Summary

VICTORY COMES AT A PRICE.
Mare Barrow learned this all too well when Cal's betrayal nearly destroyed her. Now determined to protect her heart-and secure freedom for Reds and newbloods like her-Mare resolves to overthrow the kingdom of Norta once and for all . . . starting with the crown on Maven's head.

But no battle is won alone, and before the Reds may rise as one, Mare must side with the boy who broke her heart in order to defeat the boy who almost broke her. Cal's powerful Silver allies, alongside Mare and the Scarlet Guard, prove a formidable force. But Maven is driven by an obsession so deep, he will stop at nothing to have Mare as his own again, even if it means demolish everything-and everyone-in his path.

War is coming, and all Mare has fought for hangs in the balance. Will victory be enough to topple the Silver kingdoms? Or will the little lightning girl be forever silenced?

In the epic conclusion to Victoria Aveyard's stunning series, Mare must embrace her fate and summon all her power . . . for all will be tested, but not all will survive.

*Excerpt above is from the official War Storm preview.*
*I've taken multiple ideas from Victoria Aveyard's Tumblr. THESE IDEAS ARE NOT MY OWN.*
Chapter 1

Mare

We're going to let them kill each other. I remember my own thoughts while sitting in the dark room. My enemies have given me a bedchamber at the Ridge House, and it's disgusting in its own way. Plush, thick bedcovers, I rest upon; they're unnecessary when I have the relentless heat of the summertime clawing its way in through walls. A small bathroom lays in one of the corners, in a similar spot compared to my prison room at Whitefire; I can't help but wonder if the Samo's gave me this space as a cruel joke. I'd leave it if I had the capacity to do so, but it's been mere hours. I'll be honest. It's not only him I'm afraid of facing. Anyone at all. Even Cameron, who's never been very sentimental. Or smiling silver, who's relieved Tiberias has started his quest for the throne.

Tiberias. It pains and soothes me to use his true name. For one, it's a reminder of who he really is. Who he always has been. Secondly, it lets me forget who he was to me. So perhaps I shouldn't call him anything. Just him.

I chastise myself for the thought diving into my head, yet there's no point in denying it. If I had the choice, I'd choose to be back in my chambers at the palace, wrists wrapped in the manacles that rubbed them barren. No freedom whatsoever. But that's the idea; at least that way, I wouldn't have to select whether or not I should walk out the door. Still, is it all that different? It seems now I still reside in a cage; the form of imprisonment is simply much more complex.

New tears slip out, joining the ones that already formed a shallow pool on my cheeks. "It's okay," I whisper to none other than myself. "It's okay." It's pathetic I have to tell myself this, but no one else is here to comfort me. Kilorn and my family stayed behind at the Piedmont base when I went off to defend Corvium, and as far as I know, that's still where they reside. I'll be surprised if they get word of what's happening in less than a week. Or if anyone tells them at all. It may change everything for me, but the Scarlet Guard was always prepared for this day. Like the silvers will give into democracy so easily. They've been killing each other for power for hundreds of years. How they would react if reds wanted power. It'll be a bloodbath. So why would the Guard tell their own people? That will only create unnecessary tension. There's already far too much of that. One of their top sayings; no one knows more than what they must.

I've been sitting up straight-backed for what feels like hours, the tenseness never failing to continue to work over every part of my body. I roll out my neck in circles, then stretching out my legs, finally making an attempt to stand. Do one thing for yourself today, I tell myself. No matter how little it is.

Though I never make it. I collapse on the floor midway to the chair I was aiming for. I should've been asleep hours ago, yet I'm certain my weakness isn't from fatigue. A feeble whimper escapes from my mouth, a sound I'd be mortified of if anyone else had heard it. Next, my throat clenches up, leaving me gasping for air; teardrops stream more hastily than ever down my face until soundlessly sloshing to the marble floor. Sobs freely crash out of me now, with no restraint. I yearn to scream, so the entire kingdom can hear my agony, yet the last cord of dignity I have holds firm. So instead I remain on the icy plates of black, shiny marble, and containing what I wish to let out. Choking on my own breath as if it was water. The absolute epitome of misery.

It is only then, I truly perceive it. I have never hated a man so much. But moreso, I have never hated myself more. For being so foolish as to fall for a prince, groomed all his life for the throne. I shouldn't have ever reached into his pocket to pickpocket him, as that only let him reach into my heart. The heart is a sacred place, meant for only the purest of individuals to be given a place in.
And then for years, I shook my head at the girls in the Stilts who would become entranced with one boy after another. Almost every last one ended with the same quivering lip and rapidly blinking eyes, racing back to their homes to apologize to their parents for sneaking out of their windows late at night, telling them over and over how silly they had been. Acting as if it were their decision to call the relationships off.

Now I lay here, making no attempt to cover my tears, and with a lip that quivers. Am I no better than the girls I once called foolish? Shivers rake through me, despite the summer's warmth; the estate of Rift is made up of a majority of metal, often making the ground as cold as snow. You deserve this, I confess to myself. I've earned nothing more than to suffer on this ice-cold platform, where teardrops may freeze if given long enough. However, maybe I need this. To purge the excessive heat I've become accustomed to. I once wished to burn. Now I want nothing more than to frost over.

At this very moment, I decide something for myself. I will protect my heart at all costs, and if that means transforming it into a frozen fortress, very well. Long blades of ice shall protrude, cutting anyone who dares to touch it. I once thought of him as a distraction. There were far more important things to deal with than a handsome boy. But then my ice crumpled, and I made an irrational decision. I won't be so brainless to make the same decision twice. The war deserves all of my focus, not any less.

Still, I weep. A wound as raw as mine couldn't be healed in a day, let alone hours. I don't lie down on my bed, anxious I'll break down once more, only worse. They gave me a large bed, just a big as the one I had while imprisoned. Much finer than the cot I shared with him at Notch, as well as the bed we shared in the Piedmont barracks. The mattress that I face now is too much for a single person. I recollect the day Evangeline led me to Maven's rooms. The tiny bed, meant for a boy. Perhaps that was one of the ways he tricked himself into believing he wasn't so alone. Pretending to be a child.

Children don't pretend to rid themselves of problems, they're simply unaware there was a problem to begin with. Too caught up in their own heads, filled with the silliest of imaginations. Far too pure, to understand that there is anything wrong with the world. I treasure nostalgia, though it's a bitch. It was a simpler time when I saw the world as transparent. No lying. No inequality. But when I came of age, I opened my eyes. I had to smuggle money to purchase a cast for my broken leg, despite the healers that roamed the marketplace each day. Another day, I ran ahead of my brothers to see what stood past the village. I saw magnificent crystal white homes, with the greenest of grass. Before, I had assumed everyone lived the same; powers or not. From there, I quickly learned that the society I lived in was far from perfect, continually a cloudy gray orb, where only the strongest could navigate. Where the weak would be crippled, never given good odds. Sent to fight in a pointless war, and to die in cold blood.

I cling to the small piece of comfort Davidson awarded me yesterday. If we win the war, the Guard would make certain nothing like this would ever happen again. Yet doubt still sticks to me like an extra limb as exhaustion tugs me towards the welcoming darkness my eyes have begun to see. I can only believe it will be a dreamless one.

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I wake with cold wetness creating a thin layer of clammy sweat on my face. But I discern quickly that the sweat not only covers my face. Up and down my body, seemingly everywhere I shiver from the salty water trails. My hands shake for a purpose I do not understand and my toes prickle from a fear so deep I cannot remember what that is. Uneasiness crawls through my bones, into my every nerve, until the reaching my paled skin. Scratch marks from fingernails litter my arms,
redness evident all over.

My breath quickens when I deduct what my dream had been regarding. It had begun as a pleasant memory, innocent in every way. Cal and I had been dancing in Summerton, my clumsiness gradually beginning to improve. Only this time, when his lips pressed to mind, I felt a sharp rip at my back. As his arms came away from mine, I noticed there had been a knife in his hand, covered in scarlet. When my fingers found the area in pain, my hand came away with a sickly syrupy liquid. Blood. Only then, my naïve dream-self realized that he had stabbed me in the back. But it was no longer the flame that stood over me. Maven smirked at me, wearing a cape the same shade as the blade he possessed. In the other hand, he held gray manacles. The flame will always have a shadow and reversed. My nightmare questions how far apart the two entities really are.

"They are not the same," I speak to the floor. "Nothing alike," I say the words, nevertheless my voice sounds unconvincing. Cal is not the murderer. He is not the one who kept me locked away for six months, longer if given the chance. Yet he is the one who has broken promises, time and time again.

A soft knock taps at the door, jarring me from my train of thoughts and causing me to start. First clearing my throat, I say, "Who is it?" My voice still sounds pathetic.

"It's Farley." Her voice is tender, just as it had been in the alleyway yesterday. "Can I come in?" Though it's in the format of a question, I doubt she'll take no for an answer.

"Okay," I reply. Before she has the chance to enter, I heave myself into a wrought iron chair nearby. Wipe the tears from my face just as the door opens. Her face is a welcome sight, as it is a familiar one. It occurs to me that she was the last face I saw before I slammed the door to this room and drew the curtains shut.

After Davidson left us at Corvium, Farley did her best to comfort me while simultaneously dragging me to the plane that would take us here. She kept us away from prying eyes, taking every possible turn to avoid even a single person. And when we reached the tarmac, where hundreds of people stood, did she shoot a glare so intense it had the capability to strike fear into the hearts of Lakeland gods.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine." I don't dare to look into her eyes.

"I don't have to be a whisper to know that you're not. It's alright to be weak right now. You don't have to lie to me." Farley pulls up the seat adjacent to mine, making a shrill scraping sound.

"No. I can't afford weakness; I haven't had that privilege for a long time. And my enemies certainly won't accept that excuse when they have the opportunity to assassinate me. I've been doing fine, Farley." I question whether those words are more for myself or her. "It was a momentary lapse of strength. That's all."

My eyes meet Farley's, who stares right back skeptically. But then her frown turns into a near smile. "Then you're ready to face society again." My heart leaps up into my throat. I couldn't possibly. Farley must notice my expression because she rephrases her words. "Today is the first official meeting in favor of reuniting the rightful king of Norta with his crown." This sentence sounds so stiff and artificial; Farley probably took it directly from Anabel Lerolan.

"Farley...." I trail off, my mouth never quite finding the words to reject her. To face the Samos's and their entire court of silvers sounds impossible for a girl who's spent the last hours lying on a
floor. Though Monfort and the Scarlet Guard are pledged allies to them, and while the silvers may believe them- they'll always be my enemies.

She lets out an exasperated sigh. "Fine. I tried to be nice. The little lightning girl is a figurehead to this rebellion. Davidson and I agreed that we need you at this meeting. It'll make a statement that you aren't the smallest bit rattled. And it will shatter him to the bone. He'll be terrified of you. And isn't that what you desire?"

My head says yes, but my heart denies it. The love I had for him can't vanish over the course of a night. It's a crippled idea, but I feel the same for Cal as I once felt for Maven. That thin length of thread that refuses to snap, no matter how many facts are stacked against it. I yearn for Cal to come rushing back to me, apologizing at my boots. Yet my rational side is certain that will not happen. "Yes," I tell Farley. "I want them all to fear the little lightning girl." And perhaps she isn't so little anymore.

"Very good." Farley reaches for something that she had laid at the foot of her chair. She hands me a pair of sleek, dark brown boots, slim black pants, and a deep red, tight sleeved jacket. The same shade as the blood that flows through my veins. "Wear this."

Evangeline

My father sits at the head of the grand table, with his arms crossed smugly. His black eyes gleam with pride, as he's at last achieving the goal that has been blocked so many times. Elane offers the only comfort in this room full of selfish people, stroking her gloved hand up and down my back. No one can see her, not even me. Her father was invited to the meeting, but not Elane. It's a shock even I, the future queen of Norta was invited. When in reality, Father controls my every move. It's been like this since I was small, each and every moment dedicated to winning the Queenstrial.

Ptolemus perches on his chair, crosswise from Father. After Corvium, both he and Elane returned from the safehouse, after Rift being declared secure. With Scarlet Guard troops being positioned all throughout the hallways and on the exterior of our home, Queen Anabel and Father declared it safe for them to return. Yet Barrow has free-reign here, and I fear recent news that has been brought to light here will cause her to be unreasonable. To break the deal we made at Whitefire when I freed her. Hell, maybe she's foolish enough to kill Tiberias himself. That would solve this crisis.

Tiberias sits to my left, Queen Anabel on his other side. Though he's done well on hiding it, I see through his mask. He's exhausted and depressed. Grey rings his eyes and he laces his fingers together to prevent them from shaking. His choice has ruined my life, so the least I can do is become a permanent thorn in his side, a living reminder that the woman he rules next to will not be the one whom he loves. When I notice Anabel's attention is on my father, I scoot my chair closer to his. "You're beginning to look like your brother. The tired eyes, and the mask you're using to cover those emotions. But at least Mare's not here," I use her first name for once. "Her presence only made him worse. I wonder what his record was for hours going without sleep."

His eyes momentarily light up. Most likely pondering what question he could ask me about Mare's imprisonment. They often forget I was there to hear her screams. I forged her manacles myself. Instead, he merely responds with a single word, "Don't." It sounds more like a plea than a command. Just yesterday, I considered him a tragic puppy. And without Barrow, he's lost. Suddenly, he changes his mind. "What was the worst thing that he did to her?" He murmurs just inches away from my ear as if it's a precious secret.
I can't help but crinkle my brows at his inquest. Maven wronged the little lightning girl in so many ways over those six months, I couldn't tell him. He let Samson comb through her memories as if they were sand, and he coerced her into becoming his personal propaganda, to draw newbloods in. And I'm sure he did more, terrible things that I'm unaware of. So I give him the vaguest answer possible, which is guaranteed to madden him just as much as an actual explanation. "You're not part of her life anymore, and I don't believe she'd want me telling you such sacred information."

The only harbinger of his fury is when the room's temperature rises slightly. Though it was subtle, Tiberias's grandmother turns away from Father and begins speaking to him in a low voice. Almost as if she had been listening to our whispers all along. Anabel is a small woman, dare I say shorter than Barrow, yet she is formidable. Her tiny stature means next to nothing when I look at her eyes. Cunning, and as sharp as a steel blade. Clever enough to fool her own kin into trusting her motives; she will never go for a civilization where blood isn't a divider.

As for myself, I used to care. For a long time, I'd sneer at my red servants; I wasn't even aware of the fact that they could've slipped poison into my drinks and gotten away with it. Make it look like a heart attack and flee. I simply thought they were too dense to ever challenge their superiors.

And then I met Mare Barrow, a girl who could invoke lightning storms without raising a finger. And how I hated her; she fell into our lives; literally. She had done nothing, and instantly she became betrothed to a prince. Meanwhile, I had spent the last ten years training tirelessly, for a crown that my mother and father tricked me into thinking I wanted. I'm compelled to send a vile sneer his way, but restraint holds me back.

When blood was spilled, and we discovered her true colors, my loathing for the girl increased to another level. I volunteered myself to murder her in the Bowl of Bones, throwing all cares for my own safety away. I knew the little lightning girl was dangerous, but a mad magnetron had to be worse. Or so I thought.

Months later, when she was dragged back to Archeon, I watched her more intently than ever. It brought me so much weariness, all those months of being inches from my blades, yet never having the permission to finish her off. So I used her to make for a distraction to Maven. As days stretched into weeks, and those to months, I watched her grow frail, those manacles depleting her just as water washes down a drain. Though the last few drops of water stayed with her; she could've found death if she had truly pined for it. Stabbed herself with China from one of those broken breakfast plates.

But she never did. And perhaps that's why I don't hold animosity to her anymore; though I don't like her either. Respect, you could call it. Not many people could endure spending six months at the hands of their enemies. When I say this, I may be a hypocrite. I sit here, in our grand home, surrounded by a myriad of souls who have been treated as lesser-thans for hundreds of years. It would be veiled, but perhaps the members of the Scarlet Guard are our foes, just hiding in plain sight, prowling for a crack in our armor.

I shake my head. How ludicrous of me to think such a thing. Reds may want a revolution, that I don't mind; but they wouldn't be so foolish to overpower silvers. It would be utter chaos.

I let myself slouch, the metal backing of the seat piercing into my back. At least Whitefire wasn't comprised of ninety-percent metal. Mother doesn't give me much time to complain to myself when her snake's head lands on my shoulder and collarbone. "Now, now. Don't slouch. It's unbecoming of a lady your station." The same words, as usual, they've become a recording, always said in the same monotone voice. Even she's gotten bored of them.

I resist the itch to roll my eyes. When I was small, I'd be spanked for doing so. "Yes, Mother."
Sorry, Mother." These words have also become a routine. The snake slithers off my collarbone, all the way down to my mother's feet. I stopped flinching at it's touch years ago.

Father and Anabel resumed their conversation some time ago, and only now do I pick up on Father's words when he raises his voice. "Where are General Davidson and that Farley girl? They had better not be late-" his powerful voice softens for once, as footsteps approach the boardroom. Not two sets, but three.

"General Farley would be preferable, thank you very much," the woman's voice is heard before she's seen. They come from the hallway behind Father, their figures ghosts of people from so far away; shadows. I distinguish the third character only seconds before her features become recognizable. And when the girl is only a shadow, I can practically see the electricity waiting to burst out of her skin.

Tiberias sees it too. His face turns sheet white in an instant, as he turns away from her, to stare out the window across from him. The little lightning girl earns a great deal of gapes from the rest of the table in her bloodish-colored jacket. Not a single one of them expected her here today, least of all Tiberias. He thought he was safe, and now he stalks her reflection in the darkened diamond glass windows. I do the same. Her expression is stone cold, and hands are laced behind her back. She doesn't bother to look at the awed expressions among her peers, her gaze locked on the empty chair on the opposite far side of the table. Or at least she pretends to. I solely wonder what emotions lie underneath that stone.

I glance back at Tiberias. Still pale; he has not an ounce of skill when hiding his emotions compared to his brother. Good. Let him shame himself, and look stupid in my Father's eyes. An eon ago, I actually wished to become this boy's queen. Today, there is nothing I could wish for less.

We watch Mare pull out her chair with one arm and sit down. The woman with short blonde hair who goes by Farley sits across from her, never taking her eyes off Barrow. "Look at her. Look at what you've done to her. You've turned her to ice. And the lightning girl will forever resent you for it. These next months will surely be tiresome for you."

General Davidson slides into the final empty seat at the opposite end of the table from Father, diagonally to Barrow."Shall we commence?" He says in a level voice. Yet I'm certain something else lurks behinds those words. Davidson stares at Tiberias, waiting for a reply.

Finally, Tiberias responds, looking to the general. "Yes."
Chapter 2

Mare

My fingernails dig into the cushy fabric of the armrests that lie upon the chair, leaving impressions when I clench my fists and force myself to keep them in my lap. I don't allow my gaze to wander far, keeping it restrained to the wall in front of me. Though I've been here for only a matter of hours and seen a fraction of the palace, I get the notion that it's a dark place, though nothing like Whitefire, in its sense of grandeur, but all the same for its purpose. To scheme other's downfalls and a sanctuary for liars and narcissists.

Only a thin layer of glass separates us from the morning day outside. The Samos estate isn't nearly the size of Whitefire, nor as ornate, yet I admit it radiates a different sort of beauty. Nearly all of the building is comprised of glass and steel, a feature that would be considered positive in a magnetron's eyes. Outdoors, metals arch over the greenery, a sort of hallway I can assume. Magnolia and wisteria trees stand at the edges of the expansive lawn, the wisteria's flowers blowing in the breeze. The sun lies low on the horizon, daring to dip under. I must've slept late into the afternoon.

Davidson speaks once he takes his place at the head of the table. "Shall we commence?" There's a glint of humor in his eyes, a detail I wish to slap him for allowing.

Seconds of silence pass before anyone speaks. I glance at Volo, but he appears to be waiting with his face turned towards Cal's. A ghost of a smirk lies on the man's face.

I could concede and let my eyes wander to the glass that neighbors the pane I had been using as a distraction; to watch him, I'm dubious he isn't doing the same. I can practically feel the heat of his stare burning into my chest, so powerful it almost hurts physically.

But I never do. And at last, Cal responds with a "Yes."

Though it is neither him nor Davidson who speaks next, but Volo. "Every day that passes, the Nortan empire crumbles under the bastard's rule. Many of Norta's Houses have already left, each one believing it would be better to have a traitor on the throne over a madman."

"I'm not-" Cal begins, but is quickly cut off.

"Of course not, Your Majesty." I can't help but cringe at the King of Rift's words. Already calling him by a royal title without a crown on his head. "We've gone to extreme measures to explain to them that it was all simply a horrible misunderstanding. That the dead queen forced your hand." The man glances at me for a moment, remembering the face of Elara's killer. "My point is, that Maven will not be a king at all without his people. Soon enough the scales will turn in our favor if they haven't already. "

I didn't notice until now, but Davidson has turned slightly red in the face, and his eyebrows are drawn together. "What are you suggesting? That we sit back and wait for Maven to make a mistake? That could take years! I've never met the boy, but from the tales I've heard, he's as sharp as a knife. And with the newly bounded alliance with the Lakelands, he has compensated for the damage the loss of the High Houses caused. Perhaps he is in a weaker position from where he was six months ago. But with his betrothal to the princess, it raises the stakes for us as well."

Davidson speaks the truth. For over one-hundred years, the two silver-ruled nations bled one
another out, constantly burdening the other by their very existence. With the war over, both countries will be stronger than they have been in a very long time. While I'm obligated to believe that the war being halted is a good thing for the reds, I can also see how it could be a very, very awful thing for this group of silvers and the Guard.

"Of course not. We wouldn't cheat your Guard or Tiberias of those valuable years that could be spent rebuilding our world. And after all, we wouldn't want our rulers to grow so old and become infertile." Salt to the wound; I consider throwing my chair at the window and leaping straight out. I must maintain my dignity at all costs, and no tears may be shed. And anyway, diamondglass is bulletproof, much less chair-proof.

So instead, I resort to digging my fingers back into the chair arms, until I'm convinced any more pressure would break the material. Farley notices my discomfort--though I've kept a blank expression throughout the entire meeting--and cuts in. "Though they weren't able to be present today, I have recently spoken with the Monfort representatives, Rash and Tahir. There hasn't been a specific date set, but Monfort and the Scarlet Guard have set a goal. They want Maven off the throne within one year's time. Our organization has never had so members and allied with Monfort and the Kingdom of Rift, we've never been so powerful. The sooner the better, because the longer we wait, the greater the threat becomes of Maven discovering our locations. And when does occur, we're back to square one. In the exact same situation we were in two years ago."

"Precisely," Davidson concurs, allowing himself to slouch down a little as if rewarding himself for winning the debate.

"Well then, I suppose it's settled." Volo runs his hand through his pointed beard, trying his best to seemed pleased. Though it's evident he's not, for an unknown reason. "Just one more question then. Though I missed it, I hear that Miss Barrow spent a great deal of time with the mad king during her imprisonment. You must know him better than anyone else does. Plausibly better than Tiberias, his own brother. So tell me, Little Lighting Girl, what are Maven's weaknesses?" Instantly, all bodies are turned towards me, waiting for an answer; save for one.

Remembrances that I've strived so hard to bury come rushing back to the surface: every fruitless cry for help, the seemingly thousands of hours I spent with the boy at the breakfast table, those seldom talks we had that destroyed me, and the single kiss that he forced upon me that fateful day at breakfast. I never told anyone about that day, I realize just now. But then again, I've barely spoken about those months, picking and choosing whether certain details should be shed or hidden. It just so happens that a majority of those I've decided best remain secrets; secrets that only Maven and I will ever know about.

It greatly disturbs me to know that yet another item adds to the list of things we have in common. An additional memory comes to mind; The same? No. But perhaps...we're even. The sentence stands clear in my thoughts as if it was uttered yesterday. Everything concerning those moments I still remember perfectly, no matter how long ago I forced them away. The magnolia trees whose leaves fluttered in the breeze so elegantly. Every word. Every thought. The chance to murder the king with a watery death. He had stripped those flamemakers of his and wielded no weapons, even going to far as to stick his neck into the water. All I would have had to do was push.

"Mare?" My memories leave me and my eyes uncloud from the haziness they most likely had been covered in. Farley focuses a stare on me, that speaks of worry. "Your lip is bleeding." She motions to her own bottom lip as if touching her own will wipe away my own blood.

I lift up my arm, it's hand now shaking with no restraint. When I rub my lower sleeve to it, only a droplet comes off, mixing in perfect with the shade of the jacket. One of my incisors must have cut
Finally, I find the ability to speak and for just a moment I turn over telling my audience about the kiss; to lift a single strain off my slumped shoulders. But as quickly as the intention comes to me, it leaves. "I once asked him to kill me. For it to all be over and the grievance away from both of us. But he refused to, but he wouldn't let me leave either. And I was too proud to murder myself. So instead I sat in that lonely room for six agonizing months." While I explain, I don't bother to make eye contact with any of them, instead surveying the garden outside once more. It's quite peculiar that no birds or other life graze the lavish space; perchance they've been chased away by the residents of the home. "But over those days, the king revealed much more than he should've of about his past. You know his mother forced him to walk? She stripped him of all he was until the boy was no longer himself. And she..." I trail off, searching for the correct words.

Silence ensues for several moments, only the sound of Volo tapping his nail against the glass section of the table. Though I can't discern whether it's an actual fingernail or a piece of metal; it's merely coming from his direction.

"She took away his ability to love, until all of it was directed at her. And of course, that was artificial. But a whisper's abilities only extend so far. Not all types of love can be taken away; only twisted. Maven has few cracks in his guard, as his mother molded him to be heartless. But he loves me, if you believe there is no line between love and obsession." I say the word freely now, in contrast to last time the question was asked. Love. Because that's what it is, no matter how mangled. "So to answer your question, King Volo, I am his vulnerability."

I don't excuse myself when I push out my chair to leave. The metal on the leg of the chair scraping with the floor generates a crude sound; a noise to which makes the non-magnetrons cringe. Saline Iral goes so far as to grunt as if my action pained him. I don't look back, and thankfully no other chairs are scraped.

Left, left, right, left. I rapidly understand why this estate—which is the size of a small palace— is being used to house multiple royal families. It's a maze with high-arching walkways, that an artillery would have a trial penetrating.

My breathing turns unnerved, and my face of placidness breaks. I did my best to memorize the route Farley and I took to arrive in the meeting room, but at some point I must've taken a wrong turn. By this time, I've broken into an all-out sprint, varying from the relaxed stroll I started out with. I hear faint footsteps trailing from another hallway, and my eyes go wide with alarm when thinking about who that person could be. "No, no," I mutter, picking up my already-brisk pace. I approach the same alcove I had passed thirty seconds previous, and a sharp pain cuts into my palms. I stop in the area and bring up my hands up to inspect the source of the sting. Eight nail marks have been indented into my skin, leaving behind echoes of crimson coloring. At this moment, my last strands of strength flake out on me. I hear no footfalls any longer; their owner must've just been a roaming silver, not allowed in that exclusive meeting. I would've gleefully given up my seat for them. No mirrors watch me, nevertheless I'm certain my cheeks have reddened and tears have assuredly welled.

"Mare?" A gentle voice whispers. I have to whip around to conclude it's owner, and no sooner than I see his face, do I turn right back. Tyton faces my back and puts a hand on my shoulder, urging me to turn around.

"You shouldn't see me like this," is all I manage out. Instead, I focus on the picture before me. I stopped in a dome-like area, the walls entirely composed of glass. The floor, as always is made of iron. Behind the glass rests the same garden I had viewed earlier in the conference room. Blossoms
off a nearby wisteria tree brush on the glass, an occasional frail one falling to the blades of grass. But aside from that, I still cannot block out Tyton's reflection in the crystal-clear material. I also now see my own, looking genuinely the same as to how I predicted. "No one should see me like this."

"I haven't known you as long as Kilorn or your siblings, but I've heard you had become excellent at shutting other people out. Please don't do it again. If you let that pressure build up, you'll shatter."

I restrain from biting my lip or curling the tips of my nails in and turn to face him. "I've shattered far too many times for a lifetime. I'm used to it," I lie. Each time I break, I say this to myself. That it would impossible to break once more. If a companion crossed me or a kin was killed, I'd survive. Yet I die a little more each time it occurs. I was never the same after Shade's demise; Maven's betrayal. And I suspect this will change me permanently as well.

Tyton detects my fib. "No, you won't. Not even a being born without a soul would be okay after the trauma you've endured. It's okay to be vulnerable for once; take down your shield." Vulnerable, the last word I articulated to Volo.

I try feebly to alter the issue. "You've practically taken the sentence straight out of Farley's mouth, just adjusting a couple of the words. Did she put you up to this?"

Tyton doesn't bother trying to hide it. "Maybe," he says, which is essentially the equal of yes. "Now, please. Open up to someone, even if it's not me." My secrets are often used against me, in one way or another. How can I trust anyone anymore? It seems only myself I can rely upon, but even that too, can be a fiction.

There's an allure in his eyes, though. It produces a sincerity, that pressures me to give in to his offer. I crumple into him, transforming into a deadweight quickly. Tyton helps me down and I rest my head and back to the wall. "I long for it all to be finished." A naive statement, I'm well aware, but that doesn't make it any less true. "And then I want to go live somewhere peaceful, where I never have to hear an inkling of politics or intrigue again." A place that offers nothing to remind me of the Calore brothers.

"I'm Monfort-born, as I've said before. I've never had the tragedy of growing up in Norta as a red-blooded." He's blunt, I'll give him that much. However, sometimes the truth is best, given without an ounce of sweetener. "I've never known life the way you've lived it."

I splay my legs out in front of myself from my curled position until they're parallel with his outstretched ones. Gratified the topic of conversation has been pulled off me and onto him, I reply. "Do you like it there? In Monfort?" Rash and Tahir once requested me to come to Monfort, but I refused. If I had accepted, perhaps I wouldn't have lost those six months of my life. But I earned valuable knowledge, according to the King of Rift, anyway.

Tyton gives a thoughtful moment before responding. "In a sense, I think you'd like it there. The equality, the democracy of it all. But since the age I discovered my ability, they urged I joined their army. I was so young. I didn't even understand what the purpose of the fight was for. My country was in a state of peace, so what else mattered? But I enjoy the life of a soldier, getting revenge for my red brothers and sisters."

A breath of heavy air breaks away from my lungs. If I was ordered to get revenge for my fallen reds, I wouldn't finish by the time I died of old age. "How old were you when you discovered your power?"

"I was around the age of seven if I remember correctly. My mum wasn't letting me play ball with
my friends, and I was so sad and angry I shocked her. But still, my story's pretty anticlimactic to the tale of how you discovered your abilities." I can't help my smirk. He's right. Falling into a pit of deadly electricity in front of hundreds of sneering silvers, and coming out without a scratch easily beats his. But the smirk fades away as I remember the days following. It was the beginning of my undoing. Escaping Summerton after my performance would've been an impossible task. Too many Sentinels and an enormous wall blocked the path; the odds had never been fair.

Reds haven't had the advantage in a long time.

Tyton must note my expression, because he says, "Come on. Let's get you back to your room." My wobbly and hesitant feet find the strength to stand.

"Okay," I respond, insisting my shoulders to lift up just a tad.

Noiselessness drifts through the halls and I don't object, nor does Tyton. He seems to know I've had enough socializing for now. I promptly understand I veered horribly off-course, and by now we've taken three turns down long hallways. It is only the forth, whose decor catches my attention. I stop and stare at the portraits lining the walls, my gaze burning into each one long enough that it would be rude if I had been associating with an actual person.

On my left lies grand paintings of Samos ancestors, both new and old. Live-action shots, as well as motionless scenes alternate, one of each adorning the metal wall panels, before meeting with windows. A young man with pearly silver hair and black irises—a common family trait—is painted leaping through midair, a throwing knife nearly ready to be released.

Towards the far side of the walkway, more recent members are depicted. Volo sits on a throne, undeniable crafted from the magnetron's favorite building material. The man dons his house colors, silver and black. But unlike the others, I find myself moving past his portrait quickly. His eyes give off a disturbance, an aura that is meant to strike fear into the hearts of his enemies. It feels as though he is watching me.

I float past a few more recognizable silvers, including Ptolemus and Evangeline, both lifelike in a terrifying way. How could an artist be so accurate? Tyton always keeps close, never parting more than fifteen feet away from me. Farley must've chosen him as my care keeper for that purpose. Only another electricon would be immune to my wrath and be able to calm me. Her only other option would've been to send Cameron, whose silence would cause me to claw someone else's hair out.

When I reach the last of them, Tyton speaks. "We should get going. Your room isn't far from here anyway."

I can sense his discomfort in loitering around the space, and nod my head in agreement. Tyton advances and comes to meet me, keeping pace on my right side. Just as we turn one last time, I glance behind my shoulder to see what had been on the other side. My lips stay sealed shut, only silence coming out of them, but I still see the portrait.

Tyton strolls on my right side for a purpose. To act as a barrier from the traumatizing image that now ghosts through my head. Yet Tyton wasn't fast enough to protect my eyes. Tiberias Calore the Seventh's portrait hangs, in an ornamental golden frame. A military insignia and medallions are affixed to his deep-charcoal uniform, matching his glossy hair.

I rotate my neck back to front-facing and pretend I never witnessed it. Never witnessed his undeniably beautiful face, only enhanced by the skill of the painter. At least I forbade myself from peering into his eyes. Red and gold, the colors of flame.
I gulp down my sorrow, though it hurts to do so.

"And there we are," Tyton asserts, motioning with one hand to enter. Pushing down the doorknob, the thick sheet of metal swings open to a scene I've already come to resent. I took my time in getting here, dreading the moment I would have to shut the door and enclose myself in lonesomeness.

"I'll try to not get lost again," I try to joke.

"And I'll come to be your savior if you do. Not that you need it." He makes me feel capable, though I'm not.

"Thank you," I word in my most sincere tone, as I shut the door.

Instantly, my tame exterior breaks. I tried, I tried so hard to be strong in front of the court of silvers and my fellow Scarlet Guard. And perhaps I survived that damned meeting, but it did not come without a price. Nothing is truly free, these days, it seems. We're all chained in some way. Whether those bindings come from manacles, a crown, or another being. "It was too soon," I mumble to no one, as I slink to the floor against the interior side of the door. Farley told me my actions would make a statement, and while they did, I regret confronting them. There are an abundant number of choices I regret.

I bring my head up when my back has begun to tire from the slouching. I haven't bothered to light the room, and darkness has crept into the space, forming elongated shadows of the furniture that rests in the space. And even if I attempted, I imagine I wouldn't be able to generate enough to power to light a single bulb.

I rise up in the darkness, only the faint moonlight lighting my path. But the illumination is still quite dim, barely surpassing absolute darkness in quality. So when my boot crunches into a small object, I'm the least bit surprised. I grumble before getting down to my knees and sweeping my hands all over the floor to uncover the pointed object. Similar to that of last time, chills ignite when my fingertips brush against the frigid material. The family must have built up a tolerance to the constant cold of these floors and walls, let alone wear it.

The tip of my index finger discovers an earring. Kneeling, I hold the scarlet gem up to the opaque light. My stomach curdles with the resurrected recollections. Given to me the very same day of Cal's decision. I never even had time to pierce my lobe. Next on the agenda had been diving out of a plane, then murdering Maven's soldiers.

I turn the jewel between my fingers, admiring all of what could have been. Don't forget who you are, Cal instructed when the stone was gifted to me. Electricity prickles in me, daring to obliterate the last piece of Cal I own, besides for the memories. But my heart-the heart I aimed to freeze-rejects the prospect.

But I cannot bring myself to wear it either. It would be a simple task; any magnetron would revere me if I granted them permission to use my ear as a human pincushion. Staring at the gemstone anew, I watch the shadows of the room twist inside of it; they look alive and angry, prowling for the chance to break out of their prison. As did I.

Conflicted between destroying it or wearing it, I place it on the table Farley and I spoke over earlier. Either choice would've been one that I'd have to live with forever; even if it seems an inconsequential decision. The earring is not a mere bit of jewelry. It is so much more than that. The bloody stone is a metaphor moreso than it is a silly decoration for one's self.
Still, it's presence bothers me. How such a little thing could have such an impact, I'm unsure.

I fall asleep uneasy.
Chapter 3

Mare

Without routine, there is chaos. Without distractions, there is chaos. I've convinced myself this much over the course of these past days.

Tyton and the others who share my ability have been a vibrant light to the foggy dark I've become accustomed to. Ella often comes to sit with me in my chambers during the early afternoon with lunch, and we talk awhile afterward. Silly topics, usually steering clear of the sensitive ones. Yesterday she asked if I'd reconsidered dying my hair, to which I kindly rejected. Tyton comes for dinner, virtually acting the same as Ella, and every morning Rafe comes to challenge me to a battle.

And each day I watch the trio from my window, longing to join their training. But also fearing what foes I'll meet in the hallways. For that logic, I always refuse the prospect. Farley tells me I can't stay cramped in this room for eternity and I sadly agree with her.

A soft knock resonants off my door, not startling me in the least. My internal clock has become attuned to my schedule very fine these days and I was waiting for the sound. Of course, the sun's position in the sky greatly assists my projections. A naive version of myself, just beginning her long trek of imprisonment, might think the task of keeping track of time would be a simple thing. With the meal deliveries, it was made easy enough, yet in another way, it contributed to my sense of forlornness. No windows had been planted into those walls, scaring off natural lighting. Each tray of food meant I had spent an additional five hours in the hellscape, the hope of rescue seeming further gone with every new minute. Still each dawn, I'd use my fork to carve another uneven line into my bedframe.

Without my consent, Ella strolls in, food tray in hand. She hides something else behind her back with the other. A shadow of a grin paints her mood. Assumably a session of electricon training with Rafe purposely doing something stupid. "Just lunch for you today, I already ate in the cafeteria." A ping a jealously washes through me, though I should be able to stop it. This room is not a confinement and I go where I please. "But I'll stay for awhile," Ella quickly adds, not desiring to abandon me.

"What do you have behind your back?" I query, ignoring the delicious incense of vegetable soup. Silvers have a good taste in food, I'll give them that much.

She attempts a look of confusion, but it doesn't fool me. "What do you have behind your back, Ella?" I use her name to make the statement infinitely more serious.

Letting out a hefty sigh, Ella slants forward to retrieve the item that had been crunched between her and the chair backing. She then reveals a transparent flask containing a purplish-black liquid. "Looks like an ale, doesn't it?"

"My first guess was just that," I murmur. The bewilderment lifts off my brain quickly, as I realize what the broad vile contains. "Seriously? I already rejected your idea." Not alcohol, but hair dye of course.

"It would cast such a beauty," Ella drawls on, picking up on the debate right where we left off yesterday. "Imagine what Cal would think!" She must be feeling bold today; a silent rule has been established that no soul utters his time here.
I raise a spoonful of broth to my mouth, conjuring an excuse for the silence that has been brought down. Flavor floods my palette, though I don't register it. In the beginning, I had faith time alone would be able to mend this heartache. My cries may have halted days ago, though internally I feel no different. It must be there, for I'm breathing, yet occasionally I'll press my hand to my heart and find not a single pulse. As if I'm dead.

She immediately comprehends her mistake. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay," I cut her off. "I suppose I need to begin hearing his name and learn to not flinch." I urge my lips to form a narrow line and switch my attention to my tips of my hair. Grey as ever, a detail I could forsake. But no matter how many times I pressure such thoughts from my mind, Cal's portrait sprints back, the image evermore not far, always threatening to make a sudden reappearance.

Ella tucks the object back away, no longer interested in her persuasion tactics. Then she rests her chin on her fist and gazes outside. Horrid quiet restarts, only the sound of me slurping my soup continuing. Silence is a wicked thing; it allows tortured individuals to bask in their own misery, nothing to prevent depressed thoughts from freeing themselves. It isn't much different when I'm by my lonesome.

"Dammit," I blurt suddenly and loudly, causing Ella to start.

"What is it?" She asks, worry in her voice.

Only now do I understand what a terrible thing I've been doing to myself. I've crafted a secluded prison without knowing it. This time it is not Maven's obsession that binds me, but my own head. My friends distribute my meals just as Arvens did at Whitefire. I chart the days, though not carving them into wood. Invisible manacles lay on my wrists. "I'm not fighting a war to remain chained," I say dripping with certainty. "I ought to get out of here."

I shakily clamber up from the chair and make a move to the door; no Sentinels or Arvens block my path. "Mare, where are you going?" Ella's voice is laced with panic. Like any other level-headed person, she deems me unfit to go wandering these halls without a chaperone.

I turn back to face her, my eyelids pulled open as far as they can go. From her perspective, I doubtlessly take on the characteristics of a crazed animal. "I'm not fighting a war to remain chained," I say dripping with certainty. "I ought to get out of here."

My reasoning doesn't have an effect on her. "You don't even know where the exits are here. You'll get lost!"

I roll my eyes as if I'm babbling on with Mom. "I would've found one. And if not, I could've smashed open a window." The old concept is resurrected once more.

"You and I both have a grasp on the fact that your theory wouldn't work," Ella snaps, seemingly tired of the bickering. "Just let me come with you," she tries to compromise, weaving her arms together uncomfortably.

"Fine." Though I'm stubborn, I relent, deep-down knowing it's best.

I don't fuss over waiting for her to catch up, slightly annoyed she treats me as if I'm a fragile bird with a broken wing. On the other hand, she is right. I couldn't find my room last week and managed to reward myself more tears. Ella has my best interests at heart, I need to remember.
Sole seconds are necessary for her to catch up; Ella's legs are quite a bit taller than mine. I cross my arms, mimicking her. Our feet find a pattern to step with, each pair of boots gradually pacing themselves to follow the other's tune. The din appears as only one set of footfalls. As long as I stare straight ahead, there wouldn't be any suspicion that I was walking with another being.

Sooner than I expect, I lose my direction and Ella leads me. Blessedly at no point do I find us journeying down the corridor with the portraits of notable royalty. For all the moments that have gone by, I cannot discover the words to break the silence that forges ahead to stalk us. I steal glances at several of the court's children and recognize a good number of them. Evangeline and Elane Haven converse quietly at the extremity of the walkway. Oliver Laris and Sonya Iral do the same, their hands brushing once. But in the end, what nets my engrossment would have to be the band of magnetrons testing their knife skills.

"Why don't they practice in the field? It would be much more practical," I word in a hushed tone to prevent them from listening in.

"We requested the space for the afternoon. And while those knives might appear dangerous for a hallway, they've been playing with them before they could stand. I'm sure it's fine."

Nonetheless, I observe the group with leary eyes. Shade took a needle to the heart composed of the same material. The weapon that was meant for me. Perhaps the very metal that was Shade's demise rests in the palm of one of the magnetron's. Ptolemus comes to mind with a renewed sensation of fury. Though Evangeline would not unlock my manacles if I hadn't promised to leave her brother safe. I suppose now if I were to rupture the old deal, I'd have to kill her too.

Sure, we come across a couple loitering courtiers, caught up in their gossip and such, but silence takes them as well when we pass them. Obnoxious roars from the young adults are instantaneously reduced to timid muttering. They are the ones who are too old to be babysat, yet too young to be accepted into King Volo's exclusive court.

Instinctively, I hasten my strides to clear the corridor faster. I haven't an ambition to become friends with any of them. Even if I did, I'm dubious they'd accept me.

"Hey, little lighting girl!" It's not required for me to turn around to know it's a magnetron. The voice came from the same side of the hall as they had been clustered on. "How are you holding up from Tiberias's decision?"

The cruel boy's words sting every inch of skin until they seep into the bone. This is the cause of my plan to stay hidden away; an event by the means of this would occur. My first hunch is to whip backward and transform the magnetron into a battery.

Ella's vocalization is so low, I can barely grasp the information that is expelled out of her throat. "Do not turn around. Under no circumstances should you turn around." Her air of voice doesn't only resemble a command, but a threat.

I heed Ella's warning and swallow my pride. Further abroad we march from the magnetrons, yet the boy's words ring louder. Nearly to the crook of the passageway, I can hardly resist the idea of breaking into an all-out sprint.

"To have ever entertained the thought of a poor red girl capturing the heart of Norta's future king could only have occurred in the mind of someone like yourself. Delusional," He barks out laughing.

I drown out the new words Ella plants into my ears and on the contrary, circle about to meet the
culprit's eyes. The boy, a few years younger than I am, stands apart from the rest of his group. My heart initiates a cycle of pounding against my ribcage, then retracting before starting the process over again.

Blacks eyes, not any different from the rest of the magnetrons. No hair grows on his head, just like that of Lucus. Lucas, as in the boy who died because of me. Then again, so many have died because of me. Their faces would be uncannily similar if not for their blood relation. "You're his brother," I finally speak, my words vague yet enough to discern. "It's no wonder you have a grudge towards me."

"A grudge would be an astronomic understatement," the boy's growls come straight from his chest. "I loathe you." If his comments weren't enough, the way in which he said it by far compensated.

"I was framed for those wrongs. Lucus died in vain, purely for the cause of a prince's ascendancy. But his casualty was not my doing." I understand the boy's anger towards me; he finds the closest individual who was involved in this entire mess and pushes the blame on them.

"Perchance not. But that doesn't make your hands any less dirty."

"You have to understand. I didn't want Lucus to have such a fate," my voice cracks, on the verge of tears. "He was my friend."

I divulge nothing but the truth. Survivor's guilt is an awful thing to endure, and I've been strained with the burden more times than I could count. But I've come to terms with his death. It was not my fault. It was the monster's.

"My brother was my best friend," he bites back. "I loved him more than you ever could've."

"I'm sorry," are the concluding tidings I gift him before turning once more. He shows every sign of hatred to me, and it seems I cannot change his mind. This attempt, nobody calls out to me to pick a fight. Additionally, there isn't a single utterance made by anyone about a separate topic.

Silence overtakes us again.

When we've taken the turn, Ella speeds ahead only to stand in my way. "What were you thinking, engaging with him like that?" Her face tells a tale of both sadness, outrage, and everything in between. Ella then drags a hand down her face, then pinches her chin at the bottom. To punish herself, it looks as if.

"You expected me to take his accusations. Do I look delusional to you?"

"No, you don't." Ella breathes out a lengthy exhale and drops her shoulders, before softening her vocal tone. "I simply did not yearn to see maids wiping up blood splattered on the windows. Davidson doesn't want any of his soldiers to be making scenes while we're here." Of course, he doesn't. We already have to maintain the attitude of supporting the new monarchy. Collateral discord is not vital at this moment.

"I couldn't let him get away with that," but I trail off as we approach grand double doors. A hazy glass pane is embedded into each door, iron makes up the actual doors, as always. Spirals of iron create intricate patterns on the glass, skimming its surface. They're thick, but not enough to rid our ears of all the sounds. I can still make out muffled voices verbalizing speculations on reign, matrimony, and alliances. All of which I'm extremely uninterested about.

Cal is surely inside, I cognize. He must be.
I do not vocalize, fearful that somebody behind those doors will hear me. Alternately, I elevate an
eyebrow to question her mutely. If she tells me it's a meeting, she'll have to drag my limp and dead
body into that room.

"You'll see. He asked me to bring you to him when you were ready to leave that cave you call a
room," she mouths, just before cranking the door open. Farley gave me an opportunity to compose
my features before entering the belly of the beast. Ella is vicious in that way; not bestowing a
single second to prepare. But it could be that it is best that way, related to how a parent rips a
bandage of a child's knee. Pain is best dealt quickly.

The door delivers a bone-jarring creak that angles the lords and ladies attention to me. I look to
Ella for help, who leans on the frame of the door calmly. Her expression is impassive, offering no
guidance whatsoever.

Anabel Lerolan speaks up. "Can we help you, Miss Barrow? Are you lost?" I covet the day I am
allowed to slap the woman across the face. She treats me as though I am no older than five.

"No, Miss." I vex her by speaking so kindly. "Someone sent for me, I assume?" I keep my eyes
solely on her, not daring to glance about the rest of the population. It doesn't take a genius to infer
who else surrounds me.

"That would be me," Julian's voice is not one that I could fail to remember. He ascends from his
seat, conveniently located next to Anabel's, so my gaze is not forced to travel far. His pleasant,
warm smile greets me from over the way; even his gentle brown eyes grin up at me.

For a fraction of a moment, the rest of the world no longer is relevant. War does not rage, nor does
heartbreak. No wrongdoing is possible. Only my bygone mentor stands, the author of the tomes
that kept my sanity with me. So for that cause, a broad, genuine smile blossoms out on my face;
mere artificial smiles are often the only option these days. "Julian," I say his name aloud as if the
declaration of him makes it all the more real.

"Mare Barrow," he repeats my action. "how nice it is to see your face again." He passes over from
the table to approach me, and I find that I do the same. At the halfway mark, my arms encircle his
shoulders and his going under, forming an embrace. "I arrive here and Tiberias thought I came for
him! But no, no. I had to disclose that I traveled all this way for you. I've acquired some new
philosophies and I am eager to test them." He describes these details loud enough for all to hear. To
scorn Cal.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" I ask, desperate to leave and wander far away.

"Very well," he agrees and makes a beeline for the exit.

"Julian, what exactly do you intend to teach the girl?" Anabel questions, drumming her fingertips
together. I note that the old queen sports a crown, not nearly to the degree of extravagance as
Maven's crown, but still, a crown. She deserves to be seized by the arms, shaken, and yelled at that
she does not hold a title anymore. That she is nothing. "Does she really need to be conceived more
lethal?"

Julian mocks puzzlement. "But of course she needs to become more lethal. And what would be the
fun in explaining to you how I'm going to make that happen?" Anabel mutters incoherently to
herself before relenting. Former today, I never saw Julian interact with his fellow silvers; he is an
outcast among them, for his varying beliefs. "Let us go, Mare."

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Thick, humid air wafts over my skin, practically causing a sweat. The sun rests high above us, chasing away the shadows of trees that desperately cling to the forest floor. Faraway into the beautiful greenery Julian guided me, and we now sit amongst wildflowers and the greenest of grass. Strange, how wildflowers are categorized as weeds whilst they are much more pleasing to the eye than many other flowers.

My teacher relaxes upon those blooms with no caution on crushing them and sits with his legs crossed. "Sit." He orders, reading my mind. For once, I decide to be docile and follow his command.

"Why did you come back? Have you identified exactly what causes me to be like this? What this mutation is?" The last time I saw this man, he told he'd find these answers. Not a god's chosen, but a god's cursed, I revive Julian's written words.

"For a great period of time, this question stumped me; I even went entire nights without an inkling of sleep. It drove me mad." Julian closes his eyes now as if it'll atone for the past energy deprivation. Time is fickle, the one concept that is everybody's enemy. "Think about it. Why do silvers have powers? And why do reds not have these capabilities? What makes the two any different? Mankind is but one species, whether or not you chose to accept this is up to you."

I drop my jaw open then closed, in doubt of what to respond with. Beyond the age of the Calamities, there was not a blood divide; all people bled scarlet. When silver blood did arise, they were crucified, the unwanted of society.

How things have changed.

"Humanity is an existence that is both a miraculous and devastating entity. Evolution, as well. Centuries ago we could've needled for answers as to why humanity developed the second color of blood. We evolve because we must, and that is all there is to it."

"Not a god's chosen, but a god's cursed," I repeat this time aloud. "That's what we all are." His theory takes the form of simplicity, yet makes total and utter sense.

"How kind of you to directly quote my works." Julian reopens his eyelids and stares me directly in the eyes. "But you didn't find those books, as you told me at Piedmont. I kept them hidden away, deep in my study. He provided them to you, didn't he?" I shouldn't have ever bothered lying to a clever man. In hindsight, he was not the object of my falsehoods, but Cal. To protect him from the fact that Maven is not completely gone.

Somehow I find the strength and courage to keep my gaze fixed on him. Not to the ground, not to the sky, and not to my own hands. "He gave me the texts, yes. A small act of kindness bestowed by an inhuman boy."

"That small happening may have been the deciding force in the state of your mentality. Afterall, you did divulge that my notes helped you pass the time."

"Perhaps so. Now, did we come this far for anything else?" Julian and I must've walked a good eighth of a mile, if not more.

"One can never be too secluded when exchanging secrets in a court of backstabbing. You should know that better than anyone." Nothing is truer than this statement. I've been betrayed various times, all of them people whom I loved and trusted more than anyone else. I've made the mistake of allowing myself to become close to people. "But," Julian picks up. "I'd like to resume my position as your instructor."
"Just like when I was Mareena? Teaching me how to manifest by ability, how to trigger it. It's second nature, how much more could I grow?"

"Newbloods, hypothetically, have the means to amplify their powers to be tens of times greater than silvers. You can summon electricity from thin air, but I fathom your ability goes deeper than that." Julian uncrosses his legs, then stands. "Recollect this during the hours you may sit here. You do not control the storm. You are the storm, the angry clouds, the claps of thunder, and the deadly bolts of lighting that rain down upon the Earth."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"Something that hasn't been done before," he announces before entering the underbrush; mere seconds pass until he disappears. "What makes you angry, little lightning girl?" A disembodied voice calls out, in question.

"When others call me little lightning girl," I mutter to myself; Julian is long gone.

In the beginning days of our training, it was riskless to for a man to stand near me during training sessions. But the bolts have gotten progressively larger and potent, making shields essential for rounds of sparring. My skin prickles at the vision of the duel between Cal and I. Firery fingertips raked on my back, the contact so minimal, yet so very painful. It proves that no time at all can inflict misery. Or even, in some cases, death. His meaning is clear: Julian wishes for me to call upon a storm more powerful than ever before. Using my anger as fuel.

Doing a deed I previously vowed to never commit, I rekindle agonizing chronicles that hurt just as much as thousands of knives to a heart would. Truthfully, I'd choose the blades over the thoughts. Still, I take great pains and coerce myself into reliving them.

I'll make the others scream for you, Mare, every last one.

I am the king and you could've been my Red queen. Now you are nothing.

Let the rest go-and I will be your prisoner. I will surrender. I will return.

His kiss burns worse than his brand.

I am in love with you, and I want you more than anything else in the world.

The last one is a blatant lie. I am the shadow of his flame, and after months spent together, after each battle fought side by side, it meant nothing. Still, the crown prevails; Tiberias succumbed to the promise of a powerful reign.

Throughout my eighteen years of existence, loss and I have established a kinship, and it trails my path wherever I lead. It seems I cannot shake it. During her and Maven's engagement course, Iris wondered whether the gods adored or despised me. These days I tend to agree with the latter.

Thunder rolls overhead and clouds thwart the sun's rays from roaming freely. Occasional impurities in the otherwise plump veil invite strips of buttery light to shine down. The Ridge House's illumination fails to reach such a distance, which is only logical. Near total darkness envelopes the expanse and angst should accompany this weather, but it does not. Authentically, I accept the shadows; after all, I am one of them. Though they do not stay past their welcome, the sparse patches of light curling up on themselves to bid farewell.

Black as night, the sky has forsaken it's principles. Sheer moments ago, there hadn't been a cloud dancing in the sky, nor the anticipation of a storm. Electricity throws a tantrum inside of its
condensation as if it was hostage inside of a cage. I can relate. Looking down to my hands, lawless sparks of violet energy fly down to the grass, various units plunging into the heads of wildflowers. I'd call them harmless if not for the flammable material I sit aloft. My mind strays from the task at hand, briefly envisioning the devastation a fire would bring to this manicured forest and how Larentia would scream at me, sending her snake to attack.

Additional remembrances flood my head, like a dam shattering.

Her eyes are on mine as he brings the butt of his gun down, shattering the bones in her sewing hand.

He tried to run away. He was executed. Beheaded.

And I said I would save you.

You ask how much of it was me. Some. Enough.

We're going to let them kill each other.

Something buried to great depths-rooted securely in my bones-ignites. Not a fire, never a fire. A different something. I relinquish my grasp on the lightning held above and focus my stamina on assisting this foreign concept to fester inside of my soul. Unrestrained currents of white, hot power now flash constantly from the heavens, purple and black blending into each other. A particular vigorous stalk comes into contact with the ground, forming a vulgar sound that causes a shiver to rattle down my spine. A noise that could certainly be heard for miles. Several seconds after the instance, the Earth convulses.

The truth is what I make it. I could set this world on fire and call it rain.

As if all of the world ground to a stop, the never-ending cracks of thunder fade away and the lightning withdraws back to the billows of dark air. At least that is where I assumed it went; for it did not travel upwards but to me. Malleable, sturdy threads of electricity lace over my whole body, composing a second layer of skin. I am the storm. I'd probably appear to be a monster if another saw me.

In the beginning, the sensation is only but a nice tickle, warming me. But it hastily transforms to become a dangerous, explosive thing that pushes to be set free. Hot sweat drips lazily from my glands, contributing to the ever-growing heat. It commences to physically hurt me, my cardio system aching from exertion. My spine loses its firmness and I fall backward, my shoulder experiencing a blunt-force wound via a sharp rock. My entire supply of health is being drawn to keeping the electricity in, excluding the rest of my body. I find that my breathing becomes shallow, depriving my lungs of the oxygen it so desperately craves. Soon, my eyes will fall shut.

Moisture leaks from my eyes, no sobs accompanying. I formerly had the luxury of allowing the two to combine, but not anymore. Not enough air enters my body for that occurrence. So much energy, it feels as if my skin has been set ablaze.

Perhaps it has.

So as my eyelids close themselves, I grant myself the pleasure of letting go of all the power.
Chapter 4

Evangeline

Jaymes, Lucas's adolescent brother, poises tense in the hall, back straight as a crowbar and shoulders clenched stressfully tight. Straightaway following Mare's parting, the boy migrated back to my other cousins, his character seemingly indifferent to the interaction. I've never been particularly close with any of my brethren, still, I know Jaymes better than to assume his emotions, based upon a mere facade. When he confronted Mare, it was obvious he only spoke the truth, nothing more, nothing less. The hatred that he expelled with his voice made it clear of his bottled-up feelings toward the girl. I cannot blame him, I'd react no different if the little lighting girl's existence caused my brother's death. And what scares me the most, is that the happening continues to be a possibility.

Nearly a year ago, I observed the young magnetron crash to his knees so hard he assuredly skinned them. That was the day in which the family was made aware of Lucas's impending execution. I swear Jaymes could've wept for hours if not for the Sentinels that dragged him out of the square, away from the public eye. Not for the boy's dignity, though; Maven wouldn't wish for such a situation so early embarking his rule.

"One day I'll kill that bitch, I pledge it," he growls, gritting his teeth together.

"There's a line, I'm sure you know," I can't help but call out. "I do believe you'll die of old age before you get your chance." Not to mention the fact that she'd get him first. Afterall, he hasn't yet grown a tendril of facial hair, very much on the far border of transforming into a man.

Whatever Jaymes mutters next doesn't register, as I turn back to face Elane. A phantom of a smirk rests, her lips curled upward. Her glorious red hair, in essence, glows in the morning incandesce. We don't dare flirt, not out in the open, but I can generate a good guess as to what words she forces to stay put in her mouth. Most likely a remark as to how my retorts are unmatched.

Months prior, we made the stupid flub of not being careful as to where and when we rendezvoused, and the damn servants were tossed a new juicy piece of gossip. Those maids devour private information like wolves do meat. Soon later, Maven called Elane a whore with in front of his entire court. Elane and I have both exhaustingly learned from that experience, and now take great measures to keep our relationship quiet.

She draws her lips apart as if to say something, but Cal storms up to me, his eyes weary.

"Ah, Evangeline. So glad I was able to find you so quickly." The tiredness of his pupils doesn't carry over to his voice, the tone drowning in counterfeited mirth. In no circumstance could his associating with me cause him pleasure. And by no means do I find joy around him. Tiberias serves as a constant reminder of my fate, just as I do to him. Ironic, how we're one another's torturers, with no control for otherwise.

"What do you need, Tiberias?" I douse my question with gallons of sweetener.

"My grandmother and your father would enjoy discussing marriage preparations with us. Be so kind as to join me?" Such fabrication, carefully choosing his every tongue movement. Before the Scarlet Guard, before Mare Barrow, my rare chats with him didn't involve the same strict propriety that now garnishes him.
"Happily." Not bothering to allow him to lead me, I glance back at Elane to bid goodbye, then fall ahead of him in step. Thoughts of wedlock make my blood curdle, bile threatening to climb itself into my mouth.

Softly, I listen to the tune of flamemaker bracelets scrape metal on metal. Purely by the din, I instantly identify the types of material used to craft the bands. A combination of platinum, titanium-

"What?" Cal snaps, concentrating on my watching of him.

I crack a sneer before responding. "Nervous?" I raise an eyebrow.

A cast a sidelong glance in his direction, waiting for body language out of the corner of my vision. At once, Tiberias stops the motion and drops his arms to his sides, letting them hang slackened. "I have trouble reckoning you love me. What's a marriage, if not for the crown?"

I absorb the urge to scream at the prince, to yell at him and tell him I want neither. A husband to provide absolutely nothing I yearn for and power that I haven't a desire for. Not any longer, anyway. During the period of the Queenstrial and the span of time before, I had my life carved into the oldest of stone. Unchangeable and permanent. Elane my lover and a gentle king, easy to manipulate.

"Sorry to say, but I have never and will never have feelings for you," the confession is seasoned with shameless sarcasm. "The most accurate detail you've stated all week." I fib, keeping my face neutral in the effort to get away with the falsehood. I don't deny the second part, in worry Father will discover my intentions. Though it wouldn't change any outcome; Father will force me into this course whether I agree with it or not. The knowledge cascades chills down my spine.

"Hmm," he purrs. "and it's no secret that I don't either."

I feign a gasp and widen my eyelids. But I quickly discard the act and shake my head back and forth mockingly. "You and I both understand there will only ever be one girl for you."

Tiberias returns the sneer I offered him minutes ago before turning his head to the bank of windows. Separated by the panes, lays a garden. No doubt he isn't admiring the hibiscuses, though. Still, I carry onward. "Those other electricon boys visit her room often in the day. Especially the one with the white the hair, Tytus, I think."

"Tyton," he corrects, nevertheless detaining his line of sight on the flowers.

"She'll discover a new toy before you can blink."

"She."

I cut him off immediately, picking up on my ramble. "Don't tell me that the love shared between the two of you was like no other. Because I can vouch, all darlings say the same." I deem the relationship between Elane and I the equivalent, but I am so stupid as to think that the tables will never turn. "Don't forget she once used you and Maven simultaneously. I wouldn't put it past her to forget about you all together."

My allegations scorn him hotter than his fire ever could. An ancient wound has been reopened, I can deduct. Cal doesn't respond, only hastening his footsteps, to arrive at the meeting room sooner. I wouldn't wish to be around solely me, either.

The time elapsed before arriving at the steel doors is almost none at all, a haze overtaking me as
the barrier sweeps open, and Father gestures for me to take my place right of Anabel. This is it. The rest of my pre-determined life will be revealed over the course of the next hour. The copper in my blood rebels, longing to come away from my body and into Father's neck. The uncommon sensation of my stomach flipping over begins as I sit down, and tingles shuffle through my skin, causing the small hairs covering my arms to stick up.

In place of querying Anabel which flavor of wedding cake will be served, I stifle the unspoken jabs and sit down, just like the proper girl I was made to be. Anyone else who had filled the table previously has abandoned the space, leaving a good portion of the chairs unoccupied. Now only Father, Mother, Anabel, Cal, and I sit, my father waiting for Cal to crouch into the chair.

"At least Jacos is gone now, drawn away to whatever he has planned. Never will I be able to wholly distinguish who are his allies," Father announces.

"Julian Jacos was here?" I have to ask.

"Yes," he murmurs with divided attention. "The man has been beseeching for weeks to see Mare Barrow. Developed a new theory, he told us."

Anabel, totally uninterested in discussing the particular topic, speaks. "Ideally, we'd like to see the marriage take place when my grandson has resumed his title. But, if Maven's power grows for any reason, such as another alliance with a foreign country, we'll have to move up the date. The Guard has access to Nortan feeds, and we'll transmit the feed if necessary. This union will greatly strengthen Tiberias's control." The woman seems to have already created the plan entirely.

"Why demand a gathering if you've previously computed every detail?" My mother muses, nearly identical to my scrutiny.

A forced, tight smile emerges from the woman's lips. "I suppose there wasn't a purpose to the meeting today. Anything you'd oblige to add, Volo?"

"I'd like to state my gratification of your help, Anabel. It was truly shameful my daughter ever had to face the possibility of marrying that terrible, unstable boy." While I would prefer Cal to Maven, Father doesn't speak for me. What he silently means to say is that controlling a kind, well-mannered boy is much simpler than a sociopathic one.

"What will we do with my brother when he's dethroned?" Cal asks in his most king-like voice.

"I suppose the king will be the one to decide his own kin's ending," my mother answers. The boy squares his jaw and remains stoic as ever. What a conclusion, to choose how to dispose of Maven. I wonder if Tiberias has it in him to sentence his brother to death.

"Mare should get to choose," I whisper, not intending for the others to hear me. "Maven wronged her more than anybody else." It's a rarity that I feel pity for someone other than myself or Elane, still, the empathy breaks through. The day Samson Merandus sifted through the girl's head-as if a baker was sorting flour-calls to memory. I have trouble convincing myself she was ever quite the same following the incident. The whisper shouldn't have been so arrogant as to believe he could get away with it; Cal and Mare delivered him quite a death.

Neither Father nor Mother offers their input, Anabel winces, but Cal's solemnness softens just a bit. "Yes. Yes, she should."

"Very well," Anabel concludes the affair, again cutting off the point of dialogue. The woman, years prior ago was a queen. She's certainly not stupid, she sees the weak spot in her grandson's
armor. So either out of sympathy, or selfishness, she keeps the topic of Mare Barrow to a minimum. "It's far too premature to choose dates, attire, and such. I don't know why I bother." She daintily laughs at her own quip.

"Actually Anabel, I do have something to add," Father declares with that sly cut of his features. The appearance instinctively has me molding the brass on the skirt of my dress to a sharper point. It had already been extremely honed. "Sooner rather than later, I'd like for our royal couple to broadcast a video to all of Norta and the Lakelands announcing their joining. Your idea of sending the wedding footage to High Houses projection screens is good, but this is better. It will ignite the urge for citizens to see a sane king on the throne, coupled with a strong queen of fangs and steel. The wedding must be live to have the most impact, not received over a screen."

My father has a point; broadcasting a wedding wouldn't lead to the same uproar the promise of one will cause. High Nortans adore the promise of fancy weddings, the promise of unrestrained liquor and dancing. Why fight to view a married duo with the power, when they could battle to see a young love have their wishes for wedlock achieved? Shallow and vain creatures, the court is; it doesn't make any of my father's words any less authentic.

"Fantastic," the ex-queen admits. "ever wise, King Volo."

Cal's been awfully quiet for several exchanges of ideas and answers. Looking across to him, I note the boy has become much better at covering his true emotions, however nevermore as skillful as Maven. Tiberias's decision is tearing him apart, I can perceive that much. Power, they say, destroys a man. Still, he chooses the burden of kingship over the red girl. What disturbs me the most, is that I may not ever be informed why he chose the path he did. The desire for control is too simple to be the answer.

My train of thought flees when a blaring sonance blazes into my ears, even compelling Cal to recoil from surprise. The military general, taught from birth, flinched. It obviously arrived from the sky, though I can't discern what form it came in. Not a single viewing glass decks the boardroom, to scare away mischievous folk.

"What the bloody hell was that?" Father manages to make the statement a question and an exclamation simultaneously. Swiftly, he's out of his armchair and halfway to the door that blockades us from the rest of the dwellers in the estate. The heavy metal soars open without so much as a brush of fingers, brutally fast, concerning me that they'll crack off their hinges.

The rest of us are up in an instant, following Father in tow. "Did that bastard they call a king find us? Dropped a bomb on top of our home?" A vicious chortle leaves the man as he brandishes long blades, drawing one into each of his hands. "A coward's move, to bomb us to the alternative of facing me himself." He doesn't don fighting garb, but dress robes. Though as a magnetron, that won't consume much time to fix. A few meager shifts in the metal he already wears, plus a couple sheets that can be torn from the walls if necessary.

Ahead of me, an uneven and thick breath of oxygen can be harked from the oblivion queen.

"What is it?" Father snaps out of impatience. In different situations, he would never express such an open air of disrespect to the important woman.

"Forgive me if my timing is off, but I do recall it is afternoon, correct?"

"Yes, it shouldn't be past-" Mother dawdles off, her porcelain skin pivoting its shade to become a milky white. She then replicates the same gasp Anabel executed seconds ago. I've never seen such a contortion of features from Mother, who appears shaken beyond belief. Mother, who
everlastingly bears strict and daunting traits, now looks as if she has been confronted by herself.

Only now do I see what Mother paled at. Cal and Anabel react likewise, only Father keeping up with his consistent anger. Solely my acuteness may I wield as a tool to guess what my expression comprises itself of. "The sky is not meant to be that shade during the day," Father proclaims. The observation would sound doltish if not for its speaker.

"Indeed," Anabel sighs lowly.

The flowers can no longer be seen, only an occasional indistinct shadow of the beds they rest in. Then the shadows cut themselves loose of their duties too, the final elongated cylinders of yellow light hidden away by those blackened clouds. For a fleeting moment, utter darkness traps the world, eclipsing all else. My heart skips two beats as I think about where Elane resides and if she's in peril. Blessed with the ability of light manipulation, I come to my senses and convince myself she'll be fine. But not a single blub clarifies the hall, neither a candle. She plays with light, but if there is no source of illumination, is she rendered useless? I chastise myself for not knowing, especially after my countless years of schooling.

"The good news, Maven hasn't discovered our locale," Father breathes out from someplace or another in the blackness. "Though this happening could be debated as worse." Cranking my neck skyward, I make what feels like eye contact with the clouds. The formations are antagonized, so alive, as gloomy violet energy boils within, dying to be released. "Just a rattle of thunder." He uses the word, just, as if the crack is any ordinary occurrence from any ordinary storm.

This clearly, is not.

Cal conjures a miniature inferno in his palm, the bottommost section blazing a cool blue. The entire flame stretches a good two feet tall, minor sparks flitting off seldom. The fire brings our surroundings into perspective, with not another single soul in sight. Father slides his swords back into their scabbard, not deeming Mare's storm a problem that can be solved with weaponry.

Father and Mother gaze down the corridor, surveying the nearest exits. Seconds it takes them before they're off and running. Automatically, I come forth into a brisk walk, trailing a few yards behind them. Quickly I realize, I have to break out into a jog to keep up with the two, who have already taken a swerve to the right.

Approaching the door, Father again opens it with his mind.

We can see nothing but feel everything. A wind that seems to shriek in its wake rules everything it touches, the unnatural coldness seeping through my clothing without a struggle. Along with the harsh breeze accompanies mist, dreadful in its own way and weakening Cal's flame. I'd fold my arms together if I were alone, but not in a space decorated with the eyes of these people.

In spite of that, my parents trudge on, but not nearly at the pace they had set inside.

Like a savage animal freed from its bindings, electricity escapes its clouds. Sudden and frequent, each strike is, splintering off into a thousand smaller boughs. The only silver lining of those bolts is the fickle source of radiance they give off, enough so that I can witness the startled and horrified expressions of Father, Mother, and Anabel. Only once do I see Cal, a frozen twinkling in time, no more than a half second.

Strange, how his jaw isn't collapsed outward like the others, in lieu clenched up tight. Nothingness prevails before I'm awarded the chance to behold his eyes, to enlighten me on his emotional state. Though even with the lightning, it's doubtful I'd be able to view such detail from so many feet
Ahead of us, a sixth figure's silhouette is revealed, of a man's shape. His robes billow wildly from the vicious wind, only his sleeves guarding the garment from sliding into the darkness. Perfectly balanced, he is; even I have to focus on grinding my heels into the earth to prevent stumbling.

"Julian!" Cal cries out. "What did you do to her?" I glance back to the spot in which the man settled, expecting to find Julian Jacos facing us. In place of my assumption, I find a bare patch of ground, as though nothing had ever been there. I fling my line of sight disorderly to-and-fro the courtyard, resorting to peer up at hallway arches for any movement or sign of another being. The real Julian emerges from the same doors we retreated from, a proud father-like grin coming into view. I encore my action, still no one by the treeline. Am I insane?

"What did you do to her?" Cal roars nearly as loud compared to the rakes of thunder clawing out of the horizon.

Tiberia's uncle pretends to ignore the boy, ignore all of us, and continues his stroll towards the forest. Chattering whisps of air currents gather more stamina, wobbling on the line that divides storm from a cyclone. The wind threatens and teases to rip the trees straight from their roots. Mother's precious and immaculate garden will certainly be damaged to a degree.

Julian, unlike the mysterious vanishing man, has the strife of oldness, and struggles in battling the wind for dominance. "What did you do to her?" Cal's shrill voice ripples through the air, the question asked thrice now. He doesn't try in the least bit to conceal his feelings for the girl, now.

Concurrently as the old man whips about to face his relative, a stalky beam of lilac firebolt reigns down from the heavens, it's very presence enough to illuminate the earth better than the sun ever could. Not in an alike sense, but somehow the violet light releases the cloak that for an eternity blinded the rest of the world. It proves that no matter the hours of the day that the light governs, there isn't a purpose. Light blinds, when in truth there is nothing but the darkness of the night. The world shall forever be obscure and it is up to us to come to terms with the fact. Nothing may be changed.

Powerful thoughts, those were. Yet so barbaric, they must've come from the lightning, not my head. Weather shouldn't have sentiments, but the lightning girl does, those ideas bleeding into the storm straight from her head. So illogical, but I can't come up with a better answer.

"You asked me what I did to her," Julian, at last, commences to fulfill Cal's interrogation. "Nothing. Everything. I taught her to embrace her anger and reconstruct that bitterness into an unending capacity for power." The man's greyish-brown locks have become drenched with water, the excess dragging down his face, scraggly beard, eventually dripping into the blades of grass. "Let's come to terms with the verity, nephew. This disturbance is sustained by many people's sins towards the girl, but your offense was like no other. Your decision fed her resentment more than any other decision that has been made to affect the lighting girl. You spawned this discord just as much as Mare Barrow did," Julian states matter of factly, similarly to as if the two were merely chatting about the weather over tea.

"She has never produced anything of this magnitude. How do you know it won't wound her? Kill her, for all we know?"

"Don't you have other issues at the top of your priority list, becoming king, and all?" Julian snaps back at Cal, any compassion for his cognate gone. "If the anxiety is eating away at you, I'll tell you. Human nature's first instinct is to protect itself, regardless what any other tells you about the significance of love. My point is, her body will not take on stress it cannot handle. She will be fine,
even if we do discover a limp body in the forest; she will not die. So this,” he cocks his head toward the storm, though it could've been in a random direction and it still would've been the correct way. Not a corner of sky isn't bedecked in inky, black night. "is only the beginning; the tip of the iceberg; the start of a long journey towards her destiny."

Cal's Adam's apple is visible on his throat, bobbing up and down. Dead air is exchanged between the two from that moment onward. If a servant had talked in a comparable way to a prince, they'd surely be spending nights in the dungeons, if not weeks. But no ordinary prince stands before us, owning a heart that hadn't ever been meant for this line of work. Wheather a servant or a brother of a dead queen, I doubt Cal would have enough grit to punish his attitude. Then again, he had enough grit to stab lightning in the back.

"Ah, the grand finale. Magnetrons should know that metal is an excellent conductor. I'd stand back if I were you." Julian sounds his words with a decent extent of respect. Father flicks the small amount of armor he does wear on his shoulders to the ground, along with his edges. Luckily, today is a rarity; I don a thin underdress beneath the lustrous gown. Though Mother and Father would turn their nose to the vile and frivolous substitute for clothing, I'd rather not get electrocuted.

Electricity formerly hit spots in the sky willy-nilly, untamed. Now, each strike contours itself towards a specific patch of forest, indubitably to Mare's resting place. All that force being drawn inside of a lone human imitates impossibility. The unrelenting power of it all.

And then the most inane possibility occurs. It all stops.

Between this second and the next, the flashes of voltage cease their bombarding, Cal's flame once again becoming the only source of enlightenment. Even the torrential rain pouring out of the clouds appears to hiccup, a fraction of a second lapse in its tyranny.

"You told Tiberias what you did to her," Father states, his eternally formal ice never cracking. "I'd like a more thorough answer."

"All in good time, King Samos. Though I suspect this next event may be explanation enough."

There is a second source of light, I notice now. Far, far, away in the distance, in the depths of the thicket, I make out just a glimpse of white and blinding light. Based upon depth perception, I'd have to say it's a good eighth of a mile past the manor. Yet it doesn't take long for the blotch of white light to fester, swallowing up the darkness, transforming the night into a sky laden with nothing but stars. The purple lightning did not a thing in contrast to this monster, which burns so brightly I can clearly see Mother's serpent coiling around her neck as if it's frightened. If the snake is scared, then so is Mother, despite the bored expression.

Growing, growing, feeding away at everything around it, until it is the sole entity anyone would care to notice. If the apocalypse marked only one moment in time, it would be here and now. I barely register when Tyton and others, with the blue and green hair, sprint outside, stopping where the faultless grass meets the forest, so expansive and impossible to subdue. They have horrified expressions plastered on their faces, each more shocked than the previous. My cousins also come out, their jaws dropping to meet their feet. Lastly, Davidson, Farley, and a few other Guard representatives come out, their expressions pure sickly.

Run to Elane, make sure she's okay, I order myself, but my feet refuse to move. Instead, I stare at the mass of violet and white energy hurtling towards us, disturbing branches and leaves in its wake. Similar to how explosions function, the blast starts at a specific location before zooming out in a dome-like formation.
"The energy that will meet us here will not be lethal," Julian shouts over the din of branches breaking and rustling. "We would have to be much closer for death to occur." The wall of intimidating fury clears the trees, now only fifty or so feet apart from me. Despite Julian's assurances, anxiety gets to me.

When the electricity connects with me, it doesn't pain me to feel. But it's not pleasant either, more so like a hundred insects crawling around my body, spiders dancing on my spine, crafting chills. Unpleasant would be an understatement. Painless torture, that's what it is. The rush lasts only momentarily, still, I would choose a stab to the gut over this. The sensation is plainly miserable, emotions seemingly weaved into the wave just like the strikes of lightning. Sadness, regret, fear, anger.

"Did you feel that?" Julian faces Cal, the query clearly directed towards him. "Those negative, hateful ecstasies?"

This time, it's the prince's turn to be unresponsive. Dutifully, he keeps the flames chronic but lowers his hand to mask his face with the darkness. Julian turns back to the woods, a calculating demeanor drawn on his features.

And then he commences walking towards the catastrophe zone. As does Tiberias.
Chapter 5

Mare

As I come to, I feel nothing. Hollowness, lacking even an inkling of emotion plagues me as I heave myself upward. Not sadness, nor anger courses through my bones, only infinite emptiness occupying my thoughts. The sole reminder that I once was capable of such ideas is the moistness sprawling across my cheeks. The residual sparks that jet off my body don't do much to fight off the darkness, though the clouds have begun to flee.

Too many pairs of footsteps snap twigs to count, plus exhaustion pushes me to zone them all out. Gradually, the sounds fade away, all except one who risks coming closer. I only notice now, that I have my head buried deep in the crook of my chest and knees; yet, I sense a presence hovering right beside me.

"Mare? Please look at me," says a voice I recognize as Tyton's. His hand brushes down my arm, so light it could be a feather if not for his plea.

"But they're all watching me," I respond with a low tone, quiet enough for only the two of us to hear. If I had my way, I'd prefer curling in on myself, until not a soul could see me.

"Please look at me," Tyton repeats, a sort desperation in his tone, one that nearly induces me to comply. "I only wish to help." His hand finds my chin, evermore gentle in attempting to push my head up. Decidedly spent, I give up fighting this battle and allow my eyes to meet his.

Perhaps it's the backdrop of scenery, with the dainty evening light peaking through my storm, forming a sort of angelic view. A fraction of the sun shines, bearing down upon us, siring a gorgeous panorama. For the first time, I allow myself to see Tyton for what he is-handsome, in his own rugged sense. Surprisingly, the silverish sheened hair suits him, complimenting the hazel eyes that entrance me; a combination of green and golden tan. My breath hitches, undoubtedly.

"Your back. It's bleeding and we need to get you to a healer."

I part my lips, intending to explain to him, that I don't feel the blood leaking, that it's fine. It's not as if an empty girl has the devoir to retain blood. But instead, I hear, "Not until the girl answers my questions." I tear my eyes away from Tyton to discover Volo positioned ten feet in front of me, standing apart from the remainder of his silver entourage. "What the hell did you do?" Just the man's presence, so regal and dreadful, begets me to well-nigh turn away and fulfill my wish to curl in on myself.

"Clearly Miss Barrow is not in a well enough state to answer for herself; surely she is confused as to what exactly has ensued," Julain pipes in, a blessing in human form. "Any concerns may be resolved by myself."

"Because you understand her ability better than herself?"

"I shouldn't assume, but it is possible. These last weeks have consisted of very little variety in my studies. But I will never wield lightning and I will never know what it is like to have pure energy just under my skin." At this, I take a glance at my arm and that glance mutates into a much longer ogle. Previously I had been in far too much pain to appreciate the chaotic artfulness of it all. Akin to splintered glass, electricity winds across my arms, following the patterns of veins. As far as I can see, nowhere does the force not go, the color streaking from my ankles to my fingertips.
Imaginably, my face takes on the same effect, appearing as a cracked porcelain doll. The oddest part, however, is that lightning isn't on top of my skin, rather underneath, just below the surface. Burning brightly enough to see it, despite it's covering.

My hands have begun shaking on their own accord, out of phobia of my own ability. Across from me, Tyton takes my hands in his, the sparks soaring having no negative outcome on his health. He starts to lace them together, trying to create a calming mechanism, though we both perceive the futility of any diversion. "Make it stop," I murmur the order hushedly. Realizing my mistake, I speak up. "How do I make it stop?" This shot, I shriek the command extremely loud. Get the silencers if you have to, I nearly let out, still common sense holds me back. Never again do I yearn to face that crushing silence.

"Relax yourself," Julian coos. "Liberate your anger that molds itself as the form of lightning."

When I woke, I felt deprived of all hatred, emotions altogether. Now, the lapse in feelings seems like a dream come true; immediately as everyone arrived, I plunged right back into this pit of despair and enmity. Still, another part of me embraces these feelings, finds vitality from them in a wretched sense. I stare at our interlocked hands, watching my electricity seep onto Tyton's skin, though not absorbing into it. He couldn't have held my hands in his while I was in this state, so I made myself into the one thing he could never touch.

"Go on. Do you what you must to release it."

Absolute insanity would describe the act I commit next. A split-second decision made, otherwise, I wouldn't, given the time to act rationally. My gaze clashes with Tiberias's, the exploit startling us both equally. A flame flickers in his hand, as though the fire is as surprised as he is. Still, the flame suffices to illuminate is eyes, bronze as ever. The eyes that I have gazed at a thousand times, their tint never failing launch me into euphoria.

This time around, they don't succeed. Seconds pass, and neither of us blinks, perhaps afraid that the occurrence exclusively takes place in this moment, never to happen again. Heartache and regret kick me in the gut harder than a fist ever could. Why regret, I'm not sure; I have nothing to apologize for, no wrong-doings on my part. Cal is the one who should be weeping at my feet, begging for forgiveness. I suppose the regret that passes through is not my own, but his. Afterall, I should know his thoughts, his feelings. Once upon a time, we shared everything.

But the past is in the past, as they say. And maybe there isn't regret after all.

Tyton's hands grip mine more forcefully, in attempt to yank me back to reality. Though no matter how tight they squeeze, I cannot bring my eyes away. The pressure only reminds me that another man touches me, allowing a phantom of ruefulness to graze into me. If not for vice-like hold, or the numbness that shakes through my core, I might try to pull them free out of chagrin. Yet, there is no reason why I should be faithful to him any longer.

I have an intuition that I'm countering Julian's directions and my suspicions are confirmed when I hear a clap of thunder explode in the distance. Foolish girl, I call myself for committing such a stupid, stupid act. To think, that even for a moment, gawking at the boy I once loved—the boy I still love—would cure my anguish.

As it always has, the firelight suits him well, emitting various hues of orange and gold light, doing nothing but aiding in enhancing his features. His resemblance looks no different from our conversation on the balcony, but why would it? It hasn't been a week since Cal made his decision, hasn't been a week since we fell asleep in each other's arms. My breathing skips a beat for the second time within the hour, as I take note of the mars earned an eternity ago, sowed across his
pectorals, peaking out from his shirt. But it is not those marks that send my heart into a state of 
dread.

I keep staring as if drowning. The scars might be old, but not the almost purple, bruise-like mark 
where his neck meets shoulder. That's new. That's mine, I think, gulping around a memory both 
close and infinitely far away.

Stolen moments together, plentiful in my mind. Reminiscences that pain me to bring to the table 
that is my head, while also causing a morsel of happiness to run through me, which I berate myself 
for. Those particular remembrances should not be ones I cherish, but woes that I wish to be gone, to 
haven't ever transpired. Yet no matter how hard I try, I can't force myself to lament those nights. 
So though I try not to make the connection, just like that of Maven, I worry my heart will never 
fully evict Cal.

The boy, at last, breaks our gaze, turning his eyes to the obscure, darkened grass, which now 
adorns his personal shadow, granted by the light of fire. The shadow stretches much further than 
his height, nearly meeting me on the forest floor. Temptation snickers in my ear, pushing me to 
touch the grass that illudes the shade of charcoal and mimicks Cal's shape.

The penumbra doesn't make any large movements, except for a steady rise and fall of the chest, 
intaking and releasing of air. Good for Cal, meanwhile my breath has gotten caught inside me. 
Inches separate the shadow's head and me, the reach easily in arm's distance; still, Tyton's hands 
bind me, acting dually as chains and sedatives.

The courage and stupor have both abandoned ship, and I focus back on Tyton, the kindness 
radiating off him like steam from an ocean. "Listen to Julian, he knows what's best for you. And 
you must be tired. You need to sleep, but I doubt they'll let an electric rod back inside. Happy 
thoughts, think of." I know better than to draw thoughts of Calore brothers or any instances that 
ocurred after my meeting with the crown prince of Norta altogether.

Spring had arrived, the last of the snow melting off tree branches and roofs of our village only days 
ago. Bumblebees and the rare butterfly flitted about, all gravitating towards the silver's homes, 
where they'd discover all the flowers imaginable, ranging from hyacinths to carnations, the variety 
as large as the emporium of sweets had down the road from our home. On any ordinary day, the 
candy shop would be a forbidden place to visit; few reds were well off enough to buy from there. 
But Daddy had come back the night before and in celebration, our parents told us we were allowed 
to purchase one piece of chocolate each, as well as Kilorn, who was practically family. My brothers 
and Kilorn had stuffed the delicacies in their mouths before the clerk could cash the money, but I 
tucked away mine for safekeeping, as well as Giza's, who hadn't hit the age of four yet. Shade, 
Tramy, and Bree sprinted home as quick as their legs could carry them, eager to spend all the time 
possible with Daddy, even though he wouldn't be returning to the war. Kilorn, however, pulled me 
aside from the others. He told me he wanted to take me somewhere special and that there was a 
surprise in store. My legs were very short and had trouble keeping up with Kilorn, who was clearly 
ecstatic about arriving at the mystery location. "Kilorn, wait!" I cried, frustrated he was so much 
taller than I was. "Don't worry Mare, we're almost there!" He responded. Kilorn wasn't wrong, 
soon after, a grand estate came into view, trimmed with vines and moss, positioned too flawlessly 
to be natural. Greenwardens, it must've been. "It's so pretty!" I exclaimed. "Wait until you see the 
field!" Kilorn said, taking my wrist and running past the manor with myself by his side. I had to 
push my legs to remain strong and was wheezing by the time Kilorn stopped. "Do you like it?" He 
asked, and I looked up from the ground and stood with a straight back to witness the landscape. My 
breathlessness transformed into a gasp instantaneously as I took in the sight. A sprawling terrain 
gracing only blossoms stood in my line of sight, seemingly endless. "I love it," I sighed out, 
bounding ahead of Kilorn, into the flowers and feeling the sensation of them tickling my ankles. I
could've spun around for hours, yelling at the top of my lungs, "I'm a princess," if not for the impending sunset.

I can sense the smile tugging at my lips, in contempt of this situation. Such fond memories, though partially because of our naivete. In truth, those grounds were silver-owned, and we shouldn't have been on them in the first place. I recall hearing the following the summer, walls and security were instituted in areas near red population. It's a miracle we didn't get caught, if we had, who knows what would've become of us. Giza got a broken hand for stealing; I ponder what trespassing would earn us.

"That's much better," Julain sounds, approaching me. Tentatively, he crouches down to eye level and extends a finger to tap my shoulder with. When it makes contact, I catch a brief crackle and a low hiss from Julian. "You're recovering just fine. The extent of electricity in your body isn't fatal to others, no worse than a woolly sweater in the wintertime."

"What did I do?" I ask, like a child; there is no better way to inquire.

"I'll do my best to explain it simplistically. Using anger, which altered into adrenaline, you created an extremely powerful lightning storm. From there, all that electricity you formed was drawn into your body, until there was no space left, and was compelled outward, making a circular wave of energy that flew out in all directions. Do you understand?"

I find myself automatically nodding, though he spoke so fast I haven't yet fully processed it. As I look at my mentor, his demeanor tells me this is only the beginning. He intends for me to become a weapon so powerful no one else may wield me.

"Good night of rest, then?" Tyton walks to my side, dressed in training attire.

"I could've slept another day. The shoulder wound didn't help either," I respond. After yesterday's events, I virtually fell into bed the instant Healer Reese had mended my injury. Whether exhaustion or peace allowed me to sleep for such a duration of time, I honestly don't care. Slumber is slumber, and whatever method it comes in is a detail I don't have the energy to mull over. Though I have strife believing peace was a causing factor, more likely it was exhaustion that caused the peace, which caused the sleep.

"After the stunt you pulled I wouldn't blame you for a straight year of sleep. I'd need it."

"If I was given the luxury of time, I would." Though he speaks in a joking manner, I don't quite return the humor, instead telling the truth. Candidly, I've lost track of the last night I didn't sleep fitfully. So many hours of stolen rest; a span of life that is forever gone. And time isn't the only element I've lost these last years. "There's never enough of it these days."

"Time is a cruel, nasty little thing. It doesn't play fair or for anyone but itself," Tyton's eyes go somewhere else, their appearance leading me to think it's a faraway place. "You see, my sister," he chokes on his words as if they're toxic. "No. It's not important."

My footfalls halt, erstwhile immersed in getting to training. "I'm skeptical of that." The sarcasm that tainted both our voices is no more, all seriousness now. "You've been one of my many rocks these past days. It wouldn't be fair for only one of us to be the other's therapist." From the corner of my vision, I make out a movement of his throat. He's clearly nervous, taken aback the roles have been reversed.
"My sister died four years ago, murdered by a faceless officer. I've stopped my fruitless search for the man's name a while ago, but what was the point in the first place? Each and every one of those bastards is the same as the last. Cold-blooded and plainly evil. " I barely contain a gasp, drinking it down with the rest of the shock. He doesn't give me the opportunity to respond, perhaps because if he stops, he'll never be able to finish the dreadful tale. "Back then, the Scarlet Guard was unknown, only Monfort rebels existing. And even then, we weren't prepared for a war, so our country lied low, for survival. Zara,-my sister was one of the elite warriors, strong with a heart of steel. She was the golden child of the family, destined to live a life of glory after her military achievements."

The beginning of his recount shows how in the blink of an eye, things can change.

"She was assigned a mission, risky and supposedly impossible. But of course, Zara was certain she could pull it off; I was only fifteen when I last saw her, but old enough to recognize the flaws in her. Kind, but also arrogant at times. She shouldn't have had such utter confidence. So in Tiraxes, she paid that arrogance with her life." I decide not to push for more details; what exactly the task would accomplish; how she was exposed.

"I'm sorry," I drive sympathy into my tone because no amount of apologies would suffice. No number of sorrys will resurrect her. "My brother died nearly a year ago. And before that, I had believed he had actually died. I wish more than anything that I could kill his murderer, but it's complicated." How could I explain to him the deal Evangeline and I made, not when I've already cut open a fragile scar.

"Ordinary lives are a dream of the past. Ella and Rafe won't yell too much if we're late. Tell me."

"The afternoon of Maven and Iris's wedding, the day I escaped, Evangeline gave me an ultimatum. Either stay with Maven or be released under one promise. To not kill her brother under any circumstances. If I hadn't accepted the offer, I might still be in that room, chained."  

"I can't imagine what it was like for you," Tyton words slowly and carefully.

"I like to not think about those days," I say blandly, a not very subtle hint that he should stop now while he's ahead.

"Of course," he whispers even softer, understanding my suggestion. "So what are we training on today? Ability endurance, stamina, muscle targeting, you name it."

"I think not," calls Davidson from just about the corner. "You have much explaining and apologizing to do before anyone here allows you out of this building." When he rounds the bend, I immediately notice the stiff way in which he holds his jaw, the rage in his eyes. "Now come with me, before more damage is done." Without permission, he cuffs my upper arm with his hand and carries on with his quick-paced stroll down the corridor. There is no choice in the concern, clearly, and I keep up to avoid being dragged across the floor.

I hardly have a moment to crank my neck and present a look of confusion and panic to Tyton.

"Do you have any conception as to what you've caused?" Despite the absolute anger embedded in his face, Davidson regulates his voice, maintaining it to be level. "The freedom of reds is in hot water right now, I hope you know. Our entire operation has been compromised because of that stunt you pulled yesterday. If not handled meticulously, we could lose this alliance. And let me be clear: the stakes have never been so high." He uses the word, stunt, in the same context Tyton had. Yet so very different in concert.

"I didn't know what I was doing. There came to be a point when I wasn't in control of what was
happening. You have to understand," I plead, doing my best to keep the desperation of my tongue.

"Yes, you haven't fully mastered your ability yet. Though that doesn't justify this." I shake my head in agreement, endeavoring to ease his ire. "I spoke to Julian this morning, and he did his best to tell me exactly what you did." A low and rare chuckle is emitted from him, sounding more so like a grunt. "We're lucky Rift is miles and miles away from any other civilization. No reports of ominous, unnatural black clouds were admitted to authorities. If so, it's probable we'd all be dead by now. My point is, you need to ask for pardon from Volo, and unless your demented, you had better not dare do anything to the effects of that again."

I keep my thoughts to myself, but they're certainly still there. Howbeit I hadn't a clue as to what I was conjuring, perhaps that dark, maddened, crippled part of me wanted that storm to become a reality rather than a fiction of my heart. It wanted to show him that I don't need him; in fact that I'm stronger when I stand alone, that no man could aid me in my quest for freedom. Against all odds, the marks we gave each other—both physically and mentally—don't faze me.

I only wish for that to someday actually be true, preferably over a lie.

"What the man expects of you, you do it. And in the most extreme of conditions, you will bow down if Volo or Laurentia asks you to. Affirmative?"

My stomach catapults into my esophagus, demanding to come out altogether. "I will not kneel. I am done bending to royalties commands," I growl, venom thoroughly laced in the quarrel. I've learned the tough way that each instance I allow myself to bend to those who claim to be above me, that I risk breaking. And the more of those happenings occur, the greater those chances are.

"No, you will listen to them, if you want to or not." Davidson's face is stone, as always. Ingenious, he is, though he covers it well. "As I said, we cannot and will not afford another ounce of tension between Rift and ourselves. If a simple arch of the waist is what is takes, so be it."

The corridor we stand in is isolated, still, I don't hazard screeching my beliefs at him. "It is not as elementary as that. That act would be proof of my submitting to those devils."

"I never the deed was required to be genuine. All you must do is fabricate is do look so. It is up to you, Miss Barrow, as to how you perceive your next moves."

"Fine," I force out, defying all values. "I'll do it."
Chapter 6

Iris

I roam the gardens of Whitefire, absentmindedly running my polished fingers through water that I've suspended in mid-air. Maven's court-adjourned for the hour- mills about, each lord awarding me a deep bow and the ladies giving curtsies.

Lately, the bows have been deeper and the curtsies lower. Not a month has passed since my father's fatality. They managed to retrieve Father's body, and the corpse was shipped back home, to the Lakelands. Maven was inclined to ask me if I'd like to return with country's warriors and attend the burial, but I denied him.

Few tears were shed when the news was delivered, and even those only pertained to proving to the Nortan court I'm not a heartless queen. I simply never adored the man growing up as a princess. He would always respond the same when I challenged him to a swimming race or even a game of dolls. "Sorry, sweetheart. Daddy's busy with king business." was what I heard so many times in my youth, the very phrase has been etched into the backside of my skull. So instead I'd play with my maids or my older sister, Rosalyn. Rose, reasonably and surely wept for hours when Father died. As the eldest sister, she was trained to rule. The two spent hours every day together, Father preparing her for her reign.

Mother was in charge of me. Preparing me to become a proper lady, someday graceful and strong enough to marry a lovely boy from an acceptable family. Though for that reason, I came to resent her for demanding so much of me; forcing on qualities I never wished to take on. Rose was born to rule; it's been evident for a long while that she has royal blood flowing through her veins. At no time did I listen to complaints of lessons with Father. Meanwhile, my sister would hear of my woes often enough, she went through a phase of plugging her ears at any time I parted my lips.

And then Mother's time in training me finally paid off. For one of us, anyway. Father sold me off to a mad king, to settle a dispute that has long since been forgotten. The Lakeland War, as Nortans call it, persevered for a century. And with a single betrothal, complete and utter peace was put into place. It spites me that such a union, between a powerless princess and a king on a volatile throne, could forge such perfect truce.

Though I am selfish for thinking such a thought, I can't help my mind from wandering. Let them die. The red soldiers, the silver commanders. As long as I don't have to be a part of this ruined court.

The gossips of the court whisper about the king and his state of mind. For months, leaders of high houses have been leaving Archeon; alleviated of their positions. Only the young ones remain, a method of insurance. Glorified prisoners, is all the teenagers are. The Court of Children, Whitefire's structure is murmured about in the most secluded of corners. But the foolish ones don't comprehend that reds have ears, just like the rest of us. Anyone can talk if given the details.

Though I've never met him, I've heard the stories of Tiberias, Maven's elder brother. Declared a traitor, after killing his own father. Seduced by the little lighting girl, a crazed mutated red-blooded sinner. Mare Barrow drove the prince off the rails until he was so lustful for power he murdered his own kin.

But like all stories, I've heard multiple versions. The forbidden ones, whispered in darkened night, intrigue me the most. Tiberias was framed by the mad king and the bitch queen, Elara Merandus.
It's been debated for years, but it's clear to me that whispers are the most powerful and power-hungry of people. Already, High Houses have deserted Maven and fled to the supposed rightful heir of the country.

No noise resounds off the palace floors when I stroll on them, as no shoes accompany my feet. I find the raised platforms stupid; they would only slow me down if a battle were to initiate. My day dress grazes the floor, covering where my unladylike feet rest.

Dreary diamondglass blocks out the overwhelming light of the afternoon sun, and without the light-manipulators, the changing of the panels has become impossible. I suggested to the king to remove them, but he curtly replied how ignorant that would be, as they shield us from bullets.

The two months I spent engaged to Maven, I rarely saw the boy. Frequently, it appeared he was avoiding me. Attention constantly affixed to only his star captive, the little lighting girl. At first, I was bewildered at why the king didn't execute her when she first arrived in the capital. Her screams could be heard from far away, and she went through more dishware than an entire festival would use. The second she was unclad of those manacles, which was bound to happen sooner or later- she would unleash chaos like never seen before. Even I, for someone who hadn't met Mare Barrow in the past, could see the defying storm in her.

Mareena Titanos—the girl's pseudonym—had formerly been committed to marry Maven.

And the boy loved her. And he still does, which is why he refuses to kill her.

Once upon a time, the chained girl might've loved him too. But any fondness Mare ever had for Maven has clearly turned to hatred.

Since she's been liberated by the rebels, I've had an easier time getting through to Maven. Though our talks are shallow and superficial, at least they've happened at all. On occasion, we'll sit at brunch and discuss strategy, or take to a theatre performance together. But by no means do I like him.

Rumors have started, and from there they spread as quick as fire. That the king and queen haven't yet consummated, leaving the kingdom without a successor. I roll my eyes at the rumors, even while they're true. This kingdom is in such a rocky state, it would be a horrible time to produce a baby. These are dangerous ages, and I wouldn't dare bring a child into a warring world. The poor thing could get abducted, or worse. Poisoned. Stabbed with a sword.

I arrive at the king's door to his study and raise my arm to knock. It's been months since I've had the blessing to enter a temple; the people of Norta are unholy. Materials have been running thin, as that wretched group of bandits stole a vast amount of gold from Archeon's supplies. That's what we used to call them; bandits. After that stunt they pulled at my wedding reception, it's clear that they are far more than petty thieves from an unorganized rebellion. The Scarlet Guard is a threat, no matter how many times we deny it.

Nevertheless, I'm in dire need of a temple, no matter how few supplies we have. Just as my fist is an inch from the door, I hear a shrill scream. My arm drops limply to my side and I intake a deep breath. That awful sound that I had noted hundreds of times previous.

His obsession with the girl must end, I discern. So prior to reconsidering my choice, my elbow thrusts the entryway open. At first, I ignore the boy staring back at me from the far side of the room, and rather glance at the various types of adornments. The lineage of the Calore bloodline is palpable in the space, their house colors weaved into intricate tapestries. Caesar, the first monarch of Norta is portrayed on one end; the late Tiberias the sixth's enlarged photograph lying on the
other. In the past when I've met with Maven in his study, silky, black fabric covered parts of his face. The grieving period must be over.

I make him nervous, just traipsing about in this room. Ultimately, I speak. "Why do you torture yourself so?"

I give Maven credit for being clever, but not quick-witted enough to outsmart a princess. He crinkles his forehead as if confused. But I see through it. "I'm reviewing security footage, Iris. What do you need?"

Hitherto, I would've wondered aloud when my temple would be constructed. Asked if I could begin preaching my religion to the citizens, to lift their uneasy spirits. But when those details cross my mind, I push them to be gone, more important issues in mind. "I'm not daft, Your Majesty. I'll be brusque and arrive at the point I mean to make. Why do you pine after a woman who you will not ever have?"

His lip twitches in anger. An impossible aspect to grasp, if I was not paying such close attention to him. "You believe I love the little lighting girl? What do you think I am?"

His own bitter laugh accompanies my own. "You would think a queen would know her king, wouldn't you? Your mother surely did. But to be fair, she was a whisper. But I don't know anything about you. I only have the stories they tell to judge you by."

"We are married, of course I don't love-" his efforts become desperate and futile. I cut him off before he can further embarrass himself.

"When has marriage ever meant anything? You don't like me, and unquestionably there is not a morsel of love between us." I drop down into the armchair that lays across the desk and watch him drown in my accusations. Words are similar to that of water's characteristics. Both can be stunning for their uses; however, they're both killers. "Betrothal certainly didn't stop Mare Barrow from going after your brother." My theories are confirmed when I see that heartbreakingly-devastating demeanor crawl onto Maven's face.

"Leave." His articulation is carefully slow and he keeps his eyes fixed upon papers on his desk. There is no sign of the projector screen that had been used just a minute ago to watch her cries. He must've sensed a presence, and tucked it up before I entered.

I challenge his authority by slinking further into the chair, going so far as to cross my legs. Even still, I question my decision on intruding into this room altogether. Never anger a king, a lesson I taught myself growing up in the Lakelands. Father would've never allowed such behavior from his advisors or Mother, for that matter. A shiver grazes through me, remembering the fates of such men. In spite of those thoughts, I quickly uncross my legs and raise my back to sit straight.

In truth, I have no power here; not that I possessed more when I was home. Neither a princess nor a queen truly has any. The only edge I have in this game is my name. Cygnet, the ruling family of Norta's once rivals. If His Majesty was to mysteriously force me to disappear, my sister would infallibly recommence the war. And that is not something either side could support.

"So long as Mare Barrow walks this Earth, your life shall constantly be in peril. All I suggest is that you forget her." My tone sounds terribly unsentimental, riddled with cruelty. "Please tell me what fuels this obsession!"

He snaps, bygone the point of veiling his emotions. "You don't think she tried that? My mother, the whisper? She erased it all." For the first time, I place pity on the boy. He perchance doesn't
understand the difference between his feelings and Elara's.

In our capital, Detraon, whispers aren't allowed inside of our walls without escorts. And by no means may one be within twenty feet of the king. But it's no longer the king, I have to correct myself. Rosalyn ascends now. Yet we haven't had an individual that holds the ability make themselves known for years. There is no doubt I wouldn't if I had such a curse. Decades ago, their entire clan was hung for treason on opposing my grandfather.

"You should've killed her when you had the chance. Now you've become restless with an aimless ambition." I say it anyway, though it's unfair to the girl. I haven't met her.

Momentarily, his eyes desert the room and travel back to far-off memories. I wait patiently and draw water vapor from the air. It's a habit adapted from childhood that refused to die. Granting the liquid permission, it levitates down to my bare feet. In the heat of the summer, the coolness is greeted as an old friend.

"That's what she said," Maven mutters, barely loud enough to comprehend. "Don't you think I would've done it by now?"

I take a deep inhale of air, unsure of how to respond. If I had been kept as a king's pet for that length of months, I would've wanted to end my own life. "I suppose so," I end up folding into his argument. "but that doesn't change this." I rise from the seat and turn to go, at last following his command.

"Iris. Wait."

I turn halfway about and rotate my head over my shoulder to gaze at Maven once more. Not speaking, I raise my brows to ask silently what he needs.

"You should prepare for a short journey ahead. It shouldn't take greater than a day to accomplish, but pack a few days worth of traveling clothes to be safe. It would be a shame if you had to wear the same outfit twice." He smirks at his own joke.

"Where are we going?" None of my maids or servants had instructed me such directions. "And anyway, I'm not Evangeline Samos. I could survive without my dresses for weeks." The sentence that barely a second ago spouted out of my mouth is an understatement. I despise the garb of royalty; I'd rather wear pants and shirts while training for battle.

"You'll find out soon enough," Maven skillfully succeeds in avoiding my question. "It's a surprise."

Maven's response deeply unsettles me and I spin on the ball of my foot to leave. There's no chance a romantic honeymoon for the stressed royal couple is in the lineup.

He has a plan in mind, and I don't like it one bit.

A sleek-gray vehicle waits for us on the bridge. Presumably bullet-proof for its purpose, Maven explained to me it would be carrying us to a plane. The answers stopped there, however; all further inquiries I've had since then have been overlooked, it's as though I'm repeatedly slamming into a brick wall.

Without real reports, my imagination has been free to run wild with no strings attached. I attempted to swerve to other interpretations, however, my mind lingers on a particular one evermore. He discovered Mare's location and now he's going after her. Jon, an infamous red-blooded seer I've
heard mentioned has been gone from the court for months. It's been disclosed that the king seized much information from this Jon fellow, who told Maven where to find the little lightning girl in the first place. Still, he fled during an assassination attempt; it makes me wonder whose side he's genuinely on.

Provided that my theory is correct, I ponder what source His Majesty got the information from. An incredibly dynamic clairvoyant from House Eagrie? Footage from a nearby city showcasing violet electricity? I immediately cross out the latter; I met Mare Barrow once, and she didn't seem especially dim-witted. Delivering a storm in the center of a populated area is past idiotic.

As I approach the armored automobile, Maven pulls the side door open and makes a motion for me to climb aboard. The perfect gentleman he appears to be today, scaring me more. Contrasting the typical designs that would be branded into the vehicle, this model is utmost odd. The emblem of the Burning Crown cannot be seen from an outsider's vantage point and no lavish flags or silks hang from the edges.

Dawn hasn't yet broken, causing the horizon to color itself a murky grayish-blue. Scarce clouds embellish the sky, yearning for the sun to rise. Without it, the clouds stay darkened. Soon thereafter the assault on the capital, a mandatory curfew ensued. Because of this, not a single soul parades these streets during the night and into the early morning. Formerly before this gloomy era, there were extravagant parties that battered into the morning light. Now lone mourning doves chirp on the roofs of those once raucous manors.

The intention is clear: To leave before anyone can catch sight of us.

"Queen Iris?" A nearby guardsman queries. "It's time to depart." I'm pulled from my reverie by his statement and clamber up into it, taking my seat. Maven follows suit directly afterward. I lean my head on the glass and strain to see the number of Arvens and Sentinels waiting to board different transports ahead and behind us. Exceeding one hundred men, I estimate. And those merely compose of those who aren't already buckled in. Enough soldiers to quell an army, I determine. Enough to quell a lightning bolt in human skin.

A half-an-hour later, the wheels at last begin to revolve and the gentle rattle on the road nearly lull me to sleep. If it were not for the anxiety, I would've committed to rest for hours. Often, I'll glance towards Maven and each and every time I get the same expression; solemn and bored as if this is merely a political meeting.

My old friends and my dearest sister from court aren't within reach for hundreds of miles, and I'm trapped in matrimony with a psychopath. Courtiers quickly proved that they weren't interested in deep friendships, only polite enough to make small talk about silly topics such as dresses and the architecture of buildings. I've learned to entertain myself.

So I do the same now. I generate all the possible versions of how this journey is going to go to hell in some fashion. And there are many.

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For countless blurred years, we travel via plane across the sky to a location I continue to be oblivious to. Though it has the qualities of an eternity, my rational side guesses the flight has begun only an hour or two ago. We're heading south, I know that much. Perhaps to Piedmont?

I stalk the water droplets that cling to the oval-shaped window pain. Hence the high altitude, most of the water has frozen, sculpting crystals that appear as snowflakes. Nothing interesting takes place on the exterior, just the occasional fluffy white cloud. I sense the condensation process inside
of them, the liquid urging to be released. If I willed them to, they'd do just so. I could bring this plane to the ground if it was my whim; by the time Arvens discovered what the cause of the extreme turbulence was, it would be too late. Unfortunately, I am not in the mood to murder myself.

To my side rests Maven, his character composed as ever. Deciding I have not a fragment of a chance to persuade the boy to let me in on his secrets, I concoct an excuse to take a sabbatical. "I wish to stretch my legs. Move for me, will you?"

Without responding, Maven tucks his feet in. I only observe now that he has a scarlet red cape draped over his shoulders. Bending my face away, I sneer. Why a silver king wears such a statement, I haven't got the faintest inkling. With my own ears, I listened to Maven promise my father he would crush the red rebels and return the world to the ways of old. Yet he parades around in the atrocity of a garment, proud of it. Father never wore such a style, often times wearing simple dress clothes to meetings. Fire and water are polar antonyms to each other, after all.

In sparing ways, they are similar. Father kept multiple women as pets, servants to him. On the other hand, I have trouble comparing those relationships any further. Father cast off one lady as soon as another came. In spans of time, it seemed he would find a new plaything every other day. Feasibly, Mother and Father once shared a devotion. But those days are long past; no memories of the two holding hands exist, besides for that of those in public.

But I chastise myself for thinking that way of my parents. I'm a hypocrite. I kissed Maven—no matter how brief— for the sake of the wedding. His lips were cold and exhausted of passion, I recall. A fire can only burn for so long before dying, he proved. Even the strongest of us have breaking points.

I make my way deeper into the cabin, my steps slow and deliberate. In truth, my legs tingle and ache from the period of idleness. For such a brief ride, I'm surprised we were given a private section of the plane.

Unlatching the thick curtain that divides branches of the aircraft, I step into the crew's seating. Briskly, I reconnect the metal pieces of the fabric, separating us from Maven anew. At first, I'm silent, causing no ruckus. Except when the group doesn't grasp my presence, I'm forced to clear my throat deeply.

The captain of this specific legion raises his eyes from the golden band on his ring finger and transfers his focus to me. "Your Majesty, what are you doing back here?" Hastily understanding his disrespectful tone, he rephrases his question. "I mean," he stutters, "can I assist you in any matter? Although I must say, the servants might be of better use."

By now, nearly the entire audience's attention has been turned to me. "No, I believe you'll do a fine job of assisting me. I only wonder where this journey is taking us." The man's Adam's apple bobs in his throat, leading me to contemplate whether he will allow out the truth. This time in a lower sound, "And do not avoid answering me, Captain. You'll regret it." I say. A threat, but not so vivid it could be used in opposition to me. I could've said I would drown his wife in her sleep, but I fear that wouldn't go over well.

A queen who is loved is a good queen and a queen who is dangerous is a better queen, my mother explained to me.

The leader swallows again before answering. "Andros Eagrie had a vision just days ago. It's incredible, really that such a young boy produced such a prophecy. Andros was able to locate a base location of the rebels in Piedmont, which is where we're heading. They're just rumors, but I've
heard that the lad saw the little lightning girl there." He stops abruptly, meaning to say more. The scared look in his eyes is enough to prove he's afraid of the consequences if he says more. Or of what he has already uttered. Never have I witnessed a general so vulnerable. "We intend to slaughter them, to send a message to all the reds everywhere."

"But not Mare Barrow, correct? My husband believes her wrongs have earned her a lifetime of imprisonment." I mangle the truth for the benefit of the answers I've been preying for.

"My soldiers and I have been commanded to leave her and her family unharmed." The man surely has opinions on this subject but keeps them to himself. But the way he holds himself reveals his glowers on the girl and her existence.

My eyebrow quirks. "How in the world could you perform such an act while having to check each face before ending them?"

The man frowns at my suggestions. "I'm not quite sure, Your Majesty. But do not fret, we'll crush this coup before it can grow anymore."

"I have no doubt that you shall succeed."
Chapter 7

Mare

"I apologize for my foolish, uncontrolled actions. I didn't understand what I was creating and should've known better than to continue on in the process of making a monster. If there is any method possible to reimburse my mistakes, I will more than happy to do so," I say all of this while kneeling before Volo and his damned court, my only escape being the sight of the intricate floor tiles, an array of metals and colors.

"Miss Barrow, it is clear to everyone in this room that you have done more than enough. Unless my wife can derive how you may repair her gardens, there will be no retributions." No words are uttered from the viper's mouth, most likely a shake of the head. Out of sense and fear, I don't defy the king by raising my head to him, playing the part of the obedient little girl just as I've been told to. "Leave. Before I change my mind. You and your fellow electricons are permitted to exercise your trade, so long as you leave this estate and area surrounding it in peace."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." After ostensibly hours, I ascend, but persist bowing my neck downward, avoiding the glares of the courtiers that are surely fixed upon me. Another awkward jerk of my head, indicating faux gratefulness. Rotating on the flat of my foot, I initiate my leave.

Opposite Volo and Laurentia, Davidson, Farley, and a couple other Guard and Monfort officials inhabit the corner of the throne area, most conversing amongst themselves. Farley seeks to latch onto my gaze; we haven't spoken since the events that yesterday brought. Though I do wish to explain myself to her, other priorities emerge on my list first. Davidson and I watch one another, and he bestows and subtle nod, signaling I did well. I return the gesture.

Tyton watches me from feet away, weariness pronouncing his features. I'm not the sole one who's acquired a trying day. As I cross the threshold that separates this room from a span of hallway, he decides to accompany me, strolling at my right.

"Well acted, but not sincere. Even those hotheaded as Volo could tell."

"Of course they did," I sigh. "All they valued in my speech was the drowning in my own lies. I hated every second and they know just that."

"Yes," is all he responds with.

It dawns on me now that our conversation involving his sister was never completed, though he brushed it off as if it had been. "Tyton, your sister."

"There's nothing more to say about it. If there is a heaven, hopefully, she's there now." He surrounds himself with a wall of stone and ice, clearly. Exactly how I have countless times, sometimes in the correct ambiance, other times not at all.

"You don't have to do that, shut me out because the words are too troublesome to say aloud." I realize my volume has risen significantly, and quickly work to bring it down. "You once told me it was unhealthy to hold sadness inside, yet you do it yourself." Hypocrite, I'm tempted to yell. Only then do I grasp the fact that my voice hasn't lowered, maybe even gone up more. Though the terrible actors pretend not to be listening in on every word, various men and women have terminated their journeys, conveniently striking up conversations with each other. "I only wish to be a shoulder to lean on."
"It's not as transparent as you might think," Tyton's lips barely part when he reveals this obscure piece information. Struggle contorts his body, giving hunched shoulders and creased brows.

"Then tell me, Tyton. What makes this situation so complicated?" I walk the fine line between curiosity and malice, my tone of voice especially, which is doused in pleads and a tad of contempt. It's immoral, really, speaking like this to a boy who still mourns his fallen sister; but that doesn't stop me from pushing. My actions are validated by the weight that shall be lifted from Tyton's shoulders after I force out his hardships.

"I lied," he breathes out before closing his eyelids and compressing the skin, then dragging a down his face, apparently set on touching thoroughly contacting every fiber. "about the man who killed her." He angles about and sets off, explaining for me to tailgate.

Tyton leads me down the corridor that branched off the one that had led to the throne room, taking another turn afterward. It will be a miracle if I learned the layout of this hellscape before I'm granted the blessing of departing, the date forever a mystery.

"She wasn't killed in Tiraxes, but in Summerton, Norta." I hike up my brows, accompanied by silent horror. Four years ago, Tiberias the Sixth would've been in dominion, wed to a Merandus, and two innocent boys at his side. Months previous any hint of Scarlet Guard terrorism aroused, the Lakelands the solitary threat to deal with. But even then, the war wasn't actually a battle for the cause all reds assumed it to be. Were told it to be.

"You were an uninformed red at the time, but during that midsummer, a considerable number of those just like my sister were executed, right in Caesar's Square. Supposedly, The Bowl of Bones was too grand for the traitors." In that case, I should be flattered and appalled I was special enough. "Strange, isn't it, that royalty uses the space for both marriages and beheadings?"

"Barbaric, really."

"The King killed forty men and woman, all by himself. In order to teach us filthy rats a lesson on respect towards our superiors. It's all so clear in my mind, every moment portrayed on the television, Zara's screams at the end." His eyes have gone away once more and it is no longer myself he recounts the darkest parts of his youth to. "And the worst part is, I saw the prince there, on the monitor. Sixteen years of age, I calculate; he didn't flinch once, unlike that timid brother of his, who appeared as if he was ready to throw up the last week of meals. Only a monster would be capable of retaining a straight face through all that brutality." I anticipate I'll be sick myself, listening to Tyton's sadistic remembrances of Norta's corrupt government. He shakes his head scornfully, before saying, "That's plenty of memories for one day. I think I'll go."

"Tyton," I procrastinate, though I don't have anything to say next. So I don't urge him to remain when he leaves because there isn't a reason to. All morning and into the afternoon, I've used this topic of conversation as yet another topic of distraction, which has proven to be my favorite method of relief from heartbreak.

No more, I decide right now. "I'm sorry for pushing. We don't know each other well enough for asking for those type of questions. I shouldn't have pushed," I repeat. He whips back around to return the gaze, anguish burning in those green eyes of his. In a matter of seconds, anguish becomes melancholy, and then ambition for an unknown cause.

A blur of flesh and skin and suddenly he's much closer than he'd been before, faces inches apart. And without a hint of hesitation, his lips are pressing on mine with brilliant clarity. Shock overtakes me immediately and I freeze up, but he doesn't relent. To the ordinary passerby, the kiss must look forced, with my tense shoulders and hands splayed on my cheeks.
As an eternity elapses, I locate my senses, which have been playing hide-and-go-seek, and break the caress, in spite of the longing that demands I allow him to finish what he started. Excessive gasps of air are taken from the both of us, those inhalations breathed in such proximity I swear we share the very molecules of oxygen that besiege us.

"It's awfully soon. I shouldn't-"

"No. You should've." My judgment relinquishes its hold, and before I know exactly what I'm exploiting, my lips are right back on Tyton's with a crushing passion I thought to not be capable of nowadays. The lip lock is different than the ones of the past, tender yet fierce, full of promise against fate. Speculation of all else is thrown away, only this moment exists.

Yet what horrifies me the most is the fact that I don't want to stop.

Arms wrapped around my waist, my fingers raking between strands of hair, and bodies pressed up against one another in such a way that there must be no tomorrow. Unrestrained glints of lightning flicker and are exchanged between the both of us, and they achieve nothing if not bequeath added pleasure to my nerves, veins, and bones.

Unfortunately, Tyton fractures the kiss that shouldn't have lasted that long in the first place. Immediate regret pushes me over the cliff known as my heart, but I don't let him see it. "Wow," he exhales out, still long pants taken from the both of us.

"Agreed." But it isn't the kissed who utters the accord, rather a third member, standing on the reverse end of the corridor from us. Evangeline rakes her eyes over the scene, just as I did Tyton's hair; already I'm certain a scheme brews in that pretty head of hers, no doubt to draw me further into demise. She nonchalantly struts towards Tyton and me in her alloy ensemble, the tail scraping contra the metal flooring, producing a spine-rattling tune that sends chills down my body. An expert in her aptitude, the sound is intentional, meant to disturb.

"Evangeline," I say warningly, though no real threat lurks beneath the empty words. "This is not your secret to tell."

She merely rolls her eyes and offers up a deep snicker. "Remind me how long it's been since Corvium, Mare."

I stare back blankly, not comprehending Evangeline is actually asking a question, instead of a rhetorical one. The magnetron cocks her head, gazing at me demotingly while doing so. Dangerously close she ventures, though I suppose it's not at all a risk for her, with her arrogance heavier than the dress she adorns. During the battle of Corvium, Evangeline actually edged towards my good side, in spite of her threats towards myself. Quickly as the phase came, it has left; it appears Tiberias's accord effected her as well. Comprehending, I compress my eyelids together brutally, refusing to answer such callous needling in Tyton's presence.

"Go on boy. Hurry along, now. Girl gossip is in session now."

Tyton looks back at us, surveying options. Stay at the simple girl's side, all the while resisting the magnetron's orders, the one who owns a glare as noxious as her blades. Otherwise, betray me before a relationship can commence. Opposing instincts, I disclose, "It's alright. Go. I'll be fine." Muffled terror washes over him, though he conceals the emotion as quick as a blink.

Figuring it's the sole manner I'll shake him, I give Tyton my back and focus my diligence on Evangeline. Few seconds transpire until footfalls disembark, rapidly plunging into a silence that I fear nearly as much as Evangeline's allegations that undoubtedly will dawn. Steadyng my breath
intake and composing myself as adequate as feasible, I face the destined queen consort of Norta. At least that's what they like to presume.

"So who do you plan on telling? A select few or every person you can in a hundred-mile radius?"
Uniform respiration, uniform respiration.

"Hmm," she virtually sings, tapping her chin with a beautified finger, its nail filed to an acute tip. "perhaps a distinct Calore brother?"

Sickness jeopardizes the breakfast consumed hours ago, the bile greedy to view the sunlight. Maybe I imagine it, but I suffer from feeling the substance climbing upwards, the mass meeting my tastebuds, my gag-reflex barely able to contain itself. Swallowing dread and vomit simultaneously, an obnoxious grin is thrust into my features; if it doesn't vex her, I'll electrocute her. "Maven wouldn't be very fond of this occurrence, Evangeline. The boy has an obsession-

"Stop right there and never be smart with me again," she emits the humorous growl, yet retains snowy posture and that wicked, cunning expression. "I've come to propose a trade, and these happenings shall have to act as leverage, I suppose."

"How I cherish our deals." The previous resulted in my oath to steer clear of becoming Ptolemus's assassin. These negotiations aren't usually in my favor.

"Manacles no longer confine your freedom; I can assure you it will not be that of the last occurrence." Is it fried eggs and coffee, or is she legitimately playing nice?

"Yet you revealed this secret shall be a bargaining chip. And so often words prove to be almightily compared to a set of chains."

"Fine, catch my bluff. I was just attempting to make you feel as if you had a choice."

"How considerate," I drawl, the appreciation drenched with acid.

"Nevertheless, suspicion tells me you'll like our agreement. Either I go reveal to your scorned lover the treason of the heart you've committed, or you select the latter." Evangeline delays her adjoining words, purely to spite. Treason, she calls it; but it is anything besides for treachery. "As the alternative, I'll be the guardian of your clandestine information, but for an expense."

"Perpetually a cost when doing business with royalty, isn't there?"

She bobs her crown vertically. "Yes, yes there is," the King's daughter asserts too softly for a personality like that of her own. I've punctured a wound. Apprehending her error, Evangeline twitches her topmost lip and throws a glare my way. "Together we will compel Tiberias's life to take the form of a living hell; so torrid even he cannot sustain. And as for this," the magnetron pauses, searching for the suiting words. What an oddity for the girl who undoubtedly toiled in institutions for years, gaining information on becoming the perfect queen, master of public speaking. Now she trips when conversing with a stupid little red girl. "it will materialize as social knowledge soon enough. You and Tyton will only manage to stay a secret for some span of time before someone slips. Who knows? Perhaps he doesn't want your bond to be private; perhaps half the residence is already aware."

My throat bobbles, a sufficient movement for Evangeline to notice if she cared. "Why are you helping me? A year ago you would've been more than happy to carve a couple blades into my chest."

"And certain days I still yearn to," she expels, almost fuming. "We're on the same side, aren't we?"
No. "I will never adore Tiberias the way in which you did. You do." She uses the present tense, and it greatly unsettles. You don't love him; not anymore. "I don't wish to marry the boy, but it appears I'm trapped for options. So I propose we make him sad beyond belief."

"How do you propose we manage this?" I ask, gulping. Against my own morals, I sense a twinge of pity for the boy, subject to Evangeline's wrath. It would be folly to convince myself not an ounce of love remained for Cal. New guilt amasses; once again I'm blocked at a standstill, a crossroads where two loves collide. I shouldn't be growing this connection with Tyton that has been churning lately when I prolong these gloomy ideas, not a chance in hell of them reviving.

Yet I shun thoughts of exterminating Tyton, the flower in a field of snow; the lantern chasing aside the eventide. And someday, I prompt, my heart and mind will heal from these old wounds that never truly are vanquished, under Tyton's compassion. And when someday arrives, I promise to love him with all my heart or hope to die.

"There are unlimited options, really. In the beginning, the very mention of your name had Tiberias balking. A steamy brush of lips between you and your new toy would have this place in ruins."

"You suggest I use the very notion you vowed to keep a secret from him, against him? How clever."

"If you don't prefer that one, I can concoct plenty more." Evangeline looks me in the eye for the first occurrence in our conversation. "You are the sole being on this Earth who is capable of causing the prince unadulterated agony. Whatever method entices isn't my concern. Get the job done, and this secret of yours will be hidden on my behalf."

She twirls, metal spiraling alongside her. "Farewell, little lightning girl. And make him suffer."

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The humid, yet comforting heat of the season dances amidst the air of my chambers, wafting through the cracked open window. Faint whoops accompany the breeze; one could guess they belong to Ella and Rafe, their discipline in training relentless. Combat honed fingers-morphed from the smooth skin of a child to a war stricken soldier's-stroke down my hair repeatedly, the motion mesmerizing to the both of us.

"I won't color it purple if you were ready to ask."

"No, that's not what I was contemplating," Tyton whispers, despite our solitude. "You're alluring in this state, without creams or a glamour to enhance your beauty."

Assuredly a blush travels up my neck, my cheeks, as he vocalizes his opinion. Across the course of my life, I've been labeled with a multitude of descriptions, and alluring fails to meet this list. More often it's bitch, nothing, useless... When I was still in adolescence, Mom surely told me how pretty her little girl was; all mothers tell their daughters so. And only two other boys ever had the incentive to categorize me in such ways.

I shift up from my position lying down on the mattress, and sit up with my knees tucked into my chest.

Noticing my self-consciousness, Tyton replaces the field of interest. "You know why I was so quiet when we first met?"

I shake my head.
"I couldn't find my words that day, to greet you without earning myself a week in the hospital from his royal majesty. You're strikingly beautiful if you like it or not." His declarations don't aid the redness that persists its effervescing, never satisfied with the intensity it already owns.

"Tyton..." I trail off, a warning to stop his compliments as if they're insults.

"No," is all he says. From just behind me, the creak of Tyton climbing off the bed sounds, and in an instant, he's clutching my hand, our fingers laced together, and hauling me into the washroom.

Straight to the sink, but that isn't the object of which is the concern. A refined, expertly contrived looking glass looms before us, its skeleton a shimmering gold, surely made of the same substance it takes the color of. Moisture from the heat of day adheres to the mirror, offering my blurred reflection, hazy and unclear.

Tyton pushes away the condensation, unveiling the both of us. "Now look, with authentic appreciation."

After dragging out a blink, I gaze back at the girl who is just as miserable as I am. Slightly bloodshot eyes, from the exhaustion and tears that are never through with their terrorism. At least the assured bags that decorate my eyes have been covered with the powder Farley awarded me a couple days ago. Lips chapped from the biting...

"Tyton, I can't do this; there are other, paramount activities that need to be seen to." I make a move to leave the lavatory, but I hardly get anywhere before Tyton's strong arms clamp down on my shoulders.

"No. It's evident there's nothing more important than this."

I could break out of his grasp if I wanted to, had the energy. Instead, I turn back around.

"You like focusing on the negatives, don't you? The golden, brown skin of yours perfectly offsets from your orbs, the shade of a thriving elm tree in the spring, brighter than all the others." I want to tell him, no, only lies flow from his mouth. Yet the words he utters are so poetic, beautiful even if they are falsehoods. "And the gray ends of your locks aren't distasteful when the correct beholder views them."

As much as I try to hold back my simper, a tentative one pops out. "It's amazing how all in one day I can kneel before a man who least of all deserves to perch on that throne, choking my pride, and then this happens. Thank you," I whisper the most genuine statement I've owned in my existence.

"Of course," he speaks back softly.

Before I have the chance to regret it, I whip around and encompass my arms about Tyton, forcing him into a crushing embrace. Momentarily surprised, but he quickly returns the gesture, surrounding each other in innate body heat.

It comforts me, far more than it should.

"Not just for this, but everything, every little thing you've done for me these past days. Even the kiss." The addition to the sentence I promptly wish to take back.

"About that," Tyton's breathing hiccups; I can practically listen to the beating of his heart from this distance. "I really shouldn't have." The electricon uses the same plead as earlier.

"I don't bemoan it if you're curious. But it's far too soon, you weren't wrong on that part." If only I
could see his expression now. "Though," I add nimbly, "I do believe a relationship could blossom between us, someday."

Finally, those rapid gallops of his heart pumping blood cool down to a steady pace. Though it isn't his organ that panics, but mine, I note now.

"Friends, for now, we can agree," he responds right into my ear.

"Yes, nothing less than that," I return.

A timid, almost frightened knock sounds on the door that divides my chambers from the rest of the world. Possibly a slave—though Volo claims otherwise—to deliver lousy news reporting yet another event gone wrong.

"What fantastic timing," I murmur under my breath, traipsing towards the exit once Tyton releases his arms.

Though the face of the person who greets me wasn't the one I was expecting.

For a moment I foresee Farley launching into a lengthy reprimand on the irrationality of my actions and I disjoin my lips, ready for a counterargument. Yet there's such a burden of struggle attached to her features, tensing her jaw, her eyes alert and dejected synchronously. On the brink of sobs, in fact.

"Farley," I say, double-checking my tone is sincere and thoughtful. "What's wrong?"

"If you're concerned for my happiness, that's very considerate, but I assure you there are far more captious dilemmas to mull over. Shockingly, her pitch maintains a steady beat, though it's hollow. Her throat bobbles when she announces this vague information.

Farley hasn't cried for a long time, and today sadness risks that streak.

When she understands I have nothing to say, confused, she formulates broader. "Your parents are here, you best go speak with them. I'm only a messenger; this news is not mine to deliver." This go-round, her voice hitches and a sole droplet of salty despair washes out her tear ducts.

Mom and Dad are here, all the way from Piedmont, a thousand miles south.

Only a crisis would allow these circumstances.
Chapter 8

Iris

"Where are we?" I ask wearily to one of my private Sentinels on watch nearby.

"Southern Piedmont, merely a mile outside of the Scarlet Guard's base. We'll be back in Norta by sooner than nightfall, Your Majesty," he replies dutifully, offering a dip of the head.

"I have far more pressing issues than those involving my sleep schedule," I murmur, strolling further abroad from the aircraft. A lazy breeze drifts across the pores of my skin, imitating the winds of the basin I once resided on. How I miss those years, awakening early in the morning to witness that enchanting sunrise over the lake, which never failed in conjuring shivers down my arms, raising the fuzz on my skin.

"Are we near the coastline?" I wonder aloud, the question otherwise burning a hole in my chest. Father took me to the ocean when I was still in adolescence, to hone my ability in the most powerful and magnificent way.

"Five miles, approximately, Your Majesty."

My heart sinks upon hearing the distance in which I'd have to run to reach, not to mention the return as well. So close, yet seemingly farther than ever. If the guards weren't dashing helter-skelter, to and fro, I'd trick myself into believing that the ocean could be heard from such a distance.

"Thank you," I mumble, not truly meaning it. The sentry bows his head obediently once more, then trails my footfalls, always so cautious to protect the Queen. Though it's doubtful he cares, not a chance any one of these guards genuinely are concerned. The sole purpose of preserving royalties lives entails the threat of death if overcome by failure.

Unfortunately for those two or three men-I don't bother to count- I'd put their efforts of defense to shame. Iris Cygnet of the Lakelands is more than capable of defending herself against a couple of assassins, much less meager reds, as the officers delight in naming them.

Maven poises serenely atop the knoll that overlooks the camp, acting so different to the emotions that are certainly blaring in the boy's mind, drowning out all else, so entranced with his thoughts he doesn't greet me when I stroll to his side. Or perhaps he simply chooses to ignore the imp that he refers to as "wife."

