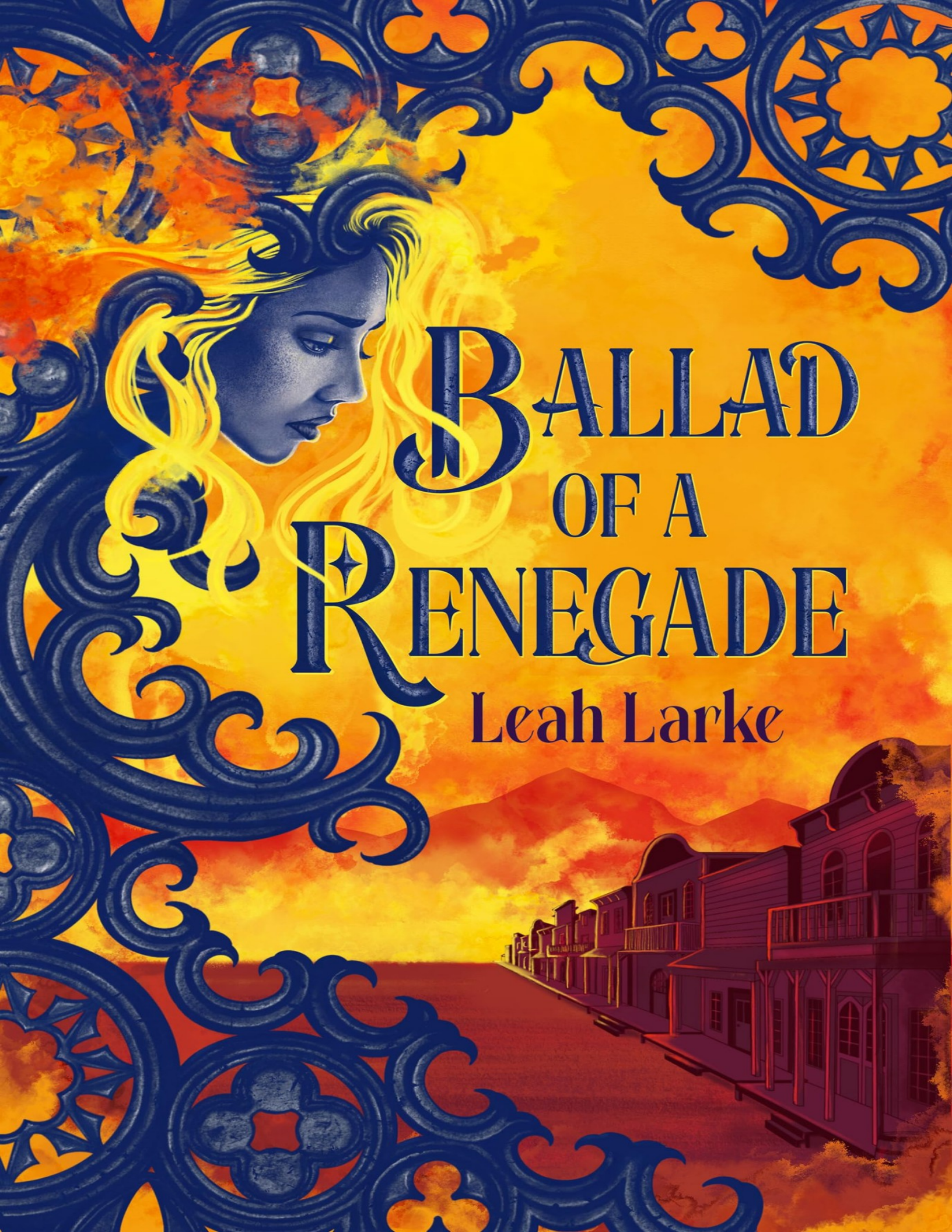
Ballad of a Renegade
Leah Larke

BALLAD OF A RENEGADE

LEAH LARKE

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Ballad of a Renegade is a romantic fantasy. This is an adult series which contain elements that might not be suitable for some readers.
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CONTENTS

1. Lost
2. Found
3. The Saloon
4. The Poster
5. Korina
6. Wyndfyre Academy
7. Order of the Red Lapis
8. Partner Projects
9. Friends Along the Way
10. The Spark
11. The Gauntlet Trials
12. Ghosts
13. The Tunnel
14. Nation of Clovia
15. Champion’s Ball
16. Reckoning

17. The Necklace
18. The Attic
19. Resurrection
20. Dalliances
21. Diversion
22. Warrior Track
23. Funerals
24. Royce Castle
25. The Catacomb Scenario
26. The Photograph
27. Trials and Celebrations
28. The Party Guest
29. Kasian’s Birthday
30. The Governor’s Proposal
31. Wilderness Exercise
32. The Doctor
33. Flight, Fight, Freeze
34. The Box
35. Compromise
36. All of Us
37. Calm Before the Storm
38. The Deal
Afterword
About the Author
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1

Lost

The sickly, sour stench of decay slammed into her nose, seasoned with smoke and gunpowder and chased by the tang of blood. The familiar bouquet of death and violence beckoned for Cyra's unconscious mind to rejoin the waking world. She resisted, but it was a losing battle, throbbing aches pecking at her muscles like carrion birds, unwillingly sharpening her senses.

A weight pressed down on her chest, straining each pull of breath as her eyelids lifted, vision filled with a gray, swirling sky. Dread crawled through her veins as she mentally prepared to greet a cruel, unwelcoming reality. And what surrounded Cyra was both cruel and unwelcome.

A blanket of dead unfurled in all directions. Hundreds, if not thousands, of bodies lay across a wide field rimmed by forest. Blood drenched bloating corpses, many missing limbs, their ashen faces eternally frozen. Cyra wasn't dead, but she had woken in hell. And with each forced blink and labored breath, the devastation seared more unforgettable savagery in her memories, adding to that already overcrowded corner of her subconscious.

A gasp slipped through her lips when she finally dragged her gaze downward and found a blank face she recognized. "Dag," she breathed, a sob clotting her lungs. Her hand rested on his back, a cold stickiness oozing between her fingers—Dag's blood. She fought the burn of tears, forcing

herself to take in the present hellscape a second time, trying to puzzle together what horror show greeted her this miserable morning.

A battle, her brain unhelpfully provided, the answer painfully obvious given the surrounding slaughter. Cyra scoured her memories for more information, but only saw jarring flashes of violence. She recalled the ear-splintering booms of cannon fire, the screams of the wounded, of the dying. It all left one question—had Castoria won?

Bang! The jarring sound echoed over the open field, disturbing a murder of crows feasting on the dead. They took to the wing, cawing disapproval at their interrupted meal.

Gunfire. Cyra's pulse skittered as a well of panic opened in her chest.

Firearms meant two things. One: Castoria had definitely lost the battle. Two: if she didn't drag her sorry butt out of this wasteland of doomed souls, she'd soon join their ranks.

A fly buzzed past her face as another loud *bang* echoed. The gunshot sounded further away. She needed to go. *Now.*

Forcing a ragged breath through her terribly dry mouth, Cyra gingerly pushed away Dag's stiff body, ignoring the sharp pang at abandoning her fellow ranger. Another friend lost to this cursed war. Left to rot on the battlefield of who-gives-a-fuck-anymore.

Why were they still fighting?

It was a question plaguing Cyra too often lately. If the Clovian colonies wanted their freedom so badly, perhaps it was time to just let them have it. This fight wasn't worth it—not anymore. Not after four bloody years of war. A war the Kingdom of Castoria was losing.

The pain in her side cleaved through her lingering guilt and confusion, reminding her she had more immediate concerns.

Curses spilling through thinned lips, Cyra wobbled to her knees and found a telling patch of dark red seeping through her hunter green ranger's coat, the wet stain a few inches above her hipbone. *Just great.*

She gritted her teeth as more flashes from the battle jabbed at her mind —the memory of locking eyes with a familiar face during the mayhem.

Fate was a vindictive bastard for creating that chance encounter. Of course, Adonis North couldn't resist a grab at revenge. The moment his scarred face had emerged through the smoke and haze, she knew he'd claim her life. The obnoxiously handsome prick had the audacity to smile just before he fired at point-blank range. The wound in her side a *fuck you*,

signed Adonis North. The fiend's second shot had killed Dag, who had jumped into the bullet's path, saving her life before the smoky chaos of the battle swept them away on its tide.

Cyra's throat thickened as she settled a last look on her friend's face. "If I ever see that asshole again," she rasped, "I swear to all the Divine Ancients, I'll give him a matching scar before sending him to hell." With this promise, a wave of determination burned in her blood.

Dag had saved her life; she wouldn't waste his sacrifice.

Sputtering profanities, Cyra fought through the pain, clumsily finding her feet, before forcing one foot in front of the other. She held her breath until trees surrounded her on all sides, only then allowing a long sigh of relief. She reached the woods without collecting more bullet wounds. A small victory. Still, the effort cost.

Cyra leaned against a tree, hissing more expletives at her agitated wound. She raised her right arm so the cuff of her coat slipped toward her elbow and analyzed the leather bracer bound to her forearm. A single red crystal glinted in the forward slot—the other ten were empty. She scowled at the lone elemental crystal, invaluable in combat but useless for healing wounds. She scoured her belt for extras, adjusting her coat to check every possible slot.

Empty.

She muttered a string of curses for not checking Dag or any of her fallen comrades before running for cover. *This is amateur, Cyra. You're a ranger captain, not a thick-headed cadet.*

She scanned the woods, finding several bodies splayed amongst the scattered trees. None were Castorian. To heal herself, she needed an evolution crystal, but she dared not risk returning to the battlefield lest she meet a sharpshooter's bullet. She had already fulfilled her moron quota for the morning. *Suck it up and keep moving. You've survived worse . . . probably. Think.*

Where would General Theodor Vance retreat the Castorian forces?

South, then west toward the kingdom's border and reinforcements. The gunshots had sounded from the south, so that direction was a no-go. West it was.

Cyra shed her outer coat before producing a dagger from her belt, cutting several strips from the hem. She pressed the material against the wound, adjusting her belt so it applied pressure. A breath of relief passed

through her lips, and she was about to reposition the now ripped and bloody coat, then hesitated. The Castorian-green military coat identified her as a royal ranger, the gold facings and epaulets marking her rank as captain.

The uniform screamed: Yes, please capture me, a wounded officer all alone—easy pickings. Eyes shifting over the forest floor, Cyra honed in on a dead man. He wore an ankle-length leather duster over a Clovian-blue waistcoat and tan breeches. A wide brimmed rancher-style hat sat amongst the leaves near his face. Clovian militia. Perfect.

Cyra ditched all her obvious Castorian identifiers before shrugging on the dead man's coat and securing the hat over her long chestnut-colored hair. At a distance, she might be mistaken for a Clovian militia soldier. She hoped—*really* hoped.

Twenty minutes into her trek through the forest, she stumbled upon two more gifts from the Ancients—water and a riderless horse.

"Champion cheers to you, Cyra." She smiled at the spotted gray stallion drinking from a small creek flowing at the base of an embankment. By the ornaments and saddle, the horse belonged to a Clovian cavalry soldier, but the rider was nowhere to be found.

She inched her fingers around the loose reins, drawing the animal's head away from the water's edge. "Listen," she whispered, patting the animal's cheek. "I need you to save my ass right now. Whatever you want, it's yours, my honor as . . . whatever I am, this time tomorrow."

After scooping several handfuls of water into her mouth, she quickly filled the canteen attached to the horse's saddle. Grimacing through the fresh spiral of pain, she hoisted herself onto the stallion's back before digging in her heels. "Time to go."

***

By mid-morning, the trees thinned, yielding to rougher terrain of rock, shrub, and brush. To her right a well-beaten dirt road emerged, her eyes snagging on a stone mile marker.

She nudged her mount toward the marker. "One hundred and eighty-seven," she read aloud. One hundred and eighty-seven miles to the royal border. Gaze dragging west along the empty road, Cyra spied the border mountains in the far distance. Somewhere west of those giant peaks was the Kingdom of Castoria, her home.

Home. The word brought her little comfort. It hadn't for some time. Regardless, she never expected to see it again. To survive this fuck-mire of a war.

Maybe she still wouldn't.

Cyra steered the horse along the road. This route was a gamble—faster to the border, but far more exposed. With her injury and lack of supplies, there was little choice. She was not a religious person, quite sure the Divine Ancients did not exist—the pantheon of gods a remnant of the Old World, their true names lost to time, but still worshiped by many. Despite her disbelief, she sent up a prayer now. A prayer for luck. A prayer she wouldn't die out here alone in the wilderness.

The chilly gray morning yielded to a chilly gray afternoon, offering the extra special bonus of a light drizzle of rain. That night she camped near a rocky outcropping off the road, dining on a few sticks of jerky tucked away in the pocket of her waistcoat, stored for dire situations.

Well, the situation was turning pretty fucking dire, Cyra mused as she tore away a chunk of dried meat with her teeth, attempting to warm her hands against the small campfire—a risk, given the situation. But with her wound and the dropping temperatures, a bullet was preferable to freezing to death. Maybe; probably. She didn't really know anymore. She hadn't expected to survive this long. She'd already escaped death far more times than she deserved.

Perhaps fate and luck were finally opting out of saving her ass.

By the look of her oozing wound, Cyra all but concluded that fate and luck had indeed washed their metaphorical hands of her bullshit. "I didn't want to live past twenty-five anyways," she muttered, before resecuring the belt with fresh cloth.

Sleep was patchy, the pain in her side denying anything restorative. Even when she finally succumbed to the black, her dreams shattered any hope of peaceful oblivion—visions of men and women screaming, whinnying horses bolting into the distance, smoke and haze only partially obscuring the violence as she fought for survival.

None of these visions stirred her completely awake, save one—the vision that awakened Cyra most nights. The one in which she stood in a desolate wilderness, watching furious flames devour a barn as she screamed.

The next morning her body was sluggish, her head cloudy, energy at a trickle. The too-salty jerky had left her mouth dry and her hunger unsatisfied. After resuming her journey west, she faced a new challenge—staying conscious.

She thought of her mother's mortification if she died here, her body left as roadside chum for worms and scavengers. It would be a disappointing end, but rather fitting for her role as the disappointing daughter. The macabre musing elicited a low chuckle even as her head lolled sideways. She wasn't sure when she had nodded off, only felt a surge of panic when her eyes finally snapped open, instincts preparing for catastrophe. Her mount was still moving, and amazingly she remained in the saddle. How long had she been unconscious?

The question went unanswered as she blinked furiously, her racing pulse beating sudden alertness through her veins. It all hardened into icy dread at what she saw directly in her path. The road sloped downward into a small valley. And intersecting the opposite upward slope stood a makeshift barricade. Cyra spied five armed men around the barrier. Clovian Infantry, by their cobalt-blue coats and unit insignias. And they had already seen her. *Son of a feckless turd.*

She couldn't turn around—not now, not already halfway down the slope in full view of the enemy. Gritting her teeth, she cursed herself a few more times—each new, self-flagellating expletive more ridiculous than the last. But Cyra wasn't laughing. She was a decorated royal ranger, for fuck's sake. Riding directly into an enemy checkpoint, wounded, armed only with a single elemental crystal, and no clue how many casts it had left.

This little pickle might be the idiotic epitome of her entire career as a Castorian warrior. "Ancients, you deserve to be shot," she grunted under her breath, finishing off her scolding tirade. The soldiers might be fooled by her own imbecility—what brainless dumbass rides straight into a crew of five armed enemy soldiers? A fool or a friendly?

Perhaps she'd play both: a friendly fool.

A confident smile expanded across her face. *Please be more dimwitted than me*.

One of the men marched forward, his back rigid but expression not overly alarmed. "Destination, rank, and unit." Though none of the soldiers had yet raised their long rifles, they looked alert, ready to unleash deadly fire should she present a threat.

Cyra ignored her thundering heart, so loud surely one of them could hear it. “Not a soldier, sir,” she answered. Female Clovian soldiers, even in militias, were far less common than in the Castorian military. Suspicions would only pique should she claim to be a soldier. “The coat is my brother’s. He’s dead. I’m headed toward a small outpost nearby.”

Even in her battered and beaten state, Cyra had possessed the wherewithal to remove the horse’s cavalry indications the prior night and had reluctantly discarded her bracer.

The forearm sheath of buckled leather, designed to hold casting crystals, would give her away as an enemy soldier instantly. Instead, she had secured her lone red elemental crystal to her wrist with a bloodied strip of cloth. If asked, she’d pass off the odd detail as an injury to her forearm, and hope no one probed. *Great plan, Cyra, working swimmingly.*

“I see,” said the soldier, somewhat skeptically. “There was a battle near Willowwood Creek a few days ago. We are looking for scattered royal soldiers. The main Castorian forces retreated south toward Red Hawk Canyon, but deserters or stragglers may venture this way.”

“I haven’t seen any,” Cyra said, hoping her natural olive complexion didn’t appear too abnormally pale or sweaty. “May I pass?”

The soldier opened his mouth, a nod tipping up his chin when another man stalked forward, a foreboding sour look twisting his roughly hewn features.

“I say we search her for weapons first. Then we let her pass,” he barked.

Huffing a sigh, Cyra didn’t bother hiding her annoyance. Dare she bolt for the hill? Or let them search her, hoping they missed her wound and hidden crystal?

Making the more cautious decision, she dismounted before opening her long leather coat, careful to hide the wound with the gathered material in her hand. “No guns, just a dagger and water canteen. May I pass?”

“Remove the coat,” said the sour-faced soldier.

Cyra bit back the choicer words rising to her lips, instead calmly muttering, “Is that really necessary, sir?” She blinked her large pale-blue eyes, conjuring her best I’m-just-a-harmless-damsel face, but was pretty sure she looked more manic-waif than innocent bystander.

“Corporal,” said the soldier who first questioned Cyra. “I think we can let the lady pass.”

Sour-Face was unmoved, however; a dark gleam edged his eyes as they worked over her body. “Take off the coat, or we will remove it for you.”

Cyra glared at the man. *You want to play? Fine.*

Taking a large step back, she turned around, shrugging off the oversized coat. The heavy material pooled around her feet. With each stalling move, her heart quickened, adrenaline ushering a storm through her body—readying for a fight.

When she turned back around, her right arm shot out, passing the point of no return with her next move. An action that would proclaim herself as the enemy, and a threat to be eliminated.

Cold raced down her arm, the magic energy amplified and channeled by the power she siphoned from the crystal tied to her forearm. The strapped stone pulsed with a red glow against her skin as if the crystal possessed its own heartbeat. Frigid air coated the entire limb as energy gathered in her palm. She aimed her wrist like a gun, ready to unleash her killing power.

With years of practiced skill, she conjured shards of ice just above the space where palm met wrist. Razor-edged, they cut through the air in deadly silence, flying nearly as fast as bullets, with enough speed and force to slice through flesh and injure bone.

The first shard hit Sour-Face in the neck, the attack so fast and vicious the others did not immediately react. Their mistake. Before the Clovian soldiers raised their rifles, Cyra’s ice shards attacked in all directions—deadly points striking each man, tearing through their wool coats, one going through an eye.

“She’s a Syphon!” cried one of the soldiers just before a shard sliced through his ear.

Too late. The trained ranger inside Cyra took control with merciless efficiency. Within seconds, all the men were dead or wounded, the latter scrambling for cover behind the barricade. One, however, raised his rifle, muzzle taking aim.

A well-timed ice shard collided with the weapon, pushing the fired shot wide. She focused on conjuring more ice, her element of surprise dwindling with each passing second.

Her luck emptied completely when her next cast yielded nothing but a puff of cold air, red dust leaking from the tied cloth around her forearm. The crystal was spent. *Shit.*

Gritting her teeth, Cyra raced to her mount and yanked herself into the saddle. Kicking with all her strength, she steered the animal around the barricade, veering north.

Shots clamored at her back just as she crested the hill. The sharp sting of a bullet grazed her left arm. She ignored it, concentrating on the steady pound of galloping hooves timed with the hammering beats of her own heart.

Relief only came with distance. Echoing shots faded to nothing. They would not follow her, not with their injuries. A small victory sprinkled over her state of otherwise completely fucked—wounded, unarmed, and riding in the opposite direction of Castoria's retreating units.

Just. Great.

When she finally made camp, she slept worse than the prior night, her everything a blend of cold and pain and discomfort. Her chances of survival dwindled by the hour, her dreams echoing that grim conclusion by supplying a fresh flurry of doom-filled images, always ending with the burning barn and her own screams.

Progress the next day was a hard-fought battle, the hilly terrain yielding to dense forest. By early evening, Cyra stopped, exhaustion sapping her final wisps of strength. After a wobbly dismount, she barely stayed on her feet, offering the horse a triumphant smile. "Not out yet."

Wrong. Her knees buckled, blackness shrouding her vision as her body crumpled to the soft earth—her last glimmer of energy winking out.

So, you'll be food for worms after all. The defeatist thought lingered as her consciousness drifted away. Maybe this was the end she deserved—dying in the middle of nowhere. Alone.

"Ancients forgive me," Cyra breathed her final words before surrendering to the black. At least, wherever she was going next, she would have plenty of company.

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Chapter 2

FOUND

A finger raised her right eyelid, yielding a blur of light for a fleeting moment. The finger immediately retracted and darkness enclosed once more.

“Is she alive?” asked a small voice. The voice of a child.

“She looks dead,” said another voice, sounding even younger. “Come on, Korina, we need to be home before dark.”

Cyra felt a light poke on the cheek. “She’s warm.”

“Maybe she just died.”

“Go get Mother.”

Whatever happened next was like a dream—something happening in her mind or to someone else. She felt her beaten body drag across ground, the dull pain in her side throbbing in protest. Then the surrounding air shifted, muffled voices too blurred to distinguish. Something tugged at her flesh, something sharp and uncomfortable.

Sleep returned once warmth cocooned her body, coaxing her mind to rest at last. She clung to the respite like a drug, swiftly surrendering to its welcome hold.

Consciousness returned slowly, reluctantly, summoned by the sumptuous aromas of roasted bacon and the growling prod of her too-empty stomach.

Eyes cracking open, Cyra immediately scoured her changed surroundings. Indoors. She was indoors, lying on a cot pressed against the far wall of a common room. There was an attached sitting space and kitchen area—all simple, modest.

A home. She was in someone's home. The realization sparked confusion, chased by more unsettling revelations. She wore fresh clothes, her skin smelling of pine-scented soap.

Someone had bathed her body and tended to her wound.

Cyra's eyes found a woman bent over a smoking stove, the source of the mouthwatering smells. Like the dwelling, the woman was ordinary looking, neither stocky nor thin, wearing a long, simple cotton dress with a floral pattern. By the faint lines around her eyes and touches of gray in her braided ink-black hair, she was somewhere in forties. She had warm brown skin and coffee-colored eyes. They looked kind. But appearances could be deceiving.

"You're awake," said the woman.

Cyra flinched at the sound, not realizing the woman had noticed her return to consciousness. She attempted to sit up. A mistake. Dizziness struck, hard and fast, almost sending her back to the pillow, back into darkness.

"Careful," the woman tutted. "You have eaten very little over the last few days. Your strength and energy are extremely low."

Despite the cautions, Cyra stubbornly triumphed to a sitting position. "Days?" she rasped through her too-dry throat. *Days*. She had been here for days in the care of this stranger.

Seven hells.

"That's right." The woman nodded. "Oh no." She quickly faced the stove. "Nearly burned the bacon—quite the almost tragedy." She scooped out the glistening strips of crispy meat from the iron pan, and Cyra's stomach lurched with renewed hunger, parched mouth salivating. She could practically taste the bubbling meat as the woman laid the strips onto a plate.

The prospect of consuming an actual meal banished all thoughts of caution or presumed danger. She could eat a bear—a bear made of bacon. Her ravenous desires must have read all over her face as the woman ladled something into a bowl before padding over to the cot.

It was some sort of porridge, Cyra discovered as she accepted the off-white mush.

“It’s not bacon.” The woman offered an apologetic smile as she retrieved a spoon. “But it will be far easier on your stomach.”

Cyra didn’t mind, devouring the entire bowl like a half-starved dog. It was bland but satisfying, filling her stomach and breathing new life through her weakened body. After draining two cups of water, she paused any more nourishing efforts, allowing her stomach to settle lest she vomit up all her progress. “Where am I?” she croaked out, her ravaged throat only mildly appeased by the food and water.

The woman did not immediately answer, instead busying herself by piling scrambled eggs onto a large plate on the table and setting down the plate of bacon. She opened her mouth to reply when rumbling footsteps tromped through the room.

Two girls and a boy raced toward the table. The eldest girl looked to be about eleven, the boy perhaps eight or nine, and the youngest girl could not be older than three or four.

“Breakfast!” cheered the boy as he climbed into the nearest chair, perching himself up like a famished wolf. The two girls, far more gracefully, also claimed seats.

The eldest child caught sight of Cyra first, her eyes widening in shock. “She’s awake!” the girl cried with a wide, exuberant smile before turning toward the boy and lightly whacking his arm. “I told you she was going to live.”

The boy only shrugged.

“I apologize for my children’s rudeness.” The woman’s disapproving frown volleyed between the older children before addressing Cyra. “Though there were several times you gave us quite the scare.” She blinked, brow clearing as if a thought suddenly struck. “Here I am scolding my children for impoliteness, and I have not introduced myself. My name is Hadara. My eldest, who is gawking at you”—Hadara threw the older girl a look of mild reprimand—“is Korina. To her left is Roone.” The boy waved enthusiastically, his eyes staying pinned on the bacon as if the meat might run away. “And my youngest is Sage.” Hadara nodded at the little girl, who afforded Cyra no interest at all. All three children bore similar physical traits to their mother, the slight outlier being the eldest girl with her hazel eyes and prominent nose.

“Can we eat?” Roone whined.

“Go on.”

Sage and Roone attacked the food. Korina, however, had yet to tear her eyes from Cyra, as if the girl had never seen anything so extraordinary as a strange, wounded woman in her home. “What’s your name?” she asked.

Cyra hesitated, mind a sudden scramble of calculations. “Nyssa,” she blurted before her silence turned suspicious.

Korina’s eyes sparkled. “The name of the night fairy in Myer’s Tales.”

A strained smile thinned Cyra’s lips as she said a breathless, “That’s right.” She had loved Myer’s Tales growing up. Nyssa was her favorite character. A name she had given to one of her dolls as a child. Not a clever alias, but the first name her half-functioning brain supplied.

“Well, Nyssa,” Hadara said, taking a seat next to her children. “I would like to officially welcome you to our home.”

Cyra’s smile stretched, tightening around the edges as she tried to force away her lingering unease. *This is just a rural family—a family who saved your ass. You are not in danger . . . for the moment*. “Thank you, truly,” she said, pulse reluctantly calming. “You saved my life.”

“I found you!” Korina grinned proudly. “Roone thought you were dead.”

Roone squished his youthful face at his elder sister before shoveling a spoonful of eggs into his mouth. “Can we go into town today?” the boy mumbled through a swallow.

“Town?” Cyra’s brow caved. “There is a city nearby?” She had a general sense of the surrounding geography, including cities and major townships. She was not aware of any in this remote valley somewhere in western Vinmore, the least populated of the four Clovian colonies.

Hadara breathed a laugh. “A city? No, though our mayor would like to someday apply such a title to Lofton.”

“Lofton?” Cyra tried and failed to visualize the name on any studied maps of the region.

“Yes, named by our very humble mayor, Ernest Loft,” Hadara said dryly. “He founded the town about six years ago when he discovered a copper source in this valley. The mining town has grown to seven hundred or so residents over the years.” An indulgent smile turned up her lips. “We are not completely out of touch with the rest of Vinmore, certainly not the sad hovel you might be imagining. Lofton boasts a post office with a telegraph—Ernest made sure of that—a saloon, a cafe, and a general store. We are even building a school. The mayor hopes our township will continue

to grow, though he is betting on this bloody war ending soon." A wistful sigh passed through her lips.

Roone fidgeted impatiently, eager eyes rounding. "So, can we go?"

"It has been a week since our last visit," Hadara said, empathy sparking behind her eyes as they regarded Cyra. "You were in such a bad way; I was leery to leave you alone for more than a couple hours. I have seen many taken by less than what you suffered."

"I am sorry to be such an inconvenience," Cyra said quickly, guilt squeezing her chest.

"Saving a life is no inconvenience," Hadara assured, "but if we don't want to live off eggs and garden vegetables, then we had best scurry to town. All of us," she added just as Korina opened her mouth, an alternative plot conspiring behind her youthful features.

After the meal, Roone scampered off to some unseen room, trailed by Sage and a half-pouting Korina. "I stored two of your personal items," Hadara said once the children were gone. She proceeded to retrieve a small box before padding over to the cot.

Cyra's throat unexpectedly closed when she spied the objects inside—a ruby ring and a gold necklace with a small woven charm. Both remnants of happier times in her life. They felt like ghosts now, haunting reminders of innocence lost.

If Hadara noticed the emotion flittering across Cyra's face, she didn't let on. "Your undershirt and waistcoat, I am afraid, were unsalvageable. Your breeches are on top of my dresser, boots by the door."

"Thank you, Hadara," Cyra said after clearing her throat. "And my horse?"

Hadara's brows rose. "In our barn, but I caution you against riding. Your body needs to heal. Give it time."

"Of course," Cyra lied. As soon as the family departed, she grunted up from her cot, stubborn determination driving her to action. She had overburdened these people long enough, and staying would only place them in danger.

The colonial military enacted strict rules around harboring enemy soldiers, with severe consequences to violators. Her imminent departure was for the best.

Cyra's first steps swayed like a newborn filly, but she persevered to find her breeches. Dressing herself was nearly an insurmountable feat. Sweat

beaded across her forehead, unsteady legs teetering her already precarious balance. Perhaps Hadara was right. If simply walking and dressing taxed her to the point of collapse, then riding a horse was a ridiculous notion. Sighing in resignation, she returned to the cot, succumbing to sleep in seconds.

And, thus, her daily battle began, her determination to leave waging war against the limitations of her own stupid body.

Naturally, staying meant more questions. Korina, in particular, was a keen interrogator—blunt and persistent with the eagerness of an attention-starved puppy. An uncomfortable combination for a secret enemy soldier.

Cyra kept her answers vague. She was Nyssa from Saraneca—the colonial city she knew best, which also happened to be over a thousand miles away. Some truth needed to flow through her story lest anyone challenge her on details. And details were what Korina craved most, the eleven-year-old desperate to drink in the wonders of a world beyond this valley. And Cyra obliged the girl's curiosity, more or less.

As for ending up on the brink of death alone in a remote valley? Nyssa from Saraneca joined a Clovian militia nine months ago. Following the battle at Willowwood, her unit chased down a contingent of Castorian fighters. During an ensuing altercation, she sustained an injury and became separated from her party before her ultimate collapse in the forest.

By their nods and empathetic smiles, the story seemed to satisfy the family.

Roone mostly wanted to hear about battles and fighting, Hadara often shushing the boy whenever he asked intruding questions. "Nyssa might not want to discuss the war. We talked about this yesterday, remember?" By the boy's exaggerated nod and vacant smile, they would be repeating the conversation tomorrow. As for little Sage, Cyra discovered the girl was deaf, the family communicating with the child using motions and symbols formed with their hands.

"Sign language," Hadara explained. "We were lucky to find a tutor who is fluent."

Intrigued, and in desperate need of diversion, Cyra soon found herself trying to learn the language. Four-year-old Sage was surprisingly patient with Cyra's inept attempts.

"I hope to teach the language in the new school," Hadara said following a lesson. "I want my children to have the same opportunities as any other

child. This is the spirit of our revolution, I suppose—the idea that any possibility is open to us despite our perceived deficiencies." She chuckled to herself. "Goodness, I sound like my husband."

Cyra's gut automatically twisted at the statement. She had wondered about the father of these children, the ominous absence within this loving family. There was one obvious explanation, but she avoided speaking the question out loud. And yet it must have read on her face, as Hadara supplied a short but solemn answer: "He was part of the 10th Colonial Infantry. Died a year ago."

Cyra schooled her face to reveal nothing but empathy as discomfort crawled up her spine. "I'm sorry" was all she said, swallowing any hints of guilt. How many Clovian soldiers had she killed over years? She rarely thought about their families, or anyone else they left behind.

Another reason you should go, leave these kind people alone.

On the afternoon of Cyra's fifth day after rejoining the conscious world, she decided it was time. Though far from completely healed, stitches still eliciting a mild flinch when attempting anything beyond a brisk walk, she would risk traveling. "I have encumbered you all long enough with my presence," Cyra informed Hadara as she readied herself for departure. "I am forever indebted to you, but I must leave."

Hadara didn't immediately respond, and when she did, the words took Cyra by surprise. "You could stay, you know."

"What?" Cyra blurted, stupidly. She expected a kind but accepting farewell, not an invitation to remain. Surely Hadara was eager to be free of this burdensome stranger.

"You could stay and make a life here in Lofton," Hadara said, matter-of-factly, as if making a mundane observation.

The faint tug of Cyra's heartstrings tempted her to consider the outlandish idea. Impossible, of course, but an interesting mental exercise. "I have obligations," she said, before adding, "There are things you don't know about me." It was as much truth as she would allow, and even that was probably too much.

Hadara gave her a measured look. "I know your secret, Nyssa."

"What?" Cyra's pulse stuttered.

Hadara sighed, as if what she was about to say was obvious. "You were in my care for several days. I know battle scars. I know you have seen things—things that plague your nightmares. I saw the same signs in my

husband during his short leave, the last time I saw him. He dreamed like you. Had scars like you.” A knowing breath slipped from her lips. “I wish he had left too. Some might call it cowardice, but I would give anything to have him back, for our children to have their father.” Her eyes softened as they swept over Cyra’s face—it was an empathetic look, a motherly look. “I do not judge your decision to leave.”

She thinks you are a deserter, Cyra realized. It was a reasonable explanation for her vagaries, she supposed, and certainly explained her urgency to leave. Desertion within the colonial armies was punishable by death, and the penalties for aiding a deserter were nearly as severe as harboring a Castorian soldier.

“So . . .” she began, deciding to neither confirm nor deny the assumption. “You understand why it is dangerous for both of us if I stay."

Hadara only smiled, betraying nothing but warmth. Again, not the reaction Cyra expected. “There is no danger, Nyssa. The war is over.”

Everything inside of Cyra froze. Too stunned to speak. To even think anything other than she had misunderstood, or perhaps the woman was misinformed. *The war is over* was a sentence knocked out of her vocabulary years ago.

Hadara’s smile stretched, a joyful laugh dancing on her lips as she said, “Our town received a telegram this morning carrying the welcome news. It will be known across the colonies already. The Kingdom of Castoria has surrendered. Clovia is free. We won our independence.”

Cyra gaped, unable to hide her disbelief. The Crown surrendered? Castoria lost the war? The news rocked Cyra to her core, leaving her unsure what to feel—relief, sorrow, confusion?

Was this even real?

“I shared your incredulity when I heard the news,” Hadara said. “The telegram reports that all Castorian military units as well as anyone loyal to the kingdom, including royal administrators and government officials, are to remove themselves from the United Provinces of Clovia by the end of the month.” She allowed several seconds of thick silence for the information to resonate. “So, Nyssa, you are free to return to your prior life or start something new—here or anywhere. The choice is yours.”

Not go back? Cyra gawked at Hadara as if what she suggested was incomprehensible.

True, she had never expected to see her homeland again, because she never expected to survive the war. Most of the time, she could barely think past tomorrow.

To not return . . . to let Cyra the ranger die on enemy lands, her body lost within a conflict too soaked in blood to thoroughly account for all its dead. To walk away from her life, from everyone and everything . . . It was unfathomable. And yet, the notion sparked something deep within her soul. Something she hadn't felt in months, too buried in blood and pain and death to ever resurface again—a glimmer of hope. Hope of leaving her sins behind, along with the cloud of darkness stalking at her heels.

"I purchased two bottles of wine while in town this morning," Hadara went on as Cyra silently grappled with this life-changing choice. "I plan on celebrating the hell out of this long-awaited news. So, I beseech you, Nyssa, stay one more night and share a drink with me." Before Cyra could protest, Hadara added, "I did, after all, save your life."

"All right, one more night," Cyra relented. A night to celebrate the end of the war. A night for indulgence. And a morning where she would decide the rest of her life.

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Chapter 3

The Saloon

Four Years Later

Cyra studied the sleeping man at her side, his heavy breathing the only sound that punctured the quiet peace of the late morning. Their bunched bedsheet was pulled down just enough to expose his well-formed chest, ribcage rising and falling in steady rhythm.

The corner of her mouth tugged as the first of several lascivious thoughts drove across her mind, plotting only naughty deeds.

With skin the color of dark sand, onyx-dark eyes, and a jawline that made statues envious, Jiro was classically handsome. He wore his long black hair in a low ponytail most days, but sleep splayed the loose ends over the white bed coverings in haphazard disarray. The man was near flawless save for his chest—a chest marred by scars. Scars Cyra knew well.

"You are doing it again," murmured Jiro, his eyes closed.

"What?" she said innocently, resisting the sly smile pulling at her lips.

"You know what," he said, eyes remaining closed. "I find you watching me sleep creepy." He grabbed the edge of the sheet and rolled over, presenting his back.

The gap between the sheets and bed revealed more scars—battle scars from Jiro's time in Vinmore's 7th Infantry Division.

"Let's go shooting," Cyra said after a few minutes, restless mind too awake to attempt any more sleep. She only received a grunt in reply. "Jiro."

"Sleep."

She playfully poked his spine. “It’s nearly eleven in the morning.”

“Yes, but you were the one who let Sal and his friends stay an hour after closing.”

“It was his birthday.”

Jiro only grunted again.

A devious smile unleashed across Cyra’s face, and she scooted her body against his before she gently slid her hand over his torso. She skimmed the hard lines of his taut abdomen before steering downward. “Perhaps I can entice you to wake up another way,” she purred, voice turning sultry as her hand neared its sinful destination.

At last, Jiro turned toward her, arching an interested brow. “What sort of way?”

Cyra’s smile widened in smug triumph. She rose to her knees before straddling his waist. “The sexy way.” She proceeded to tear off her nightdress, flinging it aside with abandon. A shiver rolled through her shoulders as the crisp air caressed her bare chest, nipples peaking against the late spring cold.

Jiro said nothing as his gaze roved in rapt admiration—scouring her body as if he had never seen her naked before now, as if they did not end most nights intertwined beneath these very bedsheets. His mouth quirked to the side as he indulged in a few more seconds of the view before tugging her closer. “I could . . . be persuaded.”

He always could.

Just as their lips met, Jiro’s hand starting a delicious journey around her breast—*Crash!* The unmistakable sound of shattering glass from below. Cyra groaned against Jiro’s mouth, her body tensing as she contemplated the possible perpetrators of the noise.

“What was that?” Jiro’s eyes narrowed.

Cyra grimaced. “I think . . . Sal may have spent the night on the saloon floor.”

A rumble of irritation huffed through Jiro's lips. “That man is going to bankrupt us.”

“I’ll take care of it before he causes any more damage,” she said, shifting away.

Jiro’s fingers captured her chin, halting any notion of leaving this bed. With a tempting look Cyra rarely refused, he coaxed her lips back toward

his mouth. “I’m sure he’ll be all right for a little while.” The promise of wicked deeds sparked across his features as he kissed her.

Heat poured down her spine, ebbing away the need to investigate any awaiting disasters. *Crash!* The sound of more shattering glass reached their ears.

An annoyed growl rumbled from the back of Jiro’s throat. “Ancients curse that man,” he hissed under his breath, surrendering his efforts at a morning dalliance.

Cyra pulled on her usual fitted trousers, boots, and undershirt before fastening on a custom-made brick-red vest. It was suede, using grommets and tied enclosures like a corset, but heaps more comfortable. The vest was longer in front, parting at her hips beneath a studded belt. The collar of her off-white shirt left open just enough to give a hint of cleavage—at least, as much as her modest chest permitted.

After plaiting her thick mane of chestnut hair into a loose side-braid, Cyra secured a brimmed tawny-colored rancher hat to her head. Jiro sported a similar combination, donning a midnight blue waistcoat and a silver pocket watch on a long chain.

Once dressed, they headed down the creaking wooden stairs and into the main parlor room of the saloon they shared ownership of. The space wasn’t large, its capacity allowing for about fifty or so people, but only if the patrons packed together. There was never a real worry they would run out of space. The business served a series of regulars, most frequenting the saloon for drinks and cards games.

Together they handled the patrons, Jiro acting as dealer for the parlor games while Cyra worked the bar or served tables, and both shared the cleaning chores.

It was a good life, simple, full of laughter and fun and whiskey.

Jiro was a good partner. Cyra had met him three years ago—a war veteran looking for work in Lofton. A year later, they became business partners, buying the saloon together, and sharing a bed not long after.

Despite her fondness for Jiro, for everyone in this town, she took care with her feelings. Her name, her story, her life was all a lie. If Jiro ever discovered the truth . . . if anyone ever discovered the truth, her whole world would end. That was, if the people of Lofton even let her breathe long enough to flee with her life.

She resigned herself to never reveal certain truths—*could* never reveal certain truths. She would live as Nyssa, the ex-militia veteran from Saraneca, till the end of her days, leaving Cyra, the Castorian ranger, as someone else's ghost—someone who died at Willowwood.

Was there guilt over her lies? Certainly. But through the years, she had learned to lock away the conflicted feelings and focus on the present. It was easy most of the time. There were bad days, of course. Cyra locked those away too, distracting herself with the now, like surveying the damage one drunk, middle-aged man had incurred over the course of a single night.

Several glasses and empty mugs had met their end. Two chairs overturned, the smell of cheap whiskey overpowering any other odor forever rooted within the establishment.

Immediately, Cyra spotted the culprit. Sal lay splayed over the wooden floorboards, a whiskey bottle clutched in his right hand, broken glass strewn around his body.

The still inebriated patron lifted his head, attempting a swig of the caramel-brown liquid. The bottle's nose missed his mouth, whiskey leaking down the sides of his face. "Oops," he muttered before actually turning his head and lapping up the spilled liquid like a dog.

Cyra swiftly relieved the intoxicated idiot of the bottle.

"Hey!" Sal balked, wiry brows caving. "It's my birthday."

"Not anymore," Jiro crooned, padding over to the mess, "and you already owe us a fortune. It's time to go home to your wife."

"I don't want to," Sal whined, crossing his arms over his chest in stubborn refusal to do anything but continue his existence on the floor.

Cyra's patience thinned. "You are acting like a child."

"Am not, you're the child," Sal spat, the last few words notably slurred.

Before either Jiro or Cyra could argue with Sal's impeccable logic, a man strode through the saloon's double doors, his head darting around in mild concern. Once he spotted the trio, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Morning Jafa." Cyra smiled in greeting.

Jafa ventured further into the saloon, offering an apologetic grimace as he scrutinized the incurred damage. "I am so sorry, Nyssa, Jiro." He nodded to the pair before glaring down at the man on the floor as if he were a petulant toddler. "Sal snuck off last night. We realized he never made it home only about an hour ago. We will cover any expenses."

“It’s all right,” Jiro said, waving a dismissive hand. Together, he and Jafa peeled Sal off the floor.

“I can stand!” Sal bristled, pushing the two men away once he found his feet. “I’m perfectly—” A long belch truncated the statement.

Cyra cringed as the stale smell of alcohol and morning breath saturated the immediate air, the unpleasant cloud forcing her backward. “You are a drunk fool.”

Sal belched again. “You sound like my wife.”

“Wise woman,” Cyra clipped. “Best get back to her before she leaves you.”

Before Sal could argue, Jafa wrapped an arm around his waist. “I’ll take it from here,” he said, steering the swaying man toward the doors, and they disappeared into the sunny morning.

“What a mess,” Jiro sighed, eying the broken glass and small puddles of liquor.

“Sal, or our saloon?”

Jiro grinned. “Both.”

Cyra held up the bottle of whiskey still clutched in her right hand. A beam of sunlight gleamed through the caramel-gold liquor. Only an ounce or two left—Sal had made quite the impressive dent. Well, best not waste things.

She took a swig, reveling in the pleasant burn. “So, shooting?” she said coyly.

“What about this mess?” Jiro gestured over the wake of Sal's destruction.

Cyra shrugged. “It’ll be here in the afternoon. We can clean up before opening.”

An amused smile curved across Jiro’s lips. “You are a bad influence, Nyssa.”

Handing him the nearly empty whiskey bottle, she only returned a dewy look of wide-eyed innocence, lower lip pouting out in a way she knew Jiro couldn’t resist.

And he didn’t. “All right,” he relented, polishing off the remnants of the whiskey before smacking his lips. “You get the rifles. I’ll get the coffee.”

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“Queen, headshot,” Cyra pronounced as her index finger squeezed the rifle trigger, eyes narrowed through the scope.

Bam! The ear-ringing shot echoed through the silent woods.

The bullet struck one of several playing cards nailed to a wide tree trunk. Venturing a few steps toward her target, Cyra smiled in self-satisfaction. She had struck the Queen of Hearts through the eye. A perfect shot.

“Impressive,” said Jiro. “I’m sure even the queen would agree.”

Cyra craned her head around, a wry grin spreading across her face. “The queen would not know a well-aimed shot if the bullet struck between her eyes from a mile away.” Her gaze returned to the bullet-punctured card. “Plus, I imagine she thinks these weapons are exceptionally primitive.”

“Primitive?” Jiro’s brows arched. “These weapons beat their asses.”

“Yes,” Cyra said, grin softening as she returned to his side. “And I wonder how the king and queen felt when they finally admitted to that fact.”

“And I”—Jiro raised his own rifle, taking aim—“rarely think about them at all.” He fired off several shots, each hitting their mark with swift precision. “I hope they stay holed up in their stone towers for the rest of time . . . the cowards.”

The statement coiled a slight tightness around Cyra’s chest. “Cowards?” she repeated.

“Yes.” Jiro nodded, lowering his rifle. “Anyone who sits in comfort while casually sending thousands to their deaths is a coward. Your turn.”

She lifted her weapon but hesitated, allowing her mind, as she so rarely did these days, to drift to Castoria. “Why do you think we haven’t heard from them?” It was a question she pondered occasionally. The kingdom’s absolute silence following the war and the resulting exodus of Castorians from the liberated colonies was perplexing.

Jiro shrugged dismissively, the light breeze turning up the ends of his long hair. “Who cares? Castoria retreated, closed the kingdom, and now we are forever free of them. I tend to not question fortunate things.”

“It is odd, though,” Cyra persisted, nagging feeling yet to fully release. “I wonder if President Mahano has heard from any royal ambassadors. It just seems strange. Castoria ruled these lands for over a thousand years. And then they gave up so easily.”

Jiro scoffed—the sound a mixture of shock and indigence. “Nearly four years of war is giving up easily?”

Cyra shrugged. “I figured they would eventually negotiate with the United Provinces following the liberation. Oh, come on,” she huffed at the skeptical look on Jiro’s face. “Royalists believe they built these lands, made the Clovian people and cities what they are, and therefore are entitled to their riches. Why let so much wealth go without trying to reclaim something? Four years since the surrender and no attempt to reopen trade routes, industry exchange, nothing? It strikes me as strange.”

A deep frown knitted Jiro’s brows. “You think they’re plotting something?”

Cyra shrugged again. “I can only guess. I hope not. I hope the kingdom leaves Clovia alone once and for all.” Her attention drifted back to the bullet-ridden cards, the awaiting mess at the saloon suddenly pelting her mind. “Perhaps we should head back,” she said, a long breath pushing through her lips.

Jiro hesitated, eying Cyra as a playful look worked across his face. “Your stance was off during your last few shots. Here, let me show you.” He positioned himself behind her body, pressing into her backside as he adjusted her stance. The scents of whiskey and coffee filled her nose as his cheek brushed against hers.

“My stance was perfect.” Cyra arched a brow as her side-eye scrutinized his expression. “In fact, I think I am getting better than you. Perhaps *you* need a few lessons.” She twisted around in his arms, popping open the first few buttons of his waistcoat.

A pleased smile formed across Jiro’s face, mischievous gaze lowering to her mouth. “If these lessons don’t include clothes, then you can teach me whatever you want.” He closed the short gap between them, drawing Cyra into a kiss.

The saloon, after all, would still be waiting for them . . . afterward.

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Chapter 4

The Poster

A half hour later, Cyra and Jiro picked their way along the forest-lined path back to Lofton.

With the flourishing copper mine, the mayor had realized many of his ambitions. A host of ex-soldiers seeking jobs settled within the Vinmore mining town. The mayor's next eager project was a railroad extension, lobbying Governor Royce to expand a stop near Lofton.

Cyra hoped the mayor's persistence failed this time. She liked the town as it was—predictable and peaceful, two things she relished following the chaos of the war.

Soon their boots crunched against the loose dirt and gravel of the main road, lined with buildings built of wood and brick. Cyra spared a few seconds to marvel at the magnificent view from the center of their little township. Lofton was an idyllic place in so many ways, framed with sloping forests to the north and south, lush trees a blanket of emerald this time of year. To the west, snowcapped peaks punctuated the distant horizon, visible on most clear days. Days like today—beautiful and warm. The late spring on the cusp of summer. Perfect.

The town was alive with activity. People bustled down Main Street: visiting one of the now two general stores; posting messages at the post office; buying furniture at the Carpentry House; selling their mined metals

at local refineries; or patronizing one of the many saloons and cafes along the wide road.

There was always something happening in Lofton, and Cyra wouldn't change a thing.

"I am starving," Jiro grumbled.

She sketched a brow. "Oh yeah? Feeling a bit empty?"

"Indeed," he said with a grin.

Stomach growling in agreement, Cyra turned her attention toward Hadara's Cafe, the restaurant right across the lane from their saloon. "I'd love to say a quick hello to Korina. What if I procure us some lunch, and you begin the great clean?"

Jiro nodded, and the two parted ways.

Hadara's Cafe was an enterprise Hadara had opened two years ago, right around the time Jiro and Cyra purchased the saloon. With three children to raise alone, Hadara welcomed the extra income. It was the perfect set-up. Korina worked when she was not in school, and Hadara worked the rest of the time. The cafe employed a full-time cook and part-time kitchen assistants—often older school children or miner's wives.

A tiny bell chimed cheerily as Cyra crossed the threshold into the modest restaurant. Pleasant aromas of baking pastries and roasting meats taunted her too-empty stomach. "Good afternoon, Korina," she greeted, flashing the girl a smile.

"Hello, Nyssa." Korina beamed. Tucking a pad of paper and pencil into her apron, she hurried away from one of the occupied booths along the far wall. There was only a smattering of patrons, the lunch hour for the miners already gone.

"Two of the day's special, please," Cyra said, heat burning in her cheeks as she just now realized that she had skipped a grommet in her haste to relace her vest. *Classy, Cyra*.

"Right away." Korina scurried to place the order behind the counter. "Montero went hunting this morning and sold us two freshly killed bucks," she chatted over her shoulder as she disappeared into the kitchens. The locals loved to hunt in the surrounding forest, selling any extra meat to the Lofton eateries. The meat pies of Hadara's Cafe were the best in town.

Cyra absently contemplated ordering a third pie, her roiling hunger demanding a feast. "How's everything going?" she asked when Korina

reappeared, taking a moment to study the girl in hopes to distract from her ravenous appetite.

The wavy ends of Korina's raven hair reached just past her collarbone. She wore her usual cafe outfit—a cheery yellow apron over a white blouse tucked into a long maroon skirt, the colors matching the cafe's window curtains and painted sign hanging over the front patio.

"Everything is fine," Korina replied, her full lips pulling into a smile, just a touch too strained in the corners to be entirely sincere—an increasingly common habit the last few months.

Something had been troubling the almost sixteen-year-old, but Cyra had been reluctant to probe, wanting the girl to share whatever it was on her own.

"What is that look?" Korian said flatly, features mirroring Cyra's scrutiny.

"What look?" Cyra said innocently.

Korina folded her arms over her chest, hazel eyes narrowing. "The I-am-thinking-something-about-you look."

"All right, I suppose," Cyra began oh-so-casually, "the last few months you've just seemed . . . off. More reserved than usual. Is something bothering you?"

Korina gave Cyra a wide-eyed blink, her spine straightening as she far too dismissively said, "No. No, no, no, no." Again, that overwide, overbright smile stretched across her face, fingers dancing in the air as if playing a tiny, invisible instrument.

Cyra bit back a laugh at the overreaction, cheekily responding, "One more *no* and I'll believe you."

"It was something stupid," Korina dismissed, fingers stiffening as if willing them not to move. "Everything is fine now. I was making a big deal out of nothing. I promise." Her eyes bulged with assurance. "Let's talk about the party."

Cyra was tempted to protest, needle into those visible cracks and break open the *nothing*. Or maybe it truly was nothing—a teenager's drama over a crush, a dispute between friends, a bad grade at school, or a host of other inane things young people fussed over.

With a short sigh, Cyra relented her suspicion-eyes. "I'm coming by the homestead tomorrow to discuss a few party-related particulars with your

mother.” With Korina about to turn sixteen, Cyra readily volunteered the saloon to celebrate the coming festivities.

“Perfect, I—” The chime of the doorbell cut Korina short. It was still around lunch time, locals trickling in around midday was normal. The five men who strode across the threshold, however, were not locals. They wore matching sky-blue jackets, double-breasted, the silver buttons reaching all the way to their necks. Wide-brimmed hats topped their heads, red sashes tied around their waists, tan breeches tucked into black boots. They all were armed, long rifles slung across their backs and at least one pistol strapped to their over-belts.

Vinmore militia. And well-funded by the quality and cleanliness of their clothes and weaponry.

Everything inside Cyra went still, the crawl of something she hadn’t felt in four years working a chill up her spine. Militia were not common here. True, the elected governor had established a provincial militia to act as law-enforcement for the region until something more official could be formed, but the hired soldiers mainly patrolled larger cities or stationed themselves along roads to discourage highwaymen.

They didn’t randomly show up in towns like Lofton unless the local authorities asked for help. Or they were looking for someone.

“Table for five?” Korina asked politely, procuring some paper menus.

“We are not here for a meal,” said one of the men, the only one sporting epaulets on his jacket. “My name is Captain Roderick, commander of Governor James Royce’s private militia. We are here in search of a criminal. A Syphon.”

Korina visibly stiffened. As for Cyra, all the color drained from her face, her worst fears converging before her eyes. She dreamed about this moment. Imagined the day when a group of soldiers knocked on her door. Sometimes they were Castorian, here to drag her across the border in chains. Other times they were Clovian, here to hang her from the nearest tree.

Chains or tree, her fate a coinflip with no good outcomes.

So, tree it was to be, Cyra’s fears concluded, picturing the unfolding events over the course of a blink—the soldiers storming forward and seizing her wrists, decrying her as a Syphon and enemy before hauling her through the town as she watched the people she’d come to love regard her with hate and vitriol.

Stop it. Soldiers charged with arresting enemies don't normally announce themselves.

"You are looking for a Syphon," she said, gathering herself with impeccable speed.

"Male, approximately thirty," Captain Roderick said, his mud-brown eyes sweeping across the cafe, gaze skirting over the handful of patrons enjoying their midday meal. "Governor Royce, however, wishes to speak with any Syphons we locate." His attention swung back to Cyra, features expectant.

A man. They were looking for a man. They weren't here for her. This wasn't the end.

Cyra allowed no small measure of relief to unfurl her insides. "Last I checked, it wasn't against Clovian law to be a Syphon." She kept her expression carefully guarded.

Captain Roderick cocked a brow, stalking closer. "Sounds like something a Syphon would say," he said, scratching the rough bristles of his short beard. He was in his late thirties, with a deeply tanned, almost ruddy, complexion, skin heavily weathered by the sun.

As he searched Cyra's face, something sparked behind his narrowed eyes. It was as if he recognized her from somewhere, but the inner workings of his brain failed to supply any clarifying details.

Cyra resisted the urge to hide herself. To adjust the brim of her hat so it shadowed more of her face. She fought the impulse. What were the chances she and this man had actually crossed paths during the war? Miniscule. Less than miniscule. A coincidence of epic proportions.

Still, unfavorable chance had nearly fucked her over in the past. Rotten luck was a ruthless bastard she knew all too well.

Whatever feeling or intuition weaseling through Captain Roderick's thoughts flickered away with his next blink. "You don't mind if we look around?" He snapped his fingers before either Cyra or Korina had a chance to respond.

The four men spread out, scouring the cafe about to find fuck-all. Only an idiot with a death wish would carry around illegal casting crystals. No sane, secret Syphon would advertise themselves as anything but your average magicless Clovian.

She would know.

Though President Mahano had made it clear being born a Syphon was not a crime, possession and use of casting crystals was illegal under the United Provinces of Clovia Charter. Syphons would be born here, however, a reality this new nation had yet to truly face, in Cyra's opinion. The ability to siphon casting crystals was a trait—like eye or skin color, passed through generations, sometimes skipped, sometimes just appearing in a child after generations of nothing.

Given public sentiment, Clovian-born Syphons needed to hide any manifested abilities if they valued their life. Maybe one day they would be accepted, but that day was not today. It wouldn't be for years. Decades, perhaps.

Cyra shoved the thoughts away, mustering up a look of exacerbated annoyance, as if this entire exercise was a ridiculous farce. "There are no Syphons in this town."

"Perhaps there are, and you simply have no clue," Roderick pressed, his proximity on the edge of intrusion.

Cyra silently debated the consequences of attacking him. Captain Roderick might think twice about swinging his proverbial dick around Lofton after a broken nose. The people here were simple but proud, welcoming to outsiders but intolerant of jackasses.

You are already flirting with fire, Cyra.

Squashing her more violent inclinations, she conjured a dismissive "If we have no clue whether or not someone is a Syphon, then what does it matter?"

"Syphon magic is a virus," Captain Roderick said as if stating a well-known fact. "It turns normal humans into unnatural monsters. We beat those bastards in the war, but the disease lingers." He absently thumbed the pistol holstered to his side. "President Mahano may think Syphons aren't dangerous without their precious crystals, but our governor feels much as the people of Vinmore do—that they are a plague to our new nation."

It was an effort not to react. Not to start pummeling the absoluteness storming across this ignorant prick's face. Cyra resisted, barely, burying both her pride and indignation with a hard swallow. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a shiver roll through Korina's shoulders.

"If you are done with your futile search," Cyra bit out, "on behalf of the cafe's owner, I kindly request you and your men to permanently vacate the premises." It was as cordial as she could manage given the filth sputtering

from this man's lips. Of course, she had met many Rodericks over the years—war veterans and average citizens alike. She rarely let their hate bother her, but something about the way it spewed from this walking pustule, a man representing someone with real power in this new country, was both upsetting and worrying.

"Not quite yet," said Roderick, sounding completely at ease as he produced a parchment and thrust it in Cyra's face. "The fugitive we are looking for is this man."

"I don't have my reading glasses," she said dryly, pointedly ignoring the poster.

Korina cleared her throat as if to silently scold, *The sooner we comply the sooner they are gone*. The girl's stress-born energy encouraged Cyra's eyes to huffily skirt over the parchment, reading the printed words at the bottom.

Man, approximately thirty years old. Physical features of brown hair, brown eyes, and copper-brown complexion. He is six foot four inches tall, and goes by the name of Finn. Wanted alive and delivered to Governor James Royce for the sum of one thousand silver heads.

Cyra froze, the breath stilling in her lungs. *Impossible* was the only word her stunned brain offered. She forced her gaze to the black and white etching of the man in question. His jaw was square, covered with a peppering of stubble, straight nose rendered over pursed lips, thick brows etched with a furrow between them. His eyes were dark and intense.

Eyes she knew—she knew that look. Knew *him*.

He was older than she remembered, of course, his hair longer, ends almost touching the tops of his shoulders. Still, there was no mistaking who this man was even without his name written below the likeness.

Finn.

Cold overwhelmed her body as if she had just plunged into an ice bath. She was utterly transfixed by the poster, half wondering if her mind imagined this face, this ghost from her past.

"Have you seen this man around here?" Captain Roderick asked, the question laced with suspicion as he scrutinized Cyra's reaction.

"No," she said far too quickly, pulse a scattered mess as she struggled to regain her composure. "No," she reiterated with forced calm. "The exorbitant reward had me startled. Surely a thousand silver heads is far too much for one errant Syphon." Not an award-winning performance, but the

best she could assemble given the circumstances. The sum was indeed extraordinary. A hundred silver heads was more than most made mining copper over the stretch of six months. A thousand was a small fortune.

“This man is guilty of siphoning crystals as well as running an illegal crystal trade,” Roderick said, “procuring, smuggling, and selling casting crystals to Tyrenese pirates and other Syphon-scoundrels here in the provinces. Governor Royce believes he has a whole network.” His mouth hitched into a cruel smile. “Catch this man, and we clean up all the trash.”

Cyra thrust the poster back at the man. “Then I wish you luck, Captain,” she clipped with a get-the-fuck-out look on her face.

Mercifully, they did, the five soldiers lumbering out of the cafe, the chime cheering on their exit. But Cyra found little relief, not with Finn’s face seared in the back of her mind like a fresh brand. A host of paranoid questions burrowed through her thoughts, but she shoved them all away. Later. She’d think about it later.

“Your food is probably ready,” Korina stuttered, a tremor in her voice as she bustled to the kitchens. She returned with two parcels, her eyes never quite finding Cyra’s face.

“Don’t worry about the militia soldiers,” Cyra said, assuming that’s what had the girl shaken. “They’ll leave once they tire themselves out, like your brother after too much chocolate.”

The corners of Korina’s mouth twitched but never formed a full smile, leaving Cyra to wonder if it was the militia troubling the girl, or the man they pursued.

Finn, the name reverberated in her mind like an incessant bird’s chirp. *Finn. Finn. Finn.*

Hoping to escape the silent calls, Cyra ushered herself out of the cafe with the food parcels in hand, scurrying across the short distance to the saloon just as three more militia soldiers exited through the double-doors.

They brushed past Cyra without sparing her a look, off to delight someone else with their bigotry. Gritting her teeth, she bustled across the main floor, finding Jiro in a similar state of annoyance, the man grunting loudly as he mopped the floor.

“I see you enjoyed Governor Royce’s militia soldiers as much as I did over at the cafe,” Cyra said dryly, setting the food parcels on the bar.

Jiro abandoned the mop, storming toward the food like a possessed bull. His jaw muscles feathered several times, his already lean face betraying

every subtle tick. “They inhaled half a bottle of rum without paying,” he griped as he tore open one of the parcels. “Entitled bastards. You’d think they were hunting for members of the royal family instead of some Syphon smuggler causing mischief.” He quickly freed the meat pie from its packaging, gobbling down several overlarge bites before he noticed the look on Cyra’s face. “Everything all right?” He frowned, concern gathering behind his eyes. “The militia pricks didn’t try anything at the cafe, did they?”

“No,” Cyra said, struggling to keep her crashing emotions at bay. Four years. Four years of nothing. Of peace. Of glorious monotony, and now a militia was sniffing around looking for Finn. *Finn*. It was still difficult to believe. As if fate, coincidence, and chance had teamed up to shit all over her life.

She schooled her face to reveal nothing but mild irritation. “You know I can’t stand when men attempt to intimidate defenseless women.”

Jiro’s brows lifted as he brushed away bits of pastry flakes from his chin. “Defenseless women?”

“As far as they know.” Cyra worked up a smile that almost appeared genuine.

“If they interacted with you, then I’d bet they know,” Jiro said after another few bites of food before reaching for something on the bar. “Did you see this?” He produced the wanted poster. *Finn’s* wanted poster.

Cyra battled a blanch. “Unfortunately.” All the moisture in her mouth dried up as she stared down at her untouched meat pie. The pastry was a perfect golden-brown, steam billowing up through the small punctures across the top. Aromas of roasted venison, sage, thyme, and rosemary tickled her nose. Too bad her appetite had shriveled up and died.

“A thousand silver heads.” Jiro gave a long whistle. “I’m half-tempted to form a posse and go after the Syphon worm ourselves.”

“And what would we do with that much money?” she asked, trying to recapture a casual timber.

Jiro’s gaze worked around the bar before his eyes flew upward to their living quarters. “Buy that porcelain bathtub you’ve had your eye on the last two months.” His attention found their shelves of liquor behind the bar. “Upgrade our stocks with liquors less likely to burn a hole through our stomachs.” His eyes traced back to Cyra, his wistfulness souring. “Of course, if we actually caught this Syphon, then we’d be required to deliver

him to Governor Royce.” His upper lip curled with the name. “Never liked the man.”

“James Royce was a captain in the navy, right?” Cyra forced a small bite of meat pie down her sandpaper throat. It left a punch of salt on her tongue, stomach twisting in protest.

“He bought his rank,” Jiro said bitterly, oblivious to Cyra’s struggles. “The man was a merchant before the war. He owned several ships the Clovian military was desperate to leverage. Royce made himself rich by maneuvering his fleet to guard his own supply lines, using the money to build a vanity project in the middle of a swamp.” Jiro’s expression darkened. “He is a war profiteer turned political hack—spewing nationalistic rhetoric to win his position as governor of Vinmore. I hope his militia find their mark and get the fuck out of this valley.” He devoured the rest of the meat pie before resuming his efforts to mop up the floor.

Cyra managed a few more meager bites, despite her stomach revolting against any more food. Everything made worse anytime her eyes skirted near the poster on the bar top.

I know your secret, Finn’s visage whispered long after she ripped the thing in half and shoved the pieces into a waste bin.

For the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, she tried not to think about the poster, about the possibility of Finn lurking somewhere nearby. Was it coincidence? Was it fate? Was he looking for her? And if so, why?

Each question only coursed more panic, more heart-racing fear through her veins. Fear she already knew the answers. Fear her life in this peaceful town barreled toward its end.

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Chapter 5

KORINA

The walk to Hadara's homestead the next day breathed new focus. She would not dwell on the poster. Would not panic. Not yet. First Korina's party, then she'd sort out any uncomfortable truths regarding . . . certain past someones.

As Cyra neared the familiar residence, she spotted Hadara pacing in front of the homestead, her salted-black hair swishing back and forth, her brow heavily knitted.

"Finally, you're here," Hadara clipped.

Cyra straightened at the curt greeting, unusual for the even-keeled woman. "Yes . . . I said between eleven and noon. Is something wrong?"

Nothing could have prepared her for what spilled from Hadara's mouth.

"Korina ran away," she said, concern breaking through her agitation. "She took a horse early this morning. I found her note only an hour ago."

"*What*?" Cyra's eyes widened in shock, and she tried and failed to piece together some rational explanation. Korina wasn't a rash or flighty girl. She had a zest for life but was generally cautious, a rule follower. "Why would Korina run away?"

Hadara stopped in her tracks, coffee-brown eyes pinning to Cyra's face with an enigmatic look as if preparing to reveal something outrageous. And she was. Her next words were utterly extraordinary. "Korina is a Syphon."

The air around Cyra stilled. Her lips parted, but no words formed. It was like her brain had just stopped working, perhaps too full from yesterday's bombshell to fully comprehend what Hadara was saying. Korina was a Syphon. Impossible. Ridiculous.

The muddled thoughts gave way to a myriad of possible responses, each option piling a new layer of dread through Cyra. Before the tense silence stretched too long, she said, "How do you know?"

Hadara strode closer, her features betraying a startling lack of warmth. "I have known for years," she breathed, glowering up at Cyra as if this situation was all her fault.

The look snaked a foreboding shiver through Cyra's body. "If Korina was born a Syphon," she said slowly, "the Castorian Census Bureau would have collected her years ago." The CCB were thorough in assessing colonial children during census checks before the war.

An impatient sigh listed from Hadara's lips. "The Bureau came to our former township when Korina was six. I hid her away. Then my husband and I moved here. Then the war started."

Cyra digested this information, selecting her next words carefully. "Syphon traits rarely physically manifest except through the use of casting crystals," she said, her forced ease almost believable. "When they do, it's subtle . . . or so I've heard. Is there another reason Korina would leave so suddenly?"

Hadara turned her head away, attention diverting to nothing in particular. "Korina is a Syphon. As are you, Nyssa." She spoke with unnerving calm, as if making a casual observation about the weather or someone's attire, and not speaking Cyra's most-guarded secret out loud.

"What?" Cyra blurted stupidly, whirling thoughts failing to conjure a smarter response.

Hadara's head swung back to Cyra. "Do you think I do not know a Castorian soldier when I see one?" she said in the same quiet calm. A dangerous calm.

"Hadara . . ." Cyra trailed off, almost inching backward, her thumping pulse betraying all the ready lies rising to her lips.

"Come on, Nyssa," Hadara said more gently. "You think me so blind? I knew you were Castorian the moment Korina led me to your almost corpse in the forest. I know Nyssa is not your real name." Her expression revealed just the hint of a reprimand, as if Cyra was one of her misbehaving children.

“Next time do not choose a character from a well-known storybook. A lie so lazy, it was almost insulting.”

Cyra gaped at Hadara, her mind buzzing in shock—in defense. Hadara knew this whole time? Should she deny the accusation? Should she apologize? Throw herself at Hadara’s feet and beg forgiveness?

“Listen to me.” Hadara’s features softened. “The day Korina found you, I saw a Castorian soldier, but I also saw a woman lost, about to die, and in dire need of help. At the time, I had been praying to the Ancients for advice on what to do with my children—with Korina. I needed help. I needed a path forward, and there you were, in an even more sorry state than myself. I thought maybe we could help each other, and maybe someday you could help my daughter.” She took a deep, trembling breath. “Whatever secrets you have, I don’t care. I don’t care what you did in the war. All I care about is my daughter. The militia soldiers scared her enough to run away. I need you to find Korina and help her. Show her that she is not alone.”

Cyra swallowed, her entire body a knotted mess. She was still half-tempted to deny Hadara’s claims, or at least offer an excuse, an explanation as to why.

“All right” was all she said in the end. “I’ll find her.”

***

The silver-blue lake came into view around midday. Hadara said it was the most likely place Korina would go. The family once considered building a lakeside cabin along the water’s edge before settling further south, nearer to the budding township. Korina held fond memories of this picturesque place, even camping near the crystalline waters for a few days each summer.

“Start there,” Hadara had instructed as Cyra readied her stallion to begin her search.

Korina was a good rider. Catching up to the missing girl over the two-day trek to the lake bore little chance of success. The journey, however, allowed Cyra time to consider everything.

After years of nothing, of performing the same daily tasks, suddenly her curated world threatened to upend. Selfishly, she pondered the consequences of these unforeseen strikes to her gloriously mundane life. The changes, if any, they would bring. Two days of riding yielded no satisfying answers. Only more questions. More fears. More what-ifs.

After securing her horse where he could reach both water and grass, Cyra hiked on foot around the lake, looking for signs of recent human activity. Korina wasn't exactly a trained army scout. Cyra hoped to pick up her trail quickly—assuming Hadara was right about the girl coming to this place.

Within the hour, she found telltale broken branches and footprints in the dirt. Following the tracks, she weaved through the trees lining the lake's mostly rocky shore, climbing over roots and fallen logs before reaching a small beach.

Just up from the sand, sitting amongst scattered leaves and branches, was Korina. The teen rested her chin on her arms, knees hugging her chest as she stared out over the still water. Her eyes were red and puffy, framed with dark circles, her hair a disheveled mess.

Cyra's heart squeezed at the devastation on the girl's face, all thoughts of her own troubles vanishing. "Korina," she said softly, inching closer as if approaching a timid deer.

Korina jerked her head up, blinking rapidly at Cyra's sudden appearance. Her gaze flew beyond Cyra, as if to ensure she had come alone, before returning to her face. "What are you doing here, Nyssa?" she demanded, squeezing her knees harder against her body.

"I spoke to your mother." Cyra ventured a few steps closer. "She told me why you left." Korina's eyes filled, lower lip trembling as her entire body shook. The reaction deepened the ache in Cyra's heart. "Come home, Korina."

Korina shook her head. "You heard what that militia captain said. Syphon magic is a disease."

"Spoken by an ignorant ass of a man." Cyra's boots sank into the gravelly sand as she claimed a seat next to Korina.

The teenager's lips trembled, as if to hold in a sob, giving a small shake of her head. "Most of Vinmore agrees," she said through a broken whisper. "My father fought against them in the war."

"Your father fought against the Kingdom of Castoria," Cyra said steadily. "Syphons are born to both Castorian and Clovian families alike." She placed her hand on Korina's shoulder. Korina flinched but didn't push it away. "Having extra abilities does not make you better or worse than anyone else."

“Everyone will hate me.” Korina’s watery eyes shifted toward the lake’s edge. “No one will understand. At best, they’ll cast me out, or perhaps sell me to those soldiers, who will take me to Governor Royce’s estate and no one will ever see me again.”

“I swear to you, Korina, I will never let that happen,” Cyra promised.

Korina dug her nails into her long skirt. “My mother should have let the CCB take me when I was a child.”

“Well, she didn’t, and you are here.” Cyra tried to mimic Hadara’s gentle but firm way she spoke to her children. “And now, without the Castorian Census Bureau doing their annual collection, there will be more Clovian-born Syphons. You won’t be alone.”

Korina’s features hardened as her gaze ripped to Cyra. “Clovians hate Syphons—more people agree with Captain Roderick’s sentiments than not. They will always be in the vast minority here. Hunted, if Governor Royce has his way. And I can’t go to Castoria and live amongst our enemies . . . the people who killed my father.” Two fat tears broke free of her lashes and trailed down her face.

“Those are not your only choices,” Cyra said. “You could continue your life as it is. Most Syphons can only manifest puffs of cool or warm air without the aid of casting crystals, inherent powers easily hidden.” She hesitated, not quite sure how best to phrase her next question. “Are you sure you possess these abilities?”

Maybe all this fuss was for nothing. *Please let this fuss be for nothing.*

A pronounced swallow bobbed in Korina’s throat. She found a dry leaf on the ground and touched the pointed tip. Frost rolled over the uneven surface, coating the edges and willowy stem. The leaf stiffened against the effect—a perfect freezing cast.

Cyra’s eyebrows flew up. For just a moment, she forgot where and why she was here, transported back in time—back to a life, a world, she left behind, forgotten. Or so she thought.

“Impressive,” she blurted. A small percentage of Syphons could manifest weak casts without the siphoning aid of casting crystals, but far fewer possessed any amount of control or precision.

“Impressive?” Korina scoffed. “How can you say that? It’s a curse.”

“Someone’s curse is another’s blessing.” Cyra reappraised Korina, as if seeing her for the first time. The girl would have done well at Wyndfyre Academy.

The errant thought cascaded a wash of memories, of her own youth—when she was Korina's age. It felt like a lifetime ago.

"I used to just ignore it," Korina said bitterly, staring at her fingers as if each one betrayed her. "Now, I rather agree with Captain Roderick. It's a disease. An affliction I just want to go away." A despondent sigh shuddered past her lips. "You can't possibly understand, Nyssa."

A deep breath expanded Cyra's lungs, heart deciding her next course of action—damn the consequences. "You might be surprised." She brushed her index finger against the jagged edge of another leaf. The familiar flash of heat, so long dormant, rushed a tingling sensation through her right arm, and a small flame sputtered forth, consuming the leaf in seconds.

Korina's mouth dropped open, and she stared transfixed as it burned, a small trail of smoke rising up from the blackened particles. After a few speechless seconds, her eyes dragged to Cyra's face, and horrified realization bloomed.

Cyra kept her expression guarded despite the bristling nerves unsettling her entire body, the emotions swiftly joined by a steaming pile of guilt at this revelation.

"You . . . you are a Syphon?" Korina stammered, blinking rapidly in abject horror as her mind made all the right connections. "You're Castorian." The words ripped free like a curse, and she slid backward over the sand, staring at Cyra like she had sprouted horns and claws.

"Yes." Cyra swallowed, trying to quell the sprig of hurt at Korina's instincts to get away from her, and the guilt spawned from the trail of lies spilled over four long years.

"And you fought in the war *against* Clovia?" Accusation laced each word, Korina's fear no longer directed at her own troubles but aimed squarely at Cyra.

"Yes." Cyra nodded, heart shredding into tiny pieces at Korina's visible revulsion. The urge to explain, to wipe away the heart-twisting look on Korina's face, trapped Cyra's chest in a vice, prompting her to blurt out the next words in quick, clumsy succession: "After the war, after Willowwood, I didn't want to be Castorian anymore. I no longer believed in their—*our*—fight, so I decided to start a new life in Lofton."

Not the whole truth, but hopefully enough for now. *Please let it be enough.*

It wasn’t. Not even close. The anger and betrayal splashed across Korina’s face only burned brighter. “You’re the enemy.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut. “No, not anymore.”

“So, what are you then?” Korina huffed, disgust taking root across her face. “A deserter? A defector? A traitor?”

Each name was its own stab of a blade, and none entirely inaccurate. “To some,” Cyra said thickly. “Personally, I prefer renegade.” Her entreating smile was met with pure ice. “To you,” she added softly, “I am your friend. I have been for years.”

“You are a liar,” Korina bit back, her eyes filling with furious tears.

“Yes,” Cyra conceded, emotions close to cratering. If she could just get one person to understand. To forgive her deceptions, everything would be all right. “I lied, but I’m still the same person I was a week ago, a month ago, a year. And I can help you, if you want me to.”

Korina was silent for several long seconds, and Cyra was sure the word *no* rose to her lips more than once. Then her gaze fell, working over the still-frozen leaf resting next to the ashes of Cyra’s cast. A tempest of conflicting emotions battled across her face—confusion, hurt, anger, fear. “I’m not sure” was all she said, but it gave Cyra hope.

“All right, well, what if we camped out here for the night?” she offered. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, and then you can decide if I’m your enemy or your friend. In the morning, we will go back to Lofton. Your mother is worried sick. She loves you, and just wants you to be safe.”

Korina was silent for a full minute before she finally nodded, and one of the many knots in Cyra’s gut released. “My horse is further south, where there’s a better spot for an overnight camp.”

Korina only spared another quiet nod, reluctantly following Cyra’s lead in telling silence. They set up camp under the fading light, the silence between them only thickening as the emotional war behind Korina’s clouded expression found no resolution.

As they settled around the campfire, Cyra braced for the impending interrogation, mentally preparing to revisit the life she swore she’d never speak of again.

“So,” Korina said at last, breaking the long silence. “Were you born in Castoria? Or were you taken by the CCB as a child?"

Stalling, Cyra procured a flask from her pack and indulged in a swig. Korina asking questions was a good sign, but after spending so long hiding

from her past—Nyssa entrenched into all aspects of who she was now—the truth was difficult. Unnatural.

"I was born in Castoria," she admitted, relishing the lingering burn of whiskey on her tongue, "but I knew good men and women who were Clovian-Chosen."

Korina gave a dry snort. "Chosen. A generous description for kidnapping children."

A sad smile stretched across Cyra's face. "Believe it or not, the ruling class of the kingdom do not see it that way. They thought their actions and laws benefited Clovian-born Syphons and their families. Those chose—er, taken, were given a living and a formal education with plenty of opportunities to succeed. They—*we*—thought we were doing the people of Clovia a service while benefiting the kingdom as well."

Korina gave no verbal response. She didn't need to: the revulsion oozing off her features made her opinions about the collection program more than clear.

"It wasn't right," Cyra said, automatic defenses rising, "but that was the world I grew up in. The rhetoric we all accepted for generations—a way of life drummed into our minds."

Korina's gaze shifted to the campfire's flames, disgust giving way to something else. "What would it have been like for me?" she asked, a twinge of reluctant curiosity wrinkling her brow. "What would have happened if the CCB had taken me away when I was a child?"

Relief bloomed at a less personal question—one so much easier to answer. "You and the other colonial children would have been sent to Castorian schools. You would have lived in dormitories, learned to read and write, learned the history of Castoria, learned about your own abilities—and how to siphon casting crystals. How this power makes you special. Learned about the things you might accomplish once you reached your full potential as a trained Syphon."

"Didn't children want to leave?"

"Some, but children's minds are easily molded." There was no point in dancing around this uncomfortable fact, not now. "That is why they are taken so young—usually between five and eight. By the time they're your age, they are just as driven and passionate about their futures in Castorian society as those born and raised there."

More tentative curiosity poured across Korina's face. And with a heavy helping of hesitancy, she asked, "So, Syphons my age—what would they do with me?"

The rest of the tightness in Cyra's chest eased as she answered: "Around fifteen, you would be sent to an academy. The Royal Castorian Academy of Wyndfyre is the top school for Syphons. Given what I have seen from you . . ." She smiled. "You would be accepted in a heartbeat. And at Wyndfyre, you would meet other teenagers from all over the continent, Clovian-Chosen along with the native-born Castorians. Students go through four years of education, then graduation, and then track assignment."

"Track assignment?"

"Post-graduation professional tracks, starting as a trainee or apprentice. Generally, you're required to pursue your assigned track, slotted into the First or Second Class, for at least four years. Afterward, your future is your own—open a business, go into politics . . . anything, really."

"So . . . probably not a cafe waitress." Korina managed a weak smile.

The attempt at a joke lifted a flurry of hope in Cyra. "The perceived menial jobs are generally reserved for Castorians not born with siphon abilities, or those who do not accept the Syphon Code of Conduct."

"Castorians are not all born Syphons?"

"No. Otherwise, the kingdom likely wouldn't have needed to collect children from the colonies. The ability to siphon passes by blood. Two Syphons have the greatest chance of producing a child with siphoning abilities. The chances are lower if only one parent is a Syphon, and very rare if neither parent is a Syphon. But"—Cyra gestured at Korina—"not impossible."

Korina fell silent again, and Cyra waited for more questions about aspects of Castorian society. Instead, Korina asked, "Can you tell me what your life was like at my age?"

The question caught Cyra off-guard, automatic walls rising against discussing anything personal. At the same time, there was a reluctant fascination behind Korina's request that bid Cyra to spill all of her secrets. To rebuild the damaged trust through truth and honesty. And so, for the first time in a long, long while, she opened her vault of memories and spoke about her past.

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Chapter 6

Wyndfyre Academy

Fourteen Years Ago

"Over two thousand years ago, the Divine Ancients led our four ancestral tribes to our great continent from the dying Old World of Kroatoa," recited the boy standing on an elevated stage before an assembly of students. As he spoke, four children representing each tribe danced around him. "First came the Havaqua, then the Vinmorian, the Tyrenese, and finally the Fujara, each tribe settling the lands east of the Mountain Divide."

"This is *so* boring," Aurelia whined in Cyra's ear. "How many times do we have to listen to this drivel?"

Cyra arched an amused brow. "Weren't you the narrator in your primary school?"

"Yes, but I made our history sound tolerable," Aurelia said impatiently. "This is worse than listening to my grandmother snoring." She wrinkled her nose down at herself. "Also, these school uniforms do absolutely nothing for me. Do you think we have to wear them all the time?"

Their freshman uniforms matched: a loud canary yellow coat cut in a military style and buttoned over white blouses and tan breeches. They had donned it for the first time only an hour ago, and neither Cyra nor Aurelia found them particularly flattering. Everyone resembled large ears of corn—well, the freshmen class, at least. Sophomores wore orange, juniors wore

red, and seniors had the choice of white or black, though they all matched in their brilliant whites for the opening assembly.

Cyra's attention skirted over the four classes, all seated within the high-ceilinged assembly hall, about a hundred students per year.

"For centuries the ancient tribes warred with each other," continued the narrating boy. The children representing the four tribes began to, somewhat comically, fight each other with wooden sticks. "They warred over land, over power, over resources. There was no peace. Then, more than a thousand years ago, Mei and Narses changed everything." Two new children, a boy and a girl, stepped onto the stage holding hands. "The Ancients gifted Mei and Narses with magic, beseeching the pair to find others with this power. Two became many." A group of children joined the representation of Mei and Narses. Together, they roamed the stage in an awkward cluster. "These pioneers searched for new land beyond the Mountain Divide. Here they established a community of tranquil prosperity. They called this land Castoria."

"Please." Aurelia rolled her eyes. "I bet our ancestors were just as prickly as we are today. At least the pint-sized bore is getting to the good part."

Cyra bit back a chuckle.

"The Ancients blessed the Castorians with powerful amplifiers in the form of three crystals." The three performing children all held up a different colored crystal: red, black, translucent. "A crystal of the elements!" the young orator announced dramatically, and the child holding the red crystal raised her arm.

Aurelia snorted, and Cyra poked her.

"The evolution crystal!"

The child holding the translucent crystal raised his arm.

"And the crystal of time!"

The last child raised the black crystal, so all three children stood at the points of a triangle.

"With this power, the people of Castoria established order over the warring tribal lands, forming the four colonies of Clovia. From the Castorian capital of Tarrinth to the Clovian coastal city of Saraneca, the Kingdom of Castoria and its colonies live on in peace. Through Castorian leadership and crystal-wielding abilities, we are all prosperous. And here, at Wyndfyre Academy, you will continue this promising future."

Each child held their final poses for several dramatic beats before lining up and bowing to the mostly enthusiastic claps from the audience of staff and students.

“Finally,” Aurelia groaned, straightening in her seat as the next person approached the central podium: Dean Anders Malcom, his billowy robes of deep purple swishing with his long strides.

“A warm welcome to you all,” Dean Malcom began. In his mid-fifties, Malcom boasted a pointed nose on his narrow face, features lending him a hawklike effect only accentuated by his slicked-back, silver-blond hair and pallid complexion. “A special welcome to our freshmen class. May the start of your journey here at Wyndfyre be fruitful.” He nodded to the sea of yellow-clad freshmen. “I’ve already heard-told of several promising students amongst you. I expect great things over the next four years.”

Aurelia nudged Cyra with her elbow. “You know he’s talking about you, Cyra, The Perfect,” she whispered, the comment earning an eyeroll from Cyra. “Although . . . have you heard of Finn and Fabien Calderis?” She pointed at two students one row ahead of them.

Cyra shook her head, scrutinizing the boys. “Are they part of the Clovian-Chosen in our class?” she whispered back. Though she didn’t recognize the boys, it didn’t necessarily mean they were Clovian. Students from all across Castoria applied to Wyndfyre Academy.

“Yes,” Aurelia confirmed, “twins. Supposedly they’re incredible, especially Finn.” A teasing smile stretched across her face. “They’re your main competition.”

Brows knitting, Cyra appraised Finn and Fabien again. The boys were not identical but did have similar features with their copper-toned complexion and cedar-brown locks. The one Aurelia indicated as Finn wore his hair longer and unkempt, so the ends curled well past his ears, a thick wave resting across his forehead. He was tall and lanky and presently slouching in his seat, looking bored as he tugged at his yellow coat, the freshmen uniform too wide across his shoulders. The other boy, Fabien, was shorter, his hair neater than his brother and uniform better suited for his broader build. He sat straight-backed in the chair, listening to the dean attentively.

Both boys were attractive. Maybe not *drool like an idiot* attractive, but certainly cute, in a boyish sort of way.

“And, finally, to our seniors,” continued Dean Malcom, drawing Cyra’s attention back to the stage. “This year marks the end of your Wyndfyre journey. I speak on behalf of our entire staff when I say that you have made us all proud. We wish you well as your time here comes to a close. And now, a word from our student body president, Kasian Byrogan.”

The students and staff applauded as a young man of eighteen approached the podium. His senior class uniform fit perfectly, as if tailored specifically for his athletic body. The brilliant white suited his dark olive skin, though most colors suited Kasian Byrogan, the young man annoyingly dashing in everything he wore.

Once the clapping died down, Kasian’s blue eyes danced over the assembled students, and a wide smile showed off his symmetrical jaw, his pearly-white teeth perfectly straight.

“Seven hells, your brother is gorgeous,” Aurelia sighed at Cyra dreamily, doughy eyes fixed on Kasian as he began his speech. “Those cheekbones alone . . .” A rosy pink dusted her alabaster cheeks, her long eyelashes batting animatedly. To Cyra’s grimace, she huffed, “I don’t know why you look so affronted. You have those same good looks—perfect skin, blue eyes, full lips, thick and wavy hair, whereas I have to work with this mousey mess over here.” She tugged at one of her ash-blond locks with a grimace.

Cyra’s cheeks warmed at Aurelia’s compliments. Yes, she and her brother shared similar physical features, but Kasian sported a slightly darker complexion, his hair closer to a chocolate brown than her chestnut. Their athletic frames were certainly more complimentary on a man, though Cyra was grateful for her taller than average height. Less grateful for her less than impressive boobs.

Rolling her eyes, Cyra said, “Oh, please, people would kill to look like you.” Aurelia was blessed with lovely curves and stunning emerald green eyes.

“Maybe.” Aurelia shrugged, but Cyra did not miss the tug of a satisfied smirk hitching the corner of her mouth. “I wonder if your brother would think so . . .”

“He might. His girlfriend Artemisia would not.”

Aurelia only shrugged, decidedly unconcerned.

“I want to finish by telling all of you, but especially the freshmen,” Kasian said, rounding off his speech, “that your time here will be some of

the best years of your life.” He paused, flashing his brilliant smile at the large room before resting his gaze on the freshmen. “This is your time to shine. To show that, no matter your name, whether you are colonial or Castorian born, you can excel, achieving greater heights than you ever dreamed. There will be moments of self-doubt, but always believe that you are here because of the promise others saw in you. And lastly: have fun, take risks, and make mistakes.”

The students of the assembly clapped loudly, some even offering a few hoots and cheers. Shortly thereafter, they were dismissed.

Official classes didn’t start until the next day, so Aurelia and Cyra headed off to their assigned sleeping quarters—Fyre Hall Dormitory. They padded across the assembly space, following the sea of yellow, orange, red, and white. Eventually the students separated by class. Only staff, seniors, and juniors lived within the castle walls while freshmen and sophomores resided in two large houses converted to dormitories—Fyre Hall and Wynd Hall.

Along with classrooms and dormitories, Wyndfyre Academy sported four different floors, eight towers, three libraries, two gardens—one being an herb garden—and an endless number of spaces for study, gatherings, and general interest. The grounds were vast, including a fireball field, swaths of forest, and even a small lake. The castle once belonged to the ancient and noble Wyndfyre family. A name now synonymous with education and prestige.

Aurelia and Cyra wove down the castle’s stone steps and eventually emerged into one of the many courtyards. After inhaling a lungful of fresh air, Cyra stole a glance over the grand stone edifice, eyes tracing the massive turrets and towers. The view sent a burst of excitement through her chest, reminding her of her brother’s words: *Your time here will be some of the best years of your life.*

The grand structure certainly represented a promise of greatness, of adventure. Cyra only hoped she could live up to its legacy.

Together with the other freshmen, the two girls trailed across the courtyard and down a grassy incline to Fyre Hall, a large beam and mortar structure north of the castle, its many windows offering magnificent views of the surrounding mountains.

After gathering up their heavy suitcases, haphazardly dumped in the first-floor common room, the girls lugged them to the second floor—the

girls' floor—before promptly collapsing on the threshold of their designated quarters.

"I miss servants," Aurelia complained, wiping moisture from her brow.

Cyra chuckled, but her humor vanished as two girls walking past flicked pointed looks in their direction. "Maybe we shouldn't brag about servants."

"I'm not bragging, just stating a fact," Aurelia said defensively. "I'm not going to apologize for being a Lassiter, and as for you—"

"I know who my parents are." Cyra bristled, swallowing a twinge of annoyance at Aurelia's snobbery. "Wyndfyre Academy accepts students based on merit. Sets grades and points on talent and effort, not the number of servants our parents employ."

"That's a good thing," Aurelia said wryly, her green eyes glittering, "seeing as how you would crush all of us in that case." She stretched to her feet and shoved open the door.

The late afternoon sun crashed through a single window in their bedroom, spilling golden light over the floor and walls. A very cozy room, Cyra observed. A single bunk bed stood against the wall, the space just managing to fit a side table and modest closet. Things would be . . . tight, to say the least.

"Goodness," Aurelia scoffed, marching into the dorm room with such visceral disgust one might assume the walls were covered in sewage. "Was a prison cell not available? Perhaps we can find a large closet to live in instead of this doghouse. Seven tiny hells, this is outrageous."

Though Cyra didn't quite share Aurelia's brutal assessment, she did wonder how they were supposed to study with just one sad table. Her attention snagged on a second door. Grasping the handle, she pushed through and found an adjoining lounge-like space complete with a couch, fireplace, and low table. Beneath a wide, expansive window were two desks with chairs. On the opposite side of this room was another door.

"I bet this is a shared common area," Cyra said. "Looks like we have suitemates."

Aurelia slipped across the space. "Hmm, I wonder if their room is bigger."

"Maybe you should knock," Cyra warned, but Aurelia didn't have a chance. The door flew open, presenting two freshmen girls, both strangers.

The girl in front had straight black hair, the ends framing her oval face. Her height nearly matched Cyra's tall stature, though her curves were a bit

more generous. She had light-bronze skin, her petite nose slightly upturned—and rosebud lips set in a purse. Her eyes were a cinnamon-brown color, sharp and cutting.

"Hi," said Cyra with a tentative smile as she joined Aurelia's side. "I'm Cyra—"

"Byrogan," finished the black-haired girl. "I know who you are."

"My name is Aurelia Lassiter," Aurelia introduced with a wide smile.

"Akira Rhoki," said the girl, eyes only briefly flickering to Aurelia before they slid back to Cyra, as if in need of more time to form what was most certainly a negative first impression.

Why the hostility? Cyra wondered after concluding the girl's dislike was not her imagination. Akira's penetrating glare only deepening as the seconds ticked by.

"I am Nailah Damarin," said the other girl. Her full lips stretched into a wide smile, a considerably warmer greeting. Nailah had dark brown skin and a broad nose. Her large eyes were her most dominant feature—the color a dark umber, framed by long black lashes. Her thick, curly brown hair fell well past her shoulders. She was average height, perhaps just an inch or so taller than Aurelia, with modest curves as far as Cyra could tell through the loose coat.

Aurelia was right, these uniforms really did little for anyone's figure.

"Nice to meet you, Nailah. Looks like we're suitemates." Cyra tried to recapture a light tone amidst the thickening awkwardness.

"Looks like it," Akira clipped. "If you will excuse me, I have some unpacking to do." With that, she whirled around and marched back into her dorm room.

Nailah gave an apologetic smile before following Akira and closing the door.

After exchanging loaded side glances, Cyra and Aurelia headed back to their own room. "That Akira seems like a total bitch," said Aurelia once their door was closed.

"Aurelia."

"What?" She shrugged innocently. "Oh, come on, you saw the way she looked at us, especially you. Good thing we can't cast from our eyeballs or your face would be on fire."

Cyra couldn't exactly argue. "I don't know why she wouldn't like us. We just met."

“Uh huh, well, we’ll see.”

***

“All right class, I want you to look around,” said Professor Wen. “You will do your core practical classes with these fellow freshmen students.”

Luckily, Aurelia and Cyra were in the same practical unit. Sitting together, they traded excited smiles as Professor Wen continued his instruction, the group of twenty-four students listening in rapt attention. They sat in pairs at wood-topped tables arranged in two columns and six rows. Sunlight poured into the cavernous space through three massive arched windows, leaving no need for candles or added light.

