Beauty in the Ashes

by Alasdair_you

Summary

The weight of two crowns rested on Emory Bordelon's shoulders for the first twenty-one years of his life and, according to the court, it seems a weight he was custom-built to carry. When terrible events shift that burden to his younger brother, Emory is left with nothing but the ashes of the world he used to live in and the nightmares of what ruined it all. The only real anchor he has left to the land that used to be his is one northern rebel with a penchant for self-destruction.

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Atara never planned to be a leader. His life was spent cleaning up after the messes his older brother left behind, always aware that he was really only ever destined to be the extra prince. The contingency plan should something terrible happen to Emory. When it does, he'll either carry the mantle or he'll be crushed by it.

Notes

First: This is part of a series. If you haven't read the first one, I recommend you do that first. Second: This contains a major character death. You have been warned twice now. Third: I am considering renaming this because I've never been hot on the title. Do not be alarmed if that happens.
Finally: Hello! I will try to update this fairly frequent, but I am editing and rewriting chunks of it. Those of you that followed me here from other places will recognize that (the ending is going to change drastically, you've been warned.) Those of you that are new: Welcome aboard!

I am also going to try my very best to answer comments and questions. I love hearing from you, so please feel free to voice and share your thoughts.
Chapter 1

My biggest problem growing up was always unbearable wanderlust and a crippling fear of the outside world. I wanted to see it. I wanted to live the stories that my parents told me, to see the places that Cyril recounted when he absently ran his fingers through my ever-darkening hair. I wanted to comb the evergreen forests of Glacia, stomp through the marshes, explore the uncharted areas of the ocean...I wanted a life outside of the palace walls but I had realized at a very young age that there was no life for me outside of the palace walls. There was only the indignant scorn of both Lierians and Corians, because my brother and I?

We were neither.

Among the Lierians, we were bastard, godless heathens. Especially me, the second son that shouldn't exist. There were those that believed Cyril blessed, or, at least, they said that to his face, but behind closed doors there was talk. There could be only one Infinito and he was Lierian. He was the Lierian living God. We could not, according to half of the pale, ghostly, impish people my Lheiro led, be Lierian gods when the King of Coria was our father.

Which brings me to the Court, who never thought anything better of us and could barely stomach the idea of calling Emory the Crown Prince. There had been livid, threatening, terrible anger when my brother had been moved to the Crown's Tower on his sixteenth birthday. My father was having none of it. People that couldn't mind their tongues about Cyril and us often lost them or found themselves on the receiving end of one of my father's many, very creative, punishments...banished from the noble district in Coryth, their heirs promised to the priesthood...people had learned quickly not to speak up publicly about the royal family. At least, not the wealthy ones. Little could be done about the opinions of the commoners who flourished under Fox's rule but still had bigoted, racist opinions about his marriage and his children.

And what could really be done to the masses? Striking out against them could have led to rebellion and so his only option was to keep us close. I learned to fear the outside world the way that Cyril once had. I balked at the idea of traveling with my parents through the market, though I ached to see it and to be among people. I wanted to live--to really live and learn and prove that I was more than just a bastard brat or a miracle baby because there were those that thought that too.

They were fewer and less vocal in their beliefs but some people called my name like it was a prayer when they saw me. There was a small, quiet sect of the Lierian nation that revered me as a real God. Not just a living God, but a real God capable of performing the things that a God could perform.

I was not, in fact, any sort of God. At all. I was just a boy--just a boy that loved to write what he saw, to describe in vivid detail the beauty that existed even in the ugliest of things. I found it in my father's mutilated back, in my Lheiro's angular markings and tiny, frail looking body, in my brother's wild behavior and avid smiles, and in my own blistering markings that Raevar had developed a poultice for not long after my birth. I even found beauty in that, though it was a watery, slimy, rum colored liquid that smelled very faintly of honey and ale. I had to rub it into the searing tattoos every morning to stave off the shrieking burn that nauseated me in the summer months. Emory was lucky he had no marks on his mouth because the stuff tasted as hideous as it looked but it healed. I could get through a day without wanting to strip my clothes off and soak in ice. It provided a chance at a quiet, normal life and there was beauty in that.

My parents called me their little artist, though I couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler, honestly. Cyril said that art had more forms than the canvas. Fox brought a poet in to teach me prose, a lovely Lierian woman who, at first, regarded me with an attitude that was dubious, at best, but she'd grown
to be the greatest teacher I had, outside of my parents. I spent my afternoons with her in the gardens and our lessons consisted of the two of us just talking. We spoke of things we loved and things we hated and how it was impossible to hate anything you hadn't first loved. We spoke about the world, what people thought of me and my brother, and we spoke about my brother himself.

I recounted Emory's constant antics and how he had a special way of making Cyril want to pull his hair out. My Lheiro was an emotionally fragile creature and not a week went by that my brother didn't have him in tears over something stupid. He walked along the edges of the battlements, arms out, balancing as he hopped from brick to brick. He was tall like Fox was tall, all long limbs and slim body--like a big cat. He'd nearly fallen several times--a fall that would, without a shadow of a doubt--kill him. He often slept through Court, when he deigned to show up at all, and I had yet to live a day when one of the servants wasn't railing against Fox about 'that wretched boy' who had no respect for anyone but himself. They were right, of course, and Emory's fights with Fox were explosive and loud. More often than not, it was one of those fights that caused Cyril's tears and he would come to my room, knock once, and slip inside. Then he'd sit against the door until they dried up and I'd let him read whatever I'd written that day, even if it was just added notes to what I'd been working on the day before.

And it was odd because I never considered myself incredibly close to Cyril. I loved him. He was my Lheiro and he'd kissed my skinned knees as a child, comforted me through my nightmares, and told me stories about the world he'd traveled through when I asked him for them. Surprisingly enough though, Cyril was closer to Emory than he was to me. I suppose they had some kind of bond, having lived together without the rest of us for the first five years of my brother's life. They'd been through things--rough, horrific, ugly things that even I wasn't sure I could find anything beautiful in. I understood the things he'd done to keep my brother alive. There was something to be said about that...that bond that was forged in tragedy and triumph. I didn't envy Emory his relationship with our Lheiro because I had the same sort of bond with Fox.

My earliest memories are all of my father. Everything else is very dim. He was the light of my life. He carried me on his shoulders even though, as I later found out, it was agonizing for him to lift me up high enough to sit there. He spoke to me like we were friends and I sought the safety of his arms whenever I felt threatened the same way that Emory had always sought Cyril. I sat in Fox's lap through Court in my early years, slept on his chest during my naps, and listened to his stories with the same rapt interest that I listened to everyone's stories only I asked for his more. He taught me to walk, to talk, to lace my boots, to put my clothes on, and to swim. When I had questions, I asked him for answers. When I sat on the floor while my parents spoke, surrounded by my toys, I sat at Fox's feet and often leaned back against his legs.

The closest bond I had with Cyril were these moments when both Fox and Emory became intolerable to the both of us and because I was a quiet, non-confrontational individual, more concerned with pleasing people, he came to me for an escape and he always apologized afterward like he was putting me in some terrible position. Maybe he thought Fox asked me about what went on when he cried against my door or maybe he thought Emory was jealous over it or angry that Cyril didn't take his side in whatever screaming match was going on in the living area of the monarchial quarters.

The night before my life changed, they'd had one of those fights. It was a particularly bad one, complete with Emory storming off and slamming a door so hard that the pictures on the walls rattled. There was always silence after that--pervasive silence, punctuated by Cyril's hiccuping while I read my latest writing to him in barely audible whispers. "I hate that they fight like this," he breathed, rolling his eyes so that they were looking up at the ceiling. He looked particularly young then. All Lierians almost always looked young though. The only one I knew that looked old was Raever but he was so old that I was starting to believe he was maybe breaking some records. To be fair, both of
my parents had aged well though. It was just that particular moment. I could see my face reflected in his. I looked more like him than Fox, a fact I was aware of, but it was hard for me to see sometimes.

"They're just too alike," I answered softly. "It's not a fight so much as it is...an ocean hitting a cliffside. Neither of them is ever going to move, not really. Emory loves him. He just doesn't like being told he's being an ass."

Cyril snorted and reached out, touching his fingertips to my cheek. "You're an old soul, Atara," he told me, almost laughing while he wiped the last of his tears off of his face. He said that frequently. So did Fox. "For the record, your father doesn't like being told when he's being an ass either." He got almost unsteadily to his feet and I followed, acutely aware of how much taller I was than him at the age of sixteen and I wasn't considered tall, by any definition of the word. Cyril was just extraordinarily tiny. I often wondered how he'd been capable of giving birth to two healthy, full-sized infants.

He kissed my forehead and had to stand on his toes to do it, even when I leaned forward a bit at his obvious intentions. Then he was gone, like a ghost. Like he'd never even been there. It was easy to miss him, even when you were staring right at him. He was inhumanly quiet, inhumanly small, and though he was fragile looking, I knew that he wasn't actually fragile. I knew, in fact, that Cyril was more capable of putting a knife in someone's ribs than Fox ever would be.

I slept unhappily that night and woke early. Early enough that I ran right into Fox on his way to Court and he squeezed me so tightly that my back made an unhealthy cracking noise that felt incredible. "You're too stiff for a sixteen-year-old, tiny," he told me quietly and looped an arm over my shoulders. Tiny was a nickname--a remnant from my early childhood when I'd been smaller than Emory ever had been. I was still smaller than Emory ever had been, though I was, by no means, tiny anymore.

Fox led me out to the dining room and we had a quiet, easy breakfast together. "Do you have plans for the day?" he eventually asked me. "You've no lessons." He glanced at his watch like he was making sure it was the proper date and I laughed but nodded. "No, no lessons today. I might tag after Emory, hit the shooting gallery, wonder around aimlessly and run into people that will complain about my daydreaming to you later," I admitted and he grinned, ruffling my hair as he got to his feet.

Fox tugged his coat on. "Keep your brother out of trouble. If I hear about him shacking up with one of the kitchen girls again, I'm taking it out of his hide." He would never, of course, but I nodded anyway and watched him leave.

I stared out the window for felt like hours but was probably only another forty minutes as the sun rose, painting the sky with pinks and oranges, chasing away the dark blue and the last hints of the stars. Eventually, Cyril came out of my parents' bedroom and kissed the top of my head as he walked by, ruffling my hair in the process. They both had a habit of doing that far more often than I cared for. He hummed and then wrinkled his nose. "I do wish you'd stayed blond," he mused out loud and I rolled my eyes. My hair had darkened to a color almost the same as Fox's, just a few shades lighter. A dark, rich brown that bordered black. "Not that I mind. Would have been nice though."

"You're not eating?"

"Taking breakfast with my council," he explained, shrugging his white seal skin on. He shot me a smile. "I'll see you at supper. Keep Emory--"

"Out of trouble. Yeah. Dad already told me. You do know how ridiculous that is? That I'm almost
six years younger than him and I'm keeping him out of trouble?" Cyril smiled almost apologetically and strapped his weapon belt on over his coat as he headed out of the room.

This was routine for us though. I expected the warning every time I had a day off of lessons and Emory was done with lessons entirely. They would both warn me to keep him out of trouble, ruffle my hair, and off they went to their respective duties. Cyril would meet with the Lierian council that had been established following the Immaran war. They would talk about the state of the tribes. Fox would go sit Court and hand down punishment to whoever deserved it. Emory, at twenty-one years old, still needed a babysitter and the job fell to me.

I headed out shortly afterward, a book of bound blank paper and a stick of graphite tucked beneath my arm as I meandered toward the Crown's Tower. Emory met me halfway there, all smiles.

My brother is a radiant individual. He always has been. He was prone to acting out, wild behavior, recklessness, and insubordination. He fought constantly, mostly with good reason because he wouldn't tolerate any of the other boys in our age group calling him a savage bastard or the son of a whore. I couldn't blame him. I'd taken a few swings at some assholes for that too and while I was smaller than Emory, I was, by no means, incapable of holding my own. I was as trained as he was, as trained as Fox and my uncles, Brentlyn and Riordan. Hand-to-hand combat, archery, swordsmanship—you name it, I'd been taught it, but I excelled at archery the way that Brentlyn and my cousin Meyer did. They'd moved out of the palace years before though and I only ever saw Meyer and Olivia on holidays, truthfully. They lived in an estate on the coast with my uncles Brentlyn and Riordan and my aunt, Isabella.

The thing about my brother was that while he may have been destructive and impossible, he was always happy. He was the first person to stop if he got the impression that you were upset and he did everything in his power to make the day brighter for you. He was funny and prone to jokes and pranks. He walked with a hop in his step that told of a constant, almost unbelievable joy.

Emory had suffered. His early life was tragic—so much so that neither he nor my parents were keen on talking about it. I knew that he remembered a time before he'd even met Fox, that his earliest memories were Lierian lodges, constant terror, and the pervasive belief that he would be poached on their escape from Glacia.

And he nearly had been.

So he lived his life in a way that only someone that has faced death could live it: Without flinching and without fear. If Emory was fire, I was water. If he was light, I was the dark. He was the sun and I was the moon, always chasing him over the horizon but never able to touch him. My life and joy in my brother's eyes was contagious to everyone but me. Even Fox was touched by it sometimes, despite his almost constant irritation with Emory's behavior. I yearned to be as adventurous as Emory, as strong as Emory, as able to lead as Emory...and I knew that I never would be. I wasn't cut out for that sort of thing and I was the second son. None of it was really required of me. I skated through my life doing what I wanted.

But that yearning was why, when he caught up with me and grabbed me around the middle, spun me around once, and sat me back down, I didn't turn down his demand.

"Lets sneak out and go to the beach," he whispered, leaning down so that he could talk against my ear, which left hot breath on my face and I grimaced and pushed at him. I didn't appreciate closeness, not the way that he did. I didn't run around finding kitchen girls or boys to fuck or to fuck me. I'd had one tumble between the sheets with a scullery maid and it had been...sloppy. Quick. Not at all satisfying. I hadn't repeated it and she hadn't come back so I took that to be a bad thing and opted to lose myself in my words.
And normally, I would have said no to him. I would have rolled my eyes and told him that Fox would take it out of his hide. The problem with that was that one, Emory was an adult and the idea of a spanking past the age of eight wasn't really threatening. Two, neither Fox nor Cyril had ever, in all the time they'd been parents, raised a hand to either of us. Cyril had pinched my arm on several occasions and dragged me by my ear when I was being particularly difficult but that was the extent of physical pain inflicted by our parents. Considering their size difference, the idea of Cyril trying to drag Emory anywhere was comical. Emory could--and had--picked Cyril up and slung him over his shoulder while our Lheiro squealed and beat his tiny fists against Em's back, demanding he be sat down.

The way he was smiling though, all wide, mint colored eyes and toothy, wolfish grin--I couldn't say no. My anxiety rose up in my stomach and I rubbed my nose, convinced he was wearing too much cologne because he reeked of the stuff--sort of evergreen like...and then I nodded. "Yeah. Sure. Do you have an idea for ditching the guards?"

Emory looked surprised. I never left the palace, not unattended and not without our parents. In part, it was because I was still a child. In part, it was that crippling fear that stifled my life. His smile widened though and he tucked me under his arm. "Oh, brother mine, I always have a plan," he laughed, knuckling my head.

It was the worst decision I'd ever made. I didn't know it then, but agreeing to Emory's 'plan' would ruin his life. It would change mine forever.

And it rocked the narrow world we knew.
Sneaking out of the palace was easier than most people assumed, especially for Emory, who had the guard rotation down to a science because he fucking scheduled it himself. He knew exactly how to ditch the two following us just beyond the kitchen and how to slip out through the tiny gate back there where the staff came and left. He stopped first, of course, to flirt shamelessly with one of his kitchen girls while I tried not to roll my eyes from beneath my hood. It was a worthwhile effort though because he left with a rucksack full of travel food and a bottle of rich, honey flavored liquor. That was the hardest part. The rest was just a walk through the market with our hoods up and our heads down until we reached the dirt path that led down to the beach. We had to practically run through the port to avoid being seen by the naval recruits for the armada.

Emory frequented a beach that was a ways off from the one in Coryth. We had to walk a solid hour along the sand, away from the crowds, and then climb over a rocky hill that he informed me was actually part of a cave that you could reach when the tide was low. It was an old smuggler's den, according to him, and I immediately wanted to see it because what was more worthy of a few pages of my journal than the grimy, gritty reality of smuggling. I tried climbing to the edge and peering over, my anxiety over being outside ebbing away with Emory beside me. My brother had been my protector for the entirety of my life. I could hold my own but he never let anyone swing on me without a violent reaction of his own.

I couldn't see much but we stayed on top of that rock for awhile, passing the bottle back and forth. I tore apart an orange and split it with him, watching the boats on the horizon head in toward the port full of goods for the market or empty and coming back to fill up and ship out again. I swung my legs, my boots gradually saturating as the waves smashed against the sides of the rocks below us. It was too cold yet to swim but the quiet of being out of the palace was nice. Feeling normal was nice. Emory missed that, I think. Being normal...and I liked this. I liked it more than I'd thought. The world, it seemed, wasn't the ugly place that I'd been taught to fear. I enjoyed Emory's company and the solitude we had out there with nobody watching us, overhearing our conversations, or judging what we were with those silent, accusatory eyes. There was just a cold sea breeze that ruffled my hair, a storm bubbling on the horizon--a mass of thick clouds as black as pitch turning the water choppy and white, and the bottle of liquor that grew more and more empty as time passed.

"Why were you fighting with Fox last night?" I asked eventually and he took the bottle back, holding it loosely between his legs while a ship with a blood red sail came tearing across the sea,
trying to outrun the storm. Red sails meant armada and my father's seal stood out in stark white in the middle of it, a skeletal tree and a tiny fox.

Emory shrugged and a small smile crossed his lips. "The reasons for not fighting with him are less numerous than the reasons for fighting with him," he said eventually. "Court, kitchen girls, reckless behavior, setting a bad example for you." I snorted at the last one, a little bit more than drunk, and watched a streak of lightning sear through the clouds rolling in. "Yesterday it was because I was 'antagonizing the priests' at the Temple. Like they have any right to tell me I'm a godless heathen. One of them started on that 'son of a whore' bullshit and I popped him in the mouth. Fox saw it happen. He was livid, with both of us. The priest is losing his tongue for being incapable of controlling heinous speech. I got a verbal lashing that would make one of the physical ones look mild."

"You know we have a public image we have to keep up with. They judge you twice--"

"Twice as hard as any other prince," he drawled, parroting back what Cyril always said. "Because the Lierians don't consider us Lierian and the Corians don't consider us Corian." The rain started spattering down around us, almost too cold to be tolerable but again, we were three sheets to the wind. I could barely sit up and I was having a philosophical conversation with my brother about our place in the world. Emory didn't do philosophy. Emory dealt in black and white, good and bad. He left the gray stuff to me to sort out with flowery language and deep sessions of pondering thought.

I took the bottle from him again and glanced down the beach where three figures were walking toward us, pushing at each other and laughing in the distance. I didn't pay them any attention, choosing instead to flop back and stare up at the sky while the storm picked up and began pelting my face. A particularly sharp wind swirled around us and I smelled it then--sweet like syrup, cloying and beckoning, and I sat up quickly, nearly falling from the wet, slippery rocks in the process. "You're in heat!" I exclaimed, eyes wide. My heart had jumped to my throat. Humans, at least, couldn't smell it when Emory or Cyril hit their heat but I could smell it. I remembered the overwhelming cologne from that morning. "And you hid it from me to get me to come out here with you! There are Lierians all over the cities now, Emory! You could get us in trouble!"

And by trouble I meant jumped, held down, and made to perform wicked, wicked acts with lust-driven Lierian men reacting to the pheromone charge of a heat.

Emory seemed unfazed by it. He waved it off like it was nothing but I knew it wasn't. The first two days were tolerable. Uncomfortable, or so he said, but tolerable. The third and fourth, however, were monstrous. I'd heard him scream through them, desperate and needy and out of control, begging for things that he didn't actually want but that biology dictated he plead for. I dreaded the day it happened to me and while nobody had been sure if Emory would have heats, the fact that he did made them certain that I would as well. "It's only the second day," he argued flippantly, getting unsteadily to his feet. "And it's raining. We ought to get home or we'll catch sick and the fathers will know."

I couldn't help but giggle at the way he rolled his eyes when he said 'the fathers,' which was a term we'd coined together in our youth when they were being intolerable or overbearing. Olivia and Meyer had often referred to my aunt and uncle as 'the parents,' accompanied by an eye-roll or a huff. We'd made it our own.

I slipped down after him, scraping my palms on the harsh, black rocks in the process. I could hear the sand crunch under the feet of the three boys that had been hiking toward us and then, even drunk, I felt it. It was a physical charge in the air, a thickening that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It wasn't pre-cognition. I was no psychic, of course, but I was Lierian. My sense of smell
and my vision were something like ten times what a human's senses were. I could smell the change, the lust-addled rage and I knew without turning around to see their faces that at least one of them was a city-dwelling Lierian or a halfling.

And then word. That singular, vicious word that slipped over my ears, carried by the now howling storm. "Heat." It was hissed and my eyes widened. I whirled to face them, convinced I was about to vomit my heart and even in the growing dark, I could see the luminescence of his pale face and the reddish-brown lock of hair that hung over his forehead. He was a halfling and he was big. Big like Emory, with wider shoulders. He may not have even been a halfling. Maybe one of his parents was, but he seemed too large to be half Lierian. The pale, lilac color of his eyes gave it away though. I remembered every terrible thing I'd been told that could happen to us outside the palace walls. I recalled every horror story, every reason for my crippling fear, and I became concerned that, in my abject terror, my legs were going to give out.

Emory's hand hit my chest and pushed, jerking me out of my fear-frozen state. "Run," he whispered. "Run, Atara!"

I didn't have to be told again. I was already gone and I could hear him behind me because three on one--with that hulking mountain of a halfling--was an impossible fight. If we'd been armed, maybe we could have taken them. My brother was a fierce fighter and when his adrenaline got going, he didn't feel pain. He could take a beating until he was little more than pulp and insist he was fine at the end while he wiped blood out of his mouth.

Terror gave me speed but all five of us were drunk. I could smell the rum in the air from their breath while I tore up the side of the beach toward the scrub grass and the collections of capsized ships that hugged the start of the Wall of Coryth that ringed the parts of the city not barricaded by the art of Mother Nature herself. I kept telling myself that if we could reach the wall there would be guards. City guards, of course, but they would recognize us. If we could reach the wall, we would be okay.

We never reached the wall though.

I heard the giant catch up with Emory, the rush of my brother's breath being knocked from his body and the sound of them rolling over the sand. I turned to look and it slowed me half a step, just long enough for one of the smaller thugs to catch me. His arms locked around my middle and we stumbled, tumbling down into the scrub grass, a mess of limbs. I punched at him, screaming for Emory out of instinct because it was always Emory that saved me but there was no indication that my brother had gotten up from his fall with the giant. My captor landed on top of me and straddled my hips and I could feel him, hard and hot through his trousers against my stomach. Panic gripped my chest and I realized how heavy he was--how much larger he was than me. He had Lierian in him, like the first, but only his eyes betrayed it--an almost peachy brown.

"No!" I screamed at him, thrashing beneath him. I kicked at the sand and clawed at him until he pinned my arms and his mouth came down on mine. He tasted of the rum I smelled and I gagged at the feel of his tongue through my muffled shrieking. My rage got the better of me then and I caught his lip, pulling and biting until I tasted blood and it was him that was screaming. He let go of my hands to hold my throat and push me back, away from his mouth, until my teeth released him and I spit a chunk of bloody meat into the sand beside me. "Get off me! Get the fuck off of me!"

"It's not you!" he wailed in response, ignoring his pain because he was lost in that hormone riddled haze that heat induced. He pressed his face into the skin at my throat, leaving bloody marks on me while I beat at his sides with small fists. "You're just a stupid little boy!"

I grabbed a handful of dirt and sand and ground it into his eyes. He howled in pain and rolled off of
me so that I scrambled to my feet, nearly blind by the rain. There was only one of them on me, which meant two of them were on Emory and I needed to even that out. I wobbled forward. I'd fallen awkwardly and wrenched a muscle in my leg in the tussle with the bloodied creature I left behind, scratching at his eyes. There wasn't a part of me that didn't hurt but I couldn't focus on that. I could see them then, a tangled mess of naked limbs in the sand, the outline of my brother's wrists held tightly in someone hands while he was crushed between them. I could make out shuddering shoulders and the way his head lolled like he wasn't quite there.

I'd never known blind rage before. I wasn't the type to get angry. I got frightened. I relied on Fox and Emory to get angry for me but this...this made me angry. This made me sick. This made all of my pain cry out for him, sympathetic and yearning to feel some of what he felt if only to make it easier. My tears came hot and livid, my fists clenched, my heart beat like a war drum and I heard a guttural, inhuman howl break from my throat in an effort to release some of the anger that had turned my blood to molten metal. I ran for them. I didn't know what I was going to do except throw myself at the smaller on with all of my body weight and hope I could claw his eyes to ribbons before he managed to hurt me. I didn't even care if he did hurt me because it meant there was one less person fucking my brother.

I didn't make it to them. I got halfway there and my original opponent caught me by the back of my coat. I heard the material tear and my legs slipped. I fell backward and my back hit the ground, knocking the breath from my body but he'd picked the wrong moment to piss me off even further. I was suffocating but I was too angry to worry about air. My limbs functioned without thought and I rolled, jumping up to my feet. He may have been bigger than me but in the storm that was my mind, a tiny eye developed to lend me some calm. I was trained and he was some gutter rat. I could do this. I could take him. He was an obstacle stopping me from my greater goal.

But he was a gutter rat and before I struck at him, he'd thrown sand in my face the way I'd done to him. I shrieked and his arms were around me again while I kicked and thrashed. "You know," he said against my ear, his breath putrid and hot. "I was going to fuck you anyway but I think I'll just let you watch what they're doing to your friend."

"My...my friend!" I arched my back and screamed my fury, stomping at his feet like an annoyed child because there wasn't much left to do. He had my arms pinned. "He's my brother! He's your prince! Get off of him! Get your filthy fucking hands off of my brother! I'm going to kill you! I'll hunt every one of you down and I'll fucking kill you!"

He snorted and I don't know if he was that drunk or if they were that fucking stupid to not realize that the only Lierians that had heats were the Infinito line and there were only three of us in the entire world. "Watch him," he snarled and his arms tightened.

He sniffed and I don't know if he was that drunk or if they were that fucking stupid to not realize that the only Lierians that had heats were the Infinito line and there were only three of us in the entire world. "Watch him," he snarled and his arms tightened.

I didn't want to watch. I didn't want to know and I kept shaking my head to say no. I wouldn't look. I wouldn't do that to him. I didn't want to see him like this and he wouldn't want me to see him like this but I could hear it. The slap of skin on skin, the lewd grunting of that massive halfling, and the things he said that made my stomach churn. "You better stop fighting it," he warned. "You're going to take every fucking inch, you little whore, and I've got no problem splitting you open even wider to do it." I heard Emory spit and my eyes opened, surprised by his defiance in the face of pain and I saw the second one shift, lifting him up so that I could see the way his body was joined with that vile creature's. The second one mimicked the position of the first, his hand gripping himself tightly while he probed at an entrance that was already in use.

And then he jerked Emory down and the scream that tore from my brother's throat should have reached the Gods themselves. I screamed for him. I begged because he wouldn't or maybe he couldn't. Maybe at that point, he shut down. He certainly stopped moving. His limbs went limp.
They didn't have to hold his wrists anymore and even in the dark of the storm, I could see the way the wet sand ran red beneath them. "Stop them!" I pleaded with my own captor. "Please! They're going to kill him! You have to do something! You can't let him die. Emory!"

I got no reaction from him either though and my sobbing became hysterical. I convinced myself that he was dead and that deepened my anger. I set my jaw and squared my shoulders, then threw my head back as hard as I could. I heard the crunch of the man's nose when I made impact. I felt the warm spurt of blood down the back of my neck and the dizzying pain. He let go of me though and I didn't hesitate. I caught the smaller of the two with my brother around the neck when I ran at him. I knocked him out of his position and he went sprawling into the sand in a pile of driftwood and, enraged and emboldened by the homicidal urge that tore through my bloodstream, I picked up one of the pieces of wood and I straddled his chest while I beat him with it. I brought it down over and over again on his face, heard the horrified noises of the two behind me, heard the giant's panicked order to run because I was fucking crazy, and I didn't stop. I didn't stop when his eyes were smashed back into his brains. I didn't stop when his skull split and his teeth fell out. I didn't stop when I felt him stop breathing.

I stopped because I remembered Emory.

I dropped the makeshift weapon, sticky and red up to my elbows, and I crawled over the sand to where he lay motionless in a pile of torn clothing and congealing blood. He was blue-lipped but he was shivering and shivering meant that he was alive so I peeled my coat off and I draped it over him the best that I could, given our size difference. "Emory, open your eyes," I ordered quietly. The rain was beginning to slow, just enough so that the sun was peering out behind the clouds, casting little rays of light over the thrashing ocean but it was still late evening. Supper would have started in the palace. Cyril and Fox would notice our absence. Or, at least, they would notice mine and that was unheard of. They would probably look for Emory and realize he wasn't in the palace either, connect the dots, and send the guards.

My brother's eyes didn't open though. He was still bleeding and one side of his face was the color of plums. I didn't know what to do. I could tend to basic injuries. I could even set bones but this...this was something I didn't even know a body could handle or survive. "Please, please, Emmy, please," I begged, desperate for some sort of reaction. I cradled his face, leaving bloody handprints on his cheeks. "It's over. They're gone. Emory, I think I killed someone."

His eyes opened at that, unfocused and distant but, more importantly, dull. Lifeless. Like he wasn't there and that was worse than them just being closed. He did, however, manage to whisper, "Atara." I kissed his forehead and tucked my coat around him tighter, hysterics building in my chest as the little stream of blood that started beneath him kept racing toward the ocean and disappearing into the waves.

"I have to get help for you," I whispered. "But I'm too afraid to leave you alone. Gods, what if they come back? What if--"

I didn't have to answer that because someone in a white guard's uniform came over the side of the hill and his eyes landed on us. He raised his fingers to his lips and I heard the whistle before he started running down the hill toward the beach. He was blond, about my size. A bit taller. Very clearly a halfling, same as we were. They were more common in Coryth now, having come here during the Immraran invasion and never left when the Lierians were given citizenship and deemed "Corians" when they traveled. They were under the direct protection of the crown. It wasn't unheard of to run into them several times a day but I didn't want him touching Emory. Not after halflings had done this.
I got quickly to my feet but he stopped before he reached us, his eyes on the body a few feet away. "Did you do this?" he asked me bluntly.

And I was so broken. So wooden. So utterly devoid of everything but grief that I didn't have it in me to try to lie. "He held me down while they raped my brother," I spat.

The man's eyes widened. They were human eyes, a shade like dark glass. It was the flax colored hair and the pale, ghostly skin that gave him away. That and his height, just a bit taller than me with wider shoulders. "I'm a field healer," he said quietly. "And I whistled for the guard but they're on the other side of the wall. It's going to take some time. You have to let me help him."

I realized I'd gone immediately into a defensive stance like I was going to crush his windpipe or something and I swallowed hard, straightening out. "Do what you have to do," I relented quietly. "Where are my parents?"

"The King is with the rest of the guard. He'll be here shortly. I'm Mack," he offered, getting down on his knees beside Emory. I didn't want to watch so I sat near Emory's head at an angle, my hand on his forehead while Mack peeled my blood soaked coat off of him. I heard him move his legs and Emory gasped in response, his breath catching in his throat. Mack moved again, to do what, I wasn't sure, but Emory shrieked like someone had put a knife in his gut and I jerked to face them, alarmed, only to find Mack retracting, his fingers soaked in dark blood, wearing the sort of look that people wear when they're about to tell you that a loved one is dying. "I need your belt."

I gave it to him immediately. In fact, I gave him everything he asked for. He'd been carrying a bag and I sorted through it while he asked me for things. In retrospect, he was probably trying to keep me occupied while we waited because I was tottering between hysterical and threatening him. He had to keep promising that everything he did to Emory, regardless of how my brother howled in agony that tore at my heart like his voice had claws, was necessary. He put the belt around him tightly, cinching it off so that it constricted just above the apex of his thighs. He tipped a bottle into his mouth. "For the pain," he explained. "Though I doubt, in this state, it will help him much."

"Is he going to die?" I was almost afraid to ask.

Mack hesitated, which only made my anxiety worse and I choked on a sob. "He's...Atara--can I call you that?" I nodded quickly. "He's in a very bad place. He's losing a lot of blood. He's--"

"Atara!" The sound of my father's voice was a balm and a terrible pain. I scrambled to my feet to see him, climbing down from his horse and racing toward me but he stopped short at what he saw. His expression was unreadable. Grief, first, then pain. Then rage. The same blind, homicidal rage that I'd suffered. His eyes flicked to the body. "Did you kill him?"

"I...yes."

"Good." That was all I got before he hugged me. "And you're safe? You're in one piece? Are you hurt?"

I dissolved into hysterics again, my face in his hands. I could barely stay on my feet. My chest constricted and I bawled. "I'm sorry!" I gasped, choking on the words as I held his wrists. "I said I'd keep him out of trouble and he's--he's--"

There were more healers with him and when I looked at Emory, they were arranging him in a sort of sling so that they could move him to the back of a guard carriage. Fox left me for a moment and went to my brother as they loaded him in. I saw him reach into the fabric that cradled him now, his fingertips running over Emory's face and I saw the lack of reaction from my brother that must have
felt like a destructive force to my father. He drew back from him and his arms locked around his own torso. The driver asked him something and he nodded shortly, motioning for me to come forward. His eyes were glassy and I wondered if he was holding it together for my sake because I was such a disaster. "You need to tell me everything that happened and what they looked like," he said stiffly.

"I bit one of them. Tore a chunk out of his bottom lip," I offered roughly, my own arms wrapping around my stomach. "Shouldn't be hard to find him and get the name of his friend. The third...well..."

"The third can be left to fucking rot," he snarled, his eyes narrowing. "Tell me what they did to your brother."

And I did.

And it was the first time I ever saw Fox break down.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

It had been years since my father held me the way that he did on the trip back to the palace. I sat sideways with him on his horse and he had one arm locked so tightly around my chest that it was hard to breathe but I needed it. I couldn't stop crying. I was covered in blood. It was up to my elbows, over my face, splattered on my shirt and my neck from the brutal beating I'd given one of Emory's attackers. I kept trying to wipe it off on my rain soaked trousers or the side of the saddle but nothing helped. It was drying and sticky and it made my hysterical state even worse. I kept repeating the same things. That I was sorry, I should have told Emory no, I should have noticed he was in heat, and that I wanted to see him. I needed to see him.

My father hushed me the way he might have when I'd woken up from nightmares as a little boy and crawled into their bed so that I could be cradled between them while I slept. His arm would tighten around me and he would press his face into the spot between my shoulder blades. I felt his chest shake and I clung to him like a child. I wept, livid and bitter and torn by guilt that ravaged my chest. My physical pains were catching up to me--my lip was split, I was bleeding from where the back of my head had connected with that wretch's teeth and nose, my knee on my left leg was twisted, black and blue. My throat was raw, my face was raw, and my heart was broken.

I wanted to bleach the inside of my eyes, the inside of my head...just to stop myself from seeing Emory like that over and over again, his wrists held tight about his head, his body jerking with every violent thrust of their hips. I wanted to forget that scream--that otherworldly, blood-curdling shriek that nauseated me every time it replayed in my head. I kept babbling to my father, "I tried to stop them. He was screaming and they held me down. He was screaming and they held me down." Like a simpleton or a Court fool only capable of singing the same rhymes over and over again. Or a parrot.

The palace gate swung open quickly and he climbed down, grabbing me around the waist so that he could set me gently in a way that I could still lean on the horse. I wanted to lean on him but I understood his reasoning a moment later because the wild, outraged form of my Lheiro hit his chest like a battering ram. "I want them found!" he shrieked. Emory's carriage had been far ahead of us because he'd made me stop to tell him what happened. I could see by the way that Cyril's coat was stained scarlet that he'd already been with my brother. "I want them fucking found and I want them executed, Fox! Are you listening to me? You find them and you bring them here for execution. I don't want any of your 'Corians don't execute' bullshit, do you hear me? You bring them to me or I will have my people do it and you won't like our way of dealing with pigs like that!"

"Cyril--" My father tried to interject but my Lheiro was having none of it. His tiny fists smashed back into Fox's chest. I'd never seen him this out of control. When one of them lashed out in anger, it was always Fox. Cyril was the calm to his storm.

He was sobbing and when he stopped hitting him, his hands went to the red on his coat and he rubbed at it like he could wipe it away the same way that I'd tried to do with the blood on me. Only the blood that covered me wasn't Emory's and I couldn't even imagine how that felt. "He's my baby,"
he whimpered. "He's my...he's still my baby. I want them to suffer, Fox. I want--" He stopped, his eyes suddenly falling on me leaning against the horse, like he'd only just been able to get a clear view through his rage and though I suppose it could be argued that, as the person that had given birth to me, he should have cared more about my well-being than his revenge, but I understood the savage ferocity of his blind rage. I wanted to hit things too. I wanted to demand they be tortured, beaten, forced to bleed the way that Emory was bleeding, and left to die like the way that they'd left him. I wanted to shriek and fight but I already had. I was exhausted. I was hurting.

His arms wrapped around me the way that Fox's had and I let go of the horse. I wasn't so much larger than him that he couldn't support some of my weight and he pulled my face into his shoulder. "You're hurt," he said quietly.

"His knee is twisted up pretty badly," my father offered weakly, running his fingers through his hair. "Where is Emory?"

"They took him to his old bedroom to work on him. One of us should be there," Cyril answered, speaking over my shoulder while he rubbed circles into my back. There was something oddly comforting about him that Fox lacked. Perhaps because he filled the traditional role of a mother. He'd always been the one to make sure I ate more than cake and raspberry tarts, which were favorites in my family. Emory and I stole them constantly. I could have fallen asleep like that, crying quietly into the folds of his soft leather coat, inhaling that lime and honey smell that lingered on his skin and reminded me of soft, sweet lullabies that were such dim memories that I barely believed they were real.

"I'll go," my father told him quietly. "I imagine they might need help holding him still if he comes around. You're too small to fight Emory."

Cyril made a dark, dismal noise in his throat. "He's not coming around, Fox and even if he did, he couldn't fight. I want to hear what happened though. You go be with Emory. I'll make sure Atara's leg gets set and he's cleaned up. I'll find you when I know he's taken care of."

We hobbled while I spoke, recounting the story. I kept expecting him to dissolve the way that Fox had but, to my intense surprise, Cyril remained oddly stoic about it. He refused every offer of every guard that wanted to support my weight for him. We were a rag-tag little duo, soaked and bloodied and the more I moved my leg, the more it swelled through my trousers. It sent agonized, lancing pain up into my hip and down to my ankle but he got me to my room and sat me in a wooden chair in the corner that had once been my time-out space.

"I should have told him no, Lheiro," I eventually mumbled through my ebbing tears. I was out of them, it seemed, or getting there. My mouth was dry and he set to getting me a glass of water first, holding it up to my mouth and glaring when I didn't drink it all at first so I forced it down.

He filled the washing bowl with water from a clay pitcher. "Let's get the blood off of your face, Atara," he said stiffly, ignoring my guilt for a moment until I let him start mopping me up. "There is no telling your brother no. It's best that you went with him. If you hadn't, he'd be in worse shape than he is. That being said, neither of you should have been outside the palace without guards. Didn't you smell it on him?"

I opened my mouth and hiccuped while he wiped beneath my eyes. "He covered himself in cologne so that I wouldn't," I grumbled. Cyril huffed, clearly irritated. "I'm so sorry. I tried. I tried and he was screaming and they held me down." I lapsed back into my babbling, distraught and uncomfortable and he pressed his fingers to my lips.

"Don't go down this road, Atara," he told me sternly. "This isn't your fault. It's not Emory's fault.
You did everything that you could and we are so, so grateful that you're both not as hurt as he is."

It took time...mostly time spent in silence, leaning against Cyril's shoulder, trying to purge the the things I'd seen from the inside of my eyelids. There was a part of me that wished dreadfully to curl into a ball and sleep...to just sleep until I forgot, to sleep and not wake up, to sleep until all of it went away and the world righted itself without my intervention. The seconds that I wished for it turned into minutes, minutes turned into hours, and hours marched on through a peppering of screaming from the room at the end of the hall, footsteps walking back and forth, and voices so hushed that I couldn't make out what they said from the confines of my room. My hear beat too fast for sleep to come, a vibration in my chest that I could feel fluttering in my throat, and no amount of comfort from my father could help me.

Eventually, the littered, broken wailing from my brother's room tapered into nothing and a crisp knock startled me from something close to catatonia. There was no person in the world that I could think of who deserved what had happened that night less than Emory and yet...here we were.

The door swung open when my Lheiro spoke, voice hoarse from disuse, his cool fingers still traipsing down my spine and over my head. Mack peeked in a second later, eyes bright, and, when he stepped into the well-lit room, the sun coming up in the window behind me, I could see that his eyes were not, in fact, as human as I'd believed. They were almost reflective, absorbing the colors around him and aiming them outward, like polished glass--slate and blue. "The King sent me to see to your leg," he spoke softly, moving quietly into the room, almost as if he didn't deserve to be there. His composure and the way he held himself sent a non-threatening message, as if he thought I might still be ready to crush his skull like I'd done to the man at the beach if he took one wrong step too close to me.

I ignored him, for the most part. "How is Emory?" Nobody had told me anything nor had anyone ever come in to speak to Cyril, who looked up with wide, inquisitive eyes when I demanded an answer.

Mack shifted uncomfortably. "I worked on him myself," he told us gently, sitting down a leather satchel that smelled strongly of ginger, alcohol, and a variety of medicinal plants. Strapped to the side of it was another leather pouch, one that would have uncurled if he'd opened it up, and I knew he had a set of surgical tools and suturing instruments tucked away in there. Emblazoned on the side was the symbol of the tribe from the coast, the closest one to the city, and when Mack spoke he ran his fingers over it like it was a nervous tick. "He is...not in a good way. May I speak freely?"

Cyril raised an eyebrow. "I believe you already are."

Mack shifted uncomfortably. "I worked on him myself," he told us gently, sitting down a leather satchel that smelled strongly of ginger, alcohol, and a variety of medicinal plants. Strapped to the side of it was another leather pouch, one that would have uncurled if he'd opened it up, and I knew he had a set of surgical tools and suturing instruments tucked away in there. Emblazoned on the side was the symbol of the tribe from the coast, the closest one to the city, and when Mack spoke he ran his fingers over it like it was a nervous tick. "He is...not in a good way. May I speak freely?"

Cyril raised an eyebrow. "I believe you already are."

The halfling looked contrite and pulled a face, almost like a grimace. "You see, I studied Lieran biology when I went into field medicine," he explained as he began unpacking gauze and stiff wooden splints. He withdrew a knife and indicated that he intended to cut my pant-leg and I nodded stiffly as he knelt beside my chair. "Not that we understand a whole lot, of course, it's all very new but...there is significant internal damage to the Prince's body. I would be...very surprised if he'd ever capable of bearing children the way that you are, my Lord Infinito. He has lost a great deal of blood. He's stitched and strapped and awake but...he reacts to nothing. Not to pain, not to speech, not even to the King. We did what we could to try to prevent infection but it's always a risk and it's even more of a risk in this case because of what he is."

He stretched my leg out and examined the muscle, prodding at my knee cap as he moved. Nothing made any odd noises or popped or grated. The bone itself didn't hurt and he seemed pleased by that so he wrapped it up tightly with a leather brace and then tied it off with linen bandages. Cyril's jaw was clenching and unclenching in fury or grief, I wasn't sure. I was in tears again, wiping at my face,
and then finally my Lheiro spoke. "Mack, I want you to be blunt with me," he whispered, his voice as hoarse as gravel. "Is he dying?"

Mack opened his mouth and glanced nervously between the two of us. He stood up and brushed his hands on his legs. "I...hope not," he finally admitted. "I will stay and do everything that I can to help him and to make him as comfortable as possible, my Lord, but such invasive injuries...and with that amount of blood loss, his compromised ability to fight infection...I--" His lips shut tightly and he closed his eyes for a brief moment, the reflective color guttering out like a candle left in an open window. "His pelvis is broken, his jaw is dislocated, one of his wrists is shattered..." He made a noise while my stomach flipped, threatening to spill bile out all over him while he worked on my aching leg. "He's bloody and beaten and bruised and that says nothing about his emotional state or what it will be when he can wake up without thrashing and screaming. It won't be easy."

But Cyril was already nodding, sitting heavily on the side of my bed. I wasn't sure what he was feeling or if he was slipping into some state of denial. He was wooden, robotic with his motions while grief washed over me wave after wave until I was inconsolable again and Mack was holding a damp, chemical scented cloth to my face. "It will make you sleep," he told me gently. "I think you need that."

And he was right. I did. I don't know when I got to my bed or how I got there, only that I woke up the next morning in sleeping clothes, my leg still braced, and tucked gently into my bed. I was groggy and nauseated. My limbs felt like they were made of lead and my face was tight and dry. I went through my routine stiffly, limping and avoiding all thought. I relied on muscle memory but the smell of medicinal herbs and chemical antiseptics hit me hard when I opened the door. The events of the night before came back and pummeled me and I remembered Mack's admission. I remembered Emory's limp arms, held aloft by thick, brutal fingers. I remembered what they'd said to him, leering while they used him like a toy, the lewd way the bigger on had grabbed his throat to keep his head from falling back while they were both inside of him.

I wobbled, clutching at the wall while I tried to get to his old bedroom at the end of the hall. The monarchical suite was like a little noble estate tucked into the palace. The palace wasn't home. This place was home and it felt despoiled, somehow, by the knowledge of why Emory was there...why there were two guards posted at his door...why my childhood home smelled like an infirmary.

I remembered everything.

The overwhelming urge to be near my brother spurred me forward. It consumed me. I was drowning in it and the guard opened the door, offering his arm so that I could limp forward. My heart was screaming, bleeding in my chest, a dozen jagged pieces that speared through the rest of me as I moved. I wanted to see him. I wanted him to be awake. I wanted to make him promise that he was going to fight with everything he had. Two days ago, I never would have needed that promise. Two days ago, I knew that Emory would fight regardless but now, after seeing his dead-eyed stare when he whispered my name, and then his utter lack of reaction to everything, I wasn't so sure.

And a part of me was terrified over seeing him. Rightfully so, because he looked nothing like the man I knew to be my older brother. He looked so small in that big bed, even paler than the white sheets. The only color in him was his hair. Even the dark stripes on his face were pale. His lips were like paste. Beside him, bent over the bed, asleep with his head in his arms was Cyril and compared to Emory, he looked dark.

I hobbled forward, a choking sob spilling from my throat. It stirred my Lheiro, who pushed himself up and wiped his eyes, his fingers knotted in Emory's hand. I had no idea where my father was, though I suspected this was all too hard for him to be close to and perhaps he found his time better
spent hunting down the sick bastards that had done this to Emory. "I wanted to see him," I managed weakly. "Is he...does he wake up? He's so pale, Lheiro." I reached for his hand and found his fingers stiff and cold. The only thing that betrayed life was the slow, shallow rise and fall of his chest.

"He hasn't woken yet," he answered, his voice hoarse from sleep. I could tell he'd been there all night. He was still his clothes, though the bloodstained coat was gone, and he looked exhausted. "But he hasn't developed a fever either. Mack says that's very hopeful. I sent him out for more sedative. It's best if Emory stays under, for the most part, until he's recovered from some of his blood loss."

So he was in denial, or at least, that's what I thought. He talked like he believed Emory would live and I wanted to believe it, too. I wanted so badly to believe that the wrath laying in that bed wouldn't be the last memory I had of a person so full of life that he made the rest of us look like walking corpses. I wanted to hear his voice again, to see him laugh...hell, even listening to him fight with our father was preferable to this purgatory he was in.

I sat down on the edge of his bed and took his hand in my lap. I held it with one hand and ran my fingers through his hair with the other. I tried to memorize the shape of his face and the way those lines slashed under his eyes. I thumbed over his mouth, traced his ears and his nose and the outline of his cheekbones. "I don't care if he can never have children. I don't care what happens to those people that did this. I just want him to keep breathing."

I felt Cyril's hands on my shoulders then and his lips against my temple, a small comfort while the hand I had on Emory's face slid down to feel his heart beating steadily in his chest. "He's too stubborn to die like this," my Lheiro told me firmly, like he had already made up his mind about it but I wasn't convinced. I'd seen that dead look on his face. I'd watched him shut down and just take it like it was the rite and he was just supposed to but the rite was controlled. There was always an observer to make sure that nobody got hurt, or so I'd been told in my history lessons.

"You didn't see him," I argued stiffly. "He wasn't there. His eyes were open but he wasn't there. It was like he looked right at me, he said my name, but he couldn't see me. He stopped fighting them. I don't know if the Emory from yesterday morning is even alive anymore."

Cyril let go of me and shifted so that he could grab my face and tilt it up toward his. He was angry and he was hurting. I could see it in his face. We were all hurting. My chest felt open and raw, like I'd peeled my ribs apart. I wanted nothing more than to crawl somewhere and let the dark take me. Trying to imagine a world without Emory was like imagining a world without color or sound or the ability to laugh. I didn't know who I was without him. We'd been so close my entire life. I wasn't so much my own person as I was a quiet extension of his boisterous personality and without him to give me the courage I didn't have on my own, I was stumbling around in the dark.

Emory was the sun and I loved him more than I loved any member of my family. I loved him more than my cousins, more than my aunts and uncles, even more than my parents because I recalled a time when we'd been fighting and Fox had lifted me up and told me how important it was to love my brother. Someday, he would be all I had. He wasn't supposed to go like this. He wasn't supposed to go before my parents. We were supposed to have a bedside vigil for them, together, and remember how frustrating they'd been and how much we'd loved them. I wasn't supposed to be begging him not to leave me.

"Atara, if you don't have hope, how do you expect him to?" Cyril asked me sharply. "The Emory from yesterday morning is dead. When he's better--and he will get better--he will not be the person you knew. This is not something we can put a bandage on but he will survive. He will get back up and he will need you." He was quiet for a moment while his words sank in and I managed a weak
He squeezed me once, ruffled my hair, and continued. "I'm going to find your father. He's...taking this worse than I expected."

And then he was gone and I was trapped in a room with someone that might as well have been a corpse but Cyril said that he needed me. My Lheiro tended to be right about things like this so I crawled up onto the bed and curled beside him, my chin on his shoulder so that when I whispered, I knew that if I spoke, he would hear me if he still could. "You're going to be alright, Emory," I promised and at first, it felt ridiculous. I didn't know if he could hear me. I didn't know if he was still in there--if perhaps that shut-down on the beach had been a coping mechanism but the initial trauma was over. He was safe. He was home. He had to know that, at least somewhat. Mack had said he'd been awake. He had to know where he was, at least a little bit. "I need you to be alright. I know that you're hurting and you're probably scared. Hell, I'm fucking terrified. I can't even imagine how you feel and I don't expect you to be the same. It doesn't matter. I'll get you there. Every step of the way, boss. I'll be so up your ass you'll probably hate me."

"Don't be stupid." I nearly jumped three feet at the sound of his voice. The fingers laced through mine tightened just a bit and Emory's green eyes opened in two tiny slits, fearful of the light that poured into the room.

"You're awake," I managed to choke, sitting up and shifting the bed so that Emory winced and whimpred at the movement. "Oh Gods, I'm so sorry! Should I get someone?" My heart was in my mouth, ready to flop onto his sheets and start beating right out of the room. I was frantic with an urge to do something. To be useful or, at least, entertaining. "Did you just sit there and let me pour my heart out like an ass? Oh, if you weren't already hurt, Emory, I would sucker punch you in the gut for that!"

A small smile tugged at his lips but his eyes opened a little bit wider. "I'm freezing," he admitted. "I only just woke up. I have no idea how long you were blathering like an idiot and I don't know how long I'm going to stay awake. I--" He looked confused for a moment and then his expression darkened while I hobbled to his closet and pulled another blanket down so that I could tuck it around him. "Oh, Gods, Atara, you were there. You saw."

I could see his expression shift from that dark, confused state to utterly disgusted. He jerked from my touch and I growled in response. "Stop it," I ordered harshly. "I saw someone hurt you. I saw you shut down to try to survive it. That's what I saw and had I not been there, you wouldn't be here because it was me that peeled him off of you and he's dead for it. You shouldn't be awake. Gods, you're not even supposed to be alive, let alone speaking. You stubborn shit--"

The door swung open then and there was Mack. Again. Wearing the same adorable, sheepish smile he'd been wearing the night before. He had that down to a science, I thought...the looking adorable bit, but the interrupting bit he had down pretty solidly as well. "I seem to be very attuned to interrupting you, Atara," he said cheerfully, stepping in and eyeing Emory suspiciously. "Stubborn shit, indeed. Let me mix up some sedative for you, Emory. Sleep is the best medicine. So is not walking on sprained limbs, Atara. Not that I would know, or anything, healer that I am. You obviously know better." He shot me a scowl and I, rather surprised by his effortless ability to scold like my fathers, sank immediately into the chair by the bed. "Good boy."

I gaped. In all of my life, nobody had ever said 'good boy' to me in such a voice that it almost made my toes curl. I'd been ignorant of Mack the day before, for the most part, but staring at him now was different. Emory was speaking and he breathed into the chemical covered gauze until his eyes drooped shut again. Mack made sure his extra blanket was tight around him, examined the bruising on his face, and then turned to look at me. He had a nice face--a bit of blond stubble on his square jaw. He had a very human shaped face, save his eyes, which were big and pale like a Lierian's. His
hair had a flax like, golden sheen to it I thought that if he'd grown it out, he'd have had barrel curls like a regular fucking Goldilocks.

"You implied that he wouldn't survive this," I eventually told him flatly and he handed me a paper bag full of food from the kitchens.

"Eat," Mack ordered quietly and when I hesitated, the serene patience he'd had with me the night before evaporated. "Atara, so help me--You will not heal if you do not eat."

"You didn't make Emory eat."

"I had Emory's insides in my hands last night. He's split nearly in half," he pointed out and I took a bite of the bread, still warm from the kitchens and covered in some kind of cheese that made me realize how starving I actually was.

I chewed and swallowed several times, which seemed to please Mack while he mixed me a dose of medication and urged me to drink it. I did obediently and without questioning him because he seemed on the verge of being very angry with me. He shuffled me out of Emory's room and back to mine and then set about looking at my leg again while I studied him.

He was older than me. Probably even older than Emory. It was easy to tell, even with a youthful face--and he did have one of those. Almost boyish with round, apple cheeks. His eyes were older though, like he's seen things he'd rather not repeat. "You're a halfling," I eventually told him like he didn't know it himself and Mack snorted while he tightened the brace at my knee.

"I am. My father was a slave. My mother was a noble woman. I suppose those were your next questions?" He raised an eyebrow and I shrugged, though my curiosity was piqued.

I'd never met a highborn halfling other than...well, me. And Emory. "Who is your mother?"

"Elizabeth Glenning," he answered simply and I nearly spat the food in my mouth. It was no small secret that Lady Glenning wasn't a fan of my Lheiro's people. In fact, she went out of her way to make them miserable. More than that, she was Corian and I knew that Mack couldn't have been over thirty. Certainly not old enough to have a father in Coria that was still a slave at his birth.

I stared at him, trying to come up with a scenario in which that information made sense. "But...but--"

Mack laughed. "I didn't say she owned him legally," he reminded me. "When she gave birth to me, she freed him and told him to keep me away from her. I think she might have thought I'd belong to someone else...a human lover, maybe? I've always been curious, you know, because why not just drink tansy tea and let the fetus die? Anyway, naturally, I have done my best to stay as close to her as possible so that I can remind her of what a truly despicable human being she is--that's not to say that I openly claim her as my mother, of course. That would be suicide. Still, it meant joining up with the guard, being transferred when I showed an affinity for healing, and...well, here I am. I just happened to be the healer on duty last night. Lucky me. I had to send to have the more veteran healers dragged back to the palace. I've never treated an injury like Emory's. Straighten your leg. Good boy."

"Gods, stop saying that," I mumbled, though I hadn't meant to say it out loud and my face flushed when he laughed even harder.

"Mhm, what are you...? Sixteen?" he drawled and stood up from where he'd knelt to wrap my leg back up. Then he ruffled my hair. "Too bad though. I like that wide-eyed innocent look."
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

This is short. Also, this is a new chapter that was not included in the original work. Enjoy!

In the days and weeks that followed that night at the beach, it became quite clear that Emory was not the same person he’d been before. It was easy to discount when he spent most of his time drugged, sleeping so soundly that he could be mistaken for dead. He barely moved, didn’t eat, didn’t speak...nothing.

It felt rather like the moment I’d caught him awake had been just that--a moment, a lapse in his general demeanor that allowed some lost part of him to slip through, but then he’d seen me. He’d seen me and he’d remembered and it all went downhill after that. He turned inward, focusing his blame and his guilt on himself, and he internalized it like it was a punishment. As if he hadn’t suffered enough, as if this hadn’t been hard enough...he turned it into living with a ghost.

That’s what he was, after all. A ghost. A wraith. An empty shell of someone I’d known, a monster that wore my brother’s face. When he did show any indication that he was being spoken to, he lashed out, enraged, either at himself or at someone near him. He’d thrash and claw and scream, dig his nails into flesh, sink his teeth nearly to bone, and he’d sob like he was a child again, the top half of his body curled around the lower half, legs still strapped together to keep his broken pelvis stable… He became an impenetrable fortress of his own devising, unwilling (or, I thought, more likely unable) to let anyone in.

He couldn’t be touched, not when he was awake. It caused a shiver of revulsion down his spine that was accompanied by a heave in his throat like he wanted to vomit. There were days that Mack tied pouches around his hands so that he couldn’t claw his own skin from his bones. There was no method to his madness. It was just madness. A descent into the dark that I wasn’t sure he would ever come back from. The longer it went on, the more unlikely it seemed, and even when the straps came off of his legs, when he dragged himself from his bed woodenly, stumbling over limbs too shaky to support his weight, with an unfamiliar gait from the injury, he said nothing. When it was offered, he only scowled in response--fists clenched and eyes hardened.

It would take time, Mack told my parents while they watched. Cyril accepted that. He seemed to understand it with a grace and an ease that spoke of some deeper tragedy. I wondered how...how he could ever begin to comprehend what Emory was suffering through, but I never asked. I watched them, graphite pencil poised over parchment bound in leather, and I told the pages how Cyril spoke of patience when we three sat at the table in our informal dining room. He preached it. Patience, kindness, forgiveness for the moments when my brother lashed out with all the ferocity of a cornered...
animal.

Fox was just angry.

I could see it in the way he stared down at untouched plates sat in front of him, in the way his jaw worked while Cyril spoke, tense and uneasy. I could see it in the white knuckled grip on his cutlery. I’d never seen him like that before. Fox wasn’t the sort to get angry and stay angry. He burned white hot for a few minutes and then, like the flare of a fresh flame, he died off. This didn’t die off though. This lingered, a slow burning ember deep in his chest and I twisted uncomfortably with it. I apologized a dozen and a half times and each time, he’d tousle my hair and he’d tell me that it wasn’t my fault, but he never got any better. He never cooled. Sometimes, he didn’t even take meals in that dining room with us. Sometimes, he spent those hours with Mack Glenning or sitting at the foot of Emory’s bed, watching him sleep, watching the only moments he had where he looked like the person we’d known before.

On one such day, just a week after Emory’s brace had come off from around his hips and his legs, I sought my father out. I had this idea that if I just demanded he speak to me, he’d eventually tell me why he was allowing this to eat at him the way that it was or he’d give me some clue as to how to make it easier. I’d always been closer to Fox than to Cyril. Perhaps it was because he’d been there my entire life, hanging on my every word, even when I was still at the age where a five minute story could take me an hour to relay to him. He’d always sat and listened like he was waiting with bated breath for every moment he had with me.

Things were different after the beach. Fox wasn’t mine anymore. Emory had him dangling like a puppet on strings and perhaps it was selfish to want him back. Perhaps it was just me being sixteen, hurting, alone...whatever it was, I wanted it fixed. We couldn’t all fall apart like Emory was falling apart. If we crumbled, there’d be nobody there to pick him up when he was ready to start piecing himself back together again.

I found him outside of Emory’s bedroom, speaking quietly with Mack, and at first I thought to interrupt them. At first, I thought to demand his full attention in a way that only one of his sons ever could, but the look on his face stopped me and something urged me sideways, tucked into the doorway of my own bedroom.

“I don’t understand.” Fox breathed. “Why won’t he speak, Glenning? Why won’t he get up? Why can’t he eat? Cyril talked to you. I know he did. You know what the Rite is—”

There was quiet for a moment and the sound of Mack taking a deep breath like he was exhausted. He had to be, I thought. He spent every waking moment with my family, hovering over my brother like a nursemaid and when he wasn’t hovering there, he was over me. He fussed and prodded and he asked questions. He asked so many questions. Where Cyril preached, Mack listened, even to my complaints, like every one of them was valid and I hadn’t realized I needed it until that spike of jealousy lanced up at my chest at the idea of him listening to anyone else the way that the listened to me. It wasn’t that I thought I had some claim on him. It was just since the beach, he’d been the only person to treat me like more than an afterthought.

I didn’t blame my parents for how alone I felt. How could I? With everything they were dealing with, of course I was the last thing on their minds. I wasn’t sick, not like Emory. Their world revolved around him.

Mack did, however, eventually answer, in that same quiet, tempered, soothing way he always did. “Everyone processes trauma differently, Your Majesty,” he explained gently and I peeked around the edge of the door. He reached, tentatively, like he might put a hand on my father’s shoulder, but he thought better of it and crossed his arms loosely instead. “And this was not a Lierian Rite. This
wasn’t Kinnon or Ivar.” He said the name with such disdain that it turned my stomach. There was hate in his voice, but I didn’t recognize who he referred to. “This was brutal. They toyed with him like orcas throwing seals and then they tore him apart the same way.”

“But--” Fox stopped himself short and his shoulders hunched like he was trying to make himself smaller. “He doesn’t even speak!” he eventually carried on, his voice hoarse like he was struggling to even get the words out.

“I’ve met combat veterans that don’t speak anymore,” Mack pointed out. “People who fought on the marshes with you. I would liken what Emory went through to battle more than to a Lierian Rite. This is combat fatigue, in my opinion. It doesn’t go away, Your Majesty. It never goes away.”

“It has to,” Fox insisted. “He can’t be King if he can’t speak. You know what, I don’t even care if he’s never King, Glenning. I don’t care.” He ran his fingers over his face. “I just want him to talk to me. Just one word that isn’t screaming. One night without night terrors. One fucking day with my Emory back.”

Mack’s lips pursed and he shook his head, his own shoulders slumping in defeat. “That won’t happen,” he said quietly and I felt my own hope deflate just a little bit. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath, hadn’t realized I’d been silently agreeing with everything that Fox said...I missed my brother. I missed him and he was barely twenty feet away from me all day. “I know what you want. I understand it, believe me, I do, but he won’t ever be that way again. This is not the sort of thing that leaves a person whole. They hit him so hard that they broke his pelvis. Do you know how difficult that is? How much force would be necessary to do that? Your Majesty--”

“Fox,” my father corrected sharply. “For fuck’s sake, Mackenzie, I’ve seen you wrists deep in my son. You can use my first name.”

I almost laughed. There was little about it that was funny, except the idea of Mack squirming awkwardly under the impropriety of it all the way that I was sure he would. He used my first name, sans title, and always had, but I was the second son, heir to nothing, and my parents were the two most powerful people in the known world. It was an enormous difference.

He relented though. “Fox,” Mack tested the word and I peeked again so that I could watch him wring his hands. “Emory is still Emory and when the pain he’s in starts to ebb away, he will still need you. Even more than he did before. You need to be prepared to help him, even if he’s not what you want him to be anymore.”

“It’s not about what I fucking want!” my father snapped, that ferocious anger starting to slip free from the tight leash he kept it on. “Help me understand. Why could Cyril walk away from this and still be Cyril but Emory can’t? Why is he suffering like this? Why can’t I help him?”

“Because he’s not Cyril.” Mack spoke like it should have been obvious...like it was obvious to him. Something in my stomach clenched at the implication, dark and hidden, some secret ferreted away that my parents didn’t want me to know about. Something sick, sick like what had happened to Emory, and I fought the urge to vomit when it curled in my throat.

There was a moment of quiet, stunned silence, like Fox couldn’t quite believe that Mack had been so blunt...or perhaps, that Mack had spoken in such a manner as to indicate that he thought it should have been clear to my father why Emory didn’t react like Cyril.

The healer pinched the bridge of his nose before he tried again. “Did Cyril ever look like that? Ever? In the entirety of the time that you’ve known him, has he ever looked the way that Emory looked when I found him on the beach? Did anyone ever break his bones on purpose? Rip him open? Beat
him relentlessly for fighting back? Look at your son, Fox, and you tell me why he hasn’t acted like Cyril.”

Nobody ever spoke to my father like that. I took a breath and held it, waiting for the shoe to drop, for that spoiled monarch to come raging to the surface, privileged and scandalized by the tone of Mack’s voice, spoken in his lilting common accent.

Instead of lashing back, my father deflated. He rubbed his hands over his face, signet ring gleaming in the glow of the candles that lined the hallway. “You’re right,” Fox relented after a second and my heart pounded away in my chest, threatening to give away that I was listening in. “Of course, you’re right. I just…I’d give anything to take this away from him and so I… I just keep trying to understand so that I can find some way to do that.”

“You can’t,” Mack answered flatly. “Believe me, if I could give him something to make him forget this ever happened, I would do it without hesitation, but I can only heal his body. He has to heal his mind on his own. In the meantime…” He hesitated then, taking a half a step back and cringing at whatever he was thinking. “In the meantime, you have another son. Maybe—and with all due respect, Fox—you should start considering the reality of your situation instead of what you wish you could do and the reality is that Emory cannot, in this state, be a monarch and if, gods forbid, something happened to you tomorrow…”

Fox breathed heavily, like a great exhale of a burden he was finally slipping from his shoulders. “You mean for me to consider naming Atara my successor. He’s not ready. He’s not even close to ready. We never prepared him for this.”

He was right. They’d always left me to my flights of fancy…to my writing and my love of history and cultures far beyond our own. I’d learned what any good prince would learn, but the intricacies of leadership had always been something that Fox passed on to Emory, not to me. I lacked my brother’s vibrant charisma. Before the beach, he’d exuded power like my father did—like he was born for it. Emory walked into a room and the very charge in the air changed. He had an appeal. People wanted to follow him. People didn’t even think twice about me.

Mack went on undeterred and put his hand on Emory’s door. “He speaks,” he pointed out thickly. “That’s more than you can say for Emory now. Tell me Fox, how heavy is that crown? Would he bare that burden or would it kill him?”

My father cringed. I knew the answer. That, at least, had been drilled into both of us: Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

“I’ll talk to Cyril,” Fox finally answered. “Because right now, at this moment, Mack…it would kill him.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Another re-written chapter with new segments that were never posted before~

I suppose most people in my position--second sons who had always been brushed off as ‘the spare’ or left to lurk in the shadows by their older brothers--they would have been shouting from the rooftops about being bumped up in the ascension order. Fox was, by accounts from both Coria and Immara, the most powerful man in the known world. The Emperors across the sea might have argued, but their subjects never had. The legacy that he would leave to an heir was enormous, both in size and scope. The effects of the changes he had implemented on his own ascension to the ground had been ambitious and far-reaching, but he had achieved them. The slave trade in Coria had not only been abolished but eradicated completely--crushed like a roach under the boot of the monarchy. Glacia had been brought to heel, their royal family executed, and one of their distant cousins had been installed as Herald of the North. Trade with the coastal Immaran city-state of Karinus flourished.

The Temples, though they stood as a testament to an age old belief that many Corians still bought into, were emptier than they ever had been. Coin previously turned over to priests opened orphanages instead, public kitchens for people who would otherwise go hungry, and schools for the unclaimed children that littered the streets. Lierians enjoyed freedoms they’d never had before in the cities of Coria and they flocked to them with goods and services, some of them even forgoing life with the tribe for life among my father’s people.

For the first time in decades, Coria had peace with all the people who had once been declared ‘enemy’ or ‘other.’

Whoever picked up Fox’s mantle would have big shoes to fill and he had always known that. That was why Emory’s education had been so vastly different from my own. We both learned the basics, of course--mathematics, geography, history, navigational astronomy, genealogy, logic, and a whole lot of etiquette, but while Emory studied tactics and language--trade Immaran and royal Immaran, Lierian, Glacian, and the garbled blend of Corian and Glacian that made up the language of the Marshers--I studied poetry, mythology, art, and religion. I’d never envied him, either, because where Emory was outgoing and charismatic, I was an introvert. People loved him. They couldn’t help but love him. He had a way of taking you in, catching you up in the hurricane of bright, blazing brilliance that surrounded him. He was a born leader.

I had never been like that...a leader. I’d never wanted it. So while most second sons might have been ecstatic over the change in their fortune, it filled me with a sort of dread that curled in my stomach. I put it out of my mind, determined not to worry over it. If it was inevitable, it would happen no matter
what I did to try to stop it and so the anxiety that would have welled in my throat would only have to well up there twice if I concerned myself with it before Fox even made a formal decision, before Cyril decided if his own would mirror it, before either of them even talked to me…

I spent my time with Mack instead, who spent most of his time hovering over my brother.

Emory had started speaking. It wasn’t much. Just a few words here and there and sometimes there were still moments where he didn’t answer at all. Sometimes I could talk to him for hours and he’d do little more than stare down at his lap, but I talked anyway. I liked to think he needed to know someone was there with him, even if he didn’t usually react.

He had good days and he had bad days…and he had vacant days. His good days held a few words. Sometimes he’d force himself to eat. He’d get up and sit in the window of the living area of our quarters, a book open in his lap. His eyes looked a brighter on those days, a little more like the shamelessly exuberant brother I’d known before that night at the beach.

His vacant days were the ones where he didn’t talk back, didn’t get out of bed, barely scraped food off of his plate and into his mouth. Sometimes he woke up with a numb expression and stared listlessly off into something nobody else could see. He reacted to nothing. He didn’t eat or sleep or move. He just stared until Mack sedated him. Those were the days one of my parents would sit beside his head, talking like he could hear them, running their fingers through his hair, or humming the lullabies of our youth gently against his ear. My Lheiro would lift his head into his lap and trace his cheekbones and his nose with one hand while he wiped away tears with the other. Those were the only times he tolerated touch…on those days, days when he wasn’t really in his own head.

They thought those were his worst days…the days when he was unrecognizable, when it would have been so easy to forget he was even there, when living with Emory was like living in a haunted house where the wraith did nothing but stare the way that bloated corpses stare--with unseeing eyes, vacant and devoid.

Those weren’t his worst days. Not in my opinion. His worst days were his bad days. They were the days he woke up screaming from dreams that couldn't even be called nightmares. They were terrors. He couldn't be roused from them. He thrashed and he fought and shrieked until Mack sedated him but the sedation didn't really work on his bad days. He would only turn less combatant and sink into uncontrollable hysterics. He cried like he had all the tears in the world to spend. When he was offered comfort, he cringed away, scrambling into the corner of his bedroom where he would curl into the smallest possible ball. He screamed and he got angry because he didn't understand how anyone could want to hurt him the way that they'd hurt him. He’d never done anything wrong. He'd never hurt anyone. He wasn't a bad person.

“It's not fair!” he'd wailed at me that very afternoon, Mack creeping up behind him with that sedation soaked cloth. It seemed cruel to have to do that to him, but if left to his own devices on days like that, he’d claw his arms to ribbons, put his fist through glass, or drink until he passed out in a puddle of his own vomit.

It should have seemed petulant to me…screaming that it wasn’t fair because of course it wasn’t fair. None of it was fair. Life wasn’t fair, but I couldn’t fault him for such a childish sentiment, even at his age. Emory’s life had been particularly unfair--torn from half of his family before he was even born, despised by the world he’d eventually been born into only to teach it to love him anyway in a way that only Emory could have ever accomplished…and then to watch it all burn down around him.

And this…

This.
“I know it isn’t,” I told him quietly, easing myself closer, my hands out, held parallel with the ground like I was trying to soothe a spooked horse. “I know it’s not fair, boss. You need to take a breath. You need to calm down.”

I hated being left alone with him, but my parents both had responsibilities. Sometimes, the burden of Emory was mine alone to carry and Mack refused to see that happen. He stayed diligently on those days, even if he wasn’t being paid to be there like he wasn’t being paid that afternoon. He was supposed to be off rotation, doing whatever it was that he did when he wasn’t caring for my brother.

Emory shook his head, eyes wild, dark hair falling in a curtain on his face. “No,” he mumbled, chewing his bottom lip to bloody ribbons. “No, no, if I calm down, I’ll fall asleep. I can’t fall asleep!” His voice went shrill and my heart broke at it. He was never content, not really. Even his dreams were nightmares. He spent every waking moment reliving that night, reminded by the pain in his hip that stretched into his leg when he walked, the deep-seated ache in his abdomen, and how his jaw popped when he opened it too far now. According to Mack, he’d healed remarkably, especially for a Lierian, but there would always be pain. One did not overcome such trauma without baring scars.

My brother opened his mouth like he intended to regale me with the details again...as if I hadn’t lived it with him, as if I hadn’t seen them break him, as if I didn’t have my own nightmares to cope with--

Mack caught him though, one arm around his abdomen and the other around his face, the cloth pressed firmly over Emory’s mouth and nose. My brother screamed through it, thrashing and kicking for a few violent, livid seconds. His eyes drilled into me, like this was a new kind of betrayal, like he knew I’d been a distraction to let Mack sneak up on him and get him back into bed before he started trying to dig the filthy feeling out of his own skin--that was his excuse for why he did it when he clawed himself to thin ribbons, bloodied from his elbows to his wrists.

Then, after that few seconds, he sagged against the healer behind him, eyes rolling back as they shut, limbs limp as tissue paper. Together, we maneuvered him back into his bed while I choked on guilt and shame for the expression on his face before he’d gone under. This was not the first time I’d played the bait and it would not be the last. He never remembered the minutes before he went out, which was a small blessing for him and a horror for me...because I did remember. I knew the betrayal.

And I knew that I would do it again and again and again to stop him from hurting. That was part of his burden that I could shoulder and though the shame of it tied knots in my stomach and filled my throat with bile that I had to swallow around, I was glad to do it for him. Someday, Mack kept reminding me, he would thank me for this.

Or, I would tell myself secretly in the darkest hours of the night, he’d kill himself before he ever got the chance. Or he’d never get better. Or someday his vacant days would become permanent and I would wish again in those darkest hours that he had died instead.

Mack shut the door behind his, oddly relaxed looking without his guard uniform on. He’d never worn armor like the others, not metal armor at least. His had been soft leather, braided over his chest and branded with the spread wings that marked a healer.

“Do you have actual armor?” I inquired, blurting the question before I could come up with the logical answer, which was that yes, of course he had real armor, but the healers wore leather for ease of movement and, given that they would not have been expected to fight (had there been actual fighting in my lifetime) it wouldn’t have mattered. They did, however, train with the rest guard and training took place in full gear.
He chuckled at the question and glanced at me, fussing with the bottom of his loose cotton shirt. “I do, in fact, have actual armor,” he eventually confessed. “And I can swing an actual sword, too. Who’d have thought? Your father...training his guards? Absurd.”

I’d learned that if Mack was one thing it was bitingly sarcastic. He was already ready with a heavy dose of scathing wit, even with people so far above his own social station that other nations would have beheaded him for the things he said. I, on the other hand, was grateful to be treated as an equal instead of a superior. I had precious few friends, the best of which was currently in a sedation induced coma, and so I cherished the fact that he had become one so easily. Like Emory, it was difficult not to like Mack. He was easygoing, relaxed, and he had a soothing softness to his voice, which curled with a deliciously common accent. I spoke crisply, like cut glass, clear and easily understandable. So did the rest of the gentry. Mack, like the common folk that lived and worked beneath us, spoke with a delightful brogue that rolled his Rs, lengthened his Os and Us, and tended to drop any hard sounds (especially T) off of the end of his words as though they weren’t there at all.

I shot him a look, rolling my eyes and wrinkling my nose in mock scorn as he followed me. I envied his relaxed clothing. Coria was tropic in her long summers, humid, wet, and sticky. Clothes reflected that. His arms were bare, his trousers cut off at the knee, and his boots were clearly made for trudging through the puddles that filled the streets.

I did not have such options, being the son of a king, and though my arms were bare as his, my trousers were tucked tightly into Lierian leather boots and the black shirt I wore was stiff and starched, embroidered with the sigil of my house on one breast in threaded gold.

Mack pushed his mop of blond hair out of his eyes. It was getting longer and my previous theory that he would look like a regular princess with gold barrel curls was becoming fact. He interrupted my thoughts, however, with his own. “You good with all this, little princeling?”

Little princeling. For a brief moment, I wanted to sucker punch him in his gut. I doubted I’d get away with it, not with the whipcord muscles in his arms strung taut as bowstrings. Mack could have easily taken me to the floor and done wicked, wicked--

I cut myself off, a pink glow rising to my cheeks. There was no mistaking that he knew he was attractive. He flirted shamelessly when neither of my parents were around, but it was just that: Harmless flirting. I thought, for the most part, that he only enjoyed teasing me and watching the color rise to my face. It never seemed overly serious and, besides that, I likely seemed like a spoiled child to someone like him. He had this look about him that made his eyes seem older than he actually was...like he had seen and done some shit that he didn’t (or couldn’t) talk about.

“All what?” I asked after a moment of hesitation, collapsing onto a chair in the sitting room. I twisted in it so that it held me sideways in its arms, my legs slung over the wood armrest.

Mack sat across from me, leaning forward so that his arms were braced over his knees. “Your brother.”

I snorted. There was no other real reaction. “How could I be? Have you seen him lately? He’s like living with someone whose dead but hasn’t figured out that they’re dead yet so their corpse just keeps walking around or something. He’s...he’s not who he used to be. I wish you’d known him for who he used to be.”

The healer watched me with eyes like polished glass, careful and observant. “I’ve heard stories,” he admitted after a second and sat back in his chair. “Admittedly, they’re stories I heard from your staff and they paint your brother in a...most entertaining light.”
I arched an eyebrow and Mack laughed, still leaning his chair, astoundingly relaxed for someone who was lounging in a king’s sitting room. “Entertaining?”

He puffed his cheeks out like he was trying to determine how best to go about explaining it without coming off as insulting. His expression even wrinkled into something of a grimace while still maintaining an air of amusement, but that was just his way. Mack was surprisingly, almost absurdly, easy to talk to. He didn’t judge. He didn’t get angry. He was never impatient. He was logical, incredibly intelligent, and eloquent in a way that his accent couldn’t hide. Most people that spoke like Mack could barely read, but he could piece a person back together without so much as a single panicked moment.

Because he took his time. He chose his words carefully. “Oh, I’m sure you know the stories better than I do. There’s one about a stable boy and your father. Another about a laundress, one about a dog--”

“Edmund,” I corrected and he stopped to blink at me. “The dog’s name was Edmund. Emory found him begging for food at the gates. He was the ugliest old thing. Missing half his ear and all of his teeth, mostly bald, tail like a whip. Cyril wanted no parts of him, let me tell you. He was livid that Emory even brought the mangy thing into the palace proper, but Em...where we saw ugly, old, and blind, he saw...suffering. He refused to take Edmund back outside and for three years, that hideous dog slept at the bottom of his bed. Then he died. At the bottom of his bed. Oh, how Emory cried, too!”

Most people laughed when I relayed the story of Emory and ‘Sir’ Edmund, who had followed my brother everywhere—faithfully and devoted until the very end—but Mack didn’t. He watched me quietly, something like sympathy in his features, and then he pursed his lips. “You know, my father told me once that the reason the people love the King is because he treats them like they’re worth something. He makes sure they’re fed, that they learn to read—shit, Atara, I wouldn’t be able to read if your father hadn’t paid for those schools himself. Sounds like your brother’s cut from the same cloth.”

“He was,” I heard myself mumble the words and my stomach twisted anxiously. I’d told myself I’d put away the worry over ascension rights until the actual topic came up but there it was, glimmering on the horizon of our conversation, and I could feel the atmosphere change. It charged between us, like Mack was readying himself to say something and I was bracing myself to hear it, but my courage came before his articulation. “I overheard you and my father the other night.”

His eyes widened, surprise written in the coloring of his cheeks and the slight part of his lips. “You mean you were eavesdropping,” he accused and his tone bit a little bit at the end, stinging with disapproval. I didn’t have to tell him which conversation I was referring to. It seemed he already knew, but then, of course he did. I was a foolish, spoiled little boy. Mack Glenning was a hardened survivor of the grimier streets of Coryth, raised by a single parent in a brothel, made of tougher stuff than I could ever even hope to be… Of course, he knew.

I winced at the tone, but Mack held his ground, his shoulders squared off and his posture straighter than it had been for the entirety of our conversation. “I’ve heard my parents argue over it since then,” I admitted. “But they scream. It’s hard not to hear it.”

That, at least, was the truth. At first, while I listened to them screaming over it—to my father reminding Cyril of arguments long passed in which Cyril had told Emory that he was reckless and unstable and that he had to clean it up if he ever hoped to be a decent King, and to Cyril pointing out that Emory was his son and he was owed the benefit of the doubt—I sympathized with Cyril. Emory was my brother. I wanted him to be alright. I wanted him to come out of it, to get the help that he
needed, and to be something close to the person I'd known before this happened.

But as the weeks went on and the bad days became the frequent days...and the good days began to
dissolve completely...I started to think that maybe Fox was right. Maybe Mack was right.

“And what do you think about it?” he inquired, his voice still hard as steel. He even crossed his arms
over his chest, eyes narrowed on me, and I squirmed under the glare.

I had to take a breath and briefly entertained the idea of bowing out of this conversation with as
much grace as I could manage, which was precious little. I even guttered out an, “Honestly?” like he
would let me off the hook.

"I wouldn't ask if I wanted you to lie to me," he pointed out, his voice flat and when I tipped to my
head to look at him, he was staring at me with an odd expression. I couldn't quite put my finger on
what it was, but it was there...this sort of absorbing gaze, his bottom lip tucked between his teeth.
Mack wasn't bad to look at. In fact, I had gone so far as to writing that he was nice to look at on one
of the pages in my journal. He had a tragic mouth, sort of pulled down at the edges like he'd seen too
much in his short life, a full lower lip that he was constantly biting so that it was always chapped, all
in a perfectly proportioned, definitely kissable shape. It was odd to think about him like that. My
sexual experience could be narrowed to that one scullery maid and easily defined as, 'fucking awful,'
so I'd generally decided to avoid sexual encounters in order to spare what dignity I had left.

And he the sort of golden blond sought after by brothel owners. It did him a world of service. He
looked like he belonged posing on a beach so that someone could immortalize him in marble or
something. Cyril had caught me staring at him one more than one occasion and had leaned over to
whisper against my ear. "He's nice to look at, isn't he?" And he'd done it just to watch me blush
because I'd turned six shades of red and stormed from the room.

Still, he was just Mack. I hardly knew anything about him beyond being Elizabeth Glenning’s
illegitimate child with a Lierian, that he’d grown up in a brothel, and that he was twenty-four years
old.

“I don’t want to be king,” I finally admitted. “I want to be Infinito even less than that.” I turned in the
chair so that I was sitting upright and rubbed my hands over my face. I felt suddenly exhausted and
the anxiety I’d battled into submission over the past week came roaring to the surface. "So I try to
shut it out because I don't want to think about it. I'm the second son. I wasn't supposed to have to
worry about things like that. I was supposed to be like Brentlyn. I could just go live in one of the
family's estates on the coast, manage a small town full of people, and appear in Court when my vote
was needed on important things. Hells, I'm not even Emory's second. They're training Olivia for that.
I'm not a leader. I'm a writer. I wanted to...write histories and go to far away places that nobody has
ever seen. Now I'll be stuck here with my invalid brother and I know that's childish but he can't even
look at me on most days."

"It's not childish," Mack corrected with a shrug. "Your brother isn’t getting any better, Atara. Surely,
you know that." I nodded and he continued. "And I don’t hang around just to check on your leg. I
hang around because you’re alone. Your parents are worried sick about your brother and...rightly so.
But Emory being sick doesn't mean you don’t exist anymore or that you don't have opinions. You
know he can’t carry a child. You know what that means, right? Cyril doesn’t really have a choice.
You have to be the next Infinito and that..."

I looked pointedly away. Of course, I knew what it meant. Cyril had been fighting the nation for
years about delaying the Rite until we were old enough to decide if we actually wanted to take part
in it. The nation, however, didn't think there was any decision to make. It wasn't about making a
decision. It was tradition and order and the succession of a leader. "Someone has to do it," I
mumbled, rubbing my face again and then wringing my hands in my lap. "And Emory can't now, so it falls to me. That's part of being Cyril's son. I always knew it was a possibility. Admittedly, it was a very slim one. My parents have always thought that combining their two roles when Emory took the Crown would really cement the Corians and the Lierian nation together. That won't happen now, unless Fox gets his way. He usually does though."

"Why does someone have to?" he asked, scooting his chair closer to me like we were conspiring against something and, realistically, I suppose we were. "You are in a unique position, Atara. Half of the Lierian nation believes you are actually a God. Not a living God. A real as sh**t fucking God. The Corians love your father. The kingdom has never been more prosperous under any other King. The threat of Immara is nearly extinct. The territory the kingdom covers has even increased under Fox's rule. You could ride that popularity into a whole new regime. Refuse the Rite. Tell them that they're wrong. That what they've done to generations of your family is wrong. Because it is wrong. Think about what your Lheiro went through. Is that a tradition you want to carry on? Is that what you think he wants for you?"

I hesitated. Politics wasn't an area I usually foraged into but under the circumstances, it was probably wise that I get a foot in the door. Mack had spent his life following Lady Glenning, always at a distance to remind her of what she'd done. "I..." I shut my mouth without finishing and took a deep breath. No, it wasn't something I wanted to carry on. The Rite wasn't something I wanted anything to do with. If I ventured into the world of sexuality again after that awful first misadventure, I wanted it to mean something. I wanted it to feel good. I wanted to love someone, but that came with its own set of terrors and I had spent most of my life letting fear dictate my decisions. Loving someone was a risk and, once upon a time, Harlan had ripped my family apart because of it and while I knew that neither of my parents would ever do that to me, the fear still gnawed away on my bones.

Cyril hadn't known. At least he had that first part of his life that was blissfully empty of the knowledge of the Rite. He'd been unaware when he fell in love with my father and I knew how much it had hurt them. It was a dark point that neither of them liked to visit. What I knew, I learned from Emory. As a child, I had been utterly terrified by the idea of falling in love and losing that person to the Rite because even if they loved me in return, how could they get over something like that? How could they be okay knowing that it was inevitable, that I would have to partake in one? I couldn't have gotten over that, if the roles were reversed. I didn't expect anyone else to.

"No," I finally muttered. "It's not. It's not what he would want. It's not what I want. What we want doesn't matter in the grand scheme of things though. What's best for our people is what we do. That's part of being the prince."

Mack ground his teeth and his fists clenched. "Listen to me," he ordered and my eyes widened marginally when he leaned forward. He was so close I could taste his breath, warm and sort of gingery. He had a habit of chewing on candied ginger, I'd noticed. "The Rite is just a scapegoat for the larger picture. The entire Lierian nation has it in their heads that the Infinito belongs to them. That you're there to fill a political role so that power in the tribe remains balanced and if that means they strap you down to be mounted like a hunting bitch, then so be it. That's why your brother is in there staring at the wall like it's the most intriguing fucking thing he's ever seen. Nobody deserves what happened to Emory and you are the only person with the power to change that. You think the nation is going to let Fox execute those boys when they find out Emory was in heat? They're going to blame him for it, Atara. Your Lheiro reacted because that's his son and he loves him. He doesn't want to see him in pain and so he's blind to what they'll actually do. The council will overrule him. This is about more than Emory. The whole system needs fixed."

“How do you even know all of this?” My features twisted in surprise and Mack’s lips pursed into a thin, irritated line. By then, however, his irritation was not at me for eavesdropping but at the entire
situation. “Mack!”

He hadn’t answered immediately and my shout of his name jarred him enough to bring him back down to reality. “Because I’m a nobody, Atara,” he admitted after a second and for the first time since I’d known him, a little bit of regret slipped into his beautiful face, like he was ashamed of his station in comparison to mine. “I’m nothing. I’m a bastard raised by whores, and not even the classy ones the gentry visit. Bastards by those ones are disdained, but tolerated. I’m the son of a Lierian whore on the docks. Saying that I’m nothing is an actual overstatement of what people in your palace think I am--”

“Stop.”
Mack ground his teeth and opened his mouth, but my heart hammered in my throat, an unrelenting rhythm that threatened to choke me. I cut him off again, fumbling forward so that my fingers found his shoulder and dug into the skin there, pulled tight over corded muscle. How had I ever wondered if he could swing a sword when it was so fucking obvious?

“Stop!” I repeated the word with all of the authority I could manage, which wasn’t much, but Mack’s mouth shut and I shook my head. “It’s your turn to listen to me now. You are the only reason I’m not dead. If you hadn’t come along that day, if you hadn’t found us, I know those boys would have come back and I’d be rotting at the bottom of the fucking bay with my brother, so you don’t get to say that you’re nothing. Fuck what the rest of the palace staff thinks. Fuck what Coryth thinks. Fuck what the gentry thinks. You, Mackenzie Glenning, are something. Someone. So shut your fucking mouth.”

I thought he might scold me. Then, alternatively, I thought he might kiss me. He was looking at me like he might, his eyes drifting down to my mouth for just a few seconds, and I thought I might have liked it if he did. It would have been good to forget.

But he shattered it like glass when he leaned back, successfully removing my hand from his shoulder and putting enough distance between us that I couldn’t smell the ginger on him anymore.

And I missed it.

“Well,” he started quietly. “Thank you for that. You’re wrong, of course, and you know next to nothing about me, so you can’t really judge, but I do appreciate your rose-tinted view of me, Atara Bordelon. It’s nice to be the hero for a little bit.” I didn’t argue. I was still watching him--watching the color in his cheeks, brighter than before, and the little catch in his breath like he’d felt it too--that charge between us, that moment that hung suspended in time, undelivered.

I should have kissed him. I’d waited for him to do it and I should have taken initiative.

Mack waited just a moment before he started in again. “You are in a unique position and I believe wholeheartedly that if you want justice for your brother, you will have to step up and demand it from the sect of Lierians that worships you. Coria thinks of your brother as a bastard who isn’t even human--closer to an animal, both of you, and me, too. All of us. You know what the Lierian nation thinks as a whole.”

I shifted in my seat, uncomfortable and hot, and my heart still thumped unhappily in my throat. He was right, of course.

I knew he was right.

All I said, however, was, “I’ll think about it.” I meant to explain, to tell him that he was right, that I
understood, but that I had to consider how it would make Emory feel to have all of that stripped away from him when he had already lost so much. My mouth even opened to form the words, but they died on my tongue with the ringing of the bells at the gate. Three times, I counted. Three times….

“Three times?” Mack blurted before I could speak the surprised words myself. “That’s royalty, isn’t it? I thought all of you were already here!”

I pushed myself from the chair, conversation forgotten, and walked awkwardly to the window that overlooked the front garden. Orchids flourished along the crushed coral road that led through the gate and palm trees leaned heavily, offering shade to anyone coming and going while the sun was still up. It was very little relief, but anything in Coria’s oppressive heat was welcome.

I squinted and felt Mack behind me, leaning over my shoulder in an attempt to see what the fuss was over. A dozen or so of the serving staff flurried forward like little worker bees, flustered and frenzied as a handful of the white-clad guards that served my entire family rode in on white horses, their sides flaking from dried mud and dirt that kicked up off the roads of Coryth.

I knew the one that stood out though, the one that they guarded...the one that wasn’t wearing white and was instead clad in his signature charcoal and seagreen. His helmet came off a second later and a mop of flaxen hair tumbled over his head.

“Is that one of the Dukes of Eden?” Mack asked after a surprised moment of stuttering.

I felt surprise roll up my spine like giddy anticipation. It had been years. Years!

And though I hadn’t expected him, the excitement over seeing my father’s youngest brother bled into my features and I grinned widely. “That’s Riordan.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

My grandmother Laila was an Immaran. A Kariner, to be specific, and she looked the part. Her portrait, which hung in the Grand Hall that led from the massive steel doors to the Keep all the way to the throne room, displayed as much. She was small, with a waist trained by years of corsets and her skin was the color of pale porcelain, rosy only at her cheeks. Her hair had been the color of freshly cut wheat, hanging in loose curls over her shoulders, and she looked out from the portrait with my father’s dark green eyes, a trait that all of her surviving children had inherited from her. When Fox talked about Queen Laila--Queen Laila before his sister Pascha died, not after--he talked about a woman unrecognizable from the wraith that I’d met a few times before her death. Once, he said, she’d been vibrant--a jewel among the gentry who sang lullabies like a songbird and read fairy tales from her seat in the throne beside the King’s.

Only one of her children, according to my father, had gotten more than their eyes from their mother and that was Riordan. He had the same head of blond curls, the same eyes, the same penchant for singing under his breath when he thought nobody heard him. He was as close as I ever got to knowing his mother, who had never quite recovered from losing her youngest daughter and had died in a special estate beyond the witch wood for...impaired members of the gentry. Riordan had told me once that the intention had been to take her away from the Keep in hopes that distance from Pascha’s childhood stomping ground would give her some form of peace.

It hadn’t. Laila never recognized me or my brother and, on most occasions, failed to even recognize Riordan when we visited. Raising my uncle had fallen, primarily, to my father and Cyril until Riordan turned sixteen, at which point he was shipped off to Eden to serve as seneschal and Olivia was brought to the Keep to start training as Emory’s second. I hadn’t seen him since then, some eight years earlier, but I knew that he kept in near constant contact with my brother.

Or he had, until Emory had stopped making contact with anyone.

The excitement that bubbled in my stomach at the idea of seeing him rivaled very little I’d felt in the entirety of my life. I wondered briefly if one of my parents had written to him to coax him home to Coryth in hopes of bringing Emory up out of his crippling depression. I didn’t stop to ask Mack. I took off, pushing myself from the window and ignoring the ache that set in behind my knee cap as I ran, nearly sliding on the polished marble outside the door of our suites and colliding with the wall and the very expensive looking bust of some ancestor whose name I couldn’t remember at the time.

I tore down the wide corridors and heard Mack behind me, urging me to slow down or I’d further injure the ligaments in my leg, but I paid him no mind. My heart beat like it had grown wings, a throbbing hum against my chest that threatened to soar right out of my throat. I took the stairs two at a time, jumped from the landing into the Grand Hall, and stopped dead at the sound of my father’s rigid, unbending voice--the same tone he used with me or Emory when we’d done something terribly inappropriate as children.

“I told you not to come,” Fox practically snarled the words and I froze. Mack collided with me, unable to stop in time, and we both stumbled forward, his arm around my middle to keep my face
from having an unwelcome introduction with the gleaming, freshly cleaned floor. His hand lingered a little bit longer than was necessary. Long enough that I shrugged him away and he cleared his throat nervously. Under normal circumstances, I would have enjoyed his attention, I thought, but this wasn’t normal.

Riordan’s face was the definition of livid. His cheeks were bright and his eyes were burning with a sort of furious energy that radiated from his person like a the red corona around the sun just before it set over the horizon. His fingers curled into violent fists and I wondered, briefly, if he would lash out and strike my father. It wouldn’t have been the first time. Riordan had a temper that was unmatched by any of his siblings, even Fox, who was known for volatility. It had been hard for him, Emory told me once, to have a mother didn’t know his name and a father that Fox had forcibly exiled not long after my birth. I’d never met Harlan.

He didn’t hit though. His fingers uncurled a moment later, flexing in steel gauntlets that shined with opalescent green glow. “You lied to me,” my uncle hissed through clenched teeth, his eyes narrowed, still furious. “You told me he was fine. You told me he was getting better, that you didn’t need me to come, that everything was okay. I had to hear through a gossip-monger that my nephew can barely get out of fucking bed in the morning, let alone feed himself, Fox, and to make all of it worse, you got Brentlyn and Mira to lie for you, too! Why leave me out?”

“Because of this exact reason,” my father replied, his voice blunt. “I knew you would rush up here half-cocked, all piss and vinegar the way that you are, and you’d make things worse. You don’t understand, Ri. He won’t want you to see him like this. You are his best friend.”

“Which is exactly why I should have fucking been here!” My uncle stripped his gloves off, the steel clinking, and threw them to one of the attendants standing near him. They fumbled with them, only barely managing to keep them from clattering to the floor, and Riordan opened his mouth to give my father a bigger tongue lashing than the one he’d already started but he stopped, his eyes closing in on me from over Fox’s shoulder. “Atara, is that you?”

He brushed past Fox and the furious rage in his face dissolved like salt in water. I’d been eight when he’d left Coryth to serve in Eden. The decision had been an unwelcome one among my brother, myself, and my uncle. We’d always known, of course, that he would have to leave Coryth eventually...that as long as he remained, the gentry would see him as a threat to Emory’s birthright and that he, of course, needed formal training to take the title of Knight and it was determined that such a thing was best done under Brentlyn’s guidance so that Fox could focus solely on Emory.

The heartbreak was a distant ache eight years removed, but I remembered standing in the rain and watching him walk away with Brentlyn, Emory’s fingers stiff and unyielding in my own, his posture cringing away from Olivia like the whole thing was her fault, but she was crying, too, because she was being left behind as Riordan was being taken away. I remembered Edmund at his feet, whining because he could feel the tension that snapped like a cord between my brother and my father.

That had been the beginning of Emory’s resentment for him, the beginning of the fighting...and though later, when he was older, he’d understood the necessity of it, he didn’t much care for how it had hurt. He’d already lost too much to care.

Riordan’s hands curled around my face, cupped at my cheeks so that he could tip my face up. He’d gotten much taller—as tall as Fox was, in fact, and he had a scar that split one of his eyebrows that hadn’t been there before, but he’d seen combat since then, with pirate raiders off the coast. He’d been formally knighted. He was set to inherit his own holdings, whenever my father found a suitable place for him that strengthened the power of our house.

“Look at you,” he breathed. “You’re all grown up. Nearly seventeen now, right?”
I beamed. “Next month,” I chirped the answer and he wrinkled his nose, grinning widely as he moved to tousle my hair. “You didn’t write to tell me you were coming. I could have kept a secret, you know.”

“Tiny,” Fox warned and he shot me a glare, clear disapproval of my compliance in the matter. I could neither agree nor disagree with either of them. How Emory reacted was so up in the air all the time anymore, it was hard to say whether he would be elated to see Riordan or whether he would hate the idea of it. I, however, was elated.

My father’s attention shifted to Mack, then, and he raised an eyebrow before the healer spoke. “He’s sedated,” he explained gently. “Woke up from a nightmare. It’s a bad day, I think. I would recommend...waiting.” He cast an uneasy glance at my uncle and Riordan rolled his eyes.

“You can’t coddle him forever, Fox. He won’t get any better if you let him ferment in his own misery like fine wine. Have you found the bastards yet? I brought a handful of my own scouts with me. They’re at your disposal, of course. At the very least, you could have let me help you.” Riordan ground his teeth and my father’s shoulders slumped in defeat, almost as if on this count, this single point, he couldn’t refute his brother’s claim. Riordan, however, either didn’t intend to accept that defeat or he wanted to grind salt into the wound. I guessed the latter. “You’re not alone in this, you know? Dad might have been a walking fuck-up, but you have other family. Mira writes daily all the time asking if we’ve heard from you. Brent’s been requiring inspections to enter Eden, checking every face through the gates and you...he’s not just yours, brother mine. He’s one of us, too. So is Atara. At the very least, you’ve done your youngest a disservice by cutting all of us out.”

Fox flinched and, instead of answering Riordan immediately, he waved a hand in Mack’s direction. “Go,” he said quietly. “You’re not on duty today. You need a day off, Mackenzie. I’ve seen you every day for two weeks.”

“Your Majesty, with all due respect--”

“I said go, Mack. Visit your father. Consider it an order.”

The healer’s shoulders sank and he shot me a look, worry clouding his expression, but he walked away. He was, after all, a soldier first. “That’s Emory’s physician,” I explained when I was sure he was out of earshot and Riordan’s attention turned back to me. “He’s worked...quite hard to keep him from unraveling completely, but...”

Fox scowled at me and I glared back with equal ferocity. “But,” I continued through my teeth. “It’s not really working.”

“Atara.” My name came with a warning and irritation itched the back of my mind. “Don’t go there.”

“Go where? To the part where I know you’re considering handing off his title to me?”

Riordan’s eyebrows show up and his eyes grew to the size of dinner plates. Surprise etched into his expression above all other emotion and he looked between us--at my father, who was staring at me like I’d slapped him and to me, still glaring with pursed lips. “It’s that bad?” my uncle asked. “The rumors are true?”

“It’s a possibility I’m considering,” my father answered, his voice sharp. He cut between the two of us and while he didn’t order us to follow, he expected it. That could be felt in the distinct charge of the air around him. “But I know how Atara feels about being in leadership positions. If he were more
comfortable with it, I would have sent him to you and Brentlyn in Eden years ago to begin formal training with you, but--” He glared at me again, eyes narrowed, and I knew I’d get an earful later for it. My heart pounded in my throat, threatening to leap from my mouth and onto the floor so that it might run, screaming, away from the possibility of confrontation with my father. I despised confrontation. Especially with Fox. He had this way of conveying disappointment that far surpassed Cyril’s own and he could crush me into crippling defeat with a well-timed scowl that displayed exactly how much I’d let him down.

It was the absolute worst feeling--disappointing Fox.

He led us up the stairs without continuing, throwing open the door to our quarters. His guards stopped there, falling in line beside the doors as they clicked shut behind us. He stopped at the hall to the bedrooms. Emory’s sat at the end, the door shut tight, and everything was silent.

“You wanted to see for yourself, Riordan,” he said flatly, gesturing with an arm out to the door at the end of the hall. “Go see.”

My uncle’s eyes clouded over. “He’s not in the Crown’s Tower?”

“He can’t be,” Fox answered with the same flat tone in his voice, his eyes devoid of anything save that same disappointment that was slowly hammering the nails into my coffin. I felt like I was shrinking, like seaweed left in the sun, slowly drying up into a thin, crackling shell. He addressed the question in Riordan’s face a moment later. “I’m afraid he’ll jump from the window if he’s left alone up there.”

I could have heard a pin drop. Ri’s breath even stopped, almost like someone had kicked him in the chest, but the shock and defeat lasted only a second before he gathered up that piss and vinegar that my father had accused him of being full of, and he strode toward Emory’s door.

I clenched my teeth. “Maybe you shouldn’t--”

“Shut. Up.” It was the only answer Fox felt I deserved at the moment, evidently, because he didn’t say anything else and he didn’t even look at me when he said it. He held an arm out to stop me from entering the corridor with Riordan. I held my breath, eyes wide, watching my uncle like I was watching someone march to his own execution. He did it with a straight back and upright shoulders, chin up, like he was trying to prove Fox wrong. It reminded me of my brother and I--of how I’d always done everything in my power to prove to him that he was wrong and I was right or to prove him to him that I was just as brave and just as bright as he was.

Riordan pushed the door open and the light from the hall seemed swallowed by the darkness inside. He disappeared into, like walking into the mouth of a cave, and I could hear my own heartbeat in my ears. This would be the defining moment, I thought. This would be where my brother showed potential for recovery or where he showed the same insanity that had plagued our grandmother years before...the same inability to come up out of a pitfall.

For a solid minute, there was silence. The hands on the clock in the dining room moved with a steady tick-tock-tick-tock that sounded so loud in the uncomfortable stillness that surrounded us. I counted them, much slower than my own heart, and felt my father’s hand curl around my shoulder and squeeze.

And then it shattered like glass thrown at a stone wall. A blood-curdling, inhuman shriek came from the room at the end of the hall, punctuated by the sound of something hitting the carpeted floor and the strangled sound of Riordan calling out for his brother the way he might have when he was a child and he’d hung the world on my father. “Fox!” There was another scream, a guttering, tormented
sound and the fingers on my shoulder left while my stomach dropped through the floor. I moved to run but Fox was faster--his legs were longer or he had more to lose or his reaction was better than mine. I couldn’t explain it, but before I was even halfway there, he was already through the door and by the time I reached it, Riordan was stumbling out.

Stumbling out in charcoal riding leathers and a sea green traveling shirt smeared scarlet, bloody hand-prints down his chest and his legs and swiped over his face. I could still see the outline of fingers in them on his cheek, as if someone had held him on the ground by his head and I grabbed for him, jerking him down to my level, searching desperately for an injury on his pretty blond head. My fingers dug into his curls and he hesitated, hands on my wrists. I could feel him shake like he’d seen the dead rise from their watery graves beyond the bay of Coryth.

“It’s not mine,” he stuttered out, eyes wide and horrified, face bleached of color. “It’s not mine, Atara! Go find that healer.”

I didn’t react. Perhaps I couldn’t. Perhaps, for whatever reason, I couldn’t comprehend what he was saying to me until he grabbed my shoulders and he shook me until my teeth rattled. “Tiny, listen to me!” He was shouting and his hands moved from my collar to my face. He squeezed until my eyes focused, wide and erratic. I needed to find where he was hurt, where Emory had hurt him--if my brother did something to cause permanent injury to our uncle, he’d never survive it. The guilt would have eaten him alive. They’d been thick as thieves--best friends, even, until Riordan went to Eden.

He’d never recover from it, not that he was going to recover from what had happened at the beach, but he didn’t deserve to suffer more. “Where did he--where is it? What happened?”

“Atara,” Riordan repeated and my throat ached, thick with a lump that settled behind my tongue and my eyes welled up as comprehension settled over my heart. It wasn’t Riordan’s blood. Of course, it wasn’t.

“What did you do to him?” I whispered the question with a trembling voice and my uncle’s expression turned pained and frustrated at the same time.

He took a deep breath. “Nothing. I swear to the gods, Atara, I didn’t do anything to him. You need to go get that healer. The one we just saw. Your father called him Mack. Where is he? Where would he go?”

“His father lives in the port district above a brothel called the Red Lantern,” I parroted what Mack had told me once in a wooden voice and Riordan nodded shortly, seized me by my wrist, and pulled.

“Let’s go.” He didn’t give me a choice. I couldn’t have made one, anyway. My legs moved only because he pulled. I breathed only because suffocation was the only alternative. Something in me broke, like a branch detaching from a tree, and like that branch I was no longer aware of the rest of my body. I functioned like a well-trained stock horse. Turn this way, turn that way, answer when spoken to. I didn’t hear my uncle order a guard to find my Lheiro. I didn’t hear him order me up onto a horse, though I remembered getting on one.

I didn’t see anything except the blood on his clothes. I didn’t hear anything except that shriek from Emory’s room. I didn’t think anything except...how much worse could it really get?

Much.

Much worse.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

There are some parts here that are pretty graphic. Just so you know!~

Numbness washed over me like the tide spilling over the sand and, like the tide swallows the little pools that build on the beach, it swallowed me. I did not register our flight through Coryth, down the narrow streets of houses and shops with brightly colored facades, through the alleys filled to the brim with merchant stalls peddling textiles—silk from Badlands beyond Immara, spice bark from Glacia, rare and beautiful jewelry made of jewels dug out of the Glenning mines on the other side of the country...I knew that they were there, but I didn’t really know any of it.

The stalls gave way to the grimier parts of the city. They changed, like a gradient losing color, to the muddy browns and grays of earthenware merchants, bowyers, and then to the empty fish market, only bustling with people in the very earliest hours of the morning. Silvery scales littered the hard-packed roads there and stray dogs and street children plucked their way through leftovers discarded in the streets. They watched us with hungry eyes too big for their faces, smeared in filth and pale as milk.

My father had done a lot of good for Coria, but he was no miracle worker. He couldn’t fix everything.

I should have felt pity or guilt...or something. Anything. I remained, for the most part, numb, my eyes trained primarily on the blood that smeared over Riordan’s face in the shape of a thin, long-fingered hand. He kept trying to wipe it away—scrubbed with his shirt pulled over his wrist, rubbed until his flesh was raw but the stain remained, even when it was no longer visible. Guilt was eating at him. I could see it. It, however, failed to see me.

He weaved us through Coryth as if he’d never left and I remembered my uncle’s wild days—sneaking from the Keep without the guards that tailed us even now, coming home stinking of brothels and cheap wine, trying to drown the grief of being so totally alone and that had always been Riordan’s burden to bear—he was alone. His mother had died when I was six. His father when I was twelve. The only parents he’d ever known had sent him away in hopes of curbing the bad behavior he displayed. I’d always thought he was acting out—reaching for attention he so desperately wanted, finding affection in all the wrong places, wishing and hoping and praying for family the way that we had family.

I wondered if he still drank like that, if he still spent his nights with whores who pressed painted lips to the collar of his shirt so he’d remember them and come back.

It was a perverse thing to be thinking of when Emory was back at the Keep, bleeding and hurt and
the gods only knew what else, probably screaming and fighting under the care of another healer. He only ever let Mack touch him because Mack was clinical about it. He didn’t speak like he was trying to cajole him. He didn’t ask him to talk. He simply healed the hurt and, as told by the calluses on his hands and the corded muscle in his arms, he stopped the ones who hurt. He burned away the aches one little bit at a time like a candle whittling away at the wick. Emory trusted him. Implicitly. More than he trusted any of the rest of us, it seemed.

“Which is it?” Riordan eventually asked, dragging his fingers through the chaos of his humidity dampened curls. Behind his eyes, I could see his mind working at the speed of sound, gears shifting over memories long buried. “Which is it? Which is it...fuck!” He turned to me, eyes wild, desperate, and then he jumped down from his horse and hauled me from my own when I didn’t immediately follow. “Atara, which one is it?” It was not so much a question as it was a demand and I blinked, staring at him, my eyes on the blood that stained his collar and his face. He shook me again and my teeth rattled in my skull, loosening memories--little pieces of life that Mack had shared with me in the past four months.

‘I always knew which was home because Keilani painted the door red when I was six. Bright red, too, no matter how dark it is...you can’t miss it.’

The port district was littered with brothels. Littered, too, with pirates from Paikea, their patrons standing on the decks of their ships in masks shaped like snakes. The Sons of the Serpent--unwelcome in Coria, but not by force of law. Unwelcome because guilds of assassins were generally unwelcome everywhere but Idra’s Vale in Immara.

One of their sails fluttered in the harbor, black as pitch sporting the blazing white head of a cobra, fangs displayed. I could almost see them dripping poison and I wondered, briefly, if it was a bad way to go. What was the worst way to go? Was it quickly--no room for goodbye, no slow decline, no expectation--just violent trauma, ripped away like a ship being cleaved in half, bow torn from stern. Was it slowly--decaying over time the way that Emory was decaying, slipping away like a ghost moving through the veil to the world beyond, trapped with one foot on either side, a display of grief and suffering for everyone around to see…

“Atara!”

Riordan’s voice startled me back and I blinked, eyes wide, face vacant. “There’s a red door,” I answered blandly. “Red like cherries.” He released my shoulders and spun back to the row of buildings, all of them cobbled together haphazardly. If they’d ever been brightly painted or adorned with window boxes that spilled orchids like the ones in the center of the city, they had long since forgotten it. The sea had bleached the color from them the way Lierien genetics bleach the color from human eyes--the way Emory’s green had turned mint, the way that Mack’s gray was like glass…

There was a red door, blazing bright among the dingy blanket of taupe and faded brick, freshly painted because Keilani painted it every time it started to fade. That was what he’d told me once when I’d asked what he remembered about being a child.

The red door, Rosie’s apple hand-cakes, how Rylin smelled of fresh linen and the water--

Riordan seized my hand and hauled me down the road, his other arm waving off my guard, Blue. He was Emory’s, really, but he’d been reassigned when my brother stopped leaving our quarters. He followed me just as diligently, a hulking giant who had lost his tongue to the Immaran sweep of the Marshlands before I’d been born. I blinked back at him, watching his head turn slightly to one side. He couldn’t disobey an order, not even from Riordan whose title of Prince had been stripped down to Duke when Emory had been legitimimized by the marriage of my parents. I could have overruled him.
I did not.

My heart lurched with each step and my head felt clouded, like I’d stuffed my skull with cotton and all my thoughts were laced with it now, disjointed and caught in a web of fibers. I was only dimly aware of Riordan’s hand on my wrist, the bruising force of it as we stomped up the steps along the side of the building to the only door to the outside on the second floor. He knocked hard, fist balled up, pounding until it opened and Mack stared back at us. At Riordan, for a second, at the blood on his face and his collar, puddled along the middle of his shirt. He looked, I realized, like he’d been run through with something. I’d known it when it happened, of course. I’d searched for the injury, but that seemed so distant then, like walking through a fog, backward, trying to figure out where I’d been.

“What--”

He didn’t even get a word out before Riordan was speaking. “You need to come with us,” he ordered. ‘Us’ seemed to register in Mack’s features then and his eyes flicked down to me.

“What happened?” he finally asked, climbing up onto my horse. I made to climb up behind him but Riordan steered me toward his, gave me a boost up into the saddle, and swung his leg up with me so that I was clinging to his back.

“Are you alright, Atara?”

I stared, eyes still wide, like a baby incapable of speech. Riordan answered for me. “He’s fine. We need to go. Now. King’s orders.”

Mack hesitated only a moment, like he might disregard Riordan in favor of waiting for me to react, but he thought better of it and shouldered the leather pack he always carried around--the one that housed his supplies and the little pouch of ginger candies that I could smell on him, even then. He shouted something back into the rooms behind him a small figure appeared, much smaller than Mack himself, with platinum white blond hair that fell in a sheet in his too-large, steel colored eyes.

Lierian, I thought quizzically. It dawned on me a second later that it was probably his father, Rylin, but the small person didn’t answer with more than a nod and a wave of thin fingers when the door shut behind Mack.

“What happened?” he finally asked, climbing up onto my horse. I made to climb up behind him but Riordan steered me toward his, gave me a boost up into the saddle, and swung his leg up with me so that I was clinging to his back. He smelled of medicine and blood and the peppermint that clung to my brother’s room from where he’d spilled peppermint oil on the carpet years before. The smell had never quite left.

It reminded me of Emory and it all came back then, washing like tidal waves over the fog in my head. The blood was Emory’s. The scream was Emory’s.

I shuddered, my arms tightening around my uncle and I felt one of his hands curl over mine, squeezing carefully as if to let me know that he was there, that he was looking out for me, even if he was rough around the edges, demanding, a wild creature made of chaos, uncontrollable and drowning in his own grief. Riordan was the sort that could put all of that aside, if he had to, for someone else.

He was like my father that way.

Riordan didn’t answer much, not at first. He just relayed that it was Emory, that Fox had told him to come for Mack, that he was only following orders and Mack took it in his own quiet way as we weaved back through the streets. Beside us, the sun was setting over the water, reflecting scarlet on blue like it was bleeding out into the bay. I pressed my cheek to Riordan’s back and watched it, watched the ship with the cobra sail move out over the water, her sailors singing ragged shanties as
they moved across the creaking deck, unaware that it looked like they were sailing through a river of blood.

Eventually, Mack snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Hey, little princeling,” he called for me, though he was right there, just an arm’s length away as the horses came to a stop in front of the gate to the Keep. Riordan pulled me from the saddle like a child and stood me up and Mack clasped my face between his sword-rough hands. He cast a careful glance at my uncle. “Are you sure he’s alright?”

“He’s unhurt.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s alright. Look at him. Atara, answer me.” He snapped his fingers again. “Answer me, now!”

“‘M fine,” I mumbled the words and lifted an arm up to wipe at my face, swiping exhaustion and despondency from my features. “Just go. Em needs you.”

The healer looked unconvinced, but he straightened back up and took a place beside Riordan as we walked. I followed, willing my feet one step at a time. I counted them out, each footfall on polished stone, each portrait we passed--Harlan and Laila, Evander and Nicolette, Etienne and Casper, Yves and Moira, Tylas and Aurora, Fox and Cyril--Riordan was talking again and I stopped counting, stopped naming my ancestors.

“He was so still. At first, I thought he was just sleeping, but the closer I got the more I convinced myself that he wasn’t breathing,” Riordan whispered ahead of me. “I grabbed his face. I know I shouldn’t have--” That last bit was in reaction to the scandalized expression that crossed Mack’s features. “But I had to know he was breathing!”

“That doesn’t mean he’s alright. Look at him. Atara, answer me.” He snapped his fingers again. “Answer me, now!”

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“It was entirely another to speak out of turn with my uncles. Brentlyn would have been worse, but Riordan was an animal unto himself. “Watch your tongue,” he snarled in response. I should have stepped in. I should have said something in Mack’s defense, but my entire person felt deflated, like punctured lungs struggling within a chest.

We stopped at the door of the royal quarters and Riordan pushed it open just as my brother wailed at the other end of the hall, screaming like he was in agony. Mack didn’t answer Riordan, but there was concern in his features. More than I’d seen in a long time. He set off down the hall, slinging his bag
off of his back as he pushed Emory’s door open, and I only caught a glimpse--just a small picture of the inside of the room--sheets twisted, stained scarlet, Emory twisting like a ribbon caught in the wind, soaked in sweat and blood.

I knew. I knew, in the deepest, darkest recesses of my mind where denial rules as king, I knew, but I couldn’t say the words out loud. My heart jerked in my chest, ragged and bruised, and I could feel it coming up my throat, threatening to spill out onto the carpet right in front of where Riordan and I stood.

I was so used to battling tears and terror alone that I didn’t think about how he felt, thrown into this pit of despair and left to sink or swim with no warning as to how to navigate the water. Emory had always been the one that held our little family together. He was the glue and, as he dissolved, we fell from the family tree like dead leaves in the height of autumn. We spiraled through the air, destined for the ground--for dry rot and dirt, for slowly sinking into the ground, for wasting away into nothing…

The disconnect between all of us, Riordan now included, was vast and uncharted. The two of us were castaways from the ship at the end of the hall, lost in storm-tossed waters with no way of getting home, if home even existed anymore. My heart seemed to fall still in my chest, a time capsule of days gone by when my brother still knew how to smile, still knew how to laugh, and when my parents still stole kisses instead of fights.

I felt stupid when the tears finally came, rolling hot and unwanted down my cheeks. Riordan sat beside me on a couch, but if he had any comfort to offer, he kept it. Perhaps he didn’t know how. Perhaps he was still in shock, blinded by the explosion that had ruined us.

I felt stupid because I wasn’t the one they’d held down. I had no right to cry, not compared to him, but that didn’t stop the tears. They came like storms. Sometimes I bawled, uncontrolled and angry, and sometimes I curled into the corner of the couch and wept quietly with my hands over my ears, trying to shut out what was happening behind me and I kept hoping that, as the hours went by, one of my parents would come out just to check on me but neither of them did. In part, I understood that. I didn’t know what was going on. Only that Emory was bleeding and in pain and if I ever had a child that was suffering the way that he was suffering, I would have wanted to be with him too.

But I still existed. I was still there, just a forgotten husk brushed into the corner of the world to make room for the elephant that sat between us. The lack of discussion. The lack of acknowledgement and maybe if we’d spoken about it, we would have known. Maybe we would have noticed because sometimes it takes saying things out loud to understand their complexities. I was a creature of words. I understood that. Maybe if we’d just stopped pretending that what he was becoming would be the norm, we would have noticed.

I remained that way for hours, trapped beside Riordan, staving off tears. Sometimes I won. Sometimes I managed to fight them off. Other times, they came like an inevitable disaster and they made my face sting, raw and scrubbed by the back of my hand over and over. Beside me, my uncle retreated further into himself. His expression became more distant. He fetched a jug of whiskey and worked on it diligently until his eyes were glassy and his cheeks were rosy and he finally spoke.

“How do you live like this?”

And because I had no answer, I gave him nothing. If he expected something, he didn’t say it. He went back to silence, nursing liquor like it was an antidote for the poison that was eating all of us. He should have stayed in Eden, I thought. At least there, he couldn’t catch the disease.
It was hours before anyone came out into the sitting room. It was Mack though, not my parents. I smelled him first, lavender and ginger and fresh soap. He was wearing different clothes and his hair was wet. He must have left at some point, I imagined, through the back door behind the office my father kept or, hell, maybe right through the front and I’d been too distant and lost to notice.

He sat down across from us. My uncle spoke first. “Is he dead?”

“No,” Mack answered softly and waved his hand away when the jug of whiskey was offered to him. “But I’m not sure if he’s better or worse than he was before.” He licked his lips and ran his fingers over his face. “Atara…”

“He lost a baby, didn’t he?” My voice was wooden, finally crawling from the hole it had dug itself earlier that night and Riordan shifted, sitting upright when Mack winced in response. It was all the confirmation I needed. I had put it together when left to my own devices...when left to wonder about all the ‘maybes’ that could have happened if only we'd been able to talk about it. If we'd paid more attention instead of just lapsing into comfort with the routine of him being so utterly broken.

I couldn't imagine the devastation. The purse of Mack's lips and the way he looked pointedly away from me told me all that I needed to know. "I should have noticed," he whispered. "I told myself he wasn't going into heat because he was so sick. He was barely eating. None of the other signs were there. He wasn't vomiting, he didn't run a fever, he didn't gain weight...I should have known. I would have given him a strong dose of tansy, sedated him, and he'd have never known it happened."

Beside me, my uncle made a disgusted noise. “You’re a physician, aren’t you? Isn’t it your fucking job to notice?”

“Riordan--”

He cut me off. For someone that stood on ceremony as much as he did, he had a habit of acting like he outranked me because he was older. He’d always been that way--bossy and domineering. It reminded me of Emory, but Emory lacked Riordan’s desire for power. Maybe it was because he already had it. Maybe it was because Emory’s home life had, for the most part, always been functioning. Even when he’d been alone with Cyril, he’d still had Cyril. Riordan was alone. Almost entirely. My father always blamed that for his behavior--that he lashed out because he was angry, because he was hurting and he never talked about it, because he’d spent so long wishing and hoping and praying for one of his parents to take an interest and neither of them ever had so he needed that power to feel like he meant something to someone, even if all he stood for was someone to fear.

If Mack had known him, he would have understood that. That was who Mack was--he understood. He read people like they were books.

But he didn’t know Riordan, so when my uncle’s words bit to the bone, I knew he wouldn’t understand why they did. “It is his job, is it not? What is he good for if he can’t do that?”

“Funny you care now,” Mack snarled back, ceremony and rank forgotten, cheeks rosy with frustration. “Where were you when it happened? What does it take to get here from Eden, a week? And what do you know about our biology? You’re human.”

If looks could kill, Mack would have been a dead man when Riordan got to his feet. They both did, in fact, and while I knew Mack had a penchant for utilizing a sharp tongue, I knew that my uncle would have dragged him out to the post himself and nobody would have done anything to stop it. Nobody could.

Except, of course, me, and my reaction time, at that moment, was dismal, at best.
“You dare take that tone with me?” Riordan hissed through clenched teeth, his knuckles curled white. “You should have fucking known! This is your fault and you failed him. What does that even make you, gutter rat? Certainly not a fucking healer. You’re nothing. Nobody!”

“Riordan!” I heard my voice before I felt myself stand up, angling between the two of them and their pissing contest. “You’re drunk. You’re angry. I get it. This isn’t his fault.”

Behind me, Mack mumbled that it was, in fact, his fault and I drove my elbow into his gut with all the force that I could muster. His breath left him in a sharp ‘oof’ and he doubled over, arms about his middle. “How can you say that?” Riordan demanded. “He admitted it! And he talks like he’s worth something. He’s a rat from the fucking port district!”

“Shut your fucking mouth or you’ll be the one on the post!” I was surprised by my own violence, by the startled way that he stared at me like I’d slapped him, by the sharp gasp of breath that Mack sucked in behind me. “I outrank you, Riordan, or have you conveniently forgotten that? He is the only reason Emory is still alive and he’s my friend. I will not sit by and let you take all of this out on him! So sit down and shut up or so help me, I will make you regret ever walking through those gates!”

A surprised little intake of breath at the mouth of the hall caught our attention and Riordan spun to look at where my father stood, watching all three of us. I thought he might scold me. I thought he might have been there to blame Mack, too, and I drew myself up like I was prepared to take him on as well. He did neither of those things. Instead, he tipped his head and his expression darkened into grief. “Atara, we need to talk.”

And I knew. I knew then like I knew what was wrong with Emory. “No, we don’t,” I corrected. “I already know about it and I’m prepared to accept it on one condition.”

Fox blinked, surprised that I’d come to this table with conditions at all. I was not a politician. I was not a negotiator. What I was, however, was a person sick of watching everyone around me ground under someone else’s heel. Mack under Riordan’s, Emory under the whole fucking world’s, my parents under each other--

I couldn’t lead. I was piss-poor at it.

But I could protect. I knew how to do that.

“When he gets better--” Fox winced and Mack exhaled loudly like neither of them believed he would, but I continued. “And he will. If I have to send for an Immaran alchemist from Paikea, I will make sure that he gets better and when he does, I will give this back to him. I will carry on as Infinito because I have no choice, but Emory will be King.” I rolled my shoulders and straightened my back. “Until then, I will oversee his responsibilities. I will take over his role as your heir, but I will not strip his life away from him. I can’t.”

“Done,” Fox agreed quietly. “And that alchemist? He should be here within the week. I already wrote.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

The new introduction of Nikita Novak. Parts of this chapter are fresh, parts are just edited from the old piece, and parts are a mosaic of both.

Emory's narration is fast approaching though~

The day they picked to announce the shift in power from Emory to me was tragically sunny and bright. It felt like a betrayal. The more I thought on it, the more I didn't want to do this and it was only seeing Emory in the state that he was in that kept me from backing out. He could get to his feet, move around, and even hold conversations sometimes but he walked with an uneven gait like it hurt him to move his legs too much. He required support on one side to keep himself on his feet. He winced frequently but seeing an expression that wasn't dead-eyed and broken was a comfort to me, no matter how pained it was.

So when that day came, warm and hopeful, I wallowed in my own cloud of self-pity and loathing. Emory had taken the news...well, rather numbly, to be quite frank. He had looked almost sad about it for a brief moment and then he'd shrugged like it didn't matter and went back to the book in his lap. I could tell the reaction had bothered my parents but neither of them said anything about it.

That was life. I liked to label the time periods of my existence as "Emory" and "post-Emory" because it was like he didn't exist anymore and because there was this elephant sitting in the middle of our lives that nobody would talk about. Nobody wanted to call it what it was or admit that it happened. Nobody wanted to talk 'it.' 'It' being what had happened to Emory and, to some extent, what had happened to me. I hadn't come out of unscathed. I had witnessed the destruction of the person I loved more than anything else in the world. I couldn't cleanse the memory of him held down like that, his arms up like the strings of a marionette. Life just kept going on and I felt like it should have stopped. The longer it kept going...the longer those bright, sunny days kept mocking me...the angrier I got.

Mine was a slow boiling rage that simmered below the surface. It was stoked with every breakfast that went by with Emory sitting woodenly at the table, pushing food around that he hadn't the motivation to put into his mouth. It was fed by the way that the staff referred to it as "Emory's incident" or "what happened at the beach." It was the way my parents couldn't say it at all and that day...that day was the final straw.

I accepted the titles as was expected of me. I behaved mechanically and the only source of joy in my life became the little interactions I had with Mack Glenning. Before the night that Riordan had arrived, he'd been trying to build a brace for my weakened leg, drawing it in the margins of all of his notes on my brother. He was creative like that, I'd learned, always carrying around charcoal and
paper with little drawings of people, flowers, animals, and abstract things that I couldn’t understand but couldn’t deny the beauty of. Mack had been on the fast track to being my only friend anymore. Prior to him, my constant companion had been Emory but now, Emory could only talk to me for a few minutes before the knowledge that I’d seen them reduce him to what he’d become caught up with him and he shut down. When that happened, Mack would have checked on me before Riordan. He chattered incessantly. He was quite the gossip-monger, as it turned out, and he asked me about...me. He pried about my journals and I let him read some. He asked for my opinion on things. Sometimes I wondered if his care extended beyond the fact that I’d been his patient.

And then it stopped. It stopped like a door snapping shut, hinges still. He didn’t spend his time off with me anymore and when my uncle was around, he ducked out of our quarters the moment he was dismissed without so much as a look in my direction. Mack was unreadable, like a blank clay tablet, but I didn’t need to see emotion in his face to tell that what Riordan had said to him cut him to the bone. That was how Riordan worked. He’d looked at the entire situation--that Mack was a halfling who had grown up in a room above a brothel that his father worked at, that he’d spent his youth in the port district...he had probably been one of those hungry-eyed kids we’d seen in the closed fish market, and from there it wasn’t hard to put together what Mack’s life would have been like prior to enlistment.

A fucking tragedy worthy of a stage play. For that, I resented Riordan. To his credit, he did attempt to apologize to me a dozen times and I’d accepted the words with a grim look on my face and then proceeded to ignore him completely. It was petty of me, I knew that. I still know that. Riordan had his own demons and, like everyone else that fought the uglier parts of themselves, sometimes he lost. Sometimes that hunger he had for recognition wrestled the reins away from his fingers and things like the argument with Mack came out.

He was present for the ceremony though, simple as it was because I’d insisted on no celebration. It wasn’t a celebratory event and I refused flat out to take part in any sort of party thrown in honor of stripping my brother of the last things that made him the Crown Prince of Coria and turned him into...me. Just a prince. Just an extra.

I accepted the title begrudgingly and I assumed Cyril’s position as Infinito permanently. That part, at least, could not be avoided. I would be required to sit at the full council meetings, though those only happened twice a year, and to attend some of the small council meetings when the issues were pertinent and pressing. I repeated the oaths, took the ceremonial mercy blade from Cyril's hand and strapped to my own waist, and let Fox put that blasted circlet on my head. I played puppet for the court. I smiled and let them bow, made small talk when it was appropriate, and tried to pay attention though every few moments, my eyes wandered to the door because standing by the door was Mack in that blasted armor I’d once asked if he even owned, the spread wings of a healer pinned to his chest, along with a shining silver bar of a freshly minted Knighthood, bestowed on him by my father for all the help he’d given Emory.

Unlike Riordan, my parents understood. Perhaps because they understood the biology of Cyril’s family better than most and understood that Mack had no way of knowing that anything else was inherently wrong with Emory. It didn’t really help. Even with that fiercely stoic facade he wore, it was clear that he still blamed himself. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t have been avoiding me so avidly.

When he caught me staring, he licked his lips and that action alone pooled liquid heat in my stomach. A flush rose unwittingly to my cheeks and I scowled at him, which only succeeded in getting him to do it again. It was the most interaction I’d had with him in three days though and I took it gratefully. Mack was a shameless flirt, I’d learned, and he’d taken great joy in making me uncomfortable before. That, at least, hadn’t changed. He even quirked an eyebrow a few times, a cheeky grin on his face when he noticed my flush didn’t fade.
Eventually, the crowds became too much for me and the congratulations (which were mixed with apologies over my brother and his ‘incident’) dwindled to a slow trickle. Fox, who knew how terribly uncomfortable these events made me, eventually leaned forward to speak into my ear. “Run while you can, tiny,” he whispered. “We’ve got it from here.” I glanced back at him and at my Lheiro, who was barely suppressing a smile like he was in on this whole joke and I felt my shoulders sag in relief. I stood up quickly, excusing myself from the raised dais on which we sat so that I could make my way to the door where Mack fell in beside me.

“I told you I have armor,” he said smartly and I shot him a glare, my eyes squinting in irritation and my lips pursed up like I’d sucked on a lemon.

Mostly, I was happy to hear his voice again, relaxed and almost normal, but there was some nagging frustration low in my stomach that he was acting like he hadn’t been avoiding me. It wasn’t as if I’d spent all of my time around Riordan. For the most part, my uncle drifted at a distance from us, unsure of how to approach any of it. He’d tried with Emory and, to be fair, he’d gotten more conversation out of him than any of us had, but it was no groundbreaking progress.

The point was that Mack had no real reason to be treating me like I’d been the one to say those terrible things to him. I’d defended him, at personal political cost because though Riordan was no longer a prince, he was still the Herald of the South, set to be installed as the Duke of Southwatch when my father deemed him ready to accept the title. He had significant political clout and he was well loved by the other gentry. I would, in some way, pay for what I’d said to him, I was sure of it. Whether it was politically or personally was yet to be seen, but I knew my uncle. He could hold a grudge for decades, tucked away with the life-long one he held against his father.

I didn’t answer Mack, not verbally, but he did follow me into our quarters. Emory was perched there, out in the sitting room, a book written in Immaran open in his lap, his glasses balanced precariously on his face. If he didn’t look up, if he didn’t betray the bleached eye color he had, he could have been mistaken for my father–tall, long-limbed, a mop of messy black hair on top of his head that could never be adequately tamed.

He looked up at our entrance, recognition flitting over his face. “Hey, Tiny,” he offered the greeting quietly, in a voice muffled by disuse, and I waved in his direction.

“You’re angry with me,” Mack eventually relented, ignoring that we had an audience for the moment. It wasn’t as if my brother was unaware of our peculiar friendship. He’d been present for almost all of it, after all, but he’d never seen it quite like this. Mack was wringing his hands, visibly distraught. At least he’d dropped the stoic act.

I whirled on him and behind me, I heard Emory’s book snap shut like maybe he was considering bowing out of this particular incident but he didn’t get up. He plucked up the glass of wine beside him and brought it easily to his lips.

At least he’s eating, I thought to myself. It’s a good day then.

My attention wasn’t diverted long and my eyes narrowed again. That rage I’d felt at Riordan boiled up in my chest, hot and livid, and it spread up in a vivid scarlet flush to my cheeks and then all the way to the tips of my ears. I could feel the war paint like scrawls of dark pigmentation across my body light like I’d lit a fire beneath them, enraged with me. My heart pounded, blood rushing in my head, sloshing against the inside of my skull. “I defended you!” I snarled, words tearing from my mouth with vicious intent. Like Cyril and Riordan, I got angry quickly and I lashed out the same way--with intelligent intent.

I wanted him to hurt, I realized, because I was hurting...because he’d hurt me with this fresh neglect.
Mack flinched like I’d slapped him and I spun away from him, making my way to where Emory was sitting, watching us with wide eyes the color of mint cream. I plucked his bottle of wine from the table and he watched me, utterly engrossed, when I brought it angrily to my lips and with such force that I felt the bottom one split when the I crushed the bottle to my mouth. The wine stung the fresh injury but I hardly felt it. My fingers trembled with rage. My whole person vibrated with it. I hadn’t deserved this. I’d done everything right and for so many months I’d relied on Mack’s steady, constant presence as a source of stability that I was lacking in the wake of Hurricane Emory. I was off-balance without it, tossed from a ship without a life raft.

I wanted to throw that bottle of wine at him but Emory reached up and his long, painfully thin fingers wrapped carefully around it like he knew. He knew, and he pulled it back toward himself silently, blinking up at me like a rabbit staring down the length of an arrow ready to be loosed.

I released the bottle back into his care, surprised by his involvement at all, but it didn’t quell the rage. Everything was wrong. Everything was backwards. Everything good was crumbling like ashes in my mouth and I was tired. I was so tired, down into my bones and it never got any better, no matter how much I slept and I did want to sleep. It was all I wanted to do anymore--to crawl under blankets and forget that the world existed.

“I know,” Mack eventually offered weakly. “I know you did, killer, I just….” He let his shoulders slump in defeat and the metal of his armor clinked against it, like it chafed at the idea of surrender, but I was undeterred by his admission. It wasn’t enough to placate the boiling hate that erupted beneath my skin.

And it was hate.

In that moment that hung suspended in the air between us, I hated him for that distance. I hated my parents for their devotion to Emory. I hated Riordan for saying the wretched things he’d said. I hated Emory for turning into a ghost that no longer resembled the brother I’d thought could hang stars in the sky. I hated the two Lieran boys that were still out there--the ones that had been the catalyst for all of this fucked up bullshit.

And I hated me, for not being able to stop it. I hated me, for surviving it when Emory couldn’t, not really. There was some small, ugly part of me that whispered in the back of my head, ‘It should have been you.’ It would have been better if it had been me. At least then, Coria wouldn’t have suffered for it, too.

I wanted that wine bottle back but Emory seemed intent on keeping it in his lap and whether he was watching because he was entertained or watching because he was afraid to move, I didn’t know. I didn’t care. If he wanted to watch, he could fucking watch.

“You what?” I demanded, striding across the room to where Mack was standing against the informal dining table, his white armor a stark contrast against the terracotta color of the walls. “You just didn’t know what to say? You just didn’t know how to deal with it? Well breaking fucking news, Mack, nobody knows how to fucking deal with this! Riordan is a prick. That’s what he’s fucking known for. I would have never let him take you out on that post and you fucking know it.”

“Riordan threatened him with the post?” Emory’s voice was small in the vastness of the room. Small and surprising. It was even more surprising when he stumbled to his feet, clearly a little bit drunk on wine, but with a righteous fury evident in his face that I never thought we’d see again. For a brief, beautiful, glimmering moment that I wanted to stretch for eternity, I could see my brother in that mutilated shell.

I couldn’t do that, however, because the longer I didn’t answer, the more furious that anger became.
“I handled it,” I eventually answered but it didn’t seem to faze Emory. He was still glaring, eyes glassy. “I said that I handled it, boss.”

He looked down, seemingly surprised that he was on his own two feet, and then he sank back into the couch. The fury drained from him like water from a broken skin and he cradled his bottle of wine in his lap, his eyes focused now on the label instead of us.

I licked the split at my lip and my attention shifted to Mack again. He was still slumped in his armor, trying to look smaller than he was, like maybe he could shrink and disappear. “I owe you an apology,” he mumbled. “I’m just...not good at apologies.”

“You don’t owe me shit,” I snarled back. “Except maybe some fucking gratitude. Gods, Mack. You can’t do that to me!”

He looked up at me, his eyes that same silvery gray as a mirror, surprise on his features. “Do what?”

I was acutely aware of Emory behind us then, but he looked zoned out, like he’d taken a rain check from reality again. Wherever he was, it wasn’t in the parlor of our quarters anymore. It wasn’t perched on that cream colored couch, sunk into the cushions as deep as he could go.

I ground my teeth and the fury started to dissolve like salt in water. Slowly but surely, it dissipated, but it remained there, flavoring everything in me with a bitter rage that I couldn’t let go of. “You’re the only good thing I have right now,” I heard myself mumble like I had a mouthful of marbles and I worried the cut on my bottom lip with my teeth. “You can’t just...rip that away. Not without telling me why.”

“Nobody has ever done that for me,” he blurted, surprise still in his features. “I didn’t know how to...react. How to...thank you? I am exactly what Riordan said I am--just a gutter rat playing at something special and I don’t know how or why, but you see more than that and I don’t...I don’t know where to put that, killer.”

Killer. I almost chuckled. He’d tacked that on to his little nicknames for me when I’d told him that killing that boy on the beach hadn’t bothered me at all. I’d expected it to, but it hadn’t, and there was a small little piece of my brain that was disturbed by my lack of disgust with myself over it, but the rest of me fully believed he’d deserved it. There was even a little bit of joy ribboned through that righteous belief.

“You don’t put it anywhere, you ass,” I bit the words out with a glare and crossed arms, still chewing at the bloodied cut on my mouth. “You just accept it as a fucking compliment. For pity’s sake, what is your problem, Mack?”

He snorted. “My problem?” It turned into a dark laugh then, shoulders lifted from their position of defeat. He ran gloved fingers through his blond hair and then shook his head in disbelief. “My problem is that you’re seventeen, Atara. You’re a prince and I’m...”

“A gutter rat?” I offered, raising an eyebrow and he shrugged in acceptance of the words. I didn’t know what had put such a belief in him. When I’d met him, he’d seemed so sure of himself and where he was going. He didn’t let anything or anyone stand in the way of what he knew needed to be done. He’d taken the reins on Emory’s treatment without so much as a shimmer of self-doubt and he’d done better than anyone could, with the exception of a tried-and-true Paikean alchemist. He could have been one, I thought, if they accepted anything but humans at the College in the northern mountains of Immara.

He could have been anything he wanted. He was intelligent enough. His vocabulary sometimes
seemed to rival my own.

And he was beautiful. I hadn’t been able to deny that since I’d really looked at him after he’d finished stitching Emory back together. He was built perfectly—strong shoulders, strong back, but the slender form of a Lierian body made taller with human genes. He had a bit of a sun-kissed tan to him that came from his mother’s side, I figured, so that he wasn’t quite as porcelain-pale as the Lierians, but he wasn’t the same lovely bronze as a Corian. He had a bowed mouth, turned down into a tragic little curve in this high-stress situation, and his eyes were clouded with indecision, bare and open in a way they usually weren’t.

I thought his hair was probably feather-soft, too, but I’d never had the courage to touch him like that. I feared rejection like it was a plague. Even more than that, I feared that I’d like it and he would, too, and my only encounter with intimacy had been so fumbling and fresh—wet and sticky and too quick. Even the memory of it brought a flush of humiliation to my cheeks.

Mack’s lips pursed, a thin line that I could easily imagine prying open with my own mouth, but I shoved the thought aside. “You know next to nothing about me,” he pointed out gently.

“Then tell me.” It was a challenge, a gauntlet thrown and he would either pick it up or he would walk away. I continued on, egging him forward, blatantly encouraging him to rise to that challenge. “Tell me all of it. I don’t care how ugly it is. I don’t care how messy or complicated it is. I don’t care if you have weird hang-ups about stupid shit. I don’t think you’re a gutter rat. I think you’re…”

He looked up expectantly, eyes wide with anticipation, lips parted. I should have shut my mouth. I shouldn’t have bared myself so completely, but if I couldn’t trust Mack—Mack, who had saved my brother’s life and worked diligently to put him back together again, then I couldn’t trust anyone.

“I think you’re brilliant,” I continued, ignoring the flush that burned my skin and heated the marks on my face into a living furnace. “I think you’re smart and you’re funny and I love the little things that you draw. Sometimes you leave them here and I put them between the pages in my journals and I don’t know if you ever notice that they’re gone because you never say anything about it.”

The grin on his face grew and a flush rose into his own cheeks. Enamored by the pinking of his face and the way he seemed to light up, I kept going. “I think you’re selfless. You put so much time into us and you don’t have to. You have your own life. Your own family, but you still stay here when you know I’m going to be looking after…this. Alone.” I was still aware of Emory, though I doubted he was aware of us. I still censored his involvement, unwilling to cause him more pain than he was already in.

“And you’re beautiful. Gods, I could write pages about it. I do write pages about it. You’re the only beautiful thing I can even see anymore and I—” His mouth was on mine, swallowing up the words I wanted to say, hard and hot and hungry. He tasted of ginger and unrefined sugar, tongue and teeth, and he took absolute control of me. His hands tangled in my hair. I couldn’t even remember when he’d taken a step forward and a strange, heated urge built in my stomach, pooling there between my hips. I stumbled back into the table and the small of my back ached from the pressure of the polished cherry jabbing into my spine, but it was a distant second to the dizzying crush of him against me.

And I didn’t care. Maybe I was starved for attention or perhaps I just needed someone to take control of me for a moment because I suddenly had more responsibility than I’d ever imagined having, because my brother was in an out of control tailspin that I couldn’t stop, or because my life was so chaotic. I needed his teeth nibbling at my lower lip, the chapped feeling of his mouth, and the hard planes of his shoulder blades beneath my fingers when I clutched at him, pulling him close enough to feel his heartbeat in his chest, wild and hot. I ran my fingers through his hair, as feather soft as I expected and my fingers turned to tight fists.
He kissed my jaw and my throat, moved down to my pulse and sucked hard until I saw stars. My back arched involuntarily and my fingers dug into the back of his ribs. "Mack!" I mewed his name desperately and twisted in his arms. I felt his fingers tighten where they’d fallen to my hips and then the heat of him was gone. He was stepping back, flushed and with his forearm against his mouth--

"Don’t stop on my account," Emory’s voice cut through my fervor to touch him again and I blanched, the flush draining from my face until I turned bleach white. I turned to face him so quickly that I nearly stumbled and only Mack’s steadying hands reaching out to grasp my waist kept me from rolling right over the corner of the table and landing on my face.

My brother quirked a curious eyebrow. I hadn’t heard that little lilt of humor in his voice in so long and, almost instantly, I craved more of it. I wanted him to scold me, sarcastic and charming at the same time. I wanted him to taunt me for the obvious crush I was carrying around for his physician.

He wasn’t smiling, but there was amusement in his angular features. “Do stop though,” he encouraged. “Because the fathers will be back in a minute and I doubt they want to see you spread over the table mewling like a kitten.” He paused and then brought his hands up to his collar and mimed folding it up, giving me a pointed look and my fingers flew up to my throat where Mack had been sucking at my pulse a moment earlier. I could still feel the warm heat of his mouth there, lingering over the tender, bruising flesh. As instructed, I folded my collar up and glared at Emory.

“You’d better not say a godsdamned--”

“Psh,” my brother scoffed and rolled his eyes. “The amount of times you’ve covered for my sorry ass? I figure I owe you a few and...I owe him a lot more than that.”

Behind me, Mack’s breath seized in his throat and I heard him choke on his own tongue. He opened his mouth like he might refute what Emory said but the door swung open with a loud creaking sound and all three of us turned to watch. I’d expected my parents and, of course, they were there.

They were not, however, alone, and the tension in the room snapped palpably. I heard Emory make a noise, disgruntled and alarmed at the presence of strangers in his sanctuary and Mack slid easily behind me again, placing himself directly between whoever walked through that door and my brother. I knew if I looked at him, I’d find his hand on the hilt of his blade, curled proactively.

It was not necessary. My father was talking animatedly to a man the size of a small mountain. He towered so tall above the rest of them that he almost had to bend to walk through the door. Fox was not a short man. In fact, I couldn’t recall ever meeting someone taller than him, but he was not this sort of tall. He was not...towering. This man had shoulders broader than both of my parents pressed together and hands that could have wrapped around my middle and been able to touch finger-to-finger. He had a grizzled look about him--a face burned by cold weather and a beard that hung down to his chest, scarlet red and streaked with silver. His hair was long, too, braided down his back with intricately carved runic beads.

I recognized his armor from my education on foreign cultures. Hardened black leather painted with white war in three jagged, claw-like lines across his chest, not unlike the pigment that marred my brother’s own body. He was covered in straps--one for blades, one for a water skin, one for the great sword that was strapped to his back in the most bizarre fashion. The hilt it of it was ivory stained sky blue, carved with a great sea snake around the handle. It was the armor of a Glacian Rider, one of those savagely fierce northenmen that Marsher mothers talked about to scare their children into never venturing into the woods too far.

“Atara!” My father looked surprised to see me, but Cyril’s attention was on Emory, riveted and alarmed. “This is Vasilev Novak. He’s from--”

Cyril’s voice broke through the visit next. “Fox,” he warned quietly and I saw him put a hand out so that his knuckles met my father’s chest, stopping him before he’d completely walked into the room with his entourage of visitors.

Behind Vasilev, another figure slipped through and into my line of sight. He was small. Not quite Lierian small, but below average for an adult human. Stunted, I thought, perhaps by the vicious climate of the north for he, too, was wearing Glacian Rider leathers, only a long black braid of black and white fiber was tied tightly around his arm.

I stood corrected. A Rider Commander and so, somehow, this fragile looking creature less than half the size of the hulking beast that was standing with Fox, outranked the massive Lord Novak himself, at least in the Rider Legion. I wondered briefly how that worked—if Vasilev had to be a Commander to lead or if he could do it simply because he was Lord of their lands. It was a question for later, when the room wasn’t so full of dreaded anticipation.

I’d forgotten almost entirely about Mack’s kisses when that small northmen stepped out, blond head tilted quizzically to one side. His hair was short on the sides and in the back, but hung longer on top so that it fell in a straight sheet almost over his eyes. He blew it back with a sharp exhale and I blinked, surprised, when he looked at me and stepped forward.

He had what the Lierians called ghost eyes. One was a vivid, vibrant coriander green and the other was the same blue as the summer sky. He had a dimple in one of his cheeks, but only one, and an impish, devil-may-care sort of look about him when he paid no attention to the horrified, pregnant atmosphere of the room. We all waited for Emory to flee like a frightened animal.

The Rider Commander didn’t wait for anything. He brushed right by me and despite Cyril’s bold and broken whisper of, “Nikita, wait!” he did not stop and I found myself watching him, turning to see him when he sat directly in front of my brother like he was daring him to lash out the way he’d lashed out at Riordan.

I expected him to. I expected him to grab that wine bottle and try to beat this boy’s—Nikita’s—head into a bloody pulp. He would fail, of course. The Riders were notoriously savage, trained from the earliest years of childhood to survive not only the harsh climate they’d grown up in, but to withstand torture and torment and to fight with all the brutal rage of predatory animals. Small as he was, I had no doubt that Nikita, whoever he was, could have butchered everyone in that room before Mack even drew his sword from his hip.

I eyed the bow that was slung from his back, almost as long as he was tall from tip to tip, lethal and sharp looking. A string of black and white feathers hung from the top, swaying with his movement and I could see that every ounce of his body had been whittled away into sinewy muscle.

He was no mere soldier. He was a living, breathing weapon.

And my brother did not run from him.

He did not fight him. He did not reach for the wine bottle.

He watched with wide, clear eyes the way a charmed snake watches the man that plays the pipe that charmed him. He seemed caught up in something, drawn in, breathless with the same anticipation that we all felt.

“Nikita,” I heard Vasilev warn him, his voice deep and rumbling, but Nikita simply waved his
concern away with a flick of one slender wrist.

He held the same hand out to my brother, placed upright between the two of them. “I’m Nikita Novak.” His voice was smooth and quiet, like silk on silk, and my heart hammered in my chest, threatening to pound a hole through my ribs. I could feel the blood rush to my head, which struggled to decide if it wanted to feel terror or relief.

Emory did not answer, not at first. Ever person in the room watched them. Cyril took a step forward and was stopped by Mack’s hand on his shoulder. Fox and I were frozen to the spot, like we’d grown roots into the floor, and Vasilev--Nikita’s father, evidently--remained beside the king in stony silence as if he wasn’t sure if he should drag Nikita out of the room by his ears and put him to the strap or if he should let this play out.

Nikita went right on talking with that thick, grating accent of his where his vowels seemed to sound wider and harder, his H was nearly silent, and his W seemed to bleed into V. “Emory, right? Can I call you that?” There was still no answer. “You look thin. Have you eaten today?”

My brother’s voice cracked when he spoke with a shake of his head. “N-no.” He was still staring down at the hand between them, small fingers turned rough with years of archery and a lifetime of struggle in the frozen highlands above Coria.

The Rider Commander was undeterred by the lack of enthusiasm in Emory’s answer. “Come on, then,” he urged. “Show me where the kitchens are.” Emory looked appropriately jarred by the suggestion, his pupils dilating in surprise and then shock and then, just as quickly, fear. He shrank away from the offered hand and that only encouraged Nikita to slide closer on the couch.

“What is he doing?” I heard myself whisper, barely audible even to myself but Mack heard me. He shook his head, disbelief written in the way his mouth was open in grim anticipation.

Emory made a face, something between a grimace and an anxiety-stricken frown. He drew his knees up tightly to his chest and Nikita’s head tilted in disappointment, a fringe of blond falling in his eyes again. “Now, don’t do that,” he admonished gently. “Do you know what I am?”

He did. Unlike me, Emory had met Riders before, when he’d been a child. The tribe he’d been born into had lived on the edge of Rider territory and, according to my Lheiro and to Em, they’d traded with them occasionally. The Riders preferred the Lierians to the southern lords and, if given the option, would always choose to go into business with them over other humans. They had, from what I’d read, a significant dislike for “spoiled southerners.”

So Emory nodded and Nikita went on. “Then you know you’re safe with me, kitten. Nothing will happen to you. I won’t allow it. I promise.” It was absurd to think, really, and even more absurd to believe, that Nikita Novak could take on a castle full of well-trained guards. A handful of them, yes. Perhaps even an impressive chunk without assistance, but he would eventually tire out. He could be beaten.

But the way he spoke made me want to believe him. There was conviction in his voice and it was laced up with fierce loyalty. In that second, when he spoke those words, I believed with my whole heart that Nikita Novak would have died to protect my brother and he’d have done it without regret, without hesitation, without thought for himself. I wondered then how he could make such a promise without really knowing any of us. I wondered if the world he’d grown up in was so dark and harsh that he understood what it was like to feel crushed by it the way that Emory felt crushed. I wondered if he harbored some secret understanding the way that Mack did.

I wondered if he was one of those truly rare, selfless creatures who dedicated themselves to helping
people who needed them.

I didn’t know. I didn’t think I ever would.

“I believe you,” Emory breathed the words so quietly that I couldn’t quite convince myself that I’d heard them. He released his knees where they were held against his chest and his hand moved, slowly but with a sense of purpose that I so rarely saw in him anymore, and it folded neatly around Nikita’s small fingers...and squeezed. He pushed himself up to his feet, wobbling slightly, and I was painfully aware of how thin he was then--how his clothes didn’t fit him quite right anymore, even the white Lierian leather coat he’d put on that day, tied around his waist.

And then, as if he’d never been a shut in at all, he let Nikita Novak walk him right out the door.

Cyril wavered where he stood, took a few steps when the dry click echoed around all of us that were left. “I should--” he started anxiously. “I should follow them.”

“No,” Mack and my father spoke at the same time. I tried to say it with them but my throat was shutting, sealing around a lump in it that I couldn’t seem to swallow. Fox kept talking. “Let them go.”

“There’s nobody safer than Nikki,” Vasilev promised them. “He’s the youngest person to ever complete his Gauntlet and earn the Commander’s braid and...” He trailed off and something ghosted over his expression while I watched him, some pain that was still fresh but recently fading. “He...nothing will happen to your boy, except maybe being forced to eat something, but--”

“That would do him good,” Mack pointed out quietly. “And it’s good for him to leave these rooms. He needs it.”

Fox only nodded in response and then moved, taking Cyril by the elbow while my Lheiro opened his mouth to protest. I understood. Of course, I did. The last time Emory had left our quarters, they’d brought him back in a makeshift sling, his insides coming out of him and his eyes as vacant as a corpse’s. “Cyril,” Fox chided. “Come on. We have to draw up these trade agreements with Lord Novak. Emory will be fine. If he’s not back in an hour--”

“I’ll go look for him if he’s not back in an hour,” I promised, finally getting my mouth to form words. “We’ll both go.” I offered Mack up without his consent and he shot me a look through narrowed eyes.

My Lheiro still didn’t want to stay, but he was lead back by Fox’s gentle hand on his arm, into the office at the back of the suite with Lord Novak.

“What the fuck was that?” I eventually sputtered the words and turned to Mack. “He just--he charmed him like a fucking snake!”

“So you meant Emory, not the kissing?” Mack raised an eyebrow, his head tilted coquettishly to one side, arms crossed over his chest. I scowled in response, an irritated flush rising to my cheeks. I had tried for so long to get Emory to leave our rooms, to have a conversation, to eat something, and I’d failed...but Nikita Novak walked in and five seconds later my agoraphobic brother was back out in the wide world and on his way to actually fucking eat something.

I was happy, of course I was happy. I wanted him to heal.

I was also jealous. Insanely, absurdly, out of my mind fucking jealous, and Mack saw it.

He heaved a sigh and put an arm over my shoulders tenderly, drawing me tight to his side. He
squeezed a little and gave me an affectionate shake. “Some people have a gift, killer. Maybe he understands what Emory is living through better than we know. Maybe it’s because he’s northern and that reminds Em of being a child again. Maybe he’s suffering too and your brother just...connected to it. Whatever it was, Nikita Novak just reached him when we haven’t been able to for months. I call that a victory and I’ll take it.”

I stared at the door, like I was waiting for them to come back through, Emory chasing Nikita with the bust of Tylas the Liberator from the corridor, Nikita running instead of hurting him. It didn’t happen. The minutes ticked by on the clock, Mack’s arm over my shoulder and eventually, I just wiggled in his grasp to wrap my arms around his waist and bury my face in his armored chest. It wasn’t comfortable, by any means, but I could hear his heartbeat through the steel plate and I could feel his lips on the top of my head.

And I called that a victory. So I took it.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Mentions of child abuse

“Emory is a symptom of a broader problem,” Mack suggested from his place on my bed. He’d taken to spending his off days with us again. Or, rather, with me, specifically. Emory didn’t hang around the quarters as much in the days that followed Nikita Novak’s arrival. Most of his time, in fact, was spent lounging in the library with the northerner because the rainy season had started and storms pelted the side of the keep like whips, sending waves as high as houses against the cliffs below it. I could hear them, even then, crushing against the ancient structure beneath us that had been carved directly into the side of them by Tylas the Liberator.