Accepting that I am doomed to utter my speculations first, I say, "Enjoying the view? Pity, it'll be ash by day's end." Unlike Norta's massive and imposing architecture, stretching into the sky so far I often find myself suffering from neckaches, the little civilization spawls out rather than upward. Buildings rarely more than two stories adorn the streets, made of all colors of brick containing burgundy and tan on the spectrum. "A simple, yet beautiful town like this doesn't deserve to be burnt." So peaceful, it's hard to conclude deadly lightning plays here.

"I was thinking more along the lines of mass shooting or lynching, but I suppose conflagration would be creative. I was going to attain the credit for myself, but blaming Tiberias would have its perks."

"Always the strategist, aren't you?" I cannot differentiate whether his humor is mocked or not. Either way, it sickens me. "Whichever style chosen is insignificant to the end game, because, my
cherished, the cruel dance that you have been competing in is insignificant to the state of your soul." A queen never questions her role of authority, Mother taught me, the strict yet acquiescent women grinding my status into place from a time before I could make it rain. Not today, though.

He doesn't so much as blink at my claim, only taking an annoyingly long whiff of the salty ocean air. "Trust me when I say this, Iris. My soul has been tarnished for a very long time. So I do what I can with the years that remain. Months, perhaps," he says, predicting his premature death.

Incapable of continuing to stand near me, Maven ventures off to the Captain of the Sentinels to plan out last-minute strategy, abandoning me with my lonesome.

If the King wasn't so wickedly intelligent, I'd assume that we're marching to our deaths. Nearly to the heart of the town, and yet red-blooded souls roam the streets as though we're invisible. Because we are, courtesy of Lakeland soldiers, the equivalent of the House Haven deserters. Refuge families laugh amongst themselves, little girls and boys tugging at their mothers' pants. All this wasted blood, stolen from innocents, not even part of the war, just yearning for peace as I do. The days I feel tranquility shall not ever arrive.

This entire disaster of a monarchy caused by one girl.

"Do not fire your revolvers nor your abilities. Only when the little lighting girl, her family, and Tiberias are located, may you utilize those weapons." Maven stands morosely calm at my side, continuing to repress his true colors. Obsessed. "Are the cameras prepared to film?"

"Yes," is called from somewhere in the back of the lines of men. I shouldn't be surprised, not after these months of getting to know Maven, even if it was abstract. A threat to the Scarlet Guard, a promise that he'll slaughter every being who dares to reach for the crown atop his head. Though Maven couldn't care less about the fates of these casualties, his mind undoubtedly focused on a particular topic.

"It's not too late, you know," I suddenly hiss into his ear. "We could turn around, undetected completely."

"I've come to the decision that words you say go into one ear and straight out the other," he growls back. "Your arguments are idle."

I go on anyway, not seeing the consequences. What could he do to punish me? "You call the reds inferior, yet you're infatuated with one. Or haunted, I could argue." Maven pauses in his steps, motioning for the infantry to begin searching buildings; silently, somehow.

"Nowadays, it's the latter. She haunts me in nightmares, her screams fracturing the boundary between sleep and reality." His confession takes me aback; after weeks of pressuring him to confide in a woman without proven alliances, I ceased needling. "She must come back."

I allow breaths in and out of my chest to steady previous to my next action. "The little lightning girl doesn't love you one bit. I've only hailed her once and from that brief conversation, I saw that rapid look in her pupils, aching for freedom and the opportunity to get her hands around your throat. So don't contemplate for a second your chances at a conciliation."

Certain he won't respond, I turn my back to him and wonder towards a cluster of homes, all of which are smaller than my chamber rooms back at home. Further away from the boy I aspire to leave; to never interact with. Each housing structure I pass emulates the characteristics of the one
before, following a cookie-cutter pattern.

A set of three steps leads up to the front door, dried out grass bedecking the minuscule lawns. Mid-
summer doesn't do this region well, drying out every particle the sultry air passes through. Stealing
a hasty glance over my shoulder, only my private Sentinel's occupy the space, the only other
exception being soldiers rushing down the way, and the occasional and oblivious passerby. The
guards won't care, the most extreme reaction bring them rolling their eyes under those ridiculous
masks.

So, making the decision, water molecules gather up together out of thin air, and sprinkle down on a
small portion of the blades, slowly expanding outward until there's nowhere further to go without
causing a disturbance. For a moment involving lapse of thought, I stare at the greenery expectantly,
as if that short period of time and water will alter anything.

Planning on advancing toward the next lawn, I rise from the crouched positive I find myself in,
having no recollection of kneeling down.

Though I don't get far before the first gunshot goes off. Before a blink passes, guardsmen are
flanking me from all angles, those thick rifles of theirs aloft. However, the screams erupt faster
than the guns are raised, townsfolk now sprinting for their lives. Yet the bullets are wickedly
efficient, claiming even the newblood speedsters that zoom past us.

Regardless of the men that protect me so feverishly, only a stooge would feel impervious; utterly
safe. From the ephemeral survey I took of the base, it's clear it functions as a haven for refugees,
while also playing the role of a military training camp. It'll take not even minutes for their legions
to enter the one-sided battle. Like a ring of fire, they shoot, stab, or otherwise demolish any brave
soul who challenges to harm the queen.

"I can defend myself," I growl out, breaking my usually calm, royal-like character. For weeks, I've
allowed those idiots to catenate me every waking moment, perpetually at a distance qualified to
take on a projectile meant for someone else. I fracture the enclosure by shouldering two of the
guards harshly and immediately begin sprinting at a breakneck pace.

Collecting vapor in the air, transforming it into liquid, then coiling all about my body, I push
segments of the water down the throats of newbloods that come at me, just enough to debilitate the
warriors for a couple seconds, just long enough for me to get away from them and find Maven his
intended target.

I've never been one to murder when in combat, abhorring the blood and gore and most importantly
the impact of such a hateful act on my spirit. No matter how firm Father was on his explanation for
when killing is permitted, I couldn't allow myself to envision permanently harming another, even if
they are the enemy, with evil agendas. Especially, in this case, I'm more so inclined to grant these
ill-fated reds life, as no other silver would do so.

Plenty of howls of misery are brought forth from both nearby and far away. Still, I hear my
security team's yells above all else- or perhaps my mind tricks me into thinking so. "We need to
keep you safe, my Queen!" one hollers, sounding polite and authoritative.

Ignoring them the best I possibly can, I continue onward, whipping my neck back and forth every
five seconds, desperately in search of the King. Though I attempt to overlook the blood, the
onslaught, there are some occurrences that cannot be unseen.

A little girl chokes on her own sobs, her cheeks flushed a tragic pinkish-red. "Mommy!" she shrieks
repeatedly, having not realized drawing attention to oneself is of utmost stupidity. Wretched
kindness tugs at my arm, begging to go and help the child. What would you do? The other, ruthless part counters. You're not her mother. You can't protect her, not with those men chasing after you. Not in the center of a battle.

Suddenly, I see a girl with dark skin not unlike my own, swoop in and cross the street, taking no time at all to hoist up the girl into her arms. What transpires next I don't foresee. The toddler on her hip, the girl—who nearly seems to be a woman—doesn't run down an alleyway or any direction away from the bloodshed, rather stands unmoving and turns to face me with a viciousness etched onto her features.

"I'd feel bad for you, marriage and all, if not for your blood," she growls out, that callousness still ever-present. Out of instinct, streams of water advance towards her, just as if they were asps. She smirks at my rain like it's nothing but an empty threat; child's play. With the arm that isn't occupied holding up the little girl, she straightens it outward until it points at me, as though her arm is an arrow and her body the bow.

The lengths of water now speed at the girl, almost out of their own accord.

My action only is reason for the girl's atrocious grin to widen, for an unknown purpose. Suddenly, my water goes loose, splashing to the ground harmlessly. The perilous liquid that was meant for the girl's lungs now is a meager puddle on the ground, the only hazard being the slickness.

"Shit," I grumble amidst my heavy breathing. She's a newblood silencer, not only capable of abducting abilities but of annihilation altogether. I shouldn't have been so thoughtless, to think that the young woman was simply arrogant enough to come at me; she really does have the strength to dig my grave.

Incomparable pain accosts me, attacking every fiber of my being. Like a God's almighty fist presses on my shoulders, I crumple down on the brick streets, my head earning a lovely bump along the way. It burns, is all I can manage to think. Scalding fingertips brush along my legs and journey upward until they've formed a sort of choke hold on my neck. All reserves of stamina flee my body, scared of the ghostly force that is both non-existent and more corporal than anything else.

I spread my jittery mouth, prepared to beseech for benevolence, make empty promises if required. The silence is unbearable. It must be given a resolution.

Regrettably, my perception of the world crashes through my flooded mind and I recall Father's wisdom. Never surrender. Die an honorable death or defeat your opponent. There isn't another option.

Shivers criss-cross, the unworldly affliction intensifying. Yet I seal my lips shut and close my eyes as well. I refuse to have unrealistic hope. I shouldn't have deserted my guards, all of which must be perished or horribly injured by now; otherwise, they would've saved me. And for the selfish mistake, I'll die.

So in my final moments, I remember the silver lining. Will my slaying matter if the little girl was salvaged from Maven's wrath? The King will find another queen, and the world will move on. Meanwhile, my soul will ascend skyward, and I will meet the creators. My only sorrow will be not getting to witness Maven's impending death myself.

Out of the blue—as the haze begins to engulf my optics— the world seems to speed to past me quicker than the speed of light. Is this what knocking at death's door is supposed to be like? I can't help but wonder. Wind pushes at my braids, over my skin, until it lulls me into a sense of serenity.
"My Queen?" is voiced by a man who sounds stricken with terror.

"Yes?" Though I'm sure my vocal cords rang out, the voice no longer sounds like my own, rather that of a witch, who appears in old storybooks.

"You nearly died, my Queen," he explains, kneeling down and touching my neck with two fingers, in order to feel my pulse.

"I wouldn't have," I regain my regal tone and build up a wall of stones to obscure my vulnerability. Notwithstanding, it is a lie. The silver monarchies have done their best to conceal the fact that newbloods are paramount to us, and the silencer back there was no exception. Helpless, I was, opposing that girl. Still, I clarify, "I was doing just fine."

A different type of silence canopies the air, only some faint orders being called from across the landscape. The Sentinel sped me back to where we touched down, I notice. He surely wants to tell me how I would've died instants later if not for his service; if I were in his shoes I'd oblige in telling the pretentious queen she was useless.

But him and I both know he'd be dead for that. "Thank you," I award him a bit of validation.

Our conversation finished, I'm presented freedom of time to gaze over the ridge of land, and watch the bloodshed without being so busy participating that I can analyze it. Newbloods fight and slaughter silvers; silvers fight and slaughter newbloods. The armies are balanced in their numbers, and if things keep going like this both sides will be vanquished. Though the snipers I notice atop the higher building roofs take out silvers a dozen per minute. In the thick of the chaos, they don't perceive where the bullets are coming from. And if I were on their side, I'd tell Maven to get his own team of assassins. At this rate, they'll all be dead in half an hour.

"Where is she?" is roared from across the way, so loudly and abruptly that I lurch backward, knocking into my escort. I cuss inwardly, automatically assuming the worst.

Summoning scant returned funds of vigor, I grabble myself upward, the Sentinel's grip on my wrist unwavering, as well as another hand around my waist in order assist the effort. The conservative part of me questions whether or not this contact is permitted in the Nortan Sentinel code. Yet the eager and anxious side prevails, and I override anything the books have to say about it.

"Thank you," I renew my gratitude, before hobbling hurriedly, trying to act ladylike and run in my state.

Maven and his army must've discovered where someone relevant resided and seized him or her before ordering the attack on the city. Obviously not the little lightning girl, though, distinguished by his cries.

As I approach Maven and his entourage, I squint to observe a gathering of cowering men and women apart from the rest, most standing, though a few kneel on the grass. Some faces glisten with terror, while others radiate unconditional hatred; a couple are assorted. Reds, clearly, with their anguished, mournful surfaces.

Eyes as wide and alert as a deer's, Maven's gaze locks in a standstill with mine, the intensity not slackening whatsoever, in such a way that it could be a contest. Unluckily for him, I don't rejoice in defeat either.

"Iris," Maven announces painfully leisurely. "You carry yourself as though you've been injured. Perhaps it would suit you us best if you waited on the plane. You'll find it much more comfortable
Days afterward our matrimony, we arrived at an agreement. Two personalities so clashing couldn't be passionate towards one another, especially with Maven's plans. Disregarding the constant tension between the two of us, we vowed to retain the appearance of a regal couple who are completely in love; who never argue.

Alternately to being a compliant woman, "Or perhaps I should stay here, to view how events play out. Thank you, though, for the concern," I reply. Stopping not five feet from Maven, I return his unblinking gaze, which I have deduced is a competition for dominance.

"If the little lightning girl hadn't killed our whispers, this wouldn't be a concern," he murmurs softly, turning back to the cowering family. A small triumph for me.

My attention turned off the king, I take a long while in examining the individuals who stand before us. An array of ages, the youngest not one year old, the two eldest looking to be in their late forties. Three boys on the brink of maturity defend a girl a tad younger than myself. Though it is the woman who must be these boys' mother who dons a mask of savagery that forces chills down my spine.

One of the boys notices it too, breaking off from the others to hold her wrist as if she needs restraint. "She's not here," the boy explains, containing the anger better than his mother can.

"What do you mean she's not here?" Maven says through clenched teeth. "You're lying."

"Mare's long gone," the girl in the back whispers loud enough for us all to hear. "She went off to defend Corvium and hasn't returned since."

I knit my eyebrows together. The unspoken words imply that she's dead, but that cannot be true. "Somewhere, plotting to kill the bastard king," she quickly adds. I'm impressed, she speaks what the rest of us are too afraid to convey.

Solely from that single phrase, Sentinel's handguns are unlocked, based on the clicking I hear. The mother breaches the grasp her son has on her and strolls to settle herself in front of the girl. "Tell me, Your Majesty. Does it pain you to look into the eyes of the little lightning girl's mother?" Oh. Now I see it, with their matching eyes and streaks of gray at tips of brown hair. "Do you see the anger of her face in my own?"

For once, Maven stays mute. As if he's ashamed.

"You stole my daughter from me!" she shrieks, advancing towards us. Guard's arms are raised, prepared to defend. Luckily, the boy who contained her previously regrips her, keeping the mother from hurting herself. "You stole my daughter from me," she repeats, though much weaker this time. "You're the devil."

Regaining his dignity and egotism, Maven asks again, "Where is she? And if you don't tell me the truth, I promise you I will tear up every inch of this pathetic base to find her. And it will achieve the same goal, only much more complicated for all of us."

The youngest girl pushes through her brothers, stopping only feet away from her sister's tormentor. Sentinels also move forward to push her back, but Maven signals them to remain motionless. "Exactly a week, she's been gone. And we haven't been told anything more, to prevent situations where you silvers dissect that information right out of our heads." She holds her ground, not blenching when Maven nears her.
A low and disturbing chuckle is emitted from Maven's throat, causing the girl to look away. I don't blame her. "Tell me, sister of the fallen princess. Would she die for you?"

Without a second thought, I would die for my sister.

"No one is dying today," a second boy emerges to the front, his eyes a strikingly colored sea-green. "We don't have her. So leave us be."

His words mean absolutely nothing in the ever-present struggle for power and love, and even the green-eyed boy understands this, his background meaningless. Another set of pawns to employ won't be wasted by Maven. Not when resources are stretched so thin and the little lightning girl is so very, very close.

"I think not," Maven retaliates, pressing his lips together to prevent a smile. "Sentinels, take the girl. The young one."

Faster than the speed of light, objections are called out, the protective circle of boys engaging. The mother takes the lead, acting as the head of the clan, staring down Maven with resolute. "Isn't one daughter enough, you coward? Go on and take her yourself, without those damned guards of yours," she nods her head towards Maven's Sentinels.

Seldomly, the King's men second-guess an order, and that rare happening takes place now. Like petrified figures, none of the soldiers move, either scared of the hunched woman or waiting for additional commands from Maven, who's obviously apprehensive about further instilling his demand. Although fierceness shines through the mother similar to that of a blaring light, no military-trained silver would be afraid of the woman edging into elderhood.

They're contradicting the Nortan King, because of his dying sanity.

"Take her," he struggles out, not with a trace of joy this time. "Give your daughter a message, Missus Barrow," adding the missus for condescending motives. "Journey back to Whitefire, and not an ounce of blood will spoil. Otherwise, your sister is as good as dead."

The young girl is slow in comprehending the situation she's been thrown into, her eyes not going wide until Sentinels seize her, gripping skinny arms against their will. "No!" at last she screams loud enough to collapse a lung. She thrashes against the guardsmen's iron grip, and when that effort fails, she jerks her head around to glimpse her family one last time. "Don't let her go. Let her be selfish for once in her life," she orders weakly, tears streaming without restraint. Bravery at its finest; sacrificing one's own life for another.

Which is worse, I wonder. A life of imprisonment or death? If not given his way, Maven will surely kill the little lightning girl's sister, but wouldn't kill Mare Barrow herself in a thousand lifetimes.

"A sister for a sister, is fair, is it not?" Maven asks the trembling family, all of which manage to keep a lid on their tempers. Out of shock most likely, they watch her get hauled away, watch sedatives plunge into her neck, and watch her limp body get practically thrown onto the plane—all in silence. How strangely wise of them. "The rest of you are free to leave. But I suggest reuniting with your dear little lightning girl because only one week may elapse previous her sister face the guillotine."
Mare

"Mare," Farley whispers my name again. "They're in the East Entrance Antechamber, outside the primary banquet room. Do you know where that is?"

I shake my head mutely and dumbly, only now regretting my prior disinterest to memorize the estate's layout. I suppose I was lingering on the hope that we'd leave before it became of importance.

"In other, simpler words, take the hallway that leads to Volo's throne room. You'll find the grand doors easily enough."

Hardly absorbing her knowledge, I shoulder past her in a daze and launch into a run.

Without demand for turning, I can sense Tyton's presence chasing after me, though he's thoughtful not to attempt to quell my nerve by pursuing a conversation with me at the current moment. Farley must be tailing us as well, but not containing the same urgency Tyton's owns.

I wish I could rest in faith that my family is here for positive reasons, though Farley's expression dashes any hope of something so unlikely, unlikely even if an emotionless man had delivered the news. Fate will forever oppose me, and that is all there is to it.

My reflections spurt away as the gold-paneled glass doors enter my sight, nearly all thoughts gone, for that matter. A sole one remains, however, that one the most morbid of all. Though contemplating further, it is not separate, rather a collection of the worst possible outcomes that may coincide with the afternoon. Alike to that of a Merandus whisper paging through my head, hundreds of diverse incidents are brought to mind, each ghastly in their own unique way.

Tip-toeing around the last turn I need to make, I halt, leary of what I might find. A brother, without an arm, perhaps; or maybe no brother will greet me at all. Just the thought sends a round of butterflies into my stomach and thorax.

And I find... nothing. Absolutely nothing out of the order, plainly another corridor in the Samos' more-than-ample manor. Additional drapery and illustrated landscapes line the walls, sickeningly excessive, yet tasteful in their own right.

"Mare?" I hear my name in the structure of a question from the direction to my back. Of course, there were two ways to turn, and I chose right over left. The woman's tone is dehydrated, both from lack of water and emotional duress, I can deduct, though deprived of so much as another word.

I can also tell, it is my mother who speaks.

I should rotate my feet as fast as in battle, but for just a moment longer, I stay in place, a microsecond of greed. They won't notice, I convince myself. Just one more blink of false security and happiness. But that, I know, is a lie. As days acting as a soldier slip by, I've learned that there is no such thing as security or happiness in this life. And never will such things exist.

So, slowly, I shuffle myself around counterclockwise, appreciating the scenery that will surely be meaningless to me soon, more important affairs dominating my schedule over viewing the pretty dusky sky. Whisps of clouds levitate and decorate the twilight backdrop, whiter than snow.
After not long enough, I come face to face with my family, the people I wanted more than anything to reunite with yesterday. Now, with perhaps something to be considered as better judgment, I feel that they'd be protected much better somewhere else. But isn't as though it was their choice to be here.

"What is it?" I ask blandly, surveying my family's devastated atmospheres. My brothers and Kilorn wobble dangerously on the chance of sobbing, Dad appears to be in utter denial, and even little Clara senses something is terribly wrong, clutching a stuffed cat playtoy with her tiny fingers, as though it could vanish spontaneously.

But it's Mom, who scares me the most. Confliction ravages her, torn between hatred and desolation, the wrinkles bordering them worse than usual. Typically, she maintains a calm exterior, but now, I question what events would ensue if the woman was given a knife.

Answers linger in their mouths, each of them expecting another to speak up. Finally, Kilorn says, "It's your sister. He took her," Kilorn shakes his head, possibly in regret. "And the Nortan King has offered an ultimatum, being either to return or watch her execution."

No, is the lengthiest thought that can awaken, Kilorn's confessions too much to swallow wholly. So, instead, I choke on it, and fall to my knees and allow the relentless pressure to crack my shield, hence my tears. Despite Kilorn's obscurity, it's painfully clear as to who he refers to. We were supposed to be safe, at least for awhile, from Maven and his army. But the King loves me too much to rest on his hunts.

My throat squeezes together, stalling any claims that need to be made. I won't allow him to hurt her. I won't allow him to hurt me. More myths, it's hopeless to believe that Giza has remained one-hundred percent unharmed from Maven, and Maven has already cut me an infinite number of occasions.

An almost soothing hand rubs at my back and Tyton whispers into my ear, "We won't let it come to that."

Rage pushes him away, not able to bear contact. Stumbling to my feet, I walk across the hallway almost in a haze. the world falling away, until there is only my family. Closer up, I see that tears flow out of Dad's eyes silently and his thin legs tremble uncontrollably like mine do.

Kilorn breaks apart from the rest of them and meets me halfway between, engulfing me in a heavy embrace. "I don't want to return. I can't," I murmur in his ear between unstable breaths.

In retrospect, I wonder how much longer I would've lasted in that room.

Not making it better, "Three days ago, he took her. That leaves four until it's over, one way or another," Kilorn sputters, his clutch on me tightening.

"Why didn't he take all of you?" Other questions flood my brain as well, the primary ones being: Why did he let you go? Did he track you? I pull apart from him, more concern entering my body.

"Giza," he uses my sister's name for the first time, "spoke more than she should've, while the rest of us kept our mouths shut, besides for your mother. But maybe we didn't speak enough; I watched her get dragged away, without a word." His shaking intensifies, edging onto a faux seizure. "I haven't got an idea as to why he let us go. But when the survivors of the attack regrouped, we ensured that we weren't followed."

A small blessing in knowing that Maven and I won't meet, at least for a couple days. Yet a new
question arises. "What are you talking about, Kilorn? What attack? And why am I only hearing about this now?"

Instead, Tramy explains, and says, "I'm shocked there hasn't been a broadcast yet. I saw the cameras, they must be putting together quite the message. Maven killed two birds with one stone, one being your return and the other an ambush on our Piedmont base. Few on both sides made it out alive, fleeing once it became obvious that the odds of life were low."

"What is all this commotion about?" Anabel's voice sounds against my back.

"There isn't a doubt in my mind it isn't related to the Nortan King," another says. Larentia.

Undeterred by the massive size of their living space, the silver elite has no trouble running into us.

"I can make an assumption," a third resounds. Tiberias. "Maven's begun a live newscast, on the bridge." I don't face him, nor do I dare to, yet I listen to the nature of his voice; nauseated, just as I feel.

The terror overwhelms the constant urge to avoid Tiberias, and I say, "I need to see it," in a dead fashion.

"Of course," he approves, attempting to meet my gaze, and though I can feel it, I don't return it. Giving in, he strides back in the route that they came, my kin and I shadowing the royals.

Volo storms past all of us, one set of fingers trailing on and leaving protracted indents on the metal sections of wall, like a scar to flesh. "Couldn't the boy leave things alone for a single week?" He murmurs angrily to himself.

Every step is misery and the fact that Cal is here doesn't help either. Alternately to facing my fears, I examine details of the outside world. The sun peaks out from the horizon, nearly gone; I've been too preoccupied to notice the change of hours. Mountains and saplings have succumbed to the darkness, their figures blurry and black, diverse to the orange and yellow sky. Barely different from the previous opportunity I had at viewing the terrain, only more sunless.

Before I know it, we're filing into a dimmed room by rows of two. Tyton's persistent, but relaxing strokes on my back restart, and this time I don't stop him.

Davidson perches in a chair apart from the boardroom table, hardly sitting with that straight back of his. Besides for his paled face, he owns a perfectly neutral expression. "You should take my seat, Mare," he announces, before wandering to one of the room's margins.

The Monfort leader must think I'll faint if I keep upward. I don't have the energy to thank him as I march further into the office, like a warrior in combat. My brothers, Kilorn, and Tyton form a semicircle around the chair, uninterested in finding a place of their own to settle.

"Mama," is cooed from Clara, who's been under Mom's care for the last week. To her, it's probably felt like ages since they were last together. A misfortune that the babe has to grow up in a war zone, altogether.

The wait to see the feed is too slow; the Samos' may be bathing in money, but they have to be careful when accessing Nortan videos, in case of tracing. My fingers grind into the cushy fabric of the armrests, and though they leave marks, it's better the chair than my palms.

"I can't go back," I repeat again absently.
"And I'll die before that happens," Bree says, staring at the blank monitor, which stretches across half a wall.

"No, you won't," I disagree. The entire purpose of my return would be to keep Giza out of harm's way. It's pointless if Giza is saved, at the cost of another. "No one's dying for me."

Startling me a tad, the screen blazes to life, the Archeon bridge coming into the picture. Silvers of the city rejoice on the structure's perimeter, whopping and booing. Any sound is a victory cry, there.

My heart skips a beat as the camera pans in to reveal Maven and his entourage. So similar to when I knelt at Maven's feet, all the same people, city, and fate. They look so gleeful or pretend to anyway, fearful of the King's wrath.

Heard from the back of the room, is Cameron, who growls, "And I almost slaughtered that bloody arrogant queen, if not for the pathetic speedster!" She points wildly at the broadcast, particularly at Iris, who doesn't bother to smile like the rest of her citizens. However short our talk was at Whitefire, I did notice the soul she possessed. She has a soul. The rest do not.

"Thank you, my dear people, for joining me on this wonderful summer evening," Maven shouts, even with a microphone. "Today, we celebrate the capture of the little lightning girl's adolescent sister, along with the total annihilation of a Scarlet Guard base!"

More cheers arise.

Seconds elapse before Giza is dragged out onto the podium, seemingly awakening from unconsciousness. I was correct on assuming that she'd be damaged in some sort. Tramy and Bree grab my hands; Kilorn clutches my shoulders as if I'd be ripped away at this very moment.

"The little lightning girl's tenure as the red rebellion's leader has dragged on, and as the rightful king of this nation, it is my responsibility to end it. Death would be mercy, and traitors cannot delight in such things. For that philosophy, she will rot instead, and no one will rescue her this time."

My nose strings, a foreboding sign of new tears. Still, I don't allow myself to blink, intent on viewing every action. The lens zooms in further, and Maven's eyes flash from the audience straight to the camera, as if his eyes were boring into mine, only not through a screen. "Come back to me, Mare. Or else your sins will be restituted with your sister's blood."

And then the screen fades back to black, Maven's grin being the last movement seen.

"Lies!" Davidson rumbles, sauntering towards the head of the room. "For one, a teenage girl isn't the commander of this organization, and secondly, both sides lost an equal quantity of men. If anything, we won, simply based that we had not a second to formulate."

"There's one more thing," Mom whispers; she isn't used to be surrounded by so many royals and officials. She pulls a crumpled leaflet out of her packet and relinquishes it to Davidson, who won't let me lay eyes on it until he does.

He scans it over, then again, having issues comprehending the message. Finally, "Sick, sick boy," he says softly. Volo snatches it up next, sharing the paper with his wife and Anabel, who shake their heads in disgust.

"What does it say?" I ask Davidson; the letter will find everybody else before I read it.
He sighs, before explaining, "It appears the king has invited you to a masquerade ball, to take place in four days time."

It's a marvel I haven't screamed yet. "What's the purpose in that? If Maven wants her captured, he's merely complicating events for himself," Tyton asks.

"Maven loves playing games," I describe. "It wouldn't be any fun if I simply walked into Caesar's Square, my arms above my head."

"He's jeopardizing his court," Anabel elaborates, rolling her eyes at Maven's ignorance. "Surely he knows what a stupid move he's made."

"Don't you understand?" I snap at her, no longer congruent to Davidson's orders on playing nice with the silvers. "He doesn't care about the consequences of his actions, so long as I'm in his possession at the end of the day."

"Mare's right," Farley recognizes; she manages to appear intimidating even with Clara on her hip. "He'll stop at nothing, but Queen Anabel, that precisely explains why he didn't make the request publicly. He knows the masses wouldn't approve, so it remains a secret. I'm sure he'll tip off the leader of the guard that we plan on attacking, but won't be explaining how he's gotten that information."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Commander Farley," Davidson warns, challenging with a staredown. "With an entire city of Piedmont soldiers demolished, we are in no shape to be plotting, not to mention the lack of time."

My neck wobbles when considering the possibility of Giza's threatened death becoming real. It can't happen- I won't let it...

"Do you suggest we do nothing?" I can't help but push out of my chair and engage Davidson myself. "Because if that's the case, I swear to you that I will march into the nearest Nortan-controlled town and hand myself over." Let me decay. It won't be of concern as long as I rest knowing that she is safe. But where will I rest, then? On an overstuffed bed, in chains, the daylight nonexistent.

He exhales out, apparently calming himself, perhaps to avoid yells. Davidson then looks at me like I'm an idiot, and says, "The resources for an attack this scale aren't in our hands, presently. I can guarantee a loss if we paraded in there right now."

"I understand, that from a general's perspective, my sister is collateral damage, a common death. But I've already lost one sibling, and I cannot afford another. So if I have to spend the rest of my days as Maven's pet, I will do exactly that. Unless somebody has a superior idea."

Not a one offers a suggestion, the room silent and nearly breathless.

"Perfect." I nod to myself, partially fathoming the new issue that has been forced upon me. "Perfect," I mutter again, pushing past my brothers, through anyone who's rather stupid to endeavor to stop me.

"Mare, please," Tyton begs for me to stay, wrapping his fingers around my wrist.

In the split second between the pressure on my skin and Tyton's words, the slow part of my brain tricks the clever sector into believing that his grip isn't bone and flesh, but silent stone.

Quicker than the pace of light, I rip my arm away, mutter an incoherent apology, and take hasty,
large strides for the sake of the strand of pride left. "Give her distance, Tyton. I'm sorry, but you can't relate to what she went through," I hear Farley say, immediately after turning out of their sight.

Panic imperils sense, and I've never felt so claustrophobic; I shouldn't, not when the hallway is basically infinite.

Frantically, I dart down the first path I see and don't glance back once.

I screamed, for as long as I could, at the most ear-splitting pitch I'm capable of.

And then, when my lungs weren't capable of sound, I wept. For Giza. For my remaining family, suffering from the loss of their favorite daughter. And primarily for myself.

Maven once informed me that he'd make them scream for me. Every last one, both people I know and haven't met; all with one thing in common: red blood. How the tables have turned, it now being me who weeps, tears still fresh from my eyes.

Either outcome, he'll always win.

I swat the heavy door leading to my room shut, adrenaline enduring its journey through my body. Yet somehow, fatigue accompanies it.

Until now, I didn't bother to absorb the total darkness that leaks through panes of glass. I must've stayed out in the space that Julian lead me to for an hour, at least.

In the midst of tears, I bunched fistfuls of flowers, leaving ugly patches of soil, sticking out like a sore thumb in comparison to the flawless grove. Similar to myself in this crowd of military officers and nobility. Aside from my lighting, I'm just as disposable as any other. And like Davidson said, in the grand scheme of things, Giza is merely another death for this righteous cause.

As I approach the bathroom faucet, my reflection glares back at me with disdain. But is it I who hates the echo of my figure in the mirror, or the reflection who resents me? Temptation pushes me to transfer that fury from my heart to my fist, to shatter the blasted mirror into microscopic smithereens, to correlate with my emotions. Shattered.

That blow would undoubtedly get Volo and Anabel on my case furthermore, angering Davidson as well. I've already snarled at the ex-Queen today; more chaos isn't going to do anyone good.

The frustration of the damned situation I've been thrust into should've been dampened, but I now believe that no amount of screams could ever restitute Maven's demand; your sins will be restituted with your sister's blood. Destroying the mirror will accomplish nothing, either. Besides, scrapes leaking blood currently are scattered about my hands and lower arms, caused by the thorny weeds I unearthed from the ground and the vain punches I directed towards the weeping willows.

Heat water washes over my glands, stinging for a second or two before morphing into a pleasure. Pinkish fluid leaves the skin, gathering in the basin, before draining through slits, never to be seen again. Truly longer than necessary, I allow my unsightly hands to soak in the steaming water, despite my vow to evade fire and heat in general at all costs.

I'm supposed to be stronger than this, is all my mind can stray to as I exit my bathroom- a similar sized area to my bedroom in the Stilts-and turn off the light. I'm supposed to-
Soldier's intuition kicks in, and half a moment after registering a second presence in the room, fibers of electricity roam on the surface of my hand, prepared to erupt into a lethal strike if required.

At the same moment, small pyres come into existence, burning at the wicks of candles that I intended to dispose of. Firelight daunts the onyx light, chasing the shadows to the outskirts of the room.

The illumination slaughters any hope of ignorance I had, as Tiberias' features come into view all too quickly. Ignorance is bliss, as they say; but bliss and knowledge cannot coexist. The lightning wielded in my palm wanes until it is nothing. A fool's optimism, but perhaps with the sparks gone, he is blind to me, the light not reaching the corner of the chambers from his perspective. At the very littlest, perhaps my expression remains a mystery to him.

"I'm sorry the intrusion, Mare," he uses my name, sending shivers of hatred and longing down my vertebrae. Fear of the unknown outshines them all. "But knocking on the door wasn't exactly going to work." His voice reeks of sorrow, yet not remorse.

The separate bathroom is still only a large trample away, so close that my fingertips caress the door frame. Simple as that; Tiberias couldn't cross the room in time to bar me from slipping through the entrance and sitting up against the opposite side of the door. Not that he would, though.

I watch him like a hawk, and he knows it too, shifting in the iron chair he's placed himself in. Farley, Tyton, Ella, and Rafe had all had their fair share of moments in that seat as well. I'd much rather be speaking with one of them than being confronted with this situation. Nevertheless, he doesn't gaze upward and make eye-contact with me, as he tried to earlier.

"What do you want?" I whisper, promptly regretting it.

Tiberias twiddles with his flamemaker bracelets, either avoiding the question or considering an answer. He even goes so far as to scrape them together, igniting deja vu. Memories, painful memories at that, come rushing back to the surface. After the battle... on the balcony...

"I want your safety," he replies, doing his best to retain a clear and meaningful tone.

This is proof that this has been a burden on his shoulders, as it has been on mine. Though surely not as severe, my actions have made him ache just as they have done to me. Still, his words sicken me. "You have more important things to worry about than my safety," I say even softer; if the room weren't so eerily silent, he wouldn't hear a word. "Tiberias," I finish.

A discontented and low growl is emitted from his throat. If I didn't know him so well, I might be scared. "So you're going to waltz into the palace and sacrifice yourself to him? Just like that?" The candle flames heighten, burning away the darkness that was hiding me, and our gazes clash for but a second; the most agonizing second of my life.

"The King will-

"Don't. Call. Him. The. King," Tiberias grinds out, standing up to make a point. He gave me the advantage of walking into a trap with a vulnerable, sitting boy. But he's tired of that. "Maven fulfills his promises," Unlike yourself. "and that was no different from any other. But you must not play your cards so carelessly."

"Should I call you Your Majesty then?" I emphasize disdain. "I'm certain your Grandmother would be ecstatic."
"Don't veer to another subject, Mare. Any other day you can chastise my choices."

Any other day, I would be keeping as far away from him as I could. "At Whitefire, maybe I'll be happier there." An outright falsehood and we both know it. "Maven and I could have breakfast together every morning like we use to, and I could spend the rest of my day formulating useless escapes. Evangeline not being there to manipulate everything will be nice."

Alarm contorts his normally beautiful eyes and his posture lurches into stick-straightness. "What did he do to you?" The forbidden question, he asks, singeing a hole in my heart. Before particular events transpired, I told him not a fraction of the traumas I endured. Of all times, now, I'm coming clean.

"A lot of things," I merely explain, really not explaining at all. "It might satisfy you to know that he only kissed me once." In spite of my conceited cover, speaking the truth aloud stings as much as the brush of lips did.

Brutal quiet occupies the space, an infrequent order or giggle slipping through the door from the hallway. The several moments of silence allot me time to consider what I've done. What have I achieved? Fracturing two hearts more than they already were? Inflicting pain on the future king? Or more so myself?

"I let him lock lips with me in order to influence him. Though in turn, he did the same to me."

"Ah," is all Tiberias says. But then deciding to continue, "You can't return to him. You're invaluable to the Guard."

"I don't care if they value me or not. My sister needs me more than they do."

"Yes," he agrees with me the first time tonight. "But we can find a different method."

My fingertips find themselves curling in on themselves, agitating my skin once again. "There is no we, here." Tiberias strides forward until we stand a sheer one foot apart. Warmth radiates from him, but reversely from the intended effect, my skin bumps up, and chills rake across my body for the thousandth occurrence today.

"Then why," his breath is inhaled from this distance. "did you keep this?" He asks, raising a glittering gem attached to a miniature metallic stick to my line of vision. The scarlet earring. Of course, I neglected to put it somewhere less noticeable than on the center of the table.

"Burn it, I dare you," I seethe, wanting to snatch it up and out of his hand and burn it myself. "There are plenty of candles to choose from."

"I won't," he retorts, leaning in further. "And I won't let you waste your life in service of Maven's obsessions." So close; too close, at that. I would back away, but I can't let him see my discomfort if he doesn't already. In addition, there is nowhere for me to go, as I'm practically pressed up against a wall.

"What are you going to do?" I bark out a callous laugh. "Chain me up, like Maven did?"

My insult hurts, based on the instant when Tiberias' expression betrays him. "You know I wouldn't."

"Then tell me, Your Majesty. How do you intend to keep me here?" But even previous completing my sentence, I know that there will be no response. Instead, he breaks the searing gaze that had come to be. "That's what I thought," I murmur softer than I meant to. "You've made your bed. Now
you'll lie in it, all alone."

I wrench open the door, only to find Tyton with a raised fist, prepared to knock on the door. Though now I wonder if the fist will contribute to a new ambition. A worried face transforms into a confused one, before mutating to anger.

"Is something wrong, Mare?" He inquiries carefully.

"Nothing," I say, halfway automatically. "I was just showing Tiberias out."

Though Tiberias doesn't leave peacefully, instead, throwing his first blow towards Tyton that's bound to wound something. And as a bred soldier, he's certain to make every second painful.
Chapter 10

Evangeline

"Perfect," Mare mutters, the heartbreak on her face evident as the sky is blue. "Perfect," is repeated, as she rises on quivering legs, and creates a beeline exit. But before Mare can step through the threshold of the entryway, the white-haired electricon lunges forward and wraps his fingers around her wrist, in futile attempt to restrain.

She starts, as though a bullet flew past her head. No guns exist in this room, at least, as far as I'm aware. His grip reminds her of my manacles, is the only reason for her shock I can invent.

The continuation of the subject interests me, yet not nearly as much as Tiberias' reaction to a second man laying hands on the girl. So quickly, I whip my head to the seat beside mine, to witness the prince's fury.

Rather, what I'm met with is a form of sickness etched on his features, his lip twitching unnaturally and his throat moving; nervous. I note, that it isn't the interaction of Mare and Tyton, but the aftermath of perceiving Maven's video.

If it were Elane, I'd feel sick as well.

Not until Tyton pleads, "Mare, please," that Tiberias' scrutiny is earned.

And what a priceless demeanor his expression morphs into. Unearned betrayal overwhelms the remainder of emotions, and for once, he doesn't hide it, not caring or else not given enough time to do so.

Though sooner than he can commit an idiotic action, Mare fractures the duo's bond jerkily, and races from the rest of us swifter than a proper girl should. But that would be to say that lightning can be tamed. "Give her distance, Tyton. I'm sorry, but you can't relate to what she went through," Commander Farley yanks him back by the shirt arm, and though Tyton spreads his mouth open, she elaborates, "Let her do what she needs to, to alleviate some of the pain."

"She shouldn't be alone right now," Tyton quips back, prying Farley's grip off his arm. "Who knows if she'll harm herself?"

"Mare won't; Mare won't, for the sake of protecting her loved ones. Especially after she learns of my plan."

The general comes out of his silence and advances towards Farley. Davidson hikes a brow and ties his arms together. "If you keep my soldiers out of it, I may be game."

"Unless you'd like to agitate her further, I suggest you bring your feet right back to where they were, Tyton," Farley growls lowly, pointing a tad violently at a spot on the tiles. Only coming to my attention now, Tyton managed halfway to the exit.

"Actually, I'd be exceptionally pleased, if you all were to leave," Anabel proposes, surging up; though the hasty motion has her smoothing the day gown she wears. Realizing the air of rudeness she employs, "My grandson and Evangeline have a critical broadcast to film," Anabel amends.

"Ah, yes," Davidson acknowledges. "It completely slipped my mind. Very sorry, for the intrusion, Your Majesty."
"Accepted," she daintily responds.

They're scared of us, or maybe simply eager to strategize their way out of this mess, but the reds cram themselves out of the meeting room in less than fifteen seconds.

"Now, where were we?" Anabel questions.

Tiberias smacks an open palm down on the transparent tabletop, forceful enough to cause waters and wines to slosh over their rims slightly, but not so much that the glasses fall entirely. "We're not going to take a single moment to recognize what's happened?"

"The girl, nor her sister are concerned, Tiberias. If it comforts you, surely the Guard will concoct some scheme or another," Father says with not a trace of sympathy. "This conversation does not accord to the schedule."

"Cal," I intervene, utilizing his preferred name; a rare incident for both of us. "We understand that a soft spot remains for the little lightning girl. But this is ridiculous. You and I will be in matrimony not long from now. I have to resist a smirk, to preserve its authenticity. But as Tiberias' eyes collide with my own, I allow a twinkling of venom to be released from within.

"Of course," he blinks, ending the gaze quicker than it began. "Mare Barrow is in fine hands." I can but envision how dire articulating those words is. Tyton seems to be like a vulture, snatching up its prey the moment it is up for grabs.

"Evangeline. Tiberias. I assume you've been practicing your script?" Mother grills, with such a tone, that even if I didn't know word by word, I would lie and say that I did. I admit, maybe I should've taken Mother's wrath if it purchased one more week of peace, before it became nationally known that Tiberias and I are engaged.

Remembering the bulky, golden band that encircles my ring finger, I grip the metal with my mind, and pull the material, inward, outward, and repeat. Traditionally, the circuit is crafted by the groom, with nothing but the burner's fire and blocks of silver, gold, platinum, and et cetera. In ordinary cases, the gesture could be considered romantic, but I opted to make my own, and let Tiberias take the credit. He couldn't make jewelry as beautiful as mine in a hundred years.

"Evangeline?" Father says, with expectancy. I must've blanked, and missed the first time he used my name. "Have you collected your mind?"

"Yes, Father," I nod my head downward obediently, and unconsciously take the prince's hand in mine, as I've practiced again and again.

"Cameras rolling in thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight..." I hear called behind me.

Deciding its now or never, I whisper in Tiberias' ear, "When you kiss me, pretend it's Mare. It'll make speaking easier, I promise." Perchance my advice contains actual, useful knowledge, yet my extreme sarcasm breaches any inkling of positivity it held.

At his ear, I can make out the sound of a heart dashing triple the pace it's supposed to. But as every second is counted down my heart mirrors his more so than the last. They don't ever beat in sync, though.

He contains himself well; but poorly compared to Maven, who I saw right through. "If we're going to spend the rest of our lives reigning side by side, you'd better me less, don't you admit?"

Deviating from the talks I intend for us to have, just like always, I see.
No. Tiberias ruined my life, and if I will be chained to his throne for my remaining days, I owe him no less than to cause living Hell. He can have a crown, or a girl, but never both. And I will be sure to remind him, spending every moment at his side tormenting him. In a sense, he should be honored that I've elected to become his worst nightmare.

"Eleven, ten, nine..."

"Not a chance," is all I say, clutching his hand more brutally on the table and watch it turn white.

"Two, one, begin."

I'd flinch if I were permitted, but instead offer a superficial-yet realistic- smile to the lens of the camera, and release the excess compression on Tiberias' hand.

"Citizens of Norta, Lakelands, and other surrounding regions," he projects his voice loudly, as though speaking to a real-life audience. "For months, Nortans have been living in a tangled bed of lies, all of which have been delicately orchestrated by your supposed King Maven."

Five minutes drag on, Tiberias at one point releasing his grasp on my hand to aim an angry pointer finger, probably accusing his brother of something or other. I wouldn't know; until my cue, I deceit myself into deafness, all the while maintaining a serene smile. My part of the dialogue isn't until the latter half, but yet Mother suggested I learn its entirety.

Tiberias is the rightful leader of Norta... it reads; Tiberias was wrongfully framed for the murder of his father, manipulated by the evil queen... it reads.

"And now, once my brother has resigned from rulership, whether forced or compliant, I will wed Evangeline Samos, as we were once engaged."

Ah, my delightful cue. "Recently, as Tiberias and I were reunited, our connection deepened, caused by not solely our common goals, but a true liking. It's an anomaly for those of royal blood to find prosperity with one another." Father explained that the guarantee of a wedding, with the wine, dancing, and such, would excite the masses. Silly, but not untrue. "We deeply look forward to seeing you all attend."

The silvers' reaction to the courtship intrigues me nearly as much as the questions that will arise on the little lightning girl and the traitor prince's relationship. Father, Mother, and Anabel wish that it would simply go away, yet such an intricate affair will not be forgotten, erased by the mere announcement of an engagement between two High Houses, not differing from the last one whatsoever.

Then, my slender fingers stiffen on his knuckles recurrently and opposing my own will, I begrudgingly turn my neck, so that he is five inches away.

The script didn't designate any time at all to prepare, so I lean in.

And I discover that his lips are colder than ice. Unnatural, disturbing; House Gliacon must have a warmer touch than this. Certainly not stiff, I was told it must be, so I move my lips against his, making it dangerously close to passionate.

At long last, we break apart, and I break out a giddy smile like a schoolgirl would if she'd lip-locked with her boyfriend.

"Thank you, dearest peoples," Tiberias and I conclude together.
"Well done," Father hums, satisfied with my work.

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So far as I'm aware, Mare hasn't made good on her promise to be Tiberias' bane, though it hasn't been long. I will make his life miserable, at all costs.

I find him at a sitting area, that overlooks the vast grounds of the backside of the palace leading to the woodland. A couple documents rest on the lamp table that touches the sofa, scattered and abandoned. The wax in the candelabra is not aflame, encompassing the elongated room in darkness, a significant ratio of moonlight obscured by clouds, aiding only a little.

"Do you not consider yourself creepy in the slightest, waiting for her return?"

The clicks on my heels, the drag of my skirt, and the sound of my voice didn't turn his head, but he does hear me, my presence sadly here. I take up residence in the loungers, crossing one leg over the other, and slouch.

"Today of all days," he sighs, still looking out that glass partition. Night has fallen, I wonder what he hopes to see.

"What's today?" I play dumb, cocking my head. "Or did my kiss really get under your skin?"

"What did I do to you, that motivates you to hate me so much?" He shifts his fiery eyes toward me, though quickly returns to the pane.

"Nothing consciously, to say. I want no part in politics of royals, nor a marriage with one. But you took that choice away from me." He will persist in asking otherwise. Though Tiberias knowing won't make my task nearly as fun. "I couldn't get out of it if I tried, I bet you're pondering. My parents won't allow me."

"Of course they wouldn't."

"Thousands of women yearn to tie the knot with a great king like yourself. Shame you get the one that doesn't."

"Shame indeed. Will you leave, please?" His tone is annoyed but also holds true; a beg.

"Hopefully she won't stay out there all night," I taunt. Figuring additional harassment would be futile, I almost push myself out of the over-cushioned chair; but between that moment of silence and the next, I'm convinced a shriek is emitted from the woods beyond. And something tells me Tiberias takes it in too, even in defiance of the darkness.

Brushing off the twinge of discomfort that rattles through the quietness, an odd, yet cruel idea enters my head, and I desert my plan to leave; it accomplishes nothing compared to this new one.

"Don't worry, I've decided to wait with you. But I promise to keep silent."

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In time, Mare retires from the outer grounds, as a blurry figure, surprisingly unequipped with her cherished lightning. I wouldn't have been starstruck if she had spawned another of those electrical blasts, if I were her, I would've without a second glance.

If someone abducted Tolly from me, I would kill them, mercilessly. Until death would be a
blessing. To even place myself in her shoes, I can hardly imagine what's its like to have peril over a sibling's neck, a defenseless neck at that. Ptolemus would've stood a chance when faced with a kidnapping.

"Go get your darling girl, Tiberias," I tell him with all the cynicism in the world. "Perhaps weighing yourself and Maven on the scales of bastardry, you'd win by such an alarming amount, you'd be considered a hero in her eyes. Which one does she hate more?"

"Go to... bed, Evangeline," he says, replacing one phrase for another. It's unwise to cuss at your engaged. "You must need the sleep, in order to concoct the things you say to me."

"My retorts are natural," I call after him as he tramps in the general direction of Mare's room, feigning disinterest for the next destination tonight. Such a desperate, little boy, is all I see when he's in my presence. Kings haven't time for distractions, and he's providing a testimony on why he should be dethroned before the crown is even given.

Though I should grant credit as well- he's pulled himself together nearly as quick as Mare did. A warzone doesn't give leniency to heartbreak, and the two of them know that here, there isn't a second to dwell on past choices.

Minutes fall away, and I religiously tap my fingernail on a sleek section of my gown, where no rough edges exist. The hits against the metal represent each passing second, measured more accurately than a clock.

The sound faulters, not entirely at my will, as I see a second outlined human emerge from the woods, reminding me of the cryptic figure that I laid eyes upon a couple nights ago; the evening of Mare's energy blast.

Regardless of how much I strain my eyes, the only precise details I can make out are the person's robes swaying astray from their legs, and long hair flowing in the slight breeze. A male, I think.

It must be the same person. Where are they going and what do they want?

I jot a mental note down, but I push concerns involving the man to the bottom of my ever-growing tally of matters needing to be dealt with. This instance, I'm not stopped when I rise from my seat, and I saunter down the hallway.

The estate may not be a carbon of our home in Archeon-which has plausibly been torn apart by now, courtesy of the King- it is still large, adequately so that locating a specific person can be troublesome.

But if it comes to it, I can always go to the security monitors. Though, with my connections here in the palace, I doubt that it will. Nevertheless, I traipse widely, in order to travel faster.

"Father, General." I bow my neck in what they consider to be an act of respect when I meet the duo conversing to the edge of the hall.

Father doesn't so much as batt an eye at me and Davidson subtly nods, not terribly engrossed with my presence either.

Yet reckoning it's my best course of action, "By any chance, have you seen Tyton or any of the other electricons recently?" I ask. "I had a question for them." The last part is a complete fib, made up on the spot. Time is running short and I have to stop myself from clicking my heels together-an old nervous habit from years gone.
"Hmm," he purrs, face ever-stoic, though the purring isn't common in officials like him. "Five minutes ago, he passed me, with the intention of going to see Mare. I don't know why you'd be keen on interacting with him, but whatever needs doing."

"Oh," my tone is disappointed, though I'm not under any condition. "Later, then."

"Later," Father echoes without meaning to go on. Puzzled and leary, as to why I'd want to speak to those red mutants.

My steps aren't deliberate now, and I play out scenarios to the endgame of my master plan, and all had better conclude with the future king more miserable than he already is. I can't decide whether or not I'd like to see blood spilled.

I whip about corners, not with much grace, the tassels of my dress causing a dent or two at the corners of intersections; if I wasn't in such a hurry, I might take a moment to correct the blemishes in the wall.

Only once does it cross my mind that this shouldn't thrill me, still it does, though. Despite Father's ceaseless agenda of events to coordinate, life otherwise, is mundane. Boring. Days elapse with business identical to yesterday's, the lone entertainment around here being Mare Barrow. It is about time I inflict some damage myself.

"Is something wrong, Mare?" I hear a voice ask at the last bend in my path. It must be Tyton. It has to be. Sneaking a quick glance, I determine that the three of them are right where I want them to be. Tiberias stands with Mare on the other side of the entry in relation to Tyton, doning unearned composture, with crossed arms. The lightning girl, on the other hand, looks about ready to spew her intestines.

"Nothing. I was just showing Tiberias out," she mutters through strife, quiet and somehow certain. But it is the similarity between Tyton's and Tiberias' expressions that I snag on. An unidentified aura links them, even when they are nothing alike. An irrelevant red boy and another, destined to rule. Yet they emulate the other one's bottled-up rage, staging indifference. And how their gazes catch; I'm am only sure that understanding isn't exchanged.

And now, the sad truth is revealed, like a magician ripping a curtain away. Tyton is but a replacement, the closest person she will ever own that could be enough. But he will never suffice, but the naive lightning girl doesn't realize such things, not even that he is a substitute, filling the bleeding hole within her heart.

Fortunately, on Tyton's part, Tiberias' preparation for a hit is slow, the anger muffling the impact's potential. And he scantily makes it out the door before collapsing, with tiny strands of electricity emerging on his skin.

I suppose I didn't care to notice that electricons' powers can vary.

"Tyton," Mare exclaims worryingly. ",That's enough." Besides fear of helping in the prince's death, I doubt she wants him to die, for selfish purposes. "Tyton," is said louder.

For just a moment, I can actually visualize Tyton killing the boy, who was caught off-guard—blinded by stupidity. A rare happening for the fighter.

"Boy," is growled from behind me, and I twirl to find a good number of reds and silvers alike.
"Stop it this instant," Davidson speaks, taking the lead by creating forcefields to separate the three, blocking ability transmission as well.
"Who started it?"

"I did," Tiberias rightfully takes the blame, though remains hunched on his knees and elbows, palms obscuring his emotions. "What he did was just."

The blueish tinted dome that hovered over Mare vanishes first, though she remains frozen, stunned. Farley comes to her assistance, and takes her hand, before guiding her away.

"Was it wise, young man, to assault the prince, even if he did lead you on?" Father questions, coming forward while stroking his beard.

The conflict is a struggle, I can tell. Yes, it was.

"No," he says bluntly, and the second dome on Tiberias diminishes, and the third falls soon after.

Davidson practically rips Tyton from his place, and he hardly stays upright as he's towed away by the General. How frustrating to be punished for an act of self-defense. Or was it more than that, maybe a revenge of sorts?

"Everybody enticed by a method of which gets nobody killed in saving Barrow's sister, follow us," Davidson calls, tightening-if anything-his grip on Tyton.

"Not a child, General," Tyton rips away from Davidson, though if the general wished to, he could've kept the grasp.

"Yet you're acting like one," an old voice carries through the building, a voice that I've heard plenty from, but not adequately to know it by heart.

Mother's viper unwraps itself from her shoulders and Father's steel backplate tightens, as do mine. An intruder roams the halls, the metal in my bloodstream senses. A dangerous one, too. Both Father and I unfasten bars of titanium from the window decor and sharpen their tips until the slightest tap would break skin. Every piece of this manor serves firstly as a weapon, and secondly as an embellishment.

"I'm too valuable of a resource to slaughter," the man almost sing-songs. No. It couldn't be. How would he have... Foolish. If it's him then he could walk into this damned palace with his closed eyes and still not get shot at. "And anyway, red blood is such a toil to clean."

"Jon," Mare breathes out; apparently she and Farley didn't get too far. "Jon!" she roars, viciously this time.

My hypothesis has been backed. So that explains the anonymous shadow lurking around the grounds a few nights ago and tonight again. But what has he been doing out in those woods for the past four or more days? Hiding wouldn't check out, as he would have no trouble avoiding everyone, every foot movement planned.

"Questions will be answered," he appears around the corner. I'm starting to wonder if constructing such an estate with so many twists and turns was a well thought-out plan. "But first, I do believe that an apology is in order, to the little lightning girl."
Chapter 11

Mare

I want to strangle him, is all I can think as Jon strolls towards us, acting as though he doesn't have a death wish. But he is a seer after all and comprehends exactly what his outcome will be. My irrational half begs for blood while reason pauses the electricity from bursting forth. I will slay Jon posterior to gathering information and winning the war. Which I will win. I have to.

"Questions will be answered. But first, I do believe that an apology is in order, to the little lightning girl," unlike most, he doesn't smear my epithet with despisal and condescension.

"You owe me a thousand lifetimes of worshiping at my feet," I return, pushing apart that blockage of people that have crowded the hall. I want to hurt him, pain Jon until he-a grown man- weeps for a means to an end. I wasn't given one, so neither shall he be granted those privileges. "You, wretched man, are the cause of my sufferings."

Not enough distance severs Jon and I, his bloodshot eyes being far too vivid for my taste. He wears dirty ropes, his shoes virtually nonexistent, just as unkempt and ragged as his ancient beard, where literal dirt from the forest hangs in small clusters. Those eyes, though, I cannot fissure my stare from, entrancing and terrifying dually. They hold all the answers to all the mysteries.

A perfectly neutral face turns to outright hysteria, as high-pitched laughter oozes from the unhinged man. "Naive lightning girl they should call you, though it doesn't hold the alliteration. Everything, every action, every word that I have brought about has been to protect you. If you believe things are bad now, you'd delight in seeing other realities."

"You categorize placing me under a sociopath's care, protection? The gift of sight has driven you mad."

Extending his smugness, Jon propels past the silver court and the Guard, like he owns the place, his ropes reeking of sweat when his shoulder brushes mine. I have to avoid a reflex to cough.

"You dare come into my home when you've wronged so many? Merely allying with Maven is punishable by death," Volo informs Jon, but it's in vain. Jon will face no harm, otherwise, he wouldn't have chosen this moment to make an appearance. Unless he wants to die.

"You won't," Jon states, not an argument but a fact. "Because I have more information than the stars do themselves. Now, if you excuse me, I'll show myself to the dungeon." He stands, awaiting Volo's blessing.

An odd quality of confusion wafts around the room, even the King himself contributing. They all wonder what he'll do if they let him out of their sight for a second. "Very well. Guardsmen, please escort the oracle to an empty cell." Fascinating to know there are occupied holding units here.

"Oh, I can-" Jon starts, but is quickly halted.

"I'm certain you can. But I'm also certain that I don't trust you," Volo counters, not bothering with kindness.

"As you shouldn't." The Sentinels trail him closely. "I suggest that it be soon, when you decide to speak to me, Mare," are his last warnings, carried by his all-knowing voice.
Tiberias, I'm only aware of -now, is beginning to uncripple himself, first rising to one knee, before taking a rest. I hadn't perceived the sheer devastation Tyton's ability causes; then again, he's never had a proper target, besides for on the battlefield. Two, three seconds, maybe, it took to replicate a brain aneurysm. In a fair fight, without stupidity and anger factoring into the outcome, I wonder who would win. Though still, Tyton's ability is quite straightforward-he can't miss his target like I can- and perhaps he would win. Their blood is a threat.

"You said there's a plan?" I turn to Farley, who appears dazed, her pointer finger twitching the slightest bit. She's maddened, undoubtedly, the one who could've prevented Shade's demise coming here, and justifying his actions by saying that things could be worse.

Farley prepares to speak but is hindered by Davidson, who gently puts a hand on her shoulder. "The clairvoyant will tell us of his plan, or rather, the future in which we're awarded a desirable conclusion." The murmurs go silent, all privy to Davidson's theory. He's been at this for a long while, I have to remind myself, as I envy his equanimity. Meanwhile, Farley and Volo are about ready to blow a blood vessel, staring at Davidson like he's insane.

"You want to gamble everything on a liar?" Anabel challenges, genuinely concerned for my well-being. More likely, though, an ulterior motive.

"There is risk in war, altogether. But unfortunately, we can either walk into Whitefire with a plan of our own that isn't guaranteed to work or side with the madman. I sense that he's here to help us."

"He wasn't there to help us when Shade died," Farley shakes her head, biting her lip. "What's changed, Davidson?" She must be nauseated, even more further than I am.

Unwillingly, "He saved my life, you know?" I say. "During the House revolt, he made certain that the bullet grazed my cheek instead of my skull." Sadly true, it was Jon whose kept me alive; for Farley's sake, I don't mention that Jon saved me at Corros, by sacrificing Shade. Still, it should've been me, not him.

"You see?" Davidson assesses the others' stance on the proposal with watchful eyes. "Let's at least hear what he has to say."

"I'll be careful. Leary," I agree, crossing my arms, wishing to cease this conversation immediately. So many high-born analyze me here-the arrogance not hidden well- I might as well leave and interrogate Jon in the dungeons. "Will somebody take me there?"

I expect Tyton to volunteer, I hope Tyton will volunteer, but he doesn't, out of shame for his actions or mere lack of knowledge on dungeon placement. I'm curious, if he hadn't been stopped, whether or not he would've killed Tiberias. Would I stop him? And if I had, would've it been for the King, or for Cal? Both can rot, I say; but my revolting heart clings to selfish love that doesn't hold a place here anymore. It needs to leave, but I will not. Tyton is my only chance of purging this unnatural emotion.

"I'll take her," a voice enlists, Evangeline of course. Odd, how she emerges from the back of the herd, contrasting from the usual place front and center. "This estate is as familiar as my palm."

"Thanks," I mutter, totally uninterested in having a conversation with her, if it's like the last one.

"Delighted," is exchanged, mischief in her tone.

Evangeline has always been much taller than myself, and I struggle to match her brisk pace; I think she enjoys provoking me with little things like this, as the smirk tells me.
We pass the corridor that holds Tiberias' painted figure, but this time I'm prepared and don't glance once at it. Conveniently, at that moment she questions, "You've begun fulfillment of our accordance, correct?"

Simply to spite, I pretend to lift my pupils in thought. "The accordance in which I make Tiberias' miserable life as miserable as possible?" Procrastination, it merely is. Not to spite.

"Hmm," she takes my thoughts into consideration mockingly, raking a hand in between the tendrils of silken hair. "I suppose I must assume you haven't then. Not intentionally, anyway." I have to smother an inhumane croak that is produced in my throat and lace my fingers, to keep from digging my nails into my skin. She isn't wrong, though. I may have inflicted damage on Tiberias, but not designed like it was supposed to be.

I can sense that she watches me, though it isn't shown directly. Waiting and prowling for my expression to slip, to uncover something that doesn't need to be uncovered. "Riddle me this, before I stop walking in circles, and actually take you there. You call him Tiberias. What do you name in your head?"

A mask like Maven's, I create, while simultaneously constructing a wall around myself at the speed of light. "Tiberias," I respond with a chilling firmness I didn't think capable of.

"You're not fibbing are you?" She grinds to a halt and backtracks, admiring the portrait that I've tried exceedingly hard to avoid. "It's unwise to lie against queens."

Please. I've killed a queen. Lying to one is nothing. "I would never," I dare look her in the eye, keeping the glimmer that will reveal everything at bay.

She examines me for a few seconds longer and I keep my breathing even and innocent. At last, she shifts her scrutiny back onto the portrait, and plainly says, "Left, right, second door on your right. Down two flights of stairs." I retire from my spot on the floor quickly, reciting the directions in my mind repeatedly. How embarrassing it would be to forget them.

"One more thing," she dreadfully adds, stalling me dead in my tracks. I close my eyes, though my back faces her. Either chaos or the Devil in human form, I've concluded. "I wish you luck in getting your sister back. Jon only knows how I'd react if someone killed Ptolemus."

"Thank you, Evangeline," I whisper, yet grateful. But her words hold a second meaning, firstly the honest hope, secondly being a new reminder of my fate if I cause her brother harm.

I follow her directions, for once believing that she's not leading me to a slaughterhouse for animals or something to that effect. I quickly find myself lagging behind an ideal pace, deep-down avidly against confronting Jon and other occurrences that will come.

I berate myself for taking longer than necessary. Giza is suffering and every second that I wait only prolongs an inevitable collision between Maven and I. My sister has been in the King's clutches for hardly three days, whereas I was trapped for six months. Time isn't of the essence, I realize. It's what I experienced in those few, rare and horrifying days. Most were bland, deprived of Maven's presence; those were the best of them all. The junctions that I spent with Maven were the traumatizing ones. Three days or six months, it doesn't matter; what happens to her does.

Huffing out a breath I pick up the pace, and still too soon I arrive at a flight of iron stairs without a banister or a source of illumination. I allow small branches of light to flicker at my fingertips, barely improving the insight of surroundings. Edging closer down the stairs, I begin to lose contact with my ability and the lightning pulses as though it has a heartbeat until weakly giving out like
"Don't be afraid, little lightning girl. I'm going to help you," Jon calls, through the silence. He's seen me coming longer than I knew that I'd be here. Water drips once in awhile, leaking through cracks in the foundation. Surprising, that the engineers here allowed error when all other aspects of the manor are immaculate.

The closer I venture, it becomes evident that this place isn't similar to the rest of the rooms in any way. Almost hastily thrown together, I could deem the architecture-sleek sheets of metal replaced by silent stone-ugly. A sole beam of moonlight escapes through the clouds, and I am careful to avoid it as I approach Jon's cell. If I'm in the dark, he couldn't foresee my features, because they aren't visible from any angle.

"Personally, I favor the Bowl of Bones' holding cells, but I suppose these do their job. Peculiar, how silence takes all of us here, instead of only the imprisoned. But chains bind us all, in one way or another."

I would acknowledge his accuracy, if not for the ever-growing heap of questions. "What do you want, Jon?" I don't have the patience for his games, so I don't bother sitting on any of the cement benches that have been bolted to the ground, fixed on getting answers efficiently.

"World peace?" He responds ending with a high note, as though it were his own question. "You tell me," he barks out another one of his crazed laughs, mutating into a barking cough, so violent there may be blood. "It gets exhausting knowing what everyone else wants, I forget what I need. A crown? A boy? A girl? Simple happiness?"

Brushing off his gibberish, I persist with more. "Why did you come here?"

"Because if I didn't set you on the right track, in a couple days you'd be sitting on your plush bed in Whitefire, screaming. I can tell exactly how to prevent that. And save Giza."

Though I should be asking him right off the bat how to infiltrate Whitefire with minimal damage, I revert back to an old and dangerous question. "Why did Shade have to die? And why did you side with Maven?" I interrogate lowly, for concern that somebody is listening.

"Said previously, everything I have done has been for very valid reasoning. Your brother relinquished his life in order to save yours. Ptolemus would've taken you otherwise." He raises his voice out of frustration for my supposed ignorance. "Don't you understand? Shade may've been useful to this cause, but not to the magnitude of yourself. You shall be the one who is the victor; Shade couldn't have."

"And why is that?" I snap, clutching thin air until both of my hands have found the prison bars, and shake them to make a point, probably startling me more than Jon.

"He was fast," Jon describes like I didn't already know this. "But he was not God-like."

"You imply that I'm godly?" I almost snicker at the obscene explanation. "If they exist, the Gods look at me as an infection to this world."

"You think that the shockwave you produced was massive? In a couple of months, it'll seem like a bruise to the fabric of the universe, rather than a deep wound. You have no idea." Jon chuckles once more, an inside joke to laugh about. "Also, Shade couldn't have wrapped three boys around his finger the way you can."

"I don't control anyone, Jon. You do," I murmur, huffing a breath strongly to make certain he feels...
"Why did you side with Maven?" I repeat, attempting to comprehend the inane act. In the rear part of my brain, I question whether or not I own a psychological grasp on them. No, I resolve. If I had had control, I would have my way.

"Sometimes we must play both sides in order to win. Just as you are doing now. Hypocrite" If he could see my grimace now, I'm shocked that he would say it here. "They aren't listening, by the way," Jon adds, saying it loudly to annoy. Then he begins to drawl, again. "You haven't the faintest idea about what goes on in his head. Chipped the surface, while you were there, but not much more. I didn't spend my time there feeding Maven truths, mostly thoughts he wanted to hear or needed to hear. Terrible advisor, I was."

"Manipulative," is what I first think to say.

"Indeed. But if it weren't for me, you'd be dead by now, several times over. The soldiers may salvage thousands, but it is I would make them do so. So who is the true hero then?"

"Always the poet, aren't you? I can't ever get a straight answer with a seer."

"What's the fun in that?"

"I don't have the blessing of time that allows spent hours on deciphering complex riddles."

"Arguing with me is only wasted time, Miss Barrow. I'll requite by skipping to the answers and not attending to questions I've heard before," he explains curtly.

Time drifts away every moment I quibble, and I choose to rest my legs by sitting down on the damp and rock-hard bench, contrary to complaining about useless topics. I still want to strangle him.

"While you were gone, screaming to the trees, Diana dreamed up an abominable plan, one in which will result in Giza and her own death as well as your imprisonment. Several key figures will die and or be tortured for knowledge, therefore impacting the endgame to the utmost severity, in formats that aren't what you need. The point is, Maven will reign and you will rot for years to come."

Months tenfold has my heart sinking quicker than a stone in water. I would rather... I would rather...

"One wrong move will leave your life in ruins. Your Commander's plan appears solid from the outside, but in motion it will crumble. And the rebellion is nothing without its little lightning girl."

Jon sculpts my position to be priceless, despite my feelings of opposition. Countless have made sure that I'm worthless and it's different to be told this. "You need to commit to the following: It must be you who rescues Giza and commit so in servant's attire. And you must kill Queen Iris."

To know that Farley had other interpretations frightens me; never in a thousand lifetimes would I wear a dress or allow another to rescue Giza. Dancing skills that I've been taught have expelled themselves from my memory the second they weren't worth my skin.

"Why kill the Queen?"

"You can't know everything, yet. Events will reveal themselves as they occur. Kill her or face regret."

Trusting Jon heedlessly could be my regret, on the flipside. I did so once and it's my biggest rue. "Can I trust you?"
"No," he says without reserve, letting out a painful cough afterward. "But options are limited and my concern is genuine. The rest of Farley's outline will glide without flaws," Jon finishes, as though I didn't question him in the first place.

"Thank you," I conclude with a tad of suspicion.

"By the way, I have a confession to give."

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"When are we leaving?" I ask Farley, still shaking off the rage that Jon bestowed upon me.

A boy from House Eagrie was the one to inform Maven about Giza's location, though at the time-apparently-he foretold me at the Piedmont base. And yet again, Jon orchestrated it all over a period of months, gradually worming his way into the Eagries, until they worshipped his gift as if they were reds and he was a silver. He brainwashed them.

Now, twenty or so members of the house are cramped inside of Volo's throne room, along with the rest of the nobles, bargaining a place in the King's new world. Pleased, yet miffed they are; though they're quite happy to gain more supporters, silver's are proud people and bothered that a strange red recruited them.

"Crack of dawn; sleep is for the weak," Farley declares, her tiredness obvious. But even here, she doesn't allow that or the constantly depressed aura of the manor stop her from poking at Clara's chubby belly and speaking babbles to her. "Harrick and a couple other newbloods have volunteered to come along," She says "along" like it's a boring old field trip from a group of schoolkids. What stupid, stupid allies I have who choose to help me in this.

"Harrick's disguising the plane, I assume?"

"Yes. The rash and unthorough aspects bother me, however," she confesses, quitting her nudges at Clara's stomach.

"If Jon didn't lie, this mission will go well," I say, though more so for myself. That man...

"Let me get my story right: Jon convinced some novice seer named Andros Eagrie to lie to Maven and tell him that he had a vision in Piedmont of you and your family?"

"Basically," I sigh out. "I'm going to sleep, for whatever time I have left."
Gawking at the young sister, I watch her pick at the seams of the day dress she's been given by the seamstresses, kind enough to care about her appearance. Otherwise, she'd still be in those dreadful cloths Maven found her in.

"Do you like the design?" I ask, sipping at my tea; the servants thought it strange to be drinking the beverage so late at night. In contradiction to Maven's theory on the best handling of the girl, I enjoy getting to know her-as much as I can anyway. Giza screams more than she speaks. It was a challenge to persuade my Sentinels to allow her to have a hot liquid in close proximity to the queen.

She bites her lip and immediately halts in touching the dress, and crosses her hands, an endeavor to act like a lady.

"No one here expects you to be proper. The hard fact is, that you are merely here as a bargaining chip. Valuable beyond comparison in your sister's eyes, but worthless to Maven's court," I explain this to her, though quickly in retrospect I realize I sound like an idiot, saying the obvious.

She takes a large swallow of the ginger peach tea; it still steams in the cup, but pride gets the best of her and she doesn't spit it. "Doesn't the queen have better things to do than host a tea party on this stupid balcony overlooking the stupid city?" Giza snarls, throwing the teacup to the brick flooring, splintering the porcelain so it's equally dispersed about the terrace. "I'd rather be left alone to die."

"You don't actually believe that she'll allow you to be guillotined? Do you?" I take into consideration that this balcony is stupid. What purpose does it really serve? To allow a good shot for a sniper?

"I wish I could," Giza admits, drained of muting out my probing. "Damn, she's too selfless. And unlike herself, my life has an expiration date in this palace. Whereas if she's here, the King will do everything in his power-which is a lot- to make her heart keep beating."

"Unfair, it is," I validate. Leaning in towards her, my chest digs into the wooden table. Though she generates the opposite effect by shirking backward, I strain as close as possible to whisper, "Between us, my husband is madder than a chicken with its head cut off. He keeps a competent attitude in public, but the maids talk. See things. Whitefire is an impossible place for secrets to thrive."

I was nearly to the stage where Giza makes eye contact with me, but she revokes my chance and starts up with her dress fiddling again. Seeing it best to have her speak next, I turn my neck out to admire the glorious yet tragic landscape that spawls before us. The Archeon Bridge- a striking beauty if one doesn't know the history behind it.

Not long after our race conquered the red-blooded, we enslaved a good portion of them to prevent a rebellion. I've been told that it was a taxing war even with the power advantage, and we couldn't have afforded more loss. Magnetrons were occupied building the essential structures of West Archeon, and the overpass-an arch- was merely busywork for reds. And it exhausted and depressed them to the point where an insurgency was fruitless.

It seems next to absurd that the structure was one-hundred percent man-made without the use of
abilities. It sparkles so finely in the evening light, the various metals refracting the dusk to their
wills.

"Why does he love her so much?" The girl seeks.

I slowly emerge from my speculation, only to ask, "What?" Though before I can respond with a
half-answer—solely the Gods understand that boy's head—Maven shows himself at the doors that
partition my chambers from the outside. "Perhaps you should ask him yourself."

Neither of them really heard me, as Giza averts her eyes from Maven and clasps her gloved hands
together; it looks troublesome, her fingertips stretching to make contact, as one of her wrists is
cuffed to the seat. But it doesn't stop there. The seat is nailed into the balcony. Obviously.

"She should be arriving tomorrow," he announces but doesn't settle down into the third cushioned
chair, instead placing himself near a raised bed of peonies.

"My sister won't come," she lies, contradicting what was said moments ago. "I told her not to."

I think of how I'd react if someone took Rosalyn from my family. Albeit she'd order me to stand
down and allow her death, I would never. Traverse the oceans, fire, or any other burden that stands
in my path, I would do.

"Truly morbid it would be if you weren't lying to me and she came. What would that about the
knowledge of your own sister?" He watches her, analyzes her so carefully, separating the features
that Mare and Giza share. Identical deep brown eyes, but the similarities stop there. Maven won't
have much luck staring at her from the edge and his vision and see Mare.

"Who knows?" I can help but chime in. "Some siblings know each other better than others. Were
you and Tiberias close before he murdered your father?"

I get under his skin and I know it.

Before Giza can split her lips, Maven commands, "Don't you dare feed the Queen's mind with the
lies of the Scarlet Guard." Smart; he thinks ahead. Though he isn't aware that I already have fallen
aware to every last rumor that has made it into Archeon, some more rational than others.

"Which lies? I've heard countless variations." I risk stepping over the line that my head could be
put on. "My absolute favorite nevertheless, remains the tale where the late Queen Elara takes
advantage of her mental manipulation and forces Tiberias to slay his own father." I steal a
momentary glance at Giza, who wants to nod her head a terrible lot. "But, that's the most ridiculous
theory I've come across!. Of course, it was the red who pulled the strings. It always is," I amend,
not wanting for Maven to believe I'm aware of the now-confirmed truth.

"Always," Maven repeats. Worry runs through me; maybe I went too far. "Iris, you asked if my
brother and I were close." A wistful smile that cloaks his teeth is produced and Maven turns his
neck down towards the flooring as if each brick is a different remembrance. "We were incredibly
close. But times are changing, as are people."

With that, he turns to go, a glass of red wine in hand that I hadn't observed earlier. Tipping his head
back, he downs the half of the contents of the objective of swallowing the entirety.

Though previous to him making it to the three-quarters mark, Giza lunges for my teacup and
snatches it before I can react. This setting doesn't have me equipped for sudden movements, though
it should with the crazed and angry girl here. I open my mouth to alert Maven but the china is
hurting through mid-air already, bound for his head.
And in that moment, I wonder if I will be held accountable for his death. If a shard of the material punctures his neck just right and a healer isn't near, he'll die.

He notices that something is amiss and tilts his body slightly, just enough so that the cup collides with the chalice, the glass fracturing instantly like the teacup did earlier, spewing red liquid across his pale hand and white shirtsleeve. The stem of the glass that leads nowhere is still gripped, though he drops it, resulting in a cheap "clink" as it touches the brick.

This time, he turns around all the way, his shoulders ascending and descending with oxygen intake, that I can tell is shallow. "She used to like throwing dinnerware as well," he murmurs, tucking the hand that isn't wine drenched in his pocket. The other stays perfectly still, generating a steady drip of fluid, adding to the mess. He looks like a murderer, with all that bloodiness, even two drops on his lips.

"That," Giza whispers back, "is what she sees you as."

"Sentinels!" Maven hollers and the guardsmen come rushing in from the outside of my room. One of them is the man who saved me from the silencer. "Take this wretched little girl to Mare Barrow's prepared chambers. Do not feed her; she may only have water." I would be concerned is the masquerade wasn't tomorrow night, which is the most logical time and place in which Mare will make her appearance.

They don't comment on the blood-like substance that adorns their King's hand and lip, hauling the little lightning girl's sister away without a struggle; she must've learned that fighting is pointless.

Clicking of the bolts in the door indicates that only Maven and I remain. Usually, now that we're alone I'd delight in poking and prodding at his weaknesses, trying to get clues out of him in any format, but not anymore. The King doesn't scare me—a boy like this will never scare me. Yet the demeanor that was in his eyes when the glass was shattered was horrid.

When I was little and annoying, I'd bother my sister in one way or another every hour of the day. Rosalyn loved me, she always has, but I was such an irritation when I was small. For a couple months when I was five or six, she lived by the policy that if she pretended I wasn't there, I'd go away eventually.

I fix my gaze on anything but him. The moon and stars. The bridge. The skyline that lights the horizon better than the moon does. The flowers that Maven stood by not five minutes ago.

"What do you know, Iris?" Maven props his tinted-red hand on his chin. "You're not the only one who listens to the palace gossip. I know all about your needling. Who do you think I am?"

With my options depleted, "I'll be honest, Maven," I improvise on the spot. "Politics and war bore me. The nitty-gritty details of planning. You'll understand if the most exciting entertainment I can find rests with my maids and drunken courtiers." I force hiccups to stay in my throat. To keep clear and blasé vocals.

This talk is far from done, but Maven moves on anyway. "Mentioning drunks, that reminds me. Have you completed your wine selection list for the ball tomorrow night? It up to you to decide what bottles should be delivered from the Greenwarden's winery."

"Parties are meaningless if you awaken the next morning to remember nothing. Any variation of red wine will suffice," I say slyly. "You choose the rest."

"Tomorrow evening's masquerade may not be a good celebration to recognize," he acknowledges,
dipping his hand in the basin of water and dragging a moist rag across his chin when a servant brings supplies. "Mare Barrow will undoubtedly infiltrate the gates, and she's destined to create turmoil."

"If you're certain she'll come, why don't you amplify the security?"

"You delight in secrets?" Maven responds with his own question. Cautious of what I'm going to learn, I stare at him blankly, not shaking my head or nodding. "I invited her. And no number of guns are stopping her."

"You idiot," I accuse noisier than meant. "You invited a killing machine into our home." I splay my fingers outward then curl them into a fist, the action pacifying. If I didn't do this, they'd be sending water into Maven's esophagus. "Have you even told the Captain of Sentinels?"

"Of course I have. They think I received a tip from a Scarlet Guard member gone rogue."

Not being able to bear sitting at Maven's level anymore, I sleekly glide out of my chair and commence into pacing. "I hope she escapes with her sister," I snap, spitting a little. Maven is the Nortan King, and he is supposed to put this country's safety above all else. Instead, he wagers hundreds of souls on a girl.

"If you so much as look the other way when you could be hindering her desertion, you will regret it," he says it so coldly; Maven himself goes from heat to ice.

"You cannot kill me!" I roar back, a surge of confidence rolling over me. "My sister is Queen of the Lakelands and maiming me will be your loss. She will reinitiate the war before you can bury me."

He guffaws sickeningly, somehow holding more power even when he sits. "But what of your affair, My Queen?" He says "My Queen" with misplaced egotism. What does he speak of? Though I realize, he's going to frame me from adultery if I further aggravate him. "Letters and footage will be counterfeited if you harass me from this point on."

"Your court is all too aware of your mental state, My King," I replicate his end flawlessly. "Nowadays, it's easy to create distorted happenings, with those newblood shapeshifters. They won't believe you," I finish, not believing my own words very much.

Maven stands, nearly meeting my stance. I was born with Father's genes of height and have been taller than most boys for a while. One asset that cannot be stolen from me. "I don't need their belief. Their fear is what keeps my throne."

He's clearly thought this over. I read the marital contracts and I know what's acceptable and what's not. If Maven can successfully forge evidence I will die and my country will have no purpose to attack. It's all legal. "Congratulations, then," I mumble, quitting my pacing. You've won.

"I expect you'll behave from now on?"

"Yes," I comply, though the words next spoken are drowned out; I unceasingly move my head up, down, up, down, siding with whatever Maven orders. But in my mind, he is already gone, absent from my terrace, absent from my life altogether. I look out to the city to distract me from his presence and study the citizens strolling across the bridge with their children and spouses. They look like ants from here. If it was my will, I could tell the water to devour the bridge whole.

"I'm tired, Maven. Let me rest," I appeal, touching the pillows of the chair, which are no match to the goose-down ones inside. "I need to be ready to defend myself tomorrow."
"Good," he says, at last leaving me in peace, the bloody bowl of water still right next to me.

Tonight is not the night that I designate for tears; the saline water stays in my eyes when I coerce it to. I am a queen and I refuse to be threatened by a boy with a piece of metal on his head.

Walking inside my study and plopping down at my desk, I yank open a drawer to reveal a stack of fresh parchment and several fountain pens that are usually wielded for my sketches. Then I start to write.

Dear Sister Rosalyn, times here at Whitefire have become more tumultuous than I ever could've predicted. It may sound childish of me, but I should've harnessed myself around Father's leg and wailed until he let me stay. Usually, I keep these letters of ours formal, for worry that officials read them. But I cannot live here, I've determined. This evening my husband—who was supposed to protect me, that was the agreement- blackmailed me. And he's given me a choice. Either be framed for adultery—which I did not carry out if you're inquisitive- or stay silent.

You know me, Rose. I get awfully bored easily and have the burning desire for knowledge, whatever topic available. And through my maidens and the gossips of the court, I've unearthed disturbing secrets, proving how corrupt this land is. This evening I confirmed my notions; Tiberias Calore was whispered into killing his father by Queen Elara, who is now blissfully dead, from my impressions. Mare Barrow did not seduce him, as the story has it. Maven knew the endgame all along. He was the liar. Now, I stand by as his sanity goes away a little more each week, the only cure being the little lightning girl.

I will see you soon, even if this message never arrives in your hands. Pray for me.

The most risky part of this plan transpires next and I crack open one of the two double doors that exits to the main hallway on the upper level of the palace. Two guards that I would think to be statues poise on both sides of the entrance. One is a Greco strongarm, replaced two days ago following the abandonment of House Eagrie. The other, a Nornus swift. He must be the same one who saved my life, though I don't admit it.

"Do you report to Maven or your Queen? I ask. Though I was quiet when opening the door, they must've seen the shift in their peripheral vision. Otherwise, they're just that calm.

"The King," Greco replies gruffly without thinking about it. "Your Majesty."

"How would you boys like to earn some money?" I ask, completely breaking away from my queen-like nature. I'm not going to waste a second attempting to gradually get them in my favor.

"What do you speak of, Your Majesty?" Nornus queries, falling prey to curiosity.

"If you're both interested, why don't you come on in?" I offer, not yet informing them that if they go through with my master plan, they'll be convicts. "This isn't business that can be discussed out in the open." I lead them through my chambers, past the main bedroom and back into my office. It would be terrible if someone had their ear pressed to the door and could report to Maven.

"May I wonder aloud, Your Majesty, is this action going to be illegal?" Greco interrogates, tucking his arms together. Dumb move. If I ambushed him now, it would take an extra half a second to counteract. When in war, half a second will cost death.

"Depending on your values, yes or no," I return, not wanting for them to think about ramifications just yet. I almost tut Grecos for considering it, but at the last moment, decide better of it. There cannot be an ounce of bad blood on my hands with these two. "You'll better comprehend my issue
if you read this letter to my sister."

Each of the men scans over the document through their masks, shifting the paper in a way that causes me to think they're rereading it. Stunned, I would be as well.

"If this is true..." Nornus says under his breath. "Tiberias Calore should be wearing the crown."

"Of course it's true," I rebut, disheartened that they're hesitant. "I've spent hours listening to other theories. You'd be starstruck as to the ratio of individuals who believe his innocence. And tonight I confirmed it."

"With what source?" Nornus asks gently, skeptical yet civil to his queen.

Snatching up the letter, I face my back to them by sitting down to compose additional copies. "Insignificant. But I'm convinced that she was reliable." They can only know so much until I trust them. And they won't trust me if I tell them that my reliable source was a red girl.

Fast-forwarding to the next point of interest, I swivel my chair to reface the men. "If we are to work together, I'd like for you to expose your features. I cannot deal with emotionless Sentinels." Though I'm fairly keen on seeing them unmasked, my agenda involves the ability to read their expressions. If they're going to rat me out to Maven, I might as well spill a memory-erasing elixir down their throats now. "In return, I offer to cast off formalities. I go by Iris; My Queen takes too much effort."

Tentatively, Nornus shucks off his visor. "I serve the king, but above that, I serve my country. And if my country is in the hands of a fraud, he isn't my king. I am loyal to you, Iris."

Copying his teammate's actions, Greco removes his as well. "To be honest, I've come across some rumors that have a similar conclusion," he admits.

Neither are past twenty-five; should I be concerned that Maven left me under guard by amateurs? Hopefully, they're exceptional young fighters. Grecos ranks at my height, while Nornus surpasses me by three or fours inches. "What are your first names?" I demand, still inspecting the men. They each have a different variation of brown hair, Nornus' being golden and Grecos owning ebony, almost black.

"David," Grecos responds.

"Bartholomew," the second one tells me. "But my friends call me Bart." That one, particularly, strikes me as having a pleasant-to-look-at appearance. An air of kindness radiates of him and it makes me feel safer than I should.

"Thank you, Bart," I let out a long-overdue confession. "For saving my life at Piedmont." A smirk flashes across him and I cannot prevent an eye rolling. "I have faith that you'll save it again if necessary. Though, let the record show that I'm normally a great warrior."

"What, exactly will we get in return for aiding your departure to the Lakelands?" Greco interjects, continuing to be a liability.

"If you haven't taken note, Maven's empire is crumbling. And if my crown was stolen unlawfully, I'd want it back. I foretell that Tiberias will be in dominion soon, and unite the country to destroy the Scarlet Guard. When that day arrives, you may rejoin your families here. Prior to then, you'll be sheltered by the Queen of the Lakelands and given all the jewels your heart desires for protecting her sister."
The room goes still, in consideration. Each glance at one another, silently asking for opinions. David and Bart spend eight hours a day fixed seven feet apart, yet they barely know the other. Now they elect a choice together because I must take them both or none at all. "I don't have the night, boys."

"When are we leaving?" Bart says, presenting my deliverance.

"Amidst the masquerade ball. The little lightning girl is going to make an entrance; I will use that to my advantage. Unfortunately, my face is well-known. I have yet to figure out transportation means." Almost growling, I spank my cheek. I've thought of everything, finding a hitch in plan after plan. Five-hundred miles rest between Archeon and the Lakeland border, and over six-hundred to get to Detraon. "Steal an automobile. Or a plane," I sigh out, my ideas becoming more and more pathetic. Taking a vehicle from a human would be wrong, and taking an aircraft would require security clearance from Maven. Unless I'd like to attempt breaking into those guarded headquarters.

"There's a recreational track across the bridge. They have racing cars galore. We can break out one of those and speed through down the highways and be to the capitol by morning." If his calculations are correct, we'd get home before the letter do.

How outrageous this sounds; it's my idea and even I have trouble thinking about it. I'm not a hostage, yet I feel like so. I should be able to visit my sister freely, without backhanded plots. But Maven won't allow my absence if I simply asked to leave. He knows I know.

"You both should stay by my side for all of the festivities, in case of last minute changes or such."

It will be a ball to remember.
Chapter 13

Mare

I haven't ever deliberately walked into a snare before. Sure, time and time again I've been blind and stupid, unwittingly fallen into elaborate plots, dreamed up by the most damned of people. In a sense, knowing hurts more than it would to be captured suddenly, the anticipation sucking out my spirit like a leech would to blood.

When I departed, the manor was split in opinions, everyone interested in offering up their suspicions, the Magnetrons particularly keen on giving advice. Jaymes-Lucas' brother-thought it would be hilarious if I were to lock myself inside my old and horrid room; cell, I prefer to call it. Waltzing straight into the ball dressed as Mareena Titanos was always another alternative, garbed in the dress that I first locked lips with Cal in. Surely that would get a rise out of Maven, Jaymes had assured me too loudly, resulting in a clash of gaze with Tiberias himself.

Now, I clutch Tyton's fingers between mine, not a romantic gesture so much as it's a lifeline, the only piece of reality fastening me from floating off to a nightmare again. The aircraft is too quiet, but I don't brave being the one to speak, to make a joke involving this mess. The Samos's borrowed us one of their older models of planes that I still consider it to be of fine technology. Their standards aren't aligned with my own.

He gently strokes the top of my hand, repetitive and steady at a constant rate, as though it's become a habit. The simple pattern renews itself every three seconds and I begin to count along with the rhythm that doesn't falter, doesn't stop. Mouthing the numbers, I tighten my grip on him just a little, probably hardly something at all to him. Yet he does notice and squeezes back before restarting the motion.

This won't be a long plane ride; I have to expel my worries at intervals. Ever since Maven and his army of Magnetrons dragged me from the atmosphere, I cannot bare sitting in one of these death-traps, which I've been made to do so on multiple occasions. It only aided in my panic when Ptolemus came up to me previous my goodbyes to Rift, and whispered in my lobe that there wouldn't be any Magnetrons to catch me airborne, but Maven still may find other, more creative ways.

I snapped at him to go to Hell, discarding my cares for peacekeeping. I should've slapped him, I decide when looking back.

"Do you actually believe him?" Tyton cleaves through the silence at thirty-thousand feet. Disappointing me, he ceases in his brushing.

"Well, I don't have much of a choice, do I," I respond, not forming a question. According to Jon, any other approach will spiral into my ruin, a future draped in chains and misery. "Against my better judgment, I'm depending on him as a source of wisdom." What else could I do besides for allow Giza to endure beheading? As an eye, he knows all outcomes, every feasible reality that could exist in place of this one. He knows all the right things to say, to convince me of his legitimacy. His lies surpass even those of Maven. "I have a gut feeling," I make up, not really meaning it. Nothing in the lucid part of me agrees with this, some other, wilder part of my mind in control now.

Tyton relents in his useless arguing but unties his fingers from mine. I doubt he can find a more severe punishment for my stupidity. Though I'm also grateful for his lack of will to hurt me
further; I'm not sure if I could handle additional retorts and reasons for us to rethink.

We took up a pair of seats in the backmost row, myself unable to tolerate eyes blazing into my back. Instead, I look at the idiots that I call friends and allies, who so dimwittedly signed up for this. Cameron paces near the front, the turbulence affecting her very little; she's restless, with jittery fingertips that continually tap together and the queer ankle rolling midway in steps.

Farley and Davidson sit beside one another, blueprints spread out on their foldable tables, dashed with erasable marks. Honestly, I'm surprised Davidson even volunteered to come with me, as the Premier of Monfort. I wonder who he left in charge to manage relations between the Guard and Rift. Davidson must feel awfully bold or secure to go along with this, though he was the first to express his faith in Jon.

Ella and Rafe share a section as well, pointing out the windows and playfully slapping at each other. Good to see some of the plane's occupants are enjoying themselves.

Harrick stands too, torking his wrist back and forth, testing and pushing his ability. Every so often I'll witness a chair or a person go invisible or transform into something else completely. We picked up Harrick and Ada back in Rocasta, who are the sole two enlisters of areas outside of Rift. A grand total of nine fools, inclusive of myself.

"Do me a favor and don't be alarmed when the plane disappears right out from under you," Harricks calls above the hum of the engine.

Five seconds pass before his warning expires and the fuselage zips into nothingness, the seating and all. Despite Harrick's warning, I still start, and for too many seconds, a phantom plunging sensation is brought upon me. Forgetting Harrick's caution sooner than I should have, my heart rate sprints from a slightly unhealthy pace to a galloping one as I furiously grapple for my armrests.

Meanwhile, Davidson briefly glances at him and gives an impressed nod. "Manage that for ten minutes, Harrick, and I'll be happy." He wants to gauge exactly how long the illusion can last, measuring how long we can depend on him inside Whitefire's gates.

I take two deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth, averting my eyes and thoughts from the infinite sky that surrounds our tiny capsule. But I can't help my itching urge to behold the vast ocean of gas and end up rubbernecking the spectacle; a contrast to what a perceptive version of me would do.

Mountains peak above a belt of clouds, piercing the fluffy material. I dare untuck my foot and tap on the plane floor, which I quickly discover is there. More clouds drift overhead, and a couple smaller masses float right past me, contorting to accommodate the plane. I awkwardly reach an arm to touch where the circular window would be, causing Tyton to press into his seat backing; I announce an apology. Though I'm aware my fingers don't actually graze the vapor, I can deceive myself.

"All limbs must be inside the moving transporter, Miss Barrow," Rafe demands with cupped hands around his mouth jokingly, at the same time whipping an empty wrapper downward. It lightly crunches against the transparent carpet. He swears.

"What did you think was going to happen?" Farley asks, talking to him with brazenness.

"Well you see," he speaks in a similar tone, "I was hoping-"

She puts up and hand to signify for him to stop. "I know, Rafe," Farley explains, uncapping her pen
and going back to the outlines. Planning has gotten to her, tinkering with her soundness; she's been irritable all day.

Rafe sighs, turning his attention to Harrick, who wears a single drop of sweat. Though his intakes of air appear to be calm, at least. I couldn't say more than four minutes have elapsed. "You're doing well, Harrick," I encourage. Though, he's focused to the point that I question if my words registered.

The sideshows ceasing in their bothering, my eyes flicker back to my aerial view, a river that has materialized. Calculating the math sloppily, I figure that we've traveled a good three-hundred or four-hundred miles since taking off from Rocasta. That would leave us... right above Archeon, I predict. The waterway must be the Capital River, which flows right through the city, cracking it into halves.

Suspense doesn't have long to build when buildings flood into view through slits of cloud. "Fantastic," Davidson states, "we're making fantastic time. "Another few minutes of cloaking would be excellent," he finishes, peering over his shoulder to join me in stalking the city. Looking for unnamed personal, from a laughable distance.

I don't waver in my examination, hardly blinking when the plane lurches in its descending, combing apart details of Archeon-which now is hurtling towards us- for any hint of my sister or protest. But what do I fancy to see, really, within the confines of realism? Giza herself? A fiery red flag hoisted atop of pole in the financial district?

"We'll get her back," Tyton says, his words oozing with promise. Don't make promises you can't keep.

"Yes," I reply, taking his hand in mine, with a smile that cannot span to my eyes. Last night I didn't rest for a split second and nearly worked myself into sickness. Exhausted, yet slumber will not greet me tonight either, even if Davidson found us a lovely bullet-proof bunker on the outskirts of the city to stay in. And if I were thousands of miles separated from Maven and my newest headache, the Sandman still wouldn't reach me. "Yes."

"Where are we landing?" I'm not wholly excited to learn another step of the scenario. It's often easier to complete tasks as they come, not holding them in your mind for too long, not overthinking. I should be eager to strategize like I do routinely, but today... it feels to close to home. But on the flipside, I should, should want to be involved in this; alternatively, I've let them do it all.

"At the airbase," Farley informs me.

My exhalation clogs up and I sputter for her to repeat herself; Farley must be joking. To fly right into the headquarters of the Nortan Airforce, would be suicide.

"Sure, we could land a few miles outside of the city, sleep there for the night, ditch the plane in the forest, and walk to the masquerade, but why not inflict some damage on the government while we're at it?" Farley pats on the gasoline tank that is tucked beneath her seat, the blue plastic camouflaging well. "I have bombs too."

"You want to set the airforce aflame?" Cameron quirks a brow, but a smirk also settles.

Maven once said that the country could be controlled from West Archeon. If we were to disable a major part of that system, it would greatly pain the silvers. "It's a good thing that night has come. It's expansive, though, and I doubt we'll destroy every plane in there."
"But it'll make a diversion," I finish the plan. "The nymphs and other Houses that can aid will be called away to put out the fire, therefore diminishing the number of Sentinels in the castle. The ones that remain will be in a frenzy. We're sneaking in tonight, aren't we?"

Farley wears a smirk alike to Cameron's. "Smart girl. Yes, we are."

Her plan is solid as a rock, yet the near-to-flawless granite has a chip in it, a chip wide enough that could fracture the granite altogether. "Maven will know," I state my apprehension aloud, making it palpable for myself. "He'll see through it."

"And do what?" Davidson makes me second-guess the quality of my concern. "He won't allow his planes to burn, will he?"

"No," I explain, "but Maven will find another way to heighten his security, to ensure we get caught."

"I'll say it again, Miss Barrow. There will always be risk in war." He tells me this as if I didn't already know it, but I suppose it needs to be affirmed. "You have highly trained military generals protecting angles you cannot see, and a task force with extraordinary abilities. If we cannot prevent Maven from capturing you, then the war is over."

I'm not a daredevil and I'll never delight in risk. When it comes to situations that I have to risk the odds to protect Giza, my worries grow to a new height. My sister may not have asked to be abducted by Maven, but there isn't a switch to be flipped that'll teleport her from the palace. I have to risk it. "You're right, General. Weighing outcomes, tonight will have the least amount of security with the fire, Maven's notions not regarded."

Just as I accept defeat, the wheels of the aircraft connect with the tarmac, Cameron stumbling into a seat. I can see the ground, leaning over my knees, and figure we're two or so meters above.

Wasting no time, "Everybody, grab a can and start dousing every inch possible. The closer to the planes the better; gasoline is in them too. Fifteen minutes and then this place goes up in flames," Davidson orders, wiggling a lighter in his fist. "Electricons," he adds while pulling out containers of the liquid out from the seats, "no electricity use in here, even if someone attacks you. One spark will create an explosion, killing us all."

I tap on the knives strapped to my thigh. More are concealed inside the shafts of my boots. "I'm feeling destructive today," I announce, taking two of the large canisters rather than the standard one. Twisting the top off, I don't strive to keep the lethal liquid inside its prison, allowing it to slosh over the rim, though do my best in avoiding getting the gasoline on my hands by tilting it at an angle away from my body.

I'm the first to exit the plane right ahead of a carefree Rafe, who glances hastily to both sides as if he's doing nothing more than crossing a street and then scampers off like a jackrabbit.

I, however, am more vigilant than my fellow electricon is. Many seconds consume the designated fifteen minutes, spent with me squinting at the darkness, waiting for a movement, an indication that we aren't alone. The plane that we took here-isn't here from my perspective, now that I've exited it, the dwellers that haven't left yet also invisible. I'm amazed that Harrick hasn't tripped up yet; he cloaks those of us outside as well.

He's been practicing a great deal.

With that, I'm off and running, abandoning an uninterrupted path of gasoline in my wake. I veer off
in a different direction than the others haven't so far, intending to cover a massive amount of space. It would be a pity and a waste to use goods in a space that is already flame-bound. The hangar is dark and dank, too enveloped by blackness to make out many details. The moonlight shines brightly enough to see the faint shadows of passenger jets and fighter wings, and when looking up, I figure the structure is twenty feet tall or so.

I litter the liquid under the wings and bellies of the crafts, skipping every other one. The explosion from the missed ones' neighbors will demolish them anyway. It saves me time.

My spirits capsize when I exit the storage unit we'd parked in, to come across twenty more units. They're all as massive as the last one. Some Godly force inside of me ignites, shooting my legs off to an inhuman speed across the tarred ground. I use the gasoline sparingly, yet enough to burn well.

Streetlamps illuminate the drive much better, revealing that the bunkers have been planted in a circular formation, the road itself a ring. Guard towers are elevated four stories, silhouettes inside, moving sparingly. I do my best to prowl through the shadows, even though Harrick assured us that they can't see us.

Throwing my first tank to the ground, I'm angered that it was only enough to for the first storage unit. But Tyton and Ella were put on bomb duty, in charge of clipping an explosive to each and every shelter and this gasoline is only a promoting agent. I enter the next edifice, it's metal in tune with the night sky's color.

"Are you attending the masquerade with your lady friend?" Someone asks and I stop short, drawing one of my blades. Harrick informed us any guards patrolling the bases wouldn't see or hear us, but I still question the outright extent of his power. The buildings are staggered a fair amount and while Harrick is more powerful than any Haven ever has been, I'm wary.

I press my back on a stack of flying missiles and locate two shifting shadows. They're not A-grade Sentinels like the ones who serve the King directly. Easy to beat, I can assume without arrogance. "Hey," I say plentifully loud enough. If they cannot hear this, then I'll trust Harrick with my life.

"Yes," the other responds and my knees buckle, before I understand he's not heeding my hello. "But what exactly is it celebrating? No holidays fall tomorrow." I can tell you exactly what it's celebrating, buddy.

But before I move onto the next plane to drench, I pause, clutching my gasoline can weakly. When the flames burst forth, these men will either be absorbed by the scorch or flee and live to tell their frightful tale. The healers would fix them up and they'd go on without trouble. I could kill them now, impale their chests with knives, a quick, pain-reduced death. Otherwise, it could take minutes for smoke or fire to slaughter them.

They're not assaulting me, I reason as more gasoline is splattered across the floor, making my way to the exit of this building. Just like the last one. I keep aside from them, not spilling the liquid anywhere within range of their knowledge. Harrick most likely is hiding the trails as well, but I decide to be safe.

I lose my speed, my motivation when I see those Sentinels, conversing like ordinary people. I only listened to a single question exchange, but that little bit proved they're humans. They could be exceptional bastards, for all one knows. Or they could be down-to-earth people, with families who would weep for days if I make sure they're dead meat. This method, I give them a chance.

Checking the timer strapped to my wrist, five minutes remain. Three-hundred seconds remain.
"High five, Barrow!" Ella charges at me and I can barely jerk my hand out before her's slaps mine, traveling twenty miles an hour. "We've covered fifteen out of twenty of em," she exclaims, affixing another to the shelter that I just exited. "Sixteen!" Ella screams.

My sprinting commences once more, my gaits widening to a leap. There are no sentries in the next depot, a collection of smaller planes and attack missiles stored here. I come across a bank airjets like the one I sent crashing to the ground in Naercey, the Ash City. I use more gasoline than needed on those ones.

"Two minutes!" Tyton peaks his head in to warn me. I don't want to be anywhere within this place when it burns.

Still, moments tick by and my supplies haven't drained yet. I divide the hangar up into quadrants, keeping chart of which hasn't been done. With one quadrant neglected, the watch beeps, indicating to get out.

But long-held fury that I've suppressed because of its pointlessness finds a route out of my hardened soul, coursing through my bones, spiraling over them, inside of them. The very marrow in me pleads I stay for fifteen seconds longer, to compel fire burning across the whole board. I run faster than a sprint, dumping the gasoline on the ground under the final planes.

Throwing the now-gutted can to the cement flooring, I beeline for the doors, wrapping my fingers around the threshold, and swing my body to the right. A fire eats at the building we initiated in. Didn't they bother to do a head count?

Of course, they did; Davidson simply doesn't like being controlled by anyone else and decided to begin the fire anyway. A penalty for me, for not knowing when to listen to orders.

I shake my head, aiming to arrive at the opposite end of the base to where the inferno originated, racing with the growing flames. The first explosion combusts behind me, setting of its sister as well. I can only beseech to our forgotten gods to spare me. The paths of gasoline that dripped between the plane shelters blaze, chasing me like an actual person.

A third blast goes off, a wave of heat rolling over my skin. These bombs aren't remote controlled, they'll blast when they get too hot. And unpleasantly for my sake, it's getting immensely hot here, as the glands on my arms tell me, not producing sweat fast enough.

A hundred yards isolate me from safety; a gasoline-free area.

Explosions are getting closer, I think while running the last stretch of land. One fires so closely that my back and triceps burn, certain to leave a mar. The weak and helpless part of me that doesn't have a voice on the battlefield wishes for Cal to be here, to command the flames, to create a sanctuary amongst the devastation.

I can save myself.

Legs ache, but I don't have the effort to think about how badly I want to collapse, with the barricade of flames right behind me. Without viewing it, I know that in a matter of milliseconds my doom will catch up to me, searing me alive.

A detonation to my right discharges its fire, and my eyes go wide, beholding the glistening orange and yellow that blow towards me, grey ash mixed in with the flame. Running would be futile now, I resolve, squeezing my eyes shut.

Every particle upon my skin erupts with energy, deadly power.
But it doesn't hurt. Rather so, I feel more alive than ever, and this isn't a side effect of death, because death cannot be empowering like this is.

Unless the volley killed me and I'm presently rushing towards Hell's floor, journeying through a hurricane of flames. This doesn't make sense. I rake at my hair, feeling its existence, it's intactness. If only I could see my arms but the fire fully shrouds my eyesight, leaving me to tug off my jacket, kneading at my skin to find it peeling off or gone.

It feels fine. Perhaps even smoother than before the fire downed my being. In contempt of the smoke that floats all around me, I breathe with ease; Burners cannot take oxygen in these conditions. In that manner, I'm stronger than the Traitor Prince. Foolish. If I can walk through flames, I am stronger than the Traitor Prince altogether. That was my first gulp of oxygen—I had been holding my breath—I realize. I take another few, before setting off in the direction that I think I had been shooting for.

Not a fleck of the blackish-blue sky is seen from my vantage point, with whichever orientation I tilt my neck at. Pools of soot replace the clouds. If I am very much conscious and this isn't Satan's household, Osanos Sentinels will have a jolly good old time putting this beast to rest.

Besides for preventing the fire from spreading to other areas of the city, the nymphs won't be rescuing anything at all, if my judgment is accurate. Nothing should recover from this.

Death has grazed me too many times. I should be dead.

"Mare!" Davidson's voice screeches over the residual explosions of airplanes. He stands, guarded by a domed forcefield. Utter amazement dominates his features, smudging his stone exterior. "Get over here," he barks lowly, if though this is just another thing I've done that displeases him.

The smog has lifted a bit, offering me a murky look at my hands. Golden, tanned from excessive sunlight at its most intense period during summer. There is no blood, no flesh stripped away to show a bone. In lieu, mauve purple lightning frolics across the underside of my skin, tendrils of the entity hitting edges of my body and bouncing off, onward with a new purpose. I didn't save myself; the minuscule strands of electricity did.

Julian told me that I don't wield lightning, but that we are one. I believe him. Not having to call my powers forth, and it reflected the inferno off of me without my consideration.

I walk stiffly, only jogging when Davidson barks at me to hurry up. "They're already here. We have to leave." When I meet him, he doesn't let me into his protection zone, deciding I don't need it or thinking I'll shock him if I'm closer. "Harrick's sapped. We need to get out of here, where we can roam without cover."

"Okay," I agree without thought, my eyes still glaring at the sparks within.
Chapter 14

Mare

"It was probably nothing," Harrick pants out, wheezing the worst of all. We stopped several blocks away from the airforce, now arranged in a tight circle inside of the Samos' abandoned home, in a windowless room. I was surprised that there was residence so close to the plane base, but it makes sense; they were once Norta's main supplier of welded objects. "But, for a second or two, I mislaid my grip on Mare's cloaking. The explosion that caught you was the most powerful," Harrick goes on, directing his concerns towards me, "and between that and your lightning, the bond fractured."

I gulp down saliva, unsure of how to respond. He couldn't help it, obviously, Harrick had been veiling us for nearly a half an hour before that and shouldn't have managed that much in the first place. This entire scheme would be thrust up to nearly impossible without him, guards waylaying in the shadows, expecting us.

"Neither a freaking camera or a person could've seen anything through those fumes," Cameron assures Harrick, who wears a frenzied expression that is certainly there, though the candlelight doesn't reach him. While a light bulb encased in a decorative glass is bracketed to the ceiling directly above us, no one flips its switch, for unease that the palace monitors the electrical intake of the mansion.

She, hopefully, is right. The smoke was dense and the fire still burned furiously when we fled the crime scene. But if Maven picks up on a sole glint of purple sparks, I'm done for.

"It doesn't matter," I sigh, shaking my head though none can bear witness to it. "They'll guess who caused it without blinking. It was too big of a catastrophe to be an accident, though the monarchy might try passing it off as one. Or else they'll lay full blame to the Guard, maybe pin Tiberias for fanning the flames."

"For Heaven's sake, Mare," Farley growls out, speaking to me for the first time since before we left the jet. She's stricken with anger, anger for my stupidity in staying a moment longer than I had to. She didn't comment when I walked out of the fire, fully well. In fact, no one did, stunned with bewilderment or irritation, some cases a mix. Tyton was the only one to come to my side, his face pale with worry. "He isn't here. You can call him Cal."

Reciprocated ire builds up for her saying such a thing during this mission. "Of all times," I say, nothing more than a croak, letting my emotions get the best of me.

"Of all times," Farley repeats scornfully. "We all know that an ember lingers in your heart, Mare Barrow," she divulges, uttering my name like I'm a total stranger. "So what is he?" Farley rotates her hand so that her palm is exposed, and jerks her arm upward, gesturing to Tyton. My organs grow cold.

The flame-small in comparison to the explosions-splutters, as if it too is shocked by the revelation. "What did I ever do to you?" I whisper, retaliating with a bitterness of my own.

"Don't you see what you're doing?" She asks, the sting of words dying down a bit. "I've tried to keep my mouth shut, to be a bystander and allow you to draw your own conclusions..." she trails off, dropping her hands to her hips, refraining from those hand gestures. "I worry how far you'll go to fill this gaping hole in your heart."
All I can do is blink lazily, as though coming out of a slumber overslept. I try to find the words to express a denial, but my jaw refuses to budge, steel nails hammering it together. Eyes stinging with anger, sadness, and everything between, I turn my back to my peers-whose gazes collide with my back, awaiting justification. "Whether in Whitefire or here, I won't be resting tonight and I doubt any of you will either," I explain, veering off topic entirely. "I assume we'll be leaving before the Kingsguard has a chance to regroup."

"Yes," Davidson agrees quietly, uncomfortable with the emotional torrent. "Five minutes and I expect all of you downstairs, at the main doors."

I nod my head mutely and I can only suspect the others do the same. The sunshine left hours ago, yet for us, the night is still young. The selfish and wide-eyed part of me tugs at me to leave this darkened room, to pad down the hallways in an untraceable sequence so that not a soul can scold me for cruelty, or whatever else I should be blamed for.

Regrettably-that childish part decides right away- I press against the propped-open sheet of iron, creating room for the others to exit. Tyton leans on a bookshelf on the opposite angle of the room; just a moment ago he stood at my side.

I stare at the quivering flame that weakens as time progresses, the wax transforming from a solid to a syrupy liquid, its color the sole property that I can rely on. Farley is the last to leave, with crossed arms and an unreadable face. She even goes so far as to close the door, lightly though. If silence wasn't a ground rule, she'd whip it shut, generate as much sound that a door can.

I can't meet his gaze, can't make eye contact with a man that is nothing if not perfect. Because I'm ashamed of the kiss I returned not two days past. I was stupid, so stupid, stupid even now for choosing the righteous path for once and facing him.

"What am I to you?" He asks the dreaded question, articulating it with a loathsome slowness.

Absentmindedly, I pinch the cartilage of my ear right above where my scarlet gemmed earring would've been pierced into. There isn't a puncture, though; instead, it continues to be pure, without mark. From there, I graze my fingers downwardly, to touch each of the other stones, their backings gone raw from overuse of years and years. Unlike my newest and invisible red jewel, the older ones are fake, constructed from plastic and scratched in places from the crashes I've taken.

"It was too soon, wasn't it?" I tell him, staying at my place by the door.

"What am I to you?" Tyton repeats, edging closer to me. His proximity sets me on edge and I have nowhere to escape to, being backed up against a wall. It's too late to run.

"I don't know," I admit through gritted teeth, pushing myself into the cool plating, yearning for it to bend to fit my shape, to encompass me altogether. "A distraction? I desire to know that isn't what it is deep-down inside of my heart. I validated it with the aspiration to allow you to fix me, to make me whole again. So then I really could love you with all of my being."

The illumination from the fire shrivels away from Tyton as he nears, as though it fears him. But, no, of course, that would be absolutely silly. Just a trick of the mind. "At least you intervened and cut things short before things escalated," he murmurs, the shadowed half of his face towards me. "Friends," Tyton echoes, conjuring forth the term used when I cut our afternoon-relationship short.

"Was that really just yesterday, that you kissed me?" I ask, recalling the moment that is barricaded by so many other events that have happened between that second and the present. "It seems like months past."
"And you kissed me back," Tyton slaps on the part of the story that was my fault; is my fault.

Though I've told him that we're just friends, a mutual longing of sorts drifts through the air that separates us. It has, since the moment he admitted his feelings towards me. If I hadn't allowed the reckless and lustful and greedy part of me to sway my actions, I would've told him to keep away, to protect both of us. In lieu, I've used him as a crutch, a wall to hide behind.

"You're right," I cave in, not bothering to tell him that I was being feebleminded. "And I won't blame you if thereafter the masquerade, you return to Monfort and live your days out happily, putting all the distance in the world to sever us. Because you deserve so much more than a crippled girl like me." Finally finding it in me to collide into his smoldering gaze, I watch his hazel eyes, displaced certainty shining.

"That's not what I want." His voice is hardly there. Tyton approaches me, the wax's flame shining as though it's the sun and Tyton is the horizon, with fragments of the light poking out from his right side. He eclipses it thoroughly when he shifts his position to stand parallel at my front. "I want to be your remedy, I want to fix you."

He collects my war-torn hands in his own, holding them so gently that one would think they were feathers. Using his pointer finger, Tyton traces an imaginary line upon my wrist, circling around one and then the other. "I cannot fathom those months you spent with him," Tyton begins. The little sprigs of hair that grow on my skin stand up as he touches the borderline of my palm and the underside of my arm. "Does this hurt you?" He inquires, dipping his head towards our intertwined fingers.

I can still call to mind Maven running his finger over the manacles that I was clad in, not that dissimilar from Tyton's movement. "It's gotten better. Something so small shouldn't disturb me like it does..." I fold my bottom lip under its counterpart, my boldness finally catching up to me. Usually, I wouldn't be so mentally exhausted that I could avoid such confessions. "Yet it does."

"It's not silly. Having that weight bound to you for so long," Tyton pauses, alleviating his push on my wrist so that it's more of a tickle than a touch. "You got used to it, and now you spend every waking moment assuming that it'll come back."

A shout is heard from downstairs, Farley or Davidson yelling to indicate that our time is up. Tyton says something about there not being enough time, and I get out of the door's route, in order for him to withdraw to the others. But whatever is spoken never reaches processing, as I ponder his suggestion.

Replacing his fingers with mine, I make a circuit with my thumb and middle finger, pinching my wrist tighter than the manacles ever did. Thumb overlaps to connect with fingernail, my grasp constricting until I thoroughly dig into the bones of my lower arm. I stare at the hand, my fingers encasing the margin separating hand and arm; traitorous little things, those fingers are, pretending to be my bane. Not satisfied, I close my eyes. Otherwise, the candlelight would blare, a signal of reality. Tighter. Tighter.

A stream of bullets hits me, each a memory lived while adorned with shackles, lived within the presence of Maven. I focus on his sapphire irises, a seething clash of fire and ice inside of them. The pupils are definite, orbs of oily black that so desperately want to corrupt the striking yet tortured blue. Bleed into the irises, altering them forever.

Right below lay bags of skin, gray from the war that is fought inside Maven's eyes. Gray like mine, the infection of fatigue spreading farther than any humans' should. Somedays, I recall, he looked
better. Must've been powder, like the concoction Farley gave me. Maven will never allow himself
to appear weak from the public's perspective, putting on a portrayal of morale and wit, utilizing
however many pounds of cosmetics are necessary.

I pick apart feature after feature, devising inferences and known facts, but I always go back to his
eyes. Light charcoal crooked streaks criss-cross one another, spiraling outwards from the center of
the pandemonium, extending to the edges of the pointed ovals. Overworked veins.

My unyielding grip has slackened, I recognize now and quickly try to refasten my fingers to their
previous strength. Yet regardless of how vehemently I anchor them together, I cannot retain my
energy, my bones not wanting to stay in place. The wrist itself feels numb, immune to any pain and
flashbacks I inflict upon it. Everything is empty.

Relenting, I drop both hands to my hips, a navy blue bruise left behind, a ring of darkness clawed
onto my skin. No one else is at fault for this one.
Chapter 15

Mare

"An old servants passageway. Sealed it off fifty years ago," Farley elaborates where we are while brushing away spiderwebs that have collected over a series of decades. "Tiberias was nice enough to tell me about it before our departure."

I fight the urge to cough up the dust that my lungs torture themselves with each time I take a breath. Not so much a passageway as Farley describes it, but rather sculpted caverns, massive pieces of rock drilled off to make a narrow walking space. Besides for a couple select feet of path, we journey in a single-file line, catching our jacket sleeves on the jagged formations too often, the accident serving as a reminder to not get comfortable.

The slimness of the caves compels caution, and I doubt we've made much progress in the half an hour the nine of us have been shuffling through the system. Davidson's forearm has been outstretched for all those minutes, balancing a miniature forcefield upon his palm to reveal where the forks in the pathway are. Besides for that, the other purpose for lighting is to scare off any fears of the darkness that any of us possess. Maven used to be afraid of the dark, Cal told me once. Used to.

"Is this environment healthy to be inhaling?" Rafe asks, though he already knows the answer. There's a chance he's simply trying to make light of this situation.

"Hold your breath, if you prefer," Cameron mocks, completely unaffected by the dust and dirt. Afterall, for the majority of her life, she was a Newtown Teckie, accustomed to fumes. I suppose that in that respect, I can be thankful for the ordinary poor red career that I griped on and on about for so long. I wasn't being worked to death or breathing in a mixture of poison and oxygen like Cameron was.

These winding tunnels prompt comparisons to the Treasury's layout, both intricate and deep mazes. We first entered the complex using the Samos' wine cellar, where Ella, Tyton, and I had blasted our lightning through the metal and rock that created the airtight closing. Davidson contained the damage waves with a forcefield and off we went.

If a pathway once connected the Samos's to Whitefire, I would assume that the policy is the same for all of the High Houses, the important ones anyway. Judging by the rawness of the channel, these uneven cutouts of rock must date back hundreds of years, perhaps back to the era of Caesar Calore, when the silver hierarchy was still beginning to stabilize. Sure, their regal abilities would've made constructing this masterpiece hundreds of times easier, yet powers aside, this network had to take months of labor. The King and his minions must've had an awfully good purpose to construct this.

They were terrified, is the only legitimate explanation that my mind can conceive. What other purposes would this serve? Allowing lovers to rendezvous would be petty, and even silvers would think of it as so. They were absolutely stricken with terror, and in case of a premature rebellion amongst the reds of society, they built this, the last resort method of transporting themselves to Whitefire or a hidden bunker that one of these tunnels branch off to.

There had to have been a purpose in locking them up, as well. Fifty years ago, the monarchy was secure, under the protection of a sane king, without hint of an uprise. Either they were bored and wanted something to do, or unwanted guests were sneaking through these tunnels. There could've
been too many young boys and girls exploiting these passageways to go off and drink their hearts out with friends. Otherwise, the grid of hewed boulders was deemed unsafe, one pebble bound to slip and start a chain reaction destruction.

"Almost there," Davidson calls from up ahead, the luminous blue spirit from his hand growing a bit stronger and brighter. Now, I can see the ceiling of the cavity of earth that we're in, can see the insects slithering on the wet layers of limestone that rest two feet above my head. A couple of instances, I've felt water drop onto my head; now I pause to wonder what crawls in my hair. I would pull out my hands and rake my hair if I had the luxury of elbowroom.

"How did Cal know the layout of this place?" Cameron asks, producing an odd gagging sound, that's something to the effect of clearing her throat. The dust is worse than Newtown's, I'll bet.

"Don't know," Farley says curtly, yet despite her words, there's a tiny hesitation in her step.

I wonder if she's wondering a similar thought to my own. Cal and Maven were playmates for years, practically from Maven's birth to his betrayal. Sure, their games evolved as they did, but around the ages of ten or twelve, boys love hiding from one another and they would've adored having a colossal hide and seek domain like this. Both of the brothers have an obsession with winning, the importance of the competition irrelevant. On days when Cal wasn't training on the battlefield or being prepared to be king... I can envision him coming down here with a pad of paper and a pencil, to sketch out the map of this puzzle. It doesn't surprise me that he still remembers it.

"Here," Davidson grinds to a halt, all of us plowing into the person ahead of us, stuck inside of our minds. Before me lays a door, with a safe-like structure. Circular, with a smaller circle slightly offset from the center, erected an inch out of the smoothed chromium- one of the hardest metals, as I so delightedly learned from Lady Blonos. "Cameron, if you please."

Cameron stands two people in front of me and is soon in the front, pulling a glass out of her satchel. The walk opens up significantly here, and we all gather around her, counting on her to pick the military-grade lock. Apparently, the Samos family used to know the combination, but security alters it once a month. She is skilled at this kind of stuff, anyway. Combination or not, we'll get in. "Six inches of bulletproof metal," Cameron says to herself, half-crouched to get a good angle, pressing her ear to the glass, which touches the metal. "It'll take five minutes, but I can get it."

Davidson nods in approval, though Cameron's as of now in her own little world, like none of us are present. Understanding that we have to be muted, both for our lock-picker's need and the guard's unawareness on the other side of that door.

Now with the blessing of space, I comb through tendrils of my hair, to thankfully find no foreign pests. "Since when do you care about your hair?" Ella asks slyly with a toothy grin. Knowing her, she could carry a bottle of her dye in the backpack that loops on her shoulder.

I shove her in the ribs lightly, rolling my eyes. "I was just making sure there weren't centipedes seeking housing in this mess." Holding a tuft of hair, I shove it upward, to emphasize the chaos. "By the way, I continue to be perfectly happy with my hair color."

"You'll regret saying that," she says cryptically with a glint of humor, smiling again and then turning to watch Cameron. I do the same, analyzing the girl's absorption towards her work, gracing an impartial, the muscle in her cheek spazzing every so often when something goes wrong- or right.

Unreadable words are spoken silently from Cameron, almost, appearing multiple times.
I glance at Tyton, who in turn I find is peering at me, in no endeavor to disguise his scrutiny. Later, we're going to finish the conversation that was interrupted by war, the talk in which it's expected of me to pour my heart out to him. But he doesn't expect that of me. I expect it of myself.

"Almost," Cameron says quietly but aloud, squinting as the dial makes a final revolution, prior to a faint click arising, not unlike the sound my chains made when Evangeline freed me. A series of sighs washes through the area, each of us discharging trepidations. "Ah," Cameron says, satisfied.

"Harrick, you know what to do," Farley orders, the first hint of contentment arousing on her features in days. Harrick nods.

From an outsider's perspective, we all vanish instantaneously, concealed via Harrick's will. Davidson puts a grip around each of the two shafts of metal welded to the doors and begins to pull. I can only presume that the movement of the hefty gate is hidden as well.

Davidson's combat boots dig into the gravel, proof of the strain he's putting on himself. He doesn't ask for help, though, and I wouldn't offer it; that alone would damage his pride and his respect for me, which has never been very high in the first place. My companions have the same ideas that I do, and stand down, waiting. In spite of Davidson's age, I wouldn't fare as well as he does in uprooting the inches-thick door.

As artificial lightning begins to peak through the slit that Davidson has opened, I can't help my destructive imagination. Perhaps Maven and fifty Sentinels stand on the other side, all too aware of every step of our scheme. Perhaps before running off, Jon gave Maven a precise date and time on when I'd be standing here, leading me into a trap. Picturing Maven's serene and evil grin sends chills down my spine. If he did indeed, I won't be the only one to fall, I take into consideration. Eight others will perish along with me.

A third of the way open, Davidson peaks his head around the corner. The fact that he doesn't rip his hands away from their place should imply that an army doesn't await us, but bile still churns in my stomach, butterflies whisking the liquid. "Clear," he decides with monotone. "Farley, you know where to go for the night. Then again, it's almost morning."

"Why aren't you leading?" I pry, suddenly feeling oblivious.

"I have no doubt, Miss Barrow, that tomorrow's events will result in a large number of Sentinels chasing after you. You'll need a getaway car; someone on the outside to save you." He isn't wrong. "I cannot even begin to fantasize what will await you when you save your sister."

"Thank you," I admit, grateful for all he's done. But alongside the gratitude comes a new concern that I haven't granted access to my mind. What tricks and traps has Maven planted in Giza's prison, wherever that might be? He won't make it easy on me, that's for sure. "I'll see you tomorrow night, then." A promise that I will see the outside soon.

"Yes," he recognizes. "Now go, before my muscles collapse on themselves." Though it sounds like a joke, he says it sternly.

Farley squeezes herself through the slender gap Davidson has made for us, I follow suit, before the rest come through, Harrick last, ensuring that the door's slam is muffled. It's almost comedic how acute Harrick's mutated House Haven ability is. I take a moment to observe how the guards merely stand at their assigned places, unaware of their failure to protect Archeon. Ella makes an obscene gesture to the one on the left, sticking her finger right in his face and chuckling about it.

"While their sight of reality is stolen, their sense of touch remains. Don't get too close," Harrick
warns Ella, who looks like she's considering flicking him off too.

I walk hastily so I can walk next to Farley, taking my chances on getting mentally attacked by her once more. "Where are we going?"

"A secluded wing of the palace. Opposite to the royal family's sector. That's all I know and believe it or not, I'll have you know that I'm not an expert on Whitefire's layout." Unable to meet my gaze, Farley looks back down at the blueprints she's been inspecting for hours. They're hand-drawn, depicting each level of Whitefire and the tunnels that we used to get how far we've come.

"Where'd you get those, Farley?" I ask, pointing at the advanced maps, labeled with all of the central stops in the palace, possible escape routes, et cetera.

"Cal made it, actually," Farley tells me hesitantly, now folding the maps, certain on the turns that will be made or saving me from another chip out of my heart. She knows I watch her, awaiting a reciprocated gaze that will never come, the information too much to process already. "What was it, maybe one in the morning that he came to me? Something like that, yes." Farley pounds a fist into her head as if to clear the fog from her brain. "He came, asking what time we'd be leaving. For a moment I thought he'd ask to partake in this dumb plan of ours. That would've been stupid though. His little keeper of a grandmother would tie him to a leash if it came to it. And then..." she pauses, crinkling the maps a bit in her fist, thinking about what to say next, if anything at all.

"What?" I snap, impatience overruling this time. Sure now that staring at her long will merely result in eye strain, I fracture the incomplete gawking and move my attention to the walls, which might as well be dripping in blood.

The same old, same old labyrinthine tapestries line the corridors, weaved dominantly of red, gray, and black hues, forming all sorts of shapes. Mighty and all-powerful kings stand atop cowering reds, the sneers there even with lack of mouth. What a liar, I can only draw up in my mind again; Maven's announced numerous occasions that the newbloods he takes in will be treated with utmost respect, yet they must see these every single day.

Pristine floors we stand on, the marble white shining against my black boots. Red blood is just so hard to clean up. I cringe, contemplating what a lucid pool of my blood would look like on the stone cold floor. How terrible it would be for the maids to clean up... but how terrible it would be for Maven to have to view it, see the maids bent over on their knees, scrubbing away the disgust and memories, hopefully rubbing so hard that they grind the liquid into the rock.

Farley hands me the maps, offering a chance to take a look for myself. She still doesn't speak.

Carefully unfolding the paper, I blink, processing exactly what Tiberias did. A total of six sheets of stationery rest in my hands, one for each of the five palace levels and the last designated for the tunnels alone. They're totally done with pencil, marks from erased areas scattered across the maps, leaving tiny smears. Writing that isn't entirely perfect crowds the margins, thin arrows placed alongside. It's better than I ever could've done, despite the obvious exhaustion that he created these with.

"He argued that we would be able to navigate the palace, so four hours later, these were handed to me," Farley completes her story at last, snatching the papers back, tracing her finger across them, intent on locating something. "He included details that would be impossible to be needed, and if you're wondering why I was so outspoken earlier, that's why."

Ah, I see it. "I don't love him anymore, Farley."
"That's what you claim," she lips back harshly but quietly for my sake. "But the passion and struggles that you shared with him cannot be forgotten because of a single choice, the gravity of that decision meaningless."

"What are you trying to achieve, by telling me this?" I ask. Anger aside, confusion also reigns, speculation racing to figure out exactly what the methods to her madness are. Farley has never been one to be nasty for fun and from her words, she means to say that she has spoken what has been said for my benefit. And deep down... I know she's not on Tiberias's side. Farley couldn't have been manipulated by a little act of wholeness from a selfish boy. Though perhaps she manages to see the silver linings of a man's broken priorities better than I can. Red-blooded through and through, she only wishes to protect my fragmented heart from further destruction. To protect others from my fragmented heart, too.

"I'm sure," she begins, tucking the papers between her arm and side to make hand motions possible. "That this relationship with Tyton you've begun has been vindicated in some sort by yourself, but such a small lapse of time has passed. Since certain events." Noticing the Tyton, Ella, and Rafe walk not too far behind us, Farley lowers her voice even more. "You call him a friend, yet I saw the two of you holding hands on the plane. So what would you call that?"

Gulping down more air than I can swallow, I hunt for an answer, even if it's a lousy one. Stupid, is all I can come up with, rapidly twidling my thumbs together mutely. How stupid I've been to bother naming this mess something else than what it is; friends, I told him. Ready to admit to stupidity and defeat, I say, "You're-

"WHERE IS SHE?" A voice shrieks, the sickening pitch reverberating in my ears, to the point where I hear the echo over and over again. The almost inhumane tone has chills sailing down my body, in my blood. In merely a fraction of a second, my heart rate triples, as if it can outrun my doom all by itself. Already, I envision an Arven cuffing the shackles to their home around my bones, their snickers cutting through my imagination into reality, the feeling of their gloved and plastic hands on my arms, yanking me through these halls, owning impatience, if any emotions at all.

Accompanying the boy king have to be a dozen booted men, their marching nonexistent, likely too frenzied to be bothered by such things. In place of organization, I hear random stomps all about in the corridor next over, orders assigned in a tangle of exclamations, everyone a superior to another.

"Dammit," Farley mutters, pulling out her maps once more, rather annoyed than concerned. "Harrick, you've been meticulous and are certain our shield is operational, visuals and audio?"

Additional incoherent words are spouted out, gaudy cussing the only parts I pick up on.

Harrick nods jerkily, closing his eyes to plunge himself into deep concentration.

"I suppose it's to be expected, being in the security wing," Tyton snaps, shuffling over to meet me and accomplish whatever he thinks his presence can help me with. Truthfully, no man can rescue me from this impending terror that has initiated its quest to consume me. No one can save me.

Footfalls get closer, and I squeeze my eyes tight like Harrick does, yet for an entirely different purpose. Shutting my eyelids, I compare this action to sealing the gates of my soul, to protect the remnants of my goodness from Maven. My brow's creases tremble, tired of keeping my eyes so far away from reality. Not solely my eyes; everything aches, a victim of old battles and assaults. My wrists, however, suffer the most of all, archaic pains leaking themselves into my mind, smashing into my nerves, pretending to be real.

"The onslaught was no accident, General," Maven's voice makes a second appearance, General
said without respect. "Did you or did you not witness the purple sparks amidst the smoke?" I will replace you if I get one more 'I think so' from you."They know.

"Yes, Your Majesty." The General is confident of his response, or it seems that way.