Amongst their classmates were the twin brothers, Finn and Fabien, as well as their suitemates, Nailah and Akira. Cyra recognized several other students from their prior school, but none she knew particularly well.

“In this class, we will focus on the elemental crystal,” Professor Wen said. In his late-thirties, the professor was a short and thin man, his small stature accentuated by his oversized eggplant coat and too-large glasses. “The elemental crystal is the easiest to siphon, but the hardest to master, possessing the most potential for injury of the three casting crystals—hence why control is essential. Now, who can name the three main casts of an elemental?”

Cyra’s hand shot up, but not fast enough.

“Akira,” called Professor Wen, nodding to Akira beside Nailah in the front row.

“Fire, water forms, and wind,” she answered confidently.

“Good,” said Professor Wen. “I know all of you can siphon the power of an elemental crystal as well as produce a small cast of each element, or you would not be here at Wyndfyre Academy. Today, we will focus on wind.” He held up a long ostrich feather. “Each of you already has an elemental crystal.”

Cyra glanced down at the regulation-sized crystal, about the length of her wrist and width of her thumb, presently secured within the leather bracer strapped to her forearm. Casts manifested above the wrist of the Syphon’s dominate arm, the closer position the crystal to this area, the stronger, and more controlled the cast.

Professor Wen instructed the students to retrieve a feather before adding, “I suggest working on moving your feather in controlled circles, or practice simple upward motions. The goal is to balance your energy flow—siphon just enough power from your crystal to achieve your desired outcome. If your crystal becomes cloudy, stop casting, then place it in this tray”—he held up a tray—“before collecting a fresh crystal. Begin.”

Exhilaration rumbled through Cyra as she studied the long white feather. Taking a step backward, she stretched out her wrist, building energy down her right arm and feeling the familiar thrum in her blood. The red crystal strapped to her forearm beat with a faint, pulsating glow as she siphoned its power, amplifying her own.

Excitement surged . . . maybe a bit too much.

A rush of air pushed forward, catching her feather and shooting it skyward with a powerful but short-lived gust. Cyra pulled back so the tingling sensation in her arm faded. The glowing crystal went dormant as the feather floated back to the table.

She ground her teeth at the mediocre performance. A true master of wind could easily conjure a steady rush of controlled air, forming said stream into channels—into whatever path they so desired. A steady stream. Focus on a steady stream.

Brow lined in concentration, Cyra tried again, mentally extracting everything she had learned before coming to Wyndfyre—the many hours spent practicing patience and control. *Obsessive* was what Kasian had called her persistence. Easy for him to say. Cyra’s obnoxiously talented brother could create elaborate water ballets long before his freshman year.

Kasian was a natural at everything, whereas Cyra struggled through hours of laborious training to even orbit his level. It didn’t bother her, not really. With time and practice, she would beat him someday. For now, she needed to focus on being the top of her class. One step at a time.

The tingling of magical energy vibrated down her casting arm, once more beating life into the red crystal in her bracer. *Control, Cyra, just like you practiced.*

Within seconds, a steady flow of air conjured just above her wrist, whisking forward in a stream of wind. This time, the effort brushed up the feather, air moving and bending the object into a wobbly circle before the feather drifted right off the table’s edge. *Rats*.

Snatching up the troublesome feather, Cyra huffed in frustration. On her third attempt, the feather completed a full circle, and a triumphant smile stretched across her face.

“Well done, Cyra,” Professor Wen said as he walked by.

“It’s so annoying how good you are at everything,” Aurelia remarked in mild annoyance, wind pushing her feather off the table for a fourth time.

“Excellent job, Akira,” Cyra heard the professor say, the comment capturing her attention in time to witness Akira’s feather completing a second full circle, then a third. A third?

Aurelia smirked. “Looks like you have some competition.”

Cyra’s stomach knotted. Competition is good, she told herself even as the swiftly formed knot sprouted several friends. She refocused her attention on her feather with new fervor, and by the last ten minutes of class, it completed four full loops in controlled succession. *Hah*.

Upon completion of a fifth loop, she searched for Professor Wen, hoping he noticed her swift progress. She frowned upon finding the professor at the back of the classroom, and he wasn’t alone. Several students were crowded around the rear corner table.

Curiosity drove Cyra toward the group, wondering what had claimed their attention. She had her answer in seconds, the scene only fueling her multiplying knots.

The two brothers, Finn and Fabien, faced each other, standing at either end of their table. Over the flat surface, they created a mesmerizing dance, their feathers circling and weaving around each other in beautiful tandem.

Cyra gaped at the display. Apart from Kasian, she had never seen anyone their age exhibit such control, such elegance, such precision, at the start of their casting training.

It was amazing.

It was worrying.

Still think you’re going to be top of your class? a voice in Cyra’s mind taunted, followed by an image of her mother sighing with expected disappointment.

“Well done, Finn, well done, Fabien,” the professor said, offering his first toothy grin of the class once the dancing feathers settled to a rest. “And that is time. Please return the feathers and put your crystals in the tray.” In a slow procession, everyone followed the professor’s instructions, the students chattering animatedly about the Calderis brothers.

“It was quite impressive,” Aurelia was saying as they headed to their next class. “Even you have to admit. Those boys are talented . . . and upon further analysis quite attractive. Too bad they were born in the colonies. My parents would die if I dated a Clovian-born.”

Cyra ignored Aurelia’s ramblings, furrowed brow yet to clear as she rehearsed the boys’ feather performance in her mind. They *were* frustratingly talented. Akira was also rather good. Dreams of being top of her class, of becoming president of the school, were already slipping away, and it was only the first day.

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“Welcome to your first practical lesson of the evolution crystal,” began Professor Hollis, holding up a translucent crystal. “Also called the binding or healing crystal.”

Hollis was around fifty, her ivory complexion peppered with freckles mostly concentrated on her aquiline nose. A tall woman with a stocky build, she was overall unassuming save for the several flamboyant flourishes added to the standard professor’s attire. She went coatless, sporting a thigh-length waistcoat—a few generations out of date—over a white billowy chemise. A tricorn hat topped her gray-streaked auburn hair, several brightly colored feathers sticking out of the treated felt, the ends swishing back and forth as she paced the room.

“The evolution crystal has the broadest properties,” Professor Hollis continued, the crystal in her grip catching the light from a large round window, projecting a spiral of rainbows around the classroom. “Can anyone list the different casting properties of the evolution crystal?”

Cyra was ready. After forcing Aurelia to sit in the front row, she was the first to raise her hand, answering the professor’s question with barely contained eagerness. “Evolution crystals can advance the growth of plants, fix broken objects, form new items or structures, and heal wounds.”

“Excellent.” Professor Hollis nodded at Cyra. “This semester we will focus on inanimate objects, both broken and new, and then work our way up to plants. Before each of you is a ceramic vase. Break it, then cast it back together. By the end of class, some should come close to completing this, but do not feel frustrated if completion demands a few sessions. Begin.”

It was odd starting a lesson by breaking something, as the sound of smashing ceramic against wood or stone echoed across the classroom joined with smatterings of laughter.

Cyra knocked her own white vase to the stone floor, and it shattered with a satisfying *smash*. She collected the pieces and placed them on the table. After sliding the clear evolution crystal into the forward slot of her bracer, she pictured what the vase looked like before it broke and began her cast.

The exercise was like reforming a three-dimensional puzzle—mind and energy working in close tandem to reset the pieces. At least, in theory. Cyra's stupid ceramic pieces did not want to cooperate. To her relief, no one managed to rebuild the vase—not even the Fantastic Brothers, as Aurelia quickly dubbed Finn and Fabien.

By the last twenty minutes of class, determination burned through Cyra, willing herself to reform this damn vase before anyone else. Each attempt, however, failed, all the pieces clattering back to the table. And back to the beginning she started.

On her next try, with minutes left in class, Cyra nearly completed the vase with just one piece left. Heart thumping, she held the cast long enough for the final piece to fly into place.

It joined.

She didn't dare breathe as she prepared to connect the pieces with a final, seamless cast. Her pulse thundered wildly. She was going to do it. The lone student to complete the vase. She—

CRASH.

Someone bumped Cyra's nearly completed vase, sending the pieces scattering back over the table. A few broke into even smaller pieces against the stone floor.

"Oops," a voice sneered. "Sorry about that." Cyra looked up to find Akira scrutinizing the mess in mocking pity. She picked up the broken pieces from the ground and placed them on the table. "I'll try to be more careful next time." And with those infuriating words, she sauntered away.

Cyra could only stare, fingers pressing into the tabletop as heat filled her face.

"Told you: bitch," Aurelia whispered, low.

Cyra didn't understand it—Akira's sabotage, her all-around spiteful aura that only seemed to be aimed in Cyra's direction.

Focusing with renewed determination, knowing she had only a handful of minutes left, she poured all her energy and concentration into reforming the cursed vase. As if being pulled by invisible strings, the pieces fitted together, rebuilding from the base and climbing to the top. Holding her breath, Cyra watched as the last piece slid into place, maintaining the sinuous cast just long enough for the spiderweb cracks to disappear.

A completed ceramic vase stood on the table.

Cyra smiled at her triumph, heart lifting in silent glee. She forgot Akira. Forgot the Fantastic Brothers, the professor, the rest of class.

“Huh, maybe a little competitive aggression is good for you,” Aurelia mused as she analyzed Cyra’s vase, the only completed vase of the class. “Don’t let it go to your head,” she added cheekily, collecting her broken shards and tossing them into a bin the other students used.

Well, everyone but Cyra.

She resisted a rueful smirk as Akira walked past holding a pile of broken ceramic.

The lesson proved one thing—Cyra could beat these people. She just needed to work harder than ever before. Harder than everyone in her class.

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Chapter 7

Order of the Red Lapis

The first few weeks of classes passed in a blur. Cyra focused hard on the practical lessons while keeping up with the academic ones. The strained, unspoken competition with Akira continued, only aggravated by the fact they were suitemates.

Akira made no attempts to hide her unexplained dislike, and for the umpteenth time Cyra wondered why. She drew no conclusions, and mostly employed a strategy of avoidance.

As for her academic ambitions, despite her ceramic triumph on the first day, there were certain realities to face. The real threat to claiming class superiority was not Akira. While her suitemate was, admittedly, exceptionally skilled, it was the Fantastic Calderis brothers who outshined both Cyra and Akira.

Finn and Fabien were infuriatingly talented. Worse, they didn't concern themselves with actual learning. They never answered questions in class, paid little attention to lectures, and messed around during practical lessons, no matter what their instructors said or did. Solidifying their victory as the most aggravating duo of the freshman class, the brothers also sported an arrogance that grated on her every nerve.

They didn't care. Not one little bit. And it was absolutely maddening.

Their flippant attitude even irked Akira. At times, Cyra caught her suitemate redirecting glares of frustration to the twins, and Ancients help

the brothers any time their laughter broke her concentration.

During one practical lesson, the class worked on manipulating handkerchiefs with wind casts. Soon bored with the task, Finn and Fabien began floating their handkerchiefs over their classmates' faces, breaking both cast and concentration.

Their low cackles of amusement boiled Cyra's already simmering annoyance. The twins not only showed off, but they literally rubbed their talent in everyone's faces. When Akira became their unwitting target, two handkerchiefs eclipsing her vision while she was mid-cast, she snatched them up and tied them in rough knots, then blasted the knotted ball back at the brothers with an impressive wind cast. One beaned Finn in the head.

Even Cyra laughed, happy to see the cocky smile slide right off Finn's dumb face.

"Nice shot," she said earnestly, offering a smile, but Akira only gave a narrow-eyed glare in response. "Seven hells, in another life did I kick her dog? Insult her favorite grandmother?" she whispered to Aurelia, at her wits' end.

Aurelia shrugged. "If it makes you feel any better, she seems to hate me too."

It didn't.

***

After the day's classes, Aurelia and Cyra walked around the grounds, enjoying the beautiful afternoon. Fall had yet to reach its zenith, the tree colors just starting to turn. With wet, cold weather on the horizon, enjoying as much time outdoors was a top priority.

"Oh, can we watch fireball practice?" Aurelia asked, nodding toward the wooden stands in the distance, beams and flags just peeking up over the treetops.

"You just want to ogle my brother, don't you?" Cyra said with a suspicious side-eye. Having known Aurelia since they were both ten, she had never witnessed an ounce of interest in professional fireball, let alone an amateur practice.

"Correction." An exaggerated expression of innocence bloomed on Aurelia's features. "I want to ogle your brother *and* the other players."

“Oh, all right.” Cyra gave a dramatic eye roll, secretly pleased to have an excuse to both watch the practice and say hello to her brother.

After walking over to the field, they emerged through the trees as players warmed up across the trimmed lawn. Cyra and Aurelia climbed into the wooden viewing stands, claiming seats amongst a handful of other students also watching the practice.

“All right, team!” Kasian shouted over the grassy pitch. “Next Saturday is scrimmage day. Friday, we’ll take the night train to Highland Academy and face the Ice Boulders. Remember to count your crystals this time. I’m talking to *you*, Artemisia.” He nodded at a particularly tall player, who only returned a wry smile.

“*She* is Kasian’s girlfriend?” Aurelia’s brows caved in dismay.

Artemisia was gorgeous. End of story.

“Yep.” Cyra nodded. She had met Artemisia a few times and found her to be quite nice, as well as an incredibly talented Syphon in her own right.

Aurelia groaned, eyes shifting around the field as if searching for Kasian alternatives. Her attention snagged on a few *tolerably* cute players, but as practice ensued, her eyes began to glaze with boredom. At least until practice ended.

With the players dispersing, they ventured down the wooden stands. After a few moments, Cyra caught her brother’s eye, exchanging a warm smile.

“Do you think he’ll remember me?” Aurelia asked in a hushed whisper as Kasian jogged over, his chocolate locks lifting in the light breeze. “We’ve only met twice—”

“Well, if it isn’t my little sister!” Kasian boomed, wrapping his arms around Cyra in a tight bearhug.

Seven hells, if their mother was here, she would certainly scold Kasian about his growing mane of hair. Of course, their mother’s comments to Kasian always rendered a gentle reminder than actual criticism—the latter solely reserved for Cyra.

“Ugh, you smell, Kasian!” Cyra grimaced, playfully shoving him away. “Great practice.”

“Eh.” He shrugged, wiping moisture from his brow. “We’re getting there, but how are you? How are classes going?” His pale blue eyes twinkled. “I’m hearing good things.”

Heat rose to Cyra’s cheeks. Yes, of course the student body president would check up on his little sister. “I’m doing my best, but no one can outshine the Fantastic Brothers.”

Kasian cocked his head. “Do I detect a little jealousy? I find competition a good thing.”

“Yes, well, they are vexing about their talents.” Cyra wiggled her nose. “Kind of like you were growing up, actually.” To her narrowed look, Kasian only chuckled. After a not-so-subtle nudge from Aurelia, Cyra quickly added, “You remember my friend, Aurelia?”

“Of course.” Kasian gave Aurelia a friendly nod. “Nice to see you again, Aurelia.”

Aurelia’s fair complexion turned a deep cherry red. “You too.”

“Hello Cyra,” greeted Artemisia as she jogged up next to Kasian. Like her brother, Artemisia was covered in sweat, and her arms sported a few minor burns.

“Hi,” said Cyra, excitement resurging as she recalled several of Artemisia’s amazing saves over the last hour. “You played great! I hope to be goalkeeper my junior or senior year.”

Artemisia’s eyebrows rose. “Really?”

“Yes, it’s the toughest and most dangerous position,” Cyra gushed, eager to discuss the witnessed practice with someone other than a bored Aurelia. “Plus, you have to cast the most.”

Kasian grinned at her enthusiasm, eyes slipping sideways to Artemisia. “Speaking of danger.” He produced a clear evolution crystal. “May I heal your injuries?”

Artemisia’s full lips twisted up into a kind smile. She really was stunning, curves making the loose-fitting practice kits look as lovely as a ballgown. “Of course.” She held out her arms as Kasian performed several healing casts. The scattered burn marks shrank, her brown skin quickly smoothing into perfection.

Once she was healed, Artemisia said, “The team is headed to Frostfyre Tavern.” She gestured expectantly toward the retreating players.

“Right,” said Kasian before leaning down to Cyra’s ear. In a conspiratorial voice, he whispered, “Expect an invitation in your room.”

Cyra frowned at him. “An invitation? To what?” But he only shrugged, sauntering off with his girlfriend before she could press. “What could that

be about?" she wondered aloud as she and Aurelia headed back to Fyre Hall.

After a pensive beat of silence, Aurelia suddenly clutched Cyra's hands. "You're getting invited to the Order of the Red Lapis, the premiere secret academic society of all of Castoria."

Cyra frowned. "I thought only sophomores received invites." Kasian had mentioned the Order once or twice over the years, the secret society never piquing her interest enough to ask follow-up questions.

"From what I heard from my uncle, who was in the Order, they usually extend invitations to a handful of freshmen each year," bubbled Aurelia. "I bet it's true, and what if I'm invited too? Oh, this will be so much fun!" She practically skipped through the common area of their dormitory, taking the stairs to their floor two at a time, with Cyra trailing behind.

They emerged in their bunk room, and sure enough, on the pillow of the bottom bunk—Cyra's bunk—sat a wax-sealed scroll.

"I knew it!" squealed Aurelia, her green eyes bright. She rose to her tiptoes, quickly checking her own pillow.

"Did you get one?" Cyra asked, collecting the scroll with a heavy helping of reservation.

Breathing a disappointed sigh, Aurelia flopped onto Cyra's bed. "Nothing for me." She immediately sat back up, the spark in her eyes returning. "But with you in the Order, you can make sure I get in next semester, right?"

Cyra exhaled in mild exasperation. "I have no idea if that's how it works—if this is even an invitation to the Red Lapis whatever."

A withering look formed over Aurelia's countenance. "Don't be dim, of course this is an invitation to the *Order of the Red Lapis*, and once you're in, you can pull strings for others. These types of groups salivate over people with amazing talent or those with high-powered names. You, annoyingly, have both. So, you better help out a treasured friend." A wide indulgent smile danced across her face.

"You're also talented and from an important family," Cyra said, not quite sure how to feel about any of this. Top of her class, fireball goalkeeper, school president—these were things she wanted. Secret societies, social intrigue, political scheming? Pass.

"My family hasn't had a high-ranking marriage in decades," Aurelia said, "nor any new royal appointments. The Lassiter name flounders at

court and everyone knows it. This is my chance to raise our status, and I can’t mess it up.”

An incredulous smile tempted up Cyra’s lips, thinking her friend was joking. When she only spied severity across Aurelia’s face, all impulses of levity vanished. “We’re fifteen, Aurelia. We should be worried about classes and grades, not social connections or who we’re going to marry. By law, we don’t have to marry until we’re thirty. Thirty! That’s a million years away. We have eons to figure out those things.”

Aurelia’s already furrowed brows dug deeper. “Listen, I know my strengths and what I lack. I am not above asking for help, so please—please, if you can, try to get a spot for me.”

Cyra sighed. “I’ll try.”

Aurelia flung her arms around Cyra's neck. “I knew we were friends for a reason.” She grinned, a teasing gleam in her eyes before they slid to the scroll. “So, what does it say?”

Swallowing the grumpy groan wedged in her throat, Cyra broke the diamond-shaped seal and began to read.

We, the Order of the Red Lapis, hereby invite you, Cyra Byrogan, to take the first step in joining our noble society of Syphons. Your first instruction is to follow the fire.

- The High Phoenix

“As clear as mud,” said Cyra, finding the cryptic message irritating more than anything. “Are you sure I should do this? It sounds weird, like I might be sacrificed or something.”

“Yes, you have to do this,” Aurelia said, looking at Cyra as if she was being exceptionally stupid. “Only people in the Order are considered for school president, so if you don’t join, you can kiss that dream goodbye. Plus, the Order almost guarantees your desired track post-graduation. So stop being an idiot.”

Cyra straightened, finally grasping the significance of this invitation. “The Red Lapis Society really has that much influence?”

“Yes! Being in the Order opens doors, trust me. This is exactly where you want to be, and if you can take me along, you would just be the best*est* friend ever.”

***

Around her mountain of homework, Cyra contemplated the mysterious invitation for the rest of the night and most of the next day. By Saturday evening, she concluded little, rationalizing that if Kasian was part of this group, then it must be a good thing. And if anything Aurelia said was correct, then joining was a requirement if she wanted to reach her goals.

So, yes, she would join this Red Lapis Society—Order of the Red Lapis, whatever. Now, if only she could figure out what "follow the fire" meant.

As night settled over Fyre Hall, Cyra found herself alone in the shared common room of her dorm, reading one of her assigned history lectures: The Raven Revolt which resulted in Castoria becoming a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament. For a fascinating story about a group of dissenters beheading prominent nobles, the dry text was putting Cyra to sleep.

After reading the same sentence four times, eyelids struggling to stay open, she nearly called it an early night. Saturday night and lights out by ten. *How lame, Cyra.*

Suddenly, all the candles blew out, sending her into darkness. A moment later, the light of a single candle snapped awake as if from nothing, the soft glow returning some of her sight.

She frowned at a tea light in the middle of the floor when another candle ignited near the doorway. Then another, and another—creating a trail of light.

Follow the fire. The words from the invitation floated across her mind. *Awesome*.

With immense reluctance, Cyra followed the candlelight down the dormitory steps and through a rear door. Emerging into the crisp air of advancing fall, she spotted the trail of lights leading around the beam and mortar structure along the tree line and up the grassy slope toward the castle, its massive silhouette of towers and turrets backlit by the full moon and clear night's sky.

The smell of pine sap and freshly trimmed grass tickled her nose as Cyra followed the soft glow of candlelight up the incline, her breath clouding in front of her face. A tingle shivered down her spine, the reaction nothing to do with the cool temperature. If this were a horror story, the trail would lead her into some grisly death trap. At the same time, a bloom of curiosity beckoned her onward. She gave into it, the squish of damp grass beneath her boots giving way to stone as she ventured across the castle's

outer courtyard and through an arched entrance, the heavy oak doors left open until midnight on the weekends for students to come and go freely.

The air warmed as she entered the castle. A grand fireplace dominated the foyer, the roar of a fire saturating the air with woodsmoke and the crackle of shifting logs. The fire's glow joined the tealights, before the trail wove into darkness once more, curving into an unfamiliar corridor. By the narrowed walls and increasingly cramped space, Cyra suspected this area was once part of the old servants' quarters, presently used for storage. She followed the trail up a set of winding steps. The windowless space was pitch black save for the line of candles, the scrape of her boots against the well-worn stone and huffing breaths the only sound to break the thick silence. She emerged in the main assembly hall, stone walls soaring high above her head.

Now cleared of chairs, the room's vast emptiness felt small and claustrophobic. Cyra's pulse spiked under the suffocating cloak of darkness. Forcing her feet forward, she followed the candles to the center of the room, the echoes of her footsteps ricocheting off the vaulted ceiling. A lone silhouette stood at the end of the trail of light, and Cyra fought the urge to run, imagining an ax-wielding murderer. A horror story, indeed.

Annoyance quickly replaced fear when the shadowed figure turned and revealed Finn Calderis. Cyra grunted, agitated. Of course Finn was here, and no doubt Fabien would be along shortly. This was already tedious, and it hadn't even started.

Though they were in the same practical unit together, Cyra and Finn had yet to share any direct conversations. Had not even exchanged formal introductions.

Fine by Cyra; she was quite settled on her low opinion of the immature brothers, an opinion decidedly confirmed by the first words out of Finn's stupid mouth.

"Hello, princess."

Cyra's lips flattened. "I'd rather you not call me that."

"Sure thing, princess," Finn replied with an unconcerned shrug.

Cyra returned an eyeroll. *Yep: arrogant, immature, and annoying*.

Movement captured their attention as Fabien entered the room, following the trail of lights. Though expected, his appearance only grated her already frayed nerves, regret boiling over at joining this odd . . . whatever it was.

Welcome distraction came in the form of others: sophomores, going by their orange coats. Cyra only recognized one amongst the approaching group, a boy named Illias Malcolm, the dean's son. There were sixteen students in total, with Cyra, Fabien, and Finn the only freshmen.

"What's going on?" someone whispered, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Cyra's heart jumped and several students gasped when a ring of fire erupted in the air above their heads, carving a full circle around the room with a low *whoosh*. The sudden light caused many to flinch, their awestruck faces bathed by the orange-yellow glow.

The fire ring dropped to the floor and encircled the group. The clop of footsteps announced the arrival of others. Students wearing hooded robes of pure black, deep maroon, and dark orange filed across the stone floor, positioning themselves around the flames.

Seven hells, this was all a bit much.

Again, in overdone theatrical flair, the circle of fire snuffed out, temporarily plunging the vast space into opaque black. Then, in a domino effect, the robed students each lit their own fire, the palm-sized balls of flame hovering just above their hands.

If they started chanting, Cyra resigned herself to run.

"Welcome!" boomed Kasian's voice before he removed his black hood, stepping into the center of the circle. "Congratulations, Neophytes. You have all taken the first step of initiation for the Order of the Red Lapis. Those here represent the finest this school has to offer." He glanced around the students. "I know you have questions, but for tonight, we ask you to watch and learn. Your time will come." He instructed the gathered group of initiates to join the robed members, expanding the human circle. "Who would like to take the first match of the night?"

Two students stepped forward, both in black. Cyra interpreted the color to mean they were seniors. After Kasian gestured them forward, the boy and girl situated themselves on opposite ends of the open space before facing each other.

"As always, the first to incur injury or knock their opponent off their feet wins the match," instructed Kasian. "Juniors, remember your match wins count toward earning a spot in the Gauntlet Trials." He reclaimed his place in the circle before bellowing a loud, "Begin!"

Cyra's mind buzzed at Kasian's words, questions floating to her lips but everything eddied away at what happened next. The two students within the circle began casting at each other in a fierce duel of elemental magic. Her mouth fell open as streams of fire, balls of ice, and rivers of water soared across the room, the two students exchanging casts as if trying to eviscerate each other. Her unease at all the mysterious posturing and performative ritual vanished. Watching two young people attack each other was nothing less than incredible.

The perimeter of robed students diverted any errant flame, water, or ice shooting past the dueling pair—their deflections only adding drama to the show. Every once in a while, a flash of fire or gust of wind brushed near Cyra, skittering her already racing heart.

"Wow," she heard Finn whisper after the female dueler ducked a ball of fire the size of her head before spinning to cast a shard of ice. The attack grazed her opponent's shoulder, the point slicing through his robe and nicking flesh.

When the boy hissed a pained breath, Kasian raised his arms. "End of the match! Sadira is the victor." The robed members all saluted the match winner by casting a burst of sparks overhead, hooting and hollering for Sadira as she rejoined the circle. The losing opponent jogged over to Kasian, who healed the injury before calling another pair forward.

The second match began with equally impressive skill on both sides.

"This is a battling society," said Finn to Fabien with a wide, gleeful grin.

Duh, Cyra silently scoffed, too immersed in the next duel to comment on Finn's obvious observation. This was certainly not what she had expected—not some tedious group of students pontificating about the ways of the world. This was amazing . . . and a direct violation of Wyndfyre Academy rules. Casting against fellow students was prohibited unless it was a healing cast or performed under the strict supervision of a professor. Even then, battle casting wouldn't start until the second semester of their junior year. Academically, anything like this was years away.

Cyra smiled as her mind plotted the various possibilities. Aurelia was right: this was exactly where she wanted to be. *Needed* to be.

The battles went on for about an hour, each match lasting a few minutes, including a most impressive show by Kasian—one of the few students utilizing the time crystal to profound effect.

“May you all continue to cast with pride,” Kasian said as the session ended. “As for our Neophytes, for now, watch and learn. Once you impress the High Phoenix—yours truly—and our council members”—he gestured toward four other students in black robes—“you will be voted in and initiated as one of us.”

The group dispersed, Kasian giving Cyra a wink as he walked past with the black-robed students, the first to exit. She only returned a knowing smirk as if to say, *Of course you’re the High Phoenix or whatever*. The juniors departed next, then the sophomores, until just the three freshmen remained.

“So, what did you think?” Fabien asked as they slipped back to Fyre Hall.

“It was not what I expected.” Cyra smiled. “But it was absolutely thrilling.”

“Agreed.” Fabien nodded eagerly. “What do you think the Gauntlet Trials are?”

“Something I’ll be winning our junior year,” Finn said with a toothy smile.

Cyra resisted an eyeroll, at the same time she felt the tightness of a familiar stomach knot. Match wins counted, at least for juniors, her mind already suspecting the win totals, the Gauntlet Trials, all of it, paved the way to who achieved the prized position of Wyndfyre president.

“I want to learn time casting,” Finn said, recapturing Cyra’s attention. “I never considered using time casts in fighting. When Kasian froze that ice barrage . . .?” He whistled, low. “I about collapsed.”

“Time crystal training doesn’t start until next year,” Cyra said. They were the most difficult of the three casting crystals, by a lot. Finicky, difficult to control or maintain. An overall pain in the ass to wield and almost impossible to master.

“We shouldn’t be doing battle casts, either, but here we are.” Finn grinned. “Advance or fall behind, princess.” He pointedly ignored the immediate scowl on Cyra’s face, veering toward the boy’s entrance to Fyre Hall.

Fabien gave her an apologetic half-smile before chasing after his brother. Cyra watched them go with narrowed eyes. Tonight had certainly solidified all her feelings about the boys—vexing, patronizing, and her two biggest obstacles to her academic dreams.

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Chapter 8

PARTNER PROJECTS

“I want to hear more,” Aurelia whispered excitedly during their elemental practical class. After painstakingly bringing everyone to a competent level at wind casting, Professor Wen set today's class on water casts, the students tasked with conjuring water and filling empty gallon jugs.

“I told you everything,” Cyra said impatiently. She had attended her second Red Lapis session last night, two weeks after the first, sharing the highlights with Aurelia before they went to bed. “Can we focus on the lesson, please?” Though she didn’t mind recounting night’s matches, her thoughts still buzzing with the dramatic action, now that she was in class she wanted to soak up every second of elemental crystal application.

“Come on,” Aurelia whined. “Professor Wen’s water jug lesson is a snooze.” She eyed her brimming jug of water as if unimpressed by the thing.

Before Cyra could respond, Professor Wen started placing several empty water jugs in two columns up the center aisle between desks, the last jugs reaching to the back of the classroom. “Now for a bit of a competition,” he said as he finished arranging the last few jugs. “This side of the class, over here.” He motioned half the students forward, and then the other half. “The other side stand there. Each student is to fill one jug, starting at the rear of the line. Then tag in the next student, who will

proceed to fill the next jug, and so on. First side to finish gets to leave class early."

Cyra and Aurelia traded excited smiles as each group of twelve formed a line. Once Professor Wen signaled to begin, both sides cheered for their teams as the first person raced down the center column to the end jug. One after the next, each student filled their jug before tagging in the next person. After ten minutes, Cyra and Aurelia's group was two jugs ahead—until Finn and Fabien's turn, on the other team. The brothers' water casts were like gushing faucets, filling their jugs in seconds, leaving the teams neck-and-neck as the last two students raced to their jugs.

Cyra versus Akira. *Just. Great.*

The elemental crystal slotted in her bracer pulsed with a red glow as Cyra siphoned its power, magic energy working down her right arm as water conjured before her wrist and funneled through the mouth of the jug, beginning at nearly the same time as Akira.

A chorus of cheers sounded around the classroom, but the beating of Cyra's heart was all she heard, struggling to maintain a steady stream while preventing any precious liquid from escaping. She was close, but not close enough. The other side erupted into exuberant yells as water spilled over the brim of Akira's jug, winning the game for their side.

Disappointment coiled through Cyra. They lost. *She* lost. Beaten by a handful of seconds. Adding a lash to her bruised pride, Akira flashed Cyra with a needling smile as she and the other students filed out of the classroom early, leaving those remaining to lug the now full and quite heavy jugs to the front of the room for disposal.

"Well, that was disappointing, but at least the game was fun," Aurelia said as they sulkily marched to their next practical class of the day. "So, back to the secret Red Lapis battles—did anyone get horribly injured?"

A breathy laugh rolled past Cyra's lips at Aurelia's insatiable appetite for information. Her amusement died, however, when she felt her hackles rise, sensing a glare. She searched for the source and immediately locked onto Akira. A look of pure revulsion twisted her features, hostility wafting off of her like a strong perfume. *What now?* Cyra wondered.

Exasperation already at a drip, Cyra ignored Akira's inexplicable anger, following Aurelia into their evolution crystal practical class, where they found Professor Hollis in front of a row of pots, dark soil waiting inside of the small clay vessels.

“Today we begin our first partner project,” said Professor Hollis. “Behind me are twelve pots planted with apple seeds. Each pairing will use the evolution crystal to sprout your seeds, then proceed to plant your sprout in a forested area somewhere on castle grounds. You and your partner will perform five casts each week and record the progress of your tree. By the end of next semester, you all should be able to fill this”—she held up a large woven basket—“with apples. You will be graded on the quality of your apples and the quantity, as well as your written reports. I have already selected your partners. Once I call your name, collect a pot and spade and begin.” Hollis cleared her throat as she pulled out a parchment. “Aedan Fletcher and Finn Calderis, Aurelia Lassiter and Pippin Howke, Fabien Calderis and Nailah Damarin, Akira Rhoki and Cyra Byrogan . . .”

Cyra immediately stopped listening as her eyes skidded to Akira. The girl’s face went red, fingers pressing against the desktop as she pointedly stared straight ahead.

This was going to be an interesting few months.

Cyra’s irritation only worsened when she caught Aurelia’s semi-squashed grin of amusement. “Good luck,” she whispered as she popped up from her seat, grabbing her pot.

Feeling as if she prepared for physical torture, Cyra trudged over to Akira, who had already claimed one of the pots, decidedly avoiding eye contact, and, most decidedly, loathing this turn of events. Well, the feeling was mutual.

“Let’s get this first task over with, then go plant the stupid thing,” Akira huffed, sliding a clear evolution crystal into the first slot of her bracer.

Before Cyra even had a chance to secure her own evolution crystal, Akira extended her wrist toward the unremarkable soil, and a tiny green sprout broke through the dark surface. Then, without a word, she snatched up the pot and bounded for the doorway.

Suppressing a groan, Cyra grabbed the spade and stalked after Akira, who was already halfway down the stairs. After jogging to catch up, she awkwardly cleared her throat. “Why don’t we plant the sprout near Fyre Hall? That way we don’t have to go far.”

“Fine,” Akira clipped, not slowing her march.

The two silently made their way toward a clump of trees near the freshman dormitories. Once they found a suitable patch of earth, Cyra

started digging, the too-quiet air around them thickening with each shovel of dirt.

“How about over here, Pippin?” said Aurelia, leading her partner to a spot about fifteen feet from Cyra and Akira. “Our trees can be friends.” She grinned at Cyra, who returned a smile. It immediately deflated at Akira’s glower of disapproval.

Good grief, this girl, Cyra silently grumbled as she resumed digging. At least she wasn't the only one suffering from partner woes. Finn stood about twenty yards away with his assigned partner, Aedan Fletcher. She fought a smirk at the miserable pairing, unsure of who had it worse. The son of a rich noble, Aedan was equal parts good-looking and pretentious ass. And Finn, well, was Finn. The two deserved each other.

All mirth vanished under Akira’s derisive appraisal, grimacing at Cyra’s digging efforts as if the pathetic job wasn’t worth insulting.

That’s it. Heat prickled up her spine. She was no longer able to play nice—certainly no longer able to keep her mouth shut. “If you have something to say to me, Akira, just say it,” she bit out, standing up and chucking the spade into the ground. “You have been nothing but rude to me since the start of school. What is your problem?”

During the resultant beat of awkward silence, Aurelia cleared her throat, whispering to Pippin: “Uh, maybe we should move over there. Yes, yes, over there is much better.” She led him a further ten feet away from Cyra and Akira, now locked in a silent standoff.

“My problem is *you*,” Akira spat, hands on either hip. “And everything just handed to you and people like you.” She flicked a venomous glance at Aurelia, now presiding over Pippin—the boy on his hands and knees, digging with the spade.

“You’re doing an excellent job, Pippy,” Aurelia hummed, examining one of her nails.

Akira gave Cyra a rueful smirk, as if the scene just proved her point. “You’re all entitled snobs,” she said with a vicious smile before kneeling to plant their sprout.

Cyra didn’t move, defensiveness gathering like a thundercloud. “You don’t know anything about me. I earn my grades as much as you do. And I worked just as hard as anyone to get here.”

“Hard?” Akira scoffed, brows soaring toward her hairline, though she didn’t look away from the sprout. “I very much doubt a single Byrogan has

ever worked hard in their life.”

Hesitation stilted Cyra’s defenses, a few things mentally clicking into place as she crouched next to the planted sprout. “So that’s it, then?” Her eyes narrowed. “You hate me because of my family? Last I checked, we don’t get to choose our parents. If you’ve figured out how, please do share with the class.”

Akira tipped up her chin, another layer of ice coating her hardened features. “If I figured out how to choose parents, I would have selected a pair who actually wanted me, instead of dumping me on the steps of a Saraneca orphanage. But, please, do complain about *your* parents.”

The revelation took Cyra aback, angry defensiveness wavering. “You’re an orphan?”

Animosity glimmered in Akira’s warm brown eyes. She aimed her casting arm at the sprout as she answered, “Until the CCB tested me for siphoning capabilities, then I joined the other Clovian-born children at dormitories here in Castoria.”

Something inside of Cyra’s chest cracked at this revelation, breaking open a swell of empathy. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“No, you don’t know,” Akira spat back, watching as the sprout stretched and unfurled its leaves. “You have no idea. I’m sure you studied very hard with your private tutors. Attended the best schools designed for Castorian aristocracy. Never had to wonder if another child was going to swipe your meal. Never had to steal books because there weren’t enough for everyone to have their own." She glared up from the small sapling, nearly seven or eight inches tall now. “Do you know how many Clovian-born students are in our freshman class?”

Cyra remained silent, stomach twisting at whatever Akira was about to say.

“Four,” she said. “Four out of a hundred and two.”

“I get it, Akira.” Cyra’s empathy for the girl combatted the lingering defensiveness still wanting to wage war. “You’re right. Your life has been considerably harder than mine. You win on that score. I’m sorry for your trials, but I will not apologize for being here. And I sure as hell am not going to stop fighting to be the best.” She channeled her agitation into their sapling, helping the tiny tree grow a few more inches, because damn it if she’d let Akira do all the work. “This school is our chance to shine, yours as much as mine. Why can’t we coexist, not as rivals, but as fellow students?”

Akira only shook her head, a snort shoving through her nose. “You think because we’re both here that we’re treated equally? That you don’t have an advantage over me.”

Cyra stubbornly squared her shoulders. “Wyndfyre doesn’t care what your last name is. It’s about talent.”

“Bullshit,” Akira snapped, the harsh language surprising Cyra. “Tell me honestly, do you think you’re more talented than me?”

Cyra swallowed, certain this was a trap no matter how she answered. “I would say that we have equal talent.”

Akira smirked as if Cyra had, indeed, said exactly what she intended. “Were you invited to join the Order of the Red Lapis?”

“So what if I was?”

“If we are truly the same in merit,” Akira pressed, “then the only other consideration given to you is your name, and all the wealth and power attached to it.” Her sneering smile widened as she claimed her feet. “And no matter how hard I work, I will never be able to overcome this lacking feature. So, save the equal opportunity crap for the naive idiots who ate up the nonsense your brother spewed on assembly day. Your last name matters here.”

With that, she stormed away before Cyra could get in another word. It didn’t matter. There wasn’t much else to say.

Picking herself up off the ground, Cyra trudged over to Aurelia, now lying in the grass and soaking up the afternoon sun. Her partner emerged from behind a tree, his ivory complexion pink with exertion as he clutched several rocks the size of oranges. Pippin Howke was on the smaller size, curly brown hair adding to his youthful look. His hazel-blue eyes were just a touch wide-set, lending him a semi-anxious appearance, certainly not aided by his nervous shifting as he struggled to balance the rocks in his arms.

“Oh, perfect, Pippykins!” Aurelia clapped her hands. “They will provide Appy with excellent protection.”

Cyra arched her brow at Aurelia. “Appy?”

“The name for our little sapling.” Aurelia gestured at their sprout. “Appy is cute, but winter is on its way. A little protection is for the best.”

Cyra cringed, feeling like Aurelia was only furthering Akira’s point about entitlement. “You should really make your partner do the manual

labor, Pippin," she said lightly, "especially when the added work is her idea."

"I don't mind," Pippin said, organizing the rocks in a circle around their sprout.

"At least force Aurelia to do her part of the project," Cyra balked as Pippin began growing the sprout. "We have mathematics in twenty minutes."

Aurelia groaned, the long dramatic sound transforming to a grumpy whine. "Why do we need to learn such boring things? I mean, are we really going to be using math when we start our careers on the Warrior Track and become tomorrow's leaders?"

"I want to go down the Builder Track," said Pippin, his casts growing the little sapling to a satisfactory height. "All good architects, city planners, and master builders know math."

"I doubt that, when Cyra and I are battle training, we'll need to spout geometry." Aurelia's face scrunched into an overdone grimace. "Please stop casting at me, I need to solve for X!"

"That's algebra, not geometry," Pippin corrected.

"It's irrelevant, that's what it is," Aurelia snipped as she sat up. "And what about our Myths and Legends class? They want us to read Galodia Mao's massively overwrought tome on the Primorians. Why do we need to learn about people who may or may not have arrived here before the tribal migrations, and if they did, lost their stupid civilization anyway?"

Cyra stifled a laugh, biting back any contradictory words. She actually enjoyed the lore of the Primorians, who allegedly were the first people the Divine Ancients blessed with siphoning gifts so powerful that they eventually destroyed each other. As the story goes, the Ancients were so angry with their chosen people for abusing their gift, they created an afterlife specifically to punish the Primorians—the Seven Circles of Hell, each layer crueler and more brutal than the next.

"The story of the Primorians is more a lesson in hubris than actual history," Pippin said with just a touch of irony in his tone.

"A waste of time," Aurelia huffed.

"Clearly," Cyra said, flashing a knowing grin at Pippin, who returned her smile. "But you still need to graduate." She tugged Aurelia to her feet. "So you must, at least, pretend to absorb the teachings of our professors. And, yes, inevitably we will grow up and forget everything, and our elders

will pontificate on how we should have paid more attention in our wasted youth."

"Pontificate?" Aurelia arched a teasing brow. "Are you practicing your big words for these inevitable elder conversations?"

Cyra grinned, looping their arms. "Yes, and you should too."

"Fine," Aurelia sighed. "I suppose I will pontificate my math classes."

"Not using that word correctly."

"I don't care." Aurelia smiled gleefully. It quickly fell away as her green eyes sparkled with mischief. "So," she began with a loaded look, "how was working with *your* apple partner?"

Cyra's amusement soured. "She didn't burn my face off . . . yet."

"I like Akira," Pippin volunteered, joining the girls on their journey back to the castle. "We're in art club together."

Aurelia's nose wrinkled. "Wyndfyre has an art club?"

"Akira does art?" Cyra resisted a scoff, trying and failing to picture the surly girl with a paint brush. "Like landscapes?"

Pippin shrugged. "Like moody landscapes."

"Sounds right," Cyra breathed, absently wondering how they would continue this partner project together without blood being shed.

"Akira isn't so bad," Pippin said, as if reading her thoughts. "I'd actually call her my friend. Nailah, too. My only friends here, really, but that's no surprise." His gaze shifted between Cyra and Aurelia, fair cheeks going rosy. "The three of us are going to the lake tomorrow for Midfyre—a picnic on the pier. I vetoed a boat." An awkward chuckle shuddered through his thin lips. "Never learned to swim, so boats make me a little nervous. You both should come!"

Aurelia caught herself mid-laugh. "Oh, you're serious. We have a thing."

"Why is it no surprise that Nailah and Akira are your only friends?" Cyra asked, latching onto this nugget of revealed information.

"Isn't it obvious?" The mild color in Pippin's cheeks deepened, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret. "Most Wyndfyre students are either highborn, rich, or come from a long line of illustrious Syphons. My parents run a bakery. Nailah's parents own a tavern in Arquewest. Akira is Clovian-born. There are no Syphons in any of our families. Our names mean nothing here. Most students either ignore us or act like we're invisible."

At that moment, someone roughly bumped into Pippin, knocking him into Aurelia's shoulder. "Sorry," growled a deep voice, the student barely turning his head in acknowledgement. His tone certainly betrayed little apology. Quite the contrary.

Pippin's reddened face drained of color once he regained his balance, gaze latching onto the offending student, presently marching toward the castle like an irritated bull.

"Then there are those who I wish acted like I was invisible," he muttered under his breath, the words barely reaching Cyra's ears.

"Aedan Fletcher," Aurelia breathed the name like a curse, visually marking the boy in question as he disappeared through a doorway. "Lord of jerks and jackasses."

Cyra cracked a smile. "Is that a reference to Linus and Alaric?" she asked, referring to Aedan's oafish friends, who followed him around like stray dogs sniffing after scraps. "Or just a general comment?"

"Yes," Aurelia answered with a wide smile. "It's too bad. Aedan Fletcher is gorgeous, son of a lord. He would be on my potential marriage list, if he wasn't such a giant dickwad."

A laugh rumbled through Cyra's lips. "Do you ever not judge a boy by whether or not you might possibly marry them someday?"

"It's always a consideration," Aurelia deadpanned.

Cyra resisted an eyeroll. "You should have been my mother's daughter instead of me."

"If. Only," Aurelia said, at least half-serious.

"If only," Cyra repeated, more than half-serious.

The girls were still chuckling as they entered the forward courtyard. Pippin was ominously silent, his attention fixed on nothing in particular, as if his thoughts were far away. And by the troubled look brewing behind his features, nowhere pleasant.

"Is everything all right?" Cyra asked Pippin tentatively.

The corners of his mouth struggled to form a dismissive smile. "It's nothing. Aedan and I had a misunderstanding." He quickly conjured a burst of overbright enthusiasm, as if eager to talk about anything else. "Think about coming to the lake tomorrow, maybe I can help smooth things between you and Akira. Plus, I'm planning all sorts of baked treats for the picnic."

"We are absolutely *not* going," Aurelia said after Pippin bounded away.

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Chapter 9

Friends Along the Way

They didn't go to the picnic. Not really. Instead, Cyra and Aurelia rented a rowboat, taking the small vessel out over the lake. They could hardly resist. The day was beautiful, a biting crispness in the air only banished by the sun's beating rays.

Midfyre marked the halfway point of fall. Rain and snow just around the seasonal corner, urging many students to grasp the last wisps of warmth.

The rowboat drifted over the lake, surrounded by trees, their golden leaves half gone with the changing season. Aurelia lay splayed over one end of the boat, limbs lazily hanging over the sides while Cyra commandeered the oars.

She hadn't meant to drift near the pier. Even so, she returned Pippin's sly smile when their gazes met, the boy surreptitiously motioning the boat closer. He held up a delicious looking baked good—some kind of custard tart thing. But despite the treat's allure and Pippin's imploring look, Cyra couldn't bring herself to row any closer.

Akira sat across from Nailah, talking animatedly about last week's fireball match. And she was . . . smiling.

It was a jarring effect. Akira looked like a completely different person as she recalled an amazing save Artemisia made during the match's final minutes. By Nailah's blank expression, and Pippin's continued distracted glances, neither cared much for the sport.

An ironic laugh almost worked up Cyra's throat. She'd love to discuss fireball with someone who was actually invested in the sport. Would love to make more friends at this school. Maybe that was why she didn't stop the boat from gliding closer even as a foreboding feeling tingled at the back of her neck, as if signaling the approach of something unpleasant.

Not far off, Cyra's gaze shifted to the lakeshore and found the disagreeable presence of Aedan, accompanied by his two sniveling underlings, Linus and Alaric.

Aedan Fletcher. The name evoked stabs of annoyance. Even from a distance the surly teen cut an intimidating frame—broad shoulders, sandy blond hair with a fair, slightly tanned complexion. His magnificent jawline afforded him a masculine attractiveness, aided by his piercing blue-green eyes and impressive height. Yes, from a superficial viewpoint, Aedan was conventionally good-looking. He was also well-educated, his rich parents saw to that, lending the teen a sharp tongue and a highborn superiority.

A foul combination for a foul person, Cyra judged, having witnessed his bullying behavior since they met at the age of ten. What was this posturing pustule plotting today?

Nothing good, she concluded, as the three boys strode down the pier. Their only possible destination was the students enjoying their peaceful picnic. A peace shattered by a strong cast of wind. The gust knocked into the carefully laid out meal, scattering plates, glasses, food, and utensils across the picnic blanket. A few items even tumbled into the lake.

At the noise, Aurelia jerked out of her afternoon snooze. Cyra quickly held up a hand, calling for silence as she quietly rowed nearer to the pier, only half-sure she wanted to intervene.

"What the hell?" Akira cried, jumping to her feet and brushing away bits of food from her coat. Nailah and Pippin also claimed their feet, startled by the abrupt disturbance.

"A sorry picnic for three sorry losers," Aedan sneered, eyes pinning Pippin in place. "Make any more drawings, stalker boy?"

Akira immediately stormed forward, venom blazing in her cinnamon eyes. "What crawled up your ass, Fletcher?" Her fiery gaze hooked to the elemental crystal strapped to his wrist. "Freshmen aren't allowed to carry non-assigned crystals."

The corner of Aedan's mouth twitched. "Report me. See what happens."

A disgusted scoff fell from Akira's lips. "Entitled prick," she spat, shoving him away.

Cyra fought a smile. The girl had gumption. Unfortunately, Aedan barely flinched before shoving her right back. "Clovian trash," he mocked, the force of his shove throwing Akira right off the pier and into the water.

"Akira!" Nailah yelled, dropping to her knees on the edge of the pier and holding out a hand just as Akira's head breached the water's brackish surface. Then one of Aedan's minions kicked Nailah into the water, too.

Fury coiled around Cyra. True, she didn't know Nailah well, and more than disliked Akira, but watching a preening peacock like Aedan Fletcher bully them awakened an inexplicable rage deep within her belly. She rowed faster.

Aedan faced his final victim, towering over Pippin as he snarled, "Your future is over." His fingers curled in Pippin's coat. "My father will see to it."

"Let go of him, maggot breath!" Akira yelled from the water.

A dangerous smile curved up Aedan's lips. "All right." He launched Pippin off the pier.

Aedan and his friends laughed as Pippin hit the water with a yelp. Then the three oversized pests lumbered away, their mission of terror complete.

"Well," Aurelia huffed, "Aedan just achieved a new level of assholery today, previously thought impossible."

Cyra ignored the comment, suddenly remembering something that made her blood go cold. "Akira!" she shouted over her shoulder. "Pippin can't swim!" Worse, Aedan had dumped him on the other side of the pier, the piles completely obscuring where he had submerged.

Reaching the pier's edge, Aurelia and Cyra helped Nailah out of the frigid water as Akira swam through the piles. The three girls climbed onto the pier before concentrating their attention on the other side.

Cyra's heart plummeted at what she saw—or rather, what she *didn't* see. Nothing but rippling circles expanded over the disturbed water. Akira had disappeared beneath the surface, Pippin already swallowed by the lake's opaque waters. *Ancients, no.*

The girls just stared, none of them breathing. One second. Two seconds. Three.

Akira and Pippin finally breached the surface, gulping welcome breaths before splashing and gasping their way to the pier's edge.

Everyone shared collective sighs of relief once the lake relinquished Pippin and Akira, the drenched pair flopping onto the wooden planks. Akira sputtered curses, Pippin spat out mouthfuls of water between stunted coughs, but they both looked unharmed.

Cyra's rage still roiled, however, unsatisfied. She turned, spying the three human turds walking along the lakeshore. The wind carried their cackling laughs, the sound boiling her already simmering blood. Without thinking, she stormed down the pier.

"Where are you going?" Aurelia asked. She said something else, Akira or Pippin said something too, but Cyra heard none of it, righteous rage overpowering all other senses. She caught up with boys quickly, walking on the balls of her feet to mask her approach. Hands out, and with all the strength her anger could muster, she shoved Aedan. *Hard*.

He stumbled forward, just saving his balance before wrenching around. His fists balled, wild eyes promising violence. He hesitated when he recognized Cyra, his brow stitching in confused surprise.

"Think you're a big man for pushing people around?" Cyra growled.

Aedan's surprise settled into smug condescension, as if this conversation had already grown tedious. "Just putting the worthless in their place." His eyes narrowed. "And ensure certain people keep their distance."

"Or what? You'll beat them up? Your father will ruin their lives?" Cyra raised her chin defiantly, and a savage smile wrung across her face. "Do you want to play the game of powerful fathers, Fletcher? Because I'll win every time. And I wonder what mine will say to yours when I tell him you nearly drowned a student?"

Aedan frowned at Cyra, his sneer faltering. "What are you talking about?"

"Pippin can't swim, you feckless twig."

To her great satisfaction, actual fear filled his eyes. He glanced toward the pier, then back to Cyra. "I didn't know the little twerp couldn't swim."

Cyra only glared. "Stay away from him."

Aedan raised his hands. "You don't have to tell me twice." He nodded to his friends, and they all skulked away.

Following them with her eyes, Cyra allowed the rage to leach from her body, the hum in her blood finally quieting.

"I really enjoy when you flex your family name muscles," Aurelia said gleefully, drawing up next to Cyra. "It's fun to see them squirm."

Cyra winced at the comment. Now that her anger had cooled, she regretted her little outburst. All she could hear was her mother: Tantrums are not cute, not on toddlers and certainly not on young ladies.

“In hindsight, I should have been more restrained,” she said apologetically. Wasn’t this exactly what Akira was accusing her of yesterday? Throwing around her last name, knowing the power it wielded.

After Cyra’s gaze found Akira, approaching with Nailah and Pippin, she waited for a fresh burst of hostility or a biting round of well-deserved *I told you so*.

Instead, Akira did something far more shocking. She smiled. It was a cocky, reluctant sort of smile, the look almost comical with her soaked black hair plastered to the sides of her face. But it was a smile all the same. “It was for a worthy cause,” she allowed, sounding as if the admission cost her.

Surprise shifted through Cyra. Dare she interpret a compliment laced behind the statement? Maybe. With a little nonverbal encouragement from Pippin, Cyra and Akira found themselves walking side-by-side back to Fyre Hall.

“Do you think we can call a truce?” Cyra asked tentatively, fully prepared for another lecture followed by a curt rejection.

Akira didn’t immediately respond, the sound of squelching boots over grass filling the silence. “I guess,” she breathed, grinding her teeth as if she had just made some grand concession. “Compared to egotistical toads like Fletcher, you’re . . . all right.”

“Thanks,” Cyra said dryly, working up a wry smile at the almost insult.

“And,” Akira continued after an exaggerated sigh, “you actually appreciate studying and hard work. If you were like Finn or Fabien, I might just have to kill you. I’ve been in constant competition with that insufferable duo since primary school.”

A dry laugh slipped through Cyra’s lips. “Try having a brother like Kasian. In my mother’s eyes, he’s perfect, and I’m the ‘oh, right, you’re also here,’ sibling. Last summer she wanted my aptitude tested, wondering why everything was so much harder for me than for him. Her criticism is always plentiful, compliments rare unless backhanded. For example, she commended me for gaining weight before the start of classes as I wouldn’t need to take in my uniform.” Cyra knew she was rambling, certainly laying on the self-deprecation thick, but the feeling that this moment was her only

chance at peace kept the words tumbling out of her mouth. “I know I’m extremely fortunate,” she went on. “Never experienced any real hardship, but I still have wants and fears . . . fear of failure.” Her pulse quickened as she gave Akira a tentative smile.

“I suppose,” Akira began, her reluctance thickening with every stalled breath, “I have been a bit hostile toward you.”

Cyra raised her brows. “A *bit*? Some nights I expected you to smother me in my sleep.”

The corners of Akira’s mouth twitched. “Tempting.”

“Our unspoken competition pushed me in classes.” Cyra shrugged. “So, I guess, thanks?”

Akira smirked. “You’re welcome. And, I guess, I’m sorry.”

Then a minor miracle happened: they traded smiles.

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“Thanks for helping with Akira,” Cyra said to Pippin once the group returned to Fyre Hall. Akira, Nailah, and Aurelia retreated upstairs to shower and change while Cyra and Pippin lingered in the first-floor common area.

“I knew you both would get along if you just talked things out,” Pippin said.

“Nothing like a pretentious pig to bring people together,” Cyra chuckled. “If Akira and I actually become friends, I’ll owe Aedan my thanks.” When Pippin did not return her rueful smile, she added, “I’m teasing. Aedan can eat slugs.”

“I know,” Pippin said, but his features deflated, damp clothes and half-dried hair only adding to the sad puppy look, as if he carried the weight of the world on his stooped shoulders.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?” she asked gently.

“Not really.” He plopped into the nearest chair. “Only that my life is over.”

Cyra took up the opposite chair. “Because?”

“Because I like boys,” he said, matter-of-factly. “I’ve known this about myself for a while.” His shoulders dragged up with a slow shrug. “Sometimes I like to draw likenesses of other students that I find . . . attractive.”

“Ah,” Cyra said, understanding immediately. “And you find Aedan attractive?”

“When he doesn’t talk.” Pippin gave a weak smile, but it died within seconds. “He’s my suitemate. He found some of my drawings, and he reacted . . . badly.”

“Aedan is an insecure, pompous idiot with a superiority complex,” Cyra said. “Don’t take anything he says seriously.”

Pippin only shook his head. “He’s not wrong about this ruining my life.”

“Why?” Cyra’s brows twitched. “You can love and marry and—”

“Not if I want a career as a Syphon,” Pippin cut in, looking at her intently. “Track Assignment is contingent on me signing the Syphon Code of Conduct pledge, meaning I agree to the Marriage and Progeny Act. If I do not uphold this signed promise, then I face penalties, including fines—”

“You could pay fines,” Cyra said, despite her insides squishing at the realities Pippin presented. Realities she never really considered all that important.

Because they didn’t affect you. Not in the same way, at least. The Syphon Marriage and Progeny Act required all career track Syphons to marry by thirty and have children. Cyra held no fondness for these laws, set in place to ensure the continuation of Syphon-born children—or so the Crown and royal administrators decreed every time people petitioned for exceptions.

“I could end my career.” Pippin’s hands fidgeted. “People like me do all the time. The law states that the Syphon career track is a privilege, not a right. Even a whisper of deviating from the pledge . . .” He shook his head. “I’d lose everything.”

Cyra’s heart sank, searching for the right words that wouldn’t sound woefully naive. “I’m sorry, the situation really sucks.”

Pippin’s throat bobbed. “I’m the first Syphon born in my family in two generations. The first ever to be accepted at Wyndfyre Academy. My parents are so proud of me . . .” The corners of his mouth trembled, but he swallowed down whatever emotion gathered.

“Do you want to be a Syphon? There are other careers outside of the Syphon tracks.”

Pippin did not immediately respond, staring down at his hands. “My dream is to become a master builder. If the Academy Board grants my

application and places me on the Builder Track, First Class, then I have to sign the Code of Conduct pledge."

"Then sign the pledge. Thirty is a long time from now. A lot can change in fifteen years." A weak smile turned up Cyra's lips.

Pippin's features brightened slightly. "You really think so?"

"Anything is possible," Cyra said, quite sure this, too, was also woefully naive.

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Pippin grimaced after tasting the raw cake batter and spat it out. "You put too much salt in it, Aurelia."

"I used half as much salt as sugar," Aurelia said defensively. "How can that possibly be too much?"

Pippin pinched the bridge of his nose, as if searching for long emptied patience. "I only grew up in a bakery, but what do I know compared to someone who has never stepped foot in a kitchen? This is foul—taste it."

Chopping pears, Cyra and Akira watched the interaction from across the work table, both squashing amused smirks. The Fyre Hall chef had allowed them access to the dormitory kitchens in order to bake a cake for Nailah's birthday. Their suitemate had joined the school's dance team at the start of the spring semester and was presently at rehearsal. The perfect time to bake a surprise cake, if it did not turn into an inedible salty mess.

Aurelia lifted her chin indigently, dipping a finger into the off-white batter and raising it to her mouth. As much as she tried not to make a face, disgust immediately squished her features. "All right," she bit out, "perhaps a touch too much salt."

Pippin nodded in triumph. "Now watch me." He commandeered the mixing bowl and dumped the contents into the nearby trash bin before Aurelia could protest. "First lesson of baking: know when to start over."

"You're quite bossy in the kitchen," Aurelia said. "I like this side of you." She winked at him, and Pippin returned a grin.

It was true. Pippin held no qualms ordering around the three girls or scolding them for making obvious mistakes, at least when it came to baking. Cyra had learned a lot about Pippin over the last few months. She had learned a lot about Nailah and Akira, too, the five students forming a friend group.

After Cyra and Akira's official peace agreement at Midfyre, becoming friends was easy. Given they were suitemates, friendship was far more convenient than continuing their hostile rivalry, the girls quickly discovering far more similarities than differences.

Thank the Ancients.

"Do you think this cake would hold up to your family's bakery standards?" Cyra asked Pippin once they finished decorating the baked cake an hour or so later.

Scrutinizing the haphazardly applied décor of fruit, white icing, and chocolate piping, Pippin scrunched his nose. "Only if their patrons had all gone blind."

"It's the thought that counts," Akira said, and they all nodded reassuringly.

"In another life, I could have been a baker," Aurelia said as they returned to their rooms.

Akira rolled her eyes. "A baker, much like your would-be life as a dancer after we attended Nailah's recital last week? Or your other would-be life as an actress after I auditioned for the spring play?"

"Yes." Aurelia straightened. "I *would* have been very busy."

Akira chuckled, shaking her head at Aurelia's indulgent smile. They both froze, finally noticing the sly look on Cyra's face once they entered their shared suite. "What is it?" Akira demanded, eyes narrowing.

"Have either of you been in your rooms today?" Cyra asked innocently.

Confusion knit Aurelia's brow, but it blinked away in the next moment. "Blessed Ancients!" she exclaimed excitedly before racing off to her bunk.

Akira maintained her thick wall of suspicion, stomping off to her bedroom as if preparing for something terrible.

A loud squeal of excitement announced Aurelia's reappearance in the common room. "I can't believe it!" she cried breathlessly, clutching the scroll in her hands. "Order of the Red Lapis!" She beamed at Cyra. "With it being halfway into the spring semester, I figured I wouldn't get another chance till next year." She threw her arms around a grinning Cyra. "Oh, if you helped make this happen, thank you! Thank you!"

After a few moments, Cyra disentangled herself from Aurelia's almost choking grasp in time to spy Akira exiting her dorm room, holding her own Red Lapis invitation.

Cyra smiled expectantly, waiting for the inevitable excitement.

Instead, a frowning Akira said, “Did you have something to do with this? I wanted to earn an invitation on my own, not because I’m your friend.”

“And I don’t care if I got this because I’m your friend,” said Aurelia unhelpfully, a self-satisfied grin still splayed across her face.

Cyra’s features flattened. “I swear, I had nothing to do with either of your invitations.”

For several long seconds, Akira’s lips maintained their tight purse before they begrudgingly broke into a smile. “So, when is the first meeting?”

Aurelia made another excited squeal, both girls staring eagerly at Cyra. “I’m not supposed to tell you,” she said with a conspiratorial look, “but it’s tonight, and I need your good thoughts. It’s my initiation, and I’m really nervous.”

An understatement, especially as night fell and Cyra found herself waiting with the other initiates outside the assembly hall. A more apt description of her present state was somewhere between an anxious ball of apprehension and a fidgeting mess as she adjusted her bracer for the fifth time in the last ten minutes.

The Red Lapis members and incoming neophytes were already inside, Kasian delivering his introductory speech. The robed students showed off for the newbies with a few duels, leaving the sixteen initiates waiting anxiously just beyond the entrance. Some paced while others practiced casting. Even Fabien betrayed a few visible nerves, brows furrowed in concentration as if mentally rehearsing the coming battle. The only student amongst the group who looked in any way relaxed was Finn, because of course.

Just don’t embarrass yourself, Cyra repeated every time her anxiety spiked, resisting the urge to glance toward her assigned dueling partner. During their last Red Lapis session, the soon-to-be initiates drew names at random for their debut battles.

And what name was scrawled on Cyra’s selected paper?

Finn Calderis. *Just. Great.*

She wasn’t sure if facing Finn was better or worse than being paired with a sophomore. Regardless, the match would be tough. Finn was better at wind and water casting, but Cyra had taken to fire with impressive speed —the only element with which she outshined the Fantastic Brothers.

Fire being her best element was no surprise, the only element she could manifest without a crystal. Even so, Finn was an incredible Syphon—no ifs, ands, or buts.

Just don't embarrass yourself, Cyra repeated once more as her eyes snagged on Finn despite her self-imposed orders to avoid lending him any attention.

Leaning against a side wall, he twirled a coin between his fingers as if he didn't have a care in the world. When his eyes flickered in her direction, the corners of his mouth curled, as if all the fuss amused him. "Are you ready to face me, princess?"

Ignoring the rapid thumping of her heart, Cyra returned only annoyance. "I'm ready to wipe away that cocky smile. But please, be overconfident, I'll take any advantage you want to give me." Her mask of unaffected confidence was not entirely convincing—smile too tight, voice too high, words too fast.

Finn's smile grew wider, oozing with anticipation. *Vexing flea*.

The rising irritation quelled some of Cyra's anxiety. A short-lived reprieve, however, as Kasian ushered the awaiting group inside. And the initiate battles began.

Just don't embarrass yourself.

It was hardly the most inspiring pep talk, but it was comforting. At the last meeting, Kasian had said they would accept initiates who technically lost their duel as long as they put up a good effort. *Just don't embarrass—*

"Cyra Byrogan and Finn Calderis!" someone called.

The tight ball in her gut lurched. *Just don't embarrass yourself,* Cyra repeated a final time as she entered the circle, positioning herself about thirty feet away from Finn, the teenage nuisance flashing another lopsided grin. Then the match began.

Before Cyra even thought her first cast into reality, a deluge of water eclipsed her vision. The clear liquid reflected the surrounding firelight in a sheen of gleaming yellow. She barely dodged the wave, water crashing against the stone floor.

She pinned Finn with a murderous glare. He wanted to embarrass her. The thought breathed welcome heat through her body as tingling warmth surged down her right arm, conjuring a line of fire aimed at Finn's feet. *You want to dance, Finn? Let's dance.*

Finn leapt into the air, tucking up his feet to avoid the fire. He landed in a half crouch, his lopsided grin widening, as if he was having the time of his life.

Cyra willed her heart to steady. It all but stopped as three fireballs flew toward her in quick succession. Instead of dodging the attack, she managed a fairly competent water cast.

As liquid met fire, steam sizzled over stone, raining smoke and mist. Before the spray cleared, she twisted around and launched another fire attack.

Finn diverted her efforts with a wind cast, curving the flames upward. His secondary wind cast burst the fire apart, embers scattering through the dark room like a firework.

Showoff. Cyra chased the attack with another fire cast. Then another. And another.

Finn swallowed her jets of flames with an umbrella of water, spraying Cyra with droplets turned into tiny ice spears. They were small enough that her strong wind cast ensnared the barrage, swishing it up and over the perimeter of students.

Sweat dripped down her back, breaths like labored pants as the battle ensued for another tense few minutes, the longest of the initiate matches thus far.

Frustration mixed with exertion soon dwindled Cyra's energies against this inflated pest, who seemingly possessed boundless stamina. Hoping to finally catch him off-guard, she cast a wall of water, trailed by an arrow of fire. Unfortunately, the risky move cost her.

In an amazing show of control, Finn curved a shard of ice around her water wall.

Too slow to mount any defense, the tip sliced through the cuff of Cyra's coat, the point grazing skin before smashing into the floor. Mild pain splintered through the shallow gash, but her pride suffered the deeper wound. She lost. Lost to stupid Finn.

A disappointed breath listed from her lips.

"Draw!" Kasian shouted.

Cyra's head snapped to Finn. He inspected his right elbow, nose scrunched up with a mild wince. Her fire cast had snuck past his defenses and tagged his arm at the same time Finn's shard grazed her wrist.

Relief and pride swelled. A draw was sure as hell better than losing.

Kasian strode into the center of the circle, nodding to both Finn and Cyra in approval. “The vote for Finn?” He glanced over his shoulder at the four council members. All four hands shot up, joined by Kasian. “Finn Calderis, you are officially inducted into the Order of the Red Lapis.” He faced Cyra with a brotherly smile. “The vote for Cyra Byrogan?” Again, all hands shot up, and Kasian grinned. “Well done to the both of you.”

Finn and Cyra locked gazes for the briefest of moments. *Not bad*, his begrudging nod and twitching brows acknowledged.

Next time, I am going to kick your ass, her tilted chin and raised brow silently promised.

A smile danced across Finn's face as if to say, *You are welcome to try.*

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Chapter 10

The Spark

Present Day

The stories of Wyndfyre, of her freshman year, tumbled from Cyra's lips with far more ease than she anticipated, emotions wrapped in a blanket of warmth and nostalgia. It had been so long since she thought about that time, almost half her life ago. And as the buried memories resurfaced, a quiet joy opened its eyes, the feeling akin to greeting a long-lost friend.

They were all so young and innocent then, the whole world ripe with opportunity. Adventures on the horizon. Futures unwritten, full of hope and promise and ambition. There was pride in those years. Fun. Laughter. Friendship.

And seven hells, did Cyra miss it. Missed the person she was then.

Cracking open this corner of her heart stirred something, a long-dormant ache pulsing back to life. It squeezed a wistful sadness around her chest. Revisiting those years now, at twenty-nine, how ridiculous some things seemed in hindsight—knowing what she now knew, living the life she had lived. Being the best, achieving top grades, maintaining class status . . . none of it really mattered in the end.

Not with the horrors she would survive.

Not with who and what she would become.

A tide of shame and sorrow and regret suffocated any fledgling joy. The stabbing emotions thickened her throat, requiring a breath, a moment to gather herself.

For several seconds, only the crackle of the campfire filled the empty night as Cyra struggled to reclaim the present, and remember why she was here.

Korina. This was for Korina.

Swallow any pathetic self-pitying bullshit and focus, she told herself.

Working up a strained smile, Cyra studied Korina's face, wondering if this was all too much for her. She wanted Korina to understand what life was like for people like Cyra, people like Akira. The things they cared about at ages fifteen and sixteen. The average day or class. They weren't monsters. They were teenagers who cared about teenage things—boys, friends, school, family. A week was a lifetime, and age thirty was a million years away.

"Do you have any questions so far?" Cyra asked, nerves over Korina's response succeeding in tempering her howling emotions.

Korina's brows twitched. "You had a brother? Parents?" It was the first time she had spoken in hours.

Cyra nodded, seeing Kasian's smiling face in her mind's eye. She would always treasure the one year they had shared together at Wyndfyre. The image tightened her chest, squeezing that ache in her heart and drying her throat so badly she nearly reached for the water canteen in her pack. Instead, she studied her nails, swallowing hard.

"Are they still alive?" Korina asked more quietly, as if she already assumed the answer.

Raising her eyes, Cyra hesitated, instincts screaming to lie, to hedge. To confirm what she detected in Korina's softened features. The truth would only yield more questions.

No. No more lies, Cyra. "Yes." The word was low, strained.

Korina blinked in surprise, and a moment of silence passed between them. The campfire flickered and twisted, dancing light and shadows across their faces, the occasional crack releasing a flurry of sparks into the ink-black sky.

"If you have living family," Korina began, her brows furrowed as if trying to work out a confusing puzzle, "why didn't you go back after the war? Why stay here?"

Cyra's entire body tensed. These were questions she was not ready to answer. Maybe ever. "It's complicated. Let's just say the war was nothing like school. It was cruel. And violent. Uncaring. There were things I saw,

things I did . . . things I can't take back." She hesitated, the lump in her throat resurging with cruel vengeance. "Things I regret. I've changed a lot since academy." Her eyes drifted to the fire, tracing the flames as they slowly consumed the logs. "By the end of the war, I felt lost. The idea of going . . ." That word, *home*, caught on her tongue and wouldn't budge. "Back," she relinquished, "filled me with utter dread. I had a chance to start over, to create a new life for myself. So, I took it." She looked at Korina, a kind smile tugging up her lips. "I don't regret my choice."

Korina nodded, as if accepting this answer. "Do you miss any of it? Your old life?"

Cyra's too-tight muscles relaxed at this question. "Of course I do. I certainly miss my time at school, my friends, my brother . . ."

"What about the war?" Korina's expression pinched, her earlier hostility rearing behind her hazel eyes. "Did you believe in it?"

Again, Cyra hesitated, debating how much truth to divulge. "I did for a while; I won't lie. We all did. But in the end, I questioned a lot of things—everything, really. I'm extremely glad Clovia won its freedom. Just as I'm glad I met your mother, and Roone, and Sage, and you." Another smile twisted up her lips. "Perhaps fate led you to find me that day in the forest."

Korina's throat bobbed. Then her eyes went a bit glassy as she said, "What should I do? The militia—"

"Are no longer a concern. They're gone, off to bother another town."

Korina furiously shook her head. "A few months ago," she began, her voice hitching, "I heard some travelers talking about Governor Royce—they were former workers on his estate. They said Royce has a group of captured Syphons, that he's experimenting on them. It explains why those soldiers wanted to collect *any* Syphons they found. It's why I ran away."

Cold shivered up Cyra's spine, leaving her struck speechless for a long moment. "You overheard former employees of Governor Royce confess to holding Syphon prisoners?" It wasn't that she doubted the girl. Korina wasn't a liar, nor prone to exaggeration—not about important things. But this information was just too shocking not to be questioned.

Despite the empty night, the surrounding trees their only companions, Korina lowered her voice. "The men said the Syphons were soldiers from the war. Captured Castorian soldiers."

The breath left Cyra as several things rushed through her mind, her frantic thoughts stalling at two words: four years. The war ended four years

ago. If this information was true, then these prisoners had been held for four long years—a direct violation of the Castorian-Clovian Peace Accords, the least of Governor Royce's crimes. *If* true.

"Are you sure?" Cyra asked, her heart in a freefall.

Korina only nodded. "The men thought Royce was trying to find a cure for Syphons. A way to nullify their magic."

More ice filled Cyra's veins. And something else—a little glimmer of her old self sparking awake. The idea that people were being held captive and suffering—Castorians, her people—boiled utter fury through her body. The familiar rush of anger and adrenaline screamed for her to act, to race off to Royce's estate and uncover all his sinister deeds.

The impulsive urge encircled her like an intoxicating perfume.

Cyra the ranger would not have hesitated. Ranger Cyra would initiate immediate plans to verify the information before plotting a daring rescue. But that was her before the war ended. Before Willowwood. Before the barn. Before she walked away from everything.

She had a new life now, a new name, a new world. *Are you really ready to throw it all away based on rumor?* Absolutely not.

"I won't let Royce, his militia, or anyone take you away," Cyra promised, squashing any hints or glimmers or twinges tugging her back to Cyra the ranger.

Focus on Korina, she told herself, and she did, the pair setting off to return to Lofton the next morning. But as much as Cyra tried to ignore what Korina had revealed—tried to ignore the militia, Governor Royce, Finn—it all swirled around in a storm of nagging *what-ifs*.

It all culminated in one question: Could she really do nothing? Return to her life as if nothing had changed?

The day of riding afforded no answers, only more turmoil and confusion and unease. Like it or not, her past was pouring free of the container she had so carefully guarded all these years, and there was no putting it back, not completely.

As night fell again, another campfire cutting through the chilly dark, Cyra spent the evening telling more stories about Wyndfyre. Korina gobbled up the shared nuggets as if each new tale was something precious. Cyra didn't mind. This part of her history was safe, a comforting dip of her toe into the turbulent waters of her past. And she loved seeing the bright-eyed fascination beam across Korina's face.

Her fear and judgement from the prior day had long vanished, replaced by a vociferous appetite to learn more about this strange and foreign world. It reminded Cyra of when she first arrived at Hadara's homestead. Korina couldn't stop asking questions then. And now, with this new discovery, a hunger to know everything consumed her.

As for Governor Royce's Syphon prisoners, Cyra would decide what to do . . . later.

"Spring semester of sophomore year, I made the fireball team as second striker," Cyra said as she roasted a small pot of beans, onions, and chopped vegetables over the fire. She had planned some sort of stew for their evening meal, hoping to trap a rabbit while they set up camp. The rabbits evaded her snares, however, so vegetarian it was to be.

"Not goalkeeper?" asked Korina curiously, ripping up bits of borderline stale bread from her pack.

"My friend was far more competent at stopping flaming balls than me," Cyra said with a half-smile, picturing Akira's determined features right before an impressive save.

"What about boys?" Korina asked, a smile tugging at her lips. "Did you see anyone romantically?"

Cyra's stomach lurched, her heart beating faster. A face appeared in her mind's eye, his crooked smile promising nothing but mischief. Then the vision skewered her chest with another stab of pain, and she shoved it away.

"I had flings here and there but nothing serious." She managed to sound casual despite her thumping pulse. "At least, during my first few years at school. I was so busy with academics, practical lessons, friends, fireball, and Red Lapis Society that I barely had time to eat." She forced a clipped laugh through her lips. "By my junior year, I was obsessed with being selected as a finalist for the Gauntlet Trials."

"You mentioned the Gauntlet Trials before." Korina chuckled nervously. "Were they as ominous as they sound?"

Cyra allowed herself a smile, pulling away the pot from the fire. "Yes," she said, dividing the bubbling stew into two tins and offering one to Korina. "The five junior class students with the most Red Lapis match wins were selected to compete. The champion became the High Phoenix and president of the school, the other four claiming student council seats." She stared into her steaming stew, inhaling a whiff of roasted beans and onions.

“Becoming a finalist was all I could think about in those months, the goal consuming my every waking thought and desire. It was all I wanted.”

“And were you a finalist?”

Cyra’s smile stretched. “Of course.” Pride laced the words, and why not. At the time, it was her proudest achievement, earned through talent, determination, and hard work.

“And did you win the Gauntlet Trials?” Korina asked eagerly, blowing on the contents of her half-raised spoon, fascinated eyes never leaving Cyra’s face. “Did you become president of the school?”

Hesitation gripped Cyra as her memories reached back to that particular event, to those two days that changed the course of her life. “That . . . is a longer story.”

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Chapter 11

The Gauntlet Trials

Eleven Years Ago

"Akira," Cyra whispered through the early morning darkness. Snores and heavy breathing sounded from Aurelia and Nailah's beds on opposite sides of the dormitory, but Akira's breath was quiet and steady. "Are you coming to trial practice?"

Akira's eyes cracked open, a wince wrinkling her brow. "I'm not feeling well. Go on without me."

Strange. Akira was intensely devoted to preparing for the upcoming Gauntlet Trials. A severed limb wouldn't have been able to stop her let alone a cold.

Overindulgence at the ball last night, Cyra surmised, failing to recall at what late hour her roommate finally returned to their shared dormitory. Akira had been the only one of their friend group to be invited to the senior ball—much to Aurelia's unrelenting envy.

Cyra smiled as she tiptoed out of the quiet castle, glad Akira had fun last night, especially after her threats to cancel just before her date arrived.

"I should be preparing for the Gauntlet Trials, not going to some stupid ball," Akira had lamented, already fully dressed in a gown of deep maroon silk taffeta—a stunning selection borrowed from Cyra's closet.

"You can't stand-up Illias Malcom!" Aurelia had argued. "Not only is he the dean's son, but his uncle owns a *quarter* of the kingdom's elemental crystal mines. If you marry him, your future is set." The comment earned a

flat look from Akira and a round of shared eyerolls between Nailah, Pippin, and Cyra.

With immense reluctance, Akira had attended the ball, and now seemed to be paying the price for her indulgence. She'd feel better tomorrow, Cyra told herself, darting through a clump of trees for the fireball field, a mixture of grass and pine filling her nose.

The late spring morning was chilly. A low layer of mist blanketed the freshly trimmed lawn, obscuring the white lines cutting over the green. "Sorry I'm late," she panted, jogging up next to Fabien, waiting near the center of the horizontal pitch. "Where's Finn?"

As if in answer, a ball of fire suddenly eclipsed her vision, barreling straight at her face. A scream built in Cyra's throat, but the cry never reached her lips as the flames abruptly halted midair, two feet from her nose.

"It worked!" Finn shouted moments before he appeared. "Oh, I would move." He waved to Cyra, who finally registered that Finn had frozen the fireball with a time cast. She stepped aside as the flames reanimated, arcing through the air before dissipating in the mists with a *poof*.

Cyra pinned Finn with a seething glare. "Did you need to practice by aiming at my face?"

"I was struggling with time casting fire." Finn's mouth pulled into a self-satisfied grin. "I figured if the stakes were higher, I could do it."

"Next time aim at your brother's face," she snapped, earning a wry side-eye from Fabien.

"You're not the least bit impressed with the time cast?" Finn asked. "Have you been able to time cast something for any real period of time?"

Heat flared up Cyra's spine. In truth, all she had managed thus far with the troublesome black crystal was forcing objects into slow motion. So, yes, admittedly Finn's time cast on the fast-moving flames was . . . brilliant, amazing, incredible—all adjectives she would rather lick the bottom of a shoe than verbalize.

Finn's over-inflated view of himself required zero flattery, even if earned.

"Where's Akira?" Fabien asked when Cyra only met Finn's questions with a silent glower. After the finalists were announced, Fabien had been the one to suggest joint practices leading up to the Gauntlet Trials—

excluding Aedan, the fifth finalist. The blustering barnacle could train on his own.

“She’s not feeling well,” Cyra said before demanding they begin their practice, lest she abandon this already tiresome venture.

Akira stayed in bed for the next two days with a bad cold, apparently, even missing Monday’s classes, but by Wednesday, she was more or less back to her determined self.

Much to Aurelia’s dismay, Akira refused any discussion of the ball or her date, leaving Cyra and Aurelia privately surmising that things had not gone well with the dean’s son.

Fine. Cyra’s mental energies were far too occupied to gab about boys or balls, anxiety pulverizing her insides daily as the trials crept closer.

When the morning of the trials finally arrived, the five contestants met at the Wyndfyre train station before boarding the awaiting train.

Thick silence filled the passenger car. Even the ever-breezy Finn appeared flustered, leg bouncing restlessly in his seat, eyes missing their confident gleam. Cyra allowed herself an indulgent smirk. Finally, something ruffled her insufferable class rival.

“Good morning,” Dean Malcom greeted, entering the train car in his usual purple robes. “As you might presume, the Gauntlet Trials are held off campus”—he gestured around the train—“run by me, a few senior faculty, and some volunteers from the Castorian military, who are largely former Wyndfyre presidents and student council members themselves. The coming trials will test your crystal-wielding skills, your fortitude, your courage, your ability to work as a group, and your ability to stand alone. Throughout the trials you will be watched in case of severe injury, otherwise we will not interfere even when you are faced with imminent danger.”

Severe injury. Imminent danger. Cyra’s stomach twisted.

“The first to claim this”—the dean held up a leather belt embossed with intricate decorations and complete with slots holding casting crystals —“will become the new champion.” Then he launched into the detailed history and traditions of the contest.

Cyra’s mind drifted, preoccupied by the sound of her own hammering heart as the train lurched forward, barreling east toward the rugged mountains.

An hour later the train slowed to a stop, and the group disembarked into an unfamiliar wilderness in the foothills, the immediate area cleared of

trees. A stone column stood within the otherwise unremarkable grass, perhaps five feet in height, two feet wide, with a phoenix carved into the flat face.

Dean Malcom positioned himself next to the column as he addressed the five students and pointed due east. “Start your journey by heading toward that peak. You will follow these columns along the way. They will guide and give you instruction. This is a dangerous competition and may extend to tomorrow.” He nodded at the cross-body packs each of them carried, containing food and water. “If you are unable to continue, one of the staff will collect you for medical attention.” He supplied each of them with two black and two translucent crystals before producing a sealed scroll, which he handed to Akira. “Instructions for your first task. I will meet you at the finish. Good luck.” After a curt nod, he boarded the train and was gone within minutes, leaving them all seemingly alone in the quiet wilderness.

Each of the five students secured the provided crystals within their respective bracers. Cyra frowned. *Why no elemental crystals?* It was the first of several questions racing through her mind.

Next to Cyra, Akira released a trembling exhale before breaking the seal on the scroll. “‘Good day, Syphons,’” she read aloud, “‘from here you will begin your journey. Head east and, together, cross the bridge to find the next marker, but beware of the knights. Should one catch you, your journey will end not long after it begins.’”

“Well,” sighed Finn, marching eastward toward the tree line with Fabien at his side. “I guess that means we should head east and avoid any knights.”

Cyra and Akira trailed after the brothers with Aedan bringing up the rear. As trees surrounded the five contestants, Cyra’s crescendo of nerves rose to alarming levels. She searched the woods and found no obvious threats, but the prickle in the back of her neck warned of something lurking within the too-quiet woods.

Nothing, however, could have prepared her for the strange cracking sound shattering the air. The horrible din was like a thunderclap.

“What was that?” Akira asked, the entire group paralyzed by the raucous pop.

“Gunshot,” said Finn, his wide eyes finding Fabien, who mirrored his shock.

“Firearms aren’t allowed within the kingdom’s borders,” Aedan said.

He wasn’t wrong. The colonial weapons were banned within Castoria. Finn must be mistaken.

He wasn’t.

Pop! Pop! Pop! More loud bangs echoed around them, the noise growing louder—closer. Illegal firearms or no, they all took off through the trees.

After five seconds of sprinting, Cyra stole a glance over her shoulder, and her heart seized. Riders, two of them, wearing hoods and black robes. In their hands, they grasped what she only had seen in books—long rifles.

Seven hells. She whipped her face forward, ignoring the burst of bark and wood chips exploding from a tree to her left. Would the riders really shoot them? Certainly not.

Certainly wrong.

Someone shouted. She turned just in time to witness Aedan faceplant into the ground, clutching his shoulder. A dark stain of blood seeped through the maroon red of his coat.

“Help me!” he cried, grimacing as he struggled to his knees.

Cyra hesitated. This was a competition, and, well, it was Aedan.

One of the hooded knights charged in front of her path, horse rearing as their rifle took aim. Heart lurching into her throat, she lunged behind a nearby tree just as the rider fired. The bullet smashed into wood, showering bark everywhere.

The rider rounded on Aedan, and for one horrifying moment, Cyra believed the knight was about to kill him. For all his faults, Aedan did not deserve to die.

“You are caught, runner,” the rider said. “Your time in these trials is over.”

Relief flooded Cyra, forcing her feet forward while the rider was distracted. After a hard sprint, she found the others near the edge of a clifflike drop-off. “Where’s the bridge?” she wheezed, clutching her knees as she scanned the wide chasm.

Water rushed some forty feet below, the river straddled by sheer rock. There was no bridge to be found, only two stone posts and nothing.

“That’s the thing,” said Finn, scratching his chin as he eyed a large pile of boards entangled with rope. “We think this is it.”

Cyra blinked. “This is what?”

“We have to rebuild the bridge to cross the gorge,” Akira said, her features cloaked in worry. “Like our fall semester projects.” She referred to the models they had cast into miniature suspension bridges spanning between trees—six feet long at the most. If Akira was correct, then what they were being asked to create was ten times as grand, with the promise of death via gorge splattering should disaster strike.

Too stunned by the monumental task, Cyra almost missed Fabien’s question.

“Where is Aedan?”

“Shot,” she breathed.

“What!” Akira exclaimed with wide-eyed alarm.

“He’ll be all right once they heal him, but he’s out,” Cyra said, flinching as more gunshots fractured the air. Then one of the riders emerged from around a tree.

They were caught.

Everything inside of Cyra cratered as several thoughts crashed across her mind. They would be the only students in Wyndfyre history to fail the Gauntlet Trials, and on the first test. How pathetic. How shamefully embarrassing. How—

Both rider and horse suddenly froze. Cyra’s head jerked around to find Finn’s arm outstretched. He had trapped the knight in a time cast. “What are you waiting for? Build the damn bridge!” he shouted, actually sounding stressed—a first.

Right. Cyra, Akira, and Fabien set to work, generating the most powerful evolution casts they had ever conjured. Together, they pieced together the bridge board-by-board, rope snaking into place as if being strung by invisible hands. Once the ropes spanned the chasm, tying around mirroring stone posts on the opposite side, they ventured across the petrifying gap.

Cyra willed herself not to look down, stomach dropping with every swing and dip and bounce. The crash of rushing water beneath their feet made everything worse, the echoes like a siren’s chorus, cheering on their failure.

Her fledgling hope at beating this test vanished when the second rider breached the trees. Cursing under her breath, she raced back to Finn’s side. With all the power and concentration her adrenaline-fueled energies could muster, she sent a time-cast at the new arrival.

The horse and rider did not completely freeze, instead slowing down to a fractional speed. Still, better than she expected.

“Thanks.” Finn gave her a relieved smile. It slid right off his face when a puff of black dust burst from his bracer—the first of his time crystals spent.

Cyra only managed a curt nod, strained focus devoted to her own slow-moving rider. “Stop moving, you black-robed bastard,” she ground out through gnashing teeth.

Finn cocked an eyebrow. “Why, princess, I do believe you uttered a curse word.”

“Don’t be a patronizing prick right now, Finn,” she said without looking at him. The first of her time crystals burst. *Come on. Come on.* Minutes ticked by, the longest minutes of her life. “Are you two almost done?” she shouted over her shoulder, sure she only had a few minutes left in her time crystal.

Wrong—less than a few. Her second time crystal burst into a flurry of black dust, and Cyra’s knight resumed full speed, rifle taking aim. Just as her heart began to sink right out of her body, Akira appeared, arm outstretched, capturing the knight with her own time-cast. “My evolution crystals are dust, go help Fabien!”

Without hesitation, Cyra sprinted across the near-completed bridge, changing positions with Fabien as his second evolution crystal dusted. Pulse a scattered mess, she concentrated on the last few boards needed to breach the perilous gap.

As rope and wood tied together, just reaching land, Cyra craned her head around.

Akira and Finn were midway across, Fabien trailing the trio over the chasm, all three racing across the rope bridge as if their lives depended on it.

Gunshots chased the Syphons, but they reached the safety of the trees without gaining any new holes. For several seconds, the four students gasped for breath, trading incredulous glances as their pulses slowed.

“That was fun.” Finn grinned, his face flushed, amber eyes bright with exhilaration.

Cyra wiped sweat from her temple. “They weren’t kidding about the danger.”

“They shot at us,” Akira said, eyes darting around their new surroundings. “Actually shot firearms at students.”

“And in Aedan’s case, actually shot him,” Cyra said, her heart finally no longer battering her ribs. “And, provided he’s all right, it could not have happened to a nicer fellow.”

They all chuckled, adrenaline slowly fading. After another minute of rest, Fabien pointed at something through the trees. “The next marker.”

They stretched to their feet, cautiously approaching the stone column. At the base lay a wooden box with a scroll on the lid. Fabien scooped up the scroll while Akira opened the box. Inside gleamed twelve elemental crystals.

“‘Congratulations, trial runners,’” Fabien read aloud after unfurling the paper. “‘You have passed your first challenge—a test to discover how well you work together, even in competition. Going forward, the choice to aid your fellow contestants is your own. Continue east where you will climb before you descend.’”

“Such clear instructions,” Cyra said dryly, claiming three red crystals from the box. Akira, Finn, and Fabien each did the same. “So, east?”

“Guess so.” Finn shrugged as they headed away from the gorge. “I like the subtle hint to stop helping each other.” He playfully elbowed Fabien in the side. “Next cliff, brother, you better watch out.”

Fabien gave a dry snort. “Please, you’re the reckless one.” He flashed Finn a teasing grin. “I just need to wait for you to do something stupid.”

“A strategy I intend to employ as well,” added Cyra with her own smug look. She resisted an eyeroll when Finn clasped both hands over his chest in mock offense.

They continued through forest, maintaining relative silence lest any more surprises present themselves. What the contestants encountered next wasn’t so much a surprise as a literal roadblock in the form of a stone wall, stretching in both directions as far as the eye could see.

“What is this?” Finn asked, scrunching his nose at the massive barrier made of thick stacked stone, its height reaching at least thirty feet toward the clear morning sky.

“The original Castorian border walls,” Cyra said with a jolt of realization. She touched the mortar between the stones. The sand-like substance crumbled. “Emphasis on old.”

“The instructions said climb, then descend,” Akira groaned.

“Awesome,” Cyra said with equal enthusiasm. After taking several steps backwards, she conjured thick plates of ice. The makeshift footholds embedded into the mortar between the stones, creating a step ladder up the wall.

Akira followed suit while Finn and Fabien joined together in their climbing efforts.

“We prefer to take the stairs!” Finn said, grinning as they produced a massive staircase made of ice.

Cyra suppressed a rueful smirk at the overuse of elemental power. Pride and overconfidence would be the brothers’ undoing. She just needed to be patient.

All smugness disappeared, however, when her foot slipped on one of her ice plates. For several breathless seconds, she dangled perilously from a single plate, from a single hand—a hand now freezing as it clung to the melting ice.

Finding another foothold, she quickly scurried the rest of the way in haphazard panic, Akira just seconds behind her progress. Once on solid stone, the girls allowed themselves a few moments of relief, plus a few more to banish the numbness from their fingers.

“Now what?” Finn asked.

“What do you mean?” Cyra frowned. “We climb down the other side.”

“Be my guest, but somehow I think even our collective ice creations will be of no use.” Finn gestured to the other side of the wall.

Craning her head over the crenellated ramparts, Cyra found a sheer drop, the wall disappearing into a misty cloud, the haze obscuring any sense of how far it plunged.

A frown captured her brow as she searched around the ramparts. The only other features of interest were two round towers, one south and one north. “Maybe—”

But any suggestion of a plan was cut short. The south tower began raining fire at the students. With little choice, the group sprinted toward the north tower. Fireballs licked at their heels, but the attacking speed was manageable, wind and water casts preventing the flames from causing injury. This wasn’t too bad.

Wrong. A wood post sprung from the wall sides, hitting just above the knee, and forcing the students to jump. The first beam triggered more, their differing heights adding difficulty.

“All right, a bit harder now,” Cyra muttered, silently scolding herself for considering any part of this venture *not too bad*.

Leap, crawl, duck—all while dodging or diverting attacking balls of fire. An exhaustive challenge, more than anything, the next hundred yards feeling like a mile. A sharp stitch of exertion stabbed at her side, slowing her efforts. The pummeling flames singed the ends of her ponytail, striking her vanity with the sharp odor of burnt hair and imagined damage.

Finn and Fabien reached the tower first, the grunting and huffing girls not far behind.

Cyra was nearly there, feet away from safety when she heard a gasp. Turning around, she spied Akira, her coat snagged on a post. Without a thought, she ran to aid her friend, wind-casting away a fresh fireball attack.

