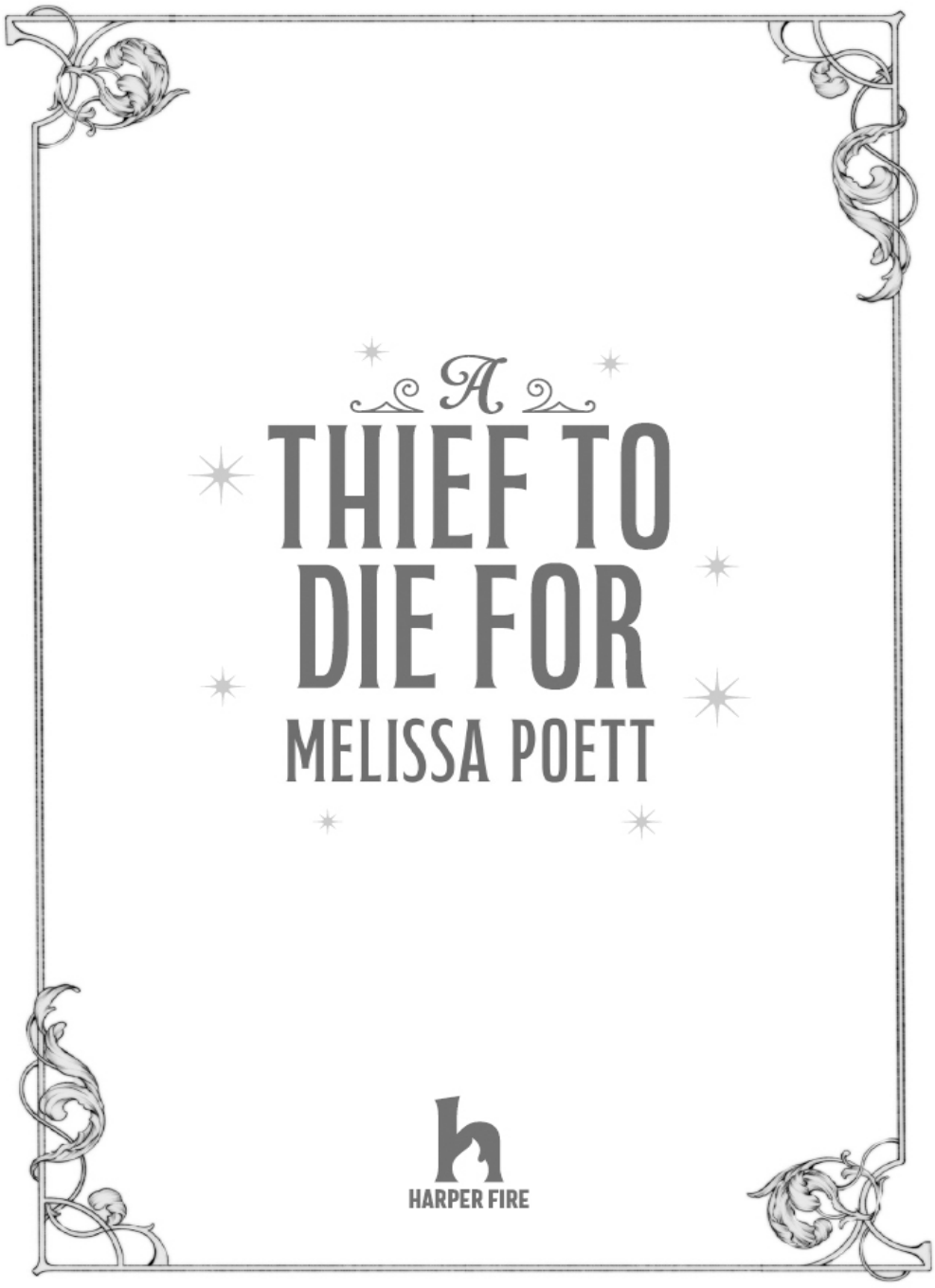

A
THIEF TO
DIE FOR
MELISSA POETT
A SOLDIER WITH MAGIC.
A THIEF WITH A SECRET.
A SPARK THAT COULD BURN
THEIR WORLDS DOWN.



A THIEF TO DIE FOR

MELISSA POETT

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Dedication

For those in need of a revolution

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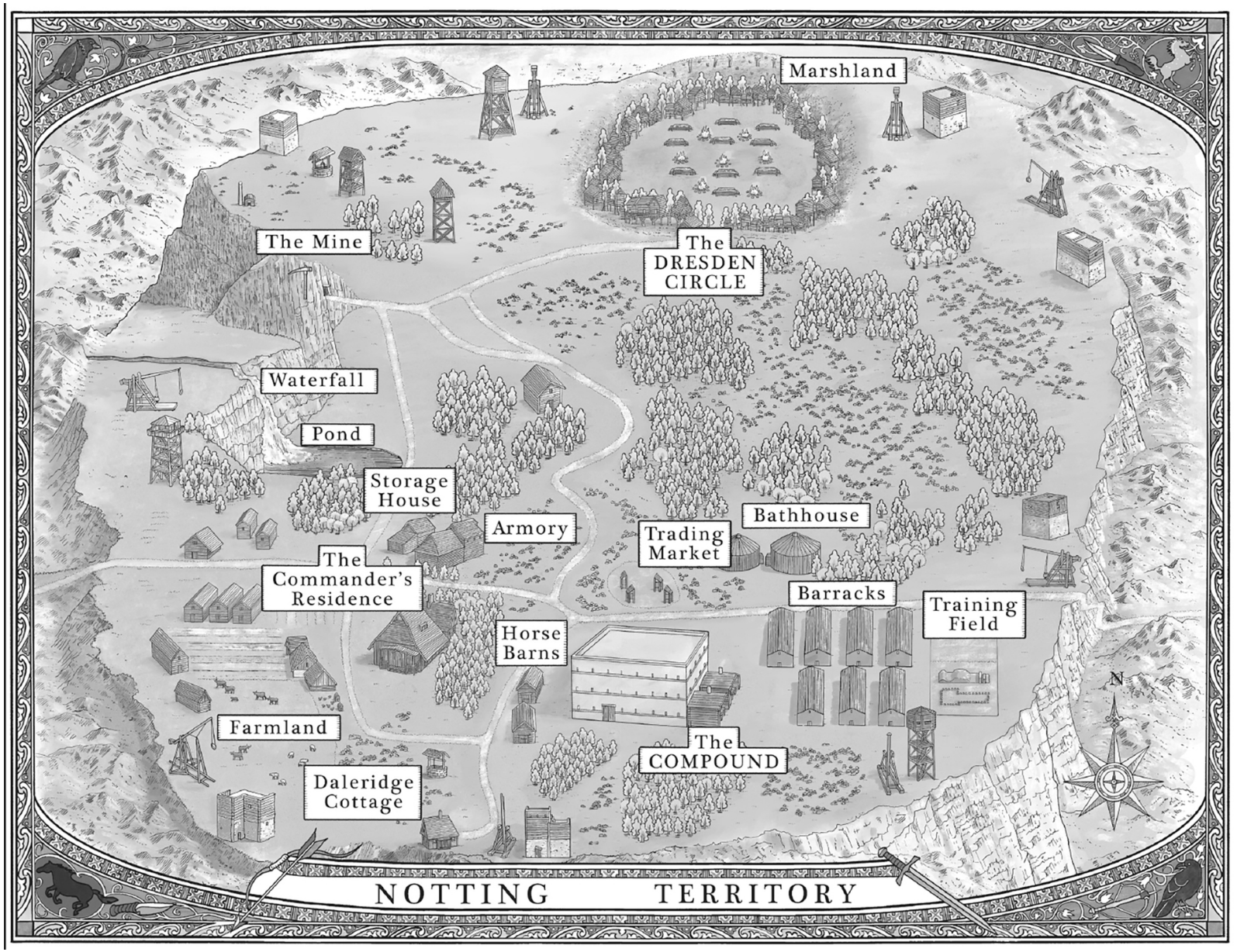

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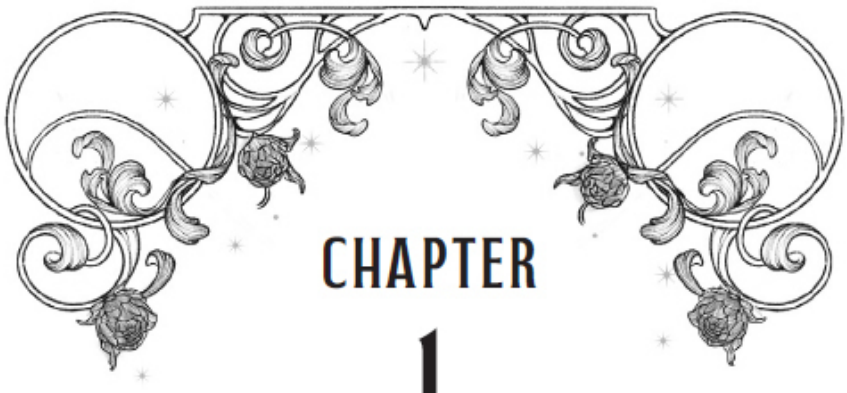

CHAPTER 1

MARIAN

The books left over from the old world warned of the apocalypse: meteors, plagues, a sky choked with ash. An endless number of ways to make humanity clutch its failing heart. But where are the stories anticipating what came after?

Was it supposed to look like this?

As I ride my horse along the edge of the shallow cliff, I glance at the mix of trees and unassuming open plains below. The raised, bowl-like shape of our territory makes our lookout posts and catapults stand out like pointed jewels mounted on a crown – a warning to any would-be raiders – vagabonds – that they'd be stupid to try climbing the rocky elevation.

If only it would stop them.

'Marian! You're finally here,' Lucky says as my horse trots up to him. He's seated on a tree stump, nowhere near the post he's supposed to be manning. His sword isn't even on his waist. 'Please tell me you brought water.'

'Did you not bring something to drink for your shift?' I flick open my leather satchel filled with morning field reports in hopes that maybe, just this once, he'll hand me his report quickly. We both know we shouldn't loiter together.

His lanky body nearly falls off his stump as he reaches for something on the ground. 'I did, but it's rotten.' He thrusts his goat-leather water skin in the air. 'Go on. Taste it.'

My lip curls at the sour odour. ‘No, thanks. And – sorry, I didn’t bring water with me.’ Not when I can hit all six active lookout posts along the perimeter and return to the compound in under an hour. I take in the view of the valley in the middle of our territory, filled with the Dresden camp. Our mine workers. I suppose the trees are thick enough here that if I have to linger, this isn’t the worst place.

Lucky huffs. ‘It doesn’t help that I might be dying.’

My gaze jerks back to him. Lucky rubs his forehead, pushing back his receding red hair, and I notice his pale skin does look paler than normal. ‘Dying from what? Thirst?’ He’s still reasonably young – not even a decade older than my eighteen years.

‘No, it’s more than that. There’s this spot. And … well, I guess, if you insist, I can show you. I’ll just need to take off –’ He pushes to his feet.

‘Stop!’ I command, then bite back a curse. ‘You know full well the only thing I’ve been trained in is how to mortally wound you. I’m no help for that kind of stuff.’

Not to mention, the Commander would shoot us with our own arrows if he saw his guardsmen talking like this.

Actually, he’d probably only shoot Lucky. The leader of the Notting Militia would have *other* more humiliating punishments for his daughter.

‘Just … see the medic about that,’ I say.

‘Ah, Grendle won’t do anything,’ he grumbles. ‘Says I see her too often. But I *could* say’ – his eyes turn hopeful – ‘that *you* sent me.’

I grimace. Our medic is a disorienting cross between a toad whisperer and a spiteful old bat – this will likely come back to haunt me. ‘Sure. If you think it’ll help.’

He nods, and I return my attention to the Dresden homes below us. The glorified tents and makeshift treehouses huddle together like a ring of mushrooms. But with most adults working at the mine, only children are walking around the communal firepits in the middle. ‘Report?’

‘Ah, sorry, Mare … I haven’t filled it out yet.’

I inhale. Of course. ‘Just give it to me verbally, Lucky.’

‘Okay. Two lone vagabonds got a little close to the northeast border at dawn. I sent a few warning arrows and a bucket of rocks from the catapult, and they tore off. But then a caravan of traders went by at noon. No contact. An hour later, I saw a pillar of smoke to the east.’ He goes quiet. ‘Looks like the traders got bit.’

Bit, as in attacked or murdered for their possessions – a grim consequence of the Republic being ruled by raiding vagabonds, which is an ever-present threat.

Unless, of course, you prove your worth as a worker to a protected settlement, like us in Notting, and are granted shelter. But even those havens are a dying breed.

I keep my face carefully blank, but that doesn't mean I don't feel the tragedy of it. In fact, I tuck it away, holding it close as a reminder of why the Dresden need to stay here under the militia's protection. No matter what the cost.

'Okay,' I say to Lucky, 'I've got to move on.'

'See you la–'

I throw him a sharp look, cutting him off. He knows better than to say that out loud.

My horse follows the dirt perimeter trail. On the left, the land drops off into a small cliff, and another quick scan of the plain below reveals no travellers. But that can change quickly, since we skirt the bomb-destroyed badlands and summer is settling in. This time of year, vagabonds are always on the move. It means everyone else has to hunt and scavenge while constantly being ready to flee.

Very quickly, a black shadow catches my eye. A raven. It swoops to a balding branch ahead, and I veer further into the trees for a better look. It's Benedict and there's something in his beak.

After tying my horse to the hitching post, I hide between the horse barns, remove some dried berries from my pocket, and toss them to the ground. A few guardsmen wander around doing chores and patrols, but they're not paying attention to me. Benedict hops closer.

'And what treasure have you brought me today?' I whisper.

His black beady eyes blink at me, then he drops something on the ground not far from my feet. It's a hairpin.

I huff a laugh, then toss him two more berries, before picking it up. 'What? You don't like my high ponytail?' I pull the long, brown length of it out to the side and flap it at him playfully.

Benedict flies back a few feet and cocks his head, affronted.

'Marian.'

I jerk to a stand. Benedict flaps away. My heart kicks into a faster rhythm as Coatl approaches. Why is he out here?

And how much did he see?

I pocket the hairpin and fix my posture, chin up, back straight. Then out of habit, my gaze locks on a spot in the middle of his forehead. Anything to avoid those dark, circular eyes that remind me of fish.

‘The Commander’s waiting for you.’

Well, that’s depressing. ‘Why? I’m not late.’

Disdain seeps into his face, causing wrinkles to stretch far into his bald scalp. Coatl hates when my tone is too casual with him. I don’t care. He may oversee the guardsmen, but now that we’re both Atlas’s advisors, I don’t answer to Coatl any more.

‘Something’s come up.’ His irritation melts too quickly, replaced with a hint of a smirk. ‘He has something he wants to show you.’

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. Coatl expressing any kind of pleasure involving me – yeah, that’s not good.

I trail him to the compound. The towering building is the size of a barn and holds a large dining room, indoor training area, and Atlas’s High Command, the cold, soulless place where I spend my afternoons.

The scent of roasted venison wafts in from the outdoor kitchen, making my mouth water. As we enter, the light dims, and I strain to see the floors of the living quarters rising up the far wall, the homes of the highest-ranking guardsmen. Oh, how I wish I could disappear to my bedroom right now. Any room, really.

At the High Command entrance, Diggs salutes, opens the heavy wooden doors, then shouts, ‘Entering now, the Commander’s Captains.’

As always, the cavernous room is sunless and lit by oil lamps, but it seems extra dark today. And a bit damp. The chilly atmosphere isn’t helped by the old relics of magic adorning the walls. There’s nothing warm or inviting about ancient grimoires and mirrors that look like they’re haunted. Or the supposedly enchanted objects that probably only contain something awful, like someone’s rotten toe. But at least the swords and specialised crossbows Atlas collects are interesting. Useful even.

We round the corner of the hallway, boots thudding against the plank floor, and find the Commander seated on his glorified throne. It’s set on a raised dais, so he can look down on people sufficiently.

I spot my sister, standing before him.

Agatha’s fearful eyes meet mine and my stomach tightens. What has she done now? I stop not far from her. ‘Commander,’ I say, voice monotone,

face utterly blank.

‘Marian.’ I ignore the pleased look on his bearded face. His fingers toy with the ring on his thumb, stroking it like a cat – the very motion the travelling merchant who sold it promised would rouse the *magic* inside. A magic that fifteen years later has yet to appear. ‘Did you know your sister has been getting traders to bring her … old-world garbage?’

Agatha’s head lifts. ‘Not garbage, Father. Certain rocks known for their chemical compounds. Dezzy and I have been studying the effects of keno–’

‘Enough!’ The command echoes around the room.

Agatha falls silent.

‘Don’t be brainless. We’re being attacked twenty-four hours a day on all sides. We don’t need rocks or useless powders. We need advancements in weapons.’ He gestures to the wall covered in the most sophisticated crossbows in the Republic. ‘And *Dezzy* is your nanny. Why are we even still keeping her around now that you’re seventeen?’

I nearly scoff as anger rips through me. Dezzy is the closest person that Agatha and I have to a mother.

‘She’s not – we’re doing experiments,’ Agatha sputters. ‘Dezzy has studied alchemy. She knows about elements, and from the minerals I’ve secured I can –’

‘Experiments,’ Atlas repeats in disbelief. He turns to Coatl, who’s all too happy to mimic his disdain. ‘Can you believe this? She thinks it’s her coal to trade.’ His angry gaze slides to me. ‘Did *you* know about this?’

In the past, I’ve tried and failed to explain that Agatha’s not cut out to be a guardsman. Even though she’s only a year younger than I am, she doesn’t fit into any part of his militia – so why not let her study her passion? He took my argument like a cornered snake … and we were the ones who got bit.

‘I didn’t know,’ I say. ‘But –’

‘Hold your knife to her neck.’ Atlas stands, his long overcoat skirting his feet as he steps down from his stage, wandering closer.

‘What?’ My breath comes faster.

‘No, I –’ Agatha objects. ‘I’m sorry, Father.’

‘Marian,’ he snaps, then speaks slowly, his voice carrying a threat. ‘Hold your knife to Agatha’s neck. Let’s do a demonstration about what *actually* matters in this world.’

My blood pounds through me. Slowly, I draw the hunting knife strapped to my thigh and step behind my sister, letting the blade float six inches from her voice box.

‘To her skin,’ Atlas clarifies.

Countless times I’ve been in Agatha’s position, either in training as a guard, or in dangerous situations with raiders. Vagabonds. But this is different. It’s not about preparation or defence. This is Agatha’s punishment and blood is about to be shed.

Refuse.

I grind my teeth, knowing that if I tell him to go to hell, I’ll be the one stuck there. Either Coatl will be unleashed on us, like the time I suffered a humiliating choke out after lying about Agatha attending guardsman training. Or this escalates to her getting a full-on beating, like the one she got after running away. And *that* I cannot watch again.

Do it. You have no choice.

‘Coatl, show Marian what I mean.’

‘No,’ I shout, swinging my knife towards Coatl as he takes a step closer. He stops, his eyes flaring with indignation. ‘I’ll do it.’

Agatha’s trembling as I return the knife to her neck, this time pressing the razor-sharp blade to her skin.

‘Now, get out of that,’ Atlas commands Agatha. ‘Show me you can protect yourself.’

Come on. A half-dozen moves flip through my mind, and I mentally urge her to pick one. But she’s out of practice. Slow.

Finally, she grabs my forearm. *Good. Now go for my thumb or press back into me*. For a split second, it looks like she’ll go for a viper’s fang, a pressure point I’m positive she’s never successfully attempted, but I have no problem faking.

Instead, she raises her elbow. I see what’s coming from a mile away. My lips tighten as I force myself to take the blow. Sharp pain slams into my mouth and teeth, followed by the coppery tang of blood.

The Commander scowls. ‘You’re trying to humiliate me?’

‘No,’ we both say in unison.

‘This is about proving how pathetic and utterly useless Agatha is. But I’ll give you one more chance.’

My eyes close. *Stop calling her that.*

Blood drips down my chin, and I spit on to the floor.

‘Just do it,’ Agatha mutters.

I step back behind her, then place the knife against her throat. Once again, she reaches for my forearm, only faster this time. But she’ll never be faster than me. A seething anger settles in my bones as I snap into action, removing the knife from Agatha’s artery and hip-checking her, throwing her down. Her back collides with the floor in a thunderous slam. Then in one swift motion, I drop to my knee, arcing my knife through the air, stopping just above her heart.

My sister gasps heavily for air.

I meet Atlas’s eyes, my face nothing but blank.

He smiles, absolutely delighted. ‘See, Agatha! *That’s* how it’s done. Now cut the nonsense. Train, and stop wasting my resources on useless hobbies.’

My shoulders drop an inch now that the trial is over.

I hold out my hand to help Agatha up, but she slaps it away and runs from the room.

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CHAPTER 2

MARIAN

Atlas is still seated on his throne when Coatl stops muttering in his ear to turn and glare at my tapping foot.

Seriously? Clenching my molars, I adjust my feet and lean against a sidewall bookshelf, my usual please-leave-me-alone spot for my afternoons in the High Command. At least there's only one business meeting left for the day.

Coatl resumes whatever he's talking about, except now his voice is a whisper. Secrets and all. He's been nothing but threatened since my recent promotions to Captain and advisor, making me the only person to match his titles. But he shouldn't be. I don't want to be here.

I don't want any of this.

He leans in closer to the Commander, probably asking if he can wipe Atlas's arse.

The High Command doors open, and Diggs calls out, 'Entering now is Brother Thomas.'

I straighten. The minister appears from the hallway wearing a shirt made of deer suede, and he's thinner than the last time I saw him. His brown skin glistens with perspiration, and although it is a long walk up the hill from the Dresden camp in the afternoon sun, I doubt that's why he's sweating.

The minister finds my gaze and his eyes narrow stonily.

Okay, then. I resume clenching my jaw and look away.

Atlas occasionally allows meetings with the Dresden because ratting on your neighbours and friends is encouraged, and sometimes even rewarded. It's his way of rooting out whether any of his miners are taking advantage of him. Stealing. Causing problems and affecting productivity. But only the brave and very stupid use the opportunity to meet with Atlas to air their complaints or petitions … because it never ends well.

'Brother Thomas,' Atlas says, sounding bored. He leans back in his oversized chair, and Coatl does the same in his much smaller one, beside him. 'I see you've come to waste my time. Coatl says he's already denied your request.'

The minister stops before Atlas. 'Marian also denied it last week.'

The Commander tilts his head intrigued. 'Really?'

I keep my face impassive.

'But I can't –' Brother Thomas fumbles, searching for the right words. There won't be any. His prayers for the sick and dying have earned him enough favour to officiate the weddings and funerals around here. But short of a miracle, he's not leaving with what he wants today. His shoulders slump, as if he knows that. 'The situation is too dire to simply give up.'

'Yes, it always is,' Atlas mutters.

'I'd like to request a reduction in the rent and security fees,' Brother Thomas says. 'Briefly. There are so many who can't pay this week. Some –' His words stall a moment. 'People are choosing between paying and being able to eat.'

'A reduction?' Atlas repeats. 'So then you'd be happy with a reduction in your protection?'

'N-no.' Brother Thomas's eyes flare wide. 'That's not what I'm asking.'

'Of course not.' Atlas slowly crosses one leg over the other. 'My guardsmen risk their lives every day to protect you and all the Dresden people, so you wouldn't think about cheating us out of what we're due. Would you?'

'No –'

'You know, you don't sound very grateful.' He turns to Coatl. 'Does he sound grateful?' Coatl shakes his head. 'I haven't even heard you thank me once for all I give you – a safe place to live when you'd be slaughtered outside. A way to earn food. Shelter. Heat.'

'I'm sorry, Commander. Th-thank you. We're incredibly grateful. For everything.'

‘But if that were true, you wouldn’t ask for a discount. You’d just work harder. Put in more hours at the mine to earn more of the goods you need, like food.’

A bead of sweat slides down Brother Thomas’s temple. ‘You’re right. Absolutely right. It’s just … people are getting sick and injured and then can’t work, so they fall behind on their rent and fees. And then the children suffer.’

Atlas makes an intrigued face. ‘Why couldn’t the children work?’ He throws Coatl a look, then laughs. ‘I love that idea.’

A whispered curse slips from my lips.

Brother Thomas steps closer. ‘But children can be clumsy. They make mistakes. They’ll die in the mine, like so many men and women already do. I’m sure you don’t want more explosions.’

Atlas snaps his mouth closed, thinking – it’s probably best if I stop him from doing that. ‘May I speak?’

Everyone turns to me, but Atlas looks especially intrigued that I’m no longer trying to blend in with the wall. A rarity.

‘A reduction in taxes is a hard no, obviously. But hearing Brother Thomas now, I think what he’s really asking for is a way to increase production in the mine.’

Coatl scowls. Atlas tilts his head. ‘Go on.’

I swallow and push away from the bookshelf. ‘To work longer – harder – you can’t have frail workers. They have to be healthy. So … in the simplest terms, they need more to eat.’

Atlas exhales, frustrated. ‘If they want more, they need to work more.’

‘I believe they will, but we might have to help them first. Maybe a simple solution would be to expand our border a little further north. There’s a swamp past our lookout tower there. They’ll have more access to deer, birds. Berries and vegetation. And, we wouldn’t even have to bring in more guardsmen. We don’t need a dozen in the mine. Let’s take two to cover the far end of the swamp. Add a seventh post. One morning shift, the other night.’

Coatl huffs. ‘I put those guardsmen in the mine for a reason –’

‘We’re talking about exploring ways to increase production,’ I say, cutting him off. ‘Besides, guardsmen should be guarding, not standing around useless.’

The look Coatl gives me makes sweat break out on my brow. I was there when he whipped the last guardsman for speaking to him this way.

Atlas steeples his fingers, and I hold my breath. ‘I suppose this might work.’

‘Sir –’ Coatl says.

The Commander throws up a hand and addresses Brother Thomas. ‘We could do a trial. But if I don’t see results in the workers …’ He trails off.

‘Understood,’ Brother Thomas says, breathless. ‘Thank you. Thank you so very much!’

‘I’ll make the arrangements,’ I offer, following the minister out, as eager to escape as he is.

There’s an unsteadiness to my legs as we pass Diggs and the other guardsmen in the hallway and exit the compound. Brother Thomas walks faster, as if trying to get away, but I match his speed.

When it’s clear I’m following him, he whirls on me, scowling. ‘Thank you for your … whatever that was in there, but I don’t need an escort.’

Yes, he does. ‘That’s not something you get to decide.’

He glances at a couple of glaring guardsmen with their hands on the hilts of their swords. With a sound of disgust, he relents. After mounting my horse, I amble behind him as he starts the twenty-minute trek down the road to the Dresden camp.

For nearly half of our journey we walk in silence. Then, with a stiffness that comes from long days spent bent over like a rusty horseshoe, he whirls on me, snickering into his hand. ‘I can’t believe that worked.’

‘Saints.’ I nod in agreement, though I never stop scanning for ears that might hear us. ‘I don’t have the authority to station Soren and Diggs at the swamp, but just having two fewer guards in the mine should help alleviate the problems they’re causing.’

He shakes his head. ‘I can’t believe the Commander allowed that. I thought I was going to ask him to cut costs and then, when he refused, pivot to something more attainable – like addressing the guards’ aggression. We never discussed –’

‘I know … but it hit me that if Atlas knew his guardsmen were beating the miners to increase production, he’d add *more* to the mine, not take them away. So I had to get creative. And the swamp –’ I shake my head, unsure how a giant puddle of musty water is going to help with anything. But it’s

something. ‘Just be prepared for me to deny every request you throw my way … for a long while.’

He nods. ‘Understood. Can’t have the Commander thinking you’ve gone soft for us.’

No, but I fear that’s something Atlas already suspects. I swallow hard, my mind shifting to the next problem – the collection of rent and fees tonight. A tightness fills my chest. That dilemma is much more out of my hands.

The crude treehouses and deer-hide tents of the Dresden Circle come into view, and I slow my horse, not wanting to be seen.

‘Thank you, Marian. I can’t –’

‘Don’t,’ I say, cutting him off as I spot a man weaving through the trees in the distance. Even if we were completely alone, I still wouldn’t want to be thanked for this. I tip my head towards the approaching stranger.

Brother Thomas catches on and replaces his smile with a scowl. ‘Am I free to go yet?’

The sudden shift in him chafes against my ribs, but my response is well practised too. ‘Go,’ I snap back, hating myself, just a little. Then I turn my horse around and trek back up the hill.

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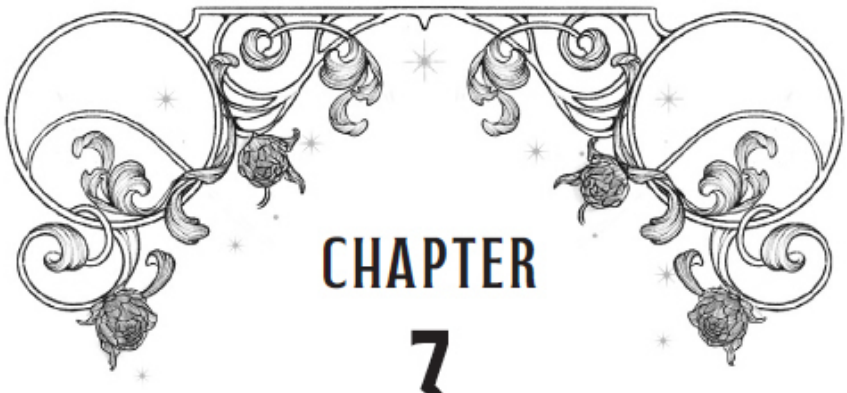

CHAPTER 3

MARIAN

Oil lamps are being lit all around the inside of the compound as I knock on Agatha's second-floor bedroom door again. 'Come on, Ag,' I plead softly, knowing she can hear me through the paper-thin walls. 'Answer the door.'

There's movement inside. Footsteps. A clinking of jars. I try the door handle – locked.

'Take a hint, Marian,' Agatha calls out.

Yeah, I am. Briefly, I consider climbing from my next-door bedroom window to hers, but she's probably locked that too. I shake the door handle. Wait – I dig in my pocket for the hairpin Benedict brought me. The lock pops with a well-placed poke.

'What are you –?' Agatha runs to block the door, but I'm already slipping inside.

I fall against the panelled frame, closing it.

'No,' she growls, pointing behind me, 'I don't want to talk. Get out.'

I cock my head. 'You got new spectacles?' From time to time, she wears a pair she picked up from a trader. But these – 'They're so …' I didn't know they came that large.

Agatha rips them off and tosses them on to her rumpled bed. She wipes under her eyes, which I now see are red and puffy.

Oh, Ag.

‘They’re safety spectacles,’ she says. ‘They protect me during experiments. Now if you’re done, I want to be alone.’

‘No, I’m not done.’ I push off from the door. ‘Talk to me; you’re obviously upset.’ She spins away. Back when we were younger, we could fix things between us so easily – I could just read her an old-world book. We’d spend the night giggling in her bed. It was me and her against the world. ‘Come on, what was I supposed to do?’

‘How about not *slamming* me to the floor?’

Would she rather an elbow to the face? My split lip throbs at the reminder. ‘Okay, first off, you know anything less than that and he would have made me do it again, or worse, have Coatl take a shot. And secondly, you *told* me to do it.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

My brows knit. Didn’t she?

She stomps back to the table where she was clearly working before. Every inch of the wood planks is covered in tools, large glass bottles of liquid, and fabric bags of who knows what. ‘You know, you didn’t even try to stick up for me. You *never* do.’

I go still, and the air fills with a charge. ‘Never?’ That’s a punch to the heart – and patently untrue. I do defend her. Constantly. But it’s rarely overt, because it can’t be. We have to be strategic when it comes to Atlas or things go bad very quickly. She knows you cannot tell the man what to do.

Her face tightens with anger, defiant at my challenge, and something pings in my chest as I realise where she’s going with this – Felix.

It’s been two years since the Dresden boy Agatha was obsessed with told her he’d rather die than work another day in the mine and convinced her to run off with him. They left in the middle of the night with one weapon between them and a single sack of supplies. And their plan? Hope that a passing trader would be foolish enough to let them leech off his precious resources as they raced around the badlands on the run. A death sentence.

I had no choice but to chase after her and drag her back home. But mistakes were made, and I regret everything that came after – how I handled it and the people I got involved. Atlas had Felix exiled. Agatha’s punishment was a beating. And I vomited into a bush after being forced to watch it all.

No matter how many times I apologise, my mistake still haunts us.

‘Maybe if I wasn’t always blindsided, I could help you better. Warn me, Agatha. Tell me what you’re up to.’ *Let me back in.*

‘Oh, like the way you share everything *you* do?’ she throws over her shoulder.

My muscles lock. But when she doesn’t push for answers on how I spend my free time, I exhale and dig the heels of my hands into my eyes. ‘Can we just … stop? This isn’t about us. The problem is him. It’s always him. He loves pitting us against each other. But we’re not going to let him divide us, right?’ That was always our promise to each other. We stick together. No matter what.

‘He doesn’t pit us against each other. He wants me to be *you*.’

Her words cut to my marrow, because that’s also an ugly truth. I walk around the table to look her in the eye. ‘He’s a shallow, morally bankrupt man.’ A man who’s never accepted his youngest daughter for who she is. Or his eldest, for that matter.

‘He’s not morally bankrupt. That would be Coatl, who we both know would be worse.’

My cheek ticks as anger brands me. ‘That’s not a defence of Atlas’s behaviour.’

Although, it is the reason I don’t betray Atlas to a passing vagabond – Coatl *would be* worse. And I’m not certain anyone else, myself included, could stand against the insurrection of guards if there was a change of leadership. It’s shocking, but Atlas’s ruthless stranglehold on Notting is the safest for everyone.

‘Father *can* be kind,’ Agatha mutters. ‘He *has* been kind. And vulnerable. He does open up to me sometimes, usually when you’re not around … and he’s feeling troubled. We actually have a lot in common – loneliness. Loss. He’s haunted, too, by what *could have* been.’

My head dips as I absorb another dig about Felix.

‘Father was even mistreated and abandoned by *his* father.’

Saints, not this again. ‘Being a victim doesn’t justify anything he’s done.’

‘I think he hates that he can’t control me,’ she continues. ‘Which is what he likes so much about you – you don’t resist. You’re so *compliant*. Predictable.’

I stare at her, frustration bubbling so far up my throat I could choke on it. There was a time I was compliant, yes. When we were children. When he’d tie a five-year-old Agatha to a tree for not being quiet enough. When he left

her there, crying all night. But then I grew older and found my voice, and we took our punishments together, our skin blistering as we spent entire days in the hot sun. That's when he figured out that Agatha was my weakness, and he could control me by hurting her. By hurting anyone.

Collective punishments began after that. For the guards. The Dresden. Whoever he needs to control. And with his enforcers, loyal guards ruled by Coatl, and no other options for people, his grip on Notting has never been more ironclad.

But me, compliant? No. My resistance began two years ago, the night he handed Agatha over to Coatl to be beaten with a stick.

I bite my tongue and painstakingly wait for the blood to slow in my veins. 'I'm glad you don't want to be me. I don't want *you* to be *me*. Be *you*.'

Agatha's eyes grow glassy.

'But at least let me train you, so we can avoid –'

She pulls back, vigorously shaking her head.

A sound of exasperation leaks from my throat. 'If you want to do your experiments, this is how you get there. You have to beat him at his own game. Ag, please. Pick any weapon, and I'll train you. With a little practice you could learn.'

'I don't want *your* help. Stop acting like him.'

Her hand slaps the table, but I feel it as if she hit my face. 'That's not funny.'

'I'm not joking,' she quips. 'Stop trying to control me. I don't want to be a guard. I want to study alchemy.' With lips tight, she returns to her experiments, reaching past her magnifying scope to draw her candle closer in the dimming light.

I wait, but I've been dismissed. *Fine.* I let the hairpin fall from my hand on to her desk, and leave.

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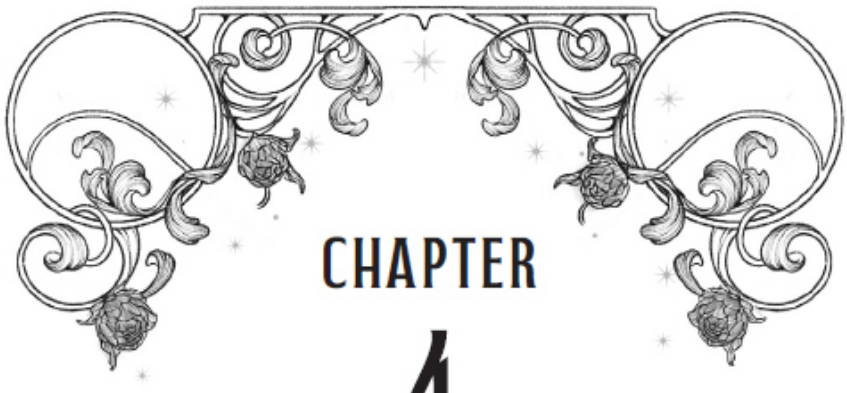

CHAPTER 4

MARIAN

After filling my bowl with stew from the outdoor kitchen, I set my tray on the dining hall table and sit across from Dezzy, who's reading something academic. The title – from what I can tell from that summer she tried (and failed) to make me bilingual – is written in her mother tongue, Gergan.

The only other people seated near us are our medic, Grendle, and her farmer husband.

'Well …' Dezzy says, stern eyes peering up at me, 'I see you're wearing black again. Black, black, always black. I did not know I raised a coal miner.'

I lift an amused brow at my former nanny. 'This is my militia uniform. What else am I supposed to wear?'

Her disappointed *tsks* come in rapid fire, flashing me back to my education purgatory with her as my tutor. 'But now you are *not* on duty, are you? Or maybe you forgot to remember that? You know it would not hurt you to try some colour in your shirts.' She plucks the faded yellow fabric of her own blouse, tempting the overwhelmed buttons to burst off her shirt.

'I always wear this. Why does it matter?'

She balks, jerking forward. 'Did you know that by the time I was your age, I was already married? You *must* marry soon, Marian. You *and* your sister. Nobody lives very long in these times. And then there's your fa–' she cuts herself off.

My father. Bold of her to go there. Talking like that could get her exiled. Although, any guard kicking her out would have to go through me first.

‘But you’ – she scoffs – ‘how are you supposed to attract a man wearing that all the time?’

‘How indeed,’ I mutter dryly. I stuff my mouth with stew and briefly regret sitting with the three oldest people in the militia. I guarantee the table of laughing guards across from us is not discussing marriage.

‘I’ve held my tongue too long,’ Dezzy says.

‘You really haven’t,’ I mumble.

‘Time is running out for you.’

‘For me? What about you? What are you – thirty-nine? You’ve practically got one foot in the grave.’ I smirk so she knows I’m joking, since she has the sense of humour of a canker sore. But my words aren’t without a kernel of truth. Dying tragically young is our reality here. Only the strongest, the best fighters, and those who don’t lose their health to infection or disease are the ones who make it past their fifties. And even then, it seems to be a lottery – one Atlas somehow keeps winning.

‘So why not spend your limited time left falling in love?’

My lip curls. *Because look at my choices.* Half of these guards are starving wolves who would skin me alive for a promotion. The other half are more like eagles – unassuming, but still capable of dropping their prey on the rocks when it serves them. No one here can be trusted to know about my after-hours activities.

Not that it matters. Love is a distraction.

Dezzy raises a brow. ‘Why do you think I brought it up? Maybe I want to die in my old age in peace, knowing you and your sister are going to be okay.’

I roll my eyes.

‘Maybe I just need to help you find the right man.’

I pause with the spoon halfway to my mouth. ‘No. Please don’t do that.’

Dezzy hums a beat before casting her gaze around at the tables. ‘Is there someone here who you are attracted to? Tell me, and I will go talk to them.’ She gestures to a table of men. ‘What about … Soren?’

Of course she’d go for the wolfiest guardsman and the one I have a history with. ‘Dezzy,’ I hiss, low and urgent. She lifts a finger, and my heart is dropkicked into my throat. ‘What are you doing? Stop pointing.’

‘With that amount of hair, he’s likely sufficiently virile.’

‘Dezzy!’ I inhale so sharply I choke.

‘And I’ve heard he’s the best archer among the guardsmen. A protector, that’s always good.’

I can protect myself. Too many people are turning to look at us. ‘Dezzy,’ I hiss, louder.

‘But judging by his tall height and large –’

Soren’s gaze lifts to us as she raises her hand higher. ‘Excuse me!’ she calls out.

Before I know it, I’m throwing myself across the table, hand straining to cover Dezzy’s mouth. I miss. There’s a crash of clanging dishes. The dining hall quiets, and I’m pretty sure everyone is looking at us now.

Dezzy gapes at me, stunned at my lack of decorum – this from the woman who once asked our cook if her soggy bread was baked with a heated argument. I lower myself back into my seat but lean forward so only she can hear when I speak. ‘Dezzy, *don’t* – and I cannot stress this enough – *ever* speak to Soren on my behalf. He’s …’ I allow myself the briefest of glances at the twenty-year-old and find he’s staring at me, a question in his eyes. Most days, he looks like he’s hoping I’ll forget what he did. But that’s never going to happen. By the intensity in his gaze, the parting of his lips, I’d guess today is one of those days. I can’t look away fast enough.

Dezzy scooches her chair forward. ‘He’s what?’ She grins conspiratorially. ‘Are we having secrets now?’

No. We’re not *having* secrets. Dezzy couldn’t keep a secret to save my life.

So I try to think of how to finish my sentence. *He’s* …

A mistake.

A mistake I made when I was sixteen and so flattered by Soren’s staring that I overlooked the fact that he had the emotional intelligence of a slop bucket. He didn’t like to talk much, preferred stolen kisses. It was in those moments I thought I saw his tenderness. That he had a beating heart. But what he really had was selfish ambition. He was a life-sucking drought, who thought of himself as the rain.

Our brief, not to mention *secret*, relationship ended abruptly two years ago, after I found Agatha’s note that she was running away with Felix. I begged Soren to help me find them, and together we persuaded the two to come home. But hours later, he sold us out to Atlas for a chance to climb the ranks. Felix was exiled. Ag was beaten by Coatl. And I was made to

watch it all. I ended things with Soren and decided I was done letting my fear keep me docile.

That was the day that changed everything.

‘Soren is … an arsehole,’ I say, finally. ‘He can’t be trusted.’

Surprisingly, Dezzy seems to accept that. Although, I’m not going to wait around and see. I glance down at the mess of spilled stew on my shirt and stand. ‘I should get changed. Then I’ve got work to do.’

Dezzy’s plump face lifts, eyes serious. I half expect her to tell me to wear red. ‘You be careful, my velora.’

A warmth gathers in my belly. She hasn’t called me *my love* in a while. ‘Always,’ I lie.

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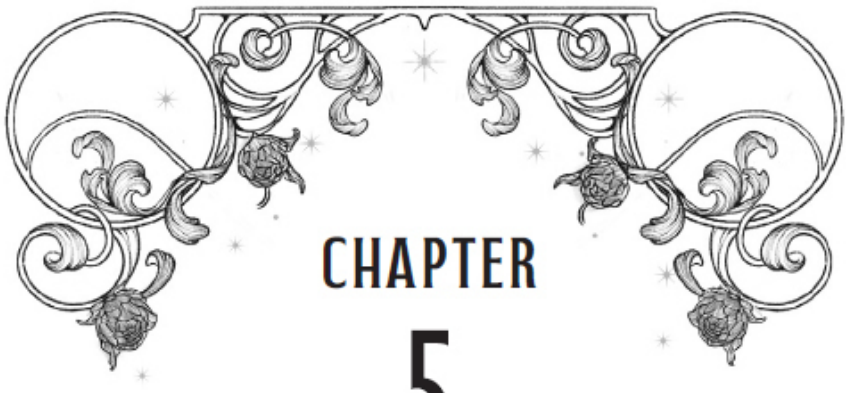

CHAPTER 5

MARIAN

The sun is setting when I lower myself down the makeshift ladder out of my bedroom window and slip away from the compound into the woods.

I move swiftly through the forest brush and tall grass, staying off the main road, but the men's clothes and large hood I've changed into catch on branches. They make me noisy. Slow.

When I reach the eastern boundary of the Dresden camp, I crouch next to a rickety log home built around a couple of pine trees. It rises multiple floors. A literal treehouse. Once clear, I weave around more small shelters, most of them looking like one strong gust of wind could blow them down.

Long ago, Atlas decided to preserve the forest within Notting territory, both for cover and to draw in wildlife for extra food. Except the 'no-logging' rule only applies to the Dresden, forcing them to use disintegrating scraps of wood to construct their homes or risk leaving militia territory to gather something else to build with. It also means the only way the forest dwellers can cook their food and not freeze to death in the winter, is to burn coal: coal they have to earn by working in the mine, in addition to the coal they need to extract to pay their rent and security fees. So it makes sense they've built their homes in a ring formation with communal firepits in the centre. To survive, they have to share.

The firepits are mostly empty now as a solemn line of people wait at collections. I inch closer in the shadows, taking in the coal-dust-covered

faces of the people who've only just finished their shift. The line leads to a table lit by torches – and God's breath, it's Soren and Diggs running the show tonight. I can't think of a worse combination.

Well … I guess Coatl could be here, too.

Beside them is a horse-drawn trailer filled with what I assume are the usual forms of payment for not meeting quotas in the mine: scavenged berries, bags of feathers, or handmade items, like mats and baskets woven with grass. Hetty Hatfield's there with her bars of soap, which she makes from lye and pig fat that she scavenges from the militia kitchen. A chicken clucks from somewhere in the collection pile – a lucky few manage to maintain a small area of animals. Everyone else buys their supplies from us.

The top half of a rocking chair sticks out of the trailer – a true treasure and likely a painful sacrifice for one of the nearly ninety Dresden who live here.

'Next.' Soren's voice rings out into the evening air.

A pale-skinned man with a torn and filthy shirt shuffles forward, clutching a small basket. He's probably only in his early thirties but looks much older.

'Name,' Soren snaps.

'Arthur McBee.' His words whistle through his missing teeth.

Soren studies the ledger. 'There's nothing here. You didn't work this week?'

'I hurt my back.' Arthur places his offering on the table. 'But I made this basket with willows and inside are …'

Diggs leans over and snorts. 'Pine cones? You want to pay your rent in pine cones?'

'Th-these are spruce cones. Male species, but only the baby ones. When boiled in honey they can be a nice treat. Even makes a syrup. You can eat them, I swear – I just, I don't have any honey to make it for you.'

'If they're edible then …' Diggs raises his baby-faced chin, perpetually trying to make his short frame look taller. 'You should eat one.'

Soren chuckles darkly next to him.

Arthur blinks. 'But they have to be cooked first. Like I said –'

'Eat. It,' Soren says, voice dropping low.

My pulse pounds heavy in my ears as a tension fills the air. Soren's only grown crueller in the time we've been apart. Arthur reluctantly nods and attempts to bite one of the green cones. He winces.

Both guardsmen dissolve into snickers.

My anger turns caustic as it simmers in my chest.

‘That’s what I thought,’ Diggs says, dumping the remaining spruce cones on the ground. ‘The basket will count for one unit, and that’s being generous. You still owe twenty-nine more to cover your debts for the week.’

Soren flips a page in the ledger. ‘One more week like this and you’ll be exiled. If I were you, I’d hand over that ring on your finger before it’s too late.’

Arthur covers it with his right hand. ‘I still have a week.’

Soren glares, then waves him off. ‘Next.’

It takes ages to get through the rest of the line, and just when I think they’re done, Soren points out something to Diggs on the ledger. My heart drops. If a splinter could be a person, that’d be Diggs. Tiny, annoying and infuriatingly successful at causing pain and getting under everyone’s skin. He draws his wooden baton and storms off, weaving around the firepits and makeshift tables.

Who didn’t pay? With a curse under my breath, I stealthily skirt the circle of homes and stop when Diggs reaches a draughty, one-floor shack.

‘Collections,’ Diggs shouts, banging on the door. He barely waits before pushing inside.

‘Get out of my house,’ shouts a small, angry voice. *Little John.*

Diggs stumbles back as if pushed. Then an angry seven-year-old appears, swinging a small wooden sword. ‘Get away from my mama!’ With a loud crack, he clubs Diggs on the shin.

The guardsman yelps, then raises his baton.

I push into the open, but Brother Thomas appears out of nowhere and hauls me back behind a tree. ‘You can’t,’ he says, voice a harsh whisper.

Oh, but I can. Maybe I don’t care if it exposes me.

‘I’ll handle it. Stay here,’ he hisses and hurries off.

I half follow, but heads swivel in my direction, and I stop, grinding my jaw. I stand out like a torch, especially with my hood.

Clara flies out of the door and scoops up her enraged boy. ‘Stop, baby,’ she scolds.

Little John fights to be set down and wins, but Clara shoves him behind her. ‘I’ll pay soon,’ she says breathlessly to Diggs. ‘Just give me another couple days. I’ve been sick.’ Her legs are bare under her nightgown and seem to wobble as she clutches her stomach.

She has? Clara has always been quick to offer me a smile or some clever comment. And I've had no choice but to discourage it, even to the point of being rude. I'd love to be friends, but we can't be. It's too dangerous in Atlas's world. That hasn't stopped me from keeping tabs on her, though, so I do know that she's friends with Brother Thomas. Why hasn't he helped her?

Diggs glares at the young mother. 'You have to make a payment *today*.' He shoves past her, entering her ramshackle home. Little John chases after him, but Clara snags her son by the arm.

'Get out of our house,' Little John screams after him.

Diggs reappears with a flat body-sized pillow. Likely their only mattress, a sack filled with feathers and rags. 'I'll take this. That'll buy you two days.'

Clara moans. 'Please, we need it to sleep.'

'No.' Arthur limps forward and removes his wedding band – the one he wouldn't part with before. 'This is Clara's payment. Take it.' Jaw clenched, he holds it out.

Diggs stares for a long time, as if disappointed he now needs to rescind his casual cruelty. 'Lucky,' he mumbles, dropping the mattress in the dirt. He opens his hand and accepts the ring.

But then he lunges at Little John and rips the wooden sword from the boy. 'I'll be taking this, too.'

Little John's cry is quickly smothered by his mother's arm. Diggs waits for a menacing second, begging for a reason to use his baton. Then, like a taunt, he tosses and catches Arthur's ring as he walks away.

* * *

I have to run to get into position, drawing the attention of a couple of Dresden. A woman calls out, 'Slow down. Where you going in such a hurry?'

I adjust my hood and make it to my spot among the trees with seconds to spare. The horse trailer filled with collections ambles up the road towards the compound. My lungs are on fire with breathlessness – or maybe that's my anger still seething beneath my breastbone.

Diggs holds the burning sulphur-and-lime torch, his horse riding slightly ahead as Soren guides the mare pulling the trailer. They talk and joke loudly. Nice and distracted.

The earthy tang of grass fills my nose as I lower myself, lying flat. Normally at this point, I'd be debating whether this is a stupid way to die. But after watching Diggs tonight, I've never been more ready to go. They pass by and I spring up, then mount the back of the trailer. It dips with my weight, but the endless array of potholes in the road makes it less obvious. Moving quickly, I drop canvas bags, baskets and boxes of food into the weeds lining the road. In the darkness outside the ring of torchlight, the spoils easily disappear.

Briefly, I wonder where Diggs might have shoved Arthur's ring – probably in his pocket. And I'm sure that shifty parasite won't even turn it in.

My efforts slow as bare spots appear on the trailer floor. As quietly as possible, I slide a few items over to cover them. If I take more, they'll notice when they get to the storehouse, and I can't have them looking for any lost goods.

I'm careful not to jostle the trailer as I climb back over the edge and drop to the ground, rolling into the ditch. The crickets fall silent. Something scurries through the long grass around my head and my eyes squeeze shut as I resist the urge to scream. Agonising minutes pass before the trailer is a safe distance away. Now begins the tedious part – finding my new treasures in the dark.

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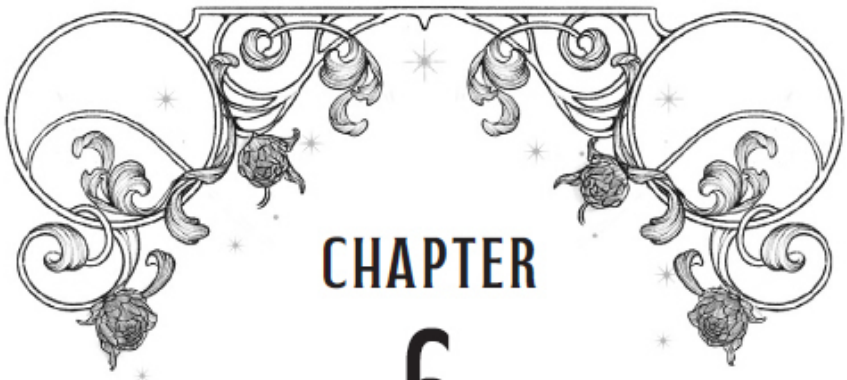

CHAPTER 6

RYLAND

It's like everything wants to kill us out here, including the trees.

Those trees, specifically.

Our horses come to a stop as we survey the valley below. The sun is setting, casting the sky in a soft yellow and pink. Mixed with the redness of the forest, it looks more like a painting than what it actually is – deadly.

After two days of edging along the badlands, this is the heart of the bomb's poison. Or, one of the hearts. Up until here, the land looked like home: mountains, trees, valleys – green, overgrown and scarred in places, with rusted remnants of the old world. Everything except towns. Villages just don't exist, even thirty-eight years later. There's nothing out here like Kingsland – the one place that somehow survived unscathed from the attempted massacre of everyone in the Federated States of the Republic.

Which doesn't bode well for our mission.

'Would you look at that?' Levi marvels. 'What is this place?'

'It's the *red* forest, you horse chip,' Samuel mutters.

Levi's eyes narrow in a way I've seen too often over the last couple of days of travelling. *Here we go.* Why our town council chose a teenage sword prodigy to go with two elite guards to find a functional coal mine is beyond me. But it wasn't for his ability to shut up.

'But why call it *red*?' the kid asks.

'What do you mean?' Samuel snaps. He throws out a muscled arm, pointing. His six-foot-six frame makes his horse look dwarfed. 'Because it's

red.’

‘Is it, though?’ Levi asks. ‘I’d say it’s more orange. Maybe brown.’

‘It’s not ora–’ Sam inhales so hard his crooked nostrils close. ‘The Sarcans bombed every reactor in the Republic, and the trees around every direct hit turned red. It’s called the *red* forest. Everyone knows that.’

‘Well, not *everyone*, obviously,’ mutters Levi. ‘But maybe they would if they called it the orange forest. And we don’t know it was the Sarcans. It could have been Daulti after decades of us playing let’s-try-to-kill-your-leader-but-make-it-look-like-an-accident. Then there’s North Ripette, another country that was constantly threatening to take us out. For all we know, it could have been an all-of-the-above situation.’

Venson, the name I’ve given the bulging vein on Sam’s forehead, makes an appearance. It’s become my guide, telling me whether I need to intervene. ‘Just walk away,’ I say to him.

A warning flashes in Samuel’s dark eyes. But then he twitches his heels and his horse moves along.

Levi turns to me, mischief sparking on his face. ‘Also, what exactly is the chip of a horse?’

‘A horse chip is what you’re full of !’ Samuel yells over his shoulder.

‘Ohhh … you mean like manure?’ Levi fights a grin.

I arch a brow at Levi. ‘That’s really how you’re going to use your free will? It’s too early in the morning to have to save your life.’ Again.

He chuckles low. ‘Good thing it’s the middle of the afternoon.’

Is it? With a sigh, I pull out the trader map that Vador, our mayor and head of the elite guard, gave me.

‘This is the Sekani Red Forest.’ I stab the bottom of the map with my finger. ‘It extends four miles. We’ll encounter more like this along the way. Especially where the bombs targeted a fission reactor, which, thanks to the old world’s thirst for electricity, could be close to a thousand different locations across the Republic. They’re the worst of the destruction.’ My gaze skates to the dots we’re headed towards, due east, the only settlements on this eastern trade map. We’re still about three to five days away from our target, if we’re lucky.

Levi leans in to see it. ‘Do we need to dig out those old-world gas masks?’

‘You can. But if we avoid this area altogether, we should be fine.’ *Should be* being the operative words. There’s not exactly a lot of scientific

monitoring going on. ‘Our contamination control team lead said the residue left from the bombs in these areas rests in the soil. If we only stop where the map indicates it’s okay, we should be good. Most importantly, don’t dig a hole and lie in it around here.’

Levi’s eyes go wide. ‘And we’re going to trust some random trader’s map?’

I click my tongue, prompting my horse, Duke, to follow Sam. ‘Not sure we have a choice.’

We ride another two hours alone, but with the hills on either side funnelling us into a forest valley, it soon becomes a popular area. We run into eight men and two women, all of us drawing our bows and taking aim as we slowly pass by each other. I’m not sure if it’s our weapons or the promise of malevolence permanently stamped on Samuel’s face, but no one has tried their luck against us. Yet.

At dusk, we stop next to a small creek. The terrain has changed again; the land is flatter and treeless. Mostly a barren prairie with some foliage along the water.

‘No fire tonight,’ I say, tense. My eyes clock a few of the lousy options for cover if we’re attacked. ‘And we shouldn’t do tents.’

No one objects. We all saw the bodies left next to a smoking campfire yesterday. A wake-up call to be more alert. Less seen. ‘I’ll take the first watch.’

Samuel squats for a drink from the creek. ‘And you, kid, will water, feed and brush down the horses.’

Levi tosses one of the packs he untied from his horse. It lands not far from Samuel’s feet. ‘It’ll go faster if we all work together.’

Samuel wipes his mouth with his shirt. Venson the vein making another appearance.

‘Sam,’ I warn.

‘No,’ he snaps at me before stalking towards Levi. ‘You listen up – I don’t know how you got here, but you damned sure haven’t earned your place in the elite guard.’ He retrieves Levi’s pack and throws it hard at Levi’s chest.

The kid falls back a step as he catches it, face tight. But, miracle of miracles, he pauses to think before he speaks. ‘I’m not an elite guard, *yet*, but I *am* a trained soldier – two years ago, I was the first they allowed to

enlist at fourteen. And I'm here because I won the Teelerman tournament. I chose this as my prize.'

Sam and I share a look. The Teelerman is a choose-your-weapon obstacle race, mixed with a tournament of battles. It's for soldiers of all ranks.

I've won it twice with my bow.

'They let you choose this mission as your prize?' Sam says in disbelief.

'No,' Levi says as if that's crazy. 'I gifted my prize to a Captain, who then put in a good word.' He shrugs.

Sam and I just stare.

'I mean, come on,' he continues. 'Kingsland is stuck in the middle of nowhere behind a mountain range, surrounded by trees, an army and an electric fence. No one in and barely anyone out, except our own traders. How else am I supposed to see what's out here? Isn't that why you guys came?'

'No,' I say, unfreezing. 'We're here because we're elite guards who vowed to protect Kingsland, and if we don't find another source of coal, *this* is our future.' I gesture to the desolate land around us.

Kingsland's always known our luck would run out sooner or later. There are only so many parts you can recover or repair from the old world. But no one anticipated that our backup plan for our failing hydro dam – our coal mine – would be wiped out by a landslide. It's going to take years to dig it out. 'We need coal or we'll lose our electricity. Which means no electric fence – our main source of protection. We can also kiss any amenities goodbye, like working lights, running water and heat.'

'Yeah. I'm here for that too,' Levi says, like that should have been obvious.

Glad we've established that.

But I guess I can't fault him for having a side mission. Mine is to find a certain killer.

'Well …' Sam says, tilting his head towards the horses. 'You're still not an elite guard. So pay your dues.'

The moon is full tonight, which means I can slightly make out the outline of a bush. Or hopefully an enemy if they sneak up on us. I rub my face, tired. We've pushed hard to make it through the most dangerous areas quickly, which feels like it's been the whole way. You never know when you'll encounter people. It makes me wonder what it means for the future of the Republic. How long can we keep operating this way? And is there

really no functioning part of the old world coming to find us – save us – from ourselves?

My eyelids dip, and I rest my eyes for a second. Then I slip into the scene of a murder.

The air is hazy, as if I'm seeing it through a fog. I'm a kid again, standing in a field just beyond Kingsland's fence and away from my parents. The blue-eyed vagrant with the missing hand stabs my father and my mother lets out a blood-curdling scream –

A hand covers my mouth. 'Wake up.'