I looked down at the Lierian coat I was wearing, the sigil of my father’s house branded into the breast of the leather. It split halfway down my chest and revealed the black shirt I wore underneath, then tied around the waist with a cored belt that held the Infinito’s mercy blade. I had my first meeting with the elders that afternoon. Cyril had left earlier to greet them when they arrived. Fox was with Riordan, going over final details regarding his inheritance of Southwatch.

Emory was...doing whatever he did with Nikita in the library or the kitchens or wherever they’d disappeared to for the day. It was bizarre. The whole thing was so strange that I had no other words for how this boy that none of us really knew had been able to sweep in and pluck my brother out of his fermenting depression like he was little more than overripe grape left on a vine. Mack called it a gift—that Nikita just had a way of making people feel safe and he did, indeed, have that. Even I could feel it. It radiated off of him in a corona of warmth and comfort that seemed...almost familial. He was a healer in his own right, with a different set of tools than the one that was currently speaking to me, but a healer nonetheless, and because of him, Emory ate with us again. He talked about his day--animatedly talked about it, with hand gestures and expressions that ranged from joy to irritation. I had yet to hear him really laugh or to even really smile, but like Mack had said–I would call this a victory and take it.

Eventually, after adjusting the coat for the eleventh time, I answered him. “What broader problem?”

“You haven’t been listening to me at all!” he accused and I looked him in the mirror, perched on the edge of my bed behind me, fingers curled around the side. I could get used to this, I thought...to having him here. To calling him mine.

He kissed me often now. As often as he could, at least, sometimes long and hard and hungry like he had been that first time and sometimes slow, mapping the curves of my palate and my teeth with his tongue while his fingers climbed the ladder of my ribs and eventually buried in my hair. Emory, true to his word, hadn’t said a thing about it to our parents, but I thought that Cyril, at least, was aware of
it. I could see it in the way he watched us curiously, head tipped to one side, while Mack shuffled through his little drawings of the day and let me pick the ones I wanted to keep in my journals. He said nothing about it, though, and for that, I was grateful.

Because I was greedy. I wanted Mack for myself and I didn’t want to share him with any of them, even the knowledge of him. I’d quietly shouldered my fair share of Emory’s burden, but this one small thing, this one comfort that I’d gotten from him—I deserved this and I deserved the quiet simplicity he offered me.

I grinned at him in the mirror and he glowered back, brow furrowed in mock frustration, his beautiful face twisted in a frown. “I’ve just been thinking that I could get used to having you in my bedroom,” I shot back and the frown melted quickly into a hesitant flush that crept up his cheeks, accompanied by a lazy, lopsided smile and a wrinkle of his nose.

“You’re flattering me,” he accused.

“I’m trying,” I answered quickly, my grin growing wider when he rolled his eyes. I turned to finally facing him, lifting myself up so that I was sitting on the dresser, my legs swinging listlessly off the edge. “What is the broader problem?”

Mack eased himself off the bed and approached me carefully, his hands landing on my knees. He spider-walked his fingers up my legs and my breath hitched at the proximity of him to me. I could smell him—ginger and sugar. I craved ginger in that moment, enough for my mouth to water for it and I leaned forward like I could coax him into kissing me but he leaned back in the same moment. “Uh-uh,” he chided quietly. “You started this, killer, you better be damn sure you can finish it.”

My stomach flipped, clenching deliciously in my abdomen and that warm heat pooled between my hips, languid and lazy like a stretching cat. It spread up my muscles and I reached tentatively to grasp his arms, my fingers closing around his biceps. I was always afraid to touch him, afraid to explore, afraid of triggering some horrible thing that he had experienced because he hadn’t told me yet and until he did, I was wary of pushing those boundaries. I’d seen what unwanted touch could do to Emory and while he tolerated some touch now, it had to come with a verbal warning.

This felt...fine, though. He was warm beneath my fingers, flesh that hard muscle. I could feel the corded strength beneath my palms when I flexed them over sun-kissed skin, just a shade or two too dark to be completely Lierian.

I wanted to lean forward and taste the skin beneath my fingers while he settled in between my knees, as comfortable as ever, like he’d always been there. I wanted to see if he tasted the way he smelled—ginger, sugar, and the salty sting of sweat that lingered on the surface of a body.

“Tell me about you,” I pleaded. It wasn’t the first time I’d asked that question and every time I did, I got a little bit more information. His full name was Mackenzie Rylin Glenning and he’d only taken the surname when he became an adult. Nobody had questioned it. It was a common surname west of Coryth where the mines rumbled deep in the ground, a remnant of our expansion into those territories several generations ago, long before Harlan was even born. He’d grown up in the brothel, raised by prostitutes, the most important of which I’d come to recognize by name: Keilani, a woman from far east of Immara in the Badlands with cinnamon toasted skin and almond eyes the color of polished bronze, and Rosie from Glacia, with riotous gold curls, blue eyes, and the runic tattoos of a northerner on one of her slender arms. Keilani used to carry him around in a sling when Rylin worked. Rosie had been the first person to take a strap to him and she’d bawled into his belly while he cried afterward.

And there was Rylin, who had been barely fourteen when he’d been saddled with Mack, and who
had done everything he could to keep him alive and well, but who had, ultimately, not succeeded as much as he’d thought he had. Rylin loved him as best as he could, I’d learned, but that hadn’t really been enough.

Mack pursed his lips and then smacked them together so that they made a sharp ‘pop’ sound when he opened his mouth again. “What else is there to tell?” he inquired, leaning in to nose at the top of my head and inhale. I could feel his mouth against my hair and he kissed me there before he moved down my face and my jaw, intentionally ignoring my lips though I sought contact and wiggled between his arms, trying to twist in the grip he had on my hips.

“You’re a halfling that grew up in a brothel,” I pointed out gently. I’d heard the stories Cyril told about how Harlan and Ambrose had come to find him in the first place, how he didn’t remember what had happened before that, how sick he’d been when they’d brought him back--I knew what happened to our people in brothels. My heart lurched at the idea of hearing it in his voice, knowing it had happened to him. I suspected, of course, and he’d done little to curb those suspicions, but I needed to hear it.

He wrinkled his nose and kissed mine. “They’re ugly stories, Atara. I don’t like to relive them.”

I ran my fingers over his arms again, squeezing gently in a manner I hoped was reassuring. “I know. I know, I just…” I hesitated. “I just don’t want to…” I trailed off, tracing a thin blue vein on the inside of his elbow with my index finger. I stopped at the curve there and thumbed over it, looking down at that point instead of at his face, which was fine, because he pressed it into my shoulder a moment later.

He exhaled heavily and then leaned back again, removing his hands from my hips so that he could step back. “You think you’re the first person I’ve considered having sex with?” he asked incredulously, arching an eyebrow and I jerked at the loss of contact, the sudden deprivation of the heat of his body and the sweet ginger smell that lingered all over him, especially in his mouth. “Or that I haven’t, at all, since then?”

“No,” I mumbled, feeling rather like a scolded child. I looked down at my hands, wringing in my lap, and then finally up at him. He was staring at me, waiting for a deeper explanation, arms crossed defensively over his chest. “No, I just…”

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“No one that survives trauma turns into a wraith, Atara,” he finally tacked on, his voice acidic. “You want to know? Fine. Fine.”

I shook my head quickly, hopping from the dresser, prepared to argue this point with him if I had to. I didn’t want him to tell me if it was going to rip open old scars and leave him bleeding again. I didn’t want him rushing headfirst like a charging bull, aiming to gore anyone in his way. My heart quickened, a terrible humming in my chest like it was trying to drown out the words he had to say and a lump formed in my throat, choking out my ability to speak.

So he spoke. “I don’t remember the first time,” he admitted with a shrug. Casual. Like he was discussing tea and biscuits. “Not really. I remember being small and too young to understand that it was wrong. I remember him pulling my hair and I remember choking, but I couldn’t tell you how young I was. Young enough to still have baby teeth. Young enough that when Rosie came out of the room and saw me under the table, she picked up his tankard and hit him so hard that his skull caved in. I remember blood in my mouth, Atara. That’s what I remember and I wish that I could tell you that Rosie stopped it and that’s the end, but it’s not, because I got older. I started using Mack instead of Mackenzie or Kenzie because it was more masculine. It turned some of them away from me. The men, at least.”
He rubbed his hands over his face and I stood, frozen, wide-eyed and struggling not to vomit. I had to keep breathing through my nose, reminding myself that it was all over. He didn’t have to go back to that. My father paid him now, even more money than when he’d first found us on the beach, because of that extra silver bar on his armor now. Even if he hadn’t, I felt like I would have started shoving money at him--finding some way to keep him away from that, to protect him from it because I hadn’t been able to then.

And I kept imagining it. I tried not to, but all I could see was a little boy with blond barrel curls and wide glass-like eyes, struggling to breathe through the weight of someone in his mouth, and that only made the urge to vomit even worse.

“When I got older, it got worse. There are always a few sick perverts around that want to get their rocks off with some stupid little kid, but it’s worse when you’re a teenager. It took me years to understand that it wasn’t about the act of sex for them. It was about control. I allowed the humiliation and the control to crush me until the air left my lungs, until nothing was left in the wake of the fire but the ashes of my life...and then I separated. Blocked it out. Went somewhere still and quiet, like detaching from my body so that I didn’t remember being used.” He pressed his fingers to his temples and closed his eyes, flinching like it had all brought him back there, to some wretched mattress he was pinned to, and I could almost see it, too--the mouthful of sheets between his teeth to keep from screaming, small fists balled up until his nails cut his palms. “I got good at it,” he continued. “At pretending everything was normal. So good that it became normal. And that’s how I survived, Atara. That’s how I didn’t become your brother. That’s how I can stand here and tell you about it and all it does is piss me the fuck off.”

I didn’t realize that, at some point, my eyes had welled up and the room had gone blurry. I was sucking my cheeks into my mouth to keep from openly crying and I scrubbed my face furiously, intent on not letting him know how much that had cut me. I didn’t deserve the tears. It hadn’t happened to me. “I’m sorry,” I managed weakly, my shoulders slumping pathetically. I’d thought it would be bad. Hell, I’d known it would be, but I’d never imagined that and I’d never thought it would hurt me to hear the way that it did.

I cared for him, I realized. More than I should have, probably. There was an itching part of my head that wanted to ride down to the Red Lantern and take every patron there to the post, that wanted to scream at Rylin until my throat bled for failing to protect Mackenzie so spectacularly, that wanted to kiss the hem of Rosie’s tattered skirts and elevate her to gentry for killing one and (probably) dumping him in the bay for the sharks.

“For what?” he asked, snorting at the idea. “It’s over, killer. It happened. I can’t go back and fix that. Neither can you. So what’s the point in dwelling on it? I don’t want to be Emory. I don’t want to turn it into the only thing that I can ever think about. So I don’t.”

“And it’s that easy for you?”

He shrugged. “Not always. Dealing with your brother has been...exceedingly trying for me.” He grated the last bit out between his teeth and I could only imagine how truly difficult it really had been. “It’s hard...knowing that I could have easily slipped into that, that if someone had just been a little harder with me, liked making me cry a little bit too much...I could have been that. That’s the broader problem, little prince. Fox can call this city a haven of equality all he fucking wants, but our people will only ever be one thing to theirs. You can change that.”

“I can try,” I corrected quietly and took a careful step toward him so that I could smell the ginger on his breath again. My fingers closed gently around his wrist and then skated up his arm once more until I slipped them beneath the sleeve of his tunic and drummed them against the heat of his
shoulder. “I just don’t want to make you feel...like you have to do this.”

Mack snorted, a sarcastic scoff of a noise. “Like you could make me? All, what, one hundred pounds of you soaking wet? Please. You couldn’t make me do a godsdamned thing and you know it.”

“You are so fucking irritating!” I shoved at him and moved to turn around and storm from the room. If I arrived at the council meeting earlier, so be it. Anything to escape his infernal need to hassle me, infuriate me, or otherwise drive me fucking crazy. He took everything else so seriously--everything but me. He treated me like a grand game and the whole purpose of it was making me want to slap the smug look right off of his face. I’d come close a few times, but he’d never quite goaded me into acting.

This time, however, he scooped me up like a rag doll and I squawked indignantly when he spun me around, arms around my waist. I kicked helplessly, my black riding boots aiming for anything at all that might give him pause, but Mack only pinned me to the wall near my bed so that I was looking up at him, caught in the cage of his arms, trapped between the slate blue of my bedroom wall and the hard, hot expanse of his chest.

I looked up at him, lips parted, practically salivating. I had next to no experience with this, but I’d have done anything he said in that moment and he asked for nothing. He only leaned forward, nosing along my jaw, nipping at my ear, running his tongue over the imprint of his teeth and I squirmed, whimpering for contact but I didn’t dare reach for it. We’d been here before. In a few seconds, he would remember his place and mine, and he would detach from me with some excuse about my age and my inexperience.

Except he didn’t.

He washed away my nerves with ginger flavored kisses at the corner of my mouth, kisses he stole away from me when I tried to garner more contact from him. His hands moved along my jaw, tilting my face up so that he had better access to me, so that my throat was bare for him like I was a dog submitting to a bigger, badder animal. My stomach betrayed how delightful that was to me, curling between my hips where liquid heat pooled and moved lower until I was stiff and aching in my trousers.

His tongue moved over my mouth eventually, a silent plea for admission that I willing granted him. It was as heated and hard as the first time he’d kissed me, desperate for something--so desperate that his body pressed to mine, one of his legs angled between my knees, and I could feel how hard he was, hot and heavy and my mouth watered against his kisses, my fingers finally lifting to play at the edge of his trousers.

This was new territory. He never let me do this, never let me take it as far as touching, but his hips flexed, perhaps involuntarily, and his body rubbed against mine so that I whimpered into his mouth and he swallowed it with a hungry groan into mine.

It undid me. His kisses lit a fire beneath my skin so that I was suddenly grasping for his clothes, desperate to get him out of them, to touch more of his bare skin, to taste it beneath my lips. I wondered briefly if he’d let me suck his cock, if he’d let me go that far, if I’d even be any good at it, all things considered, but I was too addled and dizzy to care if I was. I wanted it. I wanted to taste him, to feel him, to hear him moan my name above me--I’d have killed for it in that moment.

I pawed at him helplessly while he sucked dark bruises into the pulse at my throat, leaving prints of his teeth there. I wasn't capable of breathing or thinking. My rational thought had flown out the window with the warm, gingery smell of his skin. My heart slammed against my ribs, rattling in my chest while his hands scraped down my sides to my hips and pulled them forward, flush against his,
before they drifted back and squeezed my backside. My breath hitched, stuck in my throat, and then I
whined low and long, still fumbling with the laces of his trousers until he grabbed my hands and
finally (finally) pinned them to the wall beside me.

"I'm going to burn in hell for this," Mack mumbled as he released my hands, skimming his fingers
over my abdomen. He unbuckled my belt and I sucked in a sharp breath as his nimble fingers made
short work of the button my trousers and shifted them down over my hips. I was so hard it hurt and
I'd never wanted someone to touch me more than I wanted him to touch me in that moment. I didn't
care that the last time I'd done anything like this had resulted in a sloppy mess or that I feared this
interaction ending the same way. I tipped my head back and stared at the ceiling while his fingers
wrapped around me and I hissed.

This was new territory. The scullery maid had been...well, really just messy, wet kisses, a lifting of
skirts, and then sticky, wet...unpleasant memories that I didn't like ever recalling. She hadn't touched
me like this. There hadn't really been any foreplay to speak of.

Mack's hand was hot and...almost rough in some places and it took me a moment to remember that
he wasn't just a healer. He was a guard. One that had evidently handled weapons enough to have
calloused his hands in some places and the contrasting sensations were destroying me. I choked and
whimpered, my fingers curling in my clothes because every time I tried to reach for him, he batted
me away. "This is fine entertainment," he purred against my ear. "Watching you squirm."

He had picked a slow rhythm, leisurely pumping my cock and running his thumb over the head,
squeezing the base almost cruelly every time his hand slid down. "Mack, holy fuck!" I managed to
gasp, throwing my head back against the wall. I twisted and stood on my toes, flushed and aching. I
needed more. He wasn't moving fast enough and, in retrospect, he knew that. He did it on purpose--
to push me to a line where I was nearly delirious. "Gods, please, please!"

"Please what? And you can call me Mackenzie." He quirked an eyebrow and I managed to look at
him. More importantly, I took in the way that he was looking at me like he wanted to devour me
right there against the wall. I had to swallow several times before I could even open my mouth and
then, nothing came out but a long-suffering moan. I was just stuck, panting and wide-eyed, watching
him take in the way that my cheeks flushed and how he'd struck me stupid and speechless.

Mack leaned forward and his tongue darted out, sliding along the thin, vertical blue line that split my
lower lip while I searched for words and only managed a fretful whining noise instead. He chuckled
and then he was gone, settling in front of me on his knees and I gaped. "Mackenzie, w--" I had
wanted to tell him to wait because I'd never done this. I suppose I still could have pushed him off but
when the wet heat of his mouth surrounded me, there was no hope for stopping. I cried out and had
to stuff my fist into my mouth to keep the guards from hearing me outside the doors.

His tongue slid over me while he inched me in, taking a little bit more every time he slid down,
licking the slit at the head and then all the way to the base. He hollowed his cheeks and opened his
throat and I nearly shrieked into my hand. The other hovered helplessly near his head until he
reached up and guided it to his golden blond curls. I shuddered and groaned, my hips rocking
forward involuntarily. Mack worked my trousers down further, sucking and humming around me
while I withered into a speechless, babbling idiot above him.

I wasn't one to be struck speechless. Ever. I was clever, sharp, and sometimes mouthier than I should
have been but Mack had managed to turn my voice off until all I wanted to do was say his name. I
started with Mackenzie, because he'd asked me to and I knew, then, what being allowed to use his
full name meant. I devolved, though, from panting it like a prayer to barely gasping it between kiss-
swollen, scarlet lips. He'd slipped his hand between my legs and one of his sword worn fingers slid
carefully into me and a moment later, I popped out of his mouth with an audible noise.

"Fuck, you really do get wet. I thought my Lierian teacher was full of shit," he breathed, licking at me when I glared down at him, his finger still sliding into me, stretching me open. It wasn't uncomfortable. It wasn't really much of anything at first until he licked his lips and twisted it and I mewed like a kitten. He knew exactly what he’d been doing, luring me into a false sense of security and then lighting stars behind my eyes.

I wriggled against the wall, panting and keening and Mack chuckled again. Then he lowered his mouth back onto me and sucked me in deep and hard, letting the tip of my cock slide into the back of his throat while his fingertip brushed that spot over and over again, fucking me gently while I clawed at his shoulders through his shirt. "Mackenzie, I can’t--I can’t--You need to stop or I’m gonna--" A throaty cry escaped my mouth when I came and I tried to pull him off of me. I grabbed his hair and tugged and he pushed back, sucking and swallowing so that my cheeks flamed an even brighter shade of red.

When he'd sucked and fingered every convulsion and spasm from my body, he leaned back and licked the bottom of my cock from base to head before he got to his feet. Then he licked his lips as well and bent to kiss me while he rearranged my clothes, tucking me back into them while his tongue explored my mouth again, flavored with ginger and the bitter bite of me.

I could barely see straight. My legs were trembling and I was using the wall to support most of my weight. My hair was a sweaty mess and Mack leaned back to look at me. "See," he informed me haughtily, almost like he was taunting me. "I told you I’d be fine."

"Should I..." I started hesitantly. "Should I...do you want me to..." I didn’t know how, couldn’t even imagine being as good at it as he was, but some part of me wanted to. I knew that was how it was supposed to work--equally. He’d given me something. I should give him something back.

Mack cocked his head and then grinned when he got that I’d been attempting to offer to return the favor. "You're precious," he teased. "Not necessary, killer. Come on, sit. We ought to talk before you go to that meeting and I lose the nerve to say what I need to say."

"That’s ominous," I grumbled, but I let him haul me into my bed. I crawled into the pile of gray pillows on top of it and Mack sat down in front of me, cross-legged and not at all looking like he’d just made me turn his name into a religious conviction. I was still trembling, trying to pace my breathing and my heartbeat. My hands were unsteady and I stuffed them into the pillows, seeking to hold the blanket in tight fists so that he couldn’t see how adequately he’d unraveled me.

"I like you, Atara," he offered quietly, his hands on his knees. "And I often forget how young you are because...well, because you're much older than that, really, aren't you? You've got all this weight on your shoulders and you carry it around without flinching. You're intelligent. You can hold a decent conversation without staring at the maid's tits, which is...definitely what I would have been doing when I was your age."

"You still do that," I pointed out, wrinkling my nose. "He'd done it that morning. To be totally fair, she was a nice looking girl and she was...quite well endowed. It was hard not to notice. After the scullery maid, however, I just wasn't interested and I pursed my lips like I'd sucked on a lemon.

Mack snorted. "I take it girls aren't your thing at all then?"

I opened my mouth and then clamped it back shut, licked my lips, and tried again. "Well, there was one girl," I started. "You're going to laugh at me."

"Probably."
I scowled and he shrugged but I continued anyway. "She was a scullery maid. Her name was Ariel. She used to sneak us raspberry tarts at the bottom of our baskets when Emory and I went to eat in the gardens. It was...stupid, really. We were curious and so we..." I pulled a face and Mack blinked, a silent encouragement for me to continue. "It was messy and sloppy and fast and...I couldn't ever look at her again. Like, ever."

He did laugh, as I'd expected he would. It was the sort of laugh that came from your stomach and lifted your shoulders. I threw a pillow at him in response, burrowing deeper into them so that I could escape his looks and the way his laughter shook my bed frame. It was a nice sound, deep and warm and it swallowed me up. For a moment, I'd worried that I'd want to crawl under a rock and never look at him again the way I had with that maid but I was still comfortable with Mack and he pounced a second later, climbing over me so that his hands were planted on either side of my head. I blinked up at him, surprised by the closeness and the way he gave me a quick ghost of a kiss. "You're cute," he murmured. "And naive and sheltered and unbearably sweet. You could do much better than someone like me."

"But I like you," I managed weakly, my fingers brushing the fabric of his shirt where it hung against mine. I hadn't the courage to touch his skin then. I just stared up at him, trying desperately to implore him—to beg him not to leave with that statement and that belief. It broke my heart in some ways...that he thought himself that unworthy of my affection.

Mack sighed and his warm, sweet, candy scented breath heated my cheeks. He nuzzled against me for a moment and the sweetness of it caught me off guard. I nuzzled back and he let his weight lower so that he was settled half on top of me. "Even after all that?" he asked quietly. "You know what I did. What I am--just a gutter rat to your living god."

"You didn't do anything," I argued, my face clouding over. This was that guilt that Emory felt finally coming to the surface--as if it had been his fault for being out there during a heat, as if he'd done something to deserve it...to deserve being pinned like a butterfly to a board and torn open, used, left to bleed to death in the surf... "None of that was your fault." He was looking down at the buttons on the shirt beneath my coat like they were the most intriguing thing in the room and I lifted my hands to take his face between my palms and angle it up. He had to look at me then and he did, begrudgingly, wearing an expression almost like he expected me to be angry.

I wasn't angry. Not at him, at least. "I want to choke your mother with the jewels she wears," I finally spat out and his eyes widened, surprise etched across his face until his mouth twisted into an amused little smirk. I deflated with my anger almost immediately. "Oh gods, I'm sorry. She's still your mother. I didn't--"

"No, by all means," he encouraged. "I'd love to see you try. You're cute when you get pissed off. You turn all red and you get so worked up that you forget how to speak. Makes me want to pin you to something and fuck you stupid."

My throat clogged up again, words trapped against words that refused to leave my mouth and he watched me like he was waiting for a reaction. All he got at first was a shocked and scandalized expression that slowly melted away into heat and want and a carnal, animalistic need that I had deep in my belly.

I cleared my throat after a moment. "I wouldn't be opposed to that, I think," I managed to eventually bite out and he chuckled.

"What if I tied you down?"

To say that I hadn't expected the question was a vast understatement. My fingers stilled where they
were, toying with the sweat-damp curls at the nape of his neck and he watched me like a hawk, his eyes intent and hungry. I opened my mouth to speak but words didn’t come out immediately. My brain mulled over the suggestion, finding loopholes and explanations. “You mean physically…” I finally suggested.

Mack nodded once. “With rope.” He sat up, his hands planted on either side of my head and he bent down to kiss me gently. It was chaste. He didn’t probe for entrance into my mouth. He didn’t sweep his tongue over my lips to beg for it. He just kissed me, warm and quiet and sweet. “You don’t have to, little prince. I just...like it.”

“You like the control of it, you mean,” I corrected and he flinched like I’d slapped him but he didn’t retreat from the words, which sounded more like an accusation than I’d intended. I did not, however, retract them. I should have been more alarmed by it than I was with the limited experience that I had, but if I couldn’t trust Mackenzie, then there was nobody I could trust, not after all that he’d done for me and for Emory and for our entire fucked up family. He wouldn’t hurt me. Ever. I doubted he was really capable of hurting anyone. He liked to look tough, like the good little soldier that took his orders and ran with them, but he wasn’t that.

Mackenzie Glenning was a healer, not a soldier. A lover, not a fighter. An artist, not a politician. He could reverse those roles if he had to, but that wasn’t who he was. I knew who he was. I saw him. Under all the walls and the masks and the boundaries he set, I saw him.

And he saw me.

“Hey,” I interrupted his thoughts and I could tell he was thinking. His eyes clouded over with it, scrambling behind the mask of his face for an explanation that wouldn’t terrify me or send me running. I grasped his jaw, my fingers curled gently along his face so that he looked at me and there was something in him that seemed so crushed by having to admit that he needed that leash. Or, perhaps he didn’t need it, but it made him feel better the way that writing out what I thought made me feel better and more in control of the things that happened to me...the way that shutting himself off made Emory feel like he had control of his life when he so clearly didn’t.

Because none of us really did, did we? Did anyone?

He hummed an answer, a quiet, “Mm,” in a voice I almost didn’t recognize.

I pushed myself up and pressed my mouth to the corner of his. “It’s okay,” I promised gently. “It’s okay if you need that.”

“I don’t.”

“Mackenzie. You’re a terrible liar.”

He flinched again. “It’s not all the time,” he offered it like it was a truce, like it would change my mind or like I would care at all and I found, surprisingly enough, that I didn’t care. Then he sat up--really sat up and leaned back on his haunches so that he could run his fingers through his hair, but I didn’t allow him the space that he wanted. I draped myself around him like a blanket, my arms over his shoulders and my mouth along his jaw and up to his ear. He didn’t move, not even when my fingers found their way to his tangled hair again.

“I don’t care if it is,” I assured him and I felt his shoulders slacken, relaxing only slightly. “I don’t care if it’s every time for as long as we’re doing...whatever this is. If that’s what you need, I’ll buy the fucking rope myself.”
“Fuck you,” he grumbled, but I could feel him laugh and his arms looped lazily around me. “Making me feel all sorts of things. I hate you.”

“You really don’t.”

“Yeah,” he agreed after a moment and he nuzzled into my throat. “I really don’t.” Then he paused. “And you’re really late for your meeting, killer.”

I didn’t even care.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

I had to run to make it to the large, circular room off the side of the throne room where my father sat court three times a week to make it before I was considered inappropriately late. My heart was riotous, thumping wildly in my chest as if it had grown wings, ready to fly right from my mouth and do barrel rolls through the corridors. I wanted to turn around, run back to my room, and spend the rest of the day exploring Mackenzie Glenning’s tightly muscled body. Nothing could take that high from me, I thought--the high of feeling his hands on me, his mouth on me, hearing him laugh against me when I finally coaxed him into admitting that yes, of course, he did like me. I was regal. Euphoric. Floating somewhere in the clouds. I hadn’t felt this good since before Emory had been hurt and I thought, mistakenly, that I wouldn’t let anything ruin it.

And then my Lheiro swam into view, his nose wrinkled at my tardiness, foot tapping in displeasure. He opted not to lecture me, probably because we didn’t have time, and my euphoria wilted like a plucked rose left in the sun.

"It's important to weigh the needs of every tribe against the needs of the nation as a whole," he whispered as we entered the room, the rest of his...my...council sitting at a long table carved from petrified wood, each leg engraved with the symbols of different tribes. His tiny hand was curled around my wrist beneath the table in a quiet show of comfort and encouragement that only the two of us knew about. I was more grateful for it than I could have shown him. My stomach twisted in knots. I was two weeks from my seventeenth birthday and near the end of the table, I could already hear one of the oldest elders talking about my rite. "The older ones will want to disregard the city dwellers now. They don't think of them as 'true Lierians,' just Corian trash. They'll be your biggest adversaries. You have to be willing to embrace the future and honor the past, Atara. It's a balancing act."

I nodded and cleared my throat and every set of pale eyes in the room turned to me. There were six of them, not counting myself and my Lheiro, who dropped my arm. I knew Kinnon and Pyrin, seated closest to us, as representatives of the Glacian Mountains tribe...our tribe--the Recians--and the only female at the table, Ilyia, who represented those in the city. She regarded me with wide-eyed wonder and, I noted, she had painted a stripe down the center of her bottom lip. When I looked at her, she smiled--a genuine, heart-warming sort of smile and I felt the knots in my stomach loosen a bit. "My Lord Infinito," she murmured. "If you don't mind me suggesting, we could pick up where we left off last time?" She glanced between Cyril and I and he leaned forward to speak to me.

"Land claims and territorial disputes. Should be easy enough a problem for you to tackle first," he whispered and I nodded, both to answer him and the rest of them.

"Right," I started. "If you could just...state your name and your tribe before you speak, that would be excellent. I'm not sure I've properly met all of you, given how far some of you live from the capital." Kinnon shot me a wide grin. Though I had only met him a handful of times, my brother spoke fondly of him and he was a welcome face among those at the table.
He also spoke first, his fingers shuffling papers that he handed off to me. "Population in the Recian tribe--ah, sorry." Pyrin had nudged him. "Kinnon. You know me though." I nodded. "As I was saying, the population is nearing the numbers we were at prior to the Immaran massacres. We would like to expand into two, possibly three more village principalities. I've drafted possible locations and the names of the elders I would recommend being placed in charge of each location."

"And more elders means he gets more weight in the council," one of the older men at the end of the table grumbled. "Hiram, from the coast." The coast, I recalled, was the most pious of our people and, because of that, the most openly disgusted at my Lheiro's choice of a mate and at our parentage.

I licked my lips and looked down at the papers Kinnon had handed me. This was all mind-numbing and I handed them to Cyril, whose eyes swept over them knowingly. He leaned in to my ear again. "He doesn't need three. I would grant him the two. He can move for three again in a year," he whispered. "Sit up straight. You're in a position of command, not a maths lesson."

I huffed but straightened my spine, tapping the edges of the papers against the table until they were in a neat stack. "I can give you two, Kinnon," I relented. "You can move for three again in a year."

Hiram grumbled and I shot him a scowl. "And what would you have me do, Hiram? Over-crowding leads to plague, disease, and starvation."

"Cull them. Send their ripened boys to the coast. We haven't nearly the population they have," Hiram offered coldly. "They'll need to send them anyway. You have to undergo the Rite, unless you'd prefer it happen the way your brother's did."

Silence fell over the room like a blanket of snow, deafening the world around me. Beside me, Cyril stiffened as if he'd been frozen solid by it, his fingers white-knuckled on the table. My tongue failed to react. Nothing sharp or witty sprang to mind and I wished desperately that Mack had accompanied me to this. He would have known what to say. He would have been ready for it with a barbed answer that cut so deep and hooked behind Hiram's ribs that he would never scrub the words from his mind and he would have done it all with the political finesse of someone that had grown up in court, like I had, and not someone that had grown up hiding under tables in a brothel.

It was Kinnon that spoke after that stunned, malignant quiet. "You would dare say that now?" His voice cut like a knife, eyes narrowed. I barely knew Kinnon. He visited Coryth maybe once a year with his mate, a lovely female Lierian named Dara, and their two sons. I knew that he'd helped raise my brother when Cyril was still living with the Recians. I knew that he loved Emory and I like we were his flesh and blood because his devotion to Cyril ran deep and, according to Emory, so did his guilt. That, however, was the extent of what I knew of him. Precious little, really.

But he was there now, snarling like a rabid animal and he pushed himself to his feet in the wake of Hiram's sneer at his outburst. "We all have different opinions about what happened to Emory, you wretched old hag, but not one of us would dare call it something that sacred. That was not sacred. That was torture and we do not condone that sort of bloodthirsty brutality, even in a Rite! There are people there to make sure it doesn't happen that way!" He was fuming, fists clenched on top of the table, boiling fury that bled red into his face. For a second, I thought he might reach over and hit Hiram. "That type of obscene behavior has no place in our rituals, however archaic they might be, and those disgusting excuses for Lierians ought to be given to Fox for Corian justice on their post and you, Hiram, should have your tongue cut out for even suggesting we condone what happened to Emory Bordelon!"

I was leaning back in my chair, eyes wide, stomach turning at the very thought that someone condoned what had been done to my brother, that someone could ever possibly blame him for it the way that he blamed himself. I wanted to hit Hiram then. I wanted to tear him open the way they'd
done to Emory. I wanted him to hurt and bleed and suffer and be incapable of anything but abject torment. My nails scraped against the table and, below it, Cyril’s hand found a path to my knee and squeezed.

“You only take this stance because you wanted the boy to be yours,” Hiram drawled, his eyes rolling like this was disinteresting to him. Like he was bored. His fingers drummed on the table and I swear, if Kinnon could have reached down his throat and ripped his tongue out by the root, he would have done it in that second. I knew that, perhaps, he could have, physically. He was one of their warriors, armed to the teeth at all times. Even then, sitting at the table, he had a dozen small throwing blades wrapped around his hips and a pouch full of poison darts hanging near the pipe that shot them. A set of small, deadly looking daggers were snug against his the outside of his thighs.

He could have killed him. I dared to imagine that I probably would have let him.

Kinnon bared his teeth, livid ferocity in his face, but before he could speak, one of the old men beside Hiram piped in. “He’s right about that, Kinnon,” he pointed out clinically. “Even when the boy came out with that head of black hair and human flesh, you treated him like he was yours.”

“That’s not the point!” Pyrin shot back, as equally angry as Kinnon now. “What Kinnon wanted twenty-two years ago isn’t the fucking point! You’re deflecting. You--”

I tuned them out when a tiny hand reached over the table to grasp mine, fingernails polished with pale blue varnish. I nearly jerked back, surprised by the intrusion into my space, but Ilyia’s small face filled my vision a second later and she was up from her seat and bent near mine to speak to me. “Please,” she whispered, close enough that I could hear, and my Lheiro was too distracted, too stuck on Kinnon and Hiram, his fingers like claws in my leg, to notice her.

“Infinito,” she started again, addressing me and not my father. It was my title by then, I knew, but so fresh that it still jarred me. “They don’t understand what a blessing you are.” My face twisted in confusion. “That the ancestors chose to honor us with a second son.”

Oh. I realized. One of those.

“We’re looking,” she assured me. “I promise you, we’re looking and we will find them.”

My eyes were the size of saucers. I wasn't sure how to answer her. Behind me, the cacophony of the fighting council still rumbled in my ears, my heart was a frantic pounding in my chest, and I could almost smell that night at the beach again--salt water, rain, and the metallic tang of my brother's blood in the sand. Beyond the din of their arguing was his screaming and then his horrifying silence and beyond Ilyia's pleading face was the image of him limp and broken and left for dead on the shore.

My breath came in short, ragged gasps and I pried my fingers from my hand to touch them to her cheek and her eyes brightened like she was near tears but she returned the gesture and I pushed myself up. "Stop!" I shouted the word, my hands flat on the table and they all turned to look at me, quiet and, in some cases, contrite. Hiram only deepened his scowl though. "I am not taking a Rite."

"You can't refuse," one of the older men sneered. "It's tradition. It is your role."

"Some traditions need to be left to die," Kinnon said softly. "We're talking about one that nearly destroyed our last Infinito. I was there. I remember what Leland was like until the day Emory was born. He was more dead than alive. We're talking about legitimizing the rape and torture of people we call Gods. I understand the desire to call the next ruler your own and I understand the necessity that it used to be but it is no longer a necessity. We have the weight of the Corian monarchy behind us. Breeding the Infinitos isn't necessary anymore. They're people, not stock horses."
"And yet you took part in Leland’s,” Hiram pointed out, his face twisted in a malicious scowl and Kinnon winced like the memory alone was painful.

It was something I hadn’t known, at least, and though I’d always been dimly aware that Cyril had been involved in a Lierian ascension Rite, I had never really thought about him being with anyone besides my father. They were so...affectionate. It was almost to the point of being nauseating. I couldn’t imagine him with anyone else, even hearing that it had, in fact, happened.

Pyrin’s arms crossed and he pursed his lips. "We know that Emory can’t carry a child," he whispered, his voice pained and he cast my Lheiro an apologetic look. Cyril's shoulders sagged a little bit at the reminder and I closed my hand over his as Pyrin continued. "We know that he lost one. We can assume that it was because of the stress he was under but we can't dismiss the fact that it could be because they're halflings. We don't know, with absolute certainty, that Atara is capable of carrying a child to term either. I don't think risking their lives is worth it to save a dying tradition."

"He is a gift," Illyia spat, scowling at Hiram, who sneered at her. "And you're an abomination among our kind." She did actually spit at him then and I jumped back as Hiram nearly crawled over the table to make a grab for her throat.

Cyril pressed his hands over his eyes and rubbed them and I squared my shoulders off to attempt, once more, to put an end to this. "I said stop, Hiram!" I snapped again and Pyrin pulled him off the table while Kinnon held Illyia back. "What happened to my brother was not a Rite. It was rape and I have watched him struggle and suffer for months because of it. He has lost everything. You all knew him but you don't anymore because the Emory you knew could laugh at everything. The Emory I know can barely smile. So those of you that refuse to help me drag in the monsters that destroyed his life...those of you that think he deserved this for being out in a heat--"

"A heat is uncontrollable!" Hiram raged. "The reaction we have to the smell of it is strong and unavoidable! Emory should not have been out--"

"Hiram!" Cyril finally got to his feet and I could feel the anger emanating off of him in waves. He looked up through a sheet of white-blond hair, his eyes burning with a hatred I'd never seen in either of my parents before. "Kinnon sat with me through every one of my heats after I had Emory and he never once put his hands on me. It is! controllable. You have sons of your own." The table fell entirely silent and Hiram was scowling at him. Cyril's voice turned hoarse and low and I could tell he was struggling through an onslaught of emotions. He'd be a sobbing mess when this was over. He was a fragile creature when it came to things like this but when I reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, he shrugged me off. It should have hurt, that rejection, but in an odd way, I was proud of him for standing alone.

He continued then, his voice like gravel and his eyes glassy. "I want you to imagine someone bringing you one of your sons, awake but unseeing, bloody from his knees to his hips, beaten and broken, and then I want you to imagine having to hold him while they stitch him back together from the inside out and then to hold him again while he bleeds out the parasite that was left inside of him. My son is dead. The Emory that all of you knew is gone and though bits and pieces of him come back every day, he will never be the boy he was before that happened. I want the animals responsible for destroying his life brought here. Alive. Because I want to kill them myself."

The silence continued and beside me, he shook. I wanted my father. When Cyril fell apart, Fox was the only thing that put him back together and though Cyril was certainly the more put-together of the two of them, he was also the one that went to pieces most completely. "Hiram and...you two--" I pointed to the two older ones beside him. "You're dismissed. Your tribes can vote new elders in before the next meeting. If they don't, I will appoint them myself or you will lack representation in the council. I don't really give a shit. Kinnon and Pyrin, it was nice to see you. You--" I pointed at
Ilyia. "With me. Now."

Kinnon took Cyril around the shoulders and led him from the table to the door with Pyrin at their heels. Hiram and his company of impossible pricks stomped away, fuming and railing that I'd not heard the end of them while I pulled Ilyia away from the table. "You..." I reached for her mouth and pressed my thumb where the line was drawn on her lip. "Can you reach them? The uh...the cult? The sect?"

"They're called the Godless," she whispered like we were conspiring which, I suppose we were. "Because that's what everyone else calls us. But we have you. We're not Godless. We have the real God." She pressed her fingers to my cheek and I pursed my lips. This whole thing made me feel...unclean. I was no living god. I was a teenage boy, like every other teenage boy in the gentry, and her reverence of me should have been corrected. I was not a political creature. I did not have any business trying to manipulate something out of people who treated me like a religion and not a person.

But I didn’t correct her. I didn’t because I needed her. I needed this to be over, to give Emory the closure he seemed so hungry for, to give Cyril a night where he could sleep without nightmares, to give Fox the understanding he craved...

I needed her.

"I want them found," I told her through my teeth and she nodded vehemently. "Search every home, every shop, every sewer. Turn the city inside-out. You've seen the drawings my father had done of them. Bring them to me in chains and I will make a formal appearance for your followers. I will legitimize them as a real tribe. This is destroying my family. Do you understand me? Look at him." I gestured to where Cyril was barely on his feet, hysterical between Kinnon and Pyrin, refusing to exit the room without me. "Ilyia." Her eyes remained riveted to me. "You have until nightfall tomorrow."

"As you command," she agreed and bowed and then she was gone, tearing out the door to the sound of her striking footfalls and the rustling of her seal skin coat.

The stress of the situation was making me warm. I peeled my coat off and made my way over to where Kinnon was speaking to my Lheiro in low, hushed tones, his hands on his shoulders. My face was flushed and my heart was erratic. My palms went clammy the closer I got and I wrapped an arm around Cyril's waist. "Come on," I said softly. "Let's find Dad and get you something strong to drink."

He didn't let me lead him away though, just turned around and wrapped his arms around me so tightly I could barely breathe. "I know it's been hard for you," he breathed. "And we've been busy and distant and worried over Emory but we are so glad you're safe, Atara and I love you so much." I could feel my heart breaking for him--for the shaking in his shoulders and the wetness on his cheeks where he had pressed his face into my neck.

"Hey, it's fine," I managed, wincing when his arms tightened again and I had to shift my weight from my good leg to the bad one. "We're going to find them. I promise. Dad's got the guard looking. I've got people looking."

"We're looking," Kinnon and Pyrin said at the same time. "We brought every available scout in the tribe to the city. We're staying until we've found them," Kinnon continued alone. "I helped raise that boy, Leland. When I heard..." His fingers curled into fists and he shook his head, then looked at me. "Get out of here and away from these hopeless idiots."

I managed to get him walking after a short goodbye and Mack met us at the door. He cast us a
concerned glance but didn't ask, simply turned down the hall toward my father's library instead of
going to the royal suite. I didn't bother knocking, though by the time we reached the library, Cyril
had collected himself enough to stop sobbing. I pushed the door open with my hip and my father
stood quickly from his desk, stepping around the individual that stood there to take Cyril under his
arm. I explained what happened in limited detail, my voice hushed in the unknown company, my
eyes continually flicking over to the person that was with him. He wore black from head to toe, a
hood hanging down his back, and around his hips were a dozen little flasks as dark as his clothing,
woven tightly to his belt. The hilt of a weapon poked from the top of his boot, but I doubted he
needed it with the heavy looking staff that sat propped against the desk. One end was a blade,
pressed against the floor, and the other looked like a clawed hand, palm up, holding a flame
that...shouldn't have been burning but seemed steady as a candle in a quiet room.

Cyril noticed our company a second later and took an unsteady step out of my father's embrace. His
fingertips flew to his mouth and his hand knotted in my coat. He pulled, like he intended on dragging
me from that room if he had to.

“Cyril,” Fox warned. “We talked about this.”

Mack inched along beside me, his fingers itching over the hilt of his weapon, but a careful wave of
the King's hand dismissed them. “I didn't think you were serious,” Cyril breathed. “I didn't think
you'd let him in here armed!” The last bit came out like a desperate, pitchy exclamation.

“Like you could have disarmed me;” a voice drawled from the person that stood beside the
mahogany desk. He turned around then and I knew, somewhere deep in my bones, I knew what he
was and why Cyril seemed so intent on getting as far from him as possible.

His hair hung in a straight sheet the color of blood over eyes that were so bright blue they nearly
glowed from within. He was almost Lierian pale with an agelessness about his face that made him
seem no older than I was, but he definitely was older than me. I could feel it and see it in the way that
he moved, plucking his way across the room and weaving around my father with careful, court-
trained grace.

This was an Immaran alchemist, right out of Paikea, and the platinum ring of the Paikean snake was
wrapped regally about the ring finger of his left hand. Married to the College, I thought dimly. A
Master of his art, then, and my face screwed up in confusion. All that I'd read about the supposed
Enchanters of the Imperial Court dictated that they were not permitted to leave Old Immara, a law
laid out not by the Emperors in that ancient, blood-soaked land across the Corian Sea, but by the
College of Alchemy itself. The whispers were that they were too dangerous to be released into the
world, that their leashes must be held by Emperors and by the College itself, that they were more like
witches than men of science.

And in all fairness, he looked like a witch. “You shouldn’t be here;” I said bluntly and his mouth
curved into a smile that seemed...unnervingly genuine. It split over perfectly straight, white teeth and
lit his expression up in a way that was almost childlike.

“Oh, I know,” he agreed. “I’ll surely be expelled from the College for this. They’ll send assassins,
I’m certain, but that’s part of the point.” He held a hand out congenially. “Master Tristan. Well, I
suppose since I’ve likely been expelled, it’s back to Tristan Brighton, now. Father will be so
pleased.”

I was surprised to hear that he was young enough for his father to still be alive. Anxiety roiled in my
chest and, behind me, Mack’s fingers dug into my coat like he was ready to turn tail and flee from
the room. Corians had a healthy fear of all things Immaran. Lierians even more so, given their
propensity for enslaving my people like we were little more than household pets. Of course, they
enslaved their own people, too. An impoverished man in Immara could sell himself into slavery to provide food for his family. In most cases, I had been told, these enslaved individuals were not treated poorly. They were taught to run households, cared for, even cherished in some cases.

And then there were the horror stories, those particularly from the Vale, that painted Immara in a much bloodier, darker frame—stories about gladiator arenas, crucified leaders of slave revolts, backs as mutilated as my father’s from years under a whip or a chain--

“All relation to Rafael Brighton?” Cyril asked, his voice smart and cutting and Tristan’s smile dimmed just a fraction, fading beneath eyes that were half-curtained by his oddly colored hair.

The alchemist sighed. “Unfortunately, he’s my father.” Cyril took another violent step back and Tristan winced like he’d been struck. “I know, I know. Slavers are...unwelcome here. You have reason not to trust me, Lord Infinito.” He swept into a bow then, a perfect example of Immaran etiquette. This man had been gentry once, I realized, but titles were forfeit upon admission to the College. So were lives and most of the young men and women that made their way up the mountains into Paikea never made their way back down, if they finished the trek at all.

“However, I assure you, I am here to help.” He held a hand out, palm up between all of gathered there. “I’m not even capable of much combat. Just a healer, here to help your boy...and...I’m looking for someone, you see, and I’d heard he might have come to Coria after a time.”

“Someone worth assassination attempts?” Mack asked, bristling behind me like he didn’t quite believe the other man.

Tristan grinned widely again. “A little brother, in fact,” he admitted and Cyril huffed. “I have no secrets. Anything you wish to know, I’ll be completely forthcoming with. I know my kind are unwelcome here, but I truly only want to help the Prince.”

“Why?” I demanded, my tone harsher than I’d imagined it being when I spoke and Fox shot me a warning look.

Tristan seemed undisturbed by it though. “Political asylum,” he answered without a beat of hesitation. “I left my post in the Vale several years ago when I got news that my youngest brother had fled my father’s house. I attempted to find him with little success until I heard that he might intend to come here with a companion of his. So when news reached me about the decline of Emory Bordelon’s health, I began a correspondence with your King. He offered me a place here to look for my brother in exchange for aid in treating the boy.” He held a hand out to Mack then. “The current healer, yes?”

Mack leaned back, nose wrinkled, like he was unwilling to touch someone who dripped with foul magic that we didn’t see or practice in our homeland. Immara was ancient, soaked in the blood of millions of dead, and it had led to warped things like this poor creature who, despite my misgivings, I felt some kind of pity for. Taking up the mantle of an alchemist meant giving up everything else. It meant immortality, watching everyone around you age and die. It meant the brutal, agonizing training we’d only heard whispers about but with the number of poor, uneducated young people who made the trek up the mountain, there should have been more alchemists or more Sons of the Serpent.

Instead, there were only ever seven Masters and their two or three apprentices. One was staring at Mackenzie Glenning in my father’s office, sans apprentices. That was a big loss for Immara and Paikea. It was a great risk to his life.

So I took his hand, clasped in both of mine, and Cyril sucked in a sharp gasp. “I’ll tell you anything you need to know,” I assured him, courage that I was unfamiliar with swelling in my chest. “I was
there. I’ve been with him every day since then. You will have our full cooperation. Won’t he, Mackenzie?”

“I...I--” The healer stammered and Tristan’s eyes moved from me to him, curious and open, like the pages of an unwritten book. “Atara, are you--”

“Won’t. He. Mackenzie?” I turned and shot him the best glare I could muster up, eyes narrowed.

But it wasn’t Mack that answered. “Mister Glenning knows the consequences if he fails to provide what’s promised,” Fox cut in. “I’m sure, if nothing else, that will persuade him.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Mack finally mumbled, his eyes on the floor in front of him instead of the alchemist standing with us. “If you’ll follow me, Lord Brighton.”

“Tristan,” he corrected brightly. “Tristan is fine. I think we’ll be friends, Mack. We have more in common than you think.”

Mack shot me a withering glare as he led the alchemist from the room. “I seriously doubt that,” I heard him say through clenched teeth before he bowed curtly and winked at me. It was the sort of expression that made heat curl in my stomach, low and heady, and he licked his lips when he straightened up. “Later, killer.” The door clicked shut behind him a second later, leaving me only with that sinfully wicked look on his face, burning cheeks, and Fox clearing his throat.

“Atara...?”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

Narration: I've been noting who is narrating at the top, but here's another warning that it has changed to Emory just in case you didn't notice. His narration will be jilted for a bit, popping up every now and then until later for obvious reasons related to his mental state.

Trigger Warnings: There's a lot of symptoms of PTSD in this chapter, along with bipolar disorder, which Emory also suffers from, but because of the time setting that can't actually be "diagnosed." So if that freaks you out, skip ahead.

Also, I think this will be much longer than the 33 chapters I intended. Oops.

I divided my life into two parts: The Before and the After.

I didn't think about the Before. It was too hard to remember the world having light and color to it. My memories were blurry, distant things, so far off that I wasn't even sure they were real sometimes. I knew that I'd been happy once, that my parents loved me, that my brother loved me, and that I had a bright future. I knew that, once upon a time, I'd been healthy and active and I hated being inside. I remembered laughter...I remembered the sound of my own, how frequently I employed its use, how very funny everything had been--

And then the After started.

I'd been stupid to go to the beach that day. I knew the risks but the water was still bitter and frigid. I hadn't expected anyone. Mostly, I just wanted to get Atara out of the palace for awhile. He spent all of his time holed up in libraries, reading history books and writing about all the magic he found in little things, all the beauty that existed that only he could see...my brother was a daydreamer once. A creator, a lover and never a fighter, an old, beautiful soul that you could see in his eyes. People didn't understand him. They wrote him off as worthless because of his crippling dislike of social situations or they labeled him as dangerous because of what some of the Lierians believed but I called him a gift. Since the day they'd let me hold him, just a few hours after his birth, I'd been head over heels for Atara. I protected him, I listened to him, I taught him everything older brothers are supposed to teach younger ones, and then I ruined his life. I destroyed the daydreamer.

I remembered watching him fight, clawing at the man holding him back while I struggled and kicked but heats are exhausting and although I was tall, even among humans, I was no match for the monster that had his hands on me. I remembered the pain, an agony that tore me apart from the inside out, and I remembered both of them inside me and how I'd wanted to die but mostly? Mostly I was thanking the Gods that they hadn't touched my brother and, in a bid to keep them from moving on to him, I walked a tightrope. Fight enough to keep them focused on me, but not hard enough to send
them after him. So I allowed it. To spare him, I allowed them everything.

And I know that my arms eventually went limp. I stopped fighting, not because I wanted to but because blood loss and exhaustion won out, because fighting them and the urge to vomit got to be too much. I felt like a ragdoll being pulled by two children, split up the middle, screaming until my throat was bloody and raw and then there was Atara when they left me, broken and torn and bleeding to death on the beach. Atara, who had killed for me and who was ready to do it again if they came back. My little brother who had witnessed everything and the shame of it hit me heavy and thick, like a suffocating force over my face. Guilt raged in my chest, clawing at my ribs, berating me for ever bringing him out there because he'd been spared the ugly truths of the world. He'd been born in the palace with a silver spoon in his mouth. He'd never been hungry. He'd never suffered. To Atara, the world was a garden full of colors and wonders that he could write about and describe in such breathtaking detail that even the spider feasting on his prey could be called beautiful when the rain stuck to his web and shimmered like little diamonds.

I don't remember much else from that day because the look on his face killed me. The way he pleaded with me was a veritable destructive force. I fell apart. I retreated into my own head. I couldn't respond to Cyril when they got me to the palace and he cradled me in his lap before Atara and Fox arrived. I know that he begged me to hold on until Mack took me from him and I remember hearing him cry. I couldn't respond to anything until they were spreading me open and the terror came back with all the ferocity of a hurricane. I thrashed and kicked, shrieking and screaming until my father held me down so that they could stitch me back together. I begged him not to let them hurt me, saw the heartbreak in his face, and I knew then that my destruction didn't end at the daydreamer. It kept spreading, a fast moving cancer that infected my parents and put a strain on their relationship the likes of which I'd never seen.

Nobody I knew--nobody I'd ever seen in all of my nearly twenty-two years--had ever loved someone the way that my father loved my Lheiro but I remember them fighting over me. About what to do with me, what to do about the people that had hurt me, what to do about Atara, and I let the dark swallow me. I couldn't face my brother knowing that I'd destroyed the naive innocence he'd viewed the world with. I couldn't look at my parents knowing that I was tearing them apart. Everyone that looked at me knew--they knew. I felt out of control, wildly unstable, like my body wasn't mine anymore because someone else had claimed it.

For a few days, I threw up everything they tried to get me to eat and Mack, bless his heart, did try everything. Teas, both Corian and Lierian, warm milk and honey, mashed fruit, broth--nothing stayed down if he could even get me to put it in my mouth. I wanted to die. I wanted to sleep and never wake back up. I kept the curtains drawn in my room and remained curled in the corner of the bed, aching and bloodied and unable to move my legs because my pelvis was strapped into a girdle and because movement threatened to tear the stitches free and leave me in bloody sheets.

I'd lost everything. I felt like an empty sack of bones, a warm body for someone to use when they deemed me ready for use. My heart was broken, my will to live was broken, and I was so mutilated on the inside that my ability to give birth was stripped. Cyril had given me the news as gently as he could and I'd sobbed into his lap, screamed into the linen of the shirt he was wearing until I tasted blood. "It's not fair," he'd whispered. "I know, baby. I know it's not fair. You scream as long as you need to, Emory. I'm right here."

I needed to scream forever. I was screaming on the inside, a silent plea for someone to put me out of my misery, and I thought when I started bleeding again that someone had answered my prayer until the pain started. Horrific, bone-splitting pain that radiated through my pelvic region and the mind-
numbing terror that lanced through my chest at the feel of warm palms on my face, trying to rouse me.

If Riordan hadn’t gotten me up, I would have bled to death there, but fear won out over desire. I didn’t see him, not really. I saw bleached Lierian eyes. I didn’t smell the pine dry leather and tobacco scent that clung to my uncle. I smelled sand and salt water, the metallic sting of blood and the stink of cheap gin. I didn’t hear Riordan’s familiar voice say my name and then, alarmed when I clawed at him, knocked him to the floor, call for my father—for the older brother that had once protected him the way that I had once protected Atara. I heard waves cresting over a shoreline, the sound of a city behind me.

Riordan loved me.

I wanted to rip his throat out.

Mack was kind enough to sedate me through it but I remember coming around toward the end just long enough to hear him speaking quietly with Fox. "There was tissue in it," he whispered. "If I had to guess, I’d say he miscarried but there's so much trauma, I can't be absolutely sure. I gave him the necessary tinctures to try to stop this from happening but he's not...he doesn't keep anything down, Fox. I should have noticed."

"Not your fault," my father answered quietly, squeezing Mack’s shoulder. I could barely make them out through the haze of sedation that blurred my vision. "I was so happy he survived it that I was blinded to the other possibilities."

So I grieved. I grieved for a child that I didn't have, that I never should have wanted, but after being told that I would never be able to carry one, losing it hurt all that much more. It was a part of me, whether I'd been willing or not, and while I knew, logically, that I would have resented the wretched creature had it survived, I still mourned. It was Fox that I cried to that night, who lay beside me in my bed and let me use his stomach as a pillow while I screamed about the indignity of it. He ran his fingers through my hair and hummed the lullabies of my youth under his breath. He promised that he loved me--no matter how angry he sometimes got with me, no matter how hurt I was, no matter how much I needed from them now--he loved me. He would always love me.

I felt positively wretched about everyone around me and every day was a cyclic torment. I beat my fists against the inside of my skull. I pleaded and prayed and I begged for it to be over. To be done. For the grief to stop, for the hate to stop, but I realized, at some point, that if I took away those things, I would have nothing left.

Hate was what I lived for. Hate. Resentment. Grief. Livid, blinding fury the likes of which I’d never felt before and all of it was aimed inside at myself. For destroying my future, for destroying my brother, for destroying my parents, for showing Riordan how sick in the head I’d really become and watching our childhood friendship crash and burn around me like a ruined city.

He tried talking to me after that first night and I gathered the limping courage I had and managed a few words, but the visits trickled off to nothing. He didn’t know what to say. Nobody did.

Cyril called it a road to recovery. He insisted that anyone in my position, at my stage of grief, would be difficult to be around. He understood, better than most, that I had buried hate in my skin and that I wore it like an armor. It was all I had to keep me going, but by the time Riordan showed up, they had allowed me to stew in it for so long that nothing else was left. I was trying to build a life on the fragments of myself that had been left after the beach because they wanted Emory Bordelon back. Fox missed his son--still thought of me as that boy from the Inn, full of raucous laughter and brimming with affection and charm. Cyril missed his own version of me--more like a Lierian than a
human, wild and chaotic, who shared his darkest memories with him.

Atara missed his idol. He missed the twelve-year-old that had taught him to carve memory sticks. He missed sneaking into my room late at night with his stolen basket of biscuits and tarts, talking until the sun stained the sky pink...he missed the person he had hitched his hopes and dreams to.

He was different now, with his deadened eyes and his responsibility. He was bearing the brunt of my psychosis--left behind and disregarded as my parents tended to me. I wanted to beg him to put me out of my misery but the words didn't come out of my mouth. No words ever did, just the numbing screams while I relived horror after horror from the burning of my childhood home, the months I'd spent running with Cyril, the months they'd left me alone with Brentlyn to fight a war, the rape on the beach, and this...this. This wretched child I hadn’t ever wanted.

Every day was a struggle. I battled demons that I didn't know existed. They came at me in the form of sympathetic looks, shadows on the walls, and my new aversion to touch, particularly when I wasn't expecting to be touched. Some days were harder than others. Some days I sank back toward the dark and on those days, Nikita would come into my room. “Up, sunshine!” he’d shout at me, throwing the curtains open so that butter yellow spread over the room and I would hiss, cowering under my blankets like some sort of vampire. He would tear them free from the bed and stand at the foot, arms crossed, staring me down like the world’s worst babysitter.

And so I got up. Every day. And I suffered, bordering on psychosis, paranoid over every movement, every shadow, every whispered word, every surprising noise, every accidental touch...I lived in a constant state of terror and I suppose it was a result of my early years, combined with the day at the beach. I’d always feared that. I knew what Cyril had done to keep me alive and fed. I knew the risks of poachers, what would happen if they caught us, and what my people had been subjected to. I feared them finishing the job. I feared them coming for Atara...and then, somehow, very slowly, I feared them coming for Nikita.

The Rider Commander had become my shadow and there was no real reason for me to trust him. I thought, perhaps, it was because his armor was so familiar to me. It harkened back to my earliest years, watching the black-clad northmen ride in on their massive, long-haired horses. As a child, those beasts had seemed like immovable mountains and the men on top of them like gods that walked among us. They’d been the only humans I’d seen--stoic and fiercely loyal, fiercely honorable. Cyril used to tell me stories about them while he rocked me to sleep, my thumb in my mouth...about how they were the only humans the Lierians trusted because the Riders had a code--they never took more than what they needed, they never killed without reason, they never hurt without cause, and at some time, deep in the shared history of the Rider Legion and the Recian Lierians, the Riders had defended our little tribe against raiding southerners.

They were heroes to me and, years later, when Nikita Novak had held out his hand and promised that nothing would ever happen to me while he still breathed, I’d believed him. There’d been a conviction in his voice and in his face that went deeper than some code of honor he followed.

He needed me just as much as I needed him. I could feel it in my bones and I hadn’t felt anything like that in so long. I was touch-starved, hungry for someone that saw me under the broken pieces--me for who I was in the After, not me from Before.

Me. Emory. Mutilated and broken and grieving, but alive. I was still alive.

He became a light that I could follow through the dark. He did not coddle me the way that my parents did. When he saw how thin I was, he sat me at a table in the kitchens, kicked out the staff, and locked the door. We would leave when I ate enough to satisfy him, he’d told me, and I fought at first. I gnashed my teeth and I called him wicked names. I accused him of not caring. I threatened to
have him beaten on the post. When none of it worked, I’d sobbed and I’d begged and I’d pleaded.

He was as immovable as the Riders I remembered. He never flinched. He never wavered. He was, in all the twenty-two years of my life, the only person who had ever withstood one of my tantrums and come out the victor.

With Nikita, it was almost like being me again...almost. If that hate that I harbored hadn’t still been in my skin, a dark growth inside of me that I couldn’t rid myself of...I would have been me. Instead, it remained and the sole focus of it became Nikita Novak. I could call him my savior until my face turned blue. I could sing his praises--tell the world that he’d brought the sun back into my life, given me color and taste again, woken up parts of me that I’d thought were dead--but there was still something in me that twisted with rage because he was too good. He was too perfect. He was too pretty and too sweet and he cared too much.

When people say misery loves company, they’re not lying. I wanted him suffering with me for no reason beyond blind fury on some days. My emotional ups were so high that when I hit them, I went for days without sleep and I never felt tired. I had an endless well of energy that I poured into books, sword work, or sparring. My lows were so low that they often left me struggling to even wake up and, once I did, I hated everyone and everything.

Those were the days when I was at my worst...the days when Nikita was no longer my shining beacon of hope in the dark. He was something beautiful that I wanted to destroy.

And the sickest part of it was that I knew he would let me.

Someday, my own restraint would fail and I would hurt him with more than words and I’d told him that. I’d told him.

He’d shrugged like it was nothing. “It won’t be any worse than what I’ve already felt.” He left it at that and I knew enough about suffering to recognize the haunted sound in his voice so I didn’t ask.

It wouldn’t be that afternoon though--the afternoon when I caught my brother arguing with one of his Lierian council members, a young girl I recognized as Ilyia. He’d taken all of my responsibility, but, from the outside, he didn’t seem very good at balancing it. Partly because I’d been with Nikita and his hand had been warm in my own, one of the only people whose touch I could tolerate, at least in a platonic fashion. I couldn’t even think about sex without wanting to vomit on the polished marble floors.

It was the second fight that really got my interest.

My brother was not a fighter. He never had been. He could hold his own in a sparring ring because our parents had poured money into tutors to teach both of us, endless sums of it, but I’d always been better than him. He was small like Cyril was small, slight of build and slender-boned. Atara was shaped like a Lierian. I, on the other hand, looked more human.

He was not good at fighting with words, either. He’d never been taught to be a diplomat. He’d wanted to be a scholar--to travel beyond Immara to the Badlands, to meet the tribes of our people that lived in the deserts there, secluded and reclusive, to see the Great Glass Sea that glittered beyond Idra’s Vale and write histories and almanacs on each place he saw. He would never get to do that now because of me. That knowledge twisted in my gut as I rounded the corner quietly, unaware of what I was walking into until I saw him there, dressed regally in the black and red chain mail of the Crown Prince.

That had been mine once, I noted. They’d had a new set fitted for him.
The silver circlet on his brow was pressed over a furiously furrowed forehead. He was livid. I could see it in the flush of his cheeks, which bled all the way up to the tips of his ears, hidden under hair that had darkened to something near chocolate brown as he’d grown older. I remembered his gold curls when he was a toddler. He’d looked so much like Riordan we could pass them off as siblings.

He didn’t look like Riordan anymore. Riordan’s fury was cold. My brother’s was hot, like the blistering forge of a blacksmith, blazing in his chest. His fingers were tight, curled into small, childlike fists, white knuckled with rage. He was shorter than his counterpart in her scarlet bodice and leggings, sheer, gauzy skirt billowing around long legs.

“I told you to stay the fuck away from him!” Atara snarled through clenched teeth, eyes burning like the midday sun, lit from within to a bright, blazing green that seemed almost poisonous. I fell short of another step lest they notice my presence. Nikita was long gone, retired to his apartments with his father and his sister, Danica, who had traveled to Coryth with them, but who spent precious little time with anyone but Riordan anymore. There were rumors circulating that Vasilev Novak intended to marry his oldest daughter to my uncle, despite the ten year age difference, but Nikita was mum on the subject when I brought it up.

And it wasn’t important right then. What was important was the deadly scowl that curled over Elizabeth Glenning’s lip like the very idea of listening to my brother was akin to coddling the whims of a petulant child. “I warned him to stay away from a mongrel brat like you,” she sneered, perfect white teeth visible in her red stained lips. She had so many jewels around her throat that I thought she could have purchased half of Coryth, but that was her industry—jewels. Money. Hedonistic luxury the likes of which bordered obscenity and perversion.

I was curious enough to stand still, despite open confrontation making my stomach twist unhappily in my gut. For a brief moment, I entertained the idea of fleeing back to Nikita’s rooms in the Keep and begging him for another hour of his time. He wouldn’t have been pleased by my appearance. He kept me separate from his family of overbearing northerners, but it wasn’t difficult to do. His father was on Fox’s council and he was building an estate in the city where he planned to house one of his children when he returned north so that Glacia would have a permanent voice in Coryth. That, along with the marriage rumors that swirled around my uncle and Danica Novak like falling leaves, had to keep him busy.

Instead, I stood as still as stone. Unwavering. Unmoving. I even held my breath.

Elizabeth continued. “Besides, what do you intend to do about it, little mutt?” The insult grated my nerves and it hearkened back to my childhood, throwing myself at Adrian Belfleur while Henry Mercer watched, one hand at his throat and the other punching down over and over into his teeth while I felt the enamel cut my knuckles, felt his nose crunch and shatter beneath my fist, felt hot tears sting my face until Fox was dragging me away, kicking and screaming and trying desperately to bite the hands that held me.

Nobody called us mutts and walked away from it. Nobody called me the bastard son of a whore and walked away from it.

“I should have you dragged out to the post and whipped until the skin hangs from your back for what you’ve done,” he hissed back, teeth clenched. I wondered where my father was. Atara was training, yes, but arguments with members of his council should have been taken up with him, not my little brother. On top of that, I noted that this sounded...personal. Atara didn’t angry very easily. In fact, it took quite a lot to ruffle his feathers, but the surest way to do it was to piss around with people he cared about.

He was not a leader. He would never be a leader. He was, however, an inherently loyal protector.
and, had it not been so insulting, I might have likened him to a particularly territorial guard dog.

She grinned, all wide, malicious teeth behind red lips. “Oh, darling, you could never. He’s asked you not to, hasn’t he? Probably doesn’t even know you’re here pissing on your territory like a stray dog. I know my son. He may not want to admit it, but I do, and he wouldn’t want his good, clean name sullied by direct association to mine.”

I hesitated. To my knowledge (and my knowledge of the gentry and their genealogies far surpassed my brother’s) Elizabeth Glenning had no children. She was the sole surviving heir to her father’s fortune. The rest of the family had been wiped out in the Marshland Massacre when I’d been five or six. I had to think, to go back over the branching family trees that I’d memorized over the years, trying to find something I’d missed, but nothing stuck out and my thoughts were quickly interrupted by Atara, his tone laced with acid and spite.

“You know your son?” he spat, disgusted in a way that told me he could hardly believe she’d said the words. It was written on his face, revulsion and fury and something like grief. “What you know of him could barely fill a thimble, you repulsive whore.”

Something livid flashed over her face, like he’d touched a raw nerve and she took a step forward like she intended to strike him. His guards weren’t with him, I noted. He’d dismissed them or he’d taken a page out of my playbook and slipped them the way I had before, but I was willing to bet it was the former. We were in our home. They didn’t usually follow us everywhere inside the Keep. It was suffocating and uncomfortable for everyone involved and my parents had always tried to give us as much normalcy as they could provide.

I was surprised when I moved forward, startled by her step and urged into that primal desire to protect him. He was mine. He had always been mine and I’d failed him once. I wouldn’t fail him again. I would never fail him again.

“That’s enough,” I bit the words out, my own voice unfamiliar in the echoing halls. Elizabeth blinked, alarm flashing in her features, but her motion stopped, hand poised midair as if she’d intended to slap him. Atara’s eyes widened, surprise peppering across his features. I was sure it was mirrored in my own. I didn’t take initiative like that anymore. This was not me, but some older version of me that sometimes crawled from the muck and the mud and the grime that I was covered in from the beach and demanded use of my limbs and my voice for a few minutes.

He’s suffered enough, that part of me whispered in the back of my head. You can stop this for him.

Elizabeth’s ire turned on me and it was all I could do not to wilt like a garden starved for water. My mouth kept moving, though I didn’t know where I was finding the words. “Wipe that smug look off your impertinent mouth, Glenning, or I’ll find a way to wipe it for you,” I snapped.

“Emory Bordelon,” she cooed, but the tone was mocking. She reached for me, specifically for my face, like she sought to see the revulsion that would no doubt shudder from my eyes all the way down my spine at unwanted touch. I snagged her wrist in tight fingers before she could take that decision from me. If I touched her first, it was my choice. I could live with it being my choice. I couldn’t live with it being hers. I would vomit, I thought, right there between the two of them, because there were few people on my father’s council that I detested more than Elizabeth Glenning. She was a zealot, a fervent believer in the Regulator religion that had once dominated Coria but a generation earlier. That was fine alone, but she was also powerful. Wealthy. Too much of each of those things for my father to openly denounce her or her bigoted hatred for the Lierian people as a whole. They—and by extension, us—were little more than dogs to her...there to be of service, bred like animals, and discarded when we were no longer useful. Fox did not tolerate her insolence, but he could not openly declare himself in opposition to her. I had learned not to tolerate her in much the
same way.

It seemed Atara had his own problem with her.

Her smile was wretched and grotesque, leering at me like she knew exactly what the little lick of her lips would do. I released her hand at the dart of her tongue, nausea rolling down my throat and boiling in my stomach. My mouth watered with it, like my insides were about to go into full-scale rebellion and start heaving up what I’d eaten that day. I had to swallow hard, struggling to find my voice while she prattled on.

“Look at you, coming out of your shell to defend poor little Atara. Can you even do that? What power do you have anymore, aside from calling Fox your father? Last I heard, you barely fed yourself.” Her voice was wicked sharp and it stung like the words had barbs. Atara’s scowl deepened, but he seemed empty. Close to him, I could see exhaustion in his features. His eyes were dark with it. His cheeks looked hollow. He was struggling with something.

It took some managing, but I got words through gritted teeth, my courage draining quickly like rain after a storm. “For the chance to call you a self-righteous, pig, Elizabeth, I’d crawl out of the deepest hole in this fucking city,” I snarled. “Now piss off. If you have a problem, you can take it up with the King. Leave my brother out of it.”

She giggled, girlish and obscene. “Oh, I don’t have a problem. Your brother does.” Then she waved her fingers, wiggling them close to my face while I leaned back, and turned on her heel. Her shoes clicked in the hallway, a deafening sound in the quiet that blanketed us.

Atara stared at me like I’d grown another head. “Are you...drunk?” he asked after a moment of quiet, waiting patiently for the sound of her retreat to grow ever distant until it bled away to nothing. “I was handling that!”

“She was walking all over you. What is your issue, anyway?” I barked back. I put distance between us then when I felt his sleeve brush my arm and though I knew he had to notice it, had to resent it, he said nothing about it.

Instead, he stopped before he’d even started walking away. Mid step, as if he’d suddenly come to some decision. “Can I ask you something?” he inquired, his head tilted carefully to one side, a fringe of straight dark hair curtaining over his eyes. He looked older, I realized. Older than seventeen. Older than he should have been. Once, all I’d ever wanted was to see him grow up without witnessing what I had witnessed or suffering what I had suffered. It was what I’d wanted more than anything in the world and I would have given up all of my titles, my birthright, my money...all of it, just to see that child he’d been in his face again.

But he was gone, just like the old me was gone, and there we were--two people, broken in different ways, trying to find a new way to keep going. He was succeeding. I could see that when I saw him look at Mackenzie every day. There was something between the two of them, something sweet and sacred, and I envied them that because what I had with Nikita would never be sacred. It would only ever be unholy and wicked and bitter with grief. Even if it ever progressed beyond him being some babysitter that I hopelessly wished I could touch, it would never be beautiful like the way Atara looked at Mack. It would never have grace.

I would hurt him. I could feel it in my bones the way that I’d felt that safety with him. I would hurt him and because he was seeking atonement for something he never spoke of, he would let me because he thought he deserved to hurt.

“I guess that depends on the question,” I answered blandly, rubbing the back of my neck, trying to
get over the revulsion that had settled in my chest. It was good to be able to speak again, at least. Even if I couldn’t do it the way that I used to, even if I didn’t seek it out, Atara could speak to me and know that I would answer.

I could give him that now. It was progress.

My brother hesitated. “It...might be uncomfortable,” he admitted after a moment, his eyes glazing over with something that looked like doubt. It was etched around his mouth. “Never mind.”

“No, ask it.” I couldn’t believe I was insisting. Neither could he. His eyes widened in surprise and his lips parted a little bit. I tacked on acidly. “If it’s too uncomfortable, I won’t answer. You know that I won’t. I won’t even be able to.”

Atara didn’t understand that. He knew that the words wouldn’t come. There were things I didn’t talk about. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I couldn’t. I couldn’t reiterate the beach because it clogged my throat like I was choking and I dissolved into an anxiety attack. He never pressed, but he’d admitted that he didn’t understand. Perhaps he couldn’t understand.

“Part of it is a secret. You can’t tell anyone. Not even Nikki.”

It was always jarring to realize that I was the only person that called him Kita instead of Nikki. It was something uniquely mine. He’d told me he liked it and I had, in turn, admitted that I liked it when he referred to me as ‘kitten’ even if he refused to explain why. We’d gone from acquaintances to pet names in the span of minutes, but that was just who he was. Kita exuded trust the way that my father exuded command. I couldn’t help but believe him. It was a compulsion.

I shrugged in response. “Sure, tiny. I can keep a secret. It’ll be so strenuous, you know, not telling a whole one person. You’ll owe me big.” I was being sarcastic and he realized it a moment later and made to push at my shoulder like he used to but stopped in his tracks, arm extended and eyes wide. “It’s fine.”

And so he pushed and I stumbled. He laughed and I rolled my eyes. It was almost normal.

Except that it wasn’t. I wasn’t normal. I would always be the problem now. That was what gave me such comfort in Kita’s presence--I wasn’t a problem with him. He didn’t know me from Before. He only knew the me that I was in the After. Every tick I had, every nervous behavior, every aversion...it was standard for him.

I adored that.

“You know Mackenzie.”

“Nope,” I deadpanned. “No idea. Who is that?”

“Prick,” Atara shot back, glaring at me, but there was no real malice in his face. “You know he’s Elizabeth Glenning’s son?”

That was jarring enough to bring my eyes back up to his face. They’d been focused somewhere on his collar. I had trouble looking at faces after the beach. It was like they could see it, see how vile I was behind the masks I wore and the walls I’d put up to keep people out, how filthy and used and loathsome I’d become…

But that got my attention. “You’re joking,” I accused quickly. “He’s a halfling. She’s the most hideously racist human being I’ve ever met!”
Atara shrugged, as if he didn’t know how to explain that away. “She didn’t raise him.”

“Well, I know that, obviously,” I drawled, rolling my eyes and blowing a lock of hair out of them. “He was a guard. I used to attend to the guard schedule, remember? I know all of their backgrounds. His father works in a brothel. I just assumed…”

My brother pressed his lips together. “There’s a reason that word starts with ‘ass,’ Emory.”

I only scowled in response. My muted emotions didn’t allot for much anymore. The only thing I felt in full force was hatred or rage. The surprise of this was no different. It was there, but it was dull, like the edge of a bad blade. “You said there was a question for me in all of this?” I reminded him, arching an eyebrow and gesturing to him in a general sort of way, like he was the whole reason I was still standing there and not drinking myself into a coma the way that I did almost every night. I’d discovered that alcohol made the nightmares more tolerable. They lost some of the sharp tang that made them feel so real.

“You know he and I--”

“I have eyes, tiny. You’re not exactly subtle and, you know, you did greet his tonsils with your tongue while I was sitting right there.”

Atara huffed, brows knitted in frustration. His cheeks colored, flushed scarlet from his throat to his eyes, and I tilted my head curiously. “He grew up in a brothel. I don’t want to...I mean, I want to...you know...but I’m worried...”

The revulsion did shudder up my spine like spiders using the vertebrae as steps to my skull, but he looked so lost. So desperately helpless and out of his element and I was supposed to be there for him. I wanted to be there.

This was so close to the very core of what hurt me, though, and I realized then that Mack had insisted on being my caretaker as vehemently as he had because he understood in ways that I hadn’t even realized. He’d insisted because he knew.

I could do this for him. For them. I owed them that. So I swallowed the repulsive stickiness in my throat. “You want to...sleep with him. And you’re worried he has boundaries. So you’re asking me because…” I grimaced, rubbing my hands over my face and Atara deflated like an empty water skin.

“It’s insensitive. I shouldn’t have asked. Gods, I’m sorry--” He was retreating, walking backwards like he intended to flee.

“No, it’s fine,” I insisted, though I could feel otherwise in my stomach. The world smelled like salt water again. Waves crashed inside my skull. I could taste gin in my mouth and sweat on my skin.

Atara hesitated, his voice careful. “I thought...I just sort of thought that you and Nikki…”

I cringed like he’d slapped me and he apologized again just as quickly, stammering over the words. The whole situation was dissolving. “If I touch him, he’ll be as filthy as I am. What do I touch that I don’t ruin?” I mumbled it, hadn’t really thought about the fact that I’d said it out loud, that he was standing right there, but I could hear the sharp intake of his breath and the way he crowded in on me like he wanted to hug me or hold me or kiss the blistering marks on my face but he stopped short because Atara was a blessedly aware sort of person. He knew better. He wanted to, but he knew.

“Emory, you’re not...you can’t actually think that. You can’t think that he thinks that...that any of us think that!”
My silence was enough of an answer for him. I should have been bothered, but numbness had washed over me with the words and the gravity of what he was asking. I envied Mack again. He had suffered like me, but he was whole.

How could he be whole when I was in so many pieces? What had he done that I hadn’t done? What went wrong?

He was aware, my little brother, but even he had limits and I could hear the break in his voice when he spoke next. “No,” he breathed the word like he was desperate for an answer but I had nothing for him and he had reached that limit himself. He threw his arms around my neck and though I stiffened, I had heard the shatter in his tone and I’d expected this sort of reaction.

I didn’t hug him back. My arms were stiff at my side and his fingers dug into my back, curled like claws, like he could squeeze me back into the shape I’d been before. He wept, bitter, angry tears that burned against the skin at my collar and I thought I should have been concerned that he was angry at me, but somehow, I knew that he wasn’t. He was angry at everything else and this...this was just the only way he thought he could save me from myself.

I wanted to tell him there was no use trying. There would be no saving me and the longer he held on, the greater the risk was of sullying him the way that I feared I would Nikita Novak.

So disentangled myself long before he was ready to let go. He was still sobbing, his chest wracked with it, scrubbing at face and sucking in sharp, harsh breaths. He was gasping for air the way that I did when I had those wretched fits of anxiety and I’d curl myself into the smallest ball possible in the darkest corner of my room and I’d stay there for hours and hours, struggling to breathe the same way that he was.

“You’ll know,” I told him stiffly and he looked up at me, eyes red-rimmed and welling over, confusion in his delicate features. “If you go too far, you’ll know.”

I turned on my heel, back stiff, panic and disgust rising like bile in my throat.

“Emory, wait! Please!”

I didn’t wait.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Mackenzie

Chapter Notes

Finally actually smut! And tooth-rotting fluff.

Trigger Warnings: Smut, as previously mentioned. Past child abuse, mentions of underage sex, mentions of underage prostitution, mild D/s.

I won’t lie.

The fact that Emory Bordelon was still breathing the day after I’d spent the night packing his insides back into him surprised me. It surprised me even still when he fought off infection after infection with a rabid will to live, like he was physically clawing himself back from the brink, teeth gnashing and adamant defiance in his face.

At least, that was what I liked to imagine. The truth of it was really that Emory got lucky. Or, perhaps, he got unlucky, depending on your point-of-view. I wasn’t so sure he fell into the former category, all things considered. He was so torn apart, so utterly destroyed, that I contemplated giving him an overdose of the sedative just to put him out of his misery. It was what I would have done in the field for someone in his condition. His ribs were cracked, his face was swollen, his pelvis was broken, the fingers on one of his hands were broken, his jaw was dislocated, and that wasn’t even delving into what was going on below his waist. I’d never seen that sort of brutality, even in battle, and I’d fought in some skirmishes on the borders with Glacian rebels. Nikita's people were a fierce breed, capable of the most ruthless behavior, bloodthirsty and savage compared to the Corians I was familiar with, but this...this wasn't human. They were the sort of people that would flay someone open from the back and lift their lungs out of their chest as punishment. This was different. It wasn’t a punishment. It was animalistic in its sheer cruelty. They'd treated him like a whale treats a seal, tossing it in the waves while the poor thing struggles, until the life is beaten out of it.

And that was how I came to know the Bordelon princes. Atara with his wide, childlike eyes the color of Glacian pines just like the King’s, soaked in blood and gore, bits of gray matter clinging to his trembling hands, ready to slaughter me like he’d done to the Lierian on the beach if I made so much as one wrong move. Emory with his vacant stare and wet, ragged breathing, blood bubbling up from between pale lips, stripped naked from the waist down, degraded and destroyed. I’d seen them both at their very worst and I understood what that low felt like. It was, in fact, the reason I had insisted on staying on as Emory’s caregiver. Nobody else would relate to him the way that I could. Nobody else would understand that miserable hate that lived in him like a metastatic cancer, growing outward into a malevolent exoskeleton. Emory’s victimhood was a cage he could not escape from and I knew, deep down in the very foundation of my soul, exactly what that felt like.

It was Atara that I struggled to relate to. I'd seen whores beaten and humiliated in my early years. I’d
seen Rosie beat a man to death with a tankard, sobbing while the blood soaked her bodice and when she’d lifted me up from under the table, gore stuck to her fingers, she hadn’t smelled like sugar cookies anymore. She never did again. Something in her changed, twisted and dark, and though I’d never truly had a mother, Rosie became a proxy for one. She looked after me with all the ferocity of a mother bear looking after her cubs, but even Rosie, for all the good she did, couldn’t really save me.

Rosie would have understood Atara. She would have known what that urge to protect really felt like, what it could do when it turned violent, the ways it could break a person down...

All I could do was be there for him when nobody else seemed to be. It wasn’t that I could blame the King and his consort for letting him fade from their attention when their oldest was such a disaster. When he wasn’t screaming through nightmares, he was screaming through flashbacks, and Nikita Novak provided a balm, but he wasn’t a solution. I don’t think they knew that. I don’t think they fully understood how dreadfully unhealthy Emory was for everyone around him, how toxic they’d allow him to become when they let him ferment in his own misery like bad wine.

It was difficult to watch from the outside, knowing that in order to move on, he had to grow, but being unable to force him to do it or to force them to realize that he couldn’t be the person he’d been before. The scar tissue, visible and otherwise, would never completely go away. This, however ugly and unnatural and revolting it was, would always be a part of him. He would always remember it, just like I always remembered it.

I hated their struggle and how much it hurt them, primarily how much it hurt Atara, but I also envied them. They ate together and although usually Emory didn’t make an appearance and it was usually solemn, they were together. I didn’t have much family. Just Rylin, who loved me dearly, and Rosie, who usually slept beside him and treated me like I was her own, but who I had never called Mother. My real mother had thrown me out like trash and though I could admit that I was, in fact, gutter trash the way that Riordan had said, that didn’t take the sting away. I saw the way that Cyril held Emory while he slept, his upper body cradled in his lap like he was still the baby that he remembered holding. I saw the way that Fox always made time to sit down and ask Atara about his lessons or what he was writing. It was a minute or two every day--the King was a busy man--but he made time. That was what I envied.

My attention always went back to Atara though. The way he talked and employed the use of words no sixteen-year-old I'd ever known would have understood, the way he read everything he could get his hands on, the selfless sacrifices he was prepared to make for his family, and I tried to fit them in among the things I already knew about him. He was their miracle. Their little gift. There was a cult in his name.

He took all of it in stride. He wasn't overly pretentious. He was quiet, solemn, and ancient in a way that you could see in his eyes--like he'd lived a thousand lives before. It almost made me believe the Lieran stories about the Infinitos and how they possessed the souls of all their predecessors. If I were not a man of science, I would have believed that story looking at Atara with those old, old eyes in such a young face. The rounded cheeks of childhood had yet to fade from his jaw. He had a bowed mouth, the same as Fox's, the sort of mouth you expect to see on a teenage girl, full and curved and the color of ripe peaches.

He had large eyes, still too big for his face because he hadn't hit any teenage growth spurt yet. I doubted that he would. Cyril was so tiny he could have passed for a child. Atara wasn't much larger than him. Then again, neither was I, but even I felt big next to them. Atara was tiny in an almost feminine way. His waist curved and his hips flared, though I suspected that had something to do with his ability to bear children because Emory's did the same thing. He was just taller and more
masculine looking as a whole, so it was easy to overlook. Atara had an androgynous look about him with thick eyelashes the same color as his hair and a snub nose.

I drew him. Over and over again, in every margin of my notes on his brother’s recovery and on every sheet of drawing paper I carried with me. I watched him limp and I designed a brace with joints and cogs to take pressure off the tendons and ligaments in his knee so that he had an easier time walking. He could manage without the limp for long periods of time when he wore it, though it was a heavy thing and difficult to get on. I set to work on finding lighter materials for a second model as soon as I was certain it worked.

I don’t know how it happened. I don’t know why. I can’t rightly explain it when emotions got involved, but I think it was sometime after Riordan’s outburst at me and how it had left me feeling crippled until Atara spoke up, voice clear and eyes bright. He saw worth in me where I saw none. He didn’t care about my social status, my lineage, or how I’d grown up. None of it mattered to him because while everyone else fretted and fussed over Emory, he’d still had me.

He cared and, in turn, I cared. It was a slow sort of thing, a twisting web that he weaved with all those full-lipped smiles and the way he used words like ‘serendipitous’ in everyday conversation. He was precious and perfect and gods save the person that ever tried to hurt him because once he’d wriggled his way into my heart, there wasn’t a thing in the world I wouldn’t do for him.

I’d have burned the fucking country to ashes if he asked me to do it or if he needed me to do it. It was devotion that bordered religion. I couldn’t say that I loved him, not quite yet, because it was closer to worship. Nobody had ever seen anything in me beyond a street rat—a barroom brawler with a bad attitude, a filthy mouth, and a blatant disregard for self-preservation.

In the ruined pieces I had left, the broken bits and the scattered shards that the brothel had spit back out when I finally left, Atara found worth where I’d seen none.

He may not have actually been a living god the way that the Lierians thought he was. He bled like every other man I knew. He got angry and overwhelmed. He was easily distracted and prone to theatrics that were impressive even for a teenager.

But I was his. In that moment, standing there in the wake of Riordan’s verbal lashing, I’d become his. If he wanted to kiss me, he could kiss me. If he wanted me on my knees, I’d be there. If he told me to throw myself on my own sword, I wouldn’t have even hesitated. It might have seemed unhealthy. It should have. It would have been, had I not also known that he would never ask those things of me. I gave them to him without a word because I trusted him. Implicitly and without question.

That did not mean that I never got angry with him, that his theatrics never irritated me, that I never wanted to take him over my knee because his parents had never really inflicted boundaries on him and sometimes he was so goddamned stupid and naive--

Like that night he fought with my mother, talked to Emory, and went tearing through the city, sans guard and in that absurdly impractical chain mail of his station, right to my front door.

I’d been deep in a sketchbook, just a bundle of parchment that I’d ribboned together, trying to draw out the anatomy of the Infinito line on Tristan’s request. He’d wanted to examine Emory the day before but the eldest prince had practically spit on him in response, eyes flashing bright and furious, and Nikita Novak had been forced to physically drag him from the room lest he attempt to take the Paikean’s head right off his shoulders with his bare hands. Atara had relented, stripped from the shoulders down, and let Tristan run long-fingered, cold hands over his skeletal structure and his abdomen.
His palms, I noted, glowed an otherworldly blue while he worked, a dim and distant color. Old world magic, I thought, and I didn’t trust Tristan Brighton further than I could throw him. I didn’t trust Immarans, full stop, but the alchemists of Paikea were the absolute worst of the lot. They were steeped in mystery and intrigue and every court in the old world kept them close, just like they kept their Sons of the Serpent assassins. There were horror stories out of Immara about what the alchemists could do and how they honed their craft, practicing their wicked arts on burned out slaves.

I wondered how many collared Lierians Tristan had performed vivisections on. I wondered how many he’d had screaming under his fingertips until he’d known how to do this.

I detested working with him, but Atara had asked me to be present and so I’d been present. The fact that none of it was, according to the young prince, inherently painful so much as it was just uncomfortably probative, did not win Tristan any favors from me. I still regarded him the way that the gentry regarded my kind on the street--like he was a flea-infested water rat climbing up from the gutters.

Still, Fox had given me orders to cooperate and so there I was, sketching the bizarre anatomy of what Tristan regarded as a third sex, though he’d admitted that he wasn’t quite sure that was the correct terminology. I’d responded with a glare and he’d stopped trying to make conversation with me except to task me with this because, according to him, his ‘assistant’ was still in Immara trying to locate someone they’d lost track of.

The knock on the door startled me from what I was doing though. It wasn’t so much a knock as it was a pounding that rattled the windows, loud even above the thrashing storm that was happening outside. It rained damn near every night in Coryth during the wet season and it was the peak of the wet season. The water in the streets would, no doubt, reach up beyond my ankles, and I was grateful to be occupying a second floor flat just a few buildings down from where my father lived above the Red Lantern.

It didn’t stop, that pounding. It just kept going, like the frantic drum of a heart, and I dropped the graphite in my black-stained fingers and made my way around the table where the parchment was spread open, held by a large rock and a cheap bottle of wine, so that I could throw the door open. The rain lashed in, stinging my face, hot and sharp and Atara stumbled forward, his arms thrown out so that they landed around my neck.

He was soaked to the skin, through the chain mail and the leather and the tunic and trousers underneath. His boots made a squishing, squelching noise when he wobbled, knees buckling, chest shaking, wracked with violent sobs that had him gasping for air like he was drowning on dry land.

At first, alarm jolted through my limbs, spreading like a wildfire and I ran my fingers through his wet hair and over his shoulders, checking for blood when I brought them away from him but they only came back slick with rain. His clothes were soaked, but arranged correctly and intact. He was still shaking so hard that his teeth rattled, fingers curled into claws against my back, pulling at the fabric of my shirt while he pressed his face hard into my collar. I felt him bite down, teeth against skin for just a moment before he got the fabric there and clenched.

I wanted to shout at him. I wanted to betray how utterly livid I was that he had shown up here without his guards, past dark, and wearing full royal regalia like it was a target on his back. I wondered if he’d been followed. I wondered if, in the dark, anyone had noticed or even seen. The rain and the time of day worked in the favor of safety, in this one instance, but it didn’t make me any less frustrated with his foolish, childish decisions. He’d seen what they did to his brother and I wholeheartedly believed that Emory survived because he was too spiteful and defiant to just die when he was supposed to. Atara was not defiant, not usually, anyway. He was not spiteful or vengeful.
Atara would have never survived what Emory had survived.

Instead, my fury was swallowed by prevalent concern. “You’re in pain,” I spoke the words before I’d fully thought them out and he twisted in my arms, shoulders shaking, fingers dragging down my back, still caught in fabric, so tight that I could feel his nails through my shirt and he screamed into the cloth in his mouth and against the skin below my throat. I let the door bump shut behind him and reached for just a moment to slide the bolt back in place but he sensed the loss of contact and clung to me harder.

The scream was what gave it away though.

It wasn’t even just pain. He was livid. Teeth-clenching livid. Scream-until-your-throat-is-raw livid. I wondered, then, why he’d come to me. He had parents in the palace that would have let him vent and scream until he collapsed from exhaustion. The Gods knew they understood his frustration with the situation. I’d seen him so angry over a council meeting the week before that he’d been pounding against Fox’s chest with tiny, balled up fists, red-cheeked and furious. That was after he’d seen my mother approach me with her venomous warning to stay clear of the Bordelon boys. The whole lot of them left disaster in their wake, from Tylas all the way down to Atara.

Clearly, I had heeded her warning with about as much enthusiasm as I would bring to a funeral.

Which was none, by the way, in case that wasn’t totally clear.

“You’re angry,” I corrected my previous statement, though the two were not mutually exclusive. He was certainly both. In the moment, however, the anger seemed more pertinent a problem to address. “Come on, Atara, you’re okay. I’ve got you, but I can’t help you unless you talk to me.”

He tore away from me just as quickly as he’d arrived, a whirlwind of chaos that reminded me of the way he’d once described Emory before the beach: A tempest. A storm. A wildfire. He was positively vibrating with rage, trembling all the way down to his fingers. There was no grief in his face, not really. There was clarity, burning clear and bright behind his eyes.

“After all I’ve fucking done for him,” he fumed the words, breathing them with a heavy exhale that shuddered in his chest. He ran his fingers through his soaked hair, pushing it furiously from his eyes. “After everything we’ve been through and everything I’ve sacrificed for his ungrateful ass, he just fucking walks away from me after dropping something like that at my feet! I can’t do this anymore, Mackenzie. I won’t do this anymore!”

I knew without him ever saying Emory’s name that he was talking about his brother. Nobody else had put him through the meat grinder as frequently as Emory had in recent months and Atara was right. He’d sacrificed a lot. He’d gained a lot, too, but what is a title worth when it’s unwanted? What is power in the hands of someone who has never learned to use it? Atara was intelligent beyond his years and he was in a position to do things that Emory never could, but none of it mattered if he couldn’t turn his title into a weapon the way that Fox and Emory could.

If nobody respected him in his position, he was impotent. No, worse. He was dangerously weak. I’d thought he could rise to the challenge and, to some degree, I believed he could still, but he didn’t. That was the root of the problem.

I watched him, positively seething as he paced the length of the little room. He looked wildly out of place in all his pompous attire striding over the rough-hewn floor that seemed uneven under his steps. I’d only ever seen him surrounded by luxury and, despite his size, he seemed too big for a place like this.
Too big for commoners like me.

But that was just part of the package—he was a Bordelon prince, heir to the most powerful title in the known world. He would always be too big for things like this.

“You…” I started hesitantly, picking my way around him with careful steps so that I could pluck a towel up from a rack across the room. I draped it over his shoulders when he paced past me, but he seemed indifferent to it. Like he didn’t even notice that he was soaking wet and leaving puddles everywhere he went. “You fought with Emory?”

Atara snorted, rolling his eyes in a way that was uniquely his own. When most people rolled their eyes, it was sarcasm or disgust. Atara had mastered combining them both into a lethal look of loathsome scoffing. “How can you fight with someone that has the personality of wet fucking tissue paper?”

“That’s…harsh, don’t you think?” I kept my distance, toweling off the water he’d left on me to the best of my ability. He was not deterred by my judgement, not that I expected him to be. Who was I to judge a would-be god? Even if he found some worth in me, I was always going to be trash in comparison to him.

“I asked him,” he went on, too furious to really comprehend what, exactly, he was telling me. I’m sure that if he had been in control enough to think about his words, he never would have let me in on this part of their conversation. “I asked him how I should be with you.”

“Me?”

He scowled at my interruption. Neither of the boys were used to being interrupted. They were the definition of spoiled brats, though I ventured to guess that Emory was worse than Atara, once upon a time. They were pampered, well-educated, exorbitantly wealthy, and incredibly powerful. People didn’t dare interrupt either of them. Some people didn’t even speak back at them when they were spoken to. They curtsied. They bowed. They walked away silently. It was what I should have done, but Rosie had taught me not to hold my tongue, especially around arrogant members of the gentry. It was almost like she wanted me flayed alive, though her intentions were decidedly good. She was Glacian, after all. They didn’t know the meaning of ‘hold your tongue.’

“You,” he repeated back. “Because I don’t want to push you into something. I don’t want you to feel like that. I don’t—”

I huffed, interrupting him again, and Atara’s scowl could have melted the surface of the sun. “We talked about this already, killer. You shouldn’t have brought this up with your brother. He’s not ready for it.”

“I thought he was fucking Nikita Novak!”

That threw me a little bit and we stared at each other, his dark green eyes on my blue-grey. I was sure I looked like he’d slapped me. He stopped pacing, at least. “He lets Nikki touch him. I saw him holding Em’s wrist the other day. I just…I thought…” He threw his hands up in defeat and then shook his head, making a disgusted noise in his throat. “Regardless, I was fucking wrong. He looked like he wanted to puke on my shoes or run and hide in the nearest set of floor-length drapes he could find. Then do you know what he said?”

“Fuck off?” I suggested and it did get a small smile from the corner of his mouth. His shoulders even lifted in a small laugh and I felt lighter for it. Absently, he tugged the towel around his shoulders and then dragged it over his head before he answered.
When he did, he sat heavily in one of the chairs at the little table in the middle of my flat. It was a small place, just one room, but I was never there anymore. My weekdays were spent with his family or in the barracks at the keep. My weekends, when they weren’t spent with him, were spent primarily with Rylin. I’d decided to spend the night here only because I’d wanted to work on the ludicrous little project Tristan had assigned me.

Atara propped his head up on the table with his right hand and toyed idly with the parchment with his left. He was ambidextrous, I’d learned. So was Emory. Atara, however, favored his left hand like Cyril and Emory favored his right hand like Fox.

He sighed, the fury draining from him as he thought. “He said, ‘If I touch him, he’ll be as filthy as me. What do I touch that I don’t ruin?’” His voice sounded small when he spoke the words and I deflated. Something in me crushed like grapes in a wine barrel and, just like that, I could feel the same disgust I’d felt ten years before when I’d fumbled, blind drunk and aching, into bed with a man older than my father.

It was the first totally consensual experience I’d had that someone hadn’t thrown coins at me for and I hadn’t done it because I’d thought I would enjoy it. I’d done it because I was desperate for affection from anyone that would give it to me and I’d believed, wholeheartedly, that sex was the only way to achieve that. It was, after all, something so many people had said above me while I was gagging, their hands in my hair and their hips pistoning forward...that it was all I would ever be good for. It was always peppered with names that made them want me harder--filthy whore, stupid slut. Beg. Beg Kenzie. Beg. Harder or I’ll give you a reason to cry.

“Mack?” Atara was standing again, though I couldn’t recall when he’d gotten to his feet. He reached for my arm like he was going to comfort me and I cringed backward like his touch would blister. It could have, I thought. He was as brilliant and life-sustaining as the sun, with beautiful heat that lived under the pigmentation in his skin, but his touch never hurt. I had no reason to flinch from him the way that I had.

He took it in stride, caring little creature that he was, and he held his hand out instead the way that Nikita had done to Emory that first time he’d met him.

It was a moment in time, just one small, fleeting second of being fifteen again and then it was over. I could separate from it in ways that Emory hadn’t mastered yet. “I’m fine,” I assured him after that second passed, but his expression didn’t seem entirely convinced. His brow was knitted with concern, fury forgotten. “Why are you here without guards?”

“What’s on the street below us,” he informed me gently, raising a skeptical eyebrow. “You’re deflecting. This isn’t about me. You weren’t fine for a second there, Mackenzie. You were hurting.”

“So are you.”

“Mack.”

“Atara.”

His scowl showed up again, twisting his delicate face into a childish grimace but I remained undeterred. “You thought that, too. You still think that sometimes, don’t you? That there’s something wrong with you. That you’re...unclean.”

“Mm.” It was all the agreement he was going to squeeze of me. “I told you that if I wanted you to stop, I would tell you myself. Why would you go to Emory about it? Of all the people you could talk to...and why don’t you believe me?”
“Because you won’t talk to me?” Atara fixed me with a stare, cold and calculating, like he was judging every movement I made as I crossed the room and sank into the edge of my bed. “You won’t just tell me.”

Irritation won out and I felt my heartbeat, raging quick and furious, light up in my chest. I wanted it to be done. I wanted it to be over and I knew, of course I knew, that it never would be. Still, I glared back at him and he wilted under the look. “Tell you what, Atara? That until I could fake being eighteen, I got passed around like a party favor at the Lantern, but they always left money beside the bed when they were done and that kept us from starving so I never said a fucking word about it. That when Rosie found out I’d gone willingly to someone’s room, she turned me over the table and beat me bloody and it felt more like she was blaming me than punishing me for ever leaving the room where she’d told me to stay? That I have fucked and been fucked, consensually and nonconsensually, in every usable orifice of my body since I was eight years old and it doesn’t matter…”

“It matters to me!” I’d been shouting, I realized, and he shouted back, his cheeks red and his eyes welling up. It wasn’t rage this time. It was the same grief I’d seen on his face when I’d met him only it wasn’t Emory that he grieved now. It was me.

That made me feel filthy in exactly the same way that it had done to his brother.

He took a deep breath, his lungs shuddering so that it gasped in quick jolts into his body. “I need to know your boundaries. I need to know that when I touch you, this isn’t what you think about. I need to know you aren’t some cleverly disguised version of my brother.”

“I am not Emory!” I bit back and he flinched then, sinking deeper into the chair he’d gone back to until it seemed like he wanted to physically shrink into nothing. “I told you, killer, nobody ever hurt me like that. Nobody hit me so hard that my bones broke. I put that behind me.”

“Why can’t he?”

And that was the real question, wasn’t it? It was one I couldn’t even answer for him because gods, if I knew… “I wish I had an answer for you, darlin. I really do.”

He looked up, as surprised by me at the term of endearment that slipped so easily into my words. It was something so decidedly common that it was almost painful to hear it in reference to him but the grief melted from his face at it and his lips turned up into a smile. “Say it again,” he pleaded quickly, leaning forward over the table, and just like that he was his age. The weight of the world lifted from his shoulders like it had never been there and I’d done that. I’d given him that relief.

It was in that exact moment that I knew it went beyond religion. I loved him. It was stupid and foolish and it would never work because he was a prince and I was exactly what Riordan had called me and more. A gutter rat. A whore. Nothing. Filthy, far too filthy for his beautiful fingers to touch, but he wanted something and, like a priest compelled toward prayer, I obeyed. “Darlin? You liked that? Even without the g? It puts that pompous accent you have to shame,” I teased him.

He shivered at it, grinning wide. “That’s why I like it,” he admitted and he climbed from the chair, making his way over to me. This was dangerous, I noted, having him alone in my house. At the keep, there was always someone there. There was always someone watching. His parents, his brother, his guards, and though I’d kissed him a thousand times and I’d sucked his cock every time I got him alone for even ten minutes, we’d never really been...entirely, totally alone and without the threat of interruption.

Atara straddled my lap, still soaking wet, and I could smell him when he was this close to me.
Raspberries on his breath and rainwater in his hair. He was a warm weight across my legs. “This is okay?” he inquired carefully, brushing a lock of blond hair from my eyes and I leaned back, settling my hands on his hips so that he didn’t slide away but unwilling to really grope at his ass the way that I wanted to. Careful, I had to keep warning myself. He’s too important to fuck this up.

I didn’t answer, but I didn’t shove him away, and he took that as the positive reinforcement it was meant to be. All it took was a kiss from him though and the hunger I had Atara Bordelon bubbled in my stomach, hot and boiling. I was starved for him. I’d never let him get me off in all the times I’d done it for him and he complained about it frequently, but the truth was that I feared him seeing me for the wretched bottom-feeder I truly was. He deserved so much more than I could ever give him or be for him. I’d already been used up and spit out, but there was no hiding that I wanted him in that position. No doubt he could feel me stiffen against him where he was cradled in my lap His teeth were on my lower lip and his tongue was prying my mouth open while his hands skated down my ribs and then up under my shirt--small, warm fingers that moved with delicate grace, like he was hyper-aware of each touch, waiting for some sign that he’d injured the fragile normalcy that he thought I wore like a mask.

My hands slipped from his hips to the small of his back where I could feel those blistering dark marks sweeping down his spine and I wondered, briefly, if they went all the way over his ass and down his legs. I decided, without much forethought, to find out and I set to stripping him from his armor. I peeled at the buckles and his hands left me to help, but his mouth never did. His lips stayed on mine or they ghosted over my jaw or my cheeks and he rolled his hips against me, whimpering at the friction and the hardened bulge he could feel through my clothes.

I’d never wanted anyone quite so badly. I was desperate for him, the way pilgrims are desperate for holy grace.

His chain mail clinked against the floor and his leather tunic followed, a sopping pile of soaked clothes, but I hardly cared. Those sinfully warm tattoos were visible, slicing down his ribs in vertical lines like the war paint the Riders slathered over themselves. I wanted to lick them. I wanted to map his body with my tongue, taste every inch that he’d allow me to taste, but we were diving into territory that would, eventually, turn uncomfortable for me.

I flipped him over and he landed hard on his back, a surprised whine slipping from between his kiss-reddened lips and there he was, spread half naked on my bed, eyes wide and glassy with lust and longing.

His breath hitched when I climbed leisurely up his body, peeling my shirt off on the way, planting kisses on those searing marks and Atara whimpered above me, writhing in the sheets, his fingers sunk into the pillow under his head like he remembered our conversation about how I wanted to tie him down.

I hadn’t, of course, but he limited his touch, curbed his own enthusiasm and made do with crying my name when my tongue laved over his nipples. I sucked each and he thrashed, practically keening his appreciation at the attention, eyes rolling back until I sat up. “So these…” I thumbed over the violent looking marks that peppered his gorgeous little body. “Sensitive?”

He made a noise when I ghosted over the ones on his hip bones with my thumbs, his back arching and his chest heaving, gasping for desperate air. “I’ll take that as a yes,” I answered myself and kissed where I’d been touching, my fingers moving slowly to peel his black trousers down his legs.

We’d never been quite here. I’d had him gasping and writhing against a wall, fingers buried in my hair, one leg hitched around my shoulder, using my name like it was a prayer. I’d sucked him until his knees buckled, until I’d learned to play his body like a finely tuned instrument, but I’d never gone
any further than foreplay. I feared that once I did, I’d want him constantly. I already wanted him constantly, could feel him on my tongue when he looked at me from across a room, could already taste him down my throat before he’d even kissed me.

I’d never particularly enjoyed sucking anyone off. Not until him. Not until I’d felt his stomach suck inward with anticipation, seen his back arch from a wall, watched his eyes roll back, and been there to catch him when his legs gave out and he clung to me, begging for more, sucking bruises into my throat, and I’d always sort of imagined that someday he’d get fed up and he’d tell me to bend over something for him.

I was so certain that was where it was headed and that had been the driving force behind my desire to tie his hands down--so that I could stop, even if he found that he was too hungry to do it, inexperienced and spoiled as he was.

I leaned back to look down at him, naked and wet and painfully hard. He was the definition of carnal sin lying there like that, whimpering and holding his arms out for me, his lips in a pout. “Kiss me,” he whispered the words and I was his so I obliged, leaning in to press my mouth to his but his hands curled in my hair and he dragged me forward too far, his mouth at my ear, teeth on my earlobe.

This, I thought...this would be where he tells me to bend over the bed, where he tells me how good it’ll feel and how much he loves it, where he says he wants to fuck me--

But Atara was always good for surprising me and his tongue just licked along the shell of my ear so that I shuddered against him, his breath hot and damp against the side of my face. “I can’t wait to feel you inside of me.” His words touched every raw nerve I had and I groaned against him, suddenly acutely aware of every point where he was touching me--the way his legs were around my hips, the way his hands were tangled in my hair, how his mouth was still pressed to my skin--

I didn’t have an accurate answer to give him, not in words, but I wanted him all at once. I wanted everything. My fingers scraped down his body and I moved with them, leaving desperate, hot kisses in my wake and I lifted his hips. Atara held his breath and I was certain he expected me to suck his cock again, to leave him squealing and sobbing for more than a blow job, but I moved lower and pushed his legs up further until I had him open and exposed, soaking wet, and I slid my tongue against him.

I’d done this to one other person before for an obscene amount of money, but that level of obscenity had nothing on the bone-melting cry that tore from his lips. This was beauty that bordered obscene. It was pornographic. He wailed, his fingers curling into claws against his own hips while he twisted, panting and pleading. After that first wail of desperation, he was alarmingly quiet and when I looked up, I realized it was because his chest didn’t rise and fall with his lungs. He was holding his breath, twisted in delicious bliss while my tongue slid into him, searching hungrily for what I knew would make him squeal. His face flushed scarlet, eyes screwed up, lips parted in a silent cry and when he finally let his breath out, it guttered in short gasps, small wails, and then tapered into frantic, beautiful pleading. “Mackenzie, please! Fuck, please!” He stammered and he stuttered, his usual eloquent way of speaking turning to shameful incoherence that I positively basked in, reaching up to stroke his cock in time with my tongue.

He keened and he mewled, hips bucking, slick with rain and sweat, thrashing in my sheets like he was on the verge of constant orgasm but every time he approached that cliff, I drew back and let him breathe. He melted like butter left in the sun, a puddle of raw nerves and pent up sexual aggression. He begged. He begged better than any whore I’d ever through the doors at the Red Lantern. He begged until his throat was hoarse and he was sobbing, head thrown back, legs trembling and spread as wide as he could hold them, cock weeping red and angry on his belly.

I stopped only when his voice turned guttural and ragged. “If you don’t stop, you’re going to fucking
“kill me,” he said the words like he’d torn them physically from his chest and I finally stopped, dragging my tongue from the soaking entrance to his body all the way up over his balls and the length of his cock. He squealed, twisting and whining, eyes screwed shut until my tongue left him and he looked up at me, gaze glassy and bright.

“Would it be a bad way to go?” I teased, nosing at his throat until he tilted his head and gave me access to his pulse. I shifted on the bed, squirming free of my trousers, my cock aching from the restraint. I didn’t typically let anyone occupy my attention for as long as I’d allowed him, but I’d had him there long enough to have soaked my sheets in sweat and the deliciously sticky fluid that spread down his legs.

Below me, arms linked loosely about my neck, fingers toying with the my own damp hair, Atara snorted. “Absolutely not,” he relented quietly. “I can hear the criers already: ‘Atara Ambrose Bordelon, aged seventeen, Crown Prince of Coria and Infinito to the Lierian Nation, tongue fucked to death.’ Father will be so proud.”

“Would that make me a murderer?”

He pressed kisses against my mouth while I tried to speak, finally kicking my trousers down off of me and onto the floor in a pile with his soaked clothing. His fingers were delicate, carefully cradling my face and sliding over my cheekbones and my jaw. He caught my bottom lip between his teeth just once, sucked it gently, and then pressed his forehead to mine. “If it does, we’re going to need to find a necromancer so you can murder me again. You are absolutely wicked. I think—” Whatever he’d been saying died in his throat when I spread him open, sliding two fingers into his waiting body, slick and ready. He gasped and I felt his nails dig into the back of my neck, his forehead still against mine, and he squirmed, grinding down on my hand desperately. “Please, gods, please, more!” he finally bit out desperately.

“Shh,” I hushed him gently and moved enough to press a kiss to his cheek. “Easy, darlin, I love the begging, but I aim to enjoy every second of this. You’ll get what you want, I promise.”

I didn’t torment him like that for as long as I’d done with my tongue. Truthfully, I liked the taste of him, bitter and bright, and I liked how he’d gone from eager to utterly debauched, splayed open, begging, grinding on my tongue.

I could have kept him there for hours, I thought. I could have watched him orgasm over and over until he couldn’t do it anymore—until his abdominal muscles screamed in protest and his legs felt like gelatin, and his body hurt so far up inside of him that it touched his chest.

Someday, I thought. Someday I’d teach him the real definition of the phrase, ‘get fucked’ that he liked to fling so casually in my direction when he was frustrated with me. For now, it was pillow talk—or rather, it was pillow talk the way I’d been taught to give it—to be brilliantly filthy, to make naughty promises that I planned to deliver on, to make him feel regal and debased at the same time—

If Atara expected sweet nothings, he was barking up the wrong tree.

Eventually, when a dry sob tore from his beautiful lips, I retracted my fingers and I lifted his legs around my hips. “Yes, fuck yes, Mackenzie—” He was babbling, sobbing, naked and aching and when he felt my cock against him, he jerked deliciously, eyes rolling back, but something snapped in him when I started to slide into him, my cheeks flushed and my body hot. I was as aching as he was, as hungry as he was, and he was wickedly, sinfully tight. He shined with a thin veneer of sweat, bottom lip caught between white teeth. I was careful with him—one inch at a time, slow and steady, and he whimpered at the intrusion, fingers clawing helplessly at my back.
“You’ll stop if you want to stop,” he breathed the words against my ear.

I nodded against him. It wasn’t enough.

“Say it back,” he demanded and I melted a little bit more. He was precious, my little prince. Worried over me when he was the one spread open, gasping a little bit with each forward thrust of my hips, allowing me to sully his blessedly perfect little body with my stained fingers and my wicked mouth, already used by so many before him.

“Atara, it would take a fucking army to pry me off of you right now, but if you insist on hearing it...I will stop if I want to stop. I swear to the gods.”

I felt him chuckle, just a little hiccup of laughter in his chest until I slid the rest of the way into his lithe little form and he groaned, back arched, breathing hard. He was so delicately small that all I had to do was shift my weight to brush that spot inside of him that made him see stars. He cried out blissfully, eyes rolling again, his cock hard and wet between the two of us. For a second, I thought about stroking him, but he seemed so utterly destroyed just taking me in that I wondered if I could get him there like this, if I could fuck him to completion without touching his cock.

He looked up at me when I didn’t immediately move again, lips so close to mine that I could taste him when he gasped for air, feel his teeth when he spoke. “You’re fucking beautiful, you know that?” he breathed.

I’d been told that before, in fact, by nearly every person that had ever pinned me to a mattress and made me squeal in agony for their own kicks. Nobody ever said it with the same conviction as Atara Bordelon. Nobody ever meant it the way that he did. He didn’t mean, “Making you suffer is beautiful.” He didn’t mean, “You’re beautiful...for a stupid little whore.”

He meant it in the most devotional sense. “Mm,” I responded with a wrinkle of my nose and he snorted a laugh. “I could stand to hear it more often, I think.”

I moved then, my hips slow and needy, pressing quick kisses to his mouth while he whimpered. I knew what he felt because I’d been there before, stretched open that first time, aching and full and blistering hot. He trembled under me, arms over my back, nails biting into skin so that he left long, jagged lines down my spine that I knew I would relish in later when they bit at me beneath my shirt.

I was glad I hadn’t tied him down. I liked his touch and the way he adored me with his palms and his fingers. He didn’t have to say the words. I could feel it when he held me.

When the whimpering slowed to a stop and became desperate, breathy moaning, I picked a pace, but he was so tight and he was so strung out that slow became an impossibility. Need would always triumph over want and I needed him the way I needed air in my lungs and blood in my veins.

I shouldn’t have been as hard on him as I was then. I didn’t intend to be, but with every thrust, he rocked down against me and my hands dug into his hips, leaving bruises in the shape of my fingers, and he squealed for me. “Fuck, yes, right there!” Head thrown back, throat exposed, legs spread sinfully wide.

If either of us was beautiful, it was him, gorgeous and debauched--a Crown Prince, splayed open and hungry on the bed of a common soldier.

“What?” I hissed it through my teeth, heat coiling in my stomach. He was incredible. His body rippled around me, tight and needy, muscles flexing hungrily, urging me deeper--harder--faster. “You feel so fucking good.”
“More,” he pleaded, the word a breath of a whimper on his beautiful lips. And who was I to tell him no? I was a slave to his every whim in that moment. He was pinned beneath me. He was begging. He was glorious in his submission, relinquishing himself entirely into my hands, but he was in control. If he’d told me to stop, it would have been physically painful, but I would have done it.

He hadn’t told me to stop though. He’d begged for more and I grabbed his hands, lacing my fingers down through his. I pinned them up beside his head and I drove into him. His body bowed, arched upward, legs shaking around me. The headboard creaked behind us and he cried with it, teeth clenched, eyes screwed shut. I felt him twitch under me, cock untouched, muscles convulsing around me and he wailed when the climax hit him. It was a desperate, keening cry of my name, his hands pushing up against my own, writhing under me like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to grind down harder on my cock or if he wanted to disconnect from the constant sensation.

I should have stopped.

I didn’t.

I fucked him through it, listening to him squeal and whimper, thrashing under me, his sinuous body rocking against my own. We were wet and sticky with his finish. He was overly stimulated to a point where it had to border pain, but he kept his legs tight around my hips, kept my name in his mouth, back arched, shaking so hard the bed rattled with it--

He was so tight and he was so hot. His Lierian markings burned like brands on every part of my skin that they touched and the more he wailed, the harder I went until his thighs were bruised and his desperate whimpers were tinged with ache and I loved him. I loved him, loved him and he wanted me and that pushed me over the crest of my own climax, had me spilling into him, hot and sticky and I heard him cry out, shuddering with it while I pumped into him, desperate to give him absolutely everything with my teeth sunk into the curve of his throat.

Between his finish and mine wasn’t really much more than a few minutes, but it had been enough and under normal circumstances, I might have stopped, pressed my head against his collarbone and caught my breath but Atara was not the sort of person I usually took to bed.

I didn’t let him sink into the mattress. I gathered him up, his limbs boneless, legs bruised, a bite mark blossoming purple and scarlet on the delicate curve of his slender neck. He sank against me, breathing hard, sweat slick and sticky. I could feel his heartbeat pounding through his back the way that my own was. “Talk to me, killer,” I implored, smoothing my palms down his back, skating over every bone in his spine and down the ladder of his ribs.

“Mm,” he mumbled, voice thick, but he gathered some resolve, a little bit of that crass courage he’d picked up from his brother, and he threaded his fingers through my soaked hair and tipped my head back so that he could look at me. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Mackenzie, because I mean it in the absolute best way possible.”

My brow knitted together in confusion and he kissed my forehead sleepily.

“You fuck like a champion,” he finished sleepily.

“You mean like a whore,” I corrected dryly.

He leaned back, face shaped into a perfect mock frown. “I don’t fuck whores,” he admonished, looking properly scandalized and I couldn’t stop the snort of laughter that escaped my mouth. “You must have me confused with someone else. A different Bordelon, perhaps. There are a lot of us.” He turned serious then. It was a visible shift in his face and he thumbed over my cheeks carefully. “I
would never say that.”

“I know.”

“And you really are beautiful.”

I sighed heavily. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe him. I had mirrors. I knew what I looked like and, in that same vein, I knew what the Lierian people looked like. I knew why they were coveted in Immara, traded like treasures among slave-owning gentry. It wasn’t the outside that concerned me. It was the mutilated parts that had been left behind after my teenage years. I was no Emory Bordelon, but I could have been.

That terrified me.

It was a conversation and a thought for another day though. “Are you okay, Atara? You’re not...hurt? Let me see--” I peeled him off of me and let him slide gently back into my bed, his head lolling like he’d been on the verge of sleeping in my lap like a toddler. He mumbled unhappily and I opened his thighs to explore the bruises left by my hips. “You’re gonna be one sore puppy tomorrow. I can give you something for that.”

He huffed, seemingly insulted by the thought, and his eyes popped open, very much awake. “Don’t you dare,” he scolded, pointing a finger at me from his place among my pillows and I blinked, startled by his sudden change in demeanor from sleepy and well-sexed to mockingly frustrated. “Every time I sit tomorrow, I’m going to think, ‘Gods, he fucked me so good. I can’t wait until I have him in me again.’”

“You are a wicked little letch, you know that?” I climbed over him and debated smothering him with my weight until he squealed for mercy but collapsed onto my side next to him instead. He shifted to face me and grinned, teeth flashing brilliantly in his smile. Before he could speak, I fed him more fuel for his apparently filthy imagination. “And the answer is tomorrow before you leave this flat, little prince.”

He sucked in a sharp breath, eyes wide, cheeks flushed, and leaned in to kiss me but I put my index finger against his lips at the last possible moment so that it was caught between us and his eyes opened, wide and dark green and splendidly surprised. I spoke against his mouth and the finger pressed between us. “I’m going to bend you over my table until your legs buckle under you. I’m going to fuck you so hard you forget your own name but you sure as hell will remember mine.”

“Fuuuuuck me,” he breathed the words and peeled my hand from between us so he could press his mouth to mine.

And so I did.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

I hadn’t expected Mackenzie Glenning to be a tactile person, but his arm stayed locked around my middle the whole of that first night. It didn’t matter how much I squirmed or moved on his small bed, he was always there. When I rolled over, he dragged me so that I was draped over his chest, my arms loose on his sides and my head tucked under his chin. When I rolled off of him, he pulled me against him and nuzzled into the back of my neck, his breath warm against the very top of my spine, ghosting sleepy kisses over my skin when he stirred...and he never really woke for it. He wasn’t a heavy sleeper, I didn’t think, but it was clear that he was used to ignoring stimuli when he was supposed to be at rest.

I wanted to believe that was because he spent his weeknights in the barracks, surrounded by other guards and soldiers, but deep, deep down in a dark, worrisome, troubled part of my heart, I knew that it wasn’t because of the barracks. I knew that it was because Mack had been spending his nights with someone pawing all over him for most of his life.

I knew it because he had nightmares. I’d expected that when he’d been sleepily mumbling about how warm I was, his head pillowed on my arm. He was beautiful like that, I thought. It was the only time I’d ever seen him truly relaxed, his senses muffled by post-climactic bliss just like my own, but I could relent and admit that he’d done most of the work. He deserved to curl up, sleepy and safe, and he was beautiful like that--stress-free and drifting off, glassy eyes shut, a halo of damp gold curls limp on top of his head. I ran my fingers through them experimentally, but he didn’t do much more than drum his own against my skin where they were resting at my hip. Then they curled so his knuckles were pressed to my side and he was gone. At least, he was gone for something like twenty minutes while I quietly mussed his hair, staring up at the ceiling, relishing in the bruised feeling that was printed all over my lower half and the sting of the fresh bite mark on my collar.

My movements didn’t wake him. My toying with his hair didn’t wake him. The sound of the violent storm that raged against the shaky, wooden building that he resided in didn’t wake him. In fact, even the nightmare didn’t wake him. It woke me from that surreal place that exists between sleep and consciousness, where reality bleeds into dreams--the stirring, the whining like he was in pain, the way his fingers stretched and dug into my ribs like he was grappling for something to hold onto--

“Mack,” I whispered his name in the dark and he shivered, eyes shut tight, fingers still scrabbling blindly against my skin. I couldn’t see him well--the candle had long since gone out, sputtered into nothing on the table where he’d been working, but I could see the outline of his features, twisted like something was branding him from the inside out.

Emory had nightmares like this. Nightmares he couldn’t wake from. Nightmares that left him trapped inside the walls of his head, sobbing into our father’s lap while Fox blew carefully across the back of his sweat-soaked neck in an effort to ease his suffering. There was nothing else to be done and Emory claimed he didn’t remember come the morning.
I wondered if Mack remembered.

He whimpered again, face turned toward the pillow, lips parted slightly. His brow knitted with anxiety and my heart broke, right there in his little room, and I felt like such a small place couldn’t contain the bursting in my chest.

My breath hitching and my palms sweating, I tried again, this time lifting a hand to cup his cheek. “Mackenzie.” It was a plaintive breath of sound in the dark but his eyes snapped open, glassy and distant, a pool of reflective silver lit only by the crack of lightning that illuminated his face with a brilliant glow for the briefest, briefest of seconds. His fingers closed around my wrist with painful, bruising force, tearing it away from his face, and the broken heart I’d been sporting a moment earlier flurried into activity, pumping wildly in my chest. My fight or flight instinct roared to life in the forefront of my mind. I pulled. He squeezed harder, expression set into grim determination, grip twisting so that the skin under his hand felt raw and burned.

“Mack, it’s me,” I stressed the words, squirming beside him, pleading for recognition to cross his features. “Mackenzie, please, you’re hurting me!”

He blinked, wild and unfocused, and then his grip loosened until my arm was my own again. His shoulders slumped and he sort of wavered for a moment, almost like a tree just before the final pull of the saw blade that brings it down, swaying unsteadily. Then he slid forward and I knew then that this was almost exactly like Emory. He wasn’t really awake at all and his head landed in the curve of my shoulder. We both fell back into the mattress, Mack’s weight on top of me.

He wasn’t really asleep either. I didn’t know what he was. I could feel his heart hammering beneath my hands where they fell under his shoulder blades. I swept my palms along his sides, cradled his ribs, felt his lips at my ear with warm, damp breath. “Atara,” he mumbled my name groggily. His weight was stifling. He was larger than me—broader at his shoulders, half a hand taller, and built into a solid wall of muscle mass from endless drills when he wasn’t on duty. I could feel each of those muscles under my hands, corded and taut, even at rest.

It was difficult to breathe, but not impossible, and I was loathe to make him move when he nuzzled into me, pressing sleepy kisses right beneath my ear. Gods, he’d wriggled his way right into my chest and made a home there, nestled right against my heart, and I adored everything about him. The bruise on my wrist was long forgotten already, lost beyond more important thoughts like--

Had anyone ever held him like this? Had he ever been comfortable enough to actually sleep next to someone or had he laid awake all those nights, wondering when whoever was paying for him would roll over on top of him again?

I tried to imagine him like that—small and frail with those same blue-grey eyes that reflected the light around him, aching and hurting and screaming inside his skull but enduring it because there was no alternative besides starve. It made me sick.

I pressed my lips to his shoulder and felt him shiver under the touch, still half on top of me, still breathing warm and slow against my throat and my ear. Nobody was ever going to hurt him again. Not while I breathed.

“Mm, Atara.” He was muffled, face buried against me, still caught somewhere between awake and asleep.

“I’m here.”

“Love you.”
My fingers fell still where they were sweeping up and down his ribs, trying to soothe the horrors from his dreams, and every part of me was screaming to squeeze him tight and wrap myself around him, to smother him in affection that he’d so clearly lacked most of his life, to say out loud all those promises I’d made in my head that nobody would hurt him ever again. I wouldn’t allow it. Even if whatever it was that was happening between us ended, I would keep that promise. Even if, years and years down the road, he’d forgotten my name and the time we’d had together and he’d moved on with someone else, I would never let him hurt that way again.

But he was sleepy and he was sweet and I’d never felt more at home in my entire life. There was no soft silk with him, no smooth velvet, no down so plush and gentle it was like sleeping on water—there was just Mackenzie Glenning’s weight draped over me like a blanket and the smell of sex and rainwater that clung to his skin.

“I love you, too,” I whispered into his mop of golden hair and I let him sleep, holding tight to me no matter where I moved... finding comfort, perhaps, in love... comfort enough to stop the dreams, at least for a little while. He didn’t stir with them again and when we woke in the dim, grey hours of the morning, he didn’t bring it up. Not when he roused me with kisses and gathered me up, still groggy, to deposit me against his table. I was wobbly on my feet, grumpy and still exhausted, aching deliciously deep between my hips in a way that radiated outward down my thighs. He didn’t bring it up when he bent me over that table, legs spread, and begging for him. He made me utterly shameless—filthy in the best way possible, arching my back to give him better access to my body, sobbing incoherently, desperate for anything he’d give me. He didn’t bring it up when I told him I’d do anything he wanted and he’d shuddered over me, teeth at my throat, buried so deep inside of me that pleasure bordered pain. He’d liked the way it sounded, I thought, and when I said it again he’d grabbed a fistful of my hair and fucked me until I forgot every word I knew except his name, until I was clawing at his table through a second climax that morning, over-stimulated to a point where I twisted and writhed under him, squirming because I needed to get away from him but I also didn’t want him to stop.

He’d been so sweet the night before, focused exclusively on making me feel good, making me comfortable—the rough, raw way that he behaved that morning felt more real and I loved it. I basked in it, positively regal when he forced my face down flat against the table until my cheekbone bruised, when his callous roughened palm slapped my ass, turning it glowing red while he railed into me. So I did forget my name. Eventually, I couldn’t get anything out of my mouth, not even pleas or benedictions, and I was left pinned to the table, shuddering beneath him, eyes rolling, practically drooling for the feel of him finishing in me, hot and wet down my legs. They buckled when he pushed me through that third orgasm, this time with him, and I sobbed for him, babbling and thrashing, searching desperately for words, keening and wailing until I found what I wanted.

“Stop,” I whined it, barely a breath above audible, and just like that, he did. I expected him to simply retreat, to let me collect my wits in a heap on the floor beside his table, but he gathered me up like an infant and sat me carefully back on his bed. I was sticky with sweat and other things, heaving for air, and shaking so hard my limbs felt weak. It was like being drunk. The world around me tipped dangerously to one side and I felt myself sliding toward the pillows only for Mack to catch me around the middle and keep me upright.

I had been euphoric a moment earlier, desperate for more, even more desperately in love, ready and willing to do anything and everything he wanted and then, just like that, like fingers had snapped after that final climax, it was gone and that high crashed. I went slipping downward in my own head, like I was riding the top of a landslide. I clung like a child and my face turned hot, my heart hammering in my throat. “I don’t... I don’t understand...”
I felt him chuckle and he rearranged me so that I was cradled half across his lap, his hand moving up and down my side in smooth, slow strokes. “It’ll pass,” he assured me quietly.

I wasn’t so sure. It was like every awful thing that had happened to me in the past year came crashing back in, crowding me in my own head, and it was then that he noticed the bruising on my wrist. I felt him pluck my arm up from where it was around his neck, but I didn’t look up. I kept my face buried in his throat, counting each breath in and out of my body, shaking and whimpering. I tried to time them with his, to focus on the steadily slowing beat of his heart.

He pressed kisses to the bruise, but he didn’t question me about it. “Talk, Atara,” he insisted softly, his mouth moving to the top of my damp hair. “Are you hurting? Physically?”

“No,” I answered after only a moment of mental consideration. I was bruised. My insides felt like he’d taken a battering ram to them, but it was a delicious agony. My legs were weak and the bite mark on my throat from the night before stung from the sweat that clung to my skin.

I reconsidered. “The bite hurts.”

He tipped my head back to examine it, thumbing over the raw, red indentations of his perfect teeth. “I can get you something for that, but it’s in a drawer across the room.”

I shook my head quickly. The thought of him stepping away from me, even for a second, was somehow appalling and my heart quickened at it, fingers tightening against his skin so that the pressure turned the flesh stark white beneath my touch. I shifted so that I could wrap my legs around him too, my head on his shoulder, and he settled his arms back around me. “Before we leave, then,” he promised. “Anything else?”

“No, I just...I don’t know.” I squeezed him harder and he allowed it, smoothing fingers down my back and my sides, cradling my ribs, squeezing the backs of my legs where the bruises were tender but delightful. “It was too much. There was too much. I don’t know how to explain it!” I wanted to burst into tears, frustrated with my own vocabulary. There were no words that I knew to describe any of this. I’d been swallowing the urge to tell him that I loved him while he was pushing my face to a table so hard that my jaw was aching from mandible to collarbone. It was hard to reconcile affection with violence. It was even harder to reconcile how much I’d thoroughly enjoyed that violence, how much I’d loved the way he hit me. I was certain my reactions had betrayed how much I wanted it and he hadn’t stopped until I’d told him to. The night before, he’d fucked me through an orgasm and kept going until his own peaked while I twitched and shuddered under him, over-stimulated and raw.

He’d stopped dead at my request, though. Hadn’t driven into me through every twist of my body, hadn’t torn delightful wails from deep inside my chest. He’d just...stopped.

“Try,” he insisted a second later. “You’re not going to tell me anything I haven’t heard, killer, I promise.”

“It hurt,” I whined pitifully and the hot tears that had filled up my eyes finally spilled over. I knew he felt them hit his shoulder because he held me a little tighter. “It hurt, but I liked that it hurt. I shouldn’t—”

“Shouldn’t?” he snorted. “Why? Someone going to take a ruler to your palms for liking it when I slap your ass?”

I huffed against him and, despite his teasing, he was still there. He was still gentle, pressing kisses to whatever skin he could reach, cradling me despite how hot and sticky we were and I was hot. The
marks on my body were positively scalding so that it seemed like a furnace was radiating from my chest, but he didn’t complain. He didn’t move me away from him, though it had to be uncomfortable.

And I supposed he was right. There was no rule book. I had no guidelines, aside from my parents, and when I thought about the things I’d found in their room...well, being tied to a bed and spanked while Mackenzie Glenning turned me into a wailing, feral little animal didn’t seem so bad.

“Look,” he began when I didn’t answer immediately. “I worked you over pretty good. You were nearly drooling on my table. That’s a really high point to reach, little princeling, and when you hit the high like that, there’s always a low afterward. This is the low. You’ll be okay, though, I’ve got you.” He swept his hands up to my head, tangling his fingers in my hair so that he could run them through the tangles while my breathing evened out. “And when you’ve calmed down, I’ll clean you up and I’ll take care of that bite. I’ll check your bruises, I’ll get you dressed, and I’ll take you home.”

“I’m not an infant,” I pointed out acidly. “I can dress myself. Besides, I like it better when you undress me.”

He laughed, low and warm and he pressed his face to my shoulder. He still smelled of sex and rain, but there was honey mixed in there now and I could taste in his mouth when I moved to kiss him. I recalled him forcing me to eat a spoonful of it as soon as I’d gotten up, claiming it was ‘good for me’ like I was some kind of toddler and I’d only relented when he promised me that he ate it, too.

Mack shifted us carefully on the bed, me still in his lap, and found that pouch of ginger candies on the table beside his bed. He popped one into his mouth and pressed one to my lips without asking if I even wanted one, but I took it anyway. With him, I realized, I was compliant. I had never been particularly disobedient or defiant, but Mack brought out a side of me that yearned to be...empty. Free from responsibility. In that small flat, spread over that small bed, he was in control of me.

I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed just following rules. “I like this,” I admitted after a second. “The...the taking care of me bit that you’re doing.”

“It’s routine,” he suggested. “You have...a lot of things on your shoulders now. If I can take those from you for a few hours, I’m more than happy to do it. Besides, routine is comfortable, and I want to make you very comfortable.”

I didn’t answer. He didn’t ask me to. We sat in blissful silence until he did exactly as he’d said he would do--he let me calm down, kissed the few cooling tears that had slipped from my eyes off of my cheeks, and he cleaned me up. He spread a cold, mint scented salve over the bite on my collar, but he didn’t apologize for it. I didn’t want him to, of course, but I’d expected him to. He seemed the sort to feel guilty about things that weren’t really his fault, but he didn’t regret that.

I loved that he didn’t regret that.

What he did apologize for, however, was my wrist. He didn’t bring it up until he’d gotten me dressed in some of his clothes and thrown my still-damp set of royal bullshit into a leather knapsack that he sat beside the door. I was chewing idly on an orange he’d given me, tearing the slices out from the center when he said it, totally without context or questions. “I’m sorry,” he simply said, voice flat, and when I looked up, startled, I followed his eyes to where he was looking. “I...don’t usually have them anymore.”

“You remember waking up?”

Mack shrugged. “No, not really,” he admitted softly. “But that’s what happened, yeah? I should have told you not to try to wake me. It’s...not safe. It won’t happen again.”
“Relax, it’s not like you killed me.” My comment was flippant and his eyes flashed, bright and hot for a second, angry at the careless disregard, and I cringed, stepping backward and out of his reach, but he didn’t ever raise a hand. I hadn’t actually thought he would, but I’d grown used to flinching from Emory when he was angry. My brother had never hit me, either, but he came close in those months after the beach. Too close.

Mack flinched when I did, like the fact that I’d been nervous enough to do it caused him actual, physical pain. “Sorry,” we both mumbled the word at the same time and he looked up anxiously, eyes wide with surprise while I managed a weak smile. Mack continued first. “I just...I broke Rylin’s nose once. I was about your age. I didn’t mean to, of course, but he tried to wake me up from a particularly nasty one and...I don’t know. I can’t really wake up. Even if I do open my eyes it’s…” He trailed off and rubbed the back of his neck.

“You don’t have to explain,” I offered gently. “I get it. Emory has them. He doesn’t hit. He just...cries. I don’t want to say like a baby because that has such a negative connotation but...that’s what it’s like. It’s like he’s an actual infant. Just this horrible sobbing you can hear through the whole of our quarters. My father always gets up. It’s the only time they can really touch him, you know, so I think...I don’t know, I don’t want to say Fox likes it…”

“He doesn’t,” Mack assured me. “Trust me when I tell you this, your father would give up holding either of you or touching either of you for the rest of his life if it meant Emory didn’t hurt anymore. Rylin just...shut, he let me beat the hell out of him because he didn’t want to hit me back and he’s…” He rubbed his face. I knew where he was going.

I’d seen Rylin briefly that night we’d gone to his home above the brothel and I’d seen him the night before when I went looking for Mackenzie. I’d mistakenly believed he still lived with his father, but I’d found only Rylin at the door, a pretty blonde woman sitting at a table behind him, dicing apples with the corner of her tongue poking out of her mouth. Rosie, I assumed. Rylin was tiny. Tinner even than the woman that had stood up, alarmed to find a prince at her door.

There’d been bowing and frantic prayers from lips pressed to my hand, something I’d grown used to since inheriting Cyril’s title, and then they’d sent me here.

I finished the statement for him. “He’s small. I mean, you and I aren’t big, but Rylin is tiny like my Lheiro is tiny. That woman that lives with him is about your size and he makes her look like a giant.”

Mack laughed. “I wondered how you got here,” he snorted between giggling. “Gods, I’d have paid to see his face when you were on the other side of the door. I bet he pissed himself.”

“He kissed my hands. Bowed. Prayed. It was an ordeal, let me tell you.” I rolled my eyes and Mack leaned forward, pressing careful kisses to the vertical lines that ran from the bottom of my eyes, down my cheeks and my throat, and disappeared below my collar.

I shivered and he laughed, quiet and light against my cheek. “I don’t know. I can get on board with worshiping you.”

“Stop,” I drawled, a flush rising to my cheeks. “We are not going here. We were talking about your nightmares. I will not be distracted by your pretty mouth.”

He grinned, eyes bright and glinting with terrible deeds that I knew he was considering. I’d have let him do them, too, if he hadn’t relented and brought my wrist back up to his mouth to kiss the bruises he’d left. “I am sorry,” he repeated a moment later. “I hope I wasn’t...too terrifying.”

“You were adorable,” I protested and he arched an eyebrow, surprise written in his beautiful features. He gave me a tug toward the door, fixed my hood so that it hung over my face, and
dropped an arm over my shoulder. At some point before he’d woken me up, he must have told Blue that he would get me home on his own, because my silent bodyguard was nowhere to be found. Without him to overhear us, I kept right on going. “You sort of became aware, but you weren’t really awake, and you fell on top of me. Started sleep-talking. Turns out you do know how sweet nothings work, Mackenzie, you just have to be unconscious to be able to say them.”

He scoffed, rolling his eyes as we walked, plucking our way through the busy streets of early morning Coryth. I kept my face down, the marks hidden by the shadow of my hood, and Mack’s arm squeezed tight around my shoulder. He’d strapped his cutlass to his hip before we’d left and I could hear the chain mail clinking in his bag but, to anyone watching us, it could have been the mail that went over the white guard uniform he wore and I was just...a companion. It was so blissfully normal and, momentarily, longing hit me hard.

I could have had this. Maybe not quite this relaxed or this normal, but I could have had simple comfort like this if Emory hadn’t gone off the fucking deep end. I could have left Coryth, lived on some lesser estate in the Corian countryside near a quaint little village, and spent every morning walking the street with Mack’s arm draped over my shoulder.

It would never happen now, I realized. We could never be that way. I was the Infinito, the god-king of the Lierian nation, and heir to the throne of Coria. Even without those things, even we had been born without titles, I was my brother’s keeper. Tristan had informed me that Emory had been sick before the beach...sick in ways medicine couldn’t fix, in ways healers and alchemists couldn’t fix...a sickness in his mind. He would remain sick, even if he recovered from the beach.

Emory was always going to be mentally unstable. He would always need a guiding hand, someone to temper his violence, and that...was likely to be me.

“So what did I say that was so adorable?” Mack cut into my thoughts and I was grateful for the distraction. My eyes stayed on my boots, trained on the mud that littered the streets, hard packed by horses and buggies and thousands of people walking toward the market at the center of the city.

I debated not telling him. I was even silent for awhile, letting him lead me across the port district, through the market, and up the hill that lead to the palace. When the crowd dissolved at the gate, I pushed my hood back and looked up at the gatekeeper, who opened it wordlessly at the sight of my face.

He’d prodded a few times, pleading for an answer, but then he’d tapered off as we walked. I owed it to him, though. He’d been so good to me the night before and then again that morning. I ached deliciously in ways I hadn’t known that I could and I wanted more of him. Wanted him constantly. I didn’t care who watched me kiss him there at the front gate, my fingers tangled in his hair, pulling his face down to mine. He made a surprised noise against my mouth, eyes still open, but then he’d melted a bit and let me have what I wanted, one hand on the strap of the knapsack that held all of my ridiculous gear, and one cupped carefully under my chin.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Was it awful?” he whined when I let go of him and I hooked my arm around his waist, sliding it between the bag and his back so that my fingers drummed on his hip. “It was awful, wasn’t it? I probably said something utterly incoherent or stupid or--”

“You said that you loved me.”

His footsteps stopped dead and he froze, clinging to the strap over his shoulder, feet planted firmly in the red gravel that led up to the Keep. A dozen guards milled around us. Carriages full of gentry
rolled up toward the building and back down. I could see Danica and Riordan sitting on the steps that led up to the great door that opened to the vestibule, which lead into the throne room and the Grand Hall. He was tucking daisies into her hair.

My heartbeat thumped, loud and demanding in my ears, and I wondered if I shouldn’t have said anything, if I should have let him say it again when he was conscious and ready for it. I expected him to bolt, to run, to flee screaming and disappear into the hills or something equally absurd because it was such a heavy thing to say to someone and it all seemed so new. I had to keep reminding myself that I’d known him for nearly six months. He was hardly new and before we’d started...whatever this was...he’d spent almost all of his free time with me. I’d have ventured as far as calling him my best friend who sometimes also had sex with me, if I’d been in the mood to tease him, but he didn’t look like he was ready to be teased.

Instead of fleeing, however, Mack’s face screwed up in confusion. “And you didn’t run screaming back to the Keep?”

I stammered, eyes wide, lips parted. “...what?! No! Why would I ever do that?! I just--I said it back and you went back to sleep! That’s it!”

“You said it back?” He seemed utterly floored by the very suggestion and a carriage that was trundling up the drive toward the Keep stopped because we were blocking the road. The driver huffed and one of the horses stomped, frustrated, until Mack pulled me out of the way and it barreled on past us. On the steps, Riordan and Danica had disappeared and were replaced just as quickly by Emory and Nikita. I was grateful they were too far from us to hear us, less grateful that I knew they could see us.

I stared at him, blatantly ignoring the way my brother hopped down the steps with Nikita in tow. I wasn’t sure what to feel about Emory right then. I wanted to punch him in the throat, mostly, but I was also physically disgusted with myself for not having convinced him thoroughly enough that he wasn’t made...somehow less...because of what had happened to him. He was still Emory, whether he was changed or not, and I still loved him. I would have still thrown myself on a sword for him. He was still the boy I’d idolized as a child and he always would be, no matter how broken or used he felt. That fault was on all of us. I knew it. We’d all spent so long wishing to have him back the way that he was that it was no surprise at all that he felt like he’d failed us or that he wasn’t worthy of us or that he was too filthy to be considered one of us anymore...too filthy, even, to touch.

“Of course, I said it back,” I bit out at him. “You’re good to me. You care for me. You’re smart and you’re beautiful and, sure, you have a terrible attitude and you don’t respect authority figures very well, but gods nothing has ever made me feel as good as you did this morning. What is not to love?”

“I was a whore and you’re…” He gestured to me like I was meant to understand what he was trying to say without him saying it. I only glared, cheeks burning with frustration, because when would he ever understand? When would he ever appreciate what he was really worth?

Emory and Nikita stopped beside us and I glanced over at the Rider Commander, wearing those wickedly lethal looking northern leathers covered in buckles and straps. The sleeves had been detached and I could see, then, that his left arm was almost entirely covered in a spiral of tattooed artwork. I’d seen these before, of course, but I’d never been close enough to appreciate the sharpness of the edges that the runic symbols had or the grace that embodied the curves that looped over his skin. Whoever had done these was incredibly gifted, I noted, and I decided I liked them. It gave the overly friendly little Commander a bit more of an edge...made him seem more like the lethal killing machine he was supposed to be.

“Where have you been?” Emory asked immediately. His eyes slid over Mackenzie lazily and then
went back to me. “Father had the whole of the guard out looking for you last night. Lheiro’s making himself sick.”

Nikita elbowed him. “Don’t be an ass, kitten,” he grumbled and I narrowed my eyes. The sleeve on his leather tunic was gone, but the normally open collar had been threaded shut the whole way up to his chin so that not the barest bit of skin was visible at his throat. I knew, of course, that resources were scarce in Glacia and their clothing was a veritable puzzle. Pieces could be taken off, turned around, attached elsewhere, tied and knotted and buttoned into an entirely different garment. I’d never seen this particular piece though, and I’d seen Danica turn her leathers into an actual dress once. It had been a small dress, not even close to being called decent, and Riordan had choked so hard on his wine that it had come out of his nose when she came out of the room in it to show us just how versatile those clothes were.

I should have been more perturbed by the fact that he was calling my brother ‘kitten’ so publicly and Emory wasn’t breaking his jaw for it. Then again, I imagined if Emory tried to break any part of Nikita Novak, he’d have been taken to the floor and crushed like an ant under a boot. Nikki was small, but every inch of him had been turned into a weapon.

That was the north, though. There was no childhood. There was infancy and there was training to survive in the brutal, frigid mountains they occupied. That was it.

“It’s not being an ass if it’s true,” Emory countered. “If you weren’t nearly seventeen, you’d be taking up a position on the desk to get the strap.” Neither of us had ever gotten the strap, to be truthful, but we’d been threatened with it on more than one occasion. Emory more than me and there had been one time Cyril had paddled him good for pushing me down a flight of stairs, but he’d been so upset by it that he’d thrown the wooden spoon he’d used into the fireplace that night and never did it again.

Beside me, Mack shifted, and I wondered if he was recalling the table and the spanking as vividly as I was. If Emory noticed, he gave nothing away, but Nikita did. His grin grew across his pale face. Up close, I could see he had a dusting of freckles across his nose that the southern sun had brought out, giving him an entirely impish sort of look. “Oh, you were together last night,” he snorted in that wretchedly rough accent of his and he elbowed Emory in the side. My brother startled, alarmed by the touch, and then glared at him.

It was good to see him like that, though. It was good to see him interact with someone who so obviously thought highly of him. It was, in fact, heart-warming, because the alarm didn’t deter Nikki at all. He grasped Emory by the arm, his small hands firm around my brother’s bicep. “Together, Emory.”

“Yeah, Kita, I know what fucking is,” he drawled, rolling his eyes. “That’s not going to win you any points with the fathers, Atara. Fox is beyond livid. Like you better send your pretty boyfriend somewhere else until the King cools it because he’s itching for violence and he hasn’t slept yet.”

I cast Mack a withering glance and held a hand out. “Give me the bag,” I ordered quietly and he hesitated.

“I’m not letting you take the fall for it--”

“I ran off. You didn’t ask me to. I should take the fall for it.” His hesitation continued until I grabbed the strap from him, swallowing around the throbbing lump in my throat. Nothing hurt more than having Fox angry at me. I’d always been closer to my father than I was to Cyril. I think it was because Emory and Cyril had been through so many ugly things together before I’d been born. They had a companionship born in suffering and Fox had spent my early years trying desperately to make
up for everything he’d missed with Emory. He was featured in every one of my earliest memories.

Em didn’t have that. He would never have that.

Mack seemed resigned to being sent somewhere else for the day, though he wasn’t happy about it. I’d expected him to fight me on it more. He even opened his mouth to, but Emory quieted him with an unexpected hand on his shoulder. “I won’t let him go in alone,” my brother promised quietly. “But you should go. Fox can rant and rail at us all he wants. We’re his kids. You? He can actually hurt you and I can’t promise that he won’t try if you go up there with us.”

The healer nodded, but he didn’t immediately leave. Instead, he looked over at Nikita, still attached to my brother’s arm. “You’re going with him?”

The Rider snorted. “When Fox finds something as horrific as the Gauntlet, then I’ll be scared of what he could do to me.” It was flippant, but his expression wasn’t. His eyes were wide, open and readable. “You worry about Atara, Mackenzie. You let me worry about Emory.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Mentions of past suicide

My father’s rage had never been something I dared to trifle with. He didn’t get angry at us often, which was fortunate, but he did get angry often. He reminded me of Emory that way--his high points soared like the highest peaks in the Glacian Mountains, so far up that the air was too thin to breathe and his low points plunged, far deeper than the darkest chasms in the Corian Sea.

It was, perhaps, surprising to an outsider to realize that Fox’s angry moments were not low points. They were high ones where he burned like the surface of a star, livid and blinding, and anyone that dared to stand in his way would pay for it. The only person who ever did dare was my Lheiro, but according to Emory, I likely did not have his sympathy and so I steeled myself for the very worst when we approached the carved doors to the royal quarters.

Nikita, bless his impish nature, had tried to make light of the whole thing on the way up. He’d claimed, quite dramatically, that nothing could rival Vasilev’s rage. The way he spoke was flippant, but the subject matter was dark. Northerners were brutal, even with their own flesh and blood, and I didn’t particularly care to hear about how bad it could truly get. He didn’t burden us with anything overly detailed but, despite the teasing in his voice, there was an edge of...something ugly beneath the surface. It twisted in my stomach and I rubbed my arms, trying to reconcile Vasilev Novak--the very same hulking brute of a man who inquired after my brother every time he saw me--with someone who could cause physical harm to his own offspring.

I tried not to judge cultures that weren’t my own. That sort of behavior was what had led to all of the bad blood between Corians and Lierians...bad blood that was only just being mopped up. I did not live in a region where only the strongest could survive. I could never understand, I insisted to myself. But Emory caught my eye. I saw his expression darken. It was a brief shadow and his gaze locked on mine, Nikita still rattling on at his arm about some misbehavior in his youth, and I saw it there. Concern and a question, like he was asking me if I heard it, too...that note of something violent in the way that Nikita spoke about his life before he’d been in Coryth.

I nodded curtly and my eyes returned to the gold handles on the door, carved intricately in the shape of foxes.

My father had entirely too much fun with his name.

The Rider Commander fell silent and I swallowed hard. I’d known, of course, when I made the decision to flee the walls of the Keep the night before that I’d be in a world of shit when I came
It was irresponsible. It was foolish. There were bad things out there that could happen to any one of us, but I had...extenuating circumstances. I hadn’t started having heats yet and, the older I got, the more I knew that I was playing with fire. It would hit me eventually. It was inevitable and the days I had left of relative normalcy were quickly coming to a close. Someday soon, I’d be spending three to four days screaming into a pillow, too hot to function, too disoriented to care, too needy to be allowed out of my bedroom--

Unless, of course, Mackenzie did something about it. Somehow I doubted Fox would be totally on board for such an arrangement. Cyril would understand, but my father...my father hadn’t dealt with Emory’s circumstances very well. Even before the beach, he’d hated that my brother had to go through the same vicious cycle that our Lheiro went through. He’d tolerated Emory’s partners, but he’d become...vigilant since the beach. Cautious.

I couldn’t say that I blamed him.

Stealing a deep breath before the inevitable fallout, I pushed the doors open. They swung slowly, like the gates of a crypt, and I half-expected to hear the creak of rusted iron that you could always hear in the necropolis in Karius. I’d only been there once, but their obsession with the dead and the dying had fascinated me. The Immarans were a bizarre lot, I’d already known that. Vicious and ruthless, with ancient blood in their veins, but revering the dead so much that they’d mastered making corpses incorruptible was something far beyond bizarre.

Standing there, in the center of the room, was Cyril. He was pacing, white coat on, vicious hook blade at his hip. He was wringing his hands while he walked, boots thumping against the polished wooden floor. Near where he walked was Fox, sitting in a wingback chair, legs extended in front of him, rubbing his temples. He had purple shadows under his eyes, a sure sign that Emory hadn’t been lying when he’d told me that my father hadn’t slept. His hair was mussed and his glasses were on the table in front of him, right next to a half finished bottle of Immaran brandy.

I wondered which of them had been drinking and, after a moment, I settled on Fox. Cyril preferred wine to hard liquor.

Across from Fox was Tristan Brighton, palm extended, a glowing ball of blue light weaving between his fingers. His head was propped up in his free hand, his odd, blood-red hair in a straight fringe that fell over one of his eyes, and he was wearing an expression of utter boredom.

He was the first to notice our presence. His fingers snapped, the light disappearing as if it had never been there at all, and Cyril whirled at the same moment. When I saw his face clearly, I couldn’t decide if he wanted to slap me or hug me, rage or cry. He threw himself at me in the end, his arms around my neck so that I was pressed against him, face in his shoulder. I could feel his fingers scrabbling at my back, digging for purchase, desperate to hold on, and his heart thumped quick and hard against his chest. My own was oddly slow for the situation at hand.

“Gods, where have you been?” I heard Cyril ask, leaning back to run his fingers through my hair and over my face. “Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“He’s fine,” Tristan drawled. He hadn’t stood up yet, was only looking at me with bored disinterest. “A little bruised, but...quite fine.” His mouth widened in a wickedly cheerful little grin and I shot him a vicious scowl. It was one thing for my brother and Nikita to call me out on it. It was another for a foreign alchemist to, without my consent, give me his stupid magical once over and know exactly what I’d been doing the night before.

Cyril’s brow knitted together and his fingers ghosted over the bruise on my face, a result of Mack pushing me down into the table, his palm tight against my jaw. Heat flushed my cheeks and spread to
my stomach at the memory.

I heard Fox get to his feet and then I saw him, taller than everyone else in the room. He brushed by Cyril with a palm at the small of my Lheiro’s back—silent, gentle reassurance. It was a gesture I recognized. They’d talked about how to handle this, then, and I could only hope that Fox had been talked down off the ledge of vivid fury that I was sure he was tottering on.

“You don’t need to be here for this, Emory,” he informed my brother curtly and Emory tipped his head up. He wasn’t much shorter than my father—maybe an inch or two, but he was slighter by nature of being what we were, so it was always almost comical to see him defy Fox the way that he so often had before the beach. It hadn’t been very commonplace afterward, but it was there now, written across his mint colored eyes.

He hadn’t been lying when he’d told Mack that he wasn’t leaving me to do this alone. I’d thought he was—been certain of it, actually, because lately Emory hadn’t had the energy to even stand up for himself, let alone someone else.

My brother had always taken care of me, though. In retrospect, I should have never doubted him.

I wanted to let him off the hook. He didn’t need more of a burden on his shoulders, but it was almost like he anticipated the action. “Shut your mouth, Atara,” Emory ordered gently. “I’m not going anywhere. I upset him last night. I’m the reason he took off. You should be just as angry at me.”

Fox pressed his fingers over his eyes, clearly exasperated, and then his ire turned back to me. “So be it,” he grated out. “Where were you, Atara?” His voice was like gravel. Most of the anger and the shouting, at least, had been drained from him. I wondered what kind of verbal tirade Cyril had endured to wear him down this much. Quite a lot, I imagined, and that made my father sound like some kind of tyrant.

Fox was not a tyrant. He’d never so much as raised a hand to either of us. He never called names, he never insulted...even when Emory ground him down to his very last nerve, he was always...entirely respectful of every boundary we had. We were not, as so many other gentry treated their children, little extensions of him. We were not possessions for him to parade about, somehow disproportionately proud that he’d had some part to play in creating us. He got angry. He shouted. We shouted back, usually. He’d slammed a few doors in my face when I was being particularly mouthy. He’d stormed away from Emory and given him the silent treatment for a few days on more than one occasion.

But he was never cruel. That was what made it so terrible to upset him. He’d be disappointed for days.