"In that case," Maven begins, his shadow creeping into my line of sight-I've ceased my childlike activities and sprawled my eyes open, so wide that one can view all of white ringing my irises. Now, I covet the darkness, want it to push me into oblivion so that I cannot see an ounce of him, albeit it plainly a shadow. Yet I know that it's him, the shade holding properties that shadows shouldn't have. Jet black contrasts the white halogen lighting, curled hair sticking out from the figure.

I can touch the bulb's electricity, can crack the bond without donning sweat, as easily as breathing is, if not simpler. That would compromise the team, not just myself. And if they know about my presence in the city at all-

"You, as a general, have failed miserably at your position. You allowed the little lightning girl inside Archeon and you allowed her to destroy the lifeblood of our military force. Tonight, the odds of winning this war have shifted, and it will be marked as your doing if you do not find her by the morning." Maven has always talked a good game, and it seems he's only gotten better. But him and I both know that no general could keep a unit of newbloods out of the city.

"Your Majesty, if you please, security footage shows no trace of them spilling the gasoline. The survivors of the explosion noticed absolutely nothing out of order," the general pleads, reduced from a man double Maven's age to this, pathetic thing. "There is someone with her that controls what you see."

"Really?" Maven continues bantering. "That may be an immediate issue, but not of the magnitude of others. The scraps of a Samos aircraft was found in Hangar Ten. Which means, the Scarlet Guard has forged an alliance with the fallen High Houses. Did you not deduct that, General?" His umbra creeps closer around the bend, never shifting save for the obvious walking. Maven releases an exasperated sigh, relenting just a tad. "I suppose you're right in your thinking, General. In times like these, one problem at a time must be dealt with."

Dreadfully, Maven and his entourage come around the corner, ten Sentinels trailing the king and his leading guard. Hair that has been bleached by ink crimps about an unearned crown, the ringlet of alloys lopsided on his head, tilted to the left by a smidgeon. "The little lightning girl and her even littler accomplices could be anywhere inside of our city, our home. Residual explosions have ceased, and I expect every last guard off duty to begin in their searching. There is no place she couldn't be, and that includes manors of your peers. Some have betrayed us already and more fools are certain to follow in their footsteps."

"How do you expect us to recover her if she cannot be seen?" The General, which I figure must be of House Osanos, brings up a good point.

Maven halts his steps, stopping too close to me for my liking. He can't see you. He can't see you. He gawks at the clay sculptures resting in alcoves of the hall. "My father hired you twenty years ago, for the asset of strategic brilliance. Figure it out. The masquerade will go on, as planned, devoid of these topics." He brushes his hand through thin air, dismissing the squadron to scurry off. "I want a fifty-foot radius of silence encompassing the sister's holding room, Sentinels inside and out, so many that no newblood power can save her."

His audience gone, Maven sighs once more, pulling a scrap of something from the pocket near his jacket lapel. As far as he thinks, he's alone, surrounded by no judgment.
And there is no span of time that could heal my dried-over wounds that are ripped open by looking at the boy, a boy devastated by a number of things. All those things trace back to one source: his mother. Twisted and mangled, so severely, as the powder that adorns his skin under the eye; only other users would know the faint clues of the cosmetic.

"Mare," he mouths, pressing his lips together firmly. It's a cloth that he grips, rubbing at it between his fingers. He inhales it like he is a child and the flimsy piece of garbage is a beloved blanket. But it's no ordinary cloth, I realize. It's mine.

From a snippet of Giza's collection, Maven returned it to me as a late birthday present. The day of his and Iris's matrimony, I abandoned it in my room, wearing one of his dresses he insisted upon my wearing.

"What a mess you've made," he breathes out, Maven's pursed lips bending into a half grin. "Though how like you to burn my planes. The fire, I see the irony in that. Clever as always, little lighting girl." Afterward the speech to himself, or to me perchance, in his mutilated mind, Maven wanders off, placing the fabric into a pocket. It's his only connection left.

"We need to rest Mare," Tyton presses, though my eyes don't yet forsake the lost boy that meanders down the way. How he manages to seem so kingly, yet small I cannot perceive.

"I won't be sleeping a wink tonight, Tyton."
Chapter 16

Mare

"I know where she is," I admit, sitting cross-legged in the corner. "I didn't want to think about, but there's a place where Giza must be hidden."

Yellow slips through the rift between the windows and curtains that cover them, and if I tilt my neck just right, a courtyard is able to be made out. The medium-sized parlor that Tiberias assumed would make a good camp is tinted a shadowed scarlet, the red drapes bending the sunlight into a completely divergent hue.

"Where?" Harrick breathes out, his work not yet done with him. While he doesn't cloak us presently, he did so for a collective hour, not to mention the lack of sleep that plagues everybody. Harrick lies on the sofa pushed up against the wooden mahogany wall to my left; we figured that out of all us, he deserves the one place in this prison—Farley told us that under no circumstances should we leave—that offers decent napping space.

"My chambers. Not Mareena's room, but mine," I tell, pushing back to rest my head on the panels. While there are plenty of chairs and recliners to use, they feel so artificial, made for wealthy and wealthy alone. But of course, I have to clarify, due to living two separate existences here, one as royalty and the second a prisoner. "I know Maven. He knows me. Putting her in there hurts me more than his manacles ever could."

None respond, the moment abruptly turning depressive, my teammates kind enough to not ask further. It's best that way, with them blind to what goes on inside my head. Soon afterward, Ella, Tyton, and Rafe resume playing their game of cards around a circular tea table. The slight grins that were there just a minute ago are memories now. Ada and Farley apply my knowledge, once again pulling out the maps. Farley pays half-attention, her eyes glancing at the locked door about ten times a minute, paranoia ruling her. Harrick stares at the ceiling. Cameron does the same, stroking the beige fabric of her recliner.

These last hours spent with little sound have offered reflection, distractions unobtainable. I've considered all the places in the palace she could be, rejecting locations that I cannot reach. Yet this entire strategy will succeed only if Maven has extended his boldness, planting my sister somewhere that I may actually get to her. Maven delights in playing with his food before he consumes it, so very much that he invited me to slaughter his citizens, people in which he took an oath to protect. Why wouldn't he allow me to at least try and save her?

If she's not in that hellscap of mine, I might as well surrender. Through that smoke, the security still witnessed my lightning, one of a kind and unmistakable for nothing else. Maven knew that I'd never go to him willingly, but now he knows of my presence, amplifying security. We have a single chance, if even that.

"Per se, we rescue her, within seconds there'll be men flanking those halls like their lives depend on it," Cameron states, raising her voice as if to continue. She doesn't.

Ella drops her cards to the rug on the floor, stretching her shirt sleeves to fit over her fists. "Then we run as if our lives depend on it. Oh wait," she drops off, sarcastic. "They do."

Farley intervenes, her blood draining from her knuckles and going straight towards her cheeks. "Unless you have a damn good idea, keep your damn mouths shut," she barks, her lips twisting into
an ugly sneer. "I'm tired of listening to your pointless bickering. It won't be long until we leave."

Most unpredictably, Cameron and Ella don't retort, a far cry from their expected personalities. Cameron blinks hazily, emerging from a dream of some sorts apparently and Ella does the same, bending down to retrieve the strewn-about cards. "Sorry," Cameron mutters for the first time since I've met her, tucking her feet in, rearranging herself on the make-shift bed.

"Me too," Farley mutters, shaking her head with a sorrowful smirk on her face. The best thing that she can do right now. Forge bitter happiness, that thing that's supposed to represent a smile replacing the real fear that's just under her skin. "This is suicide, and you know it, don't you? Please tell me you know!" She cries out, verging into hysteria, pushing her palms over her ears, as if to muffle inaudible sounds. "I have a daughter, yet I'm here, risking my life once again. What's wrong with me?" She asks, the smirk now barred teeth.

We stare at the crazed general, out of touch with her personality more than Cameron and Ella. She circles around herself, watching the walls with a persistence that frightens me. The way in which Farley stares at them causes me to consider raising lightning, to guard us against the thing that must be coming, that she can sense.

Farley of all people seemed like the most unlikely to go off the rails. "I'm fine," she argues, clutching her elbows and balancing the bridge atop her head. "I'll fall apart later; I'm fine," she says again.

"When did you last sleep, General?" I only say "General" as a formality to boost her up a little.

"Irrelevant," Farley quashes my concerns, though I don't need a number to know that it's been too long. Aside from how she's been acting, Farley has classic symptoms that one who's been sleep deprived would carry. The shadows ringing her eyes are there; in spite of the powder that covers them, I know from borrowing her the concealer. And there is nothing to be done about the bloodshot eyes. "I'm fine, Mare. There's nothing wrong with me. Merely an eclipse of my senses."

That's what I say when I want to be perceived as sane. I move my head up and down, feigning agreement. Although, still when she turns back to Ada-who looks as stunned as the rest of us- I remain suspicious. Taut shoulders move mechanically up and down, ready for an ambush at a moment’s notice; I cannot discredit her for that, as soldiers should ideally act like Farley. Aside from Ada, she keeps her spine to us, intentionally obscuring her features.

Well done, I suppose. I'll make sure to follow up on it, but haul it to the low priority list in the present, groping for a solution but seeing naught.

"There isn't time to weigh my stability, anyways," Farley adds, the unlocking of a gun audible from my space in the corner. "We're out of time," she says, throwing on a positive tone to the dreaded announcement. "Does everyone understand our route of execution?"

Yes, if you're indeed speaking of our route we'll take that ends in execution.

"Sure," Tyton murmurs, slapping his cards down, before shooting me a glance mixed with remorse. He's smarter than to consider talking me out of this, knows that I'd walk through Hell and back to retrieve Giza, sevenfold. I doubt he comes up with a decent reasoning that could yank me from the ledge that I balance on. So instead, he gets to stand by and watch me sacrifice myself for kin, to condemn myself to a century as a captive.

"I'll change first," I announce flatly, speaking of the servant uniforms that the Guard has fabricated hundreds of, for undercover missions in Whitefire.
Mournful orchestra music spirals throughout the palace, its origin two stories below us in the grand ballroom. Cellos, violins, and pianos overpower one another constantly, a select few musicians going on rampages of unaccompanied devastation sporadically. The tunes send chills down my spine, peaking my anxiety. Hearing it so vividly from here, the melody must be amplified and fed through speakers.

Maven never did throw a bad party. This way, he taunts those Sentinels and officials who are cooped up here by offering just a taste of fun.

Personally, the instrumentals torture more than they help, leaving accidental side effects, arousing more memories of a past life, remembrances that I don't care to remember.

All the dancing with Maven and Tiberias, two boys with objectives clouded by their pretty smiles and lies. The kicks to the shins I gave them during those dances—both purposeful and accidental. Stolen kisses that I've forgotten. The not just routinely, but systematic minutes I spent with Maven, twirling about the tiles, song after song, killing time until the Guard would attack.

Tonight the King joins hands with his beloved Queen Iris, anticipating this episode to end the same way as the previous did. Scarlet Guard members draped on the floor, fresh blood oozing, any survivors to be shot on sight. Though there will be an exception if he does get his way. I hope that he won't order their maiming to retrieve information; if it comes to it I'll plead, beg, cry, cry for him to let them go.

Yet Maven won't let me use a carbon copy of what I bargained those months past. He'll want more, because this go-round, poor little Giza is on the line.

I cannot lose this battle.

"How can you expect that he's keeping her in there?" Cameron asks, coming up from the caboose of our compacted group. It isn't hard, not with her height.

Meeting her gaze, I exhale a sigh. She bleeds rare sympathy for me, my ability to unflinchingly comprehend Maven's madness. For once, I don't shake off her pity like an unwanted tick or gnat, because I feel the same for myself. Anger, first and foremost, though, I feel towards myself, for understanding his twisted mind. "Maven knows I won't go down without a fight," I reply, angling my face at her. "Sure, he could put her somewhere out of reach, underground and surrounded by ten-thousand Sentinels if he pleased. But he likes games, loves the ones played with me," I say the final part to myself more so than to Cameron.

"The moment any of us cross that threshold..." Tyton murmurs just ahead, with Farley at his side, her sketches of maps replaced by a pistol in one hand and a gleaming razor in her other.

"I'll do it," I blurt quicker than intended, cringing a little. Prior to arriving in Archeon, still in the odd safety of Ridge House, Jon told me three things. I'm loathed to trust the double-crosser, but at least his direction had small change from our original scheme. And after all his lies, his tricks, the wild yet wise part of me believes Jon with his eyes that wreak of death. The witness of millions of trivial red deaths, six burner-king's deaths, Shade Barrow's death.

My death to come.

"Jon said something." Those simple words earn me various scoffs. "About needing it to be me who rescues Giza, in servant's attire." At this, I pick at the fabric running down my arm, until a thread
unravels. I swallow around growing fear, as I say, "She's my sister. I'll be the one to save her from that room," finally admitting what I'm doing, to myself.

Right ahead of me, Farley's shoulders stiffen with obvious thoughts. She isn't affected by silence, making her a prime candidate for the job. Just a few seconds of air filled with fumes of Arven blood will diminish my powers far more than I'd like.

The fact that this will all go to my end if Farley snags Giza instead of me, a matter of a couple seconds, makes me wonder what surprises await inside Maven's prison. "It's fine, Farley. It's just a room," I tell her, hoping she'll believe the fib. From behind, I watch as her shoulders go more taught, even shuttering.

"It is just a room, Mare," Farley agrees, sounding honest. "And we're just humans, chock-full of fear, however irrational those fears may be. You have to do this soundly or not at all."

Responding is pointless, just like this entire speech due to Jon's words. I know just as much as Farley that Jon's cautions aren't to be taken lightly. I'm out of my skull to heed his advice, but I'd only be more insane to take him thoroughly for granted.

"What a sight," Harrick murmurs so lowly from the back of our group I could swear it's a figment of the imagination. Forcing my head up from tracing patterns on the flooring, fifty soldiers crowd the hallway, though not in a chaotic way. Half are divided onto the left side, while the same goes for the right. If an imbecile looked too quickly, the stretching corridor might set their heart off galloping; Sentinel's flank one another in fiery robes with jet visors, making it appear as if the walls are aflame. Each and every guard carries at least one bulky but painfully efficient rifle, along with lethal abilities.

Tyton pales, throwing his typical expression of nonchalance overboard. The rest of us, including stone-cold Farley, mimic him.

"How many silencers are there?" I force out the question, digging my nails into the heel of my palm, for a small reprieve.

Cameron halts, her boots stopping loud enough for the rest to pause with her. "Ten, I think." She contorts her brow, concentrating to feel out Silvers Arvens, alike to how Tyton can feel people, but more focused. "We can't get much closer without dropping our best weapons."

"We shouldn't have wasted all the grenades on that airfield," Rafe adds, placing his hands tightly atop his neon hair. Never, not on the front line nor around a table designed for politics, have I seen the electricon harrowed. "So what's it going to be then?" He pastes a sardonic grin on. "Shoot these suckers down quickly as we can, praying to the sky that a few seconds of ambush are adequate?"

As if on cue, six pairs of eyes flash to me, and sudden self-consciousness eats at me. It shouldn't be like this, around my friends and co-warriors, yet it is. Because pulling off a special ops mission couldn't be more offbeat than any old practice back in Piedmont. Healers were steadily on hand if we somehow managed to harm another. The populace was with us.

Here, they're trying to kill us.

Red, warm, and wet blood will drench my hands and thoughts if just a scrape of skin comes away from the night. Despite them enlisting of their own free will, this has been for me. War is upon us, and if the girl in my chambers was other than Giza, Montfort and the Guard would allow her death. Unwaveringly.
"Stop," Farley whispers like a lullaby to my ears, her back to us, fists clenched, ready to brawl. "Mare, kill the electricity in the palace. Take every ounce of it away from them." The order is said, with an adorning vulpine smile. Why not Ella, Tyton, and Rafe? Ella can easily draw twice the lightning.

"Farley-" I begin yet another question but am quickly cut off as she slices a battle-roughened hand across the air.

"Do it. As your General, I command you."

Merely blinking, I do as she asks, closing my eyes in deliberation. The sensation of the energy is a familiar dream that never bores, and I oblige to let it consume me whole. Not a margin of Whitefire doesn't sizzle with potential, and neglecting all else, the corner of my mouth lifts a tad. Weak voltage comes from the lowermost level, home to chefs, maids, and servants. Almost overwhelming quantities can be drawn from bigger rooms, like the kitchens, and the main generator units. In dead sync, once I've taken hold of every last bulb, I snap their tethers from where they're meant to go and concentrate the massive store into an individual bolt.

My smile only grows to be manic when I skim my hands down my arms, from shoulder to fingertip. If provided that there was a mirror, I contemplate what girl would stare back at me. The little lightning girl. Like before, in the woodland of the Rift, my skin radiates light, though not of a flame, but of sheer, purple energy. Perhaps if I viewed my eyes, lightning would replace the dulled-out brown.

I'd let it fester inside of me, grow if it didn't agitate my body as much as it thrills me. Pressing myself to release my weapon, I throw it out to the countryside, far from any civilization.

Seconds after the lighting of the way faulters and ends, an intense, brilliant flash of alabaster and lilac plunges from the heavens, like a God's sword sheathing itself into the Earth. It seems reluctant, spending breaths gleaming instead of passing in the beat of the heart. Following, a clap of thunder arrives, rumbling and resounding through the air and ground. Double the wickedness and volume of a Banshee, and while Cameron and Harrick bring fingers to their ears, the lightning in my eyes brews.

The deep growl heaves on long enough to strike concern in anybody. Or it should anyway, but the Sentinels guard Giza with stock-stillness.

And now they know I'm here. Coming for us with their guns.

"While it certainly sends a message, we just gave up the element of surprise," Rafe starts toward Farley but seems to think better of it, alternatively pacing near the windows, letting loose a hair-colored bolt of his own. "More of those idiots should be making their way up here, as we speak."

"As you speak," Farley bites back, her voice cracking. She keeps her back to us, and from my vantage point, I can see jaw muscles clenching and unclenching, ropey cords in her neck popping out from stress. "I know what I'm doing, Rafe." Her tone falls short from a warrior's, a general's. Diana Farley sounds broken, and I wouldn't be surprised to find tears amidst her cornflower blue irises.

Before encouragement and aid can exit my lips, she says, "No, Mare. I know what I'm doing," again, repeating herself with more steel.

At that, down the hallway that is obscured by shadows and darkness, I hear the clicking of fifty chambers in perfect unison. On instinct, strong sparks flare up on my fingertips and I duck into an
alcove decorated with landscape paintings. Harrick, Rafe, and Cameron replicate my movements and pull out their guns. Ella and Tyton risk it, combining the strength of bulletproof jackets and agility. Maybe a little luck in the mix, as well.

I shoot Harrick with something between a glare and confusion, and he shakes his head, denying having let his cloaking drop.

The Sentinels don't fire. They don't speak the terms of yield. An elapse of time that should be a great amount shorter than it is runs away before either side does anything. Using my angle in the pocket of wall, I watch Farley with wide eyes and gaping lips.

Rivers stream down her face and her fists shake, her whole body for that matter. "I know what I'm doing," she says and I almost expect her to develop a chant. In lieu of that, she mouths a command. "Kill the Arvens."

My eyelids sprawl further apart at the deranged command. From this distance, they all appear identical. I know from plenty of Sentinel encounters that smaller details offer their identities, along with swaths of fabric embedded into the shoulder pads, displaying House colors. But no one could get within a range that would allow...

Delicately positioned projectiles are fired, to what direction I'm almost sure of.

I barely hear the shot before I'm sprinting the short gap to Farley, my arms wrapped sloppily about her waist, and I'm yanking her down, down, down. I thought Harrick had the shield up, that our voices couldn't be heard, that we were safe for just a while longer...

I know what I'm doing, she tells me one last time, though her lips stay clamped down, as only her eyes stay pinned on me, a bird of prey. We slam to the ground harshly, and I wince, yet Farley seems unbreakable, the polar opposite to how she was performing a moment ago. "They're not targeting us, Mare," she exploits my name again to grind her point in, and I just stare, lost in her ruthless face.

"Who are they shooting at, then?" I hiss, trying to keep my voice down to preserve respect for her. "Themselves?" I temporarily brush aside the fact of her speaking without words.

Tentatively, Farley bobs her head, calm like how a buoy floats upon water. "Take a look for yourself. No baby steps, though. More Silencers will be up soon."

I don't bother to take in Farley's advice, with my head spinning, ready to fly off my neck. Slowly, but breathless, I untangle myself from her, who keeps her sight locked on the flaming-garbed men. The hallway that leads to the prison I spent an infinite number of nights in—not unlike tonight—looks so dark, plundered of fluorescents. Unable to handle the suffocation, I lift my purple-shredded hand, wishing that Davidson was here with his luminous blue forcefield. No. I wish Cal were here, I have to admit when I see a body slumped over between two of his peers, the dead man's blood glinting.

"Why aren't any of them moving?" Cameron asks. The girl sounds ready to lose her stomach, even after living in Newtown for years. Cameron is no stranger to war, either. "Shots were fired, why aren't they moving?"

"There's something wrong with me," is all Farley can muster, and her state of stoicness proves to be short-lived. "But that can be thrown to the back burner. Giza is in there, and you have the opportunity to save her from this fate. Take it, lightning girl."
What is she?

What did she do?

"She can't just walk down there," Tyton steps towards Farley, challenging her sanity. "I have no clue, as to what just happened, but plenty of Sentinels are still standing up. They still outnumber us significantly."

Farley rolls her eyes so severely I think they might fall out. "Those still standing won't be any trouble. Unless you'd like me to slaughter the rest of them? Because I could, if I wanted to," she finishes an admission. "The silencers are dead, just be wary of the cement embedded into that room. The window is closing, so go already." Farley turns away, ashamed of what she is.

She's some kind of Whisper, and I'm terrified of it. Not of her, but what she is. What she could mutate into.

I can only find consolation in knowing she hasn't had this ability for long. It's not possible, it simply isn't. Recently, she's been acting off, but the weirdness hasn't gone back more than a few days. In hindsight, I chalked it up to being plain old wariness with the shift of allegiances. I should've known better. Farley wouldn't have been disturbed by petty meetings for crowns, or separation from Clara. Sadly, she's very good at handling that.

"I trust you," I acknowledge. It's the honest truth. She can pick through my head if she wants to and she won't find a contrast. But, in spite of my faith in the Guard leader, this unsettles me deeply, but I don't have much power over the situation right now. Two nasty, evil Whispers have torn through my head before, and the concept of another having that power scares me, no matter who it is. "I'll be back."

Without further adieu, I coax myself into a run down the hall that I find too long, exposing time for thought. What am I going to find in there? What cards does Maven have to play? He'd be idiotic to bet these Sentinels as his insurance alone. Maven knows the abilities newbloods have proven to carry are above elite Sentinels'.

"Unlock the door, would you," I hear myself say to a stocky keeper smack in the middle of the thick and wooden door. It's not a question.

I stay vigilant, rotating around myself as if this were a waltz. The lion's share of Arvens are closer to the entrance, and I find fresh corpses littered near my boots from all directions. I'm glad for their masks, preventing me from seeing proof of souls inside these monsters.

Look at yourself, and I glimpse at the bodies again. You're the monster.

Shaking my head clear, I latch a hand onto the revolver at my hip, as I stare at the opening threshold.

I realize, that a trap has been laid. There are no Sentinels. My cowardice is my bane, and Maven knows how to poke at my flaws, better than anyone else. The room looks just as I abandoned it, an exception of a redheaded girl sitting cross-legged on the bed. It didn't seem like it would be such a test of wills, but I cannot move, speak, think, breathe, and my rapidly beating heart is working overtime.

"Mare," Giza pleads, but I don't listen, not really. I can practically see myself in here, screaming, crying, and my peace of mind draining like the sand of an hourglass. Paint is chipped in places, a landmark of wasted Bone China.
I could relive a thousand memories in here, but I snap out of my instability, as I hear the pounding of feet echoes down the way.

Without thinking twice, I rush into the room, feeling dreaded weight come at me like an assault. I try to suppress panic as I take in my situation. Giza's ankles and wrists are clad in unnecessary, unwanted manacles that are closely bound together, choking off the option of walking, let alone running. Meanwhile, the backup is coming closer, judging by the shouts.

"General!" I scream louder than my lungs warrant, beelining for Giza. "You can control them to fight if you can make them stand still. Make them turn on each other, and leave the rest to guard our backs." I remember being controlled like that by Samson Merandus, pitted against Tiberias in a quarrel I had no say in. I almost feel sorry for the Sentinels out there.

"Come on," I say, having to help Giza off the bed. "Are you okay?" I look her up and down, searching for bruises and cuts. The only damage, as far as I can tell, is in her mental state.

She nods briskly and braces an arm on my back, using me as a crutch to hop with. I hobble faster than for her taste, but we don't have an alternative. Waiting narrowly past the door are two Sentinels, while the other many have scattered, sent off by Farley to war their own. "Carry her," I tell the man who opened the door. He doesn't object, taking a tense Giza into his arms. She flinches, but I shoot her an assuring glance. We don't have time to pick our saviors.

Bloodshed reigns wherever the path branches to meet methods out. On both extremities of the corridor, traitor soldiers, wielded by Farley fire at their allies, the shots music to my ears. So long as they go at each other, Maven's soldiers cannot get to me or Giza.

An invisible authority pushes through the lines from where I started, and as it enters my range, my team comes into view, Harrick's shield inviting me. Farley leads, sweat gathering at her neck and forehead. I don't want to know how much longer Farley and Harrick and keep it up.

"I told you we didn't have a second for that conversation," Farley says, taking me by the forearm. "Our best bet is right through the central ballroom, which will take us straight to Davidson."

"We'll make up for the lost time. The masquerade is going on tonight, though. Another gigantic chamber of people who want our necks."

"It can't be helped. By now they've put Whitefire on lockdown. Every entrance to freedom is locked."

"Then what help will the ballroom have?" I query, maintaining her vigorous pace toward the battle. "Without hesitation, I send out multiple strikes now, to thin our competition. My colleagues do the same, creating a significant advantage. Harrick morphs everything, from us to the bolts, so they don't have reason to aim their arms this way.

"Windows, balconies. A jump out will land us where we need to be. Try to not break anything."

Deftly, I skip over bodies with ease. I don't respond to Farley, my mind on the luxurious ballroom. A particular killer nymph is going to be there, and while I should be frightened, I'm not. Her presence shrivels in comparison to Maven's, with his permanent smirk and fake crown.

"Pick up the pace, Harrick," Cameron hollers, at my heels. She brings Sentinels crashing to the floor, though I doubt she's killing them entirely. Honestly, I'm amazed she's with us, as she's so sick of the fighting and bloodshed. Maybe she wants to finish what she started with Iris back in Piedmont.
Someone has to do it, I think bitterly. Jon's orders, after all.

Farley guides us through what is a maze, taking sharp turns, vaulting down stairs, and slamming into walls after sharp turns.

"Wait," our shield pants. Harrick's face is tinted a deep, cherry red, and his hands are held on his knees. He looks ready to faint. "I, I can't go any further. You're close, you don't need me." The air that embraces us flickers, signaling our susceptibility.

The whacking in my chest intensifies, as Harrick folds in on himself, surrendering to the smooth, cold marble.

"What's wrong?" Tyton asks, something angry curling into his tone. I can't help but feel similar. So close, yet so far. Sentinels will be down here any second, and they'll multiply like insects as soon as they figure out we're here.

"I've been burnt out since we landed in Archeon," he admits, gasping for more air. "I'm on the brink of death, General."

In my peripheral vision, Sentinels charge at us. "We don't have time for this," Ella informs us. A fact. They fall as quickly as they came, victims of either Cameron or Tyton.

"Ella's right." Farley begins to pace, turning her head back and forth like clockwork. Or like a schoolgirl crossing the road. "We don't have time."

My breath hitches, as I listen to the thoughts unspoken between these men and women.

Harrick nods, understanding. Tears join his mess, slipping over his temples. "I saved her." He shakily moves his chin to Giza, who stares back at a man she hasn't met. "And that's all that matters." His chest rises in shutters, an each inhale is shallow, worse than the previous. He's going to die, because of us pushing him to his limits. "Leave me." He moves to remove a powdery gray tablet from his vest, pinching the recipe for death between his fingertips.

My own breathing turns to trembles, and teardrops prick at my vision. He won't let us watch, and I turn away, though my brain scrambles for a solution, nothing comes. I'm hitting a wall over and over again.

I draw my lightning to my skin, assembling armor as if I were a magnetron. But I am far from bulletproof, especially now.

Farley jumps back into pilotage, though we are close enough to the ballroom that I could navigate if needed. There's no pausing, not without Harrick here. Numbly, I follow her, striking at Sentinels that clearly haven't been manipulated by the Whisper. I watch them turn their guns on each other, and a shiver rattles down through my spine. Sometimes, perhaps just for a change, they take out their knives and turn the blade inward.

Down one last flight of gold encrusted steps.

The crowd of Sentinels thickens, and Farley has put together a squad of Sentinels to encircle our group, now down by one. Semiautomatics go off, unrestrained. It drags into a slow process as if a transport was trudging through wet snow. A lot of wet snow. "We're not getting out of this," Tyton screams in my ear, yet I have to strain to hear him. "How many more could they have on hand?"

"Unlimited, apparently."
My neck torks every which way, looking for a shortcut. The main entrance to the ballroom is still another hundred feet away, guarded by an infinite number of men, all infinitely loyal to Norta. Such a dense barrier of bodies guard us, any bullets directed toward us get caught by our manipulated protectors. Until Farley sleeps, this is going to be a standstill.

"What," Rafe snaps. "Is that?" He points accusingly at the water lapping at our feet, not even half an inch.

I swear quietly, standing on my tip-toes to catch a glance of Iris. Blue is her trademark color, and through a sea of black, red, and orange, I don't see any disconformity.

"Get that lightning off your skin, Barrow. You're gonna kill everybody." a faceless someone tells me.

But isn't that a good thing? "Farley, Cameron, Giza" I bark, shoving Rafe out of my way. "Get onto higher ground. Climb onto an electicon's back. I know how we're going to get out of this." Everyone looks at me like I've grown a third eye, but I shrug them off. Whether Iris is flooding the palace for my sake or her husband's, I'll take the advantage. "I'm giving you three about ten seconds," I warn them when they continue to stare.


I sprawl out my fingers in the water, flattening them so my wrists are fully submerged. "Thanks, Queen Iris," I mutter. At that, I siphon off electricity I pick up from buildings around the Square while making my own energy. And I push it out of my hands.

Water flares purple, as tendrils of my making spiral out from my body into the water. Sentinels nearest to us relinquish their devices first, those further out dropping soon after. As if it were merely a child dropping a stone into a pound, making a little ripple. Those that don't quit immediately don't make it much farther either, hastily becoming a target.

The lightning that loiters in the moistness is drawn back into my skin by myself, and Ella, Tyton, and Rafe drop the girls from their backs. Cameron makes quick work of Giza's manacles, pulling out miniature bolt cutters from her waistband.

I grapple for Giza's wrist, and when I close in on it, I secure a snug grip. I'm not strategic, but I use myself as Giza's buffer, between her and oncoming bullets. Ella, Rafe, and Cameron, led by Farley push past us, the endgame clear in their minds. Get to the opposite side of the ballroom, climb down from the terrace, and get into Davidson's transport.

The first four swing around the entryway to the ballroom, only to be met with a round of bullets. Farley coerces them to drop their guns, to the crowd's astonishment, if the gasps imply anything.

Careful to keep my lightning as protection, I weave a dome to surround us, but never to touch. The strands vibrate with life, constantly changing their course, and do well in deflecting bullets.

Albeit my iron will to keep my focus in front of me, and not allow it to stray to the edges of the ballroom, where the lords and ladies are guarded, Maven's voice filters through the discord, its own type of racket. "Do not shoot at her. Silence her."

I don't expect Farley, who has one leg over the balcony to prevent this, and it's good I don't have that kind of optimism. My lightning fizzes, like a flame slowly snuffed out. Arven silence is awful and beastly, worse than stone only because it's generated by someone; a human.
I still don't look at him.

Horrible and strangling silence overwhelms me. I can just envision my heartbeat slowing, sick with this disease.

Farley's upper half of face peaks over the sculpted rock of the terrace, still controlling. Her face is turning beat-red like Harrick's did. In the past tense. Run, she orders me through telepathy.

Trust me, Farley. If I could run any faster, I'd be doing it, I rebuke. Still, I tug at Giza's wrist, delivering the message. With the circumstances, I'm sure she feels the same as I do.

We cross into the cold atmosphere of nighttime, with honey yellow stars above us. I'd love to be up there with the far-away suns, merely a witness to events, not a part of them. A slight wind blows, slapping against my cheeks as I sprint. It's a perfect night, I realize, and prevent my lips from twitching into a snarled frown.

If I could, I'd toss Giza right over the balcony and then jump over myself. Instead, I let go of her. "Over and down."

Maven won't let them shoot us, but Farley won't let the Sentinels onto the expansive balcony, cleaving their ranks into two groups, one of which is plugging up the doorway, making it impossible for the other to get through. They're not making headway at all, in fact. Probably reluctant to brutalize team members and blood of their own.

Suddenly, I hear a crash and whirl around to take note that Farley no longer dangles from the balcony. Giza sees it from her position climbing down, and slacks open her jaw. Farley's not unconscious, but she fell quite the fall. Even someone like her doesn't have almighty grip strength. She probably got distracted, watching Giza climb, or else her task at hand.

And that's all it takes. A blink of lapse in concentration and my feet are pulled out from under me, my shoulder crashing to the ground. My shock consumes my need to scream, and all that comes out is a definite and tragic "Go," loud enough for Giza to take in and relay.

I try to make my legs move in my favor, or a basic finger twitch, but whatever guard snared me keeps me good as paralyzed. I'm dragged backward, en route to the wolves and their king. After I screamed, the telkie-incredibly strong, I should say- took away that too. I can breathe and blink, but that's the farthest my rule extends. Cool marble caresses my cheek as the balcony and fresh air recede, and the distance between Silence shortens.

A cold exhale is at my ear and a sigh follows. "Aren't you going to apologize for destroying my air fleet?"
Chapter 17

Iris

"Enjoying the evening, My Queen?" Maven asks, adorning a smirk reserved for the evilest of people. His cutting blue eyes bore into my charcoal ones, and I stare back with equal arrogance.

I curl my fingertips into his shoulder with force and offer a serene and vicious smile. In the public's scrutiny, we preserve a perfectly healthy-looking relationship between a husband and wife, but always find ways to squeeze in jabs at each other.

In this case, it happens to be on the ballroom floor, amidst an ocean of dresses and suits. There are many, many aspects of Maven I detest, but his ability to throw celebrations of grandeur doesn't fall into that category. The masquerade has a warm, welcoming theme, with red, orange, and yellow lights fixed to the chandeliers, only abandoning the edges of the massive stretch of room to darkness. Tables are arranged at those edges, holding taper candles, illuminating the food and drinks well enough to consume freely.

There are multiple rooms like this in Whitefire, suited to house the masses, but this chills me. The ceiling is a piece of magnificence, gradually added to over the course of centuries. It's a more of a story than a mural. Beginning at its core is drawn the tale of the rising Silver empire, portraying people colored silver standing up from their knees, breaking free from Red abuse. Next come the Great War and the start of the Nortan dynasty, led by Caesar Calore. Silvers and Reds combat, Godly abilities versus fruitless weaponry. Landscapes are recounted, fields that are no longer green but awash with blood, both sides taking strain. The last portion of the section shows Silver men atop a knoll, overlooking their spoils, the land stained completely red now with blood and flame.

Newer tales are found further out in the furled ring, and my gaze snags on electric purple. Literally, electric. Mare Barrow falls with her back arched from an arena balustrade, sparks spitting from her body. I wonder if that's actually how it happened, or if her powers there are exaggerated. Either way, I know not to underestimate the girl. Farther down the spiral, I see Tiberias and Mare's failed killing, Maven and his coronation, and the return of Mare and her misery.

"Presently, yes," I murmur back, almost forgetting to answer, and insinuating that the merriment is temporary. "Do you know what would be an amusing activity for our guests?"

Maven simply inclines his head, silently telling me to explain. The red of his mask shimmers and reflects the light, while the black deflects it, seeming darker by the moment. Maven isn't predictable, but his fashion sense is. I almost chastise him for being so unimaginative, but keep my lips zipped shut. Little time-minutes, perhaps- separate me from my liberation and Rosalyn, and the last thing needed would be getting into trouble with Maven, throwing my plans askew. "The lords and ladies could wager on how long it will take for the power to crash." There go my plans of not enraging the King.

He irons his mouth into a pale, thin line; a true shame for him that his mask only covers half of his face. To my surprise, however, billows of heat don't radiate from the boy, and his lips curve upward into that nasty grin that is never gone. "Leave it to the professionals to plan these gatherings, Iris. Your ideas are anything but good."

My mask, thankfully, shelters the entirety of my expression, and I allow myself to glower for awhile. The painted blue and silver lips lack emotion, neither pointed upward or downward and while the fabric may itch and bite at my pores, I am glad for it.
As nonchalantly as possible, I look toward the balcony, where Bart Nornus has settled, along with my other guards. He dons a disgusting robe, making himself identical to the Sentinel next to him, and the one after that. Greco is outside the hall's mighty doors, on duty for potential attacks from what Maven warned his men of. A particular little lightning girl. Our eyes collide, though I cannot offer any indication of anything at all, as Maven spins me and other couples come between our gaze.

Seeing no reason not to question him, "Are you excited?" I ask, without much logic or scheme. There's no underhanded tone. No snicker following. If talking with Bart isn't an option, I might as well learn about the deranged prince.

I don't watch him, disinterested in clues I could take from his actions. It's pointless. Instead, I watch the people around me, how the women's' skirts twist elegantly and how their heeled-feet move in perfection alongside their partner's. From my place in the center of the room, laughter from the Silvers nearly overpowers the rugged instrumental music from the orchestra pit, off from the opening to the terrace.

I don't recall the last time I laughed a real belly laugh that wasn't tainted with bitterness.

If Maven intended to respond, he doesn't get the opportunity. Lighting above us flickers, before dying altogether, catapulting the ballroom into bleakness, solely the candlelight keeping us au fait to our surroundings. Thanks to the King, the fire burns higher than before, jumping to additional white-colored torches lining the walls.

The giggles halt quickly, slinking off to the darkness, like steam forsaking soup. Not a soul dares to whisper to their kin as Maven raises a bony hand into the air, embers balancing at his nails. "Calm yourselves, my guests."

Maven's features are by no means enhanced by the firelight. I can better view the bags and shadows on the lower rim of his eyes and the sloped hollows of his cheekbones. He looks crueler than usual. And hungry. No; Starving.

Furious, death-dealing electricity falls down from the sky, not unlike how Mare fell into that arena. It's thicker than natural lightning should be, but then again, newbloods are a far cry from natural. The shade of orchid flowers, yet I can hardly glance at the monster as if it's the sun. At least it's not here, rather in the countryside, miles past Whitefire or High House residences. But I'm sure she could bring it closer if she wanted to.

Adam's ale cannot do such things, and for a moment I feel a terrible amount of uselessness.

"Close the palace gates," Maven orders. "There had better not be a single crack she can work to her advantage. Close the ballroom entryway, and fortify it with Sentinels and Arvens." He turns from the troops, to stare at me. "Yes, I am excited to see her." There's a tint of mockery in the word excited, as if such concepts are childlike.

I blink, as thunder crashes into my surroundings, assaulting my eardrums. I resist the urge to flatten my palms over them, for appearance's sake. The shrieks that are emitted are silent in comparison to the booming anger of Mare Barrow. Only scream-shaped mouths are witnessed, and it looks comedic, how I cannot hear their sorrows.

Maven turns the other direction, looking to give his men further instruction, and I do the same, but to the opposite. I push past loitering bodies, caught between the terror of the attack and the chamber orchestra music that has restarted. I'll assume that to be an order of Maven; no one in their right mind would continue strumming at their instruments during this upheaval.
And so my plan begins. Or crumbles.

"My Queen," Sentinel Nornus brushes his gloved fingers on my arm, taking my attention. I peer over my shoulder, to find five more guards standing a respectful distance away. "That was the stupidest action Mare Barrow could've taken right now. Why would she do that to herself? And now they're locking exits. A burden to both her and you."

I shake my head, trying to disrobe myself of bewilderment. "She must've had rhyme and reason. I don't know her well, but she doesn't strike me as overly foolish." He trails closely behind, but not close enough for any rumors to start up.

I pass a fountain of chocolate with berries off to the side but don't waiver, deviating from my character. My mind is flooded and my eyes are wide, a deer in headlights—too surprised to react. Wine of every color and scraps of unfinished aliments rest on the tables, draped in cloth according to the House that has taken up residence at each table.

"Iris," I hear from Nornus, in the form of a hissing whisper. If word got out that my Sentinel used my forename... It doesn't matter. I'll be gone soon enough. "How do we plan on getting out, if as King Maven quotes, every crack will be sealed?"

I whirl to face him, warning in my eyes. "This isn't the place to question my strategy, Sentinel." Subtly, I tilt my chin toward the multistory doors on my right. He can argue with me to his heart's content once we're out there, just the three of us, if I can find Greco. I turn back, but am met with another catechizing set of pupils.

"What do you want, Arven?" I push respect into my voice, though I come short of what was desired. Caz Arven stands at my height, his hands crossed behind him. A number of the sons and daughters of the court call him Egg now, due to Mare and her boredom, evidently.

"Is Sentinel Nornus bothering you? We can have him replaced if necessary. It's my duty to report such offenses." I turn to the wall so that I can look at the both of them. Perhaps some sort of rivalry exists betwixt them, despite their age difference.

I look at him with a blaseness set into my skin, and say, "No." I think about telling him that in fact, it's him whose agitating me. But I think better of it. "Though, if you're pursuing a task from Your Queen, I do have one for you." I have to think fast on my feet, and do not fail. "You see, in the Lakelands religion is integral to daily life. I pray multiple times a day, without exception. In hours of hassle, I don't feel well with others. I'd fancy to go to my room, to pray in peace. I doubt my wishes will be acknowledged in any other place." This, of course, is a lie. The Gods don't care where I pray.

"Our security cameras are nonfunctional, without the power. We have no idea where Scarlet Guard members roam, and even if they were up, we believe they have the newblood version of a Haven accompanying them. You'll have to wait it out. Apologies, My Queen."

"Apologies, to you, Sir. Did I sound like I was giving options?"

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My Sentinels, sworn to protect me at any cost, lay softly on the floor. Nornus and I peer down at them for a moment, frozen. I wonder if he's regretful of betraying his allies, some friends, even. I wonder if he begrudges me for it.

"I don't think they're dead. But you have to understand-"
"I understand," he says curtly. "You don't trust them. You have no reason to."

"Do you?"

"Not for what we're scheming."

The water that I pulled from the pitcher upstairs retracts into my sleeve, kept safe but close should I need to use it soon. We're at the base of a dank stairwell, a fraction of Norta's underground tunnel system. The guards were leading me through this way, to my room. They figured no unwanted patrons would come down here; I have doubts we'll come across any rogues here, but as Father said, you can never be too safe.

"Princess, as this idea is your child, I expect you know what you're doing. Greco was the man who knew about the race tracks in East Archeon, so you can kiss that plan goodbye." Princess. I won't be a queen anymore after tonight. Correction, I've already assaulted Maven's guard and written and sent letters to the Lakelands entailing the truth of their rickety government; I'm dead, in their eyes. And too stunned at the thought to snap at him for rudeness. "Those guards you put down won't be down for long."

A guard's arm is twitching slightly, a detail I have to do a double-take on to make sure I'm not assuming things. "You're my partner in crime, now, Nornus. Bart." His first name still is foreign on my tongue. It's so bizarre to call someone I met yesterday by their nickname, from my experience. Sentinels in both the Lakelands and here aren't often addressed by anything, not when you're commanding crowds of them. "You make as many decisions as I do. Stealing a plane may prove to be difficult, considering most of them in Archeon are obliterated. Going by foot's too risky, with my face. We need a transport. But we're not getting it from the racetrack."

"There's plenty of them right outside." Bart points a finger upward, where our guests have parked their pretty and expensive cars.

"Do you know where these tunnels lead? Surely there's a route that'll take us to somewhere near them." I kick at a Sentinel that is squirming too much for my liking with my pointed shoe. "Going through those halls could get us slaughtered, and I'm not talking about Maven's Sentinels."

Just the droop in his shoulders tells me his response. "Why would I know? This might be shocking, but I don't spend my free time down here," Bart snaps, his face to the wall.

Sudden guilt encompasses me, and if I didn't favor water, I'd say that it's drowning me. Rather, the guilt is burning me alive. Nornus is doing this for Tiberias Calore or myself, and I cannot understand why he feels loyalty to either of us. We've never done anything that makes him owe us.

"It's not too late, you know," I tell him, discarding my mask at my feet. "You can stay here, and pretend that I knocked you out as well."

"I'm not doing this simply to help you, Iris." Bart kicks at the pebbles scattered on the stone, and the tiny rocks whizz out in every direction. "I hate this life, of serving your wills and whims, protecting the King and his priceless court, those too weak to defend themselves. My friends, who'll call me their enemy in a matter of time, think of me as lucky. Do you know why? Because I chose to become part of the Guard, whereas they were drafted. But not really. My father served Tiberias the sixth, as did his father. They brainwashed me, made me reckon I was born to serve."

Holding his gaze has become a torment, and my eyelids shutter, a vain attempt to hide my tears. I may be a fallen queen, but a queen nonetheless. Never have I met a man so unrepentantly disrespectful, acting as if I am no one. "They'll let you out, through the main gates. We'll have to
take our chances upstairs," I say, turning away to return to the first level. "They won't let me out of the palace, I'm certain. Maven's been tightening my leash lately. Steal the car, and I'll be waiting by the kitchen delivery docks."

"Be careful, My Queen."

Nornus and I went our separate ways once we reached the passage out. He didn't question how I planned on getting to the docks, and I didn't ask if he was sure he'd be able to get outside. Before I came to Archeon, there was a newblood who infiltrated the palace with someone else's face glued onto her own. Security might think Bart is truly Mare Barrow in disguise.

I'm glad for the shadows I can lurk in, and manage to slip past many sets of patrols, who are weary from their double shift. Maven has every guard in Norta at his disposal tonight.

The kitchens are right under the ballroom, and I faintly can summon a blueprint in my mind, from when I was first given that splendid five-hour tour of the palace and its grounds. Sneak into the kitchen, access the food storage vault, and from there should be a door leading to the shipping lot. I admit the detail of the kitchen isn't something a basic royal would know. I've done my fair share of meddling throughout this place.

Heavy and metal-toed boots come pounding down the way, and I press myself into a diamond glass window, concealed with a bulky red curtain. I'm about to step out when they pass, but I listen to another several pairs dart the way I was headed. Toward the kitchen. Toward the ballroom. Toward the lightning girl.

Dammit.

Peeking my neck out, soldiers charge by the dozen, with a single objective in mind. I wrinkle my brows in confusion, just a little bit. How many soldiers can it possibly take to bring her and her and some Red snobs down?

A lot, I suppose.

I stick myself-up to my torso- into the hallway, as a lapse in the wave of guards ensues, using the rim of the window to prevent me from toppling. On one of the larger escaliers in the building, I see a flash of green lightning, and the creases in my forehead deepen until I realize its source isn't Mare. A moment later, a blue streak appears, then purple. There's three electricons, at the minimum.

When I squint, the spectacle mutates to become more lawless. "A mutiny?" I query to no one, my nails digging into the pane of glass. Soldiers fight against those who oppose the Reds, acting as a human barrier for the small grouping. Even from here, their movements are quivering and unnatural, as if they're marionette puppets.

"Whisper?" I talk to myself again, and a shiver echoes through my spine. I loathe Whispers, for all they are and what they've done to my country. Whether it's an insurrection or compulsion, both halves are equally matched. I don't have time to watch them spill endless quantities of ichor.

And maybe, just once, I'll help the right side.

Outside, is a basin of water, set around pristinely placed and undoubtedly artificial stones. I stroke the still surface with my mind and watch as it physically ripples. Good. It's not out of reach. If Sentinels or attendants are out there, they can't see the thin stream levitating skyward, nor do I care.
if they can. My water searches for cracks and finds success quickly. Though I applaud the architects of Whitefire, it's not airtight.

As soon as I've collected a decent amount of what will quickly become poison, a stream forms at the base of the drapes and slither like a snake to the guards. If I weren't a nymph, I'd like to be a Viper. The stream broadens to include new water filtering in, adhering to where the floor meets the wall, slithering onward towards the brawl.

The pool in the courtyard is nearly drained, though the amount's already adequate. As the final drops sidle into my control, I urge the mass to disperse around the Sentinel's feet, making a quarter-inch thick layer. I smile sadly, knowing it will be enough.

Sadistic, I call myself, for watching the spiderweb of death without remorse. My water is tinted white from the surface as it flows on, but is also animated with purple, swimming as if the electricity is a school of fish. Mare doesn't waste time and the ones that survive the initial round do not get much out of it.

They run, their path now clear and viable. Four of them take the front, while Mare and Giza create the rear of the pack. Mare grips Giza by the wrist, and I'm reminded of my sister. It's something Rosalyn would do if she were saving me from a villainous dictator. I wish she was here, to soothe my worry of what will happen if I don't make it to Bart. I wouldn't fret if she was fighting at my side.

Just as I'm about to cross to the opposite side of the corridor, to the companionway descending to the kitchen, a sickening sense establishes in the corners of my brain; claws tickling at my nerves. I'm reminded of that paltry girl in Piedmont, crushing and squeezing every part of my body, until it seemed there wouldn't be a body to release out to sea.

Before I can gather the wit to run, to scream, or compile my water into a sphere, a male's hand is embedded over my mouth, his other arm clipping around my abdomen to impede my ability to fight. His breath is warm on my neck, as if he's a bloodthirsty animal. Out of the corner of my vision, I see a tendril of silvery-white hair, but I can't convince myself to do anything further than that. His prowess isn't identical to that girl's, different in a scary sense. It's only my brain that pulses with agony, while the rest of my body remains fine. There's nothing in the archives about a power that can achieve this.

My legs kick as he drags me, generating pings on the floor, but not nearly deafening enough to compel attention. My connection with the water in my sleeve ebbs off, and my preeminent weapon numbly sprinkles to the floor, some of it dripping on my shoes.

"You're going to help me and stop that unavailing leg flapping, dear," the freakish-haired boy tells me.

I stop struggling and let him pull me along, captivated with stupid and brilliant planning. Why didn't he go through the ballroom with the others? I assume they've scaled down the balcony rails by now.

The man doesn't cease in pulling me along-in spite of my attempts to walk- until he wrests open a door, and pushes me inside. I have to stumble a few steps to regain my balance, and then whirl to find him with his arms folded on his chest, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"I can turn your brain to ash much faster than you think. Don't try." He smiles tightly, but it looks forced, and I don't buy his aura of mightiness.
"I saved your friends, boy," I form my defense, even though he hasn't threatened me. Aloud.

"Oh yeah? You missed one." His grin faulters, melting into a neutral line. "If you want to squabble, you're welcome to. We have fifteen minutes."

I take a squint at the doorknob, then to the nameless man. He loses an amused sigh, having caught my thought process. "At the moment," he carries on, "Mare's in there with her personal torturer, who I presume you know. I had a recent run-in with Jon the seer, and he disclosed some interesting data on yourself and priorities. You don't cherish the King very much, do you?"

I raise my nose at him, gripping a plush chair to stabilize my emotions. We're in a simple meeting room, made for second-tier palace officers, nothing worth noting. "Maven threatened me. I'm leaving, to return to the Lakelands."

He nods his head, not shocked in the least. Jon, who I have blessedly never greeted, must have told him everything. The fog in my head lightens a bit, as do my fingers on the chair.

I swallow saliva, a precursor to vomiting, before saying something I might very well regret. "My Sentinel and I have a transport, waiting by the entrance to the kitchen. I'll help you."

"Jon said you would."
Mare

My cheek is thrust against the unforgiving marble, offering a view of Maven's boots as he stands up, apathetic in my answer. No, I will not apologize for destroying your air fleet. My jaw clenches, ready to say it aloud, but my teeth are bolted together, pressing so hard they might grind to dust.

"Well. This has been quite the celebration, has it not?" Maven explains to his audience, his voice tinged with victory. The courtiers had better be appalled when some of those Sentinels I electrocuted were their relatives and friends. Though based on the lack of death jeers I get, I must've not killed many important Sentinels. As if reading my mind, "Tomorrow morning, the first item on my agenda will be to arrange a commemorative rite, for those fallen tonight. Unless I am blind, I saw the work of a Whisper at play, and I promise you that I will hunt him down, and present a death monsters are worthy of," he finishes, in a murmur.

Steps approach Maven, the click of fine-tailored shoes. "What of the girl at your feet, Your Majesty? She's killed our brethren, once again," the man says, ending his question with on an angry note.

"As deserving Mare Barrow is of death, I still have use for her." Maven provides the reason to keep me captive in an instance as if he was prepared for this. I haven't a doubt that he's written a speech. "We aren't aware of newblood Whispers and the sheerness of their ability. Surely she'll be happy to enlighten us."

"Will she be... disposed of when we've taken the desired information from her?" The gruff voice asks, a growl following low from within. His suggestions send needles at my organs, and my heart skips a beat, if that's possible while the Telky has ahold of me, never floundering in his smothering.

I push at air that weighs a thousand tons, and as expected, I don't make headway. Yet my finger twitches, and I watch, stunned at the movement, like an infant walking for the first time. Beads of sweat accumulate on my forehead and glissade down, cold and wet. The Silencers circle me, each of them applying pressure dense enough to kill. They won't take any chances, not with what happened last time, even if it means multiplying their abilities tenfold. I'd writhe and scream and curse if I could move.

"I haven't decided, Lord Rhambos. I can only assure you, she'll get what's coming to her." Maven's directing his words at me, not the Silver; he means to say, be good, and he might spare me.

But he knows as well as I that living in manacles is not an act of righteousness, but a condemnation.

Receding feet pad back towards the candled tables, a resignation. "I'm sure you're all weary, from the stress you've beheld. My Sentinels and I shall deal with the prisoner, and I think it's best for retirement to your manors and estates," Maven says, his stance still and certain, his back to me.

Agreement radiates around the room, and not before long, the doors are held ajar by servants to the Crown, and clothing shuffles and shoes hit the same surface my face is pushed against, in movement. Agonizing seconds drift by, and I breathe, in and out, in and out, emboldening myself. Yet, if the Sentinel holding me allowed me to weep, I think I would.
The room empties out, leaving a phantom of grandness in its wake. One can have all the finery and delicacies in the world, but without attendants, the hall absorbs a depressiveness. On the bright side, I didn't destroy it.

Crisp and frosty hands encircle my palms, and a gurgle leaves my throat, not exactly of my own accord. My manacles, colder than ice, clink into their positions, their homes. The Telky has lessened his mental grip, and I could scream if I desired. Alternatively, I chuckle, telling myself this is how I'll leak out the panic. And terrify them. I drive depravity into my laughter, mixed with hysteria. At last, I find my words. "You should double check those locks, Arven." I turn my head so I can meet Egg's eyes- he's as bald as ever, in emotion and hair. "If I keep killing Arvens at this rate, there won't be enough left to continue the bloodline. Not that anyone would want to mate with you, though."

Bitch, he mouths. Maven might scold him if he spoke audibly.

"Provos, close the balcony doors. Let's not bother in the search for Miss Barrow's Red accomplices. I want everyone out of this room; Arvens and Sentinels, go return to your posts. Five of you each can wait outside, lest the prisoner decides to be unreasonable." I roll my eyes and my skin prickles, but there's solace in his orders. They're not chasing after them. Good.

The Telky's influence fractures the second the doors slam shut for what is the hundredth occasion, and I'm up in a heartbeat. I have to get out before they yank me back to that room... Now is their great point of weakness and my strength. The manacles are siphoning my resilience even now, and I don't want to envision what I'll be deteriorated to in a few days.

I'm not going to bother hoping for rescue.

Still, I cannot help surveying him initially, and he stares back, amused. Or so he wants me to believe. Maven looks the same as he has for a long while, wearing an onyx shirt, pants, and shoes. I daringly heave a step closer to him, a show of dauntlessness. Probably too much for my own good. Challenging Maven, I seal my lips together, telling him I'm not talking until he does, in that sick language of ours.

"You look healthy," he informs me, with an unplaceable emotion stuck on his tongue. Sadness? Rage? Remorse? There is no pity to swallow. "But, what's that under your lashes?"

"What?" I spit, massaging the skin under my eyes. I expect blood or grime residue on my fingers, though a gritty beige salve clings. How could he see it?

"You're tired, so painfully tired. Only the thrill of the fight, the adrenaline keeps you going, doesn't it?" Mirroring me, Maven braves nearer-though he has very little to fear- until we practically touch, nose to nose. My inhalations become curt, for the irrational woe our chests will touch. I'm reminded of what happened two nights ago, with Tiberias begging me not to fly here, into the wolve's den. I should regret this, for the high price I'll pay, but I don't, not with Giza is out from between his teeth. He slowly raises a skeletal hand to my cheek, offering ample moments for me to shy away. The tentativity isn't for him, to delight in me squirming at his proximity. It's to offer me a choice. In Whitefire, every decision is made for me. What I'll wear; what I eat; if I'm going to be alive the following morning.

Deliberately, he runs his thumb over the cosmetics, gently but effectively. The natural reflex is to blink, and I fight the kneejerk reaction with personal instincts, which scream at me to not take my eyes off of Maven Calore.

"My servants want me to wear this muck. But there's nothing wrong with shadows, Mare. They'll
be there forever. Unlike other things. Giving in to them is often easiest, then resisting for people who don't give a damn about you." Maven's flesh is still on mine when I flinch, feeling the shiver vibrate down through me. I think he shivers, too.

Haphazardly, I search for something to steady myself with, a portrait, a star in the azure, an intricately hewn engraving on the wall.

I'm high and dry, and see only black and white variations of the world. The half-eaten food is unappealing, and I haven't eaten since mid-day, the mural above us is boring, and the prerecorded orchestra music that loops on in the background brays.

"So you've heard." I sound hoarse in my ears.

"Um-hum," he purrs like a cat, whose consumed a tasty dinner. "Don't be naive. I have operatives at Ridge House, just as your Guard keeps moles here, obviously. But aside from that, I could've told you this would happen the day he fled the Bowl of Bones. Cal does not know me, though I recognize my brother for what he is. It's his birthright, Father's legacy. This is war, and all's true colors will be revealed by the end."

"That's Jon's way of speech, not yours," I say, not wanting to talk about this, especially with Maven. In this bleached shade of sight, Maven's eyes stand out, a lively and deadly blue. His irises are an ocean, waiting to devour me during an eclipse of strength. They shift, waves growing in height, to become a storm. So intensely beautiful, disastrous, and bewitching.

"Do you want to share a secret?" He asks.

"Your secrets usually disturb me."

Regardless of my lackluster attempt to shut him up, Maven leans in, so his lips brush my ear. I swear I feel a grin spread in the microsecond we touch. "The Scarlet Guard and Montfort will not hang around to watch another potential tyrant king take his throne. You will sweep in, and upend this kingdom for yourselves. I'm sure my brother and dear Nanabel have their suspicions, but until they gather alliances, they have to keep you red rats close. How ironic. Needing toxicants to survive."

Sense bursts into me, at last. I shuffle away, touching the binds at my wrists. Maven waits with patience, letting me compose a rebuke. "Operatives?"

"No." He moves his head ever-so-slightly. "I listen."

My back collides with a chair, and it isn't until now that it strikes me how much distance I've traveled. A good amount of air cleaves between us, yet his mouth is still on my ear, the ringing of his whisper of revelation. Glancing upward, I hope to see something of use, an air vent, maybe. I'm nimble. I can leap onto a table, scale the wall using the valleys carved into the columns, navigate the insides of the palace with ease.

I glare, but not at him. On the ceiling, among other paintings of events in history, there's a red girl falling in the Spiral Garden, suddenly intimate with death. The torches fused to walls illuminate the room partially, allowing shadows in various areas, but not in this section of ceiling. Sparks flare at my skin, and the shout that descends with me is booming in my head. Evangeline stares up, surprised, with the stance of an executioner. The Silvers watch, little blobs of sparkly gray paint, with their Houses. "Long time ago, wasn't it?" Maven's voice carries through the ballroom.

I bite on my lip to keep from snapping a cynical remark. "Yes. Yes, it was." Unspoken thoughts
rotate between us, and Maven is left with a ghost of a reminiscent smile. "I can almost say I miss that life."

The smile reduces, though not completely. "What do you intend to do? With knowing of our plans?" It's my turn to stand idly, prowling for answers. I force a look of indifference, but he'll see through it, tearing down shields of paper. Outside, behind the diamondglass, I watch an infinitely black sky, poked with bursts of butterscotch yellow, signifying residences. The Square and Government buildings aren't viewable from here, only invisible roads and trees.

Maven thinks aloud, to spite me. "Well, I could say nothing. Or everything. That seems like a more enjoyable approach, isn't it?" We circle the midpoint of the room, like in a dual at reverse ends, marked off by the seal of the Burning Crown.

Mom and Dad and my siblings still reside at Ridge House, as far as I know. If Maven announces his hunches before they can leave with the remaining Guard members...

"You wouldn't."

"Oh, I think I would. Without red support, Cal has virtually no alliances outside of marriage. And he won't have you either."

"Tiberias lost me already; I've never belonged to anyone."

His laughter is light as if I came up with a partway decent pun. "Is that what you're calling him now? What a funny coping mechanism. I love it. I bet Cal likes it too, his vanquished flame calling him by that stupidly outrageous name. My mother had the wits to persuade my father from naming me something so dumb."

"Your mother was a sociopath. Get on with it Maven," I say, clasping my arms together. The manacles scratch my forearms, but I don't complain, though chafing marks have appeared. "What do I have to do that will prevent you from releasing this?"

He huffs, annoyed. "We have all the time in the world. There's no one to save you. And there's nowhere safer than Whitfire. Maybe your Scarlet Guard will decide to let you stay awhile."

Hiding my worries, I drag my fingers over my eyes, nose, and mouth twice, and new cream joins the old dried stuff on my palette of a hand. "Tired? I can have my Arvens escort you to your room."

NO.

The second the door to that place shuts behind me, the odds of immediate freedom plunge. But there's no exit in this room either, no air ducts, I've figured. The balcony is obscured with glass. Of the bulletproof variety. "I'm not going there," I lie.

"Oh? What are-"

To make an example, and in a flash of limbs, I'm at a High House dining table, sewed with blue and green thread, Osanos colors. The servants haven't had an opportunity to clean up yet; perhaps they're starting in the halls, cleaning up the blood and flesh. Flatware lays on plates and napkins, and a knife catches my attention, the light from chandeliers reflecting from it. Quicker than a Swift, I have a serrated blade at my neck, of my personal choice. "I'll slit my throat before you can order that Telky in, Maven. And there aren't Healers nearby, are there? You'll kill me."

Momentarily, Maven's expression dwarfs, childlike. He parts his lips, then clamps them shut. His eyes remain big, though. His jaw works, fighting the urge to come over and slap me, and his lips—now closed—twist into a nasty snarl. "Really? You'd prefer to die than spend a couple months with
me?"

I squint at him. "A few months? You'll keep me until I've rotted into an old prune."

"My advisors, who I'm supposed to trust for political wisdom, believe me insane. This week another High House deserted Archeon for a haven with the Samos's and my brother, the rightful king. I'm living on borrowed time. Rumors, the truth, some call it, have gotten out. You may survive this war, but I won't."

The handle and rivets of the knife are cold in my clutch, and I spin it around effortlessly, a skill Tyton taught me. If I threw it, I might be able to kill him where he stands. "If Cal stays king, he might pardon you. He loves you, after all you've done. He's told me so." I'm unsure of why I bother to tell a dead man that his brother still cares about him when I have no intention of allowing his brother the crown.

He scrunches his eyes closed, trying to shake off thoughts of his brother. "What would I have then?"

I stay passive, without an answer or desire to think about it. "For your silence." Metal clatters at my boots. "What do you want?"

"There is nothing you can give me that I need, when you're powerless, little lightning girl. But wants are on the table. I'd be pleased by a dance. A single tune and that is all."

The very marrow of my bones solidifies, and I feel very, very heavy. My fingernails puncture my recently healed wounds, and that lovely sharp pain returns. Pins prick at my skin repeatedly and ride deeper each go.

"I'd give you nearly anything to contain this, and you want that? I haven't practiced in over a year, and even then I was horrible at it." Anger seeps into me, and not for valid rationale. Holding hands with him, our blood divided by a titch of flesh seems wrong in every capacity. Something Mareena Titanos and the old Maven would Maven has me at his benevolence, and he merely wants to dance; I should be happy. Yet there's never not a trick up the boy king's sleeve.

He nods innocently, but I know better than to accept his bargains guaranteed to be laced in fine print. "None are present to judge your competence, Mare darling. I'm giving you an opportunity to stomp on my feet and kick my shins."

"Your lucidity corrodes more and more, doesn't it?" I pretend to itch myself under the lapel of my servant's attire, the branded M revealing itself, as clear as day. For a moment, I forgot I was in this ridiculous red and black uniform, but in a flowing dress meant for marvelous places and persons.

"This is truly your motive? To feel my fingers entwined with yours? Or-" There's a security camera in the corner of my sight, flashing a dull red at intervals. I didn't notice that before. Unless senses of surroundings are on overdrive, it's not striking. "Why is this being recorded?"

Maven glances at the red light, faux surprise writing into his features. Rarely, do authentic emotions appear on his face. Suppress it all, Maven. I do. If that camera signifies anything, it means that the power is running. Yet archaic cressets are the main source of lighting our space, besides for the moon, a sliver of it peering out from behind clouds. Dare I sadly say, the absence of lighting sets a certain theme I long to share with someone other than a lunatic.

"A gift I'll leave for Tiberias when he sits at my desk and opens the drawers to rake through my belongings," he discloses, adopting Cal's given name. "Say hello, Mare."
I wonder what else he'll find in there when he takes over for that brief period.

I look to Maven, finding watching the camera repulsive, studying the eyes of a future Tiberias. "You want to dance? Let's dance." A vengeful element of my soul speaks for me, to cause him suffering, wanting to leer over his shoulder as he watches Maven and I swirl across the floor, dancing in a forgotten room just as he once did with me.

Our next gaze communicates ten-thousand thoughts. You're doing this to spite my brother and save your people, is the most prominent.

Objecting to everything I've learned, I advance in small yet giant steps, as Maven takes a device from his pocket, a device that could be the control to that awful clicker for all I know. A momentary ping of fear slices through me, but I quell that pain with unmerited trust in Maven. More like trust in Maven's obsession.

I've taken one step and that is all before the doors fly off their hinges. Not the main set, anchored into the center of the frontal wall, but a side set, still four times larger than my family's at the Stilts.

A gilded handle hits the ground near me.

So does a gun.

And a key. Small, but noticeable, when it's the sole object I want.

Incredulous, I raise my chin to see Maven blasted by a hydrant of water, landing hard on a table with a distasteful thunk. Iris and Tyton, a Silver queen and Red rebel stand with hunched spines and crooked arms, braced for war. I suppose I should be as well. Grabbling for the piece of metal, I jam my emancipation into the opening of the first manacle, and it comes off easily, time slowing a bit as the binding slumps to the floor, then the second.

If I had time to absorb the amazement of seeing Iris oppose her husband...

Bullets are shot off from Tyton, who points at the diamondglass, uselessly making a couple of insignificant chips. Nothing happens. Iris seems to try a different approach, telling Tyton to watch her back. They must've taken knocked out the guards directly outside because it takes a good twenty seconds for the doorway to kick open, albeit without equal violence.

My fingers prickle, electricity blazing in my bones, though not on my skin. The silence does this, sucking away my electricity and my memory of the power. Nevertheless, as an initial herd of Arvens clogs through the threshold, I discharge a series of lightning javelins, a special ending for each of them. Few dangers greet me, as the Sentinels barely make it through the door before they're gone.

Iris concurrently uses her water to push at Tyton's gun cracks, working at the flaws in the glass, and makes them spiderweb farther apart. Silence flickers every so often but is stopped by Tyton or bullets quickly. Sentinels burst through the smaller and alternative entrances, and I wouldn't be shocked to find them crawling through fissures in the walls, the ceiling.

A Welle Sentinel tosses seeds into the air, and I growl, striking the man as the plant bursts forth. It would've been coniferous, with thorny branches. Deftly, I electrocute more, but they come like growing weeds, coming and coming. The guards don't fire at Iris or me, the King's orders, I assume. They try to silence us but to no avail. For my fellow electricon, it's another story. He dodges ammunition left and right, turning and twisting out of harm's way.
Glass particles creak, and I look towards the stretching windows that frame the balcony, and Tyton whirls to aim a prudent bullet at the weakest section. A shot goes off among others, shattering the glass to a million splinters.

"Run, lightning girl! There is nowhere I won't find you," Maven repeats his iconic quote from Naercey, a reminder he's not unconscious. "Cease them, you fools," is followed, though it's almost drowned by volleys of bullets and battle cries.

I don’t turn around, for that if I do, my motivation to leave will quit with me staring at the forgotten brother.

Tyton's hand is on my shoulder, nudging me along in a haze of disbelief and bullets, and we artfully dodge the projectiles, beelining for the broken glass. "I thought you got away with the others," I say breathlessly, my situation only now dawning on me.

"I would never leave you," he assures me, in mid-sprint. Best as he can, Tyton explains what has happened, with Iris and some Swift, as we vault out of our makeshift escape, land with bent knees, and hook around the corner of the palace's walls, to be met with Iris and a brown-haired Sentinel awaiting us in a transport meant for Silver recreational use.

Jon told me to kill Queen Iris. But how could I slaughter her, when she aided in my salvation?
Chapter 19

Evangeline

Dulled-out fluorescences blare at my vision, and if not for the heavily sugared coffee, my forehead would slump against the glass and chrome tabletop. We passed the midnight landmark a couple minutes ago, and no one is as amused and annoyed as I am.

Cal is usually transparent, but not to this degree. Everybody, even Father, can fathom why the aspiring king wished to have a meeting that I quote, 'will not cease until we've drawn up a realistic solution.' A sane person should've objected to the inane request, yet Father raised his eyebrows and nodded with glee a half an hour ago, eager to continue scheming. He'll take any chance he can curve his claws in to advance the timeline to his glory.

If that happens to be due to Cal's inexorable need for a reprieve of inner thoughts, so be it.

Right now, Mare and her puny sister should be on their way out of Archeon and are preparing to jet back to the Ridge. But, as that girl's luck would have it, something's amiss. Farley's overdue in radioing the general here in Davidson's stead and Nortan broadcasting is reporting of an attack on the palace, though the details are under wraps. No announcements on captures, releases, or deaths. The secrecy doesn't burden me, like it does Cal, spinning his flamemakers on his wrists. Whatever bombshell Maven's holding from the press will be leaked soon; even the king of fire cannot hold back an ocean.

"I've heard talk of Iris Cygnet's unliking of Maven," Anabel says, steepling her fingers together, elbows balanced on the table. "We could sway her. Sway the queen, then the Lakeland alliance belongs to us."

"What kind of alliance, Anabel? One that involves wedlock will not suffice, as Tiberias already has prior commitments," Mother counteracts, engaging in a battle of stares with the old queen.

And so it goes on, as it always does. Mostly useless arguments, always with someone who has a problem with the idea. Safe to say, we've made little progress. They spoke of the paramount-and temporary- capitals Cal could take over, warring over whether attacking Harbor Bay was suicide or not, the stance of Piedmont in this situation, and feasible propaganda. Discussion on what type of wedding cake is best may be up next.

The radio hidden under Cal's fist crackles and Julian pauses his with lips parted, slanting his head like a curious puppy. I'm still bemused on his part in the puzzle, why he comes here to offer advice, in spite of his dislike of monarchies. I'm sure he has cards left to play, just like everybody here.

Amid the static, "Can you hear me?" is asked, by a wavering female voice.

"Yes," Cal acknowledges in a chorus of other yeses. So unlike the young prince to be scared, adorning countless badges of honor, bread to be a soldier, and yet his hands twitch in a nervous pattern. "Farley, is that you?"

"Yes it is, Cal." I'm surprised to hear her use his nickname. Mare doesn't call him by that anymore, and I would've thought Farley would do the same. She sounds tired, but above that, broken. "We have Giza in our custody, and we're pretty sure Maven didn't bother in sending out patrols to look for us." Sizzles of electricity come through the speaker, muffling the general's relays, and my
stomach churns with the sense with whatever we cannot pick up on is terrible news for the team.

"What was that?" Julian speaks this time, leaning forward in his chair to project his voice towards the radio's microphone. More static and incomprehensible words float across, and Cal's face is a blank canvas, waiting to be painted by the news.

Father rolls out his neck and clinks a taloned finger on his chair arm. In his opinion, Barrow's fate is but an irrelevant chore-pointless and boring. To Cal... well, he might as well go hang himself if Maven touches her. He opens his mouth, ready to tell him to turn the mechanism off, but two words freeze him and knock the wind from me.

"Has her," she broadens, and I taste the vomit boiling in General Farley's throat. The sip of coffee Julian was ready to drink dribbles over his mug rim; it's a miracle the ceramic dish doesn't shatter, as Julian's knuckles turn bone-white. I consider myself stone-cold, in terms of a majority of people, but my blood drains from my cheeks and a shiver coils through my bones.

My parents and Anabel are emotionless creatures, but they all take a gasp, closing their eyes scornfully. I doubt it's in honor of Mare, however. Rather, they're shamed to be reminded that they've associated with such a beast of a boy. Anabel's hand rests on Cal's shoulder, a sympathetic gesture, though he shrugs her off, pushing up from his chair at the opposite head of the table from Father.

Tiberias is cautious to keep his spine to us, secreting his tragic expression, that I catch a glimpse of. "Thank you for carving out sleep for this, King Volo," he mutters darkly, emptily. "We'll resume discussion in the morning." At that, he slips behind the propped-open door to Gods know where.

"I suppose we will," Anabel says, her chin angled at her sternum, perhaps a tad defeated. To know her grandson still clings to a girl that he has no future with unless of course, he relinquishes exactly what she wants for him, must be agonizing. "No later than eight," she tells our miniature council, in a tone that doesn't imply it's an option.

"Excuse me." Intentionally, I grind the metal toes of my chair against the floor harshly.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of hosting Tiberias Calore in this dark and dank jail?" Jon's voice bounces off the walls in echoes, greeting me from my setting in the shadows, pressed flat against the cement, at the edge of the wall adjacent to the cells. Lovely silence pricks at my pores, and I curse the architects assigned to this section of the manor. Silent Stone is mixed everywhere, so that not only do the prisoners endure the pressure, but also guests.

Cal paces, his boots scuffing at the floor filled to the brim with dirt. "You know exactly why I came, you bastard seer."

The prince must be positioned where there is less Silence because the tides of heat roll off of him are palpable, even with the corner blocking the brunt of his rage. I sneak a gander at the tableau: Jon sits cross-legged, though there is a perfectly fine raised cot to rest on, embellished with that all-knowing smirk. There are stone benches, but Cal doesn't stoop so low. He wraps an arm around his waist, holding his obliques with a hand while propping his other elbow on that hand, and grips at his neck with his remaining set of fingers.

"And what would you yearn to learn? That she's fine, that the General's words were a miscommunication? But I bet you've already wondered that and deemed it impossible, didn't you?"
"I want to know," he says in a whisper and a roar. Weakness and strength. "Why you allowed her to go, offered information, if in the end, she is inside of Whitefire again, with Maven. As if the last two months have been erased."

Jon tsks, wagging his wrinkled finger. "The end," he repeats in a hiss like merely the words are a precious enigma, "is far from over, dear boy. I've been manipulating this twisted game of chess for a long while, and I've gotten quite good at it. Don't think for a second that I don't know exactly what game I'm playing."

My sterling silver and gold rest on my waist, my arms. Unlike Jon, I haven't lost total contact with my ability, and my metals cry out to me, wishing to be stroked. I hate Arvens and what their blood can create, though I've had short-lived experience dealing with either. I hand it over to my ingenuity to imagine the pure enmity Mare has for this stuff.

"How many days?"

"To you, Tiberias Calore, it will be a lifetime. For others, I cannot disclose." Jon leans back, his head bumping on the rocky wall, and the man's robes shift. I suspect there's a family of rodents nesting in them, and a family of worms in his beard. "I can see the past, present, and future, yet I cannot see through your eyeballs and into your mind. So I query, do you regret it yet?"

Similar to Anabel's posture, Cal dips his head, so that his fist bridges between jaw and collarbones. "Yet?" He is either genuinely curious in Jon's election of terms, or ungrateful for the question.

"I'm suggesting nothing, Tiberias Calore. You may very well exist to be an old and jolly king, inspiring peace and equality throughout your kingdom, extending to the mysterious territory in the west. Perchance you'll morph into a jaded and villainous character as you were no longer surrounded by her, the lightness that fills your soul depleted. Or, you might not end up a king, but a corpse, exiled by those you once called friends, your own brother. Her." With motion much smoother than expected from someone so crippled and ancient, Jon is vertical, his shoulder buried amidst the prison bars, and his arm flails wildly, reaching at Cal.

For the first occurrence in history, Tiberias doesn't act his fluid, lethal grace. He jerks away clumsily, grasping for air. Fortunately, in the name of his dignity, he doesn't topple altogether, quickly finding that grace of his.

"You shouldn't have come here. But the allure of speaking to someone who comprehends how this will end is too fetching, is it not? A person as educated as yourself should know better. Then again, perhaps Evangeline doesn't know better either."

My muscles grow taught, despite the knowledge that Jon is barricaded by thick steel bars, metal that a magnetron couldn't control if they wanted to.

"What does Evangeline-" Cal's question is strangled off by my footfalls, which I don't attempt to conceal.

"You still forsee comings through the stone?" I ask, taking a seat at Cal's left, on the damp bench. For once, I'm happy to have Calore with me, than confront this pathetic man by myself. Silenced, and he still can send people off a precipice of uncertainty. We'd have to tape his mouth shut for a hope of his presence being sufferable. And then, his watery, beady eyes alone would inflict ample scaring.

He shakes his crown, making that scolding noise again. "If fates have altered, I'm unaware. The moment I crossed into this wretched cell- and that's saying quite much for my standards- new
prophecies will have been unbeknownst to me. Which may entirely mean, everything has changed," Jon completes his tangent, focusing on Cal.

Cal shifts his gaze down, as if incapable of staring into the Oracle's eyes. I can't stand watching him either. "Tell me you have a non-idiotic motive in mind, betrothed," I snap at Cal, absorbing my regular persona I take on around him. "Or is that just that, to seek reconciliation with yourself, for not being able to save her?"

"If you had been there, perhaps you would've stopped that Telky, regressed Maven's battalion enough for the pair of you to slip out unscathed," Jon contributes. I hate him less.

"There aren't definitive answers with you if I've made certain of anything tonight. Perhapses, maybes." Cal breaks off from my side, flashing a glare of daggers towards my heart. For sneaking down here, helping Jon's web and weaving whatever ending he has planned for us. For being born into this cruel world altogether. "I'm sick of this," he mutters, now nose-to-nose with Jon, both of them wrapping callused hands on the bars.

The other man grins, revealing teeth yellowed with years. He wobbles, apparently dizzy with sentiments, but with a precision too practiced to be a fluke. A mangled waltz.

"In that case, it's in your best interest to become accustomed to being sick, Tiberias Calore. Sickness that reaches the bones you're sculpted out of. A plague is coming." Surprise, something that shouldn't ever be in the seer's medley of expressions, enters his eyes, a second prior to the red of his ugly eyes rolling up into his skull, leaving the whites and the debris of scarlet veins, giving him the effect of the monsters I read about as a child. A creature who belongs in a grave. Then, his knees fold in on themselves, and his nose bone smacks against the cage, triggering a snapping sound.

His body slumps downward, a torturously slow descent to the stone. Blood, the hue of my favorite wine leaks from his fractured nose, and red tears fall from the corners of his eyes and skin. I've heard of sweating blood in tall tales, but I had never believed...

I whip around to find Cal, whose eyes are vast tunnels and jaw is bent open permanently. I probably appear the same. "Where are the guards?" My intention is for a brutal, snarky tone. A choked-whisper is coughed out.

"I had them sent off." He slumps his shoulders for the first time in years, yet he doesn't move, just stares, stares at the man who has caused so much pain to so many people.

Cal doesn't want to save Jon, who could very well be as lost as Maven Calore.

"Did you see it?"

"See what?"

"The astonishment in his pupils, right before they rolled up," I say, jerking my head at Jon.

"He was genuinely astonished. This isn't a fabricated joke; even Jon cannot make himself bleed from the skin." Cal watches the crumpled figure intently, like a hawk. But no ordinary bird of prey. The soon-to-be king of Norta, wielding as much power he could ever want or need, watches the unconscious Jon as a predator as well, of equal or greater strength.

As if on cue, as if he's awake, Jon commences to seize violently, thrashing his skull against unforgiving slate. I open my mouth, my instincts to yell at him, call the Red a fool or whatever words get him to shut it. His heart rate climbs, and his breath intervals vary dangerously, shallow
"I suppose you have two choices," I hear myself say in that cunningly calm voice. "You could allow him bittersweet death, and eliminate his chess piece. A player not given requisite praise for his mastery of the game. Red blood flows in his veins, Cal. So when we and our Red allies come to a crossroads, Jon will walk with them; and we cannot defeat an army with Jon on their side."

Cal squeezes his eyelids together, willing the information I presented to be forgotten. I will make certain he does not. "Montfort and the Scarlet Guard will not allow me to take the throne," he says it aloud, making it all the more real. "Of course they won't. We're only allied with them because we have to be, when everybody else is firmly tied to Maven."

Nodding, an inward smile pops into my head while Cal drowns in the implications of what's to come. Mare, his supposed ally, will betray him, war on the opposing side of the battle. Win, I sadly have to hope. If the Reds win, Father won't be able to wed me off, let alone live.

"The second choice, Evangeline?" he asks.

"You crave another option? For a moment you considered it though, correct? It wouldn't be a crime, turning your back on someone who's done what he has."

Once again, Calore glances at the forlorn prisoner at his feet and sighs. "I won't trust you to get a medic, considering you're trying to seduce me into leaving Jon for dead. I'll get one." Then he's off and running, with an agility that Jon took away.

"Optimistically, he will not be impaled with when you return, darling," I mutter to myself, fingers touching each and every metal accessory I'm wearing today. If I wanted to wring my hands around Jon, I'd need a key to unlock the bulky lock that meets my vision. A true Magnetron's trap. Under regular circumstances, I'd fit iron into the lock and mold it to open the door.

As Cal's boots pound up the stairwell, I blink a series of blinks, remembering how tired I am, despite the excessive caffeine I have access to. I go forward and rest my elbows on my kneecaps. I would leave, go to my room and Elane, if not for the impending fate of Jon-who apparently doesn't possess a surname. His body tremors still, but not to the degree it had a minute ago. If his eyes were obscured, he might be an innocent boy with a bad tendency for nightmares.

"Mare," Jon says. If he had been the tiniest bit quieter, it would've been dismissed as the howling wind or a shift in the chamber's architecture. "Mare Barrow," is whispered again.

"What about the girl?"

"She will destroy herself," Jon explains in a hissing, apocalyptic tone, his twitching amplifying. He's flipped over so that he rests on his back, his neck angled limply at where the bars meet rock. I reel backward, momentarily neglecting the fact that this bench has no spot for my back, and have to grabble for air and cement to right myself.

"She's going to die?" I ask, not anticipating an answer I'll comprehend. Jon's eyes are white and red, but the main part continues to hide amidst his skull. An assault of shivers makes its way throughout my skin, beginning at the base of my spine. He is truly a demon, both in appearance and mind, twitching with fervor, as though he's doing it for fun.

"Life." His words are strange, unconnected to my questions, and filter into a shrill and evil laugh, and only get louder, enough so that I straighten my back, prepared to explain what I'm doing down here should Jon's raucous draw soldiers. "But the other shan't."
My thoughts blur together, and I dig my grip in and around the stone bench, feeling lightheaded. I hear, "To rise. And to rise alone," Jon says, just as voices come down the stairs.

"That man should be put down, like the animal he is," Anabel murmurs, the silken material of her dress sleeve pressed on her mouth.

"You're sure he said nothing to you, Evangeline?" Mother fixes a pointed stare at me, searching for my fib. Are you sure you're not lying to us, she means to say.

She'll find nothing in my eyes, no hint of remorse for keeping the small, irrelevant sentences of Jon the seer to myself. "Don't you think I'd recall if that excuse of a man spoke while Tiberias was away? He was preoccupied with violent shaking and eye pupil displacement. If you don't believe me, check the security feed." I know just as well as Mother that the cameras don't record at night; we don't have access to the night vision technology Archeon has, and decided it best to rely on guards to report during these hours.

"Take her word," Tiberias tells our elders, keeping close to Jon and his infirmary bed, as though an assassin is going spring through the skylight at any moment. Anabel, my parents, Tiberias, and two sentries crowd into the small medical room, typically meant for low ranking guards and housekeepers. "Jon could barely breathe, let alone give a cryptic speech."

As Cal does, Anabel stares at Jon, her wrinkled claws wrapping themselves around the cheap metal frame at the end of the bed. Anabel's eyes are ringed with gray, an array of smudged mascara and urge to rest. But I doubt she'll sleep until Cal's on the throne, with a disgusting chunk of iron upon his head.

A doctor approaches our tightly knit circle, careful to not brush against my dress or Father's armor. "He's comatose, presently. The seizures have been quelled, and if you peeled his eyelid back, there'd be a pupil. My team and I will be monitoring him closely for the next several days, but I cannot predict when we'll observe responsiveness." Mother mutters something about the longer the better, and my stomach swoops. What Jon—or whatever possessed Jon—said abandons yet another weight to bear. If only Cal had been there to listen, to pale as I had; the prince would know what to do, or at least do something, stupid or not. The second Jon rouses, I'll be there, a pair of throwing knives at the ready.

"Is there a possibility he'll never wake, Doctor?" I have to ask him. I retain an impartial expression, bored, tired.

He nods.

"I can't, no, I don't understand how Jon didn't foresee this," Cal says, pinching the bridge of his nose in the same frustration I feel. I expect the fabric of the one-person bed to singe beneath the burner's touch, but it remains intact.

"It's discernable to believe that he didn't," I say, shaking my head. "I don't believe he predicted any of this." Heedful of my word choice, I say this broadly. To them, it simply means he didn't know he'd end up in this sterile room, with a clan of regals. To me, I think of Mare, who before today, I wasn't fond of. And I am still not, to be clear. Yet I can't fend off this feeling in my gut, that if I don't suggest something to someone, anyone, things will end very badly.

"Your Majesties?" another foreign voice outside of our ring says with a worried sound.
"What now?" Father and Anabel Lerolan simultaneously turn on their heels and snap out the question. If they weren't so constantly stiff with the value of cutting right to the chase, they might laugh.

"A development has been revealed... or rather, caught by the press. The king didn't authorize its release, but it would be incredibly hard to prevent reporters from getting wind of this, considering the locations-"

"Get on with it, Eagrie," I bark, stale from the speeches able to be half-understood today.

He glares at the floor, probably angry from this flip of events. His entire family isn't trusted, not yet and probably not ever. They're here plainly because of Andros-the too young, too dumb, and novice seer- Eagrie, and good old Jon. "Mare Barrow did indeed escape Whitefire, but it appears that she took the second escape party's way out. Along with that unnaturally white-haired boy, a Nornus sentinel, and Iris Cygnet."

Paralysis of shock freezes everybody and extends into the room's furniture. The windows have been pushed open, and the lime-green jacquard curtains hang limply, despite the breeze that flows in. That too is numb on my skin.

"As in, the Princess of the Lakelands, water wielding Iris Cygnet?" Mother asks, her precious snake curling on her shoulder.

Cal says nothing, while the rest bombard Eagrie with bullets of concerns.

"Anabel. If the nymph will ally herself with newbloods, I don't imagine why she wouldn't consider an alliance with us. Perhaps your idea wasn't abhorred." Father's beard moves as his mouth does, morphing into a grin.
Chapter 20

Mare

"I would ask questions, but I suppose it's time to go." I watch Iris intently, and she fastens her eyes on me, her expression wiped off anything that will hint at her emotions. She's bedecked in a layered cobalt dress, the sole reminder of the masquerade, despite me being in its ruins just moments ago.

The nameless Sentinel slaps at the side of the transport, startling me out of the nymph's gaze and into the vehicle. It's not like Maven's armored transports he uses to make practically a spectacle out of, plastering the Nortan seal and ribbons on the black. This automobile is tragically blue, like Iris's clothing, easy to locate and conquer. It won't matter, though, unless we make it out of the city and into the countryside, where dark green coloring would be more helpful.

Tyton climbs into the passenger's seat, next to the guard, and Iris and I take up residence in the back. My door hardly slams shut before his boot in pressed on the gas peddle, and I lurch against the headrest, digging my nails into the cushion. Iris, however trained and queenly she may be, replicates my movement. "Couldn't you go faster, Nornus?" Iris asks sarcastically. Aside from her joking manner, I've learned that the Sentinel is a Swift.

Nornus hits a sharp left, curving out of the lot we had just been in. Hitting the seat between Iris and me with my hand, my arm braces against yet another jolting movement; it wouldn't be a surprise for my collarbone to break under the stress, but I hear no cracking sounds.

The backside of Whitefire blurs on my left, a stream a buttery yellow lighting from residential rooms and reflections of the moon-fully out in the open- glistening against the sections of diamondglass that aren't illuminated from the inside. To my right, behind Iris's window, darkness-sparingly deterred-reigns. Staggered guard towers form a half circle around the palace, the side that isn't crowded with government edifices, and floodlights wander to and fro, forever on the lookout for those who are going to break in. Fools, I can't help but think. They should be breaking out, not in.

"When we hatched this plan, I assumed you knew how to drive." Iris has her hips twisted around themselves, allowing her to peer out the window panel that gives us a rear view of our path, territory we have already crossed. I copy her actions and my eyes are assaulted by two transports, with Maven's signature lustrous black paint glinting in the moonlight. Three cycles that remind me of riding to my house in the Stilts with Cal trail the bulky but efficient vehicles. They're too far away too fire at, having come from a different exit than we did, on the adjacent side of Whitefire.

"You try steering at this speed, Majesty," the Sentinel retorts, keeping his gaze on the road before us. "My ability applies to my body, not this car."

As Nornus swings the car around another bend, the three-tiered bridge that spans the Capitol River looms ahead. East Archeon rests across the waterway, merchants and businessmen still working, judging by the high-rises continuing to fight with the pressing darkness with more lights. The Archeon Bridge is certainly grand, if not imposing, for what it means to me. An escape. Maven would sheer the metal tethers supporting the bridge himself if it guaranteed my capture. And according to my count, it would be my third. He would drown all the men and women crossing the bridge if it meant my return.

The water.
"Iris," I say, tilting my head away from Maven's soldiers, who are nearly in shooting range. Her eyes lock with mine, acquiring that leary yet powerful aspect. I don't trust her, but my options are few and far between. "Can you reach the water from the river down there?" I motion to the flowing mass forty feet below us, frothing whitecaps against the titanium poles that extend into the liquid.

She looks between the gap dividing Tyton and Nornus's seats, rubbernecking the distance. The arch presses closer with every second, but it's still quite the drop down to connect with the substance. Iris tilts her head, a peaceful expression laying over the face of a warrior. "You don't know much about the Cygnets, I see. An Osanos, on the other hand may have difficulties. I'll do it." Before anyone can object, she's cranking the window open with the knob fixed to the door, and anchors her fingers around the ledge.

"You're lucky there are handholds on the roof," Tyton tells her with a sneer. They broke in together, yet it's palpable they hold scorn for each other. He glances at me for the first time since we've entered the transport, and I take the opportunity to glare at him. The last thing we need is to make enemies with a water princess over a river.

"I'll have better luck attaining and aiming," she argues, though Tyton wasn't objecting to her climbing up there. I'm sure he'd love for Iris to get her head blown off by a rifle, though the Sentinels are most likely regulated to sedate the Queen, not kill her. If the Lakelands find their princess's head on their doorstep, the war will surely restart, and not merely to diminish the Red population.

A bullet is fired, but misses our tires by inches, flying into the pavement.

We're beelining for the bridge, and somehow we can't go fast enough. Nornus growls under his breath, and almost spontaneously, might I add, cuts our beeline short, and turns one more turn, blasting the sealed gates to Caesar's Square, intended strictly for walking in. It not only surprises the opposing bikes and transports but also Iris, who swears loudly over the din of burning engines, half hanging outside the vehicle.

"There are more effective methods of murder if you ask me," Tyton rolls out his neck, a concentrating look in his eyes. He's feeling their minds, trying to latch on, to kill. His expression shifts multiple times in seconds, before his concentration fractures, and he pounds his fist on the dashboard. "The transports are laced with Silence. But the bikes aren't. None of us are going to run them off our trail with ability."

"Lightning may not be the trick, this time, newblood. But even the densest of that stone cannot penetrate a river," Nornus says, his gloves tightening on the steering wheel.

"What nonsense are you talking about?" I ask, not able to keep the venom out of my tone. "The river is below."

Another ninety-degree rotation and East Archeon will be directly in front of us, but not before Sentinels who managed to survive the first two rounds of attacks tonight funnel out from the frontal palace steps in my peripheral vision. He doesn't answer.

I roll down the left side window a third of the way, my arm earning strain from the motion. Fifteen or so guards raise their signature and bulky guns at us, or more specifically, our tires. The clocks seem to slow as an initial bullet is fired off and despite our breakneck speed and distance, it seems right on target. I can either yell at our driver to move off course, or...

On gut reaction rather than from skill or training, a thin and lithe spindle of electricity emerges from my skin, trained on the bullet, as though it has a mind of its own. Maybe it does. Though I
can't physically see it, I sense its splitting, as my creation tears it apart. "Iris is right. Being on the roof offers better capabilities." Prior to Tyton's yelling at me or attempts to restrain me, I wind the glass the remaining way down, until it seems like a large enough opening to squeeze out of

Still, I'm not as quick as Tyton when it comes to striking up a quarrel. "Mare, you're not protected up there-" He isn't wrong. Bullets from the guards charging towards us are virtually nonstop, and I've never wished for Davidson's forcefields as much as I do here.

I've slunked halfway outside before I respond, saying, "Queen Iris has my back, Tyton," in a loud voice, over the heaps of other sounds. It's an unrealistic hope, but I have to believe it, if we're to sustain a chance of getting out of this city alive. Iris has made an enemy of Maven tonight, and she has to get out unless she's a fan of imprisonment.

I am not. I just have to hope she won't drown me in the Capitol River.

Before I can feel the roof for a handhold, Iris's dark hand extends to mine, pulling me up as if I'm weightless. Perhaps I am, with the set of muscles she has. I mutter thanks while surveying the damage and the damage yet to be caused.

The two transports and the three bikes have returned, following our lead through the gates. The sudden turn Nornus took threw them off somewhat, but in a skimpy amount. They had to skid around, because of overshooting the entrance we took, but it didn't take long. "Which ones have the stone implanted?" I yell down towards Tyton using the sunroof opening I hadn't noticed.

"The transports," is replied, as I duck lower, a volley of bullets approaching. The last round from the ground men, unless swifts are among the Sentinels. Silvers as they might be, but even the most elite can't keep up with wheels.

I turn my focus towards the oncoming bikes, speeding up so that each rides just behind the edges of our transport. Tyton must have gotten one of them, as I've seen no movement from Iris and a bike with a passenger draped atop it rests near the center of the Square, in the mosaic fountain. "You take the left," I tell Iris, and I catch her raise her eyebrows indignantly. Few people can order her around.

She nods after a second, raising her palm cupped with water-drawn from the air or even the bridge, which we have made little progress to, due to the swerves Nornus keeps on making. I turn to my task at hand, whipping two bolts towards the cyclist. He sees the first bolt coming from a mile away. The second, not so much.

At last, the transport blows through the central wrought-iron gates, topped with blazing torches. Two guards stationed from the outside fire their arms at us, splintering the glass on the sides. Semi-bulletproof, at least.

Iris has long since dropped her assigned guard, and squints, sweat accumulating at her forehead. She must be drawing forth enough to flood the bridge, from my guess and what Nornus said, about the bridge metamorphosing into a river. Water begins to seep onto the bridge, like an inverted sink, and I note what's going on in the river. Waves crash against the seawall, and with each repetition, they grow higher, droplets drawn off the waves and onto the bridge behind us.

"Those trucks are a curse and a blessing to them," Iris says, not taking her gaze off the seawall. "They cannot be attacked with abilities, but they've been robbed of them as well. Sucks for any Osanoses on board." I laugh lightly and throw a spiraling bolt towards the ironclad transport anyway. It dissolves before it can hit.
East Archeon blares, not far, with just about every block liten up with a manner of lights: streetlights, skyscraper lighting, and residential lighting further buried into the city. From here, its civilians are tiny ants, awaiting news from their king.

I want to make it go away.

There has to be some power bank, somewhere that generates the electricity for the lower half of Archeon. The West has to be on a separate grid, for obvious logic. It's the last stand for the Nortan government, should it come to it. A coup d'état would be too easy, too simple if a militia could envelop the city in mayhem by cutting the entire power supply at once.

An arid and hot summer breeze catches at my hair and skin, and mist blows with that wind, lightly and pleasantly. I realize only now that moisture has gathered on my forehead as well, caused by my carefully placed shots of lightning, one of which actually did harm to a vehicle, leaving a dent in its side.

But that wasn't enough.

We've made a little headway, made the distance keeping us apart a little larger, and presently their rifles aren't active. Iris has molded protective shields of condensed water around our tires, which have done their job well, but the cracks in the window glass have spiderwebbed further apart, weakening. A well-aimed bullet could hit home in the head of Nornus or Tyton.

Out of the blue, a monster of a wave crashes up this band of the bridge, reaching twenty feet over us, suspended for longer than it naturally should. The drivers of our chasing transports notice it as well, and try to make a return over to West Archeon. We're halfway across the expansive bridge, and they'd have a terrifying distance to cover to avoid the tsunami of nymph creation. They don't make it far, as the weighted mass inverts on itself, flying towards the defenseless, weak guards.

At the last moment, it goes limp, impacted from the embedded Silent Stone, but it still attacks with force, showering the cars as though a pale was dumped from the sky. Iris smiles, the sort of grin I get when I touch my electricity, steal it from Silver plants and employ their own creation against them. From the faint lamplight at regular intervals, I see the cars have stopped, one of the two flipped on its back.

For the moment, there aren't any opposing troops, and I close my eyes, strengthening my hold on the handrail near the antenna sticking up drastically. Where is it? I touch the powerlines in the city, feeling for where they're established out of, mentally climbing them, looking for somewhere that is filled with power, constantly, constantly pumping out new electricity.

Found it.

My eyelids open and my neck snaps to the side, towards Iris and beyond. The buildings from this vantage point are packed together, with no possibility of the naked eye figuring out the precise point that's putting my sense of buzzing on hyperdrive.

Though I know where it is, loud and clear.

My eyelashes brush against their counterpart row, narrowing my sight. Nornus whips a sharp right down the first avenue we come across and I nearly would fly from my crouch into the shop windows, if not for my grip expanded to a second handhold on the opposite side of the truck, stretching my arms wide.

As I'm about to rupture yet another city's electrical system, stealing the energy for myself, a siren
starts to blare, coming from just a couple of blocks away. Iris hears them too, and new, drippy beads of sweat come seemingly out of nowhere. "They'll pursue us across an ocean, won't they? Relentless bastards," she huffs, turning her attention back to the rising river, enacting a plan.

"Is it too late to destroy the bridge altogether?" I ask, terror seeping into my veins. The people coming must be Sentinels from the East, if the direction the alarms are sounding indicate anything. They should be easy to deal with, not the highly trained soldiers that are based out of Whitefire. Stupid, wanting to prove their grit by taking me and Iris into custody. In their dreams. "It's the Sentinels from the palace that we should worry about."

She shakes her head briskly, defeated. "That would take hours, and believe me when I say it. My family has considered doing so countless times. Besides, a single task at a time, correct? And that would be, them, unless I'm sorely mistaken." Iris motions her free hand to the transports blazing down the street, following our route.

"Well then," is what I respond with, bending my knees skyward. The businesses of merchants and shopkeepers run past us, or we run past them. Either way, electric neon green and pink signs advertise late-night taverns and restaurants; drunks and nasty Silvers shout as us; the powerplant set out of the heart of the city burns in the back of my mind.

No different than from a machine gun, I fire off strikes left and right, incapacitating the drivers or their vehicles, leaving scorched tires and flesh.

"They'll be coming from a new direction, soon," Nornus shouts from the wheel. He's right. I managed to choke off the avenue we're on with stopped transports, but that only puts the Sentinels back by a block or two. This city is like an enlarged version of Summerton or Whitefire, a maze intentionally created to confuse enemies. "We need to get out onto the main road, where there aren't so many angles."

To confuse enemies. It's working.

Pounding electricity nears from the river side of the approaching street junction, and I barely have the wit to shout, "On your right!" with the adrenaline rushing my brain. Maven wasn't wrong; Only the thrill of the fight, the adrenaline keeps you going, doesn't it?

Before the bikes can grace me with their presence, I reach into their engines, disabling them instantly. Nornus forks left at my request, and as I look back to see a tangle of metal and limbs—belonging five bikers and bikes—sprawled out in the midst of a typically frantic street. The stoplights are permanently red, probably a danger code for lockdown in the city.

Ahead, we're met with the financial district, comprised of buildings low and high, all magnificent in their own right. Most of them are colored the hue of a grave marker or brick red, adorned with engravings of designs and letters, the name of each building's owner or purpose. If I was given the luxury of time, I might deign to marvel at the sheer impossibility of them, stretching so high they should move with the wind.


There must be some mistake, something I'm missing. There are no more engines to be felt, to be heard or seen. The wind whistles in my eardrums, but not so loudly that it's a distraction. This deep into the city, everything is visible as though the sun continues to shine, with infinite lighting coming from every which way. I share a look with Iris. "Where are they?" she questions, pools at her ankles.
I don't respond, for fear that if I say we're safe, Maven and Arvens will be on the next road.

Another turn. Then another. Then the pillar of a highway, stretching farther than all of Norta.

Still no clue of resistance.

Finally adorning a small sense of safety, I latch onto the electricity hub not far from us now, as city merges into terrain.

And I take their lighting away, the tool that enlightens their nights. Just as they have taken everything from me.

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If I had been a Silver, a commoner, I would've enjoyed drives through the countryside.

Yet this trip is congested with stress and fits of panic every time a flock of birds flies past. If I see a tree in the distance that resembles a transport, I'll prepare a storm, drawing cumulonimbus clouds into existence. And when a jetliner flew above us, Tyton had to apply a minor pressure to my head, to prevent me from taking the plane down, 'killing a bunch of innocent Reds.' Apparently, he recognized the seal, saying that it was a Lakelander plane, moving Red slaves from one military locale to another; he proceeded to glare at Iris.

Then, naturally, there is the threat of the traitorous queen sitting beside me. I haven't had a moment to process or ask questions. My mind has been elsewhere, thankful for the rare reprieve of immediate problems. Giza was rescued, secure at the Rift, where I will join her, primarily because of Farley.

Farley...

"Of the corners of the world, I never imagined I'd visit the great kingdom of Rift," Iris thinks aloud to herself, balancing her forearm on the open window ledge. "You have no idea how often Maven speaks of it, how to take the fortress, destroy it." She turns to me, awaiting of response.

The nymph knows what I'm going to ask, or at least, what I'd like to ask. How often does he speak of me? His brother? Instead, I say, "When Maven finds a focal point, it consumes him until it's no longer a concern, but an obsession. I'm sure you learned that in your hours at his council, your time as husband and wife." If Tyton or Bartholomew are listening, they offer no suggestion, no tense expressions.

"I am painfully receptive of Maven's ability to latch onto things and... a select few people. It didn't take long to comes to terms with..." she pauses again before lacing her fingers together and looking me straight in the eye. I don't dare to blink. "His condition. I learn people quickly, how they act, how they think. Despite that, the King of Norta and I didn't spend much time together, aside from officials meetings and holding hands for pageantry."

After initially getting out of the fringes of Archeon, Nornus artfully parked our transport in a gap of the coppice we eventually stayed many hours in. I would argue that those hours were indeed pointless, as none of us slept for lack of trust, but Iris countered that we should wait out any patrols that begin tracing the roads, looking for us.

Dawn is sneaking up, the hem of the horizon dyed a soft orange, the rest of the sky remaining a deep blue and the earth a land of shadows of black.

"You didn't?" I quirk a brow, wondering the unmissable. Didn't they have to...
Iris lets loose a laugh subsequent to a deep and exaggerated shudder, and ruffles a hand in her windblown and water-torn hair. "It's not a ridiculous inquiry, I guess. As the reigning monarchs, there are laws and expectations. But we've made the argument that if we had a child in this war zone, they'd be turned into leverage rather than a human being. That's what we've told the High Houses, anyway."

I gulp down a taste of sour air and stick my hand outside our enclosure, touching the air with my palm. In another life, an isolated universe, perhaps Maven and I would be in a similar situation. "We?"

"Yes. But the feeling of hate is mutual. I scrape on his nerves, try to crack open that skull of his. He still has a yearning for you, as I'm sure you know."

I become weak in my bones and have to look away from her, my closest connection to Maven. To stop her from viewing the tears pricking at my eyes. Until now, I had no time to think about Maven and his words said to me in that forlorn ballroom. The secrets he could reveal, and though Anabel and Volo probably already have suspicions, words spoken aloud cannot be unsaid.

And though I should, should run back to him and do his bidding if only to forge a deal, my mind is far from considering the consequences of what will happen if Maven reveals the obvious.

Instead, my thoughts wander to Maven's eyes, desperate, lonely, and ice.

"As a Cygnet, I can sense the water around us. In that pond over there, in the atmosphere, coming together for heavy showers, and in your eyes," Iris says quietly, attempting to control who hears her. "Hate and love share a fine border. Sometimes people forget which side their relations settle on. There are also cases, pertaining to the strongest of us, where our relations straddle the border, forever in limbo. And there is nothing weak about that."

My blink harshly, willing the tears from my eyes. "Why did you do this? Maven will kill you if he gets the chance."

A heavy intake of breath is audible, and I almost feel guilty for asking. It seems personal, it some way that I'm unaware of, but yet I can sense it. "No. He will use this as an excuse to kill me. He would've beheaded me the moment I showed signs of my opinions of his conquests months ago if he had a decent reason. Now he does, though not decent enough for the Lakelands. He'll have fun talking himself out of that jam."

I note that she halves her response, only answering to the second part of my question. "Why did you help me?" I ask again.

"I have a sister, like you do. Though she's my elder, she's similar to Giza in certain characteristics. Her vigor, particularly." Iris's throat bobbles and her head is turned towards the treeline, endless from here. "And just like you, I would walk through Hell and back to reach her, suicidal as I may be. You shouldn't be punished for trying to save someone you love."

"Even a disdainful Red like myself?"

Iris clucks her tongue. "I do not share the values pertaining to you Reds as the rest of my country does. I, Iris Cygnet, Silver-born among royals, call myself no higher than a Red raised in dirt."

I almost snort, because of the poetic way in which she says it, sounding somewhat mocking. But she looks at me with an authenticity that has no veiled agenda or scheme behind it, with watery eyes. I bet she misses her sister, haven't have seen her since she was traded off as a piece of
property, a means to an end of a war with no purpose.

With a sudden motion, the transport grinds to a halt. The surface we drive on has changed from dirt and underbrush to pavement. And the lovely Ridge House pricks over a knoll, it's iron guard towers peaking up the most substantially. Not unlike Whitefire, far more lights are in use than necessary for this time of night, gradually bleeding into morning.

"Mare and I will go up first. If they see you with us, Volo and his men are going to deduce Maven's forces are with you, ending with hundreds of wasted bullets," Tyton says, already out of his seat, slamming the door shut.

I replicate his movements, though with a tenth of his sleekness. My limps feel heavy, and I'm tempted to ask to wait with Iris and Nornus. But desperation claws and my heart, ripping it open until I'm running ahead of Tyton down another long road, ending with the hulking manor doors. Forget-me-nots, a favorite flower of Laurentia, blur at my vision, a haze a blue and white, planted in red brick enclosures. The sun spears the horizon, a crescent of it sending light onto my cheeks, warming them.

The alloy doors blow open, not of my accord, and a legion of sentries squeeze out, followed by an array of people I love and hate, Red and Silver.

Giza's golden red is cannot be missed in the chaos, nor can her passion, as she pushes past several guards-trained to fight against brutal warlords but not teenaged girls. "Mare! Mare!" she yells louder than necessary, shoving the final man in her path away.

Before I know it, her arms are wrapped around my shoulder, squeezing so hard I have no choice but to imagine Giza worries I'll float away if she lets go of me. Involuntary flakes of salted water run down my face and onto my sister's shoulders, and I shutter, my knees weakening with my state of mind. She lets me collapse with her, and Mom, Dad, Tramy, Bree, and Kilorn join our tangle, assaulting me with kisses and rubs on the back. Even Dad, Dad of all people, kisses me on the cheek, letting his hug last much longer than they usually do.

Through the voices and lips and skin, I see Tiberias standing off to the side with Anabel, Volo, and his wife. Tyton nears them, to explain to them what the hell Iris Cygnet is doing just down the drive.

Hate and love share a fine border. Sometimes people forget which side their relations settle on. There are also cases, pertaining to the strongest of us, where our relations straddle the border, forever in limbo. And there is nothing weak about that.

I watch him and he watches me. But Iris is wrong. I have never felt so fragile.
Chapter 21

Mare

"Queen Iris," Volo purrs with a melodic voice in the cramped throne room. The usual courtiers and sentries are present, but unlike most days, the session is open to everybody, including my family and the rest of the Scarlet Guard. Gisa, who has admitted she blames herself for getting captured, clings to my shoulder, and Tyton stands to my left. I spent as much time as possible convincing her otherwise before we were summoned here.

Iris tilts her head, a ghost of a smile gracing her brown complexion. "It's a pleasure to meet you," she says. Clever, to not use an address with the King. A "Your Majesty" would boost his ego, while a plain "Volo" would have him sharpening knives. "From first glance, you seem much more pleasant than previous kings I've encountered. Thank you for granting me sanctuary here."

"Of course, Your Highness. Now tell us, if you please, how Maven scorned you into leaving Archeon." The King of Iron has never been an advocate of small chatter.

Sentinel Nornus has been glued to Iris's side since she stepped out of the car, and continues to stand beside her now. I wonder if their proximity is per the request of Iris or the guard, or maybe a silent exchange of the both. Either way, I don't blame her for allowing him so close, while she's surrounded by a hundred strangers.

"It can bluntly be said that Maven and I didn't see eye to eye on certain issues. We've been wed for months, yet he hid from me as often as possible. Of course, he was forced to engage with me for political meetings and such, but our contact hardly extended past that. To learn the things that I did took a great lot of effort, gossiping, prying."

"What did you learn?" Tiberias straightens in his chair off to the side of Volo's throne. He wears a crown, red and gold, plain and simple, but a crown nonetheless. Who got it for him? "My brother wouldn't destroy a priceless alliance for no reason."

Iris paces back and forth, perhaps pondering exactly why he did threaten her. For the number of hours we spent in the backseat of that transport together, she didn't tell what drove her out of there. "I learned things that I shouldn't have. Additionally, he hates me for what I represent. A replacement. For what could've been."

Though Iris doesn't bat an eyelash in my direction, a couple nosy women glare at me. What was it that he said? Any window we had, however small, is gone. I say nothing, only because I have nothing to say to these people.

Cal saves me. "What did you learn?"

"The truth," Iris nods at him. To Tiberias's side, Evangeline scowls, but not at Iris. At me, for not making the Lakelander's insinuations more damaging. I return her glare and she smiles wickedly. Out of everybody here, Evangeline saw me the most during those months. Knows my signature cries. "How Maven and Elara Merandus murdered your father and pinned you and Mare Barrow as the culprits. You must feel so cheated, to have your birthright stolen."

"I do," he agrees but keeps his head pointed fixed on Iris. Away from me. "So what? He discovered that you knew? Or did you tell him?"

To hear him say, implying he's jealous of Maven, feels cheated of his so-called birthright...
merely another scar. If Tiberias was born to rule, what was I intended to do, in another life, in one of Jon's alternative visions? To die for him and the rest of the Silvers. Death for a kingdom that doesn't give a crap for me.

Iris lets out a brief, forced laugh and scrapes imaginary dust off a simple dress. Though it hasn't been long since she arrived, Iris managed to squeeze in a shower and a changing before coming here. Now she stands in front of an array of vicious men and women, and looks like the most peaceful women on earth.

"Unfortunately, Prince Tiberias, court gossip extends both ways. Maven, however many rumors are spoken on the boy, is well reached. He knows the deeds that go on inside his home."

Volo shifts on his throne, made up of onyx and golden coloring. It's different from what I remember of it from a couple days ago. He must have been bored. "Well," the arrogant man pretends to think, though I bet he's been brewing up a conversation for hours. "I couldn't have foretold this happenstance a week ago. Events of late have certainly shifted the power. And now, with a testimony from Her Highness added to our propaganda, it can be released. Alliances forged, betrayal of Maven's Houses; within the month, Tiberias the Seventh may very well walk in Archeon without a fight."

A month. A month until the Scarlet Guard usurp the Nortan crown, I've been told. Davidson's lip twitches, and I can guess what's crossed his mind. We don't want a peaceful change of power, but a violent clash. It may be sadistic, but it will make our job a lot simpler. The forces of Rift will be depleted afterward, while the newbloods will be stronger, better, when the time comes around. Davidson told me a while ago that the true number of newbloods is kept hidden from our alliances to the Rift and Piedmont. They can't know how powerful we are until it's too late. A small fraction of us will fight the first battle against Maven, and the rest will come for the second.

Against Tiberias.

Against Cal.

Without clearance of any kind, I push towards Iris, revealing myself from the crowd I've been hidden behind and I blurt. "A fool's hope. Maven will die before he relinquishes his kingdom. He already knows that the tides have turned. But, and if only to spite us, he will waste every last bit of energy trying to destroy whatever he can."

Volo eyes me dangerously and waves a hand, indicating my statement irrelevant. "Not if we can sway enough High Houses into deserting him. Then the castle will be empty, save for a frail king."

A deranged king too.

"You spoke with him, didn't you?" Evangeline catches the fatal flaw that I've revealed, sharp as her blades; her immaculate posture seems to straighten more so. Maven's surely never told her that he thought he'd lose his throne, nor another soul that rests in this room. Nornus, Iris, and Tyton don't look surprised, but Cal stares at me with eyes so wide that they burn, despite hardly glancing at him.

Mom's hand grazes my shoulder, and it shakes lightly, vibrates through the layers of my skin. I haven't told anyone, due to lack of time and will. No one needs to know the things he said to me, how I allowed him to touch me under the eyes. At least I had the wit to repaint the shadows. "Yes," is what I respond with. Then I turn to the King. "But he spoke of nothing that would concern you."

Yet it might very well concern Cal.
"In that case, we can return to the topic of my initial interest-

"I have listened to enough bargains and alliances made by kings, Your Majesty. You watch me as if I'm a plate of food, ready to be consumed," Iris interjects, and Volo nearly jumps out of his seat. Evangeline eyes me once again, but I don't pay her interest or concern. She blurted in court already and she won't risk it again; it would make her appear immature and ridiculous. "Let me state my terms."

The hunger for this power that Iris has offered him no longer burns in his eyes, but an anger for her disrespect. A woman, of all things, to forge the terms of an alliance.

Other courtiers shift in their seats and on their feet uncomfortably, waiting for their king to weigh his decisions. He deals with a misplaced princess, an heir to a kingdom infinitely more powerful than his own. He could arrest her... but that cannot possibly outweigh the advantages of hearing her wants. "Very well, Your Highness."

Her ever-present smile grows. "I will film a testimony for your propaganda. My country will not bother yours, but it will not aid in battle either. This rivalry of blood has nothing to do with the Lakelands. We have made peace with Norta, and the same can be said for Rift. This war, it has become a civil war that neither myself nor my sister is interested in. We have nothing to gain, therefore you mustn't expect more than you've already been given."

He looks at nothing in particular, tapping his metal-clawed finger on the metal armrest of his throne. I would laugh at him if not for my position in this court.

"It was a fluke that the transport stolen had adequate fuel to take you this far. You won't make it to the Lakelands alone. I know little of Detraon, and I would delight in a visit. To forge an alliance with your sister, the Queen."

Iris looks about ready to roll her eyes, and her smile falters a little, turning more artificial than real. "My sister will not bend to a Nortan's wants, you should know. But if you insist upon negotiating in the north, I'm obliged to allow you to waste your time. I need to go home one way or another."

"I would consider no less for someone of your status, Your Highness," Volo finishes, rising up from his chair. "There is much to discuss in the coming days, but all that can wait. It's early, and the night has been tedious. Go and rest; court is adjourned. Princess Iris, please stay behind, if you will. We have waited long enough to unleash this bane on your husband."

Hefty steel doors are unbolted and opened and I allow myself to get lost in the surge. Davidson calls out to me, but I pretend not to notice. I have to get out of here, find some problem to address other than the immediate that's chasing after me. Right before I cross the threshold, a flash of black hair comes into my sight, and I crouch my shoulders in attempt to shrink myself.

In the heat of the moment, I don't bother to care that I've probably nearly caused my family ten heart attacks. Farley is somewhere here, hiding away from the rest of society. When I arrived Mom was holding Clara and told me Farley wasn't feeling well. Then I got pushed into the throne room. I need to talk to her, help her in any way I can. Meanwhile... I heard that Jon... no. I can't think about an unconscious man right now. He'll be more help to us while he can speak. Unless, he's toying with us, and managed to fake that whole performance Mom told me about.

And then, of course, the obvious, there's Maven.

The crowd thins, and I don't have so many puffed dresses tickling my ankles as I turn the bend to a hallway. Its walls are made up of exclusively glass, connecting two parts of the palace. For just a
moment, I need to breathe, to stop and rest.

Figuring for a moment, I'm safe, I stop in my tracks. This aisle of glass must not lead to anything much, as everybody else chose the other direction. Maybe a grouping of boardrooms, or something unimportant. But rather than look to what's at the end of the hall, I look out it. On the panel at my right lies the same lulling scene I've gazed at before: a courtyard leading out to the forest, where Julian taught me to harness my abilities to a greater degree.

In contrast, on the other side hangs a low sun with the air of a humid morning. Off to the side lies the sprawling drive that leads out to the country, eventually back to Archeon. Our blue car is still parked near the end of the tar, right before it forks at a right angle. An expansive pasture is further out, with cattle chewing on overgrown grass. A farmhouse and garden stand out to the side.

I never considered how the Kingdom of Rift collects its food, still managing to hold grand feasts and galas. I shake away the thought. It's not as if the Royals go out there and butcher their own food. Though I can picture target practice on the farm life.

A slight breeze pushes blades of grass and the leaves of wisteria trees, and I find myself with a palm touching the transparent glass. It's pleasantly cool, not the brittle cold that Whitefire's floors possess.

"I come here sometimes to think. It's peaceful isn't it?" Cal stands a polite few feet to my side. So much for trying to avoid this.

I nod and continue to stare. But no matter how much I focus on the pasture stretched across from the glass, I see the future king breathing at the edges of my vision, the crown gone from his head.

If he wants to talk about my encounters with Maven so badly, I'll make him ask, suffer for it. I roll out my neck and wait.

The sky is the color of the ocean but I'm glad Iris cannot draw from it, considering the power she showed in the city. The sun gleams yellow, though I can't look at it for long. And the air seems to ripple with heat. It's cool inside, and I don't experience any of it. I should go out later, get some fresh air, and scream my frustrations to the wind.

"Fine," Cal buckles. "You're going to make me ask. What happened in Archeon?"

Farley revealed she is a newblood with the abilities of a Whisper. We killed a lot of the men who are supposed to betray Maven and become your Sentinels. Harrick died and I didn't even look back. Maven touched me and I didn't run away. He knows the very secret I have to keep from you.

"I escaped with Gisa."

"No. You escaped after her. Gisa and the others showed up a half an hour before you did. What happened in Archeon?" he repeats. "I won't ask how you managed past Maven's entire army or blew up the airbase or got into that room. But what did he say to you?"

Would it be worth it to tell him, even if my motive was only to hurt him? But for some unknown reason, my heart tells him that I've hurt him enough. Not accepting his offer to become his queen, leaving for Archeon, for my future betrayal. "Maven doesn't ask me about our conversations, Tiberias. Neither should you. If it's any consolation, I've had worse talks with him."

Turning away, my eyes blink rapidly, though not to hide tears. To clear my dizzying thoughts of him, Farley, Jon, Gisa's possible trauma from her time at Whitefire. I can barely breathe with all these thoughts, let alone the heat that rolls off Cal in waves.
"Please don't say that."

"What?" I say, whipping around to meet his eyes. "Tiberias?"

"No. Don't compare me to him."

He's right, I think. And I don't have the wit to say another snarky comment. Maven and Cal, brothers of blood and DNA are so different and similar all at the same time. Maven was corrupted by his mother, while Cal was sculpted by his father. Which is worse, I cannot help but wonder. Maven was Elara's victim. But Cal, brainwashed as he might be, can make his own decisions.

Maven can too, I have to remind myself. Now that Elara is dead there is no one to blame.

It is not me who walks off first.

"Don't come in here," Farley says aloud behind the door. She must have felt my presence, or thoughts, or whatever Whispers sense. My knuckles drop to my side limply, having been about to rap on the door.

When Cal left, I stared at his retreating figure with glazed-over eyes. Somehow, guilt for my words plagued me and plagues me still. His shoulders were so drooped, the muscles of his back tense, and fists drawn in.

He hurt me. More than Maven ever did or could, because I loved Cal. The finest method to cause pain is simple, I'm realizing. He convinced me he loved me, he did love me, but in the end, the boy ripped the carpet right out from under me and abandoned me on a frigid cement floor. Alone. It wasn't his intention, but my heart feels splintered regardless.

And what terrifies me the most is that no one can fix this.

Still, I called Maven better than him. Only in one way, but one too many ways. A murderer, torturer, traitor of a boy... but isn't Tiberias? He's killed a fair share. He tortured Farley, and countless people before I came into the picture surely. And he betrayed me; love. Though he didn't take delight in any of those deeds.

Did his brother? I remember him snapping at me in his bathroom, trying to make me understand why he kept me so close to him, chained. I would run away otherwise. If it was indeed not a dream, Maven watched over me when Samson nearly killed me, came so close to touching me when I was half-conscious. And he promised he wouldn't allow Evangeline to lay a finger on me. Pointless, maybe, but a promise.

If Jon ever wakes, I'll have him tell me which brother is evil and selfish. Because I don't know anymore. Cal may be walking in his father's footsteps, but he has a mind of his own. He is blamed for his choices, not Maven, not his father.

"Fine!" Farley calls through the metal. "If you're just going to loiter out there and think about those idiots until I let you in, you can come in!"

For a moment, I pause in my thoughts and wait for her to open the door. When too many moments pass us by, I find myself pushing through and gliding into her room, taking quick glances around my surroundings. The space is congruent to my room, a few doors down the hall. The sun is rising further into the sky, but the curtains are drawn firmly shut, the drawstrings mangled together as if to prevent the fabric from reopening on its own. And the greatest sadness sits on the center of a big
bed, not unlike what I often do. Too much for my own good. A bed meant for two people, and a child playfully wedged in between. Shade.

Farley is either too consumed in her own thoughts to notice my own, or else pretends not to hear them.

"Farley," I say. It seems wrong to call her Diana, but I'm tempted to. It is her real name after all. "Please talk to me," is what I muster. What more can I tell her? I can barely look at her, and from the seconds stolen, she is in a horrible state. Bloodshot eyes, red, as always; tangled hair; hunched over with crossed legs, in that broken and raw position.

She pinches her eyes shut, as though the action wills inevitable tears aside. "Is Clara-" Farley cuts herself off, sobbing. The broken woman shifts as I sit at the end of the end of the bed, turning back to me.

"Is Clara what?" I ask, trying to sound motherly. I do my best, but my attempt fails in comparison to how Gisa or Mom would speak. Plus, my voice still wreaks of sorrow, from so, so many events. "She's fine, with my mom. But she misses you, I'm sure."

Farley slaps a hand onto her comforter, and the impact is surprisingly loud for the material. If it were brick, she might just shatter the material apart.

"Davidson said he was hunting down Silent Stone. Discretely, obviously. I don't want to hurt her," she whispers the admission.

I have to close my eyes for a moment, to gather myself against her words. If Maven is a demon, then Elara was the devil. And now Farley thinks she is going to harm Clara, even by holding her. Nobody knows or cares to know exactly how that Merandus witch became so twisted. And Elara now resides in a shallow grave on a forgotten island. It may be impossible to meet somebody as bad as that woman, and if it were... there are plenty of deeds I'd do before meeting them.

"Diana Farley. Do you see me going around and electrocuting my family?" I continue, half-wondering if she's going to bring up instances of my threats to Kilorn and my accidental minor electrocutions to Cal, which she must know about. "Cameron doesn't silence her brother, and even Maven, he didn't burn me." Not unintentionally.

She's quick to retort. "I find myself peaking into my visitors' heads, every time somebody visits me. It's an impulse, at this point. I just, I just worry that there's going to be a day where it's going to be more than a peak, but an alter. Back in Archeon, that God-awful city, it was almost like somebody else took over my body and actions. But now that I have time to think..." Farley pauses again. "I have powers like the queen did. Stronger, more lethal. What am I supposed to do?"

Though I don't plan on telling her, I have no clue. Davidson has already ordered the select few people who are aware of what Farley has become-explicitly and multiple times- to tell not a soul what has happened. He's had to shake off inquiries asking why the General stays in her room, and how we managed to get past so many Sentinels.

But I start talking anyway. "The whole royal clique is traveling to the Lakelands in a couple of days. If there's a moment to leave, it'll be then. Go to Montfort, or one of the Guard bases. People there won't curse at you. They'll be able to help you."

Her eyebrows lift slightly, a little intrigued and hopeful. "I don't think anybody could learn to control this," she whispers, lowering her head and eyebrows.
I chuckle, to none other than myself. A year ago, I thought I was bound to lead the average, typical life of a Red. When I first used my lightning, it was more of a reflex than something in my jurisdiction. Farley is no different, with the sole instinct of protecting herself and her family.

"You're not the only person who's felt like that, Farley. Out of control of emotions and body. At first, my powers came and went, as if they had thoughts of their own. And don't say that they won't understand. Because maybe they won't, but Julian, a Singer, taught me to wield this." At that, I raise my palm, and new veins light up beneath my skin, purple. "And look at me now."

Terrible, crippling quiet dances through the room, Farley apparently in thought. Or she might just be prolonging a response.

"I want Julian to teach me. You trust him, don't you?" she says firmly, bunching her fists into the comforter. Fear prickles in place of the lightning that has dissipated from my skin. Though she hasn't done anything to me yet. Farley wouldn't, no matter how set she is on believing her ability.

"Julian Jacos wants the throne dissolved just as much as I do," I tell her.
Chapter 22

Iris

I almost roll my eyes as Volo starts down the steps onto the tarmac, taking his sweet time.

I gave that man the Lakeland's allegiance, and I filmed that beyond-stupid video for him and that Lerolan woman for their use. Yet he dares to force my hand and allow him and his entire court to come into my home, uninvited.

At least the Scarlet Guard left. Mare and her heaping family are nowhere to be seen, and Tyton and General Farley are also missing, along with plenty of other members with names I can't remember. The rebels originated in this country, and my sister has no interest in forming a bond with the supposed rats my father couldn't contain.

And luckily for the parties here, Salin Iral decided to remain at the Rift along with those who simply didn't wish to come and those physically unable to travel. He was smart enough to hide from me when I initially entered the Samos manor, up until I left. If he had shown himself, unlike the coward he has proven himself to be, I'm not sure what I would've done. Orrec Cygnet traded me off to end a war, without bothering to consult me. But he was my father, and here in the Lakelands, family is everything.

The airbase we've landed at is not far away from our capital, and I know that my sister is only minutes separated from me. It doesn't matter now, but I still wonder if any of the letter copies I wrote to Rosalyn are on track to make it. I doubt they'd have already reached her, as it's been less than four days since I've sent them. Maven's spies probably got to them, anyway.

"Are you nervous?" Bart queries into my ear, standing close by. If the circumstances were different, I'd feel put off by his close distance, and in Norta, guards aren't allowed to be so casual.

I shake my head, forcing my fists to unclench and I carefully lace them together instead. Mother would be proud. "No. Never of my sister or country. The King of the Rift is getting on my nerves. He will not succeed in getting new troops here," I say confidently. In many ways, Rosalyn and I are the same. Neither of us enjoys listening to overpowered kings.

Next, after Volo and his family, exit Cal and his grandmother. Though I don't know either of the boys the way that Mare has been exposed to, Cal- I've begun to use his nickname- is less harsh in all aspects. From first glance, he seems like he'll be a kind and fair king.

The problem is that in our kingdoms those traits hinder rulers. He'll have to toughen up quickly, learn that disappointment is a given in sovereignty.

From what I've been told, a number of people have already tried to talk him out of it. There's no use in worrying for the prosperity of Norta. The present king has already done the job on screwing that up.

"The view is stunning is it not?" I ask Nornus, attempting to launder my head. Rosalyn will be here soon. Just a couple minutes, and then I can hug her and talk her ear off for an entire car ride. "I've missed the scenery here. Archeon was too industrial; not to say it wasn't beautiful, but the things that made the city beautiful were not natural." Here, the buildings stick low to the ground, and greenery sprouts up every two feet.

For a moment, Bart says nothing, gazing over the cliff that overlooks my precious city. Maybe I've
offended him. Norta is his home, and his entire family lives there. The Gods know how Maven will punish his entire family for his desertion. But he must've weighed that, and thought it safe enough to betray the crown.

"I suppose it is," he responds at last. "You've built your airbase in a nice place. I'm surprised your country found such a perfect plateau to place it on. It overlooks the city well."

Lake Eris is the star attraction of Detraon, and it glimmers with the sun high overhead. Even from so far away, I can feel the sloshes and pulls as children play at the edges of the water. A smile tugs at my lips. I'll have to go swimming later. Let diplomacy fly to the wind.

Our central palace in the Lakelands, Bluewater, is set off from the lake by two hundred yards, barricaded from the public beach with thick glass gates, sturdy as steel. The palace itself is a marvel to gaze at, composed of white marble and brick. The columns that hold up various balconies and have no purpose at all are shaded a dull periwinkle, the tips ringed with gold. Squinting, transports can be made out moving on the circular drive that encompasses the palace.

Good. She'll be coming soon.

"If you'd like, I'd be happy to give you a tour of the city later today, or tomorrow morning." It's not as if he's in a rush. He won't be able to return for weeks, maybe even months.

Greco won't be able to return, I think to myself and swallow down the guilt. My second Sentinel was in that crowd that I sent the water into. He could still be alive, safe in Norta, with malice in his heart. But more likely, he's dead and gone, sent to his family's cemetery in a casket. I helped kill so many that night.

"That would be nice, Iris," he uses my name and I stiffen, still unaccustomed to him calling me that, though I've told him that it's fine. It was unexpected that he'd actually follow through. "What's that?" He points further inland, past countless government buildings, upscale residences, and businesses, while a calm wind blows off the lake.

My eyes follow his finger, and they land on a structure protruding from the earth. It stands out from the rest of the city, not a modern white or grey or gold, but made of bronze sandstone. A courtyard surrounds the steep pyramid, filled with white camellia flowers and nothing more.

"Our most sacred temple. It's name is Laude, but so ancient the translation has been erased. We don't know what is means, but I trust the Gods didn't bestow a foolish name upon it." I hope to take Nornus to Laude soon, a small part of my compensation to him. Without him, I would be in Whitefire, and so would Mare Barrow.

"It's fascinating how you've created the rivers," he adds, motioning once again to the canals that run through various streets, footbridges arching across.

My favorite pastry shop is situated alongside a smaller river that branches out from Lake Eris. It's in the cultural district, and at night, neon lights of every color gleam in the area, while the rest of the city stays dark or yellow. As soon as Volo is finished making his futile arguments, Rosalyn and I should go there, and then maybe to the beach.

"If you think the Osanos nymphs are powerful, think of that ability multiplied tenfold. Once the canals were dug, it was no trouble," I explain to him, but I leave out the information on who dug the canals. None other than hundreds of Reds, of course. When I was smaller, I didn't think much of Father saying that the "slaves" had opened up the trenches. Too small to understand that the slaves weren't lesser than us.
Before Bart can ask any new questions about the city, the first of several transports peaks above the sloped hill, leading down to the palace. Though it's midday, their headlights blare into my skull, and I have to turn away, towards the series of air hangars erected from the ground on the opposite side of the tarmac.

Eleven transports, I count in total. Ten of them break off from their line and move to form a protective circle around the eleventh. I can't help but huff out a sigh of annoyance. I know, I know that the security measures aren't against me, but they do keep me from Rosalyn.