“I got this!” shouted Akira, yanking her coat feet and storming past Cyra, who hurried at her heels. Darkness eclipsed their vision as they ducked inside the tower, the threat of fireballs vanquished, panting breaths enclosing around them as their eyes adjusted.

A set of spiral steps curved down the tower’s interior before disappearing into black nothing—their presumed route off this torture wall. Fabien and Finn led the way down the steps, igniting palm-sized fireballs above their hands to cut through the opaque black.

“I don’t need your help,” Akira quietly bristled to Cyra as they followed after the boys.

“We helped each other in the first challenge,” Cyra argued, confused by Akira’s hostility.

“We were supposed to work together in the first challenge,” Akira snapped back, “but now we are supposed to finish on our own merits.”

“Right, but—”

“I am not helpless,” Akira interrupted, a twinge of surprising emotion hitching her tone.

“I know you’re not,” Cyra said defensively, confounded at this overreaction. “I won’t help you again. If that’s what you want.”

The words were met with silence.

The black combined with their single-file trek obscured Akira’s face, hiding any hints at whatever she was thinking. Cyra internally promised to broach the subject later when threats of fireballs, gun-wielding knights, and falls to their deaths weren’t top of mind.

The four students continued downward into the seemingly never-ending darkness, only their labored breaths and echoing steps saturating the air. The space was eerie, becoming increasingly claustrophobic the further they delved as if the walls were actively narrowing.

Finally, they came to a doorway, their boots sinking into sand when they reemerged into the day, finding themselves on the edge of a lake.

A low cloud layer hung over their heads, the gray canopy turning the formerly pleasant air cold and wet. A small beach clung to the tower base, the sand yielding to the lake's crystalline surface. A thick haze of fog hid any hint of a distant shoreline.

The whole scene felt otherworldly, but in a strange, off-putting way Cyra couldn't quite describe. A chill shivered down her spine, and she suddenly preferred the black of the tower.

"Do we swim across?" she asked no one in particular, hoping to locate some sort of boat.

The prospect of swimming only further unsettled her already squirming insides as she approached the waterline, struck by the weird stillness of the surface. Water should move, should ripple, should betray some sort of life, not stand utterly frozen.

"This is the famous Suspended Lake," Akira said, realization blooming across her features. To the others questioning expressions, she explained, "Fifty years ago, miners transported a cash of time crystals by boat down from Midnight Peak. A storm hit, sinking the load. Over time, the power from the crystals leached into the lake. The water, and everything in it, is essentially frozen in time."

"So . . . how do we get across?" Cyra asked.

"Over there!" Fabien pointed to several massive piles of different sized slate stones along with the next marker and another scroll.

The group crowded around the stone column, and Akira read the scroll. "Do not get stuck in the lake, or your trial is over."

"Straight to the point this time, eh?" Finn offered a smile, studying the flat stones with narrowed eyes. There were quite a lot, at least a hundred, perhaps more, all stacked high in precarious towers. "I wonder . . ." He aimed a wind-cast, snagging two stones and lifting the gray-blue objects free of the pile. They sliced through the air before landing on the unmoving surface of the lake. Finn jogged to the first stone, now resting on the water's

surface about two feet from the sandy shore. “Well, one way to find out,” he muttered, leaping onto the stone.

Cyra half-expected him to sink straight to the bottom or to go flying, but amazingly both Finn and stone stayed afloat.

“How about that.” Fabien grinned, conjuring his own wind-cast. He seized two more stones, whipping them through the air and landing the flat slate in front of Finn’s placed stones, creating a stepping path.

“So, we just follow along?” Cyra asked, thinking there must be another catch.

There was. Two arrows flew down from the tower above, both embedding harmlessly into the sand around them.

“Great,” Akira grumbled, wind-casting four fresh stones and creating a new line. “I think they want us to create our own paths.” As if in agreement, more arrows rained around the scene, forcing each student to create individual routes across the time-frozen lake. *Awesome*.

The arrows and thickening fog added both challenge and pressure as Cyra settled her wind-whipped stones as fast as her precarious balance allowed. Within minutes, moisture enclosed like a wet, unpleasant curtain. She nearly lost her footing more than once, stones becoming dangerously slick. Worse, after another few minutes, she could no longer see the piles on the beach or her fellow competitors.

Casting a line of fire back across the frozen lake to aid her vision, Cyra immediately ducked. An arrow tip sliced through her maroon coat sleeve, mercifully missing skin. Holding her breath, she captured four more stones when she heard a panicked yell echo through the fog.

Her heart thudded as she tunneled through the hanging clouds with a wind-cast, finding Finn. He teetered on a stone, his ripped coat and flash of red hinting at an injury.

Fabien raced to his brother’s aid, flying stones barely settling on the water’s surface as he moved with amazing speed, arriving in time to prevent Finn from crashing into the frozen lake.

“Thanks!” Finn smiled in relief before scrutinizing the shore’s edge. “Just a few more stones and—”

“Sorry, Finn,” Fabien interrupted, sounding jarringly deflated.

Finn’s head snapped to his brother, gaze dragging downward. Cyra saw it too. Both Fabien’s boots were stuck in the unmoving water. Apparently, his flying stones were not quite fast enough to save both brothers.

Finn’s brows caved in visceral dismay. “Ah, come on, Fabien.” He grabbed his brother’s shoulder and pulled, but he didn’t budge.

“Go on, Finn,” Fabien insisted, tone laden with defeat. “I am out of this . . . stuck, so to speak.” He worked up a hapless smile.

Finn didn’t move, head swinging around as if searching for anything to aid his brother. “I am not abandoning you.” Actual concern speared through his amber eyes.

“Go on, you stubborn ass!” Fabien shouted. “This lake can’t get the better of both of us.” More arrows only added to Fabien’s insistence, and Finn reluctantly pressed forward, conflict stitching his brows.

After another few breathless minutes, Akira reached the shore. Then Finn.

Cyra was close. She just needed one more stone. Except there were none. No more stones left with six cursed feet to go. Jumping was her only option. *Seven crappy hells.*

Stomach lurching to her throat, she swung her arms and lunged across the water.

She soared through the air, heart freezing in her chest as the ground neared. Her right foot met sand, but her left heel hit the water’s edge, and stuck immediately. Body swinging forward into the sandy earth, she landed on her hands and knees, panic choking her breath.

Come on, Cyra, her thoughts railed, six cursed inches cannot be your downfall. Drawing from a well of stubborn determination, she yanked and pulled and kicked her left foot.

It didn’t budge.

Fingers curling into the damp sand, Cyra muttered a series of creative expletives, finishing with just a simple grunted out “*Fuck*,” as everything inside of her imploded.

She was out. She failed. Her dreams were over. Bitter disappointment coiled around her insides as tears pricked her eyes. She couldn’t be out. Not yet.

“Just take your boot off, Cyra,” said Akira’s semi-amused, semi-resigned voice.

Cyra’s eyes flew to the laces of her boot, and a wash of excitement burrowed through her raging disappointment. After loosening the laces, her foot wiggled free.

Something between a cry and laugh escaped her lips as she hobbled across the sandy dirt edging the lake, hope soaring with each step. She was still in this thing—minus one boot.

A smile danced across her face. It vanished the moment she locked eyes with Akira, who was sitting on the ground, features scrunched in pain.

“No!” Cyra’s heart sank as she rushed forward.

An arrow protruded from Akira’s upper thigh. “I’m out, Cyra,” she said through gritted teeth, the color actively leaching from her cheeks.

“No, no you’re not.” Cyra knelt at her side, adjusting her coat sleeve to show off her lone evolution crystal. “I’ll heal you.”

“You will not,” Akira balked.

“Seriously?” Cyra blinked in annoyance. “Is this about me not helping you again?”

“No.” Akira furiously shook her head. “This is about you not crippling me for life. You’re good at scratches and burns, but this?” She sucked in a sharp breath as she gestured at the oozing wound. “I need a professional, Cyra, or my leg might be permanently damaged.”

“She’s right,” Finn said, jogging over to the pair. “Even I wouldn’t touch that.”

Uncertainty ripped through Cyra. “Are you sure?”

Akira nodded, releasing a long trembling exhale. “I am not going to risk my future on some dumb competition. Today is not my day. Now”—she heaved a sigh—“are you going to suck it up and keep going, or let this idiot win?” She glanced at Finn, who only smirked.

The corner of Cyra’s mouth twitched at the question, her resolve to win quickly resetting. “Any chance I can borrow your boot?”

A pained smile pulled at Akira lips, and she gingerly yanked off her left boot before handing it to Cyra. She also—far more subtly—freed the remaining crystal from her bracer. A black time crystal. With a conspiratorial look, Akira slyly tucked the crystal into an inner pocket of Cyra’s coat. “Use it well,” she whispered before more loudly adding, “All right, now scram. This arrow hurts like an unholy beast from the fifth circle of hell.”

After tugging on the boot, Cyra reluctantly nodded, shoving away the prickle of guilt at abandoning an injured friend. The borrowed footwear was slightly too big, but it would have to do. She looked back across the lake,

expecting to see Fabien still out there, but all she saw were his boots through the whirling fog. He was gone.

Prodded by a loud, impatient clearing of the throat from Akira, the two remaining contestants set out through the trees, continuing east. Finn's eyes sparked with challenge and mischief, the expression sending an internal cringe through Cyra as miserable realization sank to the bottom of her guts. She was stuck alone with stupid Finn for the rest of this thing.

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Chapter 12

Ghosts

Present Day

Finn. The name clattered through her insides like an incessant bell that would not stop ringing. Was he really here? Lurking somewhere in this precious valley? Why? What did he want?

The storm of unanswerable questions became too much, and Cyra halted her story despite Korina's protests. Thoughts of Finn crawled like weeds through her chest, wrapping around her lungs and strangling much of the joy her reminiscences had awakened. And what happened over the next twenty-hours in her story would only make those weeds squeeze tighter.

With promises to finish the Gauntlet Trials adventure later, Cyra managed to coax Korina into sleep. They rode hard the next day, returning to the homestead by evening, the sun just dipping behind the mountains as they approached the familiar residence.

Nestled within a grove of pine trees, the homestead was always a welcome sight, a safe haven in times of turmoil. A home. *Her home*. What if all this ended? Her heart squeezed at the thought, at anything threatening to steal her away from this place. From her people.

As they rode closer, Cyra spied Hadara unclipping dried laundry from a clothesline.

The ordinary task sent another pang through her chest, chased by the deepening urge to preserve this life. To forget what Korina had said about

Royce. About the imprisoned Castorians. Forget about the militia, Finn, all of it.

Maybe you still can, a voice in her mind whispered.

Hadara's head jerked up when one of the horses whinnied. Immediate relief washed over her features, and she dropped the laundry and hurried to her daughter.

Quickly dismounting, Korina met her mother halfway. "I am so sorry," she breathed as the pair embraced.

"It's all right," Hadara said, gently brushing the back of Korina's hair.

Feeling like an intruder, Cyra slid off the horse, hoping to quietly skirt herself to the barn, when Hadara lifted her head and said, "Thank you."

Cyra halted, gaze drifting between the pair. "You're welcome." She forced the corners of her mouth into an easy smile, willing all her anxieties to settle. "Although we're now officially behind in planning your party, Korina. Only two days left."

Korina's eyes widened in tentative excitement. The sentiment immediately deflated with her next blink. "I don't know, perhaps we shouldn't have a party now."

"Nonsense," Hadara balked. "Everything should go on as planned."

"That's right." Cyra nodded. "Nothing has changed." Nothing has changed, she silently reiterated despite her throttling insides arguing the exact opposite.

A slow smile crept up on Korina's face. "All right! Do you think I could come by the saloon tomorrow evening after I help close the cafe? I'd like to discuss decorations."

"Sure," Cyra agreed.

Korina beamed. "And, maybe, later," she hesitated, "we can talk more about the stuff?"

"Yes." Cyra dipped her head, eyes flickering briefly to Hadara. "We can talk later about the stuff. Now." She heaved a breath. "I have been absent from my saloon for nearly five days. Ancients knows if the place is still standing. I'll see you tomorrow, Korina."

By the time she reached Lofton, the last vestiges of light dwindled in the distant sky, silhouetting the western peaks in shades of indigo and cerulean. The sleepy town was quiet, most in their homes, enjoying their evening meal. Only a few patrons occupied the saloon when Cyra strode through the double doors.

Jiro greeted Cyra with a breath of relief. “Thank the Ancients you’re back,” he said. “You left me to deal with these unruly louses all by myself.” He gestured to a nearby table where Sal, Jafa, and a few other regulars enjoyed a round of drinks.

The group raised their glasses in cheery toast.

She waved at the table before offering Jiro an apologetic smile. “Did I miss anything?”

“I promised the wives of the town a ladies-only night,” Jiro said in a rueful tone. “They cornered me yesterday morning at Hadara’s Cafe and would not let me leave until I agreed. Peer-pressuring vipers.”

“Vicious monsters,” Cyra teased, something in her chest easing at this exchange, relieved to be back—for the return to normal.

A look of mock gravity gripped Jiro’s features. “I had very little choice, I assure you.” Some of the lightness left his face as he asked, “Is Korina all right? Hadara told me she took off and you went after her, but little else.”

Cyra’s stomach rolled over. “Korina will be fine—a little freak-out.”

“I hardly call running away a ‘little freak-out.’”

“It was a teenage girl thing,” she insisted, giving him a coaxing smile. Although the corners of her mouth were a touch too tight to be entirely convincing, but Jiro didn’t notice. “Right now, I am determined to make her sixteenth birthday the best one yet.”

***

“What do you think about red ribbons?” Korina asked the next evening. She had raced to the saloon just after Hadara’s Cafe closed for the day, claiming a stool at the bar. The saloon hadn’t been open long, a few patrons trickling inside for a drink or a game. Cyra anticipated a slow night—perfect, hoping to close early in preparation for the grand party the next evening. A party she wanted to make perfect for Korina.

“Red ribbons,” Cyra said, barely keeping the judgement from her tone as she tried to imagine red ribbons anywhere in the rustic saloon.

“What about just up on the bannisters there?” Korina pointed toward the inner balcony framing the bedroom Jiro and Cyra shared.

Cyra hid her grimace. “I think that could work.” Anything for Korina. Hell, if the girl wanted to paint the whole interior a loud crimson, then she would just smile and nod.

Cleaning a dirtied glass with a rag, she listened to a few more *interesting* suggestions from Korina, while Jiro ran a game of poker with several regulars, including Sal and Jafa.

“I was thinking my mother could make a pie instead of cake,” Korina said, her hazel eyes bright as she tapped her fingers together.

“Pie?” Cyra turned to shelve a whiskey bottle behind the bar, mentally noting she needed to order more of that brand. “What kind of pie?” she asked over her shoulder but received no response. In fact the whole bar had gone quiet—unusually quiet.

Chillingly quiet.

Cyra turned around to find Korina still seated on the barstool, expression oddly frozen, fingers pressed together in front of her body, utterly unmoving. *What*?

The hair on the back of her neck raised as her eyes shifted around the room. Everyone was frozen—patrons sitting unnaturally still, hands mid-gesture, mouths mid-laugh, some mid-drink, coins even stopped midair.

It was as if . . . as if someone held them frozen in time.

Cyra’s stomach threatened to drop right out of her body even before she heard the familiar words. Recognized the familiar voice.

“Hello, princess.”

Her ears locked on the jarring sound of a lone figure striding across the saloon. Floorboards creaked beneath every haunting step—the only noise slicing through the eerie silence, save for the pounding of Cyra’s heart.

Reluctantly, so very reluctantly, her eyes found those boots, rising up—up, up, up, reaching from the ends of his near floor-length duster, to his rust-colored waistcoat, to the man’s face.

Impossible.

“Finn,” she breathed, gooseflesh rising across her entire body. She did not believe her eyes, did not believe the name on her lips.

He was older than the last time she saw him. Like the wanted poster, he sported a dusting of stubble across his square jaw, cedar-brown hair hanging well past his ears, head topped with a wide brimmed hat. His copper-toned complexion was darker than she remembered, as if he had spent a lot of time under the sun over the years. But there was no question she knew this man, stalking through her saloon, this ghost come to haunt her. Come to ruin her life.

“How are you here?” she managed to rasp despite her actively constricting lungs.

Finn did not respond, steely amber eyes meeting hers, looking not at all surprised to find her standing there, alive, working behind a bar like any average Clovian citizen.

Heart a trapped bird in her chest, Cyra waited for his answer, waited for the man to simply disappear, all while her mind flooded with frantic thoughts, picturing all the worst-case scenarios of what might happen next. He held her whole world in his hands, quite literally.

Finn’s brows ticked, betraying an oh-so familiar expression of amusement, but there was a dark edge to the look, a hardness not present during their time at Wyndfyre.

He claimed the stool next to the still-frozen Korina, his movements casual, as if he were just another patron about to order a drink. As if he wasn’t here to shatter everything.

Maybe he wasn’t.

“You’re the one who’s supposed to be dead, Cyra, and yet you’re surprised to see me?” He cocked his head, clicking his tongue in subtle reprimand. That same dark edge coated the taunting question, promising only ominous things.

Sickening dread shivered down her spine. “What do you want?” she asked, frantically scouring the bizarrely frozen room. It was like looking at her life through a picture frame, the glass covering about to shatter before everything disintegrated before her eyes.

Her gaze slid back to Finn. Though he was extraordinary with the time crystal, even he had his limits. How long could he hold her world in limbo?

“What do you want, Finn?” she asked again, panic only pouring more desperation into her veins. *Please, Finn, don’t do anything rash.*

Finn smiled—one of his usual, casual smiles, but this one did not reach his eyes. This one made Cyra’s blood go ice-cold. “Let’s start with a drink.” He nodded at the shelves of bottles. “Rum is my usual choice these days, but I’m not picky.”

The icy feeling only spread, infecting every breath, every muscle, every movement. Forcing a deep inhale, Cyra procured a bottle of rum and a fresh glass. She quickly poured the cinnamon-colored liquid, inhaling a whiff of spiced ginger and cloves chased by the harsh sting of alcohol. She shoved the filled glass toward his hand. “You know there is a militia after you,” she

said, mouth settling into a hard line. “Governor Royce himself set the astronomical bounty.”

“I’m aware” was all he said, downing the rum in one gulp. He hissed a sharp exhale, features twisting at the burn of the liquor. “Not the best”—he rotated the glass in his hand—“though not the worst, either.”

His flippant manner only frayed Cyra’s roiling nerves. Most likely the intended effect, but even Finn wouldn’t be able to hold the saloon for much longer. Time was slipping away.

Mustering up a glower, she leaned over the bar top. “Cut the bull, Finn. You’re here for a reason. What do you want?”

“All right,” Finn said far too casually. “I want you to come with me back to Castoria.” He thumbed the empty glass.

She gaped at him. “You have not called Castoria your home since before the war. And if I recall correctly, you told me Castoria was a fucked-up place run by fucked-up people.” She couldn’t stop the bitterness from layering those words, chased by the pang of long-ago hurt.

A smile stretched across Finn’s face, but his eyes remained cold. “Good memory. I was worried.” The renewed edge in his voice was concerning as was the too-curious look on his face, gaze working around the room as if plotting all the ways he might dismantle this happy scene. “You have created quite the life for yourself here.” His attention returned to Cyra. “It’s odd seeing you so ordinary, serving drinks to these normal people. And children?” He arched a questioning brow at Korina. “It’ll be tough to leave it all behind.”

Cyra busied her hands by pouring herself a healthy glass of whiskey. “Oh, it won’t be, Finn,” she said after swallowing the drink, relishing the burn in the back of her throat and the alcohol-born warmth sliding into her veins. “Because nothing you say will convince me to go back there.”

A harsh laugh twisted from Finn’s lips. “I’ve been looking for you for three months, Cyra. I’m not giving up now.”

Her stomach lurched. *Three months?* “Why?”

“Your parents want you back,” Finn said, doing a far better job of betraying cold disinterest. “I made a deal with them.” His lips thinned. “So, you’re coming with me.”

Shock flashed through Cyra at this proclamation, certainly not believing his words because they were fucking insane. “How do they even know I’m alive?”

Another cruel smile turned up the corners of his mouth, now rolling the tumbler in a slow circle against the bar. “Funny thing, in all the body searches following Willowwood—” He lifted the empty glass. “Oh, could I have another one?” The question only earned a glare. “Fine,” he clipped. “No one found the remains of Razi and Zephyrina Byrogan’s only daughter. No reports of wayward ranger captains amongst the dead.” He snorted a laugh. “Didn’t you think your parents might want your body returned? Go to great lengths to find your corpse?” He tsked his tongue. “Ever since Willowwood, rumors of your survival spread like spiderwebs across Clovia—I just happened to tug on the right thread.”

Cyra pursed her lips, panic and fury intertwining. “I didn’t think you were one to make deals with the likes of my parents,” she bit out, “even under the best of circumstances.”

Finn’s eyes glittered. “Your parents gave me the proper motivation to succeed in this mission. So, you’re coming with me. We can do this the easy way”—his eyes shifted around the room again—“or the hard way.”

Upper lip curling, Cyra felt her simmering anger rise to a boil, blue eyes boring into his. “Don’t you dare threaten me, Finn. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Before he could reply, the room unfroze, everything resuming as if no time had passed. Those in the saloon had no idea a snake lay within their house—ready to upend everything.

Finn only smiled again, a final threat.

“I was thinking apple,” said Korina, fingers restarting their playful tap. “I think my mother makes her cherry pies too sweet, but don’t tell her I said that.”

“I prefer apple pies too,” Finn said, turning to face Korina. “I hear the bartender grows the best apples around.” He winked at Cyra, the gesture only fueling her raging fire.

He wouldn’t do this, she silently argued. Not after everything.

Korina jumped in surprise, eying Finn with mild fright. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t see you.”

“I often have the *element* of surprise.” Finn grinned at Cyra, who only returned silent fury. “So.” He angled his bemused grin at Korina, actually placing an elbow on the bar and resting his chin in his palm as if to start a gab-session. “How did you two meet?”

“Let’s talk in the morning,” Cyra cut in before Korina answered. “We can discuss this matter further in private.”

Finn’s brows twitched as if considering the suggestion before immediately releasing a long, over-dramatic sigh. “Thought about it, and no. You have to decide right now.”

“Do you two know each other?” Korina asked, wary eyes flickering between the pair as if just sensing the thickening tension.

“Yes,” Finn said at the same time Cyra answered, “No.”

“Korina.” Cyra forced a strained smile. “I missed dinner tonight. Can you run to the cafe and see if there is any leftover food?”

A frown stitched between the girl’s brows, questioning gaze still volleying between the pair. “Sure,” she said with a heavy helping of uncertainty before sliding off the stool.

Once Korina was out of earshot, Cyra leaned over so that she was close to Finn’s face. “Please, Finn, if you ever held *any* regard for me, walk away.” It was the most her pride would relinquish, her eyes round and pleading.

You know he’s going nowhere.

A pained, almost pitying expression eclipsed Finn’s features. “I can’t do that, Cyra. You see, I need you to come back with me. Your refusal thus far leaves me no choice.”

“Is everything all right?” came Jiro’s voice, the man placing a steady hand on Finn’s shoulder, his onyx-colored eyes locking on Finn’s face in clear warning to back off.

“It’s fine, Jiro,” Cyra bit out through clenched teeth, heart thundering as her whole body tensed with adrenaline-filled doom. Below the bar, her hand automatically felt for the hidden pistol stored for emergencies. *And what, exactly, do you plan on doing with that?* A scene was exactly what Finn wanted.

A smirk tugged up the corner of Finn’s mouth as he regarded Jiro. “Everything will be fine once this lady joins me on the road.” He raked a look over Jiro, eyes teeming with interest. “Is this your new boyfriend, princess? I must say, I already prefer him to the last man who shared your bed. Not a hard feat, of course, given he was a total—”

“Do you know this man, Nyssa?” Jiro interrupted, confusion twisting over his face.

“Nyssa?” Finn huffed a loud, boisterous laugh, before throwing an extra insufferable chuckle at Cyra. “Nyssa is the name you chose for your alias? Like the night fairy?” He shook his head, a trail of laughter still brushing through his lips. “Not your best one, Cyra.”

Panic gathered like a storm cloud in her chest. “This man has me confused with someone else,” Cyra said quickly, color filling her cheeks before immediately draining away. She felt like a cornered animal about to be skewered.

“In that case, I think it’s time to leave,” Jiro said, his fingers digging into Finn’s shoulder.

“I can handle him, Jiro,” Cyra said, willing the man away—willing both men away.

Jiro hesitated before letting go of Finn. “Just know that rudeness will not be tolerated.” His eyes flashed menacingly at Finn.

“You’re right,” Finn said, voice skewing dangerously high.

No, Finn. Don’t.

Too late.

Finn dramatically took two long strides backward, arms flying out in flamboyant flair. For a split second, the room went silent—at least it did in Cyra’s mind, her whole world muting before her eyes. This was the end. The end of her life. Of this life.

She looked helplessly around the saloon one more time, pinning her attention on Korina. The girl had just reentered the room empty-handed. Their gazes locked for a half-second.

I’m sorry, Korina, Cyra silently begged.

Finn, to complete his little show, fell into a deep bow. The gesture not only captured Jiro’s attention but most of the dozen or so patrons sitting within the saloon. “I apologize, Your Highness, for my rudeness,” he boomed, tone thick with sarcasm.

Ice wrapped around Cyra, and she glared at Finn as if not recognizing him—certainly not the vindictive bastard prick he presented now. How could he do this to her after everything?

Her heart crashed at the unanswered question, feeling little but abject horror.

“I think, perhaps, you have indulged a bit too much tonight,” Jiro cajoled, drawing up to Finn with an over-patient smile. “Go have a long sleep."

“I assure you, I am dangerously sober,” Finn said, eyes not leaving Cyra’s face.

“Then I kindly ask you to leave,” Jiro said, tone lowering to a growl. He made to grab Finn’s shoulder when something—some unseen force—threw Jiro backward. The wind-cast was strong enough that Cyra felt the breeze against her face, bottles at her back rattling angrily.

Jiro soared through the air, back slamming into a table, both upending.

“Syphon!” cried Jafa, leaping to his feet and drawing his pistol. He wasn’t alone, as nearly every other patron drew a weapon—including the two women within the space.

Finn arched an amused brow. “Careful, I am worth a thousand silver heads, but not if I am full of bullets.”

A whisper tore around the room, the patrons all collectively realizing this man was the Syphon from the wanted poster. The man Royce’s militia sought.

A frazzled Jiro reclaimed his feet, producing his own weapon and aiming it at Finn. Korina stood back, plastered against the saloon doors, shock and fear etched across her face as her eyes flashed between Cyra and Finn, trying to puzzle together what was happening.

For several tense seconds no one said anything, the quiet air cut by the drips of spilled alcohol. Finn’s attention fixed on Jiro, looking at the man as if he were an intriguing work of art.

Cyra’s insides clenched, knowing that look meant trouble. “Stand down!” she shouted, producing the pistol from under the bar and aiming it at Finn. *Stand. Fucking. Down.*

“Oh?” Finn’s amused smirk returned as he eyed Cyra if she were a child showing off a new toy. “Learned to shoot a gun, have we, Cyra? How progressive of you. No doubt your parents would hate it, but all the better, eh?”

“Surrender Syphon,” Jiro ordered, “or we will shoot.”

“It’s ironic, really,” Finn said to no one in particular. “You want to capture me for a thousand silver heads, when you could have a gold mine with this one.” He gestured at Cyra.

A muscle in her jaw ticked, hand sweaty as it tightened around the pistol’s grip.

Finn, please, her eyes begged. She wouldn’t shoot him. Even now, as he readied to sledge-hammer her life into mulch. Finn knew it too, his features

only returning cold challenge as if to say *I dare you*. The startling darkness in his eyes struck her breathless, feeling as though she were staring at a stranger, so far away from the young man she once knew.

Cyra wasn't the only one changed by the years.

"Allow me to offer a proper introduction," Finn sneered. "We stand here before the daughter of King Razi and Queen Zephyrina." He actually gestured at Cyra as if there might be confusion over whom he referred. "Their second child, the youngest of the royal Byrogan line. Fire Master, Ranger Captain, and decorated Castorian war hero—Princess Cyra Byrogan."

Cyra's eyes burned with furious tears, teeth grinding together so hard they threatened to crack. *Damn you, Finn.*

Jiro started laughing, the sound slicing through the thickened air. "What sort of ridiculous game is this, Syphon?" A few around the room cracked smiles as well, some offering awkward chuckles. No one particularly was affected by Finn's words. No one but Korina.

Her mouth dropped open, the whites of her eyes visible from across the room, gawking at Cyra as if seeing her for the first time. She was, sort of, because in all of Cyra's school stories, she had left out exactly who her family was, only alluding to their importance.

They were rich, part of the aristocracy. Well, all that was technically true.

"It's no game, I assure you," Finn said coldly. "But I understand that sometimes it's better to see things with your own eyes." His expression filled with promise as his gaze slid back to Cyra. And the world slowed with another time-cast—*No!*

Too late. And this time, she froze along with everyone else. The next thing she knew, her pistol was gone, and in her palm was a cloudy, red crystal. By her estimates, it possessed one strong cast, maybe two weaker ones, before it turned to dust.

As her scattered mind acclimated to the new circumstances, Cyra realized she wasn't the only one without a weapon. The room's collective firearms had been neatly piled in the center of the floor. Finn stood over the hoard with his arms crossed, a smirk on his face.

She stared down at the crystal in her hand. *He's going to force you to cast,* the horrifying thought cleaved fresh dread through her insides. "I'll go with you," she blurted, desperation brimming with each word as her fingers

coiled around the crystal. “Please, I will walk away from all this, just leave them alone.”

“What? No!” Jiro shot a panicked look at Cyra, all his prior humor gone.

Finn’s brow twitched, smirk flattening as if considering the offering. Whatever he might have answered, Cyra would never know. Jiro pulled out a dagger, lunging to attack.

Finn raised his arm, a ball of fire forming just above his open hand.

“Stop!” she cried. And without thinking, without considering any other option, a shard of ice flew from the space above her wrist—as fast as a bullet. It was pure impulse. Defending someone she cared about against this unpredictable presence.

A mistake. A horrible, irreversible mistake. And one she would forever regret.

The ice impaled Finn’s casting hand, his fireball immediately snuffing to a puff of smoke. “All the Ancients’ assholes!” he cursed, face puckering with a hard grimace as he cradled his impaled hand against his body. “I forgot how fast you were, Cyra.” He cleared his throat, water filling his eyes. “That’s on me.”

The air sucked out of the room as all the patrons were collectively struck dumb. No one moved, shock blooming across every face. It was like another time-cast held them hostage. There was no sound except for Finn’s muttered groans and curses as he struggled to free his hand of the blood-spattered ice.

Jiro halted his attack, eyes following the bloody shard as it hit the floor and shattered. Slowly, his head turned to Cyra, gaze latching onto her hand, onto the red dust from the spent crystal leaking from her clenched fist.

“I don’t understand,” he breathed, horror unfurling across his features. “It can’t be true.” His lips stayed parted, emotions shifting behind his onyx eyes in rapid succession as if searching for something to make sense of what just happened and drawing up short.

Swallowing against the lump in her throat, Cyra faced the stunned expressions from people she had known for years, now looking at her like she was a stranger—worse, like she was their enemy, something to fear. Something to hate. A liar and a criminal.

“Betrayal hurts, doesn’t it?” Finn grunted after roughly wrapping his bleeding hand.

Jiro ignored the comment, eyes locked on Cyra, his shock giving way to hurt and betrayal and anger. “This whole time?” His voice shook, bitterness filling his tone. He stared at her as if mentally rehearsing their entire life together.

Two years. Two years of friendship, partnership, sharing a bed. All based on lies.

The man had been sleeping with his enemy and had no idea.

Guilt rocketed through Cyra with a sickening jolt, like a kick to the gut, a dozen kicks to the gut. Blinking back tears, she looked away, no longer able to meet Jiro’s accusatory glare—see the pain her uncovered lies inflicted.

“I’m sorry” were the only words she managed. A pathetic, inadequate offering, but what else could she say? She was unmasked. Caught. Her past thrust into view like a thieving cockroach bathed by bright light.

The ugly truth was at last revealed.

The people of Lofton stared back at her with all the expected hate and loathing Cyra had imagined whenever she wavered in maintaining her deception. Her fears sprung to life. And there was no going back. The bell tolled for her sins, and it could not be unrung.

Motion distracted Cyra as Finn fished something out of his pocket. A black time crystal. He held the object to a candle—cloudy. “Last cast,” he sighed, icy expression fixing on Cyra, “best make it count.”

Renewed panic seized her whole body, knowing what Finn was about to do. *No. No. No.* She needed to explain herself. If she could just explain . . .

And say what? What could she possibly say or do to fix four years of lies?

Before an answer formed on her lips, before she could steal one last look at her life—everything slowed, and a strong chemical smell overwhelmed her senses. Then darkness.

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Chapter 13

The Tunnel

Eleven Years Ago

"Looks like it's just you and me, princess," Finn chimed cheerily.

Cyra pinned him with a venomous glare. "For three years, I have asked you not to call me that." A burst of fresh desire to win the Gauntlet Trials buzzed across her entire body. She would never forgive herself if she lost now.

Finn shrugged. "I'm a slow learner."

Tedious toad. Cyra bit back the barrage of insults tempting through her lips. "Maybe we should just walk in silence for a while."

Miraculously, he obliged, and they spent the next few hours traipsing through the forest without speaking as the sun faded with no fresh obstacles impeding their progress.

A break from their trials, she supposed. No complaints.

As the sun dipped beneath the horizon, they reached a circular clearing. A rock formation jutted up from just beyond the circle of trees, marking the mountain path. "I don't think we should go much further in the dark," Cyra said grimly, not loving the prospect of spending the night out here, let alone with Finn, but her muscles trembled, energy reduced to a slow drip.

Rest was required.

"Well, here is as good a place as any." Finn gestured around the circle of trees.

"Fine." She was too tired to form any other suggestions.

A mistake. Her boot stepped on something—a moving something. Her gaze shifted to the ground just as a hiss filled the air. “Ah!” she shouted, jumping away from the snake at her feet. It was a viper, poisonous. When she looked up, her heart seized as a snake dropped onto Finn’s shoulder. “Finn!”

“What the—”

Cyra reacted automatically, her ice ball already loose, knocking the snake to the forest floor. A slurry of the foulest curses she had ever heard rolled off Finn's tongue, his eyes wide with terror. “I hate snakes,” he huffed, using a stick to fling the creature away.

As if the pronouncement cued the forest, a torrent of the slithering creatures rained down from the branches above their heads.

Finn began blasting fireballs at any movement. “Slimy bastards! Die!”

If Cyra wasn’t equally petrified, she’d laugh at his frantic reaction. It was just so un-Finn.

Any inkling of humor vanished when a snake landed on her arm. A scream ripped from her throat, muscles suddenly paralyzed. Finn’s ice shard knocked the grotesque thing into the grass before its poisonous fangs sank into her flesh.

“Climb the rocks!” she cried, conjuring a ring of fire around the base of the trees.

A puff of red dust breezed through the air, marking the end of her remaining elemental crystal. They ran for the rock formation, climbing up the boulders and away from the trees.

“I’m going to have nightmares for days,” Finn gasped, collapsing once they reached a rocky ledge. He ran a hand through his shaggy hair, fingers betraying a pronounced tremble.

“So, something finally rattles the Fantastic Finn,” Cyra said with an amused smile, her own too-tight body slowly unclenching.

“You weren’t exactly calm.” He mimicked her high-pitched scream, unnecessarily raising his arms in mock terror.

“Fine,” she said with a scowl, “we can both agree snake are terrifying.”

A triumphant smile hitched the corners of Finn’s mouth. “So, we *do* have something in common.”

Biting back a snippy response, Cyra began collecting firewood. In the silence, she studied their chosen campsite—if for no other reason than to ensure no more fanged surprises. They were perched atop a large boulder,

the quiet night cloaking the forest with ink-black darkness. A beaten footpath beyond the rocks led up the mountain, disappearing around a bend, the trail promising an end to this madness.

“How many elemental casts do you have left?” Cyra asked as she dumped her collected sticks onto the rock.

After adding kindling to the pile, Finn extended his arm, generating a ball of flames. The wood ignited, firelight animating the flurry of red specks falling from his wrist. “And I’m out.”

“Me too,” Cyra sighed, sitting next to the fire, Finn settling on the other side. “If the next test requires us to wage battle, then we’re screwed.”

“More or less, prin—Cyra.” Finn smiled expectantly. “See, I’m learning.”

Her face flattened. “Antagonizing people is not cute.”

“But it’s fun.”

“Right, fun. And how old are you?”

Finn bristled in mock offensive. “It’s rude to ask people’s ages.”

“You’re the same age as me,” Cyra bit out. “Eighteen, an adult. And since we are stuck together, you might as well become more tolerable.”

“I’ve never cared about being tolerable.” He gave a casual shrug. “Or what people think of me, for that matter.”

“You don’t care what people think?” Cyra’s eyebrows rose. “You and your brother against the world.” She laid the sarcasm on thick. “The closer the familial bond, the easier it is to keep others out, right?”

Finn narrowed his eyes. “Don’t try to figure me out. I don’t like it.”

A slow smile crept across Cyra’s face as if Finn had just delivered her a delicious treat. “Oh? Touched a nerve, Calderis? What are you afraid of? Worried people might actually like you if you tried?”

He gave her a withering look. “And what are you afraid of, *See-ruh*?” He placed extra emphasis on her name. “You tell me yours, and I’ll tell you mine.”

Cyra almost dismissed the challenge in favor of suggesting they attempt sleep. Instead she said something else altogether: “All right. I’m afraid of failure. I’m afraid of being a disappointment to my parents, more than I already am.” She silently cringed at her own admission. It was just so cliché.

Surprise shifted over Finn’s features, brows thoughtfully pinching as if actually considering her words. “How do you know they’re disappointed?”

Cyra shrugged. “Kasian is their perfect child, whereas I, well, I ask too many questions, try too hard, want things too much. I tell myself I don’t need their approval or their pride, but I am always devastated when I don’t get either.” A reluctant smile stretched her lips as she stared into the campfire flames. “Sometimes, I wish I could be more like you and Fabien, and just not care.” She looked up and nearly blanched when she met Finn’s gaze. Why the hell was she spilling all her insecurities to this juvenile idiot? “Forget it.”

“No,” Finn said quickly, tone actually betraying some semblance of sincerity. “Ancients, I certainly wouldn’t want the king and queen as parents, and they certainly wouldn’t want me as a son. Can you imagine?”

A giggle slipped from her lips at the mental image. “It would be amusing—for me, not for you. My mother certainly would hate your hair.”

Finn tugged at the ends of his shaggy locks. “What’s wrong with my hair?”

“It looks as though it hasn’t seen a brush in years, and was certainly cut and styled by a blind person.”

The corner of Finn’s mouth twitched. “Words wound, Cyra.”

“I know,” she said, trying to maintain the levity in her voice, but it slipped away like sand through her fingers. A twinge of sadness, nothing to do with Finn, thickened her throat. “Do you have family back in the colonies?” she asked after a hard swallow.

The look on Finn’s face turned inscrutable, almost pensive, so unlike the boy she knew and loathed. It made him look older, less boyish. Someone she might take seriously, who didn’t grate on her every nerve. She couldn’t explain why, but her heart beat a little faster as their gazes lingered. “You don’t need to answer,” she added as a strange awkwardness pinged through her insides.

“I don’t mind.” Finn worked up a smile—one with no sneering edge or ironic intention. The look seemed genuine, almost kind, and most certainly disarming, the effect softening everything about him.

Inexplicable curiosity sparked within Cyra, suddenly making her want to know more about this person who had plagued her academic ambitions for three long years.

“My parents owned a shop in Saraneca,” he said. “It’s where I grew up. Though, if I remember correctly, my family was originally from Orlena. I have some vague memories of my mother talking about a factory my

grandfather owned. In any case, Saraneca was the home Fabien and I knew before coming here."

"Do you remember your family?"

"Some." Finn shrugged. "Fabien is better at remembering the past than I am. He often reminds me of things our mother used to say, something our father did, or how Takota used to tease us."

"Takota?"

"Our brother, older." Finn's pensive eyes drifted to the campfire. "I haven't said his name in years. Celeste's name, either."

"Your sister?"

"Younger, yes. She was just a baby when the CCB took me and Fabien."

A pang nestled somewhere in Cyra's chest. Her own parental mire aside, she couldn't imagine her life without Kasian. What it must be like growing up so far from home. "The separation must have been hard." She offered an empathetic smile. "Would you ever go back?"

Finn gave another shrug. "I used to think so, but Chosen-Syphons rarely return to their old lives, even when given the chance. I feel more Castorian than Clovian, lived here more than half my life." There was a solemness in his expression as he studied the flames. "Why did you knock down that snake?"

"What?" Cyra frowned at the sudden change of subject.

Curious amusement broke over Finn's features, obliterating any lingering seriousness. "The viper about to sink its fangs into my shoulder, thereby traumatizing me for the rest of my life." He arched a wry brow, amber eyes finding hers. "If you had let the thing bite me, you'd be the automatic winner."

Something about the look on his face raised a blush to her cheeks. "You did the same for me seconds later," she said, squashing the flustered feelings.

"Yes, but you acted first."

"I reacted automatically." Cyra shifted, backside going numb on the uncomfortable rock. "Don't read into it." She gave him a look that said, *I still find you grating in every way possible*.

"I won't," Finn said, the corners of his mouth lifting, "but I will say thank you."

She gave him a narrowed look, waiting for a smug remark or insufferable smirk. When neither came, she said, "You are welcome."

As their gazes locked for another few beats, she couldn’t help but study Finn from across the flames, the orange light highlighting the details of his face. A ruggedness had sharpened his features over the years, subtly carving away the boyishness of youth.

It . . . wasn’t an unpleasant view.

Finn’s smile broadened as if detecting her favorable scrutiny. “Say you win,” he began.

“Oh, I like where this is going.” She straightened, feeling just the touch of heat brush her cheeks. “So, yes, when I beat you, continue.” She gestured expectantly.

Finn’s smile faltered but he still asked, “What is next for Cyra Byrogan?”

“I . . .” Cyra trailed off, mind churning at the question, her blush cooling. “The Academy Board accepts my application for Warrior Track, First Class and . . .” She was tempted to answer with Kasian’s present career path—the Leadership Specialty. Instead, she said, “I’d train to be a ranger. I want to travel, meet new people, explore the colonies. And after that, I don’t know yet.” She eyed Finn curiously. “And you? What is the future for Finn Calderis?”

“No clue, but whatever it is, Fabien and I will figure things out together. It’s always been him and me, even before we came here.” His brows twitched, an uncharacteristic severity falling over his features. “I don’t want to let him down.”

“Why would you let him down?”

“Have you met me?” He huffed a laugh, angling a self-deprecating smile at the fire. “I’m a mess. Fabien is the responsible one, always cleaning up my disasters. Even today, he sacrificed himself to save me. He does the right thing, and me . . .” The irony slipped from his expression. “I am selfish.”

The admission surprised Cyra. At the same time, she couldn’t really argue.

Finn’s lips twitched at her silence. “I see you agree.”

“Well, you can be arrogant, and boastful, and painfully immature, and __”

“I get it.”

“Obnoxious, a total smart ass, incredibly unself-aware—”

“All right.”

“And you are a brilliant Syphon,” Cyra said more seriously. “Better than me, as much as I loathe to say those words aloud because it actually causes me physical pain. But you are.” Their eyes met again from across the flames. “You are incredibly talented, Finn. Just stop being such an ass about it all the time.”

His expression softened as their connection loitered, his eyes sweeping over her face in a way she couldn’t quite interpret. “I’ll try,” he said, almost sounding earnest. “And thank you. I know how much it took for you to admit that I am better than you at something.”

“Physical pain, Finn.”

He chuckled. “For what it’s worth, I think you’d make a brilliant ranger. I hope you get what you want.”

Again, the words surprised Cyra. Goodness, perhaps there was a mature person buried underneath the adolescent posturing, after all. She wouldn’t bet on that, however, especially if she lost these cursed trials. So, don’t lose.

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A rock wedged painfully in between her shoulder blades, the uncomfortable feeling tugging Cyra out of sleep. Her eyes cracked open, meeting gray sky. A hovering mist inched down the mountain slope, blanketing the area, and shivering a chill through her entire body.

The Gauntlet Trials. Finn.

She jolted to her seat in a panic, immediately releasing a sigh of relief when she found Finn lying on his side. “For a half-second, I thought you were gone.”

A yawn stretched Finn’s jaw as he rolled over. “Still here, unfortunately.” He sat up, massaging his lower back. “This bed of rocks is the worst thing I have ever slept on, although the Wyndfyre beds aren’t much better. What are palace beds like?”

“Like lying on a cloud.” She grinned indulgently, standing and brushing away dirt and pine needles from her coat and breeches.

“Did they ever let you sleep in?” he asked, cracking his back as he grunted to his feet.

“On holidays and most weekends, until noon sometimes.”

A wistful sigh left Finn’s lips. “Even I would marry an ugly, overstuffed lord for a comfortable bed and lie-in—add in some decent food, done.” He

snapped his fingers.

Cyra huffed a laugh, claiming the lead up the mountain path. “Last summer, I went on a date with a lord’s son at his family’s estate solely to experience their chef’s legendary food.” She smiled at the memory. “The son was a spoiled half-witted brat, but the food . . .” She kissed her fingers. “Worth the excruciatingly boring afternoon.”

“What was his name?” Finn asked eagerly. “This lord’s son? Do you think he would find a young, roguish, slightly rebellious eighteen-year-old to his liking?”

“Trust me, neither of us are his type,” Cyra said over her shoulder. “He spoke nonstop about this painting of his favorite horse. He hung the work over his bed. I swear the man was in love with it.”

“The horse or the painting?”

Cyra laughed. “Both.”

A toothy grin spread across Finn’s face. “You know what they say—never come between a man and his horse.”

They chuckled for a good thirty seconds, their eyes meeting when Cyra glanced over her shoulder. She could swear a hint of color touched his cheeks, amber eyes bright with levity.

He really was cute, she silently admitted. Especially right now, with this ease between them. His infectious smile was doing things to her insides she was altogether not prepared to experience. Perhaps, later, she would chalk up the reaction to stress, to the insanity of this taxing venture, to the unsatisfying meals of stale sandwiches, or to the many aches and pains needling across her body as a result of yesterday’s punishment.

Yes, there were a million reasons why she was feeling this bewildering twinge of attraction toward Finn. Why her eyes wanted to focus on that smile. On his lips. The Gauntlet Trials had driven her to the brink of a mental break. It was the only explanation.

And, just for now, she decided to indulge the madness.

With her most coy look, she said, “And what about coming between a young, roguish, slightly rebellious eighteen-year-old and his stuffed bunny?”

Finn’s humor faded, mouth falling open as he blinked in flustered surprise. “How do you know about Flopsy?”

Cyra cackled a long, body-racking laugh. “Flopsy.”

“Have you been sneaking into my dormitory?” Finn asked in a half-serious tone. “I will report you to Dean Malcom.”

“Actually.” She arched a playful brow, flashing Finn with a conspiratorial look. “I have been secretly dating your brother and spied the stuffed animal after sneaking out of your room.”

She expected a chuckle or teasing retort to this obvious jest, but Finn returned only silence. Turning around, she found him frozen mid-step. He looked stunned, as if she had just slapped him across the face, utterly appalled by the idea of her and Fabien together.

All the good feelings developing toward Finn evaporated. “I was kidding,” she huffed, annoyance mixed with hurt pummeling her chest. “I saw the bunny on your bed one day when I was looking for Pippin, but good to know how you feel about me dating your brother.” She whirled around and marched up the rocky trail with renewed energy.

And just like that, the jerk face returns.

“Cyra.”

“No, it’s all right,” she said, barreling into the swirling fog. “Clearly your perfect brother is far too good for me, so that’s just fine.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?” She twisted around again. “Actually, I don’t care.” Shaking her head, she resumed her march up the mountain, mists thinning with their upward progress.

Why did she even bother? Last night was fun, nice. This morning started off nice—like a new beginning. *Nope*. It didn’t matter; they were almost done with this thing. Afterward, they could go back to being unpleasant acquaintances.

Cyra struggled to scale a large boulder, awkwardly crawling her way onto the flat surface while muttering grunts and a few indistinguishable expletives. After reclaiming her feet, she managed a single step when a hand spun her around, and she came face-to-face with Finn.

Her stomach dipped at his startling proximity, not quite appreciating just how tall he was until that moment. His nearness jerked her chin upward. She almost stole a step backward, their lips so close they shared a breath, but stubbornness held her place.

Folding her arms over her chest, Cyra gave him a pointed look packed with challenge, only slightly undermined by the heat rising to her cheeks.

“I reacted badly to the idea of you dating my brother because,” Finn started, a muscle in his jaw ticking as if he was nervous, eyes darting sideways then back to her face.

Her brows gathered at the odd behavior even as her heart thumped faster. “Because?” She pressed, indignation pouring into the question. *Admit how you really feel about me, Calderis*, she silently seethed, expecting some form of disparagement. For him to make a dark confession about her, or perhaps about her family. Absolutely nothing could have prepared her for what he actually said.

“Because I think you are beautiful,” Finn breathed, eyes unnervingly intense. “You are driven, funny, and smart, and I like you. I have for a while now.” He ran a hand through his cedar-brown hair, the ends flopping haphazardly across his temple.

Cyra’s lips parted in shock. Caution, however, squashed the heat wanting to inch up her spine at this confession, at the nervous hitch of Finn’s breath, at the color flushing his face. This was a trick, her instincts rallied. Finn had never shown the tiniest inkling of romantic sentiment toward her before now. It had to be a joke. A cruel jest to mess with her mind in order to win this competition. He never took anything seriously; everything was a game. Perhaps this was too.

As the silence grew uncomfortable, Finn ripped his eyes away, and surprise shifted across his face. Whirling around, Cyra saw what captured his attention—a large stone with a phoenix carved into it. The next marker stood before the mouth of a tunnel burrowing into the mountain’s dense rock. At the base of the marker rested a box and a scroll.

Curving around Cyra, Finn claimed the scroll and broke the seal. “‘Your final test begins in this box,’” he read aloud. “‘The contents will reveal your true self, and in discovery you will find your end.’”

“What does that mean?” Cyra frowned as she opened the box, finding two flowers with red and purple petals.

“Bale Flowers.”

Cyra scrunched her nose, scooping up one of the flowers. “Like what Mindhealers use?”

Nodding, Finn grasped the remaining flower from the box. “Ingesting the root or flower supposedly causes hallucinations.”

“Hallucinations,” Cyra repeated warily, eying the innocent looking flower in her hand, underfed stomach growling with unease. “We’re

supposed to drug ourselves for some sort of test of character?”

Finn shrugged in answer. “It’s just a single bud—not the root. I hear the effect doesn’t last long. Who knows, maybe we’ll work out our issues.” He attempted a dismissive smile, but Cyra spied the hint of anxiety behind his amber eyes.

“I don’t know, Finn.” Her apprehension only expanded as she studied the flower in her hand. When she looked up, she saw a grimace twisting Finn’s features, his throat bobbing as he swallowed something, the flower in his hand gone.

“Time to finish this, Cyra,” he said, padding toward the tunnel entrance. “Unless you want me to win . . .” he taunted over his shoulder.

Screw it. Cyra shoved the flower into her mouth. Bitterness overwhelmed everything, face puckering as she forced the flower down her throat, chasing after Finn into the tunnel.

All other thoughts eddied from her mind; concentration solely focused on not face-planting within the disorientating black. For several minutes, only the sound of their scraping footsteps bounced against the walls.

“How long do you think this tunnel goes?” she asked after a while, not able to stand the thick silence any longer.

No response.

“Finn?” She stopped in her tracks, heart jumping as the suffocating stillness swallowed her whole. “Finn!”

Holding her breath, Cyra strained to hear something—anything. Agonizing seconds ticked by. She fought a swell of panic, chest tightening as she tried to orient herself, groping through the too-quiet darkness, when at last the sound of running footsteps reached her ears.

A glowing orb sliced through the black. “Hi, princess!” Finn said cheerfully, a fireball hovering above his palm.

Relief shuddered a breath through Cyra’s lips. “I thought you were out of elemental crystals.” Confusion turned to irritation at the glee beaming across Finn’s face. Of course, another game. Another joke. Then her eyes dropped to the object in his left hand, and ice shoved through her veins. *No—no, no, no.*

“Not anymore!” Finn grinned triumphantly, holding the champion belt of crystals. “Snagged the thing at the end of the tunnel. I wondered what was taking you so long, so I came to find you.”

“What?” Cyra’s heart plummeted, gaze volleying between Finn’s pleased smile and the winner’s belt in his hands, not quite believing her eyes.

She lost. The trials were over. Finn won. *Finn won.*

“Aren’t you going to congratulate me?” He stalked closer, needling smile settling to a wry smirk. “By the way, all the stuff I said about liking you? I was just messing with you.” He leaned in so close that his breath shifted the wisps of hair around her ear. “Almost too easy, beating you.”

Cyra’s face heated, but everything else went cold. She was utterly speechless as she stumbled backwards, away from Finn’s leering face. This was a nightmare sprung to life. All her hard work, the prior trials, everything was for nothing. Duped by stupid Finn.

Tears pricked at her eyes, feeling foolish. Feeling worthless.

“How disappointing and yet so typical,” sneered a new voice, one that was painfully familiar.

“Mother?” Cyra whirled around in a full circle, sure she imagined the sound but only found empty darkness.

“Of course you failed.” Her mother’s stinging tone was like a gust of winter’s wind. “Just like you’re failing all your classes.”

“No I’m not,” Cyra argued to the darkness, to her own rising panic.

An overtired sigh dragged through the air as her mother’s voice said, “I’ll just have to fix things for you—*again*. Like how I arranged for you to attend Wyndfyre Academy. If only you could be more like your brother. I never had to do any of this for Kasian.”

The breath left Cyra’s lungs, but her hands stubbornly balled to fists. “I earned my place at Wyndfyre.”

“I knew it,” another voice said, followed by a soft light to her left. “You didn’t earn anything.” Akira limped forward, still wearing the junior-class maroon coat. Blood stained her leg, and she was missing her left boot—exactly how Cyra left her by the lake. “You don’t belong here,” she scoffed. “Your royal mommy and daddy arranged all your success.” She folded her arms over her chest. “I should have won, and you know it.”

“So, you used your connections to get ahead,” Aurelia said, emerging from the darkness next to Akira. “We all do it. Why do you think I’m friends with you?” A cloying smile drew up her rosy lips. “If you weren’t royalty, we’d never be friends.”

Cyra's throat went dry, mind working hard to figure out what the hell was going on. "This isn't real," she said, even as her insides twisted, and her vision blurred with unwanted tears. "This isn't real."

"You're right. This isn't real," Kasian said, appearing at her side. "Which means you are behind, sister." He gave her one of his disarming smiles. "In my year, I went through this tunnel without issue."

Gritting her teeth, Cyra pressed forward through the black. Kasian wasn't real. Finn hadn't won—not yet. There was still a chance. "I can still win," she said more to herself than to the mirage of her brother.

"You sure?" Kasian arched a doubtful brow. "I wouldn't bet on your victory, Cyra." He blocked her path. "You'll always be second-best."

"Move," Cyra ordered, making to go around—hell, to go straight through this imposter.

The hard shove to her shoulders challenged every and all notion of what was real and what wasn't. Cyra stumbled backward, crashing to her seat. *What*? She gaped at her brother, now standing over her with an uncharacteristically mirthless look on his face.

"Tell you what, Cyra, you get past me and you win." He nodded at her arm, and her bracer filled with elementals.

More hallucinations, her mind reconciled. *This wasn't real.*

The fireball Kasian aimed at her face argued otherwise.

Scrambling sideways, Cyra narrowly avoided the flames, the searing heat against her skin only adding to her confusion. With no choice but to engage, she returned fire.

Kasian easily deflected the attacking flames with a wind cast, hand lazily flicking the air as if diverting a fly or foul odor. "Do you really think that you deserve to be president of Wyndfyre?" With speed she had never before faced in her life—never faced in any Red Lapis battles—Kasian attacked with a succession of fire and ice.

Flailing to block, divert, or dodge each strike, she barely avoided physical harm. Until she didn't. Until an ice shard slammed into her abdomen.

The actual fuck. She felt the pressure, the shock, the tug of skin. Felt the sharp pain spearing through her body. This wasn't real, she told herself as she crashed to the ground. But it sure as hell felt real.

A tsking sound filled the air. "You'll never succeed as a leader. Your Warrior Track dreams are dead." Water snaked from Kasian's extended arm,

splashing to the ground and inching toward Cyra like a sentient puddle. “You will never be me.”

She struggled to her feet, desperate to get away, for all this to stop.

Kasian only smiled as water swarmed around her shaky legs. The deluge swallowed her knees and waist before rising above her shoulders and encasing her head.

No, no, no! Limbs floundering, she lifted with the rising column of water. Within seconds, her lungs burned. *Do not go out like this—drowned by your literal fears.*

With a burst of determination, she conjured a wind-cast. The gale whipped around her engulfed body, spraying water in all directions. Fresh air expanded through her overtaxed lungs as she collapsed on all fours.

Kasian gave a tired sigh as if bored by this exercise. “Still worse than I would have done.”

“Fine,” Cyra coughed. She struggled to her feet, clothes completely soaked, the wound in her abdomen beating with its own life force. “I don’t want to be you, Kasian. I want to be me.” Even as she said the words, she felt their truth in them rush through her body. “I want to be me.”

On impulse, she charged forward, sprinting with all her remaining strength, straight at Kasian. Closing her eyes, she expected to crash into the man, but she met only air, feet carrying her through the apparition.

When she opened her eyes, she found darkness once more. Her clothes were dry. The wound was gone. The nightmare was over. Better still, a light ahead hinted at an end to the tunnel, an end to the madness that nearly gobbled her whole. *Go!*

The sound of frantic footsteps held her in place, however. She turned and something crashed into her side, sending her tumbling to the hard ground. “Finn?” Cyra panted up at the young man, entangled on top of her. There was just enough light to spy his features—his eyes wide with fear, breath coming in and out in short bursts. “Are you real?” she asked.

“Are you?”

“Yes!”

“That’s what you said before,” Finn said, furious accusation edging his voice.

So, Cyra was part of Finn’s hallucinations as well. “I’m real.” She shoved him sideways so she could sit up. Rubbing her pounding temples, she closed her eyes, ready to call game over on this whole thing.

“All right, *real* Cyra,” said Finn, tone thick with suspicion. “Can you tell me if you’re seeing that too?”

Eyes snapping open, she stared into the depths of tunnel. An ominous orange glow broke through the darkness. A breath later, massive fire-made claws curled into view.

Her heart seized, not believing her eyes as a flaming head followed the fire claws—the monstrous head of a dragon.

“Am I seeing a dragon made of fire?” Cyra barely managed to form the words. “Yep.”

“Good, good, that’s good,” Finn stammered. “Also, bad. Run?”

“Yes!”

The pair scrambled to their feet just as fire erupted from the flaming beast’s giant mouth. Finn shoved Cyra sideways before he folded into a roll. Heat, real flame-born heat, licked at her exposed skin. She pressed her body against the roughly hewn tunnel wall until the surge passed, then she launched herself toward Finn. Grasping his collar, she helped him to his feet, and they sprinted with all their remaining strength toward the end of the tunnel.

Flames crackled at their backs, heat overwhelming. With a great leap, they breached the tunnel’s exit, hitting the ground in successive rolls, fire brushing close enough to singe both clothes and hair.

Cyra landed on her side before flopping onto her back. She quickly batted out her smoking coat and burnt ends of her already charred ponytail, left wrist and right knee suffering the brunt of the fall.

“Are you all right?” Finn grunted. He was in a similar disheveled state of cuts and bruises and burns but otherwise uninjured. After struggling to his feet, he offered Cyra a hand.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly, accepting his help. Then she saw it. Feet away was the last and final marker. And perched on top of the column was the belt full of gleaming crystals.

The champion’s belt waited to be claimed.

“Don’t suppose you want to let me win?” Cyra still gripped Finn’s hand as a devious plot formed in her mind.

Finn’s right brow ticked. “Not a chance.”

“Thought as much.” Before she thought better of the idea, Cyra yanked Finn forward, tipped up her chin, and captured his mouth with a kiss.

The brazen act yielded its intended effect. Finn returned her kiss with breathless vigor as if too overjoyed to question her motives, suddenly forgetting where they were, and why they were here.

His mistake.

Cyra didn't allow herself to feel anything but the hammering of her own heart. "Sorry, Finn," she breathed against his lips, breaking away just before revealing the black crystal Akira had secretly tucked into her pocket.

Finn blinked in confusion as Cyra made her time-cast, the effort turning the black crystal cloudy. He slowed to fractional speed, and she easily slipped away.

Ignoring the wash of guilt at the underhanded move, she tore after the belt, both hands claiming the treasure with glee-filled exhilaration. The black, white, and red crystals gleamed between her fingers as they caught the sun's light just breaking through the dissipating mists.

She won. All her efforts, her struggles, her mental hurdles, the physical pain . . . it was all worth it. The wondrous feeling stalled at Finn's barking words. "What the hell, Cyra?"

He would not receive an answer, however, as figures emerged from the tunnel mouth. "Congratulations, Cyra," boomed the deep voice of Dean Malcom. "You have completed the trials. As the first to claim the champion's belt, you are the new president of Wyndfyre."

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Chapter 14

Nation of Clovia

President of Wyndfyre. The thrilling words repeated in Cyra's mind as her attention oscillated between the crystal-filled belt clutched in her hands and Dean Malcom. More people joined the dean. She recognized Professor Wen and Jia Masura, the current senior class president of Wyndfyre. The pair were joined by an unfamiliar man.

"Yes, congratulations, Cyra," Jia beamed. A year older, the sitting school president was not someone Cyra knew well outside of Red Lapis meetings. Jia was Clovian-born, a competent public speaker, and a skilled Syphon.

"Thank you." Cyra grinned at Jia, still not quite believing her victory, her hands tightening possessively around the champion's belt.

"And well done, Calderis," Dean Malcom said to Finn. "You completed every trial. Not many can claim that feat. You will do well on next year's council." Finn only grunted in response, pointedly avoiding looking in Cyra's direction. "Now, you both must be eager for a bath and bed. This path leads to our awaiting train." He nodded to a dirt trail leading down an incline before disappearing into the trees. "Jia, Professor Wen, Lieutenant General Vance, and I will join you for the return journey as well as tomorrow's celebrations."

Lieutenant General Vance? Cyra's heart jumped at the title, eying the unfamiliar man with renewed interest. A former Wyndfyre school president,

Theodor Vance had graduated about fifteen years ago. He was a legend amongst the Castorian army units, currently on track to command the entirety of the Castorian Military in the coming years.

Cyra opened her mouth to make an introduction when a low rumble echoed through the forest, shaking the ground beneath their feet. A flock of birds took flight from the surrounding treetops as a ringing sound ricocheted across the sky for several stretching seconds.

“What was that?” Jia asked, her startled expression mirroring the group’s collective surprise.

“An explosion,” said Lieutenant General Vance with a deep-set frown. “East of here.” He scratched the edges of his thin mustache, the feature his stand-out characteristic against an otherwise unassuming appearance.

“The Clovian rebels your units tracked near the border, perhaps?” Dean Malcom asked with notable concern.

Clovian rebels?

Vance’s thin lips set into a hard line. “Could be. The group has been attacking rail lines but have yet to venture this far into Castorian territory.” He faced the dean, a bit of dew shining against his beige complexion. “Given we still have our horses, I’d like to investigate.” His keen gaze volleyed between Professor Wen and Jia. “Any assistance is appreciated.”

The dean’s brows twitched. “Of course. Professor Wen, Jia? Are you all right to prolong our outing?”

“Yes, sir,” said Professor Wen.

“Absolutely,” Jia nodded.

“What about us?” Cyra asked. As much as she wanted to offer help, her tired and aching body screamed in protest at the mere idea, eager to scrub away the dirt and dried sweat caking every inch of her like a second layer of skin. She gave an appreciative smile when the dean ordered their immediate journey to the awaiting train.

Finn and Cyra would return to school.

After parting ways, the exhausted contestants dragged themselves down the winding dirt path through trees, Cyra once more in the lead.

It wasn’t long before she felt Finn’s tangible irritation piercing the back of her head.

"What?” she clipped, whirling around to meet the confrontation head on. If he wanted to be a sore loser, fine.

“You are unbelievable.” Anger rippled across his features.

Indignation crawled up her spine. “I wanted to win, all right. Sorry if—”

“Please,” Finn snorted, shaking his head before marching around her and continuing down the path. “I tell you that I like you, then you kiss me as a trick so that you could steal the winner’s belt. A low move, Byrogan.”

Her defenses roiled. “And your confession of feelings wasn’t some ploy to mess with my head?”

Finn halted his pace and turned around. “No, I would never do that to you, but apparently you possess zero qualms.” He made a zero with his right hand for unnecessary emphasis. “I guess I underestimated your ability to be a conniving bitch.”

Cyra scoffed. “The timing of your romantic declaration was quite the coincidence, don’t you think? Right before the last marker?”

A flash of hurt twisted across Finn’s face. “I didn’t see the marker, Cyra, but believe what you want.” The words came out deflated, almost sad.

The mournful tone struck a chord through Cyra, sure she had never heard Finn sound so dejected. Confusion cleaved right through her ire. “So, you really do like me?”

Finn only gave her a despondent look that punched right in the heartstrings, and a knot of guilt tightened her chest. *Finn likes you—like, actually likes you.*

“How was I supposed to know?” she charged, defensiveness rebounding with impressive speed. “You have been an asshat to me since we were freshmen.”

“Just forget it,” Finn said flatly. “Enjoy your victory. I hope it’s everything you wanted.” He resumed his march down the trail.

For several seconds Cyra just stood there, lips parted as she watched Finn’s hunched shoulders. *No*. No, she would not feel guilty. Would not let this young man—this *boy*—steal the pride in her victory.

With renewed resolve, she caught up with Finn just as he approached a four-car train, waiting next to a wooden platform framed by the quiet forest. A uniformed man paced across the planks, stopping short when he caught sight of Finn and Cyra.

“Are you the conductor?” Finn asked.

“Yes,” the man said, looking past them toward the trailhead. “Where are the others? Dean Malcom and the Lieutenant General?”

“Delayed,” replied Finn. “They want you to take us back to school, then return for them.”

The man’s thick brows caved into a sharp frown, as if disappointed. The look quickly vanished, and the man waved them aboard.

As they climbed into a passenger car, an internal war raged within Cyra. “Finn, can we please talk about this?” she demanded, once the pair settled in their seats.

In response, Finn scooted toward the window, decidedly looking away from Cyra, who seated herself in front of him as the train lurched into motion.

“I’m sorry,” she said, still thinking he was making a fuss over nothing, but the nag of guilt prompted her to say something. “I truly didn’t think you were serious. Hell, you were one of my apparitions in the tunnel. You had the winner’s belts, bragging about how you said all those things to mess with my head.” The confession earned his tentative attention, gaze dragging sideways to find her face. “I wanted to beat you.” Her tone softened at the genuine hurt in his eyes. “I wasn’t thinking about your feelings, but to be fair, you haven’t exactly been all that nice to me over the years.”

Finn hesitated. “You’re right, I—” He suddenly straightened. “Do you hear that?”

Cyra strained to hear anything over the rattling of the train car. Then she heard it, the sound just breaching the din of wheels turning over iron tracks —raised voices.

The conversation was indistinguishable but clearly an argument of some kind.

Finn’s head snapped toward something behind them. “I think we have a problem—correction, we definitely have a problem. A big, smelly problem.”

“What?” Cyra turned around just as five men burst through the train car door, including the conductor they had met on the platform. She froze, not quite believing her eyes.

All five men carried rifles—and all five weapons were pointed at Finn and Cyra.

The men weren’t Wyndfyre faculty or Castorian military, and they certainly didn’t look like ex-students. They didn’t look Castorian at all. With the exception of the conductor, the rest wore long leather coats over moth-eaten waistcoats, with brimmed hats and black bandanas around their necks. *What the hell?*

“Stand up!” shouted one of the men as he charged down the aisle. “Toss your satchels and the belt to me!” He nodded to the belt of crystals in Cyra’s lap.

She could only gape, heart and breath still paralyzed in fear while her brain worked to make sense of what was happening.

Who were these men? Was this a part of the trials? Some strange bonus challenge?

The man giving the orders shifted his rifle between Finn and Cyra. His upper lip curled, yellow teeth just visible beneath the bushy bristles of his beard, which was long and scraggly, streaked with gray, and caked with bits of mud. Dirt speckled his tanned complexion, staining the creases around his narrowed eyes.

Finn and Cyra eased out of their cushioned seats before relinquishing their cross-body satchels. The bearded man stared expectantly at the belt still clutched in Cyra’s hands. “Toss it or we shoot you both dead.”

“Do it, Cyra,” Finn whispered, fear lacing the words.

Right then, she knew this was not part of the trials. This was something else. Something outside of anyone's control. After a hard swallow, she reluctantly pried her fingers off the champion’s belt, stalling for her own pride, savoring just a few more moments of her trophy.

Stop being an idiot. The belt is not worth your life.

Pursing her lips, she tossed the belt, stomach lurching during its short flight to the man’s free hand. “Now your bracers,” he barked, hand outstretched as he stalked closer. A beam of sunlight captured a large, jagged burn scar peeking out of his shirt collar, the shiny raised flesh stretching to his right ear.

“They’re empty,” Cyra said. Both she and Finn had lost their remaining evolution crystals in the tunnel.

The scarred man aimed his rifle just left of Cyra’s head. An echoing boom blasted across the small space, the noise deafening. She flinched, ears ringing. Glass shattered at their backs, raining shards over the cushioned seats.

“Next one goes in your head,” spat the scarred man. With shaking hands, Cyra and Finn relinquished their bracers. The man claimed them before growling out, “Unfortunately for us, our plans have gone to shit. And unfortunately for you, we are finishing this anyway.” The sound of

screeching brakes found Cyra's still ringing ears, and the train began to slow.

"What do you want?" Finn asked.

A grim smile spread across the man's face. "We came for the Lieutenant General's life. Now, we'll leave yours to fate." A loud, rumbling *boom* shook the train. "That's our signal." He turned and nodded to the other four men, who retreated toward the rear cars. The scarred man maintained his weapon's aim as he scurried backwards before disappearing through the door.

"They didn't shoot us," Finn breathed, lowering his arms. "That's something."

"What in all the Ancients' burning backsides is going on?" Cyra kneaded her temple with both hands, limbs trembling uncontrollably. "If this is some test . . ."

Finn ran to the window. "It's not a test."

Forcing her legs to move, Cyra peered out the window next to Finn. The train was passing through an open grassy field. Riders, five of them, raced alongside the rear cargo car, each rider claiming one of the rifle-carrying men. The transfer was perfectly timed as the train regathered its speed, forest swallowing the window's view.

"Shit," Finn cursed. "I think I know why they didn't shoot us." Before explaining, he scuttled out of the seat and sprinted up the aisle toward the engine car.

Cyra remained frozen in place. *What. Was. Happening.*

Twenty seconds later Finn reemerged, pale-faced and spewing indistinguishable curses. "They disabled the throttle."

"What does that mean?"

"We can't stop." Finn's fingers stitched through his hair, frightened eyes locking on Cyra. Suddenly, he grasped her arm and dragged her toward the rear cars.

"Finn, wait!"

He ignored her protests, pulling her across the train until they reached the empty cargo car. Cyra's eyes immediately went to the open sliding door.

Passing trees rushed by in quick blurs, the roar of train wheels against the iron tracks near screaming levels. She fought to breathe normally, to think beyond the *what the fuck is happening* phase of this screwed up situation.

Think. Breathe. Calm. But any sense of calm shattered with what Finn said next, their situation skipping right to the *we are totally fucked* phase. “There’s a bridge in a mile or so. It runs over the gorge.” His expression was grim as their eyes met.

The explosion.

A sinking feeling dropped through Cyra. “You think they blew up the bridge, and we’re headed right for it?”

Finn nodded.

Neither verbalized the inevitable consequences—if they didn’t get off this train, they were going to die. This was no test. This was real. No one was going to step in and save them from plummeting to a fiery inferno.

Finn inched toward the car’s opening. “We jump when there’s a clearing.”

“Are you insane?” Cyra stared through the doorway, watching trees blur in and out of view, the loud rattling like an alarm bell warning them not to venture closer. “We’ll break our necks!”

“Then what do you suggest?” Finn whirled around, raw fear spearing across his face.

An idea struck. Hand shoving into her pocket, she produced the cloudy black time crystal. “I still have this.”

Finn’s eyes widened before immediately narrowing as he studied the crystal. “One cast left, and not nearly enough power to stop this train before it’s dust.”

“But enough to slow it down?” Cyra said eagerly. “Give us a chance to survive the jump without brain damage?”

Finn shrugged.

Just. Great. Cyra shoved the crystal into his grasp. “You do it. You’re better at time-casting, and it’s quite literally both our necks.”

Nodding, Finn stepped toward the opening. Cyra followed, heart slamming harder against her ribs with every inch closer to the edge. Wind whipped the free strands of hair from her ponytail as she reached the opening. The fast-moving scenery crashed such a strong tide of dread through her body that she could taste it on her tongue, the contents of her empty stomach churning as she imagined the sensation of her bones crunching before the world went black.

Finn raised his arm, expression intent, focused.

The train slowed.

Cyra smiled in breathless relief, tears almost springing to her eyes. She nodded her gratitude to Finn, but all relief vanished when the crystal burst into a puff of black dust, quickly swept away by the wind.

They both leapt.

Stomach flying into her throat, Cyra soared toward the encroaching ground. Momentum sent her tumbling once her feet smashed into the forest floor. She let the roll take her, body thumping to a hard stop when she careened into the side of a tree trunk, impact blasting the air from her lungs.

Struggling to reclaim her breath, she settled on her back, staring up through the sun-spotted trees. Alive. She was alive.

Straining to sit up, Cyra moaned, sure the collision with that tree bruised several ribs. Water filled her eyes, but she blinked the moisture away, only now realizing that she was alone.

Finn was nowhere to be seen.

An ear-scorching sound reached her ears. Not quite like the explosive rumbling from earlier; more like the amplified shriek of wood and metal crushing against stone—like the sound of a train crashing into the bottom of a cliff.

They had survived by seconds.

“Finn?” she called shakily, ribs barking in protest as she wobbled to her feet. The glimpse of a maroon coat near a fallen tree caught her eye. “Finn!” She ran to his side before falling to her knees. “Finn, are you all right?” She rolled him over. Blood oozed from a small gash on his forehead. Was he breathing? She certainly wasn’t as her hands shook violently. “Finn, please don’t be dead.” When a low moan pushed through his lips, her everything eased.

Finn’s eyes fluttered open. “Were you worried about me, princess?”

A weary smile tugged at her lips. “We just jumped out of a moving train.”

Finn gingerly sat up, eyes squeezing closed as a ripple of pain kneaded his brow. “Yep. We’re going to be legends at school.” He managed a sly smile, eyes cracking open.

“As long as we’re *living* legends.” Cyra only shook her head. “I can’t believe that just happened. Those men stole a Castorian train and sent it over a cliff.”

“Cliff . . .” Finn’s eyes bulged. He bolted to his feet and raced toward the tracks.

“Finn!” she huffed in exasperation, reluctantly following.

A clearing emerged where tracks and land abruptly ended. Twisted iron and blackened wood stretched out from the cliff’s edge, shorn off tracks bent in unnatural directions.

The acrid smell of burnt metal stung Cyra’s nose and eyes. From her vantage point, as close to the gorge’s edge as she dared, she spied the train’s wreckage. Smoke billowed upwards from the heap of smashed cars, now piled on top of each other, unrecognizable within the burning mess.

“Awesome,” Finn said, staring transfixed at the smoking pile.

“Awesome? That could have been us down there in the burning rubble.”

Finn cocked his head playfully. “But it wasn’t.”

Huffing a breath, Cyra tried not to think too hard about their near-mangling. Searching the area for distraction, her attention caught on something odd. Across a large tree trunk, orange paint scrawled the words: *End Castorian oppression or face the consequences - NOC.*

“NOC,” Finn read aloud over her shoulder. “Didn’t the dean say something about Clovian rebels? The man with the scar said they wanted to kill General Vance.” He scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Little did they know, they held the king’s daughter in their grasp.”

Cyra rubbed her temple, everything one giant throb. “They’re still out there,” she said, wary eyes swinging from the garish message to the innocent looking trees. “Ten of them, at least, and we’re cut off from our direct route back to school. We should find Dean Malcom and the others.”

Finn shook his head, the motion drawing a wince. “Heading toward the border increases our chances of running into our friends with guns.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

Finn eyed the gorge. “We continue toward the school.”

“I hate to state the obvious—” She gestured toward the broken bridge. “With both of us out of crystals, we’re stuck.”

“Ah,” Finn clicked his tongue, “you forget that just yesterday, a group of four enterprising students built a bridge across this very expanse. I doubt anyone has taken it down yet.” He waved over the chasm. “Should be somewhere south of here.”

Cyra didn’t have a better plan. “Then south we go, I guess.”

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They trekked across the rugged terrain, sticking somewhat close to the gorge. Neither broke their pensive silence for some time. So much the better: staying upright required all Cyra's concentration, battered body leaching more energy with every step.

"Too bad about the belt," Finn said, breaking the long silence.

"What?"

"The belt you worked so hard to win," he said over his shoulder. "Gone in a few seconds," he snapped his fingers. "You must be devastated."

Cyra flicked him with a side-eyed frown. Was he baiting her? Probably. "Better than being shot."

"Still, given what you did to win the thing? Must be salt in the wound."

He's still mad about the kiss. "Listen, Finn, I'm sorry I kissed you," she sighed, too exhausted and emotionally drained for an argument. "What do you want? A card? A song?"

Finn whirled, a conspiratorial smile spreading across his face. "How about a date?"

A scoff readied on Cyra's lips, waiting for the joke or snide comment followed by a quippy add-on to earn him an eye roll. Instead, he just stood there expectantly—no, *intently*, amber eyes piercing into hers. "You're serious?"

"We almost died, Cyra," Finn said, tone devoid of irony. "And you're right. I have been—what did you call me earlier? An asshat? Yes, I've been an asshat. I'd like a chance to—" He cut himself off in mid-sentence, spine going rigid, alert eyes darting around the trees.

Cyra opened her mouth to say something when Finn launched himself at her, taking them both to the ground just as a loud gunshot rang through the forest.

The rebels.

The dormant terror in Cyra's chest reared awake as the two of them clung together in the leaves and brambles. The sound of stomping hooves shook the ground, heralding the oncoming threat. Cyra and Finn struggled to their knees as riders surrounded them on all sides, leaving little chance at escape.

On the train, everything had happened so fast she hadn't had time to really understand the direness of their situation—how close they came to death before they leapt for salvation. Saved by pure dumb luck. Right now,

however, she knew exactly just how fucked they were, everything sharpening around her in visceral horror.

When the riders stopped, they all aimed their rifles directly at the two of them. With no other choice, Finn and Cyra raised their hands in surrender. Mouses caught by the cat—ten cats.

They were going to die.

This horrifying reality ripped across Cyra's mind, panic throttling her insides. She fought tears, fought to conjure a brave front as she met the solemn faces of those who surrounded them. She found nothing but hate or cold determination.

The bearded man with the burn scar nudged his horse forward. "You two are more resilient than expected."

"Jeremiah," said one of the riders, a woman. She was young, perhaps mid-twenties, with chin-length strawberry blond hair sticking out the sides of her brimmed hat. "We don't have time for this. We need to go—*now*."

"We came here to cause trouble and kill Syphons, and thus far we're only one for two," Jeremiah retorted, rifle resting across the saddle of his horse.

"We could take them as hostages," said another rider, a man somewhere in his thirties. He was dressed neater than the others, his round glasses poised on the edge of his long nose. He looked almost scholarly, as if he belonged indoors, thin build and pasty complexion unsuited for the rough terrain—certainly an outlier amongst the group. "Our benefactor would increase his interests, if we take a few alive." His large gray-blue eyes greedily swept over Finn and Cyra. It was the look of a butcher toward a fresh kill, eager to dissect his specimen.

A chill ran down Cyra's spine.

"Our benefactor is not trapped fifty miles inside enemy territory," the woman clipped, eying the bespectacled man with open hostility. "I say we cut our losses. We didn't get Vance, but we live to fight another day. These two are just children."

"We're students at Wyndfyre Academy," Cyra choked out the shaky words, round eyes resting imploringly on the woman. "We're trying to get back to school, please, let us go."

"Come on, Jeremiah," said the woman, "killing them is not going to further our cause."

Jeremiah hesitated, his steely gaze drifting from Cyra to Finn. “You, boy, where were you born?”

Finn flickered a tense sideways glance to Cyra before focusing on the rider. Jeremiah’s rifle raised, muzzle almost lazily pointing at Finn’s chest. “Saraneca,” Finn answered, “taken by the CCB when I was seven.”

“You see?” The woman gestured. “He’s not even Castorian. Let’s go.”

“Or he could be lying.” Jeremiah’s lip curled, free hand brushing the edges of his scar. “You—” He pointed his gun at Cyra. “Where were you born?”

Cyra swallowed, pulse thrumming so fast she could not distinguish individual beats. She considered giving the same answer, Saraneca or anywhere else in the colonies. Maybe they’d believe her, or maybe they’d call them both liars and just start shooting. “Tarrinth,” she answered honestly, her ears just catching a low curse push through Finn’s lips.

Jeremiah smiled at her answer. “Let me kill this one.”

“Jeremiah,” the woman breathed, but the man already raised the rifle, taking aim.

A sob strangled the air in Cyra’s lungs, her whole body frozen by her impending doom. This was how she died. Killed by Clovian rebels in the forest. She’d never reach her dreams. She’d never reach the end of school. She wouldn’t reach the end of this wretched day.

All her muscles tensed as she closed her eyes, waiting for the nothing.

The gun fired.

Something knocked into her sideways—not a bullet but a person. Eyes snapping opened, Cyra watched as Finn fell backwards, his face twisting into a hard grimace. “Finn!” she shouted once she had steadied herself, frazzled attention seizing on a hole in his maroon coat, where his arm met shoulder. Blood oozed from the torn material.

He had been shot. The scarred man shot Finn.

“You see, Maddy,” Jeremiah sneered, clicking his tongue. “Once they get us, they turn us.” He nudged his horse closer to Finn. “This one is just as Castorian as the other. People like them, all you can do is put them out of their misery like a horse with a broken leg.”

Cyra’s frantic gaze flung back to the woman, her eyes wide and pleading. *Stop him!* she silently beseeched. The woman only returned a hard scowl, her verbal fight over. This Jeremiah was determined to kill someone today.

Rifle aiming downward, the man prepared to end Finn's life before claiming hers. "Stop!" Cyra shouted, raising her hands protectively over Finn. "You don't want to kill us."

"Oh, I think I do," Jeremiah growled. "You Syphons are all the same. Think that your crystals give you the right to enslave us, to take away our freedoms, our children. It's time for a reckoning, and it starts here."

"I am Cyra Byrogan," she said quickly, thumping heart threatening to burst out of her chest. "King Razi's daughter."

That certainly grabbed the man's attention, at least enough to give him pause. He straightened in his seat, the other riders similarly startled by the claim, trading glances packed with caution. Perhaps they were fine with killing a Castorian nobody, but royalty was a whole other consideration.

Cyra seized on their collection hesitation, gaze sliding to the off-putting man with the glasses. "Let my friend live, and I will go with you as a hostage."

"What?" Finn croaked. "No!" He attempted to sit up when he flinched.

"Jeremiah," the man with glasses said, eagerness teaming in his tone. "Our benefactor—"

"Is not here, Nestor," Jeremiah bit out, gaze locked on Cyra—a web of calculating thoughts working behind his eyes. "We came here to send a message." His rifle drifted back to Cyra. "We kill royalty, and maybe they'll listen to our demands."

"If she is telling the truth," the woman balked, "and we kill her, then we stop being just a nuisance to the Crown. They will destroy us." She pinned another glare on the man with glasses. "And we are too deep in Castorian lands to take a hostage, especially a valuable one. You know I'm right."

For several agonizing seconds Jeremiah and the woman locked in a tense stare.

It was surreal, watching these two silently decide Cyra's fate—freedom, death, or hostage. She held her breath, the wait agonizing as the meager contents of her stomach considered making an appearance.

Finally, a low angry exhale left Jeremiah's mouth. "Son of a bitch," he cursed, holstering the rifle on his saddle.

The action flooded a wave of relief through Cyra—relief short-lived. To her shock, the man dismounted. *What*? She struggled to her feet, inching backward as he stormed straight at her like a rabid bear.

Heel hooking on a rock, she mounted no defense as Jeremiah's hand sprung forward, his calloused fingers wrapping around her neck, and roughly halting her stumble. He wrenched her so close to his face that she could smell his rancid breath, spy the freckles on his nose and the whites of eyes. Any would-be scream suffocated beneath his hold.

"Stop!" Finn cried from the ground, battling to his feet but only reaching his knees as pain halted his efforts.

With a flick of the wrist, Jeremiah produced a pistol, aiming the weapon at Finn's chest. "Move another inch and you die, boy."

Fear splintered through Cyra as she clawed at the man's grasp, her efforts useless. She was utterly powerless against his tightening grip. She could still breathe. Until she couldn't. Until Jeremiah's calloused fingers squeezed, cutting off her air with unrelenting cruelty.

"If you are the daughter of Razi Byrogan," he snarled, nostrils flaring, "then I have a message for you to deliver as gratitude for the mercy my people and I are going to show you and your friend today." The bristles of his scraggly beard scratched her face. "We, Nation of Clovia, demand our freedom from Castorian tyranny. Acquiesce or be destroyed."

Just as stars crashed over her vision, the man's crushing grip finally released. Cyra collapsed to her seat, gulping several breaths of desperate air. By the time her blurred vision cleared, the riders were gone. The sound of their hooves faded, and silence settled over the trees.

"Are you all right?" Finn asked, crawling to her side.

The sobs came then, joined by the thick, fat roll of tears. The stress of the last two days—two *months*—of little sleep, the trials, that stupid tunnel, the train, and now this. The last of her mental fortitude broke open, spilling free a flood of pent in emotions.

"It's all right," said Finn in a calming voice. His good arm wrapped around her back, pulling her against his chest.

Cyra cried for a good minute, her face buried in Finn's neck. The embrace had a calming effect, her breaths soon easing in and out in steady rhythm, tears at last drying up.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered, half-expecting him to laugh at her, or make some teasing remark at her weakness for crying.

But when she met Finn's eyes, she found them full, his own raw emotion etched over his face. "Why are you sorry? We almost died. We've earned a few tears . . . and then some."

His voice was so soft, so comforting, that her throat constricted once more, corners of her mouth unable to stay even. She averted her gaze as another tear fell. This time Finn wiped it away with his thumb. The action only surged more water down her cheeks.

“I am really sorry about the kiss.”

Finn actually laughed. “Seven hells, Cyra. You were ready to get kidnapped by a band of crazy rebels to save my life. We’re good.”

Dragging her eyes to meet his, Cyra managed a wobbly smile. “You jumped in front of a bullet for me.” She nodded at the seeping wound. “Why?”

“I told you: I like you.” His gaze swept over her face. “Plus, I’d probably be executed if I just stood there while some Clovian bastard with a beard shot you.”

A breathy chuckle shook her chest, their eyes again connecting. Before she thought better of the action, before her emotions had completely settled, Cyra closed the short gap between them and kissed Finn on the mouth.

Unlike the first stunted kiss after the tunnel, this one was slow, patient.

Warmth spread across her body, vanquishing the last of the fear-born tremors.

Finn’s lips were surprisingly soft as they moved in gentle motions, his fingers stitching into her hair, beckoning the continued dance of their mouths.

She felt the slide of his tongue against hers. Bold, but not unwanted, the touch pouring a tide of heat across her body, stomach jumping with excitement. A spark ignited between them, roaring to life a sudden and surprising desire. The fledgling of something yet to be determined.

The desire immediately faded when Finn broke away, swaying sideways before cratering to the forest floor. “Finn!” Cyra cried, scrutinizing his ever-paling face.

Why the hell were they kissing in the woods like idiots when Finn was wounded?

“I’m fine,” he muttered right before falling to his back, eyelids closing.

He most definitely wasn’t fine. How would they ever make it back now?

Renewed panic threatened more tears, the sense of helplessness overwhelming. *Focus. Stop the bleeding*. But Cyra had nothing—no healing crystal, bandages, water, not even a knife.

Adrenaline-born fear combatted her frayed energies. She tore off her coat and waistcoat, then freed her belt.

Finn’s eyes flickered open. “Undressing . . . a curious move but no complaints.”

“Hah.” Cyra forced a stressed smile, folding the waistcoat and arranging the material over the entrance and exit wound. She used the belt to hold the item in place and apply pressure. It more or less worked. Now what?

Finn’s steady breathing combined with the fading light, answered her question. She’d stay the night and seek help with the dawn. So, curling up next to Finn, using the rise and fall of his chest to calm her nerves, Cyra attempted sleep. “Please don’t die.”

“I’ll try not to,” he whispered back, both surrendering to the encroaching night.

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Chapter 15

Champion's Ball

A search party found them the next day. Finn's wound healed before they were packed on horses and escorted back to the school, grunting and groaning throughout the journey.

Upon arrival, Cyra was desperate for a bath, to change out of her soiled clothes, or even to just wash her face and brush her matted and scorched hair. Instead she very reluctantly trudged to the dean's office alongside Finn.

Dean Malcom wanted a word before they were officially released.

The newly healed Finn looked as bedraggled as Cyra. Twigs and leaves filled his tousled hair, dirt smudges, blood stains, and bruises littered his exposed skin, face pale from blood loss. It was like the forest had scooped them both into a barrel, rolled them around for a while, then shook them free.

After exchanging tired shrugs, they padded through the oak doors into the dean's office. Cyra had never been in this circular room before. It possessed all the basic elements of a typical academic workspace, complete with cabinets, bookshelves, chairs, and random decorative objects. Dean Malcom sat behind a wide mahogany desk, and he wasn't alone. Lieutenant General Vance stood off to the side near a cabinet, and a woman with dark auburn hair streaked with gray sat in the desk chair, her back to the entering students.

“Ah, Cyra, Finn,” greeted a weary-looking Dean Malcom as he stood. “We are immensely relieved you both are all right.” His tired eyes brightened slightly as he attempted a smile.

“Indeed,” said the woman.

Cyra blanched at the familiar voice, muscles going taut even before the woman stood up and turned around, her chin tipping as she scrutinized the newcomers with haughty appraisal. Despite her short stature, the effect was striking—and all too familiar, nearly causing Cyra to shrink right back out the door.

“Mother,” she said in breathless greeting, shocked to see the queen here.

Finn flinched. “Mother?” he whispered from the corner of his mouth.

“What are you doing here?” Cyra blurted.

The queen straightened, lips pursing as if tempted to reprimand Cyra for her rudeness. Instead, she said, “I am here for the party in celebration of the new champion of the school. Members of all the important families are attending the event.” Her attention drifted to the dean. “Unplanned was the news that a band of criminals committed an act of terror within Castorian borders, nearly killing my daughter in the process.”

The dean’s flustered hands spanned outward. “Your Majesty, I assure you, your daughter’s endangerment was complete happenstance.”

“Happenstance,” the queen clipped, turning her sharp eyes to Vance. “Your intelligence, Lieutenant General, designated this group as a non-threat. Yet they managed to cross into our borders, unbeknownst to our military, smuggle illegal weapons, destroy a train, and attack our citizens—including *my* daughter.”

“Our intelligence was inaccurate,” said Vance tightly.

“Inaccurate?” The queen’s thin eyebrows rose as dangerously high as her voice. “I am growing concerned, Lieutenant General.”

“They are a small rebel group,” Vance assured. “We will take care of them.”

“You had better.” The queen bristled, a touch of pink coloring her fair cheeks. “If word of this incident gets out, it will be bad for everyone.”

“All those involved will exert extreme discretion,” Dean Malcom promised.

“See that they do,” the queen said curtly. “In the meantime, I will return to the capital and inform the king of this unfortunate business. Lieutenant General, you will return with me. His Majesty will eagerly await your plans

for ensuring fewer . . . inaccuracies.” When she addressed the dean, the man visibly paled under her appraisal. “I expect a full report from everyone present yesterday sent to the capital by tomorrow night.”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” the dean said. “Your presence will be missed tonight.”

The queen’s lips thinned in response, dismissively turning away. “Cyra, dear, I had my attendants deliver you a new gown for the evening’s celebrations.” Her gaze raked over Cyra’s disheveled appearance. “Do bathe before putting it on, it was quite costly.”

“Yes, Mother,” Cyra said, taking care not to mumble—her mother hated the mumbles.

“Good,” the queen said. “And stand up straight. Winners do not slouch.”

Cyra automatically straightened.

After a final round of formal goodbyes, the queen was gone—as swift and jarring as she appeared. The Lieutenant General trailed after her, leaving the dean alone with his charges.

Malcom produced a handkerchief and dabbed his dewy forehead before reclaiming his seat. “It’s always a pleasure to have Her Majesty within our academic halls.” He gestured for both of them to sit. “Per royal orders, you are both to remain silent about the true events following the Gauntlet Trials. Not a word to your brother”—he eyed Finn warningly—“or to your friends.” His penetrating gaze shifted to Cyra. “Lest such a slip affect your futures.” He let the not-so veiled threat hang in the air. “The students believe the rail bridge collapsed due to rot, and a malfunction forced you both to leap from the train. This is your story, understood?” Both Cyra and Finn nodded. “Good. More discussion is to come, but right now you need to make yourselves presentable for the party in a few hours.”

Cyra found herself muttering her acquiescence, still collecting her thoughts in the aftermath of her mother’s surprise visit.

“So . . . your mother seems nice,” Finn said once they were dismissed, the pair grunting and groaning their way up the winding steps to the junior dormitories, each sore muscle protesting every small effort.

“She made the dean sweat.” Cyra snorted a laugh.

“How she managed to stare down her nose at every single person in that room, despite being a head shorter, was quite impressive.”

Cyra shook her head as they reached the third-floor landing. “Classic Dukane imperiousness, my father would say.” To Finn’s questioning brow,

she added, “My mother’s family—the Dukane line.” They halted on the threshold of the junior class common room, all thoughts of her mother eddying away. “I’m not sure I’m ready for this."

“Me either,” Finn said, offering an encouraging half smile. “Here we go.” He pushed open the door, and they met a gathering of students all sitting around the space awaiting their arrival.

Aurelia spotted them first. “They’re back!” she shouted, alerting everyone to their presence. The junior class immediately crowded around the pair, bombarding them with questions along with cheers and congratulations.

“Goodness, give them some air!” cried Akira.

