



Realms of Shadow and Sun

Author: *Rachel Avery*

Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: In a world where magic is fading and ancient bonds are breaking, one woman holds the key to salvation.

Renya never imagined her life would be intertwined with the fate of an entire magical realm. Bound by prophecy and passion to the powerful Prince Grayden, she must confront the twisted ambitions of the Shadow Queen. As kingdoms clash and dragons soar, Renya discovers that restoring balance to her world may require embracing the very darkness she fears.

Journey through realms of dazzling beauty and heart-pounding danger in this epic fantasy romance. As Renya and Grayden's story concludes, new tales emerge, promising more magic, romance, and excitement leading to the fourth and final book!

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Chapter One

The dragon snarled and huffed beneath Renya's knees. Heat radiated from the creature, its lungs expanding and contracting with each breath. She had wrongly assumed dragons were reptilian and cold-blooded, but beyond the scales, nothing about this beast resembled a reptile. A pair of enormous wings beat heavily against the air current, carrying her higher into the cool night sky. The dragon suddenly dived, and Renya's stomach lurched at the sensation—like hitting turbulence in an airplane, only far more intense.

It was hard to believe that mere hours ago, she had been in Grayden's arms, worrying about him seeing her thoughts. Now she found herself astride the fiercest creature she'd ever encountered, guided by the cruelest woman known to man.

Her mind drifted back to those final moments with Grayden. The image of the knife plunging into his side flashed before her eyes, and she shuddered. She'd been brutally torn away from him before she could even ensure his safety. In that instant, she knew she would sacrifice anything to spare his life. Renya clung to the hope that a healer had reached Grayden before he bled out on that field.

Cressida remained silent once they were airborne, ignoring Renya and refusing to acknowledge her presence. Renya was grateful for the lack of interaction, wanting nothing to do with the monster. Her hand throbbed where it had been sliced open, a constant reminder of the blood promise she'd made. What did such a promise entail? Was it reversible? She vowed to fight and sabotage Cressida's quest for domination at every turn, refusing to willingly join the Shadow Queen's cause.

As they soared higher, the features of the land below grew smaller. Renya's gaze swept over a shimmering lake nestled deep within a crater and an archipelago stretching out to the western sea. She marveled at the vastness of this world, realizing how little time she'd spent exploring it. Now, she feared she would be locked away for the rest of her life, separated from Grayden forever.

Desperately, she reached inward, trying to find him through their bond. The attempt proved futile, and she prayed it was due to the distance between them rather than his death. They hadn't had the chance to fully explore their connection or test its limitations. The thought of Grayden being gone forever threatened to shatter her completely. Tears cascaded down her cheeks, the wind chilling them until they felt like icicles stinging her skin.

The dragon's incredible speed and power amazed her. Renya recalled seeing more dragons during the battle, but now only this one carried her and Cressida toward the Shadow Realm. If the others had retreated, they must have done so under the cover of the dense forest canopy.

The darkness of the lands ahead loomed like an ominous portent. Sun and shadow collided abruptly, with no transition between them. The stark contrast between the two realms was jarring, and Renya realized with a pang that the lighter side was her homeland—where she was born, once loved, and comforted.

As they approached Shadow Realm territory, the dragon descended slightly. The lower altitude afforded Renya a clearer view of the realm that was hers by birthright. Everything below glistened with golden brilliance. Pearly white buildings and golden bricks created a dazzling cityscape. At its center, slightly elevated, stood a majestic palace reminiscent of the Taj Mahal, only more vibrant. Parts of the towers lay in ruins, and the surrounding city was eerily deserted. Renya's heart ached at the sight; her first glimpse of home was marred by emptiness and abandonment. While Grayden took such pride in his lands, hers lay desolate and forsaken.

Before Renya could commit more details to memory, the dragon accelerated and rapidly lost altitude. She let out a sharp squeal at the sudden descent, eliciting cruel laughter from Cressida. The tops of a dark forest came into view, its interior shrouded in near-total blackness. The only light came from the distant glow of the Sun Realm, hidden behind the overgrown foliage. Towering trees with gnarled, twisted branches stretched skyward, their leaves so dark a green they appeared black. An eerie silence enveloped them, broken only by the wind whistling through the trees.

The absence of light was so complete that Renya couldn't fathom how the dragon navigated through the dense canopy. As they neared the forest floor, the scent of pine needles wafted up, momentarily transporting her back to nights spent in Grayden's arms. His masculine aroma had always made her feel safe and protected. She choked back a sob as the dragon finally touched down on solid ground.

A massive sound, like metal grinding against metal, erupted from somewhere ahead. Renya spotted a large tunnel, its interior dimly illuminated by flickering torches. Before the dragon could enter, Cressida slid off its back and gave its scaled neck an affectionate pat.

“Good boy, Brutus.”

Renya swore she felt the dragon purr and vibrate beneath her. Before she could dwell on it, Cressida approached. Without so much as a glance in Renya's direction, she withdrew a knife from her calf and sliced through the knots securing Renya's hands to the saddle. The moment she was free, Renya pushed herself off the dragon and bolted toward the inky blackness of the forest.

She had barely covered ten feet when an invisible force jerked her back, as if tethered to Cressida by an unseen cord.

Cruel laughter bubbled up from Cressida's thin lips. “You made a promise in blood,

princess,” she sneered. “I don't need my magic to hold you here. But by all means, try to escape. I'll enjoy watching your spirit break and revel in the helplessness you'll soon feel.”

Anger surged through Renya, and to her surprise, golden strands of magic cascaded from her fingertips. An ember separated itself from the strands, falling to the ground and igniting a pile of dry pine needles and dead leaves. Cressida reached out with dark tendrils of magic, extinguishing the flames effortlessly.

“So you've learned how to use my magic.” She looked at Renya with disgust and anger.

“It's my magic,” Renya said through clenched teeth. “You just tried to take it from me.”

“Actually, it never belonged to you. You took it from me first, daughter.”

Chapter Two

Pain sizzled throughout Grayden's entire body, a relentless fire that consumed him from within. His side throbbed with an intensity that radiated down to his feet, each pulse a stark reminder of his failure. He kept his eyes tightly shut, unwilling to face the cruel reality that awaited him. Opening them would mean admitting that he had once again lost Renya—his Little Fawn, his heart, his very reason for being. He scrunched his eyes even tighter, feeling hot tears threatening to spill over and pressure building along his brow.

“Prince Grayden?” a gentle voice inquired, its softness a stark contrast to the chaos in his mind.

Grayden rolled to his uninjured side, hissing as a fresh wave of agony tore through

him. The slight movement felt like a thousand knives piercing his flesh. Finally, he forced his eyes open, blinking rapidly as he took in his surroundings. A gauzy canopy hung above, partially obscuring the view of the stone ceiling. The familiar scent of lavender lingered on the pillow beside him—Renya's scent, a bittersweet reminder of her absence. With a jolt of recognition, he realized he was in their shared bedroom at the Twilight Kingdom.

“Oh Gods, you're awake!” The soft voice came again, and this time he placed it. “I need to let Dimitri know you're conscious,” Julietta said, her words laced with both relief and concern.

Ignoring her, Grayden pushed himself up to a sitting position. A gasp escaped his lips as pain, raw and sharp, surged throughout his body. His hands clutched at the down comforter, knuckles turning white as he struggled to breathe through the sensation.

“Grayden, no. You need to heal.” Julietta's hand touched his bare shoulder, but she quickly withdrew it. “Gods, you're burning up. I think your wound is infected.”

Dismissing her worry, he attempted to swing his legs out of the bed. His trousers clung to his skin, damp with sweat, but his shirt and armor were conspicuously absent. As his bare feet hit the cool stone floor, he glanced around, searching for his boots. Every movement sent a fresh jolt of agony through his nerves, as if molten metal coursed through his veins instead of blood. His lungs felt constricted, each breath a laborious task. Glancing down, he noticed his injured side was tightly wrapped with pristine white bandages, a stark contrast to the angry red skin peeking out from beneath.

Julietta stood beside the bed, horror etched across her delicate features. She wore a flowing peach gown, having changed out of the nightgown she'd worn during the attack. The sight of her different attire made Grayden's stomach clench with panic as he realized how much time must have passed while he was unconscious. Fates, his

Renya. How could he have let this happen?

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Closing his eyes, he reached deep inside, desperate to sense her presence. He stilled his breathing, searching, hoping. There—a flicker, faint but undeniable. She was alive. Relief washed over him, quickly followed by frustration as he realized the connection lacked its usual intensity. She must be far away, he surmised, likely already in the Shadow Realm. But she was alive, and that knowledge ignited a spark of determination within him.

Grayden attempted to stand, but his legs betrayed him, muscles quivering like a newborn foal's. He swayed unsteadily, the room spinning around him.

“You've lost a lot of blood, Grayden,” Julietta said, her voice tinged with urgency. “You need to lie back down.”

“No,” he growled, the word rumbling from deep in his chest. “I won't stop until I get her back.”

If Julietta was shocked by his tone, she didn't show it. Instead, she lowered her voice, speaking to him as one might to a wounded animal. “Your brother is on his way here now. He will help you get Renya back. But you can't do anything in the shape you're in.”

“What plans have been made to retrieve my mate?” The words came out as a snarl, unhappiness dripping from each syllable. Instantly, guilt flooded him as Julietta stepped back, a glint of fear in her eyes. Grayden sighed, then grimaced as pain flowed through him once more. Gods, he wasn't fit to launch any kind of attack. He couldn't even remain on his feet. Nausea overtook him, and he fell back onto the mattress, the softness doing little to cushion the impact.

“I’m sorry, Julietta,” he whispered, his voice small and heavy with anguish. “I just...I need Renya.”

Julietta's expression softened. She walked towards the table near the crackling fire and returned with a tray bearing a steaming bowl of broth. The rich aroma drifted towards him, but instead of enticing his appetite, it only served to turn his stomach further.

“My mother is talking with Gillbert and Orien to figure out what to do next,” Julietta explained, her voice gentle but firm. “I know you need Renya, but our people are suffering. We've lost a third of our village, and there's no food and not much shelter. Times have been hard for a while, but the dragons and Shadow Realm soldiers made quick work of the village. Everything was ransacked.”

Once again, guilt flushed Grayden's cheeks and neck. Of course, their village was all but destroyed. He glanced around the room, surprised to see it relatively unscathed. Julietta caught his questioning look and seemed to understand.

“The north half of the castle is untouched,” she explained, her voice catching slightly. “Once the Shadow Queen got—got what she came for, they immediately retreated.”

Grayden heard the hesitation in Julietta's voice. She was trying hard not to say Renya's name, as if it would pain him even further. In truth, hearing her name spoken aloud might have been a comfort, a reminder that she wasn't just a figment of his imagination.

His head began to swim, the room blurring at the edges. He saw the look of concern deepen on Julietta's face before her features faded and everything went black.

The next time consciousness returned to Grayden, it was Dimitri at his side. The healer's rough hands worked deftly, adjusting the bandage wrapped around Grayden's

torso. The scent of medicinal herbs hung heavy in the air, pungent and sharp.

“Ah, you're awake,” Dimitri said, his voice gruff but not unkind. “I'm afraid you're battling a nasty infection in that wound. I've tried to draw it out using a poultice, and it seems to be working, albeit slowly.”

This time, the nausea and dizziness weren't as overwhelming, though a dull ache persisted throughout Grayden's body. Sitting up still sent shockwaves of pain through him, but he managed to do so without whimpering. He studied Dimitri, relief washing over him as he saw their healer had survived the battle unscathed.

“We'll get her back,” Dimitri said, his words an echo of Julietta's earlier assurance.

Grayden said nothing, the emptiness inside him a gaping void. Without Renya, he felt hollow, purposeless. The pain of her absence weighed on his soul, threatening to crush him entirely.

Dimitri accepted Grayden's silence and began to examine him closely. As he unwrapped the bandage, his eyes widened at the sight of the wound beneath.

“That bad, huh?” Grayden rasped, his voice rough from disuse.

Dimitri sighed heavily, moving towards the edge of the bed to retrieve several bottles from his healer's bag. “It's still horribly infected,” he admitted, his tone grim. He opened a jar filled with a mint-green paste and began to apply it gently to the wound.

The salve stung fiercely, but Grayden bit back any sign of discomfort. This sting was nothing compared to the ache of Renya's absence. “Well, Cressida kicked me several times there,” he said, attempting a wry smile that came out more as a frown. “I'm not surprised.”

Dimitri remained silent as he smeared the contents of another jar onto the inside of a fresh bandage before wrapping it around Grayden's waist. Before he could secure it, the door to the room flew open with a resounding bang.

“Grayden, are you okay?” Phillippe's voice boomed through the room as he rushed to his brother's side, concern clouding his usually composed features. Dark circles shadowed his mocha-colored eyes, and his jaw was covered in several days' worth of coarse stubble.

With effort, Grayden managed to sit up straighter. “No, I'm not okay,” he said, his voice low and tight with barely contained emotion. “Renya is gone, and I'm too weak to do a damn thing about it.”

Dimitri, sensing the tension, quickly finished securing the bandage and gathered his supplies. He backed out of the room silently, leaving the brothers to talk privately.

“We'll get her back, Brother,” Phillippe said, his tone a mixture of determination and sympathy.

“You know what?” Grayden snapped, frustration boiling over. “You're the second person to say that to me within the past half hour, yet no one has offered up a single plan.” He clenched his jaw tightly, muscles jumping beneath his skin.

“Whoa there, calm down,” Phillippe said, raising his hands in a placating gesture. “I care about Renya too. But we have a multitude of problems we're facing. The entire village outside is a war zone. People are displaced, there's no food or clean water, and the dead haven't even been recovered from where they fell. The second I got here, I dispatched as many of our soldiers as I could spare to help restore the city and at least stabilize things here.”

Grayden knew his brother was right, but every instinct screamed that none of it

mattered. The only thing in this entire world that carried any weight was the connection he shared with his mate. He looked away, shame and frustration warring within him. He felt overwhelmed by the aching need to get her back, yet helpless in the face of his own weakness and the kingdom's dire situation.

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Phillippe looked down at his brother and sighed, his expression a mixture of empathy and concern. "I can't imagine how difficult this must be," he said softly. "Fated bonds are so rare, it's hard for any of us to truly understand how you feel. But we will get her back, Grayden. I promise you that." He paused, then asked gently, "Can you still feel her?"

Grayden closed his eyes, reaching out along their bond. The connection was there, but instead of the fiery inferno he usually felt, it was like a dim candle flame, flickering and in danger of being snuffed out. "She's there," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, "but faint. So faint."

"You know she's alive," Phillippe said, squeezing Grayden's shoulder gently. "That's more than any of us would get if we lost our loved ones. You need to focus on that blessing, Brother. It's a thread of hope we can cling to."

Grayden nodded, but his insides remained knotted with worry and fear. He felt perspiration beading on his forehead, unsure if it was from the fever or the turmoil in his mind. Trying to push thoughts of Renya aside for a moment, he asked, "How is our sister?"

Phillippe's expression darkened, and he shifted his feet, suddenly unable to meet Grayden's gaze. "I haven't been able to see her yet," he admitted, his voice heavy with concern. "She'll only see Julietta. She won't let Dimitri give her anything to help ease her grief. I ran into Julietta on my way up here, and she said Selenia doesn't talk. She just...stares into the fire and won't eat or drink."

Worry gripped Grayden's heart, squeezing until he felt he might suffocate. Fates,

everything was falling apart around them. Jurel was dead, Renya was gone, and nearly half the Twilight Kingdom lay in ruins. He was also certain his magic was completely depleted. Grayden had pulled everything from inside of him on that hill to try and reach Cressida, but he hadn't been able to bring forth even a spark.

Phillippe saw the look of despair on Grayden's face and clapped him gently on the back, mindful of his injuries. "One thing at a time, Grayden," he said, his voice firm but kind. "One thing at a time. We'll face each challenge as it comes, and we'll do it together."

Grayden nodded, trying to draw strength from his brother's words. But as he closed his eyes, all he could see was Renya's face, her eyes wide with fear as Cressida dragged her away. The memory burned, fueling a determination that began to smolder within him. He would heal, he would regain his strength, and then...then he would move heaven and earth to bring her back.

Chapter Three

For the third consecutive day, Sion found himself contemplating whether or not he should just kill Brandle in his sleep. The allure of making it look like an accident was tempting. He could push him off a cliff, bury him alive in an avalanche...the list of potential punishments and methods of death seemed endless, each more satisfying than the last in Sion's mind. But as gratifying as orchestrating Brandle's demise might be, he knew Grayden was still relying on him to play his part at Cressida's court. The weight of his responsibility sat heavy on his shoulders, a constant reminder of the delicate game he was forced to play.

Sion sat by the flickering fire, its warmth barely penetrating the chill of the Snow Lands. The crackling flames cast dancing shadows across the pristine white landscape, creating a strange, ever-shifting view. He listened to Brandle's thunderous snores emanating from the nearby tent, the sound grating on his already frayed

nerves. It surprised him that Brandle trusted him enough to sleep so soundly, leaving Sion to keep watch. For his part, Sion rarely closed his eyes for more than a few minutes at a time, his fingers perpetually curled around the hilt of his dagger, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. He didn't trust the queen's cousin for a heartbeat, and he wasn't about to let his guard down now.

A muffled cough drew Sion's attention to the old man bound to a nearby tree. The sight of the elderly prisoner, forced to sleep upright in the biting cold, with nothing but the frozen ground beneath his thin, strange garb, made Sion's stomach churn with guilt. He rose from his position by the fire, snow packing beneath his boots as he approached the captive.

Sion studied the man, taking in his torn shirt and peculiar footwear. The shoes were black with laces, but they were low-cut, entirely unsuitable for the harsh conditions of the Snow Lands. His glasses hung askew on his face, one edge dangling lower than the other, a testament to the rough treatment he'd endured. Despite his disheveled appearance, the man's eyes were a piercing, crystalline blue that seemed to bore right through Sion.

Sion couldn't fathom why this seemingly unremarkable human was so important to the Shadow Queen. Perhaps he had been banished to the human realm? The memory of their initial encounter flooded back to Sion. When he and Brandle had stepped through the portal and found the man bent over a long row of books, he had offered no resistance. It was almost as if he had been expecting them, his cerulean eyes twinkling with amusement before Brandle's magic froze him in place and then forcibly dragged him into their world.

The old man rubbed his hands together vigorously, blowing on them in a futile attempt to generate warmth. The golden buttons securing his sleeves glinted in the firelight, a touch of elegance in their desolate surroundings. Sion glanced back towards Brandle's tent, confirming that the snoring continued on, before he spoke in a

hushed tone.

“I’m sorry about this,” he murmured, genuine regret coloring his words. “I wish I could let you go and return you to your world.”

The old man's gaze settled on Sion, his mouth twitching as if he possessed a secret that Sion couldn't possibly comprehend. “Trust me,” he replied, his voice surprisingly steady despite the cold. “I’m right where I want to be.” He studied Sion intently, silver hair damp against his scalp, snowflakes melting and tracing icy paths down his weathered face.

Sion sighed heavily, the weight of his conflicting loyalties pressing down on him. He reached into the leather satchel slung across his shoulder and produced a handful of dense, nutrient-rich traveling cakes. Kneeling down, he pressed them into the old man's cold-numbed hands. The prisoner grasped them eagerly, shoveling the food into his mouth with surprising speed.

“Do you have a name?” Sion asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

The man swallowed hard, then offered another enigmatic grin. “Cyrus,” he replied simply.

Sion rocked back on his heels before standing and moving back to the fire. He grabbed a battered pot and began filling it with fresh snow and a blend of aromatic herbs. The familiar motions of preparing tea provided a moment of normalcy in the surreal situation.

“Well, Cyrus,” Sion began, his tone casual but his mind racing, “what does the Shadow Queen want with you? What importance do you hold for her that she sent us all the way to the human realm to retrieve you?”

Cyrus's eyes glinted in the firelight, a hint of mischief in their depths. "Oh, trust me, I'm important to her," he said, his voice laden with unspoken meaning. "At one time, I was the most important person to her."

Sion snorted, finding the claim hard to believe. And yet...it was a strange request, traveling through the portal to kidnap an aging human male. There had to be some kind of connection there, as impossible as it seemed.

Cyrus began coughing again, a dry rattle that seemed to emanate from deep within his lungs. Sion turned his attention back to the pot he had placed in the fire. As the mixture heated, a soft citrus aroma wafted through the air, eliciting a contented sigh from the old man.

"I haven't smelled crimpling tea in almost twenty-five years," Cyrus murmured, his eyes closed as he savored the familiar scent.

Sion's suspicions crystallized in that moment. This man wasn't just a human. He was fae, glamourised like Renya had been. For whatever reason, he had either been banished or had chosen to hide in the human realm.

Carefully, Sion removed the pot from the fire and poured its steaming contents into a tarnished silver mug. He brought it over to his prisoner, watching as Cyrus's blue eyes sparkled with knowing gratitude.

"You're not really hers, are you?" Cyrus asked softly, his gaze penetrating.

Sion fought to keep his face neutral, his heart hammering in his chest. How could this man guess his duplicity so easily?

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A slight chuckle escaped the elderly man. “You're a Ruffio, aren't you? From the Snow Lands?”

Sion's eyes widened, and he felt a bead of sweat trickle down his neck despite the frigid air. He glanced nervously towards Brandle's tent, silently praying to the Gods that the man's snores continued. To his relief, the rhythmic sound still emanated from the canvas structure.

“I guessed right, didn't I?” Cyrus pressed, a hint of triumph in his voice. “I knew your father a bit. You look exactly like him. Anyone from the Snow Lands and a descendant of Markus Ruffio would never betray their own.”

Sion didn't dare speak of his double role, but he made no move to argue with this perceptive stranger either. He let the silence stretch between them as Cyrus finished his tea, the only sounds the crackling of the fire and the whisper of the wind through the snow-laden trees.

“How is King Efferon?” Cyrus asked suddenly, his tone so casual that it caught Sion off guard. It was jarring to hear this man, whom they had found organizing books in another realm, speak of the late king with such familiarity.

“He passed away about five years ago,” Sion replied, unable to keep the sadness from his voice. “The queen as well.” Grayden's parents had always been kind to him and his family. King Efferon had even been his godfather.

“Both?” Cyrus's brow crinkled with concern. “What happened?”

“A sickness,” Sion explained, the memories of that dark time flooding back. “None such as had ever been seen before. Healers were called from every corner of our world, but none could save them.”

Cyrus frowned, his eyes narrowing. “A sickness, you say? Did anyone else become ill?”

Sion's own frown deepened as he considered the question. No, no one else had fallen ill. The Snowden children had been kept away as a precaution, but even the healers and servants who had tended to the royal couple had remained healthy.

“Not a sickness, my boy,” Cyrus said quietly, his voice heavy with implication. “I'd wager they were poisoned.”

The words hit Sion like a physical blow. He felt suddenly dizzy, blood rushing to his head and then pooling in his cheeks. Fates, murdered. Why hadn't anyone considered this possibility? His mind raced back to those bleak days following the king and queen's deaths, when he had struggled to keep Grayden from falling apart completely. He remembered dunking his friend's head in the horse's water trough, desperate to sober him up enough to attend the funeral. Grayden had taken the loss of both parents incredibly hard, and being thrust into the role of ruler had only added to the crushing weight on his shoulders.

In the chaos of those days, with Tumwalt and Almory bustling about, trying to prepare Grayden and plan for the uncertain future, was it possible they had overlooked the true cause of the royal couple's demise?

Cyrus regarded Sion with sympathy, his eyes full of understanding as the young man grappled with this earth-shattering revelation.

“Who is ruling the Snow Lands now?” Cyrus inquired gently, steering the

conversation to slightly less treacherous waters. “If I recall correctly, the eldest Snowden child had no magic. The other was practically a babe in leading strings.”

“Phillippe, the eldest, possesses no magic,” Sion confirmed, struggling to keep his voice neutral. “The younger, Grayden, now leads the lands.” Despite his best efforts, a note of pride crept into his tone as he spoke of his best friend.

“And it's him you serve, isn't it?” Cyrus pressed, his eyes knowing.

Sion nodded, just the quickest jerk of his head, but it was enough.

“Ah, I see,” Cyrus mused. “Tell me, what has Cressida been up to? Besides her plans for total domination, that is.”

“She's managed to bring dragons into this world,” Sion replied, unable to keep the note of fear from his voice.

It was Cyrus's turn to look shaken. “She didn't?” he breathed, disbelief etched across his features.

“I'm afraid so. Three, soon to be four,” Sion confirmed grimly. “She's practically unstoppable.” He glanced towards the horizon, where the first sliver of sun was beginning to climb into the sky, painting the snow-covered landscape in hues of pink and gold.

“Four dragons?” Cyrus shook his head in amazement. “I just—I can't believe she would go that far.”

“You have no idea how far her depravity goes,” Sion retorted bitterly, his hand unconsciously moving to his shoulder where the phantom pain of Cressida's bite marks still lingered.

Cyrus opened his mouth to respond but stopped abruptly as the sound of rustling emerged from Brandle's tent. Sion quickly moved away from Cyrus, returning to his position by the fire, his heart racing with the fear of discovery.

Brandle crawled out of the tent, his usually neat beard disheveled and his robes wrinkled. He looked thoroughly annoyed, his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the camp.

“Sleep well, Brandle?” Sion couldn't quite keep the smirk from his voice. It was oddly satisfying to see how poorly the pampered courtier was handling the rigors of outdoor travel.

Brandle scowled at Sion, then cast a suspicious glance at Cyrus. “Sion, get him up,” he barked. “I want to be back at the Shadow Realm by this evening. I refuse to spend another night in that accursed tent.”

Sion ignored Brandle's imperious tone, taking his time as he packed up his tent and supplies before securing them to his horse. While they were able to use magic to transport themselves for some of the journey, neither possessed enough power to transport their prisoner back to the cliff high above the Shadow Realm valley.

Snow crunched underfoot as Sion approached Cyrus once more. He cut through the ropes binding the old man to the tree, guilt washing over him as Cyrus struggled to his feet, his legs stiff from the cold. Sion moved to help him onto the horse, steadying him as he settled into the saddle. Brandle approached from behind, securing Cyrus to the saddle with fresh ropes. Sion tied the prisoner's horse to his own mount, then watched as Brandle extinguished the fire with a flick of his dark tendril of magic before climbing onto his own horse.

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Despite his predicament, Cyrus sat regally atop his mount, as if he had been riding all his life. There was a quiet dignity about him that Sion couldn't help but admire.

As they set off, Sion felt a growing sense of dread settling in his chest. Every step of the horses' hooves brought him closer to Cressida's clutches, to her bed. The thought made his skin crawl. As the snow began to thin, he knew it was only a matter of time before she could sink her teeth into him once more, both literally and figuratively.

They left the icy brightness of the Snow Lands behind, entering the oppressive gloom of the Shadow Realm's forest. Though Sion had ridden through these woods many times, the dead and decaying trees always left him with the unsettling feeling of being watched. Every crackle of a branch made him turn, every rustling leaf set his heart racing.

At last, they emerged from the forest, standing at the base of the imposing cliff that housed Cressida's stronghold. Sion glanced back at Cyrus, surprised to see steady resolve in the old man's expression.

Brandle surveyed their little group with disdain. "I'm going to use magic," he announced haughtily. "You can use the spiral staircase with the human." Without another word, he let the black mist envelop his body before funneling upward and disappearing.

Sion couldn't help but sigh in relief. For the first time in days, he was free of Brandle's stares and insults. The man's oily presence had tainted every moment of their journey, his constant complaints about every snow drift and gust of wind getting on Sion's last nerve.

Dismounting smoothly, Sion untied Cyrus from the saddle. Two men, clad in the same golden garb Sion wore, emerged from the shadows to take charge of the horses. As Sion led Cyrus towards the entry to the spiral staircase, he felt physically ill with dread. Beside him, Cyrus stretched and grunted, his muscles clearly aching from the long journey.

Glancing around to ensure they were alone, Sion made a split-second decision. He quickly untied the older man's bonds, ignoring the look of surprise that flashed across Cyrus's face.

“Go,” Sion urged in a fierce whisper. “Quickly. Back to the Snow Lands. Our people will take you in.”

But Cyrus remained rooted to the spot, making no move to flee.

“Did you hear me?” Sion hissed, anxiety coloring his tone. “You need to move fast!”

A small, mysterious smile played at the corners of Cyrus's mouth. “I'm right where I want to be, trust me, my boy,” he said calmly. “Now that I'm here, I can almost feel her. This is a reunion I'm looking forward to.”

Sion's jaw went slack as he struggled to process the man's words. What person in their right mind would willingly face Cressida? Sion would have given anything to be free of her clutches, to live his own life away from her toxic influence.

“If I can't convince you to go, I have no choice but to bring you before the queen,” Sion said, his voice heavy with resignation. “I don't know why she desires you so, but the fact that she made us cross into the human realm to find you means you are instrumental to her schemes. She won't let you live. Once she gets what she wants, she'll discard you.” His fists clenched unconsciously, nails digging into his palms.

“Don't concern yourself with my welfare,” Cyrus replied, his tone maddeningly calm. “I can look out for myself.” He rolled his stiff shoulders and neck, wincing slightly. “Just bring me to her.”

Sion stood at the base of the turret that led to the palace, its imposing structure perched precariously on the mountainside. Drawing upon the meager magic Cressida afforded him, he sent out a tendril of black mist. It twisted and twirled in the air, an otherworldly serpent dancing to an unheard melody, before turning into the shape of a door on the side of the turret.

Reaching out with the borrowed magic, Sion pushed against the ancient bricks. They groaned and shifted, sliding back to reveal a hidden passageway. As the entrance appeared, Sion sighed heavily, the dread in his stomach churning like the rough sea.

If the sudden appearance of the doorway surprised Cyrus, he didn't show it. Instead, he marched ahead of Sion, his loosened bindings trailing behind him.

The smell of moss and damp earth assaulted Sion's nostrils as they entered the passage. What had once been a comforting scent, reminiscent of the forest after a cleansing rain, now turned his stomach. It was as if the very air of the Shadow Realm had been tainted by Cressida's malevolence.

Standing in the center of the circular chamber, Sion channeled a bit more magic. The torches lining the wet walls sputtered to life, their dull glow matching the look of resignation in Sion's eyes. Cyrus glanced around, his expression one of quiet reminiscence, as if these gloomy halls held memories from a distant past.

Before Sion could inquire about Cyrus's apparent familiarity with the place, the old man moved towards the first stone slab step, his shiny shoes clacking against the weathered rock.

“Up we go,” Cyrus said, a hint of anticipation in his voice that Sion couldn't quite fathom.

Sion followed behind, marveling at the agility of the older man. Despite his age, Cyrus seemed to be in remarkably good shape, tackling the endless spiral staircase with determination. Even Sion found himself huffing towards the end, while Cyrus merely paused a few times to catch his breath.

At last, they reached the landing. The passageway opened up into a dome-shaped space, with open-air windows near the top allowing slivers of the perpetually gloomy sky to peek through. Cyrus's expression was one of grim resolve as Sion pressed open the ornate marble door leading into the palace.

They crossed the threshold, their footsteps echoing on the polished marble tiles. Towering ivory pillars flanked their path, offering no protection from the abyss of the valley far below. Every walkway was exposed to the elements, with no walls to break the constant, treacherous wind.

As they navigated the twisting labyrinth of sky bridges, Sion felt as if he were walking a tightrope, his position in the air as precarious as his standing in Cressida's court. One misstep, one wrong word, and he would plummet into the darkness below.

Finally, they reached the last sky bridge leading to the throne room. Sion's heart hammered in his chest as he grabbed the ropes binding Cyrus and tightened them, forcing the old man behind him to maintain the illusion of a captive and captor. They crossed the threshold into the throne room, where Brandle stood regally, as if he were the rightful occupant of the black mist throne rather than a mere servant.

Sion moved towards the center of the cavernous chamber, the ever-present wind teasing his hair. He longed to shed his thick fur cloak, but he remained stoic, awaiting the arrival of the Shadow Queen. Suddenly, the air in the room seemed to thicken,

funneling towards the throne. Dark tendrils of mist writhed and twisted, gradually taking on a human form.

As the mist dissipated, Cressida materialized before them, a triumphant smirk playing on her lips. She was an imposing figure in a long hunter-green dress that pooled around her feet like a liquid shadow. An intricately embroidered serpent with glittering jeweled eyes wrapped around her torso, its scaled body serving as a macabre belt. Her eyelids were painted a matching verdant hue, and large, gold cobra-shaped earrings dangled from her lobes, catching the dim light as she moved. She twisted in place, her high heels clicking ominously on the polished floor.

Sion bowed his head, reluctant to meet her cruel gaze. But from the corner of his eye, he detected movement as Cyrus straightened, standing taller and more defiant than before.

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“So...it's been a long time,” Cyrus said, his voice steady as he stared down the Shadow Queen.

Cressida's lips pursed into a thin line as she descended from the dais circling her throne. She stood before Cyrus, malice radiating from her in waves. The tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife as silence stretched between them.

Finally, she spoke, her voice dripping with disdain. “Hiding in the human realm? I should have guessed it before. You always had a soft spot for those weaklings.”

Cyrus shrugged, his bound arms doing little to diminish his air of nonchalance. “It was better than being in the same world as you.”

Cressida hissed, her hand lashing out in a vicious backhand that caught Cyrus across the face. The sound of the impact echoed through the chamber, but Cyrus merely turned his head with the blow, making no sound. When he faced forward again, his expression remained calm, a stark contrast to the storm of emotions playing across Cressida's features.

“Brandle,” she snapped, her voice as sharp as a knife. “Take him away. See that he's placed in the south wing, farthest from my chambers. I don't want him anywhere near me. Bind him, with both ropes and magic.” Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “And if he fights...well, feel free to get creative. Just don't kill him. That pleasure will be mine alone.”

Brandle nodded, a cruel smile twisting his lips. Dark tendrils of magic enveloped both him and Cyrus, and in the blink of an eye, they vanished from the throne room.

Cressida stepped down from the dais, brushing past Sion as if he were nothing more than a piece of furniture. He was just about to let out a sigh of relief when she turned back, fixing him with a penetrating stare that froze the breath in his lungs.

“You are no longer permitted to leave the palace, for any reason,” she declared, her tone rough. “Your sole purpose in this realm is to serve me.”

As she swept from the room, the full weight of her words crashed down upon Sion. Bile rose in his throat, and for the thousandth time since he had infiltrated her court, he found himself wishing the Fates would grant him the sweet release of death.

Chapter Four

Renya stared blankly out the window, her mind a whirlwind of despair and desperation as she sought a way out of her predicament. Since Cressida's guards had unceremoniously shoved her into this room, she'd done nothing but sob, her body aching from the constant trembling. Every fiber of her being longed to collapse onto the ornate bed behind her and sleep away her troubles, but rest eluded her.

The most terrifying aspect of her captivity was the absence of Grayden's presence in her mind. She could no longer sense him through their bond, and the tension and worry this caused made her head pound relentlessly. Was it merely the distance between them, or was he unconscious...or worse? The image of him bleeding profusely on that hill, surrounded by destruction and carnage, was seared into her memory.

And then there was Cressida's earth-shattering revelation. Her mother? The very notion chilled Renya to her core. How could that cruel, sadistic witch possibly be her mother? It had to be a lie, some kind of ploy for power. There was no way she could be the product of such evil. And yet...the Shadow Queen had recognized Aunt Agatha immediately at the Sunset Land. She had even seemed to fear her. Could it possibly

be true?

Renya felt broken, her entire life revealed as a lie. First, the truth about her heritage and lineage, and now this latest bombshell? She wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and disappear from this nightmare.

Another tear leaked from her eye, and Renya didn't even bother to wipe it away. She watched it drip onto the marble vanity in front of her, the droplet pooling against the cold surface. The separation from Grayden was unbearable. She now understood his frantic behavior to get to her after their bond had developed. It felt as though a piece of her soul had been torn away, locked in an impenetrable vault beyond her reach.

A soft knock on the door momentarily drew her out of her misery. Rising unsteadily, she moved to the corner of the room, torn between horror at the thought of facing the Shadow Queen and a desperate desire to confront her about her outlandish claim.

Instead of Cressida, an older woman entered the room, her demeanor almost bashful. Her auburn hair was streaked with silver, and she had a kind face with soft eyes and a mouth pulled into a tentative smile. Renya could scarcely believe that someone so gentle-looking could exist in this palace of horrors.

The woman approached Renya slowly, balancing a polished wooden tray in her hands. She placed it atop the vanity where Renya had been sitting, then wiped her hands on her crisp cream-colored apron. As she turned to leave, Renya found herself calling out.

“Wait!”

The woman turned, her expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Renya hesitated, unsure of what she actually wanted from this stranger. She studied the woman, weighing her options. While the servant looked friendly, it could be a trap.

Yet there was something in her eyes that made Renya think she might be sympathetic to her plight.

“What's your name?” Renya asked, her voice hoarse from crying.

The woman smoothed her hair back from her forehead, meeting Renya's gaze briefly before lowering her eyes respectfully. “Margot, your highness.”

“Please,” Renya said, surprising herself with the strength in her voice, “just call me Renya.”

Margot glanced up quickly, a flicker of something—understanding, perhaps?—in her eyes before she looked down again. “As you wish, Renya.”

Before Renya could formulate another question, Margot slipped out of the room, closing the door softly behind her.

Sighing heavily, Renya approached the vanity. A pink teapot steamed gently, accompanied by a teacup with a lemon slice floating in it. A few slices of cheese rested nearby, along with some bread and sausage. She eyed the food warily, wondering if there was any chance it might be poisoned. It seemed unlikely; if Cressida had wanted her dead, she could have killed her back at the Twilight Kingdom. No, the Shadow Queen had some purpose for her, of that Renya was certain.

Settling back at the vanity, Renya poured herself a cup of tea. Though neither thirsty nor hungry, she knew she needed to keep up her strength if she hoped to find a way back to Grayden. As she nibbled on a piece of bread, she glanced around the room, searching for any potential means of escape.

The mahogany bed dominated the room, its tall posters draped with red gauzy

curtains. A vase of blood-red roses sat on the nightstand, their sweet fragrance at odds with the oppressive atmosphere. A small fire crackled in the hearth on the opposite side of the room, offering more light than warmth. Just off to one corner, Renya spied a tiny bathroom with a small copper tub.

The sight of the tub sent a pang through her heart as she remembered Grayden's playful teasing about the size of their bathtub at the lodge. It felt like a lifetime ago that she had sat in his lap while he tenderly washed her hair. Another sob threatened to overtake her, but she swallowed it back with effort. If she wanted to survive—to escape—she needed to be stoic and strategic. No matter how much she longed to dissolve into tears, it wouldn't get her anywhere. She had to focus all her energy on finding a way back to Grayden.

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But how could she break the blood promise? There had to be a way. She reached for her magic, feeling it hum beneath her skin, but as soon as she tried to draw it forth, she instinctively pulled back. She still had no real idea how to use it, let alone how to break a spell. And was it truly her magic? Or was it Cressida's, as the Shadow Queen claimed?

Her temple throbbed as a migraine began to form. Though she had done little but cry and stare out the window since being forced into this room, Renya felt utterly exhausted. Finally giving in to her body's demands, she crawled into the bed fully clothed and waited for sleep to claim her.

When Renya next opened her eyes, pale morning light was filtering through the windows. The shadows persisted, as they seemed to do throughout the day in this realm, but the chorus of chirping birds told her she had slept through the night. Taking a deep breath, she immediately reached out for Grayden through their bond. After several failed attempts, she gave up, fighting back tears. She told herself it was only the distance preventing her from feeling him, but the doubt gnawed at her relentlessly.

Before she could drag herself out of bed, a quiet knock sounded at the door. Margot entered, carrying another tray and a gown draped over her arm.

Determined to make a connection, Renya tried once more to engage the servant in conversation as Margot arranged her breakfast tray on the vanity. "Tell me about yourself, Margot."

Margot kept her eyes lowered and remained silent. Renya sighed, moving to examine

the tray. Unlike yesterday's meal, it held only a teapot and teacup.

As Margot began making the bed, smoothing the sheets and fluffing the pillows, she suddenly straightened, her demeanor shifting. "I have a son," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "He is a soldier for this realm. He was there that night."

Renya looked at her, perplexed. "What night?"

Margot's eyes met Renya's, a mixture of sympathy and fear in their depths. "When you were taken to the Sunset Lands by Brandle. He saw how much Prince Snowden loves you, how hard he fought for you." She paused, glancing nervously at the door before continuing. "He wishes he served another kingdom. But as long as I'm in this palace, he has to be loyal."

Moved by this unexpected show of empathy, Renya crossed the room to Margot. She clasped the woman's hands in her own, offering a tentative smile. Perhaps she had found an ally in this den of shadows after all.

Renya entered the dining room, her stomach a tight knot of anxiety, her appetite completely nonexistent. Like most of the palace, it was an open-air room, the perpetual gloom of the Shadow Realm seeping in from all sides. Despite its ominous surroundings, the oval-shaped chamber was adorned with ivory pillars and delicate hanging lights, creating an unexpected oasis of beauty amidst Cressida's dark domain. The contrast was jarring, leaving Renya unsettled and wary.

The ivory table at the center of the room gleamed softly, its pale surface a stark contrast to the shadows that seemed to cling to every corner. Delicate white iron chairs surrounded it, their intricate woven patterns reminiscent of frost on a window pane. Margot, a fleeting presence of warmth in this cold place, motioned Renya to a seat at the head of the table before quietly slipping away. Renya felt a pang of loss as

she watched her go, suddenly feeling very small and alone in the cavernous space.

Minutes ticked by, each one stretching into an eternity as Renya sat in tense silence. Just as she was gathering the courage to leave and attempt to find her way back to her room, the air in the chamber began to swirl and darken. A funnel cloud of inky blackness materialized, dispersing as quickly as it had formed to reveal Cressida in all her terrifying glory.

The Shadow Queen was garbed in a gown of deep indigo that seemed to absorb what little light there was in the room. Tiny amethysts sparkled along the neckline and waist, catching the dim light and throwing off purple reflections. In place of a crown, she wore a silver band across her forehead, a massive gemstone dangling between her eyebrows like a third eye. As she took her seat opposite Renya, she made a grand show of adjusting her voluminous skirts before fixing her violet gaze on her captive.

Renya met Cressida's glare with one of her own, seething with a potent mixture of fear and fury. The longer she went without sensing Grayden through their bond, the more her anger threatened to consume her. She clenched her fists under the table, nails digging into her palms as she struggled to maintain her composure.

Cressida finally broke the oppressive silence, her voice dripping with disdain. "Since you've stolen my magic, and I'm no longer able to get it back, I'm going to train you to be my weapon."

"It's my magic," Renya spat back, her voice trembling with barely contained rage. "It's always been mine." She twisted her engagement ring nervously as she spoke, before quickly hiding her hands beneath the table to conceal the precious token.

Cressida's eyes narrowed, her gaze raking over Renya's features as if seeing her for the first time. Renya found herself doing the same, desperately searching for any hint of a familial connection, any trait that might lend credence to Cressida's outrageous

claim. But try as she might, she could detect no similarities. Where the Shadow Queen was all darkness and malevolence, Renya was light and determination. They were as different as night and day, oil and water—destined never to mix.

“I'm a descendant of the Shadow Realm,” Cressida continued, her voice taking on a lecturing tone that made Renya's skin crawl, “but I was also born with the powers of the sun. Light and dark, I controlled them both. But with your birth, I lost the powers of the sun, and they passed to you.”

Renya felt as if the floor had dropped out from beneath her. Her powers were indeed golden and warm, reminiscent of the sun itself. She remembered the first time she had reached out to Grayden with her magic, the way heat had flushed his handsome face. But surely that was just a coincidence? She was born of the Sun Realm, after all...wasn't she?

Shaking her head to clear the doubts threatening to take root, Renya declared, “You aren't my mother.” The words came out more uncertain than she had intended, and she silently cursed herself for the weakness in her voice.

Cressida let out a derisive snort, her lips curling into a cruel smirk. “I wish it wasn't true either. I wanted a strong, competent heir. Not some weak girl fawning over a hunk of meat like a vapid idiot.”

The insult struck Renya like a physical blow, her face burning with a mixture of shame and rage. “You're just jealous,” she retorted, her voice rising, “that Grayden wanted me, not some old hag.”

In an instant, Cressida was on her feet, moving with inhuman speed to Renya's side. Before Renya could react, the Shadow Queen's hand shot out, fingers like iron as they clamped around Renya's wrist. With a vicious twist, Cressida wrenched the snowflake ring from Renya's finger.

“No!” Renya cried, her heart plummeting as she realized what was happening.

But it was too late. Cressida's eyes glowed with malicious triumph as she held the ring aloft, allowing the precious stones to catch the light one last time. Then, with a casual flick of her wrist, she tossed it over the edge of the cliff and into the dark forest far below.

A strangled sob escaped Renya's throat as she bolted to the side of the room. She leaned precariously over the edge, her eyes frantically scanning the endless canopy of trees below, desperately searching for any glint of silver among the sea of dark leaves. But it was futile. The ring—her last tangible connection to Grayden—was gone, swallowed by the shadows.

As the full weight of her loss crashed down upon her, Renya sank to the cold stone floor, her body wracked with heaving sobs. She curled in on herself, arms wrapped tightly around her knees as if she could somehow hold herself together through sheer force of will.

“See?” Cressida's voice cut through Renya's grief like a knife. “Weak and pathetic.”

Something inside Renya snapped at those words. In an instant, her anguish transmuted into white-hot rage. She surged to her feet, her entire body trembling with fury as she reached deep within herself, calling forth her magic. Golden beams of light burst from her outstretched hands, lancing towards Cressida with lethal intent.

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But instead of striking their target, the beams of light simply parted around the Shadow Queen, dissipating into nothingness as if they had never existed. Cressida stood unmoved, a look of smug satisfaction on her face as she watched Renya's attack fail.

“Stupid girl,” she sneered, taking a menacing step towards Renya. “You made a blood promise to me. Did you honestly think you could harm me?” Her voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “You'll do everything I say, and if you attempt to resist, I'll find your pathetic mate and end him.”

Renya felt the blood drain from her face, her legs threatening to give out beneath her. The thought of Grayden in Cressida's clutches, suffering because of her defiance, was almost more than she could bear.

Cressida's eyes glittered with an evil glee as she watched the fight drain out of Renya. “That was a warning,” she continued, her voice silky smooth yet laced with venom. “Insult me or disobey me again, and there will be consequences. Dire consequences.”

With those final, chilling words hanging in the air, Cressida summoned her dark mist once more. In the blink of an eye, she was gone, leaving Renya alone with her fear and despair.

Renya stumbled back to the edge of the room, her legs finally giving out as she collapsed against one of the ivory pillars. She stared out at the horizon, the shadowy landscape before her a mirror of the desolation in her heart. The loss of her ring, coupled with Cressida's threats, left her feeling more alone and hopeless than ever before.

As she sat there, the wind whispering mournfully around her, Renya found herself wondering if she would ever find a way back to Grayden. The path ahead seemed impossibly dark and treacherous, with dangers lurking at every turn. But as she watched the faint glimmer of sunlight struggling to break through the perpetual gloom, a tiny spark of determination flickered to life within her.

She may have lost her ring, but she still had her memories, her love, and somewhere deep inside, her own innate strength. Cressida could threaten and intimidate all she wanted, but Renya vowed then and there that she would find a way to break free, to master her powers, and to reunite with Grayden—no matter the cost.

Chapter Five

Cressida emerged from her bedchambers, her movements fluid and purposeful as she locked the door securely behind her. The soft click of the lock echoed in the empty corridor, a sound of finality that brought a cruel smile to her lips. Sion was trapped inside, her property, and she refused to grant him even a shred of autonomy. He would be right where she wanted him, when she wanted him—a puppet dancing to her twisted tune.

As she glided through the shadowy halls of her palace, Cressida couldn't shake the nagging suspicion that had been growing in recent days. Ever since the cave-in at the Tidal beach, Sion had seemed...distracted. His eyes, once filled with fear and grudging obedience, now held a spark of something else. Defiance? Hope? Whatever it was, it troubled her. But no matter. She would get to the bottom of it, one way or another. Brandle had been instructed to monitor Sion's every move, every breath. If there was treachery afoot, she would root it out and crush it beneath her heel.

The empty palace stretched out before her, its vast chambers and winding corridors a testament to her power and isolation. As she moved through the silence, a sense of peace washed over her. Everything was falling into place, the pieces of her grand

design clicking together with satisfying precision. She had the girl—her daughter—in her captivity, not only forced to assist and obey but utterly miserable. The thought brought a wave of savage joy crashing over Cressida. At last, it was the wretched girl's turn to feel the despair of having a piece of herself torn away.

As she descended deeper into the bowels of her fortress, Cressida found her mind drifting back to a day she had long tried to forget. The day her daughter was born. Despite her best efforts to banish the memory, it rose unbidden, as vivid and visceral as if it were happening all over again.

She had been happy then, or as close to happy as she'd ever been. Proud, even, to bear her mate a beautiful daughter. When the babe emerged, fair-skinned and crowned with wisps of golden hair, it was obvious she took after her father. Cressida remembered the surge of disappointment she'd felt at that, quickly pushed aside in the rush of post-birth euphoria.

But then...then came the moment that changed everything. As the midwife severed the cord, Cressida felt something else sever within her. A part of her magic, her very essence, was ripped away. In that instant, it became horrifyingly clear who now possessed it.

Her mate hadn't cared about the loss of her power. The second his blue eyes met the matching ones of his daughter, he was lost. Cressida watched, a cold dread settling in her stomach, as he swaddled the girl close to his chest. He cooed and whispered her name over and over with a reverence that made Cressida's skin crawl.

When he finally passed the infant to Cressida, she took her with trembling hands. A part of her—the part that still clung to normalcy, to the idea of maternal love—was eager to look upon the daughter she had carried for so many long months. But when she peered down into that tiny face, framed by wisps of golden hair, she felt...nothing.

No connection. No rush of maternal instinct. No overwhelming love. There was only an emptiness, quickly filled by resentment for this squirming creature who had so easily stolen both her magic and her mate's heart.

Cressida shook her head violently, as if the physical action could dislodge the unwelcome memories. They clung to her like a heavy fog, threatening to smother her. She quickened her pace, her heels clicking against the stone floor as she left the ghosts of the past in her wake.

At last, she reached the entrance to the dungeon. Two guards stood at attention, their faces impassive beneath their helmets. With a curt gesture, Cressida dismissed them. She didn't need the maids or soldiers gossiping about what was about to transpire. As they retreated, she steeled herself for the confrontation ahead.

The dungeon was a vast chamber, the air thick with the scent of damp stone and despair. Torches flickered in iron sconces, casting long, dancing shadows across the walls. In the furthest corner, behind bars of enchanted iron that seemed to drink in what little light there was, lay her prize.

Cyrus was chained to the wall, his once-proud form a crumpled heap on the cold stone floor. As Cressida approached, one of his eyes cracked open, as if he had been hovering in that liminal space between wakefulness and sleep, waiting for her arrival.

“I see the human realm aged you,” Cressida remarked, her voice dripping with false sweetness. “Just like it did Agatha. I wouldn't even recognize you.”

Cyrus didn't acknowledge her comment, his face a mask of studied indifference. But Cressida knew him too well—she could see the tension in the set of his jaw, the way his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

“So,” she continued, pacing before his cell like a predator sizing up its prey, “you

teamed up with my sister? My own flesh and blood? To take away my daughter?"

At this, Cyrus finally looked at her fully, his face a study in calm defiance. "What do you want me to say?" he asked, his voice rough from disuse. "The second you read that prophecy, we knew she wasn't safe from you. Your power had gone to your head, and you already resented her for taking some of it from you at her birth. Our daughter deserved better. She deserves everything."

Cressida felt a flare of anger at his words, at the implication that she would have harmed her own child. "I wouldn't have hurt her," she spat, but even to her own ears, the words rang hollow.

"You could barely look at her," Cyrus countered, a hint of long-buried pain creeping into his voice. "Instead of nursing her, being a mother to her, you locked yourself up in the library, pouring over scrolls and tomes, looking for ways to reclaim your own power. You didn't care that she needed you. You didn't care if she was hungry, or hurt, or—"

"I still don't care," Cressida cut him off, her words sharp as a blade.

Cyrus closed his eyes, a look of profound weariness settling over his features. "I wish I had never been fated to you."

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The words struck Cressida like a physical blow. For a moment, her carefully constructed mask of cruelty slipped, revealing a flicker of the hurt and betrayal that still festered within her. She made a move as if to strike him, her hand raised, magic crackling at her fingertips. But at the last second, she stepped back, regaining her composure.

“You betrayed me,” she hissed, her voice low and dangerous. “And it will be the last thing you think about when I end you.”

Cyrus scoffed, a bitter smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I’m not afraid of my death,” he said, meeting her gaze unflinchingly. “The only death I’m afraid of is the one that will come to our daughter—by her own mother’s hand.”

Cressida’s lips curled into a sneer, her eyes flashing a brilliant, terrible red. “Believe it or not,” she said, savoring each word, “I won’t be killing her. She’s promised to me—a blood promise. She’ll fight my cause, with absolutely no chance of freedom.”

For the first time since his arrival at her palace, a flicker of genuine fear passed across Cyrus’s face. He swallowed hard, unable to meet Cressida’s cruel, hollow eyes. “How did you coerce her into making a blood promise to you?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“It was easy,” Cressida replied, her tongue darting out to wet her lips in a gesture of predatory anticipation. “I just threatened someone she cared about.”

“Agatha?” Cyrus ventured, a note of desperation in his voice.

A titter of laughter escaped from Cressida's throat, the sound echoing off the dungeon walls like the cackle of a mad witch. "You fool," she said, shaking her head in mock pity. "You have no idea what has happened in this world. You took our daughter and ran away to the human world, hiding in that pathetic little shop of yours, peddling books to humans. You know nothing about her, even though you shared a world."

Cyrus looked puzzled, his brow furrowing as he tried to make sense of Cressida's words.

Cressida leaned in close, her face mere inches from the bars of Cyrus's cell. "Our daughter," she said, drawing out the moment, relishing the growing dread in Cyrus's eyes, "has a mate."

Chapter Six

The scent of smoke and ash hung heavy in the air as Grayden stood before the ruined house, or rather, what little remained of it. His fingers tightened around the worn wooden handle of his shovel, knuckles white with tension. With a deep breath that sent a sharp pain through his still-healing side, he plunged the blade into the debris, shifting charred timbers and broken stone.

The thatched roof, once a symbol of the simple comfort of village life, had been set ablaze during Cressida's ruthless attack. Now, its remnants lay scattered among the ruins, a grim reminder of how quickly peace could be shattered. As Grayden worked to clear a path into the structure, each movement sent fresh waves of pain radiating from his wound. He gritted his teeth, pushing through the discomfort. Physical pain was a welcome distraction from the ache in his heart.

Finally breaching the threshold, Grayden paused to survey the devastation within. The scene before him was heartbreaking in its totality. A thick layer of ash and soot blanketed every surface, transforming the once-vibrant home into a monochrome sea

of greys and blacks. Shards of ceramic bowls and plates crunched beneath his boots, their delicate patterns lost forever. In the corner, partially buried under a mound of straw and debris, lay a small doll crafted from navy yarn. Its button eyes stared sightlessly at the ruined ceiling, a poignant reminder of the lives disrupted by senseless violence.

Grayden's chest tightened as he recalled the family who had lived here—a young couple with two small children. By some miracle, they had escaped unscathed and were now sheltered in the tents Phillippe had brought from the training camp. But their home, their possessions, their sense of security—all had been reduced to ashes in a matter of minutes.

For hours, Grayden had been working tirelessly, moving from house to house along the eastern side of the village. He pulled out anything salvageable, working quietly and efficiently. The villagers, caught up in their own grief and the monumental task of rebuilding, barely seemed to notice the presence of a prince among them. In a way, Grayden preferred it this way. He wasn't here for recognition or gratitude; he was here because the alternative—sitting idle while people suffered and Renya remained captive—was simply unbearable.