I wrung my hands, swallowing hard. Unlike my brother, I really did have to look up to meet my father’s eye, and doing that had always made me feel so incredibly small. It felt small being next to him to begin with. He was a King. The power he wielded was second to none. People died for him. Willingly. They enlisted, just like Mackenzie, and offered up their lives to his cause. His personality and his presence filled every room he was ever in.

Once upon a time, Emory’s own had competed for control of those rooms, as charming and as elegant as Fox. He was a pale imitation of what he’d been before though. I felt no struggle for power now, standing next to both of them. My father clearly dominated that ring now.

“I was...” I started hesitantly. “...Out?”
Fox heaved a sigh and I saw his jaw clench. “Out?”

“I...needed to think. I wasn’t alone. I took Blue with me! I went to Mackenzie’s house!” I was talking too fast, giving too much information, and my father’s expression twisted into something hideously violent at the mention of Mackenzie.

He smoothed his fingers over his clothes, simple riding gear with none of the ridiculous sigils and symbols of our house attached except the crest that adorned the right breast. “Mackenzie Glenning? The healer?”

Tristan snickered. “Shut your mouth, Immaran, or I’ll have your tongue nailed to a post,” Fox snarled, turning back to him and Tristan only gave him a slow smile, almost like he’d have paid to see my father try. Truthfully, if there was anyone in the room with the ability to withstand my father in a conflict, it would be Tristan. Emory and I would never dare to enter one. Fox would never dare to enter one with Cyril. He could have Nikita executed easily.

But Tristan...Tristan wasn’t Corian and killing him risked the ire of Paikea. The alchemist did not, however, test how far he could push that theory.

Color rose to my father’s face, the same blood red as his sigil. I had to swallow again, forcing the lump in my throat back down. Cyril retreated, arms crossed over his chest, watching us fretfully. Nikita hoisted himself up on the table like it was all some kind of theatre show. Emory remained steadfastly at my side. I had to remember that I owed him for this, I thought. I owed him a lot for this.

“Yes,” I eventually spoke, voice hoarse. My fingers knotted nervously in the bottom of my coat and my stomach churned, threatening to force that orange I’d eaten earlier back up all over my father’s boots.

I felt his hand on my face then. He was angry and he was stern, but the touch was gentle. He made me look up, directly at him, so that he could see the outline of the bruise on my face. The bite, at least, was covered by the oversized clothing I was wearing.

“I fell,” I blurted. “On the way back. This morning. It’s nothing!”

Fox snorted, but it held none of the laughter I so liked to wrangle out of him when he spent time with me. “I wasn’t born yesterday,” he drawled. “I know what that’s from.”

Think, I ordered myself. Think, Atara, think! I had never been stupid. Arguably, I’d done better in my coursework than Emory had--at least, in what little overlap there had been. My parents knew of Emory’s many conquests. It was hard not to. Maids talked. Stable boys talked. It all got back to Fox eventually and Emory had never been very discreet to begin with, but I had been and one tussle with a kitchen girl that was embarrassing for both of us had been spared the rumor mill.

The point was, they’d never been particularly conservative about sex. The Lierians, after all, thought of it as a form of worship. Cyril understood Emory’s discomfort when he was in heat, though it hadn’t happened since the beach. Mack and Tristan agreed he wasn’t healthy enough for normal body functions to return yet...still too skinny, spending too much time sleeping...

But I was not Emory. They expected wild, reckless decisions from my brother. They expected responsibility from me.

And Mack was not a kitchen girl or a stable boy. He was a royal guard and, more importantly, I would venture to guess that Fox knew about his...colorful history regarding where he’d grown up.
“He was a whore,” Fox said the words like they were a curse and I startled, surprised by the ugliness of hearing it out loud from someone that I’d thought was so open-minded. A King with a male consort—a foreign consort who wasn’t even royalty by Corian standards? A King who openly denounced religion and proclaimed proudly that he believed in no gods? Who had brought order back to a country descending rapidly into chaos, who had leashed the wild north?

I chewed my bottom lip, cheeks hot and flushed scarlet. “Fox,” Cyril started quietly.

It was Emory who spoke. “So was Lheiro,” he drawled, arching an eyebrow and Fox shot him a look that could have curdled milk. Emory was unflinching in response. “What? You thought I forgot about the Fox and the Hound? Forgot about meeting you and what was happening in the rooms around me? I was young then, but I figured it out, Dad. You have no room to judge.”

“I can judge as I please,” our father snapped back, eyes narrowed viciously, looking very much like he wanted to physically throw my brother from the room. He didn’t move, but neither did Emory, and Cyril’s hand landed on Fox’s shoulder. It was promptly shrugged away. “I was an adult. Your brother is a child. He doesn’t understand—”

“I’m standing right here!” I shouted, finally finding my voice, enraged by the lack of regard he had for the fact that I was capable of making my own decisions. Or, at least, I thought I was, but what teenager doesn’t think that? Besides, I understood more than he did. Cyril had been in the sex service for less than a month. Mack had lived it. Grown up in it. He dealt with phantoms and horrors that my Lheiro would never understand and some of them...some of them I’d seen the night before. I wanted to protest, to point that out, but better judgement won over and I shut my mouth. They didn’t need to know about his nightmares. They didn’t need to know any of it. “It’s none of your fucking business anyway.”

Fox rolled his eyes and his attention shifted from Emory back to me. “Everything is my business, Atara, because I am your king and I am your father.”

“You’re not his king,” Emory corrected and Cyril flinched behind Fox. My father’s glare turned to Emory’s green eyes and the defiance in my brother’s face was fucking glorious. He had always been better at arguing than I was, always better at plucking apart defenses. “He is the Infinito of the Lierian Nation. He is his own king. You have more power over me than you have over Atara.”

Something in my father snapped then. I’d never seen him lose his patience like that and, to this day, I couldn’t rightly say what caused it. Stress, perhaps, over my brother’s declining condition and the fact that we were losing him a little bit every day. Anxiety over passing a crown and a throne to someone who was, in no way, ready for it. Exhaustion because he’d spent the night worrying after me, sending guards after me. I could see that in his face.

And I know that he didn’t mean what he said next...or that he didn’t mean for it to come out the way that it did. “A month ago, I couldn’t get you to say a fucking word to me, but now you want to argue, Emory Meeren?”

“Fox,” Cyril warned but the warning was disregarded, despite my Lheiro’s fingers latching around my father’s wrist. He was so close to Emory that if someone gave him the lightest of shoves, he’d have fallen right on top of him—close enough to be sharing breath, for tempers to bump each other, heated by friction and conflict.

Nikita hopped off the table, alarm in his features. It was the first time I’d ever seen him anything but zealously cheerful or adoringly concerned. I took a step back and found myself bumping physically into the chest of Tristan Brighton, who had risen from his chair. His fingers curled over my shoulders like he intended to stop me from intervening in whatever was happening.
Too many things bottled up, finally boiling over. Emory grew pale, the color bleaching from his features.

“Then argue,” my father snarled, his temper still lit from inside his chest, furious and raging. I hated it. I hated that he’d been reduced to this by all of the bullshit that had happened to us over the past year. I hated that he was the best of us—he was never vindictive like Cyril could be. He was never reckless or cruel like Emory. He never made foolish, emotional decisions like me. He was supposed to be the glue that held all of us together, my father, and this was the first evidence I’d really seen of him fracturing beyond the standard grief that one expected him to feel.

He was exhausted. Physically, emotionally, mentally exhausted. In no way did that make what he said next excusable, but it gave me an understanding of it.

“Argue!” he shouted it and Emory flinched, stumbling backward a step. I’d never seen him back down before and when he stumbled, Nikita was right there, one arm around his middle.

“Let’s go,” he urged him quietly. “Emory, we need to go. You need to go!”

But my brother, for all it was worth, seemed frozen solid as if he’d been rooted into the ground or left out in the snow. He stared, eyes wide and frightened at my father. I’d never seen him scared of Fox before. Not in all of my life.

Cyril pulled desperately on my father’s arm. “That’s enough!” he hissed from between his teeth and when I tried to step forward, to intervene, to help my Lheiro pull Fox away from my brother, Tristan’s fingers dug into my shoulders.

“Don’t,” he warned softly. “Emory chose to stand for you. He chose, Atara. Don’t take that from him.”

I wanted to. I wanted to take it from him as desperately as I’d ever wanted anything and the night before with Mack, how overjoyed I’d been to hear him say the words he’d said...that all seemed like it had happened years before. Walking back into the Keep...that was reality. This hell was reality.

Fox was not done. It was like watching someone grind salt into the open wounds that had been left on my brother that night at the beach. The more he seemed to want to cringe away, the more incensed Fox seemed to become. “Use your fucking voice, Emory!” He was so angry that it bordered rabid. His face was bright red, his fists were clenched in white knuckled rage, and I could see his pulse in his throat, hammering like the beat of a mighty war drum. “Argue for why it shouldn’t scare me shitless that he might end up just fucking like you!”

I heard myself suck in a sharp, harsh breath and Cyril let go, stumbling backward like he’d been physically slapped. I even heard Tristan hiss behind me. There was a collection of broken hearts in that room. I could have bottled them all in a jar, but Emory’s would have made up the dust at the bottom. He looked like my father had stuck a blade in his gut and twisted it and I recalled his words the night before.

*If I touch him, he’ll be just as filthy as me. What do I touch that I don’t ruin?*

And I wanted to scream, because this...this was exactly the reason he was the way that he was. We were doing this to him. We were crushing him back into a shape that didn’t fit anymore and we were so afraid of what he was now that we’d automatically labeled it as awful...as something nobody else should be like...as if me being, in any way, like Emory, was somehow heinous and wrong and filthy.

I felt hot tears sting my cheeks. “Oh gods, Emory--” I started to a take step forward. It had been but
half a second since my father had said those hideous things out loud, but it was Nikita who beat me to the punch. I don’t remember him moving, but I remember the sound of my father’s back hitting the wall beside the table and the harsh rush of air leaving his lungs, and then there they were, Nikita with his forearm crushed hard against my father’s throat, his other hand behind his back where the hilt of a blade rested at the base of his spine.

“Enough,” he snarled the word and Fox grappled with him, but there was no contest. My father did not have full use of his arms and he was pushing fifty. Nikita was nineteen, a Rider Commander with his own legion under him, full of spite and malice by the look on his face. He didn’t let any pressure up until Fox stopped struggling. “Look at him. Look at him! You’ve done enough fucking damage for today! Stop struggling, Fox, so help me, I will really hurt you and I don’t care what your fucking court does to me for it.”

Cyril didn’t even intervene. I was sure that he would. They’d always been so close, my father and my Lheiro, like two sides of the same coin, but he looked as gutted and betrayed as my brother did...as I felt. So instead, he turned to Emory. “Emory, please, he didn’t mean it--”

It was useless. Em had his hands sealed over his ears, his fingers curled into his hair, and his eyes shut tight like he had to block out the world. He flinched with no stimuli and I knew, without even going close to him, exactly where he was. I’d been there, too. I’d seen this play. I knew how it ended.

So I waited. I waited for the breath of air to leave his body in a great, pent-up exhale. Nikita had let my father down, but still had his hand flat against Fox’s chest. It didn’t matter. Fox looked like he wanted to vomit. The color had drained from his face and disappeared somewhere. He was as bleach white as Cyril.

I didn’t even have it in me to be angry, really. The shock hadn’t worn off. I just waited for my brother to stop holding his breath and that didn’t happen until Nikita finally crossed back to him and, without so much as a warning, he hauled him up to his feet and Emory crumpled like wet paper, fingers knotted in Nikita’s leather tunic, and he sobbed. I hadn’t seen him cry in his waking hours since those first days after the beach and then it had been pain. Physical pain. Broken bones and bloody flesh, set and sutured and plastered. Even poppy milk hadn’t taken the edge off for him.

“I know, kitten,” I heard Nikita whisper into the top of his head. It was oddly sweet, how he supported my brother’s weight with so little effort when he was so much shorter than Emory. He ran his fingers through his hair and he pressed his lips to the top of Emory’s head, all without so much as a flinch from Emory, who, under normal circumstances, tolerated next to no touch. He was bawling something incoherent into Nikita’s clothes and I could see him breaking. Physically see it, like fractures on his heart were superimposed onto his flesh.

Cyril stepped forward and Nikita looked over his shoulder, a harsh warning in his face, and shook his head. He didn’t stay long. He got Emory on his feet, wobbling and trembling like someone had beaten him, and he dragged him from the quarters and when the door shut behind them, it was like a great collective breath was let out. Tristan released me. Fox doubled over.

Cyril rounded on him. “How could you?” he demanded, his eyes narrowed and his face livid. “How could you say that to him?! We are losing him, Fox, and you’ve just pushed him further away!” I could hear the tremble in his voice like he was on the verge of tears. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Fox pressed his hands over his mouth and straightened up. His face was still pale. “I don’t...I don’t know. I don’t know why--”
“You know what? Don’t. Just don’t.” My Lheiro shook his head, his hands over his face. “If we’re ever going to get him back, you need to find a way to fix what you just said.”

“Get him back?” I finally spoke up, appalled by the utter lack of regard for Emory. Yes, of course, it sounded like Cyril was angry over how Fox had utterly eviscerated him, but the truth was that it was fear. He was afraid of losing any chance he had of getting Emory back the way he’d been. “Back from what, Lheiro? He’s already here! This is who he is now! We need to stop dancing around this bullshit and accept that Emory is changed. He’s different. There is no getting him back. He never fucking left!”

“Don’t do this right now, Atara. I do not have the patience for it. What happened at the beach was--”

“What happened on the beach?” I was livid then. It was like anger had cycled through all of us--Fox to Nikita to Cyril to me, but I wanted to hold onto it. I felt vivid in my fury, like a brightly burning star, like I could fill the room with all that command my father had because he was so defeated in that moment that he was easy to overcome. “You weren’t at the beach, Lheiro!” I was positively enraged, much to his surprise, I think, because he stopped glaring daggers at my father to stare at me, lips parted, eyes wide. “I was at the beach! I saw what they did to him! We all dance around this bullshit like calling it what it was is going to make it real, Cyril!”

My father’s eyes widened then, too, though he still looked like he wanted to vomit. “Emory thinks there’s something wrong with him because we can’t just accept that he’s different now than he was then. He thinks this whole thing stained him. He called himself filthy last night. Told me that he can’t touch Nikita Novak, because he’d be filthy, too. So call it what it was, Lheiro. Not an incident. Not ‘The beach.’ Not Emory’s accident. They raped him. They beat him. They left him to die and if that whore you so disapprove of--” I glared at Fox when I said the word and he flinched. “Hadn’t been there, he would be dead. So call it what it is and instead of talking about him like he’s fixable or calling him a victim, treat him like a fucking person. He survived, and we could all be doing a lot fucking better by him.”

Silence fell over the room, a great hush that fell between all of us. Even Tristan was motionless, eyes down at the carpet. Cyril looked like I’d kicked him in the stomach. Fox looked utterly heartbroken, chewing his bottom lip to ribbons.

But it was Fox that spoke. “Thank you, Atara,” he said quietly. “I think we...we all needed that.” He straightened himself up and I thought, for a moment, Cyril might just disappear with him, cry his heart out, and they’d be fine. Instead, my Lheiro shot him the coldest look I’d ever seen him give.

“He might be right. That doesn’t make what you did excusable or okay. You fix this, Fox, because if we lose that boy to his own demons the way Vasilev lost his girl, I swear to the gods, I will not hesitate to kill you myself.” The door slammed behind him when he left.

And it jarred me, that little statement, and all at once, I felt a pang of deep, hideous guilt in my stomach for the terminally cheerful Novak boy that hung on my brother like a wall decoration. Nikita’s cheer, I imagined, was a mask for grief, for whatever girl they’d lost--his sister, I had to believe, to her own demons.

To demons like Emory’s demons--and something became painfully clear then:

Nikita Novak did not just want to heal my brother. He needed to. He’d already failed once.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

I would have liked to say that I would not have killed the King, even pressed as I was. I would have liked to say that I had more restraint than that...that years of being sharpened into part of a war machine had taught me boundaries and rigid self-control.

And it had...to a degree.

But I couldn’t say that. I could have never said that, because in that moment, standing there in the royal quarters, watching Fox dissolve in the grief he’d been swimming in for months, watching Cyril stumble and fail over and over again at trying to crush Emory back into what he wanted him to be, watching Atara stand there, sick to his stomach and powerless in the wake of disaster...I would have. If he had pressed me any harder, if he had fought me more, if he had opened his mouth and kept spewing that hateful, vitriolic bullshit...

Yeah. I would have killed him. It would have ruined everything, of course, because despite their distance, there is nobody in the world that Emory loves like Fox. I had heard the stories, listened to the staff talk when they thought I couldn’t speak the common trade tongue--Emory was closer to the Infinito. Atara was closer to the King. It didn’t matter. If pushed into a decision, Emory would have always picked Fox. He put him on a pedestal. To some degree, everyone did, but Emory had spent his formative years listening to stories that painted Fox as the hero long before he’d ever formally met his father. He did not just adore Fox. He had wanted to be him--to stand for everything his father had stood for, to encompass all of his ideals and his beliefs....

So those...hateful, horrid things that came out of Fox’s mouth, a direct result of this whole ordeal going on for far too long, they gutted him. I saw it in his face and felt it in the way that he clung to me like a hysterical child, fingers digging into flesh. He hated touch. He even hated mine, though he tolerated it better than he tolerated that of others, but this...this was different.

I’d never heard him cry like that before. I’d never felt his chest torn up by uncontrollable sobbing beneath my hands, which struggled around his shoulders, urging him to his feet. We needed to leave. We’d needed to leave before this whole thing began. He had no business trying to play proxy for his little brother. As far as I was concerned, Atara had made his bed. He could lie in it.

Alone.

So we stumbled, my battered prince and I, through marble hallways lined in portraits of his family. I liked the one of him and Atara the best--Emory at maybe eight, Atara a toddler, seated together in their father’s throne. Fox’s crown was clutched in Emory’s small hands and Atara was looking up at him, his body twisted and his face only visible in profile.

Better times, Emory had said to me when he caught me looking at it a few days after I’d met him. If you discount Atara biting me through that entire sitting. You can’t tell, but I spent that whole afternoon crying.
Crying like he was crying now, I wondered? Crying like the earth beneath his feet was cracking open, like it intended to swallow him whole—crying the way that Milena had cried those last few days before we lost her and because of that, I held him tighter. Not this one, I told myself. I won’t lose this one, too. If that meant spending every waking moment with him, I would do it. My father would disapprove. He’d make me answer for it, but a backhand was a worthy price to pay for keeping Emory alive and I so believed in that moment that, if left to his own devices, he’d take the same route out that my sister had the year before.

He barely stayed on his feet. I’d seen people drunk on grief before, so utterly destroyed and torn down to their foundations so that all sense of self is stripped away, so that the raw emotion that sweeps through their veins carries them out like a tide. He wobbled like a drunk, leaning heavily on me for support, and he babbled nonsense. None of it had context for me—the pleading, the begging—and though I could have guessed where it was coming from, I preferred not to, for the sake of my stomach contents.

Eventually, however, I steered him down the corridor of the royal apartments and we turned the corner to the Crown’s Tower. He’d showed me this place once—his old bedroom, still kept exactly the way he’d left it, and we hobbled up the stairs. His fingers dragged along the coarse stone walls and he tripped every few feet, sucking desperately at any air he could get into his throat through the fit he was having. It tottered somewhere between panic and horror, guilt and grief.

“Oh, kitten,” I started carefully, letting him slip from my grasp onto the great sleigh bed that dominated the room. Everything was painted in varying shades of grey and a blue so dark it bordered black. There were tapestries on the walls—some of them Lierian genealogies that I thought have outlined his family tree. Atara was on it, after all, though Emory himself had a different name altogether: Aymori, and they linked back up to Fox and a Leland. Another wall had an actual family tree, this time the Bordelon Royal Family. It took up the entire space, hand painted in painstaking detail right on the stone.

There were bookshelves littered with leather bound manuscripts and scrolls, a table with a beautifully crafted topographical map of Coria, Glacia, and Immara all done to scale mounted to the top of it, the scaled chain mail armor of House Bordelon in red and black, the sigil of the Crown Prince painted into the metal plating on the right shoulder, and a white leather coat, trimmed in the same light blue as the marks on Cyril’s face. I’d tried to reconcile this place with the man I knew when he’d first showed it to me—this little slice of who he was under all the scar tissue he carted around like armor.

Once, I’d thought, he’d been a scholar. There were books in so many languages I couldn’t name them all and he was one of two people at Court who spoke Glacian with a nearly perfect accent, the other being Cyril himself. He had a collection of throwing axes, all of them sporting well-worn handles like he’d used them himself.

The Emory I knew read, but always in common because it required the least effort. The Emory I knew had never touched a weapon in my presence and, even if he had, I doubted he could throw one with any accuracy. He was too thin to be harboring much hidden muscle mass. He didn’t wear the royal regalia of either of the families he’d been born into. Without the marks on his face, he could have passed for common.

But this, I knew, was him. This was who he’d been before and who he wanted to be now and I knew he took comfort in this room, surrounded by things that belonged to him. I had seen it in his face that first time and I heard it after the fight with Fox when Emory’s ragged breathing evened out into something more...sustainable.

“I’m sorry,” he eventually croaked the words, sitting beside me on his bed. His legs reached the
Mine, however, did not, but only by the smallest bit, and I looked up from where I’d been watching my feet, trying to stretch them out enough to touch the carpet. He was wiping at his face, rubbed raw and swollen. “I didn’t—” he tried again. “I never meant to...I’m sorry.”

“You don’t ever need to apologize to me, kitten,” I offered simply. “I already told you that.”

I’d told him that the night before when he’d come to my quarters, raging drunk and beyond furious—with himself, with Atara, with the entire fucking world.

And then he’d kissed me, hand around my throat so tight I couldn’t breathe, that blood couldn’t move beyond his fingers to my brain, and I’d struggled against the wall I was pinned to, torn between a desperate desire to survive and a need to kiss him back, because gods, he tasted good. Burning rum and limes that seared my mouth and throat and there I’d stayed, clawing at his knuckles until my eyes rolled back and he finally let me go.

He’d apologized then, too, for the bone-deep bruises on my throat and how my voice croaked and scraped like gravel, and I’d told him that he never needed to apologize to me. Not for that, not for anything. If I’d really wanted him to stop, I had the power to stop him. I could have kicked him hard enough in the chest to crack his sternum. I could have clawed at his face until I could dig my fingers into his eyes. I could have twisted his wrist between my hands until the bones cracked and crumbled under my hands.

All I’d really done was get painfully hard.

I was a fighter, not a reserve. In war. In love. In everything. If Emory Bordelon needed someone on the front lines of his life, I was willing and able to do it. I wanted to do it—not even just for Mila anymore, though she still lingered like a ghost in the back of my head, the words scribbled out on that scrap of leather in her hand still echoing in my skull and burning a hole through my chest—I kept it there, her note, my own private torture, to remember what I’d done. What I hadn’t done. What I hadn’t been enough of.

I would not fail him the way I’d failed her.

Emory sucked in a sharp breath, staring down at his lap. “Why do you call me that?” he asked eventually, still scrubbing at his mouth with the back of his arm, trying to rid himself of the taste of tears. I took the flask from my hip and handed it off to him and he glowered. He was not a fan of Glacian whiskey, but it had to taste better than grief because he took it and even swished it through his mouth before he swallowed.

“Call you what?” I arched an eyebrow. “I call you a lot of things. Last night, I believe I called you a prick.” I had. Right when he’d let me slump from the wall after he’d strangled me and fed me his tongue, half out of his mind and hard against me. It had been a joke, of course, and when he’d seen the way I laughed through the word, he’d glared at me. “I called you broody last week.”

“I do not brood,” he grumbled.

He definitely did.

“Why do you call me kitten?”

I’d known, of course, what he was referring to, because he’d asked this question before and I’d never really gotten around to answering him. I’d dodged it, at first, because I wanted him to keep coming back in an attempt to unravel the mystery of it. I wanted him fascinated enough to keep spending time with me. In the beginning, that had been because I saw him as a chance to atone for
Milena. Now, it was because I desperately sought his approval and his affection like an addict that needed a fix.

Falling in love with Emory Bordelon was like kissing someone with arsenic in her lipstick. It felt good, of course, even tasted sweet at first, like honey in wine.

But it is a fondness that kills. There was a tragedy in him that drew me like a moth to flame. I could see the violence in him. I’d felt it the night before. He wasn’t grieving the way that his family thought he was grieving. Emory wasn’t sad.

Emory was fucking furious. He was alight in his misery like the brilliant tail of a falling star and, like a falling star, anything he hit on his path was destined to be burned to ash from sheer proximity. He was beautiful and dangerous, a lethal combination, and loving him would, without a doubt, kill me. He was forbidden—the highest apple atop the tallest tree and I was the foolish little boy trying to climb my way up.

I would fall. My father would bring me crashing back to the ground. That was unimportant in that moment. In that moment, what was important was finally answering his inquiry.

“Because you have claws in you yet,” I teased and he shot me a look, disgusted, and I laughed at his expression before I explained. “And you’ll use them to dig your way out of this. You will feel normal again, Emory. I believe that.”

“At least that’s one of us,” he mumbled. “I’m tired, Nikita. I’m so fucking tired all the time.” He rubbed his face and I could see it in him. It broke my heart, that exhaustion in his features. It was different from the exhaustion that had been visible in Fox just half an hour earlier. Emory’s exhaustion reached his bones and no matter how much he slept or how much he tried to focus on something else, it came back, a yawning maw intent on swallowing him alive.

I knew that look. I remembered seeing it on my sister, her eyes a mirror of my own, staring up at me beside the window of our house in Ravndal. Hollow. That was the best word for that look they wore. Hollow...like someone had drained them of life and they were just shells walking around wearing the faces of people who were already dead.

It was a subject that had to be broached...carefully. “How do you mean?” I phrased the question as gently as I could—a small, careful attempt at urging more information out of him and Emory took a shuddering breath.

“Sometimes I wish...I wish I could just...” He wiped his hands over his face and drew his legs up to his chest. His arms wrapped around them tightly. “Not be here anymore.”

“Die,” I discarded the caution for northern bluntness. I’d never been good at plucking around things like a girl on a dance floor. “You wish you could die.” He was silent, but that was all I needed as confirmation and I ground my teeth. “I won’t allow that.”

“It’s not your decision,” he countered, but his expression remained empty. He seemed so...so terribly resigned. So heartbreakingly done. I wished vehemently that I could have kissed away his aches and pains the way that Mackenzie could kiss away Atara’s anxiety when he thought nobody was looking. We’d seen it several times. Emory was indifferent. I liked Mackenzie Glenning though. He was real and I’d learned being in Coryth that most people were disturbingly fake. The south was a den of hedonism—lies, corruption, sex, manipulation, murder...a series of masks that they all wore around different people. I had never been taught the formal graces of being a member of the gentry though I was, in fact, a member of the gentry. Mack reminded me of a northmen in that way. He was not a liar. He was exactly who he presented himself to be, perhaps in spite of his parentage.
I stood up, my teeth clenched and my fists tight. “I will not allow it,” I repeated and Emory straightened his back, letting his legs fall down over the side of the bed so that he was staring at me again, head tipped to one side. My cheeks flushed scarlet and I felt that familiar lump welling in my throat. This was too close to me. It was all too close to me, but I’d put myself here on purpose. “So help me, Emory, if I have to lock you in a room somewhere to keep you safe from yourself, I will fucking do it. I will do anything. I will give you anything. I will let you do anything. Anything else...but not that. You don’t get to do that to me.”

“Why would it matter?” His eyes were wide, still bloodshot, but he seemed...genuinely curious. “It would all be over. Nothing would hurt anymore. I still ache, Kita. My hips will hurt for the rest of my life. It will always be there, like some fucked up reminder. Like, ‘hey, Emory, remember that time someone fucked you until--’”

“Stop.” He obeyed, surprisingly enough. Emory didn’t often listen to anyone but himself, but I was so hot I could feel the heat radiate from my face and my eyes stung. I had to keep swallowing, fists clenched. My brain was pulling me in two directions–on one side, I kept going back to that day with Milena in the stable, the feeling of my heart dropping through the floor, the sound of the rope creaking between the scuffling and huffing of horses--and the other side kept trying to overwrite that with Emory glaring at me from above a bowl of soup while I forced him to eat, Emory’s hand around my throat, Emory--living, breathing. Still here.

I crushed my hands over my eyes and he stood slowly, curiously, like he was observing an animal in a natural habitat rather than another human being. “It’s not all just over, kitten,” I corrected eventually. “You get to be done, sure, but do you know what happens to everyone else? What happens to whoever finds your corpse? Because I know, Emory. So why don’t we say it’s Atara. What do you think happens to him? I’ll tell you. If you want to know, I’ll tell you.” I rubbed my arms while I spoke and he stared, lips parted, eyes wide, and he looked like there was some small part of him that wanted to apologize and walk away and there was one part that stayed. One part that wanted to listen. To know. Because I had never told him about Milena. He knew she was dead, if only because all of Fox’s court knew that she was dead, but we’d taken painstaking steps toward making sure nobody ever found out that she’d hung herself from the rafters of our stable in the coldest month of the year.

Emory did not answer. His stare was enough, equal parts surprise and horror and I opened my mouth. “He’ll cut you off your rope or he’ll haul you out of your bathtub or he’ll try wrapping your arms.” I remembered cutting her down, hearing her body hit the frozen dirt, bones cracking and flesh splitting because she was half-frozen, too. I remembered her lips, black as frostbite, and her eyes, milked over like a blind animal’s. “He’ll scream and he’ll beg.”

Please, Mila, don’t do this to me. Don’t do this to me!

“And even though your lips are blue and your heart is still and your skin is cold, he’ll try to breathe for you. He’ll hold your face and he’ll put his mouth on yours and he’ll pray harder than he has ever prayed for anything in his life, but you won’t move, Emory.” She hadn’t moved. I’d spent an hour there, frantically trying to warm her, praying to gods that none of my people even believed in, screaming into the dark, and all I’d managed to do was warm her cheeks with my tears.

Emory didn’t move then. He was holding his breath, eyes glassy, fingers knotted in the front of his shirt like he wasn’t sure what to do with them so he twisted them there, pale and clammy. “Eventually, he’ll have to give up because he’s too tired to keep it up and breathing for someone is exhausting. It takes everything you have. He’ll know you’re dead. He’ll have known it for awhile by then, but that’s when it’ll really hit him that you’re not coming back. You’re never coming back and
Emory, he will blame himself for the rest of his life. You’ll be gone, but you will haunt him until he has his own death rattle in his lungs. Even then, he’ll still fucking wonder what he did wrong.”

Emory would never blame Atara. Milena hadn’t given me that closure. She’d made sure of it, and there was a small part of me that hated her for that, but I deserved it.

“Your sister…” he whispered after a second. “That’s what happened to Milena?”

I snorted and shook my head, despair welling up in my chest again to even think about it. My parents had put it behind them. Or, at least, my father had. That was what good northmen did. People died and you moved on. I could not put Milena out of my head. My parents had put it behind them. Or, at least, my father had. That was what good northmen did. People died and you moved on. I could not put Milena out of my head.

If only that was all that had happened to Milena. “No, that was the culmination of a series of a fucking horrors that we inflicted on my sister. That I helped inflict on her, Emory.”

He blinked at me, staring with beautifully clear eyes. That was the wonderful thing about Emory—at the very core of him, his heart was good. Pure, even. He put aside his own suffering in that instant because he could see mine and though he could not bring himself to touch me, the concern was there. Emory Bordelon was a good man, like his father before him, and he’d have thrown himself to a pack of wolves to save a stranger.

Me? Not so much. I’d have burned the whole fucking continent to ashes, people included, to stop someone from touching one hair on his pretty head.

“You couldn’t,” he insisted, his voice stiff and vehemently unyielding. “You couldn’t hurt someone you care for. You can’t even hurt me and shit, everyone else walks all over me like I’m the kingdom’s fucking welcome rug.”

In a lighter mood, I might have laughed at his analogy and gently scolded him for likening himself to a floor mat. Not that day.

“You know what I am,” I pointed out. “You know where I come from, what I’ve been trained for. I’m a murderer.”

“Bullshit,” he shot back, just as determined before. “You protect people. Look at what you just did for me! You’re a soldier, not a murderer. There’s a difference.”

I stared back at him. He was precious, really, bubbling all these southern sentiments and I almost laughed. “Is there?” I asked quietly. “My sister crawled back to our house after a hunt. She’d been beaten to a pulp. I couldn’t recognize her face. Her clothes were torn, leggings ripped right down the back.” He flinched, the memory too close to home for comfort. I knew that feeling. “She cried on me until her throat bled and I promised I’d make him pay for it. So I did. I hunted him down like an animal for two days, kitten, and when I found him, I flayed him open and tore his lungs right out of the back of his chest while he was still living…and I liked it.”

“He deserved it,” Emory spat bitterly. “It’s a pity we don’t have some northern justice in Coryth.”

On that, he had me. I continued, pacing the room while I spoke, and Emory just listened. He put aside his own misery and I was selfish to allow it. He needed me. Fox had left him bleeding from wounds that nobody could see, but we hadn’t even talked about it. I had learned, however, that Emory would talk when he was ready and he might not ever talk to me. Whatever he had to say
about it...it might have been for Fox’s ears only. That was fine. My intention had never been to strip his secrets from him. It had only ever been to provide support.

So I continued, despite knowing better, despite knowing that he shouldn’t have had to hear it. “I don’t like killing, Em,” I insisted softly, still holding my arms locked tight around my chest like I could squeeze Milena back into my heart, get the phantom of her off of my back… “Usually, I hate it, but...at home, we don’t have time to grieve. Every second is a struggle to keep surviving. We are always one step from starvation. You have to remember how cold it is there.”

“I was much further south than Ravndal,” he reminded me. “But I do remember winters. I remember babies freezing in their beds and my Lheiro wrapping them in white gauze before he put them on the pyres. I always hated the smell...burning flesh and bone.”

I nodded. We did not burn our dead. We tore holes into the dirt with pickaxes when the ground thawed for those few months a year and we buried all of our dead then. If you were unfortunate enough to die during the rest of the year, you were stored in a cellar, frozen solid, until the thaw.

“You’re expected to pick yourself back up from every disaster and keep going for the good of the entire village,” I kept going, trying to rationalize Mila’s last few weeks. “Women bury their babies and they move on. Fathers come home from raids with the bodies of their sons and they bury them and they move on. People lose their limbs to frostbite or the antler of an elk enraged from a hunt and they move on.” I took a deep breath and shook my head, my lips pursed tightly. “Mila didn’t move on.”

Emory shifted, sitting silently at the bottom of his bed, legs tucked under him. He looked much younger than twenty-two. His face had a hollow look. He’d gained weight since I’d arrived, if only because I forced him to eat and if he threw up, I forced him to eat again.

“Mila had nightmares,” I explained. “She screamed and she raged. She tore her own hair out. She clawed at her arms. She puked everything she ate and I...” I flinched at the memory. “I watched.” We all had, to be fair, but I carried the guilt the most because at night, she’d come to me, crawled through her terrors to my bedroom and curled at the bottom of my bed like a kicked puppy, begged me to do something. Anything.

And I’d done nothing. “My father let her physical injuries heal and then he expected her to get up and move on like the rest of us got up and moved on. When she didn’t…” I remembered the way she’d screamed when he’d taken that strap to her and how my mother had insisted she was too old for it--find another way. “He lined all of us up in the dining room--me, Dani, Anja, and Lana--and he put her to the strap.”

I heard him suck in a sharp gasp, but he was otherwise silent.

“I know your parents don’t hit you,” I added, turning to face him through my pacing and he nodded in response. He’d told me of a paddling instance once and how Cyril had set his bottom to glowing for shoving Atara down a flight of stairs, but then he’d never done it again and he’d burned the wooden serving spoon he’d used. Fox, he’d told me, had never so much as threatened to hit him.

“I know yours do,” he eventually spoke softly and I arched an eyebrow. “Oh, come on. It’s not hard to put together. We hear stories about the north and you joke about how your father would punish you, but a lot of it rings a bit too true, Kita.”

I corrected him, though the issue was minor and not really worth correcting. I felt, in this instance, my mother deserved some kind of credit. “Only my father hits,” I replied acidly. “And when he does, you don’t forget. Not for days, because he makes sure you can’t. The number of switches and canes
I’ve had broken over my ass is…” I trailed off and he watched, face placid on the surface, but color warmed his cheeks like he was…angry. “I stopped counting,” I finished. “And it’s not like he did it because he enjoyed it, kitten.”

“Please, don’t defend him,” Emory managed the words with tact, but his voice wavered. He was definitely angry and I tipped my head curiously. “You’re telling me that your sister was beaten and raped and he strapped her for it. That makes me feel…a little bit homicidal, actually.”

I huffed. “I let him do it,” I reminded him. “I stood there and watched while she screamed. I told myself it was because if I intervened, he’d do it to me, too, but I’d taken worse. The Gauntlet was worse and I went into that a willing participant. I could have done something and I made the choice not to and when she still didn’t move on, he railed on her every day and then finally he just…” My stomach churned, sick and sour in my belly, and my palms felt clammy. I could feel my heart lurching in my chest, recalling that last day as vividly as if it had been yesterday.

“He grabbed her by the hair after he beat her and she was screaming, kicking and clawing at his arms, holding the table and the frames of the doors. She fought like a trapped animal, so much he was really struggling to get her up and he looked at me, Emory, and he told me to help him. Told me to help him drag her out into the snow and I remember looking down at her. I remember her begging me. Please, Nikki, don’t do this. Don’t make me do this.” I could still feel her turn limp when I grasped her arm, like that was all it had taken—that final betrayal, the final knife in her back, and she let us drag her.

“You didn’t have a choice,” he tried to argue weakly and I glared at him, rage suddenly hot in my chest, though it was never at him. It was always directed firmly at me.

“There is always a choice!” I shouted back, fuming, positively irate, and Emory’s eyes widened in surprise. “I dragged her out and threw her into the snow, Emory! I did that and that night, I cut her down from the rafters. I tried to bring her back. I begged like Atara would beg for you, and do you know what I got?”

Emory stood slowly and reached and because touch from him was so very rare, I let his fingers curve over my face and I was surprised to feel him thumb away at my cheeks like he was expecting to find tears. He found nothing, just angry, heated flesh. I hated myself for Mila. I hated my father for Mila. Shit, everyone in my family hated my father for Mila. Danica had been so set on coming south because she’d wanted to marry a prince and never go home. Her heart had been set on little Atara, but Riordan had swept her cleanly from her feet and she’d never looked back.

All was well in that regard. Atara had Mack and Danica would have never survived Emory.

I reached into my clothes for that scrap of leather I carried with me, faded now from being folded so many times, read over and over, cried on...because I had cried on it. I’d held it to my face when I could no longer breathe for her and I’d wept like a child, angry and alone and hurting until my mother found us hours later.

I unfolded it for him then, carefully holding it in my palm, soft and worn. “This is what she wrote to me. This was in her hand when she jumped off the rafters from that rope.”

“Kita--”

I shook my head hard and stepped out of his reach and Emory stepped forward again. “It says, ‘Why didn’t you care, Nikki?’ That’s it. That’s all. That’s all she had to say to me. Why didn’t I care? I cared, Emory! I fucking cared and I killed for her, but I was a coward and I failed her! I won’t fail you, too!”
I expected that revelation to hit him like a slap, but he took it in stride, perhaps because he’d already figured it out. I was breathing hard, drunk on the sharing of a secret, on how the way he looked at me didn’t change.

He was still him. I was still Kita.

“I won’t do that to you,” he said after a second of contemplation. “I promise. You’ve been fighting for me. I can fight for you.”

“You don’t owe me anything, kitten.”

Emory shrugged. “You don’t know what I want to do to you. You stick around, I could owe you a lot.”

I shoved at him and he glared when I spoke. “Well, it’s a good thing you’ve got that wealthy family name, right?”

As if a light behind his eyes turned on, something in Emory lit up. He stared at me, cheeks still red from his earlier outburst, but he smiled. It cracked across his features like he wasn’t quite sure how to do it anymore and a small, quiet bit of laughter spilled across his reddened lips…

And I wanted to kiss him. Desperately. I took the step forward to do it, into his space, and his fingers rose, inching up my chest toward my throat so that he could have that control over me that he so desperately needed and then…

Emory stepped back. “I can’t,” he murmured. “Not here. Not in this place. This is--”

Untouched, I wanted to offer. Clean. I knew exactly what he meant and so I stepped away with a quick nod. “I get it. We...we should...my quarters are empty,” I supplied eventually.

“That’ll do.”
I had to imagine that Nikita’s family was unaware of how close he’d become to me. If I’d had any doubts before the previous night, they’d been brushed away when he’d answered his bedroom door. No doubt he expected his father or Danica, but I had a master key and I’d needed him after that confrontation with Atara.

With Nikita, I felt more like myself again. It was wrong to want him the way that I did—wrong because he deserved better than the pieces I had left, wrong because I wanted him to hurt...to know what I felt like, to know what stumbling through life, trying to pick up your heart while it bleeds out of your chest, felt like...wrong because I knew, deep down, what his culture expected of him and that I could never give him that. I knew the risks he took, the consequences he was prepared to face, but like my brother had always said...I was an arrogant, selfish, greedy little bastard and I would take and take and take from Nikita Novak until he had nothing left to give to me.

I knew they didn’t know about me because his eyes had grown wide when I’d brushed past him into his bedroom, reeking of liquor, and he’d shut and locked the door behind me, pressing his fingers to his lips to urge me to be quiet. All I’d done was pin him to the wall, squirming and panting, and I’d pressed my fingers into his throat and my tongue into his mouth.

He tasted like apples and whiskey and he smelled of the north—burning firewood, leather, and pine. He felt fragile under my hands, even though I knew that he wasn’t, and he fought me weakly, like he wasn’t really trying, legs kicking, back arching, twisting in my grasp like a ribbon caught in the wind, but he kissed me back. His mouth opened for me and I felt his tongue against mine, felt it slope over the roof of my mouth.

I should have stopped sooner than I did. I’d played plenty of games with plenty of partners before. I’d choked and been choked, but it was always preceded by a discussion--limitations, watch words, only a few seconds...a few seconds to create that rush to the head, that brief feeling of euphoria--

This was much longer than a few seconds. I had him pinned until his limbs started to turn limp, until his face was so scarlet it was nearly purple, and still, he let me in, like a child opening the door for a monster.

And when he’d slumped forward, unsteady on his feet, gasping and choking for air, I’d felt how hard he was and I’d wanted more. I’d wanted too much more and I wasn’t stupid enough to think
that was a good idea in my state. So I’d walked away.

I should have stayed. I knew the rules. I was supposed to stay, make sure he came down from that euphoria with a steady head on his shoulders, make sure he kept breathing, make sure I hadn’t done any lasting damage to his throat...but I didn’t. I didn’t because the idea of taking care of someone, touching someone in a way that might have been misconstrued as gentle or affectionate, was revolting to me. It wasn’t Nikita’s fault. There was nothing about him that even bordered on repulsive. He was godsdamned near perfect. The fault was my own. Touching him with intentions of being filthy was fine. Those parts, those moments, they were supposed to be stained. They were supposed to sport fingerprints.

Touching him when he was half-asleep, sweet and teasing in the way only he could be? That was revolting. Those moments were meant for lovers. They weren’t supposed to be bruised or bloodied. They weren’t supposed to sport those fingerprints that sex could sport.

But everything I touched would be filthy, even his good moments. So I’d walked away until my head was clear, walked away until Fox raged at me like I was the reason my brother found comfort in the arms of that healer, the reason we were all falling apart, and I knew that I was. Of course, I was. I was the only variable that had changed. Cyril’s constant fretting? My fault. Atara’s rage? My fault. Fox’s overwhelming, blistering grief?

My fault.

Nikita offered a balm and like the selfish prick that I was, I took it. I let him guide me back to his quarters, let him lock the door and turn around nervously to look at me, eyes wide, blowing his hair out of them every few seconds the way he always did when he was anxious. He claimed he wasn’t used to it falling in front of his face...said that at home, he always had a hood on over layers of caps and leather clothes to keep the heat in.

I was glad it was warm in the south. I liked his hair, especially when it fell in his eyes. Nikita Novak was pretty. Not in the same way that people said my brother was pretty. Atara was androgynous. Delicate. Very Lierian.

Nikita was not. There was no mistaking him for anything. He was a grown man and he looked like a grown man, despite his stature and the smooth state of his face. That wasn’t what made him pretty. It was the porcelain paleness of his skin, pinked on his cheeks from the Corian sun. He sunburned terribly and that burning had brought a dusting of freckles out across his nose and his cheeks. He had a dimple in one side of his face when he laughed, which was often, and full, heart shaped lips with a perfect bow. He was slight, abnormally so for a northerner, but his legs were impossibly long. I’d noticed that the first time I met him and I’d thought to myself, in another life, I’d have stopped at nothing to have those legs wrapped around me.

Having anything wrapped around me, however, made my stomach roll into uncomfortable knots.

He was staying in quarters not far from the royal apartments, a guest of our house while Vasilev sought out an estate in the city or made plans about building one beyond our wall—he sort of waffled back and forth, Nikita had told me once, because he didn’t actually want to leave an emissary in the south. He didn’t care about the south. But they were stuck there and he inhabited a room with light blue walls and gold fixtures. There was a chair tucked into a corner, more of his clothes spread over it—leather belts, riding gear, a saddle kicked beneath it and forgotten. The dresser had little jars of war paint ranging from black to red to light blue. I could tell from the lids that the black was used the most, but I thought, in that second, I’d have liked to see him wearing the red...how positively feral he must have looked, wearing red paint
to match the tattoos down his left arm from shoulder to wrist.

“Do your tattoos mean anything?” I asked, blurring the question while he stood, looking impossibly small, in the center of the room. That was the problem with planning sexual encounters, even just a few minutes ahead of time. It always got awkward, especially the first time, and he didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands, probably because I so detested being touched.

Nikita looked up like he was startled, eyes wide, and then he looked down at the arm in question. “They do,” he affirmed after a brief second of hesitation. “Only Commanders can wear the full sleeve on the left. They’re the story of the trials we undertook to get them. We call it the Gauntlet.”

“I am familiar.” The words tasted bad when I spoke them. I’d heard about the Gauntlet. Horror stories, of course, designed to strike fear into the hearts of good Corian citizens so that they were never too complacent with their neighbors to the north. I amended what I’d said when he arched an eyebrow. “I’ve heard stories. About how you all still look like Immrants. About...torture and ritual sacrifice.”

He snorted, but my ignorance had successfully diffused some of the tension and Nikita set about to unbuckling the belts on his tunic. It was good, I thought, because it probably would have taken me days to do such a thing. “Sacrifice to what?” he laughed, peeling one long strap of leather from around his hips and discarding it on the pile atop the chair before he moved to another buckle. “We don’t believe in gods.”

I shrugged in response. “You do look Immran.”

“We didn’t start marrying into the southern population much until after your father invaded,” he pointed out. “So yes, we do like like our old world ancestors. And yes, there is...torture involved.”

“They tortured you?” I wish that I could have been surprised, but I wasn’t, not really. Not after what he’d told me about Milena and what his father had done to her. I was trying to compartmentalize that...to separate it from the Nikita that I knew...but doing that also meant not acknowledging that his attachment to me, at least at first, had been for his own benefit. His intentions had been to help me, yes, but they’d also been to seek some kind of...comfort, perhaps, for his role in his sister’s suicide.

Still. There was this dark, twisted part of me that wanted to reach beyond the grave and slap Milena back into the world of the living for that note. Of all the sick, perverse ways of seeking justice, that had to take the proverbial cake. He would, without a doubt, spend the rest of his life trying to prove that he did care, and it would never matter, because she would never be there to say that he’d done enough. She could forgive him.

Nikita pursed his lips. “Yes,” he answered it like it was simple and he must have noted the disgust that crossed my features. “I didn’t have to take the Gauntlet, kitten. I could have trained to be a regular Rider. I chose to be a Commander. In times of war, I would be trusted with things that could be...sensitive. I had to prove that I wouldn’t break.”

“But how?”

“You don’t actually want to know that,” he insisted and, to some degree, he was right. I didn’t. I didn’t want to know that. The thought of them doing to him what I knew sometimes happened in the dungeons below the keep was nauseating. “Suffice to say, the tattoos are a warning in the north.”

“Like stripes on a Corian viper,” I offered and he tilted his head. Of course, he wouldn’t know. Snakes wouldn’t survive that far north. “They’re poisonous. Lethal. You can tell them from other snakes by the stripe pattern.”
And then he grinned and it lit his whole face up. Nikita was different when he was smiling, like a whole other person lived beneath his skin and he was only just learning to come out into the light. He went from pretty to stunning in those seconds and I felt the urge to smile with him, but mostly I’d forgotten how. “See, you get it!” It was praise and I glowed for it, for the joy it brought him to see me understand something he either couldn’t explain adequately because Corian wasn’t his first language or that I had trouble understanding because our cultures were so vastly different.

There was a pause and he finally stripped himself of that tunic and I looked him over, hunger pooling in my stomach. It had been so long since I’d touched anyone...since I’d wanted to touch anyone...but the night before had gotten me so painfully hard that I’d spent hours twisting in my sheets, aching for contact, unwilling to spoil his touch with my own. So I’d tried to imagine what he looked like under that leather armor. I’d been close enough to him, touched him enough, to merit a guess. I’d tried to discern if he had tattoos anywhere else, what his abdomen looked like, if his hip bones were sharp...He didn’t disappoint now. He was all sinew and muscle, hardened like the land he came from. His trousers sat low on his hips, slung over a V that disappeared into the fabric.

His arm was not the only part of wearing ink in his flesh. It was splayed down the line of his spine, too, runic letters that I didn’t recognize burning black on each of his vertebrae. I imagined they went all the way down to the base of his spine.

“The ones on your back mean something, too?” I asked eventually, mouth dry, and he watched me. He’d caught me staring, no doubt, slack-jawed like an idiot because he was gorgeous in ways I hadn’t thought he could be. Tattooing was not something we did in Coria, traditionally. Some of the sailors wore them and a few of the soldiers got them pinned into their flesh when they were particularly drunk, but they were not cultural. They were not art.

Nikita Novak was art. Not just because he was covered in it, though it certainly helped, but because of the way his ribs climbed his chest like staircases and the way his hip bones protruded, sharp as glass and tapered into those long, long legs.

And because he wore the bruises I’d put on his throat like a badge of pride instead of some horror show.

He grinned and I felt my face color, heat reaching my cheeks, but he didn’t say anything about it. He didn’t approach me, didn’t kick his trousers off and tell me to just go with it. He simply lifted his shoulders, blades like wings in his back, and smacked his lips in response. “They do,” he confirmed my suspicion and I waited for an explanation, silent until he continued. “They are marks of honor from successful raids and skirmishes I’ve led on the border against...other northerners who...find your father’s rule to be less than satisfactory.”

I clicked my tongue and he blew his hair out of his eyes again. I’d always known he was a Commander and wondered how that worked with his father as his lord, but there seemed to be some method to it if he was leading raiding parties. That was hard to imagine--Nikita actually killing someone. I knew that he had, of course, by simple definition of what he was, but hearing him confirm it was different. Still art--art that was steeped in blood--but art.

“How far down do those marks go, while we’re playing the questions game?” he asked after a second, nodding at my face. “And what are they for? I assume they have meaning. You were born with them, yes?”

“They’re not tattoos,” I confirmed, brushing my fingers under my eyes where those dark pigmentation swipes scooped like winged liner. “Sometimes we call them tattoos because it’s simpler, but they’re just...pigment that was already there. They’re supposed to indicate the tribe our father comes from. Each of them have their own hereditary markings, like the ones Cyril has. Atara
and I…” I cringed. We were different. That had been made abundantly clear by our peer groups when we were growing up. It had turned him into a recluse, pacifist that he was, withdrawing from contact with children our own age so that he didn’t suffer the jeering and the name calling that I suffered.

I ground my teeth, scowling at the recollection. It had turned me into a brawler, even into my teenage years. I’d leave the keep to get drunk in seedy taverns I never should have been with, pick fights with people I never should have fought…I’d been angry then, prone to taking stupid risks, just like I was angry now. Now, however, I understood the consequences of those risks a little bit better.

Nikita tipped his head and took two steps closer to me so that we were standing there, chest to chest, and he was looking up through that fringe of dishwater blond hair. “Fox is human,” he supplied. “Or...perhaps human is not a good word, forgive me. I meant...he’s not…”

“Human is fine.”

“No, it isn’t. That implies that you are, by way of your nature, not a person. I don’t know the word.” He looked distraught, bottom lip between his teeth. “I’m sorry. I’m not...Corian is not my best tongue.”

“I have better uses for your tongue anyway.” The remark caught me off guard as much as it caught him. I couldn’t believe it was my voice saying it. A year ago, yes, I would have absolutely believed I’d said it. A year ago, I’d been cocky, glib, sarcastic, and prone to making filthy remarks so brimming with innuendo that I could make Fox snort wine out of his nose on my bad days.

Nikita laughed, low in his throat so that it sort of bubbled from his chest. “Oh, I bet you do,” he snorted the words, nearly choking on them and I should have laughed with him. I should have stumbled into his bed with him and made him scream for me. A year ago, I would have. I would have spread him open and taken my time tasting every inch of him, would have loved him like it was worship instead of sex, made him so hard he would have been begging to be allowed to rut against the mattress before I finally fucked him.

It wasn’t a year ago. I wasn’t that Emory anymore.

Instead, I grabbed his throat and saw his eyes widen, pupils dilating in surprise when his breath was cut out of his throat. I pushed and he stumbled, choking and sputtering, face turning progressively red. His fingers sealed around my wrist, nails biting into skin, and the touch was repugnant but he couldn’t help it. Not in that moment, he couldn’t help it, but he could be taught. “Put your hands down or I’ll tie them to your ankles,” I whispered against his mouth and he tasted of apples again. Not sweet apples, either, he didn’t like that sort. He liked the sour ones that the kitchen put into pies and tarts--the ones with the crisp green skin that he peeled off and ate separately.

They didn’t have apples in Ravndal, he’d told me when I made a comment about his predilection toward eating them with every meal.

He did put his hands down. It was slow, at first, like he wasn’t quite sure he wanted to forgo that contact when his back hit the wall beside his dresser, but he did, and there was a flicker of real terror in his eyes when he flattened them against the blue surface. He twisted, trying desperately to gasp for air, but achieving nothing. He even struggled when I kissed him, though his mouth opened willingly and I felt his tongue press against mine, desperate for contact. His fists balled up beside him, beating against the wall. His face went pink, then red, then purple. His lips greyed.

I should have counted. I didn’t, but I should have, and I knew that. I should have been far more careful with him, pretty little thing that he was, but I was a slave to the rage that lived in me, a
parasite beneath my skin, and I so desperately wanted to destroy some piece of him. It was enthralling and sickening at the same time, this urge that I felt to see him debased and debauched, slick from sex, aching and beautiful.

I didn’t stop when his eyes rolled or his fists slackened or even when his kisses became sloppy and drunk. I stopped when he gathered what consciousness he had left and sank his teeth into my bottom lip hard enough for both of us to taste blood, tangy and metallic, and I stumbled backward, the hand I’d been holding him with pressed to my mouth. My palm was slick and scarlet when I brought it away from my face. Nikita was slumped, on his knees against the wall, his hands buried in the carpet, gasping and choking so that his whole body shuddered. He had blood smeared over his mouth and his chin.

He’d said the night before that if he’d wanted to, he could have stopped me. So he had.

I should have hauled him up and checked his throat. I should have apologized and taken my leave, because the gods know, I didn’t deserve anything from him after that little display, but he didn’t kick me out and I became somehow incensed, even enraged, by his lack of self-preservation. It built in my chest like a wildfire and I wobbled forward, grasping him by a fistful of his hair and dragging him physically to his feet.

Nikita yelped, surprised, and it was such a delicious noise. Something stirred in my belly, deep and hot, and hardened through to my cock. Someone in pain shouldn’t have delighted me that way, but I threw him backward into the wall and he hit it with a sharp gasp, his head bouncing forward on impact and he swayed, dizzy. “Tell me to leave while I still have the self-control to leave, because if you don’t, Kita, this is going to get so much uglier,” I ordered him the way a prince might order one of his subjects, the way I might have ordered someone a year ago.

He only threw his head back and laughed, eyes glazed. “How ugly?” he asked, laughter spilling through his words. His head lolled forward and he looked down at my hand, loose around his neck again. “Going to choke me? Hit me, kitten? Hit me. Just make sure you do it fucking hard.”

I should have stopped. I kept running into things that I knew I should have done, but this was the biggest. I should have stopped. He wasn’t here because he was hard and hungry to get off. He wasn’t here because I meant something to him, though I knew that I did. That was a secondary reasoning, at best. He was here because he wanted punishment. He felt like he deserved it and I knew that because I felt like I deserved it, too, for taking Atara to the beach, for tearing Cyril apart, for breaking Fox’s stoic heart. He wanted punished for Milena, felt like it was all his fault, and because of my shared history with his sister, he thought that I could give him what he sought.

“Is this penance, Nikita?” I asked, my fingers sliding up his face so that I could hook my thumb into his mouth and drag him forward with bruising force. “Do you want forgiveness? Absolution? To pay for what happened to Mila?”

His eyes flashed, hot and hateful, for just a second, and then they glassed over and for the first time since I’d met him, that glassy surface pooled into actual tears. He looked up at me with the most desperate expression I’d ever seen anyone wear in my life...more desperate than the one Atara had been wearing on the beach, leaning over me, my face in his hands, begging me to keep breathing, to stay just a little longer--

But this was more than that. If he didn’t have such a vehement aversion to the idea of taking his own life, I would have thought, in that moment, that he wanted to die.

Maybe he just wanted me to do it for him. Maybe he’d been hoping for it when I had him pinned to the wall by his throat and that animal urge to survive had kicked in at the last possible moment so
he’d sunk his teeth into my lip.

“Is that what you want?” I repeated, my voice a low snarl between us and he gasped sharply, sucking in a great breath and I felt his body shudder like he was staving off the urge to sob and I wondered, then, if he had ever cried for her after that initial discovery, or if he’d plastered on that northern mask and…moved on.

He nodded though, head back, eyes glued to the ceiling, and it was wrong. I knew it was wrong to give him what he wanted because Milena was, in no way, his fault, but I knew what it felt like to believe so firmly that something was your fault, even when nobody else did. I knew what it was like to want to hurt for some imagined atrocity.

So I leaned forward and I dragged my teeth along the shell of his ear. “I can work with that,” I breathed against him and he squirmed fretfully, fingers still against the wall. “Eager to please?”

“Gods, you have no idea,” he mumbled, panting with the words, and I grinned against his cheek before I spun him around toward the wall and pressed him face first against the painted surface. He shivered, and that close to him I could see the cause for his stature.

It gave me just a second of pause, that S shaped bend in his back indicative of what Mackenzie called ‘curvature of the spine’ and Tristan referred to as ‘scoliosis,’ a term coined by the College in Paikea. A small imperfection, but there nonetheless, and it made him somehow more endearing—knowing that he wasn’t as flawless as he appeared to be.

I could see scars, too, along his ribs, one on his elbow, one that disappeared into the top of his trousers. I ran my fingers over that one, stopping at the fabric. “Do I want to know?”

“Definitely not,” he confirmed. “I did read somewhere that scars are a lover’s map, though.”

I chuckled then, for what felt like the first time in years, and I took the remaining belt from his waist and looped it around his wrists, securing them tightly behind his back. “Oh, sweetheart, I’m not going to love you,” I chided gently, licking at the pulse in his throat. “First, I’m going to hurt you.” My fingers moved along his hips, following that hard, sharp path down into his pants. His breath hitched and he shivered, face pressed to the wall. His back was flush with my chest and I kept my teeth at his ear while I continued. I knew he could feel the way the marks on my face heated with arousal, blistering into a living furnace.

His cock twitched in my palms, hot and hard already, and he whimpered, eyes closed, wet lashes against his round cheeks. I could have been kind. I could have stroked and touched until he was writhing, made him squeal for more, taken him right to the edge over and over again until he was bawling for a finish.

Instead, I squeezed cruelly and Nikita cried out, a strangled, desperate noise torn from his throat. He thrashed against the wall, teeth clenched and grinding, livid ferocity written in his features. I did not loosen my grip, even when his squirming and whining subsided into a low, aching keen. “Gods, kitten,” he whimpered, his voice raw.

“I said I was going to hurt you,” I reminded him. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

This should have repulsed me on the most basic level. It would have, before. I didn’t mind games. I loved kink, but there was a time and a place and a mind set. This was not it, but I was not well and neither was he.
We were both terrible for each other. Arguably, I was worse than him. I was the one doing the hurting. I was the one that knew better.

“Yes,” he practically gagged the word when I squeezed again, my free hand flat against his abdomen. I felt his muscles contract against my palm, his face screwed up in a grimace. I knew that he could stop me if he wanted to. I knew that.

I also knew that he never would, even if it did get to be too much, even if I did cross lines, even if I beat the skin off of him and left him bleeding on the carpet, he would have crawled his way to my feet and asked for more. That was who he was. It was what he’d been taught—you don’t give up, you don’t give in, and when someone kicks you in the teeth, you push yourself up and you ask for more.

I released my hold on his cock and he let out a long, shuddering breath, sagging against the wall when I stepped back. “Does this feel good to you?” I asked him while I moved around his room, surveying the contents once more. “To be at someone’s mercy? To be toyed with? Doesn’t it frighten you? Are you not afraid of what I might do to you while your hands are bound?”

Kita groaned, uncomfortable in his trousers, hard and hot and already sore. I was sore, too, from the tightening of my own pants and the liquid heat that boiled between my hips, right where that persistent ache had settled months ago. “I can take it,” he insisted through clenched teeth. “And you won’t kill me.”

“You can take it? Are you used to being beaten before you’re fucked, Nikita?”

He snorted, like the very concept was funny, and he blew his hair out of his eyes again, turning so that he was looking at me from over his shoulder. “Yeah, all the time,” he drawled sarcastically. “I’ve got a line of big, broody suitors just lining up to drill me into a mattress.”

It gave me pause, that flippancy that he always wielded like a weapon. I got the distinct feeling that Nikita used humor as an armor the way that I used grief. He wasn’t actually all that comical when you got down to it. In fact, he was a bit on the serious side and I’d liked that about him—that seriousness to him when he let it shine through. It was trustworthy and it was real. I liked real.

“I’ve got a line of big, broody suitors just lining up to drill me into a mattress.”

“Been beaten? Are you kidding? What do you think that scar you asked about is from?” He scowled and I flinched, but my face turned stony again a moment later.

I ran my fingers over the aforementioned scar. “From another lover?”

“From my father.” He blew his hair out of his eyes again. “I tried to butcher an animal I’d killed when he told me not to and I cut into the gut. Ruined the whole thing. It’s from a belt buckle. You know for someone who doesn’t talk much, you get really chatty when the clothes start coming off.”

I was grateful for the explanation. Perhaps he’d seen the horror in my face at the implications of our situation and the mention of his father. It hardly mattered. It didn’t make it much better, truth be told, and I had a growing hatred for Vasilev Novak stewing in my gut.

I glared anyway. This was not the first time someone had made that observation. I was a chatty partner. Or I had been, before, but it evidently hadn’t faded with trauma. Prior to the beach, I’d been an expert at whispering the filthiest things at the perfect moment. I liked to tease. I liked to know that my voice could cause similar reactions to the ones I could get from my hands or my tongue.
“I meant have you been...hit before. During sex.” Clearly, I needed to be crystal clear with him or I needed to really give him an attitude adjustment at some point because this dodge and roll tactic with every question was getting old.

Nikita huffed, eyes narrowed. “No.” I dragged the belt in a loop up his spine, watching goosebumps rise on his flesh at the contact. My other hand worked his trousers down so that he could kick them off with his boots and then he was stripped, gloriously, beautifully naked and I palmed down his body to his ass.

That tattoo did reach the very base of his spine. “How about men? Done that before?” I asked, peeling my own shirt over my head and he whined, trying to turn to look at me. I pushed his face back to the wall. “I didn’t say you could move.”

“No,” came the answer, bitten and bitter.

I groaned that time, low in my throat, hungry and hard and I know he could feel the scalding marks on my chest like he’d felt the ones on my face, pressed flush to his beautiful body. “Oh, you’re going to feel so fucking good,” I breathed against his ear and he whimpered, twisting under me. His hips rocked, trying to garner some friction against the wall, and he cried out when he failed, desperate and needy, his hair dampening quickly with sweat.

I hadn’t wanted anything like this in so long and all of a sudden, that appetite came back and I was starving for him. I wanted to hear him scream. I wanted to feel him around me, tight and hot and sobbing my name, I wanted him raw and hurting and caught between divine pain and absolute pleasure.

I wanted him. Only him.

“If this is supposed to be punishment, I hate to break it to you--fucking hell, Emory!” The belt hit him first against his round ass, a red, welted stripe in pale flesh and I decided his hands were in the way. I rearranged him, tying them back in front of him and I grasped his small fingers, leading them down to his cock.

He resisted at first, whining and squirming. “I shouldn’t have to do all the work,” I whispered, nuzzling into the spot between his shoulder blades. I could hear his heart, frantic and erratic, pounding in his chest while his hips pistoned forward and he moaned, beautiful and low. “I want you to hurt, Nikita.”

Kita didn’t respond except to press his face flat to the wall, panting and flushed, and I stood back to watch him for a second, that stripe across his ass, one hand fisted on his cock, hips grinding forward. He was a sight, lewd and delicious, and there was some small part of me that wanted to get down on my knees and finger him until his knees gave out, then spend the rest of the afternoon using my tongue in that same spot until all he saw were stars.

But I hit him again instead. I wanted to feel guilty for desiring his suffering and his debasement the way that I did. I wanted to feel anything aside from supreme satisfaction when he bit down into his cheeks and groaned.

It didn’t take but a few more bites from that belt to make him a whimpering, sobbing mess, babbling in that guttural language of his, so quick I could barely catch the words, but I recognized that they were mostly profane. “I should wash your mouth with soap,” I chided.

“I thought you said--” He strangled off, shuddering and whining when I grabbed his ass with both hands and his hips rocked back into my kneading palms. “Thought you said you had better uses for
my mouth?”

I had said that, though I didn’t answer him with anything more than a sharp look when he twisted his head to peer at me. I grabbed a fistful of his hair again. “Again, I never said you could fucking move,” I snarled and he moaned beautifully at it, like he delighted in the irritation that laced my voice. “Is that what you want? For me to get angry?” I pulled his hair so that he was craned back, gasping and whimpering. “You don’t finish unless I tell you that you can. You understand me?”

“He answered flippantly and I released his hair so that his face hit the wall again and I knew he’d bruise much like Atara was already bruised.

So I did what I wanted. I hit him. Over and over again. He winced and shivered, his skin reddening and welting, then slowly turning to purple in some spots where I clipped places I’d already hit. I hadn’t meant to, but the way he cried for me, back arched, lips wet and swollen, throat a beautiful plum shade in the shape of my hand--

I crossed lines. I knew it. I went too far. I hit too much. Hit until he was sobbing, pressed to the wall, legs trembling with a need to finish and a need to finish, until the tears had turned his face as red as his ass was, until finally, finally his legs gave out under him and he slid toward the floor, gasping and struggling to breathe, yelping when he felt me behind him, lifting him onto his knees, face against the carpet.

If I hadn’t stopped by then, I wasn’t going to, even though I knew that I should have stopped. He was black and blue mid-thigh to the base of his spine. He couldn’t support his own weight. When I got him on his knees, he sagged, legs spreading wide, fingers still desperately grasped on a wet, aching cock.

I fished in my trousers for the small bottle of oil I’d pinched from the shelf in my old bedroom when we’d left for this place. Lierian, I’d noted. People that thought of sex as worship always had the very best accompaniments to the act and it warmed on my fingers when I slicked them with it, spreading him open so that I could get him ready for more.

Nikita choked under me, deliciously tight. He was in beautiful agony, the sort of pain I wanted from him, teary-eyed and incapable of speech, eyes rolling when I found that spot inside of him that made his whole body twitch. His free hand scrabbled against the carpet, searching for purchase, fingers trying to knot in fibers too short to hold, and he only sobbed in frustration at it and then he practically purred for me when I slipped a second digit into him.

“Look at you,” I whispered, leaning forward to press a kiss to his abused body--to the welts on the swell of his ass. “You look good like this.”

He groaned in response, eyes fluttering shut, still shaking too hard to do much of anything but lay there and take it. I never should have let him go that far. I never should have wanted him hurting that much, debased that much...never should have wanted him to feel as ruined as I sometimes felt.

“You like this,” I accused quietly and slapped his ass with my free hand, eliciting a sharp cry from parted lips and a twist of his body, violent and raw, away from the contact. That just spurred me forward. It shouldn’t have. It should have appalled me to see him flinch away, but it only encouraged me to hit him more, to hit him while I had him like that until he was screaming into the carpet, shoulder drawn up tight...

I was going to burn in hell for this.

I twisted my fingers in him, hooking them against him and he finally became coherent. Finally
slurred words from his lips. “Oh gods, Emory, fuck, fuck!” He was close, painfully close, my beautiful, destroyed little creature. I could see it in the way his mouth stayed open, wet and red, and how his eyes stayed half-lidded, locked in concentration, trying to fight an orgasm I fully intended to deny him at first.

There was no other word for him but gorgeous. Trussed up and writhing, bruised and broken. He was a vision in red and purple. I raked my nails over his abused backside and he sobbed brokenly, shoulders drawn up. His body sagged in an arch, ass up for me, knees spread wide, the sobbing coming from his mouth could only be called inhuman. He chewed his lip until it was bloody but he never told me to stop. He never stopped me himself, if he even could by then.

In that moment, I learned one thing about Nikita Novak: He was, before anything else, good for his word. He had promised me that he would do anything. He’d meant anything.

I loved him. I loved him in the most debased, tragic way possible because I hated him at the same time. I hated him with such an intensity for making me crave intimacy, for making me accept that I couldn’t live in a brooding sense of rage for the rest of my life, for loving me so completely that he was prepared to kiss the gaping, festering wounds in my heart until they healed. He was ready to be the company my misery loved, to let me make him just as miserable until I felt better about it.

I fumbled with my trousers, hard and aching for the first time since the day at the beach...because he was crying, because I’d hurt him. Because he let me. I slicked myself up and pushed his cheek hard into the floor, pulling his hips out with the other hand, and though I knew he was just short of prepared for it, I took him anyway.

Kita groaned and his tight little body resisted for just a moment before his muscles relaxed and I slid into him. It was slow work. Every thrust forward was another inch of tight, searing muscle. It was almost painful but he rocked back into me, urging me forward. "Shit, Kita, easy," I managed through my teeth, my hands tight on his waist. He panted and kept pushing, gasping for breath, spreading his legs wider.

"You don't want it slow, kitten," he moaned, whimpering between sentences. "Nothing about you is slow or easy. Just fuck me the way you want to!"

He was right. Sometimes, I wondered if Kita knew me better than I knew me or if he was really just that ready to let me hurt him so completely.

My fingers dug into his hips and I groaned, driving into him deep and hard at a punishing, brutal pace. He was barely getting any air in. His hands were still between his legs, pumping in time with the pistoning of my hips. He was hot and tight, unbearably so, and it bordered pain when his muscles clamped down around me. I was as slick with sweat as he was and I scraped my nails down his spine, all the way to his ass. I hit him again. He yelped and twisted, a fresh wave of tears on his cheeks.

I leaned over him and licked the salty trail they left on his cheeks, heat coiling in my stomach. My whole body felt taut, drawn up, balancing precariously on an edge and as much as I wanted him with me, I also wanted to keep him suffering in purgatory.

"Kitten, please," he whimpered, desperate for release and I grabbed a handful of his hair, dragging his head back so that my other hand could tighten at his throat again. Kita's eyes widened and he made a choking noise when my fingers gripped him, sealing his windpipe.

I took his ear in my teeth again. "No," I breathed. I could feel him struggle, writhing against me, bucking his hips so that the only sounds were my breathing and the smack of my pelvis against the
tortured flesh of his backside. His cheeks turned bright red and I was so fucking close that it hurt. I moved my teeth from his ear to his bloodied bottom lip, leaning over him, and the tremble in it did me in. I came hard, deep inside his squirming little body and I felt him stiffen at the sensation, tightening around me so that I fucked him through every drop.

Then I let him breathe--once his face was violet again and his eyes were rolling and his lips were greying...I let him breathe. My fingers loosened just enough for him to gasp in air and I slid out of him, spinning him so I could watch him and he flinched, crying out at the scrape of carpet on his raw flesh. I was on my knees between his legs and I grabbed his bound hands, jerking them away from his cock so that I could take it in my palm. Kita moaned, legs spread wide, knees drawn up, oil and semen on his thighs, and he rocked against my palm. "Kitten!" he gasped, his voice thick and pleading, tears on his cheeks again.

"Yes, Kita?" I drawled.

"Please!" His head thrashed, back and forth, like he was trying to say no but his back arched and his body trembled. "Please, let me, please! I need to, kitten, please, it fucking hurts!"

"Good," I answered simply and he cried out, frustrated and aching, while I jerked him with an oil slicked hand. "I want you to hurt. You think you deserve it. So tell me. How does it feel to be out of control, Kita? Maybe I should pin your hands up and leave you like this. Maybe I won't let you finish at all."

He sobbed and he looked so pathetic and gorgeous, legs spread as wide as they could be, body stretched with his arms above his head. I licked my lips and he looked up at me with wide, terrified eyes like he believed that I would actually leave him there trussed up and pinned to the floor in near hysterics.

I couldn't even be sure that I wouldn't. I just didn't have a hammer or a nail to pin him up with.

I pretended to think about it, pressing tiny kisses to his mouth while I stroked him and he shrieked and begged, his toes curling into the carpet, but he waited. He panted and he struggled. He fought, grinding his teeth, babbling incoherently in Glacian, but Kita was obedient. "You're an angel," I told him, almost mocking his state. "Do they teach obedience like this in Glacia, Kita, or is it just you?"

"It's you!" he spat immediately, a low keening noise building in his throat. He threw his head back and his body shuddered. "Do you think for one fucking second I'd let anyone else treat me like a common fucking whore? It's you, Emory."

"That's sweet," I drawled, licking his trembling bottom lip. "You can come now, Kita."

And he did, as soon as I let him, he filled my palm with sticky white fluid, bucking his hips and crying for me. "Kitten, kitten!" Over and over again. He pulled hard on his restraints, trying to free them from my grasp while I pumped him through every convulsion and every sob until he was utterly destroyed, boneless, and limp.

I let go of his arms and grabbed his jaw, pulling him forward and prying his mouth open. "Your tongue," I ordered and through the haze, he hesitated. A quick, sharp pat to the side of his face with my clean hand stirred him and he flinched, letting his tongue slide out of his mouth. "Clean up your mess, Kita."

He shuddered, flushed and strung out, but he licked my hand clean with wide, clear eyes, staring up at me through the whole humiliating ordeal and when he was finished, I unbound his hand and fixed my clothes. He made short work of putting his back on, wincing when he had to pull his trousers up
over his hips. I wasn't sure how I felt. A great sense of disquiet settled over me.

I’d known this was wrong when I started it. I’d known that, at the end of it, I would never be able to be what I was supposed to be. I should have been carrying him to a bathtub, soaking him in warm water and lavender, massaging life back into the bruised and battered tissue I’d done a number on...I should have, at the very least, held him until the shuddering in his shoulders subsided or until that sharp plunge at the end of something as overwhelming and raw as this came to a close.

But revulsion traveled up my spine at the thought. Fucking was one thing. I could walk away from that. I could tell myself in my own head that I loved him, that I’d have died for him if he asked me to and I would have and I knew that was absurd. It was beyond absurd. I knew next to nothing about him, but when everyone else had given up, he’d been there. He deserved my devotion.

“Kitten?” he asked, his breathing still shallow and his voice still scraping, hoarse from screaming. “Are you--” He reached for me, like somehow our prior indiscretion made intimacy okay but that was the problem.

Fucking was one thing. Intimacy? I didn’t deserve that. I didn’t deserve to hold him or call him mine or whisper sweet nothings in his ear. Not after what I’d just done to him, but there he was, looking at me like I was the one that had just been worked over like a criminal on the post and then fucked into bliss.

At least, I thought to myself, you gave him that.

“I have to go,” I managed to choke out, flinching from his touch, and he looked, for lack of a better descriptor, like I’d thrown a bucket of ice water over his head. His eyes, bloodshot from repeated lack of oxygen and tears, widened marginally in surprise.

He tried to argue, bless his charitable little heart, he really did. “Kitten, wait,” he started to insist and I jerked away from him again.

“Don’t touch me,” I snarled like a rabid animal, my heart pounding in my throat. The room was closing around me. The walls were too close. I could hear water in the back of my head, rushing toward the shore, the distant sound of a city, the smell of cheap liquor and salt-- “Don’t fucking touch me!”

Nikita’s fingers withdrew like I would blister him and, try as he might, he couldn’t quite cover up the way he had to swallow before he spoke or how his eyes suddenly went to glittering with moisture again. “Okay,” he relented and I was already backing toward the door. “I’ll see you at the dinner for Atara tonight, Emory.”

And my heart broke a little bit when I heard the door lock behind me as I exited. Not because he was shutting me out, but because he hadn’t called me kitten.

Chapter End Notes

Let me be clear that I in no way condone any of what Emory and Nikita engaged in throughout this chapter.

First and foremost, this is not an appropriate relationship. This is abusive on Emory’s part and manipulative on Nikita’s. Not all relationships are healthy and if I portrayed
every relationship I wrote to be normal and functioning, then I would be wrong. The world is not rainbows and butterflies. Sometimes people are terrible. This is one of those times.

Second, breath play is dangerous. If you are going to do this at all (and I do not suggest you do) please do it with a professional and do your research first. You can actually die from this and then you would be dead (obviously) and your partner's life would be ruined.

Third, thanks for all the comments. I love hearing from all of you!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

I wish that I could claim to have learned my lesson that afternoon with Emory. The lesson being, of course, that I was playing with fire. There was a sickness in him. A parasite. A hate that lived inside his skin and burrowed into his palms so that everything he touched could feel it and they’d put it there, those boys at the beach. They’d put it there and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to excise the cancerous rage that swallowed him whole. I’d seen him angry before. I knew that glint behind his eye that accompanied it and I’d seen it when he was hitting me.

He wanted to destroy something beautiful and I was collateral damage. It should have bothered me.

It didn’t, but it should have.

So I locked the door behind him and I drew the curtains shut until dark swallowed the room and that stifling humidity that clogged my throat every afternoon in Coryth gave way to rain that washed down the glass. I curled into the corner of the room, pressed to the wall, grateful for the cool sensation that bled down into my skin from the contact, and I separated. I’d always been good at that--separating. Checking out. I’d learned to do it right around the time I’d realized that if my father took a strap to me, it would only get worse if I cried. So pain became something I could detach myself from so that my body took a beating but my mind remained my own.

It wasn’t like Emory had given me anything I hadn’t felt before, at least regarding the belt. In comparison, my mutilated prince who hauled around all those broken pieces of himself was a distant second to the violence I’d been subjected to by Vasilev or by the other Riders during my Gauntlet or by the words that Mila had scrawled out to me when she’d jumped from the rafters.

In comparison, Emory Bordelon was pathetic, which begged the question of why I couldn’t quite separate completely...why my chest heaved and my legs trembled, why I crashed so hard it was like I’d been snorting that pale powder the Riders partook of before battle. I couldn’t stop the shaking, couldn’t totally wipe away the ache at the base of my spine or the searing sting and blistering heat that boiled on the surface of my skin from the back of my hips to mid-thigh.

In the moment, I’d reveled in it. I’d loved the feel of him, the sound of his voice at my ear, the grip of his fingers around my throat, the delicious terror that accompanied not being able to breathe while he fucked me and how I hadn’t cared. He could have killed me in that moment and I would have never stopped him, blissed out and mewling like a kitten the way that I was, desperate to feel more of him in me.

There was something wrong with me. I could taste it in the back of my throat, like that sting that precedes vomit--sharp and ugly, metallic and dangerous. The beating I could condone. I could accept it. Plenty of people did it, I knew that. I’d seen brothels. I’d never indulged in one, but I’d seen them...seen the toys that the Lieri sold in the city--silver bars with little cuffs like stocks, leather wrapped rods on harnesses, oils that burned like the one Emory had used, which still burned deep inside my abdomen, a beautiful singing ache that echoed up into my chest.
What was wrong was that I wouldn’t have stopped him. I hadn’t even intended to when I’d bitten him. I’d just wanted to taste more. I would have let him strangle me until I blacked out and I wouldn’t have cared if he hadn’t stopped.

And it was wrong that he hadn’t stopped himself, even when he knew he’d crossed lines, and he had to know. Emory wasn’t stupid. He was far more learned in these things than I was. He had to have seen that he’d gone so far beyond the lines of safe and reasonable that we’d crossed into abusive. I’d manipulated him there—known I could get him angry, known I could push the right buttons, known I could twist him into granting me the punishment I so desperately craved...and he’d given in.

Sitting there in the dark, in my own private hell, it was hard to imagine the Emory I knew as heir to the throne of anything. He was a little island of self-loathing in a sea of people that were desperately trying to love him. His anger was glacial—massive, relentless, never ending. It was a raw, palpable sensation that rolled off of him and smashed into anyone standing nearby. You could feel his rage the way you could feel the charge in the air change before a storm. His eyes were the color of mint cream but they might as well have been black for all they showed. They were bottomless, cold, and in such constant anguish that I wasn’t sure how he was even breathing. It seemed the kind of pain that would suck the oxygen from one’s lungs. I’d only ever seen him smile for me, laugh for me, and that had only been in the past two days.

He reminded me of the old castle that hung out over the mountains beside Ravndal, the old seat of the Glacian royal family—cousins of mine, as it were. It was beautiful, in its way, that husk of something that had once been grand but had been left to decay, skeletal and forgotten.

My throat felt raw and I finished the whiskey in the flask at my hip, trying to quell the shaking in my hands and my legs, trying to swallow that emotional lump that heaved against my esophagus, trying to sob its way out into the world. I shouldn’t have felt as empty as I did, but there it was. I felt used and that was absurd, because that was what I’d wanted, but I’d wanted something else from him, too. I’d wanted him to stay. I’d wanted him to realize that my touch wouldn’t hurt him. I’d been an idiot to think that intimacy (if what we’d done could even be called intimate) would grant me the ability to touch him whenever I pleased and without prior permission.

It was foolish to want him to just kiss me—to kiss me without the choking or the hitting. It was like he was in a burning building, trapped behind the glass, and no matter how many times I threw my weight against it, it never cracked. I could never really reach him. Sure, I could press my hand to the outline of his, hear his voice beyond the wall, but I was never really allowed in and he couldn’t get out.

Emory didn’t want freedom. He didn’t realize that, of course, but I could see it. He blamed himself for his torment and thus became his own tormentor, the holder of his miserable leash.

I wanted to seek him out, to crowd him like I did when he retreated, to make him angrier so that he would vent it out the way he sometimes did when we were together and got to talking. I’d let him scream until his throat was bloody before. He needed that again. I knew that he did. He needed me to tell him that he was okay...

But I hurt so bad that day. My body was a veritable fortress of agony. I couldn’t sit properly and instead remained balanced on my hip, sort of on my side. My throat was raw from choking and bruised in the shape of his hands. I had scratches, welts, bruises, bites, and red rings around my wrists from the corded belt he’d tied me up with. I felt used, unclean, taken advantage of. I hurt the way that he wanted me to hurt and I understood his desire to make people feel what he felt. He was alone, my kitten. He was a solitary force, an army of one. Even if I wanted to join him, I couldn't breach the walls he’d put up. I could love him until my heart crawled out of my chest but Emory
would never feel it.

I thought about Anja and Danica, their fascination with the Bordelon princes, and I laughed darkly to myself. If Anja had known what loving Emory meant, would she have been able to withstand it like I could? Would she have wanted him at all? He was beautiful to look at. They both were--Emory and Atara. Emory was tall and lean, not quite as tall as Fox. He was still a halfling, after all, but he was taller than any halfling I’d ever met and they were a frequent breed in Coria. He was as pale as Cyril, almost the color of milk, with that contrasting black hair and inhuman eyes. The marks on his face curved perfectly along the bottom of his eyelids and fanned out toward his temples, nearly as dark as the grease paint soldiers used on their faces in Glacia. He was angular and lethal looking. There wasn’t a single soft spot on Emory, despite the nickname I’d given him.

He turned heads, male and female alike. No doubt my sister would have tried had she not fallen head-over-heels for the soft, tenderhearted Atara. Emory would have destroyed Anja the way he was destroying me though. My sister had never been able to take a beating like I could. She never would have been able to swallow the pain and suffer through it because it was what he needed.

He needed it.

I needed it, too, but I needed more than this, even if it was just him sitting at a distance. I needed him there if I couldn’t successfully separate the affection that I felt for him from the violence he inflicted upon me.

I sat like that most of the day, an island unto myself, locked in the dark, until a knock at my door had me limping to my feet, wincing and flinching at the stretch and pull of tormented flesh. I hadn’t hurt this badly in years. Crossing the room, I almost convinced myself that it was Emory--that he’d come back before that birthday dinner they were having for Atara. His actual birthday would fall over the weekend, he’d told me when I’d asked him why it wasn’t on the exact date. He was a prince. He could have a party on any day he wanted, but he’d wanted a week day. It was kinder, he claimed, so that the gentry in attendance could return to their families by the weekend.

Atara was painfully sweet. I liked him for that and it made me wonder. How sweet had Emory been before? I could see bits of him in his brother’s face, after all, they weren’t dissimilar. It was easy to transfer that open-hearted, adorable, generosity onto Emory and Emory was generous. He called himself selfish, but he wasn’t. Not really. There were a great many things he’d have given his heartbeat for.

His people, for example. For the Corian people, for the Lierian Nation...Emory would have fought an entire army single-handedly if he had to, thrown himself willingly onto the pyre, let himself be thrown into the bay with rocks tied to his feet. Emory was generous with himself, with his life...but not with his affection.

Atara, it seemed, felt affection for everyone, save Elizabeth Glenning (no relation to Mackenzie, or so I’d been told at that point.) I’d seen him threaten to put a letter opener through her tongue at a council meeting the week before if she called him a mongrel one more time.

It was neither here nor there though. It wasn’t Emory at the door when I swung it open, rubbing blearily at my hollow expression, trying to breathe life into features that were so drained of energy and utterly exhausted that I probably looked like death itself.

My sister stared back at me, Riordan at her side. She’d taken to wearing southern style clothing in the recent week or so. Periwinkle blue gauzy gowns, sheer as sunlight when they weren’t layered against each other, but which still allowed the shadowed outline of her legs to be visible. Her bodice was laced tightly up her front, but still plunged openly to her navel, and the shirt she wore beneath it
was silver lace, embroidered like gossamer, hinting at the peach color of her flesh beneath. I knew that if she turned around, it plunged down her back to the base of her spine, too, but she’d be bare as the day she was born there. It was too hot in Coryth for modesty and she was going to marry Riordan Bordelon, who would be Grand Duke of Southreach where it was even hotter.

Her fingers were tight around his arm and I thought, for a second, that they looked so utterly perfect together it was almost obscene. My sister played the part of princess like she was born to it. She would never carry that title, of course. Riordan had ceased to be a prince when Emory was legitimized and Atara had only bumped him further down the line, but he had been a prince. He carried himself like one, he looked like one, he wore the royal sigil on his coat.

He was as blond as she was, too, a rare sight in Coria unless you had Lierian blood in your veins. They looked like a fairy tale--a princess and her Prince Charming come to rescue her from the dragon.

But her face fell when she took me in. “Nikki,” she exclaimed, surprise in her voice when she released Riordan’s arm. “Give me a minute?” She looked back over her shoulder at him when she stepped forward, crowding me back into my bedroom and Riordan, of course, nodded.

“As much time as you need. I’ll be in the hall,” he assured her and then he was gone, just long legs and that sea green coat. Atara had told me once that if I ever wanted to see what Emory had been like before the beach, I need only spend time with Riordan. Aside from their differing religious beliefs--Emory being an atheist and Riordan still adhering to the Corian faith--they were two of a kind.

Danica let the door click shut behind her. At seventeen, she already stood over me, but Dani had barely lived through the Immaran invasion and Fox’s subsequent annex of the north. She hadn’t known hunger like I had. The kind of hunger that truncates growth well into teenage years. I’d never expected to be tall, though. Mila and I had been born early, sickly. I shouldn’t have survived infancy. I certainly never should have thrived like I had, but the cost had been great. Mila hadn’t recovered like I had. She had always been sickly. She had always been frail. She’d been even smaller than I was.

Dani wasn’t small. Dani had strong legs from years of riding and running in hunts. She had arms that could pull a longbow back and outshoot almost everyone we knew, with the small exception of me and probably Atara Bordelon, who was a wickedly lethal shot. She was taller than me, already, and though it was only by an inch or so, it never ceased to grate my nerves. “Nikki,” she started in on me, switching smoothly to our native tongue. “Forgive the language, but you look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I drawled in response, my throat hoarse and my voice scratchy from disuse. I wobbled to the dresser where a pitcher of water was placed by the staff every morning and poured myself a glass. “You look like you’re trying to impress your future in-laws. I heard Vasilev sealed the negotiation. You’ll be married to Riordan by spring, having little royal babies by fall.”

“Are you drunk?”

I was. Just a little bit. I’d finished the flask and gotten into the bottle I filled it from, but I had a wretchedly high tolerance for alcohol and I’d be sober in an hour or so, tops. Or, at least, sober enough to pass as actually sober.

I turned to look at her just as she tore the curtains open and let light flood into the room. It was dim light. Evening was falling. It was still light though and I flinched back from it, scowling and hissing, nearly spitting water down my chin while she glared at me. Danica sat, then, primly on the edge of my bed, one leg crossed over the other. “Is this about Mila again? Because if Papa finds out you’re in
here playing recluse over her, he’ll kick your ass.”

She was right. “No,” I grumbled. “I lied. It is. Sort of.”

“Nikki,” she whispered my name. “I told you to stay home. I told you seeking out Emory Bordelon wouldn’t make you feel any better about this. That’s what this is, isn’t it? You can’t fix him.”

“That implies that he is broken,” I responded bitterly, shooting her a sharp glare as I sat down on the bed beside her. “He was never broken. Bruised, maybe. Scarred, definitely. I’d even go so far as to say he’s mutilated in ways we can’t even see, but he’s not broken. Sometimes, he even laughs.”

Danica watched. She had green eyes like my mother. Not Bordelon green like Riordan’s or Atara’s and certainly not the mint color of Emory’s. They were Marsher green, vivid like fresh grass just peaking out from the ground after a thaw. One of mine was the same color, but looking at her then reminded me of home and how much I did miss my mother, my other siblings, the friends I’d had in Ravndal—Gunnar and Hackett, primarily. Gunnar especially though not for reasons I could ever tell him.

After a moment, she made a flippant, teasing remark. “I’m surprised he talks at all,” she joked. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard it.”

“He talks,” I snorted, recalling my comment about how chatty he was when he’d had me naked. “Trust me, sometimes I can’t get him to shut up, even when I’d prefer he doesn’t talk at all.”

A sort of silence fell between us and Danica looked down at her hands. Something heavy filled the atmosphere and I surveyed her fingers, too, caught sight of the sapphire that now adorned her ring finger, the deepest blue I’d ever seen, set in a platinum band inscribed with the careful runic carvings of our people. It had been made, I realized, especially for her. Riordan had put thought into it. He cared. “He loves you,” I heard my voice before my fingers reached for hers and my heart broke a little bit because I’d never imagined myself loving anyone. Not the way that I was. Not where I came from.

“He does,” she affirmed gently. And then she dropped the thing that had made everything feel so heavy in the first place. “And you’re in love with Emory Bordelon.”

I stiffened. It is important to note that I was not ashamed of what I felt for Emory. I never had been. I knew, deep, deep down in the most untouched parts of me, that there was nothing wrong with me, not in this regard. I’d always known, of course, that I wasn’t like the other boys in Ravndal. As a child, I’d attributed it to my size and to being the son of the lord. I’d imagined myself just being...behind...all of them...that my interest in women would eventually catch up to me.

And then it hadn’t.

And then I’d met Gunnar. I’d known then, before I’d ever really admitted it to myself, that no marriage match that my parents ever made for me would ever be satisfying and that I would never love whoever it was they deemed appropriate to carry on our name. Unlike Danica, I would have very little say in who I was told to marry. My sister had been told ‘a southern lord, to strengthen ties’ and whoever caught her fancy could probably be persuaded. We were the only landed family in Glacia that was left. There was a lot of power in being connected to the Rider Legion.

They would select a girl for me based first on how northern her family was. Glacia would be preferable, but the Marshes and Immara were acceptable. Then they would size her up like they were sizing meat at a butcher’s. They would consider her hips and whether they were made for childbearing like my mother’s or if they were slim and slender like Danica’s. The latter would never
do. They would consider how many siblings she had and how many ties to different families across Coria and Immara that would give us. They would consider whether or not one of those siblings might be better matched with one of mine...and if she met all their criteria--if she had hips for carrying babies, if she was well-connected, if her siblings were poor matches for my own...then they would make an offer.

I’d always been content with that. It was what I was expected to do and I’d always done exactly as I was expected to do. Sometimes, like with the Gauntlet, I even went beyond it and did more just to earn their favor because if they really knew who I was and what I wanted...well, mother would have wept and father would have hunted me down like an animal for sullying the family legacy.

So I said the only thing that I could say: “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Danica scoffed. One of her blonde curls bounced down in front of her eyes, free from the many sapphire pins that had previously held it atop her head. She blew it away like I did with my own.

“Please, Nikita,” she chided. “Every young girl in Ravndal has been scrambling to get into your pants since you took the Gauntlet and you haven’t even noticed. I know. Girls talk. If one of them was warming your bed, I’d have heard about it, but I haven’t.”

“Maybe I have boundaries,” I offered weakly. It was a poor defense, just as poor as ‘I respect them too much.’ I didn’t. I didn’t care about them either way. That was the problem. My heart crawled up to my throat, thumping hard, and the pain that lanced between my thighs and stung up my back was a distant second to the dizzying terror I now felt.

I could take a beating. But this? My father would kill me. For real kill me.

“Nikki, I’m not going to tell anyone,” Dani assured me, reaching for my fingers where they’d gone cold and clammy in my lap. Her ring pressed into my palm when she squeezed and I squeezed back, my hand tight over hers. “Least of all Papa. I’ve already lost my sister. I’d not see you lost, too.”

It was easy to forget that my siblings had all lost Milena, too. Easy because I’d always felt closest to her. We’d shared everything, right down to the womb we’d been carried in together, and then she was gone. I got older. She didn’t. I loved, she never had. I became a Rider, she didn’t get the chance. Someday, I would marry and have children and Mila...Mila would be eighteen forever, frozen in time, a relic.

“I…” I started hesitantly. There was no hiding it from her now and there were things I wanted to say, things I felt like...it might have been easier to carry the burden of loving him if she’d been there to shoulder that weight with me. She wasn’t Mila. We weren’t that close, but we were close. Close like Emory and Atara had been close once. “I want...I feel like I need him to…” My mouth turned dry and she squeezed my fingers again, scooting closer to me so that she could put her other arm gently around my shoulders. “To forgive me? That makes no sense, I know. He can’t forgive me for what I helped them do to her.”

“I stood by, too,” she reminded me quietly. “I watched. I could have said something. Anja could have said something. Lana could have said something. You weren’t the only one of us standing there.”

It didn’t matter, not really. I’d been the one she begged. I’d been the one she wrote that note to and Dani knew that. She’d read it, fingers trembling, her breath a vapor in front of her face when I’d handed it to her and her legs had buckled like they were made of soft leather. I remembered the way she’d held me, fingers trying to dig into the back of my neck through her layers of gloves and my layers of coats and her tears had burned her cheeks raw in the cold while she wailed, rocked in my arms. I should have cared, too!
We’d kept that note a secret from the smaller ones—from Anja and Lana and the newest little one, the boy, Latham, that neither of us had met yet, he’d never know Mila. He’d never feel grief like this.

I envied him that.

Dani shifted, clasping my face between her hands. She thumbed over my cheeks and then ran her fingers over my bloodied bottom lip. “Did Papa hit you?” she asked after a second.

“No, I bit it,” I admitted grudgingly and she arched an eyebrow. “I uhm...we...”

Her cheeks flushed the brightest red I’d ever seen and she made a noise, something like a surprised yelp and her hands flew to her face, fingers pressed halfway over her mouth. “Heavens above, Nikita Novak, are you sleeping with him? In this room?!”

I didn’t answer fast enough. She took my silence as a yes and leapt to her feet, skirts billowing around the shadows of her legs. “He will kill you, you know that? I don’t mean that figuratively. He will actually kill you! This is...it’s...” She sat back down, probably because I was glaring at her, and crossed her legs so that we were knee-to-knee the way that Mila and I had sat on my bed when we were children, whispering secrets in the dark, and then Dani had joined us later as she grew older, a little circle of crossed legs and quiet admissions. “Listen to me,” she started again, grasping both of my hands so that she could lace her fingers through them. “Are you listening, Nikki? This is important. I need you to hear me.”

“I’m listening. You’re right in front of me. It would be hard not to hear you.”

“Stop being an asshole,” she snarled. “You only tease when you’re uncomfortable. It’s unworthy of you.” I frowned and opened my mouth but she hushed me with a sharp look. My sisters had all mastered that look from my mother. I’d told Emory about it once—about how many sisters I actually had and how we all spent most of our day in that one big room together around a fire and he’d looked at me sideways, eyebrows up. That’s a lot of women.

He was not wrong.

It was a lot of women and every one of them was as fiercely independent and as bossy as my mother. Danica pressed her forehead to mine and pulled our hands up so they were tucked, zippered together, beneath her chin. “If you have a chance to get away from the north, you take it,” she insisted and I felt my eyes widen in surprise, lips parted. This was...not what I’d expected. I’d thought she’d give me a warning about how dangerous Emory was or how dangerous my father was. I thought she’d plead with me to stop. “I love you,” she continued. “And whatever choices you make, whatever path you decide to travel on, I will be behind you for all of it, even if it means we’ve got Papa breathing down our backs for the rest of our lives. If you want to be with Emory, you stay with Emory. You don’t go home. If there is one family in this wretched court with the power to protect you from what Papa would do to you, it’s this one.”

“I can’t put him in that position,” I tried to argue with her and she pressed her hand over my mouth, her fingers moving carefully over the bruise on my cheek. She cupped my cheek the way that Mila used to. It would occur to me much later that both of my oldest sisters had always known about my predilections. Mila would have followed me to the ends of the world, content to rest on my pyre with me.

Danica was not Milena. Danica would fight, tooth and nail. She would make our father pay for every step he tried to take against her if she chose to throw herself between the two of us. She had always been the strongest among all of us, the one that mouthed off, that fought back. I’d wondered where her spit and fire was when Mila had needed us, but I think there’d been some part of Dani that broke
with her and she’d been too horrified by the outcome of the events unfolding in front of her to do anything about it.

And like me, Dani lived with that guilt, only instead of begging for absolution from someone who had survived my sister’s ordeal, Dani was going to fight for what meant the most to Mila.

Me.

“I told you to listen,” she hissed and her fingers moved to the back of my head so that we were pressed there, stuck together, one person tangled in the approaching dark. “You see this whole situation from Emory’s side, but I see it from Ri’s. I know how much this is hurting him...watching Emory struggle like he is, watching him fall every time he tries to get back up...there is nothing that Riordan wouldn’t do to see his nephew happy again. If you wanted to stay, Papa would be hard pressed to find an army big enough to pry you from the King’s own hands.”

“And what about you?” I asked eventually when the quiet fell over us again and I could only hear her breathing, smell her lilac perfume lingering over her skin. “He won’t lose both of us to the Bordelons. He’ll never let you marry the Grand Duke.” And I couldn’t do that to her...couldn’t condemn her like that. Not when she loved Riordan. It was so obvious in the way she looked at him, the way she always stood on her toes and adjusted his collar or fussed with his hair and how she sometimes wore sea green when she wouldn’t see him for the day.

No. I couldn’t take Riordan from my sister.

Danica grinned, wide and impish. “He can try and stop me,” she teased, leaning back and sweeping swiftly to her feet. “He can try and stop us, Nikki, but Riordan was a prince. Emory is a prince. Someday, when he’s healthy, he’ll be King. Who is Vasilev to tell them that they can’t take what they want? Harlan didn’t ask for Cyril. He took him.” She pulled on my arm and that ache spread up from my back but my face remained unchanged. “Come on. We have a dinner to attend and you can’t go see your brooding prince charming if you look like shit.” She pinched my cheeks, trying to bring color back to them. “Clean yourself up and meet us in the foyer.”

She paused before she left, lingering at my dresser, and then she carefully opened the jar of black paint and smeared a single line through her lower lip to match the one that split Atara’s. She turned carefully to me and did the same to mine. “Make sure you wear the rest of that war paint,” she pressed. “The red, I think. It’ll give you some color and hide the bruising...and I think the Prince of Brooding might like you looking like a feral little savage.”

“You are literally the worst sibling,” I deadpanned, trying to rub the black off of my lips, but it was ink. It would be there for days now that she’d put it on me.

Danica clicked her tongue and opened the door, blowing me a kiss on the way out. “Prince of Brooding!” she sing-songed, wagging her fingers at me just as the door shut behind her and I heard a peel of raucous giggling. I imagined Riordan had caught her, spun her around by the waist as he so often did when he thought I couldn’t see them.

At least they were happy.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

In the south, they treat politics like it’s a game of chess—every interaction, every whispered word, every scandalous secret—it’s all intentional, all subtle movements on their own personal boards. I can almost hear Atara saying, “Fucking politics” in my ear at another council meeting after this. It was the only real time I interacted with him when his brother wasn’t present and I’d determined that, out of the two of them, Emory was the political animal. Atara had no patience for the lying and the monstrous machinations that occurred behind the scenes.

Someone that had arranged this thing—Cyril and Fox, most likely—did have a mind for politics though. Fox’s council and the Elders of the Lierian Nation were seated at one table, facing each other, looking utterly uncomfortable. My father was among them, chatting animatedly with Riordan and Brentlyn, who had come up from Eden for this specific occasion. It was the first time I’d ever seen him in anything but a portrait. With him were his children, Olivia, who I had met in passing several times as she lived at the Keep with one of the former queen’s ladies-in-waiting as a chaperone, training to be Emory’s second. There was Meyer, too, who would have looked exactly like Emory did he not have a head of red hair that fell in sloppy curls over his eyes, leaning against his sister while he told her some secret.

Elizabeth Glenning was in a heated argument with Mackenzie. I did not know, at that exact moment in time, that she was his mother, but I had suspicions that what I’d been told about them being ‘unrelated’ was absolutely false. Standing next to each other, I could see her in the shape of his face and the way she smiled. It was the same smile, physically, but on her it looked smug and on Mack it looked...almost sweet.

The number of Elders, I noted, had gotten conspicuously smaller since Atara had taken charge and my eyes sought out the youngest prince, eventually locating him in a corner of the room, surrounded by a contingent of Lierian guards, whispering to Ilyia. It was the second time in a handful of days that I’d seen the two of them arguing—Atara, red cheeked and frustrated and Ilyia looking apologetic. It was odd that he wasn’t the center of attention, standing with his parents under that massive crystal chandelier that hung over the grand ballroom, casting golden light down over the pale marble and the intricately carved columns.

“It’s extravagant, isn’t it?” Danica whispered. Riordan had detached himself from her side just a minute earlier to go to the table he was meant to be seated at. Until she married him, she wouldn’t be welcome among the Council and she had affectionately claimed that she didn’t mind ‘slumming it’ with her brother when he’d excused himself and kissed her cheek. I wasn’t sure if she could tell that I’d been scowling at her from under the red war paint that now adorned my face, but I most definitely was.

I was aching in so many ways it was difficult to count. There was a bone-reaching soreness in my backside and my thighs from the vicious punishment Emory had inflicted and from how he’d gone until the muscles that held me up had buckled, trembling and strained under the pressure of that pain. My thighs felt like I’d made the run from Ravndal to the bay, a half day’s trek, in half the time it
should have taken. There was a bite in that soreness from where he’d raked his nails down over me.

And, of course, there was that deep-seated ache where I swear he’d rearranged my insides to accommodate his fucking cock. I thought I probably should have been bothered by the way that felt...by how much it actually hurt but I had no basis for comparison and, even if I had, there was no denying how sinfully, wickedly delightful it was to still be able to feel that he’d been there hours later.

It did not make me any less irritated with him than I realized I was...and I was irritated with him. That ache in my abdomen and between the backs of my legs might have been welcome, but the rest of it...the rest of it I had mixed feelings about. On one hand, there was something carnal and erotic about what he’d done to me and how much I’d needed it without ever knowing I’d needed it. Since I’d been fourteen, my entire life had been about commanding people under me. I’d been the youngest person in the history of the north to ever successfully complete the Gauntlet. That had chafed the older men that were to fight under my leadership. From the start, I’d had to develop rigid, almost painful, self-control.

I’d always been good at that, anyway, though. It hadn’t been easy, after all, to hide who I was from everyone around me so that they never found out that I was, without question, absolutely not interested in women and very keen about men. Vaguely, I wondered if there was a word for that in the south, but it was an unimportant thing that I filed away to ask someone later.

So I’d been brutal with them. Every decision they made came through me first. Every infraction was dealt with severely. It was a lot of weight to carry and with Emory that had been...gone. There’d been no ordering anyone. There’d been no delegating. In fact, there’d been no thought at all. There had only been obedience. Submission. It was jarring, how being reduced to nothing and nobody could feel good...but then I hadn’t been nothing or nobody to him.

What had he called me? An angel?

I hadn’t actually felt like nothing until he’d left me there--welted, bruised, and dropping from a high so far up that struggling through the aftermath was like breaking bones on impact with the ground. If Danica hadn’t shown up when she did, I wondered if I’d have sat there all day, trapped in that hell, trying to pick up the pieces he’d left and failing miserably.

For that, I was irritated. The rest of it? I’d gladly do all of that again.

Eventually, my sister and I found our way to a table and she set into the wine, pouring me a large glass from a bottle that was sitting in the center, likely left by a careless member of the staff.

“You look like you could use a drink,” someone chirped from my side and Tristan Brighton swam into view. He was a pariah at events like this. It wasn’t that he was Immaran, though that was bad enough. Fox himself was half Immaran on his mother’s side. It was that he was an alchemist, dreaded and regarded as some kind of ancient creature that had crawled from the depths of whatever hell the Immarans believed in. If I remembered correctly, it had something to do with dragons, because why not, right? From everything I’d ever heard, dragons had been extinct for something like two centuries by then, but sure. Tristan was a dragon. Nevermind the lack of reptilian features, wings, or the ability to breathe fire (that I had seen, at least, I couldn’t discount the fact that he did use magic.)

Add in the fact that he wasn’t two stories high or as heavy as a blue whale...and he didn’t seem quite so draconic to me, but servants believe anything they hear from nobility and the “Tristan is a dragon” theory had only been my favorite rumor, which was why I thought about it every time I saw him and it garnered a little chuckle that I kept to myself.
I lifted the glass to my lips and gestured to the seat across from me. “Or five,” Tristan tacked on tacitly, scooping up a glass of water that he promptly dropped a quarter of a lime into.

“Lord Brighton,” my sister greeted cheerfully. “Come to slum with the rest of us outcasts?”

“Oh, you know,” he teased. “Your lot is a bunch of traitors and my lot is a bunch of slavers. Don’t get many laughs in these crowds, such as it is. Corians always have to believe they have the moral high ground. It’s part of their...rustic charm. That and all the rain...and mud...and mosquitos.” He wrinkled his nose. Of all the people that stayed at the Keep (and there were many--the Bordelons were always entertaining guests of varying import and status and for varying amounts of time) Tristan was the one that I’d spoken to the most. Perhaps it was because the Corians thought of my people as little more than attack dogs and his people as pond scum. So I took companionship where I could get it--with Tristan or with Emory.

It helped that he was so godsdamned fascinating. I’d always wondered if his hair color was natural or if he’d crushed some kind of berry into it to stain it that blood color that it was. Or perhaps it was magic. I hadn’t the courage to ask or the tactfulness to phrase it in a way that didn’t require courage.

“So,” he continued. Tristan was chatty. Charismatic, even, but I suspected that was an attempt to ward off the belief that he was there to bring a curse upon the entire country. “What are the Novak siblings doing without their Bordelon shadows?”

Danica laughed, tapping her ring finger against her glass and Tristan held a hand out to inspect the new jewelry. “The Grand Duke is on the Council,” she explained and he clicked his tongue. “He has to socialize.”

“Ah,” the alchemist agreed, but his expression turned sour like the idea of socializing with the council was about as appealing to him as horse shit. I liked that about Tristan. He wore his feelings on his sleeve. I knew that was because there wasn’t a person in this room that could strike him down if they wanted to, me included, but I’d have never called him out on that. I might have considered a friend (and I had precious few of those) but I wasn’t willing to toy with the temper of someone so wretchedly dangerous.

He claimed that he wasn’t, of course. Not really. He was a healer. Combat magics were not his speciality. I disagreed. That staff he usually carried had a blade on one end. If it wasn’t for combat, it was the weirdest surgeon’s blade I’d ever seen and I’d seen plenty, given my occupation as a Rider Commander. “And Emory?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Emory did not let Tristan touch him. He did not even like Tristan near him and so everything the alchemist knew about the eldest prince, he learned from me, and that was very little, because Emory’s personal feelings weren’t my business to share. I nodded, inclining my head toward the royal table on the raised dais at the front of the room. Atara and Emory had taken seats there and Emory was pushing food around his plate, trying to make it look like he was eating and failing miserably.

He was pale, I noted. This many people was uncomfortable for him and, even from where I was, I could hear a handful of the lesser gentry whispering at the end of my table about him. They thought him damaged. Insane. They wanted him taken away to one of those ‘places’ in Coria that I’d heard of. The institutions in the country where you could send your lunatic relatives or your simpleton children to spend their days taken care of by temple priests or little old ladies with lots of cats. I tried to imagine Emory there.

He would have murdered the cats.
When I tipped my head that way, the bruising at my throat ached in a way that was...less than pleasant. When I got around to talking to him, I was going to have to tell Emory he had to be more careful where he left his territorial marks. I wasn’t a fence post for him to piss on. There was a level of discretion I required.

“When I was a boy,” Tristan began. “My father used to make all of us sit at a table like that every day. Even when we weren’t entertaining. Liked to fancy himself more important than he was. I think because Emperor Perondale’s granddaughter liked to spend her afternoons with my youngest brother. Got Rafael stewing green with envy.” He popped a grape into his mouth as he spoke, but his face was distant. Tristan didn’t speak much of his family.

Danica latched onto it though. “Oh, you have siblings, Lord Brighton? Three--two,” she corrected, her expression darkening just a fraction. “Two sisters and a brother.”

But Tristan noticed the misstep. “I had heard about your sister,” he addressed the elephant that sat between all of us then. “My sincerest apologies.” It was uncomfortable. I’d never liked how everyone in the south apologized for her dying whenever they met us...like them being sorry could make it any better or like it could bring her back. I hated even more when they said that they would pray for her. Like it mattered now. It might not have even mattered before she was gone. We didn’t believe in gods, anyway, so their prayers were worth about as much as pig shit to me and Danica had tried to reason it away...tried telling me that they were trying to make me feel better.

They were trying to make themselves feel better. Their prayers were not for us and they certainly weren’t for Milena. They were only ever whispered so that whoever was doing the whispering could feel like they’d done something while expending minimal effort on the subject.

Fucking southerners.

I rubbed at my throat instead of answering and Tristan watched my fingers curl around the leather that laced up to my chin. “Something bothering you?” he asked coyly, head cocked, and I knew then that he already knew. Tristan had a way of knowing things like that. He’d known about my twisted spine and I’d never shown him that. He’d known about Emory’s broken pelvis and tried explaining once how it would prevent him from having children but I understood none of the language he used. I did not know what crowning meant. I did not understand dilation.

In that context, I was absolutely fucking sure that I did not want to know and so I’d stayed quiet and let him believe that I understood.

“May I borrow you for a moment, Tristan?” I finally asked and he held an arm out graciously as he stood, indicating for me to lead the way, and I did. Standing up had been agony. Sitting had been worse. Walking was a terror. I could feel my clothes rub and shift against the raw flesh of my backside. I was bruised down to the bone. I’d taken beatings that had left me so stiff I couldn’t move my legs, but for whatever reason, this felt worse. Probably because there was some emotional anchor tying me to it and so I couldn’t completely separate from it.

Whatever it was, there was no person in the entire Keep that I thought might be more helpful than Tristan Brighton and if this continued, I would need help.

So we left my sister just as Riordan got up from his table and returned to her, laughing and rolling his eyes about something someone had said to him, and Tristan let me lead him out of the grand ballroom into a deserted corridor that led down into the belly of the ancient fortress below the palace proper. It was only dimly lit, echoing with the sound of song from the ball going on not far from us.

“This is rather ominous. If you wanted to get me alone in the dark, you might have spared yourself
the hassle. I’m totally spoken for, Nikita.” He cocked a smile, lopsided and smug, and his blue eyes were even more inhuman in the dark. They practically glowed like that magic that sometimes enveloped his hands.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I grumbled and Tristan threw his head back and laughed, pushing his hair out of his eyes as I scowled at him. I felt something close to guilt almost immediately. My frustration wasn’t at him—and I was frustrated. I could feel it like a fire burning close to my heart, stoked by silence from Emory until it was close to becoming wildly out of control and I valued control. “I’m sorry. That was cruel.”

“You’re not sorry,” he corrected with a snort. “It’s not as if I don’t already know. Anyone with two eyes knows, except maybe your father, but that’s because he prefers ignorance. Gods forbid his eldest son is gay.”

I stared blankly and Tristan stared back. For a moment, there was heavy silence and I tried to discern what, exactly, he meant. He’d used words I didn’t know the translation to, but Corian wasn’t his first tongue either. He spoke it better than I did by leaps and bounds, but he had that beautifully exotic accent indicative of Immara—powerful sounding consonants, sharp pronunciation aside from that beautifully rolled R, and a penchant for tacking a nonexistent vowel sound to the end of some words. It was pretty, I thought, in an almost childish way. Much prettier than the Glacian accent, at least.

“Ah,” Tristan breathed after a moment and snapped his fingers. That blue light appeared in his palm, illuminating the corridor so that I could more appropriately see his face. “It means you prefer the company of men. Intimate company?”

“...Right,” I bit out. “Maybe not say that out loud? You do know where I’m from.”

He shrugged. “Nobody can hear us. I’d hear them first. So, pray tell, what does the little Lord Novak need with the dreaded alchemist?”

I rolled my eyes and he moved to the wall, hauling himself up into a window with a sil wide enough to double as a bench. His legs swung idly while he looked at me, rolling that blue light in his hands like it was a corporeal thing. “If you...if I told you something or asked you to do something for me, are you required to...tell anyone?”

Tristan fixed me with a look. No doubt he was taking in the thin sheen of sweat that had appeared on my skin, a by product of the slowly mounting pain that I was in becoming too much to physically bear without side-effects. It was almost nauseating, that ache in my flesh. I still delighted in the one that was deep between my thighs and up into my abdomen, but the rest? The rest I could have used something for and while Mackenzie was, certainly, the easier person to ask, he was also far too close to Atara and Emory to ever be told about this. He’d have tried to put a stop to it, kind heart that he was. He would have gone right to Fox and Cyril and I didn’t want that. I didn’t want it to end.

Gods, I was so sick for that...for knowing it was bad for both of us and letting it continue because I wanted punished and he wanted someone to hurt with him.

“No,” he eventually answered. “I suppose the King could compel me to tell him, but I can’t think of a reason why he would unless he knows there’s something wrong with you. Is this about your spine? I already told you, I can’t fix that. You’re fully grown now. I could have corrected it when you were a child, but...I can give you something for the pain, if that’s it?”

“It’s not my back,” I insisted, letting him finish repeating what he’d already told me. I hadn’t had to show him that my spine was curved for him to know that it was. He’d taken one look at me and noticed it. *It’s in your shoulders*, he’d said. *One is a bit higher than the other.*
He slipped from the window and took a step forward, holding his palm out like he intended to touch me with that...magic whatever. I’d never actually asked him what that light was or where it came from. In some regards, I don’t think I wanted to know what it was. I’d find out later and it would horrify me, but in that moment, knowing that Tristan had truncated himself from a part of his very soul was not information that I had. Still, I wasn’t stupid enough to let him put it in me the way he had to Atara when he’d examined him. I remembered seeing it, that blue glow beneath his flesh, moving through his organs, and Tristan’s exclamation of, ‘How curious!’

So I stepped back. “Maybe...not...with the magic shit,” I started and he heaved a sigh.

“It’s harmless, truly,” he assured me. “I wouldn’t use it on you if it hurt. I’m not a complete monster, you know.”

And I did know. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust him. I didn’t trust the mystery behind the methods that had created him or how he had to thread a needle into his flesh every day, connect it to a tightly woven canvas tube, and let some pale blue liquid drain down into his veins from a jar he held aloft. I hadn’t asked when I’d seen him do it the first time. I did not intend to ask now, standing in that dark corridor. “I believe you.” I promised. “It’s not you. It’s just...I don’t know what that is. I don’t know where it came from. For fuck’s sake, Tristan, until I met you, I thought all that bullshit about Immarans using magic was actual bullshit.”

“Fair enough,” he relented after a second and then he paused. “So what is it then?”

Carefully and with trembling fingers, I unbuckled the belts that held my tunic up and tightened it around my shoulders. It didn’t completely come off, but it was loose enough then for me to roll it up and there, at the small of my back, he could see the start of the damage when I leaned into the window.

Tristan whistled, low and surprised, one hand on the middle of my back. His touch was abnormally cold, I noted. Like he wasn’t really alive. I’d noticed that the first time he’d touched me, but it was unnerving then and it gave me goosebumps up my back. “Did your father do this to you? Because that is something I’ll have to, you know, react to. And by react I mean commit homicide.”

“No, I--”

“Impact play then,” he supplied and I could feel the tension sort of melt off of him. Or, at least, some of it did. I wondered at that. Emory hadn’t reacted well to information about my father’s treatment us, even if it was the way every child in Glacia was raised up, but I hadn’t felt palpable tension emanate off of Emory the way it did off of Tristan and I knew, then, the way that I always knew when I saw other kids like me, that whatever ugly truths lingered in Tristan’s past, abuse was one of them.

Then, of course, I wondered if that was what had driven him to the College and if that was what had driven his missing brother into being missing. “…impact play?”

I felt stupid. In retrospect, I was stupid. Stupid and foolish to have entered into something so drastic without any former knowledge of...anything. At all.

Tristan’s hand came away from me and I spun back around to face him, my expression defiant like I was daring him to judge, but there was no judgement in his features. “Hitting,” he offered and I still kept staring, brows knitted forward in confusion. “Gods in the heavens, Nikita Novak, do you know nothing about what you let someone do to you? You did let them, I assume? You’re a Rider Commander. The only person in that whole wretched ballroom that could maybe survive your ire is me and that’s a big maybe. So you had to have let them. Did he teach you nothing?”
It was rather like being spanked as a toddler, that chiding, and I felt shame flush hot to my cheeks and Tristan ran his fingers over his face, rubbing his eyes in exasperation. “Never mind,” I snapped at him and I spun to leave, fussing with the buckles again. I was going to go find the world’s biggest bottle of whiskey and I was going to drown myself in it. If that was unavailable, hiding under a table would have to suffice. Anything was better than being here with him and having to look at his horrified expression for one more second.

“Wait!” Tristan called after me and it wasn’t hard for him to catch up. He was taller than me, after all. He held a hand out and his palm flattened in the middle of my chest. “Just...wait.”

I glared down at the offending hand. “Do you want to test that ‘maybe,’ Tristan? Because I feel like I want to break your fucking fingers.”

“Yeah, you can do that in a minute if you still want to. Just...I reacted...poorly. I apologize. I’m just surprised and I want to help you. Gods know, you must be in fucking agony right now.”

I was still scowling, but I didn’t break his fingers. He must have taken that as a sign to continue. “Did you not have a watchword? Did you tell him to stop?”

“I don’t even know what a watchword is! But no, I didn’t tell him to stop!” That shame rose up like bile in my throat. “I just...it felt good, at the time, you know? But then he left and it didn’t feel so good anymore. It was like...like drowning!” I reached up for my throat again and for a second, I hated myself for that emotion that welled back up in my chest. It was that same self-hatred I’d felt earlier...that same idea that he’d used me and left me feeling dirty for it.

Tristan was quiet, but to his credit, he did not betray anything he might have been thinking. Instead, he gave me a gentle push until we were back at our original window, far enough from the party that even if the door opened, nobody would hear us speaking. “Alright,” he breathed. “This is Emory Bordelon, isn’t it? You don’t have to confirm that. I already know. You two are close enough.”

I nodded anyway. Confirmation didn’t really matter at that point and Tristan exhaled loudly, one hand on my shoulder and the other rubbing one of his temples like this whole thing was giving him a terrible headache. I must have looked like a child to him, standing there, petulant and scolded and aching from a spanking.

“Nikita, you’re adorably naive,” he started gently but his tone quickened when I scowled in response. “I mean that in the best way possible! It’s not a bad thing to be. You went into this whole thing thinking you could heal him and listen, kid, I know what a broken heart looks like. I know what guilt looks like. You blame yourself for Mila. I blame myself for Sebastian.”

I frowned. “Who?”

“My little brother,” he explained after a second. “When I left for the College, he was five, and I knew he had a snowflake’s chance in a furnace of surviving Karinus without help. He had no mind for politics. He had no poker face. He was too kind, you know? The sort of person that you can tell, even that young, that he’s good down to the bone, down into the soul. Sebastian was good and I left him there with a pack of hungry wolves to raise him when his mother died. Now he’s gone. Dead or missing, I don’t know. My father says he’s dead. I don’t believe it. I tried to--”

He cut himself off and shook his head. “Never mind. That’s not for you to know. It’s ‘magic shit.’” He rubbed his face again. “The point is, you think Emory can grant you some kind of forgiveness, don’t you? I looked for that in the Vale. For some poor soul I could save so that I could maybe repent for what I’d left Sebastian to deal with. It doesn’t work, Nikki. You can let Emory beat on
you until your bones break, but you won’t ever feel like it’s enough. Do you understand me?”

I did. Of course, I did. Even after all that had happened that afternoon, I didn’t feel any sort of better about Milena. Not even the slightest bit. That was neither here nor there though. I wanted it to continue. I’d *liked* it. I repeated that. “But I like it,” I insisted and Tristan managed a weak but genuine chuckle.

“Well, Emory is beautiful,” he relented. “What’s not to like? I’d probably let him beat the hell out of me, too, but he thinks I’m going to rip his chest open and eat his heart.”

“Would you?”

He snorted. “I’m a vegetarian, thanks.” His fingers glowed again, otherworldly. “He shouldn’t have left you. He’s supposed to make sure you’re alright. That couldn’t have been easy, suffering through that alone.”

“Fuck no,” I grumbled, rubbing the handprint on my throat again. I peeled the laces down and lifted my chin and Tristan whistled again, grasping my jaw with his free hand so that he could survey the full extent of that damage. “This is my real concern. It’s not easy to hide.”

“You shouldn’t be doing this at all,” he admonished. “He could crush your esophagus.”

“I like to think he’d seek you out if that happened.”

“But you don’t know that he will,” Tristan insisted. “Emory is sick, Nikki. He was sick before the beach. When this is over, he’ll still be sick. I can’t heal a disease of the mind. I can’t fix those mood swings he has and you saw Fox today. You know where it comes from.”

“I’ll be more careful,” I promised after a second. “Can you fix it?”

“With ‘magic shit,’” he drawled and arched an eyebrow and I glowered, face hot and lips turned in a frown. He was never going to let that go. I could see it already.

“That alright by you?”

I didn’t see how I had much of a choice so I screwed up my face in a grimace and nodded. My eyes shut tight but I felt him touch me, his hand curled around the fingerprints. Something cold and liquid sank beneath my skin, like ice into water, plunging into the dark, and I could feel it curl there, ribboned around the bruises like they were gift wrapped. It was a cold that reached all the way to my lungs and down my spine and as it uncurled from my throat, I felt it wrap over my legs and travel up my thighs, soothing the ache that burned my tormented flesh.

And then just like that, it was gone. Tristan withdrew, eyes glowing brightly, and I stared at him, watched as that light disappeared back into his palm.

The pain wasn’t entirely gone, but it was tolerable then. “I didn’t fix all of it. That would require more time and energy than I have in me right now,” he explained. “I’ll mix you something up tonight for your...further indiscretions, though. Stop by my quarters tomorrow and I’ll have it for you.”

I mumbled a thank you, face stinging hot, and fixed the remaining buckles and laces. We started to walk away, silence between us, but before we entered the ballroom again, he caught my wrist.

“Nikita,” he started and I stared, wide-eyed and unblinking. “Be careful.”

I only nodded in response, slipping through the door and back into the bright gold light of the ballroom where Riordan was spinning my sister across the freshly cleared floor, now empty of most of the tables that had occupied it. Mackenzie was at Atara’s side, the little prince clinging tightly to his arm, cheeks flushed with alcohol and eyes wide. Beside them, Emory was still in his chair,
scanning the ballroom with a hawk-like expression on his face and his eyes met mine, locking on like he was in target practice.

He swept up to his feet, all long legs and the shadow of lithe muscle returning with weight gain beneath his clothes. It was enough to make my stomach drop and Tristan chuckled beside me, disappearing a moment later and leaving me completely at the mercy of Emory Bordelon.

I recalled the alchemist’s words. He should have *stayed*. That made the hurt worse, knowing that my ridiculous emotional meltdown hadn’t been that ridiculous at all...that it was *expected* for Tristan to know how it would have felt to come down from that high alone in the dark, throbbing from my knees to my hips, inside and out. My heart lurched, scrambling behind my ribs for something to hold onto lest it plummet to the floor, and I found myself turning, walking away. I snagged a glass of wine from a passing tray and tossed it back, wincing at the sting of it against my bloodied lip just as he caught up to me. I felt his long, wicked fingers around my wrist and that ache inside of me exploded into raw irritation.

He should have *stayed*.

“What?” I heard myself snap and I turned to look at him, eyes narrowed into fierce slits. Emory stared at me, but he remained undeterred.

“Kita--”

“If you came for round two, you can fuck off.” I’d never intended to sound so cruel. Despite my occupation, cruelty was not something I generally partook of and I hated the way he flinched back from my words, surprised and hurt. He wasn’t the only person at fault. I’d manipulated him. I’d *used* him for my own needs and that made me sick, because hadn’t being used been what put him where he was? It made me no better than any of the monsters that haunted his nightmares. “Emory, wait.”

But it was too late. He spun away from me, jerking away from my touch when I tried and failed to reach for him. We were causing a scene and I knew it. Several people around us took quick steps back but as he pushed his way through the group, they crowded him. They might have good intentions. They might have been poking the sleeping dragon trying to see how he would react to such physical stimuli. I wanted to pick up one of the carving knives and start slicing throats every time another hand came into contact with him, pawing at his clothes, trying to get him to stop.

I was not the scene, I realized. He was. I was just *there* and as he pushed through, I followed him, intent to put a stop to what I knew was going to be a full blown panic attack before he even reached the doors.

Across the room, I saw Fox move, quicker than Cyril with longer legs, and Atara’s eyes moved to watch, alarm written in his delicate features. Mack stood but the little prince held tight to his fingers and Cyril remained with them, his hand on Atara’s shoulder. They were still fighting then--Fox and Cyril. They were never without the other unless they had to be so I had to imagine they were still fighting.

Emory burst through the crowd like he was breaking the surface of water, stumbling over his long legs, his fingers at his own throat. He hit his knees once, scrambling back up half a second later so that he could throw himself at the closest set of doors. He was quick, I noted. Fox was quicker and he slipped through the door after him before it even slammed shut. I, on the other hand, had to reopen it.

I nearly tripped through the door, almost running directly into Fox, who had caught Emory and pinned him, locked tight between his arms and he was *screaming*. He twisted like a worm on a hook,
fighting savagely, every ounce of energy he had poured into an attempt to escape and he garnered nothing. Fox’s arms were clenched tight, one hand sealed around the opposite wrist, pressed against Emory’s sternum so that his wriggling body, arms and all, were captured like a butterfly in a net.

It was horrific and I thought, any second, that a bunch of gentry were going to pile through the doors and witness this full-scale natural disaster, but nobody did. Maybe Atara had ordered the doors sealed. Maybe Cyril had. Maybe it was even Riordan.

I would find out later it was Tristan who had put himself between the gentry and the door and none of them had the balls to do anything to move him so they’d just stared.

“You’re going to hurt yourself if you don’t slow down, boss,” Fox bit out. He was surprisingly calm, given the situation, and he was right. Careening blindly through the palace on polished marble floors was asking for broken bones and missing teeth. This part of the building was kept pristinely serviced. There were no long carpet runners in the corridors like there were in the wing that housed the apartments. This was all hedonistic opulence at the very top of its game.

Emory was struggling to breathe, but it wasn’t because Fox was holding him too tightly. It was like someone had a hand around his throat and he thrashed, teeth clenched, for another minute until his whole body turned limp like tissue paper, knees buckling, and Fox slid down the wall with his oldest in his lap, sobbing brokenly. I’d never realized until that moment how much slighter Emory was than his father. Standing together, it was easy to mistake them for nearly the same size, but Fox’s was bigger. Not just a few inches taller, but broader at his shoulders. Wider arms, thicker legs…just bigger in a way that made it so painfully obvious that Emory was a halfling.

It was easy to forget with his height. I’d always thought that, aside from his eyes, he looked remarkably human.

But he didn’t. He really didn’t. He looked childlike in that moment, whimpering like a kicked puppy, his face pressed to Fox’s shoulder. I felt like I was intruding on something that I shouldn’t have seen and I started to take a step back but the king shook his head and I rooted to the spot.

“It’s okay,” he breathed the words into Emory’s damp hair, sweat and tears having turned him into a slick mess. “You’re okay. I’ve got you. It’s just me.”

Emory didn’t respond with anything more than a broken heave of air escaping his ragged throat.

I’d never heard the details of what happened at the beach. I knew enough and what I’d heard had infuriated me so much that I’d stopped looking for more details. I didn’t want to know the full extent of what had happened to him. The very thought of it nauseated me, but in that moment, I wondered. It crossed my mind, that question…gods, what had they done to him? What kind of torment could turn a person into…this. Afraid of touch, afraid of his own shadow, afraid to be close to someone. I knew that the chances of finding who had caused this damage was growing slimmer by the second in a city as big as Coryth, but I hoped for it. I would have prayed for it, had I believed, if only because it would give me reason to ask the King to let me deal with them. I’d have made them suffer for every second that he did. By the time I was done, they’d have been begging to be allowed to die.

Fox swept his palms down Emory’s heaving back and I took a careful step closer, crouching nearby so that I was, at least, on eye level with them.

“I’m so sorry, boss,” Fox continued. Boss was a nickname I’d heard them all use for him in the same way they called Atara ‘tiny.’ I’d never used it, if only because it felt too familiar and too…family for me to use, but it seemed most natural from Fox and I came to believe then that he had coined it.
Perhaps when Emory was a child, perhaps when he’d met him (I had to believe Emory had been just as bossy then as he was in the current time.)

It was childlike and Emory sagged against him at it, eyes glassy, lashes wet with tears. He mumbled something that sounded vaguely like, ‘It’s okay,’ but I couldn’t be sure. It was nearly incoherent. He looked exhausted. Drained in ways I had never imagined anyone could be.

“It’s really not,” Fox insisted after a second. “Nothing about any of this is okay. Nothing about the past year has been fucking okay, Em, and that’s not on you. That’s on us. It’s going to get better. I swear it. I promise. I’m going to do better by you.”

It wasn’t right, I thought. It wasn’t Fox’s fault, either. None of it was, except, perhaps the loss of his temper that morning but I couldn’t even blame him for that entirely. Emory had been the catalyst of a lot of turmoil, intentionally or not, and it had bubbled over into everyone he touched. Of course, it was felt closest by those he, himself, was closest to. There had been days when Mila cried for hours and I’d been so extraordinarily angry over it. There’d been nothing I could do for her and the longer she cried, the more it felt like that was my fault when I knew that it wasn’t. I knew it.

So I got angry like Fox had been angry and though I’d never lashed out, I’d done worse in the end by doing nothing at all to fight back when she couldn’t.

It took another minute but Emory lifted himself like it took great energy, half rolling to the side so that he landed upright, legs drawn up to his chest, back to the wall. He took a deep breath, some measure of self-control returning to him. He pressed his face into his knees for a second, lingering there long enough that Fox leaned forward like he was concerned.

“I’m okay,” Emory eventually mumbled. “I just...I need a minute. You should go back inside. It’s Atara’s birthday. You should be there with him.”

Fox opened his mouth to argue but he thought better of it and, instead, he pressed a kiss to the top of Emory’s head while touch was still allowed, and turned to me. “You’ll stay?”

“Of course.”

And then he was gone, slipping back through the door, leaving me with Emory, who was still struggling to regain total control of his labored breathing. “I’m sorry I snapped at you,” I whispered after a minute. “I should have known how you’d react.”

“Like a fucking child?” he snorted. “I hate that I can’t control that anymore. I used to take someone’s attitude problem and laugh it off. Now it cuts like a fucking whip.”

“Low self-esteem will do that to a person,” I remarked. “That’s what it is, isn’t it? I mean, I don’t want to be that guy, kitten, but you’ve lost…everything. The beach and then…” That baby, I almost said. I’d heard about it, but I’d never asked. If he wanted to talk, he’d do it on his own terms, but I’d blundered my way into this fucked up mess. I would have to haul my ass out of it. “That child.” He grimaced. “And now Atara has both the titles you used to carry, they never caught those men, and you’re just…” I gestured to him. “How long can you keep this up, Em? How long can you go on hating like this before it eats you alive?”

“Forever, ideally,” he drawled but he noticed the way I glared at him. I’d been doing a lot of that lately...silent glaring. I must have picked up more from my mother and Danica than I’d thought. “Don’t look at me like that. You know I hate this. I’m tired, Nikita. I’m so fucking tired. I can’t sleep. Nothing tastes good anymore. And I thought...I thought, with you, maybe...but then I just bolted like a prick and you must be furious.”
“Well,” I relented. “Yeah, a little bit.”

Emory flinched, finally lifting his head from where it rested on his knees. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I just...I feel like you deserve better.”

“Better than being beaten, fucked, and left? Oh, definitely.” He flinched again, this time like I’d slapped him, and he started to shuffle away like he intended to leave but I grabbed his arm, ignoring the startled intake of air that I heard before he was staring at me, green eyes wet and glassy, tears still lingering on his cheeks. “I just want you to stay,” I finally bit out. “You don’t have to do...anything else. I can patch myself up. I just need you to talk to me. Can you do that, at least?”

“You’re talking like we’re doing that again,” Emory mumbled, his head cocked to one side, confusion in his lovely features. “Like you want to do that again. That was abusive, Nikita. I crossed so many lines. I was a monster.”

“You’re my monster,” I teased gently and my hand left his arm to move up to his face, thumbing away the remaining evidence of his breakdown. “So yes, I want to do it again. I just want to know that you’ll stay afterward, because I don’t think I can do that again. The after is...really harsh.”

“The drop,” he supplied another new word for me and seemed surprised by the lack of comprehension on my face. “Oh gods, Kita. You really...I knew you hadn’t done it, but I didn’t know you didn’t understand it! Fuck me, I should have asked. I fucked up so bad. I fucked up so--”

I found his lips with my fingers and pressed them there over his mouth, felt him kiss them in the dim light of the empty corridor and I almost laughed. For this being a party, I’d spent a vast majority of it in the dark talking about sex.

In the north, we called that a successful party.

In the south, there were too few assassination attempts for this to be a successful party.

I melted a little bit at that kiss though. It was the gentlest thing he’d ever done to me and he seemed to notice my hesitation or he heard my breath hitch because his hand wrapped around my arm and I felt his mouth move from fingers to palm, from palm to wrist, from wrist to the corner of my elbow. “Stop,” I whined. He did. Immediately. I marveled at that, almost like I hadn’t believed he would stop if I’d said it earlier when he’d been beating the shit out of me. I believed he would have, of course, but this made my stomach flip in the best sort of way. He was quiet, waiting for me to talk, and so I continued. “You can just...assume that I know next to nothing,” I mumbled. I was grateful for the lack of light. It hid the heated flush that rose up my throat to the very tips of my ears.

“Nothing,” he repeated dryly and then, like some sense was dawning over him, he exhaled loudly like I’d punched him in the gut. “Son of a bitch, Nikita, you are not telling me that was your first time.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You might as fucking well have!” He sounded less angry than he did alarmed. “No women? None at all? You were pure as the driven fucking snow until this morning. That’s what you’re saying.”

I hesitated. I could have lied. I wasn’t any good at lying and Emory was a politician by nature. He would have plucked it out like a lutist finding an untuned chord. “…I wouldn’t say pure as snow. Snow is kind of dirty. And women are great, you know, but...sort of squishy up top and a little bit soft for my liking.”
“I…” He sounded like he was going to scold me and then, miraculously and without warning, I heard him laugh. Really laugh, the sort that comes from the belly and reaches your throat and it was beautiful because I’d never heard that from him. “Squishy,” he repeated me and I could feel him shake with it beside me, his legs slipping so that they were extended in front of him and though it should have been humiliating because he was laughing at me, it was gloriously wonderful.

I couldn’t help but laugh with him. “Tristan had a word for it.”

Emory snorted again. “Gods, you don’t even know the word for it. You’re so fucking adorable.”

“I resent that accusation.”

He laughed harder and I found it was infectious and it was life sustaining. I wanted to hear more—needed to, in fact. I reached for him and he caught my hand, lacing his fingers up through mine until he pulled and I landed over his lap, my face against his chest and his hands on the backs of my thighs were I was still deliciously bruised but no longer aching quite so maddeningly.

I kissed him. I shouldn’t have. Not there, not when anyone could have walked out and seen us, but I was riding a high and his hand settled around my throat but he didn’t squeeze. He let me breathe him in, taste the wine that lingered in his mouth. He put honey in it. I’d known that before, but he tasted different when I was able to breathe. I could feel that liquid sweetness on my tongue and he let me kiss him until I was breathless, my fingers curled around his face, my thumbs smoothing over those heated marks beneath his eyes.

“I’ll stay,” he promised, as breathless as I was. “I can’t promise more than that, but I’ll stay.”

That was all I was asking for. With Emory, there needed to be baby steps…small little forward motions in a march toward healing. I shouldn’t have let the words slip through my lips when they came next, but they were there against my tongue, my mouth still lingering against his, pressing little kisses to his lazy smile and I was drunk on touch that I was so frequently denied by him. I could live for little moments like this, I thought. It would make the pain worth it if just once in awhile he could let me in, let me drape over him in his lap, let me kiss him and taste hi, let me feel him against me. I didn’t even care that he was groping my sore ass, long fingers cupping each side, squeezing and kneading until I was panting and hard.

So I shouldn’t have said what I did, but he let me kiss him again and I mumbled them into his mouth like if I fed them to him, he would believe me.

“I love you.”

Emory didn’t miss a beat. He didn’t hesitate. His breath didn’t hitch. He was as natural as a person could be when something so heavy was laid at their feet. I didn’t even care if he returned the sentiment. I only needed him to know that my heart was in his teeth.

“You shouldn’t,” he chided gently. “I’m practically poisonous.”

“I’ll die happy.”

“You’re wretched and you’re a terrible influence,” he sniffed, trying to sound miffed by the entire interaction, but he leaned forward and his teeth caught my ear. “Hey Kita.” He paused and I waited. “I love you, too.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

I've so been enjoying hearing from you guys! Just thought I should say that.

Also, here, have some Tristan. You all seem to enjoy him.

“I don’t see why you have to get it from him,” Mack whined. He’d been whining for the past ten minutes and the past three or four times we’d had this argument over the course of the last few days. “I can make you something for it myself. I can take care of my own business!”

I scowled in his direction, eyes narrowed, cheeks flaming hot. “It’s disgusting,” I argued back. “He said the one he can make is tasteless so I’m trying it. And it isn’t your business. It’s mine.” I stopped then and he halted beside me, nearly stumbling into a laundress that shot him a look that would have boiled his blood had it not already been boiling. His fingers clenched and unclenched. He wasn’t angry with me. I knew that. He was just angry in general and, to be totally truthful, it was a good look on him. His cheeks flushed a lovely shade of red and, after a minute, he raked his hands through his gold curls, giving them an effectively mussed look that almost made me relent. Almost.

Instead, Mack heaved a sigh. “Yeah, I know,” he grumbled. “That doesn’t make you getting it from him any easier. I’d prefer you stay away from him.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re fucking me and not parenting me.” My flippant reply earned me a withering look--all heated eyes and pouty mouth turned into a wicked frown. “Unless you’ve got some daddy fantasy you haven’t filled me in on?” I arched an eyebrow and started walking again but it took Mackenzie a second to force his legs to move. I gave myself a metaphorical pat on the back when he finally fell in step with me again.

The withering look I got was all the answer I really needed on that front, but he gave me more, anyway. “Your father is my boss,” he reminded me. “And he’s the King. Even if that was appealing to me, which it is not, by the way, it would be too weird in this situation. Also, you have two fathers and I know both of them.”

I grinned widely. I’d suspected as much. Mack didn’t care for nicknames in the sexual sense if it wasn’t some sweet term of endearment like that darlin that made my toes curl in my boots even if we weren’t naked...and we were naked a lot lately. After that night at his flat, there wasn’t a surface in my bedroom he hadn’t had me pinned to, squirming and squealing, with his tongue, his fingers, or his cock buried in my ass or my mouth. He’d had me in the room that I had meetings with the Elders in, too, bent over that great table that looked like a split tree, the underside still rough with bark and
the legs like great, twisted branches sticking out from the bottom. I’d spent an afternoon in the
gardens with him pinned to the wall of the old fortress with my legs wrapped around his hips and his
hand over my mouth to keep anyone nearby from hearing me scream.

It was like once we’d started, there was no shortage of places that appealed to us and neither of us
could keep our hands off the other. That morning had been in the early hours when he’d gotten off
duty for the night, slipped into my room, and I’d woken up with my knees carefully draped over his
shoulders and his tongue pleading for entrance to my body.

And so I’d spent the morning, back arched, twisting in my sheets, brought to finish over and over
until I cried, until I was too spent to go on, until I was limp and boneless beneath him, incapable of
thought. I relished in the way he flipped me over onto my belly like a ragdoll and took me anyway,
overstimulated and so full it hurt.

_Do you want me to stop?_ He asked it over and over again, at every point and stage, hands sweeping
down my sides or over my belly or into the well of my back where he would press his knuckles into
my spine while he waited for an answer and sometimes I wanted him to. Sometimes the word was in
my mouth, heavy on my tongue, pressed against my teeth and I’d swallow it because I really _didn’t_. I
didn’t want to stop. For him. And for me. Because the more I pushed it, the better the end would be--
fuller, more vivid, more _real_ even if I felt like I was floating somewhere outside of my own head.

I never told him to stop, not after that time in his flat, and because he trusted me implicitly, he never
felt the need to apologize for the bruises on my hips that were shaped like his hands or the bitemarks
he left on my collar or the love bites that peppered my throat when he spent hours just _kissing_ me.

And gods above, he could kiss. He could steal my breath with one brush of his mouth against mine,
have me ready to get on my knees and beg for him with another, and professing my undying
devotion to him before I’d even passed into the next heartbeat.

So I never told him to stop and I _never_ asked him to finish anywhere but inside of me because I liked
that deep throb and the stickiness on my thighs that followed him pulling out, leaving me aching and
wet. That was why we had to visit Tristan, after all, despite Mack’s intense distrust of anything
related to Immara. It didn’t matter that Tristan hadn’t arrived with an army of slaves or even a single
servant. It didn’t matter that he’d broken ties with his organization in Paikea or that he’d become
quite chummy with Nikita Novak, who Mack _was_ fond of. None of it mattered. He liked to argue
that it was because he didn’t trust the fact that he was an alchemist, but truth be told, he had a deep-
seated dislike of anything that came out of Immara because of the _slaves._

I understood that, at least, to some degree. What I didn’t understand was that, despite obvious
evidence that gave credence to Tristan Brighton being a decent human being, Mackenzie’s opinion
on him hadn’t changed and he had no desire to get to know him any better than he did. He’d told me
that Emory had the right of it not letting Tristan examine him. I hadn’t pointed out that my brother
didn’t let _anyone_ but Mack examine him...with the exception of Nikki, of course, who had definitely
thoroughly examined him. I’d found that out just the day after my birthday and Emory’s meltdown
during the ball.

My parents, for what it was worth, took it all with a grain of salt. Whatever disapproval Fox felt
about Mack, he kept to himself after I’d put him in his place, and though I couldn’t imagine they
were thrilled that I often stumbled out of my room with him in tow or insisted on draping myself over
him when he was supposed to be working, they didn’t say anything _obvious_. Cyril, of course, had
smiled a little bit and ruffled my hair...said something along the lines of, “I’m glad you’re happy,
tiny.” Fox had tried a lecture—something about the two of us being in different places in our lives, but
he hadn’t openly denounced anything. I suppose, after his fight with Emory, that he was trying to
wriggle his way back into my Lheiro’s good graces and that included not flouting his disapproval of someone who had saved my brother’s life.

Maybe it was manipulative of me or cruel of me not to care, but the way I saw it, Mackenzie wasn’t going anywhere. Not for a long time. Maybe not ever. The sooner they became acclimated to that idea, the better it would be.

I stopped at the alchemist’s door, Mack grumbling beside me, just as Nikita stumbled out, a jar of something pale yellow in his hand. It had taken almost a week for the war paint to wear off after the party, but it was gone by then and, without it, I could see that he looked…tired. His eyes were shadowed with purplish bruises and he looked paler than usual. “Sick?” I asked when he looked at me, two-toned eyes wide and a little bit bloodshot like maybe he hadn’t slept the night before or he’d spent it throwing up.

He held the jar a little bit tighter and forced a rigid smile. “Uh, yeah,” he relented after a second. “Just…” I could almost see him thinking and I realized, then, that he was lying through his teeth and he was terrible at it. I was terrible at it, too. Or, at least, I was terrible compared to my brother, but Nikita was really bad. His shoulders sagged and he rubbed his eyes with a small fist. “I have a back…thing.”

“That bothering you again?” Mack asked, quirking an eyebrow and Nikita shrugged. Then he tapped his fingers against the lid and gave a quick nod before hastily excusing himself and disappearing down the corridor.

“He was lying, wasn’t he?” I asked after a second, my fist balled up and held aloft above Tristan’s door. “That bothering you again?” Mack asked, quirking an eyebrow and Nikita shrugged. Then he tapped his fingers against the lid and gave a quick nod before hastily excusing himself and disappearing down the corridor.

“He was lying, wasn’t he?” I asked after a second, my fist balled up and held aloft above Tristan’s door. It was a fair bit away from the other apartments, as per his request and because Corian nobility tended to find Immarans to be distasteful. Nikita was walking back toward the wing where visiting gentry stayed and Mack was watching, head tipped to one side.

“Oh, absolutely,” he agreed. There wasn’t much to be said about it. Nikita’s business was his own and speculation, I imagined, would be had later when we weren’t standing at Tristan’s doorstep.

I knocked twice and was lifting my fist to knock a third when it swung open, seemingly of its own volition, and I practically stumbled inside. Mack hesitated. “You can wait out here,” I grumbled and he shot me a look. “I’ll be fine. This makes you uncomfortable. Stay out here.”

It didn’t take much for him to relent that fact and he knew, in the long run, that if he forced himself into that dimly lit room and spent the entire time glowering over my shoulder, that I’d be irritated with his behavior and even more irritated with his lack of regard for his own feelings.

I was the one with the ability to get pregnant. It was, as I’d pointed out to him, my business. My body. My decision. The fact that he acknowledged it, even with all of his bitching and moaning, delighted me in a way that made my cheeks flush and gave me a strong desire to bolt from the room, kiss him, and then return to what I was doing. I opted to ignore that urge in favor of looking around me.

I had never been in Tristan Brighton’s quarters. I imagined most people hadn’t. The gentry thought of him as an expensive jester—there to perform tricks with his little ball of blue light. I couldn’t see many of them visiting him, even if they could have used his help. Nikita was an odd one out—not really Corian either…a Rider savage from the wild north.

I’d expected the epitome of hedonism and opulence, though. What I got were books. Stacks and stacks of books on every surface, all of them well worn and studied. Some were sitting on top of rolls of parchment with neat, clinical handwriting scrawled over it. There were musty looking tomes that looked centuries old written in languages I didn’t even recognize. There were newer books, their...
leather binding still fresh with glossy, gold embossed letters on the spines. There were handwritten journals, stitched together with catgut, covered in meticulous notes. There were filled bookshelves, stuffed floor to ceiling with reading material, diagrams on the wall--I even recognized the one that Mack had done for him pinned above a desk.

There were others, too. Lierians and humans alike, a massive looking reptile with scale markings near it that indicated it was the size of a horse, an assortment of mammals I recognized from sight and some I had only seen in books, and then there were the jars. Jars that held preserved creatures--frogs and lizards, a piglet, a cat, what looked like various stages of human fetuses, all of them stuffed into these quarters that, when empty, looked quite large, but packed with all of Tristan’s things, seemed smaller, somehow. It was dimly lit, too, the curtains drawn tight so that the only light that bled through the area was that given off by the candelabras on the walls, which held thick, black wax candles that looked almost purple the closer I peered at them.

Sitting on a chair was his bag of surgical tools. I recognized that, at least, but the rest...the rest seemed so extraordinarily out of character for someone I’d previously thought was so obscenely cheerful.

“Ah, you decided to come!” Tristan exclaimed, finally appearing through a doorway. He wasn’t wearing the typical black coat, cut in Immran fashion so that the sleeves capped just over his shoulders, which were always covered in that black cape embroidered with snakes in blue stitching. He was wearing normal clothes. Black trousers and a white shirt pulled over his head, the sleeves rolled up past his elbows. A necklace hung around his throat that I hadn’t noticed before--a simple bronze pendant with a clasp on a leather cord.

He gestured me deeper into the room to where a desk was located in one corner. It was remarkably free of clutter, unlike the rest of the place, and instead held a series of glass flasks and bottles on stands, some of which had candles burning under them so that the contents bubbled. He plucked one up, full of a transparent liquid the color of honey, and stuck a cork into the top. “One tablespoon after the...act,” he tactfully explained. “Should prevent any unwanted tattooed offspring running around the Keep before the King is ready to be a grandparent.” He fussed with the necklace when I took the bottle.

“And if it’s...” I started hesitantly and Tristan watched, his eyes stuck on me. They were otherworldly, that blue. So bright that they shone like gemstones in the lighting. There was no way they were natural--some side-effect of magic, I thought, but they proved a distraction and I had to swallow hard to get the rest of my humiliating question out of my mouth. On second thought, now that I was standing there with him, Mackenzie had been the better option for this particular tea. “If it’s...more than...”

Tristan snorted. “Take it each time,” he chuckled in response. “I can make more. Just let me know before you’re out. It has to steep.”

I nodded quickly, face burning, suddenly very eager to be anywhere but under his gaze, but I kept looking down at his desk. A shard of what I thought looked like quartz was sitting at the corner, protected inside a glass jar that, unlike the jars on the shelves, was not full of liquid. It just...sat there. I reached without thought and he caught my wrist, fingers like ice, before I made contact with the lid. I jumped backward, surprised at my own actions more than his. It was his space, after all. I was the intruder. I had no right to touch what didn’t belong to me and he was a guest of my family. I should have known the boundaries, but it had looked so innocuous. The longer I’d stared at it, the more I’d thought I could hear it...like it was...spilling laughter over lips just beyond auditory range but so that the vibration could still be felt. Like remembering sound rather than hearing it and I’d wanted to touch it.
“I’m sorry,” I practically squeaked the words, timid as a mouse all of a sudden and Tristan released
my arm from his cold-iron grip.

Then he shook his head, that curtain of scarlet hair falling in front of his eyes, and he plucked the jar
up. “Oh, it’s not that I mind,” he assured me. “It’s just...important. If I broke it, I’d only have myself
to be upset with, yes? But you, that’s a different story, Your Grace.”

“Atara,” I corrected. “I shouldn’t have touched it. It’s not mine. I didn’t--”

And he laughed. It was the sort of laugh that came from deep in his chest and lit up his face in a way
that was almost disarming. He had a sort of charm about him, Tristan did. Mack didn’t see it beyond
his prejudices against Immarans but I saw it. It was hard to believe he was anything but good-natured
or well-meaning when he laughed like that. “It’s a curious little thing. Very rare,” he explained when
the laughter died off.

“It’s a rock,” I deadpanned, leaning back when he twisted the jar open and turned it over so that the
quartz spilled out into his palm. It was light blue, seemingly harmless looking, and it caught the light
so that it refracted into a dozen colors against his fingers. Pretty, but generally worthless, I thought.
Quartz was not rare in Coria. It was all over the glens, sprouting out of cliff sides like trees. “A pretty
rock, sure, but it’s a rock.”

“It’s a memory crystal,” he drawled. “My mentor at the College gave it to me. Would you like to see
how it works?”

I was admittedly curious. I briefly considered Mack outside the door, not-so-patiently waiting on me,
but when I reached for the stone that time, Tristan held his hand out eagerly like he was feeding a
horse and his childlike enthusiasm was utterly fetching. It spread like a virus from him to me and I
closed my fingers around it. It, like him, was cold to the touch and he turned my hand up, the rock
sitting in my palm, and that blue light that he carried beneath his skin illuminated the room around us,
moving from his fingertips to the quartz.

It sort of filled the stone, throbbing like a heartbeat inside of it before it blossomed outward and an
image flickered to life in the glow. A boy--no, I thought, he’s grown. A man with hair the color of
chestnuts and Lierian eyes--pale, seawater green. He grinned and I started, breath hitching, eyes wide
as saucers as I stared down at it. It moved. Not a lot, just him looking up and grinning and then
taking off in a full sprint while we--it--chased after him through woods with trees as wide as houses,
moss hanging from the branches, and strange, flickering lights that lingered in the leaves.

“What…” I started breathlessly, awe and wonder in my face, my heart pounding in my chest. Magic,
I thought to myself. I’m holding magic in my hands. I’d never been so close to it, aside from when
Tristan had examined me. “Who is that? How did you put him in there?!”

Tristan’s nose wrinkled in amusement and he leaned over. “He’s not in there.” As soon as he said it,
the image flickered and he was just there again, that man with the seawater eyes, and then we were
running down that same path on repeat. I waited and it did it again like looped ribbon being run
through someone’s fingers and I was watching it slide back to the start over and over again. “It’s a
memory. My memory, specifically. I can put any of them in there, if they’re strong enough, and
watch them like that or show someone or just...have them there.” He paused and held a hand out and
that blue light flickered back to his fingers and drained from the stone in my hand, returning it to
normal quartz.

“His name is Ridley,” he added. “We were...close. He stayed behind when I left. There were places
in Immara he could go that I could not follow him to and he wanted to help me find Sebastian.”
“He’s not human,” I pointed out. “His eyes are too pale. The rest of him looks human, but the eyes are off. What is he? A halfling?”

“A quadroon,” he supplied the word with a wave of his hand. “His grandmother was Lierian.”

I shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. I knew the state of most of the Lierians in Immara. Suddenly and all at once everything Mack said felt too real, too raw, and I put the stone down gently. “So he’s a slave,” I eventually said flatly and I heard Tristan exhale heavily though I didn’t look up from the stone.

“He is not. Not anymore.” That left the ugly part unsaid: That he was. He had been, at one time, and I thought back on what I’d seen of him in those brief few seconds of Tristan’s memory. Happy, I thought. He’d looked happy with that grin spreading over his face, reaching up to his eyes and I realized then that he’d been looking back over his shoulder at Tristan because I was seeing, evidently, through his eyes. Into his memories.

So I pushed. I shouldn’t have, because the tone in his voice had a lilt of sadness in it, but I did because curiosity was always a hunger of mine. Before the beach and my brother’s role as the unintentional bomb that went off in my family, I’d wanted to visit these places. I’d seen Karinus once, as a child, but Karinus was not the Vale. It was not the heart of Immara—a seat of the slave trade, yes, and I’d seen that when we were there, but it was not deep in the forests of the old world like the Vale was. I’d only seen the edges of those forests as a boy, dark and shrouded constantly in a heavy blanket of fog and mist. I’d always wanted to see more. Immara was beautiful. Savage, but beautiful.

“But he was,” I insisted. “He was a slave. Your slave, I imagine?”

