn to the ethereal gateway. As she reached out, curiosity overriding caution, Grayden's reflexes kicked in. In a heartbeat, he was at her side, gently but firmly grasping her wrists and turning her to face him.

“Forgive me, my love,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I can't risk losing you

again. There's no telling where or when that portal might lead now.”

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Renya nodded, understanding flooding her features.

Releasing her, Grayden turned his attention to the ground, searching for any signs of their previous passage. “These tracks,” he mused, indicating faint indentations in the snow, “they might be from before, when you...when you left.” The pain in his voice was palpable, the memory of their separation still raw.

Renya shuddered, overwhelmed by the conflicting emotions the site evoked. Grayden, ever attentive, removed his cloak and draped it over her shoulders before intertwining his fingers with hers.

“Never again,” he vowed, his voice barely above a whisper. “Nothing will part us, sweet Renya. Not Cressida, not magic, not the very fabric of our worlds.”

As Grayden helped Renya remount Damion, he noticed a subtle change in her demeanor. She paused, staring at her hands with a mixture of wonder and confusion.

“Renya? What's wrong?” Grayden asked, concern etching his features.

“I'm not sure,” she murmured, her forehead wrinkling in concentration. “It feels...different.”

Grayden watched intently, his eyes scanning for any sign of her magic manifesting. He saw no visible change, but there was an undeniable shift in the air around them, a subtle warmth that seemed to come from Renya herself.

“Your magic,” he breathed, more sensing than seeing the change. “It's awakening.”

Renya nodded, her eyes wide with a mix of excitement and trepidation. “I can feel it,” she whispered. “It's like...it's a part of me, but also something more.”

Grayden watched in awe, his voice low and reverent. “This is extraordinary, Renya. Even without seeing it, I can sense the power within you.”

As they prepared to continue their journey, Grayden couldn't help but feel a mix of pride and concern. Renya's newfound abilities opened up a world of possibilities, but they also brought new challenges and responsibilities. He drew her close, offering silent support and strength.

“We'll face this together,” he assured her, voicing his thoughts. “Every step of the way.”

With a nod, Renya settled back against him as Damion resumed their journey. As they rode, Grayden remained acutely aware of the subtle changes in Renya, the barely perceptible hum of magic that now seemed to surround her. He knew that helping her master this power would be crucial in the challenges that lay ahead, not just for them, but for all the lands threatened by the Shadow Queen's darkness.

As Damion found his rhythm once more, Grayden felt Renya relax against him, her breathing evening out as she drifted off to sleep. He held her securely, his mind racing with plans and possibilities, all while remaining vigilant for any signs of danger.

When Renya next stirred, twilight had fallen. The forest around them had transformed, icicles hanging from branches like crystal chandeliers, catching and refracting the moonlight in a dazzling display.

“Are we staying here for the night?” Renya asked, eyeing their surroundings with a mixture of wonder and apprehension.

Grayden shook his head, reaching into the saddlebag for provisions. “It's not wise to remain exposed,” he explained, handing her a nutrient-rich travel cake. “Cressida will be searching for you, and the Snow Lands are the obvious place to start. Our best hope is that she's preoccupied with the unexpected turn of events—your newfound powers have likely thrown her plans into disarray.”

They rode on through the night, the only sounds the rhythmic beat of Damion's hooves against the snow and the occasional musical chime of falling icicles. The closer they drew to the lodge, the more alert Grayden became, his eyes constantly scanning their surroundings for any sign of threat.

As the first hints of dawn began to paint the sky, the familiar silhouette of the lodge came into view. Grayden felt a surge of relief at the sight of the snow-laden turrets, his posture relaxing ever so slightly.

They entered the village just as the first stirrings of life began to animate the streets. A baker, bleary-eyed but determined, nodded a greeting as they passed. Grayden guided Damion to the lodge's courtyard, where two young stable hands awaited them.

“Please,” Grayden instructed the boys in a low voice, “keep our arrival quiet for now.”

The older of the two nodded solemnly, leading the exhausted Damion away with his younger companion in tow.

“No grand announcement of your return?” Renya teased, a hint of her usual spirit returning now that they were safely home.

“Absolutely not,” Grayden said, guiding her along a small stone corridor rather than the large front door. He gave Renya an intense look, desire coursing through him. “We're sneaking in through the back passageway. The last few days have been

torture. I'm going to do what I've wanted to do from nearly the moment I laid eyes on you. I'm spending the entire morning inside of you, and you, my Little Fawn, will be too sore to even think about walking away from my bed.”

Chapter Fourteen

Renya was both excited and nervous about Grayden’s proclamation. His words sent a wave of longing through her, and she could feel the warmth and moisture between her legs. She had never heard something so erotic in her life. Grayden was always so formal and proper towards her, but hearing him speak of his desire for her so frankly stirred some kind of primitive longing within her. She didn’t have any qualms or reservations about sex; she just hadn’t found the right person yet and none of her relationships seemed to last long enough before getting to that point. But with Grayden, she was sure in a way she never was before.

While her fear mounted, so did desire.

He pulled her into a doorway and up a stone staircase. When they reached the top, Grayden pushed open another door and entered the second floor corridor outside of his room. The door closed behind them, and Renya noticed it was practically seamless against the wood paneling.

Grayden could see her puzzlement over the sudden appearance and disappearance of the door. “Guard passages,” he whispered, practically dragging her towards his bedchamber, as if her pace was too slow. He pulled a bit too hard and she fell into his chest, and he kissed her deeply as he reached for the doorknob behind him and twisted it. Hands grabbing at her, they fell into the room together.

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“Oh my!” a voice came from inside the room.

Grayden tore his mouth away from Renya’s and saw Doria standing in the room with a pile of linens in her hands.

“Oh my!” she squealed again, taking them in. “Renya! You’re back! And Prince Grayden! How can this be? What is going on?”

Grayden looked at Doria and then back at Renya, debating within himself whether he wanted to explain to Doria or ravish Renya.

“It’s a long story. Doria, can you please tell no one that I’ve returned? I promise to fill you in as soon as I can, but Renya and I need some time alone before I’m ambushed by Tumwalt and Selenia.”

“Of course,” she said, looking at Grayden as he reached out for Renya, pulling her back into his embrace. Doria gasped as she put together what was happening before her eyes.

“How is this possible?” she asked, the delight shining in her eyes. “You’re both well past the age!”

“How did you know?” Renya asked incredulously.

“I’ve been with the Snowden family a long time. I was there when King Efferon brought Elowyn home. You are the splitting image of your father,” she said, looking at Grayden with affection. “He looked just the same when he found his mate.”

Grayden grinned. “Then you understand I need to be alone with my mate, uninterrupted?”

Renya elbowed him in the ribs. “Grayden! Rude!”

Doria didn’t look offended but gave Renya a knowing look. “I’ll see to it that no one comes this way and I’ll personally bring up your meals and anything else you need. I’ll also bring Mistress Renya’s items over here to your bedchamber. I’m guessing this is now her room as well?”

“Yes,” Grayden answered, not even looking at Renya for confirmation. Doria just smiled and headed towards the door.

“I’ll bring in some extra soaps and things too. I’m guessing you’ll want to wash after your travels.” She turned and closed the door behind her.

The second the door shut, Grayden started undressing Renya. Her borrowed cloak was unclasped and thrown on the floor near the fire. He pulled off his boots and they landed on the ground with a loud thud. Grayden deliberately backed Renya into the room off to the side with his bed and bathroom. He kept moving her backwards until her knees bent and she perched on the bed. Renya sat on the edge of the large mattress, wondering what she should do next when he suddenly knelt before her, pulling his shirt over his head and looking up at her. She placed her hands on his shoulders, mesmerized by his muscular chest. She traced several scars with her fingers, not noticing just how many he had before. Heat blossomed between them, and Renya knew things would never be the same once they finished this dance they started.

Grayden lifted her foot in his hand and began unlacing the ties fastening her boot to her leg. For every lace he removed, he kissed higher up her calf. Once one boot was off, he placed a gentle kiss on her arch, careful to avoid the blistering and peeling

areas from her long walk to the Tidal Kingdom.

He repeated the same process with the other foot until she was barefoot before him. Grayden stood to remove his belt, but was interrupted by a quiet knock on the door. He suppressed a growl, knowing it was just Doria, but he could hardly think straight right now.

“I’ll go help her,” Renya said, rising to her feet. “I’m more dressed than you are, anyways,” she teased.

Renya moved toward the door and quickly let Doria in. She was holding a tray in her hands and a basket full of fruit. She dropped them on Grayden’s desk, carefully finding a spot that wasn’t covered in parchment, and then went back into the hall, gathering more items. Grayden paced impatiently in his inner chamber.

After a couple of more trips into the bedroom, Renya’s clothing was stuffed in the wardrobe with Grayden’s and the bathroom was stocked with soaps and Renya’s belongings from her room. Doria left without saying another word.

Alone again, Grayden stalked towards Renya, and a jolt of excitement went through her. Ever since she saw him shirtless, sprawled before the fireplace in the inn, she had wanted to trace the planes of his chest. Renya reached out and stroked his upper chest, feeling his pectoral muscles clench under his warm skin. His chest was mostly bare, except for a tiny patch of dark hair on his breastbone. She noticed another scar that ran right underneath his strong chest muscles. He was entirely masculine, testosterone practically seeping from his pores. The wound she stitched up hadn’t fully healed, and she took a few seconds to inspect it.

“Either Almory or I will need to remove those stitches,” she said absentmindedly.

“That’s what you’re thinking about right now?” he asked. “All I can think of is how

bad I want to feel you surrounding me.”

The sound of her own laughter bubbling up in her throat helped to relax her. This was her Grayden. She felt like she had such an insight into his soul, but the physicality of their relationship made her uncertain. After denying themselves before, the rush to consummate their bond was an adjustment. But deep down, she knew she wanted him just as much as he did her.

Rather than racing to remove the rest of her clothing, Grayden turned her around to face the bed and began delicately unbraiding her hair. Renya steadied herself and held on to one of the carved posts at the corner of his bed. His fingers combed through her tresses, and it amazed her at how his large hands could be so gentle. He picked up a section of her hair and brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply.

“You smell so intoxicating,” Grayden said, closing his eyes as if to commit the smell to memory, letting her hair fall around her shoulders when he released it.

“So do you. When I woke up in your tent, that was the first thing I noticed. You smelled of pine and the forest after a rainstorm.” Renya would normally have blushed at her declaration, but after all he said in praise of her, this small revelation seemed trivial. This man was going to have her, know her intimately. They would have no secrets between them.

Grayden began undoing the pearl buttons at the back of her borrowed gown. His nimble fingers made quick work of them, and then he pulled each strap down her arms, watching the garment fall to the ground. As in the fashion of the Tidal Kingdom, she wore nothing underneath the dress except for the pair of white lace panties he saw earlier. The gown pooled at her feet, and her bare back was right in front of him. Renya self-consciously moved to cover her chest as Grayden turned her on the spot.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, his hand cradling the back of her head and pulling her in for a kiss. “You never have to hide from me, Renya.” He motioned to her arms, crossed shyly in front of her chest.

Self-doubt crossed her mind as she stood there in nothing but her panties. She took a deep breath, and brought her arms down to her sides, exposing herself to the cold room and Grayden’s penetrating stare. He stepped back, admiring her entire figure.

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His pupils dilated and he exhaled and then breathed deeply. Renya saw him struggle for control of his body. He hid it well, but she could sense what he felt, especially when his emotions were as zealous as they were now.

Grayden stared at her chest, moving towards her painstakingly slow, so as not to frighten her. He crossed the short length between them and cupped her right breast in his hand, feeling the weight and then running his calloused thumb over the nipple.

The second he made contact, Renya gasped.

“Is this okay?” he asked, trying to read her facial expression.

“Yes,” she said, moving closer to him, closing her eyes as he reached out and repeated the motion with the other breast. He opened her mouth with his, and the second she granted him access his tongue entered.

She moaned her pleasure into his mouth, and he pulled her tighter against him. She could feel his erection, hard and straining against his pants. Feeling brave at his response to her nearness, Renya reached down and tugged at his belt. He helped her remove it, and then she popped open the first button of his trousers. Grayden withdrew his mouth from hers and looked into her eyes, trying to control his emotions.

“I can feel your desire for me,” he said, placing a soft kiss on the corner of her mouth.

“But I can also smell your fear.” He tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear.

“I don't know about here, but in the human world your first time is a big deal and it's

normal to be a bit nervous,” she said, her voice shaking. “But I’m ready.”

“Little Fawn, don’t be afraid of me. I won’t hurt you.”

Grayden continued unbuttoning his pants. He slid them down his muscular legs, and pulled them off, freeing himself completely.

Renya’s breathing hitched when she saw him. Her frame of reference was somewhat limited, but he looked enormous. She knew about the mechanics of sex, of course, but seeing his member, hard and erect in front of her gave her pause as another wave of nervousness crashed through her.

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to control yourself like at the Tidal Kingdom,” she confessed in a small voice.

“It’s okay, my sweetling,” he said, running his finger under the waistband of her undergarment. He rested his forehead against hers, his voice sultry and sensual. “There’s no reason to rush this now we are in the moment. I know you are safe and you are mine. If you need me to stop, I absolutely will. You have my word, just as you have my body and soul.”

She nodded, not wanting him to hear how shaky her words would be.

Grayden tugged at her panties and pulled them down her legs. Although he had felt her there intimately before, he still stared without his eyes leaving her as he studied the swell of her breasts and curve of her hips. He pulled her close to him, his desire hard and throbbing against her stomach.

“Renya, look at me,” he said, tipping her chin up so she could look into his eyes. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about or ashamed of. For the rest of our lives, I’ll worship you.” He moved his head down and nuzzled her shoulder as she writhed

in his arms. His hand snaked down, and he stroked the apex of her thighs. “You are the most beautiful woman in any world.”

She looked up into his eyes, touched by his words. He took advantage of her distraction and slipped his finger into her folds. “For the rest of my days, I won’t want anyone else.” He found her sensitive spot at the top of her sex and rubbed it gingerly as her legs buckled a bit. “I want you. Now, forever, and always. I love you, Renya.”

He withdrew his hand and she whimpered. Grayden picked her up and carried her over to the bed, setting her down carefully. He arranged his furs around her, making sure she was warm and comfortable. “Talk to me, my love,” he said, touching her lightly on the shoulder.

“I love you too,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’m just a little scared.”

“I’m scared as well,” he replied, stroking her golden hair. “I’m afraid of so much. I’m scared of losing you. Of hurting you. I’m afraid that you’ll reject me, or that somehow, I’ll wake up and find you gone and realize it was all a dream.”

Her eyes softened and she rose up and pressed her lips to his. This time, he let her be the aggressor. He let her be in charge and go at the speed she was comfortable with. While his primal needs were driving him, he restrained himself.

Renya deepened their kiss, and he felt her mouth hot on his. They kissed and caressed each other for long moments, stopping and starting again, taking things frustratingly slow as they learned each other’s bodies.

Renya started to feel the ache between her legs grow as he kissed and stroked her. Her mind couldn’t grasp onto a single thought when his mouth moved down her stomach and kissed her belly button, dipping his tongue in her navel. When he put his

hand between her thighs again, she unconsciously spread her legs for him, inviting him to touch her most sensitive area.

He looked down at her, love and care apparent in his eyes. “Are you ready to become mine?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, blinking her long lashes.

Grayden rolled on top of her and held himself above her with one arm. With his free hand, he positioned himself at her soaked entrance. He gave her a few more deep kisses and her moaning became even louder and more desperate. He sat there at her entrance, continuing to kiss and caress. It took everything in him not to shove himself inside of her and take what he needed. Instead, he waited. And waited. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to him, she started to move her hips upward, desperately seeking him.

With a delicate thrust, he moved himself partially inside of her. Her eyes widened and her mouth moved wordlessly against his.

“Renya, are you still alright?”

She nodded, breathing around the slight discomfort she felt.

“Just a little more...” he murmured, moving another inch in her. “I’m so sorry, my love. I know I’m not a small man.”

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Her wetness surrounded him, and her inner muscles clenched as she tried to adjust around him, and it took everything he had not to release right then. Once he had entered her, he felt his body physically recognize her as a part of him. They were one person, but two minds together as one. The pleasure of knowing her both physically and mentally was making him shake with desire.

Renya felt it too. When he finally pushed himself inside, she wanted to sob. Not with pain, but with relief. The clarity that washed over her cleansed her soul. She was free from the senator and what he tried to do to her. The nervousness and embarrassment she felt was gone. It was as if her inhibitions left her, and just elation and sensation remained.

The second she felt the bond between them, her body relaxed and a joyful look crossed her face as she moved her hips up to his, goading him into pushing farther into her. He pushed in another few inches, leaving the rest of his length outside of her. He started to move, but before he could set a rhythm, Renya pushed her hips up quickly and took all of him.

Grayden shuddered as he hit the end of her, his pleasure mounting to impossible heights. He looked down at her beneath him, in his bed, and smiled at her.

“I’m going to go slow,” he whispered above her, starting to thrust lightly. “If you need me to stop, tell me and I will, no matter how hard it is for me.” He started a slow, tantalizing pace. Renya could see his biceps tightening as he moved over her, and she surprised herself by reaching behind him and cupping his firm cheeks. She could feel every muscle in his body clench and strain, working hard to bring them both pleasure.

At first, the slow movement was exactly what she needed as she adjusted to the sensation of him inside her. Renya felt stretched impossibly far, just beyond what was comfortable. She bit her lip, concentrating on relaxing her inner muscles. Grayden stopped moving, his gaze watching every expression and emotion that shone on her face.

“Renya. Do you want me to stop?” Grayden asked her, concern clouding his gaze.

“No. Just give me a second to adjust.” He heard her breathe deeply, trying to focus on the pleasure rather than the feeling of being stretched just outside of her comfort zone.

Grayden paused and held himself above her with just one arm. The other moved between them so he could stroke her gently between her thighs. Her breathing increased rapidly, and Grayden watched her eyelashes flutter. He felt more moisture between them, and he could tell she was finally relaxing. She began to rotate her hips and he once again started his precise movements. Grayden kept his pace slow, focusing on every sound, breath, and expression she made.

The room was quiet, their soft moans swallowed up by the silence. Heat filled the space, and Renya’s back was slick on the furs. Grayden picked up the speed, perspiration building up along his forehead and his upper arms. Renya wanted to say something, anything to him, but her mind was blank as he continued to rub and tease her. Her legs began shaking and she felt the pressure between her legs building. Grayden smiled at her, and sucked her bottom lip into his mouth and released it gingerly, and Renya thought she would combust. The spot on the back of her neck tingled and warmth spread through her, just like when Cressida unlocked her. But this warmth was pleasurable. It was like Grayden was everywhere within her.

Suddenly, her entire body seized up and her muscles shook from her arms all the way down to her toes. She moaned in his ear as she reached her pinnacle, whispering his

name over and over with reverence. Grayden kept moving, wanting to draw out her climax as long as he could before giving in to his own.

Once she came down from her high, Grayden stopped his movements and kissed her again passionately, putting every bit of emotion and love that he could into his kiss.

“Sweet Renya...” he murmured, beginning to move again. “Can you handle a little more?”

She looked up at him, her face red and flushed. “Yes,” she breathed, and she surprised him by wrapping her legs around his waist.

He began to rock quickly into her, pushing her into the mattress with his body. Renya braced herself, knowing how hard it was for him to fully restrain himself. She bit her lip again and breathed through her nose. She didn’t feel pain exactly, but his movements and pressure felt intense against her sensitive flesh.

With a final thrust and a groan of bliss, Grayden found his pleasure and Renya could feel him release inside of her. It was a new sensation, and she hadn’t realized how warm and heavy his seed would feel. She actually hadn’t ever thought about it. She assumed for her first time there would be protection separating them. She frowned a bit as Grayden rolled over and pulled her on his chest, still pulsing inside of her.

He saw her frown and was instantly concerned. “My Little Fawn, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, I just...you didn’t wear protection. I didn’t think—”

“What should I have worn?” Grayden asked, perplexed.

Renya looked into his puzzled eyes and realized there was no such thing here.

“Nothing,” she said, smiling at him. He returned her smile in earnest, finally feeling content and satisfied now that he had claimed her.

“I’ll wear any type of costume you’d like in the future,” he said, a devilish grin flashing across his face as she felt his member begin to harden inside her again.

Chapter Fifteen

Renya reclined on Grayden's bed, her gaze drawn to the adjoining bathroom where he moved about, preparing a bath. The sliding oak door stood open, offering an unobstructed view of his form as he worked. She marveled at his ease and confidence, admiring the fluid grace of his movements.

Grayden bent over the copper tub, pouring in fragrant oils from the bottles Doria had left. Catching Renya's eye, he grinned playfully. “Like what you see?”

“Absolutely,” Renya replied, a newfound confidence coloring her voice. The nervousness that had plagued her earlier had dissipated, replaced by a sense of belonging. The magic within her no longer felt foreign; instead, it pulsed through her veins as if it had always been there, waiting to be awakened.

Grayden, too, seemed transformed. The intense, almost predatory energy that had surrounded him had mellowed, giving way to the easy companionship they had cultivated over the past weeks. His smiles came readily now, his laughter filling the room with warmth. Renya was much relieved that he was back to his old self.

As he turned off the tap, Grayden padded softly across the wooden floor. Reaching the bedside, he gently pulled back the furs covering Renya and scooped her into his arms. She felt light as air, her body pliant against his solid frame.

“Your bath awaits, my queen,” he murmured, carefully lowering her into the

steaming water.

The heat surrounded Renya, seeping into her sore muscles. Every part of her ached—her neck throbbed where Cressida had performed the unlocking spell, her feet burned from crossing the scorching sand, and her backside stung from the long ride on Damion. A wince escaped her as the water touched the tender flesh between her legs.

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Instantly alert, Grayden was at her side, concern etched on his features. “Is it too hot?”

“No, I'm just sore from everything that happened in the Tidal Kingdom and...our exertions this morning.”

A fleeting look of pride crossed Grayden's face before it softened into sympathy. Renya couldn't help but feel a surge of affection for him, recognizing the mix of emotions playing across his features.

“Do you have room for one more in there?” Grayden asked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

Renya shifted forward, drawing her knees to her chest to make space. Grayden slipped in behind her, the water level rising precariously close to the tub's rim.

“After things settle down, we're getting a bigger bathtub in here,” he declared, reaching for a jar of soap and working it into a lather between his hands.

“Why do you need a bigger tub?” Renya asked innocently.

“We need a bigger tub, Little Fawn,” Grayden corrected, his voice low and teasing. “If you think I'm ever going to allow you to be naked in here without me, you don't know me at all.”

His strong hands began massaging her shoulders, working out the knots of tension. Renya leaned into his touch, her eyes fluttering closed in bliss. The thought of sharing

moments like this every day sent a thrill through her.

As Grayden continued his ministrations, he began to hum softly, the rich timbre of his voice reverberating through the small space. The melody washed over Renya, as soothing as the warm water surrounding them.

Reluctantly, Renya broke the peaceful silence. "Grayden?"

"Hmm?" he responded, his fingers still working their magic on her tight muscles.

"We've been hidden away in here for over four hours...do you think we should let everyone know we're back?"

"Hush," Grayden murmured, gently tipping her head back to begin washing her hair. He pulled her onto his lap, his fingers massaging her scalp with tender care. As Renya opened her mouth to protest, he continued softly, "Soon, my love. Just let me enjoy these last moments. Once I leave this room, I'm no longer just your mate and lover. I'm a ruler, a brother, a leader, and a soldier. But right now, I just want to be yours. Let me be yours alone for just a little longer."

Renya's heart swelled at his words. She understood his need for this stolen time, recognizing the weight of responsibility that awaited him beyond these walls. Settling back against his chest, she allowed herself to be surrounded by his warmth and the intimacy of the moment.

As Grayden's hands roamed over her skin, Renya felt a different kind of heat building within her. She shifted slightly, acutely aware of his body's response to their closeness.

"Grayden!" she scolded playfully, feeling him guide her hips in a slow, rhythmic motion.

“What?” he asked, feigning innocence even as the water lapped gently against the tub's sides.

“You know what!”

“You started it,” he teased, his breath warm against her ear. “If you didn't want me to desire you so, you shouldn't have tricked me into your bath, you wanton temptress.”

Laughter bubbled up in Renya's chest, and she splashed water at him in mock indignation. Quick as lightning, Grayden caught her wrists, turning her to face him. In one fluid motion, he lifted her from the water, droplets cascading down her skin like rain on a windowpane. His lips found her ribcage, following the trail of a water droplet. Renya squirmed, torn between giving in to the sensation and putting a stop to their antics.

Releasing her, Grayden stepped out of the bath and retrieved a plush towel. He wrapped it around Renya, cocooning her in its soft warmth. The tenderness of the gesture touched her deeply; it had been so long since anyone had cared for her in this way.

While Renya dried her hair, working out the tangles with her fingers, Grayden moved to the fireplace, examining the food Doria had left. By the time Renya joined him, wrapping the towel around her body, he was already dry and helping himself to the spread.

Renya reached for an arctic pear, its cool flesh a refreshing contrast to the warmth of the room. As she brought it to her lips, Grayden gently grasped her wrist, guiding the fruit to his own mouth. His eyes never left hers as he took a bite, the intensity of his gaze sending a shiver down her spine.

Taking the pear from her, Grayden helped Renya into a chair before kneeling before

her. His hands came to rest on her thighs, and Renya's breath caught in her throat, a mix of anticipation and nervousness fluttering in her stomach.

Grayden carefully opened the front of her towel, baring her to his gaze. As Renya instinctively looked away, he gently turned her face back towards him. “I want you to look down,” he instructed, his voice low and reverent. “Look at your body. You are the most beautiful woman in any realm.”

Hesitantly, Renya complied. She tried to see herself through his eyes, to look past the imperfections she usually fixated on – the slight curve of her stomach, the stretch marks around her breasts. This was the body he loved, the body he desired.

“See?” Grayden said, rising to his feet. He cupped her chin tenderly, his thumb tracing the outline of her lower lip. “You're the sexiest woman I've ever seen. Do you need proof?” He guided her hand to his body, letting her feel the physical evidence of his desire.

“If you ever—ever—doubt your worth or beauty, I want you to picture this moment, and remember how much I desire you.” As if to emphasize his point, Renya felt him twitch beneath her palm, a rush of heat flooding her cheeks.

“Do you see how ready I am for you? Just how much I desire you?”

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“Yes,” Renya breathed, her mind clouded with a heady mix of emotions.

“Good,” Grayden replied, dropping back to his knees and gently parting her legs.

“Grayden, I’m sore—” Renya began, a note of concern in her voice.

“I know. But you won’t feel pain,” he promised darkly, spreading her open before moving his mouth in between her legs.

Renya couldn’t believe how quickly he brought her to the peak of pleasure again. This time there was no discomfort, only sheer delight as her most powerful climax yet surged through her. She felt herself tighten and coil inside, before releasing and crying his name desperately.

Once she quieted, Grayden gathered her in his arms. She was completely spent, her head resting on his chest, struggling to look up at him. He placed her back in the bed and covered her up with the furs like a newborn babe.

“But what about you—”

“This was all for you, my love. But I won’t deny the fact that I enjoyed it as well. I’ve tasted your honey off my fingers before, but drinking from your hive is even better.”

Renya didn’t even have the energy to be embarrassed by his words. Grayden leaned forward and placed a kiss against her forehead and watched her eyelids flutter before closing.

Chapter Sixteen

Grayden sighed heavily, his gaze lingering on Renya's peaceful form nestled among the furs. The weight of responsibility settled back onto his shoulders as he reluctantly tore himself away from the bedside. The sooner he announced his presence and addressed the matters at hand, the sooner he could return to her side.

As he crossed the room to the wardrobe, his mind felt clearer than it had in days. Opening the doors, his eyes caught on Renya's clothes hanging next to his own. The sight of her garments—all his mother's old things—intermingled with his brought a bittersweet smile to his face. While it touched him to see her wearing them, he made a mental note to have Doria arrange for some new clothes tailored specifically for Renya.

“And a new wardrobe,” he murmured to himself, noting how her meager collection already dominated more than half of the available space. His smile widened as he surveyed the room they would now share. It occurred to him that he hadn't actually asked Renya if she wanted to share his chambers, or if she preferred he move into hers. But after the intimacy they'd shared, the thought of sleeping apart seemed unfathomable.

She can decorate it however she likes, he thought, his mind already conjuring images of how Renya might transform the space. As long as we get that bigger bathtub.

Once dressed, Grayden returned to the bedside for one last look at Renya. She lay curled up, her face the picture of serenity. It took every ounce of his willpower not to shed his clothes and crawl back in beside her. Instead, he squared his shoulders, steeling himself for what lay ahead, and strode purposefully towards the door.

The quiet of the corridor surprised him. He had expected Doria's efforts to keep others away would have faltered by now. At the very least, someone should have

noticed Damion's return to the stables. The lack of commotion suggested that Jurel, Phillippe, and Charly were still at the mountain encampment with the new recruits.

“Small mercies,” Grayden muttered. He'd only have to deal with Tumwalt and perhaps Almory for now. Selenia already knew about his bond with Renya, which would spare him at least one explanation.

As he reached the top of the stairs, a blur of motion caught his eye. Selenia came charging towards him like a stampeding elkten, her face a mix of relief and exasperation.

“Grayden!” she cried, engulfing him in a fierce embrace. “Where in the frozen hells have you been? I've been waiting for word, any word!”

Grayden returned her hug, surprised by the intensity of her concern. “I'm sorry, Selenia. I should have sent a message, but once I found Renya, everything else just...faded away.”