My eyes snap open, hand darting to the knife on my leg.

'Whoa, whoa, whoa,' Levi whispers urgently. 'Relax. There's a raid happening. A wagon that passed us is getting hit.'

I exhale and lower my blade, shaking off the nightmare, slowly putting his words together. How long was I out?

'Sam, get up,' I say, while slinging my bow and quiver over the weapons vest I never took off. When his snores don't stop, I kick his foot, startling him awake.

I turn to Levi. 'That's how you wake somebody without losing a limb.' Especially since Sam has nightmares of his own to deal with.

'Noted,' Levi says.

We leave our horses tied up and run along the bank of the creek, keeping our cover until we see it. Beside a blazing fire, two bandits wrestle with the owner of the wagon.

'They're going to kill him,' Levi whispers.

'Not our problem,' Sam mutters.

Of course it's our problem. 'Stop,' I command, revealing myself. With an arrow nocked, I pull my bow tight and approach slowly.

The two raiders still, then resume punching the old man, only faster. They don't think I can hit them from this distance. *They're wrong.* I squint, find my target, and let loose an arrow. With a noisy clang, it slams into the cooking pot hanging over the fire, flipping it. The robbers duck and yelp as they're splashed by the hot contents.

'Nice shot,' Levi mutters.

I ready another arrow, but Sam grunts and stands, probably eager to end this so he can go back to sleep. Terror enters the men's eyes when they take in the murderous-looking stranger. They scramble off the old man and bolt for their horses.

‘Well, that was easy,’ Levi says, rising to his feet.

‘Ah, many thanks.’ The old wagon owner gasps for breath before pushing unsteadily to his sandalled feet. He’s missing some teeth and there’s a bleeding cut on his cheek. With an airy chuckle, he dusts himself off – he has only one hand.

Just like my father’s murderer – the violent thief who was never found.

The memories that source my nightmares are from when I was four years old, so there’s not a lot to go on. Could it be …? My focus narrows as I catalogue his features. The guy looks ancient, but life is rough out here and appearances can be deceiving. Still, I don’t *think* my father’s killer would be that old now.

There’s a distinct smell to the guy that should have warded off any attack to begin with. I move closer, needing to see the colour of his eyes – one of the few details I do remember. Brown. I exhale – it’s not him.

‘You good?’ I ask, lowering my weapon.

‘I almost had them,’ he says, limping back to his wagon.

I watch him carefully, something about him not sitting right. His eyes are shifty. He’s hurrying too much, like he’s got somewhere to be at three in the morning.

His hand slips into the back of his wagon, then he whirls on us, pointing a loaded crossbow at my chest.

We all stiffen.

‘Drop your weapons,’ he shouts, all pleasantries gone. One finger twitch and I’m dead.

All of us obey, although Samuel takes it personally. ‘Are you kidding me?’ he growls. ‘We just helped you.’

‘Whatcha got on you?’ the man demands, eyes wild. ‘Hand it over. All of it.’

‘Wait,’ Levi shouts. ‘I … have a question first.’

For some reason, that stumps the old man. ‘Well, what is it?’

‘It’s actually a comment.’ Levi cocks his head. ‘Maybe two comments.’

Sam huffs. ‘Did your mother raise the placenta instead of the baby? Get on with it!’

It takes a monumental amount of self-control not to pinch the bridge of my nose.

‘*Anyway*,’ Levi directs to the old guy. ‘I just wanted to point out that you have only one loaded bolt and there are three of us.’

The man nods. ‘And? It’ll still kill one of yas.’

‘Right. But’ – Levi jabs his thumb in Sam’s direction – ‘just make sure you hit him first, because if you don’t, he’s gonna decorate the ground with you.’

The old man swings his crossbow to Sam, and as he does, Levi flies forward and tackles our would-be robber. The two of them land hard on the ground, and the crossbow springs from the man’s hand.

I lunge forward and scoop it out of the dirt, then aim it at the weasel’s heaving chest.

‘Hey. Hey, hey, hey,’ he says, painting on a sudden grin as Levi climbs off him. His one gnarled hand shoots up in submission. ‘I-I was just kidding. I wouldn’t have actually done it.’

And I’m an elf. I eye him warily. ‘What’re we going to do with him?’ I call over my shoulder. We can’t leave him tied up; he’ll die in a matter of days.

No one answers, but there is a gurgling sound behind me. I glance back and find Sam strangling Levi. Wonder Boy’s face is a concerning shade of about-to-be-murdered. ‘Sam!’ I shout, which accomplishes nothing. I throw myself between them. Levi drops to all fours, gasping for breath.

The wagon driver slowly crabwalks backwards … and you know what? *Have at it.* ‘What are you still doing here, old man? Go on. Run.’

He scrambles to his feet and I briefly consider going with him. Because, bloody hellfire, I’m surrounded by absolute sausages.

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CHAPTER 7

RYLAND

‘There’s a sign,’ Levi says, pointing to the painted board on a stick. ‘Entering Notting Militia territory. Use only official entrance road or be shot.’

‘Look at that,’ Sam mutters. ‘He can read.’

‘I can – want me to teach you?’

I drop the map to my lap and glare in their direction. Thankfully, they both shut up. ‘The map doesn’t mention a militia or any name. But this *should* be it.’ It had better be. After five days of travelling – three since the middle-of-the-night raid – I’m twenty reps past I-can’t-take-these-people-anymore. I squint at the jagged hills up ahead. The landscape has changed again. Now, we’re surrounded by patches of bare land and forest but just in front of us are some rocky highlands. The militia must occupy the higher ground. ‘Do you think the mine could be up there?’

‘That looks like a tomorrow problem,’ Sam says. ‘We’re losing light. We should make camp and risk trespassing in the morning.’

‘Or …’ Levi says, ‘we could ask that wagon.’ He ticks his head at the travellers coming down the official Notting entrance.

Sam and I draw our bows, encouraging our horses more into the trees.

‘*Or* … we wait,’ Sam says. ‘What part of let’s-not-get-shot-tonight don’t you understand?’

‘Maybe the *tonight* part,’ Levi mutters.

‘You know what?’ Sam huffs. ‘You two are the ones with the magical healing powers. So have at ’er. I’ll watch from here.’

We don’t have – ‘Wait.’ I turn to Levi. ‘You have the connection?’

Really, none of us have *magical healing powers*. Or, at least, not yet. He’s talking about the connection, a boon that started showing up in the founders of Kingsland and their family lines, which allows for some … supernatural sharing between partners. You can split injuries. You can share a lot of things, both good and bad. So I guess magical healing powers isn’t a total misnomer.

Unless you’re talking to my mother.

‘It’s practically a curse, Ryland. How would you ever be certain a woman wants you for you when she knows marrying you could be life-changing? Life-saving?’

That *is* the question, and one I haven’t found an answer to, other than … I guess fate. I mean, it seemed pretty fated that my uncle Farron, our founding leader, had a dream that led our families to safety in Kingsland. Then out of nowhere, another way to help them survive appeared, with the connection. That doesn’t exactly scream coincidence. So if destiny is part of the equation, you’d think at the right time, with the right person, I’ll just know. That’s how it happened with my cousin, Tristan.

‘Yeah, my father is – was Ban Benwick.’ The corners of Levi’s mouth pull down. ‘He arrived at Kingsland with Farron in the first wave.’

‘Same,’ I say. ‘I’m a descendant through my mum’s side. But then her sister married Farron.’ I leave out that I’ll be the first in my immediate family to use the connection. There isn’t a soul in Kingsland besides my mother not excited to get it – including myself – so Levi wouldn’t understand why she’d throw it away.

Now Sam looks even more annoyed.

‘Look, no one’s got a magical anything yet. *Right?*’ I throw Levi a questioning look, even though he said he’s only sixteen.

‘Not married,’ he confirms.

‘See?’ I say to Sam. ‘We’re all still easily killable.’ I return to studying the two men riding horses and pulling a covered flatbed trailer. They don’t have that chaotic, rundown look of vagabonds, and they’re riding out in early evening, probably to reduce visibility. ‘I’d bet they’re traders, which means they could be friendly.’ I exhale and ready my weapon. ‘But you’re right. It’s not worth the risk for some directions.’

Suddenly a man – a raider – springs out from the ditch and blocks the road. The horses pulling the trailer startle and immediately shy back, but the riders fight to keep control, pushing them to speed up and go around.

The raider wields some sort of rope and swings it around his head – wait. ‘Is that a whip?’

As if in answer, he snaps it and a loud crack booms into the air.

‘Okay,’ Levi says, sounding impressed. I might be a little, too. The sound startles the horses, especially the one closest to the whip. It rears up, dumping its rider. The horse next to it veers off to the side, trying to run away. The wagon twists, tipping, before righting itself and falling back to the ground.

Our horses shuffle under us, nervous.

‘I’d just like to remind everyone how our last good deed turned out,’ Sam mutters.

‘Sam.’ I shoot him a look. ‘Come on.’ My grip tightens on the reins. ‘We can’t watch these traders get slaughtered – through honour we prosper.’

He scowls at me for throwing our elite guard creed at him as if he doesn’t live it. He does, but for him it applies only within Kingsland. ‘We don’t know that they’re –’

With a kick of my heels, Duke launches forward. But by the time I’ve crossed half the distance, one driver’s already been hog-tied on the side of the road. The other takes a vicious kick to the chest, before receiving the same fate. Damn, that raider’s efficient; I’ll give him that.

Duke’s hooves pound like thunder, but I yell louder, ‘Halt!’

The hooded man spins to glance at me, then sprints after the trailer the horses have dragged away. I ride up close, blocking his path, but it’s not until I aim my bow that he stops, reluctantly giving me his attention.

‘Good choice,’ I say, voice hard. ‘Now make another one and leave. You’re not taking this trailer.’

Under the raider’s deep hood is a bandana covering the lower part of his face. It seems like overkill. Nobody’s wandering the badlands checking faces.

Sam rides up beside me, alone. ‘Where’s Levi?’ I ask.

‘He said this looked like an elite guard kind of job.’

That doesn’t –

The bandit draws his whip from his belt, and all Sam and I have time to do is duck before it cracks above us with an explosion of sound. Smoke

bursts from the tail. My ears ring as our horses panic. Duke rears up. Sam's horse kicks, then takes off galloping.

The raider stalks towards me as Duke continues to melt down. I try to steady him while readying my bow.

The whip flies again, this time wrapping around my arm like teeth from a wild animal. I look down at it. Look up. Then I'm ripped from my saddle. The hard ground meets my shoulder at bruising speed.

The tail of the whip starts to release, but I grab on to it and yank angrily. The man stumbles towards me as I jump to my feet.

Now that we're on a level playing field, I see he's actually short – not to mention a persistent little bugger as he runs at me, going low. We collide in a full tackle and land on the ground, my back taking most of the blow. We roll and …

Wait …

Is the raider a woman?

She comes at me like a wildcat, diving for my neck. I roll us again and use my weight to pin her to the ground. It's relatively easy, until I grunt as she knees me. She gasps as I press harder into her, flattening her, then reach and pull her mask down – a lesson I learned long ago: always memorise the face of an attacker.

Her eyes go wide, and so do mine as I take in her vexed expression.

With a growl of frustration, she swings again with her knee, but this time somehow sweeps my leg, tipping us sideways. I fight to stay on top of her, but she's too quick and slips out. Like a spider, she climbs across my back. Her arms lock in around my neck and tighten – that's going to be a problem. Still, I fight the chokehold, using brute strength. But it's useless against her rather excellent grappling technique.

Slowly, my vision goes dark.

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CHAPTER 8

MARIAN

‘You wouldn’t believe the stories Diggs and Petronis have been telling this morning about getting robbed last night.’ Lucky chuckles as I ride my horse up to the post he’s manning.

My gaze slides from the Northeast point lookout structure to the massive catapult sitting beside it, then down to the Dresden camp in the protected valley below. As much as I hate talking about this out in the open, this time it’s necessary.

‘Do they suspect anything?’ I skipped breakfast with everyone to keep a low profile. Wouldn’t want to jog their memory in any way. I can dress like a vagabond, but I can’t do anything about my height.

Or my face.

Icy claws sink into my gut as I remember the traveller who pulled off my mask. I shouldn’t have tackled him. Or let him get so close. He could have revealed me to Diggs, who wasn’t too far away.

‘Petronis told everyone you were well over six feet tall and two hundred pounds.’ He snorts. ‘So I’d say you don’t need to worry.’

I bite my lip. ‘And the trailer? Any problems?’

He scratches the orange scruff on his chin. ‘Don’t think so. After you dumped it, Brother Thomas emptied it, and I looked the other way. Bing, bang, boom. Then just before my shift ended last night, I saw the horses dragging it north. Likely stolen by now. Too easy.’

I huff. There was nothing easy about last night – other than finding out Diggs and Petronis were driving the evening's trading post delivery. Manhandling those wolves was rather satisfying. Thankfully, Lucky was good to work a double, covering the only post in the line of sight.

It's the first time we've done a full raid so close to the militia, but it's safer for me to dump the trailer quickly to avoid being raided myself by vagabonds. And I was right, the trees in that area along the road provided a good blind spot.

Until it fell apart. 'Except there was a problem, or didn't you see me almost get caught?'

He cringes. 'Sorry, I was trying not to look. Can't lie if I didn't actually see anything. What happened?'

'There were … these men. Travellers who tried to stop me from stealing the wagon. One saw my face.'

'Travellers.' Lucky's brows rise. 'By chance were there three of them?'

There were only two, but one asked about someone else named Levi. A sinking dread crawls over me. 'Maybe.'

'Okay.' He winces and scratches his chin again. The skin around it is turning quite red now. 'We … might have a slight problem, then. I overheard that three travellers spent last night as the Commander's guests, since they're here to negotiate a trade for coal. They set their tents up near the Dresden.'

My mind begins to race. 'Why would Atlas allow that? We don't invite strangers in.'

'I guess because they untied the guardsmen you tied up. They also want coal. A lot of it. Maybe he's buttering them up. But hey' – he waits for me to look at him – 'the Commander's probably already met with them this morning. So you might not even have to see them.'

I shake my head. Atlas's business meetings only take place in the afternoon.

With me.

I arrive at the compound shortly after lunch, anxious, but with some measure of a plan: I've got to disappear for the rest of the day. All I need is for Atlas to give permission so Coatl isn't sent to find me.

While I silently rehearse a convincing excuse, Clark salutes and opens the doors to the High Command. 'Smile,' he mutters, teasingly.

I flick a dry look at the guardsman probably fifteen years my senior. ‘Sorry, I only smile for attractive men.’

He grabs his chest. ‘You wound me.’

‘Not as much as your lovely wife will if she hears you’re flirting with me.’

His eyes flare with humour. ‘I was suggesting it for your father. When you smile, it puts him in a better mood. And besides, I would never betray Petra – love of my life since we were thirteen.’

‘That’s the spirit.’ I arch an amused brow since the man’s an eagle – a competent guardsmen who hasn’t forfeited his basic human decency. Mostly.

‘This is the third time our wagons have been raided in as many months!’

At Coatl shouting, I stop Clark from announcing me and stride through the hallway into the High Command.

‘We know, sir,’ says a voice. Diggs. ‘The vagabond took us by surprise.’

‘*Nothing* should take you by surprise,’ Coatl snaps.

Quietly, I reach the corner and peek around. Atlas is reclining on his throne, looking both irritated and bored in a way only he knows how to do. In his hand is a knife that he’s using to … carve something into the armrest? Interesting choice. Diggs and Petronis stand at attention.

‘You are guardsmen in the Notting Militia,’ Coatl snarls while pacing in front of the men. ‘You’re supposed to be the best. We only *keep* the best. If you can’t complete the simple task of making a delivery, why should you remain here?’

Atlas sits forward, now using the knife to clean his overgrown nails. ‘Why *are* we keeping them here? They’re both useless. The worst guardsmen in all the guard. I even let their families live in safety here and this is how they repay me?’ He casts a sideways glance at Coatl. ‘Look at them; they’re not even grovelling at my feet. Pathetic.’

Both guardsmen immediately break attention to do just that. They’re silenced by Atlas’s raised hand. ‘Too late.’ He turns to Coatl. ‘This is all very suspicious. Search their rooms for stolen goods, and if you find anything, whip and exile them.’

My spine stiffens. He thinks they’re somehow colluding with the raider? That’s new – he’s never suspected the guards I raid before. I gnaw on my lip as a spark of guilt smoulders under my ribs. Although, it’s a very small spark. These men are unquestionably wolves and far from innocent, which

is exactly why I chose to raid them. Diggs especially deserved a good kick in the chest.

That said, I've always known that if I got caught, my punishment would be the same – a whipping and then exile. Or that's what it *should* be. Unfortunately, since Atlas views me as one of his prized trophies, there's a likelier second option. My stomach wrenches, and I mutter a curse at the thought of being reeducated by Coatl. The man specialises in physically breaking things, just like he did with Agatha. Except Coatl would absolutely take his time shattering me.

I need to stop raiding.

'I'll have them detained until we finish our meetings.' Coatl bows deeply to Atlas.

I resist the urge to gag. *When did he start bowing*?

I ignore the men I attacked last night as I pretend to only just have arrived. But it does strike me that if they're wrongfully considered guilty, it's not only them who would be exiled – it's also their families. Petronis has a mother he supports and a brother with a lame foot. Unease winds around my spine.

'Ah, Marian,' Atlas says, the bored look in his eyes lifting as his gaze wanders the length of me. He always does this, assesses me. Checks me over for … I don't even know what. It's like he's gauging whether I'm still worthy to be here. Still suitable to be some sick extension of him. I must pass the test because a smile-shaped hole appears in his beard.

As always, I pretend not to notice. 'Commander,' I say, approaching. 'My apologies, but I have to step aside this afternoon. I'm feeling ill today and –'

'Sir,' Coatl calls from the door. 'The travellers are here.'

What? No. Not yet. My heart grows rowdy in my chest.

'Oh, good,' Atlas says delighted, then he raises his voice. 'Send them in!' He leans closer to me. 'Now, watch, Marian. I want you to take notes on how I handle this.'

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CHAPTER 9

MARIAN

My body tumbles into fight-or-flight mode as I search for an escape. Except, aside from ducking under the table on the raised dais or squatting behind Atlas's throne, I'm out of options.

Their footsteps come too quickly. I dart to my usual spot against the wall. Maybe the man I fought won't notice me. And if he does, maybe he won't recognise me. I'm not in rags or wearing a hood.

He saw my face.

A prayer falls from my lips as I rip down my high ponytail, drawing my dark hair forward to hide as much as I can. Then I still. Stare off at the wall. Pretend *I am* the wall.

Several sets of boots stride by me. My skin itches as it feels like someone is staring at me.

'Greetings. I hear you had an eventful night,' Atlas says, congenially. 'You released my guardsmen?'

'It was the least we could do.'

My pulse thrums faster as I hear his voice. Recognise it. Still, I need to see with my own eyes. I wait for the three men to stand in front of the dais before cautiously letting my gaze find them – and … my stomach seizes. Damnation, it's him. The urge to flee is like a fever now. And if I weren't certain Atlas would call me back, I'd be long gone.

As per procedure, they've all been stripped of their weapons, protective vests and jackets before entering. They're wearing matching dark trousers

with large pockets and snug T-shirts; soldiers of some kind, they have to be. I study the frame of the man I fought. Although a delicate chain hangs around his neck, his shoulders – his entire build, really – speaks to his strength. A body honed from strict training, which I experienced when we fought. He knew what he was doing, and very few people could stay on a panicked horse the way he did, me included. All while expertly wielding his bow.

Whatever – whoever – he is, he's dangerous.

Where did you come from? It can't be from either of the two small settlements to the east before the Rockies. Grimwater is armed, but not like these men, and we already have a trade deal with them – their bricks and iron for our coal. And Ashbreak's falling apart – useless leaders, worse security. They also barely have proper clothing, never mind matching uniforms.

The only other option is Lower Beaver Trading Post, a day's ride south of here. But like everyone else, they're already our customer. The largest. And with all the violence they deal with running their goods between their three forts across the Republic, they'd never hand over their weapons for a meeting.

So they're strangers, which begs the question – what do these men really want?

Most outsiders come seeking shelter and safety, taking a position in the mine or something better if they have the skills. For every trader and caravan with business intentions, countless more are thieves. A snake in the grass, pretending they don't know we're the largest and wealthiest settlement in hundreds of miles – self-sufficient with our own barns and agriculture, and an endless source of coal. Is that what they are? Predators here to scope us out to loot?

Can we risk finding out?

I know I can't.

I study him closer. He has short hair the colour of soaking wheat, and his face is the kind of handsome that no doubt makes opportunities fall at his feet. Except it won't help him here.

The next man appears to be a couple of years younger than I am. He's shorter, less built. But in a few years, I'm sure he'll be just as formidable.

I'm truly glad I didn't have to fight the last man. Not only is he taller than everyone by a hand or two, I didn't know muscles could get that big.

For some reason, he looks disgruntled, which further sets me on edge.

'I'm Ryland, and this is Samuel and Levi,' Ryland says.

Atlas gives a dismissive wave. 'I don't need names. Just tell me where you're from.'

Ryland hesitates, glancing around – until his gaze lands on me.

I suck in a sharp breath, unprepared.

His head tilts. A question forms in his eyes. And then something too close to recognition crosses his face.

My jaw clenches as I implore him with a look to stay silent.

'I'm waiting,' Atlas spouts.

'Doesn't matter where we come from,' Samuel says. 'We're here to discuss a trade for coal.'

Ryland frowns, struggling to tear his questioning gaze from me. 'What he means …'

'Get out,' snaps Atlas. He points. 'I want him – the big one – out of here. Now.'

Coatl, who remained standing at Atlas's side, grips the hilt of his sword and takes a threatening step forward.

'What the hellfire do you mean, get out?' Samuel barks. 'We just got here.'

Atlas raises his chin. 'I don't like your attitude. You're lucky I'm only kicking you out. I could have you killed for speaking to me that way.'

'Killed?' Samuel echoes in outrage. His large hand drifts to grab something on his waist that's thankfully no longer there.

Metal slides against metal as Coatl and I draw our swords.

All three of the travellers look around in disbelief.

'Sam,' Ryland cautions, quietly.

'Are you serious?' Samuel grinds out. 'Is this how you repay us for helping your men?'

Atlas scoffs. 'The thief escaped with all our goods. The only thing you did was untie two guardsmen, and in *our* grand generosity, we let you sleep under our protection for a night. I now revoke that. Get out. Don't make me say it again.'

The muscles in Ryland's jaw flex as he grabs Samuel's arm. 'Just go, man. Come on.'

Samuel's breaths are loud, and he hasn't blinked in a really long time. I grip my sword tighter. If it comes to a fight, Coatl can take this one.

The hulking soldier grunts and storms out. The door slams behind him.

My lungs slowly deflate.

Atlas shifts on his throne, but his movements are jerky. His eyes dart around the room. ‘Kick him out of militia territory.’

‘Done,’ promises Coatl.

‘Commander,’ Ryland says. ‘He’s … I apologise for my friend. It’s been a long journey.’

Atlas’s attention shifts to the opal stone on his supposedly magic ring. He runs his fingers over it with deliberate strokes. Then, frustrated, he springs from his chair to inspect the wall behind him where his collection of unique weaponry is mounted. I stiffen as he selects a trigger-loading crossbow and with a flick of his finger, loads a bolt.

Ryland lifts his chin, unease radiating off his skin.

I’m right there with him.

‘I’ll accept your apology on the condition that you get one thing straight,’ Atlas says, lifting the crossbow to peer through the scope. At least he’s aiming it at the wall, for now. ‘I’m no fool.’

‘I didn’t think you were,’ Ryland placates.

Atlas studies him. ‘Good. Then you’ll pay me what my coal is worth.’

‘I plan to.’

It’s like Atlas is a hissing cat, to a dog that can’t be bothered.

Atlas lowers his crossbow. ‘And what *is* it worth to you? Because if you’re expecting a price for a wood-burning alternative, you’re going to be disappointed. Coal doesn’t just burn hotter and longer than wood. It’s the future. In fact, after salvaging some old-world equipment, I’m closer than ever …’ he pauses dramatically, ‘… to creating *electricity* with it. Soon we’ll be the first settlement with power since the bombs hit.’

My eyes flutter closed, because *of course* he’d reveal the biggest reason to raid us … to strangers likely here to case the place.

Suddenly, there’s a loud thwack as a bolt hits the logs of the far wall. ‘Oops,’ Atlas says, holding up his no longer loaded crossbow. He chuckles.

No way that was an accident.

He loads another bolt with a jerk of his finger – a nice modification to the weapon … if it weren’t in the hands of a madman. I nearly groan seeing he has five bolts left.

‘Anyway, as I was saying … if you know history, you know coal is the key to any industrial revolution. Not only will it become electricity, but it

will be the steel that rebuilds the Republic. Coal is the future and *only* I have it.' He swings the newly loaded crossbow deliberately in front of the two men. Only the young one flinches. A smile pulls on Atlas's lips as he studies Ryland curiously. 'So you can expect my price to reflect that value.'

Ryland remains stoic.

Atlas finally removes his finger from the trigger. 'Now that we have that settled, let me tell you the rules of how this is going to work: answer my questions when I ask them. Ready? Where. Did. You. Come. From?'

Ryland's mouth stays shut for a dangerously long time. 'If I answer that,' he begins slowly, 'you'd have to know that I'm either lying to protect my people or telling the truth and risking my loved ones' lives. I wouldn't respect a person who did either of those things.'

Atlas smirks. His finger returns to the trigger. 'That was brave, not answering after I told you to. Or maybe you're just stupid. You think you're in control here, but you're not.'

'Commander,' Ryland says, his voice a little less calm. 'This isn't about control. We'd like to make a generous and lucrative offer to trade for your coal. And not just once. This would be an ongoing partnership lasting for years. It's to everyone's benefit to be truthful.'

Atlas stares, probably baffled by the word 'truthful'.

Me – I'm not fooled. Anyone who has to declare himself truthful most certainly isn't.

'But before we go any further,' Ryland says, 'I am curious about something.'

Atlas tilts his head, intrigued.

Ryland lifts a finger and points directly at me.

A pickaxe of panic strikes my chest.

'Who is this woman?'

My body turns to stone.

'Who? Marian?' the Commander scoffs. 'That's my daughter.'

I defiantly meet Ryland's narrowed eyes.

'Your daughter,' he repeats, forehead creasing.

Questions are written all over his face. *Why would you raid your own father? Why do you need to steal at all?* His judgement of me is merciless and exposing me in the name of being honest *would* earn him a favour. Suddenly, I'm his ticket to getting a deal on coal.

A sheen of sweat breaks out on my skin.

‘You’re impressed with her?’ Atlas asks, pleased. ‘Most men are. She’s also surprisingly good with a sword, for a woman.’

‘Just a sword?’ Ryland asks, raising a brow at me.

My cheek pulses.

‘Commander, if I may,’ I blurt. ‘I find it convenient these *travellers* showed up just as our trailer was raided. And isn’t it interesting that between the three of them, they couldn’t stop it from being driven away?’

Ryland’s eyes go wide.

I’m not done. ‘Was the raider one of them? I heard he wore a hood, disguising himself. How do we know these men didn’t stage the raid to make themselves the heroes? All while making off with our trailer. Then after earning a favour, they ask to spend the night, gaining access to the layout of Notting territory. They’re not our trusted trading partners; we can’t afford to believe anything they say. In my opinion: it’s too much of a risk. They should leave. Immediately.’ Not all of that’s bluster and lies. I *don’t* trust them.

I can’t.

Atlas huffs. ‘My dear Marian, I do love your protectiveness. But have you not seen their well-bred horses and unique armour? Their well-made weapons? We have much to discuss.’

‘They could have stolen them.’

Atlas turns to Ryland. ‘Well, then I want to know from where.’ He smirks. ‘They have excellent taste.’ He raises his modified crossbow. ‘As you can see, I’m somewhat of a collector of weapons myself. Tell me, what exactly has your settlement scavenged from the old world?’

Ryland again hesitates, but this time his silence is the answer.

A lot.

Horror slices through me as Atlas’s face practically glazes over with greed. It’s been six years since he’s pillaged a village before burning it down. The only settlements left in the area – Grimwater and Ashbreak – exist because they lack the advances that he wants.

But for old-world treasures, he just might be tempted to raid again.

Atlas strokes his beard. ‘Yes, I think there’s potential here, but I won’t rush my decision. I’m very busy, so we’ll reconvene tomorrow. You and only this companion here can stay – as long as you behave and continue to follow my rules.’

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CHAPTER 10

RYLAND

‘Where’s Samuel, our other man?’ I ask the guard escorting us to our horses.

‘He’s been removed.’ He points to the dirt road we took to get here.

I stare at the six long whiskers making up this guy’s goatee. They kicked Sam out – and nobody died? ‘Did you at least give him back his weapons?’

He nods. ‘We’ve also been watching him on the entrance road. Don’t worry. He’s protected.’ His hand lifts to shake mine. ‘I’m Fitzgerald. I’ll take you back to your camp to retrieve your friend’s things.’

As Fitzgerald leads, I try to think. The whole situation is a mess. It would have been nice going in to know that the Commander had the temperament of an infected plague sore. But what I mostly regret is how I handled *her*. I should have had more finesse. Less attack. Now she’s going to get us kicked out.

Levi rides up to me. ‘So … that was interesting,’ he says, voice lowered.

I glance ahead at Fitzgerald, who’s a ways in front of us.

‘You want to talk about what happened back there in the creepy room? Looks like you had quite the’ – he half covers his mouth – ‘*awakening*.’

My head jerks in his direction.

He smirks. ‘You know who I’m talking about. You were staring at her. A lot.’

I clench my jaw at the reminder of Marian. She looked even smaller without that hood and those oversized rags covering her. How in the world did she take down me and two other men like we were nothing more than a bunch of mindless sheep? Honestly, I can't help but be … impressed.

Until I remember she's a thief.

'Come on, man. Give me something. You flat-out asked who she was in the middle of a business meeting.'

My lips tighten as I study Fitzgerald for signs of listening. Now isn't the time to explain that Marian's the raider from last night. Or that the reason she wants us gone is that I know her secret. She's going to be a problem. She could cost us this coal deal *and* our lives if the Commander believes her accusations.

Although, I do have the upper hand. I just don't know how I want to use it. Turning her in could easily backfire. But using her secret to get what we want isn't really my style. I don't deal in threats.

Yet, I can't take anything off the table.

Levi wags a brow. 'You can say it – she's a total siren.'

I nudge Duke to walk faster.

Levi does the same to his horse, catching up. 'Come on, you don't think so?'

Those large, defiant eyes definitely held me for a moment. 'I'm not sure it matters.'

Levi chuckles, irritatingly.

I squint, looking as far as I can down the road. 'Just so you know, you're gonna have to leave with Samuel.'

'What?!' he demands.

Fitzgerald angles his ear towards us, so I lower my voice and speak quickly. 'You and Sam should search for coal at the next two settlements on the map. They're a couple of days' ride east of here.' The Commander seemed adamant he holds the monopoly, but he could be lying. In fact, he's *probably* lying. And when he inevitably tries to screw us over on a terrible deal, we'll need leverage to negotiate a better one. 'We have to know our options.'

'Me and *Samuel*?' Levi repeats slowly. '*Together*?' He shakes his head. 'No no no no no. New plan.'

'Like what? Levi, I can't leave, and Samuel will be killed out there alone. Not to mention, we're pressed for time.'

Levi laughs without humour. ‘I – *respectfully* – think the cheese has slid off your toast here, man. Samuel’s need for violence vastly surpasses my will to live. If you force us together, I’m not making it home.’

‘Okay, then tell me a better plan.’ The truth is Levi’s smart enough to survive a couple of weeks with anyone. It’s just going to require him to grow up.

He’s silent as we pass the precarious homes of the people here – *the Dresden*, they call them. I haven’t seen poverty like this in a long time. The shacks are connected, almost forming a ring. Some have multiple floors, built on to the trees. We veer west into the forest, and not long after, I’m pleasantly surprised to find our tents and the food we suspended high up between two trees still there. Between the people and wildlife, I wasn’t holding my breath. It’s the reason weapons and valuables usually go with us.

‘So what’s it going to be?’ I ask Levi as I open Sam’s tent to pack it up. ‘You come up with a different plan?’

He drops his head, then his eyes glint with something mischievous. ‘I’ll go with Samuel on one condition …’ He turns to Fitzgerald, who’s staring at our old-world tents like they’re a puzzle. We probably should have found some animal-hide ones before we left Kingsland. ‘You got anywhere around here to take a swim?’

I remove my shirt and toss it on to some rocks by the shore. ‘Samuel’s not going to be happy about waiting.’

Levi shucks his trousers. ‘But he *will* be happy that he doesn’t have to smell me for the next week.’ Levi hops around on one foot, pulling off a sock. ‘I wish he’d extend me the same courtesy.’

I’m not sure that’s our top priority right now, but siphoning more information about how things work here from Fitzgerald *is*. Anything to help us come up with a much-needed plan.

After grabbing the piece of soap I tucked in my pocket, I strip off the rest of my clothes and wade into the water. Levi does the same. The small pond is fed by a waterfall across the way, and the water temperature is mostly freezing. I do a shallow dive, dunking completely, then stand and push the water back from my hair.

Fitzgerald remains on the shore, and he’s … laughing?

‘What?’ This better not be where they dump their sewage.

‘You know this is for swimming.’ He crosses one leg over the other, making himself comfortable against a tree. ‘For everyone … including our women.’

Levi’s head jerks up. His hands dive into the water, covering for modesty.

‘Well,’ Fitzgerald corrects, ‘for anyone who’s not Dresden. Us guards have wash houses with bucket showers across from the barracks and a few tubs inside if a bath is your thing. But you said *swimming* … so.’

I scan the shoreline and trees. The waterfall spills from the middle of a small cliff, suggesting a channel back there. I don’t spot another person anywhere, but that doesn’t stop the feeling that somebody *is* watching – and imagining it’s a certain guard with long, dark hair does get my heart pumping. Should I be expecting an arrow to the back? ‘Why can’t the Dresden come here?’

Fitzgerald shrugs. ‘Because they’re … usually dirty from the mine. And … I don’t know, the Commander likes to separate us.’

‘You’re not allowed to go swimming if you’re dirty?’ Levi asks.

At least Fitzgerald has the class to cringe. ‘Look, I don’t make the rules, and it’s obviously not about race.’ He gestures to his brown skin. ‘It’s just – if you want to stay in Notting, you do what they tell you. What *the Commander* tells you. Simple.’

I slap a floating leaf away from me. The Commander does seem to rule with the charm of a rabid goat. Which means he won’t let me get away with not answering his questions for long.

‘We’re constantly told that the people we take in for the mine are not the best people,’ Fitzgerald continues. ‘The Dresden come with problems. They’re prone to disorder. Violence. That’s why we preventatively keep them on a short leash. Half my job is to make sure they don’t steal coal from the mine.’

My jaw tightens as Levi and I share a look. It all sounds a little heavy-handed.

When he doesn’t say more, I dunk and scrub my hair. Ironic that the Commander keeps the Dresden on a short leash because they’re prone to theft – but it’s Marian, his daughter, who’s stealing from them all.

Unless I stop her.

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CHAPTER 11

RYLAND

The three of us stand at the end of the entrance road, just outside Notting territory.

‘If I get myself kicked out before you’re back, this will be our meeting spot,’ I say. ‘I’ll lie low here until you return.’

Sam stares off into the trees, face tight. He hasn’t handled the new plan any better than Levi, but they’ve both accepted it. We’re on borrowed time – our hydro dam could fail any day. And yet we’re not desperate enough to lock into any costly deal without looking at everything on the table.

‘What’re you going to do about that throne rot in charge?’

I shake my head. ‘I don’t know.’ The Commander is a wild card for sure, but I have a feeling Marian is the crack in the boat I need to deal with first, or this ship, along with any chance of a trade deal, is going down. ‘I have an idea, but it still needs work.’

Now would be the perfect time to tell them that Marian is the raider. Except, I’m less sure than ever that they can handle a secret like that.

I pull out our trader’s map and point out the dots a couple of days’ ride east of here, just before the Rockies. ‘These are the two places you’ll be hitting. There’s nothing in any other direction, except maybe here.’ I drag my finger south. ‘But Fitzgerald said Atlas’s coal makes him pretty powerful in the area, and he basically controls the trading post. That said, it’s not in Notting’s interest to tip us off on another source for coal, so we

should confirm that. Ask lots of questions. Maybe there's somewhere else we've missed.'

Samuel grunts. 'We're already at least seven days from Kingsland if we're dragging trailers of coal. Finding a mine any further means more chances we don't make it home.'

I exhale. He's not wrong.

'I think we're in good shape,' Levi adds. 'We've found coal, so our biggest problem is over.' His face turns cocky as he smiles. 'Just don't screw up the deal.'

Right.

Sam claps me on the back, then squeezes my shoulder with his big, meaty hands. 'Stay safe, brother, and don't starve.' A playfulness dances in his eyes. 'This isn't Kingsland – there'll be no special treatment for having the connection out here.'

I resist an eye roll by searching the trees for vagabonds.

'Special treatment?' Levi asks.

Sam snorts. 'It's like a nonstop parade outside our house – people with gifts, trying to convince him to come over for dinner.'

I sigh. 'I don't ask for it and if anyone takes advantage of it, it's you – requesting pies. Inviting yourself to the meals.' I actually appreciate that part. It's nice to have Sam there to diffuse the attention, since it's a lot of pressure to find the right person to share the connection with. This gift may be my destiny, but it's also incredibly permanent once it's triggered. Partners – lovers – to the end. And as for people desperate for my attention, that doesn't bother me. Who wouldn't want a security net for survival?

I know I do.

You understand, they just want to use you.

I look away, ignoring Mum's past words of warning.

'Nice,' Levi says a little wistfully.

I eye him, pretty sure he knows exactly what we're talking about. At sixteen, I was already in over my head.

'Yeah, whatever,' Sam grumbles. 'Let's get moving.'

'Hey, Sam,' I say. He turns back. 'Don't kill Wonder Boy. Sound good?' I fix him with a serious look. 'Through honour we prosper.'

He inclines his head. 'Through trials we earn our name,' he says, finishing our elite guard creed. 'And no promises.'

I watch their backs as they ride away, hand on my bow, until I can't see them any more.

'The Commander said I can move you to the guard barracks,' Fitzgerald says, approaching my camp. 'They're the bunkhouses east of the compound. Most guardsmen and their families live there. There's another couple for the farmers and kitchen staff.'

I pour the dried meat and vegetables into the pot of boiling water and stir with my nine-inch blade. The Commander's trying to soften me up? Or does he just want me close? Probably both. 'Thanks, but I'm fine here for now.' Slipping away to talk to, or investigate, whoever I want won't be as easy if I'm surrounded by guards.

Fitzgerald shrugs. 'Suit yourself,' he says, turning to walk away.

The strum of a guitar floats through the air. It's a sound I've been hearing all evening. 'Wait. Is there some sort of party going on?'

'It's Sunday night,' Fitz says. 'The Dresden like to gather around their fires, some of them sing.'

'Do you ever go?' I ask.

'Not usually. But some guards sneak into the New Moon celebrations. They have lanterns and dancing. I've heard the music's pretty good.' He waits, raising a brow. 'Anything else?'

I glance in the direction of the Dresden houses. 'One more thing. I'm looking for a middle-aged man who's missing a hand. Do you have anyone here like that?' Helping Kingsland wasn't the only reason I stepped up for this mission. I trained with the best and became an elite guard because of my father's murder. I want to help people. Protect the innocent. And ultimately, end these nightmares by searching for my father's killer – even if it's like finding a sliver in a scrap pile.

That makes him laugh. 'You're going to have to be more specific. I can think of … at least a dozen.'

'Really?' I say, surprised.

'Yeah, accidents happen. So do hangnails. You know how it goes – sucks to lose your arm from a stupid infection, but better that than dying.'

Right. Except in Kingsland we have actual medicine we've scavenged, preserved, and in some cases even replicated, like old-world antibacteriums and medicinal tinctures from herbs. Not to mention there's a surgeon and trained nurses at our hospital. I stretch my neck, feeling a little disturbed

and a lot less optimistic about my chances of chasing down a murderer. At least on this trip.

But I'm still going to look.

Fitzgerald backs up. 'Don't be late for your meeting with the Commander tomorrow, or this'll be your last night here.'

After eating, I make my way towards the light of the fires burning in the centre of the ring of Dresden homes. As I get closer, I find the source of the music: a woman sits on an upside-down bucket, playing a guitar.

'No militia guardsmen allowed!' a kid yells with a lisp. He suddenly runs at me, holding a foot-long stick. His red shirt is torn, showing a swathe of brown skin. He lunges and swings, and I barely jump back in time so he doesn't tag me.

'Whoa!' I say, confused. 'Then it's a good thing I'm not a guardsman.'

He lowers his weapon a second. 'You look like one.'

'Well, I'm not. I'm Ryland. And I'm staying over there in the trees.' I point, but it hits me that he's shaking, so I squat to appear less threatening. 'But … can I tell you a secret?'

'No.'

Damn. That usually works. Well, then I've got nothing.

Suddenly he winds up again and with a two-handed grip, cracks me on the knee with his stick. I grunt in pain as he runs off to a woman by the fire.

His arms flail in my direction as he speaks to her.

I force a grin and wave. The woman leans into the man beside her. The gestures pointing me out seem contagious. Wonderful. Now I'm probably going to have to fight somebody.

The balding man approaches me. He's older. Could he be the kid's father? I check for weapons, but don't see any – which is good because he's tall and looks strong, although a little thin.

'Hello,' I say.

'Greetings,' he says, eyes cautiously curious. 'I'm Tom, but people call me Brother Thomas.'

'Ryland.' I hold out my hand.

He takes it with a firm grip. 'I see you met Little John. His mum's Clara over there. She asked me to apologise for him.'

So, he's not John's father. We talk a bit about why I'm here, then he asks why I'm alone. I wince a little. 'The Commander wasn't very impressed

with my friend, so my other team member went with him on the road.'

Something shifts in Brother Thomas's eyes. 'Ah,' he says. 'The Commander's known for his … *negotiating* tactics.'

I can't lie – now I'm intrigued. 'Do you mind if I join you?'

Brother Thomas hesitates before escorting me into the crowd, away from the table he was sitting at before. An hour later, I've met a number of coal dust-covered men. The black soot is under their nails and seems tattooed into the creases under their eyes and around their hairlines. Everyone I meet looks like they could use a sandwich – or five – and a nap. I keep my questions surface level and answer theirs without revealing any more than the Commander already knows. The only time I bend that rule is to ask if there are any other coal mines in the area.

A bearded man gives a wheezy laugh. 'You *are* new. Sooner you realise the Commander's got a stranglehold on everything, the sooner you surrender.'

By sheer luck, Brother Thomas introduces me to a blue-eyed man missing his left hand – Kenny. He's about the right age to be my father's murderer. My muscles tighten at the possibility.

A raised scar goes from his temple into the hair of his scalp, which I don't remember seeing, but it's been sixteen years since the attack on my family. Brother Thomas explains to him that I'm a traveller, but before he gets too far, Kenny re-introduces himself. I roll with it, but when he introduces himself a third time, Brother Thomas pulls me aside.

'Kenny's brain was injured in a mine explosion years ago,' he says, voice lowered.

That does complicate things. 'I see.'

Brother Thomas shrugs. 'They happen all the time. He still works. Has to. We all do.'

'Wait. Why do you have so many explosions?' In Kingsland, we've had a single unplanned blast. Some idiot thieves tried to raid our mine with lit torches but hugged a pocket of methane instead. The resulting explosion set off a landslide that buried our mine in seconds – the whole reason I'm here. 'That doesn't seem … normal,' I say cautiously.

'What's normal?' Brother Thomas mutters. 'Anytime you're bringing fire into the mine, it's a risk.'

'You use open flames?' I bite back a curse. Back home we only use miner's safety lamps, which don't ignite any trapped gases. 'Isn't fire …?'

‘Dangerous? Foolish?’ he finishes for me. ‘Yes. I suspect the Commander doesn’t see it as a problem because the explosions can also open up parts of the mine.’ His jaw tightens as his gaze skates over the crowd.

I stare, speechless.

Another man missing a hand passes by. I keep an eye on him. He’s alone and heading towards one of the small homes on the perimeter. He’s middle-aged. Tall. But then he turns to look at me, and it’s like lightning strikes clear through my skull. Something is familiar about him. ‘Who’s that man?’ I ask.

‘Brother Thomas follows where I’m pointing. ‘Oh, that’s Rufus. He was a trader for many years and still hawks stuff – only he does it with us now.’

Kingsland has its own traders to minimise the stranger traffic, so that’s probably not where I’ve seen him. Or is it?

‘Would you excuse me?’ Brother Thomas asks, suddenly interested in something over my shoulder. He walks swiftly in the direction of a dilapidated shack among the trees.

I casually glance back to see him sliding into the darkness and spot a person with a hood before they both disappear.

Is Marian connected to Brother Thomas?

I leave for my camp, tipping my head in farewell at the people I met tonight. But once the light recedes and I’m in the trees, I cut back to where I last saw them. It’s dark here, but the fires give just enough light to –

A figure lurches at me from behind a bush, pushing me against a tree. I react fast, locking on to their wrist, stopping their blade from reaching my exposed throat. My heart kicks into a healthy rhythm. The person is shorter than me and wearing a hooded cape. But even if I were deaf and blind, I’d know exactly who this is.

‘Hello, Marian.’

She exhales in frustration at being named but doesn’t pull back. ‘You’re as noisy as a horse crashing through the trees.’

‘Maybe … I wanted to be found.’

That’s not even close to the truth. I really need to stop underestimating her.

The lack of hostility in my tone surprises me. This woman’s accusations could have got me kicked out of Notting, or something worse. I should be livid.

That’s not at all what I feel right now.

I'm a little breathless, actually.

'That's not very soldier-like,' she says. 'I thought you had some training.'

'I never said I was a soldier.' My scalp tingles at her fishing for information. I have a sudden compulsion not to disappoint her, so I wiggle the knife I've drawn with my other hand, letting her feel the point of the blade I have aimed at her liver. 'What made you think that?'

She inhales sharply.

To be fair, how my knife got there was pure muscle memory. The part of my brain that should be focused on defence or something useful is distracted with questions and … awareness of the angry girl still pressed against me.

Get your head together.

'Maybe we don't need weapons right now. Maybe we just talk.' And back up a few steps so I can think. Except she doesn't move. 'Or … is this you wanting another opportunity to touch me?'

She leans into me even harder, and her knife breaks my skin. I bite back a hiss at the sting. 'Or maybe I should gut you,' she says soft and deadly.

I grit my teeth, and finally a half-decent thought arrives in my head. 'Then we'll both bleed out on this grass. I'm not here to hurt you, but I will if you go any further down this path.'

Her grip wavers. 'I don't like being followed.'

'And I don't like being accused of things I didn't do. Things I know *someone else* did.' Her hood has shifted, and in the low light I can just make out the curve of her lips. 'Why do you steal from your own father?'

She tenses and for a second, I think she's going to open up my artery, but then she finally pulls away. She doesn't go far, holding the knife out at arm's length between us.

I try another angle. 'Why meet up with Brother Thomas?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' Her voice is angrier now. 'But you're going to leave. In the morning.'

I drag in a breath. 'I can't do that.'

'You will.'

I slowly shake my head.

'Then you'll regret it.'

I eye her, warily. 'Give me a reason not to turn you in.' So much for finesse.

I flinch as her knife suddenly flies by my head, pinging off a tree. Anger slams through me – at her, but also at me, for letting her have the chance. Anyone else, and I'd have them tied up and kissing the ground. Begging for their life.

'You have until morning, and then all bets are off. Stay and you'll find out what other raids I can convince the Commander you've done.'

I'm breathing hard, anger pulsing in my blood as she runs off. She wants to play dirty with lies? Fine. But it's black and white – she's stealing. Let's see how the Commander handles the truth.

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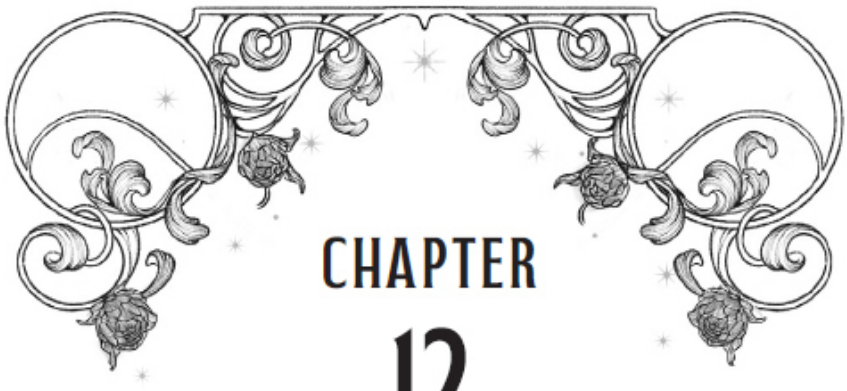

CHAPTER 12

MARIAN

‘I see him,’ Lucky says, peering through his scope in the morning light. ‘He’s coming.’

‘Good,’ I let out a breath in relief – not only for Brother Thomas recognising my call signal, spotting the sickle-shaped rock I left for him on the road to the mine, but for him being able to sneak away. Hopefully unnoticed.

Lucky mounts his horse with a guttural groan before lifting the long scope again to sweep the forest around us.

I stop my fidgeting. ‘Why’re you groaning like that?’

His face relaxes, comforted that I’d ask. ‘Same reason as before. That spot. Death is chasing me.’

My brows furrow. ‘What did Grendle say when you saw her?’

Lucky scowls. ‘I don’t know. It didn’t make sense. She lost me when she started squeezing my tongue.’

‘I’m sorry, wha–?’

‘Marian,’ Brother Thomas says, interrupting us. He pants before taking the last few steep steps to where we are.

‘Thank you for coming,’ I say. ‘Did anyone see you?’

Brother Thomas winces. ‘Never can be sure.’

‘Right, let’s make this quick.’

‘I’ll patrol over here,’ Lucky says, steering his horse down the hill. ‘Listen for my call in case of intruders.’

I nod, then turn back to the tall, balding man with kind eyes and an even bigger heart. A heart that makes him risk exile every day.

He wipes the perspiration off his forehead. ‘I assume you want to finish our conversation?’

‘Yes,’ I say. Then I tell him everything I didn’t get to last night about Ryland catching me mid-raid, and now his threats. ‘Ryland’s supposed to meet with the Commander within the hour, and since he hasn’t left yet, we have to assume he’ll tell my secret. He saw you and me together. You’re in grave danger. Avoid him. And do everything you can to avoid me. This should be the last time we talk for a while.’

Brother Thomas’s brows rise.

‘Also, as long as Ryland’s here, I need to stop raiding.’ Secretly, part of me is relieved to say this. Even as a soldier, hardened by Coatl’s training, the risk takes a toll on me. I haven’t slept a full night in more than a year.

Brother Thomas’s lips press into a line. ‘That’s going to make things … difficult.’

I swallow hard. ‘How many are close to exile?’

‘Six adults are sick and haven’t been working in the mine. Can barely eat. But Clara has it the worst. Fever. Chills. Distended belly.’

I scratch my eyebrow, thinking. ‘Can Mrs Hutter do anything?’ She’s often the wisest among the Dresden for remedies.

‘With what medicine? There’s only so much she can do with boiled willow bark.’

This cursed place. ‘Okay. I’ll speak to Grendle; see what I can do.’

Benedict follows me, soaring in the overcast sky as I ride past the animal barns and gardens to the compound. He lands beside some tall grass as I tie my horse to the hitching post.

‘Sorry, no visit today,’ I say softly to him, and slip through a side door of the compound. Grendle’s infirmary is on the right. I knock.

‘Well, come in already,’ she grumbles.

I bite my lip and push inside. The room is dim and cold and lit with lanterns, thanks to the covered windows. The single cot along the wall is empty. In the middle is a table with formidable straps used for amputations and other procedures, like giving birth. Dried blood stains the plank floor.

‘And what’s wrong with you?’ Grendle stomps forward when I hesitate. ‘Okay, fine. Open your mouth.’

‘Oh, that’s not really nec–’ I squawk as she gets a hold of my tongue and pinches it. Hard.

I jerk back in disgust, freeing myself, and for good measure, wipe my tongue down my sleeve. *What the hellfire?* Usually, the woman only goes off about planets aligning and the vibrations of rocks.

‘Hmm … you’re stressed and your heart is cold. Which is bad for circulation.’

I still. *Surprisingly accurate.*

‘I have a question,’ I say, moving on before she tries anything else. ‘What was the name of that anti-parasitic the Lower Beaver Trading Post brings in? Black wal–?’

‘Black walroot. Why? Who needs it?’

I pause. The Dresden aren’t forbidden from seeing Grendle. Medic services are like everything Atlas offers his workers – it all comes at a price. One that’s intentionally too expensive for his miners, because it’s easier to replace them than to replenish stores of our precious medicine.

‘Go on,’ she snaps. ‘Your father will need a name before he’ll approve me to give it out.’

Of course Atlas would control that. I grit my teeth – if I say it’s for me, I won’t get enough. If I pay for the Dresden, Atlas will know. ‘It’s for no one,’ I answer. ‘I was just trying to remember what it’s called.’

Grendle purses her lips, accentuating her sagging jowls. ‘Well, good, because I’m all out – until tonight. We’re picking up a shipment from the Lower Beaver Trading Post later.’

A shipment tonight. *I see.*

In the afternoon, I find Atlas alone in the High Command, studying one of his ancient grimoires. It’s probably another book about mind-reading and how to tap into the unlimited power of the universe. Magic. A total sham. His eyes brighten, pleased to see me.

I can’t say the same as my insides squirm.

‘So, give me your report. What have you found out about our *traveller*?’

My hands grow damp. ‘Umm … his camp is meagre – basic supplies but in impressive condition. Old-world for sure. It doesn’t appear that he came with any large weapons, aside from his long-range bow, and if he brought anything with him to trade, it’d have to be small.’

He scowls. ‘I already know all that. What else?’

‘And …’ I pause, mouth open. I can’t stop thinking about how Ryland put his blade down last night when he could have retaliated. He wanted to talk. Yes, he later threatened me, but am I really going to falsely accuse him and get him killed? Risk war when his settlement comes for revenge? I swallow hard. ‘Last night he attempted to make friends with the Dresden.’

‘Of course he would. He’s camping next to them. What I want to know is if he’s made *friends* with you?’

I hesitate, calculating the risks of admitting that Ryland tracked me down.

‘We had a conversation, and he dug for information.’ Information about me and Brother Thomas, but that’s beside the point. ‘My assessment of him hasn’t changed. We can’t trust anything he says. We have no reason to believe he’s not scoping us out to raid. Think of last spring and that wool trader – Hawthorne.’ Maybe stoking Atlas’s fear is enough until I know Ryland’s next move.

Atlas balks, but then considers it. A concerning smirk curls on his lips. ‘No, I can sniff out an evil plot – that’s why Hawthorne’s no longer breathing. This is our new plan: get closer. Get more information out of him. I want the name and location of his settlement. Find out what they have for weapons and the size of their army. Then find out *exactly* what of the old world they’ve collected. Why do they want coal? Have they figured out how to make electricity from it? They could have the final pieces of equipment that *we* need.’

A cold wave of dread washes over me. The idea of raiding Ryland’s settlement is forming into a plan.

Ryland needs to be run off. Immediately. Not just so Atlas forgets about him and we avoid a pointless war, but for me – so Ryland can’t expose me. For the Dresden, so they won’t starve or be exiled because I’m not free to raid with him poking around. And for Notting, because we can’t assume Ryland’s intentions are good. He could be scouting us out the same way Atlas wants to do to him, all to wipe us from the map. ‘I’m not sure he’s going to just offer up that information,’ I say carefully.

‘Oh, he will.’ Atlas leans forward. ‘Because you’re going to make him fall in love with you.’

My lungs forget how to work.

Impossible. Anger surges as I shake my head. Atlas gets to set the rules, but he doesn’t control my heart.

‘Are you refusing to follow a direct order? In fact, I’m sensing a distinct lack of enthusiasm to serve me altogether.’

His question carries a threat that spears me to the ground. Very quickly this could devolve into another *lesson* in humiliation – with or without the help of Coatl.

Or it could be like when I was promoted to Captain and advisor, a move that was nothing short of nepotism. I’ve never turned down anything faster. But then there were surprise searches on the Dresden. Food prices increased. Double the number of Dresden were exiled. It took me too long to connect the dots. Atlas is a fiend for games, and he has no problem making the majority suffer to bend the minority to his will.

‘I’ve given you everything,’ he says, voice growing harsher, his eyes hardening. ‘I’ve saved you as much as I’ve saved everyone in Notting. You *owe* me obed–’

‘I’m not refusing,’ I placate, while wanting to vomit at having to grovel. ‘I-I’m trying to figure out how to make that happen. You don’t just … make someone fall in love with you.’ Normally, every ridiculous request of his is a chance to scheme against him. But I’m too stunned to even think.

His irritation falls away like crumbs dusted from his trousers. ‘I know you’re inexperienced, since no one would dare go near the Commander’s favourite daughter. But my dear, you underestimate your potential. You always have.’

My skin feels like it’s crawling.

‘Don’t worry,’ he continues. ‘Already he can’t keep his eyes off you. Torturing him would be easier, but then I can’t make a coal deal if his settlement doesn’t have what I want. This will work; just don’t fall for him in return. I’m a jealous man, and I don’t share my things.’

A ringing begins in my ears. That’s the first time he’s spelled out his expectations of me – that I’m to be kept like some possession or maiden in waiting. But for what? I’m not one of his prized grimoires or mistresses. I’m his daughter. I’m a human being.

A human being he wants complete control of.

Atlas giggles. ‘Oh, I haven’t had this much fun in years. What a game this will be.’ Raising his voice, he calls towards the entrance, ‘Has our guest arrived yet?’

I hold my breath, waiting for the answer. *Please be gone.*

The door opens and Fitzgerald calls out. ‘He’s disarming, sir. Captain Coatl will escort him in.’

My shoulders wilt. I find my spot along the side wall, my mind spinning dangerously close to despair. All I can do is deny any accusation of being the raider. Vehemently. Then falsely implicate Ryland … and see which one of us falls.

When he finally walks in, his head is held high, and his piercing blue-eyed gaze immediately meets mine.

He can’t keep his eyes off you.

I doubt that’s true but gone is the anger I saw last night after I threw the knife. His handsome face borders on curious as he dips his chin, almost in greeting.

What does that mean? My face is carefully blank, but my already pounding heart turns bruising against my ribs.

Make him fall in love with you.

I can’t even imagine how I would do that. My mind drifts to how close we were last night with me holding a knife against his throat. There was a moment, he almost looked like he enjoyed it.

What would he have done if I had kissed him instead? Would I be any further along in silencing him about me?

Would he have kissed me back?

A warmth gathers in my belly. I quickly stomp it out.

‘Commander,’ Ryland says as he approaches the throne. Coatl takes his seat beside Atlas. ‘I have a gift for you.’ Ryland reaches into one of his pockets and removes a small jar. But he doesn’t hand it over.

‘What is it?’ Atlas asks, intrigued.

‘The first gesture of trust. Allyship.’

And what will be his second? Exposing me? I inhale, feeling like I’m about to come out of my skin.

‘But before we go any further, I need to say something, and I’m aware it might disrupt our hopes of a deal.’

I stop breathing.

‘I can’t accept your coal under the conditions with which you operate the mine now.’

Atlas’s face is disbelieving. Mine too. Control is Atlas’s fortress, and he’ll scorch the earth – or Ryland – before opening the gates.

‘It’s come to my attention that you use oil lamps or fire to light the mine, and because of it, there’ve been explosions,’ Ryland says. ‘Unnecessary deaths. If we’re to make a deal, we would need you to switch to a better way.’

Atlas unfreezes. ‘You’re going to tell *me* how to run *my* mine?’

‘No, sir,’ Ryland says. ‘It’s obvious you’re a very smart man who’s built an empire. But I can’t offer the most lucrative contract likely in the entire Republic unless you make this small change to safety lamps. They use metal gauze and glass globes to protect the flame from explosive gases.’