Tristan flinched, cringing away from the topic like it was physically painful for him to address, but he did not deny it. “Not...quite,” he explained, plucking up an empty bottle and fixing it in the place where the one that was now safely in my pocket had been a moment earlier. “He was assigned to me, but he belonged to my patron. I needed an assistant. Ridley had been taught to read by his previous master. I required literacy, for obvious reasons. I’d never put much thought into slavery until him. It was just...it existed, Atara. I grew up with it and most...most slaves are treated well.”

“That’s bullshit,” I snarled back, suddenly angry. Not at him, specifically. I understood he couldn’t help it the way that Nikita couldn’t help the self-deprecating jokes he made about how his father treated him. It was life there and though I may have found it wrong on more levels than I cared to count, it was not something I could afford to dwell on. I could not fix Immara. Previous kings, all better than me, had tried, and they’d failed. Still, ‘treated well’ rubbed me the wrong way. “Treated well would mean they had the freedom to make their own decisions, Tristan!”

He winced again, but he kept trudging forward. “Is it? They’re fed. They have a warm bed to sleep in. A poor man in Immara can sell himself to a Lord to feed his family or put his children through school. So is it worse than inescapable poverty?”

“They die without collars on their throats.”

He chuckled at that and leaned back in his chair. “That’s what Rid said,” he mused softly. “That he’d rather die free in a gutter from some wasting disease than fat and in bed with a collar on. At least the gutter was a choice, he told me. It took me years to understand and, to some degree, I still don’t see the difference, but I figure he knows better than I do, so…” He shrugged. “So I bought him from my patron and I got him his papers.”

“You bought him?” I was appalled. No, worse. I was sickened. I simultaneously wanted to reach
across the desk and punch him in the mouth and also vomit on the floor. Slavery had been wiped out of Coria before my birth, or so I’d thought. Evidently, there were still people like Elizabeth Glenning running illegal human trading games, but it was mostly gone. I couldn’t imagine growing up in a world where people were treated like livestock, where an alchemist could simply purchase an assistant.

Tristan rubbed his fingers over his face. “It’s not like that. He wanted to run, but we were in the Vale, Atara. Do you know what that means? When a slave that looks like Ridley ends up on the open market in the Vale...it’s like sending your cattle to a butcher. It’s the end of the line. He’d have ended up shackled to a bed in a reeking brothel, fucked until he starved to death or died from disease and shackled to a bed was where he started. If he ran from the Vale? He never would have made it past the border. They would have chased him down with hunting dogs and let them eat him rather than drag him back. So I bought him to give him papers so that he had a chance.”

My heart was still hammering and I tried to imagine that--to imagine Ridley with the seawater eyes running through that same set of trees, chased by a pack of hungry animals, torn and ripped and swallowed.

Immara, Emory had told me once, is a country built on the bones of our people. Their blood is in the water that feeds the trees in those ancient forests. It’s soaked into the cobblestones. It’s caked between the bricks of the buildings.

Ridley, I thought. One of mine. One of mine because I was their leader and something curdled in my stomach, nauseating and hot, because how many hundreds of thousands of Ridleys were there in Immara? I was failing them all. We had been failing them for centuries.

My mouth felt dry, but I asked anyway. “And then you left when he left? But you said he went looking for Sebastian.”

“He stayed with me for awhile. We both left the Vale. I abandoned my patron. My father wrote that my brother was dead, but I looked for him with magic and we went to the crypt in Karinus--”

“You’re from Karinus?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Indeed. And his crypt is empty.”

“I’ve been to Karinus. Small city.” He nodded in agreement. “But Ridley went with you? You...you care for him.”

Tristan chuckled and kicked weakly at his desk. “I loved him,” he supplied. “But...he is human and I am...” He gestured to himself and huffed, blowing upward so that his hair lifted from his eyes. “It won’t work, not in the long run. It ends in heartbreak regardless. While we were in Karinus, I heard about your brother’s...condition. I wrote to your father. He wrote back.” The alchemist stood, stretching so that his joints popped down his spine. “Ridley went north to Paikea. He’ll be welcome among the Sons. Me, on the other hand...” He snorted. “I abandoned my patron. My life is forfeit if I ever go back to Paikea.”

“How does one carry on a relationship with a slave? Isn’t that...rape?” I didn’t move from where I was, determined to untangle the knot of things that were now sitting in my head. I’d never come here with intentions of getting to know Tristan. I’d had no real interest in it, curious as he was. His presence made Mackenzie uncomfortable and I was almost always with Mack, so any friendship I developed with Tristan was bound to strain one way or another. On top of that, there was the subject of his...status. I hadn’t yet determined what, exactly, he’d been crafted into when he’d gone to the College and I suspected, ‘Hey, are you a monster?’ was probably a little bit premature of a question
given our current relationship.

Tristan smacked his lips together. “Indeed, it would have been, had I slept with him when he was wearing a collar,” he admitted. “But I did not. He was not mine to sleep with. My patron would have taken him out into the yard and whipped him raw. Ridley was his to sleep with.” He grumbled a little bit, eyes narrowed, like the memory woke up something furious. He set about returning the crystal to the jar, sealing it tight, and setting it back down on his desk. “He expressed an interest in me before the collar was off, but I assumed at the time it was because I was kind to him. I fed him. At first, I just needed him healthy, but then I started to see him as a person. An equal. That’s when my views on slavery got...muddled.”

“There’s nothing really muddled about it, Tristan. You’re free or you’re not. It’s right or it’s wrong,” I argued and he hummed, pulling a face, and I could tell he was working over that ‘poverty’ argument again, but he didn’t broach it.

He heaved a sigh instead. “I can’t really say anything about it,” he started, cocking his head to one side, still watching me carefully. “I don’t know anything about being a slave. I suspect, Atara, neither do you.”

And on that, he had me. My mouth opened like I wanted to point out that I, in fact, was Lierian, and that there were people around me that would have sooner seen me tied naked to a table, ready for breeding, than living in the Corian Keep. That, however, wasn’t slavery. Not even close. “Is he going to come here?” I asked instead, letting him lead me toward the door. “Ridley, I mean? If he finds your brother, will he come back with him?”

Tristan smiled, but there was no joy in the expression. “I hope not, little prince. I hope he finds someone like him. I hope they settle down in a cute little cottage far from any big city. I hope they have a dozen little babies or that they adopt some lost little orphan. I hope his heart is so full that it’s nearly bursting but it never breaks and I hope he forgets about me. I hope he forgets about it all and that the scars fade and he’s gloriously, beautifully happy because he deserves that.”

Even if Ridley’s heart didn’t break, mine did a little bit when he said that because the first memory that Tristan pulled out of his mind to show me had been Ridley and because to hope so badly for someone to have all of those things was love as deep and as wide as a sea. It was the sort of thing I’d write about later when the sun started to set and I was alone in my bedroom--about an alchemist I knew and the freed slave that he loved so much he was willing to let go.

That was hard, letting go. It was hard to even think about.

“Maybe that’s not what he wants, Tristan,” I pointed out quietly as I backed out of the door and he looked down at me, that same sad smile on his face.

“Oh, I know it isn’t,” he admitted softly. “That’s why I have to hope for it.”

I felt Mack’s arm slip around my waist and I waved meagerly to Tristan as the door shut, sealing him away from us, and Mack turned me to face him. He cupped my face in his hands, thumbing over the lines on my cheeks. “You’re okay? It took you awhile.”

“We were talking,” I mumbled.

“So I gathered.” He kissed my forehead and then both of my eyelids. “Get what you need?”

“Mhm. You know, you should really give him a chance. He’s nice.” Mack wrinkled his nose, half in disgust and half in disbelief, and he started walking, me tucked against his side. “And I think he’s
kind of lonely here.”

Mack opened his mouth like he was going to say something but the door at the end of the hall burst open and Ilyia spilled out, sliding on the marble, lurching forward. Running, I realized, and I stopped, alarm spreading over my face like wildfire. I felt Mack’s hand go to the cutlass on his hip and he moved around me, smoothly sliding between me and Ilyia, but she stopped just short, out of breath and panting laboriously. “Your Grace,” she heaved, sinking to her knees, partly in reverence of my position and partly, I thought from sheer exhaustion. “I’ve brought them. I’ve brought them here. I found them in Valmont. Lady Natalya had them in her dungeons. She was preparing to bring them to Coryth next week for court with your father on charges of theft, but when I showed her the drawings—” She held up the aforementioned drawings, ones my father had commissioned after the beach, based on detail I’d delivered.

I recognized them. Of course, I did, and my stomach dropped. I felt Mack’s fingers curl over my shoulders and behind us, as if he’d heard the frantic running and the rumble of armor when Ilyia hit her knees, Tristan stepped out into the corridor. That black cape was back over his shoulders, bunched at one side and tucked into his belt, the hood hanging in a dangerous point down to the middle of his back. His bright eyes watched us like a hawk’s and he strode forward, staying slightly behind me, but I could smell the ozone crackle of magic around him.

“I brought them. Lady Natalya is on her way to meet your father and the Lord Second now,” Ilyia continued.

“I’ll go collect your brother, Your Grace?” Tristan offered quietly.

I shook my head. “No,” I breathed, trying to fight the urge to vomit on Ilyia as she stumbled to her feet. “No, you’d make it worse. Mackenzie?”

He nodded briskly, sliding easily from the role of my lover into the role of a palace guard. “Shall I tell him his presence is required? How much information should I divulge?”

“All of it. And no, his presence is not required. If he does not wish to face them, he should not have to. Perhaps find the young Lord Novak first,” I suggested gently and Mack nodded curtly, but I didn’t miss the glare he shot Tristan. I was sure he’d have rather stayed with me, but the bottom line was that Tristan frightened my brother and this was going to terrify him enough. Mack, at least, was stable. He still resented that Tristan was at my side. “Please, Ilyia, have them brought to the throne room for judgement immediately.”

She wobbled on her feet but managed a bow, still breathless, and disappeared in a whirl of white metal and leather. Tristan put a cold hand in the middle of my back. “Steady now,” he soothed. “You hyperventilate and pass out on me and Mackenzie Glenning will try to have me assassinated in my sleep. I’d be forced to try to kill him back. It’ll get awkward. Just imagine the state dinners.” He sighed like it was a great effort and I knew if I looked up, he’d be rolling his eyes dramatically. He was attempting to ease the sudden anxiety that rolled in my stomach like a ball of lead, tossed about by bile and the honeyed peaches that Mackenzie had hand fed me that morning, licking syrup off of my mouth in the process.

I took a deep breath as he suggested, grateful for the stabilizing influence of his quiet words and the knowledge that there was a well of magic standing at my back. Nothing and nobody in Coria could hurt me, so long as Tristan Brighton called me an ally.

“I can do this,” I breathed. “I can do this, right?”

“You can do this.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

Omg so many comments last time! I love you guys so much ahhhhhh!
I promise we're getting some retribution very soon.

I’d expected rage from Emory. What I got was sickness. It was the steady loss of color from his cheeks while I watched, standing there with him between Mack and I. Watching him drain like that was a distant second to the raw agony that seared through my body from my shoulders to my thighs. True to his word, he hadn’t walked away again. He stayed, his arms around his knees, and he talked when I asked him to. It was rarely about the situation at hand. I think he had to separate himself from that for fear of turning permanently into the monster he thought he could be.

Instead, he told me about how Fox had taught them to swim in the pond in the gardens, Emory’s arms and legs wrapped around him and how he hadn’t cared much for the swimming. He’d cared that, in this one instance, Fox could lift him up and hold him without pain because the water made him buoyant. So he’d held tight and feigned terror, face pressed into the curve of his father’s shoulder, hands digging into roping scar tissue that rippled over his skin. It was hard for me to imagine him seeking out touch like that, desperate for a relationship with a man that Cyril had turned into a hero in all of his stories.

He told me about that, too. About raspberry tarts while I spread that yellow salve into my skin, hissing at the sting that turned quickly into cooling relief, about Fox at fifteen, walking on top of the walls of the gardens, arms out for balance while Cyril scolded him from below while I wriggled and winced back into my clothes, about wildly and deeply he’d loved him before he’d ever met him and how when the other children in his tribe called him fatherless he’d screamed and thrown rocks, gnashing his teeth (I was buckling the belts back to my clothes, flinching at the tightening of leather.) I came to understand their relationship a little bit more in those moments—Fox and Emory…Aymori, he’d once explained. Fox in the tongue of his people.

I wondered what Fox would have done for him, had he watched the color drain from his face knowing he’d been laughing just a moment earlier—something he so rarely did. Would he have looked desperately to Mackenzie for some guidance about what to do in a situation like this, like I did? Or would he have known to just speak, the way that Mack knew to just speak.

“You don’t have to do this, Emory,” the healer told him quietly, voice steady and gentle, leaning on the doorframe of Emory’s bedroom. “Nobody is going to fault you if you can’t look at them. Nobody is going to blame you if you aren’t there. Atara can handle this without you. I know he can.”
He didn’t react, not at first. He just retreated deeper into that shell he’d built, his arms wrapped around himself, hands rubbing his biceps. He was unreadable like that, aside from the nausea that I could see making his face that greyish color and his skin shine with a thin sheen of sweat. I normally relished in that...in seeing his arms damp when his fists hit the bed beside my face, looming after me after beating, sliding into me before I was totally ready for it so that the stretch was deliciously painful but never too much. He didn’t want to break me, he’d said, mouth pressed to the base of my neck, buried so deep I swear I could feel him in my belly.

I didn’t like that shine in that moment, but I knew what it preceded and I reached quickly for the wash basin on the table by his door, dumped the water unceremoniously into the empty fireplace closest to me, and held it under his face just as the contents of his stomach came up.

Emory clutched at the basin, arms trembling, legs wobbling, and heaved until nothing came up, until he was spitting blood from a raw throat, hair slick. Mack took a backward step toward the door. “I’ll tell Atara he can’t do this,” he whispered more to me than to Emory but it jarred the prince enough to finally garner a coherent reaction beyond vomiting and shaking like he’d been beaten.

“No,” he snarled, spitting one final time and pushing the basin back toward me. I grimaced and set it down, grateful to be...far, far away from it.

Emory fumbled for the whiskey at my hip, swished it through his mouth, and swallowed while Mack stared. Lierian eyes were large--larger than humans and reflective like cats, especially in the dark. Emory said his senses were sharper than mine, all the way down to touch, but it was difficult to see in him. His eyes weren’t quite as large as Mack’s or Atara’s. They were decidedly more human, save the color, and that was so incredibly obvious in that moment. Mack’s eyes were like dinner plates set in his face, wide and surprised, grey in the same way a mirror is grey. I’d never thought about mirrors having their own color until I’d met him--that whirling, undefinable silvery color.

Emory insisted again. “No, I’m going,” he pushed, grasping the short-sleeve overcoat that hung by his door. It was red and black leather armor, Fox’s colors, and had the Bordelon sigil stitched into the breast. Each button on it was delicately engraved with the symbol of Coryth--a circle split at the top, curving back out and around itself. Beneath it was a layer of mail. I’d seen Atara in his his, with the additional steel plating on his shoulders, indicative of the Crown Prince with his own sigil burned into the metal.

Armor, I thought to myself. Armor when he’s so surrounded by guards that only the blackest treason could have ever pried him from their grip or caused him harm, but he still put it on. It was telling and Mack stole a glance in my direction like he noticed it too, but neither of us said anything. If real armor on top of the grief he wore in plates around himself made him feel better, then so be it. I could live with that.

“Are you sure you want to do this, kitten?” I asked as we walked. Our little threesome must have looked dangerous--a Rider, a prince in armor, and a royal guard--because everyone moved out of our way. “I can go for you. I can deal with this.”

He looked bigger with his gear on...not as slight as I’d realized he was--no longer just long limbs and wickedly long fingers. Emory looked almost the way that Atara sometimes described him--regal, charming, full of an indescribable power that swelled up and out of him, but his face gave away that he still felt sick and he shook his head sharply. “I want to see them,” he insisted. “I want to see how Atara chooses to lead.”

On his other side, Mack clearly hesitated. I imagined it was, of course, because he loved Atara fiercely and the idea of walking Emory into the throne room to judge his ability to lead felt...somehow dishonest.
Emory, it seemed, sensed it, too. “Ugh, you two are nauseatingly cute,” he grumbled. “I say one thing about him and you’re ready to throw yourself between us like a guard dog. So let me say this once, Mack.”

We stopped, just on the other side of the throne room door. Fox was not far from us with a few members of the council, Elizabeth Glenning included, in a heated discussion. I spared them only a glance as Mack took a hesitant step back from Emory like he was appropriately afraid of the eldest prince’s penchant for violence.

If only he knew.

“You can fuck him, love him, marry him. Shit, you can have sweet little babies for all I care,” Emory told him and Mack blanched. I couldn’t help the way my lips curved into a smile at the horror that crossed the healer’s face like babies were the very last thing on his mind at the moment. “But you don’t come between me and my brother. That’s family and I don’t care if you’re with him for the rest of his life, if you’ve got our surname tacked onto your papers, if your raising babies with his eyes and your smile. You do not put yourself between him and me.” And then he shot me a look, like I was somehow now involved in this entire scenario. “And neither do you.”

The smile died and I felt my heart lurch a little bit because he’d included me in this future scenario. I wanted to be angry because we were supposed to be a secret. I wanted the heated flush on my cheeks to be something closer to frustration than adoration. I knew, of course I knew, that Mack and Atara were aware of my relationship with Emory. There was precious little that Atara wasn’t aware of anymore, but I trusted the young prince implicitly, if only because he’d seen me stumbling out of Emory’s room once a few days earlier, wearing love bites on my neck, collar still unlaced, and he’d simply made a zippering motion across his mouth and walked right back into his bedroom with a bottle of wine and not a word said.

I liked Atara. I didn’t know him, not nearly as much as I would have liked to, but I liked him.

Emory pushed through the door into the throne room with Mack on his heels and I politely extricated myself from their company to make my way over to the King, who was snarling something in Elizabeth’s general direction and she snapped back just as quickly. “Execution is reserved for the most wicked of heretics!” she argued vehemently, red-faced, fists balled up at her side. “Surely, you can’t possibly intend to let your child sit in judgement of these people. He’s biased.”

“We’re all biased,” I heard Cyril drawl and I had to lean around the King to see him, tiny as ever, pressed tightly into Fox’s side. He looked tired, I thought, or perhaps like he’d been crying. His cheeks were raw looking and his little nose was red. His eyes were impossibly large and the clearest blue. He looked almost childlike, if not for the adult proportions to him and the way he spoke with an adult’s convictions. “Not a single person that can sit up there and pass judgement would be neutral.”

“They’ll do their stint on the post like anyone convicted of those crimes would do and we’ll all move on from this revolting episode. Maybe Emory can take his position back. Gods know he’s better at it than his brother.”

Fox cringed, but the fact of the matter was that she was right on the latter point, at least. Even I could see that Atara was woefully unprepared to lead, but that was hardly the important part of the conversation. It was the way she spoke that grated my nerves, like she was equal to the two men she was addressing...like Fox couldn’t grind her under his boots if he so chose to do so. It would cost him greatly, of course. Elizabeth Glennning was the wealthiest member of Coria’s noble class, save Fox himself, and the city she presided over in the glens was almost as big as Coryth and sitting on a vast mineral deposit of raw, untapped money in the form of gemstones and precious metal.
The King’s voice was quiet when he spoke next. “It’s over, Elizabeth. Atara and I will handle them as we see fit. Together, as they are of both Corian and Lierian descent, and there will be no further discourse on the matter.”

“The Lierians will call for blood,” she practically shouted. “They will kill them! Execution is reserved for--”

“For heretics,” I finally drawled, rolling my eyes and flicking my hair off of my face with a casual swipe of my hand. “We heard you the first time. Your Majesty, if she is bothering you, I would be more than happy to remove her.”

She’d always ground my nerves with her comments about mongrels and savages, like Atara and Emory were somehow less than people for being Lierian, and her argument against killing them really stuck in my teeth. My heart picked up a little bit, racing in my chest, because I still didn’t know the exact details of what had happened to Emory that night at the beach, but I wanted blood and I wasn’t Lierian. I was human, all the way down to the core, and if it were up to me, I’d have flayed them alive.

Elizabeth’s eyes only narrowed venomously and she sneered. “What would a savage from the north know about law and order? The pets you keep, Fox.” She clicked her tongue then and I heard Fox heave a dramatic sigh beside me as she finally started walking away.

“She is the most infuriating person I’ve ever had the misfortune of meeting,” Cyril mumbled. “I can’t believe a miserable bitch like that could produce someone like--” He stopped short, eyes wide, staring at me. I arched an eyebrow. “I can pretend you didn’t say it and keep playing ignorant, Your Grace. I have suspicions of my own.” Cyril laughed nervously in response, his arms still locked around Fox’s elbow.

“I can pretend you didn’t say it and keep playing ignorant, Your Grace. I have suspicions of my own.” Cyril laughed nervously in response, his arms still locked around Fox’s elbow. I turned my attention to the King. “Will you execute them?”

“Me? No,” he breathed, his shoulders sagging and his head shaking to confirm his words. “I’ve been down this road. Emory could drag them out there himself and slaughter them with his own two hands. It won’t make him feel any better. It won’t fix anything.” I knew that. He knew that I knew that because he knew about Milena and he knew about what I’d done when I’d found the man responsible for what had happened to her. My father had told him in warning. In the north, the story’s intention would have been for him to drag Emory up out of the muck he was mired in, smack him on the ass, and tell him to get going back to normal.

In the south, it came across as a cautionary tale about what not to do to your child struggling with crippling depression and combat fatigue.

Cyril continued for him when he pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache blossoming behind his eyes. “Atara will,” he supplied me with more information. “The Lierians have a ritual when a member of our line comes of age. It’s to determine the parentage of the next generation of Infinito. They believe that ritual was stolen from them when those boys assaulted Emory. That’s...the blackest kind of treason to the Nation. That ritual is the most sacred aspect of our belief system.”

“Ritual,” Fox snorted, laughter spilling from his mouth, obviously sarcastic. “Call it what it is, champ.”

I did not understand. I knew precious little of southern customs and the Lierians themselves were notoriously secretive. Up until Cyril’s marriage to the King, the only Lierians ever seen in a city were former slaves freed when Fox came to power, either born into collars or poached so young that they didn’t remember their lives before humanity had them in its bitter clutches. Emory did not speak about Lierian rituals or religion.
So it was Fox who finally laid the whole horrific thing out in front of me like a body for dissection. “The Nation,” he said through his teeth. “Would prefer we give them the boys so that they can strap them naked to a table, drug them, and let an adult male from every tribe take a turn on them and they would do that through every heat until they conceived a child. So, to be totally blunt with you, Nikki, they’re angry because their chance to turn Emory into an object, to rape him and butcher him and destroy everything he used to be, was stolen from them.”

Cyril was wincing and he carefully removed himself from Fox’s arm. “If they’d been raised in a tribe, they wouldn’t think of it like that. They’d go willingly.”

“Stop defending it,” my own voice chimed in with the King’s and I was surprised by the revulsion I felt welling up in my stomach like I might take a page out of Emory’s book and puke right there on the boots of the monarch. Initially, I thought it might be because my sister’s death was too raw and I knew what something like that had done to her and then...then it wasn’t my sister at all. It was Emory, tied down the way that he tied me down, jerking away from touch, red and raw and screaming through a gag they would no doubt put into his mouth, wrists blistered from bondage, heaving...no.

Oh, the villages and tribes I would have burned alive if they’d done that to him. There would be no fury in the known world that would match what burned in my chest with the brutal heat of the sun. I would have become a butcher to avenge something like that and something like that had happened to him.

I remembered that brief moment where I’d thought maybe I wanted to know what happened to him so that I could be justified in my desire for revenge on his behalf.

I didn’t need justification. I loved him. He was mine and in that second, there was no greater power in the world than the one that I felt. They’d destroyed him. They were the reason that, after we had sex, he curled up in the corner of the bed or the room, arms around his knees, eyes shut, and he talked about memories he had that were so old they hadn’t been touched by this ugly piece of him. They were the reason he wanted me hurting like he was hurting, flayed open and left bruised and, on one occasion, bloodied by welts that cut too deep.

Cyril was watching me, head tipped curiously, like he could see the range of emotion that flickered through my features, dark and dangerous and so very lethal. “Nikita?” he asked after a second and his voice cut through the violent train of thoughts, the blood that bathed the inside of my head. My fists, balled up and white knuckled, relaxed and I blinked at him.

Then I turned to the King. “Give them to me,” I implored and Fox started, eyes widening in surprise. “What?” I couldn’t tell if he was shocked that I thought I had any right to make demands of him or shocked that I’d even had the courage to ask.

I repeated it, insistent, needy. “Give them to me,” I asked him again and Fox just stared, lips parted, wearing an expression so very like one I saw on Emory when I surprised him. I elaborated on my request then, fists balled up once more. “They made him beg. You are the most powerful man on this continent. Your sons should never beg for anything and you can put them on the post, you can let Atara sentence them to hang, but it won’t flay them open like they did to him. It won’t crush everything they are. I can do that, Fox. Let me do that for him. Please.”

Cyril reacted first, head tipped, sorrow written across the downward curve of his mouth. “Oh, Nikki,” he whispered. “Your father will kill you.” Like he knew. Like I’d opened myself up to them and he knew. Could see it in my face, maybe, because I wasn’t practiced at schooling my emotions into nothing or maybe he could hear it in the desperation that pitted my voice--the way I pleaded. My
father would have been mortified. Riders plead for nothing.

“Let him kill me. Let him try,” I snarled back, vicious and livid. I’d never been so angry in my life and I’d been angry when Danica had come running into the house, hobbling with Milena on her hip, bleeding from her face and down her legs, struggling to breathe. I’d been angry when I’d really realized she was dead and that no amount of giving her my breath would ever bring her back. I’d been alight with fury. I’d shaken her and I’d screamed and I’d cursed her to every hell I could think of because I didn’t know how to live without her. I’d never been without her.

But Emory...Emory was different. Emory was an addiction, like the powder we took before battle could be an addiction, like poppy milk and alcohol. He made my blood sing in my veins, liquid hot, and for him...for him I’d have done anything. I did do anything.

Riders plead for nothing.

I pleaded for everything.

“Please,” I repeated, desperate. “I will do anything. My sword is yours. My life is yours. Command me as you please, Your Majesty, just let me do this for him.”

I remembered what my sister said--that if anyone in Coria could save me from the ire of the north, it was this one, and Fox’s face softened marginally when I begged. He didn’t deliberate much. He just watched, noted the desperation and the vehemence with which I spoke, and then he nodded.

“They’re yours,” he offered quietly. “If Atara agrees, they’re yours.”

It was like he’d lifted something from my shoulders and I could have sagged into the floor with relief, limbs like gelatin, adrenaline heady in my blood, but I couldn’t sink. Couldn’t crumple. I straightened my shoulders out and I followed them through the doors to the throne room. When Cyril gestured me up onto the dias with them, I did not even hesitate. In all likelihood, my father would think this was nothing more than me earning their favor, and if he did think more of it, then so be it. He could have me. He could do what he wanted. For this? For closure and vengeance and justice? He could do whatever he wanted to me.

Fox sank heavily into his throne. It was a massive thing, made of steel and stone with a back that reached up toward the ceiling, a fox poised on the top, teeth bared in a vicious snarl out toward the hall. Chains hung from the arms, a sign of servitude to the empire, and on every visible piece was carved a name of some ancestor that had sat in it before him. I noted them carefully: Tylas, Evander, Caius, Harlan, Bellamy, Etienne, Victus, Fox--there did not appear to be any order to them. The names that sounded Immaran, from the very earliest days of their dynasty, were woven into the names that sounded distinctly Corian. Etienne next to Caius. Caius next to Laurien. Laurien next to Evander.

Beside his throne was the Infinito’s. It was almost as big as the Corian throne, but more slender for a smaller people. It was bone white, bleached wood, darker in spots where the knots of the tree had been before it had been cut down for this very piece. The bottom was lined with Lierian memory sticks of previous Infinitos. Atara was perched in it, legs crossed, wearing a coat as white as his chair. Mack stood close to his side, one hand curled protectively around the arm of the chair.

Emory was at his father’s arm, arms crossed over his abdomen, and I approached him carefully, brushing my fingers over the well of his back when he acknowledged my presence. It was a gesture that could not be seen by the rest of the people poured into the room, all of them lining the sides in the colors of their houses. Some were armored, some were in clothes that matched the fashion of the gentry--gauzy gowns, tight trousers and sleeveless shirts. Modesty was not a staple of Corian culture. With the inescapable heat, it couldn’t be.
Fox leaned in toward Atara. “Nikita Novak begged a request from me,” he murmured, though he had to know everyone standing there could hear. Emory turned toward me, eyes narrowed perceptively, but then he looked pointedly back down at his boots. “I intended to sentence these two to the post and wield the whip myself. I assume you were going to see them hang?”

Atara pursed his lips. “The Elders pushed for an execution, yes,” he answered tersely. “It came up at our last meeting, but Kinnon and Ilyia disagreed. They think it would cause too much tension with the Corian monarchy.”

Fox chuckled. “I’m not tense,” he offered, only half-joking, and it garnered a small laugh from Atara. “I had no intention of letting them walk away from the post alive, provided Emory did not object.”

“The post is too merciful,” Emory snarled, but he didn’t look up. He was still too pale for my liking and he was fidgeting like a teenager in a boring lesson with his least favorite governess. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, wrung his hands behind his back, and chewed avidly on his bottom lip. The violence was there in his voice though, that edge that lingered around him no matter what he was doing.

Atara flinched and Fox glanced up at me. “I am keen on granting Nikita’s request,” he eventually admitted and I felt my heart pick up a little bit, lugging itself up from the floor of my abdomen where it had fallen when he’d told me about the Lierian Rite. “The Riders are...particularly vicious and he is a Commander. He made a convincing argument.”

The Infinito looked up at me, dark green eyes searching for any sign of distress in my features. “What will you do them?” he asked, almost like he was asking the sort of tea I took in the morning. “How fast will it be?”

“It won’t be,” I answered stiffly. “I intend to give them wings.”

Atara was quiet, face scrunched in confusion, and Fox leaned forward. “The Riders have a custom about returning violence with violence on par with the original act.”

“No,” Emory snapped. “You can’t possibly think I’d want you to do that to anyone!” He looked horrified and Fox reached forward, seizing his wrist before he could bolt for the door, which he seemed pretty intent on doing.

The King opened his mouth to speak but I beat him to it. “I’m not a monster, kitten,” I breathed, surprised by the hurt that transferred from my chest to my words. “Not the way you think, anyway, but...Emory, listen to me.” His eyes were glazing over like he was shutting the whole thing off and I had to snap my fingers in front of his face to get a reaction from him. I pulled on him until he let me drag him around behind the throne so that the wide back of the chair sheltered him from the prying eyes. His shoulders sank inward a little bit, like he was under some great weight, and I repeated what I’d said to his father, my hands curled up around his face. “You should never be made to beg for anything. Ever. They should pay for that.”

“He didn’t want to say it, I realized, like it was some sick weakness or some vile word...like trying to get ‘fuck’ out of your mouth the first time, secretly whispering it where your parents can’t hear, but without the giddy anticipation or the rush of release when it finally passes over your lips. “Okay,” I relented. “Okay, you tell me which one hurt you. Atara can do what he wants with the other.”
Emory nodded, but he cringed from my touch and he moved back around his father’s chair, taking up position again beside Fox’s elbow. The King looked up, one hand on Cyril’s back where he was seated on the arm of the throne opposite of Emory, and then he gestured toward the doors at the end of the hall.

They were massive things, taller than most houses, and they had to be pulled open by a set of ropes and a handful of men on each side heaving until they scraped and creaked over the marble. Ilyia marched in, a Corian woman at her side with hair the color of dark chocolate. She was wearing mail, a sword on her hip, and a dark orange sigil that I recognized as House Valmont from the stag that reared up in it, front legs held aloft, stitched in black on that burnt orange field. Natalya Valmont was a member of the council, but she was not one that I’d met yet. Her family controlled the roads south of Coryth that led to Southreach and Eden, which gave them significant influence over Coria’s ivory trade.

She’d been betrothed to the king once, too, if I remembered my history correctly, and Emory affectionately referred to her as his ‘Aunt Tally.’

Natalya flipped her braid over her shoulder and approached the dias when Fox waved her forward, leaving her two hooded prisoners kneeling at the foot of the throne. “I am so sorry,” she breathed quietly. “I had no idea they were sitting in our cells. We’ve been absolutely inundated with problems since Riordan broke that smuggling circle in Southreach. I didn’t even think to look. They were just thieves.” Her toffee colored eyes moved from Fox to Emory and her face softened. “Oh, sweetheart. We’ll catch up, you and I, when this is over, yes? Both of you?” She looked down at Atara and he managed a smile but Emory shrank toward the throne like he wanted to be as small as possible.

The King, it seemed, did not feel inclined to punish her for the oversight, however. “Remove the hoods,” he ordered swiftly, leaning heavily on the arm of the chair nearest to Emory, his head propped up in his hand.

To me, they could have been anyone on the street. I would have never recognized them from the next person in a line. They were nothing special—a very large Lierian with white blond hair and lilac eyes—I assumed he must have had human in him to achieve that size, and a halfling about Mack’s build with pale brown curls and blue eyes, a chunk of his bottom lip torn out. Atara, however, cringed like he was being exposed to severe heat...like he was trying to sink as far back into his chair as humanly possible.

Emory lurched backward like he’d been shoved, nearly stumbling into me and only catching himself because he grasped the side of Fox’s throne with white knuckled fingers. I could actually hear his heartbeat, pounding so furiously in his chest that I was certain it would burst, and his breath came in rapid, shallow bursts that quickly turned his face red.

I felt him heave, heard the pushing sound of his stomach, but there was nothing there for him to force back out.

He recovered just as quickly, setting his jaw so that even his eyes looked hardened. He shrugged off Cyril’s touch, a reassuring brush of his fingers on Emory’s cheek, and then he stared, beautiful and angry and gods I would have thrown myself at his feet in that moment if he’d wanted me to.

“I understand Lady Valmont already read your charges to you,” Fox spoke leisurely, though I could tell in his face that he was strained and trying to appear in control for the benefit of his court. “But for the sake of those in attendance, I shall repeat them.” He didn’t unroll the scroll that rested in his lap,
courtesy of Ilyia’s trembling hand just a moment earlier. He didn’t need to. I wouldn’t have either, I realized, because what was written there could never adequately describe what they’d done to everyone standing there, especially to Emory. Emory, who would have to hear those wretched words spelled out so clinically to a room full of people that knew it had been him.

Inside my chest, my heart twisted, shattering with him when the King began to speak. “You have been accused of rape and battery, battery of a minor, and assault against a member of the royal house.” He paused at that. “Twice.”

Emory trembled, hands balled into fists, and I watched as Atara reached up, his small fingers brushing his brother’s knuckles until Emory’s loosened and threaded through them. I saw the Infinito squeeze, his hand knotted in the prince’s, like some secret thing had passed between the two of them. I understood it. It was a language shared by siblings, a kind of knowing that existed in a space that only they could occupy together...a small, quiet way of saying, ‘I’m still here with you’ when I could not give him the comfort he so desperately needed, not without the barrier of the throne to hide it.

“Now, normally, I would ask for the details on such a crime,” Fox continued, tapping his fingers on the steel arm of his chair. “But I saw the details. I held their hands. I listened to them scream. I pinned them down while someone stitched them back together again. They cried on me and bled on me and you two—” He exhaled heavily. “You two just took and took and took and you’re still taking. So I don’t particularly care about what you have to say.”

The big one was glaring but the smaller one, at least, looked contrite. His eyes were wide and he blinked, glassy and terrified, up at the family he had helped destroy. He looked so young and vulnerable down there that I wanted to crush his face in just for making me feel some sort of pang of guilt.

Atara stood then, no longer shrinking in his seat, but his fingers still zippered into Emory’s. “In light of our alliance with the Corian monarchy, we have agreed to share responsibility for your transgressions and your punishments. You—” He pointed down at the smaller one. “Will hang from the neck until dead.” His eyes narrowed then, shifting to the bigger one, cheeks livid and red and I knew then.

I knew which one had ruined Emory, had left him to rot on the beach, had put that parasite inside of him and threaded hate into his skin like it was the stitching that held him together.

It was him, with the lilac eyes and the blond hair and that scowl on his face. “Go ahead,” he taunted. “I didn’t give him anything he wasn’t asking for being out there like that.”

Rage hit me like a tidal wave, hot and livid, and I practically flew past Emory like a feral cat, snarling and livid. I would slaughter him right there on the marble. It would take weeks to get the blood out and I didn’t care if Emory saw me turn into the Rider that I was and not the man he knew me to be. I didn’t care if the entire court saw that I was, in fact, a savage little beast from the north.

I wanted to rip his throat out with my bare hands. I wanted blood up to my elbows, tanging the air so thickly that I could taste it. I wanted to pull the ropes of his intestines out through his belly while he screamed for mercy I would never give him. “You sick son of a bitch,” I heard myself hiss.

I reached the bottom stair of the dias, Atara’s order for me to stop disregarded, and then there was a flash of bright, vivid blue and I was stuck. My legs refused to move, knotted in a familiar glow that rooted my feet to the floor and I snarled, vicious and angry, my heart pounding a war beat in my chest.

“Apologies, friend,” Tristan murmured as he stepped from the shadows behind the dias and I glared
at him, fingers curled into claws, teeth bared like an animal’s.

Emory’s voice cut through the murmur of disbelief that washed over the crowd. Even the bigger halfling with his wretched glare looked surprised. I wanted to rip his eyes from their sockets when he looked at me. “Let him go,” the eldest prince ordered. “He won’t do anything. Will you, Nikita?”

I wanted to scream that I would. I would do something! I would tear his tongue out by the root. I’d rip his cock off and shove it down his throat. I’d cut one of his kidneys out and make him watch while I fed it to the hunting hounds. I would make him beg the way that he’d made Emory beg and I would delight in every fucking second of it.

He owned me, I realized. He owned me so completely that he might as well have put a collar on my throat and I knew it because I gave in. “No,” I answered through clenched teeth.

Tristan’s fingers snapped and I wobbled forward, nearly falling off the bottom stair. The alchemist caught me by the back of my leather tunic, one belt looped through his fingers, and tugged until I was steady on my feet again. “Nothing personal, Nikki,” he whispered. “They’d be required to punish you if you did it right here without a formal verdict. Patience is a virtue, Rider Commander.”

“Fuck patience,” I snarled. “And fuck him, too.” I jerked my head toward the halfling that was staring, in awe at the alchemist beside me, and Tristan clicked his tongue, retreating back to where he’d been before.

Atara watched me carefully and Fox had one eyebrow up like he was secretly hoping I’d get away with my little tantrum. “Pity,” he even breathed. “I’d have paid to see that.”

“Fox,” Cyril chided.

The Infinito let me return to where I’d been and Emory cast me a small smile, like he, too, was secretly pleased by the outburst or enthralled by my rabid defense of him. He even mouthed ‘thank you’ when I looked back at him, trying and failing to appear contrite and I wished so desperately that I could kiss him then, wash his worry away with my mouth, repeat all the furious devotions I felt for him out loud.

Atara continued when the court settled into silence. “Given the severity of your involvement in the crimes,” he said, speaking over the sobbing of the smaller one that was being dragged off toward the ancient fortress below the palace proper, kicking his legs and wailing. It muffled when the great oak doors shut behind the guards that had him and Atara cleared his throat to keep going. “You are sentenced to die by torment, to be carried out by Commander Novak at his leisure and how he sees fit.” The little prince’s mouth twisted in a grimace. “I would usually ask that the gods have mercy on your soul and that the ancestors judge you kindly, but you deserve neither mercy nor kindness.”

He hesitated then, like he wanted to say a thousand things, all of them malicious, but he held his tongue and, instead, managed a curt and abrasive, “Enjoy your stay in the Keep,” before he turned on his heel and headed for the doors.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Torture (and it's pretty graphic, so if that's not your thing, I suggest you skip but I did have graphic violence tagged so you should be okay if you are still here?), porn, unhealthy relationship, mentions of past sexual assault, abuse. There is also drug use, but it is not an addiction. It is part of a culture.

Also, I'm not actually sure how to tag this, but the porn in this happens in a pretty questionable location after some really horrific stuff so like...that's a thing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I was a storm of uncontained, chaotic fury when they released that miserable halfling to me. Fox stood over him, arms crossed, brow furrowed, looking very much like he wanted to kick him in the teeth and Emory...Emory stood behind him, fingers curled into the back of his jacket, face pressed between his shoulders, like his father could keep the world at bay and save him from the ripple of horrified shock that spread through the gentry. Execution in Coria was rare. Their religion taught them all that life, regardless of the nature of how it was lived, was still life. That was why they revered Miero as a god above all others, while in Immara the entire pantheon was regarded as equal. According to southerners and Immarans alike, Miero breathed your soul into you at birth. In Immara, being born a slave changed that.

Tylas the Conqueror had disagreed so many ages ago and there they were--with Immara’s city states always one breath from war with each other and with Coria on the other side of the sea, refusing to execute people who deserved to be executed.

Fucking southerners, I thought to myself, pulling one of the belts from around my chest free of my cuirass. With deft fingers, I looped it around the halfling’s throat, ignoring the click of heels on marble and the scent of lilac perfume that lingered around the red gauze dress that swam into my view.

I rolled my eyes. Elizabeth Glenning, it seemed, never got enough.

“This is heresy, Fox Bordelon!” she practically shrieked at the King, who looked less than amused by her presence. At least, I thought, Atara wasn’t there. Nobody got under his skin like this miserable human being and now, at least, I knew why thanks to Cyril’s little slip earlier. This was Mackenzie’s mother. His mother who had allowed him to spend his youth in a brothel being turned into a warm toy for patrons to play with. I’d have hated her, too. “You cannot allow this! I will not allow this!”

Behind Fox, Emory flinched at the sound of her voice, shrill and furious, and I saw the fingers he had curled into his father’s jacket as if he were still a child turn white-knuckled. Fox cocked an
eyebrow, like the idea of her not allowing him to do anything was the funniest thing he’d heard all day. It briefly displaced that look of violent malice he’d been wearing before. “What are you going to do, Lady Glenning?” he asked, bemused. “Throw a tantrum at the foot of my throne? You are treading dangerously close to treason.”

For a moment, I thought she might stand up there on the dias and openly denounce him for all the gentry to see. Instead, she turned to Emory. “You were always the sensible one,” she insisted. Clearly, she didn’t know him very well, because Emory was the absolute last fucking person in the world that I would have called sensible or maybe his senses had fled the coop on the beach. I had no way of judging that, but my fingers tightened on the belt I was holding tight enough to keep that halfling from talking, but loose enough that he could still choke air in. “Do something. Say something. You cannot allow such a transgression to stain the crown.”

“Yes,” I drawled. “We all know that’s what you care about.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed frighteningly and she whirled on me. I’d expected some snark thrown in my direction about being nothing but a feral savage from the north. In truth, I was grateful for her ire being turned on me rather than Emory, who hadn’t responded to her in the least and was still acting like his boots were the most interesting thing in the room. What I got, however, was not just ire or snark. I got a flash of varnished nails the color of blood, perfectly manicured, and then the sting and the sharp crack of her palm connecting with my face.

I’d been slapped before. It was my mother’s preferred method of correction when we mouthed off. Emory, too, had slapped my face a few times when he had me tied up and stripped, but that was decidedly different and never with this amount of force. Elizabeth Glenning was not a large woman. She did not hit hard, but this had been intended to cause pain.

The sting was surprising, but all things considered, it wasn’t awful, and I was sure she expected horror from me but what she got was a snort of laughter. “You dare mouth off to your betters, you vile little sea snake.” The symbol of my house, I thought. She thought she was clever. She hadn’t a clue about the monster she’d just unleashed. My mouth was the very smallest of her problems because in that little moment between the crack of her palm on mine, Fox’s surprised expression like he didn’t even know how to react because it was all so dreadfully unexpected, and the release of the fingers holding his coat, something in Emory shattered like glass hitting marble. I’d been mistaken when I thought he’d shown the gentry just what a wretched state he was in when he’d had that fit at Atara’s ball.

He collided with her like a war ship colliding with an opponent. I half expected to hear the splintering of a hull on impact when she hit one of the massive, alabaster columns that supported the throne room. His fingers locked around her throat.

If he were anyone else, I would have worried about the crown’s reaction, but Emory was godsdammed near untouchable and Fox never let the temple interfere with his rule. He hadn’t even had his reign blessed by the priests the way that every Bordelon before him had. If he had, I might have been concerned about the way her feet dangled above the floor and how her face was turning steadily more red and how she clawed at his hands.

Instead, I heard Fox say something that sounded very much like, ‘Oh shit,’ before he was on Emory, peeling him backward while Elizabeth made those gasping, choking sounds. The prince’s face was contorted with blistering rage and one of Fox’s guards intervened so that they could both haul him back by one arm, struggling and hissing like a rabid animal.

“I’ve got him,” the King insisted, looping one arm around Emory’s middle. I was frozen, stuck to the
floor, watching with a heart that had grown wings and was beating around my chest. The sting on
my cheek was a distant second to anything else I might have felt. I should have helped the King,
should have done something but I’d leapt to his defense and he had leapt to mine just as quickly. I
was giddy with affection. I wanted to shower him in kisses, throw myself at his mercy, beg for the
whips he wielded so expertly. “I’ve got him! Remove her!” The guard released Emory and grabbed
Elizabeth Glenning by the arm, hauling her bodily from the room, but Emory wasn’t finished and
while Fox could hold him back, he couldn’t shut him up.

“You have a lot of fucking courage coming in here and lecturing us about what’s legal, Elizabeth!”
he snarled. “Walking in here like we don’t know what you did to him. I know! I know what you
fucking did! You keep your fucking hands off of your betters!”

She did not deign to answer his accusations. Probably didn’t want to confirm or deny such open
allegations where everyone could see and they certainly could see. The entire crowd of nobility was
watching, alarm in their eyes, whispers spreading through the crowds. Instead, she deftly turned the
situation around. “You really are just a mad dog, Emory,” she spat back, jerking free of the guard.
“I’m leaving on my own,” she insisted, adjusting her dress and smoothing it back down over her
abdomen. “You know what people do with mad dogs, Fox? They put them down.”

Elizabeth whirled on her heel, storming from the room, and Fox released Emory upon her exit. The
prince jerked away from any more contact and instead his eyes went to me—to the print on my cheek
and the halfling squirming at my side, still on his knees, face red and struggling to get enough air in
to stay conscious. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“For what? You didn’t slap me,” I snorted. This time. I could see him think it at the same time I did
and I took a step back, dragging my prize with me. “I’ve got work to do. I’ll see you later?”

Emory tipped his head and then looked quickly at his father. “You and I need to talk,” Fox said
stiffly. “Tonight. After I go put out the fires you just started. Nikita, if you are...finished in time, you
are more than welcome to join us in our apartments for dinner. No doubt some of this discussion
will...include you. Better yet, just consider it an order if you’re done with...whatever it is you’re
going to do.” He fixed the buttons and the bars on his jacket, glaring at Emory the entire time.

I had a distinct feeling that I didn’t want to be present for whatever discussion this was going to be,
but I could not very well decline an order from my monarch and so I forced a false smile onto my
face and inclined my head in acknowledgement. “This takes a few hours, but it’s still early and I
don’t think he’ll last as long as a Rider would.”

“I’m coming with you,” Emory insisted then and I hesitated. I understood his desire to watch. I
really, truly did. Milena had made me describe to her, in minute detail, exactly how that man had
screamed, how the blood had looked on the snow, how he’d pleaded and begged and I’d felt no
inclination toward giving him any sort of mercy. Emory was not Milena, however. Milena had
cloaked herself in inescapable grief, let the dark swallow her whole until she could no longer see a
light. She’d had no fight in her at the end. Emory had fight. He had a lot of it. He had violence and
bitterness and rage and I preferred those to the emptiness my sister had carried with her, but I did not
want to feed them.

So I paused, concern washing over my features. “I don’t...know if that’s a good idea.” On top of all
that rage I didn’t want to stoke, I didn’t actually want Emory to see me turn into the monster that I
knew I could be. I’d snort that powder up my nose, my pupils would dilate, and I’d get bloodthirsty.
That was part of battle for us and he didn’t need to know that the man he loved so fiercely wasn’t
quite as soft and pliant as I’d let him believe. I liked him thinking he could control me. I liked
believing he could.
I feared that this would shatter our dynamic.

Emory pushed further. “If it’s too much, I have legs,” he reminded me. “I can walk away.”

In response, the King put his hands up and backed away from the conversation, making his way toward a group of whispering nobles. My father towered over them and he shot me a look, all wide, toothy grin like he still thought this was all just a way to earn favor in the south and that my relationship with Emory was friendly so as to better our position in the court. That was what Danica and I had been feeding him and he trusted my loyalty to our family name so implicitly that he never even considered I might be waver ing, even knowing that Fox himself had a male consort, that Atara was sleeping with his guard, that Emory had a misspent youth that included trysts with men and women alike.

“I…” I started carefully, flinching. “Listen, kitten, you’re not going to like who I am down there.”

I’d expected him to roll his eyes and shake it off. I expected him to scoff or sneer or tell me flat out that I was wrong. Emory was arrogant like that. No opinion was correct unless it aligned with his. Instead, he looked hurt, almost like I had his heart in my palm and I was squeezing until the blood couldn’t pump anymore. His full lips curved down into a frown and his eyes clouded over in deep thought. For a moment, I believed he might walk away and leave me wishing he’d explained why he looked like I’d crushed him so completely. “Em--”

He shook his head, arms tight around himself. “I’m going with you,” he insisted again.

And that time, because of the look on his face and how he hugged himself and how I wanted to get on my knees and beg him to forgive me for whatever I’d done, I didn’t argue. I turned toward the hulking doors that stood to the right of the throne, barred shut from the outside, two white-clad royal guards on each side. They lifted the bar for us as I dragged that miserable wretch down into the guts of Coryth Keep.

The building colloquially referred to as “the Keep” was actually called the Winter Palace now. Once upon a time, or so Tristan had told me, the Bordelon family only lived in Coryth through the most miserable months of the year, ages ago when it was actually called Coryth Keep. In the city, it was temperate during those times, balmy and comfortable. In the summer months, they headed north to the Marshes that bordered the southern plains of Glacia and spent their days in the Summer Palace. According to Tristan, it had been a beautiful building carved from the granite of the highlands it rested on and gilded in gold, a glittering monument to wealth and power, but during one of the Immaran attempts to take Coria back, it had been destroyed.

The remnants of the building had been gathered up like a salvaged ship and carted south where Coryth Keep, too, lay partly in shambles after the Great War, some three hundred years before Fox had even been born. So the remains of the Summer Palace were used in the construction of the present Winter Palace on top of the bones of Coryth Keep. The foundation of that ancient fortress with its barred windows and its massive, hulking archways that looked out into the sea, was still there, converted into barracks on the half that spilled into the gardens, black rock covered in moss that sat beneath the more modern white marble, and dungeons where the salt water stained it white and great swaths of it were covered in a crust of minerals.

That was where we went now--where the walls were damp with moisture, glistening in the dark, and the sea that crashed some six stories below us created an echoing din against the stone. This reminded me of home--of the ruins of the castle that overlooked Ravndal, decaying and crumbling seventeen years after Immara’s deceit.

And it wasn’t even all of Immara. Just the Vale. The Immaran city states rarely involved themselves
in the drama of their peers, so when the great lords of Idra’s Vale had turned on us, it had been the Corian army that carved a path up into the north and broke the sieges, put our royal family to the sword.

It had been Fox, just a few months after Atara had been born, that had swung that sword himself, and it was so bizarre to feel more allegiance to him than to my cousins whom he had slaughtered. Even more bizarre to think that, less than twenty years later, I’d be sleeping with the son of the man that had executed my family.

Emory was silent on the way down, only running his fingers along the damp walls, ignoring the cries and pleas of prisoners that bounced around us. The remains of Coryth Keep housed only those in line for the post and all of them begged for his mercy.

*You’re begging the wrong prince,* I thought to myself. If either of them were going to lobby for mercy, it would not be the one leading me down into the maze of cramped corridors lined in bars, hands reaching outward, pale from lack of sunlight. The Keep, I thought, was punishment enough in some places. It smelled of rot and mildew, ancient and foreboding, and I thought that the punishment we meted out in the north was preferable—at least it was immediate. We didn’t have long, drawn out assemblies. We didn’t have court. Justice was a swift and cruel mistress where I came from.

I saw the worst when we passed a row of cells that were open in the back to the sea, plunging hundreds of feet down into the rocky, storm swept cliffs below. Someone could have survived it, I imagined, if they were incredibly lucky and hit the water far enough away from the rocks...and they were an incredibly strong swimmer...and the sea was calm enough to not rip them under with the current...it was a lot of *ifs*.

Emory stopped at the end of a deep, dark hall and removed the master key from his pocket, sliding it into a doorway lit only by a single torch. He pulled that torch from the basket it was hanging in as the door creaked open and then he stepped aside for me.

I dragged my prize through and surveyed my surroundings. We didn’t do torture in the north, not really. Not like this. We didn’t devise tools to make it worse. There were better things--more important things--to spend our time doing. Torture in the north was like the Gauntlet--being thrown out into the cold with only the clothes on your back and expected to survive in the dead of winter. It was starvation. It was frostbite. It was being held underwater until your lungs were bursting and the darkness came creeping in around eyes open in terror. It was being force fed the pale green berries that grew on northern witch pines and spending the rest of the day trying to figure out what was real and what wasn’t while you hallucinated. It was being beaten, whipped, relentlessly and without compassion.

This was...a sarcophagus full of spikes, nail screws, branding irons, metal sandals that could be heated white hot. There was a rack, a pear of anguish, rib crushers, flaying knives, and pliers to remove teeth. The ceiling was a crosshatch of metal bars, shackles hanging from each junction, and there were stocks for both hands and feet propped against the wall.

Emory arched an eyebrow as if asking, ‘Good enough?’

I released the belt in my hand and the halfling sank, shuddering and choking, into a pile on the floor. I was still disturbed by Emory’s silence and by his presence there at all, but it was not enough of a deterrent. I was still enraged by the fact that the wretch at my feet was still breathing and I made short work of fixing him into stocks at his wrists and his throat, forcing him over the side of the rack, and using the straps to secure him in place there, bent at the waist. He wriggled and fought, gnashing his teeth and swearing and Emory remained in a corner of the room where he couldn’t see him.
“I know he’s here,” my captive spat. “I know you’re fucking here, Emory!”

“I can start by cutting your tongue out, if you’d prefer,” I answered stiffly. Emory was unresponsive, eyes narrowed, arms crossed over his chest. I wanted to this miserable sod’s tongue out, truly, if only because he didn’t deserve to speak to him, but I also wanted to hear him babble and cry for mercy and I thought, perhaps, Emory wanted it, too.

I fixed his legs in stocks, too, and looped another cord of rope from the wall around his waist, pinning him effectively to the table in a way that allowed very little movement. In the north, we’d have just tied his wrists to posts. He would have been expected to stand on his own until the very end. It was the only way to assure his death was honorable, despite the crimes.

I’d never told anyone at home that when I’d caught the man that hurt my sister, I’d pinned him down in the snow. There’d been nothing honorable about it.

There would be nothing honorable about this, either.

I reached into one of the pouches at my belt for the powder that Riders carried—pale crystals the color of snow, and I rubbed it over the back of my hand, pressed that to my nose, and inhaled hard.

The euphoria was almost immediate. It was very like the sensation that accompanied sex—divine and intoxicating in a way that made my heart rate pick up and my body temperature increase. I knew my pupils would be so large that the color in my eyes was nearly blotted out and I could have run through the keep a dozen times over without breaking a sweat. The energy was boundless, like a fountain that bubbled up over the top and spilled over my chest. It felt good. Too good. I knew of Riders that had let it consume their lives when it was only ever supposed to be taken on very specific occasions.

Punishment was one. Battle was the most common.

The breath I took felt somehow deeper than any others and Emory watched, enraptured, eyes reflective in the light of only the torches he’d lit upon entry.

In this state, I would enjoy this man’s torment. I would relish in his screams, positively regal in the power that seared my veins.

I plucked a flaying knife from a table and cut up the back of the captive’s shirt, exposing a wide body of hard packed muscle and tattoos like a sailor’s in faded ink. He was older than us, I noted. Maybe by fifteen or so years in Emory’s case, and the wear on his body was evident in the scars that peppered his ribs from fishing hooks and a lifetime spent in hard labor.

“Before I’m done,” I started, prodding at his back just under his shoulder blades, feeling for the spots I needed where I would separate his ribs from his back like I was butchering cattle. “You will beg for me to let you die. You will apologize for what you’ve done and you will mean it, because if you don’t, I will go upstairs and I will bring that alchemist down here to piece you back together so I can do this again and again until you’re sorry your mother didn’t just swallow for your father.”

He jerked against his bindings, fingers curling into fists above the stocks. “He shouldn’t have been out there like that,” he snarled at me, teeth bared and gnashed together as I found what I was looking for. I pressed the tip of the knife to his skin and looked over at Emory, unmoving in the far corner, one of his thumbs pressed to his bottom lip. “Do you know what he is? He’s my people, not yours, and he fucking belongs to us. They both do!”

“He belongs to me!” I shouted it back at him, mouth by his ear as the knife drove down into the back
of his ribs just below his shoulders, right along the edge of his spine. He howled like a banshee, thrashing in his bondage so that blood welled up in his back and spilled down his sides from the wound. I’d never heard a more glorious sound than his screaming or the rattling of the chains at his feet or the way the wooden stocks about his neck scraped and creaked against the table.

I knew, logically, that I was wrong. I might have thought of Emory as mine, but Emory belonged only to himself. I would never be capable of leashing such fury or containing the power he wielded so brutally. He was mine to love, though. Mine to touch. I was the person he sought out when he was hurting the worst and he was hurting because of this miserable creature tied down in front of me.

He bawled when I dragged the blade down, one inch at a time, pausing for a few minutes every time I carved through another step of his ribs. My fingers, grasped tightly on the hilt of the knife, were slick and slippery with scarlet blood all the way up to my wrist and I delighted in the sticky feeling of it between my fingers and how it pooled at his sides, thickening and turning nearly black. This would not be enough, I thought. Nothing would ever be enough to make up for what he’d done. For what he’d stolen.

I hadn’t known Emory when he’d lost that child. I’d heard of it only third hand, whispers from servants that didn’t think I spoke common at first. I hadn’t known him when Cyril had told him he would never be able to carry a babe the way that Atara could because he would never be able to deliver it. Tristan had agreed when Mack had described how and where Emory’s pelvis had broken and though he never showed any weakness in public, I had seen him stumble from bed, wincing and grasping at his hip where the bones hadn’t healed quite right. He’d told me he was always in pain. That he would always be in pain and it would always serve as a reminder of that night on the beach and how they’d stripped him of an ability the Lierians considered holy.

They’d taken more than that, I thought. If whatever I had with Emory lasted—if I developed the courage to defy my father and stay in the south permanently, if he wanted me there, at his side, if he truly thought we had a future...I could never give him children. He could never give them to me.

It would always only be the two of us.

And it shouldn’t have mattered to me. I did not, by nature, like children nor was I particularly keen on the idea of sharing his attention with someone who would require more of it, but Atara had told me about how he’d sobbed when they’d told him and how desperately he had wanted it. If things had been different, I could have given him that, but they’d taken that from him.

For that, he deserved to die like this a thousand times and more.

The poor, pathetic creature under my hands screamed shrilly, his voice pitched with guttural sobbing, his fingers clenching and unclenching. His wrists blistered where he pulled against the stocks. The wood scraped at his neck until it was red and raw and his face was swollen with tears, covered in blood and saliva and snot. He was miserable and sickening and I delighted in the gut-churning wail that I drew from his mouth when I dug the knife into the opposite side of his chest. The other was carved in a perfect C shape from the top of his ribs to the bottom and when he heaved, it lifted, squelching with thickening blood, bones grating on bones.

Emory moved around to the other side, leaning closer this time. I’d expected to see horror in his face when he took in how I must have looked, slick with blood from fingertip to elbow by then, red smeared over my tunic across my abdomen and sprayed onto my face. It dripped steadily off the end of the end of the table onto my boots, too. I looked like a savage animal from the wild north, just like Elizabeth had inferred.

But he did not look horrified. He looked...utterly, alarmingly at ease. “Did you cut the whole way
through the bone?” he asked when I started carving into the other side, my free hand on the small of
the captive’s back, slipping in blood. It was work, cutting through cartilage and tissue and bone. I
nodded in response and he continued. “But not deep enough to hit his organs?”

“No,” I answered. “And never into the spine or he’ll lose feeling and it defeats the purpose.”

His fingers lifted and wrapped carefully over mine so that his palm was soaked in red like I was and I
looked up at him. The edges of my world glittered with the high from the powder like my vision was
crystalizing along the outside. Colors were brighter. Lights were brighter.

Emory was beautiful. Resplendent in his curiosity and I loved him. I loved him so furiously that it
burned in my chest when I looked up at him and he stared down at me, eyes glinting with unfettered
fury and…something. I was like a snake, charmed up out of the basket, stuck looking up at him with
my hand on that knife hilt, pressed down by his long fingers. My eyes flicked down to his mouth and
he licked his lips, just a flash of pink tongue over the bottom.

I shouldn’t have kissed him. It should have made me sick to think about, slick with blood as we
were, but I stood on my toes anyway and I pressed my mouth to his, my free hand snaking up to his
jaw and he kissed me back. His tongue slipped between my lips, mapping over my teeth and the roof
of my mouth. He tasted of blood and honey, metallic and sweet, and I’d been mistaken when I called
him mine. He wasn’t mine at all. I’d known that, even then, but it went deeper. I was his. Utterly and
completely and when he moved back, mouth still so close to mine that we were sharing air, his voice
was husky and low. “Show me,” he ordered and I knew that tone. It was the same one he used when
he told me to strip and lay over his lap, the same one he used when he pushed my head down and
warned me not to move when he beat me, and I always obeyed. Even when I didn’t really want to, I
always obeyed, because my life had started to revolve around pleasing him.

I swallowed hard and pulled, guiding his hand down the cracking ribs, deaf to almost everything but
my heartbeat. Sick as it was, I would have let him take me right there. I knew that I would have and I
knew that later, when I thought about it, I would probably vomit, but in that moment, pressed that
close to him, I would have even though that hurt expression from when I’d told him not to come
down there was still lingering behind his eyes.

“Like the letter C,” I explained thickly, my heart thumping in my throat. I led him down each
shattering rib, carving like we were cutting a steak to the sound of human screams and the drip, drip,
drip of blood and moisture on the floor.

He released my hand only when that C was finished and moved around the table to the front, some
of his courage having bled back into his body with that kiss. “Please,” the captive babbled through a
mouthful of blood and saliva, his face smeared with tears and the gods only knew what else in his
hysterics. “I’m sorry,” he gasped wetly as I withdrew the blade for the final time. “I’m so fucking
sorry!” Not sorry enough, I thought. There was no such thing as sorry enough, not for this, not for
what he’d taken.

“You’re pathetic,” Emory murmured, bending at the waist so that they were eye level.

“Please,” he kept right on begging, his chest heaving for air, his fingers scraping against the wood
until his nails split down the middle to his cuticle and he didn’t even seem to feel it. His world was
one sharp point of horrifying agony that radiated from his back. I’d made sure of that, but I was
cought in Emory’s spell, and so anything I might have said was lost in the back of my throat because
he hadn’t told me to say it. He hadn’t told me to do anything yet and so I stood, watching like the
slave to his wishes that I was, and I waited. “Please, g-gods have m-mercy, I’m s-s-so sorry! Just kill
m-me. Please, let me fucking die!”
Emory was unmoving, still bent, his face turned toward the prisoner. “You know,” he breathed. “I begged, too.” The wretch sobbed, wailing helplessly, twisting as much as he could from where I had him bound. “I begged you not to when you threw me down on those rocks and broke my hips. I begged you not to when your friend held me down and you pulled my clothes off.” Normally, I would have wanted to vomit, but I was hungry for blood on that high and so listening to him recount these things in such grotesque words didn’t bother me. It would later, I knew, but in that moment, all I cared about was the thick tang of blood in the air and how I was balancing on the edge of a sword, waiting for the order from his red-stained lips. “I begged and I cried and I fought and you raped me. Say it.”

The prince reached forward, hand quick like a striking snake, and grabbed a fistful of his hair. He ground his face down into the table so that he gagged, throat pressed closed against the stocks he was in. His body shuddered, convulsing against the rack. “Say it!” Emory demanded, his voice a shout that echoed off the walls. “Tell me what you’re fucking sorry for!”

The poor, miserable creature beneath my skilled hands only sobbed in response when Emory released his head. His cheeks were scarlet with fury and his eyes glowed with a rage I’d never seen in him. “I’m s-sorry!” the prisoner squealed. “I’m s-sorry I r-r-raped you!”

“No, you aren’t,” Emory corrected. “You’re only sorry because you’re here.” He walked back around to me, one arm looping around my waist so that his palm could slip beneath my tunic and flatten on my belly. His chin rested at my shoulder and when he spoke, he breathed into the skin at my neck. “Open him up, Kita. He saw my insides. I think it’s only fair we see his.”

We had crossed so many lines again, I thought. This time, though, it was me. I was allowing this. I’d offered to do this, I’d let him follow me down, I’d let him become involved. I had done this and while I could blame him for beating me until my thighs were welted and bloody two days before, I couldn’t blame him for this. The fault here was my own and Emory was just a sad side-effect of my own lust for bloodshed and my own savagery.

I was a product of my raising.

He didn’t have to order me twice. When I dug my fingers into the cuts I’d made, they slipped past cartilage and bone, sliding through meat and sinew. The screams from the man on the table were broken and wet. Bone cracked when I pulled, splintering like wood. Sinew snapped and meat tore—it was like listening to dogs tear an animal apart, only with Emory’s lips at my ear, teeth biting gently, breath warm.

There was something so fucking wrong with us, I thought, and I didn’t care then. Let us be wrong. Let us be sick.

I repeated the motion on the other side, splitting my captive open like a piece of overripe fruit, his lungs and his heart on display from the back, blood pooling around his organs. Carefully, I reached into his chest cavity and slid my hands around his lungs, like wet sponges that hiccuped and twitched at my touch. The screaming stopped, morphing into guttural heaving, shuddering as he struggled for air while I propped them up against his winged ribs. They convulsed, muscles that thrashed to fulfill their purpose to the tune of his wet heaving.

Emory reached forward with his free hand to run his finger along the curve of one shuddering organ. “Fascinating,” he whispered. Dark shadows welled up inside the pale flesh, blood pooling quickly. It spilled from the captive’s mouth, bubbling in his throat until finally, the lungs stopped their twitching and he choked, eyes bloodshot, final bloody breath exiting his mouth with a soaked heave.

And he was dead. It had taken, by my judgement, three hours from start to finish, but he was dead.
Northernns lasted longer, but we made it last longer. I hadn’t wanted him to die from agony alone. I’d wanted him to suffer to the very end, to feel the horror of having his insides ripped out of him, the way they’d left Emory with his guts sliding out of his body.

“You,” the prince murmured against my throat. “Are.” He licked at my pulse and I shivered under his attention. “Incredible.” I tipped my head back and he bit down, having peeled the laces at my throat back enough to reach skin some time before—I didn’t remember him doing it. “I could take you right here.”

“I would regret that later,” I mumbled in response, only dimly aware that I would, in fact, regret that later.

Emory nipped at my throat. “Mm. Stay with me tonight then.” It was not a request. “In the tower. I want to hear you scream.”

I still hurt so gloriously from the evening before, but I never even considered saying no. Not when his hands moved up my chest beneath my tunic, thumbing over my ribs and my nipples so that I hissed at the contact, squirming in his grasp. I knew without question that I would come up with some excuse as to why I wasn’t in our quarters, if my father even noticed, and I would stay with Emory. He would beat me until my legs buckled and I would still beg him to fuck me until I was drooling into his sheets or on his carpet. He would praise me for taking it because he’d discovered, quite by accident, that him calling me a good, sweet boy when he’d hit me so hard that he’d bloodied me had made me come despite pain that should have immediately flagged and softened my erection.

“Gods, yes,” I managed to choke instead.

I heard him chuckle against my throat. “Sweet boy,” he whispered and inside my blood soaked boots, my toes curled. “I’m going to make you so sorry you tried to keep me out of this.” He turned me around toward the door and gave me a push, releasing me from all my contact with him and I stumbled toward it, aching and hard, my world still crystal-bright. My skin was too sensitive. My heart was a war drum behind my ears.

I fumbled with the door, spilling into the dark corridor a moment later with him close on my heels. His fingers dug into my neck a second later and he steered me like I was a carriage up a back hall and a narrow, twisting flight of stairs. It was not the way we’d come down here. “Walk faster,” he ordered. I could feel the blood from his hand on my neck, sticky and cold and I shivered, but I obeyed. “I want to use that pretty mouth before we have to clean up for dinner.”

That was new and I relished in it. He’d never used my mouth, said he liked the rest of me too much, had even slicked me up between my tortured, welted thighs and fucked me there against my balls once until I’d been a mewling, screaming mess, pleading for a finish he’d refused to give me. Refused and refused and refused until I couldn’t take it anymore and I’d come hard without his permission and he’d tormented me more for it.

Gods, if he did that again, I wasn’t sure I could sit through a dinner with him without wincing or begging for touch.

We stumbled upward, the two of us, climbing the stairs of the old Keep, his hand stiff on my neck, until we burst through a doorway in a room I did not recognize. When it shut behind us, I noted that it was not a door at all but a panel of the wall, hidden behind a desk covered in what looked like a guard schedule from months and months and months ago. The parchment was faded and cracked from exposure to light.

“My old office,” Emory explained at the look on my face. He had blood on his clothes and up one of
his arms, smeared down the leg of his trousers. I didn’t know what I looked like, but it was worse than him, I knew that much. He made short work of shedding the mail, using his own belt to bind my hands behind my back. He was breathless and heady, cheeks flushed red. “You’re so goddamned pretty.” He said that often, but it never ceased to surprise me that pretty was the word he chose to use. I’d asked once and he’d been unable to fully explain, only to tell me that beautiful was different than pretty. Pretty was more delicate, I thought. Pretty was something you could break. Beauty endured.

That was what it was, I thought. He could break pretty. He could ruin pretty. That’s what he wanted. “Get on the desk on your stomach,” he told me and, because I always obeyed him when he talked to me like that, eyes lidded and dark, voice low, I did. I was painfully hard already, just from the way he’d touched me in the keep and how he’d urged me on like he thought that what I was doing was attractive somehow.

“You defended me,” he breathed against the base of my spine when he had me up there, pressing kisses over the tattoos until he could no longer ruck my tunic up enough to reach skin. “You fought for me and I didn’t even have to tell you to do it. You just did it, Kita.”

He peeled his shirt over his head, moving around me and I had to squirm and wiggle to try to look at him, which earned me a sharp crack on my backside that made me hiss. I was bruised to the bone—had been for two weeks. He never let me heal enough for the marks to go away. I figured he probably should have. Tristan said he should have.

Tristan said a lot, when I thought about it. That we were unhealthy. That we were bad for each other. That I was using Emory, even if I did love him, and he was using me, too, even if he felt the same way, and that someday he was going to hurt me in a way that was absolutely not okay anymore. I’d told him I would cross that bridge when I got to it and Tristan, fuming, had thrown his hands up. ‘It might not be a bridge you can cross back from, Nikita Novak! He might fucking kill you!’

Let him, I thought. Gods, let him kill me. Let his face be the last thing I see. Let him be the last thing I taste.

Emory tore the sleeve off of his shirt and the northman in me, which was most of me, was appalled at the wastefulness of it. I’d never thrown away anything in my life that still had use left in it, but he tied that strip around my eyes and the world went alarmingly dark. “Why am I blindfolded?” I mumbled. I didn’t like that. I was a warrior by trade—a soldier. He was giving me a significant handicap if I did, in fact, need to stop him, and my heart lurched in my chest, actually scared for the first time.

“Because I want you to be,” Emory answered simply, his clothes still ruffling. “Open your mouth.”

I did not obey immediately and he slapped me. It wasn’t hard, but it was enough to hurt like a bitch and I wrinkled my nose at the fact that I’d been slapped twice that day. Elizabeth had made me laugh. Emory made me hard, straining against the desk so that it hurt, wriggling to try to relieve some of the pressure. “You can stop that,” he drawled and I could tell he was crouched so that we were eye level. I could feel his breath on my face. “If you come at all right now, you’re going to do it in those pants, because I do not intend to touch you.”

I whined furiously. “Kitten—”

“Don’t argue. You’re going to suck my cock like a good, sweet boy.” I shivered in response and I heard the low chuckle in his throat. “Praise whore,” he whispered before he continued. “You’re going to think about it all through that dinner we have to be at. Your jaw will be sore, your throat will be raw, and every time you swallow something, you’ll think about this and by the time we’re up
in that tower together, you’ll want nothing more than to be touched and then, Kita, I’ll touch you. I’ll make you come until you can’t anymore, until you forget how to speak, until all you see are stars.”

I choked, blind beneath the fabric of his shirt, squirming on the desk. “Yes,” I heard myself breathe. “Yes, please. I’ll do anything--”

“Oh, I know you will. You always do. Obedience is one of your finer qualities. Now open your fucking mouth before I pry it open myself.”

I had no idea what I was doing. He never even let me get him off with my hands, let alone my mouth. He always kept me pinned face down, arms tied so that I couldn’t touch him. I’d assumed it was some latent fear driving him—touch and sex could not really go hand in hand for him until he healed more. I wanted to believe that what I’d done for him down in the belly of his home had healed something, but I knew better. Emory liked violence. He was a sadist, down to the very core, and this was nothing but a reaction to listening to someone he hated so completely scream until breath left their body.

I opened my mouth though, eager to please, hungry to serve him in any way that he saw fit, and I could feel the hard heat of him against my cheek first, like he was measuring how far he was going to fit. I inhaled sharply, arching my back and craning my neck while he grabbed a fistful of my hair. I turned toward him, mouth open, lips grazing along the length of his cock, mewling hungrily while I squirmed, aching and hard, and I was rewarded by the pleased rumble of Emory moaning above me. “Suck,” he commanded.

Gods, yes, I thought. It wasn’t easy. I couldn’t see and fumbled blindly, mouth open and eager. He felt bigger, I thought, than he probably actually was, if only because I couldn’t see him and could only imagine how far down he’d have to go into my throat to fully sheathed inside of my mouth. I panted, desperate, until I finally felt the head of him on my lips and I took him in, plunging him through my mouth, hungry and hot. I was pleased to hear him suck in a sharp breath, one hand tightening in my hair and the other cupping my face, smearing what I imagine to be blood over my cheeks.

“We are so fucked up, aren’t we, sweetheart?” he mumbled and I couldn’t agree, not with a mouthful of him, sucking and humming, trying my best to take more of him because I was too eager to please him for my own good. I wanted to agree, though. He was right. “You have to be so godsdammed close to perfect and I’m a fucking disaster.”

I twisted, turning my head so that he slid free of my mouth with a wet pop against my lips. “No,” I gasped.

“No--” He repeated. “No like you want me to stop?”

“No,” I snorted, laughing at the very thought. “No, I’m not anywhere close to fucking perfect, I’m just better at hiding the bad shit than you are.”

He laughed then, the kind of laugh I liked to hear from him, and he pushed against my mouth again, sliding back in with a delicious sigh of contentment. The hand that was in my hair relaxed, stroking instead, urging more and more and I wanted more. I wanted all of it, aching to feel my face against the frontal ridge of his pelvic bone, his cock down my throat. I knew, in all reality, that it would never be anything close to that pretty because I had no experience and I was only trying to do what I thought might be nice had our roles been reversed. “That’s it,” he urged me. “Fuck me, if I didn’t know you better, I’d call you a liar about being a virginal little princess.”

He was so godsdammed chatty when he was worked up like that. He lost his filters and I loved it. I
loved his voice, got turned on even by him whispering in my ear, and he knew it...took full advantage
of it.

I sucked the head, rewarded by the bitter taste of him on my tongue, just a few pearls of Emory and I
groaned around him, focused entirely on sheathing my teeth and keeping my mouth wet, letting
saliva collect in pools along my tongue so that it slicked him and slid down my chin while he moved,
gentle in and out strokes of him into my mouth, like he was keeping a tight leash on what he wanted.

The muscles in my neck and my back screamed from the position I was in and it occurred to me, in
that exact moment, that he’d done that on purpose. He hadn’t wanted me comfortable for this. This
was the punishment, in and of itself, and I wondered then if he knew how much worse this was for
me, with my curving spine, than it would have been for anyone else. I wondered if he delighted in
that as much as I delighted in knowing that he was still hurting me.

I whined eagerly around him, urging him deeper, until I felt him hit the back of my throat and I
gagged, eyes watering behind the blindfold, but it did not deter me. I had no idea what I was doing,
but I figured I couldn’t go wrong with lustful enthusiasm, and he didn’t seem to mind it if this was
the world’s longest blow job or even the world’s worst, because he was still panting, gasping
sometimes, fingers turning to a fist again in my hair while the other cupped the back of my neck.

My mouth strained around him. My jaw was aching. He was thicker than I’d thought he was, though
I should have known with the many times he’d stretched me open with the very same cock, pushing
into me just short of prepared for him so that I squealed and whimpered at the intrusion.

I gagged again and Emory held me down. “There,” he moaned. “Right there. Keep it there.” The
head of him was in my throat and I struggled, saliva spilling from my mouth, face red, gagging over
and over so that I constricted around his cock and I could feel his arm, holding the back of my head,
shake with effort.

I was straining in my pants, my own cock impossibly hard, wet and angry at a lack of attention. It
was all I could think about--that and Emory buried in my throat. I didn’t hear anything but his
breathing. I couldn’t see anything and though I pulled and squirmed against the belt around my
wrists, I achieved nothing but the sound of creaking leather. Beneath the blindfold, my eyes
streamed, soaking the fabric, and my lungs screamed at a lack of air. Breathing through my nose
wasn’t enough. I needed to gasp. I couldn’t get enough air in around him and he was pushing,
nudging, sealed in the muscle of my throat while he panted and gasped above me. It was the first
time I ever heard him whimper during sex. He was usually so confident, so controlled, so brimming
with raw power, but at that moment, he whimpered, “Nikita,” like my name was a prayer.

I reveled in it, but my chest heaved and my stomach flipped until the muscles in my shoulders reared
up and I really fought him. He held me down harder and terror welled up in my chest, throbbing
around my heart. I squirmed and wriggled, my legs kicking against the bottom of the desk, thrashing
where I was, until he finally withdrew and I sucked in a hoarse, gasping breath of air. Drool spilled
over my lips, hanging from my face and he wiped it away with the back of his hand, caressing my
cheeks carefully. “You okay?”

“More,” I mumbled, desperate for breath, but still eager to please. Too eager.

Anyone else might have hesitated and understood that I was not in the right headspace to make
decisions for myself regarding my own well being. He should have known that we’d crossed into
dangerous territory again but he shoved his cock back between my lips at my plea. A choked gurgle
escaped my mouth and Emory pushed my head down so that I wasn’t so much sucking his cock as I
was having my throat fucked. His hips snapped forward, more and more with each motion, and I
was struggling to force air in through my nose, choking and wheezing when he went so deep that I
finally, *finally* felt my nose brush his skin and he stopped, buried to the hilt, while I gagged and thrashed.

“Easy,” he ordered in that *voice* and my thrashing quelled to an urgent squirm, cock stiff and hot in my pants, throbbing against my thigh. “You’re gonna make yourself come if you keep rutting against the desk like that.” I kept sucking, lewd, wet noises escaping my throat as I struggled around him, desperate to make him feel good. I didn’t stop, even though I knew he’d told me to stop moving. My hips kept at it, rucked against the desk, and Emory’s moved again, fucking my face, his stomach pulled taut and damp with sweat.

I was undone and out of control, worked to a fever pitch. My face felt hot and tight. My jaw ached like he said it would. My throat burned like he said it would, full to bursting, stretched by the girth of him buried in it, fucking into the back of it, hard and unrelenting then, like he wanted it to hurt and he wanted me to gag and I did. My entire attention zeroed in on him and what he needed from me and giving that to him, knowing that I cared more for his release than my own, granted me what my hips sought, grinding against the edge of the desk.

I cried out around him, my body jerking and spasming, my arms struggling desperately against their bindings. The sound that came from me was wet and obscene, half-gag and half-pleading moan. Behind the blindfold, my eyes rolled back and I trembled, legs tightening together, hips rutting against the edge of the desk as I came, wet and sticky and still dressed.

“Oh *shit,*” I heard Emory breathe above me, like he couldn’t quite believe that getting him off got me off so effectively. He was pounding into me and I could barely hear him anymore, though he *was* speaking. Blood was rushing in my head, deafening my ears, and the world remained crystal-bright, even behind my blindfold. I opened my throat, let him use me like I was a toy, tied up and hot on top of his desk, and Emory writhed. I could feel it because he was hunched over me, hands on the back of my neck, holding me down while his hips pistoned sharply.

He never let up, not when I felt his abdomen spasm or his cock throb in my throat, not when I felt the first spray of him down my throat, bitter and heady. He fucked me through his orgasm, never slowing or stopping, only breathing raggedly and repeating over and over, “Gods, you’re so fucking good” until I was positively soaking in praise, limp and exhausted and glowing. The only movement I had left in me was to swallow, and I did, every drop, until his cock slid out of my mouth, wet and red, and then Emory was pulling my arms free and gathering me up.

That’s odd, I remember thinking. He never touched me after, but he’d never not beaten me, either, so maybe that was the difference. I didn’t know. I only knew that he picked me up like I weighed little more than a sack of grain and he slumped against the desk with me in his lap, pressing kisses to my face until the blindfold slid down to my throat and my head lolled, falling, exhausted, onto his shoulder.

Maybe I *had* healed something.

Because he was *holding* me, my legs around his hips and my arms loose about his shoulders and he was sweeping his hands up and down my spine and it didn’t matter that I was filthy—-that I was blood-soaked and sticky from a climax he hadn’t even undressed me for (to be fair, I doubted very much that he’d *expected* that reaction when we started.)

“I’ll get better for you,” he whispered against my ear, his mouth pressed below it. “I swear, someday, Nikita, I’ll be good enough for you. I’ll be good for you.”

I wanted to mumble that he was good enough, but my tongue felt thick and I was in that sleepy spot just before the drop hit me--but it never came that day. Or rather, it came and he was there, holding
me to his chest like I was a doll. So I pressed my lips to the closest available skin that I could reach--his throat--and I inhaled the smell of him--sandalwood and linen, the thick tang of blood, and the heady, heavy smell of sex.

So I was quiet and he was quiet and when I fell asleep on him, he didn’t move.

Chapter End Notes

Further notes: The torture used here is a ritualized form of execution called the blood eagle. It's only referenced twice in texts dating back to about 867ish and the details are...poetic, at best. It was (supposedly) used by the Norse people to execute an Anglo-Saxon king and one of their own princes (at two different times.) It seemed like something brutal enough for the Riders to do, so I did my best interpreting what I had, but I am not a doctor nor am I a first century Viking king, which means that a lot of it is...guesswork based on what little was available.
Atara was surprisingly well put together after the sentencing. I’d expected...more. I’d expected the sort of trembling I sometimes felt when I had to walk by the door of the Red Lantern and I recognized some of the voices inside. I’d expected the repugnant fear that filled my throat when I ran into some of those patrons in the streets of Coryth or, on a few occasions, even in the barracks. There was a silent agreement between all of us not to say a word--they didn’t want people knowing they’d frequented a sleazy brothel and paid for an underage boy.

Still--I’d expected more than him spending the afternoon pouring over paperwork while a storm raged outside. I’d expected more than silence, but I sat at his door and I watched him compartmentalize.

“You know, we can talk about it,” I offered as the standard afternoon storm in Coria lashed the windows. You could set your clock by that rain and by the lightning that arced over the sea, illuminating the world in blue and purple while Atara read over land claims, court documents, divorce petitions, and trade agreements between his father’s people and his own.

He glanced up only briefly, a flicker of dark green eyes in a delicate, pale face. “What’s to talk about?” he asked quietly. “Nikita went straight down to old Coryth Keep with that prisoner. No doubt, he’s dead already. The other will hang in the morning.” His eyes went back down to the parchment in front of him, his immaculate hand neatly scrawling out his name.

“You sentenced people to die,” I pointed out and Atara dropped the quill, his small fingers lifting to his temples so that he could rub them, the start of a headache no doubt blossoming behind his eyes. I leaned forward in my chair when he heaved a breath, his tongue darting out to lick his lips.

Atara plucked up the wine glass sitting on his desk, took a long swallow, and then answered. “I bludgeoned someone to death on the beach. This is not my first time playing reaper, Mackenzie, and it is very unlikely to be my last. It is part of the burden and, to be quite frank, I don’t think I have it in me to give a fuck about those two. I hope Nikita makes him suffer hard and long for what he did to my brother and for what he stole from him. Do you know how badly Emory wanted children?” His eyes closed as he spoke and I felt my mouth go dry.

This was not the conversation I had expected. I’d expected Atara to turn emotional, as he so often did when he was thrown into high stress situations or over-sensitized. What I got, instead, was a brief glimpse into the leader he had in him--the one that hadn’t been fostered when he’d been growing up because everyone had always assumed Emory would be king. It was not a part of his personality that
I usually saw through the wanderlust and the lovely way he looked at everything like it all had something beautiful in it.

“I didn’t,” I answered quietly. “I mean, I don’t. I don’t know how badly. He still could, though, right? With a woman, he could?”

“Pretty sure that ship has sailed,” he answered glumly and I furrowed my brow. I had suspicions about Nikita and Emory, but I’d never imagined it was something physical so much as it was a psychological support system. Emory needed someone to lean on and Nikita was strong. He’d borne the burden of being a northerner, a Commander, and, according to Atara, his sister had died in some tragic manner not unlike what had happened to Emory. He must have caught my confusion, though, because he clarified. “I caught Nikki coming out of Emory’s room very early in the morning a few days ago with bruises on his throat that looked like teeth. Given his culture, I doubt very much that he was assigned female and I know he’s not...whatever I am.”

He pushed himself to his feet then, brushing his hair out of his face while I tried to absorb the information he’d given me. “Do you think that’s healthy?” I inquired gently, watching as his slight fingers stacked the parchment he’d been working on and then smoothed over the charcoal tunic he was wearing. His boots sounded heavy on the hardwood floors, scuffling over carpet as he walked around, putting candles out before he led me from the room.

Atara shrugged, locking the door behind him and sliding the key into his pocket as he walked, looping his arm through mine. He had long since passed caring if people saw him with me and my function as his guard had been reduced to his companion, for the most part, and though I would have gladly fought for him, I knew, realistically, that it wasn’t like that. I still had guard duties. I still examined his brother at least weekly. He wasn’t whoring me. He was keeping me paid because, I think, to some extent, he understood that we were different. I did not come from money like he did, not really, because Elizabeth had never showed any interest in me outside of calling me ‘vaguely irritating.’ I needed the job to live.

“Emory is an adult,” he finally told me. “What I think about his relationship isn’t relevant, but since you asked, no, I don’t think it’s healthy. I think my brother is violent. I think he borders psychosis. Tristan said--” I huffed at the mention of the Immaran, disgust twisted in my mouth, and Atara glared. “Tristan said that Emory was sick before the beach. That even if he recovers, he’ll be sick after it, because he can’t fix a disease of the mind. What is that? A disease of the mind?”

I hesitated. Mental illness was not something we really covered in training for healers, even when I’d apprenticed with a Lierian, and they were arguably better than Corians. It just wasn’t something we could fix and so my answers would be...skeletal, at best. “It’s not really my area of expertise,” I ventured but he was still looking up at me, his steps slower so that he could pay attention. “But it’s generally things like...a depression you can’t get out of that might not seem to have any cause, hearing voices, seeing things that aren’t there...in soldiers, we call it combat fatigue when they have flashbacks. That’s what I think Emory has, but before that? I don’t know, darlin’. I didn’t know him.”

“What about mood swings? My brother and my father they both...” He wrinkled his nose, holding his breath for a moment like he was trying to describe something that he didn’t have words for. “It’s hard to explain. Normally they were fine, right? Everything was great, but then just as quickly, it could be not great. Like blowing out a candle—light to dark in one breath. Emory could have tantrums that lasted five, six, seven hours...well into his teenage years and when that stopped, he’d have these episodes where he’d just...he’d be so amped up that he couldn’t sleep for days, no matter
how tired he was. My father does that, too. Sometimes, it’s like you can’t drag them out of bed. It’s like they’re so distant that the world could end and they wouldn’t care…”

He stopped, staring up at the doors to the royal quarters before he entered. “And they do care. They did. That’s a poor way to explain it. They do care. They just didn’t have the energy to deal with caring, even if they wanted to…even if they slept for days. It’s so up and down, Mackenzie, and Emory is even worse now. Is that a disease of the mind? Can you be too emotional some days and not emotional enough on others and have it just…switch off quick as lightning?”

“Yes,” I began carefully. I’d read about this on only one occasion and knew precious little on the details. It didn’t have a name, whatever it was, but it was the sort of thing that could rip a family apart. I was surprised, then, of course, to hear that Fox and Emory hadn’t turned their little family unit into a battlefield long before the beach. Then again, I knew Fox. I’d worked with him for years by that point. We’d never been close, but I seen that wavering emotional side to him on a few occasions. I also knew, however, that if there was one person holding them all together it was him. Cyril was a basket case, as sensitive as my father--a Lierian thing, or so I’d been told. Everything was brighter, sharper, more real to them. Atara was steadier than his Lheiro, but not by much.

Emory was more human, but Emory was broken.

That left Fox there to be the rock that they all leaned on…the foundation to their castle.

I pressed a kiss to his forehead instead of answering directly. “I don’t know enough about this to give you an answer, Atara, but I can tell you that everyone processes grief and trauma differently. Recovery is…” I winced and he looked up expectantly, eyes wide, breath hitched like he was hanging on every word, waiting for some answer that would shed light into the ruins around him. I tried to be as kind as I could. “You hear that word and you think…you think that means everything goes back to normal, right? That you can just pick up where you left off but it isn’t like that. Going through what Emory went through...what I went through—” And I hated grouping myself with Emory like we were anything alike. My trauma had lasted years, steady and consistent, but it had never been brutal like that. I’d been beaten, flogged, pinned down until my face bruised, bound until my wrists and ankles blistered, but I’d never been torn open. Nobody had broken my bones or dislocated my jaw trying to fit more into my mouth or to shut me up.

We were different, Emory and I. Atara had problems seeing that. Like Fox, he wanted the answer to be as simple as, ‘Well, you got better, so he will, too.’

“It’s not that simple, darlin’. There is no going back. You don’t recover so much as you...adapt. You become something different...someone a little bit harder, with a little bit thicker of a skin. It’s not a bad thing.” His pretty face sagged with a frown and he crossed his arms over his chest like he was trying to hold himself together and I cupped his face to make him look up at me again instead of at his boots. He broke my heart--all this sympathy he had for Emory, all this worry he had, this guilt that ate him alive...survivor’s guilt. I knew that taste, too, because I hadn’t been the only child at the brothel, but not all of us had made it.

He wondered why it hadn’t been him. He wondered why the burden couldn’t have been shared. He felt guilty that it wasn’t.

“Hey,” I started gently. “I know where you’re going. Don’t go there. That’s a dark road, little prince. It’s over. You can’t change what happened and someday, if nothing else, Emory will be able to say that he survived it and it made him who he is and that won’t be a bad thing anymore.”

Atara seemed to think, steady and hard, his face drawn up in total concentration. He was bright, the youngest prince. Brighter, I thought, than anyone else I knew and if anyone in the world could adjust
to leadership, it was him. He just needed time, a little push in the right direction…

He pursed his full lips, pale pink against white teeth. “But who would he be without it?” he asked quietly, like he didn’t dare imagine the outcome of such a line of events. “Who would you be?”

And there was my problem, really, because if I changed anything in my past, no matter how wretched and horrific it was, I would have never ended up on the beach that day. I would have never been the person to take note of how left behind Atara was in the whole disaster that was his brother. I would have never kissed him, breathless and eager, never felt him under me, never heard his whispered proclamations of love, warm against my ear in the dark.

“Not here,” I answered, frowning. “Not with you. I think that’s the greater tragedy.”

In response, he smiled, but it was accompanied by a glare and a shove, featherlight against my arm. A flush rose up his cheeks and I marveled at it— at him, in general. It always took my breath away a little bit...that he saw something in me that I didn’t see myself and that he made the choice, every day, to love me when he could have had anyone in Coria, male or female. “I love you,” he grumbled, still struggling to swallow the smile that accompanied his flush. “Because you say shit like that and you actually mean it, don’t you? You’d go through all of that fucked up bullshit again just to meet me?”

“Oh, without hesitation, darlin’,” I agreed and Atara turned toward the door, pushing it open while I wrapped my arms around, looped about his shoulders so that my chin was on his shoulder while we walked. I could feel his flush radiate from his cheeks against my own when I breathed him in— raspberries, parchment, and fresh ink that stained his fingertips the same color as his tunic. “You make every second worth it.”

“You’re impossible,” he mumbled, shrugging himself free of my grasp. It wasn’t that his parents didn’t know—they did. It was that he’d told me it all made Fox some kind of uncomfortable and so while he was not, in any way, hiding his relationship with me, he was not flaunting it front of them either and they were right there, Fox seated at the table in the dining room through the archway to the right. The walls in there were mahogany red, deep and warm. There were no house sigils hanging in their quarters like I’d expected from a family of such importance. Fox may have been, by his own frequent admission, arrogant, but he never descended into open boasting of his own rank. Instead of sigils, there were portraits. Incredibly expensive, I imagined, and painstakingly detailed, of both of the boys at various stages. Atara as an infant, recognizable only by the marks that ran vertically down his cheekbones, swaddled in white silk. Emory as a young teenager with a hideous dog at his feet, smiling widely in a way I’d never seen him do. The entire family at Fox’s throne—Atara as a toddler in his lap, Cyril sitting on the arm of the throne, leaning on Fox’s shoulder, and Emory standing behind them, leaning around the side to look down.

They all seemed so...normal. So utterly different from the ones that hung in the corridors of the palace—those lacked smiles. They were official portraits. Serious faces, sigils on their clothes, posed on horses or with hunting hounds. Those ones were fake.

These were real.

The King was wearing glasses, which I’d noted only ever happened in these rooms, and he was rubbing his eyes beneath the lenses, Cyril draped over him from behind his chair so that, like Atara and I had been positioned a moment earlier, he was resting his chin on Fox’s shoulder and talking quietly in his ear. His fingers dug into his back, rubbing at what I knew to be mutilated flesh, roped with a map of scar tissue that Atara had tried explaining to me once. It stretched, tight and unyielding, like a carapace across his father’s shoulders, making it difficult for him to lift his arms without the stinging, burning sensation of skin on the verge of tearing and that, as he’d gotten older,
“Atara,” Cyril greeted with a smile but he didn’t move, just pressed his lips to Fox’s cheek until the King looked up and smiled, too. “Illya stopped by looking for you.”

“I’m sure she did,” Atara grumbled, rubbing his face and collapsing into a chair nearest to them. “I’ll deal with her tomorrow. If I have to think anymore about trade or land claims or money I’m going to break into the hard liquor.”

Fox snorted. “Welcome to leadership, tiny. The burden you never wanted, but were given anyway by fortune of the wrong last name.” He spoke with a lilt to his voice, like it was all part of some merry little rhyme, and then he pointed to the chair beside Atara and looked up at me. “You can sit, Mackenzie.”

I did, albeit, awkwardly. Fox had not yet broached the subject of my relationship with his youngest son in any official capacity except to grudgingly allow it to continue. I knew he could have torn it out from under me if he wanted to and there’d have been nothing I could do about it. I half expected him to. In his position, I couldn’t say I’d have been as lenient as him. Atara was young and naive and though our age difference might not have seemed like a lot ten years from now, at seventeen and twenty-four, it seemed like a lot at the moment. “Thank you, Your--”

“Fox,” he corrected. “Please, for the love of the gods, if you’re going to do...whatever it is you two are doing...you can at least use my given name when we’re...casual.”

Atara choked on the wine he was drinking, spilling it back from his mouth into the glass he was holding, eyes stinging and watering. Sex had long since stopped surprising me, even in the vaguest of senses, and so the shame or perhaps embarrassment I should have felt at being called out by his father.

Cyril finally moved, clapping Atara on the back with the heel of his hand until the choking sound stopped. “Like we didn’t know,” he drawled, plastering a false pout to his face when he took his seat beside Fox. “Like you even tried hiding it, running off to stay the night with him the way you did.” He paused and then his attention turned quickly to me and I thought, for a moment, that I might melt into the floor. “Thank you for looking out for him, by the way. It seems we owe you twice now.”

“You don’t...owe me,” I managed to force the words through a steadily closing throat and finally the precariousness of the situation began to set in, heavy and suffocating around me. I thought maybe I ought to just get up and leave, let them sort out whatever talk this was between themselves, but they’d invited me here. “I’m...sorry. I’m really...not used to thinking of you without your titles and it’s...” I wrung my hands under the table. It was fine acting like me around Emory and Atara. Emory was only a bit younger than me, after all. We had things in common, all of us, and the two of them were always so...lax when it came to looking like they belonged in a royal family. Riordan played the role of prince better than either of them seemed to.

The King and his consort were different. I could have dressed Fox in rags and he still would have looked like royalty. Cyril had been trained from early childhood to play the part of gentry. He’d been crafted into what he was. They were the definition of the upper echelon of society and I was so far, far below them that I might as well have been crawling around in the dirt with the insects.

I was woefully unprepared for this and, beneath the table, I felt Atara’s fingers lace with mine like he knew.

“It’s alright,” Fox eventually relented, propping his head up in one hand and plucking his glasses off with the other. “You’ll get used to it. We’ve been meaning to invite you to dinner for awhile. Things
have just been…”

“Chaotic,” Cyril suggested without hesitation, like Fox’s sentence simply blended right into Cyril’s voice. The previous Infinito hadn’t even looked up from the bottle of wine he was reading, the label written in the scrawling hand of the court cellar master. It was a vintage only the royal family drank, produced from vineyards in Eden where Brentlyn sat as one of the King’s official Heralds. It was jarring, however, watching how seamlessly they functioned together. I’d seen them together before, of course, but never so casually...so...intimately...like they were any other family in Coryth sitting down together. They had a sort of synergy that could only come from a lifetime together and I had to remember that they had spent a lifetime together. Cyril had grown up in the palace with Fox, groomed as his constant companion and his source of unbiased advice. Their relationship spanned much longer than their marriage or even the lives of their sons.

Atara seemed to notice my speechlessness first. “They do that,” he whispered, like they couldn’t hear him, but Cyril’s eyes flicked up and Fox laughed under his breath. “Finish each other’s sentences like that. It’s weird.” He sat back in his chair, glaring at them, but the look was false.

“When Atara was a boy,” Fox started while Cyril struggled with the bottle of wine, tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth, one tiny hand wrapped around the neck while he twisted the corkscrew with the other. “He would do this thing where he’d ask one of us for something and whichever one of us it was would say no, of course, because Atara asked for absurd things.”

“Oh, gods, stop,” Atara mumbled sinking down into his chair, hands over his face, but I leaned forward, utterly engrossed. He never talked about himself as a child. I figured, as things were, it was too hard to think of things that included Emory as a child, too, because Emory had been normal once. Or, at least, as normal as Emory could ever be.

The King was undeterred by his plea and Cyril cut in fluidly. “Like a unicorn, once,” he deadpanned. “I’m not kidding. Straight faced asked for a damned unicorn from this one.” He nodded at Fox and I felt the grin cross my face as quickly as the flush rose to Atara’s. “Claimed that because Fox was King, he should be able to get him anything he wanted.”

“I said no,” Fox interjected just as quickly and I snorted just as Cyril managed to get the cork out of the wine with a pop. It was a dark burgundy color when he poured it into my glass, replacing the empty bottle that Atara had finished a moment earlier. It should have felt weird or, at the very least, inappropriate to have this man that an entire nation of people revered as a god pour wine into a glass for me but Cyril made it feel normal as Fox continued...like this was how dinner worked for them every day.

I knew, of course, that it did. Fox kept a casual table. Cyril insisted on it. Atara told me he wanted it to feel like a family, not like a royal lineage, and he’d succeeded in that. “So he asked me,” Cyril supplied the next chunk of the story as seamlessly as Fox had started it.

Atara whined, glaring at both of them with a brow furrowed in teenage frustration. “And he said,” he told me, still grumbling. “‘Your father already told you no, Atara.’ But they hadn’t even talked to each other! He just knew that I’d asked for it already!”

“A unicorn?” I asked, turning to look at him, brow raised in amusement. His scowl only deepened in response.

He mumbled a response, eventually. “Emory told me they were real. He was very convincing.”

“Actually,” Emory’s voice came from the doorway, sliding smoothly into the tempo of the conversation as if he’d always been there, a sleepy looking Nikita trailing behind him. He was in
regular, southern style clothes with the collar buttoned high and his hair was soaking wet like he’d just been roused from a bathtub he’d fallen asleep in. On that note, Emory, I noticed, also had wet hair. He sank into a chair close to Cyril and pulled Nikita down next to him. The northerner winced like he hadn’t been prepared for the motion and, at the time, I thought it was back. If I’d known what it really was, I might have done something for him.

Emory kept right on going though and in that second, I could see the charm that Atara claimed he possessed. Like his father before him, Emory controlled the room. He had wit and grace and he spoke in a way that made you want to listen to him. “I wasn’t convincing at all,” he admitted with a shrug of one shoulder. “Atara was just gullible. Father gave him a bronze soldier once for one of his birthdays, hand painted in all this little detail.”

“Why are you picking on me?” Atara lamented, sinking deeper into his seat.

Nikita watched him from across the table. “You’re the younger sibling,” he pointed out, that northern accent thick in his voice. “It’s our job, as older siblings, to pick on younger siblings. It establishes order.”

“What about the bronze soldier?” I asked, ignoring Atara’s pitiful whine of disapproval and how he put his head down on the table. Fox squeezed the back of his neck reassuringly but the little prince was motionless.

Emory poured a glass of wine for each of them. “I told him that if he buried it in the garden, he’d grow a tree of them and have a whole army.”

Nikita snorted. “You did not.”

“He did!” Atara wailed. “And I did! I buried it and Emory dug it up and stole it from me. Can we tell horrifying stories about Em now? Like maybe the whole three years with Sir Edmund?”

“Hey!” Emory pointed at him from across the table just as the doors to the quarters swung open and a handful of serving girls with rolling carts of food trundled in, lifting things onto the table, pretending for all the world that we weren’t even there. I thought Emory might continue, ignore that they were there completely as any other young noble would have, but he thanked them each as they passed by him, the picture of etiquette, and they all smiled down at him with flushed cheeks and pink lips.

In response, he looped an arm over Nikita’s shoulders and the little Rider wrinkled his nose. Emory continued, however, still pointing at Atara. “You leave Sir Edmund out of this. He never did anything to you. You were jealous that I had a dog and you didn’t.”

“That was not a dog,” Cyril corrected, grimacing at the memory. “That was the carcass of a very large rat that didn’t know it was dead yet.”

“That was cruel, Lheiro,” Emory admonished. “Cruel and cold.”

The serving girls moved quietly toward the door, content to act as if they’d never been there, but the eldest prince, seemingly on one of those highs that Atara talked about, looked up as the last one went to bow out of the room. She smiled at him, having noticed his attention, and he lifted a hand to wave, smiling back and then, as if that wasn’t disarming enough, he winked at her. It was hard to reconcile him with the man I’d seen at the sentencing earlier, cowering beside his father, ready to use Fox as a shield from the world and I wondered, then, what kind of balm Nikita provided that could bring him back to this for a little while.
Atara watched and a sort of eerie quiet fell over the table. Nikita nudged Emory with an elbow in his ribs. “You’re disgusting,” he chided. “And a shameless flirt.”

“She started it,” Emory pouted, but his eyes fell on Atara, who was staring openly, his fingers fidgeting to tear a dinner roll into the smallest possible pieces he could manage just so he had something to do with his hands. Fox and I reached at the same time and I would have withdrawn, let him stop the nervous tic and lace his fingers up with his youngest son’s, but Fox pulled back first, green eyes caught on mine, and I thought it must have been hard. It must have been among the hardest things he’d ever done to give that role of comforter to me in that one second that passed between us, but he let my fingers curl around Atara’s wrist so that he stopped murdering harmless dinner pastries.

Emory blinked, looking around suddenly at the way Cyril was staring at him, too. “What?” he asked, leaning back in his chair. “Why are you all looking at me?”

“Because you’re smiling,” Nikita offered, his voice barely audible, even in the silence. “They haven’t seen it in a long time, kitten. You only ever smile for me.”

“It’s nice,” Fox admitted gently. “We miss you, boss.”

The eldest prince blinked hard, his attention turning down to his plate and Nikita scooted his chair closer like proximity would help with the emotions that flickered over Emory’s face—joy, grief, fear, anxiety, rage, sorrow—all of them overwhelming on their own, mixed into a cocktail and forced down his throat. “It’s hard,” he mumbled after a second. “It’s hard to be...me. The skin doesn’t fit anymore.”

“I know,” I heard myself say the words before I really thought them through and Emory looked up, surprise in his features now, and his gaze locked steadily on mine. None of them had been saying anything. None of them had the right words or the right feelings to go with it, but I did. I knew what Cyril had gone through, but it was different, somehow, for the two of us. For Emory because he’d been brutalized so terribly that the scars went infinitely deeper and for me because it had happened for so long and so often that it had been my normal for awhile.

Atara watched, eyes wide, like talking about this was the last thing he’d ever expected me to do with anyone who wasn’t him and I understood it. Until that very moment, I never would have, but Emory had needed someone to say something in that vacuum of silence and I was the only person with the ability to give him that.

So I continued. “It’s hard,” I repeated him. “I know it’s hard and it’s...hopeless. And it’s sickening and every time you take a step forward, it’s like taking three steps back, but it gets easier. You’ll build back up what you lost and you’ll figure out a new normal and it...it gets easier. Trust me.”

They’d known, of course they had. They had to have known. Fox employed me and he had my work history. He knew where I’d grown up and there was only one thing that happened to Lierians in brothels and it wasn’t ‘bar wench.’ It was horror.

But Emory still stared like he hadn’t quite thought about it yet and then he cleared his throat. “Thank you,” came the quiet response before his hoarse voice returned to the usual tenor. “And don’t take offense to this, Mack, but I’m going to change the subject now for both of our sakes.”

I nodded vehemently in response and Emory did, segueing right back into Atara-as-a-child horror stories that included sneaking purple dye into the laundry, wearing socks on the beach because somehow that meant nobody would push him in the water, and how he’d gone three years refusing to eat anything red because red meant spicy—this last one was told while Atara pointedly bit into a
whole tomato just to spite Cyril, who was doing the retelling at that point. We did also hear about Sir Edmund (who was definitely actually a dog), Emory fleeing the stables from a tryst, bare ass shining in the moonlight, when the stable hand’s wife came looking for him (Nikita laughed so hard he was crying, trying desperately not to snort wine through his nose while Emory took his turn at attempting to shrink into the smallest possible space he could take up), and how, upon learning Glacian, he’d taken to swearing at all the gentry in it. Nikita promised to teach him better Glacian swears than the ones he’d learned in books.

It was all so normal. So casual. It was easy to slip into forgetting that Fox was the King and Cyril was his second, that Atara was the Infinito, that Nikita was Rider Commander of the Legion (sleepy and worn down as he looked), or that Emory still bounced between a walking nightmare with crippling depression and a manic alcoholic.

It wasn’t until the tail end of the dinner (complete with apple tarts, which seemed to be the only thing Nikita was truly interested in eating) that conversation turned...serious. “Mackenzie,” Fox started, head propped up on the table, absolutely not in line with any of the etiquette I knew (precious little, to be fair, but still.) “I’m afraid I misjudged you.”

Atara perked up, head cocked to the side. Cyril watched intently. Nikita’s head was on Emory’s shoulder and his eyes were glazed like he might pass out at any second. “You had good reason to be wary,” I managed to offer, uncomfortable with the attention on me.

The king wrinkled his nose. “Not particularly, no. I was just being an ass.”

“Someone write this down,” Emory drawled. “We should make it a national holiday. ‘Fox Bordelon admits to being an ass.’ We can exchange gifts. I like gift exchanges.”

“Emory,” Cyril snapped, shooting him a look that quickly dissolved into laughter and his words trailed off into the sharp, resonating rotation of vowels and consonants that made up the Lierian tongue. Emory chirped back in the same language and Atara rolled his eyes like he understood. I didn’t speak enough Lierian to catch it, but I thought he was telling him to mind his tongue and show some respect between the rampant bouts of giggling. “I don’t speak that,” Fox supplied when I looked back at him. “I tried, but I’ve no mind for it.”

“You did have reason,” I insisted. “Were I in your position, I would have been concerned, too. He’s wealthy. He’s powerful. He’s beautiful and I’m...a wh--”

Atara’s hand came up over my mouth. “Don’t say it,” he warned, his voice deadly serious. “I swear to the gods, I will slap that word right out of your mouth, Mackenzie.”

“Oooh,” Emory sing-songed. “You gonna take that, Mack?” I did not respond and Atara’s elder brother snorted in response. “Guess we know who is bossing who, right?”

“I will slap you, too,” Atara snapped, his fingers leaving my lips to point at his brother. Fox heaved a sigh. There’d been too much wine and too much indulging for either of the boys to maintain any level of serious conversation. At least, for this part, which wasn’t actually so serious.

I was getting the stamp of approval, it seemed. “You know where this is going,” Fox said after a time when Emory and Atara had finished throwing grapes at each other like small children only when Nikita pulled on Emory’s ear hard enough to make him yelp and warned him, in that rough tongue of his, to stop behaving like a brat (I knew because Atara translated for me--I did not speak Glacian.)

The King then turned his attention, without an answer from me, to Nikita himself, still bleary eyed
and rubbing his face. “Are you well, Nikki?” he asked eventually and the Rider looked up, two-toned eyes wide in surprise.

“I...yes? I’m just...well, we have this tradition in the north. We take this powder--”

Cyril snorted. “I know the stuff,” he cut in. “The Lieri in Recia use it, too, before battle. How are you awake? I took it once and wanted to sleep for days when I came down.”

Nikita mumbled something like he had a mouth full of cotton. Then he cleared his throat and tried again. “I slept a little bit,” he admitted. “After I came up from the old Keep.”

“So that’s done?” Atara asked gently. “He’s dead?”

“Ha.” The Rider forced a smile around a dry, mirthless laugh. “Quite. I performed a ritual execution called a--”

“He pulled his lungs out through his back,” Emory interrupted and Atara cringed but the older prince seemed utterly enthralled. I suppose, if my position had been different and someone I loved had done for me what Nikita had done for Emory, I might have looked as enthralled. Then again, ritual torture seemed a bizarre thing to be excited by.

Cyril winced like Atara, lifting his glass to his lips. “Why thank you, Emory, for that vivid description I definitely did not need.”

Nikita, too, scowled at him. “Ritual. Execution. I told you that you shouldn’t have come. It was ugly and--”

“Stop.” Emory’s entire demeanor shifted. The charm and the sweet-natured grin he’d been wearing faded and Nikita’s eyes widened, lips parted, and he obeyed like a trained dog. Like he was going to roll over on the floor and show his belly to the dominant canine in the room.

Cyril and Fox exchanged looks I couldn’t quite read, but I knew enough to be aware that they, too, noticed it, and under the table, Atara grasped my fingers.

The King cleared his throat. “Nikita, about your...circumstances. You know what will happen if your father finds out about...this. I can protect you while you’re in Coryth, but if you were to return home at any time...”

“I know,” Nikki answered. “We haven’t actually...talked about…” He shrugged, noncommittal, and kept his eyes geared down at his empty plate. He hadn’t looked up since Emory had told him to stop whatever it was he was about to say. I didn’t like the power dynamic I could taste between the two of them. It felt charged and raw and...too much. Like there was too much of them to fold into one relationship or there were too many problems between the two of them to be healthy.

Fox finished for him, suggesting mildly. “What happens in the future?”

“You’ll stay in the south,” Emory insisted, turning to look at him. “You can’t go back there. Even if you and I...even if we don’t...you can’t go back to that! You’re...you...you’re you!” He said it like it was supposed to mean something and Nikki flinched, plucking up a fork and pushing it across the surface of his plate.

“Gay,” he supplied the word. “That’s the word you’re looking for, kitten.”

Emory huffed. “Well, I didn’t want to just say it if you weren’t ready to say it!”
Nikita’s head fell back and he stared at the ceiling, eyes still glassy. Emory continued, but the command in his voice was slowly giving way to raw panic. “Kita, everything you live would be a lie. You would never be happy like that and if you did tell him—if you—if you went up there and it didn’t work, he would kill you. I mean, actually fucking kill you.”

“Language,” Cyril warned.

“Fuck language!” Emory snarled in response and Fox shot him a glare as if to say, ‘Don’t talk to him like that’ like this was some age-old argument of theirs. “Dad—”

Nikita got up quickly, wobbling when he stood too soon, and I was up and out of my chair before he caught his own balance, the healer in me demanding I find out what was wrong because it was more than drugs. He jerked away from my grip before I could touch him and took a halting step backward. “I’m fine,” he hissed, assuring both me and the king at the same time, though neither of us looked appropriately assured. “I’m fine. I appreciate your offer, Fox, and I understand the consequences of what we’re doing. I need to...I need to walk.”

He shook his head and turned to leave, but Emory was on his feet, fingers like a vice grip around his arm so hard I knew he’d bruise. They pressed down into the bone and I felt my gut twist.

So this was what was happening between the two of them. I’d known it couldn’t be healthy. It took healthy people to make a relationship healthy and neither of them were that, but I hadn’t expected...that. It might have seemed innocuous or accidental--Nikita was small and pale, he bruised easily--but the expression Emory was wearing was positively malicious in a way that spoke volumes. I knew that look. I’d seen it on many a patron’s face at the brothel. This was abusive whatever they were doing. Atara with all of his youthful innocence beside me did not see it and remained in his seat, eyes wide, but Cyril and Fox had gotten up.

Nikita pulled, wrenching himself sideways and I could almost feel the burn of those tight-gripped fingers squeezing my own arm, refusing to give an inch, twisting the skin so that it felt like it would rip. The Rider made a strangled noise, frustrated and angry and exhausted.

Emory’s parents seemed stuck, trapped in this struggle between touching him when they knew the response it might elicit and the need to stop him. It would have been hard, I thought, to have to make a decision like that--to put hands on him and drag him away, knowing it would make him kick and scream and slink back into the dark after he’d been so godsdamned normal the entire evening.

I couldn’t imagine that heartbreak...how horrific it must have been to have raised him to be someone so entirely different from what the beach had turned him into...like twenty-two years of a sweet, good-natured little boy had been ripped away from them.

Nikita warned him though. “Let me go, kitten,” he breathed, teeth clenched and I stepped forward. I was not his parent or his brother. I could stop him, but Nikita put a hand up and Atara stood, one arm wrapping around my elbow, his face pressed into my side like he couldn’t stand to watch.

Emory did not let go and Nikita repeated it. “Let me go or I will make you let me go.”

The fingers on Nikki’s arm tightened and, quick like the strike of a snake, Nikita moved. His free hand drove upward, palm first, into Emory’s jaw, driving him back so that he had no choice but to let go. He careened backward into Cyril, a mouthful of blood, and Nikita stumbled sideways, Fox catching him carefully about the waist. The Rider hissed, arching away from the touch and scrambling back onto his own two feet while the King stared, wide eyed. “I’m fine,” he insisted. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Fox.”
“You have nothing to be sorry for!” Fox looked horrified that he was even apologizing. I expected Nikita to run, to flee the room for air to breathe away from Emory’s suffocating presence. “Nikki, listen to me. Look at me.” That was an order. I recognized the shift in Fox’s voice. Even I looked at him and the Rider Commander lifted his chin, swallowing hard, his breathing ragged and spiked with adrenaline. “You didn’t do anything wrong. He was wrong.”

“He is sick!” Nikita snarled back and then he wobbled forward a few steps, watching Cyril hold a towel to Emory’s face, his bottom lip split and bloodied. “I’m so sorry, kitten,” he managed breathlessly.

Emory shook his head, the violence drained from his face, appearing contrite and my stomach turned again. They always looked sorry, in my experience. “I should go,” I started, half-choking on my own tongue. I’d seen too much of this, had it hit too close to home a few times. I could remember a few patrons dragging Rylin up the stairs by his slender arm, my father fighting and hissing like an angry cat until the backhand inevitably shut him up. I remembered the bruise patterns that blossomed on his arms, the color of rotting plums, and how his eye would blacken and cheekbone would turn that greenish color like algae on top of the sea.

“Nikita, is your arm okay?” I asked abruptly, heat flushing to my face with anxiety and the clawing panic in my throat. I could feel my heart, pounding behind my ribs, and Atara looked up at me, concern in his features. The Rider nodded shortly and I cast Emory a withering glare when he looked at me. “You…” I started. “You can go see Tristan. I can’t…I can’t be a part of this.”

I turned on my heel, shrugging free of Atara, and I did flee the room. I heard the door close behind me and then open again and I rounded on him, prepared to give the youngest prince a piece of exactly what I thought, but it was Fox that looked back at me. “Mack--”

“No.” I was adamant. Insistent. “You can fire me. I don’t care. I’m not--”

“I’m not asking you to stay,” Fox assured me. “I’m not firing you. I’m not here to chastise you at all. I just want to know that you’re alright before I let you leave here. Cyril is in there checking on Nikita. It would be irresponsible of me not to do the same for you. My sons love both of you.”

I wanted to say that it wasn’t love that I’d seen on Emory’s face, but that wasn’t entirely true, because throughout dinner when Nikita had been curled into his side, half asleep, warm and safe looking...that had been love. Nikki was right. He was sick. This was sickness. “You need to do something about him,” I whispered. “Before he kills that boy.”

Fox flinched like I’d slapped him. “We’re...talking about it.”

“Fox.” He looked at me at the sound of his name, brow furrowed in frustration. “I know you love Emory. I know you love them both, but how long before that violent side of him gets turned toward other people? How long until Nikita Novak can’t take it anymore and he lashes out at Atara? It’s almost happened already, and so help me, I swear to you, if Emory puts one fucking hand on him--”

“I know,” Fox promised. “I know. If it’s not Atara, it’ll be me or Cyril or even you. I know. It’s not that easy. You don’t understand. He’s not your son.”

“No,” I agreed and I shook my head, walking backward and away from him. “But I don’t think he’s really yours anymore either.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Mentions of past sexual assault, mentions of past child abuse

I hadn’t intended to hurt him. Not that time, anyway. There were moments when we got up on that dangerous edge between pain and pleasure, sex and punishment, and I’d want to hurt him, but that dinner with my parents hadn’t been one. That had been panic. It had been fear. I’d studied Glacia almost as much as I’d studied Immara. I understood their language and their cultures. I’d known Riders long before I’d even known my father and though I had always carried a great respect for them and the brutal training they put themselves through...it was different.

It was different to look at this culture that I’d once considered admirable and apply it’s brutality to someone I loved. It was okay, in the abstract, that the Commanders went through literal torture to get their positions--that they were starved and beaten and thrown out into the ice and the snow to fend for themselves, drugged and tormented and brutalized.... It was admirable, in fact, when it remained in that abstract--away from me, not touching my life. I knew that it was happening in the north. I knew what their culture demanded of them, had always known it, in fact, but it had never bothered me until I had to apply that to Nikita.

Nikita had gone through the Gauntlet and though he had refused to tell me what that meant when I’d asked, it had been simple enough to ask Danica and Riordan and Danica had been more than pleased to regale me with the details of her brother’s very trials and so I knew.

I knew that they’d dragged him out of their lodge into the snow and across Ravndal, blindfolded and fighting like a wounded animal, to a meat-drying shed at the outskirts of the village. I knew that they’d drugged him until he couldn’t tell what was real anymore, that they’d held him underwater, starved him, crushed his ribs with iron pincers--never enough to do permanent damage, Danica assured me, but enough. I knew that it had gone on for weeks--gone on until they’d run out of ways to try to make him talk and Nikita--foolish, brave, stoic Nikita--had never talked. So they’d dragged him back out with only the clothes on his back and told him to survive the month alone.

Surviving a month alone in Glacia was a death sentence. Like wolves, it required a pack, and so they’d become wolves. Driving someone out of that unit and into the snow was a sure way to kill them in most cases, but he’d survived it. He’d been hollow and thin when it was over and he’d eaten so much he’d thrown up on his first day back, but he’d lived and he’d earned his sleeve when nobody had expected him to.

I knew, too, what being part of a pack meant. Like all other Riders, he was expected to conform to a set of rules that turned him into a cog in the machine instead of an individual. Everything was the betterment of the whole. All hunts were shared, all gathered roots and berries were shared, childcare
was shared, and, according to Danica, in the darkest, coldest nights of the year, the entire village would pile into the big lodge at the center where the Novaks lived and heat was shared. It was *expected* and to meet expectations, a standard had to be met.

That standard was why parents were so brutal with their children, why I could beat on him until he bled and he still asked for more...why Kita was...Kita. Thick-skinned and immune to the disdain that most southerners showed him, even if I was angry on his behalf when Elizabeth Glenning referred to him as inferior or savage. According to Danica, who, like her brother, had no qualms talking about the way their father was with them (Riordan’s face had blanched, ghost white, like he might vomit when she so casually talked about being hit until she’d chewed the insides of her cheeks bloody) Nikita had been the worst of them--always in trouble when he was younger because he was an aberration. He was different, even as a child, and for that, she claimed, he’d gotten it twice as hard in an attempt to shape into what he was supposed to be.

So when he’d talked about going back, about even entertaining that idea, it had been raw panic that rose in my throat, swallowing up that charm that I’d mustered after the dungeon because I’d really, truly thought that *maybe* if I just tried harder...maybe everything would feel better because that halfling was dead. It hadn’t, not really. There was still a crawling sensation under my skin, but I wanted so badly to be better and everything had felt so *good* following that afternoon when he’d slept with his arms and legs around me, propped against the desk, sticky with blood and body fluid.

I’d memorized his heartbeat, slow and steady under the wings of his shoulder blades and I’d told myself that I would get better for this...for more afternoons like this because even when the claustrophobic anxiety of having someone on top of me had raked into my chest, I’d put it aside--concentrated on the easy way he was breathing against my neck, warm and apple-sweet, and I’d reminded myself that this was Nikita. He would never hold me down. If I roused him in that instant, he would have climbed to his feet and apologized, but I wanted to give him that small lapse into sleepy comfort so I’d swallowed my anxiety.

I couldn’t swallow it at dinner when I thought about losing him to the brutal land of his people, not knowing that if Vasilev ever found out that he was gay, he’d have tried to beat it out of him or just killed him outright. He had another son. He could start over with little Latham. It wasn’t even that there was a problem with it, according to Nikita. He could sleep with whoever he wanted to, even at home, even a man, but he’d be expected to sleep with a woman, too. To marry her, have children...to grow the pack in numbers and add to the machine.

It wasn’t about him. It was about *them*.

And I’d asked, of course, why Vasilev couldn’t know that he was sleeping with me if it was, in some bizarre, roundabout fashion, *okay*. I’d gotten an answer, too, though it wasn’t one that I’d liked. It was okay, he’d said, to sleep with men, it just wasn’t talked about. It was a deviation from the norm and, more importantly, I wasn’t some stupid village boy that could be easily brushed off as a dalliance with little meaning. I was Fox Bordelon’s eldest son. Any affair with me was serious and, Nikita had shrugged as he’d explained, it *was* serious.

I was not some common dalliance.

I’d grabbed his arm not because I’d intended to hurt him, but because I’d wanted to hold onto him when it felt like he was about to slip away. I’d heard myself in the back of my head, screaming to let go, to stop squeezing, to stop pushing so hard because asking this of him...*demanding* it...it was a lot. It wasn’t just opposing his father or even his culture. It was that staying in the south, openly and adamantly choosing me, that meant giving up all of them.

It meant never seeing his youngest sisters, Anja and Lana, ever again. It meant never meeting
Latham at all. It meant never saying goodbye to his mother or sitting against the granite obelisk that marked Milena’s grave just to feel close to her again. It meant his Gauntlet had been for nothing, because they would strip him of his rank if they couldn’t kill him outright. They would label him a deviant, an exile, an abomination among their people who valued himself above the north as a whole. It was hard and I knew it. I didn’t need him to tell me that to know it.

So I’d held on like a stupid little boy trying to hold onto a toy that wasn’t his to hold onto. I never should have grabbed him or squeezed so hard that I could feel the twist of ligaments around the bones in his bicep when he pulled back. I saw that flash of pain in his eyes, surprised and alarmed behind the haze of that drug he was coming off of, and I should have gotten on my knees and begged for his forgiveness like he was the only god that could grant it.

He was, after all, the only god that I prayed to, sick as it was, and I only prayed when he tore his name from my throat.

“You could kill him,” Tristan finally spoke. We’d been sitting in my bedroom after the fact, him pacing, trying to convince me to let him fix my mouth where Nikita had split my lip with the heel of his hand. He could have done worse, I knew. He could have killed me sixteen different ways with his bare hands, I imagined, and I would have welcomed every one, but instead he’d stormed away just a few minutes after my father returned from following Mack. I couldn’t tell if he was angry or hurt or some mix of both, but he was gone and Tristan showed up later.

I did not respond and he continued, incensed, it seemed, by my non-reaction. “You could kill him and he still came to me asking for me to check on you. Still worried about you because that stupid little boy doesn’t know he’s trying to kiss the fangs right out of a snake’s mouth!”

Immarans, I thought to myself. Always with the snake metaphors.

He wasn’t wrong though. I was, as I’d told Kita, practically poison. There was nothing good about me for him. “I told him,” Tristan went on, still glaring daggers at me. “I told him, ‘Nikki, you stick your hand in that fire, don’t come complain to me when it’s hot.’ And he didn’t, of course. Not really. I fix his bruises, sure, but that’s because I’m his friend and I know that if I don’t, his father will just replace them with more and he’ll be much less fond of those ones. I fix them and he crawls right back to you so you can beat him down again and I promised, Emory, I promised him that I wouldn’t get involved. I wouldn’t tell your parents how bad you really are. I did that for him, but you’re making it really fucking difficult to keep that promise.”

I blinked at him. “You...you’ve known? The whole time?” I’d figured, of course, that Kita was getting his bruises fixed by our resident magician, but I didn’t like to think about Tristan Brighton. I had no problem with him, personally. From all that I’d seen, he seemed a decent...thing. That was my problem. I couldn’t define Tristan within the parameters I’d set for humans or even for Lierians. How do you define a being that has achieved effective immortality?

But that changed things...knowing that he’d known and that he’d kept that secret not because it was wise or because it was even the right thing to do. He’d done it because he’d made a promise to a friend and that, apparently, meant something to him.

Tristan scowled. “Yes,” he answered blandly. “You think Mackenzie has a salve that removes bruises as fast as you put them on his throat? He’s good, Emory, but he’s not me.”

“I’m more surprised by an Immaran keeping their word.” I drawled back at him and he bristled, brow furrowed, fists clenched, that blue spark dancing between his white knuckles and flaring up in his eyes.
He shot back with the same venom I had in my voice, giving as good as he was getting. “For a halfling boy born the bastard of a King, you have a lot of balls insulting my blood.” Tristan was still glaring, his pacing having come to a stop in front of the two stairs that led up to the second half of my bedroom where my bed was located. I was perched at the bottom, my feet on a traveling trunk full of books I’d been reading.

“Fair enough,” I relented, running my tongue over the metallic split at the bottom of my lip. “At least I’ve never owned slaves, though.”

Tristan rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, Corians and their moral high ground. So superior. So much more civilized. I don’t know how we’ve survived in the east without your stabilizing influence.” He paused like he was thinking before he decided against expounding on whatever sarcastic quip sat on the edge of his tongue. “I kept that secret because Nikita is sweet and...he cares...under all of that...bristling, murderous looking leather he wears. If his armor had any more spikes, I’d call him a fucking cactus, but then he’d likely gut me for it. Are you going to let me fix your lip or are you going to keep moping and mouthing off? Because I’ve met a lot of princes, Emory Bordelon, but you—” He pointed at me, his lips pursed tight, shaking his head. “You are another caliber of fucked up.” He paused. “And spoiled rotten.” Another pause. “And fucking arrogant.” Then he stopped for a second, longer this time, and his expression softened. He returned to the original point. “You could kill him.”

“He could kill me.”

“He would die first,” Tristan corrected and I finally looked up. “You are sick, Your Grace. Do you understand what I’m saying to you? You’re sick and I know it isn’t fair. I know you don’t mean to hurt him—”

“Yes, I do,” I corrected and Tristan hesitated. “He wants me to do it. He likes it.”

“There are boundaries. There are rules you’re supposed to follow!”

My shoulders lifted. I felt...numb. It was either that or an overwhelming sense of grief so dark and so massive that I couldn’t feel around it. I stared at my hands. “I didn’t mean to hurt him today,” I relented and then tapped my mouth, an indication for him to come forward and he did, sitting down on the trunk at my feet. He reached forward but he stopped just short of touching me, a silent inquiry about whether or not touching me at all was okay, and when I nodded, he tipped my head up to survey the damage. “How much do you know about Glacia?”

“Quite a lot, actually,” he murmured. “My education was very extensive. I daresay more than your own. I know the repercussions he could face. This will be cold.”

It was cold. The magic sank down into my jaw, numbing my face from my teeth to my collarbone and I cringed as it spread, erasing the bruising and sealing the mangled portion of my lip where my teeth had gone through it. “They’d kill him,” I breathed and hearing the words out loud made my heart quiver in my chest, like someone had reached in to strangle it.

Tristan winced. “Yes, probably,” he agreed, withdrawing. “That doesn’t give you a right to cage him. I mean, of course you have the right, given your position, but that doesn’t make it right.” He surveyed his work and seemed satisfied enough to release the hold he had on my face and slide further away from me on the trunk. I’d noticed something peculiar about Tristan early on. He never crowded me. He never forced me into letting him examine me. He’d always told my father that, with time, I would learn to trust him on my own and it was important to him that such a trust be established organically rather than forced on me. He still kept his distance, always hyper aware of not touching me without express permission.
“You know,” he began slowly. “I left someone in Immara who was very important to me. He was a freed slave. Ridley. You remind me quite a lot of him, actually. He used to be like you. Very angry. In a very dark place. He got better, in time, after he put that life behind him, but he was always with me. I convinced myself, of course, that I was protecting him from how ugly Immara could be. I was keeping someone from poaching him and putting him back in a collar.”

I blinked, still looking down at the carpet instead of at Tristan, but I was listening. Atara had told me, in an effort to get me to open up to Tristan a bit more, that he wasn’t some evil enchanter from the ancient east..that he was a person. He had feelings. He had people that he cared for and family back home. He was different from us, yes, perhaps not even really human anymore, but he was still...like us.

And while I was staring, I could see Tristan out of the corner of my eye, fidgeting with the edge of his shirt like he wasn’t quite sure how to go about relaying this story. Like maybe he’d never told it or it had such a profound meaning to him that he’d never had the opportunity to appropriately tell it in a way that could capture how meaningful a memory it was for him.

I understood that. I didn’t talk about the beach, not because it was meaningful in some positive way that I felt needed to be shared, but because it was so horrific I didn’t think that there was ever a time or a place to talk about. I wanted to. I wanted to desperately, but opening that up...it was like ripping sutures right out of my chest.

So I let him continue, my mouth shut, because I knew what it was like to need to say something and have nobody to say it too and despite what Tristan may have seen in me that night, I was not a monster. Not completely. I just housed a monster beneath my skin.

“When I...I came here,” Tristan continued, his tone wavering like he couldn’t quite sort out his own feelings. “He stayed behind. I didn’t want him to, at first. I...told myself it was because I was protecting him, like I said, but it wasn’t that. Not really. I’d freed him, you see, and in doing so I thought that I’d really freed him, but all I’d done was take him from a cage in the Vale and fasten him into one of my own creation. Yes, of course, he had a name and opinions and I cared for him now, but it was still a cage, Your Grace, and if I had forbidden him from staying the way that I wanted to, then he wasn’t really ever free, was he? Ridley isn’t stupid. Eventually, he would have realized he’d fled one slavery for another and he would have hated me for it. If you rip Nikita out of the north and you make him stay here, with you, then all you’ve done is trade one cage for a prettier looking one. Someday, he will hate you for that.”

He tapped his hands against the end of my bed when I was silent and then got steadily to his feet. I felt a thousand words against my teeth, all of them dying for me to open my mouth and just scream them...to just relay every wicked thing that had happened since that night and how wretched I felt and how my skin was still crawling and the mirrors were still my worst enemies and there was this fine line I walked between wanting to fuck Kita stupid and wanting to vomit all over myself because gods I still hurt.

Instead, I let him walk out of the room with a quiet wave goodbye, but I did think about what he’d said. I did consider it and I knew that he was right. Of course, he was right, and Atara was right about him. He wasn’t the wicked alchemist I’d thought he was and my revulsion regarding Tristan Brighton ebbed away a little bit. Dark slid down around the castle, turning the sky outside my windows violet and velvet black, dotted with stars. I heard my parents whispering in the corridor and then the door to their bedroom swing shut, the lock sliding into place. I heard Atara pacing long after that, the grate of the brace he wore on his bad knee grinding. I wondered if he was waiting to see if Mack would return, but when midnight struck and the healer was still absent, Atara, too, retired.
I remained at the bottom of my bed for another fifteen minutes before I hauled myself up and slipped soundlessly through the corridors.

I’d always liked the palace at night. It was empty save the guards that patrolled through the vast hallways and they were such a commonplace part of my life that it was easy to ignore them. As a child, I’d always imagined they were statues, standing vigilant in the dark, always aware. It was a silly thing to think about then as I moved through the building, making my way to the end of the corridor where our apartments were.

In a few hours, this place would come back to life. The kitchen staff would toddle in long before daylight, eyes bright and aprons bleached. The girls would sit in front of the big doors and braid their hair up tight, pinning it to the tops of their heads before they went in to knead dough. The stable hands would wake with the hounds and, just as dawn came, they would be running circles around the external gardens, dogs nipping their heels.

It was still too early for that as I made my way to my old bedroom at the top of the Crown’s Tower. Nikita wouldn’t be there, I knew. Not after my outburst, but I wanted to be there. Around things that were still normal, untouched by my disaster. Spending time up there was like stepping into a time capsule, almost, and I could almost believe that nothing had happened. I was still my father’s heir. I was not sick, as Tristan said. My parents weren’t debating sending me to live in the country in some asylum for a year until the anger could be slowly seeped from my veins by someone who knew how to deal with it. Lysander de Chalon, I imagined, my Lheiro’s uncle...sort of. Ambrose’s much younger brother who, after inheriting the family’s land and fortune after Ambrose’s death when I was fourteen, had dedicated his life and his resources toward the rehabilitation of people who, like me, had suffered something they could not seem to recover from.

My grandmother Laila, for example, who had never recovered from the death of her youngest daughter, had spent her last few years with Lysander, surrounded by the Corian forest.

When I opened the door, I did not expect to find Nikita sitting in the middle of the bed with a book open—my book, I noted. It was one that I’d left on the table beside my bed that morning before the beach and I’d never picked it up again. Not because of the beach, really, but because it had been very dry, if I remembered correctly, a history of some Marsher family that had died out as a noble line a century previous.

But there he was, laying on his stomach, chin on his arms, reading that horrible book until he heard the door swing open and he looked up, as surprised by me as I was by him, evidently, because he practically jumped two feet in the air and landed hard on his tailbone when he wobbled on the way up.

It was absurd, really. It was my room. I had every right to be there and, really, if anyone should have been surprised, it was me.

My heart lurched. I hadn’t prepared anything to say to him. I didn’t even know what to say. That I didn’t want to cage him? That I’d never intended to hurt him? That it wasn’t really my choice at all and I understood that? He had apologized to me. For hitting me in the face, despite how I’d deserved it, and I’d said nothing to him since then. So I stared at him, in part because I didn’t know what to say and in part because he was staring at me, and Nikita broke first.

Surprising, really, because he’d been tortured specifically to learn not to break, but he was the world’s worst contestant at all games that involved some form of playing chicken. Like staring contests, for example.

“I didn’t--” he started awkwardly. “I didn’t think you’d actually come, kitten. I thought...you’d be
upset with me for your face and...did you let Tristan see you? You must have. Your lip looks...good. I sent him to you. Did he tell you?” He was babbling, trying to fill silence with meaningless chatter while the door closed shut behind me. “I shouldn’t be here. I didn’t...I just, I thought...well, you’re obviously angry with me and I just wanted to be close to you before you…” He heaved a sigh and his bottom lip trembled like he might actually break down into tears but he was stoic and he plastered a forcibly brave pout onto his face, teeth clenched and eyes hard. “Before you, you know, ended all of this and I should--I should just go. I should go.” His voice pitched, higher at the end, and he stumbled from the bed like he intended to dart by me.

I was still trying to recover from the shock, heart hammering away in my throat, a distant buzzing in my ears like I was trying to drown out the apology he didn’t even owe me.

He made to run and I backed into the door, my back hitting it before I could even speak so that if he wanted to exit, he would have to do it by physically moving me. Nikita froze, inches away from me, his eyes on the door, wide and horrified. “Stop,” I pleaded. ’Make it up as you go then, Emory,’ I cheered myself on sarcastically in the confines of my own head. ’Because winging it worked every time before this, right?’

“I said I was sorry,” he repeated desperately and his fingers reached for the door, fumbling with it in the dim light of the candles he had lit by the bed but neglected to light anywhere else. “Just let me leave. I don’t need you to tell me that I was awful. I know I was--”

“Will you just stop for a second? For fuck’s sake, Kita.” I pinched the bridge of my nose with one hand and waved him away with the other so that he took a few hesitant steps backward. “I grabbed you. I refused to let go. You warned me. Twice. And somehow, you’re the one apologizing.”

Nikita looked floored, slack-jawed and struck stupid. “I hit you in the face!” he protested, shaking his head vehemently. “I bloodied your mouth, Emory!”

“Yeah, well,” I started, thumbing my bottom lip where there was just a faint ridge of tissue left to heal on its own after Tristan’s intervention. It wouldn’t even scar, I didn’t think. There would be no physical reminder. ‘I’ve bloodied you before, so we’ll just call it even, yeah?’

“That is not even close to even!” He was stammering, horrified. He looked...almost hysterical, like perhaps he’d worked himself into this frenzy before he’d gotten there and the book had really just been an attempt to calm down.

I lifted one shoulder, watching his eyes dart from me to the door like a trapped rabbit. “Yeah,” I admitted after a second. “You’re right. I was way worse to you.”

Nikita glared, face screwed up in a grimace, and he huffed dramatically, pushing his hair out of his face while he tried to determine how to get through me and to the door without having to have this conversation that hung between us, suspended like a rope that tied the two of us together. “If you really want to be alone,” I offered after a moment. “I can leave. You were here first.”

He snorted. “Don’t be absurd,” he mumbled, rubbing his face again. “This is your bedroom.”

“Right, then.” He took a step back and so did I, leaving the door unattended, and Nikita shifted his weight from one foot to another. He was wearing loose fitting clothing and no shoes and it struck me as odd because I so rarely saw him without his leather cuirass or his boots. “I’m sorry,” I eventually started, taking a breath and trying to arrange the words that I thought I wanted to say. I knew what I needed to say...what was best for both of us, at least for now, but it was so goddamned heartbreaking to think about it that it clogged my throat and I had to swallow over and over again to even work my way around it while he watched, curiosity slowly giving way to concern. “I...I
shouldn’t have grabbed you like that. It was wrong and I’m sorry and gods, that sounds so fucking cheap when I say it out loud, because every asshole that beats on his partner says he’s sorry, doesn’t he?”

“You were scared,” he offered gently. “I could see it. You didn’t mean to hurt me. I meant to hurt you.”

“That’s not an excuse, Kita. Being scared is not an excuse.” I ran my fingers through my hair, exasperated and tired. I was sick to my stomach trying to sort through it all, trying to be the stronger party because I knew him well enough by then to know that he would always crawl back, just like Tristan had said. I could kick him in the teeth and he would come back for more, bloody and broken, but still there. He was wringing his fingers in the bottom of his loose cotton shirt. The buttons were wrong, I noted, like he’d dressed in the dark. “I just…I know what he’ll do to you if you go back. I talked to Danica. She told me everything. She told me what your Gauntlet was like and how it was always harder for you.”

Nikita’s eyes widened, horror crossing his delicate features, twisted in the curve of his lips like he really hadn’t wanted me to ever know how terrible it really had been, but there it was. About all of it. “I know he was especially tough on you because you’ve always been...different, right? And you took it because you knew you’d never be what he wanted you to be, what they demanded you grow up to be, You thought you deserved it and he beat you down into playing his good little soldier, didn’t he?”

He wiped his mouth on the back of his arm. “It’s not that simple,” he tried to argue, voice dry and hoarse like he was still fighting the urge to break down into hysterics. “There are rules!”

I shook my head. Again with the rules. Tristan had said the same thing. At least Tristan had been right. “He broke you, Kita, until you did everything exactly the way you were supposed to and that meant dragging Milena out into the snow and leaving her out there so that everyone she knew could see just how far she’d fallen, but you hated yourself for that. For all of it, didn’t you?”

He made a noise, disgusted, and jerked back when I reached for him, cheeks flaming red and eyes livid. “You don’t get to say that!” he shot back. “I loved her! I should have...I should have--” He was vehement. Insistent. Beautiful and angry and hurting because I was right and he knew it and I hated that I even had to say it.

“I know you did. You still love her. That’s why you let me do it now.” My voice dragged out at the end, quieter while his rage built and then deflated like I’d doused him with water, eyes wide and finally, finally brimming up with the tears I knew he’d been fighting. “That’s why you think it’s okay that I grabbed you. That’s why you think you need to apologize for hitting me when I didn’t let go. That’s why you take it and you take it and you take it over and over and you never tell me to stop.”

He choked, his fingers at his throat, trying to force back the tears that his compatriots in the north would have never let him shed. He needed to feel it, I thought, needed to recognize the pattern now that I could see it. “I hate him,” he finally gagged the words like they’d been stuck in the back of his mouth forever, trying to climb up his tongue and he’d just swallowed them since his youth. He repeated it. “I hate him. You have no idea what that’s like.”

“No, I don’t.”

“To be afraid every day,” he kept going, rubbing the back of his arm over his eyes. “That I’d fuck something up or that some other stupid boy would make some remark about my size or that I didn’t talk much or that I was just...different. I couldn’t even control all the things that set him off because those would do it, too, those stupid remarks, like I could control that I was fucking small! Or cute.
One of my aunts called me cute once and he dragged me out of the house by the back of my neck and he forced my head down into the horse’s trough until I was underwater and then he held me there until I was blue, Emory!”

Gods, my heart was shattering, over and over again and he just kept going. Story after story spilling from his mouth like vomit from being held underwater, beaten until his legs gave out and then bound, at the wrists, to the table so that it could continue until his father decided he was done, starved and slapped and struck with a bull whip like his entire life had been one long march of misery that made my one trauma look so trivial. He talked until his throat was hoarse and then he threw himself at me, face pressed into my abdomen, sliding down toward the floor and he sobbed. He screamed, fingers curled into hooks in my clothes, that he hated him. He hated him. The amount of vitriol and disgust that soaked those words was nauseating. I’d screamed at my parents that I hated them before—for stupid things like not being allowed outside after dark or having to sit in the carriage all day when we traveled, but I’d never really felt that hate.

I could feel it rolling off of him, radiating like the corona around the sun, white hot and brutal, and I settled my hands over his back while he carried on. We were sitting on the floor by then and he was curled half over me, legs drawn up to his chest and arms around my middle, like that fetal position could help him.

I could not be the continuation of his torment. In part, it was because I couldn’t understand why he wanted to be hit after all of that, but in part it was because I knew that I was too sick or too damaged to ever be aware of when to stop. That was what I had to say. I knew that. I knew it would hurt, too, for both of us, but in that moment, I was determined. If not for me, then for him, because he deserved so much more.

When his sobbing died off, following a story having his hand held over hot coals until the skin had started to bubble, he fell still, limp and boneless across my lap. He was feverish, from hysterics and from his earlier drug use, I was sure, and he felt like a ragdoll lying there...like I could position him any way that I wanted. “Kita, sweetheart, I want you to stay in the south,” I whispered in the dark and he heaved a sigh. “I want it desperately and I swear to the gods, if he ever decides he wants some kind of retribution for that, I will make sure he never gets it, but I can’t...I can’t--”

He sat upright quickly, no longer limp and lax, but alert and horrified. “No,” he started rapidly, his voice lurching like my heart was in my chest, like he was trying to reach me with words. “No, you can’t. You can’t just walk away, kitten, please!” He grasped for me blindly, both hands landing somewhere on my shoulders and he hauled himself forward. I had to swallow the choking panic that opened up like a cavernous maw in my gut and remind myself that it was just Nikita. He would never hold me down. Not like that. “I can’t keep hurting you.”

“You’re sick!” he shouted back, though it wasn’t a shout so much as it was a desperate proclamation and his hands found my face. “You’ll get better! I’ll get better, Emory, please, don’t do this. I’ll--I’ll--I’ll do anything!” He scrambled, trying to wrap his arms around my neck like a vice, face pressed into my shoulder, hot and wet with recent tears. I could feel his nails in my back, digging down into flesh that would surely welt under his desperate grip and his knees were tight at my hips. His heart was hammering wildly, a chaotic throb in his chest so quick it was almost a vibration. “I’ll stay,” he whimpered finally. “I’ll stay, I promise, I’ll stay, just don’t...don’t leave me. You’re the only good thing I have.”

I wanted to breathe him in so that I’d remember this when he was gone. I did try. I tried to memorize it--apples and warm leather and the feel of how he really did love me. I’d had plenty of partners,
some of them I’d even cared for, but I’d never loved or been loved by any of them. Nikita was different, had been from the start, and I’d known after talking to Tristan that he was right. He was right about all of it and this needed to end, but when it came down to it...with Nikita begging, pleading, and the very real fact that, in comparison, I really was one of the only good things he had...I couldn’t. I couldn’t just memorize him and walk away until I got my head back on my shoulders.

I should have, because I knew, realistically, nothing would change. I would still be violent. I would still want him to hurt and as long as he didn’t tell me to stop, I would rationalize crossing those lines. I would still want to destroy everything in him that made him beautiful because all of that had been destroyed in me.

“You’re breaking my heart,” I managed to croak the words through the vice grip he had on me and he shuddered.

He lifted his head to kiss my jaw and then up over my cheeks and my eyes and down to my mouth, all of them punctuated with whispers of, “Please” until I seized his wrists and he stopped, hovering over my lips.

Nikita even tasted of apples. “Okay,” I relented quietly. “Okay. Gods have mercy, you’re going to send me straight to hell, baby boy.”

He was quiet, like he had accepted that fact or maybe he was quiet because he didn’t believe in gods or hell. Or maybe it was because he was exhausted and I was running my hands down his sides, still trembling from his outburst, and down his twisted spine. It took him several minutes to finally speak. “What did you come here for, anyway?”

“To scream.” It was only a half lie. I had come there to lay in the dark and repeat all the hideous things I wanted to say into the dark where nobody could look at me like I was broken when they heard them. He kissed my collar, right where my shirt met my skin. It wasn’t pressing with words, but it was pressing for more information, all the same. “Tristan talked to me. It was supposed to give me some insight into you or something, but mostly I think he just wanted to say it.”

Nikita squirmed and then rolled off of me so that he was sitting beside me against the wall, his face half lit by dim candlelight. “About Ridley? He’ll take any opportunity available to talk about Ridley.”

I snorted. “Yeah, well, I’d probably do the same if you went home, you know.”

“I’m not going home. Don’t distract me. What were you coming here to scream about?”

“Oh, you know, shit.”

Kita glared. In the light, I could only see his blue eye scowling at me. The green one was hidden by the dark. I liked the green more. From his mother, he’d told me. That was why, I think, because I had such a hatred for Vasilev, especially after hearing everything he’d been spilling from his lips in the past hour. I wanted to wrap him up in something and tuck him away somewhere safe where nobody would ever hurt him again. It was absurd, I knew that, because Nikita was more than capable of holding his own. I’d seen him in the sparring yard near the barracks kicking the shit out of my father’s guards--seasoned men twice his age. Some of them had seen battle in the Marshes before Atara was born.

I exhaled loudly and leaned back against the wall. “I never talk about the beach.”
He stiffened visibly, in the dim lighting. “You don’t have to,” he started, a bit too quickly, which he noticed a moment later. “Not that I’m not willing to listen!” he corrected, reaching forward to squeeze my arm like that was somehow reassuring. “It’s just...well, it’s always been abstract for me, you know? I knew enough and even that made me...violent. I didn’t want you to see that today.”

I remembered that. More importantly, I remembered how irritated with him I’d been before I’d seen him work. It hadn’t been the violence that had made me want him so badly in the old Keep. In fact, even the idea of sex had been somewhat nauseating in such proximity to that halfling, but Kita had been absolutely radiant with a righteous hatred of him and a rage on my behalf that was undeniably attractive. I’d held his hand on that knife hilt not because I wanted to feel blood on my palm but because I’d wanted to feel *that*. I’d wanted his fury to blossom outward into me so that I could better understand why he’d been so vehemently infuriated *for* me. I should have realized, idiot that I was, that it was just because he loved me. He *loved* me and I felt that same sickening fury when I thought about his father.

“You see the worst parts of me,” I pointed out. “But you want to hide the worst parts of you. If I can’t take your worst parts, what makes you think I deserve the good parts?”

He inhaled sharply, like he was recalling that very moment and the sullen silent treatment I’d given him for a few minutes afterward. “Oh,” he breathed. “Oh.” Then he was quiet, introspective for what felt like several long seconds. “You’re right,” he eventually relented. “That was not...I didn’t mean it that way. I just...I wanted to protect you from that part of me, but you’re right. I get all of you. It’s only fair if you get all of me.”

“All of me is a fucking disaster,” I reminded him and beside me, I heard him laugh and his head fell onto my shoulder, one arm looping through mine so that there we were, sitting together in the near dark against my bedroom wall, legs extended, completely aware that we were each a mess but unwilling to really deal with it. I added after a minute. “All of you is a fucking disaster, too, now that I think about it.”

He laughed harder and it was a lovely sound, muffled by my shirt, but it cracked the tension of his previous hysterics and I could feel him bite down lightly on my shoulder in an attempt to stifle it. “You’re supposed to be spilling all your secrets, Emory, not trying to fix it with humor.”

“I’m a fixer,” I deadpanned and he snorted again. It was good to be comfortable with him when I couldn’t be with anyone else though. I didn’t want that to go away and I figured, if anyone, he deserved to know even the secrets I hadn’t told anyone else. So when his laughter fell quiet, I said it. There was no build up. I said it the same way I’d have asked him to pass me a bottle of wine at dinner that night. “I let them do it.”

Nikita was still, even stiff, beside me, and his fingers tightened. I could hear him swallow, trying to work around the lump in his throat, but he couldn’t seem to so I continued, my stomach churning in my abdomen. I disentangled myself from him and wiped clammy palms down the front of my shirt. “I shouldn’t say that,” I corrected. “I didn’t want them to do it. I begged them not to, which is, you know, a whole other fucking issue, because I’ve never begged for anything in my life before, but *I begged*, Nikita. Just enough. And I fought. Just enough. Because I knew if they lost interest in me--""

“They’d hurt Atara,” he breathed the sentence for me, filling in the words before I even hiccuped over them, the same way that Cyril sometimes finished Fox’s sentences.

I kept wiping my hands down my stomach trying to quell the way it writhed like a ball of snakes and I had to swallow to keep from puking. “My pelvis broke first,” I continued clinically. “Not completely. It fractured first because when the big one that you killed--when he hit me we fell over these rocks and he landed on top of me. It was too much weight and I have...Lierian bones,
according to Mack.”

“You’re slight,” Nikita informed me and I raised an eyebrow in the dark. I’d never been called small. I was tall, in fact, just a half a hand or so shorter than Fox, and he was one of the tallest men I knew. “I used to think you were the same size as your father,” he explained at my expression. “But when I saw him hold you at Atara’s ball—you’re smaller than him. By a lot. His shoulders are wider than yours. His chest is wider than yours. His arms are wider than yours. He’s...ugh...Tristan tried explaining to me what you and Atara are. Fox is—”

“Male,” I offered, snorting at the flustered way he tried to offer the words to me. “I don’t need a biology lesson on my own body.”

I could almost feel him glare. “I’m not surprised he fractured it, that’s all. You look sturdy at first, but you’re...actually pretty breakable.”

I knew that. Of course, I did. I’d been the one to fall on those rocks and I thought back on that--on the sharp pain that had started in the front left of my pelvis and rocketed upward into my chest and back into my spine like a dagger being twisted under my flesh. “It wasn’t until they had me pinned that it really cracked,” I went on, pushing my hair out of my eyes. “The bigger one sat on me to hold me down while the other pulled my clothes off.”

“Gods, Emory…”

“It’s nothing now.” I shrugged. It was something. We both knew that. If it was nothing, I wouldn’t have come up here to shout it in the dark and it wouldn’t have still been eating me like a parasite so many months later. “But that’s when it cracked. I heard it. Mostly, I heard Atara screaming and I was so pissed off. I figured I could take it, right, but I couldn’t let them hurt him. I was the reason he was out there and he’s my little brother. It’s my job to protect him. I always protected him.” I didn’t have to tell him. He was the oldest sibling, too. He knew what that role felt like.

I wrinkled my nose. “So I fought enough. They called me a whore and I spit in their faces. The bigger one hit me so hard it dislocated my jaw. If that had been all, I would have been fine. I could have shaken that off, I think. It’s just sex, right?”

“That’s not sex,” he insisted. “We have sex. That was torture.” He gestured between the two of us when he spoke and I wondered sometimes if I ever took it beyond sex and into torture, but he always came back for more. That had to mean something. I could rationalize that it did, anyway.

I smacked my lips together, but I did not agree or disagree. I was methodical. Distant. Detached. I had to be. It was the only way the words would come out of my mouth without making me vomit at the same time. “But they picked me up so that I was caught between both of them and then they were both--” I stopped and I did choke then and his fingers went over his mouth, disgust and revulsion crossing through downward twist of his frown. “I could feel myself breaking. Like being split in half and I remember throwing up. My stomach just...I think because I just resigned myself to dying at that point. I wanted to and all I could think was that when they were done with me, they’d do it to him, and so I just...started heaving and then Atara hit one of them like a fucking cavalry line and he kept hitting. Over and over and I could hear the other boy’s skull crack and my brother was swearing and crying and he just...lost his fucking mind.”

I coughed and Nikita watched, horror on his face. “And when he made his way over to me, he kept grabbing my face but I couldn’t really see him. Or maybe I could, I don’t know, I guess I could because he had brain matter on his clothes, for fuck’s sake and kept begging me to keep breathing. Then the next thing I knew, I was back in the apartments and Fox was sitting on my chest to keep me still because I was in too much pain for the sedation to work and Mack was trying to pull my hips
back into alignment with my back. I was screaming and fighting and clawing and I couldn’t move my legs. I couldn’t move my legs for days. They were afraid I’d be crippled. Mack had to sew my insides back into me and I was awake for it.”

He inched closer and my voice died off, silent in the dark. “I like your legs,” he offered gently and I couldn’t help the laugh that spilled from my lips. He even patted one of them for extra effect. He was quiet for a moment, then, like he was thinking and there were no real words to say. I didn’t have anything else to give him. I couldn’t think about it in terms of emotions anymore or I’d have spent every waking moment in the same fit of rage I’d been in for the first three months after it. It had taken a great deal of work to get to where I was at and even then, I was still sick.

Eventually, however, he did find something to say. “I’m glad you told me,” he whispered. “If I can carry it a bit for you, if it helps, I’m glad you told me.”

“You can’t tell Atara,” I added dryly. “He can’t ever know that I did that for him. It would eat him alive.”

“I will take it to my grave,” he assured me. “And you know, I don’t like hurting people. I don’t like using what I learned with the Riders. I don’t like killing. It’s not who I am....but I really liked killing that sick son of a bitch.”

I put an arm over his shoulder and he leaned in closer, snuggled against my side. “Yeah. Thanks for that.”

“I’m a fixer.”
“Are you stupid?” Cyril snarled, eyes bright, looking magnificently furious with me. He paced, small legs taking smaller steps, back and forth in front of my desk. He was wearing a coat not unlike the King’s—capped sleeves, adorned with the various markings of his station, the Bordelon sigil stitched into the silk. His was white, however, where my father’s was crimson and black, and, of course, Cyril wore no crown like Fox did when he had that coat on. These were all the markings of a second with the added sigil that only a queen or a royal consort could wear.