Seeing no sense in watching the transports for what's going to be another ten minutes, I find Cal staring down at the city, with a sort of longing written on his features. Evangeline, the princess of steel, with her ridiculous dress, watches him too, an amused expression crinkling her nose. I've heard that her brother and his wife are staying behind, due to safety issues. Those issues should apply to the king as well, but somebody had to come and make their claims.

And no one does it better than Volo Samos.

My gaze sweeps over the rest of the crowd before returning to Cal. I know absolutely nothing on the boy apart from the books and intel my family has gathered on the Calores over the years. His mother was murdered when he was a babe. Coriane Jacos was her name. I'm sure that I've read plenty on her in the past, yet a single fact comes to mind. She loved the city of Harbor Bay.

And I've been told that Detraon resembles Harbor Bay in many ways.

A door slams and two sentries emerge from the middle vehicle. I cock my head, straining a bit to see a black head of hair. If she were entertaining a larger crowd, there'd be an announcement of her arrival, but not now, not with these uninvited, unwanted people.

Finally, Rosalyn emerges, a stern expression on her face. She wears it as a facade in the court and with royals. But not with me, when we're without the pressure of appearances. My sister wears our trademark navy blue in the form of a high-ranking general's jacket, with fitted pants. Her hair is in tight cornrows and her gaze pierces Volo's.

Neither of them dip their heads the slightest.

She speaks, "You ordered my father dead," casually, clasping her hands behind her. Though these were not the first words expected, I inwardly grin. Her voice is a sound that I have deeply needed to hear, and it's time someone cut the crap when it comes to speaking with Volo.

Clearly, they weren't expecting this. A lot of soft gasps are expelled, and Laurentia's lips part slightly. But Volo doesn't move a muscle, or smile, or frown. He keeps his lips in a thoroughly straight line.

"And I hope we can come to an understanding that it was not personal, Your Majesty. Your Kingdom was allied with our enemies, in turn making your ours'. Our strife is concluded, isn't it?" Volo says in a monotone voice. I wouldn't be surprised if he started picking at his fingernails.

She nears our grouping, stopping feet from the King. The two sentries follow in tow, their hands remaining on the guns at their hips. "All is fair in love and war." Rosalyn smiles grimly, glancing around the grouping. "State your terms here. I have meetings in the afternoon and am not in the mood to be wasteful."

Volo offers a reassuring nod as if to say that he wouldn't dare. "Your sister, Her Highness Princess Iris has already submitted a recording of the truths she discovered at Whitefire."
At this Rosalyn angles her face towards me, in query. I merely shake my head. She hasn't gotten the letters yet, then. The only reason she knew that I was coming her was from the emergency and curt conversation we had two nights ago over the radio. I didn't have the energy to deliver my monologue through static. I'll tell her soon. Everything.

He continues. "In word, the true King of Norta, the Kingdom of Rift, and the Lakelands have devised an alliance. Maven's grip on power has weakened considerably in the past weeks, and it will only weaken more when we at last release this propaganda. Yet wars are not won with words alone. I need troops."

My fists clench again. If they weren't bunched up, they'd be colliding with Volo's face. I move past Nornus and to my sister's side, so that I can scowl at him directly.

"You hypocrite of a man," I say, spit flying from my mouth. In Rift, I had to at least watch my mouth somewhat, but I have free-reign here. "At my initial briefing, you told Mare Barrow that the takeover would be peaceful. That you wouldn't need troops. Don't treat the Queen of the country you stand in with such lies and disrespect."

Rosalyn's hand envelops my wrist, tethering me to this world. Otherwise, I find myself floating in pools of rage.

"So what? You want me to hand over my men for fun?"

Volo's usual calm demeanor breaks for a second, as he shoots me a glare as lethal as his daggers. Rosalyn doesn't miss it, and grips me harder.

"Having additional troops on hand is precautionary. A nonhostile takeover is ideal, naturally. But it isn't guaranteed. I don't care to admit it, but Maven Calore is smart. He has yet to play the last of his cards."

Creepy and smart.

"And what do you offer in return?" The Queen quirks an eyebrow. "Troops for what? Saving my sister's life? I believe that she, a Nortan Sentinel, and two newbloods are responsible for that. A free plane ride?"

He strokes his beard, apparently admiring the tar, which glitters in the high sun. "Your grip on your country is dying, My Queen. Whether you care to admit it or not. Dear mother passed away a while ago didn't she? And Orrec... I'm truly sorry for them. A monarch without elder relatives is a disturbing sight in these times. Surely you have the best of advisors, but it doesn't look good. You're young, unqualified to become Queen for your age."

"Is he?" Rosalyn interjects, nodding at Cal, who seems to be startled that they're talking about him. He hasn't said anything since they withdrew from the plane.

"I don't have memories of an age when I wasn't being groomed to become king. My grandmother, Anabel continues to stand by me, as well as King Volo as his Kingdom." It sounds so mechanic; I bet Volo had him practice that line in front of a mirror.

"I don't either," Rosalyn grinds out, baring her teeth.

"Wouldn't you like to be known as the queen who brought our nations together for good? By relinquishing a couple thousand men?"

A couple thousand. He says it so indifferently it makes me gag. But I know, like Rosalyn, that his
request would hardly take a toll on our country. It would help us, actually. Her hold on her reign isn't something I've thought about lately, preoccupied with other concerns, but we can use all the boosts we can get.

If Rosalyn rejects his offer, nothing will happen. Not immediately for sure. At the moment, we are united because of our hatred for Maven, the urge to see him dethroned. Once he's dead, there will be no purpose to maintain the alliance, the alliance that has no contract, no nothing at the moment. We need something long term.

For such a meager amount of soldiers, in exchange for the backing of old, wise leaders...

"I want your propaganda released by the week's end, Your Majesty. My sister and I will have an answer by tomorrow's dawn."

^^^^^^^^^^

Our guards follow us closely as Rosalyn and I make our way to the eleventh transport. Though ten others surround us, they're filled with Sentinels and palace officials that didn't make an appearance outside. Volo and his crew will be bussed to Bluewater by a new grouping of transports, making their way up the steep hill right now.

The second the door slams shut, the windows one-way, we practically dive for each other, the loving animals we are. My head finds the crook of her neck, and salty tears begin to roll down my skin. For months, on the plane ride, and on the tarmac, I governed my feelings.

But humans miss their sisters.

"Shh, shh," Rosalyn whispers into my ear, her voice somewhat strained. "I'm sorry for everything. I should've said something to Father... we knew that Maven's mind was going wayward... but we thought..." There are so many pauses in her speech, and if we were in public, I'd cringe.

Rosalyn is usually eloquent, her commentary and tone whittled to perfection. But here, her arms wrapped around my shoulders, she is anything but.

"I wrote letters to you, the night before I left, you know. I lost count of how many copies of the same letter I wrote. I prayed, I prayed that a single message wouldn't be intercepted. Maybe one will show up on our doorstep tomorrow afternoon." I laugh darkly, for fear that I'll begin to sob.

"You were so brief on the radio, Iris. You said that you needed to leave, because he threatened you and you discovered facts that you shouldn't have. What did you find out, precisely?"

I take her hand in mine and rub the pad of my thumb on her knuckles. Then I tell her.

^^^^^^^^^^

"We accept the terms of your alliance, King Volo," my sister says with all the control and sweetness she can muster up.

Rosalyn, her inner circle, and I spent hours analyzing the consequences of either decision that can be made. If we do not ally our soldiers with Rift and Cal, we will have made another set of enemies. Volo will use the propaganda against Maven, and the citizens of Norta will believe that the Lakelands support the "true" king, when in reality we don't support anybody. But by lending them a few soldiers... that's what they want, and a permanent peace treaty can be signed. If not, Volo has basically implied he will initiate a second round of war once Maven has been put down.
Men and their lust for power.

"I'm pleased to learn this, Your Majesty," Volo returns, sitting directly across from her in our circle of glass chairs.

The foreign king and his family, along with Cal and Anabel preoccupy a half of the circle, while Rosalyn, five of our palace officials, and I take up the other side. The Eris stretches in front of me, slowly falling into beach. Servants have come along and set up the make-shift boardroom within the past hour. While we have plenty of rooms in the palace that could be used to negotiate in, Rosalyn preferred the idea of doing this outside; closer to the water.

The balcony is also glass, and water runs through the hollow sections of the frame. Same can be said for the three-story fencing that surrounds my home. I would enjoy looking around the scenery more, recalling details I've left behind, if not for the herd of idiots I cope with.

"My advisors may review the contract once it's been drafted, and those of you accompanying the King do not have to stay if you do not wish." She glances at me, silently explaining that I don't have to linger either. I've been to these sort of things previously. They take a painfully long amount of time and energy. If I could switch places with Rosalyn, I certainly would as she doesn't delight in these any more than I do, but if I stay, I'm not going to help her out.

If I trust her with my life, I can trust her to deal with this. Plus, she has plenty of advisors to double-check Volo doesn't try anything sly.

Cal, out of everyone, is first to rise. I quirk an eyebrow, surprised that the future king is uninterested. Or, perhaps, there a simply other details that interest him more.

Intrigued, I follow him.

Like Whitefire, Bluewater has a lot of bulletproof glass in it. Not only are windows made of the material, but entire walls. Our version of House Haven is in charge of the lighting in the palace, and today they have magnified the sun's rays, filling the halls with brilliance.

Once we're an earshot away from the court, I say, "Cal. Do you know where you're going?" The counselors and a couple members of the Rift have floated down a different way, and I don't have to fret my volume.

He stops next to one of the many vases dotting the hallway, overflowing with the flowers from the courtyard of the Laude. "I would've found my road. Eventually," Cal adds, stepping forward a step. But he doesn't look at me, instead scrutinizing the gardens below.

I snicker. Just a smidgeon. "It must be odd for a prince who's roamed Whitefire and Summerton for his entire life to vacation in a castle that isn't his own. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"No." His eyes pierce mine, and I am met with the most intense pair of orbs I've seen in a long time. Red and gold. I don't see how he could possibly be related to a set of ice blue eyes, though his other features make it plain as day that Cal and Maven are brothers. They have the hair of a raven and sharp jawlines, and a love for electricity.

"Wanted to be gone from Volo and his court and politics?" I question, reciprocating his fiery stare. "I'm afraid you're not going to get that break when there is a crown atop your head."

His eye contact fractures as he turns back towards the wall that overlooks our prestigious gardens. With Greenwardens and Nymphs residing in the city, the plants invariably air their finest, even in the winter months.
He doesn't respond, and I take matters into my own hands. "The gardens offer a splendid view of
the lake. If you stare long enough, maybe Archeon will come into view. I'll take you there if you
talk to me along the way."

"What do you want to talk about?" He asks, releasing a sharp exhale. Cal probably thinks I'm going
to grill and taunt him, just as I've heard Evangeline does. I like to think myself more civilized
compared to magnetrons. The thoughts are practically steaming from his skin.

I lead the way, looping my elbow through his. Though I've never really cared what Nortans think
of us-apparently there are rumors of us being under civilized and savage- it would be nice if I gave
Cal a decent tour of my home. I spent a couple of days at Ridgehouse, but I didn't like it there.
Sure, they had hallways of glass, but a majority of the manor is cold and dark. Not airy and bright
like Bluewater is.

"Your brother is an awful soul," I say quietly. If he is fighting to dethrone Maven, he can't be too
offended by my words. And, I can't think of what else to tell him.

He is a monster. Maven treated me as if I was nothing, certainly not a Queen, but a thorn in his
side. Threatened me, as well. And I didn't receive the brunt of his madness.

"That's what I've been told. But he's had a busy schedule; hasn't had time for his dear brother. And
nobody will tell me anything about what he's up to these days." He doesn't bother to look at me,
our position too awkward to try and keep it up. Still, I watch his neck, bobbing up and down, his
jaw, moving slightly.

If I'm not mistaken, he means to ask if I know what happened to Mare while she was in Maven's
custody. Custody. Based on how she acted with Evangeline calling her out on speaking to the
King, I hesitate to believe Mare's told him anything. "She really didn't tell you about her stay?
Even before..." I cut myself off, uninterested in completing my train of thought. He gets the gist.

"No," Cal says, sounding almost ashamed. He couldn't have done much better, I'm sure. He gave
her emotional space when it would've been wicked to pry.

Guiding him down a marble stairwell, I'm tempted to offer the boy a pat on the back. Not for his
decision, never for a decision to choose power over love. But for his heartache, that Mare and him
undoubtedly suffer through each and every day.

At this hour, words will speak better than actions.

"I was there for the latter part of her stay, and her presence inside the castle was kept hushed,
typically. She screamed for minutes on end, sometimes. She broke a lot of China, too," I start,
listing the events that come first to mind. But those are generic, nothing unexpected or surprising.
"I heard that the chefs asked Maven to replace her dinnerware with plastic, but he refused. The
Arvens asked Maven to soundproof her chambers, he refused that as well."

Pale, pale white ebbs away his tanned skin away. Mare's screams and ruining of tableware cannot
be new information to him. The Scarlet Guard had spies inside of Whitefire, and that was basic,
day to day happenings at the castle.

"My brother chained her up yet he wanted her to be heard."

Don't you?

Rather, "A mercy," I acknowledge.
Then, we become silent and stiff, neither of us caring to speak.

I inhale the clean, sea-ish scent that has always been peppered around these corridors. When I was younger, I thought that at night angels descended from the Heavens to spray the fragrance throughout Bluewater. When I was eight, I caught a Red-blooded maid spritzing the liquid on windows late at night. I had been sneaking around, looking for an angel. It was a window cleaner.

"There you are, Cal," I say, motioning to the doors that enter to a vast garden, stretching until it reaches the glass wall. Flowers of every color are arranged in raised beds, planted into the ground, and hang from lampposts. Lilliputian streams sneak under the fencing, running systematically through the area. I'd stay, but he'll want to be left alone.

"Iris. Is there anything else, that you know of, that happened to her during those months?"

I sigh, already half turned-around. I'm almost ready to say no, but a strange memory pops into my head. I hadn't wasted a second while I was in Whitefire, and was beginning to collect bits and pieces of gossip before my wedding, discretely. A particularly nosy lady had been telling her friends about "that Samos girl and her schemes." Evangeline had taken Barrow out of her room, straight to Maven's chambers. The magnetron left, but Mare had stayed for several minutes. What had they done?

"Nothing that comes to mind. Like I said, I witnessed a small stint of her time there. And what does it mean now?" I ask, brushing off his concerns. "She's alive, Cal."

"Define alive, would you? I may not be able to pick up on every body movement like some can, but I saw the pause. Something happened, didn't it?"

Alive. Physically, obviously.

Being as vague as achievable, "It was court gossip and theories, nothing more than that. Evangeline supposedly scared some Sentinels into letting Mare into Maven's chambers. And she didn't come out for several minutes. So they talked, or did something, according to the busybodies. It was the day prior to the wedding."

Something. My suggestion is transparent, and Cal blinks once, twice, and then a third blink... Unless Maven forced himself on her...I don't think so. Maven's definition of love wasn't that twisted.

"Thanks for showing me to the garden, Iris."
Chapter 23

Mare

"Almost," Tyton tells me for the tenth time.

I cringe as pain and sting branch out from the tip of my finger to my knuckle. It lasts a couple of seconds before deteriorating, but the knowledge that this is going to happen as I edge my fingertip to the dinner candle is so much worse.

"My finger is losing its ability to feel, Tyton," I complain, leaning my chest on the wrought-iron table.

"You're sure that you didn't feel the slightest burn as you walked through that fire at the airbase."

I sigh, though I have no excuse to be annoyed. Tyton is nothing but helpful and patient in my quest to become flame retardant; unbreakable against any Burner that crosses my path. Then, I glare at the fruit scented candle that he placed in the middle of our table, its flame dancing on the wick mischievously.

"I felt like my body had caught on fire, but not literally. It didn't hurt, just felt..." I start strong, but my words slowly die out, unsure of where I am specifically headed.

Tyton's eyes glisten with interest, hazel brightened up by the sun watching overhead. It has been raining on and off in sporadic sunshowers all afternoon, but the sun never fails to flaunt itself. It feels nice, more than nice to be gone from courts and palace intrigue, where I forever find myself in the middle of it all. I hate those hallways that I constantly am running down, fleeing from one burden or another.

"Electrifying?" He suggests, a kind smirk making itself known on his face.

I chuckle, nodding my head before I sip at the caffeinated beverage a server brought out to me. "So cliché, yet absolutely true." I remove my hand from its position grasping my bendable straw to balance it on the candle's glass rim, dangerously close to a painful temperature. It shouldn't soothe me, the nearly scorching flame just centimeters away. But I find an odd, unhealthy liking to it.

My stare must be giving my thoughts away because Tyton himself sighs. "Try again," he orders, tilting his head slightly as if the change will give a better vantage point.

Subtly, I glance towards the door that enters into the inside of the restaurant, and my action doesn't cause a server to emerge. We didn't order long ago-I don't know what I'll be consuming, as I wasn't paying attention when Tyton requested the food- but my stomach has rumbled for hours, even in training. "I've burned for minutes and no avail. My fingers are turning black," I snap, showing him my middle finger. "Davidson would've found a candle, or bonfire if you were that desperate to help me with this. Why are we here?"

Around us and our table is the most beautiful sight I've seen in my entire life, unsullied by war and struggle. A river, five meters or so across, runs through my line of sight to the left, a murky green. I should find the shade somewhat offputting, hundreds of years of pollution running through it, but I do not. Its state shows that it is untouched by Nymphs and Telkies, or the public, except for the occasional drunk who falls into the stream. They should really fence the river, though, maybe they don't for a reason. To preserve another element of this natural phenomenon.
Stone bridges span the river at regular intervals, some overwhelmed with vines and leaves. The afternoon has come and gone, evening into full swing. Plenty of the restaurants and shops have turned on their outdoor lighting, ranging from basic yellow to roaring red. Off in the distance, a small boat full of passengers lollygags towards our outdoor sitting area, illuminated wood with lights embedded into the sides.

We're in San Andros, Tiraxes, ten miles east of the military base we landed at yesterday. The facility is strictly for fighters, and Davidson made no exception for my family, who are safely deposited in Ascendant, Montfort. I still haven't seen Montfort, and I cannot begin to fathom what it looks like, even with Tyton's tales of the grand country.

Though I'm kept in the dark from most royal affairs, I've never heard so much as a hint about Tiraxes. I assumed it was a government controlled by Silvers, no different than Norta or the Lakelands.

But I've never been so wrong.

Tiraxes is controlled by the Scarlet Guard and Montfort. It hasn't been for long, but it is a nation of equality. Before our federation took control, the country was a wild land, with little harmony anywhere other than the big cities, watched over by Silver lords. There was an attack on the lords several months ago, leading to a democracy being born. A struggling democracy, but still, a democracy.

What I find the most hilarious is that nobody outside the country knows that this has happened. Tiberias and his allies have no idea that we've annexed an entire region without telling them, and the Lakelands and Maven have no clue. Davidson and his officials are careful to patrol the borders with trustworthy guards and assure us every day that nobody has escaped. I don't know what to think on that part, considering Tiraxes has transformed into a prison, but nothing much can be done. It's an advantage that enemies can't discover.

"It wasn't about testing your progress," Tyton explains, breaking me from my thoughts. "I was here last year and figured you might like to see the city. I saw the candle on the table and thought, why not? Don't you wonder what you want to do if this ends? You won't have to train for battle ten hours daily, so what are you going to do? I figured, that it would be nice to give you a taste of that life."

This life. Even with the image sketched right in front of me, I can't envision myself living here, or anywhere else as serene and bright as San Andros. My imagination was robbed from me, years past. Repressed to the thoughts of my village, and the best possible life that I could give myself.

"Thank you. I'm not used to doing things like this." I lay my palm over his hand, stretched out over the table.

He grins, but the action holds a pause to it. Tyton probably wonders the same thoughts that go through me whenever he and I are alone. Where does our relationship stand? It's gone by in a blur, tangled within the Rift and Archeon, Cal and Maven. He kissed me, and I kissed back, not that long ago. Then an erratic Farley spoke the truth aloud, what everybody knew. "Tyton..." I say, removing my hand to settle it in my lap. "What are we?"

We're picking this conversation right where it left off in the Samos Archeon estate.

The mannered smile drops, and he retracts his hand as well. "I don't know, Mare. I've voiced my feelings already. But do you love them?"
"Them?" I question, confused. "It was Cal that you had the problem with; he observed, bored as your sister was killed."

"Maven," he explains soberly.

I huff out a laugh, covering a frown. "Maven is dead, Tyton. A monster inhabits his body, but the boy I loved is gone. I will kill him if given the opportunity."

"It's possible to love dead things. Everybody does."

Cal loves his mother. Maven loves Thomas. Farley loves Shade.

"You see savable fragments in him that nobody else does, little lightning girl."

My brows crinkle. "No... no I don't." But don't I? Why else would I allow him to wipe off my foundation, revealing the bruises of exhaustion beneath my eyes? I want to kill Maven, wish to see the ice melt out of his eyes as he inhales a final gasp. Yet as days have gone by, my solid will for Maven's annihilation has chipped away. Farley is a Whisper. He could be saved if she learns to harness his powers.

"Jon and I, how should I put this? We had a discussion in the dungeon on the day we left for Archeon. He told me his premonitions, with your capture, and your conversation with Maven. You let him touch your face. " He says it with an air of disgust, uncharacteristic of himself.

I look down towards the tan floor, then up to the black awning that stretches aloft. What the hell was Jon doing at the Ridgehouse when he wasn't harassing me? I heard that Cal and Evangeline were there right before he went into his seizure, but how did Tyton find the time to sneak in there? So classic of Jon to purposely come to Ridgehouse, only to mess with us.

"What did he tell you?" I ask, wanting to make sure I don't tell him what he isn't already aware of.

"Every step of that night. I was going to tell you, someone about Jon's foretellings, but I didn't, as soon as it was realized he was spot on. Farley, Harrick, I knew that he was going to die, but I did nothing."

For me. The words said under our breaths are clear, and I lower my eyes once again. Maybe I'm the monster, rather than Maven, for leaving Harrick. I should've dropped, held him as the king came marching victoriously across the hallways, begged for him to allow the Haven life.

Tyton braves on, pushing through volumes of emotion. "He described your discussion with Maven, in detail, I should tell you. He wanted a dance, for his silence."

"Wouldn't have you? To keep the tides calm between the Silvers and Reds?" But that isn't what swayed me. It was a swift burst of anger, a yearning for revenge. I wanted to see Cal stare, as he watched that damned recording, tucked away in a jail cell.

Put there by me.

"I'm not judging that. The fact that you let him touch you, rub that concealer of your eyes, prior to an ultimatum... That's what I'm concerned about."

"You think it doesn't concern me?" My eyelids are spanned, and if somebody came up and tried to pry them open further, they'd rip them off first. "The boy I was engaged to is gone. I know that. I know that," I say again, to reaffirm my words. "But I cling to his memory. And every time I see him, Maven does something or other that makes me believe there's hope. A genuine smile. A
fleeting agony in his pupils. And once, he cried. I'm sorry, I truly am. But I knew Maven Calore long before I met you.

He only nods as a slight breeze comes around, misplacing a tendril of hair.

Tyton doesn't miss a beat and brushes it behind my ear. It's barely noticable, but he lingers there, grazing a finger over my earrings, then the bare patch, where Cal's is meant to go. "You continue to love them both," he says, more a fact than a question.

His touch is tender, meaning to say that the truth isn't going to end in a slap. It serves a greater purpose than to comfort me, however. I'd lean my face to the riverwalk, otherwise, maybe contemplate jumping in, but his muscled hand prevents me from doing so. "Yes," I agree, heat pulsing into my face. I can't imagine what this would be if Maven or Cal-or both- were here. A bloodbath, to say the least.

"The heart never follows orders from the brain," Tyton murmurs, shaking his head in scorn.

"Unfortunately, yes. But Tyton... I want to see what can become of this," I start, my mind barely registering what words I'm explaining to him. "If you're willing... and it's nothing too deep... not yet."

Our waiter comes out from the restaurant's doors, with an eternal smile. He carries a sturdy charcoal tray, with mounds of food placed on separate plates upon it. "Hope you enjoy," the man says, enthusiastically. As if he actually enjoys his job. People in this city, even back at the barracks, they seem happy, pleased with what they're doing.

"Thank you," Tyton and I say in unison as the server lays out food before us.

As the server leaves, Tyton utters "Thank you," again, much lower. "I'd like that."

And I smile, staring at the exotic and unknown food on my orange plate, a similar shade to the dusk that has begun to settle in.

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Though it means nothing, we hold hands, bumping shoulders when we edge past other walkers.

I don't recognize anybody, not that I have a reason to. The people in this region of the continent have deeply tanned and brown skin and dark hair. Tyton's had brief conversations with a couple of men that he's gotten to know from past excursions in Tiraxes. But, the people of this city are more interested in me than the other electricon. Not that he minds; Tyton seems content watching as Silvers, Reds, and Newbloods greet me, offering me gifts and hugs.

It must be the culture that persuades its citizens to be so open and welcoming because in Piedmont-an allied nation- I didn't have swarming crowds trying to make conversation with me.

The sun is gone, but humidity lingers in the air and hairs cling to my forehead. It doesn't help that my arm aches, carrying a basket of food and clothing that must weigh twenty-five pounds. I don't deserve any of this, is the repetitive thought that keeps rolling through my head, no matter how hard my smiles are towards the people that greet me. I'm a murderer. I have killed Silvers and I have killed Reds. They shouldn't be thanking me, but throwing their gifts at me, pushing me into the river.

"You're a true hero, miss," a younger girl, maybe ten or eleven says to me.
"Thank you," I return, Tyton's grip almost succeeding in pulling me onto the next grateful one. Lightly, I tug back, indicating for him to wait a second. "What's your name?"

She blinks at me, surprised. I've made an effort to ask their names, or if they have an ability. But Tyton keeps us going like we're on a neverending conveyor belt. "Darcy," she responds, blinking again.

"Nice to meet you, Darcy," I tell her, now letting Tyton drag me on further. He has some sort of plan in mind, considering the relentlessness he uses in towing me along, brushing Tiraxians aside as if he's a bodyguard. He is, according to Montfort's leader. Davidson would never let me go out somewhere like this alone. Though I'm more than capable of defending myself, I don't know the geography of this region or the people.

Curving around lamps that shoot fire from their bases, Tyton argues to a couple of little girls that I can sign their cheeks later, and I think that one of them slaps him on the thigh. She says something incoherent, then scampers off to her playmates turning around. We pass a store that stringently sells hats, carved wooden heads modeling the creations in the front window. A hat with artificial lilac flowers catches my interest, woven from straw.

Though the temperature has dropped a couple degrees, I am still not happy with my choice of attire. A loose pair of black slacks and navy running shirt. Perfect, just perfect for absorbing heat. I'm half tempted to roll up my pants and throw my boots into the crowd slithering through the streets behind us.

"I've lost count of the many little children you've pulled me away from tonight," I say. The walkway thins, and our hips touch.

"You could spend days out here and they still wouldn't let you leave," he justifies, curling fingers tighter into my hand. "Whether you think so or not, you're a savior descended from heaven to them."

Huh. I wonder if I hadn't fallen into that pit, what would have become of these kids. The Scarlet Guard would exist, surely, but even a single human can alter the course of events. Maybe Tiraxes would still be Silver-controlled. Tiberias would be king... if not his dead father.

"Don't say that," I hiss, tensing my grip in turn. "Julian and Jon, they said those things too. I'm no God." A God's cursed, that could be disputed. But Gods are blessed and righteous. They are not the damned and killers.

Tyton opens his mouth to speak, but not before another little girl pushes between us, wrenching our hands apart.

I'm about to snap "watch it" out of old habit, but her bubbly smile and missing front teeth have me closing my mouth, right with Tyton. There's even a twitch of a dimple coming from him, the slightest hint of a smile. "Miss, Miss!"

Everybody's calling me that. From the elderly, my elders to the toddlers, barely able to walk, let alone give a speech to me. But it's fun to let them try. This child must be five or six, lush and curly brown hair atop her head. She wears an adorable sundress, one that'd I'd just about kill for now in this heat.

"Yes?"

"My mom and I are seamstresses," she says, and I inwardly question her. A five-year-old, sewing
with needles? Though Gisa started young, maybe it's not that severe. I'll have to ask. "Will you try on my clothes?" The girl outstretches her arms, revealing a pair of embroidered beige pants and a festive orange shirt, no more than a tube. To boot, a pair a of sandals with three tan straps lay at the peak of the pile.

Tyton comes close to my ear. "We really don't have time for this, Mare. Davidson's going to send out a squadron if we're not back to the base by nine."

Meanwhile, the girl's shoving the fabric into my hip, as if pushing hard enough will magically pop the clothes onto my body.

My self-appointed escort stands to one side, while she stands to the other, jostling me.

"Tyton..." I say, hoping he'll get my message. Just one more child to appease, and I'll be able to change out of these clothes, their sole purpose to kill me.

The child, however, is not an ordinary Red child. As seconds pass on, with Tyton pulling the opposite way that the girl does. She must be a Strongarm, with her capability to hold off Tyton for so long.

Or maybe the electicon's the one who's holding off the girl.

The world whizzes before me as I'm shoved rearward, my spine crunching against Tyton's abdomen. He gives out a grunt of surprise as we fall together, the Riverwalk of San Andros being seen from a new angle. The river.

I didn't realize we were so intimate to the water, and neither did the girl. As I descend, I catch a glance of her, mouth agape and eyes wide.

A shriek exits my mouth prior to me gaining the idea of clamping my mouth.

Tyton takes the burn, for the most part. H slaps the water a heartbeat before it takes us both, my back clanking into his body. It's pleasantly warm, the green liquid bleeding through my clothing instantly, weighing the both of us down.

Instinctively, I fish for Tyton, chaining my hand to his bicep, inches below me. Only shadows can be distinguished in the shallow yet murky substance, but he finds my shoulder all the same.

Earlier, he'd told me about the brief history of the river city, how it was shallow enough to walk in at some points, while in others it's a good twenty feet deep. We must've landed in one of the deeper sections because my body doesn't brush up against anything, save for Tyton. Forcing my eyes to stay open, I move my head around, looking for light. Bubbles escape my lips as I relax, allowing the water to carry me upward. The tiny Strongarm certainly did a number on us, discombobulating my senses and pushing hard, burying us deep under.

But heightening my appreciation for the ones that remain. The water is lukewarm and consuming, caressing every inch of my body. I only just have enough intelligence left to not inhale the substance as we float upward, the village lights wobbling and hazy.

Forgetting everything, I wonder what Cal would do, if he were Tyton and plunged into the river in his stead. The Burner hasn't much to fear physically, but the water is a grand exception. Would his love for me override his terror? Or would his devotion not be sufficient to save us both, and would he drown us in this pathetic, little river, only because of his panic?

It doesn't matter. Between the combination of my paddling and Tyton's, along with the natural
buoyancy of our bodies, my seared lungs find oxygen.

"I'm- I'm sorry," somebody containing a high-pitched and squeaky voice stammers above me.

Though I'm engaged heaving my chest in and out, I toss my head back to lay eyes on the dark-skinned girl, now with tears running. At the moment, she reminds me of Farley, possessing the inability to control her powers. The same types of tears run from their eyes, full of frustration and fear. But not of the present. Of the future; they could hurt-kill- innocents.

Still gasping, my arms find their way to the ledge, and I pull my torso onto the pathway. Her foot is no larger than my hand, when they lay next to each other; her baby feet are adorned with pastel chalk, while my hands are calloused and reddened. Different our lives are. "It's alright," I say, my face turned towards her, yet on the cobblestone. "My electricity was out of control a year ago. And I'm eighteen now. How old are you?"

"Six," she answers softly.

"Six," I laugh lightheartedly, trying to ease her tension. I wasn't under for more than thirty seconds, but she managed to accumulate a full set of tears by the time I resurfaced. Amazing, what children can do. "What's your name?"

"Ronnie."

"Well, it's very nice to meet you, Ronnie. And now that my clothes are all wet, I wouldn't mind a new set."

"You look beautiful in that," Tyton muses, walking next to me.

For once, I cannot help but agree. Nobody-as far as I know- knew my measurements, but the tan pants fit my waist comfortably, the sandals are my size, and the shirt is light, saving me beads of sweat. It's been too long since I've worn something that wasn't for the purpose of training or battle, but for the fun of it all.

"Thank you. What was it that you so desperately wanted to show me?"

He smiles, before taking my hand and the lead. It's later in the evening, and Davidson isn't going to be pleased with our late return. I have to hope that Tyton was joking, in saying our General would send a squadron if we weren't back soon.

On the bright side, most of the over-enthusiastic children have left and gone to their villas, leaving me with a less outgoing crowd. They've asked for a few handshakes, an intermittent hug by the adults strolling on the walk and drinking their drinks in bars.

We walk for blocks, past restaurants, over the bridges, and up hidden stairwells, weaving for a destination impossible to predict. And through failed attempts, I try not to be eager, but to live in the moment. We won't get back here anytime soon, that's for certain. Tyton and I as good as escaped from the base, hardly giving Davidson a heads up as to where he was taking me. Our regiment in Tiraxes focuses on forming strategy, getting stronger, and so on. Not sightseeing.

"Look," he buzzes. A gravel rooftop sits at our feet, and the moon above, three quarters completed.

My breath hitches. Below lies a panoramic view of the city, the river outwardly stretching into the horizon. Towards Monfort, towards Norta, and to somewhere else. The lights against the royal blue
night are breathtaking and crushing, and my impulse is to feel them, the power shrieking through my veins. Just like in Whitefire, there are too many, but I don't want to destroy them.

"Thank you," I manage out, consumed with roving my eyes in every direction. "For everything."
Chapter 24

Evangeline

The video will be released soon.

And this is the most unbelievable thing Father's had me done all week.

At least I get to spend some private moments with Elane this way, who originally stayed behind at Ridgehouse with Tolly. Brilliant, he called himself, when he announced his master plan. Another infiltration of Archeon, not dissimilar of the catastrophic job Mare and her clan brewed up. It's me and Elane, and there are both pros and cons to this. We're alone, probably, unless my father's hired to have us followed, which wouldn't surprise. But we're alone. I'm competent of defending myself against a couple of Sentinels, and so is Elane... still, in the opulent Nortan city, we don't stand a chance.

"You have to promise me to be careful," I suddenly say to her quietly. "That newblood died in that castle. If you're not careful..." I finish, unable to, unwanting to speak the words aloud.

"We're not going into the palace, Eve." I don't accept the answer, and she finally says, "Yes, I promise."

She takes my hand in hers, and I clench it tightly, the lifeline to my sanity. Elane and my brother, I often think, are the last beautiful things, the people worth living for.

I open my mouth to ask her if she's getting tired, and I shut it then, hoping she won't spot my action. Harrick was new to his power and likely overconfident at his skill level. Elane's manipulated light, hid from her parents for years. She'll tell me if she gets tired.

Won't she?

While I've been gone, Maven's made a few... renovations to Archeon. A stroke of Silence prickles at my senses. Up ahead, the gates to Caesar's Square are securely twisted shut, a particular fire prince not far beyond. They've installed Silent Stone throughout the city, a controversial change, from what the reports say. Either way, everybody's annoyed, whether they believe it's necessary or not. It supposedly blocks newbloods like Harrick and Havens like Elane from slipping into the palace.

Most regrettably for Maven, our side of the war has more clever players than his own. The newbloods didn't need to worry, considering the varmints took advantage of the underground tunnels. But we needn't get close for this. Enough to gauge the reactions of Cal's rightful citizens, before we depart to the manors of Welle and Arven, who have discreetly contacted Father within the last week.

"This way," I urge Elane, Silence pressing too close for my taste. A bit more, and our cloaking might disappear.

"Any minute now," she returns with, leaning against the window of a shop. I have to do a double-take before I realize where we are.

My favorite silk shop.

It certainly hasn't been long since I've last set foot in the store, but it feels like an eternity. They
always carried durable, light textiles, excellent to be combined with my metals. Elane came with me, and we could spend hours in there, buying excessive quantities of fabric, brushing hands while I wasn't busy pulling out tetrarchs.

Elane's grip on my hand falters, long enough or me to notice. It grows weak as if the bones and muscles disappear. "Do want to go in? To look?"

I shake my head, hardly thinking about going in. "The owners are rich and stupid, and probably installed Silent Stone in the threshold for shits and giggles." An easy lie. But we don't have time anyway.

Before a moment for thought, somebody gasps nearby, and I jerk my head up from the stone ground.

None other than Iris Cygnet is plastered onto the screen in the silk shop's window. She wears the same dress worn when interrogated by Volo, and vengeance is in her eyes. And in my eyes, she looks so... angry.

And in retrospect, it seems absolutely ridiculous that I desired a part to play in this madness. Chained to a king with eyes for one girl. But I never cared if he loved me, never wished he'd love me. Yet I've seen firsthand how detrimental Maven's love can be, even if I wasn't the prey. Standing at his side is a waste of a life.

"Citizens of Norta, I am Iris Cygnet," Iris begins, speaking queenly, the way my parents trained me to speak. "I'm terribly sorry, but not for leaving. For the corruption that Maven Calore has allowed into your kingdom. He sits upon a throne of lies and corpses. There are rumors circulating through the walls of Archeon, as I'm sure you've shamefully heard. I left, not because the Lakelands have betrayed you, but because the King, who you pay taxes for, rule over your lands for, is the betrayer. Tiberias Calore the Seventh, the Flame of the Norta is no renegade, but his brother."

She pauses for a brief moment, for dramatic effect, as Mother calls it.

"All those months ago, it was Elara Merandus, your beloved queen, who Whispered to dear Tiberias and ordered him to pierce his father's heart. There is no reason to gossip any longer, children of Norta. Yell it across the streets: The Flame of the North is the rightful king. The little boy, not even an adult, that parades through your streets, is an imposter, a fraud."

Elane and I have to stand off to the side as more Silvers and a couple Red servants crowd around the television, but the audio is transmitted everywhere, through every speaker on the street.

"The Lakelands have allied with the Kingdom of Rift and Tiberias Calore," she explains, and I smirk to myself. Iris failed to include the newly formed alliance with the Scarlet Guard, as well. As of now, that's the one attribute Maven's reign has going for him. The nonsupport of Red equality. And Cal will never revert to the old ways. He's already pained Mare enough; the lovesick puppy doesn't have it in him, though it would benefit him. "High Houses that seek refuge due to this newfound information may be granted asylum in the Lakelands, should they choose to want it. Or, if a brave, brave individual would like to bring us Maven, alive and well, they shall be greatly rewarded. Long live Tiberias Calore the Seventh, and the alliance between Norta and the Lakelands."

As the screen fades to black, so do the people, as if they're Shadows themselves. There's no time to pat myself on the back for cutting the segment with Cal and I out since Iris said everything herself. "Where are they going?" I ask Elane, who's as dumbfounded as I am.
The shutters of shops winding down the street shut one by one, people rushing into them or away altogether, until the street is a ghost town, save for a slight breeze that flusters my hair. Around the corner, two Arvens remain stoically placed against the gates, the toy soldiers they are. Shouldn't there be guards...

"They're hiding," she says, blinking her curled lashes twice. "I mean, it makes sense, does it not? A message like this would typically be followed by an attack."

"Ah." Of course. They're either fleeing to protect the king, completely brainwashed by him, or running to their homes, to wait out the attack. Then to decide if they stay or go. There wasn't an implication of invasion, but it seems like something these fools would think. Or anybody who doesn't have a death wish. "It will be a rather dull report to give Father, then. What now?"

We fall into a walking pattern as she and I think what to do next. I was supposed to smirk and observe as Silvers ran the streets, screaming and shouting. It's almost as if... they expected this to happen, as if Maven has announced some law for an immediate lockdown should something like this take place. That's impossible. We would be informed.

"I suppose we could pay House Welle an early-"

"Good day or night, my subjects," Maven's voice rings through the streets, siren-like. Day or night... he prerecorded this? "This message is prerecorded and is being played only if my sociopath of a brother dared to come forth from the shadows."

Maven, however young he might be, has mastered eloquence. If this was taped ahead of schedule, with time to rewrite, practice, and record, it will be utterly flawless. In other terms, a piece of art meant to persuade the masses.

Does it really matter? My mission is to listen for now, not to persuade. It isn't relevant to me if Maven retains the throne, or Cal takes it. So long as Volo Samos lives he will drain my potential and use every last drop however he sees fit.

"My once dear brother, but now a bitter traitor, dares to lie. The words that seep from his mouth are nothing but untruths, methodically constructed to worm inside of your heads, bright as they may be. Tiberias wasn't content enough running for his life, yet he digs a deeper grave for himself." His tone is soothing, and I slump a little. Against everything I know and have learned about Maven, a merciless man, intent on his goals, he sounds so sure of himself, as if he actually believes the statements that exit his dirty mouth.

"I still offer you a clean, peaceful death, Cal," Maven says, though he can't mean them. Not with their history. "And the High Houses that are tricked so pitifully may return to Whitefire's doorstep, where at first, I can promise a lack of trust and repercussions. Should they stay at brother's side until he has lost, I will not offer the same fate."

"The rumors sewn into the heads of my Lords and Ladies are put there by Iris Cygnet, the Queen who betrayed me. She is not the first betrothed to do such things. The Lakelands never wanted peace, my people. The brutes desire our demise, though we were not the kingdom that killed their ruler. They have aligned themselves with Tiberias, the Rift, and the Scarlet Guard, only to stab them once I've fallen. And perhaps I should mention that absolute irrational state of Tiberias's mind. A country in which Reds and Silvers are equal?" He laughs cynically. "Irrational."

Static buzzes in the air, signaling a live recording. "This evening, at five, a press conference will be held in Caesar's Square. Questions may be said and answered, and I will have a response for each and every question. I am not the criminal, Nortans. If you do not have prior obligations, please
come to the Square, at five o'clock."

His tone remains almost identical to the first part, but if one listens closely, a jittery edge can be caught.

"That's not for several hours, Eve," Elane says. "And I'm getting tired." She must be.

"Then let's pay a visit to House Welle. And Arven, if we have the chance."

I've heard tales of the Arven manor. Made of Silent Stone, from its floors to ceiling. I'd rather try to convince the Osanoses to come to the Lakelands, with cute streams running through their manors. A house constructed of that bloody, crippling stone... it might have me grow unconscious before I can get into the manor itself.

Oh well.

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"My father wants to obliterate me, doesn't he?"

"You're just recognizing this?"

I don't say anything in return, consumed with the gates ahead. They're made of boulders, carved into perfect cubes. I can feel the Silence ten yards from the gates, but even with the crippling pain that's sure to get worse, there's a savage beauty to the Arven estate, a uniqueness that all the High Houses possess in some way.

Here, the beauty is underlying, swimming in the dark stone of the estate, none of those decorative vines crawling up the stone. There aren't any frilly decorations in the courtyard, no flowers or animals, in fact. The residents must like it this way, or at least take pleasure in others' concern for their grounds. Benches made of Silence line the drive past the gate—it has no bars— and various sculptures are placed throughout the lawn.

Cringing, my boots touch the shallow step that meets the doors.

Before Elane and I can make it much further, the doors sweep open to show a pale woman in a black dress standing at the doorway. I'm tempted to ask whose funeral is today, based on her getup, but think better, zipping my lips shut.

The Arven's hair is auburn, not far off from Elane's. Her skin is aged, crease lines appearing as she offers a smile. Silencers aren't the best with people outside of their ability, and the ones who attempt to be friendly always fail miserably. Her cloak puddles at the ground and Chokes off at the neck, contrasting with her face too much for anyone's taste.

"It's so lovely that your father sent you to us, Evangeline," the woman says. Elizabeth, I believe her name is. The High Lady of the House. "Miss Haven," she acknowledges, nodding.

Elizabeth looks at us expectantly, unblinking.

I take a step, then another. They're Silencers, I have to remind myself. As disconcerting as Arvens are, living in a manor made of their ancestor's blood, they are immune to the crushing weight that assaults my every nerve. They'll never be familiar with the pain of their blood.

"Forgive us," Elane interjects, pulling up to my side. "We're not very good with Silence."
The old woman smirks. "Then hopefully we can come to an agreement quickly."

A breath of air is choked down by me when we cross into their home, and involuntary chills spiral through my bones. It's cold, inside and out, and dark. A single, narrow panel of glass lets through light at the end of the fat hallway, but the sunlight is tinted gray, though the star shines wholeheartedly. There's something off with the glass, this place completely.

The walls are bare, matching the gray floor perfectly. They can't...

"My family and I are aware of the reputation Silencer's have. And we figure, it's best to live up to it," Elizabeth explains, making emerald eye contact with me. "The other Houses, powerful as they may be, are afraid of Silence. A few have stopped by here, and do not enjoy it. But do not think that our entire household is so cold."

"To seem powerful is power."

"Precisely, Evangeline."

The main hallway segways into many more, opened doors and closed. I catch a glimpse of a forlorn dining room, one candle burning from an overhead chandelier. Appearances lead to fear might as well be the Arvens' motto. They look like they live in a prison, where the inmates died.

Where the corridor cuts off, two staircases curve to a second-floor landing and two wooden doors converge. They're held onto the wall by metal hinges, but when I try to touch the metal, my throat stings and my eyes water. I don't feel the metal; I feel nothing, and I might as well be in a flower pasture because there is nothing. Not even the iron in my blood.

Elane exhales quietly as she leads us past the second-story doors, and a similar picture is revealed. I wonder what Elizabeth meant when saying that not the entire household is so grotesque. This is no better than the downstairs.

"This way," she says, ushering us to the first door on the left.

The Silence has lightened considerably, though it still presses lightly, making me want to squirm out of my body. Once again, there is a tinted window at the end of the corridor, but that light soon disappears when Elizabeth takes us into the new room.

Precisely seven candles are arranged outside the ring of chairs and couches that are throughout the spacious room. Our guide takes a seat next to a man on one of the more spacious couches, and several Arven sons and cousins are lounging on the bleak furniture that surrounds the couple.

They could kill us. That would earn them great favor with Maven, and Father knew this when he sent Elane and I off from the Lakelands. Maybe he's at last given up on me.

"Evangeline Samos and Elane Haven," the mysterious man says from the shadows. It's irking Elane that she can't brighten up the room, I'm sure.

"I assume you're Kairo Arven, Lord of House Arven."

"Indeed, I am," he says, crossing one robed leg over the other. The head of the Arvens is notoriously quiet, showing up to Silver gatherings once in a blue moon. He is not shy, just not... a lover of people, they say. Personally, I've seen Kairo Arven in fits and spurts, the mystery man always disappearing in the middle of galas and banquets for unknown reasons.

Chalk white teeth flash as he grins, watching me pick him apart. His blonde hair is streaked with
gray, and he adorns a cleanly shaven face. It seems Sentinel "Egg" didn't inherit this man's hair. A rounded out face, a stomach of a warrior who eats too much meat, and wrinkles shouldn't inspire fear, yet I have to hide it.

Swallowing another gulp of Silence, I sit on half of the available couch across from him, smoothing out my skirts. Elane follows.

"House Welle has agreed to an alliance," I tell them, making sure to make eye contact with each of the Silencers, if only for a second. It's barely true. We did come to terms with Welle, eventually, but it didn't come without persuasion and plenty of promises on our part. They'll leave the country by the end of the week. "We hope your House will share their decision."

A pause. "Well, it appears that the Arvens have missed the chance to create a kingdom, as your father did, Evangeline. Wise, wise, he is. But I will say the same of myself. My House, we see that the tides are turning. The Lakelands, one of the Calore boys, and the Scarlet Guard and Montfort. I do not support your alliance to the latters, and I've known Volo Samos for years. He really supports a society in which Reds, all of things, are our equals?"

Elane practically scoffs. "Tiberias has woven an intricate web in that aspect. Outwardly, yes, Montfort and the Guard are our allies. The King of the Rift and Anabel Lerolan don't concede with Tiberias's ideas, but times are tough, and we take what we get."

"The Reds could betray us at any moment. For now, our link is the want to see Maven off the throne. Afterward, I do not know what will happen. But trust me when I say this: my father will not allow Reds to climb."

Elizabeth watches the floor, her lips pursed. She's deep in thought, thinking something. "And why is the Flame of the North intent on equalizing Reds and Silvers?"

He's madly in love with a Red, that's why. Cal can blabber on about how Mare's shown him a different path, that Reds and Silvers are truly the same, but it boils down to his unconditional love for her. He'll break her heart, but not her freedom.

"I honestly couldn't tell you, Lord Arven," I say, leaning into the couch. I'm tired, more so than after my training, or a war. The Silence. "Perhaps Tiberias can tell you if you come to the Lakelands."

They look amused, knowing the unhidden and weak trick I pulled. I'll hit myself for that later on.

"There is little your country asks for, Evangeline. If I didn't know better, I'd suggest you rethink your bargaining skills. For my able men to fight when requested and my spoken loyalty? And in return, to keep my treasures and standings? It's more of a threat than a deal, is it not? That if I don't align myself with your cause, I'll pay for it later?"

I'm candid this once. "Pick a side, Arven. Knowing Maven, the odds are fifty-fifty."

"It's a deal then."
"What's the verdict?"

"Your city isn't too shabby, Princess," Bart tells me, hands in his pockets.

"Well, you better think so. Because I'll order your death if you say otherwise." My threat ends in a chuckle, low and joking.

He grins, and I return the gesture, though I have nothing to be pleased for. My announcement was made throughout the continent, anywhere reachable and applicable receiving it. Maven, good old Maven, had a prerecorded speech to release to the people. It had an impact, but that damned boy placated it.

Mostly.

But the morning's disappointing news is hardly remembered here, only a couple of hours later. I've been too preoccupied with walking Bart through points of interest in the city, learning about him, and in turn telling the Swift about myself.

Laude, the temple, looms ahead in all its glory. The gleaming brown pyramid is two blocks away, and usually, I'd get an urge deep in my chest to run until I reach the courtyard gates. But today is not usual. My Gods won't be pleased with me, not after what I've done, for the manslaughter of a hundred Whitefire guards, for neglecting my duty to my kingdom. My duty, to sit still and grow crazy in Archeon, to maintain peace between our countries.

I don't deserve to seek the Gods' help, shouldn't even go and sniff my favorite flowers outside of the doors.

On cue, Bart asks, "Do you want to go and pray?"

My eyes splay wide, caught off guard by his question. Nortans aren't religious, it's been explained time and time again. Churches and spirituality aren't forbidden there, but not advocated either. The Calore royal family doesn't practice, otherwise I imagine numerous noblemen would follow suit, if only for appearances.

Yet there's more that surprises me. Praying. When did I last pray? I haven't just avoided visiting Laude, but contacting my Gods, my protectors altogether. The temple is one thing, where I feel closest to my creators, but I haven't thanked them for the most basic of my blessings for days.

And I... I can't. It's too raw and painful, everything I've done is. Seeing no other way, acting on survivor's instincts, I up and killed those Sentinels, without a thought. Sure, some of them recovered, and I had to get Mare and her sister out of there, but that doesn't justify the sins. The Gods shouldn't, won't condone my behaviors, princess or not. Rather, I'll simmer in my guilt for awhile... before I deserve to pray, to be listened to.

"What?" I say absentmindedly, hoping he'll ask something else, or at least change his phrasing.

"Do you wish to go there, Princess?"

I scoff, shake my head, and roll a pair of eyes. My ex-Sentinel cannot conduct a five-minute
conversation that isn't full of satire. I suppose it isn't a bad quality, but it gets on my nerves nonetheless. Constantly throwing in harmless jabs at somebody or other, for the purpose of no reason. Bart calls me "Princess" at least once per minute, and if it were Maven, or that tragic Volo Samos, I'd slap their smirks right off their faces. With Bart, it's something different. At first, it was condescending, as if to replace Princess with "You're the reason my life's gone to shit." Now, he says it like a nickname, something said absentmindedly from years of knowing me.

I lie my response. "I already went early this morning. It isn't very busy-"

Bart sticks up a hand of gloveless fingers, stopping me in my tracks. Another odd something to see here. He wears slacks, the shade of Laude, and a generic, cotton black shirt. Like other Sentinels, for the longest period, I didn't know what his face looked like. Maybe there's more reason to that besides for the obvious protection; faceless men are easier to sacrifice for the greater good.

"Why do you lie about frivolous things?" He asks, bluntly, not raising his tone. As if it's a statement of facts, not a question. But it is.

"Seemingly frivolous," I quip in a sigh. "How do you know I lie?"

"I've met many in my life that perceive lying as an art. That strive to master it. And you, Iris Cygnet, are not of that category." He stops for a moment, sloping his shoulders with an exhale. Then a smile and a low, breathy chuckle. There's something about that laugh that I adore. The pure realness, perhaps. That the happiness and pleasure of it aren't forced. "But honestly, I was out here for most of the morning. I would've seen you."

I used to do that a lot, too. It's true that the temples in Detraon are most reticent in the morning, and I'd come here often by my lonesome, but it was perfect. Slow moments to reflect upon my days, the constant worry that Father was going to sell me off to some man, and the dull ache at the back of my skull, reminding me that while the city is a picture of peace and grace, a couple hundred miles east, a war was raging. "What were you doing out here so early? Not to mention, how did you find your way?"

"There's a giant needle sticking into the sky. I've finished harder tasks." He fails to tell me why he came out here in the first place. His rooms in the palace are ten times better than a Nortan Sentinel's, he has no reason to be uncomfortable... "Hey. Stop trying to divert my focus, Princess. Why lie?"

I decide to sound very scientific in my response. "As a Nortan, you probably can't relate. No religion, no belief that there are a higher power and something waiting for us. I feel guilty, really guilty, when I push my values to the back burner. I haven't prayed in days," are my final words, and they nearly come up with vomit.

"Ah," is what comes out.

I figure out that's it for what he's planned and I speak again. "I understand. You don't know much about Lakelander culture, what the Gods mean to us, and so forth."

"It's true, that I don't have a background in religion. In fact, in Norta it's illegal to practice the Lakelands religion. But please explain to me, because I am beyond confused. You're ashamed for not praying? Do the Gods cast you out of their Heaven if you miss a few days?"

I have to resist the urge to throttle him, to violently make him understand what's going on in my heart. Bart's half-joking, but that doesn't make me feel any better.
Why I'm spilling my heart out to this man, I don't know why. "After we split up in the tunnels, I had to help a lot of people." I prolong each word, as if saying them slowly will make it untrue. Mare and her team were getting swamped, and I looked outside and found a pond. So I flooded the guards' feet, and let her do her work. Greco was in there. I don't deserve the Gods' favor."

Nornus's hand intwines with my own, and I look down to see what he's doing. It's numb, incapable of returning the gentle squeeze if I wanted to. We share Silver blood, but my hand is brown against his, lightly tanned with blue veins.

"I doubt the Gods would want you to turn away from them in the time you need them most. As divine entities, aren't they supposed to be better at forgiveness than humans are? War causes us to do terrible deeds for those we love, the sides we support. Sometimes there isn't time to think or options to consider. You care, Iris. That's what's important."

My eyes prickle with tear particles on the verge of being seen, and I tighten my eyelids. "You sound like my mother, in the way of your sentences."

"Is that good?"

"Very," I tell him, adorning a small smile in reminiscence. "She was a good woman."

Mother always had a response, whether for Father's military questions or mine about little girl friendships. She spoke so fluently, beautifully, that commanded people's attention, even if the discussion was on Red rations. But above everything, she was kind, understanding, and good.

"Iris, you could've told me you didn't want to go in," Bart says, but his grasp on my hand holds steadfast.

"I'll keep it in mind for next time."

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"Maven's press conference shouldn't be long," Rosalyn reiterates for the tenth go around. Both royal clans have gathered in our throne room, and meats, cheeses, and an array of produce have been deposited on a table crosswise to my sister's throne. The Samos's requested it, as some sort of miniature celebration feast.

"You don't know him like I do, Rosalyn. Tiberias may very well end up being further from his goals after Maven's through."

Nobody here should be celebrating. Although Evangeline radioed in a while ago to share that both House Welle and Arven have agreed to our terms—Welle asked to have a new and complimentary manor built in Archeon, and to become a higher ranked House in Norta.—nobody here should be celebrating.

My sister stretches on her throne, catlike. "Time divulges." It isn't our concern whether Cal wanders closer to his birthright, she also means to say. Events of late have my mind boggled and scrambled, and I'm hardly able to keep track of who's on whose side. The Scarlet Guard and Montfort are our allies by their relation to the Rift and Cal, but we haven't drafted any sort of contract, not like we have with our Silver counterparts.

Cal and Bart stand near each other, apparently chatting as though they're not critical pieces to this war. It's nearly high noon, and the suns gleams through the skylights, lighting the boys up golden, causing Bart's hair to glow. The architecture of our throne room is to die for, every seam of it intentionally placed for a reason. The sun peaks at this hour and shines through the center skylight,
eight smaller circles wrapped around their sun. The five walls of the room are made of glass, a
gorgeous pedestal of dark rock brought here and carved to sit the throne. Rock that came from the
edges of our lake.

The floor is strange, and that's the best method of description. Dyed blue granite, mixed with
droplets of water, are contained underneath a thin but sturdy panel of glass, the water running
through cracks like streams, actively moving.

My gaze snags back to the two boys, still talking, both wearing hidden looks of distrust. They
must've known one another in Archeon, as children and warriors in training. They have history,
something Bart and I don't have. We're on the same side, but when our fates part courses, he'll go
with Cal and Volo. In Norta I promised safety, money to last a lifetime. But we're here, finally,
with plenty of other schemers that have resources. He has no reason to stay.

Rosalyn stretches once more, restless. She hasn't gotten much sleep lately, I can tell that without
question. She's been pouring over the contracts that are due to be signed, scouring for hidden
clauses that her advisors could've missed. Later, I'll tell her that if the Nortans tricked us, we should
break our word, and reintiate the war.

"Well. Do you like him?"

Confusion seeps onto my platter of emotions before my heart starts galloping. I've been gawking at
Cal and Bart for the past minute, analyzing the Prince's expression, his posture, -slightly drooped,
but otherwise perfect- and his outfit. He doesn't wear one of those outlandish capes like Maven
does, but the uniforms of Nortan royals manage to be disturbing without. Black boots, sleek black
slacks, and a fitted gray Commander's jacket, a scarlet sash drawn over the shirt. Countless medals
of honor are pinned across, barely a space in the middle to separate the two sides. How many were
truly earned?

"No," I say, without a tinge of uncertainty. Physically, Tiberias Calore is beautiful, and it's obvious
why any other would faint at his boots. Chiseled muscles, not a plain on his body lacking, a
mesmerizing face, and an impossible set of eyes. But I'm not a fool and I listen. Cal loves Mare,
just as Maven loves Mare. But he threw that passion away for a chance to ascend to his rightful
place. A man that does not put his love first is no man to begin with. "Besides, I wouldn't dare to
try to take Mare Barrow's place in his heart."

"A Red and Silver, dirt and diamond, find love together. It continues to be more believable that she
seduced Tiberias. Everybody's telling me otherwise. I wasn't talking about him, little sister. You're
smarter than to fall for royalty. The Nornus guard? Bartholomew, correct?"

"What?"

She smiles, a knowledge that I don't possess hidden under there somewhere. But Rosalyn isn't
cruel. She'll explain. "You spend a lot of time with him. And if he isn't glued to your side, you
watch him."

Do I? We spent most of the morning together, strolling the city and its pathways. Before that, I
hadn't seen him since... "He's Nortan, Rosalyn. His family is still under Maven, and will be under
Cal during his ascension. It would be a waste."

"Tsk, tsk. But I caught a confession in there. The flowers of love begin with the roots of friendship.
And some physical attraction helps, too. You admire him, at least?"

Nodding, I suppress something between a smile and a grimace. "Bart was key to my escape.
Without him, I might still be in that Hell of a palace. Maven probably would've intercepted a copy of a letter or two, and I'd be in hot water with the Burner. He might've killed me."

At this Rosalyn raises her brows, either impressed by Maven's audacity, or his lunacy. "And how would he execute his Queen, My Princess?"

"Adultery with my Sentinel, I believe he mentioned."

Her painted brows stretch further skyward, very un-queen-like. "Oh? So your relationship with your little friend over there began prior to your plots to leave?"

Yes, in a way. I spoke to him the morning Maven's forces invaded the Piedmont base, where Mare was supposed to be. We spoke briefly then, and then he saved me from that wretched newblood Silencer minutes later. But that was Bart doing his job, not flirting with me, or whatever she wishes to call it. I don't need her knowing I almost died and was saved by one of Maven's men, of all things.

"No. Maven had no evidence, no reasoning to believe that. But kings have their whims."

"Even Father," Rosalyn returns, in agreement.

"Even Father." He wasn't a good man. Mother was, but her husband wasn't. He married her for her skin-deep beauty, but it extended much further than that. Then he resumed commanding masses of Red men and women, enslaved them in the name of the throne. Like all men of power, he tired of Mother in time. Heeps of lovers, he took, enough to make a legion if he wished. And with those ugly relationships, I surprised he didn't.

"Princess Iris," a rooted voice says behind me, commanding my attention.

Turning, I find Cal standing at the foot of the throne pedestal. His eyes are curiously wide and his head is tilted, awaiting a response. And while I should immediately reply a polite "yes", I watch him for a moment again, inwardly sighing at his outfit of choice. It's fit for the King of Norta, certainly, but their outfits have always been so outlandish.

"Perhaps my sister isn't responding due to her not knowing whether the title "Prince" or "King" is suiting."

"Cal will satisfy. I get sick of hearing that phrase anyway." Then you shouldn't have chosen this life for yourself, boy.

"What can we do for you?"

"If Her Majesty wouldn't mind, I'd delight in speaking to you alone, please, Iris. We didn't finish our conversation from earlier."

I have to suppress my want to appear shocked, as our little conversation involving Mare and Maven took place several days ago. I've only sighted Cal around the palace a couple times since then and listened to him speak to Rosalyn and Volo regarding alliances.

"Gladly." Instinctively, I offer my hand to him, and he takes it without a blink. While Cal may be a war-hardened brute, he was also raised in a palace, as I was. He's not unflinchingly articulate like Maven is, but still a prince.

Halfway to the opposite corner of the room, Cal's fingers go limp, and I take that as a suggestion to let go. Even touching him, the unnatural warmth of his skin, I feel no attraction towards him.
"I'm sorry that I cut our conversation short last week," he begins, looking forward, not at me.

"It's not my act to mourn. But I'm guessing it's yours. What? You regret not staying longer to pry more palace intrigue and secrets out of me? Trust me, I know nothing that I haven't already revealed."

"I believe you, Iris. I just wanted to apologize. Your garden here reminds me of the one outside of Ocean Hill, in Harbor Bay."

"Your mother, Coriane Jacos, liked it there," I interject, and instantly feel stupid for bringing it up. A bit of a stalker, too. Norta has never interested me in the slightest, their rejection of the Gods my main turn-off, but Ocean Hill would've been an interesting place to visit, on the eastern seaboard of the country. Our own Lake Eris is beautiful, but even it cannot compare to an ocean, so vast we don't know if there's anything past it, or if it ever ends. "The Lakelands do their research," is added to soften the blow.

"Your country should really straighten its exploration priorities." Cal chuckles, but underneath, it's to hide a grimace.

We were thorough, combing through the smallest details of the royal Nortan family, their subjects, preferred weaponry, et cetera. Waiting in the fog for the tiniest error in their ruling, their security. One was never discovered. But they never discovered flaws of ours either.

My heels stop on the floor, and Cal stops as well. We're already too close to his vile, manipulative Grandmother for my taste, alongside King Volo, sipping at a goblet of merlot.

"We're in the same boat on that one, Nortan." He quirks an eyebrow, unsure of what I mean. I'm hardly sure of what I'm talking about, even as the words spout off my lips. "Your brother set fire to an entire city, searching for your girlfriend. He threw an entire ball, risking the Houses lives, just for the pageantry in finding her." He got his round of questions, and now I'm asking mine. "His mother corrupted him, with her mental powers. But now that she's dead, shouldn't that part of her be gone?"

He flicks at his flamemaker bracelets, provoking them to spiral around on his wrists. It's a habit of mine to keep a bottle of water with me regularly, but Cal can press a button and spread fire wherever he wishes. It takes time, a lot of time to draw water directly out of the air, and I can't carry pools with me.

"Nobody knows how it works. Mare has probably come the closest to figuring it out, but I have trouble thinking that Maven himself knows when she's in control and he's not. Unless she is gone, and he's just evil."

That sentence... it's horrendous, the words of a brother given up hope in his last kin.

"However, I don't partake in that line of thought." He stares directly into my eyes, and there's a confidence, ill-placed as it may be. "I watch him in his broadcasts and I still see the small boy that I played with, taught to control his fire. He was so worried that he'd burn the other children."

"Murderers still have brothers. They can kill and deceive, but they can't change their blood. And Maven wants to, desperately, doesn't he? The things he says against you on screen extend into off-camera. He hates you for everything you are and all that you have."

"Mare."

"Yes. You should've seen how his wheels started turning as our espionage told him that you were
gathering support for your reign. Mare knows Maven, but knowledge isn't gained without dropping some of your own. He knew that she would never support you."

I'm about to tell him that it isn't only a girl, and he already knows it. But the monitor on the far side of the room, cemented to the glass, brightens to life.

The wind has picked up, blowing Maven's curling hair askew on his forehead. His crown helps a little, smashing a couple of the tendrils to the side. No paler than usual, complete black clothing, a sad, even bored expression. Most of the screen is focused on his face, and shoulders, and a podium in which he stands behind, but I can make out some of the background.

The upper half of Whitefire is chopped off in the shot, and he must be just past the gates of Caesar's Square, standing behind a podium, the polished wood branded with the Calore seal. His stage that somebody dragged out into the Square is guarded by a Sentinel at each corner, and I squint, the screen glistening, as though the stage has a glass panel over it. And it must if anybody believed my propaganda.

"My citizens of Norta, today I address you with an utmost dismay and pity. I've come outside the safety of my palace to address you and your questions, concerns that are present. So rather than a long introduction that bores, we may skip ahead to those thoughts. Perhaps this war will end when everybody realizes that my brother's speeches bore them to death." A couple Silvers chuckle in the crowd, those being full-throttle Maven-supports.

Cal stands to my side, and Bart has pulled up to my other, crossed arms with a tired look. I catch a near-scoff from Cal, and he shakes his head in disappointment. But sadly, many Silvers, especially the young people, don't care about the truth and are swayed by who promises the prettier wedding cakes and grander estates.

"Your Majesty, do you still love your brother? Do you really intend to execute him?" a man from House Nornus asks, bedecked in red and orange. I don't have the heart to look at Bart. It may very well be his father.

"My brother Cal fights for a throne that he has long lost. He is my elder, yet it seems Tiberias doesn't understand the impact of decisions and consequences." It seems that Maven is going off on his own tangent, hardly related to the reporter's query. "Typically, when one becomes impatient and elects to kill their father, my father, in lieu of waiting, the one is cast off from the family. Let the truth be cried throughout the country: there isn't a morsel of compassion in my heart for the King's murderer. He will die a traitor's death."

A series of vague and generic questions fill up a good fifteen minutes, each of which seem to convince a few more people of Maven's innocence. Why now, does Tiberias try to take back what he claims is his? How do you plan to counteract the massive force that he has gathered for himself? Why did the Lakelands alter sides for no apparent reason, other than to shake things up, if they intend to destroy us as a whole? And he has answers to everything.

"How do we know that you and the Queen, your mother, aren't lying?" The camera pans through the crowd and lands on a generic spot of the crowd where a lot of House Welle have gathered. The fact that the Welles are there unnerves, though it's perfectly logical. An entire House missing an event of this importance would look odd, unsettling, and suspicious.

Whoever asked that dreaded question should be proud. The entirety of the meeting is focused on it, yet nobody asked it until now.

Maven doesn't respond, looking for the source of those dreaded words. It was somebody for
certain, but nobody can tell who, obviously.

"I suppose," Maven starts out slow, but he knows exactly what he's saying. "That there is no true evidence that I'm not lying, and that the rumors Iris has brought to life aren't true. Yet there's nothing supporting Tiberias's argument more than mine, than a couple of our enemies. A Lakelander Princess, a couple power-hungry High Houses, and Reds? You choose to believe that volatile combination of people more than your own King and security footage?"

A tide of shaken heads rolls through the crowd.

"Those of you who support a king that believes in Red equality is in love with a Red, may leave. More questions?" The way of his speech is so sure of himself, though the boy king must be brimming with worry inwardly, if he is still capable of that emotion. Maybe he isn't, and that's how he's calm.

Nobody steps forward, out of shame for uncertainty, or else Maven truly quelled the masses.

"Then let the party begin." Of course, it wouldn't be a public "I assure you that I'm a good, non murderous king," forum without some kind of outlandish celebration afterward.

And then, as if Maven's speech was nothing but another, the screen's color flicks out of existence.

"It should've been longer." My spine shivers at the new memory made seconds ago, Maven's melodic voice something that even I wants to trust. "He shouldn't have silenced them so quickly."

"The people don't care who's on the throne. Now, they don't even care if they're on the winning side. Because Cal has voiced that his new Norta will be a place where Reds are treated fairly," Bart says, rubbing a palm against his stubble.

"Here we are, and I have the support of the Lakelands, Montfort, Piedmont, the Scarlet Guard, Rift, and five Nortan High Houses. Military-wise and in theory, we could take Norta by force with ease. But because I'm in love with a Red girl, they won't support me," Cal states monotony, a clean canvas of an expression. He's annoyed, angered, even. "So what the hell am I supposed to do?"

A thought circulates throughout the chambers. The High Houses will not stand by a king like him, not while they have this perfect photograph of what a Silver king should look like.

If he wants to reign, he'll sever his ties to the Guard and Montfort.
"Good," Julian murmurs from the sidelines above. "But you can do better."

I grunt and sweep a stray hair behind my ear. At least this way my hair sticks behind my temples nicely, sweat pasting everything into place. "Maybe if I had an audience I'd do better, Jacos," I respond, sending a bolt into the cavern's wall.

The training base here in Tiraxes is expansive and makeshift, but the years have been kind to odd facility. It really isn't manmade at all, save for a couple of wings, but a series of caves that are conveniently suited to an army's needs. The mess hall, training rooms, and viewing arenas are massive, and the echo of my voice gets worse every day.

My instructor leans over the iron railing two stories above that wraps around the jaggedly circular arena, and though his tone is playful, there's not a bit of sarcasm on his face. "You can do better."

"Doubtful." The sky above us is open and cloudly, though the wisps are rapidly dissolving into nothing but briskes autumnal wind.

"Perhaps you are right, Miss Barrow. Perhaps the day you conjured that Godly storm was simply a fluke. Just like that evening you walked through inferno at the capital, no?" Julian begins to saunter around the ring-shaped platform, identical to one below it and ten above. "Forgive me," he amends as I don't say much, only to continue glaring at the reddish-brown sandstone in front of me, all around me.

The clouds continue to dissipate, and a chill filters down into our hollow space. Julian tucks his robes further around him.

"The fire... it was some sort of miracle, Julian. I didn't conjure my lightning or even consider using it. There were suddenly sparks across my body, and that's all there was to it." I look down, somewhat ashamed of eye contact with the man that has taught me so much. It must sound so idiotic in his mind.

But Julian only says "Hmm," an intrigued sound. "Your lightning proves more and more each day that it has a mind of its own. I would call it self-preservation, but I suppose it was not. As for that storm you created with inky clouds and hundred-mile high volts, that was inspired."

"By hatred."

He cants his head in a sad agreeance. "I asked what made you angrier than anything else. But it would be a shame if you had to go through a mental breakdown and a session of passing out every time you wanted to create a storm."

"Indeed, it would be."

"Try again," he veers us back on course, and I try a new tactic, by kneeling down.

The clouds drift through my veins and the rain itches to be poured down as I draw a perfect storm together in my mind and reality. The first clap of thunder is louder than previous ones, and it is followed by another few, matching the beat of my pulse. Without glancing up, I can tell it's getting darker. Because of the shadows shifting on the floor, becoming darker and obvious.
It's taxing, it's taxing, but the feeling that I get is like a drug, addicting to the senses. The scent of coming rain bobs in the air and my hair prickles with static.

Addictive things destroy.

In anticipation, Julian backs up precisely three steps. He made us hike down a dozen stories of stairs to get here, rather than stand outside. It's safer for him and warmer for me, but I'd still rather be out there, discovering exactly what the wind is like, how dark it is without all these flamed sconces. But looking up, it's dark. Not as extreme as it was at the Rift, but a nice charcoal.

Had the sky been a piece of stationery at the Rift, then it was dripping in pitch ink, so black, where it begins and ends was a mystery.

Clouds bubble and froth, about ready to explode. Anywhere but the pit, Julian told me a while ago, before it mattered and I was still struggling with getting more than a few clouds into the sky. I nod and release them to jerk down and dip into the sky, anywhere they please besides for the cavern and its vicinity.

The sky is a display of purple fireworks, pounding into the air and earth so frequently I have to steady myself when I stand. For a moment I wonder if they should be called off, that the entire network of tunnels and rooms will implode on themselves if another second of this goes on.

Though if I really should stop, I don't, the twinges of euphoria too strong to ignore. My hands raise and my eyelashes narrow, searching for a collection of electricity up there that I've already made. So then, the same way Gisa used to braid my hair when we were younger, I intertwine strands of purple together, until the strands run out and I'm forced to let go.

A satisfying boom graces my ears before the storm begins to drift apart and Julian's clapping no longer has to compete with the thunder. "Good. But you can do better."

I scowl at him and shake my head before stalking out of the chamber. "Have a good evening, Silver."

"Do you ever think."

"Absolutely and constantly," Tyton replies without letting me finish my sentence, leaning in to graze my neck.

Against my train of thought, I do the same and close my eyes. Only for a second. "Sometimes I think that Maven knows where we are, because of the things that I do in training. How could they not notice? Radars, public sightings, something..." I trail off as Tyton sits up, pulling me along with him off the small bed we like to rest on together during break.

"If he knew where we were, would he not send every able man and woman straight out from that wolves' den of Archeon? It's not like he hasn't before. Maven was willing to burn an entire Piedmontese base to draw you out."

He's probably right. Probably. "Maven is aware, you know. That the Reds don't intend to leave him on the throne. He whispered it in my ear when I was alone with him in that ballroom. A fool could figure it out if they pleased. And I'm sure that Tiberias knows it as well as Maven deep down." But the difference between those brothers are their wants, similar as they may be. They both seek the other's destruction. "He threatened to broadcast it too."
Tyton shifts away from me to get a more adequate gander at me. "But he didn't. So what did you do to change his mind?"

I look at my roughened palms, bandaged from rubbed blisters and cuts. "He wanted to dance. One dance." I don't bother to tell him about the security camera I noticed peaking at us from the corner of the room. The sure deeds he'd use that footage for. To torture Cal day and night when Maven has him. Or when Tiberias has Maven. He'd look at it either way. "We didn't, though. You came just in time."

"Ah," he says, nodding, as a gentle knock comes from the door. "And that knock came just in time to save this conversation."

My lips lift the slightest bit, and Tyton opens the door for Davidson, who looks boredly around at our room.

"The figurehead of the rebellion and her boyfriend get quite a swanky room, don't they?"

I huff out a laugh. Our room can't even compete with the space Gisa and I shared in the Stilts. Somebody bothered to slap a can of red paint onto the walls, but besides that, the room drains me. An empty, wooden dresser, a gray rug that blends into the cement floor, and a bed that two people can lie on shoulder to shoulder.

"Mare gets a room to herself, though," Tyton says to Davidson with a sneer. "I share mine with Rafe. He snores."

Davidson rolls his eyes, putting a shoulderblade to the door. "For the things you two have gone through, I'm thoroughly shocked you can't handle this. Most here share their quarters will eight others. The Samoses have made you soft."

Though he wears a grin, Davidson's eyes gleam with weight, an unsaid burden. "You didn't come here to make fun of my room, did you? What is it, Davidson?"

He shakes his head in dismissal, crossing further into the room. "Nothing bad, Mare. Only my fears for the path ahead. Surprising, but the mask of stone I wear is cumbersome."

I say nothing, waiting for him to finish his thought. In the seconds that linger in silence, I gulp. It isn't like Davidson, our mighty general, to be in fear. Infinitely indifferent and rational, he is, but now the aging man's lips are turned upside down, disturbed as he can be.

"Silver Whispers are dangerous. The Lakelands were wise to kill them off and band the remnants from their capital. And you were wise to kill Elara and Samson. They were manipulative enough with gifts, and the Queen successfully altered the natural course of ascension."

"Farley," Tyton says under his breath.

"Julian's been teaching her well. Initially, I doubted him, wanting to come here and help her. He may have taught you everything you know, Miss Barrow, but the circumstances were a far cry of what they are today-"

"He would never, General."

Davidson puts up a finger and blinks twice as if to cleanse this conversation. "You are the last on this planet who should be making statements like those, Miss Barrow," he says my name again, lacking the tenderness it held a moment ago. "Silvers, wicked and power-hungry as they might be, are loyal to last, tied together by one apparent thought: order."
"Order," Tyton echoes, sitting down. "Their conjecture that Reds belong below them."

"While they're independent people, they were all raised in households that grounded it into them. I was leary of Julian for that reasoning, despite the countless stories I've heard of him. But after these past days, it's apparent that he's with us."

I let out an unladylike snort before plopping down onto my cot, feet away from either of the men. I've been left behind time after time, Silver after Silver, but Julian... Julian would never. My mentor wasn't raised in Whitefire or anywhere near Archeon. Born into a poverty-stricken House-though while in the Silver's eyes they were destitute, they were ten times better off than the richest of Reds in the Stilts-and shunned by the palace, Julian was.

Yet Davidson knows this. The Monfortans are well versed in Nortan history and didn't forget to learn of the dead Queen's brother. "You trust him because you had Farley reach into that head of his." And though Davidson has all the knowledge books could ever provide on the Singer, he is certain that trust is reserved for fools. He's not wrong.

"Not precisely. Farley looked in on her own accord. In that aspect, her ability is good."

I swallow, the premonition of bad news stark. "You said yourself Silver Whispers are lethal. So what do you think of her? A Newblood and a Whisper?"

"I think," the Premier states, drawing in a hefty breath. "That her very DNA contains a recipe for destruction. She told me, almost immediately after the band left Whitefire, what she had done. Holding off dozens of soldiers at a time, influencing dozens to freeze in a hallway and not breath a muscle. Demanding they slaughter one another.

"Diana Farley had never even tried using her ability prior, the very ability that she discovered existed hours before," he finishes.

"Adrenaline does that," I draw up arguments out of thin air, the sense in them floating away as soon as the words burst out of my lips. "It happened to me, too. In the Bowl of Bones and it must have happened at Archeon's airbase. Maybe not with the same magnitude, but it happened nonetheless. Farley is not a fraction of the monster Elara was."

Davidson sighs and sits next to me on my cot, their springy intestines groaning with his weight. Up close, he looks no better than the rest of us. This place pales in comparison to Piedmont, where I bathed in hours of sunlight and was never hungry. Sunlight is rarely seen here, and the rations are stretched tight between the hundreds of fighters that live in these caves. Shadows and wrinkles scar his face when he offers a tight smile.

"General Farley is no monster. But no human should be cursed with what she holds."

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In the cafeteria, when everybody should be busy chomping away at their food, I'm stared at. Not like a freak or a rodent, though. But I'd rather be ignored than looked at with the hope Davidson's soldiers hold in their eyes.

"Where are Rafe and Tyton?" I ask as Ella drops a tray of food between my arms, resting upon the table. Today's dinner is a single chicken leg, watery potatoes, and peas. There have been worse.

"Volunteered to be Julian's test subject. He hasn't taken his attention off our secret weapon since morning."
My eyebrows raise at "test subject," and water is swallowed from my cup if only to wash down her response. "I'm worried about her," I admit, though it's hardly a revelation. "Julian's been hogging her since we got here, two weeks ago. Sometimes I think he forgets to sleep and eat, too preoccupied with training Farley and me. Do you know what he's been doing with her?"

Ella shakes her head gravely before taking a flask out of her pocket and shoving it across the narrow iron table. "Drink. You need it more than me."

Hesitantly, I inch my fingers to reach the metal canister. Alcohol can stop my thoughts from racing, but it'll take the edge off my instincts. "What the hell," I murmur. "We'll just have to pray that Maven doesn't attack the base and find me drunk."

The shot burns in my throat, and I take a second one, slamming the flask onto the table. Ella snatches it, tucking the vile back into her pocket, and in the back of my buzzing mind, I'm thankful. I've witnessed too many from my home lose their sanity to the ales and brandies that they thought would fix them.

The scene around me looks the same, but I hate it less now: rows and rows of skinny and tall tables, small margins between them. There isn't an opening in the ceiling like the room I trained in this morning; in lieu, there are more torches bolted to the rocky circumference and more candelabra handing from the ceiling thirty feet above. Peoples' laughter and conversations blur together in my eardrums, and I offer a remorseful smile to the air. My family is safe and gone, and so many others I've loved before.

Ella has begun to cut into her chicken, using a fork to help her tear it from the bone. "Ella?" The woman looks up expectantly, but I'm at a loss for words, unsure of what I should tell her. "Davidson's right," is what I say in the end, and I move to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere I should've gone awhile ago."

I turn, to walk between the maze of tables that stands between me and the door. Ella doesn't make a peep of protest, and my stride lengthens in confidence. I weave through the tables, arousing plenty of stares that are turned a blind eye towards.

The massive cafeteria narrows into a single hallway, just big enough to flatly lie down in. Sconces are placed at regular sections, giving the tunnel stripes. Orange and then black and then orange again. It reminds me of the caves under Whitefire and Archeon, yet less terrifying. Cold as they might be, this system is kept as clean as caves can be, not blocked and sealed like they did in Norta. Intentionally forgotten.

The din of the soldiers' cries ebb away, and severe quiet sets in. It's always this way during dinner time, when every last human is supposed to gather in for eating. The echo of my boots against the cement and stone, and my breathing sets chills down my spine.

It's in these moments most at the base that I feel so painfully alone. I haven't talked to Mom, Dad, Kilorn, or any of my siblings since we left the Rift. Haven't tickled little Clara's belly in ages. Sometimes I dream that I return to them, but the girl is no longer little, but an old lady.

Maybe the war will rage until she is old and grey.

Tyton and Rafe stand outside the doors that lead to the arena. Tyton looks blankly ahead, while Rafe rubs his temples, cringing.
When they notice me coming towards them, Tyton straightens from his slouch. "Mare-

I shove in front of him, my arm grazing his own. If I didn't he'd tell me to not go in, that they're busy. But waiting irritates me, after waiting weeks to see her. I've provided Julian enough distance, haven't asked him questions about Farley's progress.

The sight inside pummels a nerve, and my stomach grows cold with me.

Farley sits with crossed legs in the center of the arena, a brown cushion under her. I would call her peaceful, with a trace of a smile on her face and a pair of closed eyes, her eyelashes lightly twitching, as though she's having a dream. But her nose is bleeding, one nostril with a river of blood that stains down her lips and chin. Droplets patter onto the ground, her nose a leaky sink. The sound of it colliding with the floor disturbs me more than my breathing ever could.

Julian stands off to the sidelines with his hands crossed behind his back. He glances at me briefly, passive, barely acknowledging the fact that I am here. He puts a finger to his mouth, telling me to be quiet.

My feet move me further into the cavern until I'm standing a couple feet ahead of Julian. Tyton trails behind me. Eyes aren't needed to see the frown on his face. I shouldn't be in here to see what's happening to her.

Farley grunts. Though it doesn't-not really-the fire seems to shrink backward, scared of the Whisper. "Maven."

I flinch backward, unhinged. She said it quietly, or perhaps not at all. She could've easily projected the word into my head. "What about him?"

Julian pats me on the back, but I pull past him to kneel next to Farley. "What about him?"

"She'll answer when she's ready," Julian hisses, a strange display of anger. "I understand that you are eager and I've kept you from her for too long. Yet any minute now, it'll pay off."

Maven. Maven. This time it is apparent that the words are not real, syllables that are gone as soon as they echo through my head. More blood trickles. His name, not truly said, terrifies me to the bone, and I go further away before Tyton's chest is against my back.

"What did he tell her to do?" I snap at Tyton, my heart racing a million miles. It's not as though an answer is going to come out of Julian, who I have regretted tasking to train Farley since the moment I saw the blood spewing out of her.

He lays his hands on my shoulders, trying so very hard to soothe me. Still, it's Julian who responds. "I've been trying and testing her limitations. Right now, she can control thirty or so people at a time, if they are all directed with the same order. But then I decided, to see exactly how far her mental tether reaches. Samson's was fifty yards at the most."

"And?" I ask helplessly. I refuse to believe where this is going, and an estranged teardrop runs down the slope of my face.

"She's reached further every day. A week ago it was to an operative at a base in Piedmont, and two days past she spoke with a group of rebels hiding out south of the Nortan boarder," Julian explains, some sort of energy filling his eyes, as though this excites him. "The clinchers appear to be that it only applies to people she has spoken to in real life before and that she cannot control their actions or thoughts. Only speak to them and view their minds."
"Not yet," I say, and look to Farley, suspended on her mat. "She's been at this for a couple weeks, that's it. And you want to unleash Maven on her? To reveal to him who our one and only real advantage?"

"Of course not. We intend to look into his head, and then leave. He'll never know we were there."

What do you intend to see inside? "His mother clawed at his mind and emotions for over a decade. You wish to see that outcome?"

Farley shakes her head, small, quick turns. "The last thing I want is to know what goes on in that boy's head. Nothing, nothing could be worse. But I will not be viewing that part. We need intel, and we've been nearly cut off. Ada's still there, dropped off during our escapade in the palace. But one girl can get so much. Maven knows everything. Doing this will save time, energy. Lives."

Her eyes remain locked tight, a sealed vault that holds the secrets of the universe. "We want them to destroy each other, but now we're just wasting days. Give Cal and his allies a benefit, expedite the war, expedite our takeover. The sooner this is over, the sooner we can change things."

I find myself watching the ground, ideas churning and boiling. "I need to talk to him, Farley. You won't have to look into his head, and you won't reveal yourself."

"I didn't ask you for that. I'm doing it."

"No, you're not. I can manipulate him, get answers out of him. It's safer."

She lets out a crude chuckle, throwing her head back in laughter. "Why do you want to talk to him? I thought you hated everything about him."

"I do," is ground out from my teeth. "But I have questions of my own for him. It's a vague truth, but a truth all the same. A dark, twisted part of my soul yearns for it. To yell at him and taunt him from the safety of this cave that I didn't have last time. To ask him why he didn't release the Scarlet Guard's plans on the entire country. I never did dance with him. "If I don't get the answers, then you can have at him."

"I'm not sure if I can project you to speak to him."

"Just try. Please."

"Very well."

Then, the world turns inky, like the sky on that night at the Rift.

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My breathing is unbearable to listen to. Tenfold worse than the caverns. Though this place isn't much different. They're both dark, and here the floor is wet, a viscous, black liquid flowing between my fingers.

It's all over my body, I realize. The black gel clings to my legs, my arms, and hair.

I struggle to get up, but as I do, the black melts away, dripping back to the floor. "Hello?" I say slowly, my purpose here slipping my mind. A few feet in front of me are visible, but my perception doesn't extend past that. Breath after breath, I try to focus on, intake of an air that cannot possibly exist in such a place like this.
Footsteps beat a path toward me, and I straighten my spine, unsure of what else I should do.

In time, a figure emerges from the darkness. At first, it's his outline, and then his distinctive features.

"Maven."

"Get out of my head," he whispers.
"Maven," I state his name with about as much indifference as I can muster.

"Get out of my head," he replies in a whisper with an edge.

I take a step toward him, only to notice that my shoes are gone. Barefoot with a pair of tight slacks and a long sleeve shirt that bleed into the air. He wears a similar ensemble, reminding me of how he dresses in real life. I don't have a bloody cape to offer him.

"I thought you'd be happy to see me, Your Majesty."

His iconic smirk flashes. "Get out. Now." There is something about this place that makes it harder for Maven to seem arrogant and highly. He looks younger, robbed of the stress that makes his cheeks hollow and the shadows under his eyes. The smirk is less wicked, more transparent. I see the fear in his eyes.

For a moment, I wonder if he doesn't know whether or not this is real. His mother undoubtedly played with his mind, made him see things that never happened, made him believe those things did indeed occur. If he still hears her, perhaps he still sees visions of her ability.

"No," I say, almost growling. The one time I want Maven to take interest in me, he commands me to leave. "This isn't some nightmare that witch you call a mother cooked up. I'm real, and I'm here."

"Where is here, exactly? And Mare, dear, I'd never mistake you for a hallucination of mine. My mother may have been talented, but she couldn't make a perfect impression of you. You're too..." he trails off, wordless.

"Good to hear," I say distractedly, kneeling down to rake my fingers through the black slime. Once again, it slips away when I draw my hand upward, as though it's attracted to the ground. "Where is here? This place doesn't exist."

Maven hums in response, and as I stand back to my full height, he's closer than he was before. The blackness of his tunic fabric floats around him in clouds, like a half-dried painting dipped in water. I notice mine mimics him.

"They're quite powerful, are they not?" Maven asks, and I blink. "The Whisper, I speak of. Powerful enough to reach from wherever you are and sneak into my mind. Or they're weak, and you're hiding in a room just a few doors over from mine. But that isn't the case, now is it?"

"No. I'm not stupid enough to go back there. After all, my sister is home and safe. Fifty guards protecting her from me and you couldn't win."

"I assume that was the work of your Newblood companion as well."

"Yes," I respond, walking in a curve to circle him. He doesn't allow it, copying my actions until we orbit one another, a binary system. "Maybe if you had used a few more guards, you would've gotten me." A smile arouses at the memory, remembering fighting through the blockage of Sentinels that separated me and my companions from the ballroom.
"But I did get you," he says and my confidence falters. Maven steps closer, too close for comfort, and I force myself to hold my ground. "Even the most capable newbloods, even Mare Barrow, has limits. Reviewing the footage, it appears that your friend is not well versed in their powers. A couple more seconds and you would've gotten away the first time. A couple more seconds, and you would owe me nothing."

I stare off into the oblivion, willing myself not to shiver. So many broken trusts and promises, and I hate to think that a forgotten dance with a traitor is included on the list.

"You owe me much more than dance, Maven. You stole months of my life a good amount of my sanity."

"Nonetheless, a promise is a promise," he says, brushing off a fake speck of dirt from his lapel.

I bark out a cruel, harsh, and brittle cackle. Tears sting, but I look into his crystalline blue eyes anyway. "You promised me nothing? I believed it when you pledged an oath to the Guard, to me. And I loved you for it," I murmur the last part as though it's a well-kept secret. Maybe he still doesn't know. It's been so long since I've thought it, said it aloud. I don't recall saying it aloud.

He smirks again, but it lacks the conviction it held during his first attempt at appearing mighty. "Don't lie. You loved Cal."

I break his gaze, and my lip curls in disdain. He doesn't deserve to be told, to be screamed at that I did indeed love him. Because he is a work of his mother, a monster and an incredible actor. Shaking my head, I say, "It doesn't matter now. Loving either of you was a tragic mistake."

He nods in agreement. "Falling in love with you was the biggest mistake of my existence, Mare Barrow. Yet I cannot seem to stop."

"I wanted you to kill me," I hiss, stopping my walking. "I could barely stop myself from taking a piece of China from a shattered breakfast plate and slitting my throat. I wanted to die, and you were too selfish in that emotion you call love to give me a dying wish." He's come close enough for me to pull back my shoulder, and bring my palm forward. Only, while it's spot-on, my fingers ghost through his face, and the momentum pulls me to the ground.

The blackness coats my fingertips, but this time, it's colder. Like ice, in an instant, it feels as though my bones are going to freeze over and crack. I can't help but let a pained grunt out from my lips.

Maven stands over me, unblinking. A cold, ugly moment, I'm reminded of. Maven, help me up. No, I don't think so. This stumble is no different. He watches me drag myself out of the slime, his head tilted slightly to the side. Elara is gone, though. No antagonistic Whisper to turn son against father. Still, this place feels of the likes of a place that Elara would call home.

The King's hand is hovering next to my collarbone when I'm fully stood up, hesitant. I raise my eyebrows. He wasn't tentative in the ballroom, but now he is. While he ponders my skin, I watch his surveying eyes from the two feet separating us. One would think the shadows of this place would aggravate his sunken cheeks and eyes, but they do not. He looks similar to a portrait painted by a great artist, trained to pick and chose his flaws and strengths. His skin is no tanner, but it doesn't hold a sickly aura.

"My mother broke promises. I haven't broken a promise since you killed her. And promises hold a completely different motive when blackmail is involved. But the dance will have to wait," he says, tilting his head down towards my shoulder, which his fingers brush through freely.
I stiffen and retreat, feeling oddly violated, though I felt nothing.

"Now get out my head."

"Is that where we are?" I ask, making a point to look every which direction. All blackness and bleakness held together by this disgusting liquid that clings to my feet with each step. Maybe without this, I'd be falling. With Maven forever. "Your head? Or is it just my Whisper's imagination that glued this place together? You don't know, do you?"

Maven cringes for a brief moment, a true look of pain and want. "I would like to think that she didn't take away everything." He pauses, apparently with the idea that the silence can cleave apart trains of thoughts. "The Scarlet Guard needs answers, correct? So what do you need to know? Why do you so incessantly stay?"

I hear his questions, I do, but my mind keeps me. There's absolutely nothing here, just an ongoing blackness that might very well freeze me if I stay too long. I don't want to know what my mind looks like if Farley stretched it into a setting, but it can't possibly be worse than this. It's lonely beyond measure, so quiet that the echo of my breath must extend miles. "You've said it before," I say emptily, my mind somewhere else. "You rule on a bomb of a throne, the day it explodes fast approaching. We want to expedite this war. Tell me how to destroy you."

"Why would I?"

I cluck my tongue twice, before waltzing back into my walk, a fighter in an arena. "You told me yourself. Your reign is hopeless," I annunciate each word carefully, making sure he hears me. "And perhaps, now that my Whisper can get into your head, I'll continue coming to torture you until you give me what I want."

Maven scoffs and picks his knee up to kick a blurb of blackness to my shins. Even in this blackness, sometimes reading him is difficult. He isn't used to this, not having the upper hand. And the boy king hates it.

I have to catch myself and pull away from a slippery ravine. Don't ever feel pity for him, my mind tells me scornfully. Not after chances he's had to make things better.

"What a torment that would be," I muse, narrowing my eyes and offering a wicked smile. "There must be a part of you that was glad when I killed her. Free of her control and manipulation. At least now, you have some semblance of an identity. But here we are, and you find yourself with a Whisper in the war. A new puppet master."

"I'll wear your manacles if that's what it takes to keep them out of my head. But you're not wrong. This war's tables are turning. So what? Should I renounce my throne for your cause, admit to my father's murder? Beg my big brother for mercy?"

"No," I say, though an image flashes in my head of Maven at Cal's feet, pleading. "You're not the begging type in the first place. We need this to be a messy, bloody war. Tiberias's army will be weakened directly after, and the Silvers won't stand a chance against us."

"Such dark plans for a girl who claims to fight for good."

On reflex, my teeth clamp together, and my canine draws blood from my lower lip. I am many things, but I haven't yet said I'm good. The citizens throughout the towns and bases I've seen think so, scream it, too. But, no. I'm a murderer, a pickpocketer, but never a good-doer.

"All is fair in war, Maven. You think so. Sometimes evil, atrocious acts must be committed. But I
don't take delight in them."

He smiles knowingly, and then says "Corvium." I get the hint. The count of dead didn't have to be as high as it was on my part, there. "So what should I propose? I can't exactly invade the Lakelands, my brother's current residence. Is that where you are?"

"No, I'm not, and I'm glad to not to be."

"Hmm. What about a battle, then? I challenge Cal and his entire army to a fight to end all. Him, the Reds, and the Lakelands, against my soldiers. Cal is a warrior by nature, and he'll appear cowardly if he rejects. Whoever loses renounces himself, and the victor takes the throne. That part is irrelevant, I suppose."

The ease in which Maven formulates this plan and reveals it to me sends chills down my spine. He shouldn't so willingly reveal a decent idea, but he did.

"Lots of blood will be spilled, our armies will be decimated, just as you wish," he concludes, expecting me to reply.

"Why?" is what I decide to ask.

"Why, what?"

"You're so maliciously cunning, yet you offered me a perfectly good strategy. I may have a Whisper, and you may have a smaller army, but I wouldn't be shocked if you bested us all and won this war. Why would you do that?"

This time he stops walking. "Would you believe me if I told you that I'm sick and tired of this infinite and miserable cycle? I've been waiting for weeks, sitting on my throne of rock, for Cal and his allies to make a move. They've done nothing. Iris Cygnet, of people, has shifted the tides more than my brother or my damn grandmother. Strategizing and gathering of allies that could take years, is all they do."

"That's their plan," I tell him, remembering what Davidson had told me days ago. "To drain you of your allies until Whitefire is a useless carcass that Volo could freely walk into one day. It doesn't appear that they're in a hurry."

"Ah. Why would they be? And would you believe me," Maven starts again, going off on the tangent that he is not done with, "if I said that I simply do not want to be king any longer?"

I inhale a particularly sharp breath, loud enough for him to hear. He doesn't smirk or grin, just stands there, patiently waiting for another answer.

"No. I don't think that I would," I say, and it's sincere. Maven has been vying for power since he dropped the image of the boy who helped me navigate the Silver world. The crown at this point is the very thing that Maven breathes for. He wouldn't give it up, and the time that I believed in his plan splinters like crushed wood.

"And I wouldn't expect you to. But the throne was Mother's vision, Mother's lust, not mine. It would've been different if there weren't so many rumors hanging above my neck like knives, if my brother didn't have a growing revolt against me, and if I had gotten to choose my queen. Iris Cygnet was a nightmare to deal with."

I look towards the slime again and am thankful for the cold to chase the blush from my cheeks. "She says the same about you."
He pushes on. "This life has become too difficult and complex. All I ask is that I'm there the day that Cal's face twists in betrayal from discovering your precious Scarlet Guard's true alliances. Otherwise, I don't care anymore."

"That sounds like a surrender. Months ago, at the height of your miniature stretch of rule, everything seemed fluent and perfect. How far you've fallen."

"How far I've fallen," he echoes bitterly, bowing his head. "But don't think for a second that I ever believed this would succeed. If you and Cal had died in the Bowl of Bones like destiny wanted, it may have. But you didn't, an anomaly. In so many realities, you were supposed to die, little lightning girl. But fate chose the one in which you thrived."

I should've died. In the Choke, in the Bowl of Bones, and so many other places and for many other reasons. "It would've been easier on everyone that way. Except for the Reds."

"I'll put out the announcement tomorrow. And then it'll all be over in a few weeks, and the very nature of this world will fold over on itself, because of one Red girl. One accident."

"This world was always wrong, Maven. Changes need to happen." I turn my back on him and begin to walk, assuming Farley will get the message to collapse this dream and pull me to consciousness. The further I get, the heavier the cold air is in my lungs, and it squeezes against my shoulders, pushing me into myself. If it's possible, the atmosphere darkens around me, and I'm about ready to choke if Farley doesn't pull me out soon.

"Wait," Maven's disembodied voice calls from behind, not far. "I have a request."

"What is it?"

"I want to speak to my brother the night of the battle. I'm aware that he thirsts for the thrill of the kill, but he'll have to bend this one time. There's no way both of us are going to survive this war, even if you promise we will. I need to speak to him."

I turn to see the Maven's lips, turned downward into a slight frown. "You'll have to ask him that."

Then, the blackness pushes against the both of us, suffocating me.

I vomit when I wake, onto the stone floor. Then I gag. And after that, I cough.

Tyton's rough and gentle hand is at my back the entire time, hitting medium-sized blows.

Julian doesn't waste the same times with sentiments and comforting actions. "Did you accomplish anything, Miss Barrow?"

"Yes, yes I did," I mutter, still mobbing off bits of spittle and lunch away from my lips. "Maven's going to challenge Tiberias and his bunch to one sole battle. That's it. A single fight between their armies and the winner gets a fleeting throne. Blood will be spilled, everyone will be weakened."

Silence walks into the arena, through the unguarded doors. Nobody speaks, but quiet thoughts float in our midst.

"Do you know when?" Tyton asks.

"Maybe a few weeks. But I don't know for sure."
"Around the time of the first snow," Tyton acknowledges, and I nod. It's going to be cold by then, and those not gifted with abilities to ward the cold off will suffer. Not any more than the others, I have to remind myself.

"This is good," Farley states from behind me, standing with a proud and tall posture. "Well give a small number of soldiers to Cal and his troops, while the rest wait in the shadows to take over later on. We need to tell Davidson straightaway."

All the while, Julian stands quietly, his lips pressed into a perfectly straight line. A Silver man who has helped his blood's own enemies prepare to destroy them. An anomaly.
Chapter 28

Iris

When the letter reaches my hands, I can barely force my eyes to read it and my mind to take it in.

Dearest brother,

I am tired of your unwillingness to act. You gather allies, you steal my allies away from me, but it is not enough. I write to you from here in Whitefire, where my counselors and Lords are weary and grow angry. We plot and plan, but there is little to do from the supposed safety of this palace. I wait for the day that you do something, anything really at this point. Perhaps a bomb would be stimulating.

Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that this agonizing waiting is your very strategy. To take all the allies I have left from me until I stand alone in a palace that was never supposed to be mine. I wasn't aware that you pegged yourself for a coward, Cal.

So my advisors and I propose: allow our warriors to war-as warriors do-in a neutral territory. A final, great battle, that determines the future ruler. If you are truly the better king, then let it be you. I don't ask for life if I do indeed lose. And if you are the failure in this great war, brother, do not expect the same mercy you may grant me. We suggest the Choke, due to it already being destroyed beyond measure, but if you have a better locale, do tell.

If you haven't yet reached this conclusion, let me enlighten you: both of us will not survive this war. It is impossible. For that reasoning, I would like to see you again on the evening of the war. Please, brother.

This message will be later released to the public. Do not be a coward, Cal.

All is fair in love and war.

Sincerely, King Maven.

"Iris," Bart nudges me. "The others are waiting."

I look up from the lettering, to find a line over my shoulder. "Oh," I exclaim, blindly passing the parchment to Evangeline, who returned from Norta with Welle and Arven days ago.

"He's out of his mind," Bart whispers to me, and I cannot help but nod. Wagering his life on a battle most likely balanced against him is the work of an insane man. I almost long for him to have some sort of trick up his sleeve. I gulp. He must.

"There's something about this that feels terribly off, Bart. I have this sick, sick feeling in my stomach that hollers at me to run from this battle. There's a missing piece that nobody here can see."

The Swift grabs my hand and smiles, and I return the gesture, but the grin doesn't reach my eyes.

We stand on the glass balcony that reaches towards the beach. Volo, Laurentia, Cal, and Anabel huddle around a glass table with chairs, speculating amongst themselves. The way their expressions changed as the message was passed around their circle... they are as disturbed as I am.
"Will you fight, Bart?"

Bart looks at me, surprised, far away in a daydream. "Yes. But nobody said we're going to accept Maven's request."

"Of course we will." I haven't known Maven or Cal for long, but I have a close relationship and understanding with politics. Cal cannot reject. It would rattle his regime, crack a couple of his alliances in half, and bluntly, he would be frail to reject. It would show Maven that Cal isn't as prepared as he seems, and it would show the Silvers that Cal would be a king of weak mind and conviction. "Maven has shoved his brother into a tight corner."

"Maven's quite talented when it comes to manipulation," Evangeline says, turning away from Elane to speak to me. "He may be clinically insane when it comes to the little lightning girl, but he wouldn't do this if he didn't have a reason to know he's going to win." She loudens her voice and directs it to the table of four.

"I'm sure there's something or other," Evangeline says from the sidelines of her father. The frigid morning sunlight hits her dress impressively, and light shoots off from her at every angle.

"It doesn't matter," Volo barks, and I recoil at the sound of the man's voice. He hasn't said a peep today, deviating from his usual outspoken personality. "I don't blame the boy for wanting to speed up his demise. He must be awfully bored."

I wander back to Bart after I conclude that this conversation is another of the same, pointless routine. "This balcony is supposed to be used for luncheons and celebrations, you know," I explain to Bart. "Not for mindless arguing about topics they already concur on." A sigh is let out from my anxious diaphragm, and I take a glance at our shimmering surroundings.

But it isn't gleaming as it has been for months. I often forget that we're deep into autumn now, and while the leaves further into the city bleed into crimsons and butterscotches, the beach and the waves become gray and still. The water moves slower than it does in the summer, fighting the frost that dances upon it every morning. The sun is shining strongly, though. But the lack of clouds doesn't compensate for the coldness this day brings, and I squeeze my shawl further around my body.

"War it is, then," Bart says and walks to the terrace's edge, where a tall fence of glass wraps around the platform.

Sensing his emotions, I follow him. "You're not another disposable soldier to me. I've grown fond of you, and not only because you put everything aside for me in Norta. You're a decent person, I mean to say. I'll order them to allow you to stay behind."

"It's not that," he says, looking down to see a bundle of royal children frolicking around the beach. A couple of Nymphs, for sure, itching for water. Otherwise, they would be inside, wrapped in blankets. "I'm a competent warrior. I don't fear the battle." Bart gazes at me with a meaningful expression as the subtle wind jostles his hair. "My family, the rest of the House Nornus, will fight
for Maven. I don't want to be pitted against my blood."

"I unsure of what to say."

"It's not your fault, Iris," Bart says, putting a hand over mine that rests on the railing. "It was my choice to help you. And I knew the consequences when I decided."

I nod, willing my half-formed tears to stay put. "I cannot imagine combatting my brethren. Do you... do you have anyone in your family that you're close with?" In the background, Silvers don't halt in their complaining and casting doubts upon themselves. But those words blur in my ears, and they focus on what's important right now. Bart Nornus.

He's reluctant to share, but eventually, Bart shakes his head. "No. Not particularly. I'd be lying if I said I had a good relationship with my House. My values stray from theirs more often than not."

"So what are your values, Nornus?"

Bart shrugs before answering. "I was sheltered for the longest span of my life. Taught what every other Silver boy was taught in school. It was until I got in the world, when I began my training as a Sentinel, that I really began to notice anything. Society demands we view people through a very narrow scope. This entire continent's system is screwed up."

"Yes, it is," I hear from the threshold of the balcony. Turning around, I predict it to be Evangeline, interjecting on a conversation of mine for the tenth time today. But it's Mare Barrow, clad in a bored expression and a Scarlet Guard uniform.

Cal's eyebrows immediately shoot upward when hearing her voice, and he turns towards her along with the others at the table. "I didn't expect you to arrive here so soon. The letter came only an hour ago."

"Corvium isn't far away. We began the journey as soon as we heard," she explains blandly, pointedly keeping her eyes on the piece of paper in Cal's hand. "Let me read it."

He holds the paper out to her, and she snatches it up, but not before Cal's fingers graze-accidentally or not- her palm. Mare's breath buckles, and his lip twitches, and I inwardly grow in complaint for having to watch these two.

Her eyes scan over it once, twice, three times, until I'm holding my breath in wait for Evangeline or Anabel to ask Mare if she needs help reading it. They keep silent.

"I suppose Davidson called me here to decipher Maven's logic," Mare mutters to the floor.

"We were hoping so," Volo responds with as much respect as she'll ever get out of him. "Where are the rest of your compatriots?"

"The Scarlet Guard and Montfort are only allied with the Lakelands because we are both allies with Tiberias and the Rift, as you know. Davidson and Farley are trying to make it official." Anabel and Volo take part in a stare that means to say, Silly girl. You've already lead one country into Red equality. You won't get a second.

"Well? Do you have any advice, little lightning girl?" Volo asks impatiently.

"Fight," she says simply as if it's the most obvious thing in the world. "In theory, you have the advantage. If Maven has a grand scheme that we're clueless to, he'll use it on us sooner or later. You'll paint yourself a terrible picture if you don't do this now. There's nothing from my days with
Maven that makes me think there are words unsaid on this paper." Her eyes collide with Cal's, and he stares back with the intensity of his fire. "Do it," she says.

Cal sighs. "Very well. When the announcement comes out, we'll return with acceptance. We're going to need all the troops we can get our hands on."

The days flow by, and every dawn, I watch more birds fly away. Either running away from the cold or the impending war. The servants drift down the halls as if they're nothing more than ghosts, though the palace is always a flurry of activity. Bluewater has become a hub of warfare, where soldiers are forever tunneling in and out, being transported from this place to another, while the streets rage with new businesses. Merchants sell the latest guns and weapons and clothing to our fighters, making a pretty penny.

My beautiful home has mutated into barracks and a command center. I would say I'd like to return to Whitefire, but it undoubtedly looks the exact same.

A legion of soldiers marches past me, lead by one of the Lakeland's high-ranking generals. I give her a curt nod, and she salutes me in return. Every hallway looks like this, steeped with soldiers waiting to be transported to Corvium, where they'll train and eat their rations until the day comes. Lest the sun rises.

It's mandatory for each and every fighter to be briefed and evaluated here prior to their shipment. Then, they're grouped into legions based on their blood, country, ability, and so on.

And though I'm exhausted of this constant hassle that keeps me up late, listening to the march of boots outside my door, my sister is impacted more than me. I've been creeping into her room late at night, recognizing that she doesn't have a second of time for me in the day.

During those nights, she is still awake, bent over her oak desk, forgetting to blink at the papers she reads. "This is not our war," I tell her every night, though we're too far in now. That is exactly what she replies with. "We're too far in now."

"We're too far in now," I say to myself as I wander down the hallways of a place that doesn't feel like I belong here. My sister gives me a good amount of meetings to direct and help with daily, but there are gaps here and there. I am in one of those gaps, one of those limbos where I'm unsure of what to do with myself. My sister's too busy, Bart's been in training twelve hours a day.

I pass by the royal gardens, but I backtrack as I see Mare sitting out there alone. She has that posture that Reds always have, continually slouched over as if somebody invisible is pressing on their back.

My fingers latch onto the glass and push the door outward quietly and walk until I'm within an earshot of the girl. "I catch Cal sitting there sometimes, you know."

She looks up to me, and that spine of hers raises up to its full height. "Hello, Princess Iris."

"Iris is fine, Mare. You're not Maven's lapdog anymore, and I am not his queen."

She nods, amused. "I'm surprised the palace doesn't keep you busy. The war and all."

"I could say the same to you," I rebuke, flattening my skirt to take a seat next to her. "Unless I'm missing somebody, you're the strongest fighter here. I'm surprised Volo doesn't have you training more."
Her eyes flash with a hidden secret, but I don't press. "Volo doesn't tell me what to do, Iris. Plus, I've had plenty of training down south."

"Corvium is hardly south of here. It's north, in fact."

"Oh," she blurts, and Mare's face flushes just a tad. "Sorry. They didn't teach us much of that in the Red schooling system."

"Understandable." I forget, I think we all forget, sometimes, that barely over a year ago, this girl was a nothing. It's like that for a reason, though. No Red is allowed to become anything, let alone get a decent education. My interest is piqued, and I can't resist asking her questions that everybody else call silly, unrelated. "What was it like-" I stop, searching the frostbitten grass for the right words.

And then, I cannot help myself from admiring the winter light in the moment, It is cold and beautiful and harsh, mimicking the qualities of so many people I've met in my lifetime.

I hear a sickly scream spiral outward from an upper-level window. Mare and I shoot up simultaneously, looking forward to survey the damage. From here, nothing seems amiss.

That is clearly a lie.

A second scream and I flinch backward, almost crushing the little lightning girl. I forgot how small she actually is, but at least now, she isn't smothered in those chains that must've weighed a dozen pounds each. I suppose her rudeness and ability compensate.

Mare swallows and muscles shift in her neck. "What now." It's not a question, but a concern. "Haven't we had enough problems this week?"

"The Gods think not."

Not delaying for Mare to gather her wits together, I launch ahead, cursing my skirts. The guards have left their posts at the doors and the interior hallway, and I make my way upstairs, following the residual cries and yells of anguish. There are only voices, no hoards of soldiers or bereaved maids.

The empty quiet of the palace would be a weight off my shoulders, if not for the sick, sick feeling pooling in my stomach like acid.

There are voices broiling with emotions from every direction, and I begin to whip around, trying madly to find where that lurching scream came from.

"Iris." A cold hand touches my shoulder, and I flinch again, expecting it to be Death himself.

It is Rosalyn, and I put a hand to my heart. "Sister. What is it?"

She laces my fingers into hers and I constrict her grip, daring Death to never touch her. For something tells me that he has touched somebody today. "See for yourself."

Rosalyn leads me down the hallway that overlooks the garden for its entire length, then right to a large and circular chamber with two grand staircases weaved with gold. The ceiling, as a child I lied on my back for hours, analyzing its stories for hours. Gods, cherubs, and angels, along with pristine white clouds and sunlight. Harps, and mouths that wreak of great song are painted into the pandemonium that somehow fits all together. The floor is transparent, just like so many other areas of this damned palace.
My lips quiver and my fists bunch as I see the monstrosity that has been left on my floor. Evangeline stands over it, trembling more than I ever thought possible. Her steel is dripping with the color red.

The room seems to have stopped, all it denizens paused in time and thought. This era is soaked in death, yet nobody ever gets used to it. We just stare and stare, until somebody cruel enough comes along and reminds us to start again.

"Who did this?" Volo comes up from behind me and Rosalyn, vilely calm for what's on the floor.

"I killed the snake, Father. If it wasn't dead already." Evangeline nods to the bloody snake wrapped around her mother's neck. "But Mother was certainly dead already."

Laurentia Samos sleeps on the floor, her face gray and blue. Her snake, that creepy thing, lies next to her, loyal to the last. Her neck is a deep gray, if not black. She was suffocated, it's so obvious. By her own snake. The markings cover most of her neck, and overworked veins have popped out. The woman is no longer beautiful, not even a beautiful corpse. She is ugly.

"Healers," Volo barks, unsheathing his sword. The man stalks to the center of the makeshift circle that has formed around his dead wife, and points wildly in every direction with the metal. "Who did this?" he screams once more, and the maids and servants stiffen.

Mare Barrow comes up from behind me, pale as a Silver. She says nothing, just declines her head slightly. Averting her eyes from the bitch or in respect, I don't know.

Evangeline stands stoically, her feet near Laurentia's head, watching over her like a guardian angel. A daughter, of all things, to Laurentia, yet I see nothing from her. No emotions, save for the metals moving ever-so-slightly against her body.

Nobody speaks, probably in fear that Volo's sword will shoot right to their heart if they do. "Who came upon her first?"

"I did," Evangeline whispers, looking down to her mother. "She was all alone here, back on the floor, with the snake wrapped around her neck. The snake was struggling. As if it didn't have the choice to stop killing her."

Volo snarls, still brandishing his sword, and with every twist, the too-bright light catches on its blade. I know better than to think the man is ready to break out into tears. Though Lakelander marriages are hardly better, I wonder if Volo has ever loved Laurentia. Ever seen her as more than a pawn in his games. "Did you bother to attempt reviving her, daughter?" Volo asks, pointing her blade now at Evangeline.

She barely blinks, but her eyes are wide. It is not hard to discern that the girl is afraid of her father. "No. There was no pulse."

"As if that matters," he shoots back, kneeling down to Laurentia. He touches her wrist, her heart, her swollen neck, and then growls. "Did you know," he murmurs to nobody in particular, "that a human can be revived, even if they have been without oxygen for five minutes? I don't know if I should blame the assailant or my daughter. Who did this? Is the bastard king's messenger out of the capital yet? Or was it one of you Red rats?"

Volo aims his sword at Mare Barrow, and in my periphery, Cal and Tyton stiffen.

I push to the front, only to have the King of the Rift swivel to face me. "I was with her when the scream was heard, you fool. You have no reason to believe that she would murder your wife any
"Enough!" Rosalyn shouts over the court, our visitors, and the teams of soldiers that have gathered. She sounds breathless, despite only speaking a single word. "I will not tolerate such disrespect in my home. We are all allies, are we not?

"Clearly not," Evangeline says, now kneeled over her limp mother. The woman's eyes are wide open, like her mouth. "Unless it was the messenger, we have a traitor in our midst." There is water pooling in the magnetron's eyes, I feel it heavy and reluctant to leave. No matter what a mother does, she is still of blood and genes, and one cannot be unborn from them. Evangeline hates hated her mother, I sense. But at least she had somebody to call one.

Volo on the other hand, sheds no tears. Only sanity.

And then he screams.

So loudly that the glass panels shake, so loudly that I have to clap my hands over my ears, so loudly that our Lakelander Banshees kneel down in pain. Roars and terrible cries of pain alternate, and tears shoot out from my eyes, wanting to get away from my ears.

Minutes elapse, but nobody moves, fearful of what might happen or what they'll look like. A guilty traitor.

At last, he somehow speaks, however horsely. "I want every man and woman in this damned palace interrogated by your finest, Your Majesty. And when you find them, leave them unharmed and bring them to me." I listen to the whispers between his words, and in turn, I find the truth. Bring them to me, and I'll give them a death that lasts a lifetime.

Rosalyn nods briskly, avidly avoiding eye contact with the angry man. The captain of a higher ranking legion stands by, expecting a thousand orders. Emptily, she says, "Figure it out, Captain. I don't have time to solve a murder in the midst of a war."

He nods several times, apparently shaken from the corpse of a woman on the floor. "I will, My Queen."

"You're rather calm about this for finding my wife-a queen of all things-on the floor, Rosalyn," Volo says, slurring her title. "If I didn't know better, I would say this is in retaliation for my forcing you to sign our alliance."

"But you do know better, Volo," Rosalyn says, her lips curling upward. "Check the security cameras, launch an investigation of your own for all I care. Forgive me for having a mind of rationality in crisis. I cannot look at her for another second," she sighs, directing those words at the dead queen. "I will be in my chambers, getting through papers. Ask Captain Merin your questions if you must."

At that, she spins on her heel and leaves. Volo follows shortly after, wincing every time somebody says her name.

Courtiers wander past me as I stand stock still on my feet, arms clasped at my torso. Nothing is as attractive as Death, Mother used to tell me. A means to an end if nothing else. A beautiful, slow song that can fill one entirely until they desire nothing else.

There is nothing beautiful or attractive about this, though. Laurentia Samos, hours ago, was the epitome of grace and elegance. Now she is a rotting corpse. And it is in my head, but I swear I can already smell the scent of her rotting flesh and blood. There is absolutely nothing worse than a
body absent of its soul.

Death waltzes in this chamber, for certain, but I linger, watching Evangeline-still kneeling over her precious mother.

When I can't stand it any longer, I go up to her, keeping three feet of distance.

"In my home, we drape long sheets of black linen over open windows when souls pass. My sister would oblige if it brought you solace."

"There was indeed a pulse when I found her," Evangeline whispers, pulling her shoulders together with her hands. "I didn't scream at first. But there was the pulse, lazily beating and beating all the same. It was then I screamed. So that when she died, I wouldn't feel as though I had done nothing. A guilty traitor."
Evangeline

As all kings do, my father has begun to grow mad with rage.

Both Queen Rosalyn and Father have launched investigations, and his have ended in more injuries than I'd like to count. Strategic and random, sometimes targeting people based on where they were when I found her, and sometimes his forces pluck innocent and unknowing soldiers and courtiers from their training and teas.

I cannot help but wish Ptolemus was here. He's been positioned out in Corvium for the last couple of days, and before that, he had spent most of his time at Ridge House. But simultaneously, I'm glad he's gone. Tolly won't have to look down on our mother, as I did. He'll only own memories of her, healthy and thriving.

Elane touches my bare shoulder, for my shawl slunk off minutes ago, but I haven't had the mind to fix it. "Eve. They're going to watch the footage in a minute or two."

"Okay," I say, stroking a piece of silver that I've fashioned into a bracelet. It was Mother's wedding ring that Father made. Before I left her body on that cold, translucent floor, I took it off of her and stretched the silver into a band for my arm. The diamonds bolted into the ring fell to the floor as I morphed it, and it's plain now, just an ordinary bracelet.

I don't deserve it, I know that much. Though Father doesn't know it yet, will never know it, I killed her. It wasn't the person who tied the snake around her neck, but it was me. I saw her sprawled across the floor, chest rising just the tiniest bit. I ran to her, put my hand over her heart and felt it beating rebelliously, revolting against her own snake, her own murderer. To be perfectly and ugily honest, I didn't want to save her. One less pawn in the game to control my fate.

But I screamed anyway, giving the universe the dice. The security cameras would've seen it if I merely walked away, and then Father would have my neck—if he doesn't already. It didn't matter, probably. Her heart gave out before anybody got there, ran to their positions in that makeshift circle. I felt it as her heart relented, no longer pumping iron and blood through her veins.

Father was right. A heart can be revived even if inactive for five minutes. But Mother will thrive in Hell.

My dear Elane takes my hand and raises her spine against the glances received. Rosalyn and her guard, I'm told, have previously seen the footage, so the expansive room has cleared out for the most part. The fewer witnesses to watch me vomit.

There are screens and desks on all four edges of the security office, panels and panels of monitors filling up the otherwise bland walls. It's nondescript, for the most part, the workers wearing navy blue uniforms and identical haircuts.

A screen flashes static before revealing a perhaps ordinary scene. Nothing. Two golden-white staircases and a floor that reflects the painted ceiling. There isn't sound exiting the speakers, everybody too far away from this room. Why is that? Why is everybody away, not near this chamber or in the adjoining hallway systems?

Soon enough, too soon, Mother walks into the frame. Her legs appear almost unwilling to act, as she moves in stiff, irregular motions. Her darling snake rests on both of her shoulders, wrapping...
behind her neck.

Mother and I have acquired a bitter relationship swarming of tension throughout the years, and I inwardly hit myself for being so foolish. Giving her that sliver of a chance at life was a mistake. A woman like her deserves to rot. Her body will rot. But my arms and legs contain her blood, and there's something about that stupid, stupid fact that makes me second guess everything.

It surprises me when she smiles. A serene, motherly smile that she directs towards the snake, and then she pets it. One, two, three strokes. There aren't memories of her looking at me like that.

She takes the snake's bottom half and puts him around her neck so that an entire circle is constructed. She drops her arms to her sides, and little by little, her serpent tightens around her neck. Meak sobs escape the woman's mouth and as soon as they become too loud for her liking, Mom's hands shoot upward to her mouth to stop herself. They remain there even as she falls to her knees, even as her eyelids bat groggily.

She's tired, she must be. Being queen is not easy. Mom is just falling asleep.

I'm about to turn away, but Father interjects, his eyes glazed over like Mother's are in the video. "Stop it. I've seen enough. It's ruled as a suicide."

The technician nods, tapping a button that causes the screen to go black.

"It can't be," I snap back out of frustration. "What reason would she have? And she seemed so tentative to walk out, put that... that damned reptile around her neck. Somebody made her do it."

My father rebukes my words with double the ferocity. "You have seen much less of the world than I have, daughter. Naive," he spits out to my feet. "There are no Whispers that could've gotten into her head, and certainly nobody else would've had the courage to threaten her. Do you need to watch it again, to make sure there wasn't a phantom behind her?"

"No." I saw the footage, vividly, in fact. "Then why did she do it to herself?"

"Because war is depressing. War does things to your mind, Evangeline. And it got in her head, and she decided her own fate. There is no one to blame but her."

At that, he stalks out of the room, fists in a bunch and with servants in tow. Elane stands by as the rest of the Samoses and Reds filter out, as well as for some Lakelanders, and I am glad for the small group. Most decided to not watch it, just have it reported to them. Even Cal and Anabel opted for that choice. But I had to see it for myself, to know for sure what happened. The spazzed babbles of flustered servants shouldn't be trusted.

"Father's explanation was lame, I tell Elane at my side. "She wouldn't have... would she have?"

"It must have been. I'm so sorry Eve, but there was only one person in that frame. Her own hands took that snake. I'm so sorry," she says again.

I shake my head, trying to get her to stop doing that. "It's not your fault, Elane. Stop saying that. I suppose it was a suicide." As I say it aloud, it sounds all the more real. Mother killed herself for one reason or another. Maybe she finally realized that her life served no more of a purpose than to help Father's conquests.

It doesn't matter. Mother is dead, and if she was murdered, there's no evidence. But if she somehow was, we just have to pray that the murderer doesn't strike again.
Chapter 30

Mare

"It was you, wasn't it?" I ask Farley, seated on her bed. I find her doing that a lot lately, just sitting there, staring at the wall.

"Yes," she responds, still staring blankly. "Yes it was."

I gulp, the broken puzzle pieces finally fitting perfectly into place. I was there when Laurentia was discovered dead, when Volo pointed his sword at me. And I was there when the security footage was first shown. Laurentia Samos, a proud Silver, choked herself with her snake.

"Why?"

She looks down at her knuckles, ashamed. The curtains in the room are drawn shut, not allowing a wink of the dying autumn light inside. Her room is like all the other rooms we've borrowed from royals. White sheets, a bed comfortable for two, a nice sized bathroom and closet. Not as if either of us has the need for a closet; I've borrowed and stolen clothes for years.

"Divide and conquer," she echoes Davidson's old words, smiling faintly. "Make them mistrustful of each other until they cannot stand to turn their backs. If they can't keep their own courts from falling apart, how will they ever fight against us?"

Said like a true villain. I know she hears my thoughts, but the words unravel in my head anyway, and I look down to the marble. Farley takes an agonizingly long blink.

I swallow. "Won't it make them mistrustful of us, too?"

"We don't need their trust, Mare. We are their allies because Cal and Anabel and Volo need us, not because they want to be. But do they need one another? Perhaps they don't think so. They will not dare cut ties with us because of the sheer size of our organizations. The Lakelands could break promises, they have enough troops. Cal could let go of a Nortan House or two. Or maybe they'll remain allies, as a body of broken bones."

I shake my head, dig my fingers into my palms. "Volo ruled it as a suicide. Everybody agrees that's what it was."

"To see is to believe," Farley counters, twisting her hips to face me. "Not everybody believes in what they saw, though. It would be odd for a queen, so close to a victory, to do what she did to herself."

Sickened, I say, "I worry about you, Farley. What this power is doing to your mind."

"I recognize that. But I'm the one who can see into your brain, Mare Barrow. And I'm a thousand times more terrified than you are."

"Was it your idea?" I blurt, unable to contain my questions. I don't want to talk about falling apart right now, not with the battle on the horizon. Besides. She knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"No." It wasn't. "It was Davidson's idea. Though to be fair, he never said it aloud. I heard it in thoughts and pieces one day at a Command meeting."
"Oh."

"Oh."

"Do you hear my thoughts?"

"Yes. But I block them out as well as I possibly can."

"It was Farley," I admit in the quietness of Davidson's room, tucked into a back corner of the palace.

Davidson, Tyton, and I sit around a small, wooden table, sipping on wine. The curtains are wide open, allowing the cold light of winter in. His room is somewhat bigger than mine or Farley's, but it hardly makes a difference. Our Premier doesn't have much to fill his room with either, leaving the bookshelves and dressers barren.

Tyton and Davidson stare into their goblets of wine, and I do the same. The redness of it is delicious, and if I look at it long enough, my eyes blur and the liquid seems infinite, as though I could dive into it and never return. I would very much like that.

I begin tapping my Silent Stone ring on the table, scowling at the band. At least there's good in the ring. Not like at Whitefire, where the purpose of the manacles was to prevent me from unleashing my well-deserved wrath on my Sentinels. Here, it is to protect Farley and ourselves. We don't need her hearing in on this.

"It was my idea," Davidson states factually as if there's nothing to be ashamed of. "I didn't intend it, I didn't think that the idea was realistic in the first place. The Whisper must have crawled into my head."

"Don't talk about her like that, Davidson. Farley isn't some sort of crawling pest. Don't call her a Whisper either."

Davidson looks into my eyes meaningfully and sets his glass onto the wood, resulting in a satisfying click. "I'm sorry. General Farley is no monster. The ability itself, however... she murdered a queen without telling anybody."

"I know she did. Just talking to her, Farley seems different, like there's something wrong." She spoke the words she did with a certainty that frightens me, a certainty that shouldn't exist. "Farley talked about striking doubt of trust in the Silvers. But she didn't sound righteous like she usually does. She sounded insane, with an agenda of her own."

"Does Command know about Farley?" Tyton asks, gripping the table's edges.

"If anybody besides for the people who went on that mission to Whitefire knew, this room would be cramped. To my knowledge, it hasn't been leaked."

"We need to tell Command, then."

"No," Davidson says forcefully, straightening so that he and Tyton are the same height at the table. "Do you wish to know what Command would say if they discovered we were harboring an all-powerful Whisper in the Lakelander's palace? That she'd killed dozens of soldiers without a bat of the eye in Whitefire, and that she faked Volo's wife's suicide without consulting anybody? Command would kill her, no doubt about it."
Shivers make their way across my body, raising the miniature hairs on my arms. "Farley is a weapon to be used, an asset to be gained in so many ways. Why would they ever?"

"Because she went against us. It's irrelevant if she claims that she's helping us, which she probably is. Besides, nobody should have that much power. That's why Command is divided into several equal people."

"Is there anything to be done?" Tyton asks.

"Unless chaining her up in Silent Stone is an option, then we have nothing. We can summon Julian to return to her, to guide her. But there isn't an option that can be compared to more than a tourniquet."
Chapter 31

Mare

The days separating us from the war have corroded off, like a seawall's cement slowly being destroyed. When the seawall crumbles, there is nothing preventing a vicious sea from invading our city.

I try my best to block those thoughts out, but it never works, and it doesn't work now. I've trained, I've eaten my rations, and I've stayed far from Diana Farley. Julian returned two weeks ago after Davidson requested he come and help. Sad as he is to be torn from his studies, he has a good effect on her.

She won't be fighting, and the fact oddly comforts me. I don't care if she is the best asset we have. Farley is dangerous, a volatile bomb that could explode at a moment's notice. And any of us could be standing around that bomb at the wrong time.

The sound of metal hitting a wine glass sings throughout the room, and I'm tethered to reality once again.

Everybody who hasn't yet been shipped off to Corvium has gathered in Bluewater's main ballroom, but the event isn't formal by any means. Though the Silvers think so. I wear a pair of black training trousers, a thin shirt, and brown boots, straight out of my last training session with Tyton.

And I stand alone. I need to be alone until the battle comes. I've told everyone this. I need to simmer alone in my toxic thoughts until Maven has given himself up.

This place, as does everything else in this castle, reminds me of Whitefire. It's just a ballroom constructed from Red labor, studded in fine jewels. It's dimly lit by candles hanging from the ceiling and on tables scattered in the back half of the ballroom.

The candles serve as a source of illumination. The floor is made of blue marble and the ceiling is a clear dome of glass that lets the moonlight in, and the walls in between are the same old walls, gold encrusted and such.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say. Looking at the scenery physically, of course, it's beautiful. The people clothed in their gowns and robes are gorgeous, and the candles hit everything just right, creating enough light to see, but it also casts shadows. In those shadows are stories, Jon would say. And there is nothing beautiful about those stories.

But the candles are a reminder. They are fire, and they were undoubtedly sparked to life by Tiberias. He's somewhere in here, probably up front near his grandmother, though I don't see him. Soon enough, if Maven hasn't pulled something, then Cal will be on the throne. Temporarily.

Rosalyn stands in the front of the room on an erected platform, alongside Iris. They both wear navy blue uniforms, just like their soldiers. "The Lakelands and their Queen thank you for this last month, ladies and gentlemen, Reds and Silvers. It has been a sleepless whirlwind in these weeks after we agreed to Maven's proposition. But how could we not?" She asks, shaking her head and smiling. "This army has the Lakelanders, the good Calore brother, half of the Nortan Houses, the King of the Rift, Piedmont, Monfort, and the Scarlet Guard. Maven cannot, will not win against our forces."

Volo walks up the stairs to Rosalyn and whispers something in her ear. She frowns and nods before
taking Iris by the elbow to lead her off the stage.

Though I've taken up residence at the end of the crowd, Volo's appearance is achingly obvious from here. He's worn a constant grimace since the day Laurentia died, carries too much metal around with him, and looks not vengeful, but bored.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Reds and Silvers," he reiterates callously. "Who thought that we'd all be working together? Two countries divided for a hundred years and two colors of blood that have been at one another's throats for as long as we can remember? And who would've thought it's all because of an insane boy?"

The crowd murmurs in agreement. I even chuckle a little. Volo isn't wrong. He rarely is, really. It's because of Maven's insanity that any of us are allies. The Lakelands would side with him if he hadn't threatened Iris. No. Go farther, and Maven and I would marry by now, dutiful as Silvers are supposed to be. Cal would be on the throne, the Kingdom of the Rift wouldn't exist, and I'd be siding with my enemies. Where would the Scarlet Guard and Montfort be?

But the King of the Rift isn't done yet. "Or perhaps, we shouldn't blame it on Maven. I believe we all agree that what Maven is was Elara's vision, no? Only Jon could tell us exactly when this timeline became so utterly dire. But he remains unconscious. If it were my guess, I would put my coins towards Mare Barrow, the day she fell into the arena."

I'm about to step forward to defend myself, but a hand clamps itself onto my forearm. I stiffen, instantly knowing the hand. It's traced my body countless times, ran through my hair, and held my hand. It's warm, temperature growing.

I look to see Cal, adorned in training clothing as I am and shaking his head slowly. "He's drunk. You have a better chance of getting impaled by him than making him see logic."