Selenia pulled back, her eyes narrowing. “Is she here? Is she safe?”

“Yes, she's here and she's fine,” Grayden assured her, a soft smile playing at his lips.

“Where is she? Can I see her?” Selenia's excitement was nearly contagious, her earlier irritation seemingly forgotten.

Grayden cleared his throat, suddenly uncomfortable. “She's...indisposed at the moment.”

Selenia's eyes widened in understanding before she grimaced dramatically. “Grayden! I don't need to know that!”

“I didn't say anything,” he protested, starting down the stairs with Selenia hot on his heels.

“You implied plenty,” she retorted. “I mean, I'm happy for you, truly. But maybe she could do better...As her friend, should I warn her?”

Grayden shot her a withering glare, which only seemed to fuel Selenia's amusement.

“Kidding, kidding! Not ready for mate jokes yet. Noted.” She paused, her expression growing more serious. “Tumwalt has been in a foul mood since you left.”

Grayden's own mood darkened at the mention of his advisor. “Where is he?”

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“Already bored of Renya and looking for your old lover?” Selenia quipped, unable to resist one last jab.

“Selenia!” Grayden's patience was wearing thin.

She held up her hands in surrender. “Last I saw, he was heading to Almory's workshop. Though for someone who just found their fated mate—and it happens to be the girl you were already mooning over—you're surprisingly grumpy.”

Ignoring her, Grayden made his way towards the back staircase. The fact that Tumwalt was in Almory's workshop puzzled him. With the rest of the prophecy revealed by Renya's aunt, what could they be working on? He hoped they had made progress on combating the dragons, though the thought of Renya anywhere near such creatures made his stomach churn.

Reaching the workshop door, Grayden knocked perfunctorily before entering without waiting for a response. The scene that greeted him was familiar—Tumwalt and Almory hunched over a massive, dusty tome—but the atmosphere was charged with tension.

Almory's eyes, calm as ever, met Grayden's with a hint of concern. Tumwalt's, in stark contrast, flashed with barely contained anger.

“So, you've decided to return,” Tumwalt said, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he folded his arms across his chest.

Grayden's confusion at Tumwalt's hostility quickly gave way to irritation. “Of course

I came back. Why wouldn't I?"

"Perhaps because you've now abandoned your people and your lands twice to chase after a girl?" Tumwalt's words were sharp, cutting.

"Tumwalt," Almory cautioned, "let's hear him out."

"I am not a child to be scolded," Grayden growled, already regretting his decision to leave Renya's side.

"Then stop acting like a spoiled child," Tumwalt shot back. "You don't have the luxury of abandoning your kingdom for a woman."

As Almory tried to intervene, Grayden's gaze swept the room, landing on something that made his blood run cold. There, on Almory's desk, sat a hairbrush with an aspen handle. Strands of golden hair—Renya's hair—were caught in its bristles.

Fury unlike anything Grayden had ever known surged through him. "What is the meaning of this?" he thundered, every muscle in his body coiled tight. "Why do you have her hairbrush?"

Almory looked guilty, but it was Tumwalt who answered, his voice hard. "We had to do something. It was obvious that girl bewitched you somehow. I tasked Almory with tracking down whatever magic she used."

"That girl is my mate!" Grayden roared, his voice echoing off the stone walls.

The silence that followed was deafening. Almory's face lit up with sudden understanding, while Tumwalt stood slack-jawed, his face flushing crimson.

Grayden strode forward, snatching the brush from the desk. "How dare you accuse

Renya of bewitching me,” he snarled, turning to leave.

Tumwalt's voice, now hesitant, stopped him at the door. “My lord, I...I'm sorry. It wasn't like you to abandon your duties for some human girl—”

“Her name is Renya,” Grayden cut him off, his voice dangerously low. “And she will be your queen. I suggest you start addressing her with the respect she deserves.”

As Tumwalt gaped at him, Grayden continued, his anger giving way to a cold, regal authority. “For the record, not that I owe you an explanation, Renya is the light bringer. She possesses her full magic now. We need her to defeat the Shadow Queen.”

He watched as the implications of his words sank in, Tumwalt's eyes widening in shock.

“Moreover, she's a descendant of the Sun Realm. A princess in her own right. And she's fae, not human. How else could we be bound?” Grayden's voice softened slightly, a note of wonder creeping in as he spoke of their bond. “But even if she were human, I would demand she be treated with the same respect you show me. Although at this moment, your respect and allegiance are very much in question.”

With that, Grayden turned on his heel, calling over his shoulder as he left, “I'm returning to my mate. Do not disturb us under any circumstances. I don't wish to see you for the rest of the day.”

As he stormed back up the stairs, his mind reeling from the confrontation, Selenia intercepted him once more.

“What happened down there?” she demanded, her face tense with concern.

Grayden recounted the encounter, his anger flaring anew as he spoke. When he finished, Selenia shook her head in disbelief.

“Well, he knows she's your mate now. I'm pretty sure the whole lodge heard that particular declaration.” She quirked an eyebrow at him. “No need for formal announcements, I'd wager.”

Despite his lingering frustration, Grayden felt a smile tugging at his lips. “What am I going to do about him, Selenia?”

His sister's expression softened. “It's hard for him, I'm sure. He was always close with Father. But Grayden,” she continued, her voice uncharacteristically serious, “you aren't Father, and that's not a bad thing. Even if I don't say it often because I think you're dreadfully dull and take yourself far too seriously...you are a good ruler.”

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Grayden felt a warmth spread through his chest at her words. “Insults aside, thank you, Selenia.”

“Don't expect to hear it again,” she warned, though her smile belied her stern tone.

As they reached Grayden's chamber door, Selenia's excitement returned full force. “So, when do I get to see Renya? Surely you can pull yourself away long enough to let her eat?”

Grayden chuckled, his earlier anger dissipating in the face of his sister's enthusiasm. “Yes, we'll see you at dinner,” he promised, stepping back into the sanctuary of his room where Renya awaited.

As the door closed behind him, Grayden leaned against it, letting out a long breath. The confrontations had left him drained, but as his eyes fell on Renya's sleeping form, a sense of peace washed over him. Whatever challenges lay ahead, they would face them together.

Chapter Seventeen

Renya floated in a sea of golden light, cocooned in an overwhelming sense of love. Above her, a breathtaking mural of the sun and stars shimmered, its intricate details mesmerizing in the ethereal glow that bathed everything around her. Strong, familiar hands reached out, and she found herself gazing into a pair of blue eyes that mirrored her own, filled with a tenderness that made her heart ache with recognition.

A voice, tantalizingly familiar yet somehow different, drifted from just beyond her

field of vision. Renya strained to place it, feeling as though the answer hovered just out of reach. Suddenly, the warm golden light vanished, plunging everything into darkness. The ground beneath her feet began to tremble violently, and the voice grew urgent, tinged with fear.

“It's time to go,” it insisted, the words laced with panic. “She's found out, and it's only a matter of time before—”

Renya jolted awake with a gasp, her heart pounding so furiously she could feel it in her throat. Disoriented, she found herself engulfed in darkness, the remnants of her dream clinging to her like cobwebs. “Where am I?” she choked out, her voice barely above a whisper. A sob escaped her lips as panic threatened to overwhelm her, the line between dream and reality blurring in her mind.

In an instant, warm, strong arms surrounded her, their steady presence instantly grounding.

“Shhhhhh, Little Fawn,” Grayden's deep voice rumbled soothingly in her ear. “You've had a bad dream.” His lips brushed her forehead, damp with a cold sweat, before his fingers gently tucked strands of hair behind her ears.

The realization washed over her like a warm wave: she was in Grayden's bed, safe in his arms. Renya rolled towards him, and he effortlessly lifted her onto his lap, cradling her against his broad chest. As he held her, an inexplicable calmness began to seep through her, gradually slowing her racing heart and chasing away the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

The sensation was strange, almost foreign, as if the tranquility wasn't entirely her own. Confused, Renya lifted her head to meet Grayden's concerned gaze, his jade eyes luminous even in the dim light.

“You're doing that, aren't you?” she asked, her voice thick with wonder.

Grayden's brow wrinkled slightly as he explained, “My mother could calm my father sometimes. I never understood how she did it, but when I felt your panic, I instinctively tried to push it away, replacing it with the calm I felt holding you. I honestly didn't think it would work.”

The effect was undeniable. Renya could feel her blood pressure dropping, the tension draining from her muscles as she melted into Grayden's embrace, suddenly exhausted now that the adrenaline had ebbed away.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice barely audible.

“Renya, you never have to thank me for anything again,” Grayden assured her, his voice warm with affection. “But what happened? You were sleeping so soundly and then started thrashing.”

Renya scrunched up her brow as she tried to grasp the fading tendrils of her dream. “I had a nightmare. I...I just realized I've had it before. It starts off warm, and there's light everywhere, and then darkness comes in and...” She trailed off, frustrated as the details slipped away like water through her fingers.

A sudden thought struck her, causing her to sit up straighter in Grayden's arms. “Grayden, do you think it's possible these are memories from my childhood?”

Grayden's expression turned thoughtful, his thumb absently tracing soothing circles on her arm. “It's possible, Little Fawn. What did you see?”

Renya closed her eyes, concentrating hard as she tried to recall the rapidly fading images. “There was someone standing over me. They had blue eyes, and there was a painting on the ceiling. A mural, I think. Suns and stars.” Her voice grew softer as she

strained to remember. “And then, everything turned dark, and the earth rumbled...that's all I can remember now.”

Grayden remained silent for a moment, his eyes distant as he considered her words. “It could very well be memories,” he said finally. “Fae, even as young children, have the ability to recall memories that have strong emotions tied to them. Perhaps it is a memory from your time here.”

Renya nodded slowly, the ethereal quality of the dream feeling far removed from her life in Los Angeles. She snuggled closer to Grayden, drawing comfort from the solid wall of his chest. As if on cue, her stomach let out a loud, protesting growl.

“How long have I been asleep?” she asked, suddenly aware of how famished she felt.

“Only a few hours,” Grayden replied. “I went to Almory's workshop and let him and Tumwalt know we had returned. I came back upstairs as soon as I was done and fell asleep while watching you sleep.”

Renya couldn't help but smile, a teasing note entering her voice. “That sounds incredibly boring.”

“I always love to watch you, even if you're sleeping. You fascinate me,” Grayden admitted, his voice soft with affection. “But we do need to make an appearance at dinner. Selenia is quite desperate to see you.”

At the mention of Selenia, Renya felt a surge of excitement. She crawled out of bed, pulling on the tunic Grayden had discarded on the floor. It hung comically large on her smaller frame, but she found she loved wearing it, surrounded by his scent.

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“I'm excited to see her too,” Renya said, heading towards the bathroom. She spotted her hairbrush on the counter and picked it up, running it through her tangled locks. “Hey, you found my brush,” she remarked, working out a particularly stubborn knot.

“About that...” Grayden began, his tone suddenly hesitant.

Renya turned to face him, eyebrows raised in question. “What?”

Grayden sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Tumwalt thinks I've been bewitched by you and was having Almory try to find traces of magic on your brush. He says I've neglected my duties.”

Indignation flared in Renya's chest, her hands coming to rest on her hips. “Well, that's ridiculous,” she declared firmly. “You do everything for your lands.”

Grayden's shoulders sagged slightly, the weight of his responsibilities evident in his posture. “It seems like it's never enough. I told him I didn't want to see him at all for the rest of the day. So at least I'm yours for this evening.”

Renya's heart softened at the weariness in his voice. She crossed the room to him, placing a gentle kiss on his lips. “Be mine forever,” she murmured.

Grayden's response was immediate, his fingers trailing up her legs to grasp the edge of the borrowed tunic. The height difference between them meant the garment fell past her knees, and Grayden groaned in mock frustration. “I never thought I'd want to remove a man's tunic so badly.”

Renya laughed, pulling away with reluctance. "It'll have to wait. I want to see Selenia."

Getting dressed proved to be a far more challenging task than Renya had anticipated. For every piece of clothing she managed to put on, Grayden seemed determined to remove it. When she refused, a playful battle of kisses would ensue, which he often won. It was only when his own appetite finally got the better of him that he relented, allowing Renya to dress in peace.

Arm in arm, they made their way to the dining room. The moment Grayden pushed the door open, Selenia was upon them, her enhanced hearing having alerted her to their approach.

"Renya!" she squealed, her scarlet ringlets bouncing wildly as she rushed forward. "I can't believe you're really here!"

"Me either," Renya replied, embracing Selenia warmly. The genuine affection in the other woman's welcome touched her deeply.

Selenia's eyes sparkled with excitement as she pulled back to look at Renya. "And you're fate-bound to my brother! That makes us sisters."

A warm smile spread across Renya's face. "Yes, I guess it does." Selenia's happiness was infectious, and Renya found herself caught up in the other woman's enthusiasm.

"I'm so glad you're here," Selenia continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "To be honest, I would have traded my brother for you in a heartbeat."

Grayden rolled his eyes good-naturedly, moving to pull out chairs for both women. Selenia, in a show of playful defiance, ignored the chair he offered her and instead took a seat on Renya's other side.

“So, tell me everything!” Selenia urged, leaning in eagerly. “What happened? And what's up with your ears? Are you fae?”

Renya took a deep breath, trying to organize her thoughts. “I always was,” she began, her hand unconsciously reaching up to touch the delicate point of her ear. “My appearance was glamoured. Since I'm part of this prophecy, my aunt said it was done to try and conceal me in the human world. My magic was also locked. I'm guessing it was part of the glamour.”

She paused, the memory of her encounter with the Shadow Queen sending a shiver down her spine. “The Shadow Queen took me from the human realm and tried to take my power. It backfired, and long story short, here I am. All-powerful, I guess. But I haven't the faintest idea how to use my magic.”

Selenia nodded, as if everything Renya had said made perfect sense. “Your magic...it was there all along. I could sense it before, but it was buried. Now it's strong and...scorching. It feels wild and untamed. You need a teacher, Renya.”

“She does,” Grayden agreed, leaning back in his chair thoughtfully. He swirled the burgundy wine in his glass, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. “I was hoping we could help her.”

Selenia's skeptical look said it all. “Grayden, be realistic. I haven't used my powers in years, and yours are disappearing faster than Tumwalt's hairline. We can't teach her.”

Renya could see the moment an idea struck Grayden, his eyes lighting up with sudden inspiration. “What about Kalora?” he asked, turning to Selenia. “I need to go to the Twilight Kingdom anyway. King Triston and I are reaching out to other rulers to shore up our resources against the Shadow Queen.”

“Who is Kalora?” Renya asked, her curiosity piqued. Despite her gnawing hunger,

she had yet to touch her plate, too engrossed in the conversation.

“Queen Kalora,” Selenia explained. “I know her daughter a bit, Julietta. We've met a few times. She's sweet, but kind of boring.”

“You think everyone is boring,” Grayden accused, though there was no heat in his words.

“But you're the worst,” Selenia mumbled, earning an eye roll from her brother.

Grayden turned his attention back to Renya, his expression serious. “What do you think, Renya? We're in this together. We make all the decisions together.”

Renya felt a warmth bloom in her chest at his words, touched by his insistence on including her. She considered for a moment before speaking. “I think it's a good idea. I need to learn how to use the power I have if I'm going to save the world.” She tried to inject some humor into her voice, but the weight of expectation settled heavily on her shoulders. The enormity of what was expected of her threatened to overwhelm her if she dwelled on it too long.

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“Perfect. We'll leave as soon as possible,” Grayden decided, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Selenia's arms crossed over her chest, her expression haughty. “You better not be thinking of leaving me this time.”

Renya caught Grayden's conflicted look and gave him a pointed glance. Finally, he relented with a sigh. “You can come, Selenia.”

“I knew I liked you,” Selenia declared, winking at Renya conspiratorially.

As servers arrived with several more platters of food, Renya felt a sense of contentment wash over her. The easy banter between the three of them, the way they laughed and made plans together, it all felt so... right. Like family. A bittersweet ache bloomed in her chest as she thought of her aunt, wishing there was some way to let her know she was safe and happy.

The realization hit Renya like a bolt of lightning: she was happy. Truly, deeply happy. Who could have guessed that when she fell through that portal, she'd be stepping into her own future? It was as if everything that had come before in her life had been setting the stage for this moment, for the life she would build here with Grayden by her side.

As the meal drew to a close, Grayden rose to pull out Renya's chair, ever the gentleman. As he escorted her from the dining room, they caught sight of Tumwalt rounding a corner. The moment he spotted them, he quickly turned and retreated in the direction he had come.

“You must have really scared him,” Renya observed, unable to keep the amusement from her voice.

Grayden's response was simple but fierce. “No one insults my mate.”

Back in the privacy of their room, Grayden wasted no time in unlacing the back of Renya's dress. She shivered as his fingers brushed against her skin, her body already responding to his touch. He pulled his tunic over his head, tossing it carelessly to the floor before drawing her close.

His kiss was exquisitely slow, as if he was savoring every moment, committing the feel of her lips to memory. The sensation sent jolts of electricity through Renya's body, her pulse quickening as she melted into his embrace.

As Grayden's hands tangled in her hair, Renya found herself wondering if this feeling would ever fade. How had his parents managed to accomplish anything? All she wanted was to be with Grayden, to lose herself in his touch and never emerge.

Shifting to get more comfortable, Renya's hand brushed against something behind her pillow. Curious, she reached back and pulled out a book, its cover instantly recognizable in the flickering firelight.

“Grayden, how did you get this?” she asked, her voice filled with wonder as she traced the familiar title with her fingertips.

Grayden rolled over to face her, his expression soft. “I found it in the woods after you went through the portal. I found your entire bag. I couldn't bear to leave behind anything that belonged to you.”

Emotion welled up in Renya's throat, rendering her momentarily speechless. The gesture spoke volumes about Grayden's feelings for her, even before they had been

fated.

No words were needed as Grayden pulled her into his arms. Renya nestled against him, feeling for the first time in her life that she was exactly where she was meant to be. As sleep began to claim her, she sent a silent prayer of thanks to whatever forces had brought her to this world, to this man, to this moment of perfect belonging.

Chapter Eighteen

Grayden had an entire new wardrobe created for Renya, and she couldn't help but feel a thrill of excitement as Doria helped her into the new traveling outfit. The fabric was softer than anything she'd worn before, caressing her skin like a lover's touch. It was similar to the riding dress made for her previously, but this one was a deep, rich navy, adorned with intricate snowflakes embroidered in silver thread that seemed to shimmer with every movement.

As Renya smoothed her hands over the dress, her fingers lingered on the snowflake emblem. She had worn it before, understanding its significance to Grayden, but now, as his mate, she realized the weight of meaning it held for her as well. It wasn't just a symbol anymore; it was a part of her identity, a testament to her new life and the love she'd found.

The elkten pin, proudly displayed on her collar, caught the light, its delicate metalwork a perfect match to Grayden's. Renya touched it gently, marveling at how something so small could represent such a monumental change in her life.

Doria's deft hands adjusted the sleeves of the outfit, her fingers brushing against Renya's skin. Suddenly, the maid let out a startled gasp.

Alarm shot through Renya. "What's wrong?" she asked, her heart rate quickening.

Without a word, Doria gently pushed up Renya's sleeve, revealing the inside of her wrist. There, nestled against her pale skin, was a tiny silver snowflake. It was no larger than a half-inch, but it seemed to dance in the light, its surface shimmering with an iridescent, glitter-like quality that defied explanation.

“What is that?” Renya breathed, bewildered. She ran her fingers over the mark, and the moment she made contact, a warm sensation flooded through her entire body, as if she'd just stepped into a ray of sunshine.

Doria's face broke into a radiant smile. “It's your mating mark,” she explained, her voice filled with warmth. “You're a Snowden now, that's for certain.”

Renya traced the mark again, her fingertips grazing the delicate lines of the glistening snowflake. Each touch sent a pulse of warmth through her, a physical reminder of her bond with Grayden. The manifestation of their connection both delighted and confused her, raising a multitude of questions in her mind.

“Do you know where Grayden went?” she asked, suddenly desperate to share this discovery with him.

“The last time I saw him, he was heading in the direction of the library,” Doria replied, her eyes twinkling with knowing amusement.

“Thanks, Doria,” Renya said, barely containing her eagerness as she hurried out of their bedchamber.

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As she made her way through the corridors, Renya found herself repeatedly touching the mark. Each time, she felt an odd sensation, as if Grayden's presence was with her, his mind linked to hers. It was a strange feeling, like having him right in front of her, yet transparent and silent. The connection both thrilled and unnerved her, another reminder of how much her life had changed in such a short time.

Her feet carried her up the stairs almost of their own accord, her mind whirling as she tried to process this latest development. Her body was now permanently marked, a physical representation of her bond with Grayden and her new life in this world. Renya couldn't help but chuckle at the irony. Back in her old life, she had toyed with the idea of getting a tattoo—maybe a rose on her hip or some cliché inspirational quote. Now, fate had given her something far more meaningful and beautiful than she could have ever imagined.

She burst into the library, her eyes immediately finding Grayden hunched over a large stack of maps. At her sudden entrance, he looked up, concern clouding his features.

“Renya, what is it?” he asked, already moving towards her.

Without a word, she held out her forearm to him. Concerned, he glanced at her wrist. The moment his eyes fell on the snowflake, a smile bloomed on his face. He quickly pulled back the sleeve of his own tunic, revealing his wrist to her inspection.

There, gleaming against his skin, was a golden sun.

Renya felt the breath leave her body, rendered speechless by the sight. The sun on Grayden's wrist was just as intricate and beautiful as her snowflake, its rays seeming

to pulse with a warm, golden light.

“There's no doubt you are a descendant of the Sun Realm, my princess,” Grayden said softly, crossing to her and pressing a tender kiss to the snowflake mark on her arm. A tremor cascaded across her skin at the touch, the warmth of his lips igniting a fire that spread through her entire body. “Now the Sun Realm has a claim to my heart as well.”

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Renya asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Grayden shook his head, a sheepish smile playing at his lips. “Honestly, I forgot. As you might recall, claiming you was all I could think about. And I didn't know my mating mark would be the sigil of your realm. My parents both bore snowflakes, which now makes sense since they were both from this land. I assumed mine would be too, but it appears we get each other's.”

Renya couldn't tear her eyes away from their marks, the visual representation of their bond filling her with a sense of wonder. “Well, there's no denying we are fate-bound,” she said, her voice filled with awe.

“Did you ever doubt it?” Grayden asked, his tone playful as he placed a heated kiss on her lips. Renya allowed herself to be drawn into his embrace, losing herself in the warmth and security of his arms for a moment before gently breaking away.

“Not for a second,” she assured him. “What are you doing in here?”

Grayden's expression turned serious as he gestured to the maps spread out before him. “Just going over some routes and trying to determine our path for tomorrow. I want to check in with Phillippe before we make the journey to the Twilight Kingdom. I haven't really seen him since he recovered.”

Renya felt a pang of guilt at the mention of Phillippe, remembering how close he had come to death. “I can't wait to get to know him,” she said sincerely, moving closer to Grayden. He instinctively wrapped an arm around her, tucking her against his side. The contact sent another wave of warmth through Renya, their marks seeming to pulse in unison.

“He tends to be a bit less cautious than I am,” Grayden explained, a hint of fondness in his voice. “Between the two of us, I'm more even-tempered and pragmatic.”

Renya couldn't help but tease him. “You? Really?” In her experience, she had never known someone as practical as Grayden. Even when it pained him deeply, he had found the strength to send her back through the portal when he thought it was the only way to keep her safe.

Grayden pressed a kiss to the top of her head, his voice growing serious. “You better go prepare yourself for our journey. I'm never leaving you behind again.” The sudden intensity in his declaration made Renya wonder if he was thinking about their earlier separation as well, the pain of that memory still fresh for both of them.

With reluctance, Renya left Grayden to his planning and made her way down to the second level to check on Selenia. As she walked, she found herself continually examining her wrist, still marveling at the delicate snowflake that now adorned her skin.

She knocked on Selenia's partially open door but received no response. Cautiously, she entered the room, only to find herself confronted by a scene of utter chaos. Gowns, hats, shoes, undergarments, and a bewildering array of beauty products covered every available surface, from the floor to the bed.

“Selenia?” Renya called out, carefully navigating the disaster zone.

“I’m here,” came a muffled reply. After a moment of searching, Renya finally spotted Selenia hunched over on the floor, her head buried deep in the wardrobe.

“What are you doing?” Renya asked, torn between amusement and disbelief at the state of the room.

Selenia emerged from the wardrobe, a mischievous glint in her eye. “I hid some rather...risqué...reading material in here and I wanted to take it with me.” She rose, brushing off her skirts. “The bottom of the wardrobe is false. It’s my own personal hiding spot. But don’t tell anyone.”

Renya suppressed a chuckle, warmth spreading through her chest. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” she promised. It felt good to be back at the lodge with Selenia, their easy camaraderie a blessing. It amazed her how quickly she had come to view Selenia as a younger sister, another piece of her new life falling into place.

Yet even as she reveled in the moment, a pang of sadness shot through her as her thoughts turned once again to her aunt. She wished she knew if Aunt Agatha was safe, longing for a way to bridge the gap between her old world and her new one.

A loud thump jolted Renya from her thoughts. Selenia had upended a large trunk and was now filling it haphazardly with an assortment of items. Renya eyed the choices skeptically, noting the delicate fabrics and impractical footwear.

“Selenia,” she ventured carefully, “you have traveled with Grayden before, right? I’m just thinking that silk gowns and satin slippers won’t do you a bit of good in the snow.”

Selenia rolled her eyes dramatically. “I’m more worried about looking drab in front of Queen Kalora and Julietta. They are so fashionable. We look positively frumpy over here with our furs and velvets.”

Renya bit back another giggle, struck by how much Selenia reminded her of a typical teenager from her old world. She could easily picture Selenia poring over fashion magazines and critiquing her friends' outfit choices.

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“I mean it, Renya,” Selenia continued, her tone mock-serious. “You'll want to look stylish too. Queen Kalora is gorgeous. You wouldn't want my brother's eyes to wander, would you?” She could barely keep a straight face as the words tumbled out.

“I can't ever imagine that happening,” Renya replied softly, her heart constricting in her chest. She hadn't really considered the full implications of being fate-bound to Grayden until that moment. It meant there would truly be no one else for either of them, ever. The weight of that commitment, far from frightening her, filled her with a sense of purpose.

Her desire to help Grayden restore balance to their world intensified, burning like a flame in her chest. She wanted everyone to have the chance to find their fated mate, to experience the profound connection she shared with Grayden. In that moment, Renya realized that she wasn't just in this world to be with Grayden. She was here to save it.

Selenia, ever perceptive, seemed to sense the shift in Renya's demeanor. “You look serious,” she observed, pausing in her packing frenzy.

“I am,” Renya confirmed, resolve coursing through her entire body until it consumed her. She stood straighter, her voice filled with determination as she declared, “I'm going to restore this world.”

Selenia's eyes sparkled with a mix of admiration and amusement. “Good for you,” she said, her tone supportive despite her light-hearted words. “But let's finish packing first.”

As Renya moved to help Selenia sort through the chaos of her belongings, she felt a sense of purpose settling over her like a mantle. The journey ahead would be challenging, fraught with danger and uncertainty. But with Grayden by her side and her newfound family supporting her, Renya knew she was ready to face whatever lay ahead. The mark on her wrist tingled, a constant reminder of the love and strength she carried with her. Whatever trials awaited them in the Twilight Kingdom and beyond, Renya was prepared to meet them head-on, determined to fulfill her destiny and bring hope back to this magical world she now called home.

Chapter Nineteen

Renya's bones ached with a deep, penetrating chill as she shifted uncomfortably atop Frost's back. The excitement of horseback riding had long since faded, replaced by a weary resignation. She found herself longing for the warmth and security of Grayden's presence behind her, but necessity had placed her on this dull, plodding mare that struggled to keep pace with the others.

Her eyes drifted to Grayden, who rode beside her. She observed his vigilant gaze as it scanned the horizon before inevitably returning to her. It was a pattern she'd come to recognize: a sweeping assessment of their surroundings, then back to Renya, with occasional glances towards Selenia. The intensity of his attention both warmed and unsettled her.

“Are you faring okay, Little Fawn?” Grayden's voice cut through the whistling wind, his emerald eyes piercing through her as if he could read her very thoughts.

Renya shifted again, wincing slightly. “I'm okay...just sore everywhere.” The words had barely left her lips before she caught the smug grin spreading across Grayden's face. He winked playfully, pursing his lips in a way that made her heart skip a beat.

“Don't worry, we'll stop soon,” he assured her, his eyes flicking to the sun's position.

“It'll be dark within the hour.”

As if on cue, Selenia's mount trotted up beside them, her riding cloak billowing dramatically behind her. “I'm hungry,” she announced, fixing Grayden with a pointed look.

Grayden sighed, a mix of exasperation and fondness in his voice. “You always are. There looks to be a clearing up ahead. We'll stop there for the night.”

The group made their way to the clearing, relief washing over Renya as Grayden helped her dismount. Her legs felt like jelly, and she was grateful for his steady support. As they began unpacking, Dimitri finally caught up with them. Renya felt a wave of gratitude for the healer's presence. While she had managed to stitch up Grayden after the tygre attack, the thought of having to tend to any more serious injuries made her stomach churn. Now that Grayden was her mate, the idea of causing him even the slightest pain was almost unbearable.

Selenia approached, her fiery hair whipping in the wind as she pushed back her hood. Renya handed her a waterskin, which the younger woman accepted eagerly. After a large gulp, Selenia's face contorted in disgust. “Bleh! That's just water!”