From afar, he looked perfectly normal, but up close I could see the shadow of purple under his eyes. They’d been fighting again the night before, my parents. About Emory and what to do with him. They wouldn’t have if Nikita Novak had kept his distance like he should have but he hadn’t. He’d come right back the day after the dinner like nothing had happened and he remained steadfastly at my brother’s side like an arm ornament. It was nauseating. More importantly, it wasn’t safe. We all knew that. Fox, especially, I think, because he’d seen insanity take his mother and he suffered the same temper that Emory suffered.

My father wanted him gone. He wanted to put him in a carriage and send him on the three day trek to Lysander’s asylum beyond the Witch Wood until he got his head back on his shoulders.

If he got his head back on his shoulders.

My Lheiro disagreed. It was foolish sentiment that made him that way. He’d always been...attached to my brother more than he was to me. As a child, I’d never understood it and I’d simply come to believe that I had some defect or abnormality that made him love Emory more than he could love me. I’d become obsessed with perfection--perfect lessons, perfect language skills, perfect strategies in the war simulations he put on the map. It didn’t matter how much I studied texts on military prowess or histories on how battles had played out over the span of our dynasty. I could never beat Emory. I could recite poetry better than him. I could remember small details about cultures that he deemed unnecessary. I could shoot an arrow and follow it up with another shot that split the original shaft in half and Emory couldn’t see more than ten feet in front of him without his glasses on.

That obsession had become a mania by the time it finally culminated--a sort of battle that raged in my chest that I could never quiet the noise from. I would stay up all hours of the night trying to cram more information into my head in an effort to prove that I could keep up with Emory. I was a slow learner. Not stupid, but I had to work and my brother’s intelligence was a natural gift and then, like
the waters of a swollen river breaking the walls of a reservoir, I’d finally snapped.

I’d been ten, furious over another loss to Emory’s advancing army on the maps that dominated the rooms where we took lessons with governesses and archivists and I’d collapsed, exhausted and sick, into hysterics. I remembered Fox picking me up, grinding his teeth at the way my weight stretched the mutilated flesh of his back and I’d poured my heart out into the collar of his shirt. I’d wailed that Cyril didn’t love me the way that he loved Emory and I was trying so hard to be what Emory was and it was never enough.

And that was when I’d learned the story of my brother’s conflict-soaked arrival into the world—how my grandfather had ordered my Lheiro dragged from the Crown’s Tower, kicking and screaming and digging his nails into the wall and how they’d marched him north to the Recian tribe on the borders of Glacia and the Marshlands. I learned that, for almost six years, Emory was all that Cyril lived for. It wasn’t about loving him more. It had never been about that. It was a remnant of that era, a habit—a horrible habit, Fox admitted to me, cradling me in his lap like I was an infant, but it was just a habit and not a reflection of his affection for me or how he felt.

He’d assured me (promised, in fact—swore it, with his pinky finger linked in mine) that Cyril loved us both just the same.

They must have talked about it shortly afterward because following that outburst, my Lheiro made a concentrated effort at spending more time with me but the damage to our relationship had been done just like the damage to Emory and Fox’s had been done when Riordan left Coryth.

Listening to him call me stupid brought all of that back up, ringing in my ears along with the wretched headache that bloomed in the back of my skull, a product of sleepless nights for the past week.

He snapped his fingers in front of my face, cheeks blossoming scarlet red, the little flecks of white in his irises that had always reminded me of clouds looked more like sun bursts when he was angry, radiant and livid. “I can’t believe you agreed to this, Atara!” He kept right on going and, behind him, my brother looked up, long legs extended in front of him in the chair he sat in.

“Stupid is harsh, don’t you think, Lheiro?” he asked gently and I shot him a look. His help was the last fucking help I wanted in that moment and I shot him a look. His help was the last fucking help I wanted in that moment and he knew it. He’d been trying and failing to get back into my good graces for almost a week--since the dinner with Nikki and Mack--and he’d been failing. In large part, that was because Mack hadn’t returned to the palace. He’d never shown up for his next rotation. My father had sent someone by his flat to affirm that he was, in fact, alive, and that had been the extent of it. I’d been told to give him time, by both of my parents, but patience had never been something any of us were particularly good at.

Cyril rounded on my brother and Emory shrank in his chair, eyes wide, bottom lip sucked between his teeth. It wasn’t real fear so much as it was the act of rolling over and showing his belly in defeat. “Legitimizing a cult that thinks he’s a god? I don’t think stupid is harsh, Emory. I think stupid is probably a vast understatement.”

Emory held his hands up in defeat. He’d been more than happy to go toe-to-toe with Fox for me a few weeks earlier when I’d fled the palace to ‘slum it.’ Evidently, he was not willing to do the same dance with Cyril, who was arguably more terrifying when he was angry, if only because it took so much to get him there.

I’d gotten him there. “It wasn’t like I had a choice,” I pointed out. “The council wasn’t doing shit. The elders weren’t doing shit. What should I have done? Let them get away with it? Look at what they did to him! Look at what they did to me!” I was angry at Emory, but I still cared and I still stood
by the decision I’d made to legitimize Ilyia’s group as a formal faction of the Nation, despite her failure to achieve my goal in the time I’d allotted for her. She’d gone above and beyond what I’d asked for, expanding her reach beyond Coryth and into the bordering lands of the Merciers, Belfleurs, and Valmonts. She’d gone personally to the dungeon of every lord and lady in the area, asked every gatekeeper, visited every tavern...she’d been a bloodhound, determined to pick up a scent everyone else had written off.

I insisted further. “She deserved to be rewarded.”

“That you pay her!” Cyril spat, failing to correct my filthy language in his own fury. “There is an entire fucking treasury buried under this godsforsaken mountain, Atara. You make use of the position your father holds because that is how you play politics and you fucking pay her. With gold or a favor or a ladyship! Do you know what this will cause? There will be open rebellion on the coast. The only people who will stand behind you are Kinnon and Pyrin and that’s only because—”

“Because Kinnon is hopelessly in love with you,” Emory drawled, looking pointedly at Cyril. “And because Pyrin is still hoping you’ll let him dissect you when you die.”

“Emory!” We both shouted at that and he flinched. Cyril continued, however. “If I wanted sarcastic humor to punctuate this conversation, I would have invited your father!”

“No, you wouldn’t have,” I pointed out sourly. “Because he’d have torn into you for calling me stupid.” My attention then turned to Emory, fists curled in at my sides. “And he’s only being so difficult because I’m still pissed at him.”

Cyril clenched his teeth, evidently on the verge of some kind of angry breakdown. His cheeks flushed an even darker shade of red, spreading from his face down to his collar, and he seemed to be almost vibrating with rage. I should have cared more. It was my job to care more, but my stomach was turning in my gut, writhing and knotting, my head was pounding, and I wanted to put my fist through Emory’s perfect teeth. “There is nothing more dangerous than having two factions united in opinion,” my Lheiro spat and he pointed at the door in the direction of the grand hall. “The priests are howling at the door asking for you on the post for those executions and they’re backed by Elizabeth Glenning’s money. The elders are howling at the door demanding you renegotiate your terms with Ilyia’s people and that you give them a Rite.” He ground his teeth furiously and Emory looked down at his lap. I could feel my throat constrict. “And together, Atara? They are plotting to dismantle us as we speak!”

The irritated teenager part of me wanted to snap that maybe we should let them. There were worse things than losing power, but I knew what it meant. If someone, somehow, managed to drag my father off of his throne, it would mean the headsman’s axe for all of us. Coups never ended without the blood of a monarchy painting the streets.

I pressed my knuckles into the table and Emory was alarmingly quiet. It was as if, in this one instance, the seriousness of the conversation overruled his penchant for providing comedic relief. Either that, or he was lapsing back into one of his moods. After a moment of that prolonged quiet, Cyril turned on his heel toward the door, convinced, seemingly, that he wasn’t going to get anything useful out of me. Not in this state. He stopped short beside Emory’s chair and I saw his back straighten, fists clenched, and when he spoke, his voice was stone cold.

“Get your shit together,” he hissed in Emory’s direction and my brother looked up, lips parted in surprise when Cyril pointed back at me. “Because if this continues, we’ll all be mired in a war with the west and if we lose, we die.”

The door slammed when he walked out, snapping into the frame so hard that the frames on the walls
rattled and I let out a breath that I hadn’t known I’d been holding. I wanted to care more than I did, but my head was clouded. I was having trouble focusing on anything but Mack’s disappearing act and the urge I felt in my bones to pummel my brother into a pulp. It was his fault, after all. I’d seen it in Mack’s face when Emory was bruising Nikki’s arm down to the bone, twisting the skin like it was a rag he could wring the moisture out of. This was too close to home for him. It was too much.

Cyril’s words should have bothered me. I should have been desperate for approval the way that I had been as a child. Instead, a sort of numbness settled over me and I stared blankly at the grain of the wood until I heard Emory get to his feet. “Atara, he doesn’t mean—”

And something in me snapped like kindling. I’d been so patient with Emory. I’d been so willing to accept all of his new scars and his new flaws. I’d shouldered his burdens without complaint and without flinching and I’d gone into it knowing that I wasn’t ready and that I wasn’t trained. I’d done it because I loved him and I knew, someday, that our parents would be gone and all we’d have left of our childhoods would be each other. I’d fought for him, killed for him, disobeyed the elders for him, committed heresy in the eyes of the Corian temples for him, and still, somehow, it hadn’t been enough.

“Shut up,” I snapped, pushing myself to my feet. He was standing across the table and his expression changed from sympathy to pain as if I’d pinched him and twisted the flesh I was holding. I was incensed, bold in my sudden fury, and I came around the side of the table to where he was standing, but he didn’t flinch that time. He simply looked back at me, surprised that I’d advanced on him, because in the few times our petty arguments had escalated to physical violence, he had always flattened me because he was older and bigger and generally better at combat everything.

I didn’t care. “This is your fault,” I continued and then it looked like I’d slapped him. “I get that you’re hurting, Em. I get that you’re angry. I saw what they did to you and how they left you and I’ve been here for every second of what you’ve gone through because of it but that does not give you a free pass to do whatever the fuck you want!”

“Nikita and I are none of your goddamned business, Atara,” he started, his own fury peaking to meet mine and I was reminded of those times we did come to blows. Emory had never been particularly good at maturity and I’d always been very good at pressing his buttons. Shit, some of his buttons existed because I’d put them there. This was decidedly different. In this one instance, I had a fighting chance at actually flattening him and I recognized that the thought was sick. Banking on his exaggerated response to touch giving me an edge was wrong and I knew it. That wasn’t his fault.

I ground my teeth instead, jaw clenched, eyes narrowed. If looks could have killed, I would have butchered him there. “This is not about Nikki!” I raged, shoving him backward and Emory stumbled, nearly tripping over the edge of the table, but he did not hit me back. He scowled and his fists balled up into angry weapons, but he did not hit me. “This is about your actions having fucking consequences beyond you! I don’t care if you two want to beat the shit out of each other! Hit him. Choke him. Twist his arm until the blood vessels break, Emory, I don’t give a fuck! If he’s stupid enough to dance with the devil, he deserves it! This is about me.”

“I didn’t tell Mackenzie to stay away from you!” he shouted back and that time, when I lifted my arms to shove him, he pushed back and we both stumbled. Emory caught himself on the corner of the table and I gripped the back of a chair that I sincerely considered picking up to throw at him. My blood was boiling, frothing in my veins like molten metal. I’d never been so furious in my life. Not even on the beach, because that had been fear driven. There was nothing driving this but rage.

In that second, in that moment that stretched between us anchoring the two of us to each other, I hated him for what he’d done, for what he’d driven from me, for how much I hurt.
And that was really it. I’d grown so used to Mack being at my side, that not having him had left a
gaping wound in me and no matter how much I tried to wrap myself in bandages made of
distractions, I kept right on bleeding. I couldn’t sleep and when I did, ghosts plagued my dreams. It
would start at the beach, Emory flopping lifelessly like a seal being tossed by an orca, and it would
end with a little grey-eyed blond hiding under a table, dragged out by some burly, faceless monster
wearing sailor’s tattoos. He’d pick him up by his arm the way that Emory had grabbed Nikki and
he’d twist until the screams echoed in my skull, until the phantoms disappeared up a rickety set of
wooden stairs and I didn’t have to follow to know what would happen up there.

I’d wake up sick to my stomach, struggling not to vomit into the pitcher of water closest to my bed.
I’d try to eat and find that my stomach rebelled, bringing up recollections from the night before.

I didn’t know enough about Mack’s background to know, exactly, why he’d reacted so poorly, but I
could guess. It wasn’t hard to put together.

I wiped furiously at my face, aware of the hot, traitorous tears that rolled over my cheeks, setting my
cheeks to scalding over the darkened flesh that marked us both as different. “Your actions have
fucking consequences that extend beyond you, you self-absorbed prick!” My words tasted like salt
and they felt thick when they came spilling out of my mouth, clogged and coated with tears. “I’ve
killed for you. I’ve given up everything for you! You needed me to take on your responsibilities, I
took them. You needed someone to keep you from clawing your own face apart, I did it. You used
to wake up from nightmares so violent and angry that I had to play the bait so that Mack could drug
you before you hurt yourself and every time I had to do it, you looked at me like I’d ripped you open
again! But I did it, Em, because you needed it. And Lheiro and dad?” I snorted and he watched, fury
draining from his face, replaced with the sick understanding that came with knowledge. “For awhile,
it was like I didn’t fucking exist. They were losing you. Like...like...” I reached for words,
descriptors, for anything to make him see within my vast vocabulary exactly the sort of storm he had
caused in those months that he couldn’t quite remember. “Sand sifting through their fingers. You
have always been more important than me--”

“That’s not true--” he tried to argue desperately. His anger was completely forgotten and mine was
draining fast, replaced with grief and longing and everything I’d shoved into a box in the back of my
head since the beach. I hadn’t ever dealt with it either. I’d been content to let Mack’s presence act as
a balm, warm and comfortable and safe but that was gone.

“Emory.” I stopped him and choked on a sob when he reached forward, one hand outstretched
before it fell back at his side, curled away from touch that he rebuked himself. “You’re Fox’s eldest
son. You have always been more important than me. I was always the spare. I know they love me. I
never doubted that, not from Fox, anyway, but they hung all of their dreams on you. I hung all of my
dreams on you and then you...you were gone and they were gone and he was there. When nobody
else was, he was there and now he’s gone, too, because you couldn’t keep your fucking hands to
yourself!”

The rage bit again into the tail end of the words I hurled at him like knives and Emory stood, still and
silent, but it was the sort of silent that spoke volumes. There was regret in the furrow of his brow and
sorrow in the way his mouth turned, twisted into a frown. He didn’t need to apologize for me to see
that he was, in fact, truly sorry, though he’d said the words a dozen times by then. He’d pleaded in
my silence in the days preceding that argument, trying to garner some foothold back into my life
when I wanted nothing to do with him. There was confusion, too, in the way his eyes clouded over,
little dots of darker green crushed into the mint like actual leaves. I’d always envied him those eyes.
Mine were so unremarkably human in comparison.

Emory ran his tongue over his chapped bottom lip before he finally spoke, his hands still wringing in
front of him like he itched for contact but he was afraid of the revulsion that would trickle up his spine like spiders. “I didn’t hurt Mack,” he stated quietly, one hand gripping the fingers of the other so tightly that I could see the tips of them, sticking out of his fist, turning violet with the pressure. “I didn’t even mean to hurt Kita. I...panicked. It’s not an excuse. I tried to tell him he should stay away from me, but Atara, you don’t understand. You could never understand what he already lived through.” He was shaking his head as he spoke, swallowing hard and wearing a glassy-eyed expression.

“You know where Mack grew up,” I reminded him, my tone forceful and Emory had no choice but to swallow the reality when I took a step forward. “You know what that must have looked like to him....what it was. Gods, Emory, that was abusive. You’re an asshole, but you’ve never been that kind of asshole and he just...he took it.”

“You don’t understand,” he repeated, just as forceful as I had been and he released the fingers he was squeezing so that he could run his hands down the front of his shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles and ebbing the discomfort of palms made clammy by anxiety. He did not do confrontation very well anymore. I’d seen that when he’d picked a fight with our father for me. “And it’s not my story to tell. I need you to trust me on this, tiny, you don’t understand.”

I believed him. I had no reason to think he was lying. At least, that's what I told myself. Emory had never made a habit of lying to me. In fact, he was more honest with me than he was with himself sometimes, but the way he spoke made me feel like some grave secret was on the verge of spilling from his tongue. I knew the north was harsh. I’d heard stories that their methods were...brutal. I liked to think it was an exaggeration the way that stories about alchemists had turned out to be exaggerations. Tristan was not some fanged, winged monster from the mountains of Paikea.

He was a Kariner. He had no fangs. He had no wings.

I wiped at my face again, disgusted with the tears that kept spilling over and the whole emotional mess that knotted somewhere behind my heart. It wasn’t really all Emory’s fault. It was easy to blame him, yes, but it was Mackenzie’s fault, too. The silence from him was killing me. It would have been easier if he’d just said he couldn’t do it anymore. At least then I could have grieved properly.

My brother swallowed again and when he opened his mouth, his voice was thick. “I’m sorry about Mack,” he managed. “And I know Lheiro and dad have told you to give him time but...if you want my advice...?”

I shrugged. “At this point, what harm could you possibly do?”

“If he’s this important to you--and he obviously is, Atara, because nothing has ever come between you and I before--then I think you should fight.” I looked up and he was right there, inches from me, like he wanted to hug me or hold me the way he had before, but he stayed just there and, instead, reached up and carefully pushed my hair out of my eyes. “I think you should go down to the port district and pound on his door until he answers you. I think you should make him talk to you. Fight him, because his relationship isn’t with me or Nikita. It’s with you.” Then he paused and leaned forward, pressing chapped lips to my forehead and I breathed him in.

For a second, he was Emory again. He was the Emory who pulled me along behind him on a blanket before I could walk just to make sure I never missed out on anything, the Emory that built forts out of sheets in my bedroom to keep the monsters from my dreams at bay, the Emory who had pummeled Andre Belfleur’s face to pulp for calling me a mongrel and stood over him while Andre spit his own teeth out, proudly proclaiming that if anyone picked on me, he’d have no problem breaking their noses, too. He smelled of sandalwood and brandy, earthy and warm, and I could almost hear that
infectious giggle he’d been famous for when we were children and how it had echoed through the walls of Coryth Keep until he had absolutely every member of the gentry under his spell, birth and race forgotten.

I missed him more profoundly in that moment than I had ever missed him before. My eyes welled back up, stinging with tears that I tried to swallow back and the lump in my throat grew so quickly that I thought I might choke around it. “Can I…” I tried to ask but the words thickened like molasses against my tongue.

“Yeah,” he answered anyway and I felt my arms lock around his torso. He was still thinner than he had been and I could feel the bones of his spine under my hands, pressed tight to his back when I squeezed him and he squeezed me just as hard, like he was losing me as much as I was losing him. “But then you’re getting into a carriage and you’re getting past these gates. I’ll deal with the parents.”

“Fox will kill you.”

He snorted, but he didn’t let me go, choosing instead to breathe me in the way that I had breathed him in and I wondered what he thought of when he did that. If the memories felt the same for him—blankets, forts, and fistfights or the nightmares he’d had his entire life about that village he’d been born in burning to the ground. I used to wake up to him climbing into my bed and I’d pretend he hadn’t disturbed me, eyes shut tight in the dark. I’d wait for him to slip quietly beneath my blanket and curl up against my back, his face between my shoulders. I’d known that he was crying, but I also knew that he never let me see him cry and so I’d let him lean on me when he thought I didn’t know that he was hurting. I wondered if he thought of that.

Emory stepped back first. Eventually, I imagined, the urge to cringe away became too much for him to swallow and he took a step back, hands lingering on my shoulders for a second. He ruffled my hair when he finally let go completely. “Get out of here,” he urged.

And I hesitated.

“You used to have nightmares,” I blurted and he looked down at me, surprised, while I scrubbed my face with my sleeve. “About the beginning of the war and the Immarans burning your village after they sacked Ravndal. You would come into my room at night. You could have gone to Lheiro or to dad, but you went to me and I always acted like I was asleep because you never let me see you cry, but I knew and I never asked. Why did you come to me?”

“Because if someone came here to burn this place down like they did there, I wanted to know that I’d be able to save you,” he answered simply. “When you were born, Fox put you in my lap and he said, ‘This is Atara. You keep him safe. Someday, you’re going to look around you and it will feel like you have nothing and nobody, but he’ll be there. He’ll always be there. So you keep him safe, Emory.’” He scrubbed at his own face again. He was still reluctant to let me see him vulnerable, even after all he’d been through, and he broke my heart when he spoke again because his voice cracked over the words. “And I failed, tiny.” He sucked in sharply.

“You’ve never failed at anything.” In my memories, that felt true. He’d always been better at combat, at strategy, at his lessons, his languages, and at politics. Even broken as he was, he’d managed to find someone who couldn’t resist the charm that still occasionally bubbled up out of him.

Emory sneered, disgusted at the suggestion. “Except at being Crown Prince, right?”

I hiccuped and wiped at my eyes, scowling at him from over the sleeve of my Lierian coat. “When you’re ready to take that back, it’s yours. You know that.”
And Emory choked again, like everything I said was some reminder of this failure...a failure to save me from heartbreak or to save me from what had happened on the beach or to save me from Cyril’s ire...I didn’t know. I didn’t ask. It didn’t matter because I’d never been under the impression that he’d failed me at all.

“And if I’m never ready? If I’m always like...this?” He gagged like the very thought was revolting to him, a shudder climbing up his back and settling in his throat. His face paled and he held the back of his hand to his mouth.

I grasped his wrist and he cringed, but I held tight, pulling his hand away from his face so that he had to look at me. “Then I’ll be king,” I answered--like it was the simplest thing in the world. “I’ll carry that for you forever, if that’s what you need, because Emory, right now, I feel like I have nothing and nobody, and you’re still here.”

It was typical of him to deflect emotion with comedy or sarcasm, so when he rolled his eyes to fracture the seriousness of the moment, it didn’t surprise me. In fact, I snorted, laughter breaking through the hiccups that followed my tears. “I’m not going to stand here forever,” he insisted through his own suppressed giggling. “Not if all I’m doing is keeping you from winning your pretty boyfriend back and talking some sense into that fool head of his. I mean, come on, who throws you away? You’re fucking adorable.”

“Wow, thanks,” I drawled, shoving at him and he sank into a chair at the table, one hand around a bottle of brandy and I knew he was raw when I saw that. I knew he was hurting and that he’d go seek Nikita Novak’s company soon because Emory only hit the hard liquor when he needed to sleep or when he was suffering. “Way to ruin a moment, asshole.”

He beamed, but the smile was as false as his comedy. “You know me,” he forced out cheerfully, but his grin dimmed a little bit and he cocked his head to one side. “Thanks, Atara.” He sucked in a deep breath and lifted the bottle to his lips, taking a long drink before he swallowed and gestured to the door. “Well, get going before Fox comes back and makes you stay or Cyril comes back and acts like an asshole again.”

I rolled my eyes that time, but I didn’t fight him. I simply went into my room, grabbed the pouch of coins that rested on the corner of my dresser, and fled out into the corridors with Blue at my heels. I had to remember to give that poor man a raise after he’d dealt with all of our bullshit for the year. He deserved one, all things considered.

I made a mental note of it and was looking down at the pouch in my hand when I nearly ran headfirst into Nikita, who was heading toward our apartments. He looked as cheerful as he usually did, impish and on the verge of causing some kind of ungodly mayhem. It was absurd, because he never actually caused any mayhem, but he looked like a natural disaster made into human form with eyes that didn’t match, hair that fell over the blue one in a sharp sheet, and armor that looked pricklier than a hedgehog with all of the belts and blades and arrows. That wicked bow he always carried was strapped to his back, the teeth of several large animals hanging from the top on thin cords.

“Atara,” he greeted and I stared at him for a minute--at this man, who was really hardly an adult at all, that had managed to worm his way into my brother’s closely guarded heart so much so that he could touch him without that revulsion that I so often saw in Emory’s face when I touched him.

I grabbed his wrist before he could walk by and Nikita stared, head tipped to one side curiously, his eyes flicking over mine. “Can I help you?” he eventually asked slowly.

“About my brother,” I started and he stiffened, pulling on his wrist until I had no choice but to let it go or face having to deal with an irritated Commander who could probably knock me out and then
kill me before my body even crumpled to the floor...all without pulling a single weapon. “You’re serious with him. Whatever you two have, it’s important to you.” It was more of a question than a statement, but my tone gave nothing away.

He answered regardless. “Yes.”

“If you hurt him,” I began quietly and Nikita’s eyes widened marginally. “There is nowhere in this fucking world that will be safe for you. I will hunt you down like an animal. I will burn Glacia to the fucking bedrock to smoke you out. Do you understand me? He has suffered enough.”

“If I hurt him,” he answered, his voice just as quiet. “I will sit myself at your door and you can do what you want with me, Atara, because I’ll deserve it.”
Mack was not at his flat. I knew because I pounded on the door for something like fifteen minutes, demanding he let me in—ordering him to let me in and there wasn’t a peep from beyond the door. When I scurried over to the window, hanging off the bannister around the stairs that led up to his place, I could see nothing in the little space he usually occupied. A rumpled bed, an empty bottle of liquor, his guardsman’s uniform in a heap on the floor, but no Mack.

So I marched myself over to the Lantern and climbed the exterior stairs to the attic apartment that Rylin and Rosie occupied. It was Rylin who answered that door—small, nervous looking Rylin who stared up at me with lips parted in frantic anxiety and storm grey eyes that looked almost luminous in his face. His cheeks pinked when he saw me beneath my hood and a panicked squeak of surprise escaped his mouth.

“Your Grace,” he breathed frantically, one hand white-knuckled on the edge of the door and the other fumbling with the hem of his plain, rough-spun cotton shirt, smoothing it out and tugging it down. He rocked on bare feet and I noted with a small smirk that he was shorter than me. Not by much, but by enough for it to be noticeable, even when we weren’t standing back to back. His gaze flickered up to Blue, standing menacingly behind me, a silent wall of foreboding muscle. When Rylin spoke again, his voice was strained to nearly cracking. “Are you...are you looking for Kenzie?”

I nodded, studying his features while we stood there. Mack looked like his mother, I decided. Rylin’s hair was platinum blond like Cyril’s and it fell pin-straight. Like his son’s, it looked like it would be feather soft if I reached out and touched it, but the color was wrong. Mack’s hair looked like honey spun into curls. He had a human jawline instead of the slender, gamine look that the Lierians (both male and female) were coveted for possessing and though he was paler than a Corian, it was more because his mother was half Immaran than it was because of Rylin’s race. Mack’s skin still had that pleasantly sun-kissed look that humans had rather than the milk-white tone of his father.

But the eyes—those were Rylin’s all the way through. Grey as the clouds that hung over Coryth just before a storm, but clear and reflective as polished glass. Rylin, like his son, was beautiful. Beautiful enough, evidently, to have been collared and kept like a prized pet.

After a moment, he cleared his throat and his face colored an even deeper pink. For a moment, I wasn’t sure he would tell me where Mack was. Perhaps they’d talked about the possibility of me showing up to look for him and maybe Mack didn’t want to be found. My heart fell a little bit at that thought and he must have seen the disappointment in my features, because his hand darted out and
he brushed the tips of his fingers over my cheek in a distinctly Lierian fashion—a sign of respect, of adoration. It was the same way the elders greeted me and my Lheiro every time we met with them.

“It’s not that he doesn’t want to see you, Your Grace,” Rylin explained carefully and I tilted my head, watching his expression change from nervous to disgusted to... disappointed.

When he was quiet, I prompted him. “Then what is it? Because it feels like he doesn’t want to see me.”

Mack’s father flinched. “I made so many mistakes with him,” he admitted after a moment, his voice strained and quiet. I wanted to shout that yes, he had. He had made so many mistakes with him. There were days when Mack would relay some story from his childhood that made me want to shake Rylin until his teeth rattled, but I always reminded myself that Rylin had been a child with Mack. They were so close in age they could have been brothers rather than a father and his son. Of course, he’d made mistakes. My parents were grown adults when they’d had me and they’d had practice with my brother, but they’d still made mistakes. They still made mistakes, even seventeen years later.

So of course, he had. Of course, he’d turned a blind eye to what was happening because it was easier to be ignorant than to believe the truth.

Rylin swallowed hard. “And now he suffers for it,” he tacked on acidly. “For what I did.”

“He told you what happened?” He had to have, I thought, for Rylin to be mentioning anything like this. He had to have context to understand and the only person that could have given it was Mackenzie.

The Lierian wrinkled his nose. “Mm,” he agreed softly. “I talked to him, Your Grace. I tried to tell him to go back to the castle, to walk it off, to talk to you.” His shoulders lifted. “He’s downstairs at the Lantern.”

“He’s at the Lantern?!” The disgust dripped from my voice and Rylin pursed his lips together when he nodded. I didn’t want to hear more from him. I backed away from the door and started back down the stairs, Blue close at my heels, and blood rushing to my head. Of all the wretched places in Coryth he could have chosen to waste away his life at, he’d picked the worst of them and gone right back to the catalyst of all his trauma. It was like sitting Emory down at the beach with a bottle of gin and telling him to sort his shit out there.

Simultaneously, I wanted to wrap him a quilt and tuck him away in my bedroom where I knew nobody could touch him and I wanted to punch him so hard in the mouth that he saw stars for days.

Blue grabbed my shoulder when I made for the door. His lack of a tongue had always made communicating with him difficult and so he gestured to the bright red frame in front of us and then shook his head vehemently, indicating that he thought this was a very bad idea indeed. He was right, of course. “Noted,” I answered dryly and Blue made a disgruntled noise when I pushed the door open anyway.

The Red Lantern, on first inspection, looked much like any of the more expensive brothels toward the center of the city. The walls were covered in rich red and gold tapestries depicting lewd and obscene things in pornographic detail. The chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were wrought iron, painted gold, and each wax stick was surrounded by, surprise, a red lantern that made all the light in the place a dusky, warm color. The walls were lined with benches wide enough for an adult to recline on them, laden with faux silk pillows and scantily clad women and young men--boys, really, I thought, most of them Lierians or halflings. There was a bar, too, against one side of the room where a woman with hair the color of the night sky and lips painted the color of blood poured wine and
liquor into various glasses.

Upon closer look, however, the tapestries were fraying, the lanterns were in need of mending, and the pillows were so old that some of them had been crushed flat by the weight of so many people on them every day. The whores were rail thin, with ribs like fingers reaching around to their backs and sunken eyes lined in purple shadows.

Those closest to me moved back instinctively, a whisper of anxiety rippling through the crowd of grimy patrons and skeletal prostitutes. One of the boys winked at me when I pushed my hood back and strode past him. I didn’t spare him a second glance. My eyes stayed trained on the figure slumped at the bar. One of the patrons, a large looking sailor with more filth on him than visible skin, had a hand on the back of his neck and the other on his hip, trying to coax him from his seat. I recognized the honey colored hair, the same color as his mother’s, and fury rose up like bile in my throat.

I wasn’t sure when my fingers found the hilt of the mercy blade at my hip, but they were there, wrapped tightly around it, flexing instinctively. There was a faint scrape of steel on acid-hardened leather when I yanked it free and the razored blade came up flush against the inside of that patron’s thigh when I reached around him. He smelled of sweat and booze, but he stiffened at the sensation and the people around us backed up, creating a ring of vast emptiness.

Silence fell on the Lantern like a blanket of fresh snow, muffling all but the livid ferocity in my head. Who the fuck did this vermin think he was, putting his hands all over someone like that? Mack wasn’t dressed like he worked at the Lantern—not like the boys that milled around us, wearing little more than scraps of cloth around their hips, gauzy and almost see-through.

“Hands,” I snarled and I heard Blue’s steel blade ring when it exited the scabbard that hung on his right side. The patron’s hands moved carefully, contact with Mack’s slumped form ceasing completely.

He chuckled a little bit, my new captive. “No need to get pushy,” he joked. “Kenzie doesn’t mind sharing. He didn’t before anyway.”

“I will cut your cock off,” I bit out. “Turn around and look at me. Then tell me if you think I’m into fucking sharing.”

The sailor obeyed, his eyes falling on the stripes that ran vertically over my cheeks and the one that split my lip. “Miero’s balls,” he swore under his breath. “What the fuck is Fox Bordelon’s brat doing in a place like this?”

Blue grunted, disgusted, but it was that phrase that Mack finally pushed himself up unsteadily and turned his head toward where we were. His eyes were rimmed red and his lips were chapped. He had a shadow of facial hair on his cheeks that I wasn’t used to seeing, golden-blond and deliciously rough, I imagined. And unusual, I thought. The only other halfling I knew that could grow facial hair was my brother, but I supposed he and Mack both had decidedly human features—squarer jaws, stronger features, and broader shoulders in Mack’s case.

“Get out,” I hissed at him, withdrawing the knife I had pressed to the artery in his leg. “If you ever so much as look in his direction again, I will find you and I will turn you into the world’s ugliest eunuch. Are we absolutely clear?”

He scowled at me, but he nodded, hands still up, backing away and toward the door. I grasped a handful of coins from the pouch on my hip and threw them on the counter in the direction of the Madam who stood behind the bar. Keilani, I thought, with her almond shaped eyes the color of
burnished bronze and her hair as dark as a moonless night. She didn’t look like anyone I’d ever met before, this woman from the Badlands east of the Vale, but I didn’t have time to ask her about where she was from.

I grasped Mack by the arm and pulled. He slid out of the chair, stumbling over his own feet, and collided with me like an out of control carriage. He reeked of liquor and tobacco and cheap perfume, I thought. Nothing like the ginger and honey smell that usually clung to his clothes. “Atara!” he slurred, one arm sloppily around my neck. I felt my bad leg scream under the weight of him against me but if I let him go, he was going to hit the floor. If that happened, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to haul him back to his feet and while the idea of Blue carrying him out of the brothel over his shoulder like a sack of flour was amusing, it was not at all how I wanted things to play out.

“You look pathetic,” I snapped instead, eyes narrowing at him as we stumbled back toward the door. He had one hand wrapped around a bottle of gin that smelled so strong it might as well have been kerosene and the other looped tightly about my neck. We hobbled, the two of us, the brace on my knee groaning under the weight. Blue held an arm out like he wanted to help and I declined it. If someone decided to start shit with me—for example, the man I’d just thrown from the Lantern—I needed Blue’s hands free. I was good with a blade—not like Nikita or Emory or even Cyril—but good enough to survive. Not, however, good enough to take on a sailor and his bulky mates.

We were unbothered, however, as we stumbled, wobbling down the street in a path that curved back and forth like an S. I managed to get my hood back out so that the only bizarre thing about the entire scene was Blue. Hopefully, I thought, I passed as some high ranking servant or something from the palace. They sometimes took guards to the market with them, after all, if they were purchasing something expensive enough to be stolen.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be disgusted or angry, so I was a mixture of both until he tried to drink from that wretched bottle. At that point, I grabbed it from his hands like grabbing something dangerous from a toddler, and I threw it into the closest gutter. “Hey!” he protested, reaching for it desperately. We both would have taken a headfirst dive into the sewers if Blue hadn’t grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him backward, arms flailing, before we could totally lose our balance.

“Don’t ‘hey’ me,” I snarled, tugging him along again. He weaved and wobbled, hiccuping like a proper lush. “This is your answer, Mackenzie? Things get hard so you marinate in...what, sterilizing alcohol?”

He tried to point at me and nearly poked me in the eye. I had to slap his hand away, scowling. “You-” he tried to say before he hiccuped again. “You should not...” Another hiccup. “Be here. ‘S not safe.” His accent, which I usually so adored, was even thicker and less understandable when he was saturated in liquor, but I managed to ascertain most of what he was trying to convey while we hobbled up the stairs to his flat, him pressed between me and the wall of the building to keep him from falling and Blue behind us, occasionally putting a hand out to stop him from careening backward.

“I wouldn’t have to be here,” I pointed out, fishing in his pockets for his key. I located it and unlocked the door, shoving him inside. Blue remained on the landing, giving me an apologetic look before the door snapped shut, obscuring him from view. I repeated myself, looking down at where Mack had fallen and was currently trying (and failing) to haul himself to his feet. “I wouldn’t have to be here if you had acted like an adult and talked to me instead of doing...whatever this is. And at the Lantern, Mackenzie? Surrounded by people that treat you like an object instead of a person?”

I grabbed him around the middle and he made a noise, the back of his hand over his mouth, and I
knew then exactly where this was going. I only barely got him over a washbasin before he was puking. He'd been drinking so much that even his vomit smelled of sour liquor. I'd been irritated at first, but holding his hair back while his stomach heaved, feeling his limbs shake, clutching at the edge of the basin, eyes streaming, I felt more...sad.

He was always so insistent that he wasn’t Emory...but this? This looked like my brother.

So instead of further berating him (there wasn’t any point, anyway, I figured--he was far too drunk for conversation) I blew gently over the back of his sweat damp neck and he shivered, chills racing down his spine, leaning heavily on me on the floor beside the washbasin. He remained there, even after the heaving ceased, only moving to put his head under my chin and the rest of it didn’t matter. He was shaking, half in my lap, and I gathered him up as best I could, running one hand through his hair and wiping tears from his cheeks with the other. He wasn’t crying, not in the sense that one actually cries, but rather reacting to the violent sickness that had torn up through his throat.


And so I did, like I was taking care of a child. I scrubbed his mouth out and he batted at me, whining and slurring his disapproval, but he was in no state to really fight. I wiped his face off and dumped water in his hair, toweling it dry carefully. I stripped his clothes, filthy and reeking of alcohol, and threw them into the furthest corner of the room. I had to open several cabinets to find more and was finally directed to a trunk under the bed. I realized, quite suddenly, that I’d never actually gotten my own clothes out before. I’d never had to take care of anyone. When someone in my family was sick, there were people that carried the basin of vomit out of the room and brought in a clean one. There were people who did our laundry and laid out our clothes.

It was...domestic, this scene with him, and I decided that I liked it. I liked taking care of him the way he did for me when my leg hurt or when I didn’t feel well.

I wiped him off the best I could. Given the situation (I definitely couldn’t lift him in and out of a tub and aforementioned tub was full of vomit), a bath was out of the question and would have to wait for later but he was clean. That was most important. He no longer smelled like the Lantern, at least, and I redressed him, his limbs heavy and useless while he stared at me, glassy eyed and sort of swaying in his seat like the world around him was spinning.

I knew that feeling.

I put him into bed after that, carefully positioning him on his side so that if he did throw up in his sleep, it would be easy for me to keep him from choking on it. “’M sorry, Atara,” he mumbled, his mouth half obscured by his pillow when he spoke and I kissed his temple, feverish and ill, and spoke beside his ear when I answered.

“We’ll talk about it later,” I assured him gently. “Get some sleep, Mackenzie.” I was certain he wanted to argue that he was fine and try to hash this whole thing out in his state. He even grabbed my wrist and tried to hold on, fingers steadily slackening when his eyes grew almost immediately heavy. I let him hold on until they were totally slack, slipping down my arm to my palm, and I extricated myself carefully to look around.

This was going to take work, because he had clearly not been taking care of himself in the past week. The cupboards were empty, as was the jar of honey he kept beside his bed, though the tiny canvas bag of ginger candies was still there. I stuck one in my mouth, if only because it reminded me of how his kisses tasted and I missed even then.

Grasping the pouch of coins at my hip with one hand and the basin of disgusting with the other, I
made my way to the door and pushed it open. I gave Blue the coins first. “You’re not going to like this,” I warned him. “So you can keep whatever is left in that pouch.” He made a face, half pleading and half dreading, and I pushed the basin out toward him. He made another disgusted noise and took a step back. “Get rid of this. Buy a new one and bring it back with water in it. Then find somewhere to buy food. Something easy. It has been years since I’ve had to take a cooking lesson. And honey. Don’t forget that.”

Cyril had insisted when we were younger and sent both my brother and I down to the kitchens to follow the head chef around for a few days. It was supposed to be so we could survive on our own if we had to, but Fox had pointed out that nothing the head chef in the palace made was actually ‘survival’ food and Cyril had relented the point. Still, it meant I could put something together. Besides, it couldn’t be that difficult, I thought. I had a tongue. I knew what tasted good.

Blue barked a laugh and rolled his eyes, but he did as I’d asked, signaling for me to keep the door locked before he wobbled down the stairs, cringing with the basin.

I obeyed, sliding the lock and the bolt into place when I retreated inside. My father would kill Blue if he found out he’d left me alone, but we had a relationship, my guard and I. He was a friend and he trusted me not to do something totally moronic in his absence. I had no intention of leaving Mack, anyway, just in case he did puke in his sleep.

He did not stir when I cleaned up the empty bottles I found lingering on tables nor did he stir when Blue came back with my requests and helped me haul the water into the room. He didn’t move when I sent the guard back out for two more buckets, one of which I dumped into a pot in the fireplace with the food he’d brought me–root vegetables, chunks of some undistinguishable red meat (Blue had no way of telling me and I was not proficient enough to recognize it raw), salt, and a satchel of herbs I found in one of the cabinets. I recognized dried thyme and thought it would probably work for what I needed it to do.

I scrubbed the tables with one of the buckets, the floor where the wash basin casualty had been, and then the clothes he’d been wearing. I hung them carefully over the railing outside and Blue watched, amusement in his face and crinkling around his eyes. “What?” I asked, glaring at him. “I’m spoiled, not totally incapable!”

He laughed in response.

When I had scrubbed and cleaned every surface until the smell of liquor and vomit was gone, replaced with wood polish (another trip for Blue) and soup, I sat down in one of the chairs. It had been a few hours, I thought, and the sun was sinking toward the horizon. Parts of the sky were darkening and Blue sought out a replacement for himself from one of the guards along the battlements that surrounded the city. A message was sent through them and, two hours later, Elian Janvier replaced Blue. I liked Elian just the same, though he was relatively new to the guard and only a year or two older than me. He knocked to let me know that he’d relieved my silent companion and that, if I needed anything, to let him know.

Night descended and Mack was still silent, unmoving except the rise and fall of his chest. The soup finished and I removed it from the heat. I burned my tongue in the process of tasting it and swore and that was when he finally stirred, having slept more than half the day. He pushed himself up with one arm and blinked, bleary eyed and (I thought) adorable. He smacked his lips together and grimaced, reaching blindly for the sack of ginger candies.

One was popped into his mouth and his fingers stilled at the fresh jar of honey, small wooden spoon resting across the top. He tilted his head, confused and still somewhere between fully awake and passing back out. He didn’t recognize the jar, I thought, or he was aware that he’d been out and
hadn’t yet replaced it. I wasn’t sure, but he plucked it up with clumsy fingers, nearly dropping it in the process, and then he looked up, his eyes finally landing on me.

“Atara?” he asked, voice hoarse from disuse. He looked around then, confusion still in his features, eyes furtively scanning every inch of the place from polished tables to scrubbed floors to the cooling pot of food that was sitting on the hearth. “What are you doing here? Did you clean? Did you cook?”

“You don’t remember,” I answered flatly and arched an eyebrow and his eyes met mine, narrowing perceptibly before he shook his head. “I found you marinating in cheap gin at the Lantern. We almost fell into a sewer. You puked. Mostly in the wash basin, but some on the floor.” He winced, grimacing. “So I…” I held my arms out and shrugged. “I cleaned you up and I put you to bed and then I…cleaned everything else up, washed your clothes, replaced the basin you used as a vomit bucket, and made something to eat. Also, I bought the honey you like. I think? It looks like the kind you made me eat.”

He was quiet. For a long time, all he did was stare at me like he couldn’t quite put together the sequence of events or like he couldn’t understand that this wasn’t just some pipe dream he was having. Slowly realization dawned over his face with a steady flush. “I--” He tried but his voice was hesitant, uncertain. “I avoided you and you still--why?”

I had a thousand questions. I wanted to know why he’d avoided me. It had broken my heart and left me dizzy and reeling, totally alone and spinning out of control. I’d been unable to focus or to care, even when the political climate of my father’s court became steadily more toxic...all because he’d conditioned me to need him and then he was gone. He hadn’t done it intentionally, I thought. He’d just been there for me and I’d grown used to it and then when he wasn’t…when he wasn’t....

“Because I love you;” I answered simply, my mouth dry and my face blank, like it was obvious. After a second, I shook my head. “I was angry at first. I wanted to shout at you and slap you and...and then I saw you at the Lantern and some pig had his hands all over you--”

Mack cringed and wobbled to his feet, unsteady and still tired, but he made his way to the table and rubbed his face when he collapsed into a chair. “I needed time,” he mumbled. “Space. Seeing Emory like that...isn’t easy for me. I can’t be a part of that, Atara. If he ever hurt you, I’d kill him and you’d hate me for it. I only meant to be gone a day or two but then I didn’t know what to say so I just…” He trailed off and shrugged.

“Why were you at the Lantern?” I pressed, sitting down beside him. “That place is nothing but a bad memory to you. Why would you go there?”

He shrugged, thumbing the grain of the table and staring down at his lap. He answered quietly. “Because I knew if I went back and I told you that seeing Emory do that had given me flashbacks and nightmares, you’d just feel pity. You wouldn’t get angry at me for not talking to you. You’d just brush it off like it was expected and everything would be fine. You deserve better than this and I can’t be better than this so I went there because that’s what I am.”

I ground my teeth, frustration returning, and I felt myself move without really thinking about. I wanted to slap him again--for being too self-deprecating, for having too much hate balled up in his chest, all of it circling him like a vulture over a carcass. Mack would pick himself clean and leave nothing but bone if left to his own devices.

I took his face between my hands so that he had nowhere to look but at me and his expression screwed up in a grimace. “Look at me,” I ordered when his eyes fell down somewhere around my collar. They flicked back up, uncertainty written in the way he hesitated. “Do I look like I pity you?” He didn’t answer, but he didn’t flinch either and I pressed my mouth to his quickly, tasted ginger and
honey, and breathed him in. He smelled like Mack again—honey and ginger and clean linen. “I don’t pity you. I’m proud of you. I live up there in that keep and I spend every day with someone who went through just a fraction of the hell you spent your life in and he can’t pick himself back up. He tries. Gods, he tries so hard, but you, Mackenzie…look at you. You go up there every day and you deal with him and with my fucked up family and you never complain, but I know it has to eat away at you.”

Like acid, I thought, like being near us was swallowing acid for him and it was chewing away at his insides. What a reminder Emory must be, I thought, of everything that ever went wrong for Mack and Rylin. Of all those years spent cold or hungry or hurting—pinned to a mattress and fighting off tears because the tears would only make him harder.

His breath guttered, lips parted, and he tried to flinch from my touch but I held fast. It was how I knew that I was right and I felt his cheeks arm under my cupped palms. “I know that’s hard for you, but you do it anyway and you shove all that bullshit back like you’re okay. You don’t have to be okay all the time, beautiful. You don’t have to shoulder it until it’s too much for you to deal with...until you turn into...this.”

Mackenzie choked, a small noise escaping his throat like he was in pain, and he wiped furiously at his mouth. I heard the candy crunch between his teeth when his jaw clenched and then he grabbed me, without warning, pulling me down into his lap so that I had to straddle him to avoid falling over and he squeezed me so hard that I had to wheeze to breathe. His face was buried in my chest and his arms crossed over my spine, locking me in place and I felt him inhale sharply and he shuddered when he exhaled. He mumbled into my clothes, barely audible. “Keep talking.”

I ran my fingers through his messy curls and leaned down to press kisses against the top of his head. My chest felt swollen, like it might crack open from the pressure. I’d come here to fight with him. I’d expected opposition, not a disaster that needed pieced back together, but if he needed me to put his puzzle pieces into order again, I would do that. If what Mack needed was someone to protect him from himself, I would do that.

So I talked. I told him about how I’d spoken to Emory, how I’d fought with Cyril, and how Nikita had come back. I told him about the council and the elders and the temple priests. I told him that I’d seen Rylin. I went carefully through what I remembered of each day he’d been gone and he held onto me like I was the anchor that kept him firmly on the ground...like without me, he’d simply disappear.

“I missed you,” I finally got around to. “I could barely listen to Cyril. I could barely deal with any of it. They told me to give you space and I just...I thought maybe you just couldn’t do it anymore and I’d understand, Mackenzie, if you couldn’t. Gods, sometimes, I think I can’t, and he’s my burden to carry and I love him. I really, really do, but I…” I didn’t need to explain that sometimes it felt like I couldn’t do it...that sometimes being near Emory was like drowning--like my brother was holding me under the waves, hands around my throat, and I was engaged in a struggle with him that only ended with one of us dead.

He loosened his hold on me just enough to take one of my hands and he measured his fingers against it, my smaller ones barely reaching the last knuckle of his, smooth and petite from a lifetime of privilege where his were calloused and worn. “He’s not your burden,” he corrected gently after a moment. “He’s your parents’ burden and...honestly, they could put me on the post for even saying this, but it is grossly irresponsible of your father to let Emory carry on the way he has.”

“It’s not my father,” I answered bitterly and stood up, stretching to my toes and kissing the top of his head as I moved. I wanted him to put something in his stomach after all that liquor. I’d been drunk
before—sloppy drunk, not long before the beach had happened, because I’d spent the night on the balcony of the Crown’s Tower with my brother, drinking and carrying on until the sun rose steadily over the horizon. I remembered the stomachache and the headache that accompanied the next morning and how I’d spent most of it puking into a bucket while Fox watched, leaning against my doorway, an eyebrow arched in amusement. 'Do you feel as pretty as you look?’ he’d asked me and I’d given him a very rude hand gesture in response.

Mack watched as I made my way through his flat to the cabinets against the wall. I took two bowls out, filled them up, and sat one in front of him. “It’s Cyril,” I explained while he watched me look for spoons before he got up and got them himself, wincing at the sound of the cabinet shutting. “Fox wants to send Emory away somewhere quiet to get his head together. Somewhere safe...for him and everyone around him. Lheiro he…” It was difficult to explain, the attachment Cyril had to Emory and how it bordered unhealthy. “When my grandfather sent him away, Emory was the only link he had back to my father and they’re…”

“You don’t need to explain,” he offered gently. “I’ve seen your parents together and...don’t take this the wrong way, Atara, but I don’t know if there’s anyone in the world that Cyril loves as much as he loves the king.”

“There is,” I corrected, sitting back down in my chair, spoon clutched in my hand. “It’s Emory. Me? Not so much.” Mack opened his mouth like he might argue but I shook my head. “And he’s doing your brother a disservice.”

I shrugged and changed the subject, terribly uncomfortable with the direction this was going in. It wasn’t supposed to be about Emory. It was supposed to be about us. “Eat,” I ordered, poking my spoon at the untouched bowl in front of him and Mack grimaced. “Oh, stop it. I can cook.”

“It’s not that,” he assured me. “I mean, I’m surprised you even know what a cooking pot looks like, to be totally truthful with you--”

“Rude.” I glared at him and he grinned because it was entirely false and totally transparent. “I cleaned up your vomit and you’re insulting me. Me! You know, the person that hiked all the way down here to take care of you, who dragged you out of a brothel, who threatened to castrate someone in the process--”

He choked on the food in his mouth. “You what?!?”

My shoulders lifted halfheartedly. “He was pawing all over you. I figured you would know, considering the fact that I’m a spoiled brat that has never had to share anything in my entire life, but I do not play well with others. I do not share what I consider to be mine and you, Mackenzie, are most definitely mine.” He was staring at me while I spoke and he’d managed to swallow one bite of what I’d put in front of him without dying in the process so I imagined it was probably not toxic and took a bite myself.

It was not a five star palace meal, but it was warm and it didn’t taste like I’d dug it out of the gutter, so at least there was that.

“Yours, huh?” He paused. “Does anyone ever tell you no, Atara?”

I snorted and he kept eating, but he was still watching me while I choked on a laugh. “Are you
serious?” His expression did not change and so I surmised that he absolutely was serious. “I am a Bordelon prince and Infinito of the Lierian Nation. No, Mack, nobody ever tells me no.” Then I hesitated, narrowing my eyes at him before I leaned back in the chair. “Why? Are you telling me no? As in, no, you are not mine?” Panic welled up in my throat and I felt it claw there, itching at my tongue and trying to burst through my mouth, to throw me to my knees so I could plead for him. He let me chew on that for a solid minute, heart hammering so that I could feel it in my skull, before he answered.

“Oh, I’m yours,” he promised, propping his head up in one hand, a lazy smile spreading over his expression. “How could I not be after all of this? I’m twenty-four years old, nearly twenty-five. I think I was drunk from age thirteen to seventeen. Blind drunk. Like...couldn’t walk in a straight line, couldn’t hold a conversation, started shaking if I didn’t get to whiskey fast enough in the morning. It made me numb. I needed numb.”

I grimaced and tried to imagine it--that grey-eyed boy from my nightmares cradling a jug of cheap whiskey like a lifeline, addicted to it like the poppy milk addicts and the drunks that littered the gutters, stinking of filth and vomit. I hated that I couldn’t think of him running barefoot through the grass, skipping stones on a placid pond, braiding daisy chains...things I had done as a child...I hated that Mack’s childhood was cheap liquor, tobacco burns, mattresses that smelled like sex and rough hands that lifted his hips, tongues and teeth and whiskey breath--

I pressed my fingers over my eyes and shook my head. My heart would keep breaking if I kept thinking on it and that resentment I had for Rylin would grow even though I knew there had been little choice.

Still. He could have protected him. He should have protected him. Cyril had managed it with Emory.

“Nobody ever took care of me,” he continued. “Rylin and Rosie were always working themselves, trying to numb the same things. Keilani figured if I was going to do it anyway, I might as well be numb for it. So it was a knee-jerk reaction to drink until the flashbacks stopped, but that’s not the point...” He took a breath and reached for my hand, curling his fingers tightly in mine. “The point is I would wake up those mornings and I’d be on the floor of a room somewhere in the Lantern, covered in my own vomit and gods only know what else, and nobody ever took care of me, little prince. So this...this waking up with you here, clean, with food and fresh clothes...it’s new. It’s...nice. I...” He stopped and let go of my hand, his voice turning hoarse. “I like it.”

“Not enough to keep doing this, I hope,” I teased dryly and he snorted. “I’m serious, though. I had these terrible nightmares when you were gone.”

Mack arched an eyebrow and pushed his bowl away. It was only half eaten, but I wasn’t going to fight him knowing he probably felt like he was one step from tossing it all back up. “Oh?” he inquired carefully. “About the beach?” He knew about those ones and how they’d plagued me since, much like my brother’s, but Mack was the only person who had ever asked about how I was recovering after that wretched event.

And truthfully, it hadn’t been easy. Without him, I very well could have been struggling the way that Emory was. Not to that extent, I imagined, because I hadn’t been hurt like he was hurt, but it was still hard. It was nauseating reliving that night, having to watch over and over again the way he’d fought and that terrible, wet, gasping noise he’d been making.

“Partly,” I admitted. “But mostly they were about you.” I squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze. I didn’t regret bringing it up, not really. Honesty was important, I thought. Keeping the slate clean was important. I didn’t want to have secrets from him and I didn’t want him keeping any from me.
Mack was quiet for a moment. “Tell me.”

I winced. “It would start with Emory on the beach, but it always turned into you, or a small you. What I imagine you looked like when you were small.”

“So filthy and underfed?” he joked, but I didn’t laugh. It wasn’t funny. Maybe to him, years removed, he could laugh about the thought because the alternative was to cry over it and laughing was easier, but I couldn’t laugh. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

It took a lot to wring the truth out of me. Obviously, not because I wanted to hide it, but because it was hard to think back to the look on Emory’s face when I’d finally reached him on the beach. That dead-eyed stare, empty and glassy, like he’d completely checked out of his own body. “When I got to Emory, right before you showed up,” I started carefully. “He had this look on his face. If I hadn’t been able to see him breathing, I’d have thought he was dead. He looked...vacant. Hollow. Like he’d separated from himself somehow and so I’d see you in these nightmares, under this little table or pressed into this bed--” He flinched and so did I in response “And you’d look the same.”

“I did look the same,” he answered flatly and I felt myself wilt, sinking down into my seat like a capsizing ship. My heart wanted to drop through the floor and burrow into a grave with my name on it.

It took me a minute to finally speak, to get words to move beyond my thickened tongue. “I hate that,” I admitted hoarsely, but I was still trying not to choke on the tears that threatened to strangle me. I pressed my hands flat to the table and then slowly curled them into fists so that the knuckles were white. “I hate that I lived up in that fucking palace for so many years and while I was playing in fountains, you were being--” I swallowed the words and Mack pursed his lips. “I hate that your mother put you here. I hate that Rylin didn’t protect you from it--”

He started, eyes wide, and stared at me and I knew I’d pushed some button when I brought up his father. “I’m sorry!” I managed before he held a hand out and shook his head. “Rylin didn’t know this wasn’t normal,” he pointed out through clenched teeth. “He didn’t understand. He didn’t even want me, Atara. It took him years to admit that I was his, to accept me, longer to let me call him dad, and he loves me. He does and the guilt over all of this eats him alive, but he didn’t know. This was the only life he’d ever had. He spent his time being bounced from brothel to brothel all over Immara until my mother brought him back here. Blame her all you want, but don’t blame him. He did the best he could.”

For a second, I was struck silent and dumbfounded. My tongue felt tied up in my mouth, but I persisted. “They treated you like a piece of warm meat!”

“That’s all I am!”

We were on the verge of arguing. I could feel it. His cheeks were flushed with frustration and mine were red with grief. Mack crossed his arms defensively over his chest and the last words out of his mouth rang in my head, echoing as they bounced around my skull. I was simultaneously enraged and heartbroken and I got to my feet so quickly that my chair tipped back and hit the ground with a clatter.

If I left, he would follow. I knew he would, because Mack didn’t like leaving things unfinished.

So I started for the door and he stumbled to his feet. “Where are you going?” he demanded when I threw the door open and strode past Elian without so much as a word. Mack followed, nearly tripping as he pulled shoes on at the same time, hobbling down the stairs and out into the street where
crowds of people were making last minute trips through the port market. The ground shone with seawater, bright and tinted green over the hard-packed dirt. Occasionally, there was a glitter of a scale lost in the rustle.

Two sets of feet followed after me, one clinking with armor and the other huffing indignantly at the absurdity of it all.

That stopped when I pushed the hood back off of my head and the ripple of surprised gasps made its way through the crowds. People stepped back, some of them kneeling, others staring, slack-jawed and struck stupid. Mack looked both furious and alarmed when he stumbled out into the empty space that surrounded me.

My brother and I were only ever supposed to be in the city with a whole contingent of guards. There was supposed to be an announcement. A formal parade. There were rules.

Fuck their rules, I thought.

The Lantern was nearby and I recognized the figure that stood in the doorway, narrow hips and long, braided blonde hair. Rosie was smoking and she put out the tobacco in her hand when she saw us, pushing her way through the staring crowd to the front of the line.

“Your Grace,” Mack started through clenched teeth, hyper aware of how many sets of eyes were on him and how many people were holding their breath.

I was used to an audience. More importantly, I was done caring. If he insisted on thinking of himself as little more than a barely responsive warm body for someone to fuck when they had the coin for it, then I was going to build him back up, brick by fucking brick if I had to. Every ounce of self-esteem that had been stripped from him, screamed out through a raw throat or bled into sheets, I was going to pick back up and put back in him. Every shard of broken heart that he’d lost along the way, I was going to seek out and stitch together. I intended to kiss every wound he’d ever suffered, mop up every tear I’d ever missed, and if that started now, then so be it. We were no secret in the palace, but the palace was not the swarming masses. It was a world unto itself.

“Say my name,” I demanded in response and his expression hardened. He stared at me, silently imploring me to turn around and go back into the flat. It wouldn’t help now, of course. The people knew I was there and every set of eyes would watch me if I walked back to his home. So I repeated myself. “Say. My. Name.”

“Atara,” he finally obeyed, teeth clenched like his fists and I closed the distance between us. In that last step between his body and mine, I heard him start to say, “What the fuck are you doing?” My mouth cut him off, pressed tight to his, my hands on either side of his face. He stiffened, surprised and unyielding, and there was a collective gasp around all of us. Nearby, a female giggled, but I had my eyes screwed shut, separating only to turn that one kiss into a thousand small ones, all against his sealed lips, until his shoulders relaxed and his fingers came up over my own, sliding down to my wrists.

I stopped only when he returned the last of my kisses, mouth shaped to my own, and then he stared at me, eyes wide and clear. “What are you doing?” he whispered.

“Proving a point.”

“What point?!?”

I turned to the crowd, to the giggling female who was watching, enraptured, twisting the end of a
thick black braid through her fingers. “You,” I pointed to her and she yelped, eyes wide, before looking pointedly at her feet to avoid looking at me. “You know who I am?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” she squeaked. “You...you’re Atara Bordelon. You’re the son of the King.”

“I am,” I agreed, nodding emphatically. “Do you know my family’s motto?”


“Kneel for no one, Your Grace,” she responded quickly, her eyes darting upward to look furtively over my face like she’d never imagined she would ever be speaking to me and I nodded again.

“Louder,” I asked her. “Say it louder.”

“Kneel for no one, Your Grace. Those are the Bordelon words.”

I spun back around to face Mack, my heart growing wings in my chest. I was radiantly, gloriously freed of all responsibility in that moment. I felt light, like the wind could carry me away, and I didn’t care that he was staring at me like he wanted to throw me over his lap and spank me like a naughty child. His fists were clenched and he was glaring. “Kneel for no one,” I repeated for him. “For no one. For nothing. For nobody. Do you know why?”

“Because you’re an arrogant brat from a family full of arrogant brats?” he asked through clenched teeth, his eyes narrowed on me and I grinned widely, laughter spilling from my lips.

“Because nobody is supposed to be our equal,” I corrected joyously. “But you.” I grabbed his face again and his scowl softened only marginally. “You, Mackenzie. You, I’ll kneel for.”

“Don’t you dare,” he whispered.

I dared. I felt the seawater soak through the knees of my trousers and then, seconds later, into my boots pressed against the ground, too. The crowd went deadly silent so that nothing but the gulls could be heard, calling overhead, darting around the sails of ships that littered the harbor.

Mack was as red as my father’s sigil from neck to ears and he pressed one arm over his eyes like if he couldn’t see the crowd that watched us, they couldn’t see him. “Get up,” he implored. “You shouldn’t kneel for anyone, Atara, least of all me.”

I wanted to say I’d kneeled for him before--that he’d held my face and fucked my throat and that I loved being on my knees for him.

That was different. It was sex. He was good at sex, he would have said. He wasn’t good at this. “You’re the only person that I think is worthy of it,” I insisted, looking up at him, outlined by the fading sky. “And I don’t care who knows. This is what you mean to me and if I spend the rest of my life proving it to you…” I lifted my shoulders and he grabbed my arm, trying to tug and pull me back into a standing position but I was adamant, like a two-year-old refusing to be lifted. “Then so be it. I’ll enjoy every damn second of it.”

“Get Up.” He was begging by then and I remained, as stubborn as the men in my family were known to be, determined to get him to see, to understand--he was more important than family mottos, sigils, and crowns. He was more than warm meat.

He meant everything to me.

“Okay!” he finally relented, throwing his hands up in defeat and turning around so that he was
staring out at the docks for a second before he turned back toward me. “Fine. Fine. You win. I love you. I love you! Is that what you want from me?”

“Say my name.”

Mack stared. Everyone stared, admittedly, but Mack meant the most and his face softened. The glare melted away and so did the frustration. “Atara,” he obeyed. “Tiny. Little prince. Darlin’.”

I was regal with my victory, positively glowing from it, and the grin that crossed my features was wide and genuine. “I love you, too,” I answered back and when he grabbed my arm again, I let him haul me to my feet and he squeezed me, arms around my torso so tight that the bones in my spine popped under the pressure.

“You are out of your fucking mind,” he breathed against my ear and then, softer, he added. “Thank you.”

I pressed my lips to his cheek, just in front of his ear, before I answered. “You’re worth it,” I promised. “Someday you’ll believe me.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Porn, glorious porn!~

I'm making little playlists for each character. Is that something you guys are interested in seeing?

If the Corians hated Tristan Brighton, I didn’t have a word for what the Lierian elders thought of him. For the most part, he’d avoided them since his arrival in Coryth and had only accompanied me to this particular meeting because I hadn’t felt well all morning. A low grade fever had settled into my bones and flushed my cheeks, making me sticky with sweat. A gnawing sensation grew in my abdomen, something almost like hunger but not quite as painful. Mack had made me a tea with ginger in hopes of it quieting what I could only describe as a stomach ache but it had done precious little to really soothe anything.

I twisted in my chair, squirming and uncomfortable. They’d shouted at me a little bit, Kinnon included—about Ilyia and how much power I’d given them, but they stayed on one end of the table...far, far away from where I sat with Tristan’s arm over the back of my chair. Occasionally, his fingers pressed into the back of my neck, cold as ice, and I’d clench my hands on top of the piles of parchment that sat in front of me.

“They’re not a real tribe,” Cadmus pointed out, shooting Ilyia a surprised look when she scowled in his direction. “I don’t mean it as a slight! I only mean that you don’t honor the same things that we do. You do not have the same values. You do not believe the same things!”

“Like what?” she spat in response. “That the Infinito line is ours to do with as we please? That we should be allowed to breed them like hunting bitches instead of people?”

Cadmus rolled his eyes. He was young for an elder, barely older than Emory, but he had a daughter and the ability to produce female children gave Lierians status within their tribal units. He lived on the great plains between Eden and Southwatch, a swath of savannah populated by massive, four-legged beasts with tusks that protruded from their faces and a prehensile trunk. Riordan called them elephants, but I had never seen one. He’d once told me they also had long-necked horses called giraffes.

I believed the elephants were real, if only because I knew that elephants were where ivory came from, but long-necked horses were stretching it. Clearly, I was excellent at paying attention during these meetings.

The young leader finally answered with an exasperated drawl. “More like we should keep our
customs separate from the customs of Corians.” He was trying very hard not to reach across the table and slap Ilyia. I could tell. I liked Cadmus. He’d been more supportive of my decision than Nil and Ori, who had replaced Hiram and Beras when I’d thrown them from the Keep. They’d been unusually quiet that day, but they’d made sure to voice their displeasure with me privately the day before, claiming that I’d regret embracing such a liberal point of view. Their disgust and their concern spawned from simple hatred. Cadmus, at least, had valid reasons.

“Our birth rate has been dropping for years,” he reminded all of us. “Our boys outnumber our girls six to one now and are seeking companionship from human women. Obviously, I have no qualms with halflings.” He looked pointedly at me and I gestured for him to continue, though I knew he was making a show of saying that because he was terrified of the man standing behind me and of Mack, who was leaning against the door to the room. “But those children are often raised in Corian villages and Corian cities. They are losing their culture and we are losing them. Inducting a tribe comprised of Lierians and part-Lierians who don’t even know what markings signify which tribe? We might as well start calling Fox our king.”

Kinnon crossed his arms and then lifted one hand to pinch the bridge of his nose in exasperation. He, too, had concerns, though he had voiced them with Cyril already and they’d been colorfully relayed to me. “I have no issue with Ilyia or her people, but they are now represented by both you, Lord Infinito, and your father. If one of them commits a crime, who will mete out punishment? Who do they pay tribute to? And how? Will it be in goods and services to the tribes or in gold to the Crown? Will it be both?”

Ilyia snorted in disgust and I hesitated. I truly hadn’t thought it all through very well and I shifted again, grimacing at the blossoming, bruised feeling that rippled in my abdomen. “My father and I will discuss it, Kinnon,” I replied carefully. “We’ll find a way to appease both sides. Our ultimate goal has always been peaceful coexistence. We should not be sharing a country with the Corians when we know nothing about each other.”

“We should not be sharing a country with them at all,” Nil hissed, teeth clenched and eyes narrowed. “They’re Immaran invaders at their core. This was our home first.”

Behind me, Tristan heaved a sigh and then leaned down. “That is categorically untrue,” he whispered. “They were Immaran, just as the Corians were Immaran. It hardly matters now. Savages, mongrels, and horse lords, the lot of you. This whole country smells of dirt and stagnant water.” He was kidding. I knew he was. Insults were Tristan’s brand of humor.

I did not change the expression on my face, but I drummed my fingers against the table. It was a matter of debate in Coria. The Lierians were frequently referred to as ‘the natives’ but nobody was actually sure if they’d been here before the Corians or not. They were so reclusive that there were entire decades of time during which not a single instance of them was recorded in any of the archives in the Keep.

“Is there anything else any of you want to address before I leave?” I eventually asked. Nil and Ori both scowled, whispering furtively to each other. Cadmus and Ilyia were speaking civilly, but they both looked up to shake their heads, and Kinnon clapped Pyrin on the back before the two of them walked away. The others followed shortly after, Nil casting me one last withering glance down his hawkish nose before the door clamped shut behind them.

Tristan pressed a hand to my forehead. “Still warm,” he pointed out, clicking his tongue. “Perhaps it’s something you simply have to suffer through. A nasty cold or something.”

“Wouldn’t a cold hurt my lungs, not my stomach? And it’s not even pain. It’s just…” I lifted my shoulders and the alchemist did the same in response.
“I suggest a cold bath and some sleep,” he finally offered. “I’m not all-powerful, Atara. I can’t just wiggle my fingers and poof, everything’s fine. Maybe in a few centuries.”

Mack made a noise, something akin to disbelief and horror. On my request, he was attempting to be more civil with Tristan, but the idea of someone that could live for centuries without aging still bothered him. He did not draw close, either, because there was a distinct lack of trust there. It was unfortunate, I thought. They were both healers. They probably had so much to talk about, but Tristan refused to force his company on Mackenzie and Mackenzie refused to give Tristan much more than the barest little bit of leeway.

The alchemist tipped my head back and wrinkled his nose when he looked at my eyes. “You look healthy. I’ve found nothing wrong with you all morning.”

“Have you heard from Ridley?” I changed the subject and he shot me a glare.

“No,” he answered shortly. “I know that he reached Paikea, but all correspondence out of Paikea is subject to the scrutiny of the Sons of the Serpent. Even if he could write to me, he couldn’t tell me much more than, ‘Not dead yet!’ Maybe he’d draw a smile face on it. He does that sometimes.”

I knew that. Since my first visit to Tristan for an effective contraceptive, I’d visited several more times to quiz him about his life, his memory crystal, Ridley, and what it took to become an alchemist. For the most part, he was forthcoming, except on the last little bit of information I so desperately wanted to know. He could not, he claimed, tell me what it took to become an alchemist because he’d signed his name in something very originally called ‘The Book of Names.’ He was, therefore, sworn to secrecy and only someone much, much more powerful than him could overrule the magic bound up in that text in order to relay the information to someone mundane.

I’d seen Ridley’s letters to him then, all of them stacked neatly on the table next to his bed, all of them worn on the edges like he’d read them a thousand times, and so I knew that Ridley drew a happy face at the end of each of them. It was endearing and, despite having never met Tristan’s dearest companion, I felt, somehow, like I knew him.

The alchemist flashed me a predatory looking grin, likely to further irritate Mack, and then he strode from the room when I climbed, exhausted, to my feet to follow him. He would turn to the left and return to his quarters—to his books and his bottles and his bizarre magic—and I would turn right toward the apartments where I intended to curl up in bed until Mack’s rotation changed, at which point I knew he would join me. He hadn’t left my side since that day outside of his flat, except to get an earful from my father about shirking his responsibility.

I still felt warm as we walked, almost itching around my collar, panting to get enough air in and I pulled at my clothes.

Mack put a hand out on my head and made a face. He smelled of ginger and honey and something...definitely different. Soap, maybe, scented with cedar or bergamot. I wanted to lean in and breathe, try to figure it out, seek out the source against his skin, but he drew back when I leaned forward, a sharp hiss sucked in through his teeth. He recoiled from me like I’d burned him, a shudder running down his spine, more convulsion than anything else, and he bit out a sharp, “Son of a bitch.”

I sank against the closest wall, just fifteen feet or so from the door to the apartments, a thin sheen of sweat on my face, my clothes sticking to me. “Don’t look at me like that,” I whined pathetically. “It’s not like I have some plague or something. Nobody else has been sick, have they?”

Mackenzie leaned away from me and I could see him actively attempting to breathe through his mouth. “You’re in heat,” he practically snarled. “I can smell it on you. Practically taste it and I...”
He grabbed his arms and took another step back, but I knew the drive. I'd always known this would happen and, since the beach, I'd been dreading it. It was like chumming the water for them. To me, smelling it on Emory or Cyril was always cloyingly sweet, like tea with too much sugar or a mouthful of melted chocolate too thick to swallow.

It was not like that to other Lierians.

Something snapped in him a moment later and he lunged for me, pinning me between him and the wall. He buried his face in my throat and I moaned audibly, suddenly acutely aware of the warmth in my stomach and the hollow, vacant feeling that called for him. His touch, his kisses, the feel of his skin. I knew what would sate the fever and so I yearned for it, ached for it. When his knee slid between mine, my legs parted willingly for him and a logical, rational part of me warned that this wasn't actually what I wanted. This was a biological drive. I had no desire to be fucked stupid in public against the wall of what equated to my parents' house.

But Gods, I wanted it so bad that it manifested in a physical pain. "Mackenzie," I whimpered his name while his lips moved over my throat and my fingers tangled in his hair. I heard footsteps and thought nothing of it. My hands traveled down his back and up his shirt, over the ridges of his spine and his ribs. My hips rolled involuntarily and his fingers dug into them, urging me forward--harder, faster--I could feel him through his trousers and I knew what we looked like, rutting against the wall like animals but I didn't care. I couldn't care. Emory had described being in heat to me a dozen times as lust so focused that it became a blade and he was exactly right.

It was a blade that I utilized on myself, a motivating force, an implement that caused agony until I satisfied the urge that it drove and what I wanted, more than anything--more than oxygen--was Mackenzie Glenning. I mewled and whimpered, ignorant of footsteps drawing closer. "Please," I whispered the word. "Please, Mack, Gods, I need it so bad."

"Atara," his voice was like gravel against my ear and warm, ginger scented breath caressed the side of my neck while he held me.

And then he was gone. I heard his breath leave his body when his back hit the wall beside me and my brother's face, red and livid swam to life in front of my blurred vision. One of his throwing axes was up to Mack's throat and his fingers were fisted in his shirt. "Give me one good reason," he snarled. "Why I shouldn't take your fucking head."

It wasn't really Emory. I knew that. I knew it. My brother liked Mackenzie. He trusted him implicitly. This was just...too much. It was the smell, the situation, the sound of the sea in the windows and I couldn't imagine the sort of horrors that brought back for Emory. I didn't want to know what it had felt like to no longer be in possession of your own body. Mack knew though. I suppose, in retrospect, that was why he never reached for the cutlass he carried.

"Emory!" I shouted, spurred to action by the sudden loss of body heat and the horrifying fear that he might actually kill him. His face was devoid of emotion. His eyes were blank, deep and though they were light in color, they were dark. They were hollow, emotionless, voids that should have been windows to my brother's soul but they held nothing that betrayed any evidence of Emory. "Stop it. Let him go. Emory, let him go! He didn't hurt me!"

"I can smell it on you," my brother snapped. He was so gone. I couldn't see any recognition in his face, just that raw, unbridled desire to hurt someone that he thought was hurting me and I understood it. I hurt for Emory. My heart was still in pieces over the hell that he was living in on a daily basis but Mack hadn't hurt me. Maybe, in some ways, we'd needed Emory to step in and separate us but he didn't deserve this. "He would have hurt you. Look at me, Atara! Look at what I am! Is that what you want?" He mirrored my father's words from weeks ago and gods, I would
have given the very breath in my lungs to fix the way he felt in that moment, but if the gods hadn’t stopped them from ripping him open the way that they had, they certainly wouldn’t intervene to fix him now.

“Emory,” Mack breathed. A thin trickle of blood slid down his throat from the edge of Emory’s weapon and my stomach lurched. For a moment, I thought I might vomit. I didn’t want to have to pull rank on Emory. I didn’t want to have to order someone to remove him because I knew, without a doubt, that someone putting their hands on him right now was the last thing that he needed. There were more footsteps and I silently prayed that it was our parents. “Hey, boss...can I call you that? Listen, I get why you’re upset and you’re right, I was absolutely out of line but I wasn’t going to hurt him. Okay? He never told me to stop. If he told me to stop, I would have stopped.”

I swallowed hard. Emory’s expression remained stone-set and unchanged. “Emmy,” I pleaded. “Please, please. Put the axe down. We can talk about this. I don’t want to do this to you.” In response, however, he pressed it harder and Mack flinched.

“Atara,” the halfling healer warned and I made a strangled, desperate noise before turning to the closest guard, to Blue, just as Nikita came around the corner, flanked by both of my parents.

“Lheiro!” I cried for him and I must have sounded as pathetic and helpless as I felt because he jerked his attention from Nikita and his eyes widened at the sight. I pressed my hand over my mouth and the sobbing started, uncontrollable and terrified. I was hot, sweat-soaked and panicked and the blood on Mack’s throat was growing darker and more prominent by the second. I rushed them, colliding with Cyril, whose arms closed around me and he inhaled. I felt him stiffen at the smell.

"Are you hurt?” he asked gravely.

“No!” I turned argumentative almost immediately. I didn’t want to hurt Emory. I didn’t want to have to press a blade to his throat the way that he was doing to Mack, but I didn’t think I’d survive it if he opened his throat right there.

This was exactly the reason Mackenzie had walked away in the first place. This was the reason Emory needed to be away...because usually he was fine. He wasn’t the same person he’d been before, but he functioned enough to get by and little pieces of his personality had started to shine through like light bleeding into a dirty window. Sometimes, though...sometimes he was this. Sometimes he was unreachable, a lonely little island of self-contained loathing so concentrated that it was poison.

I repeated myself, my fingers tight in Cyril’s clothes. “He didn’t hurt me. He kissed me. That’s all. I can’t...I can’t...”

I couldn’t lose Mack. There was a part of me that called to him on a level I was too young to understand but I was ready to get on my knees and beg my brother to spare him. I wiped furiously at my face, choking on every breath I tried to draw but it was Nikita that acted. The rest of us were frozen, torn between trying to help and too afraid to do anything for fear of being the final straw that pushed Emory over the edge.

I heard the bow string snap and Nikita took aim just as my brother’s axe came back for the final blow. It happened as if someone had slowed the world down for me--like I was underwater and everything was caught in the weightlessness of it. Nikita’s white fletched arrow was loosed before Fox could grab his arm and it sailed, a gray blur in a perfectly aligned line that sliced across Emory’s dominant hand. I saw his palm turn slick and red and I heard him yelp, though it wasn’t even a deep injury. The axe clattered against the marble and Nikita cocked his head.
Blue moved for him like he aimed to put the Rider in shackles before Cyril’s hand came up to stop the motion.

Nikita’s attention remained focused solely on Emory.

Emory, who was cradling his hand and looking horrified. He stared at the axe and then at Mack, who sank heavily to the floor before my legs urged me forward and I scrambled for him, clawing at his clothes and tipping his head back to examine the cut along his throat. It was superficial but my fingers came back red and my world became bathed in it. I was livid and though I pressed a thousand tiny kisses to Mack's face and to the injury, staining my mouth crimson, my mind was elsewhere. Nikita and Fox were scolding Emory, Cyril was standing near me, ready to peel me off of Mack if he had to, but I got to my feet and he stayed on the ground, face grey with surprise and nausea, and I rounded on my brother.

My fists collided with his chest, driving him backward. "Are you out of your fucking mind?" I shrieked at him and hit him again before Nikita hauled me back and Fox got between the two of us. "He saved your life, Emory! I saved your life. And you're ready to kill him and what? Ruin me? He's--he's important to me! Get your shit together, for fuck's sake! I wanted him to touch me--I feel...I feel--" I rubbed my hands down my stomach to where it felt like someone had hollowed me out and replaced my insides with a fire pit. My nails dug into my clothes and I doubled over pathetically. The marks on my body felt like they were blistering. I could feel the lines down my chest and the one across my face like they were fresh brands. The tears stung even more where they rolled over the blue pigmentation.

"He's in heat," Cyril whispered quietly toward my father and Fox's eyes, confused at first, cleared with realization over my emotional state. "Atara, baby, come on. We need to get you into bed and cooled off. The first is always the hardest."

Emory looked devastated by my tirade and Mack got shakily to his feet. "I should...I should go," he managed to say stiffly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Fox argued. "Come on. We'll get your face cleaned up and pour you a hard drink. Blue--" My silent companion looked up earnestly, always ready to serve. "Please go down to the barracks and make sure Mackenzie is relieved for a few days."

Cyril nodded to the door and Fox let go of Emory but Nikita's arm went around him as quickly as my father's left and, much to my surprise, Emory didn't shrink away from the touch. He melted into it. "You shot me!" he groaned pathetically.

"You tried to behead one of the guards," Nikita pointed out, his tone almost sympathetic while he patted Emory's arm. "And it's not even going to need stitches. Don't be such a baby, kitten." He wrinkled his nose when he looked up at Emory and my brother's pout was quickly kissed away. It was the first time I'd ever seen Nikita kiss him. I'd known, of course, that they were sleeping together, a fervent and explosive secret.

I kept my distance, as far from everyone else as I could be, curled into a corner on the piano bench with my back against the wall and my legs tight to my chest. True to Nikita's words, the injury did not require stitches and Emory didn't shrink away from the touch. He melted into it. "You shot me!" he groaned pathetically.

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I kept my distance, as far from everyone else as I could be, curled into a corner on the piano bench with my back against the wall and my legs tight to my chest. True to Nikita's words, the injury did not require stitches and Emory babbled apology after apology to Mack, who insisted that it was fine. He understood. I, however, did not, and when Emory tentatively made his way toward me, I shot him a scowl. "Don't talk to me," I hissed and he wilted, shrinking back like I might slap him or something. Maybe it was petulant of me. Maybe it was because I was in a hyped up state because of the heat. I was sweating and sticky and I refused to let Cyril help me. I was content in my misery. I wanted to feel it, to stew in it, to remain angry for as long as I could because angry meant that I wasn't sobbing or begging for someone to mount me.
Truthfully, going into heat terrified me. I remembered Emory's first heat and how he'd wailed like he was in pain. Cyril had tried to explain that it wasn’t pain, not exactly. It was difficult to really describe. It was an emptiness. A hollow sort of feeling in the belly that spread outward with a licking, flaming, tongue. It scorched me from the inside out in the most unbearably erotic way possible. It made me feel out of control, feral, more animal than sentient being— I wanted to claw myself out of my clothes, get on all fours, and let Mack have his filthy way with me if it stopped what I was feeling. I didn't even care who saw. The only thing that kept me from it was the knowledge that when all of this was over, I might regret it.

Cyril was speaking quietly with Mack, who had bandaged the wound at his neck with a thin strip of linen. I couldn’t hear them but, judging by the way that they were glancing at me, I understood that I was the subject of what they were discussing. Across the room, Fox was deep in discussion with Emory and even though my brother was taller than Nikita, who stood right beside him, he looked smaller. He looked contrite and apologetic and I almost felt bad for being angry with him. Then I remembered that he’d tried to take Mack's head off and I was angry all over again. I glared when he dared to look at me and, eventually, he stopped and followed Fox toward the back of the suite.

Mack made his way toward me carefully and I could tell he was doing it more for himself than for me, though I was certain he wasn’t entirely thrilled with the idea of approaching me given the fact that I was staring daggers at everyone in the room. I tried not to do it to him. When I looked behind him, Cyril was gone and I realized we were alone. The idea, for some reason, relaxed me, and I tried to focus my thoughts on anything but sex, despite the faint, masculine smell that I picked up off of his skin, which reminded me of nothing but that night I’d spent in his bed and how being surrounded by him and his things in his place had felt so monumentally important to me.

"Cyril says if I'm to be near you for any undetermined amount of time in the future, then I have to get used to this," he said despondently when he finally reached me. He sat down on the bench beside me and I shrank against the wall. "He also said it helps to have someone that you care for with you. He said it makes it easier to bear."

"It seems he said a lot," I answered flatly. "How is your neck?"

Mack shrugged. "Shallow. Stings a bit, but it'll pass. How are you?"

"Angry. Upset. Turned on. Violent. I want to rip my brother's fucking throat out. I growled the last bit and let my legs slide off the bench so that I could clench my hands into fists. "I want to hurt something. I'm terrified, Mackenzie. I'm so, so scared." My words turned to whimpers and I buried my face in my hands until I felt his arm over my shoulders. He was still stiff, breathing through his mouth to avoid smelling me, but he was trying and that meant more than I could explain. "I saw what they did to Em. They were so out of control because of it. Like animals ripping into a carcass and no matter how much I begged, they wouldn’t stopped. They couldn’t."

“They could,” he corrected me sharply. “Because I did. I’m sitting here right now with you and having a conversation without trying to mount you like a dog. They chose to hurt your brother. They did not have to and they had no right to him.”

I didn’t answer and he fell quiet for a long time. Minutes that felt like hours passed and then he got steadily to his feet, pulling me along with him to my bedroom. The door clicked shut behind him and I whimpered, launching myself forward in an attempt to be closer to him. "No,” Mack ordered and caught me by my shoulders, holding me at arm’s length. "You're too worked up and too hot right now. I'm saying this as your healer. Clothes. Off. Now. And keep on that side of the room until I get used to the way you smell. It's going to take me a few minutes in such a closed space."

I made short work of stripping and climbing quickly into the sheets. Modesty was a thing of the past.
between us. Gods, the man had sucked on parts of me I had trouble even vocalizing the names of, but being naked when he was so obviously trying to be good for me seemed unfair to him. I pulled the sheet up to my ribs and Mack sat down beside me with a cold cloth to mop up the sweat on my face. "Nobody is going to hurt you the way they hurt Emory," he assured me quietly and I sank deeper into my pillows. "I wouldn't allow it and you're not reckless enough to go running around the city during a heat. I'm not saying it was his fault. It absolutely was not, but there are horrible people out there and you...you don’t smell it like I smell it."

"What's it like?" I wondered out loud, licking my lips while he finished mopping up my face. He took a deep breath--through his nose--and shivered, but when his eyes opened, he was still there and so he climbed over me, settling next to me on top of the sheet so that I could cuddle into his side and use his chest as a pillow.

Mack sighed, his fingers stroking lazily through my hair. "It's like...for a second, I forgot who I was. I forgot who you were. It was all about this animal urge to just pin you down and take what I wanted. I didn't...I didn't care that it would hurt you, though, I suppose it wouldn't have. Not really. You wanted it, too. Emory didn't. That was the difference. He fought. You weren't fighting me."

"I know you," I pointed out. "I love you. It's not the first time you’ve pinned me to a wall, either."

He chuckled and fussled with my hair, running his fingers through it absentely and I practically purred at the touch. “Pinned to a wall and well-fucked are two of my favorite looks on you,” he admitted.

I thumped his chest and he laughed. "Prick," I grumbled, but I snuggled tighter against him, listening to his heartbeat and his breathing. "You scared me today." It took me a lot to admit that and Mack licked his lips above me, his fingers coming up to my cheek so that he could tilt my face up again and kiss me. It was all it took to wake that hunger again and I hauled myself up to straddle his lap, my hands cupping his jaw.

I felt his teeth on my lower lip and his tongue prying my mouth open while his hands skated down my ribs to my backside. He pulled me tight to him and my hips rolled. He groaned into my mouth.

Maybe it was the fact that I was in heat that made me disregard the fact that my parents were in the suite and maybe that was what did it for him too. I don't know, but a moment later, he had me flipped over and was on his feet. "Let me tie you down," he whispered against my ear and I shivered. The words went straight to that hollow place in my belly where I ached for contact.

I’d have done anything he wanted in that moment. “Gods, yes,” I agreed emphatically and Mack was up, moving to the dresser and returning with two belts. He lifted my hands and carefully, with delicate motions, secured them to the headboard.

“Move around. Tell me if it hurts.” I obeyed, twisting my hands and flexing my wrists. He loosened them once when I winced and I repeated the motion for him until nothing pulled or pinched. He was good to me, I thought. He considered me, even when we were playing this game he’d been promising to play with me since the very beginning of our relationship.

It wasn’t about him, I realized. I’d believed, when he’d first told me that he wanted to tie me down, that it was about control for him and he’d allowed me to believe that, but it wasn’t control at all. It was trust. I trusted him to do this. That was what he’d wanted.

I should have panicked, though. Seeing what I’d seen with Emory, knowing what I knew--but I trusted Mack and I let him bind my hands up to the headboard and lock the door, not that I worried about anyone coming in. During a heat was about the only time I knew my parents wouldn’t say anything. Cyril understood the torment of it, the need to have someone close to satisfy that need, and
I was so incredibly grateful for that then. I was panting, slick with sweat, pulling at the belts already while Mack circled the bed, his fingers skimming my skin with feather light touches that made me whine and twist in the sheets. "You're pretty as a picture, Atara," he drawled. "I might have to draw you like this someday."

My breath hitched as he settled at the bottom of the bed and began to climb leisurely up the length of my body. He parted my legs and kissed along each of them. Each spot burned with his presence and I squirmed, eyes wide. He reached my hips and sucked each one, kissed along my ribs and licked the burning lines beneath my skin. I moaned quietly, trying desperately to control the noises I was making so that nobody else heard me but him. I was hard and hot, near tears with a need that he seemed content to tease instead of fulfill.

Mack peeled his shirt off when he reached my chest and licked each of my nipples, sucking them gently with his hand splayed between my hips to keep me from thrashing too much, though I tried valiantly. My back arched and I hissed until he moved to my throat and then finally my mouth for slow, hot kisses while he straddled me. I tried to roll my hips but his weight was displaced across them and I couldn't garner any friction. I wanted to touch him and I realized too late that he'd restrained me. I would not be able to trace the muscles of his abdomen with my tongue and my fingers.

He grinned like he knew exactly what I was thinking and I glared. "You did this on purpose," I spat.

"I did," he admitted. "See, after that stunt in the street and your proclamation that nobody ever tells you no, I made a decision." He leaned forward and licked a line up the center of my mouth. "I'm going to teach you all about denial. Starting with touch, you brat." He used the word like it was endearing and licked the tip of my nose at it before sliding back down my body and pushing my legs up.

I held my breath, waiting for the warmth of his mouth on my cock again but he just blew on me and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. I made a tiny, mewling noise of protest and he pushed my legs further up, spreading me open. I felt his lips along the cleft of my backside and then his tongue--his beautiful, gifted, incredible tongue--against my soaked hole. I nearly howled at it, thrashing above him, back arched in both surprise and complete, bone-melting pleasure. "Oh fuck," I managed to whisper breathlessly when my urge to scream died out. Mack was looking up at me with a smile in his eyes while his tongue slid into me and I saw stars. "Oh Gods, Mackenzie, please, please!" I wasn't sure what I was begging for but he spread my legs wider to give it to me while I twisted and panted, pulling on the belts, my eyes rolling and my hips bucking toward him. Nothing he did to me ever compared to this. Nothing ever made me scream the way that this made me scream.

My heart was pounding right out of my chest, I could barely get air in and I didn't care, I was hot--blistering, painfully hot--keening and mewling quietly, whispering his real name like it was a plea. "Gods, I love that," he breathed eventually, moving back to lick up the length of my cock where it wept against my belly. I looked up at him, dazed and shuddering, and he kissed my forehead. "The way you use my name. Mackenzie. Anyone else calls me that, I knock their fucking teeth out but you...you're fucking incredible." He nuzzled into my throat and squirmed free of his trousers. One of his hands slipped between my legs and two fingers slid into me.

I cried into his mouth when he kissed me, both at the discomfort of the intrusion and the knowledge that he was inside me and I wanted this. I wanted it so badly that I could say, without a doubt, that I wouldn't regret this when the heat was over. He was gorgeous--rough around the edges, a bit too cocky, common, and so, so dark, but he was mine. He cared. I could feel it in the way he moved his
fingers inside me, slowly opening me up until the discomfort gave way to pleasure and I was wriggling against his hand, trying to roll my hips down for more while he scissored his fingers inside me. "More," I finally whimpered. "Mackenzie, more!"

"Shh," he shushed me with kisses and inhaled, the cloying, sweet smell that the heat put off though I wasn't sure that was how it smelt to him. That was how it smelted to me when I noticed it on Emory or Cyril. "Slow, darlin'. I like it when you beg, but it's been a week and I don't fancy splitting you open."

He kept at it for what felt like ages, taking me right to that edge before he stopped and let me sink again. Then he took me back up and repeated the process until he had to hold his hand over my mouth to keep me from screaming for it. My legs were stiff and aching, my back was in a near constant arch, I was angry with him for teasing me and turned on by his touch. I wasn't sure which I was more of, only that I wanted him to fuck me. I wanted it so badly that the moment his hand left my mouth, I begged the way that he said he liked. "Please," I breathed. "Please, Mack, please, I need you so bad. I need you! Fuck me, Mackenzie. Now!"

His eyes darkened and he shifted, hooking my legs up around his hips. I looked down at him, at what he was about to slide inside me, and felt my body shudder with anticipation. "You tell me to stop if you want to stop," he urged me. "Atara. Answer me. You will tell me to stop if you want me to stop. Say it. I need to know you're okay with this right now." I knew what he meant. That we were okay with this. That this was real consent.

He was precious.

"I'll tell you to stop if I want you to stop," I repeated quietly, nodding vehemently, ready to agree to anything to get what I wanted. I was flushed and hot and I could see his skin shine with a thin sheen of sweat. He grabbed my hips and positioned himself and I swallowed hard, biting down my bottom lip. He slid in one inch at a time, slowly and carefully, while I held my breath and adjusted to the sensation. It was a burning, stretching ache that swept up to the base of my spine and when he was fully seated, I let my breath out, trembling beneath him, and he kissed me. It was quick at first, just a few pecks against my mouth to assure me and then it was slow and needy. He felt bigger inside me than he'd looked and while it wasn't uncomfortable, it wasn't entirely what I wanted just yet. Not until he shifted his weight and brushed that spot inside me that he so loved to make me squeal with.

"Fuck," he hissed the word and I glowed at the way his hands dug into my hips, forcing me down against him harder. I had done this to him, made him this way--he wanted me. The heat in my stomach coiled, tight and hurtling toward a finish while he drove into me. He hadn't even touched me. "You are not gonna last, darlin'." He was absolutely right. I was too strung out. Too hot. Too needy. At least, I thought, I wouldn't reach the stage of this where I begged him to pin me down.

My eyes rolled and my body clenched around him. I pulled on the belts until the headboard creaked behind me and my body convulsed through a climax that blackened my vision and I must have screamed or opened my mouth to because he was kissing me and filling me up, hot and stinging
while he shuddered above me. He drove into me through every shudder of my body, hit that spot until I was trying to kick my way up the bed to stop him. I was over-stimulated and nearly delirious. I wanted him inside me, moving, fucking--and I wanted him away. I wanted to breathe and calm down. In the end, I gave in to the heat and I was rutting against him in the sheets, sticky and sweat soaked and panting his name into his mouth.

Mack eased out of me slowly and reached up, loosening the belts from my wrists but my arms stayed above my head, limp and unmoving until he used my discarded shirt to mop us up. He gathered me up, rolling me so that I was laying face down on his chest with my head tucked under his chin. "Atara?" He had my wrists in his hands, gently rubbing life back into the flesh where the imprints of belts were visible, red and bruised in my skin.

"Mmm," I hummed, sated, tired, and boneless.

"Are you alright?"

I took the opportunity--and the regained ability to use my arms--to run my hands over his chest and kiss him where his heart was beating. His breath hitched and his cheeks colored while he looked down at me. "I'm tired," I complained quietly and nuzzled into him. "And a bit sore but it's a good sore. I like it."

"You didn't mind the...uh...the tying bit?"

“Kinda liked it, actually,” I admitted with a lazy, sleepy grin. “I mean, I love touching you, but being totally at your mercy?” I wriggled upward so that I could lick the shell of his ear when I spoke. “That’s hot, too.”

Mack snorted. “Lecher,” he ribbed, releasing my arms to run his hands down my back. “You were not at my mercy and you damn well know it. Go to sleep.”

“Or what?”

He looked down at me, eyebrow arched. “What do you mean, ‘or what?’”

My grin widened, still exhausted but close to predatory. “Just curious. What other kinks do you have in that pretty head of yours?”

Mackenzie’s eyes rolled and he pushed my face away, palm against my cheek, until I was giggling against him and he was calling me a lecher again. “You have no idea, you filthy little brat,” he taunted. “And I’m not telling you. Not until you fucking sleep.” He swatted me on the ass then and I yelped, settling a moment later into his side.

He’d tell me. Eventually.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warnings: Gore. Abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The political turmoil did not stop and neither did the tension between me and my brother. I suppose I didn't actually expect it to, with the run of luck I'd been having since I'd taken over Cyril's role as Infinito, but I'd been hopeful. I was starting to see the world the way I had before—with little touches of extra color, extra texture, a little dose of magic in the fabric of existence. I attributed that to one Mackenzie Glenning and his presence in my life. When I ached, he was always ready with a bright smile and a joke or an offer to make me forget for awhile. Even when everything seemed ugly, I could always count on the physical with him—on losing myself in his kisses and his touch for a little while.

Nothing was ever completely serious with Mack. Everything came packaged with humor, despite how dark he really was. He brightened my worst days with his easy going, laid back nature and his rational way of looking at things. Emotions didn't sway Mackenzie Glenning. He could separate himself entirely from them and look at the world like he was an outsider, watching us through the frosted glass of a window. Why nobody had ever seen him for the intelligent, logic-based creature that he was, I didn't understand. Perhaps because he was a halfling and so typically looked over and brushed off as being inferior or perhaps because the fact that his father was a whore wasn't entirely a secret. He offered me perspective that I wouldn't have normally had. His outlook was refreshing and crisp.

And I loved him. I loved the way he felt cradled between my legs at night and the shape he took when he stood in front of the window in the dark—just a vague silhouette of an all too familiar body. I loved the way his skin smelled and how his clothes fit, the way he laughed long and easy, and how he used every excuse available to touch me. He ran his fingers through my hair, tugged on the loose strands that fell from behind my ears, pinched my hips, swatted my backside, draped his arm over my shoulders, or sat in my chair at my desk so that I had no choice but to sit in his lap while I worked or stay standing, which put too much pressure on my bad leg. He took care of me when my parents were busy with the destructive force that was my older brother. Mack was almost maternal, in his own way...when he wasn't tying me down to my bed and lifting my hips so he could slide into me.

He was all the support I had then, in the time after the ruination of Emory. He was all I really needed—his dry, logical, cynicism laced with humor was the balance to my eternal optimism. I never let on when I worried. I preferred to lie to myself about it so even though I knew that the problems wouldn't stop, the issues wouldn't stop, I pretended that they would.
I kept right on pretending until it became impossible to ignore.

On a rainy, humid morning in the middle of the week, Mack was shaking me awake with more urgency than he usually did, early riser that he was. It was a side-effect of living in the barracks through the week, he said. "Wake up, darlin'," he breathed against the side of my face, his hands on my shoulders. I was still face down, my hips propped up by a pillow. We couldn't have fallen asleep more than two or three hours before. It was too early. The light of predawn barely peeked over the horizon, watery and gray, and I grumbled. My arms were sore. The bastard had gone and bought proper restraints, but I always pulled on them when I was close. My muscles felt strained and overused. I hadn't slept nearly enough. My thighs were sticky and I had a bite mark on my shoulder that throbbed beneath his hand.

"Gods, what the fuck," I moaned, rubbing at my face only to find that I was still actually tied up. No wonder I hurt. I'd fallen asleep still trussed up to the bed and he'd probably fallen asleep on top of me. It wasn't the first time, but Mack usually woke up shortly afterward, untied me, cleaned me up, and tucked me back into bed before he took his leave. He'd been avoiding Emory since the incident two weeks before, not that anyone could blame him. I'd been avoiding Emory, too. The fact that he was still there was just more evidence that I hadn't been asleep long at all.

I heard Mack swear in the dark and then there was a clinking of metal as he scrambled to release my arms. The inside of the restraints were lined in smooth, plush velvet. My wrists didn't ache nearly as much as my shoulders and elbows did and I flexed my arms, whining incoherently into my pillow. I wasn't awake yet. As far as I was concerned, this was him untying me and tucking me back into bed while he called me cupcake like the asshole that he was. Fucking *darlin',* my ass. "Go back to sleep, Mackenzie," I moaned. "I don't care about getting cleaned up. I'll deal with the sticky later." I buried my face back into my mountains of pillows and felt him swat my backside. I yelped and lifted my head enough to glare at him, not that he could see. I wasn't even sure if I was glaring at him or just in the general direction I thought he was standing in.

"There is a body in the courtyard," he hissed back at me. "*Get up!*"

That had my attention and I sat up. Mackenzie moved around the room, lighting lamps so that I could see him. He was dressed only his trousers and looking around for the shirt that was on my floor somewhere. I scrambled from my bed, alarmed and wide-eyed. It took a second for me to completely shake sleep and become totally coherent, but I managed to clean up the mess on the inside of my legs and stumble into some clothes. I could hear, outside my room, other people moving around. My parents, definitely, maybe Emory. Maybe even Nikita, who would have been roused to deal with Emory under the guise of...whatever lie my father fed Vasilev. It was funny, I thought, how Emory seemed to have Nikita on a leash like a pet when it was Nikki who used *kitten* as a pet name.

Mack found his shirt as I pulled my trousers on and threw my closet open, wincing at my over-extended arms. He side-stepped me and located a shirt, tugging it down over my head and then grabbing my biceps. He massaged them quickly and I groaned, his fingers digging deep into the tormented muscles. "I'm sorry, little Prince," he breathed quietly, regret licking the edges of the lilt in his voice. "I woke up to put you back to bed and heard the guard come into the suite. I should have been more careful...made sure you were comfortable before...."

"It's not a big deal," I dismissed it easily with a wave of my hand. "Couple of minutes and the pins and needles will wear off." He lifted my wrists, lightly bruised, and kissed them carefully, then moved to my mouth with the same easy tenderness. He nuzzled his nose into mine, ruffled my hair, and handed me my coat. I slipped into it and pulled my hood up, grabbed my bow, and we were off.

I didn't often take a guard places anymore, not with Mack always armed and not when everyone
knew I'd beaten someone's skull in with a tree branch once. People tended to avoid me anyway. I was too quiet for most of them to be comfortable around and the palace at that time of night was deserted. We'd lagged behind my parents and, apparently Emory and Nikita, because they were all out in the courtyard in the heavy downpour by the time we reached there. Watery light bathed the area and there, bound in a painted chair that hung from the whipping post, was an all too familiar face.

“Is that…?” I started tentatively.

The lonely figure separate from all of us answered dryly. “Cadmus.” It was Tristan’s voice. I couldn’t see him well in the dark. The light from the moon barely breached the clouds and the dim shadows from the start of the rising sun didn’t reach the courtyard yet. He had his hood up so that faint glow in his eyes wasn’t visible until he looked directly at me.

Emory spoke next, fury in his voice. “Look at his mouth,” he managed thickly.

I was still looking at all of him, truthfully. He was bound, hands behind his back, to a chair that had been hastily doused in red and black paint. Chains were wrapped around the arms—a crude representation of the Corian throne. There was a rope about his neck, suspending the entire macabre ordeal from the post, and it creaked gently like the ropes on a ship.

His eyes were open, bleached to the color of milk and unseeing, his tongue protruded from blackened lips, the bottom of which had been cut down the middle so that a chunk was missing right where the most defining of my Infinito marks was on my own face. He was swollen and bloated like he’d been exposed to water and his skin was a mottled, hideous greenish hue.

Nikita stepped forward first, drawing one of the knives from his many utility belts in the process. He was limping when he walked and I shot Mack a concerned look in the dark, but the healer either chose not to acknowledge it or he didn’t notice it at all. I wondered with a growing sense of dread if it had been his father or my brother that made him limp like that. He’d been growing increasingly ill looking in the two weeks since he’d saved Mack’s life. The limp was just the newest addition to his dismal health. He was pale and exhausted looking, sporting large, lurid bruises around his eyes from lack of sleep. He winced with each step and he’d lost weight. By the time he reached the post, his breathing was ragged with the effort but he was Glacian. The ground would open up and swallow him before he ever admitted he couldn’t do something.

He swung his arm up, the razorsharp blade slicing through the rope with just two quick flicks of his wrist. The body, chair and all, fell with a sickening thump and the legs cracked under the weight so that the corpse flopped sideways and the face split open, oozing congealed, clotted clumps of blood that ran watery in the rain-wet sand around the post.

“Nobody deserves to be gawked at,” Nikita supplied simply before he got down on his knees and set to untying the body. My father got down with him, watching his deft fingers skillfully untangle the mess like it was fishing line.

Tristan hovered nearby and I noted that it was odd for him to not want to get involved in something like this. Injuries were sort of his thing, but he remained at a careful distance, watching with keen eyes, one arm over his middle and the other up so that he could bite the pad of his thumb.

Nikita pushed soaked blond hair out of his eyes as they stretched Cadmus out. “He was hung,” he said stiffly and I felt my stomach twist. I’d just seen Cadmus. Not even a week before, I thought, and he’d been fine. Supportive, even, in comparison to most of the elders. I liked Cadmus. He hadn’t deserved this.
Mack lifted a hand and put it gently on my shoulder, squeezing when I shut my eyes against the scene.

“His neck isn’t broken,” Tristan added, though he hadn’t gotten down with them. “He did not go quickly or without a fight.”

The Rider got unsteadily to his feet, wobbling and flinching. He ignored Tristan when the alchemist held an arm out to steady him. He plucked up the back of the ruined chair and held it out for Cyril, who took it with trembling hands and brushed his fingers over the top most portion where someone’s head might sit if they were reclined in it. “They’ve carved a fox into the chair,” he said woodenly before handing it off to my father, who studied it with a grim frown.

“Atara,” the king started.

I ground my teeth and crossed my arms, water dripping from my hood. "I know. I read the reports. They priests are preaching against me. There are riots. The temples want to put me on a tribunal and sentence me to the post. I get it. I don't know what to do."

Emory stood sulking over the corpse, the black coat, a mirror of the white one I wore, made him look more like a reaper than a person. "Kill them," he said simply, turning to look up at us. Fox winced but Cyril remained stoic. "Set an example. Start putting people on the fucking post. That's what it's there for. You let them know that this shit isn't going to be tolerated. I knew Cadmus. I knew--" He stopped and shook his head, rubbing at his mouth. Kita reached for him and he flinched away, obviously agitated, and I noticed the little blond at his side turn an even more pasty shade of white. He looked like glue. "Can you find anything pretty in this, Atara?"

I winced at his tone and Mack’s expression darkened. "Emory--" he began.

"No," Emory snarled. "This is his fucking mess. He should have dealt with the elders and the council when it started! Now people are dying because he can’t even pretend to be good at politics. So you don't get to sweep in and start playing Knight in Shining Armor because you're fucking him stupid every night." I felt Emory’s fingers at my collar then, jerking me forward like a ragdoll and I recalled Mack’s words that someday my brother would turn that vicious temper on me and when that happened, Mack would not hesitate to put him down.

In that moment, I felt simultaneously like I wanted to vomit and like I wanted to hit Emory before Mack could do anything.

I loved Mackenzie Glenning, but if I had to watch my brother bleed to death in the sand because of him, I would never be able to look at him again. I’d have gladly taken a beating from Emory to avoid losing either of them.

“Emory,” Cyril warned, stepping forward, but it was too late. My back hit the post so hard that my teeth rattled and I squirmed, my feet a few inches off the ground, clawing at Emory’s arms. I realized in that moment that I was scared of him. I’d never been scared of him before. There’d been days as children when we fought like cats and dogs--when he pushed me down stairs or pinched me until I cried or when I put lizards in his bed and painted unicorns on his cheeks with ink while he slept.

We’d been in dozens of fist fights and Emory always beat the hell out of me, but I’d always known in those fights that he would stop.

And right then...I didn’t know if he would. I didn’t know if he’d beat me until my skull was pulp like I had to that man on the beach or if he’d wring the life out of my throat or crush my esophagus before someone could stop him.
My heart pounded, screaming in my chest and I thrashed against him, finally grasping a handful of his face so that I could dig my nails in and I realized I was screaming at him. Then Mack was there, his fingers tight around one of my brother’s hands, peeling them back and I thanked whatever gods were listening that they’d tempered him with patience that none of us had. He’d told me he would kill him and I would hate him for it, but when faced with the reality of that very situation, I was more important to him than anything else. Keeping me mattered more.

Nikita was with him a second later, only he had Emory by the shoulders and was speaking rapidly, but I didn’t understand it. It was Corian, I knew that, but blood was rushing through my ears and I was choking on panicked tears,begging him to let me go, to stop shaking me the way that he was shaking me so that my brain felt scrambled inside my head and my vision was darkening and my teeth rattled and ached.

My father got his attention for one second of frigid acknowledgement when he said his name, earning an icy glower from my brother. I recognized none of Emory in his face. It looked like him, sure, but it wasn’t my brother beneath his skin. My brother loved me. He would have thrown himself on a sword to save my life. To save any of our lives.

But it wasn’t Emory behind those mint colored eyes when he reached for the axe at his hip and I heard Mack’s blade come clean from the sheath on his hip, heard myself say no but I wasn’t sure who I was talking to—begging Emory not to put that wretched thing through my face or begging Mack not to slice open his throat so that he bled all over me while he died.

Nikita moved first. His hand struck, grasping so tight around Emory’s wrist that I heard the bones pop from the strain and my brother howled in protest, releasing me so that I slid toward the ground and Mack’s sword hit the dirt beside me so that he could gather me up, dragging me out of reach.

I looked upward just in time to see Emory’s backhanded fist connect with Nikita Novak’s jaw and the Rider, who had clearly not expected such a violent reaction from someone he so clearly loved, stumbled in the wet stand and hit the ground with a strangled, surprised cry.

Silence fell like a blanket. I was holding my breath, clinging to Mack, soaking wet and trembling like I’d been dropped into ice water. I could feel my stomach in my throat, shock and horror rising like bile. For a second, I thought Emory might actually grab that axe and bring it down through Nikki’s skull, but he just stood there, chest heaving, lost in rage so deep that he was no longer reachable.

Nikita wobbled up to his knees and spat, an arc of blood hit the sand with one of his molars.

“Tristan,” my father spoke tersely and the alchemist looked up. No further order needed to be given, evidently, because Tristan snapped his fingers and Emory’s legs buckled. He wailed, howling with livid ferocity.

I’d heard someone describe Riders to me once as the sort of people that would take a kick in the teeth and crawl back for more just to prove that they could and that was exactly what Nikita did. My stomach dropped when he moved, slathered in mud and blood, arms shaking.

“Nikita, enough,” Tristan warned but the northman paid no heed. He set his teeth and pushed himself forward, sliding in red sand. I think he expected Emory to see him, to recognize him beyond the rage, but even I could see that it was a battle he would lose.

“Kitten, please--”

As soon as he was in arm’s reach, my brother grabbed for his throat, his arms unbound by Tristan’s magic, and Nikita was pummeled back into the water and the mud, face first, fingers scrabbling for
purchase until Tristan took another step forward.

I could see the effort in the alchemist’s face as twisted the hand outstretched toward Emory, peeling his arms back and pinning them down at his sides.

“Fucking hell,” I heard Mack breathe, his mouth pressed to the top of my head, still holding me tight in his lap. One arm was locked around my waist and the other held a hand to my face, keeping my cheek to his chest so that I was tucked beneath his chin.

Emory shrieked like a wounded animal and my Lheiro shook his head, stumbling back and away from my father like he couldn’t stand to watch it. He disappeared into the gates behind me, but I still heard him heave and lose the contents of his stomach.

“You’re hurting him!” I finally found my voice and pushed myself up and away from Mack, watching on in horror while Emory twisted, howling and struggling against bonds that none of us could see.

Tristan pursed his lips. “He is in no pain,” he corrected stiffly. “None that I’m causing, anyway.”

“Bullshit! Look at him! Dad, you can’t allow this!” I looked desperately at my father, but his expression was unrelenting.

“What I can’t allow is for him to kill you, Atara,” Fox answered curtly. “We would lose both of you. It would destroy him. *This* will already destroy him.” He gestured to Nikita who was hauling himself out of the dirt again, spitting mud and blood into the sand, choking on mouthfuls of water. I couldn’t understand. I don’t think any of us did. Emory had gotten so much better with Nikki around. He tolerated some touch. He laughed again. He smiled again. There were parts of him I’d been able to connect with that I hadn’t thought I would ever see again.

And then there was...this rabid creature gnashing his teeth and sobbing in the dirt, hideously opposed to being pinned down but unable to be trusted any other way. When I reached for him in an attempt to comfort, he snapped his teeth at me like a feral dog and I withdrew toward Mack, flinching.

“Take him to your quarters,” Fox ordered the alchemist. “Sedate him. Restrain him. Do what you have to do, but see to it that when I get there, he is either out cold or he is able to speak to me without trying to butcher me at the same time.”

Tristan snapped his fingers again and my brother sagged like a limp dish towel, rolling uselessly into the mud. Two guards carted him off with the alchemist and my father. Mack let me go, standing there in the rain, staring after them with an uncomfortable numbness settling over my body. I knew what this meant...what all the fighting would finally culminate in.

We weren’t just losing him anymore. He was gone.

I looked down when I heard Mack speak, grasping Nikita around his chest in the mud. “Come on,” he offered gently, grabbing the Rider’s arm and looping it around his neck so that he could haul him to his feet. “You can’t sit in the mud all night.”

Nikita made a strangled noise, pained and exhausted, as he was pulled to his feet. I turned my attention to Blue. He was standing silently by the gate, a grim expression on his face. “Get this cleaned up,” I ordered quietly. “And have word sent to Kinnon and Pyrin. They left for home yesterday morning. See to it that they’re caught before they get to far and informed of this development.”

Blue nodded and offered me a sad, understanding expression before my attention went back to Nikki
and Mack. “I don’t think he’s going to be walking on his own,” Mack told me quietly. “I’ll need to look him over. Preferably away from his father.”

“My room,” I answered numbly and Mack hesitated, his eyes locked on my face. He was trying to discern what state I was in. I could tell, but he didn’t like what he saw. “I’m fine,” I continued before he could stop and start questioning me. “Worry about him first. We’ll talk after.”

I followed him woodenly back into the palace, more machine than man, trying to purge the image of my brother going limp in the mud from the inside of my mind...trying to forget the feel of his hands on my collar, shaking so hard I’d been nearly choking. Cyril was just inside the door of the apartments when we arrived, waiting quietly with Fox at his arm.

"This is...quite a mess, Atara," the king told me quietly as we entered. I felt absolutely dejected, like I could crawl under a rock and disappear or something. Nothing ever feels quite as terrible as disappointing your parents, especially the one you’re closer to, and I had to fight the urge to bury my face in his chest and apologize a thousand times. In retrospect, I wish I had. I wish I’d done something other than slap on a stoic face and play the role of an adult. He was my father. To him, I would always be the baby he’d carried around on his hip. Behaving like an adult when I wasn’t an adult yet, in front of someone who had once checked beneath my bed for monsters and tore apart my closet to assure me that there were no boogeymen in there, was ridiculous.

"So what do we do?" I asked him softly, stopping in front of the door. Mack and Nikita were dripping water and blood into the carpet, but Mack was diligently checking the Rider’s pupils.

"We wait," Cyril said simply. "We hope it dies down. It takes a lot of energy, money, and motivation for things like this to become full scale issues. We have to maintain our stance and look stable. Eventually, this will probably dissipate."

Fox looked less optimistic. He cupped my chin and tipped my face up like he was trying to memorize the way that I looked and I stared back at him. "You weren't ready for this," he finally told me. "You're doing the best that you can. Don't put yourself down so much. You can't be your own enemy...especially now. I don't..." He looked at Nikita, leaning heavily on Mackenzie. "I don't know that Emory will ever be able to shoulder this for you again, Atara."

I nodded. That was a conclusion I had come to on my own and I stepped carefully from Fox's grip. That weight felt heavier hearing it from him and my eyes stung. I tapped Mack on the shoulder and gestured toward my room. The three of us--me, Mack, and Nikki--hobbled through the door and the Rider was carefully deposited on the edge of the bed. I heard my parents disappear into their bedroom behind the scrape of a locked door. No doubt, the fighting would start soon.

Nikita slumped sideways, curling up in the fetal position, grasping one of my pillows tight to his abdomen like he was afraid he might puke. His face was buried in it up to his nose and he was soaking wet. The ink he wore around his eyes and on his cheeks ran black into the white sheets but he didn't seem to really notice us. Not until Mack moved around behind him, intent to get a look at his spine where he’d landed after the initial blow. He peeled back the fabric of Nikki’s shirt and jumped backward at the same time Nikki flipped over, looking positively murderous, with just a dash of terrified. He was breathing heavily. His cheeks were red and swollen and his bottom lip came out in a trembling pout.

I looked between them. Mack looked like he might actually vomit. “Nikki,” he began slowly. “What the actual fuck.”

It wasn’t a question.

"It's nothing," the Glacian said flatly, cutting him off and glaring.
"Nothing my ass," Mack shot back, visibly irritated, and I tipped my head. I peeled my soaked coat off and brushed the few drops of water that had managed to get in out of my hair. I let it drop over one of my chairs and Mack stepped toward the bed again. "Let me see."

Nikita scowled and dragged himself back with his arms. "No."

They were engaged in a battle of wills and I stared, watching them glare daggers at each other. Nikita stayed firmly on his back and Mack remained stoically at the bottom of the bed.

“What is it?” I finally asked. “You look fucking homicidal, Mackenzie.” I didn’t have the energy for this. I wanted Nikita examined and put to bed elsewhere or sent back to his own quarters so I could strip the wet sheets off and spend the rest of the early hours of the morning trying and failing to sleep while the events of the night replayed in my mind. Or, alternatively, I’d get lucky and Mack would take pity on me, fuck me into real, bone-tired exhaustion, and I’d get some sleep before reality set back in.

Nikita sat up and backed himself into the headboard. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?” I inquired.

“No,” they both spat at the same time and Mack finally gave in, spinning on his heel and disappearing from the room with a violent slam of the door. It left me staring at Nikita, who was still holding that pillow and chewing on his thumb.

The door opened again a moment later and Mack came back in, Fox at his heels. Nikki looked ready to slaughter them both and I had no doubt that if he’d been armed, he would have. He glanced at the window like he was actually contemplating whether or not he could survive the five story drop to the sand and stone below. I narrowed my eyes at them, my cheeks flushing with the irritation of feeling like the odd man out.

My father pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked tired. His hair was damp and he had his glasses on. When he looked expectantly at Nikita, arms crossed, the Rider wilted and withered under his gaze the same way that I did. Fox commanded a room. He didn't need to speak to get attention. He'd been born and bred to be King and he exuded the power of the position, which he wielded like a finely crafted blade. Nikki reluctantly moved forward, flinching and wincing with every inch until he managed to heft himself to his feet. He peeled his shirt over his head, his back to the wall, took a deep breath, and turned around.

He was a bloody mess. My breath caught and I staggered backward, trying to rationalize away the state of his swollen flesh. He'd been beaten mercilessly, it looked like. He was bloody and welted in thick stripes from his shoulders down into his trousers and I didn't want to imagine what he looked like beneath them. Most of them seemed only a few hours old and had very clearly not yet been treated. Some of them were criss-crossed with thinner, random looking claw marks like someone had gauged him with their fingernails while he was welted. My stomach lurched and the urge to vomit welled up in my throat until my mouth watered and I had to look at something else. Nikki's fists were clenching and then opening. His jaw was flexing and his face was the color of my father's sigil. I wanted to believe, as sick as it is, that his father had done this, because the alternative, to me, was worse.

But I knew. I think we all did. “I think I’m going to puke,” I managed stiffly, but I didn’t move and neither did any of the other people in the room.

"Did Emory do this to you?” Fox asked quietly.

"I let him," Nikita said darkly and I nearly heaved, pressing a hand over my mouth desperately.
Mack had hit me. He'd spanked the hell out of me on a few occasions, but he'd never bruised me. He'd never welted me. He always rubbed some kind of cool ointment into the sting when he was finished and the ache disappeared in a few hours. This looked more like an animal had gotten ahold of Nikki, ravaged his flesh and muscle like a feral beast.

My father seemed to absorb the information and then turned for the door, calling out sharply.
"Cyril!"

My Lheiro came traipsing into the room a moment later, scrubbing his hair dry with a towel. He was bright eyed, if tired, and chattering carelessly as he entered. "Calling after me like you don't have two legs to come and get me, Fox, honestly. I--" He stopped when his eyes fell on Nikita and he dropped his hands, the towel hanging helplessly at his waist. He swore in Lierian and took a few tentative steps forward.

"Now what do you think? Look at him! Look at what happened tonight! Our son did this to him!"
Fox snapped and I could tell by the way Cyril's posture changed that he was referring to an argument. They slid right back into fighting mode like they'd never left it, but this time, Cyril looked back at him, defeated and glassy eyed, on the verge of tears. I hated seeing him cry. He looked so fragile and small to begin with, tears only made it worse. His fingers trembled and his bottom lip came out in a pout like he didn't want to say what he knew he had to say. He folded himself against my father's chest and his shoulders shook. A deep, lingering sense of dread settled in my belly while I watched Fox run his fingers over Cyril's hair and then bend to kiss his head.

Eventually, my Lheiro spoke and my heart got heavier with his words. I knew, somewhere in me, I knew what this was. It was what I'd hoped to avoid, what I'd dreaded--the inevitable truth, the fallout, the end of Emory's tragedy. My heart broke for my brother all over again and then it broke into more pieces for my parents and then it crumbled to dust for myself and for Kita. "Do what you think you have to do, Fox," he mumbled despondently.

My father swallowed hard and I could see the strain in his features, the obvious hatred of what he felt he had to do. "Glenning," he spoke formally and the healer looked up, his expression devoid of emotion. He lacked even the humor I loved so much. "Please notify Tristan to prepare transportation for Emory. To the little place on the other side of the Witch Wood. It's a three day journey. Make sure they take...take the sedative. No doubt he'll be angry."

"No!" Nikita protested vehemently and launched himself forward but Mack caught him and the Glacian boy was too hurt to fight much more than that. "You can’t send him away! He’s not crazy, Fox! He’s just sick! He needs me!" He sounded so desperate, so utterly defeated, and I knew that when he said 'he needs me' what he actually meant was, ‘I need him.’ I couldn’t imagine the horror he felt--didn’t want to. Losing Mack the way that Emory was being stripped from Nikita was too painful a thing to imagine and I stumbled toward the dresser where the water basin was, leaning over it when my stomach threatened to heave.

"Nikita," Fox managed. "I understand that you care for Emory a great deal and you want him to be in a better place. The Gods know we've all done stupid things for the people we love but this...Emory is unhealthy. He’s out of control. He's a danger to himself and to the people around him. Imagine how he would feel later if he actually hurt Atara. Imagine how he’ll feel when he realizes he hurt you. He is a danger to himself and to others and I cannot risk that anymore. For his sake. Believe me when I say this, Nikki, please...it is not a decision we’ve made lightly." His arms tightened around my Lheiro as he spoke and Cyril shuddered, his fingers turning to fists in the back of Fox's shirt.

My own tears stung. I didn't realize they were there until I felt them drip from my chin and I wiped
them pathetically. Mack cast me an apologetic look, thumbed one of my cheeks carefully, and then disappeared from the room to follow his orders. Nikita dissolved into desperate begging, pleading with my parents for Emory's freedom. He begged for everything he was worth. He broke my heart, or what was left of it, and when he realized, after several minutes of frantically trying to bargain with them, he turned to me. "Please, Atara, please! You can't let them do this. He doesn't belong there. He needs me!"

I flinched at his words and at the way he grabbed for my hand, his fingers tight in mine, and I remembered Emory's palm flexing around the handle of his axe. I remembered the way he'd backhanded Nikita. I could see the bruise on his jaw and the split at the corner of his mouth. I looked despairingly up at my parents and then back at Nikki. “I’m so sorry,” I managed to choke out. “I’m so sorry, Nikki.”

And I wanted him to be angry with me because I could deal with that. I wanted him to scream and hurl insults. Even hit me. He just got to his feet, his Glacian stoicism returning like he'd never been crying, and he wiped his face with the back of his arm. He hiccuped, but he betrayed no other sign of his tears, and then tugged his shirt back on gingerly.

He paused only at my father and the two of them stared each other down--two people from such vastly different worlds, one of them, my father, born to lead, and the other painstakingly crafted into the Commander he did not want to be.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Fox,” Nikki said roughly. “Because I know you think that distance might fix him, but the distance I put between myself and my sister is what killed her.” My heart lurched, climbing violently through my throat like I might heave it into my palms as he spoke. “So if you get a letter about him hanging from the rafters at whatever godsforsaken hell hole you throw him to, remember this moment.”

He adjusted his sleeves and rolled his shoulders. “And remember that if he dies out there, I will have your head.”

And I knew, when the door shut behind him with a dry click, leaving the remnants of my family standing in my bedroom, that if Emory died out there, my father would have gotten on his knees willingly and Nikita Novak would have been welcomed to take his head.

Chapter End Notes

These are not complete. I'll add more as times goes on and get you lists for Mack and Atara as well. If I start linking the more instrumental/soundtracky like ones I might give away more of the plot than I intend to. Also, the Blue October song on Emory's list is one of my favorites and is also on Atara's list.

--Nikita--
The Devil and the Huntsman, Sam Lee and Daniel Pemberton
Lying From You, Linkin Park
Take Me to Church, Hosier
King of Carrot Flowers pt.1, Neutral Milk Hotel
We Both Go Down Together, The Decemberists

--Emory--
Gasoline, Halsey
Seven Devils, *Florence and the Machine*
Hustler, *Josef Salvat*
Bad at Love, *Halsey*
For My Brother, *Blue October*
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

Short chapter. Sorry >=< His will likely be a bit shorter than usual for awhile.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I was told later that Nikita did stop by Tristan’s quarters to say goodbye to me, but that I was too out of my mind with blind rage to do much of anything but throw myself at a door, shaking the handle so hard that the wood splintered. He’d been on the other side, desperately trying to placate me and failing miserably until I’d exhausted myself. Fox told me he laid on the floor on one side while I laid on the other and he pressed his fingertips to mine through the gap, promised to stay, to wait, to do anything I needed him to do.

But I didn’t remember it. I didn’t remember any of it--not Nikita talking to me, not Cyril kissing my cheeks when they loaded me into that carriage the next morning, not Atara’s notable absence, nothing. I checked out the way I’d been doing since the beach. Gone days, Kita called them. Lapses. Little segments of time during which I succumbed completely to something that so surpassed grief or despair. I knew no word in any language that I spoke that could adequately describe what I felt. Hate, perhaps, was closest--hate and grief and an utter loss of hope as we--my father and I--rode through that carriage in the Witch Wood and arrived, three days later, at the little estate that Lysander ran.

It was less estate and more large cottage, I thought, if a cottage could be a prison, because that’s what it truly was. That’s what I thought it was. It was surrounded by a garden, walled in on all four sides by battlements manned by armed guards. Some of them patrolled the grounds, large black dogs at their sides, held tightly by leather leashes. I remembered it from my childhood the few times we’d come to visit my grandmother, wasting away in a wheeled chair, staring vacantly out into nothing. She’d had little bouts of clarity, on occasion, during which she would press Riordan tight to her shoulder and kiss his golden curls or she’d hold my face and run her thumbs over my cheekbones. ‘You’re so beautiful,’ she told me once. ‘Just like your father was when he was small.’

I recognized Lysander, who greeted us on a porch that was draped in flowering vines and hanging baskets full of yellow, trumpet shaped blossoms. An older woman on a roughly built wooden stool was trimming them, filling little glass jars with flowers and stems. She paid us absolutely no attention and I paid none to her.

I had nothing to pay, anyway. I was empty. Like someone had reached into my chest and drained everything that had ever meant anything to me. It was all back in Coryth--with Atara, who couldn’t look at me and with Nikita, who couldn’t leave me even when he should have, and with Cyril, who couldn’t face me on this journey, knowing full-well that I might never recover enough to come back.
They would leave me here, I thought, to die like Laila had. Alone.

“I want to go home,” I protested and jerked from my father’s arm on my elbow, nearly stumbling into Tristan Brighton in the process.

We’d had this conversation several times on the trip to the asylum and it always ended with me in the corner of the carriage, knees drawn up to my chest, behaving like a petulant child.

Fox ignored me, for the most part, probably because he knew we’d get nowhere with that line of conversation, and allowed me to be lead down a long, creaking hallway in that ancient home. Before it had been an asylum, he’d told me on the way, it had been Ambrose’s home away from the palace and he’d spent several summers there as a boy, chasing after Cyril through the vast, semi-tropical gardens. I hadn’t cared, but walking with them, looking up at the portraits of the Chalon family that lined the walls, I did try to. Especially when I came to the one of Cyril and Ambrose that must have been painted just after they’d taken my Lheiro from the brothel.

He looked impossibly tiny seated in that old, beautifully carved chair, hands folded politely in his lap. I wondered if it had been painted at the Keep or here, but my musings died off when Lysander pushed open a door at the end of the hallway and Fox guided me beyond it into a small bedroom. There were dried flowers in a bundle on the table by the bed, a small dresser, and a window into the garden that had been barred shut.

“I’ll give you a moment, Fox, but lingering won’t do him any good. Clean breaks are easier,” Lysander offered softly and then he disappeared with Tristan. I could hear them murmuring in the hallway beyond the shut door.

“I want to go home,” I repeated desperately. I felt...impossibly small in that room, despite it being tinier than most closets at the Keep.

Fox pressed his fingers to his temples. “Emory,” he started gently. “This is home. For now.”

I backed myself into a corner, rubbing my arms. There was a chill in me that went down to the bone despite the oppressive heat of southern Coria. I couldn’t seem to warm myself up, no matter what I did, and my stomach churned uncomfortably in my abdomen. I couldn’t breathe. The walls seemed to close around me, desperate to shut me into this wretched place. “It isn’t,” I insisted, shaking my head and taking a sharp breath at the same time. “This is a prison. You’ll leave me here to rot like grandmother...like all the other noble disappointments.”

“Nobody thinks you’re a disappointment, boss,” he argued quietly. “You’re sick. When you get better, I’ll come here myself and take you back to Coryth. I promise.”

“You’re lying,” I spat the words, venom in my voice, and scowled at him. “You say none of this is my fault—”

“It isn’t!”

“Then why are you leaving me here?”

Fox heaved a sigh, his shoulders slumped in defeat, and for a moment I thought I might win this. He would take me back out of this horrible place that smelled too much like rose petals and lemon polish—too good to really begood—and we’d go home. I’d throw myself at my brother’s mercy, at Kita’s mercy, and I’d move on. We’d go back to being normal again. It was absurd. I knew that. Nothing could be normal again, but I hoped.

He ran his fingers through his hair, exhausted. “Because you attacked your brother,” he reminded me
and I shrank further into the wall. “Because you’ve been beating Nikita Novak merclessly, Emory, and he allows it. Because you punched him so hard you knocked one of his molars out and in true Rider fashion he crawled back to you like a whipped dog. Because you are a danger to yourself and others...because I want you to be well. Because I love you.”

“Liar,” I repeated the accusation and he flinched. “If you loved me, you wouldn’t fucking leave me here!”

“I can’t do this with you right now,” he finally breathed. “This...this whole thing with you...this fucking circus that you live in is exhausting.”

I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw something at him, but there was nothing in that vile little room except the stupid flowers. Rage filled my throat like bile and emptied into the place where my heart had once been, bitter and poisonous. “This is my life!” I was finally shouting at him and he took it because it was Fox. Cyril would have grabbed me by the ear or thrown cold water over my head. He had never been one to take my shit--said it reminded him too much of the parts of Fox he wished he could change--but Fox had almost always taken it. He would get angry right back on occasion, but usually he was content to walk away and give me the cold shoulder until I’d calmed down. This time, he just took it.

“It’s my life!” I repeated viciously. “And I’m an adult! You can’t just put me away like this! It’s not your choice to make!”

He took a deep breath. He’d always been better than Cyril at maintaining the illusion that he was calm, but I could see in the flush of his cheeks that I was grating his nerves. Good, I thought victoriously. Let him writhe like I am.

“You are my son,” he pointed out calmly. “And sometimes that means I make the choice for you. Especially when you can’t seem to make healthy ones on your own.” I’d expected him to remind me that he was the King of Coria. I was still his subject. He could have ordered me to do anything he wanted and I would have been legally bound to meet his demands, but it was rare indeed that he ever threw that in my face. I could count a handful of times, maybe, including the last time I’d fought with him when he’d been pissy about Atara sneaking out. That time, however, he did not. I was quick to point that out. “Oh, so it’s not about you being king now?”

He crossed his arms and looked pointedly at me. “I’m going to walk away from this place and you’re going to stay, Emory. We won’t see each other for a long time. I don’t want to be your king right now. I want to be your father.”

“Fuck you,” I snarled in response and he took a deep breath like he knew my anger was displaced or that it was just outrage at everything and it was. Deep down, I knew that what I’d done in the courtyard to Kita and Atara was wrong on more levels than I could ever be fully aware of. I knew that my relationship was abusive and manipulative. I knew that my brother was terrified of me now---terrified, when once upon a time, he’d hung on every word I said. I’d been his hero.

And now I was his villain.

“I understand that you’re angry--”

“No!” I was shouting again, shaking my head, desperate for him to actually understand. “No, you don’t fucking understand! They took everything from me!”
“They’re dead,” he reminded me sharply.

“And now you’re taking everything else.”

“No, I’m not.” Fox was clinical, detaching carefully and moving toward the door. “I’m stopping you from ruining everything else.”

His hand brushed the door and I noted that there was no handle on this side. It could not be opened from within and brutal, crushing ferocity and despair swallowed me up until it was all I felt. Hot tears escaped my eyes and burned down my face, stinging and betraying me with their very presence. My fists were curled and I practically vibrated with fury, red-cheeked and breathless. Fox knocked once and the door opened.

“I hate you,” I snarled and he stopped to look back at me. I could tell, in that moment, that I’d cut him to the bone and I reveled in it, gloriously victorious. He had no color in his face and his lips were pursed tightly.

Tristan bit his bottom lip behind him. “He doesn’t mean it,” he whispered.

“Yes, he does,” Fox corrected. “It’s alright. If he needs to hate, he can hate me. Better me than anyone else.”

I threw myself at him, intent on causing some kind of physical injury but the door slammed shut and I hit it instead, blinded with fury and then pain that lanced from my shoulder down to the ache in my hip. I screamed, rabid and out of control like a toddler throwing a tantrum, and I beat myself against the door, shaking and clattering in the frame, until my fists were bloody and my body was bruised and exhausted...until the sun beyond the window drifted down over the horizon. I raged for hours in a way only someone like me ever could, driven manic by my situation. I tore the dried flowers to pieces and kicked the little dresser over. I pulled at the bars and shrieked my fury like a feral animal.

Then, bruised, bloodied, and weary, I collapsed beside the door and I wept. I relived the beach, over and over again on repeat, until I sobbed so hard that my stomach heaved but nothing came up and I laid there, face pressed to the cold wooden floor, until exhaustion wore me down into sleep and I woke only when the door was opened, swinging inward and bumping my hand in the process.

I made a noise, something between a groan and a cough, and pushed myself up onto my knees, my face sticky with dried tears, swollen and irritated from my tantrum.

“Your father used to throw fits like that,” Lysander said from above me. “I’m told he mellowed out when you came to Coryth. So tell me, Emory, what was the point of destroying your room?”

I didn’t answer. He took that as a reason to continue while I sat on the floor, morosely staring at the grain in the wood and the worn spot in front of the door where shuffling feet had turned the dark polish a paler shade than the rest.

“You’ll have to clean it up, you know? So what did you truly accomplish?”

I still didn’t answer.

Lysander sat down on the edge of the bed. “You will find nothing in this room that allows for self harm. There are no strings, no ropes, no writing utensils, no cutlery, no--”

“I’m not going to fucking kill myself for pity’s sake,” I snapped. “I promised someone I wouldn’t or I’d have done it fucking ages ago.”
He arched an eyebrow. “But you want to, do you?”

I resorted to silence again, indifferent about what he thought. In my head, I figured that I might as well have. What did it matter anymore, anyway? I was nothing and nobody and I had nothing and nobody. I’d remain here in this prison disguised as a home until someone else made a decision about me...for me.


I scowled at the Rider’s name and Lysander made an ‘ah’ noise like I’d granted him some enlightenment with that reaction. He must have spoken to my father, I thought, if he knew about Kita. I wondered how much he’d been told and then, just as quickly, decided that I didn’t particularly care.

Lysander rubbed his knees. He was an older man, old enough to be my grandfather, I thought, and most of his dark hair had gone to silver ages ago. His fingers were worn with age and I could see the veins through his hands, purple and blue in sun-kissed, honey tinted skin. “I only wanted to stop by and give you a breakdown of how things run here. I imagine you don’t care right now, but you will and you’ll adjust to it. You will have no title here, Emory, beyond your first name. Nobody is going to bow. Nobody is going to serve you. You are not here for rest and recuperation. You are here to learn a strategy to control this rage you have.”

I glared, my mouth shut in a thin line.

“You will be part of household chores. You will keep your bedroom clean and your bed made. You will have structure and routine. You will eat at meal time or you will not eat at all. I understand you have no problem engaging in hunger strikes?”

So he had talked to Fox.

Lysander didn’t wait for a reaction before he continued. “If you try it, I’ve been given permission to make you eat. I do not want to make you do anything, Emory, do you understand me? I want you to cooperate so that we can send you home.” He took a deep breath. “You will meet every day with me. We will spend an hour talking. Sometimes, I will ask you questions. You are not required to answer them, though I think you will find it helpful if you do and I will keep asking. Sometimes, you’ll just talk about whatever you want to talk about. Sometimes, you’ll just sit there glaring at me. I expect that will happen a lot in the early days of your stay here.”

“No kidding,” I grumbled in response and he chuckled.

“Bordelon sarcasm,” he drawled. “Cyril used to say he didn’t pick that up from your father, but he absolutely did and I see they both passed it on to you. I imagine you’re as stubborn as they both are, too.” My eyes narrowed and irritation thrummed in my chest. “You will find that I am more stubborn than you are, Emory, so if you choose to engage in a battle of wills with me, I will win.”

“You’ll try.”

Lysander laughed then. Really laughed and I decided, with a bit of internal grumbling, that I liked the way it sounded. Deep and warm and genuine. “Will you really let me go home?” I finally asked quietly. “If I do everything right and I learn...your strategy...you’ll let me go home?”

“You’re not a prisoner here,” he told me gently. “I know it feels like you are with the bars and the doors and the rules, but the bars are for your safety, not to keep you in. The doors are to contain things like the tantrum you just threw so that I can guarantee the well-being of everyone staying here
and that of my staff.” He paused and we were both quiet until I hauled myself to my feet, heavy and sore, and fixed the dresser I’d kicked over. “You were hard on your father,” he added after a moment of watching me push it back into the appropriate spot.

“This is hard on me,” I pointed out, staring down at the ruined bunch of flowers that I put back in their spot. Most of the petals were gone and littered the floor, but I couldn’t do anything about that immediately.

Lysander got to his feet. “This year has been hard on you.”

I flinched and when he reached to touch me, I stepped carefully away. “Don’t,” I warned him quietly.

“You don’t like being touched?”

“No,” I wrinkled my nose while he stared at me like he was waiting for an explanation and I couldn’t really explain it. Sometimes, touch was fine. Sometimes, it didn’t make me feel claustrophobic or sick to my stomach. With Nikita, for example, it was almost always okay, provided I could see it coming, but I had no real explanation for it then. “It’s...difficult. It feels…”

Lysander held a hand up when he saw me struggle, trying to force words that I didn’t have into my mouth. “We’ll work on it,” he interrupted gently. “Maybe it gets better. Maybe it doesn’t. It’s not my biggest concern. Strategy, Emory. Strategy for controlling that rage. That’s what we’re working toward.”

He backed away toward the door, propped open with a chair from the hallway, and then stopped. “Would you like me to leave the door open? If not, I’ll be here at six to let you out.”

“You can leave it. Small spaces are…” I wrung my hands and he nodded again, leaving the chair to keep the door open as he walked out into the dimly lit hall.

“Get some sleep, then. I’ll give you a tour of the grounds tomorrow and get you settled in. Don’t expect this to be easy.”

I didn’t, but he didn’t wait for me to answer...just disappeared down the hall and I sat heavily on the end of my bed, too tired to fight anymore and still too full of hate to do much but lay in the dark and stare at the ceiling.

Chapter End Notes

--Emory--
Wish That You Were Here, Florence and the Machine
Stubborn Love, The Lumineers
Let’s Hurt Tonight, OneRepublic
Arsonist’s Lullabye, Hozier
All I Want, Kodaline

--Nikita--
lovely, Billie Eilish ft. Khalid
I Found, Amber Run
Hurts Like Hell, Fleurie
Make You Feel My Love, Adele
I'll Still Have Me, CYN

--Atara--
Spirits, The Strumbellas
Broken Crown, Mumford & Sons
Wild Heart, Bleachers
Mess is Mine, Vance Joy
Hey, Brother!, Avicii
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“My biggest concern is how they got into the courtyard at all,” Cyril said dryly, looking down at the plate in front of him. He was pushing his food around, trying desperately to ignore the fact that the chairs my brother and my father usually occupied were empty.

There was a kind of sadness in that emptiness...that reminder that we were somehow broken or incomplete. It hurt. Looking across the table at the spot my brother had occupied for all of my life hurt and not because he wasn’t there, though that was certainly part of it. It was the betrayal that stuck in my ribs like a rusted blade--like I should have done something for him when he was screaming as Tristan wrestled him into the carriage. I’d watched from above, tucked behind curtains like a coward so that Emory couldn’t beg me the way that Nikita had begged me.

Nikita, who wouldn’t even meet my gaze in the corridors now and who, when forced to interact with any of us, was the definition of perfectly polite. He acted as if we barely knew each other--detached, cold, utterly aloof. I knew, realistically, that it was the Rider in him that allowed him such emotional control and that he was, in fact, as torn up as we were, but he was angry, too. It was the amount of control he had that made it obvious--he was too distant. Too polite. He’s hurting, Mack had reminded me when I pointed it out the day after Emory left. Let him grieve.

So I had, despite how much I’d wanted to drag him back to our apartments and make him sit with us for meals, if only because he made me feel like I still had some part of my brother. That was why, a week after what I started internally referring to as, ‘The Departure,’ it was still only me, Cyril, and Mackenzie.

Mack, true to his nature, hadn’t left my side since the night of Emory’s final tantrum. He’d been there every step of the way, including the following day, which had consisted mostly of me soaking his shirt with tears while I cried over the injustice of it all. Over Cadmus and how I’d had to light his pyre the next morning, exhausted and still trembling from my fight with my brother. Over Emory, who had been beaten down over and over again and who just couldn’t seem to get back up anymore. Over Cyril, who stood at the gate of the palace long after the carriage had rolled out of sight, watching down the main road through the city like he was expecting my father to change his mind and for my father, who had been the one tasked with making the wretched decision when nobody else could.

So he’d let me cry until my chest hurt and my face was swollen. He’d mopped the tears with cold, wet cloths and when I whispered in the dark that I was afraid of Emory in addition to being afraid for him, he’d promised me that it was okay. That being afraid was normal and he’d have been more concerned if I’d been callous.

I tried to tell him that he could leave...that he didn’t owe me anything, particularly after that, but he’d remained steadfastly at my side, a pillar of strength while my world crumbled. Cyril said nothing
when Mack slept next to me in my bedroom--whether it was because he was too preoccupied with Emory to notice or because he just didn’t have it in him to tease or warn anymore, I didn’t know.

It didn’t matter. The last little pieces we had of my brother were gone, but even without his tantrums, fear still blanketed the Keep like a thick layer of snow.

That was why, that evening, sitting around the table in our quarters, he commented on being concerned that anyone had even reached the courtyard to set up such a macabre message to my family. He’d been trying to figure it out and the way I saw it, if anyone could, it was Cyril. He had that sort of mind--strategic and patterned, able to pluck apart things in the guard rotation that I would have never noticed--little trips and alterations that seemed benign to me became glaring warnings to him but he found nothing in his search.

“So they didn’t infiltrate with new staff,” Mack said quietly. His arm was loose around my middle. I’d been clingy since Emory’s departure, desperate for comfort and closeness that wouldn’t be stripped away from me or that wouldn’t turn against me like my brother had. I was still waking up through nightmares of it, staring up at wild green eyes that no longer held any of the boy I’d grown up with in them. So when I’d finished picking at half my plate, I’d squirmed into his chair with him and put my head against the beat of his heart.

The arm that wasn’t holding me moved up and down my back in a gentle motion. If he got any sweeter, he’d have been rocking me like a baby, but I think he understood that I needed the anchor he provided. Every nerve I had was raw after that night when Emory had shaken me so hard that I’d had a headache for two days afterward and they’d only gotten progressively worse since I’d put the torch to Cadmus’s body, surrounded by a sea of pale moon white faces and pale eyes.

Cyril nodded and finally pushed his plate away. His cutlery scraped on porcelain and he rubbed his face. “Means they turned some of the old staff against us,” he added morosely. “I’ve eliminated some people, simply because they were with us when it happened. You, obviously. Blue. Elian. Janvier. Nikita can’t account for all of the Riders that traveled with them, but--” I heard him exhale loudly. “Riders would have claimed a kill like that and brutal as they are, political messages aren’t really their gimmick. They would have just declared open war and attacked the city.”

“Nikita wouldn’t,” Mack pointed out and I shifted, almost boneless against him. I didn’t like hearing Nikki’s name, not when I knew he was so positively angry with me. “I know he’s pissed off, but he wasn’t when that happened and...honestly, that kid had to be in so much pain...I just can’t see him being able to haul Cadmus and that chair up the post like that. Not in a short enough time span to avoid being seen.”

Cyril got up quietly, arms crossed, and moved to the window that looked out over the city below us. “I never even looked into Nikita,” he admitted after a moment, shrugging casually. “Perhaps that’s too trusting. Perhaps I should--”

“No,” I finally interrupted them, pushing myself to my feet. My whole body ached from thrashing nightmares that, once I woke from them, kept me from sleeping again and from the sheer amount of stress that permeated the air around all of us. “Nikki didn’t do this. He wouldn’t do this. Cadmus was an innocent. That goes against everything the Riders stand for. Yes, they are brutal and their methods are questionable, but that? That was no Rider Commander. Besides...” I stopped at the window next to him. “Do you really think he would have done that, knowing what it would bring out in Emory?”

“No,” they both agreed and I felt Mack behind me, one arm sliding over my shoulder so that it draped across my chest. He put his chin on the top of my head and I reached for the hand that hung in front of me, wrapping both of my own around it. “I’ll just keep looking for patterns,” Cyril kept
speaking. “I’ll have Fox look when he’s back. In the meantime, you go nowhere without Blue or Elian and no running off into the streets to perform theatrical romantic gestures.”

Cyril waved a hand as he walked away and behind me, Mack snorted, probably at the indignant noise that I made when I disentangled myself from his arm and followed my Lheiro. “Oh, don’t think I didn’t hear about it,” Cyril tacked on, plucking up a glass of brandy and tossing it back before he faced me again. “No staying at Mackenzie’s. Not when you’ve announced to all and sundry where he lives. He can stay here. In fact, I’d prefer he stays here, if only because I know he’s not the one butchering people and stringing them up like marionettes.” I glared and he rolled his eyes dramatically (and he wondered where my penchant for theatrics came from.) “And because maybe he’s growing on me.”

“I feel like we’re bonding, Cyril,” Mack joked, arms crossed. He was leaning against the far wall while he watched us.

My Lheiro made a noise--part exasperated sigh, eyes up toward the ceiling, and part disgusted grunt. “Don’t push your luck,” he groaned and the spill of laughter that came from Mack was all the reply he needed to repeat the same unimpressed noise. He liked Mack well enough. I knew that because he’d allowed him to stay. This was the sort of good-natured ribbing I’d expected from him, pretending that nothing and nobody would ever be good enough and simultaneously making sure that Mackenzie was comfortable in our quarters, reminding him to make himself at home....

It was good to see them like that though. It felt domestic, like he’d been welcomed as part of the family, because this was the same sort of hard time Cyril always gave me or Emory, playing disgusted at everything we did and then turning right back around to make sure we would do it again. He still played disgusted when Sir Edmund was brought up, but I’d seen him feed that dog table scraps after every meal for three years and wrap him in blankets when his little hairless body shivered at night.

“Push my luck?” Mack snorted. “The gutter rat and the prince isn’t pushing my luck already? I feel like I must be one lucky son of a bitch.”

“I could make you unlucky, if you prefer,” I snapped, narrowing my eyes at the derogatory way he referred to himself. He broke my heart a little bit every time he did it, even when it was in good fun, because I knew for a fact that he really did feel that way...like he wasn’t good enough or clean enough or noble enough...like it mattered. It should have. It would have mattered to any other family in the gentry, but my father had made himself into an historical anomaly by challenging tradition and marrying Cyril, by carrying on with the belief that people, regardless of title or race, were equals. That was why he’d surprised me so efficiently when he’d called Mackenzie a whore.

‘I just want what’s best for you, Atara,’ he’d told me afterward. ‘And Mack has a lot of problems that might not be best.’

But Mack was mine. His problems were mine. His issues, his nightmares, his messes...they were all mine.

The healer held up his hands in defeat and Cyril tossed back another brandy. He’d been drinking a lot at night since my father left. I suppose it was to keep himself asleep without him. I’d realized, after the first night that Fox was gone, that I’d never seen them spend a night apart. Even when they were angry at each other, one of them would sit in a chair by the window, watching out over the city until tempers cooled, and when I woke up in the morning they’d have gone to sleep in the same bed.

It was...unnerving seeing Cyril without my father at his elbow. Like a person wearing half a mask.
He poured another glass just as the door swung open and all three of us turned to watch. My heart leapt into my throat, initially, because all this talk of traitors in the palace had put me on edge with already frayed nerves. My fingers tightened and Mack was near me almost instantly, one hand in the well of my back like a stabilizing force before my shoulders fell in relief.

Fox looked...older than he was, I thought. He’d looked tired since the year before when they’d pulled Emory up from the beach, bloody and broken, but he looked worn in that moment...like the world was sat, quite literally, on his shoulders, and he was crumpling under the weight. There was a shadow of stubble on his face and purple circles beneath his eyes. He’d entered without all the announcements that were due him when he returned to the Keep, sigils and seals forgotten from his clothing, garbed instead in black like he’d come back from a funeral and my stomach churned when the door shut behind him with the dry click of a casket.

“Fox?” Cyril asked quietly, taking a few steps forward, drink forgotten. My father nodded, rubbing the back of his hand over his mouth as if he had to confirm that he was, in fact, Fox--even to himself. He didn’t move, though. He stood, rooted to the spot, like he’d just witnessed some great horror and he didn’t know how to tell any of us what had transpired on that trip.

The world seemed to tip out from under me, like it was going to open me up and swallow me whole, and in that one moment, I knew. I knew like I knew my own name that something terrible had happened. Emory had thrown himself from the carriage in a fit of rage and snapped his neck on the fall or he’d gotten his hands on something sharp and opened his own veins. He’d made himself a noose from the reins of a horse and they’d found him in the morning, swinging from a tree.

I wanted to scream but the words wouldn’t come. They scraped at the inside of my teeth while Cyril moved forward like he was in slow motion, like the room had filled with water and I wobbled, supported and standing only because of Mack’s hands on my waist. I felt...distant. Foggy. Like the world was quickly losing sound and color and I scrabbled in my mind, scraping at old memories of my brother in that very room we were all standing in--

*Grinning when I showed him my first missing tooth, tongue poking through the new gap, holding it triumphantly up toward his face--*

*Sleepily pressed into his side, his arm draped over my shoulder, a book in his lap...he was reading out loud in his native tongue and I always forgot that it wasn’t common Corian--*

*I got this for you,’ he said and he slipped a small green seashell into my palm with the shape of a star on the inside. It was still sitting on my dresser--*

*Just a few weeks before, standing right where I was standing, telling me that he’d failed me and how I’d wanted to scream that he’d never failed me, never at anything, he couldn’t possibly because I’d never cared about any of his attempts to protect me as much as I’d cared about him--*

“Fox,” Cyril repeated and he stopped in front of him, his hands up and cupping my father’s cheeks. “What happened?”

*He’s dead! I wanted to scream it but the words failed to form on my tongue and Mack just tightened his grip on my trembling shoulders, his mouth at my ear. “Breathe,” he reminded me. “This is real, not a nightmare. The worst doesn’t have to happen.”*

“Nothing,” Fox finally answered numbly, his voice thick and I felt my body physically deflate. My legs wobbled and I heaved the breath I’d been holding and then I was sinking backward and the only thing that kept me from hitting the floor was the way that Mack put an arm around my back and let me latch onto him, clinging to his clothes, fingers like hooks in his shirt.
“Everything,” my father amended and he was shaking his head, his face bleached of color. “I don’t know, Cyril. I don’t know.” He pressed his hands over his eyes and I knew, then, what the exhaustion he was wearing was. It wasn’t exhaustion at all. It was grief, like maybe Emory hadn’t died on the way to the asylum like I’d been so privately convinced for a few seconds, but he might as well have...like he hadn’t burned his body and thrown his bones into the sea the way that we did with our dead in Coria, but it had still been some kind of funeral.

I saw Cyril withdraw, hands pressed tight to his abdomen until Fox hooked an arm around his neck and pulled him in so that his face fell against my father’s chest. “He’s alone and he’s frightened and he wants to come home,” Fox went on and I felt my heart crack against my sternum, splitting right up the middle and Mack’s grip on me tightened. “He hates me. Gods, he hates me. He screamed it for hours, even after he thought I was gone, screamed it until he fell asleep on the floor and I just…”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Cyril whispered.

Fox snorted like the very idea was a joke, but the sound was mirthless and cold, so much so that I shivered. “Oh, he does,” he corrected dismally. “Trust me. You don’t get that kind of motivation from fleeting anger. He hates me.”

“No,” I interjected and he looked up like he was realizing I was there for the first time and I stepped away from Mack, putting distance between us so that I could stand on my own. I needed to stand on my own for this, if only because I had to look like I believed what I was saying. For his sake. “He only thinks he hates you because he feels like you’ve hurt him but he’ll get better out there. He’ll get...perspective. He’ll adapt. He’s good at that. And then...then he’ll realize he doesn’t hate you. He hated this whole situation.”

“I did hurt him,” Fox insisted and Cyril stepped away, his hand over his mouth and his other arm wrapped protectively around his middle. “I coddled this for too long. I let him practically ferment in his own fucking misery—”

“We all did,” Mack interrupted quietly. “So you coddled him? So did Cyril. I missed the signs I should have seen. Signs I lived through. Atara became his crutch. Nikita enabled him. Tristan enabled Nikita. Not one person in this room--or even in this castle--is guiltless when it comes to Emory and the disaster that is his life.” He ran his fingers through his hair and my father watched him, surprised, at first, that he’d been interrupted at all, and then thoughtful, perhaps because it reached him. “But you did the best you could in a really terrible situation, Fox, and that’s a hell of a lot better than my father ever did for me, but the bottom line here is this, alright? You can’t fix Emory. Only Emory can fix Emory. So now you have to wait.”

Fox stared, first at Mack and then at me, and then he took my face between his hands and pressed his lips to my forehead. “I turned you into his keeper,” he breathed.

“I’ve always been his keeper,” I lamented, rolling my eyes and wiping at my cheeks to make sure that the tears that threatened to spill hadn’t yet fallen over. I was pleased to find that my battle against my emotional side was, for once, going in my favor. “Let’s not sugarcoat this, yeah? Emory was difficult to deal with before all of this happened. The ups and the downs, the all nighters--”

Cyril coughed, choking on an impromptu spill of laughter. “Do you remember, Fox,” he started, stepping forward so that he could put a hand on my father’s arm. Fox released me to face him, head tipped to one side. “When he woke all of us up at four in the morning because he’d finished a book and wanted to tell everyone the ending?”

I remembered. My father did, too, because he laughed at it, even though he’d wanted to throttle my brother at the time. “The time Edmund lost his collar,” I added. “And he tore the entire apartment to
pieces looking for it only for Edmund to puke it out an hour later. In six parts. He was frantic. Remember? *Panicked* over this thing and you kept promising him you’d just get him a new one but that wasn’t good enough. It had to be *that* collar.”

Fox rubbed his face again, but the smile was genuine when he recalled that particular instance, even if he’d wanted to kill Em that time, too.

“When Emory was good, he was great,” I reminded him. “But he wasn’t always good. He always had gone days. They’ve just...gotten worse.”

“And they’ll get better,” Mack insisted after a minute. “Really. I think distance from this place is the best thing for him right now and even if it wasn’t, it *is* the best thing for Nikita.”

My father heaved a sigh and sank into the closest chair. A moment later, Cyril was curled beside him, holding a glass of brandy out, tucked carefully Fox’s side. “How is Nikki? Has anyone checked?”