As he continued to sift through the debris, Grayden found his mind wandering, the monotonous task unable to fully occupy his thoughts. Charly and Phillippe had suggested this work as a way to take his mind off Renya, but their well-intentioned plan was failing miserably. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to throw down his shovel, leap onto his horse, and ride to the Shadow Realm to rescue his beloved. The desire to hold Renya in his arms again was a constant, burning ache that no amount of physical labor could dull.

Adrenaline surged through his veins, leaving him feeling panicky and on edge. He recalled how, just yesterday, he had spent hours pacing like a caged animal, snapping at anyone who dared approach him. It was then that Dimitri and Phillippe had firmly

suggested he find a productive outlet for his restless energy while they formulated a plan to retrieve Renya.

But even as his muscles strained with exertion, Grayden's mind continually drifted back to those final, heart-wrenching moments with Renya. The look in her eyes as she made that fateful promise to Cressida was seared into his memory. In that instant, his heart had shattered. He would have gladly sacrificed his life rather than see her in Cressida's clutches. But Renya, stubborn and selfless to a fault, had chosen his life over her own freedom. The weight of that sacrifice pressed down on him, threatening to crush his spirit entirely.

Through their bond, he could still sense her presence—a subtle, gentle pulsing within his soul. It was a small comfort to know she lived, but the knowledge that she was out there, beyond his reach, was nearly unbearable. The bond that had once filled him with such joy now felt like an exquisite form of torture.

Needing a moment's respite from the oppressive atmosphere inside the ruined house, Grayden made his way towards the back, stepping out into what had once been a thriving garden. The cool air on his face was a welcome relief, but it did little to ease the turmoil in his heart. He closed his eyes, reaching out through their bond, silently willing Renya to feel his love, his determination to find her.

A soft, pitiful mewl broke through his thoughts. Grayden's eyes snapped open, scanning the ground at his feet. There, beneath a tangle of scorched grass and splintered cedar, he caught the barest hint of movement. Dropping to his knees, heedless of the mud soaking into his trousers, he carefully shifted aside bits of debris.

His efforts revealed a makeshift nest, crafted from scraps of stolen fabric and dried grasses. At its center lay two tiny kittens—one pure white, the other a mottled brown and orange. The white kitten mewled again, its eyes still tightly shut, while its sibling lay ominously still, its small body cold to the touch.

Without hesitation, Grayden gently scooped up both kittens, tucking them safely inside his tunic. Their tiny bodies against his chest stirred something within him—a fierce protectiveness that momentarily overshadowed his own pain. These helpless creatures needed him, just as his people needed him, just as Renya needed him. He couldn't save everyone, couldn't right every wrong, but in this moment, he could make a difference for these two small lives.

Cradling his precious cargo, Grayden made his way back towards the castle, his eyes scanning the streets for someone to whom he could entrust the kittens. Finding no suitable caretaker, he pressed on, eventually following a group of maids to the kitchen. As he entered the warm, bustling space, his gaze fell upon a young boy standing near the fireplace.

“Could you bring me some warm milk?” Grayden asked, his voice hoarse from disuse. “And heat up some towels and bring them to my room?”

The boy nodded, curiosity evident in his wide eyes. Grayden carefully opened his tunic, allowing the lad to glimpse the kittens nestled against his chest. The boy's face lit up with a smile—a rare sight in these dark days—and he hurried to fulfill the prince's request.

As Grayden made his way to the room he had once shared with Renya, a fresh wave of grief washed over him. Every corner of the chamber held memories of her—her laughter, her touch, the way her eyes sparkled in the firelight. Most nights, he found it impossible to sleep here, the ghost of her presence both a comfort and a torment. He had taken to falling asleep in various corners of the castle, anywhere to escape the crushing weight of her absence. After one particularly harrowing night of heavy drinking, he had even awoken sprawled across Kalora's throne, with no recollection of how he'd gotten there. That incident had been a wake-up call, prompting him to limit his alcohol consumption, no matter how tempting the numbing effects might be.

Entering the room, Grayden quickly retrieved a towel from the bathroom and gently placed the kittens on the bed. The white one squirmed feebly, but the brown and orange kitten remained disturbingly still. With gentle, determined movements, Grayden began to rub the motionless kitten, trying to stimulate its tiny body back to life. Just as despair began to set in, one eye cracked open, and a pathetic meow escaped its lips. Grayden's heart lightened for a brief moment, a fleeting reminder that even in the darkest times, hope could still flourish.

A soft knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts. "Come in," he called, carefully wrapping both kittens in the towel.

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The door opened to reveal Selenia, her eyes still hollow with grief but sparked with a hint of curiosity. She carried the requested warm towels and a steaming teapot. As her gaze fell upon Grayden and his tiny charges, a flicker of something—surprise, perhaps even the ghost of a smile—crossed her face.

“Grayden, what...” she began, her voice trailing off as she took in the scene before her.

“I found them outside in some of the rubble,” he explained, his voice soft. “I should have given them to someone else to care for when I got back to the castle, but...” He paused, struggling to articulate the inexplicable pull he had felt. “Something made me want to bring them up here.”

Selenia moved slowly towards the bed, her eyes fixed on the two small bundles of fur. “I went for a walk in the hall and saw a boy bringing these up here,” she said, gesturing to the items she carried. “I told him I would take them. I was...curious as to what you were doing.”

Grayden's heart clenched at the sound of his sister's voice. It was the most she had spoken in three days, since that fateful battle that had cost them so much. Perhaps, he thought, bringing the kittens here had been the right decision after all.

Moving to sit by the fire, Grayden patted the vacant seat beside him. Selenia joined him, setting down the teapot and towels. Without a word, he handed her the orange and brown kitten, keeping the white one cradled against his chest. Dipping his pinky into the warm milk, he attempted to coax the kitten to drink. When that proved unsuccessful, he retrieved a small hand towel, soaking the corner in milk. Finally, the

tiny creature began to suckle, its eyes slowly drifting closed.

For a long while, Grayden and Selenia sat in companionable silence, tending to the kittens. They were united in their grief, in their pain, in the monumental losses they had suffered. Yet in this moment, focused on nurturing these fragile lives, they found a small measure of peace.

It was Selenia who finally broke the silence, her voice barely above a whisper. “How are we going to get Renya back? I'm surprised you haven't ridden out already.”

Grayden stroked the sleeping kitten in his lap, gathering his thoughts before responding. “I want to, trust me,” he admitted, the words heavy with frustration and despair. “I've gotten on my horse so many times, only to ride back to the stables. To be honest, I don't know how I can get her back. I have no power left, and I'm no match for the Shadow Queen. It only took her a split second to immobilize me.” He swallowed hard, shame coloring his next words. “I knew it was a suicide mission, but I only did it to try and save Renya. But in the end, Cressida got her anyway.”

“Grayden, it's not your fault,” Selenia said firmly, though her voice quavered slightly. “How could you defeat Cressida without any magic? We are at an unfair disadvantage.”

“It's not your fault about Jurel, either,” Grayden countered gently, addressing the guilt he knew his sister carried.

Selenia's lip trembled, and she looked away, but not before Grayden caught sight of the tears streaming down her face. “Yes, it is,” she insisted, her voice thick with emotion. “If I would have forgiven him, he never would have stuck around. He never would have...” She trailed off, unable to voice the reality of Jurel's death.

“My sweet one,” Grayden said, reaching out to take her hand, “he would have stayed

no matter what. Even if you had forgiven him and taken him back, I would have asked him to stay and accompany us back to the camp. Either way, he would have met his end.”

“I shouldn't have said those things to him,” Selenia whispered, wiping at her eyes. “My last words were in anger.”

“Me too, dear one,” Grayden admitted, his own guilt weighing heavily upon him. “But he knew we loved him. I'm sure of it.”

Selenia nodded, but Grayden could see that the immense guilt still plagued her. He felt it too—the shame of how he had reacted, the regret of banishing Jurel to their winter camp. But as much as they might wish to, they couldn't change the past. Jurel was gone, and Renya was held against her will in the Shadow Realm.

As the evening drew near, Grayden reluctantly left the kittens in Selenia's care and made his way to the council chamber. The weight of his responsibilities as ruler pressed down upon him, a constant reminder of the duties he couldn't neglect, even in his grief.

Phillippe was already there, poring over maps and documents spread across the large oak table. As Grayden entered, his brother looked up, concern etched across his features.

“Grayden,” Phillippe greeted him, his voice a mixture of relief and worry. “I'm glad you came. We have much to discuss.”

Grayden nodded, sinking into a chair across from his brother. “What's the situation?” he asked, forcing himself to focus on the matter at hand. It was odd to see Phillippe in charge, but he appreciated his efforts.

Phillippe sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It's...complicated. The attack has left people shaken. We've managed to provide temporary shelter for those who lost their homes, but food supplies are running low. And there's more.”

He pushed a map towards Grayden, pointing to several marked locations. “We've received reports of increased Shadow Realm activity along our borders. Nothing overt yet, but it's clear Cressida is testing our defenses.”

Grayden leaned forward, studying the map intently. The familiar contours of the Snow Lands stretched before him, but now they seemed fraught with danger. “What are our options?” he asked, his voice low.

“We need to shore up our defenses,” Phillippe replied, his tone grim. “But with so many of our resources devoted to rebuilding, it won't be easy. We're spread thin, Grayden. Too thin.”

Grayden nodded, the familiar pangs of guilt and frustration welling up inside him. “If only I had my magic,” he muttered, clenching his fists. “I could protect our people, drive back Cressida's forces—”

“Stop,” Phillippe interrupted, his voice firm but kind. “This isn't your fault, Grayden. We're facing an enemy with powers beyond our comprehension. But that doesn't mean we're helpless.”

Grayden looked up at his brother, drawing strength from Phillippe's unwavering support. “You're right,” he said, straightening in his chair. “So, where do we start?”

For the next few hours, the brothers pored over reports, debated strategies, and formulated plans. They discussed reinforcing the border towns, establishing a network of lookouts to provide early warning of any Shadow Realm incursions, and rationing their remaining resources to ensure they could sustain both the rebuilding

efforts and their defensive preparations.

“Grayden,” Phillippe added, “we need to discuss the possibility of seeking aid from the other realms. The Twilight Kingdom has already offered what assistance they can, but it's not enough. We may need to reach out to the Tidal Kingdom, maybe even the Spring Lands.”

“I’ve actually already done that,” Grayden said, guilt coming over him once again at the lack of initiative he had shown over the past few weeks. “Triston is reaching out to the Spring Lands.”

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“That’s a good start,” Phillippe agreed, “United, the realms might stand a chance against Cressida. Divided, we'll fall one by one.”

Grayden nodded. “I'll draft some more communications,” he said. “We'll review them together before sending any envoys.”

As they prepared to leave the council chamber, Grayden paused, placing a hand on his brother's shoulder. “Thank you, Phillippe,” he said softly. “I couldn't do this without you.”

Phillippe smiled, clasping Grayden's arm. “We're in this together, Brother. Always have been, always will be.”

As Grayden made his way back to his chambers, his mind raced with the plans they'd made. The challenges ahead were daunting, but for the first time since Renya had been taken, he felt a glimmer of hope. They would protect their people, strengthen their defenses, and build the alliances they needed to stand against Cressida.

And through it all, Grayden silently renewed his vow. He would find a way to bring Renya home, to reunite their fractured family, and to restore peace to their lands. The path ahead was uncertain, but with his brother by his side and the strength of their people behind him, Grayden knew they stood a fighting chance.

Entering his room, he found Selenia asleep in the chair by the fire, the kittens curled up in her lap. The sight brought a small smile to his face. In the midst of all the darkness, there was still light to be found.

Chapter Seven

It was hard to even look at her. Every time she spoke, Renya wanted to flinch and look away. The very sight of Cressida, with her piercing purple eyes and cruel smirk, sent shivers down Renya's spine. The oppressive atmosphere of the throne room, with its looming shadows and cold stone floors, only amplified her discomfort. How had she pledged herself to this monster? The weight of her decision pressed down on her, making each breath a struggle.

“Pay attention. Our magic works on impulse. None of that 'quieting the mind.' You have to want it. You need a reason to bring it forth.”

Cressida's voice cut through the air like a whip, each word laced with impatience and barely contained anger. Renya could feel the power radiating off the Shadow Queen, a dark, suffocating aura that seemed to suck the very life from the room.

Renya wanted to protest. Her mind screamed in defiance, urging her to fight back, to resist. But every time she tried to resist Cressida, her body burned and she lost control of herself. It felt as if liquid fire coursed through her veins, setting every nerve ending ablaze. Whatever magic was woven into the blood promise was strong, an invisible chain binding her will to Cressida's commands. Renya forced herself not to comply, to disobey, but she couldn't manage more than a few seconds of hesitation before her body snapped to attention. The internal struggle was exhausting, draining her both mentally and physically. Even now, she tried to hold off, but the sweat started at her hairline and she felt sick for the three seconds she managed to force herself still. Her vision swam, and her legs trembled with the effort of resisting.

“Now!” Cressida bellowed, her voice echoing off the cavernous walls of the throne room. The command reverberated through Renya's very being.

Renya acted on instinct, the bright golden strands of her magic bursting forth and

rocketing towards Cressida. The magic felt warm and alive, pulsing with her own life force as it streamed from her fingertips. For a brief moment, the golden light illuminated the dark corners of the room, pushing back the oppressive shadows.

The Shadow Queen blocked the rays with a lazy flick of her wrist, and a shield of black mist deflected the heat of Renya's magic. The collision of light and dark created a brief, dazzling display of power before Renya's magic dissipated into nothingness. The air crackled with residual energy, leaving a metallic taste in Renya's mouth.

“See? Instinct,” she spat, her tone dripping with disdain. A cruel smile played at the corners of her lips, clearly relishing Renya's struggle and discomfort.

Renya glanced at the clock suspended between the two ivory pillars, its ornate hands seeming to move at an agonizingly slow pace. She'd been working with Cressida for an hour already. Her body was tight and exhausted, both from using her magic and trying to defy Cressida at every chance she got. Every muscle ached, and a dull throb had settled behind her eyes. But at this point, she was starting to realize it was useless. The futility of her resistance weighed heavily on her, threatening to crush what little hope she had left.

Just as she was about to ask to be dismissed and go back to her chamber, her jaw dropped. The heavy doors of the throne room swung open with a resounding creak.

Sion strolled into the throne room, with a piece of parchment in his hand. His presence was like a breath of fresh air in the stifling atmosphere. Renya wished she could meet his eye, beg him to help her out of this horrid predicament, but she knew she couldn't blow his cover. The risk was too great, the consequences unthinkable. Instead, she watched him walk gracefully over to the Shadow Queen's side, speaking in a low tone and handing her the paper he carried. His movements were fluid and practiced, betraying nothing of his true allegiance.

Cressida grabbed the paper and read it, her eyes darting over the script. While she was reading, Sion gave Renya a meaningful look. His eyes, usually guarded and neutral, held a flicker of something—concern? hope?—that made Renya's heart skip a beat. Renya attempted to figure out what he was trying to tell her, her mind racing through possibilities. But the second Cressida balled up the parchment in her hands, crushing it with unnecessary force, Sion dropped his eyes, his face once again an emotionless mask.

“Well, princess. It seems your mate survived. I was hoping he'd perish from his wounds, but it seems like I'll have to separate you two another way.” Cressida's words were like ice, each syllable dripping with malice. The casual cruelty in her voice made Renya's stomach churn.

Renya's heart raced faster, pounding so hard she was sure Cressida must be able to hear it. Surely, there wasn't a way to separate them? Fated matings were sacred and eternal, woven into the very fabric of their beings. Could she do such a thing? The mere thought sent a wave of panic through Renya, threatening to overwhelm her.

Without glancing at Renya, Cressida swept out of the room, her dark robes billowing behind her like a storm cloud. She called over her shoulder, her voice echoing in the vast space. “You're dismissed. Head back to your room, immediately. Sion, go back to my chambers. I'll be with you shortly. I have business to attend to.”

The underlying threat in her words was unmistakable, and Renya felt a pang of sympathy for Sion. She watched as Cressida's figure disappeared down the sky bridge, her silhouette a dark blot against the fading daylight.

Sion crossed in front of Renya, and in a split second, Renya's eye caught a tiny scrap of parchment floating to the floor in front of her. Time seemed to slow as she watched it drift down. Her heart leapt into her throat. Could this be a message? Hope, fragile but persistent, bloomed in her chest. She placed her slippered foot on top of it

and slowly pulled it towards her, eyes darting to ensure Cressida didn't see the movement. Her pulse raced, and she held her breath, terrified of discovery. Thankfully, the Shadow Queen's back was turned, and she was already halfway across the sky bridge, her attention focused elsewhere.

Sion left the throne room in a flash, no doubt heading to his own personal hell that was Cressida's room. Renya's heart ached for him, knowing the ordeal that awaited him.

Alone, Renya bent and quickly grasped the paper, her fingers trembling slightly. She knew that if she strayed too long, she'd be forced to comply by the blood promise. The magical binding tugged at her, an insistent pressure urging her towards her room. She thrust the paper into the bodice of her gown, the rough texture of the parchment scratching against her skin, and quickly walked to her room. Each step felt like an eternity, her mind racing with possibilities of what the note might contain.

The second she burst through the door, she pulled out the sliver of paper and unfolded it, her fingers clumsy with anticipation. The words, hastily scrawled but unmistakably Sion's handwriting, leapt out at her:

Tonight at dusk. Leave your window unlocked.

Renya's heart leapt and gratitude washed over her, bringing unexpected tears to her eyes. Sion was going to help her. She was so thankful to have an ally here, even if she couldn't speak directly to him in anyone's presence. The tiny scrap of paper felt like a lifeline, a connection to hope in this dark place.

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Perhaps Sion had a plan to get her back to Grayden or had uncovered a way to break her promise to Cressida. Perhaps he would come bearing news of Grayden. She knew he was alive, Cressida's revelation was no surprise to Renya. She could still feel him at times. It wasn't like before, when she could feel him the same way she felt her own pulse, but whenever his emotions were strong she could sense them. She felt him the second he woke up and processed her loss every morning. It was equally as painful for her, and it sometimes woke her up from her own sleep. The phantom ache in her chest, a constant reminder of their separation, throbbed dully.

She sat on the bed and tried to reach for him again. She would take anything, just a whisper of his voice or a flash of his face. Renya sat there, unmoving as the minutes flew by. The room grew darker as the sun set, shadows creeping across the floor. She strained with all her might, reaching out with her mind and heart, desperate for even the faintest connection. But the silence in her mind was deafening, the absence of Grayden's presence a wound that refused to heal.

Before long, Margot arrived and brought her evening meal. The old servant's face was lined with sympathy, but she said nothing as she set down the tray. Renya wasn't exactly being starved, but it was a far cry from the luxury she experienced in the other kingdoms. It felt like she was back traveling again, with just a few protein-packed items to sustain her. The simple fare—a hunk of bread, some cheese, and a small portion of dried meat—seemed to mock her. After the spread she saw at her breakfast with Cressida, she knew it was a statement. If Renya could be civil to Cressida, she would be allowed to take her meals in the dining room with a magnificent buffet.

Renya would sooner starve. The thought of sharing a meal with Cressida, of

pretending civility while her captor gloated, made her stomach turn.

She untied the front of her gown and took a quick bath, eager to be rid of the sweat clinging to her scalp and back. The cool water was a relief against her skin, washing away the physical remnants of the day's ordeal. But it could do nothing to cleanse the fear and uncertainty that clung to her like a second skin. She dried off, her movements mechanical, lost in thought.

Renya braided her hair, the familiar motions bringing a small measure of comfort. Her fingers worked swiftly, muscle memory taking over where conscious thought failed. She then slipped on the simple nightgown Margot left. The fabric was soft against her skin, a small luxury in this place of hardship.

Renya unlocked the window, the latch cool beneath her fingers. The night air seeped in, carrying with it the scent of distant forests and the promise of freedom. She then pushed a large chest in front of the door to her room, blocking the entrance. The wood scraped against the stone floor, the sound unnaturally loud in the quiet room. If anyone tried to enter the room with Sion present, there would be some warning. It wasn't much, but it was all she could do to ensure their safety.

A soft bird call startled her, breaking the silence. Her heart leapt to her throat as she glanced at the window just in time to see Sion climb through. He moved with the grace of a shadow, barely disturbing the air around him. He was wearing his usual golden robes, but his dark skin was marred with several scratches along his cheek and temple. The injuries, stark against his complexion, made Renya's breath catch. His robes were wrinkled and he was barefoot, and with a sinking pit in her stomach, Renya realized he came straight from Cressida's bed. The implications of his disheveled state hit her like a physical blow. Her face fell and she hung her head low, shame and guilt washing over her. She might be Cressida's prisoner, but it was nothing like the evil hold she had over Sion's soul. She ached for him, but had no idea how to possibly console him. What words could possibly ease the burden he carried?

Sion stood there for a second, awkwardly looking at Renya. The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken words and shared pain. Then, unable to bear it any longer, Renya rushed over and threw her arms around him. He stumbled a bit, surprised by the affection, but then patted her on the back. His touch was hesitant at first, as if he had forgotten what genuine human contact felt like.

“Renya...how are you?” His voice was soft, laced with concern and a weariness that seemed soul-deep.

Renya stepped out of the embrace and sat on the bed. The mattress creaked slightly under her weight. She motioned to the chair at the vanity and Sion pulled it out quietly and sat, before sighing heavily. The sigh seemed to carry the weight of all his burdens, filling the room with an almost tangible sorrow.

“I'm okay...a bit shook up. And hurting—every minute I'm away from Grayden is painful.” Her eyes watered, but she kept her tears back, knowing that Sion was no doubt suffering as well. She blinked rapidly, determined not to break down. Her voice wavered slightly as she continued, “It feels like a part of me is missing. Like I'm not whole anymore.”

“I'll try to get you back to him, however I can. But unfortunately, the queen has severely limited the freedom granted to me since your arrival. It's almost as though she senses where my true loyalties lie. But if she did, I can't imagine she'd let me live. Perhaps she just wants to keep your existence a secret.” Sion's words were carefully measured, each syllable weighted with the gravity of their situation.

“Is it true?” Renya asked, her voice small and wavering with dread. The question that had been gnawing at her since her arrival finally found voice. “Is she...my mother?”

Sion's brow wrinkled and he shifted uncomfortably on the stool. The wood creaked beneath him, breaking the tense silence. “While I don't know for certain, it's...very

plausible. It makes sense that someone would hide you from her in the human world if she was after your power, but to go after her own daughter? Yet...her depravity knows no limits..." His voice trailed off, leaving the horrifying implications hanging in the air between them.

"Sion, I'm so sorry. To act in the capacity you must—" Renya's voice cracked, the full weight of Sion's sacrifice hitting her anew.

"Don't fret over me, Renya. I serve both you and Grayden faithfully, and it is my sworn duty to do what I must." His tone was firm, but Renya could see the pain lurking in the depths of his eyes.

"Still—" she began, but Sion cut her off.

"I'm happy to serve my future queen. At least, I am assuming...?" A hint of hope colored his words, a reminder of the future they were all fighting for.

Renya rubbed the spot where her ring previously sat. The absence of the familiar weight was a constant reminder of all she had lost. Sion watched her and met her face, confused by her motion.

"Yes. Grayden asked me to marry him. But my ring—Cressida took it and threw it out over the valley." The memory of that moment, of Cressida's casual cruelty, made Renya's heart clench.

"I'm so sorry, Renya. I imagine finding out her daughter is fated to someone whom she once desired has unhinged her. Even more than normal." Sion's words were gentle, but they opened up a new realm of horrifying possibilities in Renya's mind.

Renya hadn't thought about that perspective before and blanched. The color drained from her face as the implications sank in. The idea that Cressida might harbor

feelings for Grayden added a new, sickening dimension to their predicament.

Sion gave her a sad smile. “That's what I live with everyday.” The simple statement carried the weight of months of suffering, of countless indignities endured in silence.

Renya walked over to him and gave his shoulder a squeeze in acknowledgment. It felt inadequate in the face of his sacrifice, but it was all she could offer. The warmth of human contact, however brief, seemed to bring a flicker of life back to Sion's eyes.

“So...any idea on how to get us out of this mess?” Renya asked, trying to inject a note of hope into her voice.

“You need to learn all you can, Renya. I know you're bound to her, so you can't leave. But you can learn and conquer your magic. Grayden will find some way to break the magic holding you here...but once that's done, you need to be able to survive. You're going to need to do what I do—make yourself useful to her.” He grimaced before continuing, the words seeming to pain him. “Make her believe you are the daughter she's always wanted. Be her heir—at least on the outside and then fight her with everything you have on the inside.”

Renya sat back down and smoothed her nightgown, the soft fabric a stark contrast to the harshness of their reality. Her fingers trembled slightly as she considered Sion's words. The thought of pretending to be Cressida's dutiful daughter made her stomach churn, but she understood the necessity of it. “How do I do that?”

“You'll find a way. You're clever and quick-thinking. Maybe once you've earned her trust, you'll find some kind of weakness. But seriously, take advantage of anything she's willing to teach you.” Sion's voice was low and urgent, his eyes darting to the window as if expecting Cressida to materialize at any moment.

Renya nodded, her mind already racing with possibilities. The weight of

responsibility settled heavily on her shoulders, but with it came a spark of determination. “Thanks, Sion. Do you think you could get a message to Grayden?”

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Sion's face softened at the mention of Grayden, a flicker of hope passing across his features. "I'll try the best I can—Cressida is asleep and drank heavily before bed so I'm hoping she won't notice my absence. I'll try to get a hawk out. What do you want me to tell him?"

Renya hesitated for a second. What could she possibly say to him? How could she encapsulate all her love, fear, and hope in a brief message? The words seemed to stick in her throat, inadequate in the face of their separation. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "Tell him...tell him to trust me. To wait. And that I'm okay. And...that I love him." She flushed a bit, the declaration feeling both deeply personal and woefully insufficient.

But Sion didn't seem embarrassed about her declaration. Instead, his eyes held a mixture of understanding and sadness. "I will, Renya. Hopefully we'll talk again soon. Leave your window unlocked in the evenings and I'll try to visit when I can. Good luck."

Sion gave her a quick embrace, the gesture conveying more than words ever could. Then, with the agility of a cat, he pushed himself through the window, his golden robes blowing gently in the night air before he disappeared into the darkness.

Renya stood there for a long moment, staring at the empty window. The cool night breeze caressed her face, carrying with it the scent of freedom that now seemed so far away. She closed her eyes, trying to commit every detail of this encounter to memory—the sound of Sion's voice, the warmth of his embrace, the glimmer of hope he had brought with him.

With a heavy sigh, she moved to close the window, leaving it unlocked as instructed. Her fingers lingered on the latch, a part of her wishing she could follow Sion into the night. But she knew her place was here, for now. She had a role to play, a battle to fight from within enemy territory.

Renya turned back to her room, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. The enormity of the task ahead of her was daunting. To deceive Cressida, to learn from her while secretly plotting against her – it seemed almost impossible. And yet, what choice did she have?

As she crawled into bed, exhaustion finally overtaking her, Renya's last thoughts were of Grayden. She reached out with her mind, sending her love across the distance that separated them. And just before sleep claimed her, she could have sworn she felt a faint warmth in response, a ghostly touch that whispered of hope and reunion.

Chapter Eight

“Absolutely not,” Grayden growled, his irritation evident. His fist clenched on the polished surface of the war table. “I will not wait any longer to rescue Renya. I'm healed now—I'll go alone if I have to.”

The council chamber fell silent, the weight of Grayden's words hanging heavy in the air. Torchlight flickered across the worried faces gathered around the table, casting long shadows that seemed to embody the gravity of their situation.

“Grayden, be reasonable,” Phillippe pleaded, his dark eyes narrowed. “We'll need every soldier available to us if we want to have any real chance of defeating the Shadow Queen. If we separate our resources now, our Snow Land soldiers will be killed. We need to solidify all of our armies and make one targeted attack. We can't risk the men.”

Grayden glanced around the table, fuming. The faces of his allies—friends he'd fought alongside and trusted with his life—now seemed like obstacles. How could they expect him to wait to rescue Renya? Every second they were apart was excruciating for him, a physical ache that ate away at his very core. There was so much to be done before they amassed the forces from the other kingdoms. Triston and Esmeralda were still negotiating with the Spring Lands, their diplomatic efforts slowed by centuries of mistrust and political maneuvering. The Twilight Kingdom was trying to recoup the losses they endured, their once-mighty forces decimated by the Shadow Queen's surprise attack. It would take weeks—if not months—to launch a full attack on the Shadow Realm.

The realization made Grayden's blood run cold. Months of Renya in Cressida's clutches. Months of not knowing if she was safe, if she was suffering. The thought was unbearable.

Kalora seemed sympathetic, her gentle eyes filled with understanding. But even she nodded in agreement with Phillippe. “I know how hard this is,” she said softly, reaching out to touch Grayden's arm. He jerked away, unable to bear the comfort. Kalora continued, undeterred, “But we can't afford to lose any men—not if we want to have a chance at vanquishing her once and for all.”

Grayden launched to his feet, seething in anger. The chair behind him toppled backwards, the crash echoing through the chamber. In one fluid motion, he grabbed the dagger from his boot and threw it at the middle of the table. The blade whistled through the air, embedding itself in the thick wood with a resounding thunk. It quivered there, a physical manifestation of Grayden's frustration and pain.

Without another word, he stormed out of the room, leaving the rest of the attendees stunned into silence. The heavy door slammed behind him, the sound reverberating through the stone hallway.

His boots thumped noisily against the stone floor as he strode away, each step fueled by a potent mixture of anger, fear, and desperation. He headed towards his chambers, his mind racing with half-formed plans of rescue and revenge.

Grayden had just started to climb the staircase when a familiar figure appeared at the top. Selenia stood there, her arms crossed, a knowing look on her face.

“Brother, yelling and threatening won't get Renya back any faster,” she said, her voice firm but gentle.

Grayden exhaled heavily, the fight draining out of him at the sight of his sister. He continued up the stairs, brushing past Selenia and pushing open the door to his room. He didn't invite her in, but he didn't need to. Selenia followed him inside, closing the door softly behind her.

The room was dimly lit, the fading afternoon light casting long shadows across the floor. Selenia took a seat beside the fireplace, the flames casting a warm glow on her face. She looked at Grayden meaningfully, waiting for him to speak.

He sighed and sat opposite her, his eyes fixed on his boots while the fire crackled and hissed. The anger that had fueled him moments ago was fading, leaving behind nothing but weariness.

“I just don't know what to do without her,” he said, his voice hardly above a whisper. The admission felt like defeat, a weakness he couldn't afford to show to anyone else.

Selenia's face softened, empathy shining in her eyes. “I know. I feel the same way about—” she paused, swallowing hard before continuing, “I just, I understand. But Grayden, she's alive. She's resourceful and brave. She'll be okay.”

Grayden's face turned crimson, embarrassment washing over him as he recalled his

tantrum in the council chamber. Renya was alive, and he had proof—he'd felt a flash of anger through their bond this morning. It was faint, like trying to hear a whisper across a crowded room, but it was there. A reminder that she was still fighting, still holding on.

His gaze shifted to Selenia, and a wave of guilt crashed over him. While he ached for Renya, at least he knew she was alive. Selenia had to come to terms with the fact that Jurel was gone, lost forever. They'd sent his body back to the Snow Lands so he could be laid to rest with his father. Selenia had cried and tried to accompany his body, but Grayden would take no more risks where her safety was concerned. He was needed here, and he would trust no one else with her protection.

“How are you doing, Selenia?” he asked softly, realizing he'd been so consumed by his own pain that he'd neglected his sister's grief.

She shrugged, avoiding his gaze and looking into the fire. The flames danced in her eyes, masking the pain he knew lurked beneath the surface. “I'm managing,” she said after a moment, her voice barely audible over the crackling fire.

A movement caught Grayden's eye, and he noticed a small white ball of fur curled up in front of the fireplace. The snow-white kitten was sleeping soundly, oblivious to the weight of sorrow that hung in the room.

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Selenia noticed his gaze and changed the subject, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. “Have you named her yet?”

Grayden looked at the sleeping kitten, a pang of longing shooting through him. “Sunshine, I think.”

Selenia scowled, momentarily distracted from her grief. “Grayden, that kitten is whiter than Almory's beard. Sunshine? Really?”

He looked down at his boots again, noticing for the first time how the leather was starting to scuff and peel. He would need to replace them soon. “It was Renya's nickname,” he explained quietly. “Her aunt called her that.”

Instantly, a blush of guilt crept up into Selenia's cheeks. “Of course—I'm sorry. I didn't think.”

Grayden shook off her apology, not wanting to dwell on it. “What are you going to name yours?” he asked, changing the subject.

“It's a he, and his name is Puffin,” Selenia replied, a hint of defiance in her voice.

Grayden realized the connection instantly. Jurel's animal guardian had been an arctic puffin. The name was both a tribute and a reminder, a way for Selenia to keep a part of Jurel close. He opened his mouth to comment, but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Enter,” Grayden called, not taking his eyes off of Selenia. He watched as she

composed herself, slipping on a mask of calm that he knew all too well.

The door cracked open, and Julietta peeked her head in. Her blonde hair caught the firelight, shimmering like starlight. “Are you busy?” she asked, her voice hesitant.

“No,” Selenia answered for both of them, and Julietta waltzed into the room, her violet gown swishing around her ankles.

Grayden studied Julietta as she approached. She was more pale than normal, he realized, the strain of recent events evident in the dark circles under her eyes. But her eyes themselves were exuberant, shining with an excitement that seemed out of place in the somber atmosphere of the room.

“I have some good news,” she gasped, slightly out of breath as if she'd run all the way there. In her arms, she cradled a heavy tome, its cover ancient and weathered. The book looked as if it might crumble to dust at any moment, yet Julietta held it like it was the most precious thing in the world. “I think I've found something useful in breaking the blood promise.”

Grayden's eyes widened, hope seizing his heart with such force that it was almost painful. “Really?” he breathed, hardly daring to believe it.

She nodded eagerly, her enthusiasm infectious. “This book references the breaking of spells. It says here that 'spells broken under the light will always come to right.'”

Grayden and Selenia looked at her, confused. The cryptic words hung in the air, their meaning just out of reach. Then, like a bolt of lightning, understanding struck Selenia. Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “The Sun Realm?” she asked, her voice a mixture of awe and disbelief.

“I think so,” Julietta confirmed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “I think it's

referencing one of the missing Sun Realm Scrolls. The prophecy is only part of them. They also contain the secrets to powerful magic. Mother said that they were lost, but I think—”

“We leave at once,” Grayden announced, cutting her off. He was already on his feet, slinging his sword over his shoulder with practiced ease. The weight of the blade was comforting, grounding him in the face of this new hope. “I’ll take any chance. If these scrolls still exist, I will find them.”

Selenia stood as well, her face set with determination. “I’m coming with you,” she declared.

Grayden opened his mouth to protest, but the look in Selenia’s eyes stopped him. She needed this, he realized. A purpose, a way to channel her grief into action. He nodded, accepting her decision.

“You’ll need supplies,” Julietta said, her practical nature asserting itself. “And a plan. The Sun Realm has been lost for centuries. You don’t even know where to begin looking.”

Grayden paused, considering her words. She was right, of course. They couldn’t just charge off blindly, no matter how much he wanted to. “Gather what you can,” he instructed. “Maps, provisions, anything that might help us locate the Sun Realm. We’ll meet in the library in an hour.”

Julietta nodded, clutching the ancient tome to her chest. “I’ll see what else I can find about the scrolls,” she promised before hurrying out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Grayden turned to Selenia. The siblings shared a look of understanding. This was more than just a rescue mission now. It was a chance to turn the tide of the war, to save not just Renya, but all the kingdoms.

Chapter Nine

This time, Renya focused. Her hatred of Cressida was still deeply ingrained in every soul-shattering breath she took, but she used her fury to fuel her magic. The golden energy crackled at her fingertips, responding to the intensity of her emotions. She could feel it coursing through her veins, a living force that both terrified and exhilarated her.

Several days had passed since Sion suggested taking advantage of Cressida's teachings, and Renya felt more and more confident in her magical abilities. The raw power that had once been so unpredictable was slowly bending to her will. However, her relationship with Cressida was nothing but bitterness and intense detestation. Every lesson was a stand-off, a battle of wills that left Renya emotionally and physically drained. While Renya couldn't technically disobey her, she found it easier and easier to bend the rules of what she could get away with. It was a dangerous game, but one that gave her a small sense of control in her captivity.

The throne room, where they conducted their lessons, was bathed in a silvery light. Shadows danced on the walls, cast by the flickering of magical orbs that hung suspended in the air. The atmosphere was tense, charged with the conflicting energies of Renya's golden magic and Cressida's dark power.

"I'm not seeing control," Cressida insulted, after Renya missed hitting an elaborate urn with her powers. Her voice dripped with disdain, each word carefully chosen to cut deep. "I want to see you aim and hit something for once."

Renya's jaw clenched, her fingers curling into fists at her sides. The urge to lash out was overwhelming, a tidal wave of anger threatening to break free. Then, a thought struck her—a dangerous, rebellious idea.

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Instead of aiming for the urn, Renya released her magic in Cressida's direction, and it shot against her chest. While it wasn't a powerful enough blast to seriously harm her, it was enough to surprise her and knock her backwards. She landed with a harsh thump against the cold marble flooring, her usually composed facade cracking for a moment to reveal genuine shock.

Renya suppressed a laugh, enjoying the way Cressida's phrasing allowed her to act against her, especially since that wasn't the Shadow Queen's intention. A small thrill of victory ran through her, tempered by the knowledge that her actions would have consequences. But in the end, it just put Cressida in a sour mood, her eyes narrowing dangerously as she picked herself up off the floor.

She glared at Renya, and for a few seconds, Renya thought she might turn on her and use her black magic against her. The air crackled with tension, and Renya braced herself for retaliation. But instead, Cressida just looked at her, eyes unblinking. Renya could feel the undercurrent of hostility raging silently in the room, like a storm waiting to break.

“If only your pathetic mate could see you now,” Cressida jeered, her voice low and venomous. “Too bad he has no power left. He's weak and useless. I'd hate to be fated to such a waste.”

Renya ignored the insult, though it took every ounce of her self-control. She knew Cressida was trying to provoke her, to make her lose control. Even without magic, Grayden was powerful. His strength lay not just in his abilities, but in his heart, his determination. Renya clung to that thought, using it as a shield against Cressida's cruel words.

Cressida, seeing that her barb hadn't had the desired effect, pressed on. "It's too bad you'll never see him again. I might not be able to kill him directly, but there are ways to be rid of him."

This time, Renya's face turned red, a mixture of fury and fear flooding through her. Without thinking, she sent a huge burst of magic towards Cressida, golden and hot. The power surged from her in a blinding flash, fueled by her love for Grayden and her terror at the thought of losing him.

But this time, the Shadow Queen was prepared. She sent up a misty shield, a swirling darkness that seemed to devour the light. Renya's magic bounced off and hit her squarely in the chest. She gasped, the pain and heat of her own magic intense and aching. It felt like being struck by lightning, every nerve in her body screaming in agony.

She felt herself fall back to the floor, sprawled out and unable to catch her breath. The world spun around her, and for a moment, she thought she might lose consciousness. She lay there, trying to comprehend what happened, her mind reeling from the shock of the impact.

Cressida strutted over and looked down at her, contempt in her gaze. Her lips curled into a cruel smile, satisfaction gleaming in her dark eyes. "See? You're pathetic. Your mate is pathetic, your control over your magic is pathetic, and you are useless to me." She kicked Renya sharply in the side with the toe of her boot and then marched out of the room, her footsteps echoing in the vast chamber.

Renya didn't pick herself up. She was so tired of fighting, so tired of pushing herself to learn all she could from Cressida. The weight of her captivity, the constant battle against Cressida's cruelty, and the ache of separation from Grayden all crashed down on her at once.

The longer she lay there, the easier the tears flowed. Hot and salty, they trickled down her cheeks before pooling at the back of her neck. She stayed there, exhausted and in tears, for almost a half hour before she heard the door open.

“Miss Renya! What happened?” Margot swept into the room, her apron starched and her hair in a tight bun. She hurried to where Renya lay, and knelt down beside her, worry etched on her kind face.

Renya wiped the tears from her cheeks and allowed Margot to help her up to a sitting position. The movement sent a fresh wave of pain through her, and she winced, her breath catching in her throat. Margot pulled out a handkerchief from her apron pocket and handed it to Renya. There was a delicate blue flower embroidered on it, along with Margot's name. Renya accepted it and wiped her tears, the soft fabric a small comfort against her skin.

“It'll be okay,” Margot said, patting Renya's knee gently. Her voice was soft, filled with a motherly concern that made Renya's heart ache for home.

Renya breathed deeply, her chest still aching from the impact of her own magic. “I don't think I'll ever be okay again,” she said, looking into Margot's sympathetic eyes. The words felt heavy on her tongue, a truth she had been trying to deny. “I'll never be able to match her magic.”

“You're not alone, Miss Renya,” Margot reassured her, her eyes shining with a fierce determination that surprised Renya. “I'm sure your prince is out there, on his way to come get you.”

Renya didn't have the heart to tell her that it didn't matter, that she was stuck here. Unless Grayden was able to defeat Cressida once and for all, she was bound by her blood promise. As much as she believed in Grayden, she knew the odds were heavily stacked against him. She didn't even know if he was healed, or if there were any

lingering issues from his injuries. Cressida's dragons had destroyed most of the Twilight Kingdom, and Renya had seen so many fallen soldiers on the battlefield as she flew above the carnage on the back of the dragon. The memory of that flight, of the destruction she had witnessed, still haunted her dreams. She knew any resources available were already thinned considerably.

But looking at Margot's hopeful face, Renya couldn't bring herself to crush that optimism. Instead, she managed a weak smile, grateful for the woman's kindness in this dark place.

Renya allowed Margot to pull her up, and she swayed on her feet the second she was upright. The room spun around her, and for a moment, she thought she might collapse again. Margot helped catch her, and Renya leaned on her as they made their way back towards Renya's room.

The journey seemed to take forever, each step a monumental effort. By the time they reached her chambers, Renya was breathing heavily, her body trembling with exhaustion.

Margot opened the door and helped Renya to the bed. She sank deeply on the mattress, the wind still knocked out of her. Margot removed her shoes and tucked her gently into the bed, her movements careful and tender.

“Thank you, Margot,” Renya said, slinking back against the pillow, her body tired of fighting. The softness of the bed was a stark contrast to the hard marble floor of the throne room, and Renya felt herself beginning to relax despite the lingering pain.

“I'm rooting for you, Renya,” Margot said, as she shut the door quietly behind her. The words hung in the air, a small beacon of hope in the darkness that surrounded Renya.

Chapter Ten

Sion's heart beat faster, a frantic rhythm that seemed to echo in the cavernous throne room. The familiar oppressive atmosphere felt even more suffocating today, the air thick with tension and unspoken threats. Brandle stood next to Cressida, his lips curled into a gleeful grin that sent chills down Sion's spine. Brandle's appearance alone made Sion's brow sweat and perspiration trickle down his back, the cool droplets a stark contrast to the heat of his fear. Whatever reason he was summoned for, it was something that made Brandle ecstatic.

Which meant trouble for Sion.

His eyes darted to Renya, who stood at Cressida's left, obviously held there by the Shadow Queen's magic. The invisible bonds seemed to shimmer in the air around her, a testament to Cressida's power. Renya's eyes were frantic and desperate, another sign that what was going to transpire was deadly. The fear in her gaze made Sion's stomach churn with dread.

Swallowing hard, Sion forced his voice to remain steady as he addressed the queen. "How can I serve you, my queen?" The words tasted bitter on his tongue, a reminder of the facade he had maintained for so long.

Cressida's eyes narrowed, a predatory gleam in their depths. "That's the thing, Sion," she said, her voice steady and unwavering. Each word felt like a nail in Sion's coffin. "I think you serve others, not just me."

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This was it, Sion thought, his mind racing. He knew his treachery would eventually be uncovered. The constant fear, the sleepless nights wondering when he would be discovered—it had all led to this moment. Fates, he only wished he could have done more. Found some kind of weakness, some useful information on how to defeat her. The weight of his failure pressed down on him, threatening to crush what little resolve he had left.

He stayed silent, knowing there were no words to appease her. He had always known she would grow tired of him and find a way to dispose of him. His only regret was that he wouldn't be able to take her down with him. The thought of leaving Renya alone, of failing Grayden and all those who depended on him, was almost too much to bear.

Cressida withdrew her milky white hand and pulled a piece of parchment from between her cleavage. Sion was grateful he'd never have to see her uncovered chest again. His charade was over, his own personal torment almost ended. A small part of him felt relief at the thought, even as fear clawed at his insides.

“Brandle noticed you heading towards the falconry a few nights ago,” Cressida continued, her voice dripping with false sweetness. “He followed you. Can you guess what he saw?”

Sion remained quiet, his mind flashing back to that night. He had been so careful, or so he thought. But in this place, with eyes and ears everywhere, it had only been a matter of time before he was caught. He kept his head bowed, wondering how his death would play out. He hoped it would be quick and dignified. He hated to imagine her toying with him, like she often did. She enjoyed playing with her prey before she

consumed them, a fact he had witnessed far too many times.

“You don't know? Or you don't care to deny it?” Cressida's voice had an edge to it now, sharp as a blade and just as dangerous.

Again, he kept his tongue in check. He wanted to lash out, to have the final word, but he was tired. Tired of this role, exhausted from the mental toll he paid. Pained from the emotional turmoil. He was glad it was over. Thrilled for the end to be here. He'd see his father again. It would all be okay. He said a silent prayer to the Fates. Let his death accomplish something. Fuel a fire within his lands to avenge his passing.

Cressida tapped her talon-like nails against the throne, the rhythmic sound like a countdown to Sion's fate. She was clearly enjoying Sion being in the hot seat, her eyes gleaming with malicious pleasure. Brandle watched his queen, also entertained by Sion's predicament. The tension in the room was palpable, a living thing that seemed to pulse with each beat of Sion's racing heart.

The wind ruffled Sion's robes, the cold oddly comforting. He looked at Renya, not wanting to incriminate her further, but he recognized the parchment Cressida held and knew Renya was just as much on trial as he was. Their eyes met for a brief moment, a world of unspoken words passing between them. He closed his eyes, bracing for what was coming. He had seen it play out so many times, and had witnessed so much death in this room. He wondered how his own ending would come. Would she blast him with her magic? Slit his throat? Either way, his body would end up in the ravine below, carelessly tossed aside like so many others before him. The thought should have terrified him, but instead, he felt a strange sense of calm. At least it would be over.

“Fine. Refuse to speak,” Cressida spat, her patience clearly wearing thin. “It's obvious to me that you are working for my daughter's mate—that foolish boy. As if he stands a chance against me.”

This time, Sion's pent-up frustration and anger got the best of him. Months of suppressed rage, of playing the obedient servant, finally boiled over. "Are you jealous that I serve him, or just jealous that he prefers your daughter over you?"

The words had barely left his mouth when pain hit him, a blast of magic colliding with his chest. It felt like being struck by lightning, every nerve in his body screaming in agony. This was what he wanted. If he angered her, she couldn't draw out his death. But suddenly, the agony stopped and he heard a soft cry.

Through the haze of pain, Sion saw Renya had thrown herself in front of Cressida's path and was now twisting and writhing in torment. Cressida instantly stopped when she realized her target had changed, surprise and something akin to concern flashing across her face for a split second before her mask of cruelty slipped back into place.

Sion panted heavily, trying to recover from the piercing pain flowing through his body. He watched Renya do the same, her face pale but determination set in her eyes. It was now clear to Sion that either Cressida's magic was fading, or Renya was now too powerful to be controlled at the same time as Sion. Either way, it was a good sign, a glimmer of hope in their seemingly hopeless situation.

The Shadow Queen strode towards Renya and yanked her roughly to her feet, her fingers digging into Renya's arm hard enough to leave bruises. "What are you doing, girl? His punishment doesn't concern you!"

Renya lifted up her chin, her gray gown trailing behind her. Despite the plain gowns Cressida forced her into, Sion couldn't deny her beauty. He understood Grayden's fascination with her. Her golden hair tumbled down her shoulders, the locks thick and shining even in the dim light of the throne room. Unlike her mother, Renya didn't paint her lips or rouge her cheeks. Her natural grace was evident in the way she moved, her tone of voice, and her expressions. But right now, her eyes were deeply furrowed in anger, blazing with a fierce determination that reminded Sion of why he

had risked everything to help her.

Sion was free again, unbound from Cressida's hold. He debated jumping off the edge of the cliff, ending it before Cressida could torture him to death. The ravine below seemed to call to him, promising an end to his suffering. But as he looked on, Cressida struggling to overpower Renya once more, he paused.

Renya was flailing her arms in a cruel imitation of a marionette doll, arms moving uncoordinatedly. A bead of perspiration dripped down her wrinkled forehead, deep in concentration. A flash of surprise, then horror, and then something else—almost pride?—crossed the Shadow Queen's face. Sion knew Renya couldn't outright attack Cressida while the blood promise remained in place, but she was still fighting against both the magic of the promise and the magic Cressida was using. He beamed with pride, even though Renya's training was not his doing. She had come so far in such a short time, her strength of will matching her growing magical abilities.

“Stop fighting me!” Cressida bellowed, her composure cracking for the first time. The air crackled with conflicting magics, golden sparks of Renya's power clashing with the dark tendrils of Cressida's control.

“Leave him be!” Renya shouted back, her voice ringing with authority. “Spare him, and I will never fight against you again. I'll cooperate in all ways!”

Cressida paused, her eyes narrowing as she considered this unexpected offer. “Another blood promise then?” Her thin eyebrow arched towards the open ceiling, clouds dancing above like silent witnesses to the drama unfolding below. “For your loyalty and unwavering cooperation?”

“No, Renya!” Sion screamed against the wind, his voice hoarse with desperation. There was no way he would ever allow Renya to make a blood promise for his life. Her loyalty to Cressida was too big of a price for anything. The very thought of

Renya binding herself further to this monster made his blood run cold. Seeing no other option before him, he ran towards the edge of the room, preparing to dive headfirst to his own death. Better to die than to be the cause of Renya's further enslavement.

He was halted mid-jump by Brandle's magic, the sudden stop jarring every bone in his body. Frozen in midair, he hung, arms flung forward and dangling over the cliff. The wind whipped around him, tugging at his robes, a cruel reminder of the fall that awaited him.

“Orders, my queen?” Brandle's tone was downright cheerful, the sadistic pleasure in his voice making Sion's skin crawl. Sion wished for nothing more than to be free of this spectacle, to fall into the abyss below and end this torment once and for all.

Cressida's eyes darted between Sion and Renya, calculating. Finally, she spoke, her voice cold and precise. “A blood promise can only be given freely. I cannot force the girl's loyalty in any other way. I'll spare his life in exchange for your fidelity.”

Sion knew he should feel relief, suspended in the air but knowing his life was safe, but he also understood the Shadow Queen's treachery. Death was truly the only way out. The 'mercy' Cressida offered was no mercy at all, but a different kind of prison. He wanted to scream, to beg Renya not to do this, but the words froze in his mouth, stifled by Brandle's magic.

“Do you agree, girl?” Cressida's voice was soft now, almost gentle, but Sion could hear the triumph in it. She had orchestrated this perfectly, using Sion's life as leverage to bind Renya even tighter to her will.

Renya held her chin high, a single tear coursing down her cheek. The sight of that lone tear, a testament to Renya's pain and sacrifice, broke Sion's heart. “Yes. I'll make another promise.”

Cressida's villainous laugh carried with the wind, a sound of pure malevolent joy that sent shivers down Sion's spine. He hung over the ravine, listening with foreboding as Renya once again made a blood promise to the savage queen to save a life. The words of the promise echoed in the chamber, each syllable another link in the chain that bound Renya to her monstrous mother.

“Now, release him,” Renya commanded as soon as the promise was sealed, her voice surprisingly calm. There was a strength in her tone that hadn't been there before, as if the act of sacrifice had awakened something within her.

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Sion easily predicted the queen's reaction, his heart sinking even as Cressida's lips curled into a cruel smile.

“Release him? You little fool,” Cressida sneered, her voice dripping with contempt. “You may have spared his mortal life, but there is no way he'll ever be free of me.”

Chapter Eleven

The crisp air carried the scent of pine and decaying leaves as Selenia threw her leg over her mount, her ruby cape trailing behind her like a banner of defiance. The fabric caught the fading sunlight, seeming to glow with an inner fire that matched the determination in her eyes.

“I'm coming with you,” she declared.

Grayden's jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in his cheek as he struggled to maintain his composure. “Absolutely not. I forbid it,” he said, his tone sharp as he pulled on his leather riding gloves. The supple material creaked as he grabbed the reins tightly in his hands.

Selenia, true to her nature, ignored him completely. She clicked her tongue, the sound sharp in the quiet forest, forcing her mare, Honor, into a steady gait. The horse's hooves kicked up small puffs of dust as they moved forward, leaving Grayden behind.

Frustration mounting, Grayden turned to his last hope for support. “Phillippe, back me up here!” he yelled over his shoulder, spurring Damion into a quicker pace to

catch up with his headstrong sister. The powerful stallion responded instantly, muscles bunching as he surged forward.

Phillippe's laughter rang out behind them, a rare sound of mirth in these tense times. "She's not going to stay put, Brother," he called, urging his own horse ahead as well. "You might as well resign yourself to the fact that your rescue mission includes one more."

Grayden frowned as he watched Selenia glance back at him, a smirk of triumph proudly crossing her face. The expression was so familiar, so reminiscent of the sister he knew before tragedy struck, that it made his heart ache. He struggled internally about including her. Although his quest to retrieve Renya would no doubt be dangerous, it was the first time he saw a spark in Selenia's eyes since the passing of Jurel.

The memory of Jurel's death hung over them like a shroud, a constant reminder of what they had lost and what was at stake. Grayden studied his sister's profile, noting the way the grief had etched fine lines around her eyes, aging her beyond her years. And yet, there was something there now—a flicker of the old Selenia, the one who faced challenges head-on with a fierce grin.

Finally, he gave a curt nod, and Selenia responded with a half grin. His heart leapt at the look. Although a month had passed since Jurel's death, Selenia still took to wandering the halls of the castle, absentmindedly stroking the walls and looking off into space. It deeply concerned Grayden, but he didn't know how to offer her comfort when he himself could barely keep it together. The weight of Renya's absence pressed down on him constantly, a physical ache that never truly subsided.

"You are to follow my orders, exactly as I give them," he warned, as Selenia slowed down her pace to ride alongside him. The words came out harsher than he intended, born of fear for her safety rather than true anger.

In response, Selenia stuck her tongue out at him, the childish gesture so unexpected that Grayden almost laughed. Then her expression sobered as she looked ahead into the dark forest that loomed before them.

Grayden followed her gaze, apprehension settling in his gut like a cold, heavy stone. He could see nothing but the shadows of trees ahead, their branches reaching out like gnarled fingers in the fading light. It would be a long ride to the Sun Realm, but he was determined to get there as quickly as he could. There must be some clue, some instruction on how to break the blood promise that Renya made to Cressida. Julietta's words gave him hope that such a thing was possible. If he could rescue Renya and break the blood promise, they could potentially have a fighting chance of beating Cressida for good.

As they rode, Grayden's mind raced with possibilities. Surely Renya might have picked up some secret knowledge about her, some way to defeat Cressida? If not, perhaps Sion had. The thought of Sion, still trapped in Cressida's clutches, sent a pang of guilt through him. He pushed the feeling aside, focusing instead on the task at hand.

Selenia slowed further, and Grayden finally caught up with her. "Which way, Brother?" she asked, as Honor stomped at the ground impatiently, sensing her rider's nervous energy.

Grayden eyed the forest, uncertainty creeping in. It had been many years since he rode this far west, through the thick, dimly lit woods on the outskirts of the Twilight Kingdom. The landscape had changed, trees growing taller and denser, the paths less defined. Luckily, Phillippe had been through here last year. Grayden looked back at him, seeking guidance, and Phillippe nodded in understanding.

"A little lost, there? I thought you were our fearless leader?" Phillippe chuckled as he edged past Grayden, his tone light but his eyes serious.

