

A
HEART
SO
FIERCE
AND
BROKEN

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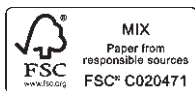
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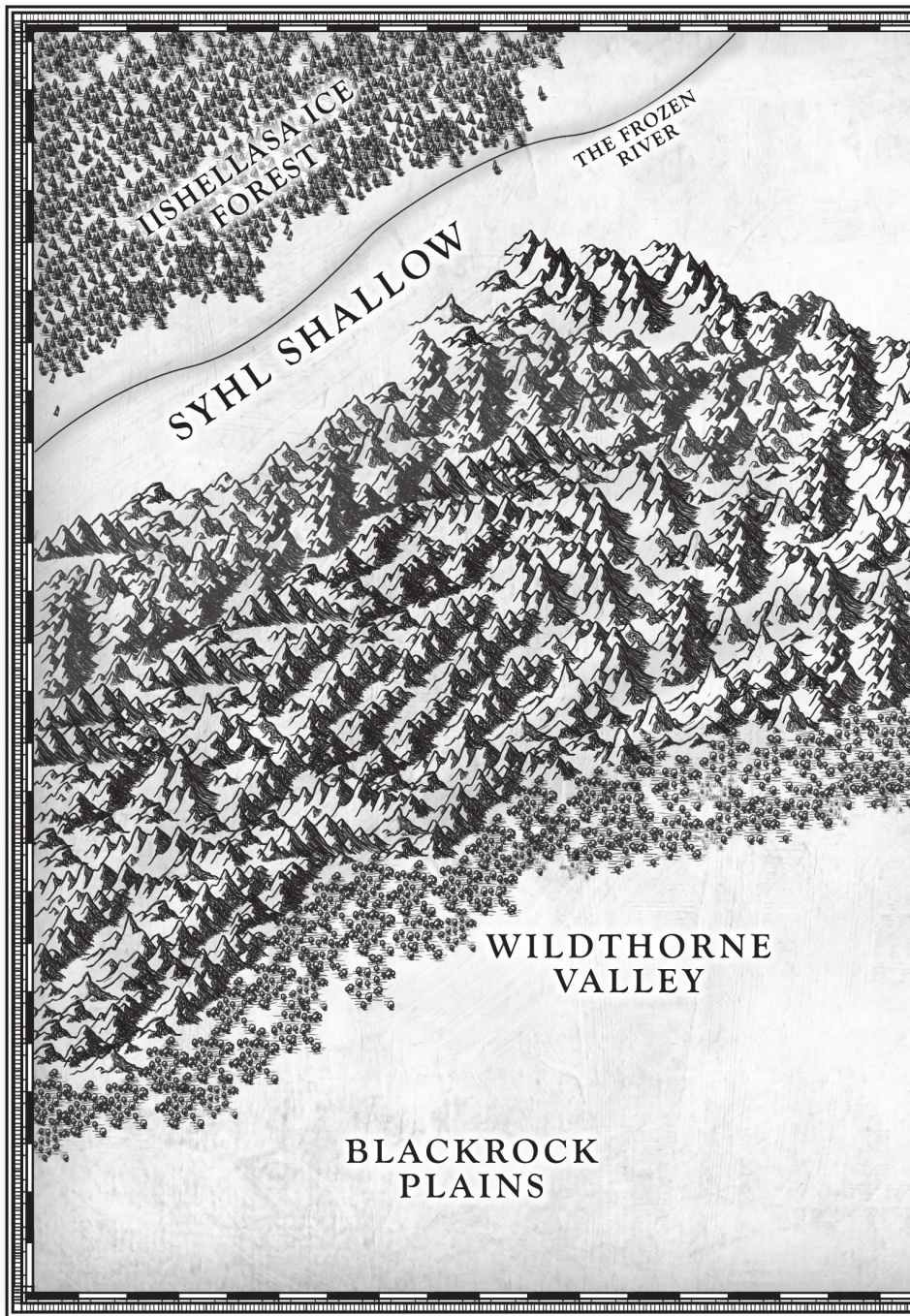
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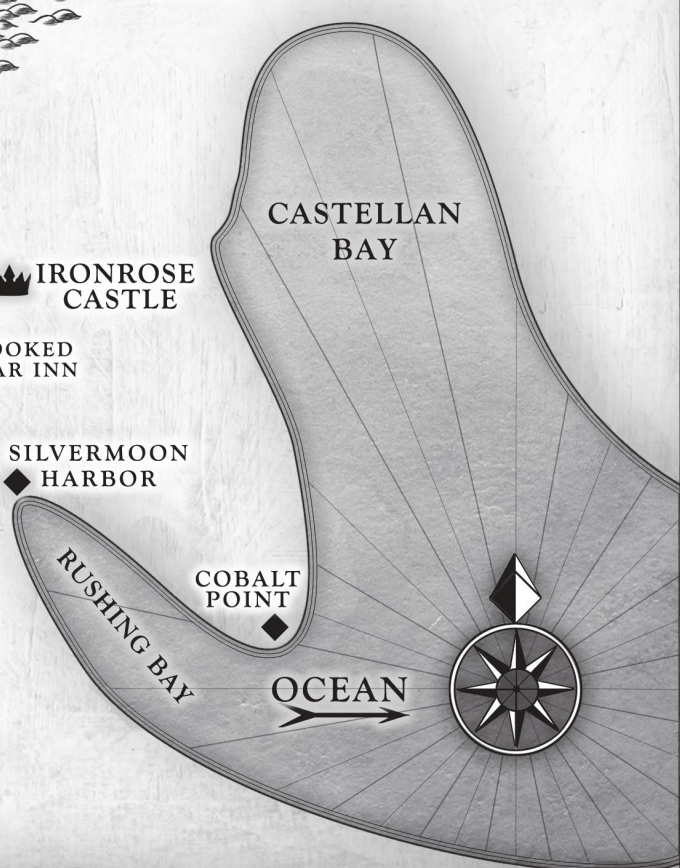
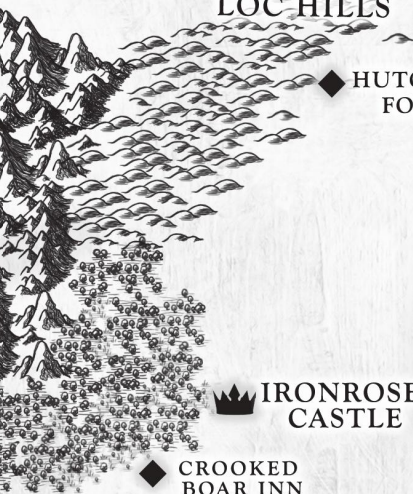
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CHAPTER ONE



HARPER

I miss knowing exactly what time it is.