“I tried to,” Cyril admitted dryly. That was news to me and I followed Mack, sitting down on his knee in the chair across from them while Fox put away brandy like it was water. I couldn’t blame him, all things considered, and I wished that I could adequately convince him that my brother didn’t hate him. Couldn’t hate him. Fox was Emory’s hero. There was nobody in the world he idolized more and yes, maybe, he was angry, but anger with Emory came in and out like the tide. It always had...like a vicious cycle of mania and depression that clawed inside his chest, making him alternate between joy, fury, and sorrow with enough speed and force to give the average person whiplash.

My brother didn’t need enemies. He had himself. He *needed* a hero and, with time, he’d realize he still had that.

Fox swallowed a third glass of bitter alcohol waiting for Cyril’s response before he nudged him and my Lheiro sighed. “He’s angry,” he finally explained. “He’s...very angry. My Glacian is rusty, but I’m quite sure he told me to fuck off.” He flinched and Fox arched an eyebrow, surprised. “I can’t blame him,” Cyril added quickly. “It...the whole thing is kind of bitter for me, Fox. It reminds me too much of Harlan and...”

“It’s *nothing* like what my father did to us,” Fox protested harshly and I held my breath. This was a topic not typically discussed in front of me. Anything that happened before my Lheiro’s return to Coryth was, for the most part, blacklisted conversation when it came to my parents. I barely knew Harlan Bordelon. I remembered his death more than I remembered anything else, if only because my aunt and uncles had all come in from their respective homes and they’d spent the entire night huddled in our apartments talking about when they were children. Or rather...Mira, Fox, and Brentlyn had. Riordan had turned in, built a tent in the corridor with me and Emory, and helped us steal two pounds of chocolate from the kitchens.

So my memories of Harlan were manufactured scenarios I’d heard that night in the time I’d been allowed in the living area, sitting on the floor at my father’s feet while he absently ran his fingers over my head...and the taste of chocolate. Harlan always reminded me of chocolate.

He did not remind my parents of anything quite so sweet.

“We tore them apart,” Cyril protested weakly. “I know the circumstances are different. I know that we’re not doing this for the sake of heirs and family names. Gods know, we’d never...it just...I know what he feels, alright? He deserves to be angry.”

“Emory beat him so badly that there will be scars, Cyril,” my father spat through his teeth and I knew
he wasn’t angry at my Lheiro. I knew it. We all did. He was just...angry. We were all just angry. “I never--”

“Fox,” Cyril cut him off and inclined his head toward me.

“Please,” my father snorted. “He’s seventeen and he’s no hapless virgin. Gods, Cyril, he’s five minutes from naming Mackenzie as his--”

“Fox!” Cyril’s hand sealed over his mouth and I felt my cheeks color. I could feel Mack laughing behind me, struggling to keep it silent, but his chest shook with it and his fingers dug into my hips. “I think we’re done with the alcohol on an empty stomach.” He took the bottle back with his free hand, the other still over Fox’s mouth, until he withdrew with a disgusted groan, shaking his fingers out. “You licked me! What are you, five?! Ugh!”

Mack’s attempt at remaining silent failed miserably a second later and he buried his face in my back, laughter vibrating through my shoulders.

By the time we reached the corridor in front of my bedroom, Mack’s wheezing giggles had started to die off enough for him to speak. “Your parents seem...so fucking happy together,” he finally managed, leaning against the wall while I opened the door. He followed me in a second later, pressing kisses to the top of my head while I attempted to bat him away. He, perhaps, had indulged in too much wine when we’d been eating, probably as an attempt to deal with the suffocating melancholy, and now he was pleasantly buzzed. I’d thought the need for touch had been mine and mine alone, but I’d evidently been wrong.

“Ah, well, nobody’s perfect, I guess. What was your father trying to say? Five minutes from naming me what?” He nuzzled into my neck and I shrugged him away, peeling my shirt off in the one second he gave me before he was nibbling pleasantly at the pulse on my neck.

I grumbled. “You’re very distracting,” I pointed out, my face flushed, though not from the result of his action. It was from the very real knowledge of what my father had almost said and what Cyril had saved my ass from having to explain...for, oh, two minutes.

Mack backed away, hands up, and then tugged his own shirt over his head to throw it at me. He had a scar on the side of his abdomen that I liked to look at and I focused on it then, on the pearled rope of soft flesh. ‘Fell off a dock,’ he’d explained to me when I’d asked, running my tongue along it the first time I’d really noticed it. ‘Got caught on some old fishing tack and had to tear the hook out to get my head above water.’

I don’t know why I thought about it then, maybe because I liked to look at him...so different from me. Muscles toned by work rather than intentional instruction, calloused hands, tan lines—he was more Corian colored than I was and his skin looked sun-kissed from the day before when he’d spent the afternoon listening to me talk by the pond in the gardens, shirt discarded, sleepily following along.
I caught myself before I started drooling but not before he chucked me under the chin with one curved finger. “You trying to paint a mental picture, tiny? Because I feel like you’re enjoying this way more than you usually do.”

“I always enjoy it,” I protested weakly and he tilted his head, mouth curved in a coy smile.

“You’re trying to get out of answering that,” he accused and then he looked me over with the same hungry eyes I’d been staring at him with. “Would have worked, too, if you’d just kept your mouth shut and let me do the staring.”

It wouldn’t work, though. Mack was like a dog with a bone when he got onto something. He hounded after answers relentlessly. “He was...trying and failing to be funny,” I attempted and Mack sat down on the edge of the bed, gesturing for me to continue as I kicked my boots off and rolled my eyes. “He meant to say that I’m five minutes from naming you my consort anyway. There’s this long ceremony and you get a special thing sigil—” I huffed, blowing my hair off of my face while he watched me. “It’s different than marriage. Nobody changes their name. I mean, Cyril is my father’s consort…and his husband? Fox wanted to do the whole wedding thing to prove a point, I think. I’m not supposed to ask. The point is that a consort never carries an equal title. A spouse does. Cyril is just an exception because he was still Infinito so he could never rule with my father.”

Mack was staring and I’d expected him to get up and walk away, go fleeing for the hills because these were serious conversations. My face was flushed sixteen shades of red from my hairline to my collar and all he did was...watch me. His expression was searching, eyes contemplative and lips parted. “Is that what you want?” he asked after a second.

I hesitated. To be totally truthful, the thought had crossed my mind, but I was seventeen. I wouldn’t have been the youngest member of my family to take a consort or a spouse, but it still felt...young. Then again, I was almost as old as Cyril was when he’d had Emory, so it wasn’t that much of a stretch, really--

It just felt like a lot. A whole lot.

“I…” I started, wringing my hands. “Well, I suppose. Eventually. I don’t…” I swallowed hard. I’d been so confident that day in the street and I’d tried my hand at building him back up into the person I knew he could be and I felt like it had done wonders, but now, faced with scrutiny and rejection, that confidence withered like roses left in the sun.

“Take your time,” he murmured. “Big talk, huh?”

I shot him a glare, but he wasn’t teasing. I could see it in his face that he was taking it every bit as seriously as it was meant to be taken and that just made the flustered state I was in even worse. Anxiety clawed at my stomach and I sat down in the chair in the corner. I needed distance from him. If he got too close, started with his touching and his kissing, and his leaving little bruises on my throat, then I would lose my train of thought and we’d end up fucking until we fell asleep.

It wasn’t a bad idea, really, but then we’d have just woken up with an even more awkward shadow looming over that earliest hour of the morning and that was my favorite time with him--the sleepy, half-awake cuddles and the warm brush of his skin on mine, my cheek to his chest…

“I’ve thought about it,” I admitted eventually and he nodded. “And...and ugh...I asked Fox once how he knew because I wanted to write it down so that I would know--”

“You are so cute,” I heard him whisper and I wrinkled my nose. His mouth shut at the same moment.
I huffed indignantly. “He told me that he knew…years before they were ever together. He just knew, because when he thought of the future, Cyril was always in it. Other people changed, but he was constant and you…you’re my constant.” I rubbed my face and I swore I could feel the heat radiate into my palms. “So, yeah, I want it. I just…I guess, I felt like you’d just tell me I was too young to make a decision like that.”

“You are young,” he reminded me. “But I think you know what you want and…” He lifted his shoulders. “Look, you’re a choice that I make every day, you know? I get up and you’re here and I think, ‘Yes. Atara. This is what I want.’ And that’s good, yeah? I don’t feel like I need to be tied to that, but if you want it, darlin’, then by all means, we can tie it up. You look good in bondage anyway.”

It had been so sweet, everything he said, right up until that last point where he slid a page of my humor from my book and peppered his darling declarations with it. I pushed myself up from the chair and threw myself at him, laughing when we fell back into the bed. “Filthy!” I giggled into his mouth when he kissed me. “Filthy, filthy mouth. What am I gonna do with you?”

“Oh, I have a few suggestions…”

Chapter End Notes

--Mackenzie--
Whatever It Takes, Imagine Dragons
You Don't Own Me, Grace ft. G-Eazy
Atomic Man, Portugal, The Man
Unsteady, X Ambassadors
Coin Operated Boy, The Dresden Dolls

--Atara--
You Should See Me in a Crown, Billie Eilish
A Little Wicked, Valerie Broussard
Renegades, X Ambassadors
What the Water Gave Me, Florence and the Machine
Devil's Backbone, The Civil Wars
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first ten days were the worst.

It was a monotonous cycle that I couldn’t break, but that was the point—establishing routine. Rigid, unbending routine that never fluctuated or changed--wake up at six, breakfast at seven, clean up by eight, walk, talk, garden, lunch at noon, clean up by one--and just as Lysander had told me, nobody even acknowledged that I was anyone special. Some people couldn’t. Some of them sat in wheeled chairs playing chess on the big porch under the hanging baskets (clivia the old gardener told me when she caught me looking at them.) Some of them didn’t speak at all. One of the girls, much younger than my brother, had a body bent in odd places with limbs that didn’t work right, legs like tissue paper, and eyes that couldn’t focus. When she tried to speak, her words came out in guttering heaves like she had to push the noise from deep in her chest, but she read in six languages.

One of the men who had to be well over eighty years in age shuffled around the ground floor all day holding conversations with anyone who would listen, but he promptly forgot them the moment that he walked away.

There was a girl sort of like me who was prone to a crippling depression that had once kept her bedridden for weeks at a time. I thought I recognized her as Natalya Valmont’s cousin, but we weren’t supposed to ask. Her name was Josephine, but she insisted that we call her Joey and though she wasn’t often cheerful or talkative, she had moments during which her smile could light up a room. We did not speak much, Joey and I, I think because we recognized each other, but it had been nice to see someone my own age those first few days when all I could think about was going home.

Eating was difficult. I wasn’t hungry, but after skipping two meals, Lysander had shown me exactly how they’d have force fed me if I refused to eat and I didn’t fancy being strapped to a chair with a tube down my throat so that they could funnel feed me porridge. So I ate even when it all seemed tasteless to me and the gardener, whose name was Rosa, watched me avidly from the corner of the table when I obsessively rearranged the blossoms in the jar at the center while people cleaned up around me.

‘Jasmine and ginger,’ she informed me that time and I’d scowled in response, trying to arrange the little flowers so that they alternated yellow and white.

The talks were the hardest. I dreaded the two hours each day that I had to spend with Lysander (one in the morning and one in the afternoon--we’d go down to one, he promised, when I started to improve, but I’d been wrestled to the floor two days in when I’d thrown a glass at a member of the staff in a fit of blind rage.)

It was a wide, circular room with a pointed roof. From the center, a series of tapestries had been hung and pinned right to the edge of the ceiling where the windows on the butter yellow walls started.
They were varying scenes, those tapestries, some Corian and some Lierian. One was the Chalon family crest, another was a family tree like the one I had at home, and I was included on the one that hung in the asylum, too, far down at the bottom where Cyril and Ambrose were. It was sweet, I thought, that Lysander had included his adopted nephew on a genealogical study when so many others would have left him out.

Two simple chairs stood in the room, facing each other, and Lysander occupied one. I was always sat in the other, my fingers curled around the seat, white-knuckled and nervous. For ten days, I was silent, squirming uncomfortably under his attention. He asked for details I had never had to speak about or share with anyone, save Nikita, who hadn’t pried but simply listened. Lysander pried, determined to peel the lid off of my traumas and drag them out into the light. ‘You have to deal with them, Emory. They won’t just go away,’ he told me.

He asked about the beach and I chewed through the insides of my cheeks. He asked about my brother and I dug my fingernails into the bottom of the chair, swallowing the pounding of my heart. He asked about my parents, my uncles, what had happened in the dungeon, the burning of my village when I was a child, the anxiety that had plagued me since Fox and Cyril had left me to fight the war in the marshes—and I was silent.

Day after day, hour after hour, I stared at the floor until he asked something innocuous. ‘Rosa saw you rearranging the clivia baskets again today.’ Or, ‘I heard you spent the morning washing apples with the cook.’

So I told him that clivia grew in the gardens at home along the walls beneath my bedroom and I told him that apples reminded me of someone I cared for, but I never divulged more information than that. I couldn’t. Everytime I tried, the words would toss against my teeth, shuttered by a clenched jaw, and I would swallow them back down until my mouth tasted of bitter bile and salt.

But Lysander was patient. He waited and he watched.

And I grew...comfortable. The sounds were different. Instead of the crash of waves breaking against the cliffside or the shore, there was the low hum of insects in the forest around us. Instead of the choking smell of the city and a million bodies pressed in tight, there was the smell of flowering orchids and jasmine, of apple trees and lemon polish, of fresh laundry and damp earth grown over by thick moss. The triggers that had existed for me in Coryth were no longer present beyond the Witch Wood and instead of spending all of my time trying to forget the way the beach sounded, I relaxed.

It was gradual--like a long, slow breath that I didn’t know I was holding finally sliding free of my lungs and the stress drained from my aching bones like water down gutters. I could breathe for the first time in months. I slept through the night without waking up screaming. Food started to have taste again and though grief still stuck in me like an arrow in a wound, it was no longer quite so enveloping. I wasn’t drowning in it.

So on the tenth day, I ventured out into the grounds. I spent a morning with a litter of puppies who didn’t care that I was hurting and sought only to lick my face or chew on my fingers. They were an accidental litter, the stable hand informed me, bred with a stray that had loped out of the woods and gotten into the walls from under the fencing. They weren’t all coal black like the great guard dogs that circled the perimeter. These were gray, like polished stone, and I quickly grew attached to the smallest in the litter, a tiny male with eyes like warm milk chocolate and little white feet. In secret, I called him Teilo, the Lierian word for boot and then Rosa the gardener caught me calling him by name.

That night, the old woman stopped by the door of my bedroom and carefully sat Teilo down just inside. ‘I asked Lys if you could keep him. He said as long as you clean up after him, he can stay.’
And so I found two friends that day: A runt with ears that hung nearly to his paws, more wrinkles than anything else, and an old woman with a bad hunched back and hands so worn and calloused that they could have passed for sailors’ fingers.

Four weeks in to my stay, Lysander finally found the button to push that made me talk.

He let me bring the dog with me to talking time and so instead of in the chair, I sat on the floor while Teilo chewed my fingers, his tail thumping against the wood. I liked to dig my fingers into the wrinkles in his little back while he rolled around. There was something about having him close that made me feel...more. He needed me and he didn’t judge me when things were hard. He didn’t snap back at me when I was upset. He couldn’t. Teilo just crawled into bed with me, found his place against my chest, and laid there until my panic subsided or the sobbing stopped.

“He’s been good for you,” Lysander commented quietly, gesturing to the animal in my lap. He’d been living with me in the house for three weeks by then and he had grown to the size of a large house cat. “I haven’t had to drag you out of bed myself since he came inside.”

“If I don’t get up and feed him, he starts to eat my clothes,” I complained gently and the puppy made a noise, almost like he was disgusted with my calling him out on his bad behavior, but Lysander only chuckled. “He’s not my first dog, anyway. I had another. His name was Edmund.”

Lysander listened and I carefully recounted Sir Edmund, the dog I’d found begging outside the palace walls who had terrible mange, fleas, and parasites. I’d spent weeks bathing him in vinegar and slathering him with poultices that I got from dog handlers in the city. His hair had never grown back completely (sometimes that happens, I was told, but it doesn’t hurt) and he was missing most of his teeth so his tongue hung out the side of his mouth. At some point, I thought someone might have kicked him in the face because his snout was bent at an odd angle and I had to feed him directly from my palm because he couldn’t quite get the hang of sticking his nose in a bowl.

But I’d loved him and he’d relied on me. Those three years with Edmund had been among the most tantrum-free of my life.

“So you’re craving affection,” Lysander pointed out. “You’re actively seeking out animals that can’t judge you or your lack of emotional control because they don’t know any better. Is that what you did with Nikita Novak? Sought out affection from someone who had grown up in a brutal situation...someone who, perhaps, didn’t really know that things were wrong?”

“He knew,” I corrected. I’d expected the words to hit my teeth or clog in my throat like the lump that forms when tears are imminent but nothing happened. Teilo rolled over onto his belly, tail swishing against the floor, long ears out like wings around his head while I rubbed his fat little legs. “Look, I know what happened with Kita was wrong--”

Lysander interrupted. “And yet you kept doing it?”

I made a face, my expression twisted into a grimace. “I wanted...I wanted someone to understand what I felt like. I wanted him to hurt the way that I hurt and I know it’s wrong. I know there’s a way to...do that safely and we...weren’t.” I felt my cheeks flush red and I shook my head, staring down at the dog instead of at Lysander. “But I needed an outlet and he blames himself for his sister’s suicide. He has this...ridiculous notion that I can absolve him of responsibility for what happened to her or that I can forgive him for helping drive her there…”

“Can you?”

“Even if I could, it wouldn’t help. Nikita is...so northern it hurts. He won’t stop until he feels like
he’s paid for it.” I shrugged then and Lysander sat back in his chair, drumming his fingers against his legs.

Teilo grabbed the strap on one of my boots and tried to pull, growling and snarling like he was four times his actual size.

After a moment, the older man continued his line of question. “And you care for this boy? Nikita? You’ve said that you love him.”

I snorted in response and, as if he were mimicking me, the puppy sneezed. “Yes, but I don’t deserve him.”

“Because you hurt him?”

“Because I feel like my skin isn’t mine anymore.” It took me a minute to answer while I grappled with the idea, watching Teilo while he stared up at me, licking his little wet nose. “I took my brother down to that beach because he’s...socially inept, to say the least. I thought I was doing him a favor. I was trying to change things...make them better. Instead, I ruined both of our lives. His leg never healed and I’m...sick.”

“Well,” Lysander started. “That’s what happens when you try to change things, Emory. Things change, but none of this is your fault. You hold yourself accountable for the beach, but where is the accountability for those boys that attacked you? You wouldn’t hold me accountable if I got run over by a carriage in a market just because I was there. You were just there. As terrible as it is, this is a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, son. That’s not your fault. It’s not your brother’s fault. It’s certainly not Nikita Novak’s fault. So why punish him? Because he wants you to?”

I had no answer. I’d never really looked at it like that...as circumstantial, not when I’d been so quick to lay the blame on myself so thickly for killing Atara’s ability to daydream like he was still a child. So I was quiet, if only because I didn’t know how to respond, and he was quiet while I thought on it with my heart hammering in my chest.

Could it have all really been that easy? To just absolve myself of guilt for my brother’s injury, for my own destruction…

“You are your own worst enemy, Emory,” Lysander eventually added softly. “And we’re almost out of time. So I want you to try something for me. Instead of disappearing with your new friend there the next time you’re upset, take a breath and remind yourself that you are in control. Do something methodical. Pick a routine. Learn to rely on yourself so that the dog is a companion and not a crutch.”

And so I did.

It wasn’t as simple as Lysander made it sound that afternoon, but the next time that rage boiled up in my chest (it was my birthday and I wasn’t home, but Atara had written me a letter and I’d gotten so angry wanting to be there with him, eating myself sick on sweets the way we always had together) I took a breath.

I looked down at Teilo, wagging his tail and staring up at me because he knew that rage meant I would disappear into my room and I’d scream or I’d cry and he would lick the tears off of my face.

No screaming, I reminded myself. No crying.

It was hard those first few times. I failed a handful, dissolving into frantic hysterics so that I had to be sedated and carted back to my room with the door closed, the dog on the other side to keep me from
hurting him, whining and licking at the bottom of the door. Sometimes there was no trigger at all. Sometimes it just filled up my chest cavity like water in a reservoir and all of a sudden I wanted to hurt someone. I’d sit and I’d think back on Nikita, squirming and screaming beneath me, welted and bloodied and bruised--

And I stopped.

It took three months, but I stopped. I caught the livid rage by the throat before it boiled out of my mouth and I flexed my fingers. I’d been standing on the porch, enraged when the girl with the bent limbs wheeled by me in her chair and brushed against my aching hip. I’d wanted to flip that chair and send her sprawling over the porch. I wanted to scream until the world burned around me.

Instead, my eyes darted over the porch and there was Rosa with her clivia baskets, painstakingly pressing soil down into fresh ones, which she scooped from a mostly empty metal bucket.

“Where did you get the dirt?” I asked her and she startled, watery blue eyes staring up at me from a face full of weather-worn wrinkles. She didn’t answer and I repeated myself. “You’re almost out of that black dirt. Where did you get it? I’ll go get some for you.”

I thought, for a brief second, that she might protest against the idea of sending me to go dig for the rich black soil that she put into those baskets, but after a moment, she handed the pail to me with knobby fingers. “At the western most edge of the estate,” she answered, her voice warm and rich with years of use. It reminded me of crackling fireplaces and ancient, worn string instruments well-used and well loved. “There’s a little brook. I dig it out of the side with the linden tree on it.”

That was how I found myself elbows deep in mud with a dog that was more filth than animal, carting bucket after bucket back to Rosa. We replaced the dirt in the baskets and then we heaped more of it around the rose bushes. We spread it over the vegetable garden she kept and as we worked, she named each plant--damask roses, linden trees, sweetbriar, basil, tomatoes, peppers, honey melon, and apple trees. She told me about her sons, one who had died in the marshes and the other who lived in Eden with his wife and their children. She talked about she loved them, but she didn’t get to see them much, and she’d started working for Lysander because she’d been bored at home alone and because she liked to think of all of his ‘patients’ as her surrogate children.

It was backbreaking work. I wasn’t used to hard labor and my fingers blistered. My skin burned in the sun. I was covered in sweat and mud, aching down into my bones by the time the dinner bell rang on the porch, but there was a sense of fulfillment that accompanied it. I was hungry for the first time in over a year.

So I went back the next day and I tore up weeds. Rosa gave me gloves to put on over the bandaged blisters, saying she didn’t want me losing fingers to infection now that she’d found a willing worker. She told me stories about her kids that day and compared ripping out the weeds to fighting an invading army. “It’s a good deed,” she said as I dumped another bucket of weeds into a fire we’d started. I watched them shrivel and blacken while she talked. “It’s like taking the bad ones out and saving only the good. Be great if we could do that with people, too, huh?”

“Yeah.” It was the first word I’d said to her since she’d handed me that pail and told me where to find her black dirt.

“It’s Emory, right?”

I nodded and wiped sweat and mud off of my face with the bottom of my shirt. I expected her to keep talking, but she only gestured me over to another portion of their massive gardens and we kept right on digging. I learned about roses--how much to water them, where to plant them, what the dirt
should look like. I learned about flowers that were easy to grow and ones that were notoriously
finicky (clematis was simple, orchids were harder.) I learned about fruits and vegetables and when
they were ripe and how some of them were poisonous before or after they were a specific color.

I learned that when the windows fogged at night, we had to mound the soil and the mulch up around
the roses to keep the roots from freezing. They could recover from frost, Rosa told me, if you were
careful. It took time. It took careful fingers and gentle coaxing and hours of work.

She plucked basil one day and stuck it under my nose. “They should bottle this,” she complained.
“We should bottle this. We’d make millions.”

I didn’t tell her that I didn’t need the money. She seemed to think that I was just some silly little boy
of no importance. Her vision was going, I could tell, and maybe she couldn’t see the marks on my
face. Maybe she didn’t care. Maybe she was so old and lived so far from any big city that she didn’t
know that I didn’t paint them on every morning.

It didn’t matter to Rosa just like it didn’t matter to Teilo and the three of us turned the gardens at
Lysander’s asylum into a sanctuary of our own. I spent almost every day out there with that little old
woman and my rambunctious dog who ran up and down the rows of the orchard while we examined
apples for holes that indicated worms. Teilo ate the ones that fell, growing larger by the day...from
palm sized to cat sized to standing nearly as tall as my hip with the same ridiculously large ears that
stretched open like wings when he shook his slate colored head.

And I learned strategy.

When frustration boiled up in my stomach, I tore into the weeds around the house. When Joey
ground my nerves intentionally, I reminded myself that we were all healing like roses trying to
recover from a frost. It would take time.

Across the table, Lysander smiled at me, as if he noticed, and I marked the day as a personal victory.
I could get better, I told myself. I had to get better. I had to fix what I’d ruined with Atara and Nikita.
I owed them that much. I owed them so much more, really, when I thought it. Atara had shouldered
so much for me. Nikita had born the brunt of my anger and would have kept right on taking it until
the end.

I didn’t deserve their forgiveness, but I knew them both enough to know that I didn’t have to ask for
it. It would be there, waiting for me, when I was ready to accept it, and I wanted to make absolutely
sure that I didn’t have to earn it from them again. I wanted to sit on the roof of the keep again and
listen to Atara read me what he’d written about the fish in the bay that day and how their scales
glittered in the light like a thousand little rubies encrusted in their skin. I wanted to wrap my arms
around Nikita and press kisses into his back instead of belts. I wanted to map his body with my
mouth instead of my fingernails and promise him that whatever guilt he still carried for Milena, I
could forgive him for it...if that’s what he needed, I could do it. I could offer him that, even if it didn’t
make sense to me.

“You don’t have a noble’s hands anymore,” Lysander pointed out four months in. “And I think Rosa
has a crush on you.”

We both laughed and when he nudged me with his elbow, standing there in the window of the big
round talking room, I didn’t flinch. “You’re getting better,” he added.

“I feel better.”

“Tell me about the beach, Emory.”
And for the first time in nearly two years, it didn’t hurt to remember.

Chapter End Notes

--Mackenzie--
Work Song, Hozier
Give Me Love, Ed Sheeran
Believer, Imagine Dragons
Wings, Birdy
The Night We Met, Lord Huron
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Mackenzie

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Typical gore. Porn.

"Glenning," the guard that stood in front Atara's offices--the Lierian 'embassy' in the palace, if you will--pulled me aside one afternoon while the youngest Prince poured over the legal paperwork that bound me to him. It had taken time on both sides of fence, if you will. The Corians on the council detested the idea of him naming me--a commoner that some of them knew as a whore--as a consort. Some of the Lierians still demanded a Rite and were fighting him tooth and nail on every front. They were testing him, seeing how far they could push, and I heard him slam his hands down on the desk in frustration before the chair scraped out from under him. I knew that if I turned around he would be staring despondently out the window, one arm over his middle and the tip of his thumb in his mouth, staring out into the market.

I left Atara to his wallowing and the guard pulled me out into the hall, his expression grim. "There's something the Infinito should see," he said quietly. "But I thought, given your...relationship...that I ought to warn you first."

"Warn me?" I arched an eyebrow and rocked on my heels. Atara had kept no secrets about me and I knew, in part, that was all part of his game to avoid the Rite and while I detested being a pawn, I couldn't blame him on this. I didn't want him taking the Rite. I wasn't as forgiving as Fox. I was jealous, prone to violence and lashing out. I'd grown up in a whore house with a tavern in the bottom. Rough and tumble was just part of the package with me.

I brushed my hand over my face and thought absently that I had to shave. The guard rubbed the back of his neck, almost nervously. He was a rank below me. Atara had made me something akin to his second. There was a word for it in the Lierian tongue but I'd only ever heard him say it a few times. I equated it with his mate. Like Fox or Raever. Emory had jokingly told me it translated closer to 'Queen' once and Atara had chased him from the room, lobbing bread rolls at his head in the process. He'd missed. Emory was wicked quick when he was having a good day.

I hoped, wherever he was, that he was having more good days.

The guard coughed and I had to draw myself out of my daydreams of Atara's brother finally healing. "There have been--" He hesitated and wrung his hands while I waited, rolling my eyes. I'd never been much of an eye-roller until I'd started spending time with Atara, who had mastered the art.

"I don't have all day," I pointed out. "The longer he's alone in there, the longer it's going to take me to calm him down over whatever fucked up shit was in this morning's report from the coast." He tipped his head like perhaps he thought I already knew something and my scowled deepened.
He pursed his lips, obviously irritated with my attitude, but that was a fairly common issue with me. I tended to bounce between painfully quiet and cocky bastard, according to Atara. I wasn't even sure how that worked, but he was the brains of our little duo. I was just the collector of whispers. Or I had been, prior to him legally declaring me as his consort a few days prior. The maids had been forthcoming with information if I batted my eyes enough and because I wasn't wearing the royal sigil or Infinito tattoos, it worked.

But the royal sigil, in Atara’s colors, was now pinned to my sleeve. No amount of eyelash batting was going to do me any good anymore.

"There have been some rather violent murders in the fishing district," he finally mumbled and I stopped, my teasing and goading vanishing with the knowledge. The fishing district was primarily Lierian. Primarily the Godless cult, Atara's little sect, the newest tribe. My mouth went dry and I swallowed hard as he continued. "The uh...the representative has asked that I bring the Lord Infinito down to the port to see the uh...the remains, sir."

I chewed my bottom lip and nodded grimly. This was all part of ruling. All things Atara would have to learn to deal with and I dismissed him, venturing into the offices quietly. He was standing by the window, right where I thought he would be, seventeen going on fifty. He wore the traditional wear of the Infinito, all white with those long black boots that made me drool sometimes. I hadn't had the courage to ask him to wear them--just them--for me. Or rather, it wasn't courage so much as it was patience because it meant peeling him out of the boots, then his trousers, and then putting the boots back on. They came up to the middle of his thighs, all soft leather tight around his skin, buckled and laced. He looked back at me expectantly, his thumb tracing the line on his bottom lip that I so loved to suck on.

I gave him an apologetic look and his shoulders fell. "What is it?" he asked quietly. "I don't think I can take more bad news today, Mackenzie."

"Ilyia is requesting your presence, Lord Infinito. I don't suppose you have a magic wand for scraping dead Lierian off the cobblestone, do you?"

Atara groaned but he hoisted his bow up from the corner and strung it over his back with his quiver. "Tristan might," he grumbled. "But if I show up in the fishing district with an alchemist, people will quite literally shit themselves."

He ordered a carriage brought around to the front of the palace and spent the half hour it took to prepare the horses trying to sleep against my side while we waited. Ultimately, he failed, and I followed him into the carriage while he was sleepily rubbing his eyes.

Two more guards hopped onto the back and another sat in the front as we made our way to the port district. We traveled in silence. Atara had his eyes shut but he was rubbing his temples like he had a headache from hell, one leg folded beneath him. He was still leaning into my side, wincing with each bump and at the cacophony of noise in the streets. It grew louder as we approached the district and a crowd was gathered around the cheap, ramshackle apartment buildings that were built against the
wall of Coryth. They used the wall as a support and some of them even seemed to lean, structurally unsound.

The carriage stopped and a guard opened the door. "Far as we get, Your Grace," he chirped, his face apologetic. "Crowd's too thick to get the horses any deeper."

He took a deep breath, my strong-willed boy, and climbed down from the carriage with me. I kept a tight grip on my weapon and he was crushed between me and another guard. Nobody really tried to reach for him. They were all too busy staring. Murder in Coria was rare. They were a people steeped in tradition. Among the court, hiring an assassin was a common thing, but in the masses, this was almost unheard of and it followed so closely on the heels of Cadmus and the exile of the eldest Prince.

It was hot, mid-summer, and the city smelled nauseating. Like people, waste, horses, and the fish coming in from the port. It churned my stomach and I could tell Atara was breathing through his mouth, shading his eyes as we shuffled him through the crowd. They moved for us, parting like an opening gate, and I smelled the death before I saw it. It was putrid and hot, baking in the summer sun, rotting flesh and the distinct buzz of insects drawn to the putrefication process.

"Oh, Gods," Atara gagged when the crowd finally spit us out into the emptied center of the circle. They were gathered around a building with a spiked wooden fence, a communal house with the symbol of the Godless painted into the side of it. That wasn't really the focus though, just a minor detail, a backdrop to the horror on the fence.

Three Lierians, all gutted like fish, were impaled on the fence posts so that the spikes came up out of their throats. Their entrails and organs littered the ground beneath them, making the dirt on the cobblestone a sticky, muddy, congealed mess that stank of putrid meat. Flies crawled over their open, unseeing eyes and their tongues stuck out, bulbous and purple. I winced and Atara recoiled. I felt him shudder against me, his abdomen constricting like he was heaving and struggling not to vomit but he didn't turn away. He looked on in horror until Ilyia approached him. "This has been happening for three nights," she told him bitterly, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. She'd had the line in her lip tattooed there permanently. "They've crossed a line, Lord Infinito. This..." She gestured to the bodies and grimaced. "This is a message."

I stepped over the entrails carefully, leaving Atara standing with Ilyia while I surveyed the corpses. They were littered with jagged, torn, puncture marks—a wound I recognized as a Corian serrated blade, a common weapon carried by street gangs comprised mostly of children growing up in conditions like I had. They were small knives though, not usually long enough to kill. They were the sort of weapons carried by boys that engaged in pissing matches with other boys over whose gang of rugrats controlled what street for their races and games. I'd stitched a few of these wounds up before, usually across the forearm. They left nasty scars. That was why the boys liked them. I'd had one as a child. I had a few scars, too.

That wasn't the most disturbing part of it. The disturbing part of it was the other wound, the one that had spilled their guts out. Two slices, parallel along the abdomen, resulting in a thin, distended strip of skin hanging between the wounds so that their bellies looked like bloody smiles. A Lierian hook blade, turned at the proper angle, made this injury. That, combined with the greenish tinge to the whites of their eyes, told an unlikely and unsettling story.

Atara watched me from a distance and looked almost hopeful when I turned around. "This is bad," I told him quietly, stepping over the entrails again. His face fell and his eyes grew even more solemn than they usually were. I took him by his arms and bit my bottom lip, scraping it with my teeth. Ilyia leaned in.
"You recognize the wounds, Glenning," she said stiffly and I nodded. Atara looked between us.

"It's curious," I finally explained, picking the word carefully. It was curious. That wasn't a lie. It was just, perhaps, not as incriminating as it should have been. "The bodies have wounds from Corian and Lierian weapons. It's obviously a display, a message. Aimed at you. I suspect they'll stop with the butchery now that they know you've seen it. No doubt they're watching, whoever they are."

Ilyia rocked on her heels and shook her head. "Still...the streets aren't safe. Something has to be done."

The youngest Prince ground his teeth and his eyes hardened. He was angry now, rightfully so. Atara was slow to anger but senseless acts like this tended to do it. "Impose a curfew," he said stiffly. "I don't want any of your people out after dark, full or halflings, not even if they can pass as human. Tell them to keep their doors locked and their windows shut. I'll have the guard doubled here until we figure out what this is and how to stop it."

He knew, of course, what it was. We both did. He had alienated half the Lierian council, threatened my mother, and legitimized a new religion with himself as a God. Atara wasn't power hungry. Quite the contrary. He despised his positions. He'd done this for Emory but he wasn't trained to be a leader. He had the potential and none of the education for it. I had to purse my lips at the idea of a curfew for the Lierians. It wouldn't do him any good for me to argue with him while a member of his cabinet was standing there.

Ilyia took her orders and we escorted him back to the carriage. He was sullen and silent, his brow furrowed, and I didn't speak until the door shut tightly with us inside. It was sweltering hot in there. He was sweaty and sticky already, red faced and flushed. It did things to me, seeing him like that. "You imposed a curfew on the Lierians and not the Corians," I pointed out stiffly. "You're making the gap bigger."

"What would you have me do, Mackenzie?" he snapped. "I don't have power over the Corians. I can only ask the King to impose a curfew. We can't punish everyone for the crimes of a few."

"So you punish the victims," I said flatly and Atara turned on me, glaring, eyes bright and wide. His fists were clenched. He had too much power. Too much responsibility. For all his brains and book-smarts, he was still only a teenager.

He was seething, nearly shaking with rage. "I am not punishing them," he snarled. "I'm protecting them. There is no other option! I don't like the idea any more than you do but I can't have people being butchered in the streets and strung up like meat to dry in the sun. That was a heinous, despicable, unfathomable thing to do to another person. I can't even comprehend the sort of psychological mindset someone would require to commit such an atrocity!"

His vocabulary killed me. Seventeen-year-olds using atrocity and heinous in a sentence, right?

I couldn't help the small smile that broke over my face at his perfectly rational rage. "People are animals, darlin'," I drawled and he scowled at me. "Corians in particular. You legalize brutal public torture but Fox relies on you to order executions because he can't. I'd rather be executed than take fifty lashes in front of a crowd. What's most disturbing is that it wasn't just Corians that did that, unless they're buying Lierian poisons and weaponry. The eyes were green tinged. That's a sign of Lierian poison. It's a sort of paste they slather their weapons in. One cut. Massive renal failure. Makes me think they've got a cage full of people pissing blood somewhere, waiting to be strung up as messages against that bloody cult. You should have Ilyia bring those bodies to Tristan."

Atara kicked the seat across from us and hunched over, his hands locked behind his head. He
growled, obviously pissed off, not that I could blame him, really. I just tended to take things a little less seriously than he did. I was very much of the mindset that there was no use crying over spilled milk. They were already dead. There was nothing to be done about it and stressing out over it wouldn’t solve the problem. Solutions would solve the problem but he was clearly too upset to start using his over-sized brain toward any logical end to the problem. "What am I going to do, Mackenzie?" he lamented, his voice muffled by his position. I loved that he used my real name. Most people didn’t realize Mack was short for anything and even if they did, I was more likely to punch someone in the throat for calling me Mackenzie or, worse, Kenzie.

I wouldn’t have minded Kenzie from him, though.

I sighed and put a hand between his shoulders, rubbing gently. I was only half-joking when I answered. "Me?" I offered and he looked back over his shoulder, a grin on his exhausted face. He sat up and his expression changed--from that innocent, adorable boy with too much on his shoulders to the little brat that had kissed me in front of Emory all those months ago. He licked his lips and banged on the window in the front of the carriage until the driver opened it and called back to him.

"Your Grace?"

Atara’s hand landed on my thigh and I felt my breath hitch. "Keep driving until I tell you to head back to the palace, please," he ordered quietly and I heard the driver agree. The window shut and Atara pulled the tiny curtain over it. He shifted back to face me, my mouth dry and my eyes wide, and slipped easily to his knees. "You, you said?"

"I think," I managed to get out while he unbuckled my belt with slim, deft fingers. "You know, if you do this, everyone is going to know."

He lifted an eyebrow and grinned, opening the front my trousers with his little hands so that he could reach in and pull me out. He licked his lips again. It was killing me. That gesture always killed me. It made me want to flip him over and just take him without the foreplay but he was already running his tongue up the bottom of my cock and staring up at me with those wide, big, childlike green eyes.

I had long since come to term with the fact that my relationship with Atara was totally inappropriate. He was young and naïve, tender-hearted and adorably idealistic. The world I’d come from had crushed all of those things out of me before I’d turned eight and touching him felt like touching clean linen with filthy hands. I was flesh and bone though...and I loved him. I’d whored my way through half of Coryth before I was his age, but nobody had ever treated me like he did--like I had value and, sometimes, I believed him when he said that I did. I didn’t just want in his pants. I wanted him, entirely, as a person. I loved him for our conversations, for his attitude problems, for his undying devotion to the people he cared for--myself included--especially Emory. He was the most devoted, adoring person I’d ever met.

I was lucky. I’d always been lucky. I was well known for being the bastard that narrowly missed being shot because I wasn’t paying attention and walked into the firing range, that skirted death, that always came out on top, and now I was the consort of the Prince. I wasn’t making any friends. More rivals than anything, people jealous of what I’d managed to get, but he was mine. That was all that mattered to me.

I groaned at the sight of him, my fingers in his dark hair. It was the color of chocolate, not quite as dark as Fox and Emory’s, but a rich, dark brown and soft as satin.

He grabbed my hips and took me in with an open throat and watering eyes, his teeth sheathed by his lips, and my breath hitched. I squirmed in my seat, my hips fighting against the pressure of his hands while he slid his mouth up and down me, fucking his own throat until his mouth and chin were
coated and soaked in saliva and the bitter beginning of me. It was sickeningly hot in the carriage. My clothes stuck to me and I could barely breathe through the suffocating heat so when his mouth slid free of me with a pop, I hauled him up by his arms and set to stripping his clothes off.

He was soaked with sweat. It dripped down the center of his chest and his back. He helped me undress him, squirming and panting between desperate kisses. He pulled at my clothes, nearly popping the buttons on my shirt until I shrugged it off and slithered free of my trousers and boots. We were cramped in a tiny carriage littered with our clothes and all I could think about was the taste of his mouth when he bit my bottom lip and pulled it between his teeth. He was straddling one of my legs, grinding down against me, all sticky, bare flesh and hot breath. The carriage was probably rocking with the motion of his hips.

Gods, he was sending me straight to hell.

"Atara," I breathed, running my fingers down his back. He had his hands at my jaw, his cheek pressed to mine, whimpering in my ear while he wriggled naked in my lap.

One of his hands travelers back and turned to a fist in my hair at his name and I slid my own hands around him, squeezing his ass while he moved. "Shut up," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "I'm angry and hot and I just want to forget about it for a minute."

"You're using me," I accused, kneading and cupping him while he moaned and shifted, sliding one of his legs so that he was straddling my lap entirely. I spread him open and he reached back, grasping me in one small hand to guide me up and into him while he slid down. His breath caught and his hot, soaked little body fell limp against mine for a moment, his muscles squeezing and flexing around me.

He made a desperate, adorable little mewling noise against my ear when I pushed his hips down and bit gently at his shoulder. "You like it," he admonished softly, breathlessly, pushing himself back up.

"Not usually, but we can call this an exception," I growled, pulling his mouth back down to mine so I could suck on that line that split his bottom lip while his hips started rocking, a fast, hard rhythm because he was desperate and irritated, hot and slick. I pushed him back down with every thrust, my hips lifting to get deeper so that he whimpered with every movement, his arms wrapped around my shoulders and his forehead pressed to mine.

I'd never wanted to finish so badly in my life. I could barely breathe. His weight, despite how slight he was, seemed suffocating and erotic at the same time. I felt like I wasn't close enough to him, even though I couldn't get any closer, and I knew this wasn't going to be long. He was too taut already, too wound up. His body tightened and rippled around me.

"Mackenzie," he mewed, squirming and shifting, his body lifting up and down, panting and aching for air that wasn't really available in the stifling carriage.

"Not gonna last long," I mumbled, taking his ear in my teeth and he made a strangled noise, his hips rolling harder and faster so that I choked on his name when I tried to speak, stammering it out with broken syllables.

A stream of steady, incoherent, babbling mixed with tiny, appreciative little moans slipped from his mouth and I felt him shudder, soaking wet, and he finished on my belly, sticky and hot. The convulsion of his tiny body did me in and I pulled him down hard, growling his name and biting down into his shoulder until I tasted blood and he cried out while I came, hard and searing inside of him. He moved his hips in tiny circles until he was certain he'd taken every drop and then kissed me again, long and slow, ginger and raspberry from the tarts he was always eating.
"Gods, darlin', you're killing me," I grumbled as he slid down from my lap, his thighs sticky. He reached between them and scooped up the mess, licking his fingers while he watched me and I felt my throat tighten at the visual. "If you ever want to leave this carriage, you need to stop that. Now."

Atara grinned and set to pulling on his trousers and his shirt. He mopped me up with his coat and then balled it up, tossing it into the corner. He threw the windows open then and inhaled deeply, shouting to the driver to head back to the palace. I felt the carriage shift and he sank back in, red-faced and sweaty, and looking well-fucked. "It reeks of sex in here," he snorted and I laughed, tossing his balled up coat at him from where it had landed in the corner.

"Because you're a horny little shit," I pointed out. "You couldn't wait fifteen minutes until we got back? I could have bent you over the desk and taken my time with you."

"You can still do that," he offered casually with a dismissive wave of his hand. He fell silent then, ignoring my contemplative look because I intended to do just that. The carriage eventually lurched to a halt and the door swung open in the central courtyard of the palace where Fox and Cyril were standing, deep in discussion with a member of the guard. I imagined it was about what we’d just seen, if only because of the grim expression on the King’s face.

The guard, however, was quickly dismissed when the carriage rolled up and Fox pressed a quick kiss to Cyril’s forehead before he followed him, vanishing back into the belly of the castle with a backward wave of his hand.

Cyril’s eyes shifted between us, following carefully as Atara dragged me up the stairs by my wrist, stopping only to greet his Lheiro quickly with a quickly flashed grin.

“Atara,” Cyril called after him and the new Infinito stopped, whirling to face his predecessor with flushed cheeks and swollen lips. He waited, quiet and breathless and desperate to get back to that desk so that I could fulfill my promise to him.

Cyril stepped by and patted him once on the cheek. I would have mistaken it for tenderness if I hadn’t seen the impish little grin that crossed his expression. “Your shirt is on backwards,” he whispered after leaning and then winked in my direction. “Enjoy your afternoon, boys.”
Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys for all the comments here and on my tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Losing my sister had been the most painful experience of my young life. It was like having the air sucked out of my lungs and, years later, I was still trying to catch my breath. There were still some mornings where I woke up and expected to hear her voice, but I’d forgotten what her voice sounded like. If I concentrated hard in a quiet enough place with a strong enough memory, I could almost hear her again, but it was never quite perfect. She was slipping through the fingers of my memories like fine ribbons caught in the wind, carried off to far distant lands where I could not follow her.

Losing Emory was different.

After Milena, he’d breathed life back into me and I’d almost convinced myself that my lungs would work again someday. I could be me with Emory and he didn’t judge me for it. What I liked, what I wanted—it was all normal to him. I’d never experienced such unfettered acceptance and the fact that he so willingly allowed me to bend him into the implement of punishment that I thought I so desperately needed was an unexpected side benefit.

And then he was gone.

I’d spent hours by the door he was locked behind in Tristan’s quarters, his fingertips pressed to mine, and I’d promised him that I would wait. I would still be right there in Coryth when he came back and he’d begged me not to let them take him. There was never a moment in my entire life that I so desperately hungered for war more than I did then. I wanted to burn the city down around that wretched palace. I wanted Fox and Cyril punished for what they were doing to him, for what had happened to him...I wanted Atara to understand that he needed me, but I’d done none of it. I’d held his fingers and I’d kissed them when he reached for me beneath the door...and that was it.

I did not let Tristan treat the wounds I wore on my back nor did I seek out Mackenzie Glenning for any sort of slow-acting salve that might help me with the injuries that the eldest prince had inflicted on me just hours before we’d found Cadmus in the courtyard. I didn’t care about the tooth or the black eye or the fist shaped bruise on my cheekbone.

In fact, I reveled in them. For days afterward, I could see the imprint of his hand on my face in the mirror. I knew it was wrong to relish that sort of pain and I knew that when he regained some semblance of control over himself, he would regret what he’d done, but in his absence, it was all that I had. I needed it.
Without him, I couldn’t be me anymore. I had to slink back into the life I’d had before him where I was compliant—a willing participant in the brutal culture that I came from. For the first time in my entire life, I’d felt like I belonged in my own skin, and that was ripped away from me the moment he was gone so that I was left living the lie again...screaming on the inside of my skull, desperate for contact and connection. The burden had been bearable before I’d known what freedom tasted like—and it tasted like Emory...like brandy and apples and the honey he put on everything he ate.

All the warmth I’d felt drained from my body in the days following his departure. All the laughter quickly drained from my world like water bursting through a dam, spilling out into the flood plains and sinking down into the dirt. Color lost the shine it had once had. Conversation lost meaning.

I was sick. I knew it. There was no way that being so dependent on someone the way that I had become dependent on him could be healthy, but there it was.

I avoided his family when I knew that Atara, at least, might have dissolved a little bit of the numbness I felt in my bones. I wanted to feel it. I was so totally convinced that he would never survive the asylum that I’d resigned myself to grieving like he was a dead man. Trying to feel any better about it felt like a betrayal of his memory. I wanted that grief and that numbness and that bone-deep ache that hit me in the darkest hours of the night. It meant that I remembered him and I needed it. It was the only thing that reminded me that I was still alive.

Cyril tried to talk to me. He’d come to my door and smooth-talked my father, giving him some excuse that he only wanted to borrow me for a moment regarding the bow that I wore—something about wanting a similar one commissioned for Atara. So he’d led me out into the corridor and around a corner and he’d asked me how I was, but he’d already known. The bruise on my face was fading to yellow. The wounds on my back no longer stuck to my sheets and my clothes. I no longer had to peel myself out of bed in the morning, sticky and red.

I wanted to scream at him. I’m lonely! I’m sick! I’m scared! I bit down on my tongue instead and I narrowed my eyes beneath the fringe of lank blond hair that fell in front of them. I wasn’t sleeping well. My eating habits were even worse. My father fussed with the belief that I was coming down with some southern illness, a by-product of the stifling heat. I let him believe it.

‘How are you, Nikki?’ Cyril asked again and he’d tried to touch my face, fingers just a breath away from the bruise on my cheekbone and I’d jerked from under his touch.

The snarl in Glacian that I gave him translated loosely to ‘go fuck yourself’ and then I stormed away from him. It was stupid, really, because if any people in that whole bloody keep know what I felt like, they were Cyril and Fox, but I wanted none of their sympathy. I wanted none of their apologies or their promises that he would get better. I wanted Emory—sandalwood and brandy and the furiously heated brands that slashed across his body.

Beautiful, dangerous, Emory.

We left the Winter Palace just a month or so after he did, destined for an estate just outside the city walls, situated quaintly along the coast where a number of noble families kept winter homes. I did not say goodbye to his parents or to his brother, though they knew that I was leaving. It wasn’t as if I’d gone far. It was a quick hour long trip by carriage through the city, out the gates, and down the King’s Highway to the manor. The Gate of Coryth was still visible from the front of the building.

Riordan came by once to say goodbye to my sister before he left for Southwatch. He looked at me like he might have wanted to say something, but in the end, he’d left in silence. Two months later, my sister and my father left to make the journey home to prepare for her wedding, stranding me in Coryth as a representative of our interests.
And so I was well and truly alone.

I spent the mornings walking up and down the beach, crossing into the walls of the city, wondering where it was, exactly, that his life had been ruined. It was a macabre thing to think about, but standing on the sand, looking up at the palace, it was all I could think about in the early hours of each morning when I tramped up and down that stretch of shore. When I grew tired of the beach, I took to the monuments that stood along the outer wall that faced the sea.

There was a long, marble, temple like structure with columns almost as tall as the wall itself and between each column was some long dead Corian king carved in perfect likeness. Some days, there were stoneworkers there, carefully repairing the oldest statues of Tylas, Caius, and Evander so that their features remained as fresh as the newest ones. I traced the names along the bottom of their pedestals, intrigued by wreaths of flowers that were left each morning by an array of people whose faces always seemed to change.

I wondered if, beside Harlan, they would leave a space for Fox when they inevitably carved Emory. I didn’t go back after that.

I holed myself up inside of the manor until my solitude was ruptured like a bubble by the eventual appearance of Tristan Brighton on my doorstep.

I’d avoided him the way I’d avoided the Bordelon family, if only because he’d helped them, and there was a small speck of guilt in my chest that ate away at me when I considered that. We were both outsiders, Tristan and I, and we’d forged a kind of friendship that I should have been more keen to foster, but Emory’s exile to the asylum had crippled me more than I’d ever imagined it could.

“You look like shit,” he chirped when I met him in the foyer, standing on the dark blue tile that glittered beneath a chandelier. The opulence was unnerving for something that belonged to my family and no matter how hard I tried to get used to the porcelain, marble, and solid, polished wood, I failed. The keep had been easier. I didn’t have to maintain a staff for it.

Here...this was mine and so vastly different from the rugged, roughly carved floors and walls that I was used to--utility over comfort, strength over beauty.

I didn’t even have it in me to glare at him in response. I just stared, vacant eyed, mouth pursed in a thin line. Tristan’s enthusiasm was not deterred. “You know the whole pouting thing doesn’t really do anything for you, Commander.”

“I’m not pouting.”

He snorted, rolling his eyes skyward. “Oh, really? Then what is this? Giving Emory a run for his money in a brooding competition? I thought your people were made of tougher stuff than this, Novak. You’re wallowing here like a moody teenager.”

I almost said that I was a teenager, but it occurred to me that, sometime between Emory’s departure and Tristan showing up at my door, I’d had a birthday. I’d gotten older and Mila hadn’t. Again. The guilt rang hard and hollow in my heart at the thought and I ground my teeth.

“Did you come here for a purpose or was it just to mock me, Immaran? Because no matter what I look like, I am still the only person in Coryth that might be able to kill you and I am not above trying my damndest if you push me.” I adjusted my sleeves as I spoke, willfully avoiding looking at him, but I saw his shoulders slouch in defeat and he leaned against the wall beside the door.

“I came to check on you. Seems it was a good idea, because this is dreadfully unhealthy. You know
that, right? This codependency you two had? That’s almost as unhealthy as the abuse.” He lifted an eyebrow above those bizarrely blue eyes and watched me as I moved, sliding boots onto my feet without regard to the fact that he was there at all. Truth be told, I lacked the motivation to care.

There was, however, one thing that stuck in my teeth and made me scowl at him. “He was not abusing me. I could have stopped him. I chose not to.”

Tristan pressed his hands over his eyes briefly, exasperated. “He beat you bloody. He knocked one of your teeth out. Just a little bit harder and I’d have been plucking bones out of your eyeball and having you fitted for a patch. I can’t fix ruined organs, you know? There’s a limit to what I can heal.”

I hadn’t, but it was a good little fact to store about him and I set it aside for later. “He loves me,” I argued numbly, but the fight was fast draining away like all emotions drained away from me. Once, I’d thought that was a good thing. Being able to separate from grief made it easier to escape my father’s ire when things became difficult at home. Now, however, grief was all I wanted to feel because not feeling it felt like some kind of betrayal of my memory of Emory. I didn’t have room in me to be angry at Tristan.

“Nikita…” Tristan started, sighing and letting his arms hang loosely at his sides. “You were using him. You weaponized his trauma and turned it on yourself. You were both toxic. Now he’s out there with people that can help him and you’re…” He shook his head. “Is this what you want him to come back to? To the same bullshit he left?”

“He didn’t leave,” I snarled the reminder and Tristan flinched, stepping back toward the door. “Fox exiled him the way that Harlan exiled Cyril. He didn’t want to fucking go! They made him go!”

“He tried to kill Atara!”

We were both silent then, red-faced and frustrated. Tristan turned on his heel and the door slammed shut behind him, leaving only the tang in the air that now reminded me of magic--bitter and metallic on my tongue when I inhaled.

I couldn’t even remember where I’d intended to go in the wake of his ill-timed visit. My heart was pounding in my chest, a war drum hungry for carnage and my fingers itched for battle. I’d thought about going after Emory a dozen times and I always reminded myself that I had no idea where the asylum was aside from ‘the other side of the Witch Wood’ and the Witch Wood bled into Hollen Wood, a vast forest that stretched across the continent. Finding Emory there would be worse than finding a needle in a haystack. It would have been like trying to hunt a specific needle in a stack full of needles.

So even though I thirsted for bloodshed, even though my heart raged for it and my stomach knotted, aching for that powder in the flask at my hip, I kicked my boots off and I tore back up the great, curving staircase.

I spent the rest of the evening screaming with my fist stuffed into my mouth, curled into the smallest ball I could possibly manage because it felt like my chest might crack open and spill its contents across the snow white sheets.

After that, my routines became even more ghost like. I avoided the monuments and the city. I avoided the staff at the manor. I ignored the handful of Riders that had stayed behind with me and I spent my time sitting on an outcropping of rock on the beach in front of the house, watching the ships come in and out of Coryth harbor. I was too far to see details, but I counted the boats and I imagined climbing on board one, disappearing into Immara, and never looking back.
But I'd promised I would wait and so I stayed. I stayed with Mila’s ghost clinging to my back, more feral and vicious than ever, reminding me that I’d now failed twice, and I stayed with memories of Emory that became glassier with time like I was putting a polish on them that they didn’t deserve.

I bought sandalwood oil and held the vial in clutched palms on the nights that it was the worst. I drank brandy just to try to remember the taste of him. I coated apple slices in honey and remembered the way he’d wrinkled his nose at me when I’d done it. ‘Apples are sweet enough, Kita,’ he’d told me.

Atara came five months in to Emory’s exile when the turbulence in the city reached a fever pitch. I had ignored politics, for the most part, but even I couldn’t deny that things were tense enough to slice with a knife. The Corians were suspicious of the Lierians. The priests were openly declaring the natives heathens and calling for their punishments on the post in the streets. The Lierians were just as vicious, accusing their human counterparts of zealotry and dogmatism.

Elizabeth Glenning stopped showing up to council meetings, not that anyone missed her.

The youngest prince didn’t have to knock to greet me the way that Tristan had. I was already outside, knees drawn up, chin resting on them, staring out at the water as the first cold fronts rolled in for the winter. It didn’t really get cold in southern Coria. It got…chilly. Just enough to frost the grass at night and fog the windows, but nothing like what I was used to. The sea turned a choppy grey and the tropical fish that called the place home during most of the year fled further south, leaving only the great black and white whales in their places, breaching far out beyond the shelf.

“Nikki?” he asked quietly and I blinked up at him. He looked paler than usual, with a bit of feverish red in his cheeks. That massive, silent guard of his loomed nearby. I hadn’t even heard their carriage over the rush of water rolling up over the sand.

I didn’t answer, but I climbed to my feet, dusting sand off of my clothes in the process and he fell in step beside me while I walked. “Are we still not speaking then?” he inquired nervously. He was a bit breathless when he struggled to keep up with me, though he wasn’t that much shorter than I was. He was slighter in a way only Lierians could be.

I had no desire to speak to him, either. I’d begged him not to allow what they’d allowed and he’d rolled over and agreed to it. As far as I was concerned, he was as terrible a betrayer as his parents.

Cyril and Fox had given up though. Or, perhaps they hadn’t given up, but they’d opted to give me space. Atara was persistent and I felt the urge to grab him by his adorable little face and pin him down in the dirt before he knew what had hit him. It would take…a quarter of a second, I imagined. He would struggle and he would fail miserably and I would snarl my threats into his ear while he squirmed. He didn’t deserve my frustration or my grief, but he was the only person there.

He was lucky Emory loved him, because it was that adoration that kept me from flaying him alive right there.

“What do you want, Atara?” I eventually bit out, still striding across the beach, oblivious to him and to Blue, who followed us at a respectable distance.

The youngest prince heaved a sigh. “This came for you,” he finally managed breathlessly, reaching into his seal skin coat and producing a rolled up scroll. It was sealed in simple white wax—nothing fancy, no detailing crest in the imprint to give away who it was from. “It was brought by courier last night and I took it because you...well, you don’t stay in the Keep anymore so...anyway, it’s from Emory. My father didn’t want me to give it to you. He said...well…” Atara trailed off and we came to a stop in the sand.
I stared down at the scroll, now held delicately between my fingers, and I became acutely aware that I could feel my heartbeat pounding in my throat, desperate and hungry. Part of me wanted to tear it open and devour the words like a starving beggar devours bread. The other part wanted to hold on, to savor it, to soak up the fact that he’d held this piece of parchment and I wondered, briefly, if it smelled of sandalwood and brandy the way that he did, warm and inviting.

It was odd to think of Emory Bordelon as inviting. He was anything but inviting, truth be told. He was guarded and secretive and downright cruel sometimes but...but he’d been mine and I’d been real with him.

“He said it might not be good for you,” Atara finally finished. “I promised him I would read it first and he trusted me to do that, but...I never really intended to read it. He meant for you to have it so…”

“Did he write to all of you?” I finally found my voice and asked a question that had no real relevance but I was curious if I’d been...special, somehow.

Atara pursed his lips and his hands disappeared in those massive sleeves. “No. Lysander wrote to my parents, but Emory...he’s only permitted limited correspondence as a reward system.”

“He’s not a fucking child,” I snapped and Atara cringed. I softened, feeling bad somehow because it wasn’t really his fault. I was angry at him for not fighting his parents with me, but realistically, there’d been nothing he could do either, even if he’d wanted to and I couldn’t blame him for not wanting to. Not after Emory had rattled him against the post so hard I’d expected him to have a concussion.

The Infinito took a breath. “He’s doing well,” he offered quietly. “Lysander says he gained all his weight back. He took in some runty little mutt. He made friends with a woman that tends the garden and he doesn’t flinch from touch nearly as often as he used to. He says he’ll be able to come home soon, if he wants to. That’s...that’s good, right?”

I stared at him, momentarily struck by the pleading tone in his voice, and then I realized he was looking at me like I could offer him some kind of reassurance. Like he didn’t quite believe what he’d been told and he wanted me to read Emory’s own words to verify what Lysander had told them.

For a second, I thought about jealously guarding the contents of my letter. It was mine just as Emory was and I missed him so terribly that it was manifesting in a physical ache behind my sternum. The bruises and the welts had all long since faded away. Even the space in the back of my jaw where my molar had been knocked loose felt...normal now. I hardly noticed it anymore.

I hurt. I hurt so bad it took the breath from my lungs on some nights and I’d stumble from bed, clutching at my chest, trying to breathe through choking panic that I couldn’t explain because gods, what if touching his fingers under that door was really the last time I ever touched him? How could I live with that? How could I add that to the last memories of my living sister, looking up at me in the snow from where we’d dropped her, sobbing and bruised, shivering in the bitter cold or to the last memory I had of her at all...swinging from the rafters, blue and stiff?

I tore the letter open with trembling fingers and Atara crossed his arms, watching me intently with the same dark green eyes that Fox always looked at me with during council meetings...like he was willing me to speak to him.

I did not read it out loud. In part, I wanted the words to be mine and mine alone, but mostly I worried that it might not be something Atara needed to hear with all the stress he was already shouldering. Emory would have protected him and so I, by proxy, protected him.
Emory’s words carried his voice across the miles and I could almost hear him when he told me about the puppy who had just lost his last baby teeth and who now took up more than half of Emory’s bed at night. He told me about a woman named Rosa who filled his days with stories and life tricks regarding clivia and roses and apple trees.

_They have so many, Kita! You’d eat yourself sick. I’m going to make a bottle of apple wine out of the sweetest ones and bring it back for you. We can drink it together._

And when he was out of rambling bits of information, he told me that being angry didn’t feel quite so enveloping anymore. It still happened, but he could control it, like putting tack on a horse. He said the grief didn’t swallow him whole the way that it used to. It came in waves, same as before, but he could swim it now. It didn’t hurt to talk. It didn’t hurt to touch.

_It wasn’t my fault. I spent so long convinced that all of it was my fault, but I didn’t do anything wrong. Neither did you._

Emotion clogged my throat, welling up behind my tongue and I had to swallow a dozen times, choking on it, to get through more of his words—through a touching apology that I’d never thought he owed me, through a paragraph on how much he’d understand if I needed to stay away from him and that he wouldn’t blame me if things didn’t work because that _was_ his fault (and I wanted to scream at the paper, as if he could hear me, that it wasn’t because Tristan was right—I _had_ weaponized his trauma and this was my fault, too.)

_Lysander says I can come home soon, but I think I want to stay awhile longer. Just to make sure._

I crushed Atara in a tight embrace until I heard his spine crack beneath my arms and he laughed when I laughed, though he didn’t quite know what the reason was because he asked, eventually, his arms still around me. “So it’s good, right?”

“It’s good. It’s good! Oh—” I stepped back and held it out to him. “Here. You can read it.” It felt foolish to keep his brother’s words from him and I had a half a mind to scold Emory when he came back for choosing to write to me instead of Atara. I was ecstatic, of course, to hear his words from wherever he was, but his family loved him. His brother, especially, deserved peace of mind.

But Atara pushed it back to me. “That was meant for you,” he argued gently. “He told me weeks before he left that I had to trust him about your relationship. That I wouldn’t understand. So I did. I trusted him. I still do. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have risked lying to Fox to bring that to you.” He lifted his shoulders in a shrug and I wondered what had prompted Emory to plead for Atara’s trust in the two of us together, but it was a conversation for another day. For another _prince_. “If you want to write back, you can, but I’ll have to put my seal on it. So just write it and then take it to the Lantern in the port district and leave it with Rylin. He can get it to me if you don’t want to venture up to the Keep yourself.”

I nodded quickly, already trying to put words down in my head—things that I so desperately wanted
to tell him—that he didn’t owe me any apologies and he need never beg for my forgiveness and that I
didn’t want space from him. I didn’t want distance. I wanted him to come home, but only when he
was ready to come home.

“Thank you, Atara,” I finally managed.

“Thank you. Don’t think I don’t see it. He wouldn’t have survived long enough to make it to
Lysander if you hadn’t been so hell bent on keeping him alive.” He pursed his lips and rubbed his
eyes. He looked...peaked. Tired. Feverish.

I hesitated briefly. “Are you okay? You look a little...I can walk you back to the Keep, if you’d
like?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.” His laugh was nervous though, like it was absolutely something, but he
waved his hand dismissively. “The cold doesn’t agree with me. I should get going.”

I should have demanded he stay. I should have made him tell me what was really wrong.

But I let him walk away. I let him go back inside the city walls.

Chapter End Notes

--Nikita--
*Miss You All the Time, O.A.R.
Awake My Soul, Mumford and Sons
It's All About Your Heart, Mindy Gledhill
Happier, Marshmello ft. Bastille
Home, Passenger

*this is the most Nikita-like song I've ever come across, just so you guys know
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Another short chapter~ Thanks for all the wonderful comments, guys!

I should have stayed with Nikita.

I should have cried to him that I didn’t know what I was doing and that I’d made so many mistakes. I should have unloaded all of my fears on him, including the reason I was so feverish and hot. Emory trusted him. I should have trusted him. Maybe if I’d stayed, if I’d told him what Tristan had told me that morning...then maybe things would have been different.

Instead, I kept my secret. I went home with Blue and I visited Tristan, who asked me if I’d told Mackenzie yet and when I admitted that I hadn’t--that I had, in fact, prioritized visiting Nikita, he’d given me a disapproving sort of look that rivaled my parents.

“You know, if you want me to terminate it, I can do that,” he offered eventually, sitting in the quiet of his rooms with his memory crystal shining between us. The blue light throbbed with a picture in it-a blue-eyed boy with raven black hair and tear swollen cheeks, standing next to a sarcophagus. He ran his hands up and down the perfectly painted face of who I knew to be his mother. I’d seen this memory before. This was Sebastian Brighton, some twelve years earlier, on the day of his mother’s funeral.

Tristan tacked on carefully, “He doesn’t have to know if you don’t want him to, Atara.”

I should have been appalled at the thought. Instead, I was quietly introspective. It wasn’t a bad idea. I was seventeen and so desperately in love that the idea of sharing Mackenzie with anyone, even our child, was nauseating to me. I drummed my fingers over my stomach and wondered if, in the confines between my hips, the little creature we’d accidentally created could feel the vibrations of my tapping.

I hadn’t been as careful as I should have been with Tristan’s contraceptives. I’d been too caught up, too keen on immediately rolling over on top of Mackenzie and showering him with a dozen kisses that were peppered with echoing giggles that filled our mouths. I’d been too happy to simply remain bound for him, strung out and desperate to be driven to a breaking point.

This was my fault and I knew it. I could have solved it without ever dealing with the inevitable lecture I’d get from Mackenzie. I already knew how it would go--he didn’t have decent parents. He didn’t know how to be a parent. I was too young to be making decisions like this.

And yet it was my decision alone to make.
I decided it felt dishonest not to tell him and that despite my jealous need for his attention, destroying something that was part of him seemed...wrong, somehow. “No,” I eventually answered quietly, getting to my feet and wobbling at the sudden dizziness that overpowered my senses. Tristan’s arm at my elbow kept me standing.

“The illness will pass,” he assured me. “It only lasts a few weeks. You need to tell him, Atara. The longer you wait, the uglier it will be.”

I knew that. I fully intended to tell him when I got back to my room...and then I didn’t.

I let him scoop me up and drag me to bed, let him love me long and hard in the dark until I forgot everything else except how much I needed him, how much I loved him, how incredibly lucky I was to have him with me.

I know that I told him that I loved him that night, but in retrospect, it never felt like I said it enough or like he believed me enough even though I knew that he absolutely did. I would have given anything to freeze that moment, alone in the dark with him, his hands cupped tenderly around my face while he kissed me, still buried inside of me....

It didn't matter in the end. In the end, nothing really did. Does it ever?

Five months after Emory left, the volatile cocktail I'd created when I'd assumed power finally exploded in my face. It was just past three in the morning. I was asleep on my stomach. Mack was using the small of my back as a pillow and was curled around me, his legs tangled in mine, sleeping soundly. I'd opened my eyes to surprising light. Outside the window, flames licked toward the sky and then the bells began to toll. Over and over and over again and alarm settled in my stomach with the nausea as Mack roused himself from sleep. He was bleary eyed, his face pink from the heat of my skin, and he rubbed almost viciously at his eyes. "Continuous ringing," he mumbled, stumbling to his feet as the palace around us sprang to life.

I could hear shouting in the halls and Mack was, very suddenly, extremely awake even though I was still in a state of numbing shock. Continuous ringing was the alarm for an attack. I'd never heard it. In fact, as I sat there stupidly, I tried to remember the last member of the Bordelon family that had been privy to the ringing of the bells but I couldn't even recall. It was that far back.

Mack jerked me to my feet. "Get up," he ordered. None of his usual gentle, comedic nature was evident in the way that he spoke. He strapped on his weapon and the armor that he very rarely wore--white, Lierian leather--and I wobbled around, gripped by terror, trying to strap my own set on. He did it for me, with careful steady hands, while my breathing turned ragged. "Don't panic. The worst thing you can do right now is panic."

A moment later, Cyril was in my room. I'd never seen him in armor but he wore the Lierian white leather and those hooked blades were in his fingers. He was all business, grave and solemn looking. "Take him and get out of the palace, Mackenzie," he commanded and Mack nodded. I knew the protocol, of course. My father, my brother, and myself were never to travel together if something like this ever happened. Still, faced with the reality of leaving them behind, my stomach tightened and the urge to vomit welled up in my throat. I blinked back tears.

"Lheiro, wait--" I managed and he stopped at the door, looking back at me with that pained expression. He managed a small smile and tucked one of his weapons into his belt, crossed the room, and kissed my cheek with his hand under my chin. When he ruffled my hair, I felt a pang of real, frigid fear grip my stomach. It wasn’t about just me, I realized. I was more than me now. "Where's Dad?"
He pursed his lips. "Talking to Blue. You know the drill, Atara. Get out of the palace and out of the city. Make your way along the beach. Get to the Novak house. Nikita has a battalion of Riders with him. You’ll be safest with the Commander." He took my face between his hands, small palms on my cheeks. “I love you.”

I should have never doubted that, I thought. All the times he’d been angry with me, all the times I’d felt like Emory meant more...I’d been wrong.

I didn’t even have a moment to tell him that I loved him, too. He turned back toward the door in a rush of armor and was gone. Mack slipped my bow over my back with tender fingers and we left my bedroom.

My father was in the dining room, leaning over the table with Blue, a pained expression on his face, but he smiled when he saw me. He took a moment to grab my hand, kiss my cheek the way that Cyril had, and then he looked at Mack. "Take care of him," he told him quietly and I blinked, alarmed at the serious, deadly tone in his voice. He was always the realist. Cyril tried to sugarcoat things, but I appreciated the blunt way my father handled them. He took my face in his hands and looked right at me and I tried to memorize his features, panicked as I was. "If we don't get there by the morning, Atara, you go through the woods to Emory. Get him out and make your way to Brentlyn and Riordan. Stay off the roads. Listen to me, tiny. I love you. Both of you. You're the best things that ever happened to us."

“This is my mess,” I protested weakly, anxiety churning in my gut. My eyes burned and stung with unshed tears and I had to bite my bottom lip to keep it from quivering. “I should be staying here. Why are you saying like this like you’re saying goodbye?”

Fox sucked in a sharp breath and then with careful, steady fingers, he ran his hands through my hair and I knew. I knew the way I’d known about Emory’s baby, like I had some precognition for the very worst things. “You’re staying, aren’t you?” I asked, horrified and I stumbled backward like he’d slapped me. “They’ll kill you!”

“If we lose, yes,” he admitted quietly.

“That’s stupid! You should be coming with us! We’ll need you. I can’t do this alone!” I lurched forward, breath caught in my throat, and my fingers grasped at his collar. “Lheiro will never let you!”

“I don’t intend to give him a choice,” Fox answered clinically and then his hands wrapped around my wrists and I stared up at him, openly crying, panic welling in my throat like bile. I clutched at him, determined not to be peeled from his person. If he was going to stay and die, he’d have to do it with me attached to him. “Atara, listen to me,” he tried. “If you’re to take this place back, one of us has to stand for it. One of us has to stand for our people.”

Behind me, Mack grabbed my waist and tugged and I shrieked, clawing myself up so that my arms were around Fox’s throat. “Not you!” I wailed and I realized that my heart was breaking. It was shattering to pieces, shredded on the floor of my chest and nothing mattered but holding onto him, remembering him and how he squeezed me and how his mouth pressed to the side of my face. “Please, dad, please, don’t do this to me!”

“I’m so sorry, tiny,” he whispered and then he pushed and I stumbled backward into Mackenzie. “Take him.” The betrayal on my face must have gutted him because I felt it down to my core. I fought like an animal, kicking and screaming, clawing at Mack’s hands and his arms, demanding he let me go. I drove my elbow back into his gut, but he didn’t let go. He followed his orders, apologizing the whole way, but no matter how much he tried to placate me, nothing worked.
All I could think about was being a child again--having nightmares and crawling into bed between my parents, waking up under a mountain of pillows, cradled against Fox’s warm body with Cyril’s small hand in mine. I remembered how much I’d loved learning to swim because he’d been able to pick me up and I’d put my cheek against his shoulder and stayed there, boneless and shivering in the water.

I remembered him younger, smearing frosting on my cheeks from a cake at one of my birthdays, laughing when I squawked indignantly about it.

I realized I wanted those things for my child. I wanted Fox, jealously and selfishly, for my own offspring, to tell the same stories he’d told me when I pressed into his side and listened to the cadence of his heartbeat—a lullaby that had been all my own, because Emory always went to Cyril.

“No!” I shrieked, squirming and screaming in a desperate attempt to get away from Mack and finally, finally he released me and I turned to face him, radiantly angry, positively alight with a sort of fury I’d never felt before. “We left my father to fucking die!”

He flinched in response and I knew what he thought, ‘Better him than you, darlin’.’ I could almost hear him say it and I wanted to slap it right out of his mouth. Instead, I turned on my heel. I was going back. I was going to fight right alongside him until the last breath left my body. If Fox was martyring himself, so was I, because no family of mine was going to be left behind to die alone.

It was then that I noticed the hallways. I’d been so caught up in rage and grief that I hadn’t seen bodies of the staff that littered the floor along the walls, cut down like animals in a hunt so that the marble was stained red in great sprays along the walls and in scarlet puddles that spread out from under corpses, a stark and vivid contrast. Some of them twitched, sucking in their death rattles, fingers scraping through sticky pools.

“We have to go,” Mack insisted and though his voice seemed quiet, I realized it really wasn’t. It couldn’t be, for me to hear him over the screams. I took two steps back toward him and felt his hand in the small of my back. “I know it hurts, but he’s staying back to buy you time, Atara. If we don’t go, he dies for nothing and they’ll go marching into the Witch Wood next to butcher your brother.”

Emory. Emory.

I could still save Emory.

That was what Fox would want and I recalled my brother’s words—someday, you’ll look around and have nothing and no one but I’ll still be here.

I grasped Mack’s hand through the grief and though the sobbing still clutched at my chest, I let him drag me through the corridors and I tried not to think about it. I tried not to think about the staff and the guards, lying butchered and drowning in their own blood. I tried not to think about Fox, wherever he was, standing for everything my family was supposed to stand for. I tried not to think about Cyril and what he’d meant when he said he didn’t intend to give my Lheiro a choice...how absolutely destroyed he would be when the dust all cleared and the bodies were collected.

Grieve later, I told myself. I could still save Emory. I could still save the little life that I was growing and I squeezed Mack’s palm. I’d tell him, I decided. The moment we got clear of the walls and into Nikita’s safety net, I’d tell him.

“This is my fault,” I heard myself gasp.

“Stop it,” Mack insisted. “There will be plenty of time for self-deprecation later. You didn't make
these people into murderers. Everyone makes a conscious decision. Everyone is responsible for their own actions. None of this is anyone's fault but the people that are holding the fucking blades. Atara, I--" We rounded a corner, sliding in blood before he managed to stop us, stumbling right into oncoming enemy fire.

Lierian darts peppered the ground just in front of us and one of the two standing in front of us, decked out in their white leathers and blue paint, let out a terrifying, shrieking war cry. I stumbled backward, surprised by the noise and already reaching for my bow. My fingers closed on a feathered arrow and I leveled it up as they approached us. One of the darts fired again and this time, it hit Mack. The tiny, fletched weapon stuck up from his throat like a pin that stopped his breath. My fingers faltered, my heart skipped and then lurched for him. I stumbled forward, surprised by the noise and already reaching for my bow. My fingers closed on a feathered arrow and I leveled it up as they approached us. One of the darts fired again and this time, it hit Mack. The tiny, fletched weapon stuck up from his throat like a pin that stopped his breath. My fingers faltered, my heart skipped and then lurched for him. I dropped the bow, prepared to catch him when he went down but he stayed on his feet, staggering helplessly with his cutlass in his hand, his face turning an awful shade of red while he gasped, desperate for air that he couldn’t get in.

I was sick. Panicked. Horrified. Not both of them. Not Fox and Mackenzie. "No!" I managed to gasp the word and lunge for him, my fingers nearly closing in his clothes but the two Lierians caught up with us. Mack, suffocating and poisoned, drove his weapon up into one of their stomachs, disemboweling the creature before it even reached us. I caught a glimpse of the man's face--of the rage and the hate he had for me when he looked at me. The other one caught my wrists. Mack gagged and his legs buckled. He landed in the entrails of the animal he'd just killed for me. "Mackenzie! Get up!" I was screaming for him. "Get up! Let me go! Get your fucking hands off of me!" I arched back, trying to drive my head into my captor's face like I had on the beach. I stomped at his feet. I clawed and fought and screamed until my throat was bloody but he kept dragging me away, my bow laying on the ground beside Mack when he slumped over, left for dead in a pile of corpses.

I saw him catch himself. Try to get back up while I screamed for him, my heart attempting to claw out of my throat to reach him because that was where it felt it belonged. I was hysterical and the man holding me wrapped an arm around my throat. I knew this trick. Emory had taught it to me. There was a way to knock someone out like this but I'd never been able to master it. I clawed at his arm. I tried to bite. I kicked again, sobbing and incapable of drawing breath.

The last thing I remember is Mack's hand sliding forward in that congealed, sticky puddle and his face meeting the marble.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Battle specific gore, torture.

Tristan Brighton came back to my doorstep in the early hours of the morning on the day that Coryth fell. I’d been watching for awhile by then, simultaneously horrified and livid, with the entire contingent of my Riders on the beach behind me. We were all dressed for battle, war paint streaked over our faces and smeared white down our leather, but there was nothing we could do.

Coryth was a massive city with a population soaring toward two million people, second in size only to Idra’s Vale in Immara. It was surrounded on all sides--two by walls that soared over the houses, one by the sea which was littered with the Corian navy, and one by the massive mountain range that rose up behind the Winter Palace, the peaks reaching all the way up into the clouds. The city had never fallen to a foreign invader and though the gates were open that evening, we would have never been able to take back the city. Even with our training, we were vastly outnumbered and on unfamiliar terrain.

So we watched as the sun rose with red ferocity, matched by the sky. Great plumes of black smoke billowed over the city, smeared above it like grease paint, and flames licked the edges of the walls, spouting upward when something flammable was caught in their path.

A great, collective scream seemed to rise up from Coryth when the Bordelon banners burned and fell from the wall. People streamed from the gates, a mass as small as a colony of ants from where we were standing, chased by soldiers wearing silver armor instead of the white plate of the guard or by Lierians on their tiny ponies.

My heart lurched at the trail of bodies left on the King’s Highway and the horse beside me stirred at the scent of death and blood in the air. The world was crystal-bright from the powder on my hip, same as it was for all of my men, and so everything seemed so much more real to me. I wondered where the royal family was. I wondered if Atara had made it out through that damp cave exit that would have dumped him out into the coast.

I wondered who had been stupid enough to perpetrate such an attack, knowing full well that half the Bordelon army was in the south with Riordan and Brentlyn and that, when word reached them, they would march north and hell would have no fury like Fox’s younger brothers. I wondered if they realized the sort of loyalty the king inspired and that a great deal of noble houses from outside the city all the way up to Ravndal and all the way down to Southwatch would answer a call if just one of them made it out alive.

And I realized, belatedly, that one of them already had. Emory Bordelon was not in the city and I
knew that when he heard of this he would come back with all that fury I loved him for and he would
slaughter whoever was responsible for this massacre.

If they didn’t kill him first.

I decided, right then, that I would take the Riders in my contingent into the Witch Wood. We would
follow every road and every path until we found the asylum and we would bring him back ourselves.
I could do that much for the royal family, for whoever survived. It was more than throwing myself at
the city now and dying before I ever reached the Keep. I could do more outside than I ever could if I
went in.

So I waited with a broken heart for the chaos to die down--for people to stop pouring out of the city
and, eventually, the gates closed. Another scream rose up from Coryth, anguished and agonized, of
those that didn’t make it beyond the gate and who were not fleeing northward for the Valmonts and
the Merciers.

“Commander,” my second-in-command, a man named Geir, leaned in closer to me. I knew they
were waiting for orders...waiting to be told to do something, but all I could do was stand there,
horrified and sick. Even if I brought Emory back successfully, what was I bringing him back to? A
world where he was the sole survivor of a brutal butchery that had ended the lives of his entire
family? Was a world without Atara a world that he would want to live in at all?

I would have gladly thrown myself at that city and died to protect them if I’d thought it would do any
good.

I peeled my eyes away, flicking them down the line of escaping civilians, when
something...odd...caught my attention. A lone horse, charging away from the group, gearing itself
toward the beach, followed by a group of silver-armored soldiers with that ruby red sigil on their
shields. I recognized it after a moment--sigils and southern noble houses had never been something I
was particularly interested in but this one was a source of frustration for me since I’d arrived.

I had my answer, it seemed, to who was dumb enough to do something like this. Elizabeth
Glenning’s blood red ruby was like a target on them.

“Shoot them down,” I ordered, my voice a snarl in Geir’s direction. He hesitated only briefly. “Shoot
down anyone wearing the Glenning sigil! Protect that rider!”

I climbed up onto my horse and this...this was a world that I could sink into and forget about the rest.
I could give in to the bloodthirstiness in my chest and the hum of battle that throbbed in my veins
with the pounding of my horse’s hooves on the dirt. A great cry rose up from the band around me,
whooping and shrieking, and swords hit shields as we powered forward, thumping against them like
war drums.

I pulled my bow from my back, undeterred by the unsteady body that heaved under me, both
powerful and purposeful. Our animals were well-bred and well-trained. She was unbothered by the
tang of blood in the air or the acrid scent of the city burning. She was undeterred by the twang of the
first arrow I fired soaring right over her head and finding a mark through the eye of one of the men
chasing down that solitary figure.

As we grew closer, I realized it wasn’t quite as solitary as I’d imagined and I could make out those
bizarrely blue eyes anywhere, even before a curtain of magic stopped an arrow from piercing his
horse’s flank. It bounced, rippling against the glowing blue with a shower of silvery sparks, and then
snapped when it fell. Tristan had one hand around his staff, the flame at the top in the clawed hand,
licking and glowing the same color as his magic, and his other arm was wrapped around a tiny figure
in white, flopping uselessly in front of him. Cyril or Atara, I thought, by the size, but I couldn’t see the hair color through the hood that was pulled down over the face.

We cut through his pursuers like they were butter until there was just one left charging us and I held my hand up. The pounding of other hooves came to a stop. Horses protested, baying and squealing at the sudden halt, while my own raced forward. He took aim with the spear in his hand, my opponent, and I grinned, blood sprayed over my face from an earlier kill. At the last moment, just as his palm launched the weapon forward, I rolled, flat against my horse and then hanging to her right.

It sailed over me in a perfect arc, thudding deep into the ground behind us and I pushed myself up, feet out of my stirrups, and as he thundered by me, I caught his saddle and heaved.

For one moment, I was airborne, clinging to the side of his braying, screaming animal and he was fumbling with the weapon at his hip and then I was clambering up behind him, my arm tight around his throat. I was enraged--blind with fury and bloodlust--because he had dared to harm a family that I thought of as my own. They were Emory’s, after all, and Emory was mine. They were mine to protect and because of this miserable wretch, I’d failed in that.

I slung us sideways and we both fell, rolling together over the sandy earth, battered by the rugged terrain as we grappled. I heard him say something in Corian, littered with a western accent--something close to ‘crazy fucking northman.’

Dirt caught in my armor and stuck to my bloodied face. I’d split my lip and my shoulder ached, but the pain was distant when we rolled to a stop with me on top of him and I planted my knee in his back, grasping for the handle of a skinning knife that was at the well of my back. I whipped it out and brought it around to his throat, pressing it, tight and razorsharp, to his pulse.

“Do not move,” I warned him through my teeth. He fell still just as Geir ran up behind me, bloodsoaked and breathless, wearing a wide smile. His pupils were blown out, so wide that the blue of his eyes was almost invisible, and he pushed his helmet off to mop at his sweaty blond hair. He peeled several of his belts off and bound the pitiful creature squirming beneath me. “Take him to the house. Tie him to a chair.”

Geir nodded. “There’s another survivor. The other boys are tying him up now. The alchemist is waiting for you.”

I left my captor for Geir and moved toward the house, my horse following along after me until another two of my men seized her by the reins and took her off to the stables to be cleaned and fed. My limbs trembled with adrenaline and the world around me seemed to glow from within, like everything emitted the same strange light that Tristan’s eyes did when I finally reached him. Oddly enough, he looked more normal when I was in this state than he ever did before.

Beside him, curled in a chair with his arms tight around his knees, was Cyril. Tears fell silently from his large eyes and his hand was pressed over his mouth like he was trying not to vomit, staring into a cold fireplace in the foyer of my home. He looked...impossibly small and incredibly fragile, shaking and vacant the way that he was and I couldn’t even imagine it--the agony he must have been in, compounded by not really knowing.

“Atara isn’t here?” Tristan asked quietly and I shook my head just once, but Cyril saw it and a low, desperate sob escaped his throat. It was a keening, horrified noise and then he got quickly to his feet, throwing himself at Tristan, blind with rage and tears, and he wailed like something inside of him had been torn out.

I knew that grief...that singular, enraged sorrow that swallows you whole when you realize that part
of you is gone. We were old friends. I’d been carrying it around since Milena and now it clung to
him, reapers on his back in the shapes of his youngest son and his husband.

“You!” he screamed, beating small fists against Tristan’s chest, his shrieking only punctuated with
violent sobbing and swearing. “Fuck you, Brighton! I’ll see your head on a fucking spike before this
is over!”

And then, as if he finally noticed that I was standing there, he threw himself at me and latched onto
my collar. “Arrest him,” he ordered breathlessly, gesturing to Tristan and two of the Riders behind
me stood up, their hands on their weapons. “Arrest him, Novak! He knocked me out and dragged me
out of the city with Fox!”

“I did it because Fox ordered me to!” Tristan exclaimed and I could see it. I could understand it. That
was who the king was--the sort of person that would martyr himself to save the rest of his family and
of course Cyril never would have allowed it so something else was done. I would have done the
same to save Emory. I would have died a thousand times, survived a thousand tortures, just to spare
him what I knew would happen inside of that Keep if they took the King alive...if they took Atara
alive.

So I stopped my Riders. “Cyril,” I started quietly and he bawled, legs buckling like suddenly his
knees were tissue paper. It broke my heart to see him like that and I could only imagine what losing
Fox and Atara meant to him. So much more than losing a sister, I thought. Cyril didn’t know life
without Fox in it and the King...the King was the last person in the world who deserved what I knew
would go on.

I tried again. “Your Grace, please.” His fingers locked in my collar and I had to support his weight,
my arms under his, until I could get him back to the chair. “Listen to me. There will be time for grief
later.” He sobbed harder, shaking his head, curling into the smallest amount of space he could take
with his body curved around his abdomen--like he was physically going to shatter and he was trying
to keep the pieces together. “Cyril. We need a plan. If we don’t take that city back, they will die in
there and it will mean nothing.”

But there was no reaching him. He was closed off, a little island of grief and loathing and Tristan
pressed his hand over his mouth like he might get sick. “Keep an eye on him,” I ordered the two men
in the room with me and I gestured for Tristan to follow me out of the foyer and into the kitchens
where Geir had our two survivors lashed to chairs--one in the middle of the room and one against the
far wall.

“Lady Glenning’s men,” I began, gesturing toward them and Tristan cocked his head to one side,
fury etched in his face. “Shall we?”

“Please,” the alchemist held an arm out.

I pulled an empty chair up in front of the one in the middle of the room--the same one that I’d pulled
from his horse--and I plucked up a paring knife from a cutting block. “I’m going to ask you once
before I start to hurt you,” I informed him clinically, tossing the blade between my palms. “What are
her plans?”

He sneered, eyes wild and lip curled, but there was fear in his face. Real fear. I could almost smell it
on him--a bitter sting in the air before he spoke. “Go fuck yourself, horse lord,” he snarled.

I blinked at him. The room was deadly quiet save the creaking of the leather belts holding the other
captive against the wall while he strained. The screaming of the city was fading in the background,
giving way to the typical sound of the surf and the seabirds, but the air still burned acrid and smoky
from the burning city. All those lives, I thought. All those people—snuffed out because of one woman’s desire for power or because of her zealrous belief in a dying religion or because of her unfounded hatred for Lierians. It didn’t matter. Her reasons didn’t matter.

What mattered was that little people were dying for the games of the gentry and in the north, that was not okay.

I drove the paring knife down behind his knee cap and he shrieked, thrashing behind the belts that held him, head thrown back in a desperate wail. Tristan cringed but my face remained stone cold and emotionless save the rage that I was sure burned behind my pupils. “I will pop your knee cap off,” I warned him. “All it takes is one twist and you’ll be lame for life.”

“You’re going to kill me anyway. What the fuck does it matter?” he wailed through his teeth.

I played like I was debating that fact, weighing it and tilting my head, but he was right. I did intend to kill him and I didn’t feel an ounce of remorse for it. Not really. I’d been born and bred for this and though I did not, by way of my personal nature, enjoy the brutality of my people or hurting others, I did take some sick satisfaction out of this.

So eventually I agreed. “You’re right. But you can die quickly or I can peel your skin off one strip at a time so that you bleed slowly. I can drag it out over days. I can hurt you so much that you’ll forget your own fucking name and you’ll answer to whatever I decide to call you.” I put my hand on top of the handle of the knife, still stuck in his leg, and pushed so that he screamed, teeth clenched, head thrashing back and forth. “So I’ll ask you again. What are her plans? How did she take the city? And don’t lie to me, because I’m going to ask your friend behind you and if his story is different, I’ll string you both up like butchered pigs and let my dogs eat you.”

He shook his head, eyes wide and terrified, shaking openly in his gear. “She—” His voice was quiet, trembling, and I leaned in to hear him. “She got help from the Merciers and a few of the older noble houses that still follow the temples and…and…some of the Lierians. The zealot natives that want to take the Infinitos back and…separate from us again. She promised him—”

“So Atara was not dead. I felt Tristan breathe heavily—an audible sigh of relief and he exited the room, I’m sure to inform Cyril that Atara, at least, was still alive. Captive, yes, but we could work with that. I could work with that. “What does he want them for?”

“He’s asking to breed the human out of them,” the captive mumbled breathlessly. “To take the babies and raise them with their kind. He’ll kill them after he gets the babes. Atara and Emory are no use to him once he has what he wants. She won’t stop until she has Emory. She can’t hold the city without Hiram’s Lierians. They’ll torture the ones they have until they find him.”

I ground my teeth and climbed to my feet, pulling the blade up with me and he yowled, screaming and squirming so that the chair hopped against the floor. “As promised,” I told him quietly before I sank the blade into his throat and left it, walking toward the back of the room where the other one stared at me, head shaking, eyes wide with terror.

I felt...nothing. Nothing but an emptiness that accompanies purpose. I knew what I had to do. My
next steps were clear to me and I pulled the sword from my back as I advanced on him. “Wait, wait! You said—”

“I believe him,” I answered numbly and my blade met his throat with one swing, severing his head from his body. It bounced over the floor, slack jawed and twitching, and came to a rolling stop near the hearth where it settled in a growing pool of dark blood.

I had to get to the Witch Wood. I had to pray that Atara could withstand whatever they did to him long enough for me to reach his brother and retrieve him. She didn’t have the men to hold the city and so she didn’t have the men to send a contingent out against a battalion of Riders to seize the prince once I had him with me. I would leave Geir here to defend the house and send Hackett north to get my father and the rest of the Legion. With all of us, we could starve Elizabeth out of Coryth—provided we could get control of the Corian navy.

I would have to send someone to Riordan for that.

My heart pounded in my chest, beating furiously as I left the kitchen and returned to the foyer. Cyril was standing again and though Tristan was with him, he was not trying to beat the alchemist’s ribs through his chest again. He was quiet until he heard me and then he spun, face red and eyes bloodshot.

His words echoed my own thoughts. “You need to get Emory,” he told me desperately, taking two steps forward until he was face-to-face with me. His small hand closed around my own, smearing blood from the paring knife into his white leather. “You’ll follow the main road through the Witch Wood until you come to an old Bordelon estate. It’s in disrepair. Been empty for years. Behind it, there’s a crossroads. Take the western path until you reach the water. On the other side, there are three dead linden trees taller than the rest of them. Take the path closest and walk another day in a westward direction. You’ll come to a brick wall. Follow the wall to the gate. That’s the asylum. Nikita, it’s heavily guarded. They will not let you in without—” He drew back and wrenched the Bordelon signet ring from his hand. “Tell Lysander I sent you. Tell him everything and send him and his people to Eden. It’s not far from there. He can pass the message along to the Duke. It should only take you about three days to get to him.”

I nodded along, cementing the directions into my memory, repeating them over and over in my head. I had a mind for directions though. It was part of growing up in a world covered in white most of the year. You learned the paths and the landmarks.

“I’ll bring him home,” I assured him, my heart thumping at the idea. I’d see him again. It was a terrible circumstance and he’d be heartbroken, but I would see him again. I’d touch him. I’d smell sandalwood and brandy clinging to his clothes.

Cyril took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m going to take Tristan and we’re going north to track down Kinnon. He only left the city again about a week ago. We should be able to catch up.”

“I’ll send a Rider to my father and to Riordan,” I offered. “Anyone else?”

“Miraena Belfleur. She’s Fox’s younger sister. She can contact anyone else we might be able to rely on. I don’t want to leave your home so undefended.” He wrung his hands. “We should build up the perimeter. Trap it.”

“I can see to that,” Geir offered softly. “I’ll send Hackett north and Ulrich south. You should beat both of them back, Commander.”

“Mm. Do not let anyone into the perimeter you establish until we return. If we’re delayed…” I
pressed my fingers to my temples. “If we’re delayed, you follow Riordan’s or Brentlyn’s orders when they arrive. Without Emory, they’re next in line for…” I hesitated and Cyril cringed, but he finished for me.

“They’re next in line for the throne,” he said quietly. “Gods have mercy, Nikita, they will kill him if they haven’t already.”

There was nothing to say to that. Nothing would ever make it easier. Nothing would ever take it away. So I put a hand on his shoulder and he looked up at me, eyes wide and tear-stained. “You bring Emory back to me,” he whispered, barely audible, his fingers wrapped around my wrist. “He’s all I have left.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Joey was the third friend I made at the asylum. It started out slowly in the last month that I was there. I’d noticed her following us at a distance—me and Teilo, tripping over his great floppy ears, lugging buckets of dirt for Rosa, clipping roses, cleaning up the apples that fell from the trees, or ripping out weeds that threatened to invade the garden spaces every day. Always a distance was Joey, watching with curious eyes, wearing a sweater she’d knitted herself and too-large men’s riding trousers. Her boots were always unlaced and the week before, in a fit of depression and rage, she’d hacked her dark hair off with a kitchen knife she’d stolen and it hung in choppy chunks around her ears and over her eyes. Sometimes, she tied a ribbon like a headband, but Lysander always took it from her at the end of the day and returned it at breakfast if he remembered. I remembered that it was white, a vivid contrast against the black of her hair and sometimes the ends of it fell on her face so when I looked back at her, she would pretend she hadn’t been following us by fussing with it and furiously trying to keep it tucked behind her ear.

I didn’t push. Joey had her own reasons for being there, just like I did, and if she didn’t want to share, it wasn’t my business. If following us around made her feel like she was part of something bigger, I was more than happy to give her that and when we did meet each others’ eyes on rare occasion, I always tried to smile.

She followed us through the apple orchard, through the roses, through the herbs that Rosa was bringing in for the few cooler months we had every year, and then down to the brook with the black dirt. Her boots, which were meant to be laced but that couldn’t have laces, given the rules of Lysander’s asylum, flopped loosely around her ankles when she finally approached me. It had taken her over a week.

“Can I…” She pursed her lips when I looked up, pushing wet hair out of my face. I was in that very brook, sunk up to my knees with Teilo, who was filthy and covered in soap. He wasn’t allowed into the house unless I bathed him, but he hated baths and so it required standing over him with one leg on either side of his body to pin him in one spot while I scrubbed dirt out of his toes and from the insides of his enormous ears.

Joey looked like she hadn’t meant to speak. She just watched for a second, a few feet away from me, toying nervously with the ribbon in her hair—weaving it between long, thin fingers. Her nails were polished to a glossy shine, I noted, and her cheeks had more color in them than usual. Those were good signs for Joey, who seemed terminally stuck in a gray area between ‘getting better’ and ‘regressing quickly.’ Everytime she took a step forward, the world seemed to throw her backward two more and I knew what that felt like quite intimately—to be struggling in that uphill battle, trying to push the stone of recovery to the peak only to have it roll right back down so that you could start
She licked her lips, anxiety in her features, and her eyes darted from me to the dog who was whining and twisting in my hands, stomping his giant feet. “Can I...help you?” Joey eventually finished. “With the dog, I mean?” She shifted on her feet, turning them inward so that she was standing sort of on the outside edge of them, and rubbed one arm nervously with the opposite hand.

I looked down at Teilo who was trying his hardest to lick his own eyeballs. Lysander pointed on almost every day that nobody had ever accused Teilo of being the brightest dog at the asylum, but he was certainly the friendliest and he’d made a world of difference for me.

“He’s going to get you soaking wet,” I warned and Joey nodded vehemently, kicking off her boots like that was enough of an invitation for her. She rolled her pant legs up and trudged into the water, taking hold of Teilo’s head when she reached us so that I could scrub and wipe the mud off of his body.

And that was how Joey joined our little group. Following that one brief interaction of bathing the dog, she’d stopped tailing us at a distance and started actively engaging in what I was doing with Rosa. She didn’t help very often, choosing instead to watch or to just listen or even to sit on the ground with Teilo. She chased him away from the worst of the mud when I didn’t notice him getting up to no good and, on the days when she was assigned kitchen work (early in the week for her, late in the week for me) she always saved soup bones and secretly dropped them inside the door of my bedroom on her way past every evening. She didn’t even say anything. She’d just snake her hand in, bone clutched between her fingers, and give it a toss toward the foot of my bed without ever stopping.

Joey wasn’t much of a talker at first, I realized. She was intensely private and when she did speak, her voice was quiet, like she didn’t think she deserved to be heard, but over the course of the first week she engaged in activities with us, I learned that she was, indeed, Josephine Valmont and that she knew who I was. We’d met before, she said, when we were very young, but she was Atara’s age and I probably hadn’t thought much of her then.

“I thought you were the prettiest thing,” she admitted quietly that evening. “That time we went to the Winter Palace for a harvest end ball. Your father is good friends with my cousin.” She was slicing up apples. Rosa had commandeered the kitchen, intent on preserving the last of the fruit and checking on the wine that she was helping me secretly ferment beneath one of the cabinets.

I was supposed to be dusting each layer of them with cinnamon, but I hadn’t the skill in a kitchen the way that Joey and Rosa did, so even though I attempted to dust them with the same amount that Rosa had shown me earlier, I generally failed and Joey had to fix it every few minutes. Her comment distracted me though and the jar of cinnamon slipped from my fingers and landed against the counter, spilling a handful out over the butcher’s block. “Were?” I asked eventually, sweeping it into my palm and unceremoniously dumping it over the fresh slices.

“That’s way too much!” she protested, shooting me a look that could have rivaled Cyril’s own. “Yes, were. You have your Rider Commander now, don’t you? What’s his name? Nikita? And my cousin is talking to your uncle about marrying me off to Meyer.”

I hesitated, arching an eyebrow in her direction at the way she said Meyer’s name like she was bored with the idea. I knew, through knowledge of the gentry, that Natalya Valmont was the only family Joey had left and, thusly, the head of House Valmont. That made her responsible for Joey’s marriage arrangements, should she choose to make them, but I hadn’t known that Brentlyn was casting a net for Meyer yet. “I didn’t realize Meyer was...on the market.” I opted for and Joey snorted.
“Don’t get me wrong, Emory, I’m sure your cousin is fantastic, but I’ve never met him.” She popped one of the apple slices into her mouth and grinned in a way that lit up the room and changed her face from pale and morose to positively glowing in the span of just a second. Her eyes lit up and she looked, quite completely, like an entirely different person. When Joey smiled, I could see my aunt Tally in her face. Otherwise, they could pass for unrelated.

I shrugged in response. “Meyer is…” What was he anymore? The last time I’d seen him, he’d been fourteen. He must have been approaching eighteen by then, if not already there. He was only six weeks younger than Atara. I tried to recall my last visit to Eden, watching as Joey fixed my cinnamon failures again and then went back to her slicing. “He looks like my aunt Isabella and her family are Marshers, so he’s got this dark red hair and he’s famously funny. Always gearing up to make someone laugh...and Eden is beautiful. You’d like it there. Surrounded on three sides by forest. Their major is export is chocolate.”

“Truly?” She stopped slicing, the knife falling from her fingers so that she could prop her head up and look at me. “We so rarely get chocolate outside the city, you know. I mean, I’m sure you get chocolate at the palace.”

“I don’t like chocolate,” I answered flatly. “Well, not a lot of chocolate. I gave Nikita some though. They don’t get it in Glacia. Too far north. He’d never had it before. Ate so much he got sick.”

Joey giggled, eyes still shining with that cheerful glow she so rarely radiated. “He’s quite lucky to have you,” she eventually said.

“I wouldn’t say that.” I didn’t tell her all the heinous things I’d done to him. The only person at the asylum that knew about any of it was Lysander. I’d told Rosa that I’d been awful, but I’d left the details out, sparing her the true atrocity of who I was. Or rather, who I had been and who I sought to never be again.

She nudged me, her elbow stuck in my side, and gave me a disapproving look. “I hope I love Meyer like that,” she mumbled after a long minute of silence. “I think I could, you know. I’m not picky, so long as he’s kind.”

“He is. So is his family. I mean, aside from me. I’m an asshole.” I shot her a grin and she frowned, wrinkling her nose in mock disgust before she plucked the knife back up and continued her work.

“It’ll be nice to have a family again,” she whispered. “What’s being in love feel like, Emory?”

I stopped, cinnamon poised above another row of apple slices, and the typical answer flooded to my lips. I wanted to tell her that it was wonderful and fulfilling and that it was everything the fairy tales made it out to be. I wanted to cast her as the Princess and my cousin as her Prince Charming who would save her from the little island of terminal despair that she lived on.

But that would have been lying and Lysander had told me that lying to the people I care about, even if it was to make them feel better, was inherently wrong, no matter how harmless it seemed.

“It hurts,” I finally answered and Joey watched me carefully. Close to me like that, I could the little flecks of green in her blue eyes, like the flecks of green in the seabed. “It’s not sweet nothings and gentle kisses the way that the bards make it out to be. It’s a fucking hurricane. It hits you when you’re not expecting it. It fills you up like flood water until your heart is bursting at the seams and you don’t even care. You’ll come back for more, over and over again, like an addict to a fix and you’ll give more and more of yourself until you feel like you weren’t even a whole person before you knew him. You start to wonder how you made it at all when you were alone. It takes your thoughts. It takes your heart. It takes the breath from your lungs and you give all of it, Joey. Without
hesitation.”

“That sounds like you want it to hurt,” she pointed out quietly.

“You do. Because there are sweet nothings and gentle kisses. That’s just not what it feels like. It feels like drowning. Like drowning in drowsy early mornings and kisses that taste like his favorite food.” I put an apple slice into my mouth. It was the wrong type. Nikita liked the sour ones and these were shining red and sweet, but it was close enough to hit me in the stomach with that longing that I felt whenever I thought of him.

Joey finished the last apple, layering it into the jar we were filling. I dusted it with cinnamon and she put the lid on it carefully, sealing it shut so that Rosa could boil it until the lid popped. “You get to go home soon,” she reminded me when I didn’t immediately follow her toward the door of the kitchen. I stayed, instead, staring at the jar, and I wondered where he was. I wondered if brandy reminded him of me the same way, if the distance hurt him the way it hurt me, and if he could ever truly get over what I’d done to him.

If only Joey had known how soon when she led me out of the kitchen.

Just three days later, as it turned out. I’d be headed home just three days later.

Nikita arrived in a gale force thunderstorm that flooded the sunroom with the glass walls that sat in the middle of the garden. The brook had overflowed and was spilling churned, muddy water up into the yards and Joey stood beside me in the dark, oversized clothes pulled down over her hands, arms crossed over her abdomen. It was much too late to go out and do anything about it. We’d stumble blindly in the dark out there, hindered by night and by the torrential downpour.

“Rosa will have a litter of kittens when she wakes tomorrow,” Joey sighed glumly, watching the water flood over into the roses. I didn’t voice my agreement, but I nodded with her assessment of the situation. Behind us, the girl in the wheeled chair fussed with turning the page of another book and the man that repeated conversations that he so often forgot sat near her, playing chess with Lysander. Every few minutes, I would hear our supervisor remind him that it was his turn and then gently prod him to move a white piece, not a black piece.

Lysander du Chalon deserved a sainthood from the temples, I thought. I’d never met anyone with as much patience as him.

Normally, we would have all been in bed for over an hour by then, but the storm had given Joey a nightmare and she’d woken up screaming just half an hour after we’d retired. That had gotten the old man to shouting, too, and eventually we’d all ended up in the sitting room with tea, waiting out the worst of the storm together.

“The dog is going to need six baths before lunch,” I grumbled in reference to the amount of muck Teilo would get into the following day. Joey snorted, looking down at the sleeping animal in front of my feet.

Had the storm been less severe, we might have noticed the raucous outside. We might have heard the great guard dogs sound off on alert. We might have heard the shouting guards, the stomping of a horse, the frenetic speech of the intruder as he was, I imagine, unceremoniously dragged from the horse and up toward the house, a guard on either arm like a common criminal. We might have heard the footsteps on the porch if not for the crack of lightning that illuminated the world with vivid blue and the booming, window rattling thunder that accompanied it.

Instead, we didn’t know about any of it until the door swung open and two of the guards physically
threw Nikita Novak into the sitting room, soaking wet and shivering, dripping war paint down his face in rivers of black ink.

I didn’t recognize him at first. His hair was darker when it was wet and it had been so long since I’d last seen him. He looked like any drowned rat dragged in from the storm, pushing himself shakily up onto his palms before a guard reached down and hauled him up with a handful of rain-slick blond hair.

My breath caught, physically trapped in my throat, and I felt my spine stiffen. I’d written him a letter. I’d told him that I wasn’t ready to return yet and then there he was, sporting a black eye and a busted lip, chilled to the bone. I took one step forward before Lysander stopped me, one hand on the middle of my chest and I inched back from the touch, still uncomfortable with it, though it wasn’t the same mind numbing reaction I’d had before. My stomach twisted, knotted and nervous, and my lungs screamed in protest until my brain finally caught up and forced me to breathe.

“This one came charging through the gates, my Lord,” the guard informed Lysander with a sneer in his voice. “Said to give you this.” He tossed something and Lys caught it, holding it carefully in his palm. “And tell you Cyril Bordelon sent him. For Emory.”

Joey looked up at me, blue eyes widening as she took in my face. Her gaze shifted then to Nikita, who was struggling, clearly exhausted, and then back to me. “Is that…?” she asked breathlessly.

“Release him,” I heard myself say, pushing past Lysander. Neither of them obeyed and my nerves grated, raw and annoyed. Fear settled in my stomach like a cold stone, burning through my abdomen like it wanted to sink into the floor. “Lysander, release him. I know who he is. He’s not fucking lying!”

“Emory,” Lys warned. “Calm down. You have no title here--”

Nikita jerked at my name and finally looked up from the floor, eyes wild, bloodshot and rimmed in red, pupils blown out so that the blue and green wasn’t visible at all. He made a noise and I realized, too late, that he’d been allowing them to hold him the way that he’d always allowed me. His arm jerked backward, elbow driving up into the chin of the guard on his right. Free from him, he swung around, fist tightened, and with the full rotation of his body, brought it backhanded across the face of the other. I heard bones break on impact and Joey leapt backward, swearing loudly. The girl in the chair wheeled herself toward the hallway and the old man got up, hurriedly aiding her in disappearing.

The remaining guard moved like he intended to try to stop Nikita and the cold ring of steel bit out in the room and a short, sharp blade met the underside of his chin. “I’m giving you the choice to live,” Kita hissed, his teeth clenched and his voice as cold as the storm that raged outside. “I suggest you pick up your friend and you take it. Leave us. Or I’ll gut you both like trout.”

“Go,” Lysander agreed quietly and the two didn’t need to be told twice. Nikita lowered the blade and I felt Joey move behind me, her fists balled up in the well of my back like I was a human shield against whatever lunatic had invaded our safe place.

“It’s fine,” I told her quietly. “He won’t hurt you, Joey. This is Nikita.”

He didn’t introduce himself. Didn’t even wait to be allowed to speak. He cut me off with a hand on my wrist. He was frigid and his fingers trembled. “We need to leave,” he ordered. “Now.”

“Wait--”
“Emory!” he barked at me and rounded back toward me, shooting Lysander a glare when the man took a step forward. “Coryth is burning. I do not have time to hold your hand through this or to sugarcoat it.”

“Slow down,” Lysander ordered, looking between the two of us, from my face, growing steadily paler, to Nikita’s chaotic, wild-eyed appearance. He was on that powder. I could see it in his face—in the way his eyes looked and how he shook. I’d seen him come down from it before, how he’d trembled in my arms after the dungeons, shaking even in his sleep and how he’d thrown up violently when he’d finally woken up, heaving until his stomach had nothing left to spit out and then it had been horrifically dry.

Nikita growled. “I just said I don’t have time—”

“It takes three days to ride here from Coryth,” Lysander reminded him. “It takes a week to get to Eden. Longer to get to Southwatch. Longer still to reach Ravndal. Whatever you’re waiting for at the city is going to take longer than whatever this place takes you. You can slow down and explain.”

The Rider Commander seemed to seriously weigh his options—like he was actually considering dragging me out into the dark and the rain and past the guards and the dogs. Teilo growled, stirring and shaking himself out at my feet. He looped around my legs, putting himself firmly between Nikita and me until my free hand met his head. His haunches relaxed and the long line of hair standing straight on end down the middle of his back fell flat.

“Coryth has never fallen,” I protested weakly, my heart fumbling helplessly in my chest, shattering over and over the longer that I thought about it. “It couldn’t—” I sounded desperate. I sounded as hurt as I felt, like there was an ache echoing through my bones and into my chest.

Nikita softened visibly. “I’m so sorry, kitten,” he breathed. “It has. Elizabeth Glenning staged a coup from inside the Winter Palace. She got the help of a rival faction of your brother’s people to hold the city.”

“My family was in that palace, Kita!” I didn’t care about the details. I didn’t care about the walls or who had done it. I cared about nothing but knowing that they were safe...that wherever we were going to, Atara would be there and I’d be the person he needed me to be again. I’d shoulder the burdens he’d taken from me. He could go back to being the daydreamer and I could go back to looking out for him. Things could be normal wherever we were, as long as he was there, too.

But the look on his face...like I was gutting him just by watching him...that was all I had to see. “Oh no,” Joey whispered behind me and I felt her fingers tighten in my clothes and then one of her hands moved up to my shoulder. “Oh, Emory.”

“Who is dead?” I asked woodenly. I felt brittle. Like the wrong word would shatter me into a thousand pieces. Light and color started draining from the world again. That familiar anxiety crept up my throat and I squirmed away from Joey’s touch, pulling my arm free of Nikita’s careful hand at the same time.

Nikita hesitated and Lysander spoke in the silence. “Remember what we’ve talked about, Emory. Strategy.”

Teilo whined and his long, slimy tongue licked at my hand. A cold nose found my palm a moment later and I dug my fingers down into the soft fur on top of his head. Steady, I told myself. I was no good to them if I fell apart. Even if they were all dead, heavens help me, the people in that city would
still need me. Millions of people. I could find worth in that, if nothing else. *That* was worthy of fighting for.

“Cyril and Tristan made it out of the city,” Nikita offered thickly. “Fox and Atara...did not. Mackenzie did not. Olivia did not.”

“Riordan?”

“He’s in Southwatch. He left weeks ago.”

“Are they dead?” The words hurt to even verbalize. I could survive Mack and Olivia being gone. I could even survive my father. It would hurt like nothing I’d ever felt before, but I *could* survive it. Cyril and Nikita still needed me.

I could not survive my brother. I could feel my knees threaten to buckle in the short second between when I asked and when he answered. “Atara is not,” he informed me gently and I breathed heavily, my limbs shaking, and then sank slowly toward the floor with an arm around Teilo. The dog landed heavily in my lap, like he sensed that I needed weight...something to anchor me, something to press the breaking pieces of me back together.

Nikita crouched. “I don’t know about your father or Olivia. There has been no word from the city...but...kitten, Mackenzie Glenning would have never let your brother be taken if he was still breathing....So I can only assume that Mack, at least, is dead. I’m...sorry. I don’t know what else there is to say to you.”

I should have felt tears. I should have felt...something. Choking anxiety. Horror. And I did, but they were nothing compared to the rage that suddenly built in my chest cavity. Outside, the storm raged on and it spread to my chest like the lightning had started a wildfire.

“I’ll kill her,” I managed through my teeth, fists clenched, breathing shallowly. “I’ll kill her if I have to burn the whole fucking city to the ground.”

And across from me, a small but vicious smile spread over Kita’s face. “There’s the rage I needed,” he whispered, reaching forward to tuck a strand of dark hair back off of my eyes. I didn’t flinch from him then. “Cyril headed north with Tristan to seek out Kinnon and Pyrin and whatever other Lierians they can find that are sympathetic toward Atara. I sent Riders south to Riordan and Brentlyn and north to my father.”

“It will be weeks before anyone gets back to Coryth,” Lysander said quietly. “You should get some sleep here tonight, Commander. Rest your horse. We’ll pack you up provisions in the morning and send you on your way.”

“No,” Nikita argued and I grasped his cold, shaking fingers before he continued.

“Yes,” I corrected stiffly. “You’re on that powder. I can see it in your face. How long has it been since you’ve slept? Three days?”

He didn’t answer, but the silence was answer enough and Joey rolled her sleeves up. “I’ll get you something to eat, Commander,” she said curtly, stepping around us and disappearing into the hall. I heard the kitchen door open and close a moment later and Lysander followed her, likely to make sure she didn’t steal knives again and to give me the moment I needed with Nikita.

Alone felt...different. It felt...sacred, somehow, and then the fingers I was holding in mine squeezed like he felt it, too. Whatever we’d been before, distance hadn’t destroyed it. It still burned there.

“You’ll get some sleep tonight,” I repeated softly. “And warm food. We’ll leave in the morning. We
should...talk. Anyway.”

“Our problems are hardly a priority,” he snorted, but the sound lacked laughter. “I saw your brother hours before it started. I should have…”

“You had no way of knowing. Atara is tough. He’ll hang on.”

“Losing Mack will ruin him and you know it.” I didn’t voice my agreement, but I didn’t have to. We both knew it. I couldn’t even imagine what Atara felt then--terrified, alone, grieving. He would hang all of his hopes on me getting him out of the shit he was in the way that I always had before the beach. It was a welcome role reversal from what we had been prior to my absence, but it was not a welcome situation to be experiencing it in. I’d wanted to greet him with a thousand apologies and to squeeze him until he was struggling to breathe, standing on his toes, laughing at how tightly I held on.

I got to my feet but Nikita lingered, rubbing Teilo’s ears until the dog got to licking at the ruined ink on his face. He stood then, wiping the slobber from his cheek with a wrinkle of his nose. “You look...good, Emory,” he offered after a minute. “Healthy.”

“I feel good. Or, I did, until you showed up. Funny that. I always imagined feeling guilty when I saw you again. Not guilty and grieving.” I rubbed my arms as I spoke. “Come on. I’ve got some dry clothes you can put on.”

He followed me, dripping water, all the way back to my little bedroom where Teilo made himself at home on the bed in the corner. Nikita set to peeling himself out of layers of soaked leather, hanging them over the chair as he undressed so they’d dry out by morning.

I’d forgotten what he looked like without welts and was nauseated to see that some of them had left thin, pearly scars over the base of his back. “Shit,” I heard myself say before my filter kicked in and he turned to look at me, eyebrow arched in question. “I scarred you, didn’t I? Those are new.”

Nikita shrugged in response and I felt grief and guilt twist in my stomach, rolled up into a knotted ball of anxiety, and quite suddenly I felt like I wanted to vomit. I wanted to kiss him--from his mouth to the scars I’d left, and simultaneously I wanted to flee. I didn’t deserve to kiss him. I didn’t deserve to share the same space as him. “Stop it,” he warned through my thoughts and I startled, eyes wide and horrified. “I told you. You don’t ever need to beg my forgiveness. It’s yours.”

“I scarred you,” I protested weakly and my heart beat against my sternum, aching like it wanted to be across the room with him--like I should have been scooping him up and depositing him on the bed so that I could get to know the body I’d missed all over again.

“Kitten,” he started, sighing heavily and pressing his hands over his eyes. He let go only to take the shirt from my hand and pull it over his head, effectively covering the damage and the tattoos I’d been imagining licking. “Look, we both fucked up. I used you. You know that, right? I wanted to hurt for Mila and you were a weapon. I manipulated you into doing the things that you did and yeah, you went too far. I let you. So we can either sit here and stew in it and enter this cycle of vicious apologies where we both feel guilty forever or we can let it go and you can just kiss me instead of staring at me like you’re sizing me up for lunch.”

I hesitated.

I hesitated because I couldn’t believe that he was mine. That I’d done something, somehow, to deserve someone who was so incredibly forgiving and who just...brushed off my worst moments like it was part of the package...like he wanted all of it. All the broken bits, all the damaged pieces,
he didn’t care about the scars I carried or the ones he carried now, too, because of me. I couldn’t tell if it was sad that he felt so starved for affection that he was willing to settle for someone who had quite literally abused him or if it was beautiful that he’d been able to see beyond how sick I was, how sick he was, and seen what we could be.

We could be good. The potential was there and I loved him. I loved him in the all-consuming way I’d described to Joey--like I was drowning in him, an addict in need of a fix, and he was that fix.

So I kissed him.

I didn’t grab his throat. I held his face, palms cupped around his jaw, thumbing over his cheekbones, and I kissed him the way that I should have the first time. The way that he deserved to be kissed--like he was loved and cherished and wanted. I mapped the inside of his mouth until he was breathless, fingers tangled in my hair, unrestricted by belts or bondage...until he jumped up, legs around my waist, and I stumbled forward, lodging him between myself and a wall.

I kissed him until he had to move away, sucking great gasps of air in through his mouth while I dragged my teeth along his jaw, hands hooked under his knees, and I heard him laugh. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone totally soft on me, kitten. I did like some of the rough parts.”

I pressed my mouth to his quickly in response and let him slide back down to the floor. “Never,” I protested. “Just thought...real affection might feel better, all things considered.”

He plucked up one of his belts with a morose expression settling over his face. “We’ll get Atara back,” he promised. “It might take a fucking army, but we’ll get him back before they...”

I didn’t have to ask. I already knew. “Cyril sent you for me because Elizabeth is going to come looking, isn’t she?”

He nodded briefly. “She promised you and your brother to Hiram in exchange for his help. They’re going to put Atara--”

“I know. Don’t...just don’t say it. I can’t...think about it right now.” My stomach churned and he pursed his lips, following me out of the room. Teilo trotted along behind his, stretching himself off the bed as we went back down to the kitchen.

I’d think about later. though. I’d think about the horror of it...of how he’d end up right here, in this kitchen with Joey sliding fresh fried eggs onto a plate with a big chunk of toasted bread. She greeted us with that radiant smile and I wondered--

Would she get to know Atara the way she’d gotten to know me?

Chapter End Notes

Couples playlists! Because I am that trash.

--EmoryxNikita--
Bom Bidi Bom, Nick Jonas and Nicki Minaj
Almost (Sweet Music), Hozier
Say You Love Me, Jessie Ware
Say You Won't Let Go, James Arthur
All The Stars, *Ed Sheeran*

--MackxAtara--
Heaven, *Julia Michaels*
Yours, *Ella Henderson*
Ocean Eyes, *Billie Eilish*
Lego House, *Ed Sheeran*
Someone to You, *BANNERS*
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I woke up in the dark.

It was a slow return to consciousness, as if I didn’t want to leave the quiet envelope of dreamless sleep. My fingers scraped against cold, wet, stone that left residue on my hands as I tested my limbs, struggling with memory. I was hurting, I noted. Not physically, but deep inside my chest where my heart should have been. I felt like someone had reached through my sternum, cracking the bones and tearing the muscle in the process, and torn it out, still beating, through the hole they’d created. A ragged, bloody wound was left in the wake and I lifted one of my scrabbling hands to check, but found my body intact.

Above me, someone breathed a heavy sigh of relief and a hand fell over my forehead, carefully dragging backward through tangled hair. I blinked but the world around me was black. Flickering lights lingered at a distance from one spot to my right and I fumbled, reaching and rolling so that I landed flat on the stone.

I had to be somewhere, I thought. Something was missing. Someone was missing. I’d been reaching, struggling—that was when the hurting started, I remembered, but my mind drew a blank, as if in my unwanted sleep it had hastily scrubbed the memory in an attempt to stay whole.

“Atara,” someone whispered, wrapping an arm around my chest and hauling me back toward them so that I was cradled there between a set of knees, my back to their chest, their arms around my middle. They kissed the back of my head and I made a noise, something between a whimper and a groan, struggling against what held me.

I had to find him. I had to reach him. That was what I’d been doing. Reaching for…for…

I pushed and whoever was holding me did not insist that I remained with them and I flailed forward, crawling toward the little lights on the wall until I realized it was a barred window. I hauled myself up, unsteady on my feet, groping for grips against age-smoothed rock until my hands could hold the bars.

This was the Old Keep, I thought. This was the dungeon where prisoners awaited the post or my father’s judgement. My father, I thought bitterly. Dead by now. He wasn’t who I’d been struggling to reach.
“Atara,” the person in my cell repeated and I moved, my limbs heavy like I’d been drugged, my voice lodged somewhere in my throat. I had to lean on the wall to stay on my feet when I looked up at my company. My pupils soaked in the dim light from the window—from the stars that glittered above us and the black and red smoke and flames that billowed up from the city below us.

Fox looked back at me, his head tipped to one side in concern. Momentarily, I considered the idea that I was dead. Surely, no usurper to our position would keep the regent alive. They were always the first person to die in coups, usually in some horrifying and violent fashion—dragged through the streets by wild horses until dead, publicly beheaded, chained to one of the stones that the tide would cover and left for the seabirds to feast on…

But he was real. I knew because I ached too much to be dead. My chest throbbed and, without warning, a sob tore loose from my throat for reasons I didn’t understand. “Where…” I started, voice hoarse, and then it all came back like a flood gate. My brain hadn’t scrubbed my memory as clean as it had wanted to.

I remembered the dart, lodged in his throat, and how wide with surprise his eyes had been and then how determined he’d turned…how he’d fought that paralytic until the very last, heaving himself up to gut one of the Lierians that had grabbed me.

I remembered the spill of intestines—the smell of it. Sewage and rotting meat and how I hadn’t cared. I’d reached for him, screaming and fighting, determined to die at his side if that was what fate had decreed for us, but he’d been left and I’d been dragged away.

I remembered his face hitting the marble, the slow loss of recognition in those gray eyes like the light was fading fast, and how the muscle in his jaw and his cheeks slackened and then he was just there—lying dead in a puddle of scarlet, surrounded by gore, and that was when something had reached down and torn my heart out right through my chest.

My father reached for me when the tears started. It was like being ripped open all over again and my knees, already weak, buckled. He caught me before I hit the ground and cradled me carefully, sinking with my weight against his, and I wailed. I screamed like someone fighting death, my voice muffled by his clothes, and I bit down on his coat. Nothing he did soothed the ache—like parts of me were spilling out through a wound I couldn’t see and I wasn’t even trying to pick up the pieces. I drew my knees up, cradled against my father, until they were tight to my chest but it didn’t help.

I wished vehemently that I’d died, too. I would have given anything for it. I had no thoughts for the little life that I was growing or for the grief my parents would have suffered. Emory didn’t cross my mind, though I knew my death would have been the final nail in his coffin.

All I thought about was Mackenzie, lifeless in the corridor, blood soaking into his white armor and his gold curls.

I’d never hurt so bad in my entire life and I had no wounds to show for it. A chasm had been opened inside of me and everything I was poured over the edge of it into the dark, tumbling toward a bottomless pit that threatened to swallow me whole.

I cried so hard that the sobs turned to heaves and Fox was holding me up while I vomited burning stomach bile into a bucket in the corner. The nausea never left me. It stayed there, churning under naval like what was left of me was rotting.

I sobbed until exhaustion took me and then I laid there, motionless, staring into the dark while Fox’s hand moved up and down my spine. I should have been overjoyed that he was alive. I should have been clinging to him, if only because I’d believed I never would again. I should have been thanking
the gods.

I was cursing them. Every single one that I knew, both Corian and Immaran, and every Lierian ancestor that I could name, I cursed them. I wished for them to burn in the darkest pits of the afterlife. I wished for them to experience the same overwhelming pain that I was living through. I wished for them to face a future with a baby that would never know his father and I thought about how I would explain that to him. I thought about how Cyril had explained it to Emory. *He just can’t be with us right now, but he loves you very, very much. I know he does.* My brother had believed him, but he’d been five and Fox had been alive. Eventually, he’d reunited with his family.

We would not have that. I would have a boy that grew into a teenager with gray eyes and golden blond hair and at night, I would curse how much he looked like Mack.

The bawling started all over again. “You’re breaking my heart,” Fox whispered in the dark. “What happened, Atara? You’re not supposed to be here.”

I didn’t want to say the words. Hearing it would make it real, but my tongue found my voice there in the belly of my childhood home. “They killed Mackenzie,” I answered thickly and Fox’s hand on my spine stilled. I heard his breath catch against my cheek where I was leaning on him, slumped against his chest, and then his arms settled around me tightly like he could hold me together.

“Oh, tiny,” he breathed into the top of my head. “I’m so sorry.” But there was relief there, too. Relief that it was Mack and not me and I couldn’t even blame him for it. Not while nausea rolled in my gut, a result of grief and pregnancy.

I’d feared telling Fox initially. He’d have called me irresponsible and he would have been right. I’d insisted on procuring contraceptives from Tristan and Mack had trusted me to do it, but there were nights when lying against him, sleepy and sated, had been more important than taking medicine. I’d never have that again, I thought. Even if I got out of here alive, I’d never have that again...and then getting out of there alive didn’t really matter much anymore.

So I said it numbly, quietly, my first confession to anyone but Tristan. “I’m pregnant.”

I felt him stiffen and then almost immediately relax, arms tight around me like if he could just hold me harder everything would be okay. “Your brother will get you out of here,” he promised. “You’ll be fine. You’ll both be fine, Atara, I swear it. Emory will never let you sit in here.” He said nothing of himself. We both knew, I think, that he wouldn’t make it. Regents didn’t survive coups. Then again, their heirs usually didn’t either, so perhaps his promises were just wishes in the dark, prayers to whatever god might have been listening…. “You’ll get out and you’ll be--”

“I don’t care,” I mumbled. “I know that’s terrible, but it hurts. You don’t understand. Everything hurts.”

“I know,” he whispered and I felt him kiss the top of my head and then rest his cheek there. “I know it does.”

And so we fell into this semi-existence down there in the dark. I was listless. Guards brought food and Fox forced me to eat, but nothing mattered. I threw it all up anyway, if not from nausea brought on by pregnancy then by the waves of grief that threatened to drown me at any given moment. I lacked the ability to feel anything but that, to think about anything but that. I relived my memories because they were the only place where I still felt alive.

I remembered that first kiss and how he’d looked over at me while I vehemently insisted that he was brilliant and beautiful and that he had worth beyond measure. I remembered the ginger and honey
against my teeth and how his hands felt rough on my face and I hadn’t cared that Emory was right there.

I remembered running to his flat in the rain, full of vivid rage, and how he’d laid me down and made me feel things I hadn’t thought I could ever feel, how he’d mumbled, half-asleep, that he loved me, how he’d cared for me the next day and every day that followed…

I missed him. I missed him so much that it broke me and it shouldn’t have. I had more to live for. I had responsibilities to someone more than me and I knew that if Mack were there, he would have scolded me for being so selfish, for not taking better care of the life we’d created, but I hadn’t the energy to do it. I slept for hours on the cold stone, nestled against Fox, but it was never enough. It gave me respite--Mack was alive in my dreams, but I always had to wake up to the crushing reality that he wasn’t. Not really. Not anywhere outside of my head.

And I lived like that for three days--in a state of miserable semi-existence, constantly stuck between violent bouts of despair and sobbing that nothing helped.

On the third day, however, the light at the end of the corridor that usually only appeared to bring food or change the guard, remained open and I was hauled from the cell, peeled out of Fox’s arms while he struggled to hold on to me and I turned limp, too exhausted and too grief-stricken to do much more than allow myself to be dragged, shackled, and hauled up the stairs like a bag of potatoes.

I should have cared. They were probably dragging me off to execution or something even worse than dying, but nothing could have possibly been worse than what I felt. I was not taken to the torture chamber at the end of the Keep--where Nikita had, so many months ago, slaughtered that halfling. Briefly, I wondered where he was. I wondered if he’d found my brother and some spark in the ruined remains of my shredded, mutilated heart lit up. Maybe Emory could be happy, at least. Maybe he could get the reunion he deserved.

That spark was quickly extinguished as I was led up into the palace itself. It was hard to think of it as home when the banners had been changed from red and black to green and white, when the portraits on the walls were no longer of my family, but of people I did not recognize, when some of the Lierian staff wore collars, their own race lording over them, faces painted with coastal markings. Hiram, I thought. I should have killed you when I had the chance.

I would, I decided. If I ever got out of this, that’s where I would start--with butchering Hiram. Maybe I would enlist Nikita Novak to help me make it last, to punish him for taking away the one person in the world that I had loved with my whole self--not just my heart. Mack had owned every piece of me--mind, body, and soul. I would never be the same again. I would never not hurt. Even years away, far removed from the grief itself (if I even survived this), I would still look back at the time I’d had with him, at the child we had together, and it would hurt.

I was half-dragged, struggling to keep up, to the royal apartments and thrown physically onto the floor of the same sitting room I’d grown up in. The portraits were different. The furniture was gone and replaced with others. The walls had been painted, but this was my home and my heart cracked again. This was my home.

Elizabeth Glenning sat, reclined on a settee, legs drawn up beneath her, plucking chocolate covered fruit from a plate on a table near her hand. Near her was another prisoner, a canvas sack over their head, bound at the wrists and shackled to a support column. They were on their knees, twisting and pulling until the flesh under the iron tore and red ran down their palms.

I looked up at her and struggled to my feet, intent on wrapping my chains around her throat and
strangling the life out of her. Her guards would kill me, surely, but I would die having avenged a great wrong and the rage that replaced the grief was so all-consuming that I didn’t care about anything else. I didn’t care about anyone. I would slaughter her and my brother’s job outside the walls would be that much easier. Command would fracture. She had no children left and even if her one child had survived, he would have never taken up her mantle. Corians would never follow Hiram.

If I could just kill her...if I could just--

Someone grabbed me by the throat and I made a noise, a strangled cry as something cold and metallic was fitted around my neck. It was heavy and cumbersome, causing an almost immediate ache in the top of my spine, but I recognized it. It was a collar and I thrashed, glaring, as I was dragged by a chain leash to a wooden basin of water a few feet in front of her other captive.

“I will ask you once,” Elizabeth started, her voice casual, as if she were discussing tea. “Where is Emory Bordelon?”

“Hopefully raising an army so he can cut out your heart, you bitch!” I snarled and struggled, gnashing my teeth at her like a feral dog, struggling against the chains on my wrists until I, too, was bleeding and chafing.

Elizabeth sighed, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. “Funny. He said much the same.” She gestured toward the canvas covered prisoner at the column. “I spent days trying to get him to talk, you know. I didn’t want to involve you, Atara. Hiram has very specific plans for you and your brother and he wants you both healthy. Physically, at least, so you understand my predicament.”

“I understand you’re a sociopath,” I deadpanned. “How could you? He was your child!” I couldn’t comprehend the depravity of her. It was on a level so deep that it surpassed typical human evil, in my opinion. What kind of monster butchers their only child? I’d thought the brothel was unforgivable. I’d believed, mistakenly, that allowing him to be tormented for the duration of his childhood--raped and molested and beaten--was heinous and inconceivable but this…this was something so alien to me that I couldn’t even begin to understand.

I had parents that would kill for me, who would die for me. Fox had been ready and willing to die in the Keep so that my brother and I would have a chance to reclaim our home, to live into adulthood as the royalty we were and not fugitives running from an usurper. Cyril had butchered people for Emory, had whored himself out to keep food in my brother’s belly, and I knew, without question, that he would do the same for me--that he would have died with Fox if he’d been given the choice. For me. For Emory. They would have endured the most despicable of torments to spare us.

But this woman, if she could even be called that, had allowed her only child to be butchered and left to suffocate in a puddle of viscera.

Elizabeth huffed, popping a chocolate into her mouth before she leaned forward and reached down, seizing a corner of the canvas. She tugged, her perfectly manicured, red varnished nails digging into the fabric that she quickly deposited at my feet.

My stomach dropped.

And then my heart soared.

He blinked, gray eyes adjusting to the sudden light and curtained with lank, dirty blond hair, but there was no mistaking the reflective quality of his irises or the full curve of his mouth, the shape of his jaw or the stubble that covered his cheeks.
“Mackenzie,” I breathed his name like I couldn’t quite believe it. “I saw you die.” I had seen it, hadn’t I? It wasn’t a trick of my memory. I hadn’t been grieving over nothing. I’d seen him fall into that puddle, surrounded by gore and bodies, and I’d seen the light leave his eyes. I’d watched his fingers twitch like he could still reach me, sticky with blood and poised, incapable of grip, over the hilt of his cutlass. I’d begged for him to get up and he hadn’t. He’d been dead.

Elizabeth smiled maliciously. “It was a paralytic, my dear. If administered the appropriate antidote before respiration completely ceases, one can be brought back from the brink. He has something I need, after all.” She reached forward, pinching his cheek and he jerked away from her, eyes vivid with livid anger, and snapped his teeth like he aimed to bite her. “Now, now, Kenzie, darling. I told you we would have to do something extreme if you refused to cooperate.”

He looked at me as if he were only just realizing I was there and horror crossed his expression. The side of his face was bruised in the shape of a fist, as if someone had repeatedly struck him. The eye on that side was swollen, too, and circled with black and purple. His lip was split down the middle and I could tell by the way he was breathing that his ribs were broken.

Mack struggled valiantly, pulling and writhing against the chains that held him. I was still staring, pieces of my heart mending themselves back together with the hastiest of stitches. The grief and the lack of regard for myself vanished, replaced with rage that boiled in my chest and flooded down into my blood so that I was positively thrumming with it.

I would kill her, I thought. Just for this. For seeing him like this, bound and collared like an animal, battered, tortured...after everything he’d already survived, she did this to him?

Killing her was too kind. She would join Hiram in the chambers of the Old Keep. I’d hear her screams like they were songs.

Elizabeth grabbed his face, her fingers tight around his jaw, and forced him forward so that he had nowhere to look but at me. I saw him mouth the words, ‘I’m sorry’ but he had nothing to apologize for. Not now. Not ever. He was alive and he was perfect and nothing else mattered to me.

“Where is Emory Bordelon?” she asked him, her voice soft like she was cooing and she leaned in close to his ear to ask it so that he cringed from the feeling of her breath on his face, cloyingly sweet from chocolate, I was sure.

Mack closed his eyes and sucked his bottom lip between his teeth in response. He wouldn’t answer.

Elizabeth’s eyes flicked up to the guard holding my leash and his thick fingers curved down into the collar. Quite suddenly, I was plunging forward, already on my knees, into the basin of cold water between Mackenzie and I. I didn’t get a decent breath before I was submerged and I struggled instinctively, thrashing my shoulders in the water, my face pressed flat to the bottom. Panic set in quickly. I’d been underwater for far longer willingly and hadn’t felt that creep of anxiety from the lack of air, but this was not willingly. They could hold me under for as long as they wanted, bound as I was, and I would be powerless to stop them.

Minutes ago, I wouldn’t have cared if I died, but fight flooded back into me knowing that he was still alive. I would not go quietly into that dark unknown, not when I’d created life and was the only barrier between that little heartbeat and sudden death. No, I would fight for our little one, if nothing else, and I would fight for Emory.

It was imperative that she not find out where he was.

My lungs screamed after seconds and I fought like I’d never fought anyone before. I was jerked
upward just long enough to take another breath and then plunged back forward, surrounded by choking cold. Over and over again until I could feel blood pooling in my palms from my constant struggling and hear Mackenzie begging above the sound of me thrashing in the water.

_No,_ I thought desperately. _This would break him._ I knew it. In his position, it would have broken me. Emory wasn’t his brother. Emory had tried to kill him, in fact. He had no reason to want to protect him aside from loyalty to me, but that could be bent. He could be broken.

When the guard pulled me upward, he stopped for a moment and I gagged, heaving water up out of my mouth and my stomach. “Don’t you dare,” I gasped, spitting and squirming. “Don’t you fucking tell her anything, Mackenzie!”

He made a sound—a desperate sob—and I was pushed back forward, lungs burning, stomach knotted in my gut, limbs aching from exhaustion and rage. It felt like it went on for hours. They’d force me down until just before I had to breathe, pull me back up and let me gag and heave water up out of my throat and my belly, and then they’d push me back down again. It couldn’t have been hours though. The water was still frigid when they finally stopped and the guard let go of me. I slumped, boneless and shivering to the side of the basin and Mack wheezed through broken ribs made horrifyingly painful by terrible, gut-wrenching begging.

Elizabeth caught his face again. “We’ll do this every day, Kenzie,” she breathed against his cheek, pressing a vivid red kiss to him that stained his skin and he hissed, furious and sick, at the contact. I was breathless, leaning heavily against the basin, trying to retain some level of consciousness. “Some new fresh hell for your little playmate until you tell me where Fox’s eldest whelp is.”

“No,” I groaned the word and struggled, trying to reach him. Any contact would be enough, just something to lend him the strength he needed to get through another day, but I was hauled up by my collar, choking and wheezing until I fell hard on my tailbone, too far from him to reach.

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “Keep saying no, mongrel. I’ll let him watch what Hiram has planned for you.”

Mackenzie gagged, like his stomach rebelled at the very thought, and I could see him swallow hard against the onslaught of vomit that threatened to heave from his throat.

“What?” I snorted, suddenly alite with bright, manic laughter. “A Rite?” Elizabeth stared at me and I laughed, rolling my eyes and then spitting viciously in her direction. “You can tell that traitor that he’s _too fucking late._ He won’t get any purebred brat out of me. He won’t get anything. My brother will butcher every one of you. You left the wrong prince outside the wall.”

And I must have looked so positively pleased with the idea that it actually frightened her because her face drained of color and Mack watched me, eyes wide, staring at the revelation I’d just laid at his feet. It wasn’t ideal. The whole situation was a fucking disaster, in fact, but something lit up in his face. Some urge to fight, to keep surviving. For me. For him. For all three of us.

“Bring me Fox,” Elizabeth snarled, getting quickly to her feet. I was dragged backward, kicking and spitting.

“Don’t tell her anything!” I screamed, struggling viciously. “You don’t fucking tell her anything, Mackenzie! I love—” A hand snaked over my mouth and I shrieked against it as the door shut, closing both him and Elizabeth off from me but it hardly mattered.

He was alive.
That was all I needed.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE!~ Come on, you didn't really think he was the MCD, did you? I'll take the lobe of that liver I was promised, thanks. Just kidding~
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Lysander didn’t say anything about Nikita sleeping in my bedroom that night he arrived. If he had, I would have insisted anyway. I needed to be there while he came down off that powder so that I could lift him up and lean him over the bucket Joey had provided when he inevitably threw up in the throes of the crash that followed that wretched stuff.

I’d decided, laying there in the dark in a much-too-small bed with him curled against my side that I hated the stuff. He shivered violently, fingers knotted in my shirt, even in sleep, and after just an hour, his clothes were soaked through with fevered sweat. His teeth chattered, his eyes darted behind his eyelids like he was in the deepest of nightmares, and he clung to me, face pressed to my chest.

He was fragile looking in sleep, I thought, in a way that he wasn’t when he was awake. Delicate and small. I’d never shared a bed with him, I realized. He’d slept on me once, after the dungeon, when I’d still felt claustrophobic by his proximity, but I’d struggled through the revulsion to hold him because I’d known he needed it then like he needed it now. There was very little claustrophobia anymore. My skin didn’t crawl at touch very often. Horror didn’t spider-walk up my spine when his lips pressed to my skin in sleep.

For awhile, I laid awake in the dark, moving my hand up and down his side beneath his too-big shirt. There was a pearled scar on his hip that I hadn’t noticed before and a few small ones that peppered his ribs. What he had said that first time we were together? Scars are a lover’s map.

I’d never asked about them, but I would, I decided. I’d find out where every single one of them came from after I’d kissed each of them and I didn’t care how wicked their origin was. I didn’t care how angry it would make me to hear that some were from his father, some were from the Gauntlet, and some were just from growing up in a place that was determined to kill him before he reached adulthood.

I would know him, I thought. I hadn’t asked the proper questions before...been too caught up in my own problems to take care of his, but I was the healthy member of our little duo now and I’d spent enough time at Lysander’s to know that trauma like Nikita’s wasn’t as easily overcome as mine.

What had happened to me was awful and horrific and unforgivable, but it was bright and quick, just a small hiccup in the entirety of my life story. I had so many good things in my past and in my future that would soothe the sting of that event and though I would never forget it and the ache in my hips would never fully go away, I could move on.

Nikita did not have that luxury. The sickening, systematic abuse that he had suffered had spanned all nineteen years of his life prior to his arrival in Coryth. He hadn’t just been knocked down the way that I had been. He’d been held face down in the water, ground into the sand, and made to believe that he belonged there...that something was inherently wrong with him. He’d been turned into a weapon, obedient and calculating, and then he’d been used against the one person he’d loved most.

I’d explained all this to Lysander. We’d talked at great length about the literal hell that Nikita Novak
had lived through. ‘That,’ Lysander had told me. ‘Is not something he will ever truly recover from.’ He’d explained it, too, citing a child’s formative years being the basis for a sense of self-worth. ‘He doesn’t have that,’ I remembered him saying. ‘He might never have it.’

Because it took years to build and nobody had ever built it for Nikita. In the north, he would have functioned like everyone else and played the role he’d been built for. He would have excelled in that environment—in a cold place so empty of empathy that the entire country bordered sociopathy. In the south, he would not flourish the same way. He would wilt, unable to connect with people on any typical level because the only thing he understood was suffering. That, Lysander had explained, was why he’d connected with me. He’d seen himself in what I suffered and while he might have claimed it was all because of Milena, that wasn’t entirely true.

I would always be the healthier one of us and after all he’d been through with me, after all I’d made him suffer...I could be that. I could pick up all his pieces and it would take years, yes, but I would put him back together again and I would teach him to understand more than suffering.

I didn’t sleep much that night, between ruminating on his scars and the two times he woke me up, heaving in his sleep. I had to drag him from the bed, half-conscious, and hold his head up while he vomited until he sobbed.

Joey woke us at six, unlatching the door with Lysander’s keys. She’d come with a tub of hot water, dragged along behind her, steam curling over the top. She had to have been awake for hours to have filled it—back and forth from the pump in the garden to the kitchens, boiling and filling and refilling... “I thought he might want hot water,” she’d explained when I arched an eyebrow at it. “And then, you know, he’s Glacian, so I figured I ought to do it myself so the staff isn’t involved, since he stayed in your room and all... Is he awake?”

She leaned around me as she spoke, peeking into the room to where Nikita was still asleep, one arm draped over Teilo, who had crawled up from the bottom of the bed to replace when I’d heard the latch. “Good,” she breathed. “I need to speak with you. In private.” She seized my wrist before I could argue, tugging me out of the room and around the tub into the corridor. She did not give me a moment to exclaim over the surprise of it or the fact that she was digging her nails into my skin. “I want to come with you.”

I froze, wide-eyed, staring at her. In truth, Joey had gotten much better since she’d started helping Rosa and I in the gardens. She’d taken a shine to Teilo, too, who liked her most during meals because she fed him extra table scraps and smuggled soup bones to him at night...but that didn’t mean that Joey was really better. From what I’d gathered, she’d been at the asylum on and off for something like three years, following a failed suicide attempt that she still wore the scars from on her wrists.

She’d told me about it once, leaning over the old wooden fence that had once gated off the brook. It had fallen into disrepair and nobody had ever bothered to fix it so it only stood upright in a few spots. The rest of it had been overgrown by climbing vines and the slipping mud on the banks of the water. She’d explained how her parents died when she was very small and she’d spent her life bounced between the homes of governesses while Natalya tried to wrestle control over a house that had, up to that point, been predominantly overseen by men. She’d never really belonged anywhere or to anything. She’d moved from place to place too much to ever make friends with any of the other noble children or even the children of wealthy merchants.

Joey’s life had been solitary. “I only ever wanted to belong to something,” she’d lamented. “And I belong here...so every time Tally tries to take me home, I find a way to come back.”

And now she was asking me to leave.
“Joey,” I started carefully and the hope in her face died a little bit. She’d clearly worked herself up to gather the courage she needed for this conversation and then convinced herself that I would say yes without question and we’d all go on some grand little adventure together. But this was not an adventure. “This is a war.”

She nodded vehemently, the bow in her hair sliding forward so that she had to push it back up with unsteady fingers. “I know!” she exclaimed quickly. “And I can suture. I can cook. There’s bound to be refugees, right? I can help with that. I was educated on infrastructures and organizing. Please, Emory. I’d have purpose there. With you.”

“What did Lys say?” I asked, crossing my arms. I couldn’t imagine him agreeing. I wasn’t sure if he knew the extent of Joey’s manipulation to get back to the asylum, but he had to be aware of some of it, at least. “And what if you find out you don’t like it? What if you just want to come back here?”

“There won’t be a here. Lysander is taking everyone to Eden. You know Elizabeth is going to figure out where you were and march people here to burn this place to the foundation.” Her eyes glittered when she said it, like there were unshed tears lingering on the surface, and I felt it, too. I loved the asylum. I loved the sanctuary it had provided for me and the serene feeling of the place...like no matter how broken things were, they’d be alright at Lysander’s. “This is my home,” she pressed desperately. “Let me fight for my home.”

Lysander would argue, I knew that, but how could I? I wanted to fight for this place, too, and I understood her sentiments regarding what she felt was home. Coryth was my home. The Winter Palace was my home...and I’d already lost Recia to an invading army long before I was old enough to do anything to stop it. I did not intend to lose a second. My broken heart wouldn’t be able to take it.

So I nodded stiffly. “Fine,” I agreed and she hopped from one foot to the other, excitement visible in her eyes. “But there are rules, Josephine. For one, you can’t tell anyone about Nikita and I.” She made a zippering motion across her face, still practically bouncing, her hands wringing in her oversized sweater. “And if you start to feel like it’s too much and you need to leave, you tell me. I’ll find someone to bring you to Lysander in Eden, okay?”

Joey didn’t give me a vocal response. She threw her arms around my neck and I could feel her heartbeat firing off rapidly in her chest. She kissed both of my cheeks when she bounced away, a wide smile on her face. I’d never seen her that happy before, that intent on believing in something or someone...but she believed in the cause. In fighting for home, for people that mattered, and even if she couldn’t do much in the way of actual combat, she was already cemented in the belief that every little bit counted.

She helped me haul the tub in before she kissed my cheeks again and disappeared to throw all of her things into a bag.

“Do I have competition?” Nikita asked drowsily, sitting up in bed as she exited, leaving the door cracked just an inch so that we weren’t locked in.

I snorted in response, rolling my eyes as he got to his feet, clumsy with sleep. “You haven’t had competition since you showed up in Coryth,” I drawled. “Nobody’s quite as pretty as you are.” I moved around the room while he scoffed, rubbing sleep from his eyes as I collected soap, stopping only to kiss him at the corner of his mouth. He was still too uncoordinated to respond. “Bath is for you,” I eventually pointed out when he didn’t immediately move.

“Just one?” he asked, climbing to his feet and peeling his shirt up over his head. I was greeted with the very scars I’d run my fingers over the night before. A lover’s map. “You going to join me?”
Heat curled low in my stomach at the very suggestion and I remembered the last time I’d had him—sobbing and bloodied, pressed into the wall, red stains everywhere his fingers touched. It would be different now, I thought. There’d be no blood. No unwanted bruises. No pained crying.

I shook my head. “No,” I answered after a minute of hesitation and he cocked his head curiously, disappointment registering in the downward curve of his beautiful mouth. I chuckled at it, mussing his hair and giving him a light shove toward the tub. “Not because I don’t want to, pretty boy. Trust me, I want to, but I want to take my time with you and we don’t have that luxury right now. This whole place is packing up.”

Nikita huffed, but he must have agreed with me, because he didn’t argue. He stripped down and I felt a twinge of fury at that roping scar along the well of his back from his father’s belt buckle. Someday soon, I was going to map him out. I was going to lay him down naked and spend hours licking and kissing every scar and tattoo that he had and I was going to hear every story that was attached to them. I’d love him the way that he deserved to be loved and I’d cherish him the way that he should have been cherished from the moment he’d taken his first breath.

I was staring at him, fingers itching for contact. He noticed it when he sat down in the water, hissing at the heat, and looked up at me with a wrinkled nose. “You look like you’re going to change your mind,” he quipped.

“I’m going to bathe you,” I argued in response and his eyes widened when I threw down the pack I’d been working on and knelt behind the tub. I couldn’t rationalize fucking him right there in the tub, but I couldn’t watch him without putting my hands on him either, I decided. It had been too long and even after a night with him pressed against my side or sprawled over my chest, I wanted more. I tacked on an excuse afterward. “You smell like you’ve been on a three day hunt.”

“I have been on a three day hunt,” he protested, jerking away from me when I cupped my hands and dumped water over his tangled blond head. “What is this? Before you left, you could barely stand talking to me. Now you’re sleeping next to me and you want to bathe me. I’m not a toddler, Emory. I can bathe myself without getting hurt.”

I bit him gently at his shoulder and he shivered, spinning to face me, knees drawn up to his chest. There was...indecision in his face. Like he wanted contact, but he was waiting for the other shoe to drop the way it always had with me.

This would be an adjustment for him...this care thing. “Can I ask you something?” I inquired, my arms curved over the rim of the tub so that I could rest my chin on them while he watched me, steam rising up around his little body, obscuring the worst of the scarring. It was all over him, I realized, from his shoulders to his shins. He was a highway network of visible trauma and abuse, wearing living memories of the most brutal parts of his life. I could feel where my pelvis had broken, but I had no visible scars. I was grateful for that, I realized. I hadn’t known it until I’d really noticed how mutilated he was.

“You just did,” he grumbled. He reminded me of a wet cat--angry and dripping water from his wet hair. “But I suppose you can ask me something else. You’re going to anyway.”

“No, I won’t. Not if you don’t want me to.”

Nikita rolled his eyes. “For fuck’s sake, Emory, just ask the godsdamned question!”

“When was the last time someone took care of you?” He stopped staring down into the water and looked up at me, his eyes flicking between mine nervously. He drummed his fingers against his legs where his arms were wrapped and then he lifted one, rubbing the back of his neck anxiously before
letting his hand sink into the depths of the tub. I decided to elaborate when he didn’t immediately answer. “You’re covered in scars, Kita. I...I know I caused some of them.” Bitter bile rose up in the back of my throat and my stomach twisted. Revulsion with myself traveled up my spine and sent a shiver down my limbs, but I recovered, refocusing on him rather than my own self-loathing. “And I know I didn’t take care of you the way that I should have and I swear, I’ll make that up to you--”

“You don’t have to,” he protested weakly.

“I will,” I insisted. “But the others. When was the last time someone cared for you when you were hurting.”

He twisted uncomfortably and I knew this was a tender topic for him. “Mila...” he started quietly. “She did sometimes when we were small, but Papa caught her and...” He shook his head, bringing his hand up to thumb over his bottom lip. “It has been...a long time. But it’s fine, kitten. I’ve always looked after myself. I’m used to it--”

“Come here,” I interrupted him and he looked up, blinking with unsure, unsteady eyes that moved from the door to me and then back to the door. “Nobody is going to come in. Come here, Kita.”

He was hesitant and precious, a flush from both hot water and nerves spreading over his cheeks and the freckles on his nose, but he slid across the tub and I turned him so his back was to me, pressing kisses over his scarred shoulders and the tattoos that ran down his spine and his left arm. He hugged his knees tight to his chest, a veritable fortress of anxiety until I slipped my arms around him and flattened my hands over the hard expanse of his belly.

When I’d first arrived at the asylum, I’d been anxious like this. I’d been afraid of letting anyone in to help me and Lysander had started just by getting me to talk--it was stupid things, at first. Just whatever was on my mind. So I coaxed him into speech while I spread soap over his battered shoulders. He told me about how angry he’d been at Cyril and Fox and how he regretted the silence now, all things considered. He told me about the estate they’d moved to, about Danica returning north to prepare for her marriage, about Atara’s visit and the letter I’d written to him. He’d written back, he said, but it was sealed in a drawer at home. “You can read it,” he promised, finally relaxing when I got around to rinsing soap from his hair and running my fingers through it until the tangles relaxed.

I took care of him the way that I should have all those months ago and I kissed the scars I found on his shoulders, the back of his neck, and the lengths of his arms, corded with the muscles of an archer. He shivered under my attention, occasionally craning backward to kiss my jaw or my mouth while I worked. If I’d had more time, I would have slid my hands into the water, gotten my fingers inside of him, and worked him over until he was sobbing through climax after climax, until his muscles were sore and exhausted, until I found his boundary...and then I would stop. I would show him the restraint that he didn’t truly believe I had.

But we didn’t have that kind of time and so I towelled over his hair twenty minutes later and watched him redress in his freshly dried northern leathers. I stole kisses until he was giggling, trying to buckle belts and keep up with the fervor of my mouth on his, his fingers always betraying him to lift to my face or tangle in my hair. It was the way our relationship should have started--with kisses that tasted of laughter instead of tears, with breathless whimpers when I finally pinned him to a wall and contemplated fucking him anyway. I could do it quickly. I knew his body enough to know what would get him there and it had been so long for both of us.

Kita put his fingers between our lips. “We have to go,” he’d whispered, and so we had. He’d been
less than pleased about Joey’s addition to our group (Lysander had even been less pleased) but we were on our way in one direction while the asylum was packed into carriages and wagons and they left in the other. Rosa hugged me so tightly that I’d thought the air would leave my lungs.

“You stay safe,” she’d made me promise before I climbed onto my horse, Teilo trotting beside me. “And you visit when this is over. I don’t care how lofty your title is. I expect you here when the roses come in next spring.”

And I would try to be there. I made that promise to myself as we left them. If not this coming spring, then the next...or maybe I’d bring Rosa to Coryth if I couldn’t make it there. She could be there, with me, in the spring, when the roses bloomed in our gardens. We could clip them together and she would arrange them carefully, always insisting on leaving the thorns intact. “Everyone should be left with their defenses, Emory,” she’d told me when I’d stuck my finger on the first one I’d clipped and stood there, swearing and sucking on the injury. “Even flowers.”