Grayden didn't laugh, but gave Phillippe a warning glance. He knew his brother meant well, but the stakes were too high for jests.

Phillippe sobered immediately, recognizing the tension in Grayden's posture. "Okay, okay. Sorry. I'll take the lead."

With Phillippe at the helm, they set off along a small trail towards the right side of the forest. Grayden and Selenia followed, riding single file as the trees became denser and overgrown. Branches reached out to snag their clothing, and roots threatened to trip their horses at every step.

"Are you sure this is right?" Grayden watched as the path closed in even more, doubt gnawing at him. The forest seemed to press in around them, watchful and ominous.

Phillippe gave a snort, glancing back over his shoulder. "Do you want to lead? By all means, go ahead."

Grayden shut his mouth and ground his teeth together. He knew he was being overbearing and controlling, but he couldn't stop worrying every minute that Renya was out of his reach. The bond between them, once so strong and vibrant, now felt like a frayed thread, growing weaker with each passing day.

Sensing his brother's distress, Phillippe's tone softened. "The trail is overgrown. No one has ventured into the Sun Realm for quite some time. I only know the way because Father took me on the eastern route to the Spring Lands, and we passed it along the mountain ridge. It's beautiful, but...creepy, in a way. Everything is opulent and gorgeous, but there's a quiet surrounding the entire desert. I'm not exactly looking forward to venturing inside the city walls..."

The description sent a shiver down Grayden's spine. What secrets lay hidden in that silent, golden realm? And would they hold the key to saving Renya?

“I appreciate you coming with me,” Grayden said after a moment, his voice rough with emotion. “I couldn't take our army, but you're the next best thing.”

Phillippe's response was immediate and heartfelt. “She's your mate, Grayden. She's part of our family. Of course I'll do whatever I can to get her back to us.”

“Me too, Grayden,” Selenia added, her voice small but determined.

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Emotion welled up in Grayden's throat at his siblings' words. The bond between them, forged in childhood and tempered by hardship, had never felt stronger. Whatever lay ahead, they would face it together.

The trio rode farther into the forest, silent except for the occasional broken branch or bird taking flight. The trees grew closer together, their canopy blocking out what little light remained. When it started to get so dark that Grayden couldn't see his horse's head in front of him, he called for a halt.

“Let's rest here until daybreak,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. The forest seemed to demand silence, as if speaking too loudly might awaken something best left sleeping.

Phillippe dismounted with practiced ease and moved to help Selenia down. She accepted his assistance gracefully, then smoothed her skirt and began unpacking the sleeping roll on Honor's back.

Grayden watched her fiddle with the ties and then move over to aid Phillippe in removing the tent. She helped him pull it off and began assisting him with setting it up, her movements efficient and purposeful. She'd changed in the last month since they left the lodge. It saddened Grayden a bit, knowing Jurel's death was most likely the culprit. He hated to see his sister lose the exuberance for life she possessed, but there was a new strength in her now, a quiet determination that both worried and impressed him.

While his siblings worked on setting up camp, Grayden took it upon himself to prepare for the night ahead. He dragged over some fallen logs and made a pit for the

fire, arranging the wood carefully to ensure it would burn efficiently. Then he set off to hunt for firewood, moving farther into the thickening edge of the forest to find some drier wood. He didn't want the fire to smoke and give their location away. That was all he needed, an ambush of Cressida's soldiers before they even left the Twilight Kingdom territory.

As he moved deeper into the forest, the shadows seemed to darken, taking on a life of their own. The air grew colder, and an unnatural silence fell over the woods. Even the nocturnal creatures that should have been stirring seemed to be holding their breath.

A sharp snap of a twig abruptly ended his thoughts. The sound was like a thunderclap in the eerie silence. Grayden's instincts, honed by years of training and recent battles, took over. He pulled his knife from his boot quickly and crouched down low, his eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of movement.

For a moment, all was still. Then, a deep, screeching laugh came from behind a tall, moss-covered tree. The sound sent chills down Grayden's spine, raising the hair on the back of his neck. It was unlike anything he had ever heard before—not quite animal, not quite fae, but something...else.

“Hiding won't prevent me from knowing you, Grayden Snowden.” The voice that followed the laugh was just as unsettling, a raspy whisper that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Grayden's grip tightened on his knife, his palms sweaty despite the chill in the air. “Show yourself!” he demanded, proud that his voice didn't waver despite the fear coursing through him. “Who are you and how do you know my name?”

A figure slowly emerged from behind the tree, the darkness partially obscuring its features. As it moved into a patch of moonlight that filtered through the canopy, Grayden felt his breath catch in his throat. The mysterious apparition was definitely

not fae, and resembled no creature Grayden had seen before.

It was shrouded in a green mist, its form shifting and undulating as if it couldn't quite decide on a solid shape. As it solidified, Grayden could see that the creature's skin was a mottled gray, reminiscent of the underbelly of a pale fish left too long in the sun. It opened its mouth wide in what might have been a smile, revealing rows of sharp, pointed teeth that gleamed wetly in the moonlight.

“I know many things, Grayden Snowden. And how I know things is not for you to know.” It gave another cruel smile and Grayden pulled his sword off of his back, the familiar weight of the weapon providing little comfort in the face of this otherworldly threat. Before he could unsheath it, he found himself frozen in place, held by an invisible force that seemed to press in on him from all sides.

“My magic may be weaker than in the past, but it's still a great deal stronger than yours,” the figure taunted, creeping towards Grayden. He couldn't see where the creature's feet hit the ground, and he had a sickening suspicion that it was floating through the air, defying the laws of nature just as it defied description.

Grayden heard rustling behind him, and his heart sank. He knew Phillippe was approaching, no doubt coming to check on him after his prolonged absence. He tried to shout a warning, but his paralyzation was full-body. He couldn't even move his lips to form words, couldn't so much as blink as the creature drew ever closer.

He felt Phillippe brush against him, sword drawn, before he too was frozen. A few seconds later, Selenia emerged and was caught in the creature's hold as well. Grayden's fear doubled, no longer just for himself but for his siblings who had walked unknowingly into this trap.

“Ah, it's all three Snowden siblings. I was hoping I'd get the chance to meet you. Your father was an interesting character, so I've been longing to meet his offspring.”

Grayden was shocked to his core. This creature met his father? His father obviously lived past the encounter, so Grayden was instantly confused as to the beast's intentions. Was this some kind of test? A rite of passage? Or something far more sinister?

He watched Selenia struggle against her invisible bonds, and he was shocked when he saw her move her fingers and open her mouth. How was she able to resist the creature's magic when he and Phillippe were completely immobilized?

“A powerful one, we have here. Yet you don't use your magic, princess. You could control it, you know. I could tell you how.”

Selenia managed to free herself completely, shaking off the last vestiges of the creature's hold. Her eyes blazed with a mixture of fear and determination as she faced the strange being. “I don't know who or what you are, but I don't need any help from you.”

“You might change your mind, one day. You're young, after all...and I know everything that lies ahead of you.”

The creature's words sent a chill through Grayden. The idea that this being could see their futures, could know what lay in store for them, was both terrifying and tempting. What if it knew about Renya? About how to save her?

Selenia looked at Grayden and Phillippe, her concern for her brothers overriding her fear of the creature. “Let my brothers go!”

“I will...for a trade. A small trade, and you shall all go on your way.”

Grayden was released from his bonds instantly, stumbling slightly as control of his body was suddenly returned to him. He heard a soft thump as Phillippe fell on his

knees next to him, as he had been frozen in mid-leap.

“Don't make any kind of trade, Selenia!” Phillippe scrambled to his feet and put himself in front of his sister and the taunting figure. His voice was urgent, tinged with a fear Grayden had rarely heard from his usually composed brother. “She's a Murcurial!”

Grayden and Selenia looked puzzled, the term unfamiliar to them. The Murcurial laughed, the sound like nails on slate. The rags it wore shifted as her diaphragm moved up and down with her movements, revealing glimpses of gray, mottled flesh beneath.

“Phillippe Snowden knows of me, he does? If I could blush, I would.”

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Phillippe didn't respond to the Murcurial, but looked at his siblings carefully, his eyes conveying a warning more potent than words. "They are tricksters who try to change your destiny!"

"Only partially right, Phillippe Snowden. Know your future, I do. It's you who decides whether or not to try and change it."

The Murcurial moved slightly towards Selenia, and Grayden instantly shielded his sister. The Murcurial laughed again, the sound rattling Grayden's nerves. "Missing your mate, Grayden Snowden? Would you like to know if you're reunited? If the pretty Sun Princess will ever be your bride?"

Grayden's eyes widened. The offer was incredibly tempting; his desperation for Renya clouded all aspects of his judgment. The thought of knowing, of having some certainty in this sea of doubt, was almost overwhelming. But Phillippe's warning rang in his ears, holding him back from accepting the Murcurial's offer.

"Grayden, don't listen to her," Phillippe urged, his voice tight with tension. "Their riddles will drive you mad, trying to find meaning in the ramblings." Once again, he attempted to position himself between the Murcurial and his siblings, his protective instincts in full force.

The Murcurial's gaze shifted to Phillippe, its black, lash-less eyes unblinking and unsettling. "You will enjoy the feeling of power, Phillippe Snowden. But you'll have to choose. Would you rather love, or magic? For you shall not have both."

Phillippe's face paled at the prophecy, a flicker of fear crossing his features before he

steadied himself. “Stop it! I'll not hear my fortune!” he cried, lunging at the Murcurial with a desperation born of fear and anger.

But the moment he made contact with the spot where she was hovering, the Murcurial vanished like mist in sunlight. The sudden disappearance threw Phillippe off balance, and he stumbled, barely catching himself before he fell.

A chill ran down Grayden's spine as he realized the creature could appear and disappear at will. How could they fight something they couldn't even touch?

Before he could voice his concerns, the Murcurial's raspy voice came from behind them. “Selenia Snowden...you grieve for the wrong man. The one you are meant for is in pain, yet instead of caring for him, your heart is torn for another. Silly girl. You know nothing of true pain and true love.”

Selenia whirled around, her face a mask of shock and indignation. But before she could retort, the Murcurial reappeared behind her, snatching at her cloak with boney, decaying fingers. Selenia screeched and tried to push her off, the sound of tearing fabric filling the air.

“I just want your pretty mantle. Then leave you alone I will,” the Murcurial crooned, its voice a mockery of gentleness.

Grayden's protective instincts flared. “Why should we believe you?” he demanded, his sword drawn and pointed straight at the Murcurial. The blade gleamed in the moonlight, steady despite the fear coursing through him.

The Murcurial stared down the sword, her eyes black and unblinking. There was no fear in its gaze, only a sort of amused curiosity, as if Grayden's threat was nothing more than a child's game.

“Your mate carries a secret. One she has not told you, one she might not even know herself. Would you like to know if she'll live to reveal it?”

The words hit Grayden like a physical blow. A secret? What could Renya be hiding from him? And the implication that she might not live...He felt his resolve wavering, the temptation to know almost overwhelming.

But before he could respond, Selenia acted. With a swift motion, she unclasped the arctic fox pin holding her cloak together and threw it at the Murcurial's feet. The silver pin glinted as it fell, landing with a soft thud on the forest floor.

“Here, begone!” Selenia cried, her voice ringing with authority. “Leave us be and speak no more!”

The Murcurial glanced at the offering, then bent to retrieve the cloak. Her boney fingers extended from the rags she wore, and Grayden felt slightly sick as he looked at flesh rotting off the bone. The sight was grotesque, a reminder of the unnatural nature of the being they were dealing with.

“Many thanks, Selenia Snowden,” the Murcurial said, its voice taking on an almost sing-song quality. “We'll meet again, you know. Next time, it will be you who seeks me out. Bring me a handsome payment and I'll serve you well.”

“Never,” Selenia spat out through clenched teeth. She moved farther back into the canopy of trees, as far away from the creature as she could get. Grayden could see her trembling, though whether from fear or anger, he couldn't tell.

With another maniacal laugh, the Murcurial slunk back into the forest, a cloud of mist surrounding her. After a few seconds, she had completely disappeared, leaving behind only the lingering scent of decay and the echo of her laughter.

Grayden let out a shaky breath, his mind reeling from the encounter. What did the Murcurial mean? A secret Renya was keeping from him? The thought tore at him, planting seeds of doubt that he tried desperately to push away.

Phillippe approached Grayden and rested his hand lightly on his shoulder. The touch was grounding, pulling Grayden back from the brink of his spiraling thoughts. “Don't worry about it, Grayden,” Phillippe said softly, his voice steady despite the lingering tension in his posture. “Murcurials love to entertain and frighten us with their fanciful talks of the future. Father said they downright lie just for the fun of it.”

Grayden nodded, grateful for his brother's reassurance, but he still couldn't push the worry from his mind. The Murcurial's words had struck too close to home, playing on his deepest fears and insecurities.

Selenia came to his other side, visibly shaken from the encounter. She was shivering, partly in fear, and partly from her missing cloak. Without hesitation, Grayden pulled off his fur and wrapped it around her slender shoulders. She gave him a grateful look, pulling the warm fur closer around her.

“Do you think there's any truth in her words?” Selenia asked, her voice barely above a whisper. “Do they ever tell the truth?”

Phillippe scratched his jaw, his fingers running through the full beard that covered his face. The gesture was familiar, a habit he'd picked up from their father. “It's hard to say,” he admitted after a moment of contemplation. “But you mustn't dwell on what she said. That way lies madness. Fae have gone crazy trying to discern meanings in their protestations. Just forget what you heard.”

Selenia nodded, but Grayden could tell she was focusing on the Murcurial's words as much as he was. The creature's prophecies had struck chords in all of them, touching on their deepest fears and desires.

“Why did she want Selenia's cloak?” Grayden asked, trying to make sense of the strange encounter.

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Phillippe shrugged, his face concentrated in thought. “I have no idea. I don't think they weave spells or any dark magic. Perhaps she just liked it?”

The explanation seemed too simple, too mundane for such an otherworldly being. But Grayden had no better theories to offer.

Selenia shuddered, pulling Grayden's fur tighter around her shoulders. “Let's get out of here,” she said, her voice tinged with urgency. “I can still sense her presence. It feels like...rot and decay. I can almost smell it.”

Grayden nodded, suddenly aware of the oppressive atmosphere that lingered in the wake of the Murcurial's departure. He picked up the pile of wood he had started to gather, then put his other arm around Selenia and guided her back to the camp. Phillippe followed behind in silence, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, eyes scanning the shadows as if expecting the Murcurial to reappear at any moment.

None of the siblings spoke as they made their way back, each deep in thought, contemplating the confessions of the Murcurial. The creature's words hung over them like a cloud, casting a shadow over their mission.

As they reached the clearing where they had set up camp, Grayden couldn't shake the feeling that something had fundamentally changed. The encounter with the Murcurial had shaken them all, bringing to the surface fears and doubts they had tried to keep buried.

But as he looked at his siblings, saw the determination in their eyes despite their fear, he felt a surge of resolve. Whatever lay ahead, whatever secrets or challenges they

might face, they would face them together. And somehow, someday, they would find Renya and bring her home.

Chapter Twelve

The dungeon was a far deal better than sleeping in Cressida's bed every night, Sion decided, as he leaned against the damp stone wall of his cell. It was wet, cramped, and musty, the air thick with the scent of mold and decay. But anything was better than being between Cressida's legs, enduring her twisted desires and cruel games. At least here, in the relative solitude of his cell, he could breathe without feeling her suffocating presence.

His cell faced the dungeon door, offering him a clear view of the comings and goings of the guards serving Cressida. Over the past hour, he had watched them closely, noting their movements, their expressions. He knew many were only loyal to her out of fear, their eyes darting nervously whenever her name was mentioned. Sion hoped to work that fact to his advantage somehow. Given time, he was sure he'd eventually be able to bribe or talk his way out.

As he sat there, his mind raced with possibilities. He'd torture Cressida until she broke the blood promises, grab Renya, and they would flee together. They could take shelter in the fallen Sun Realm or head to the Spring Lands, seeking shelter and safe passage there. He'd get a letter to Grayden, and—

“Sion?”

A rough voice came from the cell to Sion's left, interrupting his thoughts. The sound was unexpected in the quiet of the dungeon, and Sion found himself tensing instinctively.

“Cyrus?” he replied, recognizing the voice of the old man who had been brought in

earlier.

The old man coughed and wheezed, the sound echoing off the stone walls. “How are you doing, my boy?”

Sion approached the bars of his cell, trying to catch a glimpse of the old man. From the rounded angle of the dungeon, he could just make out the elderly gentleman laying against the wall of his own cell. Even in the dim light, Sion could see the weariness etched into every line of Cyrus's face.

“I've only been in here an hour, so I'm more concerned with how you are doing,” Sion replied, his voice laced with genuine concern.

Cyrus laughed, and the sound was so hearty that Sion instantly doubted the old man's age. There was a strength behind that laugh that belied his appearance. “I've been sleeping, conserving my energy. I told you, I'm right where I want to be. Where I need to be.”

Sion's brow wrinkled. “Why on earth do you want to be her prisoner?”

Silence fell between them, heavy and expectant. Sion was about to speak again when Cyrus's voice, now low and serious, broke the quiet.

“I don't have much choice, but I do believe you'll do what you can for my Renya.”

My Renya? The words struck Sion like a physical blow. No—it couldn't be—

Cyrus continued, his voice barely above a whisper. “Renya is...my daughter.”

Sion laughed, the sound tinged with disbelief. This old man, who spent his time in the human world—then it clicked. He did spend his life in the human realm—guarding

over the very portal Renya fell through. The realization hit Sion like a thunderbolt, pieces of a puzzle he didn't even know he was solving falling into place.

“You mean—”

“Yes, my boy,” Cyrus confirmed, a hint of pride and sorrow mingling in his voice. “I was once Fated to your queen.”

Sion felt sick, a wave of nausea washing over him. And embarrassed. Not only had he slept with Renya's mother, but her father knew about it. The shame of it burned in his chest, threatening to overwhelm him.

Cyrus seemed to read Sion's mind. He laughed again, the sound echoing through the stale air of the dungeon. “Don't worry about it, I don't care if you've made me a cuckold. I was able to sever my mating bond with Cressida a long time ago...once I found out that it was the only way to save my daughter.”

The casual way Cyrus spoke of severing a mating bond—something Sion had always believed to be unbreakable—left him reeling. “But—why are you here then? Why allow yourself to be captured? You know she'll want to kill you for what you've done.”

“Trust me, my boy,” Cyrus replied, his voice taking on a tone of grim determination. “She needs me. I'm critical to her plans. She wants her daughter's unquestioned loyalty—and there's one thing standing in the way from that. But with any luck, I'll be able to right a wrong and finally do something for my Renya.”

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Cyrus wasn't making any sense, but Sion didn't want to question him further. There was a plan in place, and someone else to look out for Renya besides him. He felt relieved, knowing he had an ally in this God's forsaken realm.

“What can I do to help you?” Sion leaned forward, lowering his voice. There were no other prisoners currently held in the dungeon, but he didn't trust Cressida not to have ways to listen in.

“We're going to free my daughter and get her safely to her mate—but first, the Shadow Queen needs me for a bit of magic. Once it's performed, she'll find out my betrayal. If I don't make it out, I need you to help Renya. Tell her—tell her that her father never stopped fighting for her.”

The weight of Cyrus's words settled on Sion's shoulders, a responsibility he hadn't expected but one he knew he couldn't refuse. “But the blood promises—”

“Let me worry about that,” Cyrus cut him off, his voice firm. “Trust me, I'm right where I need to be to set things right. Just promise me, you'll look after my Renya if I don't make it out of here?”

Sion nodded, even though he knew Cyrus couldn't see him. “I've been looking after her since I saw her wearing my best friend's pin.”

“I'm trusting you, my boy. Don't let me down.”

Before Sion could respond, a large creaking noise came from the doorway. He quickly pushed himself back against the wall of his cell, heart pounding as Cressida

strode into the dungeon. Her eyes squinted in the near darkness of the chamber, adjusting to the gloom.

Sion watched her glance between the two cells, and he could see her internal struggle as she attempted to decide which former lover she wanted to toy with first. After a moment of deliberation, she marched towards Sion, choosing the most recent betrayal.

She stood directly in front of him, her black dress blending in with the darkness of the dungeon. Tiny bits of onyx, sewn into concentric circles, sparkled on the skirts from the sole torch on the wall. Sion feigned disinterest, fighting to keep his expression neutral. He knew she could hurt him, bring him to the edge of death, but she couldn't push it past that. The blood promise Renya made saved his mortal body, at least.

“Oh, sweet Sion,” Cressida purred, her voice dripping with false sweetness, “how I hate to see you restrained...at least, in these conditions. I'd much rather you'd be chained to my bed.” She adopted the saccharine tone she liked to use when she was antagonizing her prey. “I'm sure you'll come to regret your betrayal quickly. The dungeon isn't any place for a man with your...talents.”

Sion swore he saw a grin flash across Cyrus's face in the dim light of the adjacent cell. He couldn't fathom how Renya's father could find this situation humorous. Perhaps he was slightly unhinged? His ex-mate was deranged, so why not him too?

Sion met Cressida's gaze. “My 'talents' are no longer yours to control.”

Cressida scoffed, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “I can make you do anything I want, my dear Sion. I just can't kill you. But don't fear, I no longer desire you. How could I, when you've aligned yourself with the losing side?”

A chuckle came from Cyrus's cell, drawing Cressida's attention. “The only losing side

is whichever one you're on, Cressy.”

Sion watched the hatred flash in Cressida's eyes, her composure cracking for a moment. “Don't you dare call me that,” she hissed, her breathing so irregular that Sion could hear her gasp for air.

“So you didn't let your former lover call you by your little nickname, Cressy?” Cyrus taunted, his voice laden with mockery. “It sounds to me like your relationship was purely physical.”

This time, Cressida lashed out. Her black magic crept into Cyrus's cell and wrapped around his neck cruelly. The dark tendrils seemed to suck the light from the air around them, pulsing with malevolent energy.

Cyrus sputtered and coughed, but Cressida didn't let up. His eyes became wide and his face started to turn red. As if in a trance, Cressida tightened her hold, her eyes gleaming with a mix of rage and sick pleasure.

“Stop!” Sion shook the bars, helpless in the cell and against the Shadow Queen's magic. The metal rattled uselessly, a stark reminder of his powerlessness in this situation.

Suddenly, as if coming to her senses, Cressida released Cyrus. He crumpled to the ground, massaging his neck and breathing deeply, each intake of air a painful wheeze.

“You fool,” Cressida spat, her voice trembling with barely contained fury. “You want me to kill you? I won't. I still need you.”

Cyrus, despite his near-death experience, managed a weak chuckle. “Ahhh, you're in the market for a new lover now? I admit, our time together was pleasurable, if not short.”

Cressida fumed, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. But Sion could tell she was trying hard not to lash out again. Whatever she wanted Cyrus for, it was incredibly important. She watched Cyrus for several seconds, her gaze calculating, before turning back to Sion.

“I’ll deal with you later,” she said, her voice cold and promising future pain. “Let’s just say, we are going to have some fun, seeing how far I can push you without ending your life.”

Sion didn’t even react. The second Renya made her promise, he knew this was to be his fate. He met Cressida’s gaze steadily, refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing his fear.

With a final glare at Sion, Cressida turned on her heels and flicked her fingers. The bars around Cyrus’s cell disappeared with a sound like shattering glass, and he was instantly bound by her magic. She dragged him out of the cell, not caring as he stumbled behind her.

“Come, you old fool,” she commanded, her voice echoing in the dungeon. “It’s time for you and your precious daughter to have a reunion.”

As Cyrus was pulled from the dungeon, his eyes met Sion’s for a brief moment. In that glance, Sion saw a mixture of determination, fear, and something else—hope. Whatever Cyrus had planned, whatever gambit he was about to attempt, Sion silently wished him luck.

Chapter Thirteen

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Renya paced in the throne room, her footsteps echoing off the cold stone walls. She had no idea why Cressida summoned her. They'd already had a magic lesson that morning, and the dislike and tension in the room was so palpable that the Shadow Queen stormed out after fifteen minutes into the lesson, leaving Renya with a mixture of relief and apprehension.

The clock chimed, its sharp tones reverberating through the cavernous space. Renya sighed, her fingers moving restlessly to smooth the rough fabric of her dress. Almost unconsciously, she found herself playing with the aragonite necklace at her throat. At least Cressida hadn't taken that from her. Her thumb brushed over her ring finger, and her heart constricted at the memory of her lost ring. It wasn't just another link to Grayden; it was his mother's—a family heirloom now lost to the winds. Her eyes burned with unshed tears, and she tried desperately not to dwell on the loss.

The sound of approaching footsteps from the sky bridge pulled her from her melancholy thoughts. Her mind raced back to the last time she had been in this room, and her pulse thundered with worry and fear for Sion. She'd gladly make as many promises as she needed to in order to save the people she cared about. She only hoped he'd find a way out of Cressida's clutches. But at least his life was saved, for now.

Brandle strolled into the room, his chest puffed out with an air of smug superiority. Ever since Sion's betrayal was revealed, Brandle's arrogance had only grown.

“Our queen will be here shortly,” he announced, taking his usual place next to the throne, his eyes gleaming with anticipation.

Renya ignored him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of a response. Instead, she

took a moment to try and feel Grayden through their bond. She had detected a bit of fear and worry from him earlier, and it scared her. Now, she searched, but she couldn't feel him. It seemed she could only sense him during times of great emotion. But even though she had felt his turmoil, she was glad for the knowledge that he was still alive, still fighting.

After a few more minutes of tense waiting, Renya heard the tell-tale sound of Cressida's ridiculous shoes against the glass of the sky bridge. She turned her eyes to the bridge and saw her mother begin to cross, but someone else quickly caught her eye, making her breath catch in her throat.

The Shadow Queen was dragging an elderly man behind her, his feet stumbling on the smooth surface of the bridge. He was clearly in rough shape, tired and pale, his clothes dirty and disheveled. Cressida was obviously binding him with her magic, as he stumbled and struggled in her wake, his movements jerky and uncoordinated.

Renya wasn't sure what was going on. Why would Cressida care about an old man? He didn't even look fae; in fact, he looked...human.

As they drew closer, Renya stared, a memory pulling itself into the forefront of her mind, like a parched man crawling towards a desert mirage. She took in the man's sparkling blue eyes and his filthy, yet elegant suit. Recognition dawned—it was the man from the bookshop. The owner. What was he doing here?

Then, another memory, long forgotten, surfaced. Those same blue eyes, looking down on her from above. Younger, more vibrant, but unmistakably the same. Renya struggled against the realization, not believing what was in front of her.

Cressida reached the edge of the bridge and strutted towards her throne, her every movement exuding power and menace. The man followed behind, still stumbling. She sat, and the man was finally released from his bonds, swaying slightly as he

regained his balance.

Blue eyes met blue eyes across the room. Renya's head started to pound, and she felt dizzy, the world seeming to tilt on its axis. This couldn't be true. This man, he was important. A part of her. She could feel it in her bones, in the very core of her being. And then she knew, with a startling certainty that shook her to her core. This man was her father. She knew it like she knew the sky was blue or that Grayden was her soul mate.

The second Renya correctly guessed his identity, the man smiled. A sweet, fatherly grin crossed his face, transforming his weary features. Renya watched as he struggled, moving his arms as if to sweep her up in his embrace, held back only by invisible bonds.

Renya was so tired, so confused, and so broken in that moment that she wanted nothing more than to rush into his arms and collapse, desperately seeking some kind of parental comfort she had never known.

Cressida no doubt sensed the raw exchange of looks between the two. Not a word was spoken, but the air was charged with unbridled emotion.

Finally, the man spoke, his voice raw. "My Sunshine. My dear, sweet Renya."

Tears sprung in Renya's eyes and her heart hammered in her chest. She felt like every breath she took might shatter her lungs, the weight of the moment almost too much to bear.

"Well, isn't this touching," Cressida mocked, looking at father and daughter with a disgusted look. Her voice dripped with disdain as she continued, "It's clear who you take after. I hoped to have a daughter worthy of me, but you are just as worthless and weak as your father."

“Love isn't a weakness,” the man retorted, his voice steady despite his disheveled appearance. “You'll never understand its true power.” Renya was shocked at how he mouthed off to her without fear of retaliation. This man seemed so gentle, so caring and warm, that Renya couldn't believe how he could have possibly been involved with Cressida.

“We'll see about that,” Cressida sneered. “Did you wonder why I brought you here, Cyrus? It wasn't to have this touching reunion with your daughter.”

Cyrus. Her father's name was Cyrus. Renya felt pieces of her soul click together, filling gaps she hadn't even known existed. She had a father. And he seemed to hate her mother as much as she did.

“I have a hunch,” Cyrus replied, his voice tinged with resignation. “And I won't do it.”

“Oh yes, you will,” Cressida's voice turned cold, her eyes glittering with malice. “If you don't, the girl possesses no usefulness to me. I'll kill her right in front of you, and then kill you next. And once she's dead, the blood promises are broken and I'll kill her mate, and her little friend Sion for good measure.”

Renya paled, her blood turning to ice in her veins. What did the Shadow Queen want her father to do? What could be worse than being pledged to Cressida?

“I won't break her bond,” Cyrus declared, his voice firm despite the tremor in his hands. “They are sacred.”

“You had no problem breaking ours,” Cressida retorted, her voice laced with bitterness.

“It was the only way to keep her safe from you,” Cyrus shot back, his eyes flashing

with a mixture of regret and defiance. “I'll admit, I never expected to have to hide our child from you. But I knew, the second you discovered those prophecies, you'd stop at nothing to take her power and prevent her from overthrowing you.”

“Too bad it did you no good,” Cressida sneered. “You only delayed the inevitable.”

“I won't break our daughter's fated bond,” Cyrus insisted, his voice rising. “I refuse.”

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As his words and their meaning hit Renya's brain, she started to shake. Violent tremors coursed through her body and fear, unlike anything she had felt before, overtook her. The very foundation of her world seemed to tremble beneath her feet.

Suddenly, clearer than she had ever heard it, came Grayden's voice in her head.

Renya? Renya, what's wrong?

It only lasted a split second, and she tried to feel for him, to respond back, but he was gone, leaving her feeling more alone than ever. She choked through a sob, relieved to have heard Grayden but terrified about what Cressida was threatening. Surely her own father wouldn't do that? What would happen to her and Grayden if their bond was broken? Would she still love him? Would he love her? Would they never be able to love again? The questions swirled in her mind, each more terrifying than the last.

“You'll do it,” Cressida commanded. “That blasted bond is the only thing keeping her from fully submitting to me. If you don't break it, I will kill her. She's no use to me if she's constantly plotting to get back to her pathetic prince.”

Renya began hyperventilating as she saw her father's face fall, the light of hope dimming in his eyes.

“If I do this,” Cyrus said, his voice heavy with defeat, “you must free me and Sion. Allow us to go to the human realm in peace.”

Cressida laughed shrilly, the sound dispersing through the cool air of the open room. “That won't be happening. You are in no place to negotiate. It's simple. Break her

bond, or everyone she loves, including you, dies.”

Cyrus looked at Renya, his eyes pleading, filled with a lifetime of regret and love. “My daughter, please forgive me for this. I have no choice. This isn't the destiny I would have chosen for you. I tried my hardest to protect you, I even watched you from afar. When you were attacked, I was there. I couldn't stop the gossip, but I could ensure you remained untouched by evil. I watched over you the best I could, my Sunshine...I love you.”

Renya thought she was going to collapse. Her head swirled and for a moment, her entire mind went blank. These revelations, combined with the fear of being severed from Grayden, was too much. The world seemed to tilt and spin around her, reality blurring at the edges.

Before she could say anything, she was tightly bound by Cressida's magic. She fought as hard as she could against the misty bonds, but her mind was so blocked that she couldn't even bring her magic forth. It was like trying to grasp smoke, her power slipping through her fingers.

She looked at Cyrus, her eyes pleading. Sadness, mixed with resolve, was evident in his expression. Hot tears trailed down her cheeks, and the fury welled up within her, a hurricane of emotion threatening to tear her apart.

“Do it, and do it now,” Cressida commanded, her voice sharp. “If you hesitate, I'll fling her off the cliff this second.”

Cyrus approached Renya, his arms outreached. Renya watched him approach, and it was like everything was happening in slow motion. He put his hands on her shoulders, and then looked into her eyes. She could see the emotion there, raw and unfiltered, and she knew, with intense clarity, that he loved her. For just a few seconds, with his hands surrounding her, she felt safe and protected, a feeling she had

never known from a parent.

Then pain, unlike any she had experienced, coursed through her as she felt her father's magic enter her. Red hot and radiating, it was more painful than falling through the portal or having her magic unlocked back on the beach in the Tidal Kingdom. It felt like liquid fire coursing through her veins, threatening to consume her from the inside out.

"I'm so sorry, my dear Renya," Cyrus said, his voice breaking. Renya closed her eyes against the burning sensation. It felt like all of her blood was boiling in her body, cooking her from the inside out. She cried out loudly, the pain overwhelming her senses.

Cyrus moved his hands from her shoulders and placed them on the sides of her head. The pain instantly stopped, leaving her gasping for breath. He leaned in and whispered gently to her, pushing her braid over her shoulder like Grayden had done so many times before.

"Trust me, my dove. All will be right."

Then, a blinding light flashed through the room, so bright that Renya had to squeeze her eyes shut against its intensity. When it faded, she found herself unbound, swaying on her feet.

"Is it done?" Cressida asked gleefully, her eyes alight with triumph.

"Yes," Cyrus replied, his voice hollow. "Our daughter will never know love again. Are you happy?" He glared at Cressida, his eyes filled with a mixture of hatred and despair. "I've broken her bond, desecrated something sacred for the second time in my life. Because of you."

Cressida's eyes gleamed and she looked giddy, like a child who had just received a long-awaited gift. Cyrus backed away from Renya slowly, his eyes downcast and full of regret. He wiped his hands on his suit pants, as if disgusted with himself.

“I suggest you let her rest before you put her through anything else,” Cyrus said, motioning towards Renya. His voice was weary, drained of all emotion. “That magic comes with a cost, and she'll be weak for the rest of the day.”

“Fine, whatever,” Cressida waved her hand dismissively. “Go to your room, girl. We'll start a new chapter tomorrow. Now that you are no longer fated, you'll have no choice but to fully commit to me.”

Chapter Fourteen

Grayden had felt her, he was sure of it. One minute, he was riding, trying to gauge how much farther until they left the protective canopy of the Twilight Kingdom forest, when a blast of deep emotional pain surged through him. He felt dizzy, and he actually thought he might pass out from the intensity of feeling that overcame him. He swayed on top of Damion before he caught himself and readjusted his balance, his heart racing with concern.

Selenia's sharp eyes missed nothing. “Grayden, what's wrong?” Her voice was tinged with worry.

“I think—actually, I'm positive—I felt Renya.” The words came out in a rush, a mixture of relief and fear.

“That's wonderful. You haven't been feeling her much, have you?” She spurred Honor on to catch up with him.

“She's hurting.” He couldn't keep the grief and apprehension out of his tone. The pain

he had felt from Renya was unlike anything he had experienced before, and it terrified him.

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Selenia's face fell. "Grayden—I'm sure she's okay." But her words sounded hollow.

He hung his head low, unable to answer her. He kept his eyes ahead on the bright light just outside the line of trees, trying to focus on their goal rather than the ache in his heart.

Phillippe caught up and studied them both, his keen eyes taking in their tense postures. "What's going on?"

Selenia jumped in, saving Grayden the pain of responding. "Grayden could feel Renya, and she's in trouble."

"Grayden, we'll get her back. I know it," Phillippe said, trying to reassure Grayden as much as he could. His voice was firm, filled with a determination that Grayden wished he could feel.

"She's my entire life," Grayden said, in a small voice, hardly audible over the hoofbeats of the horses. The admission hung in the air, a testament to the depth of his love and the weight of his fear.

"We know, Grayden. She's a big part of our lives now too." Selenia pushed her ringlets back over her shoulder and looked grimly ahead.

No one said anything until they reached the edge of the forest, knowing the pain Grayden was in was uncategorizable. The silence was heavy with unspoken worry and shared determination.

As they approached the Sun Realm, the temperatures increased and the horses, equipped and adapted for the Snow Lands, started to struggle in the intense heat. Selenia had shrugged off Grayden's fur and her gloves were long gone. Grayden's shirt clung to his back, and Phillippe removed his altogether. Their pace slowed significantly as the sweltering heat wore them down.

The trees thinned, and soon the forest floor transitioned from soft, earthy-smelling dirt to coarse sand. A vast desert appeared before them, hot and unforgiving, stretching as far as the eye could see.

“A desert? Phillippe, where are you leading us?” Grayden grumbled while unbuttoning another button on his tunic. It was the first word he'd uttered in an hour.

“This is the fastest way to the Sun Realm. We could have come through the southern border, but you have to go around Gradis Lake in order to get there. It's an easier route, but it would add at least three days to our journey.” Phillippe dismounted and walked along his horse for a bit, grabbing his water pouch and drinking deeply.

Grayden nodded, and dismounted as well. He pulled a few small traveling cakes and passed them to his siblings. Selenia nibbled at hers, while Phillippe inhaled his without chewing. Grayden passed his rations to Phillippe, his appetite long gone. Phillippe accepted it hesitantly, worry etched along his forehead.

“Have either of you been past the Sun Realm?” Selenia asked, her curiosity momentarily overriding her exhaustion.

“No,” Phillippe answered. “But Father saw it in his youth. He said that it's beautiful—but at the same time, incredibly...chilling.”

“Chilling?” Selenia asked.

“He said that parts of it are destroyed, but other areas are completely untouched, as if any second someone is coming back to claim it.”

“Do you think we'll find any clues as to how to defeat Cressida?”

Grayden looked at Selenia, his eyes haunted. “That doesn't matter. All that matters is freeing Renya from the blood magic.”

“Grayden,” Phillippe warned, his voice gentle but firm. “If there's any clues there as to how to beat her, we need to look. Getting Renya back, only to have Cressida take her again or destroy our entire kingdom, isn't much better. Renya would want us to search for anything in their archives that could potentially help us and our world.”

Grayden knew his brother was right. He wasn't usually so self-serving, so selfish. But now that he was fated, everything else seemed to fade into the background. Food had no taste, and no amount of fireale could numb his pain. Colors were dull and sounds were nothing but noise. Loving Renya fundamentally changed him, and her absence left a void that nothing else could fill.

As they carried on, he found himself following Phillippe absentmindedly, thinking about the first time Renya traveled with him on horseback. She had tried to hold herself away from his body, but she had fallen asleep quickly and relaxed against his chest. He remembered the smell of her hair and the softness of her body. Then there had been that moment at the inn, where she gaped at his shirtless body, warmed by the fire. He smiled briefly, thinking about the pink in her cheeks when she was embarrassed.

The trek through the desert was rough. They watered the horses right before leaving the borders of the Twilight Kingdom, but there wasn't a stream or pond in sight. Nothing but scorching sand lay ahead of them, the heat rising up and obscuring the horizon. He looked at Selenia, her lips parched and her back slouched. She didn't

complain, but Grayden could tell this journey was arduous for her.

Phillippe, on the other hand, ventured so much through their world that he was immune to the elements, seemingly unbothered by the humid desert air once he removed his shirt. Every once in a while he'd shake the sand out of his short hair, but he kept riding without complaining, like the dutiful soldier he was.

Grayden was no stranger to the harsh and extreme climates that made up their world either, but between his injury and the fact that he hadn't had a decent night's sleep since he woke up alone in their shared bed, was seriously impairing him. He wasn't the strong soldier he usually was. However, nothing, not exhaustion or injury, would convince him to stop moving forward.

At the hottest part of the day, Phillippe broke the silence.

“I think we need to camp now, and move again when the sun starts to set.”

Grayden looked around, trying to see if there was any natural shelter. The tents would bake them to death in the intense sun. A little to the west, he saw a large outcropping of rocks. He nudged Phillippe and pointed, and Phillippe nodded.

“That'll work well. If we rest for a few hours, and travel through the evening, we could be at the Sun Realm before the next sunrise.”

The outcropping Grayden spotted was actually a cave, hollowed out against a small, rocky hill. It was just big enough for them to spread out their sleeping rolls.

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Grayden rubbed down the horses and gave them a bit of water from their stores to try and get them through the next few hours. Selenia and Phillippe rested easily, but Grayden sat at the cave entrance, looking out at the vast expanse before him. Somewhere out there, just beyond the rolling hills of sand, was Renya's birthplace. The place she should have called home, if she had grown up here. He wondered what their lives would be like if she hadn't been taken to the human world. Would they have found each other as soon as they came of age? Would he have been drawn to the Sun Realm, his heart searching for her across this very desert? Perhaps his mother and father would have met Renya before they passed, and given their blessing of their marriage.

It was a nice dream, but there was no use dwelling on it. His parents were dead, and Renya was a prisoner. He sighed, wishing for the thousandth time that Renya was beside him, sharing his sleeping roll. But instead, he stared off at the horizon and drifted off with his back against the hard, rocky wall in front of the cave.

Phillippe shook him awake, and Grayden could instantly feel the heat pulsating from his skin.

“What the hell were you thinking? Falling asleep in the direct sun like that? You're burnt to a crisp.” Phillippe took his water skin and poured some water over Grayden's head, dampening his hair and cooling his sizzling forehead.

“I must have dozed off,” Grayden responded, standing up on stiff legs. “I closed my eyes for just a second.”

Phillippe tried to hide his annoyance. “Look, I know this is hard for you, but you

need to focus. You need to concentrate on our end goal here. If you don't drink, sleep, eat and think, you won't be alive long enough to save Renya. Enough is enough. Selenia lost Jurel, and she's handling her grief much better than you are, and your mate is still alive.”

Grayden's face reddened even more. Selenia had every right to be grief-stricken, but it was he who slowed them down.

“Selenia wasn't mated to Jurel, but you're right. That's no excuse. I'm sorry, Phillippe.”

“Don't apologize. Just look after yourself. Focus on what we need to do. We need to find the magical archives as quickly as we can when we get to the Sun Realm castle, and you need to have all of your faculties about you to do that. You know I'm not bookish, and I've spent most of my life outdoors, under the sky. You're the one who was holed up in Father's library.”

Grayden pushed back his hair and nodded his understanding. He was in desperate need of a haircut and a shave. At this point, Renya would hardly recognize him.

He loaded up the horses while Phillippe went to wake Selenia. When she came over to help with her horse, Grayden noticed her eyes were puffy and swollen. She'd obviously been crying, but he didn't need to ask why. He hadn't even fully processed Jurel's death yet, he'd been too focused on getting Renya back. He put his arm around Selenia's shoulder and gave her a slight squeeze. She looked up at him, eyes watering.

“It'll be okay, my dear one,” he said, patting her on the back. She nodded, and then squared her shoulders in resolve.

“Let's go get the answers we need to get Renya back,” she said, her voice filled with a determination that matched his own.

Phillippe was right. The Sun Realm was breathtakingly beautiful, Grayden thought, as they approached the gate into the city. The realm was right at the foot of the desert, but it appeared so suddenly, and so brightly that Grayden thought it was a mirage at first.

A golden, ornate gate towered above, with angelic figures spiraling up the sides of the columns. The entire kingdom was enveloped in a tall, limestone wall protecting the city from the harsh elements of the desert. Spikes made out of gold lined the tops of the walls, and more carvings, some of animals, some of angels, decorated the wall.

“Oh my,” Selenia said, stepping back to take in the magnificent structure in front of them. “That's...really something.”

Grayden was equally impressed. It suddenly hit him that he was outside Renya's lands, her birthright. It was night and day different from his. Everything in the Snow Lands were covered in a soft, delicate blanket of sparkling snow. Here, the gleaming sun bathed everything in a warm glow. They couldn't be more different from each other.

“Well, are we just going to stare, or find a way in?” Phillippe teased, walking directly up to the gate and giving it a big shake.

Unsurprisingly, the gate didn't yield to Phillippe's half-hearted attempt.

“You really thought that would work?” Grayden said, an eyebrow raised in Phillippe's direction.

“You never know,” Phillippe retorted, shrugging his strong and broad shoulders.

Grayden surveyed the gate and surrounding wall. There must be another way in. He started walking the perimeter of the wall, and Phillippe, knowing what his brother

was thinking, started in the opposite direction.

Selenia walked back to the horses, leading them over to a small stream that was flowing out of a small gate through the wall.

“Grayden!” she yelled excitedly. “Come here!”

Grayden ran back towards her, instantly alarmed. “What is it?”

“I think I found a way in,” she said, pointing at the gate. It was partly rusted and crumbling.

“Good work, Selenia. Phillippe, come here. We need your strength.”

Within minutes, Phillippe and Grayden had worked the gate off the hinges, allowing for a small passage through the wall.

“I’ll go first,” Grayden said, his heart racing with anticipation.

“Selenia in the middle, and I’ll go last,” Phillippe agreed as Grayden took off his boots and removed his shirt and then threw them over the wall.

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He heard Selenia gasp behind him, and he realized this was the first time she saw his wound. It was healed, but the scar left behind was deep and an angry red.

“It's okay, Selenia. I'm healed,” he said, while wading through the stream. He dipped below the surface of the water, swimming under the gate. He appeared quickly on the other side and then looked around him. The source of the stream was a serene lake, lined with palm trees and soft grasses.

Selenia emerged on the other side of the gate, swimming to the side of the bank. “Wow, it's gorgeous here. We'll need to find a way to get the horses in so they can graze.”

Grayden looked around. They seemed to be in some kind of garden area, with greenery surrounding the entire lake, and lush flowers blooming. The most fragrant smell lofted towards his nose, and he inhaled deeply. The floral scent reminded him of Renya's skin, during those tender nights that they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms. He quickly shook the memory away, determined to focus on the task ahead of him.

“Oh Fates,” came Phillippe's voice as he emerged from below the surface of the lake. “That's really something.”

Grayden dragged himself to the bank where Selenia sat, attempting to wring the water out of her skirts. He looked around for his boots and shirt, and found his boots just alongside the bank. His tunic, however, was floating in the water. He grabbed it, and joined Selenia in trying to wring it out.

Phillippe trudged up to the bank, removing his boots and dumping out the water from them.

“I’m going to head back towards the gate and see if I can find a way to get the horses in. I left them tied to a small palm tree, but they won’t stay put for long,” Phillippe said. He stomped off, leaving a trail of dripping water behind him.

Grayden held out his hand to Selenia and helped pull her up off the bank. Another thick stone wall separated the lake and trees from the heart of the city. But this time the gate was unlocked. Grayden pushed against the iron barrier, and he and Selenia moved farther into the city.

“Do you think Renya has memories of this place?” Selenia asked as they entered the city, her voice filled with wonder.

“I’m not sure,” he said, his eyes quickly surveying the town.

Opulent, grand buildings greeted them as they emerged from the garden. Everything seemed to be made from either a creamy-colored marble or was gilded. Grayden found it incredibly strange that the city hadn’t been looted long ago. He stopped to admire a particularly handsome building, with images of different fruits and vegetables carved on the stone door, entombed in a golden finish. He went to open the door, and a blast of heat hit him squarely in the chest.

“Grayden!” Selenia exclaimed, rushing to her brother’s side. “What happened?”

Grayden rubbed his chest and stood farther back from the door, his mind racing. “It seems as though there’s some kind of protective spell upon these buildings,” he said, his voice a mixture of awe and concern. “That explains why it’s been untouched for so long. There’s still some kind of magic defending this place.”

“Do you think we'll be able to get into the palace?” Selenia asked, frowning.

“I don't know, Selenia.” Grayden swallowed down the rising panic threatening to overwhelm him. What if they couldn't even get into the castle to find the scrolls? Before he could investigate the magic surrounding the building further, he heard the tell-tale sound of Damion's neigh and turned around to see Phillippe leading all three of the horses in the direction of the garden lake.

Grayden examined the next building along the street, his curiosity piqued. He peered inside the windows and found an ordinary home. There was a parlor, with cushions spread along the floor, and doors leading off to other rooms of the home. A fine sitar sat in the corner, and he could just make out some sheet music on the floor next to it. It did indeed appear as if the residents just disappeared. There was no sign of any kind of struggle on the streets and no damage done to the buildings. They were just...empty.

As he took in more of the city, he couldn't help but feel like someone was watching him. He turned around several times, expecting to see Selenia or Phillippe behind him, but they were both back at the lake, caring for the horses. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he felt a chill run down his spine despite the heat.

The unease followed him and grew more intense the farther he moved into the city. Finally, he decided to wait until Phillippe and Selenia were done with the horses. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was walking into an ambush, even though none came.

As he was walking back towards the lake, he swore he saw a girl's face in the window of the vacant house he passed earlier. But when he looked again, the face was gone. He shook his head to try and clear his vision. His eyes must be playing tricks on him, he mused, but the unsettling feeling lingered.

He approached the bank and watched as Phillippe and Selenia brushed down the horses and unloaded them.

“I thought we'd camp here tonight,” Phillippe said, unrolling the sleeping rolls. “The horses can graze on the grass, and it's close enough to the palace that we can spend most of the evening investigating.”

Grayden moved over and started to tend to Damion. The horses were in rough shape after the desert, Grayden noted. They weren't used to the warm climate and instead, were bred and adapted for high altitudes and cold weather. As much as he hated to delay, it was a good idea to rest here overnight and most likely the next night, too.

“Are you ready?” Grayden asked, once the animals were properly seen to, his voice tinged with impatience.

Phillippe slung his broadsword on his back and Selenia grabbed a saddle bag and threw it over her shoulder.

“What's that for?” Phillippe asked, eyeing the bag curiously.

“You think we've come all this way and we aren't bringing the scrolls and books with us?” Selenia replied, a hint of excitement in her voice.

“Ah, good point,” he said, as he started up the path.

They walked silently for a while, and Grayden still felt the sensation of eyes on him, the feeling growing stronger with each step.

“Do you feel that?” Phillippe asked Grayden, his voice low so as not to worry Selenia.

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“The feeling that we're being watched? Yes, but I've seen no one or any activity.” Grayden didn't mention the little girl he thought he saw. It seemed so improbable that anyone would be left in this abandoned kingdom. It was rumored to have fallen many, many years before. He wasn't even sure how Renya's ancestry was possible. He assumed that a tiny faction might have escaped and survived, hidden in another kingdom under false heritage.

A chilling thought suddenly entered his mind. What if it wasn't true? What if the Sun Realm hadn't fallen, and it had been inhabited when Renya's parents lived? If so, where was everyone now? The questions swirled in his mind, adding to his unease.

Phillippe gripped the hilt of his sword as they walked through the city, prepared in case the slightest noise or rustle came. Grayden followed up from behind, putting Selenia in the middle, his senses on high alert.

They moved throughout the city quickly, but every once in a while they stopped to observe a shop or building. Selenia gasped as she saw a clothier shop, brocades, silks and satins filling up the window in front. She looked longingly at the door and then down at her stained dress, still partially damp despite the heat.

Even Phillippe stopped as they passed a swordsmith's shop, with all kinds of swords and knives displayed proudly in the window. An intricate and ornate chess set caught Grayden's attention as they passed by a silversmith's workshop.

The marble streets twisted and turned, like a maze around the palace. It appeared to be built in the center of the town on a gentle hill. Every time they thought they were getting closer, the path they chose would take them in a different direction.

“We should have left a trail of breadcrumbs,” Selenia mumbled, stopping to adjust the pack she carried. “How much farther do you think?”

“I think we're almost there,” Grayden said, noticing how the streets seemed to narrow.

They turned a corner, and suddenly found themselves in an enormous courtyard. The area reminded Grayden of the spokes of a wheel, with different paths leading out in all directions into the city. The courtyard was round, with a large circular path connecting all the others together.

The palace was huge. Turrets jutted out from every corner, towering above. It was made of the same limestone material like the walls protecting the city, but even more carvings adorned every surface. There was gold everywhere Grayden looked, and he once again marveled that the city and its structures hadn't been looted.

“It looks undisturbed and perfect,” Selenia commented, her voice filled with awe.

“Not quite.” Phillippe pointed to the eastern side of one tower. The entire surface of the tower was blackened, and pieces of rubble lined the ground under it. Easily half of the tower was missing, open and exposed to the elements.

“I wonder what happened there,” Selenia said, glancing above and walking carefully around the rubble.

Grayden had an unnatural feeling the longer he looked at the spot. It was as if something significant happened there, something he should know. Almost as though he was there before, it felt oddly...familiar. Perhaps he had heard it described or seen it in a book? But even as he searched for the memory, he knew that wasn't it. The feeling of *déjà vu* was overwhelming, and he couldn't shake it.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Phillippe moved towards the large gate. Grayden's fears about the palace being impenetrable were unfounded; the gate was wide open and they moved through it with no resistance. Easily the height of more than two men, the gate was huge and heavy. Had it been closed, Grayden wasn't sure how they would have managed it. It would have taken half a dozen men to move it even a fraction.

Beyond the gate was another small corridor, with a fountain in the middle. A golden eagle, perched on a branch, was prominently depicted, carved into the marble of the fountain. Water trickled down the branch and tree, falling into a reservoir.

More paths led to different parts of the palace, branching off in several directions.

“Which way?” Selenia asked, looking to her brothers for guidance.

Grayden didn't answer, but his feet carried him to the eastern tower. He couldn't explain why, but he needed to see what transpired there. It was as if an invisible force was pulling him towards it.

Wordlessly, Phillippe and Selenia followed him through a passageway and up a spiraling staircase. Like most of the tower, the staircase was crumbling and they watched their footing carefully the higher they got. Burgundy tapestries lined the walls of the tower, with large valkyries decorating them. In the oldest of fae languages, the motto “the sun shall never set,” was proudly displayed on them.

Ironically, Grayden thought, as they continued their way up the dilapidated tower. The closer Grayden got to the top, the harder his heart started beating and he felt his palms moisten. There was a sense of anticipation building within him, though he couldn't explain why.

He finally reached the landing, which opened up into a large suite of rooms. His

boots thumped on the marble tile as he moved past the dark wood paneling and into the room on the far left. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw what was before him.

The circular room was painted a majestic midnight blue, with glittering images of the sun peppering the walls. A mural of a sunrise hung over a handsomely carved crib. Baby items were strewn about the room, and he saw tiny little clothes, blankets, and broken furniture. A lone baby bonnet, caked with dust, rested right next to his boot.

His heart knew what this was before his mind could catch up. He felt her here, felt the ghost of her presence in this nursery. The realization hit him like a physical blow, nearly knocking the breath from his lungs.

This was Renya's childhood room.

Chapter Fifteen

Renya sat on the floor with her back against the bed frame, sobs echoing off the walls of her chamber. She couldn't believe that her own father was alive. And not only that, he had taken away the one thing she had left: her bond with Grayden.

The moment her father performed his magic, it was like a part of her died. The knowledge that her fated mate was no longer connected to her broke her all over again.

She cried ugly, loud tears until her nose ran all down her face. She used her sleeve to dry her face, not caring about ruining the simple dress she wore. As she rolled up her sleeve, she caught a glimpse of her mating mark. The sparkling snowflake was there, as brilliant as ever. Confusion whirled around in her brain. Shouldn't her mark be gone if her bond was broken? Cressida didn't bear a mark after splitting from her father, so if her connection to Grayden was really severed, shouldn't her mark be

gone too?

She traced the snowflake with her finger, and she swore she could feel Grayden, just beyond her reach. She wasn't sure if her mind was playing tricks on her, or if she could really feel him.

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A quick rap against her window drew her attention away from her wrist. She picked herself up off the cold floor and couldn't believe it when she saw Sion's face peering back at her. Renya quickly undid the lock and swung the window open.

Sion hoisted himself up into her room, looking so much worse than she had ever seen him. He had large, open gashes bleeding on his chest, and his feet were completely bare and filthy.

“Sion, how are you here?” Renya asked, flabbergasted at his sudden appearance.

“Hold on, Renya,” Sion said, as he turned back to the window. Another face appeared, and Renya watched in disbelief as her father was assisted into the room by Sion.

Cyrus dropped to the floor and stood in front of Renya. He was incredibly pale, and he looked almost like a ghost. Renya stared at him, unsure of how she should act or even how she felt.