It's one of the few things I regret leaving behind in Washington, DC, but when darkness has fallen, dinner feels like a distant memory, and Rhen has still not returned to his chambers, I want to know what time it is. I'm no stranger to waiting in the darkness, but when I was on the streets I had my brother's cell phone, and I'd count every minute.

Now I'm Princess Harper of Disi, and Emberfall hasn't advanced to the point of having electricity.

Rhen and I have separate chambers, befitting the crown prince and the lady he's to ally his kingdom with, but he always visits before retiring to his own room.

He's never been this late. Or—I don't think he has.

The heat of the day has bled off, leaving cool air to stream through my open windows, and my fire has fallen to glowing embers. Outside, torches flicker on the guard stands that surround Ironrose,

evenly spaced flares of light that keep the grounds from ever going truly dark. Such a difference from when Ironrose was cursed, when the guard stands stood cold and dark and empty, when the only people to inhabit the castle were Rhen, Grey, and me.

Now the castle is crowded with nobles and servants and guards, and we are never truly alone.

And Grey is gone. He's been gone for months.

I take the candle from my bedside, lighting it from the glowing embers on the hearth. It's a movement I make without thought anymore, the way I would have flipped a light switch back home. Zo, my personal guard and closest friend here, isn't on duty tonight, and she deserves time to sleep. Same with Freya, my lady-in-waiting. The lights in her room went dark hours ago, and I selfishly wish they hadn't. I could use a friend.

A soft knock raps at my door, and I hurry across the floor to open it.

It's not Rhen, though I wouldn't have expected him to knock. It's Jake.

When I was young, Jake was gentle and kind, the perfect older brother. Then we hit our teens, and while our mother was on her deathbed, our father drove our lives into the gutter. Jake is built like a linebacker, and to help make ends meet, he took jobs from the loan sharks who haunted our doorstep. To those outside our family, Jake quickly grew from someone lovable into someone to fear.

Being trapped in Emberfall, a country as beautiful as it is wild and dangerous, hasn't changed my brother's temperament. The day we arrived, he was out of place and unsure of himself, but he's grown into his fictional role as Prince Jacob of Disi. His dark hair has grown out a bit, and he wears a sword on his hip as if he were

born carrying it. No one messed with him in DC, and few people mess with him here either.

Tonight his expression is somber.

“Hey,” I say softly. “Come in.”

He does, and I ease the door closed behind him.

“I’m surprised you’re still up,” he says.

“I’m waiting for Rhen.” I pause. “I’m surprised *you’re* still up.”

He hesitates. “Noah and I are packing.”

Noah is his boyfriend, formerly a medical resident in a busy DC emergency room, and now the castle “healer.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Packing?”

My brother’s expression doesn’t change. “We’re leaving in the morning.”

This is so unexpected that I stumble back a step.

Jake’s lip quirks up. “Not forever, Harp. It’s not that bad.”

“But—what do you mean, you’re *leaving*?”

He shrugs and fidgets and moves to the window. “We’ve been here for months now. I know you like playing the courtly princess, but I feel like I’m living in a cage.” He pauses and glances back at me. “It’s only for a few weeks. A month, tops.”

I blow out a breath. “A month.”

A lot can happen in a month. I know that better than anyone.

“I’d have no way to check on you,” I say. “What if something happens? It takes days—*weeks*—to send word sometimes. We still don’t know what’s happening with Syhl Shallow or Rhen’s coronation or—”

He gives me a look. “You don’t need to check on me, Harper.”

“I can still worry about you.” I swallow. We were once separated after Grey snatched me off the streets of DC, and it was horrible

not knowing what might have become of Jake. I don't want to feel that way again. "Have you asked Rhen? He might not think it's a good idea."

Jake's eyes turn flinty. "He's not my warden."

"I know, but—"

"He knows anyway. I already talked to him."

That draws me up short.

"I asked him not to say anything to you," Jake adds. "I wanted to tell you myself."

My mouth forms a line. "I guess you've arranged everything, then."

"No, Harp. I haven't." He pauses. "I want you to come with us."

"Jake. I can't. You know I can't."

"Yes, you can. You can get out of here just like I can." He leaves the window to stop in front of me, and when he speaks, his voice grows quiet. "He's not your warden either. You don't have to spend your nights waiting up for him."

"He's running a country," I say. "He's not out drinking with the guys."

"He's eighteen years old, and so are you." Jake pauses. "Do you want to marry him?"

The question catches my breath.

My brother is studying me. "Harp—you know that's at the end of this path if you stay here. He's set up this whole alliance with a fake country that's dependent on your marriage."

I know that. Of course I know that.

I'm quiet too long. Jake moves past me to the fireplace. "You didn't answer my question."

Marriage. "I don't—I don't know."

He throws a log onto the hearth and jabs at it with the poker.

“You shouldn’t have to know. That’s my point.” The log begins to catch, and Jake looks at me over his shoulder. “You shouldn’t be in a position where your boyfriend has to marry you to hold his country together.”

I move to the couch and ease onto the cushion. “Gee, Jake, I’m so glad you came in.”

He looks back at the fire, which is flickering in earnest now, making his brown hair glow with highlights of gold and red. “I know things weren’t good in DC, but I don’t feel like they’re better here.”

“We left Washington facing down a man with a gun,” I say.

“I know, I know.” He falls quiet, though, so I know this is not an acquiescence.

I don’t know what to say to him. “I can’t leave, Jake.”

“You love him.”

“Yes.”

He sighs, then moves to sit beside me on the couch. I lean my head against his shoulder, and we stare at the fire together.

“The rumors are getting out of control,” he finally says. “That he’s not the rightful heir. That Karis Luran will attack again.”

“Those rumors have been flying for months.”

“People are beginning to talk about how forces from Disi have never arrived. That your alliance is a sham.” Jake pauses, and now his eyes are sharp. “I’m not just leaving to get away from here. I want to find out what’s really going on outside this castle.”

“Rhen wouldn’t lie to us.”

Jake studies me for the longest time. “He’s lying to his entire country,” he finally says. “If you think he’s not above lying to *us*, you need to pay attention.”

I swallow. Rhen isn't like that. "You don't need to start something, Jake."

"I'm not. I'm just asking you to think." He shakes his head bitterly. "Noah said you wouldn't come. I thought you'd at least consider it."

I study him, my restless brother who did so many terrible things to keep me safe. At his core, there's kindness and compassion. I know there is. "I'm sorry."

He grits his teeth. "I wish we knew if Grey were alive or dead."

"Me too," I say, and sigh.

"Not for the same reasons you do." He looks down at me. "He's the one who trapped us here." Jake shakes his head and rubs a hand across his jaw. There's a tension in his body now. "If he ever turns up, I'm going to make him wish he never did."

It's barely a threat. Grey is likely dead—or trapped on the other side, which is equally bad. "What are you so angry about?"