“Ugh, you both look dreadful.” Aurelia grimaced as she studied Cyra’s hair. “Seven hells, the ends of your ponytail are all charred.” She pulled free several blackened strands, a look of horror on her face. “Your poor hair.”

Cyra batted her hand away. “Touch me again, and I will smack you.”

“Just trying to help,” Aurelia said indignantly. “Champion for a day and already making threats.” A smile triumphed over her mock severity. “Congratulations, by the way, President Cyra!”

“Yes, yes,” sighed Akira resignedly. “Let’s see it then—the precious champion’s belt.”

“Oh, uhm.” Cyra’s eyes flashed to Finn, her gut lurching. “It’s gone.”

“Gone?” Akira’s mouth dropped open, and her eyes narrowed, as if sensing something amiss. “You lost it? I don’t understand. How could you lose the champion’s belt?”

“It’s a long story,” Cyra said, the pressure of the dean’s warning combating the discomfort of lying to her friends. “There was an incident with the ride home. We had to jump from the train.”

Akira’s eyes flickered in confusion. “But—”

“Oh, yes!” Aurelia said excitedly. “Everyone has been talking about the disaster, as well as speculating about your possible deaths, but we weren’t worried.” She darted a glance between Fabien, Akira, Pippin, and Nailah. The four students exchanged discomforted smiles and uneasy chuckles. They had most definitely feared the worst.

“You’re both fine, right?” Fabien asked, drawing alongside his brother and eyeing the dark stain over Finn’s shoulder, the mark not quite masked by the maroon color of his coat.

“Just need a bath,” Finn dismissed.

“Ten baths,” Aurelia coughed, scrunching up her nose. “Both of you best get going. The champions of the school cannot attend their own celebration looking like the forest chewed them up and spat them back out.”

***

Normally Cyra loved balls, adored the festive energy and fancy gowns. It never failed to excite. Tonight, however, she longed for bed, emotionally and physically spent.

Suck it up, Cyra, she told herself as she trailed after the junior class, the students trickling down to the celebrations hosted in Wyndfyre’s rear garden courtyard. At least, the gown her mother left behind was lovely. The bottle green color drew out the reds and golds of her chestnut brown hair. The capped sleeves hung just off her shoulders, the generous neckline doing wonders for her modest chest, silk taffeta cinching at her waist before the material gathered at the back in a dramatic bustle.

Nailah did her best to salvage Cyra’s damaged hair, Akira healing all of her visible bruises and scratches, while Aurelia attacked Cyra’s face with a myriad of paints and powders. Somehow, hours after arrival, she emerged from the dormitories looking less bedraggled forest rat and almost—

“Pretty,” Finn whispered into her ear, suddenly at her side. “You look pretty.”

When Cyra met his gaze, her heart skipped—an unexpected reaction to the compliment, requiring a moment to collect herself lest she trip on her gown’s hem and go tumbling down the stairs like a clumsy buffoon.

“You look nice, too,” she managed to say without sounding like a bumbling idiot.

And he did. Finn looked quite smart in his formalwear of a white button-down shirt, brick-red waistcoat, and matching charcoal coat and trousers. Someone—Cyra suspected Fabien—had convinced Finn to tame his hair, now combed behind his ears, save one stubborn lock resting across his forehead.

A fluster gathered in her chest, knowing her too-long inspection bordered on ogling. Her awkwardness only deepened as Finn flashed a grin before darting after his brother.

“Uhm, what in the crying crickets was that flirty exchange?” Aurelia demanded, latching onto Cyra’s side.

“Nothing.” Cyra attempted an innocent look, undermined by the heat in her cheeks.

“Cyra! Over here,” Dean Malcom called, motioning her toward a set of double doors where the other four trial finalists waited. Where Finn waited, another lopsided grin on his face, bright eyes following her progress.

As their gazes locked, fresh warmth deepened her already rosy cheeks.

Seven hells, Cyra, what is wrong with you?

She wasn’t alone in her sentiments as Aurelia gave her a narrowed look. “The nothing is making you blush. Did something—”

“Need to go!” Cyra waved, hurrying toward the finalists, and pointedly averting her gaze from Finn lest she become a complete red-faced fool. The rest of the straggling students, including a disgruntled Aurelia, disappeared through another exit into the courtyard.

Murmurs from the crowd beyond the double doors reached Cyra’s ears, and she almost welcomed the coming distraction. Almost.

One by one Dean Malcom ushered the finalists through the doors in order of how long they lasted in the trials, positioning them in a line at the top of a short flight of steps. The view overlooked an outdoor courtyard and surrounding gardens, utterly transformed by decorations. Hundreds of lanterns dotted the space, their soft glow highlighting elaborate ice sculptures and large bouquets of red roses. The late spring air was crisp but comfortable—perfect for an outdoor gathering. A small orchestra played softly, notes just audible over the cheering crowd.

Once the applause died down, the dean gave a short speech, calling out each of the contestants and finishing with Cyra. She barely heard the words, however. Because as much as she fought the impulse, her attention kept slipping to Finn.

It was remarkable how much could change in a day.

Sudden applause reclaimed Cyra’s drifting attention. The speech was over, and they were released to enjoy themselves. Music lifted up over the party as attendants served sparkling wine to the milling guests. Amongst the junior class students were a smattering of outside attendees, including noble families, donors to the school, members of the Academy Board, and the like.

If there was one positive of her near-death experience, at least Cyra wouldn’t have to suffer the night under her mother’s judgmental eye. Even

so, most conversations frayed her already worn energies, save one notable exception.

“Aunt Thea!” She grinned excitedly at her aunt’s unexpected appearance.

In her late thirties, Thea dazzled in a dusty rose gown—the perfect feminine complement to her auburn hair and ivory skin tones.

“Does this mean Uncle Mathus is here as well?” Cyra automatically searched for the man in question.

Thea sighed. “Unfortunately, Mathus was on the same train as your mother this afternoon.” Her honey-brown eyes shifted around the nearby guests, before she lowered her voice. “Given yesterday’s events and Mathus being a royal ambassador to the colonies, the queen required his immediate return to Tarrinth.”

“If anyone can provide a level head, it’s Uncle Mathus,” Cyra said, forcing a smile to cover her disappointment at her uncle’s absence. Yes, Mathus always provided sound advice. Affable, understanding, kind—the exact opposite of his older, royal sister in every way. “So, you know what happened yesterday?” she asked in a hushed whisper. “The train hijacking. The Nation of Clovia rebels . . .” *Seven hells, was all that only yesterday?*

“Some.” Thea nodded. “But let’s not discuss such things. Now is a time for celebration.” A wide smile stretched her lips, kind features softening. “I am so proud of you, Cyra, for your triumph in the face of both the expected and unexpected. Your bravery is remarkable.” She reached out and squeezed Cyra’s hands. “I know your parents are proud as well.”

Cyra’s heart swelled at these words, the feeling chased by a wistful sadness, wishing her mother had uttered similar sentiments earlier that day. “Thank you, Thea” was all she said.

Thea’s warm smile tempered, as if she immediately detected Cyra’s faltering joy. “Well, I can’t produce your uncle, but I know a five-year-old who is very eager to see her cousin.” She nodded over her shoulder.

Following Thea’s gaze, Cyra spied a little girl with tawny colored hair. Her large piercing blue eyes—Dukane eyes—dominated her round face. “Oralia is getting so big!” Cyra exclaimed, studying her young cousin, who was chatting animatedly with two other children—a tow-headed blond girl and boy with russet brown hair, both around eight or nine.

As if sensing the attention, Oralia turned and launched herself toward the women, capturing Cyra’s waist with a vociferous hug. “Me, Tess, and

Simon are going to explore the gardens! Want to come, cousin Cyra?" She blinked her doughy eyes as if silently reiterating her entreating plea.

"I wish I could, but I need to stay and talk to the adults," Cyra said regrettably. The reply drew a pronounced pout from the girl. "Trust me, exploring with you sounds much better."

Only mildly mollified, Olaria rejoined her two playmates, the three children disappearing around a large hedge in fits of giggles.

Cyra smiled. "I'm glad she's having fun."

"Yes," Thea said. "I do wish there were other children here aside from Tess Fletcher and Simon Languine. I don't mind the children so much as their families." Her gaze swung toward another section of the courtyard where Aedan stood next to a regally dressed man with sandy blond hair spotted with gray.

Lord Marcon Fletcher—Aedan's father, Cyra recognized. And by their identical constipated expressions, neither was having a particularly pleasant time.

Cyra soon mirrored their misery as the ensuing social bombardments quickly leached away all her already overtaxed energies. With the exception of her aunt, she counted down the moments until she could break free from the verbal tedium and spend time with her friends.

This is what you wanted, remember? To be the champion.

But when Cyra reached for the triumph she had felt after claiming the belt, there wasn't much left save for a small whimper of reluctant joy. After yesterday, after the rebels . . . it all felt hollow now. A great fuss over something not important at all.

When Aurelia rescued her from the endless social torture, Cyra followed with relish, joining their friends near a fountain.

"My, my, you are popular," Finn said as he and Fabien approached the group. "I'm almost glad I didn't win. I'm weakest under social pressure." He winked at Cyra, and her insides jolted.

"You'll get no sympathy over here," said Akira as she sipped from her wine glass. "Happy to trade places any time."

Cyra quirked a wry smile, focusing on her friends to better control the not-so-subtle awkwardness at standing so close to Finn. They chatted all things Gauntlet Trials—Nailah, Pippin, and Aurelia eager to soak up the action. And, slowly, Cyra felt herself relax, felt herself having fun—exactly what her throttled soul desperately needed after the last forty-eight hours.

The relief was cut by Jia Masura's sudden appearance. The senior was a vision of elegance, dazzling in a white and black gown—perfect for her olive complexion and dark-chocolate hair, presently pinned up in a sleek bun.

"The dancing is about to begin," she said by way of greeting, her expectant smile directed at Cyra. "Tradition calls for the champion to lead. As sitting school president, I'll join halfway through the first song, followed by the rest of the finalists." She nodded between Finn, Fabien, and Akira before returning an expectant look at Cyra. "Ready?"

"Uh—what?" Cyra stuttered, heart tumbling. She had to dance in front of everybody?

"Hurry up," Jia said as the music changed and the guests cleared the center courtyard.

"Ancients . . ." Cyra trailed off, frantic eyes steering from Aurelia's rueful smile to Finn. *Please don't make me ask.*

He didn't. Extending his hand, Finn said, "Fancy a dance, Cyra?"

She gave a breathless "Yes."

Ignoring her friends' matching looks of stunned confusion, Cyra allowed Finn to lead her toward the dancing area. "Thank you," she whispered into his ear.

The corners of Finn's mouth tugged up. "Always happy to assist a princess in distress." There was no taunt behind the words. No tease in his smile. His amber eyes were soft as they met hers. And as their hands wove together, fresh flutters spread everywhere.

A flash of their heated kiss in the forest lured color back to Cyra's cheeks. She prayed no one noticed, embarrassment reaching new levels as she felt dozens of eyes watching them.

When the music started, she had other worries, however, like Finn's ability to dance.

He was brilliant, because of course he was, dancing skills as adept as his casting—natural, fluid, effortless. She didn't mind it this time, quite the contrary.

"I know—it's almost unfair that someone as charming and talented as me is also blessed with excellent rhythm," Finn said, correctly reading Cyra's pleased surprise.

She huffed a laugh as he turned her about the courtyard. "You forgot shameless confidence." Their eyes locked after a spin, their bodies drawing

together.

It was an effort not to focus on his lips and wonder about future kisses, if he still wanted to go on a date after everything. She failed on all accounts.

“All of our friends are staring at us,” Finn whispered into her ear, his breath like a caress.

“Everyone is staring at us."

“True, but somehow I think you’re in for an interrogation later, especially from a certain blond.”

Cyra resisted glancing anywhere near her gawking friends. Aurelia would see it all over her face. And see what, exactly? “We’re just dancing,” she said when their eyes met again. The connection sent her heart racing, and maintaining a steady breath became a battle. Merciful distraction came when Jia and another student sauntered to the dancing area. “You see, we’re just following tradition. Nothing strange.”

Finn gave her a smirk as if he saw right through her nervous hedging. Something had changed between the two of them. They both knew it, but Cyra would not admit to anything—yet. And she would certainly not admit to anything—first.

“Fancy a stroll through the gardens?” Finn asked as the music slowed, his thumb playing with a tendril of hair near the nape of her neck.

The light touch shuddered a pleasant tingle down her spine, raising gooseflesh across her body. An endless loop of their forest kiss occupied her mind and refused to budge for a full ten seconds. “Sure,” she said breathlessly.

Avoiding the pointed stares from her friends, Cyra followed Finn away from the courtyard. As the party sounds faded behind their backs and the scents of roses, tulips, and jasmine swirled together in a pleasant floral cloud, a sudden twist of uncertainty knotted her guts. “Are you sure we should leave a celebration thrown in our honor?” she asked, unsure of what she wanted to happen between them while alone in the gardens.

“After what we went through,” Finn said, steering down a row of rose bushes, “I think we can do whatever we want tonight.”

The words breathed a shiver of severity through Cyra, tempering some of her ruffled nerves. “Do you think you can keep what happened a secret?” Her eyes swung sideways when she received only telling silence. “You already told Fabien everything, didn’t you?”

“Ah, come on, Cyra. I almost died. Twice.” His tone tinged with exasperation. “The moment Fabien saw me, he knew something big happened, more than some stupid trials.”

“But the dean, my mother—”

“I know the consequences, but I don’t care.” Finn stopped next to a tall hedge. “My brother and I have been through a lot. We don’t keep things like that from each other.”

Cyra’s stomach tensed. Of course she wanted to tell her friends, but her mother’s severe face only glowered in her mind’s eye, demanding silence. “For both our sakes, tell him to say nothing.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Fabien.” Finn waved a dismissive hand through the air. “He can keep a secret.”

Cyra sighed, when another thought struck, her body going cold then hot. “Does that mean he knows about us kissing?”

Finn hesitated. “No, actually.”

“Really?” She stared at Finn. “I thought you didn’t keep things from each other.”

“Yes, well, that’s different. What happened in the forest was something between you and me. I would only tell him if you were all right with it.” Finn was surprisingly serious as he spoke. And she believed him.

“Thank you again for saving my life.” Cyra looked down, the swell of nerves readying another wave as she picked at her nails. “And for being so nice to me. I really lost it back there.” Her lower lip quivered, throat thickening with rising emotions.

The memories of yesterday, of nearly dying, of facing the man with the scar as he choked her life away. She had never been more terrified in her whole existence. “I completely romanticized fighting. When faced with real danger, I crumpled.” She frowned at her fidgeting hands, remembering her sobs. They threatened a return now. “Maybe you should be president instead of me.”

Finn grasped her agitated hands, drawing her eyes to his face. “Are you kidding? I nearly pissed myself yesterday. You’re the champion, Cyra. You want this far more than I ever did.”

His comforting words only unleashed fresh guilt, burning eyes promising tears. “Yes, I wanted this so much that I used your feelings to trick you.” She shook her head. “Then you go and jump in front of a bullet

for me.” She studied a single pink rose on a rosebush, unable to meet Finn’s gaze anymore.

“I needed a grand gesture to make up for years of being . . . What was that word you used again? An asshat?”

A reluctant smile tugged up the corners of Cyra’s mouth, her eyes shifting back to Finn.

“Deep down,” he went on, “you know I’d be a crap president.”

In spite of herself, she smirked. “That’s true.”

“I know my strengths—casting, fighting, effortless charm.” His eyes twinkled. “Being a responsible member of the student body? A leader? Not so much.” His features softened. “But I would jump in front of a bullet for you again—no question.”

The statement knocked the breath from her lungs, thundering heart only intensifying at the look on his face, the way his eyes drifted to her mouth. *He’s going to kiss you.*

And, as he inched closer, she didn’t move, didn’t breathe as her eyes closed.

The feel of Finn’s lips against hers sent a flood of tingles across her body. Cyra kissed him back, her tongue crossing the bridge between their mouths, leaving little doubt that this wasn’t just wanted. No, this kiss was wanted—*needed*.

The stress and emotional turmoil of the last forty-eighty hours poured through the clash of their lips, strengthening the building tether between them.

Finn’s arms wrapped around her waist, capturing her into his grasp as their tongues played together. This was . . . nice. Really nice.

Cyra, what are you doing? The question shattered the spell distilling her senses, and she broke their connection. “What are we doing?” she asked sheepishly.

Finn gave her hapless smile. “I don’t know, but I’d really like to continue.”

“Finn.”

“All right, answer my question from yesterday.” He took a step backward, hands spreading apart in appeal. “Would you like to go on a date with me?”

“The semester ends in a week,” Cyra said, irksome reality sprouting across her mind. “I’m studying all summer with a Fire Master in Tarrinth. I

even convinced Akira to come with me, took me two hours. And, if I remember right, you and your brother are going to Arquewest for a summer job at Nailah's family tavern."

Finn shrugged, unconcerned. "All right, when we return to Wyndfyre. Do you want to have a drink with me?"

"Will you still want to have a drink with me by then?" The question returned all of Cyra's uncertainties. Maybe this was a bad idea.

Finn stepped forward and cupped her face. "Cyra, I've wanted to have a drink with you for over two years, but I have been too much of a cowardly *asshat* to ask you. Afraid to put aside my own insecurities, and actually see if you might consider getting to know the real me . . . instead of the asshat."

Cyra was oddly charmed by these words, especially their sheepish delivery. "I'd like to get to know the real Finn."

"So, is that a yes?" His brows rose in tentative hope.

"You are an utter failure!" barked a harsh male voice, the sound slicing through their sweet conversation.

Cyra whirled in alarm, but there was no one there, just the tall hedge at their backs and a nearby fountain. Not a person in sight.

When more frantic speech echoed over the distant party noises, she realized the sounds emanated from the other side of the thick foliage.

"Father, I—"

"No!"

They heard a scuffle followed by the visible shaking of the hedge as if something slammed into it, the force raining leaves and twigs over the path. Cyra and Finn hopped backward, staring at the shadowy figures barely visible through the small gaps in the branches.

"You finished last, Aedan. Last!" cried the male voice. "Behind three Clovian bastards and a spoiled royal brat."

Finn and Cyra exchanged stunned expressions, both flinching at the sound of a pained cry as one of the figures fell to the grass-covered ground.

"You are a disgrace to the Fletcher name."

Cyra heard a spitting noise before the standing figure stormed away. The person on the ground climbed to his feet, and she could just spy Aedan's profile through hedge gaps. There was not enough light to make out his expression, his face completely shadowed.

After a sighing long shuddering breath, Aedan marched after the man—his father.

“Seven hells,” Finn breathed, once the sound of footsteps was long gone. “I would almost feel sorry for Aedan if he wasn’t such a prick. Certainly explains a lot.”

Cyra’s mind reeled at what she had just witnessed. Yes, Lord Marcon Fletcher was an unpleasant, overbearing sort of man, but she never imagined this.

“I suppose the moment is a bit ruined,” Finn said, hand rubbing the back of his head, the gesture ruffling his carefully combed hair.

“But you still deserve an answer. Yes, Finn.” She smiled, trying to sound casual. “I’d love to get a drink with you when the next semester begins.”

Finn beamed, his crooked grin lighting up his entire face.

The look poured another cascade of flutters through Cyra, happy feelings teeming with anticipation. This would either be fun and exciting, a love for the ages, or it would end in disaster and devastation. She sensed there would be no in between.

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Chapter 16

RECKONING

Present Day

"You fucking bastard" were the first three words to spill from Cyra's lips as consciousness returned. She was in no mood for creative expletives, her mind far too foggy from whatever Finn used to knock her out, and far too full of rage to dance around her true feelings. She was angry. Furious. She was—hogtied in the back of a moving cart. *Just. Fucking. Great.*

A canvas tarp covered her body and partially obscured her view as the harsh morning light stung her eyes. Morning. It was *morning*. The morning after Finn exploded her life, froze her in time, drugged her, kidnapped her, and now held her bound in the back of a bouncing cart.

The soaring trees on the edges of her vision revealed no hints of their present location, but she didn't need knowledge of the landscape to know they were heading west, toward the Kingdom of Castoria. Heading home. Like hell.

"I am not sure how thrilled your parents will be to hear such foul language coming from the mouth of their precious daughter," Finn said, gratingly cheery. "I'd say you have about three weeks or so to remember royal decorum. Best get to work."

"Untie me!" she shouted, testing her restraints. Tight and secure. Super.

"What did you say? Did you say gag me?" Finn said over his shoulder.

Cyra gritted her teeth. “So help me, Finn, you will regret this.” She struggled to find a comfortable position, only succeeding in banging her shoulder against the hard sides of the cart.

“Go ahead and make your threats,” he said, decidedly unconcerned.

After another minute of little progress, save for nearly dislocating her shoulder, Cyra huffed out a frustrated breath. “Why are you doing this, Finn? I thought you wanted nothing to do with the Crown. With Castoria.” She couldn’t understand it, mentally replaying last night’s awful events. The visceral images crashed in sickening waves; she was hit with the urge to puke and scream at the same time.

The horrified looks on people’s faces—on Jiro’s face—when she had cast that ice shard through Finn’s hand ripped something open in her. Those wide-eyes of shock and realization would be seared into her brain for the rest of her days. The life she had built, her relationships and hard-won joy, shattered into pieces while she stood there, powerless to do anything. It was a blow like nothing she had suffered since the war, devastation so visceral it felt as though someone just amputated part of her heart.

No, not someone. *Finn*.

Finn had mercilessly stolen her life. Destroyed the happiness she cobbled together after darkness nearly consumed her soul. Finn was a lot of things, but he was never cruel. Never vindictive. Not like this. The question of *why* fueled both rage and confusion as she glared at the back of his head.

“Let’s just say I saw an opportunity and decided to take it.”

Cyra snorted, her nausea souring to anger. “And how much is the going rate for ruining my life?”

“Ruining your life?” Finn barked a laugh. “You mean ruining the fake one you assumed for a while? That was an illusion, Cyra, a holiday. I’m taking you back to your real life. You can face it like an adult or kick and scream like a child. Regardless, I am not letting you go.”

Cyra exhaled sharply, attempting to wrangle her rage. *Free yourself first*. She focused her squirming efforts on reaching the lip of her right boot where she kept a small dagger for emergencies. And this damn well counted as an emergency.

Finn flicked the reins in his hands, the cart jolting. “You can’t go back to your little mining town now—what was it called? Lowtown? Cofton?” The intentional mispronunciations earned another glare to the back of his head. “You saw their faces. Do you think they’d accept you now?”

No. The short and resounding answer cleaved through her mind like an ax of ice, cold and heavy. The people of Lofton would never welcome her back. No amount of goodwill earned over the last four years would surmount the truth of what she was—of *who* she was. A reality she had accepted since the name *Nyssa* fell off her tongue, no matter the relentless fear of the inevitable consequences should her secrets be unearthed. Unfortunately that day was here, heralded like a cloud of joy-devouring locusts by Finn *fucking* Calderis.

Bitterness curdled in her gut. “I am *not* going back to Castoria,” she snapped, fingers inching down the length of her boot.

“Get used to not getting your way, princess.”

The condescension in his tone, in that *word*, grated on Cyra’s every nerve.

Focus. Her fingertips found the pommel of the small blade in her boot. Twisting her body to the point of pain, she worked her fingers over the hilt.

“You should be thanking me,” Finn went on. “I’ll have you home with plenty of time to prepare for your brother’s wedding. You’re welcome.”

She froze. “What?”

“Ahh, now I have your attention,” Finn said, gleefully. “The Crown and Parliament extended the marriage age requirements by three years, on account of the war. Still, with Kasian being an ancient thirty-two, and heir to the throne, time is ticking. Aren’t you curious who your brother finally agreed to marry after all this time?” Finn glanced at her over his shoulder, mouth curling with a foreboding smirk.

Cyra’s hand closed over the blade. “I am sure she is a charming—”

“If you say so. It’s Aurelia.”

Cold sliced into her chest. “Aurelia?” she breathed, sure that he misspoke.

“Yep,” Finn said, facing forward again. “You remember Aurelia—blond, intrusive, kind of annoying at times? Oh, right, and your best friend. Or she used to be, anyway. I wonder if she’ll still consider you her best friend after mourning your death for four years only to discover that you’re alive and well, choosing to work in a dingy Vinmore saloon. Personally, I’d be rather miffed, if I were her.”

Cyra’s throat went painfully dry as she reluctantly pictured Aurelia’s face and Kasian’s disarming grin. Curiosity beckoned. “How—”

“Let me stop you right there.” Finn held up a hand. “I am not the court gossipmonger. Castoria has not been my home for many years. I have no idea how your ridiculous socialite friend trapped your brother into a marriage, but I’m sure she’ll tell you all about it when we return to Tarrinth. Then again, I imagine such discussions will only come after you provide answers of your own—like how Princess Cyra, Royal Ranger Captain, ended up masquerading as a backcountry barmaid.”

Cyra didn’t respond for several seconds as she sawed her little dagger over the rope binding her ankles. “You didn’t fight in the war, Finn. You have no idea about anything.”

Finn snorted. “Aw, did things get tough for you out there? Did you learn that war doesn’t care who your parents are? Wasn’t the glorious triumph you imagined?”

Rage flooded Cyra’s veins, but she tempered it, concentrating on the restraints. Once her feet were free, she worked on her hands, careful to cut the bindings beneath the canvas tarp to mask her progress.

“Or maybe you didn’t come back because of something else,” Finn said, tone going cold. “Something unforgivable done in the heat of war when you were blinded by self-righteous passion.” He glanced over his shoulder, eyes full of intensity. “Is that it?”

Cyra met his stare even as his words laced a shiver down her spine. As much as she tried to resist the memory of the burning barn, it haunted her. The greatest shame of her life. The invisible weight she’d carry forever, and she deserved every emotional pound.

Averting her gaze, she said, in a quieter voice, “I don’t answer to you.” The rope around her wrists snapped, setting her free. “Well, Finn, I can’t say it’s been a pleasure.” She tore off the canvas tarp and, in one fluid motion, leapt over the side of the cart, landing gracefully on her feet. Yes, she probably should have thought through her exit. Waited until the opportune time, but she was so eager to free herself from this man’s company that she needed to go. *Now*.

Cyra bolted into the trees in no planned direction. Just away from Finn.

“Cyra!” he yelled after her, sounding more exasperated than worried.

Within moments, leaves crunched in her wake as he gave chase. *You want to go, Finn? Let’s fucking go.* Hand tightening around her small blade, she pressed forward but at a slower pace, daring Finn to attack her so she

might discover just how far the boy she once knew had fallen over the years.

“Where are you going, Cyra?” Finn shouted at her back, gaining ground.

“Away from you!” she yelled over her shoulder, anger rebuilding. Get away from Finn, then she could think, could come up with a plan. She broke through the trees into a large open clearing, grassy and shaded by the occasional oak. The sun greeted her with unwelcome cheer.

Not now, stupid sun. Think. She just needed to think.

“Away from me, right, and then what? Start over somewhere else?” The plodding of Finn’s boots sounded at her back. “People know you are alive, Cyra. There’s nowhere you can go.”

She only huffed, loud and indignant. Finn was wrong. She could go anywhere. Clovia was huge. She could start over—she *would* start over. But her chest squeezed at the idea.

Cyra didn’t want to start over. She wanted to have a meal with Hadara, go shooting with Jiro. She wanted to run the saloon and crack jokes with the regulars. She wanted to work on sign language with Sage, go fishing with Roone, and watch Korina grow into a young woman.

She wanted her life in Lofton. The life stolen not twenty-four hours ago, destroyed by the pestering presence stalking at her heels.

Impulsively, Cyra rounded on the man. “I had friends, Finn.” Her voice shook. A startled Finn stumbled to a halt, staring at her in mild surprise. “I had people I considered family, and you hacked it all to pieces without a care.” She waved a hand, willing away the burn in her eyes even as she resigned herself to never seeing those people again.

Finn’s face betrayed nothing. “It was all built on lies.”

“So?” Furious tears pricked at Cyra’s eyes. “They weren’t yours to reveal. You had no right!”

Finn’s throat bobbed as a mixture of emotions bristled to the surface, none of which she could read. “Now you know what it’s like to have your world ripped away from you. To lose everyone you cared about.” The words dripped with anger, hurt, betrayal.

Cyra could only stare at the man, confused. What the hell was he talking about?

Did it matter? No.

Shaking her head, she resumed her march across the clearing. “I don’t know what happened to you, Finn, but the person I once knew would never be so cruel.”

Finn gave chase. “Sooner or later we all do things we never thought ourselves capable of,” he said icily. “What sent you so far off the path to assume a new identity and leave the high-achieving, must-win Cyra behind?”

“Screw you, Finn,” she snapped over her shoulder.

“Is that an offer?” he asked, a dark grin in his voice. “Because we’ve been down that road before, and—”

Cyra whirled, left fist connecting with Finn’s chin. “*Don’t*,” she spat, enjoying the glimmer of satisfaction at seeing him stumble to the ground, the smirk knocked off his stupid face.

Rubbing his jaw, Finn looked at her, grim determination written across his expression. “You’re coming with me, Cyra. This isn’t up for debate.”

“Or what? By your own words last night, you’re out of time crystals. Are you going to knock me out with chemicals again? Try it, you worthless wart.” With balled fists, Cyra stormed away. She expected an attack. For Finn to do something—he had come too far to let her slip away now. She was almost disappointed when he simply grabbed her arm.

With the training of many years and a war behind her, Cyra spun into his grasp, using her body to wrench his arm down. Shoulder in his chest, she flung him up and over her so he landed face-up into the grass. Her knee pressed down on his shoulder, pinning him to the ground, her blade at his throat.

“You forgot I was a ranger in the war.” The effort winded her, out of shape from her fighting days. No matter, her rage gave her all the strength she needed.

Finn smirked. “And you’ve forgotten I still have elementals.”

A blast of air slammed into her chest, lifting her off the ground. Instinctively, she curled into a roll and landed in a crouch. A column of snow barreled into her chest, throwing her off her feet. The shock of cold stunned her system more than anything, and it didn’t end, the rising pile flattening her against in the grass.

Grunting, she hacked at the snow, frantically trying to free herself from the increasing weight. She mostly succeeded in cascading a flurry of snow directly to the face, the icy flakes sticking to her hair and lashes.

Finn had the audacity to simply climb over the snow mound, watching her flailing efforts with snide amusement. “You look a little stuck.”

“And you look like someone about to lose an eye,” Cyra snarled, her legs finally kicking free and rising on unsteady feet—right as a rope lassoed around her wrist.

Finn pried the blade from her wet and numb fingers, then waved it in front of her face. “I’ll hang onto this.” He tucked the weapon into his belt.

Cyra’s breath puffed in and out in venomous fury, staring at the insidious creature she once considered a friend—more than a friend, *far* more than friend. She didn’t know this man. Not anymore.

She put up little resistance as Finn tied her wrists. Instead, she allowed her weight to sag, drawing their bodies together, before she kicked her foot into Finn’s groin.

The effect was immediate as pain bloomed across his face, entire body tensing.

“Go piss in someone else’s wind—when you can manage.” she spat, shaking off the rope as she strode away, smiling at the sound of Finn’s groans. Well deserved.

Her smile evaporated when another gale-force wind crashed into her, throwing her into the grass once more. She rolled over just in time for Finn to launch himself on top of her, pinning her wrists above her head with his hands.

“Now this is familiar,” Finn said with an insufferable grin, their faces mere inches apart.

Cyra channeled a burst of fiery heat down her dominant arm, and Finn immediately released his grasp, grin replaced by a rueful smirk. “Impressive.”

“So is this.” She smashed her forehead into Finn’s nose with a satisfying crunch. Blood poured out of both nostrils, and he crashed backward with a curse. “Give up,” she gritted out, needing a moment to catch her breath. “We can’t do this the entire trip back—you dragging me, kicking and screaming. Your hand is healed, so you clearly have at least one evolution crystal. How many elementals do you have left?” She glanced at Finn’s bracer and found two red crystals. She gave him a grim smile. “Not enough to fight me through the mountains, let alone all the way to Tarrinth.”

Finn stared at Cyra, a river of crimson rolling down his chin. “I—”

A gunshot echoed through the clearing, followed by men emerging from the trees wearing matching sky-blue jackets and red sashes. Royce's militia.

A muscle ticked in Finn's jaw. "Persistent bastards."

"Much like someone else," Cyra spat, charging to her feet. She lowered her hand as she leapt over Finn, fingers snatching the end of a red crystal slotted in his bracer. "Give Captain Roderick a kiss for me!" she shouted to the wind, sprinting toward the tree line.

The forest swallowed Cyra as the next gunshot shattered the air. She didn't look back, fighting a sudden twinge of fear as she wondered if the bullet found its mark.

Don't look back, her instincts ordered, even as her heart slammed against her ribs, begging for her to turn around and make sure Finn was unharmed.

This was her chance to escape. He had left her little choice. Even so, conflict warred. *It's Finn!* her heart screamed, but her rational mind insisted that she didn't know the man she had just abandoned.

Only after a mile, maybe two, did she finally slow when she found a safe place to stop where the foliage was thickest. Leaning against a tree, she doubled over, resting her hands on her knees to catch her breath. A stitch stabbed at her side, burning lungs gulping down rasps of air. Yes, definitely not in tiptop shape. Saloon living was, well—it had been some time since she had run for her life.

Once the spots cleared from her vision, racing heart stilling to a steady drum, Cyra straightened, eying the afternoon sun as if it might yield the solution to all her problems. Because Finn was right about one thing: she couldn't return to Lofton, couldn't return to her life as Nyssa. Not now. Not ever.

A sharp pang sliced through her as another thought assaulted her mind. Today was Korina's birthday. Tonight was supposed to be her grand party, a day of celebration. A day now ruined. And it was Cyra's fault as much as Finn's. They were her lies, after all.

Her heart beat with a deep ache. If only she could say goodbye to Hadara and Korina. They already knew what she was—a Syphon, an enemy soldier. Could they forgive her last name? Maybe. But going back to Hadara's homestead was a risk. Going anywhere was a risk.

The lake. She'd go to the lake, and maybe find Korina and Hadara there. Otherwise, it was time to move on. She would decide where later.

Resolved to this plan, Cyra ventured off through the forest, doing her best not to think. Not to spiral. When evening fell, she camped near a stream—the very stream she and Korina had traveled along only a few days ago.

Seven hells, how much could change in a matter of days, a matter of hours. Finn's wanted poster was a warning, a foul omen she should have heeded.

She risked a small campfire, both for warmth and to keep away snakes and other unwanted creatures. Would Finn be foolish enough to traipse through the black in order to find his lost catch? Maybe.

Rolling the stolen red crystal in her palm, she almost willed him to appear. *You want to battle, Finn? Let's try a fight on even footing.*

When the sound of a snapped twig broke the quiet, Cyra was ready. Adrenaline fueling determination, she lurched to her feet, waiting for Finn's smug face to stalk through the trees.

Her heart thundered in anticipation, hand shooting outward in preparation for the coming fight. She wasn't, however, prepared for the small whisper in the dark.

"Nyssa?"

"Korina?" She struggled to see beyond the campfire's glow, unsure if she'd misheard. When Korina emerged from the black, Cyra immediately lowered her hand and gaped in disbelief. "What are you doing here?"

Korina sheepishly hunched her shoulders as she neared the fire. "I slipped away in the night, following your tracks like you taught me last summer." She stopped near the campfire, thin fingers tangled together. "I lost your trail, then I found your trail . . . and lost it again. I started wandering toward the lake, thinking—*hoping*—if you freed yourself from that horrible man, you might go there." She shrugged again, hands beginning to fidget. "I saw the campfire through the trees not far from my own camp."

Cyra softened as she regarded Korina. She'd make an excellent ranger, Cyra thought with a touch of pride at the girl's ingenuity and deduction skills. Still. "You shouldn't be here, Korina," she said, sentiments dividing at this turn of circumstances. "Your mother must be so worried."

"I know." Korina winced. "But I had to do something."

A reluctant smile tugged at Cyra's mouth, warmed by the girl's efforts and concern, but guilt immediately throttled it. Hadara must be going crazy

—her newly turned sixteen-year-old daughter taking off into the wilderness twice in a matter of days, chasing after two Syphons. Another consequence born of last night.

Nothing to be done for the moment.

“Well, you found me now,” Cyra said, expecting a pleased smile to dance across Korina’s face before she rushed over in embrace. But the girl didn’t move, her body visibly tense. “And a very happy birthday,” Cyra added. “Sorry I ruined your party.”

“It’s all right,” Korina said, lips never quite forming a smile.

She was nervous. But why? Was she afraid Finn might appear? Or afraid of something else? Unsure of what to do, Cyra eased to her seat near the fire. “Want to sit with me?” The question came out stilted, her own nerves infected by Korina’s awkwardness.

“Um.” Korina rocked on her feet, fidgeting hands locking tightly together.

She’s afraid of me. The realization sent Cyra’s heart plummeting. “Or you can sit on the other side of the fire, if that’s more comfortable. I don’t —”

“Are you really a princess?” Korina asked, flustered energy finally freeing this question. Her eyes widened as she took a tentative step forward. “Should I bow—or curtsy? Should I curtsy?”

“Please don’t,” Cyra breathed through a laugh as immediate relief carried away her fears.

“Is what that man said about you true? About who you are?” Korina asked, slowly sitting down. “If so, you left out some pretty big parts of your school stories.”

Offering an apologetic smile, Cyra said, “Yes, Korina, it’s true. My real name is Cyra Byrogan. The King and Queen of Castoria are my parents.” The words tasted sour, but she forced them out anyway. Her lying days were over.

Korina’s mouth dropped open before immediately snapping shut, eyes still too-wide as she stared unnervingly at Cyra. Then Korina quickly looked away, pursing her lips as if holding back more questions.

Under other circumstances, Cyra would laugh and make a joke at her own expense. Under other circumstances, they would be having this discussion over drinks, years from now. Under other circumstances, this conversation would not take place at all. Ever.

She released a resigned sigh. “Ask your questions, Korina. You can still call me Nyssa, if that helps.”

Korina gave a stunted laugh. “It’s just, well, you’re important. This whole time . . . none of us had a clue.”

A renewed ache beat in Cyra’s chest, and she was shaking her head before she even came up with a response. “I’m not important. Not anymore—maybe I never was.”

Korina only blinked. “But that’s why that man kidnapped you. Right? Your parents want you back.”

“Something like that, I guess.”

“So that man works for your parents?”

“Finn?” Cyra’s brow rose. “No, not really. Or at least, I don’t think so. He said he made a deal with them . . .” A deal. The two words settled deep in her gut. She never thought Finn was someone who could be bribed or persuaded by money, but then again, she never imagined he would possess the heartless audacity to so cruelly blast back into her life, destroying everything she cared about.

No, she didn’t recognize this twisted and ruthless and vengeful Finn.

“Wait, *that* man was Finn?” Korina’s eyes widened as the dots connected. “The boy from your school?”

“The very one.”

“He really doesn’t like you.”

Cyra snorted. “I picked up on that too.”

Korina’s brows furrowed. “Did something happen between you two?”

“Yes,” Cyra sighed mournfully, dropping a handful of pine needles into the campfire, watching as the flames devoured them, their scent filling the night air. “We fell in love.”

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Chapter 17

The Necklace

Eleven Years Ago

"First practical class of our last year!" Aurelia squealed as they entered Professor Wen's classroom. Their final months at Wyndfyre Academy had come, firing anticipation through the entire senior class. "And the first second-to-last class on the last first day of school!"

"I give it one week before I kill her," Akira muttered, taking a seat next to Nailah, the pair sitting far away from Aurelia, who gave the girls a nonplussed smile packed with challenge.

Aurelia had claimed the unofficial title of Senior Class Orator of Cheer, decrying memorable moments of importance everywhere they went. Cyra didn't mind, mostly. Being back within academy halls felt good, and like Aurelia, she wanted to savor every detail because it was all coming to an end.

But there was one beginning nestled in this ending: the follow-through to a question asked months ago.

And as if her thoughts manifested the man occupying her mind, Finn sauntered into the classroom with Fabien. Aurelia unnecessarily nudged Cyra, watching the brothers like a cat who had just spotted a mouse.

"We're in class," Cyra hissed, fighting a flush only made worse when she and Finn locked eyes. Her stomach jumped as heat crawled into her cheeks.

You're the president of the school, she scolded herself. *Stop blushing like an idiot*.

She and Finn had exchanged letters over the summer, mostly about mundane activities—Finn and Fabien's job at the tavern in Arquewest, Cyra and Akira's progress with a Fire Master in Tarrinth. The content of their letters was mostly innocent, sprinkled with harmless flirtation. Nothing too incriminating or serious, as if they both feared the other might back out of whatever had ignited between them during the Gauntlet Trials.

Their mutual hesitancy sprouted a seed of ready resignation within Cyra. If Finn just wanted to be friends, well, her heart would remain intact. Pride, not-so-much, but a bruised ego was better than a broken heart. "If Finn wants to renege on his date," Cyra had told Aurelia last night when the topic inevitably came up, "I'll be fine. Completely and utterly fine. Fine."

Aurelia smiled. "One more 'fine' and I'll believe you."

In spite of her friend's teasing, Cyra clung to this truth as she took her seat, pointedly refusing to glance at the brothers again. If Finn brushed her off now, she would be . . . fine. Too bad her knotted insides hadn't received the message, squishing and squeezing as her fluster surrendered to the anxious ball of nerves in her guts.

What if Finn conveniently forgot about their date?

"Goodness, summer has done the brothers well," Aurelia said, unabashedly studying Finn and Fabien with a wide smile.

Cyra refused to look . . . for all of two seconds before her eyes skirted sideways. An involuntary flush flared up her neck. Aurelia was right. Finn's copper-toned complexion seemed to glow, kissed by the sun. His hair was shorter, not quite long enough to curl around his ears, and combed neatly back save for the stubborn lock brushing his temple. And, was he taller? No, yes, maybe? His chest and shoulders were notably broader, his black senior coat perfectly fitting his toned frame.

He looked *damn* good. *Crap.*

Cyra whipped her head toward the front of the class as more heat set her cheeks blazing. *You are so, totally not fine.*

"Welcome to your last year of elemental classes," said Professor Wen, making Aurelia grin wildly. "Over the last three years, you have mastered all three casts of the elemental crystal. You have practiced control, power, and timing. This year, we will focus on creativity and ingenuity through transformative casting—a monumentally difficult skill, siphoning both

elemental and evolution crystals simultaneously to transfigure elemental forms. For your first project, you will transform a fire cast into an animal of your choice. You must keep the animal alive for ten seconds, and it must remain recognizable for that entire time."

Over the next hour, Professor Wen extolled on the best techniques for transformative casting. Cyra happily soaked up the information, glad for the distraction from Finn. Once the class ended, however, her insecurities returned in full force when Finn exited the classroom without so much as an acknowledging wave.

Disappointment coiled in her chest. After months of wondering, of agonizing over her letters—trying to sound interested but not too interested, clever and smart but also breezy and effortless, all the while scrutinizing every single one of Finn's words as if they might unlock the secret code to the male brain—she now concluded that it was all wasted time and energy.

Doesn't matter. She raised her chin, forcing a tight smile as she joined her friends in the corridor, willing no one to see the devastation on her face. "Cyra," Finn said, emerging from the throng of exiting students. "Do you want to practice transforming fire animals with me by the lake after classes?"

The question momentarily paralyzed her, all thoughts eddying from her mind as she stared blankly back at him. "Sure," she blurted after a subtle nudge from Aurelia.

"Great!" Finn grinned, his eyes bright. "I'll see you then." With an enthusiastic nod, he hurried after his brother and Pippin, disappearing amongst the other students hurrying to their next class.

"Looks as though you're going to be *fine*, after all," Aurelia said with a smirk.

"He asked me to study, not on a date," Cyra said to Aurelia as much as to herself.

"Do you actually want to spend time with Finn?" Nailah asked curiously.

"Of course she does." Aurelia pinched Cyra's cheek. "Look at that blushing face."

Cyra batted her hand away. "Leave my face alone."

"You like him," Aurelia said with a defiant look.

Cyra pursed her lips, heart riding a wave. "Fine, I like him," she confessed. "But I'm sure it will go terribly. I mean, it's Finn. I. Like. Finn.

That’s weird, right?” It was the same question she had silently asked herself a million times over the summer. Usually every time she spent far too long writing a letter about nothing.

Akira smiled, a kind, nonjudgmental smile. “It’s kind of weird, but hey.” Her side-eye shifted to Aurelia. “This is the best year of our lives, right? Time to take some chances.”

Aurelia mouthed a single gleeful word: “*Yes*.”

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The late summer light ebbed from the sky as Finn and Cyra settled on the soft grass by the lake. Near the horizon, the sun cast a palette of pinks and purples across the still water, fireflies awakening with the twilight, their bright yellow light lazily blinking along the shoreline. It was a warm evening, perfect for all things outdoors.

Less perfect was their middling attempts at transformative casting.

“What is that supposed to be, exactly?” Cyra asked, watching Finn’s fire-blob soar over their heads, flames extinguishing in puffs of smoke. They lay side by side, shoulders and hips brushing as they traded off casting for the last hour.

“It’s a sea turtle,” Finn clipped with mock indignation. “Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Cyra repeated lightly. “I didn’t realize sea turtles resembled lumpy blobs.”

Finn chortled. “Always happy to teach you something new. All right, your turn.”

Fun. Yes, they were having fun, but was this a date?

Yet to be determined.

Focusing on the air above her face, Cyra pictured the horse she’d been attempting to form out of fire for the last half-hour, hardly faring better than Finn’s turtle lump. She raised her arm, red and translucent crystals gleaming in her bracer. She hesitated when a new image pierced her thoughts: a fire dragon clawing through a dark tunnel.

Flame jetted into the air above her right wrist. She curved the fire sideways before attempting her evolution cast, siphoning power from the translucent crystal. Energy buzzed through her entire right arm as she concentrated on manipulating the flames, the crystals pulsing together against the fading sunlight.

Her efforts finally paid off: the fire stream shortened, two wings burst from either side, then something resembling a head began to form. She held her breath in mild triumph, the dragon holding its shape for a handful of seconds before it snuffed out with a puff of smoke. It was her best transformative cast thus far.

She turned to Finn expectantly, trying to hold her pride in check.

Arching one brow and squinting one eye, Finn rolled to his side. “Absolute rubbish, a mountain dragon would have a much larger wingspan.” For a moment she thought he was serious, but then a smile broke across his face. “No, seriously, Cyra, that was incredible. I mean, it’s no lumpy blob, but you’ll get there.”

She lightly hit him on the shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Looks like Trauma Tunnel actually gave you some inspiration.”

Cyra’s brows rose. “Trauma Tunnel?”

“What else would you call it?”

“No, I think Trauma Tunnel is appropriate.” They exchanged grins, though Cyra’s quickly faded as the memories of the Gauntlet Trials quickly extinguished her mirth. “Do you ever think about what happened in the forest?” Thoughts of being surrounded by the murderous rebels stalked Cyra most of the summer. Of how close they both came to dying that day.

“Of course,” Finn said, matching her sobering mood. “Kissing you was one of the best moments of my life.”

The comment rendered her momentarily speechless. “I wasn’t talking about the kiss.” Her heart thumped as the world went quiet around them—as Finn inched closer in the grass.

“I know,” he said, a breath away now. “But the chance to kiss you again was the only thing keeping me from falling to pieces over the summer. Fabien thought I had some strange illness.” His eyes drifted downward then raised again. “The idea of seeing you again . . . well, I dwelled less on nightmares of those rebels carrying you away while I bled out in the forest, helpless to save you.”

Cyra’s chest ached. Finn wasn’t alone in having nightmares, wasn’t alone in his unconscious mind conjuring the worst that could have happened that day.

The worst in his mind was losing you.

Suddenly, all her stupid insecurities peeled away. Whether or not Finn liked her, whether or not he was going to follow through on their promised

date, it all felt insignificant now.

“I’m all right,” she said, her voice hitching.

Finn’s throat bobbed. “I know.”

Their gazes collided, and there it was—that tether tugging them closer.

And they obliged. Closing the gap, Cyra and Finn met in a kiss—the kiss she had imagined all summer. It was slow and steady and coaxing, as if they were baring their souls through the delicate clash of their lips.

Desire surged for this boy, for this young man, as their kiss deepened. The feeling overwhelmed everything, and nothing else mattered. It was as if the world paused for this earth-shattering moment. It was both thrilling and terrifying in equal measure.

The terror won out, beckoning Cyra away, but it was Finn who broke their connection first. Confusion cooled her lust when Finn sat up and reached into a pocket on his trousers.

“I saw this in a store in Arquewest,” he said, and held out his hand: a golden chain with a woven circle charm rested in his palm. He inhaled deeply, as if to bolster his courage, and said, “I know you have much fancier things, but I saw this necklace and thought it was pretty, and you . . .” His eyes lifted to catch hers, the beat of silence stitching a raw vulnerability across his features. “You are beautiful.”

A cloud of excitement and joy lifted Cyra’s very soul at these words, her heart skipping a beat as she grasped the delicate chain from his palm. The gold charm glimmered against the pale blue of twilight. “It’s lovely,” she said. And it was, simple but beautiful—a thoughtful gift. She turned her back to him, lifting her hair so he could clasp the chain for her, the charm cool against her warmed skin. His fingers were delicate, the subtle touch raising goosebumps on her skin, and shivering a tremor through her entire body. All doubts about his feelings permanently vanished. “Thank you, Finn. So, where are we going?”

“What?”

Cyra's smile widened. “At the Champion’s Ball, you asked me out on a date to occur when we returned to school. So where are we going?”

Finn stared at her, the corner of his mouth fighting his own thrilled smile. “Yes, of course. How about tomorrow night? Drinks at Frostfyre tavern.”

“It’s a date.”

He grinned. “It’s a date.”

Another silence stretched, Finn's gaze dipping to her mouth. In the next breath, their lips locked once more, tongues sliding together. This kiss was eager, claiming. Each drive of his tongue fueled the fire in her veins and awakened something she couldn't quite describe. Cyra had kissed boys before—had kissed *Finn* before—but something about this kiss charged her with such overwhelming need she couldn't think, only obey her body's desires.

Fingers threading into her hair, Finn leaned into the kiss, into her body, pressing her back to the grass. Cyra welcomed the weight of him, settling on her back with her hands clutching at his waist to pull him close. It felt good—*really* good, everything inside her roaring with approval . . . for all of five seconds.

This is a bad idea, the unwanted thought bubbled in the back of her mind as Finn's hand skirted over her rib cage, tempting fingers inching upward. *Bad idea. Bad idea.*

Shut up.

Finn's lips broke from hers, skimming down the column of her neck. Each brush of his lips against the sensitive skin sent a thrum through her blood, heat throbbing between her thighs. It would be easy to succumb to these sudden and intense passions, but it wasn't what she wanted, not yet. Not like this.

"Finn," she breathed, at last reclaiming speech—reclaiming sense.

Releasing her neck, Finn eased into view. By the dazed look on his face, he was equally lost to the same haze. "Are you all right?"

Breathing hard, Cyra offered an assuring smile. "Yes. I just . . . I never . . ." Her nerves flared with fresh vengeance. "I'd like to take things slow-*ish*. See how things go before anything too physical?" She gave him a wincing smile as she prepared for the expected disappointment.

A wry smirk tugged at the corner of Finn's mouth. "See if I screw things up, you mean." His features softened, gaze dancing over her face. "I promise you, Cyra, I'll do everything in my power not to screw this up."

She brushed his lips with hers. "Me too." And as they traded sheepish smiles, Cyra knew she would remember this moment for the rest of her life.

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Chapter 18

The Attic

"Seven hells, I definitely want to forget this." Cyra wrinkled her nose at the dead pig on her and Aurelia's shared table, the unpleasant odor of dead animal saturating the entire classroom.

"Agreed, this is positively revolting." Aurelia's face screwed up in disgust as she stared at the carcass. "We'll leave this bit out of the stories we tell our grandchildren when recounting our glory days."

"It's time to practice healing more complicated wounds," said Professor Hollis, the long feathers in her usual flamboyant hat swishing through the air. "For those hoping for the Healer Track, mastering these techniques is critical."

"So," Aurelia started once Professor Hollis finished her instructions. "Have you and Finn had sex yet?"

Cyra blanched, swinging a sideways glare at Aurelia and praying no one overheard the question. "No," she shot back. "I already promised I would tell you."

Aurelia narrowed her eyes. "You better, I'm your best friend and should know these things. And, of course, I'm always here to answer any questions."

An overly patient smile tugged at Cyra's lips. "Can we focus on our project?" She gestured at the pig's numerous unhealed wounds.

“Oh, it’s already dead.” Aurelia waved a hand. “Is there a reason you’re waiting? No judgement either way. I know the first time is a biggy, but it’s been, what, nearly three months since you and Finn began dating?” Her mouth quirked knowingly. “You two always sneaking off together after Red Lapis meetings and fireball practice.” Her gaze drifted to Finn and Fabien, both in the process of creating additional wounds on their pig. “He’s certainly grown into his looks—muscles and a haircut suit him.” Her eyes glittered with admiration.

“Stop ogling my boyfriend.”

Aurelia’s attention snapped back to Cyra. “Do you love him?”

The question came out with such earnest curiosity, Cyra was caught off-guard. Aurelia’s direct stare only tightened the sliver of discomfort wrapped around her chest. Did she love Finn?

Yes, no, maybe. She had never been here before with a boy. Everything was new. Everything was exciting. She enjoyed their time spent together—a daily occurrence as their relationship blossomed. Better still, Finn and Fabien perfectly fit amongst Cyra’s friends. With Pippin already rooming with the brothers, expanding their little group was natural. Easy.

By winter’s first snow in their senior year, life at Wyndfyre flowed seamlessly. Cyra had little time to step back and evaluate everything. “I’m . . . not sure yet,” she answered honestly.

Aurelia raised a brow. “But it’s headed that way.”

“Yes,” Cyra breathed, her skittering pulse calming with the answer. Her heart was falling for Finn Calderis, every day marching closer to those three little words.

“Good, then you’ll need this.” Aurelia produced a small notebook from her school bag. “I took the liberty of working out some talking points about Finn to present to your parents. If he’s going to be a marriage candidate, then—”

“Whoa!” Cyra held up a hand, entire body cringing at the shift in conversation—sex and love were one thing. Marriage was something else entirely. “No one is talking about marriage.”

Aurelia gave Cyra a dull look, as if she was being exceptionally dim. “Just take a peek, then you can tell me if I’m being ridiculous.”

Sighing, Cyra opened the notebook. *Holy flying pigs, this is detailed*. There were bullets and paragraphs iterating the merits of a Finn and Cyra partnership, everything from Finn’s promising career as a Syphon and rare

time-casting abilities, to a match between the royal family and a Clovian-Chosen being advantageous for Castorian and Clovian relations.

After scanning the full five pages of notes, Cyra whistled. “Ancients, Aurelia, if you put half as much work into your studies, you’d be a better student than me.”

“Correction, I’d be a better student than Akira.” Aurelia smirked. “Her overall grade point average is higher than yours at the moment.”

Cyra’s face flattened. “By an eighth of a point.”

“I’m a thorough friend when it comes to love lives.” Aurelia’s smirk widened to a grin.

“And while I appreciate your investment,” Cyra said carefully, “Finn and I just turned nineteen. We’ve only been together a few months. We’re not thinking about marriage. In five months, we have track assignment, followed by a yearlong intensive training program, then specialties. Marriage isn’t something I’m considering yet. This is all premature.”

All playful mirth left Aurelia’s face. “If you were anyone else, I’d agree, but your family are not shopkeepers. They’re not even regular nobles. Your parents will care who you’re seeing—casually or otherwise.”

Something inside Cyra twisted. “They don’t even know about Finn.”

“If you think your parents don’t know about every aspect of your life,” Aurelia said with a hint of reprimand, “then you’re being woefully naive.”

The words knitted Cyra’s brow. She expected Aurelia to add a flippant comment or silly remark to this otherwise harsh assessment. But when her friend only maintained severity, she griped out a low, “Seven hells, Aurelia.”

“All I’m suggesting,” Aurelia said in a gentler tone, “is to ease your parents into the idea of you and Finn. They need to like him, or I fear you’re going to be in a world of pain.”

Unease rumbled through Cyra at these words. “I’ll think about it, Aurelia. Can we move on?” She didn’t want to talk about her parents, or face certain realities that seemed so far away—the idea of marriage a distant thought. She didn’t need to worry about her parents. Not yet.

***

Over the next few days, Cyra tried not to dwell on Aurelia’s foreboding caution. Thankfully, life was far too busy to ponder any one thing for too

long. As the first semester of their senior year neared its end, time became a precious commodity. Her overtaxed brain existed in a constant state of overwhelmed—too much information, too many tasks, too many obligations.

So consumed with mid-year exams, the coming fireball game, and the final Red Lapis session of the semester, Cyra almost didn't hear the low *crash* echo through the castle halls while on her way to the library. Halting her progress, she required a moment to orient herself, completing most things without thinking these days.

The crash had come from the evolution practical classroom—the doorway Cyra had just passed. Curiosity steered her back toward it and she peeked inside, spotting the scattered pieces of a structural model. At one of the empty desks in the room sat the lone figure of Aedan Fletcher. His face rested in his palm, fingers half-stitched into his sandy-blond hair. Though she could not see his expression, his sagging shoulders and bowed head hinted at distress. A crumpled letter sat on the edge of the desk.

Cyra almost kept walking. The yet-to-be-drafted research paper, which had prompted her library visit, gnawed an anxious hole through her gut. She turned away when the memory of Aedan and his father at the Champion's Ball wrestled through her mind. If Marcon Fletcher was willing to abuse his son in a public adjacent setting, what must life be like at home? Aedan's little sister was only a few years older than her young cousin, Olaria. Did the crumpled letter contain unwelcome news?

With a sigh, Cyra stepped into the room.

Boots scraping on stone caught Aedan's attention, head craning over his shoulder. His expression pinched at the sight of Cyra. "What do you want?"

"I heard a crash." She frowned at the broken pieces splayed across the stone floor. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Aedan grunted, turning away from her approach.

Fighting the instinct to leave, she asked, "Do you need help fixing the model?"

Aedan eyed the broken pieces, betraying only disinterest. He extended his hand and the fragments reformed into the White Bell Tower, a feature of Tarrinth's Old City Center.

The speed of the cast was impressive, encouraging Cyra's next words. "At least you can fix things as fast as you break them." She attempted a light tone, hoping to ease the thick tension—a futile effort as she received

only sullen silence. She almost turned away from Aedan, but something kept her there, bidding her to say, “If you need someone to talk to . . .” She trailed off lamely.

Aedan scoffed, fixing his steely gaze on Cyra. “If I did, it wouldn’t be you—President Perfect. You hardly acknowledge that I’m on the Red Lapis council. Your disdain for me is more than clear. You have nothing to offer that I want, so piss off.”

Annoyance stirred at his surly yet expected dismissal, diminishing any lingering empathy. She should march away and leave him to his own devices. But like with so many things, Cyra could not help herself. “I hold disdain for people who bully others to make themselves feel more powerful. Being a belittling ass is a choice.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he slowly rose to his feet. “So is being a self-righteous bitch.” His cold blue-green eyes glowered down at Cyra. He was tall, many inches taller than her, perhaps even a little taller than Finn. “I wonder how you’d act without your precious name.”

Cyra tipped up her chin, the gesture such a perfect imitation of her mother that, if she saw herself in a mirror, she would cringe. “I wonder the same about you.”

A closed-lip snort was his only response before he stomped out of the room. Cyra’s eyes trailed his progress, silently scolding herself for even trying with this troll.

Next time, just keep walking.

***

Finn scoured the cluttered attic. “Are you sure you lost it here?” he asked, shoving aside dusty picture frames and neglected furniture. “What were you even doing up here?”

“Dean Malcom asked me to find some old trophy,” Cyra said, rearranging random items across the wood-paneled floor to clear a space. “The Academy Board visited last week, and the dean wanted to roll me out like a talking show pony.” She clicked her tongue. “I wonder if Jia had to suffer the same tedious indignities when she was president.”

Over his shoulder, Finn pushed out his lower lip in mock pity. “It’s hard being from a rich and powerful family sometimes.”

“It is”—Cyra blew a puff of air—“thank you for noticing.” Her humor quickly faded. “I feel just awful losing your necklace. I think I dropped it somewhere in that back corner.” She pointed toward one of the two lone windows. Snow fell lazily just outside the round window, bathing the crowded room in soft white light.

Dutifully, Finn squeezed himself toward the indicated spot before lifting up an old painting. “Lord Lucas Fletcher,” he read the name on the frame and frowned. “What is one of Aedan’s snooty ancestors doing up here?”

Cyra glanced at the painting. “I think the Fletchers helped the Wyndfyre family found the academy.” She wiggled her nose. “My school history is a little rough.”

“And you call yourself president,” Finn tsked.

“Would you focus? I want to find the necklace.” She gestured for Finn to turn away. She needed him distracted for a bit longer as she hurriedly prepared for the coming surprise. It was an effort to keep her features neutral, fighting the tug of her lips as Finn sighed and resumed his hunt.

The next few minutes sent Cyra pulse scattering, the thud of moving objects masking her rasping breaths as she finished her tasks while Finn’s back was turned. Ready. She was ready.

After a long breath, she said, “Actually, I found it.”

“What?” Finn straightened, turning around with an exasperated huff. “Where—” His mouth fell open, eyes sweeping from Cyra’s face over her body—a body wearing very little.

“I have a confession,” she said, trying not to let her voice shake with her thundering heartbeat. She stood in the center of the cleared attic space in nothing but her black senior coat, her underwear, and the gold necklace. “I never lost the necklace.” She stood atop the thick, fluffy down blanket she had quietly spread over the floor during his fruitless quest.

Finn half-stumbled toward her, blinking rapidly as if he didn’t quite believe his eyes. His befuddled movements normally would make her laugh or tease him, but she was far too anxious. The parting of her coat covered the essentials, revealing only hints at what lay beneath.

Collecting himself, Finn once more raked his gaze over her body, as if he needed another confirmation that this was no hallucination. “I suddenly feel overdressed.”

Cyra gave him a smile full of excited promise. “I’m afraid you’re decidedly overdressed.”

Closing the gap between them at last, Finn whispered against her lips, “A task to be remedied shortly.” His breath caressed her skin just before his mouth slanted over hers.

The kiss succeeded in tempering her nerves. They weren’t gone but they were dormant. It was easy to feel calm with him, safe and wanted. The last three months of falling for this man culminated here, drawing her to this moment, her heart and mind finally ready for what came next.

She pushed off Finn’s outer coat, dropping the garment to the blanket-covered floor so there was one less layer keeping her from touching him. His hand rose to her face, the other nudging underneath the edge of her coat before inching downward, fingers skimming over skin.

Her breath hitched as the callused pad of his thumb grazed her breast, fingertips circling around her peaked nipple. The subtle, almost teasing, touch ignited a rush of warmth through her blood, the sensation concentrating between her thighs as his hand cupped her breast. Her hands reached for him in return, unthinking, curling into his shirt.

Cyra’s heart thundered as his lips skimmed the curve of her neck, hot breath and clever tongue creating a wonderful marriage of sensations. Suddenly starving for touch, she pulled his shirt over his head, and the sight of his bare chest made her stomach swoop. Yes, she had seen him half-naked before, had admired his lean frame and subtly defined muscles plenty of times over the months of their courtship. This time, however, she felt a wave of exhilaration as her eyes shifted over his toned torso. She didn’t plan on stopping today.

Today, she would wrap herself completely in Finn, yielding to everything she had been resisting the last three months.

Finn slowly pulled off Cyra’s coat, rendering her naked save for her underwear. The cold air pebbled her bare skin as she turned so his hard chest pressed into her back, his arms enclosing around her, cocooning her in his warmth. She nestled against him as he swept her hair away and skimmed his lips across the nape of her neck, the light kisses rippling pleasant tingles down her spine. Gently, she guided his hand to her midsection, encouraging its slow downward path. Closing her eyes, she leaned against his bare chest, sucking in a breath as his fingers slipped beneath her undergarments and between her legs. One of her hands curved around the back of his head, fingers weaving into his hair as her back arced against the sensitive touch.

“Seven hells,” she breathed, her muscles tensing. Until now, she had resisted this kind of intimacy, anticipating the storm it would unleash if she ever allowed Finn to touch her like this. She knew herself, knew her body. Knew all caution would falter the moment she allowed such a surrender. She wasn’t ready before.

She was now. Ready to give him everything, her whole heart, body and soul.

He held her in place, strong arms keeping her captive as his fingers worked with perfect precision. A breath shuddered from her lungs, the beast inside of her purring at his touch—wanting more, *needing* more.

“You’re exquisite, Cyra,” he rasped against her neck, his free hand coiling greedily around her breast. “And you’re all mine.”

Cyra smiled at the words, feeling how much he wanted her against her backside. “What do you plan on doing with me?” she asked, feeling the curve of his lips against her neck.

“Wicked things,” he said, the playfulness in his tone edged with promise.

“Good.” She attempted to turn around, but his hold tightened, free arm locking around her chest and pinning her in place as his devious finger circled around the ache between her legs before sliding down her center.

A moan slipped from her lips as he pushed a finger inside of her, her body writhing within his strong grasp. *Divine Ancients.* Cyra stood there, wrapped in his arms as his fingers repeated the sinful journey, again and again and again, like an artist playing an instrument, refusing to leave his song unfinished. Finn’s touch unleashed something inside of her—something feral and animalistic. The urge swallowed any lingering nerves. It swallowed everything but this. Finn. His body. His fingers.

He was good. Seven hells, was he good, reacting to her ever-shortening breaths, the tensing of her body every time he found the bud at the apex of her thighs. The spot that hitched her breath and rendered only formless sounds from her throat.

Another moan spilled free as she squirmed against his smooth chest, pleasure gathering as her muscles tensed for her crescendo. “Finn,” she gasped, breath coming in short bursts, legs threatening to buckle. She breathed his name again, delighting in the feel of his flexing muscles and hard arousal grinding against her backside.

All her senses crashed together, held hostage by this man until she conceded everything to his unrelenting fingers.

And she did. Chest heaving, Cyra squeezed her eyes shut against the intense wave of pleasure shattering through her core. Finn kept her pinned as she quaked against his chest, her hands clutching hard at the back of his head as she whimpered his name a final time, the sensations rushing through her body in sudden, thrilling exhilaration.

When the splintering sensations calmed—the song finished and the beast inside her satiated—Cyra was ready to crumple into a puddle on the floor. *Seven. Fucking. Hells.*

After a final gasp, her body relaxed, her mind adrift in a slap-happy haze. Never in her life had she experienced anything like this feeling—overwhelming and euphoric. She forgot where she was, forgot the half-naked man at her back even as his fingers pulled away from her body.

Almost forgot the endgame she sought in coming here.

Cyra turned around, passion-drunk eyes battling to focus. And when they succeeded, she found a self-satisfied smirk tugging up one corner of Finn's mouth. She resisted an eyeroll, biting back any well-earned compliments. They would just go straight to his ego.

Besides, she would pay him back shortly.

Quirking her lips to one side, Cyra reached for the waistband of Finn's trousers, but he caught her wrist, halting any more disrobing. Her gaze tore upward in confusion, meeting his softened features. "We don't have to go any further," Finn said, brows furrowing, "if you aren't ready."

"I want this, Finn," she breathed against his mouth, her hand moving over the strain trapped in his trousers. "For us, you and me." Her right brow rose coyly. "I've taken all the precautionary teas, so there is no need to hold back."

"Me too," he breathed, excitement blooming across his features, quickly shifting to lust as she stroked his hard length, the pressure releasing his own feral beast he had thus far kept leashed while focused on her pleasure.

A guttural growl rolled from the back of his throat. "You and me, Cyra." And that was it. She eagerly stripped away the rest of his clothes.

The white snowy light afforded Cyra a clear view of him—*all* of him, every magnificent inch. The sight revived her dormant nerves. The remnants of her pleasure fully cleared as her slowed heartbeat accelerated with renewed fervor.

Stealing a breath, she lowered herself to the blanket. Finn followed, mouth chasing after hers for a steadying kiss. Settling on her back, she beckoned him close, beckoned her heart to stop its humming drum. *Breathe, Cyra.*

Finn obeyed her silent requests. Her heart, however, did little in the way of calming. If anything, as his naked body pulled flush to hers, her pulse sped up, heart slamming against her ribs as if trying to escape.

Breathe, Cyra, she silently repeated as she lay back against the blanket.

After another kiss on the lips, Finn's mouth skipped along her neck, dusting over her collarbone, before latching around her right nipple. The touch curled fresh pleasure around her satiated body, gooseflesh rising over her cooled skin.

The sensations combatted the jolting of her stomach as Finn slid her undergarments free, laying her utterly bare beneath him.

She was ready. She wanted this. Wanted *him*.

Seizing on this burst of excited anticipation, Cyra spread herself open. "You and me," she breathed, just as his face reappeared in her view, a final question in his eyes.

Heart pounding, Cyra wrapped her hand around his length, indulging a few moments to feel him beneath her fingers. "Mine," she said and smiled.

The corner of his mouth tugged upward. "Yours," he promised, amber eyes glittering. The hunger in his features brimmed with palpable eagerness, ready to devour her. Each breath strained, as if he were barely able to contain himself, barely managing to stay the urge to plunge himself inside of her and unleash all his pent-up passions.

Cyra guided him forward until she felt the head of his cock nudge at her entrance, allowing him to feel just how much she wanted him.

Another smirk hitched his lips.

Then he drove himself forward.

Body stiffening, she sucked in a sharp breath at the new sensation of herself around him, fighting a grimace at the visceral tightness between her legs.

Finn froze, searching her face. "Are you all right?"

Heart in her throat, Cyra could only nod. *Relax. Just relax*. "Keep going," she encouraged, her fingers pressing his back. "I want all of you." When he still hesitated, she kissed him, slow and deep, and coaxed him forward, all the way to his end.

He obliged, filling her completely.

Again, their bodies stilled, his quick breaths betraying his nerves. At least she wasn't the only anxious one. The thought calmed her, and she offered him an assuring smile. *I'm all right.*

A breath later, their collective butterflies settled, acclimating bodies bidding them onward, slow and easy, like two unsure dancers.

A kiss shared between the lovers, soft and gentle. Cyra focused on him, the wet of his tongue, the flexing muscles of his back, the heat of his skin against hers.

The painful tightness slowly eased, her heart no longer trying to escape from her chest. With each kiss, each gentle thrust of his hips, her body relaxed.

The earlier spikes of pleasure reared a welcome shudder down her spine, and a well of pleasure reignited between her thighs. Eyes closing, she reveled in this moment, suddenly desperate to savor everything—Finn's weight pressing her into the floor, the rocking movements of his hips, the friction with every slid between her legs.

He moaned against her lips, free hand roving, greedily venturing over every inch of her body as if he might not reclaim this chance of liberal exploration again.

The yearning touch excited Cyra. *I won't break*, her next punishing kiss assured. *But you are welcome to try.*

As if hearing the silent challenge, Finn grasped her hips and titled them up, driving himself deeper. A gasp slipped from her lips, feeling him against her inner walls. She locked her legs around his waist, fingernails digging into the muscles of his back as he drove into her again and again, and she rolled her hips to meet his every thrust, her body quaking, the angle liberating bolts of pleasure. She didn't reach the intensity of the earlier sensations, stalled by the lingering discomfort between her thighs. It was still thrilling, every plunge gloriously welcome.

Breaths gasping, Finn buried his face into the curve of her neck. "Seven hells, Cyra," he rasped against her skin. In the next breath, his mouth captured hers.

This kiss was sloppy, stilted by indistinguishable noises falling from Finn's lips as his body shuddered with release. His frantic final drives slowed to a roll as if savoring the end, the final notes to this glorious song, chased by a quiet stillness as their bodies came to rest.

Nothing but their tattered breaths filled the air for several long seconds, their muscles communally relaxing against the blanketed floor. When their eyes locked, a smile tugged at Cyra's mouth. This right here, entwined on the floor on this snowy afternoon, was something she would remember for the rest of her life, a cherished moment that would forever change her—body and soul.

"I love you, Cyra," Finn said, his eyes soft and hopeful.

"I love you too, Finn." And she did, she truly did.

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Chapter 19

Resurrection

Present Day

"You and that angry man were in love?" Korina asked curiously.

Cyra smiled in spite of herself. Reminiscing about the start of her relationship with Finn conjured a heart-crushing pang, deep in her chest. "I thought we were," she said, swallowing an unwanted lump in her throat.

What else could she say? The feelings she once shared for Finn—*with* Finn—were real. Real for her, in any case.

Korina's brows knitted together, empathy spearing through her hazel eyes. "What happened between you?"

The lump rose higher. "That's a longer story," Cyra said, battling to keep her lips from trembling. "The summary version: we dated our senior year. We were both chosen for the Warrior Track." The corners of her mouth teetered downward, latent emotions choking her lungs. "I thought we wanted the same future. I was . . . naive about life after school." She huffed a harsh laugh. "I was naive about a lot of things back then. I suppose that's life—innocence fades with age, and inevitable reality rears its cruel head." Her eyes drifted to the campfire, watching the flames with a frown.

"Maybe he still loves you." Korina shrugged. "From your stories, your relationship sounded so happy."

"We *were* happy." Cyra tried to clear her stirring emotions as she found Korina's face. "Until we weren't. Until he wanted no part of Castoria—including me. To this day, I'm not entirely sure why things changed." She

studied her nails for a few seconds, pesky lump in her throat resisting surrender. “Just like I have no idea why he seems to hate me now.” As she spoke the words, her mind drifted over the last twenty-four hours—Finn’s unforgivable actions, his sneering ire, his harsh words. She found no explanation.

“I saw him once during the war, some time after we parted ways,” she said, talking to herself as much as Korina. “The circumstances were strange, but the interaction was cordial, albeit awkward.” Her brows furrowed as those memories unfurled, trying to make sense of the stranger who had just exploded her contented life. “Nothing resembling his present wrath.” She shook her head, absolutely confounded. “The boy I knew . . . would never have done what Finn did last night. I have no idea why he wrecked my life with such brutal calculation.”

“Maybe you can ask him?”

“I’d rather not,” Cyra said, bitterness finally conquering the hurt in her chest. “Curiosity is not the strongest sentiment I feel toward him at the moment. Any kindness and love we once shared is gone.” She flexed her right hand, anger blossoming with the words.

Korina shifted in her seat. “What will you do now?”

A good question. “Tomorrow we’ll go back to the homestead, say our goodbyes, and then I’ll have to move on.”

“Move on?” Korina’s eyes widened. “You can’t leave.”

Cyra shook her head, meeting her eyes with a meaningful look she hoped Korina would understand. “I can’t stay, Korina. You know I can’t.”

Korina pursed her lips before giving a stiff nod. “Where will you go?”

“Anywhere.”

“But not Castoria?”

“No,” Cyra said, voice shuddering to a whisper. No, she would not go back.

“What about your friends, your brother?” Korina asked, tone hesitant but curious. “They will know you’re alive—your parents will know you’re alive. You’re important. People will look for you.”

A reluctant smile worked across Cyra's face. The words sounded so much like something Aurelia would say.

Come on, Cyra, you just rose from the dead. She pictured Aurelia’s rolling eyes. *Your parents won’t allow you to skip away now.*

She’s right, Akira might add. *You’re royally fucked. Pun intended.*

We miss you, sister. Kasian's face suddenly speared through her mind's eye. *Come home*.

Cyra's eyes pricked as she turned away from Korina—away from the images tempting her to dissuade her fast-forming plans. "I can't go home," she said in a small voice. "I'm not ready to be Cyra Byrogan again."

A clicking sound echoed through the darkness—the cock of a gun's hammer.

Heart lurching into her throat, Cyra leapt to her feet, expecting Finn to materialize from the darkness. *Why would Finn be using a gun?*

He wouldn't.

"So it's true," Jiro growled, stepping into the campfire's light. His onyx eyes glinted from under the brim of his hat, rust-brown coat concealing his body save for his outstretched arm. He clutched a revolver aimed at Cyra's chest. "Everything that man said about you last night . . . You are really Cyra Byrogan." He said her name as if uttering the foulest of curses.

"Jiro!" Korina exclaimed, scrambling to her feet. "What are you doing here?"

Venomous eyes locking onto Cyra's face, Jiro said, "Your mother sent me after you, Korina. I found your campsite, then followed your tracks here." Palpable hate wafted off him, thickening the air around them.

Cyra had never before seen such unfettered loathing in his features. Jiro was always so even-keeled, a light joke never far from his lips. It was what initially drew her to him, his steadfast soul so soothing and warm to her brokenness.

Would he really shoot you? Her heart squeezed as she raised empty hands. The stolen crystal rested in her pocket, too far away to siphon enough power for combat. Even if it wasn't, she wouldn't cast against this man. Her partner, her lover, her friend. "I don't want trouble, Jiro," she managed to say despite her constricting lungs. "I'll go now, leave you and Korina."

"What? No!" Korina cried.

"You aren't going anywhere," Jiro snarled, raising his revolver and aiming between her eyes.

Fear rolled through Cyra's shoulders, every muscle tensing. He was hurt, angry.

Angry enough to kill? She wasn't sure. "Jiro, I'm sorry. I—"

“I heard about you,” Jiro spat, edging closer. The campfire thrust his profile into the sharp relief, the dancing firelight capturing the bitterness of betrayal on his face. “Cyra Byrogan, Ranger Captain and master spy. You were infamous after your handiwork in Saraneca, not to mention your little mining town stunt in northern Vinmore. Adonis North laid his own personal price on your head for what you did to him. Coined a little name for you—the Hell-Spawned Demon Cunt. The beautiful seductress who will rip out your soul with a smile on her face.” His black eyes glowed, their glint just catching the firelight in ghoulish fury. “North claimed he killed you at Willowwood.” Jiro's gaze raked over Cyra in visceral disgust. “He’s obviously incorrect there, but I suspect the rest is true. Care to deny these claims?”

Ice rushed through her veins, the sinking feeling worsening when she caught Korina’s confusion. Yes, there was still much she did not know—the worst yet to come.

The fire crackled over the tangible tension, the sharp noise slicing through the night as if it, too, waited for Cyra to speak and confess all her sins.

It was tempting to deny these claims, to downplay certain things, to make excuses. As she stared at Jiro, her heart squeezed as if being actively crushed by his mind. The agony cleaving his features only bid forth the truth. She wouldn’t lie—not anymore. “Everything you said is true, Jiro.” Cyra forced another hard swallow. “I don’t deny any of it.”

A scoff ripped through Jiro’s lips, the muzzle of the gun only a few feet away from her face. “Right. So, I was duped by a lying temptress—at least I succumbed to the best.”

Cyra inhaled a quaking breath, automatic defenses warring with raw guilt. “I didn’t dupe you, Jiro. Who I was during the war . . . I left it behind—I left *her* behind. Our life together was real.” She willed him to believe her. For him to focus on their life together, and not her lies. Not her name.

Everything inside of her cratered at the hatred oozing across his face, unmoved.

A muscle feathered in Jiro’s jaw, his next words a low growl: “More lies. Give me one reason not to kill you right now.”

Screw it. Cyra marched forward, daring him to shoot her—the man she had shared her life with for two years. “Tell me we weren’t happy, Jiro.” Her throat was raw as her voice hitched. “Tell me you didn’t love our

saloon, didn’t love our life. Because I did—I loved the mundane as much as you. That wasn’t a lie. Not for me.” Her heart pounded as she stopped mere inches from the barrel of his gun, eyes not leaving his face.

Two years, Jiro. Don’t do this.

“Maybe I was happy,” Jiro bit out, eyes glassy as his throat bobbed. “But it’s ruined now. I look at you and I see my enemy. One of the people who scarred my body, the people who still stalk my nightmares. The images of us lying together”—his nose scrunched in repulsion—“they sicken me now.”

The words burned a torrent of misery through Cyra, lower lip trembling at the ragged pain in his voice, her eyes stinging with hot tears.

“Any joy shared between us over the last two years,” Jiro breathed, “it’s gone now—destroyed by your unmasking, and your true face. Maybe if I kill you now, I can reclaim some of what you stole.”

Cyra didn’t move. Couldn’t move. Maybe Jiro was right. Maybe she could give him this.

“No!” Korina shouted, rushing forward. She shoved aside Jiro’s outstretched arm just before he squeezed the trigger.

The gun fired. She felt the rush of air past her ear, heard the deafening sound ricochet through the night.

He fired the gun. Jiro fired the gun, actually tried to kill her. Tears squeezed free of her eyes as she gaped at the man—her partner, her lover, her friend. She would have killed for him. She would have died for him . . .

The gut-wrenching devastation at his willingness to kill her rocked her to her core. She didn’t immediately react, too stunned to move as Korina positioned herself in the line of fire. “Put the gun down, Jiro!” she cried.

“Move, Korina,” Jiro growled, pulling back the hammer on his pistol.

Cyra and Jiro’s eyes met as another tear escaped, carving a line down her cheek.

A riot of mixed emotions stormed across Jiro’s face as if he, too, was just as shocked by what he had almost done. But he didn’t lower the gun. “Korina, move!” His voice cracked, hand shaking as determination filled his eyes.

“Korina,” Cyra said, heart a leaden weight in her chest. “Move.”

“No!” Korina shouted, crying now, too.

An eternity. Cyra felt like this standoff lasted an eternity, all three souls locked at an emotional impasse. No matter the outcome, none would walk

away unscathed.

Jiro suddenly went rigid, gaze at last ripping away from Cyra as his senses snagged on something else—some other threat. Whirling, he fired into the darkness.

Only then did Cyra hear it—the sound of another breath, quiet footsteps just beyond their little camp. Something fast and silent and deadly emerged from the night, slicing through the air and striking Jiro in the abdomen. An ice shard.

Finn.

Jiro stumbled backwards, firing his pistol until the chamber emptied. Only when he sank to his knees did the shadowy figure appear through the trees, stalking into the light like a creature crawling out of hell.

Cyra's mind eddied as Jiro collapsed next to the campfire, flames dancing against the footlong ice spear protruding from his upper abdomen.

Eyes wide, Korina only stood frozen in fearful silence.

"What did you do!" Cyra shouted, furious heat pouring across her body as she watched Jiro fall back against the forest floor.

"I just saved your life," Finn snapped, marching toward the fire. "You're welcome."

"Pity Captain Roderick and his soldiers didn't have better aim," Cyra spat, steering around Korina to kneel at Jiro's side.

Yellow light bathed the ice shard, already melting in the fire's heat. Jiro's eyes struggled to stay open, throat working as his body tensed. If Cyra pulled out the shard now, he would die long before he received help, unless . . .

Her head shot up. "Finn, evolution crystal, now."

"Demands, Cyra, really?" Finn folded his arms.

"He'll die unless I heal him," she said, eyes shifting from Finn's frustratingly calm expression to Jiro's paling face.

As if fueled by a fresh plate of ire, Jiro summoned the energy to open his eyes. "Don't fucking touch me, you lying bitch."

Finn scoffed, loud and derisive. "This is who you want to save?"

Cyra shot to her feet. "I'll go with you."

"What?" Finn's brows rose.

"Back to Castoria," she said, all fight draining away, replaced by calm determination. She couldn't live with herself if she let Jiro die—let him die at Finn's hands, the weight of another soul added to her too-long list. "Help

me heal him, and I'll go with you willingly," she pleaded. "I'll do whatever you say."

Finn's expression cleared, eyes rapt with sudden interest before they narrowed. "Swear."

"I swear I will go with you to Castoria without argument." When Finn didn't immediately respond, she added in a shuddering whisper, "Please, Finn." If he wanted her pride, so be it. She'd need to leave it behind before returning home anyway.

Finn extended his hand, palm up. "I'll have my stolen elemental back." He stared at Cyra expectantly. *You said you'd do whatever I say*, his expression read.

Teeth grinding, Cyra produced the red crystal from her pocket and thrust it into Finn's outstretched hand.

His fingers curled around it. "All right, you have a deal, but best let me heal your trigger-happy boyfriend. Your evolution skills are a bit rusty, I'd wager." Finn knelt beside Jiro.

Jiro's eyes closed, chest heaving. Cyra darted to his other side, uncertain if she should let Finn proceed—at the same time, he wasn't wrong. She hadn't healed a scratch in years, let alone a serious wound.

Settling across from Finn, she watched him closely. Watched him pull the shard from Jiro's abdomen. Jiro groaned, eyelids fluttering. Korina hovered just behind Cyra, holding her breath. *It's going to be fine*, Cyra told herself as Finn worked, swearing unmerciful vengeance if this was just a ploy. If Finn intentionally killed this man . . .

Finn wouldn't do that, would he? She didn't know anymore.

After a tense ten minutes, at last the outer wound began to close. *Thank the Ancients.*

"Your gun-toting boyfriend is healed," Finn announced at long last, stretching to his feet. "Time for us to go."

A deep inhale filled Cyra's lungs. Her gaze lingered on Jiro's pale face, his labored breaths easing to a steady rhythm. "Goodbye," she whispered, resting a hand on his arm. *I hope you remember the good times.*

"If I ever see you again," Jiro rasped, his eyes flickering open, "I'll kill you."

The threat hung suspended in the air as Cyra rose to her feet, Jiro falling into unconsciousness. She heaved a sigh and turned to teary-eyed Korina. "I have to go now."

Her lower lip trembled, and she flung her arms around Cyra. “Don’t forget me.”

Another lump knotted Cyra’s throat, her eyes pricking with fresh tears. Sadness overwhelmed everything as she wrapped her arms around Korina and squeezed. “I could never forget about you, Korina. You’re the only friend I have left.” After stealing a few more selfish seconds, relishing the last of the warmth she would know for quite some time—maybe ever—she let Korina go. “Tell your mother goodbye for me, and Sage and Roone.” She brushed a tear from Korina’s cheek, eyes drifting down to Jiro. “And tell Jiro and the rest of the town . . . I’m sorry.”

Korina only nodded, quaking lips pursing, as if to hold back a sob.

“And if you hear more things about me,” Cyra said, muscles tensing as a ball of guilt punched her in the gut, “try not to judge too harshly.”

Again, Korina nodded.

With a steady inhale, Cyra turned away—from Korina, from Jiro, from her life in Lofton. Never to look back. And never to return. Nyssa was officially dead, never to be resurrected. Cyra Byrogan was going home.

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Chapter 20

DALLIANCES

Ten Years Ago

"Oh, it's more beautiful than I imagined," Aurelia cooed, green eyes devouring the incredible sight of the transformed assembly hall. Sculptured ice snaked up the columns and architectural features. The frosted forms twisted around the stone like crystalline vines, flowers and leaves of ice glittering under the candlelight of the many chandeliers. Tables of food and towers of drinks lined the space, framed by bouquets of flowers accented with red, white, and black casting crystals. Floral notes of sweet perfume and spiced cologne blended with the aromas of cooked meats and baked treats. Festive music and laughter floated through the energized air. The whole effect was enchanting, like walking into a fairy garden.

The senior ball was well underway.

"Champion cheers, Cyra!" Aurelia grinned at Cyra. "To the best year of our lives."

"Champion cheers, Aurelia," Cyra beamed right back, her heart full of giddy joy.

"Let's dance, Alonso," Aurelia said to her date and current boyfriend, ushering the young man to the dance floor.

Finn offered Cyra his arm, lopsided grin yet to leave his face all evening. "You look beautiful tonight," he breathed into her ear as his eyes roved over her midnight blue gown, lingering an extra few seconds on her cleavage. "Magnificent view."

“I don’t know about magnificent,” Cyra said coyly. “My breasts are nice, but nothing to write poems about.”

“Hand me a pen, and I’ll write you a magnificent poem.”

Laughter slipped from her lips as they followed after Aurelia and her date. Cyra’s skirts swished with her movements, sewn in crystals sparkling against the candlelight.

Finn looked handsome in his pewter suit and green waistcoat, cedar-brown hair tamed behind his ears, save for the uncooperative lock resting on his temple.

The perfect date. The perfect boyfriend.

A lightness carried them with every step, elation forming every smile. Cyra was sure she had never felt so happy in her life. With track assignment in two weeks, life was wonderful. Everything she hoped it would be, culminating in perfect alignment, crowned with the promise of a bright future. There was just one thing nagging at the back of her mind. “Have you thought more about our conversation the other night?” she asked casually as the dance ended, and Finn promptly snagged them glasses of sparkling wine.

“I have.”

Cyra’s stomach lurched, but she waited for him to continue.

“I’ve decided to make a bid for the Warrior Track,” he said with a sly smile. “It’s the obvious choice with both you and Fabien bidding for the same track. I hear they like to group Wyndfyre students in the same section.”

“If this is what you want,” Cyra said breathlessly, barely containing her exhilaration. She had wanted this to be Finn’s choice. It was his future as much as hers, after all. Still, his decision brought an immense amount of relief.

“I want you,” he said, features softening, “and I want adventure. This future brings me both. So, if they’ll have me, I’m all in.”

All in. The words echoed in Cyra’s mind as they joined Pippin and Akira near an ice sculpture of a phoenix, the delicate wings rendered in loving detail. The pair were each other’s dates, happily attending as friends, although at present neither looked particularly happy or friendly.

Cyra smiled in greeting. “Why the long faces? I don’t know if you’ve heard”—she lowered her voice as if to share a secret—“but this is the best year of our lives.”

The teasing comment was met with thick silence, not even an indulgent giggle. Quite the contrary, as Akira's hard eyes leveled on Cyra. "I need some air," she said, her tight smile the only kind offering before sauntering away, mint green gown disappearing amongst the milling party guests.

Cyra scowled at the abrupt exit. "Is everything all right?" she asked Pippin.

"Not all of us have things to celebrate tonight," Pippin said, tone decidedly dour as he looked around at the merry faces of the senior class. "And no," he cut Cyra off just as she opened her mouth, "I don't want to talk about it. I'm focused on track assignment. That's all that matters now." He fled her presence before any would-be response reached her lips.

What crawled up their butts tonight?

Pippin and Akira's somber attitudes left Cyra feeling out of sorts with Finn her only remedy. Whatever troubled her friends, she wasn't sure she could help them—not tonight, at least. Tonight, she'd be a little selfish, enjoying the celebrations with her boyfriend and the assurance he'd be joining her down the same path. The same future. Together.

After the ball came to a close, she allowed the euphoric feelings to steer her steps toward the library, her flirtatious grin beckoning Finn to follow.

He put up little resistance.

Wyndfyre's East Wing library was beautiful. Towering shelves of books lined either side of the single long hall, but the grand room's most stunning feature was the ceiling. Made of curved glass, the barrel vault offered a brilliant view of the night's sky.

"Hoping for a quick study session?" Finn teased as they entered the vast space, their steps echoing across the emptiness.

Cyra sauntered to one of the many ladders leaning against the bookstacks. "I had something else in mind." She turned around, leaning against a ladder rung.

A conspiratorial look danced across Finn's features. "Care to elaborate?"

"Kiss me," she demanded, tugging him in by the waistcoat.

"Of course," Finn whispered, slanting his mouth over hers.

Cyra reveled in the tenderness of his kiss, the beauty of the atmosphere—a young couple in love kissing under the stars within these hallowed walls of knowledge. Perfect.

The mild buzz from the several glasses of wine nudged her hand to Finn's waistband. It was probably a bad idea . . .

"Cyra," Finn breathed against her lips, backing away with a raised brow.

"What?" She batted her eyes innocently.

"I'm getting the sense you didn't lure me here just to make out."

Cyra only smiled, already imagining him tugging up her skirts. The salacious thought beat a tantalizing pulse between her legs. Seven hells, she wanted him. "And?" She cocked a brow. "Don't make me the irresponsible one in this relationship."

A mischievous smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Never," he said with breathless promise.

Cyra's heart pounded with anticipation as he pressed a kiss to the curve of her neck. His lips skimmed down the generous neckline of her gown, greedy hands fussing with her silk skirts.

After several seconds of combatting the many layers, Finn achieved little progress with her undergarments. She breathed a laugh at his huff of frustration. "I do not concede defeat," Finn said in mock severity, kissing Cyra on the mouth before diving headfirst under the fabric as if forging into dangerous territory.

A giggle passed through her lips, animating to a laugh at the ticklish touch between her legs. Dangerous territory indeed.

Once the troublesome undergarments were removed, she waited for Finn to triumphantly reemerge and reclaim her mouth, but it wasn't her mouth he was after just now.

She sucked in a sharp inhale, feeling his warm breath caress her inner thigh.

No, his present target was definitely not her mouth.

Heart stumbling in sudden excitement, Cyra felt him nudge open her legs with his hands. Felt his breath against the most sensitive corner of her body. Felt the tip of his tongue. She didn't dare release the air in her lungs, didn't dare move, body taut against the ladder, right hand gripping an upper rung. *Ancients save her*.

Gooseflesh spread across her blazing skin, eyes fluttering closed as she fought to remain still. To remain silent.

It was a losing battle as she felt the slide of Finn's tongue, and something between a whimper and moan ripped from her lips, her grip on

the rungs going crushingly tight. The sound encouraged the next glorious stroke of Finn's tongue, circling once . . . twice . . . before gliding down her center.

Cyra relinquished a crying gasp at the overwhelming sensations, the high-pitched noise ricocheting off the library walls. An inkling of caution warned her to be quieter. She bit down on her lower lip, but every second of Finn's tongue between her legs drove her closer to madness, to unleashing the scream her body ached to let go.

Finn lifted her leg over his shoulder, gripping her thighs tighter as he worked. Her entire body trembled, tensing and relaxing with every stroke of his tongue. Her teeth drew blood, enough to taste the metallic tang in her mouth, and she eased her crushing bite.

"Seven holy hells," she panted, close to shattering into a million pieces. She needed him to stop. Needed, altogether, something else. "Finn," she rasped.

He emerged from beneath her skirts, ruffled hair and crooked grin just visible against the opalescent moonlight. "You called?"

"I want you inside me." Her entire body flushed with heat. She needed him. *Now*.

"Right away." Finn quickly shed his trousers while Cyra attempted to tame her disturbed skirts and clear her passion-addled thoughts, failing on both accounts.

Poising herself on a rung, she yanked Finn forward—not that he needed much encouragement, eager hands shoving up her skirts as his mouth covered hers. She could taste herself on his tongue as his frantic fingers struggled to clear away the pesky layers of her gown, shoving them up in fistfuls of fabric.

Anticipation surged as he nudged closer, his hands reclaiming her upper thighs, and spreading her open. A long breath poured past her lips as Finn won the battle against her tangled skirts and drove himself inside her with one long thrust.

Hooking her leg around his waist, she ushered him closer, deeper—taking the full of him and all the new sensations throttling through her body.

Finn moaned against her neck, movements tentative at first, as if he was reminding his own muscles to relax. Cyra pulled on the upper ladder rung, lifting herself up to better accommodate the rolling drive of his hips.

In this position, there was little motion she could contribute to their union. She didn't need to. Her pleasure was all about angles, intensified by the excitement of their illicit dalliance.