“Sunshine. I'm so sorry,” the old man said. “I never meant for it to be this way.”

The anger Renya had been carrying finally unleashed itself. “You mean you didn't mean to break my bond? The one thing I had left? The thing that I cared about more than anything in this world? You robbed me of my mate, my future husband! He means more to me than you ever will.”

Cyrus stared back at Renya, confusion wrinkling his brow. “My darling daughter, I would never break your fated bond. Do you know just how sacred those are? When I

broke mine to your mother, there were deep consequences and dark magic to pay. But I did it for you, my dear girl. To keep you safe. I would never rob you of the man you love.”

Renya's voice caught in her throat. “But...I felt something break,” she said in a small voice.

“I did sever a connection, but it wasn't your fated bond.”

Sion cleared his throat. “Enough of these riddles. What did you do?” He looked at Cyrus expectantly.

“I broke her blood promises. She's no longer bound to her mother. She's free. The dark magic binding the promises was rooted in deception and coercion, even if Cressida didn't believe it. A blood promise made under those circumstances can be broken with magic.”

Renya's eyes widened. She couldn't believe it. She was free? Just five minutes ago, she thought everything was taken from her and no hope remained. Now, she was free to return to Grayden. “You mean I can leave?”

Cyrus frowned. “You can, my daughter. But I would beg you to stay.”

“To stay? Why on earth would I stay here, with that monster?”

Cyrus looked at Renya, and she felt as if he was sizing her up for the first time. “Your mother is strong. She has amassed more power than I ever believed she could. Not only that, but she has managed to bring dragons into this world. You find yourself at a crossroads, my darling girl. You can leave, and return to your prince. Or, you could stay and earn your mother's trust. Be useful to her. She believes that you are no longer fated, and that you are bloodsworn to be loyal and obedient. There might be a

way to use that to your advantage and potentially save us all.”

“So, she's really my mother?” Renya asked in a small voice.

“She is, I'm afraid. She wasn't always this way, my dear child. She could love, once. She loved me. And she loved you, in her own way. But she was so fearful of being weak, of losing her magic, that she became blinded by power. She allowed it to blacken her soul, to transform her into what she is today. I saw the signs, as soon as you were born. We uncovered a prophecy, buried deep within our forgotten libraries underneath our palace. It foretold of a light bringer, who would bring back magic. When Cressida found it, she brought seer after seer to our home. She became obsessed with finding the meaning behind it. She neglected you and me. Finally, one seer told her that you would take her power and her throne. Your aunt overheard the conversation, and she and I devised a plan to take you to the human world and hide you there.”

“Aunt Agatha is really my aunt then? Your sister?”

“She's your aunt, but not my sister. She was born of shadow.”

Renya gulped. All this time, Aunt Agatha had kept the truth from her. Cressida and she were sisters. She felt a headache coming on, and her brain felt like it was going to burst with all the revelations.

“So you are really my father then,” Renya said, looking at Cyrus as if for the first time.

“I am. I loved your mother, but what I felt for you...I can't even describe it. When I had to choose between you two, I chose you. I broke my bond with Cressida to keep you safe and hidden. I couldn't take a chance of her finding me or sensing where I was. And I paid dearly for it. I lost my magic for several years, and was stuck in the

human world for longer than I intended. But I never stopped watching you, never stopped protecting you. When you moved to Seattle, right across the street from the portal, I knew that it was time for you to return. Just as I suspected, you were drawn to the portal. At the time, I thought it must have been the prophecy drawing you home. But now, I think it was your bond, bringing you to the man who will replace me as your protector.”

Renya stood there, unsure of how she felt. She believed this man, believed that he was her father. But she was confused, and angry at being lied to for her entire life. Even when Aunt Agatha came to save her, she still withheld the whole truth from her.

“What about my aunt? Where is she?” Renya asked, panicky. If Cyrus was at the bookstore, shouldn't he know where she was? Despite the fact that her aunt had lied to her numerous times, she still needed her safe.

“I'm sorry Renya, I think the Shadow Queen bound her to another world. But don't fret, Sion and I are going to head back through the portal and try to recover her. Her power is unmatched, and she's vital to helping us defeat Cressida.”

“Back through the portal?” Sion asked, glancing at Cyrus.

“Yes, I'd like to head home to the Sun Realm, and then search for Agatha in the portal corridor. I know it's a lot to ask, especially for how much you've been through here.”

Sion gulped, obviously uncomfortable with Cyrus knowing how much he'd been doing here. Renya's eyes became wide again, putting together the fact that her friend had been sleeping with her mother, and her father knew about it.

“I'll go,” Sion said quickly, looking between Renya and Cyrus. “Anything is better than being her plaything.” He looked at Cyrus and blushed. “Sorry,” he added.

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Cyrus brushed off the apology. "I'm thankful for you, Sion. You know the Snow Lands well, and you've been through the portal once before."

"So, you're leaving? Now?" Renya asked.

Cyrus nodded. "We need to leave before she realizes we've escaped. Hopefully we'll get a good head start." He wiped his hands on his suit pants. He was dirty and covered in grime, no doubt from spending his days and nights in the dungeon.

"So...will you stay?"

Renya's heart sank. She wanted Grayden, needed him. Her body ached to be next to him. She envisioned their reunion, the happiness that would radiate from his face when they were finally brought back together. She imagined sleeping on his warm and muscular chest, his calloused fingers softly tracing small circles on her arms after making love. The scene she painted in her mind was so vivid, so wonderfully warm, that she almost refused right away. But the longer she thought, she knew the future she pictured for them would never exist as long as Cressida did. With despair in her heart and heaviness in her chest, she agreed. "I'll stay as long as it takes for her to trust me."

"You are truly my daughter. So brave and beautiful. I only hope this mate of yours is good enough for you."

It felt odd, so strange to be in Cressida's palace, talking with her father about her future husband.

“He's the best man I've ever known,” Renya said, red creeping up her cheeks.

“He really is,” Sion added.

Cyrus looked satisfied with their answer, and moved back towards the window. “Sion, we better get going. The magic I used to free us will linger and leave a trace. I'm afraid she'll find us sooner rather than later, and I'm weak from breaking the blood promises.”

Sion moved towards the window, then paused before heading back over to the center of the room. He gave Renya a firm embrace, and knelt before her. “You might not be crowned yet, but you're my queen all the same.”

Cyrus looked on proudly, as if watching his daughter earn the respect of her subjects delighted him.

“Goodbye, Renya,” Cyrus said, preparing to climb out the window.

“Wait,” Renya said, as she came closer. Cyrus stood upright in front of her, and surprise crossed his face as she moved into his arms.

This man was a stranger, someone she had known less than a day, but she couldn't send him away without acknowledging the sacrifices he made for her. It was clear they were done out of love. But as he put his arms around her, Renya was shocked to feel a sense of completeness as her father embraced her back.

She pulled away, noting the tears that threatened to fall from her father's eyes.

“Take care, my Renya. My Light Bringer. I named you that because the second you came into this world and I held you in my arms, you became the light that ruled my life.”

Chapter Sixteen

Grayden moved over to the broken crib, looking at the miniature valkyries carved into the back. There were little suns too, and the bedding and blankets were a creamy butter-yellow. He ran his hand along the side of it, and could almost feel traces of his mate.

Phillippe entered behind him, looking confused over Grayden's fascination with the room.

“Grayden, shouldn't we go look for the archives?” Phillippe asked. He moved closer to where Grayden stood, as if trying to figure out what was going through his brother's head.

“I think...I think this was Renya's nursery,” he said quietly, turning around to take in the rest of the room. Part of the circular wall was destroyed, and rubble littered the plush rugs covering the stone floor. A layer of dust was thick on all the surfaces, but he could tell that from the care that had been put into decorating the room, Renya was loved. A small painting of an elkten was on the wall, which both excited and mystified him. Why was his animal guardian depicted in her room? Was it a coincidence? Or perhaps fate?

“How do you know?” Selenia asked, disbelief etched on her face.

“I just do,” he said, looking at the mural above the cradle once again. Suns and stars flickered against the light, almost as if they were moving.

He moved away from the cradle and heard a slight crack when he brought his foot down. He bent over and picked up a heart-shaped necklace. He rubbed his fingers over the smooth gold surface and turned it over. There was an engraving, and in fancy script, he could just make out the inscription:

To Cressida, Love Cyrus and Renya

Both horror and bewilderment flooded all of Grayden's senses. Everything around him seemed to stand still as he stared at the back of the necklace. His throat felt dry and his insides turned. It couldn't be.

Selenia came up behind Grayden and looked over his shoulder.

“What in the Gods' names?” she exclaimed, glancing at the necklace and then Grayden's face. “That can't be...”

Grayden turned over the necklace again and realized it had a small hinge on the side. He opened it, and found a miniature portrait. A woman, holding a newborn, stared back at him. He recognized the violet eyes and dark hair at once. It was Cressida. And there was no doubt that the blue-eyed babe sitting on her lap was his mate.

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He blanched, almost feeling ill. How could his sweet, brave, intelligent Renya come from such a monster? And who was Cyrus? Her father?

His eyes frantically darted across the room, looking for other clues. Besides some carved toys and a chest filled with elaborate gowns, which he suspected were to be part of Renya's dowry one day, he found nothing else to answer the millions of questions that bombarded his mind.

“What does this mean?” Phillippe asked, looking at the necklace and then around the room. “Is Renya...really the Shadow Queen's daughter?”

Grayden nodded, his throat dry and his chest tight. It didn't change how he felt about Renya, but it did significantly change the war they were about to face. Fates, how could he have not put it together? He remembered the surprise he felt when Agatha let Cressida live, even though her magic was strong and Cressida had none at the Sunset Lands. He thought back and pictured Agatha's magic, black and misty. The twin of Cressida's. Her sister. Agatha must have sensed the danger Cressida posed to her own daughter, and hidden her away in the human world. It wasn't just because of the prophecy. It was because Renya's own mother would harm her. And where was Renya's father? Dead? It was clear that something happened here in this room. Another memory hit him and like a flash, and he remembered the nightmare Renya had. She was warm and happy, and then darkness appeared. Was she witness to whatever took place? As an infant, did those memories stay with her?

“That's...intense,” Phillippe commented, looking awkwardly at Grayden. “And...didn't Cressida want you at one time? The mother of your mate? That's just...wow.”

Grayden ignored him, already aware of the implications it held. He closed his hand over the locket, and tucked it into his tunic. He wasn't sure why, but he needed to take it with him. Perhaps to provide proof to Renya...his stomach lurched again. How could he tell Renya? She would be horrified at the revelation.

“I think we should go,” Selenia said, backing away towards the door. “This room feels like...like we shouldn't be here.”

“I agree,” Phillippe said, grasping Grayden by the arm. “Come on, Brother. Let's go find the archives.”

Locating the lost library proved to be more difficult than they could have fathomed. They explored every tower, searching every room. The palace boasted a golden music room, filled with many different types of instruments, a drawing room with a large palm tree growing straight out of the ground and through a large opening in the ceiling above, and even a pond full of strange fish that they had to cross over by stepping on flat rocks strategically placed in a path from one side of the room to the other. They even looked in the kitchen and the store room, and were perplexed to find fresh vegetables still in the cellar.

“Do you think there's some sort of spell on this room, keeping the produce fresh?” Selenia asked her brothers.

Phillippe scratched his jaw, and Grayden examined the room closer.

“I'm not sure, but I'm getting the feeling that perhaps this city isn't abandoned after all,” Grayden said, looking at the soot in the fireplace. He walked over and poked at the ashes with a fire poker. Sure enough, he uncovered some hot coals.

“Grayden...” Phillippe warned, noting the recently extinguished fire.

“I know...someone is here, or has been here very recently.”

“Let's keep moving, and quickly,” Selenia said, hitching her bag up over her shoulder.

They exited the kitchen and then went through another corridor until they came to a dead end. There was a plain stone wall in front of them.

“A dead end. Let's turn around and head out. We've searched everywhere,” Phillippe said.

“Wait!” Selenia whispered, moving closer to the wall. “Can't you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Grayden asked.

“There's a draft, or wind blowing through the edges of the corner of the wall.” She knelt down on the floor and put her ear against the stone. “I'm sure of it!”

Grayden reached down and put his hand along the seam of the wall. “I feel it,” he said, the cooler air hitting his hand. “There's a secret passageway here.”

“Move back,” Phillippe said, pulling out his broadsword. He forced the sharp blade into the corner and pushed. The wall in front of them moved an inch, sliding seamlessly into a hollow opening on the other side.

“Help me!” Phillippe said excitedly, pushing on the blade even harder.

Grayden grasped the edges of the wall and pushed, and another few inches disappeared. Phillippe threw his weight against his blade, and Grayden pushed as hard as he could. Another six inches of wall slid into the other side.

“I think that's as far as it goes,” Grayden said. “Did you bring a torch?” he asked Selenia.

“Of course,” she said, and removed a long wrapped piece of wood from the pack she carried. Grayden grabbed it and struck a piece of flint from his pocket onto the torch. It burst into flames and he held it in front of the passageway.

“I'll go first. Selenia, you next, and then Phillippe, you take the rear.”

Phillippe let out a chuckle at Grayden's phrasing, but was given a stern look from his brother in return. “Sorry,” he said sheepishly, before getting behind Selenia.

Grayden turned sideways and pushed himself through the narrow opening in the wall. It was tight, but he just managed to squeeze through. He lifted the torch and looked around. A long staircase was in front of him, with no landing below in sight. He sighed as Selenia pushed herself through the wall easily.

“What do you think is down there?” she asked Grayden.

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“Hopefully the answers we've all been looking for,” Grayden said.

“Ummmm...we have a problem,” Phillippe called, his voice muffled. Selenia and Grayden turned back to see Phillippe, or rather, half of Phillippe, wedged in between the walls.

Larger in the chest and a bit stockier than Grayden, it was clear that no amount of wiggling would allow Phillippe to clear the door. Finally, after a few minutes they gave up.

“I'll just guard out here, I guess,” Phillippe said, pushing himself back into the corridor.

Grayden nodded, and he moved quietly and quickly down the stairs, with Selenia following behind him.

The stairs seemed to go on and on, twisting and spiraling down beneath the palace. The farther down they got, the colder it became. Selenia began shaking almost immediately, and even Grayden was chilled in his damp shirt. Finally, after almost a half an hour, the stairs abruptly ended in front of a massive wooden door. Ancient in appearance, and etched with runes, it was firmly locked.

“What should we do?” Selenia asked.

Before Grayden could respond, the door swung wide open.

Renya woke up with renewed determination. She would get Cressida to trust her, and somehow learn how to defeat her. She must have some kind of weakness or fear they could exploit.

Renya washed in the small stone tub and got dressed quickly. Margot appeared with her breakfast tray, and Renya didn't waste any time in scarfing everything down. She'd definitely need her strength if she was going to try and become the ally and heir Cressida sought.

“Anything else, Miss Renya?” Margot asked, her kind eyes searching Renya's face.

“Actually...I need some make-up.”

“Make-up?” Margot looked at Renya, confused.

Renya held out her arm, where her mating mark sparkled in the light. Margot gasped as she took in the meaning.

“You're fated to your prince?”

“Yes, but Cressida thinks she's broken my bond. I need your help in covering it up.” Renya's voice trembled slightly, the weight of her deception making her nervous.

Margot disappeared, and then came back a few minutes later with a light-colored powder. She helped Renya apply it, adding several layers until she was satisfied that it wouldn't rub off.

“Thank you, Margot. I know I can trust you.” Margot smiled and backed out of the room.

Renya fixed her hair and took a few deep breaths before leaving the room. Her

chambers were like a small sanctuary in the castle, and every time she left them she feared what would happen. At least Cressida never came in here, always sending someone to fetch Renya. Other than their training sessions, Renya hardly saw her.

She walked to the throne room, her heart pounding with each step. Cressida was already waiting for her. Usually, she was late and made Renya wait for her, so instantly Renya was on edge.

Cressida's face was ashen, and her entire body seemed to hum with untamed magic. The air crackled with tension, and Renya had to resist the urge to turn and flee.

Renya approached her, but was careful to stay several feet in front of her. Usually she'd stare Cressida down, but she remembered her promise to her father and dipped her head downward respectfully.

Cressida walked over to Renya, and wrenched her chin up.

"It appears my prisoners are gone," she hissed at Renya. "I'm assuming you played some kind of part in their escape?"

Renya's heart beat faster. She looked into Cressida's violet eyes, trying to think quickly. "Which prisoners?" she asked, dropping her eyes demurely.

"Don't play dumb with me, girl!"

"I couldn't betray you if I wanted to. I'm bound to you now, and I promised not to fight. I pledged my loyalty to you." Each word felt like a betrayal, but Renya kept her face impassive.

Cressida relaxed instantly, remembering the blood promises. She let go of Renya's chin, her nails leaving small marks against Renya's skin.

“Sion and Cyrus are gone. If you know anything, I command you to tell me.”
Cressida moved to her throne and sat down.

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Renya kept her face blank and emotionless, though inside she was rejoicing at their escape. “I don't know anything. I was in my room all night. And as far as I'm concerned, I don't care what happens to them. Sion clearly left to save his own hide, and I have no allegiance to a man that would abandon his only daughter in the human world.”

Cressida's eyes flashed to Renya's, no doubt looking for sincerity on her face. She must have been pleased with what she saw. “You don't wish to know more of your precious father?”

Renya treaded carefully. She knew too much flattery would make Cressida suspicious, but she had to act like her mating bond was broken and she was still bound in loyalty.

“No. I suffered in the human world. I was...attacked. I had no magic, and part of me was missing. My father—if you can even call him that—ripped me from my rightful place in this world.”

Cressida pursed her lips, and Renya hoped she hadn't taken it too far.

“Magic should never be locked away,” Cressida agreed, tapping her nails against the throne. Renya noticed that it was a habit for her. “We are nothing without our magic.”

“It was horrible in the human realm. I never felt like myself until you freed the magic inside of me.” This, at least, wasn't entirely a lie. Renya did feel more complete with her magic, though she knew it wasn't Cressida she had to thank for that.

Surprisingly, Cressida nodded. “I understand that. Let's get training. I still have much to teach you, daughter.” The word 'daughter' sent a chill down Renya's spine, a mixture of longing and revulsion.

Their practice session lasted much longer than usual. Cressida was still harsh, but at times, she was more patient with Renya. Renya couldn't help but wonder if her act was working, if Cressida was starting to see her as more than just a tool.

“To weave magic, you need more than just your thoughts. Your magic is the magic of the Sun Realm, so your powers will always prefer the light.”

Renya looked at her, confused. “What does that mean?”

“There's light and dark magic. Not in the sense you're thinking, of evil and good magic. But dark magic tends to be more earthbound. It uses the forces in the ground and darkness of night. My magic is far more powerful here in the Shadow Realm. Yours is more powerful in kingdoms and lands where the sun plays a dominant role. The Sun Realm, obviously. The Tidal Kingdom. The Spring Lands.”

Renya chewed the inside of her cheek thoughtfully. It was only a day since she pledged to get closer to Cressida, and she already pieced together some valuable information. She filed away this knowledge, hoping it might prove useful in the future.

“What other types of magic are there?” Renya asked. She wanted to directly ask about Grayden's magic, but she didn't dare. As far as Cressida was concerned, Grayden no longer held any claim over Renya's heart.

“There was earth and fire, but that magic has all but disappeared.”

“What happened to the Sun Realm?” Renya asked, her curiosity getting the better of

her.

Cressida shot her a warning look, and Renya halted her questioning quickly. The subject was clearly off-limits, and Renya made a mental note to approach it more carefully in the future.

“I want to show you how to properly shield yourself,” Cressida said, changing the subject.

Renya braced herself, knowing that Cressida had no qualms about hitting Renya with her magic at full force. She quickly let her magic flow, and tried to imagine a web of her magic around her, like Kalora had tried to teach her at the Twilight Kingdom.

As soon as Cressida unleashed her magic, Renya got flustered and dropped her shield. She closed her eyes and braced herself for the impact, but it never came. When she opened her eyes, she saw Cressida pulling her magic back into herself. Renya tried to hide her surprise. Perhaps Cyrus was right, and Cressida would start to trust Renya.

“Perhaps it's best if we took a break. You're obviously worn out.”

Renya nodded and tugged at her sleeve. She was perspiring heavily from the warmth of her magic, and she was nervous that too much moisture would cause the make-up covering her mating mark to melt.

“Come. I want to show you something.” Cressida moved towards Renya, and grabbed her hand. Renya wanted to pull back, disgusted by her hard, boney fingers, but she didn't even have time to react before Cressida spun and her dark magic transported them.

It was a strange sensation, almost as if Renya's belly button was being pulled towards

her back while she was spinning quickly. It only lasted a second, but it was jarring.

When the world stopped spinning, Renya looked around. She was in a damp, darkly lit room with a massive door in front of her. A pulsating sensation radiated from the door, and Renya realized it was enforced by magic.

“Where are we?” she asked Cressida, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice.

“You'll see soon enough,” she replied, as she unlocked the magic encasing the door with a flick of her fingers.

Cressida moved through the door and Renya followed behind, entering a long, dank passage. The walls were wet and dripping, and puddles of muddy water lined the stone walkway. Renya skirted around them and shivered as they walked farther down the path. The air grew colder and damper with each step, and Renya felt as if they were descending deep into the heart of the mountain.

“Perhaps we'll need to have some warmer clothing made for you,” Cressida said, watching Renya's teeth chatter.

Renya didn't say anything, but her spirit lightened slightly. She couldn't care less about what she was wearing, but Cressida's offer was another step in the right direction. Perhaps this would be easier than she thought.

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“Is my Aunt Agatha really your sister?” Renya asked, trying to make conversation as they continued down the narrow path.

Cressida pursed her lips, and Renya wondered if she made a mistake bringing her up.

“Yes. How did you know that?”

Renya didn't miss a beat. “Her magic...it's dark like yours.”

“Smart girl,” Cressida said, looking intensely at Renya. “Yes, and she betrayed me.”

Renya didn't apologize, but she didn't defend her aunt either. “It was really miserable in the human world. I was isolated, and I felt like a part of me was missing.” This, at least, was the truth.

Cressida looked at her, and Renya thought for a second she detected a tiny amount of pity on her mother's face. “That's how I felt when you took my magic.”

“I never asked for it,” Renya said cautiously, treading a fine line between sympathy and defensiveness.

Cressida sighed and continued moving forward through the passageway, ducking her head as a large stalagmite protruded from the ceiling.

“Watch your head,” she warned Renya.

Renya tried another approach. “When I was in the human realm, a man attacked me. I

got away, but it ruined my life. I lost my job, my friends and had to move away. If my magic wouldn't have been locked inside of me, it could have ended differently.”

Cressida stopped in her tracks, her shoulders slightly hunched. She didn't turn around, but continued walking. Renya wondered if she was gaining any sympathy from her mother. Surely, no mother could bear to hear that her child was attacked?

After a few more minutes, Cressida turned back to Renya. “Men can't be trusted,” she said, her indigo eyes flashing. “They'll betray you as soon as they get a better offer. Be glad you don't have to worry about having a mate anymore.”

Renya struggled to keep the disgust off her face. There was no one in this world that she trusted more than Grayden. “At least I don't have to worry about that,” Renya agreed, but the lie tasted like ash in her mouth.

Cressida looked pleased. Before Renya could say anything else, they turned the corner and entered a large antechamber. Two guards stood in front of a huge, heavy door. Renya could smell rotting flesh and could hear roars. The hair rose on the back of her neck, and for a second, she thought about turning and running.

This was where Cressida kept her dragons.

The guards opened the enormous doors, and Cressida slipped inside. “Come,” she ordered Renya.

She stepped inside hesitantly, not sure why Cressida would bring her here. Renya's eyes were as big as a dinner plate as she took in the sight before her.

Four dragons were encased in a large glass cage. The enclosure was massive, stretching from floor to ceiling and spanning the width of the cavern. Within, a miniature ecosystem had been created, with rocky outcroppings, a small pool of

water, and even a few stunted trees. The glass was thick and cloudy in places, marred by claw marks.

Renya instantly recognized the reddish-colored one with the orange eyes that carried her into this realm. He wasn't the largest, though. As Renya carefully skirted alongside the wall, as far away from the glass dome as she could, another dragon, this one even larger and with fuchsia scales, snorted into the air. Renya's legs shook at the sound, and she was instantly transported back to the night where she was separated from Grayden. She held her breath and then inhaled deeply, trying to fight down the rising panic.

Cressida moved forward, closer to the encasement, and beckoned Renya to follow.

“Brutus, Belinia and Berline,” she said proudly, pointing to each as she named them.

Berline was a bit smaller than Brutus, with teal scales that shimmered under the glow from the torches.

Behind the juvenile, a tiny dragon, about the size of a miniature pony, poked its head out.

Renya let out a gasp, hardly believing her eyes. The littlest dragon crept closer to her, swishing its tail and keeping its pink eyes locked on Renya. Unlike the other dragons, it walked on all fours and reminded Renya of a tall alligator. Its scales were a midnight blue, and it didn't have wings.

Cressida gestured towards the smallest dragon. “She just hatched two days ago.”

The dragon finally approached the glass, and peered at Renya intently. Renya hesitantly touched her hand to the glass, and the dragon snorted and then made a deep noise that Renya swore was akin to purring.

“She likes you,” Cressida said, astonishment heavy in her tone.

Renya stood there, mesmerized by the baby dragon. The creature continued to pace in front of the glass, keeping her eyes locked on Renya. “Does she have a name?”

“No, not yet.” A voice came from the far corner of the enclosure. Renya jumped at the male's voice, while Cressida just groaned.

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An elderly man appeared as if from nowhere, walking towards the spot where Renya stood.

“Who do we have here?” he asked in a gravelly voice. Renya took in his appearance and surmised that he wasn't from the Sun Realm. His attire was completely foreign, different and more primitive than anything she saw during her time here.

“She's none of your concern, Travers.” Cressida's tone was harsh and contained an air of finality, as if any further questions about Renya would not be tolerated.

Travers glanced at Renya again, but quickly looked at the baby dragon.

“Well, whoever you are, it appears as if she's quite taken with you.” He flicked a dirty thumb towards the smallest dragon, who was prancing around the edges of the glass enclosure, trying to get Renya's attention.

Cressida watched the dragon, her eyes narrowing, but then turned thoughtful. She turned and looked at Renya, then back at Travers. “Do you think she'd permit her to approach?”

Travers nodded, stroking his grizzled beard. “She already looks like she's trying to bond. I've never seen one take to someone so quickly.”

“Renya, come here,” Cressida said. It was the first time she'd ever addressed Renya by her name. It sounded strange coming from Cressida's mouth, although Renya knew there must have been a time when she heard it frequently. She reached inside, trying to find some memory of this woman, but nothing came. She only saw the

piercing blue eyes of her father that were identical to hers.

Obediently, Renya walked over to Cressida, her heart pounding with a mixture of fear and excitement. “It seems as though this baby dragon is trying to bond with you. Do you know what that means?”

Renya shook her head, still surprised at the civil tone Cressida used. She was so used to hearing her saccharine voice, insults rolling off of her tongue.

“When dragons are young, they are able to imprint. Some imprint on their parents, some siblings. And sometimes, other creatures. Brutus, as you might have noticed, has imprinted on me,” Cressida explained. “I'm interested to know if this small female will imprint on you.”

Renya bit her lip, considering the implications. She was intrigued, and did want to see the little dragon up close. But the other dragons were incredibly frightening. The memory of their destructive power during the battle at the Twilight Kingdom was still fresh in her mind. “How does it work?”

“You'll need to enter the enclosure and walk up to her slowly. You'll know instantly if she imprints on you.” Cressida's voice held a note of anticipation that Renya had never heard before.

It was just as Renya feared. She'd have to get in the glass cage with the other dragons. Renya hesitated, her instincts screaming at her to refuse. But then she squared her shoulders. She must continue to impress Cressida. This would be a perfect way to show her mother just how brave and valuable she could be to her.

Cressida instantly acknowledged Renya's resolve with a small nod, a flicker of something like pride in her eyes. “Good. I knew you would be unafraid.”

With Traver's assistance, Renya entered the dragon's territory slowly through a small, hinged opening in the glass. The dirt floor was soft underneath her feet, and she moved along the edge of the glass wall, taking small, tentative steps. The air inside the enclosure was warm and humid, filled with the musky scent of the dragons.

Brutus, Cressida's bound dragon, glanced at her lazily before looking directly at Cressida. The Shadow Queen gave a quick jerk of her jaw and Brutus ignored Renya, and then snorted into the air and made a loud, visceral roar. The other two adult dragons looked at him, and then went back to what they were doing.

Renya walked slowly over to the pink-eyed dragon, her pulse thumping and her heart hammering like it might burst through her chest. The other dragons continued to ignore her, but the littlest instantly took notice. She didn't take her eyes off of Renya, her gaze intense and curious.

Unsure of what to do, Renya approached her and slowly reached her hand out. The dragon looked at her, unblinking and then cocked her head, the way a well-trained dog might. Then, without warning, she pushed her snout underneath Renya's outstretched hand and purred contentedly.

Surprised, Renya stroked the dragon's nose, its small scales still pliable, unlike the older dragons. A smile crept up on her face and the dragon nuzzled Renya's hand, emitting a happy, chirpy sound. As she touched the dragon, Renya felt a warmth spread through her, a connection forming that she couldn't quite explain.

"That's it!" Cressida said excitedly, her voice slightly muffled through the glass.

Travers clapped his hands, watching the scene before him. "You've done it! She's imprinted on you."

Renya continued to pet the dragon, feeling an attachment to the creature instantly.

Upon closer inspection, she noticed tiny wing buds jetting out from her back. The dragon's pink eyes gazed up at her with what seemed like adoration, and Renya felt a surge of protectiveness wash over her.

“She's a beauty,” Renya said, admiring the creature. Her midnight blue scales shimmered in the torchlight, and her lithe body moved with a grace that belied her young age.

“Then that's what we shall name her,” Cressida responded. “Her name is Beauty.”

As Renya stood there, bonding with the newly named Beauty, she felt a strange mix of emotions. Joy at this unexpected connection, fear of what it might mean for her future, and a glimmer of hope that this might be a way to get closer to Cressida and uncover her weaknesses.

Cressida watched the scene with an unreadable expression, but Renya thought she saw a softness in her eyes that hadn't been there before. “It seems you have a way with dragons, daughter,” she said, her voice holding a note of approval.

Renya looked up, meeting Cressida's gaze. For a moment, she saw not the Shadow Queen, but a glimpse of the mother she might have been. It was confusing and unsettling, but Renya pushed the feeling aside. She had a mission to focus on, and this new development with Beauty might just be the key she needed.

Chapter Eighteen

“Who are you?” Grayden demanded, staring down at the tiny woman standing in the doorway.

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“You break into our realm, invade our palace, and then have the nerve to ask who I am?”

The woman was remarkably old, older than Almory, older than anyone Grayden had met before. Her curly hair fell past her shoulders, and it was so white that it almost seemed to absorb the light from the chamber behind her. She was dressed in a simple, flowing white dress. Her face was so wrinkled that she looked like she was in a constant state of confusion, with her forehead scrunched up and her eyes pulled back. Her skin was almost as pale as her hair, and Grayden figured that she must hardly ever leave the indoors. She carried a short staff with a gaudy sun emblazoned on the top, and a giant ruby in the center of the sun. Her eyes were a piercing gray, and she looked at Grayden and Selenia as if she could see all the way into their very souls.

“I'm here seeking knowledge about breaking a blood promise,” Grayden said, putting himself in front of Selenia. “I'm Prince Grayden from the Snow Lands.”

The old woman glanced behind his back at Selenia. “And who is this?”

“My sister,” Grayden responded, shielding Selenia further.

“You can calm down, I'm not going to hurt her,” the old woman wheezed, her voice crackly as if she had a perpetual case of pneumonia. “Come inside,” she said, and turned her back to them and walked into the room.

As soon as they entered the room, the door shut behind them with a loud boom. Grayden turned and instantly noticed there was no handle or knob on the door. He fought down the panic he felt, ignoring the hair that stood up on the back of his neck

as he worried that this was some kind of trap.

He looked around the dimly lit room, searching for something, anything that would signal he was in the right place. That he had finally made a step in the right direction, one tiny moment closer to breaking the blood promise and freeing Renya from...her mother. However, as he took in the small chamber, with nothing more than a short bookcase alongside one of the walls, his hope fell. This was the ancient library of the Sun Realm? The place where magic from the old Gods was kept and protected?

Selenia caught his eye, and he could tell she too was not impressed at the sight before her. Aside from the wooden bookcase, there was an oak desk with a large, open book on it, as well as a quill. Another door, slightly smaller than the one they entered through but no less grand, stood next to the bookshelf.

The woman finally spoke. "You say you seek ancient knowledge?" she said, looking directly at Grayden.

"I seek a spell to break a promise my mate made."

She let out a shrill laugh, which echoed in the empty room, bouncing off the bare, stone walls.

"You foolish boy, do you think it's so easy to break a fated bond? It's hard to do and requires a sacrifice. One that you are unable to pay."

Grayden didn't ask for her to elaborate her meaning. "I would never break my bond," he said, trying not to raise his voice at the anger he felt at the mere suggestion. "I wish to free my mate from a blood promise she pledged to another."

The woman looked over at the bookcase for a split second, but it was enough for Grayden to catch the look. There was knowledge there, important knowledge.

“Why do you think I could undo this promise? A blood promise is never meant to be broken. The very nature of a blood promise is that it can't be undone.”

Grayden lifted his chin. “This promise was nobly made, and my mate suffers because of it.”

“Ahhhh...you want your mate back. All those who seek magic in this library are selfish and only travel here for their own wish-fulfillment. One of the many reasons why the rumor that the Sun Realm had fallen was spread. Representatives from every land from every corner of our world have been here, seeking our knowledge to better or enrich their own pathetic lives.”

Selenia finally spoke up. “We need to break this bond to vanquish the Shadow Queen.”

Another cackle came from the old woman. “A boy with no magic? And a girl who refuses to use hers? You think you can take down the Shadow Queen? Ha! Her ending has already been foretold, and it is not some silly love-sick prince who will bring it about.”

“No,” Grayden responded, his eyes beaming with pride. “It's the light bringer. My mate.”

Before the woman could respond, the earth underneath them began quaking, and a violent tremor knocked them all off their feet. As they picked themselves up off the ground, they noticed the woman was gone.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Selenia said dishearteningly.

Grayden's shoulder was in agony, but he wouldn't give up.

“Grayden, you're going to kill yourself,” Selenia said, as he rushed the door again, trying to get it to open. He bounced off, hesitated for a second, then rammed it with his other shoulder. Nothing. It wouldn't budge.

Grayden stood back, rage rushing inside of him. He didn't come this far to get stuck in this chamber. Surely there must be a way out. He guessed the elderly woman left by magic, but there must be some other way. He stared at the door, then held out his hand, focusing as hard as he could. Nothing. Just as he suspected, he had no magic left.

“Selenia?” he asked, looking over at her. She was slumped against the wall, listening intently as if she could hear a way out. “I know you don't use your magic, but could you please try?”

Selenia looked at him sadly. “I already tried, Grayden. I don't know if this room is protected from outside magic, or if mine is gone as well.” She sniffled, and a single tear dripped down her cheek. Grayden stopped ramming the wall and sank down to sit against the rough stone wall with his sister.

“I'm so sorry, Selenia,” he said, putting an arm around her shoulders.

“I'm not upset about my magic, I'm just upset that I can't use it when I need it. Part of me felt comforted, knowing it was there, just in case. But I guess that's gone.” She looked ahead, unseeing and with her arms wrapped around her knees.

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“Not just that, but I'm sorry I ever brought you into this. When I found Renya again, I shouldn't have come back to the Snow Lands. I should have hidden her somewhere, taken her away where she couldn't be found. This is all my fault. I'm the reason Jurel is dead, I'm the reason we're trapped in here.”

“Grayden, I think we would have ended up here, regardless of our choices.”

Grayden leaned against the wall, the cold seeping into his muscles. His shoulder would be bruised for days, but the coolness of the wall brought him some relief. “You know, Renya said something like that.”

“She did?”

“Yes, when we were at the Twilight Kingdom. She said the prophecy was proof she would vanquish the Shadow Queen, because it was foretold. It gave her strength and assurance, I think. She said she felt like every move she made was the right choice, leading her to do whatever she must do.”

“She's very wise,” Selenia said, and then she jerked her head up, listening. She sat up suddenly, her eyes wide.

“What is it?”

“I can hear Phillippe,” she said. “Hush!”

Grayden sat quietly, watching her facial expression. She stood completely still, eyes closed. She finally opened her eyes, and looked at Grayden.

“He was talking with someone, but I couldn't make out anything.”

“Maybe it was the woman that was in here?”

“Maybe,” she answered, looking at Grayden. “But it sounded like it might have been a man.”

Grayden frowned, hoping Phillippe was okay. Then, from across the room, a flash of gold shone and three figures slowly spun around, becoming more and more substantial by the second.

His jaw dropped. “Sion?”

Sion and Phillippe were standing in the room, along with a man that looked vaguely familiar. Another golden circle spun, and the elderly woman appeared again.

Grayden wasted no time before rushing up and giving Sion a hearty hug. He pulled back, looking into his friend's face for injury, before asking about Renya.

“She's fine, Grayden. Unharmed and becoming more and more powerful with her magic.”

Relief poured over Grayden like rain during a thunderstorm. He released a loud breath, as if he hadn't properly breathed since Renya left him. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Grayden eyed the other man beside Phillippe, trying to place him.

“Grayden, this is Cyrus,” Sion said, gesturing to the man.

At once it clicked. The picture in the locket. The piercing blue eyes. He looked much older now, far older than he should, given Renya's age in the picture, but there was no doubt about it. This was Renya's father. If he was with Sion, did that mean he was imprisoned as well?

Grayden's heart raced as he took in the man before him. This was the father of the woman he loved, a man who had sacrificed everything to protect her. A mixture of respect, gratitude, and apprehension swirled within him.

"I take it this is the man you serve?" Cyrus said, peering into Grayden's green eyes, taking the measure of him.

"He is. Cyrus, this is Grayden. Your daughter's...mate."

"And fiancé," Grayden added, growling slightly. He didn't want anyone else to forget it.

"A little possessive, are we?" Cyrus laughed as he clapped Grayden on the back. "I've been there!"

Grayden was momentarily taken aback, realizing that he was now in the presence of Renya's father. "I guess I should have asked you for her hand, and I would have, if I knew you existed. Does Renya know you're alive?"

"She does, my boy," Cyrus replied, holding out his hand to shake Grayden's. "And I did you a favor before leaving. I broke her blood promise."

"You broke the promise, and then left her there?" Grayden said, irritation and admonishment in his tone. His protective instincts flared, overriding his initial awe at meeting Cyrus.

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“Now wait just a second,” Cyrus said, sensing that Grayden's temper was rising. “It was essential to our plan.”

“I don't care a fuck about your plan!” Grayden roared, his fist itching to punch someone. “All I care about is my mate!”

Sion placed his hand on Grayden's arm, trying to calm him. “It was her choice, Grayden.”

Grayden looked like he might strangle Sion or Cyrus, or maybe both of them.

Phillippe came to the other side of Grayden. “Brother, you must stay calm. Let them explain.”

Grayden breathed deeply, trying to regulate his pounding heart and the red-hot rage that threatened to break itself loose. He knew he was being irrational, but the thought of Renya in danger overrode all other considerations.

“You're not catching him at the best time,” Sion said to Cyrus. “He's usually much calmer.”

“He freaks out wherever Renya is concerned,” Selenia added. “You should have seen him when his head advisor accused Renya of witchcraft. You could hear him yell all the way to the Tidal Kingdom.”

Grayden looked at them all helplessly. “I need to get her back.”

Cyrus nodded, his expression softening with understanding. “You will. She's now free of the blood promises she made.”

“Promises?”

Sion looked guilty. “She made another promise to save my life.”

Grayden's jaw clenched and unclenched. He viewed Sion as a brother, and cared for him deeply. The fact that Renya made another blood promise to save his friend both touched him and infuriated him.

“I've broken them both, so she's now free whenever she wants to leave.”

“Then why is she still there?” Grayden asked, his voice still shaking with anger, but he was cooling down slowly.

“She opted to continue to be trained by Cressida. She knew the best chance we have to defeat her would be for Renya to gain her trust, learn her secrets and improve her own magic.”

Grayden instantly knew Cyrus spoke the truth. That was exactly something Renya would do. Sacrifice herself for the people she loved. For the world she now belonged to. Pride and worry warred within him.

“When can I rescue her?”

“Within the next two weeks. She's improved drastically in her magic, and given her cleverness and sweet disposition, I have no doubt she will be able to charm her mother quickly.”

“I've no doubt about that,” Grayden said, sighing deeply.

“So Renya knows? She knows of her heritage?” Selenia asked, watching the interaction, engrossed.

“She does. Cressida told her almost instantly after capturing her. She didn't believe it at first, but once Cyrus confirmed it...” Sion drifted off.

“How did you find out?” Cyrus asked, a slight frown on his face.

Grayden pulled out the locket from his tunic and handed it to Cyrus. Cyrus took it gently, a slightly pained, but sweetly reminiscent look on his face.

“Ahhh, yes. I'd long forgotten about this. There were some good memories, before she became obsessed with the prophecy.”

“The Sun Realm scrolls?” Phillippe asked, crossing his arms across his chest, trying to follow along in the family drama unraveling before his eyes.

“Yes. I take it they were rediscovered after I left for the human realm?”

They all nodded.

“I see. We found them shortly after Renya's birth, here in our libraries.” Cyrus gestured at the lone bookcase.

“That's...hardly a library, let alone libraries,” Selenia said, looking towards the bookcase.

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A shrill laugh came from the elderly woman's mouth. "That's just the index."

They all stared at the elderly woman, except for Cyrus, who started walking towards the bookcase.

"This is Libera," he said, acknowledging the old woman. "She's our head seer and the Keeper of the Knowledge."

"We've briefly met," Selenia grumbled, still irritated over their abandonment in the locked chamber.

Cyrus ignored Selenia's comment, humming to himself as he pulled out a book from the shelf. He handed it to Libera, who smiled widely as she accepted it. She ran a pale, wrinkled finger over the spine, and the door next to the bookcase started to sparkle and pulsate, almost as if it was moving incredibly fast while standing still. Suddenly, it stopped, and the door swung inward.

Cyrus stepped through the door, beckoning for them to follow him. Wordlessly, they entered the room, mouths agape. A huge, multistory chamber was laid out before them. Books and scrolls lined every inch of the room, with sliding ladders on every wall. A wrought-iron spiraling staircase stood in the middle of the room, leading up to the second and third stories. The air was thick with the scent of old parchment and leather bindings, and a soft, golden light seemed to emanate from the very walls themselves.

"Whoa," Phillippe said, breaking the silence.

“What is this place?” Grayden asked, his eyes wide as he tried to take in the vastness of the library.

“The great library of knowledge. Libera has been protecting it since we found it. It was long forgotten, but my grandfather stumbled across it while chasing a pig through the palace—long story—and it's taken years to categorize and organize the books.” Cyrus strolled over to a shelf, picking up a set of scrolls.

“Is that what I think it is?” Grayden asked, his heart racing with anticipation.

“Yes. The Sun Realm Scrolls. Once they were found, Cressida became obsessed with them. It was what led me to sever our fated bond.” Cyrus's face darkened at the memory. “There was a seer who deduced Renya would usurp Cressida, and I feared for her life. Her Aunt Agatha and I hid her away, as I'm sure you've figured out.”

“You were fated? I thought fated bonds couldn't be broken?” Grayden asked, his crinkling in confusion.

Cyrus sighed heavily, his eyes distant. “They shouldn't be, and I'm the first person I know who has attempted and succeeded,” he said, looking at Grayden. “It cost me dearly, and I lost my magic for over twenty years, in which I was stuck in the human realm, aging rapidly. But it was worth it, to save my daughter.”

The weight of Cyrus's sacrifice hung in the air, and Grayden felt a newfound respect for the man. “Do you know where Agatha is?” he asked, knowing that Renya was incredibly worried about her aunt.

“I have a hunch that she's been bound to another realm in the portal corridor in the human world. Sion and I are going to go track her down.”

“What about Renya? How do we get her back?” Selenia asked, voicing the question

that burned in Grayden's mind.

“We will need to pull her away from the Shadow Realm. She can't leave voluntarily, or at least, it can't seem that way. Cressida believes I severed Renya's mating bond. She also still thinks the blood promises remain intact. In order to keep her trusting Renya, we will need to make it seem like we are removing her against her will.” Cyrus looked around the group, making sure everyone understood. “I'll go with you, to make it seem like I'm there to break the blood promise.”

“Won't she try and get Renya back?” Phillippe asked, his tactical mind already working on potential problems.

“She will, but we'll head towards the Snow Lands. Her magic will be weakest there, and I can place a protection spell on your lodge that will make it seem as though it's abandoned.”

“Is that what you've done here?” Grayden remembered the small girl he thought he saw in the window, understanding dawning on him.

“Yes. The Sun Realm never fell. It's been cloaked for many, many years.” Cyrus looked pleased with himself, no doubt proud of the magic protecting his city. “Now that you know it's cloaked, the magic will break and you'll see the city as it truly is. Trust me, you'll never want to leave.”

Grayden's mind raced with the implications of all he had learned. The Sun Realm still thrived, hidden from the world. Renya was free of her blood promises but chose to stay to gather information. And now, they had a plan to bring her home.

“When do we leave?” Grayden asked, determination burning in his eyes.

Cyrus smiled, recognizing the look of a man in love. “We'll need a few days to

prepare. In the meantime, I suggest you all rest and learn what you can from this library. Knowledge will be our greatest weapon against Cressida.”

As the others began to explore the vast library, Grayden approached Cyrus. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “For protecting Renya all these years. And for helping us now.”

Cyrus placed a hand on Grayden's shoulder. “She's my daughter, and I'd do anything for her. But I can see she's found someone else who feels the same way. Take care of her, Grayden. She's special, and not just because of the prophecy.”

Grayden nodded solemnly. “I will. With my life.”

Chapter Nineteen

“I'm here, Little Fawn.”

Renya opened her eyes, sitting up in her bed. Grayden stood before her, his chest bare and his eyes sparkling.

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Without hesitating, Grayden pulled his shirt off, tossing it on the floor. He knelt before Renya, slowly stroking her bare legs with his calloused hands. Renya whimpered as his wandering fingers pushed up her linen nightgown and reached her inner thighs.

“Did you miss me?” He moaned against her thigh before placing a tender kiss alongside her knee.

Renya nodded, so wrapped up in the way his hands felt against her skin that she couldn't talk. Grayden continued to tease her, and then lifted himself up slightly to tug her bottom lip into his mouth. She moaned, feeling the wetness grow between her legs.

Grayden helped her to lift her hips, and he pulled her undergarments down her legs before throwing them over his shoulder. Completely bare to him, he blew against the apex of her thighs, and her breathing hitched.

“Do you want me, Renya?” Without waiting for an answer, he pushed his trousers down his muscular legs, and then positioned himself between her hips. With a quick thrust, he was inside her, and she wanted to cry as soon as she felt him. He felt impossibly large, like their time apart made her forget just how much of a man he was. She stroked his hair as he whispered words of praise and declarations of love. His mouth moved to the hollow of her throat, and she gasped as his rough hand palmed her breast.

“Grayden...” she moaned, throwing her head back. Pleasure radiated throughout her body. It happened so fast, and she knew it was because it had been weeks since she'd

had him. She felt her body coming back to life, felt the connection between them as she pulsed around him.

Renya panted as she came back down from her high, clutching at Grayden.

But there was nothing there.

She opened her eyes quickly, looking around the room, her heart racing and her sex throbbing. But there was no Grayden. She blushed, realizing what just transpired. It felt so real. It was real, she was almost certain.

As her breathing returned to normal, she walked to the window, ignoring the moisture between her legs, and looked out over the darkened valley. Her heart hurt, knowing that somewhere out there, Grayden was missing her as much as she missed him. Feeling defeated and slightly ashamed, she crawled back into her sheets, which were slick from her sweat, and tried to fall back asleep. However, the memory of Grayden's kiss swirled around in her head, and she tossed and turned the rest of the night.

Beauty darted in between the trees, jumping over logs and dodging branches. Every time she leapt over a log, she would flap her tiny wings, achieving a small amount of airtime before she slammed back down to the ground. Renya was certain that if it wasn't for the fact that she was carrying her on her back, Beauty would be able to fly.

The forest was dark, and Renya could hardly see anything in front of her. But Beauty didn't hesitate, prancing happily and weaving in between the trees. Her scales were starting to harden, and Travers said that her wings would be full grown within the next month, and she would be able to take to the sky.

Renya didn't care about flying, she just enjoyed the time they spent together in the forest. With Cressida circling on Brutus, far above the canopy of trees, Renya felt

free. The affection she got from Beauty helped to fill the aching hole in her heart, and the dragon seemed to understand Renya in ways that Cressida never could. She was certain Cressida now trusted her, believing Renya was fully under her control, but she still maintained her attitude of aloofness. Sometimes, her icy exterior would melt, and she'd treat Renya like a friend, but never a beloved daughter.

Still, it was a vast improvement to how she was initially treated. She was well fed, better dressed, and was more powerful in her magic than ever before. But at night, she'd lay in bed, her body still and the room quiet, and she'd picture Grayden's emerald eyes staring at her. Renya would imagine them together, him on top of her, kissing and caressing every inch of her. Those were the moments she lived for.

During the day, she had Beauty. At night, the memory of Grayden.

Beauty slowed as they approached a large pond. Renya hadn't been this far into the forest before, but every day Cressida seemed to trust her more and more and allowed her more freedom.

Renya got off of Beauty, and watched her dance away to get a drink from the pond.

“Where are you?” Cressida bellowed from above, her view of Renya blocked by the thick foliage around the pond.

“Beauty is just drinking from the pond.”

“Head back as soon as she's done. Can you find your way if I go on ahead?”

This was the most freedom Renya was ever allowed. Cressida must truly trust her, to leave her alone in the forest with Beauty. “Yes, I know the way back. I'll see you soon.”

“You will join me for dinner this evening.”

“Okay,” Renya agreed, her eyes on Beauty. She hated the meals shared with Cressida, and they were happening more and more frequently. Several times a week her presence was required in the grand dining hall, and she was forced to make small talk with her mother. It wasn't all a waste, though. Occasionally Cressida would drop a useful tidbit here or there, and Renya added them to her mental arsenal to use against the Shadow Queen. She'd learned that Brutus's mate, Belinia, hated Cressida with a passion and refused to obey her. Cressida could no longer enter the glass enclosure, for fear that Belinia would attack her. Renya also noticed a large cut on Cressida's thigh. The ugly gash seemed to come and go, and Renya wasn't sure why it was there and other times, it disappeared. However, halfway through one meal, Renya dropped her fork and crawled under the table, and noticed it was there, even though it hadn't been there at the beginning of the meal. She deduced that Cressida was using her magic to conceal it. That fact alone kept Renya up at night, wondering why she would go through the effort to conceal a wound like that. Her mother was vain, yes. But it seemed like an awful amount of work to keep it hidden.

The sound of Brutus's wings flapping pulled her out of her thoughts, and she felt the gust of wind as he turned and headed back towards the castle, Cressida on his back.

Renya moved closer to Beauty, who had meandered over to the far side of the pond.

As she approached the dragon, she noticed her neck starting to feel warm. The closer she got to Beauty, the hotter it began to feel. Puzzled, she reached to touch her neck, only to find that the heat was radiating from the aragonite necklace Esmeralda gave her in the Tidal Kingdom.

She carefully unclasped the necklace and looked at it. There, in the dark of the forest, the necklace glowed a deep amber. Renya dropped the necklace in surprise, watching as it hit the mossy earth beneath her feet. She picked it back up, unsure of what was

happening.

Suddenly, she remembered Esmeralda's story about the necklace, and how their legends said that it helped a mother find her lost son. Excitedly, she moved towards Beauty, and watched the necklace grow brighter and brighter. She continued walking, and after about ten feet the color faded and the necklace lost its luster.

Was it broken? Or was it a trick of the light? It couldn't be, because Renya felt the heat radiate from it before she saw the glowing beads.

Sighing, she balled it up in her hands and started back towards Beauty, worried if she dallied too long, Cressida would send Brandle to fetch her. The time she spent with Cressida's cousin, her second cousin, repulsed her.

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The necklace warmed in her hand, and began to glow again. Beauty noticed the shining bauble, and sauntered over to Renya's side.

“What do you think is happening, Beauty?” Renya asked, stroking the dragon absentmindedly and looking around the bank of the pond.

Then she saw it. Resting in a pile of mud right in front of her, a few inches away from the bank. The snowflake diamonds glistened in the light emitted from the necklace, and Renya reached out with trembling fingers as she snatched her engagement ring from the muck.

Tears leaked out her eyes as she wiped the mud off on her sleeve, seeing the gorgeous braided band emerge from the filth covering it.

“Oh Beauty!” Renya exclaimed, holding the ring close to her heart. “I never thought I'd see this again.” She dried her eyes on her sleeve, and then tried to decide what to do with the ring. She couldn't wear it, that was certain. Since Cressida believed her bond was broken, it wouldn't make any sense for her to still wear the ring of her former mate.

Renya threaded the ring through the beaded aragonite necklace, still clutched firmly in her hand. She did the clasp at her neck, and then tucked the ring securely down the front of her gown. As long as she didn't wear anything low cut, she could continue to wear Grayden's ring, close to her heart, where it belonged.

Selenia walked through the bustling market, completely surprised by the stark contrast from the day before. Vendors lined every side of the street, peddling food and wares. The entire marketplace was cloaked in a rich and spicy aroma, warm and comforting to her nose.

She passed the same stores she saw on her way in, but this time she could see fae inside, bartering and bickering, laughing and talking. Selenia couldn't believe all of this was hidden by a blanket of magic. Even the palace was inhabited, with maids and guards stationed at every post.

Her eyes caught on the dress store she admired from the street before, and she hesitated only a second before pushing the door open and walking inside. Silk and muslin, cotton and brocades lined the shelves, with mannequins every few feet, draped in beautiful gowns.

“Can I help you?” A sweet-sounding voice piped up from behind a counter. The girl was around Selenia's age, maybe a bit younger, and an intricate braid trailed to her waist.

“These gowns are exquisite,” Selenia complimented, her fingers running over the lace trim on the green silk dress on the mannequin nearest to her. “Do you make them?”

The girl blushed and ducked her head. “I help with the trim work. My mother is the real seamstress. Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“I need a new hat.” The desert was harsh, and Selenia's nose was pink from the sun. She hoped a hat would help protect her better.

The girl nodded and led her over to a small display of hats. Selenia grabbed the first one she saw, a large-brimmed bonnet with a bow on the side. It wasn't what she usually preferred, but it should offer protection for her pale skin. The shop attendant

grabbed the hat and boxed it up for Selenia while she rummaged through her pockets for some silver.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, that's everything...” Selenia trailed off, her eye catching on a dress in the very back of the shop.

The gown was ivory white, with tiny peach-colored rosettes forming a strap up one shoulder. It had a sweetheart neckline with tiny pink gems outlining the bust. Embroidered flowers, in light pinks and various hues of pale orange cascaded down the bodice, leading to a set of full skirts. Selenia could just make out a peach petticoat underneath the dress.

She walked over to the mannequin, unable to take her eyes off of such a magnificent piece of craftsmanship. She lightly traced the tiny silk flowers at the waist, amazed at how intricate the sewing was.

The girl came over and stood next to Selenia. “It's one of a kind. A Sun Realm wedding dress. Are you getting married soon?”

Selenia inspected the full skirts before answering. “No. But I know someone who is.”

“I want to help.” Selenia pushed out her lower lip and looked at her brother defiantly.

“No, Selenia. Not this time. Cyrus, Phillippe and I will rescue Renya. You and Sion will leave for the Snow Lands in the morning.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Grayden said sternly, pushing around the food on his plate with irritation.