Trying to relax, I allow some of the weight to drift off of my shoulders. Cal doesn't let go of my arm, but I don't squirm abroad from him either. The dark, selfish part of me doesn't want his warmth to leave me. The last time we touched was the day he handed me Maven's letter. Regrettably, it sparked something inside of me that made me feel dead and alive at the same time. So I let him keep touching me, if only for the excuse of restraint.

"If she hadn't fallen, the clumsy fool, Tiberias and Elara wouldn't have hidden her in plain sight, and Elara wouldn't have been able to use her. Nothing would've been hurt. There would be no pain. My wife wouldn't be dead."

There it is.

This time, I shake Tiberias's hand off, turning to leave. "Get away from me," I say quietly, hardly interested in having a conversation with him.

Volo's right in a way. Without me, Elara wouldn't have gotten the opportunity that I gave her when I fell into the basin. There wouldn't be so much death, so much crying. But there still would be, hidden from the innocent. A permanent war would be raging, millions and millions continuing to die for years and years.

"Stop," I say to myself.

My boots click on the hallway floors and a second pair of feet follow me. Fists clench and unclench. I pass portraits of Lakeland kings and queens, tapestries, and sculptures, barely taking them in. The world is a blur of abandoned hallways and echoing footsteps, and I hate it, all of it.
I pass by the circular room that Farley made Laurentia kill herself in, turning my head from it. There isn't anything I want to do with that place, this castle altogether.

And at least on the battlefield, the screams and gunshots will block out the sound of footsteps.

More hallways pass me by, until a white door comes into view, just like all the others in this hallway. With the full intention of slamming it behind me, the hand slaps against the door before I can open it.

With a deep breath, I turn to Cal, who has effectively pinned me between his body and the door. "Please," is what he says.

"Please, what?"

"Let me talk to you."

"About what?"

"Anything. Everything. You read Maven's letter. He's not wrong. If he wins tomorrow..."

"Then he'll kill you." I look down at his boots, surprisingly dirty for a prince. He must've been outside earlier. "And he'll take me to Whitefire, lock me up like a bird in cage."

"No, he won't. If I lose, you run. There was nothing in that letter that claimed he would. Even if he did..."

There is hardly any lighting down this hallway, and his face is a mess of shadows. I'm overjoyed for the darkness, because this way, he can't see my traitorous expression. I told Maven to invite Cal to a war. Deep down, I know that Maven won't win. He doesn't possess a secret weapon. It was too easy to read him in that void that Farley took me to.

"Will you kill him if you win?"

"I don't know. Would you?"

I pause, fully knowing that these questions are stupid. Cal won't get the chance to make these decisions for himself. "I don't think I could." I had the opportunity once. In those vulnerable moments before his wedding, Maven stripped himself of his flamemakers and dipped himself underwater. It would've been easy and quick. But I didn't. Whether my mindset was that the Sentinels would instantly kill me or not, I didn't do it.

Almost subconsciously, I reach for his hand still pressing against the door. They intertwine readily, an old habit. He's so warm, always so warm, and I want more.

"We can't," I try to say forcefully, but my voice breaks in the middle. "Even this," I raise our hands together so he can look upon them. "We're not on the same side anymore."

"I want what you want," he says, stroking my thumb. "I would never dare rule like Maven does. It's going to be different, I promise."

"Maybe. But you can't say the same for your offspring." Even in the dark, he winces. "Montfort and the Guard combined forces with you because we have a common enemy. They'll allow your reign because they have to. But it's going to be the same someday." Lies. You're lying to him and your breath didn't even catch. Maven would be proud.
"It won't." And before I know it, his lips are on mine with a burning passion. Even as I let him touch me, kiss me, I stare into the darkness, knowing that he is a liar as well.

So I reciprocate the kiss. I lie. Cal lies. What's the hurt in this?

He deepens in with a desperation that I've never seen from him and I rake my hands throughout his combed hair. It wasn't always like this. It used to be ruggedly cut, never combed, to flawlessly matching his crooked smile.

War does this to us. It makes us desperate. So that if we die, then we die knowing that we were loved.

I swing open the door and he follows me closely as we enter my room, a bit more light from the open balcony bathing the room in an eerie blue. Shivering, I finally realize how cold I've been keeping my rooms these last months. People have commented on it, but I've paid it no heed.

It's better cold. If I'm given heat, I'll only desire more.

Cal's lips crash on me once more, and I pull my hips against his.

His fingers touch each of my vertebrae as our teeth and tongues war. His body is as lovely as always as his shirt comes off, and I trace the muscles of his abdomen.

I touch his face, my knuckles grazing over the beginnings of stubble on his cheeks. For a moment, we just stare at each other, already on the edge of a state of breathlessness.

"I love you," I murmur lowly, return my lips to his.

"I love you too," he says, but it is a different voice.

Maven's voice.

Maven's lips are cold against mine, his hand tickling the backside of my neck. I try, and I try so fiercely to push him out of existence once I realize it's him, but at the moment, my muscles dissipate out of my arms until I am at Maven's mercy. It's the same as it was last time. Burning and freezing the skin of my lips, and that cold fire leaks into my bloodstream to make an artery of its own that ends at my heart.

So I do the thing that I can always count on.

I scream into his lips. I scream loud and hard and long until I break the barrier between this horrorscape and reality.

Tyton lurches beside me, and his hand rises up into the air in preparation to punch the intruder.

When he comes to the conclusion that there isn't an intruder, I'm already pushing myself out of the bedsheets that have tangled and wrapped me into. My face is wet with mucous sweat, but when my hands only spread the sweat around as I try wipe it off. Silent tears have mixed with the sweat as well, and none of these things help when I'm still feeling trapped, as though Maven has transformed into the sheets that I cannot get out of.

My breaths are abundant and bulky when Tyton finally rips back the sheets, and not carrying the wit to hug him, I fall off the bed, landing on cool tiles. "I had a dream."
"I noticed," Tyton voices, climbing off the bed gracefully to meet me. He wears only his underthings, and I wear only mine. Suddenly, I feel extremely bare around him. "I'm sorry I didn't wake you sooner. You weren't thrashing, you just began to scream at the top of your lungs."

"I wasn't thrashing because I couldn't budge. Not an inch," I say it vaguely, staring off into space. Distractedly, I ask, "What time is it?"

He looks at his wristwatch laid flatly on the bedside stand. "Two-thirty. We don't leave for another two hours."

Raking a hand through my hair, I move to get up, but Tyton takes my hand in his. "Don't you want to talk about it?"

My eyes and throat burn, but I muffle the tears. "I can't. I'm so sorry, but I can't."

His hand loosens on mine, signaling that he won't hold me here on the floor forever. Still, I take a moment to stare at him. The moonlight suits his white hair and enhances the warmth in his eyes. My gaze drifts down towards his chest, my heart flittering just a little. It was a split second decision when we threw our clothes on the floor last night, a passionate act.

Like in the dream. Though I do not regret it the way I regret Maven's icy lips. Maybe we weren't ready, but regardless, the consternation of yesterday's worries drove our bodies together. If only for a distraction, but it cannot possibly be.

At first, I guilted in the emotions Tyton's kiss brought to me the day his lips pressed to mine at the Rift. Those thoughts are far in the past now, wiped gone by new memories of us. I so often find myself forgetting that Maven and Cal exist around him. We've poured our souls out to one another. And I truly love him for everything he's done.

"Do you still have nightmares often?" he asks.

"They've gotten better. Other people surpress them, like you. But they still find their moments to burst through."

And then there's silence. I rise to my feet and go to the closet, where Davidson had my fighting garb placed a few days ago. Black cargo pants, a black semi-bulletproof jacket, classic army boots, and a bloody red bandana. "I'm not going to get any new sleep tonight," I say, slipping on a pair of long underwear, followed by the cargo pants.

As the final product comes together, the mirror in the closet's rear reflects my image: black as night from the neck down, fading tanned skin, and a red scarf buckled behind my ponytail and ears.

"Tyton?" I question. He hasn't said anything, and when I turn around, I turn to find him asleep once again on my bed, like my screams never took place. I envy him for that.

But on the bright side, he'll acquire an extra hour of rest, and I'll get what I need to get done without notice.

Quietly, I shut the door behind me, and I discover there are plenty more already awake. Soldiers hurry down the hallway, some carrying long rifles, others carrying no weapons at all. Those ones will have to wish to the stars that there won't be Silencers playing today.

A steady stream of soldiers has been created, and I keep to the corridor's edges, cautious of bumping into them. There is an untold number of them. Bluewater has to be bigger than Whitefire
if Rosalyn is housing this many men. Unless they're passing through, just another checkpoint before they head off to their deaths.

Heading off into an obscure hallway, I blindly wonder how many of them have earnest motivation to be here. The Reds won't because despite Davidson's pleads, the Queen of the Lakelands the King of the Rift decided to send in troops of available Reds. And even the Silvers, the almighty- most were either drafted or pressured by family.

"Mare."

Evangeline stands behind me, and I face her.

I blurt out the first thing I can think to say to her. "Please don't tell me you're here to send me on another quest to piss off somebody." As hard as it is, I act the part. I know her mother's killer, but my body won't betray my thoughts. Act I always do to the Magnetron, hateful and condescending.

"On the contrary. But last night, I did see you slip off with Tyton and nobody's seen him since. Wonder what happened."

I huff and roll my brows. "What do you have to say?"

Her expression softens considerably and she looks to each side of the hallway as if to examine for prying eyes. "The night you and your Red friends went to Whitefire, Jon went into a seizure, as you know. You also know that he hasn't woken since. But when Cal went to get help, he said things to me. Of the disturbing measure."

She pauses, and though Evangeline doesn't seem manipulative today, I still don't appreciate the suspense. "Well? What were his disturbing words?"

"He spoke your name once or twice. Then he said you'll destroy yourself."

Shaking my head, I say, "That doesn't make sense. You shouldn't believe Jon, especially when he's just had a seizure."

"I don't believe him, little lightning girl," Evangeline barks, regaining some of her snark. "Be careful, that's all I'm asking."

"Thanks," I mutter before plowing past her. She says a few more things but I tune them out, uninterested in any more of Jon the Prophet's faulty predictions. He told me to kill Iris at Whitefire, I didn't and everything turned out dandy.

Whatever illness that has manifested itself in Jon serves him right. They keep him in the infirmary at the Rift, and that's all I know. His condition remains unconscious, and though there are plenty who are hoping for his aid, I'm glad he remains quiet. He doesn't deserve the ability to control fates more than me or anyone else.

"Wait. Evangeline." The Silver swirls to me with an intrigued look as though she already knows precisely what I plan on asking her.

"Yes?"

"Where's Cal?" I close my eyes in defeat as I let his name slip past my tongue.

"Two boy toys in such little time. Even I haven't gone that far. Up those stairs," she says, pointing past herself to a set of marble stairs draped in an ocean blue rug. "Up two stories, left right, last
door on the right. Have fun, little lightning girl." And then she's gone.

I roll my eyes but steal a glance towards the staircase.

Yet each step I take is a little easier.

I have to speak to him.

Following her brief directions, I squint my eyes and try to recall what happened last night, separate it from my dream. There was a departing ball, and it was just as glamorous—if not more so—as the departure in my mind. But in the dream, in hindsight, I was all alone. The nights were conflicting in that aspect. Tyton stuck close by, his hand always in mine or on my back. Davidson, the electricons, a knot of other Newbloods, and Farley, too.

The dream and reality split to isolated paths as Cal came to grab my rather than Tyton. Volo screamed, Volo was intoxicated, that moment is vivid still. But Tyton led me to my room, it was Tyton who I poured out my heart and soul to, when hours before I was more scared of losing this battle than anything else. And I will be terrified of that outcome until Maven surrenders. Because although I forced Maven's hand—it was he who chose how to hasten the war. It's foolish to think he doesn't have something hidden in his sleeve.

Shaking fingers levitate an inch overhead the doorknob, seeing no stability in knocking. I twist and shove the door open, keeping my chin up and my eyes wide.

Cal looks the same as he did in my dream. Nothing much has changed, and I am half disturbed to know I still remember what his shirtless chest looks like. "Sorry," I mutter, averting my eyes to the floor.

A sharp breath. "It's nothing you haven't seen before."

I shake my head, silently begging him to stop.

A ruffle of fabric, and I bring my head up, only to keep my eyes on other things. His room is spacious and holds some reminder of what his residence in Whitefire held. Cluttered with war books, maps, and enough documents to burn for days. A long oaken table is set off to the side, and a bedroom peaks through doors in the back of the sitting room.

Cal's hair is wet. He must have recently gotten out of the shower.

Before I can stare too long, "You need to talk to your brother today," I voice as firmly as manageable.

He pulls at the cuff of his uniform, spins his flamemakers. The clothing of a warrior, not a sentimental brother. His clothing, in many ways, is similar to mine. But there is not a red scarf tied on his sleeve or around his hair.

"What's the point? It must be another of his tactics. Distract me, get him close so he can poison me. If there's only one of us to chose from, there won't be a war. Nobody will have a decent reason to act against him."

As hard as it is, I force my eyes on his. Red and gold, as they have been since the night I met him, and red and gold they will be until the day they fade in death. Unfortunately, I still see his beauty. Perfect eyes, a strong jaw, a lopsided smile. He is not smiling now. If anything, he is bewildered, with straight posture and keen eyes.
"At first, I thought so too," I lie. I think to that black place, the continual rawness of his voice. He wasn't lying when he said he wanted to see Cal. "But I see his sense, this time. Rare. This is the last time the both of you will be kings. Tomorrow you or Maven will be a prisoner, if not a dead man. A last talk, king to king, brother to brother."

"He'll kill me if he wins."

As much as I detest Cal for everything that he is, tears sting my eyes at the thought. I've heard Davidson's strategies, his master plans. We won't host the Silver's takeover for weeks. And in the depths of my conscience, I wonder, I wonder just a tad. My confidence faulters. What if that awful, suffocating black place wasn't of Farley's creation? What if it was Maven's mind, and he was controlling it. What if, those seemingly raw emotions of his were lies? What if there is a weapon, what if he's playing us all like cards in a deck? Maven will execute Cal if given the chance. "Will you?"

A pause. "I don't think I can. I know what is said when they assume I'm not listening. You probably think it as well. That I'm the weak alternative, indecisive and too compassionate for my own good. Maven rules under a fist of iron. And to be perfectly truthful, he's a good king."

I've never thought of it that way. Maven is a devilish king, but a good king. He makes decisions without blinks. He ended a hundred-year war, strengthened the economy. If it hadn't been for me, he might have very well succeeded. "You'll harden in time, King Tiberias," I imitate what I've heard so many fools call him. "Maybe Evangeline's heart of steel will rub off on you."

"It won't," he whispers, defeated.

"Don't lie," I say. "Don't make promises that you cannot keep. It's happened too many times already."

"You promised something as well," Cal snaps, but he doesn't come closer. "We promised to love each other."

"Don't be such a child, Cal. I've tried, and I've come damn close, but I haven't succeeded in tearing you out of my heart just yet. And you know that." I realize what I've done. Given up my last defense, the final sheet of paper that protects my raw and ugly heart.

"Then what is he to you?" Tyton.

"I love him," I say, and it's true.

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

"I'm going to talk to him," he says, shattering the tension.

"Good," I say, and I slam the door shut behind me, unable to cope with the silence for a second longer.
Chapter 32

Evangeline

Mother will not writhe her way into my mind today.

Not even my strange and bothersome conversation with Barrow will cross my mind, I'm sure.

I haven't been here in years, but the Choke inflicts the same chaos I felt as a little girl. There are no men on the blackened field, but I smell it, that stench of death and more death to come. There aren't trees for miles, only corpses that have hidden under pounds of ash and dirt.

Our alliances have taken every precaution that they can think of. Scanned the infinite field for old and new lands mines, watched over Maven's base camp for days. There is nothing amiss, as far the eye can see. Unfortunately, there are many things human eyes cannot see.

From a bird's perspective of in this aircraft, the horror of this place is seen on a second velocity. Ravaged, black earth stretches for miles on end, deep holes in some areas and knolls in others, forming no regular pattern. Even though the Choke has been inactive for months, the tendrils of ash blow into my nose and eyes. The history books tell that this place used to be a natural wonder. People used to seek this place out for its charming waters and cliffs. There were massive falls of water, emptying out into crystal-clear lakes and rivers. But those tomes are lies, meant to comfort nostalgic idiots. There are no cliffs, not a drop of water, save for the blood that leaks through layers of bedrock.

In the distance, Corvium is spotted. That's where we were shipped to long before the dawn cracked open. Though Maven has spies and moles of his own, the Lakelander generals and our men agreed to be quiet and inconspicuous. And the sun hasn't risen. When the first sliver of the sun makes itself known, then everything is fair, there are no rules. Last army standing takes the day.

Anabel and Cal bicker in their seats of the craft, Anabel adorning that permanent scowl of hers.

"You will not fight, Tiberias. But you will not speak to that serpent of a brother either," I hear her reprimand him. Despite her age, the woman has chosen to fight. Decked out her Lerolan colors, orange and red, Anabel sits with perfect posture, a queen in war.

"Oh? But you will?" he asks, motioning to her clothing.

"My life is dispensable, you, an already king, are not. Maven doesn't love you, that much is palpable. He's using your threads of love for him against you."

"Maybe," Cal admits, bowing his head. "But precautions have been set. I won't touch anything he offers me, won't drink the wine that he'll bring. Davidson is to produce a long-standing forcefield for me."

Anabel shakes her head in defeat, glaring out of the plane's window. She's less affected by the scent and the scenery than the rest of us, not having once coughed or wiped teary eyes. She looks at the forsaken war territory as if it's just another task to be undertaken, as simple as selecting her next gown.

"What made you change your thoughts? For the longest time, you were set on keeping away from Maven. Why did you come before us this morning, at the last minute, to announce and order to see him?"
"It was Mare Barrow, was it not?" I say, twisting towards the couple from the row in front of them. "She asked me where your room was earlier. Twenty minutes later, you round up every official and told them the news."

Anabel's features contort in anger, anger at that little lightning girl. "State to me that it's not true, my boy!"

Cal's vision becomes unfocused, thinking of something distant. Perhaps of what I allowed to happen this morning when I obliged to donate the route to Cal's room.

"She's right. I need to talk to Maven prior to one of us being destroyed in our standings. While we're still equal, while one isn't looking down on the other." Cal stops, in search of a final, memorable statement. "I'm sorry for not being able to let go."

"Of which one?" Anabel asks. "Of the little lightning girl, or of your brother?"

At last, the creaking plane begins to descend. Soon, all sides will be signing treaties as the soldiers at the edges of the Choke prepare to run towards their supposed enemies. Weeks past, when we had just barely gotten wind of Maven's illustrious proposition, the contracts were already beginning to be drawn up. I know the basis of them. The losing side will act as the winner's slaves in whatever way the winner pleases. It applies to everyone fighting or involved in this war in any semblance. Winner takes all. Something tells me Maven will not show so much mercy as Cal will.

"Both," Cal whispers, the plane bumping against the annihilated tarmac. I jolt backward in my seat, my spine pulled towards the cheap cushioning. The Lakelanders insisted on these lowly planes, arguing that they'll only get blown up.

But surprise quickly negates my discomfort. In my brief experience at the Choke, I have never landed on this side of its blown-out ruins.

It should not exist, I deduce immediately.

Almost a joke, but it can't be.

My steel heels click at the pavement, right behind Anabel and Cal. Father follows closely behind us, along with a representative from each of Maven's denounced Houses, and the Lakelanders, the Reds, and the Piedmontese come from separate planes of their own.

A pavilion of wrought iron and glass rests atop cobblestone, surrounded by sprigs of grass here and there. The freakish thing must stretch twenty feet wide, the edge furthest away from me extending out and over the gray lake, kept afloat by Gods know what. Most of the life around it, even the weeds, are smothered by misplaced dirt and ash. The Choke is anarchic-no law, no protections, but if I were to guess, I'd say the defined border is two-hundred yards past the brick pathway that leads up to the circular platform, a platform in which Maven Calore sits.

If the world were blurred, maybe somebody who embraces the good in things would call this place decent. The pavilion overlooks Lake Eris, seen from the opposite side from that of Detraon, the last proof of the once-majestic waterfalls that were here. If the world were blurred, the water wouldn't be so apparently dirty, and the walls made of mud that have been built upon the horizon could be hills.

Blue shields of energy are put up around our entire grouping, but I barely take note, too entranced with watching the first of many battles that will transpire today: Mare and Maven staring at one another, Maven a crazed sociopath and Mare's expression a blank slate, hiding the sentiments that
lurk behind the eyes. Cal observes them too, his face a mess of concern.

It's dark for the most part out here, the sky inky blue and sapphire, its fringes morphing into orange. Lanterns hang on posts lining the skinny walkway, wide enough for two people to walk shoulder to shoulder. When everyone has gathered into a tight knot, Cal takes a step forward, his military-grade boots hitting the bricks with a sickening finality. Anabel has taken up the rear, and instead of accompanying her grandson, she pushes and shoves, commanding the order we walk in. Rosalyn and Iris trail Cal's heels, then Davidson and a leader from Command, Mare and Tyton, then a cluster of Lords from Nortan High Houses, and Ptolemus and I. Prince Bracken and the one that didn't get assinated stand shoulder to shoulder, at last followed up by the wicked pair of Father and Anabel at the back, a replacement for Mother.

The blue glass table at the pavilion's center has ten chairs set around it, Maven and four of his advisors taking up the half facing away from Lake Eris. Cal's gloved hand fluently pulls out the middle chair, facing perfectly across to Maven. They didn't want risk of poisoning and made sure to cover Cal up to his neck in thick clothing. Davidson sits on Cal's left, the Command general on the other side of Davidson, while Rosalyn and Volo sit to Cal's right. The rest of us stand behind, Mare going so far as to lean against one of the metal pillars.

"Brother," Maven says, glancing at Mare almost wearily as if he cannot help it.

"Brother," Cal returns, summoning all of his princely strength.

Maven, a performer more than anything else, turns around to take a long gander at the rising sun over the shadowed water. To show Cal that he isn't afraid to turn his eyes away. I bet he's terrified. "Twenty minutes and dawn will break. You all know what the contracts entail. My Houses and I have previously signed our portions. It's your turn. Let the better king win."

The Nortan King brings one hand up from cloaking it under the glass table. He wears black gloves too when pushing the stack of papers to the other side. I smirk at their thoughtful insanity.

Cal glances at each paper prior to passing it to either Rosalyn, Davidson, members of High Houses, Bracken or taking it for himself. These contracts mean nothing to any of us, but it won't matter. If we lose, it's because our armies have been decimated, and we'll have no choice but to live-or die-under his rule. Montfort and the Scarlet Guard might have a chance of evading his power, tucked away with their extra soldiers in their mountain villages.

They sign the contracts in tall, elegant scrawling, and frowns become a tad more evident as they make their way through the mound of papers. Maven's advisors, an Osanos, a Nornus, a Gliacon, and a Rhambos, twiddle their thumbs in wait, but Maven stares at his brother. Memorizing how he's changed, I imagine. It doesn't feel like it's been long, or else it feels like a century has elapsed, but it's been over a year since they've seen one another face to face.

A spasm of thunder crackles overhead. Subtle, but there all the same.

Anabel looks accusingly towards Mare, who stares back at her, a smirk nearly boiling over. "What? There's no hurt in giving our enemy's soldiers a little scare. And it takes precious minutes to make a storm otherwise. I'm getting ahead."

Though Maven's lips say nothing, his expression reveals a thousand words. There he sits, in black like the rest of us, but the bloody cape he wears divulges his alliances. He looks at her proudly, like an unhinged lover would gaze upon his soul mate after she killed her first human.

Maybe they are meant for each other.
The contracts are gradually passed back to Maven, Davidson breaking our barrier for a fraction of a second every so often. At last, nobody holds papers in quivering hands except Maven, who keeps his body perfectly motionless. Calore bastard. Everybody besides for Cal on our side is shaking slightly, due to either the cold or nerves. And the victims of the latter blame the former.

"One more," Maven says, his eyes slipping from the papers he has finished checking to the little lightning girl. I stand adjacent to Mare, and her next breath is louder than the others. Out of thin air, Maven brandishes another contract. "Let me know if you need help reading it."

He tosses the paper over to us, and Cal practically grabs it out of midair before Mare has the opportunity to think about taking it from him.

One of the glass walls that encases this structure reflects Cal's expression: lips curling in on themselves and fiery eyes becoming bombs. "No."

"Just for fun," Maven explains blandly, focused on Mare as she approaches Cal from behind. Seeming to sense her, or else see her darkened reflection on the glass, the prince pushes it out of reach, flipping it over.

Eyebrows knitting together, she glances between her two boys. Dawn is steadily coming to, but in the meantime, the firelight set upon the torches lining the pathway and winding around the land parts of pavilion is the primary source of light. I've never been one to gawk at males, but Maven and Cal, are of fire, and when met with it once more, something odd transpires. Every strength and weakness is exemplified in the incandescence. The shadows in the hollow spaces of Maven's complexion and the constant scheming and secrets in his eyes. Meanwhile, Cal's hold torment, while the rest of him is physically flawless.

"Just for fun," Mare repeats at Cal's throat, as though it's completely innocent. "Give it to me."

Reluctantly, Cal offers the paper to her, never taking his sight off Maven.

I grew up in Whitefire, trained there since I was five years old. I've watched Cal and Maven grow up, forge a bond that only the closest of brothers could have. Half-tempted to ask aloud what happened, if only to compensate for the quiet, I inhale and shift towards Tyton.

The third one, of the least importance in this mess. His hair is distorted to a bronze in the fire. He watches her in such a different way than Maven does, or Cal for that matter. Genuine care for the little lightning girl, I see in him. Concern and fear and all the things I feel for Elane on a day to day basis. It's the way a relationship should be.

It is a front. That relationship of their's isn't real, and it never has been, never will be. I watch my enemies and allies with great responsibility, and I see their handholds and tentative kisses for what they are. Everything is real for the boy, and while the girl may think it, it's not. Not when two beautiful boys long after her, Cal with a pretty face and Maven with a tragically scenic mind that she understands.

I thought that as I saw them first kiss, I think it now, and I will be proven correct the day it ends.

"There. Just for fun," Mare says, passing the paper with an inky, black pen in hand.

I missed Mare snatching a pen from Rosalyn's hand to sign her unkempt signature, too preoccupied with speculating the third boy's fate. Cal was busy staring into his brother's depthless orbs. Hell, Maven looks surprised as well.

A deft motion, Cal's hand stops her wrist from advancing further. Mare's fingertips splay apart, the
letter flitting to Maven's side of the table. "What the-"

In his haste, Cal forgot. Forgot what exactly the monster sitting across from him did to Mare Barrow. How he chained her with those awful manacles that I once proudly would've said I created. For six months. Six months.

"Don't touch my wrists again, Tiberias." Mare's voice is chilling and monotone, unloving. Despite her command, he touches her for a second longer. She is a nightmare frozen in place. Lips parted, fear in the eyes, and shaking hands.

He lets go, and Mare backs away to show Maven with his chin rested atop a palm. I bet he cannot decide which part he loves more: seeing that he branded Mare with a trauma that deep, or seeing her shun his brother. "Maven will lose," she says, taking a moment to lock gazes with Maven and each of his High House representatives. "Just for fun."

"I assume it's all in order then?" Maven questions.

"Our troops lie in wait at opposite borders as we speak. When dawn comes, they may do whatever they please to win, so long as they stay within the boundaries. And that shouldn't be a problem. Thirty miles across, ten wide."

"So much space for death, isn't there?" Maven leans back, putting his hands on his head.

"Please." Mare sneers at them. "We'll have it done by noon."

"She isn't one to lose," Cal states vaguely, not paying attention to particularly anything.

"No, she is not," Maven concurs.

Single file this time, we vacate the pavilion, leaving its glass and iron and gray waters behind. All besides for Cal, Rosalyn, and Bracken have chosen to fight on this fine morning, a morning that will undeniably stretch into night. Father leads us back to the plane we landed with.

Ptolemus takes my hand in his, and I squeeze it back. He's handsome today in his war clothing, clad in his flexible metal, as am I.

Looking back to the blackened field stretching for miles, I wonder if Father prepared us well enough to defend ourselves against this. Mother awarded me all the snark in the world, and Father gave me years of iron and cunningness. Still, will it be enough to protect me and my brother from this? A lawless stretch of land that the tough men who've fought here before block out of their minds.

"Promise me to keep your breath and blades, Tolly."

"Only if you do the same, Eve."

"I wouldn't question my ability to survive for a second. I won't doubt yours either," I say, bending in to plop a kiss on his cheek.

A sliver of sun peaks out from the line that divides life and death.

Then, all Hell breaks loose.

In the far off distance, the sound of roaring planes engines grows louder, and the battle cries of our soldiers hit a climax before dying off with the stomps of their boots running towards the enemy
front lines. Bombs planted by enemy soldiers detonate, abandoning plumes of fire and smoke in their wake.

"Get moving!" Davidson yells over the uproar, causing me to jolt into motion up the jet's ramp.

The plane takes off just after Davidson's making it up and into the seating area, where most have elected to stand. The sounds of bombs exploding rings in my ears, making this situation all the more bona fide.

Maintaining balance, Davidson fluently strides to the center of the craft. "Everyone who plans on warring today, we're going to be dropped off as close to the front lines as possible, into the thick of things in under five minutes. Make sure you're mentally prepared and check that your shoes are double knotted. Queen Rosalyn and Prince Bracken will be returned to Corvium with the pilot as soon we're off. I wish you all a good fight and will be acutely delighted should you all return to the pavilion this evening in one piece and on the winning side."

A chorus of best wishes and thank yous resonate throughout the aircraft, my curt thank you being one of them.

Up and up we go, until I'm faintly wishing that the descent would never come. I'm not supposed to fear these kind of things, the thrill of the kill, the adrenaline that pumps through my blood when running from my aspiring murderers. But this battle is different. Certainly the largest I've ever participated in, but besides for that... it will be different afterward. I don't fear the fighting, the bloodshed, I fear what comes next. The sprawling days of plotting and planning will be finished, and only kind left the planning of Cal's coronation, my wedding. Or my execution, should Maven win. That section might've well been typed in uppercase or red pen.

My stomach dips into my throat as the jet begins to lower at a terribly fast rate. But if it were more leisurely, Maven's troops would blow us out of the sky and into Hell. As of habit, I pat the bands upon bands that line my arms, neck, and ankles, then brush fingertips across my chest plate, and touch each hill of my metaled knuckles.

"Jump and roll!" somebody says, a male.

Instinct taking over, I rush ahead to the sealed door and bend my knees a little. Others follow behind me. Something tells me that this isn't anybody's first rodeo at hopping out of a plane.

"Now!" the mystery pilot screams, the metal hatch drawing upward. A flurry of snow punches us in the face, and my brother swears colorfully.

Without a second glance at my compatriots, I jump, seeing the ground ten feet below.

Half roll through with a pocketful of finesse, while the others get a mouthful of dirty snow. "What kind of pilot can get that low?" Anabel growls, pushing up from the ground.

"A Montfort pilot," Davidson returns, grinning with a snow-laden face.

A bomb was released from the bottom of the craft as we descended, making the plane have the looks of a mere bombardier. Still, that bought us time, but not an eternity.

Pulling Tolly with me, the group splinters apart, all with our own agendas and vengeance. The sun rose minutes ago, but the sky has ripened to become a dark gray. Some of the clouds are innocent and created by nature, yet they that create snow are hidden by the sinister ones that growl, hungry for blood.
The first of Mare's bolts lands not far from Tolly and me, and we stumble, hardly keeping from a fall.

Snow, blessedly light now that we're not moving three hundred miles an hour in a jet, lands atop the black ground. If only it would stay that way, unmarred by our clunky boots. Nobody would know the ugliness of this place, save for the smell.

Most unfortunately, it doesn't. Fire, lightning, gunshots, snow, and wind tease one another, transforming this usually vile place into purgatory.

"What are we waiting for?" I ask, staring at the front lines made of thousands of soldiers tangled together. A rainbow of uniforms, but the colors of blood are most prominent.
Iris

It makes me want to cry.

The death and destruction and screaming and blood.

Father would reprimand me for my inner proneness after the hundreds of hours he spent tearing me down to build back up stronger. Turning a child's delicate mind into that of a killer's, immune to heartache and the value of life. Nothing, worthless, he said the people I'd slaughter were.

But a child's mind takes years to develop. Maybe if Father were still here, I wouldn't hesitate so often, but kill for the sake of his pride in me, in worry that he was watching. There's nobody to watch me now, and that is a blessing and a curse.

I cannot count the number of times I've narrowly dodged a blade aimed at my heart.

It could almost be a sunrise. Yet the golden ball of starlight rose hours ago. Noon, and it's placed itself high overhead, tinted gray in the haze that plagues this place. On the horizon, great plumes of smoke waft upward, coming from fires so big they could be monsters. They encamp this entire field, or at least the epicenter of where the battle is happening. They said the warriors could attack wherever they pleased as long inside the Choke, a damn thirty miles wide, but most of the fighting is compressed onto the southeast side this hell.

Right near one of the lakes, and I'm glad for it. Without water, I'm essentially a Red, carrying around a gun and acting as though I have a chance at living.

I managed to lose my incessant guards a while ago, and Rosalyn might very well spank me for it.

Despite its chill, I'm usually fond of the pale light winter brings without fail. But now, the bluish tone of the sky has been harshened and molded into a gray and black periwinkle, and any snow that dares to fall on this bitter earth is mixed with particles of ash. Gunfire echoes in my eardrums, and if I focus hard enough, I hear a beat, perhaps a drum to signify death.

Our soldiers and our enemies are but moving silhouettes, always somewhere to be. There is no grass, and if there were...I would kill it, to put it out of its misery. The ground and the trenches are blackened, scorched clumps of earth.

Maven's soldiers don no uniform, choosing to wear House colors instead. Splotches of blue here, orange there. I should've paid more heed to the Silver High Houses during my stint pretending to be the king's beloved, rather than seeing them as one idiotic unit. I can barely tell the difference between them and my allies dressed in Red, the colors of Piedmont, and the royal blue of the Lakelands that even the Arvens adopted.

We're making it far too facile for them to win.

I look just the same as those faceless Lakelanders my sister and I saluted this morning; in turn, I haven't attracted much trouble. With my hood, I'm just an untalented and lowly nymph.

Who knew how wrong the fools could be.

There was once a wall that shallowly divided the battle zone from the degraded water, but the
cement has since crumbled. In a few areas there are hints that such a construction existed, but most has been bombed into the lake, sinking to the bottom along with a thousand corpses of ill-fated men. The coastline is ragged, extending much further into the water than others areas, but it doesn't matter, it's all the same. Water.

The water splashes and laps against the coast, which falls off like a cliff instead of gradually sloping into the water, as it should. But nobody ever said that the Choke follows the natural rules of the world.

My breath hitches as the water pulls against my mind, the work of a fellow nymph. Though it only lasts for a moment before the resistance snaps, just like that. Dead, I'd guess.

Running, I stay a couple of feet off from the water, the chaos off to my right, a hundred meters. Most have the sense to keep from the lake, where the nymphs hide, snaring anyone who gets too close. The few who are daring in their attempts to take us out don't own much fortune, getting swept into the swirling and bubbling rapids.

My water moves quicker than my hands, shoving dozens into the water and clearing a pathway for me. The odds of them coming back out are low.

A stretch of thunder cracks open on itself ahead, and I pause, sliding down to take a gander, to land in one of the lesser trenches of this field. A last-ditch effort to survive, for a poor soldier. I wonder if the Lakelands or Norta forced him here.

The lightning started out strong, prominently a lethal purple, and for a while, it left us with the gray. As long as I'm not being electrocuted by it, the hot light is good, brightens up the haze that will undoubtedly grow thicker by the hour.

Mare's hasn't been sighted by my eyes for hours, not since our group scattered into smaller alliances, the true alliances. I could've gone off with my Silver generals, but I made the decision to escape them, and now I'm alone, though any direction that I turn one of them is near. Mare's off somewhere or other, that little hellion causing exactly what needs to be caused. As long as she doesn't electrocute the water, we won't have an issue.

Darker and darker, the sky grows, but I tear my attention off of the little lightning girl's undertaking, and towards the water and every molecule needed to give us an edge.

Droplets push and pull against one another, yet they work together for a purpose, whether they like it or not. Though I do not witness my creation, I feel the waves violently crashing against the burnt ground in a vile protest. I do not blame the water. I wouldn't want to touch this ground either.

Few soldiers of mine ventured this far towards Maven's base camp, but I dare not get closer. A mile still separates, and that aside, there are armed guards at every angle of the camp. This will do, I assure myself quickly, nodding a nod. Accuracy isn't necessary, nor is proximity. I just need a really big wave.

Maven's base, in nature, is much smaller than Corvium, nothing more than well-placed guards and tents that stretch far and wide.

The tides surge and then recede, each time more threatening.

Minutes in, a group of nymphs-Osanos, perhaps-take note of the irregular pattern of the waves. I feel their struggle, but I merely feel, for I don't reciprocate it. To me, they're weak, thanks to Father's merciless regiments.
There has always been something about the water that gives me strength, an air that I otherwise am not equipped to have. Power does not suit me, nor anyone else.

Yet I take it, grip it by the reigns when the moment arrives. From here in my trench, gone from immediate death and with my water, in control, I feel safe.

My water is held back my an invisible, nonexistent piece of twine, and I let it go.

I wish Maven was there, with the soldiers he forever will hide behind until his demise, to drown in my monsters.

Part of the reason I had for running away from my guards was my wanting to fight my own battles. They also weren't aware I planned on drowning Maven's base, which includes hundreds of soldiers that have yet to be dispatched, Healers, and any special weapons he might have.

I can nearly hear the swearing and the cries of anguish from here. It won't kill them, not many, anyways. Maven was wise enough to house his infantry inland, and my powers are not infinite. Still, from my place tucked into the ground, the waves are high and fast, certainly adequate to stir up some chaos.

Volo and Anabel would want me to kill as many as possible. But after Whitefire, leaking all that water onto Whitefire's wretched floors... I cannot do it anymore. Trip them up, sabotage, but I cannot just slaughter them. I cannot.

Off in the distance, a story of water presses inland, melting downward.

I don't watch, but let go and heave myself out of the ditch.

It won't be the first dirty trick today, I know that much. We have intel that the Nortan King has been using dirty bullets, and earlier, he attempted to drop a bomb on Corvium.

And then, I run. Towards the battle, the chaos. Ever since Bart and I said our goodbyes-no, our "see you laters"-last night, an aching dread has made itself a home inside of my stomach. I cannot help but worry for him after what he's done for me. Saving me from that Newblood Silencer in Piedmont, helping Barrow and me out of Whitefire. I demand to return the favor.

His family, all of Norta, in fact, is going to kill him, I think with a disquiet that shakes me to the core. Bartholomew Nornus could be higher up on Maven's termination list than I am, having betrayed his country. At the very least, I had a second country that I had sworn loyalty to.

Pulling up my black scarf, my brown eyes are left unobscured. I dread being in the open air, completely unsheltered from bullets and such. But the stress of the battle is a noose, blurring my sense when it comes to priorities.

Bart. I must find Bart.

My gun finds its way into my hand, and I shoot at the men who aim their weapons at me.

"I have to check on him," I mutter, almost slipping once on the mud that splotches various areas of the field. Snow descends at a subtle, magical pace, and I spit at it. The weather technicians at home say that it's going to snow all the day long, and heavy into the night.

Yet for all the crap I've endured, it's nothing I cannot handle.

Perhaps when this is over, I'll hire a muralist to depict this scene. The ground is blanketed with red
and silver and the colors in between. Waters flies, courtesy of the nymphs, bullets and cutlery hiss through the air, some controlled by the mind. I feel frozen in time. All the elements are simply amplified here; the wind, the cold and the warmth, along with life. Men scream at one another and tree roots rip outward from the earth.

Odd, how the epitomes of life and death are perfectly balanced here. Nothing like war can ignite such passion, and nothing like war can destroy so much. Dying occurs before my eyes in split seconds. Reds skulls crushed by the pressure of Strongarm's muscles, precise assassinations into the latter's hearts, sword fights, men wrestling at their knees, perfectly beautiful men dying from something as vital as water.

I slow down, looking for somebody who might be able to point me to Bart. The battleground itself is too expansive to search, the body count too dense. As though it is some dance, my fellow compatriots weave around one another, and I do the same, ducking when my instincts tell me to, throwing knives as I feel my enemies behind me.

Red and orange are the House of Nornus colors, but Bart will be in blue, just as ten thousand others are. No blurs of men to be seen, I press forth.

I do believe that a severe error in my guess of the size of the battle is. Deep enough in, I can no longer see the lake, but I suppress the panic that itches at my skin. Fine. Fine. If anything, there's good practice in being away from the water. Just the fiery and dark air, occasionally halved by vicious bolts of electrocution. And the soldiers. Few pick fights with me, and the ones who do don't last long.

I growl, turning around on myself. Nobody that might be able to point me in the right direction is here, not even Mare, who tortures us all with her sparks without actually making an appearance. Though in this case, she is wise. Every one of Maven's soldiers would come at her for slaughter—though he might've he made another of those ridiculous rules that make her immune from death.

I pick a couple fights, bearing the persona of a mysterious masked woman. Otherwise, some would be running for their lives and some would be lining up to take a try.

Grunting, my shoulder lands fist-sized blow to it, and I tumble to the bloody ground.

From a certain Greco Strongarm.

If he didn't recognize me when he pushed his weight into my shoulder blade, he does when we lock eyes. He looks the same as he did weeks ago, in yellow and blue, but with a dark, dark agenda in his eyes.

I'm up in an instant, but it isn't quick enough, not when dealing with fighters as eloquent in fighting as Maven is with words, and having all the strength and training.

"Forgot about me, didn't you, My Queen?" he asks with dripping condescension. 

"I did," I yell over the noise of a thousand other cries. "It was not intentional, though, Greco."

He stands a safe number of feet apart from me, and I do not back up. That would display fear and thoughts of inferiority. Knives are pinned to his chest by a bandolier, and guns bedeck his hips. Meanwhile, I'm down to three blades and a lake that is too far away.

"Oh? Was it not intentional to electrocute my feet with your-" he swears colorfully, "water on Whitefire's bloody floor either?"
"I..." my voice quivers and in that moment Greco charges at me.

He is a bulkier man, following the typical frame of a Strongarm, but I dodge him, my nimbleness overthrowing the sheer blunt force he attempts to use.

"Stop," I say, begging as he turns himself around, a shiny pistol in his hand. "Don't, please." My arms raise up, in surrender. During Greco's first blow he knocked my own gun to the dirt, and it stares back at me helplessly in my periphery.

"I almost died, from Mare Barrow's electricity, I hope you know. You'll be pleased to hear that when I'm done with you, I'll take her. Maybe the two of you can spend eternity together in Hell, then. Lakelanders and their Gods. So silly, My Queen."

My words are said to a deaf man. I see the resolution in his eyes, and I hit the ground into a roll as the gunshot goes off.

Then nothing but a yell full of pain.

Maybe if my eyelids stay shut, it won't have happened.

My eyes blanch open, and I grab the pistol next to my head, wildly shoot my arm forward to pull the trigger on Greco, who stands with a confused expression. He tries to pull the same trick I did, but the bullet lands in his chest, and I do not regret it.

Not when I see the sight sprawled out next to me, a man with one foot in the grave, arranged on the snow like a fallen angel. His teeth are barred, silver blood already beginning to stain our section of snow. "Oh, Nornus," I gasp, inspecting the damage. A bullet has exquisitely embedded itself between his collarbone and heart. "I got out of the way, I was fine. Why did you do that?"

He smiles stupidly, before making an effort to sit up and grab my back.

"No-"

The world blurs into specks, and bile and dread mingle in my stomach. Snow and ash mix together far more than they already were, the wind blows into my ears, my throat. To think that he's been buzzing around like this for the entire morning astounds me. Makes me sick.

In the next second, I'm thrown to the ground, and white powder puffs upward. My breath catches in my throat, and I cannot breathe.

But oxygen is the least of my worries. "No, no, no, no," I say, sensing tears on their way. My knees beat at the snow as I crawl to Bart, who is solidly planted in it. Seconds; seconds have passed, but the color of his face is that of a bloodless parchment. "You've tried to save me one too many times." He dropped us somewhere far away, but the scenery is hardly different. War rages in the background, but we are perfectly safe here on untouched snow, white snow, covering black. "You shouldn't have moved us. That couldn't have possibly been good-

"I wasn't about to let the both of us die in that massacre, Iris," he snaps, but I don't take offense.

I swear, trying to recall information that's slipping like sand from my mind.

"You see," his breath is shaky and comes out in visible clouds. "You weren't moving very fast from my perspective as a Swift. I didn't think you'd save yourself."

I own half the wit to slap him, but instead, I breathe deeply, regaining about as much composure as
I'm going to get, and then take a knife to slash open his shirt.

It's not the blood that bothers me. Blood is fine. Blood is marvelous. It's the lack of blood that bothers me. Viscous silver is splattered all over his sculpted chest, trailing down his sides, up his neck. My hands aren't clean, I don't have any tools, and if I did, I wouldn't know which to use.

Bart chuckles darkly, the laugh of a dying man. "If Corvium were closer, I would've taken us there. Plenty of healers, a true fantasy. You have no idea what to do, do you?"

"My hands aren't clean," I repeat my thought and wipe a tear away. "And I don't remember if the bullet should be removed or not."

"Remove it," he says, cringing as though I'm about to start. "Use your fingers, a knife, it doesn't matter. I have a flask of alcohol to sanitize it."

His golden and brown hair is adorned with snowflakes. So peaceful. Yet he's so pale and bloody, and his eyes wreak of stories he'll never live to tell. Tremors rake and ravage his body, and I wish more than anything that I could take the pain away from him and bare it myself.

"Iris?" He looks at me expectantly.

"Sorry," I say, nodding. "Okay. I can do this."

Wetting the cloth that was once part of Bart's uniform with the snow, I wipe the excess blood off his chest. He grunts and shifts when the fabric grazes over the wound, and I murmur an apology.

"Just don't start with the 'this is going to hurt me more than you' crap."

I laugh softly, staring at the wound that continues to leak blood. But I don't think he's right. Because look down on this man now, not as a queen or a princess, but as a girl, realizing that I love him.

A shame that I couldn't admit it to myself until he got himself a fine bullet.

My fingers skim his bare chest. A strange rhythm of breathing he has started for himself, and I make it no better when I touch his wound, in attempt to locate the bullet. He says some incoherent words and digs his fingers into the snow. If they were real words, I might stop.

Eyes stay open, my fingers clamp around the metal, and drawing it out, I clutch Bart's hand with my free one.

He lets go, though, and draws a silver flask from an inner shirt pocket. "It was meant for celebrating with later. What a waste."

"What a waste," I echo, taking the flask when he offers it to me. "Maybe you should take a drink before I do anything else."

"No. I don't need it. Just do it." Bart nods violently, probably fighting the urge to say yes.

"Very well, "I say and unscrew the flask. By smelling it, merely its scent, I can tell it will sting. But I pause, looking at his face once more.

I stop wasting both of our times, and I kiss him hard on the lips. As though he was expecting it, Bart matches the kiss. His lips are cold, but nice all the same. My body melts against his, and our
interwoven fingers clasp together, never wanting to leave. Not a kiss of death, but a first kiss.

It will not be our last, I remember as I pour the alcohol over his wound while our lips still touch. His body arches up, and he nearly bites off my lip, but the distraction worked just as well as a slug of liquor would've.

Though it was so much more than a distraction to me, and to him as well if his kiss was an indication.

Bart stares at me, a whorl of ardor and fury. A part of him must want to ask if I meant it, or if it was a tactic to occupy him from the pain.

"I need to apply pressure to the wound," I whisper, looking to the ground.

"Okay," is all he says, lying down.

I work in silence, cutting extra layers of his clothing off and fold them into squares. It's coming back to me now, all the medical tricks Father pushed into the studies that I ignored for the most part. The panic's gone. He'll be fine. I press them to his collarbone, and his lip twitches slightly. If I squint, Corvium is a dot on the sky. I don't ask him how we're going to get back because I doubt he has an inkling.

Bart's hair is slick with sweat I didn't notice prior. He still shakes, and he's pale. As long as he doesn't get worse... "Do you feel alright?"

"I feel like my heart almost got pierced with a piece of metal, Princess."

I give him a sour look. "You have to tell me if you start to feel worse."

"Yes, Princess."

While my hands stay pressed on Bart's chest, my eyes stray throughout our setting. Corvium, that gray block so far away, only appears to be shrinking further apart from us. On the other side of this snowy pasture, war rages a half a mile away. Nobody will stray so far off from will they? Where we lie is still part of the designated war zone.

"What's the plan then?" I ask.

"The plan was to keep from the bullets. And then I acted on instinct and collapsed us to this charming venue. Corvium must be five miles off, if not more. If you could get there..."

"No," I snap, barely in thought. "I'm not leaving you alone for that long. But if I go back into the battle, I can find somebody-"

"Absolutely not. You almost died not ten minutes ago, and if people begin to recognize you... forget it."

"It doesn't matter. Your life is infinitely more valuable than mine. I owe you two lives after all of your ridiculous saving of me."

"Do you really choose to believe I was only saving you to gain a favor or two?" Bart pauses, making up his argument as he goes. "I was assigned to be your guard by pure chance, but I could've easily let that Silencer kill you, no blame falling on me. But I saw your face, and I instantly knew it was a face worth saving. Not because of your status or of what I could gain, but because I saw you for what you were. Somebody who makes this world better."
"And hell, I fell in love with you the moment you asked if I'd help you escape Whitefire."

My heart catapults to my throat, and I turn to him, the man lying so incompetently on the ground, with all the zeal in his emotions that any man could ever own.

"I don't know when I fell in love with you," I return. "When I at last decided it, it seemed so natural, as though the sentiment had always existed."

"That kiss, it wasn't to distract me, was it?"

"No it was not."

He smirks a little bit. "Sadly, I would return the distraction, but my nurse has deemed me unfit to move-"

A honk of a transport startles the both of us, and whipping around, a military-grade vehicle is behind us, a pair of muddy tracks leading back from Corvium. The figures inside of it are not clear, but a crack of lightning sounds at the exact same moment as the transport's honk, as if to obscure the sound.

I exhale a sigh of relief. "I don't believe dying'll be a problem."

The threat of war and dying evokes such passion in men.
Chapter 34

Mare

Bart lets out an annoying grunt every time the transport hits a bump.

"Where have you been all morning, Mare?" Iris asks from the back seat of the transport, in between her shivers. We have the heat turned on high, flushing my cheeks a rosy red and hers a silver. The shivers aren't from cold.

"Oh, you know. Here and there. Up until an hour ago I was in the thick of it and hiding in plain sight."

"Ah, of course. Your lightning's been making quite the disruption throughout the morning. Of course you can't begin outwardly slaughtering people. They'd swarm you."

"I've built up quite the name for myself, haven't I?" I can't be another one of the soldiers anymore. My lightning and fluency in battle will get me so far, but not through an army of ten thousand. Maven can order his soldiers around as much he pleases, though at some point one of those men is bound to deviate from his king's order. And he'll inspire more to follow.

Iris chuckles, a silent display of understanding. She's had to do the same this morning, tucking her black locks under her hood and tying a generic bandana around her mouth and nose. Her laugh is abruptly cut off when Bart yelps once again, and being his dutiful nurse, Iris turns her focus back to him, pressing on the blood-steeped cloth.

Davidson, our present driver, looks at the pairing from his mirror. "What exactly happened to him?"

"He got shot by an old friend," Iris explains, shaking her head in anger. There's more to the story, I can tell, but I don't push. "And what were you two doing out here in the first place?"

"I was chauffeuring Miss Barrow, like a glorified driver. We didn't intend to see Bart, blood gushing out of his chest. We thought it a good idea to pull her out for a while, let her gather some energy. No man should have to go all day, which is what it's looking like it's going to take. Corvium's already accumulated a good army of the injured, and nobody's better than the little lightning girl to raise their spirits."

I swallow the guilt that wobbles in my throat. None of the other soldiers get the opportunity to be carted out of the Choke unless they've lost a leg and a Swift happens upon them. I was doing fine. A little tired and cold, but that's to be expected. But then Davidson came along, running over Maven's soldiers as if they were flies to be swatted.

"A true beacon of hope, I suppose she is to you Reds," Iris explains as the transport breaks at the gates of Corvium. "To all of us, really," she amends.

I'm here, you know.

"Yes, she is. Now, Mare, should I open the door for you as well?" Davidson questions behind a smirk, hopping out of the transport with the agility of a teenager.

Iris and Bart take more time to get out, Iris's hand steadfastly pressed up against Bart's wound. "Thank you," she says before a Healer guides them away.
Unfamiliar faces pass me by as I wander further into our campsite, too far away and too close to the center of the battle for my liking. Caravans with Healers practically dangling out of them leave Corvium every quarter hour, meant to drag back those who are salvageable. On the other hand, bomber planes have flown dangerously close to Corvium, only to be shot down by the tower guards.

Legions of soldiers run past me, their uniformed marching gone.

The snow falls heavier than it did to start, and fat pieces of the confetti rain down onto my hair, hatless because of that man who stole it on the battlefield. At least I still had my hood. The charred buildings of the fortress have been hollowed out into hospitals, littered with dirty cots and basins of water that are foggy with silver blood. The Healers are stretched thin, despite the mass number of them that are here today, carted in from every quadrant of this continent. Many Reds who claim to have medical knowledge have volunteered, too.

The cots have begun to run out of the buildings, and half-corpsed men lie on them, their faces covered in snow. Men and women marked with green stars on their foreheads run from one cot to another, sometimes staying for a matter of thirty seconds, other times remaining until the outpatient's hand drops into the snow beside their cot.

How much of the snow is ash?

Infernos blaze towards Maven's end of the war zone, and a smog has filled the sky higher up. My father once screamed at me to not come here, would've killed me himself had he owned the legs to do so. I have heard stories of this place, but the horridness of it was unfathomable until I truly experienced it.

Out there... in between thousands of other bodies, I start to lose feeling and control over my body. Bolt after bolt of lightning and my hand starts to grow unfeeling, then the flashes of ecstasy I get when those strands of lightning cleave the sky apart leave. Until it's routinely and dizzying and maddening, and I think that I'll never feel again.

Hell couldn't possibly be worse.

"Mare," I hear a familiar voice from a cot that has been set up alongside the tarred road that I walk along.

"Rafe," I say his name to make sure it's him, though the electricon is unmistakable with his neon blue hair. He appears to be intact, sitting upright with crossed arms. "Did you fake a gun wound to get a break?"

"No! I'm offended you think so little of me, little lightning girl. Got a nice stab to the leg actually. Unfortunately, the man didn't live to tell the story. I'm taking a breather until they realize somebody already fixed me and force me out and into a transport."

Rolling my eyes, I yank him up by the arm. "Walk with me. Don't take up that cot a dozen people need."

He sighs, realizing my point. "So what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be out, you know, killing people?"

I kick at a stray pebble on our path. Snow touches my cheeks, made soft from Davidson blasting heat into our transport. The snow falls slowly but in large pieces, so carefully it might be afraid to touch the ground. The Windweavers are at their strongest, but their tortures are contained within
the battle, hardly affecting Corvium. It's the cold that worries me. Even bundled and running, I can barely breathe in the air, cold as ice. My hands are still tingling, even after the gloves I put on in the transport, after the heat.

"Davidson brought me here awhile ago, to let me catch my breath and rile up the troops. I was heading back, but we caught a wounded soldier on the way and brought him to the Healers."

"It's cold, isn't it?" he asks, reading my mind.

"Yes," I say, bunching my fingers into my fists to retain the sparse heat I've collected. "Wickedly."

"No shame in saying that you're cold. Everybody would stick around these slums for the rest of the day if given the chance."

I shake my head. "The cold hurts, Rafe. But there's something else about this battle that disturbs me, that yells at me to run far away. I feel... sickened in there. It's not like me to flee."

He shrugs in return. "I'm sure you'll find your bravery and maybe an extra jacket layer." At that, he turns around on himself and runs to a waiting transport on the road, emitting a constant current of gas. "If I come across Tyton, I'll give him a kiss for you."

"Good luck, Rafe." Seeing nothing to do, no people to see, I enter the building closest to me and begin to climb its steps.

Find my bravery.

The heels of my boots click against the cement stairs, and I stick to the edge of the narrow passageway that teems with workers running up and down, relaying messages to their inferiors and commanders.

The top of the tower offers an excellent view of the scene, sprawling so far as to see the pavilion that is Cal and Maven's waiting place. Wait for the news that will tell which brother has the rights to execute the other.

My skin prickles at the thought. That contract... I shouldn't have doubted Maven's ability to manipulate his way out of corners for a moment. He may not be able to force his winnings, but that contract that I let absolutely nobody see certainly rattles me to the core.

Those imaginary manacles tightened on my wrists when I read it. It was rather simple, a few lines at best, but the most horrific lines of writing I've read regardless. If Maven wins, I'll return to him and Whitefire. It means nothing, really. Just another of Maven's scare tactics. I could run away, return to Montfort with Davidson. And even if he did manage to force my hand, drag my screaming form back there, the Guard and Montfort will be in control in due time.

Just another of Maven's scare tactics.

Then prove him wrong. Prove you are not afraid.

Looking further right, a dark rainbow of color is seen by my eyes. I was in there earlier. Amidst all that chaos and confusion. The battle is concentrated on the southern border of the Choke, one-hundred meters inland from Lake Eris. After that, there isn't much to say about this fight. It thins it some areas, and it doesn't extend throughout all of the Choke, but the fighting grounds are massive, flawed with mounds to hide behind and trenches to hide in. The sounds are collectively loud enough for me to hear the distant gunshots, and the colors of soldiers bright enough to see-vividly-how they collapse to the ground. It's so far, yet so big.
I've never been in a battle with so many people, nor a battle that stretched literal miles.

A decision snapping into my head, I move from the barred window, down the steps, and out into the elements.

The sun dimly pulses from behind its hiding spot in the clouds and fumes, but so do my thunderclouds. Lurking behind that nasty, ugly sky, my cloud produces a crackle of thunder, per my request.

I ask for an extra layer and a new hat, following Rafe's advice, and jump into the back of a transport that's edging its way down the long drive that leads to Corvium's gates.

Nobody notices me, too concerned with their pondering and worrying. I sit alone, gazing out the window and towards the heavens. There isn't a divine thing about them today. The sky isn't a pristine blue, crisp with the genesis of winter.

Remembering everything Julian has taught me, from the beginnings of our friendship at Summerton, up to in San Andros, I concentrate.

He told me to remember the times I had been wronged. My lip twitches and at that very second, an explosion of lightning descends from those ghastly heavens. It isn't the same as the lightning I was producing this morning. That lightning came from training with Ella, Tyton, and Rafe. This lightning is not fueled by practice.

It is fueled by my rage.

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As dusk approaches, the snow drops faster with a sudden urgency; as though a weight is pressing into the world.

Between Maven's dirty tricks and mass numbers of soldiers determined not to allow Reds to be of equal status, the tides have shifted countless times, one minute slightly in favor of Cal, the next of Maven.

Maven's using poisoned bullets, our intel discovered. Some soldiers have them, others do not. Bart got lucky, is what I understand, having seen men shrivel into themselves, then bleeding from the ears and eyes. A slow poison wouldn't suffice, I can imagine him thinking in that twisted mind. The Healers won't get there fast enough. He isn't wrong. Five seconds after a man gets hit, he's keeling over, coughing blood.

Shaking my head of those thoughts, I look at my hands, a blend of cherry and lightning purple. A barrier of electricity graces itself close to my body, though I haven't failed to dodge a bullet yet. Another of Maven's scare tactics that I feel is just for me, somehow a tribute.

He wouldn't allow me to die.

Would he?

The sun hangs low, the edges dipping below the horizon where lake meets black and gray sky. Corpses are strewn for miles, and to be perfectly sincere, I do believe there are more dead men than those alive.

Still, I fight. We may have multiple countries on our side, but Norta is far larger in population than any one of them, and his soldier count-between the lethal Silvers and Red slaves-is by no means
Reds have been slaughtered today. We're supposed to be fighting for them, not against them, yet I couldn't say that I haven't struck a single one down.

"Watch it!" a female Magnetron shouts from behind me, a knife, sharp as my senses, skims my ear.

Evangeline isn't in bad shape considering she's been out here for almost ten hours. Battles shouldn't last this long. It should've been over and done at noon, just as you said. Her hair is shorter than it was this morning, charred at the ends, but her armor remains intact, constantly reforming itself.

"Where's Tyton?" she asks, spitting at the ground as she nonchalantly throws a blade with her mind, slamming into a Nortan's heart, dead center.

"Don't know," and I swallow. I haven't spotted Tyton for hours, and that was when I departed for Corvium. "If you haven't noticed, this battle is rather large and rather hard to find somebody in."

"Usually the white hair would help, eh? But today half of us have hair dripping in blood," Evangeline says, throwing more metal with spitefully quick whips. I have half the sense to question where she's picking up all this metal from, but then the corpses are around me again, guns and knives clutched in their palms like dolls.

"Where's Ptolemus?" I ask, running ahead of her, expectant that she'll follow.

"What matters is that he's alive. We got separated a while ago," she says, kicking an oncoming soldier in the sternum.

Meanwhile, I uppercut a man clad in red with a fist of lightning. Red, he was dressed in. But not a bandana of red; scarlet shirt and pants, branding himself as one of Maven's soldiers. They're dressed as though they're asking for death, in those taunting bright garments.

It doesn't matter what his blood color is. Not now, not here in this place where rules should be of relevance but they are not. "I'm sorry," I whisper as his knees connect with the ground. "I'm so sorry."

"I doubt he forgives you," Evangeline purrs. "Apologies and death don't go well together, little lightning girl."

"I know that!" I scream at her, my patience suddenly lost. Lightning slips out of clouds from all over, casting the sky a purplish tint. "I know that." The man at my feet sleeps now, and it could be peaceful, had I not been the one who put him there.

Evangeline doesn't respond. Just stares at me as though I've slapped her. Her head tilts slightly, but I'm not aware of the question she means to ask.

I sigh, turning my spine to her. I don't expect her to follow, nor does she as I venture further into the brawl.

Darkness taunts us, the loss of the sun brushing away my vision as the last remnants of the light lingers. Just a sliver of undeniable brightness, still shining behind all the pollution that my compatriots and I have created today.

It's beautiful, in a sadistic way. The sounds of distant waves lapping against the coast drowned out by a million other pitches. The soldiers have become silhouettes, some standing proudly tall and some falling to the ground in a flatline of life.
An explosion blasts apart ground and men far away, creating a better light source. My eyes flicker to and fro, and I see identical events happening all around. Snow crashes to the ground, and the sky looks more natural now, more so as the sun grows further begone. Darkness makes the ugly things go away. They fight each other, growling and stabbing and running. And that's all that happens. Happens for miles and has happened for hours.

Each side is relentless, fighting for the king that is believed to be righteous. But neither is even just shy of goodness.

So I commit what may be the most selfish act I'll ever commit.

I walk away.

The battle will continue, and whoever wins can win. As if I care.

A silver moon hangs low, glinting through the blowing snow. Fire blazes, fake suns to enlighten the imbeciles who sacrifice lives for the brothers that have never cared about them.

A couple of Nortans pick fights with me, my hood hiding who I am.

I kill them.

I wave down a transport that I almost miss, hiding in the darkness.

"Sara." The transport is empty, save for the old Healer.

She smiles a kindly smile at me. "Miss Barrow. You don't appear injured, not physically. Would you like to return to Corvium?"

"No," I say, hollow.

"Then it is assumed we'll be driving to the pavilion, correct?"

"Indeed," I say, climbing into the transport.

We drive in silence, the transport's headlights exposing snow that harmlessly falls to the ground.

"I'm surprised, Sara. If it were anyone else, I'd have to kick them out of the transport and drive there myself."

"Then you should assume me wiser than anyone else. I'm not arrogant enough to think I can talk you down from those goals of yours."

It's my turn to chuckle. "I told Tiberias-no, I told Cal that today would be his last chance to speak to Maven while they are still equal, before one is at the other's mercy. But it slipped my mind that the same is true for myself."

The tires claw through dirt and snow before grinding to a halt altogether. Sara leans over and brushes stray tendrils of hair from my eyes. "They love you, they both do, truly. And something tells me you brave on as to love them as well. Speak to them-for they'll be dead men soon, if they are not already."

"Thank you, Sara," is all I can choke out as the door to the transport slams shut.

The Healer drives away, and I'm left alone in this snowy tundra.
A pavilion glitters down the path of cobblestone, all glass, wrought iron, and fire.
Mare

A pavilion glitters down the path of cobblestone, all glass, wrought iron, and fire.

Torches that line the walkway and surround the pavilion burn low, suppressed by time and the snow. The lake faintly shimmers, reflecting the fires, and the wind blows quietly and softly, as though it is afraid to offend me.

The brothers noticed me before the transport door slams shut.

Keeping my head down from their gawking eyes, I step forward onto the shadowed cobblestones, black with the early night. My legs walk of something's accord, but it's by no means mine. The heat of the dying fires tickles at my cheeks, and I swear as I come closer, it gets warmer. As though I'm voluntarily walking to Hell.

Lips straightening into unemotional lines, the glass door is pushed ajar by a set of foolish fingertips, and in turn, steam melts into the nighttime air.

At first, I set my back to both of them, pretending to fasten the door into place just perfectly. In the panes of glass, I see Maven sitting with pristine posture, face blank, but his eyes an exception. Hurt and fascination. Cal, for once, is the brother who conceals his emotions without flaw.

"Do you remember, at Summerton, when I was homesick, how you schemed to help me visit home?" I turn around and am met with ice and fire. "And do you remember, when I was cut during training, how you so desperately made sure nobody saw my blood?"

They seem reluctant to say anything, but Cal nods. Maven sees through, staring blankly into me.

"If I'm interrupting something, I can leave."

"You're not," Cal says.

"Oh, good." Mutely, I take a seat between them, the chair painfully scraping against the brick floor. I never got to fully appreciate this place in the morning, and I look around, now that Maven's eyes are off mine. Large enough for a ten-person table to fit inside comfortably, with glass panels separated by wrought iron spirals, all mingling together to serve a purpose at the apex of the structure. Roses and lilies made of iron are melted into the spirals, adding a lovely little flourish.

And what a panoramic view this place offers. A vast lake to the left, and a burning battlefield off to the right, where it is so dark I only see the fire and hundreds of shadows. The moon glistens above, a haunting silver light shining despite of everything that attempts to repress it.

"Shouldn't you be fighting?" Maven murmurs beside me, whatever daze he was in a minute ago dissolved. "Or are you so certain that you'll win that you've decided to take a break?"

Light from the fire echoes in my once-betrothed's eyes, but the warmth does not melt the ice.

I swallow, regret consuming me. I should be out there, fighting for the Reds, if only to be away from him. What have I done?

But it wasn't the cold or the darkness.
"I can't do it anymore," a weak sentence pushes itself from my lips, falling short of the bark I intended to give him. My mouth turns downward into a smile of grief.

Cal melts out of the world, and it's only me, Maven, and his eyes. "Oh, I highly doubt that," he simpers, interlacing chalk white fingers that gleam with sweat. "If you wish to be nostalgic, I can be nostalgic. Remember when we plotted with the Scarlet Guard to kill those innocent Silvers? They had families; children; lives to be lived. But you allowed their deaths anyway. So don't think for one moment, that you, Mare Barrow, are unwilling to kill a couple more fathers, a couple more daughters. If you were willing to slaughter to your supposed greater good then, I don't see why you would relent today."

"Stop it," Cal growls, his figure bleeding back. "Stop it with the mind games, Mavey."

Eyes wide, a shiver rattles through my entirety. "He'll never stop, Tiberias. It's the only game he knows he can win at."

Maven rolls his eyes, and I expect to see him wag a finger. "I'm surprised, that's all. If I were you, I wouldn't have shown up here a million years. But I supposed we've changed, for better or for worse."

"You haven't changed one bit," I blurt before I can think twice.

Expecting to see obscured hurt in his expression, I watch him carefully. Lying in wait for those pale fingers to cramp up, a muscle under the eye to twitch, or for a clench of the jaw. "No, I have not."

I stretch out my fingers onto the table, vigilant to make certain they note the blood of Silvers and Reds alike splattered across my knuckles and crusted beneath my nails. "It's almost over, at least," I muse thoughtfully, trying to view the splatters of colors on my skin as something other than the gruesome violence they represent. Maybe in another life, I'd be a messy painter, creating beautiful fictions, or a nurse, fixing tragedies.

"Is it?" Maven glances sidelong at his brother. "Because though that war might cease," he nods his head to the battlegrounds, "our war will continue." Cal shifts in his seat, knowing exactly what Maven implies. I wish I didn't know it. "The public will cling to the victor, and they'll demand the other be hung before they're given the chance to escape, gather allies, and become a threat again. It will always be one more death, one more sacrifice before you can sleep easy."

It's in these moments that I feel so utterly naked around Maven when he claws his way into my heart and soul. The thought of either of them dying... it makes me want to fall to my knees and vomit. I fear that day.

"She'll scream for you, Cal," Maven says, at last narrowing his attention to his brother. "If I do indeed win this war and get my chance. I can only wonder what she'll say if I'm the one who dies."

I don't react, don't blink, don't move. I say nothing.

Silence ensues.

"Are we winning?" Cal asks.

"No," I respond, half-listening to silence. "But we're not losing either," I amend.
We share a silent gaze, communicating what needs to be said. Maven quirks a brow, but he doesn't interrupt. It was unrealistic of me to say that the war would be over by noon, though I never really believed it. Both sides have used a variety of dirty tricks throughout the day's duration, from Iris's flooding of Maven's base to the dirtied and poisoned bullets used on his part. But if it comes to it... if the war isn't over by midnight...then we'll kill him.

Davidson failed to mention that little fact until this afternoon when the man dragged me to Corvium. Not only to rest, not only to inspire the troops, but to give me a weapon.

A small sphere rests in my inner coat pocket, concealed from dangerous, curious eyes. On its top, there's a small button. I press it if Maven's troops haven't yet surrendered by the time the clock chimes twelve. Then Cal and I will run, and Davidson will be there, prepared to trap Maven in a forcefield with the noxious fumes contained in this little ball of mine.

It only occurs to me now, that perhaps Cal thought I came here to carry out Anabel's plot early. I did not.

But if it comes to it...

"Good," Cal says, the bobble in his throat betraying him. But Maven merely picks at his fingernails, though he's feigning disinterest. He knows as well as I that every word that exits my mouth or Cal's is a clue, a weakness, something to use against us. "We still have hours."

I try my hardest, but my lips twist into a frown. Hours for those men to fight alongside their armies, but all alone in truth. Hours for the Silver body count to grow.

I gulp down the rancor that inevitably works its way up my throat. I did this. This entire battle is on me and me by myself. I forced Maven's hand, whether he admits it or not. Played to his greatest fear of adorning a second mind in his head. It might've been his idea, he might be manipulating this war still, but those gallons of blood on the field are mine nonetheless.

Hypocrite. You made this damned proposition into a reality. And then you ran away from it.

Maven watches me with a glint in his eyes that suggests he's aware of exactly what I'm thinking about. I break our gaze as though he brought his hand across my face, flinching.

"Well," Maven says, dragging out the word. "I suppose you're both here to get the solace that you so desire. Correct?"

Nearly biting my tongue off, I say, "Yes."

Cal smiles, a smile that has not a hint of brotherly love, but all bitterness. "We will not both survive this. One of us has to die. I wanted to see you again before I was bowing at your boots, a sword pressed against my neck. Or perhaps reverse that." He fails to mention I was the one who persuaded him to come here.

"In that case," Maven leans forward into the table, "ask your questions, brother. She already knows all the answers," he says, pointing his nose at me.

"Did you ever-"

"Yes, I did love you."

A silver blush reaches Cal's cheeks and ears, embarrassed for having asked the question in the first
"But I don't anymore. My mother took that away from me. Along with the compassion for so many other people."

It's my turn to blush, and I look to my hands, still red from the outside. Why is he revealing these things, full of such rawness and pain?

Because he doesn't care anymore. He knows it's over, that his mask can be forgotten, because soon enough, either him or Cal will be dead, taking these secrets to the grave.

I made a mistake in coming here. A lethal, deadly mistake that'll cost the remnants of my heart.

"Then what is she to you?" A glance isn't needed to understand that Maven and Cal's eyes are on me, one in question and the other searching for an answer beneath my skin.

"I don't know."

And then, quiet.

Cal looks at his brother, and his brother at him, in a standstill. Despite Maven’s asking me to speak with him, his near begging in the parchment, the young one is at a loss for words to offer his kin. Bitterly, I remember sneaking glances at Maven, pretending to be naive and tricking myself into believing he was Cal. It never worked, not really. Just another distraction to keep my ebbing sanity.

The sun has come and gone, and I question if either of them have eaten, their plates containing a bounty of food. The forcefields still stand strongly around them, courtesy of Davidson, who assured Maven he was a man of his word. If it comes to it, he'll break that promise.

As if reading my mind, Maven states, “You’re going to lose, you know.”

Cal looks up from his lap out to the panorama of a battlefield. The loss of both soldiers has been steady and brutal on both sides, Maven’s soldiers compensating with heavy bombings and infinitely skilled snipers. He appears almost dazed, perhaps waking up from a horrible daydream.

“How so?”

Maven shrugs in return, an echo of a smirk written into the creases of his face. “You might very well win this fight, Cal. Arrest me, throw me into the dungeon below the Bowl of Bones as I once did to you. Kill me if you want. I would laugh if you did,” he says in all seriousness. “But are you really so blind? To trust the little lightning girl and her allies after you broke her heart, went against everything that they believe in? Do you trust her? Because I wouldn’t.”

My heart skips a beat, but I place a look of pure interest onto my features. To look is to be.

Cal meets his brother’s eyes in a clash of simmering hellfire. “I broke her heart? Have you forgotten what you did? Betraying us or sentencing an unfair death wasn’t enough. You locked her in that fucking palace for six months and it would've been an eternity had the Scarlet Guard not saved her that day.”

The shallowness of Maven’s breaths are palpable from my hiding place, and shivers reverberate from my neck. “Tsk, tsk, Cal. My mother would slap your wrists for swearing so colorfully.”

"Your mother," Cal says slowly, measuring the pain he's about to cause Maven, "is dead."

"She most certainly is," Maven whispers with a snark that confounds me.
"Mare." Cal turns towards me, and I force myself to absorb everything that Maven's taught me about lying. Neutral face, unwavering eyes of steel, relaxed shoulders... "he lies, doesn't he?"

Lacking a moment's worth of hesitation, "That's all he's ever been, Cal. A liar." His name stains my mouth. "You may have broken my heart, but I wouldn't plot against you. The Scarlet Guard and Montfort believe in your reign. As do I." The last part is whispered.

"You broke my heart too, Mare," Cal spits, casting Maven's accusations to the wind. It's almost as if he doesn't want to believe them. "Don't you remember? That night in Piedmont, we both promised something."

"Then if anything, we both failed."

Maven's cruel, harsh chuckle echoes throughout the pavilion, and the air becomes a tad more wintry. "When did you get so cold? Oh, you should've seen it Cal, when Samson dug through her mind at Whitefire. So many memories of you, all of them happy. I wonder what it would look like now."

Tears prickle at my eyes, and I say nothing. But he's not wrong. My memories of Cal are distorted now, all mangled by the same thought: from the day I met him on the streets, to the day on the balcony, he would've chosen the crown every time.

At the thought of Samson, the Whisper who proclaimed himself not a surgeon of the minds, but a butcher...

Exhaling a breathy sigh, I move out of my chair to the far side of the pavilion, my fingers pressing against the icey glass. Bigger explosions are beginning to sound outside of this haven—or hell, though the side responsible for the booms tearing ways through the field remains unknown.

Almost absentmindedly, my lightning continues to shriek through the air, always followed by blue and green.

The pretty snow and ash fall as well, harder and harder than before.

In one of Julian's journals, I read that in an olden culture, it was believed that a sunset symbolized the death of the world, and when it rose again, the earth was reborn. Raised in a world where it was hammered in my skull that nothing would ever change, I smile. Tomorrow morning Julian's history will become true. For me and the Reds, it'll be a dawn of hope. For the Cal's Silver's it'll be a dawn of victory.

But there's a funny thing about these kinds of metaphors. They have infinite meanings, and a day is a handful of hours. Before they know it, the world will change again, and when dawn arrives, the Silvers will not be pleased.

Savor your days, Cal, I should tell him. Soon enough, he'll realize exactly how good of a liar I've become.

"It'll be interesting to see how your pick up my mess," Maven drawls, eyeing the wrought iron and glass above. "So many bridges burnt, though you handily picked up the Lakelanders already. If you forgot about the Reds, it would make your life so much easier."

I don't intend to speak, but something internal twitches, and a strand of lightning cracks down into the battle at that exact moment. "Yes. Tell Davidson and Command that you're no longer interested in granted Reds equality. Because we're rats and dirt and they're tigers and diamonds. Cut off that deformed limb while it's still growing, correct?" I say, and Cal cringes.
"You know I wouldn't. Even if it makes my life ten times harder."

"Oh, you would. If not for me." I whirl to face them. "I'm just one Red girl. So forget me and move on. And realize, if you found a way to sever ties without conflict, what an easy life you'd live."

Cal ponders this in that head of his. "This decision isn't only for you. You were simply the one who showed me the correct path."

The correct wouldn't involve a crown or a throne.

Maven watches us with careful eyes, cold and calculating. How he can make us rip at one another with a thought.

When he discovers I won't respond, Cal speaks again. "And what will you do, should your armies win the night, against all the odds?"

"That's the greatest part, Cal. I don't have to do anything. Nothing will change if I retain the throne, because it's already mine. And there won't be any more questioning when you're dead."

"You'll truly kill him?" I keep the emotion out of my voice, but him cracks. I've listened to Maven threaten Cal's life for months, but today, it's different. Real, on the horizon, perhaps minutes away. It only licks with m now,

Maven glares at me, all venom for my insolence. "What? Did you expect all talk and no act?" He chuckles. "Even if I wanted to keep him alive in hopes of reconciliation, it's my duty as king to kill those who betray the crown." Then, it's a knowing smile to Cal. "You'll be dead by tomorrow evening if things play out the way I wish."

Despite the little leverage he has in this situation that is puppeteered by the Reds, he uses that leverage for everything it's worth. I don't think... I know the Guard and Montfort won't take Archeon tomorrow. And it'll be too late for Cal then. "Killing your own brother... You might very well be sent to a very dark place for that."

The ill-placed humor that rests in Maven's eyes vanishes. He's aware. He was scared out of his wits when I suggested that should he not be compliant, Farley would seep her way into his mind once more. That dark place... I hate it there. But something tells me Maven hates it far more.

He isn't offered the chance to respond as a deafening fire erupts on the coast. A fire large enough to encompass two-hundred men.

"No," Maven whispers.

It's a sign of surrender-on the boy king's part. If we had surrendered, a fire would've exploded inland, towards Corvium.

Cal's breath hitches, but he doesn't move, the forcefield keeping others out as well as him inside.

I clear my throat, another shiver vibrating through my spine. "Congratulations, Your Majesty."

He looks at me, a thousand levels of pain in his eyes.

I leave before his traitorous mouth can say more than a thank you, my legs propelling me to the fire. I have to find Tyton, and the other electricons, as well as Davidson. I have to make sure they're alright.
Flakes of snow hit at my face, but even from such a distance down the lake, the warmth of the inferno radiates and goes throughout my clothes, wet with melted snow and half-dried blood.

My breath generates clouds of fog that smack into my face as I journey further down the lake, the light of the pavilion bleeding into the fire.

"Tyton!" I scream his name as I near after five minutes worth of sprinting, walking soldiers glancing at me with weird expressions. They too are covered in water, blood, and sweat. Men and women are silhouetted, and I yell his name many times over. When he doesn't come running, I begin to swear instead.

It's fine. It's fine. The battleground is plenty big, and he could be making his way back from further away from the lake.

But... we agreed we'd meet on the eastern side of the fire if Maven's troops lost. "You bastard," I mumble under my breath, slowing to a brisk walk.

In fact, I don't recognize anybody. We won, but did I? None of the Newbloods, the Reds, or even the Silvers that have passed me do I recognize.

They can't all be...

"Mare," somebody says, and I whirl around to face Tyton.

A couple minor scratches on his cheek, a rip in his jacket sleeve, but nothing life threatening in the least.

I throw myself against him, tucking my head into the crook of his shoulder. "For a minute there, I thought you were dead."

"Well imagine my worry when I saw you hop into a Healer transport and then drive towards the pavilion." Tyton gives me a concerned look and tilts his head just a bit.

"I left the battle because I looked around and it was pointless," I say, shaking my head. "And I'm sorry, but I had to speak with them again. While they're still alive." The explanation is short, far fewer words than it should be, but if I don't stop myself now, I would try to explain myself for years and never feel innocent.

I expect him to be furious with me, I give him the right to hold that grudge, but his shoulders only slump a little. "Of course. I understand wholly and completely."

"You're too good for this world. You shouldn't-"

But his lips are on mine, and my thoughts bleed into shadows just as our figures have done in the midst of the roaring fire. He holds my chin, and I grip his shoulders, and nobody else exists. Somewhere between when lips break apart and collide back together, I murmur an "I love you."

It could be seconds or years that elapse before we're interrupted by Rafe.

"Nice to see that you two are alive and well."

I'm about to bite out a snarky comment, but somebody blows a whistle near us. Glancing inland, I see that Maven's remaining soldiers are on their knees, palms resting on their heads. Long lines of them are being collected into columns and rows, ten of Cal's soldiers prepared to attack any one of Maven's.
They kneel there long enough for the snow to layer their heads in a fine coat, and for the fire to be reduced to nothing by Iris and her shadowed helpers.

Shouts of victory and plenty of commands ring out, all the while I stand with Tyton and Rafe on the lake's edge. It must be past six by now, but based on how dark it already is, between the smoke and sunset, it might as well be the dead of night.

Occasionally, a stray gunshot will go off; I imagine it's the punishment of a soldier who refuses to kneel, or else a soldier who managed to snag a gun and is too proud of his damn self to surrender. "I never thought this day would come," I say, desperate to have sound to listen to other than the cries of men and gunshots.

"I didn't either," Rafe says, but his eyes are focused somewhere else. On the approaching transport, perhaps. Its yellowish, white lights create a path, and as more soldiers sense its coming, they file into two clusters to form an aisle. The rest stay close to the men on the snow ground, their unwieldy rifles unlocked.

"Come on." Tyton squeezes my hand.

The transport stops at the gate of the aisle just as we take our places within it. Hundreds must be on either side, not to mention the others still watching over our enemies. Volo has appeared near the transport. He raises one finger, and the masses are quieted in no time. Silently, I chastise my brothers and sisters for so easily following his orders.

"Make way for Tiberias Calore the Seventh, the Flame of the North!" Volo shouts so loudly I question if a man's voice can be any more passionate.

Torches like the ones around the pavilion have suddenly materialized on the perimeter of the crowd, and they illuminate Cal's face nicely as he steps out from the transport, cape and all. Cries of admiration are shouted, and polite claps are made, but my lips lock together. Maven must be in the sleek-as-night vehicle too unless they brought him to Corvium in another transport.

Tiberias walks down the way, various soldiers throwing handfuls of snow at him to replace the flowers and jewels he'd receive if this coronation was in one of the various government buildings in Archeon. Because that's what it is. A coronation. But they don't want to allow anybody ability to question his place-so a ceremony on the coast of the Choke-a field of corpses- will suffice, even for the most stubborn of royals.

Anabel stands at the front, a crown made of gold and ruby in her hands. So does the Lakelander Queen, as well as Davidson, and Command general, and Prince Bracken. Maybe he'll finally get his kids back.

As he arrives at his position directly in front of Anabel, a basin of water in her hands, the crowd's murmuring ceases. Tiberias kneels before his grandmother.

It is a quick rite, stripped of the nonsense decorum that would otherwise be a part of the ceremony. Anabel dips her fingertips into the basin of water and sweeps the liquid across Tiberias's forehead, mumbling a few blessings not meant for us.

He puts his hand to his heart as he states the words she orders him to state, about virtue and character and fairness. I drown them out after hearing the first few sentences, rather listening to the tears' pleas for departure that well in my eyes.

The new king rises as Anabel drips the rest of the basin's contents onto his hair, and a single
teardrop falls out of my eye. It's warm against my numb face, but I don't desire warmth anymore.

I want to freeze. I want the icicles to climb up through my arteries, nerves, and bones until I'm entirely ice, incapable of feeling the pain of his betrayal that haunts me.

But I smile when the rest of the crowd smiles, clap when Tyton whispers in my ear to do so. Now flanked by ten Sentinels, Tiberias walks back down the aisle, a hint of a smile on his face.

Dumbly, I wonder if his is as fake and forced as mine.
Evangeline

I hold back a scoff and a sigh as our transport crests over a hill, only to reveal a small town-if one can call it that much-on the Capital River. To think, that a hundred miles south, lies Archeon, a city of glass and dynasties. Here, they work to survive, and nothing more. The river banks are decorated with trash, while on the outskirts of Archeon, low-life Nymphs work to make certain not a speck of dirt enters the city.

The Stilts, the locals call it. I know far less about it than I should, but enough to understand that it's a detour worth another hundred miles. In the spring, newly melted waters flood half the town, hence the ten-foot stilts that assault my eyes everywhere I glance. And home of Mare Barrow, obviously.

What a wonderful place to live.

At least the less savory aspects of the city are hidden by the fresh snow, including the mud that would undoubtedly line every path if it were summer. And there must be a terrible stench too, between the rotting garbage and sweaty workers.

"Maybe it'll be good for the princess of steel to be exposed to this hole of a city," Maven muses, crossing his shackled legs best as he can. "Gods, you're a decent liar when you wish to be, Evangeline. But I see disgust written all over your face."

I merely roll my eyes and choose to not react to Cal's brother. Spending hours sitting next to the Burner in this barred transport is even more hellish than I imagined it to be. Still, it was I who decided it would be a fun and clever method of passing the days we've spent on the road and the days we'll continue to spend. I was incorrect. It's hard, much more difficult to cut at him compared to Cal.

If I have hurt Maven, he hasn't given the slightest sign of heartache. All smiles and nonsensical laughter from him. He's quiet most of the time... but when he opens his mouth...

"The odds of me dying are far higher than me ending up in a place of these likes, darling. It's simply that this place is of no use to me."

"True," he agrees, rolling his neck out. The same shadows haunt the hollows of his face "Though never discount that small odd, darling."

"Whatever you say, Maven," I merely respond before turning my focus to the tinted window again.

Plumes of smoke exit dweller's chimneys and small children look in wonder towards our transports before scampering away to the ditches they came from. There was hardly a notice to any of the towns we've passed through, a few hours at most. The entire continent has heard of Cal's victory and extempore coronation at the Choke, but none heard of Anabel's touring proposal before she mouthed it the morning after battle.

The slow march down the Iron Road resurrects memories of Maven's parading back to the capital all too well. Last time it was in celebration for the end of the War, and this time it's for Cal. There is no difference in my eyes.

Ten transports, clad in Cal's seal, progress ahead of us, and the same goes for behind. Most soldiers
that fought at the Choke aren't here, either restationed to serve Cal's new order, or else buried in an unmarked, shallow mass grave. Most of the Scarlet Guard and Montfort troops have already departed for Archeon, where they'll stay as the King's dutiful helpers until the tides have settled. Somewhere ahead, Cal and his grandmother sit in a cushioned and bomb-proofed transport.

After a while, the transport stops on the main road into the city, and when it doesn't restart, I growl and push open the door. Cold air of late afternoon bites at my skin, but I resist the urge to cross my arms together.

I wasn't wrong. The stench is devastating to my nostrils, even with the snow weighing it down. But somewhere, perhaps coming from the market stalls a couple blocks away, I smell other scents. Chocolate, different types of meat...

For Elane, maybe I could find a gift to return to her with. That thought by itself, however, sends chills through my spine. She's married to my brother. She's far, far separated from me.

Soon enough, I'll be married to Cal. I spot him further towards into the city, spine slouched against his transport, a sword at his hip and a Sentinel at either shoulder. His gaze is fixed intently on something-someone.

A row of cycles lines the side of the street that transports don't occupy and more run off into the snowy grass. We're hardly inside of the Stilts, and in this area an occasional shack of sorts is placed alongside the road, but for the most part, it's barren. The real action starts further off the main road, where clusters of this dirt's denizens hurry about, spending their copper carefully on the unsanitary food the merchants sell.

Mare stands with Tyton near the bikes, who holds a helmet between his arm and side. Snow descends gracefully into her hair, and a slight cherry blush has made its way into both her and Tyton's cheeks. That alone is a reminder of what they are—and what Cal will never be.

I was surprised that she and Tyton didn't leave immediately after the battle, but I'd assume when Anabel listed of the towns we'd visit, the name "Albanus" struck a nerve with her. He himself must be leaving for the capital tonight along with another slew of Scarlet Guard troops.

Approaching Cal, I jerk my chin to his Sentinel's, a notion for them to leave. They take the hint, abandoning their king and a woman clad in knives. Fools.

From this angle, the boy has positioned himself slyly. He can watch them just perfectly, while they're unaware of his stalking. "Creeping much?" I ask.

"Call it what you want," he responds so quickly I imagine he had that defense planned in his mind.

"I won't waste your time, Cal. I do envision that Anabel has a thousand activities lined up for you before day's end. Still, I must ask: Are you having fun yet?"

His breath comes out in clouds, like the chimneys of the affluent Reds, fire in their stomachs. "If I am not having fun, it doesn't matter. Things are too twisted. Still, I must ask," he repeats, "will you ever stop harassing me?"

"When we're old and grey, and more bitter about this world than we are now, I'll still remind you of her," I bite the words out, the syllables feeling redundant. I've made the threat so many times, but each time it hurts him as much as a deep stab of my blade would put him in. "A lifetime of knowing you could've chosen differently. Make sure Maven doesn't escape his cage, Cal. I left him unguarded," I add, walking away.
A line of guards barricades the transports from the Stilts, but I push between two of the men with ease. Upon further inspection, a new level of repugnance arises.
Chapter 37

Mare

Tyton's forehead presses against mine, a blessed warmth this chilled afternoon. I lean into him so dependently, that if he were to step to the side, I'd fall right on top of my face. His gloved hands grip my bare ones, and I squeeze tightly in return.

The thought of him leaving, riding back to Norta, makes my throat close up. But he has to, per Davidson's orders. He'd make me leave too...if not for special circumstances.

I hardly recognized my hometown when I laid eyes upon it. Or at least, I thought I'd feel a little triumphant in returning here. When last stepping foot on this soil, I was an anomaly. Living as a pawn in a game ruled by Silvers.

"I suppose I'll see you in Archeon soon," I murmur near his lips. "What exactly does Davidson intend for you to that is so urgent?"

"Preparations," he says, lowering his voice further from the polite quiet we've already established. "There's no point in us being here for Cal's victory lap. The Scarlet Guard and Montfort need to get into the city before the key players arrive to mess everything up. It won't be for awhile, but Davidson and Command already have the thought of sneaking in entire legions of soldiers. So it'll be peaceful. And anyways, I imagine that you'd like to visit your house alone."

I nod fiercely, glancing towards the dilapidated shacks and houses on poles that make up the stout skyline of the Stilts. "I would go, if not for where we are. You know, I haven't visited my home since my early days of faking royalty."

Tyton offers an encouraging smile. "You'll be perfectly fine, and we'll be reunited within the week. Then the real work begins. And if you get terribly bored, I'm sure you could join Evangeline and Maven in their transport."

Slapping his cheek halfheartedly, "Those two are a toxic combination. I'd pull out all my hair before we got to Archeon," I say.

One of Davidson's men up ahead mounts his cycle and starts its engine, preceding a chorus of rumbling.


"I love you," he says, and I open my mouth, but he's turned around in an instant, walking towards an open cycle.

Twenty transports are lined up along the main road leading into our river town, black as the night that will soon cloak the air. I know for certain that one holds Cal and Anabel, another holds Volo, and a third contains Iris and Bart. I try not look too hard at the others, most of which are piled to the brim with Sentinels and other High House warriors who were in the mood to gloat. But one in the middle of the fray is different than the rest. The rest are trimmed with red and orange flowers, courtesy of Greenwardens, and seals of various gibberish are painted onto the sides. The middle transport is jet black, but instead of colorful flowers, its windows are prison bars.

In time, each of the cycles departs, kicking up dust in their wakes. Then they fade away off into the twilight, their helmets becoming specks against pink and blue.
On the opposite end of the road, the street bleeds into avenues and alleys—and more dirt. Despite the hatred I own for this place, a crusher of dreams and freedom, I take a single step towards the Sentinels that so desperately guard the convoy. Just a single step.

But then, scowling, and against all logic and sense, I enter into a steady walk. Plenty of men and women have stepped out of their transports, figuring that it’ll be a while before Cal’s soldiers secure the city. Some lean against their vehicles in weariness and others stretch their limbs.

In an earshot, I hear the crowds complaints behind the dozens of guards, all of which brandish some sort of threatening weapon. Off to a fantastic start, I see.

One of them sees me coming and shouts to a coworker, who alerts half of the squadron of my approach.

"What?" I ask, halting five feet away from the line. "Do you think I'm going to kill them?" If only they'd part, I'd probably see a hundred faces seen before. Half-tempted to leave before a fool can shout my name, I bite onto my lip.

"We've already let Samos slip past our guard," a Sentinel barks at me, not at all threatened. "We don't need another liability."

I resist the urge to spit at him. As if any of them care about my well-being, let alone a bit of wrath Cal has promised if I, in particular, wind up dead. They hate me enough for any punishment to be worth it.

Craning my neck, I angle my ear to the jeering crowd. Some of them snarl for the king to get lost—and a gruff-voiced man yells for him to go and hang himself. But others, more trusting of the Silver’s promises, shout words of encouragement. Fools. If Anabel and Volo ever get the chance, they'll spin things around until the world is exactly how it was a decade ago.

"Then let me help you," I say through gritted teeth. "I spent seventeen years of my damn life in Albanus. They know me, I'm one of them. Let me speak to them, calm them down. If I fail, you can shoot them. See how that affects Silver-Red relations."

Underneath the guard's mask, hazel eyes shift in contemplation. "Fine," he says, then turns to his compatriots to exchange words.

My fists curl in on themselves while I wait, but true to my word, my feet stay planted on the greasy tar.

The guards shuffle to make a narrow rift meant for me to slink through, to the other side. To think that two worlds are separated by a couple dozen men astounds me.

I try not to look at their faces, but rather use their tattered pants and ripped boots as a focal point. Still, curious eyes betray me, and I hold back an ocean of feelings as I see the girls I once went to school with, the well-off Reds I've pickpocketed a thousand times. It comforts me, at least, that Mom and Dad, Kilorn and my siblings aren't here. We got out early. It's so, so obvious that their situations have only worsened since I've been gone.

War demands resources and resources demand people. Prices of just about everything besides for blood have rocketed, and if I were a betting woman, I'd say that half of these people are starving.

Behind me, on the other side of the crevasse of soldiers, Cal looks towards me. He probably heard me arguing with the soldiers. Wanting nothing more than to scream at him, to grab his broad shoulders and tell him to fix this, I merely shake my head. The civilians will get the chance to gaze
upon him and interrogate him to their heart's desire later on, probably in the arena.

From his sudden manifestation, the calling grows louder, screams of hate and menace. I shake my head again, a warning. He has about five seconds before the hot-headed townsfolk decide to grab guns and fire.

Somebody near me swears loudly, my presence wholly forgotten. "One traitor prince for another, eh? A monarchy built on the bones of our ancestors and millennia of descendants to come!"

Almost subconsciously, a bolt of lightning snaps from the clouds, barely more than whisps.
"Enough," I say with firmness and volume. The last thing I want is for them to see my lightning. They know what I am, they must. From the news reports, Maven's propaganda... but when they see it for themselves, I'm not one of the Reds. I'm a Silver, snatched from them and taken to glittering luxuries.

My tongue is leaden in my throat and many of the people clutch pitchforks and butter knives. "Maven Calore was a tyrant," I start slowly, not sure of where this speech will carry me. "His brother is not."

Somebody shouts an extraordinarily vulgar comment detailing why I support Cal.

Ignoring the speaker and swallowing my pride, I inwardly wish I could tell them all of our plans, to overthrow the Nortan government, to create a new country, to truly cast Reds and Silvers as equals.

"My name is Mare Barrow. Many of you know my parents, Ruth and Daniel. My brothers, Shade, Bree and Tramy. My sister, Gisa, the seamstress. They're safe, if you ever wonder." I don't mention that Shade was killed in attempt to rescue me. None of them have the need nor desire to know that. "You have the right to hate me for what I am. But underneath the hours I've spent in Silver's company; dancing with them; plotting with them. I'm a Red girl who was in the wrong place at the wrong moment."

This is wrong, as well. The sky has bled into warm colors: red, orange, and yellow. Like the blooms plastered to the transports. The stalls further into the city and a couple blocks down that aren't permanently closed were shut down for the day moments ago, and the city enters a weird silence. The timid stay tucked in their houses, perhaps cracking open a window to hear. That is, for those who are lucky enough to have windows in the first place.

"Believe what you want; I'm in no position to tell you." I daringly try to make eye contact with a few of the people, but they look at their shoes in haste. I never knew them well, but still, two years ago, they would've offered me the basic gesture.

Yet, that would require they think me human.

"I need to go to my house," I say.

Begrudgingly, the crowd parts, quieted.

My shoulders refuse to relax as I begin a short and long journey to my house, which must be shrouded in dust. If it were a different family that went missing in this town, the carcass of wood and metal would modestly be put up for sale. But Maven wouldn't let that happen over his dead body. Just as I'm sure that my rooms in Whitefire and Summerton remain perfectly intact, though they could be renovated and made into guestrooms for unwitting courtiers.

It was either burn or freeze to death in the winter. The cold air that comes with a dying sun brushes at my cheeks and sneak down my scarf.
In the distance, my house sits, a beacon. None of the candles are flickering that lined our windowsills, and the cheap light fixtures don't radiate through the thinning but drawn curtains. Maven could've burnt it, too, had he ever saw it. He probably would've, too.

All coulds and woulds.

My left-hand touches the first latter rung, and my boot pushes weight to the rotting wood in order to test its strength. Adequate.

Nimbly, as it would be if I had never gone, I climb the latter with deft hands and legs, the action done too many times over to be forgotten.

Nobody in this town missed me. I kick up thickly coated dust as I step through the threshold.

It's the same. The residents are replaced by dust, but the differences stop there. The moon casts the household into a silver opaque tint. The dining room sits in front of me, consisting of a worn out table and seven chairs. The kitchen is off to the right, small but tidy, and the living room is behind the table.

There are no footprints beside for mine, freshly made. Nobody comes here, not to pay their respects or even to loot this house. A ping of sadness echoes through me.

The townspeople never liked me in the first place. I was that jaded girl who dropped out of school sooner than the rest. Dad didn't come outside, Mom rarely wanted to, and my brothers were already gone. Gisa is the only one they might've wanted to see tonight.

Still, for some logic, I thought that speaking to them would be different. Maybe a kind, eccentric family would recognize me and say a "hello."

They wouldn't have dared to utter some of those words had Maven still been in power. The entire country was a submissive pet while he sat on the throne. But now, with Cal's promises, the Reds are testing out exactly how far they can push him before punishment ensues.

At least Dad had the common sense to give this house one good attribute. He embedded a fairly large window in the back wall of the house overlooking the river. In the afternoon transitioning into evening, ships that carry goods sail south, en route to the capital. I so often forget, that despite this madness of the war, a world manages to function outside of it.

I get the fire burning in the hearth, chasing away the ghostly silver.

Then, I settle into my father's overstuffed chair. Mom used to bark at us when we dared sit in it. I never found out why they were so protective of it. A spring juts against my spine, but I ignore it to the best of my ability. The chair provides a good vantage of the rest of the house, and Dad would be the first to notice if somebody burst through our door. Maybe it was his way of having some power; though he couldn't fight an intruder, he sure could holler.

Even with the fire, drafts assault me from the creaking floorboards and the window that never has completely closed.

The dinner table has plates strewn about it. The food's gone, of course, from rats and flies picking at it. But the plates remain. My family never told me about how they fled, but judging by the looks of our house, when they left, it was sudden and messy. Maven surely ordered their heads the day Cal and I were captured.

My eyes whip past the table and to the door when I hear the creak of feet against the latter. Three
knocks on the door.

"Who is it?"

A whistle.

I raise my eyebrows, racking my brain for any indication of who is behind that cheap plank of wood.


Lo and behold, Will Whistle opens the door to reveal himself and his white beard. I straighten my spine. The months have not been good-natured to the old man. New winkles pepper his face, and honestly, I'm amazed he made it up the latter.

"It's apparent you've never been popular with the townspeople," Will says, coughing. "But for what you represent, I'm ashamed of my friends."

I smile bitterly, crossing my legs at the ankles. "If I were here without the Silver convoy, they might very well applaud me. They think I support him and his cause."

Making himself at home, Will pulls out a chair. Shade's chair. "Why do you fight in his battles if you don't support him?" He stares at me closely for all the feet between us, his eyes full of questions and answers of his own.

"We're biding our time," is all I say, vague, but clear enough for him to understand. I don't know why I don't question what he wants. Maybe I'm just desperate for some company.

Will nods. "Just know, Mare. A many in that crowd love you for what you are. But hate often overthrows love, doesn't it?"

"Always."

I haven't seen Will since the night I joined the Scarlet Guard. "Why are you here?" I ask thoughtfully. He's another person I have to thank for all of this. If not for Will, I wouldn't have had means to joining the Scarlet Guard, and never would have been Farley, for that matter.

Out of all the people in this town, besides for my family and Kilorn, Will was my favorite. He didn't make me feel ashamed of how I made ends meet, endorsed it actually.

"Perhaps you forget, running around with those royals," he explains and I cringe, "but I was the reason you became a part of the Scarlet Guard, back in its primitive times, along with Diana. How is she, by the way?"

"She's alive."

Will continues. "For the longest time, your name was the only name I heard. Wanted ads in the newspapers, security footage on television, I could go on. I don't listen to news brought to us by Silvers. I want to hear it out of your own mouth."

"There's nothing much to it," I start, twiddling my thumbs. "None of it matters, now. The future is relevant."

"Then tell me about it."

"Well, where to begin? After this stupid parade across Norta, we'll return to Archeon. If you're
interested, you should ask Anabel Lerolan about the logistics. Begin a reconstruction period, Evangeline and Cal will get hitched, and the Reds will get their freedom."

Will tsks me twice. "That's the Silver's future," he says, shifting in his chair. The sun has begun to set, and its departure casts the room in growing shadows, fended off by the fire. "I assume Montfort and the Guard possess a grand scheme involving the toppling of multiple empires. Do tell about those plans." He's not a Silver, and Will Whistle is about as Red as it can get. While Cal and his counterparts can believe that the Reds are okay with another Silver king, Will knows better. So infinitely better.

I swallow, shifting my eyes to the doorway on the opposite side of the room. Though I haven't paid careful heed to the sounds coming from down below, I would've heard anybody coming nonetheless.

"Shouldn't you know this information yourself, Will? After all, you're a veteran of the Scarlet Guard."

"Ah, little lightning girl, you've been out've this town for far too long. And I've long since lost contact with the Scarlet Guard. I'm an old man. The leaders of Command have cast me aside for younger, prettier faces. But my brain remains intact."

I sigh, losing a long, nervous breath. It isn't safe to talk about these kind of things here. And even when we do, its usually a small group of people tucked inside a guarded, soundproof room. "Montfort and the Scarlet Guard are far larger than they let on to the Silvers. And Maven knew that his time was running out, so we struck a deal. The war decimated both side's troops, and the while our troops are actually thriving in the shadows, the Silver's numbers have suffered dearly. We'll strike soon, in Archeon. When all of them are gathered in one place so we can have our best at damage control," I say, still worried that somebody could be listening to my traitorous words. "Now you know as much as I do."

Will pushes himself out of the chair. "Thanks for the enlightenment. You're playing games far more dangerous than the pickpocketing you used to do, Barrow. I miss selling the little trinkets you used to come to me with. Be careful with those fire princes. Playing with fire-"

"Gets you burned," I finish the thought for him, standing up myself. "I'm familiar with the phrase. I'm being about as careful as it's going to get."

We shake hands and Wil leaves, deserting me in silence far too soon.

But at least somebody in this entire and forsaken town wanted to hold a conversation with me, even if it was short and adorning the intention of gathering facts.

I watch the fire, daring it to scorn me. The arena that's typically used for fighting is filling up, I can imagine, with willing, unwilling, and curious citizens. I wonder if Maven will make an appearance in the arena tonight. Whether or not the crowd supports Cal, he'll surely get a nice round of jeers.

A photo on the fireplace's mantle stops me from leaving and walking to the arena. I pick it up with tender fingers.

My brother's face is fifteen years younger, surrounded by a thick white border. It's black and white, not enhanced with color like the photographs in Whitefire and Rift are. He's missing his front teeth and has one of those smiles children have when they try to smile but fail miserably.

He was the only one out of the five to get his photo taken. That was before money was stretched
unbearably thin and prior to Dad coming home with a mechanical heart and two missing legs.

I will myself to tuck the paper into my pocket, rather than throw it into the flames. Farley would like to see it, and Clara too. Otherwise, she'll never have an inkling of what Shade looked like.

This house holds nothing but pain for me, and it's beyond a shadow of a doubt that my family feels the same way.

Grabbing Gisa's sewing supplies basket, I glance around the house. I take Mom's favorite teacup, old letters my brothers wrote us from the front, my little sister's favorite dress that I find hung over one of the dining room chairs.

I heave myself up the latter to my bedroom, surveying the area. My bedsheets are crumpled; I must have never folded them the day I left. But no matter where I look I don't see anything worth taking with me. Gisa destroyed most of my clothes in her endeavors to make something better, and the items I stole I never kept. There wasn't a single thing I kept for myself.

There is no object in this world that means something to me.

Except...

I find the cooking oil in the cabinet above the stove, contained in a metal canister. The yellowish oil finds the floor of the kitchen, the table, Dad's chair.

I try to be regretful, I try to stop myself from burning this place to the ground for even the smallest reason at all. I don't find one, and the oil continues to flow, seeps through the floorboards of my house.

Tears, tears blur in my eyes, but I don't blink.

Dad always kept his matches upstairs in his room shared with Mom, tucked into his nightstand. Oil trails me up the stairs, into their room. I find the matches with ease, and as my oil-free hand touches them, my heart slivers in half.

But it doesn't matter, nothing here matters as I jump onto the first floor landing. This place has no reason to exist anymore. Nobody gives a damn about Dad's chair or the plates at our dinner table. Nobody in this town thinks me a hero. I don't think I'm a hero. Nobody will ever pass by this house and stare up at it in wonder.

Near the door, I strike the match, and a flame flares up from its tip.

Gisa's basket in hand, I throw the match to the oil-slickened wood. In a heartbeat, fire erupts, and I push open the door to the wintery air, in order to descend the latter.

The fire grows like a hungry beast, ravenous for wood and memories. Sounds of walls folding in on themselves and glass cracking sizzles, and I start when a blast on the back wall of the house explodes.

I wouldn't have done it had our house been in the clustered streets near the market. But our house is a good fifty feet from the next, and the snow on the earth will prevent the fire from running around.

Too fast for my liking, the fire prince arrives, accompanied by a dozen guards.

"You may put it out when there's nothing left for it to devour."
Chapter 38

~In the dark~

Jon wanted to scream. He wanted to scream all his frustrations to the world, but he could not.

The seer was trapped somewhere the Gods themselves would dread. It was dark, so dark that no stars shone because of the cold, dense fog that veiled him from the world. The ground was forever slick in something black and inky, and it was so terribly quiet and loud at the same time.

Yet despite the darkness, he could see it all.

Iris

Two weeks after the battle at the Choke, I lounge in a boardroom chair, surrounded by my supposed allies.

This is what I get for taking Rosalyn's suggestion to become the Lakelander ambassador to Norta.

"Your title is holding fast, Your Majesty," Volo announces, sitting at Cal's right. "All but two High Houses have pledged loyalty to you, the Lakelander alliance remains strong," he nods to me, "and the Scarlet Guard and Montfort have been nothing but helpful and respectful in overseeing the transition."

Cal nods, positioned at the head of the glass table. Though they couldn't be compared to that of the Lakelands', the boardrooms here aren't unworthy by any means. Stories down and a mile away lies the other end of the Capital river through the Diamondglass wall, and the floor is a charming pale green, crafted of some sort of marble. The sky is pale with fog, but it doesn't snow.

"I had my doubts about the Red alliance to be perfectly sincere," Cal admits, mimicking my slouch. The people seated around him-Volo, Anabel, a couple Lords of High Houses, and myself-are his closest confidants, and the king is allowed to slouch around us. Apparently. "Especially after my brother voiced those doubts aloud. But you're right. They've been peaceful and completely trustworthy. Besides, if they had wanted to strike, they would've done it by now, when our troops were still at their weakest."

"You never know," Anabel begins, joking. "The Reds aren't the brightest bunch."

Volo and the Lords chuckle along with the old queen, but I press my lips together. So does Cal.

"Without the Reds, we would've lost ten times over. If only based on body counts, we Silvers lost a higher percentage of men than the Reds did," I say, finding it difficult to not defend Mare and Davidson. If not for them and their transport, Bart would be dead.

The joking manner folds in on itself, but Cal rises to lift the tension. "Well, I must thank you for the report." He tilts his head towards Volo. "Now, if that's all, I best get back to my study."

The men around me nod their appreciation and file out the door, but I wait in hopes of speaking with Cal.

"Your Majesty," I say, curtsying. The Sentinels have taken their cue to leave, and only Cal and I remain in this too-big room.
Cal shakes his head mockingly. If his crooked smile and playful eyes were erased, he'd look the part of a true and horrifying king: a bloodred cape with his seal embroidered onto its back, charcoal boots, pants, and a long-sleeved tunic with scarlet whorls. "You know you can drop the pleasantries around me, Iris."

I feign a gasp. "It seems that no amount of kingly clothing can take away your humor, Cal. But in all seriousness, I wanted to ask you how you're doing as king. I don't believe I ever got the chance to congratulate you on the victory. A beautiful city you've inherited." My hand gestures outward to Archeon's skyline, it's lights pressing through the gentle fog.

"Like Volo said, it's going better than I imagined it would." He's lying. "Thank you for asking. Now I just have to make the rest of the country as beautiful as this."

I let out a palpable sigh. "Seeing the Stilts really hurt you, didn't it?"

"More than you can imagine. I've been there before, but so much has befallen me since then." He spins on his heel to scrutinize downtown Archeon, across the bridge. "I once cared more about maintaining balance than creating equality. And I was willing to let places like the Stilts exist so long as that balance stayed in place."

"Though your reign has extended over a period of two weeks, I believe that you're a good king, Cal. Moreover, a good person." I stride past the table to stand next to him at the glass. His bronze eyes flicker from one place to another, and I follow closely.

"Some might argue that if I were a good person, I'd flip this country over on itself and fabricate a democracy out of its ashes."

He watches something closely now, and I squint, pressing my chin to my neck to look down at the sidewalk, where Mare and Tyton happen to run, clad in tight training gear.

"Hey," I tap him on the shoulder. "That right there, it's only going to cause you pain."

"Was it selfish to take the throne, what is supposedly mine?"

Though I have an intuition that he's speaking to himself, I answer. "Not in the least. If you're anything like my sister, you have this...thing inside of you. Put there by your father, for certain. A feeling of duty, of obligation. I assume you've been training to ascend since before you could walk? Yes, of course, you were." I stop for a moment, looking for a memorable end. "We're all clay, constantly being molded, all with different definitions of right and wrong. Your definition is no better than anybody else's."

He opens his mouth, but I add, perhaps foolishly, "Somebody extraordinarily wise once told me that if there is anything in the world more valuable than your beloved, you should forget about her. Because when love comes, it consumes you."

"It did consume me," Cal states, his voice lower than it was before.

I don't have the nerve to quarrel with him right here, with emotions running high.

"She just burnt it to the ground," he whispers.

Without context, I know he speaks of. "Can you blame her?"

He laughs scornfully. "No. I saw what it looked like in there... and it was nothing memorable. A place to live before you got shipped off to the war. Besides, her fellow townspeople didn't seem
overjoyed to have her back. I suppose it was her way of erasing herself from the Stilts for good."

"I still don't understand why they treated her like that," I murmur. But then, "How's Maven doing?"
I ask, swerving out've that dangerous path of conversation faster than a bat out've Hell.

The king shakes his head. "As good as an imprisoned traitor can be. The palace carpenters did a
good job of converting his old rooms into a classy prison."

"Better than he would give you," I say, crossing bracelet-swathed arms.

"He wouldn't have given me so much as a cot, Iris. I would've been dead five minutes after the war
ended, had he won."

"I cast so many doubts to that threat, Cal. He's your brother. Blood binds, whether he likes it or
not."

"Maven stood by and allowed me to stab my father," Cal says, pressing a palm to the glass.
"Nothing's changed."

"His mother is dead," I argue, placing my palm over his. "Perhaps he had the honest intention of
lost."

"You're a good friend, Ambassador Iris. You make me question myself continually, but not in that
rotten method that Evangeline forces on me."

"Anytime."

Cal and I stroll out of the boardroom, climb down flights of stairs before an advisor of his tugs him
away, leaving me to my lonesome and imagination.

Whitefire has changed in the week since Cal's ascension into Archeon. It's livelier than before, an
invisible pressure heaved from the air. Where the halls once walked quiet servants, now walk
raucous Reds and drunk Silvers. It's as though everybody knew all this time that the crown on
Maven's head was wrong, like a joint that didn't bend right. The lords of Cal's court are much more
outspoken than I remember them being with Maven, and the panes of Diamondglass aren't
darkened quite as much.

But even passing through the halls, my eyes stray from one servant to another, carrying trays and
brooms. Though the intentions of the new king are well known, the servants haven't yet been
released from this place. Nobody asks, not the Reds and certainly not the Silvers.

Montfort and the Scarlet Guard earned our trust on the battlefield, and they earned my personal
trust when they saved Bart from that frozen purgatory. But if Cal doesn't act soon on his promises,
the fragile alliance between our blood will splinter. I'm sure of it.

"Princess," a voice comes from my back, and I whirl.

My lips are pressed against Bart's before I have the chance to take in so much as the smile that has
inhabited his face ever since the Choke.

Sooner than I'd like, our lips depart each other, and I'm gazing into his green eyes.

"I love you."
Over my pewter lace dress, Bart places a cobalt shawl on my shoulders. I roll my eyes at him. "I'm not going to catch a cold out there. If anything, I should be worrying about you. Hardly two weeks have gone by since you almost got shot in the heart."

Bart smiles in return, tightening his jacket. Not the jacket of a guard, but one of a Lord. "We've been over this. The Healer removed any trace of damage the bullet left." When Cal discovered what Bart had done, trying to save me, he promoted Bart off the field and into the castle-to become a King's counselor.

"Then the Healer will remove any trace of a cold I might get," I say, batting my eyelashes at him. He huffs in protest, but I pay my man no heed.

At most, the public crowning ceremony will last an hour. And that's only if we experience... difficulties. The palace may be a tranquil place of wine and affinity, but plenty of dwellers on the outside oppose Cal. Despite the propaganda that's pushed onto Archeon's screens every day, despite the leniency with which Cal rules, there are still Houses that haven't vowed their loyalty.

A majority of Houses were at Whitefire's doors when Cal arrived, begging and on their knees. The smart ones. But the stubborn ones are biding their time, hiding in their manors on the outskirts of town until a legion of soldiers inevitably marches to those manors.

Soon, somebody in this city of a million is going to go rogue.

"Ready?" I ask as Bart sheathes a sword.

"Oh, yes," he responds, heading towards my bedroom door. "I've waited what feels like years to see Maven publicly denounced."

I chuckle, following him out the door.

Rabbles of courtiers exit their rooms with wives and lovers, meshing into the stream that leads towards the main doors. Through the windows the fog has somewhat cleared, probably the work of a couple Windweavers. The bridge settles over the vast rift of a river, imposing in all its metal and godliness.

"What do you suppose Maven's scheduled to say?" I ask, settling into a slow walk. It's not as if Bart and I have to fight for seats.

"I can only imagine what Anabel has cooked up for Maven to recite," he says, shaking his head in bewilderment. "An admittance to his sins and lies, a promise to his old people that he is their god no more."

"Poetic," I whisper under my breath. "And I can only imagine what would happen if he were to deviate from the script."

"Something tells me that he won't. I'm sure Anabel and Volo have thought it through, taken precautions to make sure he says exactly what they need to be said."

Though the fog has left, the sky remains a pale and bleak color, a detail that the finest Windweavers won't be able to correct. A burst of cold air rushes through my shawl as we pass through the towering doors, but I don't let Bart see my chill.
The long road leading past the banks, courthouses, and halls doesn't end for far as the eye can see, just stretches and stretches. I try to forget the gaggle of palace Sentinels that stalks me from behind but focus on the path ahead, envious of the Nortan's architecture.

They have an edge to the Lakelands when it comes to this sort of technology. Their ships are more modern and cut through water likes knives, whereas we rely on our Nymphs to push our ships to be up to par with theirs. But this architecture... petrifies me.

The buildings glitter and the bridge looms.

Before I know it, I'm stepping onto the bridge, where five-hundred people already gather. Past the bridge, thousands more are settled on the streets. But the voices are hardly audible over the rush of the rapids so many stories below. I hardly noticed the dangerous push and pull of the water last time I crossed this arch when we were speeding away from the city. But now I note it. If the bridge were to collapse, I'd plummet, and nothing could be done about it.

I wouldn't drown. I would fall to the water and it would kill me as though it were cement.

Gulping down my fear, I brush hands with Bart prior to him bleeding into the crowd of High Lords past the platform nobody stands upon. They wear their fanciest clothes, representing House colors.

The upper levels of the structure yawn across the river, casting a shadow over us. The highest of nobility stand hardly five feet past the platform that contains the last king's glass throne, sparkling in the cold sunlight. Torches burn high and mightily around the metal stage's perimeter, and upon the glass table off on the side is the original Nortan crown, worn by Caesar himself. Further back, the lesser Houses are watched by columns of Sentinels standing at the bridge's edges, and common folk-mostly Silver and a couple brave Reds- are furthest away, practically on the other side of Archeon. An endless river of Nortans.

Mare walks past me, artfully menacing in the dress somebody picked out for her. It's a hue of scarlet, unsurprisingly, but the shade isn't what earns the raised eyebrows of a dozen Lords. The back of the fabric cuts downward in a severe fashion, skin exposed practically to the end of her spine. But the choice isn't meant to expose her-at least not in the way a young woman would desire it to. The lack of red shows numerous white scars, crisscrossing her back's every inch.

She wears them like diamonds.

The front is hardly preferable, curving to show off the hideous brand that Maven bestowed on her.

"Your Highness," Volo purrs, suddenly at my side. He too, eyes Mare, calculating.

"Your Majesty," I return, inclining my head. "Is it time already?"

"Indeed it is." He jerks his head towards the stage. "Excuse me."

He saunters up a set of five steps on the back side of the stage and applause echoes in my ears. Volo is a beloved figure in Nortan culture for his fierceness in war.

"Citizens of Norta and of other wheres," Volo begins, feigning disbelief and clasping his hands together. The microphone attached to his face projects his words well, not to mention towards the thousands of monitors across the continent. "Thank you for attending this fine event on this fine evening."

"Your welcome," comes from hundreds of mouths.
"For perilous months, our country was ruled by a fraud, a traitor, an unjust murderer." Sighs and growls of anger echo throughout the river. "I could go on. But why hear it from me when you can hear it from Maven Calore himself?"

Promptly, a march of synchronized boots comes forth into existence from the palace. I have a better view of the scenario than most, at my place behind the guarded stage, but still, I only see a head of black hair in between the Sentinels.

I don't have to see him to know that the clinking against cobblestone is caused by the manacles adorned by his wrists and ankles. He'll be well-groomed, tucked into expensive clothing. But the shadows will be there.

The Sentinels part for Maven to climb the steps to the stage, his expression indifferent. He didn't put up a fight in coming here, his hair perfectly groomed and his bloody red cape smooth. The boy king smiles morosely, as the citizens whisper amongst themselves. Though they don't chastise him, just whisper.

For a moment, I feel empathy for the forsaken boy with the pristine posture up there, looking down at his crossed allies.

Then, I look at Mare again. Though Maven doesn't reciprocate her fiery gaze, she looks at him with all the hate in the world.

"I'm a liar," he says into the deafening silence. His words burn into my eardrums. "And a fraud, and a traitor, and an unjust murderer. It saddens me to see all of you on this bridge, turned against me. My people. But it isn't undeserved."

I have to remind myself to breathe, to want oxygen. Even the rapids have seemingly quieted, and the slight breeze has stopped altogether.

So then, a father telling his children a story, Maven explains. It goes on for minutes and minutes, answering to every possible concern, divulging every traitorous detail. He depicts himself as a monster.

"...Elara was never a fan of Tiberias Calore," Maven continues. "She wasn't a fan of her husband, either really. So she plotted to kill them both, under that facade that Mare Barrow, that freakish little bitch, she called her, seduced my brother into wanting the power all for himself."

Even with an army against him, Maven is eloquent. He tells the story as though it were a poem, his emotionless eyes never caught in a falter.

I pick up bits and pieces here and there. "...I had Silvers of the highest Houses sent to Corros who didn't agree with me."

"...I even blackmailed Iris Cygnet into keeping quiet when she put together the pieces of what really happened when Cal killed our father.

"So if the propaganda wasn't enough, if countless testimonies weren't enough, let it be shouted throughout this damned country that I am no longer its king. That I denounce myself."

As Maven finishes his final words, a second troop of Sentinels enters the bridge, with the same, sickening march that Maven was rewarded with. They bare flags of Norta and the House Calore, armed to the teeth.

The crowd dares not to release so much as a heavy breath when Cal and Evangeline walk up the
steps, the man red and black and the woman metal and fangs. Anabel falls out of the High Lords' crowd and links elbows with Volo as he ascends the stairs once more. I do the same, linking arms with a nameless and kind Sentinel.

However rehearsed, cracks of hatred break through the glass in Maven's eyes. The brothers stand, facing one another, their profiles turned to the masses.

"Kneel," Cal demands, the black cape laid across his shoulders. The single word beckons shutters down my spine. I watched the television avidly the day Mare Barrow marched across this bridge, reduced to dirt. Maven and his brother's words are one and the same. It's an unspoken message to Maven, salt to an infected wound. But it's not like he wouldn't do the same had he gotten the opportunity.

Maven flashes his teeth—though it could be more of a bar. "I don't recall ever speaking my congratulations, brother—"

"Shut it, son." Volo plants his toe onto the backside of Maven's knee, compelling him to the ground.

His forehead nearly meets the ground as well. Beneath his eyes are Cal's boots, a polished black leather. At that precise moment, something in Maven splinters open and his mask fractures wide open. I see it in the shift in his eyes, the sapphires darkening to a black. "You are my king. I am at your mercy and your mercy alone," Maven whispers, but the microphone amplifies it.

Below, tears litter Mare Barrow's cheeks.

"I pledge myself to Tiberias Calore the Seventh, Flame of the North," he says without the conviction his voice held before.

Though I can tell that Cal does his best to keep his pity at bay, under his skin, his lips are twisted into a pained look.

Two guards haul Maven off the stage, back to wherever he came from.

Anabel, with an uninhibited grin, performs the rites that were done at the Choke. Though according to the Law, Cal is already king, it was a good idea on Anabel's part to make it seen by all the important people in the city so that nothing could be questioned.

Ceremony officials stand near by, stepping in to perform deeds that Anabel herself isn't certified to perform.

She wets Cal's forehead and hair with water from an ornate China basin, recites blessings and promises, before crowning Cal. The headpiece is silver, encrusted with strands of gold, and baptized with rubies and ambers.

The sun taunts us, just beginning to dip below the horizon, washing the earth in a gold, the color of the crown. Lights from all across the city have begun to flicker on, in the form fire and electricity. In tribute to the newly-born king.

The citizens scream their approval when it is finished, a roar emerging from utter quiet.

As per tradition, before each loyal individual exits the bridge, they light a match and throw it off the bridge to sear the water. Amidst the cries, fire falls from all these stories above.

Warm-colored fireworks explode off to the south, as Cal and Evangeline step down, heading to the
direction of the palace. The invited citizens follow them, swallowing up the platform, heading to the party that was promised to them in Caesar's Square.
~In the dark~

Jon saw the way in which the Whisper bent the board where this horrible game was played. He was the gamemaster. He was supposed to be in control. Not her.

But the seer hadn't anticipated, hadn't owned a notion of the happenstance the game had fallen because of. No. He had seen not one bit of it coming.

Something divine, he imagined, would have his hand in the game no more. The Gods were real, he was sure of that much. But to assume anything more would be foolish. If his ability was now faulty, untrustworthy... it did not matter. He was never leaving this purgatory.

There was not such an entity as days in this place. A day implied a sunrise and sunset, but there was no sun at all. And the chill that was brought with lack of sun seeped into his heart and soul, his eyes and bones.

For a while, he ventured to scream, when he realized he was alone and couldn't be hurt by anything other than his sanity. To drown out the voices that were coming from every direction, the voices of Silvers and Reds and Newbloods that would die now because he couldn't save them.

Mare

The expression written over Maven's face when Volo kicked him to the ground haunts me.

He looked so exceptionally small up on that stage at his knees with the others shadowing over him. So exceptionally broken.

After they dragged him off, I couldn't watch anymore. I didn't drop a match into the river as everybody else did— including Davidson. Just tucked it away into the pocket of my too-thin dress, and now it burns a hole.

As Tyton and I reach Caesar's Square, I feel little more than disdain for the party that is a centuries-old tradition. But it's beautiful, and different, if anything. All of Maven's parties and dances were held inside in the various ballrooms Whitefire holds. There's something about this scene that's... intoxicating.

Enormous fire pits constructed of bricks decorate the Square, chasing away December. Windweavers must still be lurking around too—there isn't so much as a draft in the wrong direction. Distant relatives of the Jacos House perform in the middle of the vast expanse, their seductive, melodic voices carrying throughout Caesar's Square without the need of microphones. As if the beats want to drive into my ears. Dancers and contortionists leap and spin in time with the Singers' tunes, their costumes gleaming in the firelight. Behind the scene, Whitefire smolders a welcoming yellow. On the other side, the bridge and the city blare brightly. It's as though the Gods attempt to crush the world with darkness and we're doing all we can to fight it.

The people of Archeon and beyond gravitate to the Singers in hoards, enthralled by everything about them.

Tyton grins at me and I can't help but grin in return, clasping his hand in mine.

It doesn't take long for sweat to prickle at my pores, and the salt water drips down my exposed
back. Between the king's fires and the ever-growing number of bodies... I glance downward at my own chest, modestly covered, but low enough to reveal two-thirds of Maven's brand. It's my back that's entirely exposed, from my neck to where my spine cuts off. Oddly enough, it doesn't bother me, knowing that everybody in the whole wide world may look at my marred skin, scathed by the clicker that Cal invented, that Maven wielded.

Let them see it. Let them see the destruction they've caused.

Servants tote around platters of wine and horderves, the girls wearing red paint on their lips. Not a one, however, is clad in a hideous red uniform like the one I wore during my stint as a servant here. They wear black and white, but even with the new colors, the fire illuminates their faces well enough to know that beneath the measly change, they're still Red.

"Come on," Tyton says, before pulling me towards a particularly large mob of people.

I don't have the sense to leave the festival for hours.

I vaguely recognize how long it's been when the sun begins to peak over the Capital River, once again lighting the world in oranges and yellows. It would be sinful to deny its beauty.

The Jacos Singers dance to the beat of their own lyrics, and the fires burn still. The men and women have a dangerous effect on the crowd, lulling us into a false sense of tranquility. Skillful fiddlers play in the Square's center too, bringing their bows up and down. Many of the people—Reds and Silvers both—sway into one another accidentally and on purpose, forgetting to remember that our blood isn't the same, that we aren't really allies.

If only they knew...

At some point along the way, I discarded my shoes and tossed them into the fire. At another point, I ripped off the bottom half of my dress and threw the fabric into the fire as well, the dress only reaching just past my knees now.

The cobblestone of the Square is warm and welcoming beneath my rough feet, and I lean into Tyton, whose arms have been fastened around my waist for what may be hours. His fingers make patterns on my naked back, and though he's seen my scars before, he touches them as if he never has, as if they are completely new to him.

In the bourne dawn, the colors return, resurfacing from shadows and fire. Dresses and trousers of all color and shape make a rainbow around us, and Lords, Ladies, and Reds wear blushes, either from standing too close from the fires or else from the way their lovers smile at them, touch them.

Though distantly, I know this state of euphoria is inflicted by the Singer's abilities, the string of thoughts is a mist, fading and fading away. The words they sing aren't audible in our spoken language, but I still understand every crescendo and hit of bows against violin strings. Sorrow and bitterness, light and glory, good and evil, and all the grey that has ever and will ever exist.

The crowd swells against Tyton and I, and no longer being able to tell where my body ends and his begins, I kiss him hard on the lips. A groan from deep in his throat is emitted, and he deepens the kiss slowly.

Others dance and laugh near us with smeared makeup and unbound hair. I doubt I look any better, but that fact doesn't bother me in the slightest.
If anything, it frees me.

The moment Tyton rests his head on my down pillow, he's out like a light.

I watch him for a moment, analyzing the rhythm of his breathing that continues to beat with my heart and the dying music in Caesar's Square. His face is beautiful, it always has been, but like the way in which he touched my back, I look at him with a newfound appreciation. He's a graceful sleeper, with lips lightly pressed into an indifferent line, brows relaxed. A fine layer of stubble has grown onto his chin, his cheeks. His hazel eyes—magnetizing as they might be—are closed, hiding in his dreams.

My fingers skim his cheek, feeling the rough hairs he'll shave off when he wakes in the afternoon. Touch the white linen of his button-down shirt, brush through the soft tendrils of silver-sheened hair.

"I love you," I whisper, though he doesn't hear me, lost in sleep and imaginations.

For a logic I cannot recall, I chose to take back Mareena's room as mine for the time being. But in truth, it'll never be mine, because it belongs to another girl entirely.

In the glass beside my old closet, my tired reflection stares at me. My feet remain bare and my dress is ripped and drooping, but it isn't the stupid clothing Ella suggested I wore that catches my attention.

I look so old.

The greyish strands of my hair have sneakily crept upward. My eyes are far duller and drained then I remember them being. Oddly enough, though, I wonder if I've grown an inch.

Then again, when was the last time that I truly looked at myself in the mirror?

Hours? When I dressed up and combed out my hair? Days? Months?

No. Years have passed.

A silent tear escapes my eye, but I wipe it off, pretending it was never there.

The Singer's songs are alcohol, and now I'm falling, falling, falling off a cliff.

In an instant, I'm out the door, shutting it softly and slowly behind me. The Sentinels had made sure to adjust the door all those months ago, to ensure it would make a creaking noise each time somebody exited. Wise of them to think me dangerous, even when I was just a girl dressed in paint and gowns, not adorning an inkling of understanding.

The marble outside is cold on my feet, but I pay it no attention.

Without the Singers to blind certain senses and heighten others, I have to squint at the brightness filtering in through the windows lining the hallway, to cover my ears at the shrillness of passing courtesan's voices.

Yet not retreating to my curtained chambers, I turn right, keeping one hand pressed against the wall to steady myself, tempting to throw up the dinner I never ate.

At first, I consider going to Maven himself in my haze, to scream at him for wasting my life, for
turning my hairs grey.

But in the end, I stand outside of my room, the little lightning girl's room. The door looks as it always has, a talisman that will forever stand. Even if I were to burn the entirety of this palace to the ground, the door and the room would still exist. Somewhere, at least.

Releasing a slow blink, my fingers wrap around the doorknob, testing its strength. I recoil at the sharp and blunt feeling of Silence's claws gripping my neck, my every bone. Even with the stone burned into every inch of the dark place behind the door, the doorknob is incredibly sturdy, probably durable enough to withstand a Strongarm.

Yet I'm weaker than ever, especially as my barren spine collides with the opposite wall in terror. Suddenly, the metal door reigns over me, looming worse than the bridge made of Red labor ever could.

With a quivering body, my quadriceps strain as I heave myself back up, grabbing at the door again.

The Silence pours into me like a bowl with no water. It consumes me until I'm Silence itself, made of Arven's blood and cement replacing bone.

Emptily, I shove the door open, welcoming more pain and memories. Last time, there wasn't time to wallow, but this time... I think it's what I need. To confront this place once and for all, in order to someday lie in my coffin, unfearful of it.

When I last stepped foot in here, it was more of a sprint than the slow and dangerous trek I perform now. Not enough time to ponder my fears and woes-the single fear that rested in my heart that day was rescuing Gisa from a monster's clutches.

Now... I willingly allow a different, much more personal fear to enter me in tow with the Silence. In tandem, they eat away at every barricade I've employed, the Silence beating at me until my pulse begins to slow, beating sluggishly, outré.

Unless, of course, I'm just imagining things.

Either way, my breath hitches as the door slams behind me.