My pulse beats so loud, I half expect to be kicked from the room. Atlas is going to shoot Ryland through the heart, which, frankly, would solve a lot of my problems.

But it wouldn’t make the mine safer – a complex issue I’ve lost many hours of sleep over.

Atlas’s scowl cracks into a smile. He even huffs a laugh. ‘You’re talking about miner’s safety lamps; we already have those.’ He shrugs. ‘We don’t use them because the workers complained the light was weak. But … we can try them again. For the *right* deal.’

Is that a lie? My post is never in the mine, so I don’t know. My gaze darts back and forth between them. What the hellfire is going on?

‘*See?* I can compromise.’ Atlas leans forward, lowering his voice. ‘But the question is, can you?’ An ominous tension fills the air. He wants the name of Ryland’s settlement.

Ryland smiles, unfazed. ‘Compromise is essential in making a deal, and I look forward to it. But first comes trust.’ Ryland finally hands the jar to Atlas. ‘In the interest of becoming friends – business partners – I’d like to gift you these.’

Atlas raises the glass jar in the air. The contents appear white. ‘What is it?’

‘Water purification tablets,’ Ryland says. ‘Mix one with two litres of water. Maybe two tablets if the water is visibly dirty. Wait thirty minutes before drinking.’

Atlas drops the jar to his lap. ‘Just like magic.’ He snickers. ‘I do love magic … but we don’t need these. We have wells.’

‘*You* have wells, but your mine workers don’t,’ Ryland says. ‘And nothing will affect your productivity more than waterborne illnesses.’

‘They boil their water,’ Atlas says, flippantly.

‘Even when they’re deep in the mine? What about your traders when they’re racing around the badlands?’

Atlas considers the jar for a second. ‘Fine. I’ll accept your gift.’ A calculating smile curls his lips. ‘Now accept one of mine. Join me and my daughters for dinner tonight. In the interest of … getting to know one another and building *trust*, as you’ve said.’

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CHAPTER 13

RYLAND

‘Get your hands up,’ I yell.

Little John lifts his arms out to the side, his face turned away, eyes scrunched closed.

‘No. Put your hands up in front of you. And open your eyes, buddy.’ I toss our makeshift ball, which is a potato-sized rock, in the air and catch it. ‘You have to look.’

He peeks over with one eye. ‘Do I have to do this?’ he lisps.

I exhale. He *is* only seven.

No, he’s seven and prefers to catch things with his face. ‘Yes, you do,’ I say. ‘This is a life skill.’ Well, that, and … I need him.

After hours of reconnaissance, I’m turning to a new source for information – a boy with no filter. Besides, everyone else has a job, and I have time before my dinner date tonight.

‘Ready?’ I toss the rock to him.

It smacks his chest. ‘Ow,’ he yells, crumpling to the ground.

I jog over, but he grabs the rock, jumps up, and hurls it at me. I only have time to twist away before he cracks me on the hip. He throws so hard he falls over.

‘Oooow,’ I say through my teeth. ‘Also … good throw.’ I reach down, and he’s concerningly light as I pull him to his feet.

A big grin settles on his dirty face.

Twenty minutes later, one of us is questioning what constitutes a life skill and one of us still can't catch. So now we're throwing rocks at a tree.

'My mama says in the old world they had people spray.' He chucks a stone. Misses the tree. 'You put it on, and it kept the bugs away. She read about it in an old-world book.'

I fling my rock. 'Yeah, I think they called it bug spray, though. Back home we make it with plants.'

His face twists. 'Bug spray? But bugs don't wear it. It's for *people*. *People* spray.'

'Good point.' I scoop up another rock. 'So … it's just you and your mum?'

He bites his bottom lip. 'Yeah.'

'It was just my mum and me, too – until I grew up. Became a man.'

He pauses mid-throw. 'Mama says I'm already a man.'

Something sharp pings in my chest, triggering a memory.

I know you're curious, Ryland, but your questions are painful. Your father is gone – you're the man of the house now.

I kick the dirt, unearthing more pebbles. 'Speaking of men, there's a guy named Rufus that Brother Thomas said was a trader. He's missing a hand. You know anything about him?'

'Yeah – to stay away from him. Mama says he'll sell anything, even my words to the Commander.'

I still. That's a thing? 'Is he the only one who sells people's words to the Commander?'

His nose scrunches. 'Maybe Mrs Bates. She hates everyone. Don't let her grab you; it's a trap.'

I nod. 'I won't. But not Brother Thomas? He's a good guy, right?'

'Yeah. He always helps people. Marries and buries people too.'

Interesting. 'Do you know if he's friends with Marian, the Commander's daughter?' He doesn't throw his next rock as hard. He also doesn't answer.

'She seems nice,' I prompt. Nice and dangerous. Not to mention, allergic to me – emotionally. Which is new territory for me, come to think of it.

'Why you asking?' His little hand tightens on the rock.

Because I need answers. With Marian's privilege, she could have anything she wants. Yet, she chooses to be a thief. Why? Who's she selling it to?

And if Kingsland is to be allies with the Notting Militia, how can I let her steal from and sabotage the mine and its operations?

He's still waiting for my answer, so I shrug.

He shrugs back. 'You got any food? I'm hungry.'

I arrive at the compound a couple of hours later for my dinner, and a new guard takes me to the holding room. This guy's tall, one of the few who are clean shaven, and likes decorations embossed on the hilt of his sword. He also reminds me of an alpaca, with his hair all curling up in the front. As if on cue, his fingers slide over it, checking that it's all in place.

I place my quiver and bow in a pile on the table, just like every time I've met with the Commander.

'Drop your weapons on the table,' he barks.

I raise a brow but don't point out the obvious. 'Haven't seen you before.'

He ignores me and stands guard by the door.

'I'm Ryland,' I continue, removing the knife strapped to my left thigh. As usual, I leave the weapons hidden under my clothes. Those they'll have to come and get.

His eyes turn laughing in a feel-free-to-piss-off kind of way. 'I know.'

What a horse chip. No, not a horse – he's the chip of a hairy alpaca.

Another guard appears at the door. 'Hey, Soren. The Commander's ready.'

'Soren,' I repeat, as I walk past him, memorising the name. I hope we don't have the pleasure of meeting again. 'Thanks for the chat.'

People stare as I make my way through the compound to the Commander's High Command. It's mostly one big barn-like room that's divided into sections. Now that it's approaching suppertime, the dining area is filled with people who've grabbed food from the outdoor kitchen. But it's eerie; everyone is so quiet.

Beyond the tables is some sort of training area with a fighting ring made of hay. But the back wall is filled with doors of rooms, three floors of them – who lives there?

The guard is all business when he opens the door to the High Command and shouts my arrival. Even salutes as I walk in.

'Ryland,' the Commander calls, his mouth full of food when I appear out of the hallway. He waves me over to the candlelit table behind his oversized chair.

I glance around, disappointed that he's alone aside from a man standing in the corner, pulling an alarming amount of ribbon from his mouth. The entertainment, I assume? He waves. I nod back. But was this not a dinner party? Where are his daughters?

I take in the scratched and carved-up armrests of the chairs as I pass; they look like a teething dog was unleashed on them. A single plate of roasted meat and potatoes sits in front of him, and most of it is gone already. Nice.

'Sit,' he says. 'Enjoy Silas, my magician. Sadly, he's not a good one. Not a *real* one. Just an ill-usss-sion …' He struggles with the word, then gives up. 'But – bleeding skies – how I love magic! You know, I saw it once. As a boy. Seven years old.' He sways, and I realise he's drunk. 'A man appeared to me after I ran away from my father. Read my mind. Told me everything about my life and that I could have immense power, if I'd only look for magic and learn to harness it.' He lifts his hand, staring at it as if he's stuck in the memory. Or maybe he forgot he was talking. 'Anyway, I've become a collector of magical things ever since. Like this ring' – he holds up his pinky, but the ring is on his index finger – 'It's supposed to reveal people's true motivations.'

Yeah, I'm sure. I take the seat diagonally across from him.

'Guard!' he yells at the far door. 'We need another plate!'

The door bursts open and a woman with a red nose and an inability to pretend she wants to be here, drops a plate in front of me. Something tells me Notting dinner parties aren't common. The Commander stabs a chunk of meat with his fork and devours it.

'Go on. Eat,' he urges me with a full mouth. 'Guard!' he yells again. 'We need more wine. And get my daughters. Tell them I'll starve them for a week if they don't hurry up.'

My body tenses.

No – relax, he's just drunk.

The woman returns with the wine, and the Commander gestures for me to pour it. *Building bridges*, I remind myself as I tip it to his cup.

'Entering now, Captain Marian and Agatha.'

There's a thump in my chest as I look up the moment Marian appears out of the hallway. Her dark hair is down in a mix of curls and waves that trails behind her as she strides in. Her bow and a quiver of arrows are draped over a jaw-dropping red dress – a dress that has a slit up the side, flashing her leg with every step.

It takes me too long to notice the wine is overflowing on to my hand. I jerk the bottle upright. Stand in greeting. Try to remember how to work my tongue.

‘Marian,’ the Commander yells, slurring. ‘Give me a kiss.’

Her steps slow, shoulders stiffening. Her face is always so carefully controlled, but in her big brown eyes, I see her reluctance. Maybe even revulsion. She leans in and quickly pecks him on the forehead before stepping out of range.

The Commander smiles dreamily. ‘Isn’t she stunning?’

Since I’m struggling to pull my gaze from her, I can’t disagree. But there’s something about how he’s treating her that’s rubbing me the wrong way.

‘She’s wearing my mistress’s dress,’ he brags. ‘I had her do Marian’s hair, too. It’s silly that my daughter won’t go anywhere without her weapons, but …’ His head tilts. ‘Doesn’t she look like a beautiful huntress … here to slay *your heart*?’

For the first time, Marian boldly meets my gaze, and an electric current shoots down my spine to every nerve ending. There’s a challenge in her eyes. *Go on. Speak your mind.* She wants to see how I’ll play his game.

Is she here to slay my heart? No. I’d venture she doesn’t even want to be here.

It hits me then, how much he’s controlling her.

Well, not *completely*.

But to answer his question, is Marian an absolute vision tonight? ‘Yes,’ I confess, ‘you look beautiful.’

Her mask cracks at my sincerity, as if she expected mockery. She swallows and glances away.

‘More food!’ the Commander yells abruptly.

‘And I’m Agatha.’

My attention jerks to the other woman who walked in with Marian. ‘Oh! I’m sorry,’ I say, feeling guilty. I should have acknowledged her sooner. This must be his other daughter. I step off the dais. ‘And I’m Ryland.’ I wipe my wine-covered hand on my trousers before holding it out to her.

She offers a smile and shakes it. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

‘Yes, that is my other daughter,’ the Commander says, slurring a little. ‘The one who thinks she doesn’t need to learn to fight or work, and who wastes my wealth on all her experiments.’

Agatha's face falters, and an awkward silence follows.

'There's been a lot of wine going around,' I say, shooting her an apologetic look. 'Shall we take our seats?' I pull out a chair beside me.

Agatha beams at me as she sits.

I don't immediately see a resemblance between the two sisters, other than that they share the same long, dark hair. Agatha is wearing a dress with yellow layers of skirt and ruffles down her sleeves. It's fancier than Marian's, more formal, and yet I'm left with the sense that this isn't the first time Agatha's been forgotten in a room with her sister.

More plates of food are dropped on to the table. Marian angles away from her father, her face the picture of someone enduring our time together like a prison sentence.

Then there's me – the man who's holding her most dangerous secret over her head. I shift in my chair, and with a pit in my stomach, take in the man she's stealing from. What if her secret isn't the result of greed, but something more dire?

Necessity.

'So let's get to know each other better,' the Commander says, digging back into his food. 'Tell us about yourself, Ryland. Tell us *everything*.'

Real subtle. 'Well, I'm a soldier.' I glance at Marian as I confirm the suspicions she voiced last night. Her gaze is cold. I shift again.

'And have you been one all your life?' Agatha asks.

'Yes, that's all I've ever wanted to do.'

I'm not about to ask Marian if it's the same for her, but I have wondered how she got so good at grappling. Is it required of her? Or something she's always wanted to master?

The Commander curses gutturally. 'Ask a better question, Agatha.' He turns to me. 'Do you have a mistress, Ryland?'

Marian chokes on her drink.

I wait until she stops coughing before answering. 'No.'

He leans forward. 'Would you like to try one of mine? They are very pretty.'

Agatha's eyes are wide as she exhales into her hand.

'No,' I say again, feeling like I'm fighting for my life. 'But, thank you.'

The Commander's lips purse. 'Well … I keep three.'

Marian has studiously begun eating her dinner.

‘They’re a handful, though,’ the Commander mutters. ‘But so are my daughters – who are also available for … *getting to know*.’

The room feels like it’s shot up ten degrees. I scratch my neck. And here I thought the fathers in Kingsland were intense. ‘Thank you. But my preference is … to earn a woman’s attention.’

‘Boo!’ he shouts. ‘I tried that with the girls’ mother, but Agatha killed her in childbirth. Never again.’

There’s a series of smacks as the magician drops the balls he was juggling. Marian’s grip on her fork has turned white, her eyes murderous. I can’t say I disagree with the sentiment. I lick my lips, digging deep for restraint. ‘Of course, children are never responsible for the outcome of childbirth. It’s an incredibly dangerous feat on its own.’

‘And what are your interests?’ Agatha asks me, changing the subject. ‘Do you have any hobbies?’

‘Agatha,’ the Commander snaps. ‘Ask something *normal*.’

This man. I offer her a quick grin. ‘I don’t have much free time, but aside from my job, I enjoy … fishing. Archery. A good competition or game with my friends. The occasional book.’

Agatha laughs, delighted. ‘What do you like to read? Are you interested in any academic studies?’ Her hand taps my forearm. ‘I’ve been fascinated with the study of elements as of late. Alchemy.’

‘And trading my coal so she can fund her obsession with it,’ the Commander grumbles. ‘She gets these jugs and bags of powders –’

‘I’ve studied all the sciences,’ I interrupt. ‘But what’s interested me most lately …’ My gaze wanders back to Marian, ‘is grappling. It’s fascinating when it’s done well.’

Her eyes flick away, almost in alarm. Too late, I realise my poor attempt at complimenting her skills as a soldier was taken as a threat to reveal her secret.

‘Oh,’ Agatha says. ‘That’s –’

‘Marian’s excellent at grappling,’ the Commander blurts, then glares as he looks at his daughter. ‘But what she’s not very excellent at is *talking*.’

Marian shifts. Her teeth bite into her full bottom lip, like she’s fighting to keep her mouth shut. But then she pierces me with the full force of her big, brown eyes. Something wild takes flight in my chest. ‘Okay, I have a question for you. Where did those water purification pills come from?’

‘We … have a supplier who specialises in these things.’

She hums her interest. ‘A supplier. That’s rather vague.’

My eyes narrow.

She leans forward, elbows landing on the table. ‘How do we know they’re not poison?’

‘Because they’re not,’ I say with disbelief. ‘Why would I kill the very workers who will supply us with coal?’

She stares, defiant. ‘I can’t answer that. I don’t know *what* you want.’

And that *is* the problem, isn’t it? I’ve left her fearing me. Questioning my every move. Then let me clear it up for her. I lean forward, matching her posture. ‘I’m here for coal. Only coal. We have no interest in your land. No ulterior motives.’

She exhales harshly, falling back in her chair. ‘Right. There’s nothing to worry about. Let’s just overlook the fact that you could wipe out half or more of our population with these supposed *purification* pills.’

‘Would you like to watch me use one on myself?’

A challenge enters her eyes. ‘Yes, I would.’

‘Perfect. Let’s do that after dinner.’

The air grows thick in the silence.

‘I’m sorry about my sister,’ Agatha says, frowning. ‘Sometimes she doesn’t know when to relax.’

Hurt flashes on Marian’s face.

Agatha ignores it. ‘Have you seen our little lake? There’s a nice waterfall flowing into it. Even a cave and tunnel that stretches into the rock behind. It’s not far from the mine.’

‘I’ve been to the pond,’ I say. ‘But haven’t checked out the waterfall.’

‘I could … take you some time.’ Her voice is soft. Nervous. ‘We could go swimming.’

‘He can’t,’ Marian mutters, between sips from her cup. ‘He doesn’t have a *swimsuit*.’

My gaze snaps to her, her words landing like the crack of her whip. There’s only one way she’d know that – she saw me at the pond with Levi.

So Marian *has* been keeping an eye on me.

A smile pulls on my lips – *okay, little spy*. *No need to be so sneaky*. She won’t look at me, but she feels me staring. I see it in the way she’s barely breathing.

‘We’ll decide it with a competition,’ the Commander declares.

Agatha startles, jostling her glass.

‘Decide what?’ I ask.

He snaps his fingers at the shelves on the far wall. ‘Silas, bring me that hourglass filled with sand.’ Then he turns back to me. ‘My daughters will compete for who will take you to the lake. I love competitions. That’s actually how I won the coal mine and all of Notting.’ His blurry eyes lift, becoming unfocused. ‘All it took was Coatl, a few highly trained men and half-a-dozen card games.’

‘A competition is a lovely idea, Father,’ Agatha says, brightly. ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘Let’s play an old-world game,’ he says. ‘Truth or stare. One round with each of my daughters where they will compete in truth-telling or staring. Your choice.’ He throws Marian a tight look. ‘And my daughters will try their *best* to win.’

I’m pretty sure he meant *truth or … dare*. Although his rules make me question that.

I weigh the risks, knowing full well this could be a trap to gain information. But he did say *they* compete, not me, which is intriguing. Turning him down also won’t build comradery or trust, which is our best hope of getting a fair coal deal. ‘All right. I choose stare.’

‘Excellent,’ the Commander says. ‘Marian will go first. Lean forward. Stare into each other’s eyes.’ His voice drops low and deliberate. ‘You can blink, but don’t look away. Whichever daughter lasts the longest, will escort you to the lake.’

That’s it?

Marian nibbles her lip as the Commander begins the game with a flip of the timer. It lands with a heavy thump on the table, and nothing could have prepared me for when her defiant eyes lift to me.

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CHAPTER 14

MARIAN

Our gazes meet in a head-on collision.

My already racing pulse begins to pound. It's like last night all over again, when we both pulled a weapon and were stuck in a standoff. Except, instead of trying to win the draw, I'm daring him to go first. *Go on – quit.*

Of course, he doesn't. Those overly perceptive eyes are locked on me, so studious. Damnation, this is so uncomfortable. The urge to look away is up there with breathing.

Time passes at a glacial pace, so I opt to disassociate. My brain has already locked in too much information. The masculine angle of his cheekbones. The fresh shave on his tanned skin. I especially don't want to feel how he's slowly peeling me apart, layer by layer. But before I can imagine myself somewhere – anywhere – else, his gaze moves, sliding from my left eye to focus on my right. It leaves a trail of heat as it drags across my skin.

I exhale.

His head tilts, then he quirks an eyebrow.

Stop it. How is it possible he's enjoying this?

They say the eyes are the window to the soul, and I'm beginning to worry that might be true. He seems too satisfied with what he's uncovering, with no intent to end it.

My cheek twitches with the urge to check the timer. What are we at? Two minutes? Three? Maybe quitting and risking a punishment is worth it.

Ryland releases a heavy breath.

Bored? I refocus and cock my head at him. *Maybe you should quit.*

A hint of a smile appears on his face. Then his excavation of me continues.

This is all part of Atlas's hare-brained plan to get Ryland to fall in love with me. It's not going to work. I sit up straighter. Fill my lungs. *Hang on; you're almost done*.

But then Ryland's gaze moves again, meandering like a raindrop down the branches of a tree. It lingers. Settles in places, like my lashes, the freckles on my nose.

I bite my lip. This is *too* intimate.

I'm not making this uncomfortable enough for him.

I lean in, done being dissected. *Okay, my turn. Show me your secrets.* I'm not sure what his eyes are telling me, so I debate the shade of blue.

His pupils dilate.

Oh? *What's that about?* I edge closer and his dark lashes blink faster. My lips tug to the side. *Do I make you nervous, Ryland?* He has a small scar on the corner of his brow. A flaw, though not really. More like a carving on the handle of a beautiful knife. I search for more past injuries, meticulously exploring the bends and slopes of –

His tongue slides over his bottom lip.

My skin prickles. *Do not look there.*

But he seems to know the temptation I'm resisting as the intensity in his gaze increases. Energy sparks and builds between us, and I feel it low in my stom–

My breath hitches, and I break our stare, turning my head away.

'Time,' the Commander says.

I'm breathless as I study my lap, recovering. What was that? What just happened?

'My turn,' Agatha says eagerly. 'Ready?'

Ryland takes a big drink from his cup before turning to her.

Agatha smiles as their gaze meets, and Ryland grins in return. I don't know why but watching them suddenly feels like staring at the sun. They laugh at the uncomfortableness. Agatha cringes. It couldn't be more different from when Ryland did this with me. No deadly standoff. Nothing

but *fun*. Agatha bites her lip, her eyes growing wide as she fights the polite need to look away. Then suddenly her gaze jerks to the wall. She loses. ‘Oh, no,’ she cries in laughter. ‘I didn’t mean to do that.’

‘Yes, well, I don’t think anyone’s surprised,’ mutters Atlas.

I grab my goblet and chug down the need to punch him in the throat.

‘Marian, take Ryland to the lake for his prize,’ Atlas says, dismissing us. ‘Agatha, you can go to bed.’

I rise from the table, eager to make my escape.

‘Thank you for the evening, Commander,’ Ryland says carefully. ‘I look forward to discussing business tomorrow. And Agatha, pleasure to meet you.’ Then his footsteps follow me from the cavernous room.

Guardsmen stare as I speed out of the compound. I must look ridiculous in this old-world dress. Even Soren, standing guard with Diggs, openly watches me. His gaze snaps to Ryland, who’s calling my name, trying to catch up.

I’m tempted to break into a sprint. At the hitching post, I bolt left. Almost there.

‘Are we not going to the waterfall?’ Ryland asks when he’s only feet behind me.

It’s annoying how much longer his stride is than mine. ‘*We* are not going anywhere together.’ I reach the next corner of the compound, leading to the back. Another hundred steps or so and I’ll be below my bedroom window – my preferred passageway to it, avoiding both people and the winding maze of the compound.

‘Wait. Wait. Wait,’ he says, appearing before me, forcing me to stop.

His urgency seems to evaporate at having my attention, and it’s like he’s seeing into me again. Peeling layers back.

Something flutters in my chest, until I remember he’s threatened to ruin my life. Why do I keep forgetting that? I wait another couple of seconds for him to speak. ‘Okay, nice chat. Good night.’

‘Wait!’ he says, stepping with me as I try to leave. ‘Where are you going?’

As if that’s any of his concern. I cross my arms. ‘What’s the name of your settlement, Ryland?’

His mouth opens, and for some reason he looks like he might *actually* answer.

‘Don’t tell me,’ I snap. ‘I’m trying to prove a point.’

His forehead creases.

‘Where you *live* is none of *my* business. And where *I’m going* is none of *yours*. I’m not doing this – taking you to the lake. You know why? *Because you’re not supposed to be here.* Please don’t follow me.’

‘Okay, but can I say something first? Your father … how he acted in there. He’s a real bully sometimes, isn’t he?’

‘Don’t call him that.’

‘Oh.’ His face pinches. ‘I’m sorry. It’s just at dinner, I got the impression you might not … approve of the way he –’

‘I don’t approve. I meant, don’t call him my *father*. He absolutely is a bully.’

His chest swells with a relieved breath. Then he smiles, showing off a hint of dimples.

My stomach tumbles. *Damnation, what’s happening to me?* I turn my head to leave.

‘Wait – one more thing,’ he adds, then winces, struggling with how to start. ‘I can see why the Commander is shrewd with me; I’m a stranger. But you and Agatha, it’s like he stabs you just to watch you bleed. That’s unacceptable. Spineless. And … I’m beginning to wonder if I’ve made some assumptions that I shouldn’t have … about you and how things work around here.’

For a second, his words are gratifying in a way I can’t explain – until I’m reminded it’s to his benefit to weaponise every scrap of information he collects on me.

Give me a reason not to turn you in.

‘Listen, as happy as I am that you’re figuring out the Commander has the charm of an unmedicated amputation, you threatened me.’ Technically, I also threatened him, but that’s beside the point.

His face falters.

‘I’m also still unconvinced you’re not planning a raid on Notting.’

That’s a lie. After everything that happened in the High Command this evening, something’s changed between us. Call it intuition, I don’t know. But I believe him. Or maybe I’m finally open to the facts: why request miner’s safety lamps in the mine if his settlement is going to raid and take over? Why compromise with Atlas, refusing to bend to his every whim, if Ryland were going to kill us all?

It doesn’t change what has to happen, though. I step closer, leaning into him, and lower my voice to a whisper. ‘But for a moment, forget my concerns about you and listen to me. If you care about your settlement, *run*.’

He swallows, taking his time before responding. ‘I can’t do that.’

‘You would if you understood the stakes. The Commander is … very manipulative.’

Ryland angles even closer to me. He’s a head taller, but now we’re only inches apart. His scent of leather with a hint of wood smoke envelops me. An unfamiliar nervous energy vibrates through my body.

‘Are you saying there’s no coal to be had?’ he asks quietly.

‘There’s coal,’ I say softly. ‘But it will come at a terrible price. Atlas sees your well-made clothes and weapons and wants your wealth.’ I bite my lip. Have I said enough? No. I couldn’t live with myself if something happened because I wasn’t absolutely clear. ‘He *will* raid your settlement if he finds out where it is.’

Ryland’s head lifts, his eyes hardening. ‘I’m not worried.’

‘Then your arrogance will be your downfall. Because you should be.’

‘He doesn’t …’ Ryland stops himself from speaking at normal volume, again inclining his head. His lips are so close his breath tickles my ear. ‘He doesn’t know the name or location of our settlement. And our army – it’s formidable. He’d be foolish to attempt anything. Plenty have tried before him, and every one of them failed.’

My chest rises and falls shallowly. It’s dizzying having him so close. Almost as much as staring into his eyes. ‘The Commander is biding his time. Stalling to gather information. Even if you reach a deal, he’ll follow you home. Nothing good will come of this.’

‘Still not a problem.’

I balk.

‘We’ll confront them or outrun them,’ he continues. ‘Divide up the coal among our traders and lead them astray. We’ll do whatever we have to do, even bring an army. But finding us is only the first step. We’re not letting them in.’

This man is unbelievable. I stare dumbfounded before letting my eyes drift lower. He must have collected his weapons when he left the compound, because there’s a large knife strapped to his strong thigh. His bow and quiver are slung across his chest, pulling his shirt snug against the

defined planes of his upper body. My heart flutters with awareness, and I look away, ignoring it.

‘We need this deal,’ he says. ‘And so does the Commander. I just need time to convince him of that and why it’s better to keep us as friends.’

His confidence both confounds and exhausts me. I can’t help him if he won’t help himself. I take a step away, and it feels like stepping out of a tent that’s been baking in the sun. ‘I expect you to keep this in confidence,’ I say in parting. ‘You repeat anything I’ve said, and I’ll deny it. Now … I’m tired. I’m going to bed.’

His lips tighten. ‘And what about the water purifying tablets? Are we not testing them?’

‘No,’ I say, walking away. Water pills are the least of my concerns, and he’s distracted me long enough. I need to move on to the people who actually *want* my help.

‘Is that because you’re starting to trust me?’ he calls. There’s something hopeful and teasing in his voice.

My treacherous mouth cracks a grin. The smallest. I don’t look back as I climb the makeshift ladder to my second-floor bedroom window. ‘Don’t you wish.’

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CHAPTER 15

RYLAND

I thought Marian rushed off because she was up to something tonight. And *bloody hellfire*, I wasn't wrong. She stops swinging her axe to scan the forest, and I duck lower from my elevated position. Her gaze shifts to study the sky again, as if checking the position of the setting sun. I suspect she's waiting for someone, likely on a schedule. Another one of her father's trading wagons perhaps?

She adjusts her hood and resumes chopping.

What's the plan, Marian?

I mean, other than the obvious – a raid. She picked a good spot. Twisty road. Low visibility due to the trees. The target won't see the roadblock she's creating until it's too late to turn their wagon around. But then what? She's far from Notting this time, and there'll be no running off with a wagon if she blocks her exit.

With a final swing, the tree gives a beastly crack and falls across the beaten road.

The sound of barking comes from the distance. She spins, and even from my hiding spot, I see the blood drain from her face.

I rise a little from behind a bush and curse. Last time there were no attack dogs on her father's trailer. I tense as she dives for cover, and the sense of foreboding I've felt since Marian and I went our separate ways hours ago is a screaming siren now in my head.

I pull an arrow from my quiver and nock it on my bow, then watch the horses and wagon ride closer.

Three men. Two on separate horses. A third steers their wagon, a small house on wheels with suspiciously human-like skulls mounted along the top – fair to say it's also not a friendly traveller. The old driver is missing a leg, but the others on horses look young. The one wearing a cattleman hat is strapped with blades and a crossbow. His partner has that and extras – two arm-sized machetes crisscrossed on his back.

The dogs are chained but won't stop barking in my direction. I clench my jaw, ducking lower.

'Henrick! Mast!' yells the cattleman. 'Both of you, quiet!'

Too quickly, they reach the final curve in the road and stop at the fallen tree. Machete jumps down from his horse to investigate. Then everything happens at once. 'Axe marks,' he yells, barrelling back to his horse. 'Ambush. Release the dogs.'

No, don't do that.

The cattleman goes for the first dog's lead. I stand. Aim. Then aim again, forcing myself to slow down. I'll get only one chance. I release my shot. My arrow slams through a link in the chain, nailing it back to the wagon wall.

The cattleman ducks, covering his head. 'They're shooting!' He throws himself at the next lead and then a solid eighty pounds of teeth and muscle is set free.

I curse and take off, sprinting, but the dog's chain smacking the ground is too damn close.

I give up and stand my ground, taking aim – I have to. Neither Marian nor I has a horse nearby. The dog is thirty feet away. Twenty-five. My lungs burn as I hold my breath. *Don't make me do it.*

Suddenly, another set of horses and a covered flatbed trailer rides in between us, blocking the dog from view. It skids to a stop before the road curves, spotting the trapped vagabond wagon.

I recognise Fitzgerald. *This* is the trailer Marian was waiting for. Fitz shouts, trying to get his horses to back up.

The dog reappears, going after the horses and militia men. Their geldings rear up and kick out. But my reprieve is short-lived – the other dog has been released. It's nothing but a streak of fur as it races across the road and into the trees.

Marian.

The sound of arrows hitting wagons carries to me as I crash through the brush to get to her.

‘Don’t hit the dogs,’ snarls the old man. A sharp whistle cuts through the air. ‘Mast! Henrick, get over here.’ The canines retreat. My feet don’t stop running as more arrows fly. Men shout panicked orders.

‘Go, go, go.’

‘Give me the reins.’

I glance over my shoulder as Fitzgerald completes the turn and steers back in the direction they came. Good. Except something pokes out from the tarp covering their trailer. What the –? I slow, then change directions, needing a better look. A hand grips the end of the trailer, then I spot what looks an awful lot like Marian’s hood.

How the hellfire did she get inside there?

I try to keep up with her, but I can’t. I’ll have to go for my hors–

Suddenly Marian climbs out and hits the ground with a roll, holding something clutched to her chest. A bag? She disappears into the trees without anyone the wiser. I chuckle in disbelief. She even timed her exit not far from her horse, knowing they’d have to backtrack.

I drop my hands to my knees, breathing hard. Looks like I won’t be uncovering what she does with her loot tonight.

But I did learn she’s stealing from someone who probably deserves to lose every piece she takes. Which does seem to shift the ground rules I’ve lived my life by. Attacking, raiding, stealing – they’re wrong.

And yet I’m starting to wonder whether I need to do more than just protect her secret. Maybe this is a cause I should support.

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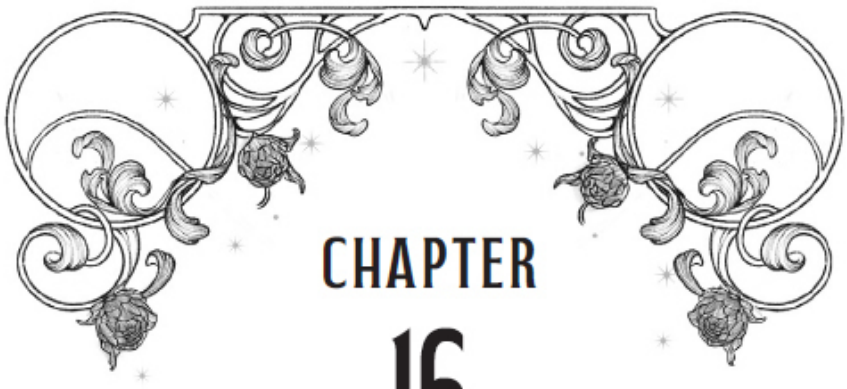

CHAPTER 16

RYLAND

The attacker backhands Mum, sending her face-first to the ground. Her screaming stops.

'Mum?' I yell, terrified. What's happening? One second, we're outside Kingsland's electric fence, welcoming my father home from his supply route. The next, I'm watching my parents get attacked by this man. A one-handed stranger.

He pulls a knife. 'Now, give me your ring.'

'Go away, Ryland,' Mum calls, as I race closer. She pushes to her feet, face red. Tears streaming down her cheeks. 'Get out of here. Run.'

With another scream, she throws herself at the man, scratching and clawing his face. My father grips his stomach. There's blood everywhere. He falls.

'Dad!' I run to him. Except when I get there, it's not him I find lying on the ground.

It's Marian.

Her lifeless eyes stare up at me. Then her lips move as she speaks. 'You're talking in your sleep.'

I startle awake, sitting up. My hand sweeps behind me, grasping my knife.

The nightmare world disappears, along with my father's face that I can no longer remember, and I struggle to make sense of what's left. Of … the boy leisurely slurping a drink from my canteen. The sun's up just enough to

see Little John lying on his stomach, staring at me. My tent is unzipped and wide open. How did I sleep through him doing that? I scrub a hand through my hair, my heart still pumping as if I've been chased by a bear. 'What are you doing in here?'

'You were talking. But you were asleep.'

I grunt. 'I gathered that.'

Unbothered, he glances around. 'I've never slept in one of those cocoons before.' He ticks his head at my sleeping sack. 'Can I try that?'

'Not while I'm in it.' I reach for a T-shirt and slip it on, wincing at the stiffness from sleeping on the ground. 'How long have you been here? Wait. What time is it?' I try to look out of the unzipped door.

'Do I look like I own a windup clock?'

The kid doesn't look like he owns anything. He's wearing shorts that are too big and a shirt that's practically see-through. He never has shoes.

'I meant, has everyone left for the mine yet?' I had planned to get up early and talk to more of the men who fit my suspect profile. My time here is running out.

'Oh, it's too early for that.'

I relax a little and rub my eyes. 'Does your mum know you're here?'

'Nope,' he says, popping the *P*.

I raise a disapproving brow.

'What?' He shrugs his little shoulders. 'She's still sick, but maybe she'll feel better soon now that she's got medi–' He cuts off, his eyes wide.

I tilt my head. 'Medi … *cine*?'

He looks like he might start crying for letting that slip out. But then he nods his head.

I don't know where they get medicine around here, but why is that a secret? 'And if *I* needed medicine, the same kind your mum needed, where would I go to get it?'

His bottom lip pushes out, and I almost feel bad for asking. He drops his tone to a whisper. 'The Saint of Shadows.'

I huff a laugh. Wait – he's not joking.

The pieces fall into place. Is *Marian* the Saint of Shadows? Was that what she was doing last night? Stealing medicine?

'He helps us.'

He?

‘You can’t tell anyone.’ Suddenly, Little John jumps up and runs out of the tent, taking my blasted canteen with him.

People are up and cooking over the coal fires in the shared common area. A couple of them watch me with suspicion as I pass by. Not that I blame them. My combat clothes and weapons make me look like a guardsman, and if I’ve learned anything here, it’s that a militia guard is not a friend of the Dresden.

I find my first person of interest drinking from a mug while sitting by a firepit.

‘Morning,’ I say, stretching my fingers out to warm them over the burning coals. ‘Mind if I join you?’ I nod at him. ‘I’m Ryland.’

‘Ji-ho,’ he says, then ticks his head to take a seat on the cut log beside him. It’s clear he’s missing a hand, and now that I’m close enough to see past the coal dust on his face, I realise he’s got brown eyes. Not my suspect.

The tension eases in my muscles. ‘Looks like it’s going to be a nice day.’

‘Yes,’ he mutters. ‘Not that we’ll get to enjoy it.’

‘How long are your shifts?’

‘Usually takes ten to twelve hours to hit my quota. More if you have other mouths to feed.’

An uneasiness clamps around my chest. It’s a feeling that’s been getting worse the more I learn how the Commander runs things around here.

Ji-ho and I continue to chat, and I’m surprised to learn they’ve started using the miner’s safety lamps. Equally shocking, he resents it.

‘Doesn’t let us see much, which slows our work. But I guess it’s important we live to work another day.’

I frown. I thought the miners would be happy to improve the dangerous conditions of the mine. But that obviously only scratches the surface of their problems. In Kingsland, every able-bodied person has a job, and no one goes without food or help or medicine if they need it. Here, what happens when they get old or sick? Do they just … die?

Eventually, Ji-ho leaves and I spot Rufus, the one-handed trader – the man Little John said was a snitch.

‘Excuse me,’ I call, jogging over as he heads towards the mine. Rufus is about my height, and just like everyone, he’s covered in coal dust. In his one hand, he’s carrying a jar of water.

He turns, and at seeing me, his blue eyes widen.

There’s a pulse of something inside me. Recognition? Or is it because he ticks all the right boxes – he’s white and I’d guess in his forties. The world melts away as I go on alert.

‘Do I look familiar to you?’ I ask. I’m not sure this is even about the attack. I study his overgrown blonde-and-grey hair. He’s got a look about him, like I should know him. But I can’t put my finger on it.

His mouth opens, then closes. His feet stop. ‘Yeah, actually. You look like … my brother.’

‘Your brother.’ Wasn’t expecting that.

‘He was a good-looking guy like you.’ He smiles too brightly. ‘So I hear you’re trying to get a deal for coal?’

A bit of an abrupt change of topic. ‘Trying,’ I say, studying his face. He’s got some scars, which makes me think of my latest nightmare. The events were the usual remix of the same things. The scuffle. The screaming. The blood. But did Mum really scratch the face of our attacker? Or am I making up new details while I sleep?

‘Where did you say you’re from?’ he asks.

‘I didn’t, and I can’t say. You understand, right?’

The smile is back. ‘Of course.’ Rufus leans in. ‘Listen, the Commander has the market cornered on coal, but I’ve got connections for other things. Supplies. Horses. If there’s something else you’re looking for, let me know.’

‘Well … I am considering a ring for my girl.’ I don’t expect the attacker to have Mum’s ring this many years later, but I am curious to see how he plays this. ‘You deal in that kind of thing?’

‘Yeah,’ he says, real eager. ‘I’ll do some digging and get back to you.’

Digging or stealing? ‘One last thing – I’ve been talking to people about the mine explosions. It seems like there’s been a lot of them. Is that where you got those scars on your face?’

His eyes seem to cloud over with a memory. ‘Something like that.’ His smile returns but this time it seems forced. ‘Well, I need to get going to work, but let’s keep talking.’ He tips an imaginary hat.

I watch him leave, not feeling any closure. I think I’d really like to know where he was on August fifteenth, sixteen years ago.

That afternoon, in the High Command, I find the Commander slumped in his chair, eyes heavy and glazed, unmistakably hungover. In comparison,

his advisor – Coatl – looks like he'd sell his dignity for a thumbs up. Marian stands in her usual spot along the side wall.

As much as I need this deal done yesterday, I'm not mad about the Commander's condition. Stalling means time for Sam and Levi to find a better option. And for me to convince the Commander a coal deal is better than invasion.

'Marian, I wanted to say thank you for the enchanting time at the waterfall yesterday.' I smile, playing it up. Last night, the Commander practically threw her at me, and if he wants her close, I'm happy to oblige.

Something calculating enters her eyes. 'You're welcome. It was so … *romantic*.'

I raise an intrigued eyebrow, as my stomach dips. Now, I'm thinking about Marian and Romance.

'Really?' the Commander asks. His eyes lift with interest for the first time since I arrived.

'Yes,' she says. 'Ryland picked me wildflowers. Unfortunately, it was too loud at the waterfall, and we weren't able to do much talking.'

I bite back a smirk. 'That was unfortunate,' I agree. 'Which is why we should do it again.'

A sound of surprise emerges from her throat.

'This time we could go somewhere quieter. Perhaps take a walk. Or maybe we could attempt a swim, since I've secured the proper swimwear.' Her gaze flares with amusement, and it's like a drug in my blood. 'How does tonight sound?' Her mask is uncrackable, except for her eyes, which I think I know intimately now after our staring game.

'But I thought you told me you didn't know how to swim?' she counters.

'Oh, I know how to swim.' I cock my head. 'You've seen me, remember?'

Colour blooms on her cheeks at being called out on spying, and the fact that she can't hide it from me has me grinning like an idiot.

'Enough,' the Commander snaps. 'My head hurts from all this talking. I called you here for a reason.'

My gaze flicks back to Marian.

'I've got business at the Lower Beaver Trading Post. I'll be gone two days,' he grumbles. 'So, you can take my offer or leave. I want twenty head of cattle or the equivalent for every wagon of coal.'

Twenty head? We traded our coal for ten per cent of that.

‘And no deal without your settlement name and location. For trust reasons, of course.’

Naturally. A slow, seething anger begins to boil in my gut. I knew he’d try to do us dirty, but this isn’t even in the realm of a possible deal. It’s a slap in the face.

And yet we can’t walk away.

‘Your hesitation tells me you’re not going to take advantage of my generosity. Fine.’ The Commander sounds unconcerned. ‘We’re done here. Coatl, have him removed.’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ I rush to say, then flash Coatl a look, letting him know he’ll lose that hand if he touches me. He stands down. ‘I thought this was a negotiation. Do I not get to make a counteroffer?’

The Commander rubs his forehead. ‘Like what?’

I exhale, wishing he wasn’t on the verge of puking – he won’t have the patience to go back and forth. ‘Our offer is …’ Going to be worlds away from what he wants. I grimace. ‘We’ll match you wagon for wagon of wheat and a second grain of your choice.’

Coatl barks a laugh.

‘I’m not done,’ I say loudly, even though I should be. ‘If you agree to my offer, we’ll give you a one-time gift of a water system – a gravity-fed water tower that will provide you with running well water from an elevated reservoir to one location.’

Marian gasps quietly. Coatl’s wide eyes grow wider.

‘You have your own lodge, do you not?’ I ask. ‘Imagine a water line to that.’

The Commander straightens, intrigued. ‘You have the old-world materials to give me running water? Pipes? A holding tank?’

‘I wouldn’t offer if we didn’t.’

‘Interesting.’ He sits back. Pulls on his beard with his long fingernails. ‘But the answer’s still no.’

My brows slam down.

‘However … we *are* getting somewhere. It appears we have more to discuss.’ The Commander thinks for a second. ‘You can stay. For now. I’ll give my counteroffer when I return. Marian will entertain you while I’m gone.’

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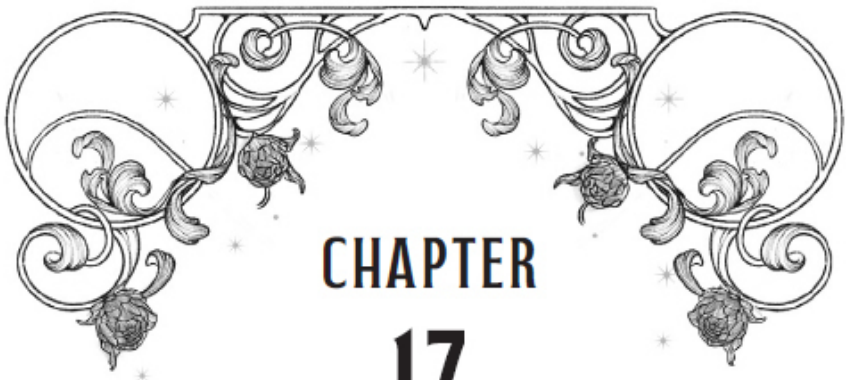

CHAPTER 17

MARIAN

I slip into Agatha's room and shut the door.

Her head whips back, and annoyance creeps over her face. 'What do you want?'

I take in Dezzy leaning over something at the end of Agatha's worktable. We've never needed a reason to invade each other's rooms before.

Agatha bugs her eyes out when I don't answer.

'I don't know,' I say. 'To hide for a minute, I guess.' At least until Atlas and Coatl leave. Then I'll be in charge, which mostly means nothing. Everyone knows what they have to do.

'Hide in your *own* room.' She turns back around, attending to whatever she's working on.

'You don't come to my room any more.'

'That's because you have nothing in it.'

It's the first time she's commented on the missing things I've slowly been donating to Brother Thomas for the Dresden. I frown. What's with the attitude? It can't still be about the sparring incident. She seemed mostly fine at our dinner with Ryland yesterday.

'Why are you hiding?' Dezzy asks, raising her chin. 'Is there a grizzly bear outside?' Her words drip with a mix of sarcasm and righteous disdain, because anything short of a mauling bear is not a reason to avoid work.

I roll my eyes. ‘Can’t a girl take a quick break?’ Although avoiding Atlas isn’t my only reason. After flirting with Ryland – as per my mission – there seems to be a light, yet persistent, fluttering now in my chest. I need it to calm down.

Agatha leans into Dezzy and whispers something.

Okay, that’s rude. Whispering to each other is *our* thing – something we did frequently during Dezzy’s lessons, until Dezzy got so frustrated, a rare curse would slip out.

I exhale, trying not to be sore about it, and draw closer. ‘What are you working on?’

‘Your sister’s found potassium nitrate,’ Dezzy says, her accented voice animated in a way she only gets when discussing academia. ‘She found the white crystals of it growing on the walls outside the barns. It appears the ammonia gas from the animals’ excrement reacted with the bacteriums there to make a nitrate. Then that reacted with the potassium minerals found in the stone.’

I try to look fascinated, even though I enjoyed studying the elements as much as I’d enjoy an eye exam with rusty tweezers. I can still appreciate the impressiveness of those words. ‘Sounds important.’

She points to the large jar on the table. ‘It means we have a natural source of potassium nitrate from the stone walls of the barn.’

Now *that* makes me smile. Agatha finding her elemental compounds *within* Notting territory should keep Atlas off her back. ‘And what do you plan to use it for?’

Agatha barks a frustrated laugh.

Dezzy’s face falls in disappointment. ‘It’s an oxidiser –’

‘Don’t,’ Agatha says, cutting her off. ‘Don’t tell her any more until we’re out of the discovery phase. There’s nothing to report right now.’

‘Agatha,’ I say, affronted. ‘What’s going on? Are you still upset about the sparring?’

‘Why are you *really* here, Marian?’ she demands, crossing her arms.

Her anger feels misplaced. Unfair. ‘I’m here because I *want* to be with my sister. Who I *miss*.’

‘Liar.’

My head rears back. ‘How is that a lie?’

‘Girls,’ Dezzy chides.

Neither one of us acknowledges her.

‘How about you tell me what you want from me?’ I say. ‘Do you want me to stand up to him more? Fine. I will. And then we’ll see how bad our punishments can get. Will that make you feel better?’

‘Yes,’ she snaps back. ‘I do want you to stand up to him. Stand up to him and tell him no. For once. Tell him he can’t force you to … manipulate people. No whoring yourself out for his purposes.’

Oh. My mouth drops open. This is about Ryland.

‘But I know you won’t. Because you *like* being used by Father. Anything that keeps you his favourite. As if the way he looks at you weren’t enough.’

Fingers of anger fist around my heart as I push closer. ‘Are you seriously jealous that Atlas measures my worth by how shiny I am as a trophy? That he promoted me to stoke his pride, all while treating me like an object?’

She makes a sound of disgust. ‘No. Don’t be gross.’

‘It *is* gross, isn’t it? Yet we all just *let* it happen, because we know the alternative – that pushing back is worse. You’re not the only one who has to endure something that feels intolerable. But we do what we have to.’

For a moment, it appears I’ve broken through her thick skull – until she pokes a sharp fingernail into my collarbone. ‘You think you’re so helpless. You don’t know the power you have.’

‘What power?’ I repeat in disbelief. ‘For someone so smart, you sure have a poor memory. Or did you forget what happens when one of us *tries* to leave?’

Her thin lips form a line at my reminder of Felix. Of his exile. Of her being beaten by Coatl as I was forced to watch. ‘You did that,’ she hisses, angrily. ‘All of that was because you and your boyfriend turned us in.’

‘It wasn’t me and you know it! I ended things with Soren the second he betrayed you. And from that point on I’ve …’ My words grind to a halt as I stop myself from revealing how I’ve worked to weaken and sabotage Atlas ever since. I swallow. ‘I was trying to save you from dying in the badlands.’

‘And it got Felix killed.’

‘We don’t know what happened to him after he was exiled,’ I whisper. ‘But … yes, it was terrible.’ I look away, biting back the temptation to remind her that we’re on the same team. That I’ve slept with her in the dirt at night, that I stood with her day after day in the hot sun without water, every time she was punished for breaking Atlas’s rules. And even though we’re no longer children, I’m still protecting her. Because the day I’m finally caught for my raids, she can honestly say she didn’t know. ‘It’s why

I'll do whatever it takes, even drag you back from the badlands, so I don't have to bury you beside our mother.'

She huffs in disbelief. Then she pulls off her leather gloves and throws them on the table, rattling the jars. 'I would have been better off in the badlands.'

'Agatha,' I shout after her as she storms out of her bedroom.

My stew slops over the bowl as I set my supper tray down on the dining hall table. 'Have you heard from Agatha?' I ask Dezzy.

'No,' she says, aggressively wiping her mouth, back as straight as a sword. 'But just leave her. She'll return when she's ready.'

She'll come back when I'm not here. So childish.

'Do you mind if I join you?' asks a deep voice.

My breath catches in my throat as I lift my gaze.

Ryland.

Dezzy clutches her chest and smiles in a way I didn't know she was capable of. 'Hey, who are you? Oh my, you are a good-looking man.'

I feel frozen, even though I'm sinking lower in my seat. No, he can't eat with us. If he thought being interrogated by Atlas was unpleasant, he's about to be opened like a tin can – with the end of a hammer.

'Yes, of course you can sit. Here.' Dezzy makes room, pulling out the chair next to her.

Ryland flashes his straight, white teeth and takes the seat, setting down his tray. 'Thank you. I'm Ryland, and I'll be staying here for at least a couple of days.'

'And where do you come from, handsome man, Ryland?'

'Dezzy,' I hiss, leaning forward. 'For the love of all things Gergan, you can't call him that … or ask him where he came from.'

'Why can't I ask that?' She looks baffled.

'*Because*,' I say. 'It's not safe for him or his people to give up their location.' I toss her a meaningful look while trying to ignore Ryland's gaze roaming all over my face. Tingles erupt over my skin.

She snorts. 'Fine, then. Marian, maybe you want to do the talking. Do you find this man attractive?'

My face heats, and with horror it dawns on me that I was wrong – it's not Ryland being ripped open and laid bare here. It's me.

She squawks. ‘Look at her. She is speechless.’ She chuckles, then drops her voice. ‘She is also single.’

I bow my head and pray for mercy.

‘Is she?’ Ryland muses with interest, making me peek up at him.

Don’t encourage her.

His eyes dance with amusement. ‘Well, so am I.’

My heart lurches. Is he flirting for real? My skin flashes even hotter – a mix of embarrassment and something else I haven’t felt in a long while. Something I *shouldn’t* be feeling with him. ‘Ryland, please know you don’t have to be subjected to this. You can leave anytime.’

‘Oh, I’m *exactly* where I want to be.’

My lungs stutter. What is happening? Why is he being so … bold?

And why am I so hot? I almost fan myself. Instead, I remember the facts: Ryland and I aren’t friends. He’s a stranger from a land filled with *the most* dangerous strangers. And to avoid a full-scale war between our settlements, we shouldn’t even be talking.

So whatever he’s after – information, an ally, a better deal for coal … or even a moment of *distraction* – he’s not going to find it in me.

Even if he is the most attractive man I’ve ever met.

‘Well,’ I say. ‘Then don’t say I didn’t warn you. Dezzy, have at him.’ I turn my head, pretending that will spare me more humiliation, and stuff my mouth with stale bread.

‘I don’t know. The tinctures were just missing.’ From beside me, Grendle’s words register in my brain. ‘It’ll be another two weeks until the next load.’

My heart gives a firm thump. She’s talking about the black walroot tincture I stole. I tilt my head, angling closer, trying to catch whether she’s suspicious about who took it. But she moves on quickly, letting it go. I exhale a slow breath.

‘Do you speak other languages?’ Dezzy asks Ryland.

‘Only sign language,’ he says. ‘But that was a long time ago. I’ve forgotten most of it.’

‘Sign language?’ Dezzy balks. ‘How do you speak with signs?’

Ryland demonstrates as he explains, and I find myself watching his strong hands and forearms move in unacceptably interesting ways. Thick veins run like vines under his tanned skin. He has the perfect dusting of

golden hair. I notice his muscles strain against the edges of his sleeve and imagine feeling them, running my fingers up and over –

Ryland's gaze snaps to me.

It jolts something in my chest. Panic – but also a thrill.

Make him fall in love with you.

The thought of manipulating Ryland for a purpose, especially Atlas's purpose, knots uncomfortably in my stomach. As it should.

But getting closer to Ryland for my own curiosity …

Ryland seems to have forgotten what he was saying.

I force my gaze away and swallow hard. *No.* If Atlas wants me to do it, then I need to do the opposite. I collect my dishes. 'I need to get going.'

Dezzy ignores me and asks Ryland if she can see his hands, commenting on how large they are. He holds them up, looking confused, but gives her his full attention. It's not until I'm clear of the dining hall that I realise he hasn't asked me anything that would help him secure a deal.

In my bedroom mirror's reflection, I bend my arms, testing out the crude stitches repairing my vagabond disguise. I'm hardly a seamstress, but this will have to do.

Okay, what am I missing?

Aside from the common sense to not raid tonight, mere hours after being left in charge of Notting.

After changing, I fold the pieces, then shove them in my pack. As usual, a nervousness hums below my skin, radiating from my bones. The inescapable fear of getting caught, rearing its head.

Call it off. The risk is too great to continue. What's the end goal, anyway? Am I going to do this for the rest of Atlas's life?

I brace a hand on the wall and breathe, but it feels like I'm trapped underwater.

What if I *did* quit? Maybe I've done enough.

My chest loosens for a split second, until I remember I've been given a gift of Atlas and Coatl being gone. *Are you really going to waste that?*

I groan. Plus, it's collection day. A simple operation. Just slip into the trailer and dump stuff in the ditch before it's tagged and locked away at the warehouse.

Simple. But not easy.

It's never easy.

The anxious burn behind my sternum returns as I open the window with a creak. I cringe. Normally I don't care who sees me enter or exit this way. Tonight is different.

There's something sitting on the outside ledge – a single red wildflower. I hold it to my nose and inhale, wondering how a raven carried it all this way.

Ryland picked me wildflowers I said to Atlas in the High Command.

Wait. Ryland wouldn't have …

My stomach swoops at the possibility that it was Ryland who gifted me this. I bite my lip. Nobody's ever done something so thoughtful.

Well … except Benedict, who I see has taken the berries I left this morning and brought me an old-world coin. I pick up the perfect circle of silver metal and examine the profile of the man embossed on one side. A worthless relic, but a collectable nonetheless.

'Heads and I have a safe night raiding.' I toss and catch the coin but pause before looking. Do I really need another reason not to raid? Instead, I shove it in my pocket, hoping it brings me luck.

Something tells me I'm going to need it.

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CHAPTER 18

MARIAN

I watch from a safe distance, tucked behind a log Dresden home, as Soren and Petronis run collections tonight. It's good to watch. It gives me a sense of what's being put on the trailer and where, which helps me to work faster during my raid.

A tickle goes up my spine as the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It feels like I'm being watched, so I crouch lower. Shrink deeper into my hood. But after scanning the tree line, the darkness gives nothing away.

'Please,' a Dresden woman begs, reaching for Soren's hand. He jerks back in disgust, and she drops to her knees before the collections table. Her head is wrapped in a faded scarf and her sharp face carries both desperation and deep fatigue. 'Give me another week.'

'Time's up,' Soren says, while writing in the ledger. 'You've underpaid for over a month. You owe too much.'

'It's the mine.' Her voice rises with anger. 'I can't lift –'

He peers behind her. 'Next,' he growls, just like the wolf he is – him and Petronis.

'Wait!' She grips the table. 'W-what if I work as a laundress? The Commander hires people for that. Or I could farm his animals. Do the cleaning?'

'Those positions aren't for asylum seekers with bad joints.' Soren's lip curls. 'And you stink. If you can't rinse yourself off once in a while, you're

not qualified to work a mop. You'll be escorted out of Notting territory at sunrise.'

'No, please,' she cries, then whirls around, facing her fellow Dresden. 'You all know this is a death sentence. Help me.'

My head drops as silence fills the air, and my stomach turns. Exiles have become rare since I've started raiding. But every time it happens, it feels like we've failed. Like *I've* failed. I search the crowd for Brother Thomas and find him standing not far off, his face tense. I don't understand. Was there nothing left we could have given to her?

'You miserable rats,' she spits, but not at the guardsmen. 'May you all burn in hellfire.'

Her anger hangs in the air, thick and venomous, and Brother Thomas's words from years ago come back to me.

We have to be cautious of those who would turn on us to save their skin.

Is that what's happening? This woman is someone who would snitch on our charity to benefit herself? Or maybe blackmail us into giving her more and more?

Petronis draws his sword. 'Leave before you make me use this.'

Her mouth snaps shut. Then with a pitiful whimper, she shuffles away.

We can't help everyone, Marian. It's a bitter pill, but I swallow it down, walling off that part of my heart. If I didn't accept my limits, I'd have lost my mind under the pressure and grief long ago.

Twenty minutes later, I take my position in the ditch along the road. The trailer, pulled by one horse, is approaching. Soren is on his own mount, not far off. I press my hands into the cold grass, readying myself.

They're moving quickly. They pass, and I dive out of the brush, but it's so dark that I miss the back of the trailer and fall hard on to the dirt road. My elbow smarts as I scramble to my feet and start running. My boots thud loudly as I catch up. I grab hold, grit my teeth and jump, hauling myself over the wooden edge. The trailer dips with my weight.

'Wait! Hold on,' Soren calls to Petronis.

His horse immediately slows, and my heart climbs into my throat. I duck down, out of breath, but as much as I need to be quiet, I need *to hide*. One swipe of Soren's torch this way, and he'll see me.

'What?' Petronis asks, as the wagon slows to a stop.

'The trailer … bobbed.'

Petronis laughs. 'Yeah, look at this road.'

The load bounces as it rumbles forward again, and I've never been more grateful that Petronis has the patience of an overfilled bladder. A second later, Soren's horse resumes walking.

Blood rushes in my ears as I waste no time dropping items into the tall grass beside the ditch. I want this over with. My hand retrieves a bag of what feels like potatoes. I lower it down. Drop it into the grass. Whatever's inside shatters. Loudly.

Panic slams into my chest. I dive low, flattening myself.

'Stop,' Soren shouts.

Petronis obeys.

Soren's horse ambles closer and – stay or go? *Stay or go?* He's going to see me either way. With a silent prayer, I spring up and leap over the side. But in the dark, I land awkwardly, twisting my ankle.

'There!' Soren shouts. 'Thief! Stop!'

Pain rips through my foot as I stumble. I can't run. Thinking fast, I drop to the ground and roll under the trailer.

Soren's feet stomp the gravel as he jumps from his horse.

'Where'd he go?' Petronis shouts, also dismounting. 'I'll check this way; you clear the trees.'

Excellent plan, except Soren doesn't follow through. He inches closer, using his torch to inspect the trailer. He's so close I can see the caked dust on his tall leather boots.

I hold my breath, knowing he's going to bend down and look underneath. Carefully, I try to climb the axles of the wheels to pull myself up off the ground. My throbbing ankle burns from where I've wedged it. The sweat on my hands makes my grip slip. Worst of all, my hood falls back, and my ponytail falls out. It's dangling, touching the ground, but I don't have a free hand to tuck it away.