Thunderclouds roll through his eyes. "I've spent months watching them use you, Harper."

"No one is *using* me—"

"Yes. They are. Grey brought you here to help break a curse you had no part of. And then when you escaped, he brought you back *again*."

"I *wanted* to come back." And I did. I don't regret the choice I made.

Until this moment, looking into Jake's eyes, I never realized that *he* regrets the choice I made. It might have saved his life, but now he's trapped here with no way to get home.

The latch at my door clicks, and I turn in surprise to find Rhen in the doorway.

The prince is still dressed in his formal clothes, a blue jacket buckled all the way to his throat and a sword in place at his hip. The firelight catches his hair and turns it gold, but his eyes are tired. He spots me and Jake by the fire and stops. The tension in the room has grown so thick that he can probably feel it.

“Forgive me,” Rhen says carefully. “The hour is late. I thought you would be alone.”

Jake sighs. “You *should* be alone. I’ll get out.” He leans forward to kiss me on the forehead. “Take care of yourself, Harper. I mean it.”

That softens the edge all his other words carried. “Thanks, big brother.”

Jake stops by Rhen before grabbing hold of the door handle. “I’m still leaving tomorrow,” he says.

“Today, in fact,” says Rhen, matching Jake’s even tone. “It is well after midnight.” He glances at the dark window. “Dustan will accompany you, along with a small contingent of guards. You may leave after daybreak if you wish.”

That throws Jake for a moment, but he recovers quickly. “Good.”

Rhen raises an eyebrow. “You thought I would go back on my word?”

“I thought you’d find other things more important.”

“Indeed. I do.” Rhen opens the door and holds it there. A clear dismissal.

Jake opens his mouth to argue.

Rhen can be patient when he wants to be, but I sense that now isn’t one of those times. “Jake,” I say. “You got what you wanted.”

“Nowhere near.” But it’s enough to draw the fight out of my brother, and he goes through the door.

Once he's gone, Rhen crosses the room to where I'm standing. Every day seems to add new shadows beneath his eyes, a dark and guarded wariness that never seems to ease anymore.

"Are you all right?" I say as he approaches. He's always so buttoned up after he comes out of meetings with his advisors, but today feels like a new level. He's distant. So severe that if I didn't know him, I might back away from him. "What's going on? It's late. I thought—"

His hands catch my waist, and I gasp. Then his mouth is on mine.

Rhen is so strong, so capable, that he still surprises me when he's gentle. He stalked across the room like he wanted to wage war, but he kisses me like I'm the most delicate thing in the castle. His hands are full of warmth that I can feel through my sleeping shift, soft against my waist. I put my hands against his jacket and breathe him in, letting his closeness erase some of the worry Jake stoked.

When Rhen pulls back, it's barely far enough to speak against my lips. His eyes bore into mine. "I could feel your worry on the other side of the castle," he says. He brushes a thumb across my cheek. "I can feel it now."

I blush and look down. My fingers fidget with the buckles of his jacket, as if they need straightening, but of course they don't. "I'm okay."

"Harper," he says softly. He puts a hand over mine, forcing mine still.

I love the way he says my name, the way his accent lends weight to the *Rs* to make it a purr. He's always so formal that my name feels like a secret just between us.

He puts a finger to my chin and lifts my gaze. "Tell me your fears."

“Jake just told me he’s leaving.”

“Ah.” Rhen sighs. “Your brother is impatient and reckless, and the timing could be better—but it could also be worse. I would rather send him with my blessing than learn he’s caused havoc somewhere in the kingdom. Dustan will not allow him to get into much trouble.”

I’m surprised by that. “You’re sending your guard commander?”

“I would rather not, but I have few guards I can trust on such an assignment. The Royal Guard still feels untested, but your brother is insistent he will leave whether I like it or not.”

Well, that definitely sounds like Jake.

Rhen studies me. “Would you rather I send Zo?”

“No.” If Jake’s leaving, I can’t bear the thought of losing my friend, too. “Did Jake tell you he wants me to go with him?”

That forces Rhen still. “No. And your decision?”

This is one of my favorite things about him. He’s commanding and decisive and never falters—but he never takes a choice away from *me*. “I said no.”

He lets out a breath, then kisses me again. “I spent so long waiting to find you that I worried fate might take you away.”

I press my forehead against his neck and inhale the warmth of his scent. “I’m not going anywhere.”

He holds me quietly for a moment, but I can tell his worry has not eased.

I bite at my lip, not wanting to add to his tension. “Jake said the rumors about another heir have grown.”

“They have.”

I press a hand against his chest, thinking about everything Jake said. “Talk to me, Rhen.”

He sighs, and it sounds aggravated. “The heir exists. There are royal records with my father’s seal. I wanted to accelerate the coronation, but many nobles have already made it known that they want proof that the line of succession is solid, and so I shall do my very best to provide it.”

“How will you find him?”

“It may be impossible. In truth, he may not live. We have very little to go on for our search. If his mother was a magesmith, as records indicate, he should have magic like the enchantress Lilith. She once told me that the web of magic did not end with her, that she could feel another’s existence. Magic has been banned from Emberfall for years, but if we spread word that someone has this power, it may not be so easy to hide.”

Lilith. Just her name is enough to cause me to shudder. “What will you do if you find him?”

“If he bears magic, he will be destroyed.”

I jerk back. “Rhen!”

Rhen says nothing. He doesn’t need to. The look in his eyes says enough.

I take another step back. “This man is your *brother*.”

“No. He is a stranger.” There’s no give in his voice. “I spent a near eternity trapped by one magesmith, and it almost drove my country to ruin. I will not risk Emberfall being destroyed by another.”

I’m rooted in place, filled with ice despite the fire at my side. I don’t know what to say. I’ve seen him order a man’s death before, but that was a man who’d killed one of our guards, a man who would have killed us if he’d gotten the chance.

This is different. This is calculated. Premeditated.

Rhen takes a step forward and reaches a hand to touch my face.

I flinch away, and his expression goes still. “I did not intend to upset you,” he says quietly, and I know he means that. “I did not realize this would be a surprise. You saw with your own eyes the damage Lilith caused.”

I swallow. Yes. I did. I saw her torture Rhen time and again. He was powerless to stop her.

“I’m sure you’re right,” I say, even though I’m not sure at all. I draw a shaking breath and have to press a hand to my stomach.

Rhen has proven that he’ll do what he needs to do to hold Emberfall together. He’s proving it now.

“Do not draw away from me,” he says softly, and there is a new note in his voice. Not vulnerability—never that—but something close. “Please. I cannot bear it.”

He looks so tired. His body is so tense. I wonder when he last slept. I take a deep breath and chase the trembling out of my fingers, then move forward to put my arms around him.

“Tell me *your* fears,” I say quietly.