It appears, that in the months I've been gone from it, the room has not changed. The bedsheets aren't changed, still crumpled from Gisa pealing out of them the night of Maven's cataclysmic masquerade. A relatively thick layer of dust rests on my dresser and the paintings that maids should be polishing weekly. The bathroom and closet doors are shut. But the desk...

The desk is neat, not cluttered with the books I surely left there. A couple of pens lie on the wood, but Julian's diaries are stacked in a straight pile on the desk's left end.

Intrigued, I brave further into the space, touching the luxurious comforter that palace slaves didn't fold. Perhaps Maven never let anybody come in here, using this place as a tomb for my memory because he couldn't produce a corpse.

Even air in this room is stagnant, traced with hints of depression and decay.

It's perfectly clean, sparkling, even. The wood doesn't have a speck of dirt or dust on it, and neither do Julian's books. The curtains to the room are drawn shut, but shafts of sun break through from cracks, offering adequate lighting to page through Julian's diaries. I smile. I didn't finish the last volume of his writings, not having the precious moments to sneak back up here when battle broke out during Maven's wedding. I'll make sure to read it later, see if Julian has any wise words left for
A paper is tucked between two of the pages, hardly noticeable at all. I almost miss it completely.

Not parchment, but a finely embroidered envelope, more lavish than the invitations to Maven's wedding were. Gold and silver intertwine, forming flowers and vines. The colors of the deceased House Titanos. In elegant, scrawling, and beautiful handwriting, my name is written on the center of the thick paper. And not Mareena, just Mare.

I recognize the handwriting, the way it tilts to the right, the tight letters that make up my name, the name that he's scrawled so many times.

Mare.

What bothers me the most is that I kept them. I stole and pocketed the notes Maven left me in the pale hands of dead children, mothers, somehow perceiving a bit of sanity and goodness in them. Cal knew how sick it was, too. He was just as disgusted with me as I was with myself.

I slam the decrepit book shut with resurrected disgust. The desire to understand that boy more than I already do, that understanding obtained through torturous hours spent in his presence... is nonexistent.

But why did he abandon the note here? Why not somewhere else, where nobody would stumble upon it, even if Cal did ascend?

I hiss, almost growl, as I push myself from the desk, with the intention of never coming to this room—the little lighting girl's-room again. He knew, he knows that eventually, I'd summon up the courage and stupidity to return here, if only for solace. He probably didn't expect it to be caused by my Singer-drunken state... but still. Maven was so convinced that I'd notice how this room was like a catacomb, save for the oddly clean desk in the corner.

He knew that I hadn't finished Julian's final diary, and left the letter as a bookmark.

The sorrow that I felt in the mirror is replaced by anger, that anger pushing out everything else, even the impending doom of Silence.

But my dress snags on the lower drawer of the desk, and in my fury, the force manages to tear the box outward, its resistance sending me into the bedpost.

My gut collides with wood, knocking the wind from me.

And as I struggle for air, coughing violently on my hands and knees, I catch a glimpse of more paper in the revealed drawer. Parchment, some sheets without envelopes and some with. More than a couple are crumpled, showing the author's displeasure of those copies, while others are decorated in marks I don't wish to comprehend.

There must be hundreds of them.

Knowing exactly what they are, and knowing better than to take a second glance at a single one, I stifle a sob of rage, slam the drawer shut, and turn to leave.

The effects of the Singer's voices have entirely faded, the madness absorbed by the Silence and the bliss long since discarded. When I return to my room, our room, I'll order a vessel of coffee, and it'll take the edge off my mind, pressing into my skull as a razor blade would. Hopefully.
Aware of my lack of shoes, I hurry back to my room, clenching and unclenching fists, fantasizing about using those fists to punch Maven to the past.

It's all a game, one big, damned boardgame that Maven got the idea he controlled. And he sits in his prince's chambers now, still manipulating, still scheming.

When we take over this palace, I'll make sure he's dead. If only I believed that lie.

"Mare?" Iris says my name in question, coming at me from the other end of the corridor. A shutter runs through me at the sound of my name, the name written on all those envelopes.

Iris looks queenly as always, though she isn't queen anymore, the annulment of her marriage with Maven finished ages ago. But she continues to be a princess. I offer a dainty bow, keeping my eyes on her. She's well-rested, which indicates the Lakelander didn't spend the early evening into the late night out in Caesar's Square.

She shakes her head, chuckling. "I assume you danced your heart out all night? Burned your shoes and your dress bottom in the fire?"

"I danced somebody's heart out all night, yes. The Singers have a certain..."

"They contain a terrifying ability to make us do as they wish," she finishes, clasping her hands together. "They can achieve just as good a bliss as ale can."

I laugh, settling into a risky comfort around her. Though Iris and I rarely talk, there's a welcoming aura she expels. The betrayal I'll cause her one day might hurt almost as much as the one I'll give Cal.

"Shouldn't you be asleep? If you have indeed been living it up all night in the Festival of Fire?"

"I wasn't aware it had a name," I say, entering into a walk beside Iris. "You're right, I should be. But it's hard to explain. I'm tired and wholly awake."

"Ah. I was lucky to be pulled out of that chaos before the clock struck midnight," Iris explains. "My Sentinels can be real wet blankets. But it's for the best. Plenty of meetings for me to attend today, as always. Besides, after midnight, I don't think anybody knows what they're doing or who they're touching." She winks.

A blush sneaks onto my face. Iris isn't wrong. Somewhere between when the Sentinels carted the High Nobility off and sunrise... I don't remember. "Are all Sentinels wet blankets?" I ask, eager to change to course of our conversation. "Because I saw the way you looked at Bart that day Davidson and I saved his life."

It's Iris's turn to blush, and silver rises to her cheeks. "Be quiet about it, would you? It's just more fuel for court gossip."

I nod my head, a grin still on my face. "I'm all too privy about court gossip, Iris. I won't tell anyone. Though between you and me, I think he suits you, and you suit him."

She offers a smile of gratitude. "So what were you doing then? If you could not sleep?"
"Visiting my old room."

At first, she takes it as a joke, but upon noticing that there's no trace of humor in me, her expression turns solemn. "What?"

I shrug, wanting the significance of my words to be gone. "As you said, the Singers have a dangerous effect on your mind. At first, it's pure happiness, then soon enough it's utter despair. And before I knew what I was doing, I was there, five feet away from the doorknob to my room."

"You're so different acting from when I met you," she says, not asking what I expect her to ask.

"I suppose that's to be anticipated. After all, I'm not chained to a psychopath now, a blade a hair's breadth from my throat."

Turning about a corner that leads to the royal dining room, Iris says, "Have you laid eyes on him since we've returned, deposited him in his fancy little holding cell?"

"I have not."

"I hear he does nothing," she whispers, a secret. "Docile and obedient to the Sentinels in charge of him. I read over the reports... it's unnervingly, really."

"He's only doing that to scare you," I reply, looking her in the eyes sidelong. "The boy king is panicking on the inside."

"You know him better than anybody does, little lightning girl. I do believe that fact may be used as a weapon-on yourself or on him." She gestures her head to the dining room, signaling that it's time to part ways.

I nod, smile, and turn back the direction I came in, all the fury that has ever existed for Maven resurfacing.
Chapter 40

~In the dark~

But what spited him the most was that the Whisper knew it. General Diana Farley knew about this place that existed in his head, this wretched, forgotten tundra of emotion.

He had screamed at Mare and Maven when he found them here, pleaded on his knees for them to listen, to snap out of their bickering. To think, that the two believed this place was the boy king's head. Both Jon and Diana knew that Maven Calore's head looked nothing like this damned-

Evangeline

Winter bleeds into spring, and I nearly vomit on the last morning of March.

Elane holds back my hair while I sit in front of my toilet, daring it to bite me.

"It's going to be fine, Eve," Elane says into my ear, stroking my hair with her free hand. "Tomorrow afternoon, while Cal's waiting for you at the altar, we'll be halfway across the country."

I shake my head, but that act alone dizzies me more. "We're leaving behind everything we've ever known, Elane. And so many things could go wrong. If my father discovers that we're trying to leave... or if we do indeed succeed, where are we going to go?"

On trembling knees, I grunt as I stand up, the nausea passing over me. For now.

"Your father won't have a drip of power tomorrow, mid-afternoon," she whispers, crossing her arms as we walk out of my bathroom and into the main rooms.

Elane isn't wrong. "I know he won't," I whisper back.

I've kept the Scarlet Guard's secret for more than three months.

I haven't told a soul besides for Elane of what I learned that evening in Albanus, or the Stilts, as the filthy wretches call it. In a carriage with Maven, bored and tormented out of my mind, I decided to slip past security and explore the town before the Sentinels made sure the arena was a safe place for the new king to travel to.

There was nothing worth seeing in the river city. The houses were certainly no phenomenon and the markets were closed by the time I reached them. So much for the chocolate I promised myself I'd get Elane.

But I wasn't the only one who was feeling bored, apparently.

From the shadows cast off by one of the bigger buildings in the Stilts, I watched Mare and her futile attempts to reason with the crowds. They didn't listen or even like her. And that surprised me a great deal. She's never fit in with us Silvers... and I supposed... yet that must be the curse of being a Newblood. Not good enough for either side.

I stalked her as she weaved through streets, and I watched her fists, angry little fists they are, clench while she brooded.

Had there been any other opportunity at all, I wouldn't have followed her to her old house. In hindsight, I'm not sure why I did it at all. Surely I could've gone and begged a slew of guards to
play cards with me and scrape them dry of their coin. Oddly, though, I suppose I was just a tad intrigued.

The home of Mare Barrow was a completely insignificant sight to see. It was plain and dull, and if anything, perhaps smaller than the other ramshackle homes further into the city. One of Mother's rings easily cost ten times as their entire home, and my chambers at Whitefire—which are not my largest—are easily larger than the puny house.

Just as I was about to leave, an old and disheveled man turned the block, whistling a tune that couldn't have been more than random notes strewn together.

No Silver man with the exception of Volo Samos scares me, and I've never met a Red who could so much as cause my heart to skip a beat. But this man... was frightening.

He wasn't a Newblood. If he had some sort of power, I wasn't aware of it. Besides, Newbloods have the means to get out of places like the Stilts. This man had obviously lived there for years.

What frightened me to my wit's end was when he ceased in his whistling, only to climb the latter to the house Mare had entered moments prior. Of course, of course, the one Red man who disturbs me knows her.

I crept out of the shadows of the adjacent house, unsheathing a knife from my pocket. But the thing about Mare's house and those surrounding it, is that everybody can hear one another. The words, "Come in," had me lowering my blade. The wasn't any one specific crack in the floor that betrayed their voices. It was everywhere. The window that didn't close, the floorboards that left drafts through.

"It's apparent you've never been popular with the townspeople," the man said with a cough. "But for what you represent, I'm ashamed of my friends."

"If I were here without the Silver convoy, they might very well applaud me. They think I support him and his cause."

"Why do you fight in his battles if you don't support him?"

"We're biding our time," was what first aroused suspicions. It was then that I angled my ear closer to the large window emitting firelight.

"Just know, Mare. A many in that crowd love you for what you are. But hate often overthrows love, doesn't it?"

"Always. Why are you here?"

"Perhaps you forget, running around with those royals, but I was the reason you became a part of the Scarlet Guard, back in its primitive times, along with Diana. How is she, by the way?"

"She's alive."

"For the longest time, your name was the only name I heard. Wanted ads in the newspapers, security footage on television, I could go on. I don't listen to news brought to us by Silvers. I want to hear it out of your own mouth."

"There's nothing much to it. None of it matters, now. The future is relevant."

"Then tell me about it," the man asked of her.
"Well, where to begin? After this stupid parade across Norta, we'll return to Archeon. If you're interested, you should ask Anabel Lerolan about the logistics. Begin a reconstruction period, Evangeline and Cal will get hitched, and the Reds will get their freedom."

Two tsks. "That's the Silver's future," he said. "I assume Montfort and the Guard possess a grand scheme involving the toppling of multiple empires. Do tell about those plans."

My heart stopped, and I became very conscious of my breathing.

"Shouldn't you know this information yourself, Will? After all, you're a veteran of the Scarlet Guard."

"Ah, little lightning girl, you've been out've this town for far too long. And I've long since lost contact with the Scarlet Guard. I'm an old man. The leaders of Command have cast me aside for younger, prettier faces. But my brain remains intact."

A sigh. "Montfort and the Scarlet Guard are far larger than they let on to the Silvers. And Maven knew that his time was running out, so we struck a deal. The war decimated both side's troops, and the while our troops are actually thriving in the shadows, the Silver's numbers have suffered dearly. We'll strike soon, in Archeon. When all of them are gathered in one place so we can have our best at damage control," she pauses. "Now you know as much as I do."

I should've stayed longer, should've stayed to listen for more. But I ran. I sprinted all the way across that town to the arena that had begun to brim with audience members.

I smiled, pretended that I hadn't just learned of the Scarlet Guard and Montfort's damning plans. I held Cal's hand, kissed him.

Having the earnest intention of reporting what I discovered to Father, I went to his carriage, only to have him snap at me for not playing my role as Cal's betrothed convincingly enough.

Our caravan would stop every night in cities, but every sound felt silent to me.

And when we at last returned to Archeon, thousands of citizens shouting their admiration, I went to my rooms and slept and tortured myself over what I should do.

While I might not play my part as Cal's darling as well as Father wants me to, the Reds are relentless in their acting, always helping, always in agreement with us. It's as though they were all trained merely for this purpose: to lie to us.

I begged Cal for permission to bring Elane to Archeon.

And I told her everything, and in turn, Elane began spying on them.

It's terrifying really, to one hour see these perfectly peaceful Reds around our council chambers, when the next I see them plotting behind our backs.

Tomorrow afternoon.

Thousands of soldiers are already under Archeon, sharpening their swords, knives, and teeth. Reinforcements are waiting in the forests outside of the city, and entire legions of Sentinels are being discreetly replaced by Reds.

In her quiet house to the whistling man, Mare said that they'd choose a time when we were gathered in one place to have their best at damage control.
Days after Cal's official coronation, it was announced to the world that our wedding would be on the first of April.

Tomorrow afternoon.

The weather technicians say the weather is going to be perfect and balmy. The sky will be cloudless and the sun will be positioned high overhead. My designers even managed to craft a dress I would've enjoyed flashing around, had my partner been somebody different. I was even allowed to be head planner of the royal wedding.

But in the end, Elane and I decided that we should flee, rather than be locked up in the cages they're undoubted preparing for us-or worse.

We're leaving tomorrow at dawn.

"Eve?" Elane questions, noting my distant eyes. "If you're better now, you should get dressed. Anabel will have your head otherwise."

I huff, coming from my reverie. "She's one I won't miss."

Elane's mischievous grin drops. "What are we going to do about your brother?"

My heart skips a beat at the mention of Tolly. Elane and I formulated a relatively simple escape out of the capital, something that won't be very hard given her ability and my skill, but Ptolemus... is loyal to our father, and not somebody I pin for being a Red advocate.

"I'm not sure," I admit, taking a seat on the ottoman in my expansive dressing room. To think that we're leaving behind all this luxury...

Irrelevant. If we stay, these indulgences won't be ours tomorrow evening. Perhaps had I told Father that night in the Stilts, we would've stood a chance.

I step into today's dress, the metal heavier than usual. I've been wearing more on my person lately, especially after Elane told me the Reds are already in the tunnel. Sometimes, I think I can feel the blades down there, the iron in their blood pounding through veins.

"Despite the thousands in the tunnels," I continue, reasoning with myself, "the Scarlet Guard and Montfort aren't violent. At least, the Scarlet Guard has settled down in the last year. I don't think they'll execute him." The words are vile in my mouth.

"I wouldn't rely on that."

"I know. And I won't," I say, stepping into a pair of stilettos. "I'll see you at the rehearsal dinner tonight."

She does her best at a smile, though we both know it's a cringe to disguise her pain. A wisp of red hair falls from its spot behind her ear. She shouldn't be off to the sidelines, acting as my bridesmaid. Not even my maid of honor. Iris took that piece of cake. Elane should be up at the altar with me in Cal's stead, exchanging vows with me, not my brother.

So often, it slips my mind that she's married to my brother.

Resisting the urge to kiss her and brush the stray hair from her eyes, I exit my rooms.

On one of her rare days of showing emotion, Mother exclaimed to me the true rapture the days
leading up to a royal wedding are. She was around for both the ceremonies are Coriane and Elara, and proclaimed she was an expert on their logistics.

Mother's ravings haven't been disappointed thus far.

Since the official date was announced, the atmosphere of the palace has shifted, but in the last two weeks, the maelstrom has worsened by tenfold. Additional servants have been hired for the month, and the kitchens always wreck of the chefs' newest experiments. The main doors out to Caesar's Square are left open; servants and Sentinels come through its jaws by the minute.

I do my best, but at least one of my ladies in waiting-daughters of Welle, Iral, and Rhambos-is always lurking, palettes of fabric or assortments of roses in hand.

Speaking of which- "Your Majesty!" Rohr Rhambos says from down the hall and yells again when she assumes I don't hear her.

Repressing the desire to massage my temples, I turn and smile a pretty smile towards her. So long ago I wanted that. To be named "Your Majesty," to be feared and loved by Norta all at once. To sit up here in a palace, with no more power than a meaningless title. Now I want them to forget about me.

"Rohr," I say with little respect. I was surprised to hear that she wanted to become one of my ladies in waiting and bridesmaid, along with the rest of the High House children. They were my competition during the Queenstrial when I was still trapped in Father's mindset. To say it modestly, I put their abilities to shame.

She curtsies. "Is there anywhere you'd like me to accompany me to, Majesty?"

One more day. Not even that long. "Well, I'm heading to my last dress fitting as of now. You can accompany me wherever I must go next if you'd like."

We walk the corridor side-by-side quietly. Rohr may be my bridesmaid, but in the Silver culture, one isn't selected because they're liked by the bride. The bride's family simply chooses the girls that are most respected and advantageous.

The maids will be up through the night preparing for the wedding, polishing off the rooms that out-of-town guests are staying in. For now, Caesar's Square is nothing special, no more ostentatious than the rest of the palace and Archeon are.

But tomorrow...

I smile demurely at Rohr, and she smiles back. I'll be gone from this crumbling city before they know it.

More servants than I can count are gathered inside of my seamstress's working room. Stripped of the gorgeous, cultured fabrics and threads, the room is plain and white, and hardly larger than Mare Barrow's house.

"Ah! Your Majesty!" the seamstress at the room's back coos, coming to take me by the shoulders with her dainty hands. Her blood is Red, but she's the most talented in the business. Though usually, the Royals wouldn't humble themselves into allowing a Red to design my dress, it was a good decision on Anabel's part, once again. Another flippant show of unity.

"Madam Seamstress," I say, glancing around at the woman's apprentices and ordinary servants. Some are highly skilled; they've been using me as a test subject throughout the week per their
Master's orders, but none have the honed ability their leader has.

"Girls," the woman barks, not in the sickly sweet tone she uses with me. "Get to work!"

Servants strip me of my shoes and try their best to remove my gown without impaling themselves. Eventually, I shoe them away and do it myself, almost tempted to mutter an apology. I don't.

The wedding dress is pulled over my hips and hooked onto my shoulders. In the mirror that takes up an entire wall, I stare at myself.

It would nearly be worth it to stay and attend my wedding if only for the gasps I would receive.

A heaping ballroom dress with a tight bodice surrounds me. The initial base fabric is of the purest white silk, harvested from the finest Greenwarden larvae habitats. But Madam Seamstress wanted something more, something... memorable. So precisely a thousand gold spheres crafted by my hand were weaved into the fabric, not as a decoration, but to become embedded with the dress. They touch the silk everywhere, arranged to make bracelets at the end of my lace sleeves, to my modest-enough neckline, to my feet, where if not for my ladies in waiting, I'd trip over myself because of the excess. Over the dress, an apprentice places a hoodless cape made of tulle, clasped together by a broach marked with Mother's crest. I wear no veil, but a crown of iron thorns, in lieu for the Nortan crown Anabel Lerolan herself will bestow upon me.

Anabel said that this wedding must surpass Maven and Iris's in every sense.

My shoes, so I've been told, are entirely metal, not a bit of fabric to spare; the very structure that holds up the dress is a cage made of iron. The daughter of fangs and steel.

Madam Seamstress touches my dress with those wrinkled hands of hers, analyzing the work of her apprentices and that of her own. "It's far more beautiful than the dress of Princess Iris. Do you like it, My Queen?"

They haven't even worked on my maquillage yet. For now, my face is boring in comparison to this fine masterpiece, only trimmed in red stick and mascara, along with silver eyeshadow. And I thought my standards were impossible to please.

"I like it," I say, pushing back my shoulders in pretend disinterest, careful to keep my voice unfeeling. "You all did a good job."

The seamstress's face falls for a moment, but she recovers the lost composure in an instant. "I'm glad to hear it, Your Majesty. And I wish you the best of luck tomorrow." She exits the room along with her girls, leaving me with the maids.

"I heard she mentored Mare Barrow's sister," one of them whispers to her friend, thinking I cannot hear them.

"What?" I ask, twisting around.

The maid's eyebrows shoot up in a panic. "Nothing, Your Majesty. Just some silly maid gossip."

To my knowledge, which should be decent, Mare has one sister, colored with the same hair as Elane. "Everybody's related to somebody around here," I mutter, chastising the maid's shaky fingers in my head.

Five minutes later, I'm in my regular palace wear again, and strutting out the door, prepared to find another ten people on the other side to demand tasks of me.
To my pleasure, nobody is outside, not even a pesky handmaiden. I could pay a visit to Cal's court, which will be adjourned early for the day, due to the practice wedding taking place tonight in the throne room. Or I could return to Elane. But Elane's busy packing our belongings, consisting of keepsakes and the most expensive dresses we own—the gowns will be a good source of cash.

Maybe Mare would be a good source of entertainment.

Or...

A brutally vicious thought arises in my mind.

I return to my chambers to find Elane folding one of her day dresses. Not expensive compared to her other dresses, but a favorite of hers. She looks at me quizzically. I should've have been back here for hours.

"Let's raise a little hell before the wedding bells."
Chapter 41

Iris

"Are you religious?" I ask Mare on a stroll through the garden in the evening.

"No," she says, still donning gear and sweat from her afternoon training session with Tyton. I don't know why she bothers to keep up such a vigorous exercise regiment anymore. It's not as though she'll have to fight again. The entire continent is united under Cal.

Personal reasons, then.

"I never have been," she continues. "Though the worshipping of your Gods isn't outlawed in Norta, it's not looked upon very fondly."

I nod, sweeping a braid out of my face. "It's just... I enjoy our talks, Mare. And I find it absolutely hilarious that five years ago, a Nortan Red girl like you and Lakelander Silver princess like me couldn't have been friends. Someday... if you'd let me, I'd like to share my religion with your country, and perhaps my message could start with you."

A sadness flickers in her eyes, but only in a flash. I don't ask her what it is. Maybe someday we'll be close enough for me to.

"I'd like that," she says at long last. "Our countries have already come so far. I don't see why we couldn't share that, too. Besides... maybe having something-someone-to believe in would be good for me. Would make me start living for something-someone-more than this war."

Hope sparks in the little lightning girl's electric eyes. I dare call Mare Barrow a friend for all the time we've spent together over the months.

So I tell her about the legends of the Lakelander Gods.

A half an hour later, edging dangerously close to when the practice wedding is scheduled to commence in the throne room, I find myself with Mare in the temple Cal had the decency to build for me and my fellow Lakelanders. I gave Maven months, but he failed to do much more than point me to the door.

The temple his men built is small, but it is a home away from home, and good enough for me. The outside is a pale sand color built from sandstone, and the interior is but a couple of rows of pews and a worshipping shrine at the front. There couldn't be room for more than fifty people in the pews, but there are never more than fifty Lakelanders in Norta, Cal probably figured.

But in time, as I gain the respect of the Nortans, I'll have a new temple built for Archeon and all the other cities.

We kneel before the altar together, backs straight but heads bowed. Besides for the two of us, the building is abandoned.

"What should I do?" Mare asks, still in the outfit she wore earlier. "I've never-"

"Shush, you," I say, smiling at her. The girl can wield bolts of lightning and steal the hearts of men left and right, but she's on edge, out of her element in this temple I haven't yet named. "A prayer isn't the type of thought that has much of any restrictions. You pray to the Gods. You ask them for
wisdom, courage, help, maybe a dash of sanity. To admit your sins to them when you're ready. And prayer doesn't have to occur here. As long as your heart it with you. I simply feel most comfortable here, rather than in my Nortan-designed rooms."

"Thank you, Iris." Mare nods, closing her eyelids.

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"Where's my grandson?" Anabel asks, fuming and pacing in the throne room.

The sun has long since set, but chandeliers worth of candles hang high above from the ceiling, offering plenty of brightness. The throne room, for once, is relatively boring, the characters who make it so scandalous and exciting gone and asleep, resting up for tomorrow's events.

I'll surely be risen hours before dawn tomorrow. While as many preparations as possible for the ceremony and the reception were made in advance, only so much can be done ahead of time. The invitations were sent out eons ago, and all responded within twenty-four hours. But the mass amounts of food cannot be prepared a week ahead of time, nor can the chairs or flowers be set.

Tomorrow night I'll be sleeping in my bed, and Cal's reign will be stronger than ever.

Until then, I'm going to be tired as hell.

"Well?" the woman snaps, looking around. Evangeline and her bridesmaids, still in their day clothes, stare back unknowingly. "If the King cannot keep track of his watch, he had better have a stunning council. Somebody, go fetch him."

"I'll go," I volunteer, more than happy to be out of Anabel's screaming range for a minute or two.

The walk to Cal's chambers is short, but I still take the moments to note all the goes on around me. A cold wind filters in through the main doors not far past the throne room, allowing Sentinels and servants passage without having the sentries open and close the doors so often. Along with the palace staff, designers and coordinators of every sort have walked through the doors in the last few days. Dress designers, florists, pastry chefs, journalists and newscasters, pianists and violinists, and a thousand more jobs... I didn't pay nearly as much attention to how much work goes into a wedding during mine.

"Cal?" I rap my knuckles on his doors, stepping past the Sentinels.

No response. "Did you see the King enter or exit his rooms recently?" I ask the room's guards.

They shake their heads, so I invite myself in.

I scan the antechamber comprised of a couple of couches and tables before entering into a boardroom. These chambers aren't the same ones Maven used while he was king; they're in a completely different wing of the palace. Cal told me he couldn't bear sleeping in the same room as Maven did. I don't blame him. I went to Maven's chambers plenty of times, though not to accomplish the duties being queen demanded of me. His bed was small, I still remember. Too small for somebody with as much power as Maven had. There was a displeasing presence in his room. I don't think Cal so much as lets servants go into the chambers.

Cal's rooms are filthy for that of a king's standards. He must've not been expecting company anytime soon. The boardroom's large oak table has stacks of books littered atop it, tombs that I might stop and take a glance at if I didn't know Anabel was three stories below waiting on me.
More sitting rooms, a study with dozens of maps, and then Cal's bedroom. The door to the last unexplored room swings open without a sound, and I peak my head in. To my disappointment and shock, I don't find him collapsed in his bed like I was hoping he'd be. A nonpunctual and exhausted king is better than no king at all.

Going to far as to check his bathroom, I slam the door to it when my searching yields no results.

Wildly and madly, I rack my brain for what I'm missing. It doesn't make sense...

I look inside of the closets, under the bed, places a little boy would like to hide from his nightmares. "Cal?" I ask again.

There's no blood, no sign of struggle. Besides, highly trained Sentinels-bland as they might be-stand guard outside of his rooms, and the windows and balconies are thoroughly locked. But there's no indication of where he might've gone. He didn't send word to Anabel obviously, and there's no messily-written message in his study.

"No point in guarding this room, boys. Put out an alert, but keep it under raps. We don't need a widespread panic," I order the Sentinels as I walk past them. "The King is missing."

My words ruffle their steely feathers, and they're off in separate directions before I blink.

There's no feasible reason he'd be in his office downstairs, still, I storm down the steps that lead towards the room. This time, I don't take the damn time to admire the work that's constantly being thrown into this wedding. My heels click against the ground angrily and shake my head.

The doors aren't guarded. My news already reached them, in that case.

And it's going to reach Anabel and Volo in about five seconds.

The mahogany and glass doors are cool to the touch, and I burst through them, my eyes taking in the scene. In this case, Cal did inherit his brother's room.

At the back of the study, there's a desk, more books, papers, and maps on it. The flags of Norta and House Calore hang nearby, and portraits dating back to the start of the dynasty decorate the side walls. More couches and chairs, meaningless rugs and lamps, casting the room in a theme of red, black, and gold... he's not here.

I double check all the stupid, childish places, though deep-down, it's just me, getting desperate and idiotic.

Wind from the double doors being wrenched open blows through Cal's study. I spin around, expectant to find Cal, coming from Gods-know-where, perhaps disheveled from a nap...

"He's missing?" Anabel questions as I pull myself up from searching the desk for notes, anything at all. Her tone implies she believes his disappearance is my fault.

"It appears that way," I croak. "I told his Sentinels to send out an alert. It's probably nothing. Cal probably just lost track of time somewhere that I'm not thinking of."

"I've heard." The rest that were in the throne room minutes ago fall into the room behind her. In addition, Bracken and Davidson follow, each wearing some degree of terror. "But it isn't like my grandson to forget. Especially when every hallway echoes with wedding chatter." She sighs. "This is ridiculous, and not something we have time for either. I'll order a task force to begin searching every inch of this palace. And somebody needs to figure out where he was last seen. In the
meantime, those missing, go back to the throne room. We'll have to practice without him."

"But-"

"Missing his chance at practicing will be his punishment, Princess Iris," Anabel says, her
dangerous bronze eyes glimmering with a hint of annoyance.

"Of course," I return, concurring with the old woman.

Bart walks next to me while we make our way to the throne room. The halls are still bubbling with
joy; something about royal weddings riles up the servants. But the Sentinels around are next to
none, save for the small army that walks with us. If something happened to Cal, who's to say
something won't happen to another royal?

"I checked his rooms. I went so far as to look under the bed, Bart," I grind out, in grave need to
talk. "Where would he be?"

His eyes shimmer in repressed panic but still manages a smile. "It is the last night before he's a
married man, Iris. Maybe the young lad got the idea to have some fun and ditch the palace."

Rolling my eyes heavily, I punch him in the side. "Young lad? Aren't you the same age as Cal?
And anyway, you barbaric man, Cal wouldn't do that. He's responsible to a fault when it comes to
the throne and Crown. Unless he managed to pass out from fatigue, there's something horribly
wrong."

Bart whispers now. "I was joking, Princess," he says sadly, using my old name. "Don't think that
I'm any less concerned than you are. If he's gone, if a band of rebels managed to abduct him,
everything will go to crap. And besides the fate of this country, Cal's a decent guy."

"Maven," I state dully, stopping in the hallway, and Evangeline nearly bumps into me. "If Cal were
to disappear, who would the throne be given to?"

At my words, the rest of the party ceases their walking, too. Anabel looks at me again. "Despite
denouncing himself, Maven is the last Calore. It would fall into his hands, no matter what the
people wanted. And he might very well be insane enough to try it. But that's impossible," she
reasons. "Maven is kept under lock and key, watched by our most loyal men. We're jumping to
conclusions. Cal is a fine warrior, he wouldn't have allowed himself to get kidnapped."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Evangeline interjects, speaking for the first time tonight. She
looks... humored. As if this entire situation is a mere joke. "Maven has more connections than
you'd think. A lot of blackmail, too. He could've made arrangements prior to the battle, as a safety
net."

Volo growls, hand at sword. "Then let us all go pay the boy king a visit."

Not more than ten minutes later and more than a few Sentinels marching into the throne room,
Maven Calore is thrown onto the marble, his shackles scraping the stone. At this point of stress and
fury, I wouldn't be surprised if Volo yelled at him for it. Though he is a prisoner of the highest
order, his caretakers keep him in good care. Despite his simple gray clothing, his hair is short and
slicked back, and he wears that same impish grin he owned months ago along with the crown.

It is Maven's very way to read situations the second that he's tossed into them. He notices that the
throne is empty, and the way that Anabel paces off to the sidelines. "To what do I owe the pleasure
of all of your graceless faces on this evening? If I have kept track of the days correctly, I would say
that my brother is due for marriage tomorrow."
"Congratulations, boy," Volo says as he drags a sword across the marble, in turn making a shrieking sound. "You etch markings into your bedpost like a professional."

Maven takes the compliment with a nod, not daring to break eye contact with the King of Rift. Out of all of us, he is easily the most terrifying, as Anabel kindly put it. So now Volo stands before the half-standing boy, a self-appointed interrogator.

"Have you decided at long last to kill me? It would be perfect timing, too. I'm sure Evangeline would enjoy that as a wedding gift. Or perhaps an entrée for those of you who are particularly disgusting."

That remark earns Maven a kick to the ribs via Volo's metal-toed boot. He falls to his side, a grimace sketched onto his face. "One broken rib? Two? You're lucky that Healers are near. So long as you cooperate. Now, look around. Do you see wrong with this room?"

Maven laughs, the kind of chuckle that says, you really think I can't handle a bit of torture?

"Well, there are a good deal of things wrong with this room. For example, I am not seated on the throne up front. But if I were to venture a guess, my dear brother appears to be missing."

"That he is," Anabel says, coming forward, her yellow dress shimmering in the candlelight. "Do you know where he is, Maven?"

Real, true confusion that cannot be imitated pops up onto Maven's face. Seated on his knees, an unholy man in prayer, he looks to his shackles, binding bony wrists together. "My brother's gone?"

At that moment, a Sentinel enters the chamber. He's forgotten his mask, and he has a silver blush.

"News?" Anabel tilts her head up.

"In Whitefire's blueprinted entirety, His Majesty has not yet been found. We've expanded the search to the palace's grounds and surrounding government buildings. If we don't locate him by the hour, we'll send out troops across the bridge."

Anabel nods gravely. "Good. Continue to alert us of your progress, and under no circumstances is this... setback of ours to reach the maids. Those little hellions are worse than the press."

The Sentinel is dismissed, attention returning to Maven. He raises his eyebrows. "You think I did this? How could I? I've been shackled to a single room for months. I don't have any means-"

"Shut up," Volo growls, his boot half-raised, taunting Maven. To my surprise, he flinches. "My daughter's wedding is tomorrow afternoon, and the palace has been in the midst of preparing for months. The last thing I want is for it to be derailed because you didn't get your unearned crown. If we don't find Cal by dawn, I'll behead you myself. Let the line of succession go to Hell."

"You wouldn't. If you killed me, the order in this country would go to Hell. You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Volo's sword scrapes Maven's neck. "Do I look like a double-dealer to you?"

"Get a Whisper. There must be a Newblood crawling around somewhere in this castle that can prove my innocence."

"There are no Newblood Whispers, fool," Anabel says. "And any distant Merandus cousins have fled."
"Shame," Maven spits. "But my plead remains the same. And I am a man of my word. Cal won the war against me, and I lost. I don't question the order of things once they're finished."

"He'll be of no help. Take him back to his rooms," Anabel says. "As for the rest of you, don't count on getting sleep tonight."

At three in the morning, Bart and I slip away from the preparations, only to collapse on his bed.

Just two hours...

A blink later, Bart's nudging me awake.

Despite the coffee that scalds my throat, chills rack my body as I stand outside, listening and critiquing the orchestra. They're from the finest opera house in Archeon, and I know their music is lovely-I've heard it before—but the notes have trouble reaching my ears now.

Cal still hasn't been found.

And if Volo stays true to his promise, Maven won't have a head soon.

When the musicians finish their last piece, I smile at them, nodding my approval. Around us, the beginnings of the wedding venue have been constructed.

Clutching papers listing various acts I have to accomplish and oversee, I head back inside, using a red quill to cross the orchestra off my list.

That leaves taste testing with Evangeline, my bridesmaid dress fitting, prewedding interviews...

Shaking my head, I'm tempted to sneak back to my rooms and take another nap.

A hair before dawn, Cal returns.
Chapter 42

~March 31st, The night before the wedding~

Mare

I walk below Whitefire with Davidson, in the tunnels of the city.

A traitorous, vile feeling brews in my stomach as I behold the hundreds of soldiers that we've snuck into the city through the hollowed-out passageways. And Davidson's only shown me the beginning of it.

We pass the soldiers, some disguised as Silver Sentinels, while others wear traditional black gear, scarlet bandanas crowning their heads. Either way, they smile as we pass, laughing quietly amongst themselves. In certain areas, the tunnels are twenty feet wide, and soldiers relax in circles, cards in hand. In others, too tight to do much more than walk through, they've abandoned stores of food and weapons.

The tunnel systems extend far and wide, for miles on end. Right below Archeon most of the passages are newly renovated and white, but further out towards the rural High Houses, they bleed into sandstone and mildew. Mold or not, Davidson's made sure to use every inch of these tunnels to his advantage.

"How many are in the tunnels?" I ask.

He pauses, noting my hidden terror. "Twelve-thousand."

"And there are more in the forests."

"Yes."

Our conversation lapses into silence.

With shaking fingers, I twist the knob that leads to Mareena's bedroom. Tyton blessedly isn't here, but somewhere in the tunnels.

Silent tears slip out of my eyes as I numbly lie down in my bed. The salty water stings, like blood flowing from fresh wounds. And my clothes are suddenly too restricting, and I can't breathe-

Nothing can be done now to fix what I've become a part of.

But I don't regret it. I don't regret meeting Will Whistle all those years ago when I was just a girl who wanted to sell stolen buttons and knickknacks. I don't regret joining the Scarlet Guard when I met Farley because of Will. I don't regret anything that I've said or done for the sake of the Reds.

But I regret meeting him, I know now.

I remember it so vividly. My attempts to pickpocket the Silvers in the Summerton markets had gone so, so horribly wrong, and I was walking back to the house that is now burnt to ashes. But along the way, I made a mistake. A stupid, irrelevant mistake that somehow turned out to change my life forever. I knew to pickpocket the stranger wouldn't fix my problems, but I reached into his pocket for not reason at all.
His eyes were fire, and they still are.

And tomorrow, when we're stripped of our masks and true colors are revealed, Cal will know it wasn't the Silvers that were the deceivers, but it was us all along. The Reds. I can only imagine the hatred and betrayal that will burn through his fiery eyes until the fire's been muffled by all that rage.

I lied to him so perfectly and effortlessly that night at the pavilion. But something tells me, had Cal been anybody else, he wouldn't have believed me. Which means, somewhere deep down, he trusts me, loves me.

He shouldn't. Cal's beautiful enough to have anyone in this whole damned world, yet he chooses to love the one that in the end, will betray him. If only he hated me; that would make everything so much easier.

My body shutters with dampened sobs and I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, willing this existence to go away.

But he can't be king. Nobody can or should. Not when the last five-hundred years of this country's history has been mutilated by glorified kings and the violence and travesties they've created. Men are not designed to rule single-handedly. The power, in the end, always gets to them, like a delicious poison.

The cycle needs to end.

"Mare," Evangeline watches me by the door that leads out to the hallway. It's closed. "Why are you crying?"

How did I not-

I never answer the question.

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Life becomes the ocean, vast and infinite and warm.

I savor its warmth; its fire. All the weight of the world is lifted off me and I breathe the water, tasting faintly of candy. Any memories I once held onto so gingerly are wiped away, and I'm empty, but that's alright. The brush of the water against my cheeks as I float through the ocean soothes me, and I wish I didn't have to leave.

Faintly, my forgotten name whispers itself in the quiet, but it isn't loud enough to hear. Yet does it matter, what I'm called? The ocean doesn't seem to care whether or not I have a name. It likes me for what I am. A murderer. A liar. A betrayer.

I smile in a benign fashion toward the ocean, encompassing my being. It feels nice to let it all go, to cease that constant and feverish paddling I sense I've been doing for a long while.

But in time and unwillingly, my body reaches the surface of the infinite sea.

Pain lances through my head in the form of a sharp needle as my eyes jerk open, but I still see the ocean, dark and black and nothing. Something made of ice and silk touches my legs, no longer clad in the training gear I wore earlier. What was I training for? My feet are bare, and the cement against them is paralyzingly cold.
I whip my head around, but the effort is futile and only makes white sparks collide with my vision. There's no light at all, just blackness and nothing. I'm awake, am I not? My breathing turns heavy and loud.

Choking down my breaths, I clamp a hand over my mouth. The pain is still there, pulsing through my head, and dried and new tears are splattered on my cheeks. My breathing is still too deafening, and the sounds hit my skull with sickening booms.

"Mare." Not a question, but my name. "Let me help you." Warm hands are at my bare back, helping me sit up from the cold cement. Though a part of me knows that I shouldn't let him touch me, I lean into his palm, because everything else is so cold.

Suddenly, I jerk away from the hand, realizing who I am and who he is, and why we can never be together. "Where am I?" I demand, painting my voice in strength, though I feel weaker than I ever have.

Standing, I touch the walls of this place, cold as the floor. I walk from one end to another and then do the same with the adjacent wall. Certainly not infinite like the sea. Maybe fifteen feet long by twenty feet wide, and made of metal walls and cement flooring.

"I don't know," Cal's voice is rough against the chill air. "What I can tell you is that this is Evangeline's idea of fun."

Though he cannot see me, I try to keep my expression neutral and bored.

When I don't say much of anything, he continues. "This afternoon she came to see me when I was in the palace garages." Working on your cycle. "Soon enough, I woke up here. I assume something similar happened to you."

She found me crying in my old room. Weeping over the very man that I now reside in the dark with.

Swallowing, I begin to pace, counting my steps. Though I don't get far before my foot connects with something soft. A mattress. An involuntary breath exits my throat, followed by a cry of anguish. I run my fingers over it. The softest mattress is just as lavish as any king's, but no bigger than the one Cal and I shared in Piedmont. Only large enough for one person to fit comfortably.

Cal chuckles darkly. His voice is scratchy and raw; he must've spent a good amount of time screaming for help. "She told me Elane would come and release us at dawn. It can't be past eight o'clock at night now. You can have the mattress."

I close my eyes, letting another layer of darkness come over me. I should laugh as well. He may not have the ability to catch the slightest shiver, but that fact doesn't go across the board. And Evangeline knew that when she threw us into this place, with an honest and bloodthirsty intention. "No," I say. "You can have it. Let's not act as though either of us is going to sleep tonight."

His eyes watch me as I touch the walls, searching for a weakness in them or a crack of light. "We're not getting out until they let us out. I've already searched this room three times over."

Regardless of his words, my fingers brush over the work that I can only assume to be of Evangeline. It's pointless to think the Magnetron might've made a flaw in her design; if she can forge a new iron dress each morning, putting together a box would be child's play. Still... if there's the slightest chance of getting out of here, I need it.

"Don't you want to get out so you can go back to wedding planning?" I ask, my tongue edged with
"That's not the argument, Mare. The fact is, that we're trapped here. It doesn't matter whether or not I want to return to wedding planning. However, I'm sure my grandmother's had a dozen heart-attacks by now." His tone, too, is bitter.

Our conversation falls into silence, and I eventually find it in me to sit against the opposite corner, my knees tucking into my chest. Cal's right. There is no escape. The door on my side of the room is locked from the outside, its hinges bulky. Not the tiniest crack in the architecture. And no light. If she had left so much as an ember in here, we'd be out in a matter of seconds. Besides, the darkness eats at us both of our wills, I think.

Though I couldn't be sure, we stare at one another, in some sort of challenge. His bronze eyes burn into me, a mix of want and sorrow. I look back with remorse.

He still doesn't know that there are twelve-thousand men beneath the city, Newbloods armed with their skin and Reds carrying advanced weaponry. He won't know until it's too late, when twelve-thousand pairs of boots echo up from the underworld, an army of blood that is Red.

I could tell him.

Biting my lip until it bleeds, I fight with myself. He can't know. Cal is loyal to his father and the Crown until the end. It would only backfire, and one of us would end up dead.

Whatever Evangeline dressed me in tickles at my legs, the fabric soft when I bunch it into my fists. The neckline is simple and modest, and if I stood up, the dress's hem would sweep the floor, the perfect length for dancing.

My heart stops. Running my hands over the fabric again and staring off to the opposite corner, I come to the conclusion that this is the dress I wore when Cal and I first kissed. Another memory I can draw up in my mind so easily, as though no time has passed in the least.

"But I'm not exactly interested in the wedding planning," Cal says into the air.

"Oh." There's nothing more to say or ask without sounding hairbrained. I know the answers to the questions I could ask if I desired to fill the silence.

An hour passes, the tingling sensation in my feet long since gone. Though they don't hurt anymore, I'm not foolish enough to be glad for it. It can't be warmer than thirty-five degrees outside, but the metal worsens the temperature to make it cold, cold, cold. The entertainment I've chosen for myself is staring at the black landscape in front of me, trying to envision Cal within it.

Now that he's a king, the palace barbers maintain his hair neat, not anything like the way he cut it himself in Piedmont. I miss that hair. His mouth must be twisted into a straight line, or otherwise a slight frown. He probably has his legs sprawled out in front of him, unlike mine, tucked into me as closely as possible. His arms would be crossed. And Cal's wearing simple clothing, if he was working in the palace garages beforehand; but not enough clothing to share with me.

He could be naked in January and not mind it.

I know for a fact that my breath comes out in clouds, though I cannot see. And my fingers are indisputably flushed a deep rose.

We both know where this is going to end, I imagine Cal thinking in that head of his.
I would respond with, Yes. I'm just trying to hold it off for as long as I can.

Persuading myself to stand, I shake out my gelid arms, and then my legs, aching with the movement. If events take a turn for the worst tomorrow, I'll have to fight. Davidson won't be pleased to hear I can't move my legs. And going to a Healer in this state and no explanation won't be much fun.

"You're cold," Cal acknowledges, suspecting the cause of my shifting.

"Yes," I say, walking in circles. "Don't worry. I won't be able to take it much longer."

Cal emits a lengthy sigh. "What are you wearing?"

"A dress." Our dress. "I was wearing training gear earlier, so she must've..." I forget my thoughts, I retreat into the wall. I hiss as the world spins.

He's up in an instant, footsteps led by my heavy breathing.

"Just for once Mare, don't fight me." A moment's notice before his palm is pressed against my forehead, gauging just how far I've gone. Cal swears, and it isn't until he's touching me do I realize I'm sweating.

Leaning into him for the cursed-second time, I say, "Fine."

How Death would walk a dying woman to her grave, Cal guides me to the mattress. They didn't care to leave any sheets or a blanket along with the opulent bed. But what would be the justification in that? I lie down on my side and he lies down next, his muscular body pressing into mine. "Well. Evangeline and Elane got they wanted, now didn't they?" I ask.

Falling into old, treacherous habits, I rest my head on his shoulder. Understanding, Cal wraps an arm around my body, cold as ice. "I don't think they'll be satisfied until we succumb to our primitive urges."

My body tenses and so does his.

"But you're with somebody else," he amends. "And our paths are going different directions at the speed of light."

I relax, but the feeling in my core doesn't leave. "You have no idea."

He's quiet but warm, and that's all I need for now.

The heat helps ebb off my worries for tomorrow and the knowledge that I had a thousand other things to do tonight.

"Where are you going to tell everybody you've been all night?" I whisper against his chest.

"Evangeline said she'd take care of that. But what about you? Don't you and Tyton share a room now?"

If Cal could see my rose blush, I'd blame it on the nonexistent cold. "Let me worry about that." But in reality, I won't have to. Tyton's spending the night in the tunnels with some of his old friends from Montfort. Deep-seated guilt manifests itself in my chest, right in my heart. But I couldn't tell Tyton about this... not in one-thousand years. And even when I emerge from this darkness tomorrow morning completely faithful, I can't.
He rests his chin on my head and absentmindedly strokes my hair. I'd tell him to stop, but it's nothing more than an old mannerism. Chances are he doesn't note that his hands are doing it.

"I watched them," he says into silence.

"You watched what?" I ask though it's clear what he's talking about.

Hesitation. "Maven left them for me," he responds, knowing that I understand. "Six months worth of security footage, as a slap in the face."

"You shouldn't of," I scold him, though my voice sustains no irritation. How could've he not? They were handed to them on a silver platter, by Maven, of all people.

"I know," he says, still stroking my hair. "And I'm sorry." I cannot tell if he's apologizing for watching them, or for what he watched on the tapes.

"I'm sorry too," I say, knowing that he won't listen to another word I say again after the wedding tomorrow afternoon. "I'm sorry that things have gotten so bitter between us."

"No. You've had every right to treat me that way you have. I lied. That night in Piedmont... when we vowed to put each other first, I didn't do that after Corvium." His throat moves against my head. "You may have not either, but at least your reasons were just."

Were they? Not five minutes after I left Cal on that desolate terrace, I learned of Davidson's plans. We're going to let them kill each other.

"Forget it. That's all in the past, a million years ago. What matters is now. And that fact is," I state with as much conviction as I can take on without crying, "that we'll never be together." I'm not lying.

"When are you leaving?"

New salt splashes from my eyes, but Cal doesn't know it. Not for a long time, I'd imagine, with what we're about to pull. And then, say it somehow goes horribly wrong, say that the Silvers know about the Reds underground. Say Cal knows, and he's testing how good of a liar I can be. The only way I'd leave Norta would be in a coffin.

I shake those thoughts away. "Soon, I hope. I hate Whitefire for all it is."

He nods, not daring to share his thoughts. I close my eyes, nestling myself closer to him.

Maybe I'll get some sleep. Maybe.

Cal radiates heat around us so that no part of me is cold, but my heart beats erratically, scared for the present, scared for the future.

Like Maven, Cal has a way of stripping me raw without shedding my clothes. He notices the way in which my heart beats, too many thoughts on my mind, and puts his free hand to it, at the slope of my breast. "What's wrong?" he asks in a tone too sincere for both of our sakes.

"Tomorrow evening... ask yourself that question again, and maybe you'll understand," I whisper, explaining it the only way I can. "But for now, I'll say I'm scared." My hand slides over his.

"Mare Barrow has endured worse, has she not?"

I've always been the one who got betrayed. But tomorrow, the Reds are the gamemasters and
Devils. While certain ones might deserve what's coming to them, others don't. Not Cal, and definitely not Iris. Hell, she saved my life and this is how I'm repaying her. I deserve nothing but death. "Maybe," I say, my heart's pace quickening as Cal's slender fingers interlace with mine.

What are you doing?

I roll over so that I'm on my back, my forearm bracing me. My other hand still holds Cal's, drawn to him despite all we've been through and done. I hate it. I hate that I still feel attraction towards the man that broke my heart, and even in the dark, when if not for Cal's voice and unnatural warmth, he could be any man.

Our hands hold onto one another like they're tethers to reality. Maybe they are. Without Cal, I'd be in this woebegone nothing, only the sounds of my cries to keep me company. "You watched those videos. And you know what I was thinking every time I screamed, every time a plate was thrown against the wall? I never did tell you."

Cal's pulse against my wrist goes dangerously quiet. "What?"

"I wanted to be saved more than anything in the world. I carved lines into my bedpost every day with my breakfast fork. Maven does the same thing now, in some kind of sick tribute to me, I've heard. The only thing that kept me alive was the hope that somebody would rescue me. And I wanted it to be you, Cal. More than anything in the world."

I don't understand why I tell him these things, when the last thing I should be doing is softening myself to him. He should hate me... it would make things so much easier. Still, I reveal the little, insignificant detail I never told him. But above that, I use his name. Not Tiberias. But Cal. I used that name at the pavilion in spite and hatred, but now... it's in love.

The blackness I stare into has no finite depth, but knowing his eyes stare back at me from the black ocean is enough.

"You haven't used my name in so long."

The space separating us seems to shrink, and I'm acutely aware that I breathe that same air Cal exhales.

He's aware of it, too. "We can't," Cal says, but his hand drops from mine and finds my waist.

Nobody would know.

But tomorrow...

"We can't," I agree, taking his hand from my waist and into my palm again. "It would be primitive, and giving Evangeline what she wants."

The tension in this prison is intensely discernable, and both of us breathe too loudly.

If we ever... and then I turned my back on him tomorrow...

Cal's hand once again leaves mine, only to brush over my cheek.

When he touches my skin, dull, almost forgotten sparks echo through my body, places I don't like to think about. Against the cold of the room, his hand is so perfectly warm against my skin.

A delicious poison.
"You can't tell anyone," I whisper, defeated in his seductions.

He murmurs agreement as his lips touch my neck, lightly, careful not to leave a mark. Our lips touch and lightning flares inside of me, terrible, lawless lightning. His kisses are a slow burn, not like the eager violence we used to have.

He climbs on top of me, his muscles hard and sculpted as he comes down to greet me, and I know the slope I'm falling down all too well. Our lips come apart and then together in a violent dance that is so addictive I can no longer see clearly, even in the dark.

In between our collisions, I gasp, meaning to tell him to stop, to turn my face away from him. But he's too fast, too good for his own sake, and rather, I draw him closer yet. Cal braces himself with a forearm and a palm, though I wish he didn't, wished he crushed me if only to be closer to him. I want to burn.

I kiss him slowly, yet with a sense of urgency, deep and rooted forever. This will be the last time he'll love me, the last time he'll touch me with any other intention besides for murdering me. There's a small, sad smile on his lips, I can tell. He feels the same. This is the last time.

I push him off me and he rolls onto his back, his grip still on my hand becoming harder. Then, not able to resist myself not able to stop, I find myself running my hands over his chest, wanting to feel every inch of him ten times over.

In the dark, I shiver before I make a move, my legs straddling his hips.

He exhales, pushing himself upward so our chests press together, fingertips brushing over the small of my back, barren because of this Gods-awful dress.

"What are we doing?"

Shaking my head, though he cannot see, I run my palms across his shoulders, down his biceps. If he knew... if he knew. "Just kiss me," I say.

"And promise me, that no matter what happens tomorrow, because something is bound to go wrong, that some part of you will always love me."

Though he has no inkling of what I speak of, as his lips caress mine, "I promise," he says.

If only he hadn't broken his promises before.

Our clothes stay on, but any morsel of happiness I owned vanishes knowing the pure hell I've brought upon myself.

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The doors to our room creak open, Elane's red hair molten lava in the lamplight. "Good morning, lovers," she says, noting the way we're tangled together. "Unfortunately, I have to cut your rendezvous short; Evangeline's father plans to execute Maven at sunrise. They think Maven managed to hire men that have abducted and-or killed you, Cal, because if you're dead, then the crown would revert to Maven. Better go and stop them. You were in Julian's old study, Cal. You know? That room that's kept locked by Julian Jacos religiously? He gave you a key, you fell asleep. Oops. Looks like the Sentinels missed a spot in their search." She winks.

She tosses both of us a new pair of clothing and turns away for privacy's sake. Though, now that I think about it, one of them bothered to change me into this dress.
Now exposed to the light, Cal's hair sticks up at odd angles, but more so, he looks at me and my dress. He remembers.

I need to go. At least they won't know I was gone the way that the entire Sentinel shift knows Cal was gone.

But it's a good thing nobody figured out that we're both missing.

I step into the clean slacks Elane gave me, and then pull over the shirt and jacket.

Now that I can see him and he can see my face, I have trouble looking him in the eye. It was effortless last night, when I could make up imaginary eyes for him. But now...

Cal leaves first, running down the hall towards the throne room. We must be near the dungeons, or else in a special cell unit. "Good luck at your wedding, Cal," Elane says blandly. "The guards never think to check the dungeons. These units are used the unruly and loud prisoners," she explains, noting my confusion. "Evangeline didn't make it, if that what you were thinking. It's been around for decades. Amazing what an old jail cell and some intense air-conditioning can do."

But then she steps into the room, leaning against a wall. "What a mess you've created for yourself, dearest."
Chapter 43

Iris

When Cal enters the throne room, slowing from a sprint, his hair is bedraggled and the shirt collar and lapels he wears are folded at the wrong angles. Sentinels nip at his heels, their guards higher than ever.

Anabel meets her grandson halfway into the massive chambers, her eyes a mixture of relief and anger. She catches him in a tight embrace, and by the look of Cal's expression, I'd say she knocked the wind out of him. "Where have you been, my boy?" Her hands run over his cheeks, through his ink hair, straightening the tendrils the best she can.

"I'm so sorry," he looks at all of us, and his eyes connect with mine for a moment. "I was in Julian's private study last night, reading through an ancient text of his. Time got away from me, and I fell asleep. It wasn't my intention-"

"You mean to tell me that I was nearly executed because you were tired?" Maven interrupts, twisting around to face Cal from his position kneeling on the floor.

"Return the boy to his chambers," Anabel exhales, motioning to Maven, who stares at his brother, wide-eyed.

The younger one shakes his head and mutters something incoherent as the Sentinels grab him. I was surprised to learn that Maven was invited to the wedding. Though it wasn't an invitation, but rather a mandate. It'll be another good show of power on Cal's part, when the Silvers once again see the fallen Calore seated with his enemies, celebrating his brother's happiness.

As the gaping doors to the outside hallways close, Anabel half-heartedly smacks Cal in the chest, the most violence she can invoke. "Hours. That's how long you have until you're to wed Evangeline. We had double that last night, but the entire palace has been going mad looking for you. Unfortunately, I must say that Maven's right this time." Something changes in the way Anabel holds herself. "We have a lot of catchup work to do. You may be king, but I am your grandmother. So you'll listen to me when I say this: get your ass out the door and do what the servants tell you to do."

Volo is silver in the face, brimming with unchecked anger. "That's all you're going to say to my future son-in-law?"

With terrifying, perfect posture, Anabel adjusts the folds of her dress, still the yellow one from last night. She's been more engrossed than any of us. "I'm sure the shame Cal feels for neglecting his duties is enough punishment. Besides, if you'd like to give him a beating, do it after the wedding."

Volo eyes Anabel like a scrap of annoying dust on his jacket. "I thought nobody could get into that room. Julian Jacos is the only soul who holds a key. Are you sure that's where you were, son?"

Slowly, as if Cal's afraid of vexing the King of Rift further, he pulls a piece of metal from his shirt pocket, dulling gleaming in the sunlight. "Your daughter was kind enough to make a copy. If my uncle was more than book smart, he would've considered lining the lock with Silent Stone."

I narrow my eyelids. Unlike Cal to depreciate Julian, when I've only listened to him admire his uncle ever so fondly.
But his response satisfies Volo, and Cal's shoulders sag in relief. Later, perhaps at the reception, I'll inquire after him. For now, a hundred maids and Sentinels choke Cal from my sight in a flurry of movement, and plenty of others stand off to the sidelines, wiping their brows of stress. Nobody is very anxious to ask questions or doubt Cal's explanation, though I know Cal well enough to understand that's not what happened.

At the reception, I promise myself.

From somewhere in the room, Anabel yells at us to get back to work.
Mare

Shit.

The cuss recurs in my head over and over again until I'm safely tucked in my room, hidden from unwelcomed sneers and titters.

My hands drag across my face; my lips, willing crawling skin to be cleansed.

Somewhere in the distant corners of my mind, I recall what Davidson ordered of me.

Stomach lurching against my heart, I sit down on my bed, pen in hand, and stare at the lined parchment set on a book for a hard surface. The black streaks separate the faded and yellow paper at even increments, and if I squint at the paper long enough, my vision blurs.

Davidson reminded me weeks ago, the day Cal and I fought in our execution and won against all odds, only for Maven's men to attempt again, I was branded the leader of the Scarlet Guard. And Maven said so himself when he stood before me on the bridge connecting the two halves of the city. I was a prize to him and his dutiful Silvers, but also a weapon to be flourished. If I was the assumed commander of the Scarlet Guard, and Maven controlled me, then our regime was over. Unfortunately for him, I have never had any actual power when it comes to the inner workings of the Scarlet Guard or Montfort. I've only met one of the Command generals, though two more are slated to make appearances in the city once our unspeakable deeds are committed. Another two are in the tunnels, riling up the troops.

Though it's a widely known fact that I'm not in a position of authority, I'm still a figurehead, a face that everybody has seen and heard of.

Better for Davidson—a man everybody has heard of but few have seen—to step down for a day to let somebody else deliver the Silver's news of damnation.

To be clear, he didn't offer me the chance to speak to thousands of my enemies.

Davidson told me it had to be me.

And though I've had the assignment for weeks, my pen hasn't touched the paper once. I would've begun working on yesterday evening and through the night, had it taken that long.

The glass pen begins to quiver beneath my fingers, and I throw it across the room as if it's hot. It might as well be. Mare Barrow, destroyer of lives.

I like to pretend I didn't know this is how it was going to end. With me on one side, and the Silvers I've come to respect—to love—on the other. But that destiny felt so remote and impossible. Like it would never arrive. But now it's here, and by sunset, the Silvers that I've wanted dead since the beginning will be imprisoned, along with those that perhaps don't deserve such ends.

But... they didn't think twice when they enslaved us, made us build their bridges and palaces. And while we served as disposable game pieces and collateral damage, they sat up in the palaces we built for them with our blood.
And though Cal has decreed Silvers and Reds are equal, in mind, soul, and power, they still work in the kitchens. The sheets under me were put there by my Red sisters. I could take a stroll through Caesar's Square and there would be dozens of so-called servants bustling to and fro, answering to the King's orders and those under them. I see the world on the edge of a blade. Without balance, it will fall. If not for Anabel and Volo whispering their influence into Cal's ear, the puppetmasters they are, Cal might've liberated the Reds from their work months ago.

"In time," Volo tells Davidson when the Premier presses the issue. They're just stalling, waiting for us to give up and leave. Now that Cal has the whole of Norta at his back, our partnership with the Silvers has become secondary to them.

Besides for the Scarlet Guard's and Montfort's presence in the palace, nothing has changed. No matter what Cal says, in time, when we retreat into the mountains of Montfort... they'll be left to their own devices and Cal will lose his reasons to change things. His Silver council has done a good job of keeping our ideas at bay, and without the Reds around at all, the natural order will fold back in on itself.

Cal's not strong enough to fight the wills of his Silver council. Maven may have been, but Maven didn't-

Maven.

The pen on the other side of my bedroom and the paper in front of me, my heart begins hammering, as if to warn me of my ideas.

Maven, that eloquent, silver-tongued bastard, would know precisely what to say for my speech. And he'd be more than happy to help, something dark and conniving whispers. Maven wants to see his brother's downfall more than anything. He'd be proud to play a conspirator's role.

Dawn came and went an hour's worth ago, and the wedding begins at three. I could put together a decent speech with time to spare for getting dressed... but Maven would craft a speech in half that. I just have to endure his presence...

The thought makes me cringe, but nonetheless, I take my parchment and pen, and pad out the door.

A stray Sentinel nods his respect at me amidst my walk, face eclipsed with a nondescript mask. Any ordinary Sentinel wouldn't dare, or so much as bother, me the way the odd one does now. Discreetly, he tugs at a scrap of scarlet fabric at his wrist, covered by a jacket sleeve. I nod my appreciation in return.

Throughout the week, more Montfortians have snuck up through various tunnel endings, posing as Cal's faithful guardians. They are anything but. The Sentinel ranks already overflow with hundreds of men, and Davidson figured it wouldn't hurt to throw a couple into the chaos. The traitors give their leaders reports on an hourly basis and when the Nortan Sentinels fight back, they won't know their enemies fight with them.

"Rise," the man says as I pass, his hand brushing mine. Sparks, tiny fragments of electricity zip into my hand as he brushes his with mine. Not Tyton, but Rafe.

"Rise," I repeat, my voice low.

I take an obscure route to Maven's room, avoiding the Sentinels that I know are otherwise posted around each corner. For the months I've lived here, not as Mareena Titanos, or as the little lightning girl, in atonement for her sins, I haven't stepped foot in the hallway that connects to his room.
Yet here I am, walking down the very path I promised myself I'd never go down. Then again, I've followed too many wrong pathways. In this isolated section of the palace, it's colder. They don't burn fire, because if they do, they'll run the risk of Maven burning the whole of Whitefire.

"Good morning," I say to the Sentinels posted outside of his door. "I need to speak to the boy whose room you're guarding."

He hears me, undoubtedly.

"Do you have clearance?"

"Yes," I state, lying. 'The King of Norta gave it to me. If you don't believe me, go ask him yourselves."

The guards grunt, knowing not to bother. Nobody would dare lie about the King's word.

I smile. "Thank you."

The interior of Maven's room is more severe in every manner compared to that of the hallway. It's cold, but nothing Maven can't handle if Cal could thrive in that cell beneath the palace. I shiver at the thought. The curtains are drawn over three-quarters of the window that overlooks the eastern gardens, and the furniture and bedding are conflicting shades of blue and grey, but pale.

In a chair the color of the sky on a foggy day overlooking the gardens, Maven sits, staring out the window. With closer inspection, the garden he overlooks is the one that Tyton and I run in every morning.

"The windows are the worst part, aren't they?" I ask, not knowing where to stand. His chambers are simple: a bed in the middle with a nightstand, a closet and a dressing screen in one corner, a desk and an overflowing bookshelf in the other, and a grand window across from the bed. The walls are white. They've taken away all the extravagances this room was adorned with when he was prince; stripped it to its ugly rawness.

"Better than a cell," he says, standing up in a blink. Maven comes close, but I force myself to hold still, clutching the parchment in my hand until it wrinkles. I always forget he's taller than me. "But I imagine the Scarlet Guard will not be so kind to me."

The walls are soundproofed to the outside and there isn't that buzz that used to drive me insane. We're alone. Truly and achingly alone.

He wears basic clothing, a pair of gray slacks and a long-sleeved shirt of the same shade.

"You might be kicked down to the dungeons tonight. There are quite a few guests that might need to borrow your room," I say slowly, hoping he'll understand my implications.

Of course, Maven knows what I imply. He raises his eyebrows, glancing at the paper I hold. "It's happening during Cal's wedding, then. How many reinforcements are you bringing in?"

Twelve thousand are in the tunnels, another few thousand in the forests. "Enough to ensure a victory on our part," I say, fiddling with the paper.

Maven sighs, widening the uncomfortable distance between us with his pacing. "I have no throne, no crown, and no power, yet you still won't offer me more than a vague tease-something I already know. Why are you here?" His voice lacks the snark it usually possesses. He sounds tired.
"I was busy last night," I say, resting my elbow on my hip so he can see the plain paper and pen I hold. "And I didn't have time to write out what I wanted to say when the Reds take over Cal's wedding this afternoon. Davidson's appointed me to deliver a grand old speech, telling of the Silver's failure and the Red's and equality's victory, all while keeping everyone calm and forgiving."

But he merely eyes the paper, like an unfinished scrap of food. "That's an impossible task. Cal was busy last night, too. And you weren't there with the others when I was about to become a dead man. You wouldn't have missed that."

Maven shouldn't be able to put pieces together like the way he does. I look to the ground, trying my best to hide the obvious blush written across my face.

He scoffs, turning away from me as if he can't bear to watch me. "After all this time, all the enmity you and my brother share, and just like that..."

He doesn't know the half of it, but still, the blush works its way into my ears, down my neck. All it took was a little chill and too much silence, and I was on top of him, letting him kiss me into oblivion. "You have no right to tell me who to love."

"No, I certainly don't," he says, settling into his chair again. I can only imagine how many hours he spends there, just sitting, watching the gardens for any sign of life. "But not him, Mare. Never my brother." Maven pauses. "Why?"

About five feet and five seconds from leaving, my fingers sweat, a reminder of why I'm here. "If I tell you, will you write a speech to inspire the masses for me?"

His fingers dig into the armchairs, with the anger mine always did during those countless and pointless Silver meanings. "Oh, I've been aching to write a speech along the lines of yours for weeks. If only to spite Cal. I'll make sure to tell him I wrote it for you when we're sharing a cell row in the dungeons together. I assume it will have the typical babble, no? Reds have had the lower hand for centuries while Silvers have dwelt in mansions and castle built from their blood...change is coming... Don't give me any directions, will you?"

Nimbly standing from his chair, he plucks the pen and paper out of my hand and takes a seat at the desk.

"It was some kind of sick plan between Evangeline and Elane. Evangeline burst into my room, stared at me for a second, and then knocked me out with a metal pipe. Or something to that effect. I woke up somewhere dark, almost as dark as the place my Whisper created. Later I figured out that it was an older imprisonment unit in the downstairs. But Cal was there, and so was a mattress, and I only wore a dress without shoes. It was so cold," I say, almost smiling at the way Maven's shoulders tense. "I held out for an hour or two before I couldn't stand it anymore." I spit out the words as fast as possible, never wanting to utter or so much as think about them again.

The pen moves against the paper dexterously, but the faster the ink scratches against the surface, the more intently he listens.

"You know nothing about our relationship or how twisted it is."

"I don't," he concurs, writing. "Though I wonder how Tyton will feel about hearing that you've been unfaithful to him."

I swallow, sensing the words from a mile away. "If you think we-"
"Don't say it aloud," he grinds out. "I really don't need to hear about that."

"You asked. But we didn't." I feel the odd need to tell him that as I lean against his bedpost, crossing my arms.

But something tells me he knows we have before.

Our words lapse into quiet, like the tide enveloping sand.

There's no Silence in this room. As long as there isn't an ember Maven can exploit, there's no reason to. Any fire from fireplaces is too far out of his range. Still, it's unnaturally cold in here. I hate it.

"Odd of you to shut your eloquent mouth when you could be speaking, Maven," I say, meaning it, not just trying to fill the void of noise.

"But I'm fueling your less-than-eloquent mouth with this pen," he retorts, writing away as though he dreamed this kind of thing would happen and has been preparing for months. "When is the wedding? Three o'clock this afternoon, correct? You'll hardly have any time at all to practice."

I shrug, brushing it off, though a burst of panic flares through me. "It won't be the first time I've delivered a speech to quell the masses. But last time, if I remember right, you forced me to deliver it."

Twisting to face me, Maven shakes out his hand. "Really?" He quirks a brow in amusement. "I don't think that's how it happened."

"I think that's exactly how it happened." I don't share his humor.

His throat bobs, and he turns back to his desk, no cluttered with all the worthless junk Cal's must have. His eyes read over his work, once then twice, as he crosses out words and replaces them with new ones.

More sheets of paper are pulled from his desk, and at some point along the line, the tip of the pen falls off, though his handwriting isn't particularly forced.

Another pen comes from his desk.

And I wonder if he's simply using up all that ink to mess with me, to compose a speech with words I've never read or heard of.

He asks me odd questions, maybe to distract himself from the thoughts of his brother. Odd questions indeed, asking me about my family and Kilorn, the electricons and my lightning. There's no motive behind his eyes, and that's the only reason I answer them.

"Done," he states, setting the pen on the barren desk. "Read it here. I didn't insert any clever tricks or insults. Ask your Whisper friend if you must, whoever they might be. Remember, Mare Barrow, I want to see my brother's downfall more than anything else."

Maven hands me a stack of papers, and I'm cautious to avoid his hand.

Paragraphs of text sit on the parchment, neatly written for the amount of time he used.

"Fifteen minutes," he whispers. "Twenty if you pause to look threatening."

It's perfect, but I don't tell him that. The perfect balance of authority and compassion, hatred and
understanding.

"Thank you," I whisper in return, though I have no reason at all to be gratified.
"You look beautiful," Ella says, scissors coming away from my hair.

"I don't feel the part," I respond, dragging my fists through hair that cuts off at my shoulders. She must've taken off six inches, and now not a trace of the grey plague is hinted at in my brown locks. Though I suspect it will come back faster than usual. "Is it finished?"

She nods, setting down the scissors on the bathroom counter. "I only wish you had let me dye it."

Shaking my head, I brush the dead strands from my shoulders, clad in a leather-like scarlet fabric. To appear is to be.

Tight black pants flare out at my calves, and black stilettos that only somebody with the schooling of Evangeline could control poke at my heels. But that isn't the half of it. A lovely and imposing leather jacket—the shade of blood—is fitted around my shoulders, its sleeves cuffed at my wrists. It's just a jacket, but that sensation at the place where my hand meets my arm sends bursts of panic through me, among other reasons. Buttons made of fake gold—a Magnetron might very well attempt to impale me—bring the jacket together across my chest, and a slitted train that covers my sides reaches the flare of my pants, streaming from the back. The front of the jacket cuts off abruptly, exposing the waist of my pants.

Medals of honor that I couldn't say whether or not I won are pinned to my lapels and cuffs, adding a gilded element of the ensemble.

Ella slicked back my hair with a gleaming gel, adding a sheen to the brown. Mascara, dark velvet-red lipstick, and one-thousand other products are smeared over my face; I relented in asking Ella what she was doing five minutes in. Either way, even I will admit I look every part of a risen freedom fighter.

The little lightning girl.

And to think, that a simple red T-shirt I've worn for training these last months is beneath it all.

"You look beautiful," Ella repeats as if I don't believe it.

"I know," I nod. "But I don't think my appearance is what will be the issue today."

"Have you memorized what you wrote?"

"Yes." No. A pen by my hand didn't touch the paper once. It's Maven's speech, Maven's glory, yet he knows I won't credit him for it. I wouldn't dare. For a boy as twisted as that one, seeing the pure disgust, the pure horror...it will be enough for Maven. Especially if he finds the chance to tell Cal I asked him to write it.

Another betrayal.

I spent the greater part of the morning reading over Maven's writing paragraph for paragraph, line for line. At even first glance, he tailored it for me, to make it seem like something I would say. Despite its length, it's relatively simple for the content, but it would be a far cry from the truth if I
said it wasn't riveting. Addictive, even. I've never asked him, never think I'll get the chance to ask him where he learned to write the way in which he does, with this raw sort of elegance and passion.

As much as I wish it weren't, something in there, if only a fraction, comes from his blackened heart.

"I need to return to the tunnels," she says, running a comb through my hair one last time. "I'll say hello to Tyton for you."

"Thank you, Ella," I say with all the sincerity in the world.

We walk through the threshold to my room together, but no further than that. She heads right and I head left, not turning back to see Ella and her red bandana head towards the tunnels.

The heels to my shoes click nervously against marble, and my ankle nearly twists in them once, but soon enough, I straighten my spine and hold my head high, grinning like a wild idiot, an arrogant bitch, at anybody who raises an eyebrow to me. Unfeeling and uncaring is what I need to be today. Perhaps longer than that.

News anchors and pesky journalists pass me through the main hallways, coming back or going to interviews on anybody who played any part in this wedding.

The sun shines in the crisp light, even through the dimmed Diamondglass for privacy's sake. Servants bustle from one place to another, their work never really done. Volo and Anabel chat quietly with some dignitary off towards the direction of the throne room, but they barely glance at me as I come to the hallway's end, which pours out into a lobby, where more than a few servants are going to collide with one another.

For the months I've spent in this palace, a place where a girl of Red blood shouldn't spend so much time in, I've rarely come through the massive room that leads out to Caesar's Square. It's a creamy marble, with paintings and tapestries and murals, paired with a set of hulking Diamondglass doors that must be two stories tall.

But architecture isn't what catches my attention.

Tiberias Calore the Seventh, the true Flame of the North, and whatever else, watches me from the other side of the room. Iris stands beside him, but anything she might've said to him has gone to the wind.

Cal will always be handsome. No. Beautiful and sculpted from the finest marble, just like the floor I walk upon. But the clothing he wears repulses me in hundreds of ways.

His cape is heaping, a heavy material made of black and silver. His boots match the fabric, and his tunic is red, red, and red. The solid and golden crown is capped over his head, covering his oiled-slickened hair.

I don't like to think about how his hair used to be so badly cut, how he used to have stubble on his chin that I'd kiss, how his clothes were so simple and ordinary.

And now... he's exactly the kind of man he always wanted to be...was destined to become.

A hand clamps around my fist, cold, bony fingers working their way between mine with great force. If my body hadn't gone numb and cold, I might fight Maven even as he says, "Don't. It isn't worth it."
Maven's sad eyes meet mine as I twist to face him, his grip surprisingly strong against my fingers. He doesn't have the look of a jealous boy or a crossed lover, but just somebody who's tired of it all.

So am I.

"Is it ever?" I ask, aware of Cal's eyes on us. Vaguely, I recall being told that Maven was allowed to attend the wedding and the reception without shackles or immediate guards.

But they're forcing him to attend in the first place. As a sign of submission, another chance for the Silvers of the court to laugh and ridicule him.

"Sometimes," he says, and though I know I should shake off his grip, my arm is slackened on my shoulder. "But not today."

Maven wears a button-down dress shirt and gray slacks, simple as the blood in my veins. The shadows are vanished from his eyes, though they were there earlier. The same cosmetics Ella used on me, then. I watch him carefully as he starts into a walk, intending to guide me like a farm animal. But not enough of me pushes against me, craving to take a break from guiding myself-just for a moment.

"Don't spare him a second glance. You and I both know he won't be looking at you at all when the sun sets. Remind me how many are beneath the city?" His snark returns, and the invisible chains that have always bound me to him constrict, choking, suffocating me.

I don't see the point in holding the truth from him. "Twelve-thousand. And that's merely the beginning. There are more in the margins of the city, and more should arrive lest something goes wrong."

Something within Maven's mechanical brain ticks to a stop for a moment, in calculation, and I guide him now, through the glass, down the shallow steps that lead to the Square.

He laughs, though it isn't cruel. "My brother doesn't stand a chance."

"That's the point."

"Imagine when he finds out you've known for so, so long," Maven muses, glaring against the sharp sunlight. "So many opportunities you had to tell him, so many lies told. You'll never be the same person to him."

"That's too bad for him, then," I say.

"When did you get so cold?"

"I didn't and you know it," I spit at his umber shoes. "Every step that I've taken to advance this plan has pained me more the last, and certainly more than your betrayal ever did."

As though I didn't say it, he carries on. "So much marvelous orchestration has been going on right under his nose. And so much time wasted listening to his stupid strategy meetings, coronations, and weddings. You've watched it all with a pasted smile and fisted hands. My battle proposal can hardly be called my own, and the fact that you escaped that night of the masquerade was by no means from skill. A Whisper that can control hundreds...they're here today, are they not?"

"In case things get ugly, of course they are."

Caesar's Square has calmed down considerably since I saw it from the window in my room.
upstairs. And it is no less a work of art than the inside of Whitefire.

Ornately carved wooden chairs are divided into four quadrants, cleaved apart by a wide aisle in the center of the Square, and the back half separated from the front half by the fountain that will forever stand in the Square. The chairs are backed with white silk and the bottoms hold white cushions. Various people already sit in the chairs, though most are still empty; whoever arranged seating, it must've been a nightmare for them. At least five-hundred of those masterfully crafted chairs bloom throughout the Square, and plenty of eager, lowly Silvers gather on the bridge behind it all.

The firepits that littered the scene so long ago are arranged at the sides of the aisles and burn dully. The cobblestones are the same cobblestones that have always been there, bright against the cloudless sky.

It won't be cloudless for long.

Hundreds of courtiers crawl throughout the Square, all so stupidly oblivious.

The bridge towers in the backdrop at one end, and the grandness of Whitefire hulks over at the other end, making Caesar's Square so seemingly insignificant with all the government buildings around.

At the front of the chaos stands an elongated arbor that must be twenty feet long, made of the same caramel wood as the chairs. Between its wooden planks weaves deep and lush green vines brimming with red, orange, and white flowers. An odd combination, but I'd guess that it's supposed to symbolize Cal's fire and Evangeline's steel. Beneath it is an erected platform of salmon marble, with a single and shallow step.

"They didn't spend so much for my wedding," Maven says, and I remember he's there. "Anabel and Volo have been quite strategic, though. Any cost, so long as it puts my wedding to shame."

"I don't know. If I were to deliver a grand denouncement speech, it would be here. It's beautiful."

I'm not lying. The scene doesn't possess the severe, imposing beauty that the other Silver-made palaces hold. Though there are five-hundred chairs, it's beautiful, not the wedding a Magnetron would want. Maybe a Greenwarden, with all the wood and flowers.

Maven looks at me thoughtfully. "I haven't heard you talk like that in a while. It's refreshing, to hear that you still appreciate things."

"It's my fault that whenever I'm around you I find nothing to appreciate," I snap as we walk at the Square's edge, heading for the fountain entrance of seating. "Do you know where your seat is?"

"They like to put me on display, if you've failed to notice. Front row."

We walk by a building made of grey cement with a volley of columns embroidered in gold, the chairs on our right.

"But I did the same to you," he continues. "I put you a collar and dragged you onto that bridge. I made you give speeches for me."

"Which is why," I say, very, very careful in the rhythm of my words, "I will never feel sorry for you."

We arrive at the aisle that leads to the fountain and beyond, and turn down it. Lords' and Ladies'
suits and dresses glisten in the sun, smooth as the sun on water. Some dress in simple, modest outfits, while others might as well be attempting to outshine Evangeline.

Davidson stands nearby a couple from Command, looking handsome in a classic suit. He smiles knowingly at me, breaking away from the red-clad man and woman. All throughout the crowd, specks of red stand out. We're not trying to hide much anymore.

"Nice of you to join, Miss Barrow," he says, barely glancing at Maven, my fingers still twined in his for some reason I cannot comprehend. But his eyes communicate volumes.

Maven interjects. "I assume you're lengthy eying of Miss Barrow has something to do with the fact that she's prepared to deliver the Scarlet Guard's denouncement speech of the Nortan dynasty as you all take over, no?"

Davidson doesn't falter. "Why yes, it does. How insightful of you, Maven."

The boy's eyes narrow. "Good seeing you, Premier."

We walk towards the fountain where a cluster of serventmen wait, thick books balanced in their arms. The fountain is grand as usual, cement and gold, water spilling from its insides.

"Mare Barrow," I say my name to one of the men. The books contain all the names of those invited to the wedding and their seating arrangements. Like I said-making whatever kind of charts they have in the tombs must've been a nightmare.

"Maven Calore, the False King," Maven names himself, smirking at me.

One of them chuckles, despite weak attempts to hide it. "Queen Evangeline was a bitch when it came to crafting the seating chart. She seemed to make it so that everybody was near somebody they truly hated. You two are sitting right next to one another." He's Red, the one who said it. No Silver would dare call Evangeline a bitch.

"Just take us to our seats," I say, my stomach turning over.

"As you wish," the man says.

In time, we take our seats, and without help, my leg brushes into Maven's. For now, nobody occupies the seat at my left, but Maven's too-warm presence is all-too-obvious at my right. Though it's fifteen feet away, the stage feels too near, the oddly and beautifully colored marble like orange blood.

"Calm yourself," Maven whispers in my ear, his hand still in mine.

Why am I still holding his hand?

Sensing my repressed panic, Maven whispers words, his voice having a disgusting, therapeutic effect on me. He tells me how to carry myself, how Cal's never mattered, how to look is to be.

It's when Cal comes out when my stomach begins to roll, a boat surfing over dangerous waves in the middle of a desolate sea.

He wears the same wedding garb as before, and a ping of sadness darts through me. He's flanked by a dozen groomsmen, and those groomsmen are flanked by enough guards for me to lose count.
As the entourage makes their way through the aisles, taking the same route Maven and I took, the courtiers take their seats, as if they couldn't find them before and now suddenly know where they belong.

As I look at the chairs and the men and women in them, it is no longer a sea of Silvers, but a sea of liars and traitors, all stupid enough to believe in our faith.

At some point along the line, Davidson comes to sit at my left, offering another of his nods. Iris and Bart settle down at the other side of the front row, and Volo, Anabel, and Bracken, filter in from an obscure side entrance. All of the important people in the first row, yet here I am, sitting somewhere I was never destined to exist.

Freak.

Distantly, Anabel says something I cannot hear. Cal's men disperse onto the marble, forming a very practiced and neat line at the left.

Lulling music plays from the speakers attached to the firepits, the sounds of love and fortune.

And distraction.

"Something's amiss. What's going on?" I hiss at Davidson, finally gaining the control to let go of Maven's hand. "What's going on, Davidson?"

I can't help but notice that Evangeline's bridesmaids aren't standing at the altar.

He shakes his head, and I notice he's more pale than usual. "Hopefully nothing that will interfere with the real problems."

I tap my shoe against the cobblestone, but there's hardly a sound to be heard.

Without much thought, I push out of my chair, walking a few chairs down to Anabel, who chats with Volo in an almost violent fashion. "What's wrong?"

The old queen purses her lips, adjusting herself. "Evangeline is not to be found. Neither is Elane."

"Oh? I raise my brows. "What do you mean you cannot find them? Haven't Evangeline's ladies-in-waiting been with her for the entire morning?"

Her throat bobbles. "She has been missing since dawn."

Of course, she is. "She's gone, then," I spit, cutting to the truth. "You all knew she didn't want this, but you forced it on her anyways. Her and Elane are probably past city boundaries by now."

Volo stands up in an instant, and I'm surprised his hand isn't around my throat. "You don't think we don't know that, girl?"

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to find her," Volo says, lips curling in disgust, "And then I'll drag her to the altar myself if I manage not to kill her."

The clock ticks from the second-to-last minute of the hour to the last. Two-fifty-nine.
"Nothing changes," Davidson murmurs into my ear.

"I know," I return, glancing up at the sky. I've spent the past half hour creating the perfect storm high, high up. Thunder rolls overhead, though I make certain that not a drip of lightning spills from the gray, black clouds. The sun is a haze between wisps of my prowess, shining meekly.

"It wasn't supposed to rain today," a man says a couple of rows back.

No, it was not.

The attendants know nothing of Evangeline's total and utter absence, just think, just believe she's taking her time in getting ready and is running a hair late. Besides, the wedding isn't supposed to start for another minute-

Cal paces the altar, looking nothing more than the likes of a boy whose nervous to be wed, his cape dragging at the floor.

Our glances catch for what could be the last time as the clock tower cries out.

Lightning graces the earth in all my furies.
Chapter 46

For I've poured my heart and soul into this chapter, lovelies.

Mare

Volo spins out of his chair, a blade in hand as my lightning rains upon the earth, illuminating the blackened sky in a terrifying purple. Bolt after bolt comes down in vicious, unnecessary punches, punches to my own gut. Violet veins against charcoal, dead skin.

Growing, as if he knew this kind of stunt-more than a stunt, really-was coming all along, he throws flashing silver towards me.

I grunt, but duck anyway, rolling away from my chair.

Behind me, the knife with a pretty wooden hilt is lodged perfectly into my chair. Maven eyes me dangerously in the second it takes me to get to my feet, put a hand forward in surrender. A warning.

"Stop," I say with force, lightning echoing in the background faintly. "I wouldn't if I were you."

But somewhere in the depths of my mind, I want him to throw another knife at my heart, just to try to kill me. I'd dodge him again, maybe strike at him myself with an off-kilter shot, to play with my food before I finish him off for good.

Before Volo can decide for himself, clad in those fancy lethal metals of his, I notice a slight twitch in his eye muscle. Then he collapses on himself.

The exact opposite of the remnants of good in the world, Volo sprawls on the ground, twitching like an angel whose wings were clipped off by the gods. His eyes remain open, watching, and his fingers move, intent on having his last word. I recognize the work of Tyton in an instant. They must be coming up from the tunnels now.

Volo swears in between his spasms, violent, hateful curses that would condemn me to Hell if his words had any value. And then he laughs, the same laugh that all the mad kings before him have used as they've died with their horrible and barely remembered legacies. "I'll say hello to the devil for you, little lightning girl," he says, louder than the rest of his slurs. His metal-clawed finger taps the cobblestone once, twice, before nothing.

The muscles in his body give out, his body jerking upward one last time before I know that his heart has stopped. Tyton.

Tyton's ability isn't messy and awful like that. He can make deaths happen in a tenth of a second, but Volo suffered for seconds. Seconds. He made it hurt. Shivering at the thought, I can't, don't want to imagine what Cal's death would be by his hand. Tyton might very well not bother with his brain, but go straight for the knives.

I don't dare look up from the king's fresh corpse, and I vaguely sense that Davidson has put up a force field around me, tinted a winter blue. Yet a thousand boots begin clomping anyway, not caring that I don't pay attention. Just stare at the cobblestone.

Screams. The unsheathing of knives and the gunshots of guns.
It's supposed to be peaceful. Or at least as peaceful as the annihilation of a five-hundred-year-old monarchy could be. To get them under control, we have to strike fear into them, get them to stop panicking, stop running, get them to sit down.

Maven still sits in his chair, shoulders slouched and relaxed. His fingers are tucked together at his lap, one ankle crossed over the other. But he smiles at me, a wicked grin that only somebody who has everything he ever wanted could own. He clucks his tongue, eyes flickering between me and the arbor, where Cal inevitably kneels, guns and steel made of Silence pressed to his face.

The scene before me is no better than Maven's psychotic, sadistic, and pathetic smile.

Anabel's limp form lies in her chair, Silver blood leaking from a wound carved into her temple. Another one of the gunshot, just another one of the victims that will get burnt later tonight. But the old queen was not any ordinary courtier. She had to go, and I knew that from the beginning. I don't bother to act surprised, even as she falls from her chair and onto the ground, her heels nearly connecting with Volo's skull.

But... there's so much blood. Blood everywhere on the stones, staining the rock as much as my vision. Her face is already going pale and gray, wrinkled hands stilled, her little tiara on her head, however misshapen.

I'm not remorseful for that one.

But the Reds would pay dearly if we pulled the same stunt with the Lakelander's princess. Iris kneels at her chair, hands pressed against the seat so that the guards can see.

Iris... the girl showed me her religion, and this is how I repaid her.

I'll keep repeating that thought to myself for the rest of my days.

The Lakelander doesn't so much as notice me, hands so violently smothered against her chair as she braves glances up; guards cry at her, orders to keep her head down. But she looks at the Square, looks at what it has become.

No matter how much I yearn to cry, to scream at myself and the world, I keep my lips pressed into a grim line, if not a bit of a smile. And while on the outside I have the looks of a pleased sociopath, inwardly, I hate myself.

Everything comes at a cost, now doesn't it?

Men and women with red clothes on their foreheads and wrist file into the Square, brandishing their weapons at those who dare to fight back. Various wedding attendants are against the ground, either stabbed by impatient usurpers or spared with a nice hit to the head by the kinder fighters of the bunch. Dress fabric is ripped and suits are ripped off as Silvers launch out of their seats to fight off the Reds, who outnumber their ranks ten to one.

Some of my compatriots fire their heavy rifles into the air for simply showmanship, while others are yelling at the Silvers to kneel into submission, completely oblivious to the fact that Silvers are trained to do all but surrender.

I bring my lightning closer to Caesar's Square, though it probably doesn't do much more than add to the chaos.

The screams make my ears ring and my vision blurs as bloods launch over chairs to attack at one another, but there's nothing to grab on to, nobody to lean on. More lords and ladies hit the ground
with sickening thuds as they defend themselves too well, blood leaking onto the stone. And the Reds, Newbloods with powers I've never heard of attack them with a passion that shouldn't exist.

We've lived in the shadows far too long for this kind of thing to be done without conviction.

Cal's eyes burn into my back, searing my clothes. Eyes with contempt, love to hatred turned, I know. I know.

I turn to face him, the king on his knees and already bound in chains. They're taking no risks, then. But his eyes are blank, glazed over as though he's dead. Not yet. Not ever, I'll make sure.

The most dangerous kind of emotion is this, staring me right in the face. There's nothing behind his eyes, or if there is... he's a better liar than I thought. Better at hiding himself that Maven is. However hard I try to see through the barriers he's put up over his eyes, I see... nothing. Nothing, like that black abyss that I hate just as much as Maven does, though I'll never let it on. Black like the abyss, black like night, black the jewels on his garb glinting in the crisp afternoon light.

Staring back with an equal carelessness, my eyes rake over him. Cal's-no, Tiberias's hair is disheveled, crown knocked off his head at one point or another, landing at the last stair. His cape is ripped off him, leaving his long-sleeved tunic, pants, and boots. He put up a fight, then.

I'm only glad I didn't see it. But I saw his eyes all the same.

A dozen guardsmen watch over Cal, pointing all sorts of weaponry at him.

But yet we stare at each other as if we're the only two left in this world. And we might as well be.

His gaze slips from mine to land on his grandmother, precious Nanabel. Even from feet away, the breath that catches in his throat isn't hard to discern. Or the one after that. I don't dare reciprocate the glance, deciding to keep my eyes on him. Because if I take my eyes off his, he won't look at me again. And I won't get the chance to punish myself like this again.

Time seems to break for a moment as he stares, watching reality unfold beneath him.

Dried blood cakes half of Anabel's face, though it's hardly been any time at all, and a pool of the substance lies at her cheek, pushed up against the ground. So painfully, so obviously dead.

The look he gives me fractures me. Decimates me. No longer bland, bored hatred, but red-gold eyes scream coalesced emotions, merging on themselves to create something terrifying. Betrayal. Hurt. Anguish. Disappointment.

I would say something, perhaps an apology. No words come to me though, for whatever reason. Does he deserve one at all? Do I deserve to attempt some level of forgiveness at a wound so raw?

He doesn't so much as bother to shake his head at me.

With no other choice but to turn away, I face Davidson, who wears pity upon his face. "Nearly time," he says, motioning with a wide gesture towards the rest of the crowd, most of whom have been subdued into crying messes and unconscious piles. "Are you ready?"

I smile sadly. "Of course not."

"Are we ever?" Maven says, glancing towards Cal again.

"Never." At that, Davidson releases his force field, leaving me to the mercy of any stray Silvers.
But looking around, there's no threat. The Silvers who weren't stupid enough to fight back sit in their spots in a so very docile manner, and as others come to, Reds drag them into available chairs, all while more of my brothers and sisters silently watch over the Silvers from the great aisles, so very, very carefully.

"You look stunning, Mare," Maven makes sure to say just as I'm about to summon enough stupidity to start walking.

I roll my eyes.

My heels click as I walk, and the train to my coat suddenly feels like too much.

My hands clasp the ridges on the podium that somebody managed to pull out during all the disruption. It's wooden and intricately carved, glazed over with a finish, all topped off with a microphone to deliver my voice across the ages.

With Cal in my periphery at my left, surrounded by enough guards to be unnecessary—even for him—and more Monfortans coming in to guard my right, I should feel protected, indestructible.

But the Silvers look at me with twitching lips and furrowed brows, hands shaking. So are mine.

But others sit perfectly quietly, unnervingly still.

A Whisper's hand.

I let my mouth twist into a smile, a shrewd, cunning smile. The epitome of a villainous, conniving betrayer. All while clad in a bloody red coat, wickedly high heels, and oiled, slick hair. Lips to match my coat.

A breath louder than I'd like is exhaled onto the microphone, but it's not shakey and uncertain, but...threatening. Imposing. "Don't tell me or my companions that you didn't expect this sort of thing to happen. Governments built off corruption," I say, my nails digging into the wood if that's even possible, "are bound to implode on themselves sooner or later. But sometimes, sickly monarchies need a bit of a push when it comes to their destruction."

I glance at Maven for just a moment, but he catches my gaze nonetheless. He nods, raising his head in a challenge. A dare. Then he smiles.

"The Nortan Dynasty has stood for five-hundred years, five-hundred years of bliss in Diamondglass castles and rich fabrics for the Silvers, the self-proclaimed better half of society. But what of me and my ancestors? The Red Rats, that's what you call us behind our backs, no?" My voice breaks, and a violent bolt of lightning jerks free of the sky. Courtiers lurch at the sudden sound, and Reds raise their weaponry. "My story follows the exact path of millions of Reds before me, up until I was seventeen. Born into a family of five children with no control over my distressing fate, destined to become another useless warrior for your army."

I tell them stories of my youth that Maven didn't know to write; how I broke my leg when I jumped from my roof; dropping out of school because I didn't have the time of day; the number of times I pickpocketed them to prevent my family from going hungry that night.

"But I was saved, randomly drawn for a job as a servant at Summerton." It's common knowledge that servant jobs aren't drawn for, but I'm banking on the fact that the Silvers are too distraught to care. And for some logic or other, I don't want the entire world to know that it was Cal who saved me from a fate so horrible I can't breathe when I think about it; my body mutilated, forgotten in a trench somewhere in the Choke. "You all know how the rest of the story goes."
An explosive noise resounds through the Square, and I have to steady myself against the podium. Not my lightning. They're already bombing the tunnels. They must be. Davidson said the explosives were planted last night, before our troops so much as left the tunnels, but still... I didn't think it would happen so soon.

But the tunnels are the best means of secretive transportation out there. Now that this is out in the open, there's no reason for us to need them and every reason for the Silvers to depend on them if they ever plan on an escape.

"They're bombing the tunnels right now, if you're curious," I state, tapping my index finger on the wood. "We've used them so many times to know what a weapon they can be. And now...

"It wasn't supposed to come to this. We've spent these last months whispering in your councils' ears for change. We've watched as that change never came, as the servants of the palace, my blood, were never released, and not the slightest improvements were attempted on impoverished Red villages. Newtown and Grey Town remain fully operational. At least for a couple more hours," I trail off, leaving the implication in the air.

This takeover is not just of Caesar's Square. It's of the whole damn country.

"But even if those changes had been made, even if Tiberias had become a great and fair king, monarchies are problematic, destined to wind up with a mad king sooner or later. And then some war would spring up, and another hundred-thousand Reds would end up dead."

"They deserve it!" somebody in the crowd shrieks. "You all deserve to die, you filthy-"

A gunshot.

We're not like this, I have to remind myself. But for today, this is what we have to be. Ruthless leaders, capable of killing anybody who so much as sets a fingertip out of line. They can't believe that we have an ounce of compassion for anything but justice, at least not for now.

Composing myself at the podium, my head towards the wood with carved vine-like patterns, I breathe away from the microphone.

"Next one to say something will get two of those," I say, gripping the wood harder.

"When I was young and naive," I begin again, running around my brain for the words, "I thought that the Gods were real and that this was my place in the world, whether I liked it or not. To die for the greater good of my country. But I learned several months ago, that all along the war had been a method of population control. It makes sense, looking back, though it breaks my heart all the same. It's never been about being a part of Norta, but fueling it towards greatness, becoming a set of stairs. That's all we've been to you," I whisper, not weak, but...disappointed. "And for what? The color of my blood?"

"Society finds reasons, the smallest, most insignificant reasons to look down upon each other. I've read about how when the Silver blooded people emerged, the Reds-the normal people-persecuted them. It seems impossible to believe something like that could've ever happened, but it did." It isn't until as the words bleed from my mouth that I realize Maven read them too, the tombs of Julian's he left me. Probably checked them twice to make sure I wouldn't learn anything too important from them. "Neighbors turned on neighbors. And for what? Of course, some of it was fear. But some of it was the simple desire to go to war, to cast pain on others.

"And a sure-fire method of inflicting pain is by hiring a dictator to rule your country. So good job
to you all. Tiberias might be a good ruler. I know from first-hand experience that he cares," I say, glancing towards him on the floor at my left. He watches me with some quality of a hunter, waiting for the right moment to attack. "But power and glory are a delicious poison." My face turns back toward the audience. "No one man or woman should be trusted with it."

A woman rises in the audience nearby. Stupid, stupid...Ten Montfortans nearby raise their rifles.

That would be twenty bullets, then.

The click of ten guns.

"Stop," I say, despite my previous threat. One of the guards looks at me in confusion. "I'm giving you three seconds to sit down."

She speaks anyway. "Yet you, little lightning girl, should be trusted with the ability to rip the sky open, blanket the world in your violet knives? Hypocrite!" she screams. "Hypocrite!"

It sounds like a clean, two shots. But I know it is not.

"Not a god's chosen, but a god's cursed. That's what we all are," I say, straightening my back if that's at all possible. "Nobody should have these abilities. I would get rid of mine if I could," I say, and I have to repress a blush. I shouldn't be getting so personal with my enemies. But it's not as if they believe it.

The rows of Silvers somehow don't feel intimidating anymore. I control them now, I control him. There isn't anything left to fear in this world except the wrath of a million betrayed. Somehow, it doesn't sound so bad.

I go on to tell them about our plans for Norta and the countries beyond.

More agonizing words and minutes.

"A new order is coming. A government made of Silvers, Reds, and Newbloods alike. Whether or not you decide to become a part of it is up to you."

^^^^^^^^^^

They thought that reinforcements would come. From the other cities into Archeon, the country's heart, it's final defense if it ever came to it. But nobody came from the Silvers to sweep them from our claws. Then again, the people of Harbor Bay, Delphie, are probably in expectation for men to come in from Archeon.

Nobody's coming from the Gods. Their people have forgotten about them.

Our men took over the security towers and broke them hours ago, before Tiberias had any inkling of my betrayal, when we were still lying together.

In a circle with Farley, Davidson, and a man and woman from Command, I'm applauded for my beautiful eloquence. They praise me like the false god they've made me out to be.

Most of the Silvers have been ferried out by now, back to their mansions and manors to be religiously watched over by their enemies. But a few still remain, that including Tiberias, Maven and Iris. Anabel and Volo-and the rest of the dead-were dragged out of the Square to be burned ages ago. The three sit in chairs from the front row, though none of us bothered to tie them up. Hopefully, the guns and Newbloods will be enough.
Besides, Tyton took the lead for watching the Silvers. He'd have them down in an instant if it came to it.

"The Silver Nornus escaped, but he won't make it past city walls," Davidson explains, nodding up to the blue forcefield that blankets the sky. "I put it up seconds after the battle broke out; Bart isn't that fast. As for Evangeline And Elane..."

"We'll worry about that later," Farley concludes, jerking her head towards the horizon. She's getting better, I think. Hasn't killed any new queens without Davidson's permission and I haven't walked in on any crying fits.

"We've controlled most of the variables," one of Commands states. "And nobody unwanted can enter the city either." She looks at me. "You did good today, Miss Barrow. I still can't tell if you inflicted fear or respect in your enemies."

"Thank you," I say as the group disbands, turning towards Tyton, watching over Iris and Cal along with a dozen other guards at the front, another dozen at their backs.

A dark part of Tyton is enjoying this. Tyton's hatred for Cal is pure, so much dear than mine. It's had years to rot and fester, to distort in his head. Cal watched as Tyton's sister was executed on these very grounds, but chose to do nothing. To stare on with a blank face. But why wouldn't he? Cal is a bred soldier, taught and encouraged to embrace the death of his enemies.

Though who am I to judge Tyton's feelings when I feel the same way?

When I come closer, I hear Iris. "What do you intend to do with us?

I take a place near the rear of the guards that watch Iris's back. Tyton's eyes latch onto mine. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure if Command has thought that far ahead. But I can guarantee you'll be kept alive, Iris. We'll need a bargaining chip when it comes to keeping the Lakelands at bay, won't we? Unfortunately, the same can't be said for Cal or Maven."

A sickening feeling churns within my stomach.

They escort the royals to the dungeons at dusk.
Chapter 47

Iris

"Cal," I murmur through the darkness, long since done in my endeavors to escape this place. "You need to stop. You're not going to get out until they want you to leave."

The scraping at the opposite side of the room pauses for a moment before resuming.

It's getting worse, I know that much. The first couple of times I told him to stop, he responded. Now it's just a pause.

"You really, truly think that the Reds would have put you in a cell without sniffing every hair of it?" Maven says from across me, the epitome of peace.

Cal doesn't say anything, but the scratching continues. A stray pebble the Reds left in his cell as a joke, probably. I found a couple in mine, but merely deposited them in the corner.

There was nothing to be done, I have to remind myself, to keep myself from going insane.

Deadly Silence radiates the air all about the chamber, that I sadly cannot call larger than my bedroom just upstairs. The Bowl of Bones holding cells, if I remember correctly.

An incessant dripping of water echoes against the rock floor at intervals of twelve seconds, twelve seconds precisely. A perfect torture for the Lakelander princess. Besides. If I ever escape, it wouldn't be enough water to inflict any real damage.

I'll kill her, though, I'll make sure to kill Mare Barrow and make it hurt. I was beginning to think of her as a friend, somebody I could tell my secrets to and expect her to keep. I allowed her to pray with me, kneel before my Gods when she never intended to be my friend.

She lies better than Maven Calore himself.

The only thoughts that chase away my woes is the reminder that Bart is out there, somewhere in the city. He couldn't have possibly been fast enough to make it out of Archeon, but he's not in this palace. Perhaps if he hadn't hesitated, had listened to my screams at him to run as though the Devil himself was chasing after him, he would've gotten out.

Davidson's shield protects the city day and night, glistening an artificial blue against the bruised sky. I might call it beautiful was I not trapped beneath it.

Cal's scratching against the wall reigns on, and I'd scream at him to stop, if I didn't have the urge to search the cell again either. But not only does he do it for the hopeless hope of there being some sort of weakness in the structure, a crack that would allow him the chance to fight against the dozens of guards that are standing in the corridors, but he does it... as a distraction. Yes, a distraction. For the quiet, to protect him from the thoughts that must beat at him so violently.

The stone is cold on my legs, the spring night's chill swimming through my thin dress and over my barren feet. They didn't so much as bother with a cot, but left us to our own devices with four walls and a floor made of bloody stone. I spent an hour combing my cell for weaknesses, and when none were found, my shaky fingers spent another hour taking apart my cornrows with meticulous care. And now, there's nothing left to do but wait.
Wait for Bart, wait for my sister, wait for Mare Barrow.

The clouds over the city must shift, because a bit of moonlight floods through the skylight.

Cal's muscular silhouette-just a simple shirt and slacks-stands at the far corner of his cell, away from the bordering cell that contains his brother. Even in the obscured light, he looks defeated, his king's posture replaced with that of a worn-out boy's. It's suiting, I suppose, as he's no longer a king. Tyton snatched his crown right off his head and made sure that Cal saw as he threw it into the river.

I take a deep breath before I make a mistake of saying anything. "Cal?" I say, trying to be gentle in my words.

"Yes?" he says. I'm surprised he says something at all.

"Why did they do this to us? They killed Volo and Anabel without hesitation, and who knows how many others? How could they just... destroy our alliance when we were prepared to give them everything they've ever wanted?" Just saying the thoughts that have been raging in my head for the past hours is freeing, and my next breath comes a little easier than all the ones before. Though I highly doubt I'll like Cal's response.

A moment's silence. And it isn't Cal who speaks, but Maven, slouched against bars of his cage so that he faces his back towards me. His cage is on the opposite wall from mine, next to his brother's.

"Are you really that naive, Iris? You really believe that Volo or Anabel ever intended to grant the Reds equality, release them from the factory towns and the palace?" Maven chuckles darkly, as though he thinks that this entire situation is the funniest happening in the year. Despite the fact that he awaits his fate along with us, I can't help but think he does. "It was obviously a ruse from the beginning, just something to give the Reds hope until they could figure out how to cast them back to the West."

Though he cannot see me, I look at Cal with scorn. "I thought you loved her, Cal."

"Tyton isn't wrong, Iris," Cal says into the darkness, followed by a long sigh. "You'll live. Unfortunately for us, there's nobody left who values us enough to barter. That's what matters, no?"

"Good to know," I murmur, pressing closer to the corner of my cell.

It'll be for the better if Bart becomes rational enough to stay away from the palace and bides his time. After all, Cal doesn't think any harm will come to me for now. Even with his speed, he won't be able to get a foot into this room before he winds up with another bullet in his chest.

He really needs to fall out of that habit.

But if the Queen of the Lakelands gets wind of this...she'll march into the capital with enough men to plunder this city twice. Make the river run red with blood of all the men who have wronged me. Make the Reds scream so loudly that the sounds ring through Caesar's Square for decades.

She won't, though. Davidson put up that force field for a reason. Nobody can get in or out, and the city is under lockdown, and only the Premier of Montfort has the key.

There's not a proper place to pray, either.

But I suppose it does not matter. If the Gods were real, they wouldn't have allowed me to end up here.
Heavy footsteps thunder down the stone steps, accompanied by incomprehensible chatter. The rattling of chains.

Cal shoots away from his place at the far end of his cell, knuckles turning white as he grips the cell bars. His face is suddenly turned furious from the mellow surrender he surely borne seconds ago.

Maven watches his brother, amused, as he slouches against the bars.

"Will you shut up for a minute?" somebody grunts from the entrance, shadows bleeding apart from the darkness. The voice and the figure of another nameless, disposable guard. The Scarlet Guard may protest and kill for equality and goodness, but at the end of the day, they're just as willing to sacrifice bodies as we are.

"I'm afraid you'll have to cut my tongue out to achieve such myths," a female says, her arm gripped by the guard. Another guard made of shadows is at her other side. "But I don't suggest trying it." A shaft of moonlight illuminates Evangeline as the soldiers drag her towards the empty cell at my right. Her hair is disheveled, matted, even. She's not even in the dress that her seamstresses slaved over for months, but a simple pair of fighting slacks and jacket. Though I don't know Evangeline Samos well, I know her well enough to be aware of the fact that she'd never leave her chambers with pounds of metal on her.

Evangeline's head snaps to mine. "What? Did you miss me?" She smiles like an unfeeling bitch, that same face Mare's been using lately. But fear laces her pupils.

If anything, I should ally myself with her, now that true allegiances have been revealed at long last. Rather, I snarl at her.

This had to be part of their plan. The Reds. To make us turn on one another until we couldn't fathom the thought of working together, against them. They wouldn't have put us in these cages, so very close together, otherwise. We could be conspiring, planning against them, but instead we sulk alone.

The angry guard shoves her into the cell next to mine, shutting the door hard behind him. Then, the click of a lock.

"Wait," I say, not so much out of intelligence than panic. "What's going to happen to us?" Tyton's answer...

He pauses while his partner lets out a brief chuckle, sauntering up the stairs. I sense the hesitation in his movement, and he weighs his options with care. Abandon me, haunt me with the ringing of the other guards chuckle, implying Gods know what or tell me something that could be better or worse.

"Be glad you have this prison cell, Princess Iris," he says, turning towards me. The Reds don't wear masks like the Sentinels of Norta did, and his face gleams in the moonlight. He's young, handsome, and strong too, if he was trusted to handle Evangeline. "A many of us have faced places ten times worse than a measly prison cell."

His boots pad lightly back to the stairs before the man becomes shadows again.

If he wasn't referencing the Choke, I don't want to understand, don't want to comprehend what sorts of places he spoke of. I spent one day, not even that, on the battlefield, and that was more than enough for me. A place that can be so loud and busy yet so desolate all at once.

The second the soldier's boots fail to reach my ears, the bars at Cal's end of the room jolt with
sound, and Cal growls deep within his throat. "What the hell, Evangeline?"

The way in which the Magnetron laughs induces chills throughout my body. It's a long, high-pitched laugh that might as well be a series of scrape against the floor. "I wouldn't be too angry, Cal. From Elane's description of how you and Mare were so...erotically tangled together, it appears that I merely aided a spark in a fire that needed to burn." She laughs again.

"That's not-

"That's where you were, last night," I interject, standing up so that Maven is the last one on the floor. "You said that you were in Julian's private study, but you were really with her." Something in my tone says betrayal, though it shouldn't be there. Cal isn't mine, I have not the faintest interest in him, but still. He shouldn't have been off with the girl that was going to destroy him hours later. Maybe had he not been so blinded by her imaginary love for him, he would have realized that her love died months ago.

From here, Cal's breaths are heavy in the air, weighed down by so many things. "It wasn't exactly my decision."

"Don't pin your treacherous actions on me, Cal," Evangeline says. "I might have been the one to lock you two in that room for a little fun, but I certainly didn't rip her clothes off."

I close my eyes, running a finger over the bridge of my nose. Evangeline's doing this for more than simply a little fun, now. Maven still sits in his cell, back to the bars.

"We didn't-" Cal pauses, slapping the metal again. "I have no reason to justify myself to you, Evangeline. You'll be dead, soon enough."

"Why weren't you at the wedding?" I ask hollowly, begging to the Gods—if they're still listening—for a change of topic.

"It's a long story," she begins, slinking down to the floor next to my cell, and her tone becomes a little more serious. "I discovered a couple hours before this was going to happen. I was ease dropping. The Reds have been planning it since the moment you declared you were to become king, Cal. And to be perfectly honest, I don't give a damn about saving any of you. Elane and I got halfway out of rural Archeon, but I got weak and started imagining Tolly's death. I was selfish for leaving without him, but I didn't think he'd flee with us. He respects-respected-my father." She swallows. "So we turned around and made it back into the city before the field went up, and I got myself caught in the streets. I made it look like an accident."

The story has so many holes in it, but I'm too exhausted to list a single one. But the way in which she says hours makes me think that she knew sooner than that.

Cal seems to come to Evangeline's words slowly and thoughtfully, his head pressed against the bars. "You've known that our government was allied with traitors, yet you said nothing? Decided to flee instead?"

"Oh, I was going to," she says. "But my father began yelling at me before I could get in a word about it. And every time I would try to tell him, he'd always have something to say first. He's dead, is he not?" Oh, yes. She hides her pain very well.

"Yes," I whisper. "So is Anabel. We should kill you for what you've done." An undefined rage simmers just below my skin, so red and hot that I can barely understand it, let alone do anything more than put a few words out've my mouth. She knew. She knew, and she did nothing.
"You should," she agrees. "Unfortunately, I believe that there's a line and Silent Stone."

"You're all fools," Maven spits, shaking his head in the moonlight. "It was obvious from the start that this would happen. To think that the Reds would ally themselves with one good king, despite the history of our bloods and wars. Somewhere along the line, the country is bound to end up with a lunatic as king again." He chuckles, that same, dark laugh Evangeline used. "You cannot blame them for being wise."

"You're right, Maven. But that doesn't make this right."

"Since when has this been about our little actions being right or wrong? It's about the big picture, to them. They don't care how many bodies are dropped, how many families they have to uproot, how much damage they inflict, so long as they get what they want."

"And what exactly is it that they want?" I ask, now clutching one of the bars in my hand.

"They want what we've never bothered to give them. Life."

"It seems you've spent a good deal of time thinking this over," Evangeline muses from her cell. She picks at her nails as if she's waiting for a dinner party. "How long have you known? Somebody that's clever enough to manipulate himself onto a throne and into a crown must have had some idea."

The darkness seems to pause for a moment while Maven mulls over his response. But the silence is enough to tell me what I need. He's known, too. But yet I've been the one who's spent hours with Mare—my friend—in the palace, in the gardens, in my temple, praying. And I never second guessed where her heart lied.

You stupid, stupid—

"I've had my suspicions for a while," he admits. "But it wasn't until the night of my masquerade where I got her to tell me herself. Then, weeks later, she contacted me."

He seems to be content stopping right then and there.

"Well?" I ask, not interested in playing his games.

"She asked me to expedite our war between the divided Norta. Preferred, in a method that would devastate the numbers in both of our armies. So I invited you to war. And Gods, she lied to you so effortlessly that night on the pavilion, Cal. It's terrifying, really. I would've believed it had I not known the truth."

That battle nearly cost Bart his life and me my sanity. The Red's own men died by the dozen at the Choke, along with hundreds of Maven and Cal's Silver men.

We're divided, then. Wise against foolishly blind.

Another boot against the stone creaks.

My head whips towards the entrance, only to find Mare Barrow, wearing a wicked smile at her cheeks.

She wears that same bloody coat, but those ridiculous shoes are replaced with combat boots.

"It's not nice of you to tell my secrets, Maven."
Chapter 48

Evangeline

"What?" she asks, looking around at the bunch of us. Cal's gone pale, probably from both Mare and her vulpine smile. Iris is barely holding herself back from flinging her body at the bars. Maven turns himself around so that he can face her. "Don't tell me you're surprised."

The shaft of moonlight reveals Mare well enough, everything from her slicked hair to that bloody coat of hers. But even I-somebody who's learned how to read the little lightning girl well-doesn't see anything behind her eyes. No fear, no soul. Just nothing, like a cold void of black.

"Mare-" Maven begins, but the lightning girl puts up a hand to silence him.

"I've always wondered," she says, daring further into the room, "when deprived of your abilities, do you grow cold?" Mare turns to face Cal, glancing at Maven occasionally. "Because I'm sure a Magnetron could die by a blade and a nymph could be drowned, so long as Silence is playing."

Cal presses his lips together. She isn't close enough for him to try anything, though I see his fingers twitch. Has he really gone that far off the cliff?

Either way, there is something very, very wrong with the girl.

"I see how it is. I betray you once and you're quiet. See how it feels? Does it hurt more than drowning in a thousand lifetimes, Tiberias? Does it hurt more than thinking about all the people you've ever loved dying in the worst possible way? Your own personal tortures?"

She turns towards me, but merely rolls her eyes. "Poor girl, dead mother, dead father. Your only family left is Ptolemus, the man who killed my brother. You've already lost two parents, I don't see any reason to keep him. Especially when so many, many people loathe him."

"You psychotic bitch," I whisper, looking up at her leering down on me from the floor. "Have you always been like this?" There are no words, no words for me whisper or scream at her that can express my rage, my utter fury. There's no point in threatening her, no threat that I can use that won't have her laughing at me, pointing out that there are steel bars separating us from any physical damage I may inflict.

Father taught Ptolemus and me how to torture people with our blades and words, how to make it last for weeks.

"And here we have Princess Iris," she says, walking from my cage with hands interlaced behind her back. The red jacket glistens in the moonlight, tinted purple now. "In love with a useless Sentinel, a nobody. I hear his family doesn't like him much anymore. So desperate for attention that she turns to Reds for friendship, not seeing anything clearly. Bart will probably leave-"

"Shut up," Iris swears, launching herself at the bars, her arms gracefully sliding between them, only for her hand to brush at Mare's shoulder. "I showed you my religion, I trusted you as much as my own sister. If anybody is desperate, it's you, befriending people you're bound to betray."

Mare blinks, as if resetting herself.

But she never gets the chance to sink her teeth into Iris for again.
"Don't listen to it, Iris. That's not Mare Barrow," Maven says. "Is it? Oh, no. You're somebody else entirely."

She whirls on her heel to look Maven straight on in the eye. He grins at her, proud of himself for whatever puzzle he thinks he cracked. The boy king stands up now, for the first time since we've been here. His fingers tap at the bars rhythmically, and he shakes his head slowly in some disappointment.

Though the passage is still shrouded in shadows, I see their figures well. Mare clenches her fists, coming back to that bad habit she's had ever since Corvium. Maven raises an eyebrow, waiting for a response. "I've heard so much about you. Never did think I'd have the tragedy of meeting you, though. I suppose it was inevitable."

They gaze at one another in a language I don't understand, and neither do Cal or Iris.

"You see," she begins pacing towards the center of the room. "I see all of your greatest fears. Cal fears drowning more than he has ever or will ever let on. But above that, he fears seeing those he loves get hurt. Because he killed his own dear father, and then he hurt me so badly. Evangeline fears not being able to protect who she cares for. And Iris is scared of being alone." She swivels on her heel, whirling to look at Maven again. "But do you know what you fear Maven?"

"What do I fear, Mare?" he says, grinning, though I know by now whoever we're talking to isn't the lightning girl.

"You fear losing control," she states plainly. "You've lost control before. On me." She peels back her coat to reveal a rotting brand, still stained a pale purple after all this time. She tucks the shirt back together. "You lost control on Thomas, once. That one hurt, didn't it?"

"What's your name, Whisper?"

The hairs on my arms stand up, though I made sure to dress warm before I allowed myself to get caught. "What-"

"Silence," she says, and I don't dare speak again. Though she can't be controlling me through the bars. It doesn't make-

"What do you want my name for?"

"For shits and giggles," he murmurs. "I won't tell anyone. Promise."

She laughs distantly. "That's a fine line between stupidity and cowardice. You're in no position to bargain; any information you could offer I could pluck right out of your little brain. Let's not forget about that dark place you despise you very much."

Maven flinches. "You're a monster for everything that your Reds stand for. And that's coming from me. You've been lurking in the shadows all this time, manipulating each and every one of us in some way, I'm sure. And now you've lost it, haven't you?"

It's Cal's turn to flinch, and he does a good job of it. There's must be something unimaginably sickening about seeing this monstrosity take the form of his lover's body. Even her voice is Mare's.

"Tell me how all of this happened," Cal whispers into the air. "Evangeline did a hell of a job explaining it."

Mare's light chuckle echoes on the cold stone. "Ah, yes. I forget that Evangeline was privy to our
maneuverings. The others didn't know, for the record. Had I told them, nothing good would have come from it. From what I could see, you were never a liability, darling."

I swallow, and in spite of my nature, I push myself further against the wall.

She goes on. "The Scarlet Guard and Montfort never intended to allow another monarch. We knew that from the beginning, but played along. Always watching, always waiting for our moment. Divide and conquer, and that's what we did, though our help was hardly needed. You Silvers are quite good at that kind of thing. The battle at Choke, of course, was planned by us and Maven ahead of time with the intention of decimating your troops. It was all an act, a useless slaughter that weakened your army. And then we waited, waited until the right time like beasts hiding in shadows that we have always been. Thousands of Red men have been snuck into the tunnels in the past weeks, and more waited in the forests. You may have turned out to be a good king, Cal. But to be honest, I doubt it. In time you would have realized that preserving Daddy's legacy was pointless, especially when you were just Anabel and Volo's puppet."

"If it's any consolation, Mare felt sick to her stomach before getting up on that stage. On the other hand, I doubt it helps to know that Maven wrote the speech she delivered so eloquently; she asked him too, in fact. No surprise he was eager to aid in your downfall."

When nobody speaks, she clucks her tongue. "Your fate will be revealed tomorrow morning. Might as well get some sleep before anybody forces you to make any decisions. And don't tell anybody about this, or that you're aware of my existence. They wouldn't be too pleased about that." She doesn't have to tell us the truth. The Guard doesn't know that she's down here.

"I'm truly sorry if my explanation is no better than Evangeline's. If you wish to know more, ask your brother. Mare's talked to him about our plans multiple times. Three, if only to be precise." She releases another dark laugh. Dark and haunting and vicious.

Iris actually might have managed to fall asleep, if the pattern of her breathing means something. But more than likely, she's just mimicking the sounds, hoping to hear things she isn't meant to hear.

The sun's edges poking through the tiny windows in the cells across from me, the light growing by the minute.

"I have to congratulate you," Cal says in the creeping shadows. "That speech you wrote for her was stunning."

Next to him, Maven exhales. "Somehow, I wondered if we'd come back to this. But don't applaud solely me. The stories she told about her youth were not my idea, and if anything left a mark on her audience, it was that. The pain lurking beneath Mare Barrow's voice that makes her so incredibly relatable to the masses, even as her allies point guns to their heads."

"When we break out of here, I'm going to kill her," Iris says quietly, as though it's a scandal. Everyone in this room—at least some part of them—wants to kill the lightning girl.

"What makes you think we're going to get out of here before we die of old age?" Cal asks. As the light hits more of him, I realize he finally sat down like the rest of us, his small defiance of standing gone.

"Well," she says, scooting closer to me, "while the Reds were mostly clean about it, there are a
couple variables they cannot control. The Whisper, for one, is obviously unhinged and unpredictable. And something tells me that Evangeline didn't waltz back in here without a plan. She definitely didn't waltz back in here with Elane, which makes me wonder where she's gone. And Bart ran away before they could point a gun at his head. I ordered him to."

She's right, that little nymph. Elane is in Archeon, lurking under her shadows somewhere. I told her that Ptolemus is my brother, and I'd be the one to save him. And before we turned back around in the countryside, I begged her not to come with, but she insisted upon it. I'm only glad I could convince her not to come here, into the belly of the beast. But I can only hope she doesn't get any ideas. It's not as if she can get through the Silent Stone and guards all alone.

"That's only if any of them get to us before we get to the guillotine," Maven says with snark. He's not exactly saddened by it either.

"I'm surprised you didn't try to negotiate with her, Maven," I say, glaring up into the crack of sunlight. The Whisper told us that we would discover our fates this morning. "You might not believe me when I say this, but she loves you somewhere in that heart of hers. If you pushed her the right way, she might have broken in favor of you, allowed you to live."

"I did always have a way of breaking her," he says, in sick reminiscence.
Chapter 49

Mare

"Nobody's going to make you go in there," Farley says, elbowing me in the ribcage as we walk from my room. "Nobody would blame you if you left this country altogether, either."

I sigh, crossing my hands behind my back. "Maybe it's just to punish myself. But... in a sort, I think I owe them this."

"Maven's one thing. He tried to execute you. But Cal's another story, and now he's had a long night in the dungeons to let his thoughts of you twist and distort. I just ask you to think about this before you walk in there," she turns on her heel, heading towards the boardroom Davidson plans on holding the brothers' trial in.

Last I saw Cal, his face alternated between blatant fury and emptiness. A blankness I found so unreadable I'm still not sure if it was a mask or not.

"It starts in fifteen minutes," she calls over her shoulder. "Last thing you want is to walk in after they do."

Davidson and the Scarlet Guard chose a small room to hold the meeting in, a place too little for me to try and hide behind any of my colleagues.

There are four chairs in the center, simple wooden chairs that look like the same ones from the wedding. Any elaborate desks or long tables that might've been here before have gotten dragged away, leaving the glassed room barren aside from the chairs.

The floor is made of a pale green marble, and the back wall is made of glass, overlooking the bridge and the other side of the city.

Yet all I can do is stare at the chairs that will soon be filled by those I have betrayed.

Anabel and Volo and dozens of other Silver nobility are dead because of a secret I held too well. And knowing Maven... putting him down there with Cal was a mistake. I revealed my true colors yesterday evening, and there was no reason for Maven to keep quiet about what he knew. How I've known about our rebellion for months, the battle at the Choke that I personally orchestrated, how I asked him to write a script for my speech at Cal's wedding...

"Mare." A hand brushes my arm and I flinch away.

Tyton looks at me with worried eyes, and his brow crinkles.

"Sorry. I'm just..." trailing off, I relax my shoulders. "I didn't sleep last night," I whisper.

And I didn't stop crying for hours after locking Mareena's door and slumping against it. I think Tyton understood, despite whatever deep-rooted hate he possesses for Cal and his family. Tyton escorted the prisoners to the Bowl of Bones holding cells along with a dozen or so of the Guard. But he never came to my room. He understood.

"Not at all?"
I swallow. "No."

His fingers brush mine as he settles against the side wall with me, in wait for them to be escorted up.

Davidson, Farley, and two generals from Command chat near the glass wall, Davidson nodding intently. Farley and Command wear jackets similar to the one I wore yesterday, and the Premier wears simple clothing, nothing out of the ordinary from what he usually dons.

Aside from them, several guards position themselves at the room's edges, and a couple other curious Reds gather in their own groups. There aren't cameras. The first step to democracy is getting rid of the gaudiness of all that this place is, not publicizing the Silver's humiliation, but rather our victory.

When Cal concedes his supposed birthright, then we'll broadcast it.

The foggy glass doors glide open with lethal silence, and before the first of several guards slips in, I wipe my face of any emotion it might've held, becoming that emotionless bitch that I have to carry myself to be. Earlier, I smudged powder over the skin beneath my eyes and ran a tube of light gloss over my lips. And the black clothing isn't something for mourning. It's a display of power.

The guards filter into the room in basic black uniforms and red bandannas.

Maven emerges from the throng first, his eyes already roving around the space. I'm sure he's been in the room before; it looks the part of a royal boardroom, and I've heard talk of Cal and his allies meeting in here for various reasons. Meetings that Volo and Anabel never allowed us into.

I watch him with a careful precision, tracking his every movement. While his brother or Evangeline might try to pull some sort of stunt in attempts to escape, Maven won't. He's smarter than that, and less desperate. In time, his eyes snap to mine. He winks. No. He watches the room for pure amusement, surveys the minds he'll be going up against.

Forcing a wicked smile, I wink back.

When Evangeline comes forth to take her place in a chair, she merely offers a smirk that screams of wicked intentions. Her long silver hair is tousled, but she looks like an imperious queen anyway, with her tall posture and that wild and wicked grin of hers.

So I swallow back my vomit.

Iris doesn't deign to look at me, the edges of her ratty bridesmaid dress dragging against fine flooring. That one hurts.

But even as the effects of an unplanned betrayal hit me like a bullet to the skull, and in certain ways, it's what makes me question if it was worth it in the dead of night. Becoming friends with Iris wasn't part of the plan, it was an ugly flaw. Despite her uncharacteristic kindness she showed me before she wed Maven... I didn't anticipate her risking bullets for me, smiling at me with clean, corrupt eyes.

But...

Those thoughts ebb away with the pain of losing one of my few friends.

Cal. Tiberias. He looks at me with molten eyes and a gaze fabricated to exact revenge.
He has a guard on either side of him, unlike the others who were allowed to walk to their chairs—a measly ten feet away. He must have put up a fight on the way from the dungeons. I don't want to know... will never want to know what that looked like.

Farley wasn't wrong. A lonely night in those dungeons does things to a person's mind. I was in the Bowl of Bones once, caged alongside Cal with the expectation of death. I just... just hope he remembers the words I asked of him when we were together the night before last.

And promise me, that no matter what happens tomorrow, because something is bound to go wrong, that some part of you will always love me.

I won't lie and say that I don't love him anymore. If what happened the night before the wedding means anything to either of us... then I know where my heart lies. But I cannot bring myself to regret what I've done, even as I look at Iris's hollow eyes bolted to the marble, even with Cal's burning eyes doing everything they can to scar and brand me from the inside out.

I return the gesture, though without as much passion. I won't look away, won't be a lying coward.

His hair is swept in off-kilter directions, but he still wears remnants of wedding clothes. The boy I loved and the king who made a decision. But his crown is far gone, in a river deep as the blood his family has spilled.

But the manacles, the manacles are what catch my mask and force a hitch in my breath. They're attached to his wrists and the bumps at the ankles of his slacks indicate another pair in hiding. I know that pain all too well. The grating at skin and soul, until the wounds are raw and Healers pay daily visits to keep the imprisoned from that fine, fine line of death.

I wouldn't wish that torture on my worst enemies.

The tan hasn't left his face, his muscles fine as ever. Healthy, thriving...

"I'm sorry things had to be this way," Davidson admits, coming out of his circle from Farley and the others. "But the last thing I want is for any more blood to be on our hands."

They gave them the luxury of sitting with their hands unbound from one another, but that is all. Thirty guards line the walls, and my allies spare no more of an expense than Maven did with me.

"You killed my grandmother," Cal says quietly from his chair on the end. "You killed so many people, yet you've pretended to be my confederates, my friends for months. Yet here we are."

"Here we are," Davidson echoes. "You must understand that nothing I've done-nothing we've done-has been for vengeance. As much as I knew that this moment was coming, I thought of you as a friend in Piedmont. There were simply...certain variables that had to be removed from the game board."

Iris jerks her head up, barring her teeth as if awaking from a violent slumber. "You sound like all the other tyrants that have ruled this country before, Premier. You claim to be a democracy, but yet here we are, targeting those who pose too much of a threat to your revised nation. Cal would've been a good king."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Maven says, turning to face Iris. He sits on the other end of the four chairs. Good. I've already heard the guards put them in cells right next to each other. "I wasn't alive to see it, but I hear stories of how my father was good when he first met Coriane. But he was hardly that when he died."
"You mean when you and your mother killed him," Cal states with much emotion.

"Divide and conquer," Tyton whispers next to me. "It worked too well."

"A perfect storm," Davidson says. "But the last thing we want now is to keep you locked up in the dungeons below. Last night was merely a precaution, a place where we could keep an eye on your angry minds until the initial chaos settled down. Now I want to negotiate."

"Will you kill us otherwise?" Evangeline blurts, balancing her elbows on her knees as best as she can with the manacles.

Just a second more of pause than there should be. And in that pause reveals the truth: yes.

"If you've failed to notice, a large blue dome blankets the city. Nobody can get in or out without me lifting the field. The same goes for news, for deaths." When he speaks like this, I remember that the Premier wasn't elected leader of Montfort for his unconditional softness. "Volo and Anabel were killed because we were certain they'd never bend to a democracy. But you, Cal, not King Tiberias, are different. We don't want to kill you."

"Will you kill me?" Iris interjects again. "They don't think you will, because I'm valuable alive than dead."

"Insightful and correct. News of Norta's capture, to my knowledge, hasn't reached the Queen of the Lakelands yet. But then, I ask myself, where is Bart Nornus? Or Elane Haven? All of the major cities in Norta were captured successfully, yet in each city, somebody seems to get lose. It's only a matter of time before the Lakelanders declare war on us."

Until there are more soldiers, more weapons, more barring of teeth, and more blood.

"The Lakeland armies will kill you all." Iris's eyes latch onto mine. "Except you, Mare Barrow. I intend to be your murderer. I promise you I'll make it hurt, too." A tear slips from her eye. Anger, not sadness.

I don't have to gaze into a mirror to know that pain flashes through my face for a second. Just a second, but long enough for all of them to see that everything I've done still hurts to the marrow of my bones. "Know that you're the one who makes me question if it was worth it, more than anyone else."

Her lips twist upward, but not in a smile. "I don't care."

I make sure not to blink, not for my lips to twitch either direction.

"Denounce yourself, Cal," Davidson says. "Declare your allegiance to us and freedom."

"Tell me. What is it like out there, outside of the palace. Are they all under house arrest? Is each house guarded by five soldiers to one citizen? To what end will it cost for this plan of yours to actually work?"

"I don't believe any revolution has come away successful without sacrifices," Julian says softly from behind Cal, slipping in the glass doors in practical silence. I don't notice him until he speaks, too focused on the four, until he speaks himself. "Hello, Cal. Evangeline. Iris. Maven," he acknowledges as he makes his way further into the room.

There it is. The same, blank stare Cal gave me yesterday. Even Maven is speechless.
Cal's throat bobbles, but no words unleash themselves on Julian.

"They came to me awhile ago," Julian admits. "With a special task that they believed I'd be suited for, despite my blood. And along with that task came knowing what they intended."

Julian looks to Davidson, but the Premier shakes his head firmly. No telling that secret, then. Unless Maven's already told them about the Whisper.

Cal doesn't speak.