There was no Rosa on the road to Coryth though. There was just the three of us and one nosy dog who, right before dusk fell on the first day, disappeared into the forests for an hour and caught back up with us later, a dead rabbit locked between his teeth. Joey stewed it, carefully feeding Teilo the leftover bits after Nikita skinned it. He’d taken a liking to her quickly. I’d told him, halfway through the day when she stopped at a stream to get her hair wet because the heat was intolerable, about her reasons for being at Lysander’s. He’d figured it out on his own though--seen the scars on her arms and put the idea together.

When Joey had a nightmare that first night while I was on watch, I’d climbed to my feet to put Teilo in her bedroll with her but Nikita had whispered her name in the dark. It was barely audible above the chirping insects, and when I got to where we’d set up to sleep, I found her tucked against his chest with her thumb pressed over her lips like she’d sucked on it as a child and hadn’t quite broken the habit.

Nikita took Joey under his wing the next day like she was one of his little sisters. He disapproved of the way she handled a horse. ‘Treat it like a friend, not a tool, but don’t let it control you.’ He critiqued her throughout the day and she grew gloriously frustrated, but she liked the attention and the focus it gave her. ‘Emory doesn’t let the horse boss him around.’

‘Emory is a spoiled prince. Nobody bosses him around. Least of all you, if I hear correctly,’ she’d spat back and they’d both had a laugh at it because Nikita had nearly choked, swatting immediately at me like I’d been the one to say it. They’d spent the greater portion of the afternoon engaged in a verbal sparring match over who could make the most lewd and insulting comment.

It was like traveling with children. Naughty, filthy children.

Josephine won the contest, though, if only because Nikita was adorably new to the world of sex and debauchery and she was...decidedly not.

Joey slept with Teilo on the second night and I had Nikita to myself, warm and comfortable against my chest, breathing deeply after a sleepily whispered, “I love you.” It was the first time he’d said it since he’d arrived at the asylum and I melted a little bit, cradling him close through that second night and then into the third as well.

We broke the forest line to the wall of Coryth and though I’d known how bad it was from what Nikita had told me, I hadn’t adequately prepared myself for the punch to the gut I felt when I saw the green and white banners hanging over the walls instead of my father’s red and black.

The gates were sealed and I knew that no battering ram was going to break through that triple layer
of protection. Wood and then stone and then wood again--Coryth had been built around a fortress, designed as protection for that fortress, and nothing much had changed since the construction of the walls. Ships littered the harbor, some of them sunk, with masts still sticking up from the shallows, turned on their sides and blown to pieces by Lierian fire. Some had retreated out into the deeper waters and were moored near the Novak estate, still flying black and red, but the harbor was such a disaster that sending any of them in to try to take the city was a suicide mission. Elizabeth had seen to that, I imagined. Those ships that littered the shore of the city had been put there intentionally.

A great sea of people blanketed the large, flat area between the sea and the forest, directly in front of the gates. Some of them had cobbled together hasty shelters. Some of them were living in shoddily sewn tents or ruined wagons with torn canvas tops. There were thousands of them, I estimated, but they had picked up the red and black banners that had been thrown from the battlements of Coryth and erected them around their little shanty town.

My heart, which had seized up in my chest, paralyzed with mounting fear and stomach churning dread, melted a little bit at that. My father was well-loved, particularly in Coryth.

My father, I thought, who would not survive this and I recalled, with growing horror, that my last words to him had been that I hated him. My fingers tightened on the reins of the horse and Nikita glanced over at me like he felt the shift in the air around me. For one second, I slipped back into that wraith I’d been before the asylum--hopeless and broken and I wanted to throw myself at the gates and beat my fists against them until they were bloody. I wanted to scream and rage against the entire world.

“Kitten?” he asked quietly.

I pursed my lips. “The last thing I said to my father was that I hated him,” I answered shortly. “And now he’s in there, probably already dead, and I’ll never be able to tell him that I didn’t…”

“You don’t know that,” he protested weakly.

“Yes, he does,” Joey corrected, her back stiff as she looked out over the sea of people. “Regents do not survive coups. I’m sure he knew, Emory, and you can prove it by taking back his city.”

That would have to be enough, I thought bitterly as we crossed in front of the little village of refugees and moved toward Nikita’s home. The Riders circled it relentlessly, their great black horses braided and painted with white war paint to match their armor and their faces. One broke off from the formation, trotting up to intercept us. He inclined his head dutifully upon reaching the three of us and Teilo grunted, snuffling against his horse before deciding he was safe and falling back behind me like the cowardly dog he truly was.

“Your Grace,” the Rider greeted. “Commander.”

“Gier,” Nikita responded stiffly. “Any news?”

The Rider pulled a face. “A few of the soldiers exited the city and tried to engage us. We were able to collect information from some of them. The temple guards have thrown their weight behind the new ‘Queen.’”

I made a face. “Don’t call her that.”

“It doesn’t suit me, either,” Gier admitted. “I have a full list of the noble houses that aligned with her back at the estate. You’ll have to excuse me for not repeating them. My southern pronunciation is...not good. Some of the royal guard got out of the city. They were helping people flee the chaos.
They’ve been instrumental in organizing the refugee camp and procuring food for the people there, but Commander...we do not have the resources to keep feeding this many."

“My uncle will arrive from Eden within the week,” I informed him and Gier nodded, gesturing for us to follow him through an array of trenches and spikes arranged to face outward around the big manor house on the beach. “He’ll be able to alleviate a lot of that pressure. Have you heard from anyone else?”

“Lady Valmont is on her way. So are the Belfleurs and a handful of others. Word hasn’t reached the marshes yet, I imagine, but we can likely count on them and the Rider Legion. If nothing else, Lady Danica will respond with Riders of her own.” Gier stopped at the front of the house and slid down from his horse. We all followed a handful of Corians came scuttling from the door, taking the reins of the horses and leading them down to a stable that was deeper inland by about fifty feet or so.

“Has there been any information out of the city?” I asked eventually. “Has anyone...managed to get out since the gate shut?”

Gier shook his head, a solemn expression crossing his features. “No, Your Grace. We’ve been combing the beaches though, as far as we can before we reach the wall of the city, at least. They’ve been throwing corpses out of the Keep and the current washes them out toward us. A few have survived, but they’re all staff. There is one thing you ought to know--”

He led me through the door and stopped in the entrance hall where a small Lierian sat with a northern woman, her hair braided down one side of her head. They were curled on a couch together and when he looked up at me, I recognized the eyes as familiar. “Rylin?” I asked gently. I’d never met him, but I knew of him from my brother, and he looked up at the name, wiping at his face tearfully. “Your Grace--”

“Please,” I insisted. “Emory is fine. You made it out. I’m...” I was happy, of course. Overjoyed, really. My brother would, at the very least, have this little scrap of Mackenzie left. “I’m so sorry,” I finally finished and he shook his head, a small laugh escaping his lips.

Gier put a careful, surprisingly gentle hand on his shoulder. “I’ll explain,” he offered quietly and let Rylin sink back into his seat with the woman who I could only assume was Mackenzie’s pseudo-stepmother, Rosie. The Rider drew the three of us aside. “One of the staff we found on the beach confirmed that Mackenzie Glenning is, in fact, alive. Elizabeth is in the process of attempting to extract information from him regarding your whereabouts. We were able to confirm Rylin was his father through one of your personal guards...so we let him into the house. We thought, all things considered, you would want him close.” As he spoke, he opened a small box on top of a mantle and handed me a slip of paper with a small list of gentry that had sided with Elizabeth.

It was smaller than I’d anticipated, I noted. That was a good thing. I handed it off to Joey and Nikita. “You should know, Your Grace,” Gier continued stiffly. “That they are using your brother to do so.”

I stiffened and rage boiled up in my throat. I’d known. Of course, I’d known, that they would hurt Atara. They would torture him. They would put him through a Rite to give Hiram what he wanted...but knowing that it was happening because of me...that was different.

My stomach churned and my fists clenched. Teilo whined at my feet, nosing at one of my legs and Joey reached forward but I flinched from the touch. “Strategy, Emory,” she whispered. “Focus. You won’t be any good to Atara if you can’t control yourself enough to lead.”
I took a breath. She was right and, for the first time since we’d left, I was grateful to have brought her, if only for this reminder. Nikita couldn’t offer it anymore, not surrounded by his Riders. His support would be silent and distant and though I knew it was there, quietly surrounding me, it was still good to have Joey say it.

“Right,” I agreed after a minute, the taste of bile in my mouth. “Joey, can you please fix Rylin and Rosie something to eat and see to it that they have a place to sleep inside the perimeter around the house.”

“There are empty bedrooms,” Nikita said softly. “But you might want them for the gentry that are arriving.”

“Fuck the gentry. Rylin is family and I’ve lost enough of that already.”
I could have taken the beatings on my own. It wasn’t any different than the things I’d lived through at the Lantern. It could even be argued that being at the mercy of my mother was somehow \textit{simpler} because I could withstand the punishment and the shackles. There was a clawing sense of revulsion that rose in my throat like bitter bile, but I could separate from that the way that I had separated from it when I was younger.

I told myself those first three days that I could do it for Atara. His only chance at getting out of this alive was for Emory to take back the city. It was everyone’s only chance, really, and a nauseated sense of dread filled my stomach when I considered it. The last time I’d seen Emory Bordelon, he’d been reaching for an axe at his hip to take his brother’s head off and I’d been absolutely prepared to gut him right there in the courtyard to prevent it.

I loved Emory. That couldn’t be disputed. I’d spent over a year as his personal physician. I’d put him back together in his worst moments and I’d seen myself in his shattered psyche. He was damaged goods, the walking wounded, the mad prince...whatever people wanted to call it, he fit the bill, but he was Atara’s older brother and when he spoke about Emory you could hear in his voice that he was talking about his hero. So I’d loved him the way anyone loves family--in spite of all of his failures and his setbacks...because I had to believe, like Atara, that someday he would get better even if I knew it was a slim possibility.

And when Atara named me his consort, it became more than just an abstract concept--family that you choose instead of family that you’re born to--it became legal. Emory was a brother.

I just didn’t know if he was capable of the kind of control a war required.

Still, I hoped. Through the pincers they cracked my ribs with and the guard that battered my face, asking every time his fist came back for information about Emory’s location...I hoped. I would not make it out of this alive, I came to understand. That became especially clear when news that Tristan and Cyril had made it out of the city reached Elizabeth. They would have made it to Nikita and the Rider Commander would have gone immediately to get Emory. Eventually, she would hear that Fox’s prodigal son was behind a battalion of Glacian Riders and whatever forces they could muster.

Then I would cease to have value. Fox and Olivia would cease to have value. Elizabeth would rid herself of all excess weight and the only person would survive that purge would be Atara and only because of the child he carried. \textit{My child}. 
I tried not to think about that when they were holding his head underwater in the days that immediately followed the coup. I told myself that he was lying, trying to buy time and lenience. He was bright like that...but then I noticed the way he curled around his abdomen every time they threw him into the royal quarters where she kept me chained like a pet to the column in the sitting room. I saw the way he sought to protect that part of him more than any other part and I recognized it as abnormal behavior. Instinct would always be to cover your head first.

So I think I knew, even if I refused to acknowledge it because the reality was too horrific an idea for me to entertain in that situation. My wrists were bloody and blistered from the shackles and my ankles were just as bad. I was beginning to run a low fever that I attributed to infection from the open wounds and that my nightmares all the more vivid. I dreamed about Atara being one of the bodies they threw out the windows on the far side of the Keep—staff and guards that had fought to the last breath, regular civilians trying to wrestle control of the Keep from Elizabeth and Hiram so that they could throw open the gates and put Fox back on his throne…

That was the saddest part of it, I think—the regular people who loved him enough to throw themselves into the meat grinder. I kept expecting to see Rylin or Rosie among them when Elizabeth dragged me with her like a dog on a leash to watch them being thrown into the water where sharks or orcas would finish the job if the fall didn’t.

They were chumming the waters.

And every day, regardless of executions or insurrections, they would bring Atara up. They would hold him underwater or throw him over the table. He’d be strapped down and his face covered in fabric and they’d dump pitchers of water over his head, soaking through the cloth so that even when they stopped, he couldn’t breathe. She didn’t have him beaten like she did to the others, likely to avoid getting a rise out of Hiram and his ilk, but he suffered just the same and I suffered for watching it. I chewed my cheeks and my tongue to ribbons, willing my teeth to stay clenched against the words that I knew would end it.

He tried not to scream. I knew that he did, for my sake, and he always succeeded at first, but the longer it went on, the more frantic he would get. He would thrash wildly, chained to the table, pulling until his arms bled, biting through his lip until scarlet stained through the linen on his face.

But he always ended up screaming, terrified that they would actually drown him, and there were times they very nearly did...times when he would flop lifelessly from the basin and someone would have to lift him up and trigger his gag reflex or push on his ribs until I heard the bones crack and the water came up out of his lungs. I always felt like dying in those moments. I’d beg him to breathe, straining against the shackles, acutely aware of the fissures that opened up in my heart while he lay there, blue-lipped and motionless. Sometimes he would bounce back immediately. Sometimes it took close to two minutes to get him heaving and I knew, someday, they’d go too far. Someday, he wouldn’t wake up and she’d have killed all three of us—extinguished my entire family in one bucket of water.

When they finished with Atara, they always brought Fox up. He was more resilient than his son, despite the fact that they were harder on him the way that they were harder on me. She broke his bones—small bones, mostly. Fingers, ribs. She stripped the flesh from one of his hands, but he didn’t scream the way that Atara did. Fox just ground his teeth and when she asked him, inevitably, where Emory was, he would remain resolutely silent. Perhaps it was a result of Emory being his child. Perhaps it was just Fox’s famous resilience in the face of unimaginable pain. Whatever it was, he, like Atara, did not break.

And neither did Olivia when they heated the pokers from the fireplace and pressed them against her
thighs. She screamed, held immobile and trying desperately to thrash her way to freedom, but she never told them.

I remember Elizabeth telling her that she was too much like her father--too stoic. Too stubborn. Olivia had glowed at that like it was the world’s most incredible compliment and then she’d leaned back and spat like a soldier, aiming and hitting Elizabeth square in the face and the aches I felt from head to toe seemed duller in that moment. “That,” she’d hissed. “Was for my cousin. May he feed you to the fucking sharks.”

I’d never known Olivia, not well. We’d crossed paths only a few times, but in those moments where we were both held captive in that room together, I came to think of her the way that I thought of Fox. She had all that fire in her that the Bordelons were known for.

They left her chained beside me once when a messenger came to the door and she’d whispered, “We’re going to die here.” Her fingers, shackled to the same column as me, found my palm and I squeezed. “Emory will come for you,” I’d managed thickly, but we both knew it was a lie. Or rather, we both knew that he would come but he would never get through the walls in time to save her. As soon as Elizabeth knew he was reunited with Cyril and coming after her head, she would slaughter every member of the family she had except Atara.

She laughed bitterly. “If you make it out, will you tell my parents I didn’t break? It would make my father proud, I think. And tell them I’m sorry. I love them. Tell my brother, too.”

I couldn’t see her, but I could hear the waver in her voice and I knew, then, that she was afraid. We all were, I think. I was, but I’d spent my entire life afraid. It wasn’t a new feeling for me...being afraid for someone else, however, was. They could do what they wanted to me. She could break my bones, give me to her guards as a toy, keep me shackled and leashed like a prized pet, and I’d be fine...but Atara was breaking me. Every time they brought him, it chipped a little bit away.

It would not be Olivia that broke. “I’m sure they’re very proud of you already,” I responded numbly. “But if I make it out...I promise.”

“Stay strong, Mackenzie.”

It was the last time I ever spoke to her.

Four days after they first brought Atara up, Hiram came to watch. His expression was sour, as it had always been at council meetings, but this was particularly vile. He circled the youngest prince like a vulture and I could see that Atara had a thousand wretched things to say to him but they’d gagged him with a metal bar connected to a belt that wrapped around his head and buckled in the back. He was grinding his teeth against it, glaring so vehemently that if looks could kill, everyone in the room would have been dead.

“So you’ve spoiled my plans again, Atara.” Hiram’s voice was like acid. It sent shivers down my aching spine and I looked around, my eyes finding Elizabeth seated atop her usual settee, a glass of wine in her hand like she enjoyed all of this...like all this misery and suffering that existed around her was just entertainment, not real tragedy happening to real people.

Atara’s eyes hardened and he made a noise like he was trying to speak through the gag, but nothing coherent made it beyond the bar between his teeth. Hiram waved a hand and two of his guards hauled him up to the table. Atara arched his back, squirming breathlessly, his head shaking ‘no’ over and over again until he was dragged over it on his back. He fought the whole way with everything
he had and I slumped against the column. The unbothered bravado I’d always worn like armor was wearing thin all over. This was not like ignoring past trauma. This was not like staring up at the red lantern on the ceiling, imagining myself anywhere but there, while some sailor twice my age fucked me against a filthy mattress.

It was not making up some pretend world in my head where none of this was really happening the way I had as a child.

This was real. There was no escaping it, even in my own head, because I wanted to be there with him. I wanted him to know that he wasn’t alone and his eyes locked on mine, the way they always did, a silent plea to keep my mouth shut.

Hiram pulled the gag from between his teeth and Atara started immediately. “I should have fucking killed you when I had the chance,” he sneered. “You might not think I’m a real Infinito, Hiram, but you can’t deny that Leland is and if you believe, for one second, that he’ll let you be reborn after all of this bullshit, you are sorely mistaken.”

“Leland was a weak Corian sympathizer who bred with a human,” Hiram answered nonchalantly. “It would be simpler to just gut that infant out of you when the time comes, Atara, and raise him properly...breed him with one of our own.”

“Fuck you,” he ground out through his teeth. “My brother will never--”

“But it would be faster to just purge this mongrel. The tansy could kill you, too, but I’ll always have your brother to fall back on. Ancestors know he’s certainly not pregnant already, mad little bastard that he is.” Hiram leaned over him, his hands on either side of Atara’s head, and for the first time since this whole thing had started, I saw real horror pass over the youngest prince’s face.

It settled in my stomach, as well, a clear and omnipresent dread that snaked outward and enveloped my entire body like I was submerged in ice water...like I was choking on it...like it was filling every cavity in me, chilling my insides while something writhed in my belly like a den of snakes.

I felt my teeth sink through my lip as Hiram took a flask from his hip and twisted the top off. Atara’s mouth clamped shut stubbornly and he started to struggle so hard that the table quivered beneath him, the legs straining under the violent, twisting weight that shifted on top of it.

Not this, I thought. Gods, anything but this. I could have taken anything but this.

Elizabeth’s eyes fell on me with clear and deadly focus. “You’d let your son die, Mackenzie?” she asked quietly. “For a feral half-breed that you know isn’t sane enough to be a king? You would let Atara die for Emory?”

Hiram held the flask over his mouth and Atara thrashed harder, shaking his head ‘no’ again, trying desperately to twist away. The old man’s free hand sealed over Atara’s nose and no matter how hard he writhed, he couldn’t get air in without opening his mouth. He fought valiantly and so did I. I pulled on the column until I felt the bones in my wrists start to snap and it should have been the sort of pain that nauseated me but I hardly felt it. I didn’t care if I turned them to gelatin, as long as they slid free of the shackles so that I could stop this.

But it wasn’t fast enough. I wasn’t bleeding enough for the blood to slick my hands through the metal and Atara’s face turned red and then violet and then his mouth opened--

“Stop!” I heard myself bite the word and Hiram stopped, turning to glance at me.

Atara arched his back. “No, Mackenzie! Don’t! Don’t you fucking tell him shit!”
“This all stops if you just tell us,” Elizabeth cooed. “Atara gets to live. So does your baby.”

‘Gods forgive me,’ I thought and my shoulders slumped. My whole body felt limp. Defeated. She’d beaten me. She’d used the one weakness she knew that I had--Atara--and she’d twisted him into a weapon to dig into every part of me that she could reach. She’d known I was the weakest link from the beginning. Emory was family, but he wasn’t blood.

Atara was now...and I loved him. I’d never had that before, never felt such devotion from another person, never been valued.... I’d told him from the beginning that I was nothing but a gutter rat and he’d argued so vehemently but he’d been wrong. I was a gutter rat and I could serve no higher purpose than my own self-interest. I had never been instilled with the values of the gentry--I didn’t care about the people of Coria as a whole.

I cared about him and the little life he carried inside of him. Those were mine to protect and more important to me than Emory Bordelon or the entire population of that whole wretched country.

I swallowed hard and Atara stilled like he knew that the fight was over. “Please, Mack,” he choked. Emory didn’t deserve this. I knew that. He’d been through so much already. He’d suffered so much already. The last thing he deserved was to be hunted down and bred like a prized horse...and that was exactly what Hiram would do to him. This, I thought, would break him...but it had already broken me.

“He’s in the Witch Wood,” I breathed and Atara sobbed, turning limp on top of the table. Elizabeth slid to her feet. “Past the old Bordelon estate and the three dead trees. At the old Chalons house with Lysander.”

“I know the place,” Elizabeth said curtly. “You’ve done well. You ought to be rewarded, my boy.” She ran her fingers over my hair as she spoke and then took a fistful of it to drag my head back. “If you are lying to me, Mackenzie, I will strap him to that table and let every guard in this palace take a turn on him while you watch. Do you understand me?”

I didn’t answer, numb down to the bone, and she released me. “Take them both back to the cells. Throw them in together. I’m sure they have loads to talk about.”

And so for the first time since the coup, I was dragged from the royal quarters with Atara. We were taken down the old stairs into the belly of the fortress below the palace where the only light shined in through barred windows too small for even a child to fit out of. It was dank and dark and it smelled of rotting meat and mildew. Some of the royal guard were locked behind the bars. I recognized a few faces--Blue, Elian, even Olivia. We were marched past all of them in sullen silence and then shoved roughly into a cell with Fox, who was sitting in the corner with the shredded remains of a shirt wrapped around his ruined hand.

The bars swung shut. The lock grated into place. Armored feet stomped over stone in the dark and then we were alone.

“How could you?” Atara snarled, turning on me. “He was the only chance we had!”

“You still have that chance,” I snapped back, glaring back at him. I wanted to gather him up, make sure he was okay, kiss him a thousand times, but he was so positively livid and I felt sick to my stomach at the expression on his face. Loathing. He hated me in that moment, but he waited for a further explanation. “Tristan and Cyril made it out,” I continued and Fox stumbled to his feet. “The first thing they would have done is collect Emory. This whole fucking thing has been buying time, Atara, and we bought enough. I couldn’t let them...I couldn’t--” I pressed the back of my hand over
my mouth and shook my head.

“You told them?” Fox guessed gently.

The guilt washed over me like tidal waves and I shuddered. “I’m sorry!” I whispered desperately. “But tansy induces spontaneous abortion. You could have fucking bled to death down here, Atara. You remember what that was like for Emory!”

“Bleeding to death down here is better than sending butchers to my brother’s doorstep!” His voice was shrill and livid and he crossed the small cell, seized me by the arm, and spun me back around to face him.

Fox’s good hand rested on his shoulder a second later. “He’s right, tiny,” he interrupted. “We were buying time. With any luck, we’ve bought enough.”

“You have no value to her anymore!” Atara shot back, pointing at the cell door like he was indicating Elizabeth. “She’ll kill you, dad!”

“She’ll kill everyone but you,” I corrected and he whirled back to face me, eyes wide and bright in the dark. “Fox, me, Olivia. You were the only one of us that was ever going to make it out of here, Atara. We all knew that.”

He stood there, between me and his father, like he was being torn into two people and he didn’t know which of us he wanted to run to first. I could see, even in the dim light, that his cheeks turned damp with tears and his breath came in staggered gasps. In that moment, it seemed easier to me to be one of the damned. At least there was an end to the suffering. He didn’t have that luxury. There would be no end for him. One by one, he’d watch all of us die—his father, his cousin, his consort, and he’d be left behind to carry that grief alone without Emory or Cyril to grieve with him.

He opted for me, perhaps because it had been so long since he’d touched me or because he’d thought I was dead those first few days. His arms locked around my ribs and I felt the bones grate where they were broken, causing a pained rush of air out through my lungs and he loosened his grip but pressed his face harder into my sternum where his tears soaked through my filthy clothes.

“Hey,” I managed weakly, settling one hand on the back of his head and the other on his back where I rubbed circles into his quivering spine. “You’ll be fine. Emory will get you out of here. You’ll have a...” I choked briefly and pressed my lips to the top of his head, eyes shut tight. “A happy, healthy baby and he’ll be beautiful and you’ll tell him all about me. I know you will. And you can show him all those pictures I drew for you that you kept under your mattress. I bet those are still there and there are some at my flat. If it’s still standing when this is over, you can take everything in there. All the clothes and the ginger candies and the--”

I couldn’t force myself to breathe enough to keep talking because the longer I went on, the harder he cried and I sank into the corner of the room with him folded in my lap. His teeth found the fabric of my shirt and he bit down hard, jaw clenched, fingers curled into hooks at my back. “I don’t--” His voice guttered before he could finish, stalling out and cracking into more heartbreaking sobs. He kept trying to get air in, but it came in staggering gasps and Fox sank down in front of me, his good hand landing lightly on Atara’s back, close to his shoulder where he could feel his racing heart through his skin.

“You’ll be okay, tiny,” he promised softly. “You’ll have Emory and Cyril and Nikki.”

It was no consolation. Fox and I both knew that. I could tell because he caught my eye and grimaced. If I were in Atara’s situation, I’d have been the same way—silently clinging, hoping that I
died right along with the people that I loved if only to be spared the grief of having to keep going at it alone.

But Atara was stronger than all of us. I had come to realize that in those days that led up to telling Elizabeth where Emory was. I’d been led to believe that Fox held all of them together and that might have been true, but Atara was the foundation on which they were built. When things were hard, he was the only one of them that kept pushing forward, even if he had to drag them with him and he had dragged Emory. He’d been dragging Emory for so long by then that I think he’d forgotten what it felt like to not have his brother’s weight weighing him down.

“I will,” he promised eventually, his lips pressed against my cheek just in front of my ear so that his voice was muffled. His arms snaked up around my neck and he squeezed. “I’ll tell him everything. I promise. I’ll love him enough for both of us.”

It hurt. Nothing in my life had ever hurt like those words. They lodged in my throat and choked me the way that tears did. Then moved on to crack my chest open and shred what was left of my heart.

There were a lot of things in my life that I regretted. He was not one of them...but this? This moment? Sending him off into a future alone to raise our son without me?

I regretted that.

And I prayed to any god that would listen that Emory made someone pay for it.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said something about not wanting this to be over 40 chapters? Yeah, it’s gonna be way over that.

Also, this is like 12 pages of porn because I felt bad about giving you guys so many emotional chapters all at once. So here. Have some sex with angsty seasoning.

We would have to talk, Emory and I.

I knew it was inevitable as we crossed the forests toward the house that I’d learned to call home. What we’d covered in our brief time together at the asylum was not nearly the weight of what he carried in his chest. I could see that in the way he looked at me like I was a study in divinity...like he’d done something truly horrific and he couldn’t quite understand why I was so ready to brush it all away like it had never happened. In part, I suppose my willingness to just move on was a result of the culture I’d grown up in. We did not dwell on things. We did not have the time for aches and pains to come back and haunt us. What had already happened could not be changed.

But mostly it was because I loved him. Nobody had ever made me feel like I belonged in my own skin the way that Emory did. Even when he was brutal with me. There was a saying about it in the south, but I could never remember exactly how it went. Something about how even bad attention is good when you’re starved for it...and I was starved for it. I’d never felt cherished by anyone until Emory. I never felt needed until Emory.

So I knew that the talk was coming. He had five months of thinking to lay at my feet and it was important to him. It had helped him. I could see it in the fullness of his face. He’d put all of his missing weight back on and honed it into muscle working in that garden and chasing after that dog. He had a glow to his face that hadn’t been there before and a brightness behind his eyes that I’d only ever seen when he was violent. He was living again—not just alive, but actually living.

It didn’t surprise me, then, that he showed up at my door just past midnight when the rest of the house was asleep. I’d wanted desperately to keep him in my bedroom so that my sheets would smell of sandalwood and brandy, so that I could wake up drenched in him like I had those three days we’d traveled with Joey, but with a battalion of Riders outside my relationship with Emory would have to retreat back into the dark.

That broke my heart. I wanted nothing more than to be his, openly and without reservation, and I would. Someday, I would, but it would have to be later. I was not keen on throwing away my family before I got to see my mother and my three youngest siblings one more time...to tell them how much I loved them and to make sure that they understood it before I went willingly into exile that would
have been death without Emory’s protection from it. I needed that closure, after all...to say goodbye to them. It was important to me in ways that I couldn’t quite explain, but it lingered there in my chest—a dread that unfurled like a blossom when I thought about it. Anja, Lana, and Latham would be raised to hate me. Danica would flee to Riordan and impose an exile on herself as well.

Choosing Emory meant shattering their world. I wanted to give them as much time whole as I could.

The prince knocked twice before he slipped inside, damp hair hanging in his eyes, his skin warmed by hot water and warm, fresh clothes. Nobody else had returned yet and I’d seen how disappointed he’d been to not be greeted by Cyril. The Emory I’d known months ago would have raged and broken things, beaten me into submission, and then chewed the inside of his cheeks to ribbons in the aftermath.

This Emory had soaked himself in nearly scalding water and called it dealt with.

“Do you have a minute?” he asked quietly, sliding the lock into place behind him. “Nobody saw me come in. I...I checked and Joey caught the bottom of her skirt on fire to distract Gier.”

I snorted and rolled my eyes, looking away from the list of gentry Gier had provided me with—a very long, very Corian list of names that hadn’t allied with Elizabeth Glenning. I’d been penning the same letter over and over again, my fingers stained with ink while I sat there in the dim light of a few candles, waiting for his inevitable talk.

Gesturing to the end of the bed, I pushed myself to my feet and flopped over the mattress. Emory shifted, legs crossed under him, so that he was facing me when I finally dragged myself into a sitting position. I was tired. I’d barely slept on the way to the asylum and the way back had been plagued with Joey’s nightmares and the fear of Elizabeth’s men stumbling on us in the dark in their search for Emory. Then I’d spent the entire day reviewing the traps and barriers Gier had assembled around the building, organizing the house to better accommodate the amount of people we were going to be playing host to, and writing letters. My eyes were stinging. My back was aching from being hunched over the desk. My fingers were numb toward the tips and sore at the knuckles.

I wished for nothing more than to fall asleep beside him, but that heaviness permeated the air around him and I knew that this was it. This was the talk.

“I…” Emory started nervously and I rubbed my face. “I wanted to talk to you. About...about before.”

I’d heard him refer to before in the past as the time prior to the assault on the beach, but this felt different. This was not the same before. Or, perhaps it was and his definition had simply changed to encompass not only before the beach, but also before the asylum. “Before…?” I asked, tipping my head.

Emory cleared his throat and he wrung his hands anxiously in his lap. “Before everything. I just...want to clarify a few things for you. I’ve never been...typical.”

“Color me surprised,” I drawled, blowing my hair out of my eyes and he shot me a look that mollified me immediately. I fell silent, shifting uncomfortably and arching my back in an attempt to take the pressure off of my bent spine.

He heaved a sigh. “I meant that I’ve always had these lapses in behavior. Times where I can’t sleep for days and I’m just...filled to bursting with this manic energy that I don’t understand and I can’t control. I would power through books and work and I’d obsess over things to the point where I’d wake my entire family up at three in the morning because something was on my mind. I knew it was
wrong, but I couldn’t stop myself from doing it and then as soon as they were over, I’d be so...unmotivated to do anything that I would lay in bed for days at a time convinced that nothing mattered.”

This was not news to me. Tristan and Atara had both brought it up before--that Emory had been sick before the beach. That he would be sick even after he recovered from that trauma. It hadn’t mattered to me. I’d never been normal either. There were days when the world felt so crushing to me that the only thing that dragged me from bed was fear of my father. Without him in the south, there’d been days I hadn’t moved from beneath my blankets...days when I’d shut the world out and stayed, listless and lonely, in the dark. Nobody was really normal, I’d determined. Emory had his mood disorder or whatever it was. I was crippled under the weight of anxiety and depression. Mackenzie suffered combat fatigue that he hid from the world but I’d seen combat. I knew that look on his face when things were too real for him. Atara feared loneliness like it was plague and disease and he was obsessive over things that were important to him so that his sense of loyalty became faulty the way that mine sometimes was--no longer simple loyalty but devotion that bordered dangerous. Tristan had survived horrors he still couldn’t speak about, but they drove every decision he made.

Not a single one of us wasn’t fucked up. That was what had endeared them all to me. At home, I’d been alone in my horrors because everyone covered up the things that made them different but in Coryth, differences were celebrated.

Emory swallowed hard. “That...won’t go away, you know?” he asked gently. “I’ll always be like that.”

“Kitten,” I started, pressing my fingers to my temples and rubbing at the headache that threatened to bloom behind my eyes. “This isn’t news to me. I come from a place where not conforming to the typical standard is grounds for execution or exile. The fact that you don’t fit the mould and you can admit it...that just makes you even better.”

He fixed me with another look, this one curious, like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop and when it didn’t, he leaned forward and pressed his mouth cautiously to mine. It was a quick, warm kiss and he smelled of sandalwood soap and fresh laundry when he leaned in. It only cemented my desire to crawl on top of him and sleep without even stripping from my clothes, but he leaned back before I could even grasp him and pull him down into the bedding with me.

“Let me get all of this out,” he pleaded quietly. “If you stop me, I’ll have to start all over and this is important, Kita.”

So I was quiet, separated from him again, and he settled with his hands in his lap like if he touched me, we’d fall into old habits now that we were well and truly alone. “Go on,” I urged. “You’ve been dying to talk to me since we left. Get it all out.”

Emory laughed and it was such a casual sound now. I’d heard it so much since our departure from the asylum, even with the circumstances surrounding us, that it was hard to believe a year ago, he’d never really laughed at all. Now all of his smiles were genuine and they spread up to his eyes. “That transparent, huh?” he asked and I shrugged in response, offering a weak smile of my own. Communication had never been a skill of mine. Talks like this were difficult.

He continued after a brief hesitation during which he seemed to weigh his thoughts again. “What we were doing before I left...” he started and we immediately plunged into dangerous waters. Emory pushed his hair out of his eyes and licked his lips. “I know you say that you like it. Liked it?”

“Like it.”
He nodded and his cheeks colored pink. “And that’s good. That’s...perfect, actually, because I like it, too, but I need to know your limits. I know that I crossed lines. We both did, but it’s my fault—”

“How is it your fault?” I interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Emory pulled a face, his nose wrinkled in discomfort, and he shifted his weight from one side to the other, his hands clasped over his knees. “Because I knew better and you didn’t. I jumped into this thing with you without ever explaining any of it or asking if you understood or finding out how far you were even willing to take it. So I need to know what you liked and what you didn’t like.”

“I liked all of it.” That was a blatant lie. It wasn’t that I intended to lie. It was this blanket sensation that I deserved to hurt. I’d failed Milena and I’d failed him, too, because in the end, it hadn’t been me that had solved his problems or healed the festering wounds he still carried. It had been Lysander and time away from Coryth.

He ran his fingers over his face like he knew that it wasn’t true and his lips pursed into a thin line. “No, you didn’t,” he corrected gently. “There were times you wanted me to stop, weren’t there? And you didn’t say it because you have this...idea stuck in your head that you deserve it.” He moved forward, reaching out for me so that his hands cupped each side of my face and he pulled me so that I leaned into him, my palms falling outward to land on his knees and support my weight. I had nowhere to look but at him and my breath hitched in my throat. My lips parted and heat curled low in my belly. I was starved for him, I realized. I didn’t care how tired I was or how many Riders were circling the house or that Gier was right downstairs with Joey. I was going to feel him in me that night if it was the last fucking thing I did.

“Listen to me, Nikita,” he breathed, his thumbs sliding carefully over my cheekbones and I felt my insides melt a little bit, warm heat spreading out from my heart to my limbs. “You don’t deserve it. If you like it and it gets you off, that’s fine, sweetheart, but I can’t help you hurt yourself anymore. Whatever punishment you think you needed, it’s over. We’ve both suffered enough.”

There was a tremble in my hands, an itch to touch him more that I was afraid to fulfill because I’d seen him flinch from touch a few times since we’d left. It still sent that shiver of revulsion down his spine sometimes, but it was far less frequent than it had been before. Still, I was wary. I’d never sought to cause him discomfort or to hurt him but his words tugged on my heart and I wanted to be so impossibly close to him. I wanted to feel his skin on mine, hear his heartbeat beneath my ear, memorize the cadence of his breathing all over again--

“Talk to me,” he pleaded after a moment. “Give me boundaries.”

“I don’t like the scratching over the welts,” I finally managed breathlessly and he nodded quickly. I didn’t know where the words were coming from, but they poured out of me between desperate kisses, like I was feeding him the limits he so desired. “And I don’t like being bloodied. I have scars all over me from a war with my father that I never wanted to fight. I don’t want to wear more from you, kitten.”

“Gods, I’m sorry,” he whispered back against my lips.

I ignored the apology. “The blindfold was...unexpected,” I kept going and he ran his fingers through my hair and down my back, pulling me into his lap so that my legs settled on each side of him. His breath didn’t hitch with claustrophobia or terror. “Warn me if you’re going to do that. They blindfolded me for my Gauntlet. I trust you enough to go without my eyes, but the warning would be appreciated. I really like the choking, but sometimes it’s so long--”

“I’ll count,” he promised. “We’ll test it out. Find a number you like. I’ll never go above it.”
“I like the tying, too, but sometimes I want to touch you, Emory.”

I’d known that was pushing it when I said it. Touch during intimacy was different than regular touch and I couldn’t imagine he’d gotten much practice at overcoming that little hiccup at the asylum.

But he didn’t argue. “I won’t tie you down,” he assured me simply. “Unless you ask me to…but if I need you to stop--”

“I’ll stop,” I whispered against his mouth. “And I...I’ll try to tell you to stop. If the hitting is too much, if the choking is too much, if anything is...too much. I’ll try, but I’m gonna fuck up.”

“I figure we both will,” he snorted, finally grabbing me under my legs and tumbling on top of me, sinking both of us down into the bed. “It’ll be a learning curve.”

I looked up at him--at the way he watched me carefully, like he was measuring each movement of his hands along the buckles of my clothing, deftly peeling me out of each of them until my leather tunic could be slipped over my head.

His hands were hot--in fact, Emory was hot, in general. He ran warmer than I did. Lierian biology, he’d told me once. His average temperature hovered somewhere around two degrees above mine and the blistering marks all over his body could get even warmer than that. They did then, searing against my cheeks when he kissed me and I noticed, late, that he’d shaved.

I ran my fingers over his cheeks experimentally. I’d grown used to the rough stubble he’d been wearing scraping against my face when he kissed me and found, to my own surprise, that I missed it. “You shaved,” I said, my tone accusatory and Emory looked down, his weight supported on his forearms, which were pressed to the mattress on either side of my head. He ran his tongue carefully up the center of my mouth, eliciting a shiver that ran up my spine and a painful hardening in my trousers.

“You sound disappointed,” he chirped.

“I liked it,” I admitted quietly, running my fingers over his smooth jaw. “I mean, I like your face regardless--”

He snorted. “Well, thanks. I like your face, too.”

I scowled at him and he responded by kissing me, prying my mouth open so that he could slide his tongue over mine, mapping out the contours of my teeth while I squirmed under him, hot and hard, trying frantically to pull his shirt over his head and failing miserably. He was wearing too many clothes. I wanted to feel those heated dark slashes of pigment across his chest against my own skin. I wanted to confuse his heartbeat with my own.

And I think Emory wanted to forget. We’d always been good at that--at using sex to forget things that were too hard to think about and everything was too hard then. If I could give him a few hours of simplicity--of sex and sleep that wasn’t plagued by nightmares or worries about his family trapped inside the keep--then I would do that.

He was slower than he had been before. His lips moved from my mouth to my jaw, all the way back to my ear where his breath was hot and humid down over my throat. He wasn’t desperate the way he had been or maybe it was because he’d been too afraid of touch to take the time before--I didn’t know. I figured, at that point, I might never, and it didn’t matter. Whatever it was, fast or slow, hard or gentle, loving me or fucking me, it didn’t matter. I was his and he could do what he wanted with me.
Emory shed his shirt and his lips moved down my neck and over my shoulders, pausing at a puckered scar that he laved his tongue over. “What’s this from?” he asked softly, his voice warm against my skin and I shivered under his attention.

“Arrow,” I answered quickly, staring up at the ceiling because if I looked at him, I’d start begging and I didn’t want to beg yet. My cock was painfully hard, but I liked the attention. He’d never done this before--this slow, exploratory thing that he was doing.

I remembered what I’d told him that first time. Scars are a lover’s map. I remembered his answer, too, vivid in my recollections as if he had only just said it yesterday. Oh, sweetheart, I’m not going to love you.

And he hadn’t. He’d beaten me and he’d fucked me and he’d left me in pieces, emotionally unstable and walking along a line between love and hate.

“Battle?” he questioned briefly, grazing his teeth over it gently.

“No,” I mumbled shaking my head. “Accident when I was teaching my youngest sister to shoot.”

He accepted that and moved on to a collection of small pearled marks on my right bicep. He kissed each one and I whined, twisting under him until he put a hand in the middle of my chest to hold me still. “These?”

“Playing chicken with Mila. We’d take sticks out of the fire--”

“I know how to play chicken,” he interrupted. “That was stupid. Did you win, at least?”

I chuckled. “I always win.”

He found each mark that marred my torso and showered them all with affection. His tongue traced the lines from the cane he’d taken to me that last time we were together when he’d beaten me bloody and I’d been screaming in my skull for him to stop but the words had never made it out through my teeth. He didn’t have to ask about those, but he paid particular attention to them when he turned me over on my belly.

He found every mark my father had ever left on my body, too, and he kissed each one. I’d always hated those. Reminders of something ugly and I knew what I’d done to earn each of them. When he asked, I told him. Spilled milk, improperly slaughtering an animal, too cute, too short-- “This one?” he finally asked, peeling my trousers down and freeing my aching cock. His fingers flexed around it casually, not stroking to provide the relief that I so desperately needed, but squeezing enough to remind me that he was there while he ran his tongue up the long slice on the inside of my thigh.

“You don’t want to know about that one,” I croaked, my fingers knotting in the sheets. I was glad I was on my stomach, my hips propped up with a pillow. It meant that I couldn’t look at him, couldn’t see the question in his face.

I tried not to think about that particular scar or the story that I related to it.

He licked it again, his tongue dangerously close to my cock, and then his lips sealed over it and he sucked gently, bruising me around the pearled flesh while I twisted and squirmed, my hips grinding against the pillow. He held the length of me in one hand and the other reached up, smoothing over the small of my back and the swell of my ass, cross-hatched with a pattern of shining marks. “I want to know everything,” he protested and his hand left me briefly, drawing a pained whine from my throat before it returned, warm and wet with saliva when he finally started to stroke me.
Heat swelled in my stomach and I whimpered, flushed from my cheeks to my ass, vivid scarlet with lust and the tender humiliation he coaxed out of me simply by having me spread naked over my bed while he was still in trousers.

“It’s from a blade,” I finally mumbled and he hesitated briefly but I felt his teeth move along the crease where my thigh met my backside. Every scrape of enamel against flesh sent another jolt to my groin, turning me slick with sweat and needy in the span of a few minutes.

When I did not immediately offer more information, Emory probed. “How did a blade come that close to your cock? There’s a pretty major artery there, if memory serves me right.”

Why, I thought to myself. Why did he have to be so fucking chatty when he was horny? I’d have killed for someone that just shut his mouth and fucked me until my wits fled my brain, but that wasn’t Emory. Emory liked to talk and he seemed more comfortable talking when he was intimate—like he was baring everything anyway, why not strip down his emotions at the same time, right?

“I really, really don’t want to tell this story naked while you’re jerking me off,” I grumbled and I heard him laugh, felt the blush of breath against my thigh where he had settled himself. “Why do you talk so much when I’m naked?”

He really laughed then—the sort of laugh that starts deep and spreads outward and he climbed up my body, dropping kisses along my spine while he moved until he was settled over me, his knees on either side of my hips. Still annoyingly clothed. “You have an attitude problem, Nikita Novak,” he breathed and I felt his lips at my ear, his teeth along the shell, biting gently between words. “I kind of want to spank it out of you.”

“Fuck,” I hissed at the sharp lurch I felt in my stomach and the quickening of my heart at the very idea. I was nodding before I ever even thought about it, heat rushing over my cheeks and between my thighs.

“I’m gonna need better communication than swearing and nodding, sweetheart,” he teased, pinching my hips and then reaching around to do the same to my nipples until I writhed under him, gasping and bucking, not sure if I liked the sharpness of it or if I wanted him to stop it, but I let it continue out of curiosity. It was the sort of pain that lanced right to my cock and my hips flexed eagerly.

I floundered, desperate for words and so unused to having to speak to him during sex. He usually spoke at me. He called me things, praised me, degraded me—but he rarely expected me to do anything but sob in response and I didn’t know how to answer him, anyway. He hadn’t really asked me a question. He’d expressed an interest and I was keen on having him do just that.

Emory seemed to notice the way I struggled for words, lips parted and panting while his hands skated up and down my ribs, ran through my hair, and massaged deep into the tissue around the curve in my spine. He leaned forward again, kissing just in front of my ear. “Do you want me to hit you, Kita?”

I whimpered desperately and managed a stuttering, “Yes,” before the questions continued.

“With a belt or my hands?”

“Your hands,” the answer came quickly, without thought, like I’d always wanted him to use his hands but he very rarely did and I hadn’t even known that desire existed in me until he wrung it from me like you’d wring water from a rag.

“Like this or over my lap?”
That had never been an option before. He always bent me over a table or pushed me against a wall. I groaned at the idea--at the absurdity of even wanting it--before I answered pleadingly. “Over your lap.”

I’d always known how much bigger he was than me. With the exception of full-blooded Lierians and halflings like Atara, pretty much everyone was bigger than me. Tristan had attributed it to malnutrition, abuse, and the curve in my back. It was still jarring though—the way that he picked me up like I weighed little more than a sack of potatoes, manhandling me expertly so that I hadn’t the time to struggle or to even help him before I was splayed face down over his legs.

The humiliation of that was enough to turn me scarlet again and I buried my face in the blankets, my fists tight around the fabric while he rubbed his palm over my backside, spreading me briefly and thumbing over the entrance to my body while I jerked beneath him, breathless and surprised. He circled it until I was practically squealing, squirming against him, hips flexing, degraded and impossibly hard.

I shouldn’t have wanted to be turned over someone’s knee like a naughty child but the surrender of it was gloriously mindless. I didn’t have to think. I wasn’t tied down or blindfolded. There was no mistaking this for anything but willful obedience. I let him hit me and when he started, he wasn’t soft. He was the same violent Emory that I’d known he was. The same force was there, but there was a measure of control in his movements that was new. The first one stung, burning bright and I yelped in response, surprised at the crack of skin on skin. He’d lulled me into a sense of security with the promise of fingering me and then jerked that safety net away from.

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When I reached my limit, it wasn’t because he had bruised me to the bone, though he had. It wasn’t because the pain was overwhelming, though it was. It wasn’t because I really wanted it to end, because I didn’t.

“Stop,” I gasped the word unexpectedly, my cheeks wet, nearly drooling. My fingers groped backward, scrabbling against his chest, digging nails into his sternum and he stopped. Immediately. My ass glowed cherry red and violet, hot even to the touch, and he shifted me upward, dragging me into his lap so that he could lick the tears that lingered on my mouth.

He ran his fingers through my hair, cradling my head close to his so that I was breathing the same air as him, my lips so close to his that when he spoke, his mouth brushed mine. “Are you alright?”

“Gods, yes, but if you kept going, I was going to fucking come in your lap,” I mumbled and he laughed again, feeding me the sound while he tipped me back over into the same position I’d been in, spread over him, ass up and pleasantly bruised.

His fingers probed at my mouth. “Open.” I hesitated and he pushed again. “Open up. Open your mouth, Kita.” I obeyed sloppily, letting him slide his index and middle fingers between my lips and I sucked, swirling my tongue around them, confused about the game but happy to hear the groan that
emitted from his chest a moment later. “Good boy.”

I hummed, pleased at the sentiment, one hand on his hip and the other fisted in the blankets. His fingers popped from my lips with a delightfully lewd sound and then he shifted my hips, angling me up and letting one of my legs slide down off his lap toward the floor so that I was spread.

Emory didn’t give me any warning before his fingers sank into me and I cried out at the sudden intrusion...at the burning stretch of him while I chewed on my lip. “Fuck me,” he breathed above me and I almost answered with a quip about how I’d love to, but this was Emory. He didn’t have to tell me for me to know that he would likely be incapable of ever letting me do that. His insides were scarred. His hips ached all the time. What was a pleasant pain for me would be agonizing for him.

So I swallowed the words and let them turn to incoherent babbling, half in Corian and half in Glacian, wet and lewd. “You are too fucking tight, sweetheart,” he informed me, patting me smartly on my stinging ass so that I whined his name and flinched, squirming in his lap. “Tell me you didn’t fuck yourself stupid while I was gone.”

“Like I would even know how!” I groaned and Emory exhaled sharply, his other hand gliding down my spine while his fingers hooked inside of me and I saw stars. My limbs turned boneless and my eyes rolled. My legs spread wider involuntarily, silently pleading for more of him but he just stroked inside of me, scissoring me open, always careful to hit that spot over and over again until I was sobbing brokenly.

It felt like forever. It always felt like forever when I was hungry for him to just fuck me and all he wanted to do was ease me open, coax me into readiness, turn me hot and boneless and utterly subservient.

“Please,” I eventually begged, barely able to find my voice through the panting and the crying. “Please!”

“Please what?” he asked cutely, slipping a third finger into me so that I howled until his other hand sealed over my mouth to silence the desperate noise. My whole body shuddered, flexing around his fingers. He only let me have my mouth back when he was certain my wailing was quite finished and I was too far gone to care. All I wanted was to feel him again. It had been so fucking long.

I twisted viciously and he tightened his grip on me in response so that I was powerless to do anything but lay there and take it unless I really wanted to stop him...and I didn’t. I would have been content to let him play with me all night if that was what he truly wanted. “Please fuck me,” I ground out through my teeth.

“Fuck you?” he chirped, his voice disturbingly cheerful. I had the sudden urge to punch him in the mouth and my fists tightened in the blankets so that I wouldn’t. “Or love you?”

“Fuck me,” I growled. “If I wanted to be loved like some wilting fucking flower, I’d have set my sights on someone a lot less violent than you, kitten.”

Emory snorted but he slid his fingers out of me and I moaned at the loss of contact, receiving a sharp slap on the ass to propel me forward. I wiggled over the bed and heard him peel his trousers off while I got up on my knees. He always had me face down. It was easier to control me that way, I thought, and so I assumed he’d stick to that but he grabbed my hips and flipped me over so quickly that I landed on my back, breathless and surprised while he settled between my legs. “Surprise,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss me. “I want to see your face this time.”

“Do you...want to tie my hands down?” It was an awkward question, made even more awkward by
this uncharted territory I was in. My cock ached, desperate for attention between us and Emory stroked it a few times, making me hiss and squirm.

“Do you want me to tie your hands down?” he asked, cocking his head to one side in question.

“I…” I hesitated, watching him while he hiked my legs up around his hips and flattened one hand on my belly. I could feel him against me, sliding along the slickened entrance to my body, hard and hot and my stomach clenched deliciously. “No,” I finally answered. “No, I want to be able to touch you.”

“Mm,” he agreed casually and leaned over me, searching for my mouth in the dark while he slid into me. It was slow work. It had been so fucking long and I’d thought about it--about getting up on my knees in the dark and fingering myself to completion while he was gone, but I hadn’t the slightest idea of how to do it. I’d never done it to anyone else and Emory made it seem like it was a skill. Like he’d practiced at it and I knew, of course, that he had. He had a reputation from before the beach.

What had Atara called him when I’d asked? A shameless slut? I’d nearly choked on the wine I was drinking when he said it and he’d laughed at me. *It’s not that it’s a bad thing,* he’d added on with a wry grin. *That’s just who Emory was.*

I cried into his mouth regardless and he fought for each inch he earned, his hips gliding forward, stretching me open, not nearly slick enough without that oil he used to have, but too needy to fucking care and it hurt. The tears were real, but I was a sucker for punishment and pain. I would learn later that there was a word for it and I would quietly assign myself the attribute of ‘masochist,’ but I hadn’t known that then. All I knew then was that pain that should have flagged my erection only made me impossibly harder and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, my nails digging into his skin, scraping down his ribs.

“Almost,” he breathed into my mouth, my bottom lip between his teeth. I arched by back, desperately seeking more. “Take it,” he urged me quietly. “Take it.” I had no idea what I was agreeing to, but I nodded vehemently, my fingers curled against the back of his neck, holding his mouth against my own when his hips finally snapped forward and he was buried completely inside of me, rearranging my body for his own use. I felt gloriously full and my breath came in guttering sobs.

I was aching from sternum to thigh but I pleaded anyway. “Move,” I whimpered, scraping my teeth over his mouth. “Harder. Harder! I’m not--oh, fuck, Emory!” My head dropped back and I clung to him through the snapping of his hips and the sound of skin hitting skin while he fucked me, driving into the deepest parts of me, setting off stars behind my eyelids and taking the air right out of my lungs.

“Have I ever told you,” Emory began. “How fucking good you feel?”

I thought he had. I was a praise whore, according to him. He heaped those sorts of things all over me until I was positively soaked in them, but I couldn’t remember right then. I was whimpering with every thrust, my nails digging into his back, leaving welts in their wake. “I can’t--” I started but the words failed me and I slurred them, sucking at air instead because my lungs were screaming. “R-remember. Yes?”

“I’ll just tell you again,” he answered, his hands sliding up my legs to my knees so that he could push them back and open, nearly bending me in half. It was difficult to breathe like that, not that he let me anyway. His mouth was over mine almost constantly, biting at my bottom lip, sucking my tongue, moaning right with me. “You feel so fucking good.”
My eyes rolled again and my mouth fell open. I was ignoring my cock, too caught up in him and what he was doing to me, balancing on an edge between desperately needy and an actual climax that I so badly wanted to reach. He knew it, too, because he licked the parted seam of my lips and I shuddered beneath him. “Just another minute,” he pleaded, his voice hungry and I set my teeth, my stomach coiling with heat, my thighs trembling around him while he moved in me. My hands dropped from him as his frantic movements pushed us up the bed and my palms hit the headboard, leaving hot fingerprints along the polished wood while I pushed on it.

“Sweet boy,” he purred against my ear. “Obedient to a fucking fault, Kîta. It’s beautiful.”

I shook my head, crying out when one of his hands skated between us and finally, finally found my cock. “I’m not,” I panted. “If you don’t stop, I’m gonna--”

“Good,” he fed me the word with his lips on mine and I snapped under him, my body seizing up with a climax that tightened me down around him and had me twisting and practically screaming. He swallowed the screams, catching my hands and pinning them down beside my head with his own while I thrashed, spilling hot and sticky between us and he fucked me relentlessly through it. Fucked me until my limbs turned boneless and limp and my body twitched beneath him, convulsing with the aftershock of orgasm while he turned erratic, lips beside my ear, panting my name over and over again until he was filling me up, stinging and hot.

And then he, too, was boneless, breathing hard on top of me, his hips still flexing without rhythm just to feel me twitch under him, whimpering softly at each brush of his cock against my insides.

This was where he left, I thought. This was where my Emory got up and curled in a corner, chewing on his thumbs while I cleaned up and dressed.

But he just stayed there, blanketed over me like a living quilt, hot and damp with sweat and I lifted my hands experimentally when tone came back to my limbs and ran my fingers through his wet hair. I felt him shiver, but it wasn’t the sort of revulsion-shiver that I was used to.

He allowed it.

In fact, after a minute, he was pressing sloppy kisses to my cheek and pushing himself up. He slid out of me, sticky and wet and beautifully well-fucked. Then he hoisted me up with him and I squawked, alarmed at the sudden affection when he nuzzled into my throat and deposited me back down on my belly.

Emory whistled and his fingers found the bruised flesh of my backside, pressing carefully into the worst parts while I squirmed, fidgeting under the attention. “Careful,” he eased me back down when I lifted myself up. “Stay still. How are you feeling?”

I blinked. “Fine.”

He huffed behind me and I felt his knuckles dig into the sorest parts of my back right where the curve looped downward and my body went limp almost instinctively. “That nice?” he asked gently and I felt myself nod in response. “Fine is not an appropriate answer, by the way. I want details. Are you hurting anywhere?”

“You just spanked the hell out of me,” I pointed out dryly. “Of course, it hurts, but this…” I was right on the edge of that emotional fall out, the rush of endorphins finally spilling out of my system.
“It’s nice, but can you just...talk? I got used to the talking.”

“Just talk?”

“No,” I started, pushing myself back up. I climbed carefully into his lap and gave him a little shove so that he tumbled backward into my pillows. I settled in with my head over his heartbeat. “Now talk. Tell me about the roses.”

“Tell me about that scar.”

“It’s from my father,” I answered numbly. We were both naked. The room smelled of sex and sandalwood. The situation was arguably worse than when he’d asked the first time, but my defenses were breached already. I didn’t have it in me to fight him when he asked.

Emory was quiet, his hand sweeping up and down my back, fingers pressing hard into the parts that he knew hurt the most. “Your father...cut you there?” he asked. “Intentionally?” When I nodded, he continued. “Why? He could have killed you, Kita!”

“A lot of things could have killed me,” I answered flatly, listening to the steady thump of his heart slowing down to a beat that was indicative of rest. It hiccuped then, though, when anger flooded through Emory’s blood like adrenaline. It was in little moments like this that I knew he loved me no matter how bad our relationship had ever been. We might have been terribly unhealthy. I was sure that, in some aspects, we still were. Plenty of people would have argued that we were toxic to each other and should have walked away from it. Found other people. Plenty of fish in the sea, they’d say.

But none of them were Emory. None of them had turned my scars into the lover’s map that I’d read about in a poem. None of them had such tightly leashed anger over injustices done to me--injustices that I knew, should I have asked him, he would have righted. Bring me my father’s head, I could have demanded and Emory would have shaken the very heavens to give it to me.


Emory stilled. “The better end of it? There’s a worse end?”

I nodded against him. “Sure,” I whispered in the dark. “Gunnar is dead.”
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: This begins the main character death that you have been repeatedly warned about. I am so sorry in advance.

I'm also sorry this is short. Don't worry, the angst continues in the next chapter~

I fluctuated between my father and Mack, never quite sure who I wanted to spend my time with, never sure who I would lose first or if she’d snatch them both out of from under me at the same time. I tried not to think about it. I focused solely on the fact that Emory surely would have left the asylum by then. He would raise an army with Cyril’s help and they would take back our home. I would not die in this cell. I would get out. I would have a happy, healthy baby just like Mackenzie promised me I would. He would be beautiful and when he looked up at me with eyes like storm clouds and mirrors, I would remember where he got them.

And it would hurt, but it would be the best sort of hurt, because I’d remember them in Mackenzie’s face and I’d recall the way he always made time for me in the early days of our relationship, before we were anything more than friends. I would think about the times he kissed me, tucked away in some alcove, breathless and ginger flavored.

I’d remember darlin’ and killer and I’d scoop up that little boy with the storm cloud eyes and I’d kiss him twice. Once for me and once for Mackenzie and I’d tell him how desperately he was loved, even in absence.

When I was with Mack, I’d tell him that. I’d curl into his lap and whisper in his ear while I stared up at the light through the barred window. “I’ll call him Lian,” I told him quietly. An old Infinito name that meant something close to ‘the light bearer.’ I didn’t have to tell Mackenzie why. He tightened his arms around me and that was enough.

At the end of all of this, Lian would be the only light I had and he’d have to be enough to get me out of bed in the morning. He’d have to be enough to stave off the wave of crippling depression that I already felt chewing on the edge of my reality.

My father was different. I would wait for Mackenzie to fall into restless sleep and then I’d disentangle myself from his limbs and crawl to the opposite corner of the room where Fox was always sitting, long legs extended, that mutilated hand held close to his abdomen. It was festering with infection. I could tell already. If Elizabeth didn’t kill him, that thing certainly would but he never complained about it. He just lifted his good arm up and let me tuck myself into his side.

He was usual quiet, content just run his fingers over my head the way he had when I was very
small...like it brought him some measure of comfort just to have me there and I’d close my eyes against the dark in the dungeon and I’d memorize his heartbeat. There was a little hiccup in it, a small murmur that only Fox had. I could have picked it out easily in a room full of the static sound of heartbeats. I’d been listening to it my entire life. Some of my earliest memories were of sleeping on his chest, my thumb in my mouth, that familiar cadence in my ear and the lingering smell of spearmint and aftershave.

“Tiny?” he whispered one night when I was on the verge of falling asleep to that steady thump. His hand stilled, his fingers tucking dark hair behind my ear and I stirred, shifting against him to let him know that I was listening. His voice had a hoarseness to it that I didn’t recognize and he leaned forward to kiss the top of my head, his lips pressed tight, before he continued speaking. “I made so many mistakes. Don’t make the same.”

I didn’t want this talk. I’d done so well not thinking about it, not considering how every time I leaned in to him, it might be the last time I ever heard that heartbeat. My throat swelled with the familiar threat of tears and I squeezed in tighter against him. “I don’t think you made many,” I managed choke.

Above me, Fox laughed, but the sound lacked any real humor. It was cold and distant and I hated it immediately. That wasn’t my father. My father laughed, even when things were ugly, because it made all of us feel better.

“Oh, I did,” he insisted gently. “Don’t be too hard on him. It’s not worth it and you’ll regret all those stupid fights when he’s older. Don’t make him into something he’s not and don’t smother him. You have to let him figure things out on his own and the only way he’ll do that is if you let him stumble. And gods, don’t...don’t give him more than he can handle.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and pushed myself upward, my heart in my throat, threatening to claw right out of my mouth if the lump there was any judge. “This isn’t your fault,” I argued. “I made the decisions that led us here!”

“I let you,” he answered flatly. “This is on me. You weren’t ready. I knew that.” The conviction in his voice told me all I needed to know about my chances of convincing him otherwise. My father had always been stubborn, prepared to metaphorically lock horns with anyone that dared argue when his mind was made up--and it was made up.

Fox reached up with his good hand and brushed his knuckles carefully over my cheek where tears seemed to constantly be scrubbing the dungeon filth off of my face. “But--” I started anyway.

He shook his head. “I’m not going to argue with you, Atara. Not now. I need you to do something for me when you get out of here.”

I didn’t argue, just nodded and caught his hand, threading my fingers through his and settling back down next to him. I let my head fall back to his chest where I could hear the steady thump of his heart and the occasional skip in the rhythm. He kissed the top of my head again and I felt him take a ragged, heavy breath. “The last thing your brother said to me was that he hated me,” he bit out and I cringed at the memory of that evening he’d come back from the asylum without Emory. “I need you to tell him that I knew he was sorry and that he didn’t really mean it. You say whatever you need to say to him to make him understand that, okay? Emory needs to stand on his own and when this is over, there won’t be any great threat to make him do that. He can’t have anything like what he said to me weighing him down. So you tell him that and you tell him that I love him. I love you both.”

I spent that night in lapses--trapped between nightmares that would end with one or both of them
dead and I’d scramble in the dark for Fox’s weight against mine or I’d stumble to where Mack was and press my fingers to his thready, fever-stricken pulse. He was sick, too, from the wounds on his wrists.

I felt like a rope in a match of tug-o-war, being pulled between the two of them all that night, wiping frantic tears from my cheeks every time a nightmare woke me. I’d listen desperately for Fox’s heartbeat and drum it out on my wrist with the fingers of my other hand. I’d urge myself to remember—to remember spearmint and aftershave and the raucous sound of my giggling when he threw me into the pond in the gardens, making me paddle between him and Cyril until I didn’t sink anymore.

To remember that first tooth I’d lost and how I’d presented it to him like a trophy and he’d tousled my hair and traded me for it—my first leather bound journal for my first baby tooth.

To remember the way that Cyril would fall asleep against him in the sitting room of the royal quarters, Emory and I playing at their feet with carved wooden horses and hand painted dragons.

To remember breakfast in the days before the beach and how he’d lean over my chair and kiss the top of my head every morning, no matter how much I complained.

I’d never gone a day in my life without my father. I’d never known a world where he didn’t exist. I’d never not felt genuine, overwhelming affection from him every time he looked at me, even when he was angry.

And I would never forget that. I would seek to emulate it, in fact, and when I told Lian later how much Mackenzie loved him, I made a promise that I would tell him that Fox had, too and when he lost his first tooth, I’d trade him for it. His tooth for something as important to him as that journal was to me. I would teach him to swim in that same pond. He would have wooden horses and hand painted dragons and I would kiss the top of his head every morning, no matter how old he was or how much he complained.

When he was old enough, I would tell him why.

Light peeked in through the barred window while I told myself these things. Mackenzie shivered in one corner, his fever creeping higher every passing hour and Fox stirred listlessly in the other, cringing when he had to move the arm with that wretched hand on it. He woke first, but we did not speak about the night before.

He kissed the top of my head.

Keys rattled at the end of the corridor and I wobbled to my feet, peering out through the bars of the cell while the temple guard advanced down toward us and I knew. It was the same way I’d known about Emory. That instinct that twisted in my stomach like a ball of snakes writhed then and I felt the trembling start when the keys grated in the lock on our door. Mackenzie jolted upright.

I felt Fox at my back and I spun, breathless and sick and more desperate than I’d ever been in the entirety of my life. I didn’t think about what I did. I just threw my arms around him and I felt him shudder at the contact like I was breaking his heart in ways he hadn’t known were possible.

Maybe, I thought to myself, if I held on enough they’d leave him. They couldn’t kill me. Hiram wanted me alive. So maybe...maybe if I made it hard enough for them, I could save him from this.

My fingers locked together at his back and I shut my eyes tight, my cheek pressed against his chest, but he didn’t squeeze me back. He ran his fingers through my hair gently, but he wasn’t fighting the
way that I was fighting. He was resigned to it, I think, and determined to make it as easy for me as possible--a clean break, Mackenzie would have called it. Clean breaks heal easier.

Nothing about it was clean, though. I grew frantic, my throat clogging with tears that spilled unchecked down my face. “No,” I heard myself sob the word and felt him swallow hard. “No, no, no. This isn’t--”

“Let him go,” one of the guards ordered me but he might as well have been speaking a dead language for all I cared. I held tighter, shaking my head, and all I could think about was the way his arms had felt under mine when he’d heaved me into that pond and how I’d squealed and kicked. I thought about being four-years-old again, crawling into his lap when he was on his throne, and how my nanny would always try to remove but Fox would wave her away and let me stay there.

Gods, I’d have given anything to be back there for just a minute. I’d have traded my entire life for it.

Fox took a deep breath. “Atara, I don’t want them to hurt you. You have to let go,” he said gently.

I was willfully disobedient. My fingers turned to claws and my breath came in ragged sobs. Hold tighter, I told myself. They can’t take both of you. And then, I love you, I love you, I love you. I mouthed it and he knew because he bent to press his mouth to the side of my cheek and he whispered back, “I love you, too,” before Mackenzie’s arms closed around mine and I was hauled backward, kicking and screaming like an errant child.

I fought him harder than I’d ever fought anyone in my life. I threw my entire body into it, frantically clawing and screaming, threatening him in every language I knew, and Mack just kept apologizing while they shackled my father and led him away.

I remember the sound of the bars sliding shut again and I remember that last time he looked back at me. “You’ll be okay, Atara,” he told me through the grate.

But I wouldn’t. I would never be okay again. He was leaving with a part of me, torn from my chest, and I screamed until my throat was raw, even after he was gone. I sobbed until the choking turned to heaving and I vomited in the bucket over and over until nothing came up. I threw myself at the bars until my arms were bloodied and bruised and Mack had expended all the energy he had just to detach me from Fox. He was shivering again, his own cheeks wet, huddled in the back of the cell.

Time passed and I felt none of it. I raged in a way I’d thought only Emory could. My fury burned for hours, limitless and laced with grief. I bit the guard that brought food and he backhanded me, which only served to fuel the rage and I cursed at Mack when he tried to look at my face.

“They’re not bringing him back,” I eventually rasped, my throat bloody from hysterics and my voice as hoarse as grating gravel.

Quietly, Mackenzie answered. “No,” he whispered. “He’s gone.”

“But you came back,” I insisted, whirling to face him, fresh tears on an already swollen face. “You came back!”

“I’m sorry, Atara.”

And there was nothing else to say. There was nothing else to think. I sank, drained and empty, into the floor beside him. “I’ll kill her myself when this is over,” I said stiffly, my fingers tightened into fists in front of me. “Her and Hiram both. With my own fucking hands.”

He only slipped an arm around me in response, his head slumping onto my shoulder.
Exhaustion won out over rage in the end and in the morning, Mackenzie was gone, too.
Cyril made it back first. I’d expected Brentlyn to beat everyone, but it was Cyril and Tristan making their way down the coast a few mornings after my initial return from the asylum, followed by a few hundred Lierians. They nearly blended into the white sand on the beach and if not for the black smudge that was Tristan’s tell-tale armor and the pounding of the hooves of their tiny ponies, we might not have noticed they were thundering toward us at all. It was a distant rumble at first, not unlike far-off thunder from a storm rolling in off the coast, but the skies were the same blue of my Lheiro’s eyes—crystal clear and cloudless.

The rumble grew louder and, on the horizon along the coast, a cloud of dust and sand kicked up like a cyclone. I’d been standing with Gier and Nikita on the edge of the perimeter, watching the wall, when the alarm rose up behind us and the Riders all shifted like they were preparing for battle. My stomach churned when Kita climbed up onto his war horse, streaked with chalky white paint like the black armor he was wearing. She was marked to match his face, adorned with that red that I so loved on him. They’d all taken to red and black, following his example, a tribute to my fallen house.

He’d ordered me to stay, but when the noise crested over the dunes and I saw the flood of white, there was no staying still. I recognized the symbols painted on their armor as Recian. These were my people, caught up with before they made the long journey home to southern Glacia after their yearly meet on the coast near Coryth. The Riders visibly relaxed as they, too, recognized the heraldry and I felt my heart soar in my chest like it had grown wings.

I hadn’t seen Cyril in so long and I’d never been without him a day in my life until the asylum. My first five years had been spent in a small, one room lodge with him and my grandfather, snuggled between the two of them for warmth at night while Cyril filled my head with stories about the south. He’d been my constant source of comfort as a child, even after we moved to Coryth and I met Fox. I’d never quite associated home and safety with my father as much as I did with my Lheiro and I missed the honey and lime smell of him more than I’d realized.

I stumbled out ahead of the perimeter and heard Nikita curse me while he climbed from his horse, calling after me, shouting at me to get behind the line. I ignored him. I was running further from the wall, anyway, and the only danger to me out there came from the refugees themselves but none of it mattered in that moment. Especially after I saw him, there at the front, leaning in toward Tristan as their small horses slowed to a trot upon the final approach.

It was not nearly enough to take the city. Not even close. I didn’t care.
"Lheiro!" His attention zeroed in on my voice. He turned sharply toward the noise as I called for him. Nikita came up behind me, shielding his eyes from the sun, and Cyril was running. His boots pounded against the sand, he nearly tripped half a dozen times—he was nothing if not clumsy when he was excited—and his arms locked around me with a crushing force that I didn't know he had in him. His fingers tangled in my hair, a dozen kisses fell over my face, and I could feel his heart against my ribs.

His speech was frantic, almost slurred. "Emory, Emory, Gods, I was so sure they'd reach you before Nikki did. You look so healthy! Look at you!" His joy was bittersweet, I could sense it, and so was mine, but I hadn't seen him in nearly six months and for that brief moment, all I cared about was knowing that he was safe. Cyril, at least, was still there. "You're safe? You got here safely?"

I nodded quickly and he kissed me a dozen times again before Tristan grasped my hand and shook it hard. Kinnon approached a moment later with promises to do anything he could, but nobody mentioned anything about my father. I could tell in their features that it was a topic left quiet on purpose. I could see in the way that Cyril trembled when he moved that he was beyond worried. He could barely speak. He chewed his fingertips and kept looking down the beach to where the carrion birds circled. The coast beside the palace had become a dumping ground for the dead. They were just being tossed from the windows of the building into the waves below and the water churned with sharks and orcas all feeding on the corpses.

“We need to talk,” Tristan finally whispered when Cyril peeled himself away from me, his hands still cupped around my face like he couldn’t quite believe that I was there. “Privately.”

Nikita nodded toward the house and the four of us made our way through the weaving traps that the Riders had set up. Kinnon returned to his people, all of them unloading their small carts and erecting tents along the edge of the borders, their filmy white banners catching in the sea breeze as they worked.

The door to the manor house shut behind us and Nikita’s deft hands slid the locks into place. Joey was inside already skinning a basket full of fish with Teilo nearby, chewing on whatever scraps she threw to him.

“She’s fine,” I informed Tristan when he glanced at her, his expression wary. “She can hear whatever you have to say.”

“It’s about your brother,” the alchemist said tersely. He shrugged his cloak from his shoulders, draping it over one of the chairs. My stomach twisted within my abdomen, knotting beneath my skin, stricken with panic and anxiety. I was trying my best not to think about Atara behind those walls...to not think about any of them. Atara was the most difficult, though. I knew my brother like I knew the backs of my own hands. He would be holed up in there blaming himself for this entire disaster and if I’d learned anything at the asylum it was that people must be held accountable for their own actions. He might have lent to the series of events that led up to this monumental catastrophe, but the actions of Elizabeth Glenning, Hiram, and the temple guard could be attributed only to them.

I settled into a chair and Cyril sat beside me, plucking up one of my hands so that he could squeeze my fingers between his own and when I didn’t flinch from the unexpected touch, he smiled widely before his attention went back to Tristan. “You didn’t tell me anything while we were gone,” he pointed out stiffly, a frown replacing his grin.

Tristan pursed his lips. “I needed you focused,” he answered grimly. “And this would have only made you wildly emotional. I know how Lierians are.”

Cyril scowled, but he couldn’t argue the reality of it. Our people were sensitive creatures, both
physically and emotionally. That much could be seen by the way he clung to me, even in those few minutes since he’d arrived, like he couldn’t believe the change in me. I’d put my weight back on, honed it into the muscle I’d had before, and there was color in my cheeks. I didn’t cringe from touch, though that had more to do with the proximity of both Nikita and Teilo, who would have been fighting over who got to rip someone apart for upsetting me should the need arise.

The alchemist ran his hands over his face and sighed heavily. “I spoke with Atara the night before this all happened. He came to me with certain suspicions and after a brief examination, I confirmed them. I doubt very much he had the opportunity to share the information with anyone except me, given the time frame between my conversation with him and his capture inside the Keep.”

Something cold grew in my chest like my heart was steadily freezing. It was dread. I recognized it. Of course, things would be getting worse. Of course they would, because nothing that ever included Atara was simple. It had been that way his entire life. He liked complicated. Thrived on it, in fact. To some extent, we all did, but Atara made theatrics into an art. It was no surprise then that there was something horrible going on beneath the veneer of this wretched coup.

I think some small part of me guessed it, but that was the same part of me that detested the fact that I was no longer capable of childbirth the way that Cyril and Atara were. I’d wanted children so badly and I’d spent so long struggling in the dark after the beach, weighed down by the horror that I would never have that. It was a grief that stretched on endlessly in a way that made my chest feel like it would always be...just a little bit empty. Like I was waiting for some bright-eyed little boy with marks on his face to fill the void but it would never happen for me.

“Atara is pregnant,” Tristan finally confirmed my suspicion and I felt Cyril physically deflate at my side. If he’d been able, he would have sunk into the floor and disappeared beneath the house, I think, but instead, all he did was put his head in his hands, his fingers pressed over his eyes.

Nikita was gravely silent and Joey’s movements ceased entirely.

My mouth went dry and my tongue thickened. My heart lurched in my chest like it could climb out of my ribs and march itself right up to the Keep to be with my brother, imprisoned in the dank dark of the cells in the old fortress.

We had a time limit, I realized, because once Hiram had that baby, my brother’s life ceased to matter to him. I’d thought we would have more time than that. I’d thought they would have to put him through a Rite to achieve it, but trust Atara to expedite things.

Nikita spoke first. “They won’t put him through a Rite, at least,” he offered weakly, and I supposed there was that. I would have never wished that fate on anyone, least of all my brother, who had known only the sweet and tender touch of someone who adored him in all of his life. A Rite would not be like Mackenzie Glenning, especially in these circumstances. A Rite would be intentionally brutal--a punishment for being a halfling, for fighting back against tradition, for defying the elders….

Atara would have never survived what I had survived. He was made of tougher stuff than any of us gave him credit for, but in this one instance...on this one front...Atara would be easily broken. He would expect Mack and he would get the beach.

“We have to get him out of there before he has that baby,” Cyril breathed. “Hiram will...he’ll...Emory, I can’t lose one of you. You know what they’re going to do to your father--” He choked on the end of the sentence and I flinched, withdrawing my hand from his touch and retreating back into my own space.

I tried not to think about what they would do to Fox. It only started a panic that clawed at my throat,
laced with the memory of the last things I’d said to him and how deeply I regretted all of it. At night, in the darkness of Nikita’s bedroom when I inevitably wriggled into his arms, I’d tell him how badly I wanted just five minutes to apologize for that...how I’d have given anything for it. I’d have even traded places with Atara, if only for that chance to tell him that I was sorry. That I hadn’t really hated him. I’d thought I did, but I was wrong. I loved him. I idolized him. He was everything I wanted to be and I’d spent my life feeling like I would always fall short because Fox carried with him the sort of grandeur that bards sang about. I would consider myself a success if I was ever half the man he’d tried to teach me to be.

We were quiet then. Cyril stared down at his tiny hands, fingers stretched out over dark wood. Nikita disappeared and returned to his Riders. Tristan fell asleep, his head down on the table, and Joey draped a blanket over his back when she finished her work, squeezing my shoulder when she walked by with a quiet whisper of, “Strategy, Emory. Focus.”

And I tried. The house moved around me in the hours that followed. Joey cooked delicately fried fish and handed it out among the Riders. She’d become quite popular among Nikita’s men, who called her ‘the Southern princess’ and treated her like she was a little sister to each of them. One of them even painted her face in inky war paint, dutifully dubbing her one of their own for the way she took care of them all. They painted Teilo, too, the way that they painted their horses, but he was significantly less appreciative.

Cyril stayed beside me and, after a time, I began to tell him about the asylum. I told him about Teilo, Rosa, and the roses I’d grown. I told him about apple wine, Joey, and how I’d learned to forgive myself for the disaster at the beach. He listened quietly, his eyes on me, wide and clear as the sea, and he told me over and over again how different I looked, how happy he was for me, and how incredible it was to have me back in some fashion. Not quite the same, he admitted, as I had been before, but very close.

We would have stayed like that for hours had Nikita not come in toward noon, breathless and pale. “The gates are open,” he panted and I stood quickly, adrenaline flooding through my limbs like blood in my veins. I stumbled to my feet, nearly tripping over Teilo, who followed me on long legs out the door, his ears flapping beside his face as I tore around the corner of the house and stopped short of the perimeter.

The wall of Coryth was lined with archers, all of them pointed outward, arrows poised as a lone figure atop a horse was sent galloping across the open field frantically, as if it had been struck to send it running. I expected them to fire...like this was some bizarre way of flexing their numbers at me, displaying their strength--like they wanted to engage in some pissing match, but not a single arrow hurtled downward.

Cyril and Tristan both stopped near me, my Lheiro’s arms wrapped tightly around one of mine. Nikita took a step forward, squinting, but it was Tristan with his alchemist eyes that saw first. “Oh,” I heard him breath and then it was followed by a string of curses in Immaran. He pushed through the Riders crowded around us, making his way up to the front of the line with me and Cyril on his heels.

I think I knew then. It was a gut feeling--dread and sorrow that bloomed from the cold pit in my stomach. This was a test, I thought. A way of seeing if the mad prince was still as unstable as he had been before the asylum. It wasn’t flexing. It was taunting and there were only two people in that Keep that could ever really test how capable of standing on my own I truly was after Lysander’s. One of them needed to be kept alive. The other needed to die.

And so I jerked away from Cyril’s arm before Tristan said the words because the horror that settled in my belly was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. I remembered Nikita’s words the night
I’d left for the asylum—that nobody deserves to be gawked at. I started forward, tearing through the line of Riders, intent on running until I reached that frantic horse, weaving and careening, nostrils flared, hooves pounding on sandy earth and the figure that slumped over it, arms hanging loose down its neck instead of grasped around reins, ropes lashed tightly about the abdomen, looped into the saddle to keep the rider from sliding off.

It was Nikita who stopped me, fingers grasped tightly at my elbow with enough force to bruise. “They’ll shoot you,” he snarled through his teeth and I looked back at him, fingers clenched into a fist, and I wanted to punch him like I had that night in the courtyard. I was livid and sick, torn between wanting to break down into breathless tears and wanting to rip something apart like I had in the months that followed the beach.

I wanted to destroy something again. *Strategy. Focus.* They echoed in my head to no avail.

“Let me go,” I hissed back, jerking my arm toward my body but Nikita held fast, his teeth set in a determined grimace. “Let me fucking go!”

“You go out there, you die!” he shot back. “You are the only hope these people have! I cannot let you kill yourself!”

And so we struggled, the two of us. I was bigger than him, but he was stronger than me. More determined than me. He wasn’t fighting because he was angry. He was fighting because he was in love. His conviction far outweighed my own and he only released me after that horse had galloped out of range of the archers on the wall and I tore from him, Teilo on my heels, bounding out across that empty field.

I was dimly aware of Nikita following me, of Cyril shouting after me, of the crackle of Tristan’s magic slowing that panic-stricken animal down with soothing swathes of blue and I nearly collided with it.

I realized then that I was crying. I wasn’t sure when it happened, but the tears were there, blinding me when I tore at the leather cords holding my father in that saddle, my nails digging into them haphazardly. Nausea rolled in my belly, pressing against my throat like waves on the shore until the knots finally loosened and he slid toward me.

My heartbeat was frantic, a desperate drum in my chest and I felt like, little by little, I ripping apart at the seams. I caught him when he fell but the pain in my hip lanced upward through my ribs and I stumbled back, sinking into the damp dirt with him on top of me and I was so sure he was already dead. I was so sure that I was holding his corpse and the sick feeling in my stomach grew more vehement at the thought because gods, the last time he’d touched me had been at the asylum and I’d been so angry with him.

It hurt. Gods, it hurt so bad that it was hard to breathe and I couldn’t tell if it was pain or sobbing that caused it, really. Or maybe it was the way that I kept repeating, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” over and over again in a voice so hoarse that I didn’t recognize it.

And then he coughed. A wheezing breath sucked down through his throat and I felt his fingers scrape against my ribs, but my shirt was soaked through, warm and scarlet with sticky blood when I shifted him, cradling him half-upright in my lap.

There was a blade stuck in his belly, twisted at an angle that I knew was fatal, but he was living then and he reached for my face, blood-slick fingers groping at my cheeks and sliding in tears. “Boss,” he slurred and I managed a nod, quick and hard, chewing on my bottom lip. “You look—really good.”
I hushed him. What else was there to do? He was dying. I could feel it in the ragged way he breathed and I needed him to hear it before lucidity was lost. “I’m sorry,” I rasped the words and he winced. “I never hated you. I was stupid and selfish and you were only doing what was best.”

“Shh,” he managed and tried to shake his head but he winced at the sensation. Behind me, Teilo laid down at my back, a warm, comforting weight that breathed against me. “I,” he tried and choked, red bubbling up through his lips and his teeth and I made a noise, gagging on my own tongue when I tried to talk again. “I know,” he finally got out.

Cyril reached us first and I heard him before I felt him. "Fox." His name was a choked whisper and Cyril stumbled forward, landing heavily on his knees in the sand. His fingers fell on the hilt of the blade, an inhuman noise tearing from his throat, and then his hands cupped over his mouth. It was an agony I’d never witnessed before and one that I would never witness again. I almost wanted it to be a scream but it wasn’t a scream. It was torment given a voice. It was audible anguish and my whole body seemed to break for him. “No, no, no. It’s not supposed to be like this, Fox. You’re not supposed to go like this!”

“If I...had a choice...little one,” he choked and there was a small smile on his lips when he reached for Cyril’s face. His hand was caught, seized between my Lheiro’s own. Cyril didn’t care about the blood or the dirt. He kissed his fingers and then leaned forward, pressing his lips to the blood soaked, split ones on my father’s face and when he came back, his mouth was stained red, too.

Tristan fell beside me and I could feel the cold of his magic wash between us. “Fix him,” I demanded suddenly, turning my head to face the alchemist with a vicious expression. “Fix him, Tristan!”

“Em,” Fox started, coughing another spray of red down his chin and out of his mouth.

Tristan blinked at me, anguish in his features and I could tell already that he couldn’t. I wanted him to, desperately. I didn’t care what it cost, but I knew the answer before he spoke. “I can make him comfortable, Emory,” he said gently. “But this is...catastrophic. That knife is the only thing keeping him alive. Even if I were centuries old, I couldn’t fix this. He is dying, Emory. Spend what time you have on him instead of begging me.”

I tore myself away from him, fresh tears spilling over cheeks stained with grime and blood from his fingers, and in that moment there was nobody in the world that I hated more than Harlan. I’d never put much thought into the first five years of my life and how Fox had been missing from them. I’d never considered how important it was, though I’d known abstractly that it hurt him. It had never hurt me. Not until that very moment when those five years suddenly felt like the deepest kind of betrayal.

“But I didn’t have enough time,” I sobbed. “I want more time” My heart was cracking, splitting down the seams that had healed into fractured little pieces. The sutures I’d so delicately placed after I’d spent so long bleeding were tearing open, hemorrhaging into my chest. I felt like I’d been robbed of something—like I had after the beach, like someone had reached inside of me and ripped out some vital part that I could never recover.

I’d thought he was already dead and so I’d grieved quietly, knowing all the time that I would probably never find his body when I took the city back. That seemed, somehow simpler...like a gradual grief. It was different than this soul-rending sensation that I felt then, poised with him dying in my lap, bleeding out all over my clothes. I kept remembering the spearmint smell of his soap, the way he ruffled my hair, the days I’d spent with him as a child splashing around in the fountain while he held Atara, still blond and fat, on his lap. I remembered crawling into bed with him and Cyril, snuggled between the two of them while they laughed at something above me, his fingers stroking absently over my face or down my arms like he couldn't quite believe that I was real.
I remembered meeting him and how he’d looked at me when he first knew who I was to him, grief and adoration in equal parts on his face. That first night after we’d left when I’d stumbled to him in the camp, he’d taken me back to bed and tucked me in, and then he laid down beside me, one arm over my chest, and he’d whispered against my ear, ‘You changed everything.’

My heart felt so beyond shattered in that moment that the state was damn near indescribable. Cyril shifted closer to me, his arm hooking around Fox’s neck so that he could pull his weight into his lap and my father flinched, a low groan escaping his lips that Tristan quickly soothed over, but he couldn’t take all of the pain away. I could see that in Fox’s face.

“We had...a good run, sweet thing,” my father rasped, light laughter in his voice like this was somehow funny to him, but I suppose, in his position, in that amount of pain, an end must have seemed like salvation. I wondered for years afterward how hard he’d had to fight to hold on long enough to spend those few minutes with us the way he had with Atara.

My Lheiro made a pained noise in his throat and leaned forward, his forehead pressed to my father’s. “We did, didn’t we?” he whispered back. Fox’s hand reached blindly until he found my fingers, but he couldn’t squeeze. He just wanted proximity and I clasped his hand with both of mine while his other arm hung, listless and infected up to the elbow, against his abdomen. “Godsdammit, Fox. You had to be the hero, didn’t you? Self-righteous, arrogant, prick.”

My father choked on a laugh again. It was a familiar string of insults, one that I’d grown used to hearing bantered back and forth between them. Cyril said that all the time and Fox had always responded by grinning or pinching his hips or picking him up while he squawked and kicked, indignant and furious. If I was ever even a fraction as happy as my parents were, I would consider my relationship worthy of the bards.

“You,” he started weakly. “Get him...back and...crown Emory.” I didn’t need to hear the name to know he was referring to my brother and Cyril nodded vehemently, his fingers lifting to press over Fox’s mouth. He was fading quickly. The fevered color was leaving his cheeks, replaced with gray and he shivered violently. Dread creeped up my collar, causing goosebumps over my flesh despite the heat.

“I love you,” Cyril breathed the words, pressed against the fingers that were lingering over Fox’s lips. “You’re okay. It’s okay. You don’t have to fight anymore.”

And it was almost like he was waiting for that permission to let go. I resented Cyril having given it. I wanted him to fight. I wanted him to defy the odds, to surge upright so that Tristan could fix him, but I’d known the wound was fatal when I saw it—it had pierced through his gut and cut upward toward his liver. In the days that had directly followed the beach, Mackenzie had talked out loud while he worked on me and I’d come to recognize anatomy in some rudimentary degree. That wound was bleeding toxic bile into his gut and his bloodstream. Even if Tristan could fix the damage, he could not solve the problem of the infection that would follow.

It would be a horrific, slow, and brutal way to die.

But that wasn’t how Fox died. Fox died right there, in that moment after he nodded when Cyril told him that he didn’t have to fight anymore. He took two more breaths, grating and wheezing, and he mouthed the words ‘I love you,’ with a thick, numbing tongue...and then he just...stopped. Like a clock that needs to be wound again, but Fox could not be turned over and twisted back into working order.

Fox was gone.
My throat ached with sobs that tore at my shoulders and I felt Nikita’s hand on my back, felt Teilo get up and lick my face, tucking his head under my chin, but my focus was on Cyril. It was on the way he seemed to crumple, his spine curved forward, his arms around a cooling corpse, and he wailed like someone had ripped him apart. He pressed his cheeks to a quiet chest that no longer heaved with struggled breathing and I couldn’t bring myself to move.

I watched, detaching quickly, compartmentalizing the grief and funneling it into rage that turned into fury soaked tears. His lips turned black and his skin was ashy, but he was still recognizable as my father...as Fox.

Behind me, Nikita got to his feet and spoke quietly to Gier. “Hang the black banners,” he whispered. “And build a pyre. The King is dead.”

Cyril remained and fingers traced his face, his eyelids, his mouth. He kissed him and it should have nauseated me but all I felt was the raw aching of my heart that struggled to flutter in my chest. I couldn't imagine what he felt. I couldn't even begin to. Every memory I had of them together was so soaked in a kind of intense, loving bond that trying to imagine having that and losing it was a task better left for gods than men.

I watched him fall apart, gather up the pieces of himself, and fall apart again because what had always kept him together was Fox. The glue that made up Cyril was gone and eventually, his shattering spurred me forward and I put a hand on his shoulder. He jumped at the touch and looked up at me with an expression so utterly destroyed and impassioned that it struck me speechless. "Emory," he choked my name and his hands lifted to his mouth like he was going to vomit. His whole body shuddered and it killed me. It killed me because I loved him. He'd given me life, he'd done things for me that went above and beyond what anyone could ever expect from another person, and he was so small and helpless looking in that moment that all I wanted to do was wrap him up and take back what had happened. I could just never tell him. I could spare him this agony of seeing Fox like this.

"Come on," I finally whispered, urging him up but he shook his head and clung to the body, unwilling to let go.

"No," he whimpered. "Not like this. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I don't want to leave him. Emory, please!"


He sobbed, uncontrollably and without reservation, and I had to support nearly all of his weight. The Lierians had set up tents just past the tide line and we hobbled toward them. Kinnon opened his and stepped out. "Emory, I'm so sorry," he whispered and I made no attempt to answer him. He didn't expect one. I just let Cyril slink into the tent and curl up in the skins that lined the floor. He trembled and his teeth chattered, though it was humid and hot as hell, and then he sat up suddenly when I got down beside him and pulled me into another crushing embrace. He was more torn than I was but he was holding me in such a way that it seemed he was the one providing comfort.

And we stayed like that, with him sobbing into my shoulder, holding my head pressed to his, and I allowed him the touch. I rubbed circles on his back and his shoulders and he kept repeating that it wasn't supposed to be like this. They were supposed to go together. They were supposed to be old together. They were supposed to watch us have our own families. He told me that Fox loved me, a dozen times, more than that--over and over. That he loved me, he was proud of me, of both of us, like providing me with comfort eased his own suffering and then he cursed Lady Glenning to hell and back. He wanted her to suffer. He wanted her to bleed. He wanted her thrown out the window
into the water like a sack of meat left for sharks. I promised him that she would pay. We'd make sure of it and we would get Atara back. We had to, because he kept telling me how he couldn't lose them both and quite honestly, neither could I.

I don't think it would have hurt so bad if it had been expected--not that I didn't expect what Lady Glenning did. Quite the contrary, but there is a distinct difference between watching someone sicken and die and expecting that death than there is in expecting an execution. The brutality of it makes it so much more profound and intense. My parents loved each other like no other couple I knew had ever loved each other. There wasn't a day in my memory of them together that they hadn't said the words--their quiet, whispered 'I love yous' over breakfast or before one of them left, punctuated with gentle kisses and embraces. I had known Cyril without Fox but it was hard to imagine him without Fox after knowing them together for so long and knowing what they'd been through to get there.

Eventually, when the tears slowed because there were none left and because we were too exhausted in our grief to do much more than stare, we laid on the skins of the bottom of the tent and we did just that. Cyril absentmindedly ran his fingers through my hair and I could hear him take shuddering, desperate breaths every few seconds. "Lheiro," I whispered in the growing dark and he hummed his acknowledgement. "Do you remember when we lived with the tribe and I would ask you about my father--you told me stories. You made him into a hero and a comedian and a friend and a villain at the same time and when I was little, I used to think it was impossible for him to be the way that you described but you were right. You were so right. He was all of those things and so much more."

Cyril stiffened and whimpered, like thinking about it caused him physical pain and I tilted my head up to look at him. "Do you remember the story about the raspberries?" I continued and a small, weak smile crossed his face. It cut through the shuddering and the sobbing and a tiny, barely audible laugh escaped his lips. "Will you tell it to me again?"

He took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Fox was..." He choked on his name and had to start again. "Fox was twelve. So I had to be something like ten. We were always getting into trouble, mostly because he insisted that rules were there to be broken. I tried telling him that was exactly what rules were not meant to be. He brought me along because Brentlyn refused to be an accomplice to his 'criminal behavior.'" He chuckled at the memory and bit his bottom lip, struggling to continue through tragic, sobbing that was cut with quiet, nostalgic giggles. "We stole a basket of raspberry tarts. A whole banquet's worth of them and snuck out into the garden behind the kitchens to eat them. We ate all of them together, your father and I, and it made us so sick. We were throwing up an hour later, laughing because we'd eaten so many that the vomit smelled of raspberries and he looked at me and he said, "It's worth it to get in trouble with you, Cyril." And he started heaving again. I can't even remember why there was a banquet...oh...Oh--"

He sat up and his eyes welled up again and I sat up with him, staring at him in the dark, waiting on the next round of hysterics. "Oh Emory, it was his birthday. It was his thirteenth birthday."

And he shattered again, an isolated, unreachable island in the dark, comprised of the deepest, most profound grief a single person could ever feel.

I waited there beside him while the tears built and washed over his face. He would gather himself up and then they would cascade again, like tides rushing over the shore. He wept himself into exhaustion, curled on his side, and I left only when I was certain he was asleep. Kinnon slipped quietly into the tent at my exit with a soft promise to look after him.

I made my way numbly across the Lierian camp and, at some point, Teilo fell in beside me, graceless legs tripping over each other until we reached the edge of the water where Nikita was staring out at the bay, alone save the horse that lingered near a pyre.
“We’ll burn him in the morning,” I offered weakly. “It’s tradition to do it as the sun comes up and then I’ll...I’ll take a boat out into the bay and throw his bones in the deepest part.”

Nikita nodded. “I’m familiar with Corian funeral customs,” he said softly. “I’m less concerned with funerals than I am with you, kitten. I’ll leave my door unlocked tonight.”

“You shouldn’t.”

He hesitated, arms crossed over his chest, and then he tilted his head and looked up at me. “No?”

“No,” I repeated. “I can’t promise I’ll be able to control myself tonight.”

He was quiet for a minute and then he held that hip flask out to me and I took it, numb down to the very heartbeat that I couldn’t even feel in my chest, and I took a long drink of warm Corian brandy. It was a surprise. Nikita didn’t favor brandy. He liked his whiskey. Neat. I was intensely appreciative of this small gesture because I knew he’d done it for me. Sometime between that morning and when I’d emerged from Kinnon’s tent, he’d dumped the whiskey and replaced it with something I preferred. “Do you know why I drink brandy?” I asked after a minute.

“Fox drank it,” he responded and I blinked at him, startled by the knowledge, and he managed a small smile. “I love you, Emory. If I didn’t notice the little things, how could I claim that?” He was quiet then and, after a long minute of heavy, hideous silence, he reached out and squeezed my shoulder lightly. Any more contact would have to wait until we were safely in the confines of his bedroom, but the gesture was enough. “I’ll leave the door unlocked,” he repeated. “And there won’t be any sex. You won’t want to be alone tonight and, quite frankly, I don’t either. He was a better man than me. I can’t think of any one of us that deserved that less than your father did. How is Cyril?”

I scoffed. “He fluctuates between stoic and crying so hard that it makes him vomit. I waited until he sobbed himself to sleep before I left him with Kinnon. I needed to...get some air.”

“How are you?”

I was silent for a long time before I managed thickly, “I miss him. Gods, it hasn’t even been twelve hours and I miss him. Where is he, anyway?”

“Joey cleaned him up. He’s in the cellar at the house. Tristan healed the bruises. He looks...like Fox. I had them wait to wrap him in case you or Cyril wanted to...” He gestured toward the building and shrugged, swallowing the end of the sentence through a waver in his voice that indicated the threat of tears. He walked to where the horse was and reached over him, plucking something off the saddle that he held out to me when he got back.

I recognized it immediately as the black and red coat that my father had been wearing, freshly scrubbed and mended with expert fingers. “I thought,” he started with the same waver in his voice. “I thought you should have it. It’s the King’s, right? Station indicative and all...and, well, you’re the king now. Joey did most of the work.”

I handled it carefully. The cloth was familiar under my hands, soft and well worn, with my father’s sigil stitched in leather on the right breast. The buttons had been replaced. The originals were likely on the floor of a dungeon in the old Keep. These were northern in make, I noted, leather capped and black, but I liked that. I liked that there was some piece of Nikita on it and I brought it to my face.

It smelled of spearmint and my eyes welled up again, the threat of tears swelling in my throat, and Nikita flinched. “I’m sorry,” he breathed the words desperately and I knew precisely why he was
sorry because I wanted so badly to throw my arms around him and sob into his lap there on the sand but it was an impossibility out in the open. He was sorry for that and I knew because I saw his fingers ball up into fists. “The door will be unlocked,” he repeated after a minute while I struggled not to break into breathless sobbing. “I promise--”

“Commander!”

I sucked in a sharp breath, pulling the coat away from my face. I slid it on over the Lierian leather I was wearing. My previous clothing had been ruined, soaked through with blood, and these were Kinnon’s. I breathed in heavily as the coat settled around me, cutting out the chill that blew in from the sea. It was too big. I’d have to have the sleeves shortened and the shoulders brought in, but it was my father’s and it was almost like having him next to me. I could smell him in the fabric, scrubbed with spearmint soap on Nikita’s order, I would discover later, but I hadn’t the time to ask then as Gier ran up the beach, two Riders behind him, hauling up a stumbling figure soaked in seawater and strings of kelp.

Nikita was ahead of me a few steps and he put an arm out, careful to keep me away from any potential danger as Gier met us. “Commander,” he said breathlessly. “We fished him out of the water not fifteen minutes ago. Is the Immaran up at the manor? I’m afraid he’s got water in his lungs.”

I stepped around them at the sound of coughing, wet and heaving, and the splat of vomit and water hitting the sand. The Riders that had him by the arms seemed unconcerned by the fevered, pathetic looking creature between them, but I recognized gold-blond curls and the remnants of white armor made filthy by the grime of the dungeons and the stinking corpses that were washing up on the beach every day.

“Son of a bitch,” I cursed and Nikita pushed past Gier. “Mack?!”

He coughed, cheeks flushed scarlet, sweating through infection that I could smell on him. “Hey, boss,” he choked, his voice slurred with fever that I could see raging beneath his skin. It was visible in the palor of his face, waxy and white, and the shine of sweat that coated his body. I’d mistaken it for seawater, but it wasn’t. His clothes were dry and coated in a thick layer of sand, but his skin was soaked.

Nikita barked an order and the Riders released his arms, but Mack wobbled, unsteady on his feet, and pitched forward into my arms. He was searing hot and I knew, just from a basic understanding of biology, that he was incredibly sick.

“Give him to me,” Nikita insisted and I hesitated before he repeated it. “Give him to me and go get Tristan. I’ll get him up to the house. Move, Emory!”

It wasn’t the first time Nikita had ordered me to do something, but it was the first time I listened.
“We need to get his temperature down.” It was the first thing out of Tristan’s mouth when I hobbled into the door with Gier, Mackenzie sagging between the two of us, barely capable of using his own legs. He was mumbled, delirious with fever from the exertion of just getting up the embankment to the manor and I could tell, just by having my arm around him, that he was dangerously close to death--straddling the line between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

My grief for Emory was forgotten temporarily, but that was the Glacian in me. I could not help the dead and Fox, whether I wanted to think about it or not, was dead. Mackenzie was not. He could still be saved, I thought, if we could break the fever that radiated off of him, a corona of sweltering heat that I could feel through my armor. Each breath he took was labored and ragged when I was finally able to transfer him to Tristan’s waiting arms.

Mackenzie would hate this, I thought, and if the situation weren’t so dire, I would have laughed at that. There was nobody in the palace that Atara’s consort hated more than Tristan Brighton, but Tristan had always seemed utterly unfazed by it. Even then, he simply set to cutting the remnants of the Imperial guard’s armor from his shivering body while Gier and Emory dragged a tub out to the pump and then back in. Joey and I remained and she handled one of my knives deftly, slicing through leather straps and cloth while Tristan wrestled with boots.

I could see the sources of the infection then. Ragged strips of mutilated flesh hung from his wrists, dangling from a wide wound around each hand. They looked like bracelets--angry, scarlet bracelets lined with black bruises and skin colored green with infection. Mack was still but for the labored breath that echoed in his chest, wet with seawater.

Tristan moved to his head and I watched, transfixed, as he closed his palm over Mackenzie’s mouth and that blue light glowed through a bruised and battered throat circled with a steel collar and the body on the table twitched quickly, turning suddenly rigid with a convulsion that arched his back and then Tristan tipped his head to one side and another mouthful of water came up from his lungs. Mack coughed and heaved, water that smelled of metal and infection spilling up from his lips until his muscles finally went lax and he sank, boneless, back onto the table.

Emory reappeared, hauling the tub with that dog at his heels again, his teeth closed around the same handle, pulling with all the strength he had in his body. A body which, by the way, was mostly spindly legs so it wasn’t really all that much in way of strength.
Tristan and I secured Mackenzie by his arms and the alchemist snapped his fingers. The warm well water frosted over with a thin veneer of ice and, beneath the surface, the fingers of frozen water branched outward turning the whole thing into a bucket of slush. “Hold his head in but make sure his face stays up,” he told me stiffly as the heated, sweat-slick body between us was carefully lowered.

The cold brought some lucidity though and Mack fought weakly, slurring incoherently in a language that was some bizarre bastardization of Corian and Lierian. His fingers dug into the straps of my clothes, clinging and pulling, trying to haul himself out of the ice and I couldn’t imagine how bitterly frigid it must have felt to someone with a fever that high. The small bones of one of his wrists, I noted, were popped and bent at an odd angle beneath the swollen infection, hindering his ability to struggle against me as I pushed him down.

“Nikki!” he managed breathlessly, his teeth chattering. One of his hands curled around the edge of the tub and he wailed, thrashing in the ice and the water, fighting to keep his head up. In the north, a fever like this was grounds for being taken outside and packed in snow and I’d been there. I knew what that felt like—the bone-numbing sensation, the pain that accompanied it, and he was already delirious. He’d been sobbing for Atara on the way up the beach and I’d had to repeat a dozen times that I wasn’t Atara.

Even as stoic and cold as I was known to be, seeing Mackenzie Glenning reduced to such a pitiful state made my heart hurt like something was squeezing it too tightly. Atara’s consort had always been kind to me, despite our differences, and though we hadn’t known each other well, I’d liked him for the selflessness I so often saw him display. It couldn’t have been easy, coming from where he’d grown up and dealing with the fallout of what had happened to Emory. It would have been so close to home for him and still, he’d stayed. He’d dealt with all of it and even when he didn’t agree with our relationship, he’d never made it a point to lecture me about it.

And he loved Atara. I’d been able to see that from the beginning. You couldn’t commit yourself so fully to someone if you didn’t value them in a way that bordered religion and Mack practically worshiped that boy. I wondered then...how had they torn Atara from his arms without killing him?

It was a question for later.

“I know it hurts,” I eventually managed and he made a strangled noise, something between a choke and a whimper, when I put my hand over his face and pushed the back of his head down into the water. “But it’s only for a few minutes. Just a few minutes, Mack, and we’ll get you out of there.”

He either didn’t understand or he was too far gone to care because he fought until he didn’t have the energy to do it anymore—until his limbs fell limp into the water and he stared up at us, glassy eyed, crimson cheeked, and blue-lipped. He was visibly exhausted and thinner than I remembered him being three weeks ago when we’d crossed paths in Fox’s court. He’d been with Atara, one arm draped protectively over the young prince’s shoulders.

How far he’d fallen, I thought.

Tristan worked diligently, scrubbing away at the infection on his wrists until the wounds bled clean. Magic stitched the skin together at most points, but it was down to the bone at some and on those, he doused the injury with strong alcohol and wrapped it in clean linen. “I’ve done all I can,” he said after something like ten minutes. “That infection in his blood. I can keep his fever down and I can help him fight it off, but it's too deep for me to clean it out entirely.”

“Oh he live?” Emory asked from Mack’s other side, his arm plunging into the water so that he could scrub dirt and blood off of Mackenzie’s face and out of his gold curls. It had been so strange to encounter this new version of Emory--this person who didn’t mind getting dirty...who hauled water
and skinned animals and bathed the injured...who didn’t flinch from touch when Mack’s fingers found his and tightened on them, trembling with cold and fever.

The alchemist nodded. “I think he’ll be fine,” he assured all of us sitting there. “I’ve battled worse infections than this one. Give him a few days and he’ll be lucid. Until then, I wouldn’t expect much. I doubt he’ll even remember all of this.”

We hauled him, dripping and limp, from the tub and Joey wrapped him quickly in the thickest quilt she’d been able to find. Tristan ordered him bundled on the couch where he could watch him and, minutes later, he was cooed on in a nest of blankets, still shivering but no longer radiating heat, while the alchemist hovered around him with bottles of tonics and spools of clean linen.

It was only then that I knocked on Rylin’s door upstairs, just past two in the morning, and the Lierian came blearily to answer. I was running on very little energy by then, exhausted to the point of nausea, and I simply gestured for him to follow. He was impossibly small in the same way that Cyril was, but he followed obediently, rubbing sleep from his eyes as we descended the stairs.

Tristan had removed that wretched collar. It was discarded in the fireplace when we entered the sitting room and Rylin took a sharp breath, stumbling forward and landing on his knees near the couch. “Kenzie?” he whispered, but Mack had slipped away to sleep and no amount of noise was going to wake him up from whatever Tristan had given him. “But he was...how?”

“Some of the Riders found him crawling out of the water,” Emory explained softly. “He’s got a bad fever and a terrible infection, but Tristan expects him to be fine in a few days. We thought you might want to sit with him.”

Rylin only nodded, his fingers hovering over Mackenzie’s red cheeks.

It was bittersweet, that scene, because I’d been witness to a similar one just a few hours earlier and the end hadn’t been nearly as nice as this one. I hadn’t thought it possible to feel someone’s grief as profoundly as I felt my own, but watching Emory sob over the dying figure of his father had done things to me that I wasn’t sure how to deal with. My heart felt raw--like someone had taken a steel brush to the exterior and left me bleeding. I’d never known a father like Fox. They didn’t exist in Glacia. Where I came from, fathers weren’t parents so much as they were enforcers. It was their job to see that the family’s honor remained intact while their children grew and they did that by any means necessary.

Meeting Fox had been...different for me. He’d never raised a hand to either of them, not for anything, and I’d been so enthralled by the notion that he didn’t have to. He’d never had to and he’d still managed to raise two boys who cared deeply for their House and their people, who had their own ethics and codes of honor to uphold, and who loved without reservation and without conditions.

When fathers in Glacia died, nobody really mourned, but nobody really loved them. Not the way that Emory and Atara loved their father.

So when I went upstairs to bed, finally, bone-tired and sick to my stomach, I’d expected Emory to follow me when the house grew quiet, but he didn’t. I waited for him, sat silently in the center of my bed, listening to waves hit the beach in time with the throbbing ache of my heart, but time kept passing by and I thought back on what he’d said--that he was too angry, that he couldn’t promise he wouldn’t want to hurt me, but he’d been so sweet that first night. He’d slept with me tucked against his chest, his arm over my hip and his hand flat on my belly, and I’d felt his warm breath on the back of my neck all night. He’d never left and, in the morning, he’d kissed my bruises after he fucked me quick and hard, leaning over the dresser, chewing on my own hand to keep from crying out.
Eventually, I unfolded myself from the bed and I padded silently down the carpeted hall to his room. There was still a slit of yellow light under the door and when I tested the handle, I found it unlocked. I hadn’t expected that. If I had, I wouldn’t have leaned quite so heavily on the door so that it inched open and I had no choice but to stumble into the room.

Emory was on his side in the bed, Fox’s coat hugged tightly against his chest, the sleeve folded between his teeth. His eyes were shut tight, soaked eyelashes pressed to wet cheeks, and I wondered how long he’d been like that—how long he’d resigned himself to grieving alone in the butter colored glow of a single candle. It crushed me until my heart was pulp, a thrumming mess of aching emotion that swelled in my chest. He’d spent the entire afternoon with Cyril, catering to what he needed and then he’d spent the evening with Mackenzie, determined to save him because he hadn’t been able to save Fox and because he so desperately wanted to be able to give this one victory to Atara when it was all over. He’d looked after everyone but himself, compartmentalizing grief until it broke free of the barrel he’d stored it in and flooded out of him in his room.

I’d have given anything to take that from him. I could shoulder grief. We were familiar, sorrow and I, and I’d grown used to her company since Mila’s death. Emory only knew grief that could be converted to anger.

This could not be converted. It demanded to be felt, an insistent urge that beat fists against his ribs and I knew what that was like. I’d felt it once, too, and that first night without Mila I’d stumbled into Danica’s room, drunk and hurting, and we’d crawled under her bed where nobody could hear us so that we could cry.

He didn’t have to suffer like that.

I locked the door behind me and blew the candle out on the way to his bed. He didn’t flinch when I slipped in behind him, sliding an arm around his middle. He curled tighter, his legs inching closer to his chest and I pressed my lips to his spine in the dark, felt his fingers fumble against mine briefly, and then he turned around. The coat was still against his chest but he pressed himself into me, his face tight to my sternum, and I could feel him shake. It trembled in the frame of the bed and I could feel that grief roll off of him in waves when he sobbed, choked sound finally escaping from his throat like he was trying to strangle it back down.

It was too much. It was all too much, too fast, and the work he’d put in was shattering like glass under the weight of it—the crown, the city, fear for Atara and his baby, fear for Mackenzie, grief for Fox, empathy for Cyril. He was trying to pack too many emotions into one body, trying to seal them all away to be the straight-spined leader he thought everyone needed. Even there, hugged tight against me, he was struggling to contain it. He squirmed against the aching sobs, trying to swallow each of them and every time he failed, it seemed to crush him even more.

He was killing me. Every strangled cry that he muffled with his mouth tore at my heart with clawed fingers. He didn’t owe me any measure of strength. I’d seen him at his worst and loved him anyway.

“Let it out, Emory,” I breathed into black hair that smelled of brandy and medicine then, clinging remnants of helping with Mack. “I know it hurts. It’s fucking brutal. I know.”

He shuddered and I felt him take a long, heaving breath and he wailed, his voice muffled by my ribs and it vibrated in my chest, humming through my lungs and up my throat while he screamed. He could scream as long as he needed to. It wouldn’t help, not really. I’d done the same thing after Milena. I’d hiked out into the great pine forests around Ravndal for hours. I’d walked until I was sure nobody could hear me and then I’d screamed. I’d screamed and I’d thrown my gear at tree trunks. I’d punched them and kicked them until the snow fell off the great, heavy boughs and landed all over me, but it hadn’t helped.
Emory screamed until his throat was raw and bloody, until it hurt too much to continue, arms wrapped tight around my waist, coat wrinkled between us and damp with tears, but it didn’t help. I knew it when the sobbing didn’t subside and he finally spoke. “I just want it to stop,” he grated out, his voice scraping like steel on stone. I knew what he meant. He didn’t have to explain it—that chest splitting pain that came with grief. A physical manifestation of losing someone who meant so much that it cleaved part of your soul away from you and left you limping along, licking a wound that would never really heal. “When does it stop, Kita?”

And I cursed fragile humanity for such a cruel trick because the answer I had for him wouldn’t help him at all. “It doesn’t,” I whispered back and his breath hitched painfully while I ran my fingers through his damp black hair. “You just...get better at living with it. You’ll think about him a little bit less every day. It’ll ebb away to every week, every month, and then maybe only on his birthday, but sometimes, without warning, this will come back and you’ll feel just as crippled as you do now. It’ll take your breath away and you’ll feel this same hurt and that never goes away, kitten, because you’ll never forget him. And that’s okay.”

He whimpered, curled tightly around me like a coiled snake, and when he tipped his head up to kiss me, his mouth tasted of brandy and tears. He’d been drinking, I thought, trying to numb the pain with liquor and all he’d succeeded in doing was making it worse.

Emory stayed there, shedding quiet tears until sleep took both of us near dawn, and it was only when Joey could no longer put off waking us that she finally knocked on the door. I had to disentangle myself carefully, his arms still clutching that coat, and I was loathe to leave him. If it had been up to me, I’d have stayed in bed with him and let him cling to me until the first few waves of lonely grief passed.

But all I could do was rouse him with kisses and join the somber procession to the beach where the pyre had been built. Cyril was already there, a small, lonely figure staring listlessly at the white wrapped corpse that had been delicately placed atop it. There was a press of refugees around the perimeter of the house all watching with sad eyes that were either on the pyre or on the ground. There wasn’t a single whisper that passed over the crowd, not even when Emory appeared, exhausted and pale, rubbing at bloodshot eyes and wearing Fox’s coat.

His coat, I reminded myself. It belonged to the King, a mark of station, and Emory was the King now. I’d been standing there when Fox insisted it, a witness to him naming his eldest as his heir again, not that there was any real choice with Atara locked in the Keep.

I watched, separate from him, silently cursing my culture for keeping me at a distance when I wanted nothing more than to hold his hand in mine when he threw that torch onto the pyre. There was a moment when Cyril lurched forward like there was some drive for him to throw himself into the flames, too, but he turned at the last minute and threw himself at Emory instead, and stoicism returned to the new regent’s face.

Beside me, Joey wiped at her own eyes. “This will be hard for him,” she whispered and I knew what she meant. It would be hard for Emory, who was barely recovered from the last trauma he’d survived, to sustain a battering assault on his emotional stability like this.

“I know.”

“Do you?” she asked, turning to look up at me just as I glanced down at her. She was so southern it hurt—bronzied skin and blue eyes, a sheet of dark hair cut in odd chunks around her face so that if formed a sort of asymmetrical frame. Her expression was an open challenge though—wide eyes, mouth set in a line of grim determination. She reminded me of my sisters...Danica, particularly. “You have no idea what it’s like to live with a leash on like that, to have to constantly worry that you’re
one wrong breath from a complete breakdown. You have to worry about not trusting other people. Emory has to worry about not trusting himself. So no, you don’t know. You don’t know anything.”

It was like being slapped or dropped into a bucket of ice water. I stood there, staring at her, the heat of the pyre crackling, our voices muffled by snapping flames and distant crying. “You’re right,” I relented eventually. “I don’t know.”

Joey scowled. “You’re the one person that could make this easier for him and he doesn’t even really have you, does he?”

That hurt.

If I’d thought her proclamation of not understanding was like a slap, this was like being sucker punched in the stomach and she turned sharply away, her eyes bright and glassy with tears, focused not on the pyre but on the way Cyril clung to Emory. I knew what she was thinking, because I’d already thought it–that Cyril was leaning too much on him, that grief like that should have been equal and this absolutely wasn’t–but I didn’t speak.

I was stuck on what she’d said and how right she was about it. I couldn’t be the support he needed, not in the daylight hours, but watching Fox die had only cemented the urge I had to see my mother one more time. I’d be there for him wherever I could and, hopefully, it would be enough. When it was all over and I threw myself into exile, I’d beg him to forgive me for this. Maybe I’d beg him to forgive me sooner.

I’d make it up to him. I’d find a way. There had to be a way.

The pyre burned for hours, stripping flesh from charred bone, and when it was over, Emory carefully collected the skeleton and the ashes in a Lierian leather bag that was chalk white–the same color he was as he moved woodenly, like he would have rather been anywhere but there, but this was Corian custom. When Harlan had been burned, Fox would have collected his bones, too. He would have had his siblings, though. He would have had Cyril.

He would have had his siblings, though. He would have had Cyril.

Emory was alone, standing there in front of the blackened sand when the crowd finally dispersed, that bag clutched in his hands. Joey led Cyril back to the house, desperately trying to distract him while she told him about Mackenzie and insisted he come visit. Only Teilo stayed with Emory, dutifully at his feet while I approached.

“T’ll take them out into the bay when my uncles get here,” he said stiffly when he recognized my presence at his side. “They should...we couldn’t wait to burn him in this heat...but they should get to...if it were Atara, I’d want to....”


“I should put them away,” he added. “If she...she meant to kill Mackenzie, throwing him out of the Keep. She’ll have done something with Olivia. I should search the beach. See if I...if I can find her. I don’t want Brentlyn to find her. Gods, can you imagine?”

“Yeah, actually,” I managed and he stiffened, wiping hard at his mouth with the back of his hand when he realized what he’d said and who he was saying it to.

“Shit,” he breathed. “I didn’t--”

I shook my head. “It’s fine.” My mouth felt full of cotton and my tongue felt thick and sticky. I’d have given anything to just hold him for a minute, to apologize for the distance and for the grief he
was so clearly swimming in. “Kitten, I...if you...I’m sorry.”

Emory bit out a dark laugh that lit nothing in his face with the joy I’d come to love in the few days we’d had since he’d left the asylum. “For what? You didn’t put a knife in his gut. You didn’t kidnap my brother. You didn’t steal my home.” He turned toward the walls of the city where the green and white banners hung and scowled. “That’s my home, Nikita, and she’s turned it into a fucking slaughterhouse.”

“I know I didn’t, but...” I twisted my hands in the bottom of my tunic. “This is hard for you and I...I just wish I could do more.”

He shrugged, his fingers toying with the top of his leather bag. It was so unnerving knowing what it contained--that he was carrying Fox’s bones like precious relics and they were to some degree. There were plenty of people that would have paid their weight in gold to own that skeleton and I wondered how many of his family’s heirlooms had been sold off by Elizabeth Glenning already. I wondered how much of his home he was really going to get back...if he could get it back...

Support would dwindle now. The people had loved Fox, but they thought Emory was mad. Something would have to be done to remedy that quickly or the lesser houses would start to hemorrhage away from him and drift toward Elizabeth because she, at least, was familiar and she hadn’t been carted away in the middle of the night.

“You did enough last night,” Emory insisted softly. “And the coat, Kita...it means a lot to me that you even thought of it. Shit, you even remembered the soap he liked. It smells like him and it shouldn’t because you had it washed, but you still managed it. You’re doing everything you can. That’s enough for me.”

“It’s not everything,” I bit out. “I could say fuck it and just start heaping affection on you every time I see you.”

He snorted and rolled his eyes and in that moment he looked so much like Atara that it was almost painful. He liked to say his brother had a penchant for dramatics and he would have never listened to me had I pointed it out to him...but Emory was just as bad.

The new king rubbed his eyes. “Don’t do that,” he finally ordered gently. “You miss your family. You should see them again. I know what it’s like not to have that option anymore. I would never take it from you. Besides, my uncles will be here soon. They’ll help with Cyril.”

“Brentlyn is very likely going to find out his daughter is dead, kitten,” I whispered and he flinched. “Gods, Liv,” he sighed, a sob echoing in the end of her name. “Let me...let me put these...with Tristan and check on Mackenzie. Then...would you...would you walk the beach with me? I don’t think I can stomach finding her alone.”

I almost said, ‘If we find her at all’ because the likelihood of it was slim. The waters were so churned with blood and body parts that it was thick with sharks, the great black fins of orcas, and the notorious fringe of the great Glacian sea snake that weaved over my family’s heraldry, as long as a galley ship and thick enough to smash the hull of a long boat like a python crushing bones. It was a fucking miracle Mackenzie had made it through that gauntlet of predators, cliffs, and currents to reach the shore alive and he’d only barely managed it. Someone else in his condition...probably wouldn’t be so lucky. Miracles didn’t often come in pairs.

But I nodded instead because if he did find her, he was in no condition to deal with that alone and any Rider that wanted to accuse me of something could fight me for the right to even speak.
I could have used a bloodshed then anyway.
Every time I woke, I remembered the fall first. It was like having one of those dreams that you’re plunging through the dark and then jolting upright when you expect to hit the ground...but I couldn’t jolt upright. I could barely move with the fever that wracked my body. So I focused on the fall--on the jingle of keys at the end of the corridor and how I had quietly and carefully disentangled myself from Atara so that he didn’t have to witness it the way he had witnessed Fox.

I recalled Olivia standing on the edge of the sea cell with me--those wretched, barred off rooms with open backs that plunged down into the cliffs and the water below. Her hands were shackled, but Elizabeth took the shackles off of me. My reward, she called it, for being so cooperative at the end. Unfortunately, she had been keen to tell me, Emory Bordelon was no longer at the asylum, but was amassing an army outside the wall. There’d been a tremor in her voice, but she’d smothered it with laughter when she told us what she’d done to Fox.

I remembered Olivia crying and then, ‘Please, no, please--’ before she was shoved over the side. They didn’t shove me.

I jumped.

If I could just get my hands on her. If I could just get her around the waist and get our heads above water we could cling to the rocks below until low tide washed out and the water was just a little bit calmer. Then we’d make our way to the shore and hobble up the side of the wall to Emory.

It was a slim chance. I’d grown up on the water and I knew some of the names the sailors had for the coast of Coryth. The Coast of a Thousand Colors was the nicer name--the one that people referred to when they were talking about the reef and the bright fish that darted in the shallows, glittering under the waves...but the sailors didn’t use that one. The sailors called it the Sea of Storms. There was a warm current in the bay that teemed with tropical and semi-tropical life and it moved up the coast toward the marshes and then snaked back out to deeper water.

But there was a cold current, too, that thrashed along the cliffs near the Keep carrying seals, orcas, sharks, and Glacian sea snakes closer to the shore. They connected right there under the Keep, those two currents, colliding with each other and churning up steam and vapor that materialized into a thick fog like a blanket that coated the mountains behind the city, rolling over them, as opaque as snow.

There was no escaping that and I knew it, even when I hit the water and I fought, pulled one way
and pushed the other by white capped waves that thrashed like whips against the cliffside. I fought until my lungs burned, fingers grasping for the surface but every time I got close to it, I’d be swept back down and battered against the rocks or the silt covered bottom of the sea some fifteen feet down. I searched for Olivia frantically, but the waves churned so hard that beneath them was a storm of bubbles and sand, impossible to see through, not that it mattered, I thought. I was drowning. I could feel it in the screaming of my lungs and the most basic part of my brain that was shrieking, ‘Breathe, breathe!’ There was nothing to breathe but the sea though and the world faded to black, my limbs turning limp with exhaustion and suffocation, and I figured it wouldn't be so bad. At least Atara hadn’t had to watch.

Then, quite unexpectedly, I woke up on the beach and there were only flashes after that--brief moments of lucidity while I heaved saltwater, scrambling in the sand, trying to choke Olivia’s name out but I couldn’t find her among the litter of corpses and body parts that were being dragged away to mass pyres.

There was Emory, arms under mine, panic in his voice and Nikita barking orders in that harsh tongue of his, stumbling up the bank with my weight supported on his curled spine.

I remembered the ice bath, frigid and horrific and numbing to the bone and I kept trying to tell Nikki about Olivia but I couldn’t get the words out through the choking cold. So I lapsed in and out of fitful sleep, only vaguely aware of the appearance of my father, who lifted my head and slid beneath me so that his lap became a pillow. Rosie, too, came around, trying to spoon warm broth into my mouth while the fever raged. Emory appeared in the morning, a blurry outline with jagged marks on his face and, for a moment, I thought he was Atara. I reached for him, blindly catching his fingers and mumbling his brother’s name. Emory, to his credit, just tucked my hands back into my nest of blankets and felt my forehead for a change in my temperature. I remembered him speaking softly to Tristan—that was how I knew it was him and not Atara. Their voices were so distinctly different. Emory’s was rich and warm, sweet like liquor. Atara sounded bright, crystal clear. Sweet like sugar instead of brandy.

I dipped back into dreams that consisted of drowning--falling into a basin of water like the one they’d been forcing Atara into only to find that it was actually a bottomless sea and that no matter how hard I tried, I never reached the top.

Emory carried Olivia in, face blue and limbs stiffening. I remember hearing him cry, cradling her broken body like he could rock life back into her but even sick and only semi-lucid, I could see that her neck was snapped, likely from the initial plunge into the rocks. It had been quick, at least, but that was no consolation, even when Tristan pointed it out as gently as possible. ‘She didn’t suffer, Emory,’ I remembered him saying, and I wanted to correct him.

Yes, she had. We had all suffered. Atara was still suffering, locked alone in the dark while Rylin hummed lullabies above me and caught my fingers when I reached for Emory again.

When I woke next, it was to the sound of distant drumming and the march of thousands of pairs of boots on hard-packed dirt. My whole body hurt like I’d been run through a laundry press and I blinked in the dark, searching for Olivia, and I found her redressed and cleaned up, wrapped in white on what had become Tristan’s work table. His fingers hovered over her, eliminating bruises so that she looked like the girl I’d seen walking the Keep before the fall.

I remembered her father, whose army had made that drumming sound inside my skull, and how I’d never seen another human being in pain like that before. He’d picked her up like she was still an infant and sunk with her, cradled tightly in his lap, his face buried in her collar. I’d watched, struggling over the corner of the couch, aching so deeply that even my insides felt battered, but I’d
made a promise to her. It was bitter in my mouth, those words I couldn’t speak through a throat ravaged by fever and saltwater. ‘She loved you. She thought about you. She was strong all the way through to the very end.’

It wouldn’t have helped. Brentlyn’s grief was inconsolable in ways that I could only imagine. To lose a father or a brother...that felt distinctly different than this. This was his only daughter, his oldest child, and I screamed inside my head for the little one squirming to life inside of Atara. Would this be me soon--cradling Atara like this, my fingers splayed open on his swollen stomach--but this, with Olivia...this had to be worse. I tried to imagine it--to have seen her first steps, heard her first words, felt her first few little gasping breaths while she was still wet and screaming that shrill, thready infantile scream with fresh lungs…. I tried to imagine all the hopes and dreams he would have had for her, hopes and dreams that I had for my own son...and to be robbed of that...of all of that potential.…. 

I watched him there, pressing a thousand kisses to her cold face, struggling through grief that split his chest like an axe splitting firewood. I saw the tremble in his limbs like his entire world was caving in around him, like his shoulders carried the weight of the continent, and he must have stayed like that for hours. Rylin appeared and he hugged me tighter than he ever had, his arms locked around my torso until the bones in my spine popped from the pressure. Across the room, Cyril pressed his face into Emory’s chest and nobody said it, but I knew what they were both thinking. Better her than you.

Better her than you.

It was a macabre and sickening thought, but it was there, hanging between all of us like a palpable thing and it was inescapable. What parent wouldn’t have thought it? I hadn’t met my son. He could not exist without Atara yet, but I knew, without a doubt, that I would have thought it, too. Better her than him. Better anyone than him.

It took hours for Brentlyn to haul himself to his feet, his little girl held carefully in his arms. He took her to the cellar where they’d kept Fox and, for the first time, I noticed the boy by the door with hair that was such a dark red it shone like burnished copper. Meyer Bordelon, I thought, hovering near Riordan and Nikita, both of whom understood the horror of losing a sibling. He looked lost...like he didn’t know how to feel or how to help, floundering like a little lamb without a shepherd until Riordan hugged him and I saw his shoulders shake, saw them both break down before the fever dragged me back under.

I woke to daylight...to Rosie trying to force feed me again, to Brentlyn asleep at the dining table with an empty bottle of gin and Joey draping a blanket over his shoulders. She took the bottle, too, the last two inches of it sloshing in the bottom. She dumped it out a window and disappeared back into the house.

“Mackenzie,” someone said my name while the world tipped dangerously to one side and I struggled, once more, to remember everything that had happened since I’d fallen from the Keep. Emory, Olivia, Brentlyn, Meyer--

They repeated my name and my vision swam into focus while I swallowed another mouthful of bland poultry stock, but I was hungry. That was a new sensation.

The person speaking was Emory and he had his hand on my forehead. It moved slowly downward, cupping my cheek and then his other hand lifted a glass of water carefully to my cracked, chapped lips. “Your fever is breaking,” he told me gently while I struggled to swallow again and Rosie reached up, tucking my hair back off of my face. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I fell six stories into water,” I rasped and Emory managed a weak smile in response, but I
could see in his face that he was tired. He had heavy bruises under his eyes, indicative of a lack of sleep, and it was evident in the red, raw texture of his cheeks that he’d spent a lot of time crying recently. I couldn’t blame him. His family was dissolving around him. His father was dead, sent out of the wall with a blade in his gut to try to rock Emory back down the slippery slope of madness that he perpetually lived on. His cousin had been thrown, shackled, from a sea cell, and likely been dead before she ever got the chance to drown. His brother and, by proxy, his nephew were held captive, his uncle was drinking hard, and Cyril looked like he was barely holding himself together the few times I’d seen him.

And yet, here was Emory--Emory, who had once tried to take my head off with a throwing axe, carefully making sure my fever was broken and that I had water before he ever thought to ask me about the things that were truly important.

This was the boy Atara had described to me...the one from before the beach, considerate and gentle and filled to the brim with raucous, chaotic energy that gave people no choice but to love him. “Tell me about Atara,” he eventually pleaded and the dog at his feet nudged Emory’s leg with an enormous head before he put it down in the young king’s lap. He was promptly rewarded with Emory’s hand, fingers digging into fur, but I recognized this relationship for what it was. He was not a dog so much as he was a support system, something to keep Emory from shattering at the seams when Nikita was unable to.

I licked my lips and pushed myself upright on trembling arms. “Easy,” Tristan urged from the small table beside the couch where he was draining that blue bottle into his veins through a needle that pierced him at the junction of his elbow. “It’s a wonder you’re even alive. Let’s not push how far your body can take it.”

“He’s in the old fortress,” I informed him dryly, coughing at the end of the sentence. “He knows...he knows about your father.” I paused when Emory flinched, the wounds still raw some three days later. I wasn’t sure. The passage of time had been difficult to measure in and out of consciousness. “And I’m sure he thinks I’m dead again.”

“But how is he? Tristan told me about the...about the pregnancy. I’m sure you know--” Emory lifted his hand up to his mouth and chewed nervously on the pad of his thumb until I grimaced and nodded.

I knew. Of course, I knew. It was making me sick to my stomach to even think about. “How do you think he is, boss? He’s locked up alone in the dark. He doesn’t know you’re here. He barely keeps food down. He moves between cold and stoic and absolutely inconsolable. He cries until he throws up or he rages and beats his fists against the wall until he’s bloody. He’s dying in there and when Hiram gets that boy out of him, he’ll cut his throat and throw him over the side of the keep or turn him into a whore for his little army of zealots.”

Emory ran his fingers over his face and rubbed his temples. He looked so impossibly young in that moment, like he was dangerously close to being out of his element, but it passed just as quickly and control returned to his features. Rigid, tightly leashed control that hadn’t been there before.

So that was how he’d done it, I thought. I had beaten my demons by separating myself completely from the trauma that I’d survived as a child and a teenager. I thought of it as something that had happened to another person in another lifetime. Emory had leashed it, focusing rage into harnessed energy.

Atara had been right. They’d left the wrong prince outside the wall. Emory was wound up like the coiled rope of a trebuchet just waiting for someone to spring the hook and let all that rage be shot outward. He would break the walls down if he had to. He would slaughter every person that had
taken up arms against his family. People were going to pay for what they’d done to him and no simple price was going to be extracted. He’d get his seven pounds of flesh for every one they’d taken from him.

“He won’t get the chance,” he informed me curtly. “When the rest of my father’s court answers—”

“If they answer,” Tristan corrected and Emory scowled. I heard the shift of leather and turned my attention to a figure I hadn’t noticed. Cyril was near the empty fireplace, sitting on the floor against the wall, his hands on his knees, watching us carefully and absorbing information. I’d heard Fox say once that he relied too much on Cyril’s mind when it came to politics and military ventures— that if he ever lost his second and his consort, he’d have made a hopeless king.

I’d never seen it though, not until that moment. “I’m not losing Atara in that city,” the previous Infinito said through his teeth. He pushed himself to his feet and gestured to Brentlyn’s slumped form, unconscious from liquor consumption and absolutely still, despite the noise we were making.

“I can’t live through that. Do you know what I felt when it was Fox in your lap, Emory?” Emory’s lips pursed and his face clouded over in grief.

“Relief,” Cyril breathed. “Because if it was Fox, it meant that it wasn’t your brother. I can live without your father. It hurts and I miss him. Gods, I fucking miss him, but Atara? No. He’s too important. Your father missed five years with you and I fought so hard to give him another chance. I won’t lose your brother.” Something jarred me deep down in my stomach and in my chest and I remembered Atara saying he’d never been as important to them as Emory. I’d believed him in Cyril’s case. He had never seemed quite as attached to Atara as he had to Emory, but something had shifted with Fox’s death and I could see, clearly, that it had never been about loving Atara less than Emory. It had been about allowing Fox a closeness with Atara that he couldn’t have with Emory...but Fox was gone and now it was visible. Cyril loved Atara just as fiercely as he loved his oldest, if not more now because Atara was a link to someone he’d lost.

I’d have killed to show Atara this moment—this instance where Cyril was so open and raw in ways he usually wasn’t. He’d always seemed cold to me...so much colder than Fox, who heaped attention on both of them like the spoiled princes they were. Cyril had always seemed more affectionate to his husband than his children.

He was vehement now. Furious and brilliant.

“Fox’s lesser court will gravitate toward Elizabeth,” Tristan pointed out, wincing when he slid the needle from his arm and smoothed the bead of blood away with cold blue magic. “She’s wretched and horrific, but they know her. They all liken Emory to a rabid dog after the last two years.”

“Then we model him after Fox,” Cyril protested and the room stilled. “We keep the red and black sigil. Alter something small to make it Emory’s, but still recognizable as part of his father. We put him in red and black armor. We invite them here and we give them no choice but to see him as more than Fox’s heir, but an extension of his father.”

“I am not my father,” Emory insisted. “He was...nicer than me!”

Behind the couch, Nikita snorted and I turned, surprised by his presence at all. “No kidding,” he drawled. “I don’t think anyone has ever accused you of being nice, kitten.”

“Then you fucking lie, Emory,” Cyril snapped. “You’re a politician. Lying should be second nature. You look like Fox. You sound like Fox. You have the same...command about you. It will not be
hard to model you into a duplicate...as painful as it will be to watch. We need them if we’re going to take that city back and taking it back is the only chance your brother has.”

Nikita leaned over the couch and tousled Emory’s hair playfully before he tipped his head toward Cyril. “Won’t she just kill Atara if he breaches the walls?” he asked eventually. “I mean, as a Commander, that’s what I would do. I would know the fight was over and that I was dying, but I would want to go out as spitefully as I could. I’d want the victor to pay for beating me.”

Silence fell over all of us and Cyril pressed his hands over his eyes before Tristan finally spoke. “I...might have a solution to that,” he admitted gently. “But it involves Immara.”

There was another long pause. My stomach churned. We’d find a way around it. We had to. Emory wouldn’t just walk away, not after all Atara had done for him. He wasn’t that sort of leader. Fox had not been either...and there was more at stake than Atara. ‘I’ll call him Lian. The light bearer.’

Emory rubbed his face. “I can’t believe I’m going to say this...” he started. “Talk to me, Tristan. Tell me about Immara.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Tristan insisted on waiting...said we ought to handle the dead first and go into this discussion on Immara with clear heads. There was an ominous sense of dread in the way that he spoke, carefully checking Mackenzie’s temperature as he did, spooning another mouthful of some sleeping tonic between his lips to keep him under. Sleep, he claimed, was the best medicine for a fever and although Mack’s had broken, there was a fear of it rearing its ugly head again clinging to Tristan’s thoughts. It was evident in the way he handled him, delicately inspecting the wounds on his wrists when his patient was asleep again.

They were healing nicely. The raw, red tissue and exposed bone had pinked over into pearled flesh with daily doses of Tristan’s magic to stimulate growth. He bent all of Mack’s fingers and twisted his wrist along the full rotation of the joint, rubbing aloe into the scars to keep them from tightening and limiting the range of motion.

I watched, marveling at the tender way he treated him when all Mack had ever done was irritate Tristan, blatantly refusing to trust him. Even at Atara’s pleading, he’d only begrudgingly tolerated the alchemist’s presence.

“You’re awfully good to him after everything he put you through,” I commented and Tristan simply shrugged, moving to the small, delicately carved box that Cyril had moved Fox’s remains to. He’d carved it himself, a tender differentiation from the usual custom of putting the remnants of a late King into an elaborate wooden structure coated in iron to sink it to the deepest part of the bay.

We did not have access to the usual artisans that would have crafted such a ritual piece, so he’d made one in the Lierian style as if it were just one large memory stick depicting scenes from life. He’d spent the entire night on it, Kinnon had said, and then he had delicately moved each fragile bone into the box, which was no larger than my torso, and filled it with the sandy earth from the shore and a Lierian mercy blade. It was the highest honor among our people to be buried with one and although I was sure that many of the Lierians present would have objected, they never saw him put it into the box.

Tristan handed it to me then, flat and heavy, and I was reminded of the trip I would have to take out into the bay to finally put him to rest.

Eventually, his hands still on the box that I held, Tristan answered me. “You have opinions on my kind,” he said flatly. “Most of them are wrong, but what good would it do for me to rail against generations of inborn fear? I can only show you that I’m different from what you believe. I’m a healer. Whether or not Mackenzie likes me is irrelevant. I heal people who are hurting in any way that I can regardless of who they are or what they think.” He pursed his lips, his eyes on the pale, wooden box between us, carefully carved from beech wood. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save him, Emory.”

“So am I,” I managed quietly, but my heart was screaming in my chest. I’d been solid these past days—a steady rock that my Lheiro could lean on, but I was beginning to crumble. I could feel the
cracks and the fissures start to spread along the old scars that I’d hoped had healed at the asylum. At night, it was okay to feel like that...like I was breaking. Nikita always made his way to my bedroom because I was too afraid to get up and go to his--afraid of what I might do to him, what he might see me turn into again.

But he wasn’t afraid. He slipped in silently every night for those three days while we waited with those bones. He helped me forget when I needed to...let me lose myself in the pattern of scars that marred his perfect body, let me make him scream--twisting in sheets soaked with sin, quietly whimpering that he loved me while I left bruises in the shape of my hands around his throat.

I counted though. I never lost the leash that Lysander had helped me put on myself. I never went above the number that frightened him. I took the time to learn about him—to memorize what made him hurt the most (he could take the least amount of blows from a cane, but it was still a surprising number before he was squealing for me to stop) and what made him finish hardest (pinning him down right at the end, my fingers on his neck to cut off his air--he’d shattered like fine glass and held his breath even after I let him go, twitching through the aftershocks like a puppet on strings.)

And I would sleep those nights, draped in Nikita, and wake to mornings that smelled of riding leather and blade oil and that tasted of apples.

During the day was a stark contrast. Nikita kept his distance except in rare moments when nobody from his homeland was around. He’d tousle my hair or kiss my cheek or pull me somewhere quiet and ask me if I was okay before he really kissed me. I never felt the clawing claustrophobia of touch with him anymore. I’d become so used to having him that I actually craved it in those distant hours that I hated where I was just the King and he was just my Commander. I’d catch him looking at me, an apology written in his features, and I’d have to look elsewhere to keep that hate from rising like rage in my throat.

I’d always known I would have to take Fox out to sea alone. I’d always known that Nikita would not be on the shore as anyone but a subordinate member of my court. I’d always known that comfort would come from nowhere. Cyril was too broken to offer me anything. Mackenzie was too weak from fever to even hold his own cup, let alone make the trek down to the beach to watch a funeral rite. Joey had been distant. The death of a parent was too close to home for her and she kept herself busy any way that she could to keep from thinking about it. Brentlyn and Meyer had their own grief to sort out. Olivia’s bones were stashed away in a leather satchel awaiting transport to Eden so that her mother could be there.

Riordan was drinking to the point of vomiting before ten in the morning.

And Atara...he would have been the only one I could have really leaned on and he was gone. Locked alone in the dark, I heard Mack tell me again in my head. My little brother, going slowly mad from grief and loneliness. Every time I looked up at the Keep in the distance, I begged him- **Hold on, tiny. I’m coming for you. Don’t be the next box I have to take to sea.**

The little boat on the shore was a Lierian fishing vessel, thin and slender, but easily maneuvered. I waded out with my precious cargo and put it carefully into the vessel before I climbed up with it. There was a crowd on shore—refugees and nobility that had poured in from across the southern continent. Henri Mercier who had killed his older brother to seize control of his house and switch allegiances from Elizabeth to me because of some ill-fated attraction he’d had to me since childhood. Natalya Valmont, wiping tears from her cheeks near Cyril, who was hugging himself so tightly I thought his ribs might crack. My aunt Miraena had arrived that morning, only there for the funeral rites, and she stood quietly beside Brentlyn and Riordan.

They were all that was left, I realized, of my father’s nuclear family. Their parents were both dead.
Pascha was dead. Fox was dead. Miraena had never been close to anyone but my father and, in fact, barely knew Riordan, who was more like a child that Fox and Brentlyn had shared rather than a sibling.

Brent, I noted, looked terrible. Pale and gaunt like he was on the verge of vomiting, red rimmed eyes and clenched fists.

I didn’t want to imagine the kind of grief he was struggling with, knowing that he’d outlived his daughter--his daughter, who was supposed to be married in a few months and having babies of her own, who was supposed to be safe with my family and instead she’d died on the cliffs below the keep.

Nikita was there, too, watching me carefully as I rowed that boat out into the waves with a heart so heavy it threatened to sink the tiny vessel. There was a boat in the keep specifically for this funerary rite, painted the colors of the King it was meant to carry, but it, too, was small. It was custom for the children of the monarch to do this alone as a test of their strength to carry on. It was a rite of passage in addition to a funeral. I remembered Fox rowing Harlan out into the bay and heaving the box over the side without much of a thought. There’d been such hatred there that he hadn’t hesitated. It hadn’t been difficult. He’d just pushed it up over the side, turned around, and come right back.

I was finding it...rather more difficult as I neared the center of the bay where a great crack in the sea floor opened a few meters wide like a gaping maw that turned a large swath of the water much darker than the crystalline blue around it. It went thousands of feet down, according to the legend, all the way down to Meiro’s underwater palace where the great sea god hosted the kings of old in a place separate from the great golden city that the old gods invited the souls of Immarans to. This was where Meiro the Regulator turned everyone equal--where kings and men alike feasted at some grand banquet.

I did not like this particular belief. I’d never felt the presence of any gods and didn’t believe there was anything down there but the bizarre deep sea creatures that occasionally washed up dead on the beach. If there were gods at all, they should have feared the day that death came for me because if you could kill a god, I was going to make sure that each of them died. I was going to pay particular attention to Miero for it was he whose name was shouted when they took my home. It was he that Elizabeth based her zealotry on and believed so vehemently in that she would butcher my father. It was he who had demanded they strap a nineteen-year-old boy to the post for reading books and so mutilated Fox for the rest of his life.

Oh, I had things to say to him if he existed...if he had ever truly existed.

I preferred the Lierian belief that Fox would exist in a thin world that blanketed this one, waiting for the day that Cyril joined him so that they could be reborn and begin their story all over again. I liked that thought--that he was still here, somehow, wrapped up in all of our lives like he was still part of them and that they would find each other again because fate decreed it. Cyril didn’t seem whole without Fox. It was like someone had torn him in half and left him only with pieces of himself--not enough to get by anymore, not alone, and so he leaned on me.

I looked down at the box and rubbed my eyes, the boat floating over the stripe of dark water in the bay. The people at the shore looked so distant from there and I could see into the city from that vantage, blocked off by sunken ships. It looked deserted. The port district was nearly burned to the ground, littered with the charcoal husks of buildings and stray animals weaved through the ruins.

It looked like a ghost town, as lonely as I was out on the water, and I grasped the box with both hands. It was custom to say something, but the words died in my throat. What was there to even say? That I was sorry? That I loved him? He’d heard that as he died. That I would get revenge on the
people that had done this? That wasn’t my father. He’d sought revenge once in his life against an old tutor and I didn’t know the precise details of it—it had been struck from the records intentionally—but I knew that he’d taken him out on the post and he’d beaten him to death and that it had haunted him for the rest of his life. My father was not a killer. He was not a vengeful person. He’d been Corian to the core—a life is a life, no matter what you think of its worth.

“I wish the last two years had been different,” I finally settled on. “I know missing that first five with me really hurt you and I never...thought about it much. I think about it now.” It felt stupid, at first, to talk to a chest with a fox carved into the top of it, teeth bared and eyes bright. I ran my fingers along the grooves of the carving with it settled in my lap and for a moment, I thought about opening it. I almost convinced myself that I would open it and he would climb out of it, whole again, and everything would be okay because this was all just a terrible fucking nightmare, but I left it sealed, the wooden latches on all four sides shut so tightly that the lid didn’t even move.

My tongue felt thick and the salty air off the sea did nothing for the sensation and I felt nothing out there but the waves lapping at the sides of the little boat I was in. “I wish we’d had more time,” I repeated the words I’d said as he’d been dying and I remembered the flinch when I’d said them like he was thinking the same thing. I could almost hear him say it. ‘Gods, Emory, so do I.’

I ran my thumbs along the edges and lifted it, balancing it carefully on the edge of the boat and my heart ached, lifting to my throat with the threat of tears. This was it. That final moment before he was really, truly gone and nothing left of him would remain with us.

Something in the back of my head whispered in response. ‘That’s not true.’ And I remembered standing in the mirror with him when I’d been something like six or seven—not long after he’d come back from the marshes. He’d been shaving and he put the lather on my cheeks, let me mimic him with my fingers while I sat in his lap. I’d reached up to his smooth face afterward, my palms on his jaw and I’d met his eyes in the mirror. ‘Look how much I look like you, daddy!’ And he’d laughed, his mouth against the top of my head, eyes alight with adoration in the mirror while I watched him.

I choked, the box slipping my from fingers, and I could hear Cyril in the back of my head when it tipped forward. ‘You look like Fox. You sound like Fox...it will not be hard to model you as a duplicate.’

‘I’m not my father.’

And I wasn’t. I wasn’t half the man my father had been.

The box splashed into the water and I scrambled, my fingers plunging into the warm waves. They scraped the top of it as they sank but I was unable to grasp it and a strangled, horrified noise left my throat because I hadn’t been ready. I’d wanted to hold onto him forever and that sickening loneliness that had plagued me for so long washed over me like cold water, chilling me down to the bone, and that wretched part of me that would always be a little bit broken, urged me forward. ‘Dive in, I thought. Wrap your arms around it and sink with it, stay forever in the dark, let Brentlyn or Riordan be king. They’d be better at it anyway.

It was such a welcoming idea—to just be done with it and there was no threat of Atara finding me the way that Nikita had once described. There was just slowly sinking into the waves and never being found again. I’d join my father in whatever world existed beyond this one and I’d make up for all the time we’d lost, for all those little moments in the mirror when I’d first noticed how very much I looked like him...how little there was of Cyril in my face.

Gods, would I ever be able to look in a mirror again and not see Fox? Would anyone ever look at me again and not see Fox? Was that the life I had to look forward to—modeled into a carbon copy of my
father to win support for an army so that I could save my brother and my city?

What of Atara would even be left? Alone in the dark, isolated and struggling with the belief that Mackenzie and Fox were both dead, that Olivia was dead, that they would rip his unborn baby from his belly and throw him over the side of the keep to the sharks—what point would he even see in survival? Would it have not been kinder just to die there with the little creature that Mackenzie called Lian...to spare the boy whatever Hiram had planned for him?

I could die here, I thought, and it wouldn’t matter because there was nothing left.

“Emory!” someone shouted and I heard splashing at the shore, hundreds of meters behind me and the voice was so distant that I could barely make it out, but it shouted again. “Emory, you promised me!”

I jerked back from the side of the boat, the little chest barely visible anymore as it sank toward into the depthless sea, and I remembered Nikita standing on the shore and I thought about how it would tear him apart to watch me sink into the water and never come back up. It would be Milena all over again and I couldn’t save Atara in that exact moment, but I could save Nikita and so instead of sinking over the side of the ship, I sank into it. I curled up at the bottom of the ship, swallowed by loneliness and grief that I’d thought I’d put away at the asylum, and I wept. I didn’t know how I still had tears after everything I’d cried that first night, but these were different. These were not just for Fox, but for everything I’d lost with him and everything I’d been witness to in the past two years.

I thought about my very earliest memory, bundled up in Recia, toddling through pine trees heavy with snow while Cyril chased me. We put dried raspberries in the snow and sucked on them frozen until my lips turned purple from the juice. He gave me a carved wooden boat for spring and he whispered ‘happy birthday’ in my ear. ‘But it’s not my birthday, Lheiro!’

No, he’d said. It’s your father’s, but I can’t say it to him so I’ll say it to you because I see him in your face.

I thought about how different it would have been if Fox had been there. He would have caught up with me and lifted me up, ignoring the pain in the twisted flesh of his back, and he’d have spun me around the way he always had when I was small and I’d have squealed and screamed, thrashing wildly in his grip until he deposited me back on the ground, dizzy and giggling.

But that hadn’t been how it happened. Fox hadn’t been there for my earliest memories...hadn’t even known I’d existed and for the past two years, I’d shut him out again, intent on suffering alone because gods, there were still parts of me that felt disgusting after the beach. Even after Lysander’s, there were parts of me that felt disgusting and right then, in that moment, they all came hurtling back like a crushing weight on top of my chest. I couldn’t get enough air in, I couldn’t move. It was terror and loneliness and grief and rage all balled up and writhing in my chest, blooming outward into my limbs like an untangled nest of snakes.

I felt the boat move and the cool press of magic along the bottom soaking through the wood to my cheek and then the smell of warm leather and apples, the splash of seawater as I was hauled from the bottom of the boat and I thought, distantly, that I ought to tell him to stop. People were watching, but my mouth failed me and I recognized this for what it was—l’d barely been sleeping lately. I’d been so focused on Cyril, on Atara, on Fox and Olivia, that I hadn’t noticed a manic episode creep up on me like encroaching fog, but that had been what it was. That had been why I’d been able to spend the entire day as a support system and still have the energy to spend the night making Nikita scream.

And now the inevitable crash had hit me, swallowed me like the dark water had swallowed Fox’s bones, and I no longer had the energy to move. It drained like sand through a siphon and I don’t recall getting up to the house, only that Nikita had my arm around his shoulders and that he was
talking, but I couldn’t hear through the ringing in my ears. Cyril was there, too, snapping something at Kita as we stumbled into my bedroom and the silence drowned out the ringing so that I could hear them accurately for the first time.

“Get out!” Nikita snarled and Cyril pushed at him but he was strong-armed toward the door with little effort.

“I just want to--”

“You’ve done enough!” He rounded on Cyril and I saw my Lheiro shrink backwards, eyes wide. “I told you we shouldn’t have sent him out on that fucking boat alone. I told you something was wrong! He’s not sleeping more than two hours every night. He’s obsessing over things. He’s sick again, Cyril, and you sent him out there anyway because of tradition and now it will take weeks to get him back on his feet and you fucking know it because Fox was the same way!”

Cyril was quiet, standing in the doorway in white leather, but my eyes were raw and blurry and I couldn’t see him as much more than a pale outline. “They can’t see him like this,” he said softly and I swear, the rage boiled off of Nikita like steam out of an overflowing kettle. If it had been anyone but Cyril standing in the doorway, he would have torn their head off with his teeth, I think. I could see his fists tighten and relax over and over again and I focused on that--on the methodical way he moved like it was to the throb of his heart and I knew that tender beat. I’d memorized it in the dark, a macabre lullaby that let me know he was still breathing.

“I don’t care how they see him,” Nikita hissed, teeth tight together. “He’s not just a fucking figurehead for your war on Elizabeth Glenning! He’s a person. He’s your son. Have you fucking forgotten that?”

“How can I?” Cyril snapped in response. “Look at him! I can’t see him without seeing Fox! It’s like living with a fucking ghost. Do you know what that--”

“Get. Out.” Nikita’s voice was harsh and low and his fingers stayed clenched. There was a moment where Cyril stood this ground and then, without warning, Kita grabbed him the shoulders and steered him toward the door, shoving him harshly through the frame and slamming it behind him. He stayed there, breathing hard, quiet and livid until he was sure that Cyril had walked away, and then he turned to look at me.

I was motionless, sitting stiff at the bottom of the bed, and he moved around me the way that I had around him that night he’d appeared in the asylum. Prior to Lysander’s, I’d never let him close enough to really take care of me. Afterward, I was too intent on taking care of him and making up for what I’d done to let him. It was different now. I felt detached from myself. It reminded me of the way Mackenzie described surviving his years in the brothel--becoming someone different, focusing on the bird nest outside the window and separating himself from the act on the bed so that he could believe, in his head, that he was standing at that window watching the hatchlings cry for food instead of being pinned to a mattress and raped for a handful of copper coins.

Better than starving, he’d told me, but I wasn’t so sure.

Nikita peeled my boots off and tugged my shirt over my head with quite literally no help from me. I felt incapable of moving my limbs, staring listlessly at a spot on the floor, damn near catatonic. I’d been like this after the beach. I remembered Fox being the one who came into my room to care for me then when Mackenzie wasn’t around because Cyril wasn’t strong enough to lift me. I remembered him humming or singing under his breath. He’d had lessons as a child, he told me, just like I had, but I hadn’t really paid attention then.
“Do they sing in Glacia?” I asked numbly and Nikita stilled, folding up my shirt and dropping it on top of the chair in the corner.

He hesitated, patting the side of the bed until Teilo crawled out from under it and climbed on top next to me, nosing his head beneath my hand but I didn’t respond the way that I normally would have. “Sometimes,” he eventually answered. “My papa used to sing to us when we were very small. It’s one of the few fond memories I have of him.”

“Fox sang to me when I was sick,” I continued, my voice thick. “I don’t think I can do this, Kita. Atara will die in there and I--”

“Stop it,” he ordered briskly. “I’m not listening to this. This isn’t you, kitten. This is all in your head. I’ll get you through this.” He pulled me backward, shifting me down onto my side. Teilo scrambled around, curling up at my back so that his head rested on my waist and Nikita leaned forward, pressing kisses to my cheeks. “I will get your brother out of there,” he breathed. “Even if I have to do it without you. I promise, Emory. Atara is going to survive this.”

I choked, my arm reaching blindly for the dog at my back and I sank my fingers into his slate coat. I was rewarded with the pleased sound of a thumping tail on the pillow beside me. Nikita couldn’t possibly make that promise and know that he could fulfill it, but he sounded so absolutely certain that some small part of me felt a little bit of relief at his conviction. If any of us was capable of breaching that wall, it was him, I was sure of that much. “You shouldn’t have to deal with this,” I eventually managed hoarsely and he tipped his head. He was kneeling at the side of the bed, his arms folded on the edge of the mattress, his chin resting on top of them.

“Deal with what? Your up and down shit?” He snorted. “You shouldn’t have to deal with pretending we aren’t something during the day.”

I remembered the beach and him pulling me out of the boat. “You shouldn’t have done that today,” I breathed.

“I was assisting the King,” he answered with a shrug and then leaned forward to kiss me. My mouth tasted of salt and he tasted of apples, sweet and tart. “Get some sleep, Emory. I’m going to lock you in. I’ll be back tonight.”

And so he did. He locked the door behind him and I heard it grate shut. Sleep took me quickly, but the nightmares ravaged it.