“We do not even know if Lilith is dead,” Rhen says. “If she were to find this heir—if they were to work together against me—”

“It’s been months. She’s either trapped on the other side or Grey is.”

“Or he’s sworn to her, as we saw, and she is biding her time.”

Grey swore himself into her service to save me—just before putting his sword to Lilith’s throat and disappearing to the other side. To Washington, DC.

“He wouldn’t help her,” I say. “Rhen. He wouldn’t.”

“I have to protect my people, Harper.”

He leans against me, and I listen to the pattern of his breathing as it slows. I lay a hand against his cheek, and his eyes close. There was a moment, months ago, when he was the monster, and he pressed his face against my hand and settled, just like this. I could feel his fear then. I can feel it now.

“You’re not a monster anymore,” I whisper.

“I sent guards to Grey’s mother’s home in Wildthorne Valley,” Rhen says carefully.

My hand goes still on his cheek. “What? When?”

“Last week,” he says. “To be thorough.” He pauses. “They returned today.”

Grey once told me that Lilith killed his whole family, leaving only his mother alive. “What did they find?”

“His mother was gone. The townspeople said she sold off her livestock and moved away months ago. No one knew where she’d gone.” Another pause. “Rumor said a wounded man stayed with her for a short while, but no one saw him.”

I hold my breath for a moment. “Grey could be alive,” I whisper.

“Yes.” Rhen’s voice is hard, but I feel the worry and uncertainty behind it. “Given what they reported, I suspect Grey is very much alive.”

I look up at him. “Grey wouldn’t be sworn to her, Rhen.”

“If he was not, why would he not return to Ironrose?”

I try to think of an answer and fail.

“Karis Luran could attack at any time,” Rhen says. “The heir could appear at any time.” He pauses. “And Lilith could be waiting for the perfect moment to strike.”

I lean my head against Rhen’s chest and look to the window

again, gazing out at the stars spanning the sky. “Oh, Grey,” I say. “Where are you?”

“Indeed,” says Rhen. He sighs, and in the sound, I hear the longing and sadness and worry wrapped up in the word. He brushes a kiss against my hair. “Indeed.”

CHAPTER TWO



GREY

Late afternoon always bears the weight of the sun, but I don't mind, because the stables are quiet, and I rarely have more than the other stable hand for company.

This is the last place anyone will look for me, so I welcome it.

Sweat clings to my arms, attracting bits of dirt and straw as I swing the pitchfork. The heat will get worse before it gets better, but I'm used to it. Worwick's Tourney is closed for business until dark, deserted except for me and Tycho. Later, the stables will be loud with the sounds of men calling for horses or bickering over the weapons for rent at the end of the aisle. Once the drink starts flowing and the stadium is filled with people eager for a show, the noise will be deafening.

Now, though, the stadium is empty, and the stables are wanting for a good cleaning. A far cry from the extravagant luxury of Ironrose, when I was commander of the Royal Guard of Emberfall.

Tycho has been singing under his breath as he mucks the stalls,

so quietly that I can't catch the melody over the sounds of horses breathing. He's small for his age, with a wiry build that makes him look closer to twelve than fifteen, but that doesn't stop him from being quick and capable. Dark-blond hair hangs just past his chin, keeping the blue of his eyes in shadow.

Tycho likes this time of day, too, for different reasons. Men with a belly full of ale sometimes come looking for entertainment after the tourney. I've heard them offer Worwick coins for an hour of Tycho's company. I've watched Worwick consider it.

The boy knows how to make himself scarce.

I've spent the last few weeks trying to make sure he knows how to defend himself instead.

"How many do you have left?" I call to him.

"Three," he calls back. He drags a forearm across his brow. "Silver hell, it's hot."

I look out the stall window at the angle of the sun. We have a few hours left until sunset. "I'll take your three. Head for the Growling Dog. Jodi said she would have crabs from Silvermoon this week."

He steps out of his stall. "Hawk. Jodi's tavern is on the other side of the city."

Hawk. Three months, and I still haven't gotten used to the name. I shove damp hair off my forehead and smile. "Then you'd better get running. Steamed crabs cost a copper apiece."

He sighs—but a moment later, I hear his feet slap the dirt floor of the aisle. "When I win, I'm ordering a *dozen*," he calls behind him.

He won't win. Even with the head start I've given him.

He's getting closer, though.

When I first came here, I was still healing from my final battle with Lilith. Nightmares plagued my sleep for weeks, leaving me exhausted and weak. Cleaning stalls and weapons took most of my energy.

Once I healed, however, the monotony of life at the tourney began leaving me bored and twitchy. I missed the physical rigors of the Royal Guard. A few hours with a pitchfork and a rag were nothing compared to hours of drills and swordplay. I began rising before the sun, running a loop of the city in the early morning darkness, or climbing the laddered roof supports of the stadium.

I don't know how long Tycho was following me before I caught him, but it was early enough that I was still terrified of being discovered. He was lucky I didn't have a blade on me.

Or maybe *I* was lucky. My skills with weapons would definitely draw attention. If anyone comes looking for a skilled swordsman, I don't want anyone pointing to me. Sometimes I'll spar with Tycho using the blades we keep for practice, but I'm careful to execute only basic moves, and I let him get in a lot of hits.

A wagon creaks outside, with the clopping heaviness of draft horses. A man's blustering voice calls out, "Tycho! Hawk! Come see what I've got!"

Worwick. I sigh. He could have anything, from a slab of ice to a rusted nail to a fisherman's corpse.

Considering this heat, I very much hope it's not the latter.

I step out of the stables, wiping my hands along my trousers. The wagon carries a massive crate, taller than a man, covered by a huge length of fabric that's tied down at the corners. The draft horses are slick with sweat, froth dripping from their mouths.

Worwick always drives the animals too hard. I'll have to wash

them down before running across the city. Tycho might win today after all.

Worwick looks like he's found a pile of the king's silver. He practically bounces down from the seat of the wagon, and considering his heft, that's saying something. He pulls a rag from his pocket and mops his drenched brow. "You won't believe this," he says. "You simply won't believe this."

"What do you have?" I say.

"Where's Tycho?" Worwick all but cackles with glee. "I want to see his reaction."

Racing me to the tavern for steamed crabs that I'll have to buy if you drag this out too long. "I sent him into the city for an ointment for one of the horses."

"Ah. Too bad." He sighs with disappointment. "I'll just have to see yours, then."

I likely won't have much of a reaction, and he knows it. Worwick finds me stoic and unimaginative. I spent far too long serving the crown prince—in both his human and his monster form—to bat an eye at anything Worwick might have under this sheet.

He's not a bad man, just a bit crude, and too driven by what will bring him an extra coin for his pocket. As Commander Grey, I would have pitied him.

As Hawk, I simply tolerate him.