“Selenia, I agree with Grayden. The Shadow Queen will be absolutely furious when we retrieve Renya. She'll attack us however she can, using whatever she can. I need you safe at the Snow Lands, far away from here.” Phillippe looked at Selenia, pleading. “Please understand.”

Selenia grumbled and continued eating. She stabbed a piece of chicken with her fork a bit too roughly, and her plate slid a bit against the golden tablecloth.

Dinner at the Sun Realm was a lengthy event. Course after course came out, and Selenia had trouble staying interested in food that long. Maybe dessert, but definitely not all the dishes that came out of the kitchens.

“Do we have everything planned out?” Phillippe asked, downing an entire glass of wine in one sip. Selenia knew her eldest brother could handle his drink well. Unlike Grayden, he spent much of his time in the winter encampment, drinking with his men well into the early hours of the morning.

“I think so,” Grayden said, hardly touching his food. Selenia knew he must be nervous, now that the moment he had been waiting for was almost here. The last month was excruciating for him. Well, for all of them, Selenia thought. Grayden without Renya was an absolute pain in the ass. He was short-tempered, incredibly quick to yell, and grumpy all of the time. Selenia was glad they would be rescuing Renya in just a few days' time. Any longer, and Selenia would have gone herself just to save them all from the annoyance of her brother's mood swings.

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“Cyrus will use his magic to transport Phillippe and I to Renya's room in the castle. Cressida has magic protecting her entire castle, but Cyrus said he can break it.”

Cyrus bobbed his head in agreement. “Her magic leaves a trace, and since I am familiar with it, I can undo it.”

Grayden continued. “Once we have her, we'll head to the Spring Lands at the border. They are expecting us, and will provide us shelter. Then, we will all head back to the Snow Lands and Cyrus will perform the protective magic on the lodge. Once that's done, he and Sion will go back through the portal to try and locate Agatha. The rest of us will continue to plan and train.”

“Why do I have to leave tonight then?” Selenia whined a bit, not eager to start the journey back.

“Because you need to take the horses back, and I don't want you or Sion anywhere near Cressida. Once she finds out the blood promises are broken, she will kill Sion on sight and use you as bait. Now, finish your dinner and go get ready.”

Selenia slammed her fork down in annoyance. “Stop bossing me around,” she threatened, storming out of the dining room. Before she reached the door, she decided to backhand Grayden on the back of his head. He jerked forward, but made no other response. Satisfied, Selenia left the room and made her way up the long staircase into the guest wing of the palace. Unlike the tower that contained Renya's room, the rest of the castle was in immaculate shape. Everything was dusted and polished, clean and orderly.

Selenia found her room and closed the door tightly. She didn't fear retaliation from Grayden; she knew she hadn't hit him hard enough to cause any sort of significant pain, but she wanted to be left alone with her thoughts.

It annoyed her to no end that Grayden thought he was responsible for her in all things. She was nineteen now, and fully capable of caring for herself and making her own decisions.

She collapsed on the soft bed, feeling the mattress sink down a bit with her weight. She stared up at the ceiling, and like most nights, she thought of Jurel. The days kept her busy enough that she didn't dwell on it all the time like she did at the Twilight Kingdom, but the nights were harder. Quietly tucked away, she remembered the look on his face, the one that haunted her dreams. His mouth slightly agape as his life's essence pooled behind his back. Selenia could still smell the blood, and sometimes it was so thick in her dreams that it choked her, and she woke up breathing hard, trying to pull air into her greedy lungs. If only there was a way to forget about him. A way to break the spell he had over her.

A knock on the door pulled her away from her thoughts. She opened the door, expecting to see Grayden. Instead, Phillippe stood there, bulky as ever, with a concerned look on his face.

“What do you want?” she said, a bit harsher than she meant to.

“Selenia, I just wanted to let you know that Grayden and I care about you deeply. We couldn't bear to see anything happen to you. We've already lost our parents, we can't lose each other too.”

Selenia's face reddened slightly with shame and embarrassment. She knew her brothers considered themselves to be her caretakers. While they were overbearing at times, Selenia knew they had her best interests at heart.

She sighed deeply, wanting to collapse onto the bed and put this day behind her. “I understand. Tell Grayden I'm packing and I'll be ready to go in a couple of hours.”

Phillippe nodded and shut the door behind him. She could hear his boots thump against the stone floor as he stomped back to his room.

She glanced at the small traveling trunk she brought with her. She left most of her things at the Twilight Kingdom with Julietta, knowing that they'd be traveling light to the Sun Realm. It didn't take her long to toss in the few clothes she brought with her. She had tucked in her cloak and gloves, knowing she'd need them once they crossed into the Snow Lands. Finally, she carefully placed Renya's wedding dress inside the trunk. As soon as she was finished, she dressed in the lightest gown she could find, and headed downstairs, lugging the trunk behind her.

She found Grayden in the entrance hall, looking into the fountain absentmindedly. He didn't even see her approach.

“Are you okay, Grayden? I'm sorry I hit you.”

He looked up at her, and Selenia could see the heaviness in his eyes.

“I'm just...eager to get going. The closer I get to getting her back, the more nervous I get. I've also...been feeling her more.”

“That's great, Grayden!”

But the look on his face was not one of happiness. “What is it?”

He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “She's...happy, at times. I'm not sure why or how, but there hasn't been as much sadness coming through. And a few nights ago, I woke up and I could feel her...” he trailed off and looked down, embarrassed.

Selenia understood his meaning, and while she wasn't exactly sure what transpired, she imagined that the physical loss of Renya was taking its toll on him.

“Do you want her to be miserable, Grayden?”

He looked at Selenia, struggling to vocalize his complex emotions. “No, of course not. But, Selenia...what if she wants to stay?”

“Stay? Grayden, of course she won't want to stay.”

“Her mother...it's her family. She's always envied us for our family, and now she has one.”

“You're right, Grayden. She does have a family. But it's us. You, me and Phillippe. We are Renya's family. She's just there, playing a role. As soon as she sees you, she'll run into your arms and it'll be like you've never been apart.”

Grayden looked at her, emotion right underneath the surface. His eyes softened. “You're right, Selenia. I'm just being crazy...”

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“No argument there.” She playfully slugged him, and he chuckled.

“Do you have everything you need?”

Selenia patted her trunk. “Yes. I also wrote to Julietta to ask her to send the rest of our things home to the lodge. I included Renya's as well.”

“That was thoughtful of you, dear one.”

They both turned as they heard someone approaching from the other side of the room. Sion strode towards them, no longer in the flowing garb he arrived in. Instead, he was wearing loose-fitting pants and a shirt that was completely opened, but tied together with a cord of lace.

“Looking good there, Sion,” Grayden teased.

“Cyrus gave me these. They are traditional Sun Realm clothing.”

“I don't think I've ever...seen so much of you,” Grayden continued, enjoying roasting his friend a bit.

Sion ignored him, and looked at Selenia. “Are you going to be comfortable in that?” He gestured to Selenia's riding outfit, which consisted of a thick, long skirt and a silk top, buttoned all the way up the neck. Selenia loved the way that the hunter-green color complimented her hair, but agreed that it wasn't ideal.

“It's all I have,” she said, pulling out the sun hat she purchased. “But I'll be fine.”

Without another word, Sion headed out the door to the stables, where they had moved their horses.

Grayden looked down at Selenia. “Phillippe wanted to say goodbye, but he's with Cyrus in the armory, gathering up whatever weapons we'll need. I think goodbyes are hard for him too, but he won't admit it.”

Selenia wrapped her arms around Grayden. “Goodbye, Brother. And good luck. Renya will be back where she belongs before you know it.”

As she pulled away, she saw a mix of determination and vulnerability in Grayden's eyes. “Be safe, Selenia. And...thank you. For everything.”

Selenia nodded, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall. She picked up her trunk and walked towards the stables, her heart heavy with the weight of leaving her brothers behind but hopeful for what lay ahead. As she mounted her horse, she cast one last glance at the Sun Realm palace, silently praying for the success of their mission and the safe return of Renya.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sion couldn't believe he was finally returning home to the Snow Lands. After he crossed back through the portal to return to the Shadow Realm, he thought he'd never see them again. He knew he had Renya to thank for that, and he would never stop being indebted to her.

He lifted his face up to the sun, feeling the warmth hit his cheeks and brow. After spending so much time in the darkness of the Shadow Realm, the sun energized him and made him feel like a new man. Sion still had scars, both physical and mental, that would stay with him for the rest of his life. But riding on Phillippe's horse, Nectaria, with a slight breeze fluttering the open neckline of his tunic, felt like a rebirth.

“You better watch where you're going,” Selenia said from slightly behind him.

They'd traveled into the night without stopping, and now it was almost midday. They hardly spoke, and Sion knew Selenia was lost in her own thoughts. He himself took Jurel's passing incredibly hard, but he didn't know how close Selenia and Jurel were until Grayden took him aside and provided him with the facts of Jurel's passing. He made sure to give Selenia space, also while protecting his best friend's little sister.

Selenia caught up to him, and he studied her features. Although she wore a large hat to protect her fair complexion, it was clear that she was no longer the churlish girl he'd chased away with play swords and teased for most of his life. Her auburn ringlets hung prettily behind her shoulders, and her posture had changed. She carried herself with more grace, and took herself a little more seriously than she did before. Sion wasn't sure if it was the loss of youth or the loss of Jurel that changed her so significantly.

As she rode beside him, Sion found his gaze lingering on the curve of her neck, the way her riding clothes hugged her figure. He quickly averted his eyes, surprised by his own thoughts.

“Are we near where you made camp before?” Sion asked, his voice slightly rougher than he intended. They planned to rest during the most intense heat of the day, and then take off again during the cooler evening hours. Their route would take them past the Spring Lands into the Snow Lands. It was a much more direct route than heading back to the Twilight Kingdom and up the Mountain Pass.

Selenia looked around, her eyes shaded by her hat. “Yes, I think it's just behind this dune.”

Sure enough, the small cave came into view. The pair dismounted and walked towards it, with all three horses trailing behind them.

“Wait, stop,” Sion said as Selenia went to enter the cave.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing, I hope. I just want to check it and make sure nothing is in there before you go in.”

“It was fine earlier,” she argued.

“Absolutely not. I will see you safely to the Snow Lands, Selenia.”

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Sion entered the cave and came back out almost immediately. "It's all clear."

"Told you," Selenia said under her breath. Sion just shook his head. That was the Selenia he remembered. Quick to argue, quick to anger, and even quicker to forgive. He ignored her comment and began to unpack the saddle bags. Selenia started to help, carrying a small trunk over to the cave.

As if in slow motion, he watched Selenia drop the trunk, close her eyes and then fall into the desert sand.

"Selenia!" he yelled, dropping the supplies he was carrying and rushing over to her. He felt her face, and noticed she was incredibly clammy and even paler than usual. He bent down and scooped her up, careful to support her head. Once he was inside the cave, he laid her down carefully on the floor.

"Selenia, wake up!" Sion patted her cheeks gently, and then ran back to the horses to grab the water pouches. He hurried back to the cave, and felt her forehead again. She was sweating profusely and needed to cool down.

Gods, forgive me for this, he thought, as he undid the buttons at her collar. He continued unbuttoning until her silk shirt was completely open. He averted his eyes, trying hard not to notice the skimpy bralette she wore. He said a silent prayer, hoping that Grayden would never find out that he saw his sister in her undergarments.

He removed her shirt completely and soaked it in water from one of the water skins, and then began wiping her face gently with the damp shirt. "Selenia, come on. Wake up," he whispered gently. "Please!" He untied her sunhat and removed it. Her hair

was silky smooth under his fingers, so much different than Cressida's coarse hair.

Finally, one of her eyelids began to flutter. "Thank the Fates!" he exclaimed, relief flooding through him.

"What happened?" Selenia asked, her voice a dry whisper as she regained consciousness.

"You got overheated and fainted. You can't travel in those clothes, at least not through the desert."

She looked down, realizing she was exposed. Her hands went to cover herself, but Sion shook his head. "No time to be modest, Selenia. You need to cool down fast and drink. Now."

He pressed one of the water pouches to her lips and she drank greedily. After a few sips, he took it away from her.

"More," she said, her lips parched and cracked.

"I'm sorry, Selenia. You need to rehydrate slowly."

She nodded weakly and attempted to sit up, struggling.

"Stay here, I'll go get the sleeping rolls."

"Where am I going to go?" she teased, weakly, but with a slight smile.

Sion's breathing finally returned to normal. Grayden would have killed him if something happened to her. Fates, he would kill himself. Selenia was sweet and innocent, and needed to live a full life.

He grabbed the trunk she dropped, as well as the sleeping rolls. He brought them back to the cave, setting the trunk in the corner and unrolling the sleeping rolls. Once he was satisfied with their arrangement, he walked over to Selenia, and picked her up in his arms.

“Sion, I can walk!” she protested, but rested her head on his shoulder.

“I'm not going to take any chances with you,” he said, and laid her down carefully on the bed roll. He grabbed the water skin and pressed it to her lips again, allowing her a few sips.

“How are you feeling?”

“I have a pretty bad headache, and my shoulder hurts from where I fell.”

Sion frowned. “Let me look at your shoulder. It might need to be wrapped.”

Selenia obeyed, and turned her back so Sion could examine her. He tried to be gentle, but she winced sharply as he palpated her shoulder. His fingers brushed against her bare skin, and he felt a jolt of electricity run through him. He quickly pulled his hand away, confused by his reaction.

“I'm so sorry, Selenia. I think it might be dislocated. I could pop it back into place, but with your fainting spell, I'm afraid it will be too painful and you'll lose consciousness again. I'd rather wait until we are home and have Almory look at it. He can give you something for the pain.”

She nodded, trying to pull her shirt back on.

“It's too hot for that blouse, Selenia. Do you have anything else?”

“I have...a nightgown. It's in the trunk.”

Sion wasted no time, and started rifling through her belongings. He pulled out a lightweight silk nightgown. It only had thin straps to hold it up, and Sion felt guilty that she'd have to be dressed so immodestly in front of him. But, survival was more important, he told himself.

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As he pulled out the nightgown, he noticed a large, carefully wrapped package that fell to the bottom of the trunk.

“Selenia, what's this?”

She looked almost embarrassed. “It's...a wedding dress. When I bought my hat from the market in the Sun Realm, I saw it in the shop, and I knew it was meant for Renya.”

Sion was speechless. He was away from the Snow Lands for so long, he forgot how selfless Selenia could be. He tucked the dress back carefully, and closed the lid to the trunk.

“Selenia, that was incredibly sweet of you.”

She brushed off his praise. “As much as I like to give him a bad time, I love my brother. I know he'll love Renya in that dress, and I want her to feel like the princess she is when she marries him.”

Sion helped Selenia into the nightgown, trying to avert his eyes as much as possible. However, he couldn't help but notice the way the silk clung to her curves, the thin fabric leaving little to the imagination. He swallowed hard, pushing away the unwelcome thoughts.

Sion watched Selenia sleep, still concerned after her fainting spell. He stared as her chest rose and fell, her breathing slow and easy. Leaning against the wall of the cave, he closed his eyes for a little bit, trying to protect them from the dry heat of the

desert.

“No! Please, no!”

Sobs came from the corner where Selenia slept. Sion opened his eyes and saw her thrashing and moaning.

“Gods, please don't!” Her entire body trembled. Without thinking, Sion pulled her onto his lap and held her close to his chest. His arms wrapped around her tightly so she wouldn't injure her shoulder any more than it already was.

“Shhh...it's okay, darling. It's just a bad dream.” He stroked her hair carefully. Her body was covered in a sheen of sweat, but he didn't care. He just continued to rock her, murmuring comforting words into the shell of her ear. Finally, she pulled herself out of the nightmare and looked around at the cave and where she sat on Sion's lap. She tried to push herself away, but Sion held on to her tightly.

“Stay here a moment longer, I don't want you to faint again, especially after you've worked yourself up into a sweat.” At least, that was what he told Selenia. He surprised himself, enjoying the comfort her lithe body provided, resting easily on his lap. It had been so long since he'd had contact like this. Gentle and tender, easy and sweet. Cressida tortured every inch of him, and he forgot how good a woman's touch could be. He breathed in deeply, smelling the floral scent seeming to surround her, even in the dry and desolate desert.

Selenia held incredibly still, not responding to him, yet not fighting him either. Her injured shoulder was hanging limply. Sion could feel the warmth of her body through the thin nightgown, and he found himself acutely aware of every point of contact between them.

“Sion?” she asked tentatively.

“I get nightmares too,” he confessed, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against hers. “The last six months have been...excruciating for me.” He squeezed his eyes shut, trying hard not to relive them in his thoughts.

“Sion...what exactly occurred at the Shadow Realm?” Selenia pulled herself back, tears in her eyes from her nightmare, but concern for him in her gaze. He closed his eyes again, ashamed and unsure if this was something he wanted to share. Grayden and Renya knew, as well as Phillippe, but it appeared as if Selenia was sheltered from the truth.

He kept silent, his eyes open but downcast and focusing on her bare shoulder as he held her. Her nightgown's strap slipped down her upper arm, revealing smooth, pale skin. Without thinking, without realizing what he was doing, he placed a soft kiss there.

She looked at him, puzzled, but didn't push him off. Instead, he felt her shiver slightly, her breath catching. “Sion, tell me what happened to you.” Her tone was soft, but commanding.

He sighed and held her closer, looking past her shoulders and at the wall of the cave. He couldn't make this kind of confession with her looking at him.

“While I was at the Shadow Realm, I became...a plaything of Cressida's. She used my body, tried to break my spirit and infiltrate my mind. Selenia, some of the things she did to me...” he trailed off, holding back the tears that threatened to fall. He never thought he would have to deal with the ramifications of what transpired in her castle. He thought he would die and never have to deal with the trauma of it. But seeing Selenia, shaking from her own nightmare, made him realize that they would never be free from the reach of Cressida. Even if she was defeated and put down, the invisible scars of her cruel reign would mar them forever.

“Oh, Sion...” Selenia pulled him closer to her, clinging to him like a life preserver with her injured arm. “I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

He picked his head up and looked into her eyes. Sion never realized the depth they held, the raw emotion tucked just behind her playful banter. He saw pain there, not just for herself, but for him too. As if his body had a mind of its own, he pressed his lips gently to hers.

She inhaled deeply, shocked by his actions, but then tentatively moved her mouth with his. Her kiss was shy and inexperienced, but that made it all the sweeter for Sion. After the bleakness and evil he was surrounded with, her goodness and innocence seemed like a fresh wind, blown in from the pure, crisp air of the Snow Lands.

He parted her lips slowly with his, needing more, and then deepened their kiss. Selenia wrapped her good arm around his neck, and he couldn’t believe how right it felt, to have her like this, kissing him back. His hand slid down her back, feeling the silk of her nightgown and the warmth of her skin beneath. Selenia made a small noise in the back of her throat, a mix of surprise and pleasure, and Sion felt his body respond.

Suddenly, guilt and self-hatred filled his belly and he pulled back, horrified by what he had done. The loss of contact was almost painful, and he had to resist the urge to pull her close again.

“Selenia, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what came over me. You were scared and upset and I...I just needed to feel something good for a change. I don’t know what possessed me to take advantage of you like that.” He carefully lifted her off his lap and back down onto her sleeping roll, fighting against every instinct that told him to keep her close. “Please don’t hate me.”

Confusion, and perhaps something else that he couldn't detect—desire, maybe?—burned brightly on her face. “It's okay,” she said in a small voice. “We are both broken, both shells of who we used to be. Fate knows that we could both use a little pleasure.”

Her words sent a jolt through him, and he had to clench his fists to keep from reaching for her again. “It can't happen again. Your brothers trust me with your life. I won't bring shame to your family and dishonor you. Please, forgive me. You should get some rest. I'm going to sleep outside.”

Before she could respond, he swept out of the cave, positioning himself at the entrance. His dark skin protected him from the damage of the sun, and he lay there on the hot sand for over an hour, sleep eluding him, trying to get the memory of Selenia's lips against his out of his mind. The feel of her body against his, the softness of her skin, the little noises she made—it all played on repeat in his head.

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As the sun began to set, Sion knew they would need to continue their journey soon. But for now, he remained outside, torn between his duty to protect Selenia and the unexpected feelings she had stirred within him. Whatever happened next, he knew their relationship had irrevocably changed, and he wasn't sure if he was ready to face the consequences.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Selenia lay back on the sleeping roll, rubbing her fingers over her lips, still burning from Sion's kiss. Now that the initial shock wore off, she tried to grasp what she was feeling. Guilt, of course. Jurel hadn't even been gone a month, and she had already kissed another man. He kissed her first, to be fair...but she didn't try to stop it. Her lips moved with his, and something about it felt starkly different than it did with Jurel. She had only kissed him a handful of times, and then they were mostly just chaste pecks on her lips. But this...this was sensual and seductive.

Her face burned hotly, and she felt like she was betraying Jurel. How could she kiss another man? Her head swirled in confusion and pounded, both from the heat exhaustion and the contradicting feelings in her body. Plus, Sion was a childhood friend. He was older than her, closer to Grayden's age, whereas Jurel was closer to her in age. But her heart ached for Sion, hurt for the intense torture he endured. She shuddered, thinking of him bound and shackled to Cressida. The horror was almost too much to even comprehend.

The pain radiated from her shoulder all the way up into her neck. She refused to cry, refused to show any weakness. She was tired of crying, tired of her aching heart.

Selenia turned her head and tried to see Sion's silhouette in the encroaching darkness. She could just make out his strong shoulders. He faced away from her, guarding the mouth of the cave. He was resting, but she could tell he wasn't asleep. Any sudden sound forced him to lift up his head, scanning the desert in front of them.

She sighed, realizing that they both had hardly gotten any rest. He was busy taking care of her after she foolishly allowed herself to get overheated, and her shoulder was throbbing.

“Sion,” she called out softly. He raised his head immediately, pushed himself upright, and walked towards her.

“What is it, princess?”

Princess? He had never addressed her that way before. She mustered up the angriest glare she could and looked up at him. “Do not call me that again.”

Sion was flustered, unsure of where to look. Selenia watched his gaze land on the cave wall again. “I crossed a line. I won't cross it again.” He folded his arms in front of his chest.

“Sion,” she said again, trying to sit up. He saw her struggling, sighed, and knelt down to help her. His touch was gentle, but she could tell that he was trying to keep his hands away from her as much as possible.

“You can touch me,” she said, surprising herself with her boldness.

He looked at her, but shook his head no, and then moved towards the sleeping roll. “Are you ready to go?” he asked, rolling up her sleeping roll and throwing it over his shoulder.

“Yes, I want to get home as soon as possible,” she said, cradling her arm.

Sion dropped the roll and walked back over to the saddlebags on Damion. He fiddled around in them and pulled out one of the golden robes he wore at Cressida's court.

“I was going to burn this when we got back home, but tearing it is good too.”

He grabbed the sleeve of the garment and ripped it off, then threw the rest of it on the desert floor. She watched him spit on it and saw the fire of hate in his eyes. But when he came back over to her, he wore a mask of calm on his face, though Selenia knew it was just for show.

“Give me your arm,” he said, and wrapped the sleeve around her arm before securing it around her neck. “That's the best I can do out here.”

Selenia dropped the hand supporting her arm and felt relief. It still hurt, but at least she had better use of her other arm.

Sion finished packing up, refusing to allow Selenia to help at all. She came over and looked at Honor, wondering how she should attempt to hoist herself up on the mare's back. Before she could come up with a plan, Sion was beside her. With one swift motion, he grabbed her by the waist and settled her on Honor's back. “Thank you,” she said. “That would have been difficult on my own.”

She grabbed the reins with one hand, but before she could command Honor to go, she felt Sion's chest press into her back as he leapt on behind her.

“What are you doing?” she asked blankly, trying to ignore the warmth of his body against hers.

“Do you really think you're in any condition to ride? Let alone in unfamiliar territory

in challenging weather?” Sion grabbed Honor's reins from her hands and started the horse off at a steady pace. He whistled, and the other two horses followed behind obediently.

Neither Sion nor Selenia said anything for a long time. Selenia was wrapped up in her own thoughts, ashamed of her betrayal to Jurel's memory. Sion was equally engrossed in his own thoughts, and Selenia guessed he was feeling guilty as well.

Finally, she broke the tension. “So, are you gonna be cold and standoffish towards me forever?” She gave him a sweet grin, and he returned a small one.

“Probably,” he said with a smirk, but she felt his body relax slightly against her.

“Well, we weren't that close anyway,” she teased back. The tension dissolved between them, replaced by a comfortable familiarity tinged with something new and uncertain.

“What do you miss most about the Snow Lands?” Selenia asked, genuinely curious about his perspective.

Sion looked thoughtful, taking time to consider his answer. “The way the foothills of the mountains look after the snow has settled. The smells of the town. The market always smells so wonderful.”

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“Except for the time you, Phillippe, Grayden, and Jurel let all those cows into the village.” She felt a small pang, remembering how much they had all laughed as the cows wandered the cobblestone streets, harassing patrons and irritating vendors as they left their droppings everywhere.

“I thought your father was going to murder us. I'm pretty sure that was when he decided it was time for us boys to train with the armies.”

“What was it like? Having so many friends?”

Sion looked at Selenia, not understanding her meaning. “You mean Jurel and your brothers?”

She nodded. “I really don't have any friends back home.”

Selenia could feel Sion's chest expand and then tighten. She felt his hand rest on top of hers and looked down where their hands met. Her fair skin, his dark olive complexion on top.

“I'm your friend, Selenia,” he said softly, his voice carrying a weight she hadn't heard before.

The simple statement sent a flutter through her chest. She turned her head slightly, catching his gaze. For a moment, they just looked at each other, something unspoken passing between them.

“I know,” she finally replied, her voice barely above a whisper. “I just...I've always

felt a bit left out. You all had your adventures, and I was just the little sister tagging along.”

Sion's arm tightened around her waist, a gesture that felt both protective and comforting. “You're not just a tag-along, Selenia. You never have been. You're strong, brave, and...” he paused, seeming to search for the right words, “and important. To all of us.”

Selenia felt warmth spread through her at his words, a feeling that had nothing to do with the desert heat. She leaned back slightly, allowing herself to relax against him.

“Tell me more about what happened in the Shadow Realm,” she said after a moment. “Not the...not the bad parts. But what you saw, what you learned. I want to understand.”

Sion was quiet for a long moment, and Selenia worried she had overstepped. But then he began to speak, his voice low and measured.

“It's a place of contradictions,” he said. “Beautiful and terrible all at once. The architecture is stunning, all sleek lines and imposing structures. But there's a darkness that seeps into everything. The people there...some of them are just trying to survive. Others have embraced the darkness.”

As he spoke, Selenia found herself captivated by his voice, by the way he painted pictures with his words. She asked questions, and he answered, their conversation flowing easily as the desert landscape passed by.

Hours later, as the first hints of dawn began to color the sky, Selenia realized that her exhaustion had faded. Despite the discomfort of her injury, she felt more at ease than she had in weeks. Sion's presence behind her was solid and reassuring, and she found herself wondering how she had never noticed before how well they fit together.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Renya hunched over the small vanity, her eyes squinted in concentration. The quill trembled in her inexperienced grip as she attempted to form letters on the cream parchment. A large ink blot spread across the page, obscuring her careful efforts. She sighed, dipping the quill once more, determined to master this new skill and record her thoughts.

Margot had gifted her a leather-bound journal, its pristine pages both inviting and intimidating. In the long, solitary evenings that stretched before her, writing had become Renya's sole companion. Though Margot visited when she could, her duties in the castle often kept her away, leaving Renya to grapple with her isolation.

As she posed the quill over a fresh page, Renya's mind wandered to the conveniences of her former life. The smooth glide of a ballpoint pen seemed a distant luxury now. She made a mental note to ask Grayden if he had found any in the bag he'd recovered from the snowbank.

Grayden. The ache in her chest intensified as she realized they had been apart for over five weeks now. It was almost as long as the time they had spent together before Cressida whisked her away to the Shadow Realm. Her fingers instinctively reached for her ring, now tucked safely into her nightgown on the aragonite necklace.

Renya? Renya?

Grayden's voice echoed in her mind, more vivid than ever before. It was as if he stood right beside her, his presence almost tangible in its intensity.

Grayden? I can hear you!

I'm on my way. I'll be there soon. Get ready.

The quill clattered to the floor as Renya bolted to the window. She pressed her face against the cool glass, eyes straining against the unyielding darkness beyond. Though she could discern nothing in the oppressive gloom of the realm, her heart thundered in her chest, a mix of anticipation and fear coursing through her veins.

Renya's gaze darted around the room, suddenly uncertain of what, if anything, she wanted to take from this place of her captivity. She grabbed the pillowcase from her bed, hastily stuffing the notebook and quill inside. The journal held her deepest thoughts and fears; it couldn't be left behind to fall into the wrong hands.

She retrieved her dagger from its hiding place beneath the mattress. After a moment's hesitation, she found a blue ribbon and bound the weapon tightly to her calf, the cold metal a comforting presence against her skin. Beyond these meager possessions, there was nothing in this room she wished to carry forward into her freedom.

Renya rushed back to the window, her breath fogging the glass as she peered into the impenetrable night. The shadows seemed to shift and dance, playing tricks on her desperate eyes.

“Renya!”

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She whirled around, her heart leaping into her throat. Grayden stood there, one hand gripping her bedpost as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. His eyes, those deep pools of green she had dreamed of for weeks, locked onto hers with an intensity that stole her breath.

“Grayden!” His name escaped her lips in a choked sob as she flung herself into his arms.

He crushed her against his chest, his muscular frame enveloping her completely. “My Little Fawn!” His voice was rough with emotion, muffled against her hair.

Grayden's embrace was almost painfully tight, but Renya reveled in it. She couldn't see his face, pressed as she was against him, but she felt the dampness of his tears on her scalp. Her own sobs wracked her body, weeks of pent-up emotion pouring out of her. Her legs buckled, and they sank to the floor together, neither willing to loosen their grip.

Grayden cupped her cheek with one calloused hand, his thumb gently wiping away her tears. “Don't cry, my love,” he murmured, his voice thick. “It's okay. We're okay.”

“I know this reunion is long overdue, but sadly, we don't have time for it.”

Renya lifted her head from Grayden's chest, her gaze falling on her father's face. Cyrus's blue eyes sparkled with barely contained emotion, a telltale glimmer of moisture at their corners.

“You came back for me,” she breathed, her eyes darting between the two men. As her gaze shifted, she noticed another figure hovering in the background.

“Phillippe!” She made to move towards him, but Grayden's arms tightened around her, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

Phillippe's lips quirked in a half-smile. “I'll give you a hug later, Renya. Once my brother finally releases you.”

“I'll never release her,” Grayden murmured, burying his face in Renya's hair. She felt his breath, hot against her neck, as he inhaled deeply, as if reacquainting himself with her scent.

“Grayden, you need to let my daughter go,” Cyrus said gently, his tone tinged with urgency. “We don't have much time, and this rescue needs to go perfectly.”

Renya twisted in Grayden's embrace, reluctant to break contact but needing to face her father. “What do you mean?”

Cyrus's expression grew serious. “Do you know where Cressida's chambers are?”

Renya shook her head. “No, we've only met in the throne room and sometimes in her study.”

Her father nodded, a flicker of concern crossing his features. “Sion told me where they are. They're across the sky bridge, to the right. You're going to have to run for it and act like you're trying to get to her for help. It's the only way to maintain the illusion that you're loyal to her and that your mating bond is broken. Phillippe and Grayden will take out any guards that come to your aid, and I'll deal with Cressida. My magic isn't strong enough to defeat her after breaking the blood promises, but I can hopefully hold her off.”

Renya's stomach churned with anxiety. "Won't that be dangerous?" Her eyes flicked between the three men, worry etching itself across her face.

"It's the only way," Cyrus replied, his jaw set with determination. "Let us catch up, and we'll grab you. Then I'll transport us to the edge of the forest. My magic won't allow me to get us all the way back to the Snow Lands, so we'll have to run for it."

"She'll catch us," Renya warned, her voice tight with fear. "Her dragon will hunt us down."

"Don't worry about that. I can cloak us until we get to the Spring Lands. They'll give us shelter." Despite the confidence in Cyrus's voice, Renya couldn't shake the dread that settled in her gut. The plan seemed reckless, fraught with potential disaster. If anything went wrong, Cressida could hurt or kill Grayden now that the blood promise was broken. And once she saw Renya vanish with Cyrus, she would know that the magic binding her to Cressida had long since dissipated.

"Don't worry, Little Fawn. I won't let anything happen to you." Grayden's lips brushed her hairline in a tender kiss, sending a shiver down her spine. She took a deep breath, trying to suppress the flood of emotions his touch evoked.

"I'm not worried about myself," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's you three I'm concerned about. Cressida really thinks that I'm loyal to her. I don't think she would hurt me at this point."

Grayden's eyes widened in surprise, a mix of pride and concern flickering across his features. "That's...amazing, Renya. We could definitely use that to our advantage."

"We can plan all this out later. Let's get going," Phillippe interjected, his hand moving to the hilt of his broadsword.

Renya opened the pillowcase and handed Grayden her journal. He tucked it swiftly into his tunic, the movement betraying a hint of nervousness. "It won't make sense if I'm running with that in my hands," she explained.

He pressed another kiss to her forehead, his lips lingering for a moment as if to memorize the feel of her skin. Then he turned to face Cyrus and Phillippe, his posture straightening as he slipped into the role of leader. "Are you ready?"

The men nodded, their faces set with grim determination. Renya took a deep breath, steadying herself for what was to come. She slipped out the door, her bare feet silent on the cold stone floor.

The hall stretched before her, deserted and foreboding. The servants had long since retired, leaving an eerie stillness in their wake. "Let me get past the throne room, and then I'll start screaming," Renya whispered, her voice barely audible.

They moved like shadows through the empty corridors, pausing at the slightest sound. Occasionally, they ducked into alcoves or vacant rooms to avoid the night guards on their rounds. The journey to the throne room seemed to stretch on endlessly, each step fraught with the possibility of discovery.

Finally, they reached the throne room. Renya's heart pounded in her chest, the sound deafening in her own ears. "Ready, Renya?" Cyrus asked, his voice low and tense.

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She nodded, swallowing hard. "I'm ready." With a deep breath, she moved towards the sky bridge, her legs trembling slightly. She took one tentative step onto the bridge before letting out a blood-curdling scream.

"Help! Someone help!"

The sound of running footsteps echoed behind her almost immediately. Three guards appeared on the bridge, their weapons drawn. In a flurry of motion, Phillippe and Grayden engaged them, their blades flashing in the dim light. The guards fell quickly, rendered unconscious by the skilled warriors.

"Help! Mother, help me!" Renya continued to scream, her voice growing hoarse with the effort. More guards appeared, but they posed little challenge for Grayden and Phillippe. The two men moved with deadly grace, dispatching their opponents with swift efficiency.

Renya ran down the hall towards where Sion had indicated Cressida's chambers were located. Her feet slapped against the cold stone, the sound echoing off the walls. Her heart raced, not just from the exertion, but from the fear that at any moment, their plan could unravel.

Finally, at the end of the corridor, a figure emerged from the shadows. Cressida stood there, resplendent even in her state of disarray. She wore a black silk nightgown, the fabric clinging to her form. She barely had time to process this sight before Grayden tackled her to the ground.

"Mother!" Renya cried out, her voice cracking with what she hoped sounded like

desperation. She struggled against Grayden's grip, her eyes fixed on Cressida's face. "Please, help me! Don't let them take me!"

Cressida's lips curled into a sneer, her eyes glittering with malicious delight as she watched Grayden's face contort with anguish at Renya's words. "How dare you come to my palace, you foolish idiots," she hissed. "She's bound to me. You couldn't take her even if she wanted to go. And she doesn't. Isn't that right, Renya?"

"Mother, please," Renya pleaded, tears streaming down her face. She prayed they would be interpreted as tears of fear rather than the complex mix of emotions churning within her. "Help me! Don't let them take me!"

Cressida's sneer widened, clearly relishing Grayden's look of despair. "Oh, did you not realize? She's no longer fated to you. I'd kill you, but I made a promise that prevents me. But that doesn't mean I can't have someone else volunteer. Brandle!" she called, her voice ringing out with cruel anticipation.

Before the named individual could appear, Cyrus stepped into the corridor. Cressida's eyes widened, her face contorting with shock and fury. "You!" she spat, her voice dripping with venom.

Before she could raise her hands to cast a spell, Cyrus thrust his arms forward. Golden rays of light erupted from his fingertips, weaving into an intricate web that enveloped them all. With a blinding flash and a sensation of being wrenched through space, they vanished from the Shadow Realm.

The transition was jarring, leaving Renya disoriented and breathless. As her vision cleared, she found herself sprawled on damp grass, the earthy scent of the forest filling her nostrils. In the distance, she could have sworn she heard Cressida's enraged screams echoing across the realm.

Renya pushed herself up onto her elbows, her eyes quickly searching for her companions. Phillippe and Grayden were already getting to their feet, their postures tense as they scanned the area for potential threats. Only Cyrus remained standing, his face drawn with exhaustion from the magical exertion.

Before Renya could fully regain her bearings, strong arms encircled her, lifting her off the ground. Grayden cradled her against his chest, his heartbeat thundering beneath her ear.

“Put me down, Grayden,” she protested weakly, squirming in his grasp. “I can walk.”

Instead of complying, Grayden captured her lips in a searing kiss. Any remaining thoughts of propriety fled Renya's mind as she melted into his embrace. The kiss was desperate, filled with weeks of longing and fear. She felt weightless in his arms, all her worries momentarily forgotten as she lost herself in the familiar taste of his lips.

Renya's fingers found their way into Grayden's hair, longer and wilder than she remembered. As her hands explored, she encountered the roughness of a full beard, the sensation both foreign and thrilling. A small part of her mind, not completely lost to the passion of the moment, wondered how that beard would feel against other parts of her body.

“Okay, that's enough.” Phillippe's amused voice cut through their bubble of reunion. The sound of a sword being driven into the earth punctuated his words. “We have to get moving, you two.”

Grayden reluctantly set Renya down, but his hand immediately sought hers, their fingers intertwining. She squeezed gently, relishing the small gesture of affection.

“We need to move quickly and quietly,” Cyrus said, his voice carrying an edge of urgency. “I can use a cloaking spell, but I can't mask our voices or the environment

around us. That means we watch every branch, every bush. We can't make any noise." He extended his fingers, and a golden web of light enveloped them all. The world around them took on a hazy, dreamlike quality, as though viewed through a light mist.

"Which way?" Grayden asked, turning to Phillippe.

Phillippe's eyes scanned the horizon, taking in their surroundings. Behind them loomed the dark, forbidding forest of the Shadow Realm. Ahead, the darkness gradually gave way to a soft glow that illuminated another forest. "Northwest," he declared, pulling his sword from the ground with a soft squelch.

As Phillippe took the lead, Renya leaned close to Grayden. "How does he do that?" she whispered, marveling at Phillippe's confident navigation.

"Shhh," Cyrus cautioned gently.

I'm not sure, Little Fawn, Grayden's voice resonated in her mind. I know he spent time with a master navigator at camp.

Renya felt a surge of joy at the renewed connection, that empty space in her heart once again filled with Grayden's presence. A wave of giddy happiness washed over her, the reality of their reunion still sinking in.

I'm happy too, Renya, Grayden's mental voice was warm with affection. I can't wait to be alone with you. Just you wait.

A deep blush crept up Renya's neck and across her cheeks. She was grateful for the dim light that hopefully concealed her reaction. Her body thrummed with desire, longing to be truly alone with Grayden. For now, she had to content herself with the small circles he drew on her palm with his thumb, each touch sending shivers down

her spine.

A deafening roar shattered the silence, causing Grayden to instinctively pull Renya against him, shielding her with his body. Phillippe unsheathed his sword in one fluid motion, while Cyrus raised his hands, golden energy crackling at his fingertips.

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Through the canopy of trees, Renya caught glimpses of Brutus' scaled body, his massive form weaving between the clouds. Atop his back, a familiar silhouette stood out against the night sky—Cressida.

The group stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe as Brutus dove in and out of the tree line. Cressida's gaze swept the forest floor, searching for any sign of their passage. Renya's heart pounded so forcefully she feared its rhythm might betray their location if Cressida flew too close.

Brutus ascended, his wings carrying him higher as he circled in ever-widening arcs. As the dragon neared their position, Renya trembled, her body betraying her fear despite her best efforts to remain still. Grayden's arm tightened around her, and he pressed a reassuring kiss to her hand.

You're alright, my love. Your father's magic will protect us.

Through their bond, Renya sensed a flicker of shame from Grayden. She knew it pained him to rely on Cyrus for protection, his pride as a warrior and protector bruised by the necessity.

After what felt like an eternity, Brutus and Cressida veered east, their forms growing smaller as they headed towards the Sun Realm.

“She thinks that's the first place we'll go,” Cyrus whispered, his voice barely audible. “It's the closest and where my power is the strongest.”

“Plus it's abandoned,” Renya added.

“Actually...” Phillippe began, a hint of hesitation in his voice.

Renya looked between her companions, sudden realization dawning. “It appears there's a lot I need to be caught up on.”

The journey through the forest seemed endless, each step a battle against exhaustion. Renya's legs ached, unused to such prolonged exertion after her confinement in Cressida's castle and the Twilight Kingdom. She longed for the hiking trails of California or even the familiar streets of Seattle, where she'd walked everywhere. The delicate satin slippers from the Shadow Realm offered little protection against the forest floor, leaving her feet sore and blistered.

“Are you doing okay, Renya?” Cyrus asked, falling back to walk beside her and Grayden. His eyes, so like her own, were filled with paternal concern.

“My feet hurt a little, but I'm fine,” she admitted, trying to keep the fatigue from her voice. Before she could protest, Grayden swept her into his arms, cradling her against his chest.

“Just for a few minutes,” she conceded, too weary to argue. As she relaxed into Grayden's embrace, she caught her father watching their interaction, a mix of emotions playing across his face.

“Renya, you don't need to be embarrassed for being in love,” Cyrus said gently. “You're fate-bound, there's no shame in that at all. I happen to think highly of your mate, anyway.”

Heat crept into Renya's cheeks. “I'm sorry, I just...I don't know how to feel. I hardly know you, but you're my father, and I feel like I should remember more of you...since you were the first man in my life. But...Grayden has protected me since I came into this world, and I—”

“You don't have to explain,” Cyrus interjected, holding back a low-hanging branch for Grayden to pass. “I'm glad you have someone to protect you now. I looked over you the best I could in the human realm. But I'm getting older. The human realm aged me significantly, and I won't always be around. When the time comes for me to join the Fates, I'll gladly go, knowing there is someone here who loves you so completely.”

Renya felt tears prick at her eyes, overwhelmed by the sudden sense of belonging. After feeling alone for so long, she now had a father, Grayden's family, and her aunt. The thought of her aunt sparked a question.

“Did you find Aunt Agatha?” she asked, wiping her eyes on Grayden's shoulder.

“No, but Sion and I are going to go through the portal as soon as you're delivered safely to the Snow Lands,” Cyrus replied, his tone resolute.

“Where is Sion?” Renya inquired.

“He's taking Selenia home,” Grayden explained, his chin resting atop Renya's head. “I didn't want her anywhere near Cressida.”

“That was wise,” Renya agreed, a shudder running through her at the thought of Selenia in Cressida's clutches. “I don't want her around Cressida either.”

Grayden's arms tightened around her, and she felt his heart rate quicken. “Did she hurt you, my love?” The question was laden with dread and barely suppressed anger.

“No,” Renya assured him, her hand coming to rest over his heart. “She was rough on me in the beginning, but I think she actually might care for me a bit.”

“I felt—at times, you were happy, Renya,” Grayden admitted, his voice thick with

emotion. “I was scared that you would want to stay there.”

“Oh Grayden,” Renya breathed, cupping his face in her hands. “I was miserable! The only friend I had was Margot, the lady who attended me. Well, and Beauty.”

As soon as the name left her lips, a pang of sadness pierced her heart. Beauty. She'd left Beauty behind.

“Who's Beauty?” Grayden asked, instantly attuned to her emotional turmoil.

“She's...amazing,” Renya explained, her voice soft with fondness. “Cressida now has four dragons. But the youngest, Beauty...she bonded with me. She was—is—my friend. I know that sounds weird, but—”

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“Not at all,” Grayden interrupted gently. “I’m glad she provided you with comfort.” He ducked his head to avoid a low-hanging branch, his movements careful not to jostle Renya.

Feeling the strain in Grayden’s arms, Renya squirmed slightly. “I can walk, you don’t need to carry me the rest of the way.”

“Actually, we’re here,” Phillippe announced from the front of the group.

Renya looked up, her breath catching in her throat as she took in the scene before them. A gorgeous meadow stretched out ahead, filled with flowers of every hue imaginable, their petals swaying gently in the breeze. As she stepped out of the shadows of her mother’s land and into the lush landscape of spring, she felt as if she were entering another world entirely.

Beyond the meadow lay a shimmering lake, its surface dotted with swans in shades of soft pink. Cherry blossoms drifted on the air, their delicate petals carried by a wind that smelled of jasmine and honey.

“It’s beautiful,” Renya murmured, awe evident in her voice. She knelt, running her fingers through the lush grass. A ladybug, its shell a soft pink instead of the familiar red, alighted on her arm. She watched in wonder as it spread its wings and took flight, disappearing into the vibrant landscape.

“I think the Spring Land Acropolis is just on the other side of the meadow,” Phillippe said, removing his gloves and tucking them into his pocket.

“Have you been here before?” Renya asked, turning to Grayden.

He nodded, his eyes scanning the horizon. “I have. I met with Samatra and her husband, Thesand, last year. They are kind rulers, good to their people and cooperative neighbors.”

A flutter of iridescent butterflies passed by, their wings catching the light like living jewels. Renya marveled at the stark contrast between this realm of new life and the oppressive gloom of the Shadow Realm.

As they made their way across the meadow, Renya's hand found Grayden's, their fingers intertwining. Despite the beauty surrounding them, she felt a flutter of nervousness at the prospect of meeting another set of rulers. Her experiences with King Triston of the Tidal Kingdom and Queen Kalora of the Twilight Kingdom had been positive, but each new encounter brought its own challenges.

“You'll be magnificent, Renya,” Grayden's voice resonated in her mind, a wave of reassurance flowing through their bond.

Renya smiled up at him, grateful for his unwavering support. After everything they'd been through, the separation and the constant threat of death, she found herself wanting to share every thought, every feeling with him.

As they neared the lake—which Renya now realized was more the size of a small sea—she paused, mesmerized by the school of rainbow-colored fish circling beneath the surface and the graceful swans gliding across the water. She stood there for a moment, drinking in the idyllic scene, before Grayden gently tugged her hand to rejoin the group.

As they walked, Renya noticed a change in Grayden's demeanor. A frown creased his brow, and through their bond, she sensed a flicker of sadness. An image flashed

across her mind: his mother's ring, slipping onto her finger in the warmth of the hot springs. Understanding dawned, and she pulled her hand from his grasp.

“It's okay, Grayden,” she said softly, reaching for the necklace. She unclasped it, sliding the ring free before placing it back on her finger where it belonged.

Grayden's expression remained uncertain, his eyes not quite meeting hers. “Grayden, what is it?” Renya pressed, concern coloring her voice.

He looked away, struggling to find the words. “Grayden,” she repeated, more firmly this time.

Finally, he turned to face her, fear evident in the depths of his green eyes. “Honey, what's wrong?”

Grayden took a shaky breath. “When we were apart, I woke up one night and I felt...I felt you.”

Confusion wrinkled Renya's brow. “What?”

“You were...satisfied,” he explained, his gaze fixed on his worn boots.

Realization hit Renya like a thunderbolt, heat flooding her cheeks. “Oh my god!” she exclaimed, mortification and amusement warring within her.

“It's okay, Renya,” Grayden rushed to assure her, his words tumbling out in a nervous stream. “If you sought comfort with someone else, I—I understand. I can't imagine what you must have been going through, alone in that castle with...her. I don't blame you at all. But you were not wearing your ring...and it scared me.”

Renya's heart ached at the vulnerability in his voice, the insecurity so at odds with his

usual confidence. She stepped closer, rising on her toes to place a tender kiss on his throat. “There was no one else, Grayden,” she murmured against his skin. “There will never be anyone else. I had a—dream—about us.” She felt her face grow even hotter, the admission hanging between them. “I only think of you, always. The only reason I wasn't wearing my ring was because Cressida took it from me and flung it out into the forest. I found it while I was riding Beauty, and I tucked it away against my heart to keep it safe.”

“But...your mating mark is also gone,” Grayden persisted, a hint of doubt still lingering in his voice. “Renya, what happened?”

A smile tugged at her lips as she held out her arm, rubbing vigorously at the skin. “I was forced to hide it. Cressida tried to make Cyrus break our bond. She thought he was successful, so I had to cover it.”

Grayden's relief was palpable, a strangled sob escaping him as he pulled her into a fierce embrace. “Thank the Fates,” he breathed, peppering her face with kisses. “I was so worried.”

“Grayden,” Renya said, cupping his face in her hands, “you don't ever need to feel insecure. We are bound for life. Nothing will ever change that.”

He nodded, pressing a final kiss to her forehead before releasing her. As they hurried to catch up with Phillippe and Cyrus, Renya felt a renewed sense of connection, their bond stronger for having weathered this moment of vulnerability.

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Cresting a gentle slope beyond the lake, the Spring Land Acropolis came into view, its magnificence taking Renya's breath away. It was as if she had stepped into a vision of Ancient Greece, reimagined and brought to vibrant life. Before them stood an enormous palace, its ivory columns reaching towards the sky. At its base, nestled between twin columns supporting a burnt orange roof, sprawled an open-air market that assaulted the senses with a riot of colors, scents, and sounds.

The air was heavy with the aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg, cloves and citrus, creating an intoxicating blend that made Renya's head spin. Her eyes darted from stall to stall, trying to take in every detail of this feast for the senses.

A grand marble staircase led up to the acropolis, its handrails interspersed with exquisitely carved stone figures. Renya's eyes widened as she recognized some of the statues—Diana the huntress with her quiver of arrows, Dionysus with his overflowing wine glass. The presence of these Greek deities made her wonder just how intertwined the human and fae worlds truly were.

As they ascended the stairs, the sounds of the marketplace surrounded them. Children's laughter mingled with the animated bartering of shopkeepers and customers, creating a tapestry of noise that spoke of life and vitality.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Renya found herself in the heart of the marketplace. A fruit vendor's stall caught her eye, its wares a mix of familiar and utterly foreign produce. Alongside recognizable apples and pears sat what appeared to be purple and green oranges, and star-shaped fruits in every color imaginable.

Across from the fruit stand, a silk merchant displayed his wares—an array of fabrics

so fine and varied that Renya had never seen their like. Gauzy cottons light as air hung beside heavy brocades and sumptuous velvets. Hats adorned with delicate veils and crowns woven with fresh flowers completed the display. Renya couldn't help but think of Selenia, imagining her friend's delight at such a treasure trove.

Though she longed to linger, to sample the exotic fruits and run her fingers over the fine fabrics, Renya hurried to keep pace with Grayden and Phillippe's long strides. Cyrus walked at a more sedate pace, and she fell into step beside him.

“We have a similar market in the Sun Realm,” he told her, his eyes following a woman carrying a tray laden with sugar-spun pastries.

“Really?” Renya asked, her gaze drawn to a turquoise, flower-shaped cake that made her mouth water. “Is it really just cloaked?”

Cyrus nodded, a hint of weariness creeping into his voice. “It is. It takes large amounts of my magic to keep it hidden, which is why I'm currently no match against Cressida. Luckily it held when I was trapped in the human realm, but the strain aged me greatly. Between cloaking the Sun Realm and the Snow Lands when we arrive, I'll pretty much be overextended. Even when and if we lower the cloaking, it will take some time to gain back my powers. That's why we desperately need your aunt. Between the two of you, I think you'll be able to take on your mother and her army.”

Renya felt her stomach clench, anxiety bubbling up at the thought of the inevitable confrontation with Cressida. The weight of the prophecy settled heavily on her shoulders—she would be her mother's downfall, but at what cost? She had thought sacrificing herself in the Twilight Kingdom would fulfill her role, but fate, it seemed, had other plans.

“Is something the matter, dear?” Cyrus asked, his face lined with concern as he studied her.

Renya forced a smile, not wanting to burden him with her fears. “I’m fine. Just nervous about what’s to come.”

Her father took her hand in his, patting it gently. “All will be alright,” he assured her, his voice warm with affection.

The simple gesture brought tears to Renya’s eyes. While Grayden was her protector, confidant, best friend, and lover, having a father was something she had never truly realized she was missing. The sudden rush of emotion caught her off guard, and she blinked rapidly to clear her vision.

Grayden glanced back over his shoulder, catching Renya’s eye. A small, understanding smile played at his lips, and through their bond, she felt his happiness for her newfound connection with her father.

As they approached another set of columns, even more intricate and impressive than the last, two guards stepped out from their posts. These pillars were a work of art in themselves, the stone carved in spiraling circles with miniature figures of animals—both mythical and real, or perhaps all real in this realm—placed at regular intervals.

The guards were imposing figures in their loose tunics and black leather trousers. Their boots were crafted from supple leather, and instead of swords, each carried a bow with a quiver of arrows slung across their back. Both men sported long, flowing hair—one brown, one blond—adding to their ethereal appearance.

“We are here to see Queen Samatra and King Thesand,” Grayden announced, his voice carrying the authority of his position. “I’m King Grayden of the Snow Lands.”

“So, you gave yourself a promotion, did you?” Phillippe teased, earning himself an elbow to the ribs and a glare from his brother.

Grayden cleared his throat, addressing the guards once more. “Please let them know we are here.”

The guards bowed low in unison before straightening. “We’ll take you to the receiving room,” the blond guard said, his tone respectful.

As they followed the guard deeper into the Acropolis, Renya marveled at the architecture. While the marketplace had been open to the elements, this section—which she assumed housed the royal family's quarters—was more enclosed. However, large windows and terraces allowed ample light to flood the space, creating an airy, open feel.

The receiving room they were led to reminded Renya of an enormous parlor. Chaises were arranged around wooden tables, and flowers adorned every available surface. The floral scent was intense but enchanting, a symphony of fragrances that tickled her nose. Several of the blooms were larger than her head, some standing nearly four feet high.

One arrangement, in particular, caught Renya's eye from across the room. It was a massive bloom, its petals forming a perfect circle with every shade of blue imaginable, like a pantone blue rainbow. She resisted the urge to cross the room for a closer look, reminding herself of the gravity of their situation.

The guard directed them to a low table surrounded by four chairs. “They will be with you shortly,” he said before turning to rejoin his companion at the entrance.

Renya took in the circular room, her eyes drawn to the soaring ceiling several stories above. Every sound echoed in the vast space, prompting them all to remain silent, not wanting their voices to carry.

Don't worry, everything will be fine, Grayden's reassuring voice sounded in her mind.

Renya smiled, drawing comfort from his unwavering support.

“Renya!” A familiar voice rang out, echoing throughout the chamber. Renya stood, her heart leaping with recognition.

“Esmeralda!” she exclaimed, surprised and delighted to see her friend. The two women rushed towards each other, embracing warmly.

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“I'm so glad to see you again,” Esmeralda said, her sweet tone filled with genuine affection.

“You too,” Renya replied, pulling back to look at her friend. “How long have you been here?”

“Three weeks,” Esmeralda explained. “After you left the Tidal Kingdom, my brother and I finished up some business in our own territory, and then ventured here to discuss aligning our forces with the Spring Lands.”

Grayden approached, his hand coming to rest on the small of Renya's back. “Esmeralda, it's so good to see you again.” He took Esmeralda's hand, bowing slightly to place a respectful kiss upon it.

Renya felt a flare of heat rush through her body, an unexpected surge of jealousy tightening her muscles. She tensed, then forced herself to relax as Grayden released Esmeralda's hand.

Esmeralda, ever perceptive, caught Renya's reaction. Rather than taking offense, she chuckled, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “I take it you finally sealed your bond.”

Heat crept up Renya's neck and into her cheeks, her embarrassment compounded by Esmeralda's astute observation.