My tiny pants of breath feel like thunder in the air.

Soren takes another pebble-scattering step. I close my eyes and murmur another prayer. If he finds me, I'll just have to put my hood back up and fight him. Both him *and* Petronis, then get away.

Suddenly, a hand grips my hair. 'Gotcha,' he says and yanks. It comes with a sound like grass being torn free from the earth.

The pain in my scalp is blinding, and a cry leaks from me as I fall, unable to keep my grip. Soren goes still. 'What the –' His surprise turns to

pleasure. ‘Are you a … girl?’ Then with utter brutality, he attempts to drag me out from under the trailer.

Kicking off the bottom of the wagon, I spin and sweep his legs, knocking him on his back. The torch flies into the grass and flickers out. It’s enough – his hold on me releases.

Roll. Get out of here. And I try, except my execution is sloppy. My head is in agony, and I’m struggling to think. I resort to crawling away like a spider under a boot’s shadow.

‘Come back here, *little girl*.’

It’s both a blessing and a curse that it’s now so dark. He can’t see me, but I also don’t know which direction to go.

My breaths are too loud as his footsteps crunch the ground, rounding the trailer. He’s hunting me.

‘I’ve got your hair,’ he taunts. ‘Do you want it back?’

‘Yes,’ rasps a low voice.

Soren’s feet scuff through the gravel as he spins around. ‘Who’s there?’ he demands.

I stiffen. That wasn’t Petronis.

Then a bone-chilling cry comes from Soren. It abruptly cuts off.

There’s a struggle. A grunt. Then the sound of skin meeting skin in brutal fashion. A body drops to the ground.

I can’t breathe. What happened?

‘He’s out. But not for long.’

Ryland.

Rolling twice, I clear the remainder of the trailer overhead and push to my feet. Pain stabs my ankle. It’s so dark, I don’t even see Petronis’s torch. Why? Did Ryland get to him first?

Ryland *helped* me.

It’s taking a moment for that to sink in, but as it does, I’m overcome with gratitude. And confusion. How did he know?

I strain to see into the trailer. There’s no time to take more or even retrieve what I threw into the ditch, which is a problem, because if anyone finds it, they’ll know exactly what I’ve been up to.

A groan rises from Soren.

My heart feels like it’s been kicked.

Ryland’s arm finds me and wraps around my stomach, pulling me away. I step on my hurt foot and take in a sharp breath.

‘You’re hurt?’ he whispers, then he’s lifting me into his arms.

‘No, I can push through it. I don’t think I’m *that* hurt.’ I squirm out of his grasp and lead the way into the forest, running with a hitch in my step. There’s nothing else we can do right now.

This raid was an utter loss.

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CHAPTER 19

MARIAN

My stomach twists as we near the edge of the Dresden camp. So many thoughts battle for my attention. ‘I need to get back to the compound.’ They’re the first words I’ve spoken since we made our retreat. Even shucking my vagabond jacket and hood and stuffing them under a log was something we did wordlessly. ‘Soren will launch a search for the *thief*.’ A female thief. ‘Any minute he’ll sound the alarm; that’s protocol.’

I think of Brother Thomas – should I warn him? No, he’s always prepared for a search. And I was going to surprise him with the new supplies, so it’s not like he was expecting a delivery.

Then there’s Ryland. I glance at the man beside me.

Why did he help me?

What he did could have consequences for him and his deal with Atlas.

‘Can it wait?’ Ryland asks. ‘We should lie low. Clean you up first. Then I’ll take you back on my horse.’

Reluctantly, I admit that’s probably best. I’m a mess. Besides my ankle, my arms and knees burn with scrapes, and I’m almost certain I’m bleeding from my scalp. ‘I suppose I can wait until I hear the alarm.’

‘I doubt Soren will even report it,’ he continues, keeping his voice down. ‘Doesn’t seem like the type to announce that he failed at his job.’

‘That actually sounds *exactly* like Soren. He and Petronis are probably scouring the forest for the thief right now.’

I can finally see a bit of Ryland's profile as we walk. We remain in the trees, skirting the Dresden homes, but the firepits and scattered lanterns from the centre give off a bit of light. The muscles in Ryland's jaw clench, distracting me for a moment. I follow the strong lines of his neck down to the hooded cape he's wearing – something I've never seen on him before. What was he doing tonight before he came upon me?

'If you're good with it, my tent isn't far from here.'

Suddenly, it's like I've swallowed a fish and now it's flopping around, slapping my ribs. Mere hours ago, I was running from Ryland after supper, pretending the way he looked at me wasn't causing meteoric flashes of heat. Now, he's escorting me to his tent to hide out.

Alone.

Relax. We can't clean me up out in the open, and I'm blanking on an alternative plan. My brain has turned to wet sand, my thoughts nothing but clumps of crumbling questions and concerns. The adrenaline is crashing and my injuries are aching, especially my head.

How did Ryland find me?

At his camp, he greets his horse with a soft word. Then he lights a lantern using some flint from a hidden pocket. The sudden brightness makes me feel exposed. Dishevelled. I touch my ponytail and find it both lopsided and half falling out. I hope my clothes aren't ripped.

Ryland bends to open the flimsy tent, and I eye the lock on the zip.

'Nice security,' I say with a small laugh. 'A lock on fabric walls.'

He smirks as he opens it with a flick of his wrist. 'It helps to know whether my gear has been tampered with.'

'You're a guest of *the Commander*. I doubt anyone would risk it.'

He holds open the door flap for me to enter, but as I pass him, he quietly murmurs, 'You take on that kind of risk. Why wouldn't they?'

'Because they have much more to lose.'

He hands me the lantern, and it feels odd to climb into his space. I have to hunch over, and it grows immeasurably smaller once he joins me and zips the door closed. There's only his bedding and a full saddlebag near the door that he keeps packed and ready to leave.

He's temporary.

He nods at the bedroll. 'Have a seat. I should look at your ankle and check your head.'

After dimming the lantern, he undresses, first removing his quiver and bow. Then his hooded cloak. His shirt rises up slightly, revealing a ridge of firm muscle and skin.

I glance away until he settles beside me, and I feel him staring at the side of my face.

'Thank you,' I say, slowly lifting my gaze to him. 'For stepping in.'

He focuses on my left eye, before moving to the right, just like he did during our staring game, and it has the same effect – the feeling as if he's dragged hot fingers over my skin. There's something so intimate about it. So intentionally careful.

Tingles spark inside me, as an energy fills the tent.

He lifts his hand to my cheek, tilting my face to inspect it. 'Where does it hurt?'

Pain? I'm so distracted by his touch, I feel absolutely nothing other than fire and goosebumps spreading over my skin.

'On your head?' he asks, voice deep and gravelly. 'Maybe let down your hair.'

I remove the tie and hiss at the sharp, throbbing pain that surges back. Gently, his fingers thread into my hair, parting it, then re-parting it in different places. He makes a variety of disapproving sounds at whatever he finds, while I do my best not to moan. Why does this feel so good?

I watch his studious expression. So serious. I find myself drawn to that clenching muscle in his jaw again. The strength of his neck adorned with a silver chain peeking out of his collar. I wish I could see more of it and hear the story of why he never takes it off. Once again, I notice his freshly shaved face, a rarity around here. It wasn't like that when he arrived in Notting, but this – I like that nothing is hiding him.

He frowns. 'You've got some dried blood, but nothing that needs stitches. Still, that must have hurt. He got you good.'

'And you got *him*.'

He grimaces. 'Not nearly enough.'

I bow my head and exhale a laugh. 'I … disagree. Soren was within his rights to defend his trailer and attack me. It's literally his job.'

Ryland's frown deepens.

'Look, I know you have questions about why I'm stealing from Atlas, but I can't answer them … beyond saying I don't do it for me.' Ryland helped me, but I still barely know him. It'd be foolish to trust him with names and

details when it could put Lucky and Brother Thomas in danger. Soren betraying me to Atlas taught me that lesson. ‘It was very kind of you to … help me the way you did, but you shouldn’t do that again. I know the danger and I … prefer to raid alone.’

Anger flashes on his face. ‘If you had been alone tonight –’

‘I would have been fine.’ I stare back defiantly. ‘I’m well-trained, and I would have fought Soren until I escaped.’ These are the words I’ve lived by. Do I believe them? Now, I’m not so sure. Tonight was humbling. It showed me everything I’ve feared is very real. But that doesn’t mean it’s a risk Ryland needs to share.

Multiple emotions pass over his face as he fights with himself. I’m sure he wants to argue that I’m being arrogant or overconfident, because no one can win every fight.

It’s only a matter of time before you’re caught.

My fingers start to tremble as I look away. ‘Do you think you were recognised? It would be bad if you were.’

‘And it wouldn’t be bad for you?’ The frustration in his voice grows. ‘Fine – don’t tell me who you’re helping; keep your secrets. But why is it only your job to risk everything on these raids?’

‘Because …’ I look down, shaking my head. He wouldn’t understand. Ryland’s probably never been forced to watch the people he cares about be punished because of him. So I tell him another reason. ‘Because he’s *my* father.’

And I’m so ashamed and angry at what he’s done.

There’s a beat of silence. Ryland’s face softens. ‘*That* is not your fault.’

‘That doesn’t change anyone’s reality.’

‘Have you ever considered … leaving?’ he asks. He tilts his head, eyes earnest. ‘You’re trained to fight, so you could defend yourself if you were travelling. There’s got to be somewhere you could go.’

‘A couple of years ago, my sister ran away with a Dresden boy. My sister, the one who can’t swing a sword or survive without a chamber pot, thought she’d go on the run around the badlands. Soren helped me find her, but then he betrayed us to Atlas. The boy was exiled. Agatha was badly beaten. And to be honest, most of her punishment wasn’t because she ran away.’

‘Marian, you left without telling me?’ Atlas yelled. ‘Without notifying your commander?’ He turned to Coatl. ‘Beat Agatha. Right here. And every time Marian so much as whimpers, add another lash.’

I swallow hard. ‘Much of Atlas’s success comes from using cruelty to manipulate others. He’s figured out that he doesn’t have to hurt me to control me. If I escaped, it’s the people I left behind who’d be punished. And because of that, I’ll never leave.’ The truth bites at me, leaving me restless. My gaze darts around. ‘It’s getting late, I should leave.’

‘It’s only been minutes. And I still have to check your ankle.’ He pulls my foot into his lap and gently unlaces the boot.

‘Do you have training as a medic?’ I ask.

He grins. ‘I’m a soldier; we all undergo some form of medical training.’

There are so many questions about him that I’ve suppressed, and they surge to the surface. It’s clear he enjoys being a soldier, and I want to know why. How is his army different from the Notting Militia? And why did his settlement choose him to come in search of a coal deal?

Does he have a family?

Is there a girl he likes back home?

He’s single, he’d told Dezzy.

‘Does this hurt?’ he asks, delicately manipulating my ankle from side to side. Then his fingers run along the side of my foot in a way that sends tingles racing up my leg. ‘No,’ I say breathless. ‘It was a zinger, but it’s better now. It only hurts when I walk. It’ll probably be fine in a day or two.’ I pull my leg back. But then I notice the blood on his knuckles. ‘Wait. Are *you* hurt?’

He opens his mouth to answer, but I shift and grab his hand, drawing it closer to examine. His breath stutters. ‘It’s nothing. Petronis got me with his torch.’

I study the broken skin. He’s right. It’s superficial. Still, I push up on to my knees and tilt his head the way he did for me, checking for injuries. ‘Are you hurt anywhere else?’

He goes quiet, allowing me to find the answers for myself.

I’m exactly where I want to be, he said tonight at dinner. Then he helped me during the raid, right when I needed him most.

I know I need to raid alone. But right now, I’m grateful I’m *not* alone. In a moment of weakness, I drag my fingertips down the curve of his cheekbone.

His hand rises to cover mine on his jaw, holding it there. Fire enters his eyes – as well as a question. A request. I answer by stretching my fingers,

caressing more of his skin. My thumb slides over his full bottom lip. I pause there.

He kisses it.

I gasp as heat licks up my arm. My neck. Tension coils in my belly. How do I get him to do that to my lips?

'Was that okay?' he asks. 'What are you thinking?'

'I'm thinking … I'm jealous of my thumb.'

Ryland's gaze drops to my lips, looking every bit like he's going to kiss me.

And I would absolutely let him. The realisation has me moving. Ryland leans in. I half climb into his lap, and he lifts me the rest of the way. But despite our sudden urgency, we slow as our chests come together. Everything feels magnified as his eyes study me, lips parted. There's something like awe on his face. It's so intense it makes me nervous, yet the pull to him is growing seismically. His strength supporting me is a nest of safety I haven't felt in a long time. I inhale – and *saints*, his scent of leather and fresh air smells so incredibly good. Once again, I run my fingers over his cheek as our faces hover only inches apart, breathing each other's air. My heart feels like it's about to come flying out of my chest, but I'm beginning to understand that I could wait hours – days – in his lap and that likely wouldn't change. I didn't know this kind of alchemy was possible.

I lean in and kiss him, my lips brushing his in the softest –

A ragged scream rips through the air from somewhere outside. We both still, then quickly break apart. He dives for his weapons. I scramble to pull on my boot.

More panicked screams come, growing louder.

And they don't stop.

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CHAPTER 20

MARIAN

‘Could it be a *real* vagabond attack?’ Ryland asks.

I wince as I tie my hair back, needing it out of my face in case I have to fight. ‘It’s possible. They could have gotten past the guardsmen on the lower bluffs leading to Notting territory.’

Another anguished cry comes from outside. They’re happening in close succession now. A man frantically shouts something I can’t make out.

Ryland dives to open the zipped door of the tent and helps me out first. Then we’re running, sprinting – as best I can with my ankle – through the trees in the direction of the disturbance. It’s at the Dresden camp.

When we’re still a good distance away, I see light. Too much of it, illuminating the tops of the trees.

I’m breathless. A fire.

With so many homes sharing support trees and walls, this whole place could go up in flames.

We run past a woman outside her home, hand over her mouth, eyes wide with fear. And now I see why. There’s not one fire, but three separate ones, nowhere near each other. How does this happen?

It doesn’t.

These fires were set on purpose.

People closest to the flames run and scream for water.

‘Over here,’ Ryland says, grabbing my hand, snapping me out of my paralysis. He leads me around the firepits and tables in the centre, working our way to the closest blaze. The calls for water are incessant. Others scream, desperate to find their loved ones.

I spin around. We need buckets from the compound and –

Two men standing off to the side grab my attention. They speak among themselves, not running. Not helping. One of them holds a lit torch, allowing me to see their uniforms – guardsmen. It’s Soren and Petronis.

Instantly I know: *they did this*.

Someone screams, drawing my attention. It’s the woman facing exile for not paying at collections. She rushes past the men, panicked, arms loaded with blankets and other irreplaceable supplies she’s trying to save. She trips and falls hard. Petronis attempts to hide his laughter behind his hand.

Molten hot rage pumps through my body, as I charge towards them. What I wouldn’t give to have my whip right now.

Soren mutters something as he spots me, then reluctantly straightens. No doubt, this was his idea. I walk right up to him and slam my hands hard into his chest, knocking him to the ground. ‘What did you do?’ I yell.

His face twists in anger. Petronis holds him back as he half launches at me. ‘Marian,’ he growls. ‘Nice to finally have your attention.’

I draw my knife and hold it out, ready for him. ‘Do you know what the Commander’s going to do to you for starting these fires?’

A few Dresden stop to listen.

Soren jerks his arm free of Petronis, then climbs on top of a picnic table. ‘I have an announcement,’ he yells, loud enough that people everywhere still. ‘Tonight, the collections trailer was raided. By two people. Dresden. We know you’re hiding them. You have until morning to turn over the thieves, or the rest of the homes will burn too.’

Gasps and cries rise from the growing crowd.

‘No,’ I yell, spinning to face everyone. ‘That won’t happen. He doesn’t have the authority. I’m in charge with the Commander gone.’

Soren steps down from the table, glaring at me. ‘Then where have you been?’ Dried blood trails down his chin, making him look crazed, courtesy of Ryland’s attack from earlier. ‘I did what had to be done – what the Commander would have wanted.’

‘The Commander would have wanted you to follow protocol and sound the alarm so we could search the area,’ I shout. ‘You think you’ll be

applauded for risking his workers' lives? How can they work if they have to rebuild their homes? You've directly threatened his business.'

I slow my speech, so he doesn't miss a word. 'You won't touch another house or so help me, I will exile you myself right now.'

Soren looks like he wants to light *me* on fire.

Ryland touches my hand, and I realise he hasn't left my side. He tugs me back a step. 'We need something to carry water. *Now*.'

I glance at Soren and find his gaze locked on Ryland's hand in mine. He's breathing hard, but something dangerously curious brews in his eyes.

'Water,' Ryland reminds me softly.

Yes, water.

I point at the hollow-skulled goons. 'This isn't done, Soren. You're going to answer for this.' Then I guide Ryland away and watch as Brother Thomas dumps a small bucket of water on the fire consuming a deerskin tent. The water vaporises without doing a thing. Flames and sparks drift high into the night air. I swallow back my despair. The blaze is a starving beast, and we don't have what we need to stop it.

Or do we?

'The mine!' I whisper.

I run to Brother Thomas. He's covered in soot. Sweat soaks his brow.

'We need to gather the wheelbarrows and small carts from the mine, anything that will hold water. Fill them at the pond on your way back. Can you do that? We could even form a chain to refill them.'

He takes the lead on finding people. I stay behind, not sure my ankle can handle the journey.

'Is there anyone still inside?' Ryland demands of a crying woman not far away. The curtains hanging inside her glassless window have just started to burn.

'Everyone's out,' shouts a shirtless man. 'But we need to save it. Please. We have to save the wood.'

Ryland's jaw flexes as he considers the treehouse. In seconds, the flames have already spread to the walls. 'Then let's take it down.' He grabs a board and yanks hard until nail by nail it pries free. I help him. Some of the planks are burning on the ends and the desperate owners smother them with a blanket.

More people join us, and soon Ryland and I move on to the next home in danger. The flames are so cursedly hot as they lick towards us from feet

away.

But then the water starts to arrive, and the people who were clearing out their homes, thinking it was a lost cause, join back in the fight to extinguish the fire. I even see a few guardsmen – Lucky and Fitzgerald – driving a horse and trailer filled with spilling buckets of water. Others arrive and do crowd control, moving children and the injured out of the danger zone.

We labour for hours, long into the night, but our efforts are working. By the time the flames are out, only nine homes are destroyed, their remains nothing but smouldering black logs and ash. I'm beyond exhausted as I sit on the ground, legs sprawled out in front of me. Ryland is still dumping water, oversaturating as much as he can. Grendle's here too, bandaging a young man's arm nearby – at least she doesn't have him by the tongue.

There's a movement of people preparing food and warm drinks. A woman passes me a mug. I thank her and drink from it hastily. It feels odd to be here interacting with any of them. Showing my face.

Some singing breaks out, a chorus I've heard many times leaking from within the mine. A beautiful woman with a storm of curly brown hair raises her voice above the others, leading them. One by one, everyone joins her. Goosebumps spread over my skin at the heartfelt voices coming together as one from every direction of the Dresden Circle. There's something magical about it that I've never felt before. I listen to the hope in the lyrics. Marvel at the words – they're singing about being grateful.

It's baffling.

How can they come together and sing like this after suffering such loss?

But the more I listen, the more something expands almost painfully in my chest. I don't know what it is. Maybe a longing? A desire to join in with them?

I find my eyes are watering, and slowly my question dissipates like smoke. Because I was wrong. It's not *how can they gather and sing at a time like this?*

The question is: how could they *not*?

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CHAPTER 21

RYLAND

I wipe my sweaty brow, then resume sawing the plank of wood I'm holding down on the picnic table.

'Why aren't you wearing a shirt?' Little John asks from the bench beside me, where he's lying in the shadow of the table.

'Because it's hot out.' And this stuff is dirty. I wipe my blackened fingers on my trousers, achieving nothing. Some of these salvaged boards got more than a little kiss from the flames.

'Yeah, but I'm not allowed to take my shirt off. Why do you get to?'

'Because my mum isn't here.'

'I think you should talk to my mama and ask if I can take mine off.'

I push the saw back and forth the final few strokes, and the jagged, burned end of the board falls to the ground. 'And what would I say to convince her?'

'Tell her it's hot out and we're working men.'

I quirk an eyebrow.

'What? I'm helping,' he says.

I smirk as a blonde girl his age sets a cup filled with wildflowers on the table. Since it's Sunday, everyone's off from the mine and doing chores, like washing clothes by hand and cooking. Or, like me, cleaning up the damage from last night.

'What are they doing?' I ask Little John, gesturing at the lanterns being hung on sticks all around.

He sits up and shields his eyes from the sun. ‘Decorating. They always do that for the New Moon celebration.’

I grab another mangled piece of blackened wood. ‘They’re still going ahead with that after last night?

Not for the first time, I see Rufus watching me from where he’s sitting at another table. I noticed him doing that last night too, after the fire.

Little John shrugs. ‘Why not? Dancing is fu–’

‘I see you’re working hard.’

I turn and find Agatha smiling. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

She pats her long skirt, looking out of her element here. Her gaze skims my chest. Maybe Little John’s mum was right. Damn, where is my shirt?

‘His skin is the colour of a plucked chicken, ain’t it?’ Little John says. ‘Well, maybe one that’s roasted a little bit. Or is that not what you’re starin’ at?’

Agatha’s face reddens.

I clear my throat. ‘Out for a stroll?’ I ask Agatha.

She exhales. ‘Yes. I didn’t hear about the fire until it was over. So sad.’ Her fingers twine together.

‘Well, there’s lots of it to see.’ I adjust my plank and return to sawing.

‘I actually … I was wondering if you wanted to join me at the pond? I was going to dip my feet in the water, since it’s so hot today.’

Cold water sounds like a dream right about now. But alone time with Agatha? Wouldn’t want to give her the wrong idea. I make a show of surveying the mountain of boards that need to be cut and reinstalled. ‘Doesn’t look like I’ll be free for a while.’

‘Maybe I could help?’

‘You know how to work a saw?’

‘No, but you could show me.’

I find my shirt and give her a brief lesson, then take a pile of the already-trimmed planks to one of the houses being rebuilt.

A man named Pedro has already framed the small house but because of the lack of proper tools, it looks like a piecemeal shack of countless small boards. Although, I doubt even the master carpenters from Kingsland could do much more with these supplies.

Pedro is explaining his vision for a window when Rufus pops his head in.

We haven’t had a chance to speak since yesterday. But between his facial scars that match the ones from my latest nightmare, and the way he’s been

eyeing me from the shadows, he's not exactly calming my suspicions.

It solidifies my gut feeling – we've met before.

As if he's inspecting our work, Rufus runs his finger over a jagged plank. 'I'm sure Shenna's going to be real happy you're rebuilding this.'

'You here to help?' I ask.

'Actually,' Rufus turns to face me, 'I was hoping I could have a word.'

Pedro looks wary – I see Rufus's reputation as a snitch precedes him. 'I'll go gather more wood,' he mutters, stepping out.

Rufus smiles. 'I have an update on getting you a real big ring for your girl. I'm even working on finding you a selection to choose from. But I need to know your budget. I'm assuming big. Also, what's the timeline? Have you popped the question yet?'

He's sure got the smarmy grifter part down. 'Not yet,' I say, playing along with this fake engagement idea. 'Gotta convince her father first. But tell me, where do you get your rings from? Are they stolen?' *Do you steal them yourself?*

He smirks. 'I source ethically. Of course, I can't reveal my contacts.'

Right. I eye him. Business must not be booming because he looks destitute. Dirty clothes over a thin and wiry body, honed from working the mine. His weathered skin is like an old boot, and his greying blondish hair is overgrown. The only thing imposing about him is his height and broad shoulders, but I'm not sure he has the constitution of a cold-blooded killer.

Although anyone can kill under the right circumstances.

'And you have such good connections because you were a trader?' I ask.

'For fifteen years. Too dangerous to keep it up,' he admits, raising his missing hand.

'Yeah, when did that happen?'

His eyes cloud over, just like when I asked about the scars on his face. 'Years ago.'

He's evading. I roll my shoulders, digging for patience as my blood pounds harder. I can feel it; I'm on to something. 'You said I reminded you of someone, and honestly, you look pretty familiar, too. In fact, I think … I was there when you got that scar on your face.' I gauge his reaction.

Caution enters his eyes.

I press in closer. 'You ever try to rob people? Hurt them?'

His mouth opens, then his wide eyes dart towards the exit. He's afraid.

It unlocks something in me, and suddenly the faceless man from my nightmares merges with him. I see Rufus push Mum to the ground. It's him who lunges with the blade.

I slam him into the partially finished wall, my knife at his throat before he even thinks to look down. 'Why don't you tell me how you got that scar on your face?'

He pants, his breath sour. 'Hey, now. Calm down.'

I grind my teeth as a tidal wave of deep-seeded fury – the kind that only comes from justice being denied – crashes over me. I shake him hard, cracking his head against a log.

His Adam's apple bobs. 'Okay, okay,' he says. 'I recognise you, too.'

I inhale, bracing. 'Say it,' I command. 'How do you know me? Tell me what you did.'

Rufus blinks rapidly, eyes wild. 'I-I know you're from Kingsland.'

I lean in harder. How has he not sold me out to the Commander yet? 'Keep going. How did you get that scar? The truth!'

'A woman.' He grits his teeth. 'Your mother, Samantha.'

I knew it. 'You killed my father,' I whisper.

He stills beneath me. 'No.' He squints. 'I didn't kill anyone. Ryland, I *am* your father.'

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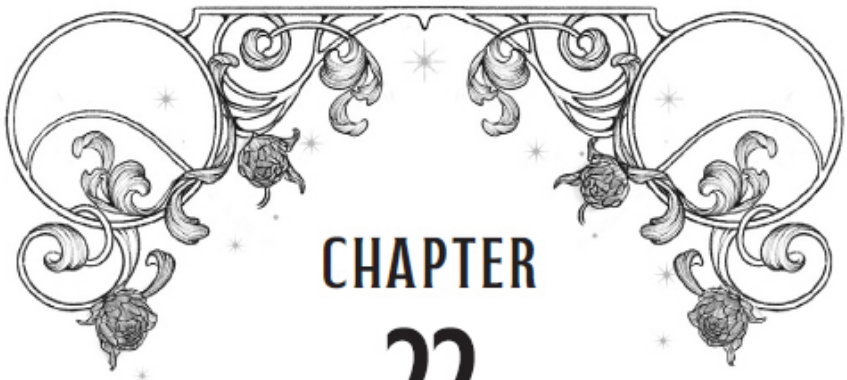

CHAPTER 22

RYLAND

‘Liar,’ I spit. That’s the most ridiculous, impossible thing he could have said.

And yet …

He knew my mother’s name.

I shove off him, breathing hard. ‘Explain everything. Now.’

Rufus stretches his neck from where I was choking him. ‘I was a trader when I met your mother at the gates of Kingsland.’

Gates. Another piece not just anyone would know. My chest feels like it’s caving in. Truth or not, Rufus already knows too much.

‘I was a trader, except Kingsland wouldn’t deal with me. They only used their own.’

Also true.

‘But my foot was injured, so I asked the soldiers if I could at least get some stitches before I went on my way. Your mother was my nurse.’

A storm builds inside me. He’s a conman. This is what he does – sells things. Stories. Lies. Whatever he has to.

But my mother *was* a nurse.

‘I’ll be straight with you – she was real pretty.’ He nods. ‘So I started coming around again, and we met outside the gates, in the forest. Luckily, she had a soldier friend who would help her slip out on his shift. We met quite a few times.’ His head bows. ‘And, well … then she told me she was pregnant.’

I shake my head. I know my parents never married, but that's not how the story goes. We were a family until the attack. Dad was just gone a lot on the road.

Being a trader.

Just like Rufus. I wince. The details have aways been foggy, so Mum filled in the rest. But I know for a fact my dad died that day.

'I'm telling you the truth, man.' He exhales, then laughs. 'I panicked and left. Then years later, I heard a rumour about how Kingsland has something special about it. A magic. This *connection* deal if you get married.'

I think I'm going to be sick.

'They said, you marry somebody there, you can heal each other. Talk in your heads and all these crazy things. And by then, I was needing some fixing, and I was sick of fighting all the time, trying to survive. So I came back to see if it was true. Talk to her, you know?' He looks off into the distance. 'I remember her bringing you.'

I'm sure he does, because he *isn't* my father. He's the murderer.

'You stay over here while I talk to your daddy,' Mum said. We were outside the gate.

I rear back at the faint memory that comes out of nowhere. One I've never seen before.

Rufus sneers. 'Her nose was all out of joint right from the start, but I almost won her back … until I mentioned *the connection*. Then she got angry. Drew her knife. Started screaming about how I just wanted to use her. Again.' He pauses. 'She pushed me. I returned the favour.'

Mum falling to the ground flashes in my head. She screamed and launched herself back at Rufus, clawing his face. But in my memory, there's a third person. I don't understand.

'She scratched my face up good. I'm not proud of it, but I punched her. Next thing, she's swinging her big old knife with everything she's got, and my hand was lying on the ground.'

No. The attacker was missing a hand from the start. That's been consistent in all my nightmares. But then I hear it echoing in my mind – the hair-raising scream. The moment my father was stabbed.

I scrub my forehead. Could the scream have come from another cause? I try to dredge up something to fill the infuriating gaps in my memory, but there's no fixing the recollection of a four-year-old standing dozens of feet away. Still, I try, and what I remember plays out in hazy, broken flickers in

my mind. I feel myself being scooped up. Then we're running. There's blood on Mum's dress and face.

'But you said Daddy …'

'Your father's dead,' she cried with a sob.

She had chanted that over and over the whole way home … until I believed it was true. Did she rewrite the story? Or did I invent it after she refused to talk about him after that day?

'Anyway,' he says, rubbing the gnarled stump at the end of his wrist. 'I knew I had a kid somewhere. One about your age. Then you show up from a *mystery* place with my blue eyes, looking like the heart-stealing version of my brother who's been dead for twenty years. Of course, you've got some of your mother in you, too.'

My gut knots as I stare at him, and there it is – all the proof I'm not going to find in my broken memories.

I have his eyes.

'You need to remember, it wasn't me who lied to you all this time, though.' He chuckles, all too pleased with himself. 'So no need to be a stranger now.'

I mutter a curse. Mum's always been adamant that she didn't want another partner, even though she had the connection. *Can't be trusted*, she'd say about men. Yeah, I guess – if her experience was with Rufus. That'd also explain why she treated the connection like the plague. Both for her and for me.

Slowly, it's sinking in that this is plausible – the way Rufus is telling it.

It means Mum lied.

Betrayal seeps into me, expanding like a sinkhole, until I look back at Rufus. The man just admitted to running from his lover, abandoning his baby, and coming back only to try to use them again.

I swallow hard. Can I really blame her for protecting me from him?

Maybe not back then, but I'm also not four years old any more. 'I've … gotta go.'

'Just be sure to let me know if you need any more supplies,' he calls after me. 'I'm your guy, especially *now*.'

I struggle to weave around people. Piles of burned rubble. Tables. I bump into a woman. Apologise. *I need to get out of here.*

'Ryland,' Agatha calls from behind me. 'Ryland, wait.' She grabs my arm, pulling me to a stop. 'Hey.' Her eyes narrow. 'What's wrong?'

Where would I even begin?

‘Tell me.’

My mouth opens. ‘I just … met someone I thought was dead.’

‘And that’s not … a good thing?’

A choked sound slips past my lips.

‘Come on, let’s go to the pond and get cleaned up.’

Agatha dips her hands in the water, washing them.

I remain back, even though I’m the one who needs a bath. Two women and a handful of guardsmen swim about seventy-five yards away, closer to the waterfall. One jumps off a small rock ledge, but the sound of the crashing water smothers their laughter.

All of it chafes.

How long before Rufus sells what he knows about Kingsland? The location. The general idea of security. *The connection.*

I roughly scrub my face. He knows more than even our traders do. Although secrets getting out isn’t a new problem; a lot of people know *something* about Kingsland. Vagabonds stumble upon it all the time and have questions. Or they’ll attack. But not all of them are as organised or as highly motivated to conquer us as the Commander.

Agatha trips on a rock as she walks back to me. I grip her elbow, steadying her.

She exhales a laugh. ‘It’s slippery.’

I force a grin. It’s painful. Why am I even here?

I should find Marian.

‘The water is wonderful,’ she says, still holding on, even though I’ve let her go. ‘Oh, you’ve got some soot on your face.’ Her fingers brush my forehead.

I try to rub it off.

She giggles. ‘You made it so much worse.’

I glance at my hands. Yeah, I’m a mess. Reluctantly, I untie my boots and roll up my trouser legs. The water draws the heat from my skin as I wade up to my knees and wash as much of my body as I can. My shirt melts to my chest after splashing my face and head. Agatha’s gaze jerks away when I turn back around.

It’s obvious what she wants from me, and that’s not a conversation I’m eager for. Now or in the future. ‘I’m not very good company at the moment.

I should go.'

Her lips press together. 'Not yet.'

'You're not letting me leave?' I huff a small laugh. I've met my share of persistent women, but I didn't think Agatha was one of them.

'I'm not leaving you *alone*. Yet.' She lowers herself to a boulder and pulls her long hair over one shoulder. 'You don't have to tell me what's going on, but … I know you're going through something. I also know what that's like.'

My jaw tenses.

Her fingers comb through her hair. 'I'm not sure if you've noticed, but my father doesn't like me very much. Sometimes.'

'I may have seen some things.' With a squint, I count the people. Three in the water. Four on the sandy part across the way. 'I wasn't sure if it's always like that, though.'

'It is. Well, when we're not alone, that is.' Her hands stop moving. 'As predictable as the clouds running out of rain.'

I should probably respond, but my mind is dragged back in time to old conversations. I try to think of the exact wording Mum had used to answer my questions. Did she explicitly lie, or just omit information, leaving me to come up with my own conclusions?

It hits me that the reason no one remembers my father isn't just because he was always gone as a trader. No one knew him. And the ring! Did that keep coming up in my nightmares because Rufus actually proposed with one? I exhale harshly … until I remember I'm not alone.

Agatha meets my gaze, or maybe she was waiting for it. 'Don't you wish you could run away from your problems sometimes?'

The water laps against the rocks from the light breeze, and I turn to watch it.

She chuckles humourlessly. 'But I guess if you can't escape it, you find a way to endure it. Or even join in the game. Unless, of course, you're *you*, who gets to leave whenever he wants.' She sniffs. 'Would you ever …' She pauses, biting her bottom lip. It reminds me of her sister. 'Would you ever consider taking me with you? When you leave?'

Oh. I bow my head. Truthfully, it's crossed my mind for a lot of people. Marian. Little John and his mum. Some of the other Dresden. But the logistics of travelling and defending that many people would be a nightmare. Not to mention the fallout of stealing the Commander's daughter

from here. Also, with the population hitting six hundred, Kingsland isn't taking in strangers. Not without a marriage.

She laughs nervously when I don't answer. 'Never mind. That was a stupid question. That could ruin your coal deal, especially if you're caught.'

There's that too. 'It's pretty dangerous out there. Leaving would mean risking your life.'

'Oh, I know.'

I can't tell what danger she's referring to – her father or vagabonds. But if she's dead set on trying again, she should take an escort of real soldiers. 'Maybe if Marian –'

'I don't want to talk about Marian.' She takes a steadying breath. 'I actually … want to ask you *another* question.'

'You're making me nervous,' I say truthfully.

She laughs. 'This one's easy. Or should be, because it's hypothetical.' Her eyes roll to the sky. 'Can a man be attracted to a woman who *isn't* classically beautiful? Or is that a myth?'

I resist a curse under my breath. How do I get myself into these situations? 'Not sure I should be speaking on behalf of every man.'

'Then speak for yourself.'

I pick up a flat rock and fling it across the water. 'I'd rather not.'

'Why?'

'Because …' I *am* fiercely attracted to your sister, and I can't imagine it any other way.

Though that's hardly the only reason for the gravitational pull I feel to Marian.

'It's okay if a person's appearance matters strongly to you.' Her sullen voice says the opposite. 'I understand. It's something I've experienced all my life. It would be so much simpler – better – if I just had a more pleasing face.' She stands. 'I'll leave you.'

'Agatha.'

She takes her time meeting my eyes.

'You're not unattractive,' I say. 'And I kind of want to punch whoever taught you that you were.' It's the truth. The more I get to know her, the more beauty in her I see. There's a lot to love and some man will be lucky to have her.

We stare at each other for a few seconds before she dips her head, fighting a smile.

‘But to answer your question …’ I’ll probably regret this, but it feels like I’ve rolled too far down the hill to stop now. ‘For me, the most beautiful parts that make up a person aren’t what you can see.’

I think of Marian’s compassion for the Dresden and her willingness to sacrifice for them. Her loyalty. Her sense of honour. She lives by a code to protect people – the same one as m–

Agatha kisses my cheek.

I suck in a sharp breath.

But before I can say anything, she dips her head and leaves.

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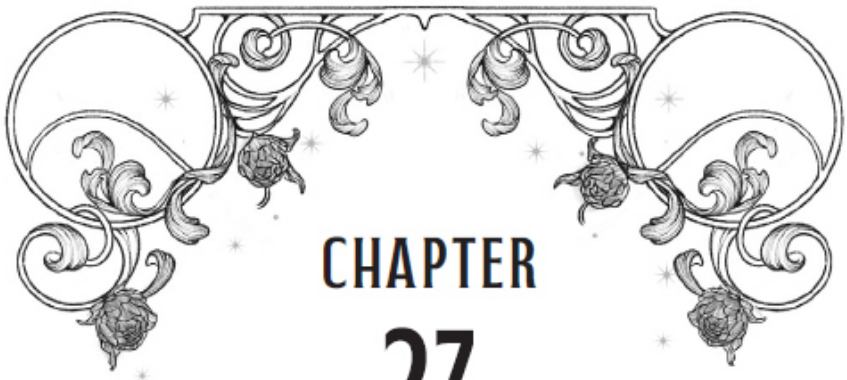

CHAPTER 23

RYLAND

You'd never know from the infectious beat of the music – made with upside-down buckets for drums and hollowed-out sticks for flutes – that this place almost burned down last night. People sing too, as a group, even as they dance. There's a wilder edge to it here than what I'm used to in Kingsland. It's rougher, freer. I like it.

The Dresden not participating gather around the firepits and decorated tables. Lanterns light up the place, even though the sun hasn't completely set. These people have so little, yet they pool what they do have to make it look nice.

Brother Thomas shoves a chipped mug of something into my hand. I glance down at the brown liquid. 'Thanks. What is it?'

'Happiness,' he says with a mischievous grin. 'Although, if you drink too much of it, you won't feel so happy in the morning.'

I take a swallow and a burning sensation quickly coats my tongue … along with a mystery substance that feels questionably like sawdust. Or dirt. I clear my throat and resume searching the crowd for Marian, even though I doubt she'd come to this. She's likely working since the Commander's still away.

Wait, she wouldn't raid right now, would she? Not after almost getting caught last night.

My pulse picks up, because I wouldn't put *anything* past her. I've never seen anyone so foolishly brave.

‘This batch is fermented pine cones and some berries for the sugar,’ Brother Thomas says. ‘It’s a little rough, I know. But you get used to it – just look at them.’ He tips his mug towards the guardsmen laughing around a picnic table, cups in hand. They’re set apart. The Dresden are treating them like they’ve got the pox – as they should, after the fire.

‘They avoid us until we have our New Moon celebration.’ Brother Thomas huffs. ‘Then help themselves to the wine that isn’t ‘good enough’ as payment for collections.’

I look them over. None of them are Soren, who I’ve been meaning to have a little chat with. Maybe that’s what I should do right now, make sure he’s behaving and staying away from –

The song changes to something faster, and more Dresden cheer and jump up to dance.

Dancing brings me back to Marian. *Where are you?*

Brother Thomas nods at a man passing by, and it hits me that the person most likely to know Marian’s whereabouts is standing right here. ‘I’m worried about Marian,’ I confess. ‘Have you seen her?’

He inhales a slow breath before responding. ‘I saw you holding her hand last night when you ran to the fire together. Things have … *shifted* between you two.’

‘Yes.’ Last night everything *shifted* between us, and now I can’t get her out of my head.

His lips twitch at my lack of hesitation. ‘I’m glad to hear. She needs more *good* people around her. People who are concerned for her welfare. Just … be careful.’ He lowers his voice. ‘Her father’s a tricky man.’

I glance away. Tricky, yes. Not to mention controlling. Cruel. ‘Good thing his daughter’s nothing like him.’

Brother Thomas hides his grin behind his mug. ‘Hear, hear. I suppose this once I could tell you where Marian is.’ He ticks his head, his smirk deepening. ‘She’s right behind you.’

I whip around and can’t find her, until I peer into the trees. She’s unbelievably beautiful in a simple green dress, bent over and engrossed in a serious conversation with Little John. My stomach flips. Her long hair is draped around her shoulders, and I remember all too well how it felt between my fingers. The tightness in my chest releases, although not completely. Now that a night’s passed, I hope she doesn’t go back to

keeping her distance, thinking she's protecting *everyone*. And I really hope she doesn't regret what happened between us in my tent.

Marian removes something that looks suspiciously like a slingshot from her pocket and signals Little John to hide it. He does, then throws his arms around her waist. As I approach, she laughs, and it's glorious.

I *knew* they were friends.

'I think I know where this came from,' Little John says proudly.

Marian looks intrigued.

'The Shadowed Saint,' he says, voice dropping low.

She straightens. 'The Shadowed Saint?'

Little John nods vigorously. 'Yeah, he's been helping us. Giving us stuff. I bet he found out that guard stole my sword, so he got me this. But don't tell anyone; he's a secret.'

Her laughing eyes flick to me, in disbelief. 'I'm not sure there's a Shadowed Saint. But if there was, what makes you so sure he's a man?'

'He *is* a man,' Little John says back, outraged. 'I thought he was someone else, but now I think … I know who he is.' His eyes tentatively slide to me.

'Oh, really?' Marian bites her lips, taking a breath. 'Well, then, if you see this *Shadowed Saint*, tell him …' She pauses, fiddling with her hands, before lifting her shy gaze to meet mine. 'Tell him I'd like to meet him behind the waterfalls tonight.'

A live current jolts through my veins.

'I will.' Little John gives me a not-so-secret look, then runs off.

'I'm surprised to see you here, Marian,' Brother Thomas says. 'You don't *usually* come around.'

Marian grows serious. She flicks a glance at me and must decide I'm allowed to hear this. 'I've been thinking about it. What if I've been approaching this wrong? Maybe I shouldn't be avoiding the Dresden. If I'm here more, I can step in when things go sideways with the guardsmen, like with Soren. And the people didn't seem to have a problem with my presence last night.'

Brother Thomas inclines his head. 'It also means you'll be seen as sympathetic to us. The Commander won't like that. He may blame you should things … keep going *wrong*.'

She's more likely to get caught.

Marian presses her knuckles to her lips. 'Neither way is safe. But for now, with Soren being so destructive, I think I should be around more. It

makes you less vulnerable. Also … I want to get to know the people better. I don't want them to be afraid of me.'

The minister doesn't look so sure at her plan, but he nods. 'So you're here to join the party, then?'

She shrugs half-heartedly, then strains to look over his shoulder to where the music and dancing are. 'Just watch from the outskirts. Maybe.'

'Then can I have this dance?' I ask, and offer her my hand. My gut lurches at the possibility of touching her again – and also maybe because I don't have a clue how to do these Dresden dances. But I'll figure it out.

Marian's eyes light up, then tighten as she studies the crowd.

'We can stay back here,' I suggest as Brother Thomas takes that as his cue to leave. 'Or do you think you should give your ankle a rest?'

'It's doing better, thanks. I've wrapped it.'

Her fingers slip into mine, and just like last night, my skin comes alive. The shock of it travels through my body, wiping away every distraction or thought except the feel of her hand. Living in this moment.

Why is it like this with her?

Little John pops his head out from behind a tree. 'Oooooh, he likes you.' A full belly laugh erupts out of him. 'I knew it. He's always asking about you. *Where's Marian?*'

'Is that true?' Marian shoots me a teasing sideways glance. 'You were looking for me?'

I run a hand over my head and clear my throat, while smiling like a fool. This isn't her putting on a show for the Commander. She's genuinely flirting with me – and it's potent. 'Yes,' I say plainly. Then I spin her, so her back is to the annoying seven-year-old, giving me a second to think. *Take a chance, before you regret it. Nothing in this hellfire landscape is guaranteed – especially time.* I swallow. 'And it's true, I do *really* like you.'

Her eyes flash with surprise, and a flush jumps to her cheeks.

Her mask is gone, and it's like I'm truly seeing her. It's difficult not to stare.

Marian drifts closer, taking my other hand, and I could lift a wagon with the energy that slams through me. 'I suppose you should be warned, I don't really know how to dance.'

'Then we'll do our own thing,' I say, reeling her into me and moving one of my hands to her lower back. I begin to rock us slowly. She twines our fingers. She's not the first girl I've danced with, but she is the first who has

me struggling to breathe, scared I'll somehow mess this up. 'Is this okay?' I ask. Without thinking, I brush my thumb over the calluses on her palm, secretly pleased that they match my own. She must do an incredible amount of weapons training.

She smiles. 'This is perfect.' Her gaze shifts to the women who are spinning and jumping in unison. 'They probably wouldn't want me over there with them anyway.'

'I don't know about that.'

She dips her head. 'It doesn't matter. That's not something I need to risk tonight. But one day I want to learn that dance. Doesn't the spinning look fun? Sometimes I watch them from within the trees.'

She tries to hide it, but I see the longing on her face. It makes me wonder who she spends her time with if not the Dresden?

I spin her away from me. The skirt of her dress flares out, then wraps tightly around her legs as she comes to a stop. She laughs and I pull her back, my arm curling around her waist. We're so close our faces are only inches apart. It reminds me of last night. Of our brief kiss – a kiss I very much want to repeat. 'For spinning, that's the best I can do.'

She's breathless. 'Excellent work,' she whispers.

My heart thumps wildly as we return to swaying back and forth. 'This is how we dance where I come from …' I say into her ear.

Where I come from? Am I really not going to tell her anything about myself?

'You're very good at it.' Then she surprises me by tucking her head under my chin.

It feels like the perfect metaphor for what my gut and every part of me has been hinting at all along: we fit.

'Tell me about your day.' I inhale. She smells so good – of soap and maybe flowers and something that makes me want to bury my face in her neck. 'Were you busy?'

'Yes. Mostly, I kept an eye on Soren. I'm scared he'll take matters into his own hands again. I don't trust him.'

The relaxed ease in my muscles disappears. 'And?'

'And … he behaved. Shockingly. Though he did look like he wanted to punch me in the face.'

'Are you in danger of that?' My words are deceptively calm.

Soren and I are *definitely* going to have that chat.

‘Soren’s always been like this. Hot then cold. Moodier than a wet cat and loves to hold a grudge, especially since …’ She shrugs, not finishing. ‘It doesn’t matter. If he attacks me, he’ll be risking the Commander’s wrath.’

Which he had no problem risking last night by setting the Dresden Circle on fire.

‘Hopefully justice is coming for him,’ she says. ‘Atlas won’t tolerate anything that harms his business.’

That doesn’t put me any more at ease, and my arms tighten around her protectively. ‘I wanted to tell you – I’m not just a soldier; I’m an elite guard. We’re trained to always work in pairs. Maybe … you and I should stick together.’

She hums, thinking it over, and I feel it vibrate through me like a tuning fork. There’s so much more I want to tell her, but the hairs on the back of my neck prickle like we’re being watched. I glance over.

It’s Rufus. His unfocused eyes watch us, his posture leaning, threatening to spill the contents of his mug. All at once, the unpleasant reality that he’s my father comes crashing back.

Reluctantly, I pull back from Marian. ‘Can we go somewhere? How about the waterfall?’

‘This your girl?’ Rufus calls loudly. ‘Don’t you want to introduce her to your *father*?’

My eyes close. *Of course he did that.* ‘You’re drunk, Rufus,’ I snap over my shoulder. ‘Go home.’

By some miracle it works. Except now I’m riled up as we leave. I stop short. ‘Wait – your ankle.’

She shakes her head. ‘It’s okay. But we should –’ She snags a hanging lantern from a table. ‘Now let’s go.’

We walk a while until the music dims. I know I owe her an explanation. ‘So, that man …’

She waves it off. ‘You don’t have to tell me. I’ve said all along that sharing our secrets isn’t safe.’

She stares ahead as if she’s made peace with us never really knowing each other. That it’s just the way it has to be. I rake my hand through my hair.

The road forks, and we turn left, veering off the main path, already hearing the waterfall. Just past it is the access to the mine. ‘What if I don’t want to keep secrets from you? Not any more.’

Her eyes widen. She dips her head. ‘I don’t know how smart that is. But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about what happened back there.’

‘That man – Rufus – is my … *father*. And I met him for the first time today.’

We approach the edge of the lake, the same spot where Agatha and I were at earlier this afternoon. The light from our lantern barely allows us to see ten feet ahead. The waterfall crashes across the way. But the feeling of being here with Marian couldn’t be more different. There’s nowhere else I want to be as we stand side by side, staring out at the water.

‘I thought my father was dead,’ I say, continuing. ‘When I was four, there was a vagabond who attacked my fam–’ I shake my head. Laugh humourlessly. ‘Actually, no there wasn’t.’

She’s a good listener as I fumble through explaining the messed-up memories and nightmares that started the fire in me to find my father’s murderer.

But I sputter to a stop, not sure how to explain Rufus’s true motivations for trying to use my mother – that he wanted access to the connection.

She thinks I’m done and her hand brushes mine. I hook our fingers, but it’s not enough. I want to pull her to me and bury my face in her hair.

‘How devastating to think your father was dead all these years when he wasn’t,’ she says. ‘That changes everything.’

Everything. And nothing. ‘He only wants to use me. I’m better off without him. Funny thing is, if I’d known the truth, or if he’d remained in our lives, who knows if I’d have become the man I am today – an elite soldier. Him passing on honour? Integrity?’ I huff a laugh. ‘Maybe Mum’s lies and my own twisted imagination are the real heroes in all of this.’

She frowns. ‘It’s wrong. My first heartbreak … and last … was my father too. It’s not supposed to be that way.’

‘No, it’s not.’

Her head lifts. ‘You know, I hate that you’re going through this. That you understand this specific pain. Disappointment. But at the same time, there’s something comforting about knowing you get it. My sister never … I like that I’m not alone.’

I do too. And the depth of that scares me a little.

I could so easily fall in love with you.

The truth of that hits like a thunderbolt.

She squeezes my hand, noticing I've stiffened. 'Hey, I'm sorry. Am I oversharing? You're just so easy to talk to. And we have so much in comm–'

I smile as she comes back into focus. An incredible peace fills my chest. Clarity. *She feels it too – this is special.* 'Marian, there's no need to apologise. But just so we're clear: I want to know *everything* about you.'

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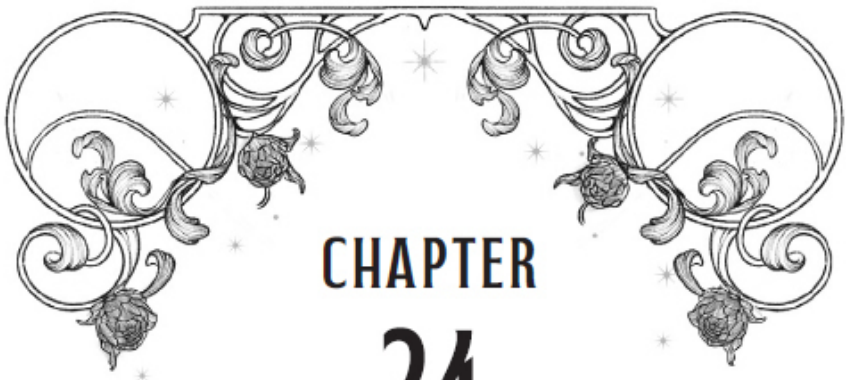

CHAPTER 24

RYLAND

‘So where are your favourite places in Notting?’ I ask, as we wind our way around the small lake towards the waterfall. ‘You know, if I ever needed to find you in a hurry.’

She chuckles. ‘I’m rather good at not being found when I don’t want to be. But maybe the cliffs – I like the view. Or on one of my secret paths into and out of Notting.’

‘Secret paths,’ I repeat. I really need to stop being surprised by her cleverness.

We reach the rocky slope leading up to the waterfall, and each take a turn holding the lantern as we climb. She goes first, nimbly scaling the incline, even in her dress.

My thick boots slip a little on the narrow ledges, and she reaches out to pull me up the last step. I don’t give her hand back when I rise to stand at the top. But I do take the lantern.

In front of us is a cave, or pitch-black tunnel. At the entrance is a firepit – I should get it going for more light. Heat.

‘You hear that?’ she asks.

I nod. The noise from the falls is a constant low thunder, but my mind is on threats, of both the human and animal kind. I shine the light, illuminating the smooth rock walls veined in minerals. They sparkle, making the secluded, almost cosy space feel like it’s enchanted.

Marian playfully beckons me with a curl of her finger. My heart stutters at her flirtatious eyes, and I follow her, hypnotised, deeper into the cave.

‘This tunnel leads behind the waterfall,’ she says as mist wafts towards us. ‘Although I’m not sure how much we’ll be able to see in the dark.’ She shivers at the dampness coating our skin.

I turn my back to protect her from the cold mist. ‘I’ve got a confession. It’s not the falls I came for.’

She stares back at me in the low rim of light. ‘Well, that’s too bad. They’re really beautiful.’

‘*You’re* beautiful.’ I lean in and get distracted by the freckles dusting her nose. If she was the only person I got to look at from this day forward, I think I’d die a happy man.

‘I think … you’re beautiful, too.’

Oh, really. A bright smile spreads across my lips.

‘Especially when you flash those dimples. Like that.’ She sucks in her bottom lip, and my gaze drops there. ‘But I’m sure you’re well aware of their effect.’

I make sure to flash them again. ‘Yeah, well, everything about you is a weapon that disarms me. Fascinates me. It’s been really difficult to think about anything but you since I got here.’ We both seem to be holding our breath, standing in the space of so much potential.

As intoxicating as it is, my heart pounds in my throat. ‘Would it be okay if I kissed you?’

Her answer is to grab my face and pull me to her. I groan against her lips. It’s so different from last night. Less careful. More sure. Heat rips through me like an open flame.

‘Finally,’ she breathes.

We shift, hands pulling each other close. Her tongue brushes my lip, and I have to beat back the urge to lift her. Beg her to do that again.

She shivers, and I try to shuffle us back out of the mist without breaking apart. We trip, unwilling to let go of each other long enough to see where we’re heading. I give up and lean against the cold stone wall. Marian presses into me so close, she probably feels my heart slamming against my rib cage. I capture her lips. Get lost in them.

We lose our breath, and she pulls back, panting for air, peering up at me through heavy lids.

She’s so achingly beautiful, my throat tightens into a knot. A knot that threatens to choke me at the thought of any of this coming to an end. I don’t know how we got here so fast, but it feels like I’m falling over the edge of something.

‘I want you to come with me when I leave,’ I whisper. The words just slip out. I wait, my stomach sparking with nerves.

She blinks up at me. ‘W-what? I can’t. Atlas would never –’

‘I think he will. There’s a way where he releases you completely.’

Her brows pinch. ‘How?’

Now that’s a loaded question.

What I wouldn’t give to slow this way down. Do it right. Take our time. Learn all there is to know about each other.

Earn her heart, fully.

I can honestly picture us ending up together. Eventually. But how can I wait for the *perfect moment* if it puts her life at risk? She needs separation from the Commander and protection – the kind only the connection can give. The kind only *I* can give her.

And the connection will cover the rest. You can’t share memories and emotions without building trust. Every gap in what we understand about each other will be quickly filled in.

I bite my lip. I can’t just ask her, can I? I’ve got to set this up better. Explain. Tell her everything.

‘This is going to sound a little impulsive, but … marry me.’

I bite back a curse at the confusion and shock on her face. Okay, I’m an idiot for saying it that way.

I inhale and talk fast. ‘Think about it – this could set you free from the Commander. Protect you.’

Her eyes are wide, lips parted. ‘You think if we marry, Atlas will let me go?’

I nod, encouraged. But my reasons go far deeper than that. Part of me wants to ask if I’m alone in feeling this pull between us, like something’s bringing us together.

No, I’m skipping steps. She deserves the truth about me before we discuss feelings. ‘It’s not just that. There’s something else I need to tell you.’ I guide her to the firepit at the cave’s entrance, quickly light the leftover coal with flint and my knife, then sit down beside her on a log.

‘The place I’m from is called Kingsland.’

She takes a deep breath. ‘Ryland …’

‘I know you’re concerned that sharing this information is dangerous,’ I say, ‘but I trust you. Do you trust me?’

Her eyes soften. ‘You know what? I do,’ she says sincerely. ‘Okay, tell me.’

‘After the bombs fell thirty-eight years ago, when all hellfire broke loose and everyone was stabbing each other from lack of food and clean water, there was my uncle, Farron. He had a divine sort of dream about an old-world town that had been preserved. Undamaged. Unraided. Unpolluted. All because it was hidden and protected from everything by the mountains. Except it wasn’t just a dream; it was real and he found it. And he led a group of people with him.’

She tilts her head. ‘Preserved? What do you mean?’

‘*Everything* from the old world was still there and working. We have a hydroelectric dam on the river for electricity, but we’ve run out of parts to repair it any more. It could fail any day, so we’ve slowly been transitioning to coal for our energy supply, until a landslide took out our mine. We have other things, too. Plumbing for running water. Appliances, though they are becoming harder to find. Our traders are experts at scavenging parts and supplies, and our mechanics and blacksmiths work hard to maintain and rebuild what they can.’

Her eyes are wide. ‘You have electricity?’

I nod. ‘It’s how we protect ourselves. We scavenged barriers from the old world that painfully shock people if they touch it – an electric fence. It surrounds our whole town, hidden by trees. It’s very effective, but we also have a highly trained army, which I’m a part of.’

‘Holy …’

‘After Farron arrived, strange things started to happen. Members of the founding families … could do things. Impossible things. Then their descendants could too. Some blame a genetic mutation from the fallout of the bombs and breathing atomic dust for years, but it’s always seemed supernatural to me. Intentional. Fated. I think it’s a gift, the same as Farron’s dream. The one that brought us there.

‘How does it work?’

She’s going to think I’ve been hit on the head too many times. *Just say it.* ‘Maybe the best description – it’s like casting a spell. You say the words, perform the ceremony and then you get … a result. Magic, in a way. Except

here you say your vows and then you're connected … and the two of you can share things you shouldn't be able to share.' I think of my cousin Tristan and his wife Isadora, who as mortal enemies had quite the rough start. 'That is, if you're in tune with each other – and trust each other. Then it's automatic.' Once again, she has a confused look. But she motions for me to go on.

'If anyone marries a descendant of a founding family, then they can share memories. Share injuries. Carry each other's pain.' *Share wonders and senses.* I blow out a breath. Maybe I'll save that one for later.

'All my life I've seen it happen to the descendants around me and their partners, and although I don't really understand it, I *know* it's a big part of how we're all still here. It's like a gift to help humanity restart – one chance, with one partner – and it's saved a lot of lives. Just like how we were saved when we were led to Kingsland.'

'And you're a … *descendant*?'

'Yes,' I say. My heart thuds firmly in my chest. 'My mum's family arrived in the first wave. Though because of Rufus, she didn't want to marry.'

'Hmm.' Her fingers press into her chin. 'Sharing memories would be incredible. I wonder what that's like.'

'Me too. I've always looked forward to trying that.'

'What an odd ability.'

'Not really.' I grin. 'Everything about *the connection* seems to be about making you both a team. And memories give context, understanding, which is key to working things out. Working together. Same reason for sensing each other's emotions. Or that's what I've always thought.'

'Wow.' Her eyes skate over the rock walls as she thinks. 'And the healing is because …?'

'Survival. You can share injuries. Pain. A lot of things, both good and bad, so you're never alone. Maybe that's the real purpose. But all of it either helps you survive when you're sick or injured or fosters connection, protecting that bond with your partner.'