Julian looks to Cal in desperation, so close yet so, utterly far. "Please. Align yourself with them."

Cal thinks aloud. "I didn't sleep last night," he says, and I have to stay bored, uninterested. Neither did I, I want to scream. "And I had time to think about your plans, all the pieces that I missed before. I have trouble believing that is going to be any more than a temporary coup. There must be... fifteen thousand soldiers in the city? Another thousand in this city, another thousand in that. You may be newbloods but you're not invincible. And while Montfort is large, and you've bombed the tunnels, and you have me at your will and wim, this could amount to nothing. The Lakelanders have the best armies on the continent. This is only a bandage."

"And I'll call your bluff: you're not going to kill us. At least not yet," Evangeline purrs from her seat.

"Return them to their cells," Davidson says.

Hours later, I find myself at the entrance to the Bowl of Bones holding cells.

It's of my own accord. Davidson didn't put me up it, and Farley didn't Whisper it into my ear.

There must be ten guards at the door that leads to the cells, but I only nod to one of them before the door is opened.

As I pass through the somewhat narrow door, a drowning sense of Silence washing over me like water. It hits my bones and nerves, and my vision spots black in places for seconds, and I have to steady myself against the wall at my left.

My ears ring and black circles dance in my eyes as I stagger away from the door. Besides for the dozens of guards patrolling the various exits their prisoners might take, any one of them would have to pass through one of these doors at least once. There must be more blood in the blocks that make up the doors... because if I stood in that threshold for a minute, I'm sure I'd die.

I focus on the steps and my stealth, walking towards the hall's end that forks off in multiple directions to jailing units. Sets of stairs go off in different directions, too, up and down, painting a great grey labyrinth.

Whoever pushed them into a unit was kind enough to offer them one of the sections that sees daylight though windows at the tops of the walls. The floors below just are colder and colder.

I stop feet away from the threshold that would reveal Cal, Maven, Iris, and Evangeline if I took another few steps.

Even though it's above ground, there's a chill that comes from a set of stairs nearby. And though I wear a thin jacket and the seasons creep towards summer, the hairs on my arms rise.
Then again, it's most likely not from the cold.

From what I've been told, the conversations of this place between the four are short and brutal, interlaced between long lapses of cool Silence and quiet. There aren't any security cameras, but sometimes the guards patrolling the other units—holding other uncooperative Silvers that managed not to die at the wedding—hear things said out of complete peace. It's usually Evangeline's jeers or Iris's rants to nobody in particular. Maven answers questions.

It's quiet in the cells for now, save for the rhythmic pacing of one set of boots. I know him well enough to recognize the pattern and sound of Cal's walking; his breathing.

I take a seat at the wall opening up into their cells, and rest my head against the stone.

In a way, this place was better than my room up in Whitefire.

I wasn't here for long; it was a second compared to the time I spent as Maven's chained pet. But it was cold, and Death was expectant of me. The fire of Maven's betrayal surged through me, raw and biting. Later, in Whitefire, the fury I held for him was at a simmer, infinite but steady. And while Death was expectant of me at the Bowl of Bones, I was expectant of it. In Maven's clutches, in the room he so graciously offered me, I didn't anybody to be there. To save me.

For the hour that I wait in that dark and dank place, Evangeline should speak with that loud mouth of hers. Cal keeps pacing, as if he's still fighting. Something in his pattern of walks is calming, though. Therapeutic. It fights off the silence that I doubt anybody can bare.

"Do you simply enjoy walking, brother? Or is it to protect yourself from something? Somebody, perhaps?"

Cal doesn't rise to the bait. I've heard that about him, too. He hardly speaks to them, no matter how many jeers Evangeline creates.

"You obviously have something on your mind. Besides for your impending death, to clarify," he adds. "Why don't you just ask me?"

My brows contort in unsaid question.

Cal's feet pause. "What do you mean?"

I can nearly feel Maven's nonchalant shrug he teases Cal with. "You have questions and a lack of answers." Maven sighs. "Why don't you ask one, and I'll consider responding to it? I have spoken to her three times since Corvium, you know. Sometimes I think I know things about her that even she doesn't."

Another game, is all I can think of. Something to ease the pain of boredom with nothing much else to do besides for think and formulate escape plans that won't work. Not that Maven's in much of a hurry to go anywhere.

"That night... at the Choke and after Mare came in. You tried to oust her in front of me. Suggested that my Silvers and her Reds weren't truly on the same side. I asked her if it was true. She told me that you were a liar, and despite what I did, that she wouldn't do something like that."

"Yet she did. And?"

"Was it a good lie that she told? I can't remember if her eyes shifted or her lips twitched."
Maven sighs again. "Such elementary ways of telling lie from truth. There are other ways to tell, from my experience. I distinctly remember that she kept her throat from wobbling, and she didn't flinch. But it was a lie. And she was counting on your love for her, your denial, to pull it off. But oh, yes. It was a very good lie, as I've said before. Still, for everything that you are to her, brother, you should've have been able to see through it."

Cal should've seen it. Though I've tried to study the mask that Maven uses, I haven't and will never become anything like the liar he is. Maven makes deceit into an art form.

This time, it must be two hours that go by without incident.

"Can you blame her? Can you blame any of them for what they've done to us?" Iris says. "Maybe they were smart for doing this. Maybe Cal should've accepted their bargain. We would've never given them the same mercy."

"No. We wouldn't have. But I sure as hell wouldn't have unleashed that Whisper on us. Not that they knew the Whisper came down here to torture us."
Chapter 50

Iris

The screaming begins just a hair before dusk.

Snared in between the driftings of my dreams, I jerk from the corner I neatly keep myself in when not arguing with Evangeline or staring at Maven's back, thinking about the boy and his mind.

I think I rip my dress as I come forward, my fingers desperately clinging to the bars. It is a woman who cries out, for sure, though her scream is animalistic and guttural, so loud it's as if she's trying to cut a hole through the Heavens themselves. "Is it Elane?" I ask, however reluctant.

"No," Evangeline answers, also having stood. I hear a slight exhale of breath from Cal's side of the room, and I let loose my own as well. She's barely told us anything about Elane and her location, let alone any plans they might've hatched before Evangeline willingly got herself captured. But Elane is out there regardless, and she needs to stay out there, rather than locked up here with us. "I would know if it's Elane, and I've never heard that scream before."

The woman screams again, this time closer; I flinch. "Well that hardly sounds like a victory whoop, so it certainly isn't anybody who has the intention of unlocking these cages."

"But I don't think an executioner would be making those cries either," Maven murmurs, having barely shifted since he heard the screams. As if he were expecting them, but that's impossible. Well reached as Maven is, he has no connections down here. Nobody comes to talk to him, just like how nobody comes to talk to us, unsavory Whispers the only exception.

"More than likely, it's a stray Silver who finally got caught," I say, backing away from the bars with the intention of sitting down again. Perhaps to unlace my intricate braids for the tenth time, count the seconds between the water drips, though I already know it's-

Sobs, sobs are between the heaved breaths and screams borne of anguish. And then, words.

"How could you?" the female asks, her voice too raw for me to identify if I've ever met her before. Still, I get anger; anger mixed with the deepest sadness that I've encountered in a long while. "I wasn't trying to hurt them any more than they deserved...they broke you and enslaved you...yet they merit our benevolence?"

Her sentences are fractured because of the violent sobbings. Like bits and pieces of shattered glass, most of the shards forgotten about and swept away.

"And I thought you were getting better," a second one says, snaps, actually. General Davidson, the man who keeps all the men and news inside of Archeon. "You promised us you were getting it under control, and Julian... Julian reported to us that you were getting stronger."

A demented laugh. "My power is not a curse, Davidson. It's a gift. Without me, Mare never could have made it out of Archeon when saving Gisa, and the wedding would have been more chaos than it already was. The minds of the men and women were angry and distracted. Without me...you wouldn't have gotten a word in, Mare."

The voices get fainter now, trailing down another passage toward another wing of the prison. The Whisper...the Whisper is a women, and she's gone insane. The other thoughts can come later, about the masquerade and the way that they took down all those guards before I came in, the way in
which the sea of Silvers at Cal's wedding was so calm...

"How did your mother handle the power?" I ask. My voice is empty; confused.

Something tells me the others are stunned into silence as well, because neither Cal nor Evangeline erupt as they should. Just cold, friendly silence.

"I don't think that she did," Maven says, moving so that his back is a little straighter against his cage. "Samson was a psychopath. He took pleasure in ripping apart Norta's enemies. He always went farther than was necessary with prisoners. He left Mare incapacitated for days. I-" He stops himself. Very close to sharing something intimate, I'd imagine. I wasn't there for the first months of her imprisonment. "But while my mother put on a facade of calm and grace, she was no saner than her brother. Her insanity took a different form, though, something of a warm, simmering fury that ate at her for years. I don't know what made her like the way she was."

Swallowing, I find myself pacing, almost embarrassed for trying to walk within my cell. "The Whisper is powerful, obviously. But Whispers can hear everything. Every bad thought about them, every sadistic thought that passes through a mortal's brain. They would hear that. Of course she'd go insane."

"Good," Maven says. "The Whisper is no better than Jon, always pulling the strings of this game when the rest of us are condemned to being pieces."

"You liked being the gamemaster," Evangeline muses from her corner. "And now you're mad that you don't get to play God anymore."

"Yes."

The screaming increases to a crescendo as one last, victorious shriek before cutting off completely.

And I stand up again, straining to see through the door at the side of our cellblock. Mare and Davidson and Gods know—who else will pass back through the corridor outside. One of the Bowl of Bone's obvious strengths—only one way in, one way out.

Growing footsteps, weary and slow, as if the feet don't have any enemies to run from. As if they've killed them all already. Secret whispers, quiet this time. They didn't care if we heard the Whisper then... but now they've quieted.

"Come out and play, little lightning girl," Evangeline calls from her cell, but she stays seated. So does Maven. "We've missed you. Cal misses you so dearly."

Cal hisses at Evangeline, a stupid snake begging to be slaughtered by a bigger asp.

Yet the footsteps near, and I have no doubt that she—they—heard us.

The whispers turn to arguments. The voice that must be Davidson's is bound by caution, a tone that says, don't say I didn't tell you so.

She appears from around the corner, rests her back on the threshold of our room, but doesn't deign to look at us. Doesn't bother to speak at us, just stares at the thing haunting her behind her eyelids.

"I'm sorry," she says. Shaking her head, coming out of whatever nightmare she keeps replaying, she shakes her head slowly, putting a hand over half of her face. "Not this." She gestures to us, the cages and our dirty clothes. "I don't regret this." However hollow her voice is, it's a cold, hard truth. "But the Whisper... she was not supposed to interfere."
Cal is silent, still deploys whatever tactic he invented for himself. He stands, watching her closely.

Maven speaks. "Her voice was too hoarse to be comprehensible. Who is it?"

She snaps her head to Maven, something like annoyance playing at her features. "Why do you care so much?"

"Know your enemies. It's the only way you can effectively destroy them."

Mare contemplates his words for a moment, taking a long blink. Closing her eyes around us... I cannot exactly call smart. It's a sign of weakness...or arrogance. No fear of us, the Silvers trained to kill since we were oh, so young. "This isn't the first time she's snapped. The first time... you were there, but none of you knew. None of you knew," she repeats.

"What are you talking about?" I demand, pressing myself on the bars. "When before did she do something like this?"

"It was worse," she says, pushing herself off the threshold and into the room. Though we have no weapons other than our minds, she shouldn't dare to come closer. It wouldn't surprise me if Evangeline threw one of her collected pebbles into Mare's eye. "But we had to act like it was nothing, like it hadn't happened because of the Whisper."

She's dragging it out not for cruel suspense, but because she's still uncertain of whether she should tell us.

"Your mother's death wasn't a suicide, Evangeline. My Whisper ordered her to wrap her own snake around her neck and suffocate herself."

My heart wobbles in my throat. It happened in my own palace, in my own country. The Whisper was there, in those halls that I walked through every day for almost two decades. And she killed-

Evangeline's breath is surprisingly calm. "I found out my father is dead a few days ago, killed by your assassins during the wedding. Had I been there would have I been killed too? For the duration of time I've known about my father's death, I have been locked in here, hardly able to think about it. My father may have not loved me that way fathers are supposed to love their daughters, and as many times as I thought I'd be better off without him...

"It still hurts the bits of iron in my chest. And now you tell me this?"

Mare paints her face in calmness, though she's anything but. Still, she says, "Would you still like to know her name?"

"So that I may exact revenge on her in whatever way I see fit?"

"No." Mare's voice is lethal calm, dredged of emotion. "Your brother, Ptolemus, is being held in another wing of the prison. That is why you came back and Elane lurks, isn't it? Despite my promise to you in exchange for freeing me of my manacles, I have no reason to keep my oaths now. He killed my brother, and my Whisper killed Laurentia Samos. I'll only tell her name if you vow to stay away from her. She wasn't in her right mind when she killed your mother. She thought it would be a good idea, to split the Silver Houses apart from the inside, but Davidson never authorized it. Sh'es sick, Evangeline. She's so sick."

"You ask me to make a vow in the same paragraph of orders as you threaten to breaks yours?" She laughs. "Very well, Mare Barrow. I will not hurt your Whisper, nor will I allow Ptolemus to hurt her."
"Farley," she says, and I blink at the girl. Never in a million years would I give up that secret. Did she feel so horrible about the Whisper coming down here after the first incident? "She began showing symptoms this fall... and then at the masquerade, her powers manifested themselves. Without her, the others wouldn't have escaped and I wouldn't have followed."

"But how do you contain her if she influences our visions even encased in Silence?" Maven asks, back to her. He seems awfully keen on not looking at her.

"She's not immune to Silence. Hopefully in a few days..." Mare trails off. "She didn't make you see things. Anything she told you she knew before you were thrown in here. She used me—my body—and she came. Nobody sent her or me to come down. I have no idea how she got me through the archs of Silent Stone. She must have erased any memories I had of it."

I can almost sense the shutter that rolls off her back. Her possession shook her, more than she lets on, but I don't lend a shoulder to cry on. Hardly that at all. "It doesn't feel good to be taken advantage of?"

Mare laughs, if only to fill the air. "There was an opportunity to free those who have been oppressed for centuries. I had to make sacrifices, but if that's what it takes to fix this, then very well. How can you possibly blame me for this? You had every chance to change the world with your jewels and crowns, yet you did nothing."

"But the takeover wasn't something the Scarlet Guard devised when they realized Anabel and Volo were never going to change. You've been planning this since the moment since I positioned myself against Maven in the summer."

Cal looks at Mare now, an ancient dark in him. She looks back. She almost leaves. But she doesn't. Standing perfectly motionless in the room, she says, "Yes. But it wouldn't have ever come to this had things changed."

Cal nearly scoffs, and Mare flinches. "Don't lie. Even had I done everything to please the Reds, they wouldn't have allowed me to keep the crown."

I hear the words written in their eyes; in between the words they exchange and silent breaths they take. They have more to say to each other, but not here. Never here, not with me, Maven, and Evangeline. And in contradiction to all the people I've held secrets for, all the gossip I've listened to, I don't want to hear that conversation that will inevitably occur. Either before an execution or when Cal manages to bend the metal bars apart with his hands.

"Take the deal Davidson offered," she says out of the blue, though it's surely been on her mind for hours. "Renounce yourself and pledge allegiance to the Scarlet Guard and Montfort."

"For whose sake?"

She shrugs, but it isn't careless. Her shoulders are tight and a slight blush takes over her face. "Everyone's. Only more blood will be shed should you choose to keep that claim to a piece of metal now at the bottom of a deep river."

"I don't know. I rather like these manacles." He raises a hand up for her to see, and we all know the impact they have on her. I saw, just as the others did, her reaction when we walked into the council chamber in shackles.

Something within her breaks, and she slowly prowls to Cal's cell, boots silent against the stone. There are marks etched into the stone, lines of warning to tell how close one can be while still
being safe. But she crosses the line, stepping well into reach of Cal's hands. Closer, closer, she goes, until they're face to face, an inch apart by the bars.

For all of Cal's words and stares, he isn't that far gone to try and snap her neck. Not yet, at least.

She says something to him, tendrils of whispers I cannot hear. The beginnings of the conversation they're bound to have.

She leaves.

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Life. No. It's more of a fine balance between existence and fading that I walk every day. I retrieve my food from the guards, and I grind my fork into the stone at dinner every night. The food is decent enough. Nothing like what Maven provided Mare with, but it's most likely an indication of how they're faring above. If the portions of chicken and rice and beans and milk begin to grow smaller, then I'll know.

They deliver changes of clothes with our dinners, and I wait until the pitch-black of night to change.

They don't treat us like glorified prisoners. They want to break us, chiefly Cal.

And I don't like to think about how I haven't showered in ten days, the ten days I've been here. I don't like to think about the bucket in the corner either.

They didn't expect Cal to hold out for so long. If they intended him to be a real prisoner of war, they'd put him and us somewhere nicer.

But no. They want to break him.

It is a quiet night, tonight, the sun having barely just set. The shadows are beginning to creep in, and the loud, rude guards must not be on shift. A slight breeze shuffles in from one of the passages outside, and I tuck my feet in to the cuffs of the pants they gave me.

In these moments, when Evangeline isn't picking fights, these moments are the loneliest.

In these moments, I wish Bart were here. He wouldn't even have to come to save me, and I'd still be happy, just to see him.

I don't stir from the wall when Jon the seer emerges from the shadowed corridor, torch in hand. There's always some light from the hallway in the sconces, from passerby-guards.

He probably isn't real, anyway.

"This story...how twisted it has become," he states, coming further into our cell block.

I hardly have the energy to muster surprise, and I merely move my neck so I can see him. His eyes are more red than before, and he bears a hunch in his back. What things has he seen, what places has he traveled to? His robes glisten in the torchlight, but no sweat he dons.

"And how much more mutilated will it be by the end of the night?"

He tosses Cal a set of keys before leaving.
"They're coming," Davidson says, pouring over the spread of papers on the table in the glass meeting room. "Our scouts spotted them last night, barely ten miles past the edges of the city."

The Lakelanders. The thought of waging another war so soon sends chills. "How did they manage to get so close before anybody saw them? And how are they here at all? How did they find out?" My questions are too many and too fast.

The Premier's throat wobbles, showing rare distraught. The scouts saw them yesterday, right before night hit, hidden poorly beneath the cover of barren trees. There must have been dozens of thousands of them, enough to at least cover every one of our men three to one. But something tells me that the fact they were so easy to spot was intentional; that they want us to know they're here, prepared to bleed every Red dry if it means getting Iris back. The only piece of leverage we'll have if our reinforcements don't arrive on time.

"The Lakelander army consists only of Silvers, but don't discount them for that. They have means of getting around unnoticed, too. But the tunnels don't exist anymore, besides for the ones directly under the palace and the buildings nearby. They won't be getting into the city until the force field falls. As for how they know... I wouldn't say it matters. The lockdown was only a bandage for an infected wound. Anybody from any city in Norta could have been out of the field boundaries when it went up, and then they would have run to the Lakelander Queen for help. Not to mention any cities too small for us to have noticed in the first place wouldn't have gotten contained."

I look up from the map Davidson's neatly laid out on the table to see all my loyal compatriots; those who plan on fighting until the end. If the Lakelanders cannot break Davidson's shield, they'll siege us until we surrender. Until this was all an unsuccessful coup in history that the Silvers will be sure to erase. We killed a few of their leaders, ruled Archeon and Norta for ten days-

Tyton's hand gently clasps around my own, and I have to stop myself from pulling back. He knows something's wrong, I can feel it in my bones. I've told him so many things that I can hardly remember anymore. That I'm tired when he wants to kiss me. That I was having a nightmare, and that's why I'm still awake when he wakes from dreams of his own. That I was down in the dungeons when Maven dropped that clue about Farley torturing them because I wanted to see Iris, but was too scared to talk to her.

"When are the reinforcements coming?" Ella asks, her face grave. Even in battle, Ella's never worried, never tired. Now...

"The first legions of them should be here by midnight," Davidson says, rolling up the map. "Even if the Lakelanders broke through my shield in fifteen minutes, we would be able to hold them off until reinforcements arrive. And I promise those legions contain some interesting Newbloods within them."

"Any Whispers?" Julian asks, another gaunt face. But unlike the rest of us who suffer from restlessness, he doesn't wear facades or powders to hide it.

We don't hide Farley's identity anymore. Aside from Davidson, the other Electricons, and Julian, the nameless Command officers listen to us in the shadows, along with other curious Newbloods. Here, Command is silent, as if they don't want us to know what they sound like. Only with
Davidson in his most secret of meetings do they speak. Farley used to be part of Command.

Julian, more than anybody else believed in Farley. The thought makes my stomach heave over itself. He trained her in Tiraxes, and continued to work with her up until a week ago. And I thought you were getting better, Davidson said. I shouldn't have been down there, having succumbed to some stupid, weak urge to hear their voices, to torture myself over the decisions I've made. But then I heard what Maven said, after sitting there for hours. I sure as hell wouldn't have unleashed that Whisper on us.

I had to make up a story on why I was down there. I came up with the most simplistic, unbelievable story, saying that I wanted to talk to Iris, but had been too scared, and ended up sitting there until I heard Maven say those treacherous words. The story exists for my pride, but also Tyton's sake, if anything.

I ran to Davidson, and we slipped on our rings of Silence. We found Newblood Silencers, and I ran again. She screamed. Her screams echo in my ears even now, a week later.

"None have been recorded, no."

Conflict bubbles in the Singer's eyes. Inwardly, I feel more than a twinge of pity for him. What is left? He betrayed his nephew in our name-in my name-and now the one person he was responsible for has gone off the rails. The guards in the Bowl of Bones dungeons don't report change, though she can't hear whatever hell she heard before. Just fits of sobs and screams... she was fine before Davidson called her out, having burst in on her lesson with Julian.

He went down to talk to her once.

She swore at him to leave.

It must have broken her to see us look at her as if she was a monster, for us to cry at her in such bitter anger.

"And what of Cal? What of Iris, Evangeline, Ptolemus, and whatever others you hold down there, deeming them too dangerous to return to their manors? What of Maven?"

"Do not believe for a single second that every step of this plan wasn't thought out for months, though at times it may look reckless. But despite all that planning, it appears that we underestimated your nephew, Julian. It was thought that he'd see reason in that cage of his."

"So you intend to keep him there until he breaks?"

If smoke could come out of Davidson's ears and nostrils, now would be the time. "Perhaps we can reconsider things once our newest problem, the Lakelanders, has been dealt-"

"The Lakelanders can wait," somebody chokes out as the Diamondglass doors glide open. Ada. We stare at her in shock.

The blood is everywhere.

She wears a white lab coat drenched in red blood, and there's blood covering every inch of her hands. I stare at it as a drop falls to the floor. It makes a little sound, too.

Ada, the girl who knows everything. She stayed behind at the masquerade the night I rescued Gisa, and I hardly noticed, hardly even noted it, too wrapped up in my grief with Harrick and Maven.
And now she's covered in blood. Not her blood, but somebody else's. Her breaths come out in ragged pants.

But I hear the word all the same. Or rather, a name. Jon.

Jon.

Jon.

He's been fast asleep for months. His body was moved from the Rift to Whitefire months ago, so that the Silvers and Reds alike could keep an eye on him, though nothing ever changed. I used to make it a point to check on him every so often, but I've fallen out of the habit. For everything he's worth, I've hardly remembered he exists.

Maybe that's what he wanted to happen.

"I keep an eye on him," she explains. "The other physician is in charge of feeding him, but... I keep an eye on him. And this time, when I went into the room, Jon wasn't on the bed, laid down on his back the way I always find him. He was gone, but the other physician... was dead. He had a slash across his neck, ear to ear. I tried to stop the bleeding," she holds up her hands, "but I was fooling myself. He was already dead, probably had been for an hour. Jon didn't leave his murder weapon behind."

"How do you know it was Jon? Maybe somebody wanted Jon and killed the physician in the process," I murmur, though it isn't true. Nothing but the worst possible conclusions are true here.

She gives me a look, not annoyed, but tired, perhaps. "Who would kidnap a man who was unconscious for months?"

"So then why would he kill somebody who's dedicated to keeping him alive?"

Ada swallows, but gives a sort of smile anyways. It's more of a cringe. "My best guesses are that he's either gone insane, or else he plans on doing something we don't want him to do."

Before we departed for Archeon for Gisa, Jon told me the only way that I'd make it out of there was by killing Iris, the Queen of Norta at the time.

Iris saved my life that night, and the thought of slaughtering her fled my mind. How could I? But I've betrayed Iris since then, locked her in a desolate cage. I push the thought to the back of my mind, pushing worn hands against my temples.

But... she's in there, defenseless without her water and certainly without a man-made weapon that she could use. If Jon woke up to carry out unfinished business, he'd do it with the element of surprise. With the very weapon he slashed his physician's throat with. I don't know why he'd want to kill her, if he'd have any reason to, now that I made it back from Whitefire...

Just to be safe. "Check the dungeons," I say. "Make sure they're still in there, alive and present. In the meantime, double-up on security, especially since another war is on the horizon."

"Spoken like a leader," Ella says. "We need to clean up that blood, Ada. It's getting everywhere."

Though I know it's nothing, there's a pressure building in my chest, rising and rising. It's like an extra sense, telling me that something is very wrong. A shallow cut with a fatal infection. Nothing a damn bandage can fix.
The comparison in mind, my heart flutters and skips a beat. "Let's go now. If he's already been awake for an hour, I don't want to give him a single additional minute."

"Even Jon couldn't surpass hundreds of pounds of Silent Stone, Mare. Just go and check, but nothing's happened, I'm sure," Rafe says. His eyes hardly look sure of himself.

Julian is the only person who seems to have a sense of reason. "Go," he whispers.

I run.

There's an urgency in my steps, one that commands the guards on duty to get out of my way as Tyton silently trail me. Some of the guards, as well, find themselves following me, whether out of sheer curiosity or duty.

I run.

It's nothing. I have to remind myself. Tyton's right, it's just a stupid jumping to conclusions, an overanalysis. Jon is like Farley, en route to insanity because he can see everything. Jon has been asleep for months, half of a year. Maybe all of this time he has been trapped in a limbo, gone crazy in the process.

I turn down one of the tunnels that will take me straight to the Bowl of Bones, still running, that crawling sensation at the spine of my neck prickling. A phantom breeze flows through the tunnel, pushing at the clammy sweat that sweeps my face. The stairs in this section of the tunnels are old and decrepit, pebbles knocking at my boots with every pounding step I take. The only reason they didn't blow up this section of tunnel under the earth was because it was too risky with the palace above, whereas most of the sections they destroyed had nothing above them, maybe some streets or avenues.

If they escaped...

Like so many other thoughts, I push it into oblivion, to the depths of my soul that are too shrouded in grief to give a damn.

I run.

There's only one way out of the cells, one way that they would have taken unless they're trying to wait us out and hide down here instead. But Cal wouldn't take that risk, even if it meant facing a dozen guards with a half-broken body. Hell, it wouldn't matter. With Evangeline and Iris, Elane and Bart lying in wait somewhere in this city, it would be worth the odds.

It's not even going to...

"Get your weaponry prepared," Tyton barks from behind, to the others that trail us.

In the wide granite chamber that narrows into a doorway of deadly stone, eleven men lie dead at my feet. Maybe they're unconscious, but the blood... the blood is everywhere.

Worse than Jon ever could have done to a single Red, the blood is everywhere. It leaks from the throats and chests of men, from their mouths. Yes, yes they're dead. Two of them have gone purple in the face, their weapons clutched in vain. Six of them were Reds, the men that stood closely to the door. The others were Newbloods. Most of the dead rest in bent positions with cuts. Knives were there. Evangeline's knives. But three of the men, all Newbloods based on their lack of weapons...that's what makes me fall to my knees and become violently sick.
I retch until there's nothing left of me to discard, and the other guards hurry along into the passages, while gripping my stomach in the foolish hope that it will keep me from falling apart.

Tyton holds my hair back, the epitome of everything I don't deserve. My palms brace myself on the stone-cold floor, and my left hand catches blood. It's not warm, which means he's long since left. Still, I start, only to crash into more blood.

"I...I," I stutter, looking at the hideous burn marks Cal left on the men. "He did this." It couldn't have been Maven. Maven doesn't...

And he destroyed the men in doing it. One of them no longer has a face, it scalded off by fire. Another's clothes are in ruin, his leather armor nothing more than shreds now. The third...

I keel over, and Tyton's there again to hold back my hair. But nothing comes out, nothing but sobs that I cannot control, and I can't breathe, can't think as I behold the men that Cal so perfectly ravaged with his fire. It's like the men didn't even put up a fight, or were ambushed, though they should always be watching that passageway.

In the quiet of the night, my sorrow is unchained.

And I cannot bare to look at the third one, and for fear that if I close my eyes, I'll see him anyway, I focus on the ground, cold and bloody and laden with my disgust. The burns... they're nothing like my brand that is faded to an icy pink. They're lethal and inhuman, made in a way that I've never seen Cal use his power. Made with a skill that never crossed my mind, a way that I never bothered to think existed. Because Cal... These people... they might as well be monsters now.

"I'm sorry," I say, on the ground, but I don't meet Tyton's eyes. "He did this," I say again.

"You did nothing wrong. Why would you apologize?"

"Because somebody needs to. Somebody's going to have to be there, to apologize to the families of a man who doesn't have...have-"

"You need to lie down," he says, gripping my shoulders. "You shouldn't be here anymore."

But I don't move, as solid as a weight at the bottom of an ocean. "How did Jon do this? He didn't kill these men, but he manged to get past them."

"I don't know. Maybe there's another entrance that the seer knows about that we don't."

I blink, and the image of the man flashes before my eyes. "They're out there, either somewhere in the palace or maybe already outside of it. They could be in the tunnels, they could be waiting somewhere, waiting to slit and burn our throats."

Footsteps echo through the passage, and I force myself off the ground, to be steadied by Tyton. I come into his embrace but am careful to keep my eyes open, watching the platinum locks of his hair stick up at odd angles. How am I ever going to sleep again? "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Stop saying that," he hisses, though not in anger. "How could've you known that Jon would wake up today?"

I shake my head, and let go of him, sensing the guards are near. Jon didn't kill Iris. He let her go, along with Cal, Maven, and Evangeline. She's not dead, but... I look down at the purple-faced guard. Iris nor Cal are killers. They're not supposed to be like this, but being down there, in that suffocated Silence and the weight of betrayal and loss... it loosened something bone-deep.
Tyton’s brow crinkles as manacles clack from within the tunnels, not far away. "Who did they find?" he muses to himself.

I make the conscious decision that I don't want to know, though the manacles rattle closer, my own personal beacon of death. Closer and closer, and all I do is maintain my gaze firmly fixed on the adjacent rock wall.

"Who is it?" I ask anyway, not daring to look.

"Maven," Tyton breathes.

My head snaps up to find the boy being shoved up the long corridor, smudges of dirt on his face. He's already looking at the bodies, even with his hands firmly chained together, surveying the damage. His gaze snags on one of the bodies, the flesh forever branded in my mind. I don't follow his gaze. He keeps watching it, almost memorizing it. Maybe he is.

"What the hell happened down there?" Tyton says, using a much lower, darker voice than anything I've heard from him.

The facade, the mask Maven uses is gone. Wholly and utterly gone. He pales past his usual shade, his eyes going towards the spot in which I knelted, then to my eyes. There may be emotions behind his eyes today, but they're by no means legible. A snare of nothing good, nothing tangible. Sadness and fury and rage and pity.

"It had been so quiet," he says. "But then Jon appeared with his red eyes and a ring of keys. I don't know where he came from, but he said, 'This story... how twisted it has become.' Then he asked us how much more mutilated it could become. Nobody said anything. I think Iris thought it was a dream at first. Then he left, and Cal unlocked his cage. He unlocked Iris's and Evangeline's as well. He didn't unlock mine.

"There was hardly any screaming. I wasn't sure until now if they had even made it out. There are more bodies downstairs as well, though this is the worst of it."

My breath shakes, a traitor that tells Maven I wept. "Tyton will be able to sense them if they're near. We won't be ambushed like these guards were. We need to get back to the main part of the palace, to Davidson, to tell him what has happened."

"Watch your metal," Maven says. "Looks like the Magnetron took out six of them."

I skip my next breath altogether.

"He burned them alive, Davidson," I tell the Premier as I try to choke down a cup of tea at eight.

Davidson looks down at his desk, ashamed. Of himself or Cal, I don't know. "The first rounds of reinforcements has arrived early, which means we can bulk up our defenses and search teams on the palace walls and inside. The chances of them having gotten outside of the palace before you discovered they escaped are very, very low."

"They can't get past the force field?"

"No, though Archeon is rather large," Davidson says. "The only reason Evangeline was able to come back to Whitefire after she left was because she hadn't yet crossed the line. She must have either already been on her way back, or else her and Elane weren't past city limits yet."
I nod, glancing over at Maven, who examines Davidson's maps. He doesn't wear his manacles anymore, but Davidson didn't return his flamemakers either. Cal doesn't have his flamemakers with him; he must have taken a torch. But we didn't know what to do with him, not after the guards found him alone in the cell block.

"We should set a trap for her. The only reason she came back was for Ptolemus, wasn't it? That's where she plans on going tonight."

"Yes. We've already bulked up security and moved Ptolemus to a new location. Though if I were to guess, we won't catch them all at once. There's power in numbers, but there are better strategies, not to mention they have different goals."

"And Elane and Bart... Elane must be lurking around here somewhere." I swallow, reminded that she could be in this very room. "She probably knows that Evangeline's free by now, and is looking for her. Bart will be looking for Iris, as well. And once they get their lovers, they'll shoot for the Lakelander camp, which they must know exists by now."

Maven's pencil drags against his paper. He's invited himself to play strategist, and despite myself, it's a good thing he's here. He knows his brother's-the legion general's-mind better than anyone else. Yet... why is he here? "But you're forgetting one thing. Evangeline and Iris will be looking for Elane and Bart; they won't leave the city until they find them. What will Cal be doing, Mare?"

"He's not going to waste his time with me, Maven."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Why not?"

"While it would be much more intelligent to lie low and wait for Evangeline and Iris, Cal has time to kill. He won't leave without them, because when they're running for their lives there is indeed strength in numbers. It hardly makes a difference if they try to leave the palace now or in a week. The security is deadly either way. He's going to come looking for you, tonight."

"So what? None of them know where I am in the palace or who I'm with." I glance around Davidson's rooms, the chair in his study beneath me. "Cal wouldn't know where to look, and even if he did, Davidson's moved rooms since he was imprisoned. And there are plenty of witting guards waiting in the shadows outside."

He sighs, looking at Davidson. "We know where Evangeline is going, with or without Elane. We're setting a trap for her. Iris is going to be the tough one, because she has nowhere she needs to be, and we don't know where Bart is. But Cal... you could find him."

Everybody from the meeting earlier in the night is gone, dispersed to their separate corners of the palace. Tyton volunteered for a patrol shift, and he ordered me to get some sleep on the sofa in Davidson's room. He doesn't trust Cal to stay away either. And after the men...

Davidson looks me straight in the eye.
Chapter 52

Evangeline

The tunnels beneath the palace are odd, almost alive, breathing things, against the torches each of us hold.

We don't run, but Cal's pace ahead of mine carries urgency, and sometimes there's a spring to his step that makes me think he's about to launch into a sprint. I can't blame him, not with the people marching through the halls above us; the bodies of the guards we left behind.

Father, amid my years of training, taught me to have a tolerance for blood and guts, the unsightly parts of the art of war. The cuts I made to the guards were clean and merciful, though they hardly deserve it. Iris's kills could've been kinder, but water takes time to suck a soul. But for the glance I spared at Cal as we ambushed those Red guards, the sight I saw turned my stomach over. And Cal, not armed with anything but a nearby sconce... I know by the look in his eyes that he didn't do it out of spite or to prove a point, but out of necessity. He brought flames at three of the guards without relent, until he was sure that they wouldn't be getting up, wouldn't see sunlight again, die in a lonely prison.

The tunnels beneath the palace transition at random from modern white to ancient sandstone, and now we enter a new passage in the system that looks older than the other ones we've been in, branching off from one that was already desolate and cobweb-covered.

And the torches we carry hardly help underground, darkness on each and every side of us, the flames glowing dully. We don't need to lead our hunters right to us.

"Every moment that we stay down here is another moment wasted, Cal," Iris hisses storming through the tunnels behind me. "You heard what they said. The tunnels anywhere besides for right under the damn palace are gone. They've probably found the corpses by now, or else noticed that Jon woke from his coma. We need to leave."

Cal doesn't stop, and at first he doesn't respond. Then he sighs. "Of course they've found the corpses by now. It wouldn't take long, not when guards are always changing rotations in the units. It was luck that we came up when there wasn't a rotation going on." Not luck. Jon. "But we don't have armor or any weapons to use if they bring Silencers down on us. I need a set of flamemakers, and we need time away from the Silence to regain energy. Trust me when I say it won't matter if we leave now or in a week. The window for element of surprise is already gone."

My gaze skips around through the passage that seems to narrow as Cal speaks. At first it was wide, wide as a palace corridor, but now it's grown smaller, so that Cal, Iris, and I could barely walk shoulder to shoulder if we desired. The walls are more craggy than before, jagged rocks sticking out at various angles. Wherever he's taking us isn't a glamorous path towards the royal libraries or the King's rooms.

If only because Iris has to be thinking it, I ask, "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere that Maven and the bastards upstairs don't know exists."

I can't do much more than blink at his back. I charge forward anyway, leaving Iris to the rear.

Cal has this...militant expression on his face when I look at him now. A soldier with the sole motive to survive, to kill. Or else a scared boy who's learned how to distract himself. I should tell
Cal that, whisper in his ear, asking what Mare will think of him when she sees those he killed for herself. Not that she should judge, with all the people she's murdered. I've seen the corpses she's left behind, horrible, terrifying bruises from her lightning all across their bodies.

"Do you still wish to be king?" It isn't condescending. It's a genuine question. I could tell Cal a thousand facts that would rip him apart from the inside out, but I don't. I ask him that question.

He grits his teeth, moving past me as the walls move closer together. We all retain some semblance of civilized human beings with our fresh clothes that our guards brought us each night after Davidson sent us back to the dungeons. But none of us smell pleasant in the slightest, reduced to something perhaps worse than what Mare was before she wound up with royalty.

"That's hardly today's issue. Who knows when the Lakelander troops will arrive? Maybe never, if news off it truly didn't get out. Today we survive."

"For what?" I say, though I didn't intend for the words to slip out. "What is there anymore for any of us?" I don't tell Cal what he already knows. At least I have my brother and Elane; Iris has her country, sister, and Bart. But Cal... the few family members he has left have turned against him. And Mare... there's nothing left.

The Burner Prince stops dead in his tracks. Some of that militant look is gone, replaced with a dull rage. At least I knew. At least I knew that this was going to happen, never made the mistake of calling his lover anything more than a questionable ally. "Then I suppose there's nothing left for me, Evangeline."

"Cal," Iris shakes her head back and forth. If she wasn't a Nymph, there'd be tears in those brown eyes. "Please." That single word spoken in these hollow caves could mean so many things.

He sweeps a hand through dirty hair as if to clear his mind, strands glinting in the orange light.

"I was mad at her at first," she says, willing Cal to look at her rather than the floor. "I was livid as they dragged us to the dungeons, trying to process a betrayal I could barely comprehend. She was my friend, and she hurt me more than I've ever been hurt before. Maybe you've been hurt worse, by your brother, I don't know." Iris takes a grounding breath. It isn't wise to just be standing out here, listening to Iris and her monologue, but... "But then the morning came, when Davidson offered you an ultimatum. I glared at her with the hatred of a million burning stars, and I told her that I'd kill her. She thought she deserved it, by that look on her face.

"She told me I made her question if it was worth it more than anybody else." She breathes again, the words coming too fast, too much. "Then I grew tired, exhausted by her words and face. And now I'm still tired, because I've barely slept, because that's all I've been thinking about. Her."

Sometimes I woke in the dead of night to hear Cal's pacing, or else breathing too loud to be of somebody who was asleep. I know him well enough by now to know that she's all he's been thinking about, as well.

Maven might have very well gotten more sleep than the rest of us combined.

"Let's go," Cal says, turning back and starting into a walk.

"Okay," Iris says, though her voice is void of much of anything. His response wasn't what she was hoping for.

We continue down the narrow pathway, no end in sight. Occasionally doors appear on the left or right, forking off in different directions of shadows. The tunnels underneath the palace are easily
the most dense, but still I wonder what the other tunnels were like; how many miles they carried on for.

Though I left Elane on the outskirts of Archeon still encompassed by Davidson's forcefield, I have no doubt in my mind that she's wandered further than the places I begged her not to leave. Namely the palace. She's somewhere within this sickly beast's walls, hidden in the shadows, waiting for her chance. Despite how many times I argued with her on the way here that I would find a way to escape without her, she's been here all along, I imagine. Once the news of the bloody guards reaches her, and it will, then she'll come looking for me.

And I'll be looking for Ptolemus.

"They'll be down here looking for us soon enough," Cal says out of the blue, suddenly keen on talking. "Especially the Newbloods who can sense us. If Farley-the Whisper-" he amends, "was still out on the prowl, we wouldn't stand a chance. Hopefully there aren't more we don't know about."

"Tyton the Bloodhound," I murmur, scraping a nail on one of the walls. Cal cringes and Iris roles her eyes. "He'll be leading the hunt, I'm sure. He seems to enjoy taking up roles of leadership when it comes to you."

"It's more than Mare, though," Iris says, walking behind us thoughtfully. "There's something more to why he hates the royal family, something more than simply hating them for the Red's sake. He grew up in Montfort, so it has nothing to do with growing up under oppression. Mare would know."

"Yes, she would," I say, looking to Cal. He doesn't deign to respond. "I'm sure they know all of each other's secrets. All but one, anyways."

But Cal's forgotten about me entirely, focusing on the floor at his feet. His eyes float over the space, searching for something. The stone is the same, if not covered in more dust and dirt. He kicks at a patch of earth, now looking at the walls. "Yes, this is the right place," he says, almost to himself. He crouches down to the ground, running a finger over the dirt, thick everywhere, particularly here. Unusually, unnaturally thick here.

He stops after awhile, having found something. Then he continues in a light line, then turns his finger, then turns it again and again until he stops for something.

"A hidden passageway," Iris muses, looking at the small indent in the flooring Cal's discovered. "How innovative."

Cal finds the spirit to grin as he looks up at Iris, arms straining as he finds purchase on the covering and pulls upward. It's not large, the the piece of stone, a two-foot-long square at most. And the sound it makes against the floor is loud as Cal heaves it upward-nails on a chalkboard-revealing nothing but more shadows, just like the passages on the hall's sides.

"What is it, exactly? Iris asks.

"A secret," Cal breathes, drawing the flame out of the torch and into his palm. He crouches over the entrance. "It's more than just another royal safe house. It's meant for the king and his heir, a secret that's been passed down from son to son for generations, since Caesar Calore. In case there was ever mutiny within House Calore."

"Maven doesn't know about it?" We left him in the dungeons after Cal unlocked my cage, then Iris's. All it took was one low laugh from him before we ran. He spoke it softly, the word run, as
though he had wanted us to get away. But, oh, no. Maven only wanted to see a hunt take place tonight.

"My father didn't tell him, no," Cal responds. "Unless Elara cared enough to search my father's mind and pass down the secret to Maven. I doubt she did though, and either way, I doubt he remembers. It would've been years ago, before Elara ever decided to overrun the king."

Careful with the torch, though Cal controls the flame, Iris dangles a leg into the passageway and lowers herself into it, bracing herself on the sides with her arms.

"Spiral stairs. My father took me down once before."

Iris only nods, and as her arms relax as her feet touch the stairs, she disappears down into the safe room. Not afraid of the dark, then.

Cal raises his brow. "After you."

"How chivalrous."

I hand my torch to Cal and swiftly lower myself. My fingers find the metal railing, smooth and cold and untouched for years. It's indeed soft and cool to the touch, and I descend into the room, Cal close behind as he pulls the slab of stone back over the floor-the ceiling.

Above, the dust isn't thick enough to show new footprints, but old enough to cover up a hidden passageway, even after it's been opened. For the years these tunnels have been abandoned, what perfect timing.

The stairs keep coming, widening under Iris's flame ahead of me. The metal that creates them is intricately molded, curved into circles and waves. Twenty-two stairs I count, before my foot at last takes another step, to find a rug beneath my boot.

Moving out of Cal's way so he can light the sconces on the high stone walls, I brave further into the chamber, half-alight with fire.

"Of course, food supplies have to be changed out every few months, so a couple of Arvens knew about this place as well. But..." he thinks to himself, "yes, they're all dead now."

"Good," Iris says, tearing away a white sheet from a piece of furniture. Cal lights a massive fireplace at the far right side of the cavernous room, a room that has several hallways branching off from it. The spiral staircase splits the room clean in half, the side on the right like a large, happy old sitting space, two sofas with various armchairs and benches scattered around them, a great red and gold carpet placed at the foot of the fireplace. Though there would never be more than two people using the chairs, if everything went according to plan.

The rest of the floor is wood, the color of dead leaves on an autumn day.

Forgotten and empty, this place is still a palace in and of itself.

On the other side of the room is a desk and an oaken table, eight plush chairs surrounding it. No, certainly not made for two men alone. The desk is large, too, meant for the king, I'd assume. Though now that there isn't much of a king, I settle into the chair, flippantly opening up the drawers on either side of it, the table in front of me, the seal of the Calore dynasty weaved into a tapestry at my back.

The drawers are full of documents of protocol, some neatly handwritten and others typed.
Yes, this isn't a place for a king and his firstborn son. It is a place for the king, his heir, and his closest allies in times of hardship. Of course the architect didn't actually believe the king would only allow his son down here. Two men aren't really enough to lead a nation.

"The hallway on the left wall leads to the bedrooms and a washroom. The others lead to boardrooms and a kitchen."

Iris rips another sheet off a lamp, though we don't need any more light. A fireplace blazes at one wall, and fire burns every few feet on the stone walls, bringing the room into a warm light.

Cal stands next to the fireplace, and if he were anybody else, his back would've burned by now, the flames stretching high behind the glass. He closes his eyes and rolls out his neck, and I see now how tired he is, the way in which he slouches for a moment, a generous reprieve in the drowning he's been enduring for the past week and a half.

"I can't sleep," I growl, despite the obvious tension he's trying so poorly to hide. "I need to find Elane and my brother."

"I need to find Bart," Iris whispers.

From across the wide and tall chamber, Cal lifts his eyes to mine. "And who do you need to find on this fine evening? If you say it's best we wait until the guards have lost their edge and we've regained some energy... gathered some supplies, you have a bit of time on your hands if Iris and I have people to find."

"What are you implying, Evangeline?"

"You know exactly who I'm implying, Cal."

Half an hour later, I've read only half the headings to the various writings of generals and kings, but none yet have suggested a solution to the situation Cal's found himself in. Crown at the bottom of a river, a coup of Archeon shepherded by a rebellion that wasn't recognized three years ago, a Whisper in the dungeons and a seer running loose.

Cal swears as he comes from the hallway leading to the bedrooms at my left. Though there's a perfect decent bathroom down there, none of us have bothered to bathe. I've spent my time reading, and Iris has taken to raiding the armory hidden in the kitchen, well-kept with knives and guns and fighting gear.

"Flamemakers are a relatively new design, are they not? Burners are spoiled with those things. Guess you'll just have to take to carrying a torch around like your ancestors did." He's been looking for a pair of bracelets for the last twenty minutes, but to no avail. Apparently nobody had the sense to stock a set or two down here in the last ten years.

Cal laughs through his teeth. "Without my flamemakers, I'm useless and disarmed unless there's a fire nearby. The torch issue is precisely why my ancestors never fought their own battles."

I shrug. "Maybe they were just cowards."

"The world would be better off without your sarcasm. It cannot contain itself, even when we're trapped down here," Iris says.

"I know for a fact that there's pairs in my room. My old room, I mean," Cal says, and I can't help
but lurch out of my chair. "It'll be a painless trip," Cal says, but he swallows nonetheless his attempt to calm me down. "Through the tunnels, and the passageway leads to one hallway down from my room."

Desperation. Nothing but desperation laces his voice. But I don't call him a coward, because he's anything but for suggesting something like this. He could never win against a volley of guards without his abilities, let alone Tyton or Mare. He needs them to survive.

"I'll go with you," Iris says, sensing his struggle.

Slowly, I sit back down. Cal stares at me, waiting for what I'll say.

"Very well, fireboy. But you owe me one."

"Consider it your payment for locking me in a cage with the little lightning girl."

Somebody's going to die tonight, I can feel it in my bones. But I give him a wild grin anyway.

Getting through the tunnels is easy enough. Cal seems to have the entirely system mapped out in his head, and he doesn't take a wrong turn once, though we pass five doors for every turn we make.

There should be guards in the tunnels looking for us, but we haven't heard any foreign voices or footsteps, let alone seen any troops. Their absence sets my nerves on edge, even with the knives strapped across my limbs. Where are they?

"Security cameras?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "There aren't any in the royal family's wing of the palace. The guards are expected to do their job."

This section of the tunnels are modern and white, and as Cal glances through the crack in the set of double doors he's opened, he jerks back, but keeps the door very, very still. The doors on the other side look the part of any other room, just another set of chambers for a privileged Silver. That's the one advantage we have over them. Or Cal, anyways. He knows the palace like the back of his hand.

In time, he looks again, then angles the other way so that he can look down the other side of the hallway.

"Go," he says, pushing the door open on silken hinges.

Iris closes the door behind us as we dart to the other side of the hallway that has too many windows for my liking. It must be nearly ten o'clock at night now, and there's no moon to be seen in the sky. Lights cast shadows on our faces, and Cal glances around the next hallway.

Clear.

Another sprint down the corridors that I'm so familiar with yet are mine own no longer.

Cal eases open his door, and we slip inside. For all my talk of becoming Cal's queen, I've never laid eyes on his room, messy and cluttered with books and swords. A half-finished game of chess on a table near the desk.
The bed is neatly made, which isn't something it seems Cal has the capacity to do based on the likes of the rest of this room. Books, so many books on war strategy are strewn across shelves and small tables, and more photographs than I've ever seen in my life litter his desk, as if he was looking through them when he was last here.

As Cal opens a closet, I near the black and white photos. The glossy paper on top is a photograph of Mare, and though it hasn't been two years, she looks... different. Painted in white paste and dark lipped, the girl in the picture smiles, though I know for a fact that she hated everything we turned her into.

There were always photographers at the balls we went to, and it must have been just another ball, another dress, another coat of paint. Yet... I've never seen her smile like that. Mareena.

There's a click in the background, meaning Cal must have his bracelets. But the photo is magnetizing as I try to remember when it was from, whether it was from Summerton or Archeon, what color the dress really was in the black and white photo, and what-

"Why are we here, Maven?"

The voice paralyzes me for a moment as I here it from outside the door, and I look to Iris and Cal, who have both gone still as well.

My first thought is that we can't fight them. Three against two, but it would cause a raucous and the guards would be called up. The closet is a risk, and the only other hiding place is under-

"I haven't been in here since we played half a game of chess."

Iris is ahead of my thoughts, already shuffling under the bed, and Cal follows her.

I have no choice but to follow them as somebody-either Mare or Maven-puts their hand to the doorknob, and twists.
Chapter 53

Mare

"Why are we here, Maven?" I ask, swallowing as I look up into the boy king's fiery blue eyes.

He doesn't respond at first, hand on Cal's doorknob. It isn't safe out here, not when more and more of the soldiers have left the palace for patrol at the gates and boarders, despite Davidson's promise of more soldiers searching for them. And certainly not when my only backup is Maven. New Montfort soldiers arrive by the hour, though hardly any of them join the search for Cal, Iris, and Evangeline. Not when thousands of Lakelander troops wait across the blue dome's arch. They're coming in closer, surrounding us, intelligence says.

"I haven't been here since we played half a game of chess," he says, not bothering to answer my question. His bony fingers clamp down onto the fine bronze metal, then lighten up. Why did he bring me here, persuade Davidson that there was something worthwhile to us in Cal's room? So worthwhile that he'd risk us out here, with a lengthy trek through the halls of Whitefire. He wears a pair of manacles and doesn't seem to mind it.

Tyton left shortly after he brought us to Davidson's rooms, pale as the rest of us. But now he's down in the tunnels with a troop of fifteen Newbloods, looking for the three. I saw the look in his eyes as we walked up the stairs; he wants to murder Cal. The thought turns my stomach over. Tyton isn't a killer, even with that bloody death he gave to Volo on the afternoon of Cal's wedding. I still remember the way in which Volo crumpled over on himself, under the influence of the Electiron's steady brain, how he choked, wide-eyed and incredulous.

Not enough soldiers are working on tracking them down. Several groups patrol the tunnels underneath us, which still stretch far even though the other passages that lead out of the palace and government buildings have been destroyed for days. And the service in the hallways is not next to none; a band must pass by the hallway on minute-wide intervals, always vicious and cunning. They won't find them up here, but they won't risk it.

It still isn't enough.

They're killers. Evangeline's always been a relentless killer, but now with Cal and Iris...

It isn't that Davidson isn't keeping enough soldiers on watch. But I know better than to believe it's enough.

I cast my thoughts far away as Maven twists on the knob, pushing the fine door open.

He doesn't hold it open for me, waltzing in himself, and I have to catch it myself to avoid being hit in the face.

Instead, he speaks again. "It's more cluttered than I remember." The words are supposed to come out as a judgement, I think, but they're relatively quiet as he looks around the room, flicks the light switch on.

It's not much different than his room that I once was in at Summerton, spacious but cramped because of all the junk he kept in here. A large four poster bed rests in the middle, dressed up in thick rich blue blankets, the color of water. The blankets are long, dragging against the floor. A window that covers half the wall is at the other side of the room from the door, revealing the clear night sky. The rest is the same, with books and more books on strategy decorating the desk further
into the room. The bookshelves are build into the walls, with so many books they might as well splinter their casing. The floor is made out of the same wood as his door, red carpets laid on top of it.

There isn't any theme to the room, but somehow it seems to make sense, with its dozens of weapons and books... and photographs.

"Where did he get these?" I ask, paging through the photos carelessly set on his desk. Black and white, pictures of Maven, pictures of grand banquets and festivals, pictures of me.

Maven comes up from behind me, snatching one of the photos from off the desk. "He didn't take them. Cal's only talents involve military strategy and charming Red girls." I roll my eyes, hardly flinching at his remark. "But if you failed to notice, too busy with staying alive when you were Mareena, there were always photographers. I don't know why my father hired them, but he always did. And Cal always collected the photos. Those must have been the newest batch before you left."

I don't reply. There are a couple dozen in this pile, mostly generic pictures of Silver courtiers dancing and drinking. But there are a few of the king and queen, of Cal and Maven together. A couple of Maven and I, dancing. I cringe at the memory, when I was so stupidly oblivious. "I was so young," I finally murmur, setting the stack back in its place at the desk.

"You were only seventeen."

"I was," I say, nodding, walking towards the window. The moon is behind the clouds tonight, and the world is perfect and dark. "And I was stupid and naive, thinking I could trust Silver princes."

Maven chuckles, the sound low in the night. He passes by one of the bookshelves, dragging a finger over the dusty surface. In fact, everything in this room is untouched, just like my room of Silent Stone and Mareena's room.

"You keep our rooms as though they're tombs, never to be touched or looked at again, if you say you haven't been in here since you last played chess with him. How long ago was that?" A lash of shivers shake through my body, thinking about how long it's been, how much has gone by. "Over a year and a half. There's dust everywhere, strewn about books that could be added back into the library. They have no use in here anymore. And the photographs are just fake memories for you, nothing worth keeping."

Facing the window glass, Maven has gone pale in the reflection, if that's possible. I watch him carefully, creeping up beside him.

Shoulder to shoulder, we look outside into the pitch-black together.

"I think that in a way, you understand me more than you used to, darling," he says, turning his head to look at me. He crosses his hands behind his back. "You wouldn't stand this close to me otherwise, wouldn't talk to me without spitting on my feet. I once told you that perhaps while we weren't the same, we were even. You laughed at me, though even then some part of you agreed. You and I have both killed. And you see the corpses Cal left behind tonight and vomit over them not because you're disgusted with what he's done, but what you've turned him into.

I've seen the corpses you've left behind in your wake; they're horrible, purple and black and dull yellow scars scraped across their bodies from your lightning. You've seen them too, though you push those images far, far into the depths of your mind."

I hiss, curling my fist to punch him. "Stop it," I snap. "Why are we here, Maven?" I ask again,
storming back towards the door, to distance myself from him, but...

He continues to speak. "He burned one of their faces off, the other with ruined clothes. But the last one," Maven says, his face grave. "That was the one that made you fall to your knees, wasn't it? Because his entire body was unrecognizable from his fire, with scarring just like the bruises that lightning leaves."

I stare at him, unblinking, as he watches me, waiting for me to realize that what he said is true.

But he blinks first, and closes all but a couple of feet of the distance between us. "I left this room untouched. I left Mareena's room untouched, and I left your room untouched, little lightning girl," he says, though I've been in that room, know for a fact that it has changed with all those letters in the desk. "I leave the rooms the way they are because they're the only pieces of you and Cal I have left. So yes, I do keep them like tombs."

Maven is a liar. And I should've known that when he told me that he didn't dream, that not a bit of him loved Cal anymore.

But I don't tell him that. "I befriended a girl who showed me her religion, her life. I looked a man that I love in the eyes and I told him that I would not betray him. But you're still wrong, though. We're not even. We're the same."

He says nothing, bowing his head and moving to a nearby dresser. Maven shuffles through one of the drawers, apparently looking for something. "Like I said. Evangeline and Iris will be out on the prowl, looking for Ptolemus, Elane, and Bart. If I were to guess where Cal's first stop would be tonight, it would be here."

More shivering, and I follow him over to the dresser. "Why here?"

He plucks something silver and flashy out of the dresser, holding it up for me to see. Flamemakers. Of course.

"My brother is a bred soldier, and he could kill ten trained Reds armed to the teeth with knives if he wanted. But this isn't a fight against only Reds, now is it? He needs his fire, and he doesn't want to carry around a torch. He's already been here. There's two pairs missing from his usual collection. I just wanted to check. And I wanted to talk to you before you go. There's nothing worthwhile in here."

I gulp as my stomach twists, looking around the room. It's almost as though he's still here, a vague smokey incense lining the room. I don't know how I'll face him tonight, lay a trap for him, of all things.

"Promise me you'll be careful," he says, tossing the flamemakers back into the drawer and pushing it shut. "Because while you may be equal to him with your lightning, if he manages to trap you somewhere with Silence, he will use his size and training against you. If you think you've seen my brother fight... you haven't. He's been training much longer than you have."

I don't argue with him. It's true. Cal and I are evenly matched with fire and lightning, but it's a different story when it comes to pure, brute fighting. "Why are you so certain that he'll come for me?"

"You haven't been down there in the dungeons with him for the last ten days. All he did was pace back and forth, back and forth for hours on end, in between longer bursts of sitting on the floor, staring at the ceiling. When he thought I wasn't looking, I watched him. And I don't know what I
saw in his eyes. But he won't leave this palace before he says his last words to you."

"If you're so certain this plan of yours will work, setting a trap for him with me as the bait, what do you think he'll do with me, if say, he makes it out without getting recaptured?" Though I try my best to hide it, fear taints my tone.

"First of all, he won't. There will be guards hidden in your room, in the halls, outside the window. But if he did... I don't know. I don't know what he'll do once he finds you. I don't think he does either."

The fact that I've allowed Maven to plan this, that Davidson is allowing this idea... The overhead lights flicker in Maven's irises as he watches me back, slowly blinking. He still wears his imprisonment clothes, a gray pair of slacks and a black shirt that reveals white arms.

"Intelligence says that the Lakelander forces are growing in number. More are still coming in from the hillsides, and now they're moving to surround the city. I should go check on Davidson, to see if there's anything I could do to help before I go to my room." I breathe out, turning my back from him. But I stop, just for a moment as I see another photo, thrown carelessly against the floor.

Crouching down, I pluck the paper from the ground. Cal must've dropped it months and months ago and never picked it back up.

So I pick it up now, squinting though it's right next to my face. A photo of me in one of those ridiculous dresses Lady Blonos always made sure I wear, decked in all of that paint to cover who I really was. What I really was. I smile in the photograph, eyes ever-so-slightly squeezed together, as if I was halfway through a good laugh.

"I don't remember ever smiling like this when I was in Summerton." But I did, the photo has to be real. "Do you remember which ball it was?"

Maven comes up from behind me, walking alongside the bed until he decides to perch himself on the post at the corner closest to the door. Without knowing why I do it, I come closer to him, sitting on the edge of the mattress. It feels like a violation in a way to Cal. But I hold the photo up to Maven anyway, our feet dangling at the floor.

"Was it the one where we plotted to have those High Lords assassinated by the Scarlet Guard?"

I shake my head, though I know he means it as a joke. "I wouldn't have smiled so genuinely that day."

"In that case, I suppose I don't remember. It feels like a lifetime ago."

"That's because it was," I say, pushing myself away from him again, and I swear I see a gleam in his eyes that isn't from the lights. The conversation is too deep, a path that I can't go down with Maven again. Talking about when we were engaged, plotting to destroy the world together... that will only lead to talk about what could've been.

And I can't think about what could've been for anyone. Lives lost, loves destroyed...

Despite everything, the reckless nature of talking about it, I speak again. "You know I would pay for that life again. When all I had to do was keep straight posture and avoid tripping on the feet of royals. I thought it was difficult...but now..." A tear slips through my eye. "Everything that I've done, everyone that I've betrayed and lied to and stolen from, it's still worth it, if it means the end of an era. But if it's all for nothing, if the Lakelanders force us into surrender and Cal and Iris and Evangeline get out..." A second tear slips out, and I press my lips together.
If he were anybody else, Maven would tell a white lie, tell me that we'll win because we're Newbloods and we have thousands of more fighters flying in. But Archeon isn't the only city that we have to protect, that's under siege.

He sits on the bedpost, his booted heel tapping against the frame.

"Then the monarchy will live on. Somebody will force a new crown. And Cal will have kill you, and the rest of the Reds. Me as well. If you're so certain that you and I are the same, then at least we'll go to Hell together."

"I'm going to the barracks to shower and change for when I have to fight," I announce, pulling open the door. He follows behind me.

As pointless as it was, I can't help feeling a little less alone.

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I walk through the halls of Whitefire palace, in new clothes and with clean hair, the bloody clothes I wore down to the dungeons gone, replaced with dark green cargo pants, a black tank top, and a thin black jacket, dark enough to blend into the night. My fresh set of boots pad quietly down the forgotten corridor, and only a few of the lights that usually illuminate the hallway are on.

Davidson briefly opens up holes in the force field to allow men in, and thousands more have arrived since I left Cal's room with Maven.

It's begun to rain since I left the barracks, and I allow a couple of bolts of my lightning to play with the rain on the outskirts of the city, above the force field. They could be natural, for all I know. Yet I know better. Either from Iris or the Lakelander Queen, they have to be.

The rain pounds without mercy against the darkened force field stories above, and I quicken my pace, if only to find a group of guards I can latch onto. I tell myself I'm not scared in the shadowed corridors, but I can't help but feel a lick of fear strum at my heart every few seconds. They couldn't possibly know where I'm coming from or where I'm going to.

Why aren't there any guards on this corridor?

It's too quiet. It's too dark.

Sighing through my nose, "May the Gods damn you, Jon," I whisper, shaking my head.

A shadow shifts in the corner of my vision, tall and swift.

Though by the time I shift my head fully to see what it was, it's gone. They wouldn't be in this section of the palace. There's nothing useful here, no weapons, no secret hiding places. They must be in the tunnels, hiding where Tyton and his team cannot find them.

I stop in the hall, circling around myself to search for the cause of the movement. Shadows aren't supposed to move.

Just a change in the clouds, probably.

But the moon is still covered, the chandelier at the end of the hallway the only source of light. The clouds are thick and dense, blocking out all the stars and the moon completely and thoroughly. It's been that way all night. The men and women in the paintings on the opposite side of the hallway do not move, grinning with wicked smiles or else donning terrifying straight-faces. But those men
and women are long since dead, the oil on the canvas all that's left.

I'm not alone.

By the time I completely circle around myself, I find a woman in front of me, but she doesn't smile, just stands there, clad in fighting gear and weaponry.

"Iris," I murmur. I should scream, but-

A hand clamps over my mouth, and another arm wraps around my body, pinning my arms to my sides. His chest is warm against my back, his arms solid, unyielding around my body, even as I relax myself when I try to slip out of his grip.

His arm tightens around me and forces me back up. He taught me that trick.

I try to shock him, but there's something wrong, something that makes my lightning falter, hiccup and then die like a snuff of a flame. Because while you may be equal to him with your lightning, if he manages to trap you somewhere with Silence, he will use his size and training against you. If you think you've seen my brother fight... you haven't. He's been training much longer than you have.

My foot kicks backward, looking for his shin, only to stun him long enough to let my lightning come back, to run-

He pushes me up against the window, easily dodging my second trick, his hand crushing itself against the pane of glass, pressed on my lips so that I can't speak, can't so much as make a sound. My forehead touches the damp glass, though with the heat pressing me against the wall, it's a small relief.

The Silence. I have to get rid of it, get away-

Iris's shoes quietly click against the tiles. "I'm sorry," she says, and I close my eyes, foolishly willing it all to go away, though I can't see her as fingers brush my neck, looking for-

There's only the feeling of a sharp pang before the world begins to fade and my body goes limp.

Cal's arm catches the back of my knees as I fall, the other shifting to support my shoulders as he lifts me up.

The world fades to black.

He taught me that trick.
Chapter 54

Iris

If not for the chain that attaches both of her wrists to the wall, one would think that she's just sleeping.

In the great room beneath the tunnels, I watch her while her chest rises and falls, and Cal stares at her too, eyeing the girl from his chair by the fireplace. His foot taps against the floor, once for every time that she breathes. I think that the fire in the sconces pulses with her breathing, too.

Everything, all of our little schemes and tricks have worked too well. Skill, luck, or Jon, I'm not sure, nor am I sure if I'd like to know.

The walk back from that desolate hallway was silent, as Evangeline and I walked behind Cal, watching as he never faltered, never flinched in holding her unconscious form, no matter how many steps he carried her down, turns in the passages that he made certain to keep her head from hitting.

There aren't actual cells in the safe house beneath the tunnels, but Cal's found other methods of... imprisonment. The word leaves a stain on my tongue, though I haven't said it. She rests on her side against the stone wall, hands bound behind her back with chained manacles-he got in the weapons room-attached to a circular anchor poking out from the stone. Upon closer inspection, they're all over the place, little but infinitely strong pieces of metal, infused with Silent Stone.

Just like the hatch leading out of here, so that any Whispers or Bloodhounds couldn't sense us, but not strong enough for them to notice when walking past. Another flawless part in the flawless design.

And oh, yes. How she's going to scream at him, cry, perhaps when she wakes up, realizing what he's put around her wrists. Though she did the exact same to us, caging us in stone cages for ten days, put those same manacles around our wrists when we went to Davidson for negotiation.

With gleaming and wet platinum hair, Evangeline comes out of hallway leading to the bathing room and bedrooms, though her usual arrogance is replaced with something else. Now dressed in basic fighting gear, she bears a grim face, gloved hands scrunched up in contemplation. Usually she wears heaps of metal with her armor. And tonight is no different. She just hasn't found the right metal yet.

"It's dawned on me that my brother is more than likely gone from the dungeons and moved to a separate holding unit."

"More than likely, yes," I say.

"But I imagine she knows," Evangeline says, nodding to Mare. "Let me talk to her before Iris and I leave. You have all night to play with her." She watches Cal with glimmering eyes.

Cal's face contorts into a cringe before he wipes his hand down his face. Firelight hits his profile as he shifts, watching a section of the wall that Mare isn't chained to now. He's tired. Like me, though the nights have been harder on him than they have on the rest of us. Still, he looks handsome in the fire and shadows, like a Haven with their abilities to look perfect in any light. Almost like the fire favors him in that sense, never allowing him to look anything short of masterfully handsome.
"You want to torture her? No," he says.

"You're not hurting her," I say quietly, remembering the words she said in Cal's room. "It's two against one, so find another way to get Ptolemus's location. She wouldn't answer you anyway, no matter how much pain you may inflict. It would probably be a relief," I say, loud now.

Cal turns his head to us with dulls eyes, propping a foot on his chair. "We're not talking about what she said to Maven in my room, or what he said to her. I don't want to hear it from either of you."

I swallow, glancing at her again. Still limp, eyes firmly shut. Before I pinched the nerve in her neck, I had never rendered somebody unconscious that way before.

"I'm going to shower before I leave," I announce, making my way for the bathroom.

The water should calm me and my churning thoughts of Mare, Rosalyn, and Bart, and even as I sense the puddle of warm water Evangeline left in the shower's basin, my shoulders droop a little. The hallway is lit with candles on narrow shelving, lighting the way in warm colors, more wood at my feet and sides. Here, there's fire everywhere, enough to engulf this entire safehouse in a matter of seconds. There aren't any real lights, and we're underground, so only a Burner could ever really live in these rooms.

As nice as the bedrooms and couches are, this place was never designed for the sake of comfort or glamour. No, no. It was indeed created for a Burner king and his closest of closest allies, and nobody else.

The little pools of water in the shower guide me to the bathing room at the end of the hallway, a surprisingly small facility compared to everything else. A sink, a toilet, and a shower on cold tile, various candles littered on the sink counter and more shelves.

I slink out of my dirty clothes and step into the shower with the honest intention of casting aside my thoughts of the little lightning girl and her woes.

But as the hot water runs over my skin and into my pores, massaging the dirt off my face and onto the shower floor, I cannot help but think about what she said as I hid under that wretched bed with Evangeline and Cal.

Mare Barrow is no conniving and heartless bitch. She certainly looks the part, with bloody red jackets and faked smiles and speeches to magnetize thousands. And a part of me already knew that she wasn't, part of me understanding in why she did it. There's no apology that she owes to Evangeline or Ptolemus or any of the other Silvers who have ever evilly destroyed her in some way.

She wouldn't owe Cal anything either, had she not done anything—whatever she did—with him the night before the wedding.

But when she took herself up onto the stage and stood in front of that podium the afternoon of Evangeline and Cal's wedding, that hurt. My first instinct before I felt the pain was to tell Bart to run, because I saw the armed Reds and Newbloods coming at us. But after that, as I knelt before my chair with my hands placed ever so carefully on the cushion, then I could think.

I would have wept had I not faced those hundreds.

Now she compares herself to Maven, allows herself to understand him because he's the only one left that really understands her. Their conversations are so different from the talks I've had with Maven over the months, typically long tracks of quiet interlaced with short rants. They could talk
for hours if they wanted, about their old lives, the sacrifices they've made for the things they care about more than anything else. They ridicule and laugh at one another, but those are only guises to cover bone-deep pain. Then there are those moments when they share genuine laughs between vexations, a real truth. Those were the hardest to hear.

I do not hate her. I pity her for all the decisions she's been forced to make.

And I know now that it was never her intention to become my friend. Perhaps it was an accident or a scheme that Davidson put her up to. But there was something there.

Then there's Rosalyn, somewhere across the city, waiting to plunder it all for me. I tell myself that it's because her allied country has been taken over, but it isn't. It's only for me and me alone.

I can barely stand that fact, knowing the soldiers she's amassed only for me, how she surely intends to gut Davidson and his leaders. Lakelanders and Nortans alike will die by the end of the week.

But Rosalyn... I haven't seen her in months, tied up with my promise to help Cal and Evangeline during their engagement.

She's coming.

Another secret Mare and Maven divulged to us in that room.

When I at last feel clean, I step out of the shower and into a clean pair of fighting pants I set out for myself earlier. The shirt comes next, then the boots that I take care to double-knot. I draw the water out of my hair, dropping it back into the shower basin.

The walks I take down the hallway are hesitant with the knowledge that she might very well be awake by now, or at least any minute.

But when I shove open the door to the main room, she still rests on her side, not having moved a bit. When she does wake, I'm not sure if it'll be sudden; a jerking from a bad dream. Or a slow waking, gradual enough that she'll be able to pretend to sleep; to listen to whatever she wishes, to plot and plan how the hell she's going to get out of here without any help.

Evangeline has taken her spot back at the desk, papers laid on the wood neatly. It could be for amusement, or maybe she's actually looking for something useful for Cal. Somehow, I imagine it's the former.

"You should go bathe, Cal," I say, going towards the other side of the room. "You look horrible, and it'll be better if I speak to her first when she wakes. I can tamp her down if she starts screaming or trying to break the chains."

"Okay," he says, and a I own half the wit to question him. Without complaint, he rises from his chair and heads towards the bathing room, closing the hallway door on his way.

"Wise words, Iris," Evangeline says, tucked away in her corner. "But I doubt she'll start screaming or trying to break the chains. For what the uneducated little Red girl is worth, she's learned by now when to keep her mouth shut. She waited six months to escape from Maven."

It's not the same, though, and I don't respond. When Maven took Mare hostage, she knew what kind of man he was. This is different, lover to lover, betrayed to betrayed, surrounded by fire and chains. And tonight of all nights, with another impending war on the brink of the horizon. All the lies and the masks are discarded at the ground now, with nothing left but air between them.
"Do you have any idea where your brother might be?" I ask, meaning to clear the atmosphere.

She shrugs, picking up another document and pretending to read it. The words probably don't register in her mind. "I know where he isn't. He isn't anywhere in the Bowl of Bones holding cells, not when Jon got down there so easily when there's supposedly only one entrance. There are other holding places throughout the palace, or maybe Davidson's keeping him close in a room nearby his. Not to say that I know where Davidson is."

"And if we can find Elane and Bart, we can get out on stealth. Our powers are brute, and we're just going to end up chopping down guard after guard until they manage to take us down."

Evangeline shrugs again, and the motion gets on my nerves. So nonchalant and uncaring, though I know she's anything but. "I would like to chop down some Red guards very much right about now. But you're right," she amends, saying, "slaughtering dozens of skilled Reds and Newbloods wouldn't be a very good idea."

"You should find Elane first. She'll be your best bet when it comes to finding your brother."

The Magnetron just smiles, not longer looking at me but the space to my side. She raises her eyebrows, raising a finger towards the wall.

I quirk my brow in response, already knowing what's happening. I turn anyway, and notice the slight movement in her hands, assessing the damage.

"Or maybe I should just threaten Miss Barrow over there, who appears to be waking. Tiberias and you may have prohibited torture, but I see no reason why I can't use a bit of leverage. When I was in a cage, she told me that she'd tell the name of the Whisper if I promised I wouldn't kill it, in exchange for Tolly's safety. But I could make a similar deal now."

The hands playing with her chains go still, though what's been seen can't be undone.

Water descending onto the shower floor echoes in the background, just having been turned on.

"I don't know where he's being kept," she says, but not in the harsh voice I was expectant of. In time and with limbs that must ache, she struggles up into a sitting position, shoulders pushed back from the way that her wrists are tied to the wall. She slouches into the stone wall, hair strewn over her face.

Evangeline tuts, but doesn't rise from her desk. She wouldn't made a great queen. "Why should I believe you?"

Even with the hair over her eyes, I sense the emptiness within her. "You shouldn't."

I open my mouth, but closing it, I sink into one of the chairs around the table. She doesn't bother in attempting to brush the hair out of her face, though she's hardly able. And she's quieter than a prisoner should be, with defeated posture and fingers that continue to pick at her chains, trying to understand how they work.

She sprawls her legs out in front of her, but quickly retracts them into her chest, like some sort of scared child. No more appearances tonight, at least not for me or Evangeline.

"You have no idea where he might be?"

"No," she says.
"Very well," Evangeline says. "I'm going to gather new weapons and then we're out of here."

"Very well," I reply as she leaves the room.

But I don't let the silence of the room take over, instead moving my body so that I sit on the floor with her, tucking in my legs like her, if only to have something in common. I don't sit close enough for her to ram a leg out and into my chest, though.

"It was so quiet in the cells. I couldn't stand it, and whatever we are now, I don't want you to endure that silence either. So I'll talk whether or not you wish for me to talk," I say. "We were friends, Mare. Don't give me any reason to doubt that. Because whether you intended to become friends with me in hopes of gaining an insider's ear to Cal's court, or because you and I... we were just friends... there was something there. Don't tell me otherwise."

She shakes her head firmly. "We were friends. Our walks and talks were never for some stupid political gossip. We were friends, Iris."

I nod, feeling the prickle of tears at my eyes. "Then know that I forgive you. Because as somebody who was raised for no more of a purpose than to protect her country, know that I know what's it like to prioritize. It's not vicious; if anything, it's more human than anything else. Making those conscious decisions that you know will hurt those you love more than anybody else."

"You shouldn't."

"I forgive you, Mare Barrow. We may not be on the same side, but know that you did nothing wrong in my eyes, despite whatever I said before."

"Thank you," she says, and I smile down at her sadly as I get up. Evangeline comes from the weapons room, knives of every sort bedecking her arms and legs. She's made armor out of the blades she found in the room, making a full outfit for Evangeline Samos.

The Magnetron hardly looks at the girl before she begins her ascent up the stairs. I expect another crude comment from her, but she continues up the steps.

Braving near, I brush the hair from her eyes. She doesn't meet mine, staring straight ahead towards the fire on the walls. What a hollow girl.

"If we never see one another again, little lightning girl, then I'll promise you this: I won't hurt your Whisper." I think it's the most sentimental goodbye the steel-hearted girl can manage.

I say nothing more as I too climb up the stairs, heave myself out of the hidden chamber and begin to walk by Evangeline's side.

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"Hello, lover," a voice purrs from thin air as Evangeline and I stride through the tunnels that has me jumping back, nearly cutting myself on the wall.

I flinch as Elane appears, swearing under my breath. Even as she fades into existence, the edges of her body are faded, her black shirt and pants and vivid red hair fading into nothing.

And I turn away as she pulls Evangeline into a kiss that lasts longer than I'd like, and I nearly start to walk down the tunnels without them. Rather, I splatter them both with a bit of water, pulling up my lip a bit. "Do you really want them finding us because you couldn't resist your urges?"
Evangeline rolls her eyes, fingers lacing with Elane's. "I doubt you'd be arguing if Bart were here."

"But he isn't," I say, crossing my arms.

Elane smirks, starting into a walk between me and Evangeline. "He's upstairs, prowling the hallways, if you're curious."

"Take me to him," I breathe. My sister can wait for now. Just for a moment, I promise myself, yearning to see her just as much.

"Only if you say please," she says, though a wide-open smile.

The door to the room where Elane and Bart have been hiding out for the past week opens softly, and he's on his feet in an instant.

Bart's eyes meet mine, and I surge across the room, our arms wrapping around one another. I breathe in his familiar scent.

His strokes against my back are calming and scream of sorrow for what I went through, but I shake my head in the crook of his neck, then grab his face between my hands.

"I told you to run," I say slowly, looking deep into his eyes. "Do not blame yourself and do not be angry with yourself. You couldn't have surpassed my guards in the Bowl of Bones. I have been through worse. Do not blame yourself."

"I know," he says, though he doesn't mean it.

"I love you," I say, crushing my lips against his.

Time seems to stretch and strain as I kiss him, and I hardly notice or care when Evangeline and Elane leave, hardly notice anything but Bart.
Spacious as Davidson's rooms are, there's hardly any room for me and Elane in the corner of his office, tucked away so that nobody can brush up against us.

We slipped in a while ago, undetected as our invisible selves strode in behind a pack of Tyton's hunters, though he himself wasn't along with them. Good, though we'd be fine if he found his way back here, too many Newbloods and Reds inside for him to possibly sense two extra brains.

The great Premier himself stands behind the desk, his chest hidden beneath war-torn arms. I wanted to come here for the hope that somebody or other would reveal where Ptolemus is being hidden, but to no avail have I stood here, listening ever-so-carefully for the last fifteen minutes. Other men and women shuffle about the office and his chambers, talking and strategizing amongst themselves. I'm surprised Davidson allows so many people in his rooms, though I suppose he knows all of them very thoroughly. The man wouldn't be so foolish as to let random soldiers in here.

Another band of soldiers enters through the doors, clad in bulletproof vests and guns. Except the one in the middle doesn't have a gun, white-haired with a titch of a scowl on his face.

An unsuccessful hunt in the tunnels, then.

"Nothing," Tyton says, the men around him dispersing from him. At first I tense, expecting that he'll feel my unwanted presence in the room, having just thought about it, even though there are thirty others in here. Maybe he counts them, counts their minds each and every time he enters a room. There's something about the way that he carries himself tonight that makes me wonder if my guess is true.

But he walks towards the Premier, shaking his head, though Davidson doesn't appear angry. He wasn't expecting that Tyton would actually be able to track us down. Smart.

"We looked through every tunnel that exists while guards still searched through the hallways and the grounds. Even the dustiest of the passages down there don't have any sign of them. Dust is too thick to be noticeably moved, if they were down there at all. Not to mention Jon's still out on the loose."

"Fine," Davidson says with steepled fingers upon his desk. "If there's no hope for hunting them down the old fashion way, then we'll use the traps we've deployed. Finding her brother will be almost too easy for the Magnetron, and hopefully she'll lead us to the others." I strain to hear, but Davidson's lips are unmoving, even as I'm sure that he has more to say about the traps he intends to set for us.

As if he feels my thoughts, Tyton glances around the room, fireplace nothing but ashes and more wooden paneling and rich color schemes. "Where's Mare? I thought you were keeping her here."

I nearly laugh as I see the slight glint of pity in Davidson's eyes. They haven't realized she's gone yet, but...

"While you were in the tunnels, we developed a plan to catch Cal. She and Maven went to Cal's old room to get some old maps. He seemed to think they'd help us. And then she was going to go back to Mareena's room, to lay a trap for him." I see now that Maven was quite vague in his reasoning to
Davidson on why he needed to go to Cal's room. There weren't any maps he took, I know for a fact.

Tyton's gone still. Such a simple, elementary explanation, but it hits him hard nonetheless. "You sent her out there with Maven, not only without decent protection against them, but also with Maven, a two-faced bastard. But also to lay a trap. It could go horribly wrong, Davidson," he snarls, slapping his hands against the desk. "You're endangering her life. I'm going to get her."

"No, you're not," Davidson says with equal vigor. "She is not your liability, and neither is Maven, not when we attached manacles of Silent Stone around his wrists before he even left the tunnels. She didn't seem to have a problem with it, so I let her go, if only for this rebellion's sake, even if Maven's reasons for going to Cal's room were shaky, even if it's risky. Guards are constantly roaming the halls; we hardly had to send a troop with them. If anything, that would arouse suspicion. There are dozens of guards waiting to pounce on Cal in there. The Newbloods waiting in her room haven't even radioed in that she's arrived yet."

"She hasn't gotten there yet?" Tyton hisses, curling up his fists. Though even he isn't foolish enough to start a fight with Davidson. "Then it's not too late to end something this stupid. I'm going to check on her."

Anything that Tyton has in mind is dashed away as the door is flung open yet again, this time a black-haired boy waltzing in, with that silly and little arrogant mask he so delights in donning. There are indeed manacles encircling each of his wrists. I understand now why she hated them so much.

"Ah," Tyton says, approaching Maven. Though the Electricon could crush Maven's tormented mind in an instant, Maven hardly blinks as Tyton stops only a couple feet away from him, eyeing his manacles. Yes, the Silence will protect him. For now. "So you let him roam the halls alone, too?"

If he weren't a highly skilled general, Davidson would roll his eyes. "Where would he go, Tyton? The city is on lockdown and his own brother left him in a cage."

"Have you captured Cal yet?" Maven asks, looking past Tyton, hardly acknowledging him, to Davidson.

"Not to my knowledge," Davidson says. "They'll bring him here along with Evangeline and Iris if they decide to accompany him. Mare hasn't even arrived at her room yet. I hope those maps were worth it."

Maven looks...confused as Davidson responds. "What do you mean she hasn't arrived at Mareena's room yet?"

"She hasn't gotten into position yet. The guards haven't radioed in that's she's in position yet," Davidson repeats.

"But I left her over an hour ago. She mentioned that she was going to the barracks to shower... but she should've gotten there by now."

Davidson and Tyton raise their eyebrows in tandem. They don't ask what he's been doing alone in the palace for the past hour, but...

The Premier snatches a radio off his desk, punching in a few buttons before he raises the piece to his mouth. With wide eyes, he murmurs a few code words to the listener on the other end. Though the listener cannot see him, Davidson shakes his head several times over. I didn't ask nor question
Cal's plans for what he plans to do with her, chained up to an immovable ring of Silence embedded into the wall. I cannot believe he will damage her. I wouldn't have let him go through with it otherwise.

He drops the little black box with a sickening clink. "They haven't forgotten to radio in and they haven't sighted Cal, Iris, or Evangeline."

Tyton looks about ready to vomit. Davidson's already patted two of his generals on their shoulders, indicated for them to go and find her.

"How could you send them out alone?" Tyton cries, his voice deep and ragged. He's livid as hell, and I swear my brain tingles for a moment. He turns to Maven, who doesn't open his stupid mouth for once. Maybe Maven believes he deserves whatever beating he's had coming for years. They're both pale, Tyton sheet white though nothing's been confirmed. She could very well be roaming the halls of the palace still, finishing business, for all they know. "You're not much of a fighter, but if you claim to love her in whatever sick way of yours, you wouldn't have left her."

The fire prince turns a bit grey in the face, some of that famous anger of his resurfacing. "I didn't leave her. And maybe I don't love her the way you love her, but we understand one another. I wanted to go to Cal's room to see if his flamemakers were gone; they were. I also wished to speak to her one last time before one of us winds up dead. There were no dire maps. But our conversations... oftentimes escalate. She left and I didn't dare follow her sorrow."

"We're moving," Davidson announces, picking up his other papers and radio. "Too many generals have arrived with their legions by now for us to all fit here. We're heading to the throne room, where these matters can be discussed over more properly."

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We follow them like lonely ghosts throughout the halls, knowing things that they don't.

Tyton and Davidson lead the pack, two dozen soldiers on their heels. Somewhere near the front is Maven, wearing somber, blank eyes. He blames himself for what has happened, letting her go in the middle of the night, even if she is out there somewhere perfectly safe. Dangerous, vicious creatures prowl in the night. And he knows better than to hold out for Mare's safe return. He isn't as optimistically stupid as the rest.

Reaching a fork in the corridor that will take them down a floor with another turn and to the throne room, they move in unison, Elane and I keeping to the edges of the hallway, though close enough to the rest of the guards that Tyton doesn't sense an outlier.

"Have the Lakelanders reached out to us yet?"

"No," one of the generals near the front replies. "They've been completely silent, though they haven't exactly been attempting to be inconspicuous."

"If they don't speak up by dawn, we'll release our men. Enough Newbloods have been shuttled in by now that we have a fighting chance."

"What of the other cities?"

"They'll be fine, honestly. It seems that the Lakelander Queen has provided bare minimum forces for the rest of the cities. Harbor Bay, Delphie... I thought it was bad, at first. It's almost as though she doesn't care about the other cities, only Archeon."
"She's not trying to win the other cities. She's just using her pathetic and weak legions to draw away your troops from Archeon," Maven speaks up, tilting his head at the Premier. "She doesn't give a damn about Cal or his throne or any Nortan. Rosalyn only wants her sister back. She's just giving herself an advantage by taking your good men away from this city, distract them with men that would die on the battlefield of Archeon in five minutes."

The thronging whips around another corner, a familiar corner in the midst of the dozens of corridors that make up the palace. Ah, yes, I recall the events of a mere few hours ago so well, when I stood in one of the alcoves of the hallway. I was the shadow that darted past Mare Barrow's visions, causing her to turn just the right way so that Cal could come up from behind her as she saw Iris.

"How do you know that, Maven?"

"I know many things, Davidson," Maven states. "I have a great deal of time to think, these days. Even before the Lakelander troops made themselves known, it seemed like the kind of thing the queen might try. She's almost as bad as Ir-"

But his words are unfinished, unneeded as Tyton breaks away from the group abruptly. He swears violently and then some, and I feel that tightening in my head again, as if he's doing it to everyone. Out of control.

Elane and I shuffle around the crowd to see what he looks at, not particularly quietly as the rest of the guards and generals turn to look at it, too, shifting their bodies with whispers of horror.

A pane of glass. They look at a pane of glass.

Outside, rain still pounds against Davidson's forcefield, and inwardly I wonder how powerful he is. This must be why he was made the president of a country, because of his seemingly infinite ability. It's been up for ten consecutive days without reprieve, and Davidson doesn't look tired. He sleeps and can trust himself to keep a hold on the dome. Not the flashiest of talents, but still.

The wall of glass is mostly fogged over from the dampness outside, but one pane breaks the chain, human smudges written all over it. The outline of a small woman's body, waist to shoulders, is distinct, the places that she placed her fists each owning a smudge. Another marking is etched where her forehead went as Cal slammed her into the glass.

Most of them have crowded around the glass, examining it to understand what happened.

But Maven stands in the middle of the hallway, his eyes caught on something further down. He could run away and have a decent chance of escape if he wanted, with his guards distracted. Yet he only walks to the object resting on the floor, picking it up with a chained hand.

So I watch the little wheels turn in his head as he comes to a conclusion on how that photograph is possibly there, just lying on the marble.

The photograph of Mare smiling at some damn Silver ball, as she'd probably call it.

The flamemakers were gone by the time they came to Cal's room, but the photo was still there. Mare picked it up herself, kneeling ever-so-close to the foot of his bed. And Cal wouldn't risk a second trip to his room only for a photograph. Which means...

Maven stuffs the photo into his pocket with all the speed in the world, an indifferent, bored expression on his face, though the guards continue to examine the glass. They don't notice the small movement done by the forgotten boy.
And they don't need to know. Cal left that photo for Maven alone for a logic I cannot comprehend. Even as the boy is encompassed by guards once again, he keeps that insufferable mask on.

He's scared out of his mind.

Tyton departs from Davidson with twenty men. They take the entrance to the tunnels nearest the hallway that the fogged window panes were part of, though it isn't the same entrance as we took on our way back down, risking ourselves for an extra hallway to throw any guards off that might've seen the glass soon after.

Elane and I follow the guards.

In my hand, there are twenty blades, all razor thin, but all perfectly capable of bringing each and every guard to their knees in an instant.

We follow them deep into the tunnels, once coming through a pass only a turn off from the underground safe room. But they turn in the other direction, refusing to cover more ground by splitting up. It wouldn't be wise though, if they stumbled upon us while we were all together.

We took out eleven guards while we were together. They won't risk it again, even if they're all Newbloods.

I let them travel a bit further from the safe room before I begin positioning my invisible knives throughout their ranks, at the left side of their backs.

All but two. The one that wears a cross-shaped patch at his shoulder I spare, recognizing him as a Healer. He won't fight back; the Healers are always too good-natured to harm us. And Tyton, rather than hold the knife at the backside of his heart as I do to the rest, I place the blade at his thigh, an inch off from his bone.

The knives are invisible to my eyes as Elane carefully maintains the illusion, but I feel them in the air, moving with the unwitting guards, aligned with their red-blooded hearts.

I count by fours, bringing the knives forward at the end of each count to keep up with their vigorous pace.

Even if they went right down the passage with the hidden door, they wouldn't spend an extra second to think twice. They're going too fast, not looking for what they don't think exists. For everything Whitefire has, Tyton's legion hasn't bothered to think that there might be a hidden safe room somewhere down here.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

I pull the blades forward with grace, the metal wheezing through the men's chests to come straight out the other side. The last blade whips through the air at an angle, bringing Tyton crashing to the rocky ground as the weapon shoves through his skin and sinks into the earth.
The Healer cries out, and I'm tempted to cut off his tongue.

The other men are dead, though, solidly and permanently dead. thin, clean wounds pierced through their hearts. Not a one of them had the chance to yell or weep. For that reason, I don't cut off his tongue, only put a blade at his chin. That shuts him up, the muscular, rugged looking man.

I put a blade at Tyton's throat, as well, and a second precautionary blade dangles from over him. If he tries to choke me off, he'll impale himself. "Careful," I muse, stepping over the fallen corpses one by one. I can't help but turn my nose up at my own work. "There's a blade hanging five feet over you. Should you try to kill me...."

With his thick military pants, my blade had no trouble slicing through Tyton's leg. He grunts, trying to pull himself upward, but realizing that I've trapped him, he slowly lowers himself back down, his leg moving against the iron. Ouch.

His breaths are shallow, though he's far from death. Paralyzed by agony, maybe, but not death. He cannot turn, but he knows very well what I've done.

So sudden and cruel. The Healer watches us wearily as Elane makes us appear again, and he cusses, despite the edge that I press into his neck more forcefully, drawing blood.

"Where is she?" he growls through his teeth, glaring at my feet as I crouch down beside him.

"You're not going to ask me why I'm here? Beg for your life?"

He swears at me, every bit of a man he can be staked to the ground, disarmed of his ability and troops. "Where is she?"

Giving him the satisfaction of an answer, I smile. "Chained to a wall with manacles of Silent Stone, left to Cal's will and whim." I should tell him that Iris and I are both away, but I don't. He doesn't need to know the Cal is without his allies.

"I'll tell you where your brother is if you tell me where she is," he begs, splaying out his fingers.

"What a desperate man, you are, Tyton. I can find my brother myself. And whoever said she wants to be saved?" I didn't trek all the way down here to barter with him. He has nothing to offer me but an excess of male testosterone and meaningless threats. "It wouldn't be the first time bad things happened while they were in a locked room together."

He tenses, not understanding. I smile again. No, I came here to tell him the truth that Mare never told him. He would've left her had she told him.

"Has she been distant, lately? Perhaps since the wedding?"

The swallow in his throat tells me yes. But he stays silent.

"It was my fault, I admit," I say, full-well aware that he'll kill me if he ever gets the chance. "I see the way that they still look at one another after all these months, still remnants of twisted love between them. I liked playing off that obvious crack, using it to torture Cal with if only to get out of my marriage to him. It didn't work.

"I assume you were camping out down here that night with your compatriots, otherwise you would've figured it out. Somebody must've told you, didn't they? How Cal missed hours worth of Anabel's wedding preparation because he fell asleep in his dear uncle's study? The fact of the matter that everybody seems to turn a blind eye to is Mare was missing that night, too. It was pure
He understands, now. At least the worst of it. I could leave him here, simmering in his hatred for Cal, wherever the hell it originated from. Yet I wait for him to catch up in his thoughts. "What did you do, Evangeline?"

I shrugged. "I locked them in a cold, dark prison cell. Elane helped me, of course, in dragging their bodies down to one of the old wings that isn't used anymore. No bars. Just solid iron walls. We put Mare into a dress and cranked down the thermostat. It's sound so animalistic when I repeat to Tyton, callous and targeted. "She would've been at Death's doorstep had she not let Cal warm her body. Anything after that, however, I cannot justify for you. They claim that they didn't, but... Elane told me that they were rather tangled together by the time she let them out in the morning."

Yes, that stings him far worse than the knife in his thigh does, scraping against his bone.

"Your relationship with her is based off heartbreak, Tyton."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Somebody had to, and Mare never seemed inclined."

I saw it when nobody else did, that Mare only fell in love with the Electricon because he was there, with his pretty eyes and lightning. If it could be called love. Maybe there was something there in the end, but any true feelings she felt for him were destroyed when she entered that room with Cal.

"And besides. I'd like to see you try and kill him. Why is it, by the way, that you hate him so much?" Aside from the obvious, boy.

His eyes go wide as if some age-old memory is resurrected. It has to be more of a reason than simply for the Silvers and Reds and five-hundred years of bloody history. No, it must be for a reason far more personal. "His family slaughtered my sister on public broadcast, at the gates of Summerton."

And that is all he says, nothing more and nothing less. I don't ask how or why, coming to conclusions on why she was in Norta, far away from Montfort. "When?" I ask.

"Five years ago, next month."

I flung the knife from over his heart down the passageway, and it lands with a quiet scuff at the end of the hall.

"I wish you the best of luck in your murderous endeavors, Tyton."

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They said that they were laying a trap for me, just as Mare tried to with Cal. They said it would be almost too easy for me to find Tolly, sitting like a waiting duck for me. It'll be the second time eavesdropping has saved a Silver's tail tonight.

Where would they put him, my brother? They made it sound so obvious, so easy for me to find, only to be sprung on by a band of Newbloods. He must be out of the dungeons by now, put somewhere that the Scarlet Guard can better control.

"The Magnetron bitch hasn't shown, yet?" a soldier walking past us asks his compatriot. Elane has made us invisible again.
"No. You'd think she'd think to listen to the rumors that we've been spreading through the halls all night. He's in his old rooms, what a surprise. The Haven girl takes pleasure in lurking around these halls, looking for gossip. Tonight should be no different," another guard states, bitter and tired, it seems. Though for all of Elane's lurking, he doesn't seem to believe that she could be here right now.

Elane has spent the last hours first looking for me, then stalking Davidson and Tyton. She hasn't had time to listen to ordinary guards gossip.

Before tonight, I did not believe in the gods. But with Jon waking from a months-long coma, Cal, Iris, and me being in that room while Mare and Maven discussed dark things and secrets, and now this... the Gods haven't forsaken us.

The doors leading to Ptolemus's old rooms are not guarded, meaning however many highly-trained soldiers are all inside the room, his room. At least it used to be his.

Though I cannot see her, Elane surely smirks at the sight. They're not even trying to hide the fact that this is a trap.

I approach the door with quiet, deadly feet.

The feeling of my lover's lips brushing up to my ear quells me, though the words I will hear out of her mouth are not that of pleasure. Strategy and planning.

She whispers her idea into my ear, and I smile. "What a lovely plan, Elane."

Silencers are not like Tyton. The Electricon can feel brains, shut them down without so much as seeing the human. But Silencers cannot sense men. They must see them.

Elane cranks on the door, sending it flying open with rattling hinges.

We step back, pressing ourselves to the wall as Newbloods come rushing forward, Ptolemus's muffled cries in the background. A trap, he's trying to warn us. But really, who are the hunters and who are the preys?

A second later, Elane launches into a sprint, making her steps awfully loud. Almost too loud. The bloody blades twitch in my hand, begging to be used again as the men come rushing out from under the threshold. They're big men indeed, as big as Cal and my brother, carrying guns and knives on top of their abilities. I'm not foolish enough to try and take their weapons from them, undoubtedly laced with Silencer's blood.

I bring my weapons into the air as I break into a silent sprint behind the men, wondering if there are any who opted to stay behind in the room. But I count nine...ten...eleven guards chasing after Elane. The same number Cal, Iris, and I took out in the dungeons.

How poetic.

I slam the blades into their hearts once again, and the men die quick, clean deaths as their friends did downstairs.

Elane's clicks of shoes stop when the men come falling down on their stomachs, dead before they've hit the ground. Thirty-six men. Thirty-six men I've killed tonight, but I don't regret it, don't feel inhuman for it. Not when they have the intention of slaughtering us ourselves and certainly
"Tolly," I say, looking at my brother as I come back towards the room, away from the blood of Reds. Tied into a chair with a cloth in his mouth, his eyes aren't focused on me. He cannot see me, but he should've heard me. They're off-center, but not because somebody drugged him.

When we were young, we made up codes for battle, small indicators that nobody except us would ever know. Eleven men with the expectation of three, four, five of us coming to retrieve my brother. Though Cal, Iris, and Bart aren't here, they don't know that. No. There are more than eleven guards.

Hardly knowing what I'm doing, blinded by the eternal love I have for Ptolemus, I charge into the room, still masked by Elane's shadows. And I feel the metal in their blood.

And I pound it together, driving it into their hearts as they charge at me.

Elane shoots two more down with her gun, heading for Ptolemus in his chair.

More advance, and I'm keenly aware that every moment I spend here is another moment too long, more time for them to realize that we're here and send more guards funneling into this room.

I cut down another man, dodging his hand attached to an incredibly-powerful looking arm. Strongarm. I don't let them surround me, all of them seeming to come spilling from the room that Ptolemus looked at. It's just a sitting room, no beds to hide under. Knives are faster than the water one tries to force down my throat, faster than the seeds another throws into the air. Faster than the voice of the man that tries to serenade me with his poisonous voice.

But more than myself, I keep them from Elane, who works feverishly at Ptolemus's chains, using her clever pins to pick at the lock. Keep her alive, because I cannot fight them and undo his chains. Keep her alive, because I cannot live without her.

I slash another guard across the face, barely noticing that Elane's ability has been taken away from us, or that I can no longer fling knives through the air. There can't be more than-

Chains clatter as Ptolemus's bounds are broken apart, falling to the ground. The only advantage we have here is that they're not fighting for blood, unlike us. They hardly use their deadly abilities, going straight for our bodies as if to pin us down. When they do, it's too delicate, too slow to accomplish much of anything. They need us alive and conscious, because... we know where Cal and Iris are. More valuable alive than dead. Conscious than unconscious.

Davidson underestimates me. Because there's no way to control a Samos Magnetron without knocking her out.

I growl as another soldier bursts from the room off to the side, and I give up a knife, throwing the blade into his chest.

They'll be coming any minute. "Run," I growl at Elane and my brother. Just off Silence, he's in no shape to fight.

Then again, neither was I as I took down those guards in the dungeons. Ptolemus takes a fallen blade from the floor, throws it into the throat of the last guard that emerges from the door. "Now we can run," he says, slamming the door to the hallway.

We take the backdoor connecting to his balcony, disappearing into the night.
If only I didn't have to go back for Cal.
Chapter 56

Mare

Iris and Evangeline leave me.

I don't wonder how they found me. How they Silenced me long enough to knock me unconscious, only to put new manacles forged of Silencer's blood around my wrists.

No, none of that matters. The answers are easy enough to guess, nothing of relevance any longer. When I woke from a darkness not that unalike from Farley's oblivion, I could hardly convince myself that it mattered that I was chained to the wall of a place that I've never been to before. This...state of unfeeling....that is what matters.

I woke up and I did not care.

I cared before I woke up.

Didn't I?

No. It's just that here, in this house of my enemies, it doesn't particularly matter what face I show with them. I could be a coward pleading for benevolence, an unfeeling bitch, or a girl who doesn't have a bit of her soul left to give. I've been running for so long, but with no path ahead of me and a betrayed princess and king, there is nowhere for me to keep running to. Maven was always right, even if he replaced one word with another; I know that now. We are the same.

I kept going, kept running after our conversation in Cal's bedroom. Ran all the way to the barracks and forced myself to walk back to my room. I did not make it.

When Iris showed me that kindness, the forgiveness of a human who has every right to destroy me and everything that I am...when she pushed the fallen hair from my eyes...I cannot decide if it broke something or helped. Such a capacity for goodness shouldn't exist. Not in this palace.

Shower water echoes in the background as I twist and turn my wrists, brushing my fingertips against the stone. It's not that I fear him or his wrath. Despite all that I've done to him, the secrets I've held against him, I still can't believe that he has it in him to hurt me. These manacles are a precaution to lock me here, make me listen to him and answer his damn questions. But if he did wish to hurt me...I wouldn't begrudge him of that privilege.

The room that I've woken in has to be some sort of safe house, centered around the theme of fire and House Calore, with all its sconces and banners. A place so secretive that even Maven must not be aware of it. I imagine it's underneath the tunnels or else part of them, though it could be somewhere else entirely. A grand fireplace at one end, a gaggle of hallways, couches, chairs, a table and a desk.

The fire is everywhere.

Pushing that thought away, I strain my shoulders as I push them back to attempt and understand these things once more. When I was Maven's prisoner, I don't recall ever trying to escape Evangeline's craft, but only because there were three Silencer guards with plastic gloves waiting for me to try and escape.

But now I try, for Davidson and Tyton. Tyton, the man I betrayed in a completely different way.
Though he doesn't know, and I could smile and pretend everything's okay after tonight, be with him for the rest of our lives if he wished, I can't. I tried at first, but I can't. I have to tell him when it's all over.

Evangeline, being the weapons-detector in the room, must've taken the gun and blades at my hips. Yet she left the small metal hairpins tucked into the back of my scalp, meant to be moved later when I fastened my hair into a tail for battle. The Magnetron couldn't have not noticed them with her keen ability, and she's too intelligent to disregard such a small, small thing. She of all people should know what can be made into a weapon.

I shove myself against the wall so that I've lying on my side, straining one arm towards the back of my head. I tuck myself into the wall, taking advantage of the little slack I have with the chain looped through a small but strong ring bolted into the wall.

My shoulders ache as I force them to move further, bending my head on the floor so I can grasp at the little hair pieces. My fingers graze them the first time, seizing a single metal between two of my fingers the second.

And the water shuts off.

My body goes stiff, and I nearly drop the hairpin.

It was stupid of Iris and Evangeline to leave for the petty reason of searching for their lovers and Evangeline's brother. They did it anyway; maybe Cal doesn't know they've left; maybe they weren't supposed to, though it would surprise me if Iris did something like that. It's just Cal and me now, imprisoned in these manacles that I call myself worthy of.

I force myself back up, shaking the hair from my eyes, clutching the pin like my life depends on it. Using both my hands, I pry the two ends apart. The water started not a minute after I woke up. He was the one who wrapped his arm around me in the hallway, covered my screaming mouth with his hand. He also carried me down here, or wherever we are.

My hand squeezes the pin, looking for a keyhole to insert it into. I drag the pin around the distance of the metal until the little thing hits a cavity in the smooth surface.

There is no time. And I force myself to stop, back myself against the wall so that he cannot see the tool I've placed within the keyhole of my chains. But I don't force myself to create a face, no awful or fake smiles. I allow my face to stay the same: not sadistic or unfeeling. But a different type of unfeeling. An emptiness that I don't want anybody to ever sympathize with.

But I still force myself to draw my legs out, so that I don't look weak, head not tucked into my chest like a feeble and broken girl. I cross my legs together at the ankles.

With all the fire surrounding me, I'm so incredibly cold.

I'm so cold, I think as the doorknob to the hallway twists open.

I'm so cold, I remember as I stare into the fireplace, somehow finding his eyes in the fire.

His footsteps sound faintly on the wood, approaching me, and I still watch the fire, seeing the red and gold and bronze of his eyes. Even from here, the heat radiating from him is obvious; angry and constant. But I don't know how to look him in the eye, say anything at all. No right to scream at him for the people he's killed tonight or what he's done to me. I've done worse.

He drags one of the simpler wood chairs set near the desk, walking with it until he stops in front of
me, though I continue to avoid his fiery and agonizing gaze as he watches me with a feline precision. He sits down out of the corner of my eye, resting the lengths of his forearms on the flat back of the chair. He taps his foot incessantly.

It's a challenge. Probably the first of many. To see who will break first.

"What do you want me to say?" I ask in a slow, quiet tone, not being able to stand the tapping, the heat that he radiates. Not caring if I lose in the terms of his silent challenge.

"I want you to look me in the eye," he says, in that slow, quiet tone. He stops tapping but the heat doesn't relent. He's never been with so much fury, never been so warm, except...I push those thoughts of him far, far away.

I do more than look him in the eye. I look him up and down, dressed in new clothes. Black, no House colors. But a pair of fighting pants, along with combat boots and a plain black shirt, nonetheless. He'll put the rest on later. There's no dirt on him or in his hair from the cells. No blood. His hair is like it was at Piedmont, though that doesn't comfort me now, knowing why it's not glossed back as usual. The same fine cuts to his jaw, no sign of sickness from those cells.

I don't remember when I began to waste away in my room with my manacles.

But before I meet his eyes, I see the gray marks at his wrists, resting on the chair that he's faced backwards. They're not severe, but the two marks are there anyway.

We're the same.

I look him in the eye, seeing burning fire within them, even as his face remains impartial towards me. "What do you want me to say?" I don't look away, keeping us locked in a painful battle of wills.

He shifts in his seat, disturbed that I can stare at him with all the ferociousness in the world after all this time. "I want to know the truths to the lies you've told. I want to know the secrets that you still keep. I want to know if you think it's still worth it, with a Lakelander army and a wroth queen at the city's boarders. But I also want to understand, more than anything-"

"Stop." It is not fury in his voice. Though the room is hot and fires burn wildly in their sconces, there is something else there. Understanding or pity or something else. "Why I allowed myself to be with you, even when I knew that tomorrow, everything between us would be in ashes?"

He nods slowly, and I have to look away from him for a moment. Pull at my chains to distract me. But here, bound to a wall at the mercy of a betrayed man, I don't fear him or his fire.

"And promise me, that no matter what happens tomorrow, because something is bound to go wrong, that some part of you will always love me." By now, I've memorized the words. I said them to him that prison cell in between his savage kisses and I said them to him when Farley was dragged to her cage and Evangeline taunted me into coming into their block. Whispered them when there was nothing but strangled trust and prison bars between me and him, so that nobody else could hear them.

"Would you believe me if I told you that I tried so hard to fight it, knowing how you'd think of me on your wedding day? But there's still..." attraction.

Though I don't say it, he hears the word. In a demented sort of love, that was one of the best nights of my life, no matter how wrong it was, regardless of the damning consequences. Would I really take it back, if I could? The last time that Cal and I would be anything but enemies?
"I should've seen it. So obvious now," he says. I look at him again. "So many things you said carried a double meaning and your heartbeat was panicked and off-kilter. You weren't scared of me or the dark."

To think that it hasn't been two weeks.

"Did you ever tell Tyton?" he asks out of the blue.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "He would've killed you himself."

He must get the sense of how deep Tyton's enmity runs. I doubt he knows why, but it's clear. He threw Cal's crown in the river and leads search parties through the tunnels looking for him.

And I don't know why I tell him, but I do. "After tonight, I'm going to tell Tyton the truth. You'll be gone and with the Lakelanders, safe from him, whether or not Rosalyn succeeds in her attack. He deserves better than me."

"I don't know if I'm going with the Lakelanders," he admits. It shouldn't be like this. He should be screaming at me, threatening to slaughter me with all his rage. For what I've put him through with the torturous pairings of Maven and Evangeline in those cells, he's earned nothing less. But he just sits on his chair, motionless as I watch him, feeling incredibly small against the chains.

"What?"

A nerve has been hit.

"Rosalyn doesn't care about me or Norta, Mare. She's making this fuss because of Iris. She didn't come to save our government and its people, just her sister. The only other reason she'd do this would be if she worried that the Reds were going to overthrow the Lakelands, too. Whichever it is, she's not going to help me regain this kingdom after all of this."

"She'll leave once she has her sister and those responsible for taking Iris in the first place are dead," I say.

"Leaving me to a kingdom in ruins, with no real claim left to the throne. Maven wants me dead, my parents are dead, and so is my grandmother," he says, and I take a long blink. I cannot decide if that's blame in his voice. "Julian's with the Scarlet Guard, and you..." he trails off. "There's no one left."

We're not talking about political alliances anymore. And I don't know what to say. I want to tell him that he brought this upon himself, that he has to live with his choices. Or on the opposite side of the spectrum, tell him that Iris will care, make sure that he regains his kingdom. But the words of a foreign princess won't hold much, even if she speaks them into the ears of the Lakelander Queen.

I want to tell him that I'm still here, I still care. But our eyes say it well enough, laced with pain and agony borne from long, long ago. "Why did you want the crown and the throne at all?" I can't help but ask it. He didn't tell me the first time, upon that balcony.

It would be great if he told me that he was like every other king, with an infinite lust for power and control. But I can hardly believe that.

"I loved my father more than the world itself. I looked up to him in every way possible. And if I don't honor his legacy, I'll feel like a traitor for the rest of my life."
Some connections never break, even in death. No matter how much time, how many months, he spent with me, he'll always have that connection. That duty.

Just as I'll always choose the Scarlet Guard over him, he will always choose his father over me. His supposed birthright.

I open my mouth, failing to remember where I am. "You're father was a tyrant, Tiberias." Cal may have loved his father, but his father was an inherently bad man. Maybe good and kind in the eyes of his Silvers, but he killed and crippled the Reds.

"Don't speak that way about my father."

"Yet it was your father's will that put my father in a wheelchair and gave him a mechanical heart."

The flames go terribly still in that moment. "At least you still have a father," he whispers.

My heart and mind go still, too. Suddenly, I feel blessed for what I had. What I have. Perhaps I am broken and empty, but he's right. I have a father and a mother and a whole gaggle of siblings. It's not everything, but it's something. Better than his nothing.

"Doesn't it get tiresome?"

"What?" I ask, snapping from my sepulchral reverie.

"That face that you're constantly wearing." He sounds like Maven.

"Oh," is all I say, pressing my lips together before I smile bitterly. "Yes. Yes, it does. You sound like Maven when you ask me that." It reminds me too much of the words exchanged earlier this evening.

"How is my brother?" he asks, almost carefully. As if he's pacing himself, watching for something that I don't know to look for.

I shrug, feeling the pin pressed between my fingers that I've nearly forgotten about. "Same as he's always been."

There must be something in my expression that tells him that I have more to say, because his face breaks as well, sorrow in his eyes. Cal nods, easing up from his chair. The muscles in my arms clench, though there's nothing much I'll be able to do if he comes towards me. He doesn't; he walks to the fireplace, admiring his flames.

"You haven't attempted to fight against your bindings. You haven't demanded to know where we are or what time it is. Why?"

Even as he says it, I fiddle with my hairpin in the lock, tiny movements. "I imagine we're in a safe house meant for House Calore, no? Buried within the tunnel system. It's not yet dawn; I wasn't out that long. The night is not over. I figured I should let you ask your questions before we never see each again. Where will you go, if not to the Lakelanders?"

"I don't know," he says, the hairpin moving deeper into the lock. Royal hairpins are no different than the ones in the Stilts. "Somewhere warm, maybe. By the water so that I can finally overcome my fear of it."

"That sounds nice," I say, knowing that he'll be all alone there. The lock clicks, separates one manacle from the other and chain. But there's still a second lock that keeps the manacle around my
wrist, a second keyhole on the bracelet. I twist my hand to gain better access, finding a new keyhole.

"What will you do, when it's over?"

"You mean after the years it takes to transition this nation into a democracy? I'll go back to my family in Montfort." I swallow, a second click resounding against my skin. "Maybe I'll go and find you."

He turns to me with a quizzical look. I slink my hand out of the manacle that he's more blind to, the other still stuck against my wrist. One will do. I smile a sad smile at him. I have to get him close.

"Why not go now?" he asks, the remnants of everything he ever was. I've forgotten-haven't realized-that Cal might very well be just as broken as I am. "We're both broken, Mare. And I couldn't stand to see you get hurt in this war. It's bigger than anything we've ever faced. We could leave, go anywhere you'd like."

I exhale, a tear slipping from my eye in salty envy for the girl who said yes. He comes towards me, stopping at my feet. "I killed your grandmother. I turned Julian into a traitor. I've plotted against you for months. How could you ever want that?"

"Because we both made choices that day at Corvium. Choices that we expected to hone the rest of our lives. I won't blame you for any of it, because I understand. I understand that constant regret you have beating inside your chest, but not big enough for you to wish otherwise. As long as you won't blame me, either." The corpses he left in his wake in the Bowl of Bones. The love for me that was not enough.

Cal has become too much like his brother. Too much like me.

He has no one left. Nothing to fight for.

But I do.

Tears streaming, I say what could be my last words to him. "I'm sorry," I say.

I lunge forward with my free manacle, aiming for his wrist, and snap the metal around it. I don't look at the disbelief in his eyes as I grab his hands—the hands that I've touched so many times—to bring him forward, ramming my knee between his legs as he falls.

A sharp, inhuman sound escapes his throat as his kneecaps fail him, paralyzed. He would land on top of me if I didn't roll away, my hands leaving his. I've been told of the agonizing pain wounding a man like that leaves. It was always my first move of defense when pickpocket jobs went wrong.

Our eyes clash one last time when I hurry to leave, boots pounding against the spiral stairs. His fingers twitch.

I run with the full expectation that he'll be coming for me.
Chapter 57

Mare

I make it to the top of the stairs, balancing myself precariously on the latter that joins the spiral stairs, climbing up the few rungs without my hands. However stiff my body is, my arms strain as I heave the rock hatch upward, adrenaline helping me most of the way. I don't lift it out of its place; just wide enough for me to slip out.

I pull myself out backward, relying on the assumption that the rock won't crush me when I use both of my arms to make it the rest of the way. The cover presses against me as I straighten my bent arms, the roughness of it scraping on my pants.

It falls against the enclosure when my boots are out, and I get to my feet.

Attacking Cal was not meant to incapacitate him permanently. It was a head start.

Doubt in myself makes me pause for a moment, looking at the hatch that hasn't begun to move yet. He knows these tunnels better than anybody, certainly better than me. If I hit a dead end... Stronger, too, though maybe not faster. I think back to those days in Piedmont and ours runs. I don't like to think about those runs often, but I know that I could hold my own against him. With a head start... He has a cuff of Silent Stone, unless he had the keys right on him.

The hatch shifts, meaning that he's gotten to his feet. Seconds away from me.

I run.

The passage stretches both directions, and I chose to go left, though it's of no importance. Either way could end in my doom, and this section of the tunnels isn't familiar to me.

A moment later, halfway down the long hallway, the hatch's rock hitting rock cuts slashes through the air, but I don't look back. I can't look back, not when I've made these decisions and have to live with them.

I grab onto the corner of the tunnel as I hit a bend, using my momentum to propel myself around it, turning right.

Down in the safe house, he had to make two decisions. Whether he should take the extra time to grab the key to the manacle I stuck around his wrist, risking losing me, and whether or not he should go after me altogether. We might run into a legion of guards down here, but on the other hand... if I got to the guards, they'd know exactly where he is. He could always go and take refuge someplace else; wherever Iris and Evangeline are.

But we both know this is about more than losing a prisoner.

My heart beats erratically, my legs moving so fast I worry I'll trip, though I don't let up. Anything less, and I'll wind up in a situation I do not want to be in. With Cal again, though we won't be having another civil discussion. I don't...

A legion of dead guards lies in front of me, twenty feet. I don't look at their faces, fearful of who I might find. There are knives poking out from each of them, where their hearts should rest, undisturbed. Knowing he's not far behind, based on the tramplings of footsteps, I pull a knife from one of their chests to be a cautionary weapon. It's disrespectful to not spare the man a second
Evangeline. I grunt as I pass the rest of the fallen guards, my eyes zipping back and forth to take in the doorways passing me on my left and right. The Scarlet Guard took great care in destroying the tunnels leading out from the castle, but those right under Whitefire are still a tool for those living-or being kept-inside of it. There are too many passageways to count, too many courses that could be right or wrong.

I only need a set of stairs.

But I cannot keep running forever.

My breaths are gasped in as I continue, just as fast as I began with, though my legs and chest burn with fire. He has to be tired, too. It can't be just me. It takes every piece of my will to fray from looking at him. As long as his footsteps are there, I'm fine.

I turn again, this time left, not wanting to make a square and all my heavy breathing be for nothing. Dungeons. I'm near the dungeons.

I was here earlier tonight, when Tyton, the other guards, Maven, and I departed from the dungeons, taking a back way up from the cells, when we feared running into the royal Silvers, after what they did to their guards.

One more turn, another to the left...

Cal's footsteps seem to get closer, sensing that I know where I'm going.

A long hallway greets me when I make the final turn, no doors on either of its sides. Stairs are at its end.

I don't say anything to him, right on my heels now, nearly close enough to lunge and grab me. I force myself to go faster, to allow my feet to nearly fly, hardly on the ground, hearing his echoing breaths in my ears.

To the stairs and up them, through the door and into whatever room or hallway. That's all.

Our boots pound in sync and it reminds me of hot summer days spent in Piedmont running. It almost makes me falter, stop altogether and accept his invitation to run away with him, spend the rest of my days with a man that will forever be a threat to Norta's new democracy.

I hiss out my breath, vaulting onto the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. It's not a single story I'm climbing, but a second case of stairs comes after the first with a ninety-degree turn.

The Silence pulses at my bones, having been on my body for hours. Just a couple, but the suppressant erases my powers and corrupts my energy. He's had the Silence on for not five minutes. It's a disadvantage, but it won't matter... I force myself to take another breath, a pang at my ribs.

I fly over the landing to the second set, still forcing myself to take every-other stair.

But Cal's footsteps have stopped.

I take a wager, looking behind me to find Cal stopped at the landing between the first and second
stairs, several steps between us. "Before you tell them, give me a head start."

Because there might be blood in my throat from the running, because I don't know what I haven't told him, I only nod. Everything I said to him was real down there. Nothing was a lie.

As stupid as it could be, I give myself a few seconds to catch my breath, staring at him. His face is flushed grey, and mine must be burning red. He doesn't so much as move a muscle, though his breaths are panted. I want so desperately to...

To touch him. One last time. To hold him and memorize his scent. Smoke and salt.

He looks at me from below, his breathing easing up. Though he doesn't say anything, I nod again, to myself. To him, to answer whatever questions are on his mind.

The last few steps disappear from under me as I hurry up them, trusting Cal to stay where he is.

I open the door, shutting it swiftly behind me in case there's somebody near. I don't allow myself to look back again, pressing myself against the disguised wood, made to look like a servants' closet. Locked to the outsider, open to the insider.

I come out to an ordinary hallway, the one I used earlier when we left the prison. On the first floor, facing one of the gardens, more Diamondglass. I should be screaming, attracting guards and ordering them after Cal. But rather, I step forward to the windows, away from the door. He better be running already; anticipating that I won't be giving him much of a head start.

My hands press to the cool glass, fogged over in the night of April. The clouds have shifted enough so that the nearly full moon shines through the blue glitter of Davidson's force field.

A single pair of boots echoes from down the hallway. Not a legion that's going to demand answers. Good.

"Tyton," I breathe, looking at his rock-hard expression as he prowls closer, stashing the blade in my boot. I don't need it anymore.

Gods, he's angry, with his fists bunched and haunted eyes. He's armed to the teeth, blades and blades and guns, not to mention an ability that can kill in a blink.

"I'm fine," I justify, wanting to avoid a lecture that I know is going to come. "I know it was stupid, but it was the only way-"

He chuckles bitterly, closing the last few feet between us. His hand clamps right over the manacle that I still haven't gotten off. "You slept with him?"

My brows crinkle as I look up at him. He seems taller than before. "What?"

He scoffs at me, hand tightening on my wrist. But I don't feel the pain. "Evangeline told me what you didn't bother to."

In the tormenting moonlight, my complexion must pale. She told him. I was supposed to tell him, tonight, in fact, when I at last realized, having been stripped of every layer of my armor in Cal's room...that he deserved far better than me. Somebody who can love him wholly and completely, without any damned or distorted love towards another. A Silver prince of all things.
"We didn't-" I begin, but Tyton bares his teeth, gleaming.

"You didn't?" he growls, surprisingly quietly. "Maybe you didn't. Maybe you did. It's not as if I can trust anything that comes out of your mouth now."

Shame. Shame is what I feel, what boils deep down inside of my chest. Tyton gave me everything I could've ever wanted in a man. And I did this to him, betrayed him a way that's worse than what Cal or Maven did to me. "It was cold," I whisper. He knows, and there's no point in trying to hide the truth now. "They locked us in an old, dark cell in a wing of the palace jails that isn't used anymore." My voice is louder, trying to justify something that has no validity. "I woke up and I couldn't see anything but I heard his voice. They put me into a dress and I couldn't feel my feet. I lasted two hours before-"

He cuts me off again. "I don't care what you did with him. I don't want to know. But you didn't tell me. You didn't tell me," he says to himself. "If all he did was hold you for the sake of you not freezing to death, and you had told me, I would've gone after Evangeline and Elane. But..."

But he did more than hold me. And I didn't tell him. At first I thought I was being selfless in sparing him the pain of a stupid, stupid mistake on my part. Yet I'm believing more and more that it wasn't an accident. Not a regret.

"Where is he? Why did he let you go?" Tyton asks, his tone of voice perfectly and deadly neutral.

I shake my head violently. "He didn't let me go. I escaped."

"Where?"

He wants to kill him. Not out of duty to the Reds and the Scarlet Guard and Montfort. Cal would be at Tyton's mercy, if not for the manacle I attached to his wrist. If it isn't still there... better for the two to come face to face without their powers at all than for Tyton to have his ability matched against Cal's fire. Last time they went head to head, before we went to Archeon for Gisa, Tyton had Cal beat in no time at all.

I glare up at him. "I don't know. He ran after me in the tunnels, and he wouldn't have gone back to the safe house planted into the floor of the passages. Didn't notice it on your search?"

Tyton's grip slackens on my arm, and he drops his hand altogether to go limp at his side. He's never had the rugged attraction that Cal possesses, but more of a fine, sharp beauty, white locks glinting silver. He's cleanly shaven in dark clothes and a red scarf at his wrist, to show that he's a friend, not an enemy. I should laugh at the irony.

"Did you love me, at some point along the line?"

It's such a sad question, without a veil or mask. "Yes," I reply soberly.

"But. Your relationship with her is based off heartbreak, Tyton. That's what Evangeline told me. As though she's seen through everything this entire time. I gave you everything, Mare. I pieced you back together again when you were a crying mess in the hallway after Cal's first meeting. I waited when Farley called you out on still being in love with him in Archeon. Even these last two weeks, I gave you space and I didn't ask questions when you couldn't look me in the eye or hold my hand the way you did in San Andros. But you only fell in love with me, if that's what we're calling it, because you wanted to fill a gaping hole in your heart. You're still trying to fill that gaping hole, even now. It would've never changed."

I blink back tears, old ones dried on my face. "I was beginning to love you, I know that. I'm sorry."
"If you were sorry, you would've told me. You would've ended it," he says, grabbing onto both of my wrists. He raises our hands up so that I can look at them, my manacle gleaming in all its glory.

"Well it's over now," I say. "It's over, and you can move on once Cal's left this damned city. You can move on from both of us."

"I won't. His family executed my sister and the rest of the rebels in public for Silver's entertainment. How could I ever let that go?"

The anger Tyton holds for Cal is... unabating, however many years. It's festered and rotted and become unhinged. Cal's father killed his sister along with a bunch of other vain freedom-fighters. Cal didn't kill her. His father did, and he was the bystander. In a way, though, it's worse, I bet, in Tyton's eyes.

"I let Ptolemus go. He killed Shade," I say, and I don't remember when I last said my brother's name aloud. "Ptolemus pierced my brother's heart with a metal needle that was meant for me. At first I thought that killing him would bring me solace and let Shade's death be for more than just his pathetic little sister. To this day, every time he enters a room I want to throttle him and make him feel every bit of pain I've felt, manifested physically. Not because of Evangeline's deal, but because I know it won't do anything... I don't kill him. It won't do anything."

"Is it so wrong for me to want to erase the last real threat to this government? So wrong to kill him for what he's done to me; to you?"

I swallow, wrapping my hands around his wrists, too. "You'll have to kill me as well, then."

"How could you possibly love him, after what you did to him? After what he did to you?"

"It goes against all common sense, yes. But I'm going to make certain you're far away from him. He doesn't make you think straight, Tyton. You don't make him think straight either."

His eyes darken. "You've always loved him more than me."

Just when I think the shards of my broken heart cannot crack again, they do. I've tried so hard to make it not true, believe that Tyton was the one that would make me wholesome and happy again. He could've been, had I not been so stupidly attached. So I say, "Yes."

The look in his eyes makes me shiver, thinking of what he'd do if Silence Stone didn't encircle my wrist. "I suppose I'll have to kill both of you, then."

An obsession. One with roots so deep I never bothered to look for. An obsession.

"I know that you loved me, Tyton," I say slowly, still trying to understand my conclusions. "But part of you kissed me for the first time that day because you wanted nothing more in the world to hurt Cal. Just a small, lonely and sad part."

He doesn't acknowledge that I'm right, but he lets go of my wrists again. "I won't waste my time on you. Goodbye, Mare."

There's a very, very hellish pain at the middle of my thigh, and Tyton's pushing me to the ground, a bloody blade in his hand. I repress my scream, choking on it until I have trouble breathing again, though the pain's so much nastier than running through the tunnels on jagged breaths.

His expression is blank as I fall, using my hands to brace myself when I can't move my leg. It's no betrayal, though I still feel the sting of it, worse than the jab of his knife.
The sound of a door closing gently passes through the airy corridor.

"I'm right here, Tyton," Cal's voice says sadly, though I'm focusing on the ceiling, barely recognizing that it is him.

Why isn't he running?
"Cal," I whisper his name as he glances at me from the doorway to the tunnels. How much of our conversation did he hear? His manacle is still firmly shut around his wrist, and he, too, picked up one of the blades from the dead soldiers in the tunnels. "Run."

He shakes his head. Tyton already taking steps towards him, spinning the knife he used to stab me. Cal doesn't have his abilities, but he can't be touched by Tyton either. Tonight, they're useless, plain, simple Reds. "Let me end it."

Tyton throws his gun to the floor, out of his reach, Cal's reach, and my reach.

I shuck off my jacket, leaving me in a bare black tank top to press the extra fabric to my leg, the blood coming too quickly for my liking. Not a lethal wound, at least.

"It wouldn't be fair to kill you with my ability, which I see you've taken precautions against. Neither would it be fair for one of us to have a gun-or a girl," Tyton sneers, looking at me and my bloody jacket, "when the other doesn't."

"I wasn't aware that you played by honor," Cal remarks, meeting Tyton in the center of the wide hallway. "A man for a man, a blade for a blade."

Before I can yell at one of them to stop, a new debilitating throbbing taking over, Cal slashes at Tyton, and the latter flings himself backward, Cal's blade slicing through thin air.

The pain in my leg won't let me move, hardly blink as Cal and Tyton waltz across the floor in battle, their figures becoming blurred images. Or perhaps it's the black at the edges of my vision, begging me to sleep. He cut my leg deep and added a twist at the end, narrowly avoiding the bone in the process.

I gasp when Tyton slashes, aiming for Cal's heart, but leaves a shallow cut to his shoulder instead, Silver blood mixing with my red on the metal. Cal merely grunts, returning the favor with a kick to the stomach that sends Tyton to the floor.

In the naked and bitter moonlight, the men are creatures of honed grace, yet savages all the same.

Underground, after Cal, Iris, and Evangeline went missing, the Guard lit up the tunnels with Silent Stone sconces, lighting up the tunnels in a warm way. But the moonlight, in many ways, makes both of them look like deviant wraiths, boots scuffing on the tiles, hair glittering.

With Tyton on the floor but quickly moving to get up, Cal glances at me, opening his mouth.

No words come from his lips, as his opponent, swift like a fox, leaps from the ground, throwing out a fist to Cal's face to land a blow.

Tyton's fist lands home on Cal's jaw, the Silver staggering backward as his blade whips through the air at his hand, trying to shiv Tyton's side. Tyton barely notices Cal's move on time, shifting out of the way so as to only suffer another shallow cut.

They both growl, annoyed at one another's skill. Silver and Red, but equals in every way when it comes to rudimentary fighting with blades. No brain lightning or infernos. It could go on for hours,
I imagine, just watching them, awed, as they go back and forth, neither of them keeping an upper hand for more than a couple seconds.

I try to gain some semblance of control over something. My words, to scream down the halls to force them away from one another. If Davidson were here, he wouldn't allow it, not when one of his best soldier's life is at risk. But I can't speak to them, wanting to knock some sense into them, my face racked in sweat. My body won't do much either, my tired, beaten body that wants nothing more than to sleep. I force myself to keep sitting up, focused on them, to stay awake.

They're on the floor, Cal trying to beat Tyton into oblivion with his fist, while keeping Tyton's knife and hand on the ground. Tyton hasn't made a move to grab any of the other blades attached to his hips, and the Newblood looks worse for wear, but he throws Cal off him, going for Cal's chest with his blade.

Oh Gods. Oh Gods, one of them is going to kill the other.

It's a thought I cannot comprehend, because it seems so unrealistic. They've both been in battle countless times. Cal's been sentenced to death at my side, and we still made it out alive. Cal and Tyton are both fine warriors, bred since the beginning of their days. But they've always been on the same side of the battlefield. Never pitted against one another.

Cal's eyes are wide with Tyton's metal flashing downward, his hands shooting out to grab Tyton at the wrists. His knife points at Tyton, and Tyton's knife points at him. They're arms strain against one another, having done the same number of push-ups and lifted the same weights all their lives.

"Your sister? That's why you want so desperately to end me?" Cal grits out from under Tyton, with a pale face. "With the number of executions we had, I doubt I'd recall what her face looked like."

Tyton flinches just long enough for Cal to have the upper hand. He throws his weight into his arms to get the other off of him; Cal raises himself from the floor, standing. He hovers over Tyton. It's a strategy, I have to remind myself. The cruelty that made Tyton distracted with his memories and fury for a second too long.

Cal relaxes, Tyton doesn't make a move, even with the Burner's blade dangling over him. "She was part of a group meant to start an early rebellion In Norta, from Montfort. It was a failed effort, and your government brought them to the doorstep of Summerton to be slaughtered like the rats they were."

How many instances of that could've there have been? As quiet as the Stilts was, the Reds still whispered amongst themselves when people like that were caught. It only happened a couple of times for all the years I lived in the Stilts, but when it did occur, it was news to everybody. Cal would remember a mysterious group of rebels caught from the west.

Cal half-faces me as he takes Tyton's words in, and I see the recognition in his eyes.

Though neither says anything, Tyton launches to his feet again with renewed vigor. He slashes at Cal over and over, all of which end in no injury, just more dodges and sidesteps from Cal. Their conversation was a reprieve. They're both absolutely exhausted.