She tilted and twisted her hips, chasing that wondrous feeling already set to a roar by Finn's tongue. Her head dropped back and listed left as his lips latched onto her neck. She stared up at the glass ceiling, offering the twinkling stars just the hitch of an indulgent smile. *Our little secret*, she silently spoke to the sky, relishing each drive between her legs, the rock of her body against the ladder, and the wicked notion someone might catch them at any moment.

This. This right here. This was everything.

Cyra's breath shortened to trembling gasps—everything tensing, surging, shattering. Her hand tightened on the upper rung of the ladder, the other curling into Finn's hair with white knuckles. A lust-filled groan, growling and guttural, spilled from his lips—the sound tipping Cyra right over the edge. Her climax came quick and intense, crashing and rolling in pleasure-freeing waves, chased by a surge of warmth between her thighs. She muffled her cries against Finn's shoulder as he quickened his pace, thrusts rough but not painful, before he, too, surrendered, moaning her name in ragged whispers.

Muscles collectively unfurling, the lovers relaxed as their present setting sharpened around them. Library. They were in the East Wing Library on the night of the senior ball. It was well after midnight. And the two of them just fucked on a ladder.

A rush filled Cyra's insides. Anyone might happen upon their compromising position—her skirts hiked up to her hips. Finn, bare-assed, poised between her legs. Compromising indeed.

And absolutely thrilling.

A devilish smile stretched Cyra's mouth as she looked at Finn, who returned a mischievous grin. "I'm beginning to think I'm a bad influence on you," he said.

With him still buried inside her, she closed the short gap between their faces, kissing him lightly on the lips. "You're just discovering this now?"

Finn shrugged, at last parting and allowing her skirts to fall free. He recovered his lost trousers before helping in locating her undergarments. "Just think of all the mischief we'll find next year."

"I can't wait." And she couldn't. They were all in, together.

***

Two weeks later, Cyra found herself in another gown, on a similarly lovely night, but under far less enjoyable circumstances. Graduation was in two days, track assignment in three. Tonight was the Champion's Ball following the Gauntlet Trials. Which meant one thing: her mother would be in attendance.

Once the dancing finished, Cyra hoped to avoid her and meet Finn in the gardens as soon as her presidential duties concluded. No such luck as the queen summoned Cyra to her side, foreboding intention lining her features.

Queen Zephyrina, as always, looked the epitome of royalty in her gown of purple and gold, wearing a diamond-encrusted crown atop her salted cinnamon hair. "I understand you are seeing a fellow student—a Clovian-born Chosen," her mother said without ceremony, her expression betraying little but pointed interest.

Cyra's entire body went rigid, knowing very well she needed to choose her next words wisely. "Was there a question, Mother?"

The queen's thin lips pursed. "Is this relationship serious or just a dalliance?" Her tone was suspiciously casual, as if she had merely asked after the weather.

Cyra resisted the many biting remarks rising to her lips. She pictured Aurelia rolling her eyes as she shouted, *Remember the notebook! The talking points!* "Why do you ask?"

"Do not pretend to be simple, Cyra," her mother sighed. "It's insulting. You know very well there can be no future with this boy. If this is just a dalliance, then fine. But if not, then best break it off now before it goes any further."

"Is that a suggestion or a threat?" Cyra snipped, trying and failing to remember the nuances of Aurelia's notes.

"Do not be combative, it'll only give you wrinkles." The queen tipped up her chin. "When I was your age, I had my share of lovers. I am not as ignorant in the ways of the world, or as small-minded as you might think."

"Ew, Mother." Cyra scrunched up her nose.

"Cyra—"

“It’s nothing,” she assured tightly. Although expected, her mother’s disapproval of her relationship with Finn shifted a tide of fear through her insides. “I’m having fun, like you said. And even if things were serious, Finn is one of the most talented Syphons I know—including Kasian. He has a bright future, and given current tensions with Clovia, a relationship with a Clovia-born Syphon could help things.” She tried to sound casual, like she could care less about her mother’s approval, but summarily failed to banish the defensiveness in her tone.

The queen’s eyes narrowed. “So not entirely a dalliance.”

“Mother—”

“What about Lord Marcon Fletcher’s son? I hear he is single and bidding for the Warrior Track like you.”

Cyra’s face squished at these words. “Aedan is an ass, and his father is worse. I thought you were allowing Kasian and I a choice in our partners.”

An exasperated breath left her mother’s lips. “You do have choices, Cyra. They’re just limited to certain circles. I shouldn’t need to explain this to you. These are the circumstances in which we exist.”

Her mother’s condescending tone fanned Cyra’s bristling annoyance, quickly squashed by a fresh twist of anxiety. “You won’t even consider someone outside the bounds of our circles?” She lowered her voice, tone losing its hostility. “I nearly died a year ago. Finn saved my life. I am here because of him. Clovia is angry with us, angry with the Crown. Changing certain circumstances might benefit everyone.” When her mother did not immediately respond with sneering dismissal, Cyra’s hopes lifted a tick. “Will you at least consider my words? And rest assured, no one is talking about marriage.”

A beat of tense silence passed before the queen relinquished a sigh. “Very well, Cyra.”

The best answer she was going to receive, and it brought a smile to her lips—the first genuine smile all evening. “Thank you, Mother.” And she meant it, grasping at this shred of hope the woman might actually consider Finn as a long-term match.

Cyra quickly excused herself, desperate to claim this small victory and slink away, lest her mother offer other boyfriend suggestions worse than Aedan Fletcher.

Any all thoughts of her mother vanished when Finn’s arms encircled her waist, the pair hiding themselves deep inside the garden hedges. Spring

flowers were in full bloom, the floral blend of notes joining the oh-so-familiar aroma of Finn as his body crushed against hers. The trickle of water from a nearby fountain drowned out the party noises as they stumbled away from the main path. “I was worried you weren’t coming,” he breathed against her lips.

“My mother entrapped me,” she said after a swift kiss, stealing a moment to relish the softness of his lips.

“Oh?” Finn raised a curious brow.

“She knows about us.” Sprigs of renewed fear sprouted in Cyra’s chest like weeds. “She thinks you’re some sort of *dalliance*.”

A devious grin danced across Finn's face. “A dalliance, eh? Well, fancy a dalliance over by that bush?”

Cyra only returned a dry look. Nothing could tempt her to indulge the sinful plots gleaming behind Finn’s eyes with her mother lurking nearby. He grinned back at her, like he knew that and yet couldn’t resist teasing her.

“She thinks I should date Aedan,” she said, and Finn grimaced as if catching a whiff of some foul scent. “My sentiments exactly,” she huffed, taking a breath as she mentally reviewed the exchange with her mother. “We might need to more careful. And don’t be insulted if my mother offers you money or position to walk away from this. My parents are not above bribery or coercion.” An unsettled feeling throttled her gut. Would Finn bolt at this potential force threatening their happiness? They hadn’t talked much about the future beyond track assignment. Marriage was still a distance thing in Cyra’s mind, a concept rather than a reality. She wasn’t sure what the future had in store for them, but she wasn’t ready for this thing to end.

As if reading her thoughts, he gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m not walking away from anything without a fight.”

Her heart swelled at the words, at the way Finn looked at her right now. “I know, but . . . she’s the queen.”

The corner of Finn’s mouth twitched. “I’m aware.” He tilted his head. “Just as I’m aware of how hopelessly in love I am with you.”

Heat spread through Cyra, but she didn’t lean in for a kiss as her somber thoughts only deepened. Maybe it was their present surroundings, the Champion’s Ball following the Gauntlet Trials, that kept her pensive mood firmly in place and prompted her to say, “Do you think we’d be dating if Nation of Clovia hadn’t almost killed us?”

Finn’s brows rose. “No,” he answered simply.

“No?”

Warmth filled his eyes as he brushed a flyaway lock of hair from Cyra’s temple. “Until that man with the scar pointed his rifle at you and pulled the trigger, I thought you were all but unattainable. Certainly that you’d never reciprocate my feelings. It’s partially why I leaned into childish behavior.” He cringed at whatever memory occurred to him.

“And after the scarred man?”

“I realized one main truth.” His amber eyes searched her face, expression tender but tinged with a hint of intensity. “Life is fleeting, and we’re all going to die.”

Cyra huffed a dry laugh. “Grim.”

“Exactly, so why not reach for the impossible?” His words rushed over Cyra, and she kissed him lightly on the lips. “And what about you? When did you stop seeing me as an unlikeable but incredibly talented asshat?”

A smirk turned up her lips. “After I kissed you, then stole the champion’s belt,” she admitted. “You looked as though I’d just stabbed you in the heart.”

“You did,” Finn said ruefully. “It’s one of the things I admire about you. You know what you want and you’re not afraid to take risks.”

“I do know what I want.” She tilted up her chin, lips parting. “And I want you.”

Finn claimed her offering, pulling her into his arms and holding on so tight she ached for this moment to never end. With each clash of their lips, her earlier worries fell away. Their love, their relationship was stronger than her mother’s threats. Strong enough to weather any storm.

At least, this was what Cyra told herself as the pair lingered in the quiet of the Wyndfyre gardens. The needling anxiety in the back of her mind cautioned that this feeling wouldn’t last. That a harsher world awaited them once school ended.

In hindsight, she wished she had heeded this warning. Instead, she listened to her heart, breaking their kiss only to whisper, “I love you.”

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Chapter 21

DIVERSION

Present Day

Finn said little as they traipsed through the dark forest away from Cyra's life as Nyssa. She let her mind drift—anything to distract herself from thinking about the confrontation with Jiro. How he had almost killed her.

A sense of emptiness crawled through her veins, and she embraced the numbness that followed, allowing her obstinate spirit to whittle away with every step deeper into the silent night. Her fight was over. She'd carry on with grim acceptance. Even if she was tempted to break her vow to Finn, the idea of starting a new life somewhere else in Clovia, of creating more lies, of starting this cycle all over again . . . she couldn't do it. Not again, not to anyone else. Which only left one path.

Castoria.

They didn't have to travel far to find Finn's horse, freed from the ditched cart and secured to a low-hanging tree branch. At the sight of the lone animal, something twisted in her gut that had nothing to do with her present emotional shitstorm. "You couldn't have stolen a second horse from your militia friends?" Cyra snapped.

Finn smirked, cold. "They offered but I had to pass—all nags." He untied the reins and hoisted himself into the saddle before extending a hand.

Gritting her teeth, Cyra took the offering and settled behind Finn in the saddle. It wasn't the most comfortable seat of her life, taking care not to

touch Finn as he nudged the horse into a steady walk, the darkness far too thick for a faster pace.

Cyra wasn't so lucky the next morning, the light canter forcing her to latch her arms around his torso or risk an abrupt meeting with the forest floor. She tried to kept her chin craned away, but Finn's hair still brushed her nose. He smelled like the forest—earth and evergreens, mixed with salt and leather and Finn.

An ache opened in her chest every time she inhaled his familiar scent, tugging her right back to their youth. This felt like another kind of torture, more subtle than anything thus far—tiny jabs directly to her heart. Reminders of everything wonderful that was, completely shattered by how fucked up things were now. And if possible, she hated him a little more for that heartache.

Hated him. The sentiment burrowed through her insides, gnawing and festering.

He hated her, too. Why, she had no idea, but she felt it with every sneer, every cold look packed with vengeful wrath. And no matter his reasons, whatever had changed over the last decade, she would never forgive him for Lofton. Never.

With this promise, Cyra kept her lips pressed tightly shut throughout the day. He gave her anger, so she would give him nothing. Not a word, not her fire. Just icy indifference.

Her resolve lasted until evening when Finn declared a campfire was too risky. "There are worse things out there than trigger-happy lovers—or should I say, *ex*-lovers." He had the audacity to wink at her, as if they were in on the same joke.

Cyra's dormant anger stirred, clearing away the sinking emptiness encasing her mood for most of the day. She pinned him with a scathing glare. "Care to share why Governor Royce's personal militia is after you? Why he put a reward on your capture large enough to buy a town?"

"Royce understands my true value," he said with an indulgent smile. A look so characteristically Finn that it both fanned Cyra's annoyance and landed another stab to the heart.

"Or he's willing to burn a small fortune to rid the world of your presence," Cyra snipped, folding her arms. There had been no sign of Captain Roderick and his men, but she sensed they lurked close on their heels, pursuing their illusive prey. "What did you do to him?"

Finn simply shrugged. “I might have tortured a few of his personal guards while investigating rumors surrounding captured Castorian soldiers. I had already been caught smuggling crystals over the border, so my exceedingly rugged face circulated around Vinmore for months.”

Cyra ignored another of his indulgent smiles, and certainly ignored the resultant throttling of her insides. Instead, she honed in on one particular piece of information: “And are the rumors true? Does Royce have captured Castorian soldiers?” Her thoughts whirled as an insane idea crashed through her mind. A final rescue mission before she faced the consequences of her choices. She had nothing to lose now—no life to preserve, no mask to maintain. Maybe there was one good thing she could do before the end, a small silver lining to her present fuck-mire.

A penance for her sins before they reinfected her soul.

Finn’s brows twitched, eyes working over Cyra appraisingly. “No one of your description,” he said coldly as if reading the idea sparking behind her eyes and preemptively shutting it down.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Your question doesn’t matter,” Finn retorted, focusing his attention on unpacking a blanket and bedroll tied to the horse’s saddle.

“If Castorian soldiers are being held prisoner, then—”

“Then nothing, princess,” Finn sneered, unrolling the bedroll over the forest floor. “I discovered quite a lot during my interrogation of Royce’s men. His little vanity estate in the swamp is like a fortress. A castle built of stone surrounded by swamp, surrounded by more swamp, and more swamp after that. The only way in and out of the place is by train on a lone elevated railway built next to the monstrosity Royce calls home.”

“And what would you have done if I *was* there?”

Finn gave her a wry look that more than suggested the response rising to his lips was something akin to *absolutely nothing*. Instead, he shrugged. “Allow myself to be captured, work out the escape plan later.”

A laugh caught in her throat. Yep, that certainly sounded like a Finn Calderis plan. *Act first, plan as you go, or preferably not at all.*

“What does any of this matter to you?” he asked, a hard edge back in his tone. “I didn’t think you cared about your fellow Syphons anymore, given you chose to abandon your country and your people.”

A flash of rage heated her blood, hands curling to fists. “Fuck you, Finn.”

His right brow ticked, a smile pulling at his lips. “Are you offering?”

“I would rather grind pepper into my eyes and tear off all my nails than touch you again,” Cyra spat, marching up to the man, who had the audacity to bark a laugh. She fussed with the clasp at the nape of her neck. “I should have given this back to you a long time ago.” She freed the small chain, the necklace falling to her palm. She chucked the thing at Finn. “All yours, asshole.”

He caught the object, blinking in befuddled surprise as he opened his fingers. The fading light bathed the gold chain and woven circular charm in soft violet.

All the icy mirth slid right off his face, and something else broke free. A glimpse of the boy she once knew—kind and loving and vulnerable. It was gone with the next blink as his fingers curled around the charm. “You kept this?” He frowned at his closed fist, as if trying to work out something confounding.

“The necklace meant something to me,” she bit out, refusing to let the stormy emotions in his features affect the inferno blazing in her veins. “Guess I was wrong.”

Yes, she had kept the necklace along with the ruby ring on her hand, the sole remnants of her past. She wore both every day, rarely removing either even in sleep, a habit she had started once she became Nyssa. She wasn’t entirely sure why, only conceding that a part of her heart refused to completely untether from her past. The necklace and the ring were reminders, keepsakes her soul required. There was no real rational reason.

After tucking the necklace into a pocket, Finn ground out, “We should sleep.” His voice was devoid of anger—of anything, really, as if he was forcing himself to feel nothing. “Do you want the blanket or the bedroll?”

Well, two can play empty vessels, Cyra thought and matched his deadened features. “Blanket.”

***

Torrential rain slowed the next two days of travel, the Ancients deciding to add another helping of shit to Cyra’s misery pile. The clapping slap of water meant no verbal exchanges, a small consolation to the bone-deep chill her sodden clothes sank through her body. During the evenings, she was tempted to broach the idea of a Royce estate infiltration, their route bringing

them south, then west. It wasn't too late for a final grasp at something. Even if the idea was a bit suicidal.

All the better, a dark corner of her soul cooed.

The long-dormant sorrow she had kept at bay over the years pounded on her walls, desperate to claw free. As they inched closer to the border, dreams of the burning barn haunted her unconscious after years of reprieve. She would soon have to face it all, the question of why she left. Why she let everyone in her life believe she'd died at Willowwood.

It all crashed around her, gripping her chest in a vice. She begged the Ancients for something to stop this inevitability. To give her more time, one good deed before she faced the proverbial music. And on the morning of their fourth day of travel, the Ancients answered.

Cyra cracked her eyes open, nudged awake by . . . something. A threat lurking just out of sight. It was dark, just before dawn—indigo light yet to yield to the sun's coming rays. Her gaze worked around the silent forest, finding nothing but mist clinging to the surrounding trees. The miserable rain had cleared the prior night, leaving the travelers in a permanent state of damp.

Last night Cyra had insisted on a campfire, her limbs numb, her body locked in an uncontrollable shiver. Finn had mercifully relented.

The risk, perhaps, had been a fatal error.

The embers of their fire breathed small trails of smoke, joining the hovering mists clinging to the forest floor. The earthy mineral smell of soil after rainfall filled Cyra's nose, along with something else—the distinct odor of unwashed men.

Where? her thoughts charged as she squinted through the semi-darkness. Then her eyes locked onto the muzzle of a rifle, shifting just around a tree. A flood of adrenaline shoved into her veins, but she forced herself to stay frozen, wrapped in her blanket.

Think. Finn had crystals and both of Jiro's revolvers. If she could get to the weapons—

Too late.

"Surrender, Syphons!" shouted a deep voice, followed by two loud bangs.

Bolting awake, Finn scrambled to his feet before immediately racing for cover, kicking up leaves and dirt in his wake, bullets chasing his progress. He returned fire with bullets and ice in quick succession.

Muttering curses, Cyra scurried behind her own tree, pressing against the rough bark. A bullet struck near her face, wood chips splintering through the air.

Pulse at a roar, she dared a glimpse around her tree and ice spread through her body. Over a dozen, maybe two, armed men encroached through the trees and fog. She immediately recognized the sky-blue uniforms and red sashes.

The governor's militia closed in on all sides led by Captain Roderick, his golden epaulets gleaming under the lightening morning.

"Finn!" she cried over the herald of bullets. "Toss me a crystal, a gun, anything!"

After a moment's hesitation, Finn angled around his tree, aiming one of his stolen pistols at more semi-hidden assailants. He fired a rapid succession of bullets while simultaneously tossing a crystal to Cyra.

She nearly caught the elemental when another shot rang out, and the crystal shattered.

"Ancients' assholes," she grunted. Risking bullets, Cyra snatched the nearest shard and shoved it into her boot. Then she resigned herself to capture. They were outgunned, outmanned, and totally fucked. One crystal shard wouldn't make a difference in this fight.

As if sensing their victory, the soldiers rushed through the mists. "Hands up, or we shoot," ordered Captain Roderick as the men circled their prey.

The memory of Finn and Cyra standing in a different forest, surrounded by a different armed group, leapt into her mind. They were helpless, then . . . not so far off now.

She darted a frantic glance at Finn. One pistol lay on the ground, presumably empty, the remaining firearm clasped in his hand. As for the elementals . . . one shattered, and the other? By the red dust brushing away in the breeze near Finn's feet, Cyra guessed the crystal had met its demise. With little choice, she raised her arms in surrender.

A hand immediately latched around Cyra's wrist, wrenching her sideways. She nearly careened to the ground, balance just saving her from a face full of dirt.

The cock of a pistol's hammer reached her ears, and the burn of hot metal scored against her temple. Chin lifting, Cyra stared up at Captain Roderick.

His thin lips were set in a hard line beneath his shorn beard, mud-brown eyes glowering, the brim of his hat jutting into her face. “I knew there was something wrong about you,” he growled, breath reeking of booze and musty oats.

Fighting instincts bid Cyra to defend herself—grab the gun, hit the back of his extended elbow, then go for the groin. And then what? Disarm the other nineteen men? Finn seemed tempted, grip on his pistol tightening, features defiant as his eyes dragged to her face.

What now, Finn? She glared the question at him as the pressure of Captain Roderick’s gun forced her head sideways.

For several tense seconds no one moved, all waiting to see what the cornered Syphon would do—strike or surrender?

Releasing a frustrated exhale, Finn dropped his gun and raised his empty hands.

“Search them both,” Captain Roderick ordered.

Hauling Finn and Cyra to their feet, the men hurriedly searched their captured charges. They found little, claiming Finn’s remaining gun, bracer, and crystal belt—the latter two empty save for one evolution crystal.

Captain Roderick didn’t lower the gun from Cyra’s temple, didn’t look away from her face while his men bound their hands with rope. “Confirm that your name is Cyra Byrogan,” he bit out, whites of his eyes bright. “Daughter of King Razi and Queen Zephyrina, and the ranger who led hundreds of missions during the war, resulting in the deaths of thousands.”

“I’d rather not,” she said, half-wondering if this man might just kill her. He wore the look of someone tempted, vengeance brewing behind his eyes, as if his hatred was personal.

A muscle in his jaw ticked several times before he finally flicked his gaze to Finn. “On behalf of Governor Royce, you are formally charged with illegally smuggling and trading casting crystals as well as their illegal use within the United Provinces of Clovia. You and your associate”—he flashed a loaded look at Cyra—“will be brought to the Governor’s residence for further questioning and criminal charges.”

Fear throttled Cyra’s insides as a hood was tugged over her head, throwing her into complete darkness. *This is what you wanted, right?*

Kind of.

As she fought to stay upright during the ensuing march through the woods, a suffocating panic built in her lungs with every breath. Real danger

hadn’t visited Cyra in four long years. She forgot what it felt like, her heart a wild animal thrashing against her ribs.

Eventually she was placed on a horse, and the group rode for hours before hands finally dragged her from the mount. Cyra half stumbled over what felt and sounded like gravel, but the soles of her boots soon met wooden steps, which she was forced to climb. Smoke found her nose through the hood, the scent chased by the sweet, sooty smell of burning coal.

The steps yielded to flat wood—a platform, perhaps? The unmistakable scream of a train horn shattered the air, making Cyra flinch.

A train. They were being loaded onto a train.

Hands ushered her forward, the air shifting before going still as if she just entered an enclosed space. Sounds shrank around her, the wood beneath her feet hardening to a flat surface—metal. She was inside a train car.

Someone raised her hands upward. She heard the clank and felt the cold of iron as shackles closed around the rope encircling her wrists. Then the hood was suddenly torn away, the burst of daylight requiring her eyes several blinks to adjust.

She tried to jerk backward when Captain Roderick’s face sharpened into focus, only a breath away. Her back collided with the train car’s wall, the hard surface trapping her in place.

Fury coated his features, cold eyes sweeping over her face as if calculating all the ways he might destroy her. “Did you and your team sink the *Soltana*?” he growled, his arm shifting before she felt the unmistakable prick of steel against her neck.

Cyra’s brow pinched. “The *Soltana*?”

“A steamship destroyed by three Castorian rangers six weeks before Willowwood,” Captain Roderick ground out. “A small unit of ten Clovian soldiers, including my younger brother,” he said, voice shaking, “pursued the retreating enemy into the Vinmore swamp. None of them returned. So, I ask again, did you sink the *Soltana*?”

Cyra blinked a few times, mind in a scramble. “I don’t know.”

A muscle flickered in his jaw, and the blade bit harder into her neck, though still not enough to break skin. “Did you kill my brother?” Roderick snarled.

“I don’t know,” she answered, schooling her features to hide all emotion as a series of memories cleaved through her mind. Images of a desperate

sprint through knee-high water as rain lashed at her face and lightning slashed across the black.

“Captain!” a voice from outside the train car shouted. “We need to leave now if we want to reach the Governor's estate before midnight.”

A growl rumbled from the back of Captain Roderick’s throat. With a visibly immense amount of effort, he pulled the blade away from her skin.

Something released in his other hand, and a force dragged down her wrists. Cyra caught herself before crashing to the floor, recovering just in time to watch as a wall of light swallowed Captain Roderick’s silhouette.

The train car’s door slid closed with a resounding *thud*, thrusting her into pure darkness save for a beam of soft golden light streaming in from the overhead windows, the openings little more than slits.

A cargo car, she determined, empty save for floating dust particles swirling with the disturbed air. A loose chain hung from her rope bindings, limiting her range of motion to a few feet. She could sit at least, a small comfort to her present circumstance.

At the other end of the cargo car stood Finn, shackled in a similar manner. “You’re a terrible liar,” he said, easing to his seat. “It’s a wonder no one discovered your hidden truths long before now.”

Technically, Hadara had discovered Cyra’s hidden truths, but she wasn’t about to correct him. Instead, she plopped to the metal floor, chains rustling with her movements. “It’s a wonder no one has lit your face on fire long before now.” Not her best comeback, but her brain wasn’t firing on all cylinders at the moment.

“Testy for someone who just got her wish,” Finn said as the train lurched into motion. “We’re on our way to Royce’s castle. Hope you don’t mind never seeing the light of day again.”

She gave him a shit-eating smile. “Perhaps you can turn this situation in your favor,” she said, guts lurching at the prospect of spending the next eight hours trapped in close quarters with Finn. “Given the obscene reward Royce placed on your head, maybe you can convince him to pay double for my capture.”

“I’m not doing this for the money,” he scoffed.

Cyra stared at him, frustration and exasperation twinning together with each pound of her heart. “Then why, Finn, for the love of all the Ancients—*why* are you doing this?”

A look glinted in his eyes she couldn’t interpret. “You seriously don’t know?”

“No,” she breathed. “I have no clue why you decided to wake up one day and ruin my life.” Her throat went dry as she added, “Or why you seem to hate me so much.” Thick silence coated the air between them, tightening her throat with each inhale.

“It’s not a hard one, Cyra.”

The resentment in his tone fanned the flames of her anger, and she didn’t resist the heat snaking up her spine along with something else. Something born long ago. The sadness in her heart she had thought long cured. It all cracked upon with raw and brutal vengeance.

“You left me, Finn,” she said. It was an effort to keep the quiver out of her voice. “You disappeared from my life like a coward.”

A long breath passed through Finn’s lips, and he looked suddenly exhausted, ready to surrender some small weight, “Would you like to know why? The whole truth?”

Cyra’s heart beat a little faster, uncertainty pricking at the edges of her mind, as if warning her to answer *no*. To keep that particular heartache permanently locked away. Instead, she said, “Yes.”

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Chapter 22

Warrior Track

Ten Years Ago

"Alexander Bashar," Dean Malcom called, his resonant voice booming over the assembly hall. "Healer Track, Second Class."

Every name poured more nerves into Cyra's blood, anxious energy combatting the hangover holding her head in a vice. She and her friends had overindulged the prior night, the new graduates all leaning into celebrations with unwavering enthusiasm and far too many bottles of sparkling wine.

The morning following the debauched revelry, however, was harsh and brutal. Cyra hadn't planned to be hungover during track assignment, but there was nothing to do about it now.

Her eyes shifted across the assembly stage, drinking in the eight people clad in purple robes—the Wyndfyre Academy Board. They had already issued the coming track assignments, having reviewed each first, second, and third-choice bids by the seated graduates. Everything was considered—the student's grades (both practical and academic) extra curricular activities, along with a personal essay on the desired first choice bid and why.

Nothing was guaranteed.

"Kualin Brixon," the dean continued, his eyes moving across the scroll in his hands. "Administrative Track, First Class." After every name, the student in question rose from their seat and marched to the stage before collecting their accepted bid. "Cyra Byrogan, Warrior Track, First Class."

Elation soared through her very soul, temporarily muting the pounding in her temples. She flashed a grin toward her friends, each one beaming as she walked to the stage with a broad smile. After claiming an official-looking scroll, she returned to her seat, giving those yet to be called hopeful looks.

“Fabien Calderis, Warrior Track, First Class,” Dean Malcom called. “Finn Calderis, Warrior Track, First Class.”

A bloom of relief stretched the corners of Cyra’s already broad smile. This was it. All her dreams were coming true; the life she pictured unfolding before her eyes as if fate deemed it so.

“Nailah Damarin, Healer Track, First Class.”

It went on like this for some time, bouts of cheers and claps and smiles as many achieved their first choice, scowls and grimaces and somber looks for those who didn’t.

“Pippin Howke, Builder Track, First Class.”

Cyra released another breath of relief, clapping for her friend. So far so good—until the dean called Aurelia’s name. “Aurelia Lassiter, Builder Track, First Class.”

The giddy joy filling Aurelia’s features for the last twenty-four hours blinked right off her face. Confusion riddled her gathering scowl as she rose on shaking legs, trudging toward the stage.

When she accepted the scroll, her lips parted as if tempted to argue, to make an appeal here and now before the Academy Board. Rational sense trumped any such notion, and she returned to her seat. Her lips pursed, wide eyes pointedly not looking toward her friends, who all exchanged worried side-glances.

A furrow stitched between Akira’s brows, right knee bouncing as if fearing her first choice might slip away too.

“Akira Rhoki, Warrior Track, First Class.”

A long breath passed through Akira’s lips, making her way to the stage. Cyra cheered. Aurelia, however, did not move—only sat rigid in her seat, face fixed with crushing failure as she blinked away tears.

The list continued, bringing more joy and more disappointment. Once Dean Malcom finished, he dismissed the graduated seniors.

Aurelia immediately rushed out of the room ahead of anyone else.

“I think we’re in for a long night,” Cyra said, and she wasn’t wrong. They spent the evening crowded together in their dorm room, consoling a

very loud, very mournful Aurelia.

“Oh, come on, Aurelia,” Pippin encouraged. “You’ll be apprentice training with me, is that so bad?”

“It’s not what I wanted,” Aurelia cried, scrubbing tears off her cheeks. “It’s not what I planned.” Her watery eyes found Cyra. “For our whole lives we talked about futures down the Warrior Track together.”

And they had. Warrior Track, First Class, was the most prestigious amongst post-graduate tracks, presenting opportunity for those part of the aristocracy and those hoping for appointments within the Castorian military or government. The vast majority of the elected parliament were warrior-trained with the pathways providing the most national recognition. The royal court especially celebrated matches between Warrior Track graduates, with many of the nobility encouraging their children down this course as a matter of pride and honor.

This future was always part of Aurelia’s plan. A chance to be noticed. To find her match. To stay by Cyra’s side.

“You two are going to be famous warriors and forget me!” Aurelia sobbed.

“That’s not true,” Cyra insisted for at least the third time that evening. When Finn padded into the room, her heart immediately lifted, then quickly stuttered when she met his eyes. They were dark with intensity.

She slid off the bed, huddling Finn in the corner of the room. “Is something wrong?” she breathed. The energy around him was odd, emotions churning behind his eyes.

“I don’t think so,” he said, but the furrow of his brows argued otherwise. Across the room, Aurelia released a loud sob, dramatically flinging against the bed.

“My life—my future is over!”

“We can talk tomorrow,” Finn insisted with a smile far too tight in the corners.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her gut urging to discover the truth now, but her heart begged her to stay with Aurelia.

It would be fine. She would talk to Finn in the morning.

Except by morning, he dismissed whatever it was, offering little more than a shrug. A fuss over nothing.

In hindsight, Cyra really wished she had trusted her gut.

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“All right, cadets,” said Kasian as he paced along the line of thirty trainees. His boots crunched into the soft sand of the open-air arena, about half the size of a fireball field. A running track and weight room stood just beyond the arena’s fencing, joined by a smattering of brick buildings. The entire complex was situated on the eastern edge of the capital city of Tarrinth, the cityscape framing the Camp Ravenwood training grounds—their home for the next year. The cadets had already nicknamed the complex, Camp Hazywood due to its proximity to the Industrial Quarter, the afternoon breeze wafting a constant cloud of smoke and haze over the grounds.

Much to Cyra’s delight, the seventeen Wyndfyre students accepted as First Class Warriors were all placed in the same section. Kasian being named as their section leader only added a burst of excitement to the next chapter of her life.

Well into the Leadership Specialty, Kasian had his pick of appointments. Cadet Section Leader was his top choice. As for becoming this particular unit’s section commander? Cyra suspected the circumstance was not a coincidence. Whatever royal strings he had pulled, she was thankful. She rarely saw her brother these days.

“The next year will be the hardest of your life.” Kasian clasped his hands behind his back as he spoke to the cadets, all matching in their olive-green fatigues. “Warrior Track training will be nothing like school. School is finished. Over the next year, you will face dangerous situations. You will be pushed to your limits. And not all of you will move on to specialties.”

It was odd seeing her brother so serious, Cyra struggling to keep her face steady.

“All of you are here without crystals, correct?” His blue eyes shifted down the line.

“Yes, sir,” the cadets replied in unison.

“Good.” Kasian nodded, resuming his march across the off-white sand, the harsh summer sun shifting his shadow over the uneven surface. “Because in real life, you may not always have access to your preferred weapons. As a warrior, you must be as resourceful a fighter as you are a Syphon. So, for the first seven months of training, we will work without crystals.”

All the cadets exchanged wary looks of surprise. No crystals?

"You will first learn to fight with your hands," Kasian continued, "fight with weapons, even with basic firearms. Only then will we return to this." He held up an elemental crystal. "Now, break into lines. We begin with basic fighting positions."

The cadets followed orders, quickly mirroring Kasian's instructional moves as he walked around and made corrections. Next to Cyra, Finn mimicked the fighting stances with his usual effortlessness. With Fabien on his other side, both brothers showed off their natural abilities.

Cyra suppressed a smirk. Of course the Fantastic Brothers would settle into Warrior Track training with annoying ease. Akira worked just in front of her, attacking the present task with her usual focused vigor.

Wyndfyre students grouped together certainly bore advantages . . . and one disadvantage. Cyra's gaze swung to the cadet on her left. Aedan Fletcher. *Groan*. Her mother's suggestion of Aedan as a potential partner only fueled her deep dislike of him. No matter, one aggravating lord's son was not going to dampen this next phase of her life.

With track training officially started, more changes greeted Cyra and friends—a new location, new people, and new beginnings. As for Aurelia, she was . . . adjusting.

"We'll still see each other," Cyra had said during their teary parting a few days ago. Tarrinth played host to all the First Class programs—a valuable perk Cyra and her friends planned to leverage as much as possible. "Every day off we'll spend time together—find all the fabulous places this city has to offer."

The words only partially mollified Aurelia.

She would cheer up, Cyra consoled herself. Tarrinth was the perfect place for people their age. The oldest and largest city in Castoria, Tarrinth was as beautiful as it was vast, made up of different architectural quarters and distinct neighborhoods. Plenty of places to explore when they had time. Unfortunately, time was a rare commodity for the trainees.

As was personal space.

Adjacent to the training arena, two large rectangular buildings made up the male and female first-year cadet barracks. Each trainee had a small cabinet for personal things with shared bathrooms attached to either end of the building. The new environment was, in a word, sparse. A sharp reminder

they were all at the bottom again, earning their way to more luxurious accommodations with time and experience.

Fine by Cyra. She was ready. She was eager.

In addition to daily morning drills with Kasian, afternoons were reserved for study. All cadets were required to work on a variety of topics including math, military history, strategy, and behavioral and social sciences. Between the punishing physical demands under Tarrinth's summer heat and rigorous academic curriculum—yielding hours of homework—there was little time for leisure.

Most rose to the challenge, working hard to impress their section commander and academic instructors. Everyone apart from one cadet, who showed up late to morning sessions, lazily worked on moves, and rarely completed homework assignments on time: Finn.

After a brilliant first week, his energies seemed to dwindle as time passed, like each day sapped away more and more of his motivation to be there.

Cyra hadn't noticed at first. Finn never had the best worth ethic, after all. She dismissed or made excuses for his behavior. But the more time that passed, the clearer it became that something was definitely wrong, and yet, every time she prodded, Finn either hedged the answer or assured her that everything was fine. Given the not-so-private sleeping arrangements and their intensive schedule, finding the time, energy, and location for intimacy presented another obstacle to their relationship. Things were decidedly *off* between them. The blissful end of their senior year now felt like a distant memory, not a mere two and a half months ago.

Despite both achieving their preferred Warrior Track bids, Kasian and Artemisia's relationship had not survived his first year of training. But Cyra was determined to succeed where they had failed. She just needed Finn to open up.

Today.

As the trainees trickled into the training arena, Kasian ordered everyone to line up. Finn arrived on time with just a few seconds to spare. But it wasn't his almost tardiness that sent an anxious jolt through her insides. It was the fact he looked terrible, dark circles shadowing his eyes and hair more unkempt than usual.

He wasn't the only one who looked like a sleep-deprived wraith, however. Aedan trudged onto the arena sands a full five minutes after their

eight o’clock start time. With bloodshot eyes and eyebags even darker than Finn’s, he looked haggard, stubble shadowing his normally clean-shaven face, tanned complexion splotchy.

“Take the day, Fletcher. Go home,” Kasian said solemnly.

The order surprised Cyra. No one was excused from training except for illness or injury.

“You didn’t hear?” Akira whispered at the startled look on Cyra’s face. “Lord Marcon Fletcher is dead. Found at the bottom of the stairs with his neck snapped, and a shattered bottle of wine next to his body.”

A pang of empathy chased the shocking news as Cyra watched Aedan slink back to the barracks. The altercation between Aedan and his father at the Champion’s Ball still settled an unhappy note in her mind. And if Aedan were anyone else, she would offer comfort without question. If she wasn’t dealing with her own troubles, she might seek out Aedan anyway.

For now, her focus was Finn.

After the morning session, she snagged his arm and dragged him toward the running track. “I know something has been bothering you, Finn,” she said, gripping his arm tighter when she felt him try to pull away. “You’ve been off for *weeks*. Tell me what’s wrong.”

The hardness edging Finn’s features was startling, his amber eyes full of uncharacteristic resentment. “It’s interesting how, when I’m late, I’m assigned laps, but today Aedan is late and he gets the day off.”

“His father died,” she said, scouring Finn’s face as if it might reveal the source of his present woes. She only found more questions.

“I wonder if a Clovian-born would be afforded the same reprieve,” he said coldly. “Of course, for most of us, it doesn’t matter. We’re completely isolated from our families.”

Confusion rattled through Cyra. Finn wasn’t bitter about his situation or circumstance, and certainly never voiced dissent. It was like someone else was talking through him. “What is this really about, Finn?”

“Nothing,” he said, bristling, and stormed away without another word.

An ache gnawed through Cyra’s chest, leaving her feeling lost. Following the afternoon lectures, she walked the track a few times, watching the sunset silhouette the visible spires of the city as somewhere within brick and stone and haze a bell chimed. She kept going until the last vestiges of indigo light faded, stars blinking awake across the clear sky.

She found no answers, tired muscles ushering her back to the barracks. She nearly missed the shadowed form sitting on the ground just outside the weight room, his back against the wall.

Finn? Her heart squeezed. No, not Finn.

Aedan stared at nothing in particular, features blank, hands resting on his knees.

Cyra almost kept going, remembering the last time she'd tried to offer emotional support, but when a tear glinted on his cheek, she couldn't help herself.

"What?" Aedan barked, quickly wiping his face. He scowled up at Cyra. "You thought I wasn't born with feelings, I'll bet? Must be quite amusing." His blue-green eyes glinted in the darkness, fresh hostility wafting off him like a strong cologne.

"I'm sorry about your father," she said all the same, drawing closer.

"Why? Because he was such a fine fellow?" A line stitched between Aedan's brows. "A disappointing end for a disappointing father."

"It's all right to be sad, Aedan," Cyra said gently. "To grieve his loss, no matter what kind of person he was."

A gravelly scoff cracked out of his throat. "He was a cruel bastard who got away with beating his wife and children for years because who would dare to admonish a Fletcher." Aedan lifted his head, throat bobbing as their eyes met. "I only wish he fell down the stairs drunk off his ass years ago."

Cyra's chest constricted at these words. "Aedan—"

"Save your pity." He shoved to his feet, impressive height towering over her. "I'll go back to being the prick everyone hates shortly."

"Aedan, that's not—"

"Not, what, accurate?" He arched a brow. "It's fine, Cyra, you don't need to pretend to like me. I know where I stand with you and yours." With that, he brushed past her without a backward glance.

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"Thus far in training," Kasian began, striding through the assigned pairings for the next morning's sparring session, "I have tried to match you with those of equal size and strength. Today, however, you will face opponents who outmatch you in strength and size, or those who *appear* smaller and weaker. In either case, you must learn to adapt."

Cyra faced Aedan—her assigned partner. *Awesome.*

He certainly had the size and strength advantage of the two of them, standing a good seven inches taller. His broad chest had filled out over the years, muscle complementing his good looks and sour disposition.

“For the physically stronger opponent,” Kasian continued, “your task is to focus on controlling your strength and force. Subdue your partner without causing them injury. It takes as much skill to apply strength as it does to know when and how to hold back. And remember, do not underestimate someone simply because you have physicality on your side. Hubris has taken down plenty of champions. For the partner who is physically weaker, focus on the defensive moves we’ve been practicing. Begin.”

Aedan immediately lunged at Cyra. The aggressive attack caught her off-guard, her defenses coming too slow. His right hand latched onto her arm, whirling her around before his knee slammed into the back of her legs.

She hit the soft sand as his arm curled around her neck. It all happened so quickly—rendering her completely helpless in moments.

“A bit more difficult winning without crystals,” he sneered, arm lingering around her neck for two seconds longer than necessary.

Seething, Cyra reclaimed her feet. Any lingering empathy for his troubles swiftly evaporated. *Malignant toad*. Moving back into position, she readied herself for the next attack—expecting to do better this time.

She didn’t.

Again, Aedan’s efficient yet brutal efforts brought Cyra to her knees, pinning both her arms in his iron hold and bending them painfully backward. When he finally loosened his grip, she shoved his hands away, anger and frustration marrying cold fury as she glared at him. “You’re supposed to be working on *control*, remember?”

Aedan only smirked. “Hard not being the superior one, isn’t it?”

Again and again they fought. And again and again, Cyra was met with a face full of sand, seasoned by Aedan’s cutting remarks. It wasn’t long before she sensed eyes on her—Finn counting each grunt of pain, each wince from Aedan’s increasingly rough handling.

Cyra’s frustration spiked when white-hot agony ripped up her spine. She had tried a flying kick, heel successfully connecting with Aedan’s lower back, but the living, breathing column of muscle barely swayed. Instead, he wheeled like a bee-stung bull, venom-filled eyes promising retaliation.

After another kick, Aedan grasped her ankle, iron grip unbreakable as he jerked her forward. She crashed to one knee before attempting to twist and throw a fury-born punch. He caught her fist, wrenching it behind her back before throwing her to the ground as if she weighed nothing. For extra asshole measure, he slammed a knee into her back.

The full brunt of his weight crushed her ribs. When she sucked in a rasping breath, sand clouded into her mouth. She coughed and choked and struggled, but Aedan didn't budge. "The rightful place for preening brats," he snarled into her ear. "Enjoy the taste of sand."

Her vision began to swim, lungs burning under the crush of Aedan's weight.

"Get off of her, you parasitic fuck!" Finn shouted before hurling himself at Aedan and knocking him sideways.

Cyra gasped for breath, scrambling onto her knees as she fought to clear the water from her eyes. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the crash and pummel of limbs—Finn on top of Aedan, closed fist connecting with his jaw.

Aedan quickly recovered from the surprise attack, shoving Finn aside before launching himself like a wolf onto flailing prey. The brutality of their frantic fight trapped Cyra in shocked stillness. Finn was fast and scrappy, but Aedan was stronger, his punches devastating.

"Stop!" Cyra cried, looking for Kasian. Her brother was on the other side of the training arena, chin turning in the direction as if just noticing the disturbance. When her attention returned to the fight, Finn was on his knees, clutching his ribs.

Blood coated Aedan's lips like ghoulish paint, a snarl curling on his face as he wound up his next punch. Fabien intercepted with a hard shove to Aedan's shoulder, sending him stumbling. Thinking quickly, Cyra thrust out her leg, just managing to trip the glowering tower of muscle and sending him sprawling to the sand with a satisfying *thump*.

"I don't need your help," Finn spat, battling to his feet after refusing Fabien's offered hand. The look Finn pinned on his brother's face knocked the air from Cyra's lungs far more viscerally than Aedan's knee to the back. She had never seen Finn bite at Fabien like that. And by the startled look in Fabien's amber eyes, neither had he.

"Enough," Kasian cut in as Aedan reclaimed his feet, murder in his eyes. "The morning session is over. Fletcher, you'll be working with me

tomorrow.” His voice was adamant, features admonishing. “You appear to require further instruction on controlling your fighting techniques. Calderis.” He faced Finn. “Another attack on a fellow cadet out of order, and you will spend the rest of the session running laps. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” both cadets answered tightly. Neither looked at each other, as if doing so would most certainly spark another attack and earn a far harsher punishment.

Aedan promptly stormed off, while Cyra latched onto Finn’s arm and pulled him in the opposite direction of the dispersing cadets. “We need to talk.”

“Don’t expect me to apologize for attacking Fletcher,” Finn bit out. “He was out of line.”

“Agreed,” Cyra said quickly, studying his face, her first chance all morning. What she saw worried her more than she already was. A litany of bruises painted Finn’s exposed skin, the swell of a coming black eye on his face. Was all this from training? “Finn, stop pushing me away. Tell me what’s going on with you. Whatever it is, let me help.”

He gave her a look, as if contemplating something, gaze intense. Then he worked a hand through his sweaty hair, eyes tearing around the training grounds. “Don’t you think all of this is really fucked up?”

“What do you mean?” Her heart thundered, staring at the man she loved and feeling nothing but terror.

“This . . . whole thing, Cyra.” Finn gestured through the air. “I have a family out there—a world far away from Tarrinth, from Castoria, from this life.”

“Of course I know you have a family. You told me.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Right. I told you how the CCB stole me and my brother away at seven. For what? For the honor of becoming a Castorian Syphon? A prestigious warrior?” His eyes narrowed with tangible bitterness. “And like a good little soldier, I’ll make sure none of those pesky Clovians even think about rebelling against the very people who steal their children. It’s messed up, Cyra.”

Her heart halted in her chest, at a complete loss for words. What conjured these feelings? Why now? Finn rarely spoke of his Clovian family, never indicated he was unhappy with his life—quite the contrary. He was happy. *They* were happy. She couldn’t understand these sudden emotions, nor the hurt and anger she hadn’t known even existed.

“I don’t disagree, Finn,” she said, throat closing with every word, “but we can’t change things. Where we are right now . . . We’re starting a new future. Together. I thought you wanted that.” Her eyes burned, but she blinked it away.

This was just a moment. Everything would be fine.

Finn’s next words, however, argued otherwise. “I don’t know if I want this anymore—any of it.” And without another word, he marched away without once looking back.

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Chapter 23

FUNERALS

"Please, Fabien," Cyra begged. "I'm desperate." After many rounds of well-needed drinks with her friends the prior night, they had all agreed on one piece of advice: talk to Fabien. Cyra readily took the advice, but wished the background for this heart-to-heart wasn't Lord Marcon Fletcher's funeral procession.

With time off scarce, it was either today or waiting another ten days. And every hour of this strain in her relationship with Finn was torture. Today, her schedule was wide open—until orders from the Crown shattered all her plans.

The king and queen were unable to attend the funeral, though Cyra suspected their absence had more to do with Lord Marcon being a miserable prick than actual royal business. They selected Cyra to act as royal representation, along with her Uncle Mathus and Aunt Thea.

The trio, at least, suffered in unity.

Her presence was only required for the procession, to be publicly seen mourning the death of a fellow aristocratic. The rest of the events around a noble's death were intimate, traditionally only attended by family and close friends. Given Lord Marcon's asshole tendencies, she imagined those gatherings would be quite intimate indeed.

Refusing to waste this precious time, she convinced Fabien to join her as the procession reached the Old City Center, while Finn busied himself

with extra assignments due to his most recent failed exam.

The Old City Center was a large oblong plaza, lined with shops and markets. Tarrinth's city hall dominated the edifices, its reaching White Bell Tower chiming the midday hour while servants, and familial associates completed a slow journey around the edges before marching in the direction of the family's mausoleum.

Mathus and Thea rode in an open-air carriage just ahead of where Cyra and Fabien followed on foot. Any time Cyra felt the bite of tears, she focused on the couple. Her uncle rarely failed to brighten her mood, a grin always playing on his lips, his smile alight with cheer. He bore similar coloring to his royal sister—same blue eyes and cinnamon-brown hair, same fair complexion. The mild paunch in his midsection was just a touch larger than the last time Cyra saw him, his receding hairline more advanced as he edged closer to middle age.

Thea still looked at Mathus with the blissful admiration of an adoring teenager. And Cyra's uncle never looked at Thea with anything but pure, unconditional love. It was as if they lived in their own bubble of joy and warmth and happiness. Their fifteen-year marriage was something Cyra admired, something she longed to achieve for herself. Had thought she was on her way there, but it was all shattering with no clear reason why, and it was driving her mad.

"If you know something, tell me," Cyra pleaded after seeing just a hint of hesitation in Fabien's expression.

His lips parted, but before he could answer a small figure latched onto Cyra's side. "Cousin Cyra!" Oralia shouted. The newly turned seven-year-old thrust a flower into Cyra's hand—a white rose tied with a black ribbon. As per Castorian tradition, the children of friends and family distributed flowers to the public as symbols of both life and death. The activity, if nothing else, gave them something to do during the long march.

"Thank you, Oralia," Cyra said, swallowing hard as she accepted the flower, her burning eyes sliding between her young cousin and the girl at her side, Tess Fletcher. "I'm sorry for your loss, Tess."

The girl only nodded, clutching her basket of flowers tighter. Tess didn't resemble her older brother much, her white-blond hair far paler than Aedan's sandy locks. At ten, Tess was tall for her age. Her willowy frame and soft features made her look delicate and fragile—so unlike her bulky,

broody brother. Only her eyes resembled Aedan's piercing blue-green irises, the color of the sea on a sunny day.

Oralia claimed Tess's arm and pulled her toward a new target for flower delivery.

"A week after training began, Finn received a letter," Fabien said as soon as they were alone, yanking Cyra's attention back to him, her pulse accelerating at the admission. "I'm not supposed to tell you about it. Finn made me promise."

"Fabien," she whispered, barely able to say his name. This was it, the answer to whatever infected the man she loved.

A long-resigned sigh left his lips. "It was a letter from our mother. Somehow she found a way to get a message to Camp Ravenwood—to Finn." His throat bobbed, eyes flickering around the winding procession of people dressed in mournful finery. "Our father died in the spring."

Cyra's heart sank, a few things Finn had said now making sense. "Oh, Fabien, I'm so sorry." Empathy swelled for Fabien, for Finn, but the feeling was joined by a jab of confusion. Why wouldn't Finn tell her this?

"I barely remember our father. He was always working." Fabien's gaze latched onto a small group of people, all wearing cobalt blue. They handed out pamphlets to those passing through the large plaza. "Something about the letter," he went on, "affected Finn in a way I don't understand. He wouldn't show it to me, only said that our mother wants us to come home, back to Saraneca."

Everything inside Cyra twisted, a prick of hurt chasing the confusion. She almost didn't notice a pamphlet being thrust into her hand.

"Representation or referendum!" cried a young man wearing cobalt blue. "It's time for change, now!" He jogged away as jarringly as he appeared, continuing to enthusiastically distribute his pamphlets to any passerby who gave him an ounce of attention. And many who didn't.

The distraction worsened her tumultuous emotions. Instinctively, she glanced down, eyes skirting over a flyer supporting adding parliamentary seats for Clovian representation.

"Are you going to go to Saraneca?" Cyra managed to work the words through her closing throat. She wasn't ready to ask about Finn, not yet.

"A journey to and from Saraneca costs far more than our monthly allowance," Fabien said. "It would also take weeks. We won't have that kind of leave until next summer. And—" He hesitated, jaw ticking at least

twice before he added, “According to Finn, our mother said we can only return home if we renounce our Castorian lives and never return here.”

Never return. The words crashed through Cyra like a bullet. “So what will you do?” She forced herself to ask it, stalling the actual question trapped in her chest.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a group of people entering from the north side of the plaza. Based on their painted faces and boisterous expressions, she guessed they had just come from a fireball match, the city’s stadium only a few blocks from the Old City Center. The sagging flags loosely clutched in their grasps confirmed her suspicion.

Fabien raked a hand through his short hair. The gesture was so achingly like his brother that a lump clotted her throat, the similarities between them sharp and visceral in that moment.

“I don’t want to leave my life here,” Fabien said, anguish edging his tone. “And despite the kingdom’s flaws”—he glanced down at the flyer clutched loosely in Cyra’s hand—“I have dreams and people I’m not ready to let go of. Not yet.”

Cyra's heart pulled in different directions. Surely Finn felt the same way. Right?

Still, her pulse quickened, fear hacking at her insides as the dreaded question finally readied on her lips. Sudden shouting caught her attention. Several fireball fans were locked in a heated exchange with the cluster of Clovian sympathizers. A large, mustached man with a green stripe painted across his face roughly grabbed a stack of pamphlets and tossed them into the air, the papers scattering like confetti.

“Finn can’t be considering . . .” She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

“I don’t know” was all Fabien said, confirming her fears. “Something about the letter . . . It’s eating at him. He won’t tell me why.” A defeated sigh slipped past his lips. “You’re not the only one he’s pushing away.”

Cyra struggled to breathe, blinking to clear her eyes, knees threatening to buckle. Another shout drew her attention back to the plaza’s center as a surge of people crowded the open space. The number of bodies had doubled in a matter of seconds, raised fists and red faces ready to explode in violence all centered around the Clovian protestors.

The tension erupted. Fists flew, casts indiscriminately ripping through the churning throng—belligerent emotions shifting between agitation, fury,

and panic.

“Lieutenant General!” Mathus called to Vance, who rode a horse leading their carriage. “Call for the City Watch Guards!” Her uncle did not wait for Vance’s confirmation before jumping out of the stalled carriage and racing toward the escalating tussle.

He wind-casted several rough-looking fireball fans apart, stopping them from hitting and kicking a man in cobalt blue. Though Mathus didn’t present the most intimidating image, his voice was loud and carried well, his casts strategically wielded. He struck the brawlers with a wave of water as he battled through the mash of people to rescue the unfortunate man, curled into a fetal position on the ground.

“Olaria!” Thea cried, standing up in the carriage to scan the crowd. After several frantic seconds, her panicked eyes found Cyra.

Nothing needed to be said. Cyra launched herself into the mayhem.

“Tess!” another voice yelled, and she saw Aedan in her peripheral vision. He was dressed identical to Cyra and Fabien in his formal olive-green cadet uniform—required attire whenever off Ravenwood grounds. Like Thea, fear filled his eyes, the emotion so strange on his steely disposition. With his formidable size, he carved through the crowd as if slicing through stalks of wheat, calling his sister's name.

Cyra focused on her own task of finding Olaria, praying she and Tess were together. Fabien followed behind her, struggling to stay close. The crush of people was disorienting. Rank body odor mixed with stale liquor assaulted her nose, the noise a chorus of shouting and screaming. It was hard to focus on anything other than avoiding fists and casts. An elbow smashed into her nose, not hard enough to break cartilage, but enough to shoot pain up the bridge and across her forehead. Water filled her eyes and she felt the slide of blood down her chin.

“Oralia!” she screamed, wiping her nose with her coat sleeve, debating if casting would help or hurt the situation. A shoulder careened into her back, flinging her forward so she went to one knee. Through the piles of legs, she caught a glimpse of tawny curls and a silver-blond ponytail. “Fabien! I see them!” she called over her shoulder, unsure if he was even still behind her, but she wasn’t going to let the girls out of her sight.

She charged headfirst through the sea of people, using wind casts to protect against the mob. “It’s going to be all right!” she cried when she reached the girls.

They looked so small amidst the jumbling crowd, huddled together on the ground as legs and knees bumped and brushed past them. Tess clutched one of her own arms, agony gripping her youthful features—face pale, cheeks streaked with tears. Oralia sobbed at her side, arms wrapped tightly around her knees, eyes squeezed shut as if trying to disappear herself from this maelstrom of bodies.

Cyra used another wind cast to clear a breach through the crowd before hooking either arm around Oralia and Tess, and steadying them both against her sides. Fabien reached them just in time to block three drunk imbeciles from colliding with Cyra and the girls.

“Carry Tess!” she shouted over the din as she lifted Oralia and secured her against her chest. Fabien, likewise, scooped Tess into his arms, and they battled their way through the thrashing crowd, just starting to disperse with the onslaught of the City Watch.

“Tess!” The strangled cry reached Cyra’s ears, and she found Aedan in the chaos. He frantically tossed aside soldiers and brawlers alike as if they weighed nothing. His eyes were wide, panicked as they latched onto his sister, his broad chest heaving a labored breath. Tears threatened as he took Tess from Fabien, who clung to her brother’s coat as he cradled her against his chest. He gasped into her hair, squeezing his eyes shut, his relief almost palpable. Then he gave Cyra and Fabien a tight nod of gratitude before carrying his sister away.

With blasting whistles and shouting voices, the City Watch reclaimed control of the scene by the time Cyra had deposited Oralia into Thea’s arms. “Where’s Uncle Mathus?” she asked, breathless, wiping more blood from her nose.

“Ensuring no one kills the protesters,” Thea said, her cheeks damp with tears as she hugged her daughter. "The soldiers want everyone to return to their homes. Best escape back to Camp Ravenwood.”

Cyra didn’t need to be told twice.

Only when the pandemonium faded into the background as she and Fabien left the plaza behind did she realize Fabien was struggling to keep pace with her. When they paused in an alleyway, he slumped against the wall with a hissed breath, as if pained.

“I thought it was just a punch,” he grunted. When he raised his hand from his abdomen, his palm was stained red. “Not a punch.”

“Shit,” she cursed, racing to his side. “Can you make it to Ravenwood?”

“Hopefully.”

Through a series of grunts and groans, they hobbled the mile or so back to the training grounds, heading straight for the infirmary. Inside the long room were rows of empty cots and chairs. Two women stood outside an office room, analyzing a clipboard. To Cyra’s surprise, she recognized Nailah.

“Cyra!” Nailah said when she looked up at their approach. “Apprenticing started last week, so I volunteered for Camp Ravenwood to hopefully see you and Akira.” She blanched at her words. “Well, I wasn’t hoping for either of you to be injured, but—”

“Nailah,” scolded the older woman, steps echoing through the empty space. “Do we have a patient?”

Nailah straightened. “Yes,” she squeaked, eyes sweeping over Fabien’s ashen face before landing on his abdomen. She rushed to guide him toward an empty cot, one hand on his elbow, the other on his back. “Oh, dear, Fabien, what happened?”

“A bunch of drunk idiots started a brawl in the Old City Center,” Cyra said.

“This looks like a stab wound,” Nailah said after unbuttoning Fabien’s coat and rolling up his shirt.

“A stab wound,” the older woman repeated, claiming a stool next to the cot and scrutinizing the injury over a pair of purple-rimmed glasses. “In this location, Nailah, the greatest risk is nicking the intestines, which . . .?

“Would lead to infection followed by a long and painful death,” Nailah said.

“Great,” Fabien mumbled, eyes struggling to stay open.

The sound of a door opening and closing pulled Cyra’s attention away, and her entire body tensed as Finn marched down the center aisle toward them. “What happened?” he growled. He was shirtless, his bare chest glistening with sweat as if he was just coming from a punishing workout.

“Some drunk idiot stabbed me,” Fabien grumbled.

“What?” Finn’s complexion went ashen as his eyes worked over his brother.

“No talking,” the healer chided, flashing a pointed look between Fabien, Cyra, and Finn. “In fact, everyone but the patient, leave my work space. This is a teaching infirmary. Those unnecessary, out.”

Cyra shot Nailah a side-glance that said *good luck training under this prickly puss*.

When Finn looked ready to argue, Cyra grabbed his arm and ushered him away. They didn't need him picking a fight with the healer.

"Fabien will be fine," Cyra assured him, quickly explaining what happened in the Old City Center. When he said nothing in response, she offered up a weak smile. "We're training to be warriors. A light stabbing is inevitable."

Finn only looked at her, tempestuous expression finally easing to something else, something far more worrying. "I've made a decision," he said, the resignation in his voice flooding her veins with ice.

"Does it have to do with the letter from your mother?"

Finn blinked in surprise before he glared back toward the infirmary. "Fabien told you," he said, a hint of betrayal in his voice.

"Yes, Fabien told me," Cyra said, heartbeat a wild drum in her chest as her lungs strained with her next breath. This was it. This was their moment to fix everything, or watch it all come undone. "Please talk to me, Finn. Tell me what you're thinking."

It was like someone siphoned all the emotion from his face, eyes going so jarringly cold, she almost took a step back. "I'm leaving. And I'm not coming back."

The world froze, and she along with it. Or perhaps it simply ended, and her heart ceased to beat. Her lungs ceased to work. Either way, she wasn't sure how to find her way forward. How to breathe. How to consider existing without him. "You can't leave," she choked out, reaching for his hand. He jerked away.

"Oh, I think I can," he said, jaw clenched. "Castoria is nothing but a fucked-up place run by fucked-up people. And I won't be a part of it. Not anymore."

Everything in her body went cold, her vision blurring with a torrent of tears. "Three months ago, we were in love, all in, *together*." Her voice hitched, the corners of her mouth pulling down no matter how hard she fought to keep them even. "What changed, Finn? Tell me, and let me help. Please."

"My family needs me, Cyra," Finn said, his throat bobbing. "This kingdom has already stolen too much from them. I need to give them something back."

It was like a punch directly to the heart. Confusion and rejection spun a rising storm in her chest threatening to smash her into a million pieces. She stared at him, lips parted, eyes swimming as she waited for him take it all back, and return words of love and assurance.

He didn't.

"Then promise me you'll return," she said through a broken whisper, all semblance of normal speech caught in her throat as she struggled to form words. "And I will wait for you." She reached for him again, but he eluded her.

A sob caught in her chest as a fresh wave of rejection slammed into her too-tight lungs. *This wasn't happening. Couldn't be happening. He couldn't just leave, not like this*.

"I can't make that promise, Cyra." The resignation in his tone was resolute and unmovable, his eyes hard and empty as he stared back, seemingly immune to her pain. "I won't make it."

I won't make it. The words cleaved her in two, unleashing only hurt and anger and agony, carving a wound she was quite sure would never heal. The promise of a life together, a shared future full of hope and joy and happiness crumbled before her eyes.

Cyra looked anywhere but Finn's face as the tears fell unhindered down her cheeks. She longed for the pain of her injured nose, longed to feel anything but the slow crushing of her heart.

"Find someone else, Cyra," Finn said, the hollowness in his voice another lash to her battered soul. The fatalistic tone was worse than angry defensiveness—so much worse. His entire countenance, entire body, slumped as if presenting himself for some grave fate. "You have to find someone else," he breathed before closing his eyes and turning away, as if battling his own anguish.

"I don't want someone else," she rasped, forcing her gaze back to him. "I want *you*. I love *you*." She didn't care how pathetic she sounded. She would do anything to change his mind, to fall back to what they were. To undo whatever had caused this change in the man she loved.

For a long, breath-stilling moment she thought she detected a hint of hesitation in his expression—a slight twitch of his brows, a touch of regret in his eyes. Her heart gave a tenuously lift before crashing right out of her body.

“I can’t love you, Cyra” was all he said. Then he stalked away without a backward glance. As she watched his form disappear, she sank to her knees in a fit of wracking sobs—her heart, her soul, all semblance of happiness utterly shattered. Torn apart from the inside out, leaving her a broken whimpering mess.

This was goodbye. The forever kind of goodbye. He was leaving. Leaving the Warrior Track. Leaving Castoria. Leaving *her*. He would not elaborate on his reasons. But then, she wouldn’t have accepted them anyway.

By the next day, he was gone.

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Chapter 24

Royce Castle

Present Day

"You just left," Cyra said, remembering Finn's words like they had shattered her heart just yesterday instead of ten years ago. She closed her eyes, forcing a steady breath in and out of her lungs. "I stood there like a blubbering fool, begging you to love me. And you said 'I can't love you.' Told me to find someone else." Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them away. Finn didn't deserve them. "For months I hoped you would show up and take it all back, prove I mattered to you enough to stay, but you didn't."

Finn said nothing, steely features mostly obscured in shadow, his thoughts a mystery. The empty train car shook in jerking motions, rattling their chains and thickening the silence as they stared across the darken space at each other. When he finally spoke, his voice was devoid of emotion. "I had to leave."

"Why?" Cyra snapped. After locking everything away for so long. It was shocking how badly she wanted answers now, a decade later. It had always been a gnaw at the back of her mind, a lingering question she had thought she had moved past over the years.

"The day of track assignment, your mother paid me a visit," Finn said, bitterness greasing his tone.

Cyra's mouth dropped open. "She—*what*?"

Finn scoffed. "The queen was still at the school after graduation. Such a lovely woman, your mother." He cocked his head. "Told me to break up

with you or face devastating consequences. I thought it was just a bluff at first, or maybe some twisted sort of test. You warned me your family might try to end our relationship, so I brushed it off. I didn't think they'd stoop as low as they did." His jaw ticked. "Then, a week into warrior training, I received that letter from my mother. It was more than just news of my father's death and a plea for me to come home."

Cyra's heart pounded over the rattling sound of wheels, dread slicing through her body as she waited for him to continue.

"My mother wrote that Castorian soldiers had arrested my elder brother," Finn went on. "Accused him of being a member of Nation of Clovia rebels."

Cyra's mind reeled. "But . . . but your brother . . . Takota was—"

"At the time my elder brother was running our parents' store in Saraneca," Finn shot back, "minding his own business, until soldiers raided the shop and arrested him on false charges. My mother said I had two months to end things with you. If I failed to do so, my brother would be brought to the capital and executed for treason."

What in the seven fucking hells? Bribery was something Cyra had expected, but threatening Finn's Clovian family? The thought never entered her mind. Shock was the most visceral feeling, but she resisted any other reaction, not until she heard everything.

"I didn't know what to do. I decided to wait, see if the threat was serious, slowly pulling away in case it was." Finn sighed a long, weary breath. "About a week before I left, orders came from the Chief Law Administrator of Tarrinth, who required my presence. When I arrived at the civic building in the Stone Quarter, soldiers brought me to a holding cell." Finn shifted, his set jaw and furrowed brow emerging from the shadows. "And there Takota was. Someone I had not seen since I was seven years old. He was chained. Beaten. And I knew the threat was real." He huffed a mirthless laugh. "But still, I hesitated like the selfish bastard I was, because fuck them for trying to steal away my life. To steal away Fabien . . ." He swallowed before adding in a quiet, almost reluctant whisper, "You."

The pain in his voice tore something open in Cyra, spilling free all those raw feelings she had spent years battling to keep at bay. She thought about the girl she once was, the girl in love, the girl with her heart broken, the months of aching sadness following Finn's abrupt departure. The anger and

confusion over why. Now she knew. It healed nothing, only left a sense of emptiness and a bitter taste on her tongue.

After Finn cleared his throat, she prepared for more devastation.

“When Fabien was stabbed during the brawl in Old City Center, it was the final straw. Maybe it was a coincidence, or maybe it was a warning. I couldn’t stall anymore. So the next morning I went to the Chief Law Administrator and demanded they put me and Takota on the next train out of Castoria.”

Tears welled in her eyes. And this time she did little to stop them. *Now you know what it’s like to have your world ripped from you. To lose everyone you cared about.* Finn’s words burned through her thoughts. Was this what he meant? Fabien, Cyra, his life in Castoria—all torn away because he chose to love her and she loved him back? Was this the reason Finn hated her now? Why he wreaked such havoc on the life she had built?

“I’m sorry, Finn.” It felt far too small, but it was all she had to offer. All she *could* offer after Lofton.

“Aw, don’t worry your pretty little head.” Finn’s cold sneer boiled with new venom. “And you found happiness again. Your next choice of partner must have just tickled your parents.” The statement earned a glare. “Then of course there are your illustrious war achievements—or crimes, depending on who you ask.” The words dripped with malice. “You became the perfect princess, soldier, spy—a royal daughter to make your powerful parents proud, no matter who you sent to hell along the way.”

Cyra’s empathy curdled. “I’m sorry for what my parents did to you—truly.” Her voice trembled, but she carried on. “I never imagined they would go to such extraordinary lengths, but I had no idea they had done any of this—were even capable. When you left, I was *devastated*. I waited for you to return for months. Wept for you. Pined for you. And yes, Finn,” she said, her tone hardening, “I eventually moved on—found love again, found purpose. I’ll not apologize for those things. Not to you. When the war began”—a shuddering breath pushed through her lips—“it chewed me up and spat me back out. I fell into the deepest well of darkness. I was drowning. Then something miraculous happened, something I didn’t deserve. Kindness found me in the form of a family, one who asked few questions and made no conditions for their love. They gave me a chance to start over. To find peace. So I chose to stay, and I was happy.”

Until you smashed it all to pieces.

Another tense silence settled over the train car, filled only by the low, uneven rattling of its wheels over the rails. “Tell me, Cyra,” Finn said icily. “Did you stay to find peace, or to run from your sins?”

“If you’re asking me about regrets, I have many.” The unrelenting image of the burning barn filled her mind. She shoved it right back out. “I did unforgivable things during the war, things that bring me far more shame than pride.” She stared down at her bound hands—the blood they had drawn could never be washed away. Some days, her guilt and sorrow and pain threatened to swallow her whole—the emotions a beast she battled daily. Living as Nyssa helped for a time, but Nyssa was gone, and the beast clawed at her insides.

“You can still seek forgiveness,” he said, soft tone surprising Cyra.

She lifted her eyes, heart hardening to stone. “Some things can’t be forgiven, Finn. I don’t expect you to understand.” Her eyes drifted to the small, narrow windows around the top of the train car, flashes of light occasionally breaking the shadows. “Maybe this is the fate we both deserve.”

Welcome silence fell. As the hours passed, Cyra drifted in and out of consciousness. The temperature within the car steadily warmed despite the advancing evening. Moisture in the air clung to her skin in an unpleasant sheen of wet.

They must be getting close to Royce’s castle in the swamp.

Long after dark had fallen, the train finally began to slow. The sliding doors to their temporary prison opened, a wave of humid air pouring in.

Yes, they had indeed arrived in the swamp.

Captain Roderick greeted them with disdain, as if he had spent the last eight hours stewing over how he might make them suffer. He ordered his soldiers to unchain their hands before leading Finn and Cyra out of the car by their tied wrists onto a broad wooden platform. Lanterns hung from wood beams, but beyond their soft glow lay only darkness.

Cyra required a few moments to orient herself, gaze tracing a zigzagging trail of lantern lights descending beneath their feet along a switch-backing wooden staircase. They stood on an elevated railway built high above the swamp, she realized, scouring the crisscrossing beams holding up the tracks until they disappeared into the dark.

Captain Roderick led the bound Syphons off the platform and down the lantern-lit steps. Wood creaked under their feet, light just bright enough to

illuminate a path—a path with seemingly no end. Under other circumstances, Cyra might be impressed by the architectural feat. At the moment, the never-ending stairs only inspired a sense of disorienting isolation. She felt like they descended into a strange, remote land—treacherous to enter, far more treacherous to leave.

What had Finn said about this place? It was a fortress surrounded by swamp, surrounded by swamp, and surrounded by more swamp after that.

When they finally reached the last of the steps, boots squishing onto soggy ground, Cyra guessed the train car waited some fifty feet above their heads, no longer visible from the bottom, overrun by inky darkness. Everywhere was overrun by inky darkness. The muggy air around them intensified, the suffocating environment made worse by the din of unseen nature: croaking frogs and shrieking cicadas and warbling birds. It made her feel far from civilization, from anyone and anything.

Out here, no one would notice if you disappeared.

Something splashed in the water, startling her. Only the dance of fireflies revealed any hint of the new world around them, their subtle glow animating reeds and tall grass but not much else. When one of their escorts angled their handheld lantern toward the noise, she spied the glint of water and a foreboding dread sank to the bottom of her empty stomach.

The path ahead, however, offered a promise of life—something other than darkness and creatures of the swamp. A stone castle soared up out of the nature. Lantern light bathed stone turrets, balconied windows, and crenellated ramparts as the group approached an impressive set of oak doors, flanked by two guard towers.

It was, indeed, a castle fortress smack in the middle of a swamp, an architectural marvel given the harsh surroundings.

Cyra’s muddy boots found stone as the group journeyed the final few yards to the castle’s grand steps. The massive oak doors at their top creaked open, and inside they went.

Candles and lanterns lit the entry hall, illuminating lavish wall decor complete with a blend of pastoral tapestries, antlers of various animals, and guns—lots and lots of guns.

The entryway yielded to a high-ceilinged gallery with an adjoining sitting room. A area rug covered the stone floor, surrounded by plush furniture that framed a grand fireplace and a large stone-carved mantle. The huge head of an elk hung above it, the animal’s glass eyes gazing at them in

blank terror. On either side of the massive head hung a series of paintings—hunting scenes, still-lifes, and a prominently positioned portrait of a man Cyra didn't recognize.

As the group loitered, she analyzed the portrait. The man stood triumphant next to a dead deer, a large rifle propped up in his left arm as his right hand rested limp on his bent knee, boot poised atop a rock. His cobalt-blue coat betrayed his status as a Clovian Naval Captain, medals and ribbons painted on his upper chest in loving detail. As for the man himself, she might place his age somewhere in his thirties. The pink hues of his skin denoted a fair complexion with blue eyes and shiny amber-brown hair. His most prominent feature was his bushy eyebrows and equally bushy handlebar mustache, which completely covered his upper lip and framed his wide chin in sharp contrast.

"Governor Royce," said Captain Roderick, pulling Cyra's attention away.

A man strutted through an archway, the spitting image of the portrait but for a few details: the living man was older, with far more lines around his eyes, and touches of gray salting his amber-brown hair. His round face was fuller and he boasted a subtle paunch in his midsection not represented in the hanging likeness.

"Dare my eyes deceive me!" the newcomer boomed, blue eyes glittering as they alighted on Finn. "The illusive Syphon is caught at last?"

Cyra darted a sideways glance, watching for Finn's reaction. He gave little away, steely face a cold mask.

"Yes, sir," Roderick said. "And with him, we believe, is Cyra Byrogan."

Discomfort shifted through Cyra as Governor Royce's penetrating gaze locked on her face. His features immediately animated with curious fascination as he stalked closer. "Could this really be the lost princess thought deceased?" he asked no one in particular, eyes raking over her as a smile spread across his face, lifting the sides of his ridiculous mustache.

Uncertainty dropped through her body. She wasn't sure if the avarice look was better than fear or hatred, but she attempted to mirror Finn's emotionless façade with, she suspected, middling success.

"Take this one below and see what Kade can glean." Royce nodded to Finn but kept his attention firmly planted on Cyra.

Finn's guarded expression slipped as soldiers ushered him from the room, his gaze briefly connecting with Cyra. Then he was gone.

She wasn’t quite sure what to feel as the soldiers led Finn away to some unknown location—to the ominous *below* for some sort of interrogation by a man named Kade. If Royce held imprisoned Syphons, she would wager her family’s fortune that Finn was about to join their ranks.

“And please remove our guest’s bindings.” The governor gestured at Cyra’s restraints. “She’s royalty, after all—or might be. I’d rather not give offense either way.”

Captain Roderick looked as though he’d rather wipe his ass with a cactus than cut Cyra’s restraints. “Governor, sir, you must be aware of her reputation during the war. If this is Cyra Byrogan, and half the rumors about her are true, you should keep her bound—or, better yet, send her below with Kade.”

Royce angled an indulgent, almost patronizing look at the captain. “There were over a hundred Castorian ranger teams working in Clovia during the war. And yet more than half their sins are attributed to the infamous princess.” He flashed Cyra an almost apologetic smile. “It was just too tempting, given your royal parentage and growing reputation toward the end of the war. The most common rumors would have us believe that you are some supernatural terror, able to be in multiple places at once.” He chuckled, as if he just made a clever jest.

A muscle ticked in Roderick's jaw. “Regardless—”

“Regardless, Captain, the war is over,” Royce crooned, facing the man. “Cyra is a guest here. I want her treated as such. Now, remove her ropes.”

With the enthusiasm of someone asked to saw off their own hands, Captain Roderick cut her bindings. The ropes fell away, bringing immediate relief to Cyra’s raw wrists. Roderick pinned her with a final glower before reluctantly stepping backward.

“Come,” Royce boomed happily, after dismissing Captain Roderick with a casual wave. “You look as though you require a drink.” He motioned to the nearest couch before steering himself toward a well-stocked drink cart. Atop the silver tray sat a set of gleaming crystal decanters. His fingers danced over the lavish toppers, selecting and opening one before inhaling a deep whiff. “Vinmore rye whiskey.” He released a luxurious exhale. “The best in Clovia.” He poured two glasses, lifting one toward a nearby candle and admiring the caramel-gold color. Then he glanced over at Cyra expectantly.

She felt Roderick's glare, the militia captain lingering in the hall before finally forcing his own departure, footsteps trudging away as if he walked through mud.

After hesitating for a handful of seconds, Cyra eventually joined Royce by the sofas, resigning herself to acclimate within these new surroundings before contemplating anything drastic. Besides, she could really use a drink.

Accepting Royce's offered glass, she claimed a seat in the center of a couch while Royce sat in a large armchair, promptly sipping from his glass before smacking his lips in satisfaction. Cyra likewise indulged. The whiskey was good—exceptionally good. The peppery flavor lingered on her tongue, chased by toasted notes of honey, cloves, and almonds. The delightful taste brought her right back to Lofton, enjoying a drink with Jiro on their balcony under the stars.

Oh, Jiro. The thought of him made her entire body ache, and she struggled to stay in the present. *Focus,* she silently scolded herself, *glean as much as possible about this man*. The most powerful man in Vinmore. *Remember that, Cyra. Remember where you are*—all but trapped in this castle hidden in a swamp with no idea how far she was from anything.

"So," Royce began, tearing his eyes away from his drink and affixing them to Cyra. "Care to confirm if you are, in fact, Cyra Byrogan?"

She met his questioning gaze, silently weighing the pros and cons of the truth. "If I was, what do you plan to do with me?"

Royce smiled. "As I said to Captain Roderick, you are a guest in my home."

"So, am I allowed to leave?"

Royce's smile turned coy, one brow arching upward, as if the question amused him. "Regardless of your true name, you stand charged with siphoning crystals, witnessed by several people in a town called Lofton—a crime in all four provinces of Castoria. As governor, I am willing to waive these charges, but in exchange I'd like the courtesy of hosting you as my guest."

Cyra narrowed her eyes. "Your guest . . . who is not allowed to leave."

Royce twisted the end of his mustache with his thumb and forefinger. "By all means, explore the grounds at your leisure. You will find it difficult, however, to venture too far from the castle. It was dark when you arrived, the night masking the vast, unforgivable landscape. My residence stands on an island surrounded by foul water full of considerably fouler creatures. I

possess a small rowboat, but unless you know where you're going, I really do not advise a swamp adventure. By train is the only sure way in and out. And at present, said transportation is currently away collecting my other guests." Royce's blue eyes glittered. "Your timing is most fortuitous. I'm hosting a party tomorrow night in celebration of my bid for reelection this coming fall. All the important families of Vinmore will be there. I would like to host you as my honored guest for the festivities."

Surprise shifted through Cyra, and she swallowed a stalling sip of whiskey. This one burned on its way down. "You want to introduce me as Cyra Byrogan to your guests?"

"Assuming that you are she, then yes, that is exactly what I want to do." Royce nodded. "You see, unlike the other Clovian provinces, Vinmore borders your fair kingdom. For four years, we have not heard a peep from your countrymen. I mean to change that. It's natural that our nations start talking again, start working together. I want to build a bridge, and the first step is happening right here, right now."

Cyra's brows rose. "You intend to make some sort of deal with Castoria."

"Those of us in politics call it diplomacy, but yes, something along those lines." Royce inclined his head. "All I ask is that you hear my plans over the coming days." He polished off his whiskey before promptly refilling his glass.

"And what of Finn?"

"Oh, I'm afraid the charges against your friend are far more grievous."

"He is not my friend," she said flatly.

"All the better, then." Royce cleared his throat. "Finn Calderis has been charged with smuggling contraband crystals from Castoria and selling them to organized criminal elements within Clovian borders. He faces severe penalties should he not cooperate—up to and including capital punishment." He allowed those words to resonate through the otherwise quiet room. Then, in a far friendlier tone, he asked, "So, will you attend my party tomorrow night?"

Cyra finished off her drink, eying the empty glass as she considered the question. What choice did she have? She did not want to end up wherever Finn was now—which was, no doubt, far less comfortable than her present environment. Planning a prison break followed by an escape would be more easily achieved with free rein of this place.

She glanced back to Royce. There was a hint of malevolence behind his cordial charm that warned her not to test him. She wouldn't. Not yet. "Well, I suppose I have nowhere else to be," she said, offering up her empty glass.

Royce grinned, straight teeth just poking out from his long bristles, clearly pleased with this answer as he gladly refilled her glass. "I never imagined Castorian royalty would fancy whiskey."

"I think there is a lot about me that might surprise you, Governor."

His mustache twitched. "I do hope so. With a reputation like yours, I'd be very disappointed to find you boring."

"Boring is exactly what I have become of late. So, you may want to prepare yourself for disappointment."

Royce raised one bushy brow. "I read about your exploits during the war, and I have spoken at length with Governor North." An amused chuckle escaped his lips. "The man had much to say about you—nothing kind, I am afraid. I'll spare you the details."

Cyra suppressed a cold smile. "I promise I am not quite the . . . Hell Spawn Demon who Adonis North no doubt described." She waited for Royce's inevitable scowl, condemnation of her actions during the years they were enemies. Royce fought in the war, after all. He may not react with the same venom as Jiro or Roderick, but she expected some admonishment.

To Cyra's surprise, Royce only released another light chuckle, as if simply entertained. "Your presence entices my interest, assuming you are, in fact, the elusive princess."

Entices his interest . . . ominous. Cyra only sipped her refreshed drink.

"I know, it may seem odd for a Clovian politician to be fascinated by a former enemy," Royce went on, seeming to enjoy hearing himself talk. "But I have always been fascinated by Syphons and their power. I long to understand why some are born with this magic and some are not."

Cyra weighed her response. "So, you aren't looking for a cure?"

A boisterous laugh rumbled past his lips. "Now where did you hear such an outlandish thing?"

"A rumor," she said casually. "The same rumor which said you are keeping Syphon prisoners somewhere within these walls." Her heart sped up with the not-so-subtle accusation, studying his expression closely.

He revealed nothing but amusement. "The only people I have in this place are criminals, such as your friend." He spoke as smoothly as any seasoned politician, half-truths woven beautifully on his silver tongue.

“Not my friend,” she muttered over another sip of whiskey.

“It’s not surprising many paint me as a villain,” Royce said, reclining in his armchair. “Consequences of the political games we play, I’m afraid. I view myself as a seeker of knowledge. I want to unlock the secrets of Syphons. To understand the source of their magic. For example, who were the first Syphons?”

Cyra frowned at this turn of conversation. “Mei and Narses?” she offered with an indulgent smile.

“A convenient tale, to be sure,” Royce tutted with just a hint of intellectual pretension, as if Cyra was a student who provided the wrong answer to an obvious question. “I believe the birth of siphoning powers goes much further back than Mei and Narses—to the first people of this continent, the Primorians.”

Cyra almost laughed. “The Primorians are a myth.”

“Are they?” He sipped from his glass. “Or perhaps their blood runs through your veins, providing the true origins of your power.”

This man is a nut, she thought, covering her reaction behind her glass. “And what do you hope to achieve in your quest of discovery?” she asked with honest curiosity.

A broad smile stretched his comical mustache. “"I seek a path to control fate, perhaps even change the fate of those not so blessed with magical gifts.”

Cyra had to choke down an incredulous laugh. “You wish to be a Syphon?”

“I wish to explore if such a thing is possible,” Royce said, the fanatical glint in his eyes darkening.

Discomfort pricked at Cyra. There was definitely something off about this man. “Well, I wish you luck, Governor,” she said lightly, downing the rest of her drink before standing up. “I must apologize, however, as I am quite eager for a bed.” And drinking more on an empty stomach was a bad idea.

“Of course, of course, you must rest before the party,” Royce said, rising as well. “We will talk more tomorrow. I’ll have one of my servants show you to your room. Goodnight.”

The unsettled feeling persisted as a young woman led Cyra to one of the many rooms in this strange place. For now, she was eager for sleep—to rest

her exhausted mind and body. Tomorrow she would gauge just how much trouble her new surroundings heaped onto her already present woes.

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Chapter 25

The Catacomb Scenario

Nine Years Ago

"Come on, Rhoki," Kasian sighed impatiently as Akira squared off against Aedan. "You should have these moves mastered by now."

Sparring a few feet away, Cyra tried to ignore the negative feedback Akira received. But as the hour progressed, ignoring Kasian's scolding words and Akira's frustrated grunts became increasingly difficult.

Aedan claimed the upper hand over Akira again and again with the ease of a bear scooping a fish from a barrel. If anything, Cyra suspected he was holding back.

It was not Akira's day—hell, it was not her month.

Kasian had been relentless with their hand-to-hand combat drills for seven months. Seven cursed months without the glimpse of a crystal. It was enough to fray anyone's frustrations.

Though Cyra struggled with the physical fighting aspect of the Warrior Track, she had managed a steady improvement since the program began. Akira, not so much, and Cyra couldn't understand why. The girls worked out together following afternoon lectures, shared a similar build and physicality, but for some reason Akira struggled with speed and confidence during hand-to-hand fighting.

"You're hesitating, Rhoki," Kasian said, a pronounced scowl gripping his features. "Move with assurance, with instinct. Your defenses should be

natural by now.” His instructions did little to help their intended target as Aedan again sent Akira to the sand with a fairly obvious move.

A furious growl rumbled from Akira’s lips as she shot back to her feet, hands balling to fists, wild eyes fixed on Aedan.

“Hey.” Kasian raised his hand, leveling a steadying look on Akira. “Take a breath.”

Akira only glared at him, ire switching focus. “Sir, why can’t we move on to crystals?”

“Because, as I have been telling you for months, casting crystals are a finite resource.” Kasian spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, words brimming with subtle reprimand. “They cannot be your only tool of protection. First Class warriors train for any situation.” He took a deep breath, as if stalling his next statement for added emphasis. “If cadets cannot rise to the given challenge, then they are a liability and will be dismissed from the program.”

Akira looked as though Kasian had just slapped her across the face. After a collecting breath, she faced Aedan once more, and Kasian turned his attention elsewhere.

The session ended an hour later, Kasian dismissing the cadets for their lunch break before afternoon lectures. All save one cadet. “Akira, can I speak with you privately?”

Shit. Cyra internally cringed, knowing this was nothing good. She lingered on the edges of the training arena, anxiously tracing circles in the sand with her boot. After a few minutes, Akira tore across the open sands, looking as if she fought tears.

“What did Kasian say?” Cyra asked, matching Akira’s brisk pace.

Water filled her eyes. “He’s not sure if I’m right for this program.” Her thickening voice skewed unnaturally high. “Although I’m doing well in academic lessons, unless I improve in our combat sessions, I’m out. That I’ll be a big fat failure.”

Cyra’s heart plummeted. “He called you a failure?”

“No, but he thought the words,” Akira said bitterly. “I know because I *am* a failure.”

“No, you are not.” Cyra said, searching for a way to help. Maybe Akira just needed a break. They all did sometimes. “Let’s go out for a drink tonight.”

“I need to train,” Akira choked out.

“You’ve been training harder than any of us.” Cyra squeezed Akira’s hand. “Maybe a break is exactly what you need. Tomorrow is our day off. Have a drink with me tonight. Tomorrow you can train.”

Akira’s dark brows twitched, and Cyra readied herself for a verbal battle. Instead, through a defeated sigh, Akira conceded: “All right, one drink.”

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“Seriously, your brother is so annoying.”

Now on their third drink, Cyra and Akira sat in their usual corner booth of Wielder’s Whistle Tavern, nestled in the heart of the Industrial Quarter. Conveniently located a short walk from Camp Ravenwood, the price for drinks incredibly reasonable, and the trappings of the dimly lit interior not too unsavory, the drinking establishment was a favorite amongst first-year cadets.

“I’ve been saying that for years!” Cyra said, cheeks flushed from the alcohol. “No one ever listens to me.” She cracked a smile, but Akira only looked glum—the pitying expression yet to leave her face for the last two hours.

“How can he just kick me out of the program?” Akira shook her head before gulping down a mouthful of ale, the frothy drink leaving behind a line of foam on her upper lip. “I had the most battle wins in the Order last year.”

“Damn right. Better than me.”

“Better than you.” Akira gestured across the sticky wooden table, nearly knocking over her pint. “And stupid-faced Finn.”

Cyra narrowed her eyes. “He does have a stupid face.”

“And Fabien—does he even want to be a warrior? What’s the point without the lesser Fantastic Brother part of that dynamic duo?”

“None!” Cyra shook her head.

Akira rested her mug on the table. “And don’t get me started on Aedan.”

“The. Worst.”

“I just . . . hate failing at something.” She stared across the table at Cyra. “I feel like no matter what I do, or how hard I try—I can’t win. I just freeze. My body knows the moves, but my mind . . . I just feel helpless. I can’t focus, and I forget everything.” She raised the mug, downing an

uncoordinated gulp before slamming it back on the table, amber liquid splashing over the brim and sending a cascade of foam down the side.

“I understand.”

The words were met with a hostile frown. “How could you possibly understand? You work hard, I’m not saying you don’t, but you have no idea what it’s like to be utterly helpless, to freeze under pressure—to be rendered weak.” She stared at her drink, shoulders slumped, lips wobbling.

Cyra was at loss. She had never seen Akira so dejected. As for her claim, well, it wasn’t entirely true. There was a moment when Cyra had experienced terror. When she had crumpled under fear—an event she wasn’t supposed to reveal. To hell with it. What did it matter now? “You know the second day of the Gauntlet Trials?”

The question drew an annoyed glare from Akira. “Seriously? You’re bringing up the Gauntlet Trials? Another one of my failures?”

“Would you just listen?” Cyra huffed impatiently. “The story you know about the train and bridge collapse is a lie.” The words successfully captured Akira’s full attention. “The bridge didn’t fail due to rot. There was no onboard malfunction. We jumped for our lives because a group of rebel hijackers commandeered the train, sabotaging the engine before blowing up the bridge. They called themselves Nation of Clovia—NOC. They hoped to take Lieutenant General Vance’s life in the attack, but as he wasn’t there, they instead settled on claiming ours.”

All Akira’s annoyance slid right off her face. “Why wasn’t this national news?” Her brow pinched. “And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because we were sworn to secrecy by my mother under threat of ruined futures.” Cyra straightened in her seat. “So, please, for both our sakes, say nothing of this.” Akira immediately nodded, a touch of gravity glinting in her eyes. “The rebel group,” Cyra went on, “took the champion belt. That’s the real reason I lost it.”

A small, knowing smile tugged at the corner of Akira’s mouth. “I knew you would never have let that belt go, not even while jumping from a moving train.”

Cyra snorted. “Yes, well, I wish I had been clever enough to hide a few crystals. After Finn and I leapt from the train, we ran right into the rebel group in the forest.” Her pulse thrummed as she recounted the ordeal. How Finn took the bullet meant to end her life. The feel of the scarred man’s hands around her neck. Her grip tightened around the ale mug as she felt a

tremor shiver through her hand. “After they left, I just shattered into a shaking, sobbing mess. Even now, just thinking about those moments . . .” She focused on her breathing. “Training—learning to fight without crystals. It empowers me. I tell myself that I’ll never again be that scared, vulnerable girl in the forest, pleading for her life.”

Akira didn’t immediately say anything, staring at her mostly empty mug. When her gaze rose, her eyes filled with pure heart-wrenching sorrow. It sliced a knife through Cyra’s chest, everything automatically squeezing.

A confession awaited on Akira’s lips, something terrible.

“When I fight men like Aedan,” Akira said after a hard swallow, “or other male cadets, I only feel weak and powerless.” She shuddered a breath, eyes closing. “I freeze. I can’t breathe. Every second takes me back to the night . . . I was raped.”

Shock dropped through Cyra, feeling the sensation of ice-made spiders crawling over her skin. “What?” She was barely able to form the word.

When Akira met Cyra’s gaze, her eyes swam with tears. “End of our junior year, the night of the senior ball.”

Mind reeling, emotions darting all over the place, Cyra forced herself to make the connections even as her heart broke. Akira had been the only one of their friends invited to the ball as a junior. Invited by the dean’s son. “Illias Malcom?”

Two tears broke free of Akira’s lashes and trailed down her face as she nodded.

“Oh, Akira, I’m so sorry.” Immediately Cyra abandoned her side of the table and scooted next to Akira, wrapping her friend in a crushing embrace. She didn’t let go as their silent tears fell. “Do you want to talk about it? You don’t have to, if you don’t want to.”

Akira wiped the trails of water from cheeks, nose sniffing loudly. “I haven’t told anyone, not even Nailah.” She absently picked at the tabletop’s worn wood with her index finger. “I was drinking that night. We were alone together, kissing . . . I put myself in a stupid situation.”

Cyra grasped Akira’s hand. “Whatever happened, it was and always will be his fault. His choice. His crime.”

The trembling corners of Akira’s mouth pulled down. “Regardless, I couldn’t stop him, Cyra. No matter what I said or did—he was stronger than me.” Her gaze darted in all directions, glassy eyes valiantly battling more

tears. “I thought I was the fiercest fighter in that school.” She huffed a harsh laugh. “I was a naive fool.”

“Akira, you ran the Gauntlet Trials two weeks later. That’s incredible. I would have fallen apart.” Cyra shook her head, working up an empathetic smile. “You are the strongest person I know.”

“Then why can’t I let it go?” Akira’s voice hitched. “I’m letting it—letting *him* ruin my life. Every time I fight a man stronger than me, I feel this utter terror in my chest, and I’m paralyzed. My mind and body at war.” Her hands trembled. “Kasian said I have to show improvement or he’ll recommend reassignment to the Warrior Track Director. What should I do?”

Cyra hesitated. “Have you . . . thought about reporting Illias? Maybe getting some justice would help.”

Akira’s face shuttered, expression going ice-cold. “Illias Malcom is the dean’s son. He’s the nephew of one of the richest men in the kingdom. No authority is going to listen to me, a Clovian-born orphan with nothing.” She shook her head, black hair swishing over her shoulders. “There is no justice for me, Cyra. Illias chose his target with precision, if not intention.” She inhaled deeply, wiping her nose with a shaking hand. “At the time, I knew saying anything would only hurt my career more than his life—and yet here we are.” She resumed picking at the table. “I’m about to lose everything. I feel so pathetic, everything inside of me screaming to give up.”