Her brows knit. 'I don't … Atlas always believed in this stuff – magic. But Dezzy taught us a more … academic approach to the world. So, I'm sorry if I seem unsure. It's just a lot.'

I never thought I'd have to convince someone it's true. No one in Kingsland doubts it for a second. 'Completely understandable.'

‘I’m not saying I don’t believe you, though. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve stared at the stars and the vastness of the sky and have just … I don’t know, felt there had to be something there beyond my understanding. I’m not sure what the word for it is. Maybe it is magic. But the kind Atlas wants never felt … real.’

She breathes in sharply, her body becoming rigid. ‘The Commander can never find out about this connection. *Ever*. He’s collected things he thinks are mystical since he was a child. Like that ring he’s always stroking. Or all the supposedly enchanted relics on the walls of the High Command. Atlas is obsessed with magic, just like he is with power, and if he knew about this …’ Her lips part as if imagining the worst. ‘He’d never let you go.’

I give a low laugh. ‘Yeah, I won’t be telling him. But Rufus knows about the connection and Kingsland, so it’s probably only a matter of time before he sells me out.’

She grabs my arm. ‘Then you need to leave.’

‘I will … as soon as I can. But not without a deal.’ My hand covers hers. ‘No coal means no electric fence to protect my people. All our progress ends. So I have to stay until then. The question is: when I leave, do you want to come with me?’ *Do you want to give this mad plan a shot?*

She blinks. ‘Atlas won’t just let me go.’

‘If we’re married, he can’t claim you. Even if he tried to keep us apart – too bad. The connection weaves you together. I’ve seen it with my cousin, and it’s powerful.’ Then I tell her about Tristan and Isadora and how even as enemies they ended up together. ‘We’ll be able to protect each other. Work together by sharing memories. That means we can plan without even speaking – if we’re near each other. Whatever Atlas or anyone throws at us, we’ll have the upper hand because of the connection. We’ll be the ultimate teammates – and harder to kill.’

I hear myself and stop talking because you don’t rush stuff like this, even with someone you know you can easily fall in love with. ‘I realise this is a lot. It’s also pretty much a forever-kind-of-thing. So … you should take time to think about it. I will too. It’s not something we should enter into lightly.’

The coals grow dim, close to burning out.

‘We should keep the fire going,’ Marian says, standing. ‘There’re twigs and fallen branches along the path below. Enough to last the night.’

My head snaps up. ‘Shouldn’t you get back to the compound?’

She smiles, then looks away shyly. ‘Nobody will notice I’m gone until the morning, and … I have too many questions to leave now.’

That sounds promising. ‘Like?’

‘You mean, aside from all my unasked questions about the connection? I also want to know …’ She sighs. ‘What does your home look like? And who’s in your family? Who’s your best friend? And how do you celebrate your birthdays?’ She laughs. ‘*When* is your birthday?’

I smile, genuinely charmed. ‘Those are a lot of questions.’

‘And I have a lot more … because, yes, this is wild and rash and impulsive. Did I mention wild? *Incredibly* rash?’

‘And impulsive,’ I add, a rush building in my chest.

She nods. ‘But if we’re going to seriously consider marriage, then we should get to know each other, don’t you think?’

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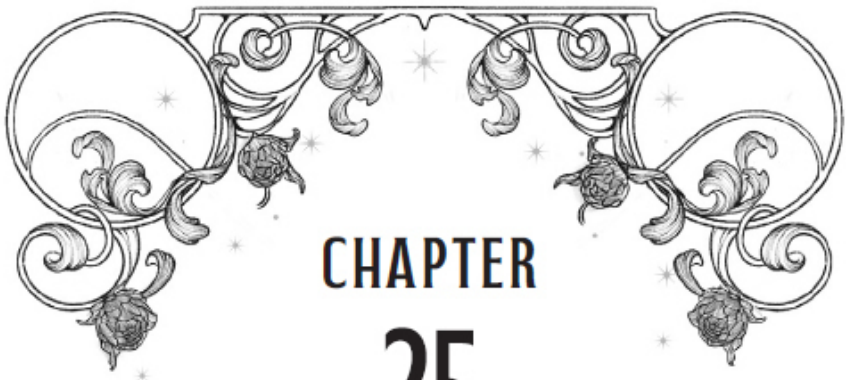

CHAPTER 25

MARIAN

‘Thanks for walking me back.’ I glance up at my bedroom window. ‘I should go inside.’ The night passed in a blur, and now the sun is getting too high in the sky to ignore.

Ryland frowns, then glares in the direction of our spy. Soren’s buddy, Diggs, spotted us returning and has been performing his guard duty with a grating level of seriousness.

Ryland’s jaw flexes.

‘It’s fine,’ I mutter. ‘Atlas wanted me to seduce you for information, remember? So we don’t have to hide this.’

His head snaps back to me. A smile curls on his lips, growing deeper the longer he stares. ‘Well, in that case.’ He suddenly leans in, cupping my jaw, and kisses me.

My stomach flutters violently, like I’ve been bucked off a horse. Speaking this way and kissing in plain sight is so wild. Reckless. It’s night and day from what I let people see of me as a guard. I don’t recognise this fevered, giddy version of myself. This isn’t us pledging our lives to each other after only one night alone; but we are letting this new world of possibilities play out. And it’s intoxicating.

‘When can I see you again?’ he mutters softly against my lips.

My chest swells at the thought of more of him. I wish our time didn’t have to end, but I haven’t slept a wink in twenty-four hours and real life awaits. ‘Later? I’ll need to check in with the first lieutenants. Maybe slip in

a short nap. I'm not sure when Atlas will return, but my evening should be free.'

Ryland studies me, something troubling making his brows pinch.

'What is it?' I ask.

'When the Commander calls me in for our next meeting, there's a chance he'll send me packing.' His deep voice softens. 'If he does, I'll wait for you at the end of the Notting entry road. On the west side. Meet me there and we can decide on the next steps. I'll respect whatever you choose.'

My head drops low. Sometimes I barely notice how much I've separated myself from nearly everyone else, all so I protect them from the fallout of my raids. But other times, like now, I feel the magnitude of my isolation, and it's … crippling. Ryland is a glowing beacon, reminding me that this life I live, the risks I take, are not what I want forever.

It's incredibly tempting to accept his offer.

But at the mention of Atlas, my stomach spirals with dread. Or more accurately, fear. Atlas will never simply let me leave … or marry Ryland.

Just don't fall for him in return. I'm a jealous man, and I don't share my things.

Even if we eloped, and I took Agatha with us, what about the Dresden or Dezzy? How could I protect them all from the fallout of Atlas's rage?

I can't.

A sharp needle weaves through my heart, leaving a trail of tightening thread. If we're serious about doing this, we'll have to somehow clear the danger of it first.

'Okay,' I agree. Then I kiss him one more time before starting the climb to my room. Two thirds of the way up the ladder, I look down and find Ryland respectfully turned around, guarding my back. It touches something deep inside me. I'm not used to these kindnesses.

'Marian!'

Dezzy's head pops out of my window, her dark hair falling out of her usually pristine bun.

My brain misfires. What's she doing in my room?

'Where have you been?' she cries, her accent as thick as mud now that she's upset. She gestures vigorously for me to hurry inside.

I speed up, blades of anxiety stabbing my ribs as I climb through the window.

'Have you been out all night?' She gapes like she doesn't recognise me.

I stride to my bed while fighting the blasted zip on the back of my dress. ‘Yes, I was with Ryland. And it was … nice.’ Nice doesn’t cover it, but I’m sure my flushing cheeks do.

‘And you told no one where you went?’ she squawks. ‘Is your head just for decoration?’

With a grunt, I give the zip a final tug, then abandon it and fall back on my hard mattress. ‘I had no desire to be found, Dez. You should be happy. This is what you wanted.’

‘I *wanted* to find you three hours ago. Your father is looking for you.’

I jerk upright. ‘He’s back?’

She motions aggressively towards downstairs. ‘Go. Go now. He is very unhappy that you haven’t answered his call.’

‘I need to change,’ I hiss, springing to my feet. Thankfully, Dezzy agrees, and in a flurry, we strip me of my dress and reclothe me in my guardsman uniform. I barely have one boot on when Dezzy cries, ‘We need to tie back your hair.’

‘No time,’ I say, pulling on my other boot and running out of the door.

People gawk and lunge out of the way as I sprint down the maze of hallways and stairs, then through the compound dining room. Clark grins at me, but before he has a chance to open the door to the High Command, I slam through it – Atlas has waited too long.

He’s frowning when I burst out of the hallway into the cavernous room. Coatl – no surprise – glares at my intrusion. But it’s Soren, standing before them, who makes my thundering blood run cold. My former flame seems almost relieved to see me, which makes no sense.

‘Ah, my daughter,’ Atlas says. ‘Nice of you to *finally* join us.’

‘My apologies. I was attending to … my *assignment*.’

‘Oh?’ Atlas looks at me curiously. ‘I see.’ Then, as if forgotten, he speaks to Soren. ‘Continue, Lieutenant Collins.’

Soren clears his throat. ‘As I was saying, I’d like permission to collect the suspects from the Dresden –’

‘What suspects?’ I interrupt. Instead of going to my usual spot along the wall, I step on to the dais and take a place beside Atlas, looking down on Soren. ‘How could you possibly have suspects from among the Dresden when the raiders were vagabonds? Ones who got away because *you* didn’t immediately initiate a search inside our territory.’

‘The raiders looked familiar,’ he says coolly, trying and failing to hold back his anger. ‘I was following my gut.’

My mouth goes bone dry – *familiar?* ‘It doesn’t matter what your gut felt. We have protocols. Instead, you set the Dresden Circle on fire. And I couldn’t even do your job of initiating a search because I was trying to keep the whole place from burning down.’

His words turn clipped. ‘I followed the evidence, and now I have suspects.’

‘What evidence?’ I demand. ‘And who are you accusing?’

‘Marian.’ Atlas looks baffled. ‘Calm down.’

I exhale. Why is he not raging? ‘My apologies, Commander. But Lieutenant Collins has done an incredible amount of damage by not following our rules.’

Atlas tilts his head, thinking. ‘Yes, but he has suspects.’

My stomach bottoms out.

Atlas waves his hand. ‘Enlighten her, so we can move on.’

Soren raises his chin. ‘There’s been a rumour that the Dresden have been receiving gifts to pay their collections. We now know these gifts are stolen from Notting collection carts. They’re looting to pay their outstanding rent and protection fees.’

I stop breathing.

‘All whispers point to Brother Thomas,’ he continues. ‘He also matches the height of the second raider. Let me talk to him. And Lieutenant Lucky Pollent. I don’t suspect he’s the raider, but he’s often working the post closest to our trader raids. That can’t be a coincidence. With your permission, I’d like to interrogate these men at Halkirk Tower and –’

‘Interrogate?’ Halkirk Tower is essentially our jail, but it’s also where we take people to be questioned – so nobody hears their screams.

It feels like a horse is stepping on my chest. ‘I strongly disagree with this direction. Lieutenant Collins is basing this on rumours, not true leads. But if we’re going to talk facts – Soren failed to stop a raid, broke protocol, then destroyed nine Dresden homes in his resulting temper tantrum. He’s undoubtedly hindered our production of coal, due to injuries and people needing to rebuild.’

Pleadingly, I stare at Atlas, hoping for *once* whatever favouritism I have will actually help me. ‘Look, Brother Thomas is a man of the cloth. A good

citizen and a hard worker. And Lucky is also a loyal guardsman. These men are not raiders. *I* can vouch for them.'

Atlas stops me with a wave of his hand, and it's physically painful to shut my mouth. 'My, my, you are worked up about this, my dear.'

I nod.

'But you shouldn't be,' he chastises. 'If Brother Thomas and Lieutenant Pollent are innocent, that will come out.'

No.

'It'd be negligent to ignore Soren's suspicions.' Atlas shifts in his chair, then digs his fingers into his temples. 'This whole thing is giving me a headache. Soren, clean up your mess. Go. Report to Coatl. I don't want to be bothered with this again.'

Soren's face is the picture of victory, and he immediately takes his leave.

My hands fist as my body floods with panic. 'Then I request to go with him. To … represent the integrity of your office and interests.'

'You would miss our afternoon meeting.'

I force a disappointed look. 'It's not ideal. But I feel it's important.'

He sighs. 'I … suppose. Except not yet.'

Urgency splashes like molten metal up in my throat.

'Aren't you going to ask how my travels –'

The High Command doors open with a creak. 'Commander, Agatha is here to see you,' Clark announces. 'She says it's important.'

My sister appears out of the hallway without waiting for approval. She's dressed in a guardsman uniform. Cold alarm seeps through me.

'Why are you interrupting us?' Despite Atlas's annoyance, there's a note of curiosity in his voice. 'This had better be important.'

'It is.' She stops near me, hands clasped behind her back like a guard. 'I trust you had a productive business trip?'

'Yes, get on with it.'

The confidence on Agatha's face wavers, then something hardens in her eyes. 'I wish to have a rematch against Marian.'

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CHAPTER 26

MARIAN

‘A rematch?’ Atlas scoffs. ‘You wish to fight your sister, right now?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I took your advice and have been working hard on my training. I’m ready to show you what I’ve accomplished.’

‘Commander,’ I urge. ‘Now’s not a good time.’ In minutes, Soren will have my friends rounded up. I need to get there, not help Agatha chase Atlas’s approval.

Agatha finally meets my gaze, and I’m not prepared for the coldness in her eyes. ‘Are you afraid to fight me?’

‘Agatha,’ I breathe out, confused. My reflexes are dulled from fatigue, but even if I hadn’t slept for a week, I could still beat her with one hand tied behind my back.

‘Then let’s begin.’ She bends her knees. Her fists rise but not high enough to be in position.

Anger burns through me. She’s trapped me here at the worst possible time. I exhale sharply, then take a proper stance across from her, except my fists remain lowered at my sides. I don’t even need them.

Suddenly, Agatha runs at me.

I easily evade, while leaving a strategically placed foot, tripping her. It’s a cheap shot, and she bellyflops gracelessly, yet somehow snags a handful of my hair. Fire rips over my already sore scalp as I’m yanked backwards, but I remain on my feet. ‘This is a waste of time,’ I snap. ‘I have more important things to do.’

‘Like seduce Ryland?’ she mutters bitterly.

What? Did she see us?

Agatha gets to her feet, face flushed. ‘Again,’ she yells.

So she’s jealous and trying to hurt me.

And it’s far from the first time.

My jaw tightens as my anger reignites.

For too long, I’ve deluded myself that the fallout with Felix was the only cause of the distance in our relationship. But our problems started long before that, when she decided I’m the reason she’ll never be enough.

It doesn’t matter that for years I’ve shrunk myself so she could shine. That I’ve supported her interests, encouraged her studies, protected her at every chance I get. None of it matters; all she sees is that I’m her competition.

I wind my hair up into a knot, then reset my stance. Except this time, I raise my fists. If this is what she *really* wants, maybe I’ll stop dimming myself for her.

She launches at me again while pulling something from her pocket. A black ball. Her thumb flicks a button, or maybe it’s a pin. Then she tosses it between us. It bounces with a clank of metal. What is that?

A deafening explosion rocks the room. Splinters of wood fly as the floor is blown apart. I collapse to the ground, arms protecting my face.

Long seconds pass as I fight to catch my breath. My ears ring. Someone is coughing, and as the smoke slowly clears, I spot a gaping hole in the plank flooring. Cursing, I pat down my body, checking for damage – miraculously, no limbs or fingers are missing.

But any closer and that might not have been the case. Betrayal sweeps over me.

Ammunition? Explosives? I thought all of that ran out or went bad decades ago.

The Commander cowers in his chair as guards burst into the room, weapons drawn.

Agatha straightens cautiously. ‘I’m sorry. That was bigger than I thought it would be. But I wanted to show you: not every fight needs to be hand-to-hand. I’ve replicated some old-world explosives, and I wanted you to see how even with someone like me, it can give you the advantage.’

‘Are you mad?!’ Seething, I shove to my feet. ‘Y-you could have killed me!’

Her head turns, her bluster from before returning. ‘*Could have?* Yes. But I didn’t – just like every time you’ve nearly stabbed *me* or held your knife to my throat.’

Her attention shifts back to Atlas. ‘This was a demonstration, but it’s merely a bang compared to what I could create. Imagine how this could be fired from a slingshot, or for large-scale attacks, our catapults. Behind the barns, I’ve created fireballs up to six feet wide. But we could go larger, more destructive. The supplies I need to create this are plentiful, and I could easily make more.’ She exhales a shaky breath as pride shines in her eyes. ‘There are many ways to fight our enemies, but this could be the greatest.’

I stare in horror. She has to know he’ll use this to raid, to harm and subjugate others, not just for defence. Which is terrifying. No place, no matter the size of their army – or the height of their electric fence – could stand against this.

Atlas leans forward in his chair, transfixed. ‘Exactly how many of these weapons have you been able to create?’

Agatha breaks into a beaming smile.

Unbelievable. She did it. She got exactly what she’s always wanted: his full attention.

And she can have it.

For the first time ever, I don’t ask for his permission. I just leave.

I race to Halkirk Tower on horseback, weaving through the dirt paths to nearly the back Notting territory.

This lookout post isn’t manned unless there’s a prisoner. It’s located on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the steepest drop below, which makes it the least likely to be breached.

Diggs and Patronis mount their horses to leave as I jump down from mine. It appears Soren summoned help from his henchmen.

‘Soren!’ I call, as I storm through the door of the rickety, multi-floor building. A haunting moan weaves through the tower from the wind. The first room is empty, save for a table and chairs and a rusty cot along the wall that you couldn’t bribe me to touch. To the right is the creaky staircase to the second- and third-floor lookouts.

It also reeks from years of uncleaned excrement, making me hold my hand against my nose. Lantern light glows from the back room but I don’t hear voices. Cautiously, I step through the final door.

‘Took you long enough,’ Soren says, reclining on a chair.

Goosebumps race over my skin.

He’s facing away, staring at Lucky and Brother Thomas whose hands are tied above them to a beam in the ceiling. From the swelling on their faces, they’ve already taken some abuse.

‘What’s going on?’ I demand. ‘You were only supposed to question them.’ Spinning around, I look for something to stand on to cut them down. ‘Free them. Now!’

‘I will,’ Soren says. ‘When they confess.’

‘We’re innocent,’ Lucky growls. His lip is swollen and split on the side.

Soren stands. ‘I think we both know that’s not true.’ He walks to the wall of weapons used for various forms of torture and grabs the whip, the one I’ve borrowed countless times on my raids. His hand slides along the braided leather. ‘But now that Marian’s here, we can get to the real questions.’ He flicks the whip back and forth, the tail end rhythmically slapping the floor with each pass. ‘Have you used this whip to raid?’

The question is aimed at Lucky, but a knife of fear carves a channel down my spine. I didn’t use a whip when I raided Soren the other night.

‘I’ve never raided anyone,’ Lucky says.

‘Me either,’ Brother Thomas adds.

‘Wrong answer.’ Soren pulls back and cracks the whip into the air. We all flinch at the deafening sound in the room.

‘Soren,’ I say, trying to remain calm. ‘Come on. These are *good* men.’

‘Good men,’ he repeats. ‘Except they’ve been handing out stolen supplies that belong to the Commander. I have an eyewitness.’

I swallow hard. ‘Anyone with a grievance could have accused them of that. Soren, you’re on the wrong trail.’

‘No!’ he seethes. ‘I’m on the *exact* right trail.’

I’m frozen as he retrieves a white handkerchief from his pocket, unfolds it, then pinches something and lifts it into the air. It looks like hair. Several long, brown strands.

‘Would you like these back?’ His mouth pulls into a terrifying grin. ‘*You* raided me the other night.’

My chest seizes, unable to breathe.

‘You were behind all the raids.’ He laughs in disbelief. ‘I can’t believe it took me so long to figure out. You’re raiding your own father and then giving it to *them.*’

Brother Thomas is sweating profusely, despite the dank chill of the decrepit tower. Lucky's eyes are clenched shut.

My mind races. Something doesn't make sense. If Soren knows, why didn't he do this in front of Atlas?

He wants something.

'*That's* your evidence? Some hair?'

His face is hit with a bolt of anger, and he cracks the whip again, this time striking Lucky in the leg. Lucky howls in pain.

'Stop!' I yell. My hand goes for my sword, except it isn't there. For once, my weapons are missing; I forgot them in my room. The remaining torture tools on the wall – an axe, a shovel, a few chipped blades and a pair of rusty shears – are my only options. But to get to them, I'd have to get through Soren first. 'Listen to me, okay? Let's talk this through.'

'No, you listen to me. You humiliated me last night with the Dresden, then tried to do it again in front of the Commander. But thanks to your father, I know that nothing hurts you more than people's suffering. So I'm going to take another page from his playbook. You're going to watch them get whipped, knowing it's your fault.'

Lucky squirms, fighting against the rope.

'And then,' Soren continues, 'you're going to undo all the damage you've done. You'll talk me up to the Commander. Get me a promotion. And if that happens in a timely fashion, I'll keep your secret to myself, and *they* won't be exiled.'

My chest heaves with panic. No matter how I play this – fight Soren or run for help – the result is the same. Soren goes to Atlas and blows everything apart.

'How do I know you'll keep your word? We've been here before, remember? You turned in Agatha and Felix.'

'I didn't turn them in,' he snaps. 'I was questioned, and I told the truth.'

'Right. And the promotion was just a coincidence.'

He sneers. 'You know it didn't have to be this way – you hating me. Well, I can hate you too.' He raises his whip.

'Stop!' I shout again.

I can't watch this. A restless fury bubbles up in my throat at the thought, and it's suddenly so much harder to breathe.

This is why I raid alone.

‘All right!’ I bite my lip hard. ‘You want to be first lieutenant. Fine. I’ll make that happen.’ It shouldn’t be too hard. Atlas was already willing to listen to Soren over me.

‘Good,’ he says, then raises the whip again to strike.

‘What are you doing?’ I shout.

He pauses. ‘Like I said, you *humiliated* me. A lesson needs to be taught.’

I glance at the two men, my friends. ‘They’re innocent. I worked alone.’ My eyes squeeze shut. God’s breath, I wish all of this were already over.

There’s only one way to make that happen.

I need to play by his rules.

‘Don’t whip them. Whip me. I’ll take their place.’

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CHAPTER 27

MARIAN

I groan into the straw mattress of Brother Thomas's bed, then try to heave myself up into a sitting position and somewhat succeed. My boots skim the grass floor mat.

'Lie back down. You're bleeding through your shirt.' Clara dabs a cold cloth to my back. 'You might need stitches.'

Uneasiness settles over me that Brother Thomas called her here. Clara's exactly everything I thought she would be – lovely and kind. Nurturing. But she can't be dragged into this. Nobody else can get hurt.

'I'll be fine,' I whisper. It's probably true. Dezzy will fix me up. I consider standing, but a throbbing pain scrapes down my vertebrae. It comes with the dizzying urge to vomit. 'I just need another minute, and then I'll leave.'

'No, you will not,' Clara says, grabbing my wrist like I might actually run. 'Just rest.'

I breathe in, trying to do that, and my mind returns to the jail. To Brother Thomas and Lucky calling for help. To the sound of Soren breathless as he took out his rage, before stopping, face filled with something that looked like regret.

I'm the biggest fool alive.

Because I didn't just *let* him hurt me.

I asked for it.

I clench my eyes shut. I should have fought Soren with my bare hands. Fought to whatever end. All I did was delay the inevitable. He's now in control, and eventually, when I've stopped being useful to him, he's going to turn us all i–

'Where is she?'

At Ryland's voice, my head lifts. What's he doing here?

Little John shoves past Brother Thomas in the doorframe and Clara leaps off the bed. 'No, you can't be in here.'

'But Ma,' he cries, 'I want to see –'

His voice disappears as Clara scoots everyone out but Ryland. The frayed strip of fabric dividing the two rooms falls closed. Ryland looks every bit the elite guard: tall and fierce with weapons strapped all over him. Chiselled face etched with concern.

Despite my initial confusion, I'm hit with an inexplicable wave of relief. His gaze rakes over me. I grow self-conscious. My loose hair is tangled around my face. I'm dirty and my cheeks are tight with dried tears.

'What happened?' He comes closer and drops to one knee before me. 'Are you hurt?'

I fill my lungs and wince as it painfully stretches my back. 'I …' My teeth bite my lips closed. *Don't say more.* If I've learned anything today, it's that no one is safe if they get involved with me. Ryland especially is too honourable to look the other way.

He leans closer, eyes scouring me. 'Marian,' he prompts gently.

Shame crawls over me like an army of beetles, nipping at my skin. Ryland would never have let Soren just beat him. Best him. *Control him*. 'I-I …' My eyes grow hot.

His hand gently cups my arm, but he looks to the door, and I realise: a few words with Brother Thomas and he'll know everything anyway. 'I was caught,' I say. 'For the raids.'

'How? What happened?' His voice carries an authoritative ring.

When I don't speak right away, he gently pushes a strand of hair out of my face. 'It's okay. You're safe now.' His hand drifts over my shoulder and the pain from his touch is instant. Searing. I can't stifle my sharp intake of breath.

He stiffens, then rises to his feet. I count the seconds as he stares at my back. 'You were whipped?'

'Yes.'

Very gently, he lifts the fabric from my skin, then rips the back of my guardsman shirt. He curses as it falls open, exposing my wounds. The cool air simultaneously eases and intensifies my pain. I inhale shallow breaths.

'The Commander did this?' The hard edge in his voice is harsher now.

'No. It …' My distressed thoughts come surging back. There's an intense need to protect him from the fallout of simply associating with me. The more he knows, the more he'll get involved. 'Ryland, I –'

'Was it Soren?'

My gaze flits to him.

His jaw clenches, and he nods as if I answered him out loud.

'Please. You can't confront him. It's too dangerous.' My chest becomes unbearably tight as my panic grows.

It hits me that danger isn't a deterrent for an elite guard. But it's not until I touch his arm that I realise that my growing distress isn't only about another altercation with Soren. It's difficult to admit when I need something. Some*one*. But right now, what I want most is *him*. 'Ryland, I need … please stay with me.'

His shoulders loosen, and he lowers his head. 'Of course. But I need to understand how this happened.'

I finally relent and explain the events that led to my deal with Soren and ultimately being whipped. He listens intently, eyes flashing with sparks of fury. When I've finished, I wait, hoping he'll have some grand revelation about how to fix this – something that won't risk a deadly confrontation or expose the people I care about. 'I have to be smart,' I say. 'I need a plan, but it feels like my only option is to continue to bow at Soren's feet.'

'That's not going to happen,' Ryland promises.

I wish that were true, but he can't promise that. 'If I can get Soren his promotion, then maybe he'll leave me –'

'You'd never be able to drop your guard. He'll always have this to hold over you.'

My lungs empty. I know. Soren holds all the cards now.

'What would happen if you told the Commander that Soren attacked you over a personal vendetta? Leave out the raids. Tell me Atlas wouldn't flay Soren on the spot.'

'Maybe,' I admit. 'But Soren would also do his damnedest to take me and my friends down with him. Atlas just might believe him – he did earlier when Soren and I disagreed.'

Roughly, Ryland shoves a hand through his hair. The sharp glint of calculation and something dangerous flickers in his eyes.

‘Stop,’ I say. ‘I can’t have you involved. Soren will turn on you, too. Get you in trouble.’

He laughs humourlessly. ‘I don’t care about that.’

‘You should. I do. It will threaten your coal deal. Worse, if Soren succeeds in convincing Atlas that you’re an enemy … Atlas will kill you.’

Ryland’s eyes soften at the emotion fissuring my voice. ‘And what would he do to *you*?’

My lips pull to the side, pain my constant companion. ‘Atlas wouldn’t kill me … at least I don’t think so. But he would unleash Coatl on me … and make me wish they would.’

Determination hardens his eyes. ‘Then we should use the connection.’

I swallow, not sure how to answer, though my body can’t say the same. A rush of nervous excitement flutters through me. He’s talking about getting married.

‘I could heal you,’ he whispers earnestly.

‘But we’d have to share the pain, right?’ I imagine him with some of my wounds and vigorously shake my head. ‘I don’t want to give you this.’

‘That’s good, and we can argue about it later. But healing isn’t the only aspect of the connection that would help us.’

Yes, sharing memories and communicating wordlessly would give us an advantage against Atlas or anyone else. Also, getting married could free me from Atlas’s grip. A sure fix? No.

But there’s potential.

I falter for a beat, because relinquishing Atlas’s hold on me isn’t all a marriage would mean. Ryland would be stuck in a calculated union. A marriage of convenience with someone he barely knows. Permanently.

What an extraordinary sacrifice for him.

I frown. ‘This is your one chance at the connection, and you said yourself, it’s not temporary. Do you really think you could marry someone … you don’t love?’

I watch as he ponders the question, not rushing. ‘Of all the things I’m worried about, Marian, falling endlessly, hopelessly in love with you is not one of them.’

My bones might be melting.

His eyes light with a sincerity that seizes my chest. ‘This isn’t a favour I’m offering you. You’re not taking away my *one chance*. I choose you, if you’ll have me. Marrying you would be *my* greatest honour.’

My pulse is relentless as hope and longing ignite inside me.

‘But that doesn’t mean we have to barrel into this. We’ll use the gifts of the connection, but the rest of it, our relationship, can take whatever speed we want.’

‘So let me get this straight,’ I say. ‘You’re okay with rushing into marriage with a girl you barely know, all so you can *possibly* help her by using a rare and unexplainable magic … that may not solve her problems at all.’

‘Yes,’ he assures me. ‘But the connection *will* help us. I really believe that’s its purpose.’

I can’t decide whether my chest is swelling or on the verge of caving in. In all my life, I’ve never met a man as selfless and as honourable.

‘And what about you?’ he asks. ‘Are you okay with marrying a man you barely know—’

‘Yes,’ I say, quickly. I may have questioned it for his sake, but not my own. He’s offering solutions wrapped in hope that my suffocating, perilous life won’t be like this forever. But he’s much more than just a way out.

By accepting, I gain an incredible partner, something I didn’t dare let myself dream of.

Butterflies fill my stomach. I search myself, wading through the wild rapids of emotions rushing through me, but don’t find any reservations. There isn’t a part of me that doesn’t want to see this come true.

He smiles. It’s breathtaking. ‘Good. Then let’s do this properly.’ He grips my fingers and lowers himself to one knee. ‘Marian, will you do me the honour of becoming my wife? Right now?’

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CHAPTER 28

RYLAND

Little John stops pushing his horse – a block of wood – along the floor. ‘You look nervous.’

‘I’m not,’ I say, with a glance at Brother Thomas. We’re seated on mismatched chairs in his closet of a kitchen. There’s a bucket for his sink and a few dishes on a shelf. A wooden box makes up his table. Hanging from the ceiling is an oil lamp on a hook, by far the nicest item in the room.

Brother Thomas raises a slightly swollen, but doubtful eyebrow. Little John squints. ‘Then what’s wrong?’

I stop chewing on my lip. ‘Nothing. Just thinking about the man who hurt Marian.’

And what I’m going to do to him.

Clara sticks her head out of Brother Thomas’s bedroom. ‘We’re ready for you.’

I run a hand over my hair as my heart rate picks up. Maybe I do have some nerves. But to be fair, this is a big deal – fate, colliding with wedding vows in an unexpected but extremely welcome way. And how do you even prepare for such a monumental moment as receiving the connection?

Brother Thomas claps me on the back as we file through the small doorframe.

The bedroom is so small I don’t know how we’re all going to fit. But despite it still being daylight, lit candles cover every shelf and wooden storage crate, giving the room an ethereal glow.

My heart nearly flops out of my chest at the sight of Marian. She greets me with a shy smile as she stands.

‘No, don’t get up. Rest,’ I say, moving closer.

Her torso is wrapped in cloth bandages, but a white sheet is draped over her shoulders and belted around her waist to look like a dress. She’s still wearing her uniform trousers and boots, but her face is clean, and her dark hair is combed and curling around her shoulders.

She’s so beautiful my heart aches.

‘I can stand,’ she says. ‘I *want* to stand.’

Pain flickers on her face as she tries, and my heart hammers with how much I hate to see it. But in minutes, I can take this from her. Heal her. I don’t care that she doesn’t want to hurt me.

Brother Thomas clears his throat. ‘Well, this is a surprising yet pleasant turn of events. Shall we begin with a reading?’

Marian and I take each other’s hands. She’s looking at Brother Thomas, grinning. I only have eyes for her.

‘Marriage,’ Brother Thomas begins.

Little John gasps. ‘You guys are getting married?’

Clara smothers his mouth with her hand, but he pries it off. ‘Just kidding. I knew that.’ He chuckles. ‘I’m the best man.’

Brother Thomas opens up a book and reads a short passage about the meaning of love. The purpose of love. The power of it. ‘Is there anything either of you would like to say before we move to the vows?’

‘Yes,’ I say. Marian’s gaze slides to me, and I pause, getting my thoughts together. We may be rushing this – we *are* rushing this – but that doesn’t make it less sacred to me. ‘I’ve spent my life wondering what you would be like. What you would look like.’ A baby starts to cry in the distance. ‘I’ve wondered if I already knew you, and if not, how I’d find you.’ I run my thumb over the calluses on her palm and marvel again at how they match mine. ‘I knew you’d be kind, but your generosity and fierceness have exceeded my expectations. We’ve known each other for only days, and you’re already my favourite person. And although an impromptu wedding is unconventional, I wouldn’t change it, because it means my search is over. I’ve found you.’

She exhales slowly. ‘This feels like a dream.’

A horse rides by and someone whistles. Clara subtly pulls back the curtain to peek out of the window. I don’t like the way she frowns.

‘Ryland,’ Marian begins. She squeezes my fingers. ‘You have shown me that even though the world can be broken and awful, good men still –’

Glass shatters in the distance.

Clara opens the curtain wider, and this time doesn’t look away.

‘What is it?’ Brother Thomas asks.

‘A guardsman …’

‘Maybe let’s get to the vows,’ Marian says, and I nod in agreement, even though it kills me that Marian didn’t get to finish what she wanted to say.

‘Ryland,’ Brother Thomas says. ‘Do you take Marian to be your wedded wife? Do you promise to love her? To defend and protect her? To respect her, treating her with kindness, while holding her in the deepest part of your heart, to the best of your ability from this day forward?’

I remove the thin silver necklace I’ve worn since I was ten – a gift from my mother – and place it around Marian’s neck. At the clasp clicking into place, I meet her eyes and speak my vow. ‘I do.’

Marian retrieves a ring made of twisted grass from the bed. I stretch my hand out and she slides it on the fourth finger. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says, her lips pressing into a line. ‘I don’t have anything better. But I *will* replace this.’

It doesn’t matter. I’d wear anything she gave me. She holds the ring in place and pauses. After a few seconds, she attempts to smile but falters. I notice her chest is rising and falling sharply.

‘Marian?’ I ask, gently.

She shakes her head and huffs a laugh. ‘Sorry. I just …’ She doesn’t finish.

‘What is it?’

Her brows pinch. ‘Nothing … other than – he’s going to hurt them, you know.’

‘Who? Soren? We’ll deal with him –’

‘No, Atlas.’ She nods, now breathless. ‘He’s going to retaliate if I marry you. Then more people are going to be hurt. People I care about.’ She dips her chin. ‘I … my friends were just attacked because of me and I …’ Her head snaps up. ‘What if I ask Atlas for permission?’ Her fingers are trembling in my hands. ‘I think I need to try. It’s the safest path for everyone.’

I stare at her, stunned and more than a little disappointed.

‘I could go right now,’ she offers. ‘I’ll beg him if I have to. Throw myself at his feet.’

I feel it in my gut; it's the wrong decision. But I'm hardly impartial, and never in a million years would I force her to say the words that will tie us together irrevocably. 'And if he says no?'

Her gaze darts around the room. 'Then … I'll come back, and we'll do it anyway. But at least I'll know I did my best to protect the people I care about. I don't have to live with regret.'

Her eyes are wild with desperation to prevent more suffering. My grip on her hands tightens, but it's false reassurance. I can't promise that everything she fears won't come true. My head drops, as my stomach sinks. Not going through with this is a mistake; I feel it.

But she can't live with herself doing it any other way.

'Yeah.' Reluctantly, I nod. 'Okay.'

She unties the belt and removes the white sheet comprising her dress. I shuck my jacket and wrap her in it, covering the bandages on her chest. She eyes my dark T-shirt while pulling her arms through the sleeves that hang well past her fingers. Her face tucks into the collar and she inhales, closing her eyes. 'Thank you.'

I'm not done. 'Let me escort you to him.'

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CHAPTER 29

MARIAN

Ryland jumps down and gently lowers me to the ground from his horse. He keeps his hand on my elbow to steady me, which I'm thankful for. The waves of pain are less eviscerating now; it's more of a constant burning ache.

'Can I come inside with you?' he asks. 'It should be me asking the Commander for your hand.'

My stomach flutters wildly. It's still so shocking to hear that. We're doing this. I'm going to *marry* him – this man who's thrown himself in my path and earned my trust. More than my trust.

I'm giving him my heart.

Except – 'You can't come with me.' I lower my gaze. 'I plan to appeal to every ounce of favouritism Atlas has for me. I'll lie, tell him whatever he needs to hear to gain his blessing – that I'll spy on you, your settlement, your neighbours. But if you come, he may be … irritated. It won't go in our favour if you're there.'

The wrinkle on his forehead tells me he still doesn't like it. 'Okay. I'll wait for you here.'

I exhale, then kiss him, pulling him firmly against me. I've second-guessed which path to marriage will cause the least damage, but I want Ryland to know – to feel – that I'm not second-guessing my choice to marry him.

His chest rumbles with a sound that has my knees wilting. His hands linger on my waist, hesitant to let me go.

‘I’ll be as quick as I can,’ I assure him. ‘We’ll be back to saying our vows in no time.’

Sweat beads on my brow as pain strikes like lightning with every step. My first order of business is to change into a new uniform shirt, which I do in my bedroom. Ryland’s jacket would only distract Atlas from the topic at hand – that is if I can even pry his attention from Agatha’s bombs. Somehow, I’ll need to control the conversation like never before.

As I make my way to Atlas, I rehearse persuasive arguments on how a marriage to Ryland will be beneficial. How it will create a lasting partnership for trade. Something far stronger than any deal –

A figure steps out from the disarming room, blocking my path. I jerk to a stop.

Soren’s nostrils flare, taking me in.

My heart beats like it’s been clubbed with a bat. Was he waiting for me? I knew we’d meet again, but it’s only been hours since he attacked me. ‘What do you want?’

He glances behind me at the people clearing dishes in the dining hall, then leans in. ‘Going to the High Command?’

‘That’s where I work.’ I force my chin higher and fight the urge to back up. ‘Are you afraid of what I’ll say to the Commander, Soren?’

‘No. Not really.’

His tone betrays him. Something sad and perhaps repentant even flickers in his eyes.

Good. I hope he feels awful. I hope he never sleeps again.

He studies my resolve, then invades my space further. ‘I’m not the one who should be afraid,’ he whispers.

His words shove me under a tide of dread. ‘So, you came to threaten me?’

‘I came to say I’m looking forward to that promotion.’ Then he slides past me.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him where to shove his promotion. Instead, I speed off and push through the doors of the High Command, ignoring the guard there to announce me.

Only once I’m alone and hidden in the hallway do I stop, shoulders collapsing. This is my life now, isn’t it? Threats from Soren? Intimidation

around any corner? My legs wobble under me, my exhaustion and pain nothing but heavy anchors, their chains wound too tightly around my throat.

'They have everything that you could ever want, from what I can tell.'

My head lifts. Who is Atlas meeting with?

'All from the old world.'

I recognise the voice. Rufus, Ryland's father. Alarm buzzes over my skin. Ryland feared he would sell him out to Atlas. Is that what's happening here?

I strain to listen, but the speaking is muffled.

'Of course they do,' Rufus says. 'Although I've only ever seen it from outside their *electric* fence.'

'They have an electric fence?' Atlas's voice is much louder now.

Shut up, Rufus. I lurch forward, wincing as I rush to interrupt them. Although, how I'll distract Atlas now, I don't know.

'They have more than that,' Rufus says. 'They have magic – the real kind.'

A curse slips past my lips.

'You get your daughter married to my son, and you'll see what I'm talking about.'

A few steps before the exit of the hallway, my feet stop.

'What kind of magic?' Atlas asks.

'The healing kind. The seeing-into-each-other's-head kind. Of course, he can only use it on the woman he marries, but it works *both* ways. Unfortunately, that's all I know, but this is the easiest way to get any information you want from Ryland. Not to mention, he's in love with your daughter. He's already talked to me about getting a ring.'

A dumbfounded laugh bursts from Atlas. Coatl joins in. I bite my lip, torn. Rufus is saying too much. But I also wonder if this is *perfect*.

They go back and forth, discussing how Ryland could have real magic and where it came from. I only let it continue because Rufus admits he doesn't know. But in every response from Atlas, I hear the unquenchable thirst to investigate whether it's true.

God's breath. This just might work. Thanks to Rufus, Atlas is going to think a wedding is his idea. Of course, he'll expect me to commit more espionage and information gathering, but it'll be like every time I'm tasked with spying for him – I'll give him nothing. He may even grant me his blessing to leave with Ryland.

‘What else do you know?’ Atlas demands. ‘Can this magic be used in warfare?’

And – that’s enough. ‘I hear you were looking for me,’ I say loudly, as I make my appearance. There’s now a patchwork of floorboards covering up the hole left by Agatha’s bomb.

Atlas sits up. ‘Ah, Marian! We’ve missed you.’

‘I’m sorry. Things took longer than I’d hoped, but …’ It’s difficult not to choke on my next words. ‘Soren handled the situation perfectly. Our concerns about those men are now resolved. As I thought, they’re innocent. That said, there’s something else I must address with you.’ I glance at Coatl. ‘Alone. It’s *very* important.’

‘Not now.’ Atlas flaps his hand. ‘I’ve been speaking with Rufus. Did you know he’s Ryland’s father?’

‘That’s actually what I was coming to tell you.’

He smiles, absolutely delighted. ‘Yes. Well, I’ve just come up with the most brilliant idea.’

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CHAPTER 30

RYLAND

Duke nudges my shoulder, and I scratch his soft horse nose, my attention fixed on the compound doors. I don't know how long this will take, but if Marian doesn't walk out soon, I'm going in. Atlas is too unpredictable.

The guardsmen eye me as they go about their business, which is no different from any other time. Although, should Soren pass by, I'll give them all something to watch.

'Ryland!'

I glance over my shoulder and squint into the distance. 'Levi?'

The kid is riding up the entry road, flanked by two guardsmen. He jumps down from his horse, and we greet each other with a back-slapping embrace. 'You're alive,' I tease. I check behind him. 'Where's Samuel?'

'He's back there at the start of the road. They wouldn't let his big arse in.'

Right. I take in Levi's filthy clothes. He looks like he's slept in a pile of dirt this whole time.

A guardsman interrupts us. 'Ryland? The Commander's requested to see you. Bring everything with you. Leave nothing behind.'

Levi and I share a troubled look. No way the Commander has approved Marian's request if he's kicking me out. Damn it all – how is Marian going to make a run for it when she can barely walk? My thoughts then go to where they probably should have gone first – our coal deal.

‘Please tell me you found coal,’ I mutter to Levi. ‘Preferably a small mountain of it, for an excellent price.’

‘Sorry, man.’ Levi rubs his dirty face. ‘The other settlements came up empty, Grimwater and a place called Ashbreak. We even tried that trading post to the south. But it’s all Notting coal. The Commander must own them – they wouldn’t even talk about going behind his back. They couldn’t meet our demand anyway; all we have left is the source.’

My eyes roll skyward. That means, *somehow*, I have to make a deal.

Levi helps me pack up my tent, and we get it loaded on to Duke in record time. ‘I need to make one stop,’ I tell Fitzgerald, who’s taken over chaperoning us.

No one’s home at Little John’s shack, so I toss my sleeping sack in the corner; I’ve got saddle blankets for the road. It’s not the goodbye Little John deserves; I hope there are no hard feelings.

Back at the compound, more guards than ever are standing around. At least twenty now.

‘What’s going on?’ Levi mutters as we disarm so we can enter the High Command.

‘I’m not sure.’ The possibilities are vast. Any second, we might have to make a run for it. Or, what if I was wrong? What if the Commander *did* approve Marian’s request, and I’m walking into the best day of my life? Covertly, I slip off my grass ring. ‘Just be ready,’ I whisper to Levi.

The guard announces us to the room, and we file in, uneasy. Instantly, I find Marian standing in her usual place along the wall. She looks pale, but there’s also something undeniably hopeful on her face. She bites her lip and nods the tiniest bit.

I fail miserably at holding back my smile.

‘Ryland,’ the Commander says. He takes a loud slurp from his goblet. ‘And your friend – he’s back, I see. With nothing, am I right?’ He grins smugly before continuing his feast. ‘Yes, well. That should make this more interesting.’ There’s a leg of a large bird in front of him, lying more on the table than the plate.

‘Let’s start with the easy part. With no other options for coal, you have to accept my trade offer, which remains at one wagon of coal for twenty head of cattle or old-world treasures of equivalent worth. We can discuss the value of your water tower as part of that payment, if you wish. But know that this is my final offer, and I’m all you’ve got.’

God help us.

‘Moving on, I propose we make another deal, separate from the first. You’ve mentioned you want changes in how I run my mine, and I have an interest of my own I’d like to pursue. But instead of negotiating, let’s make this entertaining … and settle it with a competition.

I blink. ‘What sort of competition?’

‘An archery contest. You against one of my men. The winner gets their wishes.’

I resist the urge to laugh. Archery? The skill I’ve been best in class in since I was sixteen? He must not know. Still – *be smart*. He’s absolutely working some angle. Although, his last contest did work out, incredibly, in my favour. *I could win this*.

‘I’m listening. What are the terms?’

‘If you win, I’ll take into consideration your working conditions for the Dresden.’

My eyes narrow. *Consideration?* ‘If you’re talking about the changes I want to improve safety in the mine, yes, I have some. And everything would have to be in writing and guaranteed. But continue.’

‘Ah, good idea. Go ahead – what are they?’

I think fast, not really prepared. ‘I’d want continued mandatory use of safety lamps. Daily structural inspections of the mine. Shift work reduced to eight hours … but on the rare occasion, no longer than ten. And those rare occasions can’t be more than twice a week.’ It hits me that this will result in a loss of wages for the Dresden. ‘And … I want better compensation for the miners. From the cattle you’ll get from our coal deal, you’ll gain incredible wealth; so twenty-five per cent of our payment in animals goes to the Dresden.’

Atlas drums his greasy fingers on the table. ‘I could agree to safety lamps and weekly inspections. No cap on working hours, but I suppose the Dresden could have twelve per cent of the cattle you give us, which will result in fewer mine hours needed to meet their obligations.’

I shake my head. ‘I thought you’d be more certain of winning.’

His eyes narrow. ‘You think I fear losing to you?’

‘I know you don’t, which is why I’m surprised your offer suggests that.’

His lip twitches.

I soften my voice. ‘You’ve always been three moves ahead, so I don’t need to tell you that aid to your people is a defensive strategy – hungry

people go where they're fed. Protected. My terms will only benefit you.' I try again. '*Daily* inspections. And by trained supervisors who will shut down the mine in unsafe conditions. That's non-negotiable. And twenty per cent of our payment goes to the Dresden *if* you give them two wells for drinking water in the Dresden Circle.'

His eyes flash dangerously. 'Weekly inspections, but the miners can report concerns. One well in the Dresden Circle, and the Dresden get ten per cent of your payment. Keep going and my next offer will be five per cent.'

I bite my tongue.

'Good.' He sinks lower in his chair. 'And if I win the contest, I want a guided tour of your settlement.'

'No. You're asking too much.'

He purses his lips. 'Am I? Perhaps. I still want it, though. So if our coal-for-cattle deal is set in stone, and I won't budge on any more changes for the Dresden or the mine, is there anything else you might want from me? Something *big* enough to make this contest worth it for you?'

I cast my gaze to Marian. Her eyes are wide with expectation as she gives the tiniest of nods. 'Yes. I want to marry your daughter. Immediately, if I win.'

The Commander slowly wipes the grease off his fingers before responding. 'Are you sure? Marriage is very serious. What happens if you change your mind?'

'I won't.'

He studies me. 'I'm not just talking about a commitment. I'm talking about our deal – breaking it would be an offence punishable by death. Whoever wins must live or die by the results.'

Meaning, if he wins and I don't take him to Kingsland, he'll kill me.

But if I win, not only can I fix some of the terrible working conditions for the seven or eight dozen Dresden working the mine, but Marian and I are married within the hour.

She'll be free of him. For good.

'How does the competition work?'

He smiles, pleased. 'Three rounds. And the arrows will be shot at targets with increasing difficulty. Do you accept?'

Something in me knows I need to be cautious. 'I use my own bow and arrows, although I'm not limited to that.' *What else?* 'Distances are

standard – we start at fifty yards and work up.’

Levi stares at me, concern leaking from his pores. He’s worried I’ll expose Kingsland.

But he’s not taking into account one crucial piece of information: that what he can do with a sword, I can do with a bow. And I’m the only one in the room who knows that.

‘I accept,’ Atlas says. ‘Do you?’

I breathe in slowly, weighing it once more. But I already know my answer. ‘I accept too.’

Atlas laughs. ‘Delightful. Let the games begin. Oh, I do love a good show.’

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CHAPTER 31

RYLAND

I stand off to the side as Coatl and a few guards set up targets on the sparring field east of the compound. A crowd has gathered, including guardsmen and kitchen staff. Even Rufus is here, which is strange. Dresden don't usually mingle with the militia.

The Commander's ridiculous chair has been dragged outside, along with seating for others. Women in dresses fit for an old-world monarchy fawn over Atlas. His mistresses, I assume. He wasn't kidding about making this a show. Even Silas, the magician, is working up the crowd by doing tricks with a tall black hat.

My gaze locks with Marian's as she sits beside Agatha. She offers a tight, reassuring smile.

Agatha pokes her, and she flinches, looking at her sister, and I return to studying the first target fifty yards away. It's a shot I've made hundreds, maybe thousands of times. I could make it in my sleep. But it's not just about hitting the target; it's whose arrow lands closest to the centre.

I'm surprised to spot Brother Thomas. He wanders over but doesn't get too close. Doesn't look at me either when he speaks. 'I was instructed to come, in case there's a wedding. He clears his throat. 'But … I don't know. Something feels off.'

Everything feels off when I'm dealing with the Commander. I scan the crowd – guards now line the field. Too bad Levi was sent back to the entry road; I could use another set of eyes. 'Like what?'

‘I’m surprised he’d risk losing her.’

Marian. ‘Or he’s just confident he’s going to win.’

Brother Thomas ponders it. ‘You’re probably right,’ he says, as he backs away.

‘Can I have everyone’s attention?’ Silas calls loudly from the centre of the field. He places his enormous black hat on his head and swings his arms wide. ‘May I introduce our two contestants? First, from a distant land, here, seeking coal for his people, is Ryland of Kingsland.’

My head snaps up. Who told him the name was Kingsland?

The Commander tips his drink at me, very much enjoying my shock.

I breathe out a curse.

A few people clap. Mostly Rufus. *Rufus – he’s* the source of the leak.

‘And his opponent,’ Silas continues. ‘Representing the Notting Militia, our most formidable archer, the finest marksman in our ranks, Lieutenant Soren Collins.’

You’ve got to be kidding me.

Soren’s cowardly frame separates from the crowd to stand not far from me.

Dark, intrusive thoughts flood my head. I imagine nocking an arrow and shooting Soren somewhere extremely painful – but not to kill him. No, not yet. I want him to live long enough for infection to set in. For it to spread and eat away at him until –

‘The contest will be three rounds,’ Silas calls. ‘There will be two targets for testing accuracy, a short and a long distance. And for the third round, both contestants will fire at the same time. The first to hit the target wins. Now, can the two competitors shake hands?’

Soren quirks an arrogant eyebrow, then lifts his wet fish of a hand.

When I don’t take it, he leans in. ‘Tell me, why do you even want her? She’s –’ His eyes go wide, as if struck by an idea. ‘*Oh.* It was you,’ he whispers, anger clouding his face. ‘You were the one who hit me. *You’re* her accomplice.’

I don’t care if he knows I helped Marian. Maybe I even *want* him to know. *Forget Marian; you’re going to answer to me.*

I take his hand, crushing it, then jerk him towards me. ‘When this is over, I’m coming for you.’ I shove him back, and the crowd oohs, not missing the tension.

Silas clears his throat. ‘Look at that, folks. We already have some healthy competition going on. Exxxxxciting! Now, the Commander will choose heads or tails for the coin toss.’

‘Heads,’ the Commander shouts.

The coin that Silas flips in the air lands in the patchy grass. ‘It’s heads,’ he calls. ‘Lieutenant Collins will go first.’

Soren’s face is tight and a little red after our conversation, which is rather satisfying. He takes his place at the starting line, a piece of rope stretched out on the ground.

Like me, he’s working with a long bow, which tells me he’s got some skills. Most of the militia guards are willing to sacrifice power and distance for something smaller and less technical – the short bow.

Soren pulls an arrow from his quiver, nocks it, and aims for nearly ten seconds before he shoots. It hits the target in the middle of the bullseye, or damn close.

A blade of worry digs into me.

The crowd is still celebrating Soren when we swap places. Except Soren remains a few paces away.

I nock an arrow in my bow and attempt to ignore him, then close my eyes and inhale. It’s not until I feel my heart slow that I open one eye. The wind is a slight breeze, blowing in from the west at maybe six or seven knots. I adjust my mark to accommodate for it. Then shoot. *Thwunk.* It hits the target right beside Soren’s arrow.

The crowd quiets. A guardsman runs to take a look then points at the Commander.

‘Winner of the first round – Lieutenant Collins,’ Silas shouts.

Dread dumps down my back like a bucket of cold water.

Soren bows for the crowd, eating up the attention. ‘One more shot, *thief*,’ he says to me. ‘Just one and you lose. Then, you lose her too.’

His words burrow under my skin as he intended. But he isn’t wrong. One more win for him and a hell of a lot goes wrong for Marian and me. For Kingsland. And for all the Dresden I thought I could help.

I exhale hard. Wipe my brow. Maybe this was a mistake.

My gaze again seeks out Marian’s. Her face remains vigilantly hopeful. Hands clutched to her chest. She mouths four little words.

I believe in you.

So did I … until a moment ago. The target is dragged back another fifty yards and Soren returns to the starting line. He takes his shot as precisely as the first, but this time his arrow lands a couple of inches to the right of dead centre.

He missed. A surge of energy floods me, as we trade places on the line. The breeze has shifted slightly. That's probably where he went wrong. I close my eyes and feel the air. Grip my bow and pull back the string. Open only one eye.

'You know …' Soren mumbles from behind me. 'She held in her screams.'

My fingers twitch but don't release the arrow.

'She told you what I did to her, right?'

Violent thoughts return to me like an axe in the forehead. I breathe through them, but there's an unbearable need to send an arrow through his teeth.

'I thought she would beg me to stop …'

The words are faint, but loud enough for me to hear them. A tremor starts in my bent arm, all anger.

'But she didn't –'

I spin and aim at Soren's chest. The crowd gasps. 'Back up,' I snap.

He raises his hands as if he's innocent. Reluctantly, he takes a step back, then another, but his mouth never stops running. 'She tried but she couldn't stop the tears.' Blood surges in my veins, and my vision turns into a tunnel. There's only Soren and his laughing, cruel eyes.

'Ryland,' the Commander admonishes.

'He's trying to intimidate me,' Soren calls over his shoulder to the crowd. 'He knows he's going to lose.'

But then just for me he says, 'Did you know she asked me to do it?'

I grit my teeth, warring with an untameable rage.

In my peripheral vision, the Commander stands. 'If you kill him, Ryland, you'll die on the same dirt. Nobody breaks a deal with me and walks away.'

And what if it's worth it?

'Guards,' the Commander calls. 'Take aim.'

Guardsmen raise their bows from the edge of the field, with me as their sole target.

My imagination is betraying me, because I can see the scene he's painting with every horrific detail. Even the sound of the whip echoes in my

head. I curse, my fingers twitching on my bow. What kind of man am I if I let this vulture go?

An alive one.

Through honour we prosper.

I exhale, breathing out my need for instant vengeance. ‘You’re not getting away with this,’ I promise Soren.

‘I think I already have.’

The last strands of my restraint snap. I shoot him.

The crowd screams as Soren stumbles back, doubling over. Breath ragged, he clutches his left ear. His fingers tremble as he pulls them away, hand slick with blood. ‘You shot me?’ His face twists with fury. Then he fumbles for his bow, but guardsmen surge forward, restraining us both.

‘I’m going to kill you!’ Soren bellows. He fights the other guards holding him back. A creek of blood winds down his neck from his ear.

‘Sorry, that had to be done,’ I call out to the Commander. ‘He was speaking vile things about your daughter.’

Soren’s nostrils flare, reminding me of a wild horse.

I shake off Fitzgerald, who’s pretending to have me by the arm, and return to the starting line. I pull another arrow from my quiver and raise my bow. There are zero distractions in my head as I aim. Shoot.

It lands dead centre. We’re tied going into round three.

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CHAPTER 32

RYLAND

‘He cheated!’ Soren sputters, shoving himself free of the guards. ‘He shot me. He should be disqualified!’

The Commander strides on to the field, and I brace for this to go south. Sure, I took the shot, but it wasn’t without a measure of calculated risk.

You wanted a show. You got it.

Suddenly, Soren’s hand darts back into his quiver.

I drop to a knee and take aim at him before he’s even nocked an arrow. ‘Keep going and let’s see what happens.’

‘Enough,’ the Commander shouts. ‘Guards! Take away their weapons.’

We’re both swarmed again. But I keep hold of my bow until Soren is stripped of his.

The Commander reaches us and sighs dramatically. ‘Now, as entertaining as all of that was, Lieutenant Collins *is* right. You’ve injured him. You have an advantage in the third round. We can’t have that.’

‘Then let me shoot *him*,’ Soren bleats like a dying goat.

‘I suppose that is an option,’ the Commander concedes.

My cheek twitches. ‘I’ll take a penalty. A distance penalty on the third shot.’

The Commander tilts his head. ‘How far?’

I glance at the target. In a competition of accuracy, every inch matters, especially over the hundred-yard range. ‘An additional two yards.’

He scoffs and turns to Soren. ‘Go ahead – shoot him.’

‘Okay, four yards!’ I shout. ‘But nothing more. He’s not missing a limb; he’s got an earache. And like I said, he deserved it.’

The Commander holds up a hand while he thinks. ‘Fine. I’ll accept that.’

Bloody hellfire. A four-yard disadvantage to hit a spot I can barely see could easily tip the balance in their favour. Maybe I should have opted for being shot.

Soren predictably protests. Although I’m sure he’ll find another opportunity to shoot me. Silas announces for everyone to make their way to the eastpoint lookout post.

I didn’t anticipate we’d be moving locations. I strain to see Marian as she converges with the crowd, but there are too many bodies in the way.

The dirt road takes us into the trees, and we soon reach a wooden tower. It’s similar to the others along the perimeter of militia territory, except this one is less of a shelter. More strictly for observing. A set of open stairs goes up multiple floors to a covered deck for watching the area below. Just beyond, the land drops off in what looks like a cliff, giving a view of a mostly treeless plain.

Silas strides to the front of the crowd. ‘The final round of the contest will be to shoot a passing wagon. The first to strike one wins.’

‘We’re shooting at real people?’ I ask.

The Commander laughs. ‘They’re just vagabonds. And if it matters to you, then don’t hit the people. But the wagons won’t move on their own.’

I move closer to Silas to look over the edge. It’s about fifty feet straight down to the ground, but to hit an approaching wagon, we’ll be firing at max range, two hundred yards – all while navigating the wind gusts up the cliff side and air drag over the land. Hell, then there’s the speed of the wagon, which will change the moment the driver realises he’s the target.

It’s an impossible shot, especially since we’ll be shooting at the front of the wagon – directly at the horse and driver. I shake my head. ‘No. This is too dangerous.’

‘So you forfeit?’ asks the Commander, not hiding his delight.

‘No.’ I frown. ‘I’m saying we need to change the target to something that can’t be killed.’

‘But where’s the drama in that?’ The Commander turns, egging on the crowd’s reaction. It’s delayed, but they manage a collective laugh.