Before Renya could formulate a response, Phillippe strode over, inserting himself into the conversation with his usual charm. “Are you going to introduce me to this lovely lady?” he asked, his gaze fixed on Esmeralda.

Renya watched as color bloomed in Esmeralda's cheeks, mirroring her own flushed state. "Phillippe, this is Princess Esmeralda from the Tidal Kingdom," she said, gesturing between them.

Phillippe took Esmeralda's hand, bowing low to place a kiss upon it. His dark eyes remained locked on hers as he straightened. "I've heard much about you, but your beauty was never mentioned. What a travesty."

Renya barely suppressed a snort at the flowery praise, but seeing how Esmeralda preened under the attention, she held her tongue. She didn't know Phillippe well enough to discern if his interest was sincere or if this was his standard behavior around beautiful women.

"Grayden!" A booming voice echoed across the entrance hall, drawing everyone's attention. King Triston approached, his presence commanding as always. He wore a pewter crown fashioned from intertwined eels and a chartreuse tunic paired with dark boots. While his face remained mostly impassive, a slight grin tugged at his lips as he clasped hands with Grayden. Grayden returned the gesture, clapping Triston on the back, and the two immediately fell into discussion about recent events.

Phillippe glanced between Esmeralda and the two kings, then sighed before joining their conversation about war strategies and alliances.

Renya knew she should participate in the discussion, but the joy of seeing a familiar, friendly face overwhelmed her sense of duty for the moment.

"I see you are wearing your mate's ring," Esmeralda observed, nodding towards the snowflake engagement ring on Renya's finger. "I hope that we will be invited to the wedding if you've not already wed."

Renya's hand went to the ring, her fingers brushing over it as a smile spread across

her face. “Of course! I wouldn't dream of excluding you and your brother.”

Esmeralda gently took Renya's hand, examining the ring more closely. “It's beautiful,” she said, admiration clear in her voice.

“It's because of you that I still have it,” Renya said, gratitude coloring her words.

Esmeralda wrinkled her nose. “What do you mean?”

“I was taken hostage by the Shadow Queen—”

“Oh my goodness!” Esmeralda gasped, her eyes widening in shock.

“And she took my ring and flung it down into a ravine,” Renya continued. “The aragonite necklace you gave me led me to it.”

Esmeralda beamed, clearly pleased that her gift had proved so useful. “I had a feeling you would need it. But Renya, how did you escape from the Shadow Queen?”

Renya launched into her tale, recounting the harrowing events of her captivity and rescue. Esmeralda listened intently, her expressions shifting from shock to concern to relief as the story unfolded.

“Oh my, Renya!” Esmeralda exclaimed when she finished. “What are you doing here now?”

Before Renya could answer, a hush fell over the receiving room. She turned towards the doorway through which Esmeralda and Triston had entered earlier, and saw two regal figures approaching.

Queen Samatra glided into the room, slightly ahead of her husband. She wore a lilac

gown that seemed to float around her, the fabric adorned with delicate floral patterns in deepening shades of purple. The fitted bodice accentuated her slender waist before giving way to a flowing skirt that cascaded to the floor, creating an ethereal effect with each step.

Instead of a traditional crown, Queen Samatra wore a floral headpiece composed of live flowers. The blooms, which Renya thought might be violets, ranged in color from deep purple to soft lavender, forming a graceful circlet atop her head.

Suddenly self-conscious, Renya became acutely aware of her own disheveled state. Her white nightgown was dirty and wrinkled from their journey, her braid had come undone with wisps of hair falling messily around her face, and she knew her skin was covered in a sheen of sweat and grime. She discreetly tried to hide her dirty hands behind her back, praying that no one would expect her to shake hands in greeting.

Won't stop me from kissing every inch of you, my mate, Grayden's voice sounded in her mind, warm with affection and desire.

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Renya suppressed a smile, Grayden's words bolstering her confidence. She straightened her posture, meeting his eyes across the room and giving him a tiny nod of appreciation.

King Thesand was not at all what Renya had expected. He was dressed in black leather, a sword hanging at his hip, with no crown or other obvious signifiers of his royal status. His black hair was cropped short, and his alert eyes darted around the room, assessing each newcomer with cautious interest. While he allowed his wife to approach the group first, his posture made it clear he was ready to defend her at a moment's notice, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword and a quiver of arrows visible at his back.

“Welcome,” Queen Samatra said, her melodious voice carrying easily in the large chamber. Her gaze swept over the visitors, taking in each face carefully. She shook hands with Renya, Phillippe, and Cyrus in turn, but when she came to Grayden, she merely inclined her head in a respectful nod.

“I've heard from our guests that you two are fate-bound,” she said, her eyes moving between Renya and Grayden. “I'll try not to touch him in your presence, Renya. I've instructed my husband to do the same with Renya.”

Renya's eyes immediately sought out Esmeralda, noting the crimson blush that spread across her friend's cheeks as she looked down, avoiding eye contact. It was clear that Esmeralda had shared the story of Grayden's possessive behavior in the Tidal Kingdom.

“That's most considerate,” Grayden said, his tone light as he attempted to dispel the

awkwardness. “I do get incredibly possessive when anyone touches my mate.” He let out a hearty laugh, and gradually, everyone in the room joined in, the tension dissipating.

With the ice broken, Queen Samatra invited everyone to gather around a large table deeper in the receiving hall. Grayden wasted no time in claiming the seat next to Renya, while Esmeralda took the chair on her other side. Renya hid a smile as she watched Phillippe make a beeline for the remaining seat beside Esmeralda.

As they settled into their seats, Queen Samatra's gaze swept over the group once more. “What brings you to the Spring Lands? I was surprised to get your letter,” she said, her tone both welcoming and curious.

Cyrus took the lead, his voice steady as he explained their situation. “We seek shelter and rest on our way back to the Snow Lands. My daughter, Renya, was taken hostage by the Shadow Queen. While she was there, she was able to earn her trust, which could assist us later on.”

King Thesand nodded thoughtfully, stroking his chin. “We've been speaking with King Triston about pooling our resources to make a final stand against her. We've agreed.”

“That is wonderful news,” Grayden said, his hand finding Renya's under the table and giving it a gentle squeeze. He turned his attention to the other rulers, his voice taking on a more authoritative tone. “We'd like your input on where and how to take a stand.”

Renya hesitated for a moment, then spoke up. “I have a suggestion.”

All eyes turned towards her, and she swallowed nervously before continuing. “While I was in the Shadow Realm, I learned that Cressida's magic is weakest in opposite

power types. Since her magic is dark, it is weaker in areas of light, like the Sun Realm. I think that we should lure her there, using me.”

Grayden's grip on her hand tightened, and his voice resonated in her mind, tinged with worry and a hint of anger. I won't allow you to be bait.

Renya met his gaze steadily. You don't have a choice, my love. This is how it has to be.

For a moment, she thought Grayden would protest aloud, but he gave a small shake of his head, reluctantly accepting her decision. Renya released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, relieved that the biggest hurdle to her plan had been overcome.

“You'll only do that if I'm there too,” Cyrus interjected, his eyes full of affection as he looked at Renya.

She closed her eyes briefly, touched by the wave of emotion that washed over her at her father's protective instinct.

“I'm sorry, but who are you?” King Thesand asked, his piercing gaze fixed on Cyrus as he assessed this newcomer.

Cyrus met the king's stare unflinchingly. “I'm the King of the Sun Realm.”

The declaration was met with gasps and murmurs of disbelief from around the table.

“That can't be—”

“It's not possible—”

“It must be a trick—”

Grayden rose to his feet, his presence commanding attention as he addressed the group. “I assure you, I've been to the Sun Realm. It's cloaked, but the entire city is active. More importantly, they have an army that is untouched. I've seen it personally.”

The room buzzed with side conversations and speculation. Finally, King Triston's voice cut through the chatter. “Grayden, you've never given me a reason to doubt your word. You've been honest with me when the truth seemed unbelievable. If you say this is true, I believe you.”

Grayden inclined his head towards Triston, gratitude evident in his expression.

“Thank you, Grayden,” Cyrus said, his voice carrying the weight of his royal status. “We have much to plan, but I know my daughter and the rest of our party are exhausted from our travels. Would it be possible to continue this conversation tomorrow?”

Renya felt a surge of pride as she watched her father take command of the room. He exuded the same natural leadership she had come to associate with Grayden.

You get your strength and leadership from him, my princess, Grayden's voice sounded in her mind, accompanied by a pulse of admiration and love.

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“I would definitely appreciate a soft and welcoming bed,” Phillippe chimed in, his gaze drifting towards Esmeralda, who blushed deeply once again.

“Phillippe...” Grayden warned, shooting his brother a stern look.

“What? I'm tired,” Phillippe protested innocently.

King Thesand ignored their banter, addressing the group as a whole. “We'll have you shown to your rooms right away.”

As Renya stood, Grayden's arm snaked around her waist, his need for physical contact evident in the way he held her close. Several attendants materialized as if from thin air, ready to guide them to the guest quarters.

Renya and Grayden fell into step behind one of the attendants, with Phillippe and Cyrus following close behind. Esmeralda and Triston brought up the rear, and Renya surmised they too were staying in the guest wing.

The group made their way down a long, open hallway that allowed the sweet spring breeze to filter through. As they rounded a corner, Renya's eyes widened at the sight before her. A grand stairway led outside to a cluster of miniature cottages, each sporting ornate columns and angled red roofs.

Esmeralda gave Renya a warm embrace before heading towards a cottage on the far left, with Triston entering the neighboring structure.

The attendant gestured towards the cottage on the far right, and Renya followed

Grayden as he pushed open the door. She stepped inside, her eyes widening as she took in their accommodations.

A large bed dominated the center of the room, its frame crafted from rich cherry wood. Pristine white linens adorned the mattress, inviting and luxurious after their long journey. The walls were adorned with intricate frescoes depicting a variety of flowers, their colors vibrant and lifelike. Scattered throughout the room were several statues of Greek gods, which Renya recognized from a mythology class she had taken in college.

The furnishings were minimal but elegant—a small table with two chairs, a vanity, and a trunk for storage. Renya's gaze drifted towards the bathroom, curiosity piquing her interest, but before she could investigate further, Grayden's hand was on her shoulder, turning her to face him.

Without warning, his lips crashed against hers in a searing kiss. His hands found her waist, and he backed her against the nearest wall, the heat of his body pressing into hers.

“Grayden, honey—” she began, but her words were cut short as he swiftly pulled the thin nightgown over her head. Before she could protest, his tongue traced a hot path between her breasts, eliciting a moan from deep in his throat.

“I can't wait, Renya,” he growled, his breath hot against her skin. “I—I don't think I can be gentle.” The raw need in his voice sent shivers down her spine.

“I don't care,” she gasped, her fingers tangling in his unkempt hair, guiding his mouth back to hers. “Be with me. I just want to feel you.” She tugged at his shirt, desperate to feel his skin against hers.

As her hands roamed his newly bared chest, her fingers encountered the rough patch

of scar tissue. She pulled away from his kiss, her eyes falling to the thick, raised scar that marred his flesh.

“I’m fine,” he assured her, trying to recapture her lips. Instead, Renya sank to her knees, pressing gentle kisses along the length of his scar. Sorrow welled up inside her as she traced the permanent reminder of how close she had come to losing him.

Grayden moaned, his hands cupping her face and drawing her back to her feet. The evidence of his desire pressed insistently against her, and she marveled at the effect she had on him.

A low growl rumbled in his chest as he hooked his fingers into her undergarments, sliding them down her legs. Renya clutched at his shoulders, stepping out of the discarded fabric as Grayden's lips blazed a trail of fire along her shoulder, neck, and collarbone.

Her fingers fumbled with the laces of his trousers, urgency making her movements clumsy. As the fabric pooled around his ankles, he didn't bother to kick them off completely before hitching her leg around his hip.

Renya bit her lip, a whimper escaping her as she felt him, hot and hard against her core. The weeks of separation melted away, replaced by an all-consuming need to be joined with him once more.

Grayden lifted her other leg, wrapping it around his waist as he supported her weight effortlessly. For a moment, he paused, his gaze locking with hers. The depth of emotion in his green eyes made Renya's breath catch in her throat.

“I swear to you, Renya,” he said, his voice low and intense. “I will never, ever allow us to be parted again. Even in death. I pledge my soul to you. Fates be damned.”

A shiver ran through her at the weight of his words, spoken like a solemn vow against any force that might try to tear them apart. She cradled his face in her hands, drawing him in for another kiss, her body thrumming with need.

“Promise me,” he demanded, holding back despite the tension evident in every line of his body.

Renya shifted her hips, seeking the connection they both craved. “No, Little Fawn,” he insisted. “Not until you promise me. No more sacrifices. From here on out, we do everything together.”

“I promise,” she whispered, the words barely out of her mouth before Grayden surged forward, sheathing himself inside her in one smooth motion.

They both gasped at the sensation, the feeling of completeness overwhelming after their long separation. “Renya...” Grayden groaned, his face a mask of concentration. “I can't go slow right now.”

“I don't want you to go slow,” she pleaded. “I need you.”

He obliged, setting a rapid pace that had Renya clinging to him, muffling her cries against his shoulder. It took only moments for her to reach her peak, her body singing with pleasure as she shuddered in his arms.

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Grayden followed soon after, his release accompanied by a strangled cry that echoed through the room. For several heartbeats, he held her there against the wall, both of them trembling and breathless.

Finally, he gathered her in his arms and carried her to the bed, his trousers still tangled around his ankles. He laid her gently on the soft mattress before stepping out of the remainder of his clothing.

“Now that we got that first one out of the way,” he said, a mischievous glint in his eye as he joined her on the bed, “I can take my time with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Selenia leaned over Sion's sleeping form, her eyes tracing the contours of his face in the flickering firelight. She watched the steady rise and fall of his chest, ensuring his breathing was even and deep. Relief washed over her as she confirmed he was finally asleep. For hours, she had waited, knowing the exhaustion that weighed heavily upon him but understanding his reluctance to succumb to it.

Throughout their journey, Sion had taken his duty as her protector with unwavering seriousness. His vigilance was admirable, but after long days of travel and several sleepless nights, even his iron will had finally given way to the insistent pull of slumber.

With careful movements, Selenia extricated herself from the warmth of the campfire. She crept away silently, her steps measured and deliberate to avoid waking Sion. The Twilight Kingdom's forest stretched out before her, a maze of shadows and muted

colors. Every tree, every bush seemed to blend into the next, making navigation a challenge. Still, Selenia pressed on, convinced she was retracing their earlier path to the pond where they had stopped before.

Dry nettles crunched softly beneath her feet, the sound unnaturally loud in the stillness of the forest. A startled bird took flight, its wings cutting through the dusky air with a whisper of feathers. The sudden movement caused Selenia to start, her injured arm throbbing in protest as she instinctively cradled it closer to her body.

The pain in her arm was a constant companion, dulled only slightly by the poppy plants Sion had managed to find. Those precious flowers were scarce, and Selenia rationed them carefully, steeping just enough in her morning tea to take the edge off the worst of the pain. She knew Sion worried about her injury, his concern evident in the scowl he often wore and the gentle way he tended to her. But for Selenia, the physical pain paled in comparison to the guilt that gnawed at her heart.

As she walked deeper into the forest, doubt began to creep in. Had she misjudged their location? The repetitive nature of the Twilight Kingdom's landscape made it all too easy to lose one's way. She had convinced Sion to seek out this pond for the horses, but now she questioned whether it was the right one. What if she had led them astray?

Just as panic began to set in, a familiar scent assaulted her nostrils. The unmistakable odor of decay and rotting flesh filled the air, causing Selenia to whirl around, her heart pounding.

“I told you we would meet again, Selenia Snowden.” The Murcurial's voice slithered through the air, sending chills down Selenia's spine. The ethereal being circled her, its body now wrapped in the cloak it had taken from Selenia during their previous encounter. “Did you bring me an offering?”

Selenia swallowed hard, fighting to keep her voice steady. “How do you know what I'm here for?”

The Murcurial's hollow laugh echoed in the clearing. “I know everything, Selenia Snowden. The Fates whisper in my ear. When I was a babe, it drove me mad. But now I listen and enjoy the things I hear.”

Hope and desperation warred within Selenia. “So can you do it? Can you help me?” The plea in her voice was unmistakable.

“You know I require payment.” The Murcurial's hollow eyes gleamed beneath the hood of the cloak, pinning Selenia with her gaze.

With trembling fingers, Selenia undid the bow beneath her chin and removed the hat she had purchased in the Sun Realm. It was a beautiful piece, adorned with delicate embroidery and tiny, shimmering beads.

The Murcurial's bony fingers emerged from beneath the cloak, snatching the hat away with surprising speed. “Your payment is satisfactory,” she declared, resuming her unsettling circling of Selenia.

“Then do it,” Selenia demanded, her voice cracking with emotion. “Make me forget. Make me forget he ever existed.”

The Murcurial paused, her head tilting to one side as if listening to some unheard voice. “That I cannot do. Once in the memory, always in the memory. But...I can do something else.”

“What?” Selenia cried, desperation clawing at her insides. She needed to forget his death, to erase the memory of betrayal she felt when Sion's lips had touched hers.

“I cannot tell you before it is done,” the Murcurial replied, her voice taking on an almost sing-song quality. “It will be painful at first. But in the end, you will be happier than you've ever been.”

Selenia closed her eyes, bracing herself. “Just do it.”

The smell of decay intensified as the Murcurial drew closer. Selenia flinched as rotten fingers touched her forehead, fighting the urge to recoil. A current of electricity surged through her body, quickly followed by an intense, chilling cold. She shivered violently, certain she would never feel warm again.

Just as the cold reached the very tips of her fingers and toes, warmth began to bloom within her. It started as a small spark in her core, rapidly growing into an inferno that raged through her bloodstream. The heat surged through every part of her, culminating in an explosion of pain behind her eyes. For a terrifying moment, everything went black.

When Selenia opened her eyes, the Murcurial was gone. Before she could call out, demanding to know what had been done to her, her heart constricted painfully in her chest.

An overwhelming, all-consuming surge of desire coursed through her, causing her eyes to widen and her lips to part in a silent gasp. She panted, struggling to reconcile the intense feelings flooding her body with the thoughts racing through her mind. The need, the drive to find him was unlike anything she had ever experienced, even with Jurel.

She still mourned Jurel, grieving for what might have been. But this...this was different. This was a soul-crushing, all-encompassing realization that the rest of her life belonged to another. It was as if a veil had been lifted, revealing a truth that had always been there, hidden just beneath the surface.

Without conscious thought, Selenia began to run. She tore through the forest, her heart pounding a frantic rhythm in her chest, her mind filled with images she couldn't quite grasp. How could she have been so blind? How had she not realized it before?

In her haste, her skirt caught on a low-hanging branch. She barely noticed, continuing to push forward even as the fabric tore, leaving a strip of cloth fluttering behind her like a banner.

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At last, Selenia burst into the clearing where their camp was set up. Her eyes immediately found Sion, still sleeping peacefully by the dying embers of the fire. She approached him slowly, her breath catching in her throat as she gazed upon him with new eyes.

Kneeling beside him, Selenia reached out with a trembling hand to caress his cheek. Sion moaned softly in his sleep, turning his face slightly into her touch. His skin was smooth and warm beneath her fingers, and Selenia felt a deep sigh escape her.

Her entire body thrummed with the need to touch him, to explore every inch of him with her hands, her lips. The urge to taste him was nearly overwhelming, and Selenia found herself leaning closer, drawn to him like a moth to a flame.

In that moment, everything became crystal clear. The confusion, the guilt, the conflicting emotions that had plagued her for so long...all of it fell away, leaving only one irrefutable truth.

Sion.

Her fated mate.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Renya eased herself into the bath, a contented sigh escaping her lips as the warm water surrounded her body. The heat seeped into her muscles, gradually unraveling the knots of tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying. It seemed there wasn't a single spot on her body that didn't ache, a testament to the passionate reunion with

Grayden. Even her lips were swollen from his ardent kisses, and her scalp tingled where he had tugged perhaps a bit too enthusiastically on her hair in his fervor to claim her again and again.

Closing her eyes, Renya allowed herself to relax fully, savoring the simple luxury of a warm bath and the opportunity to get clean. More than that, she reveled in the joy of being reunited with her mate, their bond renewed and strengthened. She could feel Grayden's presence in her mind more acutely than ever before, their connection humming with vitality. She wondered idly if it was their physical proximity that enhanced their bond, or if it was the repeated joining of their bodies that had deepened their connection.

“What do you think you're doing?”

Without opening her eyes, Renya could picture the scene before her with perfect clarity: Grayden, naked and magnificent, towering over her. His muscled body would still be slightly damp with sweat, a testament to the vigorous activities that had occupied their time since their reunion.

“Move,” he commanded, his voice a low rumble that sent shivers down her spine despite the warmth of the bath.

Renya opened her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest in a show of defiance. “No,” she said, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “I'm going to relax in this tub all by myself.”

Grayden threw his head back and groaned, the sound a mixture of frustration and desire. “Why do you torture me, Little Fawn?”

In response, Renya sat up, allowing the bubbles to cascade down her chest, exposing her cleavage to his searching gaze. She watched with satisfaction as his eyes

darkened with arousal, feeling an answering surge of lust pulse through their bond.

A sharp knock on the door interrupted the charged moment, eliciting a growl from Grayden.

“Should I go get it?” Renya asked innocently, rising further out of the water and allowing droplets to trace tantalizing paths down her stomach.

“You are playing with fire, little one,” Grayden warned, his voice husky with barely restrained desire.

Renya offered him a sweet smile, relishing the effect she had on him. With a final frustrated growl, Grayden turned and left the bathroom to answer the door, closing it behind him with perhaps more force than necessary.

Smirking to herself, Renya settled back into the bath to finish washing, taking particular care with her hair. She had just begun to rinse when Grayden returned, his arms laden with an assortment of flowing gowns.

“Those aren't your colors, sweetie,” she teased, nodding towards the garments.

Grayden's laugh filled the room, deep and rich. “These are from Esmeralda. She thought you might need to borrow some clothing.”

“Oh god, yes,” Renya said fervently, grateful for her friend's thoughtfulness. She lifted herself out of the tub, accepting Grayden's steadying hand as she navigated the slippery floor. Before she could reach for a towel, Grayden had grabbed one and began gently drying her off.

“I can do that, Grayden,” she protested halfheartedly.

“I know,” he replied simply, continuing his ministrations with careful tenderness.

Renya sighed and allowed him to continue, sensing the underlying current of guilt that still lingered from their separation. If this small act of care helped ease that feeling, she was more than willing to indulge him.

As Grayden worked, Renya examined the clothes he had set on the counter. Several satin dresses in the distinctive style of the Tidal Kingdom caught her eye, along with a pair of sandals and some undergarments. A wave of appreciation washed over her; the thought of putting on her filthy nightgown after being clean was unappealing, to say the least. More than that, she had no desire to wear anything that reminded her of her time in the Shadow Realm.

After careful consideration, Renya selected a butter yellow gown. The front was relatively simple, with a modest scoop neckline and cording around the waist. The back, however, was far more daring, featuring straps crisscrossed in an intricate net-like pattern. The hemline dipped lower in the back, creating a slight train that trailed behind her as she moved.

“Do you mind?” she asked, noticing Grayden's intense gaze as she dressed.

“Not at all,” he replied, his eyes never leaving her. “Although if truth be told, I'd rather you be undressing.”

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Renya bit her lip, fighting the smile that threatened to break across her face. “Hold that thought, mister. We were invited to dinner tonight.”

A low growl was his only response. With an indulgent sigh, Renya took his hand in hers and led him out the door.

Esmeralda and Triston were waiting for them outside. Esmeralda's face lit up as she took in Renya's appearance.

“Renya, you look gorgeous,” she exclaimed, her eyes sweeping over the borrowed gown. “I knew yellow was your color!”

Renya beamed at the compliment, a warm flush of pleasure coloring her cheeks. “I appreciate you lending it to me.”

“It looks much better on you than it ever did on me,” Esmeralda insisted. “It fits you beautifully.”

“I couldn't agree more,” Grayden chimed in, his voice thick with admiration.

Renya's blush deepened, the heat creeping down her neck. She was saved from further embarrassment by the arrival of Phillippe, who cut a dashing figure in a borrowed tunic from the Spring Lands, not unlike the one Grayden wore. As always, his signature broadsword was slung across his back.

To Renya's surprise, Phillippe bypassed her and Grayden, making a beeline for Esmeralda. “You look radiant, Esmeralda,” he said, his eyes twinkling as he brushed

a gallant kiss across her knuckles.

Renya watched with interest as Esmeralda blushed under Phillippe's attention. While she was glad to see her friend enjoying herself, a tendril of concern wormed its way into her thoughts. She made a mental note to ask Grayden about his brother's reputation with women when they had a moment alone.

Triston, seemingly oblivious to the flirtatious exchange, led the way back into the acropolis and towards a large dining hall. The room was a breathtaking example of Grecian architecture, with grand columns adorned with intricate carvings and figures. The walls were painted a rich, earthy brown, accented with gold that highlighted the exquisite details of the columns.

At the center of the room stood a magnificent table of polished wood, surrounded by ornate chairs upholstered in luxurious velvet. The fabric featured an intricate pattern of vines that seemed to wind their way up and down the chair backs. The table setting itself was a work of art, with fine porcelain plates and silverware arranged on a crisp white tablecloth. Olive branches and fresh roses formed elegant centerpieces, lending the room the air of a grand celebration, as if a wedding was about to take place, rather than just a dinner.

As Renya took in the opulent surroundings, her fingers unconsciously sought out her engagement ring, twirling it absently. The thought of weddings brought to mind her own impending nuptials, and she wondered if Grayden would broach the subject again soon. They hadn't discussed their plans since the night of their engagement, and with everything that had happened since, it felt like a lifetime ago.

A soft breeze ruffled Renya's hair, drawing her attention to a set of large French doors that allowed ample natural light to flood the space. The sun had begun to set, casting a warm, golden glow across the room and intensifying Renya's growing hunger. She was more than ready for a warm meal and, hopefully, a peaceful night's

sleep.

As she settled into one of the plush chairs, a slight shiver ran through her. The light dress, while perfect for the Tidal Kingdom's climate, offered little protection against the cooler evening air of the Spring Lands.

Grayden took the seat beside her, immediately claiming her hand and placing it on his knee, as if he couldn't bear to be without her touch. Esmeralda gracefully lowered herself into the chair on Renya's other side, and to no one's surprise, Phillippe quickly claimed the seat next to her.

The group's quiet chatter fell silent as Queen Samatra and King Thesand entered, still wearing the same attire from earlier. They took their places at the head of the long table, and Renya felt the weight of their scrutiny fall upon her and Grayden. She wondered what thoughts lay behind their appraising looks. Were they curious about the nature of their fated bond? Or perhaps they were more interested in her parentage, or the time she had spent in the Shadow Realm. Pushing aside her discomfort, Renya focused her attention on the meal being placed before her by an attentive servant.

The plate was a work of art in itself, featuring an array of colorful fruits and vegetables artfully arranged alongside a variety of legumes and a seeded bread that looked freshly baked. A bowl of fragrant rice, tinted a warm golden hue and releasing the distinctive aroma of saffron, completed the main course. To accompany the meal, the servant poured two drinks: a vibrant tea with a striking hibiscus flower floating on its surface, and a glass of what appeared to be elderberry wine.

Renya took a sip of the wine, her eyebrows rising slightly at its unexpected sweetness. As she sampled a crisp radish, she marveled at the intensity of flavors in every bite. Everything tasted incredibly fresh and bursting with natural goodness.

Queen Samatra, noticing Renya's expression of delight, smiled warmly. "Everything

at the table was grown in our gardens,” she explained, a note of pride in her voice.

“It's wonderful,” Renya praised sincerely. Samatra's smile widened, and Renya felt a small surge of accomplishment as she sensed the ruler beginning to warm to her. Grayden squeezed her hand under the table, a gesture of support and pride that didn't go unnoticed.

As the meal progressed, King Triston turned to Grayden and Phillippe, his expression serious. “What are your plans now?” he asked, getting straight to the heart of the matter.

Grayden's posture straightened almost imperceptibly as he answered. “I want to get Renya home to the Snow Lands as soon as possible. Once we're there, I need to speak with my advisors and retrieve my soldiers from the Twilight Kingdom. They've been helping with the rebuilding efforts there.”

At the mention of the Twilight Kingdom, a pang of guilt shot through Renya. The memory of the destruction wrought there weighed heavily on her heart, and she couldn't help but feel responsible for the damage.

Not your fault, Grayden's voice resonated in her mind, firm and reassuring. You can't think like that, Renya. You never asked for any of this.

She glanced up, meeting his green eyes filled with compassion and unwavering support. The guilt didn't disappear entirely, but his words helped to ease its grip on her heart.

“At what point do you want to launch an attack?” Thesand asked, his gaze fixed intently on Grayden.

Grayden's response was measured, revealing the careful strategist beneath the warrior

exterior. “Ideally within the next moon cycle. My fear is that Kalora will start to lose her powers soon. She's one of the few leaders left with an arsenal of magic, and I worry the longer we wait, the more likely she will start to lose them. However, we should also wait until Renya's aunt is located. She's Cressida's sister and incredibly powerful. Like Cyrus, her magic is still intact after spending significant time in the human realm.”

Thesand nodded, a gleam of excitement in his eyes as he rubbed his hands together. “We can gather our men. Our archers never miss,” he said, his enthusiasm for the coming conflict evident in his voice.

“My soldiers are ready too,” Triston added, his expression as stoic as ever. However, Renya noticed Esmeralda's downcast eyes and the way she picked at her food, betraying her friend's apprehension about the looming battle.

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Before the conversation could progress further, a thunderous roar shattered the relative calm of the evening. The sound reverberated through the air, causing the delicate glasses on the table to tremble.

Bile rose in Renya's throat as her body instinctively tensed, terror coursing through her veins. Not again, she thought desperately. I can't go back there.

In an instant, the dining hall erupted into a flurry of activity. Grayden's sword sang as he pulled it from its sheath, the blade glinting in the fading light. Phillippe was on his feet in a heartbeat, his massive broadsword at the ready. Thesand pulled an arrow to his bow with practiced ease, while Triston produced a small but wicked-looking trident seemingly from thin air.

As the roar continued, Esmeralda rose from her seat, her eyes wide with panic. Before she could move, Phillippe stepped in front of her protectively, his body a shield between her and the perceived threat.

Grayden lunged towards the source of the sound, his blade held high and ready to strike. In that moment, time seemed to slow for Renya. Without conscious thought, she found herself moving, driven by an instinct she couldn't explain.

“No!” The scream tore from her throat as she threw herself between Grayden and the approaching figure. An arrow whistled past her head, its trajectory aimed at the beast behind her. With a surge of power, Renya caught the projectile in a web of golden magic, stopping it mid-flight before shattering it into a million glittering pieces.

As the dust settled, Renya's eyes fell upon a familiar form. Beauty sat on her hind

legs, another earth-shaking roar emanating from her throat before she dropped to all fours.

“It's okay, girl. I'm here,” Renya soothed, her voice cutting through the tension in the room. She approached the dragon without hesitation, her hand outstretched to stroke Beauty's head. The dragon's rumbling purr of contentment filled the air, a stark contrast to the earlier roars of challenge.

Renya turned to face the stunned group, a mix of pride and nervousness coloring her voice as she made the introductions. “Beauty, this is everyone,” she said, gesturing to the assembled company. Then, with a slight hesitation, she added, “Everyone, meet Beauty. My...dragon.”

The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the sound of Beauty's contented purring and the soft rustle of scales as she shifted her weight. Renya stood tall beside her unexpected companion, her chin lifted in a gesture of defiance that dared anyone to challenge this new development. As she waited for the shock to wear off and the inevitable questions to begin, Renya felt a surge of warmth through her bond with Grayden—a mixture of surprise, pride, and unwavering support that strengthened her resolve.

Whatever came next, she knew she could face it with Beauty by her side and Grayden at her back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sion woke up, his senses on high alert. He couldn't believe he allowed himself to fall asleep. He was supposed to be guarding Selenia.

Selenia. Where was she? He frantically lifted his head as his eyes searched around the camp. There she was, sitting on a log and looking directly into the fire, a small

blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

He walked over to her, and touched her lightly on her good arm. She jumped, startled by his presence.

“What are you doing up, Selenia? You were supposed to be resting. I'm worried about your arm.”

She looked up at him, and something in her gaze seemed different. He wasn't sure what it was, but she seemed...off.

“Selenia, what's wrong?”

She looked at him and swallowed hard, grasping at her gown as if to still her hands.

“Nothing,” she said, her voice wavering.

“Are you in pain?” he asked, frightened that her arm was getting worse or that she had lingering effects from her heat sickness.

“You could say that,” she whispered.

Sion felt a rush of sympathy come over him, and he sat down next to her on the log, putting his arm around her waist. She flinched, almost as though his touch burned her.

“Selenia?” he questioned.

“It's nothing...you just...it's better if you don't touch me.”

Sion felt a pit in his stomach. She must be angry about what transpired in the cave.

He didn't know what came over him, and now she didn't even want him near.

“I promise, I won't touch you again,” he said, removing his hand and inching to the far side of the log.

Selenia didn't respond and continued looking into the fire.

Sighing, Sion sat up. It was near morning, and if they made good time they could be in the Snow Lands by tomorrow, or even late this evening.

“Let's get packed up,” he said, grabbing some dirt and throwing it over the fire to put it out.

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Selenia said nothing, but moved to gather up her belongings, not even looking at Sion.

Sion had never seen Selenia so forlorn. He assumed it was Jurel's death, hitting her all over again. Perhaps the kiss they shared sparked old memories for her. He wished he could do something to assuage his guilt, but she didn't even want to talk to him. When they stopped midday to water the horses, she scarcely glanced at him, and hardly said two words. It was worse than he feared. Would she say something to Grayden about his indiscretion? He tried to think back, to find out what had possessed him to make a move on his best friend's sister, but he couldn't fathom why he acted the way he did. Maybe he was just so lonely, starving for any type of touch that wasn't cruel or hurtful. She was so sweet and innocent, the opposite of Cressida.

And her lips. So soft and fresh...

Fates, what was wrong with him? He needed to get away from her, and fast. He started counting down the hours, eager to be off this horse with her in front of him, so the temptation would leave him.

When they finally crossed over into the Snow Lands, there was no gradual shift in the terrain and weather like usual. The second they passed the boundary line, snow, thick and viscous, whipped around them.

"Sion, what's going on?" Selenia asked, trying to pull her small blanket around her shoulders, her nose already pink in the few minutes they'd appeared in their lands.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's some kind of blizzard," he said, amazed. Their lands had

been losing their magic and becoming warmer and warmer, so they hadn't seen weather like this in quite some time.

“What should we do?” she asked, her teeth chattering.

Sion looked at the sky, trying to gauge how fast moving the storm was.

“Selenia, I was hoping to get back to the lodge by this evening, but I'm afraid this storm isn't safe for us to travel through. The visibility is horrendous, and I'm concerned that we'll go in circles and run out of provisions. I think we ought to stay the night.”

“You're probably right,” she said, pulling her blanket up around her shoulders even tighter.

“What happened to your hat?” Sion asked, looking at her pink ears and her hair whipping around in the wind.

“It must have blown away,” she said.

An odd sensation down his spine hinted that she was lying, but it seemed such an odd, insignificant thing to lie about that he ignored his suspicions.

He scanned the horizon, looking for something to help shelter them from the wind. An outcropping of rocks caught his eye, and he directed Honor towards them.

He dismounted and then helped Selenia down. When he put his hands on her waist, she flinched, and he felt guilty all over again. She tried to keep her body away from him the entire time they rode, and the slightest touch caused her to tense everywhere.

“I'm afraid we'll have to share a tent,” he said, his eyes searching hers. For a split

second, he thought he detected a look of excitement, but it was so fleeting he was sure he imagined it.

“Alright,” was her only reply.

They worked together, albeit silently, to set up a makeshift campsite. Once the tent was pitched and a fire flickering in front of the rocks, he motioned for Selenia to get inside.

She paused at the tent flap, watching him arrange himself in front of the fire.

“Sion, you'll freeze to death. I know you're adapted to the cold, but there's no way you could survive the night out here in a blizzard. Come inside.”

He looked down at the snow covering his boots, and then back at the tent. He watched Selenia crawl in, and then headed in behind her.

She sat on the sleeping mat, shivering in her gown. Her clothes were soaked, and his were too. The snow was wet and damp, unlike the sweetly falling snow they were used to.

He sat down on the opposite side, trying to keep as much distance between them as he could. He watched as Selenia blew on her trembling fingers, trying to bring warmth into them. He struggled for a second, then moved over to her and took her hands in his. She looked like she might protest for a second, but then she held still and watched as he rubbed her pale hands in his.

“You have to keep your fingers moving, keep the blood circulating,” he said, rubbing her fingers and then moving to her palms. “I refuse to allow you to lose a limb.”

She trembled while he continued to caress her hands, and he worried that she was

going to get hypothermia in her wet clothes.

“Selenia, I think you need to remove anything that's wet. The tent can keep us warm enough, but it won't do much good if you're in soaked clothing.”

Wordlessly, she began to unbutton her blouse with her good arm, her fingers shaking. Sion wasn't sure if it was from the cold or if she was scared to be undressing in front of him. He turned towards the side of the tent, giving her privacy.

“Once you're finished, get into your sleeping roll and then I'll do the same.”

Sion heard her struggle with her injured arm, but he didn't want to offer to help her undress. He'd already crossed far too many lines on this journey.

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After a few minutes, her voice came quietly. "I'm finished."

He turned around, and saw her white shoulders, bare against the blankets and a sudden burst of desire surged throughout his body. He swallowed hard, reminding himself that she was off-limits. Sion turned again and began removing his soaked clothing. Once he got to his trousers, he remembered that he wasn't given any undergarments at the Sun Realm. He considered sleeping in his bottoms, but the wind howled outside and shook the tent slightly, and he decided against it.

"Selenia, close your eyes," he said, turning back to strip. The cool air hit his body, and he was glad to be getting out of his wet clothes.

He quickly shucked his pants and then crawled into his own furs. He glanced back over at her, and saw her eyes widen. Was she embarrassed at the thought that he was completely naked? Or the fact that they were sharing a tent? He wondered if he should say something, apologize for the conditions, but instead he just blew out the small candle he had lit and closed his eyes, the situation completely confusing him.

Sion was hovering near sleep when the sound of thrashing and crying caught his attention. He looked around in the dark, squinting to see what was happening. He could barely make out Selenia's silhouette, shaking and seizing. Without thinking he reached out to her, and pulled her close. She sat on his lap, stunned for a moment before she wrapped her good arm around his neck, sobbing into his shoulder.

"Shhhhh...I'm here," he said, rubbing her bare back. She continued to cry, unable to form words. Her chest was flushed against his, and he sighed, enjoying the warmth their bodies made together. The storm dropped the temperature significantly, and

Sion couldn't ever remember being this cold. The wind howled around them, masking the sound of her sobs. He continued to hold her, and her scent enveloped him. She smelled like clean cotton and roses, and he was surprised, unsure how she could smell so amazing considering they had been traveling. He shuddered as he suppressed a sudden desire to run his fingers through her soft hair.

Slowly, she stopped shaking but continued to cling to him, like a newborn to its mother.

“I'm here for you, darling.” The endearment rolled off his tongue so naturally that it surprised him. He expected her to pull away, but if anything, she grabbed him more tightly. Sion became very aware of the fact that she was completely bare from the waist up, and he could feel her soft breasts against his chest. Her nipples were hard and cold, and he took a shaky breath, trying not to give into the arousal he felt stirring in his groin. Her skin was supple and velvety, pale and inviting. He never thought he'd ever see another woman besides Cressida, and the longer he held her, the more enchanting she became to him.

He knew he should push her away, move her off his lap and back to her own furs. But he was drawn to her in a way he had never experienced before. Sion knew she was a pretty girl, but he'd never felt desire for her.

“Sion?” she questioned, as if finally realizing she was in his lap. She let go of him quickly and then covered her chest with her arms, suddenly embarrassed.

He couldn't fathom why she would be embarrassed. Her body was the most alluring he'd ever seen before.

“Selenia, I...” he trailed off, looking for an excuse for his attraction to her, but none came. Instead Sion just stared at her lips, remembering how sweet they tasted against his.

As if sensing his thoughts, she moved forward, hands still covering her chest. She dipped her eyelashes and looked up at him, and his heart skipped a beat.

“Beautiful,” he whispered, reaching up to stroke her cheek. “So beautiful...”

Selenia continued to watch him, unmoving. He wondered if she could feel the same pull of desire that he felt.

Throwing caution into the wind, he moaned and leaned forward to press his lips to hers.

Electricity jolted through him, and the second his lips met hers, he fell. There was no turning back, no way to climb out of this hole he dug for himself, as he quickly fell in love with his best friend's sister.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“No, Beauty.”

The dragon looked up at Renya, ears back and stomping slightly at the ground. Renya sighed, trying to coax the dragon into the stall in the stables. It was the third time she'd tied up the dragon, and she tied the knots even tighter, hoping they'd hold this time.

Renya knew that Samatra and Thesand were incredibly uncomfortable with Beauty in their lands, so she promised to restrain her until they were ready to leave tomorrow. But Beauty managed to break free twice, terrorizing the village trying to seek out Renya. Grayden already made reparations to several market stall owners after Beauty went on an eating spree and devoured an entire stall of fish, and another of deer meat. The second time she got out, she managed to tear into the wall of the guest house Renya and Grayden were staying at, and Renya woke up to her nudging her awake,

growling slightly at Grayden for being too close to her. Rubble scattered across the room, and Grayden promised to send funds to replace the walls of the guest house, too.

All in all, Renya knew they needed to return home to the Snow Lands and find a permanent solution for Beauty. It was clear that she wouldn't be separated from Renya, and the larger she got, the more problematic it was going to become.

“Should we try chains?” Grayden came up behind Renya, putting his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder.

At the suggestion, a low growl started in Beauty's throat, as if she understood exactly what Grayden was proposing.

“No, I'll just tie them tighter and add more ropes. I'm not sure what to do with her.”

“It's clear that she's bonded to you,” Grayden said, eyeing the dragon. She was growing bigger every day. “Did Cressida bond to any of the other dragons?”

“The adult male one,” Renya said, scratching Beauty affectionately on the snout. “But it's not like it is with Beauty. She seems incredibly determined to be by my side at all times.”

Beauty circled the stall before finally collapsing in the hay. She closed one eye lazily, but kept the other partially open, watching Renya's every move.

“I can't believe you have a pet dragon, Little Fawn.”

“Not exactly what I was expecting either,” Renya said, as Beauty's watchful eye started to droop.

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“Do you think she's big enough to ride?”

“I could ride her, but she doesn't have any kind of harness or saddle. When I left the Shadow Realm, she couldn't fly with me on her back, but could carry me on the ground. Her wings are growing larger each day, though.” Already her wingspan had doubled in size since Renya last rode her.

Beauty's eye finally closed, and the soft sounds of a snoring dragon sounded through the barn. Renya walked towards the barn door, Grayden following. She latched it securely and then bolted it with an extra lock that was installed just to try and contain the troublemaker of a dragon.

“Are you excited to be going back to the Snow Lands?” Renya asked, wiping her hands on her borrowed dress. This one was a pale blue silk, with tulle sleeves that went down to her wrists.

“I'm more eager to get you home,” he said, stopping her on her path back to the Acropolis. He stood in front of her, trailing his fingers up her arm, and then tenderly cupping her cheek. Renya looked into his eyes, and saw love and affection pouring out.

“I love you,” she said, snuggling down into his hard chest.

“Oh, Little Fawn. There are no words to describe what you mean to me. I'm completely and utterly yours, for all time. The moment you came for me, I ceased being just me. It's now us, forever.”

Grayden kissed the top of her head as Esmeralda walked by, with Phillippe following behind. Renya noticed that Esmeralda was holding a bouquet of fresh flowers, and she had no doubt that Phillippe picked them from the meadow.

“Did you finally get that rabid beast back in her stall?” Phillippe asked, catching up to Esmeralda as she made her way over to Renya and Grayden.

Renya untangled herself from Grayden and lightly pushed Phillippe on the shoulder. “She's not rabid, and she's not a beast.” She put her hands on her hips and stared him down. “She's my friend.”

“A friend that could eat us all,” Phillippe mumbled.

“She won't hurt anyone as long as I tell her not to.”

Grayden glanced at the barn and then back at Renya. “Do you mean that? Can you control her?”

“I don't control her. We're just...friends.”

Phillippe snorted. “Right...friends with a deadly dragon. Grayden, your mate is crazy.”

“No crazier than you are, thinking you have a chance with Esmeralda,” he retorted, and Renya watched as Esmeralda blushed again.

“What are you doing over here, Phillippe?” Renya asked, wanting to get back inside with Grayden as soon as she could.

“Thesand invited us to inspect his army with him,” Phillippe said.

“Then let us go,” Grayden said, motioning to Renya.

“Actually,” Esmeralda said, “I was wondering if I could speak with Renya. You are leaving tomorrow, and I don't know when we'll have a chance to catch up.”

Renya was torn, glancing between Grayden and her friend.

You should go, Little Fawn. Go enjoy some time with your friend.

She nodded, but remembered that only she could hear what Grayden said. “I'll stay with you, Esmeralda.”

Esmeralda looked thrilled. “Great! I packed some lunch for us if you'd like to relax by the lake.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Renya gave Grayden a quick peck on the cheek, but he turned her back towards him for a heated kiss.

Phillippe made gagging noises, and Grayden pulled away. “You're just jealous,” he said to his brother.

Phillippe looked at Esmeralda wistfully, and Renya realized that Grayden was right. Phillippe was incredibly jealous that Grayden had someone.

Grayden patted Phillippe on the back, as if he understood his feelings, and then they headed off in the direction of the Acropolis.

“Come,” Esmeralda said, leading them away from the barn to a stone pathway lined with roses. They walked for a little while, the sun shining down on them. Renya felt peaceful, but she knew that the feeling wouldn't last.

They stopped under a cherry tree right next to the lake. Esmeralda spread out a teal-colored blanket and they both sat down.

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Renya looked off into the distance, barely making out the mountain range that stood behind Snowden Lodge. She was enjoying her time at the Spring Lands, but she couldn't wait to be home again.

Esmeralda uncorked a bottle of elderberry wine and handed Renya a small glass. She continued to unpack the basket, pulling out little raspberry cakes with a thick icing and several different types of cheeses.

“This was so sweet of you,” Renya said, grabbing one of the cakes.

“It was no trouble. Besides...I wanted to talk to you about something.”

Renya knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth.

“It's about Phillippe, yes?”

“Fates, am I so transparent?” Esmeralda groaned, putting her hand to her forehead.

Renya chuckled. “No, not at all. But he certainly is.”

Esmeralda looked pleased. “I like him,” she admitted, quickly looking down at the soft grass lining the bank of the lake.

“I don't blame you. He's quite charming,” Renya confessed.

“This might be awkward, but when we were children, my father hoped for me to marry Grayden. But his father refused.”

Renya felt a tiny stab of jealousy but moved on quickly. Grayden was hers and hers alone.

Esmeralda continued, “but I'm so glad for it. Grayden is sweet and kind, but...”

“Broody?” Renya guessed, a coy smile on her face.

“Yes. But Phillippe...he's so funny and carefree. I know he has his own burdens, but he makes me feel like I'm the only thing that matters.”

“I'm happy for you, Esmeralda. But to be honest, I don't know a great deal about him, so I don't know how much help I can be.”

“That's not it at all. I wanted to know...before your bond, did you feel something for Grayden? I think I'm falling for Phillippe, but a part of me still hopes that there's a fated mate out there for me.”

Renya chewed the inside of her lip thoughtfully. “Yes, I suppose I did. Honestly, I was attracted to him the second I met him. He was handsome and noble, and I did feel drawn to him. I even loved him before our bond came. We had a solid friendship, and we tried to downplay our physical relationship, but looking back, I think I always knew he was for me.”

Esmeralda looked deep in thought. “I'm definitely attracted to Phillippe, and the timeframe for me to develop a bond has passed. But...it's hard to let go of the dream, you know?”

Renya didn't know, but she didn't want to tell Esmeralda that. The last thing she was thinking of was developing a fated bond when she stumbled into this world.

“Esmeralda, I think that if you like Phillippe, you should go for it. You can't live life

waiting for something to happen to you. This could be your chance for love and happiness. I loved Grayden before we became mates, and even if I had never been fated to him, I knew we belonged to each other.”

“Thank you, Renya. That was exactly what I was hoping to understand.”

“Of course. For what it's worth, I think you look really happy with him.”

Another sweet smile from Esmeralda. “Well, enough about that! Tell me how Grayden proposed!”

“Renya...my Little Fawn...”

She closed her eyes as she felt him enter her, desperately seeking the connection they shared.

“Grayden...” she moaned, unable to believe that she was really here, pinned beneath him. Renya couldn't stop herself from constantly running her fingers all over his body, just to make sure he wasn't a dream. Which in turn, led to more couplings. She wasn't complaining though. She needed him as much as he needed her. They used each other's bodies to convince themselves that they could never be parted again, desperately clinging to each other.

“Gods, Renya...” Grayden continued, his eyes fixated on hers. A shiver went down her spine at the intensity in which he claimed her. “I can't ever live without you. Never leave me again.”

She tried to reassure him, tried to say something, but at that point he angled his hips and she shook, pleasure coursing through her bloodstream.

Grayden followed behind her, relief shuddering throughout his body. He collapsed on

the bed next to her, pulling her on top of him and keeping himself within her.

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Renya sighed contentedly as he caressed her arms and placed a soft kiss along her neck. Her head against his chest, she listened to his heart pound, and then slow as he recovered from their exertions.

“I love you,” he whispered, running his fingers through her now tangled hair.

She lifted up her head and planted a kiss along his jawline, feeling the thick hair that now covered part of his face.

“You should shave soon,” she said absentmindedly, rubbing her palm along his chin and cupping his cheek.

“I’ll do it tomorrow morning,” he replied, his eyes closing.

“Wait,” she whispered. “There’s something I want you to do first.”

He opened his eyes, staring deeply into hers. “Whatever it is, I’m happy to do it.”

She struggled with the request, suddenly embarrassed as she pictured his scratchy face between her thighs.

You never should feel ashamed to ask me for anything that makes you feel good.

Renya blushed, knowing that he must have seen what she was thinking, but she didn’t stop him as he kissed a trail down her stomach. Her breathing hitched as he moved between her thighs, his rough stubble tickling against her.

“Is this what you desire?” he breathed, blowing gently against her folds. She nodded, squirming as he continued worshiping her body.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Selenia felt peaceful for the first time since Jurel's death. With Sion's arms wrapped around her, she felt safe and protected. Loved, even. She knew he wasn't aware that they were fated; she could feel it in her soul that he didn't realize it. It was cruel to allow her this gift but to not allow Sion to reciprocate. He obviously felt something for her, but she knew it wasn't the desperation and aching desire that flooded her senses.

The Murcurial said it would hurt, at first, but she would be happy in the end. That was something, wasn't it?

She sighed and tilted her head back towards Sion. He held her tightly, his arms around her waist and his warm breath hot against her neck.

Her nightmare had brought them closer together. Selenia dreamt that Sion was in Cressida's court, and she was forced to watch as Cressida cut him over and over again, marring his beautiful skin. With a devilish look in her eye, the Shadow Queen had carved out Sion's heart right in front of her. That was when she woke up, with Sion's chest pressed against her own. It took her a while to realize that he was safe, and not locked away to do Cressida's bidding. When he told her what happened to him there, it upset her. But once he became hers, the revelation was absolutely horrifying. She'd stab Cressida in the heart for hurting her mate.

Her mate. Fates, how could this be so? Sion was well past the age for it. But then again, Grayden was too when he discovered he was fated to Renya. Was her mating bond somehow locked like Renya's? Or did the Murcurial create it? If she had somehow, when would Sion feel it?

Her head felt dizzy, trying to piece out this strange, yet exhilarating revelation. Selenia debated telling Sion, but it made no sense, and she didn't think he would believe her. No, she needed to figure out exactly what happened before she confessed.

Her face brightened. They were in the Snow Lands, and they should be home today. Surely Almory would know what was going on. Perhaps he would be able to force Sion's bond to her, so they could be deliriously happy together.

She traced her fingers lightly over his hand on her stomach, thinking about the kiss they shared last night. After a few minutes, Sion had pulled away, and the loss of his body against hers was so substantial that she had begun to cry again. He had held her then, pulling her to his furs, wrapping her in his muscular arms and placing tender kisses along her back. Even now, his chest was pressed to her back and she could feel the warmth radiating from him. Her bottom rested against him, and she could feel his hardness against her backside.

She was horribly naive when it came to men, and the only knowledge she possessed about sex had come from romance novels hidden deep in the false bottom of her wardrobe. From what she read, the hardness she felt indicated that he wanted her. Relief flooded her. Perhaps he sensed their connection, even without his side of the bond activated.

Sion shifted in his sleep, and Selenia felt herself being pulled to his body even tighter. She could scarcely breathe, but she didn't care.

Finally, Sion began to wake up. Selenia dreaded the moment, knowing that when he woke up and realized how close they were, he would undoubtedly push her away again. But for just a little bit, she could pretend.

She could tell the instant Sion remembered the previous night. He tensed behind her,

a shaky breath escaping him.

He started to pull away, but Selenia turned towards him and held his face in her hands. He blinked rapidly, and she watched him swallow hard.

“None of that,” she said, looking deeply into his eyes. “You aren't going to pull away.”

He closed his eyes, and Selenia could feel the pulse of desire tug at them both.

“Selenia, this can't happen...”

“What did I just say?”

Sion pushed himself up, untangling his limbs from hers. “I took advantage of the situation. You're sad because of Jurel, and I'm preying on that.” He held the fur over his body as he tried to pull his trousers on, nearly falling over in the confined space of the tent.

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“You did no such thing. If you must know, my nightmare last night was about the horrors you endured at the hands of the Shadow Queen.”

Sion paled, his hands pausing on the laces of his pants.

“Why would you dream about that?”

Selenia bit her lip. She wanted to tell him, make him understand that what was happening between them was inevitable. But she knew it would be hard for him to believe.

“It just...bothered me,” she finished lamely.

They both looked anywhere but each other.

Sion broke the tension first.

“We should get going.” He turned his back to her, indicating that she should dress.

She rolled her eyes, even though she knew he couldn't see it. He had held her all throughout the night, her body pressed against his, but in the light of the day, he was concerned for her modesty. She struggled getting her arm into her sleeve, the pain worse than ever. The weather was so poor that they didn't even eat dinner, and Selenia was desperately overdue for the pain relief that the poppy concoction provided.

Sion heard her grunts of pain and turned. She was mostly dressed, but her arm hung

in the sleeve, her blouse still open. Selenia could see his concern, his pity for her condition.

“I’m fine,” she grumbled, leaving her injured arm outside of the blouse and shrugging on her cloak.

“Selenia.”

All it took was her name on his tongue, his voice thick, causing a shiver down her spine. He moved towards her and her breathing hitched, watching his hands reach out to hers.

The second his hand made contact with her skin, she felt a jolt of electricity trail through her body. From the widening of his eyes, Selenia knew he felt it too, although he didn't comment on it, but instead focused on helping her into the rest of her clothing.

Once her borrowed cape from the Sun Realm was clasped around her neck, Sion opened up the tent flap and crawled out.

When she looked outside, her mouth dropped. At least three feet of snow settled around the camp, completely covering the terrain.

“Whoa.”

“We haven't seen snow like this in ages,” Sion agreed, heading towards the horses, his feet sinking deep in the wet snow.

Selenia followed him, teeth chattering. The horses were tethered under a tree, their thick coats protecting them from the cold.

“Can I help pack up the tent?” she asked?

Sion shook his head. “It's too wet to take back. We'll leave it and just take what we need.”

Selenia had never been so excited to see Wesalie again. The town was quiet, everyone hunkered down for the evening, but the low glow from the streetlights was like a beacon, leading them up the gravel path to Snowden Lodge.

She could feel Sion's excitement as well, his body practically humming once they reached the outskirts of the town.