"Go ahead, then," I say.

"Help me untie the canvas."

The ropes are tight and double knotted. I'm on the second corner when I realize he's still on the ground, watching me.

Typical. The second rope gives, and I flip the sheet high.

It's a cage. I'm staring down at . . . a creature I can't identify.

It's somewhat human-shaped, with dark-gray skin, the color of a cloudy night sky. Wings bound with rope sprout from its back, and there's a length of tail that curls limply along the ground of the cage. It has clawed hands and feet, and a shock of black hair that's matted with sweat.

It's not moving.

"Goodness," says Worwick. "Do you think it died?"

"If it's not dead, it's close." I cast a dark look at him. "How long has it been covered up like that?"

"Two hours."

"In this heat?"

He puts a hand to his mouth. "Oh dear."

"It needs water." When he doesn't move, I jump off the wagon and fetch a bucket from the stable.

The creature still hasn't moved by the time I return. I climb back on the wagon and crouch beside the cage. I watch its rib cage expanding slowly. At least it's breathing. I take a handful of water and extend my hand through the bars, trickling it along its face. Its nose is slightly narrower than a human's, its jaw wider. The water makes a trail along the smoke-colored skin.

"What is it?" I say to Worwick. "Where did you get it?"

"It's a scaver," he says. "They said it was captured far in the north, in the ice forests beyond Syhl Shallow. I won it in a game of cards! Fortune smiled on me today, my boy."

A scaver. I remember a childhood story about something like this, but it's been too long for me to remember much. "I thought those were a myth. Something to scare children."

"Apparently not."

I take another handful of water and let it run down over its

face, then cluck to it like a horse. The scraver's eyelids flicker, but it does not move.

"Can you believe," says Worwick, "that they were charging two coppers just to look at it? Absolutely shameful."

My eyebrows go up. Sympathy isn't something I often hear from Worwick. "I agree."

"Exactly! For a scraver? People would surely pay five."

Ah. There it is.

When I take a third handful of water, the creature twitches. Its mouth moves, seeking the water. Claws scrape against the floor of the cage as it tries to pull nearer to me. Its movements are weak and pitiful.

"Easy now," I say softly. "I have more." I take another handful of water. I'll have to fetch a ladle.

The scraver inhales deeply, its nostrils flaring, and a low sound comes from its chest. I put my hand as close to its lips as I can manage.

Its eyes open, and they're all black. The low sound becomes a growl.

"Easy," I say again. "I won't hurt—"

It lunges for my hand. I'm quick, but it's quicker. Fangs sink into my wrist before I can get my arm out of the cage. I jerk free and stumble back, tripping over the bucket of water and all but falling off the wagon.

Worwick stares down at me, then bursts out laughing. "No, no. It was better that you were here. I don't think Tycho would have had the nerve to put a hand in there with it."

Silver hell. My wrist is bleeding something fierce. Dirt and sweat have already set it stinging.

The scraver has retreated to the opposite side of its cage. From here, I can tell it's unashamedly male. It's glaring at me, fangs half bared, his eyes pools of dark warning.

"You're going to have to wait for water now," I say.

"What do you think we should do with it?" says Worwick.

I sigh. My wrist burns, and I'm starving. I'm going to have to fetch Tycho and be back before dark, or there will be hell to pay. "We can't leave it out here in the sun. Let's take the wagon into the stadium," I say. "We can figure out what to do with it after the tourney."

"Hawk, you're a good man." He claps me on the shoulder. "I'll be in my office if you need me."

Lucky me.



Tycho is sitting at the bar, a half-eaten platter of crabs in front of him and a smile on his face. It's early for the tavern, too, so the place isn't crowded, and Tycho has the bar to himself. He looks so pleased with himself that I'm almost glad Worwick rolled into the courtyard with a problem he expected me to solve.

I can't help but smile back. "Don't get cocky."

He grins at Jodi, the young woman behind the bar. "I think I'll have another dozen. Hawk is buying."

She smiles, her golden-brown eyes shining. "So you've said."

I snort. "You'll make yourself sick on what's in front of you. I'm not carrying you back."

"I know." He pushes the tray over. "The other half are for you."

I climb onto the stool beside him, and Jodi slides a plate and a knife onto the counter for me. My trip across the city was long and

grueling and destroyed my appetite, but I take a crab from the pile anyway. Tycho is usually so reserved that I don't want to rain on his spirit.

Jodi comes to lean against the bar. Her brown hair hangs to her waist, with feathers and stones braided into some of the strands. She's tan from the sun, with freckles on her cheeks and a tiny gap between her front two teeth. Her chest all but spills out of her dress when she rests against her forearms, and she offers me a wide smile.

It's an effect not lost on me, but I spent so long forswearing any kind of relationship that I've forgotten what a flare of attraction could feel like.

No. That is not true. I remember Harper. I remember the kindness in her eyes and her endless tenacity and the feel of her hand under mine when I showed her how to throw knives in the snow.

That was forbidden then, and it's forbidden now. Thoughts of Harper will go nowhere useful, so I shove them away.

"Wine or ale?" Jodi says.

"Water." I split a crab leg with the knife and pull the meat free. "If you please."

She pouts. "You never drink."

I shrug. "Tycho already spent my coins on the food." This isn't true, but I have no head for spirits. It wasn't allowed when I was a guardsman, and the one time I shared a bottle with Rhen, it nearly put me on the floor. As Hawk, I worry what truths would spill from my lips if I dared to try.

Then again, maybe they wouldn't. When I was in the Royal Guard, I always felt that my life had been split into two acts. There was before, when I was a young farm boy, looking for a way to help keep my family alive.

Then there was after, when I was a guardsman, making my life by keeping the royal family alive. There were times when my family became a distant memory, almost people my imagination conjured instead of individuals I'd lived with and cared for.

Now it seems I've found a third act. Some days the castle and the curse feel as imaginary as my family. I don't know how much of Grey the guardsman is left.

Jodi sets a glass of water in front of me. I drain half in one swallow, wipe at my mouth with a napkin, then split another crab leg with the knife.

"You eat like a nobleman," she says, her tone musing. "I don't think I ever noticed that before."

My fingers hesitate, but I force my hand to move, to split another shell. She's not wrong, but it's not something I ever considered: I eat like a man who was trained to dine with royalty.

I try to do it more clumsily, though it probably looks forced. In a moment, I'm going to take off a finger with the knife. I offer Jodi a smile and give Tycho a good-natured shove. "It's more likely that you're used to drunkards digging for the meat with their teeth."

Tycho smiles shyly. "I'm not drunk, at least." His eyes fall on the makeshift bandage I wrapped around my arm. "What did you do to your wrist?"

I break the next crab leg in half with my hands, conscious of the fact that Jodi is watching me now. "Worwick has a new pet."