‘I see something,’ a woman calls, pointing northeast. ‘A single rider pulling a covered wagon.’

Right now, it’s only a speck in the distance. But it’s moving fast; a small mushroom cloud of dust billows out behind it.

‘Round three begins now!’ shouts the Commander. ‘Give them back their weapons.’

I accept my bow but don’t move except to meet Marian’s worried eyes from her place beside the Commander.

He’s not going to call it off. So do I risk the life of a horse and driver to protect Kingsland? Win the hand of Marian? Improve the lives of the Dresden?

That’s not all that’s at risk – if I don’t take the shot, I’m dead. Because there’s no way I’m handing over Kingsland’s secrets to the Commander.

Soren hurries to the edge and takes aim at the land below.

Idiot. It’s too early to hit anywhere near the wagon yet. Raising my hand, I feel for the wind, estimating the direction and speed. I mark where I think a controlled shot could land if the wagon continues on its current path. There’s really only one area that’s optimal, and any wagon driver will hightail it out of here as soon as he notices he’s under fire.

Maybe that’s it. *Shoot early. Scare him away.* Then I insist on a new challenge.

Soren takes a shot.

I watch it and realise he’s testing the air drag and gusts of wind up the cliff. With only three arrows left, I can’t afford to do the same.

Especially with a four-yard penalty, which will push me so far back from the cliff, I won’t be able to angle my shot down.

‘Bloody hellfire,’ I mutter. The Commander knew that.

‘Get higher,’ Marian shouts to me.

I glance around at the trees, then to the lookout post on my right. I love how she can read my mind. Racing up the old stairs, the lookout creaks and quakes. The crowd grows noisy as they spot me. With a running leap, I jump, pulling myself on to the brittle roof.

The cedar shingles look like they’re a century old and could disintegrate under my weight. Slowing down, I take a step and – *crack*. The thin slab of wood splits and my boot slides. I scramble for a different foothold but it’s more of the same. Wood cracking. Boards splitting. All while the edge of the roof rushes closer. I grit my teeth and jump, praying I guessed the

location of a support beam correctly. Incredibly, my feet hit something solid and I don't crash through. Great. Now don't move.

Just focus on the shot. Unfortunately, the breeze is different up here. Stronger updraught, which will make any shot the equivalent to pissing into the wind.

Soren takes aim again.

The wagon is maybe twenty seconds from being within range, but I need to scare it away before it gets too close. I nock an arrow – where to aim so the driver sees it? *You're running out of time.* I pick a spot and shoot, but the updraught takes the arrow way off course.

Soren's attempt isn't any better. He overcorrected for the wind.

The wagon continues forward, and I draw my second-to-last arrow. Aim. My back starts to burn as I hold back the full 180 pounds of force of my bow, waiting for the breeze to drop.

Soren shoots again.

Come on, *come on*, I whisper, begging the wind for a break. Things are about to get real unsafe for that driver in about five seconds. Four. I release my shot, and the arrow strikes the road, directly in the wagon's path. A miracle.

It does absolutely nothing. The driver doesn't even slow.

With a shake of my head, I nock my last arrow. But time's up. He's in range of getting shot now.

Soren aims and shoots.

I hold my breath, waiting for a body to fall. Human or horse. But he misses – badly. It strikes the road up ahead, finally alerting the driver. With a shout and snap of the reins, the wagon picks up speed.

'Arrow!' Soren yells. 'Get me more arrows.'

I lower my bow. He's out of arrows?

He shoves by people. 'No, I need long bow arrows!' Too soon, he finds what he needs, stealing it from a guard's quiver.

Even if a guard would let me do that, I can't risk leaving this spot. I return to watching the wagon and the hard right turn it's making. The driver mostly gets there by the time Soren nocks an arrow. All that's visible now is the back of the wagon as it races to get away.

Horse and driver are in the clear. I can make a proper shot.

Soren and I both take aim.

We shoot.

Soren’s arrow strikes the road once more.

Mine lands true, striking the rear of the wagon.

I breathe out hard, relief crashing over me.

I won.

The cheering from the crowd is minimal, no one willing to risk the Commander’s wrath.

Except Marian. She claps and shouts her support as our gazes lock.

I jump from the roof to the landing and run, not stopping until I’m standing before the Commander, victory pumping through my veins. Maybe I should be a better sportsman, but I can’t wipe the smile from my face.

‘You are the winner,’ he concedes mildly.

The emotions I see on Marian’s face match everything I’m feeling. Euphoria mixed with relief. Surprise. Triumph. ‘You agreed that I could marry your daughter *immediately*,’ I remind him.

‘Yes, I did,’ he says. Then his face cracks into a smile that sends a chill down my spine. ‘Let the wedding to my daughter, *Agatha*, begin immediately.’

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CHAPTER 33

RYLAND

‘Agatha? What do you mean, *Agatha?*’

The smugness on the Commander’s face has adrenaline dumping into my blood.

‘I meant exactly what I said,’ he says. ‘You will marry Agatha. I agreed you could marry my daughter. I didn’t say *which* one. Check the contract.’

Marian gasps.

My chest heaves. ‘No.’ That can’t be. I said her name. I said *Marian’s* name.

Didn’t I?

But one look at Marian’s horrified face, and I know.

‘Then I forfeit.’ Somewhere in the back of my head I know the deal was bigger than a marriage, but nothing else seems to matter right now.

I can’t marry Agatha. With the connection, we’d be joined – intertwined – forever. No one has ever broken that kind of bond.

The Commander gives a hard laugh. ‘You can’t forfeit. It’s too late for that.’

‘It’s not,’ I assure him, my voice lethal. ‘I won. It’s *my* prize. I can do what I want with it. And I refuse the marriage.’

‘You can’t refuse,’ he says simply. ‘Nobody breaks a deal with me and walks away alive.’

He’s threatening to kill me for not accepting my winnings?

‘And, careful, you’re hurting my *feelings*. Not to mention the feelings of my daughter.’ He waves at Agatha, who’s a few paces away. No one has dispersed from the cliff’s edge.

Agatha stares at the ground, and something twinges in my chest at adding my name to the list of people who’ve rejected her. But not enough to concede. ‘Are you sure it’s not because you’re giving her away?’

He scoffs. ‘Agatha’s honoured to be chosen for this. But it’s you who’s publicly refusing her. Is this any way to start off our alliance? We’re to be family.’

With the gentleness of a spear to my skull, it hits me what an absolute fool I was. How rash it was to agree to his terms. He made it so that no matter the outcome of the contest, he’d get exactly what he wants – information on Kingsland. Even in me winning, he’ll get every detail about my homeland. He’s just going to use Agatha to do it.

He was never going to let Marian go.

To hell with this. ‘You knew exactly which daughter I asked to marry in my terms. You cheated.’

‘Cheated?’ he scoffs. ‘Cheating would be shooting your opponent while he stands only feet away. If anyone cheated in this contest, it was *you*.’

‘I’ve already asked Marian for her hand in marriage,’ I grind out. ‘This was merely a formality.’

‘He did.’ Marian pushes forward. ‘And I accepted. I want to marry Ryland. Right now.’

Something dark and possessive settles on the Commander’s face as he whirls on her. ‘Absolutely not!’

‘*Father*, please,’ she begs, moving closer and clasping his hand. ‘It would mean *everything* to me if you’d allow this one kindness.’

It hurts to watch. I know how much bowing before him is costing her.

Suddenly he slaps her across the face. Her head snaps to the side, eyes closing in pain.

Guards jump to restrain me as I launch myself at him. ‘Don’t touch her!’ I snarl as my arms are pinned behind my back. ‘Don’t you lay a hand on her again!’

A guard’s knife presses painfully into my back, adding to my rage.

The Commander’s face is mottled red as he stomps up to me. ‘We need to get something straight: Marian is not available to you or anyone else. She is *mine*. You will honour *your own terms* of our deal, or you will die where

you stand.' Then he grabs Agatha and shoves her at me. 'Where is Brother Thomas?' he shouts.

'Here,' responds a guard. The crowd splits and the man who almost married Marian and me hours ago is revealed.

No.

The knife in my back digs in a little further, breaking the skin. I growl, straining against the hands holding me, until the owner of the blade speaks into my ear, 'I'm glad I didn't kill you yet so I can have a front row seat to this.'

I rip my arm free and let loose an elbow that connects with Soren's head, then twist and knee another guardsman. I throw an uppercut. A cross. Another elbow. But someone kicks my leg out, dropping me to my knee and more guards pile on, holding me down.

'Your choices are death or marriage. And really,' the Commander muses, 'the answer is obvious. You know what you have to do. Your people in Kingsland are counting on you.'

Death or marriage – either way, I lose Marian. For how much that hurts, you'd think I've lost a limb. A surprising reaction to losing someone I didn't know weeks ago.

It's because *I've fallen in love with her.*

'Ryland,' Marian says, eyes desperate. Then she speaks two words that throw my world on its head. 'It's okay.'

I shake my head. It's *really* not.

'I can't watch you die.' The feverish panic is back in her face. 'Just *live*. Do what you have to do. We'll figure the rest out.'

She doesn't get it. If I do this, I can't stop the connection.

If I marry Agatha, *this* is our end.

'Time's up. What's your answer?' the Commander demands.

The only answer I want to give is to bury Soren's knife in both his and Atlas's lungs.

'Start the wedding,' the Commander says to Brother Thomas. 'Make it quick.'

Despite Marian's assurances, she looks devastated. Defeated.

Brother Thomas appears before me, his face filled with the deep lines of a frown. He clears his throat, slow to start. 'A wedding is a serious lifelong commitment to one another,' he says loudly for all to hear. 'A vow before God and not something to be taken lightly.'

‘Yes, yes. Get on with it,’ the Commander says.

Brother Thomas’s eyes turn apologetic as he continues, skipping over his scriptures on love that he spoke in the first ceremony. Because this isn’t about love.

But that doesn’t mean it won’t come. My eyes close. That’s the thing about the connection – it unites you. Draws you together. Mind. Spirit.

Body.

I feel like I can’t breathe.

‘Agatha,’ Brother Thomas asks. ‘Do you choose to love and honour Ryland?’

My heart thunders. It’s a small mercy that he’s asking her first, but how are we at the vows already?

‘Do you choose to take him as your wedded husband for all of your days?’

‘I do,’ Agatha says, voice surprisingly strong. Her despondency is gone. Now she looks encouraged, almost eager.

You don’t understand what you’re saying yes to.

‘And do you, Ryland, *choose* to love and honour Agatha? Do you *choose* to take her as your wedded wife for all of your days?’

Choose. He changed the vows from what I spoke to Marian. Boiled them down to the bones. It’s still too specific. Cruel. No, I don’t choose this. But that’s what I’d have to do. Every day, going forward, I’d have to *choose* Agatha.

I hesitate. Soren’s knife disappears from my back and slides to my throat. I hiss as he cuts me, digging in.

I’m out of time. Atlas wins.

‘I … do,’ I say, speaking my vow before the Creator.

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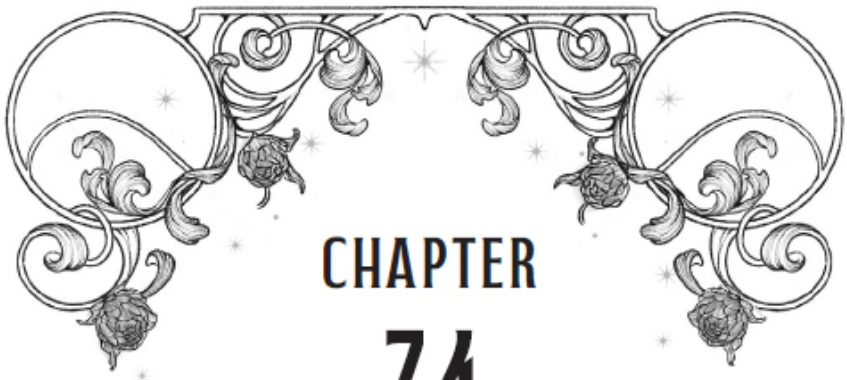

CHAPTER 34

RYLAND

‘I now pronounce you husband and wife.’

I feel like I’ve stepped outside my body.

Agatha’s heavy exhale breaks the silence. She looks around in disbelief.

I’m equally stunned. What a nightmare. A nightmare of all nightmares, because I won’t be waking up from this.

Every Kingsland descendant has pictured this moment. It’s supposed to be the most incredible, unforgettable time – so intense that the wedding ceremony comes *after* the food and dancing. Because once the vows are spoken and the connection slips into place, the last thing any newlywed wants is to be surrounded by a crowd. Not when they’re stumbling into each other’s memories for the first time. Sensing each other’s emotions.

Desperate to be alone.

Instead, I’m gutted. Never would I have imagined that I’d reach this moment and not want to bond with my partner. Not want to experience every single way the connection deepens and amplifies that closeness.

The knife disappears from my neck, and I’m hauled to my feet, although they don’t release me. The crowd has the decency to not give more than a pathetic applause.

Agatha’s smile is careful. Hopeful. She’s obviously not sensing my devastation yet, which is surprising. I don’t expect the connection to arrive with the usual mind-blowing fanfare because we don’t know each other. I

can’t even say I trust her, which will probably mean our access to what we can share is limited. But shouldn’t I feel something by now? Shouldn’t she?

Unless – I straighten – it didn’t work. Does it matter that I didn’t want this? That I didn’t choose her? Maybe the connection recognises that I made my promises to Marian first, even though we never completed the ceremony.

With every second that passes without sensing anything from Agatha, the more the tight bands on my chest loosen.

Until I remember: I still spoke a vow. Connection or not, *we’re married*.

Atlas stares at me as if I’m a snake about to shed my skin. ‘Did it work?’

‘Did what work?’ I snap.

‘The magic.’ He turns to Agatha. ‘Do you feel anything?’ He lowers his voice. ‘Can you see his thoughts? His memories?’

Agatha frowns.

I bite back a curse, then a dozen more. *Bloody hellfire, Rufus.* ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ Even I don’t believe my voice.

‘You don’t know about a family magic that’s activated by marriage? Well, your father had a lot to say. He was rather convincing. And since I’m always looking for magic, naturally, I was very intrigued.’

My head shakes as I search for the face of the man who has been nothing but a walking disappointment. ‘Yeah, well he’s a liar.’

Not to mention a repeat offender – this is the second time Rufus has upended my life in pursuit of the connection.

Agatha squints, confused. Clearly, she has questions, which I won’t be answering … not if the connection didn’t take.

‘Where’s Rufus? Bring Rufus,’ Atlas barks over his shoulder.

‘Yes, your eminence,’ Rufus says as he jogs over, careful not to meet my glare.

‘It didn’t work,’ Atlas says, irritated. ‘Were you lying?’

‘N-no, sir,’ Rufus sputters. ‘I told you everything I knew, which wasn’t much. But they’re hardly giving the magic a chance. He doesn’t even want her.’ He gestures at Agatha. ‘What did you expect?’

‘You failed to mention that part,’ Atlas says, voice menacing.

Rufus retreats a step. ‘I thought you’d let him marry the *other* girl. Marian.’ He’s shouting now. ‘She’s the one he wanted.’ His wild eyes finally slide to mine, but I won’t be saving him. He did this to himself.

‘Enough,’ Atlas growls. ‘Get him out of here.’

‘Ryland,’ Rufus begs as he’s dragged away by guardsmen. ‘Explain how it works. Tell him I was speaking the truth. I was only trying to help you anyway,’ he shouts. ‘You have to believe me.’

‘Take him to Halkirk Tower,’ Atlas instructs, ‘until I decide what to do with him.’

‘Release me,’ I demand. ‘I’ve fulfilled our deal.’

Atlas is slow to give me his attention. ‘Actually, that’s not true. There is one thing we’ve forgotten. You haven’t kissed your bride yet.’

Marian takes a sharp breath. Mine feels like it’s been stolen.

Atlas ticks his head at Agatha, and she strides to where I’m still being held immobile by the guards. She leans in, hands cupping my jaw.

The kiss isn’t quick. The tenderness in it confuses me.

Something foreign hits me on the inside. Little explosions of hope and excitement. A warmth swims in my gut.

It feels off. Inauthentic. It doesn’t make sense how I could be feeling that.

It’s because I’m not.

I rear back. *No.*

Bile rises in my throat. I step on the boots of a guard behind me as I back away. But there’s no escaping this. The connection has taken hold and we’re joined now.

Irreversibly.

Agatha’s flushed face transforms from confusion into a mask of hurt as she picks up on what I’m feeling. Panic. Horror. The sensation of drowning, because I’ve just been tossed headfirst into the deepest pit with no chance of climbing out. ‘What? What’s hap—?’

I reach for her, gripping her hand. *Don’t say anything*, I beg her with a look. Atlas watches us closely, but I’m done letting him pull my strings.

Agatha swallows, then clears her throat. ‘I want to request a proper honeymoon.’

What?

She gives my hand a squeeze. *Trust me.*

I’m unnerved. One touch, and I know exactly what she’s doing – getting us out of here so we can talk and figure things out.

Together.

Piece by piece, the weight of how much my world just changed is sinking in. By far, this is the most devastating day of my life.

Atlas hesitates, sharp eyes tracking our every move. Then he lets out a peal of laughter. ‘Brilliant idea. Guards. Accompany Agatha and Ryland to my private cottage, so our happy couple can be alone together.’

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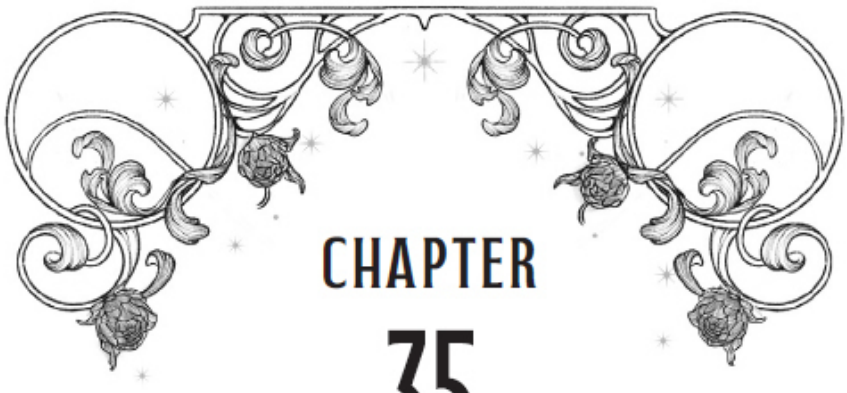

CHAPTER 35

MARIAN

Guards jostle Ryland to move, and he barely reacts. His blank eyes stare off into the distance.

It scares me. It's so unlike him.

Agatha weaves her arm through Ryland's as if claiming him, and fire erupts behind my sternum. She has no right. Can't she see he doesn't want this?

Can't she see it was supposed to be me?

'Wait,' I call. 'I need to speak with Ryland.'

Atlas opens his mouth to object.

'No,' I say angrily. 'Give me one minute with him. You *owe* me that much.'

His eyes narrow dangerously at my defiance, but I tear away from the crowd to a quieter spot. Something in me is splitting at the seams. But if I can hold it together long enough for us to regroup, it'll be okay.

Moments later, I hear Ryland's boots, following after me. We come face-to-face, and I don't understand why he won't look at me. Why he's still so emotionless, even though *it's me*. The seconds are ticking, and I need him to speak. Everyone's watching. I shift, angling away. 'Ryland, are you okay?'

His lips pinch.

'Of course you're not. I-I'm so sorry he did this. I'm sorry' – my eyes close – 'that I didn't just marry you when we had the chance.' I choke back a sob. 'Tell me what to do now.'

‘There’s nothing we can do.’ His voice is flat. ‘The connection … it worked.’

‘No,’ I breathe.

His mouth opens and closes. He looks so lost.

‘Then, let’s leave,’ I urge. ‘You don’t love her. You don’t … want her.’ The pressure in my chest grows, rising in my throat. My back is throbbing in pain. ‘Let’s run. We’ll go to Kingsland. We’ll –’

‘Marian,’ he whispers. ‘I married her … and it’s been set in stone with the connection.’

My heart stills a beat. ‘I know. But you made promises to me too. And the promises you made to Agatha were forced; you didn’t mean them.’ I stare. ‘Right?’

His eyes appear shiny in the sunlight.

I look away, my heart breaking. ‘This is how it is with Atlas – you do what you have to in order to survive, then behind his back you defy him. But I didn’t think you’d … so that’s it? We’re done? You’re going to carry on where we left off, but with her?’

‘Marian,’ he breathes.

I rake my hand through my hair and pain explodes in my head from where my scalp is torn. Tears sting my eyes. So what if he can share memories with Agatha when they’re in the same room; he doesn’t have to enter a committed relationship with her. ‘There is a way out of this. You’re just not willing to take it.’

His jaw flexes as the despondency on his face sharpens to something desperate. Finally, a response. ‘She’s already a part of me, Marian. I can feel it. There’s a blending of me and her.’

Blending? He thinks they’ve become *one*? My hand goes to my chest.

He inches closer to me. The intensity in his eyes pins me in place. ‘I’m still going to get you out of here,’ he whispers, urgently. ‘I will never give up on finding you a better life.’

It just won’t be a life with *him*.

The mask I’ve worn nearly every day, the same mask that Ryland’s gentleness and protectiveness finally gave me the courage to let down, slips back into place. Part of me knows I’m being irrational. He didn’t choose this. He wishes it were another way.

But *he* made me fall in love with him. Asked me to trust him. And now he’s just walking away? ‘No, don’t worry about that any more. I’m not

leaving. The Dresden need me.'

'Marian,' he says. His hand twitches like he wants to reach for me.

Inside, I beg him to do it.

'I'm *not* leaving,' I say more firmly. 'But you should. As soon as possible. And if you ever cared about me, don't make me see you two together. Avoid me at all costs. Goodbye, Ryland.' I walk off, feeling him stare after me. But he doesn't stop me. He's really letting me go.

Of all the horrific pain coursing through my body from my injuries, it's now my heart that screams the loudest.

Lucky turns at the sound of me approaching the lookout post he's manning. 'Marian.' He jumps to his feet, eyes roaming the empty forest, before returning to me.

'Hi,' I say as I limp closer.

His freckled face pinches with confusion. 'What're you doing? Where's your horse?'

Isn't it strange that after our grisly encounter with Soren earlier today, life just carried on? Lucky had to go back to work. And I – 'I was … going for a walk.'

The crease in his brow turns into a trench.

'Any vagabonds?' I prop my hands on my hips and pant a couple of breaths.

'Um … no.'

'Good. That's good.' I nod. 'I should've grabbed some water for you. You always forget. Do you need me to find some?'

'What are you doing here, Mare? You should be resting.'

I let out a single hard laugh. *Rest.* I haven't slept in a day and a half. 'I can't do that.' Though I don't mention it's because I can't close my eyes without seeing things – things I very much don't want to see right now.

Like my sister kissing Ryland.

'Well, then, you should sit.' He gestures to a tree stump.

'I don't need to sit. I don't *want* to sit,' I clarify. Then, inconveniently, I sway on my feet. I wince as I'm struck with a bolt of pain down my back. Mutinous tears sting my eyes. We stand in silence as I fight to pull myself together.

'Why are you here?' he asks, gently.

‘Because …’ The two people closest to me, the two I would give my life for are now –

I sniff hard. *Don’t think about it.*

‘I didn’t know where else to go.’

‘Well, you look awful.’

My head bobs. ‘Thank you. I feel awful.’ And as if that weren’t enough, an image of Agatha pressing her lips against Ryland’s flashes in my head. I reach for a tree for balance and miss. I start to fall, then catch a branch on my second try, awkwardly lowering myself to the ground.

‘Marian,’ Lucky shouts, lunging for me.

‘I’m fine. Just distract me,’ I say. ‘Tell me about what’s going on with you. How’s your leg, where Soren got you with the whip? Or your ailments?’ *You never stop talking about that. Don’t fail me now.*

A switch seems to flip in him, and the concerned lines in his face smooth out. ‘Well, actually, I have been doing pretty poorly, myself. My leg’s not too bad. But that pain I have just never goes away any more, and I think I’m getting a fever –’

Ryland’s face flashes in my mind.

‘I can’t sleep. I can’t –’

I clear my throat. ‘And Grendle has nothing that will help you?’

‘She wouldn’t even look. Said I was fine. Called me an incessant complainer.’ He shakes his head. ‘If only I could see the spot myself, I’d know what I’m dealing with.’

Agatha didn’t hesitate to kiss him.

My head tips back with nausea. Now that Ryland is Agatha’s husband, he’s too honourable to turn her away. He’s going to love her back. Eventually.

Suddenly, I need to move, so I crawl awkwardly to my feet. ‘Show me,’ I say.

Lucky’s bushy orange brows shoot up. ‘What?’

‘Show it to me. Whatever’s the problem.’

‘You’re going to –? Oh, thank the saints.’ He starts to unbuckle his trousers. ‘It’s on my lower back, maybe a bit beneath that, but it’s nothing carnal, I promise. I just need someone to –’

I throw up a hand. ‘I know.’

‘Okay.’ He nods aggressively, then turns around.

I hear his trousers come down a little.

At first, I only give the area a cursory glance, blocking most of it with my hand. But there *is* something there. I squint. ‘You definitely have a wound.’ I move closer but then jump back, nearly losing my footing.

He whirls around, dragging up his trousers. ‘What is it?’

I exhale harshly. I don’t know; maybe I imagined it. ‘Show me again.’

He does, but this time he’s also trying to look.

‘Stop moving,’ I scold. Then I see it.

I spin away and dry heave.

‘What?’ Lucky shouts.

‘You have maggots,’ I say. ‘In the wound.’

‘Maggots!’ he shouts. He whips around, trying even harder to see, and something about it, about all of this, brings me to my knees. I drop my forehead to the cool forest floor. I can’t catch my breath. Tears suddenly fill my eyes and spill down my face, soaking into the dirt.

Why do we live in such a cursed place?

My breaths grow louder, turning into sobs that I don’t know how to stop.

‘It’s just some worms, Mare,’ Lucky ventures, tentatively. ‘It’ll be okay.’

But it won’t be. Nothing is okay.

And nobody is coming to make it better.

When I finish weeping, my mind is finally still. There’s a blissful numbness to it. I should really let myself cry more often.

Lucky sits – somewhat lopsidedly – beside me, staring at a tree. It’s the longest I’ve ever been around him without him saying a word.

‘What are we going to do about your wound?’ I mutter.

‘Leave it for now. You’ve got enough to deal with.’

‘That hardly seems like a good plan. You should go back to Grendle.’

A raven swoops down to the ground from a branch. Benedict. He hops closer, pauses, then changes direction. He’s nervous with Lucky here. We watch him continue the pattern until he’s only a dozen feet away. He cocks his head. Then drops something metal from his beak.

‘Did that bird just bring us something?’ Lucky asks.

‘Looks that way.’ I study the shape of it but can’t make it out.

Lucky rises to retrieve the gift, and Benedict flaps away. ‘It’s a key.’ He examines it. ‘Mare, you know this is a sign, right?’

‘It’s really not that deep.’ I sigh. ‘That’s Benedict, the raven. This is what he does. I feed him and he brings me things.’

‘But is it always a key?’

‘No.’

He holds it higher. ‘Then it’s a *sign*. I’m serious. Ravens are intelligent and otherworldly.’ He hands it to me. ‘But a sign for what? The raven dropped a key, and then he flew away.’ His eyes tick back and forth, thinking. ‘The raven … *left*. Maybe that’s what he’s telling us: the *key* is that we need to *leave*.’

I scoff. ‘We need to do the opposite of leaving. We need to stay … and start an uprising.’

It’s so painfully obvious to me now.

‘What?’ Lucky looks aghast. ‘Th-that *isn’t* what the key means.’

‘Think about it,’ I say softly. ‘Nothing’s going to change with Atlas. How long can we continue like this? Not just us, but the Dresden. They deserve so much better. Even with all Atlas puts them through, they’re the best people. Physically, they’ve got next to nothing and yet it feels like they have … the only things that matter. Kindness. Gentleness. Love. They care for each other, living like family. Doesn’t that feel like they’re rich in a way we’re not? Don’t you wish you could be around them all the time? That’s what we should be protecting. That’s what we should be fighting for.

‘But then there’s Atlas,’ I continue. ‘And Soren. Even so many of the guardsmen are selfish arseholes. What if we just …’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know.’ I bite my lip. ‘Let’s burn down the compound.’

Lucky gasps. ‘What?’

Now that I’ve opened the floodgates, ideas rush in. ‘We could empty the armoury. To arm the Dresden.’ I’ve always thought that the Dresden needed food and essentials most, because they had no choice but to stay. But what if what they really need is a way to fight back?

A revolution.

I remember Agatha’s explosives. ‘Then we blow up the mine.’

‘I think … I think you need to slow down here.’ Lucky huffs. ‘Besides, don’t we need the mine?’

He’s right. The Dresden need the coal to stay warm. And for trade, once they’re free.

Free of Atlas.

‘We’ll need to exile the guards who are loyal to Atlas and find a way to keep them out.’ I purse my lips. ‘That’ll be tricky.’

‘How would we do that?’

‘Yeah, I don’t know,’ I concede, tossing the key back to Lucky. ‘Maybe first we steal weapons and train the Dresden in secret. Once they know how to fight, they can become the guards themselves.’

Lucky leans over and drops the key in my shirt pocket. ‘The Commander loves his weapons too much; he’ll notice. Then it’ll be him this time, burning Dresden homes.’

‘Not if he’s distracted,’ I muse. ‘Nearly every vagabond who passes by is an enemy. Maybe … we let some close. If all the guardsmen are too busy defending, they won’t notice if weapons go missing.’

I sit up straighter. ‘We could dig secret channels into the mine to store everything until we’re ready. The guardsmen refuse to go in too deep anyway. That’s where we’ll train everyone until it’s time to strike. It could be our base –’

‘That’s a rather treasonous plan,’ Coatl says, stepping out from behind a collection of trees. ‘Although, I can’t say that I’m surprised you’d betray your commander.’

Lucky and I both still, then leap to our feet.

‘What are you doing here?’ I demand.

Coatl’s wide eyes simmer with rage. ‘I’m doing what it seems I’m always doing – looking for you. Though I wonder what the Commander will say when he learns you’re planning to overthrow him?’

My heart slams against my lungs. I don’t doubt Coatl will turn me in; he’d love nothing more than to strip me of being an advisor. Kick me out of his precious afternoons with Atlas. But he’s forgetting something: in the last hour, my entire life was flipped on its head.

Now I have so much less to lose.

‘Go for it,’ I snap. ‘Then I’ll accuse you of the same thing. Do you really want to see which one of us he believes?’

Coatl smiles coldly, then removes his bow and reaches into his quiver. ‘I suppose I should thank you.’ He nocks an arrow. ‘Because now I get to deal with you both *myself*. Lieutenant Pollent, consider yourself relieved of duty. *Permanently*.’ He aims at Lucky’s chest.

‘No,’ I shout as a stake of panic drives through my heart.

‘It’s okay, Mare,’ Lucky whispers, eyes darting to his bow on the ground. ‘It all was a sign.’

‘Shut up,’ I hiss as I move to block Lucky with my body, since I’m also unarmed. ‘If you so much as –’

Everything happens at once. Lucky spins away from me, taking off at a run. Coatl releases his arrow. It flies right by my arm. I can’t turn fast enough to see if it strikes true. All I can do is scream as my friend reaches the edge of Notting territory and in a blur of motion, jumps off the cliff.

I dive after him, but I’m too far away. Too slow. This section isn’t as steep as Halkirk Tower – the initial drop is closer to twenty feet, then staggers off to something more. But is it survivable? I don’t know.

Coatl grabs my arm as I continue to scramble to the edge.

‘No,’ I scream, kicking out. My first attempt misses but not my second. My boot cracks his knee. He grunts.

‘Lucky?’ I yell, then do it again, louder, my voice breaking.

He said it was a sign – what does that mean? But then his words from before echo in my mind.

The key is that we need to leave.

Is that why the fool jumped? He thinks Benedict’s silly gift was a sign to escape off a cliff?

‘Get over here!’ Coatl’s large hand grabs my throat and squeezes, cutting off my airway.

He really meant to kill Lucky, and now he’s going to kill me. I grit my teeth as I fight to pry open his long fingers. But pain tears through me, splitting me in half. I’m weak. I slam him with an elbow. Try to reach his knife. Nothing makes him budge. My lungs scream for oxygen; time is running out. With every last bit of fight in me, I resort to dragging my fingernails across his face. He roars, but his bulging eyes remain fixed on me. Blood beads in his cuts as darkness gathers in my vision.

Then suddenly he lets go to strike me hard in the temple. My knees hit the ground as everything goes black.

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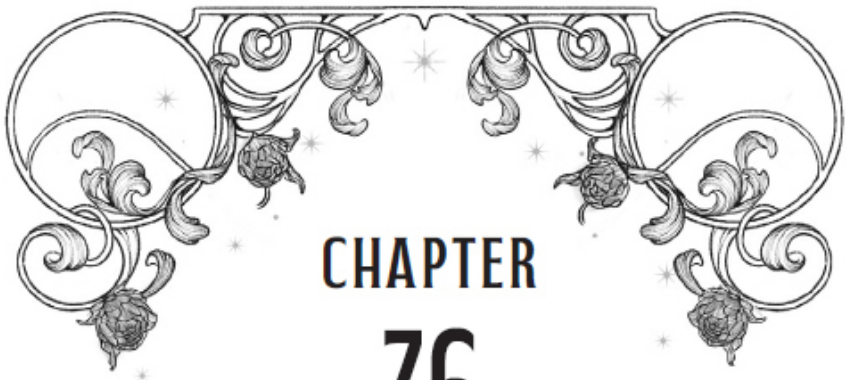

CHAPTER 36

RYLAND

‘Daleridge Cottage is a private residence my father had built,’ Agatha explains. ‘One of his mistresses requested it because his main residence has so many … eerie magical relics. But then she betrayed him, and he had her exiled. Anyway, he never uses it now.’

I stare ahead as we walk.

Agatha climbs the stairs to the front door of the small log cabin and leads the way inside. The four guardsmen escorting us stop.

Leave so I can chase after Marian and beg her to forgive me.

My head drops, and I take a tight breath. Why? So I can break her heart one more time? There’s no undoing this marriage. Marian was right – *I need to keep my distance*.

The thought nearly brings me to my knees.

‘Enjoy your honeymoon,’ Diggs calls, then laughs. ‘We’ll be right outside.’

Tension ripples through me, along with the need to prove that they can’t keep me locked up. I’m not a prisoner.

My gaze lifts to Agatha as she spins, taking in the place.

Or maybe *I am*.

‘Isn’t this place beautiful?’

I lock the door, then pull the curtains. The room immediately dims.

‘I’ll light some candles,’ Agatha suggests. ‘I’d give you a tour, but this is it.’ She waves a hand. ‘One giant room with a bathing chamber in the back.

Oh, and a tiny kitchen in the corner.'

A single flame lights as she sets to work, and I reluctantly take in the massive bed. Across from it are a small table and chairs, as well as an oversized chair for lounging.

I rub my face, a bone-deep exhaustion taking over. 'Agatha, we need to talk.'

There's a stone fireplace that crawls up the wall, and she begins lighting the coal inside the hearth. 'Okay.'

My mouth opens, but I don't know what to say. Or maybe I do, I just don't want to *say it*. Saying it makes it real.

The fire is lit before I can get anything out. She claps the coal dust off her hands, then frowns at them. 'Actually, do you mind if I quickly clean up in the bathing chamber?'

I nod, relieved to have a minute. 'Go ahead.'

As she disappears, I sit on one of the chairs at the small table. My head falls into my hands, and Marian's devastated face flashes in my mind. It feels like I've been kicked in the gut.

Avoid me at all costs. Goodbye, Ryland.

That's the last thing I want. Agitation crawls over me until I swear I'm being boiled alive in it. Needing to move, I jump to my feet. But my heart just pounds harder, like it's trying to escape my body. My hands shake with frustration and before I know it, I have the chair in my hands and I'm smashing it on the floor.

A small whimper pulls me out of it. I turn and find Agatha standing there.

Then I notice what she's wearing – very little, and the *very little* is made of silk. A short housecoat hangs open. What is she doing? I jerk my gaze to the wall and try to find the words. Any words. 'I-I'm … sorry. For scaring you.' I swallow hard. 'That wasn't my intent.'

I look at the pieces of chair around me. What am *I* doing? This isn't me.

'You're upset,' she says softly. Slowly, she pads towards me. 'My father tricked you.'

'Yes, he did,' I say bitterly.

'And now you're worried because … he wasn't wrong about the magic.'

Suspicion settles over me. 'Did he tell you about it? Before the wedding?'

'No.'

Her words resonate in me in some inexplicable way, letting me know they're true. More proof of the connection tying us together.

'You know I've felt it a few times already,' she says. 'It's so interesting to sense when you're angry. And feel it right here.' She brushes her fingers down her sternum. 'I think when we kissed, I even felt that you're injured. Is that right? On your lower back? There's a cut?' She stops to stand before me.

I stiffen.

She huffs a laugh in amazement. 'Even that. I felt your hesitation. Just for a second. It burns … here.' Her finger drags down my stomach.

I stop her hand. The touch intensifies the line of communication between us, and I'm acutely aware of her attraction to me. I can practically taste her longing on my tongue.

It's so bittersweet to experience this. To finally be here, encountering the connection … and simultaneously wishing I wasn't. 'You're right. I *am* worried. Your father –' My eyes skate to her face. 'Are you going to tell him what you learn about me? About my … *magic*?'

Her hand drops. 'I don't see why I would. He's never really cared about me. Could barely tolerate me, which is all *I've* ever wanted. To matter. I know he's hoping to use me against you, but I won't do it. Not when … I now have you.'

Her words vibrate inside me with a sense of rightness. Another truth.

'So, will you tell me how it works?' she asks.

I've run out of reasons not to. There's no changing this course. 'It's a long story.'

She takes a seat on the edge of the bed. 'I have time.'

Apparently, so do I. I lower myself down beside her, jaw clenching over and over. 'It started years after the bombs fell …' I begin, and somehow I get through telling her about the founding families of Kingsland and how the connection first appeared, spreading down the family lines.

My explanation isn't anything like what I gave to Marian. I keep it vague. Agatha needs to know the basics. Yes, we're sensing each other's emotions, and eventually, if we open up to each other, we could share more – like injuries and memories. 'You'll also notice that we can't use the connection if we're too far from each other, more than few dozen feet.' But I stop there, unable to elaborate more.

‘How do I heal you?’ she asks, after I’ve gone quiet, lost in my head. ‘Ryland’ – she stands – ‘you’re injured. Why wouldn’t we do that now?’

Because I would have to let you in.

And my heart is already full.

‘Let’s just try it,’ she urges.

‘No. We’d have to be more connected and …’

‘Closer?’ She stands from the bed and takes an unsure step in my direction. ‘Do we need to touch?’ Suddenly, she steps between my legs. There’s a shake to her fingers as they slide through my hair. ‘I’m okay with that. I *want* to touch you. Actually …’ Her head dips nervously. ‘If I’m honest, I think about it all the time.’

I peer up at her. ‘Agatha,’ I say, pained. ‘This is …’ *Impossible.* On some level she has to know – feel – the misery inside me. Is she just ignoring it?

‘You can’t,’ she says.

‘I *can’t*.’

With brisk movements, she closes her housecoat and backs away. ‘Can’t ever? Or can’t now?’

I feel her rejection. It tastes like bile. But I also get flickers of other emotions. Desperation. Hurt. Anger. And something else that claws at my gut – jealousy. I run a hand over my head. How much time would I need? Decades? *Lifetimes?*

Except, I’m not factoring in the connection. The way we’ll be drawn together, mind and body. One day, I *will* grow to love her … because she’s a part of me now.

But even without that, I’m forgetting what matters most: I’m a man of my word.

‘Can’t now. But in time … it won’t always be this way.’

Agatha has taken the bed. I drift off in the lounge chair, wondering where Marian is right now. And before I know it, she’s in my dreams.

Some part of me is aware that none of this is real as we make our escape. I don’t care.

I can’t take my eyes off her as she gallops her horse beside mine. Her smile keeps growing the further we get from Notting.

‘Ryland,’ Marian says, slowing. ‘Look. Vagabonds.’

I see them.

‘Take my reins,’ she says, then spins to face backwards in her saddle. I wrap them around my pommel, and we both pull our bows, working together, me covering us in the front, as she covers us from behind.

Our partnership doesn’t end when we make camp under the stars, her head nestled against my shoulder. I marvel at how I got so lucky. She shivers as I stroke her hair.

‘Are you cold?’ I don’t wait for her answer. Instead, I warm her by getting acquainted with her neck.

We hunt for hares and ptarmigan as we travel. She picks me berries. I kiss the flavour of them off her lips.

‘The forest – it’s red?’ she says, mouth agape as we view it from the hilltop.

‘Some say it’s orange,’ I mutter, and chuckle. Then I tell her why that made me laugh. There isn’t anything I don’t want her to know.

I point out the mountains, rolling hills and canyons. We stop at rivers for water. Even venture in for a swim. She clings to me in the cold, and I can’t help but kiss her. Then I carry her to the bank, and we lose all track of time.

We travel long days, and the nights are too short.

At the first glimpse of Kingsland’s coal mine, I tell her about the collapse – something I can’t believe I haven’t shared yet, as it was the catalyst for everything.

At Kingsland’s fence, she looks confused.

‘Don’t touch it,’ I warn. ‘It’s electrified. It’ll hurt you.’

‘It’s buzzing,’ she says with fascination, dismounting her horse. She goes to it, reaching.

‘Marian! Don’t!’ I shout. I jump from Duke and race to her, but I’m too late. She touches the metal links, jolts once and crumples to the ground.

‘Marian!’ I drop to my knees and gather her in my arms, but she’s so still. Too still. Desperately, I brush the hair from her face. ‘No, no, no.’

Kingsland soldiers come running from the gate.

‘She’s not breathing!’ I yell to them. ‘Someone help! Get Dr Henshaw.’

‘Can you heal her?’ asks a woman.

I blink. ‘No, get the doctor.’

‘She’s not your wife?’ asks another soldier. ‘Then where is your wife?’

‘Forget my wife,’ I snarl. ‘There’s only Marian.’ I start compressions on her chest. ‘Don’t you dare leave me,’ I beg her.

One of the soldiers grabs my shoulder and tries to pull me away.

‘Stop it!’ I shout, and shove him.

His cry as he falls startles me awake. My breaths come hard, and it takes time to orient myself in the dark room. Atlas’s cabin. I run a hand through my hair, then sit up in the chair.

I become aware of a person’s heavy breaths – someone’s sprawled at my feet. ‘Agatha?’ As my eyes adjust, I make out the outline of her frame. It looks like she’s fallen.

Or like she was pushed.

I lurch forward and find her arm. ‘I’m sorry. Did I do that?’ She must have been trying to wake me. I scoop her up and carry her to the bed. ‘Are you okay? I was having a nightmare.’

‘I know,’ she whispers.

Carefully, I set her back on the mattress, and she rolls away from me, pulling the blanket over her body.

I apologise again, then stand there like an idiot, not sure what else to do. Eventually, I return to my chair, and my mind drifts back to the dream I can’t shake. The same gut-punch of devastation hits me all over again.

Because the pain of Marian dying in that dream is the same as what I feel in real life.

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CHAPTER 37

MARIAN

My head lifts as I wake, and a sharp ache stabs my neck from being bent at an awkward angle all night. I groan. The sound is muffled, thanks to the gag in my mouth.

The pain everywhere makes a vicious resurgence. My wrists and ankles burn from where the ropes tying me to Atlas's disgusting throne have rubbed away my skin. My lashed back and overfilled bladder aren't helping things either. In a fit of frustration, I wrench on the ties binding my wrists. But it's pointless.

Then I remember Lucky – *he jumped*. And I don't even know whether he's alive. He very well could be lying broken and helpless at the bottom of the cliff. My eyes sting as I squeeze them shut.

Don't you *actually* die on me.

The door to the High Command opens.

I stiffen as the sound of boots on the floor grows closer. Atlas comes into view, with Coatl following in his wake.

'Well, well, well,' says Atlas. He's visibly disappointed, and most concerning, not the least bit surprised to see me restrained. 'I hear you've been planning my demise.' His eyes flash with an anger he usually reserves for Agatha.

I shake my head.

'Don't worry. I know you could never. Not really. I'm your father, after all. Your blood. You were just having … a little *temper tantrum*. You

mistakenly thought you fell in love with that boy and were acting out, wouldn't you agree?'

I remain still.

'You should thank me for saving you.'

My gag-smothered words that follow are not anywhere in the realm of gratitude.

'You know, you only have yourself to blame.' He clasps his hands behind him. 'You've been protecting him. Keeping secrets from me. If you had only proven yourself loyal, it'd be you married to him right now.' He ticks his head to the side. 'At least temporarily.'

Right. Because I'm some twisted form of his security blanket he'll never let go. 'You are the most pathetic, disgusting, selfish, insecure excuse for a man. And you don't own me.' Of course, with the cloth in my mouth, he can't understand me.

He paces slowly. 'I thought you were smarter than that. Luckily, Agatha is finally proving her worth.'

I huff. If he thinks Agatha won't serve her heart on a platter to Ryland, then he hasn't been paying attention.

All you've achieved is losing both of your daughters.

'You don't think so? Well, she's certainly proved herself lately. Did you know she's already trained a large team to assemble an arsenal of explosives for my use? She also brought in additional supplies from the Lower Beaver Trading Post. I think you should be afraid. She might become my *favourite* daughter.'

I jerk on my restraints, knowing Agatha just might fall for that. *You stay away from her.*

His head pulls back. 'Still temperamental, I see. Coatl, we may need –'

A guard knocks, then calls from the door. 'Excuse me, Commander. You have a visitor.'

'I'm busy,' Atlas snaps.

'Right,' the guard says, voice unsure. 'Except it's … Agatha.'

Atlas inhales deeply. Then his expression changes to one of intrigue. 'Okay, but tell her to wait by the door.' He lowers his voice, leaning in to me. 'Wouldn't want her to see you like this.'

I jerk on the bindings. 'Aggg!' I cry out, praying she'll hear me.

Atlas frowns. 'Keep her quiet,' he commands Coatl, before walking away.

Coatl's face is marked with the deep scratches I gave him, and he doesn't hesitate to draw his knife. I brace as he comes at me. The cockroach has already crossed the line and Atlas didn't care – why wouldn't he try again?

'Agatha,' Atlas says, enthusiastically, as he disappears into the corridor. 'I didn't expect to see you this morning.'

She clears her throat. 'Yes, well, I have news to report, and …' Her voice sounds sombre. 'There's no reason to waste time.'

What is she talking about?

'You've encountered his magic?' asks Atlas.

'Yes. And it's *very* powerful.'

My brows furrow. *Agatha, no.*

'Is that why you look so tired? You've been up all night … engaging in *magic*?'

Fire licks through me, scalding me, even though I know he only said that to hurt me. To provoke me. *To prove I was a fool to ever give Ryland my heart*. But as devastated as I am, I'm equally furious. Agatha got what she wanted – Ryland. Why would she betray him like this?

'What was it like?' Atlas asks wistfully. 'To experience something so … beyond yourself? Did you feel powerful?'

'It's … unlike anything I've felt or seen before.'

My eyes squeeze closed.

'I get flashes of his emotions,' she says. 'I've seen … his deepest desires.'

My head falls back. This might be worse than getting whipped. I wish I could rip my ears off.

'You, daughter, have done *very* well,' Atlas coos. 'And I want to hear more. But first tell me what you have learned about Kingsland.'

'I know the location. Or rather, I know how to get there. I saw the landmarks in his memory.'

'Excellent! And what kind of advances do they have?'

'Umm … I couldn't see inside of Kingsland because his dream ended. But their settlement, even their fence, is very sophisticated. Something from the old world.'

Atlas makes a sound of interest. 'Can they turn coal into electricity?'

'I don't know. Maybe. Ryland talked about their lost coal mine, and I'm not sure if that's what they use to generate electricity, but they

unquestionably have it. They've weaponised it into their fence to keep people out.'

'Interesting. What other weapons do they have?' His questions come hard and fast now.

'Stop,' I scream into the gag.

Coatl hits me in the temple with the butt of his knife. My head spins, making me miss much of what is said next. When I finally catch my breath, I glare back at Coatl.

'What's … what's going on over there?' Agatha asks.

Yes. Hear me. I scream again.

Coatl's forearm digs into my neck, drastically narrowing my airway.

'It doesn't matter,' Atlas soothes. 'Tell me about their soldiers. How well are they trained? What weapons do they use?'

'I … don't know. Their soldiers looked similar to ours, I suppose. From what I could see, they use bows and arrows. Ryland mentioned they have a well-trained army, but he's part of their elite guard, which seems more advanced.'

'Very well done, my daughter. Now, tell me – your explosives, the big kind – would you say we have enough to raid a settlement of their size? Destroy their fence?'

'What? What do you mean?'

I wheeze, taking in a laboured breath as Agatha gives a nervous laugh. She really thought she could dance with the devil and not get covered in blood.

'But,' Agatha says, 'y-you said we would only use those weapons for our *defence*.'

'This *is* our defence, girl. We are defending our right to have coal-powered electricity. Why would you object to our progress?'

'I – I …'

'Coatl,' the Commander calls impatiently.

His weight on me disappears, and I greedily gasp in air.

'Go with Agatha and assemble the explosives to be transported,' Atlas calls. 'All of them. Collect the catapults at the lookout posts and wagons, too. We're going on an extended trip. Hand-select our most loyal guardsmen. But leave Soren. He will be in charge while we're gone.'

'And what about Marian?' Coatl asks.

Silence follows for a few beats. ‘She will be too much of a risk. Same with Ryland. Get Soren to contain them both until we return.’

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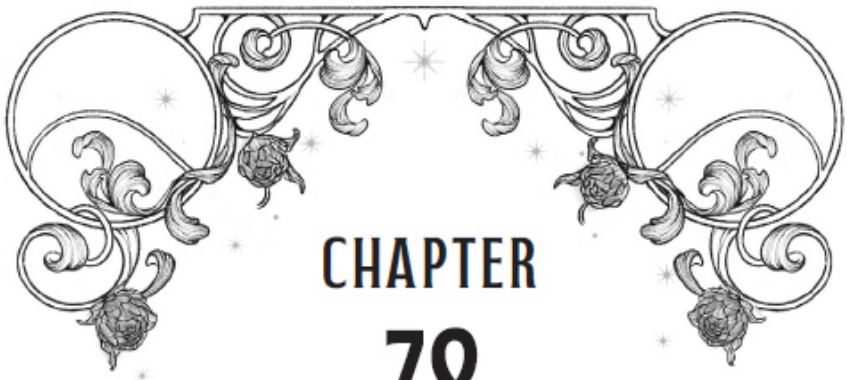

CHAPTER 38

RYLAND

‘Agatha?’

In the morning, the bed is empty. The bathing chamber too. After a peek out of the window, I find only two guardsmen standing in the rising sunlight. Did the rest trail Agatha?

My jaw tightens. That’s inconvenient. The only thing I woke up certain of is that we’re getting out of here and away from Atlas.

Agatha’s got five minutes before I go after her.

After pumping water from the well behind the cabin, I haul the pail inside and dump it into the shower bucket mounted on the wall. Water sprinkles out of the shower head. It’s freezing but not brain-numbing enough to forget about yesterday or the way Marian looked at me like I’d stabbed her.

I grip the wall. She’s right – I need to go. If the roles were reversed and I had to watch her kiss another man, leave with him to spend the night together – spend every night together from then on …

Raw pain lashes me, and blood pounds in my head. I run a hand over my face, trying to pull myself together. No, leaving is a mercy, and it’s the least I can do after I collect Samuel and Levi. *And … Agatha*. Somebody else can try to outplay Atlas and salvage this coal dea–

The shower curtain is ripped to the side.

‘Hands up,’ shout multiple guards. Two hold out swords, while one aims a bow at me. A fourth throws my trousers at my face. ‘Get dressed.

Someone wants to speak with you.'

'Why the aggression?' I ask, as I'm marched deep into the back end of militia territory with untied boots, no shirt and not a weapon on me. Atlas wouldn't request a meeting out here, which is why I'm cooperating. Despite everything, I can't help but hope this is Marian summoning me. 'The terms of my contract with Atlas are fulfilled. I'm not a prisoner.'

'You shot Soren from close range,' says a spindly guardsman with a broken tooth. 'Don't mind us for being careful.'

My wariness grows as we reach a rickety multi-floor tower. It's similar to the one from the archery competition and overlooks the same cliff, just further back where nobody would find it. From my count, there are over a dozen lookout posts surrounding Notting territory, but they only keep about half of them manned. This isn't one of them.

'Your visitor is inside. In the back room.'

It's getting harder to believe Marian sent these goons, which puts me on edge. I step inside and Broken Tooth lights a lantern. I'm hit with a foul stench in the chilly air – someone's been using this building as an outhouse. On my right is a decrepit staircase to the second floor. The lookout.

Bad vibes roll off this place, like it's filled with ghosts. 'Marian?' I call out. I wait one second. Two. Then turn back and make a break for the front door.

Boots pound behind me. One guard grabs my arm, yanking me back. I'm slowed enough for the others to swarm. I land a kick. Throw a right hook and gift Broken Tooth a broken nose. He cries out. But I'm outnumbered. They work together, wrestling me to the back room, and before I know it a metal cuff is clamped on my ankle.

They scurry away, and I lunge after them but jerk to a bone-jarring stop as the metal around my ankle snaps tight.

With a snicker, one retrieves the lantern and hangs it on the wall.

'This is a breach of our deal!' I shout at their retreating backs. 'This voids our coal contract. You tell the Commander he's getting nothing!'

'He don't care about that any more,' Broken Tooth mutters, then slams the door.

'That Commander *is* a slimy one,' mutters a deep voice from the far corner.

I turn to the huddled form and chuckle darkly, unsure what I did to be this cursed.

'What happened?' Rufus asks, shifting, rattling his own chains.

I examine the shackle on my ankle. 'I believe *you* happened. You sold me out to Atlas. Did you sell the location of my people too?'

'No. I told him I couldn't remember, because it wasn't about that. Crazy as it sounds, I was actually trying to help you. You think I couldn't have told him about Kingsland long ago? I'm not heartless. I'd never sell out the homeland of my kid.'

I raise a brow. 'So you waited until I was here to do it?'

'I never told him the location – are you listening? I was trying to do something nice for you. Make up for … a lot. You said you still had to ask your girl's father for her hand in marriage, and once I realised it was the Commander, I knew I could help. The man isn't the type to let you run off with her … not without an incentive. That's what I gave him – a nugget of information that doesn't hurt anyone so you two could be together. How was I to know he'd make you marry the other girl?'

I don't think I can trust a word he says. I scan the room for something to pick the lock, but find only a leaky bucket to piss in. On the far wall, there's a concerning rack of weapons and tools. The whip there looks curiously like Marian's. Everything's too far to reach.

'Ryland, you have to know I didn't mean for –'

'Let me ask you a question,' I say, cutting him off. 'What'd you get out of it? For the *nugget* of information?'

He looks away.

'Yeah, that's what I thought. You don't have an honourable bone in your body. It's a miracle we share any genetics.' I try pushing against a board in the wall, then another. Nothing gives. I resort to kicking it until it's clear that won't work either.

'I agree,' Rufus says. 'We are different. But you're a good kid. A good man. A father would be very –'

'Please,' I beg. 'Unless you have a way out of here, I don't want to hear it.'

He nods and bows his head.

Hours pass before someone comes again. I jump to my feet as the front door creaks open.

'You going to whip me again?' a woman spits.

Marian.

‘Only if you give me a reason,’ Soren says. Then she’s shoved into the room, collapsing to her knees. Her hands are tied together.

I launch forward and the chain snaps tight around my ankle. ‘Stop! Don’t touch her!’

Marian’s hair has fallen into her face. She pants like she’s in an incredible amount of pain. She looks … injured. Broken.

You broke her too, just in a different way.

Suddenly, Marian kicks out and cracks her boot into Soren’s shin. He yelps, and his eyes darken dangerously as he grabs a scrambling Marian by the hair and drags her forward. She cries out, clawing his hands.

‘Stop,’ I shout, straining to rip my chain from the floor.

He throws her into the wall, and the whole room shakes. Her arms shield her head as she crumples to the floor. He points at me. ‘That one was for you.’ Then he dives for her.

‘The lantern!’ Rufus calls.

‘Get off her,’ I roar, as Soren tries to chain her ankle with another rusty cuff.

Marian comes alive, shoving him hard. She climbs on top of his back, then rains down some vicious elbows to his head. With a loud grunt, he bucks and spins, but she’s faster and uses her tied hands like a noose around his neck, strangling him.

‘That’s it,’ I encourage, my heart beating out of my chest. ‘You’ve got him.’

Panic spreads across Soren’s face. His skin goes from red to something darker.

‘Fire!’ shouts Rufus.

Marian’s listing to the side, her face a grimace. She’s hurt and struggling.

‘Hold on,’ I shout.

Soren reaches around and punches her in the ribs. It breaks her hold, and he slips out. With another shot, he knocks her to the floor, then dives for the cuff again. Too fast, there’s an ominous click as it locks, clamping around her leg. He springs off her, breathing hard, fingers repeatedly dabbing at his nose as he backs away.

‘I’m going to kill you,’ I promise Soren.

‘There’s a fire!’ Rufus calls again.

Rufus's words finally register, and I see the broken lamp that fell off the wall when Soren threw Marian. A fire has started, spreading surprisingly fast across the floor.

Soren stares, then looks around with alarm, unsure.

The dry timber of the tower begins to snap and pop as the fire licks up the wall to the right of Marian.

'Hey, you have to free us!' Rufus calls. 'We'll die if you don't.'

Soren seems frozen, his gaze locked on Marian, who's struggling to push herself up. Leaving would kill the Commander's daughter.

Yes, help her.

But then he glances at me, and any sliver of compassion is wiped from his face. 'Not sure how I'm supposed to free you if you're going to kill me.'

Rufus releases an animalistic scream as Soren runs from the room.

'Marian?' She's closest to the flames, but they're spreading across the floor.

She manages to push herself into a sitting position, back propped against the wall. Her chest rises and falls hard.

'Marian,' I urge, reaching for her. My chained foot feels like it's ripping off. 'Look at me.'

Her head rolls my way.

'Good. Now try to free your ankle.'

Her eyes widen at the fire, as if she's only just noticed it.

'I know. Ignore it,' I say. 'You have one job right now – get yourself free. Check your ankle, love.'

She gives the cuff a firm tug, confirming my fears – it's secure. Her face twists with confusion as she looks back at me. 'But what about you? Why aren't you trying?'

There's no saving me. 'Don't worry about that. Do it again,' I urge.

She fiddles with the metal. Then fights with it, yanking hard.

She's as trapped as we are. I drop my head, wincing through the panic as I try to think.

Rufus starts screaming, 'Help! Someone help us!'

Smoke fills the air, and Marian coughs.

'Get lower,' I tell her. 'The air will be better closer to the floor.'

We both lie down, and Rufus does the same. But the fire is spreading too fast.

'I'm sorry,' she says. 'I couldn't –'

‘You did everything right,’ I say firmly, locking eyes with her. ‘You fought well.’

She coughs again, eyes darting around. The fear on her face guts me. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give to save her right now. ‘Just look at me,’ I say.

The flames are growing so intense that I’m sweating. The room is becoming an oven; the smoke, even down low, is painful to breathe.

‘Ryland,’ she calls. ‘I need to tell you something. Atlas – he’s heading to Kingsland.’

I struggle to make sense of what she’s saying.

‘He’s using Agatha’s bombs to attack. He’s going to raid them.’ She stops to cough long and hard. And I do too. ‘They won’t stand a chance.’

The smoke is making my eyes water, and it’s difficult to hold them open. ‘Don’t worry about that. Pull your shirt over your nose. Try to breathe. That’s the key.’

‘But you don’t have a shirt.’ Her eyes go unfocused. ‘Wait a minute – what did you say? That’s the … *key*?’ Then she’s moving, hands patting her trousers. Her shirt. Her movements slow as she carefully pulls something small out of her breast pocket with her bound hands. ‘Benedict, I love you,’ she says, holding up an ancient-looking key.

‘Try it,’ I urge.