Desperately searching for the right words to say, Cyra found herself at a loss. “You are not pathetic. You are Akira Fucking Rhoki, badass Syphon with the most Red Lapis battle wins of our class. You are destined to be a warrior. You have no choice but to keep going. Every day is a new start.” She squeezed Akira’s hand. “And don’t forget that you have friends, people here to support you through anything.”

Akira’s throat bobbed several times before she finally said, “Thanks, Cyra.”

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They wisely chose not to indulge in a fourth round, securing their coats before beginning their return to Camp Ravenwood through the Industrial Quarter’s narrow streets.

The chilly spring night combatted the mild buzz in Cyra’s head, the rest of her mental capacities already plotting ways to help Akira without

overstepping or treating her like a glass doll—the last thing she would want.

So lost in how best to tackle this delicate situation, combined with the dulling effects of the three consumed ales, Cyra didn't notice the shadows moving in the night, nor the scuff of boots against the cobblestones. Someone stalked their heels, and the two cadets reacted far too late.

Cloth eclipsed Cyra's face. Rough hands jerked her arms backward before rope encircled her wrists, binding them together. A kick to the back of her legs sent her to the uneven ground, knees cracking as they hit the stone.

Everything happened so fast—all her training, her defenses, deserted her as pain exploded across the back of her head. The blow did not send her to unconsciousness, but the reverberating ache stalled any would-be counterattack or cry for help.

Hands hoisted her into the air before slinging her over a shoulder like a sack of wheat.

Blinded by the hood, with both her hands and ankles bound, Cyra struggled to think of anything—some strategy to escape this kidnapping.

By her grunts and gasps, Akira suffered a similar fate.

They didn't travel far before she sensed a descent. The shifting air reinforced this notion, atmosphere turning damp and stagnant, chased by the strong odor of mildew.

They were going underground.

The shriek of metal hinges cut through the rush of her own labored breath and hammering pulse, both amplified within the cloth hood. Finally, the shock of it all broke, and she opened her mouth, readying to scream until her lungs burned. Then she was falling.

Bound feet not ready to support her weight, paired with her obscured vision, sent Cyra teetering sideways. A strong hand caught her momentum before shoving her into a chair. Rope wound around her chest, binding her to the wooden seatback so she could barely move. Her breath stalled when someone ripped off the hood, and the sight before her eyes threatened to drop her stomach right out of her body.

A figure stood inches away, face covered by a ghoulish white mask, like something out of a nightmare. "Your leader has been captured," the masked figure snarled. "Rescue him before dawn or risk never seeing another morning." The shadowy figure disappeared through the doorway, and the dull light snuffed to nothing as soon as the door closed.

The resounding *thunk* of a lock punched cold straight to Cyra's chest.

What the fuck was happening?

"Cyra?" Akira said through a shaking breath.

Twisting her head, Cyra found her friend similarly bound—their chairs back-to-back. "I'm here, wherever the hell here is." Her eyes darted through black and found little.

A light existed behind their obsidian prison, too far away to illuminate anything around them. The odor of something old, something long dead filled her nose, the foul scent pouring more fear into her veins.

"We're in the catacombs beneath the city," said a voice, making both girls flinch.

"Fabien?" Cyra whipped her head around but only discovered more black.

"And Aedan," said Aedan. "The masked marauder gave us the same message," he growled, irritation straining his tone as if this entire situation was some tedious exercise instead of absolutely terrifying. "It's all a bit overdone."

Confusion knit Cyra's brow. "What in all the Ancients' burning backsides is going on?"

Akira gasped. "Oh, this is the Catacomb Scenario."

"The what?" Cyra craned her head around, getting a nose full of Akira's hair, and inhaling the scent of strawberries and citrus, a brief reprieve to the musty air.

"The Catacomb Scenario we studied last month," Akira explained with an excited lilt lining her tone. "Four soldiers are captured and bound within a crypt. There are five guards in between here and where their leader is being kept. We have to free ourselves, take down two guards positioned within the tunnels, before defeating the final three and freeing our leader."

"This is some sort of field test?" Cyra huffed, trying and failing to recall the specifics of Catacomb Scenario—one of hundreds they had studied over the months. Regardless, this being a training exercise calmed her thundering heart, shoulders sagging as she allowed herself a measure of relief. They hadn't actually been carted here for some horrible purpose. Her brother wasn't in danger of execution by a masked group of crazies. No, they were just riding off a buzz from alcohol with their future in the Warrior Track on the line.

“How are we supposed to get free?” Fabien asked. “My wrists are bound with chains above my head.”

“Mine too,” Aedan added.

Cyra twisted in her seat, wiggling her hands in an attempt to find her hidden knife. “My blade is gone,” she said after her efforts yielded nothing but sore wrists.

“Mine too,” Akira said.

“Great—a night in the catacombs it is.” Cyra ground her teeth. “My guess is they will keep us here through the night before admonishing us in the morning for our miserable failure.” A sigh fell from her lips, the sound joined by a disappointed grunt she suspected came from Aedan. “What are you doing?” she asked after feeling a few jabs in her side.

“Trying to reach the hairpin blade I have tucked in my boot,” Akira said.

“Your what?”

“My concealed weapon. It’s small, like a hairpin, but sharp like a knife,” Akira explained as her body contorted awkwardly. “I had the thing custom made a while ago. I keep it in a secret sewn sleeve of my right boot.”

“Why do you have such a weapon?” Aedan barked through the darkness.

The air in Cyra’s lungs suddenly constricted, knowing exactly why Akira possessed the secretive blade.

“None of your business, Fletcher,” Akira snapped, body adjusting as she fished the weapon free. “Now, shut your trap, or we will leave your tedious butt behind.” She quickly got to work on their bindings.

Once they were free, Cyra resisted the urge to pull Akira into a hug. To shower her with compliments and affirmations regarding her brilliance and ingenuity. *Akira doesn’t want your coddling.* She wanted success. To beat this test and earn all the well-deserved accolades.

So, let’s fucking go, Cyra thought, anticipation blazing an excited trail through her blood.

“In the Catacomb Scenario,” Akira said, her boots crunching over the gravelly floor deeper into the black hallow of the space, “somewhere in the room was a hidden elemental. We need to find it.” She began working on one of the boy’s restraints.

Picking locks was something they had learned a few months ago, although never performed in the pitch black. Cyra inched toward the clacking sounds of metal-on-metal, Akira huffing and grunting with the effort.

“Ow,” Fabien groaned, “that was my wrist.”

“I can’t see shit,” Akira bristled. “Hold on . . . almost . . . got . . . it.”

After a loud grunt, Cyra heard the sound of rolling chains.

“Finally,” Fabien breathed through a relieved sigh, “they took us directly from the barracks. We’ve been strung up here for over an hour.”

“Yes, and some of us would also like their turn at freedom,” Aedan said expectantly.

“I don’t recall the imprisoned soldiers whining during their capture in the Catacomb Scenario,” Akira snipped before finding Cyra’s hand in the darkness and pressing the thin blade into her palm. “Fletcher’s all yours.”

“Thanks,” Cyra whispered dryly. She felt her way along roughhewn walls in Aedan’s general direction while Akira and Fabien searched for the hidden elemental. Her hand grazed skin, hard muscle sliding under her fingers as her palm wound around what she realized was the side of Aedan’s bare chest. “Are you not wearing a shirt?” She recoiled her touch as if burned, despite Aedan’s skin feeling quite cool.

“Or shoes,” Aedan grumbled miserably, “the bastards snatched me right after I showered.”

Color flooded Cyra’s face. “You are wearing trousers, right?” When Aedan only met the question with silence, she repeated a trembling, “Right?”

“Yes,” he said, and Cyra could swear she heard a smile in his voice. “I’m wearing trousers.”

“Too bad,” Akira said from somewhere else in the room, “I was rather curious.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours, Rhoki,” Aedan said, his growling voice turning to a rough purr.

“Not for all the gold in Castoria, Fletcher,” Akira quipped lightly.

“Ugh, I think this is a human skull,” Fabien said in disgust, and Cyra heard the sound of something rolling across the dirt-covered ground.

“Don’t throw it away, Fabien!” Akira scolded. “A skull would be the perfect place to hide a crystal.”

“Then by all means, have at it,” Fabien scoffed.

“Such a baby.”

Aedan pointedly cleared his throat, recapturing Cyra’s attention as Akira and Fabien continued to bicker. “Not to be rude, but are you going to leave me strung up like a slab of meat all night?”

“Don’t tempt me,” Cyra said dryly. She inhaled a steadying breath, but there was nothing to combat the discomfort of her present task. The all-consuming darkness left her with little choice but to feel her way up to his restraints. As her hands skated over his stupidly toned chest, heat filled her cheeks for altogether different reasons.

He’s a dick, remember. The lord of dicks. Albeit, he had been considerably nicer over the ensuing months since the brawl in the Old City Center.

Of course, nicer for Aedan Fletcher meant he was tolerable, at best, absent his active cruelty and posturing nastiness. Still, a vast improvement.

Ignoring the embarrassment piercing her chest, Cyra felt around his face and up the muscled chords of his biceps. “Ancients, do you have to be so damned tall?” She stretched to the very tips of her toes, the strained reach forcing her body so close to his, she inhaled a whiff of him—ocean spray, lemon, and soap.

In that moment, she was glad he couldn’t see her face, cheeks flaming fire hot as she wondered how close her lips were to accidentally brushing his. *Focus*.

Cyra forced the blade into the manacle’s lock, balance swaying as she worked.

“I expected you to be good at this,” Aedan said after a full minute of little success.

His breath shifted the wisps of hair around her left ear, spreading goosebumps down her spine. “Shut it, Fletcher,” Cyra bit back, not at all understanding why her body was reacting this way. She loathed Aedan. And even if she didn’t, her broken heart was still on the mend from its complete crushing almost five months ago.

Had it really been that long since her breakup? Even longer since she felt an intimate touch—since someone kissed her, admired her, worshiped her beneath the sheets.

As if cued by the thoughts, something inside of her shuddered awake, a dormant need setting her pulse pounding. *Don’t you dare think about sex while pressed up against this half-naked cock wad.*

“Found it!” Akira called triumphantly. And just as the hairpin blade triggered the lock mechanism releasing Aedan’s manacles, a sharp light cleaved through the black.

The combination startled Cyra, shattering her already precarious balance.

Aedan caught her against his chest, stopping her plummet to the ground. And for one heart-squeezing moment, she imagined it was Finn. His arms, his naked torso, his everything. It all shivered an unbearable ache through her entire body.

Seven hells, she missed this. Missed Finn. Missed another person sharing her soul. Sharing her body. Since Finn’s abrupt departure, Cyra hadn’t considered the gathering loneliness over the months of his absence. Not until this moment. And for that moment, something desperate unleashed. She wanted to stay in these arms even though they weren’t Finn’s. Longed to be with someone, to feel something again. Even if it wasn’t love.

All of it was made worse when her eyes swept over Aedan’s magnificent chest.

Yes, she had seen the man half-naked before—in the weight room, running laps—but something about this odd situation struck an altogether different chord. The man was beautiful, his arms and abdomen sculpted in gorgeous detail.

Prick, her thoughts reminded her, but the scolding was faint as her gaze traced down his abdomen, following the telltale converging lines disappearing into his trousers.

Stop. Gawking. You. Idiot.

Aedan eased her away, grip surprisingly gentle, as if he sensed her stirring vulnerability. Once the contact broke, Cyra’s temporary madness ceased, senses returning with her next breath. She staggered away before her side glance found Akira, who only returned a wry smirk, giving Aedan a generous once over as if to say—*why the fuck not?*

Because he’s an asshole, Cyra wanted to counter. No amount of pathetic loneliness would offset that fact. “Can we focus?” she hissed, fighting the deep blush staining her cheeks.

Mercifully, Akira made no comment, huddling the group together before drawing lines into a patch of loose dirt. “This is the general layout of the catacombs. I memorized the plans when we studied this scenario.”

“That wasn’t part of the assignment,” Fabien said over her shoulder, maintaining a small ball of fire above his palm.

“Akira’s an overachiever,” Cyra teased, marveling at the rendered sketch. She barely recalled the name of this scenario, let alone the intimate details.

Akira scoffed. “Says the person who wrote a bonus essay on Journey of Vanities in last year’s literature class, despite receiving no extra credit.”

“It’s my favorite book and deserved an assignment,” Cyra said defensively.

Aedan impatiently cleared his throat. “Now that we’ve determined you both are insufferable try-hards, can we continue with the plan?”

Cyra and Akira exchanged amused glances. “We are here,” Akira said, her tone shifting back to business mode as she placed four pebbles inside a square. “The first guard should be just around this turn.” She marked the spot with another pebble, then another. “The second down this corridor outside of another crypt. And the final three should be here, guarding this room.” She drew another square in the dirt and marked the area with more pebbles.

“The most successful strategy was attacking the guards in the pitch black.” Akira continued, “Cyra and I will flank the first guard. Aedan and Fabien, you muscle them into the chamber here.” She pointed to a small room. “Assuming we’re successful, we execute the same strategy for the second guard. Disagreements?”

The group all shook their heads.

“You’re lead, Rhoki,” Fabien said, and Akira grinned with swelling confidence and a dash of determination, as if the success or failure of tonight would dictate her entire future. Maybe it would.

After picking the door lock, Fabien snuffed out the ball of fire. A lone torch down a side tunnel kept them from battling the complete black, but as they turned a corner, the cloak of darkness swallowed their vision once more.

They kept to the walls, walking in a single file, Akira in the lead as they stalked toward their first obstacle. Though the pitch-black lent them the element of surprise, it was like fighting blind.

The attack on the first guard was both frantic and disorienting, wrangling the figure to the ground with a crash of limbs and punches. Cyra wagered the entire altercation was hilariously comical if they could see shit.

Aedan accidentally struck Fabien in the jaw. Cyra tackled the wall instead of their intended target, but eventually the four of them wrestled their struggling charge into the side chamber without a single cast.

The second guard went down seamlessly, the cadets working in impressive tandem, leveraging ice and wind to force the guard into the crypt. Their success yielded three additional red crystals, so each of them now carried elementals.

Akira led the way toward their final test, halting the group just before a sharp turn. “Wait here,” she instructed in a low whisper. “I have an idea.” She dropped into a crouch, peeking around the corner as she hovered her hand over the ground. Water conjured over the surface, pushing over the packed earth in a slow-moving film. A soft glow from behind the locked door at the end of the corridor saved them from complete darkness, the light not strong enough to find the encroaching water as it slinked over the ground.

The near-invisible tide halted just in front of the three unsuspecting guards before hardening to ice. “Keep to the edges,” Akira whispered. “We won’t have the element of surprise, so attack quickly. You three, focus on the guards. I’m going for the door. As soon as Kasian is released, the exercise is over.” After an exchange of silent nods, they moved along the walls, carefully avoiding the layer of ice, now indiscriminate with the ground.

This attack was frantic, the soft light immediately giving away their advance as soon as they rounded the corner.

Casting fire at the attacking cadets, two of the three guards charged forward—an immediate mistake. Their feet shot out from beneath them on the ice, throwing them both onto their asses, their fire smashing into the low ceiling, allowing the cadets to gain ground.

Unleashing a pummeling barrage of ice, Cyra kept the two fallen guards on their backsides while Aedan and Fabien focused on the remaining figure.

Akira sprinted for the door, diverting an attacking fire cast with wind.

The converging forces crashed together, Aedan punching the remaining guard so he slammed into the wall and crumpled to the ground. By the time Cyra and Fabien secured the final two, Akira was already through the locked door, releasing a flood of lantern light.

Kasian stood over a chair, blinking in surprise as his eyes landed on Akira before shifting over the fallen guards and the remaining cadets. After

a few confused seconds, realization broke across his features. “You four just completed the Catacomb Scenario faster than any team I’ve ever heard of.”

The awe in his voice rushed a swell of pride through Cyra, the cadets exchanging satisfied glances. “It was all Akira,” said Cyra, smiling at her friend. “We’d still be locked in the crypt if it wasn’t for her. She led the entire mission.” Aedan and Fabien nodded their agreement.

And as much as Akira fought it, a proud grin stretched across her face.

“Well done, Rhoki.” Kasian nodded approvingly. “Congratulations. Enjoy the next two weeks off. We start training with crystals after the break. Dismissed.”

Triumph beamed across Akira’s face the entire journey back to the barracks. She smiled as if she had just proved all her doubters wrong—including herself.

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Chapter 26

The Photograph

Present Day

After a surprisingly pleasant night's sleep in the biggest room she had slept in years, Cyra woke up around midmorning just as a maid named Marabelle arrived with a breakfast cart. "Governor Royce asked me to deliver breakfast and coffee," said Marabelle, wielding the heavy cart with remarkable agility despite her petite frame.

Cyra eyed the cart, almost passing on breakfast. She was eager to explore the grounds and gauge the weak points of this unfamiliar environment. Conclude for herself just how fucked the situation was, while gleaning all she could about Royce's plans. But when her stomach growled in protest to any notion other than devouring every crumb, she relented, scooting to the edge of the large four poster bed, and digging into the meal of eggs, toast, bacon, and fruit.

"I also drew you a bath in the side chamber," said Marabelle, demurely clasping her hands together as Cyra ate with ravenous abandon. "I will stay and help you dress afterward."

"Oh," Cyra mumbled through a mouthful of eggs, chin already dusted with breadcrumbs from horking down a piece of buttered toast. She swallowed the mostly chewed food and wiped her face with the provided napkin. After forcing a polite smile, she attempted to reclaim some amount of dignity. "A bath would be . . ." Again, she almost turned down the offer, impatience to scour the grounds jabbing at her mind. At the same time, she

realized she must look and smell wretched. “A bath would be lovely. Can you also point me to my clothes?”

In the daylight, this room evoked the estate rooms of Castorian nobility, albeit with a country flair. The silk-lined bedroom and adjoining suite were complete with a sitting couch and chairs, vanity, grand dresser, large woven area rug, and a king-sized bed. Cyra particularly appreciated the private bathroom.

The room’s décor, however, was less impressive—paintings of guns and mounted animal heads the primary selections for the wall space. Cyra loathed the feeling of being watched, even by glass eyes.

“Your clothes, mistress?” Marabelle’s eyes rounded. “I already collected your old clothes, as they were filthy. I offered to clean them, but Master Royce said to dispose of them.” She nervously played with a tendril of auburn hair. “I brought you a summer dress to wear.”

A prickle of annoyance bristled through Cyra, thanking all the Ancients that she had possessed the foresight to remove the hidden crystal shard from her boot and wedge the thin fragment within the ring band on her left finger. The fractured crystal was small enough to fit in the space, the ruby ring snug but not uncomfortable. She masked her irritation, however, not wanting to add to the maid’s distress. The girl couldn’t be older than her late teens.

When Cyra located the indicated dress, she inwardly cringed. Should she need to fight or to trek through the swamp, pants and boots were far preferable. “Do you have any women’s riding pants and boots?”

“I will look around, mistress,” Marabelle said.

“Thank you.” So, dress it was to be.

And after a blessedly warm bath, scrubbing away the layers of dirt and grime coating her skin, Cyra allowed Marabelle to lace her into a corset and fit a yellow dress onto her body.

At least the material was light and airy. The late morning humidity was already thickening the air, heat growing increasingly uncomfortable by the minute.

A jolt of surprise knocked Cyra sideways when she caught her reflection in the vanity mirror. She hardly recognized herself. Despite the bruises and scrapes, she looked something that resembled pretty as Marabelle braided her semi-damp hair.

With a square neck and a modest plunge, the dress was lovely with its floral-printed design and tiered ruffle skirt. Mercifully, it bore no bustle or petticoat. Cyra could move—the most important thing at the moment.

She hadn't worn anything so feminine in a long time. When she and Jiro opened their saloon, Cyra had donned a gown in celebration. The black and vermillion dress was simple compared to the gowns of her past as a royal and student at Wyndfyre, but she enjoyed indulging in the finery—finery evoking a life left behind. Maybe that was why she had avoided such things ever since. She didn't want reminders of her past, the things she enjoyed—the things she missed despite herself. Images of readying for a party or ball with her friends only struck a sad chord through her now.

Following the opening of the saloon, Cyra decided that Nyssa of Lofton would not wear another dress or gown again. And she hadn't. Until now.

A sigh passed through her lips. Nothing to be done. She would have to reacclimate to certain things—like being waited on by a maid. She studied Marabelle through the mirror. The young woman's features were beautiful: alabaster skin covered in freckles, upturned nose perfect for her heart-shaped face.

Marabelle worked efficiently, delicate fingers taking great care with Cyra's hair, weaving the thick locks into a coronet. Her thoughts were a mystery, however, offering no comments or questions about the scars littering Cyra's body or why she was here at all.

Fine by Cyra, grateful for the lack of prying questions.

When she was finally ready for the day, she asked Marabelle to show her around the grounds, and the maid led her along a balconied corridor and down an expansive flight of stairs. They passed servants laying out tablecloths and shining cutlery, others setting out flowers, and readying the residence for a party.

The sight knotted her stomach. The idea of mixing with the prominent citizens of Vinmore as Cyra Byrogan made her want to hurl up the contents of her quickly consumed breakfast. "How long have you been working for Governor Royce?" she asked as they emerged into the day.

"Two years, mistress," Marabelle said politely.

Manicured grass surrounded a stone walkway, before yielding to the tall reeds and water of the swamp.

Swamp. A most accurate word to describe the stagnant, brackish water encircling the island, now laid bare by the sunlight. Large cypress trees

punctuated the bright green film of floating algae, countless insects filling the expanding landscape, their chorus even louder during the day. It was all joined with an almost tangible fetid odor clinging to the stifling humid air.

Yes, swimming in this stinking soup water was an unappealing prospect.

Large weeping willows lined the footpath leading around the castle grounds, their massive branches and curtains of leaves offering welcome shade. To Cyra's right a rowboat sat in the grass near the water's edge. The transport would not take her very far in this unforgiving hellscape.

Pursing her lips, she shifted her attention to the elevated railway, marveling at the crisscrossing wooden beams emerging from the water's surface and stretching toward the sky. Could she scale those beams?

Maybe, and then what? How long would she scramble across the towering tracks before finding another hint of civilization? She inwardly groaned at the possible answers, anxiously thumbing the crystal shard wedged in her ring band.

One cast. Perhaps two small ones, at most. Positively useless against the half dozen or so militia soldiers milling the grounds. Finn had been right about this place. If she hoped to save herself, or anyone else locked away in these stone walls, she needed more information.

"Who is Kade?" Cyra asked Marabelle as they walked into a courtyard. Niches lined the stone walls, each housing a sculptured figure—their stone eyes watching the women's slow progress across the open space.

Marabelle flinched at the question. "He is, uhm, Master Royce's doctor." Her eyes darted around, as if fearful someone might have overheard the response.

Interesting. Cyra also noted the way Marabelle said the word, *doctor*, and hazarded a guess the man was not benefiting anyone's health in this place. Royce hinted he was some sort of interrogator. Did that mean Finn was being tortured?

Probably.

Any more questions eddied from her mind when she spied their host approaching. Governor Royce sported a satisfied smile, the gleeful look rendered more ominous by something clutched in his hand—a paper? No, a photograph.

"Good afternoon, my dear," Royce said, eyes glittering. "I'm happy to confirm that you are, in fact, Princess Cyra."

"What?" She blanched in confusion.

“You see, I wasn’t sure of your identity. You certainly don’t look the part of Castorian royalty—at least, you didn’t last night.” His gaze swept uncomfortably over the yellow dress. “I had my doubts. I could not present a false princess to my most illustrious constituents.” He chortled at the idea. “I’d be quite embarrassed if I was wrong, but there can be no questioning of it now.” He extended his right hand, presenting the photograph. “Procured this morning by Captain Roderick.”

A furrow stitched between her brows as Cyra grasped the black and white image—and she gasped. It was her, a photograph taken years ago. Her stomach dropped as her eyes sketched over the long-forgotten details of this moment.

Wearing a gown that revealed far more than anything worn during her school days, Cyra sat poised on a stool situated in front of a blank wall. Eyes intent, she stared directly at the camera, chin angled, the corner of her mouth curved up in subtle smirk—like she knew a delicious secret.

Cyra, *you shameless smug fool*, her thoughts railed, immediately recognizing the exact circumstances of where and when this photograph was taken—and so did Royce, apparently.

“Taken when you infamously infiltrated Nation of Clovia’s headquarters,” Royce said with an impressed nod.

Cyra could only stare in horror at her likeness—at the moment this image immortalized. Dragging her eyes away from her own stupid face, she met Royce’s pleased smile. “How do you have this?”

Royce was all too happy to answer. “It’s not the original, if that’s what you’re wondering, but one of many copies made following your exploits in Saraneca. Those who survived the destruction left in your wake eventually discovered your true name. After your encounter with Adonis North, he ordered copies made of this one and only photograph of the increasingly notorious Cyra Byrogan, Castorian ranger and spy. He financed the distribution to Clovian unit commanders. Most officers ended up using the photograph for target practice, assuming the men didn’t use it for . . .” He cleared his throat. “Other purposes. We’re lucky Roderick found one with no bullet holes.” A giddy energy infected Royce, as if he loved every second of this revelation. “I’m surprised this image didn’t find you long before now. It became something of a souvenir following the war, a talking piece or keepsake for many soldiers. Wherever you hid yourself the last four years must have been remote indeed.”

Cyra thrust the image back at Royce, unable to stare at her arrogant smile any longer.

“You keep it.” He waved at the image. “I’m in the process of acquiring more. Most of my guests will have seen it—many will certainly recognize you.”

It was like someone punched her in the gut. After living so long in anonymity, to see her face staring up from her own hands, knowing the image had circulated the country for years . . . the effect was more than jarring.

Royce’s cloying smile was enough to needle through her shock. He stared at her like she was entertainment, his personal trophy to show off to his friends.

“I am not a circus animal,” she managed to say after several seconds of thick silence.

“Now, now, nothing so ridiculous.” Royce clicked his tongue. “Your presence at my residence, however, will cause a stir—given your history, your name, the mystery surrounding your death.” He cocked a wry brow before adding, “Where you have been for the last four years.” The words sank more piles of dread through her insides, made worse as Royce nodded at the photograph. “This image immortalized your fame. It is unavoidable now, especially with spreading news of your survival. The infamous fire-breathing princess has risen from the ashes, the newspapers will report soon, the headline most likely printed next to this very photograph.”

Cyra’s stomach pitched, her corset strings suddenly far too tight. “What do you want from me?”

The question made the manic gleam fade from the governor’s eyes. “My odds of winning reelection are less than certain. Tonight, the most powerful, rich, and influential citizens of Vinmore will be here. They want to be impressed.”

“And you think they will be impressed by me?” Cyra did not hide the bite in her tone.

“They will be as fascinated by you as I am,” Royce said. “I want to stir conversation, breathe excitement into the room, into my guests. Show that I am not just a man of words but of action. As I told you last night, I want to create a bridge to Castoria. Your presence represents my delivery on that promise.”

“I cannot promise anything.” Cyra shook her head. “Given my estrangement from Castoria—from the Crown—I presently wield very little power and influence.”

Royce gestured dismissively through the air. “This is politics, my dear. My guests don’t need to know all the details. Your mere presence shows both my efforts and determination.”

“And what if my presence does the opposite?” The sinking feeling in her chest hardened. “Clovia is not favorable to Castorian Syphons in general, let alone me. You heard Captain Roderick last night.”

Royce cracked an indulgent smile. “You are one of the most famous Castorian soldiers known in Clovia for many reasons. People kept your photograph because you represent the Crown of Castoria—beauty, danger, and power. You are seductive in that image—a dangerous allure who people both love and hate. The families invited tonight hold land, wealth, and industry here in Vinmore. Though they are not royalty, or even noble, they recognize power. They’ll recognize your power and influence. And power attracts power.”

“What power, Royce?” Cyra hated every second of this conversation, yet refused to let this point go. “My parents thought me dead as much as everyone else. I have no power—not anymore. The woman in this photograph died in the war.”

Royce gave Cyra a patient, almost belittling look. “I am not asking you to promise anything to my guests, just indulge their questions. Simple conversation will be enough to keep them talking for months. And”—he cleared his throat—“in case it needs to be mentioned, no killing anyone.”

Cyra only returned a flat stare. “And then what? If I attend your party and make nice with your guests, will you let me go?”

“And then I have a proposal for you—a proposal for Vinmore’s future.” Royce smiled. “Hear out my plans, my vision, how you can help, then yes, we will discuss your departure.”

Discuss your departure. A clever hedge. “Fine,” she bit out, knowing there was little else she could say.

“Excellent, excellent.” Royce clapped his hands. “Oh dear, it is getting late. Marabelle, can you help Princess Cyra into her costume?”

Cyra nearly choked. “Costume?”

“Yes. Didn’t I mention? Tonight is a costume ball.”

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Cyra groaned as she analyzed the selected attire for the night's party, the gown already lying on the bed when she and Marabelle returned to the room.

The gold dress was an historical costume, evoking the Castorian noble fashion from the Age of Queens—a period some three hundred years ago characterized by two back-to-back, long-ruling female monarchs. The first was known for her severity and conservative reign, while the second for her progressive laws and disarming charm.

Under other circumstances, Cyra might relish the chance to wear something inspired by this period. At the moment, the choice of gown only lent more credence to her assumption Royce intended to sport her around as some sort of fascinating sideshow—an attraction to distract his voters from any real issues they might otherwise discuss at such a function.

"Let's just get this over with," Cyra sighed, flinging away the photograph still clutched in her hand. It spun around in a few circles, cutting through the air, before landing on the vanity.

"Yes, uh, Your Highness," Marabelle said, her tone notably more strained than before.

"Oh, please don't call me that." Cyra blanched. "Cyra."

Marabelle hunched her shoulders, as if attempting to make herself smaller, more meek-looking. "All right, mistress. Would you mind sitting at the vanity so I can ready your hair and makeup? Then I'll assist you with your gown." She gestured toward the vanity, her hand visibly trembling.

A frown knit Cyra's brow as she sat at the vanity. "Are you all right?"

Marabelle's eyes widened like a startled doe. "Oh, yes, Your—er mistress, I'm just fine."

Liar, Cyra thought to herself, scrutinizing the young woman through the mirror, and wondered if this would be the reaction she'd receive this evening. Hell, for the rest of her life.

She shifted her gaze to the photograph leaning against the mirror. *Remember what you were, Cyra. What they all must think of you. What Jiro thinks of you. Captain Roderick. The people of Lofton.*

"Whatever you heard about me," Cyra said, "not all of it is true." As she stared at the photograph, her forever frozen smirk seemed to challenge that

statement.

Are you sure? it taunted.

Cyra flipped over the image—no longer able to stomach her own smug face, but as much as she fought the impulse, her eyes lingered on the white backing of the photograph—one of *many* copies. The idea that Clovian soldiers kept the image as some sort of trophy or memento twisted her insides. It was like she was a wanted criminal or erotic saloon girl—worse, she was an enticing combination of both. An enemy for some, a dark fantasy for others.

Fucking. Awesome.

Was this how Finn found her in Lofton? The question blazed through her mind. Perhaps someone passing through the sleepy mining town recognized her face and began spreading rumors that Cyra Byrogan lived, or where to find a remarkable lookalike.

Regardless, if Finn had not tracked her down, someone else would have similarly wrecked her life, sooner or later. Her days in Lofton were already numbered, and she'd had no idea. She wasn't sure if this realization made her feel better or worse. *What a mess.*

Over the next two hours Marabelle twisted, braided, and pinned Cyra's chestnut-brown hair, embellishing the secured curls with decorative pearls and gold ribbon. She applied face powders and paints, before finally assisting her into the costume-gown.

The garment was not as uncomfortable as Cyra feared. The bodice was stunning, beautifully made of pale gold silk and embroidered patterns of delicate flowers. The wide square neckline hit low—certainly lower than preferred, cleavage plentiful. The long sleeves started at the crest of either shoulder, material puffing out with hand-stitched trim and separating to reveal peeks of contrasting emerald-green silk.

Designed in a style before corsets, the built-in boning of the bodice cinched her waist before the skirt's luxurious fabric flared outward in a soft A-line. The skirt's two layers parted in the front, revealing more emerald, the bold green a lovely contrast to the gold brocade of the outer skirt. Sewn-in pearls and semi-precious gemstones decorated the opulent gown, metallic thread shimmering against the dying light of the setting sun.

Analyzing her reflection in a full-length mirror, Cyra certainly looked the part of a queen. Kasian would have a good laugh if he saw her now. So would Aurelia and Akira, for that matter.

Look at you, she imagined Akira's voice. *You lived in Clovia for four years only to be trussed-up like a royal peacock in the end.*

Yes, and you look absolutely gorgeous, no notes, Aurelia's voice added.

"All done," Marabelle announced, stepping back to scrutinize her work. The satisfaction on her face overshadowed her prior nervousness. "Oh, it's almost seven! Master Royce will be waiting to escort you into the party."

"Great," Cyra said flatly, mentally preparing to play nice with wealthy Clovians as they gawked at her. After a deep breath, she strode from the room, golden material billowing around her ankles. She absently fingered the crystal shard still wedged in her ring, praying the stone would go unnoticed tonight. She didn't trust leaving the shard behind, nor did she want to enter a room of sniveling socialites completely defenseless.

Governor Royce waited just beyond the velvet-covered stairs, greeting Cyra with an approving smile as his eyes raked over her attire. She likewise studied the man, hiding her immediate mortification. Royce wore a matching costume of the same era, as regal and detailed as her lavish gown. His gold brocade tunic reached just past his waist, sitting over red and gold pantaloons that cinched at the knees. Red hose covered the rest of his meaty calves, feet tucked into gold-buckled velvet shoes. A gold chain hung from either shoulder, studded with garnet stones. A flat slanted cap topped his head, garnished with a plume of dyed feathers.

The man's handlebar mustache countered the whole effect, combed and oiled for the evening. Still, the matching costumes were no coincidence, the royal and Castorian affiliations most definitely intentional.

Cyra ground her teeth. *Just. Great.*

"Good evening, my dear," Royce greeted as he extended his arm. "I thought it fitting that we match."

"Did you?" Cyra raised a brow, shoving down her irritation. She tucked her hand around his offered arm, pursing her lips lest she say something regrettable. *Just get through the night.*

Royce steered her across the gallery, approaching an area of the castle yet to be explored. The rumblings of milling guests and muffled music reached her ears just beyond a set of heavy oak doors, the sounds beating a drum of nervous energy through her blood. Two servants opened the doors, sound exploding with both music and party noises, paired with an almost overwhelming cloud of perfume and cologne.

Forcing her feet forward, Cyra tipped up her chin, conjuring her best Dukane confidence. She'd need some familial boldness tonight, a shield of steel to face down the political vipers waiting inside.

The ballroom was medium-sized—long, with high-stone arches along one side, the floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of the swamp. A string quartet played at the opposite end while roving servants carried trays of food and drink to the fifty or so guests in attendance.

As the governor and Cyra entered, heads turned and conversations died. All eyes fixed on the pair—well, all eyes fixed on Cyra.

"Greetings, my friends, I'm grateful you all made the journey to my fair estate," boomed Royce's jovial voice, a performative country drawl affecting the lilt in his tone. "I called you here to officially announce my bid for reelection this fall. I hope to have your support—your donations and, of course, your votes. As for tonight, I'd like to introduce a special guest: Cyra Byrogan, Princess of Castoria."

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Chapter 27

TRIALS AND CELEBRATIONS

Nine Years Ago

"To Akira!" toasted Cyra for the fifth time that night. Following their amazing success in the catacombs, the cadets launched their two weeks off with a celebratory night out at Wielder's Whistle Tavern. The initial rounds soon became many, and by midnight, most revelers wisely dragged their drunken, staggering butts back to Camp Ravenwood, leaving only an irresponsible handful drawing out the indulgence.

"Akiraaa." Cyra nudged a dozing Akira with her elbow. "I am cheers-ing you."

"Come on, Akira," said Fabien, swaying on his feet. "Let's head back to the barracks." Akira only grunted. "Cyra will stop giving you toasts."

Finally, Akira lifted her head off the bartop, eyes cracking open. "Fine," she said, a sloppy grin chasing away her sleepy expression. "I won Kasian's game."

"You did indeed." Cyra nodded, matching her friend's grin. "Go to bed."

The two cadets staggered out of the tavern, but not before Akira yelled a final, "I won!"

Shaking her head in amusement, Cyra turned to Aedan, who was sitting on a stool next to her at the bar—the two last cadets standing. "Some people can't hold their alcohol," she said just before almost slipping off her stool. "I'm fine! I'm fine!" she insisted as Aedan reached out a steadying hand.

“Ever the graceful one.”

Cyra puffed air through her lips, fighting the spin upsetting her equilibrium. “I *am* graceful, as graceful as . . .” She waved a hand through the air, nothing clever coming to her ale-addled brain. “Something graceful.”

A smile pulled the corners of Aedan’s mouth, and Cyra tried to recall ever seeing a genuine smile on his face—at least one not packed with malice or cruel intention. This smile was easy, kind, as if he was having fun. Up until now, she was quite sure Aedan didn’t know how without hurting another person. This version of Aedan was . . . strange.

“One more round, Cyra? On me?”

Something about the way he said her name shifted a lightness through her body, cheered on by the buzz in her temple. “Sure,” she blurted before she could stop herself, eyes absently wandering to his now very clothed chest. A flash of what lay beneath seared through the ale-haze, heating her already warm cheeks.

As the bartender refreshed their ill-advised drinks, a pensive look knit Aedan’s brow. “I never thanked you for saving Tess during the Old City Center brawl,” he said, the softness in his features surprising Cyra. And something else was there, too, something resembling regret, but if he felt any urge to apologize for his past behavior the words never reached his lips. Still, what did pour forth was just as shocking as any would-be apology: “I am forever in your debt.”

Her mouth dropped open as she stared at him. Surely he had just traded brains with someone else.

“What?” Reluctant humor broke across his face. “Did I use the wrong words? Gratitude and sincerity are new to me.”

Who the hell was this person and what happened to the real Aedan? Actually, she didn’t care, whatever new personality occupied his brain, she wasn’t going to protest.

Grasping her refreshed mug, Cyra raised the drink in a toast. “Glad to see you are expanding your lexicon.”

He knocked his mug against hers, another smile stretching his lips. “I’ve also recently added ‘please’ and ‘you are right’ to my vocabulary.”

Cyra laughed. Actually laughed at something Aedan Fletcher said. “And how do you feel about these new words?” she asked, sipping her drink.

“Hate them,” he said, severity working back through his tone, but his eyes retained a hint of levity. “It’s like my entire body revolts when anything nice falls from my lips. I’m seeing a Mindhealer about it.”

His sly, drunken grin drummed a faster pulse through Cyra’s blood. “Well, I hope they *don’t* fix you.”

Was she flirting? Flushed cheeks, skittering heart, stupid bouncing stomach, yes, she was decidedly flirting. Flirting with Aedan Fletcher . . . That was just wrong. Yes, he was gorgeous—the drooling sort of beautiful, unfair to the average population—but he was still a . . .

What was he, again?

Something bad, but it was like her mind couldn’t remember anymore, traitorous eyes lowering to his mouth.

“A little bit of me hopes so too,” he said more seriously, and she could swear his eyes also darted to her lips.

Later, she would blame the call of alcohol, its siren’s song knocking all common sense from her brain—both their brains—because when he inched toward her face, she didn’t move away. Nor did she pull away when his lips met hers.

He tastes of sweet barley was the first thought to strike her inebriated mind as her eyes automatically closed. Her lips moved instinctively against his wonderfully soft mouth as heat poured across her body.

Seven hells, she forgot this feeling, *missed* this feeling—want, desire, passion. With each clash of their lips, something deep within her clamored for more, but a second later she caught herself, dragging her lips away from this temporary madness.

Adrenaline cleared some of the ale-born lust, staring at Aedan with wide eyes. *Aedan*. She had just kissed Aedan. *Fuck*. “Listen, Aedan, I’m not . . .” She sucked in an uncomfortable breath, clutching her mug as if it might undo this intoxicated blunder.

“You’re not interested in assholes,” Aedan finished. “Fair enough.”

“I’m not interested in anyone,” Cyra said quickly, sobering discomfort ridding more of the fog from her brain, chased by a bloom of sadness. The emotions swallowed any and all riled passions, leaving nothing but a cold emptiness seeping across her skin.

Aedan’s steely eyes shifted over her face, and whatever he saw there softened his expression. “For what it’s worth to you, Calderis is an absolute fool.”

“Thank you,” Cyra said, chest tightening as she managed a stiff nod. Neither spoke for a full minute, sipping on their ales in thick, awkward silence.

“Will you, at least, allow this asshole to walk you back?” Aedan asked after a final gulp from his mug.

Cyra agreed quickly, leaving her regrets and a bad headache for tomorrow.

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“So, this is where all the excitement happens?” Aurelia asked, looking around curiously. A party unfolded across Camp Ravenwood, joining a similar celebration for the second-year warriors, everyone allowed to invite friends.

“More like where the pain and humiliation happens,” Akira added dryly. She and Cyra led a mini tour for their friends, walking along the training arena and slowly making their way to the meeting hall where the party was hosted.

Catching up with friends was long overdue. Aurelia gabbed about Builder Track classes, with Pippin occasionally adding commentary. Nailah shared the best stories, describing all manner of gruesome or fascinating injuries witnessed as a shadowing healer.

Everyone was excited to spend some genuine time together.

“Oh, look, there’s Fabien and Aedan.” Akira waved. The boys waved back, presently chatting with Jia Masura, who was looking sharp tonight in her second-year warrior’s coat.

“Speaking of pain and humiliation,” Pippin grumbled, eyes flickering over the male cadets.

“Seriously.” Aurelia scrunched up her face. “You’re voluntarily spending time with Aedan Fletcher these days?”

Akira slid her gaze sideways, as if already detecting the prickle of heat presently crawling up Cyra’s spine. It had been over a week since their inebriated tavern kiss, all parties involved acting as though it never happened.

“He’s been less of an asshole, recently,” Akira said, her attention lingering on Cyra, who returned a reprimanding glare.

Aurelia narrowed her eyes, honing her gossip detection skills like a shark scenting blood. “What happened? Did one of you sleep with Aedan?”

“No,” Cyra said quickly. “We were drunk the other night, and experienced the rare event of a pleasant exchange, yielding to a lapse in judgement in which our lips happened to touch.”

“Meaning you kissed?” Nailah said.

“Technically . . . yes,” Cyra admitted, her face on fire.

Hurt flared across Aurelia’s features. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was nothing,” Cyra insisted, planning to murder Akira later. “And it never happened.” She shifted an insistent look around the group, a dash of panic quickening her pulse as Fabien, Aedan, and Jia rapidly approached.

The desire to melt into the packed earth beneath her feet worsened when she dared a look at the cadet in question. Of course Aedan looked annoyingly gorgeous in his formal coat, sandy-blond hair brushed back in loose waves. And there was that smile again, so strange on his face, and yet it suited him perfectly.

A flash of their sloppy kiss shoved into her thoughts. Gah, why did she have to kiss Aedan Fletcher? And why couldn’t she stop thinking about it?

Cyra wasn’t the only one feeling out of sorts. Pippin shifted side-to-side, looking anywhere but the approaching cadets. Although she did catch one fleeting flicker toward the boys. It wasn’t fear or discomfort, however, that shone in his features, but something more akin to heartache. A look packed with regret and sadness.

Odd, thought Cyra, wondering at the source. Aedan or—

“Fabien was just recounting your Catacomb success,” Jia said by way of greeting, her bright eyes lighting on Akira. “Congratulations. So few groups even make it out of the crypt, let alone defeat the challenge in under an hour. I’m told the team’s triumph was mostly your doing.”

“Thank you.” Akira beamed with appreciation. “I’m only relieved we are finally graduating to using crystals.”

“I don’t know,” Fabien said with mock severity. “We haven’t seriously fought with crystals in ages; we’re all probably rubbish now.”

“You can speak honestly, Fabien,” Akira said with an over-serious frown. “Aedan was always rubbish with crystals.” She gave him a goading grin as if daring him to snap back with his usual humorless ire.

It flickered there for just a moment, his instinct to annihilate anyone daring to give insult rising to the surface, but the biting words never

reached his lips. Instead, a smile triumphed as he said, “If you recall, Rhoki, I was in the lead during the Gauntlet Trials—for the first two minutes, at least.”

A laugh escaped Cyra’s lips before she could stop it. Worse, she responded with a teasing, “I suppose that makes you only boorishly average, then.”

“Thank you,” Aedan said with extra emphasis, as if indeed struggling with the pronunciation of the two words.

The inside joke brought more laughter to Cyra’s lips, and she allowed their gazes to meet. Something about the look in his eyes dropped her stomach, a fresh blush tearing back through her face. She quickly looked away, as if catching herself doing something wrong or embarrassing. Thankfully, Akira drove the conversation elsewhere before anyone noticed —well, except for Aurelia, whose keen eyes watched the entire exchange like a hawk tracking prey.

After a few minutes, Aedan and Jia strode away together in search of refreshments.

As they retreated, Cyra studied his broad shoulders, half-expecting a backward glance. She felt a confounding twinge of disappointment when he maintained his full attention on Jia.

“Don’t worry,” Aurelia whispered into her ear. “He is crushing on you. Jia’s just a distraction.”

“What?” Cyra’s spine went rigid at the implication. “I am not interested in Aedan.”

A knowing smile danced across Aurelia’s face. “If he’s matured since Wyndfyre, why not? Plus, your parents would love you and Aedan.”

Cyra groaned. “Just imagining my mother’s smug smile dissolves any attraction.”

Aurelia’s eyes sparkled as if she just caught Cyra confessing something salacious. “So, you are attracted to him?”

“I mean—” Cyra opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish. “You’ve seen him, he’s not unfortunate looking.” Especially without a shirt, her libido added, unhelpfully providing that picture in her mind once more.

Whatever Aurelia saw in Cyra’s expression only stretched her smile wider, but she said nothing more as plots conspired behind her sparkling green eyes.

***

“Welcome to phase two of first-year warrior training,” Kasian said, standing in front of their completely transformed training arena. No longer an open empty space, the sand lay covered with an assortment of walls, metal boxes, climbing bars, ropes, balance beams, and more, all organized into some sort of course. “This is the first configuration of three courses that will become your new nightmare—each designed to test your reaction time, strength, speed, and agility. At the end of four months, you must get through each course in under ten minutes. Success means graduating to specialties. Should you fail one or more courses, you will train during the summer weeks off, earning one more opportunity to pass. A second failure, and you’ll repeat the entire year.” Kasian paused, letting this statement resonate.

It certainly did, the cadets exchanging worried glances at the prospect of starting this nightmare all over again.

Kasian spent the next half-hour going over the course, pointing out the different features, pitfalls, and impossible-looking obstacles. At various locations were boards cut in the shapes of people. He instructed the trainees to cast against the wood-figures, aiming for the center painted circle.

Any inkling the coming months would be easier because they were allowed crystals evaporated within those thirty minutes. Everyone struggled. A small consolation for the next weeks of pain. Surely the next course could not possibly be harder.

Surely wrong.

At the start of month two, Kasian changed the course. This host of fresh obstacles sported moving targets. It was impossible. Devious. Cruel. Nothing could exceed the second course for difficulty . . . except the last course. The targets in this one actually shot wood pellets back at the cadets. It was absolutely maddening.

“You’re dead, Cyra!” Kasian shouted after she was shot for the fourth time.

Three months—exactly ninety-five days of running these courses, and the cadets had more or less mastered the first two, but the last one remained an unconquerable beast.

“You’re dead, Fabien! Headshot, Fletcher! You’re dead!” Kasian called before ending another miserable day of failure, not one trainee yet to

“survive” the final course. “You must be mindful of your crystal’s defense abilities. Strike and defend.” He shook his head at their lack of success before dismissing the group with a disappointed huff.

“How are any of us going to pass that last course?” Akira lamented as the cadets slunk back to their barracks. “We have one month until the final trial . . . It’ll take a year.”

“Maybe Kasian is testing us on our humility at facing inevitable failure,” said Fabien, walking between Aedan and Akira.

“I’m certainly feeling very humble at the moment,” Aedan said, raking a hand through his sweaty locks.

“The final set of shooters.” Akira’s hands balled into fists. “Inanimate metal bastards—especially the last one. If it would just fire a second later, I would have passed today.”

Fabien tiredly rubbed his temple. “After everything we went through this year . . . if a wooden pellet prevents me from moving on to specialties, then I’m burning the whole place to the ground.”

Akira gave him a wicked smile. “I’ll bring the kindling.”

“I’ll pay off our alibis,” Aedan said, dead serious.

“And I’ll distract my brother,” Cyra offered. The group shared a half-hearted chuckle before gloomy silence thickened the air, only broken by the soft plodding of their boots before they all eventually dispersed.

Over the past few months, the awkwardness had mellowed between Cyra and Aedan. They had not repeated their inebriated kiss—thank the Ancients. Better still, Aedan began dating Jia Masura. So that was that, the conclusion to their very boring story.

Fine by Cyra, she was too busy with Kasian’s torture-courses and the prospect of failing her first year of warrior training to fuss about boys.

When the end of year trials finally arrived—a day reserved for each course—she had only successfully completed the third course twice.

Day one, everyone passed. After her own run, Cyra wondered why she ever thought the course was hard. Day two, all but one cadet passed. Cyra had a few close calls, but nothing too worrisome. When day three arrived, fear over her encroaching performance carved a nervous hole through her insides, anxiety like nothing felt since the Gauntlet Trials.

Fabien, Akira, and Aedan each passed, reporting Kasian only failed those who received more than three hits or a fatal “injury” from a wooden pellet.

Envy spawned at their success, intensifying Cyra's nerves. What if she was the only one of her friends who didn't pass? Forced to train over the next six weeks with the five thus far failed cadets?

"Cyra Byrogan!" Kasian called.

Stomach lurching, she forced her legs to move, entering the arena and positioning herself at the starting point. She eyed the lone red crystal slotted in her bracer, another agonizing aspect of this challenge—moderate your casts or lose your only defense against wood-pellet failure.

"Begin when ready," Kasian said, holding up a stop watch.

Inhaling a deep, steadying breath, Cyra focused on the obstacles in her path. One way or another, this would be over in the next ten minutes.

Darting forward, she leapt over a series of logs. Two metal figures popped up behind hay bales, shooting wooden pellets. She blocked the attack with a cast of ice. Easy.

She climbed up a steep ramp, halting just before her head crested the pinnacle, knowing a shooter was waiting to snipe her in the face. After three shots, she swung her legs up, an ice shard already whipping through the air before her body settled on the ramp's narrow summit. Her attack smashed into the metal shooter, halting its continued assault.

Stretching to her feet, Cyra grabbed a rope, stealing a breath as she prepared for the next set of challenges. Timing was everything.

Heart in her throat, she leapt off the ramp, casting fireballs at the next target. At the crest of her swing, she twisted her body midair, toes just reaching the narrow plank, marking the next obstacle. Landing on the beam slightly off balance, she nearly careened into the sand. *Don't you dare eat sand today*. Falling off an obstacle meant an automatic failure.

Once she regained her balance, she sprinted across the beam while simultaneously casting at metal figures to her left and right. After reaching the other side, she raced down a set of shifting steps, "killing" two more faux assailants.

The next set of obstacles offered a reprieve from the shooting, albeit no reprieve from failure. She jumped, ducked, dodged, and slid her way through a series of moving contraptions deviously designed to knock the runner into the sand. A fate she only narrowly avoided, landing on a block before stepping onto the sand, and entering the last challenge.

Three walls staggered across the arena, pellet-firing figures waiting out of sight. Defend or dodge were her only options.

Pumping her arms, Cyra dashed toward the first wall. Pellets soared, one brushing the ends of her ponytail, another licking at her heels. Another grazed just below her rolled up sleeve—her first hit.

Pulse thumping, she ground her teeth, reaching the first barrier. After the next pound of her heart, she resumed her charge, casting a succession of fire and ice. Sand kicked up around her footfalls, relentless pellets smashing her ice-shields, and spraying blasts of cold into her face.

She passed the final wall, zagging right as she cast ice to her left, when her elemental crystal turned cloudy. *Shit*.

Early, the cloudiness came too early.

Panic surged, blood roaring in her ears. She needed more casts than she had left to complete this final section—the final section where she nearly always failed.

Thin shields, go! Cyra drove her body forward with all her remaining energies might. An ice shield to her left diverted two would-be killing blows. A shield to her right diverted three more. *So close!*

Cyra's stomach dropped as a sheen of glimmering red mist joined the warm summer breeze. Her crystal was gone—dust in the wind. *Seven premature hells.* Feet from the finish line, she launched herself through the air, feeling a pellet strike her ankle, another hitting her hand.

Three hits.

A fourth pellet struck her chest as she rolled over the finish line.

Immediate cold sliced through her veins as she settled on her back, staring up at the cloudless sky, everything inside of her wilting. She had failed.

"Well done, sister. You passed." Kasian's smiling face jutted into view.

"I sustained four hits," Cyra gasped for breath. "The last one was a killing blow. I failed." She didn't move, couldn't move, fingers curling into the sand. This was a nightmare. All her friends passed, and she failed.

"The last pellet hit after you crossed the finish line, Cyra," Kasian said in an over-patient tone. "You passed."

"What?" Cyra's mouth dropped open, relief hauling away the soul-crushing devastation. "I passed?" She shot to her feet as a wide grin spread across her face. "I passed!" She flung her arms around her brother's neck.

"Congratulations, sister."

***

“Come on, Akira, one more,” Cyra whined, the triumphant trainees now several hours into celebrating their well-deserved success at Wielder’s Whistle.

“I remember the last time I overindulged,” Akira grumbled, gathering herself for imminent departure. “I’m not going to end the night with my head in a toilet again. The pellets didn’t get me today. The ale is not getting me tonight.”

Fabien yawned, joining Akira’s exit despite Cyra’s protests, powerless to stop them from walking into muggy summer night. Which meant circumstances once again left her in the company of Aedan Fletcher—the last cadets left at the bar.

She gave him a tight smile, knowing there was no need to be awkward. Their drunken kiss was four months ago. Aedan was seeing someone else. They were decidedly just friends.

“So, Fletcher, what will be your specialty?” she asked, body warm from the alcohol, her mind buzzed but not drunk. “Leadership?” The smell of toasted oats tickled her nose after the next sip of ale left a film of foam on her upper lip. She licked it away, and could swear Aedan tracked the move.

“I have no patience for leading.” He waved his hand through the air. “As tough as Kasian was at times, he made running a first-year training program look easy.”

“He’s annoying like that.” Cyra scrunched up her nose. “Combat?”

“Too many rules.”

“Intelligence?”

Aedan gave a dry snort. “Even more rules. Nope, my heart is calling for adventure and certain danger. It’s the Rangers for me.”

A smile pulled at Cyra’s lips, feeling far more pleased with his answer than she’d ever admit out loud. “What about Jia? She just landed a job with the Castorian Intelligence Corps, right? Ranger assignments can take you quite far from the capital.”

“That’s true, but I doubt she’ll care much where I go.” A somberness eclipsed his expression. “She and I are no longer together.”

“Oh,” said Cyra stupidly. The awkwardness she had successfully battled returned in full force. *Words, Cyra, form words like a human*. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Aedan’s brows crowded together as he sipped his drink. “We were both so busy that we hardly saw each other. And”—a mild flinch scrunched his features—“I might have shoved her ex into a wall after we crossed paths on a date.” To Cyra’s raised brows he added, “Jia’s ex is an entitled prick.”

“Whereas you . . .”

“Whereas I am a reformed entitled prick,” he deadpanned before the corner of his mouth twitched. “Mostly.”

Cyra fought a smile. “You shouldn’t shove people.” She paused, giving him a knowing look as her thoughts revisited the time when she had shoved Aedan following the lake incident at Wyndfyre. “Unprovoked, at least,” she added cheekily.

A twinge of shame prickled across Aedan’s face at the reference. “On further consideration, perhaps I owe Illias an apology for the face full of wall.” He tensed, as if the idea of apologizing brought him physical harm. “The sour-faced snob was always such an insufferable twat at school, especially during Red Lapis sessions. I was an asshole, but I had talent, respected teachers and the upper classes, for the most part. Illias walked around Wyndfyre like he owned the place, got away with anything because he was the dean’s son.”

Cold whirled around Cyra, as if a winter storm suddenly blew through the stuffy tavern. “Jia’s ex is Illias Malcom?”

Aedan shrugged in answer. “And by her reaction the other day, it was a nasty breakup. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, uh, no,” she breathed, clearing her throat before swiftly suggesting they call it a night, successfully escaping any drunken mishaps.

But she couldn’t escape what Aedan had revealed.

Illias Malcom. Just the name boiled utter rage through Cyra. And as much as she tried not to think about him, the task was like scrubbing away dried pond scum—laborious and stomach-churning. The itch to do something gnawed a hole through every fiber of her being. Maybe that was why the next morning, Cyra found herself wandering to Jia’s apartment. Second year warriors were allowed their own city accommodations, Jia conveniently living near Wielder’s Whistle—an end of night location Aedan often found himself on their days off. Not that Cyra noticed. Much.

She lingered on the covered porch steps, suddenly uncertain if this was a good idea, more than once raising her fist to knock when the door swung

open.

“Oh, hi Cyra,” Jia greeted, surprise quickly blinking off her face. “What are you doing here?”

“Uhm,” Cyra stuttered, feeling a surge of awkwardness about the topic she intended to broach, quite sure she shouldn’t have come here. “I actually came here to discuss something . . . sensitive.” Jia’s brows caved but she said nothing, waiting for her to elaborate. “I heard you dated Illias Malcom.”

Jia’s whole countenance changed, a wary hardness falling over her features. “And?”

“And, well.” Cyra shifted uncomfortably, resisting the urge to fidget. “I heard something very distressing about him from a credible source, and I wanted to ask you if, uhm, if—”

“If Illias assaulted me too?”

Cyra blinked, taken aback by Jia’s icy bluntness, the response all but confirming her assumptions. “I’m sorry, Jia. I don’t mean to pry. I know this must be difficult, but would you be willing to report what happened to the authorities? With more than one story, then—”

“Then nothing, Cyra,” Jia bit back, bitterness peppering her tone. “Three individual complaints weren’t enough for either the Wyndfyre Academy Board or the Warrior Track Director when I petitioned them last summer.”

Cyra’s heart plummeted. “Three?” She could barely say the number.

“The Malcom family is one of the richest and most influential Castorian families in the kingdom, and we were three Clovian-born girls with little political influence.” Jia spoke without emotion, as if stating facts no one could argue against. “The authorities only shuffled around our complaints, if not actively tried to silence us. One more report is not going to make a difference.”

Everything inside of Cyra squeezed. “But we have to do something. Don’t you—”

“Of course I want that sentient turd punished.” Jia’s eyes flashed, but her anger immediately deflated. “The Warrior Track Director threatened to pull me out of the program if I made any more . . . *fuss* was the word he used. Maybe someday I’ll be in a position to change things, but for now, I have to toe the line like everyone else.”

Burning anger replaced the frost in Cyra veins. “I don’t have to toe the line, Jia. I am in a position to help—or at least try.”

Jia’s features softened. “You can do what you like, Cyra, but leave my name out of it. I earned my new position at the CIC in spite of Illias. My whole future hinges on the next few months. I will not jeopardize it for a cause I cannot win.”

Cyra wanted to argue, but what could she say?

Nothing.

During the walk back to Camp Ravenwood, her frustrations simmered. She wanted to fight, to breathe righteous hellfire on anyone who allowed this vile creature to keep preying upon women before eviscerating the dastardly fiend with merciless brutality.

When she returned to the barracks, she composed a letter to her mother, omitting names, only that she personally knew multiple victims of Illias Malcom. Wrote that she could not, in good conscience, do nothing while this predator roamed free.

The writing wasn’t her best work, but her words breathed fire and passion.

She posted the letter before caution summoned any hesitation. Someone had to stop this man. The queen would do something, surely.

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Chapter 28

The Party Guest

Present Day

Cyra's eyes skirted over the costumed crowd as murmurs spread across the room following Governor Royce's grand introduction. She had never considered herself a shy person, and most times didn't mind attention. Right now, however, the desire to fade into the wall surged with each heart-thundering second as dozens of eyes glued to the royal Syphon, risen from the dead.

A spectacle. She was a spectacle, and she loathed every second.

Amongst the gawking crowd, Cyra detected a mixture of sentiments. Some wore scowls of anger or knit brows of uncertainty, but most just stared with wide-eyed wonder.

Royce steered toward the first couple, Cyra moving with the enthusiasm of someone about to lose a vital organ. She had certainly lost her dignity, along with most of her remaining pride. *Suck it up, Cyra.*

"Antonio, Marie," Governor Royce greeted a middle-aged couple with a wide smile. He shook their hands in vigorous welcome. "Thank you both for coming."

Cyra forced a strained smile despite her deepening cringe. The couple was dressed in similar Age of Queens-style costuming, as finely made as the ensembles worn by their host.

"We couldn't miss a James Royce party," Antonio said, his country drawl thick as he flashed a wide toothy smile. His large golden-brown eyes

drifted to Cyra, lips parting in wonderment. “Well, Governor, you certainly are full of surprises.”

“I would hate to be as predictable as some of the papers report,” Royce said, positively gleeful as he reveled in this whole charade. “And of course, I have the honor of introducing you to the woman of the hour, with whom I willingly share my spotlight tonight. Though she needs little introduction, this is Cyra Byrogan.” He gestured as he spoke. “Cyra, this is Antonio Adamos, and his wife, Marie.”

Cyra managed a tight nod. Flirting the line between restrained politeness and rude indifference was her main strategy tonight. She’d play along with Royce’s political schemes and pandering. For now.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Antonio said, eyes warming as he regarded Cyra. “What is it like to come back from the dead?”

“Painful,” Cyra bit out and Antonio chuckled. His wife, however, merely stared with narrowed eyes, as if not entirely decided on whether she found Cyra’s presence interesting or tasteless. Either way, her pursed lips and tense stance oozed irritation.

“Cyra is still adjusting to life back in the public eye,” Royce said, cajoling half-grin yet to leave his face since they entered the ballroom.

“I do hope you find Vinmore high society to your liking,” Antonio said. “We’ve worked hard to get where we are.” His gaze swept around the space as if the present party constituted a grand success.

“Quite.” Royce nodded approvingly. “Antonio owns the East Hills Oil Fields. With industry expanding everywhere, the Adamos name might soon be the richest in all Vinmore, if not Clovia—once the fields are fully developed, of course.”

“That is the dream, Governor,” Antonio said. “Now if only President Mahano would rescind these pesky federal taxes and regulations—but never mind all that. There are far more interesting conversations to be had with our special guest. I must ask, Your Highness, where have you been hiding these last four years?”

“A saloon in Lofton,” Cyra said flatly.

Having just sipped from her wine glass, Marie choked at these words. “A saloon?” She huffed a breathy laugh, at last lending Cyra more than just a side eye of disapproval.

“That’s right,” cut in Royce. “Cyra made her home right here in Vinmore, seeing these lands for their potential, just like we all do.”

“Indeed, indeed,” boomed Antonio. “Governor, why don’t we talk on the balcony. I have some specific plans to discuss with you in private.”

“Of course.” Royce’s countenance brimmed with exuberance. “If you will excuse me, Cyra, I will return shortly.” And with that, the pair sauntered away, leaving the two women behind. Cyra wasn’t sure if she was relieved or annoyed to be abandoned by her sniveling escort.

“So,” began Marie reluctantly, curiosity and arrogance waging war behind her pretentious countenance before she finally asked, “Is the Sapphire Coast as beautiful as they write about in books?”

Cyra shrugged. “It’s pretty—lovely beaches.”

Before Marie could respond, another woman inserted herself into the conversation. “I heard there is a city built over the water in Shallows Bay.” Her eyes bulged with eagerness. This guest wore something completely radical, a crimson drapery-style gown—gauzy material clinging to her curvaceous form. It was a style evoking a time before the Great Tribal Migrations, back to Ancient Kroatoa.

“Ah, Felicity,” Marie greeted warmly. “It is good to see you.”

“You as well, Marie,” the woman said, greedy attention pinned to Cyra. “I hope you do not mind the interruption. None of us have ever entertained a member of the Castorian court. Personally, I am just thrilled at the chance to learn more about aristocratic life.”

Better curiosity about court life than lobbing aspersions about her war exploits, Cyra supposed. “Shallows Bay is not so much a town as about ten estates built over the bay. Quite a wonder during summer—especially if one is attending a party . . . such as this one.”

Yes, indulging them was the right play, as the immensely pleased women traded indulgent smiles.

“I am considering buying an estate on the Tyrenese Sea,” Felicity said, chocolate-brown eyes glittering, “I can’t stand these horribly humid summers anymore. A beach sounds lovely right now—perhaps I should just make the purchase.”

“Ah, to have money and no husband.” Marie sighed longingly. “Antonio would never spend such an exorbitant sum on something he deems frivolous.” She faced Cyra. “Felicity is the heiress to her father’s gold mine fortune.”

“My family has been quite fortunate,” Felicity agreed. “But like many here, not so long ago we were all just average people.” She stared eagerly at

Cyra, like she might devour her whole. “Tell me, does every Castorian noble family own a castle? I swear I read that in a paper once. I always wondered if it was true.”

The two women tossed her a continuous stream of questions, and were soon joined by other female guests. They asked varying things. Curiosity about aristocratic-life weighing the most on the ladies’ thoughts—or at least what they possessed the courage to ask.

They fed off of her answers as if conspiring to build their own little noble court right here in Vinmore. After an hour, Cyra held little doubt this was exactly what they were plotting.

Everyone in the room had wealth—either earned themselves or inherited from the prior generation. The guests dripped with their self-made riches, necks and ears almost comically adorned. Felicity alone wore a minor fortune. A robin’s egg-sized ruby rested over her draped neckline, while large diamonds dropped from either ear. Marie wore a sparkling sapphire tiara with matching earrings and an emerald ring the size of a marble. The male guests did not shy away from expensive accessories either—sporting gold chains, gilded diamond-encrusted canes, and white-gold timepieces inlaid with precious gems.

What a gaudy display of overeager new-money, her mother’s voice trilled across Cyra’s thoughts. She shoved the sentiment away. These people earned their wealth far more than the Castorian nobility ever had.

The whole evening felt strange, yet familiar in many ways. She had attended this party before—many times. New money, old money—it was the same competition. The same race to impress with their fortune, their name, or their influence.

Sliding back into the familiar skill of social maneuvering amongst the affluent was easier than anticipated. Cyra was rusty, sure. Her natural charm and elegance needed improvement, her plastered smile not quite believable, but as the night waned, most of her worries eased, awkward moments scarce, save for a few exceptions—like any time someone brought up the war.

Once most of Royce’s guests decided Cyra wasn’t some monstrous demon who might spontaneously sprout claws and breathe fire, some—particularly the men—grew bolder with their questions. She tensed whenever a sentence began with, “*I heard during the war you . . .*” followed by some dreadful embellishment of a true-*ish* story.

She stayed vague, responding with, "*Don't believe everything you hear*," or "*Quite the exaggeration, I assure you*."

Not everyone was impressed or curious, however. Several icy stares stalked Cyra throughout the night, sourced by those recognizing an enemy. Four years—four days. The war was still a vivid memory for some. She avoided these people.

Whiskey, however, she did not avoid, happily indulging in a generous pour during a brief reprieve from the social onslaught. While Royce was off on yet another private conversation, she sequestered herself near the bar, cherishing the stolen quiet.

A quiet short-lived as a man approached the bar and ordered his own glass of whiskey. "It's tough being so popular, isn't it?" he said, side-eye latching onto her face.

The man was around Cyra's age, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that curved up on the edges. A silver-colored waistcoat buttoned neatly over a tailored shirt—both finely made and appropriate for an upscale atmosphere. Less so were the leather chaps worn over gold-studded boots. The odd juxtaposition, however, worked on the rugged-looking man, lending him a rich but rough effect.

"Unavoidable for me, I suppose," she said flatly, hoping he might take the hint and bother someone else.

He didn't—angling a smile in her direction. His hazel eyes betrayed amusement as if he found her predicament entertaining but not in an overtly gleeful or snide way. Like his contrasting clothes, his caramel-brown hair was neat, combed back in thick waves. His skin was fair but kissed by the sun, jaw dusted with several days of untamed stubble. Again, the effect suited the man.

"At least there is alcohol available." He raised his glass. "Whiskey is a remedy for most things in this world. It certainly got me through the war."

Cyra automatically tensed, mentally preparing for the inevitable verbal battle with this veteran. "I'm not here for trouble."

The man cracked a smile, warm eyes raking over her from head to foot. "I'll bet trouble mostly finds you. Sorry, where are my manners? My name is Nathaniel Smithson. I go by Nate." He tipped the edge of his hat with his finger. "Cattle rancher."

"Costume, or your actual occupation?" Cyra asked, scrutinizing his outfit as studiously as he did hers.

Nate shrugged. “Both. I’m not really one for parties—certainly not of the costume variety. I live a few miles north of here. I planned to pass on the governor’s invitation until I heard you were coming. I attended to see if his outlandish claim was true, or if James—Governor Royce—created some grand ruse in order to stir donor interest before his ultimate confession.”

Cyra tipped up her chin. “And are you satisfied, Nate?”

He smiled. “Quite. You are both what I expected and, at the same time, not at all.”

There was something disarming about the man; his casual confidence was neither arrogant nor hostile, more oddly encouraging. “Don’t worry, I hide my talons well.”

The statement earned a laugh. “And when will the fire breathing start?”

“Only after I burn the man parts of those I’ve seduced,” Cyra said dryly. “It’s a whole process.”

She expected Nate to be put off by the dark humor, end the short-lived banter with a threat or sneering remark. Instead he raised his hands playfully. “I would not want to interfere with your process.”

Cyra resisted a pleased smile, sipping her whiskey.

“What?” Nate cocked a brow at her nonverbal reaction. “You expected insults?”

“Followed by a light stabbing.”

“I left my stabbing knives at home, I’m afraid.”

Now it was Cyra’s turn to laugh, the first genuine humorous reaction of the night. “Next time, I’ll be ready then.”

Nate’s grin settled to an amused smile. “In truth, I appreciate the candor. There’s far too much stuffery around here for my taste. Most of the fools in this room fought the war with their purses and not their blood—a bit of dark-humored honesty is refreshing.”

Cyra arched a curious brow. “Even from me?”

“Especially from you.” His hazel eyes twinkled. “Finding humor from darkness is the best way for old enemies to find common ground.”

“Well, plain-speaking Nate, what do you believe this room thinks of me?” She narrowed her eyes, daring him to tell the truth.

Nate shrugged, making a severe dent in his drink. “Most of the men here either want to bed you or watch you swing from a tree. The women either want to be you, be your confidant . . . or watch you swing from a

tree.” His tone was casual, almost flirtatious, like he was complimenting her hair or dress.

A dry laugh huffed up Cyra’s throat before dying on her lips. “I should not laugh. People have plenty of reasons to want me dead.” Fresh severity rolled over her features. “I have many regrets from the war, I assure you.”

Nate returned a measured look. “After a war, everyone should have regrets, or they are fools. All the same, your accomplishments are impressive, even if you were on the other side.”

Cyra straightened, all lightness evaporating as her stomach knotted. *Here we go*. “Most of what you heard about me is an exaggeration.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” he said, right brow ticking, “as, for the last few months of the war, I was a corporal serving under General Adonis North, just after his promotion.”

Cyra choked on her next sip of whiskey. “Were you?”

“Yes.” A wry smile pulled at the corners of Nate’s mouth. “He . . . had some choice words to describe you.”

“I’ll bet he did.” Her smile turned cold as an image of the man in question flooded her thoughts. The last person she saw before waking up half-dead. “North would put a bullet in my head if he ever saw me again.” She might do the same to him should they ever have the misfortune to cross paths again.

“You see, that’s the curious thing,” Nate said, procuring them both fresh whiskeys. “He swears he already killed you. Said he shot you at Willowwood, twice. That no healing crystal would have fixed you in time. Adonis North may be a lot of things, but he is not a liar.”

“Just an optimist.” Cyra considered her next words and decided on the truth. “He shot me at Willowwood, but only once. The second bullet hit a fellow ranger, saving my life. The man died on top of me.” Her throat went terribly dry with these words, chased by the unwelcome images they conjured. She gulped down a mouthful of whiskey, reveling in the subtle burn.

“A horrible day,” Nate said grimly. “I think about that last battle every now and then. Maybe we all were fools.” He threw back his drink, inhaling a deep breath. “I understand why you didn’t return to your home. I couldn’t return to mine. When my uncle gave me a swath of land five miles northeast of here, I never looked back.”

“A cattle ranch sounds nice.”

“Busy but the good kind.” Nate nodded. “You are welcome to visit, of course, if the offer does not sound too presumptuous, Captain.”

Surprise shifted through Cyra. “Certainly not, Corporal.” She smiled. “As long as General North is not invited.”

“That would be Governor North, now,” Nate corrected.

Unfortunately for both Nate and Cyra, the tolerable conversation did not last much longer as Royce barreled into their little corner. “Now Nathaniel, you have been occupying the lovely Cyra’s time for far too long.” He promptly steered her back into the fray, ending her precious few minutes of enjoyment.

Still, overall, the evening went better than expected, but by the end she was glad to be free, and glad for a bed.

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Chapter 29

Kasian's Birthday

Nine Years Ago

"I think Akira is seeing someone," Aurelia blurted to Cyra. The two friends had just arrived at the Royal Palace, attending a late summer ball in celebration of Kasian's birthday.

"Why do you say that?" Cyra asked, following the milling throng of party guests to the palace's rear courtyard, the soft melody of violins filling the air.

"Akira didn't come with us to the theater last week," Aurelia said as she scanned the arriving guests. "And she missed the fireball game two days ago with no explanation. You and Akira are about to begin ranger training, kicking off with three weeks in the wilderness. If it were me, I'd be going out every night."

Cyra shrugged. "Akira is not you."

"I know, but, honestly, do you think Akira would tell us if she was seeing someone?" Suspicion flared in Aurelia's green eyes. "Just like you would tell me if anything started between you and Aedan?"

Cyra rolled her eyes. "For the last time, Aedan and I are just friends. The one and only time we kissed was months ago."

"He's single now."

"I'm aware."

Aurelia pursed her pink-painted lips, as if she found Cyra's responses unsatisfactory but didn't want to beleaguer the point. And, thankfully, she

didn’t, instead veering away toward her first social target of the evening, dusty-rose gown disappearing in the crowd while Cyra wandered toward the palace’s facade.

Large torches lined the stone base, their yellow glow dancing shadows over the cream-colored marble. The sculptural forms were magnificent, a stunning blend of art and architecture. The interior was just as grand, with too many rooms to count.

The opulence could be cold sometimes, however, and certainly lonely other times, but overall, it was a wonderful place to call home. She was extraordinarily lucky.

A presence drew up along her side. “I’ve always wondered,” Aedan said, nodding toward a sculpture on the second level. “Is that man petting that duck or choking it?”

The corners of Cyra’s mouth reached for a smile, but she forced them to stay even. “That duck is a swan. And they are in an embrace.”

Aedan’s right brow ticked. “Can one embrace a swan?”

“King Tristan believed the swan possessed the soul of his dead wife.”

“And, suddenly, I don’t want to know more.” When their eyes collided, heat rose to her cheeks. The blush worsened with his next words—with the admiring gaze he swept over her sage-green gown: “You look lovely tonight. Pre-Industrial suits you.”

Pre-Industrial was the party’s theme, featuring high-waisted gowns and narrow silhouettes. Cyra loved the style, which required no corset, the two light skirt layers perfect for the warm late summer night.

“Thank you.” Cyra relinquished a full smile, ignoring the fresh flutter in her gut. “I secretly love a good costume ball, but you must swear to never tell my mother.”

“On my life,” he said with the gravitas of someone actually pledging their mortality to a cause.

She liked it more than she would admit.

“You look nice, too,” Cyra said. And he did, wearing an elegant midnight blue double-breasted summer coat. Similar to women’s attire, Pre-Industrial suits cut high, the style accentuating Aedan’s tall, broad frame.

Ask him out for drinks, you idiot, Aurelia’s voice trilled through her thoughts, but Cyra shoved away the notion. She wasn’t entirely sure why. And soon it didn’t matter.

Soon she had bigger problems.

“Whatever happens next, I’m sorry,” she said, muscles tensing as her eyes fixed on an approaching figure—her mother.

Queen Zephyrina wore an antique gold and burgundy gown, a diamond-encrusted crown resting gently on her nest of salted cinnamon-brown curls. “Good evening, dear,” her mother greeted, blue eyes flittering over Cyra in swift appraisal, lips pursing as if not quite impressed but not entirely disappointed—a begrudging pass. “And Lord Fletcher.” The queen’s attention shifted to Aedan, expression betraying a decidedly favorable assessment.

“Lord Fletcher,” Aedan said, a muscle in his jaw flexing. “Still sounds strange.”

“Best get used to it.” The queen inclined her chin, her gaze flicking between the pair. The hint of a smile played around her lips, leaving little ambiguity of what she thought of Aedan and Cyra spending time together.

The happy look soured Cyra’s stomach, her discomfort only surged when another thought struck. “Mother, did you receive the letter I sent a few weeks ago?” When the queen only returned a blank look, she added, “It was one of a sensitive nature.”

The queen’s entire countenance shifted. It was a familiar look—displeasure mixed with admonishment. “This is Kasian’s night, Cyra. Not a time to discuss unpleasantries.”

Cyra ground her teeth. So, her mother had received the letter and done nothing. “And when is the right time to discuss such unpleasantries?”

“Later, dear. I must greet the Vance family.” Her mother gave a curt nod before hurrying away across the courtyard, guests bowing and curtsying as she strode past.

“I have a feeling that happens often,” Aedan commented.

“My mother completely dismissing me?” Cyra sighed. “Only my whole life.”

The party ensued under the lovely evening with Cyra and Aedan quickly dragged into different conversations. Cyra mostly avoided anything too tedious before finally set free to choose her next engagement. Aurelia was chatting with a handsome lord’s son named Drake Languine. Kasian was entrenched in conversation with their Uncle Mathus and General Vance.

And then there was Aedan, standing alone by the cake table.

Indecision swirled on which social avenue to choose. As if sensing her conundrum, Aurelia silently waved Cyra toward the cake table, giving her a

look that said, *You are being unreasonably obstinate*.

Relinquishing a resigned sigh, Cyra strode toward Aedan, the dormant flutter in her stomach reanimating with this choice. “How is the cake?” she asked by way of greeting.

Mouth full, Aedan struggled to form a smile without losing any crumbs from his too-large bite. He mostly succeeded, save for a slash of white frosting lingering on his lower lip.

Cyra resisted the urge to wipe the dab away with her finger—or with her lips.

Stop it, she silently scolded herself.

Too late. A blush heated her cheeks, mind already imagining the feel of his lips, chased by the sweet taste of frosting. Quickly collecting herself, she pointed to her own lower lip. “You have some frosting . . .”

Aedan licked away the frosting with the tip of his tongue, and Cyra’s stomach dropped.

Seven hells. Cake, look at the cake. “I hope the cake is as good as it looks,” she said, grasping at anything to calm her pattering heart. The three-tiered masterpiece at least offered some diversion.

“It’s a bit dry.”

Face mercifully cooling, she managed a casual smile. “I won’t tell my mother.” She grabbed a knife and carved a piece for herself, hands needing something to do.

“Ah, familiar faces,” said an encroaching voice. “Would you mind cutting me a slice, Cyra?”

At the sound, every muscle in her body froze. The party noises faded. Only the pounding of her own heart rang in her ears. A year ahead of her at Wyndfyre, Illias was of average height, neither exceedingly plain nor particularly handsome, but rather exceptionally unassuming. Cyra knew better, however. Knew what lay beneath his disarming facade.

“Illias,” Aedan greeted coolly when Cyra’s silence trended toward uncomfortable. “How’s life as an architecture apprentice?” His tone oozed disinterest, as if subtly prodding the intruder to make himself scarce.

Cyra could only stare, grip strangling the cake knife in her right hand.

A blithe smile stretched across Illias’s face. “Slow-going, but I’m enjoying the experience.” He placed his drink on the table, resting his hand just next to the glass.

Fury burned through Cyra's veins. He shouldn't be smiling. Shouldn't be walking around as if he hadn't ruined lives. As if he had the right to share the same air as decent people.

"And you? Is First Class Warrior Training as hard as everyone says?" Illias asked, oblivious to her gathering venom as his eyes shifted to her face expectantly.

When Cyra remained tight-lipped, Aedan asked, "Are you all right?"

No. She wasn't. She was furious.

Eyes blazing with fire, she leaned toward Illias, upper lip curling in rage. "I am going to destroy you—you vile piece of human garbage."

Illias huffed an awkward laugh. "Too much to drink, Cyra?"

The puss-filled pimple had the audacity to laugh, eyes gleaming as if he detected exactly what had her incensed and knew she would do nothing.

The look sent her right over the edge of reason, and all thoughts of caution evaporated.

Because fuck caution.

With the cake knife still wedged in her white-knuckled grip, Cyra spun it around and plunged the blade into Illias's hand, still resting on the table.

She smirked at his shout of pain. "Oops."

The sound drew the attention of the nearby party guests, directing confused scowls toward the noise. Several things happened next. Illias yanked the knife from his hand as Aedan looped his arm around Cyra's waist and steered her away from the scene.

She allowed Aedan to eject her from the situation lest she cause more damage. And, seven hells, did she want to cause more damage. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied servants assisting the injured man, someone wrapping a napkin around the bleeding limb all while Illias whimpered and cursed in agony. *Good*.

Aedan guided a shaking Cyra around a garden hedge, her visceral rage cooling once the pair stopped. "What the hell was that about?" he demanded, concern and confusion working across his face.

Before Cyra composed herself enough to form sentences, Kasian appeared, followed by—her stomach lurched—the queen.

"By the Ancients, Cyra, have you completely lost your mind?" the queen snapped.

Under any other circumstance, Cyra might shrink under her mother's scolding ire, bow her head, and offer immediate apologies or excuses. Not

this time. This time she glared back at her mother with such ice, she was sure the air around them cooled several degrees.

The queen's wrinkled brow cleared. "That little scene was about the letter you wrote." She shook her head as if Cyra was the source of all her woes. "If you were going to throw a tantrum about the matter, I'd rather you had stayed home—in the new lodgings your father and I just financed for you."

No. No guilt. Not this time. "Illias Malcom is a fucking rapist," Cyra bit out, fiery anger reigniting. "And nobody cares."

"Language, dear," her mother bristled.

"Cyra?" Kasian breathed, looking as if someone just punched him in the gut.

"Not me," Cyra said in a quieter voice, the horrified look on her brother's face calming her reawakened outrage. "*Four* other women—and they matter just as much as I do." She leveled her fading glower on Kasian, and suddenly her eyes pricked with tears.

They have to matter, Kasian.

His throat bobbed, inclining his head in acknowledgement before returning his attention to the queen. "Tend to the guests, Mother, I'll see to Malcom."

"Happy to see to him as well, sir," Aedan offered, tone packed with violent promise.

"I have this at hand, Fletcher," Kasian assured.

"Yes, no need to create more spectacle," the queen sighed as she regarded Cyra. "You, daughter, are excused from this party and are disinvited to future social events until you recall how to act like a lady."

"Fine" was all Cyra said. What else could she say? She wouldn't apologize. Never. Tipping up her chin as a final act of defiance, she stormed off into the gardens.

"Cyra, wait." Aedan chased after her.

She ignored the order, weaving past fountains, flowerbeds, and trees, not stopping until she neared the small pond edging the palace grounds before unceremoniously plopping herself into the grass. *Until you recall how to act like a lady*—that was all her mother had to say. She snorted. She wasn't sure what she had expected. Not that, at the very least.

The beauty of the night stood in sharp contrast to her thunderous mood. The peaceful reflection of the full moon over the black water was simply

stunning. Stupid pretty moon.

Aedan sat down next to Cyra in the grass, and they both stared out over the sparkling surface in pensive silence.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” she said, breaking the quiet. “What sort of person stabs a man in the hand at a birthday party?”

“I think . . . you should have gone for the face,” Aedan said darkly. “Illias fancies himself a dandy. Best to hit vain people where it hurts the most.”

The corners of Cyra’s mouth tugged but never formed a full smile. “I probably just made everything worse. I am certainly in heaps of trouble.”

“Your mother will pass the injury off as an accident.” Aedan waved a hand through the air. “If there is a name more important than Malcom, it’s Byrogan.”

Cyra shook her head. “Great, so, I’m leveraging the same advantages as Illias to escape accountability for my own misdeeds.”

“Would you rather lose your career for doling out a fraction of the punishment that worthless wart deserves?”

Another tentative smile pulled at her lips before giving way to a long sigh. “I just wish things were different. And more than anything, I don’t understand how someone can hurt another person like that. To be so cruel.”

Aedan did not immediately reply. “People abuse others to feel control, to feel powerful. My father did—I did.” Pain broke across his features as he stared out over the pond. “When my father hurt me or my mother, I always felt so utterly helpless. When I bullied others at school, I felt better about myself. As if releasing that rage proved I wasn’t the weak, pathetic boy my father presumed.” A muscle in his jaw ticked several times. “It’s a wretched excuse for my behavior, and there is still much I’m sorry for.” His eyes worked over Cyra, the shame in them piercing her very soul.

She offered him a small smile.

“Some people can change,” he continued after a hard swallow, “recognize toxic behavior before it consumes their life or destroys others, but some people—people like my father . . .”

“Like Illias.”

“We all have an inner darkness. We either control it, or it controls us.”

Cyra released a long-tired breath, lying back in the grass and looking up at the stars. “I acted rashly tonight.” Guilt squeezed her insides, not guilt

over Illias, because fuck him, but guilt for those he harmed. Would they pay the price for her lunacy tonight?

“You stand up for others, Cyra. It’s part of who you are.” Aedan lay on his side, eyes sweeping over her face. “I know better than most. For what it’s worth, I admire you.”

His words eased some of the guilt-born tightness. “After the social suicide I just committed tonight, it’s good to know at least one lord will still speak to me.” She huffed an uneasy laugh as their gazes lingered.

“I am more than happy to be the lone lord at your side, Cyra, if you’d have me.” His voice was soft, almost sweet. And the way he said her name . . . the sound stilled her heart.

In that moment, she felt the overwhelming urge to kiss him—kiss this gorgeous creature lying next to her in the grass. It drove away all other thought, pleading with her to close those tempting inches between them. She ignored the silent call, just as she ignored the squeeze of her own heart at the vulnerable look on his face.

Until she didn’t.

Until she closed the distance.

It was a short kiss, a brush of the lips really—another impulsive act tonight. She pulled back in mild mortification. What if this wasn’t what he meant? What if he just wanted to be by her side as friends?

By the look of thrilled surprise on his face, he most definitely didn’t want to be just friends. She waited for him to say something. Ask her what the kiss meant.

What did the kiss mean?

She didn’t have an answer. And she didn’t need one.

Aedan shifted forward, his mouth covering hers as his hand slid around her waist, pent up desires spilling through his parted lips, tongue meeting hers with a claiming stroke.

She didn’t resist. The simmering heat in her blood rose to a boil as the clash of their lips intensified.

And, at long last, the ache of sadness infecting her heart these long months went silent.

Cyra wasn’t entirely sure if she wanted Aedan or just wanted someone, but this pull between them was a force of nature. And this time she surrendered, leaving her wondering why she’d ever hesitated in the first place. Because, fuck, this felt good.

A gasp slipped from her lips as he kissed the column of her neck, the touch shivering down her spine and concentrating between her thighs. She pulled her body flush to his, desperate for more.

He obliged, fingers skirting the edge of her gown's plunging neckline. His knuckles grazed along the sensitive skin just above her left nipple. He placed a kiss to the swell of her spilling breast, and she shuddered a breath at the achingly teasing touch.

When his name fell from her lips in a plea, a low, almost animalistic growl rumbled from the back of his throat. He dragged down the neckline of her dress, capturing her nipple with his mouth while his free hand claimed her other breast, slipping beneath the material so his rough calluses raked over the sensitive flesh.

Her body bowed into the sinful touch, breathy moans begging for more.

You should stop this, an unwanted thought intruded. *Think. Catch your breath.*

But the protests never reach her lips.

Aedan released her nipple, mouth rediscovering hers. She did nothing to stop him, did nothing as his fingers curled into her skirts and lifted the hem. She felt his hard arousal against her leg, ready to claim her as his own.

A giddy throb of anticipation beat within her core as Aedan's hand skated up her inner thigh. If she allowed his fingers to reach their destination, to slip beneath the nearing undergarments, there would be no stopping this—all caution burned away by the blaze of overwhelming passion.

And why not? Why shouldn't she steal this for herself? Battle the suffocating loneliness of the last ten months with meaningless sex.

But would it be meaningless? For her? For Aedan? Did she want something more? Did he? The questions beat unwanted hesitation into her heart.

"Aedan," she rasped as his fingers tugged the drawstring of her undergarments, on the precipice of no return.

At his name, his progress stalled, eyes searching her face in question. *Do you want to stop?* his features read.

Yes, no, maybe . . .

Fuck it.

Cyra reached up and pulled his head down, reuniting their lips. The approving gesture bid Aedan's fingers to resume their devious journey,

plucking free the pesky strings of her underthings. She held her breath as his fingers dipped beneath the thin material and drove between her thighs.

A ragged exhale left her lungs, elated pulse beating in silent applause. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Aedan's fingers expertly worked, movements surprisingly delicate as he applied the perfect pressure in the perfect places. Each stroke vanquished the already tattered remnants of reason, leaving Cyra powerless to do anything but yield to her passions.

She rolled her hips into his touch, writhing harder when his fingers breached her body.

"Ancients," she moaned against his neck. She had forgotten what it felt like to be touched liked this, the trembling sensations awakening in a dizzying thrill from their long and lonely slumber. Her mind turned to mush, shutting out anything and everything, if nothing else but to ensure Aedan did not stop.

Muscles tensing, Cyra nestled her face into his shoulder, helpless against the splintering effect of his fingers. *More* was the only solid thought.

Seizing on quenching exactly what her body craved, she clawed off Aedan's coat and waistcoat, flinging away the garments in haphazard abandon. Then her focus went to the perilous buttons of his trousers, the length of him straining the material taut.

Once free, she'd have everything.

A loud noise echoed from the other side of a hedge, chased by laughter. The approaching sound froze the feverish pair, wrenching them out of their passionate trance.

Someone was coming.

Cyra immediately readjusted her dress, head craning toward the disturbance and spotting a couple. With full wine glasses in hand, the intruding pair walked unsteadily through the gardens, their teetering gates raining wine over the path. They disappeared around a fountain, drunken giggles floating in their wake.

A relieved sigh escaped Cyra's lungs. They had not been seen—thank the Ancients. She met Aedan's sheepish look. His sandy blond hair was a disheveled mess, undershirt and trousers in various states of openness, outer coat and waistcoat crumpled in a nearby pile.

Her appearance fared little better, dislodged hair pins strewn around the grass, rumpled dress hitched around her thighs, undergarments lying feet away. Seven reckless hells, were they really about to have sex in the palace gardens during a royally hosted party?

Her rational senses crashed through her mind like an ice storm of sobering reality. What if Kasian—or her mother—found them rutting around in the grass?

Embarrassment flushed her face crimson. “What were we thinking?”

Aedan winced. “Not much.”

“Thank the Ancients we didn’t . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t need another rash mistake tonight.”

“Having sex with me would have been a mistake?”

Cyra’s gut lurched, mind sputtering. “It’s just that . . . we’re starting ranger training soon, and I’m not sure if . . .” She trailed off lamely, searching for the right words to explain the emotional mire ricocheting through her insides. “Sex would complicate everything.”

“I like you, Cyra,” he said after a hard clear of his throat. “I have for a while. I’m not interested in just a casual fuck.” His eyes skirted over her face. “I assumed you felt the same way.”

“I’m not sure how I feel.” Cyra’s pulse thrashed in warning. In fear. What if she was staring at another heartbreak? It was Aedan, after all. She’d be a fool to trust him with something so fragile as her heart, especially after witnessing his cruelty for years.

Whatever he saw in her expression flickered a tide of hurt across his face as if he read all her doubts. All her assumptions. The lingering distrust despite the vulnerability he relinquished tonight. In the next blink, his expression hardened to bitter disappointment. “Do let me know when you figure it out.” He snatched up his discarded clothes and stalked away.

Cyra watched his shadowy silhouette disappear, her insides twisting with a fresh bout of guilt. *Go home,* her tired thoughts ordered. And so, she did, dragging herself from the gardens to her newly rented city apartment—lodgings she shared with Akira.

By the time she crossed the threshold, it was well after midnight. Assuming Akira was asleep, she quietly crept through the sitting area when the soft glow of a candle captured her attention.

Akira sat on the lone couch in the space, glaring at Cyra as if she were a stalking intruder. “You stabbed Illias Malcom at the party tonight?”

All speech momentarily froze on Cyra's lips. "I—wait, how can you know that?"

Akira launched off the couch, agitated hands resting on either hip. "It doesn't matter. I told you to leave this whole thing alone."

"There are others, Akira, more women," Cyra said, guilt and defenses recharging. "I couldn't sit by and do nothing."

Closing her eyes, Akira released an exasperated breath. "There'll be a day of reckoning for Illias, but what you did tonight . . . I fear only the people he victimized will face repercussions. So, please, I beg you to drop this."

"All right, you're right, I am sorry." Cyra nodded in quick acquiescence. "I acted without thinking." After a beat of silence, her lips tugged into a sly smirk. "He yelped like a baby."

The corners of Akira's mouth twitched before she resumed a reprimanding scowl. "Cyra."

"Yes, yes. I will not involve myself again, unless you ask me."

"Thank you. Now, I have something to tell you." Akira straightened, her next words banishing all thought of Aedan, of Illias, of anything. "Kasian and I are seeing each other."

Cyra's mouth fell open. "Wait, Kasian? My brother Kasian?"

"He and I met up during the party," Akira said, hands twitching as if tempted to fidget. "That's how I learned of your little stab-happy incident."

Momentarily speechless, Cyra managed a few awkward noises before finally forming real words. "You are seeing my brother." She let this information resonate. "How long?"

Akira gave a casual shrug, as if this news was not earth-shattering information. "He asked me to dinner after the course trials. He said that he admired me, and had been interested for a while, but wanted to wait until he was no longer my section leader. It's only been a couple weeks."

Even in the dim light, Cyra spied a soft blush rise to Akira's cheeks. "So . . . you like him?"

Finally, a sturdy smile fixed across Akira's face. "Yes, but our relationship is a secret. Kasian is sure your parents won't approve, so we're keeping things quiet—see where things go first." A nervous line stitched between her brows. "Are you upset?"

"What? Why would I be upset?" Cyra walked over and clutched Akira's hands. "You are one of my best friends, and Kasian is smart, kind, and

perfect at everything. I love you two dating."