Renya couldn't help but chuckle. “What did you think it was?”

“To be honest, I was hoping for some fireale,” Selenia admitted, handing the waterskin back with a dramatic sigh.

As they made their way through the snow to help with the tents, Selenia's sharp eyes took in the sleeping arrangements. “There's only two tents?” she asked, her tone a mix of surprise and suspicion. “How is that going to work?”

Grayden's response was swift and matter-of-fact. “Simple. I'm going to share with

Dimitri, and you'll share with Renya.”

Selenia's relief was palpable. “Okay, as long as I don't have to share with you,” she quipped, eyeing Grayden. “Or worse, you and Renya together...”

Grayden's annoyance was clear in his clipped tone. “I can control myself and so can Renya.”

“Sure, whatever,” Selenia retorted, grabbing her sleeping roll and disappearing into the first tent.

Renya turned to Grayden, unable to hide her disappointment. “We're sleeping separately?”

A hint of a smile played at the corners of Grayden's mouth. “You're the one who wanted her to come with us.”

Dinner was a subdued affair, the group's exhaustion tangible in the quiet that settled over them. Renya and Grayden sat side by side, their knees touching throughout the meal, a small comfort in the face of their impending separation.

Saying goodnight at the tent flap proved more difficult than Renya had anticipated. The bond between them seemed to pull tighter, making the prospect of parting, even for a few hours, almost painful. They lingered in the frigid air, neither wanting to be the first to break away.

“It won't be for that long, Little Fawn,” Grayden murmured, his hand coming up to gently stroke her cheek. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver through her that had nothing to do with the cold. “As soon as we get to the mountain camp, I'll make it well worth the wait.” He pulled her in for a tender kiss, both reverent and gentle, before reluctantly releasing her. Renya could feel his eyes on her as she crawled into

the tent beside his sister.

Sleep proved elusive for Renya. She tossed and turned, her body aching from the cold and the absence of Grayden's comforting warmth. She hadn't realized how quickly she'd grown accustomed to the inferno of heat his body produced. Shivering beneath the pile of furs, she strained her ears for any sound from outside the tent. Without Grayden by her side, a creeping anxiety took hold, making every rustle of wind sound like a potential threat.

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Selenia's occasional snores punctuated the silence, the younger woman seemingly unbothered by their surroundings. Renya envied her ability to fall into such a deep sleep, remembering a time when she too had been less aware of the world's dangers.

After what felt like hours of restless attempts at sleep, Renya felt an inexplicable pull drawing her outside the tent. Moving with careful stealth so as not to disturb Selenia, she slipped out into the night. The sight that greeted her was both expected and comforting: Grayden's dark figure sat by the fire, his gaze fixed on the dancing flames as he nursed a steaming beverage.

“Couldn't sleep?” she asked softly as she approached.

Grayden looked up, his eyes softening at the sight of her. “Too much on my mind.” He patted the spot next to him on the log, and Renya gladly accepted the invitation. The moment she was within reach, Grayden enveloped her in his arms, his body heat instantly chasing away the chill that had settled in her bones. He placed a soft kiss on her temple, and Renya felt the tension in her body begin to melt away.

“What are you thinking about?” she prompted gently, sensing the weight of his thoughts.

Grayden's hand moved to the sheath of his sword, a habit Renya had noticed more frequently since her return. It was as if he was constantly preparing for battle, ready to defend her at a moment's notice. The thought both warmed her heart and filled her with a sense of unease.

“The alliance with Triston,” he began, his voice low and contemplative. “Getting the

other kingdoms together. Ensuring we are training our men properly. Trying to figure out how to defeat an army of dragons. How to best protect you and Selenia.”

The length of his concerns made Renya's heart ache. “I wish I could help you,” she said, feeling suddenly inadequate in the face of such monumental challenges.

Grayden turned to her, his gaze intense and sincere. “Your presence is enough help. You give me strength. Hope for the future. You are the most important thing in my life. Trust me, Little Fawn, you are the reason I keep fighting.”

Renya snuggled deeper into his embrace, finding comfort in the solid wall of his chest. After a moment of comfortable silence, she ventured a question that had been lingering in her mind. “Do you think about our future?”

“Of course I do,” Grayden replied, his fingers absently tracing the length of his sword sheath. “I think of our future a lot. I can't wait until the Shadow Queen is defeated and we can feel safe at the lodge. I can't wait to show you off to the people of the Snow Lands, dance with you at a grand ball, and wake up beside you every morning.”

The picture he painted made Renya's heart swell with longing. “I certainly wish I could wake up beside you tomorrow.”

A confident grin spread across Grayden's face. “Ah, can you not sleep without me, Little Fawn?”

“I can't,” Renya admitted. “You're like my own personal fireplace.”

Grayden's laughter rumbled through his chest. “I was hoping you'd miss something else.”

“That too,” Renya conceded, rising to her feet with reluctance. “I better head back to

bed. I know tomorrow will be another long day of riding.”

The next four days seemed to stretch endlessly, each hour a test of endurance as they pushed further into increasingly inhospitable terrain. While Selenia and Grayden appeared to adapt more easily to the biting cold, Renya felt its effects acutely. Her hands and feet remained in a constant state of numbness, her cheeks perpetually flushed from the harsh wind.

Each night, before they retired to their separate tents, Grayden would remove Renya's boots by the fire, his strong hands working to massage feeling back into her frozen feet. These tender moments of care made their nightly partings all the more difficult. Renya yearned to sleep in Grayden's arms, to feel his warm breath against her neck as she burrowed into the safety of his embrace.

The journey proved more challenging than any Renya had undertaken thus far. As the path grew steeper and rockier, the horses' progress slowed, requiring more frequent rests as they ascended to higher elevations.

On the fifth day, Renya awoke with a renewed sense of determination. Barring any unforeseen complications, they were set to reach the mountain camp by evening. The thought of a reprieve from their grueling travel filled her with a mix of relief and anticipation.

The ascent to the camp consumed half the day, the trail becoming a series of increasingly tight switchbacks as they climbed higher and higher. The thinning air began to take its toll on Renya, leaving her gasping for breath even as she simply sat atop her mount. Her lungs burned with each inhalation, the frigid air seeming to settle in her chest and triggering frequent coughing fits.

In some sections, the snow gave way entirely to vast sheets of ice, forcing them to dismount and lead their horses across treacherous terrain. Frost, true to her obstinate

nature, refused to obey Renya's commands, necessitating Grayden's intervention. As she watched him struggle with the stubborn mare, Renya felt a pang of longing for Starlia's steady temperament.

As the sun began its descent towards the horizon, they finally approached the pass leading to the camp. The scent of woodsmoke reached Renya's nostrils before any visual signs of the encampment came into view. Cresting the final slope, an awe-inspiring sight unfolded before them.

An enormous mountaintop loomed ahead, its face split by a crevasse that stretched several stories high. The natural contours of the surrounding terrain had concealed it from view until this moment, making its sudden appearance all the more dramatic. As they drew nearer, Renya's eyes widened at the sight of a vast, snow-covered landing that opened up before them, flanked on either side by majestic mountain slopes.

A hawk circled overhead, its piercing cry cutting through the thin air before it descended to land on a large, man-made perch. Another of its kind already rested there, its keen eyes surveying the bustling camp below with lazy interest.

Renya's gaze swept across the open area, taking in the sheer scale of the operation. Hundreds of soldiers milled about, engaged in various activities: sharpening weapons, practicing archery, tending to cooking fires, and sparring with one another. A herd of horses, their coats thick and shaggy from life at the timberline, grazed on sparse vegetation at the camp's edge. Along the outskirts, several dozen wooden cabins stood resolute, their backs pressed against the harsh, jagged mountain face.

The reality of the camp far exceeded Renya's expectations. She had envisioned a modest field of tents housing perhaps a few dozen men. Instead, she found herself facing a well-established, efficiently run training facility that, despite its remote location, hummed with purpose and activity.

Before Renya could fully process the scene before her, a blur of crimson and velvet streaked past, accompanied by an excited cry.

“Jurel!” Selenia's voice rang out as she raced towards one of the campfires. Renya's eyes quickly found the young man in question, his face a mask of shock as Selenia launched herself into his arms. A flush of embarrassment colored Jurel's cheeks before fading as he awkwardly returned the embrace.

Renya glanced at Grayden, noting the tightening of his jaw at the display. Sensing his discomfort, she decided to attempt the calming technique he had used on her after her nightmare. Focusing on the serenity of their snow-covered surroundings, she took a deep breath, channeling a sense of tranquility. With careful concentration, she directed this feeling towards Grayden, towards that special place inside her where their bond resided.

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Her mating mark tingled and pulsed as she maintained her focus, regulating her breathing. To her amazement, she watched as Grayden's shoulders visibly relaxed, a look of confusion followed by peace crossing his handsome features. His breathing fell into sync with hers, and after a moment, his eyes met hers, understanding dawning in their depths.

Renya offered a guilty smile, but Grayden's response was a warm laugh as he dismounted. He helped her down from her horse, pulling her close and placing a quick, affectionate peck on her icy cheek.

“Thank you, Little Fawn,” he murmured, his hands at her waist drawing her hips flush against his. “I know that was you.”

“I'm enjoying this mating bond,” Renya admitted, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “I can manipulate your emotions a bit too easily.”

Grayden's gaze darkened, taking on a sensual edge. “Can you tell what I'm feeling now?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

Renya leaned into his warm embrace, her body responding to his proximity. “Yes. Because it's pretty much what you always feel,” she breathed.

Grayden tipped her chin up, his intent clear as he leaned in. “You're not wrong, my mate.”

Just as their lips were about to meet, a booming voice cut through the air. “Grayden!”

They both looked up to see a powerfully built man striding towards them, a large sword at his hip and a metal breastplate adorning his chest. As he drew near, he dipped into a low bow before Renya, making a sweeping gesture with his arm.

“Mistress Renya, it's so nice to finally meet you,” he said as he straightened, taking her gloved hand and pressing a kiss to the leather. “We received a hawk from Almory telling us of your return to our lands.”

“It's nice to meet you too,” Renya replied, her eyes darting to Grayden for guidance on the proper etiquette. But Grayden's attention remained fixed on his brother, his voice carrying a note of correction.

“Not mistress. My mate.”

Confusion clouded Phillippe's eyes as they flickered between Renya and Grayden. Renya took the moment to study him more closely. He stood a few inches shorter than Grayden but was more thickly muscled, his body a testament to rigorous physical training. Unlike Grayden's unruly locks, his jet-black hair was cropped close to his scalp. His skin tone was darker, likely a result of extended exposure to the elements.

As the man's mocha-colored eyes continued to dart between them, seeming to search for some visible sign of their bond, Grayden pulled down his glove to reveal the glistening sun mark on his wrist.

The sight left the man momentarily speechless, his mouth agape as he struggled to process this revelation. When he finally found his voice, it was thick with disbelief. “You're...fate-bound? How? And your mark is the sun? Does this mean—”

“That Renya is who I thought she might be? Yes,” Grayden confirmed, a note of pride in his voice. “She's not just my mate but a princess of the Sun Realm.”

Renya felt heat rise to her cheeks at Grayden's words. The title of 'princess' still felt foreign to her, a mantle she wasn't sure she was ready to bear. Despite her regal attire—the sweeping velvet cloak and jeweled snowflake clips adorning her braid—she still saw herself simply as Renya. Writer. Light bringer. Mate of Grayden. These identities were far easier to accept than 'princess.'

Grayden squeezed her hand reassuringly as the man—whom Renya now realized must be Phillippe—regarded her with renewed interest. Without warning, Phillippe stepped forward and pulled her into a bear hug. Through their bond, Renya sensed Grayden's tension spike. Instinctively, she channeled calming energy towards him, feeling his muscles relax as Phillippe released her.

“Well, that means you're pretty much my sister,” Phillippe declared, clapping Grayden on the back. His eyes twinkled mischievously as he added, “If this ugly brute ever gives you a reason to cry, just come see your big brother and I'll straighten him out.” He punctuated his words with a wink, eliciting a low growl from Grayden.

Eager to diffuse the building tension, Grayden steered the conversation in a new direction. “So, Phillippe, tell me how the training is going,” he prompted, his tone making it clear he was ready to focus on matters of strategy.

Phillippe's demeanor shifted, becoming more serious as he surveyed the camp. “There's a matter about some maps that I need to discuss with you privately, but other than that, the new recruits are doing well,” he reported. “Jurel and Charly have been training them hard, and another batch of recruits from the eastern borderlands arrived two days ago. Honestly, I'm impressed you were able to pull so many men together.”

“I can be pretty persuasive,” Grayden replied, a hint of pride in his voice.

Phillippe chuckled. “Of course you can. How else could you have managed to

convince such a pretty woman to be your mate?”

Before Grayden could retort, Selenia approached the group, Jurel close behind. His face still bore a faint flush from their earlier greeting. Selenia threw her arms around Phillippe, who returned her embrace warmly. Watching their interaction, Renya felt a pang of envy mixed with admiration for the close-knit family before her. She couldn't help but wonder what it might have been like to grow up with siblings, to have that built-in support system even after losing their parents. Her own childhood, with only Aunt Agatha for company, suddenly seemed even lonelier in comparison.

“How long are you planning on staying here?” Jurel asked, his eyes never leaving Selenia. Then, turning to Grayden with a hint of disapproval, he added, “And Grayden, why in the Gods' names did you bring the women with you?”

Renya caught the fleeting look of hurt that crossed Selenia's face at Jurel's words. She felt a surge of protectiveness towards her new sister-in-law, wishing she were close enough to give Jurel a sharp elbow to the ribs for his thoughtless comment.

Grayden's voice was steady as he explained, “This isn't just a visit to check out the recruits. We are stopping over and resting for a few days before we go through the pass to the Twilight Kingdom.”

Phillippe's eyebrows shot up in surprise. “The Twilight Kingdom? Why are you going there?”

“I know we haven't had time to talk,” Grayden began, his tone patient, “but Renya has her full powers back and we need someone to help train her.”

“Kalora?” Phillippe guessed, understanding dawning on his face.

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Grayden nodded, glancing at Renya. “Exactly. My magic is too weak, and I hardly know anything about her magic. We haven't even really seen a physical manifestation of it since she came into her powers.”

Phillippe's brow crinkled. “Then how do you know she has them?”

Frustration welled up inside Renya. She was tired of being talked about as if she weren't present, as if her powers were some abstract concept to be debated. “Because I created a cave-in,” she interjected, her voice sharp with irritation as she crossed her arms defensively.

Phillippe's eyes widened, impressed. “I'm sorry for questioning you, Renya,” he said, his tone genuinely apologetic. “I'm just surprised, that's all. You bring us and our people hope. That's something new for us of late. We haven't had much hope at all, and here you are, powerful and a descendant of the Sun Realm. It's just...almost unbelievable.”

Renya felt her anger dissipate, replaced by a mix of understanding and frustration. She sighed, uncrossing her arms. “I understand. I'm just frustrated because I'm supposed to have these magical abilities but all I've managed to do is knock down a cave, and that was by accident.”

Phillippe's expression softened. “Don't worry, Queen Kalora can help you. She knows more about the origins of magic than any of us.” He patted her arm reassuringly. “You'll be pushing Grayden around with your magic soon enough. I can't wait for that day.”

“She'll be able to kick your ass too,” Grayden added, shooting Phillippe a pointed look.

“Now, now, boys,” Selenia interjected, her laughter cutting through the tension. “Let's not let Renya see how our family really is. She might leave us for good. I don't know why she stays with Lord Boring anyways.”

Grayden's lip twitched, a mischievous glint entering his eye. “It's the sex,” he deadpanned.

Selenia's eyes went wide with horror. “Oh my Gods! Grayden! That's disgusting! Why would you say that to me?”

“Maybe now you'll keep your mouth shut for a while,” he replied, looking entirely too pleased with himself for having finally bested his sister in their verbal sparring.

Selenia stomped away in mock outrage, Jurel following close behind as if tethered to her by an invisible string.

Renya looked up at Grayden, torn between the urge to scold him and the desire to laugh at the siblings' antics. Deciding to play along, she rose on her tiptoes to whisper hotly in his ear, “It's definitely the sex.”

Chapter Twenty

Selenia stood at the edge of the makeshift archery range, her breath coming out in small, visible puffs in the crisp mountain air. When Grayden had suggested that she learn archery, she had been incredibly excited.

She watched as Jurel demonstrated the proper stance for shooting, his muscular frame cutting an impressive figure against the backdrop of snow-capped peaks. Her heart

fluttered in her chest, a mix of excitement and nervousness coursing through her veins.

“Are you ready to give it a try?” Jurel asked, turning to her with an encouraging smile that made her knees weak.

Selenia nodded eagerly, stepping forward to take the bow from him. As their hands brushed during the exchange, she felt a jolt of electricity run through her. Jurel's touch lingered for a moment longer than necessary, his dark eyes meeting hers with an intensity that made her breath catch.

“Remember,” he said, his voice low and husky, “keep your back straight and your shoulders relaxed.”

Selenia tried to focus on his instructions, but found herself distracted by his proximity as he moved behind her to adjust her stance. His hands on her shoulders were firm yet gentle, guiding her into the correct position. She could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell the earthy scent of leather and pine that clung to him.

“Like this?” she asked, her voice coming out breathier than she intended.

Jurel nodded approvingly. “That's it. Now, draw the string back to your cheek.”

Selenia followed his instructions, feeling the strain in her arms as she pulled the bowstring taut. Jurel's hand came up to steady her elbow, his touch sending shivers down her spine.

“Take a deep breath,” he murmured, his lips close to her ear. “Focus on your target, and when you're ready, release.”

Selenia tried to concentrate, but her mind was a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and

emotions. She let the arrow fly, watching with disappointment as it sailed wide of the target, disappearing into a nearby snowbank.

“That's alright,” Jurel said, his tone encouraging. “It takes practice. Let's try again.”

As they continued the lesson, Selenia found herself torn between the thrill of Jurel's attention and a nagging sense of unease. She couldn't shake the memory of his reaction when they first arrived at the camp, the way his face had fallen when he saw her. It was as if her presence was an unwelcome complication in his carefully ordered world.

“You're improving,” Jurel remarked as one of Selenia's arrows grazed the edge of the target. “You have a natural talent for this.”

Selenia beamed at the praise, her cheeks flushing with pride and exertion. “Do you think I could become as good as you someday?”

A shadow passed over Jurel's face, so quick Selenia almost missed it. “With enough practice, perhaps,” he said, his tone carefully neutral. “Though I hope you'll never need to use these skills in battle.”

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The comment caught Selenia off guard. “Why not? I want to be able to defend myself, to fight alongside you and my brothers if needed.”

Jurel's eyes darkened slightly. “It's not a woman's place to be on the battlefield, Selenia. Your brothers would never allow it, and neither would I.”

Selenia felt a flicker of irritation at his words. “I'm not some delicate flower that needs protection,” she argued. “I'm just as capable as any man here.”

Jurel's expression softened, but there was a patronizing edge to his smile that made Selenia's stomach twist uncomfortably. “I know you're strong, Selenia. But there are other ways you can contribute, ways that don't put you in harm's way.”

Selenia bit back a retort, instead focusing on placing another arrow. As she drew back the string, she tried to channel her frustration into her aim. The arrow flew straight and true, embedding itself near the center of the target with a satisfying thud.

“Excellent shot!” Jurel exclaimed, genuine pride in his voice. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a brief, celebratory embrace. Selenia melted into his touch, her earlier irritation momentarily forgotten.

As they continued practicing, Selenia found her thoughts drifting to the future. She imagined herself by Jurel's side, no longer just the little sister of his commander but a true partner. In her mind's eye, she saw them facing challenges together, building a life in the Snow Lands.

“What are you thinking about?” Jurel asked, noticing her distant expression.

Selenia hesitated, suddenly feeling shy. “I was just wondering...what do you think will happen after all this is over? After we defeat the Shadow Queen?”

Jurel's face grew serious, his gaze fixed on the distant mountains. “I suppose we'll need to rebuild, strengthen our defenses. There will always be threats to face, enemies at our borders.”

“But what about...us?” Selenia pressed, her heart pounding. “Have you ever thought about settling down, starting a family?”

A flicker of discomfort passed over Jurel's features. “Selenia,” he began, his tone cautious, “you know my duty is to the Snow Lands, to your brothers. I can't afford distractions.”

Selenia felt as if she'd been doused with ice water. “Am I a distraction?” she asked, hating how small her voice sounded.

Jurel sighed, running a hand through his hair. “That's not what I meant. I just...my life is here, in the camp, training soldiers and defending our borders. It's all I've ever known, all I want to know.”

Selenia nodded, trying to hide the hurt his words caused. She had always dreamed of adventure, of seeing the world beyond the Snow Lands. The thought of being confined to a military camp for the rest of her life felt suffocating.

“I understand,” she said, forcing a smile. “Let's keep practicing. I want to hit the bullseye before we're done.”

As they resumed their lesson, Selenia threw herself into the task with renewed vigor. She focused on the physical sensations—the tension in the bowstring, the strain in her muscles, the biting cold of the wind on her face. It was easier than dwelling on the

growing sense that perhaps she and Jurel wanted very different things from life.

The sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon when Jurel called an end to their practice. Selenia's arms ached pleasantly from the exertion, and despite the emotional turmoil churning inside her, she felt a sense of accomplishment.

“You did well today,” Jurel said as they packed up the equipment. “You're a quick learner.”

Selenia smiled, warmth blooming in her chest at his praise. “I had a good teacher,” she replied, looking up at him through her lashes.

Jurel's expression softened, and for a moment, Selenia thought he might kiss her. Her heart raced as he leaned in closer, his hand coming up to brush a stray lock of hair from her face. But at the last second, he seemed to think better of it, pulling back with a rueful smile.

“We should head back,” he said, his voice rough. “It'll be time for the evening meal soon.”

As they walked back towards the camp, Selenia found herself hyper-aware of the space between them. It was as if an invisible barrier had sprung up, keeping them just out of reach of each other. She longed to bridge that gap, to take his hand in hers, but something held her back.

“Selenia,” Jurel said suddenly, stopping in his tracks. “I...I'm glad you're here. Even if I didn't show it when you first arrived.”

Selenia's heart leapt at his words. “Really?” she asked, hope blossoming in her chest.

Jurel nodded, a conflicted expression on his face. “It's complicated. Having you here,

it makes me want things I can't have, things that don't fit with the life I've chosen.”

“Maybe you don't have to choose,” Selenia suggested, taking a step closer to him.

“Maybe we could find a way to make it work, to have both.”

For a moment, Jurel looked tempted. His eyes searched hers, filled with a longing that made Selenia's breath catch. But then he shook his head, the walls coming back up behind his eyes.

“It's not that simple,” he said softly. “We have responsibilities, duties to fulfill. We can't always put our own desires first.”

Selenia felt as if she'd been punched in the gut, but she forced herself to nod. “I understand,” she said, even though part of her wanted to scream that she didn't, that she couldn't accept a life defined solely by duty and obligation.

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As they resumed their walk back to camp, Selenia found herself at a crossroads. Part of her wanted to fight for Jurel, to prove to him that they could find a way to reconcile their different dreams. But another part, a small voice growing louder by the moment, whispered that perhaps this wasn't the grand romance she had imagined it to be.

The camp came into view, bustling with activity as soldiers prepared for the evening meal. Selenia caught sight of Renya and Grayden across the yard, their heads bent close together in conversation. The easy intimacy between them, the way they seemed to fit together so naturally, made Selenia's heart ache with a mixture of envy and longing.

“Thank you for the lesson,” she said to Jurel as they reached the edge of the camp. “I really enjoyed it.”

Jurel smiled, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder affectionately. “Anytime,” he replied. “You're a natural with a bow. Who knows, maybe someday you'll be teaching me a thing or two.”

As he walked away, Selenia watched him go, her emotions a tangled mess. She loved Jurel, or at least she thought she did. But for the first time, she found herself wondering if love was enough, if shared feelings could bridge the gap between two fundamentally different visions of the future.

Shaking off her melancholy thoughts, Selenia squared her shoulders and headed towards her brothers. Whatever doubts and uncertainties plagued her heart, she was still a princess of the Snow Lands, sister to the ruler and the light bringer. She had a

role to play in the coming battles, a duty to her people and her family. For now, that would have to be enough.

As she joined Grayden and Renya, Selenia pushed thoughts of Jurel and their complicated relationship to the back of her mind. There would be time to sort out her feelings later. For now, she had a war to prepare for, a world to save, and a family to support. And perhaps, in the midst of it all, she would find her own path, one that led to a future as bright and boundless as the snow-capped peaks surrounding them.

Chapter Twenty-One

As the sun dipped below the jagged mountain peaks, casting long shadows across the snow-covered camp, the group gathered around a large fire at the back of the encampment. The crackling flames cast a warm, golden glow on their faces, a stark contrast to the encroaching darkness and biting cold of the mountain night.

Renya settled comfortably beside Grayden, his strong arm draped protectively around her shoulders as he deftly managed to eat one-handed. She leaned back against his solid frame, relishing the heat that radiated from his body, warming her back while the fire chased away the chill from her front. The dual sources of warmth were a welcome respite from the bone-deep cold that had plagued her throughout their journey.

As she took in the scene around her, Renya couldn't help but notice the marked improvement in their provisions. The camp's dedicated cooking staff had prepared a feast that put their travel rations to shame. She savored each bite of the expertly baked bread, its crust crisp and interior still warm and fluffy. The fresh meat, seasoned to perfection, was a far cry from the dried jerky they'd survived on during their trek. The simple pleasure of a hot, satisfying meal after days of travel felt like pure luxury.

Jurel's voice cut through the comfortable silence that had settled over the group. "So, are you leaving tomorrow?" he asked, his tone casual as he sat next to Selenia. Renya noticed how he carefully maintained a respectful distance from the younger woman, clearly mindful of Grayden's watchful gaze.

Grayden shook his head, his chest rumbling against Renya's back as he spoke. "No, we're going to stay at least three or four days. I want to show Renya Snow Pass Springs."

Intrigued, Renya tilted her head to look up at him. "Snow Pass Springs? What's that?"

A soft smile played at the corners of Grayden's mouth as he explained, "It's a short ride from here. It's a geothermal hot spring. I figured after leaving the sunshine and warmth of the human world, you might miss being surrounded by heat."

The thought of sinking into warm water, letting it soothe her aching muscles and chase away the persistent chill, was incredibly appealing. "That does sound nice," Renya agreed, already imagining the steam rising from the water's surface.

"But first," Grayden continued, his tone turning more serious, "you're training with swords tomorrow."

Renya blinked in surprise, straightening slightly in his embrace. "What?" she asked, perplexed by this unexpected development.

Grayden's arm tightened around her slightly, a gesture of reassurance as he elaborated. "In the event your magic fades or it's somehow taken from you, Phillippe is going to teach you some basics. I want you protected and safe, with or without powers." His gaze shifted to Selenia, including her in his next statement. "That goes for you too, Selenia. You'll be training as well."

Selenia's eyes widened with excitement, a mischievous grin spreading across her face. "I can't wait to stab someone," she declared, her gaze sweeping across the group as if assessing potential targets.

Grayden rolled his eyes, though Renya detected a hint of fondness in his exasperation. "I thought you'd say that. Jurel will be training with you. I figure he'll be the safest from the pointy end of whatever weapon you wield."

Selenia's scowl was halfhearted at best, and Renya didn't miss the faint blush that colored her cheeks at the prospect of training with Jurel again. The younger woman's attraction to the soldier was as obvious as it was endearing, and she had been bubbly after her archery lesson.

Phillippe, who had been quietly observing the exchange, spoke up. His voice carried the authoritative tone of a seasoned commander as he addressed the group. "I suggest everyone get a good night of rest. Tomorrow's training is going to be grueling. I expect the same from you as I do my men."

As the implications of Grayden's decision sank in, Renya felt a surge of gratitude and respect for her mate. His choice to have both her and Selenia trained in combat alongside the men spoke volumes about his character. In a world that often seemed to value chivalry and traditional gender roles, Grayden's progressive attitude was refreshing. It eased some of Renya's fears about being seen as too weak or soft to play a meaningful role in the coming conflict.

Still, as she finished her meal, Renya couldn't help but wonder about her role as the light bringer. The title still felt foreign, its responsibilities and implications a mystery. She found herself hoping that Queen Kalora might have some answers, some insight into the power that now coursed through her veins.

As the group began to disperse for the night, Grayden took Renya's hand, his touch

warm and reassuring. He led her towards a cabin nestled against the left side of the towering ice wall that bordered the camp. Hope blossomed in Renya's chest as they approached. "Do we get this all to ourselves?" she asked, unable to keep the eagerness from her voice. After nights of sharing close quarters with Selenia, the prospect of privacy—and the chance to sleep in Grayden's arms once more—was incredibly enticing.

"Yes, my Little Fawn," Grayden confirmed, a hint of anticipation in his own voice as he pushed open the door.

The interior of the cabin was spartan at best. A small fire stove occupied one corner, promising warmth against the mountain chill. A tiny washroom, equipped with just a simple sink for washing, stood off to one side. The bed, if it could be called that, was little more than a lumpy straw-stuffed mattress that looked barely big enough for both of them.

Yet as Renya took in their humble accommodations, she found she didn't care about the room's shortcomings. After nights spent on the hard ground, Selenia's soft snores a constant companion, the prospect of privacy and Grayden's embrace outweighed any lack of comfort.

Renya stood in the middle of the cramped space, drinking in the moment. Grayden wasted no time in crossing the room to her, his movements purposeful and filled with barely restrained passion. The metallic clang of his sword and sheath hitting the ground punctuated the air as he undid his belt, kicking the weapon aside with a careless foot.