She inserts it into the lock on the cuff, while I grit my teeth against the blistering heat.

‘It’s not a fit,’ she cries. ‘It’s too small.’

My eyes close. *I can’t watch her die.*

‘But maybe … maybe I can …’ She plays with the lock, fiddling and twisting. Suddenly there’s a pop and her chain falls with a clatter to the floor.

We both gasp, then cough as we scramble to our feet. In seconds, she has the chains falling from me as well. ‘Get out of here,’ I command her, taking the key to free Rufus.

Since the fire was started closest to Marian, it’s less of an inferno over here. But somehow it’s smokier, and – *what the hellfire did she do to make this work?* I continue twisting the key that’s too small for the keyhole, ramming it at different angles. Nothing works.

‘I’ve got it,’ Marian says, appearing beside me. She takes over, while I switch to untying her wrists. I loosen the rope and get it off her. The lock

pops – already? I almost kiss her forehead. Then we're up and running, clearing the prison room. My hand hovers close, ready to catch her, carry her if I have to. But she's strong, leading the way to the front door. We all spill out, hacking and trying to catch our breath in the fresh air.

I brace my hands on my knees but spot Soren standing in the trees. Looks like he stuck around to watch us burn. An alarm blares in my head as he seems to make a decision, drawing his knife.

He left the Commander's daughter to die.

He can't leave witnesses.

A fresh surge of adrenaline hits as he breaks into a sprint, charging at us.

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CHAPTER 39

MARIAN

‘Ryland,’ I rasp, breathless. But he knows Soren’s coming. I only hope he also sees the knife in Soren’s hand.

Soren swings violently and Ryland dives back, but he’s too winded from the smoke to really fight. He coughs, barely moving out of the way of Soren’s next slash with the blade.

He needs a weapon. I whirl around, searching, but everything is inside the jail. At the smoky door of the post, I gulp two big breaths of clean air, then run inside and regret it instantly. The smoke is like acid in my eyes, the heat unbearable.

Do it anyway. Ryland will die without something to defend himself. Resolve bolsters me as I clear the first room quickly. My lungs ache from lack of oxygen as I enter the back room we just escaped. It feels like the flames plaster the ceiling. Blindly, I make my way to the wall of torture instruments and pat it down. My hand closes on exactly what I’m looking for.

The burn from holding my breath turns agonising, and I allow a small pant. Acrid smoke spreads like poison through my lungs. I immediately start coughing. The heat adds to my panic as my clothes feel like they’re on fire.

Get low, Ryland had said.

But I can’t. Instead, I run, fighting my desperate lungs from taking another breath and stumble out of the door. I suck in fresh air, then check

myself – no flames to put out. A miracle.

My gaze snaps to Ryland. Although Soren's above him, they both have a hand on the knife, wrestling for control.

'Get off him!' I shout, panting.

Soren ignores me.

'I said.' *Gasp.* 'Get off of him.' *Gasp.* Then with every ounce of strength, I break into a limping run. Soren releases one hand to punch Ryland's temple, just as I snap my whip. The tail booms into the air, cracking against Soren's face, throwing him back.

He lands hard on the ground, hand gripping his cheek. His shocked face melts into rage as he pushes to his feet.

'Ryland,' I call. Why isn't he moving?

Soren stalks forward, attention now on me. I make the whip lash out again, faster than he can dodge. It strikes him in the chest.

With a cry, he drops to his knees. I use the moment to catch my breath.

But before I can get more than a lungful, he comes at me again. I swing, but the timing's wrong. His arms collide with my waist, tackling me, and we land hard on the ground. Pain explodes in my wounded back.

My training kicks in, and I wrap my legs around Soren's waist. I keep my hold on the whip – I'm not losing my weapon. Not when we've both been trained in grappling by the same man.

Soren rolls us, and my heart screams at how dangerously close we are to the edge of the cliff – the highest spot in the whole Notting perimeter.

A split second before he swings at my throat, I notice that he still has his knife. I block him using my whip clutched between both hands. The serrated edge sinks into the leather. I scream as I fight to hold him back, knowing I can't do it for much longer.

Ryland ploughs into Soren, throwing him off me, and nearly over the cliff. Soren claws at the ground, his legs dangling perilously over the edge. 'Help me!' he calls.

I freeze.

'Marian!' he shouts. His gaze flicks to me. Begging. Pleading. 'Please, I'm sorry. Help me.' He slips a little more and makes a feral sound as he grimaces, fighting to hang on. 'Come on – it's me. You know … you know I love you. I've *always* loved you. That's what this is all about.'

His confession arrives like a slap. 'How dare you say that.' Not after hurting me. Leaving me to die in the fire. Love would never do the things

he’s done.

But there is something about his desperation that sinks its teeth in me. It reminds me that he’s human. He’s the boy I once gave my heart to. My first kiss.

I won’t deny he’s a terrible person – the kind who would leave people to die. But that’s the difference between us: *I am not*. Before I know it, I crawl forward and extend my whip, refusing to get close enough to give him my arm.

‘Marian, no!’ Ryland shouts.

Soren manages to grab on, and his weight drags me closer to the edge.

Ryland lands on my legs, holding me down. ‘Marian, let go!’ I feel another person – Rufus – grab my feet.

My arms scream in agony, and my hands slip.

‘Pull harder,’ Soren yells. Then he lets out a single hard laugh in victory as he finds a foothold on the side of the cliff. He reaches and grabs my arm. I cry out as he uses both my body and our holds on the whip to pull himself up.

It feels like I’m ripping in half.

‘I knew you’d do it,’ he says in my ear. ‘You’re so patheti–’

Suddenly, the whip snaps, exactly where his blade cut it. His body slips back, losing ground, then swings wildly from our connected arms, dragging me with him.

Ryland lets out a beastly growl as he fights to keep me from going over the edge. Then, in the blink of an eye, Soren’s grip breaks.

Time pauses a beat. Soren’s arms pinwheel as he tumbles backwards through the air. And knowing that this time there’s no saving him, I tuck my head and look away.

Ryland pulls me back from the edge, and once I’m out of danger, he drops back down, hugging my hips like he doesn’t trust the ground – or me – to stay put. ‘Are you okay?’ he asks, his chest rising and falling harshly against me.

The answer doesn’t make it to my mouth.

He lifts his head. ‘Marian?’ He crawls up my body and gently rolls me over. His concerned face is damp with sweat and specked with soot.

In a burst of movement, I sit up and hug him to me.

He grips me just as fiercely, his hand cupping the back of my head. ‘I’ve got you.’

I bury my face in his bare chest, and we stay like that until our fast breaths slow down and begin to sync. I don't want to let him go. Ever. Soren almost – 'Wait. Are *you* okay?' I ask. 'Did he cut you? I saw him hit your head.'

'No stab wounds,' he says, looking like he wants to pull me back to him.

Do it.

But then something shutters over his eyes. He backs up and rises to his feet. I watch as his muscles stiffen, first his fists, then the planes of his face. Now he won't look at me, seemingly fascinated by the ground.

Really? Even after that? My face heats, then cools as rejection comes swiftly.

Rufus strides to the edge of the cliff and peers over. 'Well, he's dead.'

I glance at the forest, feeling like I'm bleeding, haemorrhaging from somewhere important – my broken heart. I slip on a stoic mask, like a piece of armour. Even my next words come out as if reporting for duty. 'The whip snapped. It shouldn't have, but Soren cut it when he attacked me.'

'He deserved it,' Ryland says. 'He was trying to kill us so we can't report it to Atlas.'

That's the first time I've heard Ryland *not* call him the Commander. I nod and swallow back the sickness twisting my guts at Soren's betrayal. His death. 'Speaking of Atlas – Agatha is with him.'

At the mention of my sister, a muscle twitches in Ryland's cheek – what does that mean?

'You said they're marching on Kingsland?' he prompts.

'Yes.' I take a breath. 'When you … *bonded* with Agatha, she saw how to get there.'

'I didn't –' His head rears back. Slowly, his eyes shutter. 'She was touching me when I woke. She must have seen the memory of what I was thinking. Dreaming. *Somehow.* But I didn't show her anything. Not on purpose. I wouldn't have …'

Why not? I hate how desperate I am to know the answer. How I hold my breath at the thought of him changing his mind about me, about Agatha.

Stop it. He's made his choice.

I study Halkirk Tower as it smoulders beside us. The bed of rock it's built on should keep the fire contained. 'The Commander wants your coal-powered machinery. Electricity. Magic. And anything else he can get his hands on. He has Agatha's bombs, all our catapults, and unless you have the

same kind of weapons, bows and arrows won't stand a chance against them. He'll annihilate the people in Kingsland, then capture it. Our best chance is to stop him before he gets there.'

'You'll come with me?' Ryland asks. 'To stop them?'

'I'm in,' says Rufus.

'No, you're not,' Ryland says to him. His steady gaze doesn't waver from me, waiting for my answer.

'Yes, I'll come' I say. 'Me confronting Atlas is long overdue.'

After checking the Northeast point cliff and finding no sign of Lucky, dead or alive, I collect our horses and Ryland's gear, then lead him through one of my secret raiding paths – though I'm not sure the secrecy was needed. I saw almost no guards left on duty. Atlas must have taken nearly all of them with him, leaving Notting with barely a defence.

With extreme caution, Ryland and I search for Samuel and Levi's camp, hidden somewhere on the outskirts of militia territory. Ryland whistles and soon the sound is returned.

For the first time in a while, Ryland and I make eye contact, the message clear: *be alert.* Our already nocked bows take aim in the direction of the sound as our horses walk closer.

'About time you made it out here,' Samuel grumbles. He appears slowly from behind a bush. But instead of lowering his bow and arrow, he scans the horizon with it, looking for anyone who followed us. 'The kid thought you'd show up yesterday. Tell me you won that contest.'

The tension on Ryland's face doesn't break at being united with his friend, which surprises me.

'Long story, and yes,' he says, as he steps down from his horse.

I do the same but stop when I see the dim outline of not one but two men sitting around the pit of an unlit fire. The first man is tall. And he looks a lot like –

'Lucky?' I ask.

The man stands, and – by saints – it *is* my friend. We collide in a painful hug, his wiry frame wrapping around me. 'H-how did you –?' I sputter. 'I thought … I looked …'

'You thought I was dead and dragged away by an animal?' He smirks, looking over at Levi beside him. 'Nah. But I did hurt my arm, trying to catch myself on a root. Twisted my ankle too.'

‘Of course, you’re injured,’ I say. ‘Because you *jumped*. From a cliff.’ Anger flashes through me and my hands smack his chest in a small but forceful shove. ‘You scared me to death!’

He chuckles. ‘I had to. The raven.’ He shrugs like that says it all.

I can’t even dispute it because not only did Benedict *apparently* save Lucky, he also saved me and two others with that key. When I return home, Benedict’s getting a buffet of berries. ‘I tried to come after you, but Coatl tied me up.’

I feel Ryland’s gaze snap to my face. ‘What? Why?’ he demands.

His attention sends a jolt through me, and my heart flutters with longing. *Yes, look at me.*

I quickly smother that. ‘After Coatl caught me planning a rebellion, he attacked. Lucky jumped off a cliff to save his life, and I was tied to Atlas’s throne all night until Coatl could turn me in. It’s how I overheard Agatha explaining what she learned from you, and Atlas making plans to go on the biggest raid he’s ever pulled.’

‘That bastard,’ Lucky mutters. ‘All of them.’

Samuel points at Lucky. ‘If he’s got no place to go, he can’t stay with us. The guy never shuts up.’

‘We’re going to need him, though,’ I say. ‘We’re going to need every able-bodied person to stop Atlas.’

‘We’re what now?’ Samuel asks.

‘That ambush she mentioned – it’s on Kingsland,’ Ryland clarifies. ‘He figured out how to get there and left already.’

‘Is that what they were up to?’ Samuel says with a dangerous edge. ‘We saw them leave.’

Ryland turns to me. ‘Why don’t you fill them in on the rest?’

That won’t be a quick conversation, so I take a seat on the log Lucky was perched on before. I start with Ryland being tricked into marrying Agatha, since that’s where it all went south.

‘So you’re married … to her *sister*?’ Levi asks, incredulous. ‘Like, *connected* married?’

Ryland’s jaw ticks, then he asks Lucky to check the perimeter. ‘Yes,’ he finally answers when we’re alone.

Levi’s brows knit as his gaze sweeps over me. ‘Whoa. That’s kind of … permanent. What are you going t–?’

‘Tell us the rest,’ Samuel interrupts.

I take a breath, wishing I didn't have to. 'Last night, Ryland and my sister … bonded and …'

Ryland drags a hand down his face. 'She saw into my dreams and possibly my memories.' He exhales hard. 'So she knows how to get to Kingsland and likely what's there if they raid.'

A tension fills the air.

'My sister has also developed explosives. Bombs, though not the kind that created the badlands. Smaller. But still, the kind Kingsland won't be able to defend itself against.'

'Your sister's evil,' Levi mutters.

'She's not,' I insist. 'They were for defence. Atlas is misusing them.'

'But she betrayed Ryland to your father,' Samuel says. 'Or can you explain that?'

I can't, which terrifies me.

Ryland's face grows tight. 'It doesn't matter why she did it. She made a mistake.'

His quick defence of her is a blade to the ribs. Wow, maybe they have become *blended*.

Samuel exhales a curse. 'We should have stopped them earlier, when we saw them.'

Levi drops his elbows to his knees, head bowed.

'We'll still stop them,' Ryland says.

'Yes,' I agree. Although, I don't know how we can stand against these new weapons of theirs. 'If you give me an hour or two, I can gather food for the journey. Supplies.'

'You have all night,' Ryland says. 'We'll leave in the morning.'

I shake my head. 'But we need to catch them –'

'We need to *rest*.' He gives me a significant look, one that tells me he *might* just be worried about me. 'It's five days on horseback to Kingsland, and they'll be slower since they're pulling trailers and have an army. We'll catch up. Let's eat. Pack. Rest. Make sure all of our … injuries are taken care of. Because once we're out in no man's land, we won't be doing much of that.'

Samuel takes out his knife and works on whittling the shaft of an arrow. 'Any thoughts on *how* the handful of us might stop all of them?'

His question hangs in the air, but it feels like it's directed at me. What *am* I prepared to do to stop my sister? My father? How far am I willing to go?

I don't know.

'We could start by breaking their trailer wheels,' I suggest. 'Steal their horses. No way they'll be as motivated to keep going if they have to walk and carry everything on foot.' I bite my lip. 'Or we could try to somehow take the explosives …'

'We slip in and retrieve Agatha first,' Ryland says. 'Then we'll reassess.'

Air punches from my lungs. For once, I think I'm truly jealous of my sister.

And yet, I agree with Ryland's plan. I am going to save Agatha's sorry arse, even if I have to drag her kicking and screaming. Again. Maybe I should just be glad Ryland wants to help.

Samuel's eyes narrow on Ryland, then he stands. 'I think we're done here. No tactical plans can be made until we get eyes on the landscape, their weapons and numbers.'

He's probably right.

'Marian,' Ryland says, following me as I go to my horse.

My stomach flutters with reckless hope. 'What do you want?' I ask, face blank.

In the dimming light, his eyes seem intense. Frustrated.

I glance over his shoulder at his friends watching us. They both burst into movement.

Ryland exhales, drawing my attention back to him. His mouth opens, but he doesn't speak. 'Nothing … I just … rest. Get some sleep.'

My head seems to wobble on my neck. 'Yeah … you too.'

Out of everything we're about to face, deadly vagabonds on the road and an impossible battle with Atlas, I think it's this that might destroy me.

A broken heart.

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CHAPTER 40

RYLAND

Lucky throws off the saddle blanket he was sleeping with and stretches. ‘Thanks for that ointment; I’m feeling loads better. But – hoo wee – my bladder is more bloated than a cow’s stomach on fresh clover.’

The moment Lucky disappears, Levi throws on a shirt and leans closer. ‘So, are we going to talk about how your new wife has turned out to be a villain? The very reason we’re about to risk our lives against an armed militia? Because I think we should talk about it.’

He’s been waiting for the right moment. And he’s going to be waiting some more. ‘I’d rather not.’ I splash water on my face from a spare canteen. It doesn’t really wake me up, not like the rain last night did. Or the way my mind wouldn’t stop running, trying to find a way to fix everything.

Levi scoffs. ‘Look, I know Agatha’s your one chance at the connection, but you can’t be serious about wanting her back. She’s currently trying to blow up Kingsland.’ He mimes an explosion with his hands.

My jaw clenches.

He stands to strap on his sword belt, then tries again. ‘You know, the connection wasn’t meant to be a prison sentence. Just because you’re noticing the two of you are coming together, doesn’t mean you can’t walk away. It’s not a love potion; it just makes love more likely. *Everything* about the connection requires choice. Even now. If you ask me, you don’t –’

‘I didn’t ask you,’ I say sharply. I don’t expect him to understand. To him, the connection looks like a joyride. To me, it’s an honour. A privilege, no

matter whom it's with.

It's fate.

But he's also not saying anything I haven't already been chewing over. 'I made a vow.'

I made a vow to *both* Marian and Agatha, and I intend to keep both. Loving Marian from a distance will be simultaneously the easiest and hardest task of my life.

Yet the connection is proof that only Agatha is my wife. So it's settled. I don't like it. I don't want it. But there's destiny to consider, right? Because if there is some great design behind the connection and it's not just happenstance of a gene mutation, then this is where I'm supposed to be, with Agatha. All I can do now is make peace with it.

Somehow.

Levi stares at me, his face the most serious I've ever seen it. 'Nobody would blame you if you broke –'

'I would,' I say, cutting him off. And that's the crux of it. I couldn't live with myself.

Or could I?

'It's done,' I say. 'And it can't be undone. There's nothing more to do but move forward. And as far as Agatha – she made a rash decision …' *Because of me*. I can't even imagine how she must have felt if she saw the whole dream. 'She's not a bad person. And now she's my wife, so … we're going to find her and I'm going to bring her home. Fix this.'

Levi's gaze flicks to someone over my shoulder. I turn. Not only is Samuel back from watch, but he's brought company.

My heart full-on stops. 'Marian,' I choke out. The last thing she needs is to have any of this rubbed in her face.

Samuel scratches his crooked nose. 'You guys should come see what our girl brought.'

Everyone follows Samuel, with me bringing up the rear. We walk a while through the trees to a more open area and find Marian didn't come alone. Dezzy and a couple of guardsmen – Fitzgerald and one who I think is named Clark – stand with a loaded trailer. Rufus is here, too. I grimace when I see his armour. Fine. I won't stop him from coming, since we need the help.

Lucky's first to look at the supplies they towed here and hoots a laugh. 'You empty the armoury or something?'

‘Something like that,’ Marian says, fighting a grin.

Her face has been washed, her hair braided. She’s got weapons everywhere – leather straps holding knives to her thighs, fitted armour on her chest and forearms. A sword hangs from her belt. She’s a vision, even hiding pain. A warrior goddess – the kind you take a knee before, then go on to conquer worlds in her name. Even the hint of her smile has warmth surging through my veins. My body craves her, remembering too vividly *everything*. Her fire. Her laugh. *Her taste*. Will I ever forget? I force myself to scan the trees, so I don’t do something stupid, like stare or beg her to take me back, connection be damned.

‘But how?’ Lucky asks. ‘No place is as secure as the armoury.’

‘Usually,’ Marian agrees. ‘Except Atlas took most of the guardsmen. And …’ she gestures at Fitzgerald and Clark, ‘turns out all I had to do was ask nicely. We talked, and they want to help. So they’re going to come with us.’

Good. More fighters.

‘We have food for you, too,’ Dezzy says. ‘I know such handsome and … *fertile* men require incredible amounts of nutrition.’

Marian bows her head, lips pulled tight.

Dezzy turns to Rufus. ‘Of course, I’m not talking about you, but you can eat it too. We’ve packed enough food to feed your small army.’ Her gaze grows serious as it settles on me. ‘You bring my girls back home. You hear me? *Both* of them. Safe.’ Then she pulls Marian into a hug, whispering in her ear.

Marian hugs her back just as fiercely, though I can see her wince as Dezzy’s arms brush her injured back.

I look away, tense. That’s the plan. But that’s also not a promise I can make.

We spend the next hour loading our mounts with as many weapons as we can carry. It doesn’t make sense to pull a trailer. Not when we need speed. At least with the three extra riders, we’re able to carry more of everything.

I forgot the stress of riding outside of protected territory. How you can never let your guard down. Not if you want to live.

‘Vagabonds,’ Levi calls out, only minutes into our ride.

Already? I close the distance I’ve worked to put between Marian and me. Our group of eight stops, weapons raised as four riders pass us, horses galloping.

‘That was easy,’ says Lucky.

My eyes accidentally meet Marian's, and my heart throbs as I absorb every detail. No pain on her face. 'It was *this* time,' I say, then with a kick of my heels, ride ahead.

We make camp when it's nearly dark. The horses need the rest, and securing an overnight location with a surveillance advantage beats getting in an extra mile.

'Levi and I will take first watch,' Samuel says. 'The muskrats can do the second.'

'Who are the muskrats?' asks Rufus.

He nods at Fitzgerald and Clark. 'The one with the handful of whiskers on his chin and the one with the teeth.'

Clark points at his mouth. 'What's wrong with my teeth?'

Samuel glares. 'Did I say there was anything wrong with them?'

'Lucky and I will take last watch,' I say, leaving no room for Marian. Though she hasn't complained even once about her injuries, she needs the rest the most.

Then there's Rufus, who will never be left on watch.

After a meal of bread and dried meat, we unroll our mats and without the heat of a fire, lie together under the open sky. It looks like we'll avoid rain tonight. Marian's bed, although not beside mine, is still within sight – I made sure of it. I'd never sleep if she wasn't close enough to get to quickly if we're raided.

In the morning, I feed and saddle the horses, pretending not to notice Marian. But I do. Her sleepy eyes steal my breath as she packs up her bedroll. Strands of long, dark hair have come loose from her braid. Heat, and something I definitely should not be feeling, stirs in my gut as she raises her foot to a log, then adjusts the weapon straps on her thighs.

I turn away and force myself to think of Agatha and her possible location. We've seen their wagon tracks, and if she continues on the path I dreamed about they'll be moving quickly, travelling mostly downhill. I doubt we'll reach them today.

We ride out and soon find ourselves looking down on one of the many red forests. Marian slows her horse. The whole group follows.

'I've never seen this before,' she says.

That's right. She's never really been away from Notting territory, and I'm tempted to tell her more about this place.

I don't.

‘When will the colour change back?’ Fitzgerald asks, bewildered.

‘Hopefully never,’ says Samuel. ‘It’s a warning that it’s contaminated. You don’t ever want that to go away.’

Marian looks around, thoughtful, and it hits me how much this is like a scene straight from my dream – me showing her the red forest. Except we’re not alone.

We’re barely even talking.

‘We need to keep moving,’ I say, roughly, and take off, leading the way.

For the last few hours of the day, we ride over dry, barren land that leaves us caked in dust. A light rain surprises us, turning the dirt to mud. We decide to stop an hour before sunset and make camp beside a creek so we can clean up and dry out before it gets cold.

We’re probably only hours from catching Atlas and his guards now. But better to ambush him when we’re not exhausted and have daylight to see what we’re dealing with.

Fitzgerald, Clark and Rufus go first, washing up by the water as the rest of us eat and take watch. Then Lucky, Sam, Levi and I take our turns. Because of the freezing water and remarkably strong current, only Levi and I brave a swim.

Marian waits to go last, and the moment she disappears behind the trees, it hits me that she can’t go alone.

‘Marian,’ I call and run up to her. Water drips down my face, and I scrub a hand over my hair. My shirt is damp from where I pulled it on over my soaking body.

She looks over, startled. I don’t blame her. It’s been an entire day of not talking. Of me not risking a glance her way, even though I knew exactly where she was every second. But now, I take her in like a starved man. She’s dirty and her cheeks are slightly wind-burnt. Every part of her makes my heart race.

I don’t know how I’m going to walk away from you.

The ache in my chest is suffocating. I clear my throat like that will help. ‘You can’t be in the creek without cover. You need somebody to stand watch.’

‘Okay,’ she says. Then she walks off.

For a second, my body locks in place. I didn’t mean … *me*.

Do you really want it to be anyone else?

Breaking into a jog, I run to catch up.

She reaches the edge of the creek, and I'm silent as she washes her hands. Then she removes her hair tie, unwinds her braid and shakes the dust from her hair.

I should get an award for turning my head away.

'My bandages are wet from the rain,' she says, dumping her weapons and jacket on the bank. 'They'll need to come off, and I should go for a swim – to keep the wounds clean.'

I wince at the sweet temptation to help her. But assisting Marian in any state of undress is not a good idea. 'Do you …' My eyes close. 'Need help?'

She doesn't answer at first. 'I can handle it.'

I inhale. Good.

Except I'm also disappointed. Which leads to guilt – *because you're married and connected to someone else, you halfwit.*

She pauses, and I realise she's waiting for me to not just turn my head.

'Right,' I mutter, and face the other way. Unfortunately, the gentle noise of moving water doesn't mute the sounds of her clothes hitting the ground.

She hisses as she wades into the water and comes up sputtering after she dunks her head.

I smile, remembering exactly how cold it was. 'A little chilly?' I call out.

'S-s-o cold.' Her teeth chatter.

I chuckle. 'Watch out for that current. You don't want me to have to come and get you.'

'Yeah, that would be … *bad*.'

My nostrils flare at the thinly veiled taunt.

This is torture.

After another minute, she makes her way back to the shore. But there's a sudden splash.

'Marian?' I shout and wait. With a curse, I spin and find her gone. I run right into the creek, and the waist-deep water immediately slams into me, trying to sweep me away.

Her head emerges sputtering, further down the stream.

'You okay?' I ask when I reach her, holding on to her arm.

Her eyes widen at seeing me, as she coughs and pushes hair out of her eyes.

'Slippery,' I tease, with a grin.

'Yes. And c-cold. So, I'm going to stand up now.' Her head is barely out of the water despite it only being a few feet deep. In my peripheral vision, I

catch a glimpse of her white skin.

I whip around and walk back to the bank, boots sloshing with every step. She follows not far behind me and dresses.

I'm so distracted, a vagabond army could be staging an ambush in front of me and I doubt I'd notice. 'Do you have more bandages?'

'I do. They're in my pocket.' She grunts like she's pulling on a boot. 'I just need to …' She doesn't finish.

'What?'

'Nothing. I'll figure it out.'

She needs help wrapping her back. But getting any closer to her, being the one to care for her, it'd be cruel to both of us. Not to mention my resolve to be a good and honourable husband to Agatha is already hanging by a thread.

'It's safe to turn around now,' she says.

I'm not so sure about that. Slowly, I spin and find her dressed, her fingers working on the last button of her shirt.

'Marian,' I say, unable to stop myself. 'What about your bandages?' There's no way she did it already.

'It's fine,' she brushes off.

It's not. She needs them. I extend my hand and become certain of two things – I'm about to play with fire, and I don't care nearly enough about whether I'm burned.

'Give me the dressing. Let me help you.'

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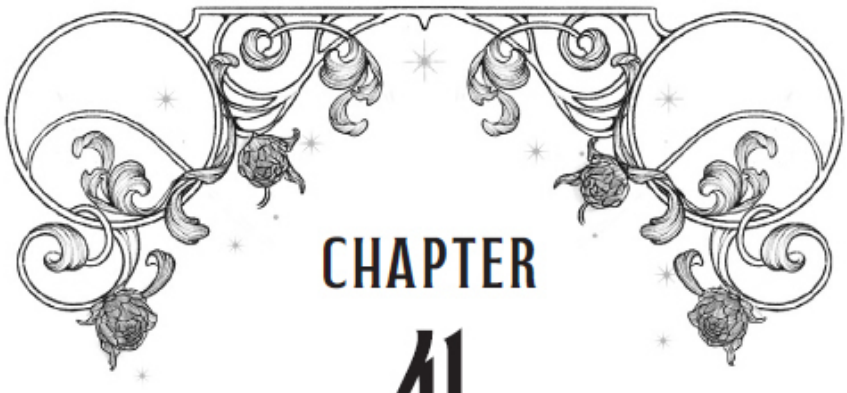

CHAPTER 41

MARIAN

I hand Ryland the roll of thin cloth, then slowly turn around.

My wet hair is in the way, so I pull it over my shoulder. Then, heart thundering – at his closeness, at what he'll think about what he sees – I slowly lower the back of my shirt.

Ryland inhales deeply.

'Dezzy said only a handful broke the skin. Some worse than others.'

He's silent for too long. But then he speaks, voice stricken, 'I'm so sorry.'

I fight a shiver as his finger traces gently over my shoulder.

'I'm sorry I couldn't heal you,' he whispers.

His words surprise me. For the first time in what feels like forever, he's not shutting me out. Ignoring me. Pretending I'm not here. My heart begins to pound with desperation for this version of him to stay. I pull my shirt back up over my shoulders and face him.

His hand remains in the air between us, that furrow still creasing his brow.

'Can I ask you something?' I'm not the type to beg, but after having all this time to think, I've realised there is something I need to know. 'It'll be quick, and then I won't bring it up again.'

I swear he's leaning into me. 'What is it?'

'Was it ever anything more than attraction for you? Lust? What we had? It couldn't be, right? There wasn't time to develop anything deeper.' At his

silence, my fingers fidget with my shirt. ‘Not if you could walk away so easily.’

His eyes close. ‘Marian.’

He speaks my name like another apology.

Shame floods my cheeks as he drops his hand. Instantly, I hate myself. *Have some self-respect and stop fighting for this.* He’s made his wishes plain. Briskly, I step back.

‘You should bandage it again.’

‘I will,’ I mutter sharply.

‘Marian,’ he breathes. ‘Please.’

Please what? Please let him go quietly? Pretend we never were?

I bend down and wince as I grab my weapons. Sure. I will do that.

‘Please don’t hate me,’ he says in a rush.

I chuckle soberly. ‘Trust me. Hate is not what I feel for you, Ryland. This would be a lot easier if it were.’

He runs a hand over his head. ‘I know.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I say. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m just … trying to make sense of it all. I’m not like you. I can’t just turn it off after falling for –’

You.

A wave of devastation sweeps over his face. He looks away, his hand flexing at his side. ‘*Nothing* has been turned off.’

Tears burn my eyes and, not wanting him to see, I walk away. ‘Could have fooled me.’

‘I’m trying to make it easier,’ he calls. ‘What do you need to hear to make this hurt less? That I wish it was you? Does that make it better?’

My feet slow.

‘Because I *do* wish it was you.’ He moves closer. ‘I can’t sleep because of how much I miss you, and when I do, you’re in my dreams.’ He huffs. ‘That’s why Agatha did what she did. The dream she saw – it was of you and me running away.’

My chest swells painfully.

‘The only reason she knows the way to Kingsland is because in that dream I was showing *you*. She saw us together at the red forest, talking about how it formed.’ He gestures to the creek. ‘She saw us swim in water just like this. She saw me carry you to the riverbank and …’ His fierce eyes

snap up to mine. ‘Do you want me to keep going? Do you want me to tell you how I kissed you? What happened after that?’

My head spins. No wonder Agatha betrayed him.

‘I have fallen in love with you,’ he says brokenly. ‘You’re not alone in this.’

A knot forms in my throat.

‘I want *you*. Anyone else feels wrong.’ He exhales, then his expression falters. ‘So what the hell am I doing?’ he whispers to himself.

He blinks. ‘You know, since the attack on my family, I’ve lived my life by a set of rules. Everything was black or white. Right or wrong. We even have an oath we speak in the elite guard – ‘Through honour, we prosper. Through trials we earn our name.’ Honour’s everything, no compromise. But you’ve turned all of that on its head. Because you’ve shown me there *is* a time to steal. There *is* a time to break the rules. A time to revolt.’ His words slow. ‘And maybe … just maybe there *is* a time to break a vow, too.’

My stomach twists as I suddenly see where he’s going. He’s not wrong; there is a time to push the limits and go rogue. But is breaking a vow – *his vow* – one of them? I thought so, but now I’m not so sure. Should there be a time to break an honourable man? Is his integrity a stumbling block we need to overcome?

Like a blindfold lifting, I finally understand him. ‘Ryland.’

He closes the distance and cups my face. ‘Run away with me.’ His mouth pulls into a breathtaking smile. ‘First, we’ll stop Atlas, but then … it’s you and me until the end.’

Hot tears sting my eyes. This is what I’ve been waiting to hear, and the temptation to accept everything he’s offering is nearly unbearable.

Nearly, but not entirely.

My hand covers his fingers, and my chest swells with misery as I gently pull them from my cheeks. ‘I want that, Ryland. I want everything you said.’

‘Then what’s wrong?’ he asks, searching my face.

I sniff and focus on a small wet spot on his shoulder, because if I look at him, I’ll change my mind. ‘In my head, it was simple. You only needed to choose me. But after hearing you, I think I … I didn’t understand the magnitude of what you’d have to do to make that happen. You shouldn’t have to compromise yourself – especially the very best parts – to be with me. You shouldn’t have to reject who you are.’

His hands drop. ‘I’m not.’

‘Can you honestly say that breaking your vows to Agatha won’t eat away at you every day?’

His answer seems stuck in his throat.

‘And what about the connection? Are you *really* okay with walking away from it? Or will you always question whether you made the right choice?’ I look at him now, needing to see the answer.

His face turns stricken. ‘It won’t be like that.’ He winces. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It does.’ My heart cracks down the centre. ‘You would have to break who you are to be with me. And one day you would realise you made a mistake.’

My shoulders fall with the weight of my sadness, but I know what I need to do.

‘There aren’t words for how sorry I am for not marrying you when I had the chance,’ I say. ‘*That* was the worst decision I’ve ever made. But I don’t regret telling you to marry Agatha. In fact, I would do it again … because it *saved* your life.’

I confronted Ryland because I wanted to know how he could leave if he loved me. But there’s only one question that matters any more: *If I love him, how can I ask him to stay?*

‘I’m sorry for tempting you to break your vow,’ I whisper thickly, certain my ribs are fracturing at the anguish in his eyes. ‘It won’t happen again.’

This time, when I walk away, I don’t let myself stop.

Not long after, while Fitzgerald and Levi are on watch, the rest of us sleep out in the open.

But slumber is impossible for me. Instead, I stare at the stars under the bright, full-moon sky and try not to think about tomorrow. About how I’ll face off against Atlas. Or what will happen after … *if* I survive. All I know is that I’ll have to go wherever Ryland isn’t. I don’t see any other way.

In what feels like both a victory and a loss all at once, no one sleeps in between Ryland and me tonight. He lies maybe ten feet away.

When enough time has passed, I finally roll over and allow myself to look at him. He must be asleep by now, and if these are our last moments, I want to memorise the details, treasure them.

But when I make out the shadows and form of his body, I see that his eyes are open too, and he's already staring at me.

My stomach tumbles.

His gaze doesn't waver, and I can't for the life of me look away.

The pain of the reality we're facing is worse than anything I've felt before. My heart yearns for him with a physical ache. How easy it would be to rise and slip under his blanket and –

Stop.

I could live a thousand years and I wouldn't face a greater temptation. Still, neither of us makes the move.

I wish you well, Ryland. A bright and long future. I hope for you the very best life.

Then, feeling like my heart is being ripped from my chest, I turn my head and close my eyes. Not long after, I hear Ryland shift, also rolling away.

We're in agreement. *Whatever we had is over.* I stuff my face in the crook of my elbow and cry silently into my arm.

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CHAPTER 42

MARIAN

In the morning, we ride hard for an hour, until I spot the remnants of a campfire. Many fires. Not far off lie deep wagon tracks, fresh in the soft ground. Against my better judgement, I look at Ryland. ‘It’s them.’

My stomach swoops low as he dismounts and kicks at the ashes with his boots. ‘It’s smouldering,’ he says. ‘We’re close.’ In the set of his jaw, I find equal parts caution and determination. He’s in elite-guard mode. Still, I bask in the way his eyes struggle to tear away from me, then mourn when he succeeds.

I’m a mess.

The weight of tension on all of us grows heavier as we ride on, knowing Atlas could be around the next corner. We slow down so we’re not a thundering stampede announcing our arrival. And then, just as we’re about to ride into a valley, there they are – a horde of dozens of trailers and wagons. They’ve stopped for a rest and formed a circle, creating a protected space in the middle. Most of their horses are being watered at a pond near the trees.

They’re close enough that it wouldn’t take much riding ahead to land a shot. We also have the high ground, while they’re exposed on open land. If only they didn’t outnumber us eight, possibly ten, to one.

‘What’s the plan?’ Fitzgerald asks. ‘Surround them and fire?’

‘I say burn their wagons,’ offers Levi. ‘Let them run.’

‘No,’ Samuel growls. ‘We can’t let them regroup to try again. This ends here.’

‘What?’ My heart jumps. ‘My sister is in there, and not all the guardsmen with her are irredeemable. Shouldn’t we at least see? Be cautious? It’s not their fault they were commanded to come.’

‘Trust me,’ Samuel says. ‘Once they figure out we’re here, a clear line will be drawn in the sand.’

What does that even mean?

‘Nothing is *happening* until we get Agatha out,’ says Ryland.

A claw of jealousy digs in. I push it away. ‘He’s right. It’s why I need to go in *first*. Alone.’

‘What?’ Ryland whirls on me.

‘Are you two idiots?’ asks Samuel. ‘If anyone goes in, we’ll lose the element of surprise – our *only* advantage. Your priority might be this little *love* situation you’ve got going on. But *my* priority is Kingsland, and I’m not pissing around. So we’re going to flank them, then light them up. And if you need to, we can chat about it afterwards.’

Panic rises in my throat as Samuel continues to give orders. ‘Fitz and Clark, take the south side. Levi and –’

‘Samuel,’ Ryland snaps, pushing his horse closer.

‘No, Ryland,’ Samuel growls. ‘Your priorities are skewed now and you’re going to get us all killed – not to mention everyone in Kingsland. We’ll look out for Agatha, but you’re not deciding this. I’m taking the lead.’

It dawns on me that we won’t be changing Samuel’s mind. It leaves me no choice. I grab my reins and guide my horse away from everyone, my heart frantic.

Rufus notices me first. ‘Don’t do it,’ he calls.

I have to. I throw Ryland one last look before taking off at a gallop down the hill.

Almost immediately, I’m spotted by the men on watch. One guardsman, then two, point and shout in my direction. An arrow strikes the ground not far from me. A warning shot. The next one won’t be.

I stop my horse and wait, hands raised to show they’re empty. There’s a commotion as guardsmen rush to the line of their armed circle, taking up weapons. Some run to a catapult.

I make out the faces of Diggs and Petronis. Perry and Larson. All wolves – *great*. ‘It’s Marian!’ I shout, more than a little shaken.

As my name is repeated through the crowd, weapons start to lower.

‘What do you mean it’s –’ Atlas shoves his way to the front. His long fur coat flaps open to reveal a shiny breastplate. He spots me, head rearing back, then he spins on his militia. ‘Get your weapons down, you lackwits!’

His reaction has me exhaling. But he also left me behind for a reason, and I’ll be damned if I give him another chance to tie me up. I move closer until I’m about twenty-five feet away, then stop, searching the crowd. *Where are you, Agatha?*

Coatl arrives, his bald head sticking above the crowd like a middle finger through a ripped glove. His face is murderous, eyes bulging. My breaths come hard, knowing my presence is *his* failure.

‘How did you get here?’ Atlas demands. ‘How could you possibly have come on your own?’

I swallow hard. ‘I did.’

‘I doubt that,’ Coatl says.

Atlas appraises me warily. ‘Yes, I doubt that, too. Where are they? In the trees?’ Guardsmen switch their focus to the surrounding forest, going on alert.

My heart booms louder in my chest as my plan to ride in and steal Agatha before everyone starts shooting unravels.

‘You’re here with Ryland, aren’t you?’ Atlas asks. ‘And his friends. By the fates, are you here to *stop me*?’ He laughs, all jagged edges and mockery.

My skin heats as my chest heaves.

‘Well, then.’ He waves at his guardsmen. ‘Grab her. Take her in.’

‘Agatha!’ I shout and guide my horse to run parallel with the line of guardsmen. ‘Agatha! Where are you?’

‘Marian?’ she calls from within their protected circle. I catch flashes of her loose hair as she runs through the crowd – until a hand grabs her, jerking her to a stop. She screams and claws the air, reaching for me. Her appearance is startling. She’s filthy and looks exhausted, as if she hasn’t slept in days.

‘Don’t just let her trot around,’ Atlas yells. ‘Someone grab her!’

My attention shifts to Diggs and Petronis, mounting horses to come after me – until I notice Coatl raise his bow and aim in my direction.

Suddenly, Atlas rips Coatl's weapon from his hands. 'Are you trying to shoot *my daughter*?' Coatl sputters some excuse but is cut off with a hard slap to the face. 'Nobody shoots her,' Atlas yells to his militia. 'And if she's injured, I *will* kill you.'

My mouth falls open. *Well, in that case* … I nock an arrow in my bow and aim it at Diggs who's creeping up on my left. 'You heard him: you can't hurt me. But come any closer and *I* will shoot you.'

He slows his horse and lowers his weapon, unsure.

I glance at Agatha. She's hysterical as she tries and fails to free her arm. *Fight harder.* Her distress terrifies me. Enrages me. Not even when Coatl beat her, did she act like this. What have they done to her?

Nothing they won't do again if I don't stop them. And with that revelation, I find the courage I should have found a long time ago. 'I have a message to deliver.'

The men quiet some.

'Your journey ends here. You're not going to Kingsland to pillage them. I won't let you.' I find some eagles among the men – Jefferson and Millo. Men who serve the Commander only because they wouldn't survive the badlands. I speak directly to them. 'This isn't who we are. But it *is* the Commander. He's a coward and a murderer. And you're wrong if you think he cares about you.' A murmur rises. I yell over it.

'You're right, I'm not alone. You *are* surrounded. You won't escape, but you can choose a different path to do what's right.' I shout at the top of my lungs. 'Revolt and join me!'

The faces before me are mostly stunned. Petronis snickers loudly, and although his ridicule bites at my skin, I'm not surprised. An arsehole until the end.

Atlas shouts commands to ignore me.

My eye catches on movement behind all of them. I spot Levi and then a sliver of Ryland's face as they dive and roll under an unmanned wagon. My heartbeats turn painful – I need to keep the guardsmen's attention on me.

Lowering my bow, I reach for my cape tucked in my saddlebag and hold up the vagabond hood I've used every time I've raided the militia. 'Recognise this?'

Heads lean together, and a rumble spreads across the crowd. Some spout their outrage as they realise what it is.

‘Yes, I’m the raider!’ With my point made, I toss the garment away, knowing I’ll never wear it again. I’m done hiding.

‘I-it was you?!’ Atlas sputters. ‘You’re the thief?’

I raise my chin as a calm settles over me. ‘Yes, *Atlas*,’ I say, disrespectfully. He’s not my commander. ‘I’ve been sabotaging you for years. But your abuse of power ends today!’

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CHAPTER 43

MARIAN

‘Hey!’ a guardsman shouts. He points at Levi, who’s in the middle of releasing a horse. ‘They’re attacking from behind!’

Guardsmen everywhere turn to look in Levi’s direction. My heart leaps into my throat as Levi takes on his first opponent, his sword arcing with a precision I didn’t expect. He blocks with a loud clang of clashing metal, then kicks the guy in the chest. He’s managing impressively, but there’s an entire swarm of men charging his way.

A fever comes over me as my hand dives into another saddlebag and retrieves a small metal ball – a present from Dezzy. I remove the pin and throw it as hard as I can. It lands between Levi and the men rushing him. The explosion is mostly dirt launching into the air, but it works to scare away some of the guards.

It’s not enough – Levi needs a way out. I dig my heels in, and my horse springs into a gallop. The remaining guards left standing around Atlas dive as I jump my mare over them and into the middle of their wagon circle. I pass others as I ride hard to where Levi’s succeeded in releasing the horses from two trailers.

‘Get on,’ I shout. I hold out my hand and hug the neck of my horse tightly with the other, only marginally slowing down. I hope he’s as coordinated as he looks.

Levi’s eyes widen, then he grins and gets a running start. I strain to reach further; we’re only going to get one shot at this. We slap hand to forearm,

locking our grip. I grunt, fighting to keep my seat as he heaves himself up, slamming into my back. I gasp at the pain.

'Go, go, go,' he urges, looking behind him.

I bank right and take off again, guiding my horse to skirt the outside of their wagons. *Agatha.* I search for her, then watch as arrows of fire fly across the sky from the trees. I guess the plan Sam settled on is to burn the trailers.

'You might want to hold on for this,' says Levi, gripping my waist tighter.

Oh. It's not the trailers they want to ignite; it's Agatha's bombs. I brace as the lit arrows land on the now horseless trailers. But nothing happens. Maybe that wasn't where Agatha's compounds are being –

BOOM! The explosion nearly knocks us both from the horse. I duck as a giant fireball erupts into the air, so much bigger than anything I could have imagined. My pulse turns violent at the shock of it, the searing heat. Briefly, my horse gallops away from the fight, spooked. Men shout and scream. The ones not thrown back from the explosion try to organise. 'Fire! They're shooting arrows of fire.'

'Take cover!'

The guardsmen huddle, weapons drawn, when Levi and I make it back to the wagons. I fight to rein in my skittish horse while searching for my sister. It doesn't take long for Coatl's bloated eyes to stand out. Agatha's with him; he's holding her as bait.

'Let her go,' I yell and draw my bow, but he jerks her in front of him. My arms shake as I lower them. 'I'm going to need help getting Agatha out,' I say to Levi.

'At your service, my lady.'

'Agatha,' Ryland yells, drawing my attention. He's about twenty feet away, trying to get to her. He swings his sword, blocking a blow, then promptly faces another one. There are too many guards around him.

'No!' I shout as he's hit from behind and falls. He barely rolls out of the way in time to keep from being impaled.

'Levi, help Ryland first,' I yell over my shoulder.

Levi leaps from the horse, sword in hand. He cuts through one, then two men like a force of nature. I've never seen anyone so nimble with a blade.

I aim my bow at the guards around Ryland, then pause as I notice that some are fighting each other. It worked. A number of them *are* revolting

and joining our side.

Ryland kicks out the feet of Petronis, then shouts at me. ‘Go get her.’

Gritting my teeth, I turn and find Coatl dragging Agatha away. He carelessly tosses her on to a catapult trailer.

I ride closer, anger consuming me. Nock an arrow. Aim.

Coatl steps behind the wooden frame of the launcher.

Cursing, I slip from my horse and run to climb onto the trailer.

Coatl pulls a lever, and the large bucket of the catapult swings, launching its load high into the air. It’s headed in the direction of our men who were shooting arrows of fire from the trees.

The explosion lands, and it’s as terrifying as it is mesmerising. Orange flames and black smoke billow into the sky. It’s a smaller explosion than the other trailer, but that wouldn’t matter if it was a direct hit. I hold my breath. Was it?

‘Let me go!’ Agatha yells.

I turn and find Coatl gripping Agatha’s wrist as he tries to reload for another shot.

I lift my bow and aim once again.

He ducks as I shoot. The arrow strikes his shoulder. With a cry of rage, he rips it from his arm. His nostrils flare. ‘Come here. Let’s end this properly.’

Yeah, no thanks.

He releases Agatha and reaches for his bow.

I race to nock another arrow, except there isn’t one in my quiver. Panic explodes in my chest.

Coatl grins as he takes aim.

Suddenly, the trailer he’s standing on lurches forward. Coatl stumbles to his knees.

I pant a relieved breath.

The distance between us expands as the trailer races off. Coatl rises, gripping the catapult frame for balance, then gives me an evil smile. My world slows with terror as he climbs over boxes to where Agatha is driving the horses and trailer.

No! Once again, I’m sprinting.

They hit a pothole and Coatl staggers but recovers quickly. It’s like watching a nightmare unfold as he reaches Agatha and wraps his hands around her throat.

‘Stop!’ I scream, pushing my legs faster.

The trailer slows as Agatha releases the reins. She desperately claws at Coatl's hands. His arm.

My heart feels like it's about to fail as I leap onboard the mobile platform and scramble over the boxes to get to them.

Agatha's face is a horror, red and etched with fear. Her hands are weak as they bat the air.

I launch myself at Coatl, but he anticipated it and tosses my sister to the floor. His enormous hands fly to my neck, fingers crushing it. I'm so stupid. I knew Agatha was only ever bait.

I struggle against him as his scowling face draws close to mine to speak. 'You have been nothing but a thorn in my side since the day I met you.' Sweat pours down his brow.

I hit pressure point after pressure point on his arms. Dig my fingers into his wounded shoulder. But he was my grappling teacher, and he easily flicks my hold off him with a cruel smile. I attempt to knee him in the groin, but he stops me before I've barely lifted my leg. It feels like my lungs are filling with acid. My vision darkens around the edges. Fear hotter than a flame spreads through every limb. This is how I die.

Distantly, I notice the trailer moving again. I bend back one of Coatl's fingers and do my best to break it.

It only makes him scream in my face. 'Just die already.'

You first. It's a beggar's dream, because my strength is leaching from me like I've split a vein. *Hang on. Just hang on.*

Agatha appears over his shoulder. But we're still moving, so who's controlling the horses?

Her face is terrified, and she wobbles as the trailer bounces. After getting her balance, she lifts and lowers her hand slowly, rehearsing how to strike.

The world grows hazy; I'm about to lose consciousness.

Agatha bares her teeth, then gives up, dropping her hands.

Disappointment cuts deep as she disappears, but it's probably for the best. She'd never win against him. *Just run.*

Suddenly she returns and crashes a wooden crate over the back of Coatl's head.

The rage on his face drops. His legs dip, going weak, and his vice-like hold on my neck releases. Then with one well-placed kick to his back, Agatha sends him toppling over the side of the trailer.

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CHAPTER 44

MARIAN

It takes too long for my lungs to work again. My breaths are nothing short of wheezing gasps – it feels like my windpipe has been crushed to a third of its size.

It doesn't help that we're still in imminent danger. The horses are slowing down again now that they're not being steered, which means Coatl could come back. 'Where is he?' I demand, not recognising the broken shards of my voice.

Agatha strains to see behind us. 'He's there … but he's not moving. I think he's hurt.' She points. 'Look at his neck.'

The horses come to a stop as they approach some trees far from the fighting. My feet are unsteady as I stand. Coatl's lying face down, neck at an unnatural angle. It has to be broken. I wait, studying his chest – it's not moving. 'I think he's more than hurt.'

'Wow,' Agatha mutters in astonishment. 'We actually beat him?'

She did. And with a bloody crate. The floor beneath me spins. My knees give out, and I fall back on to a box. *Don't sit around now. Get up. Find a weapon. Arrows.* Only I can't move, no matter how much my mind screams for me to help Ryland and the others. I need a moment.

Agatha abruptly throws herself around me. 'You came,' she says, tears warping her voice.

I can't hug her back very well. All my strength is keeping me from tipping over. 'You're shaking,' I say between breaths.

She laughs. ‘So are you.’ Her voice quiets. ‘I … I can’t believe you came to save me.’

‘You’re my sister. I’ll always come for you. No matter what *terrible, impulsive* choices you make.’ Bitterness leaks into my words, because there’s no glossing over how badly she messed up this time.

She stills. Pulls back. ‘I’m sorry, Marian.’

To her credit, she looks repentant. But those words cause the dam holding back my hot anger to fissure. How many people have died today because of her selfishness? ‘For what?’ I demand. ‘Are you sorry for betraying Ryland and his *entire* homeland? Or for marrying Ryland when he chose me?’ There. I finally said it. *She betrayed me too.*

‘Both,’ she whispers.

I stare, still panting. ‘You didn’t even object. Couldn’t say your vows fast enough.’

Her face softens. ‘I didn’t object,’ she agrees. ‘And it hurts, doesn’t it? It hurts when you need someone to speak up for you and they don’t.’

My shoulders fall as the ground feels like it’s crumbling. ‘Do you *really* think I’ve never stood up for you with him?’

Now she can’t hold my gaze. ‘I think … you did what you thought was best. But it wasn’t always what was best for me. Or it wasn’t enough. It’s selfish, but I wanted you to openly defy him, even if it meant you’d be treated like me. I was jealous because you had the choice. Add to that the years of you being secretive. You stopped trusting me to know where you went, and I hated you for it. Just like I hated you for what happened to Felix. So when another chance at love came – another opportunity to escape this – maybe I felt vindicated in *not objecting* to taking something from you.’

She did it on purpose.

‘But I was wrong. It backfired in every way.’ Tears fall down her cheeks as she meets my eyes fiercely. ‘Do you know how breathtaking it was to feel the love Ryland has for you? To know he’ll never feel that way about me?’ She bites her lip, muting a whimper. ‘So I ran back to the man who’s hurt me the most, thinking I finally had something to make him love me.’ A sob breaks through. ‘I was an idiot, and I’ll regret that for the rest of my life. I’m so sorry, Marian. I’m so very sorry.’

She falls into me, crying, and on reflex my arm goes to her back. But I feel paralysed. Stunned at her confession. Broken for both of us. For our

crippling loneliness. All the choices we couldn't afford to make.

But now isn't the time to lick our wounds. I gently push her off me, then turn to the fighting – half of the wagons are still burning, although I can't see much of what's going on from here. 'I need to go help my friends.' I wobble as I stand, then remember that I've left something out. 'But … you should know that as much as we're here to stop Atlas, Ryland is also here for you.' At the reminder of losing him, a leviathan of pain is resurrected inside me.

Agatha frowns. 'What?' It comes out choked.

I can't bring myself to say it again.

'Marian, answer me.' She grabs my arm. 'He came for me? He wants me back?'

'Yes,' I say, stumbling over another box and bashing my knee. Where is my damn bow?

'But how could he possibly want me now?' she asks. 'How could I even explain? He loves –'

The urgency to get to the fighting is overpowering. Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll be impaled. That would be less painful than this conversation.

She bites her lip, then throws the heavy tarp off one of the boxes. She pulls out a large glass jug, giving it a shake. 'You know, if Father had given me the time of day, I could have been his greatest weapon years ago.'

I don't doubt that.

She grins. 'Now, I'll be his nightmare.'

After confirming the horses have been released, Agatha dumps the sharp-smelling contents of the jug all over the trailer, then uses a long rope soaked in the same liquid to light it up from a distance. Multiple explosions go off, making us dive for safety, my arms covering Agatha. The shocking heat sears our skin, even through our clothes.

'I'm a little jealous you know how to do that,' I say, in awe.

She raises a brow, smirking. 'Really? You know, with a *little practice*, you could learn.'

I let out a snort at my own words about combat training being thrown back at me.

We take off running and dive together under the nearest non-burning wagon. 'What's the plan?' I whisper, since she left the jug of chemicals behind.

‘Above us, there’s a box that should have my phosforexium. I’ll just need to mix –’

A startled cry bursts from her as she’s dragged out from under the wagon by her foot.

‘Agatha,’ I shout, and scramble after her.

I freeze when I find Atlas holding her against his body with a knife at her throat. ‘Let her go,’ I growl, voice shaking with fury.

Atlas looks like he’s been robbed. He’s missing his coat and chest armour, and there’s a bruise over his eye. His hair is mussed, and blades of grass and leaves stick out of it. ‘You two have ruined everything.’ He shakes Agatha as she tries to speak, his eyes wild. ‘Shut up!’ he snaps at her. But then he nods at someone behind me, just as Agatha shouts my name.

The strike to my head drops me painfully to my knees and darkness swallows me whole.

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CHAPTER 45

RYLAND

I stick my head around the corner of the wagon and an arrow immediately flies in my direction. I fall back against the wheel, nearly toppling the small stack of boxes Sam, Levi and I are taking cover behind.

'How many?' Samuel asks, keeping his back to me, eyes locked on the trees.

'Probably a couple of dozen hidden around the wagons. You?'

'Eight at least, on the right,' he says. 'A handful are lying in the tall grass, waiting to pick us off.'

'Three on my side,' Levi adds. 'Still no sign of Marian or Agatha … or our other guys.'

I mutter an oath. What was I thinking asking Marian to take on Coatl alone? A man double her size. And while she's injured, no less.

That's the problem – I *wasn't* thinking. I was too busy drowning in Agatha's emotions. All her hysteria and fear. It appears me wanting to save her and her wanting to be saved has opened up a channel between us, because whenever I'm within throwing distance of her, I pick up flashes of her terror. But being knee-deep in Agatha's panic is no excuse. I deserve to be stabbed for sending Marian in alone.

'We'll have to make a run for it,' I say, unwilling to wait any longer.

Sam grunts. 'Be serious; we have three arrows left. We aren't going anywhere without a fresh supply, which isn't coming. I haven't seen Lucky or the muskrats since the catapult launched that last explosive.'

Neither have I. Damn it all.

‘I saw Rufus cowering under a wagon,’ Levi adds.

‘Of course he was,’ Samuel mutters dryly.

‘The guards are going to make their move soon, so what’s it going to be?’ I ask, urgency blistering under my skin. ‘Run, or die behind this trailer?’ I know my choice, but I won’t make theirs for them.

All I hear is Samuel breathing hard behind me. He may be cranky as hell, but he’s fiercely loyal and protective to a fault. He’d never let us die without a fight. ‘Okay,’ he finally agrees. ‘We run and head east. Round up horses and regroup.’

‘Fine,’ I say, since that’s the best route. ‘But then we work our way to the north side where I last saw Marian and Agatha. And if I don’t make it, you find them. Get them out of here.’

I glance at Levi. He looks less sure and a lot more nervous. I clap a hand on his shoulder. ‘You good?’

‘Probably shouldn’t admit this, but you know how goats do that screaming thing?’ He nods. ‘That’s the sound playing in my head.’

I crack a smile. ‘What a way to break you into being an elite guard.’

Samuel turns to look at me, his expression dark. ‘No.’

‘No what?’ I ask, startled.

‘No, we’re not getting Marian and Agatha for you if you die. So *don’t* die. You damn well better liv–’

A piercing sound starts from somewhere behind us, and we all raise our weapons. It occurs to me that it’s a battle cry, as a man on a horse bursts from the trees and gallops at full speed straight for us.

‘That’s Lucky,’ I say with disbelief.

Levi angles closer. ‘What the hellfire is he doing? He’s not even armed.’

Or slowing down. ‘It’s a diversion,’ I say, amazed.

Lucky speeds past us, cutting through the circle of wagons, drawing everyone’s attention.

‘Go, go, go!’ I urge, and we all spring up from our hiding place.

But Lucky’s voice cuts off as he’s shot with an arrow. He bends over, clutching his thigh, then tumbles awkwardly from his horse, hitting the ground hard.

Samuel grabs my shirt and hauls me back behind the wagon for cover.

The whole place goes silent as Lucky lies sprawled out in the open. It wasn’t a killing shot, the fall was nasty, and he’s lying dead still.

Come on, wake up.

Suddenly, he takes a loud, gasping breath.

My shoulders fall in relief.

‘That really hurt, you arseholes,’ Lucky yells.

The man has the survival instincts of a napkin. *Shut up, Lucky.*

We wait for more arrows to fly. Instead, somebody snickers.

‘I bet it did,’ says a militia guard. A bunch more laugh.

With a guttural moan, Lucky attempts to sit up. He seems stunned by the arrow protruding from his thigh and he balks. ‘I can’t believe you guys shot me,’ he cries. ‘I’m not even armed.’ He starts spiralling, his chest heaving. ‘You know this is going to get infected. I’m probably going to die.’

‘Oh, you’re fine,’ snaps a deep voice. Another guardsman. ‘Just pull the arrow and stand up.’

Lucky sniffs, then with a whimper, he grasps the shaft of the arrow. ‘I just want you guys to know I also hurt my head when I fell.’

‘Something else is going to hurt if you don’t hurry up.’

Lucky grimaces, then yanks on the arrow and cries out. He falls back to the ground, arrow still in his leg.

‘Did he just faint?’ Samuel asks, disgusted.

‘Yes,’ I say, puzzled – but not at Lucky’s weak constitution. It’s that they haven’t shot him again. Even the first arrow wasn’t meant to kill him.

They still consider him one of them.

‘Someone go do it for him,’ shouts a guardsman. ‘Pickler, I nominate you.’

A man from behind me yells back. ‘I’m not getting shot. Why don’t you do it?’

‘I’ll do it,’ I shout.

‘What?’ Samuel attempts to grab me again, but I dodge him and strip off my weapons.