"A new *pet*?"

Before I can answer, the door at the front of the tavern swings open with enough force to bounce against the opposing wall. Half a dozen men come through, fully armed, their armor bearing the gold and red crest of Emberfall.

Not Royal Guardsmen, but soldiers in the King's Army. I freeze, then force myself to turn back to my food. Beside me, Tycho goes equally quiet, for his own reasons.

I suddenly find myself very much wishing for a sword at my hip. My fingers casually wrap around the hilt of the knife.

I am likely being foolish. I only got a cursory glance, but I don't recognize any of them. It would be very unlikely for them to recognize *me*. My hair has grown out a bit, and my face is unshaven.

With any luck, no one is looking for me anyway. I simply have no way to know.

One of the men steps up to the bar. He flips a bronze coin down onto the wood. "Food and wine for my men, if you please."

Jodi pockets the coin and offers a curtsy. "Right away, my lord."

He's no lord, but he'll eat that right up. Two of his men whistle from the table they've taken near the door.

The soldier tosses another bronze on the bar and clears his throat. "You have my thanks."

"As you have mine." She pockets this coin too, and as he turns away, Jodi winks at me.

I can barely smile back. I'm too worried about what they're doing here. We're far from the border. This is not a town that sees many soldiers.

The man pauses before moving away. He's looking at me.

I take a sip from my glass and measure the weight of the knife between my fingers. I can lodge it in his throat without thought. My arm remembers the motion. It's lighter than my throwing knives were, so it wouldn't take as much—

"Are those steamed crabs?" he says. "We haven't seen shellfish in ages."

I clear my throat and force my fingers to let go of the knife. When I speak, my voice sounds rough. “Jodi makes the best in the city.”

“We picked the right place then.”

I finally look at him. I have to take the chance, because otherwise I’ll look like I’m hiding something.

He’s dark-haired, with ruddy skin and a large build. I don’t recognize him at all. Relief slides through my chest, and I take a breath. “You won’t regret it.” I pause. “Traveling far?”

“Heading north, to Hutchins Forge,” he says. “Official business.”

“Of course.” I offer him a nod, then slide off the bar stool. “Travel safely, Soldier.” I drop a handful of coins beside my plate. “Tycho, we’re due back.”

We haven’t finished what was on the tray, but he scurries off the stool and follows me to the door. We step out into the blazing sunlight.

Before the door swings closed, I hear one of the soldiers say, “For the love of silver, Captain, people know towns are rebelling because of another heir. The rumors are in every city.”

I grab hold of Tycho’s sleeve and hold my breath, hoping to hear more.

“What do you think the prince will do when he finds him?” says one of the others.

The captain snorts. “Take his head off, most likely. The king is dead. The crown prince will take his place. He’s not going to let some outsider—”

The door swings shut, leaving us out in the sunlight.

Tycho peers up at me. “Those soldiers made you nervous.”

I don’t like that he saw right through me. I bump him with my shoulder. “They made you nervous, too.”

He blushes and looks away.

I shouldn't have said that. I was trying to take the focus off myself, but instead, I put it squarely on him. "Race you back?" I say.

"I thought you were out of coppers."

"If you win, I'll do all your stalls tomorrow."

He grins and takes off without hesitation, without even considering the heat or the food that fills his belly. I'll probably find him vomiting shellfish halfway back.

I keep walking.

The king is dead.

The crown prince will take his place.

The crown prince *should* take his place. It creates a pull in my chest I did not expect. I once swore my life to Rhen, for this very reason. To be a part of something bigger than myself.

Now I am here, in the dusty streets of Rillisk, barely more than a stable hand. The secret half-brother to the Crown Prince of Emberfall. The missing heir who doesn't want to be found.

Part of absolutely nothing at all.

CHAPTER THREE



LIA MARA

I've been peering out the carriage window for miles. The air on this side of the mountains has a weight to it, a heavy stickiness that makes me wish I could travel in a vest and leggings instead of my royal robes. The beauty of the landscape is worth it, though. Beyond the mountains, Syhl Shallow consists of miles of flat farmland, broken only by occasional cities and only one narrow river. Emberfall has been a wealth of valleys and forests and varying terrain.

Plus a few burned-out cities, charred remains left by our own soldiers when Mother first tried to take this land.

Those always force my eyes back into the carriage. I have no interest in seeing the destruction wrought by our people.

A pattern of destruction I once thought I could change, until Mother named my younger sister as heir.

Across from me, my sister looks unaffected by the weather and the scenery. Nolla Verin is sitting in the shadows, embroidering with red and silver thread. Knowing her, it's an adornment for one of her horses.

She would not flinch from the sight of burned-out cities. Nolla Verin would not flinch from anything.

That is why my sister has been named heir, and not me.

Nolla Verin's mouth is curved with soft amusement. "Lia Mara. You do realize we will be seen as hostile," she says in Syssalah, our language.

I do not take my eyes off the lush greenery. "Mother has tried to raze this country. How could we be seen any differently?"

"I am thinking you would make an easy target, leaning out the window with your mouth hanging open."

I close my mouth and settle back into my seat, allowing the sheer curtain to fall over the window.

Nolla Verin's smile widens. "And everyone always says you are the clever one."

"Ah, yes. Though I do prefer that to being called the *sturdy* one."

She laughs softly. "Keep a list. When I am queen, I will have them all executed on your behalf."

When I am queen.

I smile and hope she does not see the hint of sadness behind it.

Not because I am jealous. We promised each other long ago that we would support whoever was chosen. And though she is two years younger than I am, even at sixteen she could not be better suited to inherit the crown from our mother. Nolla Verin was practically born with a bow and arrow in hand, not to mention a sword at her hip. Like our mother, she has no hesitation in using either. She can break the most aggressive horse in the stables, and in fact many of the Royal Houses have begun sending their colts to her for training, just to brag that their steeds were tamed by the great queen's daughter.

Nolla Verin and our mother also share the same affinity for swift, brutal judgment.

That is what makes me sad. My sister laughs at the thought of execution.

Because she is not joking.

Their resemblance does not end there. Nolla Verin and Mother share the same build, small and lithe and athletic—perfectly fit for the battlefield. The only trait I share with our mother is my red hair, though mine hangs to my waist, while Mother keeps hers shorter. Nolla Verin’s hair is a shiny curtain of black. I am not small and I am not nimble, leading many at court to remark on my cleverness when they’re being kind—and my “sturdiness” when they’re not.

My sister has gone back to her embroidery. Her fingers fly back and forth across the fabric. If she is nervous, she shows no sign of it.

Our traveling party is not large. Sorra and Parrish are my personal guards, and they ride at the back. Tik and Dyhl, Nolla Verin’s guards, ride at the center. My mother has four personal guards, and they surround her carriage at the front.

“What if the prince rejects Mother’s offer?” I say.