Akira sighed in relief. "I was hoping you'd react this way. Nailah is the only other person who knows." She hesitated, joy dimming. "I need to ask you not to tell Aurelia—or anyone else."

Cyra blinked in surprise. "Why?"

"You know very well Aurelia has had a crush on Kasian since we were freshmen." Akira rolled her eyes as if the reasons were obvious. "I'm not sure how she would react to me dating him, especially after track sorting."

"We've all had crushes on people. In the end, Aurelia would be happy for you."

Akira arched a doubtful brow. "I know you and Aurelia are childhood friends. I'm sorry if this puts you in a difficult situation, but I'm not ready for her to know. She already feels left out of things."

Cyra's insides squeezed but found herself nodding. She owed Akira after tonight. As for her own messy love life, she would discuss her muddled feelings regarding Aedan later. For now, bed called, and she readily answered.

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Chapter 30

The Governor's Proposal

Present

Marabelle had successfully procured a pair of ladies' riding pants, shirt, and boots. Instead of the jacket typically worn with the sporty attire, Cyra donned a man's waistcoat, adjusting the clasp in the back to fit the garment to her body. As she examined herself in the mirror, comfort eased through her insides at the familiar sight—far more prepared for battle.

Royce invited her to join him for breakfast, and she found him seated in an outdoor patio overlooking the swamp. A cool morning breeze cut through humid air, making the atmosphere almost pleasant. A generous breakfast spread awaited on the round, cloth-covered table. After claiming the empty seat, Cyra snagged a piece of buttered toast, eyes drifting to Royce.

"May I start off by commending your performance last night." Royce inclined his head, a satisfied smile lighting up his whole face. "Everyone was quite impressed with you."

Cyra swallowed down the bite of toast, patience thinning for his games. "Enough with the political niceties, Governor. You said you have a proposal for me. I'm listening."

Royce was quiet for a few moments. "Last night, I wanted you to witness my passion and investment for this province. The future I envision for Vinmore is ambitious, one that might take a lifetime. We need a government that does not place so many limitations on provincial power.

The idea of a united Clovia made sense while we fought a war for our independence. But the reality is: the four provinces have different interests, different landscapes, and different populations. To speak plainly, Vinmore should be an independent nation and I its leader."

Cyra raised her brows, absently wondering if his ambitions trended more toward president or king. She suspected the latter. "What do your lofty aspirations for Vinmore have to do with me?"

"Everything," Royce said gleefully, stuffing a pastry into his mouth, crumbs clinging to the bristles of his mustache. "I have the drive and the funds, but I do not have the soldiers to wage war should the central government deny our claim for independence—which they will. During our Constitutional Convention, President Mahano and Congress ratified laws against any act of secession. The military belongs to the federal government of Clovia. If Vinmore were to initiate a civil war, we would not win with our militia numbers. My proposal is an alliance with Castoria."

Cyra nearly choked on her next bite of toast. "You can't be serious."

"I am quite serious."

"You want to ally with your former enemies?" She leaned forward in her seat. "Enemies of a war that ended not so long ago, mind you. Just to rebel against your newly formed country?" Royce only smiled in answer. *The guff of this man*. "What incentives would Castoria have to join you? They don't care about your independence-related woes."

"Ahh, but they do want the rest of Clovia." Royce popped a grape in his mouth. "During the war, your forces struggled to control the sheer vastness of our lands—specifically the rugged terrain of Vinmore. We were a thorn in your side. How many times did Castorian troops retreat because we shorted your supplies or cut off your forces? Over the last four years, we have built a network of roads and rail lines. We will protect this infrastructure and allow full access to Castoria, thereby rendering the rest of Clovia vulnerable."

Cyra stifled a dry laugh, polishing off her toast. "Why would Castoria want another war?"

"Why are there no offers of trade and commerce?" His bushy brows twitched. "The kingdom's silence is telling. My theory? Your countrymen are regrouping. They expended too much of their crystal stock during the war. They believed themselves vulnerable, so they surrendered. As soon as they have enough crystals to wage war again, we will be hearing from them.

There were too many assets left behind, too much money to be made here. I hope to show them the value of an alliance."

Cyra munched on a piece of bacon, the salty, smokey unctuousness coating her tongue. "I wish you well on your ventures," she said after swallowing, "but there is little need for me."

"There you're wrong. I need your help. My many communication attempts to the Crown have gone unanswered. And no wonder. Why would the king and queen of Castoria listen to little ol' me?" He gestured over the swamp. "From their perspective, I am a nobody. I must do something to earn their attention." His blue eyes blazed with whatever he was about to suggest, but nothing could have prepared Cyra for what tumbled through his lips. "What I am proposing to you is a proposal of marriage."

She nearly choked on her next bite of bacon. "Between you and me?"

"Of course. You are unmarried, as am I." Royce leaned back in his chair, looking quite pleased with himself. "For all intents and purposes, I want to be king of this land—and I need a queen. You more than proved your ability to enchant the powerful people of Vinmore. A marriage would lend my position legitimacy. Plus, I think we would make an excellent team. The future is bright for Vinmore, a place you have called home for four years."

Cyra struggled to form words. He couldn't be serious. This was a joke. "Governor—"

"James, please," Royce crooned.

She cringed, doing everything in her power to keep her voice even. "James, I admire your ambition, but I have no desire to be a part of your plans. Last night was a one-time indulgence, a way to thank you for your hospitality and generosity. I cannot stay here permanently."

A cloud shifted over Royce's expression. "I understand your initial hesitation, but I entreat you to think on my proposal. Your days of anonymity are over. Between your infamous photograph and last night, the continent knows you are alive. If you flee this place, more people will come for you, either to ransom you back to Castoria or simply end your life." He straightened in his seat. "After the war, you chose not to return home, and I am guessing the reasons for that decision remain. My offer allows you a way to stay here. It might not be your first choice, but in life we must compromise. For now, consider—weigh—your options."

Cyra schooled her features to give nothing away. “Very well” was all she said.

“Thank you.” Royce inclined his head. “In the meantime, I’ll show you the benefits of a life here.”

“And if, after a few days, I still refuse?” she said carefully. “Will you let me go freely?”

Royce dabbed his chin with a napkin. “I would entreat you to stay, but you seem like a woman who cannot be kept, even in my little swamp paradise.” He hesitated, as if considering something. “As a thank you for accepting my hand in marriage, I will release Mr. Calderis as well as the twelve other Castorian souls locked within my walls.”

Everything inside of Cyra stilled as ice crawled through her veins. “And here I thought you only imprisoned criminals.”

“They are criminals,” Royce said, a dark gleam in his eyes. “Deserters from the war. I never received any demands for their return—all but forgotten by their kingdom. Should you choose to stay, I will release them, and they can deliver the good news to your family in person.”

Fury licked up her spine at the absolute audacity of the man. Still, the offer gave her options, opened a window into his ultimate desire—not much, just absolute power and dominion over his own little kingdom with a princess as his wife.

Cyra suppressed a dry scoff at his shamelessness. “I have much to consider,” she finally said, easing to her feet. “If you will excuse me, I have a headache.” Without waiting for a reply, she headed back to her room, thoughts whirling.

With the confirmation of Castorian prisoners and the revelation of Royce’s scheme, it was time for action. She spent the day wandering the grounds, gleaning as much information as possible. As evening fell, the train returned from ferrying home the last of the prior night’s guests. The locomotive screamed to a halt on the rail bridge just above the switch-back wooden staircase. Billowing steam from the engine car huffed free, joining the fading light as workers offloaded for the night. Men snuffed out the cascading lanterns as they descended the creaking steps, the train and bridge soon turning to silhouettes against the twilight.

The lanterns around the base of the steps remained lit and guarded by armed men. Cyra only watched and studied. By the next evening, a plan took form. And it was time to go.

An hour after the dinner meal, she slipped out of the quiet castle through her bedroom window and scaled the uneven roofs, stone windowsills, and protruding sculptures like a sly cat in the night. Once her boots found ground, she hid herself in the shadows of a doorway, eyes tracking the patrolling men—a combination of militia soldiers and hired ruffians, unaware that one of their charges was on the move.

At the first opening, she sprinted across the soggy grass, hoping the screaming cicadas masked the subtle squishing sound of her steps. Only a sliver of moon hung in the darkening sky, offering little light as the stars winked awake.

She reached the lone rowboat without issue—and more importantly, without being seen. With a gentle shove, she eased the small vessel into the swamp's waters. After an athletic leap, Cyra settled herself into the boat before descending across the pitch-black swamp. Six people, maybe eight might fit in this thing—if they squeezed.

Maneuvering the oars to minimize the noise, she rowed toward the base of the elevated tracks. Progress was slow. The cloaking darkness both shielded Cyra from the island's occupants as well as hindered her speed—the moss, algae, and other plant life all combating her oars.

"There's someone out there!" called a frantic voice.

Ancients' assholes. Her grip tensed around the oars. Out of the corner of her eye she spied a figure along the water's edge, the glow from his lantern too far away to capture her position.

Five minutes—they noticed her escape after *five minutes* of forging through the waters.

Splash! The sound of another boat hitting the water reached her ears, lantern light cleaving through the black. So, Royce had more than one boat—to reclaim wayward Syphons, she assumed.

Cyra reached the crisscrossing wood beams at the base of the rail bridge.

Any hope of an easy summit deflated as she attempted to climb out of the unstable boat and onto the slanted beams. Between the almost pitch-black darkness and the slippery algae-covered wood, she nearly went careening into the swamp before her feet even left the boat.

Steady, Cyra. Pulse racing, she finally pulled herself upward, and began scaling the slanted beams, the wood only a little less slippery the further up from the water she journeyed. Within minutes, sweat dripped down her

face, the humid heat of the swamp adding difficulty to this slimy, awkward ascent. This was hard—her arms weren't in climbing shape, the crisscross of the beams rendering each hold tenuous. Soon her muscles burned, focus straining against the raucous chorus of the swamp, the sounds serenading her perilous quest as if lauding for her demise.

Bam! A gunshot echoed through the air, chased by the sound of wood splintering next to her right hand.

Cyra's stomach twisted, surprised Royce was allowing anyone to shoot at his bride-to-be.

"Careful, Captain, the governor wants her alive," a voice barked from below.

Her stomach gave another twist. She'd wager the crown jewels on who wielded the gun. The captain who blamed Cyra for his brother's death. And to be fair, he was most likely correct on that score. *Just. Great.*

Through gritted teeth, she managed twenty feet with another thirty to go. Her heartbeat thudded against her ribs, grip latching onto the next beam of slanted wood when another ear-splintering gunshot filled the air.

A hard force drove into her shoulder blade, propelling her body forward as pressure-born pain spiraled across her back. A slew of curses spilled from her lips, barely hanging onto the wood beam.

Then she wasn't. Then she was falling through the black.

A gasp escaped her throat just before she hit the tepid water. Something hard struck her left side, a branch or rock, knocking the air from her lungs along with the rest of her remaining energy as water and reeds swarmed her body.

The swamp swallowed Cyra whole, sucking her flailing limbs to the shallow bottom like a monster gulping down easy prey. She managed a feeble thrash against the forest of underwater plants, but it was no use. The swamp claimed its prize.

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Chapter 31

Wilderness Exercise

Nine Years Ago

"Use your maps to locate each of your assigned checkpoints," instructed Lieutenant Maya Diaza to the group of ten rangers-in-training standing on an uneven plateau overlooking a vast forest. "You will set out alone, hiking along separate routes. If you meet each other during your trek, I encourage you to work together. Your first checkpoint will take four days. There, you will meet a ranger officer. The corporal will have provisions for the rest of your seventeen-day journey."

Maya was a competent instructor—straight to the point, no nonsense or fuss, much like this next task. Inhaling deep, Cyra eyed the map in her hands and adjusted the three elementals and one healing crystal slotted in her bracer. The only other item on her person was a single canteen for water—no food provisions. The first part of this journey was about resilience, endurance, and resourcefulness.

The first few days of the wilderness adventure were uneventful. Fall was well underway, the evenings crisp—close to biting. The gold, red, and orange swirl of autumn leaves sang a celebration of color. Little sound seasoned the air save for the occasional bird's call or startled animal. Peaceful.

By the afternoon of day four, she reached a small lake. The scenery was gorgeous. The rippling light-aqua of the crystal-clear water revealed a sandy

bottom. Three stunning waterfalls poured from an upper clifflike shelf, the roar oddly calming.

After filling up her canteen from the flowing water, Cyra hiked around the enchanting scene toward the first checkpoint: a trapper's cabin, located just above the falls.

Her stomach growled in approval. After four and a half days of living off berries, nuts, and one well-timed slain rabbit, she was eager for provisions. And even more eager for another person—ideally Akira.

Today, these hopes were answered as a hand grasped her wrist just as she reached the rocky ledge. With her concentration occupied by her tenuous footholds, the flowing falls masking all noise, she flinched in surprise. Losing her balance, she pitched sideways, gravity threatening to careen her into the rocks at the base of the falls.

A slurry of curses rolled off her tongue as she flung herself back against the clifflike wall, desperate to reclaim her hold. A spray of icy water splashed into her face, as if cheering for her doom. *Stupid, pretty death-lake.*

The person's hand tightened their hold, keeping Cyra from falling and allowing her time to scramble back against the rock wall.

Heart making a home in her throat, she shoved, crawled, then flopped with all the grace of a walrus over the shelf ledge. "Seven hells, Aedan," she huffed once she spied the person attached to the hand gripping her wrist. "You scared me half to death."

Aedan straightened. "Sorry." He didn't sound sorry. "I came up a different path. It seems as though you and I have the same checkpoint."

"Great," Cyra said, brushing off the dirt and leaves stuck to her hunter-green coat as she climbed to her feet.

Aedan backed away, decidedly not making eye contact. The avoidance tactic pretty much summarized his entire attitude since their pond-side dalliance nearly a month ago. Now, they were alone together with a seventeen-day hike ahead of them, and no one else in sight.

This wouldn't be awkward at all.

A cabin stood to her right, situated along the branching creek feeding the waterfalls. "Have you already seen the corporal?" Cyra asked before the thickening silence grew uncomfortable. Well, *more* uncomfortable.

"Not yet," Aedan said, marching toward the cabin. "I only arrived about a minute before you. Apologies, if my assistance was unwanted."

“Just unexpected,” Cyra said to Aedan’s back as she trailed after him. She opened her mouth to say something more when her gaze went to the cabin door.

It was ajar.

The sight prickled a warning along the back of her neck. And that’s when she saw it: just visible through the narrow opening was a limp hand.

“Ancients,” she breathed, darting around Aedan as a sinking feeling crashed through her body. When she pushed open the door, a beam of sunlight bathed a dead man in pale gold.

A gasp slipped past her lips as she stared down at the still figure. He wore an identical hunter green ranger coat as the two trainees, facings and cuffs indicating his rank as a corporal. She had never seen a dead person this close before—certainly not someone so young, only a few years older than her twenty.

Flies swarmed the body, buzzing angrily at the two intruders, the stench of decay overwhelming. At Cyra’s side, Aedan coughed, expression mirroring her disgust. “He’s been dead for days,” he managed to say.

By the corporal’s ashen face, skin tinged a sickly gray and flesh starting to bloat, she would have to agree. This wasn’t recent.

And what was this, exactly? Young soldiers didn’t just drop dead.

Her stomach churned as she analyzed the corpse, locating a dark stain smearing the man’s left temple—the focus of the flies.

“Gunshot.” Aedan uttered the same word floating across Cyra’s mind. “Self-inflicted?”

“Firearms are illegal for general use, except during training exercises,” she said, crouching next to the body.

“This is a training exercise.”

“Then where is the weapon?” she asked after scanning the scene. Ignoring the man’s blank eyes and half-open mouth, she found another dark stain in the center of his chest. “And I doubt he shot himself in the head after shooting himself in the chest. Someone killed him.”

Aedan crouched at her side. “There’s something in his mouth.” Choking down a breath, he pulled free a crumpled piece of paper from the dead man’s gaping mouth. Trying to avoid touching the item more than necessary, he carefully unfolded the paper.

It was a newspaper clipping.

‘“Massacre in Orlena,’” Aedan read aloud. “‘Last week, during a peaceful protest for Clovian liberties, Castorian soldiers killed ten unarmed people.’” The article went on to describe the events, portraying the Castorian Syphons as the villains and the Clovian protesters as the innocent party. “Peaceful protest.” Aedan issued a dry snort. “My guess is it was more like a riot, and our people acted rashly.”

Cyra frowned. “This is dated two months ago. Why didn’t we hear about this?”

“There’s more writing on the back.” Aedan revealed a scrawled message in large red-ink lettering. “‘We will return the sins of Castoria. - NOC.’”

“Nation of Clovia,” Cyra breathed, staring at the dead man with renewed horror. Nation of Clovia was here. They did this. Her mind automatically conjured the bearded man with the scarred neck. *Jeremiah*. Was he here too? Lurking somewhere in his peaceful forest?

“Nation of Clovia?”

Cyra swallowed, gooseflesh pricking across her skin. “They’re a violent Clovian rebel group. If they’re here, then we’re in danger.” She bolted to her feet, heart stampeding in her chest. “This changes everything. We need to find the others as soon as possible.” She scoured the cabin, needing to move—to do something other than succumb to crippling fear. “We’ll gather provisions, then leave a note for anyone else coming to this checkpoint. Or should we stay and wait? Or should we go to a different checkpoint?”

“Cyra—”

“Or maybe we should hike back to the drop off point.”

“Cyra.” Aedan grasped her shoulders. “Let’s not panic—not yet."

“You don’t know these people, Aedan,” she said, fighting to breathe. “They travel like wolves. They’ll kill us with relish and without a thought.”

Aedan’s brows twitched, searching her face as questions filled his eyes. “We can’t go back to the drop off point. No one will be there. Lieutenant Diaza will meet us at the final location, and the other checkpoints are in opposite directions. Our only choice is to continue forward.”

A chill ran down her spine. “That’s seventeen days, Aedan. What about the others? What about Akira? She’s out there, perhaps alone.”

What if she found Akira’s body like this . . .?

Her stomach rolled over at the horrifying thought, unable to stop her eyes from drifting to the gruesome figure lying on the floor.

“We’re trained to handle this kind of threat.”

“Oh? How many people have you killed? This is no longer just a training exercise.”

“I know,” he said, tone surprisingly calm. “But we’re going to be fine.” Then, in a softer voice, he added, “Akira is going to be fine, but we need to keep moving.”

After expelling a long exhale, Cyra nodded. He was right.

They quickly located two packs and stuffed them full of the scraps left behind by the rebels, then locked up the cabin. There was little they could do for the unfortunate corporal. He’d receive a proper burial once they found their way out of here. So they left.

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No longer did the fall colors sing a palette of autumnal calm. Instead, every sound, every snap of a twig or rustle of leaves spiked her pulse. Every time she closed her eyes, a vision of the corporal’s blank eyes seared across her mind.

Studying Aedan’s back, she was glad for his presence. Glad she wasn’t alone.

A sign, Cyra?

Maybe.

They camped as evening fell, finding a secluded glen, and risked a small campfire to cut through the dropping temperatures. There was no moon on this cold night, the surrounding trees their only companions.

Cyra stared into the flames, willing herself not to think about Akira or the man with the scarred neck. Tried to banish the corporal’s bloated face and the stench of his decaying corpse from her mind. She failed on all accounts.

“It was your first dead body, wasn’t it?” Aedan asked, breaking their pensive silence.

Eyes lifting from the flames, she watched the orange light dance across his stubbled jaw. “Was it that obvious?”

His features softened. “Given the last public execution was ten years ago, I’d imagine young princesses don’t come across too many dead bodies in the palace halls.”

“It was my first real look at death, yes,” Cyra admitted, and gave a resigned sigh. “We are soldiers now. I’ll need to grow a stronger stomach.

What about you?”

“My father made me watch the hanging of the Treasonous Three.”

Cyra gaped. “Seven hells, Aedan, you must have been young . . .”

“Eight.” His jaw ticked, but he betrayed no other emotion. “Three years younger than Tess is now. My father said seeing death would make me a man. I had nightmares for months.”

Cyra swallowed down the dryness in her throat. “Do you think we’ll be able to take a life?” She fished out a piece of jerky from her pack, but only stared at the salted meat, suddenly not hungry.

“We’re training to be rangers.” Aedan shrugged. “We pledged our lives to Castoria, to fight for our kingdom. For its people. To save life and to take it.”

“What if I can’t, Aedan?” She closed her fingers around the jerky. “What if I freeze? Let fear paralyze me?”

Aedan raised a brow. “You’re the last person in the world I’d expect to be paralyzed by fear. If anything, fear should be paralyzed by you.”

Despite herself, and the shit situation, Cyra’s mouth curved into a begrudging smile. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Levity bloomed across his face, though it faded with the next crack of embers. “What happened to you, Cyra? Something has you afraid, more than just seeing death today.”

She pursed her lips, her pulse quickening, but gave no answer.

“Does it have something to do with Illias Malcom?” he asked in a quieter tone. “Is he why you don’t pursue things with me?”

The agonized look on his face ripped Cyra’s heart right open. And suddenly, she was desperate to alleviate all his fears. “I have not admitted how I feel about you because I am a complete chicken-shit, hung up on my own fears.”

A surprised furrow stitched between Aedan’s brows. “And what are your feelings?”

“I like you,” Cyra confessed, heart racing again but for all new reasons. “But I’m afraid you might break my heart . . . and I just put it back together.”

Their eyes met from across the flames; the penetrating look on his face so close to melting all her inhibitions. A fresh yearning called for her to leapt right over their small fire and embrace the man. She resisted, however, picking tiny holes in the piece of jerky. *Coward*.

“I can’t promise things will work out between us, Cyra,” Aedan said. “But if you lend me a piece of your heart, I swear, I will be its trusted custodian and do everything in my power to keep it whole.”

She allowed several beats of thick silence to pass. “All right,” she breathed, slowly releasing the jerky.

“All right?” A tremor of hope speared across Aedan’s features.

She gave him a smile. “When we get out of this mess . . . let’s go on a date.”

Aedan was on his feet, closing the distance between them before her next breath. She slid into his arms as if they were made to wrap around her, snuggling against his hard chest with welcome ease. The embrace was nice, stirring happy feelings. Stirring other feelings . . .

“Aedan, wait,” Cyra said before she was carried away.

“You’ve already changed your mind,” Aedan said through a rough chuckle. “If so, I have an idea on how to change it right back.” He claimed her mouth in the next breath, his lips warm and soft against her own.

Her body reacted to his touch, to the surety of his hands, to the feel of his arms around her waist. Yes, she could just say screw it and finish what they started weeks ago. It was tempting. So *very* tempting.

Her teetering mind plotted where they might satisfy their reignited lusts, perhaps against that tree or next to the fire. They could be quick. She’d wager a fortune Aedan had imagined himself planted between her legs many times. She’d be lying if she said she hadn’t imagined the same. Imagined what would have happened if that drunk couple had not interrupted their escalating passion by the pond. Imagined straddling his hips, her skirts hiked up to her thighs as she rode him under the stars.

Why not pick up where they left off? There was no party, no royal mother nearby, just trees. And a murderous group of rebels who had already tried to kill her once.

The chilling thought sliced through any carnal cravings like a deluge of water to a candle. “Aedan, we can’t do this right now.” Cyra pulled away. “Nation of Clovia is out there. They will kill us. We can’t be caught with our literal pants down.”

Aedan smiled darkly. “But what a way to go.”

“Aedan.”

“For all we know, it’s one lone rebel. A single threat.”

She shook her head. Aedan needed to know what was out there—her mother's threats be damned. "There is something I need to tell you about these people," she began, capturing his attention. After a long, steadying inhale, she launched into the real story following the Gauntlet Trials, only omitting the part where she and Finn kissed. That was . . . not relevant to their current situation.

Aedan listened in horrified shock, color draining from his face. "Seven hells, Cyra."

"So, you understand now," Cyra said. "We're in serious trouble."

And they were. Serious trouble lurked somewhere beyond their little camp, undeterred by their newfound happiness. If she faced the group again, either her life would be forfeit or theirs would be. There could be no mercy this time.

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Chapter 32

THE DOCTOR

Present Day

Sharp teeth bit into her shoulder blade, gnawing on her flesh. She tried to move, to inch away from the pointed jaws, but her efforts yielded nothing—vision only black.

Something was very wrong, her mind and body out of sync, dragging her muscles and consciousness in different directions. She felt drugged, faculties struggling to reconcile her current environment. The surrounding air was stale, temperature teetering between too warm and just comfortable.

She lay on her stomach across a flat surface. Rough wood pressed into her cheek and bare chest, back exposed to the stagnant air as the prodding bites continued.

“Got it,” rasped a nasal voice, followed by the clank of metal against ceramic.

“Will she be all right?” asked another voice—a familiar voice. *Royce*.

“Most certainly."

Damp. Her hair was damp, locks around her face sticking to her clammy skin. The sour-sweet stench of body odor mixed with the metallic tang of blood reached her nostrils as her mind and body stitched back together.

“You were supposed to knock her from the beams, Captain,” Royce scolded. “You could have killed her.”

“The darkness masked my aim, sir. Apologies.” But he certainly didn’t sound sorry.

Something pricked, then tugged at her skin—tug, prick, tug, prick, tug.

The painful stabs banished the last of the fog, ushering a wave of agony through her entire left side. Muscle, tissue, and bone throbbed in a symphony of hurt.

You were shot, remember?

Argh was all her mushy brain supplied.

Teeth grinding together, Cyra writhed awake, ready to fight whoever was inflicting this pain. Her agitated limbs immediately met resistance. A leather belt was strapped over her back, pinning her against the wooden slab.

“I think our patient awakens,” Nasal-Voice cooed.

When her eyes cracked open, she found a torch-lit darkness. A shuddering breath sucked into her lungs as she squashed down a surge of panic, the final pieces of what happened clicking into place. She had been shot in the back before careening into the swamp.

As if to pour salt on her wounds, Governor Royce’s mustached mug slid into her limited view. “Hello Cyra, welcome back,” he said, face partially shadowed, the other half bathed in flickering yellow-gold light. “I must admit, I had hoped for a different reaction to my proposal. But never fear.” The ends of his ridiculous mustache twitched. “I’m not giving up just yet. Perhaps a few days with your fellow Syphons will provide you with some fresh perspective.” His gaze darted toward something out of sight. “Doctor Kade, may I speak with you in private?”

With that, the governor stalked out of view, leaving Cyra to study her new surroundings.

From this position, she spied little but a wall, the hewn rock disappearing beyond her toes and above her head. Staggered torches set in wrought-iron sconces illuminated the space, their light revealing no windows. A drip of water splashed on her cheek, damp air condensing against the cooler stone.

They were underground, she concluded, buried in Royce’s personal swamp dungeons. This was fine, all part of her plan—well, not the getting shot in the back part, but—

Cyra’s heart stuttered as her thumb went to the band on her left finger. If the shard was gone . . .

A long sigh eased from her lungs. The elemental crystal was still wedged in her ring band. The swamp had not claimed the crystal, nor had Royce's doctor-minion or his trigger-happy captain. Not all hope was pissed away. Not yet, at least.

Footsteps announced the return of someone—multiple someones. "We will resume in the morning," said Nasal-Voice, the man she assumed was this Kade person. "Put her in that one."

The buckles restraining Cyra loosened, and calloused hands grasped her shoulders, pulling her sideways. Pain ripped across her back, skin tugging against the movement as her body slid off the table.

"And do not mess up my stitches," Kade barked.

When her bare feet met stone, a sheen of wet film nearly sent her left foot flying, but the coarse hands kept her steady.

"Nice view," said a too-close voice. His rank breath scrunched her nose, drawing her eyes upward. She found a rough-looking man, well over six feet tall and the size of a boulder. The brute's meaty fingers dug into her arm, eager brown eyes latching onto her bare chest.

"Thanks," Cyra said with an over-sweet smile, studying the man. A jagged burn mangled his left ear, made all the more prominent by his round bald head. She silently promised to add more scars to his body.

Captain Roderick stood a few feet away, his pistol trained on her. When their eyes locked for a brief moment, the corner of his mouth pulled as if daring her to give him a reason to shoot.

The third man present was no hired muscle or militia soldier. Bathed in shadow, his attention was focused on a notepad, ink-stained fingers clutching a long quill that hurriedly scratched across the paper. He wore tidy clothes, white buttoned shirt tucked into dark trousers, greasy mouse-brown hair framing his narrow face, dominated by round spectacles.

There was something familiar about him, but her pain-addled mind drew a blank, the shadows masking too many details for her to be sure of anything.

"May I have my shirt returned—Kade, is it?" she demanded.

Kade's head jerked upward, his spectacles capturing the torchlight and turning the round glass an opaque molten yellow. The effect was jarring, creature-like, as if he was something born of the swamp. His gaze shifted over Cyra, but she sensed there was nothing sexual about his cursory study

—as if he were well dulled to the naked form, male or female. He gestured with his quill to the brute holding her shoulders. Whatever that meant.

Worry over the whereabouts of her shirt along with her partial nudity vanished when the scarred-eared henchman wrenched her sideways. A grimace ripped across her face, pain so sharp and sudden her knees nearly buckled.

“Stitches, Marvin,” Kade clipped out.

Marvin? The bald brute’s name was Marvin? It cut a smirk through her grimace, a fleeting moment as her entire left side seized with utter agony. Sucking in a sharp breath, she allowed herself to be dragged wherever this Marvin directed.

Marvin. Cyra wasn’t sure why she found the name so amusing. Maybe she just needed to cling to something other than how much her body hurt.

Blinking the blur from her eyes, she glimpsed the other side of the room. Cells. Barred cells lined the entire wall, most hardly bigger than a washroom. Oversized cages, really. The open bars would offer nothing in the way of privacy. Her breasts on display were the least of her worries down here. *Just. Great.*

Movement snagged her attention as Minion Marvin steered her to an empty cell, shadowy figures shifting inside the other cells. It was too dark to count them, but she assumed they were the twelve Castorian Syphons who Royce had named. All held captive in this damp, swampy shithole since the war. Her chest tightened at the horrifying thought, any embarrassment over her present lack of modesty fizzling away.

Marvin the Brute shoved her into an empty cell, then marched over to a crumpled white shirt on the ground. He stole a final leer at her bare breasts before tossing her the soiled garment, smirking as he closed and locked the barred door.

Cyra smirked right back. *Enjoy the view, turd-face.*

The shirt in her hands was still damp, covered in dark smudges and crimson red splotches, the stench of swamp sludge coating the material. Seven hells, she almost preferred going shirtless. It was warm enough down here, light casting the other figures in shadow, and, well, she had nice tits.

“Until the morning,” said Kade, straightening away from the operating table. Marvin trailed after him, leaving only Captain Roderick hovering near her cell. The militia soldier had yet to lower his weapon, looking

exceedingly tempted to end her miserable life here and now, damn the consequences.

Instead, he gave Cyra a look of pure loathing, packed with deathly promise.

She returned a bored sigh. It was all she could manage under the circumstances, but it was certainly enough to rile his already steaming anger. His upper lip curled, limbs shaking as he finally lowered the weapon before storming across the chamber, exiting through a doorway opposite the row of cells. The resounding *clang* of a lock bounced around the stone walls of the horizontal room before yielding to thick silence.

After donning the soiled shirt, Cyra inspected her new lodgings—a padded cot that smelled strongly of mildew and a rusty bucket that thankfully smelled of nothing worse. Lovely.

Her gaze shifted past the barred door to the operation table in the center of the large chamber. Its leather bindings dangled off the edges, buckets rested on the floor. A smaller table stood nearby, set with a series of ominous metal instruments and a pile of rags. A few feet away was a large wooden chair, its legs bolted to the ground, leather straps built into the arms and back. Not far from the chair, two sets of manacles hung from the ceiling. Cyra suspected they saw frequent use by the stench of blood and human waste saturating the air.

“Welcome to the seventh circle of hell, princess,” said a familiar voice, the sound breaking her cursory study.

She followed the sound to Finn lying on a cot in the adjoining cell. His lips curved as if attempting amusement, but the hard look in his eyes betrayed something else. Cyra was out of practice in reading Finn’s expressions. If she had to guess, she detected fear behind his mask of annoyance.

“You’re still alive,” she said tightly, hiding her relief as she slowly shuffled toward her cot, fighting the pain crawling across the left side of body. The bullet wound was only half her woes as her abdomen and ribcage screamed in protest with even the tiniest movement. She had struck something during her swamp misadventure—a hard something.

Sweat beaded on her forehead with the effort spent to reach the cot, unfortunately positioned against the bars shared with Finn’s cell. Her vision was a blurry mess, lips staying pinned in a thin line as she eased herself onto the thin mattress, teeth grinding so hard they threatened to crack.

No shoes, barely a shirt, body in tatters. *Nice plan so far, Cyra.*

Finn adjusted on his cot so his body angled in her direction. The close proximity and dim light revealed his bare torso. Apparently, the courtesy of a shirt was a luxury down here. Odd scorch-like welts covered his arms, neck, shoulders, and abdomen. A light sheen of sweat coated his copper-toned skin, face several shades paler than normal.

“What happened to you?” Cyra asked, shoving down her spiking concern. They were in this mess because of him, she reminded herself. Pissed off a Clovian governor enough to send an entire militia after him.

“Ah, well, Doctor Kade was testing out his new machine on me.” Finn managed a shrug, but even that small movement drew a visible flinch. “It was . . . painful, to say the least,” he said, eyes flickering over her body. “Are you all right?”

Huh, that almost sounded like concern.

“Fine,” she said on a stilted breath. She contemplated lying down, but the idea of moving only beat more stabbing pain through her muscles. Instead, she closed her eyes, trying to think of something nice. She pictured her saloon, enjoying a drink with Jiro as they played cards and took the piss out of their regulars. Seven hells, she could use a stiff drink right now.

“I’m hurt, Cyra,” Finn said, mocking ire pulverizing any would-be concern on his part. “Attempting escape and all but leaving me behind without a thought?”

“Oh, I had several thoughts,” she ground out, stirring anger dampening her pain. Her eyes cracked open as she said, “And I wasn’t leaving you behind.”

Finn snorted. “No? Could’ve fooled me. Weren’t you shot in the back while scaling the rail bridge?”

“I was testing an escape option.”

“And?” He placed a closed fist under his chin, as if eager to hear a juicy piece of gossip. “How’d it go? I’m just dying to know.”

“Such a smug little shit.” She glared at him. “I have a plan with three contingencies.”

He cocked an inane brow. “Only three?”

“Shut your trap, Finn, or I’m leaving your ass for the mad doctor to dissect.” Cyra glared through the bars, anger dulling her pain to a middling throb. “One, please tell me that sometime over the last decade you learned how to drive a train?”

The smugness fleetingly blinked off his face. “As a matter of fact. Yes.”

Relief rolled through her, but she fought the sentiment. “Then I guess I won’t be ditching your tedious backside down here after all—almost a pity.”

“I am afraid, Captain,” said a new voice, “escape will be very difficult.”

The weary, almost mournful, sound was a jarring contrast to Finn and Cyra’s petty barbs. She turned toward the other adjoining cell and found a man standing at the bars.

Black curtains of matted hair parted to reveal a gaunt face and sunken cheeks. He was young, not much older than Finn and Cyra. This realization struck a chilling chord, more than the disheveled state of his clothes or the sallow tinge to his brown skin. He looked both young and old. And almost as shocking, she could swear they had . . .

“Have we met?” she asked.

The man dipped his chin, corner of his mouth twitching upward as if attempting a smile before thinking better of it. “Yes, Captain, a few days before Willowwood. My name is Corporal Hiram Naemus. I served in Commander General Vance’s 5th Regiment. Our meeting was only a brief encounter, and I look quite different now than when we exchanged pleasantries.”

Cyra felt herself soften, finding other signs of trauma, long healed scars over his smooth skin. And—her stomach lurched—he was missing the last two fingers on both hands.

Seven hells, what had Kade done to them down here?

“I wish we were meeting under better circumstances,” she said, heart squeezing for this man, for everyone stuck in this hellhole. A fresh curl of anger followed, hot and furious and welcome. Every life taken to free themselves from this place would be claimed with fiery relish.

Hiram dipped his head, mouth setting in a grim line. “Yes, Captain. Unfortunate, indeed, to see you here with us.”

“Apparently Cyra planned to be here.” Finn scoffed, shooting her a look that said he thought she was full of shit. He folded his hands behind his head, smirking lips battling a wince.

Cyra squashed an eyeroll. Arrogant idiot. It was like they were fifteen all over again.

“Over the years,” Hiram went on, “we have attempted escape, Captain __”

“Cyra, please.”

Hiram nodded. “Cyra. But all our attempts were met with failure, followed by injury or death. There used to be seventeen of us down here.”

Seventeen. Her blood ran cold. “Royce said you were deserters,” she said gently, trying not to insinuate anything. She’d trust whatever Hiram said over that power-hungry peacock.

Anger broke through the haunted trauma on his face, his hand curling around one of the bars. “We are no deserters,” he bit out. Others in the surrounding cells shifted and grunted in agitated agreement. “Royce’s militia scooped us off the battlefield following Willowwood. He saved our lives only to inflict horror on our bodies for years.”

“Why?” Cyra uttered the only question she had left. “Why is Royce keeping you? Why not release you, or . . .?” She hesitated, not able to finish the final question.

No need—Hiram completed the dark unspoken thought. “Why not just kill us?” He retreated into the shadows, releasing his grip on the bars. “We wondered that, too, at first. But Royce needs us—Kade needs us—for their obsession. They are both fixated on unlocking the secrets of Syphons. Why some can siphon crystals and some cannot. The first year down here, the doctor only took our blood. Those days were . . . tolerable.” A sigh escaped him. “Then Kade began taking our bones.” His right hand appeared through the bars in Cyra’s cell, showing off the two gnarled knobs of his ring and little fingers. “Then the marrow from our hips, but what befell us was nothing compared to the women.”

“Women?” Cyra searched the other cells, but only found indistinguishable dark figures. Something told her they were all male.

“There were two female members of our unit,” Hiram said, sorrow spearing across his face. “You do not want to know the horrors that befell them.”

“Perhaps I should,” Cyra said, despite the quickening of her heart. “If for no other reason than to remember our fallen soldiers . . . if you’re willing to share.”

A long mournful sigh left Hiram’s lips. “Two years ago, Kade became convinced he would unlock the secret of Syphons . . . by examining fetal tissue.”

A sick feeling coiled around Cyra. “Fetal tissue.” The implications were horrific, but nothing compared to the reality as Hiram told the stories of

Lana and Minra. By the end, Cyra's throat was thick, barely blinking back the burning tears in her eyes.

"Minra found a way to end her life—her only escape," Hiram whispered, voice thick. "Lana did not wake up one morning, her cot soaked with blood. The doctor operated." His eyes flickered to the wooden table. "The miscarriage took her life."

Cyra could not speak. Could barely breathe. She wanted to burn this place to the ground. Turn the stone to rubble and lay waste to every single person responsible for the pain inflicted upon the souls here.

"We are the forgotten," Hiram said hollowly.

If she could stand, she would. March the few feet to Hiram's cell and meet his sorrow-filled gaze as she spoke her next words with venomous ferocity. "I swear to you, Hiram, and the rest of you—" She raised her voice. "You are not forgotten. We're leaving this place, together. All of us."

One way or another. Even if it meant she stayed behind.

"A lovely sentiment, princess," Finn cut in, his earlier arrogance replaced by a harsh growl. "Hiram talked me through all the things they have tried over the years. Unless you know something we don't, you're just as fucked as the rest of us."

Cyra angled a glare at Finn through the bars, almost savoring this moment before he ate his words. "You could say I have something up my sleeve, or ring, as it were." She shoved her left hand into Finn's cell, the movement more forceful than she intended, spiking fresh pain through her left side. She swallowed it down, too eager to watch Finn's expression morph from cruel scoff to surprised amazement.

She wasn't disappointed.

"Seven hells," Finn said with satisfying astonishment, rising to his seat. She did not miss the mild wince the motion incurred. Good. "One large cast, maybe two small ones at most." he said, frowning at the stowaway crystal.

"Yes, enough for us to make one large or two small strategic moves," Cyra said, looking toward Hiram. "If we plan together, use your knowledge, maybe we can all get out of here."

Something resembling hope shifted over Hiram's features. "Captain—Cyra." He nodded as if unable to speak, corners of his mouth teetering. "Apologies, hope is not something I have felt for some time." When his

hand wrapped around the bars of his cell once more, her eyes drifted to the missing fingers, and her gut tightened.

No matter what. Do not let this man down.

Swallowing down a fresh lump of emotion, she asked, “I need to know—if they’re researching the origins of Syphons, does that mean they possess casting crystals?” Their next moves hinged on this answer.

“Yes,” Hiram said, the answer breathing welcome relief through her lungs. “There are crystals stored in the chamber next to us, locked and guarded.”

“Do we know how many they have?”

Finn answered this question. “They’re running low enough to press me on revealing how I source my smuggled stores.” To Cyra’s questioning brow, he waved at his torso and said, “How do you think I earned these marks? They wanted information on my smuggling operation. My routes in and out of Castoria, names of dealers, and so on. I told the good doctor to eat a dick. He didn’t like that answer.”

Cyra’s lips flattened. “How have you lived this long?”

“And you? Enjoy castle time with the maniacal governor?” His brows twitched, as if it was an honest question. “If Royce plans to ransom you back to your beloved parents, I’m surprised he’s allowing you to witness his more . . . depraved dealings.”

“Governor Royce is not selling me back Castoria.” Cyra’s stomach rolled with her next words. “He wants to marry me.”

Finn choked. “What?”

A cold smile turned up the corners of her mouth. “Royce fancies himself a king. And a princess is the perfect bride for his ambitions.” She hesitated, eyes returning to Hiram, who watched the entire conversation with steely resolve. “If we can’t escape in the next few days, then I will agree to his proposal.”

Finn’s mouth dropped open. “Wait—what?”

“Royce promised to release all of you if I agreed to marry him.” One way or another these people were getting out here.

At last, a real sense of gravity eclipsed Finn’s features. He cleared his throat, as if about to make a grand proclamation. It never came, or, at least, Cyra heard none of it over the sound of her own screaming.

A blinding pain, worse than anything she’d felt tonight, spawned from her left side. Something was stabbing—no, twisting her insides with a

pulsating grip, relentless and cruel.

She collapsed to the stone floor, feeling like she was going to die.

“Cyra!” Finn’s voice broke over her wailing cries.

Hot, her body was terribly hot, cooking from the inside out. She rolled over and wretched. Purging the contents of her stomach did little to alleviate whatever thing was trying to claw itself out of her body. Something inside was wrong.

“Help! We need help!”

The banging on the cell bars sounded distant.

She heard the faint whining creak of a door opening. Footsteps. Then nothing as a blinding white crowded her vision.

Maybe she was dead.

As the black closed in, a sharp smell of ammonia assaulted her nose, the strong chemical slicing through her body’s desperation to drown in darkness. As her lungs filled with air, Cyra realized she was back on the operating table, strapped down once more, this time on her back.

“I think you have an internal injury from your fall,” Kade’s nasal voice said. He didn’t sound concerned so much as stressed, mixed with a touch of agitation, as if her injury was most inconvenient. On this point, she agreed.

Cyra’s blurred vision found the bespectacled man, his eyes narrowed, brow set in a deep furrow as he examined her abdomen. He wore a strange black necklace attached to his ears, the cords joining together in the middle, with a round metal pendant at the other end, presently gliding over the clammy skin of her stomach.

“It is imperative you survive, so we need to find the bleeding quickly,” Kade said. “Where is the pain stemming?”

Cyra swallowed, shifting her bleary gaze toward the black ceiling. “Left . . . side . . . near my lower ribcage,” she gritted out as tears leaked from her eyes.

Kade moved the strange metal disc over the area in question. Even the slightest touch speared fresh agony. She sucked in a trembling gasp, limbs jerking against the leather belts.

“Spleen, I think—ruptured,” Kade said. “We’ll need to operate. Morphine, Marvin.”

Great. Leering Marvin was back, her tits on display once more, but she was in far too much pain to care. She wanted to die.

“Let me help!” Finn’s voice boomed through the space. “I can heal her.” Something poked into her arm. “Kade! Are you listening to me?” He almost sounded concerned—no, definitely sounded concerned, panicked even. Did he care about her wellbeing? Or did he just not want her to die, thereby missing out on collecting his reward for her return?

Her thoughts began to swirl, rolling and dipping—all her muscles slowly unclenching. A floating sensation chased away any lingering agony, pain becoming little more than mild discomfort. This was nice.

“Scalpel, Marvin,” Kade demanded.

Scalpel, less nice.

“Kade!” Finn shouted. “Please. I can heal her in minutes. Don’t—”

Too late, Kade was already slicing her open. “A lot less nice,” Cyra muttered. The fresh spear of pain sharpened her dulled senses, fingernails digging into the wood fibers of the table.

Don’t think about it, she told her morphine-fogged mind.

“Ruptured spleen,” Kade sighed. “It’ll have to come out . . . tricky.”

“I want my spleen,” she whined, eyes reluctantly drifting downward. The flash of metal caught the yellow light, blade poised over her abdomen. *Nooo!* her mind screamed, but her mouth only managed whimpering moans.

The doctor hesitated, a stitch lancing his brow as if mentally calculating the likelihood of her death should he proceed with the operation. By the muscle feathering his jaw, chances were high. *Fucking. Great.*

This reality more than anything cleared some of Cyra’s haze. “You’re going to be in big trouble if I die.” The words spilled free in a sing-song cadence. She met his startlingly wide eyes just before the torchlight’s reflection sheened his round glasses in yellow-gold. “Biiiig trouble.”

Kade growled behind his pursed lips before inching away the scalpel. “Procure an evolution crystal, Marvin. Captain Roderick, bring me Mr. Calderis.”

Sounds echoed around Cyra, now struggling to keep her mind from drifting into a pleasant restful cloud. Her eyes slipped closed, but the sensation of her skin separating sharpened her senses. Discomfort, bordering on pain, conjured a burst of adrenaline, and her lazing eyelids snapped open.

“Fucking hell,” said Finn, his voice far closer than before.

Cyra's head rolled sideways, finding him at her side, wrists in shackles. His shocked eyes surveyed the open gash before shifting over the rest of her exposed chest. "Ancients, Cyra."

Her eyelids grew heavy once more. "You've seen it, Finn." But even in her haze, she knew he wasn't staring at her breasts. The shock wasn't due to her nudity, nor the new feature displaying her organs. Finn had a full view of the accumulated scars scattered across her torso—marks absent the last time she allowed him such a view.

Composing himself, Finn focused on his task. "I need more light."

"The rupture is right there. If you—"

"I see it, give me a minute."

The men continued to bicker, and something about the odd exchange over her damaged insides struck a dark, humorous chord. A mild laugh shook her lungs.

"Cyra, I need you not to move," Finn said.

The severity in his tone struck her silent but only for a moment. "So mean." Her eyes rolled back to the ceiling. She felt heavy, drunk but not drunk. "You've been really mean to me, Finn . . . I'd be in my bar right now . . . spleen would be just fine." She tried not to think about anything—tried not to think about Finn manhandling her guts. Focus on the black, focus on nothing. "I'd be drinking, probably." A wistful sigh escaped her lips. "A drink sounds nice."

"Got it," Finn said.

"Are you sure?" Kade barked. "If we close her up, we'll not know until the morphine wears off, and by then it will be too late."

"Too late," Cyra repeated, not really sure what she was saying anymore, eyes tracing the dancing torchlight against the nearest wall. "Pretty."

"Move your instrument," Finn growled. "I'm closing her up."

"Don't worry, Doctor," Cyra said. "Finn was the best at school . . . casting-wise. His grades were underwhelming, however."

Perhaps her mind played tricks, but she swore a smile tugged at Finn's lips. "Done."

"Yay," Cyra said flatly, eyelids falling closed. Seven hells, she was exhausted.

"Good," Kade said. "Put Mr. Calderis back in his cell. Marvin, remove our patient's trousers."

“What? Why?” Finn’s alarmed voice beckoned Cyra to fight the drowsiness.

“Not that I need to explain myself.” Kade straightened. “But since we are prepped for surgery, I’d prefer not to waste an opportunity to collect an ovarian egg.”

Cyra’s face scrunched. “I’d rather you not.” She felt callused fingers at her waistband as Marvin fussed with the buttons on her trousers.

“Don’t you fucking touch her!” Finn shouted, swinging his shackled wrists.

The metal struck the back of Henchman Marvin’s round head. Finn ducked as the brute hurled his fists around in retaliation. Marvin’s knuckles, instead, connected with Captain Roderick’s drawn pistol, Finn timing his dodge perfectly before maneuvering away from both men. His success was short-lived, however, his face meeting the muzzle of not one but two rifles, held by different men. Their aim was quickly joined by Captain Roderick’s pistol.

“A night in shackles, I think,” Kade said, gesturing for the gunmen to escort Finn to his cell. Turning his attention back to Cyra, the doctor huffed an irritated sigh as if he was the aggrieved party. “When was your last cycle, Cyra?”

Anger cleared a path through her mind-fog, thoughts of Minra and Lana only adding fuel to her gathering rage. “Three days from go fuck yourself.”

Kade made a clicking sound with his tongue. “Not helpful, but I’m willing to risk a useless effort—some lessons are hard-learned down here.”

She heard the sound of boots scraping against stone, her eyes following the pained grunts to find Finn thrashing against the restraining efforts of the surrounding men.

The butt of a rifle smashed into his nose before slamming across back.

Finn dropped to all fours, blood gushing from both nostrils. “He wants her as his bride,” he choked out as hands wrenched him to his feet. “Perhaps you should ask your boss before taking anything that might impede his long-term plans.”

Kade only stood there silently as Marvin unbuttoned Cyra’s trousers. The gleam in the brute’s eyes spoke of all the things he’d like to do with the helpless woman on the table.

Maybe she’d match both of his eyes with his mangled ear.

“Phylis tea,” Cyra mumbled.

“Stop.” Kade raised a hand, halting Marvin’s progress. “What did you say?”

“I drank Phylis tea nine days ago,” Cyra managed through the crushing drowsiness.

The readily available tea both in Castoria and its former colonies prevented pregnancy. She had been regularly ingesting the steeped herbs long before she and Finn searched for her “lost” necklace in the attic.

You do not want an unplanned pregnancy, her mother had drummed into Cyra since her cycles began. A warning she adhered to without argument, dutifully drinking her tea once a month through school, through training, through the war—up through nine days ago.

Nine days ago, when Finn walked into her saloon.

Kade bristled in annoyance. “We are done here. Put her with Mr. Calderis.”

Cyra’s fear and anger abated, mind retreating back into its morphine stupor. She was only vaguely aware of hands hauling her off the table and toward the cells before stumbling into the slack chain between Finn’s wrists.

“Keep her on her right side,” Kade ordered. “Morphine causes nausea. If the pain returns, call for me.” His chin dipped. “I hope your healing skills are as clever as your mouth.”

“Definitely not,” Cyra mumbled, body easing onto something soft. Footsteps echoed, but she barely heard them—floating off to unconsciousness.

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Chapter 33

FLIGHT, FIGHT, FREEZE

Nine Years Ago

"I don't know what's worse," Aedan said. "Blissful ignorance before a direct shot to the head or seeing villains everywhere and driving yourself mad." They had traveled for four days with nothing more exciting lurking in the woods than the errant squirrel.

The unfortunate corporal's blank eyes and foul odor stayed with Cyra, a stalking reminder of the present threat. To not be fooled by the calm beauty of the forest.

When she wasn't looking for rifle-wielding riders, she was scouring the trees for Akira. *Please let her be all right*, she prayed to whatever Ancient was listening.

Their journey led them through a ravine, the way out yielding another precarious climb.

Aedan reached the top with relative ease before he offered aid to a struggling Cyra. Not as tall as the remarkably limber man, she required a few extra foot- and handholds during the last and steepest part of the climb.

She was inches from his outstretched hand when the branch beneath her foot broke.

Weight careening downward, she scrambled to stop her fall, flinging her arms outward like a long-limbed frog. Abruptly she stopped, feet and hands locking around rocks. Loose gravel fell around her body, a few tiny pebbles

bouncing off her forehead and nose as if scolding her for a second sloppy climb during this nature venture.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Cyra huffed, breath kicking up a cloud of dust around her face. She craned her head upward, meeting Aedan’s relieved face. She had slid about six feet; it felt like sixty. “Did I mention that I hate climbing?”

Aedan rested his hands on his hips. “And here we were worried about treasonous rebels.”

“Hah. Hah.” Cyra had barely uttered the words when a loud *bang* cut through the air. The sound shoved ice through veins, the feeling worsening when Aedan turned around and disappeared from view.

“Aedan!”

No response.

No. No. No. Cyra pushed herself up toward the ledge, grabbing anything her hands could fit around. There was no time for care. Dirt and leaves dislodged from her tenuous path, threatening to send her into another slide.

They didn’t, and she reached the top before rolling onto the grassy edge.

“Cyra!” called Aedan from around a tree, motioning frantically.

She sprinted to his position behind a fat oak tree just as more shots sliced through the air. “How many?” she asked once sure Aedan was uninjured.

“I don’t know, but that is one of ours.” He nodded to the other side of the tree.

She followed his gaze, and her heart all but stopped at the sight of a bloodied green ranger coat. Lying prostrate was a body, chest stained with a telltale dark liquid, expression blank. A ranger-in-training—dead, but not Akira. *Not Akira.*

Selfishly, Cyra’s pulse eased. A short-lived reprieve as a pained female cry found her ears. She recognized the sound immediately. “Akira.”

Cyra was already running. Already imagining what she might find—Akira lying face-up in the woods. Panic wouldn’t let her stop even as Aedan called her name. Even as more unseen bullets zipped through the air.

Wood chips burst from a tree to her right. Cursing, she zigged and zagged as more bullets rained down from somewhere. She craned her head around in desperate attempt to find the source, gaze finally latching onto the barrel of a rifle aimed at her chest. “Shit.”

She changed directions too late, feeling a burning sting through her coat, the bullet grazing her ribcage. She ignored the pain, leaping over a fallen tree before twisting midair. Three small fire balls erupted from her wrist and tore over the ground, speed kicking up a wave of dried leaves.

The fiery barrage smashed into the gunman. One ball slammed into his leg, setting his trousers aflame. The other two crashed into his chest. She didn't see what happened next, her body falling backwards over the horizontal log.

"Seven hells, Cyra," Akira gasped. She was huddled behind the log, eyes wide, lips parted at she took in Cyra's sudden appearance.

"I heard you scream." Cyra scrambled to a crouch. "I thought the worst."

Akira glanced down at her left arm. A knotted strip of cloth wrapped around a bloody wound. "Just a scratch, being a baby about it."

The seeping wound didn't look like a scratch, blood already soaking through the wrappings. "I wounded a gunman pretty badly," Cyra said, still catching her breath.

"I killed one," Akira said solemnly. "And I wounded another. There are at least three more. We encountered the gunmen in the forest a half hour ago. Arthur and I thought it was some sort of test. Then they shot him, and . . ." Her lips pursed, corners of her mouth teetering as moisture rimmed her eyes.

"We saw him."

"We?"

"Yes, me and—" A cry rang out—a yelp of pain. "Aedan!" Without thinking, Cyra leapt back over the fallen log, searching the trees. *Where?*

Several yards away, Aedan stumbled backward, casting ice shards toward an unseen foe. His left hand gripped a wound in his side.

Everything inside Cyra seized when she glimpsed a second armed assailant stalking through the woods, his revolver aimed at Aedan's head. Instincts called her hand outward, ice flying before Aedan's next backward step. The shard glinted against the sunlit beams peeking through the tree canopy. Then the silent blade buried into revolver-man's neck.

Cyra only saw a flash of crimson, the man's hand flying up to the spear impaling his throat. He had no chance of survival. She watched as he crashed to the ground. He'd be dead in minutes—seconds, choking on his own blood.

A life. She had just claimed a life. The realization stalled her breath. Stalled everything.

“Cyra!” yelled Akira, snapping Cyra out of her momentary daze.

She whipped around, gaze locking onto another shooter, his gun aimed at her chest. *Shit*. Slow—she was too slow to stop the man, his echoing gunshot heralding her own end.

A flinch gripped her body, waiting to die. Instead, a block of ice filled her vision, the sudden barrier bursting into tiny chunks as two successive bullets struck the conjured shield.

Through the scattering pieces, Cyra cast a stream of flames at her would-be killer, chasing the fire with two ice shards. With low stomach-turning thuds, they struck her assailant in successive blows. Another life claimed.

She didn’t think about it, not yet, turning her attention toward Aedan. His relentless attacker at last stalked into view, closing in on his wounded prey.

Focusing on nothing but saving Aedan, Cyra curved her next ice shard around a tree, the point burying into the gunman’s neck. A third life taken.

Don’t think about it.

Pulse still hammering, she scanned the trees, searching for more threats, but all was quiet. After a steadying gulp, she assisted Akira in helping Aedan over the fallen tree, using the horizontal trunk for cover should the forest manifest any more unwelcome guests.

Aedan’s wound was worse up close, blood oozing through his red-stained fingers, face growing paler by the second. They weren’t trained to heal wounds like these, but with the risk of more gunmen and nearly two weeks away from real help . . .

What if he dies?

As if sensing Cyra’s flaring panic, Aedan said, “Second time I’ve been shot in the woods with you two.” He threw a flinching glare between the women. “Good thing I do my best fighting from the ground. I was about to make a most brilliant move.” He grimaced before adding, “You just had to show off, Cyra.”

In spite of herself and the total crap-sandwich of a situation, she smiled. “Next time, I’ll let you handle the situation on your own.”

“No,” Aedan said through a wince. “Your ice-throwing needed practice. You did the right thing.” Another wince twisted his features, the visible pain

stalling the laugh dancing through Cyra's lips. *What if he dies?*

Her panicked eyes fixed on Akira. *Please help*, she wordlessly begged.

Akira nodded, launching an examination of the wound. "The bullet went clean through, so nothing to dig out," she said after a minute. "Nailah showed me a few tips for deeper wounds. I can stop the bleeding, but if the bullet hit anything vital, you're screwed."

"Your bedside manner is remarkable," Aedan ground out. "You missed your calling as a healer."

Akira only gave him a grim smile, setting to work on the wound.

As the seconds ticked by, Cyra's fears worsened. She forced her attention toward the forest—toward any more would-be threats, anything other than answering her silent question. *What if he dies?*

"You didn't freeze," Aedan said, his gentle tone recapturing her attention. She turned her head, meeting his soft eyes. "I'm grateful." He dipped his chin in gratitude—in pride.

Cyra wasn't sure how to feel about these words—about what she had done to save him, to save herself. She'd decide later.

"Done," Akira announced after twenty minutes that felt like twenty years. "I left you with two nasty scars, so I hope your vanity has cooled over the years."

Aedan scoffed. "I was never vain." The comment earned pointed looks. "That vain," he added begrudgingly.

The corners of Akira's mouth twitched as she untied the cloth around her arm, revealing a nasty gash. She scrunched her nose at the ripped flesh, beginning another healing cast. "It's them, isn't it? Your Gauntlet pals?"

"Yes," Cyra said. "Which means there are more out there—I feel it in my gut."

"Then let's get the hell out of here."

So, they did. Once their wounds were more or less healed, they raced through the woods like three scurrying mice fleeing the unseen cat's chase. Luck was on their side when they found a cave with an hour left of light.

The night was uneventful, thank the Ancients. They rose at dawn the next day, continuing their trek. Aedan managed fairly well, color slowly returning to his tanned complexion, blue-green eyes brightening any time they caught Cyra's gaze. The quiet exchanges did not go unnoticed by Akira, but she said nothing, the trio avoiding any frivolous talk, too focused on freeing themselves from this wretched forest with their lives.

By afternoon they approached a large river, the mud and pebble shores yielding to a wide gray-brown waterway, spotted with mossy boulders. “The current is too fast to wade across unless we want to become river mulch,” Akira said after a cursory study. “Temperatures cold enough to freeze our proverbial balls off.” Aedan arched a brow at the comment, prompting Akira to add, “Or actual balls.”

She wasn’t wrong, which left only one option: the bridge.

The stone structure curved up and over the fast-moving water, walls reaching just under hip height. Cyra cycled through all the reasons this crossing was a bad idea—no cover, narrow walkway, utterly exposed to anything hiding in the surrounding trees. But it was this or hike for days down river. Either option was a risk, so they risked the bridge.

It was the wrong choice.

The trio hadn’t made it halfway across when loud booms rang through the air. The shots fired from both sides of the river, a trap well-laid.

All three crouched within the bridge’s feeble stone walls. Casting was useless. They each only possessed a single elemental. Firing blindly toward their all but invisible attackers would only serve to waste their last defense. They were penned in from escape with only one grim option remaining.

“We’ve got to jump!” Akira cried as bullets rained, smashing into the loose rock around them. “Now!”

Muttering curses, Cyra flung her body up and over the stone wall. In her peripheral vision, she spied Aedan and Akira following suit.

Gunshots chased them as they hit the water in three successive splashes.

Blistering cold paralyzed Cyra. It was so deep that her feet did not reach the bottom, the water effortlessly sweeping her forward, hungrily swallowing this new treat. She struggled to find the surface, clawing at the water, too thick with silt and haze for her eyes to lend aid.

She claimed a tenuous breath before her body slammed into a rock, current jerking her down and then up like a rag doll. For several long, agonizing minutes, she flailed helplessly against the river’s tide.

Water clogged her eyes and mouth, her burning lungs reaching their limit when at last she latched onto a boulder. Nails digging into the moss-covered crevasses, Cyra battled the current desperate to drag her back into its tow before finally breaching the river’s surface. She caught sight of a partially fallen tree, its branches dancing over the rushing waters.

Cyra’s fingertips stretched tauntingly close to a branch when her tenuous grasp on the rock faltered, and the greedy river captured its charge once more. *Shit*.

With a strong kick, she propelled her body toward another spindly limb. *Come on!*

Hand curling around the wisp of a branch, her body jerked to a halt, the surrounding current churning in disapproval. Desperation beat a wild drum in her chest as she wrestled her free arm out of the water, and grasped further up the tree’s straining arm.

Needlelike sensations stabbed across her numb fingers, skin going white as she climbed up the taut limb. Water lashed at her face, feet kicking with vigorous fury, desperate to reach the bottom, a rock, a root—*anything*.

Finally, the tip of her boot found something hard. Leveraging the fragile hold, Cyra propelled herself upward, finding a sturdier branch. And inch by inch she freed herself from the river’s clutches, each new hold a victory, each claim of her boots against the riverbed coursing a wash of relief through her unthawed body. The river slowly relinquished its would-be prey.

With a final push-pull, Cyra flopped onto the rocky bank, lungs heaving with exhaustion.

The crisp air immediately curled around her waterlogged form, everything going ice-cold. She trembled against the sharp sensations, still gasping for welcome breath as she lay on her back, staring up at the cloudy sky.

Move, Cyra! her inner alarm called, but her tired muscles barked in protest. *You need to go. Find—*

Too late. The heel of a boot drilled into her right wrist, pressing it painfully into the muddy ground before a pistol jammed into her face, barrel aimed between her eyes.

Cyra’s heart leapt to her throat, already shortened breath hitching. She waited for the trigger’s pull, for the sound of a gunshot, chased by the inevitable black. Instead, a gravelly voice spoke—a voice she had dreamed about from time to time over the years.

“Cyra Byrogan, aren’t you a gift from the Ancients.”

Her eyes slid up the pistol’s barrel, and all her muscles stilled. Two and a half years had changed little about the man’s appearance—same beard, yellow teeth, and jagged neck scar.

Jeremiah.

He rested on bent knee, almost lazily holding the gun in Cyra's face, his boot wedged into her right wrist. His free hand produced a dagger, lowering the tip to her still-pinned arm.

"We came here to be heard," he growled, prying open the buckles on her bracer. "Perhaps, if we take you, they will finally listen to us." He discarded the bracer with its lone crystal. It tumbled toward the river, settling near the water's edge.

Another man stalked into view, his beady eyes raking over Cyra. "Are you sure she is a Byrogan?" His lip curled, revealing a single gold tooth. "She looks like just another ranger to me."

Jeremiah's attention stayed hooked on Cyra's face. "Trust me, it's her." The painful weight of his boot heel was close to fracturing her wrist. "Nestor can confirm once he returns."

"Nestor is injured," said the gold-toothed man. "We already lost five. Maybe we should just kill her now—"

"No," snapped Jeremiah, his eyes flashing. "The Ancients put her in my path; I am not going to squander the opportunity again. For now, she remains alive."

"And how do you propose—"

Finally, Jeremiah turned his head, gaze releasing their lock on Cyra, his pistol's aim drifting. Like a striking snake, her free hand shot out, shoving the firearm away before rolling into the leg pinning her arm.

The heel dislodged enough to free the limb. Popping to her feet, she scrambled toward the bracer resting precariously near the water. She'd grab the thing, then—

Bang! A gunshot splintered her eardrums as a violent burning jab drove into her back, the force propelling her forward. She crashed to the ground, landing over the bracer, both hands plunging into the frigid water.

"I said I wanted her alive," Jeremiah barked.

Cyra heard the crunch of boots against loose pebbles, but she didn't move—couldn't move. A biting pain spread across her right shoulder blade. All she could do was stare down at the disturbed silt swirling around her submerged hands as she sucked in sharp breaths through her mouth.

"She'll be fine. Probably," said Gold-Tooth.

A hand clamped around her left arm, jerking Cyra to her feet. A half second—she had a half second to grasp the bracer, her wet fingers just

clinching the leather before it slipped away.

"Learned a few new skills, eh?" Jeremiah's face filled her vision, his sneer so close she spied a chipped tooth in his upper jaw, breath smelling strongly of raw onions. "Tie her hands before she causes any more trouble." He shoved her sideways.

The pain in her shoulder-blade exploded across her back, leaving her unable to stop from crashing into Gold-Tooth, who caught Cyra before she careened back toward the ground.

Another man emerged from the trees. He was limping, strips of bloody linen tied around his leg. He looked familiar, his ivory complexion tinged pink, circular glasses halfway down his nose. His startling gray-blue eyes were slightly wide-set, giving him a birdlike effect.

Realization struck with her next blink, recognizing the spectacled man from the forest encounter following the Gauntlet Trials.

"Nestor," Jeremiah greeted the newcomer. "What do you report?"

"Rangers," Nestor replied, features oddly blank. "Thirty, just over the hillcrest."

Jeremiah's entire body went rigid, countenance temporarily frozen. "Thirty?" A muscle feathered in his jaw as the ramifications shattered across his paling face, coming to a single conclusion. "So . . . this will be our last mission, after all."

"Sir," Nestor said, strange eyes flickering with recognition as soon as they latched onto Cyra. "We have a valuable hostage. We can still—"

"No," Jeremiah snapped, gaze landing on Cyra as murder gathered behind his features. "You can attempt to squirrel yourself back to the swamp and inform our benefactor of this failure, but I'm staying." A slow smile twitched the bristles of his beard. "Today, I get to kill a Byrogan. My last mission before meeting the Ancients with a smile on my face."

With those foreboding words, Jeremiah raised his pistol, the motion tauntingly slow as if savoring this moment before ending Cyra's life.

Her heart thudded, eyes flickering to the bracer—so unhelpfully resting on the ground feet away. Reacting on pure adrenaline, she spun around Gold-Tooth, still standing at her back. She reached for the second pistol holstered at his hip, fingers wrapping around the handle just as Jeremiah's firearm blasted its deadly force.

The bullet slammed into the gold-toothed man's chest, throwing him backward as Cyra yanked the claimed weapon free.

Fortunately, cadet training included practicing with all manner of firearms. Unfortunately, Cyra was exhausted, half-drowned, and had a bullet lodged in her shoulder. Her aim went wide, the bullet grazing the outside of Jeremiah's arm.

She pulled the trigger again—*click*. The pistol only had one round. *Shit*.

A flush tore up the burn scar along Jeremiah's neck, nostrils flaring, eyes burning with promised vengeance. He held the same model of weapon, however. He was out too.

They stared at each for one tense moment. Red glinted out of the corner of her eye, her elemental crystal beckoning. Cyra dove for the bracer as Jeremiah grasped the rifle slung across his back. That model of rifle held three rounds. Three cursed rounds.

Her fingers slipped into the bracer, momentum rolling her into the river just as the first shot fired.

A bullet cut into her left arm, just above the elbow. The second smashed into her casted wave of frozen water. She sank herself into the shallows, calling a hum of fire down her arm. She gathered the well of energy in her palm before releasing an explosion of flames, springing from the water like a fire-breathing river beast.

Steam puffed and sizzled as fire met water, the inferno blazing across the short expanse like a flame-made cannonball. She heard more than saw her cast find its target—a loud, guttural grunt finding her ears over the clap of settling water.

Blinking rapidly to clear her vision, Cyra readied herself for returning fire. Except Jeremiah was no longer standing on the shoreline.

Because Jeremiah was dead.

A black-red hole in the center of his chest breathed a trail of smoke from his still body. Her fireball had burned right through him, killing him where he stood.

Cyra gulped a breath, hearing little but the rushing river at her back, the sickening smell of burnt flesh saturating the air. When her eyes ticked up, she found Nestor standing there, seemingly unperturbed by the violence—by the death of his leader. He inclined his head as if acknowledging a superior foe, then, as casually as someone taking a morning stroll, he began limping toward the trees.

Kill him, Cyra's instincts throttled, but she found herself hesitating—not budging from her kneeling position within the shallow water. Rebel or not,

could she really shoot an injured, unarmed man in the back?

Indecision warred as the man disappeared into the trees, his fate left to the Ancients.

So be it.

Overwhelming cold leached all warmth from Cyra's blood, wounds beating fresh pain through her entire body as her adrenaline faded. Lowering her arm, she sagged toward the water's surface, chin drooping in exhaustion. She watched her shadowy reflection wave within the ripples of the unsettled waters as drops of blood splattered across the shimmering image, mixing with the disturbed silt.

She sank toward the red-brown haze, and gave into the cold, wet black.

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Chapter 34

The Box

Present

Cyra's pillow shifted under her head. Rolling over, she hoped to drift back to sleep—tired mind craving a longer fix. The movement coursed a shock of pain through her body, mind sharpening away from the fuzzy, blissful black.

Her pillow shifted again.

Not a pillow, she realized, as odors of sweat and dirt filled her nose.

Reluctantly, she cracked open an eye, almost flinching to her seat as she found a naked torso inches from her face. Her eyes flew upward to find a sleeping Finn. He was leaning against the bars, head lolled to the side, his eyes closed. Her head was in his lap, her body lying on the cot's pad, placed on the ground.

Her mind struggled to identify where she was, why she found herself sleeping in Finn's lap. Her eyes traced over the angry welts across his bare torso. As painful as they looked, it wasn't the welts which captured her attention, gaze drifting over the well-formed contours of his muscled chest.

Impressive, Finn. She hadn't noticed before—well, she hadn't been this close to him so undressed in a decade. The boy she had known then was the same height, but slender, lanky—yet to fully fill into his adult body. He was certainly filled out now—*my, my, Finn*.

Her eyes trailed up his abdomen and along the hard muscles of his arms and shoulders. They weren't bulky or massive, but toned, tight. Like her

own body, Finn's bore marks of long-healed scars—raised and discolored skin in places. Not as numerous or as deep those marring her flesh, but they were there—healed cuts, burns, gashes. Evidence of a rough existence these last ten years.

Everything about him was so familiar, yet she felt as though she stared at a stranger. His face was more angular than his once softer boyish looks, hardened just like the rest of his body. Thick stubble clung to his sharp jaw, untamed locks brushing the tops of his shoulders.

The imperfect features had always suited Finn, born to be rugged instead of neat.

She loved that about him . . . once.

Her attention lowered to his mouth, a mouth she knew all too well—lips that had scoured nearly every inch of her body. Lips that once breathed words of love, of passion, of promise.

Until they didn't. Until they were gone.

Cyra expected to feel anger at the memories. Instead, a wistful sorrow carved a trench down the center of her heart. Because of their relationship, Finn lost everything, lost his brother, his career—*you*. Did he blame her for this? Blame her for the life of crime his future found?

But she saw him once during the war, and he seemed . . . fine. Sort of.

The last nine days were confusing—his anger, his spiteful behavior as he shredded her life with relish. Had bitterness over his unhappy life whipped back around to lay blame on her? Had the thought of her dead for four years hardened his heart against any compassion around her survival? Or maybe whatever her parents offered was too strong to allow any empathy over her plight?

He fought for you last night, her mind argued. Even now as Finn slept, the position offering little but aches and stiffness, he seemed protective. His shackled hands rested nearby but were careful not to disturb her slumber. He sat on the ground, allowing her the pad.

It was this small sacrifice of comfort that, more than anything, confounded Cyra.

Yes, maybe Finn didn't hate her enough to let her die or let some twisted man steal from her body for his own sick experiments, but why the almost tender sleeping arrangements? Why the panic bordering on desperation last night when he tried to stop Kade from inflicting additional damage?

Cyra’s pulse spiked thinking about what almost happened, remembering the punishment Finn had incurred on her behalf. The ounce of decency left in his soul came alive last night. A fleeting moment? Or something else?

Did it matter?

Cyra wasn’t sure. Regardless, they needed to escape this place. One night was enough. Her aching body and the taste of bile on her tongue was preferable to every second trapped here.

Gently, she eased upright, noticing she wore a new shirt—Finn’s shirt. The smell of him overwhelmed her nose, granting temporary reprieve from the more unpleasant odors hanging around the space—leather, pine needles, and Finn.

The familiar scent evoked a time when she wore his shirts often, sneaking from his bed in the early morning hours back to her own dormitory. Something about the smell and the memories they displaced brought another ache to her heart.

They were so innocent then. So naive.

“Are you all right?” she heard Finn ask.

A dismissive “yes” poised on her lips. She swallowed the word as a dread coiled around her insides at the prospect of looking up and finding icy eyes or a taunting smirk. She feared the impending testy exchange might crush the fleeting memories of her former life, because for some reason, as they sat together in this pit of hell, she wanted to live a few more moments in the past. Longed to bask in the comfort of something kind instead of facing the cruel reminder of how much things had changed. And more than anything, she didn’t want to feel Finn’s ire anymore. Her mind and body were too weak to combat whatever harsh remark or subtle jab he might lob in her direction. She could barely straighten out of his lap without a sharp grimace, much less reinforce her mental and emotional walls to prepare for a verbal duel.

“I’ve . . . had better days,” she said, waiting for a sharp response or clipping words.

“Same” was all he returned. No snark, no bite.

At last, she worked up the courage to meet his eyes. They were soft, filled with empathy as they searched her face. The look squeezed her heart in such an unexpected way that she had to look away as a sharp burn of emotion thickened her throat.

She didn’t understand the reaction, nor Finn’s expression. The look he wore felt so familiar—so impossibly Finn. It conjured both joy and sadness, the feelings as strong as they were confusing.

They were just weak—too battered and too tired to wage war. This truce wouldn’t last.

“Listen, Cyra,” Finn said in a low, urgent whisper. “I spoke at length with the others last night. We need to attempt escape today. It’s only a matter of time before that shard is discovered. It’s a miracle they haven’t found it already. Hiram believes that, given your present state and Royce’s . . . designs for you, Kade will focus on me. I still have this.” Finn uncurled his hand and presented an evolution crystal. “I think Kade forgot to reclaim it last night. I healed your back, and my nastier burns.”

Cyra’s brows twitched. Right, her bullet wound. She rolled her shoulders and felt no tug of skin or stab of pain, the morphine long gone from her system by now. Yes, her body hurt—still battered and bruised from last night’s escapades, but her external wounds were more or less healed, Finn responsible for both.

“Thank you,” she managed to say through her scratchy throat. She meant the words.

“We need you as strong as possible,” Finn said, though she did not miss the slight hesitation in voice. “Hiram says the best time for escape is during the midday meal. Fewer guards patrol then than at night. With luck, they’ll keep us in this cell together. With even more luck, Kade will remove my shackles. We’ll cast through the lock and out through the door. We need to reach the adjoining room and its stored crystals. Hiram reports at least two guards—one for us and one for the crystals. We’ll need to get past them both without making noise.”

“And if you are too injured to help, or they separate us?” Cyra’s eyes rested on the evolution crystal in his hand. It wasn’t cloudy—yet.

“Then it’s up to you.”

The corner of her mouth turned up in a weary smile. “Easy peasy.” The plan was rough, not particularly good, and pretty much went to shit immediately.

The sound of an unlocking door announced the arrival of four men—including gnarled-eared Marvin and Cyra’s new best friend, Captain Roderick.

Kade entered last, the nearby torchlight bathing his face in visceral detail. And for the first time she truly looked at him, studying his pale features and large eyes thus far hidden behind round glasses.

Everything inside of Cyra dropped as recognition blasted through her body. “No,” she breathed just before the air in her lungs froze.

She remembered this man. The Nation of Clovia man. The man she had let go all those years ago. The man responsible for the . . . But her thoughts refused to form the lone word that haunted her *what ifs* as much as the burning barn.

How was he here?

“Everything is going to be fine,” Finn whispered, a wrinkle capturing his brow as he tried to interpret the look on her face.

It wasn’t going to be fine, Cyra wanted to argue, but strangling shock choked down any and all speech. The occupants in the other cells collectively shuddered, several shifting backward in their human-sized cages.

In his hands, Kade carried an ominous box. He set it on a small table next to the bolted chair with leather belts. “Bring out Mr. Calderis and the princess.”

With stunned horror still thudding through her veins, Cyra barely registered what the order meant for her, meant for their escape. No part of their haphazard plan involved Kade bringing out both of them for questioning—for torture.

Finn and Cyra rose to their feet, exchanging tense side glances as the barred door opened.

Captain Roderick locked his grip around Cyra’s arm, dragging her from the cell. “I’m going to enjoy this,” he growled in her ear.

Marvin and another guard escorted Finn close behind.

The thought of shooting their plan to hell crossed Cyra’s mind. An ice shard to the neck would take care of Captain Murder-Eyes, a second shard would end Marvin the Lech. But what about the third guard? What about Kade?

Nestor.

Cold ripped across her body, chased by the visceral image of smoke and water and screams. The fleeting vision held her captive, stalling any would-be action.

“Ceiling chain.” Kade gestured at the goons holding Finn. “The princess in the chair.”

Finn was shuffled toward one of the two iron manacles hanging from the ceiling.

This was her moment, a precious few seconds in which he was free of his shackles, and Cyra was not yet strapped into the bolted chair. *Go, now!*

Except she didn’t. Weak body and tired mind hacking away her confidence and spiking all her fears. Fear of failure. Of watching one of the armed brutes shoot Finn in the head. Fear her long dormant skills were not up to this gargantuan task—this lone chance to save not only her own life but the lives of the poor souls in cages.

Cyra, the ranger, would not have hesitated.

War-Cyra would have smashed Roderick’s throat before removing Marvin the Meathead’s leering smirk without wasting a cast. She had faced worse odds and survived. This was just another day, another mission, for wartime Cyra. Pain and death her common companions.

That was four years ago. She wasn’t that person anymore, spending most of her days arguing with drunks and combating dust mites instead of fighting for her life. She forgot this feeling, the sense that if she didn’t seize a moment she might die in the next.

And just like that, her brief opportunity vanished. Roderick shoved her into the bolted chair, quickly securing the wrist and leg restraints with the swift efficiency of someone who did it often. The last belt wound across her shoulders, pinning her against the chair’s tall backing.

The rustle of chains drew her attention as Finn’s arms rose above his head, wrists shackled within iron manacles. And that was that.

“More fun with your new gadget?” Finn sneered, watching Kade fuss with the metal box. “I’m not sure why two of us are necessary.” He sounded unconcerned, almost bored.

“We’re going to try a different experiment today,” Kade said. The small table holding the metal box possessed wheels, man and object positioned about halfway between the restrained prisoners.

Whatever this box did, Cyra assumed it was responsible for the welts marring parts of Finn’s exposed chest and arms. So, who would be suffering the torture today?

Not the right question, Cyra. Who would be suffering the torture first? They both weren’t out here for simple conversation, and the wheels allowed

the box to move in either direction.

As Kade rolled a black rubber glove over his right hand, her heart beat faster. This would not be her first torture session. The resulting scars, both visible and unseen, still lingered on her body and in her consciousness. After last night's torment, she wasn't sure how long she might last. Her days of practiced resilience to physical pain and mental stress felt far away. A lifetime ago.

Hold on as long as you can, she told herself as sweat pooled along her lower back. She didn't look at Finn, fearing what she'd see in his face. She wasn't even entirely sure what was worse—panic or indifference.

To her right, Kade fussed around the box, grasping the attached iron rod fixed to the side by a metal chord. Then his attention shifted to Cyra so their eyes locked for the briefest of moments. She was first. *Awesome*.

Her nerves thrashed, desperate to stall. "I know who you are, Nestor," she blurted. "Nation of Clovia. One of Jeremiah's men. You—"

"Have long since resigned from such work," Kade said, glancing over his spectacles and giving her a tight look.

Finn blinked, surprise blooming over his features as he regarded Kade. "The forest," he breathed, lips parting with realization.

The sound of a door opening announced a new presence, distracting all parties within the chamber. The strong smell of cologne hinted at the visitor's identity as boots scraped against the stone floor. "Good morning!" Royce's voice boomed, the boisterous man stalking into view. "I heard about your troubles last night. Lucky my doctor was here to lend aid."

Cyra met his grating smile with a deep scowl, silently picturing all manner of ailments befalling this goatish turd, everything from drowning in his treasured swamp to simple death by fire atop all his silly trophies—guns, animal heads, portraits, and his beloved whiskey.

No, she'd drink the whiskey while watching him burn. Perfect.

"Have you reconsidered my offer?" Royce asked as casually as one might ask about the weather.

Cyra answered with thick silence as more imaginative death scenarios peppered her mind.

"Disappointing," he said, smile sliding off his face. "A week down here, I think, will change your mind. If not, I will leave you at the mercy of my good doctor." He let the words hang in the air. "He thinks your royal blood, the potential for life formed by your body, might hold the answers we have

been seeking all these years. I told him that no bride of mine would be subjected to such indecencies. As the benefactor of his research he will obey my command, hoping you maintain your rejection so he might claim what he desires for our quest."

The threat shivered a chill down Cyra's spine. But something else chased that fear, a prickle of suspicion forming at Royce's choice of words. Well, one word in particular. "Benefactor," she breathed, a horrifying thought taking shape.

"What?" Royce's bushy brow rose.

"Before the war you were a merchant," Cyra said, feeling her pulse begin to thrum.

Royce's eyes narrowed, as if trying to detect where she was headed. "Correct."

Her jaw worked, scrutinizing his reaction as she asked, "And did you associate with the Nation of Clovia rebel group?"

Royce gave nothing more away than mild surprise. "Now, why would you—"

"I had a few run-ins with NOC when it was led by a man named Jeremiah," Cyra clipped. "I recognize Kade." Her eyes flicked to the man in question, who barely reacted as he tinkered with the ominous box. "Jeremiah called him Nestor—a first name, I presume?"

Something dark gleamed in Royce's eyes as they shifted to Kade.

Cyra hazarded a guess, the good doctor failed to mention this connection. "When he worked for Jeremiah," she went on, fury coating the words as she glared at Royce, "he referenced a mysterious benefactor more than once." Her throat went painfully dry. "It was you, wasn't it? You funded Nation of Clovia."

The corner of Royce's mouth twitched, but his eyes went ominously cold. "Before the war, I took an interest in the group," he admitted. "Chaos creates opportunity, Cyra. It was nothing personal."

Rage and sorrow whirled together in a storm trapped in her chest, knowing what he did—what Kade did. The ensuing tragedy that launched everything.

"It was personal for me," she spat, tears burning her eyes. "You bankrolled—" She lost her ability to speak as the vision of smoke and screams clotted her throat. "What you did—"

“What I did was hurry along the inevitable,” Royce said, as if confessing to thieving an extra dessert and not starting a fucking war. “As soon as the revolution started, I withdrew my involvement from the group. They were never a long-term investment, too extreme for most of my constituent’s appetites.” He shrugged, as if that made everything all right.

Like fucking hell.

But as much as she wanted to spew righteous venom, the heartbreaking memories pouring through her thoughts strangled any and all speech. She barely noticed Royce’s exit, nor the dull *thunk* of the dungeon door as it closed.

“We will begin now,” Kade said clinically, clutching the metal rod in his gloved hand.

Cyra gritted her teeth, looking straight ahead. “I should have killed you next to the river,” she bit out. “One of the greatest regrets of my life.”

“I find regrets a waste of energy,” Kade said, his monotone voice its own goad. “Lessons should be learned, of course, but we must live with our choices.”

She dragged her gaze to find his face, hatred thickening the rage in her blood. “And how do you live with yours, *Nestor*?” She spat his name like a curse.

“Sparing little thought,” he said, extending his ungloved hand to the side of the mysterious metal box. “I exist for my work, for discovery, for the answers today might yield.” He flipped a switch, and a buzzing sound hummed through the box as if the object suddenly came alive. “Are you familiar with electricity?” Jagged sparks licked from the rod’s end. The flickering white glistened in the reflection of Kade’s glasses. He watched the flurry as if staring at something utterly enchanting. “It’s a recent invention.” He swung a glance at Finn. “One your friend has been getting to know quite well.”

Cyra swallowed. “He’s not my friend.”

“Friend or no,” Kade said, eying Finn like he was a piece of meat about to be cooked, “he is proving stubborn.” Kade turned back to Cyra. “Since we can only count on your company for a short time, I’d like to try something different. My primary goals are twofold: entry into Castoria and a route into the Pyral Mines. Information on contacts and storage facilities are a bonus.” With his ungloved hand, Kade turned a dial on the metal box, and the buzzing grew louder.

Cyra could almost feel it—the tremble in the air, the subtle unseen vibrations. It was how her blood felt before a cast, like dancing bubbles over the surface of sparkling wine, frantic and random.

Kade inched the sparking rod toward Finn. “Pay attention.” He actually licked his lips just before touching the metal end against a patch of Finn’s unmarred skin.

Cyra did not want to watch, was tempted to purse her lips and look away. She didn’t. Instead, she studied Finn’s casual features, unable to stop his muscles from tensing just before the sparking point made contact.

The effect was immediate. Pain leached free with every uttered grunt and jerk against his iron restraints. Remarkably, Finn managed to choke back any cry, eyes squeezing shut.

Everything inside Cyra clenched, and she held her breath until Kade lifted the rod, breaking the connection. A fresh, angry welt raised the affected skin, bubbling and blistering in furious agitation.

A long breath poured from Finn’s lungs, his eyelids snapping open. “Unfortunately, Doctor, my memories are still fuzzy. Perhaps a bottle of Tyrenese cask rum might provide some clarity. Neat, preferably.”

The corner of Kade’s mouth twitched, looking amused more than anything. Kade turned toward Cyra, an expectant gleam in his eyes. “And what about you, Princess?” He padded toward the chair. “What secrets do the royals hold? The secrets to your ancestors, perhaps?” The whites of his eyes expanded to alarming levels—a bug before a meal. “Tell me something of use, and I’ll grant you a reprieve from your friend’s fate.”

“He is not my friend,” Cyra repeated, trying to calm her racing heart. “I hold few secrets relevant to your quest. I don’t know why some are born Syphons, or where our power originates. If the Crown, Parliament, or any of the powers that be knew how to replicate siphoning power, they’d make damn sure all Castorians were born Syphons.”

“We’ll see” was all Kade said. “Final chance to tell me something useful?”

“Why waste a breath?” Cyra said, all energies devoted to remaining calm. But any calm immediately faltered when Kade flipped the box's switch before turning the dial. A burst of fresh sparks erupted from the tip, the sight turning her blood cold.

Fuck calm.

The sensation of the burning hot rod against her forearm channeled a violent pulse up the entire limb. The restraints around her wrists kept her in place, preventing the thrash her body willed. The smell of burning chemicals—burning hair, burning flesh—pulled bile up her throat. She swallowed the acidic taste, fingernails digging into the wood of the armchair.

Somehow, she managed to keep her lips locked tight, grinding her teeth instead of crying out. But as much as she tried, she couldn't quite squash the pain from showing across her face.

At last, the rod lifted, releasing her arm from the limb-tensing shockwave. Like the burns littering Finn's torso, a red-blistered welt marked her skin.

Kade gave an almost loving smile to the new feature—an artist admiring his work.

"Nothing to add," Cyra managed, but she failed to hide the tremor in her voice. As the pain ebbed, she fixed an icy glare on the man, silently hurling creative promises of death.

"For now." Kade's ungloved hand reached into Cyra's space.

The strap across her shoulders prevented her from flinching away. A sick feeling gnawed through her insides as his fingers pried opened the top buttons on the borrowed shirt. The already loose fit made it easy for Kade to shove down the material, exposing her shoulders.

Cyra bit the inside of her cheek, anything to distract from her throbbing arm—from whatever Kade was about to do next. She focused on the cells of the other prisoners.

Think of them. What they have withstood. This was nothing.

"I must be careful using the rod on the chest, as its effect can stop the heart," Kade said, tone matter-of-fact as if instructing a student or giving a lecture. "Now, Mr. Calderis"—he flicked his eyes to Finn—"are you going to let your princess suffer?"

Cyra managed a smirk. "Joke's on you, the man hates me."

"Hate. Love," Kade said. "I find they run together more often than not."

She waited for Finn to scoff or quip at these words. When he said nothing, her eyes reluctantly found his face—his expression murkier than expected, impossible to interpret.

His true feelings mattered little when the sparking rod touched beneath her right collarbone. Nonverbal curses ripped across her mind, body

convulsing against the leather restraints as blinding pain cleaved through her chest. Her lungs constricted against the vibrating shockwaves, breath squeezing from her body.

Standing a few feet away, Captain Roderick watched every pained reaction with a wide, indulgent grin as if having the time of his life.

At last, the rod was lifted, the violent pulse releasing her body. Cyra gulped mouthfuls of air, blinking to clear her vision. Sweat trickled down the sides of her face, breath ragged, nose running. She wasn't entirely sure why, but her eyes shifted to Finn once more.

The raw fear carved into his features surprised Cyra. And for a moment, Finn was the boy she knew—the boy she loved. The boy who would do anything to make her happy, to keep her from harm.

A jolt of wistful sorrow constricted her chest at the reappearance of this Finn. She wasn't entirely sure why.

Kade cleared his throat, gaze volleying between the restrained pair. "Come, Mr. Calderis. This is not very chivalrous of you."

"Eat shit, you animated corpse," Finn spat, eyes flashing murder.

"Go again, Doctor," Captain Roderick crooned, his greedy expression pinned on Cyra.

She barely managed a steadying breath before Kade placed the recharged rod's end just above her right breast. A groan slipped through her lips this time as burning pain splintered through the area, the air in her lungs, once again, sucking away. She shut her eyes, shock enclosing on all sides—harder and faster than the previous times—ushering a wave of darkness.

"Kade, you sick prick! Royce wants her alive!" Finn shouted.

The rod pulled away. And all the energy emptied from her body, limbs and muscles cratering against the leather straps. Her head lulled sideways, too much effort to keep upright. The darkness had yet to completely claim victory, black lingering on the edges of her consciousness.

When her eyes fluttered open, she dragged her gaze to Finn. Through her spotted vision, she could swear she spied water glazing his eyes.

"The mines, Calderis," Kade pressed.

"Even if you knew the path," Finn said tightly, "you cannot enter the kingdom—not without a time crystal and a Syphon."

"Why is that?"

Finn’s throat worked, a sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead. “Midnight Peak. One of the mountains near the border is one giant time crystal. The king ordered fifty of the kingdom’s best Syphons to perform a series of casts. They created an invisible time-freezing barrier that will stop anyone from crossing into the kingdom. The wall will last decades. The only way through is to time-cast a temporary breach.”

This information rolled through Cyra like a slow-moving avalanche, the ramifications just managing to permeate her present haze. Castoria activated Midnight Peak?

It was a last resort in case of direct threat to the kingdom. A resort that was theoretical at best. Any attempt to execute such a plan required both royal and parliamentary approval as the time-wall would literally cut off Castoria from their former colonies in every way. *Why?*

Kade’s features were a mystery as he wrestled with this revelation. “Under the right circumstances, would you work for us?”

Finn gave Kade a sour look before a casual smile broke across his face. “Let us go, and I’ll think about it.”

A low chuckle slipped past Kade’s lips. “It’s amusing that you think bravado will withstand my administration, especially when you have already revealed a key weakness.” He shuffled back to Cyra.

This time the rod found her neck—shooting scorching shockwaves down her spine. The last of her strength sapped away, consciousness happily relinquishing the moment the metal tip tore away from skin, and she gave into the welcome darkness.

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Cyra wasn’t sure how long she remained in the black, only aware of a mild poking in her arm. Morphine? No.

Lashes fluttering open, she spied a large syringe. Instead of emptying, the attached vial filled with something—blood. Her blood.

“A small sample,” Kade muttered—either to himself or to Cyra. “I want the afternoon for preliminary tests. We’ll determine future proceedings from there . . . especially now with Mr. Calderis’s evolving cooperation.”

Afternoon? It was afternoon? Cyra frowned over at Finn. He hung from his chains, staring at the ground, torso and arms littered with fresh welts.

She gave her own body a cursory once-over, half-expecting additional marks, but found nothing new marring her skin.

The burns on her arm, neck, and chest smarted. Bones and muscles a rotation of throbs. A line of drool trickled from the side of her mouth in a tenuous string down to her partially bare chest. The stiffness in her neck and back lent more evidence that Kade had, more or less, left her unmolested for some time.

“Are you sure you don’t want to give the princess a few more prods, Doctor?” Roderick offered, brow wrinkling at his shortened entertainment.

Kade’s bug-eyes swept over Cyra, as if he seriously considered the question. “It would be . . . unwise.” After Kade finished collecting his blood sample, the hulking form of Marvin eclipsed Cyra’s view. Apparently, it was his turn to manhandle the lone female prisoner.

Once free of her restraints, she slumped forward, limbs and bones like rubber. Handsy Marvin was all too happy to accommodate her weakened state. The ogling ogre feasted a generous glance down her shirt before gathering her into his tree trunk arms, meaty hands stealing their liberties.

Oh, Marvin, you just sealed your fate. When the oversized oaf shoved her into the cell, Cyra felt his hesitation. Detected the deviant thoughts barreling across his dark mind, conjuring plots and schemes to satisfy what had thus far been denied.

Instinct raised Cyra’s hackles, vowing a silent promise of death should this groping pervert dare more. She hid her vindictive revulsion. Instead, as her tired body sank to the cot, she portrayed a facade of vulnerability, flinching away as if his touch inspired fear.

Yes, you craven cockroach—I’m a weak, scared woman. Not a threat.