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His hands, always so gentle despite their strength, moved to the elkten pin securing Renya's cloak. As the heavy fabric fell away, Grayden's mouth found her neck, his breath hot and urgent against her skin. Renya sighed, melting into his touch, realizing just how much she had missed this intimacy during their journey.

Their cloaks and boots soon joined the growing pile on the floor, discarded without a second thought. Renya's fingers traced a path up Grayden's chest, savoring the solid warmth of him beneath the fabric. She tugged at his tunic's collar, drawing him closer before helping him pull it over his head.

As Grayden's chest was revealed, Renya couldn't help but marvel at his form. He was like a Greek statue come to life, all chiseled muscle and perfect proportion. Her hands explored the planes of his pectorals, feeling them flex slightly under her touch. The chill of her fingers against his warm skin elicited a subtle shiver from him, a reminder of the temperature difference between them.

With swift, eager movements, Grayden removed his trousers, pushing them past his hips and stepping out of them in one fluid motion. Renya's breath caught as she realized he wore nothing underneath, her gaze drawn inexorably to his arousal. Grayden's eyes followed her line of sight, darkening with desire as he caught her staring.

His hands found the hem of her shirt, tugging it upwards with barely contained impatience. As the cool air of the cabin hit her exposed skin, Renya felt a thrill of anticipation course through her. That morning, hoping for just such an opportunity, she had chosen her undergarments with care. The sheer, red lace she now wore was a far cry from her usual practical choices, selected from the items she and Selenia had

picked out in the village before the Sky Lights Festival.

Grayden's eyes widened as he took in the sight, appreciation and hunger warring in his gaze. His fingers reached out, almost reverently, to trace the delicate lace covering her breast. A low groan rumbled in his throat, the sound sending a shiver of delight down Renya's spine. She felt a surge of feminine pride, pleased that her efforts had garnered such a response.

With aching slowness, Grayden's fingers traced a path along her collarbone before sliding the straps of the bralette down her shoulders. His touch was feather-light, a stark contrast to the urgency she could feel pulsing through him. He tugged gently at the fabric, and Renya obligingly turned, allowing him access to the laces at her back.

The moment the garment was loosened, Grayden all but tore it from her body, spinning her back to face him with an eagerness that left her breathless. The cool air of the cabin caused her nipples to pebble, and Grayden's appreciative gaze made her skin tingle with awareness.

“You are more perfect than you'll ever know,” he breathed, the awe in his voice making Renya's heart swell. He pulled her against him, the feel of skin on skin eliciting a soft moan from both of them. His hands slid down to cup her hips, fingers working deftly at the ties of her pants.

As the last of their clothing fell away, Renya felt a curious mix of shyness and power. Standing bare before Grayden, seeing the love and desire in his eyes, she felt truly seen and cherished.

Their lips met in a passionate clash, tongues sliding past each other before finding a perfect, synchronized rhythm. Renya moaned softly into the kiss, overwhelmed by the intensity of being with him again after their forced abstinence. The bond between them seemed to hum with renewed strength, as if celebrating their reunion.

Grayden guided her backwards towards the bed, his knee pressing into the rough mattress as Renya's head came to rest on the flat pillow. She parted her legs instinctively, welcoming him into the cradle of her hips. Just as she anticipated his next move, she felt a flicker of nervousness through their bond. The emotion was so at odds with the moment that it gave her pause, curiosity and concern momentarily overriding her desire.

But the feeling passed as quickly as it had come, replaced by a surge of love and passion as Grayden claimed her mouth once more. His tongue sought entrance, mirroring the motion of his body as he finally, blissfully joined them together.

The sense of completeness that washed over Renya was almost overwhelming. The desperation that had built during their separation gave way to a profound relief, a feeling of coming home. Grayden, sensing her emotions through their bond, slowed his movements, savoring the moment of reconnection.

“I want you so badly,” he murmured against her skin, his lips trailing fire along her neck.

“I always want you,” Renya gasped in response, her breath catching as he nipped gently at her pulse point. The sharp sensation radiated through her body, causing her inner muscles to clench around him, drawing him deeper.

Grayden's pace increased, each thrust bringing them closer to the edge. Renya felt the tension building within her, a coiling spring ready to release. When it finally broke, she pulled Grayden close, muffling her cries of pleasure against his neck. He followed her over the precipice moments later, his release filling her with a warmth that seemed to spread throughout her entire being.

As their breathing slowly returned to normal, Grayden rolled to the side, bringing Renya with him in one fluid motion. She found herself sprawled across his chest, his

heartbeat strong and steady beneath her ear. His hands came up to massage her back, working out the knots and tension that had accumulated during their journey.

Renya sighed with pleasure as his skilled fingers worked their magic on her aching muscles. The bone-deep weariness that had plagued her began to melt away under his ministrations. As his hands moved lower, focusing on her backside and thighs, a louder moan escaped her lips.

Grayden's chest rumbled with a low chuckle. "Be careful, Little Fawn," he warned, his voice a mix of amusement and renewed desire. "I want you to rest, but if you keep making those noises, I won't let you sleep tonight."

Renya tilted her head to meet his gaze, a playful challenge in her eyes. "Do you promise?" she asked, deliberately letting out another exaggerated groan as his hands found a particularly sensitive spot on her inner thigh.

"You know I'm a man of my word," Grayden replied, his tone low and full of promise.

As they lay there, tangled together in the small bed, Renya felt a sense of peace settle over her. Despite the challenges that lay ahead—the training, the journey to the Twilight Kingdom, the looming threat of the Shadow Queen—in this moment, she felt safe and loved. Whatever trials awaited them, she knew that together, they could face anything.

The fire in the small stove crackled softly, casting a warm glow over the cabin. Outside, the sounds of the camp gradually quieted as night fully descended. Renya closed her eyes, letting the steady rhythm of Grayden's heartbeat and the gentle caress of his hands lull her towards sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Grayden woke before dawn, his internal clock as reliable as ever despite the exhaustion of their journey. He carefully extricated himself from Renya's embrace, pausing to admire her peaceful expression in the dim light. The sight of her, vulnerable and trusting in sleep, stirred a protective instinct so fierce it almost overwhelmed him.

As he dressed quietly, his mind wandered to the day ahead. The thought of Renya training with Phillippe filled him with a mix of pride and apprehension. He knew it was necessary, crucial even, but the idea of her being hurt, even in practice, made his jaw clench.

Stepping out into the biting pre-dawn air, Grayden made his way to the camp's kitchen area. He wanted to surprise Renya with breakfast, a small gesture to start her day of training on a positive note. As he waited for the food to be prepared, he found himself lost in thought, fingers absently tracing the sun mark on his wrist.

The camp was already stirring to life around him, soldiers going about their morning routines with practiced efficiency. Grayden observed them, his keen eyes picking up on small details—a slight limp here, a favored arm there. He made mental notes, already planning how to address these issues in future training sessions.

When the tray was ready, laden with dried fruits, pastries, and two steaming mugs, Grayden made his way back to their cabin. He paused outside the door, balancing the tray carefully as he listened for any signs that Renya was awake. Hearing movement inside, he pushed the door open, a gust of icy wind following him in.

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“I thought you'd abandoned me in a camp full of men,” Renya teased, her voice still husky with sleep.

“Never,” Grayden replied, his tone light but his eyes conveying the seriousness of his words. He would never abandon her, not for anything in this world or any other.

He handed her the tray, watching with satisfaction as she began to eat. “I wanted to bring you breakfast in bed, but it appears the bed part of your day is already over,” he said, reaching down to play with her braid. The silky strands slipped through his fingers, and he marveled at how such a simple touch could ground him so completely. “It's going to be a long day of training, and I want my woman fed and ready.”

“I appreciate it,” Renya said between bites. “I'm excited to train and get to know Phillippe better. What are you going to be doing while Selenia and I learn?”

Grayden stroked the stubble on his chin, considering his response. He knew the missing maps that Phillippe had filled him in on were a serious concern, but he didn't want to worry Renya unnecessarily. “I'm going to talk to the men, train with them a bit, and manage some business that needs to be seen to,” he said, opting for a partial truth. “Phillippe said some maps with the positions of our other camps have gone missing. He repositioned the men, just to be cautious, but it has us concerned.”

He watched Renya's face carefully as he spoke, noting the flicker of understanding in her eyes. Sometimes he forgot how perceptive she was, how quickly she pieced things together.

“Any leads?” she asked, her tone casual but her eyes sharp.

Grayden hesitated, weighing his words. “Phillippe has a suspicion that we could have a spy here,” he admitted finally. “If that's the case, we need to be sure that no one knows of your powers.”

“Easy enough. I haven't even figured out how to use them yet,” Renya said, a note of defeat in her voice that made Grayden's heart ache.

“Don't worry, my love. You will,” he assured her, wishing he could do more to help her unlock her potential. “I am just sorry I can't train you myself.”

As Renya finished eating, Grayden held out his hand to her, pulling her to her feet and into his arms. He placed a kiss on the top of her head, inhaling her scent deeply. It centered him, reminding him of all he had to fight for.

With a mixture of pride and nervousness, he reached into his boot and pulled out a small dagger. He had commissioned it specially for Renya, wanting her to have a piece of him with her always, even when they were apart.

“Your dagger?” Renya asked, surprise evident in her voice as he placed it in her hands.

“No. This one is yours. I had a duplicate made. Well, a near duplicate,” he explained, his voice soft with emotion. “Read the inscription.”

He watched as Renya tilted the blade, her eyes widening as she read the words etched into the steel: Queen of my Heart and Light of my Life. The sight of tears in her eyes made his throat tighten with emotion.

“Thank you,” she stammered, and Grayden could feel her gratitude and love flowing through their bond.

“Tuck it in your boot,” he instructed, pushing her braid over her shoulder. “I never want to see you without it.” He couldn't resist adding with a wink, “Well, with one notable exception.”

As they made their way to the training area, Grayden's mind raced with all the things he wanted to tell Phillippe about Renya's training. He knew he was being overprotective, but he couldn't help it. The thought of her being hurt, even in practice, made his blood boil.

When they reached the clearing, Grayden's eyes narrowed as he took in the array of weapons surrounding Phillippe and Jurel. He knew this was necessary, but every fiber of his being rebelled against the idea of Renya being in any kind of danger.

“Are you ready to get your ass kicked?” Phillippe said playfully to Renya, and Grayden had to bite back a growl.

“Phillippe, not a scratch,” he warned, his voice low and dangerous. “If Renya has so much as a bruise when I come back later, you'll pay for it.”

“Grayden!” Renya scolded, and he felt a flash of shame at his overprotectiveness. “How am I supposed to learn? I need to be sore and bruised. If I'm not, then I'm not learning properly.”

Grayden knew she was right, but it did nothing to quell the surge of protectiveness he felt. Unable to argue, he instead pulled Renya to him for a deep, passionate kiss. He poured all his love and concern into the embrace, hoping she could feel how much she meant to him.

“We get it. You're fated and in love,” Phillippe's exasperated voice broke through the moment. “Grayden, go away. You're distracting my pupil.”

Jurel sighed audibly. “I’m missing my student.”

Phillippe groaned. “I’m not waiting for her. She’s your responsibility, Jurel.”

Before Jurel could argue, Selenia came rushing towards them, struggling in the snow. Grayden heard Jurel sigh deeply as he went to her and grabbed her arm, helping her combat the glistening ground.

“Sorry I’m late! I overslept.”

“Only you could oversleep in sub-zero temperatures with a camp that’s been awake since sunrise,” Phillippe said, shaking his head in disbelief. A few minuscule flakes floated from his short hair, hovering around his ears.

Selenia ignored him and dragged Jurel away from Renya and Phillippe.

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Phillippe turned his attention to Renya. “Are you ready to do this?”

“Absolutely,” Renya said. “Where do we start?”

With one last warning glare at his brother, Grayden reluctantly tore himself away from Renya and headed back towards the cabins. Every step felt like he was leaving a piece of himself behind.

As he walked away, Grayden's mind was already racing with plans. He needed to find out what happened to the maps, to eliminate any threat to Renya and their cause. The weight of leadership settled heavily on his shoulders, but for once, he didn't feel alone in bearing it. With Renya by his side, he felt even stronger.

Grayden spent the morning coordinating with his men, reviewing reports, and strategizing their next moves. But no matter how engrossed he became in his work, a part of his mind was always with Renya, acutely aware of her presence in the camp.

When noon approached, he couldn't resist the urge to check on her training. As he made his way back to the clearing, he saw Renya sparring with Phillippe. Pride swelled in his chest at her determination, even as his protective instincts flared at the sight of her being thrown to the ground.

Grayden retreated reluctantly, reminding himself that this was for Renya's own good.

He went back to Phillippe's office, pouring over the records and trying to see if anything looked off in their roster. Something that would explain the missing maps. His eyes searched the list of names, and then a sudden realization hit his mind as his

finger traced a name.

Rage and fear warred within Grayden as he stormed back to the training ground, his mind racing with worst-case scenarios. How could they have let a spy into their midst? How close had this impostor gotten to Renya?

Grayden approached, brandishing a piece of paper as he spoke.

“You picked up new recruits on the way here,” he said, thrusting the parchment at Phillippe. “Look at the name under the Lile family.”

“Sabin? What about him? He’s been a great asset.”

Grayden fumed, and he knew Renya could feel his anger trickling down the bond. She tried to calm him, but she was so tired from training with Phillippe that she could do nothing but feel his anger course through them both.

“Sabin Lile died three months ago in a hunting accident. Whoever that is, it’s not Sabin.”

Phillippe’s face instantly fell and he paled. “Oh shit.”

“You let a spy into our camp. We have to assume it’s a member of the Shadow Realm. How could you be so careless? And with my mate here? You know Cressida would do anything to get her hands on her, yet you put her in danger.”

“Grayden, I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t realize—”

“I’m tired of being the one who cleans up all the messes. This time, it’s your turn. Find him and question him. Then kill him. Immediately.”

With that, Grayden turned on his heel and stalked back to his cabin, his mind a whirlwind of fear and anger. He knew he had been too harsh with Phillippe, but the thought of Renya in danger clouded his judgment.

Alone in the cabin, the weight of everything crashed down on him. Grayden sank onto the mattress, head in his hands, feeling utterly defeated. He had sworn to protect Renya, yet danger seemed to lurk around every corner.

When Renya entered a few moments later, Grayden felt a mixture of relief and shame. He didn't want her to see him like this, but her presence was the only thing that could soothe the storm raging inside him.

“Honey, what's wrong?” she asked softly, and the tenderness in her voice nearly broke him.

Grayden sighed heavily, reaching for her hand like a lifeline. “I'm scared, Renya,” he admitted, the words feeling foreign on his tongue. “I'm trying to protect you the best I can from Cressida, and here comes another opportunity for her to know our plans and movements. I've allowed you to be taken twice now. What kind of man am I?”

“Grayden, you've saved me so many times. You protected me from the elements, from tygres...the list goes on and on. But you have to understand, as much as I love you being there for me and keeping me safe, I need to stand on my own two feet in this world. You can't shelter me forever. Eventually I'm going to have to step into my role and play my part on this stage.”

“I'll always protect you,” he vowed, looking up at her with desperate eyes.

“Grayden, I need this,” Renya insisted, her voice gentle but firm. “I need to learn to rely on myself. The weak girl you rescued in the forest is gone. I'm no longer powerless. I'm no longer alone in a mysterious world. I'm home and I'm with my

mate.”

Her words struck a chord deep within him. Grayden swallowed hard, nodding as he tried to reconcile his need to protect her with her need for independence. “I just can't lose you again,” he confessed, his voice raw with emotion. “I'm a man possessed. My thoughts, my feelings, my body...they all belong to you. Even my soul is yours and yours alone.”

“You won't lose me, Grayden,” Renya assured him, her conviction clear in every word. “It's you and me. Forever.”

As the last of the tension left his body, Grayden placed a tender kiss on her temple, drawing strength from her presence.

“Now, go find Phillippe and help him deal with this problem. And apologize. You acted like an idiot again.”

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He groaned before rising from the mattress. He held out his hand and Renya allowed him to pull her to her feet. Another gentle kiss and he was out the door.

However, before he could find Phillippe, chaos erupted in the camp. The impostor Sabin was gone, having either accomplished his mission or fled upon realizing his cover was blown.

As Grayden issued orders alongside Phillippe, sending men out to track the spy, he felt a renewed sense of purpose. They would face this threat as they had faced all others – together.

When Renya joined them, asking if they needed to leave, Grayden felt a surge of pride at her strength. Despite the danger, she remained calm and focused.

“Yes, I think we should leave tomorrow,” he decided, already planning their next move. “Sabin, or whoever he is, was here this morning for count so it'll take him several days to reach the Shadow Realm.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Cressida's ruby red heels clacked against the dark marble floors, each step a percussion of power and frustration. She paced back and forth in the throne room, her indigo eyes narrowed to dangerous slits, casting terrifying glances at anyone unfortunate enough to cross her path. The air around her crackled with tension, thick and oppressive like the moments before a devastating storm.

Ever since her return from the cave-in at the Tidal Kingdom, the Shadow Realm court

had been walking on eggshells. Servants scurried out of her way, and even Sion had been conspicuously absent despite her repeated summons. The thought of his disobedience only served to fuel her already simmering rage.

Her gaze flicked to the ornate clock suspended between two ivory columns, its intricate hands moving with agonizing slowness. A sharp breeze whistled through the open-air room, a reminder of their lofty perch atop an unscalable cliff. The throne room, suspended high above the land below, was a testament to her power and ambition. Jagged ridges jutted out from the cliff face, a natural defense that, combined with her magic, made her domain impenetrable.

Finally, the sound of footsteps on the delicate sky bridge caught her attention. Brandle entered, crossing the glass walkway that hung precariously above the valley floor. Cressida felt a flicker of satisfaction at the barely concealed fear in his eyes as he approached.

“Is that idiot here?” she sneered, fury radiating from her very core. The air around her vibrated with unchecked magical energy, and she saw Brandle flinch almost imperceptibly. With great effort, she reined in her power, forcing it back beneath her skin. She wouldn't allow anyone, not even Brandle, to see her lose control.

“My queen...” Brandle began, his eyes darting nervously to her still-tingling fingertips.

“It's nothing,” she snapped, cutting him off. “Where is Geralt? I was told he was on his way.”

“Sion's magic was too weak to bring him up to the tower. They took the spiraling passage.”

Cressida's frown deepened, a new thread of suspicion weaving through her thoughts.

She had given Sion enough magic to carry out her bidding. If he was using it elsewhere...Her fingers twitched, itching to wrap around his throat and squeeze the truth from him.

As the clock chimed, its musical sound echoing through the vast chamber, Cressida glided to her throne. The spindly structure of twisted black marble looked more like solidified smoke than a seat of power, but as she settled onto it, crossing her legs regally, there was no doubt about who was in control.

The sound of approaching footsteps drew her attention. Geralt's heavy tread contrasted sharply with Sion's quick, graceful gait. As they entered, both men bowed deeply before her. With a lazy flick of her wrist, she motioned for Sion to stand slightly behind her, a silent reminder of his place.

“Rise and tell me what you've learned,” she commanded, her voice cold and imperious.

Geralt stood, his eyes carefully avoiding her piercing gaze. “Just as you suspected, the girl is with Snowden. The older brother is mostly healed from the dragon wound, and the younger Snowden seems unharmed. The girl seems fine as well. They were all up at their winter encampment in the mountains.”

Cressida leaned forward slightly, her interest piqued. “The girl too? Snowden brought her with him to the mountains?”

“Yes,” Geralt confirmed, a hint of hesitation in his voice. “Rumor has it among the camp that they are fate-bound.”

The words hit Cressida like a physical blow. For a moment, her control slipped entirely, and thick, inky mist poured from her fingertips, plunging the room into shadow. The air crackled with raw power, a manifestation of the rage and...something

else...that boiled within her. With monumental effort, she pulled the magic back, leaving the room in tense silence save for the whistle of mountain wind.

When she finally spoke, her voice was unnaturally calm, each word carefully measured. struggling to keep control. “I think it’s time we pay them a little visit. How well-armed is their encampment?”

“It’s actually fairly well held. With mountains all around, the base itself is protected by the natural terrain. Also, it’s so high up that I don’t think our dragons would be able to fly or make it up there. With our forces alone, it would be hard to invade. But, I do have another idea—”

“Then do share it. And quickly before I lose my patience.”

“One of the men said he overheard that the younger Lord Snowden and the girl are going to be heading to the Twilight Kingdom within the next few days. That would be a much easier victory.”

Cressida drummed her nails along the spidery throne. “The idea does have merit. Sion, tell the troops to be ready to travel within the next week.”

“Yes, my queen,” he said, slinking away towards the sky bridge.

“Oh, and Sion?” Cressida said, staring at him harshly. “I expect you to be in my bed tonight. And if you give me another excuse, I’ll have your head on a spike.”

Without waiting for a response, Cressida rose and swept from the throne room. Bringing forth her magic, she transported herself far beneath the high tower into the sublevels of her lands. She approached a thick door, reinforced by magic. With a flick of her fingers, the door disappeared only to reappear behind her.

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The deeper she descended into the enormous cavern system, the temperature cooled significantly. Yet Cressida didn't feel the cold. Her own ambition rested on her shoulders like a cloak, protecting her from the elements and sealing in her determination. She moved quickly through the damp space, ignoring the moist walls and the occasional rat scurrying along the uneven stone pathway. It had taken her all of two seconds to use her magic to transport her to the sublevels, but the entrance into the cavern was protected from any magical activity. While it was the most secure place in the entire Shadow Realm, the journey to the bottom of the caverns annoyed her. She moved past a set of guards, one of six pairs set up along the passage. Both men, clad in full armor, tipped their heads when they noticed their queen passing. She ignored them, absorbed in her own thoughts.

Fate-bound. Of course. How had she missed it? She thought of Snowden's desperation to save her and his act of selflessness during their bargaining in the Sunset Land. It all made sense now. To think she lusted after the fool, when all along he was bound to that pathetic girl. She was disgusted at the implications of it all.

The path continued downward and she picked up the pace. Her foot landed in a wet puddle and she looked up, seeing moisture drip from a stalactite in the cave ceiling. The satin covering her shoe absorbed the murky water and the wet sensation against her foot made her mood even fouler.

She was irritated that Sion hadn't been obeying her commands. She was furious that her idiot servants had managed to let the girl escape again. She was enraged that Snowden and the girl were fated. It complicated her plans even more than her escape had. And even more infuriating was the injury on her thigh. She managed to hide it from everyone, but the large gash on her thigh wasn't healing despite using her magic

and a variety of ointments. It worried her more than she even admitted to herself. At least her seamstress hadn't asked questions when she requested the slits on her dresses sewn up. Cressida cringed when she realized she'd have to glamour it from Sion when he was between her legs tonight. It was easy enough, but during the height of passion it was hard to keep control of her magic, especially when rage boiled inside her.

After what seemed like forever, she was getting close. The smell of rotten flesh hit her nostrils, and she could just hear the sounds of their roars from behind the heavy iron doors. Cressida quickened her pace, seeing the well-lit space ahead. She emerged from the tunnel passageway into a large antechamber, with four guards flanking the edges of the cave walls. Another two stood at the doors, their eyes unmoving as they bowed their heads in reverence. As if they were completely below her notice, she didn't even acknowledge them as they opened the heavy doors, both men straining under the significant weight.

She entered as soon as a sliver small enough for her to pass through emerged. Clear glass made up a large dome in the majestic cavern, pushing out towards the walls and containing her precious pets.

The largest dragon snorted the second it saw her coming over. His maroon body was covered in thick plates of scales and he sat regally on his hind legs. His leathery wings rested at his side and blood-red talons perched against the dirt of the dome floor. The dragon moved his neck slowly down to the ground, and Cressida peered into its orange eye.

"Hello Brutus," she cooed, eyeing the dragon. He had grown even larger since she had last been down here. His belly bore scars from his last battle, but Cressida was pleased to see they faded from his tough skin, leaving behind leathery tracks.

His mate, Belinia came towards the edge of the dome and she flapped her wings and

she moved quickly to Brutus's side. Her purple scales were iridescent and shimmered underneath the torches in the room. She was much larger than Brutus, and she sneered her teeth at Cressida, hot breath fogging up the glass as her crimson eyes narrowed. Unlike Brutus, her middle was unscathed.

A deep chuckle nearly made Cressida jump. Travers ambled towards her, his white hair oily and stringy across his face. At nearly one-hundred and thirty years old, he stopped caring about his appearance long ago. Cressida hated the old coot, but there was no one who knew dragons better, and it was Travers who helped bring them to this world and cared for them.

"She still hates you," Travers commented, looking Belinia straight in the eye. The dragon flapped her wings again in annoyance and bore her teeth at Cressida.

"She resents you for the loyalty and favor Brutus has shown you." He patted a bit of dust off of his leather tunic, and it landed too near Cressida's hem. She grasped the hem out of the way, repulsed by the torn and filthy garments Travers wore. He refused to wear the clothes of her realm and instead wore the same leather garb he traveled with from his own world. His leggings were made up of some kind of rough animal hide, and his worn leather boots were permanently stained with ebony dragon dung. He whistled absentmindedly as he moved closer to the dome's edge, and Belinia turned her attention to him. The large ivory spikes on her back lie flat at once, like a dog lowering its heckles for their owner. A deep contented growl entered her throat as the weathered old man peered at her affectionately.

The smallest of the dragons, a teal male, hung back on the outskirts, farthest away from the pair. The color of his scales transitioned in the light, like a slick oil spill in the sunlight.

"Berline," Travers called, trying to rouse him. The slumbering dragon just snorted and kept his head down. The only movement he made was a tantalizingly slow swish

of his spiked tail.

“He’s the stubborn one of the lot,” Travers said to Cressida, flicking his dirty thumb towards the drowsy juvenile. “I keep telling you, you can’t keep them confined here all day. They will turn on you, especially Belinia.”

At the mention of her name, Belinia roared. The sound was so intense and guttural that Cressida almost covered her ears as the vibrations bounced throughout the cave.

“I know this tunnel system leads out to the fallen Sun Realm. It would be easy enough to let them stretch their wings and legs there.” He motioned to the other iron door on the far side of the enclosure. “Plus there’s plenty of prey in the valley between our lands for them to hunt.”

“Are you an idiot? Do you think I’d ever take a chance of letting them roam free? They belong to me.”

“They belong to no one. The sooner you realize that, the better chance you have of Belinia and Berline warming up to you.”

“I don’t need them to be loyal,” she spat, glaring into the old man’s dark eyes. “I just need them to do their job. Besides, their glass cage is the only thing protecting the climate. If they are free for too long, they’ll disrupt the balances even further than they already have. I still want this world to be livable, even after I’d taken all the magic.”

Travers shook his head. “They don’t belong here. I’ve told you that before.”

“You seemed fine with it when I offered to trade you some of my magic for your assistance.”

Travers looked at her long and hard before moving on. “Well, you better find a way to make peace with her. Belinia will have even more reason to be possessive of her family. Berline will have a sibling soon enough.”

Cressida’s eyes flashed with delight. She frantically looked around the dome, and sure enough, there it was. The nest was dug deep into the dirt, and just a shallow wall rose up around the egg. It was deep purple and scaled, the twin of Belinia’s skin. Cressida longed to go into the dome and cradle it, but she knew it was unwise when Belinia still detested her. Plus, based on the size, she guessed she would be unable to lift it.

“Why didn’t you summon me immediately?” she asked, the irritation evident in her tone.

“I just saw it a couple of hours ago. Hasn’t been here long, I’m guessing she laid it in the middle of the night. Should hatch within the next fortnight.”

“Wonderful.” Cressida’s eyes glowed as she stared at the dragons, their scales reflecting in her pupils. Four dragons. She would have the fiercest army and was already the most powerful force within this world. Even without the girl’s powers, the entire fae population would kneel before her, and soon.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Wake up, Little Fawn.”

Renya groaned, pulling the fur over her head as consciousness reluctantly returned. Her entire body throbbed, a testament to the grueling training session with Phillippe. Every muscle felt as if it had been stretched to its limit, then pummeled for good measure. She attempted to roll over, but even that small movement sent a wave of discomfort through her side.

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With monumental effort, she managed to turn towards Grayden's voice and cracked open an eyelid. The dim light of the cabin felt like daggers to her sleep-addled eyes.

“Go away,” she mumbled, her voice muffled by the furs. “I'm tired and sore.” The words were half-joke, half-plea. She squeezed her eyes shut again, trying to ignore the gentle strokes against her back, even as her body instinctively leaned into his touch.

Warm lips pressed against her mouth, and for a moment, Renya tried to push him away. But as always, her resistance was short-lived. Almost against her will, she found herself responding, her lips moving against his with a mind of their own.

All too soon, Grayden broke away. Renya finally opened her eyes fully, blinking away the last bit of sleep that clung to her eyelashes. He sat on the edge of the mattress, already fully dressed, his eyes twinkling with amusement and something else...anticipation?

“Is it time to go?” she asked, finally convincing her tired limbs to cooperate.

“Yes, but not to the Twilight Kingdom. It's still late evening.”

Confusion settled in on Renya's face. “Then why are you waking me up?” she asked, already preparing to burrow back under the inviting warmth of the furs.

Before she could retreat, Grayden scooped her up with ease, settling her onto his lap. The sudden change in position sent a fresh wave of soreness through her muscles, but the warmth of his body was too comforting to resist.

“Because I promised to take you to see the springs,” he explained, his voice low and tinged with excitement.

Renya's mind flashed back to their earlier conversation. “That was before we found out about the spy,” she reminded him, concern creeping into her voice.