I have to do something, even if it kills me from all the blood I've already lost, absorbed into my jacket.

The gun.

The gun is on the other end of the hallway, separated from me by their fighting bodies. There's a
blade in my boot, as well, deposited there when I saw Tyton at first. But I'm delirious with my injury and don't trust myself to get close to them with their flying knives and speed that can kill. Well, is going to kill.

Maybe Evangeline could do it, half-dead in the legs and mind, but I won't try with my knife.

Men in battle tend to lose sight of everything and everyone around them, and I have to rely on that as I drag myself up to lean against the window, blood from my hands getting all over the glass. A wave of nausea passes over me, and I clutch my stomach, looking at the blood soaked rip on my pants.

I count my pounding heartbeats, and take a step after every ten counts.

Tyton nor Cal notices my movement, too lost in a vicious world of their own making. Cal takes a wicked slash to Tyton's face, Red blood spilling from his pretty face.

But Tyton retaliates quickly, aiming for Cal's heart, his dear prize.

He misses again, Cal crouching to avoid being hit.

Ten.

I creep closer to the gun, willing it to my hand, willing this to all be over, to disable Tyton and beg Cal to stop, to put his blade down and run. Run and run and run until he cannot remember where he was supposed to go.

I keep my mouth shut when Tyton attacks again, shoving the need to scream or cry deep into my chest.

There should be guards making their rounds, yet none have come down this hallway, which isn't a particular quiet hall usually. But Cal and Tyton battle in near silence, only with the occasional grunt.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The gun is cool in my slick hands, tossed thirty feet down the hallway near the windows.

I sweat for more than one reason now, aiming my bullet for Tyton's shoulder, though it's an impossible task, when they're constantly moving and shifting. If Tyton decidedly evades one of Cal's blows, leaving Cal exposed...

They're close together, snarling and panting at each other, both of them probably too arrogant to believe that they could ever lose a fight.

Cal goes for Tyton's neck, raising his left arm while guarding his right side with the blade, twisting His face is covered in sweat because of the Silence, no longer a Burner. Regular body heat, unable to walk through fire and very able to be burned. Very easily damaged, like one of the palace's china plates that I delighted in breaking. An ordinary, foolish man. I notice his mistake half a second before Tyton does, brandishing his grim blade.

Time slows and I scream, surprising myself and everyone in all of the whole Gods-be-damned palace. I scream his name in warning, helping him understand his mistake as I reposition the gun a bit higher, aiming for something else. Something more vital.

Cal's leaving his heart unguarded and wide open for Tyton to try and hit, too distracted with trying
to slit his opponent's throat. His face is all precise concentration, utterly ignorant of the hole he's
left in his defense.

My fingers find the trigger, unmoving but certain.

I fire without regret.

The bullet launches from its chamber, resounding in the dead of night as a wicked shout.

Tyton, closer to me, crumples to the ground, blood leaking from his temple.

Tyton's dead in an instant, sprawled across the floor with a fine bullet lodged in his temple,
creating a small stream of blood on the floor. It doesn't seem to make sense that he's dead, on the
floor with that blood. I feel like I'm out of my body and light-headed, not in control of much of
anything right now.

But Tyton's blade, the same one that he used on me, is firmly lodged in Cal's chest, just to the left
of his heart. It wouldn't have missed had I not screamed.

I don't scream his name now. I whisper it to myself, remembering what his name is.

Tiberias, that witless replacement of a name. Cal.

In this desolate hallway, panes of glass for walls at my back, I limp to him, still standing as if he
refuses to accept that there is a blade stuck very close to his heart right now. He looks at me
stupidly, almost as though he's confused. He presses his hand to his chest, black shirt ripped and
wet with silver.

"No," I whisper, keeping myself upright even when I feel the sickly flow of blood drip against my
kneecaps. The pain doesn't register like it should; that agonizing pain that's supposed to tell me to
stop moving. "No, no, no, no, no, no." Saying the word will make this a bad dream; a long string of
nightmares, all these last months. Not only tonight, but all the nights before that I've been so idiotic
and wasteful.

He blinks, falling to his knees with a strangled sound as I meet him, grabbing his bruised face in
my hands, the thin knife sticking out of his chest to separate us. Tyton was more merciful to his
face than Cal was to his, leaving only one painful mark on his jaw and an invisible graze at his
cheek. "No," I say. Tears stream down my face and I sob, running my hands down his face. He's
pale; whether that's from the blood loss or the knowing of what might happen, I wouldn't know.

"Don't scream," he murmurs, coughing. His hand finds mine at his face. "You already screamed. If
they heard you or care, they'll come. Stay. Please."

"Why did you do it?" I ask, trying so very hard to be angry at him. But all I see is his other hand,
keeping a steady pressure on his chest around the blade. Silver has already begun to slip onto the
marble, liquid mercury. "You should have run. I was going to give you a head start, like you
asked."

I think he'd laugh if he didn't know it would be detrimental to his body. He smiles at me. His smile
is a lie. "I was going to leave, but I heard you say his name. I watched him stab you through the
crack in the door, and... I'm sorry for eavesdropping."

"Evangeline must have told him. I don't know why she told him, if it was in spite of you or me or
just to stir up more chaos. And look at what's she done now." I motion with my hand to the blade
that can't be more than an inch away from his heart. He made a mistake in letting down his guard
on his side, and Tyton took advantage of it, like any decent fighter would.

"If I've learned anything from spending ten days in a cell block with her, I've learned that Evangeline Samos is a bitch who does things for shits and giggles without much care for the consequences anybody else have to deal with. Not to mention my months being betrothed to her."

Before I can respond, he's coughing again, letting himself lay down on the floor. I come down with him, never breaking eye contact. I keep my fingers entangled with his, the other resting on his knee.

"A Healer's going to come," I say, though if one hasn't come by now...

He sees the doubt in me, clutching my hand tightly. "It's okay. What matters is now. You're beautiful, you know. Even that day we met in the Stilts..."

I shake my head, brushing a strand of hair from his face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

His hand isn't doing much of a good job in keeping the blood from flowing, so I take my own jacket, still pressed on my leg. I move the jacket to his chest, moving his hand to replace it with my own. Our bloody hands touch, his Silver and mine Red. But I let go, using both of my hands to press the fabric to his chest, around the knife that I'm terrified to move.

I should know these things. Whether I should remove the blade or not. If it comes out, the blood will start moving more freely, and he'll lose more of it too. On the other hand, it's so close to his heart. One bad move and he could end up impaling his heart. For now, I'll leave it in.

Cal doesn't want me to leave him and look for help.

Maybe he worries that if I leave, he won't ever see me again, even if I come back in five minutes. Maybe he fears being alone for a few extra minutes in this hallway more than dying itself.

I press on the area harder.

He moans, but I don't let up.

"For what?" he asks lowly.

"What?" I ask, having already forgotten whatever I said to him.

He exhales a shaky breath. I tense. "You said you're sorry. Twice."

"Oh. For locking you in a cage. For hitting you in the balls," I elaborate, not being able to help the laugh that comes out. "For not shooting Tyton a second earlier." There are so many other things that I wish I could take back.

"That did hurt," he agrees. "Was it true what he said to you? What you agreed with? That you've always loved me more than him?"

It's such a petty, childish question. I don't begrudge him or scold him, though, and I understand why he asks it. He needs to know. And I needed to hear it tonight myself, from my own mouth. Because these last few months, as revealed by my words and Tyton's, have been... a fabrication. A charade of smiles and kisses and hand holding that offered me some degree of fulfillment, but nothing that I deserved. "Yes," I say. "And I will always love you, Cal. Forever, no matter-"

"Don't say it. I know that I'm dying and that I'm waiting for a Healer that might never come. What
matters is that I know the truth," he hisses, shifting under my hands. "And like I said. I forgive you, for everything. I will always love you, too."

I lean down to kiss his cheek, resting my lips against his skin for a moment. "Remember when this used to be normal?" I say into his ear, trying to keep him cognitive. I won't lose him to this. I won't ever lose him again.

"I miss that. I've missed you so much."

It isn't the cheek of a king I kiss. It's Cal. My Cal. I try to contain my tears, taking a full breath in and out. We don't wear any armor, just our scared faces as we look at one another, sharing our thoughts of everything that we have feared and ever will fear in a single glance.

"But I want you to know something." In case you don't make it. In case all the Healers are gone, preparing for the battle. "When we were running, it was like in Piedmont. The way our steps sounded together reminded me of Piedmont. The best weeks of my life, with you. I was this close to saying yes, in the tunnels. If I could afford to be selfish and forsake everyone, I'd do it. You're not alone. And I've taken so many people from you, maybe even your own brother. But Julian loves you, Cal. I think some part of Maven does, too."

He's dying. The cut that Tyton made is irrevocably fatal. And I have no power, no resources in this whole palace that can hear me.

"Stay awake, Cal," I order of him. pressing harder on the jacket. There's blood all over my hands. You're not alone. Please. Please. Don't leave me. We can't leave each other again."

His hand, in a sudden show of energy, comes up to hold my elbow. Not my wrist, one of which still is decorated with a manacle. I don't even feel the Silence anymore. "Tell Julian that I understand. Tell Maven that I still love him. Go back to your family in Montfort, Mare. They miss you."

"What?" I crinkle my eyebrows, tears dripping onto his hand at my elbow. "You're going to be fine. You're going to be fine, and then we're going to do exactly what you wanted. We can go to the ocean and live by it, where it's always warm. Not cold like here. That's all I want."

"Don't you see?" he turns his head towards the windows, asking me to do the same. "The first explosion. The battle's started. The Healers..."

He's right. Though I can only see a bit of Caesar's Square from this angle, it's clear that something's exploded in one of the government buildings, orange and smoke rising from it. Davidson's force field has dropped, and I'm only noticing now that the tendrils of dawn are beginning to rise. Rise, Red as the Dawn.

I don't want to say it, but the Healers aren't coming. They'd have no reason to be here, and few of the guards will be in the halls, unless the Lakelanders make it into the palace. Nobody who can help us is here any longer.

He knows it, too. Cal's blinks are heavy. "You're more important than any power I could've ever had, even if it meant ruling the world in the name of my father. We'll see each other again."

"No, no, no, no, no," I say again, shaking him as much as I dare. "You can't do this to me. I will go and run, and I will drag a Healer back here."

His hand tightens on my elbow. "You won't find one in time, Mare."

My mouth opens and closes, searching for any words at all that I can use to argue with him. But
this isn't an argument with Cal. It's an argument with Death, who does not barter. "Then what
would you like me to do?" A dying man's wish. Words that I could hardly get out of my mouth,
parched and horrible. A mouth that has told so many lies.

I do my best to control myself, for him, to prove that I'm okay, that I'm the strong one. I'm the one
in control. I'll get my chance to destroy the world later on. Make sure that Evangeline feels this
regret for the rest of her miserable life.

The sun peaks up at us, the sky less of a black and more of a blue now, with fire and smoke and
war. The beginnings of orange light illuminate the floor in warmth, but Cal is going cold. The
chandeliers above have long since been extinguished, and the gray marble is a tapestry that rivals
the rest on the walls. Red and Silver blood splattered all over it, from wall to wall, a gun and two
knives at the floor.

But what the world looks like doesn't matter. It could burn for all I care. So long as I have him on
this watery dawn.

"Tell me something you believe in."

I can't tell him that I believe in Iris's Gods, after what I've done to her. So I tell him something else,
a long-kept secret at the core of my heart that I still believe in. "Despite what people have done to
me, and what I have done to people, I believe in us. Julian says that men are destined to destroy one
another. Look at us right now."

Cal's coughing again, these coughs weaker; less potent. My hands leave the rag of a jacket that I've
pressed into his chest, no use anymore. "But I believe in some of us. There is no such thing as
black and white; evil and good. Because if that's all that's it, then everybody's doomed, Cal. We're
all shades of grey. But no perfect black or white. We're flawed, Cal. We all are."

I hold both his hands, dried and wet blood pressing together again. "This is proof. That we're
changing. Evolving. We might've just been the first."

I tell him more stories. I tell him about San Andros and how he would've loved it there. His
breathing gets weaker, and I cry more, having to take breaks between my words. I tell him about
what Iris believes in and where one goes when they die. I tell him about the day I met him, the day
that ruined me in a thousand ways. Shutters annihilate my body, as do his.

I recite the stories of Caesar Calore and his great dynasty that I read about in the journals Maven
gave to me. The great legends that exists before Silver blood, how the Silvers were the ones that
were looked down upon and persecuted.

I remind him of our dancing lessons and our runs. Of all the battles we fought together and of the
day that we were together again after Iris and Maven's wedding. We'll see each other again.

The realization hits me like a brick wall coated in blood.

He'll be gone.

A blip in history that nobody's going to care about.

Never there for me again.


He looks at me one last time. Really, truly looks at me. "You changed my life. You changed
everybody's life. Your eyes are purple," he muses, before closing his bronze eyes.

Cal's eyes are closed, and his grip on my elbow ceases, his hand lowering itself to his chest. He takes a long breath, as if he's sighing. As if he's going to sleep. His hair is messy, sweat pasting it to his forehead. His illy-cut hair back at the Piedmont is something that I will never forget.

My screams are of the epitomes of anguish and horror and disbelief.

I scream until the Gods themselves cannot ignore my cries.

He cannot be dead or dying. I scream if only to wake him up and yell at me for being so loud.

I touch my hand to his heart, just an inch from the blade that will be the end of me. There's no heartbeat, not a trace of life. I move my fingers to his wrist, frantically and hysterically searching for a pulse. And he's not breathing. He's not breathing.

He's not breathing.

My screams turn into sobs, and I wipe blood-drenched hands over my eyes, not caring what I look like.

It doesn't matter. Nothing was supposed to matter except him, but he's, he's-

My manacle shatters off my wrist, splintering into thousands of little, insignificant pieces. There's lightning under my skin, running with my veins like it did that night at the Rift, when Julian asked me what makes me mad.

This makes me mad. That I can't save him. I couldn't save Shade, or Farley from herself. That I couldn't save Dad when he was off in the war, or Gisa from the Silver that destroyed her hand. I couldn't save Harrick either. I couldn't save Maven or Tyton.

I couldn't save Clara from a life without a father and with a mother that might never be well again.

My lightning flashes across the sky in angry bolts, begging for attention. They come from the countryside, far out from the city. I let some strike the river, lightning it up in a majestic, swimming violet. Others hit Caesar's Square, perhaps knocking down my compatriots.

I don't care.

I don't care.

I don't care.

They come from all over. I reach high up into the atmosphere, looking to drag a black and depthless cloud over us if only to turn back time, make it night again so that everything could change.

I don't care.

I don't care.

I don't care.
Before Jon was a prophet, he was the storyteller of his Red village.

The town that he had lived in-the town that Maven destroyed in his hunt for the little lightning girl and the Newbloods-had not been a desirable place to live, though he hadn't minded it. It was a step above Albunus, the town where Mare Barrow was born and raised. But whatever opinions his fellow villagers had of their little town, those opinions were dashed away on the lazy summer nights when Jon pulled out his old book.

The book was only for show; Jon knew the tales inside of it by heart.

Of course, this was all years ago, when the ways of the world were simple and unfair. Before he began waking up from the vivid nightmares. He thought they were just bad dreams at first. His mother and father had always thought he was an imaginative child, after all. His wife said the same, brushing off his jolts and screams as an effect from those hours at the factory. That was one thing that he did not miss.

The dreams were too real, though. Jon dreamt of freedom and death and life and sorrow. Births of babes and losses of grown men in war. People of ranks he could never believe to meet. Boys with fire for skin and a girl with lightning eyes.

When he met her, years later, she looked just like the girl in his dreams. Brown hair with greying ends, a fierceness to her that implied she didn't trust anybody, and for good reason. Eyes that were wells of sorrow, not yet full either. The boys looked just like they did in his dreams, too, somehow related with their blue and bronze eyes, one ice and the other fire.

Weeks after the dreams-nightmares, depending on circumstance-began, he started to daydream. It wasn't voluntary at first, and he couldn't control it. He would see things in the midst of his factory shifts, suddenly jerking back to life though he had stood the entire time. It was when he was beaten by the overseers for not working, that his wife became concerned for his mind.

Selene.

The gods were real, and Heaven was real, he assured himself each night, as he begged the Gods to take care of her. He had not been able to take care of her the way he ought to have.

She had ran to him in the town square where they beat him, so stupidly trying to force the guards away from him. She screamed that it was not his fault, but she was Red and they were Silvers, outnumbered one to three. They cut her, the nameless Magnetron of the bunch slashing her across the stomach with one of his blades.

It was a shallow cut, easy enough to be mended. But infection leaves no man.

When he realized that she was infected he reached deeper into his powers, searching for a way to save her. Never before had he been able to control his dreams consciously. He supposed he could thank Selene for what he had grown into.

But Selene was slipping quickly. His village was isolated, save for the few Silvers that resided there to keep watch over them. He was a coward, dignifying himself with the logic that the Silver houses could never be infiltrated to get the right medicine. And what cruel fate it was that the apothecary of the town had gone bankrupt mere months ago. Nobody could afford the medicine anymore, and the Silvers would never help him, not when they had done this to him.
His wife knew it, too. What was happening to her. By this point, he had acquitted his position as storyteller to his apprentice. He still told stories, though not from his storybook. From his dreams, he told Selene of the stories he saw while he sat on her sickbed, pouring cold water over her face. He promised her that one day, all the Silver dynasties in the world would crumble to the ground.

She died a few days later, Jon remembered as he strolled through the dungeon passageway, searching for the Whisper.

From that day on, he focused all his energy on learning of his strange power. He called himself an anomaly, for being a Red and having powers. It was not the way the world was supposed to function.

Jon would always remember the look on her face as he told the stories of a silly Red girl falling for two Silver princes. How foolish of her. His wife smiled, the subtle wrinkles on her face becoming pronounced as she did so.

And the seer smiled as well as he came to a crossroads in the dungeon system, not at all surprised that there were no guards to seen. Though with his powers, he should've never been surprised or startled. Jon hadn't been for a long time, not since his wife's death. Lately, however, there was something fundamentally wrong with his ability to see.

He had never expected to go into that seizure at Rift last fall and not come out of the darkness for months. He still didn't understand it, because General Farley had been off to Norta by then, preparing to aid in Mare Barrow's rescue mission. He was in a prison made of Silence.

It had to have been the Gods that did this him. But Farley played a role, because as he woke up, he was trapped in blackness, rather than having woken up in a soft physician's bed. She spoke to him, told him that she had powers as well. The strange and wrong powers of a Whisper. She told him that he was no longer needed on the playing field. No longer wanted. She hated him for many different reasons.

That infernal Whisper bitch.

He only woke up at all because Farley's grip on him had slipped aloof after she was thrown in the prison of the Bowl of Bones. He bided his time in the physician's room of Whitefire, pretended to still be sleeping. Until his chance came. Bypassing guards came too easily to him nowadays, a skill he could've used to save his wife from Death's evil claws. The guards were always too arrogant; too sloppy, no matter what their reports to their leaders sounded like. Like all men, they had flaws.

Since he had gone under the long lull of a torturous sleep, the events he had envisioned were gone. Not a chance of them being restored existed any longer, not after all the manipulations the Whisper had created. How twisted this story has become, he said to the fallen royals not that long ago.

He allowed Cal and Iris and Evangeline out of their cages only because he didn't wish to see all of them dead. For the greater good, Jon reasoned with himself. For the sake of the Scarlet Guard's wrath, they would have all been slaughtered had he not released them. They would've been executed moments before Rosalyn and her forces penetrated the palace. At least this way, only one would die.

A small price to pay for three other lives.

And now, Rosalyn's forces would not be penetrating the palace.

Jon continued to walk, through the lonely prison passages, knife in hand.
The shadows of dawn began to creep in. The pain-

Jon hissed as he stepped on something sharp, his calloused barren feet still feeling pain. With creaky limbs, he bent downward to find the source of his struggles, noticing that his foot was leaking slight amounts of blood. Good. Let them find Red blood on the halls of the prison. Elara Merandus always did say that Red blood was more difficult to clean up.

A thumbtack. An ordinary thumbtack that had no place being in a place like this. Probably smuggled down here by an unruly prisoner, hoping to messily slit a Sentinel's throat.

No, he didn't foresee that one either. Something in him changed that night of his seizure. Even tonight, there had been various things he missed. He nearly ran into a pair of guards before he snatched the ring of keys from its ring in one of the general's rooms, and later, more. There were more incidents that could've damned him for his blindness and more that would come later.

Without shoes, Jon continued to walk towards Diana Farley's cell, bloodying the floor in drops. He tried to act unphased, but he could only hope she hadn't heard his pathetic hiss a moment ago.

He tried not to think of his wife or of lost fates as he turned the corner for the Whisper's cell wing.

Not of Mare Barrow and her fury.

"Hello, Diana," Jon said, creeping in the shadows. Enough time had been wasted already. Months worth of time.

She had stuffed herself in the corner of her cell. He could hardly see her with the torch set further down the isolated wing, but the dulled-out firelight said enough. Matted hair, heavy breathing, the posture of one defeated...

"You deserved it," she said, throat obviously scratched raw.

"Maybe," he said. "Yet I beg to argue that the Devil himself wouldn't deserve it."

"Hell was made for the Devil, Jon. My dark oblivion was made for you."

Jon growled, his hand with an urge to plunge the knife into her chest right then and there. He had not risked his hide to come down here and argue with Farley on the morals of what she had done. "I was in pain. My very existence was hard to accept. And you always had their voices playing in the background, so that I always knew what was happening, and that I could not stop it."

"That was the point."

"You are an unhinged little girl who cannot control her abilities or her mind. If only you had somebody who could've actually taught you. I could've taught you. How to deal with that constant weight of knowing things that others do not. I know how the world will end, Diana. I know who will die tonight. It feels as though people are constantly screaming at you, correct?"

She nodded slowly and reluctantly. "Every time I think it's so loud I'll go deaf, I wish to cut off my ears. But I know I'll still hear the voices after."

"Does the Silence help?"

"Yes."

"Good. When they let you out of here, wear a ring of Arven's blood. It'll help you until you learn
how to properly control your ability."

"Why have you come here?"

Jon smiled at the girl in the cage. He had not gotten to tell anybody a story in a very long time.

The seer told the Whisper stories that night. He told her the story of the future that would never exist now, not in this universe anyway. Of great love stories of Red and Silver blood. Of governments signing peace treaties that would uphold until the end. Of smiles and happiness and the laughter of children. Things that would still exist in this timeline, but in completely different ways.

The things he had cried at Evangeline Samos that night amidst his seizing were lost fates.

The said remnants of an existence that simply would not exist.

He told her of the things she changed; the deaths and lives she caused.

He told her that it was okay.

Because this existence was just as tragic and beautiful as the one he had imagined.

But somebody simply had to know what could've been.

Jon raised the knife he held.

Farley flinched, so unlike the Red general he once knew.

He slit his own throat.
Chapter 60

Iris

All hell breaks lose in Archeon, Norta.

Davidson dropped his force field at dawn, minutes ago, and Rosalyn's troops-my troops-are filtering in, the Swifts already in Caesar's Square, coming at the Scarlet Guard without quarter. An explosion went off from the Treasury, and rain pounds down on the earth angrily. Violent and vindictive.

"I'm going," I announce to Bart from the room Elane took us to. The window faces the bridge and the Square, and it feels as though I'm watching it all transpire through a television screen. "I'll find Rosalyn, and I'll tell her to call it off, once we've gotten Cal."

Bart quirks an eyebrow, sitting on one of the chairs at the tea table set off to the side of the room. "Call it off? How's Cal going to get his crown then?"

I bite my lip, having had the thought swirling at the back of my mind for hours. "He's not," I say, beginning to pace. "The people driving his reign are dead, and the relations between the Lakelanders and Nortans are volatile, at best. My sister won't fight a battle that isn't hers, and I can't persuade her otherwise. She's only doing this to get me back."

He knew it, somewhere deep down. Nonetheless, Bart's expression is heart wrenching. He looks up at me from his chair, jaw shifting as he chews on air. He might love me, but Norta is his country. The Calores have ruled over his family for generations, and even if the Scarlet Guard's idea of democracy is right, it'll never feel quite right to him, even if he's said otherwise. Maybe. Norta might be twisted and wrong, but Cal is far from it.

"What's going to happen to the fire prince?"

The rain outside pounds in my blood and bones, a second heart that beats too quickly and overwhelms me. "I don't know. I'd like to say I could grant him pardon in the Lakelands, though my sister will never agree to it. She won't kill him, but she certainly won't let him live in peace among us, let alone wage war on the only army large enough to stand as a threat to her. Not when the Choke decimated our troops."

Bart nods slowly. "What a tragedy. From a boy who had the world at his fingertips to a man who has nothing."

"I-"

A deafening clap of thunder rattles behind me, shaking the very ground that I stand on.

It shakes the world. And it does not stop.

Violet lightning begins her reign of terror on the earth but a second after, and I jolt away from the window, yet somehow unable to tear my eyes from it.

The stocky bolts of electricity shower down in groups, blinding me in all white-hot fury. As tendrils of orange appear on the world's edges, Mare Barrow's lightning assaults the earth, not like any ordinary lightning I've ever seen. Not of the likes of the girl's usual lightning, either. Something new and different, deeper and darker. It comes from all over, birthed from the clouds of
Rosalyn's creation. The far-off countryside, into the Capitol River, shadowed by night. Into Caesar's Square itself, where Red men fight with my Silvers.

It's almost as though the lightning isn't interrupting this day, but rather this day is interrupting it. It is constant and relentless and speaks of unspeakable pain. The watery beginnings of dawn fade before my eyes, even as I focus on the orange horizon, squint at it, willing it to stay.

"I thought you chained her up," Bart says, quiet under the sounds of thunder growling.

A breathless tear leaves my eye. "We did."

But time slows, reverses as it grows dark and black thunderclouds roll in, bathing the room in creeping shadows.

Until it is darker than night. Darker than Tiberias Calore VII's onyx black hair.

"Iris!" Bart screams after me, begging me to stop running down the long corridor in Whitefire Palace. "It isn't safe here!"

Like Hell it isn't. It isn't safe anywhere anymore, not in here nor outside, where lethal strands of purple rain down, parading as innocent water. She's killing them. She's killing all of them.

Davidson has bigger issues to be concerned over than a harmless Lakelander princess. Besides, the guards have left, given up in searching for me, Cal, and Evangeline. They've all taken to outside positions. Because they're desperately afraid of losing this battle, knowing every single implication that will exist if they do not win. Cal, on the other hand, is no threat. Not when the Reds have figured it out: he's not getting back his crown.

The lightning blurs at my periphery and thunder grumbles at my feet, so powerful and vengeful that I nearly trip over myself once. Every time I glance out the window, I expect to see a white moon, but I have to remind myself that it isn't night. It's dawn, the beginnings of another wretched day in this forsaken city. It is Mare Barrow, playing the role of a crestfallen God, something so terribly and permanently wrong.

I know the feeling, in a more shallow sense. The feeling of drowning and being out of control and internally screaming. Yet nobody listens. Nobody can hear you. Nobody cares. And the people who do care... well, it's just too late for them.

She'll destroy the world if it means somebody listens. Just for once.

And I know what's wrong. I know what's happened. But I can't-

Bart screams in my ear, my name, over and over again. I forget that he's faster than me. His hands are at my shoulders, shaking me with pleas that I can't hear over the thunder and my thoughts. I can hardly make out his face in the flickering dark, staring into mine. "It's not safe out there. Look at the lightning."

"I can see the lightning," I cry out at him, barring my teeth and crunching up my fists. "It's the only damn thing I see! I have to find her and stop her."

"How could you possibly stop that?" Bart rebukes. I might not be able to see much of him, but I sense the growing impatience in his tone. "You are a Nymph, Iris. Powerful as you might be, you are no match for her, not now. Please."
"Please? This was supposed to be a war between the Reds and the Silvers, this dawn. But she's killing all of them. Look at the lightning, Bart. Tell me that her lightning is just there for show, that it's just a ruse meant to scare. It's not. That's killing lightning. Slaughtering lightning."

"What are you going to do?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I have to find her first."

He laughs lowly. "Fine. At least let me help."

"Run, Bart. Run."

I walk slowly throughout the corridors, even as I know that Bart sprints faster than the speed of sound throughout the palace, covering the opposite wing. It's not a wild, reckless search like his, but methodical, knowing that there must be a better way to find her than running through every hallway and tunnel that's known to the architects of the palace.

Every storm has an eye, even this one. I turn down hallways that seem quieter than others, less static in the air. The eye of the storm is where it is most calm, and the eye of this storm is somewhere in the belly of this Silver beast.

How did it become like this? What did we do that made everything so awful?

I whisper the names of the people I love, to myself. The people that have managed to survive thus far. For me, the losses have been bearable. Only my father has died from this war, and I did not love him that way that a daughter should truly love a father; I know that now.

I've heard stories of Mare forging arcs of lightning that travel outward for miles. In my quests for knowledge and gossip, I've heard that she can walk through flame. And now this....

"Is somebody there?" another somebody asks in the dark.

Realizing who it is, my skin prickles and my nose flares in a combination of anger and weariness. I consider stepping past him quietly, ignoring him altogether.

"So they let you out of your cage?"

Maven doesn't laugh. How uncharacteristic of him. "They haven't been paying much attention to us royals tonight. Or is it dawn now?"

I don't answer his question. "Do you know where she is, Maven?"

He sighs. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

There are certain words that aren't said, but we know them anyway. The pounds of thunder echo in the background, and Maven's electric eyes seem to pulse in time with the growls. The hallway flashes violet every couple seconds, revealing Maven's form, hands slackened at his sides, face gaunt. He wears simple clothes; certainly not the clothes of a king. But at least they are not covered in blood.

A bone-sickening depression holds me tight, how a wayward lover would hold her man.

"Do you still love her?"
I remember the conversation they had in Cal's old room well, though there would be no reason to forget it. It's been mere hours, even if a lifetime of traumas and calamities have taken place since them. There was something between them, whether or not it was love. Nostalgia brings out both the best and worst in people, and Mare and Maven have history, whether or not either of them likes to recall it.

"Would you believe me if I said that I was?"

Purples flashes over him again, showcasing the shadows under his eyes and in his hollow cheekbones. I'm no longer sure I look much better for wear.

"Ironically, I would. You understand her in a way that Cal didn't." The way I use my words is a confession, both to myself and the boy king. That I know. "You both have a jaded darkness. You're the same."

"So you were under his bed, too, you Nymph bitch."

I raise my brows at him when the lightning illuminates the interior hall again. But no matter how many snarky comments Maven rattles off, he does not smile. "You're smart. Very smart. Smart enough to see past that ridiculous facade she's always wearing and see Mare Barrow for what she really is. For what you turned her into. You're smart enough to know that this isn't a purposeless act. Something's wrong, Maven."

"Best we find her, then. It seems that dawn will need a little push today."

"She's killing a lot of people right now."

"I'd let her kill as many people as she pleases."

I blink at him, feet separating us as I register why he cares at all. Not about these people; they've never done anything for him. Maven only cares about the little lightning girl, for the right reasons or not.

Wordless, I start into a walk again. Maven follows behind me mutely, his strides long and with haste. The Lakelanders and the Reds won't be fighting now, if they have any semblance of self-preservation. But I worry that they don't. The Reds could retreat into the palace if they pleased, but my sister came from the countryside, not some grand palace. They'll be fighting for their lives out there.

Lightning comes down at random, in unnaturally broad strokes. We made her like this. The Silvers trained her and then fueled her rage. This our fault, and now we're paying for it.

Maven and I come to a crossroads, and I put a hand out, touching the air. The left and the center buzz with static, and I subconsciously wonder how badly my hair sticks out from my scalp. Yet the right is still and airless. The boy king tilts his head. "There's static everywhere. You can feel it, can't you? That's because the lightning's everywhere. The roof has probably gotten struck a thousand times by now. But the eye of the storm..."

"Is peaceful."

"That's right. This way," I say, turning down the silent corridor.

And after a couple more steps, I know that I'm close.

Because I hear the sobs and the defeated screams.
I stop, sensing that I need to stop, to think about this. Maven doesn't have that similar thought, charging right past me and towards the next turn in the hall. He's like a living shadow when the light of electricity shines on him, the anger and concern rolling off him in waves.

But then he stops too, facing the sound coming from the next hallway. I watch him carefully, searching for clues in his expression. It shifts violently, his lips parted ever-so-slightly.

He mouths her name once. Twice. A third time.

I step closer, careful to be quiet. Not far enough so that she can see me, but a couple steps closer, if only to hear what she says, if anything.

"They're both dead." The words are strangled, vile things, said in between the crescendos of her sobs. "And the blood is everywhere."

No. No. I bite my lip, not wanting to acknowledge it; to understand it. Who would've possibly wanted to-

Unable to do myself the favor and protect myself, I step out into the hallway to Maven's side.

Oh, yes. The blood is everywhere. The blood of three fools, like some kind of demented painting. Tyton's red blood leaks from his temple, the Newblood limp. There's more scarlet, mostly in small streaks and drops at the floor, from windows to walls. It flashes into existence when the electricity goes off, ghastly in the purple light.

But the Silver... I cannot look at him, lying on the floor as though he was going to sleep. The blood on her hands implies otherwise, slick and mixed with her own red. She covers most of him with her body, back facing us. And purple veins run up her bare arms, alive as they spark to life as if she's going to tear herself into millions of pieces.

I say a prayer for Cal's soul in my head when Mare shifts enough for me to take in the dagger protruding from Cal's chest. I can't even tell if it hit his heart or not. His hands are balanced at his stomach, as if he's sleeping. As if he's sleeping.

"Mare," I speak her name lowly. "I'm so sorry." Even as I speak the words, I don't understand them or what I'm seeing. Cal can't be dead. He's too good, too important to this wicked story. Undeserving of such a fate when people like his brother are still alive.

Amazing, that she's capable of all of this. She can control this lightning storm and still breathe; still speak.

She doesn't speak this time, though. Just shifts again so that I can see her lightninged face; her eyes.

It's not like the purple veins running across her arms, swimming through her body as fluid jellyfish would swim through an ocean. Her eyes are purple, any trace of there having ever been a pupil or iris gone. Pure violet energy lights them up, consumes them, and they glow with such effort I have to look away, towards the steady streams of lightning pulsing outside. She looks like one of the poor and possessed maidens out of an old fairy tale book.

Maven's gone still, looking at Mare, careless of worrying if he'll blind himself. His eyes flicker back and forth from Mare to his dead brother, his mouth parted, pale skin growing paler.

If she really has lightning for skin and if the tales of her being able to destroy the power grids of entire palaces are true, then she is a ticking time bomb, something that will go off at a moment's notice, simply triggered by one sour thought or action. She'll truly electrocute us all to death.
"I need you to calm down," I whisper, scared for myself. "You're hurting your friends." I don't think about all the men and women that have already gotten killed in the last minutes that I've been running and searching for her. Gods, Rosalyn must've brought twenty-five thousand warriors into Archeon, and Mare's lightning kills in an instant. Half or more could be dead by now.

"Don't you see I already have?" she snaps, pressing one of her bloody hands to her heart. Tyton, with a bullet in his head. Mare must've done it, despite the way they seemed to love and care for one another. And right before that, Tyton must've stabbed Cal. I try my best to put the pieces together in my head, with the limited number of clues I have. Yes, that would make the most sense, with the gun on the other side of the corridor. How much time did they have together before he passed?

Maven steps forward; just a single step. "Then do it. Kill us all. Kill yourself, because that lightning inside of your skin is bound to tear you apart. That way, no man wins or loses. There'll just be nothing."

I don't know what he's playing at, and his loose words make me nervous. He might be bluffing, or knowing Maven and mind, he might be unhinged enough to not give a damn. He looks at her in all seriousness, arched eyebrows in a sick dare. She's capable of it, too. She could kill us all if she wanted to, and none of us would have the time or ability to stop it.

Her lightning eyes tremble with doubt, wondering the same thoughts as me. As livid and horrified as she is, she still keeps the ability to properly think.

"But Cal wouldn't want you to do this."

There it is. The truth that'll either make her tear the world apart or sew it back together, the lightning its seams. An undeniable truth that even she can't make into one of Maven's lying games. It's the truth.

Her small form shutters as she breathes out and in, falling apart or trying to ground herself.

So slowly, Mare Barrow's lightning eyes ebb away, fading into ordinary brown ones. There's blood all over her face, particular around her eyes, as if she attempted to wipe her tears away. The lightning racing through her arms and up her neck and face dissolves into nothing, leaving nothing but a shaking girl dressed in black and blood.

She looks away from Cal now. And not at Tyton either. Just towards the ground and her hands draped across it.

The lightning fades from the sky and the clouds begin to turn grey from black.

"Stay with her," I murmur in Maven's ear. Maybe it's not the best idea, but I don't have a better one, and Maven was the one who calmed her down, not me. "I have to end this."

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Though Mare's black clouds have dried up, rain still pounds on the ground.

Yet nobody fights as I shove one of the main palace doors open, breathless as I take it all in.

Reds and Lakelanders and Nortans freed from house arrest alike litter Caesar's Square, and more walk on the bridge, hands on their hips, perhaps surveying the damage. I quirk my eyebrows at nobody in particular as I make sure to stay in the shadows of Whitefire's hulking doors, not wishing for anybody to see me. They just... walk. From first glance, I don't see any dropped bodies with
ugly lightning scarring on them, and my heartbeat dies down a little, though not completely. There are still bodies, died from regular, ordinary guns and abilities.

I suppose I don't understand what's going on, then. None of them are hugging or kissing each other; they still watch one another's groups warily, but there are no clashing of the swords or violent abilities that impale. It's an uneasy sort of peace, heavy and quiet with the rain pouring down.

A gentle orange peaks up, rising, now. I glare at it through the rain, sensing that even it will be passing soon.

She did this. Mare ended the fighting, somehow. She scared them to death, made them second-guess if it was worth it or not.

A troop of Lakelanders dressed in royal blue march through the decimated Square, cracks in the stone at every step. Their expressions are by no means jovial, if anything, more on-guard than usual. I cannot tell if they're relieved or annoyed, for whatever reason. The blue of their jackets glistens in the newly-born dawn.

Only when I look around do I notice the damage Mare wreaked on the city of Archeon. The Square is broken up as if it was never more than glass in the first place, entire chunks of stone uprooted from the earth. Pillars of grand buildings surrounding broken Caesar's Square are cracked away, having landed on the shallow steps and landings of the white and grey buildings.

A supple breeze graces my wet hair, blowing the light and innocent clouds away, and the wind becomes mist. I savor the feeling, letting the water rinse off my sweat. No doubt Davidson's already sent whole legions of soldiers to look for Mare and drag her out her for a public apology, or something like that.

From the corner of my eye, I see the tale of a long blue general's coat, alongside a pair of army boots. Rosalyn Cygnet and Dane Davidson walk side by side, with steely gazes, coming from a nondescript government building, hands tucked neatly behind their backs. I would quirk my eyebrows again, but there's nobody here in the shadows to take notice and stranger things have happened.

Before I can think for the better, I pad down the stone steps, revealing myself to a gaggle of Lakelander soldiers with the intention of running into Rosalyn's arms.

I sidestep the soldiers when they call out my title, beelining for my sister.

She seems almost shocked when I pull her into an embrace, practically appearing from thin air.

"Iris-

"I'm fine. Don't kill anybody for me, Rosalyn. Let's just go home," I say, telling her all the things that I'd have to tell her at some point along the line. "After we finish up business, let's just go home and never come back here."
Mare

I cannot breathe. Cannot think or move.

Maven stands at the turn in the hallway patiently, not moving. He doesn't say anything, keeping silent while I struggle with myself.

But I can't look at him, can't look at Cal, for the irrational fear that he's already begun to change in the worst ways possible. Instead, I look at the marble floor, cool on my red and silver hands. My breaths come too fast even as each heave of air feels like I'm lifting a cement brick.

It's not... no.

I wanted to destroy the world with my lightning. Turn back time, make it so that it was night again, when I was walking through the hallways, Cal and Iris and Evangeline hiding in its alcoves waiting to ambush and take me away. Yet even more than that, I wanted to kill them all. Evangeline and Elane and whoever else I can place the tiniest bit of blame on for this. Maven, perhaps. He's wanted his brother dead for a very long time.

And in the end, after those minutes of glorious lightning crawling through my skin and ricocheting around my eyes, a feeling of chaotic control, he was the one who talked me down from my high. Oh yes, I would've been just fine killing myself and the rest of the world had he not come around, the embodiment of all my fears woven into the body of a boy.

"But you weren't bluffing, were you? There was no backup plan had I done what you said, destroy the world and myself. Everybody else in the palace is gone."

Maybe dead, because of me.

"I may be a liar, but I don't bluff. And I can't say that I was confident my words would calm you down, either. They usually don't," he murmurs, as if to himself. "I don't particularly give a damn as to whether or not we all die tonight."

What is left? He has nothing left, nothing and nobody left to live for. I close my eyes at the irony, feeling Maven's glimmering blue eyes on my face, half turned to him.

Somebody will come, and soon. My storm was like none other, sent and inspired by the Gods themselves. The power I felt as a different part of me took over was devastating and vast, making my ordinary lightning the shores of a very large sea. I only saw purple after the world faded to black, Cal's form warm and stiff beneath my hand. Then I only felt power, infinite and addictive. Something that I certainly would not have given up had Maven and Iris not come around, their voices the sole indicator they existed at all.

Nobody would've stopped me. Nobody could've stopped my black clouds.

I force out his name, looking at his blurred figure from the corners of my eyes. "Maven," I say, shivering. While once I might've thrown myself over the cliff edge that was Tiberias Calore, now Maven pulls me back from the ledge of a far more dangerous canyon. He anchored me, made me realize that it wasn't worth it. Not to destroy everyone, let their deaths be in vain.

I don't speak again, a sob coming out from deep inside of me. At first it was animalistic screaming
and tears, and for awhile there was a yawning, numb quiet.

Now I cry, putting my bloody hands over my eyes again. My breathing is offbeat and cries are high and low, short and long things. "I- I-" I stammer, trying to say something to explain myself to him, what's happened, though with Maven's mind, he's already figured out exactly what has happened.

"Not now. There will be time for everything tomorrow, and the day after that." His words are startling, making me want to stay here, never let time pass again. But the sun has risen, painting the walls in an inviting orange. "Right now..." he seems tentative to say whatever's on his mind, like he doesn't know what to do. I doubt he does. "We should leave. I'll take you back to your room, or wherever you need to go. And I'll be quiet the whole way."

I can't help but hear the unspoken words whispered in his mind. That I need sleep, not to be on this floor, in this hallway where an unspeakable amount of pain rests. That I can't be alone, even if it's Maven that watches over me. To make sure that I don't hurt myself.

But at the same time, I know that once I leave this hallway, everything will change. Even as the sun creeps up higher, time is stopped, forever frozen in this tragic moment.

"Staying won't make it better," Maven says quietly, still positioned near the glass window, hands folded together. "I know that for a fact."

One would think that this moment would be the happiest one of his life. For his entire stint as king, Maven wanted nothing more than to see his brother how he is now, a defenseless and broken corpse at his feet. And he got what he wanted. But there's no victory in his voice; just a hidden sort of sadness.

Thoroughly trusting him for the first time in a very long time, I lift myself to my feet attached to aching limbs. "Okay."

Having left my jacket behind, I walk down the hallways slowly, feeling the bite of the cool spring air running through the empty palace. This is the only time I'll ever be able to see Whitefire this empty.

Maven walks at my side, content to keep my agonizingly slow pace, never walking the slightest bit ahead of me.

"I killed Tyton," I say, my voice hardly emotional and my mind still hardly registering what I've done. "And I've surely killed dozens if not hundreds more out on the battlefield. I'll be discharged from the Guard, if not worse. Not that it matters."

"Your family is still there." He doesn't mean to brush past my laments, I don't think. Just wants to remind me that there's still light. Somewhere, shining softly in a seemingly eternal dark.

I shake my head. "How can I face them?"

Maven crinkles his brows, and I notice that a thin layer of sweat gleams on his forehead. Nerves, exhaustion, a mix. "They're your family. They always forgive."

A sudden and sharp pain hits me in my stomach, recalling Cal's dying words. He still loves—loved—Julian and Maven, forgave them, despite what they did, even though he had no reason to.

"Cal wanted me to tell you that," I say, looking up at Maven's pale face. "He forgives you. Wanted
you to know that. After everything that's went on, he wanted you know that he still loves-loved-
you."

"Oh," Maven says.

We continue our long and slow walk in silence.

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Nobody comes, surprisingly.

Maven and I find ourselves far away from my room, not lost, but uncaring. We took a wrong turn
at some point along the line, and walk along a familiar path on the first floor, basking in the quiet.
He doesn't ask questions, and I make no effort to answer the queries that hang in the air between us.

Earlier, I stopped in one of the servants' passageways and went to their bathroom, to wash the blood
from my eyes and hands.

There aren't any gunshots or exploding of bombs, either, which is disturbing and comforting at the
same time.

"I'm tired of these hallways. I've walked and ran down them too many times," I say.

"Agreed," Maven says. "So you'll leave, then? When whatever's going on out there is over?"

"Yes," I say, stopping to peer outside. Though we've been walking along window banks this entire
time, I haven't stopped to glance at the battle yet.

The bridge towers over the rest of the city, and I see no fire, only dead smoke blowing off a couple
of buildings. There are hardly any bodies in the streets, and the ones that are littered around have
blood on them. Not the way lightning plays.

No fighting goes on, and in the back of my mind, I know why. I scared them to death.

Now they gather on the bridge, a sea of red and royal blue.

"They're negotiating," Maven says, nodding up at the bridge.

A part of me wants to go there, perhaps to see history be altered forever. If Maven's right, which he
must be, then Davidson and Rosalyn will reach a compromise. That compromise will have to
include Reds' rights in the Lakelands, too. I don't allow myself to think about the possibilities for
long, shaking away all the ideas that might become reality.

Another part of me wants to go back. Pretend that it's still night. I just left him in that hallway, all
alone.

Maven watches me wearily, and I have no doubt that he somehow knows what I'm thinking about,
again. He shakes his head, and my shoulders bunch up.

I make the decision that there will be time to cry and shriek later, somewhere isolated and silent.
Maybe in the abandoned tunnels, in that safe house Cal took me to.

A shaky breath comes out from me before I speak. "You don't have to come," I say, new, salty
water mixing with that of old and dried tears. "But I need to go out there, even if they throw me
over the bridge for trying to kill them." I gasp, clutching the base of my neck. I meet his eyes. "I
need to see, to know that it wasn't for nothing. That it wasn't in vain."
"If they throw you in the river, then they'll throw me in too."

I nod.

Maven goes ahead of me to push open the exit door nearest us, swinging wide to welcome a subtle and cool spring breeze. I follow him, feeling the warm mist contrasting the wind on my face; pushing and pulling at my tears. The shallow steps that I've walked down and up so many instances disappear from my feet, and as I look at them, a few with keen eyes and hearing have already seen me, surely.

Though I don't feel any sparks on my hands, I check them anyway, and there's nothing, not a trace of the blood I scrubbed off my hands and from underneath my nails. It took minutes. Minutes.

I keep walking, chin tilted up.

"Presumably, the war's over, Mare. Enough with the faces." He doesn't say it in a condescending manor, not when my lips still quiver and I question how I'm standing at all.

"One last time," I whisper, picking up the pace. The sooner this is over, the sooner I can leave this place, go somewhere else. Whether back to my family or a new place completely... I'll leave for good and never come back. Not for anything.

I shouldn't be thinking about these things already. But... it's the only way I hold myself together, in imagining a life far in the future, a life erased of the aching pain in my chest, feeling as though I've been stabbed myself.

"You shouldn't be doing this," Maven murmurs, though one-hundred meters still separate the crowd of Reds and Silvers from us, a Red and a Silver.

I shake my head at him. Because if I stop moving, stop to think about it, I worry that I'll never start moving again.

The iron of the bridge sounds beneath my feet, stone blending into metal, the construction of a thousand enslaved Reds, polished off by the most worthy of Magnetrons.

When we reach the crowd, I don't try to push my way forward, content to stay in the background, though everybody stares at my anyway. Yet they don't wear expressions of anger, only deep and plentiful sorrow. Somehow, the bunch of them-by bunch, I mean thousands-found shelter against my lightning, and Davidson's force field couldn't have possibly been that shelter, strong as he is. My only thought is that they know what's happened.

And though I don't ask for it, they part for me, bowing their heads in some kind of demented respect.

I consider walking right past them, keeping my shoulders high and head lifted, but my feet freeze in place. "Why?" My voice breaks, a haunted tear slipping past my eyelid. "Look what I've done. Look what I tried to do. Why?"

A fact that I haven't bothered to acknowledge yet, many buildings around the Square are in ruin, chunks of stone cracked from pillars and ceilings. Whitefire itself sustained little damage that I can actually see, built to be indestructible-though it was mostly luck-and last until the end, but the area around it is absolutely, irrevocably destroyed, the Square itself with ugly cracked veins throughout its architecture.

The people stand somberly on the dark bridge, made of steel and iron, those who don't look
directly at me bowing their heads. The warm sun rises on the river, bathing its waters in a soothing orange, though I can't do much more than look at the ground while I wait for their answers. Iris's mist has settled down, and the world is a jumble of the epitomes of evil and good. War and peace, death and the saving of lives.

At the end of the pathway the warriors have cleared for me stand Iris, Rosalyn, Davidson, and one of the Scarlet Guard generals. Davidson beckons me forward and Maven slinks back, telling me that its okay to leave him here, though I shouldn't care.

With tentative steps, I walk to the Premier, my eyes carefully focused on the material beneath me. I did my best to scrub myself clean of Cal's blood, my blood, but there are still signs of the trauma that I can barely comprehend, convince myself that it's not fictional. On my boots, my pants that I didn't have the time of day or will to change.

Davidson holds his arms out on this cool spring's day, and I walk straight into them, undeserving of this man's kindness or empathy. He holds me for a long moment, and I have to restrain myself from falling completely into his fatherly embrace, knowing that eventually I'll turn around, face my friends and foes again. "Thank you," I say, removing myself from his arms.

"At the first crack of your lightning, we knew that something was wrong. It was a particularly angry bolt, and everyone dispersed out've fear, whether or not they were on your side. The Lakelander Queen and I ended up in the same building, by coincidence, running in at the same time before either side could barricade the doors. Then we talked, rather than fought. That's all that's important, all you need to know. No one died from your lightning, Mare."

I shake my head, bitter that he doesn't blame me. I should be blamed.

The royal Lakelanders, the top-Reds, and I stand in the center of the bridge, everybody else pooled around us.

"Well? Rosalyn asks out of nowhere. "Do you agree to our terms of alliance?"

Davidson smiles. "Raised by Orrec Cygnet, yet you don't desire to cling to your throne? I'm impressed, Your Majesty."

"I will have a roll in my nation's government. But there will be more, too. My sister and her noble Swift, among Reds and Newbloods and other Silvers. If this is the cost of being a queen," Rosalyn motions around her, "then it is not worth it."

Cal once said to me that change wasn't worth the upheaval and chaos it would cause. And I wonder if he's right, with the lives lost today, though it's hardly anything compared to the moralities from the Choke. But Cal died on the front of a completely different war, between him and an angry, jealous, cheated Red. Were either of the battles truly worth it?

Yes, I say. If only because any different answer would send me to a very dark place.

"Good. I'll begin having contracts written up," Davidson says.

"As will I," Rosalyn returns, standing tall.

Though I should care how all of this happened, having only seen the final seconds of exchange between the two sides, I can't find it in me to ask questions. Maybe I'll ask Iris how Davidson and Rosalyn came to talking, but not today. Probably not tomorrow, either. But someday, I'll make sure I understand how this history was made.
In the meantime, I stay put, backing away from Davidson as he and Rosalyn shake hands, neither of them conniving or plotting.

"For all the years I've been a leader of armies, I never foresaw an ending of the likes of this one," Davidson says, more to himself. "Good day, Rosalyn Cygnet."

"Good day, Dane Davidson," the queen returns.

Though I imagine there'll be hours of festivities on both sides, the Lakelander Silvers retreating further out into the countryside, I push through the masses as quickly as I can, wanting to get out, make sure that... that... Cal is protected and cared for.

Before I can get far, a hand is at my shoulder blade, the kind of touch that one wants to lean into. I turn against the crowd, its people tugging me back towards Whitefire, where everybody seems to be going.

Iris's eyes look at me, wise for the amount of time she's been on this earth.

"When you are ready, I will be here. I'm thinking ahead of myself, but I plan on staying in Norta for awhile, to watch over relations. I don't know when you plan on going back home, wherever home is nowadays, but I will be here if you chose to stay." She knows. Knows that I feel ashamed of the idea of confronting my family, that I might stay here longer than I should, despite my self-proclamations of leaving this place, one way or another.

"Don't worry for Cal, Mare. I'll see it taken care of," Iris says, dipping her head. However hard the words are for her, she says them away. I wasn't the only one who loved him. She loved him too, in a different way, of course, but she does this anyway, makes promises that she shouldn't have to keep.

We walk together for awhile, heading towards Whitefire. There's nothing of my personal belongings there except for a clean pair of clothes and an earring that I've nearly forgotten about.

Before I leave, I'll return one last time.
Epilogue 1

Evangeline

Elane, Ptolemus, and I walk like ghosts in the somber, depressed palace.

Nobody can see us, and that is for the better. I wear a veil of shame, angered with myself for so many different reasons.

No, I wasn't ever especially close with Cal, despite all the time I spent smiling at his side, forced into an existence of my father's desires. I was never close with Tyton either, and from the little talk that goes on in the palace, I've only heard that Cal killed him with a stray gun just before the Burner himself passed. Another forgotten name in another pointless war, is what Tyton is.

But this battle was not between Lakelanders and Reds. It was between two stupid, jealous, lovesick boys that wanted more than anything to be with their supposed true love. I'd scoff at the term if Elane wasn't by my side, clutching my hand as if I'd float away otherwise.

We came back for Cal, in the tunnels, only to find the hidden bunker abandoned, the chain that bound Mare Barrow to the wall gone. At first, I had merely thought that the two of them had caved to their less-than-controlled desires, as they surely did that night before Cal's wedding. Yet upon further examination, we found that... they were not in the bunker at all. Nor in the nearby tunnels. I believe that's when the horrible, undeniable pit opened up in my stomach.

I have done horrible, undeniable things in my life. Killed for the sake of killing on the battlefield, baring my iron-tipped teeth in victory. I kept my mouth shut when I discovered the treacherous plot of the Reds, betraying my own people. The Silvers. I've done things to destroy the relationships of others. And that might be the first true, sincere regret I have.

I did it out of selfishness, out of a bitter jealously for Cal's ability to chose. Though I wasn't wrong when I predicted that Tyton was only something to distract Mare, I still...

Elane huffs beside me, her eyes trailing Dane Davidson, who walks briskly beside two of his Red generals. No, he doesn't trust the Lakelanders one bit, his alliance with the country taking place not two hours ago. Since we've come back here, not knowing where to go or what to do, we've watched. Just watched.

We were supposed to come back for Cal. But we didn't find him, had no idea what the hell happened until the vicious lightning started. That electricity was not of a warrior; it was of a cheated lover.

I didn't see her until after the lightning stopped, on the bridge when nobody fought. I would've stayed in the palace and looked for her... but with Elane and Ptolemus, I didn't risk it, not knowing what she would do if Elane let down our shadows-accident or not. So we waited, until the lightning and fighting stopped, tucked away in a corner of a palace.

Coward, I whisper to myself. For not facing what I've created or done.

"Evangeline," Ptolemus says my name quietly. "If we're going to leave, we should leave."

"I know," I state, closing my eyes for a long while. "We will. There's nothing here for any of us. I don't know where we'll go... but we'll leave for someplace better. Mother and Father are dead, and there are no other obligations to keep. But first..." the words aren't said, but I think they know
If I don't talk to her now, then I never will, and the little lightning girl's fiery rage will cool to a low, wild, poisonous spite.

"Go to the edge of town, by the old Samos manor. I'll meet you there by noon. If I'm not there... then leave anyway." The other words are left unsaid, again. They know that I love them.

And though in my best hopes, I'll be able to control her and settle her down, there is always a chance of her rage overtaking her, if the lightning is any evidence.

"Let me go," I say quietly to Elane, who immediately nods. She knows that arguing with me on this would be futile.

"I'll see you later," I say, careful not to say goodbye.

It didn't take much to find out where Mare's gone. The palace is empty of her, that's for sure, and for all the time she's spent here, it feels odd to know that the lightning girl has left. Never to come back to this household of pain and suffering.

Sticking to the shadows of buildings and keeping my face down, I've crossed the bridge into East Archeon, the home of the common Silvers. Despite being in the city of Silvers, I have never felt so out of place with my pale skin. All of the people I pass wear red-blooded skin and scarlet clothing. I imagine the Silvers have either paraded off with the Lakelanders, or else are hiding inside of their manors. Though going with the Lakelanders won't solve much of anything now; Rosalyn vowed to dissolve the Lakelander Silver hierarchy.

Turning the street, I come to a quaint avenue lined with storefronts, potted plants decorating windows. Funny, to think that hours ago fighting was going on in this city, when now, it seems entirely peaceful.

Next comes a door for me to inevitably open, painted a deep blue. For all the years I've spent in this city, I've never stumbled across this part of town. Certainly a part of the common Silver's domain, with its cobblestone streets and lamps about ready for a new coat of paint.

Taking an uncharacteristic deep breath, I walk into the shop, which at a first glance has the looks of a trader's store, with glass cases on both sides filled with jewelry and fine stones. The walls are made of a deep brown wood, the light from the sun and blue sky outside filling the shop with spring warmth.

"Hello?" I ask wearily, suddenly realizing that I haven't slept in ages.

A man that I've never met before peaks up from behind a desk at the back, with a pair of glasses and a lack of hair. "How can I help you?"

He looks at me the same way I look at him: with a calculative distrust, particularly when I'm dressed so differently from him, in my shining black boots and a multitude of metal bracelets on my wrists. At least I discarded my knives on the way here.

"Would a Mare Barrow be staying somewhere around here?" Looking at his pale skin, I wonder, if he was the one to give her a place to stay, why he'd allow it.

Before he says anything, the man raises an eyebrow. "Upstairs, in one of the apartment units, yes.
Are you a visitor?"

I nod my head, coming forward. "I'm heading out of town, but before I go, I need to speak to her."

"Are you certain the girl would like the company of Evangeline Samos?"

At his slyly spoken words, I smile a bit. Of course he'd know who I am. Even the common Silvers, those who don't spend time in the courts, would know who I am, if only because of my relationship to Cal. The dead prince.

"It's not for whether or not she wants to see me, sir. But I need to say goodbye."

Nodding, the man tilts his head towards a door leading off from one of the side walls. A set of stairs peaks out from the half-shut door, polished wood. What caused her to choose this place, out of all of the grand hotels and apartments she could've threatened her way into? Above a trader's shop, of all places?

"The last door on the right," he informs me, "Miss Samos."

"My father's dead," I respond over my shoulder as I head for the stairs. "That name is not mine any longer."

Though I expect the stairs to creak on my ascent, they don't, and I'm glad for it. I don't need Mare knowing I'm here a second earlier than she needs to. And the stairs disappear under me, bringing me to a long, narrow hallway that is much colder than the room downstairs, lighted only by a tall window at the end of the way. Along the hall are framed pictures, black and white, of people at random, not of esteemed lords or ladies. Just ordinary people in ordinary circumstances, smiling and laughing, children playing in the grass and with one another. How odd.

The doors on each side of the hallway are colored a deep red, offset by cream walls and white trimmings. It's beautiful in a simple way, not austere like Whitefire or my family's manors. I doubt Mare selected this place because of its aesthetics, though.

As I approach the last door on the right, I focus my senses on the lock, feeling for whether its sealed. Surprisingly, the dead lock isn't clicked into place, and I tighten my fingers around the door handle.

She's had time to cool down. It's well into the morning. She's had time to cool down.

Without much thought, I twist the door open, and the first thing I see is fire.

Not a large fire of the kind that eats buildings and people, just a flame that burns in the fireplace, controlled enough at the edge of the room. Yet it's the first thing I see, as it wickedly eats away at the wood, high enough that it touches the top of its container.

The window near the fire has been curtained shut, and only shafts of light peak through the drapes. The room I'm looking at must be the living room, with its chairs and couches and television screen and beautiful caramel rug. A hallway shoots down the left wall, which must lead to a bathroom and bedroom, maybe a kitchen.

In the dark room, Mare looks at me from the chair facing the fire, twisting her neck so she meets my eyes.

The worry of her rage dies off fast, her face blank and if anything, bored.
I return the look long and hard, and she doesn't break our stare, as if it's a challenge. She wears nondescript clothing, a blanket thrown over her lap, her hair tied into a tail. From what I can see, there are no tears on her face. But from experience, I know that a screaming, crying mess would be so much better than this depressed silence.

My feet pad into the room, and I leave the door open. For extra light, I tell myself. Settling down onto a couch near her, I blink, wishing for her to be the first to speak.

But she doesn't break, shifting her gaze back into the fire. Uncaring and unfeeling, and just... sad. My steel heart cracks in half for the girl, who's lost more than perhaps anybody else in this war. And I know that I played a part in that loss.

I was the one who came here, so I'll be the one to speak first; it's only fair.

"I'm sorry," I say.

She keeps staring at that damn fire. "I know," she whispers. "I was going to tell him, you know."

"When?"

She keeps her face motionless, but I see the tears rimming her eyes anyway. "When I was locked down there, with Cal. I finally realized that I would never love Tyton the same way I loved Cal. I was going to break it off the next time I saw Tyton, tell him what happened after Cal was far, far away. But you took that choice away from me, Evangeline. That was my secret to tell, not yours."

"I-"

"Yes, he should've known. He had the right to be told, and you can justify your actions all you want with that fact. But at the same time, I was the one who was supposed to tell him. And the next time I saw him, with the full and honest intention of telling him, he was so angry. He stabbed me in the leg, and then he stabbed Cal in the chest."

The words are an effort for her to say, and each breath is another struggle.

The atmosphere of the room shifts darker yet, but Mare slouches in her chair. She looks pathetic, curled in a blanket next to a fire. But I have no right to judge her; the only thing I have the right to do is apologize again and again.

"How did you find this place?" I ask.

"I went back to Mareena's room. I took all of her jewelry, and brought it to the store downstairs to sell all of it. The people who gave it to her are dead, so I saw no sense in returning it to the palace. After that, I asked the man if he knew if there were apartments nearby. That brought me here."

She answers the questions mechanically, but even as she speaks devoid of emotion, I see the red shimmer at her ear. The other ear, not filled with earrings that I imagine are from family members. A new earring, red as her blood. Red like fire.

"Is there anything else you need Evangeline? Or did you just come here because there's nobody left to torment except me?"

I stand up, tears threatening to spill out of my eyes. "You're grieving. And I don't blame you. I blame myself, in fact. But just know that I'm sorry for the role I played in this, and that I hope... someday you'll forgive me."
Shaking breaths, then, "I shot Tyton," she says, instead of a response.

"What?" Instantly, the atmosphere in the room changes again, my mind buzzing in attempt to understand what she just said, so utterly blunt.

"I told the others that Cal shot Tyton right after he was stabbed. Maven and Iris are too smart too have not figured it out, but I've been told that my electricity destroyed all of the security footage. No one that won't keep their mouth shut will ever know the truth.

"Goodbye, Evangeline," she says in the form of a dismissal, nestling further into her chair. "Keep that secret and you'll be forgiven."

Not knowing what else to do with the cold girl, I say goodbye as well and then leave, shutting the door softly behind me.

I meet Elane and Ptolemus a quarter of an hour before noon at the manor, and taking one of Father's cars, we're out of the city early into the afternoon, the sun high above us.

Ptolemus drives, and in the backseat with Elane, I try hard not to think about what Mare said and the way that I left. It's well known by the both of us that we were never close, but I still wish things had ended differently. It's my fault, I suppose. But I'll keep my mouth shut and earn her forgiveness anyway.

Before I went to the trader's store, I had indeed heard the story of how Cal killed Tyton in his final moments before dying, in self-defense against Tyton. Only a story. Mare killed Tyton, not Cal. And it only further proves my guess of the truth of Tyton and Mare's relationship, but I hardly had the nerve to mention it in her apartment.

The things we do for love.

Mare Barrow is broken. Shattered. And shattered things have little chances of ever being mended.

I'll keep her secret at the back my head for the rest of my life if that's what she wants, her precious little secret that she had no obligation to tell me. And I'll earn her forgiveness anyway.

Elane and I continue our drive after dropping Ptolemus off at Rift, with our cousins.

The day stretches into dusk, the sun in our eyes as Elane drives west, towards somewhere better.

I smile at Elane, a partially genuine smile after everything I've went through today.

Throughout these hours in the car, I've had time to think. To breathe, for once.

I'm a reformed monster and I know it. The smile masks shame, regret, pity, and sorrow, but somewhere deep down, looking into the sun with my lover, there's a sense of hope too.

Someday I will back for a visit to Archeon, Norta, and I will see that things are better. That I did not need to tell Mare Barrow that she is strong for her to get back up again, even if she is shattered. That Reds and Silvers will finally be equal in every way, and the gap between our bloods will be faded.

"Where do you want to end up, Elane?" I ask her.
"I don't know," she responds, smiling back at me in the car. "With you, I suppose."
Epilogue 2

Iris

I would have left with my sister, retreated to my homelands immediately, had it not been for the little lightning girl and the things she did.

Despite who I am and who she is, the alliance between the Silvers and Reds so volatile, I feel drawn to look after the broken girl. She locked me in a cage of Silence, and I did not help her nearly enough when she was bound in chains, at Maven's feet. For the lies and wrongs she committed against me... I forgave her days ago, in that dank cell of mine in the dungeons. I call it equal.

How could I possibly begrudge her now?

I go to check on her every other day, not wanting to push at the edges of whatever our relationship is. They're brief conversations, usually not lasting long enough for me to so much as sit down. The little apartment she's found herself is suiting, from the looks of the quaintly-sized room I always find her in, perched upon a chair and staring at the fire. It's only growing warmer, but whenever I go, the fire's always burning.

"Iris?"

I look up to see Davidson staring at me from across the desk, a raised eyebrow. Bart sits next to me, also staring at me.

"Sorry," I murmur, shuffling the reports between my hands that Davidson offered me when we came into his private study for this. "I was just contemplating things." Caught up into a wind of thoughts as Bart gave his suggestions on blood equality to Davidson, from the point of view of a Nortan Silver. Important, but Bart and I have discussed them already, prior to coming into this room. I know everything on his mind, and he knows everything on mine.

"She'll be okay, Iris," Bart says through barely parted lips. "Eventually."

The word breaks my heart, partially because I know it's the truth.

I lost my mother years ago; she was my life, the woman I looked up to in every way, shape, and form. I loved my mother, and I didn't come out of my rooms for days. Maybe it was weeks, I don't remember. It is humanity's undeniable greatest strength to overcome these things, and we shouldn't have to. There shouldn't be any sorrow to have to overcome at all.

Family and lovers make you weak and strong, somehow at the same time.

"I know she will be. But I still have the right to worry about her, and what she did. She could've killed us all, Davidson." My eyes snap to his. "I saw her, and a few more minutes would've made her explode."

I don't tell him about what is perhaps my largest concern for the girl. She lied to Davidson. Lied to everybody, in fact.

I was there. I saw where Cal's body was, at least ten paces from the gun, perhaps more. He did not fire that shot, move all that distance and then crumple to his final resting place with a blade lodged in his chest. Mare killed her fake lover, not Cal.
"Why didn't you punish her, Davidson?" I ask, trying to stay focused this time. "She tried to kill everyone, and you let her walk off that bridge with not so much as a slap to the wrist. Why?"

"You know why," the Premier says, steeping his fingers on the desk. "Even if it wasn't right, how could've I ever punished her? She tried to kill the Lakelanders and my Reds and Newbloods out of her anger for the world. You saw her; tell me that she was herself. I've seen her walk through flames and create thunderstorms beyond belief. And in those moments, her eyes are never the eyes of Mare Barrow. How could I punish her if it was somebody else entirely controlling her?"

Those eyes... he's right. They weren't her own, and in the moments that I saw them, I couldn't help but think it was her lightning in control, not the girl that's supposed to wield it. She lost it, and she didn't care anymore.

"You think of her as a daughter, don't you?"

He nods, eyes turned down at his desk. "You think of her as a sister."

"Yes."

Ghosts are always wandering the palace these days.

Not real ghosts of course. One of the only pieces of certain knowledge I possess is that ghosts are not real. Cal is gone and so is his soul, his body taken away by trusted Silver morticians, his soul swept away by the kind and tender Gods. I must always remember that. He may be gone in this world, but he is surely there in the next.

Someday I'll tell Mare that. I don't know if she'll believe me, but someday I'll tell her that.

That she might see him again.

Not yet, though. Not when I know how many hours she spends staring at that fire, what she might do to her sorrowful self if she knew... I cannot think about more death.

But by ghosts, I speak of the fools who stay in this palace. I suppose that would include me, but at least I don't wander aimlessly throughout the halls, drifting by as if I'm lost and confused.

There are some maids that do this, maids that find there's nothing useful to clean, but are too frightened to leave, to explore a world that has long been out of their reach. Sometimes I think about grabbing them by the shoulders and shaking them until they run far away, out of Archeon, if only because they fear me.

Red rebels do the same, waiting for another attack that is unlikely to come.

And so do Maven and Julian, who I always catch somewhere or other on my walks, oftentimes just staring out the windows, or else seated on garden benches, admiring the flowers. Sara Skonos accompanies Julian most of the time, the two of them together in silence. Julian has Sara, and I have Bart, but Maven... I am at a loss of words for the boy.

Trapped, would be the word to describe him. Stranded between a world of freedom and a world of peace. He could leave whenever he pleases. Davidson and the others have probably assumed by now that he's left, and the Reds are hardly concerned about him starting a Silver uprising. Or he
could stay, rebuild the bridges he's burnt.

And he hasn't left. But he hasn't talked to anybody either. He floats about the palace, hands always crossed behind his back, face locked in a bland disinterest that's designed to make me think he doesn't know I'm there on my separate walks.

For all the visits he payed Mare during his imprisonment, I'm surprised he hasn't gone to talk to her yet. How smart of him.

This time when I find him, he's sitting on one of those palace garden benches, surrounded by colors of all varieties, hair blowing in the subtle breeze. Staring at nothing.

"Maven," I say his name, pushing open the glass doors to the outside. The gardens are on the backside of the palace, and birds chirp in the mid morning sun. The space is framed by wisteria and azalea and magnolia trees, not much of a pattern blending into something beautiful.

Nothing else comes out of my mouth as I trek across the still-manicured lawn, not a weed in sight. I don't speak again until I reach his bench, plopping down on it beside him. Neither of us wear anything particularly fancy, just plain slacks and short-sleeved shirts.

"What are you doing here? With your wit, you could go anywhere in the world. And you're still here." Not knowing how else to phrase my observations, I say it to him bluntly, not much emotion in my eyes.

But he doesn't look into them as he ponders my question, slowly blinking with his hands laced together at his knees.

"I don't remember what is was like to have aspirations for myself." I blink at his equally-blunt observation. "My mother gave me the idea that I should focus all of my will and energy into taking what was Cal's. The throne and the country. The love of the people," he goes so far as to say. "I have no idea what I want for myself."

He still loves Mare, though, and I can't help but remember his admission in the hallways, before we went to retrieve her. Before he calmed her down all by himself.

"You should see Mare these days," I start, cautious of where this is going to lead. "She has this little apartment on the other side of Archeon. I check on her every other day, and it always feels like I'm intruding, even when all I ever catch her doing is looking in her fireplace. I checked on her yesterday, when it was seventy-five degrees outside. The fire was still blazing, and she was still staring into it."

"She's mourning," Maven responds, a cold doctor diagnosing a patient. "We all are, in some way or another."

I have half the wit to snap at him, but keeping myself in check, I only glare. "You don't have to act like that anymore. You aren't some king, hell-bent on keeping your throne and looking constantly cold and strong. You can be real for once, Maven."

"Fine," he seethes through his teeth, looking at me with an equal intensity. "What would a proper answer be for you, Princess Iris? That I'm still in love with her? That I am painfully and achingly alone and am too scared to go somewhere else by myself? That perhaps, I, the brother of Cal, would like to attend his funeral, and will not leave until I see it through?"

Loosening a breath, I stand up, suddenly feeling cold. Facts and nothing but the truth. There still isn't any emotion on his face, but I don't need emotion to see facts and truth. Gods, this boy...
"Someday, Maven, you must talk to her. Not today or tomorrow, and probably not next week. When she has left her apartment on her own accord, you must speak to her." An order. "Just once. That, in some way, will bring you solace."

"Have a good day, Iris," Maven says. Not snarky or cruel. Just cold disinterest.

I learn far later than I should of what happened in the dungeons that night after Cal, Evangeline, and I escaped.

What happened to Jon. What happened to Farley.

When Bart so nonchalantly mentions it, assuming I was already aware, I'm out of the room in mere seconds, heading towards the dungeons.

"He's dead?" I ask, already knowing the answer, as the door to my room slams shut, a telltale sign that Bart is right behind me. This time, I wait for him to catch up, pausing down the hallway. How did I forget about Jon?

"You didn't hear?" is his only response as he settles into step next to me. While Bart is taller than me, I keep up with him just fine, our feet matching one another's steps as we follow a path we know too well to the palace's... lower levels.

"How?"

Jon being dead is both a relief and a nuisance, if my heartbeat is any indication. The seer freed us for a logic I'll never be privy too. Gods only know if it were for the greater good or not. If Jon hadn't freed us, we might all be dead, not only Cal. Or we'd all be alive, and something much, much worse would have happened to everybody else. Either way, part of me thinks that no matter what, Mare wouldn't be curled up in a blanket, staring at firelight right now. Maybe she'd be dead. Maybe she'd be with Cal.

The seer was far too skilled at his job.

"Farley said he slit his own throat. That's all she said when Davidson and his men checked on her a few days ago."

"And she's still down there." Not a question. Another known fact and truth.

"Yes."

Just as well as anybody else, I know the extent of the Whisper's power. She killed Larentia Viper and made everybody believe it was a suicide. Snuck into the mind of Mare Barrow and made her walk through the dungeons to taunt us. And then there's the matter of knowing how many people she can control at a time. Elara and Samson Merandus could control no more than a single person at a given moment, and they ruined those people.

"The dungeons are a horrible place," I remark. Cold and dark and wet. The Silent Stone is another matter by itself. "Davidson should put a manacle on her wrist and keep her... monitored. But not the dungeons. Never the dungeons."

Bart takes my hand in his, looking me in the eyes endearingly. "You're okay, though?"

I twist my lips at him. "I promise I'm okay. Those days simply weren't the best days of my life."
He cares too much, and I can't decide if that's a good or bad thing. I've already demanded of Bart that he stop blaming himself, especially when I ordered of him to run away at the wedding.

As we descend the steps that lead to a tunnel that leads to the dungeons, he squeezes my hand against his. "In that case, never again."

"Never again," I agree.

Before we reach the turn in the hallway that leads to Farley's lonesome cell, she speaks.

"Visitors?" she asks. "What an oddity."

We hit the turn, Bart and I side by side. Though outdoors the sun would be nearly at its peak on this cloudless day, no natural light reaches the dungeon stone, the cell, or Farley's half-emaciated silhouette. In the torchlight, the shadows of her face are pronounced, dirty clothes on her body, tucked into itself and in desperate need of washing.

I tell myself that she heard our footsteps. Not that she heard our thoughts. She couldn't have, with the Silence.

"Why haven't they let you come out of this cage, Farley? You seemed subdued enough."

"They're not keeping me here," she responds, pushing herself to her feet so that she's eye-to-eye with us. Farley raises a hand to the torchlight, exposing her cuffed wrist. "The door's not locked. I'm free to leave whenever I please."

Tempted to ask her the obvious, I hold my tongue. Then why don't you leave? She has her reasons, just like Mare has hers to stay in solitary confinement. Even when wearing that manacle, she doesn't trust herself.

"I take it that the Silence has done you well? You seem more like yourself, General."

"I think I am. I am. The Silence... it made the voices stop. The voices were so loud."

A tear comes from her eye, and her fingers wrap around the bars as she looks at me. "How are the others?" Her voice echoes off the tunnel stones, her self-made prison, extending far and wide.

"The world has seen better days." I don't lie to her, but I won't give her the purest truth either. Ghosts wander the palace, the Silvers of Norta are angry, and it's only a miracle that they haven't tried to take back their country, either. The Lakelander Queen's compromise with Davidson is the only thing that keeps the Silvers in check.

"You needn't bother with the vague explanations, Princess," she says, and some part of her is familiar, with that old snark. But this time it's gloomy, trying desperately to cover up her pain. "Davidson already told me what I needed to know, when they came down here and found Jon's cooled corpse."

Then she knows. Knows about Cal, Mare's fury-though more than likely, she heard it from down here-and the newfound peace in the country.

"So he just came down here, pulled out a knife and slit his throat?" Bart asks. His voice isn't exactly the voice of patience.
"You make it sound so insane and... uninspired. In a sense, I understand Jon more than anybody else on this earth ever could've. While there are voices in my head, he has dreams and visions. I don't blame him for it. But no. He didn't just come down here, stand in front of me, and slit his throat."

There's a calm in Farley's eyes, peace. No, she isn't scared of losing control now. She's scared of facing the others, taking responsibility, being looked at as a dangerous, Whispering freak.

"So he spoke to you?"

"Indeed," Farley responds. "Jon told me stories of the visions he saw. What could've been."

"Other... versions of history?" I gulp at the thought. The world where there could've been more peace than the signing of a treaty. A real, bone-deep peace. Happiness, even.

She nods. "Don't be fooled, though. There were other routes to be taken, when Jon woke up. He picked the one that resulted in the least number of causalities. There was no path where you, Evangeline, Cal, and all of the soldiers lived. He told me that much."

A stern, calculative man.

Even as I think about Jon, another thought enters my mind. Jon awoke from his months-long coma on the same day that Farley was thrown into a cage of silence. I've talked to the doctors. They didn't understand what was keeping the old man from waking up and didn't know if he'd ever wake up at all. "You did it, didn't you? You were the one who kept Jon asleep for all those months." A mercy. A tragedy.

"I believe it was the Gods that initially inflicted his state of unconsciousness. But yes, when we came back to the Rift after Maven's masquerade, I saw an opportunity. And I took it. The last person we needed on the game board was Jon. I did the world a favor by removing him."

"Did you?" I ask, because Farley looks like she's trying to convince herself as she says it. "Maybe. But Jon was a key player. You changed things, by removing him."

"I did. But if I've learned anything, it's that in every single timeline... there's always something terribly wrong with it."

^^^^^^^^^^

We leave Farley not long after, in that grim cage of hers. I still don't fully understand what happened between Jon and Farley, but it will have to be enough for now.

Ascending the steps towards the world once more, I nearly pass a certain block of cells on my left. Pausing, I step back a few steps to peer inside.

The door to each cell is still open, and I can nearly see myself in the first cage on the right, hair in tangles, crouched on the ground.

I point to the cell. "That was mine."

To my surprise, Bart enters the space, examining everything with the fine eye. He looks at my cell, Evangeline's, Cal's, and finally Maven's. Noon light filters in from the narrow windows on Cal and Maven's side of the room, filling the space with a dare-I-say pleasant light.

"It wasn't months, Bart. It was nothing compared to what other prisoners of war have endured."
"I know that, Iris. You're stronger than most." But I shouldn't have run away.

Like him, I glance at each of the four cells, going to the back of the room, where Cal and Evangeline's cells face one another.

It's so faint I almost look right past it, not acknowledging the pale etchings written into one of the walls on Cal's cell. There are scrapes of all varieties in all of our cells, usually the markings of inhuman fingernails or small stones. Sometimes the scrapes are just scrapes, lines and arcs and occasional words. But this... in Cal's cell...

Not the elegant handwriting that Cal would have if he were given paper and a quill.

My eyes struggle to read the words that were written in moonlight, and I approach the cell, squinting. Cal's words are half cursive, the other letters plain and stick-like, as if he gave up in making it look nice.

I go so far as to enter the cell, keeping a hand on the door for the irrational fear that it will close behind me. My other hand traces the etchings, perfectly beautiful and sad.

My ashes should be spread on the shores of the ocean.

Fire. Yes, a fire prince should be burned. Not buried in the earth, like I so flippantly told the morticians, when I forced myself to take care of Cal when nobody else would. Nobody else was willing to make those decisions, see it through that Cal was given a proper death.

But Cal was not a Greenwarden. He was not a Nymph either, and while it surprises me that he would want his remains spread at the edges of water, I will see it through. I will see it through if nobody else will.

That was what the scraping noises were. Not a pathetic attempt to break out of his cell, perhaps not even the distraction I thought it was. A message, carved into stone. Unbreakable and permanent. Cal was certain enough that he was going to die that he did this, spent all those hours scraping and crafting a single sentence.

I would sink to my knees if I were weak, if I were not given a precious mission.

While they shake, I do not bend to my sorrow, but stand tall, curling my lip in defiance to the cruel and clever Gods.

"Before we settle down, we must go the ocean."

It will get better. It always does, even though it should not. That is one of humanity's greatest strengths.
Mare

The fire in front of me burns and burns, eternal and immortal. Its flames are always dancing, sometimes in quick, lively steps. Sometimes they waltz slowly, taking their time with the silent music. Gold and orange, the base of the fire the blue of an ocean in the night.

Though I rarely leave my place in front of fire, I don't spend much time looking at it, even if it might seem that way. My thoughts are scattered, dwelling on the past and never daring to look into the future.

Cal.

My fingers squeeze the blankets as the name of the fire prince floats past my lips. Too lost in the pain, I don't know if I say it aloud or not.

I was so utterly stupid. Wasteful, naive. Stupid.

The last days have given me time. To mourn, to think, to breathe, even if I forget the fundamental action every so often, caught holding my breath as I think.

Maybe I loved Tyton. But those days, whether or not the feelings were genuine, are long gone. It hasn't been that long, maybe seven or eight days since the Lakelander invasion, since... other events, but it feels like a hazy nightmare, a dream that I can't recall specifics of.

Tyton made me... happy. I bite my lip and have to force myself to stop before it bleeds, drips on the white blanket I found in one of the apartment closets. I used to smile when he'd touch my hand, and I wanted to be with him, let him make me forget all the old troubles my heart held heavy. At the same time, I don't know if it was real or not. Cannot push through the fog of that hazy nightmare, back to before Cal's wedding, when it was just me and Tyton. I can't remember if even then, some part of me knew that I was still in love with Cal.

While the Electricon may have stabbed Cal, I killed them both. Long before either of them lay dead and dying on that hallway floor, silver and red blood splattered into a gruesome painting. I should have chosen sooner, made up my mind. Not lied to both Tyton and myself about what I really wanted.

He was so angry. Tyton wanted to kill Cal, and he succeeded. He was so angry.

And I can't help but think if I hadn't lied, and told Tyton the truth sooner, neither of them would be dead. And I wouldn't have to lie about who killed Tyton. Because if Davidson knew the truth, if much of anybody knew the truth...

I come out of the chair, throwing my blanket to the ground. In my hurry, I did a decent job of finding a habitable living space, one of the apartments above the common Silver's jewelry shop. I traded Mareena's priceless jewels to him, and he gave me a year's rent on this apartment.

No, I won't stay here that long. Won't.

The rooms are small, but tidy enough that I couldn't care less. Whitefire will do me no good, not when it's a constant reminder of everything that I've lost. Here, there's a living room with a lovely fireplace, a long hallway of closets, bedrooms, and bathrooms that leads to a kitchen and a dining
room. The floor is covered in soft grey carpeting, and the walls are eggshell white with paintings of black and white.

I pad down the hall to the kitchen, my legs weak from disuse. The food's running short in here, and if that's how I find my motivation to leave this place, then so be it. I've given myself the luxury of stopping, of spending my long and miserable days doing whatever I please. But soon... soon I'll need to start again. Recover, pretend that I'm fine.

That I didn't spend every moment staring into that fire, thinking about where it went wrong. What I'm to blame for and what isn't my fault. How stupid and stupid...

I wipe the sleeve of my cardigan against my eyes, reaching the kitchen. Like the rest of the apartment, it's quaint, made up of a wooden island, a stove and cabinets, nothing interesting nor boring.

Though the curtains in every room are closed shut, I hear the rain pounding outside, and I feel the storm in the making above. Not of my creation, this time; if lightning falls, it will be ordinary, white lightning. Another aspect of that day that continues to unnerve me: Davidson barely said anything over my storm, which should have killed hundreds, thousands. I wanted it to kill them.

A part of me that I work very hard now to keep locked up still does. The energy rolling in those clouds above touches me; pushes me to go to it, create hell on earth once more. Make it night again. A jaded, bitter smile tugs on my lips.

But as soon as I sit down, I find that I'm not hungry, that this entire trip to the kitchen was pointless. Though it must be well into the afternoon, my stomach doesn't rumble, and hunger doesn't gnaw at any part of me. My throat's parched, but that's not unexpected.

Like I said, I forget to breathe sometimes, holding my breath when I shouldn't. I forget to eat, too. And I wish I could forget other things. My name. What I've done.

This time I laugh out loud, a long, strained chuckle that has me shaking my head at myself.

Gods, I need to get out of this place.

Though my family expects me to return to Montfort, I can't bring myself there, not in this state. I can't lie properly, can't pretend that I'm okay, that I wasn't in love with Cal anymore. I burned my old home to the ground, my family is one-thousand miles away, and my lovers are dead.

I walk back to my chair in the living room, settling myself into it and curling my knees into my chest. Though I don't look into the fire this time, even as I tap the scarlet earring in my skin. There's a stack of papers, a rather thick stack, on the table beside my chair, looking an ancient gold in the firelight.

When I went back to the palace after the bridge, I collected an extra set of clothes, Mareena's jewels, and a far more precious earring. On my way out, I passed my room. My room. And remembering the gifts Maven had left me all those months ago, in between the cracks of my desk, I entered, grabbed as many of the crumpled and neat letters as I could. Only then I left.

Tentatively, my fingers brush against the paper on top, turned over so that I can't read it. Crinkles wreck it, obviously having been one of the copies Maven deemed useless, tearing it up.

For a long while, I forgot about these letters. When they were written and who they were written by. Then one stupid day, I found the stupid courage to go into the room, coming off of an odd high, inflicted by those Singers after Cal's coronation. I only just recently recalled them, as I passed my
room.

If only for a distraction, the dark and lonely and out-of-my-mind part of me begs. Nobody's here to judge you. To cringe at you.

The paper is frail between my shaking hands, turning it over to bring Maven's elegant scrawls to my eyes.

Dearest Mare,

And that's all that's on it.

Without much thought, I toss the paper into the fire, watch as it burns and shrivels in on itself.

Without much thought, I pick up the next one.

Mare,

Each day, I come here to think. Sometimes it's for a few moments, just for the Silence. Sometimes it's for hours, to think and to breathe. To write these pointless letters that I hope you'll never have the tragedy of finding.

Then it ends. Again. I toss the piece of paper into the fire, shoving down my frustration at Maven.

I pick up a third, then a fourth. Then I lose count.

With each letter I toss into the fire, a new glimpse at Maven's hideous, terrifying soul is revealed. Few of them that I took from my old room have more than five lines, and if I hadn't found half of them crumpled, I imagine they'd have some flow to them, each tying back to each other.

Instead, the letters are random streams of pained thoughts and truths, messages he should have burned. As I finish each one, I do what he should have. Burn them.

I wonder if he wanted me to see these copies. Probably not, when he went to the efforts of shoving them all in a drawer, leaving just one copy as a placeholder in Julian's book. That one's at the bottom. Maven likes games, but there's no way he would've ever allowed me to read these.

Absentmindedly, I toss another into the fire.

I try to not let his words sink in, under my skin. Dark confessions of love and regret. The ways that he felt chained even when I was the one in manacles, how he began to dream when I left. The heartbreak he felt when Elara revealed to him what I did with Cal in that lonely ballroom during our dancing lessons. The regrets that he didn't have. He doesn't regret taking me, keeping me in Whitefire, even as he watched me waste away in agony. I kept him sane. I made him feel some semblance of some emotion that wasn't emptiness. The cracks in Maven's mask have always been tangible to me, the sadness in his eyes and the twitch of lips and throat. These are truths too raw to be fabricated, couldn't have possibly been made only to trick me.

We're the same.

I pick up the last letter in the stack, decorated with silver and gold thread, familiar lettering in the middle spelling out my name. Whatever this envelope contains, it's what he wanted me to see.
Undoubtedly, it's polished and cold and cruel, nothing of the rawness that all of those other papers contain.

Using the edge of my nail, I rip the envelope open. Looking at the flowers and vines threaded into the lavish and thick cardstock, I don't throw it into the fire with the rest of the paper. I merely toss it to the ground, eyeing it for a moment before I unfold the crisp parchment, tucked into three sections.

In the blackest of ink, a date is written at the top. A date from the late fall, when autumn was bleeding into an early winter. Days before the battle between Maven's armies and Cal's armies that the boy king knew he was bound to lose, was supposed to lose.

Mare,

When you inevitably come back to this room out of valiant efforts to conquer your traumas, you will find this. And whether I am already dead, locked up, or somewhere else entirely, you will read it.

I know you well enough that no matter how much you wish you could burn it, you won't. Not now that you've opened it at all.

~

I'm tired and bored of this war. Over time, too, I have realized that I don't particularly give a damn about the crown or the throne. That was my mother and my mother alone. So I suppose I've at last separated one of her truths from mine. Let Cal have the throne, let him win this pointless war for the purpose of decimating his and my armies both. My court is failing anyway.

Better to let go of my thread of power and see the look on Cal's face when he realizes you were never on his side at all. There will be few moments in my pathetic life that rival it.

There is nothing for me here, in this palace, anymore that is worth anything. I see my court as power-hungry wolves waiting for me to fall. I once said that the smart ones do not, and I do not believe that now. I have no true allies here, only a supposed birthright.

So win this war, Mare Barrow. I will help you, because I cannot help myself.

Ever since you escaped after the wedding, things have changed. I told you once that I didn't dream, that my mother took that away from me. But when you left I began to dream again. In the rare moments of sleep I get, I dream. And they are not pleasant dreams. Sometimes I wake up, and my clothes are on fire.

Iris was no help in strengthening my reign. Part of me is glad she left, while the other part knows better. Her abandonment, along with the message she broadcasted to the whole of Norta, explaining what exactly what down all those months ago, was not helpful to my dying reign. Such a little gossip. I did good enough damage control to keep the Silvers at bay, convinced them that she was lying; not that they care if an honest and just ruler sits on the throne, as opposed to a conniving one.

Know that I will always love you Mare, in whatever messed-up way I know. I will always care for you, and I wish to see your enemies fall to your feet. If that includes me, so be it.

He doesn't sign his name, and my shaking fingers, however violently they grip it, let go of the parchment, allowing it to fall to the floor as well.

As is his way, the letter is polished, down to the very ink he used in writing it. It hardly shows the
extent of his emotions, the rawness of the other burned, uncompleted letters. Just glimpses, a fraction of how he truly thinks. It's hardly an accurate portrayal of Maven and his mind.

About to throw his last paper into the fire, I flip it over when I pick it up, making sure there's nothing on it.

However...

Look in the desk. -Maven.

Unable to control myself, I ball up the paper and chuck it into the fire, my breath suddenly turning very, very heavy.

The lightning in the clouds becomes too easy to grab onto, but I contain myself, wrenching myself from the chair and tangle of blankets in order to sink to my knees. I watch the fire eat up and devour the paper, forever erasing that final smack in the face.

It was an accident, that day when my bedraggled dress snagged on the desk and revealed Maven's letters. I was supposed to find them after reading this plain introduction. Like flipping a coin, there was half a chance that I'd turn the letter over, half a chance that I wouldn't.

I choke down a sob, blink back my tears. I can't cry anymore. I can't.

I've cried for too many people, blamed myself for too many things.

A knock sounds at the door.

It's not Iris's day to come. She comes every other day, and she came yesterday.

Wearily, almost rolling my eyes, I look up at the door on the other side of the room, willing for whoever's on the other side of it to go away, to be gone. "One moment," I say, willing power and conviction into my voice, to make it sound so that I'm not falling apart. Not crying.

Nobody responds as I force myself up wiping at my eyes and tucking the embroidered envelope under my chair. I run my fingers through my hair, try to straighten the loose slacks and shirt I wear.

When I open the door, an equally exhausted and sad person stares back at me.

"Farley."

"Iris told me that we need to go somewhere."

Somewhere deep down, I think I know where. Or at least for what.

Biting my lip and holding back new, threatening tears, I offer up a sad smile. "Okay."
Epilogue 4

Mare

Far below, the glittering lights of an unknown city twinkle in the night like stars. From the looks of it, the city is fairly big, spread out for miles with a center that's particularly dense with orange and yellow lights. I even make out a river alongside the center, oddly shaped with plenty of miniature waterways branching out from it, like the roots of a tree.

The pane of glass on the airplane is cold beneath my hands, my nose almost pressing against it as I peer outside, into the darkness. A mirror, the actual stars are above us, sparkling proudly on the cloudless night.

"Sharilut, I would guess," Julian says across from me, watching as I look down thousands of feet. "We're close to the ocean, now. It shouldn't be more than half an hour."

Sharilut. I don't recall noting it in the geography texts I've read, despite how large it appears to be. It must be directly north of Savannus, maybe by two-hundred miles or so. "Hmm," is all that is said by me.

I have to blink back the tiredness, will my heavy eyelids to stay open for the night sky. Farley and I left my apartment about an hour after she initially arrived, telling me nothing about where I was going or what for, though it wasn't difficult to guess either. There are few reasons why anybody would come to my apartment and tell me I had to go somewhere. Cal hasn't had a funeral yet, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I guessed why. They've made ash out of him, and now we're heading south. To the ocean.

Before he died, Cal told me he wanted to go and live by the ocean, to at last conquer his fear of the water.

I swallow back the thought, once again leaning into the electricity of the plane, careful not to touch it.

In the apartment, while Farley waited for me to pack my minimal belongings, taking my precious time to do so, we spoke. She apologized to me, showing off her manacle that she now constantly dons. She was mad, she told me. Insane with voices in her head, and she snapped. The Silence did her good, and she doesn't dare remove it now. Soon, I'll make certain to take her back to Julian.

She mentioned what happened with Jon, as well, but I didn't ask her any further about it. I don't need to know what that sick man told her or why he killed himself.

She only told me, that someday, should I desire to know of the lost futures Jon narrated, she would tell me.

Farley took me to the airbase in a transport, where Iris, Bart, Julian, and much to my dismay, Maven, waited. Soon after, she left, catching a flight of her own to Montfort. To Clara. I'm happy for her. I have no doubt in my mind that Farley will get better, be the mother that Clara deserves.

Across the aisle from me and Julian, Bart and Iris sit in reflective silence, the both of them looking out the tiny plane windows. And somewhere further back in the plane, Maven sits. Alone.

Those letters...
Instead of thinking about them, I turn to Julian. "Before he died," I breathe out, "he told me that he still loved you, didn't care that you sided with us. He wanted you to know that."

Julian's lips pinch into a tight line. It's as though he wanted to ask the question the whole time, but hadn't worked up the nerve. "Thank you."

When we land and file out of the airplane, taking our small packs, the warm, balmy air hits me in the pores of my face, sultry but soothing. The night heat reminds me so vividly of last summer, the long nights spent awake with Cal.

The lights lining the tarmac are the only source of light besides for the stars, illuminating the black landing pad and the yellow line that cleaves it in half.

"Come on," Iris says, turning her head over her shoulder. Her thick black hair is woven into an intricate plait, and she wears a long blue jacket, paired with black leggings and a shirt. So much more put-together than I am, somebody who barely found it in herself to drag a comb through her hair and change clothes.

She leads us away from the plane, walking on another tarred over road that leads to rows of cars, sheltered by a roof over them. We're on the south eastern coast of the continent, not more than a couple miles from the ocean, but I wouldn't know if we're in a city or a simple base. There are no other buildings, just the structure that protects the cars from the elements, and the plane.

"Where are we?" I ask, finding it in me to speak.

She seems surprised, the way that her shoulders tense from behind. But nonetheless, she explains. "Citadel. It's a fairly substantial city, though you can't tell that from here. The bulk of the population is directly on the coast. I've been told that veterans of war retire here, and people who just want reprieve from reality."

I nod back at her, clutching the straps of my bag. Sounds like a paradise. The kind of place that a fire prince might have liked to live.

We reach the cars, and without much consideration, Bart opens the door of the third one in the first row. Sleek and silver, enough room to perfectly fit five people.

The rest of us toss our bags into the trunk.

"You can take shotgun, Julian," Iris is quick to say, lingering behind as she motions for Julian to take the other front seat. I think that the Singer almost smiles as she says it, his eyes darting to Maven, who politely waits for everybody else to get in first. He hasn't said a word on this trip. I'm surprised he's here at all. Surprised the others let him come. Surprised I haven't snapped at him yet.

She orders me to get in first, taking the left back seat. Then Iris climbs in, separating me from Maven, who gets in last and tugs the door shut.

What an odd, odd group I travel with.

Before long, Bart's turning the keys in the ignition and rolling down the windows to allow the breeze in. The car smells new, like leather and cleaner, even as I rest my head against the window. The jeans and travelling jacket I wear are far from comfortable, and though I need the extra sleep, I keep my eyes open, focusing on the highway that Bart turns onto from car lot, dark apart from the car's headlights.
We drive for fifteen minutes before I see anything remotely interesting. The highway splits off into two directions, and Bart chooses the one on the right. And as we crest the hill the road takes us over, I see a valley of lights.

Not as large as the city I saw in the plane, but this city is light. This city is fire. Not of the sleek, imposing moderness that Archeon possesses, but an old, more humble beauty. Even from here, I feel the cars racing down its roads, the electricity that keeps the lights on. The buildings aren't tall, keeping low to the ground and bright.

Bart doesn't drive into it, though. The road that we take curves around the city, which divides us from the ocean. We won't spread his ashes tonight, I know. It would be too rushed, too disrespectful to Cal. We'll settle down somewhere near the ocean most likely, and part with Cal at dawn.

Oh Gods. Oh Gods help me.

"We can go into the city, tomorrow, if any of you would like to," Iris says, though she glances at me the most.

"It looks beautiful," I say. Maybe I should just stay here, not go back to Archeon to help Davidson oversee reconstruction. Be selfish and live out my days by the ocean. I would have done it with Cal. Left the whole of Norta for him, come here with him to stay for good.

"For all that I am, I've never seen the ocean," Iris admits in a low whisper, leaning towards me. Though it comes as no shock, I say, "Neither have I."

^^^^^^^^^^

Coming to a stop, the halting of the engine brings me away from my half-sleep.

Bart's pulled into a driveway, and Bart, Julian, and Maven are already pulling open their doors, stepping into the night on creaky limbs. Before I'm so much as outside, I hear the waves from the other side of the house. Can smell the salty water blowing in from off the ocean.

The last person to exit the car, I take my bag from Maven, who holds out to me. Careful not to make eye contact, I say a thank you and turn on my heel to head inside.

Iris has already disappeared, having handed off her bag to Bart. She's probably running towards the ocean right now. Zealous nymph.

"At least Davidson relinquished Bracken's children to him," Bart says, walking up the driveway towards the house he and Iris somehow acquired. "But the man still wasn't happy when he discovered we were coming here. Agreed to keep it classified, though. The last thing we need is a bunch of angry Piedmonteese pounding at the door."

One look at the house tells me that only somebody very privileged would be allowed to live here. Large doors beckon me forward, made out of a deep colored wood. Though no light shines through them, the windows are bounteous, and the house itself is made out of a beautiful stone, adorning columns and balconies.

Palm trees and flowers have been systematically planted throughout the yard, the grass shadowed in the porch light. A few birds still chirp, their sounds combating with the soft and steady breeze.

Julian comes up to stand next to me, admiring the architecture of the house. "You should've invited
Sara. She would've loved it here."

"I know," he responds quickly. "But I need to see this through alone. She understood."

I approach the doors with Julian, who goes ahead of me to tug open one side of the entrance so that I'm looking into yet more shadows, the light of the porch and moonlight creeping into the space. Nobody came ahead to prepare, and I have doubts that this house has been stayed in recently.

As I enter the darkness, dim lights flick on, courtesy of Bart, who trails right behind me. Julian holds open the door, waiting for the bunch of us to come inside.

"Was such opulence really needed for this trip?" I ask, swallowing. It's not a vacation. We're not here to relax or have fun. Not that I could if I tried.

Bart shrugs, setting down Iris's bag, which happens to be far more packed than his own. "Davidson made the arrangements. I asked him for somewhere to stay for a couple of nights by the ocean, and this is what he came up with."

"Thank you," I blurt, wanting him to know that I appreciate it either way. "Thank you for driving us and all."

He smiles back, taking the stairs with the bags. "How could I deny Cal what he deserved?"

I can only nod. Because he deserved so much more than this.

I turn away from Bart, taking in the house. The entryway seems to be some sort of art gallery, decorated with colorful paintings and an elongated rug, dusky blue. It then opens up into an expansive room, filled with a kitchen, a dining table surrounded by chairs, and a living room. The main set of stairs are at the back wall, interrupted by glass doors leading to the sand and the ocean.

The theme of the house is a pale elegance, blues and whites and greys.

Julian heads for the stairs next, leaving me with Maven.

I don't look at either of them. I can't look into Maven's eyes, only because I know that I'll just end up staring, attempting to comprehend how such a young person ever wrote those letters. I remind myself that I didn't even read all of them. There are still more back at Whitefire, those that I couldn't carry.

Without looking at the boy, or any more at the immaculate rooms, I head up the stairs a moment later, going to look for a room of my own.

The white stairs are quiet beneath my feet, not creaking the way that the latter to my Stilts home would've creaked. There are two hallways at the top, one going straight and the other going right. I choose the one ahead, there being three doors on the left, the right wall covered in more artwork.

My fist pounds the first door, checking to see if Bart or Julian claimed it. Nobody responds, and I twist open the door, revealing a bedroom. Deeming it good enough, I enter.

I toss my bag to the floor, noting the bed, the seating area and fireplace, a bathroom and a closet, and doors that lead to a balcony. On instinct, I head for the balcony, opening the door and slipping through it.

Perhaps infinite, the ocean stretches miles and miles each direction, the sand racing along with it. The waves are indeed steady, washing up on the shore in rhythm, swelling around the kneeling
body of a nymph. Iris sits on the sand, or should I say in the ocean, depending on the moment. The tide dances around her, one second there being nothing at all and the next a foot of water lapping around her.

However uneducated I might be when it comes to these things, I know that waves aren't that extreme. She's controlling them, making them rise unnaturally high around her.

Like all Silvers, the power that Iris carries cannot be created the way that Newbloods wield their powers. To be here, sit at the edges of something so huge... it must be like one of my storms. Not the ordinary ones. The storms born out of a pure hate.

I smile an innocent smile. Not for myself or what I have. But for Iris, and what might be one of the most amazing moments of her life. The nymph who got to see the ocean at last.

Cherishing the heat and cool that somehow coexist, I stay outside for awhile, smelling and seeing and hearing this place.

The waves of the ocean echo in my ears as I turn away, leaving the balcony doors open.

The room is empty, save for myself.

And I remember, in horrible flashes, why I'm here. How all of this came about.

Somehow, I don't sit down by the fire. I leave the fireplace unburning, unused as I eventually climb into bed.
I awake long, long before dawn arrives, sitting up from bed in a smooth yet flustered motion, knowing what happens today previous to recalling my own name.

Mare.

But the voice that says it in my head isn't my own, but that of a dead and gone fire prince.

The doors to the balcony are still flung open, and without looking, I pray that Iris has vacated the beach and relented to a few hours of sleep. It's utterly dark outside, no hint of the sun rising over the ocean.

Without any haste at all, I slip my day clothes on, tie my already-greying hair into a loose tail at the base of my scalp. I don't bother to look myself over in the mirror, at the simple black pants that flare out and stop at my calf, the black shirt, or jacket. My drawn face.

Almost rolling my eyes at myself, I leave the room, the bolt clicking behind me. Though I'd like to bet that the sun will be out in an hour, that my comrades' alarms will be ringing any moment know, I know better than to bet. Judging by the dull ache in the back of my head, I didn't get a full night of rest. Not that I was expectant of one.

The perfectly-made steps allow me to descend into the lower rooms without sound, a phantom in my own right. I slip into the spotless kitchen, not pattering the walls for a light switch to turn on; my mind instead reaches out, searches for energy above me until settling on a bank of lights over the island. They flicker on, casting the large room in a butter yellow light.

The clock near the oven reads the time. Three-forty-six.

Great. Sunrise isn't for at least another three hours. And in spite of the tiredness that pushes me to go back to sleep, it'll only be a rest crowded with tossing and turning. At least if I'm awake, I might accomplish something.

That something, I'm not sure what it would be.

Through the glass panes, there's an ocean. I could go and sit, meditate and listen, or do whatever else the hell I please by the water. Run down the shorelines, bare-footed. On my other side is a door, to the car and the driveway. Silently, I curse all the Silvers who taught me many things, but never taught me to drive. Because they didn't want you to get away.

Yet there's still a road. I can't cover the same distance on foot, but it's something to provide a little ease to my roaring heart, while not coming too close to the ocean. And I can't put my finger on it, but there's a wrong feeling in going to the ocean early, walking along its shores when I know Iris, Bart, Julian, Maven, and I will be spreading his ashes there when dawn comes.

Then it'll be over.

Before I can think on it, act on my feelings and summon a storm in which I'd calm my anger, I bite my lips down and walk across the room to the door.

As the cool breeze of night hits me, I promise myself that I won't go back to that pathetic
apartment. If I'm called on by Davidson for help, so be it. I'll find somewhere else to stay, but not that pathetic apartment. I spent enough wasted, sad moments in there, contemplating, thinking. Jumping to conclusions I couldn't possibly make without more reasoning. Drowning. Drowning in that indescribable, self-inflicted sorrow. I'd still be drowning if it weren't for this trip.

Before I so much as cross the invisible lining dividing the driveway from the clean and freshly tarred road, I decide that this won't be a walk.

It will be a run. In the dark, all alone.

As I start into a steady jog, any lurk of fear I have tucked away by larger concerns, I give a wide, crazed smile to the night. Because it's either smile or cry, and though the smile is mostly bitter, I give it anyway, to anybody that is impossibly watching. My boots eat up the road, the lights of Bart and Iris's borrowed house growing smaller with each pound of my foot.

I go faster, not really paying attention to the fact that I'm going too fast, faster than I ever could've when I was training in Piedmont with Cal. Still can't go that fast, at least not for long.

I throw my restraint to the wind, watching the ocean on my right, only illuminated when I pass other houses, porch lights on. But otherwise sleeping; like I should be.

The left is filled by nothing but plains, as if this one line of houses is special, cut off from the rest of society. Utopia indeed. Just in the distance, I see the bulk of Citadel, its low-rising buildings still alight despite the hour. No matter how far one travels, to Archeon or to this place, people in the city will always be awake.

The ache in my stomach is refreshing and missed, the wind whipping at my hair, forcing the short strands out of its tail in a matter of seconds.

Stars, again, look down on the world, poking holes in the dark night, still shining after millennia. What courage, what a feat. To still stand, still be on display, after all this time. They're beautiful, in their silver glory, unfathomable distances away. Now of course, the stars don't have lovers or family. They don't fight wars or fake royalty or spread the ashes of their loved ones on vast beaches.

Stars are born in chaos, in the cold, to become blazing hot monsters that outlive us by millions of times.

If the Gods are real, then perhaps they did not forsake the Reds out of cruelty. Perhaps... it was out of despair, the inability to look down upon this earth and attempt to fix it. I doubt even the divine could've fixed what we made ourselves into.

I hold out longer than I expect, repressing the pain in my abs, from the speed, the disregard for control.

Laughing into the wind, drunk on my racing heartbeat, the sweat that's gathered on my brow, I turn back around, steadying myself with a slow saunter back to the house.

The residence approaches sooner than I'd like it too, and I consider taking a moment's rest on the deck that wraps around half the outside, earn back my strength and go out for a farther run. Even with the darkness, running here is... electrifying, with the thrill of the dark, mixed with streetlights, city lights, and stars. The ebb and flow of the ocean's tides. The pavement against angry feet and legs.

I decide against it, however, climbing the driveway back to the house. Now that I've run, maybe I
can rest for another hour or two. Prepare myself for the day that's to come. I have to remind myself that it's not a challenge. Nothing that I can't do, nothing that people expect of me. The tar is a hard, solid tether to the earth.

Doubtful, but possible. Getting sleep. I'd hardly like to spend this day powered on headaches and caffeine.

Though my heart beats erratically, and my senses are alert, there's still something... in me that feels so incredibly tired.

The door cracks open beneath my hands as I push it open, but-

"Oh." The word escapes my mouth before I can shut it, at seeing Maven sitting on one of the chairs near the stairs in the living room. There's only a single light on, a lamp, right next to the armrest of his chair. The kitchen light I turned on is off. Oh.

His gaze snaps to mine, which I imagine can't be much more than moonlight and shadows, with his lamp so far away.

Off to the side, there's the steady trickle of coffee brewing in the kitchen, its scent tickling past my nose. Those and the waves happen to be the only sounds in the whole wide world.

"Couldn't sleep?" he whispers the question, staring at me in the shadows.

I only stare back for a moment, look at the pronounced shadows under his eyes, the way that his finger rhythmically taps his knee, the ankle of that leg balanced on his other knee.

"No," I finally state, hoping that the undeniable red from the run has mostly banished itself from my features. The door knocks shut behind me in a swift, fluid, soft motion. "You?"

"No," he returns, and all I can think about is his letters, many of which mentioned his sleep. He slept better when I was with him, in the palace with him. But once I left... the ability to sleep left and the nightmares arrived, months later.

For just a moment, I consider telling him about it. To have another raw and scaring conversation with the boy king... it might be the end of me. He doesn't need to know the fact that I've read those letters, peered into the deepest parts of him. It's not relevant. It will never be relevant.

I summon the capacity to nod and walk into the room, keeping my gaze down. But... but out of the corner of my eye, trying so hard to focus on the floor, I see Maven. His eyes are down, too; his throat bobbles.

Almost as if, he has something to tell me. The war is over, yet we're all still keeping secrets.

However. These are no ordinary secrets, not secrets of war.

I won't be sleeping now, not with Maven here, not when I know he's awake one story below. So I settle down in the living room as well, facing the glass as I perch on the couch opposite him. Absently, I reach to the other lamps around us, flick them on one by one.

Maven, not to my surprise, doesn't flinch when the lamps turn on. "Parlor tricks," he says, examining the hand on his knee.

"Not much else my lightning is good for these days," I reply and tuck my legs up. The last time Maven and I were together replays like a film inside of my head, even as I try to stay in the present
and focus on the dripping of coffee. He was the one that stopped me. I would've killed thousands had he not pulled me back, reminded me of that damning fact. Cal wouldn't have wanted me to destroy my enemies, friends, in my fury. Then we spoke. He sounded so caring. So real.

When he doesn't say anything else, I speak again. "I don't think I ever said thank you for that morning. If you hadn't reminded me of that fact I might have very well killed a million people."

Something like a cringe lances across Maven's face. "Don't ever thank me. I would've been fine either way, whether we had all died or not."

I would ask you don't really mean that, do you, if I were dumb when it comes to these sorts of things. Maven truly has no regard for himself anymore. Not others, either, apparently. "Then why bother at all?"

At that exact moment, the coffee pot halts its noises, and Maven's quick to get up. He moves to the kitchen, but I track him anyway, watching as he opens one cupboard after another, searching for mugs. On the third attempt, he comes away with two coffee cups.

"You may think that it can't possibly get worse. That the broken fragments of yourself can't possibly become smaller; more broken. But somehow, they always do. I only did it, because if you had killed everybody, you would've never forgiven yourself, whether here or in whatever afterlife exists. It makes no difference to me. But I know it makes a difference to you."

He recites it, probably having known I'd ask it at sooner or later. That's Maven's way, always knowing the questions I have that only he can answer. I curse him for it.

"The lightning felt good to wield. It was another sort of pain, so much more bearable and lovely compared to... Cal."

Maven comes away from the kitchen, mugs in hand. He poured the coffee, all while he spoke his toxic words. "I know."

We drink our coffee in silence, awaiting dawn.

In time, Bart, Iris, and Julian come down from their rooms, each with more concerned looks than the last. Maven and I, sitting in the same living space, sipping at our coffees. Not clawing at one another's throats.

Julian sits on the couch separating me and Maven. Bart shuffles in the kitchen. We're all wearing our day clothes, consisting of blacks and greys. The colors weren't planned, just... occurred.

"Sunrise is in ten minutes," Iris acknowledges from her place near the glass doors, hand brushing up against Cal's urn. She set it on the table against the back wall, the urn itself a regal silver and nothing more. It doesn't matter. Cal's ashes will spend little time in there.

I find myself nodding, setting down my mug though nobody told me to. "I'll be outside," I murmur, crossing my arms as I get up.

Not bothering with shoes, I pluck them off-along with my socks-before I crack open the glass door.

The ocean is of the deepest indigo, salmon pink clashing with it at the horizon. The clouds are a pale purple, and the rest of the sky is yellow and orange. Such beautiful colors for such a day. The end of a life, an admission of that.
My feet sink into the loose sand. It's a placid, motionless day, or rather the dawn of one. The wind hardly touches me, nothing more than an echo.

I could've gone outside last night, when we arrived, or this morning, for that matter. It was best that way, though.

My toes touch the water, pushing and pulling. That horizon... where pink meets blue, but a fine line is maintained. There's no purple, just a definite, tangible line. And I wonder... what's on the other side? This world has to be bigger, doesn't it?

The thought of it not being larger terrifies me. The earth is bigger than Norta, the Lakelands, Piedmont, Montfort, and a couple of other territories. It has to be. There must be other continents out there. There's a twinge in the back of my mind. We can't be alone.

But why hasn't anybody ever bothered to reach out?

Because they witnessed what we were like. Decided that they'd never associate with us.

The others aren't far behind, with the repeated sound of glass opening and closing. They come forward, stopping off to my sides, if my senses are correct, and look out to the ocean with me.

"Does anyone have anything to say?" Iris asks, almost reluctantly.

I turn to face the others. Though Julian tries his best to hide it, tears well in his eyes. "I loved my nephew," he says, head down. "I sided against him when he most needed the support. Sometimes I think... that if I had been there... things would've been different. I could've helped him, made him remember what was important."

"There's no point in dwelling, Julian," I whisper. "Trust me, I've tried. Don't blame yourself. It was misfortune, coincidence, anger, stupidity, but it wasn't your fault. No more than it was Evangeline's or mine. And I still blame myself."

Julian only nods, though I never told him how Evangeline, of all people, played a part in this.

Iris holds the urn close to her chest, chin nearly resting on it. "Cal was my friend. He understood what it was like to rule, to feel obligated to put his country above all else." She doesn't dare glance at me, and I feel a pang of guilt. "I wanted him to be happy, but part of me knew that he never would be, so long as he wore that crown." A tear washes out of her eye, travelling down her face as her mouth twists into a frown. "And I know, that he loved you all so much."

Not me, not just Julian. All of us.

Bart goes next, the rising breeze ruffling his hair. "He was a good man, king, and soldier. That's all that needs to be said."

Maven is looked to. Even by me. In his black clothing, his curling onyx hair, he looks like the Angel of Death, the white of his face not penetrated by the sunlight. He, Julian, and Bart elected to keep their shoes on. But while we all look to him, he stares out to the sea, eyes fixed on something that is perhaps invisible to everybody else.

"Cal knows," he says to the ocean, flicking his gaze to me. My turn.

My turn to look down at the whitish sand, and beg my mind for something to say about Cal. Nothing that a sentence or two could encompass. "I loved him," I simply say, but my mouth stays open, looking for more. "I wasted so much time, pretending otherwise. But we parted on good
terms, and he knows as well."

I move around myself, looking to where the sun will emerge. Move just a little deeper into the water, stopping only when the hems of my pants touch the ocean. The water's cool against my skin, caressing.

"You will see him again," Iris says, coming to stand next to me, her legs gliding through the water. I don't bother to hide the silent tears that have begun slinking down the my face. "In another life, I promise." Before I may object, step away from her, Iris grasps my shoulder with the hand that doesn't cautiously carry his urn. "This life is but a practice, a mere second compared to the next one."

The girl who showed me her religion... the Gods are real. Otherwise... Cal is irrevocably gone. And that cannot be. I shiver at the thought of it.

A splinter of pure, holy yellow cracks through the horizon, and Iris immediately lets go of my shoulder. "Bart," she says his name, and the Swift is at her other side, taking the urn from her. At some point, he rolled up his pants and removed his shoes. Iris looks at me. "We may take our turns, whispering any secrets you may have to the ashes. Bart asked to go first, as it's customary with the royal bloodline. Then friends, then family. Then lovers."

"Okay," I say, my voice fracturing at single word. Bart ventures several paces away, the water parting for him as he walks. Words come off his lips that I cannot hear, those secrets that Iris spoke of. The Swift and the Burner weren't especially close, but Bart was another Silver, loyal until the end.

Chalky, grey ash pours, Bart's steady hands moving side to side, until he deems his work adequate. My heart beats hard in my chest as he hands the task over to Iris, her black dress floating around her.

Iris takes the urn, moving further out into the water. Meanwhile, more fractions of the sun creep into sight, shafts of light blooming from it. I don't lessen myself to squinting or blinking. A sunrise signifies birth, and the ashes mean death, farewell. In that case, what am I to make of this? I clasp my hands behind my back, watching as she discharges Cal's remnants into the ocean. She takes great care with it, the water still moving for her as she walks through it. She, too, murmurs private words.

Julian and Maven step into the shallows of the water, rolled-up pants and bare feet. Iris ventures back to them, handing it to Julian.

"I thought he hated the water," Julian says over the steady lapping, taking another step into the ocean.

"He did," I respond. "But he wanted to conquer his fear of it. He told me." Before he died.

"He told me as well," Iris says. As if she's ashamed to admit it. "That's how I knew to come here."

In time, Julian says his piece with Cal, repeating the motions of Bart and Iris. He gives it to Maven, who goes out further into the water, whispering words of his own to Cal and the ocean. Iris again parts the water for him, the waves climbing halfway up his thighs.

Cal's brother returns, bowing his head imperceptibly as he hands the ashes of to me. Despite all who have touched it, the urn is cool beneath my hands, silver glinting in the newborn sunlight. I
take a moment to admire it, notice its intricate little carvings that I hadn't seen before.

The sunlight strikes the dark ocean, the urn, too. Turns it gilded.

The others retreat to the beach and I watch my feet as Iris pulls back the water for me. I walk a few paces, the sun scratching at my toes. "I love you," I murmur to the horizon. "I know you know that. But... I wish we had more time. We could've fixed so many things, Cal. I would've gone to a place like this with you, alive. Let Archeon go to hell, I don't care." I sigh, walking further. I only stop when the entirety of the sun shows itself, millions of miles away. "I loved you the whole time. Tried to deny it, tried to push it away, but I loved you. I'm sorry for everything. Maybe you were stupid, too, but it doesn't matter now, not when you're gone. You with the Silvers... me with the Reds. We promised to put each other first, and we failed. We both failed."

The words aren't prepared, but they aren't words that I haven't said in my head before. They come out of my barely-parted lips before I can protest, in slurred whispers. "It's okay, though. It's okay," I say more to myself in a comfort. "Iris says we'll see each other again, and I believe her."

Though he's nothing more than ashes, I close my eyes, letting my hands grip the edges of the metal, tilt it until its contents pours out in a semicircle. Until there's nothing left to dispose of.

When I turn back to the others, Iris faintly smiles, her dress seemingly dry. I find it in myself to smile back. I return to the sand, handing Bart the empty urn, who puts his hand out to receive it.

The others turn back, but my feet are rooted to the ground, unmoving and unwanting to move.

I open my mouth to explain, but Iris speaks first. "Stay here as long as you need, Mare. On the beach, in the house. They're practically yours."

So I stand on the beach. Sit, kneel. For hours.

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I don't find a reason to leave for the entire day.

When I do, it's because the sun is long gone, this day surely over.

On tight, aching limbs, I walk back towards the house; into it.

Everybody's asleep, from the looks of the desolate downstairs, not a lamp in sight or rumble of a coffee machine to hear. The moon's out, rendering another haunting night.

I take the stairs two at a time, not bothering with the railing. I'm not sure when I'll leave, or when the others will depart. I'm not in a distinct hurry to go anywhere, nor to stay, though. I could leave Ascendant tomorrow if I pleased, go be with my family... for all the travelling and war zone combat I've done, they'd be happy to have me back. Even though they've certainly heard of what happened in Archeon. To Cal, to me, what almost happened to everybody else.

When they begin writing letters to me, then I'll consider it. For now...

My room is ahead to my left, Bart and Iris's at the end of the hall-facing the ocean-if the muffled laughter is any indication. Julian's room is the first on the other hall, light pouring out of it. Late-night reading and studying.

That room. The one at the end of Julian's hall, the one completely shut, shrouded in shadows that the upstairs hallway lights don't reach. Uncannily similar to the boy himself.
I don't know when we're leaving, and after that... more than likely, I won't see Maven for a long, long time. If ever again. I have to tell him, so that he knows. A part of me will always, always hate him for what he is and all that he did; another sympathizes with his darkness, that evil that was forced into him as a child. The point is... if I'm never going to see him again, then it hardly matters.

I've spent enough sleepless nights for one more to be nothing.

Creeping past Julian's half-open door with as much stealth as I can muster, I cringe when I realize that he'll heard the knock either way. But that, too, doesn't really matter. I won't see Julian for a long time, either. He and Sara will probably go to a place of scholars, books and knowledge galore. Archeon is no place for him. It never has been.

I make it to Maven's room, and before I can regret it, my knuckles rap on his door thrice.

My heart beats twelve times in the seconds it takes for him to answer.

The door opens with a click, and Maven, still wearing his mourning clothes, appears, a quizzical expression written over his features.

Only when I see him do I remember that I'm in my black clothes as well, half-damp, half-dried with sea salt. "I need to speak to you," I say, trying to act diplomatic, though we're far past that. I'm careful to keep eye contact the entire time.

He responds by turning away, leaving the door open in silent invitation. The curtains in his room—similarly formatted to mine—are drawn, and he goes to open them, revealing the road we drove down to get here. The road I sprinted down, like a reckless, unhinged girl.

There's a bed, a bathroom, a closet. Furniture here and there, including a desk and bureau. Unremarkable shades of color. Completely unremarkable.

I open my mouth to blurt, to come out with it so that it's over, but he holds up a hand. As if ordering me to be quiet. And I wouldn't be, I would roll my eyes and tell him he's not king anymore, if not for the small, glossy square of paper he holds between fingers. "You say whatever you wish to say to me, but after I tell you about this photograph."

The photo is recognizable before he faces me, holding it out for my eyes to see. Mareena. The smiling, long-lost Silver girl, finally reunited with her people. At some royal party. There's a challenging glint in Maven's eyes, and I hold it, though it isn't ire or sarcasm in the exchange. A challenge for me to understand. I don't.

"What about it? Did you figure out when it was taken? At which ball?"

He must have grabbed it out of Cal's room right before we left that night, searching to see if Cal had made the stop for his Flamemakers.

But Maven sees the question on my face and forgets about the others I asked. "No, Mare. I didn't take this," he flaps the photo to further prove his point. "I found it, when Davidson and his men dragged me with them to look for you. In the hallway where there were markings of your struggle against Cal on the fogged-over windows."

He waits, gingerly sliding the paper onto the desk. All thoughts of what I have to tell him are dashed away, my mind trying to comprehend what Maven's talking about. What he's implying.
"You found it where they took me," I say. A statement.

Maven said that Flamemakers were missing from Cal's collection by the time we got to his room to check. But if that photo... if that photo was lying on the ground, where they took me... that photo that Maven and I had pondered over in Cal's room. The photo was on the floor of his room when we arrived, as though somebody had been in the midst of looking at it.

I try to drudge up every damning piece of information I let past my lips in that room. Maven and I had spoken of the Lakelanders' arrival, of Davidson's plan to recapture Cal, with me as the bait. Just before we left, I told Maven I was going to the barracks to shower.

"So what?" I ask, my voice already a crackling whisper. "They heard us from the hallway, and hid under the bed?" If what Maven's getting at is right, then the bed would've been the only decent place to hide. I still remember bending over to pick up that photo. Another few inches, and I would've seen them.

Does Iris know? The nymph that's sleeping in the other hall?

"That was my theory, yes." It would explain how they knew where to take me, coming back from the barracks. I offered that information to them on a silver platter. What tragic luck. At least if Cal had gotten captured, he wouldn't have been at Tyton's mercy.

Maven continues his thought. "And when I asked Iris about it, when we were hunting for you in the halls, she said yes: all three of them had been in that room. That's why that photo was on the ground. One of them was looking at it, but heard you on the other side of the door. They dropped it and hid under the bed."

Not only did he hear of those secrets, but of mine. How worthless and broken I felt, even then, before everything went wrong. The secrets I told to Maven, about how it'd be worth nothing if we lost, if Cal regained the throne and the Newbloods were put to death. About how I vomited over the men Cal slaughtered with his fire, only because the burn marks were too similar to lightning scars. And more. And more. And more.

"So he heard all of that."

"Yes," Maven says.

Cal showed no hint of it in the time that he spent with me after. In the safe house, chasing me through the tunnels. In his final breaths. He didn't want me to know.

Maven confessed things, too. He kept Cal's room like a tome, the only part of his brother he had left. Maybe that's why Cal said he forgave Maven. He heard that part. Heard every part.

The salty water begins dripping out of my eyes before I register it, and I don't wipe it away. I bare my tears to Maven, let him see the way that they shimmer in the moonlight, pouring in from the balcony. "After all this," I say. "And I can still cry, over something like this."

"You loved him," Maven says, sitting down on the ottoman in front of his bed. He stretches his long legs out. "So did I. I don't think I remembered it until it was too late."

At his silence, I recall what I came here to do. With footfalls that don't make a sound, I shut the door to Maven's room, realizing anybody could be listening in on this conversation. Then I go to sit by him, crisscrossing my legs.

The distant light from the hallways gone, it's the spectral and periwinkle moonlight that enables me
to see Maven's profile, looking straight forward. Shadows and planes and valleys. Trying to ignore me, what I came here to do. His breaths, I notice, are perhaps too heavy.

"I-"

"You read them," he says, looking ahead.

Of course he'd know. Maven always knows, and he's barely holding it together, the cracks in his mask spider-webbing apart. He breathes out shakily, and I nearly expect him to bitterly laugh.

My clothes, cold and wet and salty, stick to my skin, a omnipresent reminder of where I've been today and what I've been through. I cried and sobbed for hours on that beach, barely holding back my screams. And I continue to cry now.

"I thought that you should know," I say. "But it appears you already do." Maybe he changed his mind. Decided that my eyes should never grace his written words, yet he never got the chance to discard them.

"I've been watching you since we arrived. You look at me differently. More broken, more reluctant to be cruel."

How could I? Those letters chipped at every part of Maven's tarnished heart and soul.

"You say... you say that you didn't remember you loved Cal until it was too late. But you remembered?"

He nods slowly. "Just in the last few weeks. Maybe being around him in the Silence was what it was, I couldn't tell you. I don't know if she's finally left my head. I started dreaming again. Nightmares. But you already know that."

"What do you dream of?" I ask, willing him to look at me. He doesn't.

It was vaguely written about in his letters. Darkness and the constant feeling of being alone. Not specifically of what, however.

"Most of all? I dream of that place Farley brought me to when you and I spoke. That place... I still don't know what it really was, but it reminded me..." he pauses, hesitant to tell me. "Of a place my mother sent me to. For punishment, when I tried to defy her. It was when I was little, still hell-bent on being my own person. Not yet absolutely terrified of her."

Farley sent me there only once, and as a messenger. I hated it enough, but it wasn't a punishment. A cold and dark and lonely place, surely though.

"Sometimes I dream of you," he quickly adds. "Of the day you escaped. The second time you escaped. My mother, my father. Cal. Thomas," he even dares to say. "I don't know what changed. But one day, after the masquerade... I began to dream again. Not pleasant dreams, but dreams all the same."

After the masquerade... right when Farley discovered her powers. It isn't possible... no.

But it is. Not certain, but possible.

"Farley could help you," I admit, daring to say it. I don't know how he'd react to having another Whisper inside of his head, but I say it anyway, in case.
Maven's breath hitches again. "Isn't she psychotic?"

It's not a yes, but it isn't a no, either. I shrug. "She's getting better. She came to visit me in my apartment, was the one who told me about this trip. She's... stable; going back to Montfort, to see Clara and my family. Someday, she could help you. If that's what you wanted."

"Would you be there?" Maven asks, and I'm not sure where the question comes from.

He looks at me, that lonely darkness in him. He's been alone for such a long, long time, simmering in his own furies. So have I.

I remind myself that I'm not alone. That I still have my family, the Scarlet Guard, even if I don't deserve them. But Maven and I will always share a darkness, honed by those months that he kept me at Whitefire against my will. I understand him, and he understands me, as proven time and time again by all of our heated discussions we've had in secret.

He understands the pain.

"If that's what you'd like, then I would, yes."

"And in the meantime, are you going back to your family? To Montfort?"

These last months... I've committed terrible, awful acts. Tainted my soul more than I like to think about. "I don't think I can go back. I'm not ready to see them."

Maven doesn't have to ask to understand why I'm not prepared to return. He quirks a brow. "Then where are you going to go?"

I sigh through my nostrils. "For the first seventeen years of my life, I thought the farthest I'd ever go would be the Choke. And my life would end right there. Now that I've survived, I don't think I know how to live. I don't know anything about this country past warzones, military bases, and capital cities. I suppose for my lack of knowledge, I'll stay here for awhile. Iris said that it'd be okay. And where will you go?"

The confident, steady king I knew is gone. Not a trace of him to be seen. "I have just as little of an idea as you."

I swallow, feeling the offer form in my throat.

"You could stay here, if you'd like. Maybe we could... help each other." Heal.

The boy king's eyes glint with a new emotion, one that I don't believe I've seen in a very long time.

"Thank you," he whispers into my ear.

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to téloς

THE END
A/N

A very large part of me is very happy to be done with this story. Checking my word count, it's somewhere around 240,000 words. Depending on the words/page count, that's 600-800 pages. Congratulations, if you made it here, and thank you. As much as my extreme passion and love of Red Queen inspires me to write this, you guys, the people who contribute to my view count and follow count, and comment on this story, equally made this ride worth it.

I wrote this story because I had just finished writing my first fanfiction, Bleeding Crown, which was essentially the same idea as this, as it was a fan-made Red Queen 4. Looking back on my first story, even then, I was extremely critical of it, and desired to make it better. After all, the actual War Storm wasn't coming out for a couple of months, right? Ha. I started writing this story in late December of 2017. I finished writing it today, June 17th, 2019. Ouch.

Yet as tiring and as stressful as this story has been to keep up with, I suppose I did it. My update schedule is notoriously inconsistent, this story having sometimes getting two posts a week, and every so often not being updated for three or four weeks. To that, I apologize. I truly love this story, but it's very easy to get into slumps.

I did not outline this story. For when I began, there was a vague ending in my mind, various scenes that I was certain should be included. Perhaps had I outlined it, it would've been shorter, less confusing, etc. If anything, however, War Storm was a learning experience for me, and turned Red Queen into something so much more than a book. I've made this plot, these characters, into my own, and that makes me really happy.

From here on, I will be at last continuing Calore Dance Academy. Hopefully I'll have an update out by the end of the week. (To those of you who are living for that next chapter, again, more apologies.) This summer, I also plan on writing some original works. I don't plan on publishing these.

As I've mentioned before on my Wattpad profile, if enough people are interested, I'd be happy to write a single-chapter alternate ending, of which would detail the immediate happenings of Mare and Cal's story, had Cal been able to get help and survive. I'm also considering bonus chapters, which would tell of what's happening in the months following the end of Epilogue 5.

And of course, as somebody who will always hold the Red Queen universe near and dear to her heart, I will do any sort of one shot at all, in a book I'd call Shattered Fates. These stories wouldn't have to have anything to do with my version of War Storm, just the universe in general. Please message me if you have any ideas!

For updates on my writing, follow me @Natthefantastic on Wattpad. I'm also on Fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own, but I'm the most active on Wattpad, and you'll be most likely to be aware of delays (and more) if you follow me on this platform. Additionally, I've noticed-as I do my writing on Wattpad itself-that formatting doesn't carry over onto Archive, such as with italics and bolds and underlines. (I realized 3/4 of the way into this story that I could've just checked a different box, but I suppose it was too late for that...)

Again, thank you all for this journey. I've changed so much in the lapse of time I've been writing this story, not merely as a writer, but also as a person. My writing style is ever growing and changing, and I look back at even the early chapters of this story and cringe.

Lastly, if any of you just want to talk Red Queen-or any of fandom, depending-message me
whenever you feel like it! I love talking Red Queen, as you can imagine. Or, if you're going through a difficult time, whether that be with friends, family, or yourself, I'm always here to listen and do my best to help. I'm happy to offer support and whatever advice I might have. Life isn't easy for us teens!

Love you guys ~Nat

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!