Her eyes lift from the fabric. “He would be a fool. Our forces could destroy this pathetic country.”

I glance at the window. So far, I have not found Emberfall to be *pathetic*. And Prince Rhen was able to drive our forces back through the mountain pass, so it seems that we would be wise to be cautious.

“Hmm,” I say, “and do you think this destruction will lead to people being willing to work the waterways we so desperately need?”

“Our people can learn.”

“I feel they could learn more quickly from people who already possess the skills.”

She sighs patronizingly. “You would likely beg for instruction with nuts and honey.”

I look away, out the window. I’d rather ask for help than order it with a sword in hand, but this is another reminder of why Nolla Verin has been chosen instead of me.

“We can leave a few alive, if need be,” she says. “They’ll be desperate to help.”

“We can leave them *all* alive if Mother secures an alliance.”

“And we will. Prince Rhen’s monstrous creature is gone,” Nolla Verin says. “Our spies have reported that his cities are beginning to question his right to rule. If he wants to keep this silly country, he will accept.”

She is so practical. My lip quirks up. “What if you do not like him?”

She rolls her eyes. “As if that matters. I can bed a man without liking him.”

I blush at her boldness. “Nolla Verin. Have you . . . *done* that?”

“Well. No.” Her eyes flick up to meet mine, and her fingers go still on her embroidery. “Have you?”

My blush deepens. “Of course not.”

Nolla Verin’s eyes widen. “Then you should do it first and tell me what to expect. Are you bored now? I shall call for Parrish right this very moment. Or would you fancy Dyhl instead? You can have the carriage—”

I giggle and throw a brocade cushion at her. “You will do no such thing.”

She dodges the pillow without missing a stitch. “I am just asking you to be sisterly.”

“What of Prince Rhen’s betrothed?”

“Princess Harper?” Nolla Verin pulls her thread tight and knots it off. “She can bed who she chooses, too.”

“Do not be coy, Sister.”

She sighs. “I am not worried. Their alliance means nothing. Three months have passed since the prince supposedly allied Emberfall with the mysterious Disi. No forces have arrived. Mother does not think the prince has been fully honest with his people, and I am inclined to agree.”

I am too. While Nolla Verin prefers to spend her time on the training field, I prefer to spend hours each week under the tutelage of Mother’s chief advisor, Clanna Sun, learning about military strategy or the intricate interweaving of the Royal Houses. Over the last few months, it seemed that Prince Rhen was assembling an army that could produce a threat—but somehow one has never materialized. I do find it curious that the prince would continue courting the Princess of Disi if their alliance has fallen apart. Emberfall is weak. He needs to tie himself to a country that can offer the support his land needs to thrive.

A country like Syhl Shallow.

The curtain flutters at the window, and in the distance, I see the charred remnants of another destroyed town. My throat tightens. Mother’s soldiers were thorough.

I look back at my sister. “What makes you think the prince will even grant us an audience?”

“Mother has information he wants.” Her fingers fly through the fabric. “Do you remember, months ago, when that enchantress came to the Crystal Palace?”

I do. The woman had beautiful alabaster skin framed by silken black tresses, and a gown of the deepest blue. When she first appeared, claiming to be a magesmith, Mother had laughed in her face, but the woman caused one of her guards to collapse at her feet without laying a hand on him. Mother granted an audience after that. They disappeared into the throne room for hours.

Nolla Verin and I had hung back to whisper about it. You didn't have to be a great student of history to know that anyone with magic had been driven out of the Ishellasa ice forests decades ago. They used their magic to cross the Frozen River, then tried to settle in Syhl Shallow, but my grandmother refused. They sought shelter in Emberfall—where they were granted asylum, but later, after some kind of trickery on the king, they were all executed.

Except, apparently, the enchantress.

"Of course," I say. "She was the last one."

My sister shakes her head. "Apparently another survived somehow. Mother told me last night while we were preparing for our journey."

Of course Mother told her, and not me. Because Nolla Verin is the heir.

I am not jealous. My sister will make a great queen.

I swallow. "Another survived?"

"Yes. She was seeking the other."

"Why?"

"Because he is more than a man with magic in his blood." She pierces the fabric with her needle. Scarlet thread flies through the white silk like a bleeding wound. "The other magesmith is the true heir to the throne of Emberfall."

I gasp. "Truly?"

"Yes." Her eyes flash. Nolla Verin *loves* a good bit of gossip. "But the prince has no idea who he is."

What a scandal. Magic is no more welcome in Emberfall than it was in Syhl Shallow. I wonder if Rhen's people know. I wonder how they will react.

I imagine living the rest of my life like this, learning information about warring kingdoms like a dog seeking scraps beside a butcher's block.

I swallow again. "Does Mother know who the heir is?"

"No. Before she left, the enchantress said there was only one man who knows his identity."

"Who?"

"The commander of the prince's guard." She ties off her thread and snaps it with her teeth. "A man named Grey."



By nightfall, we are miles from the last town we've passed, and my mother orders the guards to stop and make camp. If we were traveling through Syhl Shallow, large tents would be erected for our comfort, but here in Emberfall, we must be discreet.

Nolla Verin and I share a narrow tent. Sorra and Parrish, my guards, have spread blankets along the ground to make a round space resembling a nest of pillows and blankets. We haven't shared a space like this since we were very young, and I'm grateful for it.

My sister has already reclined among her pillows, and her eyes narrow mischievously. "These blankets are quite soft. Are you certain you would not prefer to share them with Parrish?"

My cheeks flare with heat. It was one thing to joke in the privacy of our carriage. Entirely another to say such things when the man in question stands on the other side of an opaque length of fabric. Being named heir has emboldened her—just as it's stripped away some of my own confidence.

“Hush,” I whisper at her.

Her smile widens. “I am merely asking. It may make for a more interesting evening.”

I glance at Parrish’s shadow on the other side of the curtain, then shift closer to Nolla Verin. “I believe he fancies Sorra.”

Her eyebrows go up. “You do?”

I arrange the blankets around me carefully and force my voice to be bored, because I do not want her to needle my guards. “I have long suspected.”

I have done more than suspect. A year ago, during the midwinter celebration, I found Parrish and Sorra kissing in the wooded darkness beyond our palace. They broke apart hurriedly, stars in their eyes and a blush on Sorra’s pale cheeks.

“Do not stop on my account,” I said to them, then turned and fled back to the party before my own blush could flare.

No man has ever looked at me the way Parrish was looking at Sorra. I thought about that kiss far longer than I’d admit.