“I know,” Grayden acknowledged, his hand rubbing soothing circles on her back. “But I think it will make your muscle aches better.”

The prospect of soaking in hot water suddenly seemed incredibly appealing.

Renya sat up straighter, her eyes scanning the cabin for her discarded clothes. She spotted them across the room where she'd hastily shed them earlier, eager to escape under the warm covers after the tense dinner.

The memory of the campfire meal brought a frown to her face. Grayden's lingering irritation with Phillippe had cast a pall over the gathering, and Phillippe had barely acknowledged her, guilt radiating from him. Only Selenia had kept the conversation flowing, her excited chatter about the Twilight Kingdom and her training session with Jurel filling the awkward silences.

“Are you sure it's safe?” Renya asked as she pulled on a pair of softly lined leggings and a baby blue tunic. The fabric felt cool against her skin, a stark contrast to the lingering warmth of the furs.

Grayden nodded, his expression reassuring. “I think we'll be okay. The springs are only a couple of miles away, and they're pretty secluded. Very few people know they're there. And the people that do know won't bother us.”

Renya nodded, bending to tuck the steel blade into her boot. The weight of the dagger was becoming familiar, but the cold press of metal against her leg still sent a small

shiver through her. It was a constant reminder of the dangers that lurked beyond their temporary haven.

Grayden retrieved her thickest cloak, its midnight blue fabric trimmed with pristine white fur. As he pinned the ends together with his elkten emblem, a soft smile played at his lips.

“What is it?” Renya asked.

“I just love seeing you with that little pin,” he admitted, his eyes warm with affection.

The memory of her time in the Tidal Kingdom surfaced, and Renya's hand unconsciously went to the pin. “I almost lost it,” she said softly. “Sion said Cressida would take it from me and punish me over it. He said she's still angry at your refusal of her.”

Grayden's forehead creased as he fiddled with his own emblem. “I really thought she just desired my lands and my lineage.”

“Apparently not,” Renya replied, pulling on a pair of dark leather riding gloves. “You seemed to have wounded her pride. Sion gave it back to me after the cave collapsed. I used it to get safe passage within the Tidal Kingdom as well.”

Pride swelled in Grayden's chest, the emotion so strong that Renya could feel it echoing through their bond. “I'm glad it served you well, Little Fawn.”

“It did,” she affirmed, her voice soft with gratitude. “Even in your absence, your name protected me.”

As Grayden slung his sword over his shoulder, Renya braced herself for the chill that awaited them. The moment the door opened, a blast of icy air rushed in, cutting

through her layers and raising goosebumps on her skin. She stepped outside, following Grayden's lead as they made their way through the quiet camp.

The night air was crisp and clean, carrying the scent of pine and snow. Around them, the camp was mostly still, save for a few men talking in hushed tones around smoldering campfires. Their faces glowed orange in the firelight, reminding Renya of the jack-o-lanterns she used to carve with Aunt Agatha. The memory brought a bittersweet pang to her heart.

As they passed the armory and kitchen cabin, Renya's eyes were drawn to the small barn where the horses were kept. She spotted Frost's beautiful coat and moved towards the stall, but Grayden's hand on her arm stopped her.

“We're riding together this time,” he said, leading her to Damion's stall. He handed her a curry comb, and Renya set to work brushing the stallion's coat while Grayden expertly saddled him.

Once they were both settled on Damion's back, Grayden urged the horse into a leisurely pace along the outskirts of the encampment. They skirted the edges of the rocky terrain before passing through the large crevice in the mountain wall that marked the camp's boundary.

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Beyond the camp, a profound silence fell over them. The only sound was Damion's steady breathing and the soft crunch of snow beneath his hooves. As they descended the mountain trail, the path gradually leveled out, leading them towards a still forest. The trees, their silver bark barely visible beneath a thick layer of snow, grew sparsely in the high elevation.

Renya closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. The crisp scent of pine filled her lungs, evoking memories of Christmases past and the brief time she'd spent in the Pacific Northwest. For a moment, homesickness washed over her, but it was quickly replaced by a sense of rightness. This world, so different from the one she'd left behind, was becoming home.

As they entered a large clearing, Renya's eyes widened in wonder. The snow-covered ground reflected the moonlight, bathing everything in a soft glow. Steam rose from the center of the clearing, hovering in the cold air like a misty veil.

Grayden brought Damion to a halt, and they dismounted, their feet sinking into the soft snow with a satisfying crunch. Renya approached the edge of the pond, crouching down to get a better look. She peeled off one glove, her fingers already protesting the cold, and cautiously dipped her hand into the water.

A gasp of surprise escaped her as warmth surrounded her hand, the stark contrast to the frigid air sending a pleasant shiver up her arm. Before she could fully process the sensation, strong arms wrapped around her shoulders from behind. Grayden's chin came to rest on top of her head, and she felt, rather than heard, his contented sigh.

Renya leaned back into his embrace, savoring this moment of peace and solitude.

With their impending journey and the looming threat of the Shadow Queen, such moments were precious and rare. She closed her eyes, focusing on the steady beat of Grayden's heart against her back, allowing it to ground her in the present.

After a long moment, Renya broke the silence, her voice tinged with playful sarcasm. “Well, was your plan to get me out here and freeze me to death? Because if that's the case, you should have just left me in the forest when you first found me.”

Grayden's laughter rang out, deep and joyous. Renya realized with a start that she'd never heard him laugh quite like that before. Even in the face of their challenges, he seemed different—lighter, more carefree.

“You first,” he said, releasing her and leaning against a large rock outcropping, his arms crossed and a challenging glint in his eye.

Renya surveyed the heated pool before her. Large boulders and rocks surrounded it, creating a natural shelter from the harsh mountain elements. As she drew closer, the faint scent of sulfur tickled her nose.

Taking a deep breath, Renya decided to be bold. She unclasped her cloak, draping it over one of the large rocks at the pool's edge. She could feel Grayden's gaze on her, hot and intense, as she continued to undress.

She removed her gloves and carefully extracted the dagger from her boot, placing it within easy reach at the water's edge. Her boots followed, landing with a soft thud in the snow. As more of her skin was exposed to the biting cold, Renya's movements became faster, eager to submerge herself in the inviting warmth of the spring.

What had started as a teasing show for Grayden quickly became a race against the elements. With a final, swift movement, she shed her undergarments and practically dove into the water. The transition from freezing air to scorching warmth was so

abrupt it nearly took her breath away.

As she submerged herself to her neck, a sigh of relief and pleasure escaped her lips. The hot water immediately began to work its magic on her sore muscles, easing away the aches from her training session. She turned to Grayden, unable to keep a smug smile from her face.

Not to be outdone, Grayden began to undress, his eyes never leaving hers. Renya watched, mesmerized, as he shed his layers. Even in the frigid temperature, his body was a marvel, all corded muscle and quiet strength. For a moment, she allowed herself to simply admire him, marveling at how this man—this powerful, kind, sometimes infuriating man—had become such an integral part of her life in such a short time.

“Okay, you've proven your point,” she called out, her voice a mixture of admiration and impatience. “You're all kinds of masculine. You can brave the cold. I get it. Now come in here and kiss me.”

Instead of carefully entering the water as she had, Grayden moved to the far end of the pool and dove in headfirst. The splash sent a cascade of water around Renya, momentarily obscuring her vision in a cloud of steam. For a second, panic fluttered in her chest as she lost sight of him.

Then, suddenly, strong arms encircled her waist from behind, pulling her close. Grayden's body was already warm, and Renya couldn't hold back a moan of pleasure as his hands began to work at her shoulders, kneading away the tension. The combination of the hot water and his expert touch was heavenly, and Renya felt herself truly relaxing for the first time in days.

His calloused hands, hardened by years of wielding a sword, moved across her skin with surprising tenderness. Every few minutes, he would pause his ministrations to

place a soft, wet kiss against her back, each one sending a shiver of delight down her spine.

The peaceful moment was shattered by the sharp crack of a breaking branch. Renya felt Grayden tense behind her, his hand already reaching for the blade he'd left at the pool's edge. Her heart hammered in her chest as she scanned the tree line, searching for any sign of threat.

A flash of white caught her eye, and she let out a relieved laugh as a small rabbit darted across the clearing, its nose twitching curiously. Beside her, she heard Grayden's sigh of relief as he replaced his sword in its sheath.

"I was worried there for a second," he admitted, moving back to her side and resuming his gentle massage.

Renya turned to face him, taking in the sight of his wet hair, tousled and glistening in the moonlight. His eyes, impossibly green, met hers with an intensity that made her breath catch. He leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to her collarbone before his hands resumed their exploration of her body, starting with her fingers.

As he worked, Renya closed her eyes, losing herself in the sensations. The warmth of the water, the soothing pressure of his hands, the crisp mountain air on her face—it all combined to create a moment of perfect contentment.

Suddenly, she felt something cold and hard slide onto her finger. Her eyes flew open in confusion, looking down to see Grayden silently slipping a slender ring onto her hand.

For a moment, Renya's mind went blank with shock. She looked up, meeting Grayden's gaze. His eyes, usually so confident and sure, now held a mix of uncertainty and hope that made her heart clench. Through their bond, she could feel

his heart racing, his emotions a swirling mix of anticipation and fear.

A thousand thoughts raced through Renya's mind in that moment. It was too soon, wasn't it? She'd only known him for such a short time. She'd never even considered marriage before. Everything in her life had changed so rapidly, she'd barely had time to process it all.

But as quickly as these doubts surfaced, they were washed away by a wave of certainty. She knew, with a bone-deep surety, that she would never love anyone else the way she loved Grayden. The idea of spending her life with anyone else was unthinkable. Suddenly, marriage didn't seem like a scary, archaic concept. It felt right. Natural. Inevitable.

As the seconds ticked by, she could feel Grayden's anxiety rising through their bond. Before she could find her voice, he broke the silence, his words barely audible over the whisper of wind across the water.

“Renya?” he asked, his voice uncharacteristically timid, his eyes searching hers for any hint of her thoughts.

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“Yes,” she breathed, her voice thick with emotion. “Yes, I will marry you.”

The transformation on Grayden's face was instantaneous. Joy, relief, and love washed over his features, and before Renya could say another word, she found herself caught up in his embrace. This wasn't his usual controlled, gentle hug. This was wild, almost desperate, as if he was trying to pull her into himself, to merge their very souls. A rain of kisses fell upon her face—her hair, her eyelids, the tip of her nose, her forehead—before finally claiming her lips in a kiss that left her breathless. It was tender yet passionate, gentle yet demanding, a perfect reflection of the man himself.

When he finally pulled back, his hand came up to cup her cheek, his thumb tracing her cheekbone with reverence. “I promise,” he said, his voice low and fervent, “I will spend the rest of our lives devoted to your happiness.”

“You better,” Renya replied, her tone light but her eyes serious as she pressed her hand against his, leaning into his touch.

For the first time since he'd slipped it on, Renya took a moment to really look at the ring. It was a delicate silver band, intricate braids of white metal weaving around its circumference. At its center sat a large snowflake, a perfect match to her hair clips. Even in the soft moonlight, it sparkled and gleamed, catching the light as she turned her hand to admire it from every angle.

“It was my mother's,” Grayden said quietly, a note of uncertainty creeping back into his voice. “If you want something new or something else, we can—”

“Absolutely not,” Renya cut him off firmly. “It's perfect.”

Relief washed over Grayden's face. It was clear that while he wanted her to be happy, this ring held special significance for him. The fact that she loved it seemed to lift a weight from his shoulders. Grayden pressed his forehead against hers, his eyes closed as he took a deep, steady breath. Renya felt the intensity of his emotions through their bond—joy, relief, love, and a fierce protectiveness that made her feel simultaneously cherished and slightly overwhelmed.

The water stilled around them as they stood like that, the steam rising around their hips, creating a cocoon of warmth in the frigid night air. Renya tilted her chin up, capturing Grayden's lips in a kiss that quickly ignited into something more passionate. She pressed herself against him, the heat of the water nothing compared to the fire building between them.

Every intimate encounter they'd shared so far had been slow, gentle, almost reverent. But now, Renya felt a burning need that demanded more. As if sensing her urgency, Grayden's mouth left hers, trailing a path of searing kisses down to the hollow of her throat. A moan escaped her lips, echoing in the quiet night. Her fingers tangled in his hair, still damp from his earlier dive into the pool.

Without warning, Grayden scooped her up, one strong arm supporting her bottom. Instinctively, Renya wrapped her legs around his waist, her ankles locking behind his back. Water cascaded down her skin, but she barely registered the cold, too caught up in the heat of the moment.

Grayden groaned, the sound rumbling through his chest. “No matter how many times I have you,” he murmured against her skin, “it's never enough.”

Their coupling was intense, passionate, a physical manifestation of the commitment they'd just made to each other. Renya lost herself in the sensations, every touch, every movement amplified by the bond they shared. When they reached their peak together, Renya buried her face against Grayden's neck, muffling her cries of pleasure.

As their heartbeats slowly returned to normal, Renya clung to Grayden, reluctant to let go. The reality of what had just happened—not just their lovemaking, but the proposal—was starting to sink in. A mix of emotions swirled within her: joy, excitement, but also a twinge of apprehension at the enormity of the change in her life.

Grayden gently set her back in the water before making his way out of the springs. Renya watched as he efficiently set about building a fire, the play of muscles in his back a distraction from her tumultuous thoughts. He retrieved a few rough towels from the saddlebags and held one out to her.

Renya emerged from the water, quickly wrapping the towel around herself. She moved to stand in front of the fire, grateful for its warmth as she dried off. As she moved, the ring on her finger caught the firelight, drawing her attention once again. She found herself pausing to admire it, still hardly able to believe this was real.

Grayden, already dressed, came to her side with her clothes. His eyes followed her gaze to the ring, a soft smile playing on his lips.

“So,” Renya began, pulling on her tunic with slightly trembling hands, “when should we get married?”

“I was thinking of the Winter Solstice,” Grayden replied, his voice filled with quiet excitement. “It's the most sacred time in the Snow Lands. The celebrations go on for days, and it would be great to coincide with our wedding. We could use the opportunity to present you to the people as their new queen.”

Renya froze, her mind stumbling over his last word. “Queen?” she echoed, a note of disbelief in her voice. “Since you aren't a king, how can I be queen?”

Grayden's expression turned serious. “I think it's finally time for me to step into the

role my father held,” he explained. “When it was just me, it made sense to keep things the same. But now that I’m going to have you beside me as my wife, it makes sense. Plus, if anything happens to me, you’ll be queen in your own right and will rule the Snow Lands.”

A frown creased Renya's brow as she processed this new information. “Wouldn't Phillippe replace you?” she asked, thinking of Grayden's capable older brother.

Grayden shook his head. “He doesn't have magic, Little Fawn. It's unfair, I know. But no one in our world would accept him as the true leader. Plus, he doesn't want it. He doesn't want to be the one to make the tough decisions.”

“But I'm practically a stranger to your lands,” Renya protested, a hint of panic creeping into her voice.

Grayden took her hands in his, his thumbs tracing soothing circles on her skin. “I'm marrying you because I love you and I want to be bound to you for all eternity, both through our bond and in front of the Gods,” he said softly. “But I also know that if anything happens to me, you'll do whatever you can to keep our lands safe and secure.”

Our lands. The phrase echoed in Renya's mind, driving home the reality of her new situation. This was real. She would be a queen soon. The thought terrified her more than any battle with Cressida ever could.

“When is the Winter Solstice?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“In about a month.”

Renya felt her knees go weak, and she had to steady herself against Grayden's arm as she pulled on her boots. A wave of dizziness washed over her as the full weight of

everything settled on her shoulders. It was all happening so fast. She'd barely had time to accept her lineage, her magic, their bond, and now their marriage and becoming a queen. Her heart raced, and she felt as if she was being crushed under the weight of responsibility. Was this how Grayden felt every day? How did he cope?

“You're scared, Little Fawn,” Grayden said softly, pulling her upright and meeting her eyes with an intense gaze. “I can feel it through our bond. What's bothering you?”

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Renya struggled to find the words to express the whirlwind of emotions inside her. “When I was younger, my world was so simple,” she began, her voice trembling slightly. “Even up until the last few months, I thought I knew exactly how my life was going to go. I’d work my way up at the newspaper I reported for, become editor, and settle down with a nice house on the ocean in Malibu. I’d convince Aunt Agatha to move in with me when she couldn’t continue to care for herself, and that would pretty much be it. Maybe I’d get married, or maybe not.”

She paused, searching Grayden’s face. His expression was patient, encouraging her to continue. “But now...I’m full of magic I don’t know how to use, I’m instrumental in fixing a broken world I’ve barely spent any time in, I’m fate-bound and I hardly even know what that means...and now I’m going to get married and become queen in a month.”

Grayden was quiet for a moment, his hand absently rubbing his jaw, the stubble there darker and fuller than she’d ever seen it. He looked older, more weathered here in the mountains, the weight of his responsibilities etched in the lines around his eyes.

“I wish I knew what I could do to help you,” he said finally, his voice heavy with concern. “There’s no rush to marry. I’m sorry if I put any pressure on you. And if you don’t want to be queen, I understand. The only thing that matters to me is that we’re together.”

Renya felt a rush of affection for him, touched by his willingness to put her comfort above tradition and expectation. “Being with you isn’t what scares me,” she assured him, leaning into his embrace. “The thought of being with you forever is the only thing that makes sense to me right now. I just...I don’t know. Maybe I’ll feel better

when I finally figure out my magic.”

Grayden nodded, understanding dawning in his eyes. “I’m sure you will,” he said, his voice filled with conviction. “Right now there’s a huge piece of you that you don’t understand. Fates, even with the gradual loss of my magic I’ve felt unsure. It’s an important part of who we are. You’ll learn how to wield it, and I know you will be a sight to behold.”

His words, filled with such faith in her, helped to calm some of Renya’s fears. She nodded, allowing herself to believe, if only for a moment, that she could live up to the destiny that seemed to have been thrust upon her.

Grayden put his arm around her shoulders, guiding her away from the dying fire and back towards where Damion waited patiently. As they walked, he pressed a kiss to her temple, his voice low and filled with promise.

“Whatever happens, you’ll always have me.”

As they mounted Damion and began the journey back to the camp, Renya found herself lost in thought. The ring on her finger felt both foreign and right, a symbol of the new life she was stepping into. She was scared, yes, but also excited. Whatever challenges lay ahead—mastering her magic, becoming a queen, facing the Shadow Queen—she wouldn’t face them alone. With Grayden by her side, she felt like she could conquer anything.

The pre-dawn sky was just beginning to lighten as they approached the camp. Renya leaned back against Grayden’s chest, drawing strength from his solid presence. She didn’t know what the future held, but she was ready to face it—one day at a time, with the man she loved by her side.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sion sat on the edge of her massive bed, his feet hanging over the tall bed frame. Dark red curtains hung along the four posters, and the only light in the room was from a few candles burning low. He looked over his shoulder to make sure Cressida was asleep, her pale skin translucent in the amber light. She was completely naked apart from the small, cold blade she kept strapped to her calf. Even in the throes of passion she didn't remove it, and Sion had scrapes and scars from where it dug into his back and sides when he pleased her.

The room was more like a dungeon than a bedchamber. Despite the lit candles, the space seemed to hang in a perpetual shadow, almost strangling him. He felt like he was in a long cave, and he could see the light out ahead but never reached it, no matter how hard or fast he ran. A large open air balcony covered an entire side of her chambers, with a dark satin curtain that ruffled in the wind.

A large decanter of fireale sat open on the dark granite nightstand, and Sion grabbed the bottle and took a large drink straight from the container, not even bothering to pour the cranberry-colored liquid into one of the thick-walled glasses. The ale burned his throat on the way down, but he took another large gulp, numbing his emotions and warming the hollow pit in his stomach.

Sion checked again to make sure she was deep under before he grabbed his tunic and pants from the floor, where Cressida had thrown them after ripping them off his body. He stepped off the raised platform the bed was on and pulled his tattered clothes on quickly, eager to be out of her room and away from her presence. Even asleep, her very existence tormented him.

He left the room and shut the door behind him silently, bare feet creeping down the hall, boots in hand. It was the middle of the night, and he knew she'd be furious he didn't stay until morning. But he couldn't force himself to sleep in her bed. Sion knew she didn't trust him, and he was equally untrusting of her. Once he served his usefulness, he was sure she would kill him. There was no love or affection in her

heart. The only reason she wanted him was to satisfy her lust. He was talented in bed, and Cressida knew it would be hard for her to ever replace him in that department. Still, she tended to explode and act irrationally, and Sion was always one tantrum away from death at all times.

He continued moving quickly through the palace, the open air cool against his skin. The wind played with the open collar of his tunic; he hadn't even bothered to lace it up, he just wanted to get the hell out of there. The side was torn open, and the fresh air hit his torso.

Sion wasn't sure how much longer he could play this double role. He didn't mind acting as a spy, but the secrets he got from her were no longer worth the self-degradation.

His feet carried him down a few steps to another landing, followed by another corridor. The hallways were a labyrinth, but he made this walk of shame so many times he could do it in the dark, which he sometimes did during the times Cressida didn't dismiss him until the early hours of the morning. The torches were all burning low and the guards only half paying attention to who roamed the halls. In times like these, the Shadow Realm Palace was actually peaceful. If it wasn't for the way he was forced to spend his evenings, it would be a nice place to live. But Cressida's cruel influence spread throughout the land. Her subjects were starving, oppressed, and miserable.

He finally approached the door to his room and let himself inside. The room was dark and quiet, his bed made and everything tidy. He hardly spent time in his room, barely trusting anyone and never allowing himself to sleep deeply. He had been at her court for almost six months now, and managed to pass along useful information. The part he played was vital for his homelands and the Snowdens. Grayden had saved his life many times on the battlefield, and Sion knew that without him, he would be dead and buried, his soul with the Fates. But still, the depravity of being in her bed was

wearing on him.

Sion slipped off his trousers and the ruined tunic and tossed his shoes in the corner of the room. The walls were a deep mahogany, and there was a window overlooking the valley. In the distance, he could just make out the Sun Realm Castle. Renya's ancestral home. At least she was safe from Cressida, but there were other dangers in their world besides her. Sion pictured the way Grayden defended and protected Renya during the scrimmage at the Sunset Land, and it was obvious his best friend was in love. If Sion was ever fortunate enough to find someone to love, someone who would accept his past life as a whore to Cressida, Grayden would protect her too. They were brothers all but in name.

Shivering in the shadowed night, Sion moved away from the open window and into the bathing chamber to his left. He turned the handle to the large stone tub and filled it with the hottest water he could get to come out of the tap.

While the tub filled, he examined his copper-colored skin in the mirror. He had several long scratches on his face from where Cressida had dug her nails into him as he fucked her. His torso carried the same damage, as did his back. As he moved his neck in the mirror, he saw two large bruises on each side of his neck from her violent kisses. He grimaced as he splashed water on his face, the cuts stinging. Sion dried his face with a soft clean towel and then climbed into the tub.

The water stung the other marks along his body, but he grabbed a washcloth and scoured himself clean until the marks bled again. He washed off every trace of her from his body, until he couldn't smell her scent upon him. Every time he came from her room he felt dirty and shameful. But he did his duty to protect his kingdom and his best friend.

Sion sat in the tub until the water turned cold. Feeling more like himself, Sion got out of the washtub and dried himself off. He just slipped on his robe when he heard a

knock on his door.

“Enter,” he said, fearing it would be Cressida. Although, she most likely wouldn’t have knocked and just barged in. Or, sent someone else to summon him.

The door swung open and Brandle appeared, smug in the doorway. Sion tried to hide his disgust. At times, he wasn’t sure who was worse, Brandle or Cressida. Cressida was plain evil, but she didn’t hide it. Brandle was oily and sly, and if it came to it, he would murder anyone who got in the way of his goals. Which were mainly to screw anything that walked and to accumulate wealth and power under his cousin’s rule.

Brandle stalked into the room, looking around at Sion’s bare accommodations.

“As the queen’s lover, I would have expected your accommodations to be more...well, more accommodating.”

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Sion gritted his teeth. “I care not for materialistic things, unlike you.”

Brandle’s lips curled into a smile, but Sion knew from experience that it was no such thing. “As much as I’d love to chat with you about the finer things in life, our queen has a request of us.”

Both of them? Sion was instantly on edge. He hoped to get a hawk or falcon to Grayden to warn him of Cressida’s plans to ambush them at the Twilight Kingdom. The task would be much more difficult with Brandle alongside him.

“What is it?” Sion asked, trying to calm his heart and keep his features disinterested.

“There is something our majesty requires from the human realm. She wishes for us to cross into the Snow Lands, through the portal there and retrieve it.”

Confusion came across Sion. “Didn’t she destroy the Snow Land portal? Didn’t she fear that Agatha would come back through?”

Brandle sneered. “How our queen accomplishes her goals is none of your concern. But, the old bat is no longer a problem. Queen Cressida bound her to the human world, so she can’t travel through the portal. She’s stuck in that hell for good.”

“I wouldn’t be so flippant about it, Brandle. I seem to recall just last week our queen was threatening to banish you there.”

Hatred crossed Brandle’s face, and Sion knew he touched a nerve. He watched as Brandle quickly pushed it down. “Worry about your own hide, Sion. Once our queen

tires of your...skills...she'll be done with you. I'm family, however. My place is beside her."

Sion ignored him. He would be glad when Cressida finally relinquished her hold on him, even if she killed him. "So, when do we leave for this mission?"

"At dawn," Brandle said, a sinister grin crossing his face. "Oh, and Sion? Since you're going to be gone for a while, our queen told me to fetch you and bring you back to her bed. Once you return from our mission, you are to vacate this room and take up permanent residence in her chambers."

Sion could barely swallow the horror down.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The air rushed from Renya's lungs as Selenia wrapped her in a bone-crushing hug. The younger woman's excited chatter filled the crisp morning air, her words tumbling out in a torrent of enthusiasm.

"Let me see it again!" Selenia demanded, gently grasping Renya's hand to examine the ring. The delicate silver band glinted in the pale sunlight, its snowflake centerpiece catching the light. "It's so beautiful," she sighed, before a mischievous glint entered her eye. "But seriously, how come I didn't get our mother's ring?" She planted her hands on her hips, adopting an exaggerated pout.

Renya felt Grayden's arms snake around her waist from behind, his solid warmth a comforting presence at her back. His chest vibrated against her as he spoke, "You got everything else of hers. Mother left it for me, along with a note."

A thoughtful expression crossed his face, one Renya had come to recognize as his 'piecing things together' look. "I've wondered if she and Father suspected I might be

fate-bound. Father never pushed me very hard into a marriage alliance, even though it was well within his rights. And Mother left the ring to me...maybe they knew something I didn't."

Phillippe scratched his head in an exaggerated gesture of contemplation. "Nah, they just liked you best," he quipped, earning a playful punch from Grayden.

Renya couldn't help but smile at the siblings' easy banter. She noticed the change in Grayden's demeanor since their return from the hot springs, his mother's ring securely on her finger. The tension that had simmered between him and Phillippe seemed to have evaporated, replaced by a lightness she hadn't seen in him before.

As they gathered for a quick breakfast before their departure, Renya's mind wandered to the journey ahead. The protective embrace of the mountains would soon give way to the harsh arctic winds of the open terrain. She layered her clothing carefully, hoping to ward off chill she knew awaited them.

"Well, it's time to get going," Grayden announced, his eyes scanning the sky. "If we make good time, we might reach the Twilight Kingdom by this evening. I know Renya hates our travel sleeping arrangements."

Heat rushed to Renya's cheeks at his words, and she caught Selenia dramatically covering her ears, her face scrunched in mock disgust.

The farewells were a flurry of embraces and well-wishes. Phillippe's hug surprised Renya with its warmth. "Take care of my brother," he murmured, his voice gruff with emotion.

"I'll do my best," Renya promised, tightening her arms around him briefly. The easy acceptance of this makeshift family warmed her heart, easing some of the homesickness that still lingered.

As they prepared to mount their horses, Renya noticed Selenia and Jurel engaged in an intense conversation nearby. Not wanting to interrupt their moment, she called out to Grayden, “Could you help me up on my horse?”

Selenia shot her a grateful look before turning back to Jurel, their heads bent close together as they spoke in low tones.

Finally, the time to leave had come, and Renya looked back as they left the mountain camp behind, sad to leave the little cabin.

The moment they emerged from the protective cocoon of the mountain pass, the wind hit them like a physical force. Renya gasped as the icy air bit at her exposed skin, grateful for the layers she'd donned.

Frost's hooves crunched confidently in the snow as they began their descent. Grayden led them along an eastern route, warning, “The terrain is a bit steeper here.”

Renya's breath caught in her throat as she took in the view. From their lofty vantage point, the Snow Lands stretched out before them in a dazzling expanse of white. The rising sun painted the sky in hues of pink and orange, its light reflecting off the snow in a breathtaking display.

Source Creation Date: May 23, 2025, 8:57 am

“It's quite something, isn't it?” Grayden's voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“It's so majestic,” Renya breathed, her eyes wide with wonder. “Being up so high, and then seeing the entire realm laid out like that below your feet...”

A wistful expression crossed Grayden's face. “When I was a teenager, my father sent me up here to the camp to train. I would sit and watch the sunset and look out over our lands. I remember being so excited to rule them one day. But it happened so much sooner than I ever would have imagined.”

“I think your father would be proud of the job you're doing,” Renya said softly, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

A genuine smile lit up Grayden's face, and Renya felt a surge of warmth at his obvious pleasure in her approval.