My heart is a hammer behind my ribs as I raise my hands. When my palms don’t gain any holes, I call out again. ‘I’m unarmed.’ Slowly, I show my head.

Any weapon that wasn’t pointed at me, sure is now. But as the guards peek out from their hiding spots, I see they’re some of the ones who flipped sides earlier, joining us in revolting. They’re just as trapped as we are.

‘What are you doing, Ryland?’ Samuel growls.

I'm making a gamble – probably our only shot. They haven't killed Lucky because they don't *want* to. And I think that's not the only thing they *don't want*. Slowly, I step out from behind the wagon.

I flinch, pulse racing, as an arrow flies right past me, only feet from my left arm.

'Come on,' I shout. 'I'm trying to save one of your own.'

Someone scoffs. 'He's not ours any more.'

'I don't know about that,' I say. 'I think you have a lot of friends here – some have just decided your commander is a coward who's not worth dying for.' I inch forward another step. 'Speaking of the man, where is he?'

The silence that follows is deafening.

'Dead?' I ask. 'Or is he hiding, while you do the dirty work, as usual? You know you're nothing to him.' I take another step. 'And he's nothing *without* you. You hold all the power. So what are you going to do with it? Shoot your friends?' I lock eyes with one, then two men who are looking out at me. 'Or take this opportunity to get out from under a tyrant, which is as simple as walking away and leaving him here. No one else has to die today.'

For a long time, nothing happens, and then one guy curses, stands and strides towards the trees, leaving.

I wait.

A couple more pop out from their hiding spots. They're more skittish and duck as they run away. Another one stands and aims his bow at me. My eyes close, bracing – of course, there had to be one. But when I finally chance a look, he's slowly backing away.

'It's a trap. Don't do it,' someone warns.

'How about we leave, but your men have to come out first?' a guard calls from the grass.

He means Samuel and Levi. And good luck stripping Sam of –

Something sharp and dangerous pricks my gut. Emotions that aren't mine. My gaze snaps up. Agatha is close. And she's afraid.

There's movement. A group of men ambush Samuel and Levi behind the wagon. An older man with a broom of a moustache takes the lead and yells at them, 'Surrender. Drop to your knees!'

My friends must obey, because I don't hear fighting. Moments later, an enraged Samuel and Levi are dragged out, hands tied behind them. Legs bound.

‘They’re secured,’ Moustache announces.

Samuel glares at me as if it’s my fault.

My heart pounds. At least they haven’t been shot; that should count for something.

There’s still tension in the air, but now with their capture, more of the guardsmen relax and emerge from their hiding spots. The collective sense of abandoning ship seems to grow as men run to gather weapons. Supplies. Most don’t even look at me. Unarmed, I’m not their opponent any more. And I’m certainly not their leader.

No one is.

‘What about him?’ Diggs asks, eyeing me nervously.

I remain still, hands open. But I see it: he’s going to tie me up too. Not just because it’s the safest for him. He’s a friend of Soren.

And then I’ll never get to Agatha or Marian.

I dart to the side, risking the tentative peace and sprint. At a flipped catapult, I dive underneath.

Diggs’s voice calls out, alarmed, ‘Hey! Where’d he go?’

I glance back while belly-crawling and spot Diggs jogging the other way – probably realising the other guards are about to leave him behind.

Sam and Levi will have to wait to be set free. Agatha has to be close – and alive – or I wouldn’t have felt anything from her before. Maybe she’s hiding.

My gut wrenches – Agatha might hide but not Marian. *Where are you?*

It hits me that I should be able to use the connection to guide myself. I try to focus … and feel nothing. Agatha and I haven’t *really* connected. Slowing my brain to home in on her is as natural as breathing underwater, but I force it. Maybe if I think about the parts of her that have intrigued me – her love of science, her intelligence. I throw in how badly I want to find her, and I feel it – the tug of the threads holding us together.

It’s followed by a swift kick of terror, stronger than before. I spin around, trying to follow where it leads as if it were a scent drifting on the breeze. But it’s gone. ‘Agatha!’ I call. I start running again, weaving around debris and scouring burned wagons. Is she buried under something? ‘Marian!’

I round some fallen trees and freeze when I see Atlas. He’s holding a fancy crossbow from the wall of his High Command. His daughters are tied up and gagged at his feet.

My pounding blood runs molten.

‘I knew you’d come for them,’ he says, aiming at me. He sounds smug, like holding his daughters hostage is something to be proud of. ‘I just had to wait.’

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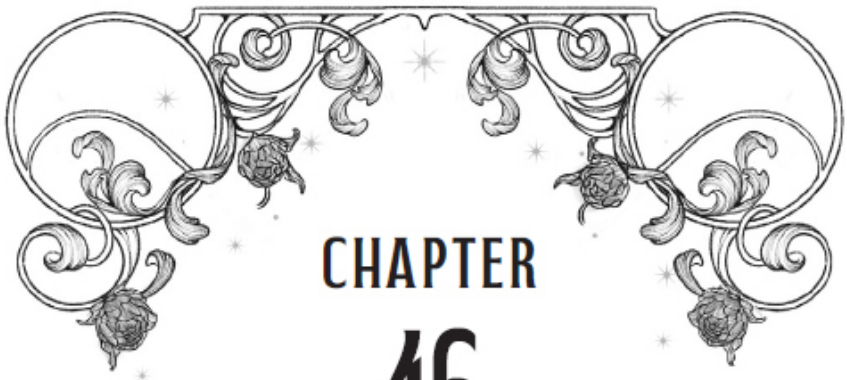

CHAPTER 46

RYLAND

My hands slowly rise. *You fool. You should have grabbed a weapon*. ‘What are you doing?’ I ask, carefully. Marian’s temple is bleeding. Agatha’s eyes are big, and she’s got a streak of blood on her cheek.

‘I told you.’ He waves his crossbow. ‘I was waiting for you to arrive.’

So he can kill me? Get his revenge for the revolt, since he probably just heard my whole speech to his guardsmen? Not sure how true that crossbow aims, but from twenty feet away, my chances aren’t good. ‘Well, I’m here now, so let’s talk.’

‘Oh, I don’t want to talk.’ He laughs incredulously, eyes wild, hair dishevelled. ‘I’m ready to start shooting.’

I tense, but then he surprises me by swinging to aim at his daughters. ‘All three of you deserve to die for what you’ve done.’

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa,’ I say, lunging a step.

‘Stop!’ he shouts, jerking his weapon back to me. ‘Don’t you dare move.’

‘Okay, not moving,’ I assure him.

Agatha whimpers and I somehow feel it in my soul.

‘Good, then where was I?’ He returns to aiming his crossbow at his daughters, this time at Marian’s face.

My reaction is visceral. A bolt that close would mean instant death. It takes everything to keep my voice calm. ‘Come on, now. There’s nothing we can’t talk out. Don’t forget that I have a ton of resources you want. Old-

world treasures. Cattle. Wheat. Electricity. And I'm your gateway to *real* magic. I'll tell you anything you want to know.'

A sick smile twists Atlas's face. 'They all left me – Coatl's dead. My guardsmen have deserted me. They even stole my coat. My armour. All because of you. I know I'm not making it home, so there's only one thing I want now – and that's to see you suffer.'

'*I'll* get you home,' I say. 'Just let Marian and Agatha go.'

'No, you won't.' He shakes his head. 'You're a terrible liar. But I *will* let you choose *one* of them.'

'For what?' I ask warily.

Again, he smirks. 'Choose which one lives, and which should die.'

Agatha moans, and the crossbow jumps to aim at her. Marian fights against her ropes.

'You can't be serious,' I shout. 'They're your daughters.'

He makes a sound of disgust. 'They're treacherous witches. Now choose. Take too long, and I'll shoot them both.'

I can't do that. The choice alone would destroy me, no matter who I chose.

And yet – *Marian. I have to save her.*

Our eyes meet, and to my horror I find permission to do the unthinkable. *Rescue Agatha.*

I shake my head. Not if it means sacrificing her.

Not in a million lifetimes.

Guilt chokes me, and I deserve it. Because how could I not choose to save my wife?

'Magic or love? Which one will win?' Atlas taunts.

I glance around helplessly, begging for someone to arrive. Even if I chose to save one, he'd probably start by shooting the other. 'You're a sick, evil bastard.'

'Yes.' Atlas looks pleased as he points at me. 'That's what I want to see – the *agony* of having to choose.'

An odd sensation enters my head. It's a mix of pressure and something like the spark of a new idea. My brows pinch, until I realise it's the connection trying to work. Agatha has sent me a memory.

Except I can't see what it is. We're still strangers, working with broken and underdeveloped wings.

She nods, then glances to a spot on the ground.

I see it – a sword lying in the grass, not far from Atlas.

‘Should I count down?’ Atlas asks. ‘Let’s start at seven … six …’

I swallow hard as my blood thrashes in my veins. If I charge him, he fires. Same deal if I go for the weapon.

‘Five … Four.’

‘Wait!’ I shout. A shadow moves behind him.

Atlas cups his ear like he’s listening. ‘Which one?’

‘Please,’ I beg. ‘Don’t do this.’

He gives a crazed smile. ‘Request denied. Three, two, one.’

I break into a sprint as he aims at Marian’s chest. The shadow – Rufus – moves, launching at Atlas. But he’s not fast enough to knock the crossbow away before Atlas pulls the trigger.

A cry rips from my throat.

Atlas immediately turns and lands a kick to Rufus’s stomach. Then he races to load another bolt.

I’m almost there.

Atlas is faster. Time slows as he raises his crossbow, this time pointing it at me.

There’s a loud click as he pulls the trigger. For a flash, I see the bolt in the air. It strikes like lightning. Pain explodes in my stomach. I stumble to my knees. *No no no.* My hand finds the wooden shaft and even touching it, it doesn’t feel real.

But it is real. A gut shot fired from only feet away.

Fatal.

I pant and watch as Rufus jumps to his feet and stumbles from the scene. If he knows anything, it’s when to bail on a bad deal.

Atlas pulls again on the mechanism to reload.

With a guttural cry, I rip out the arrow and fist it as a weapon. If I’m going to die, I’m taking this monster with me. *Get up*, I command myself. But moving even one foot is the worst pain I’ve ever felt.

Atlas curses and smacks his crossbow.

It jammed? I stagger forward.

Atlas’s fearful eyes dart to me as he snarls at his weapon, ‘Come on.’ He hits it again, this time harder.

Determined yet weak, I charge at him.

He turns to run. But then there’s an ominous click as his crossbow loads a bolt. He laughs victoriously and aims at me. He shoots.

This one hits my chest, close to my heart. It's a bomb of pain, too much to doubt that it's real. The struggle to breathe is instant. My legs refuse to carry me forward any more.

'Ha! I win,' Atlas celebrates with disbelief. 'I did it. You're dead. There's no way you're surv–'

Rufus reappears out of nowhere with the sword in his one hand and runs it through Atlas's stomach.

'How dare you kill my son!' he shouts.

Atlas drops to the ground.

I stare. It's wild that my search for justice for my father's murder ends with him avenging mine. My eyes close in relief that the threat is over, but also because my lungs are failing. I fall.

'Ryland,' Rufus cries as he rushes over. He moans, taking in the bolt and blood.

'I can't – I can't breathe.'

'Here, let me help you.' And before I can stop him, he rips out the arrow from my chest.

I growl through the burst of agony. No doubt I'll bleed out faster now. It makes me cough violently, and I choke on more blood. But oddly, it does help me to breathe. 'Are they … okay?' I wheeze out.

'Who? The girls?' Rufus throws a look over his shoulder, his face grim. 'One of them took an arrow.'

I clench my eyes shut. Atlas was pointing at Marian when he fired. My heart pounds wet and heavy in my chest. 'Go help her.'

He grips my hands. 'Okay, son. If that's what you want.'

He disappears and soon after a shadow falls over me. My eyes blink open. I can't believe it, but I see the long strands of Marian's hair.

'Marian?' I whisper, relieved that she's okay. There's a halo of sunlight around her head. Her silhouette looks like an angel.

A sob leaves her throat. 'You're bleeding,' she says. She drops to her knees, and her hands try to cover the wounds. 'Help. We need help,' she calls out.

'It's too late,' I whisper. Even a Kingsland surgeon couldn't save me now.

'No,' she whimpers. Her head shakes in disbelief.

I wish I had the strength to touch her face. How is she here? But then I remember that Rufus shoved Atlas just as he fired. 'Was it Agatha who was … shot?'

Marian stills.

If the connection is allowing me to sense any of Agatha's pain, there's no way I could separate it from mine. I'm consumed with my own.

But if Agatha could come closer, maybe I could help her. Heal her. 'Bring her here,' I wheeze between breaths. I don't know how much more injury I can take on before my heart stops, but I can try.

Marian seems to understand it would speed up my dying, and her head returns to shaking.

I try to spin it a different way. 'Don't let her die … alone.'

And I mean it. The connection can do a lot of miraculous things, but with absolute clarity, I see now what the heart of it is – to connect. *To not have to do this cruel world alone.*

That's what I can give her now.

Marian quiets. 'I-I don't think she would want to be here right now. She's too ashamed of what she's done.'

I don't have the strength to argue, so I pull on the fragile threads connecting Agatha and me, which is damn near impossible. They fortify instantly the more I focus on her.

And then, for the first time, I open myself up to her fully. I start by accepting my place in this. Accepting Agatha. Accepting us as partners in the connection, together. A warmth, almost a wonder, gathers in my gut.

I feel her mind startle, sensing me draw close mentally. She doesn't resist it, and a door cracks open between us. It's incredible to be exposed to the inner workings of someone. She *is* injured, shot with a bolt, and now I can feel the sharpness of that wound in her gut. Along with it come her emotions – loneliness. Her curiosity at what I'm doing. Hope. Her longing to be loved. Her desire to be wanted by me.

Ultimately, it's her shame that hits the hardest. It's overpowering. I choke on some blood. Spit. Without her even saying a word, I know she regrets her betrayal. Deeply.

Darkness spots in my vision. If I'm going to save her, I'm running out of time.

I forgive you. It's okay. Let me help you.

Don't shut me out.

I imagine her hearing it. And I think she just might, because the fear and some of her emotional pain melts away.

Marian takes my hand, and I squint against the sun, wanting to see her one last time.

'I love you,' she says in a broken whisper.

My ability to speak is gone. *I love you too.*

For doing what was right for me and not letting me break my vows.

For showing me what it means to fall completely in love.

Then with everything I have left, I reach through the connection to Agatha and siphon all I can of her wound.

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CHAPTER 47

MARIAN

Rufus struggles to get the right angle to cut the rope. It doesn't help that his sword is as sharp as a piece of bark. After an eternity of sawing, the fraying spot begins to unravel. I grunt and rip the remaining strands free. The disgusting gag in my mouth goes next. I spit. 'Faster,' I urge Rufus, then take over the unwrapping of my legs from the bands binding me.

'Ryland,' I shout, pushing to my feet. I slow considerably when I reach him, because I don't know what I'm looking at, and I'm scared to figure it out.

Miraculously, his eyes blink open slowly.

I huff – he's still alive. But how?

A line forms between his brows as he struggles to lift his head. His confusion grows when he sees Agatha lying on his chest.

There's so much blood. It puddles between them.

'Agatha,' I venture tentatively, my hands shaking. I know she's injured too after taking a bolt to the stomach, but that didn't stop her from running to Ryland the second Rufus set her free. Dread pools in my gut. She's so still. I drop down beside the two of them.

Slowly, Ryland rolls Agatha to the side, and her arm smacks hard against the ground.

I gasp, my hands flying to cover my mouth, knowing she's dead.

No.

Even if her eyes weren't open and empty, there's no mistaking the bloodless pallor of her skin. My sister, all the family I had left in the world, is gone.

Ryland's hand shoots to her neck, checking for a pulse. He grimaces, then readjusts his fingers. 'Come on, come on,' he chants. The seconds painfully tick by, until Ryland finally gives up and drops his head. 'I'm sorry.'

'No, Agatha,' I whisper, pulling her head into my lap and rocking her gently back and forth – but I stop when I see her chest. 'How did this happen? She wasn't shot three times.'

Ryland looks just as stunned as he stares. His hand drifts to his own chest, feeling around. He winces. 'She … Agatha healed me. At least the worst of it. But how … I was –'

I don't understand. 'Are you saying that the connection did this somehow? You gave this to her?'

His eyes snap to me. 'No. It doesn't work that way.' He grimaces in pain as he tries to move closer. 'I thought she was you. I mean, the sun was shining …' He shakes his head in disbelief, then goes still. 'She sounded like you. She even said that Agatha didn't want to come over … so I tried to connect with her. To heal her. But I … I don't know what happened. I must have stopped.'

And she returned the favour.

He keeps talking, but I can't listen any more. The rest is pointless. All that matters has been said.

My sister made yet another impulsive choice, and this time it's too late for me to save her.

I cling to Agatha as a weakness slips over my body. A strange mix of numbness and the feeling of being buried alive.

'Marian,' Ryland says, voice broken.

'He's over here,' Levi calls, running up.

Samuel follows, his face scowling, sword clutched as he assesses for threats. He checks to make sure Atlas is dead before turning to Ryland. His movements go unnaturally slow when he sees the blood. 'Are those arrow wounds? How many?'

'Two bolts – one gut, one chest. Partially healed.'

Samuel's narrowed gaze slides to Agatha in understanding. 'How partially?'

'Enough,' Ryland says.

‘Not for an infection. Show me,’ Samuel commands.

Ryland reluctantly moves his arm from his stomach, wincing at the movement.

Sam lifts Ryland’s shirt for him, then abruptly stands. ‘We leave right now,’ he snaps. ‘Levi, get a trailer. Kill somebody if you have to.’

With wide eyes, Levi nods and sprints off.

Samuel turns to me. ‘Are you injured? You going to be able to ride?’

‘She can come on the trailer with me,’ Ryland says.

A long strand of Agatha’s hair, the exact same colour as mine, is lying across her nose. With a gentle finger, I tuck it behind her ear. Slowly, my head shakes.

‘No, you’re not able to ride?’ Samuel asks, his voice softening. ‘Or no, you don’t want to ride with Ryland?’

‘I’m not coming,’ I mumble. But there is relief in knowing that Ryland’s taken care of.

‘Marian,’ Ryland says carefully. ‘I know this is … awful, but you *have to* come to Kingsland.’

No, I don’t. There’s only one thing I *have to* do. My mind won’t stop drifting back to Agatha, and my heartbeats turn arthritic. Every fibre of my being begs for this to be a lie. A cruel nightmare.

We were supposed to have more time to fix the problems between us.

Now any chance of real reconciliation is over. I struggle to take a breath.

Ryland keeps talking, listing all the logical reasons I need to go with him. None of it resonates. I don’t care.

This is what happens when I let people close. They get hurt. *Hurt enough to die.*

Lucky shows up, limping but otherwise okay. Then Clark arrives on horseback with Fitzgerald, who’s suffered some burns on his arm and face. Ryland’s agitation only grows when they volunteer to accompany me back to Notting.

‘No, she needs to come with me!’ Ryland says. ‘She’s not in any condition to fight if you’re raided on the way back.’

My mind wanders – how am I going to explain Agatha’s death to Dezzy?

Eventually, Levi arrives with a trailer and most of our horses, and the arguing between Samuel and Ryland escalates. Ryland insists they force me to come. Samuel threatens to tie Ryland up.

Ryland holds his stomach and struggles to his feet, then shoves Samuel. He yells, his tone harsher than anything I've heard from him before.

Samuel takes it, falling back a step. And when he responds it's almost soft. 'You're really going to boss her around like her father?'

Ryland looks like he's been struck.

Samuel exhales noisily through his crooked nose. 'You know this has to be her decision.' Then he turns to me. 'So, what's your choice? Hurry up because the clock is ticking. I need to get Ryland to a doctor.'

I stroke my fingers over Agatha's tangled hair. It doesn't even feel like a choice. 'I'm going home to bury my family.' She needs to be buried beside our mother.

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CHAPTER 48

RYLAND

‘What are you … doing?’ Levi asks as I limp past him.

I untie Duke’s lead from the pommel of Sam’s saddle. ‘If we go by horseback, it’s three days to Kingsland from here. At least five if we take this rotting trailer. I don’t think I have five days.’

Sam lowers the tree branch he was using to dig the wheel out of the mud, then glowers at the dirty bandage on my torso. ‘Then let’s go.’

Hours later, the fatigue and cramping in my gut has me listing in my saddle. To stay awake, I think about Agatha. Her sacrifice. Did she think she owed me? Was this about penance? And how much exactly did she heal me?

I let my guilt overflow as I dwell on all the things I missed – like how I mistook Agatha for Marian. How did I not notice that Agatha was healing me? I took some of her injury first. I *know* it. You don’t forget the pain of an extra bolt wound ripping open on your stomach. But the world turned hazy after that. I vaguely remember my pain easing up and blaming it on blood loss. The last seconds of a dying man. I’m such an idiot.

Just before dusk, Samuel casts a worried glance at me and says he needs to rest. It’s not until I’m lying down, staring up at the open sky under the same stars as Marian, that I let myself think of her.

Please make it home safe.

My new nightmare is the horrified look she had when she realised her sister was dead.

That and her hollowed-out expression when Samuel and Levi dragged me away. She looked so lost.

I scrub my fist over my forehead. Maybe I should have tried harder to convince her to come with me.

'Take care of her,' I called out to Rufus. 'Guard her with your life.'

I can't believe I'm trusting a crook to get her home. *My father*. The only comfort is that she's not alone with him. Lucky and the others will protect her.

The second day, I slump even more in the saddle, and when I gaze at the stars that night, I have a fever.

The third day is nothing short of torture. But in the heat and sweat, and possibly my swelling brain, my dreams are incredibly lucid and Agatha visits me. Her long hair is down. Combed. Her clothes are clean and free of blood. I don't understand it, but she smiles as she sits cross-legged beside me.

I talk to her about my guilt over failing her.

She listens, seemingly happy to be with me. At times, she stares up at the clouds or hums a tune. I take advantage of it, telling her how much I wish I'd been able to save her. How awful I feel that I couldn't. After hours of that, she turns and presses her finger against my lips.

'Ryland, stop.' Her dimples flash as she laughs. She changes positions to recline beside me, leaning on her elbows. It's like she can't be sad. It's not a possibility in whatever realm she's in now. She stays long after I settle, but when she finally leaves, she mutters the words, 'Don't waste my gift.'

Gift.

The rest of the night is spent tossing and turning in pain, but I also can't stop thinking about her parting words. That's the thing about the connection. When you take on someone's pain, suffering, sickness, it's always a choice.

Gifts are given, willingly. What Agatha did, she did on purpose.

I wake the next morning to Samuel violently shaking me, and although he scowls at how much I'm shivering, my spirit feels … lighter?

But I can't say the same for my body, which is rapidly giving out. Multiple times, I almost tumble off my horse. I also throw up with every drink of water. But the dream of Agatha, or whatever that was, lingers. A reminder that I didn't kill her. I never would have. Her healing me was *her*

choice. But also, I can't really honour her sacrifice – this second chance at life, however short it might be – without letting go of the guilt.

When we ride through the gates of Kingsland, I'm rushed straight to the hospital, placed in a bed that must have been stolen from heaven, and started on medicine. Then I sleep like the dead.

I wake to cold fingers prodding my bare chest.

'Hi,' I say to Isadora, Tristan's wife, who's also Dr Henshaw's apprentice. I think I slept a full twenty-four hours, and it didn't fix a thing. I still feel like I got shot; still burning up and sweaty.

'Hey, soldier.' She smiles grimly, then places what looks to be rotting leaves over my still-open wounds – although I know I'm in good hands. 'I see you've been out catching arrows with your chest.'

Tristan's sitting on a chair behind her, elbows on his knees, and I give a sleepy smirk. 'Occupational hazard. What can I say?'

Tristan snorts. But what I really see is relief on my cousin's tired face. He stands and stretches. Something tells me he hasn't left that chair in a while.

I glance down at Isadora's plant handiwork, her healer specialty. 'So are these leaves gonna make me better? Because I've got somewhere to be.'

Her soft smile falls. 'The infection you have is very serious. We put you on antibacteriums – a few different kinds – but you're going to need poultices and herbal teas every few hours, everything we have in our arsenal to get you better.'

'Sure.' I attempt to sit up in bed and grimace. 'Just give me a day or so, then we can pack it up. I'll take it with me on the road.'

She places a hand on my shoulder, hardly pressing me down, but I flop back to the mattress with a smack. 'No, Ryland. I'll need to monitor this. Adapt the formula of the poultices. Try different herbs.' She bites her lip. 'You're not leaving here for a while, and treatment could take many weeks.'

Tristan clears his throat. They lock eyes, and it couldn't be more obvious they're using memories of their thoughts to have a discussion in their heads.

I never cared before, other than being playfully envious. But now it stings. Being connected to someone, woven together by those invisible fibres, was one of the wildest experiences of my life – even though my version was only a fraction of what it could have been. And now it's just … gone. Every tie, linking us together. Any chance of it ever happening again.

‘Samuel mentioned there’s a girl – you planning to go back for her?’ Tristan asks.

‘Yes.’ As soon as possible. But then I wince, remembering how I left her. Her grief. The dead look in her eyes. ‘It might be for nothing, though. I don’t know if I’ll be able to convince her to come back with me to Kingsland.’

‘Why does she have to come back here?’

‘Because,’ I say, baffled. ‘I vowed to serve Kingsland.’

Tristan chuckles mirthlessly.

As an elite guard himself, he knows the creed we live by. ‘It’s not exactly honourable to walk away from a commitment I made.’

He gives his head a half shake. ‘You and your blasted honour.’

I scowl, too tired for this. ‘What’s wrong with my honour?’

‘Nothing. It’s just …’ His gaze drifts to Isadora. ‘What’s the point of it all? Honour? Integrity? Duty? The kind you die for, if not for love?’

The fight drains from me.

‘And you don’t have to choose between them, you know?’ he continues. ‘You can serve Kingsland from anywhere, especially with a trading partner.’

Isadora pats my shoulder after covering my wound. ‘I’ll come back in an hour to change the herbs under that dressing.’ Her head dips. ‘I’m glad you’re home.’

* * *

The days in the hospital are filled with sleep, pain and visitors. And by visitors, I mean every person I know, but especially the unmarried women. My room is overflowing with food, which Samuel happily devours, and I get offers to do everything from washing my clothes to washing me. At one point, I beg Tristan to put a sign on the door that announces: *he doesn’t have the connection any more*. But Tristan only laughed at me.

‘It’s your winning personality,’ he said. ‘And besides, everyone already knows. Word travels fast.’

A week later, I’m well enough to sleep at home, but there isn’t much sleep being had. The not knowing is killing me. Did Marian make it back to Notting without any trouble? Is she safe now among the guards? Doing okay?

I can’t stop thinking about her, and it eats at me that she probably hates me.

Then there’s Notting itself – who’s running things? And what’s happening there now that Atlas is gone?

I try to be patient and let myself heal, but I’m terrible company to everyone, including Mum, who visits often.

‘Is that doctor-approved?’ she asks, wrapping her cardigan tighter around her as she strides into the horse barn. She looks small, shoulders rolled in. Her grey hair brushing the edges of her hollow cheeks.

I pause with my hand on Duke. Brushing my horse doesn’t hurt too much. However, the push-ups I did this morning – probably not advised. ‘I’m being good. Mostly.’ I wink. ‘And he still needs to be cared for.’

‘*You* need to be cared for.’

I grin. ‘I am.’

She hums, not so sure.

‘It’s been three weeks,’ I say. ‘I’m practically good as new.’

‘Right.’ She smirks. ‘That’s why Dr Henshaw and Isadora said another two weeks?’

My jaw ticks. Two *more* weeks of no answers about Marian and I’m going to lose my mind. ‘But you know what happens once I’m cleared, right?’

She took the news of my marriage to Agatha better than expected. Probably because it proved her right: people – in this case, Atlas – took advantage of the connection the second he learned about it. I didn’t tell her much after that, so she doesn’t know about Rufus. That’s a conversation I’ve been building up to, and every day I chicken out.

‘You’re going back?’ Emotion chokes her voice.

I resume brushing Duke. ‘Yeah, I’m going back.’

She bites her lips. ‘Is there anything I can say to stop you?’

‘No.’

Her head bobs up and down. ‘And do I get to meet this *Marian*?’

My hand stops moving. I don’t even know if she’s alive.

Yes, I do. She has to be.

‘If she’ll have me, I’d love for you to meet her some time. She’s already …’ *Just say it*. I take a deep breath. ‘She’s already met my father.’ Shock registers on her face, and I shift my feet. ‘I … ah, I found my father, Rufus, in Notting. He told me the real reason he’s missing a hand.’

She sits down unsteadily on a bale of hay. Her shoulders have started trembling.

'I understand why you did it,' I say gently. 'Why you lied while I was a kid and made up a story about what really happened. You were protecting me, because he's … a swindler. But you could have told me later.' Remnants of betrayal still cut through me. 'I don't know why you continued to shut down my questions, even when you knew I was having nightmares.'

Her face has drained of colour.

'Were you afraid of people finding out? That you'd get in tr–'

'I was afraid you'd go and find him. I know you.' She gives a hard laugh. 'You would want answers and *justice*. That's how you work. You can't just let things go,' she says bitterly.

I suck on my teeth, checking my anger. 'Have *you* let what happened with him go?' The words hang between us. 'Or do you live in fear that someone might break your heart again?'

We both know the answer. To protect herself, she's dug a hole and buried herself alive.

I walk over and pull her into a hug, hoping this conversation becomes her turning point to do what only she can – set herself free.

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CHAPTER 49

RYLAND

Samuel drops a dusty old rucksack on the table with a thud.

I lift my plate of eggs in the air. The bag carries a distinct Samuel odour that I'm not sure should be allowed in our kitchen, let alone near my food. 'What're you doing?'

'Packing.'

I raise an intrigued brow. 'For?'

'A trip to Notting. I've been cleared to go see what's left of our coal deal.'

My plate clatters to the table as I jump to my feet. 'I'm coming. They can't stop me.' Isadora says I need another week of treatment, but there's no way I'm staying behind.

Samuel grins. 'They won't stop you. You've been cleared too. And besides, who else is going to keep me from killing Wonder Boy?'

'I'll take it from here,' Lucky says to the young guardsman at the gate, blocking the entry road to Notting. 'But in the future, they're good to come through anytime.'

The young guardsman cranks the gate up as Lucky nods at me from his horse. 'Sorry about that. He's new.'

'And stubborn,' Samuel grumbles.

As frustrating as it was that the guard wouldn't answer any of our questions while we waited, I like him. I like this new security measure of

having a gate even better. Rocks and sand have been piled around it to make a wall, likely the unwanted waste rock dug out of the mine.

Lucky and I take each other in with a big grin. He looks well. ‘Marian’s here? Is she okay?’ I hold my breath, bracing.

‘She’s here. She’s going to be surprised to see you.’

My shoulders sag in relief. Those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard.

Lucky escorts me, Samuel and Levi at an infuriatingly slow place towards the compound. It feels surreal. I’ve dreamed of this moment for weeks.

There are other noticeable changes. For one, a lot of the Dresden are guardsmen now. Or at least, I think they are. I’m not used to seeing their faces without a few layers of coal dust. I tip my head at a few of them, and they respond with a nod.

What happened to the guardsmen who left Atlas? Did they not make it back? Or were they not allowed to return?

The barns and fields on our right are bustling with more people than ever. Is there even a divide between the Dresden and the rest of the residents now? I hope not. ‘Who’s running this place?’ I ask.

‘For now, we have a committee,’ Lucky says. ‘Everyone was a little nervous about giving any one person all the power again.’

Understandable.

‘The guy running the mine – his name’s Pedro.’

‘Oh, yeah?’ I grin. ‘I met Pedro.’ We worked together rebuilding that Dresden house after the fire. He seemed like a solid guy.

‘Brother Thomas is in charge of food, farming and distribution.’

Appropriate, since he’s been doing that job for the Dresden from the shadows.

‘We’ve got new leaders in charge of trading, and we hope to expand our medic services. I’m the new head of security.’

‘Not Marian?’ I ask. She’s probably the most knowledgeable about the weaknesses in Notting’s border.

‘She didn’t want it. Said she’s looking …’ He presses his lips together.

Looking for what? Don’t leave me hanging.

‘For now, she’s leading the guardsman training.’

And then what are her plans? Does some part of her still wish she could leave? Where would she go?

Lucky guides us into the compound, and the first thing I notice is how much noisier it is. And crowded. People seem more relaxed. On the far right, next to the dining tables, are the sparring mats.

Then I see her. She's surrounded by a circle of guardsmen as she explains a grappling move.

Her uniform is combat trousers with a simple fitted T-shirt. Her weapons have been removed, but the leather straps for them remain.

My heart feels like it's going to punch out of my chest. She looks perfect – healthy. So *very* alive.

I think I'd do just about anything for her not to run away when she sees me.

But I know that's a very real possibility.

'Marian,' calls Lucky.

I go still as she glances over. Her face falls like she's seen a ghost.

'That's not good,' Levi mutters.

No, it's not.

By the time she's standing in front of me, my heart is thrashing behind my ribs. I open my mouth, but it's like the air crystalises between us, holding us frozen in place.

I've rehearsed this moment countless times. Practised opening lines and apologies until I could recite them in my sleep. But nothing's prepared me for the avalanche of emotion I feel at seeing her. My throat goes thick. My tongue feels tied in a knot. I want to hug her. Stare at the cleverness in her doe-eyes. Memorise the curve of her lips. Before I know it, I'm tracking the freckles on her nose, counting. My memories haven't served me well.

'You're making the air awkward,' Levi whispers, not so quietly.

I grimace. 'Is there … somewhere we …'

She nods, then spins on her heel and speeds off.

'Well, go get her,' Samuel says. 'And try some words next time.'

I throw my friends a look that says 'not helping' as I chase after her. But I know – I'm messing this up.

She exits the compound, rounds the side, passing the cooks working in the outdoor kitchen, and disappears behind the back of the building. I jog to catch up and the moment I turn the corner, she's there, waiting for me. I stop and let out a relieved breath. Then we're back to staring at each other.

'Marian,' I finally get out.

'You came back,' she says.

‘Yes.’

‘I wasn’t sure you would.’ Her gaze slides down me. ‘You look … healed.’

‘Yeah, although it took a while.’ I bite my lip. ‘And how are you?’

‘I’m … okay. Mostly.’

‘Good.’ There’s more to unpack there, but I’m not sure now is the time. ‘And you’re teaching grappling?’ I can’t stop my smile. ‘They get to learn from the best.’

She studies a rock by her foot, face revealing nothing. ‘I’m not the best.’

‘You’re better than I am, and I’d jump at the chance to be taught by you.’ I’m dead serious. I’ve spent entire nights dreaming of doing the simplest things together. Dreaming of our future.

She half shakes her head.

It feels like there’s a hole in my lungs, and I’m leaking air. My smile fades at the obvious wall between us. A wall I don’t know how to break. ‘Is that what you want to do? Teach?’

‘Partly.’

‘And the other part?’

She looks at me and just like every time, my stomach lurches. With excitement. With claws of dread. This could go either way, and it’s killing me. ‘Still figuring it out,’ she says. ‘Listen … the last time we were together, I was in a bad place. I … I had a lot of guilt. For not stopping Atlas sooner. For how I left things with my sister, and that we didn’t have time to …’ She quiets a moment. ‘I had to go home and bury Agatha. Face Dezzy. Explain everything that happened. And – this might sound ridiculous – but I needed to see that people can get close to me without getting hurt.’

‘No, Marian, I’m the one who needs to apologise. I shouldn’t have tried to make you –’

‘It’s okay. I know your intentions were good. For that and … other things.’

Does she?

Do you know I tried to save your sister?

Do you know that I’m endlessly, hopelessly in love with you?

I swallow hard.

Her face tightens. ‘How long are you staying, before you’re back on the road?’

My brows shoot up. She thinks I'm leaving again – is that why she's being so guarded? 'That depends,' I venture. 'How long are *you* staying?'

A cautiousness enters her eyes. 'What does that mean? Are you not here for coal?'

'It means, Samuel and Levi are here for coal. I …' *Just say it.* 'I was hoping to find out your plans, then talk you into letting me tag along.'

The beautiful shock that spreads across her face makes me feel like I could fly. 'But what if what I want is … to stay here?'

'Then we stay.'

She stares at me for a long time.

'I'll watch you lead grappling classes,' I suggest. 'Take you on moonlight trips to the waterfall.'

Something playful enters her eyes. 'What about learning some of the Dresden dances with me? We never did get to finish our dance.'

I smile, more than encouraged by the direction this is heading. 'I've already been practising. How about you?'

It's been over a month without Atlas ruling with an iron fist. What's changed for her?

'I've been too busy for that. Grief is … messy sometimes. And I've also been caught in my head, worrying over … *someone*.' Her gaze locks with mine.

It's a horse kick to the chest. 'Yeah?'

'But I think that might resolve soon – the worrying part.'

Every muscle goes taut. 'That's good. You'll have more time for dancing.'

She fights a grin and loses. 'Well, I actually … was thinking I might fill my time with some romance.'

'Romance,' I repeat, hopeful. So damn hopeful. 'Can I suggest someone for that? He comes highly recommended.' My gaze drops to her lips, and my blood grows heated. 'He's passionate. Very good at archery.' I tilt my head to the side. 'Excellent at cooking bacon.'

She snorts, and it's like the sun has split through the clouds.

I lean in and lower my voice. 'I'm serious, Marian. I'll take whatever you're willing to give. Friends. Lovers. I'd marry you right here, right now, if you'd let me. Just tell me I'm not too late.'

She bites her lip. 'You're not.'

I want to touch her, to kiss her, but I sense there's still something holding her back.

She turns her head. 'How do you think Agatha would feel about this?' she asks warily. 'She hated the idea of you and me together.'

'She didn't hate it.'

Her eyes go wide with disbelief.

'Okay, maybe, at first,' I concede. 'But not in the end. Why do you think she healed me? She knew, better than anyone, how I felt about you. She knew and she chose to save my life.'

Marian studies me, weighing my words for truth. The last thread of whatever was holding her back seems to snap. Her eyes turn glassy, and then she's reaching for me, falling against my chest. I hug her tightly, my chin resting on top of her head.

Finally, *finally*, it feels like I can breathe.

We stay like that for a long time – no way am I going to be the first to let go. But then she grabs my face and brings my mouth to hers, and we spend a very long time getting reacquainted with each other's lips.

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ONE MONTH LATER

RYLAND

There's a knock on the door.

My hands pause with my shirt half fastened. I can't help hoping that it's Marian, but I also know Dezzy would strangle her, and then me, if we saw each other now.

Rufus slips inside as I open the door. 'I got it!' He holds up papers in his one hand. 'My contacts sent the list of what they can round up.' Immediately, his hungry gaze sweeps Agatha's room, which I've mostly packed up except her worktable of tools and supplies.

'None of that's for sale,' I say, and return to buttoning my shirt. 'Dezzy's claimed it all for the school.' To teach the sciences. Not bomb-making. At least, I hope.

'Oh, I know that,' he says, like he wasn't mentally cataloguing everything. He thrusts his papers at me. 'Anyway, the Lower Beaver Trading Post said they can find about fifty yards of copper pipes to run along the wood-stove chimneys. So it looks like we *will* have hot water this winter and –'

'Rufus,' I say, cutting him off. 'I'm not talking about projects today.'

'Okay.' He shrugs, then brings on a smile that has my guard rising. 'It's my *son's* wedding day. Let's start the celebration.'

Son. My stomach roils. For weeks now he's been taking the wear-the-crown-until-it-fits approach to our relationship, which is going about as awkwardly as expected. We may share the same eyes and height, but very little else. He wants to be *trusted*. I'd bet our budding chance at old-world electricity that depending on him is a mistake.

Although, he has proven me wrong on a few things now, especially with his trader relationships. I wouldn't have half the pieces I've acquired from the old world for the extra water tower and well projects without him.

Rufus presses his lips together and attempts to look reflective. Or maybe he's going for sentimental. 'You look good,' he mutters.

I'm saved by another knock on the door, and Levi, Samuel and Tristan file in.

I smile. 'You guys all loaded up?'

'Mostly,' Tristan says. 'Delivered the grain to the barns and packed the coal in the trailers to take back. But we still have to reload our food and water before heading out.'

'We're not leaving too early, though, right?' asks Levi. 'Because it's going to be a late night, tonight. A proper party.' He looks genuinely concerned.

'Yeah, no need to rush off,' I say. 'You could always stay another day.'

'Right,' Tristan drawls. 'Because you'll be available to hang out.'

I smirk. 'Who said anything about hanging out?'

'No.' Sam flops down on the chair in front of the long desk and it cracks. Loudly. We all freeze. When it doesn't splinter into pieces, he continues, 'I told the rest of the team we'll leave at sunrise. With the trailers, it'll take at least a week to get home.'

Tristan's face turns stricken. 'In that case, we're definitely leaving at first light.'

Levi groans. 'Why didn't you just bring Isa–'

The door opens with a flourish, revealing Dezzy in a yellow dress. 'Ryland and … oh my.' Her hand flies to her chest and she giggles. 'So many handsome soldiers.'

Samuel grins so hard I almost see his teeth – interesting.

'It is time to go,' she announces.

'Really?' I glance out the window at the position of the sun. 'I thought we had –'

Dezzy's amusement drops like a lead hammer. 'It is *time* to go! Being early means being on time.' She claps her hands twice, and all five of us move like she just pulled a weapon.

Lanterns hang everywhere, glowing brightly even though it's not quite dark. It looks no different from a New Moon celebration, except tonight there's also a path of lanterns forming an aisle.

Every resident except the guards protecting the perimeter of Notting is at the Dresden Circle.

Tristan and I secure our horses and approach the crowd as the musicians play soft music.

I point at Little John and give him a thumbs-up. ‘Nice shoes.’ They’re more of a handsewn leather slipper and possibly a little too big for him. Samuel whipped them up last night after being outraged at finding the boy still barefoot.

Little John smiles proudly, showing off his front tooth that’s starting to grow in, then also points out his shirt and shorts, which look like he only played in a barn, not spent years living in one. It’s amazing how removing a few rules, like taxing people into oblivion, can transform trade for a community and improve lives.

Clara pulls her son into a hug. ‘He says they slow him down when he runs, but he’ll wear them for the wedding.’

‘Because I’m the best man,’ Little John pipes up. ‘*Again*.’

‘Nice try, kid.’ Samuel huffs as he strolls up, crossing his beefy arms. ‘*I’m* the best man.’

‘What?’ Little John’s face falls, and he buries his head in his mother’s skirt.

‘Hey, kid!’ Samuel says in a tone that’s anything but kid-friendly. ‘I was only joking. It’s fine. You’re the best man.’

Clara picks Little John up and tries to console him by whispering in his ear.

‘You want a …’ Samuel glances around looking a little distressed. ‘A shoulder ride or something?’

Little John pops his head up and wipes his eyes. ‘No, but I’ll take your knife.’

Sam’s eyes narrow, but before he can reply, Brother Thomas interrupts us, nodding towards the road. ‘It’s time for everyone to take their places.’

The crowd quiets as Little John, who’s wearing his newly acquired weapon’s strap like a necklace, walks with me and Brother Thomas to the front. The music changes and a new song starts. Then the people begin to sing in unison.

I brush a hand over my hair. Take a deep breath, vibrating with anticipation. I’ve only been apart from Marian for a day, but there’s a sharp ache in my chest from how much I miss her.

Marian appears at the end of the aisle on her horse, white dress flowing behind her, a ring of flowers in her half-pinned-up hair. Everyone else

disappears. My throat instantly goes thick as I take her in – *she's so beautiful*.

The singing grows louder as Marian, and Dezzy behind her, step down from their mounts. They hook elbows and walk together through the lantern-lit path. Marian's face lights up when she sees me.

I go to her, taking her from Dezzy. She touches my face, eyes soft as her finger wipes away a tear on my cheek.

'You're not ugly,' Little John blurts out. 'He's not crying because of that.'

Marian laughs, along with most of the crowd.

'He's right,' I say as I take her hands. 'You're stunning.'

'This day has been a long time coming,' Brother Thomas begins. 'It's a celebration. Marriage –'

Marian bites her lips and her eyes dance as Brother Thomas begins with the same words he spoke in his little hut at our first go at this.

The poems and his thoughts on love don't go on for long, and soon he transitions into something heavier.

'At Ryland and Marian's request,' he says, 'we honour and remember Agatha today.' My head lowers, respectfully. Marian squeezes my hands tighter.

'We also remember that this freedom we now enjoy came at a cost, one that Agatha and others paid for with their lives. There will always be those who wish to take advantage of us. Control us. Imprison us so they can gain power, just like the Commander did. And we will not forget the sacrifice and bravery of those – including the two people getting married today – who stand against tyranny. Who fight to have a better way of life.'

I watch as Marian's eyes crinkle in a fresh wave of grief. I feel it too, but in a different way.

Every thread of the connection tying Agatha and me together is gone. But I'll always carry a mix of sadness and gratefulness for the sacrifice she made in an impossible situation. Through her, I got to experience the wonder of the connection.

And because of her, I get to live.

When Brother Thomas finishes, I nudge Little John. 'It's time, buddy.' I stuck the rings in his pocket seconds before Marian arrived, but that doesn't stop the stab of fear when he blinks up at me with a blank face.

To the amusement of the crowd, Little John empties his pockets, pulling out sticks, rocks and a dead beetle that he tells everyone is named Todd. He

hands Todd to Samuel, which sets the crowd tittering. Levi's laughing so hard he looks like he's choking. Finally, with a flourish, Little John reveals the two rings in the palm of his hand.

Marian stares, amazed. 'Where did those come from?'

We'd agreed to finish our exchange of necklaces, but she's already wearing the one I gave her, along with her own. I squeeze her hand. 'Let's just say I came back to Notting prepared.'

I slide the ring on to her finger and speak my vows to her a second time, proud and thankful that despite all that happened with Agatha, they remain unbroken. To Agatha, the words 'I do' were an acceptance of a forced marriage. But in Brother Thomas's hut, I vowed to protect Marian and give her my heart, and I've loved her beyond anything I thought possible ever since.

Marian takes off the necklace she wanted to give me and places it around my neck. I can't take my eyes off her as she finally speaks her vows to me. Emotion chokes her voice on the last line, and she repeats herself, saying it again, louder. 'All the days of my life.'

I immediately kiss her, and the crowd erupts in applause.

Marian smiles against my lips.

But then it's like I've been dropped into a vat of deep, cold water. Pressure builds in my head. Expands in my ears. My ribs feel too small to contain my lungs – and that's just the start of it as all hellfire breaks loose.

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MARIAN

Everything is so much. Too much – light and sound. I have the oddest sensation of being wrung out. But then, it all recedes like an exhaled breath. Tingles climb like a vine through my body, leaving little wakes of euphoria. The spell binding me snaps, and I pull back from our kiss. ‘Ryland?’

His eyes are wide. Disbelieving. There’s no doubt he felt that too.

‘Was that the …’

Connection?

My hand slaps to cover my mouth, because even though I didn’t finish my sentence, I’m pretty sure I also did … in his head.

Ryland’s shock breaks like a dam, and then he’s laughing. He pulls me to him and boldly kisses me again. ‘Yes, love. That’s exactly what it is.’

How strange to physically feel someone’s love for you. My chest is swollen with it. There also seems to be a piece of Ryland taking up residence there now; I don’t know how else to describe it. This constant tether between us leaves me so aware of him. His happiness is light and fizzy and tastes sweet on my tongue.

‘Umm … aren’t you guys supposed to walk back down the aisle now?’ asks Little John. ‘Everyone’s waiting.’

Ryland speaks to Brother Thomas. ‘Go ahead and start the party.’ His surprised eyes are consuming and full of anticipation as he turns back to me. ‘We’re going to be a bit distracted. For a while.’ *A long while* he says in my head.

I gasp. I remember him explaining that if we think something, we can send the memory of that thought to each other. A way to communicate without words. But he’s doing it seemingly without even trying.

‘I now pronounce you husband and wife!’ Brother Thomas calls. Everyone cheers again.

Ryland kisses the back of my knuckles, then raises my hand into the air.

I smile and laugh, all the while overwhelmed and struggling to think. There’s too much feeling going on. New sensations, like the deep headiness of Ryland’s joy. New ways to communicate.

How in the world are we supposed to celebrate with all of this going on inside us?

I realise I did it again – spoke into his head using the memory of my thoughts, and it is as easy as asking the question out loud. ‘Did you get that?’ I ask him.

He nods.

That’s just the beginning of what we can do. Ryland’s voice is clear in my head. His smile turns devilish, and yet I sense his pride at me – at us – for figuring out this part of the connection so quickly. We walk down the aisle of clapping people, and I do my best not to look stunned.

Or eager to escape so we can be alone.

Ryland stops not far from where the musicians are playing a celebratory song and pulls me to him, arms wrapping around my waist.

‘We’re going to dance?’ I ask.

‘It’d be rude to leave right now, wouldn’t it?’ He pulls back to check my face. ‘But just say the word.’

He’s so close to stealing me away. I feel it. ‘No, you’re right. Let’s dance while everyone enjoys the food and music. That should give us a moment to get our bearings.’

He begins to rock us back and forth, and his hand slides up my back, causing goosebumps to race over my skin. I shiver and my forehead falls against his chest.

He groans softly.

‘What?’ I ask, lifting my head. ‘Are you okay?’

He swallows. ‘I can honestly say I’ve *never* been better. But I’m going to need you to slow down on the … sending-me-sensations thing. For now.’

I laugh. ‘The what?’

‘We can share the good things as well as the bad.’ He blows out a slow breath, then his brows furrow. ‘Speaking of which, your ankle – it still bothers you?’

I tilt my head, considering the ache that I’ve become good at ignoring. He can feel that? ‘It’s hardly worth complaining about.’

His gaze falls to my parted lips, then he kisses me. ‘I’m going to heal your ankle now.’

He might as well be speaking Gergan because his words don’t register at all. I’m nothing but sensations. Emotions.

Ryland’s eyes close. He’s concentrating, and soon I feel a gentle pressure on my mind. He smiles as if he’s found the part of me he was looking for.

Peace floods me. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Exploring you like an old-world map.’

That’s an excellent analogy because I feel him. This link between us is like a road that extends into both of us now, and he’s wandering me. Learning parts of me. An image of him delicately holding my foot in the tent flashes in my mind. It feels like something I’ve remembered, but it came from him. ‘What does that mean?’ I ask.

‘May I attend to your foot?’

I’m so curious, I nod.

Instantly, the dull ache in my ankle fades to something barely decipherable. Just like that. ‘Ryland,’ I gasp. ‘But now you have the pain?’

He drags his nose lightly along my jawline, causing my breath to hitch. ‘You tell me.’

I grin at the challenge. Okay. Now it’s me following the mental path between us as we continue to sway back and forth to our own beat. It takes a second to figure things out, but I quickly catch on. Every corner, every branching path leads to a new area of him. I try one, since I don’t know where to go. These are where his memories are. There’s a banquet of them. Some closer, some further away. I lean into one

An image of a woman with greying hair appears in my mind. It’s followed by a warmth in my chest. Pride. Love.

‘That’s my mother.’

My heart melts. ‘She looks lovely.’

He hums in agreement and reminisces a little longer, showing me her house. Then *his* house, where he lived with Samuel. I’m fascinated by what I see, and we go back and forth, sharing parts of ourselves. All our favourite things.

One of my memories is of Agatha. Of how we grew up, sharing a bed most nights, taking turns telling bedtime stories and giggling until we fell asleep – until everything changed between us. A sharp arrow of pain pierces my side.

Ryland’s smile falters. I feel his hesitation about whether he should speak. ‘I had a dream about Agatha after she died,’ he says softly. ‘Or maybe it wasn’t a dream; I don’t know what it was. But I saw her, and it felt real.’

My brows furrow.

‘Do you want to see it?’

My eyes sting as his memory of her appears as if I’m the one remembering it. Agatha’s there as clear as day, sitting beside him, smiling at me.

I’m quiet for a long time, not knowing myself how I feel. I miss Agatha. Sometimes the ache is so present and overwhelming it feels like a knife is lodged in my throat – like now. But I’m also so proud of her. Proud of the courage she found to do what she felt was right, even though it cost her everything to save Ryland. Suddenly, the crushing unbearableness of losing her inexplicably eases. My gaze flits to Ryland. ‘Are you doing that?’

His lips press into a line. ‘You know, my people argue over the purpose of the connection, but I think I’ve learned … it’s for times like this. To show that you’re not alone.’

Eventually, the music shifts into a driving beat. My head snaps up. ‘That’s my favourite song.’

‘What song?’

‘The red drum song.’ It’s the one where the women spin and kick, moving as a group.

Ryland releases me. ‘Go. Now’s your chance.’

I bite my lip, unsure. I don’t want to leave him.

‘I know,’ he assures me, waving me away. ‘But I can also feel how much you want to try it. I’ll be right here.’

He can feel it. I chuckle, amazed at how the connection has become so seamless between us already. ‘Okay,’ I say, as I step back to join the crowd coming together.

I notice I can’t sense Ryland so easily any more, with some distance between us, so I glance back and find him watching me with a searing look in his eyes.

The drums grow louder, and Clara bumps my shoulder. ‘Hey, haven’t seen you here before.’

‘Yeah. I-I’m trying something new.’

‘Good.’ She smiles and hikes up her skirt to her knees, like the rest of the women. I copy her, laughing self-consciously. I suspect I’m about to make a fool of myself.

The group begins to move as one. Clara and I match them, kicking our legs to the beat. The drums grow louder. Faster. Our kicks get higher with

every instrument that joins in, building the tension in the song. We add in clapping. A turn and a stomping of our feet, and distantly, I notice there really is no pain in my ankle at all. That sneaky pretty-boy charmer of mine took it all.

At the chorus, Clara and I hook arms and spin faster and faster until I can no longer contain my giggles. I feel like a child, and there's something inexplicably joyful about it. Healing.

The song ends, and I wave Ryland over, wanting to share this feeling with him. But he shakes his head, encouraging me to keep dancing.

I purse my lips, unsure, until I spot Dezzy stoically judging me from a table. I march up to her. She crosses her arms. 'Come,' I say, ignoring her protests as I drag her to the middle of the dancing. The women clap encouragingly, and Dezzy smiles reluctantly. She starts by bouncing on her toes, then grows more confident. Soon she's doing moves that both delight and scare me.

The next time I look up, Ryland is with Tristan and his friends, and I'm pretty sure by their shocked faces, Ryland's just shared with them that we somehow, miraculously, have been given the connection. It's a wonder I still don't understand, especially when Ryland said he's never known of anyone to receive it twice.

But now that I feel it – experience it – I know what the connection isn't: a fluke. I now believe in the impossible. A supernatural kind of magic from the same source that first brought Ryland's uncle to Kingsland through a dream.

That brought Ryland to me.

Tristan is first to celebrate as he claps Ryland heartily on the back. Samuel grins and says something that makes everyone break out laughing.

I can't wait to see that memory later.

Eventually, I convince Ryland to try a group dance with me, which he does incredibly well. It only makes me impossibly more attracted to him.

I know the moment he feels it. His eyes snap to me as if I've shouted his name. He draws extremely close, pressing into me, lips brushing my ear. 'Do we need to leave?'

I chuckle, embarrassed that I can't even glance at him appreciatively without him knowing – until I realise the deep, unrelenting heat coiling in my belly isn't coming from me.

Well, maybe this isn't so bad.

We don’t leave quite yet. Instead, we eat and laugh with our friends, then dance some more; all while the connection distracts us with memories and sensations we haven’t learned to control. It’s the most blissful torture.

‘Have I ever told you that in Kingsland, descendant weddings are done backwards?’ Ryland asks into my ear. ‘Party first, ceremony last?’

I chuckle. ‘That would have solved a lot of our problems, wouldn’t it?’

He blinks at me, then scoops me up into his arms and marches me towards the trees.

‘What are you doing?’ Little John yells at our backs.

I smother my laugh into Ryland’s shoulder. ‘If you don’t answer him, he’s going to follow.’

With a sigh, Ryland spins and walks backwards. ‘I’m solving problems,’ he shouts. Then just for me: *If the connection demands to be explored, then we have no choice but to become experts at it.*

I have no objections to that plan. He helps me on to his horse, then quickly climbs on behind me.

‘You can’t leave!’ Little John says, breathless as he runs up to us. ‘It’s your party.’

Even though I can’t quite see Ryland’s smile, I somehow feel it like a hug around my heart. ‘It’s all good, little man. The party was just the start. Now is when the adventure begins.’

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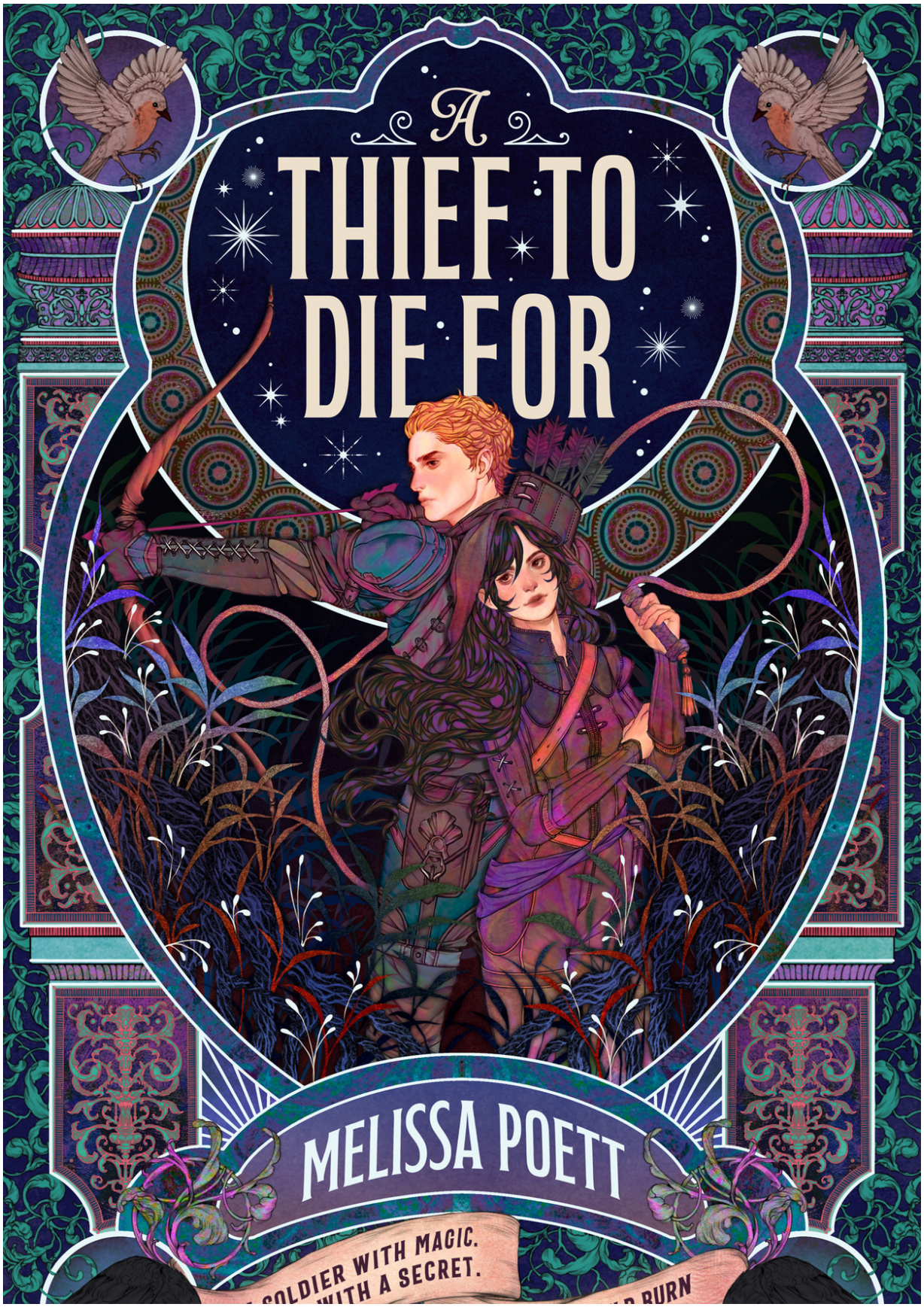
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