“How long have you been gone?”

“Almost a full year. Before I went to the Shadow Realm, I was up in the mountain training camp.”

“Will you stay at the lodge or go back home?” Selenia tried not to sound too hopeful at the prospect of being under the same roof.

“I'll stay here until Grayden is back. Then I'll head out towards the foothills.”

Selenia nodded. “Has your house been abandoned all this time?”

“No, my grandmother is living there. As soon as my father died, I moved her there. It's bigger than her old house and closer to the town.”

“That was good of you.” She leaned back into his arms, the scent of him too strong to ignore. She felt him tense against her, but then he relaxed as Honor continued up the path to the lodge.

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Two grooms were waiting for them, no doubt spotting them as they came up the long hill. Sion dismounted first, and then pulled Selenia off and carefully lowered her to the ground.

“Selenia!”

She whipped around to see Tumwalt rushing towards her, Almory a few paces behind. Tumwalt had grown grayer in the weeks they'd been gone, and his hairline receded even more. He looked thinner, as if their absence caused him a great deal of stress. Almory looked the same, although his eyes twinkled even more, as if he was pleased to see them.

“Selenia is hurt,” Sion said immediately, looking at Almory.

“I'll see to her at once—” Almory started, but was cut off by a woman who appeared quickly, racing across the yard with speed that didn't match her age.

The woman looked at Selenia and Sion, sizing them up quickly. She wore several strange pieces of clothing, layered as if to keep her warm in the Snow Lands.

“Where is Renya?” the elderly woman asked, eyes darting quickly around the courtyard and behind them, as if she expected more guests to appear.

Selenia understood immediately who this was, even though she hadn't met her the last time she barged into the lodge.

It was Renya's aunt, Agatha.

Selenia's jaw fell the second she realized that Renya's aunt was here, not only in their world, but here at the lodge.

“She's not with us,” Sion said, clearly baffled by the woman's appearance. “You're Renya's aunt? I met you briefly in the Sunset Land. You hit me with some falling rubble.”

“Ah, the spy, is it? Hopefully I just knocked some common sense into your brain. If my Renya isn't with you, where is she? That boyfriend of hers better be taking care of her. He's far too handsome for my liking, but he does seem to care about her.”

Selenia tried to piece together the timeline in her mind. Based on her speech, she guessed that Agatha didn't know Renya was fated to Grayden. She glanced at Sion, and he shook his head slightly while Agatha looked behind them again, as if Renya would pop out from behind the horses.

Sion was right. It wasn't their place to tell her of Renya and Grayden's bond.

“If everything went to plan, Renya, Cyrus, Grayden, and his brother Phillippe should be on their way here as we speak.” Sion looked at Tumwalt next. “Have you had any communication with them?”

“None since they left the Twilight Kingdom. We've been in the dark here.”

“You all better hope my Renya's in one piece. What has happened since Renya came back through the portal?”

Selenia spoke up. “Renya's powers were unlocked by the Shadow Queen. We went to the Twilight Kingdom so Renya could be trained by Queen Kalora—”

“That old bird is still alive? Hmph. She stole my beau from me when we were

younger and I've never forgiven her for it.”

“—and then the Shadow Queen came there and took Renya—”

Agatha gasped at this revelation.

“But Renya was able to get on her good side. Cyrus, Grayden, and Phillippe went to the Shadow Realm to get her back.”

“What's being done to end this threat for good?” Agatha looked at them all, hostility rolling off of her in waves. Selenia wasn't sure why she was hostile towards them, or if this was just her personality.

Sion cleared his throat. “Grayden has a plan.”

Agatha snorted. “I'm sure Pretty Boy does. Hopefully it's better than the plans he's had so far.”

Selenia wanted to argue, but she was tired and cold. She shivered, and then felt Sion's eyes on her.

“We can talk about this later. Selenia is in pain and needs to be seen to.”

Sion gave her a gentle nudge forward and Almory beckoned for her to follow him. She turned her back and marched away from the courtyard, towards Almory's workshop. Just before the doors closed behind her, she could hear Sion trying to reassure Agatha.

“Grayden is the best leader I've ever known. He also loves Renya. She's safe as long as she's with him.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

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Renya worried for the borrowed horse she rode on. Not only were the Snow Lands much too cold for the poor creature, bred for the Spring Lands, but every time Beauty swooped down to check on Renya, the poor thing reared up and almost threw her. Grayden begged her to ride with him, but she refused, knowing they had an audience.

She looked over at Phillippe, who had been unusually quiet since they left the Spring Lands. Renya had a feeling that it had to do with leaving a certain Tidal Princess behind. She caught Grayden's eye, and he slowed to ride next to her

“Has Phillippe said anything to you?”

“About what?” Grayden asked, looking confused as he tightened his hand on the reins of his horse.

Honestly, men could be so dense, Renya thought.

“You didn't notice? He's been quiet the entire way home.”

Grayden glanced at Phillippe, then back at Renya. “I guess he has...”

“He has a thing for Esmeralda.”

“Really? That surprises me.”

“Why would it surprise you?”

“Well, he's never been one to spend time with just a single woman, if you know what

I mean.”

Renya frowned, trying to decide what to do with that information.

“Do you think he could be serious about her? I don't want my friend to get hurt.”

“Honestly, I don't know. I'd hoped he would have settled down by now, especially since he's older than I am and not bound by duty like I was before. But he never showed much interest.”

“Well, maybe this is a good thing for him,” Renya said. “It would be a great match.”

“I would like to see him happy,” Grayden admitted.

“Esmeralda said they would join us at the lodge soon. Her brother wanted to spend a few more days practicing with their soldiers in archery.”

“That reminds me, Little Fawn,” Grayden said, stopping his horse in the snow. “Now that you're back...do you still want to get married?”

“Of course, why wouldn't I?”

“I actually meant, would you like to get married before we go to battle? I can't stand the fact that you don't belong to me on paper.”

Renya snorted. “I think what we have means much more than a piece of paper does.”

“I also want to be married in the eyes of the Gods,” he continued, looking at Renya hopefully. “And I was thinking, since Esmeralda will be here in a few days, perhaps we could do it then?”

Renya's heart sank. A look of panic crossed Grayden's face, and she quickly sought to explain. "It's just that...I don't want to get married without Aunt Agatha there. Since my father is going to try and find her after we are settled in the lodge, I'd like to wait until he comes back, if you don't mind."

"Of course, Little Fawn. I've waited an eternity for you. What's another week?"

Renya smiled, thankful he understood.

"What are you two conspiring about back there?" Phillippe called over his shoulder, slowing his horse down when he noticed that the pair fell behind.

"You," Grayden retorted, and Phillippe cracked a small grin.

Renya decided to broach the subject. "Soooo...Esmeralda?"

Phillippe's grin widened. "Did she say anything about me?"

"Just that you're an idiot..." Grayden mumbled.

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“You better not hurt her, Phillippe Snowden. She's an amazing friend and a sweet person.”

Phillippe's eyes looked wistful. “Trust me, Renya,” he said, turning to look forward once again. “She's far more likely to hurt me.”

It was almost morning by the time they arrived in the village. Grayden insisted that they ride through the night, worried that by this point, Cressida would have been to the Sun Realm and learned that Renya wasn't there. The Snow Lands was the next logical place he would take her. There had been a blizzard while they were in the Spring Lands, and the thick snow at least covered their tracks.

Once they reached the village, Cyrus began looking around excitedly. “I haven't been here since I was a young man,” he said. “Hardly anything has changed.”

Renya was thrilled to see the village was indeed the same as she left it. After the destruction that occurred in the Twilight Kingdom, she was fearful for the little town of Wesalie, but it was the same as the last time she saw it, the night of the Sky Lights Festival. Was it really that long ago? So much had changed since she and Grayden watched the twinkling lights dance across the dark sky.

“Do you think Selenia and Sion have arrived already?” she asked Grayden, eager to see both of them. She missed Selenia terribly, and she was still so worried about the young girl, especially after Jurel's death.

“I'm hopeful that they are. As long as they didn't encounter any significant delays, they should have arrived a couple of days ago.”

They approached the courtyard, and everything was as Renya remembered. The air still smelled of pine, a smell that permeated from Grayden at all times no matter how far away from his lands he was.

Grayden entered first, Renya behind him and Cyrus and Phillippe taking up the rear. From her view, she could see Tumwalt racing towards Grayden. Renya figured he had much to talk to Grayden about, but she was still hesitant on how to act around him after he accused her of bewitching Grayden. A woman was walking directly behind him, shouting at him, but Renya couldn't make out the words she was saying, but that didn't matter.

It was her aunt.

“Renya!” Aunt Agatha cried, running past Tumwalt and Grayden to the horse carrying Renya.

Renya's heart nearly burst at seeing her aunt. Although she still hadn't completely forgiven her for concealing Renya's identity for so long, she was still the first family Renya ever knew. Plus, she now understood that Aunt Agatha gave up her entire life in this world to keep Renya safe.

Renya half-fell off of her mount, eager to hold her aunt in her arms, as if to reassure herself that this was all real. The second her feet hit the cobblestones, she was pressed into a giant hug, tears streaming down her face as her aunt cooed in her ear.

“Sunshine! Oh, my dear! I never thought I'd see you again!”

Renya sobbed, unable to contain her relief. She could feel Grayden's relief too, down through their bond.

Oh god. She would have to tell her aunt she was engaged. And fated to Grayden. She

gulped and tried to hide her ring, wanting to wait until the time was right to tell her aunt.

Aunt Agatha let her go and held her at arm's length while Grayden dismounted and handed over their horses to a waiting groom. Phillippe and Cyrus did the same.

“Sunshine, I can feel your power radiating from you! I'm sorry we locked your magic, it was the only way to keep you safe—”

“It's okay. Really, I understand why you and my father did what you did.”

Renya watched Agatha swallow hard and then look at Cyrus.

“You told her?”

Cyrus chuckled. “It's good to see you again too, Agatha.”

Agatha ignored his greeting. “She knows you're her father...and her mother—”

“Is Cressida,” Renya finished. “Yes, unfortunately I know.”

Renya could see Tumwalt greet Grayden while she was talking to her aunt.

“Sunshine, I—”

Before Agatha could finish, a thunderous roar ripped through the courtyard and Beauty landed right behind the horses, who reared up and ran out of the courtyard, the young grooms following behind, their cries echoing off of the stone walls of the courtyard.

Aunt Agatha looked surprised, but not stunned. Tumwalt, on the other hand, fainted.

Renya looked around sheepishly. “Oh yeah, I have a dragon now.”

Agatha raised her eyebrows as Beauty pranced over to Renya's side, nudging her arm for a pat.

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“Well, I think you have quite a bit to fill me in on, Sunshine.”

Renya sat opposite Aunt Agatha in the library, with a fire roaring in front of them and crimpling tea steaming in mugs on a small side table.

“So I was stuck in that blasted rocky land for weeks! I forgot how awful the coastal worlds are, nothing but water and rocks. I finally found a broken portal, and it took forever to fix it.”

“I’m just so glad you’re here!” Renya looked down at her skirt, smoothing it absentmindedly.

“Out with it, Renya.”

“What?” Renya asked, sipping the contents of her mug carefully.

“You have something to tell me, and you don’t want to. You’ve been in my care since you were a babe, you don’t think I know when you’re uncomfortable?”

Renya set her drink down and steadied her breath, staring at the fire. “So, Grayden and I—”

“Are fated.”

Renya jerked her head up from looking at the fire. “You know?”

“Of course I know. You’re mated and engaged.”

“Who told you?”

Agatha laughed, her shoulders shaking slightly. She looked at Renya and then picked at the hem of her shirt. She wore a man’s tunic and leggings, clearly loaned from someone in the Snow Lands.

“I’m not blind, Sunshine. You’re wearing his ring and your mating mark shines clearer than the moon in the Twilight Kingdom.”

Renya looked down at her wrist, where the corner of the snowflake peaked out from her sleeve.

“You never seemed very interested in tattoos, and that ring has Snowden written all over it. It wasn’t exactly a secret.”

“Are you disappointed?” Renya’s stomach churned as she waited for her aunt to answer.

“Fates, no child. Of course not. You think I would be upset over something fate decided? No, Sunshine. I raised you to be a strong woman, to not depend on any man. Are you that woman? At any time in the Sun Realm did you need Grayden to come and rescue you? Or did you manage on your own?”

“He did rescue me,” she said hesitantly.

“Did he now? Sion said you stayed voluntarily after he and Cyrus left.”

“When did you hear that?”

“I was speaking with Tumwalt.”

There. It was no longer than a split second, but the tips of her aunt's ears turned red like she was embarrassed. Was it Tumwalt? Did her aunt have a thing for Grayden's advisor? Renya chose to ignore what she saw, and moved on.

"Yes, I stayed. I needed Grayden there though. I was miserable without him."

"Of course you were, Sunshine. He's your mate. Your other half. You needed him to comfort you. But that's no different than me missing you when you were gone. In my eyes, you set out to do the impossible and succeeded. Your mother must trust you if you've won the heart of one of her prized dragons. Obsessed with them as a child, she was."

"What was she like?" Renya winced and rubbed the bridge of her nose after she asked the question. Did she really want to know what her mother was like? Would it humanize her? Make it harder for Renya to do what she must?

Agatha pondered the question. "She was younger than me, of course. Independent. It seems to be a Shadow Realm trait that we all share." She looked at Renya with a knowing grin. "But thoughtful too. She was interested in the history of our people, wanting to know where we came from and why. I thought she might end up being close to the Gods, like Almory is. Some people seem to have a connection to them, almost spiritual. She seemed like she might have possessed that. Once our parents died, I had taken over the leadership of the Shadow Realm, and I thought she might train under a seer or healer. But then she met your father."

Renya closed her eyes tightly. She didn't want to hear anymore. Everything Aunt Agatha was saying resonated deep in her bones, and she kept trying to reconcile the version of Cressida that she knew with the one that Aunt Agatha grew up with.

The fire popped and hissed, and Renya watched as the flames licked the wood. Agatha sighed.

“It’s not easy for me, Renya. I should have ended her in the Sunset Land. I had her, powerless and friendless, right within my grasp. But instead I fled, leaving her to lick her wounds. I couldn’t do it then. I’m not sure if I would ever be able to do it.”

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Renya reached out and squeezed her aunt's hand. "It has to be me, anyways."

Agatha didn't respond, just continued to gaze into the fire.

"So, tell me about the wedding. How did he propose? Am I invited?"

Renya laughed, and then proceeded to relay the story to her aunt.

Renya crossed her arms and pouted. "She'll just destroy your home to get to me."

"Our home, Little Fawn," Grayden gently reminded her. "And yes, we will find a permanent solution. But right now I think she needs to be locked up."

"What about the balcony outside of your room?"

"Our room, Renya," he said, and then sighed. "I guess that's as good a space as any. But she can't come into the bedroom. She's already larger than a horse and the lodge is old."

Renya grinned. "Deal." She opened the wardrobe and pulled out the first dress she could find, eager to get downstairs and join everyone for dinner. The gown she haphazardly threw on was midnight blue, reminiscent of the starry night sky, and was made of luxurious silk, draping gracefully to the floor. Adorning the gown were delicate snowflakes, intricately embroidered with shimmering silver thread, scattered across the bodice and trailing down the skirt. Every step she took in the gown resulted in a rustling noise, almost as if the gown itself was whispering a tale of winter magic.

Grayden stopped, his tunic only halfway on, and drank Renya in. “That gown is gorgeous on you, my Little Fawn.”

Renya beamed, running her fingers along the material of the gown. “Doria must have made it for me after we left. I don't recognize it.”

He finished pulling on his shirt and walked over to her, placing a kiss along her temple. “Remind me to thank her for taking such good care of my mate.”

“I missed her so much, and she was certainly happy to see us again,” Renya replied. The second they had appeared on the landing outside of their room a few hours earlier, Doria was there, shaking with excitement. She had fussed over the state of Grayden's hair, demanding that he allow her to cut it before he left their chambers again, and then she had worried about Renya's weight, proceeding to force feed her a tray of sweet pastries.

Grayden held out his arm to Renya, and they left the room.

“You’ve finally cut that mop on your head,” came a teasing voice from down the hall. Selenia ran towards them, embracing Renya then giving her brother a playful slug. “Renya, you look beautiful. I’m so happy you’re safe and back where you belong.”

“Me too. You look amazing, as always, Selenia.” Her gown was a tad short for her, hinting that she’d grown taller since she last wore it, but it was beautiful nonetheless. The buttercup yellow dress displayed delicate dragonflies dancing across the fabric, their wings shimmering in iridescent hues. The dragonflies, meticulously embroidered with golden thread, were so realistic that Renya thought they might take flight at any moment.

Sion came out of the room on Selenia’s left, looking slightly startled at seeing them all huddled outside in the hall.

Renya noticed Selenia shift uncomfortably when Sion joined them. She frowned, surprised by Selenia's reaction to Sion. Renya watched Grayden, to see if he noticed it, but like usual, he didn't pick up on the things that Renya seemed to. She'd have to ask Selenia about it later.

They all walked towards the stairs, and Phillippe joined them from the far side of the hall.

"You weren't even going to wait for me?" he teased.

"I assumed you were already stuffing your face," Grayden said playfully.

Renya watched Selenia again. Not even a hint of amusement sparkled in her eyes. Something was definitely up with her. It was a joke that she should have made, not Grayden.

They continued to the dining room, and when Renya walked in, she saw her aunt was already there, sitting next to Tumwalt. Renya watched the pair hard, trying to discern if there was something going on there, but didn't see any tell-tale signs.

She moved towards the far end of the table and sat beside her aunt, with Grayden sitting down right next to her.

"You look radiant, Sunshine."

"Thanks, Auntie. You do too." Someone provided Agatha with an upgrade in her borrowed clothing, which Renya suspected was the work of Doria. Her aunt donned a simple gray dress with tiny beaded roses all over the skirt. Renya had never seen her aunt in anything but pants and a shirt. Her hair was also braided and wrapped elegantly around her head.

Almory was also there, sitting next to Tumwalt. Cyrus was on Almory's left, and they chatted animatedly and Renya wondered if they previously knew each other. They had never all dined together before, so Renya assumed this must be a special occasion so they could all discuss the upcoming plans and tactics for their stand against Cressida.

Phillippe and Selenia sat across from Renya, and she thought she detected a slight uptick in Selenia's expression as Sion glided into the seat beside her, taking up the last available chair.

Grayden stood up and clicked his knife against his glass of wine. A hush fell over the chit chatter as all eyes turned to him and Renya.

"Now that we're all together, I think it's important to fill everyone in on what has happened over the past six weeks."

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Nods came from all across the table. Renya even had trouble remembering who knew what.

“Renya now possesses her full powers, and has trained underneath Cressida. Cressida believes that Renya is on her side, and loyal to her. She is under the illusion that she is being held against her will. Cyrus, Renya’s father, who is also the King of the Sun Realm, worked with Almory this afternoon to place a protection spell over the lodge and the town. As long as we reside here, it’s cloaked and Cressida cannot find anyone in the village. It’s the same spell that has kept the Sun Realm safe for all these years.”

Only Tumwalt looked surprised by that knowledge. Grayden continued, “with the help of the Tidal and Twilight Kingdoms, as well as the Spring—”

Beauty’s roar came from outside, shaking the ornate snowflake chandelier in the ceiling.

Renya’s eyes widened. “Something’s wrong,” she said, rising from her chair and quickly running out of the dining hall towards the garden. Her dress trailed behind, and Grayden and the others were on her heels.

She threw open the solid oak doors and saw Beauty, just behind the boundaries of the lodge, pinning something to the ground. Or, rather, someone. A cry of pain echoed through the area, and Renya raced to see who Beauty had trapped under her talons.

Brandle, face white as snow, was screaming, his arms and shoulders pinched down by the juvenile dragon. Beauty’s teeth were bared, and Renya could see her hot saliva dripping onto Brandle’s cheek.

“Help me!” Brandle screeched, wispy magic floating from his fingertips, but nothing substantial coming forth.

Renya moved forward, unsure of what to do. Before she could decide, Cyrus stepped forward and bound Brandle with his golden strands, holding him in place.

“Renya, call off Beauty. He’s no good to us if she rips him to shreds.

“Beauty, come here.”

The dragon picked up her head, and looked at Renya, and then back at Brandle. A low, guttural growl came from the back of her throat as she continued to stare down Brandle.

“Beauty!”

Reluctantly, Beauty moved aside and sauntered over to Renya, where she sat on her hind legs and looked at Renya expectantly. She sighed, then gave her a pat on her head. “Good girl, Beauty.” The dragon purred and swished her large tail before glaring back at Brandle.

“How did he get in here?” Phillippe asked, staring at Brandle and then at Beauty.

Before anyone could answer, Renya saw a blur move past her at full speed.

Grayden was on the snow-covered ground, a knife raised to Brandle’s throat.

“I warned you, if you touched one hair on my mate’s head, I would slit your throat. And now I’m going to fulfill that promise.” He raised his hand, but Renya quickly reached out with her magic and froze him in place.

Beauty let out a large bleat, as if she was disappointed that the carnage had been stopped.

“Grayden, you can’t kill him. Not yet. He could be useful to us.” Renya looked at Brandle, his clothes torn and tattered and multiple scratches adorning his arms, no doubt from Beauty's razor-sharp talons.

Renya released Grayden, and the second he was free, he growled and moved to attack Brandle once more.

“Grayden!”

He got up angrily and threw the knife into a nearby tree, planting it several inches into the bark. Without looking at Renya, he stormed off back inside the lodge.

“That was intense,” Selenia said, approaching Renya cautiously. “And you have a dragon now? When was that fact going to come out?”

“Sorry, everyone. I know she’s a handful—”

At this, Beauty snorted and laid down near Renya’s feet.

“—but I don’t know what else to do with her.”

“She’s a great asset to us, Renya,” Phillippe said. “But how did Brandle end up here?”

Cyrus cleared his throat. “I’m guessing she found him outside of the perimeter of the spell boundary line. Since she was within the boundary when I cast the spell, she’s able to bring people in. From the looks of him, she must have dragged him around a bit.

Beauty purred again, looking pleased with herself. Brandle continued to squirm in his bonds, his eyes darting around.

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“What should we do with him?” Sion asked, looking at Brandle with intense hatred.

Tumwalt spoke up. “We have chains in Almory’s workshop that prevent magic from being used. We can lock him up and interrogate him.”

“Make sure they work,” Sion said. “He’s an oily asshole.” He spit on Brandle’s body as Cyrus hoisted Brandle up with his magic.

“Let’s take him to the weapons room,” Almory said, and Tumwalt and Phillippe left, with Cyrus maneuvering Brandle across the snowy garden.

Selenia looked frightened, and Renya watched a conflicted look cross Sion’s face, almost as though he wanted to comfort her.

Yes, there was definitely something going on there.

“So, a dragon?” Selenia asked, watching Beauty snore at Renya’s feet. “Is she a baby?”

“I think she’s definitely more in the adolescent phase. She behaves like an irate teenager lately.”

“I guess I’ve missed a lot.” Selenia looked a bit hurt.

“Don’t worry, Selenia. I’ll fill you in on everything after I calm your brother down. I think you have some things to share with me too,” Renya said, pitching the last part of her sentence lower so only Selenia could hear.

Selenia shrunk down a bit, flustered, then nodded.

“Sion, could you put Beauty back in the stables? Tell the groomsman that they need to restrain her with iron only. She breaks through everything else.”

Sion sheepishly approached the slumbering dragon.

“Beauty.” Renya nudged her with her toe. The dragon opened a lazy eye and glanced at Renya. “This is Sion. He’s a friend. Go with him.”

Like a reluctant teenager, Beauty ambled along behind Sion, swishing her tail irritably and looking over her shoulder at Renya with what Renya thought was a scowl on her face.

Renya gave Selenia an apologetic smile and went back inside the lodge, heading straight for the staircase. She was sure Grayden would be sulking in their room.

Sure enough, she opened the door to their chambers and there he was, sitting on a chair by the fireplace with his head in his hands. She tried to enter quietly, but her dress rustled as she approached the back of the chair. He tensed, but she threw her arms around him from behind and rested her head against his neck, placing a light kiss there.

He put his hands on top of hers, which were hugging his chest. She could feel his rapid breathing under her palms, feel his chest rise and fall quickly.

“Honey, you can't tear apart every single person who's wronged me.”

A deep, soul crushing sigh escaped his lips.

“I can't think straight when it comes to you, Renya. I used to give Phillippe such a

hard time about his impulsivity and inability to control his emotions. Now I'm ten times worse than he ever was."

"Grayden, you can't blame yourself. This bond is a part of us, and I think we are meant to feel this way for each other. There is so much good that comes with being fated, but there are things that we will struggle with too. But we'll do it together."

He closed his eyes before looking back at her.

"You're right, of course. I just—I couldn't even look at him, knowing he took you from me here in the forest and then all the grief I'm sure he caused you at the Shadow Realm."

"He mostly left me alone after Cressida started to favor me."

"I need to kill him."

Renya suppressed the slight smile that threatened to appear on her face. Men. They were all the same sometimes. "I promise, when the time comes, you can make him pay. But not now. We can use him for information, perhaps use him as a bargaining chip. We don't even know why he's here. I'm sure he's following orders from Cressida to get me back—and we need to know what those are."

"I know, all that makes sense. But it's like I'm possessed. I can't handle him being alive when he dared to touch what's mine." He practically growled the word mine, and Renya couldn't believe how primitive, yet sensual it was.

"I am yours," she responded, turning his head and planting a searing kiss on his lips. He moaned, tugging at her until she was perched on his lap, her legs over the arm of the chair, her head cradled in his arms.

“My Renya,” he growled, licking the seam of her lips until she allowed his tongue access. “My everything.”

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She felt dizzy, swept up into his passionate embrace. He unlaced the back of her dress and then slid his fingers across the front of her chest, groping and exploring as she gasped. His other hand pushed aside her skirts, and she shivered as he reached her core.

“This is mine too. Only mine.”

She instantly was lost, swimming in the deep pools of her desire. This was the last thing she thought would happen when she came up here to console him, but sometimes their bodies spoke more deeply than their words could.

Grayden rose from the chair, easily cradling her body against his as he took her to their bed. He set her on her feet, helping her out of the elaborate gown before shucking his own tunic and pants quickly. He groaned when he saw her, and Renya knew it was partly due to the seductive underclothing that she put on. He fiddled with the strap of her bralette, rubbing the soft lace between his fingers.

“You will be my undoing, sweetling.” He rested his forehead against hers and exhaled, his breath shaky. Renya felt her core tighten with pleasure, pleased to garner such a sexual response in him.

His fingers found the lace of her bottoms, and he slowly traced a line around her thigh, while caressing her face with his other hand.

“You don’t know what you do to me, Renya.” He backed her carefully towards the bed until her knees bent, and then leaned over to cover her mouth with his.

She whimpered as he kissed her, needing more but unable to vocalize it as all of her senses became overwhelmed.

“I mean it, Little Fawn. From the moment I carried your unconscious body to my tent, that was it for me. Everything I ever want is right here in this bed with me. Now lie back, my sweet girl, and let me love you like you deserve.”

At that moment, he placed his hand within the hollow of her back and moved her up the bed, making sure she was comfortable, and then covered her body with his. She invited his touch, and he gave a wicked grin as he felt how ready she was for him.

“You were made for me to love, Renya.”

She pulled his face to hers, and kissed him deeply as he moved between her legs. The second he entered her, she was connected to him so deeply that she felt robbed during the hours of the day where they couldn't be together like this.

Grayden shuddered as he reached her end, but moved slowly, and Renya could tell he was determined to make this time slow and sensual. Their long parting took a toll on his restraint, and she knew he struggled to take things slowly. She didn't mind the quick pace he usually set, but for tonight, his languid love making was exactly what she needed. She was back where their story started, back here in the lodge where they fell in love.

Chapter Thirty

Selenia watched Sion lead Beauty towards the stables, and debated going after him. Finally, the pull towards him got the better of her, and she ran after him, her satin shoes slipping in the slick snow.

He stopped as he heard her coming, turning around. Beauty stopped as well, obeying

Renya's orders to go with Sion even though she wasn't there to enforce them.

“Selenia, you're going to freeze out here!” He took off his tunic and pulled it roughly over her head. Instantly she was enveloped in his warm scent, reminding her of the sweet breeze off the summer sea.

“Sion, take your shirt back. You'll freeze now.” She tried hard not to fixate on his bare chest. He was completely smooth there, without a single stray hair. She'd seen other men with their shirts off before, but they didn't compare to the sight of his olive skin against the crisp white snow. She gulped, trying to pull his shirt back over her head. Sion gave her a stern look, and she dropped the hem and let it fall to her thighs.

He marched ahead, Beauty once again following. They reached the barn, and both young grooms looked at Beauty with fear in their eyes.

“She won't hurt you,” Sion said, trying to assuage their fears.

Even Selenia looked skeptical. “How did Renya end up with a dragon?”

“I'm guessing she bonded with the newest offspring. You know Renya, she's something special.”

Selenia pressed her nails into her palms, trying to calm the rough sea of jealousy about to drown her. She loved Renya. Renya was like a sister, fated to her brother. There was no need to be jealous. It was just their bond. She now understood Grayden's insane behavior since Renya came into his life.

Sion passed by the grooms, who looked anywhere but at the dragon meandering past them. He moved to the enclosure at the very end, and led Beauty inside. She obeyed, but gave him an irritated look as he locked the stall door shut.

“That won't hold her for long,” he said to the older of the two boys. “Tomas, that's your name, right?”

The boy nodded nervously, obviously concerned that he was going to be asked to attend to Beauty.

“Tomas, I want you to go to the blacksmith and have him fasten some iron chains for the dragon. I also want this stall reinforced with iron bars on the outside. Have him come up here and take the measurements.”

Tomas looked relieved that his chore was taking him away from the dragon, who was eyeing him curiously. He scampered away, not even looking over his shoulder.

The smaller boy approached Sion. “His Lordship's horse is also foaling.”

“Starlia? Finally!” Selenia squeaked. “I'll let my brother know right away. He'll want to be here for this.”

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“This is great news, hopefully that will put him in a better mood. I could tell he was frustrated that Renya wouldn't let him kill Brandle.”

Selenia chuckled, and Sion smiled at her. She felt the stirring and longing in her stomach and quickly looked away. She was thankful for the cold, which helped mask the heat rising in her cheeks.

Sion quickly looked away from her, and she tried not to sob at the rejection and instead, followed him back up to the lodge. When they got to the top of the stairs, he started walking back down the opposite hall, no doubt to fill Grayden in on Starlia's condition.

“Sion, wait,” she said, opening the door to her room. “Let me give you back your tunic.”

He met her at her bedroom door, and she tried to pull it over her head, getting one of the buttons caught in her hair.

“Ouch,” she said, tugging on it.

“Hold on, I'll help you. You're just pulling out your hair.”

The second his hand made contact with her head, she couldn't help but lean into the palm of his hand, her cheek resting there comfortably. The slightest moan escaped her lips, wanting his touch so badly that she was practically burning.

He looked into her eyes, and she could see the lust there, and it gave her a bit of relief

to know she wasn't alone in her attraction. She watched his eyes move to her lips as she parted them, trying to calm her rapid breathing.

He untangled the button from her hair, not taking his eyes off of her lips, and then he held his shirt in his hand, still watching her.

And then he was kissing her, his hand cradling the back of her head and pulling her towards him, and her stomach was suddenly fluttering, like she'd swallowed the dragonflies adorning her dress. Selenia wrapped her arms around his torso, and he groaned into her mouth.

Spurred on by his response, she stood on her tiptoes and moved her fingers along his collarbone, dancing along his strong shoulders. He grabbed her roughly, pressing her body close to his, and her eyes widened as she felt him harden against her abdomen.

She backed into her room, needing him in a way she had never needed anyone or anything before.

“What is going on here?” Phillippe's voice thundered and Selenia opened her eyes, and saw the panic in Sion's.

Phillippe's fist made contact with Sion's jaw, and he spun back away from Selenia and hit the wall.

“What do you think you're doing to my sister?” Phillippe roared, cocking his fist back to hit Sion again.

“Phillippe, stop!” Selenia screamed, trying to grab his arm before he could take another swing at Sion.

Sion's lip was bleeding, and he was trying to tug his tunic back on as quickly as he

could.

“What's happening?”

Selenia groaned as Grayden joined them in the hall, the door to his own chambers wide open. Selenia could tell from his hair and the way his own tunic was on backwards that he had been busy with his own romantic encounter.

“Sion took advantage of our sister!” Phillippe fumed, pushing Selenia aside as he rounded on Sion again.

Sion stood still and quiet, awaiting his punishment.

“Please, Brother, stop!” Selenia shouted, once again stepping in between the two men.

“Phillippe, I'm just as angry as you, but you need to control yourself,” Grayden said, touching his brother on the shoulder. “Sion, explain yourself. Now.” His words came out as a growl, and Selenia wasn't sure what was worse, Phillippe's fists or Grayden's tone.

“I'm sorry,” Sion said quietly, his face looking pained. “I have no excuse for my behavior. I don't know what has come over me. There is no explanation I can give, no action to take other than to accept whatever punishment you see fit to bestow.” He hung his head low, refusing to look at any of them.

Grayden looked at Phillippe, who nodded. “Sion, you are one of my best friends and a trusted confidant. Normally an offense like this would be banishment, exile from our homelands. But given your loyalty up until now, I won't force you to leave the Snow Lands. Instead, I'm reassigning you to the mountain camp.”

“No! Don't take him away from me!” Selenia couldn't believe the pitch of her own voice, the anguish strangled in her throat.

“He's taken advantage of you, Selenia. You were feeling depressed and unsettled from Jurel's death, and he preyed upon you,” Phillippe spat.

“That's not true at all,” she said, looking at Sion. He refused to meet her eye, and looked at the runner under his feet.

“My decision is final,” Grayden said grimly, as if he hated issuing the command. “Sion, leave now.”

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Sion turned and headed for the stairs, his head still lowered like a dog being punished by its master. Selenia felt physically ill with every step Sion took, and she panicked, not knowing how she could handle his absence.

“You can't send him away!” she yelled desperately. “He's my fated mate!”

A hush fell over the hallway, and Sion stopped, his shoulders hunched as he faced the stairs. He slowly turned around, his jaw hanging.

“What do you mean, Selenia?” Renya's voice carried down the hall as she walked towards them, her hair messy and a silk nightgown hugging her frame.

Selenia gulped and felt the tears burn in her eyes. “I'm fated to be with him.”

“That's impossible,” Grayden said, instantly dismissing her words. “He's too old for you.”

Sion finally spoke. “Selenia, it's sweet of you to try and lie for me, but you know we are not fated. I feel affection for you, and I took advantage of your friendship. But I'm not your mate.”

Selenia started sobbing, unable to control the flow of emotion that came over her. “It's true,” she begged, looking at her brothers.

Renya spoke. “Grayden, you of all people should know that exceptions occur with fated bonds.” Her voice was firm, but gentle, and she looked at Selenia with concern. “Selenia, tell us why you believe you're fate-bound to Sion.” Renya walked over and

put her arm around her, and Selenia felt a rush of affection towards her soon-to-be sister.

“When Sion and I came back from the Sun Realm, we stopped in the forest that borders the Twilight Kingdom. I was hurting, aching for Jurel—”

“See! It's grief that's driven her to these actions—”

“Phillippe.” One warning word from Renya was enough to make him shut his mouth. Renya squeezed Selenia's shoulder, encouraging her to continue.

“And I just wanted to make it stop. So, I tricked Sion into taking me to the pond where the Murcurial appeared.”

Hurt flashed in Sion's eyes, and Selenia looked away, embarrassed by her sudden guilt.

Renya looked baffled. “What's a Murcurial?”

“Almost like a soothsayer,” Grayden answered. “They are akin to witches and are said to know the future.”

“That's elkten crap,” Phillippe argued. “They are just no good pranksters.”

“Anyways,” Selenia continued. “I sought her out and asked her to help me forget about Jurel. She said she could make the pain lessen, but not in the way I thought. And that it would hurt at first, but I would be happy for it in the end. She touched my forehead, and then...I knew. Sion is my mate.”

Selenia looked at Sion, not caring about anyone's reaction but his. He looked confused, and disbelief was evident in his dark eyes.

“I know it's unbelievable, but I think somehow the lack of magic has masked our bonds. I think the Murcurial broke through whatever was blocking me from feeling the bond. But it's true. I know in my heart that I am fated for Sion.”

Grayden looked torn, like he wanted to believe her, but Phillippe looked skeptical. Renya gave her shoulders another squeeze, as if to let Selenia know she was on her side.

Selenia's eyes darted to Sion again, and he met hers, walking slowly towards her. He stopped right in front of her, and Renya let go of her shoulders and moved back to Grayden's side. Sion fell to his knees, looking up at her.

“If you are truly my mate, Selenia Snowden, then I am the luckiest fae to ever walk our world.” He kissed her knuckles, his brown eyes piercing hers. “But I must confess, I don't feel the certainty that you do. I admire you, care for you...lust after you,” he whispered the last line, “but I don't know that I'm fated to you.”

She touched his cheek. “I understand, Sion. I'm sorry you had to find out this way, but I couldn't have you sent away. Being around you hurts me, knowing you don't feel our bond, but having you gone—I wouldn't survive it.” The words rushed out, and she normally would have been embarrassed at such a confession, but she'd already opened herself up wide and let the raw truth tumble out.

“Grayden. You can't possibly send him away and subject your sister to more pain.” Renya looked expectantly at Grayden.

“Yes he can!” Phillippe thundered.

“Phillippe Snowden! If you don't stop acting like a world-class asshole, I'm going to write to Esmeralda and tell her what a hot-headed, idiotic dick you are!”

Selenia suppressed a smile, and even Grayden looked impressed at Renya's threat.

“I don't know what half of those things you said mean,” Phillippe retorted. “But I get the gist of it. I don't like it, but I won't interfere.” He turned his back and headed down the stairs.

“Thank you,” Selenia mouthed at Renya, and she returned a small smile.

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“It's getting late,” Grayden said, looking at the wooden clock hanging behind him. “I say we finish talking about this in the morning.”

“Oh! Grayden!” Selenia exclaimed. “I forgot to tell you, Starlia is having her foal!”

His eyes lit up, and he grabbed Renya's hand excitedly. “Come, my sweet Little Fawn. I've been waiting for this for a long time.”

As Grayden pulled Renya away, Sion looked down at Selenia. She tried to read his expression, but it was hard for her to tell what he was thinking. She hoped that once his side of the bond was awoken, things would become easier for them. Instead, they stood there and looked at each other awkwardly, until Sion kissed her hand and left for his own room. Selenia sunk down onto the floor, her back against the wall, and cried.

Chapter Thirty-One

The little filly wobbled on her legs, trying to nurse as Starlia looked on proudly. Renya's heart swelled with joy at the sight of Starlia and her newborn daughter. Grayden was equally proud, boasting about how easy the delivery had been and how well his mare was caring for her foal.

“What are you going to call her?” Renya asked, watching the foal attempt to gallop around the pen.

“Whatever you'd like, Little Fawn. She's yours.”

Renya's heart fluttered. She dearly loved Starlia, and the thought of having her own horse, graceful and majestic, excited her.

But then the filly tripped and landed head-first in a pile of droppings, shattering that vision. Renya laughed as the pony stood up, shaking her head as if confused about what had just happened.

“So, what's her name, Little Fawn?”

Renya thought for a moment, her eyes drawn to the sweet little creature. “Talía.”

“Talía,” Grayden repeated. “I like that.”

They watched the mother and foal bond for a few more minutes before Grayden put his arm around Renya. “Should we go to bed?”

“Go to bed...or go to sleep?” Renya teased.

“Both,” Grayden responded, laughing heartily. The sound made Renya's chest tighten and her mood lighten. Nothing sounded better than Grayden's laughter.

After feeding Starlia a few arctic pears and patting Talía on the head, Grayden followed Renya to the far side of the stables to check on Beauty.

The dragon purred the moment Renya approached, swishing her long tail excitedly. She had almost doubled in size since Renya had met her, with wings now over four feet wide. Renya felt a pang of concern, realizing Beauty was growing too quickly. She wasn't sure how she could possibly keep a full-grown dragon in this world long-term. Perhaps Almory or Cyrus would have some ideas.

Beauty began ramming the door of the stall, and Renya sighed. As much as she loved

Beauty, it wasn't good for her to be restrained and locked up like this. She felt no better than Cressida, who kept her pets in a glass cage.

“Can you ride her, Little Fawn?” Grayden asked.

Renya looked at Beauty, whose tail was switching back and forth, eyes fixed on Renya's every move. “I did a few times in the Shadow Realm, in the forest.”

“Why don't you try here? She's obviously annoyed at being cooped up, and I can feel your tension.” He moved behind Renya, his strong hands pressing into her shoulders.

“Mmmmm,” she moaned, arching like a waking cat into his arms. “That feels nice.”

“Careful, Little Fawn,” he warned, his hands wandering down to her waist before wrapping around her. “Or neither of us will get any sleep tonight.”

Renya felt some of the tension leave her body as she chuckled. “No matter what I do, that's usually the case.”

“Has your insatiable appetite finally got the better of you?” he asked, eyes sparkling mischievously.

Renya elbowed him in the ribs and danced just outside of his grasp. “Do we have a saddle or reins I could try with her?”

In the tack room, Grayden sorted through bridles and saddles before tying a few together. “I think this might work,” he said, pulling at the leather to test it.

Renya nodded, nervous but eager to ride Beauty again. She unbolted the stall door, ignoring Grayden's warning to be careful. The dragon protested a bit as Renya arranged the makeshift saddle and bridle, but then sat patiently when she realized she

was going to leave the stall.

“I'd recommend taking her out the back entrance of the stables,” Grayden suggested, stepping back to allow Renya to coax Beauty away from the other horses.

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Renya attempted to swing her leg over Beauty's back, but the dragon had grown so much that she could no longer hoist herself up. Grayden came over, clasped his hands together, and gave her a boost. She settled into the saddle, feeling uneasy. Beauty was even taller than the last time she'd ridden her and seemed more excited than usual. Renya feared she might take off running and throw her.

“Calm, Beauty,” Renya murmured, stroking the dragon's neck. Beauty purred and started walking towards the open door. Renya turned briefly and saw Grayden behind her, encouraging them.

“Okay Beauty, let's do this.” She pulled on the reins, and Beauty took off, careening through the snow with ease.

Renya was thrown back for a moment, unbalanced, before righting herself in the saddle and holding on tightly. Laughing, she threw her head back, enjoying the snow whipping around her and the cool wind rushing through her hair. The air stung a bit, but the cold was nothing compared to the exhilarating pace that Beauty set.

Be careful, my love. I just got you back.

Renya grinned, her chest light. Grayden was by her side again, her aunt was safe, and she was momentarily protected from Cressida by her father's magic. Giddy, she urged Beauty faster, her worries seeming to roll off with every step Beauty took. The dragon ran faster, turning back towards the lodge.

“Careful, Beauty,” Renya said as the dragon continued a grueling pace towards the gardens. She grasped the reins, pulling back. “Beauty, no! We're going to crash!”

But the dragon continued forward, and Renya closed her eyes, preparing to smash into the brick wall surrounding the garden. Suddenly, a feeling of weightlessness stirred in her belly, and she felt the air from Beauty's wings flapping. Renya heard a giant 'whoop!' from Grayden below. Wait, below?

She opened her eyes and clung to the reins. Beauty soared over the garden, circling and gaining more altitude.

“Beauty! You're doing it, girl!”

The dragon purred again and switched directions, heading back towards the village. Renya could see the shocked looks of the few villagers left on the streets as they began pointing and waving.

Renya felt Grayden's panic and worry through their bond. She tried to urge Beauty back towards the stables, but the dragon had a mind of her own. She flew past the village and soared over the snow-covered foothills leading to the mountain range. Renya's stomach dropped as Beauty suddenly started to descend. She watched in amazement as Beauty finally reached the ground, her wings fluttering softly until she landed delicately in front of a small stream. The water flowed freely here, and Beauty dipped her head to drink.

“Thirsty girl, huh Beauty?” Renya cooed at the dragon, trying to remain calm despite her racing heart, fueled by the excitement of flying and the anxiety radiating through her bond with Grayden.

After a few more seconds of drinking, Beauty started running again, then gliding, then flying high into the air. The higher she went, the more Renya shivered.

Almost as though she sensed her discomfort, Beauty croaked a strange throaty sound and headed back towards the stables. A few minutes later, the lodge came into view,

and Renya could feel Grayden's relief. Beauty gracefully landed in front of the stables, and Grayden rushed over to help Renya off.

“I can't believe it, Renya! You flew! On a dragon!”

“Way to state the obvious,” she said, grinning at Grayden. He helped her down, and her feet hit the ground. She swayed a bit, off-balance from the sudden descent and the adrenaline coursing through her system. Grayden's protective arms instantly steadied her, and she let herself be taken into his embrace.

“Have I told you how magnificent you are, my mate?” he asked, nuzzling her neck and then kissing the spot right behind her ear.

“Daily,” she teased, enjoying his affection.

Beauty purred, watching the pair, and then circled them both before heading back into the stable.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Grayden held his dagger right at Brandle's throat. “I should slit you from ear to ear for touching my mate,” he growled, his voice thunderous and echoing off the walls of the room.

The chamber, once used as a dungeon, had been converted to a weapons storage by Grayden's father, though the chains still remained. Brandle sat chained to a chair in the center of the room, pale and cowering as Grayden continued to threaten his life.

“Do you not have words for me?” Grayden continued, jerking Brandle up by the collar of his robes. “Did you think there would be no consequences for touching what is mine?”

Brandle sputtered, eyes wide and darting. Grayden released his hold, and Brandle fell back into the chair, which creaked and shifted with the impact. Grayden roared and threw the dagger at Brandle, feeling a bit of satisfaction as it just grazed his neck before impaling the chair he was sitting on.

“Grayden,” Cyrus warned. Grayden continued pacing the chamber, fisting his hair in his hands. “Do we need to do this without you?”

Grayden sighed, trembling and clenching his knuckles. He had promised Renya he wouldn't kill Brandle...yet.

Phillippe moved in, standing in front of Brandle. “Tell us why you are here, or else I'm going to let my brother gut you like a fish.”

Brandle shook again, and Grayden rolled his eyes as he saw a gleam of a tear in Brandle's eye. Weak. He was weak, hiding behind his powerful cousin and his magic.

“Fine, I'll tell you everything. Just please, don't hurt me,” he whined, staring at Grayden. Grayden grinned, relieved that his presence was enough to frighten Brandle.

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“Then speak, you disgusting coward,” Phillippe said, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“She's coming here to the Snow Lands. She might be on her way now already. She wants her daughter back.”

Grayden growled again, and this time Cyrus came over and put a gentle hand on Grayden's shoulder. “She's not going to take her again, son. I've made sure of that. I'll protect her with my life.”

“I will too,” Grayden replied, grinding his teeth. He hated relying on Cyrus's magic for everything. He wanted to protect Renya himself, protect his lands and people.

“Is she bringing her army?” Cyrus asked Brandle. He shook his head no, and Grayden felt a bit of the tension leave his body.

“She must think she can come in and grab Renya and leave,” Phillippe said, still eyeing Brandle carefully. “Are you sure your magic will hold up?”

“It should,” Cyrus said. “It's weaker than it's ever been, cloaking two separate areas, but it should hold for a little longer. We need to start making plans, though. I can feel myself weakening.”

“Just in case, I think we need to restrict everyone in the village and have them shelter inside, and I want everyone in the lodge to wait her out in the sublevels.” Grayden looked at Phillippe, and he nodded his agreement.

Just then, a loud roar echoed throughout the lodge, terrifying and deep. Grayden's heart sank. She was already here.

"Stay with Brandle," he ordered Sion. "And don't kill him," he added, knowing Sion wanted him dead just as much as he did.

"Grayden, go to my daughter," Cyrus instructed. "Don't let Renya anywhere near Cressida, and don't let her out of your sight. You know how she is, she'll want to sacrifice herself."

Grayden nodded, but hoped in his heart that Renya's last promise to him was enough to deter her from that. "Phillippe, I want you to go outside and protect the village. If Cyrus's magic holds, she shouldn't be able to see anyone."

Phillippe left without saying a word, and Grayden headed in the direction of the stables. Renya was often there during the day, stroking her new filly and talking to Beauty. Grayden was almost certain that the dragon understood every word and command Renya gave her.

He rushed up the stairs to the main floor, issuing orders to every servant he met to stay inside the lodge, before leaving through the back door. He trudged towards the stables, the heavy snow making it difficult to move quickly.

Another roar, followed by deafening silence. Grayden looked up, and saw Cressida on the back of one of her dragons, only a few yards away from the lodge, circling in the sky. He stopped, feeling exposed in the middle of the snowy field. But Cyrus's magic held, and she circled around and around, irritation easy to read in her posture.

He heard a loud roar from inside the barn, and knew Beauty was agitated. Ignoring Cressida above him, he ran for the stable, throwing open the door and closing it against the cold air.

“Grayden!” Renya exclaimed, and quickly ran to his side, fear in her eyes. “She’s here!”

“Shhhh, it’s okay. She can’t find you. Everything looks abandoned. Cyrus told me that she doesn’t know of this type of magic, so she won’t even suspect that we are hiding in plain sight.”

Renya nodded, her fear preventing her from speaking. Grayden grabbed her hand, holding it in his. Her hand was cold, and she was shaking. He wasn’t sure if it was from the temperature or fear.

“She won’t take you from me again, Renya.”

Her bottom lip trembled, and Grayden knew she was trying so hard to be strong. He understood her fear, because it was the same as his. His dreams kept him up at night, horrible nightmares where she was ripped from his arms. He often awoke, covered in sweat, breathing unevenly until he found Renya next to him. He held her tight in those moments, not wanting to wake her, but needing the comfort her warm body provided him.

He did that again now, covering her body with his, feeling her tremble beneath him. He kissed her hairline, trying to comfort her the best way he knew, and in turn, comforting himself as well.

Beauty continued roaring, but it was a panicky, throaty roar. Grayden wasn’t sure if she was picking up on Renya’s nervous energy, or if she could sense the other dragon.

Renya sighed from inside the protective cocoon of Grayden’s arms and then carefully untangled herself. Grayden watched her walk towards the stall that held Beauty, and undo the iron latch keeping her contained. She comforted Beauty, making soft

crooning noises, and the dragon began to settle.

“Do you think she’s gone yet?” Renya asked him, her eyes moist with unshed tears.

“I’ll go check,” Grayden said, walking towards the door. He opened it, and peered outside. The snowstorm had picked up, and visibility from the barn to the lodge was poor, but he didn’t see any sign of her. He stood at the door for a few more minutes, making sure she was really gone before heading back to Beauty’s stall.

“I think she’s left, Little Fawn.”

Renya exhaled, looking at Grayden, and then ran over to him. He pulled her into his arms again, and held her for a long time, listening to her heartbeat against the howling wind outside.

“I think we need to make our move now,” Renya said, her voice strong and steady. Grayden watched on with pride, glad she was asserting herself and becoming the leader she was meant to be. “She’ll only keep searching, and next time, I imagine she’ll bring her entire army.”

Tumwalt, Almory, Phillippe, Agatha and Sion all joined them in the cabinet room. After Grayden and Renya left the stables, they immediately called a meeting. It was time for them to stop planning and start acting.

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“How will we draw her to the Sun Realm?” Agatha asked.

“Brandle,” Grayden said. “We’ll force him to send her a falcon stating that Renya will be there, held against her will.”

“Then what do we do with him?” Sion asked, and Grayden knew he wished the answer to be death.

“We bring him with us,” Renya said, looking at Sion. “I know that’s not what you want, Sion, and it’s not what I want either. But if something goes wrong, perhaps we can use him as a bargaining chip. But I do promise you this, Sion. He won’t be allowed to go free. Even if Cressida bargains for his life, we will track him down.”

“Do you promise?” Sion asked.

“I promise, Sion,” Renya said.

“So, what next?” Phillippe asked.

“We coordinate with our allies: the Spring Lands, the Twilight and the Tidal Kingdoms. I need to let them know immediately, since Triston was going to come here next and will need to change directions,” Grayden said. The second he mentioned the Tidal Kingdom, his brother sat up a bit straighter. Renya must be right, Grayden thought. Phillippe was very interested in Esmeralda.

“And we’re all meeting in the Sun Realm?” Tumwalt asked quietly. He was still cautious around Grayden, not wishing to invoke his wrath. Tumwalt was also careful

to be respectful to Renya. Grayden was glad that his advisor finally understood her importance in their world, and in his life.

“Correct,” Grayden said. “This evening, I’ll send a hawk to Triston, Kalora, Samatra and Thesand. We’ll march under Cyrus’s cloaking spell, and the Tidal Kingdom will travel along the river with the Spring Lands to avoid detection. Kalora’s army will stay close to the trees in the Twilight forest and then move at night in the desert. Hopefully we can all get there undetected. When we arrive, that’s when we’ll force Brandle to write to his queen.”

“Does anyone foresee any problems with what we’ve proposed?” Renya asked.

Almory shook his head, pleased with the plan. Tumwalt stroked his chin, and then voiced his agreement. Phillippe and Sion both agreed.

“It’s a good plan, daughter,” Cyrus said, looking at Renya with the same pride that Grayden shared. “Let’s put everything into motion.”

The next few days flew by, with everyone working furiously to prepare. Renya trained with Cyrus, picking up additional pointers on how to wield the magic of the sun. Grayden watched, pleased to see his mate bond with her father and grow even stronger in her magic. For his part, Grayden trained hard with Phillippe, Charly, and Sion, working their muscles until they bulged from the blood flow.

Tumwalt and Almory oversaw the village, ensuring every resident knew to go to the lodge at the first sign of trouble. Almory and Tumwalt would both stay behind, at Grayden's insistence. If something happened, they would be in charge of securing the Snow Lands. Dimitri would come to the Sun Realm and provide assistance to those injured in battle.

They all worked incredibly hard, right up until the night before. Grayden spent

several hours that night in the cabinet room, reiterating their strategy and preparing for any unforeseen circumstances or problems they might encounter. Only when he saw Renya yawn did he finally decide to dismiss everyone.

“Go get some rest. We leave at first light,” he said, and watched everyone file out of the room, leaving him and Renya alone.

“Come with me, Little Fawn. I have a surprise for you,” he said, grabbing her hand and leading her out of the room and up the stairs to their chambers.

They entered their room, and Renya looked around, her forehead wrinkled. “What’s the surprise?” she asked. “Or was this just your attempt to get me in your bed so you can seduce me?”

“You’ll see,” he teased. “Wait here for a few minutes.” He went into the bathroom, getting to work.

“The bathroom? What kind of surprise could you possibly have in there?” He could hear her mocking him through the closed bathroom door.

After a few minutes, he called her in.

Grayden looked around the room, pleased with how it turned out.

While they were all concentrating on the battle ahead, Grayden reached out to the best stone cutters in the village and had them replace the bathtub in their chambers. The bath was made of a beautiful piece of carved marble, smooth and warm colored in the light of the candles that he lit on every surface of the bathroom. Lotus petals floated in the water, and Grayden knew the lavender bath salts he put in would delight Renya.

“It’s...amazing, Grayden!” she beamed, happiness shining in her eyes. “How did you pull this off?”

“I have my ways, Little Fawn. I must admit, it was hard to keep it a secret. I tried so hard not to think about it so you wouldn’t find out.”

“Well, I didn’t suspect a thing,” she said, quickly disrobing. He watched her remove her clothing, excited but also worried. He wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life here, in his home, with her by his side. He wasn’t sure if this would be their last night together, or if they’d have an entire lifetime of moments like these. Trying not to dwell on it, he brought his mind back to the present, watching Renya slip into the tub, giving him an encouraging look.

Grayden breathed deeply, as Renya dunked underneath the water, lotus petals floating around her. He stripped down and then crawled in behind her, dragging her across his lap and against his chest.

“I thought we got a bigger tub so we could have our own space?” she teased.

Grayden growled, and then playfully bit her earlobe. She sighed, and he kissed her neck, slowly making his way down to her collar bone. He placed another nip along her shoulder, and she began to squirm in his arms.