As they continued their descent, Renya found herself pondering the weight of responsibility that rested on Grayden's shoulders. “What was your father like?” she asked, curious about the man who had shaped the ruler Grayden had become.

Grayden was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “He was fair. He could be stern at times, but he thought things through and never made rash decisions. My mother was the passionate one, quick to anger and even quicker to forgive and love. My father was a good man. Everyone respected him. He always seemed to know what to do in any situation. I'm envious of that.”

“Grayden, you are dealing with threats your father never had to face,” Renya pointed

out. “Hard choices must be made, and you're doing a fantastic job of protecting your people.”

Selenia, overhearing their conversation, chimed in, “She's right. I think Father and Mother would be proud.”

Grayden's cheeks flushed slightly at the praise, and he quickly changed the subject. “I think we'll be at the Twilight Kingdom in a few hours.”

As they rounded a particularly steep bend, a low rumble filled the air. Renya felt it in her chest before she heard it, a deep vibration that set her nerves on edge. She looked up just in time to see a wall of snow careening down the mountainside towards them.

“Avalanche!” Grayden shouted, his voice nearly lost in the growing roar.

Time seemed to slow. Renya saw the panic in Grayden's eyes, the fear on Selenia's face. Without thinking, she threw her hands up, a surge of power rushing through her veins. Golden threads of light burst from her fingertips, weaving together in the air before her.

The avalanche hit the shimmering barrier of light with a thunderous crash. Snow and ice pushed against it, threatening to overwhelm them, but Renya's magic held firm. She gritted her teeth, pushing more power into the shield as the avalanche raged around them.

For what felt like an eternity, but was likely only moments, they were surrounded by a sea of white. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. The golden barrier dissolved, leaving them standing in a small pocket of calm amidst the chaos of displaced snow.

Renya lowered her arms, her breath coming in short gasps. She looked at her hands in

wonder, golden sparks still dancing across her fingertips.

“Renya,” Grayden breathed, his voice filled with awe and pride. “How did you do that? You saved us.”

As the reality of what had just happened sank in, Renya felt a mix of exhilaration and exhaustion wash over her. She had used her magic, really used it, for the first time. The power that had been dormant within her for so long had answered her call when she needed it most.

“I...I didn't even think about it,” she admitted, still stunned. “It just...happened.”

Selenia let out a whoop of joy, her earlier fear replaced by excitement. “That was amazing! You're going to be unstoppable once you learn to control it properly.”

As they carefully navigated around the freshly fallen snow, continuing their journey, Renya felt a newfound confidence growing within her. She had faced a life-threatening situation and not only survived but protected those she cared about. Maybe, just maybe, she was more prepared for this new life than she had thought.

But as they continued to ride, she tried to access her magic, only to find it completely absent. She was frustrated, unable to figure out how to bring it forth again.

With the Twilight Kingdom drawing ever closer, Renya hoped that Queen Kalora might have the answers—and could figure out the mystery of her power.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Renya knew they were getting closer as the snow thinned and the biting wind no longer stung her ears. They finally reached the end of their long, grueling descent and found themselves on flat ground. Though still cold, unlike the tropical heat of the

Tidal Kingdom, she could at least feel all her fingers and toes. Selenia and Grayden, seemingly well-adapted to the cool weather, removed their gloves and thick fur cloaks. Renya kept her cloak wrapped tightly around her, not yet ready to surrender its warmth.

Now at a lower elevation, their pace quickened, and Dimitri once again fell behind. Grayden didn't seem to mind the healer's slower pace; his trust in Dimitri outweighed any concern for his lagging.

The trees grew thicker and fuller as they traveled farther south, and Renya spotted flowering bushes dappled among them. The blossoms were all dark colors: maroon, navy, and deep indigo. As they approached a large forest, the sky began to darken, bathing everything in a soft glow. Renya could just make out the path ahead, but she had to squint to see clearly.

Grayden halted and dismounted, rummaging through a saddlebag until he produced a torch. He lit it and remounted Damion. Renya and Selenia followed the flickering orange beacon deeper into the forest.

An owl hooted, causing Renya to jump. Her heart raced, and she noticed Grayden slowing to join her side. "I can sense your fear, Little Fawn. What's troubling you?"

Renya struggled to find the words. "I think this place reminds me too much of the Sunset Land. It's bringing back some unpleasant memories."

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They hadn't discussed Renya's time in the nightmare dungeon since fleeing the Sunset Land. Grayden knew she had managed to keep her sanity, but he also realized that her intact mind didn't mean she wasn't still scarred internally from the ordeal. His worst fear had been realized when he lost Renya to the human realm, and he had only lived through it once. He couldn't fathom having the darkest moments of his life play on an endless loop.

“You're an extraordinary woman, Little Fawn.”

Renya looked at him, puzzled by his meaning. “I tell you I'm scared, and you think I'm extraordinary? I know our mating bond is unconditional, but—”

“You survived something most people wouldn't have. I stand by my words. You are magnificent and one hell of a woman.”

Renya's cheeks flushed, and not just from the cold. His praise felt too generous, but she allowed the compliment to surround her, lightening her heart. The fear slowly ebbed away, and she wasn't sure if it was Grayden's words or if he was manipulating her feelings through their bond.

Selenia remained oddly quiet, and Renya found herself glancing at the girl more frequently as the day wore on. She looked quite forlorn, and Renya wondered how she had missed it before. Perhaps the separation from Jurel was causing the change in her mood. She made a mental note to chat with Selenia once they reached the Twilight Kingdom.

The temperature seemed to rise with every step, and just as Renya prepared to

remove her cloak, she caught sight of something massive looming in the distance.

An enormous, gray-brick castle stood along the horizon, nearly blocking out the sun behind it. It was the largest castle Renya had ever seen, easily double, if not triple, the size of the lodge. Four distinct towers stood at the corners, rising high above the land below. Unlike Snowden Lodge or the Tidal Kingdom Palace, this was a real fairytale castle. Renya even spotted a moat surrounding the massive structure. Behind the castle, the sky was a deep cerulean, transitioning to a fiery orange as it neared the horizon.

“What do you think?” Grayden asked, pulling on Damion's reins as he tried to circle Frost.

“It's...breathtaking.”

“It's quite a bit larger than our home, I'm afraid.”

Our home. The lodge was their home. She had developed a soft spot for the cozy lodge ever since Grayden had brought her there, and nothing, not even this castle, could replace her fondness for Snowden Lodge.

“Our home has something this castle will never have,” she said, meeting his eyes. “We fell in love at our lodge.”

A smile played across his lips, appreciative of her remark.

Selenia pushed ahead, moving past the couple and breaking their moment. Once she was out of earshot, Renya gave Grayden a pointed look.

“Do you know what's troubling her?”

Grayden released a sigh into the silent forest. “I think something happened between her and Jurel. I'm not sure what, but Jurel was incredibly surly before we left.”

“I noticed that too. He didn't seem as happy to see her as she did him.”

“I worry about them,” Grayden confessed. “Selenia is young, and she and Jurel are very different people. Selenia is passionate. I'm not sure Jurel will ever be able to fully reciprocate her love.”

“She seemed hurt that he wasn't happier to see her.”

“I think he was, in his own way. He's just not adept at communicating his feelings. He's a closed book. I know you think I'm being hard on their relationship, but I am concerned that they are fundamentally incompatible long-term.”

Renya chewed on the inside of her cheek. She had been the couple's biggest advocate, but now she wondered if she had misjudged their compatibility. Jurel was so serious. Selenia was bright and youthful, shining like a star in the darkest night. Perhaps the match wasn't as ideal as she had originally thought. “I just wish everyone could be as happy as we are together.”

The look of adoration returned to his face. She had never felt so loved or admired before. She wished they were already at the castle so she could sink into his warm and possessive embrace.

Almost as if reading her mind, he nudged Damion forward. “If we hurry, we might be able to get a hot meal and a bath before bed.”

Motivated by the thought of a warm meal and a hot bath, she urged Frost ahead, trying to overtake Damion's powerful strides. It was a losing battle, but she enjoyed it nonetheless, her hair pulling loose and whipping behind her. They caught up to

Selenia quickly, and the trio crossed the forest far more easily than any other part of their journey.

When they reached the moat, they were greeted by a rather large man with a long white beard. He was dressed in a deep blood orange-colored overcoat and black trousers with thick boots covering his feet. Renya trailed behind Grayden, allowing him to approach and greet the man.

“Welcome, Prince Grayden,” the man said, his voice booming and jovial. “We are delighted you could join us. We received your hawk a few days ago and made arrangements for you and your group. Although the letter mentioned a fourth traveler...”

“Our healer, Dimitri. He isn't a fast rider but should arrive within the next few hours. If you would be so kind as to have a meal waiting for him, I would greatly appreciate it.”

“Of course. Our healer will be most delighted to have another fae of the healing arts to confer with.”

Grayden motioned to the two women behind him. “I'd like to introduce you to my companions. This is Princess Selenia, my sister. I believe you are somewhat acquainted with her.”

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“Ah yes. Princess Selenia, you have grown more beautiful over the years.”

Selenia remained silent, which was so unlike her that Renya's concern deepened. Selenia usually loved praise.

Grayden moved on, seemingly ignoring Selenia's silence. “And this lovely woman is my mate and fiancée, Princess Renya Solaris of the Sun Realm.”

Renya's face went ashen as the man's calm expression morphed into surprise as he took her in.

“I—it's a pleasure to meet you, Princess Renya. My name is Gillbert, and I'm Queen Kalora's most senior advisor.” He dropped his head into a respectful bow, just as he had done with Grayden and Selenia.

“There's no need to address me as princess—”

Grayden gave her a meaningful look, and she stopped mid-sentence.

If Gillbert noticed their interaction, he didn't show it. “You must be exhausted. You've missed dinner, I'm afraid, but I'll ensure someone brings you supper in your chambers.”

“Thank you. Your hospitality is very much appreciated.”

“It's our pleasure. I was sorry to hear about the loss of your parents, Prince Grayden. They were both kind and fair.”

Grayden nodded at his statement but didn't elaborate further.

Gillbert led them over the drawbridge and into a massive courtyard. Frost's hooves clip-clopped over the cobblestones as Renya glanced around. The courtyard bustled with activity: people shoeing horses, sending hawks, and maids beating out rugs.

The group dismounted, and several men came forward to take the horses. Renya watched Grayden approach her, and he pulled her into his body for just a split second before releasing her, offering a small measure of comfort.

“Why are you insistent that Gillbert calls me princess?” she asked.

“Not just him, Renya. I want everyone to know who you are. I want you to have a proper place beside me, Little Fawn. I don't want anyone—ever—to challenge your place or your right to be at my side.”

“Would anyone question it?”

“I don't think so, but if at any point we need to prove to people you are who we say you are—light bringer and all—we will have witnesses.”

Satisfied with his explanation, Renya followed Grayden and Gillbert into the castle, with Selenia trailing behind. Renya took in the large entryway, massive and daunting. She could see hallways branching off in every direction, and a large bronze sculpture of an owl perched on a tree dominated the center of the room.

The lighting was low, bathing everything in a romantic glow. Candles seemed to cover every surface, and it looked more like a church confessional inside than a castle. The air hung heavy with silence, and Renya could hear the sound of their boots on the stonework floor.

Gillbert ushered them down a long hall lined with portraits and actual suits of armor. Renya glanced at the portraits, noticing one marked as Queen Kalora. She wanted to stop and examine it, but Gillbert's pace was too quick. She did catch a glimpse, noting the queen's dark blonde hair and sharp nose.

They followed him up a grand staircase, golden posts glittering in the candlelight, before Gillbert stopped in front of a closed room. He opened the door and motioned to Selenia. "Princess, this is your guest chamber."

Selenia didn't say a word and marched inside, shutting the door behind her. Renya felt a twinge of emotion from Grayden through their bond. Compassion, maybe? He was hurting for his sister.

Gillbert ignored Selenia's curt dismissal and nodded towards the room beside it. "Princess Renya, we've set this room aside for you. Prince Grayden, you'll be up another level."

Before Renya could cross to the door, Grayden pushed his body in front of it. "Absolutely not. My mate and I will share a room."

Gillbert took a step back, thrown by the unexpected harshness of Grayden's voice. The compassion he had felt for Selenia was replaced by extreme possessiveness, and Renya felt it tug at her. She placed her hand on his shoulders, and he relaxed almost instantly.

Gillbert cleared his throat. "If it is suitable to you, she is welcome to take up residence with you."

Grayden breathed a heavy sigh and steadied himself. "That would be acceptable. Thank you for understanding."

The older man led them up another staircase before gesturing to a room at the end of the hall. “Feel free to make yourselves comfortable. Someone will be up with a meal shortly. Also, Queen Kalora hopes that if you're not too tired from your exertions, she'd like your company for breakfast.”

It took Renya a split second to realize that the exertions he was referring to were their travel here, not the plans she assumed Grayden had for them tonight. She flushed as she watched Gilbert descend back down the spiral staircase.

A seductive look, full of pent-up passion, crossed Grayden's face as he sensed her desire. He swept her up and urged her quickly through the stone door.

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“Possessive much?” she teased as he backed her into the room, slamming the door with his booted foot.

His eyes glistened intoxicatingly. Renya could get lost in those deep pools of jade and never resurface. He tugged her alongside the bed next to him and wrapped his arms tightly around her chest. Rolling her on her back, he gave her a scorching kiss, his lips seeking out hers like the force of two magnets.

After a few moments, Grayden pulled away, and they both lay back on the bed, panting and trying to catch their breath. Renya felt herself being pulled into his side, and he stroked her head like a prized puppy. She finally started to relax after their long day of travel. They hadn't discussed how long they would be at the Twilight Kingdom, but their accommodations suggested an extended stay. Plus, Renya was sure it would take a while for her to learn how to use her magic.

The calm seemed to settle both of them, and Renya felt her eyes growing heavy as she tucked her head against the side of his neck, breathing in his unique scent of pine and cinnamon. She listened to his blood pumping through his jugular and could feel his heart steady under her palm. The sound soothed her like waves crashing along the beach, and she was pulled under, the allure of sleep too strong to resist.

The smell of freshly baked bread gradually roused her. She reached for Grayden on the bed, only to find herself alone. She sat up immediately, looking around the room.

Grayden sat at a small table near a crackling fireplace, his feet and chest bare. He was picking at something on a silver platter, holding it between two fingers as he looked at her.

“How long was I asleep?”

“Just an hour. A maid brought in the tray, and you looked so peaceful I couldn't bear to disturb you. But I saved some for you.”

Renya swung her legs over the bed. She tried to push herself off, but the soft down mattress hugged her body as she tried to force herself up. Her legs were sore, and Grayden saw her struggle.

“Rest, my Little Fawn.” He crossed the large room and brought her the platter. He set it down on the bed and crawled behind her, his hands moving to her shoulders and pressing deeply with his thumbs, rubbing out the knots that had formed there.

She purred contentedly as she brought a piece of bread to her lips. Renya admired the room as she scarfed down her supper. She could tell they were in one of the towers by the large circular shape of the chamber. The bed was centered in the circular part of the room, with a small bathroom off to the left. The walls were a deep crimson, and plush white carpets lined the hard cobblestone floor. The little table was circled by two chairs, and they each had a nightstand on their side of the large bed. It was even larger than Grayden's bed back at the lodge, and the four corners of the posters almost reached the tall ceiling. Gauzy tulle curtains were pulled back, and thick embroidered tapestries covered whatever view there was from the window.

Grayden continued to work his way down her back, massaging and caressing her aching muscles.

“Aren't you glad we're in the same room now?”

She moaned and leaned back into his chest as she popped a candied date into her mouth.

“I never said I wasn't,” she responded, trying to keep herself upright when all she wanted to do was sink back into the feather bed and disappear into her dreams. “I'm always happiest when I'm with you. But I have to admit, I don't think I've ever been this tired.”

His eyes warmed, and she couldn't help but notice the stark difference from when she first met him in the woods. He had always been caring and compassionate, but he seemed so much happier now. She wondered if she had changed as well.

Grayden stopped his fingers and moved to the floor on her side of the bed. He knelt before her and started working the laces of her boots. He slipped them off, placing her dagger on her nightstand, and then massaged her arches and the pads of her toes. Next came her calves, and he pushed her trousers up as far as he could, continuing his gentle care. She tried to sit up, but he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

“Let me take care of you.”

It felt so good to be pampered that she let him continue. He undid the fasteners of her trousers and pulled them down her legs, then pulled up her tunic. Grayden crossed the room and Renya noticed their travel trunk had been brought in as well. He rummaged through it, before coming up with a peach-colored nightgown. Her clothes were folded and left on the trunk, and he came back over to her.

Her eyes were unbelievably heavy. She looked at him through lidded eyes as he slipped off her bralette. Exposed to the cool air, she shivered, and he couldn't help but place a warm, masculine kiss between the valley of her breasts. She whined a bit when he stopped, but he hushed her.

“Hands up.”

She did as she was told, and he pulled the nightgown on and settled it over her hips.

“You're so good to me,” she murmured as he placed her back against the pillow, tucking her legs underneath the white sheets and coverlet.

“You are good for me.”

She was nearly drifting off when he moved to the other side of the bed. Grayden pulled back the sheets and removed his trousers, sleeping in the nude as he generally preferred when they weren't out in the harsh elements of his lands. He tugged her closer to the center of the bed, pulling her leg over his hip before kissing her on her temple.

“Goodnight, my little light bringer.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Renya couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so well. She opened her eyes gingerly, finding Grayden's face mere inches from hers. His arm lay draped across her stomach, pulling her close like a child clutching a beloved teddy bear. His warm breath caressed her cheek, his face unlined and peaceful in slumber. She inched closer, eliciting a quiet moan from him. He pushed against her involuntarily, his hardness straining against her stomach. It seemed he woke ready every morning.

Sensing her slight movements, Grayden's eyes fluttered open.

“Morning.” His lazy smile accompanied the subtle lift of her leg over his hip as he ground against her. Renya's lips parted, her breath quickening. “Sleep well?” he asked, continuing his gentle assault as he gauged her reaction.

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“I did,” she managed breathlessly. “I—”

Her words dissolved into a gasp as he palmed her breast and nipped at her neck. Coherent thought slipped away like a child's escaped balloon.

Grayden's eyes darted across her face, drinking in every nuance of her expression. “Gods, I need you. How did I survive before you came through that portal?” He parted her thighs with his own and captured her lips in an artful kiss. Renya had kissed many men, but none like Grayden. His kisses were neither messy nor sloppy, but purposeful and perfect. He knew when to tease and when she craved him hard and fast. Whether it was the bond or just him, she couldn't say. She lost herself in his kiss, the world narrowing to just the two of them and their bodies moving against the sheets.

Grayden entered her slowly, drawing a low groan from Renya. He filled her completely, careful to keep the last inch of his length outside to avoid hurting her. His rhythm was slow and languid, perfect for their morning coupling.

Renya reached her peak almost immediately, Grayden following close behind with a quiet grunt as he spilled inside her.

“It's never not good with you,” she panted, rolling onto her side and propping herself up on an elbow to watch him recover.

He turned to meet her gaze. “I didn't know what I was missing until you. My encounters before—they seem so hollow and meaningless. It's like I didn't truly live until I was with you.”

His confession struck her deeply. She wondered if she, too, hadn't truly lived until meeting him. Those other men—boys, really—paled in comparison to the magnificent specimen beside her.

He traced a single knuckle along her arm, raising goosebumps in its wake. “As enjoyable as this is, I suspect we'll be missed if we don't make it to breakfast.”

Renya sat up, clutching the sheet to ward off the chill. The fire had died during the night, and now that their passionate inferno had subsided, the cold air bit at her skin. She forced herself out of bed, her legs protesting as she crossed to the bathroom. A simple, small stone tub awaited her. Grayden followed, eyeing the modest bathing arrangement.

“Well, that's no fun,” he quipped.

She grinned, understanding his implication before playfully shoving him out. “Let me get ready! If I don't eat soon, I'm going to get hangry.”

“Hangry?”

“Yes. Angry because I'm hungry.”

“Ah. Quite clever, that.”

Ignoring him, she turned on the tap and began to freshen up. The scent of campfire clung to her hair, and she felt as if a layer of ash had settled into her pores.

After scrubbing herself clean, Renya returned to the main room wrapped in a towel. Grayden stood fully dressed, cutting a handsome figure in a navy tunic adorned with gold filigree. The elkten pin gleamed on his breast, his sword strapped across his back as if anticipating an imminent attack.

She brushed past him to the trunk, carefully selecting her attire. Remembering Selenia's words about Twilight Kingdom fashion, she opted for a light blue silk dress embroidered with cream snowflakes and a removable white fur collar. The skirt's large slit revealed tight matching trousers underneath. She braided her hair meticulously, securing it with snow clips. Her engagement ring caught the light, drawing Grayden's appreciative gaze as he began shaving weeks of stubble.

“You look radiant,” he said, admiring her reflection as he wielded the razor.

“You always say that.”

“Because it's always true.”

Smoothing her skirt, she slipped on silk shoes before her eyes fell on her dagger. Frowning, she grasped it and tucked it into her bralette. Grayden emerged from the bathroom just as she adjusted it, stopping dead in his tracks.

“Gods, that's sexy.” He circled her, shamelessly peering down her dress to glimpse the jeweled hilt. He swallowed hard, unable to tear his gaze away.

“We should leave before we never do,” she said, sensing his rising arousal.

“Agreed, and quickly, lest you end up needing to dress all over again.”

Finding the dining hall proved challenging, requiring directions from two attendants before they succeeded.

The hall's grandeur matched the rest of Twilight Castle, though Renya felt it lacked the warmth and coziness of Snowden Lodge. They crossed the room together, Grayden's hand resting gently on the small of her back.

At the head of a long, polished table sat two women. Queen Kalora rose regally as they approached, her long gown flowing to her feet. Renya noted the queen's impressive height, easily half a foot taller than herself. Kalora's simple crown glittered in the chandelier's light, its dark gemstones reminiscent of the twilight sky. Her burnt orange dress, trimmed with golden suns and moons and adorned with owl feathers, accentuated her olive skin. Though she appeared barely older than Renya, the queen must have been considerably older given her teenage daughter.

Julietta wore a chartreuse dress adorned with peacock feathers, a matching headdress perched atop her piled strawberry blonde curls. The gowns' elaborate elegance made Renya feel decidedly plain in comparison.

Selenia sat beside Julietta, nearly unnoticeable. Renya's worry deepened. Selenia typically commanded attention, yet now she sat with downcast eyes. Renya's heart ached, angry at herself for neglecting her friend's welfare. She vowed to address it after breakfast.

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Queen Kalora approached, and they exchanged polite bows. As Grayden kissed the queen's hand, violent jealousy seized Renya. She longed to smack the queen's hand away and stake her claim on Grayden. The feeling subsided quickly as Grayden's presence washed over her. His voice echoed in her mind:

Not even one-tenth as beautiful as you, Little Fawn.

She gasped, locking eyes with an equally startled Grayden. This was no figment of her imagination.

I don't think you're imagining it either, Renya.

Composing herself under Queen Kalora's scrutiny, Renya grasped for a compliment. “Your gown is breathtaking.”

“Why, thank you,” Kalora replied, her sweet voice tinged with firmness. “Yours is quite unusual. Are trousers common in the Snow Lands?”

Before Renya could respond, Grayden intervened, his arm encircling her waist. “Renya is more than a princess of the fallen Sun Realm. She's the prophesied light bringer, destined for greatness. Her attire ensures she's prepared for whatever our world might throw at her.” His gentle squeeze sent a wave of gratitude through Renya, which Grayden visibly processed. Clearly, they had much to learn about their bond's complexities.

“What a heavy responsibility,” Queen Kalora mused, gesturing to the chairs before her. As they sat, she appraised the couple. “Gillbert informed me you are fate-

bound.”

Though not phrased as a question, Renya felt compelled to answer. “We are, Your Highness.”

“Please, no need for formalities. Address me as Kalora, and my daughter as Julietta.” Julietta offered a shy nod of greeting.

“Your parents were fate-bound as well?” Kalora asked Grayden.

“Yes.”

Kalora looked thoughtful. “Perhaps there's a familial aspect to the bond, or it's related to inherited magic. Renya, what do you know of your parents?”

“Very little, I'm afraid. I was raised in the human realm by my aunt.”

Julietta's head snapped up, her eyes wide with excitement. “The human realm? Really? Is it true no one has magic there?”

Renya chuckled at the girl's enthusiasm. “That's right. No magic. It's quite dull, honestly.”

Julietta's words tumbled out in a rush. “I think it would be amazing. No magic, no feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. No worry about your magic fading—”

Kalora cut her off. “My daughter's magic faded incredibly fast. Born powerful, her abilities diminished more quickly than anyone could have predicted. While most fae gradually lose their magic, Julietta's vanished within a moon cycle.”

Julietta's gaze dropped, a blush creeping up her cheeks. Renya's heart went out to the

clearly embarrassed girl.

Seeking to change the subject, Renya asked, “Grayden mentioned you might help train me in my powers?”

Queen Kalora's eyes raked over Renya as if searching for a physical manifestation of her magic. “That depends on you. Only the wielder truly knows how their magic works. I can help you access your powers, but you must learn to weave your own magic.”

“I understand. Any help would be greatly appreciated.”

Kalora nodded as a servant arrived with steaming plates for Grayden and Renya. Famished, Renya restrained herself from devouring her meal immediately. The sight of bacon filled her with childlike glee. She savored the salty crispness, fighting the urge to close her eyes and moan, knowing Grayden's reaction to such a display.

“I'm happy to assist in any way. Shall we begin this afternoon?”

Renya nodded as Grayden squeezed her hand beneath the table. This was why they'd come. A weight lifted from her shoulders. Everything would be okay.

Her gaze drifted back to Selenia, and her heart clenched. Almost everything would be okay. She'd help her friend, too.

As breakfast concluded, Kalora and Julietta excused themselves after finalizing plans for Renya's afternoon lesson. Grayden rose, giving Renya a quick peck. “I need to send a hawk to Phillippe about our safe arrival. The Twilight guard captain wants to discuss strategy and available resources. Care to join me?”

Renya tilted her head toward Selenia, who sat absentmindedly tracing the rim of her

glass, oblivious to the others' departure.

“Ah. Perhaps you're better suited for that,” Grayden conceded, clearly embarrassed by Selenia's predicament but relieved Renya would handle it. “We should also discuss this morning's discovery.” His pointed look mirrored her astonishment at their bond's new gift.

As Grayden's boots echoed down the hall, Renya moved to Julietta's vacated seat beside Selenia.

“Selenia.”

The girl looked up, eyes brimming with tears. Renya's heart swelled with protective, almost maternal feelings for this motherless teenager.

“Can we talk about it?” She kept her voice low and supportive, hoping Selenia would confide in her.

“Yes. But not here.” Selenia glanced around as if expecting eavesdroppers. “Let's go to my room.”

Selenia's quarters mirrored Grayden and Renya's. They settled into armchairs by the fire, the castle's drafty chill seeping into the room despite the moderate climate outside.

Renya watched Selenia stare into the flames, waiting for her to break the silence.

“Jurel doesn't want to be with me anymore.” Her confession quivered on her lips as tears spilled down her cheeks, her usual sparkling demeanor crumbling like a shield of brittle armor.

“Oh, sweetie,” Renya murmured, sliding to the floor beside Selenia's chair and patting her knee sympathetically. “What did he say?”

Selenia's shoulders shook as she continued. “He doesn't want marriage or to settle down. He loves me, but not enough to change his lifestyle. He doesn't want a home or children.”

“And you do.”

She sniffled. “With all my heart. It was so lonely after my parents died. I love my brothers, but I want my own family. I don't want to feel like a burden.”

“Selenia, you could never be a burden. Your brothers adore you. I wish I had siblings like them. You might bicker, but you'll always have each other's backs.”

Selenia met Renya's gaze, her eyes red-rimmed. “I thought he'd eventually want marriage.”

Renya hesitated, torn between hope for change and protecting Selenia from false expectations. She took a deep breath. “I know you love Jurel, and he loves you. But sometimes, things just aren't meant to be.”

Selenia scoffed. “Easy for you to say. Your relationship is nothing but meant to be.”

Renya couldn't deny the logic. She stood, moving her chair closer to Selenia's. “I know it's hard to hear, given what your brother and I have. But things weren't always perfect for me. I had my own issues to overcome, and I wasn't looking for any relationships before meeting Grayden. Remember how I mentioned my trust issues?”

Selenia nodded, wiping her tears on her sleeve. Renya turned to the fireplace, watching the dancing flames as she began her confession.

“Before coming through the portal, I lived in a city called Los Angeles. I had a writing job, reporting on a senator's campaign.”

Noting Selenia's confusion, she clarified, “Sorry, that probably makes little sense here. Basically, I was working with a powerful man who promised to help my career, introduce me to contacts, and advise me. I was trusting and naïve.”

Selenia's hand found Renya's knee, sensing the story's direction. The gesture gave Renya strength to continue.

“One day, he asked me to stay late in his office, claiming he wanted me to ghostwrite his autobiography. When I arrived, his true intentions became clear.”

Selenia's grip tightened, offering silent support.

“He attacked me. He tried to force—”

“Oh, Renya,” Selenia sobbed, pulling her into an embrace. “I'm so sorry.”

Renya melted into the hug before continuing. “I got lucky. I grabbed a lamp and struck him, stunning him long enough for me to escape. He chased me, but there were photographers outside from a press conference. My torn shirt led them to assume we'd been intimate.”

She took a steadying breath. Recounting the story was difficult, but her heart no longer raced with panic as it once had. The memory felt distant now, as if she were watching it happen to someone else.