Would he act on his dark desires? Not yet, but he wanted to—desperately, tense hands locking the cell door as if the bars had wronged him, furious he was not presently indulging in his warped fantasies. Marvin’s last glance in her direction promised a return, even if it meant defying orders to claim what he wanted. By the foreboding look he exchanged with Captain Roderick, his plots might just be realized with some happily provided assistance.

Good.

Really, Cyra, that’s good? another part of her brain scolded. The part of her brain screaming to both weep and vomit at the same time. She couldn’t

remember the last time her body was this weak, this battered. Certainly not since the war.

Suck it up, Cyra. If Brute-Face or Captain Death-Glare appeared in her cell, she needed to be ready. As for her piss-poor escape plan? Not going well.

Shackles reclaimed Finn's wrists before he was locked in the adjoining cell. He immediately sank onto his cot, shoulders sagging.

The aura of defeat about him alarmed Cyra more than anything—more than Marvin or Roderick's silent threats, more than Kade's insidious plans or Royce's schemes. She needed Finn, needed his rage-fueled energy if they had any chance at escape.

"We can still do this," Cyra said from her own cot. "I just need a few minutes of rest."

"We're not escaping today, Cyra," Finn muttered. He sounded worn down. Hopeless.

"Finn, don't—" Her abdomen suddenly cramped as overwhelming nausea throttled her insides with such intensity that she barely had time to roll over and grasp her cell's bucket before losing the meager contents of her stomach. The movement coursed fresh pain through her burns, prompting a sharp inhale.

"You were saying?" Finn craned his head around.

Cyra wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "We're leaving today."

He only shook his head. "We're both too beaten. The next window for escape is dinner time—tomorrow will only be worse."

"You still have the evolution crystal?" she asked, and Finn nodded, brows furrowed. "Good," she said. "Heal your worst burns. We rest for the next few hours, then we get the fuck out of here. If not, we have our contingency. I'll agree to marry the governor." Cyra shrugged. "A castle in the dregs of Castoria's former colonies, god-complex husband—what's not to want? The marriage will certainly piss off my mother. So, that's a bonus." Her features darkened. "I imagine a short honeymoon, ending with the groom's inevitable death at the hands of his new bride. A whirlwind romance for the ages."

The corners of Finn's mouth twitched, as if he wanted to smile, to lend her true joy without the hint of irony. She almost wanted him to, just to see

another flash of the old Finn. On the other hand, a genuine smile would only breathe fresh confusion.

Instead, she received something even more confusing than a smile: his expression softened, and he looked at her like he cared. Like he still . . . Cyra couldn't even say the word in her mind. "Love" was far too strong, given the circumstances—given everything.

"We're leaving this place—all of us," Finn said, the intensity in his eyes adding, *And I am not leaving without you*.

Cyra dipped her head, a lump of unexpected emotion knotting her throat. "Heal your wounds," she said, swallowing any and all turbulent feelings. "We need to rest."

"You first."

"What?"

"I'm healing your wounds first." Finn nodded over her burns.

"Finn—"

"My wrists are shackled." Finn raised his arms. "We're not wasting an elemental cast on these, which means you're the one who must breach this room. So, I'm healing you first."

A resigned exhale passed through her lips. "Fine." She extended her hand expectantly. When Finn did not relinquish the evolution crystal, she leveled a flat look. "I can heal myself."

"Your hand is trembling."

And as much as she willed the appendage to still, she could not stop the tremors.

"I'm a better healer," he said, "and you don't need any more scars."

The note of gravity in his voice caught Cyra off-guard. Was it pity? No—something else, something closer to sadness, as if he wanted to heal all her wounds, past and present. And for a moment, she relished the look, a pathetic part of her heart wanting him to care. Grasping at the hope that somewhere, buried behind his vitriol, hid the boy she once loved.

That he wasn't entirely gone.

It vanished with her next breath as thoughts of Lofton shoved into her mind, curdling any longing their present hell had awakened.

"Best not to sell me back to my parents with fresh scars, right?" she bit out. The edge returned to her voice as she remembered all the reasons she was even here. All the things she'd lost because of this man. His soft eyes

and wistful expressions would not reconcile these actions nor the pain he had inflicted, and for what?

Finn's brows twitched, any sorrow and grief slipping away. "If you think I'm bringing you back to Castoria for money, then you don't know me at all."

An iciness wrapped around Cyra, eviscerating any lingering sentimental emotion. "I knew who you *were*, Finn. I've seen a few glimpses of him but little more. So, you're right. I don't know you at all. Not anymore." She extended her arm, presenting the first welt.

Finn stared at her for several long seconds, hostility molding to steely resolve. He said nothing as he worked, leaving Cyra to wonder if their brief truce in the face of pain and survival was over.

Maybe it was for the best.

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Chapter 35

COMPROMISE

Nine Years Ago

"She's waking up," said a familiar voice. *Pippin?*

Cyra lay on a bed, silk sheets cocooning her body against a soft mattress, her head on a pillow. Soap mixed with a floral scent filled her nose as more voices bounced around her wakening consciousness.

"She looks wretched." Definitely Aurelia, thought Cyra as she slowly opened her eyes and found herself surrounded by concerned faces. "Oh, and by wretched," Aurelia added quickly, an overbright smile spreading on her face, "I mean, not too bad considering your near-drowning, and almost bullet-ridden death by mad rebels. Champion cheers, Cyra."

Akira pinned an unamused glare on Aurelia before her own smile forced up the corners of her mouth. "We knew you would be fine." But her worried eyes betrayed the lie.

"Of course she's fine." Nailah's smiling face appeared. "Healer Delia healed your wounds. She's the best field healer in Castoria—no scar left behind."

Someone was clutching her hand, and Cyra followed the arm to find Aedan's face, his mouth set in a hard line, brow knit. "We thought you were dead when we found you."

Something eased in Cyra's chest. Aedan and Akira were all right. *Thank the Ancients.*

She attempted a reassuring smile, certain it looked more pained than assuring. Her sluggish mind failed to form full sentences, the pounding in her temples not helping.

Looking past her hovering friends, Cyra's eyes skirted across the brocade covered walls and lavish decor splayed over every corner of the room. "Am I in the palace?" she asked, voice hoarse and throat terribly dry.

A new voice answered, the comforting sound of her brother: "Welcome home, sister," said Kasian, his tall frame filling the doorway. One of his usual disarming smiles spread across his face, warmth oozing from his presence. It vanished with his next words: "Father is in residence, and he wants to speak with you."

"Father is here?" Cyra bolted upright, immediately regretting the fast action. Her hand pressed against her head as a wave of dizziness clouded her vision.

"You must take it easy," Nailah scolded. "You lost a lot of blood, not to mention the hypothermia and near-drowning. Your body needs time to recover."

By the fresh clothes and royal surroundings, Cyra knew it had been days since the river. Days of rest. Still, her body craved more, a heaviness weighing on every muscle, but if the king was calling, she would answer.

After assuring her friends that she was fine, and swearing many promises of rest and sleep to Nailah, Cyra ushered everyone from the room so she could dress. "We'll talk later," she promised Aedan when he stubbornly refused to leave her side.

A touch of moisture glistened in his eyes as they slipped over her face before he reluctantly released her hand and followed the others out of the room.

Cyra absently wondered how many hours Aedan and her friends had spent at her bedside, fussing over her while she slept. Silently pledging to buy each of them a thoughtful gift and many, many rounds of drinks on their next social venture, she forced herself from the bed.

A maid helped her dress, but even with assistance each small action was a monumental effort, making her feel a thousand years old. Cyra was sweating by the time she emerged, finding Kasian waiting just outside her door—a place she often found her brother growing up, waiting on the threshold of her chambers for his tardy younger sister.

A large ornate mirror dominated the corridor, the brocade walls dripping with gilded finery. The decor was all unchanged since their youth, save for their reflection in the grand mirror. The sight punched an ache of nostalgia through her, the feeling deepening as she took in her wan features and Kasian's visible concern.

A grimacing smile turned up her lips as she attempted a strong front.

I'm fine, her expression hopefully read.

Kasian wasn't convinced, immediately pulling her into a tight embrace. "You scared me half to death, Cyra." The way he said her name struck a weighty chord—barely a whisper, as if he was choking down a sob. Kasian was always so confident, so self-assured. As if he feared nothing. Was rattled by nothing. The unmovable big brother.

The pain in his voice ushered an onslaught of emotions. "I'm tougher than I look," she bit out, barely keeping the corners of her mouth steady.

Kasian only managed a half-hearted chuckle, voice uncharacteristically husky as he said, "What you did out there . . . I'm so proud of you."

The already growing lump in Cyra's throat threatened an embarrassing sob. "I was trained by the best section leader in Castoria." Kasian only stared at her, emotions warring behind his pale-blue eyes. "Come on," she said and nudged his side, knowing if one of them broke, they would both erupt into puddles of tears. "We best not keep the king and queen waiting."

They were only a short distance down the corridor when a child barreled around a corner. "Cousin Cyra!" cried Olaria. "You're awake!" Dressed in breeches, an oversized shirt, and unbuttoned vest, the newly turned eight-year-old clutched a wooden sword. A hastily tied band contained her tawny curls in a loose ponytail, freed wisps framing her face.

A genuine grin squashed the last of Cyra's emotional turmoil, highly amused at her little cousin's less than courtly appearance. "Hello Olaria."

"Can't talk!" The girl scurried down the corridor, swinging her sword, the tip slicing dangerously close to a priceless vase. "I'm avoiding Aunt Zephyrina." A mischievous gleam filled her bright eyes just before she disappeared into a side room. Cyra huffed a laugh, marveling at Oralia's uncanny similarities to her own youthful behavior at that age—indecorous clothes, evading the queen's disapproval. *Never change, Olaria.*

"Are Mathus and Thea here as well?" Cyra asked Kasian.

"Just Mathus. He arrived with Father yesterday." There was a severity in his tone that suggested there was more to be shared, and none of it good.

They neared one of the reception rooms, voices loud enough to reach Cyra's ears.

"This is the second time, Razi, the *second time* rebels have infiltrated our lands and attacked our people." Her mother's voice was clear and commanding, tone holding just a touch of deference. "Mathus and I covered up the last time, but Castorian citizens are dead now."

"I see we are well-timed," said Kasian, announcing their presence as he and Cyra strode into the room. Nicknamed the Green Room for its green brocade-lined walls, it sported an opulent theme exuding all things indulgent leisure. The mood of the three present occupants, however, was anything but indulgent or leisure.

The queen claimed Cyra's attention first, and when mother and daughter locked eyes, something moved across the queen's features—relief, love, joy? The sentiments were out of place on her mother. The uncharacteristic feelings vanished quickly, replaced with her usual mixture of impatience and businesslike pretension.

Mathus greeted the royal siblings with a wide, welcoming smile, his too-tight lips failing to hide the stress-born weariness hanging over him like a dark cloud.

The third figure, however, struck Cyra with her own helping of stress.

In his early fifties, Razi Byrogan looked so much like his son. He and Kasian shared the same dark olive-toned skin and thick chocolate brown hair—albeit the king's locks were streaked with gray, and Kasian's kissed with cinnamon. Their tall and lean frames were a near match, save for Kasian's youthful athleticism. The most striking difference was their eyes. The umber brown of Razi's large, discerning eyes shone gold or bronze under certain light. They were always intense, and almost always inscrutable.

"Daughter," Razi greeted, features softening into an almost kind expression. "We're relieved you're all right."

"And if she wasn't?" the queen snapped, her sharp blue eyes darting from the king to Cyra. The agitation in her mother's tone was a jarring contrast to her father's calm, distant demeanor. "If rebels killed our daughter, would we go to war then?"

"Seven hells, sister." Uncle Mathus threw up his hands in exasperation. "You would start a war over the actions of a small band of radicals?" The

frustrated shaking of his head hinted this was not the first time he had conveyed this question today.

“Parliament is ready to sanction such a declaration and send reinforcements to Saraneca, Orlena, and Mauroi,” Zephyrina said. “All we need now is approval from the king.” She looked at her husband expectantly.

Mathus ran a hand through his thinning hair. “The cost, the soldiers, the sheer vastness of the colonies. All for what? A handful of traitors? Sister—”

“How do we know there are only a handful?” Her mother’s perfectly plucked eyebrows rose toward her hairline.

“I have been in contact with colonial representatives,” Mathus said. “On behalf of the colonies, Idris Mahano and Adonis North officially denounce the actions of Nation of Clovia.”

“Rhetoric.” Zephyrina waved a dismissive hand. “If we do not answer this attack with action, then we appear weak.”

Zephyrina and Mathus battled around points for several more minutes while the king watched in calculated silence. “What do you think, Kasian?” Mathus asked during a ceasefire.

“I think,” Kasian began in a steady voice, “that we should strive for peace—listen to the colonies’ grievances and adjust accordingly.”

Cyra gave Kasian an approving smile. “I agree with Kasian.”

The queen volleyed venomous glares between them. “Their attacks must be punished, not rewarded. Compromise will only encourage more bloodshed. They will seize upon our weak response and exploit it.”

“Seeking peace is not a weak response,” Mathus said, sounding exhausted. “We cannot punish the whole for the crimes of the few.”

“The crimes of the few embolden the many,” the queen clipped. “I advise the systematic disarmament and destruction of all colonial firearms and explosive devices through a full military occupation.”

A low groan crawled out of Mathus’s throat. “What you suggest is not only impossible, but the attempt would only fan the flames of the rebel-minded—turning a small rebellion into a devastating war. A war we could lose.”

The queen chuckled at this statement, but when no one else shared the sentiment, she straightened, her mirthless smile vanishing as she faced the king. “Husband, we tried peace.”

“Not hard enough,” Mathus urged.

King Razi regarded his wife, gaze drifting around the room before at last resting on his two children. Whatever rolled through his mind was a mystery, his stony façade unmovable. “What do you suggest, Mathus?” he asked, his eyes never leaving them.

Mathus straightened, the ghost of a smile turning up his lips as if he had just won a great battle. “I’d like to write to Idris Mahano and call for a summit of sorts. I will personally attend, representing the Crown, along with the Speaker of Parliament. If no compromise is reached . . .” His eyes flickered to a fuming Zephyrina. “Only then do we prepare for war.”

“Very well,” the king said. “A final compromise—then we prepare for war.”

***

“Are you awake?” whispered a small voice. Cyra’s eyes snapped open to meet Olaria’s wide pale-blue eyes. “Were you having a bad dream?” the girl asked.

The truth? Yes, Cyra was having a bad dream—the same wretched dream she’d had every night for the last week. Dreams of drowning in frigid water, gasping for untenable breath as blood leaked from her body. Of Jeremiah’s leering smile as he watched her die. Of Aedan and Akira lying dead in a blanket of rotting leaves.

Jeremiah was dead. Cyra was safe. Aedan and Akira were fine.

To Oralia’s question, Cyra answered with an unconvincing “No.” She rolled onto her back and stared up at the stucco ceiling. A beam of bright light cut through the room, hinting at a late morning hour. Another long sleep. Nailah had said fatigue was normal. Cyra groaned all the same, feeling trapped by her own physical weakness. A sentiment made worse by her mother’s orders. She was to receive no more visitors, claiming the need for undisturbed rest. Ridiculous. Isolation was her mother’s punishment for siding with Uncle Mathus.

Cyra’s twenty-first birthday was two weeks away, and she had been grounded like a petulant child.

Olaria grinned. “Come explore the gardens with me!”

“Very well, but we need to be quiet.” Though Oralia wasn’t a visitor and her mother had not expressly forbidden venturing outside, Cyra would rather avoid an argument over technicalities.

The eight-year-old nodded eagerly. After Cyra dressed, she took Olaria's hand and crept through the palace as if about to rob the place, peeking behind corners and darting across corridors on tiptoes.

Open air greeted the girls with a crisp breeze that hinted at winter's almost arrival. The sun was bright, unbroken light offering welcome spots of warmth across the vast grounds. Oralia immediately raced toward the hedge maze, tawny ponytail bouncing with her steps.

"Olaria!" Cyra called, pushing her body as fast as she could. Not fast enough, as the girl disappeared into the hedges, which were little more than mangled sticks and dried leaves this time of year. "Olaria, where—" Cyra crashed into a broad chest, nearly toppling backwards. She recognized his scent before she met his eyes.

"Aedan," she breathed, just saving her balance.

Seven hells, he looked good: freshly shaven, royal blue coat perfectly suiting his sandy-blond hair and sun-kissed complexion. His blue-green eyes danced across her face before sliding a sly look over his shoulder. "Anyone see you?"

Olaria poked her head from around a hedge. "Nope. Now pay up." She extended her hand toward Aedan expectantly, and he surrendered a box of chocolates.

"Quite the little plotters," Cyra said, squashing a smile once she realized their ploy.

"I needed an accomplice to liberate you from the palace." Aedan winked at Olaria, who did not return the gesture, too enraptured with her payment. Seemingly satisfied, she gave Aedan a quick nod before scurrying away, clutching the box of chocolates like a mouse with stolen cheese. "That girl is going to be trouble when she grows up."

"She's trouble now," Cyra laughed. "As are you, contributing to the delinquency of children to steal a date."

Aedan gave an unrepentant shrug. "Are you disappointed?"

"No," Cyra said, touching his cheek.

Excitement ignited across his features, lips parting as if considering a kiss. Instead, he grasped her hand and led her away from the hedge maze toward the pond's edge, right past the spot where they had shared a kiss—had almost shared everything. Cyra steadied a casual mask over her expression, hoping the crisp air might cool the faint burn in her cheeks as memories from that night filled her mind. By Aedan's pointed side glance,

he knew exactly what she was trying not to think about—and failing miserably.

They continued around the pond, venturing to the base of a circular structure within the gardens. Surrounded by a colonnade, the interior held a single semi-enclosed room complete with a couch and area rug.

“I worried it might be too cold for an outdoor picnic.” Aedan gestured up the short steps. Just inside the colonnade lay a picnic spread, along with a bottle of white wine.

They settled together on the blanket in front of the couch. Aedan commandeered the task of opening the wine while Cyra admired the view through the open columns. The surrounding foliage stood in mid-transformation from fall to winter, still awaiting Tarrinth’s first snow. A smattering of leaves clung to the spindly branches of the almost bare trees, deep browns and purples twinkling in the breeze.

It was beautiful—the old clearing away so the new can grow. Peaceful. The wine was equally as lovely, rich with notes of vanilla, apple, and citrus enchanting her taste buds.

“The wine is delicious,” Cyra said after a sip, admiring its pale gold color.

“Good,” Aedan said. “I hoped to ask Akira about your favorite vintage. When I dropped by your apartment, I walked in on her and Kasian having sex.”

Cyra spat out her next sip. “Ugh! Now that image is in my brain.”

“It was far more uncomfortable in person, I promise you.” He swallowed a large gulp of wine. “By your reaction, I’m assuming you knew about them?”

Nose yet to de-scrunch, Cyra said, “It’s been a couple of months. They swore me to secrecy.”

“Do your parents have something to do with said secrecy?”

“Seeing as how they weren’t exactly thrilled with . . . my last relationship.” She was so close to saying Finn’s name, but all instincts screamed to banish it from any discourse. “Kasian is their heir. Akira is Clovian-born. It shouldn’t matter—certainly doesn’t to me.”

But it does to the king and queen. The unspoken fact hung in the air, neither needing to say the uncomfortable truth aloud.

Akira and Kasian took the secrecy of their relationship so seriously that sometimes Cyra forgot they were dating. Forgot one of her best friends and

her brother were, well, what Aedan found them doing in their apartment.

"I worry for them sometimes" was all Cyra said, staring into her wine glass. "I worry about a lot of things. My mind has been a swirl of *what-ifs* these last weeks." She swung her gaze to Aedan, relishing this break from her mired solitude.

Cyra expected a commiserating smile. Instead she found only severity.

"I need to tell you something." A long, heavy breath tumbled past his lips, as if he was about to confess something grievous. "Along the river—I found you first." Shame filled his eyes before he quickly dropped her gaze. "You were lying in the water. I thought you were dead. And I—I just stood there, frozen at the nightmare before my eyes. Akira shoved past me, hauled you to shore, and breathed life into your lungs. You were so cold—lips blue." He shook his head, looking absolutely tortured. "She saved your life while I found you a blanket like—like—"

Surprise shook Cyra at this admission, not just Aedan's guilt but his revelations about Akira . . . just how close Cyra had been to her last breath. *Seven hells.* "I was cold, and you gave me a life-saving blanket. That's not nothing." But her attempt at levity failed miserably. Aedan didn't raise his head. Didn't move. Certainly did not look at her. "I'm here, Aedan." She squeezed his hand. "I'm all right."

He wrenched up his head. "But I didn't—"

"It doesn't matter." Cyra cupped his face with both hands and said, "I'm here—you're here," as much to herself as to Aedan.

His throat bobbed as he scoured her face. She could sense that he wanted to say those three little words. They were there, hanging on his lips and shining through his features, but he held them back, as if still remembering her rejection.

Well, at least there was one thing she could remedy today.

Closing the gap between them, Cyra slanted her mouth over his and hoped he would hear what she couldn't say: *I'm not running away, not this time*. She traced a hand up his neck, burying her fingers in the soft waves of his hair. He tasted of wine and autumn spices.

With each slide of their tongues and press of their lips, the tightness ebbed away from his body, the emotional weight of the past few weeks—past few *months*—fading away, replaced with something else. Something exciting.

Aedan leaned into the kiss. He wanted her, desperately, and yet she sensed just the hint of hesitation, his hands remaining innocently at his sides.

That wouldn't do.

Cyra groped clumsily for the buttons on his coat, but they proved uncooperative and then—*clink*. Her knee smashed into the half-full wine glasses, cleverly knocking both of them over and dampening Aedan's trousers. *Awesome*.

The temporary spell broke along with their kiss, and they quickly extricated themselves to stop the spilled wine from causing any more damage.

Embarrassment flushed her cheeks. "Here," she said and ushered Aedan onto the couch, "sit and don't move."

Aedan's brows twitched but did as he was told, seating himself on the couch as Cyra cleared away the mess. Once the soiled blanket and emptied glasses were put aside, she stood before him, studying him from head to toe.

He really was beautiful. Classically handsome, like a sculpture or a storybook prince.

Aedan remained silent during her perusal; mild confusion mixed with amusement the only subtle revelations of his thoughts. After a full ten seconds, she scratched her chin, sighing as if coming to some grave conclusion. Without uttering a word, she lowered to her knees.

"Cyra—"

"Nope, no arguments, your trousers must come off."

"If you insist" was all he said as she tugged off his boots.

With each layer removed, Cyra's heart beat a touch faster. She knew where she wanted this to go. And the building desire in Aedan's eyes and rising color to his cheeks more than cheered on her plans.

When her fingers reached the buttons on his trousers, she slowed her progress, coyly brushing her thumb between his legs, and feeling the hardening promise beneath the material.

A muscle in Aedan's jaw ticked, and his fierce gaze locked on her face as the air around them hummed with anticipation. His breaths grew deeper, longer, but he said nothing as she pulled off his trousers and hooked her fingers in the waistband of his undergarments. Again, she indulged in

stroking her palm along his hard length before stripping away the last barrier between them and laying him bare before her.

The sight took her breath away. *Wow* was her only thought as she quickly plotted her next moves. Heat throbbed between her legs when she raised her gaze to find him staring at back at her. So still she wasn't sure he was breathing until he spoke: "What now, Cyra?" He asked it almost like a dare, his brow ticking. *Your move,* the look read.

The corner of her mouth hitched into a conspiratorial smirk. She gently nudged open his legs to kneel between them—eyes performing one more sweep of heated admiration. Then she brought her lips to him, over him, sliding down his length and taking everything.

A satisfying groan ripped from Aedan's throat, his hands gripping the cushion edges as he fell back against the couch, the sound going right to her core.

She explored thoroughly, relishing every hitched breath, every squirm, rendering him completely at her mercy. Maybe she should finish him like this, and leave a promise for more. But as quickly as the thought crossed her mind, her body screamed in protest: *Don't you dare.*

"Cyra," Aedan panted, board chest rising and falling as her tongue worked over every magnificent inch of him. "You're going to have me undone." The words came out stunted, as if he waged his own battle over halting her sinful administrations.

She released him, a coy smile curling across her swollen lips. "Is that a problem?"

"It's a serious problem." Aedan leaned forward, reaching for her with trembling hands. "I'll not be undone before you."

The gravel in his voice set her blood on fire, her smile widening as she stretched to her feet—still quite clothed. Something to be remedied. Some of her earlier awkwardness returned as she stripped off her boots and clothes. Her still on the mend body set her balance off kilter and undermined any hope of preserving her sensual coyness, but the hunger in Aedan's eyes only burned brighter with each relinquished item.

A chill snaked down Cyra's spine once she wore only a shirt and her underthings, the crisp air assaulting her heated skin. Warmth enclosed, Aedan's formidable body at her back. His hands reached around her chest, freeing the last buttons of her shirt. He had already shed the rest of his

clothes, standing wholly naked in his all glory. And he was fucking glorious, she observed after stealing an indulgent glance over her shoulder.

Aedan kissed the nape of her neck, his bare chest against her back, the promise between his legs pressing hard and hot against her backside. His left hand tugged her shirt down, lips trailing along her spine and skirting over the spot in her left shoulder blade where a bullet had wedged into her flesh not two weeks ago.

A shiver snaked through her body.

After her shirt dropped to the ground, Aedan's callused hands roamed her body, the pulse between her legs beating eagerly, begging for the attention of his touch.

She was left frustrated as Aedan explored everywhere but where she needed him most. It took all of her control not to usher him back to the couch and sink onto him as she should have done by the pond months ago, as she should have done many times hence.

The temptation vanished as Aedan scooped Cyra into his arms, sending a pleasant whoosh through her stomach. He laid her on the couch, claiming her lips as his finger hooked into the waistband of her underthings. He dragged the material down before prying his mouth away so he could drink in her naked body.

As Cyra lay over the wide cushions, a tight ball of nerves barreled through her insides. She was tempted to cover herself as Aedan's eyes devoured her. "You're lovely, Cyra," he said, attention resting on her face.

Her heart pounded a thunderous chorus against her ribs, desperate for his mouth somewhere, anywhere, on her body.

He obliged.

Achingly slowly, Aedan inched onto the couch, brushing his lips over the sensitive inside of her right leg. After dragging his tongue along her inner thigh, he spread her open. Again, she fought the nervous impulse to stop him. To cover herself out of embarrassment or modesty. She resisted, want too overwhelming to be cowed by bashfulness.

She felt his breath first, coaxing her legs to spread wider, heartbeat drumming in wild abandon. Then, at last, his tongue.

"Fuck," she breathed, eyes squeezing shut as her body tensed. Any sense of nerves or shyness vanished from her mind, fingers kneading into the couch cushions.

The working of Aedan’s tongue was too intense for description. Bolts of pleasure spiraled every which way, almost overwhelming—no, definitely overwhelming. Every time he reached the apex of her thighs, a moan fell from her lips. He concentrated on that divinely blessed bud as if unlocking a riddle, each flick of his tongue uncovering a new secret.

Cyra’s body crashed toward shattering if he wasn’t careful.

And he wasn’t remotely careful.

Relax, she told herself, but when he plunged a finger inside of her, there was no relaxing. Cyra gasped against the dual sensations, her writhing body an inferno, threatening to combust. And with a whimpering cry, she surrendered. The intensity of crashing sensations claimed her body, her mind, her everything. She was completely undone.

But far from finished.

Stealing a few stalling breaths, Cyra oriented her mind, eyes blinking open. “You’re in big trouble,” she rasped through a shuddering breath.

He gave her a taunting smile. “Am I?”

Finally catching her breath, she sat up, hauling Aedan to sit on the couch. “I thought we’d finish together.” Rising to her knees, she straddled his lap.

“I’m a gentleman—ladies first.”

“A gentleman?” Cyra arched a brow as her eyes drifted down to his hand, now curving around her breast, his thumb grazing her peaked nipple. She felt him twitch between her legs, his cock so tantalizingly close to the heat pooled at her core that it must be maddening.

“A beautiful, naked woman is perched on my lap,” he said, a wolfish gleam lighting his eyes. “Touching your breast is the most innocent desire crossing my mind at the moment.”

“And what is the least innocent desire crossing your mind?” As Cyra said the words, she ran her palm down his length, drawing a low moan from his lips. She could feel his muscles tense, clearly taxing all his self-control not to twist her around and bury himself inside her.

Good. She wanted him on the edge of madness just before she gave him everything. It was only fair.

And so she did, lifting her hips and poising him at her entrance before sinking down—down, down, down. Her body claiming the full length of him. A pinch of tightness stalled her next move as she let her body adjust. It had been a while and, well, Aedan wasn’t small.

He didn’t move at first, only leaned forward, lips finding the curve of her neck. With one hand on her hip, the other still cupped around her breast, he persuaded her body to relax.

The kisses and achingly tender touches coaxed an ease through her tense muscles, her hips rolling of their own accord, hands launching their own quest of discovery. She explored the dips and planes of his chest, fingers following the twisting hair down his abdomen. She traced the fresh scar in his side with one hand, Aedan’s souvenir from their forest venture—a reminder of his own brush with death. A reminder of how much time they’d wasted.

There would be no more wasting time.

Cyra leaned into this moment, into this man, their bodies moving in perfect unison, their ragged breathes entwining. One hand laced with his against the couch, the other gliding around his back, her nails digging into his flexing muscles. Every touch, every kiss he gave with rising urgency, feasting on her body as if starved.

Pleasure firmly reset from its prior explosion, Cyra drove her hips with reanimated vigor, riding this gorgeous man, hungrily chasing those body-shattering sensations regathering between her legs with each slide of his cock against her inner walls.

Maybe she was a little starved too.

When Aedan’s name cracked from her throat, his muscles tensed, as if he battled the internal forces tearing him apart. She wickedly encouraged his torture, moaning his name in plea after plea as if begging him to come apart.

“Fuck,” he breathed, gripping her hips as his head arced backward, the knot in his throat bobbing.

On the next thrust he found that innermost spot and Cyra lost all control. When his mouth closed over her breast and his tongue flicked over her nipple, it sent everything right over the edge. And she surrendered to the torrent.

Core muscles tensing, she threw herself forward, shattering against him, on top of him, around him. His arms encircled her body, pressing her tighter against his chest as if he needed to feel every tremor of her pleasure. “Aedan,” she rasped a final time as her climax peaked.

It was his final undoing, relinquishing his hard-fought war against the tide of his own passion. The grip on her hips turned almost bruising as he

clumsily captured her lips before spilling into her with his own release.

“By the Ancients, Cyra,” Aedan breathed, shuddering violently, eyes screwed tightly shut and his lips fixed on her neck. He said her name again, moaning the soft word into her damp skin.

Gradually he slowed, and for several seconds nothing but their ragged breaths and the afternoon breeze wrapped around their entangled bodies, minds collectively resetting.

Aedan’s face filled her view, features turning wistful. Again, she sensed those three words rising to his lips. And, again he swallowed them down. She felt both relief and disappointment, quite aware those opposing feelings made no sense. She was ready to start things with Aedan, but not quite ready for love. Not yet, but soon.

The wistfulness in his expression disappeared, mock suspicion evicting any professions of love. “This was your plan all along.”

Cyra’s brows rose and she tucked her bottom lip between her teeth. “My plan?”

“The wine-spilling ploy . . . all to get me in a compromising position.”

“Please, you masterminded this entire venture.” Smirking, she narrowed her eyes in mock scolding. “Bribing a child! Aedan, have you no shame?”

“Very little when it comes to you,” he said, unabashedly admiring her body with hungry eyes and greedy hands, as if she was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld. As if they hadn’t just had sex, as if their bodies weren’t still intertwined.

She smiled. “I’m glad I did not disappoint.”

Something softened in his expression as his gaze returned to her face. “Disappoint? You’re magnificent, Cyra. I’ve always been a little bit in awe of you.”

The intensity in his eyes beckoned fresh warmth to her cheeks, the sensation combatting the sharp chill wrapping around her nakedness. She shifted closer, eager for his warmth, and pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. “Thank you, Aedan.” Her heart swelled, stirring awake a seed of excitement that had nothing to do with the pleasure they just shared. She was finally ready for something more, something great—a forever kind of love.

What if he breaks your heart?

No, she wouldn’t fear this outcome any longer. Would not sabotage this budding happiness again.

What never occurred to Cyra was that she might be the one to break his heart.

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Chapter 36

All of Us

Present

Someone nudged her shoulder, consciousness dragging her eyelids open with unwelcome efficiency. Cyra glanced around her cage, reluctant to move, her body one giant ache.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Captain—Cyra," Hiram whispered. "The evening meal just began."

Cyra stifled a yawn. She could sleep for days—weeks. "How long before the train leaves to collect the night crew?" she asked, battling to sit upright, tired muscles barking in protest.

"One hour, two at most."

One hour. One hour to free themselves of this wretched place. One hour, one small crystal shard, and one haphazard plan that already went to shit once. Not ideal.

"We could wait until tomorrow," Hiram said as if reading her thoughts. "Until you're stronger, or you and Finn could escape—"

"I'm as well as I'll ever be for this venture, Hiram," Cyra said. With her external wounds healed, nearly six hours of rest, and water combined with the several fist-sized pieces of stale bread she forced down her throat, she felt . . . Well, she felt like a battered shell of a human. Still, better than the whimpering husk she was this morning. "We're leaving tonight—all of us."

They just needed a little luck. A metaphorical bone tossed their way.

The sound of a door unlocking echoed through the space. In the other adjoining cell, a sleeping Finn bolted awake, startled by the noise. Cyra frowned at the darkened figure entering the dungeon. Hiram said they'd be left alone until morning. So, what was this?

Marvin.

The corners of her mouth twitched—oh Marvin, you predictable parasitic pig. She had wanted a bone, and this vile villain just might grant her wish.

A series of muffled curses spilled from Hiram's lips, his face paling at the entering henchman—correction, *henchmen*. Marvin brought a friend with him. Two bones. Perfect.

"No, no, no," Hiram said with gathering panic. "I didn't think—not to you."

The words drained all gleeful anticipation from Cyra as realization quickly struck. "The guards have come here like this before?" Her stomach churned at what she was asking—what she already knew by the hauntingly grim expression seizing Hiram's features. He only managed a nod.

Lana and Minra.

Icy fury drove through her veins, but she forced herself to focus. "Do they come into the cell?" she whispered. "Are there more guards posted elsewhere?"

Hiram swallowed, looking utterly miserable. "Usually, one locks the other in the cell. There'll be two more on watch just outside the dungeons—most of the times they'd . . . take turns."

Take turns. The words burned through Cyra, stirring the recently consumed contents of her stomach. She shoved down the sickening feeling, replacing her nausea with pure, unfettered rage. "Four?" she said through gritted teeth. Hiram nodded.

Something dark stirred within her, something not felt for some time—the desire to kill, to rip a human soul to pieces in righteous anger. At least four would die tonight.

"What do you mean 'take turns'?" Finn said. "What is this? Why are they . . ." And then horror bloomed across his face. "No," he growled, jumping up from his cot in sudden panic. "No, no, no, you can't do this!" He clutched the bars of his cell, voice raising to a shout at the approaching men.

Finn, Cyra wanted to scold, but Marvin and his friend were too close. She needed to look afraid. The guards perceived her as a nonthreat—her reputation overrated or body too weakened to put up much fight.

It was always nice to be underestimated.

The encroaching brute did not carry a weapon—no visible gun or blade on his person. Interesting. Marvin's friend, however, carried both—his revolver aimed into Cyra's cell, either with the intent to dissuade escape or encourage cooperation. Most likely both. Strapped to his boot was a comically large dagger. From the curve of the handle, she might guess a hunting knife—something used to carve up large game. *Perfect*.

"Royce wants her as his bride," Finn said as Marvin shoved an iron key to the lock on Cyra's cell.

Shut up, Finn!

Too late.

"Perhaps we should listen to the Syphon, Marvin," the revolver-carrying man said. "This one is different from the others. Royce wants her for himself."

"Captain Roderick promised to cover for us," Marvin said confidently. "He's keeping the governor, his nephew, and the doctor occupied in the ballroom. We have an hour."

"I don't know, Marvin. Maybe—"

"Maybe you can wait outside," Marvin barked over his shoulder. "I'm owed this."

Yes, you are. Cyra welcomed the wave of sizzling wrath down her spine as she scurried backward over the cot. Pulling her knees against her chest, she attempted to make herself look small. Meek. She would act as prey to this stalking wolf, right before she clawed out his innards.

Marvin's eyes gleamed with anticipation, her ruse working—too well.

"You're making a huge mistake," Finn said.

Was that a tremor in his voice? The sound almost broke Cyra's concentration as her hands curled around the cot's flimsy metal frame. She had already situated her ring and crystal shard to her right hand, ready to unleash.

Marvin tossed the keys through the cell bars to his friend, who turned the lock with a resounding *clank*, trapping predator and prey together. Then the cocky fuck gave Cyra a dark smile.

Enjoy your last minutes, you feckless turd.

She felt Finn’s panicked gaze, his eyes begging her to cast—to attack, to defend—but she would not waste a precious cast on *dear* Marvin. He deserved so much less.

The ogre’s hulking figure filled her entire view as he inched toward the cot, a perfect shield for any would-be gunshots. Cyra masked her rage, exuding nothing but fear.

Just a little closer.

The hapless brute obliged, crawling over the cot toward her. “If you cooperate, I’ll make your time here far more pleasant.”

“I’d rather chew on broken glass,” she spat. In one fluid motion, Cyra lifted her braced body up from the cot and kicked her foot. Her bare heel connected with the knob in the center of his throat, the force driving into his neck muscles.

The effect was immediate.

Crashing backward, Marvin grasped at his throat, a single wheezing cough the only sound the damaged chords could make. A punch followed her kick, smashing into the man’s broad nose, breaking cartilage with a satisfying crunch. Blood gushed from both nostrils.

With no time to celebrate, she jumped over Marvin’s floundering bulk. She threw her hand out with a cast. Knifelike ice shot between the bars of her cell, plunging into revolver-man’s neck before he could even so much as blink.

Cyra raced forward, snatching the guard’s waistcoat and hauling him closer so his head collided with the bars with a resounding *clank*. She needed those keys. With a hard yank, she assisted gravity’s pull and snagged the keys from his clammy hand as he fell.

Ignoring the liquid-choked gasps, Cyra unlocked the cell door and stepped free. Miraculously, the gasping man still lived, teetering on his knees, revolver limp in his hand. She kicked the weapon away, sending it clattering across the stone floor.

The crash of metal against stone was louder than expected. *Ancients’ idiot.*

Grinding her teeth, she grasped the hilt of the hunting knife just before the dying guard dropped to his stomach, gurgling sounds going silent. She returned to her cell, to a recovering Marvin, now managing several gulping breaths as he rested on the cot, his back to Cyra. On the balls of her feet, she prowled toward her victim. Without hesitation, she dragged the long,

curved blade across the chords of his neck, slicing into flesh until she felt bone.

“Rot in hell, rapist bastard,” she spat.

It was all over in a matter of moments. But just as she feared, the noise drew the attention of the outside lookouts, key turning the door lock and announcing their arrival.

Shit.

Holding her breath, she snatched the key still poised in her cell’s lock and tossed it to Finn. She didn’t look at him, didn’t look at anyone as she leapt over the body of the fallen guard and raced toward the dungeon door right as it started to creak open. She couldn’t hesitate, not again. If one shot fired in this room, they were all caught. This solitary chance at freedom over and done with no more Marvins, no more bones, and no more siphoning crystals.

The point jabbing into Cyra’s finger assured her there was at least one remaining cast left in the elemental fragment. Her last strike. Pulse racing, she plastered herself next to the opening door as an outstretched pistol entered first.

She lunged, catching the guard by the wrist before throwing her weight into his elbow. The limb hyperextended with a satisfying—*crack!* The arm broke, his hand letting go of the firearm as an agonized cry tore past the man’s lips. He bent double, presenting her with a clear view of the second guard.

Hiram was correct: just two guards. *Perfect.*

A ball of casted fire engulfed the second guard’s hand, forcing him to drop his gun. Dust pooled against Cyra’s finger—her crystal shard gone. No matter. The second guard made the mistake of trying to extinguish the fire licking up his sleeve instead of focusing on the greater threat. She plunged the stolen hunting knife up into the soft underside of the man’s chin.

A muffled groan from the first guard recaptured her attention. He was on the ground, clutching his broken arm, and bumbling toward the dropped pistol. Another mistake.

After wrenching the blade free of her fresh kill, Cyra leapt toward the crawling man, stabbing once, twice, a third time, knife sinking deep into his lower back.

The guard collapsed.

Cyra scooped up the unclaimed gun. Pulse thundering in her ears, she allowed herself a single gulping breath, but her anxious heart wouldn't allow her any reprieve. Their precious hour was ticking away.

Finn drew up to her side, lips parting as he surveyed the carnage—one guard lying face down, his entire back a shredded mess of red. The other guard lay crumbled within the doorway, blood pooling from the hole in his jaw.

"Help me pull the guards inside a cell," she said, ignoring the metallic stench of blood assaulting her nose.

Finn answered with an astonished look, eyes wide as if he didn't recognize her. He wouldn't. The person who brutally claimed these four lives died in the war. This hellish place had resurrected this phantom from the grave—just for now. Just for tonight.

Patience thinning at his delayed reaction, Cyra grasped the wrists of one of the dead guards and hauled his corpse into her abandoned cell.

Finally, Finn snapped out of his momentary trance, assisting with the gruesome task. "Free the others and meet me next door," she said, barely sparing Finn a glance as she claimed the loose set of keys next to the nearest guard's body and darted out of the dungeon. All she could think was hurry. Their window for escape closing with every breath.

She found an adjoining door, trying two keys before finding success. After stealing a nearby torch off the wall, she marched inside, entering a laboratory of sorts. Jars full of discolored liquids filled the many shelves lining the walls. Tubes, weights, vials, and other instruments crowded a central table. Cabinets and a writing desk were set against the far wall. She began her search there, desperate to find the crystal stash.

Finn soon joined her quest, opening drawers, and rummaging through cabinets.

"Here!" Finn whispered after a minute or so, staring into a drawer. "I see why they want my help." A frown sketched across his brow as he analyzed the contents.

Cyra's heart sank as she looked over his shoulder—three measly elemental crystals, three evolution, and one cloudy time crystal. A meager stash indeed, but it was better than nothing. She insisted Finn take the black time crystal while she strapped one of the elementals to her forearm with a strip of cloth.

An immediate buzz worked up her arm, the welcome energy filling her entire body. The feeling revived her fading bloodlust, and she stared at the red crystal, wondering what additional havoc she might reap against the vile creatures who inhabited this castle.

Specifically, two vile creatures.

And then an insane idea sparked, spreading like wildfire, her rage gladly fanning the flames. “Finn, I want you to take Hiram and the others through the castle to the train,” she said, before reason could change her mind. “I’m going after Royce and Kade.”

“Wait, what?”

She ignored both the question and the startled look on Finn’s face, allowing anger and adrenaline to fuel her next steps. A chance at vengeance was just too tempting. And it blocked out everything else, leaving her only seeing red.

It was time Royce and Kade paid for their crimes.

She was almost to the doorway when a hand clamped around her arm, wrenching her around. “Cyra, you cannot go after Royce and Kade,” Finn said, staring at her as if she had gone mad. Maybe she had.

“Watch me,” she said and jerked out of his grasp, but Finn didn’t give up, grabbing her shoulders and slamming her against the doorjamb.

He was close to her face, a breath apart, intense eyes boring into hers. “If you go after them, you’re not leaving this swamp.”

“I don’t care,” she bit back, and she didn’t. Happy to give her life if only to take theirs, to bring an ounce of justice for the lives they stole.

Finn gaped at her. “Cyra—”

“You don’t know what they did,” she said, emotion slipping into her voice, “the breadth of their crimes.” Her hands shook as she thrashed against Finn’s hold. But he wouldn’t budge, his strong arms keeping her caged in the doorway. “The *Windstorm*—”

“I know,” Finn said more gently, amber eyes softening. His voice calmed to a whisper as he said it again: “I know.”

The look on his face made everything inside of her go still.

The corners of her mouth trembled as her chest became painfully tight. She felt the sudden and overwhelming urge to throw herself into his arms and cry about everything she had lost. All the parts of her soul destroyed by tragedy and death. But she couldn’t. Not now. Not when justice was at her fingertips.

“Kade was there. He did it,” she rasped, swallowing the sob clawing up her thickening throat. “Please, Finn.”

“Vengeance is not worth your life.” There was a plea in his voice, the sound so close to faltering all her fast-forming plans.

“Yes, it is!” She pounded a fist on his bare chest, furious tears pricking at her eyes. She would not be deterred, not by him. Not by that stupid look on his face. She clung harder to her righteous fury, but it was already slipping away, the fire in her veins cooling with every trembling inhale.

Quiet steps filled the antechamber as Hiram and the others filed out of the dungeon. “Is it worth theirs?” Finn asked her calmly, penetrating gaze unbudging. “We need everyone fighting their way out of this hellhole, or we’re not going to succeed. It’s all of us or none of us, Cyra. What do you choose?”

Hiram’s brow knit as he glanced between Finn and Cyra. “We follow your lead, Captain,” he said, his warm features full of hope.

It broke Cyra, pouring ice water over her fading anger. When she closed her eyes, a flash of the burning barn blazed brightly in her consciousness, the eternal reminder of the time she let vengeance cost innocent lives. Not again. *Not. Again.*

Inhaling a quaking breath, she opened her eyes. “All of us,” she breathed, allowing Finn to see the wrath leach from her face.

He stepped backward, warily monitoring her expression as if half-expecting her just to take off and relaunch her quest for revenge.

She didn’t. Vengeance would have to wait.

After distributing the crystals and stolen firearms, the group worked their way through the castle. The patrolling guards who could be subdued with a silent cast or blade were subdued. They hid their bodies in hopes it would delay the inevitable alarm from being raised.

With fourteen people stalking through the twilight lit castle, even a few precious minutes meant the difference between salvation and death.

Miraculously, they reached a walled courtyard with the alarm yet to sound, gathering in an archway, not twenty yards from freedom.

This was it, the final breach before a mad dash to the rail bridge.

Dusty-pink light kissed the sky, the sun well set, elongating shadows swallowing both person and structure. It was hard to tell how many men patrolled the crenellated ramparts. Cyra spotted at least three backlit figures, rifles at the ready.

“We run,” Finn said. “If we wait any longer, we’ll be facing more fire from above.”

He wasn’t wrong. Still, if they darted across the open courtyard, they’d present themselves as ripe for the plucking. Not all of them would reach the other side. Some would fall. Some would die.

All of us, she silently vowed as another reckless idea took root. “Use your time-cast wisely, Finn. I’ll see you soon.” She glimpsed his confused frown, heard the first word form on his lips, but she was already sprinting along the courtyard’s shadows.

If she couldn’t claim vengeance tonight, then she would give the souls who had suffered here the best possible chance of escape.

Cyra began scaling the wall, the gaps between stones just accommodating her toes and fingertips. She was grateful for not wearing shoes, certain they would not fit into the narrow openings. She ate her unspoken words seconds later when her big toe jabbed into a too-small wedge, quite certain she just took off her nail.

By all the Ancients burning backsides, she hated climbing.

“Escape!” shouted someone. “The prisoners have escaped!”

Seven shitty hells. Cyra was still feet from the ramparts when a gunshot blasted a hole in the stone just next to her cheek, shattering pebbles and mortar into her face. *Fuck*.

She worked her hands and legs faster, the chaotic climb inflicting more jabbed toes and broken nails. Continued gunshots echoed across the courtyard. Returning fire from Hiram and the others echoed from below. She swung herself up and over the wall, encountering her first foe faster than expected—practically landing on top of the surprised guard.

He raised his rifle, aiming at Cyra—too slow. She blasted the man with a gale-force stream of hot air, throwing him over the wall.

Ignoring the sickening crunch of bones and flesh, she raced along the ramparts, firing ice spears with quick efficiency. Another guard fell, then another. She reached the other side, watching Finn and Hiram lead the escape effort.

The group battled across the open courtyard, shots firing at threats Cyra could not see from her vantage point. No matter, soon she had her hands full.

Over a half dozen rifle-wielding men spilled onto the ramparts, led by none other than Captain Roderick. Separating in opposite directions, the

men prepared to rain their fire down at the escaping prisoners. It would be like shooting fish in a barrel. *Shit*.

Indecision paralyzed Cyra. She could not eliminate all of them at once. But she didn't need to—she just needed to distract them.

Hot vibrating energy burned down her right arm before unleashing across the center of the courtyard like an inferno, alive and angry as it expanded through the air, bathing the darkening courtyard in brilliant yellow-orange.

The effect was exactly what Cyra intended. The surrounding guards' heads jerked up, transfixed by the floating flames. A wind cast cut through the hanging fire, scattering the blaze outward into an expanding cloud.

The effort would not claim lives, fire already weakening as it tumbled over the rampart walls. But the cast achieved her goal, the threat of burning faces forcing the men to duck.

By the time the flames shrank to embers, the escaped prisoners had reached the other side, now running toward the wooden staircase leading up to the rail bridge.

"Cyra!" Finn cried from below.

She glanced over her shoulder where she spied Finn waving for her to join the scattering escapees. Head snapping back toward the recovering guards, she hesitated. If she stayed, she could buy the others time. Die fighting as Cyra Byrogan, Ranger Captain—as she was meant to at Willowwood.

It was why she had wanted to come here in the first place, for this moment. Perhaps fate had granted her a four-year reprieve from death so she could help save the forgotten souls trapped in this place. And in sacrifice, her weary conscience might find absolution. Alleviate the crushing guilt every time she closed her eyes and saw the burning barn.

"Cyra!" Finn shouted her name again, but she was already fighting, casting ice and flame at the flurry of encroaching men.

Captain Roderick barreled forward. "She's mine!" he cried, a greedy gleam in his eyes as he pointed a gun at her chest and fired.

The bullet smashed into her body. She slammed into the wall, the force knocking the breath from her lungs, but she didn't need to breathe, pouring all her energy into her casts. An ice shard speared into Roderick's hand, sending his weapon flying, another grazed his arm, and then . . . nothing.

Red mist shimmered across her vision—her crystal was dust. *Shit*.

“She’s mine,” Captain Roderick growled again, pure determination in his eyes as he produced a blade. He went in for the kill like a man possessed.

The hunting knife was Cyra’s only remaining weapon. Perhaps, if she could just—

Whatever hope her mind attempted to manifest eviscerated with Roderick’s first slash. She managed to defend, barely, the bullet wound beneath her clavicle roaring agony through her entire right shoulder.

Roderick easily sent her blade flying away, leaving her disarmed and surrounded.

The Ancients had finally called in her death.

So be it.

Cyra waited for Roderick to slice her open, instead his free hand closed around her throat and shoved her against the stone wall. “You killed my brother,” he snarled into her face, the bristles of his short beard scratching against her cheek. “Now, I send you to hell.”

“Let’s . . . go . . . together,” she rasped, fading strength just enough to launch herself sideways, arcing her body through a slot in the crenellation.

Surprise shifted over Roderick’s face, and he released his grip—but was far too late to halt his forward momentum as they both sailed over the wall.

As Cyra plummeted toward the stone, she reached for a happy thought —mind desperate for something joyful before her neck snapped.

And yet nothing but panic flooded her veins.

Maybe she wasn’t ready to go after all.

She heard it first, the horrible sound of smashing limbs and breaking bones chased by a strangled moan through shattered teeth. But they weren’t her sounds. They weren’t her bones. She was fine, frozen in midair, two feet from the ground, locked in a time cast.

Finn’s time cast.

The realization whipped through her as an arm wrapped around her waist and hauled her sideways. The time cast released, and her body hurled into a roll, falling energy needing to displace somehow, somewhere.

Soft earth and grass cushioned the force of her fall, Finn’s body tangled with hers as he tried to slow her speed. Grass filled her nose as she landed on her stomach, her heart pounding so loudly that it blotted out all other noise. A biting pain beat across her right shoulder, the bullet wound barking in agonized protest.

“We need to move!” Finn said, yanking Cyra to her feet as gunshots shattered the air.

Adrenaline screamed at her to keep going, that this wasn’t the end, not yet.

Mustering the energy from someplace deep inside she didn’t know existed, she scrambled to her feet, sparing only a brief glance over at Roderick’s crumpled form before chasing after Finn toward the zigzagging steps leading up to the awaiting train.

The last vestiges of twilight leaked from the sky, cloaking the rail bridge and train in near-complete darkness. As Cyra and Finn raced up the first steps, she heard the plodding of scurrying footsteps above her head. The freed Syphons were almost to the platform.

Go! Her heart clamored, but her body slowed against her will, adrenaline not powerful enough to keep her going. She missed the next step, and black clouded her vision as she fell forward, bracing her fall with both hands.

Below her feet, she heard the thud of boots against wood. The pursuing guards had reached the stairs. She and Finn were only halfway to the top.

You’re not going to make it.

Finn grasped her arm, tugging her upward. But every step, every progress won, drained more energy. By the next switchback, Finn was supporting her ever-sagging weight. Blood oozed from her bullet wound, mingling with the sweat and humidity clinging to her body.

You’re not going to make it.

Another ten steps and her legs gave out, her knees cracking against the wooden step.

“Come on, Cyra!” yelled Finn, dragging her forward.

“Just go!” she begged, body shutting down.

You’re not going to make it. The repeating sentiment closed around her, sapping her already tenuous will to go on, their pursuers clawing closer with every breath.

A bloom of heat licked free from Finn’s outstretched arm, and flames cut through the darkening space like a great, fire-breathing beast. The blaze coiled around the lower section of the staircase before collapsing inward, swallowing both stairs and men.

“We’re leaving—*all of us*!” Finn hauled Cyra back to her feet.

With each agonizing step to the train platform, the encroaching night brightened with luminous orange light. Finn's fire had ignited the lower half of the staircase, stopping their would-be assailants . . . and creating a whole new problem.

The steps beneath their feet wobbled as the base of the staircase was engulfed in flames. Twenty feet—twenty more feet!

Cyra's body turned to jelly, sweat pouring down her face.

The wobble of the steps quickly became a violent shaking. She could feel the heat now, flames resuming the failed chase by Royce's guards. Overhead, she spied small puffs of smoke pouring from the engine car's smokestack.

The others had made it. They made it. Relief coursed through her body, further sapping her dwindling resolve to move her feet.

"Cyra, don't you dare stop," Finn snarled into her ear. "Ten more feet."

Ten more feet . . .

The stairs pitched violently. In front of them, the metal hinges attaching the staircase to the train platform shrieked in agonized fury. The entire structure was about to collapse.

Close—they were so tantalizingly close to salvation. And not close enough.

Wood groaned and metal snapped. The stairs and platform separated like yawning jaws, leaving both Cyra and Finn poised on the final steps, watching their destination drift away.

They didn't make it.

Seconds. They were seconds from careening into the swamp.

Finn let go of Cyra, lunging for the platform over the expanding gap. His body just breached the edge to safety. He rolled over and reached back for her, but she was too far from his out stretched hand.

"Jump!" he shouted.

Jump. Grasping for the last wisps of energy left, Cyra leapt through the black. Fire licked at the bare soles of her feet as she stretched toward Finn's waiting grasp.

Everything seemed to slow, body temporarily weightless, the air in her lungs unmoving, heart wedged in her throat. Salvation or death awaited in the next half breath.

Finn's hand closed around her wrist, grip tightening as her body arced forward. Her stomach dropped to her feet, her legs dangling midair as Finn

struggled to hold on.

The collapsing staircase masked his strangled grunts, wailing wood beams fracturing and splintering as the growling inferno dragged the crumbling structure into the swamp's clutches.

Their tense gaze connected through the rising smoke now stinging Cyra's eyes and smothering any would-be scream. A grimace twisted Finn's features, panic spearing his eyes as his hold gave an inch. He didn't have the strength to pull her to safety, sweaty grip only stalling the inevitable. They both knew it.

Cyra readied herself to fall, for the darkness to claim her in the burning mass slowly sinking into the stagnant water. The swamp would have its prize after all.

Mere seconds before she slipped away, Hiram's face suddenly appeared over the edge and his hand caught Cyra, too. Another of the escaped Syphons appeared beside him, then another, all helping to haul her onto the platform.

Not today, swamp. The relieved sentiment flooded Cyra's mind as they pulled her upward, inch by inch. Water blurred her vision, ever-thickening smoke disorienting her overwhelmed senses—hell's last gasp to claim her life.

Her consciousness teetered on a delicate thread as she was dragged closer to safety, feet no longer dangling over the terrifying nothing.

She settled across a flat surface, allowing an exhausted exhale to ease from her lips, consciousness longing to give into black.

"Just a bit further," Finn said.

Cyra groaned at these words, groaned as Finn lifted her into his arms. Her head dropped against his bare chest, his strong grasp oddly comforting.

You made it. You can rest now. And so, she did. Closing her eyes, she let go.

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Chapter 37

Calm Before the Storm

Eight Years Ago

The voluminous layers of Cyra's silver gown swirled as Aedan ushered her into a turn, the glossy fabric catching the brilliant light of the many chandeliers

"You look beautiful tonight," Aedan breathed into her ear as she glided into his arms. "And happy birthday." The comment earned an eye roll. Cyra's birthday was over six months ago. The Crown just wanted an excuse to throw another party.

Anything to distract from the rumblings across the border.

"I do love an excuse to visit this place," she admitted, glancing toward the ballroom's western wall—entirely made of glass that offered a magnificent view of Azuria Bay and its glittering waters.

Tonight's ball launched the summer season, but for Aedan, Cyra, and Akira the event signaled the coming end to their month and a half of leave, a generous amount of time off not all her friends could claim. After completing his second-year of training within the Intelligence Specialty, Fabien had already started a coveted position within the Castorian Intelligence Corps. Nailah and Pippin had also begun their next steps toward their chosen careers of Healer and Builder back in Tarrinth. Cyra should be grateful she was allowed the luxury of travel, should be celebrating.

Except Cyra didn’t feel like celebrating. Tomorrow, Mathus would set out for the extensively planned summit meeting with the Clovian representatives, hoping to reach a truce before the unrest turned to blood—well, more blood.

Fears of war needled at Cyra’s thoughts for months. As much as she tried to stow it all away and enjoy the moment—this moment—worry nipped at her heels.

What if the summit failed? What if peace could no longer be kept?

“Stop,” Aedan whispered into her ear when the song ended. “I can see your stress furrow deepening. Mathus will make Clovia see reason."

A reluctant smile stretched Cyra’s lips. “It’s creepy when you read my thoughts.”

The corner of his mouth hooked as mischief touched his eyes. “I’ll bet you can read my present thoughts.”

Ancients, yes—each more lascivious than the next. “We cannot ditch this party for the things you’re plotting.” She’d never hear the end of it from her mother. “It’s my birthday, after all. Not to mention the fact that our relationship is a secret.”

Well, relatively. Everyone but her parents knew.

“Please,” Aurelia scoffed to Cyra later in the night. “You and Aedan could not be more obvious if you were locking lips on the dance floor while naked.” Tonight, Aurelia was a vision in crimson, ash-blond hair draped in loose curls down her back. “It’s been months. Your brother and your friends know. Why not tell your parents? They’ll be happy about this one.” *Unlike your last boyfriend*, the knowing flash of her green eyes added.

“I know, and that’s why I don’t want to tell them,” Cyra said stubbornly. “The moment my mother learns about Aedan, she will start planning our wedding, followed by the entire rest of our lives.”

“Just marry him, then,” Aurelia said casually, as if telling Cyra to have another glass of wine. “Your mother will stop nagging.”

A breathy laugh passed through Cyra’s lips. “Mothers are born to nag their daughters. If it’s not men, it’s marriage, then it’s children. I just want this for myself—for a little longer, have some measure of autonomy over my life.”

“Autonomy, autonomy . . .” Aurelia tapped her chin as if confused by the word. “Remind me, when is your birthday? Because I could have sworn it was at the end of fall.”

Cyra stifled a vexed-born grumble. “I will tell my mother when I’m ready.”

“In the meantime, she will throw every important young man in the kingdom at you.” Aurelia’s eyes scanned the room, gaze snagging on a target. “Speaking of available and important young men . . .” She excused herself, impressively gliding through the mingling crowd with the elegance of a prancing mare.

And with the hunger of a ravenous wolf, Cyra mused.

“She’s not wrong about you and Aedan,” said Akira, drawing up to Cyra’s side. “I don’t know why you’re stalling.” In a cerulean-blue gown, Akira looked lovely tonight, raven-black hair pulled back, showing off her long, graceful neck.

The comment squished Cyra’s already uneasy insides. “Things are going so well with Aedan. I worry that, if I tell my parents, things might change.”

Akira’s expression tightened. “You don’t think I know how that feels?” She lowered her voice so Cyra needed to lean closer. “I am terrified of your parents finding out about Kas and me.” She shot a leery sideways glance.

Cyra followed her gaze, finding her brother chatting with Aedan. She suppressed a smile at the two men together—her two favorite men in the world. And for a wondrous few seconds she envisioned their future. The couples married, their children playing together. Aedan and Cyra working with Kasian and Akira to make things better for everyone—Castorian and Clovian alike. The four of them entwined in friendship, love, and family.

A beautiful dream.

Akira’s worried sigh cut right through Cyra’s pleasant fantasy. “I know exactly how your parents will react to your brother dating a Clovian-born. Kasian has a rather insane plan.” Her eyebrows crowded together, looking as if she was trying to convince herself of something. “I’m dubious. A rational person would have ended things long ago . . .” She closed her eyes, looking close to tears. “But I can’t, Cyra,” she whispered, eyes cracking open but avoiding contact. “He makes me so happy. I wish he didn’t sometimes. It would be easier.”

Cyra clasped Akira’s hands. “And I think you both deserve each other in the best kind of way.” She hated seeing her friend in such distress with little comfort available, and only impossible realities no one wanted to acknowledge. “I wouldn’t be breathing if it weren’t for you. I’m so glad we

were paired to grow apple trees together back at Wyndfyre.” She squeezed Akira’s hands as she added, “Whatever you decide, I support you.”

Akira dragged her gaze to Cyra’s face, wobbling lips not quite forming a smile.

A laugh traded between Aedan and Kasian, the jovial sound drawing their attention. “For tonight,” Cyra went on, reveling in the sight of their two men together, “let’s imagine whatever we want—the moon, the stars.” She cut a glance toward the glass-paned wall overlooking the moon-kissed bay. “Imagine all our dreams coming true.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Akira said, her wistful tone matching Cyra’s, albeit edged with just the hint of melancholy as if she could not fully commit to this fairytale.

“Cyra, dear” came her mother’s commanding voice, her icy presence carving right through the nice moment between friends.

“Mother,” Cyra greeted with a strained smile. Tonight, the queen wore a pearly white gown, the stark color sliced with a violet-colored sash. Atop her salted hair rested a large pearl- and diamond-encrusted crown. The completed look was neither overly ostentatious nor simple—just royally elegant, and so perfectly Zephyrina Dukane.

“Walk with me.” Her mother’s calm but insistent tone rendered the words more an order than a request. Again, so perfectly her.

Darting an apologetic look to Akira, Cyra reluctantly joined her mother’s side. “Here to wish me happy birthday?”

“Don’t be tedious.” Her mother’s gaze raked over Cyra in quick scrutiny. “You decided to go with the silver gown over the gold, I see. Pity—gold complements your skin tone much better.”

Cyra ground her teeth, searching for some way out of this conversation and conjuring nothing. “Is there something specific you wanted to discuss with me aside from my unwise fashion choices?”

“I’d like you to confirm or deny whether or not you are courting Aedan Fletcher, or else I intend to arrange a few outings before your first ranger assignment.” Her mother was always so impressively casual, especially when dolling out ultimatums.

“Is that a threat, Mother?”

“Cyra—”

“Fine.” Her fight immediately leaked away. Maybe Akira and Aurelia were right. “Yes, I am seeing Aedan Fletcher.”

“Excellent,” the queen said without any hint of surprise.

She already knew. Of course she already knew.

“Now, your brother,” the queen said, the three words tensing every muscle in Cyra’s body. “His acting skills are far superior to yours when it comes to covering up dalliances. I know he is seeing someone, and I am guessing it’s someone imprudent. Who is it?”

Cyra schooled her expression to reveal nothing, forcing a casual tone as she said, “If Kasian is seeing someone, as long as she is a Syphon, what does it matter?”

It was the wrong question to ask.

For the next several minutes, Cyra suffered her mother’s long-winded explanations, each one dripping with grating condescension, on why the next queen of this kingdom needed to be a lady from a prominent family. How noble support and alliances were requisitions for the Crown, blah, blah, blah.

Cyra suppressed a yawn. She had heard this sermon of stuffery before. It all boiled down to power and money. Fine, whatever. She said all the right things, offered all the expected nods of agreement, anything to escape this tedium.

Mercifully, Mathus rescued Cyra from dying under the weight of her mother’s pretentious pontifications. “People facing torture look less miserable than you right now,” Mathus said once the queen finally ended the conversation and sauntered away.

Cyra tried to shove down her irritation. “My mother is more concerned over her children’s love lives than a potential war. It’s absolutely ridiculous.”

Mathus chortled. “An imminent invasion would not cease my sister’s plots over her children’s marriage prospects.”

“It seems so superfluous at the moment.” Cyra shook her head, earlier worries creeping back through her insides like a blooming hangover. “Do you think there’s still time to avoid disaster?”

“I’m hopeful about the coming summit,” Mathus said through a tired sigh. “Idris Mahano and Adonis North seem like reasonable people. If not, my secret plan is to wear them down with the unrelenting charms of my wife and daughter.” His eyes drifted sideways.

Cyra followed his gaze, finding Olaria and Thea dancing together. Mother and daughter were sweetly dressed in matching gowns of pale

yellow and blue.

A smile stretched across Cyra's face. "Only monsters would say no to Thea and Olaria."

"I am hopeful."

"Me too."

Mathus would find a way, she told herself, clinging to this hope for the rest of the night, laughing and dancing with her friends, with Aedan. When festivities finally wound down, disappointment nestled in her chest. There was something about tonight she wanted to cherish, feeling the inexplicable sense that everything was about to change. When Akira asked Cyra and Aedan to join her for a walk along the sea cliff, she readily agreed.

The night air was cool, sea breeze lifting up the freed ends of her pinned hair and chilling the light sheen of sweat on her skin. She clung to Aedan's arm, feeling the pleasant buzz from the evening's libations linger in the front of her mind.

There was nothing suspicious about the late-night stroll until Akira steered the trio toward a circular structure overlooking the crashing waves.

The soft dulcet melody of a single violin floated through air. *Strange*.

Stranger still, Cyra spied figures standing within the columned structure. "What's going on?" she asked curiously. Aedan only shrugged, the couple following Akira's lead up the steps and into the colonnade, the open-air structure offering little protection against the breeze. Torches hung within the columns, bathing the domed roof and awaiting figures in orange-yellow light. "Kasian?" she blurted, immediately recognizing her brother.

Kasian grinned, warm eyes shifting between Cyra and Akira. "We're getting married," he announced, his casual tone so jarring that Cyra was certain she misheard.

She hadn't. Mouth dropping open, she volleyed an incredulous look between the couple, receiving nothing but smiles and sheepish shrugs.

"This is Andros Ganlof." Kasian motioned to the other person standing within the circle of columns. "The priest who will be marrying us."

Cyra's gaze flickered briefly to the man, then immediately returned to Kasian and Akira, still not entirely believing they were serious. Akira was fidgeting, nervous gaze fixed on Kasian as if waiting for him to change his mind and put a stop to the ensuing proceedings.

He didn't. Only flashing a mischievous grin between the women—pride and anticipation lighting his eyes. "We want you and Aedan to be our

witnesses.” He looked at Cyra expectantly, but her brain was still frozen in shock, parted lips yet to close.

This was real. This was happening.

After a soft nudge from Aedan, she sputtered, “Of course!” The proclamation was chased by a giddy grin. This had to be the most impulsive thing Akira had ever done, and hell, Cyra was all for it.

Akira wrapped her arms around Cyra. “And I have your blessing?”

“You don’t even need to ask,” she said, returning a tight squeeze.

So, this was their plan. To marry in secret. To bypass the king and queen’s approval so that nothing could be stopped. The old ask for forgiveness, not permission. Bold.

The priest began his speech, reciting some boring tale about the Divine Ancients and Castorian marriage history and traditions. Cyra heard little, watching Akira and Kasian holding hands, staring at each other with unconditional love and adoration, and her heart brimmed with happiness.

Then it was done. The ceremonial words said, a tender kiss exchanged.

Kasian and Akira were married.

The priest left the two couples dancing in the colonnaded structure. The violinist’s soft play of strings over the crashing sea was a beautiful toast to the romantic moment, sparkling wine flowing liberally.

It was a perfect end to a perfect night.

And yet the nagging pit in Cyra’s stomach did not entirely extinguish. The sense that they were on the precipice of something persisted even hours after she and Aedan stumbled into their hotel room and tucked into bed. It was a sense of foreboding she could not describe, like destiny was about to deliver them all a cruel hand.

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The pounding in Cyra’s head forced her eyes open. The stale taste of wine on her tongue pitched a wave of nausea through her guts. “Ugh,” she groaned. She regretted opening that last bottle of wine, regretted watching the sunrise on the beach with her head nestled in Aedan’s lap.

The aftermath of overindulgence was always a vengeful bitch.

She rolled over to find Aedan sleeping next to her, his mouth half open, breath heavy in deep slumber. Just another hour of sleep, Cyra told herself and the pounding in her head.

“I’m never drinking again,” she lied, rolling away from Aedan, envious of his blissful sleep. She frowned at the too-bright beam of sunlight pouring through the crack in the curtains.

What time was it?

She reached for a pocket watch on the nightstand, and immediately bolted up once the time registered. “Ugh.” She pressed her fingers to her temple, nausea rearing its ugly head.

“What?” Aedan’s eyes cracked open, an unhappy groan rumbling past his closed lips.

“We’re late.” Cyra’s panic surged. “We’re going to miss the ship’s departure.” Aedan only made another unhappy noise. “Come on, we need to go.”

Anxieties over her tardiness temporarily muted Cyra’s hangover. If they hurried, they could still get to the harbor in time to say goodbye to Thea, Mathus, and Olaria.

They dressed quickly, departing the hotel looking mostly presentable and weaving through the seaside town without vomiting. A major victory—and one nearly lost a few times during their journey.

When they reached the sea cliff steps down to the harbor, Cyra sighed in relief once she spied the teered white sails of the massive ship. She hadn’t missed the departure. Thank the Ancients. The royal viewing party sat underneath large white awnings, positioned at the base of the cliff. As soon as her shoes met sand, Cyra immediately felt the queen’s admonishing glare.

Consequences for later, she decided, as they padded up the dock, quickly locating Mathus as he supervised the last of the cargo loads.

“Cyra, Aedan,” Mathus greeted when he noticed their approach. “I worried we were going to miss you today.”

“Good morning, Uncle,” Cyra said, fighting a grimace. “Sorry we’re late. Aedan and I are moving slowly today.”

A knowing smirk pulled at Mathus’s lips. “Ah, to be young.” He shook his head jovially. “You did better than your brother. Kasian is nowhere to be found this morning.”

Aedan and Cyra exchanged furtive glances but didn’t say a word.

Mathus’s eyes narrowed, as if mentally cataloging the exchange. “I better board if we’re to leave on time, since the cargo loading took far

longer than expected. Based on all the boxes, I'd wager we're transporting enough goods to support a small town." He chortled a laugh.

"Cousin!" cried Oralia, the girl skipping toward them. Her small arms latched around Cyra's waist in a too-tight hug. Cyra did her best not to vomit, especially as the sea breeze unhelpfully delivered a cloud of pungent fish from the many markets just off the quay.

"Are you sure you can't come with us?" Olaria asked, releasing Cyra from her exuberant squeeze. "Father says the journey to Orlena is going to take nearly a month!"

"If the Crown and Parliament would build steamships as they do in the colonies, then we'd be there in half that time," Mathus grumbled. "Stubborn traditionalists."

Cyra only offered her uncle a commiserating sigh before focusing on her young cousin. "Unfortunately, Olaria, I'm unable to come, but I hear Orlena is a fascinating city, especially with all the new factories."

Olaria's lower lip jutted out in practiced pout.

"Olaria!" Thea's voice echoed over the wind. Cyra glanced up and spotted her aunt waving at them from the ship's stern. Cyra waved back.

"We had better go," Mathus said on a sigh. "Or I fear Thea will tire of waiting and leave without us."

"Good luck, Uncle. Truly," Cyra said after a final round of goodbye embraces.

With a solemn nod, Mathus and Olaria headed up the long gangway and onto the imposing sea vessel. Cyra watched the departing pair for a few minutes before releasing a heavy sigh. "We should join my mother in the viewing area."

Before she entirely turned around, a figure half-collided with her shoulder. She flinched at the rough contact, automatically turning toward the person—a man with a pale complexion, wearing round, almost oversized glasses. He came from the gangway, dressed similarly to other dock workers.

"Everything all right?" Aedan asked as Cyra stared after the man.

There was something familiar about him, the brief glimpse not enough to be sure of anything as she watched his mouse-brown hair disappear in the busy harbor. "Fine," she said when her hungover brain failed to reveal anything helpful.

A whipping breeze churned the flyaways of her untidy hair. With a bright sun overhead and calm seas awaiting the *Windstorm*, today was perfect for sailing. So why did the gnawing sensation in Cyra's gut only bite harder?

Something was wrong. That man. She had seen him before. But where?

The bells aboard the ship chimed, signaling to weigh anchor. The sound reminded Cyra of her tardiness and the coming scolding from her mother.

It was time to face the queen's displeasure.

The pounding in her head raised to a splitting beat as Cyra and Aedan trudged away from the departing ship. By the time they reached the viewing party, the *Windstorm*'s massive sails filled, pushing the ship peacefully across the waters of Azuria Bay.

"Glad you were able to join us, Cyra," her mother greeted, the expected sarcasm thick. "I shall call off the search parties."

"Sorry we're late," Cyra said. "We overindulged . . . a bit." A lot.

"A poor excuse." The queen straightened. "Now, where is your brother? Also sleeping off last night's wine? Or perhaps he was kidnapped by Nation of Clovia?"

Cyra went cold with realization. The man with glasses. The man with Jeremiah who she had decided not to kill . . . Why would he be here, helping to load cargo?

Only one reason.

Icy terror stampeded through her veins, all the color leaching from her face. "No, no, no," she muttered, craning her head toward the ship.

"What's wrong?" Aedan asked, brow furrowing.

There was no time to explain. She took off back toward the docks, running at full speed despite her stomach lurching in protest. "Signal for the ship to return!" she shouted at the dockmaster, panicked heartbeats thudding against her chest.

The uniformed man only gave her a curious look. "The ship is gone, my dear."

"It's still in the bay, signal for it to come back!"

Aedan arrived at her side, breathless. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

Then it happened. Something born of nightmares—all of Cyra's combined fears converging before her eyes.

A tremendous *BOOM* echoed across the bay, the ear-shattering noise like nothing she had ever heard—louder than a gun. Louder than *ten thousand* guns. Like a thunderclap tearing apart the sky.

All three of them hunched over, collective gazes jerking toward the ship—the source of the horrible din. A massive plume of flames erupted from the center of the vessel in a fiery cloud of destruction. Thick, black smoke consumed the tall sails.

Consumed everything.

The dockmaster immediately swung into action, calling for boats to take to the water, but Cyra barely heard the orders. Everything sounded far away, out of focus, as she stared at the devastation exploding before her eyes.

The ship was only a half mile from them, close enough to hear the screams of everyone onboard. Close enough to watch the vessel sink and sink and sink.

The explosion had caused a fatal wound, fracturing the hull and cleaving the massive ship in half. Could anyone survive? Mathus? Thea? Olaria?

Panic wrapped her lungs in a chokehold. Legs giving out, she collapsed to the wooden planks of the dock, knees suffering the brunt of her sagging weight. She barely felt the pain as a cold numbness worked down her spine. “No,” she breathed, throat closing against the coming sobs as she stared at the unfolding disaster.

“They could still be alive,” Aedan said, but his thickening tone betrayed his true thoughts. He knelt at her side, arm wrapping around her waist.

All they could do was watch.

And so they did, watched helplessly as dockworkers in rowboats tried to save the passengers of the *Windstorm*, arriving to find little more than floating wood and scorched bodies.

The water had swallowed the ship in a matter of minutes. A lucky few were pulled to safety, but Cyra’s greatest fears were soon confirmed—the horror beginning the moment she recalled how she knew that man. The man *she* had let live.

Her aunt, uncle, and cousin were gone. Their lives cruelly stolen in moments.

Cyra lost the contents of her stomach, sick spilling freely over the wood planks. She didn’t try to fight the urge anymore, her soul too shattered to care.

“They wanted a war,” she rasped, more to herself than to Aedan. “They’ll have one now.”

The torrential tears would come later, she knew. Racking sobs to be unleashed in droves over the coming days—weeks, months, years. For now, as Cyra kneeled on that dock with the bitterness of bile on her tongue and the stench of smoke clotting her nose, she allowed the gnawing dread in her stomach to unfurl.

It spread something else through her veins. Something new and raw and welcome—a slow-burning wrath, promising bloody vengeance for the innocent lives claimed today.

Yes. They would, indeed, have a war now.

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Chapter 38

THE DEAL

Present Day

The ashy taste of smoke coated her tongue. She was staring at the *Windstorm* again, watching the fatally wounded vessel slip beneath the surface in a matter of minutes, hearing the screams of those aboard go eerily quiet. Except the *Windstorm* sank eight years ago.

Then why did she still taste ash in her mouth?

Cyra wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of much, really, only that someone tugged at her shirt, wiggling open the top buttons, their close breath caressing her right ear.

Instincts battled against sheer physical exhaustion and the enclosing darkness. Automatically her arm shot up, fingers latching around the intruding hand.

"Cyra, would you let go," a tired voice said through the murkiness. Something loud rattled around her, the soft cushion under her seat shaking in rhythmic jerks.

Train. She was on a train. They were moving. They had escaped.

This realization was not enough to fully sharpen her senses, the steady sounds and motions calling her back to sleep. Her grip slackened, and she released the hand, which proceeded to open her shirt, peeling the sticking fabric off her chest.

No, her mind rallied, conjuring enough energy to bat the intrusion away.

A series of muttered curses reached her ears, the nearby presence filling her nose with the stink of smoke and sweat. “You stink,” she mumbled when the hand resumed its attempt to pry open her shirt.

“So do you,” Finn shot back. “Now, let me tend to your wound, or you’re going to die right here smelling like a swamp rat.”

Cyra snorted, failing to summon enough strength to open her eyes. The pull back to sleep won, Finn’s low breaths growing distant, the touch of his fingers on her skin no longer a bother.

Until it was. Until a splintering pain shredded through her chest, hacking away the blissful blackness. She gasped, eyes snapping open, ready to fight. “Seven fucking hells,” she cursed, grasping the hand in front of her chest—the hand holding a small blade half-wedged into her bullet wound.

“Let go, Cyra,” Finn said, speaking with a forced calm, as if talking to a skittish animal. He sounded stressed, beads of sweat dotting his soot-stained forehead, his body rigid. “You have a bullet lodged just under your collarbone. I need to dig it out before I can close the wound.”

Several labored breaths escaped Cyra’s lips, her cluttered mind reorganizing as she took in her new surroundings. She sat on a velvet-covered booth. Candles rested on a table in front of the red-cushioned seat, the main source of light within the otherwise moonlit train car.

Opaque darkness greeted Cyra when her eyes shifted to the large window over her shoulder. The sight offered nothing but black yielding to more black. Only the night sky afforded more, clouds partially covering the smattering of stars, the moon somewhere just out of the sight. The only sense they were moving was the continued rattle of wheels straining against the iron track. As for the train car, there was nothing remarkable about the space, containing a series of booths and tables—a dining car, perhaps.

Cyra’s quick scan returned to Finn, the only other figure amongst the shadows. He sat unnervingly close, blade clutched in one hand, suspended over her wound, the other hand gripping her shoulder. He was filthy and shirtless, soot smudging every inch of bared skin. By the sweat gilded in the lamplight, she guessed they hadn’t been traveling long. Or he was stressed about the present operation. As he should be—he was doing a piss-poor job.

“If you need it, I can find you something to bite down on,” Finn said, bloody blade yet to resume its plunge.

She glared at him. “Oh, I can think of something to bite.”

“Cyra.” Finn’s brows twitched. “I don’t—”

“Just get it over with.” She turned her head away to stare at one of the candles, anything but the idea of Finn digging around in her flesh.

“All right,” Finn whispered and pushed the blade back into the wound.

Loud expletives spilled from her mouth, her entire body gone rigid against the blinding pain. She squeezed her eyes shut, fingers digging into the cushion, into anything. She strained not to move as the blade tip searched for its quarry.

Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it, she mentally chanted over and over despite her brain clamoring for the opposite.

“Got it,” Finn gasped through a breath of relief.

When the sharp pricking stab in Cyra’s shoulder relented, she opened her eyes, blinking away the onset of tears. A long, heavy inhale filled her lungs, suddenly desperate for air.

In Finn’s hand rolled a bloody bead the size of a marble, the tiny ball leaving a trail of glistening red as it settled in the center of his palm.

“You are a lousy surgeon,” she bit out once her gasps steadied.

“Best amongst your options.”

“If my options are between you and Kade, I’d choose the psychotic scientist.”

Finn’s face flattened, dropping the bloody bullet on a cloth on the table. He leaned over and grasped something from the floor. “Then I guess you don’t want this?” He produced a half-full bottle of brandy.

Cyra snatched the bottle from his taunting grasp. “Why didn’t you lead with this?” She pulled the cork free and drank several deep gulps, unbothered that her haste caused dribbles of liquid to escape the corners of her mouth.

The liquor burned down her throat, the floral taste overpowering anything else. Not Royce’s good stuff, certainly. Probably smuggled aboard by one of the guards or militia soldiers for a pre- or post-work indulgence.

To Cyra, it was superb, breathing welcome heat through her chilled body and banishing the lingering taste of ash and blood from her mouth.

And for a moment, she was back in Lofton.

Finn watched her with a silent scowl, yet to give her any distance from his uncomfortable proximity. When her desperate gulping showed no signs of slowing, he sighed an exasperated, “Cyra, you are bleeding. Would you stop sucking down alcohol and let me heal you?”

Her lips released the bottle and she inhaled a chest-expanding breath before braving a glance at the wound. Between her semi-frantic movements and Finn's rough surgery, the hole wept with fresh vengeance. Blood trailed down her chest, soaking into her already soiled shirt. It also hurt like an unholy bastard. Her entire body hurt like an unholy bastard—*ten* bastards.

Fine, she'd give Finn this one.

Grimacing, Cyra set the bottle on the table and allowed him to resume his efforts. At least healing was less painful than being prodded like a dead pig in her evolution practical class. The sewing together of veins, blood vessels, muscles, sinew, and skin was more like an unpleasant prickle than stabbing pain. The evolution cast advanced the healing process, but the body still needed to complete the usual steps, albeit at miraculous speed.

As Finn worked, Cyra searched for distraction. "Where are the others?" she asked, only now appreciating how silent and empty the train car felt under the darkness and steady clatter of the locomotive's progress.

"Those not resting or manning the engine are scouring the train for supplies—food, water, weapons, fresh clothes."

Fresh clothes. She longed for such a luxury, her borrowed shirt bloody and in tatters, trousers faring little better. Her lack of footwear also made her aware of her toes' burning throb. She didn't dare glance downward, knowing she'd find yet more bloody messes. By the visceral ache on her right big toe, she was fairly certain the thing was broken.

As for Finn, well, as decent as he was without a shirt, she preferred him fully-clothed if he was going to be this near her person.

Yes, fresh clothes were more than welcome, but there was something else her body craved: "Can you add a warm bath to that list?" she asked.

A smirk tugged at the corner of Finn's lips, but he said nothing as he worked.

Despite risking ire at any slight movement, she reclaimed the brandy bottle, careful not to disturb his progress. As expected, Finn's eyebrows caved with disapproval, but she took a quick swig anyways.

"Last one," she said with no intention of honoring the promise.

His scowl followed her hand as she placed the brandy back on the table, eyes lingering on the bottle—no, they were fixed on her hand. A flash of something shifted over his features—discomfort, maybe?

Cyra glanced at her hand, then at the bottle. Red smudges dotted the peeling label, blood smears left behind by her mangled fingernails. "I know,

my nails need a paint job. Don't look at my toes." She attempted a self-deprecating tone, though she wasn't entirely sure why. What did she care if he found her ripped nails off-putting?

Huffing a sigh, Finn resumed his task, his mired thoughts a mystery.

Cyra frowned. They had just escaped certain death, so why was he pouting? A few new burns and gashes littered Finn's torso, but the man otherwise appeared unharmed. No reason to be grumpy.

"Done," he said, eyes lingering on the healed wound. Again, more enigmatic thoughts twisted across his face. There was a heaviness about him, a different sort of severity than anything yet betrayed since he walked into her saloon.

Cyra decided to venture another attempt at dark humor. "I hope the scar matches the others. I have a whole aesthetic going."

It was the wrong thing to say.

Finn's eyes lurched to her face, staring at her with something resembling accusation. No, definitely accusation, plain and simple. "What were you thinking?" he demanded, shifting away from her as if requiring a better angle for his pointed glare.

"Excuse me?"

"First you nearly race off on some suicidal quest for revenge," Finn spat. "Then, without warning, you decided to fight all of Royce's men by yourself, as if you *wanted* to die on those ramparts like some self-possessed martyr."

This was why he was mad? "I'll admit," she bit out as her internal defenses rose, "in the heat of the moment, vengeance was a tempting prize."

"Worth your life?"

"Yes," she insisted without hesitation, heart thumping as she remembered those moments. Even now, a twinge of regret stabbed at her insides. "I had a chance to avenge the deaths of my aunt and uncle." She swallowed against a desperate dryness working up her throat. "My eight-year-old cousin. I had a chance at justice, to claim the lives of the men who stole theirs. So don't you fucking dare judge me for trying."

"Cyra—"

"I watched them die, Finn. And Kade was there—" Her voice shook, and she forced another hard swallow. "He was there because *I* let him live. I had a chance to kill him months before the *Windstorm*, and I let him live.

Do you know how much guilt I have carried the last eight years over that choice?" Her lips refused to stay even, eyes burning with merciless tears.

How many times had she tormented herself with *what-ifs*? What if she had killed the man with the glasses at the river? What if she had recognized him on the dock? What if she hadn't been so stupidly wrecked from drinking until dawn the night before?

It was a cruel game she had played for years with no resolution but spiraling insanity. She absently wondered if tonight would add another volume. If she would come to regret the choice to escape with the others over pursuing revenge.

The hardness in Finn's features slipped at whatever he saw darkening her expression, but he quickly reinforced his emotional walls—his brow reclaiming its furrow, a muscle in his jaw working before he said, "So, this is the reason for your death wish?"

"Death wish?" Cyra balked, heat clearing the thickness in her voice. "I don't have a death wish."

Finn scoffed. "You climbed up those ramparts expecting to never come down again. If you argue otherwise, then you're lying to yourself as much as you are to me."

"I was willing to die," she spat. "There is a difference." But a quiet voice in the back of her mind argued otherwise. She ignored it.

Finn gave her flat look, seeing right through her bullshit and pathetic denials.

Well, he could go fuck himself.

Quite done with this asinine conversation, Cyra lunged for the clear crystal tied to Finn's forearm. She'd be healing the rest of her ailments on her own. He pivoted, sliding out of the booth and into the narrow aisle. Annoyance bristled as she crawled after him, but he dodged all her attempts to claim the crystal. "Are you a child?" she huffed.

"If I'm a child, then so are you," he spat, keeping his arm out of her reach.

Cyra rolled her eyes before leveling a hard punch to his side.

A wince seized his face, but he still managed to clutch her wrist just as her fingertips gripped the edge of the healing crystal. "Why did you stay behind?" Finn demanded.

A wave of exhaustion freed a long sigh from Cyra's lungs, her internal fight leaking away. "I wanted to help Hiram and the others, all right? Now,

please, for the love of all the Divine Ancients, hand over the evolution crystal. My toes are killing me." They really were, each one its own throbbing world of hurt.

Finn didn't move, amber eyes fixed on her face. "No, I mean, why didn't you go home after the war? The real reason."

Cyra lowered her hand, struck by the question, by the sheer intensity in his eyes. Her surprise quickly gave way to anger. "Why did I stay in Clovia? Let's see, uhm, none of your fucking business. Give. Me. The. Crystal."

"Did your reasoning have to do with Fabien?" He asked the question in a faint voice, the accusatory tone gone. No, if anything, there was a light tremor in the way he said his brother's name, joined with a subtle vulnerability softening his eyes. He stared at Cyra, as if desperately needing an answer to this question. As if any future joy or happiness hinged on what she said.

The emotions he revealed did little to stem Cyra's genuine confusion. "Fabien?"

"Yes, Fabien," Finn said, all softness vanishing as accusation nudged its way back into his voice. "You know, my brother? My best friend in the world?"

Cyra's patience thinned. "What does anything have to do with Fabien?"

"Did you betray him?"

"Did I—*what*?" She almost laughed, almost huffed a dramatic breath directly into Finn's face. The impulses caught in her throat, however, as a bloom of resurging vulnerability in his expression halted any mocking response. "What are you talking about, Finn?"

"During the war, Fabien was convicted of high treason. Sentenced by the Crown to twenty years in a labor camp."

Cyra straightened, noting the pain in Finn's voice. The brothers had been so close once, inseparable until Finn . . . until he left—no, until he was *forced to leave*.

Right, Finn never intentionally abandoned his brother like Cyra had long assumed.

A bubble of empathy filled her chest, squashing the room her annoyance required. Still, there were realities Finn needed to accept. "Finn," she began slowly, carefully. "Your brother was guilty of wartime treason. There was __"

“You were the only witness, Cyra,” Finn cut in, anger resuming with a not-so-subtle flash of accusation.

Cyra’s brows twitched. “How did you—”

“Did you report him to the Crown?” Finn leaned closer, not quite in her space but nearing the edges. “Did you report him to your parents?”

Cyra opened her mouth, then promptly closed it, several realizations ricocheting in her mind. This was it. This was the reason. The reason for all his anger and bitterness.

He thinks you betrayed his brother.

She gulped a breath, not quite sure how to feel. Relieved? Furious? Defensive? Indignant? She felt all of it, and then some. “Fabien was my friend—”

“Did you report him?”

“No!” Cyra snapped, eyes flashing as she glared up at him, daring him to call her a liar.

Oh, he dared.

“I don’t believe you.”

Asshole. Cyra snatched the clear crystal strapped to his forearm. “Believe what you want, Finn. I didn’t report what I saw.” She brushed past him, needing to look anywhere else lest she punch him in his stupid face. She marched to the last booth in the car and slid into the seat. Raising her right foot, she focused on her toes—on anything but Finn.

“Then who, Cyra? Who is responsible for Fabien spending his life in the mines?” He marched right up to the booth. “He fought for his country. He was loyal. You, of all people, know why he did what he did.”

She stared at her injured toes, her right big nail hanging on by a razor’s edge. The left one was completely gone, each digit some sort of shade of purple, pink, and yellow—all swollen. “I don’t know,” she said on a long breath. Her brow furrowed, eyes sliding up to Finn’s face. “This is the reason you’re angry with me, isn’t it? Not our breakup or my parents’ actions. You think I sold out your brother because, why, blind loyalty to the Crown? To Castoria?”

“You’re different, Cyra,” he said, the words coming out evenly, without judgment. As if he simply stated fact. “Different from the person I knew.”

“So are you,” she said in an equally emotionless tone. “The person I knew, the boy I once—” She could not say love, not in this moment, not now—not ever again. “He wouldn’t . . .” She trailed off, another realization

suddenly striking her tired mind. “That’s the deal you made with my parents, isn’t it? My return for Fabien’s release?”

Finn didn’t immediately respond, his throat bobbing before he answered. “I was caught smuggling crystals across the border. I told anyone who would listen that I could find you. Turns out your mother is an exceptionally good listener. I promised to bring you back in exchange for Fabien’s sentence being commuted to exile.” His eyes dipped, fixing on nothing in particular. “He’s the only family . . . He’s all I have left.” A tremor broke through his voice, a tremor heavy with regret. With grief. With all the years of missing his other half—a half stolen from him because of who he chose to love.

Well, Cyra could accept this reason. It did not excuse Finn’s behavior. And she was still mad—furious for many, many reasons, but she recognized his motives now, and the clarity was welcome, even if most of her feelings stayed mired in resentful anger.

A mirthless smile spread across her face. “So, you destroyed my life for a noble cause after all,” she said, tone threading the line between bitterness and understanding. That’s all she would give. He earned nothing more.

Hurt mixed with confusion flickered across Finn’s face. “I’m going to go check on the engine” was all he said. Then he was gone, leaving Cyra to stew over everything.

It all felt like an unfixable mess, a decade of hurt and pain and loss, two people shattered by circumstance and their own terrible choices that they could never unmake. And everything was about to become so much worse as they careened toward an inevitability she could not stop.

The full resurrection of Cyra Byrogan still awaited her. And once she stepped foot in Castoria, she’d face the full consequences of her actions. Answer to every single person she had left behind. All the regrets she had locked away in the dark corners of her mind.

The storm awaited her arrival—judge, jury, and executioner. And she’d deserve every punishment. It would come. But not yet.

Not yet.

Her emotions churned as a foreboding sensation prodded her mind, the tingling feeling that this adventure home was far from finished. More loomed in the wings. Clovia wasn’t done flaying her for her sins. Certainly wouldn’t let the villainess, Cyra Byrogan, slip from its web so easily, and not without recourse.

She almost welcomed the challenge, another diversion to delay her ultimate destiny, perhaps another opportunity to right some wrongs. Whatever awaited her, she wasn't afraid, and she wasn't going to run. Not this time.

She would confront fate's callous plans with a savage smile on her face.

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AFTERWORD

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Leah Larke is a self-published, independent author. *Ballad of a Renegade* is her debut novel, and the first of four books in the Syphon's

Saga series. She lives in Santa Monica, California with her husband and long-haired dachshund. In addition to writing, Leah also sews fantasy costumes and creates digital art the not-so-old-fashioned way: with an iPad and stylus.

She loves traveling, history, books, art, food, wine, and a themed formal event (you will find at least one costume ball in each book of this series).

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I’ve been a fan of fantasy and romance books since high school (early 00s). For fun, I began plotting my own characters, worlds, and adventures post college. I started writing the story that would become *Ballad of a Renegade* in 2019, never expecting to do anything with this story.

When I gave my books to friends, they became my champions, encouraging me to do something more with this series. I kept writing for fun, creating other stories, other worlds, and occasionally revisiting the story of Cyra and Finn. The original draft was far from ready for primetime viewing, and I worried the writing wasn’t strong enough to be seen by the eyes of anyone who wasn’t my friend (or husband). Thanks to both, I made it here.

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