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“Hold still, or I’ll stop,” he warned, and she giggled and splashed water back at him.

“I’m never going to do what you tell me to do,” she threatened.

“You will right now,” he replied darkly, dipping his hands under the water to stroke the inside of her thigh. She shivered under his touch, creating ripples on the surface of the water, and he knew he had won.

“That’s my good girl,” he whispered huskily against her ear, his hands moving closer and closer to her center. “My sweet Renya. Hold still and let me love you.”

He moved his fingers to her folds, and she jerked back against his touch. The second she moved, he stopped what he was doing.

“What did I say, Little Fawn?”

She didn’t answer, but he could see the red creep down her neck and he knew it wasn’t the temperature of the water causing her to flush. He continued gently kissing her along her neck, then replaced his fingers.

“Grayden,” she whispered, as he began teasing her again, just enough to make her tremble but nothing more than that.

“Do you need me, my love?”

“Yes,” she whimpered, leaning back farther into his muscular chest.

“I think we need to get clean first,” he said, grabbing a tiny bottle and lathering up his hands. She whined the second he moved his hands away from her flesh, but he just grinned. She’d teased and taunted him enough during their time together, and he was enjoying the erotic game he was playing.

He ran his fingers through her hair, cleaning the strands and humming lightly as he worked the soap through.

“You’re a tease!” she accused.

“It takes one to know one. Now hush. You’re distracting me.” But in truth, he was the one hoping to distract her. He knew tomorrow they would leave the protection of the lodge, and they wouldn’t be able to be together again until it was over. He wanted to give her this one night, these few hours, to relax and try to forget what was coming.

She sighed impatiently, and then he gasped as he felt her fingers circle around him.

“You were saying?” she asked sweetly, and he growled a low growl.

“Keep playing with fire and you’re going to get burned,” he warned.

She slid her hand up and down his length and then turned her face towards him, a defiant smile evident.

“That’s it, you’ve done it now.” He stood up and stepped out of the tub before she could react, and then scooped her up in his arms. He carried her to the bed, dripping wet, while she protested.

“We’re going to ruin the bedding,” she complained.

“I don’t care.” He laid her on the bed, sweeping her wet hair off of her face before

kissing her. He joined her on the bed, and rolled on top of her. She reached out to stroke his chest, but he grabbed her hands and held them above her head.

“Now you’re going to pay for not listening to your mate,” he said.

Her eyes flashed with desire, and he was glad. He leaned back in and kissed her, swallowing the smart remark that he was sure she was about to give him. He deepened the kiss, and he felt all the resistance leave her body as she melted into the furs under her.

He gave her one last kiss on her swollen lips before beginning a trail of kisses down her body. He lapped up every drop of water that clung to her skin, and every drop that dripped down on her from his wet hair.

“What have you learned?” he growled.

“Absolutely nothing,” she said, eyes sparkling. He groaned, loving the fire she possessed. She was truly of the Sun Realm. She burned so brightly for him; she was a beacon of hope for everything in his life.

“I love you,” he said, now in the mood for tenderness.

“I love you too. Forever.

“Always,” he agreed.

Chapter Thirty-Three

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Sion's back ached from hours of sitting against the wall. Phillippe and Charly had offered to guard Brandle, but Sion refused. He would ensure Brandle didn't escape or slink off into the night. Despite Cyrus's magical enforcement of the room, Sion felt compelled to keep constant watch.

He stretched his legs, his boot scraping against the stone floor. Relief washed over him at being back in his normal clothing and home lands. As he scratched his head, his mind wandered to recent events, inevitably settling on Selenia. Could it be possible? Was he truly fated to her? It would explain the unfamiliar feelings stirring within him.

From his limited knowledge of fated matings, they typically manifested after the teenage years but before middle age. He hadn't felt this way about Selenia when he last saw her two years ago. Didn't Grayden have feelings for Renya before they were fated? Sion longed to ask him but suspected any conversation about Selenia wouldn't be well-received.

The patter of quiet footsteps drew his attention. He recoiled into the shadows, straining to identify the late-night visitor.

Selenia's slight frame came into view as she rounded the corner, her auburn hair flowing freely down her back. She wore a white nightdress with a crimson robe cinched around her narrow waist. Sion watched as she approached the weapons room door, confused over her purpose here. When she turned, he caught the glint of Grayden's dagger in the torchlight. She attempted to open the door quietly, but it wouldn't budge.

“It's locked by magic, Selenia,” Sion said softly.

She jumped, dropping the dagger with a clatter that echoed off the stone walls.

“Sion!” she squealed, her face flushing. He rose and walked over, retrieving and inspecting the dagger.

“How did you manage to steal your brother's dagger?”

She bit her lip. “It's not his. It's Renya's. He had a copy made for her. I knew they would likely be...preoccupied this evening, so I took it from their room.”

“Why? Why kill Brandle?” Sion asked, fighting the urge to run his fingers through her wild ringlets. She looked stunning in the torchlight, her pale skin aglow.

“You know why,” she murmured, eyes fixed on her silk slippers.

Sion frowned. “For me? Selenia, I'm not worth killing for. I wouldn't want your soul darkened.”

When she remained silent, he gently tilted her chin up. Her expression startled him—eyes moist, lips curled in pain. He longed to pull her close, to comfort her.

“You can't kill him, Selenia. We need him to feed information to Cressida.”

Her face fell. “Was no one going to tell me this?”

Sion chuckled softly. “In all fairness, I don't think anyone anticipated you coming down here to murder him.”

She flinched at the word 'murder.' Sion wondered if she could have gone through with

it had she breached the door. The Selenia he knew as a child wouldn't have, but this grown woman before him, with passion in her heart and fire in her eyes, seemed capable of anything.

“I don't know what came over me,” she sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

Sion's resolve melted. “Hush, my darling. Come here.” He opened his arms, and she fell into them, sobbing against his chest. He fought to control his body's response to her nearness, trying to resist the woman he now suspected he was destined for.

“Oh Sion, I don't know what I'm doing. I never wanted you to find out we are fated. I'm so confused, but I also couldn't bear to have you sent away. I'm so sorry.”

“Shhhhhh...dry your eyes, Selenia. You did nothing wrong. I'm just sorry that I don't feel the certainty you do. But I won't lie—I do desire you.”

She looked up at him, heat flushing her cheeks and neck. “Really?”

Sion swallowed hard. “Selenia, I'd have to be struck dumb not to want a woman like you.”

She trembled in his arms, and he could no longer resist. He didn't want her to feel rejected; no part of him could ever reject her. He brought his mouth to hers, kissing her gently yet thoroughly. Her warmth, her eagerness, her sweetness overwhelmed him. May the Fates strike him down, he thought, but he was becoming seriously addicted to Selenia Snowden.

The moment they crossed into the desert, Sion's eyes were drawn to Selenia. She was dressed more appropriately this time, wearing a thin silk top with delicate straps and a light skirt that fell to her knees. He tried to avert his gaze from her exposed legs. Her pale skin took on a shimmering quality under the harsh desert light.

How could he be bound to her without knowing it? What had that creature—a Murcurial?—done to her? And more importantly, could she do the same for him? If he survived this war, he vowed to seek out the creature and pay whatever price necessary to free his side of the bond so he could be with her fully.

“Are you okay?” Grayden hung back, studying Sion carefully.

“Honestly, I don't know.”

“I know I said some things back at the lodge—”

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“Don't worry about it, Grayden. If I had a sister, I'm sure I would react the same way.”

His friend nodded, his gaze returning to Renya. Sion noticed Grayden's eyes rarely strayed from her for long, and he envied their certainty in their love. Sion had never considered love, never thought he'd live long enough to experience it. He was broken, irreparably damaged by the Shadow Realm, but for the first time, he felt a glimmer of hope. Perhaps there was a happily ever after for him as well.

Sion watched Grayden gallop ahead on his horse, eager to ride beside Renya as they approached the Sun Realm. They all gathered before the gate, waiting.

“How did you get in last time?” Cyrus asked.

“We crawled through a drain,” Phillippe said. “Not quite the warm welcome I was looking for.”

Cyrus laughed, then lifted his fingers. A golden gust of air rushed out, and the gate swung open.

“Once all the soldiers arrive from the other kingdoms, I'll cloak it again.”

“What do we do with him?” Charly asked, nodding towards Brandle, who was chained and bound on a horse tethered behind Charly.

“We have an inescapable dungeon,” Cyrus replied.

“Tell me about it,” Phillippe mumbled. “I got stuck in the passageway.”

They filed into the bustling city, citizens waving and gasping at the sight of Cyrus.

“I guess I should have let everyone know I was back,” he said absentmindedly.

They rode along the golden streets, people stopping to stare as their entourage passed. Phillippe waved and winked at everyone until Grayden smacked him on the back of the neck. Sion heard Selenia giggle behind him, amused by her brother's antics. He slowed down to ride beside her.

“A bit different than the last time you rode through here?”

“Yes,” she replied. “It's quite beautiful. I'm envious that Renya has a place where she belongs.”

“Selenia, you belong in the Snow Lands. Who knows, Cyrus might eventually want Renya to lead here, and I know Grayden will follow her anywhere. You could be in charge of the Snow Lands.”

“I don't have usable magic,” she said.

“If everything works out right, you might.”

“Do you have any magic left?”

He frowned, considering. “Perhaps a little. Cressida—” he cringed at saying the name aloud “—would grant me small amounts of power to do her errands. I haven't used magic since. It feels...tainted to me.”

Understanding shone in Selenia's eyes as she gave him a sympathetic smile. “I know

the feeling.”

“Of course you do. I'm sorry, my dar—Selenia.”

She waved away his apology. “Maybe you're right. Maybe one day we'll have our full powers back—and I'll be able to control mine, and yours will be pure again.”

Before he could respond, Phillippe let out a loud whoop from behind them. Sion turned to see hundreds of soldiers marching towards the gates. The first group entering the city wore breastplates with shiny scales that caught the sunlight. They all carried large pewter tridents. Leading them was King Triston, Sion guessed. He wore similar armor, but his helmet bore the carved figure of an eel. Riding beside him was a woman in a flowing periwinkle gown, a pearl crown perched upon her long hair.

Sion watched as Phillippe flicked his horse's reins and raced towards the pair. As he approached, the woman's face lit up. Sion's jaw dropped slightly as Phillippe pulled a small trinket from his pocket and handed it to her. Though too far to see what it was, Sion noticed the woman's delight as she carefully tucked it into her woven bag.

“Wow. Phillippe has a crush,” Selenia said, her eyes on her brother. “Never thought I'd see him try to woo a woman.”

“Who is she exactly? I know she's obviously from the Tidal Kingdom...”

“Esmeralda, King Triston's sister. She's become good friends with Renya.”

The Tidal soldiers continued to march into the city, Triston riding ahead to speak with Grayden, and his sister moving to chat with Renya. The Tidal princess was clearly an inexperienced rider, and Phillippe trailed after her, watching her carefully.

Behind the Tidal soldiers came the Spring Land army. Dressed in dark green with

daggers at their hips and bows slung over their shoulders, they moved quickly in cadence. Sion had never met Samatra or Thesand, but they rode ahead of their army, greeting Renya and Grayden like old friends. Sion felt a burst of pride, seeing how well his friend had assumed his role as leader. Grayden had come a long way from the scared teenage boy whose head Sion once had to dunk in a trough to sober up. Sion knew Grayden and Renya would make fine rulers, and he vowed to help them however he could.

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More and more soldiers filed into the city, heading for the barracks on the east side of the palace. Sion hung back, letting the leaders talk. After being away for so long, he wasn't sure of his place anymore. No longer a spy, but not quite a member of Grayden's family.

Selenia stayed by his side, and he was grateful for her presence. Somehow, she grounded him, made him feel less alone. Together, they watched as the final wave of soldiers, this group from the Twilight Kingdom, shuffled past. Selenia let out an excited sigh as they marched by.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Queen Kalora brought Julietta. I was hoping to see her again. She's been a good friend to me.” She gestured towards a blonde-haired girl wearing a bright orange dress.

“I'm glad you have someone your age to talk with.”

She scowled. “Age doesn't matter, Sion.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sunlight streamed through the open window of Selenia's borrowed room, accompanied by the melodious chirping of birds. The opulent space boasted gold trim and velvet furnishings, with dark mahogany woodwork adorning everything from the four-poster bed to the wardrobe cabinet. Julietta rummaged through Selenia's trunk, her curiosity heightened.

“What's this large package?” Julietta asked, pulling out a wrapped parcel.

“I completely forgot about that!” Selenia exclaimed, taking the package. She unwrapped a corner, revealing the gown to her friend. “I got it at the market in the city. It's for Renya—a wedding dress.”

Julietta's eyes widened. “Selenia, that's so thoughtful! It's gorgeous,” she said wistfully, carefully inspecting the fabric.

“I'll give it to her tonight. She and Grayden decided to put off the wedding until after the battle. With everything that happened back at the lodge, it slipped my mind.”

“This is the second time you've alluded to something big happening at your home. You can trust me, Selenia.”

“I know. It's just...unbelievable.” Selenia now understood Grayden and Renya's experience. Fated mates were rare, and hers was particularly unorthodox.

“Well, I suppose the story actually begins in the forest near your castle...”

Julietta listened, wide-eyed, as Selenia recounted her encounters with the Murcurial.

“What did she do, Selenia? To make you forget Jurel?”

Selenia gazed out the window, watching the chiffon curtains flutter in the breeze. “I haven't forgotten, exactly. But it's less painful...”

“What happened?”

“She...she unlocked my fated bond.”

“What?” Julietta's voice pitched higher than Selenia had ever heard it.

“Yes...I'm—I'm fated to Sion.”

“Sion? That handsome man you were riding with?”

Jealousy coiled in Selenia's stomach, and she breathed deeply to calm her involuntary reaction to Julietta's comments about her mate.

“Yes. It's awkward because it's only one-sided. Whatever that witch did, it was only on my end. He doesn't feel the bond like I do.”

“Selenia, that must be so difficult, to love someone who doesn't love you.”

Selenia bit her lip. Did she love Sion? She certainly felt attracted to him, wanted him, cared for him...was this love? And did he love her? She knew he desired her, and there were those tender moments when they traveled together...

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Selenia rose and opened it.

“Renya! I thought you'd be busy preparing.”

Renya entered, smiling at Julietta. “It's so nice to see you again, Julietta.” She turned back to Selenia. “No, I don't think there's much left to do at this point. Sion and Grayden are forcing Brandle to summon Cressida as we speak. I just wanted to check on you and see how you're doing.” She gave Selenia a pointed look.

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“I'm doing okay. Really,” Selenia added as Renya's face scrunched in disbelief.

“If you need someone to talk to, I'm always here. And probably someone who understands the most.”

“I appreciate you so much, Renya. I'm so glad we're going to be sisters. Speaking of, I have something I've been meaning to give you.”

Selenia retrieved the wrapped dress from the trunk.

“Selenia, what's this—” Renya gasped as she unwrapped the gown. “Selenia, this is incredible.” Her fingers danced along the rosettes and smoothed the fabric. “But surely, you'll want to keep such a magnificent gown for yourself—”

“It's a Sun Realm wedding dress.”

Renya's jaw dropped, and Selenia noticed a slight sheen in her eyes.

“Selenia, this is so thoughtful. I can't believe it.”

“I wanted you to feel like the princess you are on your wedding day. Here in our world, it's tradition for the bride's mother to make her wedding gown. I knew that wouldn't be the case for you, but I still wanted you to have something special from your first home.”

A few tears trickled down Renya's cheek. Selenia glanced over to see Julietta's eyes were misty as well.

“This is the sweetest gift I've ever received,” Renya said, crushing Selenia in a tight hug.

“I know my brother is quite the gift-giver where you're concerned, so I doubt that. But I'm glad you like it.”

Selenia paced the halls, sleep eluding her. Anxiety coursed through her, fear that something would go wrong tomorrow, that the people she cared about would be taken from her. The memory of Jurel's death before her eyes haunted her, and she envisioned the same fate befalling Grayden, Renya, or...Sion. The image of him lying in a pool of his own blood drove her from her room in a panic.

Though she didn't know where Sion was staying in the palace, she couldn't remain in her room any longer. She thought about waking up Julietta, but she was sharing a room with Kalora and Selenia didn't want to take any chances of messing up the much-needed rest those participating in tomorrow's battle would need.

After perusing a small reading room at the end of the hall, Selenia decided to return to her room, a book tucked under her arm.

She saw his shadow first, rounding the corner. Before his face came into view, she knew it was him. Selenia watched as Sion walked past her bedroom, made a motion to knock on the door, then walked away without following through.

“Sion!” she whispered loudly, rushing down the hall, her bare feet padding against the stone floor.

“Selenia? What are you doing out here?” He turned to face her. He wore only a loose pair of trousers, his chest bare. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, as if he hadn't slept well in days.

“I’m—I’m just scared for tomorrow,” she confessed, closing the distance between them until only a couple of feet separated them. “I’m worried for everyone.”

He reached out as if to stroke her cheek but quickly withdrew his hand. “You don’t need to worry, Selenia. Our plan will work.”

She tilted her face up to him, studying his handsome features in the darkness. “What were you doing outside my room?”

Sion lowered his eyes, shuffling his bare feet slightly.

“Sion?” she pressed, waiting for his answer.

“Honestly, I’m not sure, Selenia. I was worried that this might be my last night in this world, and I couldn’t stop thinking of you, and how much I regret that I can’t feel our bond.”

Selenia took a step closer, their foreheads nearly touching. “How I wish you could,” she murmured, gazing into his dark eyes.

“Believe me, Selenia. I know I might not feel fate-bound to you, but I definitely want you.” His voice was husky, filled with desire. Selenia swallowed hard, looking at the man before her. She’d never felt so desirable, so wanted or needed. Her knees felt weak, and she thought she might collapse from the wanting she felt within.

Sion reached out and stroked her cheek, her skin tingling at his touch. Her insides felt like they were on fire, as if she would die if he stopped touching her. She stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his.

Unlike their hurried and lustful kisses before, this was gentle and tender. She felt Sion explore her mouth, his hands circling her and pulling her hips towards his. She felt

his length hard against her and moaned softly, knowing she was playing a dangerous game with this man who desired her.

She pulled away. “Do you want to come into my room?” she asked shyly. She wasn't sure she was ready for this next step, but she also knew she couldn't say goodbye to him like this.

A pained look crossed his face, and then he ran the back of his fingers along her jawline before tracing her bottom lip with his thumb. “Selenia—I won't take your innocence. Not like this. Not when I can't guarantee that I'll still be alive tomorrow night.”

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Tears stung her eyes at his rejection. She turned to retreat to her room, mortified that she'd thrown herself at him.

Before she could shut the door, he gently grabbed her arm, pulling her back into his warm embrace. “But that doesn't mean I can't be with you tonight in other ways,” he said, his voice low and dark as he moved into her room and closed the door behind them.

The moment the door closed, he moved towards her, kissing her hungrily.

“Fates, you possess me, Selenia Snowden.”

He began trailing warm kisses from her lips down her neck. He breathed in deeply, and Selenia sighed, craving the lavish attention he gave her.

“You are incredible, my darling,” he murmured, slipping her nightgown off her shoulder and kissing her collarbone. “So sweet, so innocent. Pure and good, like the snow in the meadow.”

Her body responded, desire pooling between her thighs. She let him guide her back towards the bed, falling gently backwards. Sion adjusted her so she rested comfortably on the pillow, and he leaned over her, his lips moving along her hairline.

“Sion, I need—I need—”

“What do you need, my darling girl?”

“You,” she gasped, trying to pull him on top of her.

He moved between her thighs, still fully clothed. “I won't take from you, my Selenia. But I can certainly give.”

She met his eyes as he gently began caressing her thigh. Her entire body clenched with need as she whimpered his name.

“Hush, my darling. My sweet one.”

He brought his mouth back to hers, deepening their kiss, exploring her with exquisite precision. Selenia had never been kissed so purposefully before.

She gasped as she felt his fingers trace the outline of her undergarment, and she lifted her hips, giving him access to remove them.

“No, my Little Fox. I won't claim you. Yet.”

She shivered at his phrasing, heat rising as she imagined giving herself to him completely.

He continued to tease her, stroking her lightly before moving up to caress her breasts. She moaned into his mouth, and she felt him smile against her. “Is this what you need?”

She nodded, her voice lost. He raised himself above her, and then without warning, pushed his hips against hers. She could feel him, feel his hardness pressing against her center.

“Sion, what are you doing?” she gasped.

“Shhhhh...tell me if you want me to stop, Selenia.” He tilted his hips slightly and pressed again, and she felt his length hit her in just the right spot.

“Don't leave me. Please don't leave me.” She knew her plea meant more than just asking him to continue and hoped he understood as well.

“I never want to leave this bed, Selenia.”

He gave her another scorching kiss, then thrust against her, this time a bit harder, and circled her nipple with his fingertip.

Suddenly, her entire body seized, and pleasure radiated throughout her. She trembled, not fully understanding what was happening but knowing it was the start of something amazing. She let the sensation course through her, making her toes curl and her fingers tingle.

Sion stopped kissing her. “Open your eyes, Selenia.”

She opened them, not realizing they had closed. Her eyes met Sion's, and she knew, knew with all of her heart...He might not feel their fated bond, but she knew deep down that she was loved.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Renya sat on the worn, ornate chair in her childhood nursery, her stomach a tangled knot of anxiety. The knife Grayden had gifted her was tucked within the bodice of her gown, its weight a constant reminder of the task ahead. Her eyes roamed the room, taking in the care that had once gone into decorating it—now a stark contrast to its current state of disrepair. Broken furniture and scattered debris told a silent story of the destruction wrought by her own mother's obsession.

Cyrus approached, his footsteps echoing in the hollow silence. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, his touch conveying a lifetime of unspoken love and regret. “It'll all be over soon, my Sunshine,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “If you'd rather, I can be the one to end it.”

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The offer was tempting. The burden of what lay ahead weighed heavily on Renya's shoulders. But this was personal—Cressida had threatened the people she loved too many times. The prophecy dictated it must be her. With a deep breath, she squared her shoulders in resolve.

“Thanks, Father,” she said, the word feeling both foreign and right on her tongue, “but I should be the one to do it.”

Cyrus's eyes glistened with unshed tears, and Renya felt her own eyes welling up in response. It was the first time she'd called him 'father,' and the significance of the moment wasn't lost on either of them. Here, in this nursery where she had once been loved and cared for as a baby, the wounds of abandonment began to heal.

Her father knelt before her, his gaze level with hers. “I've always loved you, my Renya,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

Unable to contain herself, Renya slipped from the chair and into her father's waiting arms. His embrace was warm, solid—everything she had yearned for in her darkest moments.

“Shhh...it's okay, my daughter,” Cyrus murmured, stroking her hair. “We have a lot of time to make up for, but I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you.”

For a moment, Renya wanted nothing more than to disappear into that embrace, to hand over this burden to her father. He would do it, she knew, without hesitation. She longed to be a child again, protected and loved, safe in a nursery untouched by the ravages of war and betrayal.

But as she looked around the room—furniture splintered, rubble littering the floor—the harsh reality of their situation came rushing back. There was no true safety, no freedom, as long as Cressida lived. This destruction, this chaos, was the work of her own mother, hellbent on ending her daughter's life to keep and enhance her own magic.

Despite Cressida's occasional moments of softness towards her, Renya knew what had to be done. The stakes were too high, the consequences of failure too dire.

Are you in place, Little Fawn? Grayden's voice echoed in her mind, a soothing force against her frayed nerves.

Yes. How is Beauty behaving?

She knows you're in the tower. If I don't keep her focused, she tries to get to you, but other than that, she's been great.

“Are you talking to your mate?” Cyrus asked, helping Renya to her feet. His eyes held a mix of curiosity and something akin to wistfulness.

“How did you know?”

A sad smile played on his lips. “You get a peaceful look on your face. I could do that with your mother before I broke our bond.”

The mention of their broken bond stirred something in Renya. “Do you ever miss her?” The idea of breaking her bond with Grayden was unfathomable—it was as much a part of her as her arms or her face.

Cyrus sighed deeply, his eyes distant. “I miss what we had before she found that prophecy. We were happy—you, me, and your mother. But on her quest for power,

she lost sight of the most important thing.”

She's here, Renya, Grayden's voice interrupted, laced with concern. Be careful, my love. I'll find you when it's all over.

“She's here,” Renya announced, moving to what remained of the window. In the distance, she could see Cressida astride Brutus, her dark figure a stark contrast against the bright sky. Behind her, an army, thousands strong, marched towards the city gates. Renya's throat tightened, fear gripping her heart as she thought of all the soldiers on their side—her family among them.

It'll be okay. Deep breath. A wave of calm washed over her, and she knew Grayden was trying to steady her nerves. Guilt gnawed at her; he was the one about to face a massive army, yet here he was, comforting her. She just had to kill her mother. The thought sent another painful knot twisting in her stomach.

Cyrus stood behind her, his fingers outstretched as his eyes scanned the horizon. They watched as Cressida landed before the city gate, unaware of the combined forces of the Twilight and Tidal Kingdoms, Snow and Spring Lands, waiting on the other side.

The Shadow Queen raised her hands, seeming to swipe through the air. “What's she doing?” Renya whispered, though she knew she couldn't be heard from their vantage point.

“She's looking for traces of my magic,” Cyrus explained. “Once she found the Snow Lands abandoned, she must have realized I'd cloaked it.”

“Can she break it?”

A hint of pride colored Cyrus's voice. “No. But I'm going to let her think she can.”

They waited, tense, as a burst of dark magic flew from Cressida's fingers. Cyrus shuddered, holding out his hands as waves of golden power radiated back into him. "She'll know where I am now," he said, almost glowing as his power settled. "But if I was successful, she won't know she's walking into a trap. She must have expected something, bringing her army, but hopefully, we'll catch her off guard."

Below, the Shadow Realm soldiers waited for their command. Cressida raised her right hand, and they fell into marching formation.

"It's begun," Cyrus said, his eyes never leaving Cressida as she blasted through the gate with her magic. As the soldiers began to pour into the city, Renya felt bile rise in her throat.

"He'll be fine," Cyrus assured her, correctly interpreting her worried expression. "I've watched your prince, observed him ever since I learned he was your mate. He's strong and capable, and more importantly, if he promises to come back to you, he will." His eyes softened as he looked at her. "I never dreamed I'd meet a man who loves my daughter as much as I do, but I'm so thankful that I have." A mischievous glint entered his eyes. "And I hope to have grandchildren someday. No pressure, though," he added quickly. "You do things in your own time."

Renya's hand went unconsciously to her stomach. She wasn't entirely certain, but she was beginning to suspect she might be carrying Grayden's child. Her cycles had been irregular before coming through the portal, which she'd attributed to stress. She'd also experienced bouts of nausea, but had chalked it up to fear and uncertainty. Now, however, she was noticing subtle changes in her body that left her wondering.

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She pushed the thought aside, hoping Grayden was too preoccupied to peer into her mind. When her emotions ran high, he tended to check in on her, but she didn't feel his familiar presence. He must have attributed her apprehension to their current predicament. Once she was sure, she would tell him. She didn't want to be mistaken, and she knew such news could distract him during the battle. More than that, she knew Grayden wouldn't allow her to do anything remotely dangerous if there was a chance she was carrying their child.

From their vantage point, they watched as the first of the Shadow Queen's soldiers entered the city. As planned, Grayden swooped in on Beauty, landing before them. Renya had asked him to offer the soldiers a chance to retreat, hoping to minimize bloodshed. Though she couldn't hear his words, she watched as he pleaded with the army.

Cressida appeared, shooting a blast of magic towards Grayden. He ducked, and Beauty quickly lifted him to safety. Renya's heart clenched as the soldiers marched on, her hope for a peaceful resolution crumbling.

“I knew she wouldn't allow for a peaceful solution,” Renya said, twirling her engagement ring. “But I really hoped she would.”

The air filled with the sounds of battle—clashing metal, shouts, and battle cries creating a ruckus that hung heavy in the air. Renya shuddered, knowing each sound potentially represented a life lost.

Cressida weaved above the city on Brutus, shouting orders and commanding her troops as she slowly made her way towards the tower. Though Renya couldn't make

out specific soldiers, her heart raced knowing Phillippe, Triston, Charly, and Sion were down there. She could see bursts of magic that she knew came from Kalora and her aunt.

Her mind wandered to Selenia, likely huddled in the library, sick with worry over Sion. She imagined Julietta and Esmeralda comforting her, though Esmeralda would no doubt be equally concerned for Phillippe. The thought of Sion finally being able to feel his bond with Selenia once Cressida was gone helped strengthen Renya's resolve.

“Can you tell who's winning?” Renya asked, her eyes straining to make sense of the chaos below.

Cyrus shook his head. “They're holding steady. Our side hasn't pushed her army back, but they haven't penetrated deeper into the city either.” His expression was pained, and Renya realized he loved these lands as much as Grayden loved the Snow Lands. With a pang, she acknowledged that this was her realm too, and she felt the horror her father felt as the darkly-clad soldiers tried to infiltrate the streets.

She watched, helpless, as a group of soldiers broke past several Tidal Kingdom warriors and set the communal garden ablaze. Her fingers clenched, teeth grinding as she took in the destruction.

“It won't be long now,” Cyrus warned, his eyes fixed on the approaching figure of Brutus. The dragon was close enough now that Renya could see his gleaming eyes and scales reflecting the harsh sunlight. Cressida, clad in a black skin-tight leather suit with a cape trailing behind her, circled the dilapidated tower.

“Renya, get back,” Cyrus ordered through gritted teeth.

A moment later, Cressida appeared in the large stone window, stepping into the room. A chill ran down Renya's spine as dread overcame her.

“Well, isn't this fitting,” Cressida crooned, her eyes taking in the destroyed room. “It's right that we should end it here, where it all began.”

“It began before this, Cressy,” Cyrus replied, his voice tight. “The second you found those scrolls, you set this whole cycle of events in motion.”

“Don't. Call. Me. That.” Cressida's face turned ashen, her body tensing visibly. Her elaborately braided hair and dark, menacing makeup gave her an otherworldly, threatening appearance.

“Why not? It's what I called you before.”

“Before you deceived me and broke our bond.” Cressida's eyes bulged, her nostrils flaring.

Cyrus chuckled, his arms crossed lazily against his chest in a show of false nonchalance. “Well, are you here to make the trade? Your cousin for all the magic you've siphoned out of this world?”

A cruel laugh escaped Cressida's lips. “You fool. As if I would go to any trouble to save my idiot cousin. Keep him, kill him, it matters not. I'm here to reclaim my daughter.” She made a motion with her fingers, as if to summon Renya, but Cyrus was faster. Golden strands of his magic shot out, binding Cressida.

She broke free with ease, laughing at the attempt. “Your magic is no match for mine.”

This time, she moved with lightning speed, freezing Cyrus where he stood. The surprise in his eyes told Renya this was unexpected. He struggled to break free, managing only to move his head slightly.

“I have a few more tricks up my sleeve since we last met,” Cressida taunted. “Did

you ever wonder why Brandle was captured so easily?" The cruel smile she flashed made Renya take an involuntary step back.

"You took Brandle's magic?" Renya asked, finally finding her voice.

Cressida ignored the question, her attention laser-focused on Renya. "Daughter, come to me. Let's destroy your father once and for all. We'll take his magic, and then move on to even greater things."

"Yes, mother," Renya replied, feigning obedience as she moved towards Cressida. But before she could take more than a few steps, she found herself suddenly paralyzed.

Confusion swirled in Renya's mind as Cressida approached. What had happened? Why was she frozen?

Cressida grabbed Renya's arm roughly, pushing up her sleeve. "You thought you could fool me?" she spat, dropping Renya's arm as if it burned her. She began pacing the tower, her movements sharp and agitated. Horror rose in Renya's throat as she realized what her mother had seen—her mating mark, sparkling in the light that filtered through the gaps in the ceiling.

"Your bond was never broken," Cressida accused, snatching a broken picture frame from the dresser and smashing it on the floor. Glass shards scattered everywhere, a fitting metaphor for the shattered façade of their deception. She turned to Cyrus, fury blazing in her eyes. "You deceived me!"

Cyrus remained silent, still unable to move. Renya could see his eyes darting frantically, searching for a way out of his former mate's hold.

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While Cressida's attention was fixed on Cyrus, Renya took a deep, centering breath. Her lungs expanded as she tried to calm herself and find a way out of this precarious situation.

Little Fawn? What's wrong? Grayden's concerned voice filled her mind.

Grayden! She reached for him desperately. I need you to help me like you did in the Twilight Kingdom. Calm me, help me center my magic.

To her relief, he didn't question her request. She felt his presence immediately, in that special place inside her, helping to regulate her breathing and slow her racing heart.

You can do this, Renya, he assured her. Do this, and then we'll get married.

The image of herself walking towards him, ready to pledge her soul for eternity, flooded her mind. A surge of emotion welled up within her, raw and powerful. Renya felt her magic stirring, like a slumbering beast awakening.

She closed her eyes, focusing inward. The world around her seemed to fade away—Cressida's menacing presence, Cyrus's frozen form—all of it receded as Renya delved deeper into her magical core.

There, she found a flare of energy, swirling and churning. It was wild, untamed, waiting to be harnessed. With Grayden's steadying presence as her anchor, Renya reached out to touch this whirlwind of power.

The instant she made contact, it was as if a dam had burst. Magic flooded through her

veins, setting every nerve ending alight. She gasped, her eyes flying open, glowing with a strange light.

Cressida, sensing the change, whirled to face her daughter. “What are you—”

But Renya was beyond hearing. The magic continued to build, causing the air around her to crackle with energy. Her hair began to float, defying gravity, as if she were underwater.

“No!” Cressida snarled, realizing what was happening. She raised her hands, dark tendrils of her own magic reaching out to subdue Renya once more.

But it was too late.

With a primal scream that seemed to shake the very foundations of the earth, Renya released her pent-up magic. It exploded outward in a dazzling burst of light and color, shattering Cressida's hold like glass.

The force of it knocked Cressida backward, sending her stumbling. Waves of magical energy rippled through the air, causing the tower to sway as if caught in a strong wind.

As the initial burst subsided, Renya stood tall, her entire body suffused with a soft, pulsing glow. Tendrils of her magic, visible now as shimmering threads of light, wrapped protectively around both her and Cyrus.

Cressida's eyes widened in shock as Renya's magic continued to push against her own, slowly but surely freeing Cyrus from his paralysis.

“Impossible,” Cressida whispered, a hint of fear creeping into her voice for the first time.

Cyrus, feeling control return to his limbs, flexed his fingers experimentally. His gaze, filled with a mixture of awe and pride, never left Renya.

With a final surge of willpower, Renya's magic gave one last push. The paralysis spell shattered completely, releasing Cyrus from its grip, and in turn, moved to Cressida and bound her.

“Renya! You did it!” Cyrus exclaimed, his chin held high, eyes gleaming with pride. He rushed to embrace her, keeping his gaze fixed warily on Cressida. He smoothed Renya's hair and placed a tender, fatherly kiss on the top of her head.

Renya, still pulsing with magical energy, returned her father's embrace. She turned to face her mother, her eyes now holding a new strength and determination.

“It's time,” he said softly, nodding towards Cressida, who was struggling within the searing bonds of Renya's magic. She sputtered, managing to free her mouth.

“Renya!” Cressida cried, desperation coloring her voice. “You are my daughter! Don't listen to him! Assist me! Release me!”

With trembling hands, Renya pulled the dagger from her bodice. For the first time in her life, she saw genuine fear flash across Cressida's face.

“Don't do this, Renya,” Cressida pleaded, her voice softer now. “I love you, in my own way. Let me go. Let me be a mother to you.”

“Stop it, Cressy,” Cyrus warned, moving to stand behind Renya in silent support. “Don't listen to her, Sunshine.”

Renya took a deep, steadying breath and positioned herself directly in front of Cressida. She looked up at her mother, who stood slightly taller due to her high-

heeled boots. The dagger felt heavy in her hand as she raised it, ready to end her mother's tyranny.

“Killing me won't bring the magic back,” Cressida hissed as Renya brought the knife down. The words caused Renya to hesitate, the blade stopping mere centimeters from Cressida's chest.

“Ending your rule will restore our world,” Cyrus growled, glaring at his former mate.

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Cressida's laughter was hollow, tinged with desperation. "I admit, I've been siphoning off magic from all corners of our world. But killing me won't restore the balance."

Renya's eyes darted to her father, her fingers sweaty and struggling to maintain their grip on the dagger. Uncertainty clouded her thoughts.

"It's a trick, Renya," Cyrus warned, his voice tight with tension.

Renya adjusted her grip on the dagger's handle and brought it to Cressida's throat. She pressed the tip in slightly, causing a small bead of blood to form on her mother's pale skin. "What do you mean?" she demanded, her voice trembling despite her attempt at firmness.

"You're a fool, Cyrus," Cressida spat, her eyes never leaving Renya's. "You've only believed what you've wanted to believe. I haven't been destroying our world—I've been trying to save it."

Chapter Thirty-Six

The thick smell of smoke and ash filled Sion's nostrils as he ducked behind a crumbling golden wall. The sounds of battle raged around him—clashing metal, agonized cries, and the thunderous beating of dragon wings overhead. He took a moment to catch his breath, his hand instinctively going to the hilt of his sword.

Selenia, he thought, his mind drifting to the fierce, auburn-haired woman he'd left behind in the palace. The memory of their last embrace, the softness of her lips, the warmth of her body against his, gave him a renewed surge of energy. He had to

survive this—for her.

A deafening roar shook the air, and Sion peered around the wall to see Grayden atop Beauty, swooping down on a group of Shadow Realm soldiers. The sight of his friend in action filled Sion with a mix of pride and determination. Despite their recent tensions, Sion knew he would give his life to protect Grayden and the kingdom they both loved.

“Sion!” Phillippe's voice cut through the chaos from behind him. “We need you at the eastern gate!”

With a nod, Sion sprinted from his cover, weaving through the battle-torn streets of the Sun Realm. Golden tiles, once pristine, were now stained with blood and ash. As he ran, he dispatched two enemy soldiers with swift, precise strikes of his sword. Years of training at the mountain camp had honed his skills to a master's level.

Reaching the eastern gate, Sion found Phillippe and a handful of Snow Land soldiers struggling to hold back a surge of Shadow Realm forces. Without hesitation, he threw himself into the fray, his blade singing as it cut through the air.

“Glad you could join us,” Phillippe grunted, dodging a blow from a particularly large opponent.

“Wouldn't miss it for the world,” Sion replied, a grim smile on his face as he engaged three enemies at once.

The battle raged on, a brutal dance of steel and magic. Sion lost track of time, his world narrowing to the next opponent, the next threat. He caught glimpses of his allies throughout the fight—Triston's fierce determination as he wielded his trident, Charly's graceful fury as he cut down foes with his dual blades, and always, Grayden's commanding presence atop Beauty.

A piercing screech drew Sion's attention skyward. Cressida's smaller dragon was clawing at the city walls, its scales gleaming with an unnatural, dark sheen. As he watched, Triston charged towards the beast, his trident raised high.

“Triston, no!” Sion shouted, but his warning came too late.

The dragon's tail whipped around, catching Triston square in the chest and sending him flying. His trident remained lodged in the creature's hide as Triston hit the ground hard, rolling to a stop several yards away.

Sion rushed to Triston's side, helping the dazed king to his feet. “Are you alright?”

Triston nodded, grimacing as he rubbed his shoulder. “I'll live. But that beast—it's unlike anything I've ever faced.”

Before Sion could respond, a wave of Shadow Realm soldiers descended upon them. Triston grabbed a knife from his boot, and back to back, Sion and Triston fought off the onslaught, their movements perfectly synchronized despite never having fought together before.

As the last attacker fell, Sion felt a searing pain in his side. He looked down to see a deep gouge, blood already soaking through his tunic. When did that happen? he wondered, the adrenaline fading enough for the pain to truly register.

“Sion!” Triston's alarmed voice seemed distant. “You're hurt!”

Sion tried to wave off the concern, but his vision was already growing fuzzy. He stumbled, falling to his knees on the golden street. As consciousness began to slip away, he saw Grayden swooping down on Beauty, concern etched on his face.

“Grayden,” Sion managed to croak out before darkness claimed him.

Sion drifted in and out of consciousness, aware of movement and the rush of wind. He felt the solid warmth of Beauty beneath him, Grayden's voice urging the dragon on. Then, the clamor of the infirmary, hands lifting him onto a table, Dimitri's calm commands as he worked to stem the bleeding.

Through it all, one thought persisted: Selenia. He couldn't leave her, not now, not when they were so close to understanding the bond between them. With every ounce of strength he had left, Sion clung to life, to the promise of a future with the woman who had captured his heart.

As Dimitri's healing magic flowed through him, soothing the pain and knitting flesh back together, Sion's mind cleared enough to take in his surroundings. The infirmary was a flurry of activity—wounded soldiers on every available surface, healers rushing between them. And there, across the room, was Selenia.

His heart swelled at the sight of her, hair pulled back, an apron over her dress as she assisted with the wounded. Even in the midst of chaos, she radiated compassion and strength. Sion wanted to call out to her, to tell her he was alright, but his voice failed him.

As darkness began to creep in once more, Sion's last conscious thought was a prayer—not for himself, but for Selenia, for Grayden, for all those he loved. Let them be safe, he pleaded silently. Let this war end, so we can all find peace.

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With that final wish, Sion succumbed to the healing sleep his body so desperately needed, unaware of the momentous events unfolding in the tower above.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The air crackled with magic and the clash of steel as Grayden soared above the chaos on Beauty's back. The smell of smoke mingled with the metallic tang of blood, creating a nauseating cloud that hung over the battlefield. Suddenly, Phillippe's voice cut through the chaos, urgent and sharp.

“Grayden, behind you!”

Instinct took over. Grayden yanked on Beauty's harness, the dragon responding instantly to his touch. They swerved in a tight arc, the scorching heat of a flaming arrow singeing Grayden's ear as it whooshed past. The projectile exploded against a nearby building, showering debris onto the combatants below.

Before Grayden could even catch his breath to thank his brother, his eyes locked onto Triston. The Tidal King was surrounded, fighting hand-to-hand against five Shadow Realm soldiers. Their dark armor seemed to absorb the sunlight, making them look like living shadows as they pressed their advantage.

“Beauty, to Triston!” Grayden commanded, leaning low over the dragon's neck as they dove.

The moment Beauty's claws touched the golden cobblestones, Grayden leapt from her back. He hit the ground rolling, unsheathing his sword in one fluid motion. Beauty

took off again with a thunderous beat of her wings, charging towards another group of fighters who scattered in terror at her approach.

Grayden's blade sounded loudly as he engaged the three soldiers on Triston's right. The clash of metal on metal rang out as he dodged a blow, ducked under another, and thrust his sword through a gap in his opponent's armor. The man fell with a gurgled cry, and Grayden spun to face the next threat.

Beside him, Triston dispatched his remaining two attackers with a series of quick, brutal strikes. As the last body hit the ground, Grayden turned to his ally, noting the sweat and grime that streaked Triston's face.

“What happened to your trident?” Grayden asked, his eyes darting around for new threats as he spoke.

Triston rubbed his shoulder, wincing. “I made the mistake of trying to take on the smaller dragon,” he admitted, gesturing beyond the city gates. “It's lodged in the beast, and I had to retreat.”

Following Triston's gesture, Grayden saw the dragon in question. It snarled and clawed at the wall surrounding the city, its scales gleaming with an unnatural, oily sheen. The beast's eyes glowed with malevolent intelligence as it sought a way past the defenses.

Grayden raised his fingers to his lips, ready to whistle for Beauty, but stopped short as he saw Agatha approach the rampaging dragon. The air around her crackled with power, her magic manifesting as arcs of energy that danced across her skin.

In an instant, a shadow darker than the blackest night enveloped both Agatha and the dragon. The darkness was absolute, hiding whatever confrontation was taking place within its depths. A chill ran down Grayden's spine, and he turned away, his thoughts

immediately going to Renya.

“Grayden!”

The desperate cry cut through his worry. Grayden whirled around, searching for the source. His heart dropped as he spotted Sion sprawled in the middle of the street, a deep gouge in his side staining the golden tiles crimson.

Without hesitation, Grayden sprinted to his friend's side. He hoisted Sion up, grunting with the effort, and whistled sharply for Beauty. The dragon landed beside them with a ground-shaking thud, her eyes wide with concern.

Grayden knew Beauty couldn't carry them both, and he had promised Renya he'd stay with the dragon for protection. But seeing Sion's ashen face and the blood soaking through his tunic, Grayden knew he had no choice.

“Beauty, quickly!” he commanded, carefully draping Sion over the dragon's back. “Take him to the palace, to Dimitri!”

He gave Beauty an encouraging pat, watching as she took to the sky with his wounded friend. Guilt and worry warred in his chest—guilt over how he had treated Sion when he learned of his relationship with Selenia, and worry for his sister should Sion not survive.

Pushing aside his tumultuous thoughts, Grayden turned back to the battle. He sprinted towards the castle, his eyes constantly scanning for civilians who might have been caught in the crossfire. The streets were a maze of destruction—buildings scorched and crumbling, golden tiles cracked and stained with blood.

As he ran, Grayden couldn't avoid seeing the fallen soldiers that littered the ground. Each face, friend or foe, was a stark reminder of the cost of this conflict. He took a

deep, pained breath but forced himself to keep moving. War always brought casualties, but the weight of responsibility pressed heavily on his shoulders. These men had joined this fight under his command, and their lives were the price of his decisions.

Reaching the courtyard, Grayden's eyes immediately darted to the tower. Golden light radiated from the room where he knew Renya faced her greatest challenge. The absence of black mist loosened the knot in his stomach slightly, but the battle was far from over.

A wet nudge against his hand startled him. Beauty stood beside him, seeking comfort or reassurance. In any other situation, Grayden might have chuckled at the dragon's behavior—so fierce in battle, yet so gentle now. It was clear that Renya had worked her magic on Beauty, just as she had on him. He gave the dragon a distracted pat, but his breath caught in his throat when he saw the amount of Sion's blood staining her scales.

Every instinct screamed at him to run to Renya, to ensure her safety. But he knew her father would protect her, and right now, he had another duty to fulfill. He needed to look after Selenia, which meant ensuring Sion's safety.

With a heavy heart but resolute determination, Grayden strode towards the main hall, now converted into a makeshift infirmary. The scene that greeted him was one of organized chaos—healers rushing between patients, the air thick with the scent of medicinal herbs and the sounds of pain and comfort intermingling.

His eyes widened as he spotted Selenia, her hair pulled back and an apron over her dress, assisting a man with a broken leg. Julietta worked beside her, wrapping the injury as Selenia held the man still, whispering words of comfort. Pride swelled in Grayden's chest.

Part of him wanted to scold her for disobeying his orders to stay safe, but he held his tongue. Selenia's heart was pure, her desire to help others a fundamental part of who she was. If nursing the injured brought her purpose in this dark time, he wouldn't stand in her way.

From Selenia's calm demeanor, Grayden surmised that she was unaware of Sion's condition. The thought of the agony she would feel upon learning of his injury made Grayden's heart ache. He knew all too well the pain of seeing a loved one hurt.

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Scanning the room, Grayden's gaze fell on Dimitri. The healer was hunched over a table, working diligently on a patient surrounded by bloody linens. With a jolt, Grayden realized it was Sion. He sprinted over, catching Dimitri's eye.

“He'll survive, provided there's no infection,” Dimitri said, his voice strained with exhaustion, dark circles prominent under his eyes.

Relief flooded through Grayden. “Thank you,” he said fervently. “Twice now you've performed miracles to save my family and friends. You shall be rewarded.”

Dimitri shook his head, patting Sion's unconscious form on the shoulder. “No reward needed,” he insisted before moving to tend to another patient.

With Sion's immediate safety assured, Grayden reached out through his bond with Renya. The emotions he sensed from her—uncertainty and confusion—puzzled him. Concern mounting, he made his way to the stairs, taking them two at a time in his haste to reach her.

As he burst through the door to the tower room, sword drawn, the scene before him was not what he expected. Cressida, bound in the corner; Renya, standing before her with her dagger hanging loosely at her side; Cyrus, his expression a mix of concern and contemplation. The air was thick with tension, and a shiver of unease ran down Grayden's spine.

“What's going on?” he demanded, looking between Cyrus and Renya.

Cressida's voice, dripping with false sweetness, burned his nerves. “Ah, if it isn't my

daughter's mate!"

Ignoring the Shadow Queen, Grayden moved to Renya's side. "Renya, do what you came here to do," he encouraged, offering his unwavering support.

But to his shock, Renya dropped her dagger. The clatter of metal on stone seemed to echo in the suddenly silent room.

"I knew you couldn't do it, daughter," Cressida sighed, relief evident in her voice.

The word 'daughter' from Cressida's lips sent a wave of fury through Grayden. His entire body tensed, fists clenching at his sides. How dare she claim that title after all she had done—trying to kill Renya as a child, kidnapping her, attempting to steal her magic, nearly killing him. If Renya found the task too difficult, Grayden would gladly finish it himself.

He moved forward, raising his sword, only to find himself suddenly immobilized by Renya's golden bonds.

"Renya, what are you doing?" he asked, his eyes darting between her and Cressida, searching for understanding.

"We can't kill her, Grayden," Renya explained, her voice tight with emotion. "Killing her won't fix our world."

Confusion and frustration wrestled within him. "What do you mean? Of course it will! She's been stealing magic!"

Cyrus exhaled heavily. "Renya's right, son. The balance was already broken before she began empowering herself."

Grayden struggled against the magical restraints, his mind reeling. “So? Either way, it doesn't matter.”

Guilt flashed across Renya's face. “I'll release you, but you have to promise me you won't touch her until we figure out what to do with her.”

“Oh, touch me, please,” Cressida mocked, and Grayden felt a surge of murderous intent. If he were free, he would have ended her with his bare hands then and there.

Taking a measured breath to calm himself, Grayden met Renya's eyes. “I promise you, Renya.”

She studied him for a moment before releasing her magical hold. As the bonds dissipated, Grayden fought the urge to lunge at Cressida, honoring his word to Renya.

“We need to restrain her permanently,” Renya said, eyeing Cressida warily. “I don't trust her.”

Cyrus nodded. “There's a spell we can use, but I can't do it alone. I'll need your help to make any kind of permanent bindings.”

“She needs to call off her soldiers, too,” Renya added.

Frustration mounting, Grayden crossed his arms. “Will someone please explain to me what's going on?”

“Renya, I'll take her down to the library,” Cyrus interjected. “There's a secure room there that should hold her for a while. I'll make sure she puts a stop to her troops first.”

Grayden snorted, memories of his own time in that room surfacing. “I remember that

blasted room.”

As Cyrus wrapped his magic around Cressida and disappeared with her, Grayden turned to Renya, his expression a mix of concern and confusion.

“Now please explain why your dagger isn't down that witch's throat.”

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Renya took a deep breath, her eyes meeting Grayden's with an intensity that made him pause. "I went to do it, and she said something that stopped me. Remember Kalora's tales about the first fae? And how the magic faded as the Gods left? Cressida said she knows how to bring them back, how to restore the world to what it once was."

As Renya continued to explain Cressida's claims about gathering magic to restore the world's balance, Grayden listened with growing amazement and skepticism. The implications were staggering, but could they trust Cressida's words?

"This is true, Little Fawn," he said gently, "but there's nothing we can do about that. We need to kill Cressida, and then the magic she took will return to wherever it came from."

She sighed. "Are you willing to live in a world where fated bonds have died out? Think of what we share. Can you deny that experience to others? What if there's a way to restore everything? What if we could restore your magic completely? Allow Esmeralda to find her fated mate? Allow Sion's bond to your sister to materialize? For Julietta to regain her powers? For the snow in your lands to cover the ground completely? The glaciers to stop melting? Are you willing to ignore the possibility that we could make it right?"

"Renya, I'd love to believe that's true. But the prophecy says that—"

"Yes, I know," she interrupted. "That the sun betrays. But that's already happened. My father betrayed my mother when he broke their bond and hid me away. What if this entire time, the prophecy had nothing to do with Cressida? What if it was all

about bringing back what's been lost to our world? Grayden, please.”

Looking into her eyes, Grayden saw the desperation there, the burning desire to fix a broken world, to save everyone in it. His Renya, with her pure heart and generous spirit, wearing her ferocity like a cape. He didn't trust Cressida, but he trusted Renya with his life.

“If this is what you need to do, Little Fawn, I support you,” he said finally. “I'll be there with you each step of the way. I just have one demand before we go gallivanting off on another adventure.”

“What's that?” she asked cautiously.

A smile tugged at Grayden's lips, love and admiration for this remarkable woman overwhelming him. “For Fates' sake, would you marry me already?”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Renya's heart fluttered as she gazed ahead, her eyes locking with Grayden's. He stood at the altar, a vision of regal charm in his pressed tunic, his usually unruly hair miraculously tamed for the occasion. A smile tugged at her lips. I'll have plenty of time tonight to mess it up, she thought mischievously.

Beside her, Cyrus walked with measured steps, ready to give her away to Grayden. The tradition was foreign to both men, but Renya had insisted her father walk her to the altar. Cyrus had agreed without hesitation, eager to give Renya whatever she desired. His dedication was a poignant reminder of the time they'd lost, and now he embodied every bit the doting father she never knew she was missing.

A sense of euphoria washed over Renya as she realized she no longer needed to look over her shoulder or fear Cressida tearing her away from Grayden. Her mother—if she could still be called that—was bound deep within the sublevels of the lodge, her

magic neutralized. She'd been forced to give up all the magic she acquired over the past twenty-five years, and little by little, fae around their world regained some of their powers. But, disappointingly, nothing else seemed to change. No new fated bonds came forward, and Grayden's lands still warmed.

The sole surprise had been Julietta. Her full powers had surged back the moment Cressida released them, revealing that they had been stolen in Julietta's infancy. Renya's gaze drifted to the far side of the forest, where Julietta sat with Kalora. She smiled, warmed by the sight of mother and daughter bonding as Kalora guided Julietta through her newfound abilities.

As they continued down the long, rose-lined pathway, Renya's eyes swept over the gathering of friends and family. Samatra and Thesand had made the journey, as had Margot from the Shadow Realm, accompanied by her son who had chosen flight over fighting in Cressida's war.

Passing Esmeralda and Phillippe, Renya noted the exquisite flower headpiece adorning Esmeralda's hair. Recalling Phillippe's earlier presence in the garden, Renya's lips curved in a knowing smile. It seemed her brother was actively pursuing the Tidal princess's affections.

When they approached Sion, he offered a respectful bow. Though his side remained bandaged, the contentment in his eyes was unmistakable. Selenia stood at his side, her unwavering presence a testament to their deepening bond. Both had struggled with the news of Cressida's survival—Sion yearning for her death to erase his scars, and Selenia's anger perhaps surpassing even his. Yet today, their faces shone with genuine happiness.

A gentle sniffle caught Renya's attention. To her left, Doria dabbed at her eyes with a delicate handkerchief, overcome with emotion.

As Cyrus guided her past her aunt and Tumwalt, they finally reached the altar. Before

her stood Grayden, with Almory at his side, resplendent in ceremonial robes that struck Renya as a curious blend of solemnity and whimsy. He looked like a cross between the Pope and a circus performer, and Renya held in her giggle the best she could.

I don't know what a pope or a circus is, Little Fawn, but I trust you'll tell me later, Grayden's amused voice echoed in her mind.

Hush, we need to pay attention, she chided gently, turning to face Almory.

The ceremony was brief, spanning less than five minutes, which suited Renya perfectly. While she understood the significance for Grayden of being married in the same spot as his parents, she felt as though their bond had been cemented since the moment she stepped through the portal.

As Almory pronounced them man and wife, a hush fell over the snowy forest. All eyes turned towards the left of the altar, and Renya's breath caught in her throat at the sight.

Three elkten stood there, majestic and serene, as if they were honored guests at the wedding.

Grayden's hand found hers, their fingers intertwining as they gazed at the ethereal creatures.

“Our union has been ordained since the beginning,” he whispered, his breath warm against her ear, “and it will last until the end.”