Sorra is always cool and distant, stoic and fierce like all the guards, with her brown hair bound into a tight braid that hangs trapped beneath her armor. She wears no adornments on her lean body, no kohl darkens her eyes or rouge brightens her cheeks, but anyone can see the gentle beauty in her face. Parrish is equally lean, slighter of build than many of the men, but he’s quick and skilled. Many think he is quiet, but I know he’s simply careful with his words. When I’m alone with my guards, he’s rather funny. In fact, he can often pull a smile out of Sorra with barely more than a glance.

My sister is studying me. Her voice finally drops until it is almost inaudible. “Lia Mara. Do *you* fancy Parrish?”

“What? No! Of course not.”

Her eyes scrutinize my face. “Do you fancy Sorra?”

“No.” I finally meet her eyes. “I fancy . . .” My voice trails off and I sigh.

“Who?” She giggles and shifts closer. “Oh, you *must* tell me.”

“I fancy the idea of a man fancying me.” My blush deepens. “I fancy the idea of a companion.”

“Ugh.” She rolls onto her back, disappointed. “You are a princess, Lia Mara. They all fancy you.”

That is decidedly untrue. No man at court seeks a woman who would rather discuss extensive strategy or ancient mythology than display her skills on the battlefield—or in a ballroom. “I do not want a man to fancy me because I am Karis Luran’s daughter. I do not want someone’s attention because he believes I will bring him political favor in our mother’s court.”

“Well. That is all the women of our bloodline are worth to any man.”

Her voice is so practical—this doesn’t seem to bother her at all. Maybe she wasn’t teasing about bedding the prince or asking me to experience it first so I can describe it to her. Maybe my sister looks at such a thing as just another royal obligation. Something else to practice so she can be perfect.

I flop down on the blankets beside her, staring up at the darkening panels of fabric. “This is why I am far more enamored of the men in my stories.”

“Oh, I am certain those dry pages keep you quite warm at night.”

“You’re so vulgar.” I giggle and turn my head to look at her.

She makes a lewd gesture and grins. I smack her hand away, and she laughs.

I know she will make an exceptional queen, but I want to

remember my sister just like this, with a soft smile just for me, no vicious determination in her gaze.

A shout echoes through the camp, followed by more yelling, and then a girl screams. A man speaks rapidly in the common tongue of Emberfall, his accent much thicker than the one our tutor has. It takes me a moment to parse out the words.

“Please,” he is saying. “We mean no harm. Please allow us passage.”

Nolla Verin is already through the panels of our tent, and I am quick to follow.

Our guards have built a fire, and a few hare hang on a spit above it. No one is paying attention to the food, though. Tik and Dyhl have their crossbows trained on a middle-aged man who is on his knees, crouched over a young girl, blocking her with his body. A thick beard covers most of his face. A few brown pelts lie in a pile beside him.

My mother stands in the firelight, tall and lean and striking, her red hair hanging straight to her shoulders. “What is your business here?” she says.

“I am a trapper,” he says. “I saw your fire and thought—” He breaks off with a gasp as Dyhl moves close enough to drive the point of his crossbow into the man’s back. From where he stands, if Dyhl pulls the trigger, the force of the weapon will drive the arrow into both the man and the girl.

“I-I-I am unarmed,” the man stammers.

“You wear a knife at your hip,” says my mother. It’s right there in plain sight. She doesn’t suffer fools.

His hand shifts as if to go for the weapon, but Tik, standing in front of him, lifts his crossbow just a hair. The man’s hand goes up

as if to prove he's harmless. "The knife is dull!" he cries. The girl whimpers underneath him. "For skinning. Take it. Take everything I have."

My heart thuds in my chest. We've ridden past the remains of towns—destruction caused by our soldiers. The population here is sparse, but we are also trying to make our way to the prince's castle under some veil of secrecy. If we allow this man to leave and he spreads the word, we could be attacked before our arrival. As my sister said, we are in hostile territory.

Hostile because of our own actions, my thoughts whisper to me.

If I did not want to see the result of our attacks on Emberfall, I most certainly do not want to see slaughter before my own eyes.

At my side, Nolla Verin does not look affected. She looks curious. She is waiting to see how our mother will handle this invasion.

To my surprise, Mother turns to look at Nolla Verin. "My daughter will decide your fate, trapper."

My sister straightens. This is not the first time Mother has looked to either of us for a decision, but it is the first time real lives have hung in the balance.

The man's eyes lock on my sister. From below his arm, the girl peers out. Tears streak through the dust on her cheeks.

"Please," the man says, and his voice is rough. "We have no part in the quarrel between your people and ours."

I cannot see my sister's expression, but the man's eyes fill with sorrow at whatever he finds there, and he turns his head to speak softly to the girl cowering beneath him. A sob breaks from her chest.

I reach out and grasp my sister's hand. "Nolla Verin," I whisper. "We are here to find a path to peace."

She squeezes my fingers, then glances at me. I want there to be

a flicker of indecision in her eyes. Of dismay at having to make such a choice.

There is none. She looks back at Dyhl. "Kill him."

The girl screams. The crossbow fires. The man collapses. The girl is no longer visible. The bolt must have gone right through them both.

Silence envelops the forest.

It does not last long. Nolla Verin looks to the guards. "Double the number of lookouts through the night. I do not want another *trapper* stumbling into our camp."

She turns on her heel and returns to our tent.

I cannot follow. Every guard in this clearing can probably sense my unhappiness.

Mother surely can.

I turn from the bodies as well. I cannot go back to our tent, but I can walk. Sorra and Parrish will follow, though I do not feel as though I deserve guards. Not now. I step into the heavy darkness surrounding the camp.

A bit of gold glints between the trees, barely caught by the firelight. I freeze, narrowing my eyes.

Not gold. Blond. Hair. A girl, larger than the one who was pinned beneath the man. Her hands are over her face, her shoulders shaking. A long strand of pelts hangs from one shoulder.

She is crying.

Her eyes meet mine, and she gasps. She goes still, panic washing over her face.

I give a brief shake of my head. So brief it's almost invisible. *No*, I want to say. *Stay away*.

Run.

“Lia Mara,” my mother calls.

I should not care about one man and his daughter. *Daughters.*
I swallow.

I should not care.

Mother will not call my name twice. I turn, awaiting a rebuke.

Parrish, my guard, is right there, almost beside me. He followed me into the trees, as he should, but one look at his eyes and I know he’s seen the girl, too. His own crossbow hangs ready in his hand, and a swell of fear rises in my gut.

He gives a brief shake of his head, the movement as minute as mine was. “You should not walk into the forest,” he says. “Who knows what other dangers hide among the trees.”

I must fight to keep from gasping in relief. He will not pursue her.

My gaze returns to the spot where the girl hid. Only darkness waits there now.

If I look back at Parrish, Mother will know something is amiss. I straighten my shoulders. “Yes, Mother.”

“Come join me.”

She is sitting by the fire. Near the bodies.

This will be my punishment. For being too soft. For begging mercy.

This is why Nolla Verin will be queen.