“My point is, even when things seem bleakest, you never know what life has in store. I never imagined having a relationship, yet here I am, engaged and mated to your dumb brother.”

Selenia managed a small smile. “He is dumb. But Renya, asking you to marry him was the smartest thing he's ever done.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Renya stood with her eyes closed, feeling foolish as Kalora and Grayden watched her

intently. She searched inward, trying to find the tiny golden spark she had felt surge through her body when Cressida unlocked her powers. Now more attuned to the magic within her, she could only distinguish a slight electric current humming beneath her skin. She recalled the sensation of pulling that small ball of power closer to her in the jungles of the Tidal Kingdom, or the panic she felt when the avalanche hit.

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Nothing happened. Well, not nothing exactly. Her head throbbed from clenching her eyes and teeth, and for a split second, she feared she might be sick all over the castle floor.

“Renya, you have to relax,” Grayden said. “I can feel your tension, and it's giving me a migraine.”

Tell me about it. It's even worse over here.

He looked at her, hearing her voice inside his head. He laughed, and suddenly Renya felt warm.

“There it is!” Kalora exclaimed excitedly.

Renya watched as a tiny trail of golden dust flew from her fingers. If she hadn't been staring intently, waiting for something to happen, she might not have noticed it.

“What did you do differently?” Kalora asked, approaching Renya. Her canary-yellow gown swished around her petite ankles, her slippers silent against the gray stone of the throne room floor. The chamber was empty, save for the single throne placed on a dais. It was made of glass, not clear and transparent, but a deep blue. Lapis lazuli stones decorated the edges, and plush cream velvet lined the seat.

“I'm not sure.” Renya bit her lip, trying to remember. Grayden had laughed down their bond. Was that it?

“Try it again.”

Renya focused, trying to relax yet search for the ball of light in her body. Suddenly, confidence overcame her, and she grasped the sensation of electricity vibrating throughout her. She concentrated on the feeling, then pushed it out through her fingertips. Golden sparks streamed out, illuminating the dimly lit room.

“I did it!” She looked at Grayden. He smiled, pride evident on his face. Renya beamed as she returned his grin.

You just needed confidence.

Renya looked at him. Was that you?

He just smiled in return.

Kalora looked thrilled. “Keep trying. I want you to be able to summon it at will, with no delay. Reach inside and feel the connection to our ancestors. Our magic is ancient, a gift from the Gods. Do you know the legend?”

Renya shook her head. Kalora looked at Grayden, appalled. “You didn't even tell your mate about the source of magic?”

Grayden looked embarrassed. “I can't explain something I don't even know.”

Kalora sat on the edge of the dais, her gown trailing at her side. She took a deep breath, as if building anticipation for her captive audience.

“In the beginning, the Gods ruled everything. All of our kingdoms, our seasons, and elements were governed by them. Each God possessed a special power, making them unique. The Snow Land God had the power of frost, wielding cold and ice over her domain. The Sun Realm God did the same, shining light over his lands and filling his corner of our world with sun. And so forth. But each God was lonely. Unable to find

happiness ruling their lands alone, they came together and decided to fashion a mate for each of them, their perfect match in every way—this is where our fated bonds come from.”

Renya shivered at her proclamation, noticing a look of awe on Grayden's face.

Kalora continued. “The Gods were content with their Fate—which is what they called them. Eventually, the 'T' was dropped, and they became simply 'Fae.' This is our origin. As years passed, the Gods and the fae reproduced, creating children with powers. But just as the Gods struggled with loneliness, so did their offspring. So, the Gods ensured that every fae was created with a mate—a matching half to continue their lineage. But something happened, unknown even to the first fae, and the Gods disappeared, leaving their descendants to steward their world alone. Over time, the magic waned.”

“The fading?” Grayden guessed.

“Correct. The fae waited for the Gods' return, hoping they would restore their power. However, the first fae from the Sun Realm had a powerful connection with the Sun God. He loved her more than any other God loved their fae, and he left within her the secret to reviving the magic, hoping to reunite with her.”

At this, Renya's heart raced. Grayden's excitement was palpable through their bond, and they both had the same thought simultaneously.

The Sun Realm Scrolls.

“The secret is said to foretell the arrival of a woman from another world, with the power to restore the ancient magic. This part, I think you already know.”

“Yes,” Renya whispered, barely audible in the quiet recesses of the throne room.

“So, you see, that is how our magic came to be, and how fae were created. Now, Renya, I want you to try again.”

Renya squared her shoulders, determined. She pushed her braid over her shoulder and closed her eyes again. Calm. She needed to be calm. She breathed in and out. In and out. Her heart rate slowed, and her breathing steadied. This time, when she reached for her power, it came more quickly, and the light that erupted from her was brighter and lasted longer before fading.

“Bravo!” Kalora called. “It will get easier each time. Now that you've found where it resides in you, you'll be able to bring it forward much more easily.”

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Renya rubbed her neck. It was sore where Cressida had unlocked her powers. It hurt less than when she first brought her power forth, but it was still uncomfortable.

Grayden seemed to sense her discomfort. “I think that's enough for today.”

Kalora looked disappointed but nodded. “Good idea. We don't know how much power she has, and we don't want her to drain it all at once.” She started towards the stone archway before turning back to the couple. “Would you prefer to take dinner in the dining hall or in your chambers?”

Grayden looked at Renya, her face flushed from exertion and her shoulders sagging. “We'll take a tray in our room so Renya can recuperate.”

Kalora nodded and left the room. Grayden approached Renya and put his arms around her waist. “I'm so proud of you, Little Fawn.”

Renya shrugged off the praise. “It was just a few sparks.”

He tilted her chin up to look at him. “You're incredible. When your power came out, you practically glowed. I am in awe of you, every day.”

Renya beamed. She felt strong. She finally felt like in time, she might be able to actually accomplish what she was meant to do in this world. Whatever it was.

Grayden kissed her slowly, and she moved her hands up to grasp his biceps. His large body dwarfed her and always made her feel safe and at home. After a few seconds, she pulled away, eager to be in their room and in a hot bath. She was putting her body

through so much stress, and she was constantly exhausted and sore everywhere.

Grayden guided her out of the throne room and back up to their chambers. When the door was shut behind them and they were finally alone, Grayden broached the subject.

“So, we can hear each other's thoughts now?”

“Apparently so. But I don't think it's our thoughts exactly. I feel like I make a conscious attempt to reach out to you, and then you hear it.” She sat on the bed and removed her dagger from the bodice of her dress. Grayden watched her, his eyes darkening with approval. He quickly shook himself and brought his thoughts back to their conversation.

“I felt the same way. I wanted you not to worry about Kalora, and the second I thought about what I wanted to say to you, you heard it.”

“Did your parents experience the same thing?”

Grayden stood beside her at the bed, thinking back. “I don't think so. I have never heard of being able to exchange thoughts before. I don't even know where I would find such information.”

Renya removed her satin slippers and placed them on the rug next to the bed. “Esmeralda. She might know. She has been studying fated bonds.”

“That's a good idea. You'll write to her? Do you trust her? I don't think we should let anyone know unless we have to.”

Renya agreed. For whatever reason, she felt like this revelation between the two of them was a secret that should stay in their knowledge alone. “I trust her. I'll write to

her in the morning.”

“So, what do you think of our origin story? I must admit, I've never heard the whole thing told before. Only bits and pieces, like fae being created with a mate.”

“Honestly, it frightens me a bit, knowing that this prophecy has been foretold for so long. There's so much riding on it—but at the same time, a prophecy is meant to happen, right? So whatever choice I make, that's the right choice? There's comfort in that, knowing that I'm doing what I should.”

“That makes perfect sense, Little Fawn. When the time is right, you'll know exactly what to do.”

Renya continued to undress, and Grayden lay back on the bed, his legs crossed at his ankles and his arms propped behind his head. He watched her strip, but Renya wasn't in the mood for anything but the bath that was calling to her. While the tub didn't quite meet their expectations, at least the water was hot. She turned on the tap and wandered back over to where Grayden rested, a white towel tucked around her.

“So, I talked to Selenia.”

Grayden sighed, like he knew the conversation was coming but had been dreading it.

“I knew you would. Did you get to the bottom of it?”

“Jurel doesn't want to get married or have a family. Ever.”

Grayden looked unsurprised.

“Did you know that about him?”

“Yes. Why do you think I discouraged the match? I've known Jurel for a very long

time. And when he says he's not looking for those things, I believe him.”

“Selenia is pretty broken-hearted. Be gentle with her, Grayden.”

“What did you tell her?”

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“I sympathized as much as I could. Our engagement came at a bad time, I'm afraid. I think us being fated and engaged is hard for her, especially when she wants a family of her own. I think it's hard for a lot of people.” Renya thought back to the quick rush of jealousy she had picked up from Esmeralda at the Tidal Kingdom.

“How is she now?”

“A little better, I think. I—I told her what happened to me back in my world and how it affected my relationship with you at the beginning.”

“I wondered what was going on. While I was meeting the captain of the guard, I thought I felt you panic for a split second. I tried to help relax you a bit.”

“I felt it. I didn't realize it was you. Thank you.”

He brushed off her gratitude, since it was unnecessary. “That must have been hard for you.”

Renya went back into the bathroom to check on the bath water. Grayden got up from the bed, removing his boots. She stepped back into the main room. “It was. But not as hard as it used to be. But I think Selenia understood that sometimes we get dealt a bad hand of cards, but we just have to return them to the dealer and start fresh.”

Grayden looked at her before pulling his tunic over his head and tossing it on the ground. “I'm guessing that's a human expression?”

“Sorry, yes. But anyway, I think it will take some time, but she'll come around. I don't

know if Jurel will change his mind—”

“He won't.”

“—but I think she'll be okay either way.”

Renya disappeared into the bathroom and unbraided her hair, preparing to submerge herself in the minuscule tub.

She called out to him from the bathroom. “What happened during your meeting with the captain?”

Grayden stepped inside the bathroom, sitting down on a small bench near the tub. “We had a great talk. They've been perfecting a new type of armor that is lighter and stronger than any before. It should make coming up head-to-head with a dragon a little easier. It won't be an instant death, at least.”

“That sounds encouraging,” she said sarcastically.

“Honestly, I've been trying not to think about it. One day at a time. We'll figure it out.”

“Together,” she agreed. She slipped into the hot water and suppressed a whimper. Her body was in worse shape than she thought. All the magic had been resting inside of her, a part of her. Pushing and pulling it out took its toll. She was glad Grayden had insisted she rest tonight.

He watched her, entranced, as she began washing her hair. She lathered up the soap and began rinsing away the sweat that had accumulated on her scalp from the effort of bringing her magic forth. Grayden sighed loudly and she turned towards him.

“I hate that pathetic excuse for a bathtub.”

She laughed, splashing a bit of water towards him. “How long do you plan to stay here?” Their accommodations weren't bad, but she was starting to miss Doria and the cozy comfort of the lodge.

“I think perhaps a week more or so. I want to be sure you've learned all you can from Kalora. I'm also planning on returning to the camp on the way back. About half of the Twilight Kingdom soldiers will travel towards our encampment. They'll train with our men. The landscape is pretty impenetrable to outsiders. They are safer there than here and can train away from prying eyes. Unless Phillippe lets in another spy...”

“You have to forgive his mistake.”

“No, I don't.”

“Grayden,” Renya warned. “He didn't do it intentionally. Also, how are you sure the Twilight soldiers are trustworthy?”

“Orien vouched for them all personally. He's the captain of the Queen's Guard and oversees their armies as well. He seems like a decent man. Fair, perhaps a bit standoffish, but he didn't give me any reason to doubt his loyalty to Queen Kalora.”

Renya started to drain the tub. She stood up, and Grayden's eyes flickered over her body appreciatively. However, he handed her a towel, and she wrapped it around herself after drying off. Grayden followed her into the main room as she searched the trunk for another nightdress. She slipped the pale pink gown over her head and found a robe. She had barely fastened it when there was a knock on the door. Grayden strode towards the heavy door and opened it. A maid stood there, a large tray in hand. Grayden took it from her quickly and muttered his thanks. Renya caught the young woman glancing at Grayden's bare chest and the way his trousers hung low on his

hips before he shut the door.

Annoyed, she scolded him. “Don't answer the door without a shirt.”

His eyebrow lifted. “Why?”

“Because she was ogling you!”

“I assure you, she did no such thing. What does ogling mean?”

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Renya rubbed her forehead exasperatedly. “Just don't do it again, okay? Or I'll answer the door without a shirt on the next time Gillbert comes by.”

That seemed to drive the point home.

He moved over to the small table and placed the tray down, uncovering the lid of a silver dish, one for each of them. Renya sat down and looked at hers. It was some kind of meat stew, and it smelled like home. It reminded her of the winters in the mountains of California, where her aunt would put a pot on the stove all day and let it simmer. Her heart lurched as sorrow overcame her. She still hadn't fully processed the loss of her aunt. Renya fervently wished she was alive and safe in the human realm, but without knowing for sure, her grief clawed at her heart like an angry bear.

A hand reached across the table. She looked up into Grayden's handsome face. His stubble was back, and he seemed to grow hairier by the hour. His thick mess of hair was even longer, and he was desperately in need of a haircut. “You'll find her again, I'm sure of it.”

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“I felt your sorrow and then saw a flash of your aunt's face. Apparently, we aren't just hearing each other's thoughts, but getting flashes of images here and there.”

Renya frowned slightly. The idea of Grayden being in her head all the time frightened her. Some things were just private. She didn't plan to withhold anything from him, but the notion of someone accessing her thoughts scared her. The longer she dwelled on it, the more it unsettled her. She felt violated, as if her power had been stripped

away.

“I’ll stay out the best I can, Renya. I understand.”

At least with him knowing her thoughts, she didn't have to explain herself. “It's not that I don't want you in my head or that I'm keeping anything from you—”

“I know, sweet Renya. It's going to be an adjustment for us both. The only reason I cried was because I felt your sadness. I didn't know what I was doing, and then suddenly I saw a flash of your thoughts. I won't do it again.”

She picked at the bowl of stew, her appetite gone. She tried to force down a piece of bread but gave up. Her hands pushed the bowl away.

“I'm going to bed.” She took off her robe and left it on the floor, eager to get underneath the covers and away from Grayden's watchful eyes. She knew it wasn't his fault and that he would never hurt or betray her intentionally, but that seemed to make it even worse. She wanted to be mad at him, but she knew there was no rational reason for it. It wasn't his fault. Yet, she was furious.

Not looking over at where he sat, she crawled into bed and faced the wall. She felt tears sting her eyes and leak onto the satin pillowcase. The appearance of her tears made her even angrier, which in turn caused her to cry more. She held her breath, trying not to give in to the full-on meltdown she wanted to have. Renya wished she could be alone, in the dark, and cry until she was dehydrated, her body sore from shaking. She desperately sought that kind of cathartic release.

She heard Grayden blow out the candles, the room dark except for the low-burning flames dancing in the fireplace. Eyes closed tight, she tried to fall asleep as fast as she could, wanting to safeguard her thoughts from the man who was her mate. She felt resentful towards him. All of these things happening to them didn't seem to affect him

at all. She was the one in a strange world, with strange magic, with a strange connection to a man she'd only known for a handful of weeks.

Renya felt the mattress dip, felt the warm body slide under the covers next to her. His gentle hands reached out for her, and she allowed herself to be pulled into his chest. She wanted to push him away, but the second she felt his breath on her neck, she craved the comfort he provided.

“It's okay, Little Fawn. You can be as mad at me as you want. I'm here for you. Hate me if you must. Use me in whatever way you need to. I won't leave you.”

She turned towards his warm embrace, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. Sobs racked through her body, and he held her tightly as she cried long into the night.

Chapter Thirty

Grayden woke before Renya, deeply concerned about her reaction the night before. He hated himself for making her feel that way. He hadn't known he would have access to her thoughts like that. He felt her sadness, and the second his mind questioned the change in her mood, it was as if her brain answered for him. Though purely accidental, he sensed it was a huge breach of trust.

Unsure what to do, Grayden stared at Renya, finally asleep beside him, and felt panic rush over him. He had felt confident in their love, certain he wouldn't lose her again, but now he was terrified. What if this wasn't what she wanted? He was aware that she was having trouble adjusting to everything, but this seemed to be the final straw. Fates, he wished he could stop it. Or bear the weight for her. It was what he was best at, wasn't it? Taking on the burdens others couldn't shoulder?

Renya stirred next to him, and he brought his hand down to stroke her hair, hoping to keep her under for a little while longer. She had tossed and turned against his side for

a good chunk of the night. She'd cried, clung to him, and then pushed him away, only to seek him out again and mew against his chest. It had been a long night for both of them, full of uncertainty and confusion. Yet through it all, he still felt their connection. That was something, at least.

He stared up at the stone ceiling, unsure of what to do. Maybe Esmeralda would know of something—

Renya's hands hesitantly reached out and touched him on the shoulder, bringing his thoughts back down from the ceiling. He turned to face her and watched her throat move as she took a deep breath. Grayden waited, not wanting to say anything to upset her.

“I feel like I should apologize.” She tipped her eyelashes down, avoiding eye contact. “But I'm struggling with it. I think my reaction was justified.”

“There is absolutely nothing to apologize for.” He scooped his hands under her chin and brought her face up to the light peeking through the curtains. “I understand what a shock it was for you. How hard all of these revelations must be. You don't ever need to apologize to me for the way you feel. They are your feelings. You're allowed to have them. I'm here to support you in whatever way I can.”

Her lip trembled and he ran his thumb gently over it. “Hush, my Little Fawn. It's okay. You know I hate your tears. But if you need to cry, at least let me hold you.”

“I'm crying now because I feel so guilty. I feel awful for feeling the way I do. You are the most caring, kindest man I've ever met, and I feel like a brat for being angry at you.” She scrambled into his lap, covered by the soft white sheets.

“Please don't feel guilty. I mean it. This isn't just some short-term relationship, Renya. We are in this for the long haul. There are going to be times when I make you

angry, and I'm sure you will talk back to me or put yourself in danger and make me fume—but it doesn't matter. This—” he held his hand to her heart—”is forever.”

She nodded, unable to say anything else. Grayden held her to him for a long while, smoothing her hair and humming tenderly against her ear. He could feel her body relax, her head landing against his shoulder. After a few more minutes, she drifted back off to sleep. The stress her body was under was starting to wear on her, and he was concerned. Grayden shifted her back to her side of the bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. Placing a gentle kiss along her jaw, he got out of bed and dressed. He'd go find Kalora and suggest they take the morning off from training, and then he'd find Renya something to eat.

Grayden was just about to enter the dining hall when he heard a loud commotion coming from the direction of the throne room. Pulling his sword from his back and grabbing the dagger from his boot, he sprinted ahead, ready to attack and defend.

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He burst into the room, only to find Jurel and Selenia. His jaw dropped. “Jurel, what are you doing here?”

Selenia pushed Jurel towards Grayden. “It doesn't matter, he's leaving.” She gave him another shove towards the door. Jurel spun back towards her.

“I might not want a family or a wife, but I want to be with you.”

Selenia's eyes flashed red. Grayden had never seen her so angry before. Her cheeks were ashen and somehow she towered over both of them, even though she was barely over five feet tall. The look she gave Jurel could melt a glacier, and Grayden was glad not to be on the receiving end of it.

“I mean it,” she hissed, about to push him again. “I no longer care what you want. I'm not willing to sacrifice my hopes for the future because you're too chicken to get married and have a family. Trust me, I'll find someone else, and you'll be alone. Now go back to the mountain camp. We're finished.”

When Jurel didn't make a move to leave, Selenia stormed out of the throne room and down the hall. Grayden could hear her stomp away, and he had no idea how her footsteps could be so loud for someone so small. He glanced at Jurel, both embarrassed and angry.

“I think you should go,” he said to his friend. “My sister is right. If you aren't serious about your intentions towards her, you need to leave her alone. You're no longer part of her guard. Instead, I'm assigning you to the mountain camp, permanently.”

Jurel bowed his head, not even bothering to look Grayden in the eye as he swept out of the room, his thick fur cloak sweeping the ground.

Grayden released a long breath, feeling the tension leave his body. He couldn't believe Jurel rode all the way here. To what? To tell Selenia again he didn't want a family or a wife? He wished he would have put a stop to their relationship sooner. He also wished it had been Renya to intercede here. Perhaps she could have melted the tension and helped the pair figure out how to end things on more pleasant terms. But for better or worse, it seemed like things were over for Jurel and Selenia. While he hated the idea of the pair of them, he felt sorry for his little sister. She was sweet and pure of heart, and he knew this would hurt her deeply. But he was also fiercely proud of the way she handled herself. She stood up for what she wanted, and didn't give in to Jurel. Renya would be proud of her, too.

He stepped into the dining room, expecting to see Kalora. Instead, Julietta was eating alone. She looked up as soon as she saw him enter.

“Why Prince Grayden, I'm sorry, you've just missed my mother. She went out to the training yard.”

“That's fine, could you relay a message to her? Just let her know Renya is indisposed from the training yesterday and I think it's better if we skip the morning session and meet this afternoon.”

“Of course,” Julietta said, concern for Renya clouding her face.

“Thank you.” He walked briskly out of the room before finding a maid and requesting that breakfast be brought up to their chambers.

By the time he returned, Renya was dressed. Her hair was still damp from her bath, and she was braiding it. She paused when he walked in, her engagement ring

sparkling on her finger. Grayden supposed it was a good sign that she still wore it.

“Where did you go?” Renya asked, securing the end of the braid with one of his mother's snow clips. She was dressed in another one of the trouser-gown hybrids Doria made for her. At first, the idea of her in trousers mortified him, but the more he saw her in them, the more arousing he found it. This pair hugged her legs tightly, a rich forest green color. The skirt was long and flowing, but parted down the middle so she could move easily. A tight bodice pressed her breasts up, and he could just see the top of her flesh. She wore the aragonite necklace Esmeralda gifted her, but his eyes dipped past it for a second and he saw the handle of the dagger in between her cleavage, and he felt his arousal growing. Fates. His Renya, dressed for war. He didn't know why the thought enticed him so, but her strength was sexy to him. He had trouble taking his eyes off of her long enough to respond to her question.

“I went to get us breakfast.”

“Is it invisible?” she asked, gesturing towards his empty hands.

“No, it's on its way,” he said, lips tugging up into a grin. Then he remembered what happened in the throne room and he quickly grimaced.

“What's wrong?” Renya asked, no doubt feeling dread and embarrassment through the bond.

“I heard arguing coming from the throne room. Jurel was there, quarreling with Selenia.”

Renya's mouth dropped in shock. “Jurel came all the way here?”

Grayden nodded. “He said he wanted to be with her. But he wouldn't give her any kind of commitment.” He tried to say the words nonchalantly, but it still embarrassed

him. She was his baby sister, after all.

“What did she say?”

“Honestly, she told him off,” Grayden said, the pride evident in his voice. “She said she wasn't going to compromise for him, and told him to leave.”

“Wow. I'm proud of her.”

“Me too. I was worried she was delicate and unable to take care of herself, but she's grown into a strong woman. I think you've had a lot to do with that, Renya.”

Renya deflected the praise. “Absolutely not. I've only spent a few weeks with her. You and Phillippe did a good job showing her what strength looks like. I know you felt ill-equipped to deal with a young girl, but she's turned out quite well.”

“Thank you, Renya, that means a lot. Especially coming from a woman like you.”

She smiled, and Grayden felt his heart lighten considerably. There didn't seem to be any anger or hostility left in her. He wondered if he should broach the subject or leave it alone. However, she decided to mention it first.

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“Grayden, I'd like to explain myself, if you'll let me.”

“There is no need. But if you want to tell me something—anything—I'll always listen.”

“Okay. Thank you. I think I might have overreacted a bit yesterday. Having you hear and see my thoughts just...freaked me out a bit. I felt like my mind had been violated—”

“I'm so sorry—”

“Please, just let me finish. I've had to adjust to a lot since coming here, I don't need to tell you all the things I've learned and all the things that have changed in my life since falling through the portal. Some have been really good, and others have been scary for me. But the reason I think I was so freaked out was because of what happened in the nightmare dungeon. I know we don't talk about it, but my mind was manipulated the entire time I was down there, and that fact alone was almost as horrifying as the things I kept dreaming about. Having you in my head, it just brought back all those feelings. I know it's irrational, but I was mad at you too. I know it's not your fault but...” she trailed off.

“You hurt the ones you love,” he said. “I'm a safe place to direct your anger. You know we're bound for eternity, and I won't leave you no matter what. I'm the safest place and the safest recipient for your anger.”

She nodded. “It doesn't make it right though, and I am sorry for that.”

He looked up at her, his eyes deep as a well and reflective as a mirror. “There's no need—but if you need to hear it, you're forgiven. You're forgiven everything.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Renya trembled, focusing on reaching out to Kalora with her magic. She managed to grasp her outstretched fingers, but that was it. The golden threads of her power shimmered in the air between them, delicate and wispy.

“You have to concentrate, Renya,” Kalora urged, her voice a mix of encouragement and frustration. “It will come easier over time, but right now you need to keep your mind blank.”

Renya took a deep breath, centering herself. She reached out again, pushing her magic out of her body. The golden strands shone and sparkled in the light, dancing like sunbeams through leaves.

Your magic is almost as beautiful as you are.

She lost control and her magic splintered, going in a thousand different directions before dissipating throughout the throne room. The sudden loss left her feeling hollow and drained.

Grayden! Don't talk to me. I'm supposed to be keeping my mind blank.

“What was that?” Kalora asked, astonished at the sudden outburst. “What were you thinking about?”

“Nothing in particular,” Renya lied, her cheeks flushing. She and Grayden had decided to keep their newfound abilities to themselves for now.

“Well, whatever you did seemed to have helped. Your magic responded more strongly that time.”

See? I'm helping you.

Renya sighed and tried to clear her mind again. But she couldn't help but hear Grayden's thoughts as soon as he had them. She wasn't sure if he was doing it on purpose to try and make up for the intrusion into her thoughts earlier, or if he just couldn't control it. It was a strange sensation, almost as though she had a commentator narrating her life.

Turning to the side of the room, Renya tried to empty her thoughts. Instead, she caught a glimpse of Selenia talking with Julietta in low tones. Selenia looked better, the sadness replaced by a simmering anger. Renya could almost feel it radiating off of her. She hadn't gotten a chance to talk with Selenia yet about her conversation with Jurel, but she hoped this would be enough closure so she could begin to heal and move on.

Julietta said something to Selenia, and she smiled. It was a tiny smile, but it was something. Renya felt it was a positive sign. Selenia was young and she hoped she would bounce back quickly. She was too lively and spirited to stay down for long.

“Renya, are you listening? Try it again.” Kalora's voice cut through her musings.

Renya dropped her thoughts of Selenia and did as Kalora asked. She drew a quick breath, her lungs expanding as far as they could, and then released it, trying to push her powers out. Nothing happened. She focused again, but she couldn't bring them forward. She felt like a flowerless vase, about to tip over from a high place. She was unbalanced and empty.

“I think we should call it a day,” Grayden said gently. “I want to have a word alone

with Renya, if you don't mind.”

Kalora nodded and swept out of the room, her gown of bird feathers trailing behind her. She reminded Renya of an owl, her sharp eyes missing nothing. She could be harsh, but not unfairly so. She pushed Renya hard but realized her limitations as well.

Julietta and Selenia waltzed out together, and Renya watched them walk in the same direction. She was glad to see Selenia had a friend her own age. While she enjoyed being her confidant, she knew as her brother's mate there were probably things Selenia didn't want to disclose to her.

The chamber was empty. Grayden moved from his spot in the corner over to the middle of the room, where she stood, tired and exhausted. He wrapped his arms around her before resting his chin on the top of her head. “Do you feel like these lessons are helping?”

Renya gnawed on the inside of her cheek. “I mean, I've been able to manifest my power, which is more than I could do before. But I feel like I've stalled. When my mind is clear, I can't seem to feel or reach my power at all. It's almost as though it's gone.”

Grayden pulled back and looked at her thoughtfully, brushing her hair out of her face. Some of the strands had fallen loose from her braid and were curling around her face. “Maybe that's not the way your magic works. Your powers might be different because you're from the Sun Realm. Or maybe because they were locked within you, you have to access them differently.”

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“How do you access yours?”

He rubbed the back of his neck, thinking. “I'm not exactly sure. I've had them my entire life, so it's almost instinctive. When I need to use it, it's there. Now, not so much. But before...” He trailed off, and Renya hurt for him. He never seemed to mention it or dwell on it, but the loss of his powers must bother him.

“When was the last time you used them?”

“In the forest with you and Brandle. I haven't had magic since then. At this point, I'm worried it might be all gone.”

“Oh, Grayden. I'm so sorry. How do you know for sure?”

“It's complicated, and I'm not entirely certain. But if you think of fire burning on a log, you need fuel to keep it burning. That's the log. But without air, you can't have the fire either. It's a balance. The fuel is the time it takes me to recharge, and the air is the total power I have left. They work together. But as there becomes less and less oxygen, the flames burn lower and less intense. Does that make sense?”

“I think so.”

“Will you do something for me?”

“Yes...”

“Try it one more time, but this time, don't clear your mind. Reach out to me. Just

focus on touching me with your magic. Just react.”

She closed her eyes.

“Eyes open, Little Fawn. The enemy will take advantage of you like that.”

Grayden paused, then added, “Remember the avalanche, Renya? You didn't think then—you just reacted. Your magic came to you naturally in that moment of crisis. Maybe that's the key—not overthinking it, but letting your instincts guide you.”

Renya's eyes widened as the memory flooded back. In that terrifying moment, facing the wall of snow, she hadn't hesitated or questioned. Her power had simply answered her need.

She focused on Grayden before her, and once again tried to pull her magic together and force it out. At first, she couldn't access it at all.

You can do it. Just picture it like it's already happened.

At his words, she envisioned her magic, hot like the sun, reaching around him. She let go of her doubts and fears, tapping into the same instinct that had protected them during the avalanche. And then, it wasn't a vision. The golden cords wrapped around him, pulsing in a field of electricity.

“You're doing it!”

Renya was able to hold up the golden strands for a few seconds longer before they slipped away into the air of the throne room. The room felt warmer than it did before, and Grayden's face was red like he was sitting in front of a roaring fire for too long.

“Are you okay?” she asked, running over to him as fast as she could on her tired legs.

He looked up at her, his eyes full of pride.

“That's my girl,” he said, reaching up and stroking her cheek. “You are dazzling.”

“But are you okay?”

“A little warm, that's all. Your magic feels heated and untamed. I think that's why emptying your mind doesn't work. Your magic lacks discipline. Whereas Kalora is in strict control of hers, yours works with emotion and desire.”

She reached out and brushed his cheek, feeling the heat slowly beginning to fade. Renya felt both giddy and exhausted, the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. Her body felt oddly heavy, as if the power had a substantial hold on her.

He put his arm around her, and she allowed herself to lean into his tall body, taking the support he offered. Even the walk back to their room drained her, and by the time they were back in their chambers, Grayden was half-carrying her. He picked her up and lifted her gently on the bed, taking off the satin shoes she was wearing.

“You don't need to undress me,” she said, pushing down her silk trousers. “I can do it myself.”

“Trust me, I know you are more than capable of doing whatever you want. It's not a weakness to allow me to help you. You're exhausted, and I feel useless here. Orien left this morning with his half of the men, Dimitri following. There's nothing for me to do here except watch out for you. So please, let me put you to bed.”

She acquiesced and let him pamper her again. Before she knew it, she was tucked into the bed and oblivious to the world.

When Renya awoke, the sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows across the

room. She felt refreshed, her magical exhaustion having dissipated during her nap.

Grayden was nowhere to be seen, but a note on her bedside table informed her that he had gone to discuss strategy with Queen Kalora.

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Renya stretched, her muscles pleasantly sore from the day's exertions. As she rose from the bed, a soft knock came at the door.

“Come in,” she called, smoothing down her rumpled clothes.

The door creaked open, revealing Selenia and Julietta. Selenia's eyes were rimmed with red, a stark contrast to the anger Renya had seen earlier.

“Renya,” Selenia said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Can we talk?”

“Of course,” Renya replied, gesturing for the two girls to enter. They settled on the plush chairs near the fireplace, Julietta's hand resting supportively on Selenia's arm.

“I'm sorry if we woke you,” Julietta said, her eyes filled with concern. “We didn't know where else to go.”

Renya shook her head. “Don't apologize. I'm glad you came.” She turned her attention to Selenia. “How are you holding up?”

Selenia's lower lip trembled. “I thought I was doing better. I was so angry earlier, and that felt...easier. But now...” She trailed off, a sob catching in her throat.

Renya moved to kneel in front of Selenia, taking her hands. “It's okay to be sad, Selenia. What you're going through, it's not easy.”

“But I should be stronger than this,” Selenia protested. “I told him off, I stood up for myself. Why do I still feel so horrible?”

“Because you cared for him,” Renya said softly. “And caring for someone, even when they're not right for you, it leaves a mark. It's okay to mourn what could have been, even if you know it's for the best.”

Julietta nodded in agreement. “My mother always says that the heart doesn't always listen to reason. It's okay to feel conflicted.”

Selenia looked between the two of them, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. “I just...I feel so foolish. I thought he would change his mind. I thought I could be enough.”

Renya squeezed Selenia's hands. “Listen to me. You are more than enough. Jurel's inability to commit has nothing to do with your worth. Some people just aren't ready for the kind of love and commitment you're looking for, and that's on them, not you.”

“But what if I never find someone who wants what I want?” Selenia's voice was small, vulnerable.

Julietta spoke up, her voice gentle but firm. “You will. You're amazing, Selenia. Any man would be lucky to have you. And in the meantime, you have us. You're not alone.”

Renya nodded in agreement. “Exactly. And think of it this way—now you're free to find someone who truly deserves you. Someone who will cherish you and want the same things you do.”

Selenia managed a watery smile. “You really think so?”

“I know so,” Renya affirmed. “You're strong, Selenia. Stronger than you know. This pain won't last forever, I promise.”

Selenia leaned forward, wrapping her arms around Renya in a tight hug. “Thank you,” she whispered. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Aloud horn sounded, jolting Renya from the depths of sleep. She awoke quickly, disoriented and scanning the dimly lit room. Grayden’s side of the bed was empty. His naked silhouette stood before the fire, struggling into his clothes.

“Grayden, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know, Renya. But that horn is a warning. Something’s going on. Get dressed—quickly. Make sure you have your dagger. We need to head to the throne room.”

Renya’s heart pounded an irregular rhythm as fear choked her. She knew what it was. The Shadow Queen had found them. Renya pulled on the outfit she wore the day before, not caring that it was dirty. She found the dagger on her nightstand and tucked it into the bodice of her dress. Guilt washed over her as she watched Grayden sling his sword over his back. She had brought this here, to the Twilight Kingdom. Cressida would follow her wherever she went. It wouldn’t be over until one of them was dead. Renya knew it in her heart.

The horn sounded again, and then Renya heard something that made her stomach drop and bile rise in her throat. A loud roar, trembling like thunder, pierced through the night air. She looked at Grayden, knowing what it was, but desperately hoping she was wrong.

His look said it all. Dragons.

Cressida was here, and with her dragons. Renya shuddered all over, and Grayden

grabbed her by the wrist.

“Look at me, Renya. You can stay here if you want, and I'll go negotiate with Cressida.”

“Like hell I'm leaving you.”

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“I figured that's what you would say. But I had to give you the choice. Let's go—whatever we are about to face, we face it together.”

He held her hand tightly as they made their way down the staircase. Grayden was moving so quickly that Renya took the steps two at a time to try and keep up. With his hurried, long strides they made it to the throne room in minutes.

He barged into the chamber, looking hyperaware of his surroundings. “What's going on?”

Kalora looked up from where she sat, knuckles gripping the glass throne so hard they were white. Julietta and Selenia sat off in a corner together, wrapped in blankets and looking scared.

“We are under attack.”

“How many dragons? And men?”

“Two dragons at least. As for men, it's hard to say. We didn't even see them enter our borders—I think they were either magically transported into our lands or they killed every single watchman from the border to here—both are equally possible.”

“Gods—have you sent word to the other half of the troops?”

“A hawk was sent ten minutes ago—but they are most likely ten or more hours away now.”

Renya watched Grayden's eyes, felt the panic rising inside him. Then, just as quickly as it came, she felt his resolve. He squared his shoulders and looked around the room. "How are the troops managing the attack?"

"I'm not sure, Orien's second in command, Diggory, is out there now."

Grayden nodded. "I'll go out and meet him. I've seen the damage these dragons can do—he needs to know what he's up against if he doesn't already."

"I'll hold the castle," Kalora said, looking at her daughter. "I have armor, I'll go get it on. Grayden, please take some of the prototypes we've been working on for you and Renya."

"I'm staying here," Renya said. "I'll hold down the castle with Kalora."

"Renya, we'll be apart."

I know. But we can communicate. We can still get messages to each other. If things go south, I can get Selenia out of the castle.

Renya could tell the exact moment he saw the truth of her words and the precarious situation they were in. He nodded, hating the idea of separating from her, but knowing it was the only way to protect the two women he loved the most.

Kalora looked between Renya and Grayden, obviously aware something was occurring between the two. Renya didn't care if she found out at this point. There was a good chance none of them would survive until morning.

Kalora motioned to one of the guards standing alongside the throne. "Rubio will take you to the armory."

The tall man was already sheathed in his own armor, and Renya couldn't make out any facial features. He left through a side door, and Grayden and Renya followed him quickly. Grayden's footsteps were heavy on the stone, and Renya scampered quickly, trying to keep up with his rushed pace. She heard what sounded like cannon fire, and she covered her ears, adrenaline coursing through her. Grayden looked at her.

“Are you sure you're okay doing this?”

She gave him a look.

“Okay, okay. I'll stop asking.”

They followed Rubio farther and farther through the halls, until they came to a large spiraling staircase leading underneath the castle.

“Down here,” he said in a gruff voice, muffled slightly by his visor.

As soon as they moved downward, the air turned cooler, and the sounds of battle ceased. Renya thought they traveled at least three or four levels underground before they reached the bottom of the stairs. The room was lit by several torches, and Renya saw dozens of men working on armor and various weapons. Rubio went to talk to one of the men, and then came back with two pieces of armor.

“These should work for you both,” he said, handing one to Grayden and one to Renya. Renya took the cool metal in her hands. It certainly didn't feel dragon proof, but it was all she had. She watched Grayden fasten his, and it looked more like a fitted sandwich board to Renya, rather than the medieval armor she had seen in her history books. Once Grayden secured his, he grabbed the armor from Renya and pulled it over her head. It was small enough to fit her, but trailed down her stomach almost to the top of her thighs. She figured it was better to have more coverage than less, at least. He fastened the leather belting on the sides, and then nodded his

approval.

Rubio came back over. “They need my help down here for a few minutes, can you find your way back?”

“We can,” Grayden said. Rubio handed Grayden a bow and quiver of arrows. “Are you any good with these?”

“I’m a fair shot. Thanks.” Grayden added the arrows to his arsenal and then pulled Renya back up the stairs.

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Even though the armor was light, the trip back up the three stories of stairs took her breath away. She was still so tired. If they made it through this, she would sleep for days straight.

The closer they got to the ground level, the louder the battle sounds became. Renya could smell the smoke of burning buildings, and she couldn't imagine what the damage outside must look like.

Once they reached the main floor of the castle, Grayden stopped her. He looked up and down the empty hallway, and then pushed Renya up against the wall, crushing his lips against hers. She was so surprised she didn't know how to react, but after a split second, she kissed him back fervently and with desperation.

“Renya,” he moaned against her, pulling her bottom lip into his mouth. He enveloped her in his arms, holding on to her like he would never let go. Their armor clinked together, and it brought her back to the true reality of this moment. She felt tears sting in her eyes, not ready for this to be the last time she might see him. The thought terrified her.

“I'll come back to you. I promise. Stay safe.” With another kiss, he made his way down the hall.

Renya took a few seconds to catch her breath and wipe away the tears. She needed to be strong for Selenia and Julietta. She knew they both must be terrified.

Renya walked into the throne room, and saw Julietta and Selenia still huddled under their shared blanket. Queen Kalora wasn't in the room, and they were alone except for

a handful of guards.

“How are you both doing?”

Julietta looked down at her slippers. She was still in her night dress, a cream-colored satin robe cinched at her waist. Selenia had gotten dressed, but her hair was a mess, the red mane tangled and teased. Both girls were pale with fear.

“What does she want?” Selenia asked.

“The Shadow Queen? Me.” Renya felt a pang of guilt. This was all her fault. She shouldn't have come here. She'd endangered this entire kingdom. Bile rose up again in her throat and she steadied herself against the cold stone wall, trying to keep herself upright.

“Renya, it's not your fault,” Selenia said. “If she wasn't after you, she'd be moving against another kingdom. She won't be happy until she's conquered everything and stolen everyone's magic. It was only a matter of time.”

That was probably true, but Renya couldn't help but wonder if it would have been better if she had never come through the portal. How was she supposed to restore the balance when she couldn't use her magic without pushing herself to the brink of exhaustion? She needed a safe place to learn her magic, a way to buy them time. The idea hit her suddenly, with the force of a runaway train. She could open a portal and hide there. She could practice her magic away from Cressida. She would just have to figure out how to do it and how to close it behind her so Cressida couldn't follow.

Before she could plan anything, Kalora re-entered the room, in full armor, a sword at her waist. She looked fierce, with a large display of peacock feathers against her back and her crown perched on top of her head.

“They've managed to scale the walls. The dragons have torn through every protective barrier we've thrown at them.”

“How long do we have until they make it to the castle?”

“Not long, I'm afraid. I think we should head down to the armory, it's the safest.” Kalora looked over at Selenia and Julietta, and Renya knew she was concerned for their safety.

“I think that's a good idea,” Renya said quickly. “Come on, let's head down now.”

The guards exited the throne room first, with Selenia and Julietta directly behind them. Renya and Kalora followed, protecting the girls from the back. The sounds outside were deafening. Renya felt adrenaline from Grayden through their connection, and she could tell he was working hard and fighting. While his adrenaline mixed with hers and made her nerves pulsate and her stomach sick, she knew he was still alive. As long as she could feel him, he was safe.

She could hear the clash of swords and the sound of cannon fire. It sounded different than it did in the movies. The explosion was noisy, and then followed by silence before any other blast came. She could also hear the howls and roars from the dragons, the vibrations shaking the stone castle underfoot. Renya had no idea how they would be able to bring down the monstrous creatures.

As soon as they rounded the hall towards the spiral staircase, Renya heard screaming. She whipped around, only to see men in armor, blacker than night, hurrying towards them. They moved in a swift formation, like a line of ants making their way to a picnic. Julietta screamed, and their own guards turned, breaking to the front to face the Shadow Realm soldiers.

“Julietta, Selenia, run!” Kalora screamed, pulling out her sword. “Julietta, take

Selenia down!”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Grayden's heart pounded as he raced through the castle corridors, the weight of his new armor and weapons barely registering. His mind was split between the impending battle and Renya's safety. He could feel her fear and determination through their bond, a constant undercurrent to his own tumultuous emotions.

As he burst through the castle doors into the courtyard, the full chaos of the battle assaulted his senses. The air was thick with smoke and the metallic tang of blood. Screams and the clash of steel against steel filled his ears, punctuated by the earth-shaking roars of dragons.

Grayden spotted Diggory, Orien's second-in-command, directing a group of soldiers near the eastern wall. He sprinted towards him, ducking under a volley of flaming arrows.

“Diggory!” Grayden shouted over the din. “What's our status?”

The battle-worn soldier turned, relief flashing across his face. “Prince Grayden! We're holding the walls, but barely. The dragons are making it nearly impossible to maintain our defenses.”

Grayden nodded grimly. “I've faced these beasts before. Aim for their eyes and the soft spots under their wings. And watch for the riders – they're as dangerous as the dragons themselves.”

As if summoned by his words, a massive shadow passed overhead. Grayden looked up to see a dragon, scales gleaming like polished obsidian, swooping down towards the courtyard. Its rider, clad in blood-red armor, directed the beast with practiced

ease.

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He nocked an arrow, took aim, and let it fly. The shaft whistled through the air, but the rider deflected it with a casual wave of their hand, dark magic shimmering around them.

“Fall back!” Grayden shouted to the nearby soldiers. “Protect the castle entrance!”

As the men scrambled to obey, Grayden felt a surge of panic through his bond with Renya. He couldn't make out specific details, but he sensed danger within the castle walls.

Torn between his duty to lead the defense and his desperate need to protect Renya, Grayden made a split-second decision. “Diggory, take command here. I need to check on the castle's interior defenses.”

Diggory nodded, understanding the unspoken concern for the royal family and guests. “Go, my prince. We'll hold the line here.”

Grayden clapped him on the shoulder before turning back towards the castle. As he ran, he dodged debris from the crumbling walls, narrowly avoiding a falling stone arch. The sounds of battle grew more intense, and he could hear the terrifying screeches of dragons getting closer.

Suddenly, a group of Shadow Realm soldiers burst through a breach in the western wall. Their armor was as black as night, seeming to absorb the light around them. Grayden drew his sword, its familiar weight offering a small comfort.

The first soldier charged at him, blade raised high. Grayden parried the blow, the

impact jarring his arm. He countered with a swift strike to the soldier's exposed side, finding a gap in the dark armor. The man fell with a cry, but two more took his place.

Grayden fought with all the skill and strength he possessed, his sword a blur of motion. He dispatched one opponent after another, but for each one that fell, it seemed two more appeared. The fatigue of battle began to set in, his arms growing heavy with each swing.

A crossbow bolt whizzed past his ear, embedding itself in the stone wall behind him. Grayden ducked and rolled, coming up in time to block another sword strike. He could feel sweat stinging his eyes, the smoke making it hard to breathe.

Through it all, he remained acutely aware of Renya's presence in his mind. Her fear and determination fueled his own, giving him strength when his muscles screamed for rest. He had to keep fighting, had to clear a path back to her.

As he felled another Shadow Realm soldier, Grayden felt a sudden spike of terror through the bond. Something was very wrong. He needed to get to Renya, now.

“Retreat to the inner bailey!” he shouted to the nearby Twilight Kingdom soldiers. “We need to regroup and strengthen our defenses!”

The men began to fall back in an orderly manner, covering each other's retreat. Grayden fought rearguard, his sword flashing in the firelight as he held off the encroaching enemy.

Just as they reached the inner bailey gates, a deafening roar split the air. Grayden looked up to see one of the dragons perched atop the highest tower of the castle, its rider barely visible in the darkness.

A chill ran down his spine. The battle was far from over, and the worst was yet to

come. As he helped barricade the gates, Grayden reached out through the bond once more.

Stay safe, Renya. I'm coming.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Renya grabbed her dagger, but before she could move, dark blue tendrils spread from Kalora, and the room went completely dark. Renya wanted to scream, but she felt Kalora grab her hand and drag her down the hall in the direction of the sublevels. While their guards took on the intruders, Kalora and Renya raced to catch up with Selenia and Julietta. Just as they rounded the final corner, they heard Selenia scream.

Renya halted, the sound piercing through her heart. Up ahead, a Shadow Realm soldier was brandishing a sword right towards Selenia.

“No!” Renya screamed and pulled deep inside her. Her magic burst out of her fingertips, the gold wisps hanging in the air but not doing anything. The soldier looked at Renya's failed magic and laughed, and charged at Selenia, his sword aimed for her chest. Selenia's eyes went wide, and Renya froze, unable to believe the scene before her.

Renya heard the impact of the sword, heard the steel break through flesh.

But it wasn't Selenia's.

Jurel stood there, sword through his chest, mouth open and eyes fading.

Kalora plunged her weapon into the side of the Shadow Realm soldier's stomach, and he fell to the ground.

Renya ran to Jurel as he fell. Selenia sank to the floor, in shock.

“Selenia, help me stop the bleeding,” she said, cutting the fabric of the skirt that partially covered her trousers with her dagger.

Selenia stared, unable to comprehend what she saw. Jurel lay flat on the ground, blood pooling behind his back.

“Selenia, did you hear me? Pull out the sword, and I'll apply pressure.”

But before Renya or Selenia could act, Kalora put her hand on Renya's shoulder. Kalora silently shook her head. Renya then realized the hopelessness of the situation. There was no healer nearby, and no modern medicine. He was losing blood much too fast.

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Kalora helped Renya to her feet. "It's best to let them say goodbye," she said softly.

Selenia finally seemed to understand the horrifying scene in front of her.

"Jurel!" she screamed. "No!" She crawled towards him, her hands running over Jurel's body as if she could fix him by touch alone.

Jurel reached up and stroked her cheek, weak and fading quickly. "I couldn't—couldn't leave. Not after—what happened." He coughed, and blood trickled out of his mouth.

"No! Jurel! You can't leave me! I—I love you!"

He looked up at Selenia, his eyes glazing over and his skin losing its color. "It's...better this way. I can't...can't hurt you again. I...love you. I'm sorry for...being too scared to admit it." He reached out one last time, and Selenia grabbed his hand, pulling it to her chest.

"No! Don't leave me!"

Renya heard another explosion, and saw the hall behind them crumble, rubble falling everywhere. She pulled Selenia up to her feet. "We have to go! Jurel would want you to live!"

Selenia could hardly walk. Kalora and Renya dragged her around another corner and down the staircase, Julietta sobbing in sympathy behind them.

By the time they reached the bottom level, Selenia was mumbling incoherently. She sank to her knees the second Renya and Kalora let go of her.

“Selenia,” Renya said, her eyes full of unshed tears. “I’m so sorry.” She pulled the girl against her chest and Selenia sat there, frozen.

“I think she’s in shock,” Renya said to Kalora and Julietta. “Help me get her to a chair.”

The armory was almost empty now. Renya could hardly believe it was the same room she had been in barely twenty minutes ago. She wasn’t sure if the men working fled or joined the fight. They left the fires burning, and Julietta found a chair and moved it next to one of the stone hearths. A sword was sitting in the flames, unfinished, the steel an intense orange. Renya watched it unseeingly, trying to make sense of what happened upstairs.

Kalora grabbed Selenia under the arms and got her into the chair. Selenia’s eyes were wide open, and she looked ahead, a vacant expression on her face.

Julietta kneeled before her, wiping a cool cloth she found across her face and cleaning the blood off Selenia’s hands. Renya looked at her appreciatively, never noticing Julietta’s quiet compassion until now. Renya moved over the pail of water left behind, and Julietta soaked the cloth again, rinsing Jurel’s blood away as she continued to care for Selenia.

Kalora spoke under her breath. “I don’t think this battle is going to end well for us.”

Before Renya could answer her, a panic-filled voice filled her head.

What’s wrong? I can feel your pain. What happened?

Renya could barely focus. The second Grayden reached out, she pictured Jurel as he laid there, the blood spilling out of his body.

She could feel the exact second Grayden saw the image in her mind. Pain, unlike anything she'd ever felt, surged through her. She dropped to her hands and knees, feeling Grayden's sorrow at the loss of his friend. The despair coursed through her body, and everything inside her tensed up as the tears streamed down her face.

“Renya?” Kalora asked, concerned. “What's going on?”

Renya could hardly speak, the emotional and physical pain too great. It washed over her, the grief seeming to open up every wound, every emotional injury she'd ever had in her life.

She sat there, huddled and rocking herself, trying to gain control of her feelings. When it finally subsided, she could no longer tell where her emotions started and where Grayden's ended.

In that moment, she knew. She knew if she didn't act, every single person she loved and cared about would be killed. Murdered and struck down, just like Jurel. Without thinking, she wiped Jurel's blood off her hands and on her trousers and stood up, making her way over to the staircase.

Kalora grabbed her arm. “Renya, you can't.”

“I have to. It's my destiny,” she said, pulling away. “I'm the light bringer. I'm the sacrifice.”

Kalora looked at her, and Renya could tell she wasn't sure if Renya was in her right mind. But things had never been clearer to Renya. This was what she was meant to do. She climbed up the stairs, careful not to look back behind her. She didn't want to

lose her courage now that she made up her mind. Her body pushed her forward, and she found strength she didn't know she possessed as her feet hit each metal step, taking her higher and higher. She reached the hall and kept moving forward.

Renya ignored the voice in her head. The pleas, the begging, the bargaining, the screaming. She couldn't listen to him. Couldn't picture him there in the battle, realizing what she was about to do. The pain and betrayal he was feeling. Renya tuned it all out as she skirted around rubble and moved deftly to the entrance of the castle.

She stepped out into the courtyard, seeing the carnage at her feet. She was more sure than ever that this was the right move. A peace came over her, a realization that this was how it was always supposed to be. It felt foolish now, that she hadn't put it together. Of course she was the sacrifice that would restore the balance of magic. Through her death, power would flow again and Grayden would be able to defeat Cressida. She smiled, thinking of Julietta gaining back her magic. Would Phillippe get powers too? Would Selenia's magic become manageable? Perhaps Esmeralda would now find her fated mate. It would all be okay. She just needed to do this one, simple thing.

I love you, Renya. Always. Take care of Selenia.

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Grayden's voice came through her mind loud and strong. She instantly panicked. What did he mean, take care of Selenia? What was he doing?

Renya looked up and spotted him, waving his hands at the top of the hill in front of her.

“No!” she screamed, racing towards him. But it was too late.

The large dragon landed on the hill next to him, red talons digging into the earth. Renya could just make out Cressida, wearing blood red armor and thigh high leather boots. She slid off the dragon, approaching Grayden. He pulled out his sword and lunged at her, but her magic was too fast. Her dagger was outstretched, her magic now binding Grayden, holding him still.

Renya ran as fast as she could, her legs barely touching the ground as she sped towards Grayden. A few Shadow Realm soldiers tried to stop her, but she lashed out with her magic, the golden tendrils knocking them over before they could touch her. She made her way up the hill, stumbling and screaming at the top of her lungs.

“It's not him you want. It's me!”

Cressida turned towards Renya, a vicious and victorious smile on her pale face.

Grayden's eyes reflected the horror he felt. Unable to move, he stood there, helpless and gagged by magic.

“Why, if it isn't our star-crossed lovers,” she cooed, her voice soft as silk and

sickeningly sweet. “Have you come to trade your life for your mate's?”

“Yes. Let him go, and you can take my power. And then you can kill me. Just please, let him go.”

“I'm not sure that's a deal I want to take,” Cressida said, moving towards Grayden. She slid a long nail against his cheek, cutting his face with the sharp edge until it bled. “It's much more fun to hurt him and watch you suffer. Tell me, do you feel what he feels? Do you enjoy your little bond?” She sneered as she gripped her dagger and slid it in between the unprotected side of Grayden's armor, piercing his body deeply.

“No! Please stop!” Renya sobbed, unable to stand the sight of the knife in Grayden's flesh, the pain he felt making her ill as she experienced it through their bond. “I'll do anything.”

“Will you?” Cressida purred, holding the dagger in place at Grayden's side and fixating her violet eyes on Renya. “Would you vow to join me?”

What? Join her? Renya couldn't even comprehend what Cressida was asking. She assumed her power would be taken and she would be discarded immediately.

“Please, just take my power and kill me. Let him go.” The sobs continued and Renya dropped to her knees as the blood ran down Grayden's side and onto the dirt below him, pooling at his feet. His eyes were wide, and he was losing blood too quickly.

Cressida twisted the dagger and unbound Grayden at the same time. Free of the magical bindings, he cried out before he hit the ground, bleeding worse than before. Renya moved towards him, but Cressida's magic turned toward Renya and trapped her instead.

The Shadow Queen moved back towards Grayden as he struggled to get to his feet. She kicked his injured side, and he grunted and fell back to the ground. The wound

continued to hemorrhage, and Renya could do nothing but watch as his life's essence spilled on the dirt.

Renya continued to sob hysterically. “Please...” she begged. The desperation surged through her, and she knew in that moment, she would do anything to save him.

Cressida sank to where Grayden lay. He was still struggling to get up, even though he could barely move. Renya could see him reaching for his dagger in his boot. Before he could grasp it, Cressida's magic reached out and froze him. She brought her own dagger to his neck, ready to finish him off.

“I'll do it!” Renya screamed, the horror of the moment almost making her faint. “I'll join you.”

Cressida looked at her and smiled cruelly and then licked her lips. “You'll need to promise in blood.”

“I'll do anything,” Renya said, unsure of what she was agreeing to, but determined to save Grayden.

Cressida once again released her hold on Grayden. He struggled to get up, his hand clutching his side. “Renya, I'm not...worth it. Please. You have to give me up—you know it, and I know it. This is...not how your story ends.”

She looked over at his handsome face, covered in dirt, blood and sweat. She could see the moisture in his eyes and knew this would hurt him almost as much as her death would have. But she couldn't let him die. She wouldn't let him die.

Cressida grabbed the dagger and sliced her hand before doing the same to Renya. At this point, Renya was so numb that she didn't even feel the pain from the cut. Cressida pressed their hands together, their blood mixing together. “Do you promise to join my cause and take up my fight?”

“Yes,” Renya said, trying not to look at Grayden while Cressida conducted the ritual. The second Renya said the words, she felt the anguish rip through Grayden. She tried to hear his thoughts, tried to push into his mind, but all she could sense was his pain, both emotional and physical.

Cressida smiled, her look sinister and dark. She grabbed Renya, pulling her towards the dragon.

“No! Please, just let me say goodbye!” She pulled free of Cressida and ran over to Grayden. Renya threw herself against his chest and kissed him passionately. Their tears mingled together, and she couldn't believe she had to be parted from him again. But she'd rather bear their separation than his death. Grayden clung to her, his mouth trying to kiss every part of her face, knowing it was the last time.

“I'll always be with you,” she whispered, the pain between the two so intense that it was almost incapacitating them both. “I'll always love you. Please, don't come for me. Stay safe.”

Before Grayden could respond, Cressida pulled her away. Renya kicked and screamed, shouting obscenities. She managed to break Cressida's hold for a split second, but the Shadow Queen just laughed and bound her with magic once again. She used her powers to manipulate Renya onto the back of the dragon. A harness, almost reminiscent of a saddle, was secured to the back of the huge beast. Cressida forced Renya down into the seat before tying her hands to the saddle. She moved to the front, and the dragon took to the sky.

Renya watched Grayden grow smaller and smaller before he disappeared and all she could see was the darkness of the night sky. As they soared higher, the cold air bit at her tear-stained cheeks. She closed her eyes, trying to reach out to Grayden through their bond one last time, but found only a hollow emptiness. Whether it was the distance or Cressida's magic, she couldn't tell.

The dragon banked sharply, and Renya's eyes snapped open. Below her, the Twilight Kingdom burned, orange flames licking at the night sky. The sight of destruction brought a fresh wave of guilt and sorrow. How many lives had been lost because of her? How many more would suffer under Cressida's rule?

“Beautiful, isn't it?” Cressida's voice carried over the wind, filled with cruel satisfaction. “This is just the beginning. With you by my side, we'll reshape this world into what it was always meant to be.”