Gin and seawater and the vile feel of fingers pulling at my clothes--

Atara huddled alone in a cell, arms around his swelling middle--

Blood soaked clothes and Fox in my lap, sticky, wet fingers on my face. You look good, boss.

I woke to distant voices, barely recognizable as Tristan and Nikita. “I sent a letter to Immara,” the alchemist whispered. “He’s in no state to make decisions. He can hear what they have to say when they get here and make one then.” Nikita agreed softly.

Nightmares again.

A girl with blonde hair and eyes like Kita’s--one blue and one green--hanging from the rafters in a frozen stable, surrounded by bellowing horses all riled by the smell of death that clung to the frosted air--

Pulling Mackenzie out of the water with dead gray eyes, milked over and sightless above blue lips
and imagining how Atara would *scream* when I told him--

Recia burned over Cyril’s shoulders and he told me not to look, but I looked anyway and the sky was black and red over the village. The smell of burning flesh hung in the air and we spent the first night in a cave, huddled together, and he whispered against the top of my head. *Please, Fox, believe me.*

I woke to Joey the next time, a bowl of the broth they’d been giving Mack in her hands. She set it on the table by the bed and turned to look at Nikita. “I was wrong about you,” she said quietly. “I should have given you more credit. You haven’t left his side.”

“He wouldn’t leave mine,” Kita responded and I felt him run his fingers through my hair, but I was too tired to move. My limbs were too heavy and I was only vaguely aware that days were passing and I wasn’t getting out of bed. I was familiar with this feeling. It had plagued me since I was a teenager--this listless malaise and fatigue that settled in so frequently after fits of mania. Lysander had told me that I would never be like everyone else. This was going to exist forever, a lifelong struggle of mine, and the people around me would have to learn to navigate it because there was nothing I could do to change it.

Tristan came in a few times. I remembered his fingers against my temple, cold and reeking of ozone. “Emory is different from other people I’ve examined,” he explained to Nikita. “There are things about everyone that are the same. We all have two kidneys. We all have livers, lungs, stomachs full of acid. We all have the same number of bones and teeth...and mostly, our brains are the same. The structures within them never vary too much. What makes them up never deviates too much...but it did in Emory and Fox. It’s different. I can feel it in the chemical makeup.”

“He needs to get up,” Cyril said stiffly. I didn’t remember his exile being lifted, but at some point, he’d been allowed back in. “People will talk.”

“Let them,” Nikita snarled and even with my eyes closed against the world, I could feel the anger radiate off of him from where he sat beside me on the bed, his hand gently moving up and down my side from my hip to my ribs.

I heard Cyril huff, but it was Tristan who spoke. “He can’t help this,” he informed him my Lheiro after a moment. “This is difficult to explain, but trust me when I say this. If Emory *could* get up, he would, but he can’t. He quite literally *can’t* do it right now.”

“That makes no sense!” Cyril argued.

“Most things about brain anatomy do not make sense,” I heard Tristan respond dryly. “You seemed to have no qualms with it when Fox couldn’t get out of bed.”

I imagined that felt like being slapped for Cyril. “Atara’s life wasn’t hanging in the balance then.”

Nikita’s hand passed near mine again and I reached, grasping his fingers when they hesitated along my hip. It was all I had the energy to do--to just squeeze his hand and hope he understood that I appreciated his vehement advocacy for me and my fucked up emotional state. It wasn’t that I didn’t care about Atara. I cared. That was part of what had put me there--I’d cared so much about him and Cyril and Fox and Mack that I’d inadvertently crippled myself. I’d cut my own tendons over-extending my energy, letting mania run its course without a leash.

The manic parts were easier, I thought. At least I functioned then.

“He’s awake,” Nikita breathed and I felt his lips at my cheek. “Are you hungry, kitten?”
I didn’t answer, but I heard Cyril and Tristan leave, whispering between the two of them and when the door grated shut, I found my voice. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” he answered quietly and his fingers moved through my hair. He kissed along my bare shoulder. “I’m going to have a tub brought up. We’ll take little steps. Get you back on your feet.”

And so we did. I fought him every step of the way--or rather, I just didn’t cooperate the way that I would have normally. He bathed me carefully with tender fingers and showered me with kisses and under any other circumstances, I would have pulled him into the tub with me, but this was decidedly...not sexual. It wasn’t platonic, either, but it was...something different. Something I hadn’t felt before, but we’d never been particularly tender before and I’d never given him the option to do any of that for me. I’d bathed him when he was coming down off that powder. I’d cleaned him up when he was vomiting in the aftermath. I rubbed life back into his skin when he asked me to hit him.

But he’d never had the opportunity to do any of this for me. In fact, I couldn’t recall ever letting anyone do something like this for me and when he’d gently rinsed the last of the soap from my hair (one hand over my eyes to keep them from stinging), he wrapped me up in towels. He rubbed one over my head while he spoke. “At home, baths are quick because it’s so cold,” he told me. “So my mother used to bathe me, Mila, and Dani at the same time and then she’d scrub my hair dry so hard it made me dizzy. It was never completely dry though, so then she’d twist it into spikes with her fingers and call me her little monster.”

“I hope you growled at her,” I managed thickly.

He laughed, but he didn’t scrub my hair dry nearly so hard. He did, however, smooth it into a spike that I quickly shook out like a wet dog, spraying him with water while he flinched and giggled, stumbling backward from the onslaught. “You’re terrible,” he informed me, trying and failing to keep a straight face while he deposited me back in bed. “How are you feeling?”

“So tired. I’m always tired.”

Kita nodded. “Sleep.”

So I did, because it was all I could do. I slept day in and day out, only aware of the changing hours because at night, he would curl up behind me with his arms around my waist and he’d whisper things in my ear in Glacian that I only half understood in my semi-lucid state. In the morning, he would drag a tub of water in and make me get into it. At meal times, he forced me to eat. He talked, too. He talked endlessly the way that he made me talk after sex. He told me about his first hunt and how he had the bones of his first hare hanging from the top tip of his bow. He told me about Milena, snowball fights, and how sometimes after storms the drifts would be so high that they could climb onto the roof of the lodge they lived in.

He told me about Anja, who was fourteen by then, and how she had red hair like Meyer’s because their mother was a Marsher like my aunt. He relayed that his father always said ‘a red head mother guarantees a brat’ and that was how he explained Nikita’s ‘differences.’

He told me about his horse, who was called Anikka, and how he’d been with her since she was born five years before. He’d bottle fed her and slept in the stable with her when her mother abandoned her because the winter was too hard. His father had insisted he put her down and Nikita had adamantly refused and she was a little bit smaller than the other horses, but he liked that, because he was smaller than the other Riders. Teilo, he said, was not a fan of Anikka, or of any of the northern horses, for that matter. They were massive animals, nearly as tall as some elephants I’d seen in the forests around Eden, and they had long hair that was shorn in the south but at home, he told me, they grew it
out and braided it with intricately carved beads so that when they ran, the braids thunked and clicked. A scare tactic to be used against enemies.

And he kissed me. Often and without reason, simply because he wanted to or because he thought I needed it. He would stop in throughout the day while I slept and nuzzle into me, kiss my neck were my pulse beat beneath my skin, and leave again--just a way of saying that I was on his mind, he explained when I asked.

Gradually, he lifted me out of that well of depression until finally, one morning, I pushed myself from bed at the sound of a distant horn that the Riders used to signal incoming allies or ships. It happened so often anymore with contingents arriving from Eden, Southwatch, and the Nation that I didn’t think much of it.

Nikita stirred, his cheeks pink with sleep, and his eyes opened blearily. “You’re up,” he croaked, his voice hoarse and groggy. “Are you okay?” He pushed himself upright only for me to crawl over him, planting kisses up his chest and his throat to his mouth. He squirmed, laughing under me and wiggling out of my grasp toward the end of the bed where he flopped unceremoniously onto the floor. A moment later, his head popped up from behind the mattress, hair tousled with sleep and eyes bright with joy. “You’re okay,” he repeated, the question dropped from the end.

“I’m okay,” I affirmed. “Still tired, but I think I can handle a little bit today.”

“Good,” he began, stumbling to his feet. “I mean, I’m glad. I wish you could waste that energy on me, but, you know…” He shrugged and I threw a pillow in his direction just as someone knocked on the door.

A second later, Joey’s key slid the lock apart. She was the only person Nikita trusted with it anymore. Her eyes looked instinctively for him and when she found me, sitting up and dressed, a bright smile spread over her face. “Oh, you’re up, Emory!” she exclaimed but the joy was dampened quickly. “If you want to slip out, Nikki, Gier just went to greet the new arrival. It’s the Immarans Tristan wrote to. Guess you’ll be playing politics today, Your Majesty.”

I remembered that, dimly, as if from a fever dream, and glanced at Nikita as he pulled his leather tunic over his head. “The Immarans?”

“The Kariners,” he explained. “Tristan said their princess is an old friend. He wrote to her. Guess she showed up.”

“The Perondale princess?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Name’s Cassie, if I recall. Her brother just took over as Emperor of Karinus. There was supposed to be some assassination involved.”

I snorted. “Oh, I’m so surprised. Assassination in Immara?” I got to my feet and he threw the door open, Teilo tripping over him in his haste to get outside before us. We made our way down the steps just as the door opened to the manor and Gier walked in with Tristan, who was paler than usual, like he was used to having Immara over there and having them here was causing him some kind of distress.

The woman between them, however, was who really got my attention. She was beautiful in a way only Immaran women were beautiful--old world and aristocratic--with blonde hair like fresh cut wheat that was curled and pinned, half up on her head and half loose around her pale shoulders. Her eyes were a warm, light brown and when I stopped in front of her, I could see little flecks of gold in the irises, burnished brightly over a plump mouth the color of peaches.
“Emory Bordelon,” she greeted in a smooth voice, her accent the same intoxicating lilt that Tristan had. “The new King of Coria. We have so much to discuss.”

And although she was beautiful in a way that I’d never encountered before, there was something distinctly dangerous about that woman. Perhaps it was the man behind her wearing that all-too-familiar snake’s head mask of the Sons of the Serpent, a personal assassin at her beck and call, or maybe it was the cold way she smiled at me like every move she made was precisely calculated....it made the entire interaction feel venomous.

I had no choice, however, and so after a moment, I held an arm out and I led her to the library off the sitting room turned infirmary.

I couldn’t help but feel it was like letting a snake into my house.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

The new introduction of Cassie and Sebastian~ And also Caius~ Let me know what you think <3

“A moment?” Tristan asked before the library door closed behind me. Cassiope nodded graciously before sinking into a large, overstuffed chair, her white gown puddling around her feet as he tugged me back into the sitting room. My stomach turned and exhaustion swept around me like a current, threatening to pull me back under. This was about all I could handle for the day, I thought, and I stole a glance at Teilo, who was happily chewing on a bone Joey had slipped to him from one of the hunts.

The alchemist took a deep breath, his hands on my shoulders. “Be careful,” he warned me, his voice barely above a whisper. “The Perondales are renowned politicians and Cassie has been trained as an Imperial Nightingale since she could talk.”

“An Imperial what now?” I screwed up my face at the term. The Immarans had flowering, delicate names for everything. Politics was a ‘grand game’ and everything around it had some kind of delightful terminology that you didn’t find in Coria. At home, our assassins were simply assassins and they were generally exiled Riders or soldiers specially trained in espionage and spycraft. In Immara, assassins were plucked from the streets in their tender years and sold to the guild in Paikea where they were honed into machines more suited for killing than even Nikita Novak was. Every Imperial court had a handful of Sons of the Serpent from Paikea on hand. They were practically accessories, or so I’d heard, but I’d never once heard the words Imperial Nightingale.

Tristan took a breath. “Gods, I wanted time to educate you on how to handle her, but you’ve been stuck in bed close to a month now.”

“A month?!” I hadn’t realized it had been that long. I’d never been stuck in such a crippling rut for that amount of time. Prior to the beach, the longest had been something like two weeks, after which I bounced out of it and went right on with my normal life until the cycle started again. I didn’t have a month to waste right now. No wonder Cyril had been so irritated with me. Atara was wasting away in the Keep while I allowed myself to waste away in bed. I remembered, of course, that Tristan had said there was nothing I could do about it, but I had to figure something out before that happened again. My brother didn’t have that kind of time.

The alchemist pursed his lips and cast a glance over his shoulder at the door. “It will take several more months for the Rider Legion to reach the south during the cold season. You have to wait regardless and Cyril...had not been easy on you. That doesn’t matter.” He shook his head out, that curtain of blood colored hair falling in his bizarre blue eyes as he refocused and lowered his voice.
even further. “An Imperial Nightingale is a young, beautiful, unmarried member of the gentry who is schooled in song and dance. They do not announce themselves. They do not refer to themselves as Nightingales. The teaching is never made public like it is with the Sons. They go to courts in other city states and they cultivate affairs, trade in secrets, and work closely with a Serpent. Getting on the wrong side of a Nightingale could doom your family for generations in Immara. They will carefully arrange the downfall of your entire house and watch from afar while it all goes up in flames.”

“Gods above, Tristan, what the fuck have you gotten me into?!?” I could feel my heart hammering in my chest, a drum beat that accompanied a growing sense of horror that fanned outward like flames.

He shook his head quickly. “You’re a politician. Cyril has assured me that you can handle her if you’re warned ahead of time that she’s not the brainless, pretty tart that she’s going to portray herself as. She is wickedly intelligent and she is ruthless. Do not let her age fool you and do not pick a fight with her. That assassin she has at her side is high ranking. He could kill you before you even saw him move. I suggest you take Nikita and I in there with you.”

I’d banked on Tristan, but Nikita wasn’t a politician. He was muscle. I recognized that in the way that Tristan talked. “He couldn’t take one of the Sons,” I argued weakly.

“Play your cards right and he won’t have to,” he insisted. “You don’t need Cassie. You need her alchemist. His name is Caius Erucius. You get the Riders here, Caius can open that gate. He is infinitely more powerful than I am and he’s ancient.” It was the way he said it, a little note of fear tinged in his voice, that gave me pause--like there was something about this Caius character that made Tristan exorbitantly uncomfortable.

“You have some history with him?” I asked after a beat, my eyes narrowing in suspicion as I waved Nikita over. He had painted that red war ink on his cheeks and his blade was strapped over his back again, arms crossed, as if he’d expected this sort of encounter. Then again, he had probably spoken to Tristan about Cassie’s entourage when I could not--just picked up the banner of leader when I had floundered because that was what he was: A leader. Not by choice, but by necessity--to survive his father, he’d needed to be more than anyone else around him.

Tristan took a breath. “When an alchemist breaks the laws--”

“Like you have,” I suggested and he flinched, but nodded.

“When an alchemist breaks the laws...like I have...the College sends Caius to deal with the problem. I haven’t told you any secrets about the covenant we forge to...do the things we do, so he won’t be nearly as severe with me as he could be--”

Nikita made a face. “What kind of severe are we talking about? He going to take you over his knee?”

Tristan scowled. “Ha,” he drawled. “Very funny, Novak, but not all of us share your extracurricular preferences.” Beside me, Nikita made a choking sound like he hadn’t expected that quip to be turned on him, and his cheeks turned pink behind the paint on them while I snorted, digging my elbow into his side as if to say, ‘You walked into that one.’ Tristan continued. “No, he doesn’t spank us. He kills us.”

There was a deadly stillness while my heart dropped through the floor and Nikita finally gave voice to what I was thinking, staring dumbfounded at Tristan. “And you brought him here? Knowing he could kill you?”

“He was my mentor,” Tristan argued gently. “And Caius has...opinions about the Vale and the slave
market. I doubt very much he’ll execute me for leaving a patron that was a slaver. That’s not the issue. He’s going to...he’s different. You’re going to have questions. He will not want to answer them. I suggest you do not ask until he provides the information willingly…if you can even secure his help. He has opinions about the Bordelons, too.”

“I don’t even know who he is!” I exclaimed and Tristan shot me a look.

“You’ll see,” he grumbled and then he held a hand out to the door and I hesitated. I considered pressing him for more information--like what he’d offered Cassiope Perondale to get her here. If she was such a political heavyweight then everything she offered would come with a heavy price and judging by the presence that emanated off of her--raw power and regal royalty--she was used to getting what she wanted.

I adjusted my father’s coat around my arms and brushed past Tristan and Nikita, sliding quietly into the library where Cassie was still seated on the chair she’d been in. Her assassin was behind her, lingering in a corner near the window, a shining serpent’s mask hanging over the top half of his face. It was polished silver, attached to the hood he had pulled up over his head. He was clothed from head to foot in scaled leather armor, spiked along the forearms with steel. His hands were gloved, too, and I could see a chain of iron looping between his knuckles. He’d shatter someone’s jaw with one punch wearing those things, I thought, and he was no skinny little thing like Nikita was. The Serpent, as his kind were called, was not all lean, lithe muscle like my Rider. He wasn’t large, but he was solid. His shoulders were broad and square, his arms were thick about the biceps from years of training with an assortment of weaponry--if rumors were true, the Sons of the Serpent were even more brutal an organization than the College.

I could see none of his defining features though. If I had, I might have been able to determine what part of Immara he originated from, but the only glimpse of his actual flesh I had was from the upper lip to his chin.

Cassie wasted no time as I took the chair opposite her. Tristan hovered by the door and Nikita stationed himself near a window, not far from that assassin. I could see him sizing the Immaran up, his eyes moving around the room, searching for cover and exit points. They were like night and day, I realized. Nikita was drawn up, a coiled spring of violence and anxiety. The Serpent was relaxed like he had not a care in the world regarding this entire exchange.

“You have my sincerest condolences about your father, Your Majesty,” the princess practically purred, but when I looked at her, there was a genuine apology in her features. “I met him several times when he visited Karinus. He used to bring me chocolates with chili peppers in them. We don’t get chili peppers in Immara very often. They were my favorite. I always looked forward to his visits.” Her fingers smoothed over her lap and I made a mental note about the chili peppers. Those could be procured easily enough for her. They grew rampant in the underbrush of the forest and little tokens like that went a long way in swaying political gains. Perhaps that had been Fox’s goal when he visited Karinus once a year, though I doubted it. He likely saw in her a child that was just a little older than my brother and he’d sought to make her happy. Nothing more.

That was just who Fox had been.

I nodded briefly and offered her a quick smile. “I’m sure we can arrange for chilis and chocolate, Princess,” I answered smoothly. “We might even make it part of an official negotiation.”

Cassie laughed--a flash of pearly white teeth and glittering eyes. “I think you’ll find my terms very agreeable,” she began. “I’m sure Tristan loaded your lip and filled your head with all sorts of horror stories about me, so let me speak plainly, Emory, for both of our sakes. I do not have any interest in any sort of marriage negotiation.”
If Tristan had been closer, I would have wrung his neck. Instead, Nikita shot him a look of raw, palpable contempt like it was the deepest sort of betrayal and I made another mental note to give him a lesson in politics lest he end up assassinated for opening his mouth or glaring at the wrong person at the wrong time.

I leaned forward. “Well, it’s a good thing you’re not my type,” I answered briefly and she laughed again, one hand on her slim stomach and the other, jeweled in platinum and sapphire from knuckle to wrist in a web of intricate metal spun like lace, curled around the arm of the chair.

“Truly?” she asked with a predatory grin and her eyes flashed, flickering over to the Rider by the window. “I’d heard blonde was exactly your type.” My stomach dropped and I felt my face pale visibly because how did she know? And now that she had this thing--this precious thing to lord over me because I would have done anything to protect Nikita from the fallout of his people knowing--what would she require of me?

Cassie leaned back, rolling her shoulders. “Oh, pick your jaw up,” she continued dismissively. “I’ve no interest in watching the Riders ritually execute your lover.” My expression must have changed. I was out of practice. I hadn’t sat in court in years, hadn’t played this game in years, and she was a professional. I should have brought Cyril, I realized. If any of us were capable of engaging in a verbal boxing match with Cassiope Perondale, it was the one that had been trained as a second to a king. The surprise was etched in my features thought. It had to be, because she kept talking. “You didn’t know that’s what they do?”

“Shut up,” Nikita snarled from the window. “He doesn’t need to know any of it because it won’t happen.”

“No,” I ordered. “Please, continue. I’m dying to hear the secrets.”

Nikita froze where he was standing, halfway between the window and the chair, but not because I’d ordered him to. He froze because Cassie’s assassin stood up and took a silent step forward. His boots didn’t make a single sound against the solid wood floor. He was just lingering in the shadows and then he was standing in the light of the window, that mask reflecting the sun so that he looked positively radiant and lethal.

The princess lifted a hand and tucked a curl carefully behind her ear. “They’ll circle him and take turns in the ring until he’s too tired to fight anymore. Then they’ll butcher him like the pack of wild dogs they are. My father saw it happen in Glacia--”

“When your kind betrayed us!” Nikita hissed in response, his cheeks flushed and livid under the ink, and I turned my gaze to him. I wasn’t angry. I’d thought I would be, but I recognized this for what it was--his attempt at protecting me from how truly brutal his people were when I’d been in such a fragile state since he’d met me.

Cassie ignored him. “They strung his insides up like gossamer in the trees,” she added flippantly. “But I’ve heard about you Nikita Novak. I’ve no wish to see you die. I simply needed to know the situation I was offering to assist with before I made the three week journey across the sea.” She tapped her fingernails, perfectly polished with glittering gold varnish, against the table beside her chair. “Let me be frank, Emory. Can I call you Emory?”

“You already have, Cassie,” I responded acidly.

She smiled again. “I do not want a marriage negotiation,” she repeated. “Not for me, not for my brother, not for any member of our court. I do not want your money or your land or your army when this is over.”
I leaned back in my chair, my fingers squeezing the arms on both sides. “Do you have a list of what you do want? You said it would be agreeable, but I’m not hearing any demands yet.”

“I want you to give someone a lordship,” she said flatly. “And political asylum the way that your father did for Tristan. When this is over, you will write to my brother, Emperor Laurien, and you will ask him to appoint me as Ambassador to your court. I will have a seat on your council.”

I hesitated. It sounded like a lot, but truthfully, it wasn’t. There were twelve people on the Corian council. That was a lot of voices to outweight hers and political prowess aside, there was inborn hatred of Immarans running rampant in Coria. No amount of charm would win her the aid of the older houses. That, combined with the fact that I was going to replace some of those older houses—the ones that had sided with Elizabeth—with my own people made a position for one Immaran princess on the council a simple ask.

“Who do you want asylum for? Because if it’s for Caius Erucius, I’ll have trouble swinging asylum for two Paikean alchemists, especially one as old as he is,” I responded briskly, but Cassie was already shaking her head.

She held a hand out and her assassin companion stepped forward. “No, I request asylum for him,” she answered and that gave me pause. An Immaran princess on the council was one thing. An Immaran princess with a pet assassin in her pocket was another.

“For one of the Sons,” I said flatly. “We barely let them leave their ships when they come here and you want me to offer him a lordship and asylum?”

Cassie snapped her fingers and the man at her side peeled the mask back off of his face. It was at that point that I realized how painfully young he really was. He couldn’t have been older than sixteen or seventeen. Younger than Atara, certainly, but with age in his eyes that betrayed some horrific knowledge and he was beautiful like she was only he looked…Corian. His skin was pale, which was uncommon in our southern land, but his eyes were blue like that chasm in the bay, depthless and clear, without a single fleck of a different color—as if someone had painted him and used dabs of sapphire blue to fill in his irises. Blue eyes were common in Coria, but not like that. That looked almost like Tristan’s without the strange, alchemist glow.

He brushed black hair out of those startling eyes and looked right past me to where the alchemist stood by the door and I heard Tristan step forward. He brushed right by me, curiosity in his face. His brow was knit together in concentration and he reached out like he might touch him before he withdrew his hand like he’d been burned.

“Been a long time, Tris,” the assassin murmured. “Ten years? Almost eleven, I think, since Madeline’s funeral.”

Tristan was deadly quiet and then he sucked in a sharp, alarming gasp. “Well, shit,” he managed to choke out. “Sebastian?”

It clicked, then, and I could see the similarities in them. Tristan’s looks had been altered with magic and, if I recalled correctly, they did not share a mother, but the eyes were the same. The complexion was the same—pale in a way that almost looked sickly but with enough pink in the cheeks to betray actual health.

“You’re one of the Sons now?” Tristan continued, horrified by the implications. “You were so close all those years and you didn’t write to me!”

“Wasn’t allowed to,” Sebastian answered with a shrug.
“So...Ridley never found you?” Tristan inquired and he seemed...awkward somehow in a way that I didn’t recognize on him. Like he wanted to hug the boy standing in front of him but according to the stories he’d told me, Sebastian had been six when he’d left for the College in Paikea. They barely knew each other anymore. “Father said you were dead!”

Sebastian snorted. “Oh, Rid found me,” he laughed. “You’ll see him when we settle on terms with your new patron….and if it were up to Rafael, I would be dead, trust me.”

Cassie cleared her throat. “Touching reunion, but we have business,” she said softly and then she reached forward and caught Sebastian’s fingers with her own, threading them together like it was the most natural thing in the world and I remembered one of Tristan’s stories about him.

’Sebastian had a friend in the royal court and our father was wickedly jealous of how well the Perondales took to him. He’d always wanted to marry up and never managed it and couldn’t stomach the idea of his unwanted, half-Corian brat actually achieving it where he failed.’

Cassie caught me watching, her thumb sliding over the back of his hand. “You have nothing to fear from Sebastian,” she promised. “He’s only here because leaving him in Karinus was a death sentence. I need that asylum.”

“And in return,” Sebastian spoke. “I can guarantee your brother survives the assault on the city. I can scale those walls. I can get by the guards. I only need a map of the Keep. You grew up there. I’m sure you can fashion me one. Doesn’t have to be perfect.”

“Caius?” Tristan pressed. “I asked for Caius, Cassie.”

She nodded. “He’s on my ship with Ridley. Pissed as hell that I’ve dragged him back into ‘Bordelon drama.’” She held her fingers up in quotes and rolled her eyes. Her pretense as a princess dropped and, just as easily as she was a politician, she was a girl lobbying for safety for someone she obviously cared for. I’d have done the same for Nikita. Hell, every day was an arrangement to keep him safe from the brutality of the north. “I made him promise not to kill you, if it’s any consolation,” she tacked on, looking pointedly at Tristan. “I said I’d let Sebastian gut him if he tried.”

“Sebastian couldn’t--” But Tristan stopped and his brother raised an eyebrow. It was almost like he was about to say that Sebastian couldn’t possibly gut someone, but his armor said otherwise. “You really ran away to Paikea. That’s where you went? Why didn’t you come to me, Bash?”

“Gods, nobody has called me that in over a decade,” Sebastian snorted. “You hadn’t forged your covenant when I reached Paikea. I had no way of contacting you and no way of surviving alone. I got picked up stealing and it was join the guild, the College, or lose my hands. Nobody of Corian descent has ever survived the covenant. So I picked the guild.”

Tristan frowned and I could tell that this whole situation made him dreadfully uncomfortable. Faced with the same idea, it would have done that to me, too. My brother was gentle and sweet natured the way that he’d described Sebastian to me—the sort of boy that picked up spiders in cups and put them outside rather than squishing them. He’d shown me Sebastian, too, in that memory crystal he carried in his pocket, the only thing that he’d taken from the Keep when it fell, and he’d talked about how he’d never met a kinder soul than his little brother.

Could kindness be crushed out of someone? Could the very nature of who Sebastian had been be changed by whatever the Sons had taught to him?

I liked to think it couldn’t be. I wanted to believe that somewhere, deep beyond the butcher they had turned him into, that he was still the boy that Tristan remembered.
“A lordship for Sebastian and an ambassador’s position for you,” I repeated. “You start having him slaughter people at my court, Perondale, and I’ll execute both of you, no questions asked.”

Cassie’s smile widened. “He won’t kill anyone you don’t order him to,” she promised. “After all this, I think you might find a use for Sebastian.”

She had a point on that front, at least, and Sebastian sized me up with those big blue eyes of his like he knew that his very presence made me uncomfortable. “Fine,” I agreed after a moment. “But if Atara dies in that keep, the deal is off the table. If Caius can’t open the gate when we’re ready, the deal is off the table. No negotiations. You two just get back on your ship and you leave. I don’t want to see you again. Is that clear?”

The princess stood and held a hand out. I pushed myself to my feet and took it, surprised by the strength of her grip. She was a small woman, but she packed power into her grasp. “It was a pleasure doing business with you, Emory,” she purred. “If you’ll excuse me, Tristan is probably dying to see Ridley and Caius will want to verbally eviscerate you for the sins of your forebears. If it’s all the same to you, we’ll keep our lodgings on the ship. I think Sebastian might make your Riders nervous.”

“Because he’s a butcher,” Nikita mumbled and Sebastian shot him a grin.

“Oh, little Novak,” he teased. “You and I aren’t so different, you know.”

“I’m disturbed that you even know who I am,” Kita deadpanned. “I’d prefer you forget it. Post haste.”

There was a snort from Sebastian before he rolled his eyes, suddenly more the seventeen-year-old boy that he was instead of the trained killer that he’d been made into. He looped an arm around Tristan’s shoulder on the way out, Cassie following after them. “So tell me about the past ten years?” I heard Tristan ask as the door shut.

I’d been mistaken in thinking that I would have a minute to talk to Nikita before Caius arrived. As soon as the click of the door echoed in the room, a black fog flooded up over the windows like the burning, choking smoke that had risen over Recia when the Immarans burned it. It snapped the locks on the windows so that the frames lifted and Nikita stumbled backward, his fingers reaching for the blade on his back while I choked, horror and surprise etched into my features until I recognized the ozone smell of it.

This was magic. It was different than Tristan’s. Tristan was a healer. He hadn’t learned much combat magic, or so he said, which had led me to the belief that alchemists specialized in specific fields. Caius was very much not a healer if he could blow the gate off of the city.

“Wait,” I told Nikita and he glared at me.

“What the fuck do you mean, wait?”

The thick, black mist flickered with veins of what looked like lightning and then it gathered in a vortex in the center of the room, a spinning black cloud that quickly materialized into the shape of a person barely taller than the average early teenager. It was facing the other side of the room, hood drawn up, black coat cinched at the waist with an acid green silk cord from which dangled a dozen bottles and vials of various heinous looking liquid. I recognized hemlock, at least, and the vibrant red of Imperial paralytics.

The figure coughed and cracked his knuckles. “Emory Bordelon,” he chirped, rolling his sleeves.
“Descended from Tylas the Rebel and Delior the Infinito. Not a cross-match I ever imagined happening in the past millennium. Corians and Lierians. Huh. Delior would be rolling in the Beyond if his soul was still there.”

“Caius Erucius?” I asked carefully.

He rocked on his heels, clad in black leather wraps the way that the Lierians wrapped their feet so that their toes and heels were bare--better for quiet walking, Kinnon had told me when I was a child, so we can feel the ground under our feet.

“Just Caius is fine,” he answered before he spun around, his hood still obscuring most of his wickedly pale face. I could see the glow of green eyes though--the same bizarre glow that Tristan’s had--cat-like and the same acid color as the silk cord around his slim hips. “You should know,” he continued. “The only reason I agreed to this meeting was because your father made good on a promise Tylas made to me some nine centuries ago. He didn’t know it, of course, how could he? The priests disallowed anyone from reading the old records in the temples. If I heard correctly, young Fox paid dearly for breaking that accord. Corians. Bloody infuriating, you lot. And boring, too. This is the most excitement you people have seen since you broke with Immara. Of course, you didn’t really. Delior did. Tylas gets all the credit for minimal work. Typical fucking humans.”

I stood, stunned, watching him fuss with an assortment of thick rings on his fingers while he spoke, simpering and complaining like a little old woman at a temple. It was the last phrase that caught me off guard though and Caius finally looked up, eyes large like a child’s, and noticed the blade in Nikita’s hand. In an instant and with nothing more than a flick of his eyes, it was jerked from the Rider’s steady fingers and flew across the room, embedding in the wall behind Caius’s shoulder, black smoke weaving around the hilt in the vague shape of a hand. “Well say something,” the alchemist urged. “I’m not here to be gawked at. This isn’t a slave market, Bordelon. And is that Novak blue on that blade? Tsk tsk.” He waved a finger like we were naughty children. “A proud old family that one. What will they say about you two?”

“How--”

“I can smell it on you, boy,” Caius barked when Nikita spoke and the Rider jumped, surprised, as if he’d had his hands struck by a ruler in a classroom. “And you stayed by his side when everyone else left even though you knew you’d never have a chance against Sebastian. That upstart would take your head off so quickly you’d still think you were alive when your skull hit the floor and if you don’t have a chance against him, you certainly couldn’t hope to stand against me. Nobody stands against me.” He turned to me then and though I couldn’t see his face, I got the distinct impression that he was scowling. “Are you simple minded, Bordelon? Are you capable of speech?”

“I…” I began hesitantly. “I guess I don’t really know what you want me to say? Cassiope already agreed to lend us your help.”

Caius snorted. “I knew she would. I aimed to help anyway. Delior was a good friend of mine. I would be remiss to let his boy rot in that wretched fortress.”

“His boy?”

“Atara, right? That’s your brother’s name? He’s the new Infinito? You--” He took a breath, inhaling through his nose, and the shadow of his mouth turned into a frown. “You’re still broken. Maybe you always will be. The heats haven’t come back?”

I started, alarm running through my blood like adrenaline and Nikita glanced at the blade on the wall like he was trying to figure out if he could reach it before Caius split his ribs open with that vile
magic that dripped from his fingers. “How do you know that?” I asked breathlessly. “We only just learned--”

He took a deep breath and held a hand up. “Delior was the first Infinito to leave Immara and come to Coria. His line is the only one that survived the slave markets in Immara.”

“It’s the first? As in there were more?”

“One for every tribe,” Caius confirmed. “Tylas promised to free our people. That was why I forged the covenant. To help. I sold a piece of my soul to the dead to fight Immara and Tylas kept most of them in chains. The Bordelons kept them in chains until your father fell in love with Delior’s descendents. I promised I would never come back here...to this miserable, hot, cesspit of depravity that stole my life from me.”

He spoke like this had all happened yesterday, but he was talking about people that had been dead for some eight hundred and fifty years. Talking about them like he was one of them and my brain struggled to keep up with the things that he was saying--with the implications of selling part of a soul to the dead and I thought, with growing horror, that this was what Tristan had done. This was the promise he’d made, the covenant he’d forged, in return for his abilities--he was not really alive.

Neither of them were.

And then I repeated the way he’d said it, played it back in my head, and my heart lurched. “Wait,” I breathed, taking a step forward. “You’re not human, are you? You called the Lierians our people.”

Caius looked up and his hood slipped back over platinum colored hair not at all different from Cyril’s and it was obvious, then, that he had never been human. Everything I’d been told about the alchemists was a blatant lie--propaganda by the temples--that they slaughtered Lierians by the masses, that they performed sacrifices and vivisections on their slaves--

I remembered what Tristan had said...that Caius had opinions on slavery and opinions on the Bordelons.

“You’re a Lierian,” I breathed helplessly. “You’re...but how...”

Caius breathed heavily and his shoulders slumped. “Sit down, Emory,” he said softly. “And I’ll tell you where we really come from.”
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

I collected Cyril before Caius started and, after the initial shock of meeting a Lierian with alchemist’s eyes, he settled into a chair. It was...odd...to see him after listening in on the feud he’d had with Nikita over the past month. They’d been at each other’s throats--Nikita vehemently advocating that Cyril leave me alone and Cyril doing exactly the opposite until he was physically removed the room. In the Keep, that would have been grounds for treason and reason enough to throw Nikita into a cell. The rules were different out here with Riders serving as guard--Riders who answered to their Commander.

Cyril searched my face before Caius began to speak, wide blue eyes flickering over my features like he could read what I was thinking and I felt terrible. Losing my father, worrying about Atara and his baby, Olivia...and I’d checked out like Laila. My heart throbbed in my chest and, momentarily, I considered squeezing him closer to me with an arm around his shoulders but his attention turned back to Caius.

The alchemist was holding a glass of whiskey, which he stirred with his finger. He sucked the liquor off of it with a smack of his lips and then sat down in the chair that Cassie had been occupying.

“Immara used to stretch all over this continent from Glacia to Coria,” he began, settling back in his chair and crossing slim legs. One foot turned in a circle as he spoke, his fingers steepled over the glass he’d put on the table beside him. “There were native Corians here. Humans with dark hair and blue eyes who lived in little fishing villages. One of Tylas’s ancestors married a local girl and it became...a sort of tradition. His vassal lords were appointed members of the native population and gradually, over time, the Immaran blond was bred out of your family.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I wanted a history lesson. Not genetics.”

Caius flashed a grin and shrugged his shoulders. “They were all too glad to marry into the Bordelon family and enter their service. It protected them from being collared by the slavers, who turned their focus to my people.” He heaved a sigh. “It went on for years. Centuries. Primarily in what you call ‘Old Immara.’ We aren’t native to Coria, contrary to what Lierian tradition says here. We’re native to the deserts above the Vale and every year, we’d meet there. The Infinitos would gather and select mates--”

“Select?” Cyril asked, arching an eyebrow. “They picked their own?”

“Mm,” Caius pursed his lips. “That Rite of yours was engineered by elders after Delior died to guarantee genetic variation and to keep the splintering members of their tribe united. They were all moving in different directions, you see, and they all wanted their own little groups to play host to the newest addition to their pantheon. Delior’s grandson died young in childbed--a combination of blood loss and exhaustion, or so it was told to me by an elder that still wrote. He was removed from his tribe father’s care and raised communally by the elders, who installed the Rite and turned him into a prized head of cattle rather than the deified leader he was meant to be.”
He spoke with acid in his voice, like this whole thing was a trauma for him to remember, and his eyes darkened as he recalled it. I tried to imagine what it was like—to watch from afar as your culture collapsed into something unrecognizable and my eyes moved to the window where I could see the curve of the wall around the city, hiding the charred husks of buildings and people who were slowly starving with the gates closed and the harbor blocked.

Cyril stammered, teeth grinding, fists clenched, and he ground one of them into the cushion of his chair. “It was meaningless, then,” he snarled. “Everything they put me through was meaningless. Everything they want to do to Atara is meaningless!”

Caius’s expression softened, if an alchemist’s even could with those strange eyes, and he took his bottom lip between his teeth, worrying it while he watched. I felt familiar rage boil in my stomach at the implications—that all of this was for nothing. Hiram’s support wasn’t over a tradition that should have meant something to our people. It wasn’t holy. It was convenience.

“It’s not about tradition,” I answered stiffly. “It’s not even about the sex. It’s about control. They couldn’t control Atara because you raised him with the understanding that you’d never force that on either of us. They couldn’t put a bridle on him and steer him like a horse, so they’ll do it to his son.”

The alchemist nodded shortly. “Our people are not immune to the allure of power over other people. The Infinitos have been slaves to the Lierian nation for the past nine hundred years. You took away their favorite toys, Cyril.”

“You haven’t explained how this relates to you and Tylas,” I pointed out, eager to lead the conversation away from this crushing subject that was putting more weight on Cyril’s shoulders—weight he couldn’t carry on his own and weight that I couldn’t afford to offset for him. I steeled myself for the worst of it and looked over at Caius, who was watching me with the predatory gaze of a raptor bird, acidic green and bright.

He paused for a moment and then licked his lips. “I was born not far from the Vale,” he told us softly and his eyes glazed over like he was remembering long distant things that never crossed his mind anymore. “I was a hunter by a trade, a soldier by necessity. I was killing humans long before I should have ever known how to use a weapon. One night, when I was fourteen, poachers came to our little village on the mouth of the Erucius river. I had a little brother to worry about, not unlike you, Emory.” He trailed off, his expression softening even more to something akin to grief but it was over just as fast as it was there, clouded with misery and longing. I was surprised at how I empathized with him—how terrible I felt for the things he must have seen that night so many centuries ago.

“We hid in the woods around the village. I had to cover his mouth to keep his from crying out and I should have done something, but he meant more to me than all of them. Our parents were already gone, poached seasons before by a much smaller party of humans. This one wiped us out. They took our leader, our Marked One, tore the toddler from his arms, and dumped the boy in the river. I remember the screaming most vividly and how every instinct I had told me to jump into that water for that baby, but I could feel Cyprian’s heartbeat against my chest, so fast it hummed like a bird’s.” He propped his head up in his hand, his elbow on the arm of the chair. “So I let him drown.”

There was silence. It crushed the air around us and Cyril shifted uncomfortably, his eyes on the floor. “I would have, too,” I eventually said quietly. “If I had to pick between Atara and someone else’s baby...I would have picked Atara like you picked Cyprian.”

Caius smiled, but it lacked joy, and he drummed his fingers against his lips. “I was enraged,” he continued quietly. “I’d lost everything. I was alone with an eight-year-old and we had nowhere to go, nobody to turn to. The other tribes weren’t safe. I was convinced of it. The poachers from the Vale would come for them and I was so determined not to lose Cyprian like I’d lost my family and
my Infinito. I’d heard stories about the Paikean mountains...about old creatures there that would grant you infinite power for a price and how nobody had ever been willing to pay that price. It was a story mothers told their children to keep them from venturing out into the desert you have to cross to reach Paikea...but I did it anyway. We had no other option. We were being hunted by those poachers and their hounds.”

Cyril shifted in his seat, his brow knit tightly in concentration, and I wondered what his take on all of this was. Clearly, he’d been angry about the Rite, but this was so much more than a Rite. My own insides twisted with discomfort as Caius recounted the crossing of the desert—how the heat rose off the sand and looked like water, how there were lizards the size of horses that the tribes road on.

They’d left the desert years before, he explained, in search of water, but some had stayed steadfastly behind, determined to make a go of it. To his knowledge, he explained, they were still there and no poachers ever went far enough into the dunes to find them.

He went into lurid detail about the sand scraping their skin, about drinking the water out of cacti and hallucinating because of the sap, stumbling blindly through the great mountains of sand that hummed and sang when they shifted, vibrating deep under the surface like low bells. He talked about finding an oasis where the water was so salty it made the thirst worse and how he’d cracked coconuts growing from the trees to keep Cyprian alive.

“But we made it,” he finally finished. “We reached the edge of the mountains and we climbed up into the snow capped tops. It’s perilous, that pass into the Paikean Valley where the College and the Guild sit now. Some of the pathways are so narrow you have to walk sideways. There are snow leopards that stalk the night—cats the size of large dogs who will gut you before you even hear them coming.” He rolled a sleeve up and showed us three long, jagged scars in the shape of claws along his arm. “I had to hike with Cyprian on my shoulders most of the way and all that drove me was rage. It was unending. This bottomless well of fury that I couldn’t see through anymore. I wanted revenge more than I wanted my next breath because every time I closed my eyes, I saw them throw that baby into the water. I remember his face, even now, and I hated them for it.”

I knew that kind of hate. It lived in me, a burning forge stoked to a rage that existed in my chest, and the fire never went out. I could control it, but it was still there, a well of energy that I could call on when I needed it. If nothing else kept me going, spite would always be there, because there were things I couldn’t forget, too. The smell of gin and saltwater, Atara’s heartbroken face flecked with gray matter and blood, Nikita’s strangled screaming when he refused to tell me to stop, screaming at Fox that I hated him...then holding him while he died.

I’d never forget that blood on my clothes or the way he’d grasped my face with grimy, bloodied fingers and left his prints on my cheeks. I’d wanted so badly to keep them like they were additions to the marks I already wore.

Caius watched me while I stared pointedly out the window like he knew exactly what I felt, but he didn’t remark on it. “I made it to the Paikean Valley,” he said quietly. “We both did. It was empty then, just a river of glacial meltwater surrounded by pine trees that were taller than houses and stags that had never seen people before. They walked right up to us and I followed them through the forest, learned all the places where berries and roots grew, and we were happy for a few months, but that rage didn’t leave and I spent my days searching for the specters I’d been told haunted that place.”

“You found something,” Cyril offered quietly. “You’re...different now.”

Caius chuckled and wiped his mouth. “I did find something. A handful of creatures older than creation who carried names like Miero, Finna, and Grennen.”
“Gods?” I asked, raising an eyebrow, skepticism alight in my features.

He shook his head. “No, not quite, but not human, either. Perhaps something that existed before we did. Remnants of a forgotten race or shards leftover of creatures too phenomenal for us to understand. They offered me a great boon if I was willing to pay the cost and they warned me, before I agreed, that if my heart wasn’t in it—if I wasn’t absolutely devoted to my reasons for wanting this power, then it would consume me, but I was adamant. I was sixteen by then, young and reckless and full of unquenchable fury. So I signed my name in their book.”

“Like Tristan signed his name in a book,” Cyril said softly and Caius nodded.

“What was the cost?” I asked, leaning forward, eyes wide.

The alchemist’s expression flashed with grief again. “My mortality,” he answered quietly. “At the time, it didn’t seem like a cost at all. Who doesn’t want to live forever, right?” His voice dropped nearly to a whisper. “It was a great cost. I didn’t know it then. I wouldn’t know it for awhile, not when something reached out of me after I signed my name, a piece of what made me real and the empty spot that it had existed in was filled to bursting with power. It came only after great pain during which I thought that surely I was dying, but then...It sang in my veins, a heady sort of thing like being drunk with none of the stupidity that comes with it. I’d been helpless in comparison before. Now, I could shatter trees with a thought. I could shake the mountains. I could fire arrows with no bow in my hand. It took time to master it, of course, but I was a quick study and we were safe there.”

He hesitated then. “They warned me, those remnant figures, that I would gain power with time. That I must learn to temper it, but I was a fool and I was cocky.”

“Temper it?” Cyril inquired.

Caius nodded shortly. “I’m sure you’ve seen Tristan give himself infusions. Those temper his abilities. They keep his power from consuming him entirely. I didn’t do that, not in the beginning. I didn’t know and neither did my teachers. Nobody had ever survived their covenant before. So my power grew until I could split mountains from base to summit and crush living things like grapes without so much as a flick of my wrist and the more it grew, the less human I became. Grennen eventually figured out a way to temper it, but I was angry that he even wanted to. By then, I had more power than even they did. I was eighteen. Cyprian was afraid of me. They insisted and I...”

“You killed them,” Nikita finally spoke from the corner, his arms crossed. I’d nearly forgotten he was there. “That’s what happens when men get power hungry. They kill the wiser ones so they don’t have to hear that they’re being foolish. Look at Immara. It’s a cesspool run by morons for exactly that reason.”

The alchemist flinched, but he agreed after a moment of brief frustration with himself. “I did,” he affirmed. “I took their book and I brought down the mountain that they lived in. I learned that I had sold a part of myself to the dead, that my power came directly from the fabric of their world. It didn’t matter. I felt grief for what I’d done. Overwhelming, inconsolable grief. They were my friends and I’d butchered them like the poachers had butchered my people. So I made a promise to see the Lierians out of chains and we left the Paikean Valley. We made our way to the outskirts of Karinus where we lived away from humans, just the two of us. Cyprian grew older. I did not. I remained almost seventeen while he grew taller, met a Lierian girl from the nearby settlement. Settled down. Had babies. I could never be close to them. My circumstances could not be explained.”

He fidgeted and dread settled in my stomach. “I understood the cost then,” he whispered. “Cyprian grew older. His children grew older. Everyone...everyone grew older. My brother died when he was
seventy-two and I...I was still seventeen.” He glanced at the window and I followed his line of sight out into the circular garden in front of the building where a dark haired boy was wrapped around Tristan like a snake, arms and legs tight about his body, face buried in his throat.

Ridley, I realized. Ridley would die. He would grow up. Tristan never would. “Gods,” I choked out. I tried to imagine that—to love someone, knowing all the while that our relationship was destined for disaster. I tried to imagine Nikita growing older while I didn’t and my stomach churned, cold and heavy.

“So eventually I made my way to Coria,” Caius continued, but his voice was strained then, like talking about Cyprian had taken a toll on him. “I met Delior, who, against all odds, had taken his tribe across the sea to Coria and befriended the lord’s young son...a Tylas Bordelon. There were Lierians in Coria, of course, but they were all slaves and Tylas, behind his father’s back, as young and foolish as I had been, helped Delior lead a rebellion...with moderate success. In them, I saw hope. I thought...maybe this boy, this human with his dark hair and his blue eyes, will be the great liberator we need. I watched them for a time, content to play the part of normal while it all panned out. That slave rebellion grew into open rebellion against Tylas’s father. He married Aurora, a merchant’s daughter from the city, and her father poured money into their cause, but money couldn’t breach the walls of old Coryth Keep.”

“You could,” I insisted.

Caius smiled sadly. “I could,” he agreed. “So I did. I helped Tylas open the walls. I helped him defeat the Immarans when they came to reclaim what they thought was theirs. I murdered and butchered and destroyed in his name...because Delior believed in him and I believed in Delior, who I had come to see as my Infinito. My leader. My god. We were friends, the three of us. Tylas named his son after me, but when the dust settled and the war was over, reality set back in. The new king could not hold a throne while a hundred angry nobles gnashed their teeth over lost slaves. So he let Delior and his transplant tribe leave, but he did not free the remaining slaves the way that he had promised to when I agreed to help him...and we were tired of fighting. Tired of killing. Tired of watching our people die. Surely, you know the feeling—” He looked at Cyril, who sat back, his eyes glazed, and I knew he was remembering Recia and the Marshland Massacres.

Nikita, too, looked to be lost in thought. If any of us understood butchery on that level, it was him, after all.

“I returned to Immara,” he continued. “I started the College. Delior’s tribe became the only tribe that I know of to retain an Infinito, unless the one in the deserts still keeps the old faith. I have no way of knowing. Even I can’t find where they call home. I resented Tylas and I made a promise not to come back here until he kept his oath. He never did what he said he would, but then little Fox Bordelon fell in love with a Lierian who bore marks on his face and you can’t imagine the way I felt when he struck down those old slave accords the day of his coronation. It was like...nine hundred years removed, everything we’d fought for finally had meaning. So when Tristan wrote to me about Fox’s oldest son, who he claims has more potential than his father, I agreed to help. I needed a patron, of course, so the Vale didn’t look sideways and start asking questions, but I knew that Ridley had found Sebastian in Karinus so it was a simple ask. The Perondales have been good friends of mine for decades.”

There was heavy, thick silence that blanketed the room and Cyril got quickly to his feet, pacing back and forth in front of the windows. “All this time,” he breathed. “You knew all this time and you said nothing. Your people needed you! We could have learned from you!”

Caius winced. “What was lost could not be regained, Leland,” he answered quietly. “It seemed cruel
to tell them that, once upon a time, our people numbered in the millions and we had a city made of glass where the Vale sits now. It seemed cruel to tell them that Immara is built on the bones of our ancestors.”

“You could have come years ago,” he insisted, rounding on him. “You knew what Fox did years ago. You could have come to me! I would have listened!”

“You were happy,” Caius whispered. “You were in love. You had two small children and a nation to lead. You were already taking them down paths that would lead us back to what we were before. I would have done you no favors filling your head with ancient stories about the way things used to be. I knew what you went through to get to where you were. You didn’t deserve my grief on top of it. Unfortunately for both of us, that’s no longer an option.”

“Ignorance is not bliss,” Cyril snapped. “I deserved to know. You keep no secrets from me now.”

Caius’s face split into a smile. “Ah, but you’re not Infinito anymore. Atara is. I owe explanations to him, not you.” He held his hands up in defeat. “But in his absence, I will default to your leadership, Your Grace.”

It was Nikita who eventually asked the question that was on my lips, locked behind a thousand more about my people, where we came from, what it was like to be what he was, how lonely it must have been-- “Can you open the gate?” he asked. “As the only human here, the rest of it means nothing to me unless you can open that gate.”

The alchemist snorted. “I can bring down the whole fucking wall if you want me to,” he chirped. “I suggest you wait for the Riders though. It takes a great amount of energy to perform magic like that. I will be of little use to you once the walls come down and Tristan signed his name with intent to heal the world. He can’t injure people for you. It won’t allow him to do it.”

“That’s how that works?” I wondered out loud. “The intent when he signs...that’s what determines your power? You wanted war, so you got weapons. Tristan wanted to heal, so he got medicine.”

He grinned widely. “As bright as Tristan claimed you were,” he answered.

“I think he oversold you on my potential as a leader,” I grumbled, getting to my feet. “How is it you were able to tell us all of this but he can’t?”

“Because he’s not allowed to,” Caius informed me, rising steadily and smoothing his black coat out. “There are rules. If everyone knew that they could fulfill their greatest desires simply by wanting it enough to survive the covenant, I’d have a valley full of hopefuls at the College and I’m dreadfully picky. I don’t want people making that promise or signing their names. I only allow those that I truly believe are capable of it. They’re warned that when they agree to enter, there will be no leaving.”

“And if people change their minds?” Nikita asked, raising an eyebrow.

Caius cleared his throat. “That,” he answered curtly. “Is an answer you don’t want to know about. If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with Tristan. He was my prized pupil years ago. I was loathe to send him to the Vale and I’m all too pleased he left. I’d like to hear from him before he disappears with Ridley for the next week.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He vaporized, all thick, black smoke and the scent of ozone, leaving the three of us alone with our altered histories and our tragedies weighing heavy on our hearts.
In Emory’s absence, my fever broke completely. It took time to regain the strength I’d lost and to get over the aches that now throbbed in my wrists every morning. Tristan had explained that there had been permanent damage to the cushions between my joints—that I would always feel arthritic there as a result of the infection having reached so deep. I should have cared, but I’d retreated back into the numb teenager I’d been before any of this had happened—before I’d joined the guard, before I’d met Atara and Emory, before I’d loved someone too good for me and been rewarded with love in return for the first time in my life…

It was the only way I knew how to survive trauma...by dissociating. Or trying to. I could separate myself from the torture—from the way her guard had beaten me down with gauntlet clad gloves, asking over and over again where Emory was...until my cheek split over the bone and one of my back teeth popped loose, until I throbbed from my eyes to my collar and all the way down to the base of my spine, a steady, pounding pain that pulsed in time with my heart...until I lost some of the hearing in my right ear and some of the vision in my right eye. That, Tristan had said, would also never come back, but glasses could solve the sight problem, at least.

I could detach from Elizabeth ordering them to pull that information out of me, from knees meeting my gut over and over until I threw up, shaking my head, adamantly denying her the information she needed. No, I’d ordered myself inside my head. I’ll die first.

She’d taken my jaw in her hand on the third day while I heaved through ribs that had been broken by pincers, struggling for air, and she’d pursed her lips. ‘I was told Lieri were sensitive little things—that you feel pain more than real humans, that you feel emotion deeper than real humans. You don’t seem to feel it at all.

I’d spit in her face and she’d slapped me so hard I’d seen stars, sagging against that column in the royal quarters that she kept me chained to like a dog, my wrists shackled behind it, slowly blistering and gathering infection. I wanted to scream at her. Of course, I could detach from that sensory system that was so much more acute than a human’s. I’d spent my entire life being beaten, tied down, and used like I was little more than a warm sex toy. She had condemned me to that. She had me so godsdamned near unbreakable.

I hadn’t told her that. She didn’t deserve an answer, didn’t deserve to take pleasure in the suffering she’d been inflicting on me my entire life, so I’d kept my mouth sealed shut. She’d found a way though.

I could detach from my pain. I could not detach from Atara’s. Outside the wall, the reality of that situation set in and instead of being overjoyed by Rylin and Rosie having made it out of the city, I cared very little. When I’d been sick, I remembered Rosie holding cold cloths to my face, singing quietly in Glacian or apologizing for being too young and too desperate to look out for me the way
that a mother should have. She thought of me as hers and I realized in those little moments that Elizabeth Glenning had never been my mother. Rosie Beckett had been giving me ice baths through fevers... She’d been the one bringing vegetable stock to me when I was sick and spoon feeding it to me when my fingers were too weak to hold the cutlery. She’d taught me how to read and on my birthdays, it had always been Rosie helping Rylin scrape money together to buy me a toy horse or to bake me a cake...and she’d been doing that my entire life. Not just after the siege.

She had never cared that I wasn’t human, that I hadn’t come from her body, and that I had never called her mother because I hadn’t understood the concept of mothers until I was much, much older.

And though I could appreciate that after I was thrown from the sea cell, I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I recognized all that she’d done for me...that it mattered to me, because letting myself care about one thing would open the gate for me to care about a lot of things and I only had energy to care about Atara. The rest of me remained numb.

I stared up at the walls of the keep from our steadily growing camp of soldiers and I watched, despondent, as the gates remained sealed. I thought about him, huddled alone in that dark cell, staring up through the bars of that window with nobody to talk to, nobody to lean on...isolation was a living hell, one that was detailed very specifically during my medical training, and all I thought about when I looked at those walls was that the hallucinations would have already started. The deterioration of his mental faculties would be in full swing. He would lose himself, day by day, and I was outside, trying to look in, wondering how much of him I would have left if we even got him back at all.

I would put him back together, I decided. I would do for him what he had done for me and no matter how long it took or how shattered he was in the aftermath, I would be there the way that Nikita had been there for Emory. I hadn’t understood his vehement refusal to leave the young king’s side, even before the asylum, but I did after the fever. Nothing would keep me from him, I told myself. I would crawl from the grave if I had to, claw myself up until my nails cracked to the cuticle, beat the door down with my fists until the flesh gave way to bone--it didn’t matter. I would be there, at his side, no matter how it panned out and if he spent the rest of his days a babbling invalid, then I would take care of him. He had been the only person in my life that had ever assigned me value that wasn’t monetary, the only person that had ever loved me, truly and completely, and who had sought to convince me that I had real worth. He deserved my devotion and he would have it.

I threw myself into work not long after I got back on my feet. It was what Atara would have done. He would have focused on helping the people that he could help and so I emulated that. Someone had to. Emory was out for the count, driven into the dark parts of his head by Cyril’s overwhelming grief and attachment, by Fox and Olivia, by Atara himself...and Nikita didn’t leave his side except to issue orders to his Riders, who obeyed nobody but him. Brentlyn was stewing in more whiskey than a distillery, leaving his men under the command of Riordan, whose only source of comfort became learning all he could from the Riders about Danica Novak, and Meyer, who spent all of his time throwing himself into sparring matches to forget about the satchel of Olivia’s bones. At night, I often found him drinking gin with Joey, both of them aware that their futures were intricately tied together, and trying to make a go at forging a relationship prior to an exchange of vows.

That left the refugees and they were in dire need of a healer so, with Tristan’s help, I worked my way through the injured. I delivered two babies, trying desperately not to think of my own, growing steadily in someone who was, no doubt, descending into the madness of isolation. I learned from the Riders how to ration--something they did all year round because food and resources were communally shared in the north--and I helped them to divy it up to the people who needed it. We built little shelters, the refugees and I, hobbled together from wood we hacked out of the forest, and though they were not houses with hearths or separate rooms, they were enough to stop the rain. Three or four families crowded into each at night, warm and dry, and with bellies full enough to stop
the ache.

When Emory came around, I wanted his transition to leadership to be as smooth as possible. I could help with that, I thought, the way that Atara had sought to help with that—to shoulder the burden until his brother could and in Atara’s absence, I took up that mantle. I shouldered my share of the burden until Emory finally stumbled from the house on the day the Immarans arrived, bleary eyed and paler than usual from a lack of sunlight. He spoke briefly with Tristan and his new companion, a young man with Lierian blood in his veins—I could tell by the seawater color of his eyes—and a chaotic head of soft, chestnut curls. He touched his fingers to Emory’s face, a very Lierian gesture, before the new king’s eyes scanned the people milling around the house.

An Immaran princess, a Son of the Serpent, a handful of guards wearing the silver Perondale dragon on their shields, and a black clad alchemist who kept his hood up, but he couldn’t hide the acid green that glowed from the eyes beneath it. He replaced Emory at Tristan’s side when Emory’s eyes finally found me and he made a line for the solitary post that I kept, standing on the outside of the perimeter, staring up at the walls that kept me from Atara.

“Mackenzie,” he greeted quietly when he finally reached me, his dog flopping down in the sandy dirt at his feet. “You look...better. Sort of.”

I cast a withering glance in his direction. He wasn’t the first person to tell me that I looked...different than usual. The snark had drained out of me like water through a gutter and I hadn’t the energy to promote the false cheerfulness that I usually exhibited with people. He, however, did look better than he had the last time we’d had a real conversation. That had been before the asylum. I hardly counted the one we’d had when my fever had only just been breaking and I’d been still confusing him for Atara. “You look better. Not sort of. Definitely,” I answered dryly. “Better than trying to cut my head off or beating a certain acquaintance of ours bloody, at least.”

“Yeeeaaah,” Emory dragged the word out when he spoke and rubbed the back of his neck like he was nervous. “I...owe you an apology. A lot of apologies, actually.” He looked down at the sand, his lips pursed into a thin, anxious line. If he was anything like the other Bordelon prince, apologies were difficult for him--a byproduct of growing up a spoiled brat.

I shrugged in response. If things had been different, I might have teased him. I might have lectured him. I might have told him that there were better ways to deal with your trauma than taking it out on people you love, but he seemed to have learned that last one, at least, at the asylum. If he hadn’t, I expected the dog would have been dead by then. The dog or Nikita, loyal little fool that he was, standing adamantly at Emory’s side even when Emory didn’t deserve him.

After a moment, I answered. “An apology is just words,” I said, my voice flat and my arms crossed. “It only means something if you actually change.”

“I have!” he protested eagerly, eyes wide, and for a moment he looked so much like Atara that it almost hurt to look at him. They both had those big, Lierian-like eyes, more childlike than adult. In Emory, it was barely noticeable because he looked more human everywhere else than his brother did, but there were a few times, like this moment, where it was all too obvious they came from the same stock.

“I hope so,” I responded tersely. “Because Nikita has been locked in a power struggle with Cyril since you disappeared into your room and if you haven’t changed, Emory, I can tell you with absolute certainty that you don’t deserve him. He has fought every step of the way to protect you. He delegated jobs out to everyone in your name, let them believe the orders came from you, when those of us close to you knew damn well that they didn’t. The only reason you’re coming out here to an army that still believes in you is because of Novak. You should treat him like the fucking hero he is
instead of your personal whipping boy.”

Emory cringed like I’d given him a proper backhand to his face and he wrung his hands in front of him. “I know,” he admitted quietly. “And you’re right. I was...terrible to him. More than terrible, actually. There aren’t really words—”

“Yes, there are,” I corrected, my back stiff and my eyes hard. “They’re abusive. Toxic. Unworthy. Disgusting.”

He shifted uncomfortably, turning his feet in so that his weight rested on the outside curve of his boots, a nervous tick I’d noticed Cyril and Atara both did, too. He straightened himself back out a second later. “I deserved that,” he mumbled.

“You deserve to have the shit kicked out of you,” I deadpanned. “You’re lucky he’s too nice to do it because he would wipe the fucking floor with you and you know it. I saw you fight in the sparring ring in the gardens before you left. You’re good. You’re not Rider Commander good. That kid is the best weapon you have. Well, human weapon, anyway. It’s not fair to compare him to the alchemists or that Serpent.”

“That Serpent is entirely human,” Emory argued gently. “And he’s Tristan Brighton’s younger brother, so I’d keep my opinions to myself if I were you.” I huffed in response, arms still crossed, before Emory continued. “But you’re right. I am lucky that Kita is who he is. More than lucky...and I don’t deserve him. I don’t deserve any of you.”

I was bitter and angry and what he didn’t deserve most was my ire. None of this was his fault. He hadn’t even been in the city when it happened. He hadn’t been the one making the decisions that led to this wretched disaster--that had been Atara, though it wasn’t fair to say it was his fault either. I blamed Elizabeth and Hiram entirely. In the beginning, there’d been a small part of me that had blamed Fox for putting all of this on Atara before he was ready, but I’d encouraged that...and Fox had more than paid the price for allowing it. That wound was still raw and occasionally, after I’d stared at the wall, I would stare out at the bay where his bones rested at the bottom, and I’d remember that the last time I’d seen him, his concern had been about making sure that Atara didn’t fight because he didn’t want him hurt. He’d known he was dying. He’d known it was the end...and his last concern had still been for his son.

It made me feel even more guilty about the thoughts that occasionally crossed through my head.

“This is hard for you,” Emory finally said softly and when I glanced at him, he was staring up at the keep in the distance, his mouth turned into a pained frown. There was heartbreak written in his features. It wasn’t fair to think I was the only person that suffered from Atara’s absence. Arguably, Emory had been missing him for much longer than I had been.

Emory had been missing him for years.

I ground my teeth, my jaw working through grief and livid rage. “Of course, it’s hard for me,” I answered through my teeth, my words barely more than a hiss laced with fury and sorrow. “It’s my fault! We were so close to the fucking door. We nearly made it out and he turned around for me.”

The new king blinked, his brow knitted in confusion, lips parted like he wanted to speak but he had no words that would steady the tremor in my voice. I had not yet admitted any of this out loud to anyone and there was no reason to admit it now. Especially not to him. Cyril loved Atara and for all the world it seemed like there was nobody that suffered more from his imprisonment than his Lheiro, but I knew it was wrong. Nikita knew it was wrong. There was not a single person on the continent that could match Emory’s affection for his younger brother. I’d learned a few things about the eldest
of Fox’s sons while I worked for his family and the most important one that I’d filed away in the mental image I had of Emory was that when Emory loved someone, he was all in. He loved completely and with everything he had. He didn’t reserve any small piece of his heart for himself so that he could recover from death or loss like the rest of us could.

The only person I had ever loved like that was Atara, but I hadn’t spent my life looking after him like Emory had and I knew that he had always been Atara’s greatest protector because the youngest prince had told me as much. When the other gentry called him a mongrel, it was Emory who beat them into the dirt. When they shoved him around because of his size, it was Emory who kicked them into the mud, who broke teeth and noses, who held boys down in the tide pools and snarled above them that nobody put their hands on his little brother.

If anyone had reason to hate me for having let Atara down, it was Emory, who had never once been the person to let him down. I’d thought about the beach a lot. Atara had explained it to me so many times that I could visualize it almost perfectly.

Emory was taller. He was stronger. He was faster. There was no way he should have been behind Atara that night.

Unless he’d done it on purpose. Unless he’d allowed it to happen to spare his brother.

“What do you mean?” Emory asked eventually while I turned those thoughts over in my head, my stomach twisting, making me physically sick when I recalled that night when Coryth fell.

I rubbed my eyes and then returned my arms to where they were wrapped around my middle. “I got hit with a Lierian dart. It had a paralytic on it. I fought it, boss. I fought like hell. My limbs were going numb and I couldn’t breath, but I kept pushing myself back up to try to buy him time and he turned around because he didn’t want to leave without me...and they caught him. They caught him because he wouldn’t leave without me.”

“He loves you,” Emory pointed out and he raised an eyebrow like he shouldn’t have had to remind me of it at all. “I would have turned around for Nikita. You would have turned around for Atara. Nikita would have turned around for me. That’s what love is, Mackenzie. It’s caring for someone else more than you care about yourself and trusting that they’ll do the same. It hurts, Mack. I know it hurts, but that’s part of the deal. You pick the people worth hurting for. You’re worth hurting for and...and I would have turned around for you, too.”

“That’s stupid,” I spat and he made a face like he didn’t quite believe me or he didn’t understand. “I’m nothing to you.”

“You’re the father of my nephew,” Emory answered incredulously, shaking his head. “You’re family. Even if that baby was out of the equation, I could never look Atara in the face if I left you to die and he is worth hurting for. You know godsdamned well that he is.”

I couldn’t argue that point, except to remind myself that I didn’t deserve any of them, not really. I certainly didn’t deserve that baby, nor had I really wanted it, truth be told. The only example of appropriate parenting I truly had were from Fox and Cyril. Rosie and Rylin had tried, but they’d been young and poor and trapped in a hopeless situation. I loved them for all that they’d done for me, but Atara had been right when he’d said that it wasn’t enough. They hadn’t protected me enough and I suffered for it. I didn’t want to be that father, but neither did I know how to be a better one.

And there had been...thoughts. Worries. “Every day we wait is another day he’s in there and I’m out here,” I started stiffly and Emory’s face fell because he knew it, too, but he had no better way. “They’re going to start to starve to death in there, boss, and with no access to anything outside the
wall, they will have no way to burn the dead. Bodies will pile up. Disease will spread through what population is left.”

He shifted uncomfortably. “I know,” he whispered, his voice grave. “If I had a choice, Mackenzie, I would pry the gates open now, but I can’t hold that city yet. Not against the temple guard. They number in the thousands and they have the advantage of the walls.”

I nodded. I knew it. Of course, I did. That wasn’t the point. “I keep thinking about it,” I admitted, sick to my stomach. “And I caught myself saying a few nights ago that as long as Atara makes it out, then that’s fine. I don’t care about the rest. I don’t even care about...about that baby. We can try again. Later. When he’s older, when we’re ready. If that...if it dying means he gets to live because he doesn’t have to support it anymore...then I’m okay with that. And if it survives--if he survives--I will spend the rest of my life hating myself for thinking that. Every time I look at him, I’ll remember that I wished him gone once because it would be easier for Atara to live without him. I’ll remember that I was selfish like my mother is selfish--”

“You are nothing like your mother,” Emory interrupted. “She’s...not even your mother, Mackenzie. Rosie is your mother. Rylin is your mother and your father. Elizabeth doesn’t deserve you and she definitely doesn’t deserve to be called anyone’s fucking mother.” He paused and then I felt his hand on my shoulder, a surprising gesture from someone who could barely tolerate touch the last time I’d seen him. He squeezed and I hadn’t expected comfort, least of all from Emory Bordelon, but it was there in the unnatural warmth of his palm and the sandalwood smell that always clung to his clothes and his hair.

He was quiet for a moment, both of us staring up at the wall while I turned over what I’d said, acutely aware of the way my heart tore itself to pieces in my chest, littering the bottom of my rib cage with shredded remnants of what it used to be. I felt dizzy and sick and ready to throw myself back into work to forget that this conversation even existed. Surely, there was someone out among the many shelters that needed a tonic or a splint or sutures. If not, I could always Tristan for a task—mixing tinctures, measuring poultices, respooling the linen into smaller rolls for bandaging. Something. Anything to take my mind off of Atara and, by proxy, off of Lian.

But then Emory spoke again, his voice quiet and sincere. “You’re going to get him back,” he promised, his fingers squeezing around my shoulder and I felt the cold despair I’d been living with walk up my spine like spiders. Nothing he did would shake that, but it was nice to have him there...on his feet again...fighting just as hard as the rest of us.

“Mackenzie, listen to me,” he insisted and I turned to look at him. I was surprised to find him staring back at me, mint green eyes set in an expression of absolute certainty. “I get it. I would do the most heinous, wicked things to make sure he comes out of this alive. I don’t have any right to judge you for what you thought because I have thought the same things. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“You don’t know what isolation like that does to a person, Emory,” I breathed. “Even if you get him back, he might not ever be Atara again.” My heart cracked again, another handful of red confetti for the bottom of my chest, and I pushed against my sternum with one of my palms, rubbing painfully like I could dull the ache.

Emory pressed on, determined. “He will be,” he pushed. “I know him. He’s stronger than you think. He’ll survive in there just to spite Elizabeth. He’ll do it because he knows I’m still out here and he knows that when he has nothing and nobody, I will still be there. And he’ll have you. He doesn’t know it yet, but he’ll get to come out of that hell hole and you’ll still be breathing. That will mean everything to him.”

I was quiet. He was right, of course. It would...if he could understand it. If he retained any of his
It will take...a long time for him to recover. It will be ugly, boss. Uglier than what you went through. He’ll hallucinate. He’ll live in nightmares constantly. His ability to feel the passage of time will be changed. His night and day cycle will be altered. Isolation like that *destroys* people.”

“We’ll get him through it,” Emory answered adamantly. “You and I, Mack. We’ll get him through it.”

I wanted to tell him that getting him through it might not be possible. It might not be about getting him through it. It might be about making him comfortable because the deterioration in his brain was too insidious. He might have trouble distinguishing between real and not real for the rest of his life.

Instead, I nodded, because even if he was like that...even if he never spoke, even if he never recognized reality as different from fantasy, even if he was like a toddler trapped in the body of an adult--unable to feed himself, bathe himself, comprehend--I’d take care of him because he’d have done the same for me. He’d have loved me through it, until the very end, and I owed him that much.

“Yeah,” I agreed after a moment. “I’ll get him through it.”

Chapter End Notes

A few people have mentioned that they have favorite characters and so I’ve become curious if all of you do so I pose a question: Do you have a favorite character? If so, why? Is there someone you particularly dislike? If so, why? No judgement. I'm just curious to see the answers and the explanations :3
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three days after their arrival, I spent the day with Sebastian Brighton, who had perched himself on a fence to watch the Riders square off with each other. He didn’t wear a mask when he mingled and had slipped into common Corian clothing--muddy boots made for keeping water out, pants rolled up to his knees to keep them dry, and a loose fitting shirt. He would have blended in had he developed more of a tan. With time, I thought, maybe.

There was also the massive predatory bird that sat on his shoulders, his red-tipped wings folded tightly into a brown, black, and white speckled body. His eyes were lined in that same scarlet and every so often, he leaned in and nipped at the boy’s ear. Sebastian would reach up and brush his fingers over the feathers of his chest. I’d met him three days earlier and after the shock and horror of hearing that the faith of my father’s people had been based on ancient remnants of a forgotten race and that my Lheiro’s people had once dominated the continent and that they’d turned my family into stock horses on purpose, I became...more keen on getting to know our new companions.

Cassie had been quick to strip down from her Immaran gown and muck around in the dirt with Joey and Meyer, pulling fishing baskets out of the water on the shore and digging for clams after the rain, her feet buried in the sand, turning back to laugh at Sebastian while she worked. I hadn’t expected such...normalcy...from an Immaran princess...such a willingness to blend seamlessly into the culture of the people around her and to help in a place where help was so desperately needed. She’d unloaded her ship, too, which had been packed full of barrels of pickled vegetables, wheels of cheese, and sacks full of grain.

And she gave it all away that second day with Mack and Caius. Some of it, she had wheeled into the larder at Nikita’s estate and the rest of it was doled out carefully among the refugees, one afternoon at a time, with a priority placed on making sure families with children got it first.

Nikita said he kept waiting for the other shoe to drop with her, but I didn’t think it would. Cassie wasn’t trying to get anything from us. She already had what she wanted, mostly. What she was trying to do was earn a place among these people, in this city she planned to call her home after this was over, so that she could make a go of it with Sebastian Brighton. They reminded me of my parents when they were together, which seemed weird, at first, to compare them to Fox and Cyril, but it wasn’t the parenting that did it. It was the way they oriented themselves to fit each other, like they’d been doing it forever, and how every time she walked past him, her fingers would brush over his arm or his shoulder and he’d know it was her without even looking--could catch her wrist on the way by without ever glancing in her direction. He did the same to her--a pinch at her hip when he moved around her, a tug to the long blond braid she wore, a palm dragged over the well of her back.

He loved her, I realized quickly, and she loved him. It had been that way for awhile and I knew from Tristan that they’d been childhood friends like my parents had been. Even if I hadn’t known, I would have guessed it. She was giving up her entire world for him.
And so I sought him out, if only because I couldn’t find Caius, who loathed spending any amount of time with people and preferred the solitude of the ship. He was difficult to trust, I thought. Much more so than Cassiope and Sebastian. He was ancient and powerful and terminally grumpy.

“What’s the bird’s name?” I asked, hauling myself up onto the fence beside him. Sebastian only glanced quickly in my direction, a wry grin on his face, his fingers still brushing the feathers just beneath the animal’s chin.

“Commandant,” he answered eventually. “He’s a Kariner eagle.” The creature stood up a little bit taller, turning his head to the side so that he could look at me. “I found him outside the city when I was eleven. He’d fallen from his nest or been pushed or abandoned. I don’t know. So I took him home and, well....”

I hesitated. The only birds I was familiar with were parrots, canaries, and carrier pigeons. None of them were quite as large as the raptor on his shoulder, whose hooked beak had been designed specifically for tearing flesh from bone, and whose talons were sharp as razors serrated like wicked knives. Sebastian had to wear a padded leather sleeve that reached from his shoulder to his hand to even have Commandant sit on him like that. “He’s...impressive,” I eventually managed.

Truthfully, he made me nervous. When he wasn’t sitting on Sebastian, he was circling the camp or diving into the forest and returning with small game that he always brought back to his master. He’d hold it out and then Sebastian would either toss it to the kitchen and send him back for more or he’d give it to the bird. Only then would Commandant perch beside him and rip through it, cracking bones and tearing sinew. He could have easily torn someone’s eyes out with those talons or ripped into a throat.

“Does he…” I began carefully, watching Commandant as he watched me. “Does he fight with you?”

Sebastian snorted. “We both survived the citadel in Païkea together. If he hadn’t been capable of killing, they’d have made me get rid of him. We’re not supposed to keep outside connections. They’re a weakness.”

“You kept Cassie,” I pointed out and his eyes flashed, bright blue and lit with laughter that I didn’t expect. Sebastian was difficult to describe without writing fucking poetry. He looked like he’d been carved from marble and the only imperfection was a scar across his cheekbone on the left side, wider at one end and tapering to thinner the closer it got to the bridge of his nose. He had brilliantly blue eyes, the sort that I imagined Tristan would have had, like he’d been painted, too, after he’d been carved. He was beautiful. In another life, in another time, I might have pursued him, but he was in love and so was I and so I admired that someone had hit the genetic lottery so efficiently.

Because Sebastian Brighton was beautiful in a way I’d never seen anyone else be beautiful. Like the work of a world class artist brought to life. I thought the same about Nikita, whose body was a living canvas of scars and tattoos--different kinds of art, I thought. Sebastian was pristine--a still life. Nikita was a story, weaved naturally over the surface of his skin.

Sebastian’s legs swung from the bench and his eyes flicked over the Riders in the ring, one with a polearm and the other with a sword, both wearing shields and both kicking the living shit out of each other. It was something they enjoyed, from what I understood--something that was traditional--testing their mettle against each other. Not a one of them had invited him down into that ring, though I was curious if he’d have agreed to it at all. The Sons did not typically fight with armies or against soldiers. They fought other Sons or they butchered in the night, painting the sigil of their guild in the stark blood of a contract so that all the world knew who claimed the prize.

It was beyond difficult to imagine this baby-faced boy painting the sign of the devouring snake in
“And she is a weakness,” he eventually admitted with a shrug. “That is why I’m here and not over there.” He jerked his thumb toward the water to indicate his homeworld, shrouded in mystery and magic. “You have a weakness, too, Your Majesty.”

“I have plenty,” I snorted in response and he chuckled at the gesture. “But I prefer to think of them as reasons to fight harder.”

He pursed his lips. The Rider with the polearm swung wildly, knocking into the shield of his opponent and sending him sprawling down into the sand. “I only went to Paikea because she made me promise to leave Karinus,” he admitted. “If she hadn’t forced me out, I would already be dead. I intended to seek Tristan, but things didn’t work the way that I wanted them to and I promised myself that when I got out of the citadel in Paikea, I would find her. I would not have survived that wicked place if I hadn’t had that to look forward to, so I believe you are right...reasons to fight harder.”

“What are you, Sebastian, sixteen? So you were...how old when you got scooped up by the Sons?”

“Thirteen,” he answered thickly and his eyes clouded with the memory. Commandant rustled his feathers, his wings spreading wider than I was tall, and he pushed himself off of Sebastian’s shoulders to make for the forest, soaring high above the rest of us, just a flash of red against the clouds. “And I’m seventeen. Well, nearly. Next week.”

“And you’ve been with Cassie...?”

He laughed then--a real laugh, not just one he muffled into a closely guarded chuckle. “My entire life?” he asked. “Does that count as an answer? I don’t have any memories from before the Guild that she’s not in. I remember meeting her. At the time, it was a simple equation for me. We were both members of the gentry, so I made up my mind when I was, oh, six, that I intended to marry her. It was allowed, I thought, because I was the son of a lord and she was a princess. That was all that mattered....but I was the son of a slaver lord, barely gentry at all. In the Vale, that counts for something, but Karinus has always been more...like what Coria used to be. Slavery exists, but it’s distasteful to make your money off of it and like hell if my father was going to let his Corian bastard marry up before he did.”

“You’re a--”

“No,” he answered flatly. “My parents were married, for all the good it did. I’m still his mixed breed.”

“Yeah,” I responded numbly. “Know that feeling.”

Sebastian huffed, swiping his hair off of his eyes. “I bet you do,” he said, his voice bleak. “Anyway, my mother died. My father became a drunk. Tristan got the worst of it, at first. Didn’t take an interest in the family business. It is a cardinal sin to give a shit about ‘the property’ in the Brighton house and...you know how he is. Wants to save the world. Still. I mean, look at him. He came here to this sweltering mud pit to try to help you.”

“Not liking the heat, Immaran?” I teased, cocking my head to one side and he scoffed, rolling his eyes. It wasn’t even that hot, not by Corian standards. This was the cold season. At night, there was a chill that even required coats and when it rained, it dumped cold water down over our camp and the refugee village that had popped up beside our ever growing army. Those expanding numbers were the reason I’d been so grateful to Cassie for the barrels of food she’d rolled off of her ship. It was one thing to feed the army. Brentlyn and Riordan took care of it with supply lines from Eden. It
was another to feed an entire population of evicted people.

“No,” he finally responded curtly. “It is never this hot at home. We have pine trees and deer. You have coconuts and monkeys.”

“You should see what we have further south,” I laughed. “Elephants, lions, giraffe—”

“What is a...giraffe?”

“A giant horse with a neck as tall as a tree,” I deadpanned and Sebastian leaned away from me, his face incredulous. “It’s true. Ask Riordan.”

“He doesn’t like me,” he pointed out flatly. “Most of your people don’t like me. You’d think, being half-Corian it would have bought me some leeway. I don’t wear the mask around the camp. I could teach your Riders a thing or two—”

I snorted. “Don’t tell that to Nikita,” I drawled. “He’ll deny it and probably try to fight you.”

“He would lose,” Sebastian said simply. “I mean, he would be a more even match than the rest of these jackasses. But he fights with rules. They all do. They care about the honor of it. Their whole culture is based on that—on fucking honor and rules. Fight a certain way, respect your enemy, defend only what is ‘worthy of dying for.’ That’s a load of bullshit, Emory.”

I paused and he glared, his brow drawn tight as he scowled at the Riders in the ring we were perched at, seated on the fence. The wood dug into my fingers where I held it and I was silent, waiting for Sebastian to continue until he shook his head and finally opened his mouth. “There are a lot of things worth dying for, you know? Water could be worth dying for if you’re in the desert. But worth living for? That doesn’t happen often and you’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’m going to die in combat because of some stupid honor-bound rules rather than live to spend another day with her. So I would beat Nikita Novak, because he cares about what is worth dying for and frankly, Emory, I don’t give a shit about it.”

“Then why are you here?” I asked eventually. “Why offer to take this risk for me? The chances of you dying in that Keep or on the way over the wall are pretty high.”

“No, they aren’t,” he said, his voice nonchalant. “That’s just fighting. I’m no good at honor or large scale battles or the tactics of war. I’m not a politician. I’m a terrible Immaran. But fighting, Emory? I’ve been fighting and running since my mother died. This is just one more hurdle before I reach the finish line…and...well, this Elizabeth woman? They say she threw her son over the wall into the water. That true?”

I nodded. “Mackenzie. He’s around here somewhere. Probably avoiding you. He’s not a fan of Immarans.”

“I don’t like parents that hurt their kids,” he spat. It was the way he said it that reminded me so profoundly of Nikita.

I slid down off the fence and brushed my fingers off on my shirt. “Sebastian, you’re a kid,” I told him softly.

“Nah.” He shook his head when he spoke, his eyes up at the sky and the great wingspan that spread over it. “I stopped being that me so long ago that I don’t remember who I was.”

There was nothing to be said about that. I recognized the tone in his voice as the same spite that Nikita used when he spoke of Vasilev. There was hate there, deep seated and prolific in its nature.
Sebastian hated Rafael Brighton and I’d recognized that hate not only in Nikita, but in Tristan the few times he’d brought up his family. There was a reason, I imagined, that Cassie had sent Sebastian running and Tristan packed up for the College. There was a reason he believed in helping people adamantly enough to survive the covenant. There was a reason—a person—who wanted Sebastian dead in Karinus and that person had access to enough money to hire a rival Serpent to do it, if I judged correctly, and I so often did when it came to the politics of heirs and gentry.

Rafael had already told the world that his youngest boy was dead. Tristan had mentioned it on more than one occasion and he’d mentioned how he didn’t believe it. It only made sense that it was Rafael who wanted him really dead now that he’d returned from Paikea.

I left him with his bird, freshly returned to his shoulder with a dead rabbit, and made my way back to the estate. Joey was scrubbing Teilo in the yard and his tail thumped happily in the tub when he saw me, splashing her and Meyer, who was holding a towel and a bar of soap, struggling not to laugh while Joey fought to control the aforementioned thumping tail. I hurried into the house, hoping my absence would calm their problem, but it turned out that the inside of the house was just as much of a disaster as the outside, if not more.

Cyril and Nikita were fighting again. They hadn’t said as much as two words to each other since I’d finally crawled out of my room and I’d left the subject untouched, if only because I didn’t want to bring up anything that neither of them wanted to...discuss...but it hurt, truthfully, to see them at each other’s throats like that. Cyril was...trying. I understood it. Gods, I understood it too well. I’d lost Fox, too. It hurt like nothing I’d ever felt before and I tried to imagine losing Nikita—to have to hold him while he choked on blood in his last breath, to have to watch that light in his eyes go out...and it nauseated me. My entire being rebelled against the very thought of a world in which he did not exist. I couldn’t imagine being trapped in something like that--in a situation where my mind and my body kept screaming that no, it couldn’t be possible, he couldn’t actually be dead, and then having to grapple with the reality that he was.

That was Cyril’s life now...and it wasn’t like he didn’t try. He sat in front of maps and papers all day and most of the night, incapable of sleep without my father at his side, and he tried to plot the easiest streets to weave through in the city. He tried to discern where Elizabeth might set down barriers and blockades to slow the progress of an army. He drew Sebastian a map, complete with an old, hidden entrance to the fortress from inside a library not far from the royal quarters. It was more difficult to draw the map of the old Keep with the narrow, weaving hallways, the steep staircases that roped around columns, and the seemingly endless number of cells. Mack tried to help him pinpoint where Atara was, but he’d been so feverish when they’d taken him from there to the sea cell that he second guessed himself half the time and ended up cracking his knuckles in anxiety to still the trembling of his hands.

The fact that they were fighting in the front hall told me that Nikita’s Riders weren’t in the house, which was a positive, because it meant I got his time that afternoon...provided I could peel him from Cyril.

“You can’t keep me from him forever!” my Lheiro snarled and as I came around the corner into the hall, the door shutting dryly behind me, they swam into view. Nikita’s arms were crossed and he was looking pointedly at the ceiling like he was ready to just walk away from this but Cyril was furious, red-cheeked and pointing at the staircase to the upstairs bedrooms where I had spent the past month in a crippling bout of depression.

Nikita pursed his lips, fingers drumming on his forearms. “I’m not keeping you from him,” he insisted, eyes narrowed and finally looking down at Cyril. “I’m keeping you from hurting him. He is not your crutch, Cyril. You can’t lean on him every time it gets too hard. It’s hard for him, too, look
at what he just crawled out of!

“He’s my son, Nikita. You don’t get to decide what’s best for him—”

“He’s not a child!” Nikita was shouting then, just as livid as Cyril, cheeks like scarlet stains, eyes vivid and bright. All thoughts on Sebastian being beautiful fled the planet in that moment and I wished vehemently I could take him upstairs and let him vent his rage on me instead of my parent. Preferably without his clothes on. The thought of it made my mouth water momentarily and I could almost feel him squirming under my hands, begging to be hit until he reached a limit and I wondered if there was a limit to how many times I could get him off—I wondered if he’d ever tell me to stop or if his legs would just give out and his vision would go black….

Nikita wasn’t done and his voice cut me free of my daydreams while I stood, stranded in the doorway, unsure if it was wise to just walk out and let them kill each other or to intervene. “He doesn’t belong to you anymore,” he snapped vehemently. “He’s mine and if that means I have to protect him from you leaning on him until his mind buckles again, then I will do that.”

“He’s yours?” Cyril repeated and I could see him roll blue eyes from where I was standing. “So yours that he’s a secret.”

I hadn’t ever thought about whether that bothered Kita. I had assumed that he took the northern route of thinking and shrugged it off as an obstacle that simply had to wait. I imagined he just...got over it...the way that he was supposed to get over it at home. It wasn’t his fault, anyway, that his people were stuck in archaic traditions. So were ours, if Caius was to be believed, and I did believe him.

But it was obvious that this hurt like a blade hitting bone. He cringed backward like he’d been hit. I knew Cyril was downright fucking cruel when he was angry. He said things that he knew would hurt and he felt poorly about it later, but in the moment, he wouldn’t care. He would feed that poison down his throat until nothing else was left. “You want to protect him from something?” my Lheiro continued. “Protect him from yourself. You want to be the support he needs but you can’t even touch him when your Riders are around. Protect him from the inevitability of this, Novak, because we both know that at the end of this, you either stay in Glacia and you do as you’re told or you die—hunted like an animal through the snow for betraying your people.”

“That won’t happen,” Nikita pushed, his arms tightening around himself as he shook his head. “I’ll say goodbye and then I’ll come south.”

“And your father will be honor-bound to hunt you. They will bring you home a prisoner to face the judgement of the men you command or they will bring you home in pieces. Even if you make it out, what happens then? He has to respond. You know he does!” Cyril was insistent, furious and worrying. My stomach churned. Nikita and I...we weren’t good at talking. Not about this, in particular. He didn’t want me to hear about the details and I had learned at the asylum that people had boundaries that couldn’t be pushed. I didn’t want to find his boundaries, not these ones, anyway. I wanted him comfortable enough to share them with me willingly.

But he wasn’t...and it was possible he never would be because of the way he’d grown up and I remembered Lysander saying that trauma like what Nikita lived through didn’t just disappear. It lingered, possibly for the rest of his life, a scarred and twisted reminder of what he’d come from. Perhaps separating me from it was a way to dissociate the way that Mackenzie had to in order to survive. The Riders functioned in a world of black and whites. Good and bad. Right and wrong. It made sense for him to keep me distinctly different from the previous aspects of his life. Blending me in with them would have made it gray...difficult for him to navigate because of the very honor that Sebastian had just cursed.
“Stop it,” I finally spoke, my voice thick and hoarse and Nikita jumped, surprised at my arrival. Cyril only took a step back, increasing the distance between him and the Commander.

He answered, though, his voice sharp. “I said everything he needed to hear anyway,” he drawled and I scowled at him, eyes bright and livid. I understood his concern. I really, really did and I knew he was hurting. I loved him. Nobody had ever suffered for me the way that Cyril had to keep me warm and fed when I was a boy, but life at court and my father’s spoiling of him had turned him sour. He was excellent politician. He could cow people into obedience with words and threats like knives in their ribs, but he wasn’t so great at separating his political nature from who he really was.

He was not a bad person. He got no joy out of hurting people, but he wasn’t a fighter like Nikita was. He had to win with his tongue and he went into every argument like it was a full-scale battle.

That had to stop.

“Kitten, I--” Nikita started, obviously startled by my presence and hyper-aware of how much I’d heard. “I’m sorry, I didn’t--” he tried again and I pressed my mouth to his to stop him, quick and warm, but with none of the hunger I’d felt a moment earlier.

“Go,” I told him when I backed up a step, running my fingers through his dark blond hair. “I’ll talk to you upstairs. We’re fine.”

He seemed to weigh the options, his anxiety only slightly mollified by the promise that we were fine. He wrung his hands, his eyes flicking over my shoulder to where Cyril was leaning against the wall and I realized that he didn’t want to leave me with him. He’d spent the past month as a barrier between Cyril and I, forcing him out so that I could recover without his grief weighing on my shoulders, and he wasn’t keen on letting me swim without that safety net, so to speak. “I’m fine,” I promised again. “Go upstairs. Pour yourself a drink. Shut the damn door, too. Joey bathed Teilo and I don’t want him on the bed until he’s dry.”

A small smile played at the corner of his mouth, but he took a careful step backward before he turned completely and headed for the room upstairs. It would be mine, I imagined, because it was easy to explain away his presence in my room. I could always claim to have ordered him there to talk about the city, his men, the preparations we were making...that was simple. He would sneak out again before the sun rose and nobody but the people who mattered most would ever know he’d been there at all. I hated that, but I’d have hated it more if I had to watch what Cassie and Cyril had both described would happen should his Riders find out he was sleeping with a man who was not at all some common dalliance. That begged the question of what had happened to Gunnar, who had been common, but I hadn’t the heart to ask him that yet. The time for worrying over that was gone, though. I’d need to ask, if only because I needed to know he’d survive this.

I waited until his footsteps faded and then turned to Cyril, who looked...guilty, but not entirely apologetic...as if he recognized that the timing could have been better, but that what he’d said was necessary.

I disagreed.

“Lheiro,” I started, rubbing my eyes. We hadn’t talked much since I’d left my room, but standing beside him, I could see that time had done him no favors after my father’s passing. He looked tired down into his bones, which explained a great deal of his pitiful mood, and his eyes were red rimmed and circled with purple bags of exhaustion. “I know this is hard for you--”

“No, you don’t,” he corrected stiffly and he stared up at me, eyes hard, like he was daring me to argue that I did. “I built my entire life around him. He was my best friend and then he was the father
of my children and then he was my husband. I look at you, Emory, and I see him and it hurts like you can’t imagine, but it reminds me that he’s still here! We put him in that bay because of a tradition that doesn’t matter. Harlan tore us from him for a ritual that was designed to control us. My baby is dying inside of that fucking city for a religion based on gods that don’t even exist and Nikita Novak put a wall between me and the only family I have left!”

I flinched, shrinking the way that I always did under his scrutiny or his ire, but he wasn’t angry with me. He was just angry. He was hurting, and I understood it, because he was breaking my heart. “I know,” I said gently. “I know it hurts. I lost him, too, and I worry about Atara just as much as you do. If I could take that city right now and give him back to you, I would do it, but we both know that we’d be condemning all of these people to die. They would slaughter us from the walls with the numbers they have now. We need time.”

“We don’t have time!” Cyril snarled and he wiped at his eyes, but his shoulders sagged and I knew that he understood. No, we didn’t have time. But we didn’t have a choice, either.

“Taking this out on Kita won’t make it any better. I know you want to be close to me right now. I get it, but I’m not who I used to be, Lheiro. I can’t shoulder that for you anymore. I’m barely holding on as it is.” It was a difficult thing to force from my mouth and he scrubbed at his face, but he nodded, finally contrite. “He’s protecting me the only way he knows how and I love him. You’re both my family.”

He crossed his arms, eyes on the ground, and managed to force another quick nod before he threw his arms around me and I was surprisingly grateful for the sensation. It was familiar--Cyril’s grip. He smelled of honey and limes and...spearmint, I thought, and I felt my heart crack a little bit more. We all had our ways of surviving it, I guessed, and if breathing that in on his own clothes made him feel like he could cling to my father a little longer, then I was glad he’d found something to take comfort in. “I’m glad you’re alright,” he breathed. “I was worried you were going backward. I know I lean on you too much. I know Nikita is right, I just...I just don’t like the idea of losing you yet.”

“Nobody is losing me,” I pointed out. “I’m still right here.”

“But you’re not mine anymore, boss,” he choked.

I snorted. “He’s a possessive little thing.”

He stepped back and carefully brushed the tears that lingered on his face from his cheeks. “Well, I don’t blame him. If you’d grown up in a world where nothing was ever yours, you’d be possessive of something you finally had, too.”

“Mm,” I agreed and kissed the top of his head. “You know, I love you? That doesn’t change with Nikita.”

He scoffed. “I know.” There was a laugh in his voice, despite the melancholy that pervaded his person. “I love you, too. I’m just a disaster right now.”

“Yeah, well, you know who could use you?” He looked up at me when I spoke. “Mack’s not doing so great. This is really eating him alive and normally, I’d say it’s just grief. It’s fear. But this feels different and...your situation is pretty...close. He’s got a baby in there, too.”

Cyril nodded quickly. “I tried to talk to him, but I don’t know him so well and Atara and I...gods, I shouldn’t have been so hard on him. If he dies in there...then he goes thinking you always mattered more to me and it was never about that, boss. I was so close to you already and I wanted your father to have that chance so I kept my distance from him. I let Fox get close to him like I got close to you
and we were stupid. We were so fucking stupid and broken and...Harlan did so much damage to all of us. Fox didn’t know how to talk to you. I didn’t want to take away from him and Atara and all we did was end up dividing the two of you between us when it should have never been that way.” He shook his head hard, wiping at his mouth like he felt sick, but I already knew all of this. I’d grown up knowing all of this and I’d tried to explain it to Atara. I’d tried to tell him how fucking hard it had been to live in Recia like that...how lonely it had been for him when he couldn’t speak the language. I’d been all he had.

“He’s not going to die in there,” I insisted instead. “Caius and Sebastian will see to it. I...trust Sebastian, at least.”

He was incredulous. “Truly? Over one of our own?”

“One of our own who kept secrets for nine hundred years? Sebastian is an open book. You have questions? You can ask him. He’ll answer. He’s got nothing to hide and Tristan trusts him. Tristan is one of us.” I rubbed my hands over my arms. “Now get out of here. Go find Mackenzie. Make sure he’s not slowly losing his mind on me. We’re gonna need him whole if we want Atara to heal from this.”

Cyril didn’t need to be told again. He hugged me one more time and then he disappeared through the door, allowing me to make my way up to the bedroom where Nikita was asleep, curled on his side, an empty glass with a few drops of whiskey around the rim clutched in his fingers. I plucked it from his fingers, navigating the room in the growing dusk to set it on the dresser before I stripped down into linen bottoms and climbed into bed behind him.

We’d become used to this. He didn’t jump upright like he had the first few times I’d climbed into bed with him, searching blindly for a blade he kept under the mattress. He stirred, eyes sliding open, and his arm covered mine over his abdomen so that his back was pressed to my chest. I kissed his exposed shoulder, the leather tunic discarded somewhere on the floor with his boots. He’d had way more than one glass of whiskey. I could smell it on him and he wasn’t a drinker, not really, so drunk tended to happen fast.

“Kitten,” he slurred the word and wriggled so that he could roll over, his arms wrapped tightly around my middle and his face pressed to my chest. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t even know what you’re sorry for, do you, sweetheart?” He shook his head at my words and I laughed, kissing the top of his blond hair before I fell to a more serious topic. “Nikita, if you tell your family--”

“When,” he insisted sloppily, pressing kisses to my neck as I spoke with a warm, wet mouth. It was distracting, to say the least, but I would not be torn completely from this discussion. I adjusted my phrase for him, though, if only to avoid him correcting me again. “When you tell your family...you’re going to survive that, right?” He stillled. “Because I don’t want you to do it...if you won’t. I’d rather you be alive and without me than dead because of me. You know that, right?”

Kita sat up and ran his fingers through his hair, suddenly quite a lot more sober than he had been a moment ago, but this topic, I imagined, could do that to a person. I sat up with him, my hands in my lap. “Is that what happened with Gunnar? Did they...did they hunt him down?”

He flinched, eyes bright and black in the dark--just pins of glittering light reflecting the silvery glow that shone through the window. “I...wasn’t going to tell them,” he said flatly. “I thought a lot about it and about what would happen. So I was going to go see them, tell them at the end that I was taking a few days to hunt, and then I’d disappear. Make my way back to Coryth. By the time they realized it,
I’d be too far out of reach, and then I’d write a letter.”

As sick as it was that he intended to lie by omission and as horrifying as it felt to know that it was necessary for his safety, I was glad to hear that he would do it. I liked it better than telling his father. “And if they found out beforehand?”

“It would be as Cassie explained,” he answered, his voice thick and heavy. “It’s a slow and...brutal way to die, but dying in combat grants you an honorable death. It does no favors for me, but my family would be spared the stain on their legacy, so that’s why they would do it.” He plucked at the blanket around his legs and I felt my stomach knot around my heart like it was trying to squeeze what was left of it into the smallest possible space--like if it were more compact, it was less likely to shatter. I couldn’t imagine him like that. Or rather, I didn’t want to. It would take...a long time to kill someone like him. He would fight to the very end, always doing exactly what was expected of him.

I leaned into him, sliding around so that I could sit behind him, my arms around his hips and my chin on his shoulder. I kissed the scar that rested there--hunting, I remembered, thrown from his horse when she fell through ice tracking a stag. “What happened to Gunnar?” I asked again and I felt his heart pick up, rapid in his chest. I smoothed my hands up his belly to his ribs, folding them over the spot where it beat the loudest in the center of his sternum and he pressed his hands over mine. He was quiet for a long time and I wondered, had he loved this boy? Had it been that silly puppy feeling that enamors so many of us before we’re really ready? Had Vasilev torn that from him with the cruelty I’d seen displayed all over Nikita’s body? I pressed my mouth to the spot behind his ear. “It’s okay,” I whispered against his skin.

“Gunnar was older than me,” he finally managed, shaking his head. “He wouldn’t marry the girl. I can’t remember her name. I was fifteen. He was nineteen. They threw him in the ring and he refused to fight so they just...they just...” He fidgeted, twisting his fingers around in the blanket in his lap. “They just killed him. I was right there. I was standing right there, Emory, and I didn’t stop them.”

“You were a boy,” I insisted.

“I was already Commander,” he said monotonously, the emotion detached from his voice. “I let him die the same way that I let Milena die. I let people with more power than me control the things around me. I let my father’s expectations destroy my sister. I let my people butcher someone that I...that I...”

“Loved,” I filled the word in for him and he shuddered against me. “You loved him. That’s okay.”

“But I love you,” he pointed out viciously and squeezed him, drawing him flush into my lap and he squirmed. This explained Cyril--this desire to protect me the way that he’d failed to protect them...or rather, the way that he thought he’d failed. I disagreed. He’d been little more than a child with an adult’s responsibility shoved on his shoulders. He hadn’t the mental faculties to make adult decisions, regardless of his role, and it wasn’t fair to expect that of him.

I bit down at the juncture of his shoulder lightly and he made a quiet, plaintive noise, twisting in my arms. “You can love more than one person, Kita,” I told him when I withdrew my teeth. “Not everyone gets it right the first time like my fucking parents.”

He snorted at that, but he accepted the words...carefully. He seemed to consider them with significant thought before he turned his head to really kiss me, seeking entry to my mouth so that he might map my teeth with his tongue and I granted it, his fingers on my jaw while he explored until he needed to separate, breathless and panting in the dark. “Not like this,” he informed me forcefully. “It was nothing like this.”
“Aren’t you sweet tonight?”

He batted at me and I toppled backward, letting him fall into the mattress beside me. He settled in, one arm and one leg slung over my body, the blanket twisted around us. “I didn’t mean to upset you...fighting with Cyril,” he managed after a time.

“You didn’t. I appreciate it, in fact...the way you always look out for me. Even before the asylum, you were picking fights with Elizabeth to defend me, threatening Fox, going head to head with Mack and Atara and Tristan...anyone who told you to stay away, anyone who you thought was a threat.” I skated my fingers up his arm, tracing the pattern of knots and loops in the tattoo that I’d followed with my tongue so many times I knew it by heart. “You can...maybe lay off Cyril a little bit. He’s not himself.”

“None of us are,” he said acidly. “But I can’t have you falling apart again and he pushed you there. He leaned too much.”

I hesitated. “A lot of things pushed me there.”

Nikita heaved a sigh. “Emory, if you fail to take that city back, your army will dissolve. They will flee to Elizabeth. She will open the gates and she will come for you. My Riders can’t the entire Corian army if it comes to that, no matter how many of us there are and...” He choked and shifted, flipping over so that he was on his back, staring at the ceiling. “There is a really big part of me that thinks it would be better to kill you myself than let her have you.”

I was quiet and I considered it, dread and horror in my stomach. Not over dying, over him having to be the one that wielded the sword. “I’d do it myself if it came to that.” I eventually said and I could mentally see him open his mouth to argue. I even stuck my hand out and covered his parted lips, to which he grunted in disgust and stuck his tongue out, licking my palm like a child, but it didn’t deter me any. “Don’t argue with me. I will not let you take that burden on alone. It won’t come to that...but if...if we are that divinely fucking unlucky...then I will do it myself.”

He leaned forward and I felt his mouth at my ear. “I won’t leave you,” he promised, lacing his fingers tightly with mine.

“You’re certainly not staying to kill yourself with me, sweetheart.”

“No,” he agreed. “I’d be staying to kill as many of them as I could before they took me down. Then you won’t have to wait like Fox. That’s how it works, right? That’s what Lierians believe. One waits for the other and then they move on together, reborn to start all over?”

I was breathless, my heart seized in my chest, and he walked his fingers up my sternum, on his side again, until they pressed to my mouth. I felt his lips there afterward, kissing fervently at the corner of my own. “That’s not--” I started, half-choking, because gods, I loved for thinking it. I loved him for believing it--for believing we were as fated as Fox and Cyril had been, that we could defy odds and take on the world and demand the chance that we were due the way that they had. “That’s...you really think we’re...destiny is an awfully southern concept for you to believe in. An awfully Lierian concept, too.”

He laughed. “So are you,” he teased. “A southern thing for me to believe in, I mean. A Lierian thing.”

“You need to stop,” I told him, dragging him on top of me so that he was straddled over my hips. “Because you’re too godsdammed sweet right now.” I rolled over, flipping our positions a moment later so that he was prone beneath me, his arms around my neck. “And if you don’t stop, I’m going
to do something stupid.”

“Something stupid? Like what? Propose marriage?” He rolled his eyes, but I knew what he meant. The situation was absurd, no matter how devoted to each other we truly were. We were trapped outside the city with a war to fight and he was a Commander in Glacia, incapable of engaging in this sort of relationship. I couldn’t jeopardize my alliance with his people like that.

But the thought…was there. “Maybe,” I drawled, licking the seam of his lips. He opened them, but not to kiss me. He opened them to answer.

“I’d say yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I have a super busy tomorrow, so I don't know how much writing I'll get done. I shall do my best, but there's your warning. <3 It was super great hearing from you and the question still stands to anyone who didn't answer: Who is your favorite and why? Is there someone you particularly dislike and why? No judgement. Just to appease curiosity.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been hard watching Emory suffer. It had been harder knowing that Cyril wasn’t helping. It had been hardest having to separate them, knowing that Cyril was the only parent he had left and that he loved him fiercely—but that was just Emory. Everything he loved, he loved fiercely and without regard to the heartbreak it might cost him later. I wondered about it—about why he threw himself into things so completely that they would almost always let him down, especially when he was stuck in that bed, curled in the fetal position, incapable of rousing himself to do much more than force food down his throat.

And even that had been a battle. That whole month, in fact, had been one long series of battles for me. There was one every morning with Cyril, who was so determined to wrest Emory from bed like getting him on his feet was going to change the state his head was in. On that, at least, I had Tristan’s support. Getting him outside of the house wouldn’t actually fix anything. He would still be just as incapable of functioning, laying down or sitting up, but Cyril was adamant.

I suppose, in some regard, I understood it. It couldn’t be easy watching Emory plummet when he was the only hope anyone had of Atara making it out of the Keep.

It’s selfish. I knew it when I thought it...but my concern wasn’t Atara. I liked Atara. He was sweet and he didn’t deserve the situation he was in, but my primary concern had always been Emory and I wasn’t willing to sacrifice how incredibly well he’d been since his return for the sake of his brother. I wanted him as whole as he could be and Emory’s whole was still broken. He was still a sutured mess of who he’d been before. He still had nightmares—woke up in a cold sweat fighting things that weren’t there or stumbled from bed, rubbing his hands down over his abdomen and staring down at them like he expected to see blood. I never asked him for information about them. If he wanted to talk, he’d do it when he was ready, and he paid me the same courtesy. When I woke up, fingers around my throat like Mila’s noose was there to hoist me to the rafters, he never asked. He slung his arm over me and I was grateful, in those moments, for the oppressive warmth of him.

I’d lost him once. I wasn’t going to lose him again. Not because Cyril was in a plummet of his own.

He’d crawled out of it though. It had taken weeks of work—of sitting beside him, forcing him to eat, forcing him to bathe, insisting that he stand up and use his legs once in awhile and sometimes he was mean. Sometimes he snarled or he begged or he cringed from my touch like he had before, but if Emory was anything, he was resilient. He weathered the storm and he took every beating the world had to offer him and he still got back up.

It was harder still to watch them turn him into his father.

Brentlyn had brought armor from Eden that had belonged to Fox once when he was a teenager, red and black as was his custom, and he’d held it out to Emory with the shadowed face and the red-
rimmed eyes he seemed to be permanently wearing those days. It was polished steel and plated leather, crafted for someone who didn’t like to be encumbered in a fight—not unlike the armor my Riders wore, but this was decidedly more expensive looking than anything in the north.

“It belonged to Fox,” Brentlyn rasped, his voice hoarse from too much liquor and not enough sleep. “Isabella sent it for you. We thought you should have it, all things considered.”

And it had fit him perfectly. Riordan had fixed it with a pauldron—steel covered in the skin of a lion that hung over his shoulder and so the nickname that Emory would carry through his regency began a fragile infancy that afternoon while he stared into the mirror.

Emory the Lion, they would call him eventually. “They call them the king of beasts in the south,” Riordan explained and I saw him from where I was seated—he caught Emory’s eye in the mirror and profound grief flashed through his face. It was unnerving how much he looked like Fox. There was barely a whisper of Cyril in his face—just the underlying hint of bone structure too delicate to be human—but the rest of him was his father. His hair laid the same way, a mess that got too curly for control when the humidity got too thick. He was long and lean, all lithe muscles like a large, predatory cat.

I almost laughed at the comparison. He was like a cat. I hadn’t realized quite how much when I’d taken to calling him kitten, nor had I expected ‘the Lion’ to be the moniker people stuck on his name the way that they had stuck ‘the Liberator’ on his father and ‘the Rebel’ on Tylas. It wasn’t only about the way he looked though, but the way he behaved, not that anyone but me would have ever noticed that Emory absolutely did not enjoy pain the way that I did. He could dish it out just fine, but when it came to sex, he preferred to be coddled and caressed.

Like a cat.

“Gods, you look like my brother,” Riordan whispered and Emory looked pointedly away from the mirror. Everyone said it now. They’d said it before, but more people seemed to point it out now that Fox was gone. Every lesser member of the gentry that came to meet with him in the weeks that followed the arrival of the Immarans said it. They said he sounded like him, that he smiled like him, that even his mannerisms matched Fox to the point that Emory had taken to turning his mirror to face the wall when he wasn’t using it. It was like looking for a ghost, he said, and being disappointed every time.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, getting that a lot lately,” he managed, acid in his voice, and then he walked away.

They altered his sigil next. He’d always used the Bordelon tree on a black field, stamped in gray instead of red, and sans the fox that dominated his father’s. The gray became scarlet, as dark as blood, and the fox became a lion, shoulders hunched like it was stalking something.

It hurt to see. It hurt because it was so wildly out of his control. Cyril planned and detailed with perfect precision, ever the politician they had trained him to be, and without Olivia, he was the only one of us with enough knowledge to fulfill the role of a Second who was also in a functioning state of mind. I could tell that it was weighing on Emory—this venture to make him into a duplicate of his father, but he played the part. He pasted on the smile that I could see right through and met with lesser gentry in that polished set of armor, the lion hanging from his shoulder. Anyone who didn’t agree...who didn’t immediately fulfill their role as a member of the court...was struck down by Sebastian on the way out of the camp.

That had been Cassie’s suggestion. “If they aren’t with you, Emory, they’re against you. Eliminate one enemy before he joins forces with the other.” I remembered the conversation because he’d
protested so vehemently. He had such beautifully Corian ideals. Two years ago, I would have scoffed at how sacred he thought life was—that was the northman in me. I would have told him that it hardly mattered. Every life has to end eventually and if they sought to conspire against you, they deserved to end sooner. Get over it and move on. I never would have called a Corian ideal beautiful.

But Emory, like his father, thought that life was sacred. “They didn’t do anything wrong!” he’d argued. “They’re allowed to have opinions that are different from mine. That’s why we have a council. So that the regency can’t become a tyranny!”

It wasn’t about that, though. Differing opinions were fine, but this was civil war. The very problem was a differing of opinions and anyone that didn’t fall in line would inevitably fall across the line and be another group of soldiers we had to cut down when Caius tore the gate open.

He’d looked at me helplessly, anguish in his pretty face, and I’d wanted so badly to tell him that he was right. They were allowed to disagree. They were allowed to have other opinions. That was what had made me fall in love with the dreaded south—differences were celebrated, not crushed underfoot, but I had the most military experience of everyone that was advising him. It couldn’t be about wanting to make him happy or trying not to break his heart any more than it was already breaking. It was about the best defense being a good offense. “I would kill them,” I’d answered as gently as I could and he’d looked crushed by it...like I’d been his last hope and he’d been holding out for a different answer. The fight drained out of him then and he relented.

So Sebastian gained a collection of noble skulls and more kills to add to his counter. I’d never seen someone so silently and effectively sever a head from a body without being noticed by an entourage until it was too late. The young Lord Brighton was steeped in blood and bones the way that most Riders were, but killing like that was supposed to take a toll on a person. It wore you down. I remembered every face.

He seemed...unbothered. Alarmingly unbothered. Each time he threw a head, slack-jawed and white-eyed at Emory’s feet, he’d wipe his long, curved blade off on his black pants, tuck it into his belt, and casually ask for another assignment like he was asking for tea.

“Don’t you get tired of it?” I’d asked eventually and he’d fixed me with those blue eyes set into such a wretchedly young face (I’d never realized how horrific it must have been for other people to see me as a Commander at fourteen—& I realized it when I looked at Sebastian...I realized how stomach wrenching it was to know that a child had been turned into what he was so efficiently.)

A small grin played across his mouth. “Everybody dies, Novak,” he’d reminded me. “It’s just a job.”

“But it’s murder, Sebastian.”

He’d shrugged. “Blood’s not on my hands,” he’d answered flippantly and I’d felt a grimace cross my face, eyebrows drawn together in confusion. Then he’d hesitated and taken a deep breath, turning to face me and stopping mid-stride on the way back to the little boat that would take him to their ship. “It’s like this, okay,” he had explained. “When you take someone’s head off, do you say, ‘I killed someone,’ or do you say, ‘My sword killed someone?’” He didn’t wait for me to answer. The question, in my opinion at the time, was absurd enough not to merit one. “I’m the sword, Novak. That blood is on Emory’s hands.”

That weighed on me as he walked away. It weighed on me as time lapsed by, too. Bodies piled up on the beach, tossed into the harbor from the city, wearing evidence of disease and starvation. Some mornings, the water in the harbor had a thick, filmy oil over the surface. “It’s decay,” Mack told me the first time when he caught me staring at him from his post outside the fence where he spent his days looking up at the Keep. “Bodies break down, oil and fat comes out just like when you cook
meat. That’s human rot.”

“How many bodies would it take to do that to a whole harbor?”

He never answered...only looked at me and I knew, then, by the expression he was wearing, that I didn’t actually want to know the answer.

So weeks and months passed by, collecting bodies and skulls, driving up the death toll in Coryth until we could smell the decay from outside the wall. Death had never bothered me. It was part of being alive in the north—we raided for resources, challenging other villages and other Riders to their claims in the woods and along the frozen shores. I’d been seeing death for so long that it no longer bothered me, but the Siege of Coryth….

That disturbed even me. It disturbed Sebastian, who was so unbothered by death that thought of himself not as another human being but as a simple blade used to wield destructive forces. This was astronomical in scale though and the longer it went on, the more obvious it became that the ruse to make Emory into Fox had worked. His army grew and the one atop the walls dwindled with disease. A hemorrhagic fever, Tristan said, plucking over some of the bodies pulled from the water, black blood smeared over their mouths and out of their ears. He warned us all away from them, particularly the Lierians. He and Caius burned them alone, the only two immune to such an epidemic plague.

We all fell into routines. Tristan combed the beaches during the day and, at night, he could often be found near Sebastian and Cassie with that dreadful bird on his shoulder. Sebastian slaughtered mercilessly. Cassie played advisor to the new king with Cyril, who hovered over Emory but never quite leaned on him the way that he had in those first few weeks. Brentlyn drank. Riordan sat with Emory, reminiscing on Fox.

Mackenzie kept his vigil, eyes on the Keep, like if he stared long enough maybe he’d catch a glimpse inside. He was too heartbroken to reach. We’d all tried, Cyril most insistently, but he remained a solitary fortress, guarded by his own grief.

I did not want to imagine the sort of horror he was living. I’d been on the outside of Emory’s self-imposed hell, unable to reach him through the trauma he wore like armor prior to the asylum. I knew intimately what it was like to see someone I loved suffer so profoundly and be unable to offer even the slightest relief. That was the world Mackenzie lived in, compounded by the fact that he’d been the one to break. He’d kept that secret locked inside his mouth for months after Emory got back up from his depressive episode and then, one evening, he’d walked into the new king’s room while I was there--the door had been open, but the intrusion was surprising anyway--and he’d turned the lock behind him.

“I need to talk to you,” he’d said, a tremor in his throat, his hands wringing in front of him. “Before the Riders get here, you deserve to know. You both do. I just...I--”

Emory, perched on the bottom of the bed with that lop-eared dog half in his lap, looked up with bright eyes. He’d been so carefree that day. I remembered because it had been the first day in a long time he hadn’t been meeting with members of the gentry and thus Sebastian hadn’t thrown a decapitated head at his feet. He’d stolen kisses from me in the kitchen, dangerous and laced with giggles, and made filthy promises for later the way that he’d done before he’d had so much on his shoulders.

I didn’t want that to end, but it was snuffed out with one look at Mack. “Well, shit, Mackenzie,” he started, gesturing to a chair. Mack declined the seat and shook his head, standing steadfastly by the door. “You know you can talk to me, right? I told you already. You’re family...but if you want to beat the Riders here, you’re running out of time. They’re due any day now.”
Mack winced, cheeks flushed scarlet. “I...back at the Keep, before I was…here,” he began carefully, his voice trembling with something between grief and fear. “They wanted to know where you were. She had very specific plans for what she wanted to do with you before...and I fought it. They kept me collared and broke my bones and I didn’t talk. I told myself I’d die first, but then they brought Atara up and I…” He rubbed at his face and I shut the book in my lap.

I knew where this was going. So did Emory. I could tell because when the rage boiled in my chest, his face softened into understanding. I put a leash on it quickly. Mackenzie didn’t deserve my fury. Nothing bad had come of it, anyway, and he was trying to be forthcoming...to be honest. There was value in that...but he and I were in love with two very different people in two very different situations. I would have protected Emory with my dying breath and he was doing the same for Atara—it just so happened that in this one instance, it put us at odds with each other.

It shouldn’t have. We should have been like family. The Bordelon boys were close. If our relationships continued, we would, inevitably, be close. This shouldn’t have changed my opinion of him at all, but in that moment, it did. “You--” I started.

“I’m so fucking sorry--” Mackenzie explained. “They held him underwater or they’d put a cloth over his face and pour it over him so he felt like he was drowning. They’d chain him down and…” He shook his head hard. “They were going to force feed him tansy. Even if he survived it, it would have destroyed him and...you know, I’d trust it if I’d mixed it myself, but I hadn’t and if he’d had a poor reaction, he would have bled to death down in that Keep. It would have been excruciating. I couldn’t condemn him to that. I tried, boss, I did and I’m so fucking sorry--”

Emory watched with the same clear, bright eyes when Mack choked. “Nothing bad came of it,” he pointed out.

“Yes, something did,” he said flatly. “I lost my value to them and so did Fox and Olivia. She executed them because I told her where you were.”

“She would have executed them anyway,” Emory reminded him. “This has been eating at you for a long time, hasn’t it?”

“I don’t deserve him,” Mack answered quietly. “I don’t deserve any of you.”

My stomach twisted, concern washing out to my limbs and I nearly got to my feet because it looked like he might just buckle right there on the floor. Emory spoke before I could move though, his voice still calm and quiet and it surprised me. Emotional control on Emory always surprised me, but he had been struggling with Fox’s death for months. Hearing that it could have been delayed should have prompted more of a reaction.

“Nobody deserves Atara,” Emory insisted. “But you’re pretty fucking close, Mack, and even if I didn’t think so, that’s his decision to make. Not yours. Not ours. When he gets out, he’ll--”

Mack made a noise, disgusted and upset. “I already told you!” he spat. “He’s in isolation, Emory! You can drag him out of that cell and put him back into his old life and it won’t matter. A part of him will always be stuck in there and what has it been now? Six months? Seven? He’s nearly to term. They will gut him and throw him over the side of the Keep. He’ll already be bleeding so you won’t get a body. He’ll be--”

“Enough!” I snapped, watching Emory’s face pale with horror. “Nobody needs the colorful
We didn’t need one day at a time anymore though. Mack spun on his heel and left us that night. Emory spent most of the night taking his frustration out on me until my legs were quaking and my knees were buckling—until I was gloriously, beautifully bruised from my hips to my thighs and wearing bites in the shape of his mouth all over my throat. I was exhausted when it was over, spent and sated in a heap on his bed and I slept two hours before I dragged myself to my bedroom just as the horns roared to life from the perimeter.

They were answered by the distant sound of more and the familiar, chaotic beat of thousands of hooves striking the dirt. I’d been exhausted, but in that moment, I was overjoyed—not that they’d arrived but that he’d spent that night working me into a frenzy because now that they were here, our time together would be over until we took the Keep back. That wasn’t to say that I wasn’t happy that the Riders were bearing down on us, blue and white banners weaving like ribbons above their armored mounts, streaked with war paint in black and red—a tribute, I thought, to a fallen king who had liberated them from an Immran invasion.

“What is that noise?” Emory asked when I exited my room and started for the stairs. Teilo was hiding behind him, adamantly refusing to exit the bedroom.

“You army,” I drawled and his eyes widened, excitement and nerves playing over the smile on his face.

I tore out the door, momentarily overwhelmed by the sound of it and the smell. Leather and blade oil and horses all stampeding down toward us, guttering to a halt just short of the perimeter—a sea of black and red, armed to the teeth, stretching from the shore to the forest. There were more than we had anticipated—far more. I’d imagined most would answer a call from the south, if only because they were bound to the law that had annexed us and only with the numbers absolutely required.

This was far more than that.

“There’s so many,” Emory breathed, finally catching up with me, Teilo absent from his side. “I didn’t know there were this many of you!”

“I’ve never seen them all together,” I admitted after a second as the leader climbed down, a sleeve on her left arm. She strode toward us, shield clattering against her back, her horse following without being lead, wild eyed and panting, covered in foamy sweat. We’d need to cut their long hair off, I thought to myself as I looked at the stallion that trotted behind her, black as pitch and as glossy as a well-bred war horse could get—like polished metal made to muscle.

She held her left hand out and I grasped it with my own only to be jerked forward as she yanked her helmet off with the other. A cascade of blonde hair fell down around her and over my shoulders as her right arm circled my neck. “Nikki!” she squealed and I recognized the voice.

The sleeve, however, was new.

“Danica!” My heart felt ready to leap from my throat, half with overwhelming pride that she’d taken a Gauntlet and passed it and half with growing horror that she’d taken a Gauntlet and passed it. She was giddy with joy though, squeezing me tightly, practically bouncing on her feet until I wrestled her out to arm’s length. “You’re a Commander! When...when did that happen? Why did you think that was a good idea?!”

My sister lifted her shoulders in a shrug. “I’m going to marry Riordan and leave home behind. I wanted to take a piece with me,” she answered sadly. “Besides, they wouldn’t let me lead the march
if I didn’t have a sleeve.” She held her arm out and examined it with a wry smile. “I think it suits me.”

“I think you’re insane,” I deadpanned and she rolled her eyes, turning her attention then to Emory.

“Your Majesty,” she greeted, sweeping into the world’s most encumbered bow. “I’m sorry for your loss.” If she only knew how tired he was of hearing that. Still, he forced himself to nod through it. “A thousand Riders,” Danica added. “At your request. I only ask that you give them a day or two. It hasn’t been an easy ride.”

“We have preparations to make anyway,” Emory assured her. “Caius won’t be re--”

He nearly stumbled when Riordan swept past him and my sister wasted no time in launching herself at him, arms and legs locked around his body. There’d been a moment of panic when he arrived at camp, I remembered. He’d been under the impression she was still in the city and had practically run me over in his haste to get my attention only to find out that she’d left a few weeks prior.

“Get a room,” Sebastian cat-called from his perch on the roof of the house, shooting Riordan a look that was shot back with equal contempt. I’d learned quite quickly that Emory’s uncle had a seriously difficult time getting along with most people. Danica, as it turned out, had the same problem.

I expected that was why they’d hit it off--through mutual hatred of literally everyone around them.

Danica looked up at him, head tipped to one side, and she reached into the bag on her horse’s side to retrieve a dried apple. It was hurled in Sebastian’s direction, a scowl on her face, like she intended to knock him from the roof with it and he caught it, the fingers of his left hand wrapped tightly around the fruit. It would have been less impressive had I not known he was right handed. “Thanks,” he chirped back at her. “Not much in the way of food up here.”

“Your pet assassin is irritating,” Riordan complained, casting Emory a withering look.

“He’s adorable,” Emory argued sarcastically. “Even purrs when you pet him. I think I’ll have a little pink collar made for him when we get home. Maybe with a little heart on it for his name.”

“Ugh,” I groaned, shoving at him. He shoved back and Riordan stepped between the two of us.


“Esteemed,” Danica snorted and I stopped, searching the crowd of gathering Riders all climbing from their horses as Gier and our battalion set to passing buckets out and leading them to the well to be cleaned and fed.

My sister noticed and leaned forward. “Papa didn’t come,” she said softly. “Stayed north. Said someone needed to watch our borders. He...expects you back when this is over, Nikki.”

“Yeah,” I agreed after a beat, my voice quiet, my stomach sinking. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

We are finally getting to the end of this conflict!
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We sent Sebastian over the wall in the dead of night a week after Danica and her Riders arrived.

He insisted on going alone, claiming that too many people being there to see him off would attract unwanted attention. Cassie had disagreed and they’d argued—loudly, on her part—in the front room. She wanted a chance to say goodbye to him, insisting that the chances were good he wouldn’t actually survive this excursion and announcing to all present that she’d never actually liked this idea in the first place. It had been Sebastian that insisted he carry his own weight in the bargain she struck. It had been Sebastian that insisted he prove his worth to the new king in Coria.

So she’d said goodbye to him there, arms tight around his neck, unshed tears glittering in eyes the color of toffee. She kissed him a thousand times—on his face and over his mouth—and he’d laughed because I’d learned, quite quickly, that Sebastian didn’t take the dangers of his profession very seriously. I supposed he couldn’t, really, because it would all be too much if he did.

“It’ll be over in two days,” he’d told her, kissing her forehead one final time before he stepped toward the door. “We’ll have the life we talked about.”

Caius watched him, eyes like a hawk, and before Sebastian could disappear he’d handed him a small crystal vial with a smoking black substance inside of it. “If you get into trouble, crack it open,” he’d explained. “It will work once, Sebastian, so make it count.”

And then he was gone, a whisper of dark clothing that had been there one second and just...wasn’t there the next. The door swinging closed was the only evidence that he’d been there at all.

Inside the house, Cassie cursed him, apologized to the gods for cursing him, and then whirled on me. “If he dies in there,” she’d threatened, her finger in my face, standing half a step away from me. She was sick with worry. I could see it in her features, beautiful and heartbroken, full lips turned in a terrified frown. “I will spoon feed you your own balls, Emory Bordelon.”

Beside me, Nikita snorted and her eyes flashed bright, earning her a choked silence from my companion while she stalked out of the house, no doubt to go back to their ship.

I’d wondered, earlier that day, how we would know that Sebastian had made it over the wall and he’d merely grinned, flashed a smile, and said that I wouldn’t. I’d have to simply trust him—and I did, mostly—but there was some part of me that still looked at him and saw an Immaran instead of Tristan’s youngest brother, who was barely more than a child. A child that had been honed into a sharpened weapon of war—or, as Sebastian liked to argue, a weapon that prevented war.
He’d talked with me when he started taking heads, having seen that the idea of it made me sick. When he’d arrived back with the first one, he’d plunked into a leather bag and tossed it off to Gier to get rid of and by ‘get rid of’ he actually meant to mount it on a pike surrounding the camp as a warning to anyone else who dared to fall in line with Elizabeth instead of me. I avoided looking in that direction until Sebastian joined me that first night, a bottle of brandy in one hand and a handful of chocolates in the other.

“I have a terrible sweet tooth,” he’d said when he caught me looking at him and then he’d handed me the bottle and a chocolate. “You don’t like the killing bit, I gather. I didn’t at first, either. I couldn’t even kill spiders as a boy.”

“Tristan told me,” I’d managed mutely, taking a long drag from that bottle before I sat it down on the table beside me and continued staring into the fireplace in the foyer.

Sebastian heaved a sigh. “So it’s like this,” he’d started. I’d realized that was Sebastian’s catchphrase—a sort of warning that he was about to explain some foreign concept about what he was to someone who didn’t understand. We all had opinions on the guild he belonged to (or used to belong to, according to him.) Liars, thieves, murderers—they ran the gambit of criminality, stretching from pirate to assassin to spy. Sebastian was of the assassin variety of the Sons.

I pursed my lips and waited, though I wasn’t sure how much he’d really change my mind. I’d wanted that halfling in the dungeon dead but this felt...decidedly different. This wasn’t killing people for something I thought of as a crime, though Cyril and Cassie both insisted that in the situation of a civil conflict, disagreeing with the king was treason. It was a crime and people would die from it. Cyril had tousled my hair when he’d seen how upset I was. ‘You’re new to this. You’ll catch on.’

I wasn’t so sure I wanted to.

But Sebastian kept talking. “Your father,” he’d continued. “He was a good person. He let people disagree with him. Cassie says he thought of it as a way to grow—that if nobody dissented...if those disagreements weren’t voiced...then things that bothered people would never change and he wanted a happy populace. And that’s all well and good, Emory, but if Fox had eliminated Elizabeth when she became a threat, there’d be a lot less bodies than the ones I’m piling up for you. A lot more people would still be alive. Including your father.”

It was jarring to hear it framed that way--like this was all preventable and I opened my mouth to argue that he never could have known but I realized, in that second, that we had all known. We had all seen how volatile she’d become and we’d all known the problems Hiram caused Atara, but execution in Coria--that just wasn’t something we did.

But I never wanted my family in this position again.

“Being a leader is a fucked sort of job,” Sebastian had added, his tone oddly sympathetic. “You have to make the decisions like these ones, but you have to remember, you’re doing it so that the people out there don’t have to. It’s your burden because you’re supposed to be the wall between them and everything that would hurt them. So you make the ugly choices and sometimes heads have to roll, Emory. The world is fucking ugly. If anything I’ve heard about what you lived through is true, you already know that.”

And I did. I did know that.

So I put the worry for Sebastian out of my head when he went over the wall because it had been an ugly choice to make, but it was my job to make it and I swallowed Cassie’s threat, barbed glass that it was, and I stomached the nervous tapping of Tristan’s fingers on the table until I retired to bed.
I hardly slept. I stared up at the ceiling. I wondered what Nikita was doing, two doors down from me, and if he found sleep as difficult to reach as I did, but I doubted it. Nikita had seen combat before. It didn’t set birds to flying around in his stomach. This was all just a part of life for him...then again, it wasn’t combat that worried me.

It was Atara. It was everything that Mackenzie had said to me about living in isolation with no meaningful human contact and I found myself climbing from bed to stare out the window, my arms folded over the sill, to watch the Keep the way that Mack did every night like if I just looked hard enough, I’d see into the walls or Atara would know that I was out there, thinking about him, worrying over him, begging him to have found some way to stay sane through all of it. Sleep found me just before dawn and lasted only a few hours, hunched in the window like that, until Nikita opened the door and locked it behind him to wake me with kisses and promises that everything would be alright.

I didn’t even jump when he touched me in my sleep anymore, like I recognized the shape of his hands even in that state and the way that they smoothed down my ribs, tracing the bones with cool fingertips while his teeth grazed my jaw. “Wake up, kitten,” he whispered against my ear, breath warm and apple scented. When I turned to look at him, I found his pupils blown out from that powder he had no doubt taken on this, the morning we would crack the gates and discover the horror that lay within my home.

I blinked at him, kissed him with a sleepy mouth and clumsily ran my fingers through his hair until he hauled me to my feet. He helped strap me into that armor that had belonged to my father, fashioning me into the duplicate they wanted me to be. “You’ve never killed anyone outside the dungeon, have you?” he eventually asked, his eyes flicking to mine in the mirror as he fussed with a strap along the side of my ribs, buckling it tightly.

“No,” I admitted after a moment. “Unless you count letting Sebastian play slaughterhouse the past few months.”

He laughed, but the sound was dark, and then he shook his head. “This will be different than ordering someone to do it for you. You’ll remember this. It’s going to stick with you for a long time, especially the first one. You stay near me, yeah?”

“You’re not riding with Dani?” I’d expected him to join his people. In fact, I’d been so convinced that he would that I hadn’t even questioned it. I’d just imagined I would be surrounded by the royal guard that had survived and by Kinnon’s personal best, a wall between me and them designed to keep me alive while we battled through the city. If it had been up to Cyril and Cassie, I’d have sat on a horse and just watched from a distance, then trotted through when it was over like some shining beacon of victory, but my father had always told me that if I sent a man to war, I had to be willing to join him. On this one point, I had refused to concede to them. I was going to fight--right alongside the people that had agreed to.

Nikita made a face. “Why would I ride with Dani?” he asked, incredulous. “She’ll have an army of Riders and eight other Commanders with her. She doesn’t need me. I’ll be with you. I’d have actually preferred we kept Sebastian near you, but he’s...hopefully in the Keep already.”

“You doubt him?”

He snorted. “Doubt Sebastian Brighton’s ability to be lie, cheat, and murder? No. That boy would spend months convincing someone that they were absolutely in love with him if it meant getting close enough to rip their throat out. That’s why I’d prefer him with you. Somehow, he seems to genuinely like you. Probably because you’re giving him what he wants--which is safety for him and that princess.”
“How do you know it’s genuine if he’s so good at lying and cheating?” I arched an eyebrow and Nikita rolled his eyes.

“Because he’s had plenty of opportunities to kill you and even been alone in a room with you, but you’re still standing. That can only mean he actually wants you to keep breathing.” He reached into a satchel that was slung over his shoulders and turned me to face him. “Now, here. I have something for you.”

He dug around, brow knit in concentration, until he located what he was looking for and produced a shining, platinum crown, delicately crafted with stones the same blue as the one set into the hilt of the family blade he carried. It glittered in the light that poured in from the window, little spots of opalescent color in the scalloped arches between each stone. “This,” he explained carefully, holding it out to me so that I could grasp it with gentle, almost trembling, fingers. “Belonged to the last King in Glacia. He was killed by Immarans before the Marshland Massacres. He was cousin to my father, so this was given to us. Fox should have taken it back then. It was his by right when he annexed us, but he let my family keep it. I requested it retrieved for you.”

It was strangely beautiful to be the crown of a people who favored war so fervently. Someone had crafted this with very particular opinions, I thought—to portray a stark comparison between the people of the north and the compassion that a ruler should have had. It was so different from the polished, gunmetal black crown that we had in Coria, set with rubies from the Glenning mines. How it looked, however, was only partially important to the entire situation.

This should have been his. In another life, it would have been, and it was Novak blue—a color synonymous with the Riders—and he was putting it on me. “This feels possessive,” I joked and rolled his eyes, a small smile crossing his features. “It is possessive, but also, you should be wearing a crown when you take your kingdom back,” he tacked on. “The fact that I like the idea of you wearing Novak blue isn’t relevant to the real point.”

His fingers were still closed around it with mine and he carefully lifted it, setting it on top of my head and then taking a quick step back. “See,” he said, only half teasing. “Blue suits you.”

I kissed him. It was the only way to really show how much it meant that he’d gifted this family artifact to me and that Danica would have been the one to have to actually argue for why she needed to take it south. I owed her thanks, too, but I owed him so much more than gratitude. He’d kept me standing all those months outside the wall, been a shoulder to lean on when things were too heavy for me to handle on my own, been a barrier between me and the world when I needed it, and still managed to think of things like this and the coat that was draped over the post of the bed. I had no idea what I’d done to deserve him—nothing, really, because I’d never been a particularly kind person—but somehow he’d ended up with me and it made my heart feel swollen, so big it would burst out of my chest while I kissed him until he was breathless, stumbling backward to pin him to the door.

He only pulled back when he had to breathe, his fingers lingering near my face. “We should…” he started, his voice guttering and low. “Caius is waiting.”

Right.

Nikita fixed his leather tunic where I’d rucked it up to touch his heated skin and I fussed with my hair where he’d run his fingers through it, skewing the crown on my head. We made our way downstairs and out of the house minutes later, climbed atop our respective horses—mine a russet colored Corian breed and his Anikka, the great black war horse from Glacia that he’d raised from birth. Behind us, Teilo and Joey stood in the door of the house with Cassie. My dog whined at me, but I’d determined early that he was no war hound. He belonged safe at home and Joey had
promised that if something happened—if things went wrong—she’d take Teilo and make for Karinus with Cassie.

And so it began, our fateful strike into the city. It was a quiet ride to the front line where Tristan stood with Cyril and Mack. The horses were dismounted and walked away. The streets, Cyril had explained, were too narrow for a cavalry charge in the beginning. Most of the Riders we had would not be mounted for this incursion. A mounted unit would ride through last, sweep up any stragglers, and start assisting the wounded. With me would be Mack, Tristan, Cyril, Nikita, and Caius, who insisted that he would be doing no more blasting of ancient walls but that he was still more than capable of butchering a few people.

Beside me, Tristan shifted uncomfortably. “What he’s about to do,” he said quietly. “It’s going to horrify you. You’re going to witness things you don’t want to see, hear things you don’t want to hear, remember things you’d rather not remember. Caius’s magic is ugly and brutal in every way imaginable. I’d recommend you close your eyes, but I don’t actually believe any of you will.”

“What does that even mean?” Mackenzie asked out loud what we were all wondering, leaning forward to look at Tristan in the line of us, a disturbed sort of expression on his pale face. He looked like he’d slept about as much as I had and worry was written in the corners of his mouth, turned into a perpetual frown. I could only imagine the anxiety twisting in his gut over Atara—I could feel my own, but Mack, admittedly, had so much more at stake than I did. My brother was his entire world...more than that, all things considered.

Tristan’s mouth turned into a thin line. “Our magic comes from the dead,” he repeated what Caius had already told me. “We take directly from the fabric between worlds where they hover, waiting, like the Lierian legends say that they do.”

Cyril stiffened beside me, his lips parting, like he had a thousand questions to ask, but Caius stepped out from the group with two staffs in his hand and silence fell over the entire assembled army—the sea of men and women in armor, all staring up at the nearly deserted walls. Inside the city, a bell was ringing out in alarm and archers appeared on the walls garbed in the gray steel of the temple guard or the white leather of the Lierians.

Caius plunged both of the staffs into the dirt with the blades at the ends of them.

“You didn’t answer what that means!” Mack insisted, almost frantic, but all eyes were on Caius, who gripped the staffs with both hands, poised between them, hood drawn up over platinum hair. The ground rumbled beneath him, trembling under the feet of ever person standing there—all three thousand or so of us—like the earth was going to split right down the middle. Fear clogged my throat and behind us, the horses at the back of the army screamed in terror, their voices joined by...something almost indescribable.

It was screaming, but it wasn’t...it wasn’t alive. It was pulled from the very air around us so that the whole field smelled of ozone and decay. Thick, black smog swirled around Caius’s feet, crackling with lightning that arced up the staffs and over his arms.

“Tristan!” Mack tried again, his voice a pressing shout over the cacophony of a thousand souls all shrieking from a world beyond our own.

Tristan did not answer. He didn’t have to. The smog began to take shape, bodies and faces lurched outward, peeled from the inside of it in figures that looked to be made of sand—wet and black—and the world shook harder. Nausea clamored up my throat and my skin crawled. My wrists burned like hands groped them. Beside me, Nikita stumbled backward, fingers pressed to his neck, and when I looked at him, I swear I could see the vaporized outline of a woman at his shoulder, arms draped
over his throat, squeezing tightly.

“Our magic comes from the dead,’ Tristan had told us.

From the dead that clung to the living, I realized. From the monsters on the beach that leered near me, from Milena Novak who haunted her brother’s nightmares so that he could never forget that he’d let her down, from the tall, broad-shouldered, scraggly looking creature that hulked over Cyril with his hands around his throat, from the thousands of hands that pawed at Mackenzie--

Beneath Caius, the earth split like a maw, and I wondered if Cyprian lurked around his shoulders or if Delior and Tylas stood at the side of each staff. I wondered if Fox was there, in that pool of black that traveled up Caius’s body from the six inch crack in the mantle of the world, arching from the alchemist to the gate. It collected around his hands and over the staffs and on top of the wall, soldiers clamored over each other, running for the towers that would take them to the ground.

Most of them never made it. All that screaming smoke hurtled forward as if shot from a bow and it collided with the gate. The wood splintered and burst, showering down over the field as little more than pulverized saw dust and the layer of granite that came next fractured like glass and tumbled down, rolling away from the wall that trembled, groaning at the pressure. It buckled in some places, towers heaving forward full of soldiers that fell, head over feet, down into the field in front of Caius, crushed under the weight of the breaking architecture. The alchemist’s arms trembled and I saw him dig his feet into the ground like it was taking every bit of effort he had to keep standing--the same way it was taking me every bit of effort I had not to vomit or black out.

All around us, people wavered and shook, and then the final barrier snapped like twigs and Caius jerked his hands back, flinging the last pieces of the gate out into the rubble that he’d already created...and the city was open, the skin of it split like an overripe fruit.

Silence fell over us again and Caius sagged, exhausted, and then hauled himself up with the staffs in hand. He jerked them free of the dirt and walked, half-stumbling, back to us, where Tristan caught him under the arms before he collapsed completely.

“All give me…” he slurred. “A minute.” Tristan was already working though, feeding one of those hollow needles into his arm and holding a glass vial up, attached to a tube, that fed something acid green down into Caius elbow. The Lierian alchemist leaned heavily on his counterpart for a few minutes, breathing rapidly and shallowly. Mackenzie checked his pulse, fingers at his throat, and made a face, remarking that it was much too fast, but that it was slowing down.

Halfway through the vial, Caius got back to his feet and I managed to finally look around without succumbing to the vertigo that had plagued me. My skin no longer crawled like a thousand insects were marching over it and the vapory ghost that had clung to Nikita was no longer visible. He was stark white. Even his lips had turned a shade of gray and he looked up at me, fear in his face. It was unnerving to see Nikita afraid of anything in a way that shook him down to the bones, but this had.

“I could feel her,” he whispered like we were sharing some secret. “Like she was holding onto my back, choking me out...I--I--” He rubbed his hands over the front of his leather tunic and then looked up at the broken gate.

“We’d expected an army to come flooding out of the place but there was nothing but silence to greet us. “They’ve probably retreated deeper,” Cyril spoke softly. “To protect the Keep or to block off roads. They’ll have abandoned parts of the city that they can’t hope to hold.”

Down the line, I heard the horn that the Riders used. Danica and Riordan had gladly taken command of the respective armies and I knew the signal for a charge when it was sounded out, a short, sharp
blast and then the resounding shout as thousands of people stampeded forward, dispersing into the streets, us with them.

It was difficult to process at the time and, with time, it only came back in chunky memories--scrambling over the rubble of Caius’s destruction with Nikita at my side, his bow clutched in one hand, my axe gripped in my palm. Mackenzie crested the debris first, his eyes on the soldiers that dissolved into the streets and the enemy that burst from broken doorways, cut down with savage, northern rage.

I remembered the bodies in the streets. Not soldiers--bodies piled on carts, rotting in the Corian sun, pools of fluid and decay gathering beneath them, all smeared with black blood. I remembered the smell--disease and waste and putrefying meat, strong enough to have Cyril puking two streets in, mercy blade forgotten at his feet.

I remembered haunted eyes staring out from windows, set in gaunt, skeletal faces. I remembered opening the door of a warehouse in the port district and finding a hundred corpses laid out like it had functioned as an infirmary that nobody survived.

“Fucking hell,” I heard Mack whisper at my side.

Tristan and Caius only stepped inside to push me back and seal the door. “Nobody wanted to touch the bodies,” Tristan explained. “So they left them, I imagine. That’s what happens when there’s no infrastructure.”

He spoke of it like it was clinical--just politics and logic--but I saw people. My people, left to rot, their flesh melting from their bones in the oppressive heat of the upcoming dry season. It was death and destruction on a scale that had never been seen in our country or, according to Caius, in Immara. “I’ve seen some shit,” I remembered him saying. “But this…this is insanity.”

“Power begets a hunger for more power,” Nikita parroted some philosopher he’d taken to reading, having found the books in a box in the cellar at his estate. “What’s more powerful than deciding whether your people live or die?”

“What is there to rule over if everyone is dead?” I hissed in response, shooting him a glare as we worked our way up the street. The Riders butchered mercilessly and the temple guard didn’t have a chance. Not a one of us had raised a blade yet, halfway up the center market, but Nikita’s bow was poised, arrow still nocked. “She is Queen of nothing and nobody!”

Caius coughed. “That’s why I said it was insanity,” he sing-songed, rolling his eyes and then his expression changed along with Tristan’s. Whimsical one second and hard the next. Tristan reacted first, hand outstretched, and a shimmering blue shield breathed to life just as a rain of arrows showered down around us. They bounced and snapped off the magic, crackling and burning as they hit the ground, all of them launched from a barrier up ahead that had seemed deserted.

Hell broke loose then, just as the shield vaporized. Caius vanished, a whisp of black smoke that materialized inside a charging soldier, shattering him into chunks of bleeding flash, effectively soaking the Lierian so that his white-blond hair was as scarlet as Tristan’s. Nikita’s bow sang beside me, each arrow ending with a thud, buried six inches deep in the forehead of a temple guard but they were bearing down on us and he slung the bow over his shoulder in favor of the sword on his back.

The world seemed to slow. I was only vaguely aware of Mackenzie’s cutlass sinking into the belly of someone clad in green and white, spilling intestines out into the street. Cyril’s mercy blade opened a throat and I recalled my childhood, running from Recia, and the poacher that had grabbed my arm before we’d reached the inn where we’d met Fox. I remembered the shower of blood from his
jugular vein cascading down over my face, the salty, metallic flavor of blood, and the trembling in my limbs when Cyril picked me up and ran.

I grasped my axe, the haft of black steel and carved with the relief of a fox and a lion, pressed tightly to my palm. A temple guard charged on me, eyes feral and bright. Nearby, Nikita sprinted forward but was stopped short, for just a half a second, before his blade burst through the chest of his opponent like he was little more than a rotting melon.

I recalled his words that I would remember this. I would remember looking into those rage-filled eyes, devoid of anything but zealotry and fury, and I would remember the way his sword beat against my shield—how it hit with such force that I almost thought it would shatter my arm. Adrenaline rushed through my blood, singing in my veins like a chorus, and it became, in that instant, kill or be killed.

I would never forget pushing forward with that shield so that the hilt of his blade hit him in the face, stunning him backward, and I would never forget the way that the edge of my axe cracked through his skull, splitting it like a skinned grape, and how there’d been a brief moment of understanding when he hit his knees, eyes surprised but fully aware that he was, for all intents and purposes, already dead, before his breath finally stopped and he slumped. My axe released with a sickening squelch of blood and bone, coated in gray matter that reminded me of Atara, and for a second I thought I might vomit. Nikita had been right. I would never forget it.

But I would never forget Fox with blood on his lips, rasping his dying words to me and I would never forget Mackenzie, melting down in my bedroom about how all of it was his fault and how he didn’t deserve my brother, and I would never forget Nikita living on that powder so that he didn’t have to sleep to make it to the asylum before them and how he’d spent the night vomiting and shaking to save my life.

I would never forget what it felt like to wake up every day and know that my brother was locked in a cell, alone in the dark, deprived of all meaningful human connection.

And I found that I didn’t care about this one soldier who had given me no choice but to kill him. I didn’t care about the ones that followed, a corridor of carnage that led to the gate of the Keep where Riordan and Danica had looped chains to the iron and were pulling with all of their men, pulling until the metal screamed and bent outward, pulling until the hinges cracked and the final barrier between us and my childhood home came tumbling down.

“Orders, Your Majesty?” Danica turned to me, blood smeared over her ink stained face and in her teeth. She had a black eye and a bruise on her jaw, but she looked positively in her element the same way that Nikita did. He was saturated in red. It stained his blond hair and went all the way to his boots. His shield was coated in it. His sword shined scarlet in the afternoon sun, dripping it into a puddle everywhere he walked while he cut people down behind her—archers and temple guards. He was worth ten of every regular soldier we had, a veritable weapon of mass destruction. Taking a blow to the chest from someone’s shield didn’t even slow him. It knocked the sword from his grip but he switched easily to his hands, caught the wrist that held the opponent’s blade, brought his knee up into his chest, and snapped his neck with lethal precision.

This was a side of him I hadn’t known before and when I didn’t answer immediately, Danica glanced over her shoulder and then smiled. “He’s good, isn’t he?” she quipped.

“He’s terrifying,” I deadpanned over the din of the soldiers around us. Nikita had scooped up his sword again and decapitated a temple guard with one swing, his head bouncing away like a child’s ball. “Take your brother. Find Elizabeth and secure her. I don’t want her dead just yet. I want her to deal with her in public. Kinnon is going to be searching for Hiram already. I’ll take Cyril and
Mackenzie with me--"

“A moment,” Tristan interjected, Caius at his elbow, coated in a fresh layer of gore and plucking what looked disturbingly like the remnants of someone’s liver from between his fingers. “Atara thinks that Mackenzie is dead. Given his situation, I advise he not be the first face the young prince greets after isolation. He won’t believe he’s real.”

“You’re out of your fucking mind if you think I’m hanging back for this, Emory,” Mackenzie snarled. He was soaked in red, too, had it splattered over his uniform and his face, breathing hard, livid and sick. “I promised your father I would look after him! I’m his consort. That’s my son!”

“Nobody is suggesting you never see him again,” Caius drawled, rolling his eyes, the only part of him that wasn’t red. “Merely that you not compound his inevitable insanity by showing your pretty face too soon. Let Emory and Cyril greet Atara first, get him into a bedroom with light, get some food in him. Then you can whisper your sweet nothings, lover boy.”

Mack took a step forward, clearly enraged, his cutlass gripped in his hand. “Oh, you little fuck--”

“Mack,” Nikita joined us, one red stained hand on Mackenzie’s chest when he spoke. We all reeked of gore and rot and sweat. Ozone, too, in the case of Tristan and Caius, though Tristan was the only one of us not literally bathing in the blood of enemies. “Why don’t you take Gier and Caius and clear the royal quarters? Get Atara’s bedroom cleaned out for him. I’m sure Caius can manage getting the blood off the walls.”

The alchemist flashed a toothy grin.

“I want to be there!” Mackenzie protested again. “You would want to be there if it was Emory!”

“I would want what was best for Emory,” Nikita pointed out. “And in this case, you are not what is best for Atara right out the gate. Let Em break the news that you’re alive to him when he’s settled down. This won’t be easy. You said it yourself.”

There was quiet between all of us and then finally Mackenzie made a noise, a grunt of approval, and he grabbed Caius by the arm and stalked toward the Keep without another word. Danica and Nikita left shortly after, following them up the path littered with the remnants of Elizabeth’s dying army--Lierians missing limbs crawled in the dirt, wearing Hiram’s colors, and the siblings stepped over them without a thought for mercy.

Tristan took a breath. “I’ll come with you,” he declared after a moment, following Cyril and I as we started forward. I could smell the gardens burning and see the smoke rising from it. Somewhere inside, Sebastian had stashed Atara. “I think Sebastian intended to keep him in the cell as long as he could. Figured hiding him under her nose was as good a bet as any and if Mackenzie described the corridor correctly, it only has one entrance. It’s easily defendable. Plus, I don’t think he actually expected Atara to want to leave with him.”

“Would you want to leave with him?” Cyril asked, arching an eyebrow, and Tristan snorted.

“Fuck no,” he agreed. “So I suggest we start in the Keep and then, if they aren’t there, we start in all the hiding spots you listed on your map. Worst comes to worst, I can track Sebastian.” We both glanced at him. “Only because we share blood,” Tristan tacked on. “Gods, I can’t track everyone. You two are paranoid.”

And so we walked, skipping the front entrance to the grand hall where pockets of battle still raged on, and slinking along the outer gardens to the door hidden in the back of the barracks that opened
into the grime and mildew of the dark, lonely old fortress below the Winter Palace.

This was what my brother had called home for damn near close to six months and this was where I was going to get him back.

Chapter End Notes

An Atara chapter tomorrow, for all of the Atara/Mack lovers out there~ You'll finally get your reunion!
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hiram only came down into the old Keep once—to tell me that they’d thrown Mackenzie and Olivia from the sea cells and that they’d both disappeared into the thrashing, white capped water below. I’d guessed that, already, by the time that he’d arrived because Mackenzie had been gone for what I thought was three days but it might have been longer. At first, I’d convinced myself that he was coming back. Nothing and nobody would ever keep him from me, but time marched on. I couldn’t really tell how much. Sometimes I would fall asleep when it was dark through my little barred window and when I woke up, it would still be dark, and when I woke again, it would still be dark.

It became...disorienting. Hard to discern how fast things went by me when I was surrounded by nothing but damp, black walls and empty cells—they’d made sure of that. I knew because directly after Mackenzie’s disappearance I’d screamed for what felt like hours and nobody had ever told me to be quiet. Nobody had reacted to anything because nobody was there.

Until Hiram showed up. He leered into the cell, fingers around the bars, and I’d scowled up at him from the corner I huddled in, arms around my knees. His skin reminded me of wrinkled tissue paper and while he told me this, glee in his voice, I bit down on the inside of my cheeks until I tasted blood. I swallowed the tears and the bile that threatened to rise in my throat. I would not cry for him. My grief, I decided, would be my own, and not something Hiram could take joy out of. I would deny him that, as spitefully as I could, because it was the only measure of control that I had—control over myself and my reactions. So he told me that he’d watched Elizabeth order them thrown over the edge of the sea cells and I’d felt my heart shatter in my chest, grinding into my ribs like all that it left behind were shards of glass. I’d clenched my fists until my nails bloodied my palms when he told me she’d taken a blade from Emory’s bedroom—from the many ceremonial weapons he had in the Tower—and stuck it into Fox’s gut before she’d sent him outside the city on a frantic horse.

I’d wanted to scream. I’d wanted to buckle into the floor, curl up there, melt into the stone—anything to stop what I felt raging through my chest. Nothing had ever hurt like this before. That was a routine for me by then, though, situations that hurt so much I didn’t believe they could possibly get worse but then something worse popped up. It had been Fox. Then it was Mack.

And for days down there, alone in the dark (or for what felt like days because I was never really sure) I fluctuated between enraged and despairing. I shook the bars of my cage until my fingers and wrists were bruised. I threw myself at them, screaming and desperate, and the only thing that ever happened was the door opening and a gray clad soldier throwing a plate of food into the slot at the floor.

I threw it back at first. I cracked the porcelain and I hurled the shards through the bars at him as he left and he remained utterly unperturbed by it. Then I would crawl into my corner and I’d sob, because I would have given anything for the option to crawl into the grave with Mackenzie, let the ocean swallow us up, just bones on the seabed with Fox. It had been so cruel, I thought—in fact, it
was the cruelest thing they ever did to me--to give Mackenzie back for those few days, to erase the fears I’d had about having to see him in Lian’s face, having to explain to a child why his other parent couldn’t be there with him...that they’d never met but that I knew, somehow, that he was loved from beyond that watery end that had pulled his father under.

It all came back when he was gone. It came back tenfold, with a fresh horror, and in my nightmares I watched him fall over that edge and I reached and reached and reached until I was falling too but I never touched him. I’d wake up shaking with that familiar nausea in my stomach that plagued me every time I woke and I’d vomit yellow bile, press my face to the cold rock walls, and I’d drift off again.

That became my life down there. Endlessly sleeping, arms around my middle or my hands pressed over my ears. Loneliness encroached on my reality, a blanket of crippling despondency that reached into my bones. I grieved with nobody to mop up my tears the way that I was certain Nikita would have mopped up Emory’s. I had no arms but my own, no voice but my own, and I was locked in a stone cell of hard, flat surfaces and thick, suffocating darkness.

The hallucinations started not long after that. It began with little flashes of light that I would notice in my peripheral vision, but when I scrambled to find the source, my hands would meet nothing but dark walls. They blinked and dazzled in the world around me and I realized, quickly, that they weren’t real. That my mind was so used to being bombarded with a litany of stimuli that when I had none, it created something. It tried to make sense of a world devoid of structure...a world in which I might as well have been plummeting into a bottomless void, falling endlessly, swallowed by nothing.

I started speaking to myself and then to Lian, nonsense stories that my parents had told me about talking animals and people who could fly with wings like birds. I cradled the swelling bump beneath my ragged clothes. I hummed nursery rhymes, rocking back and forth. I laid on my back and I closed my eyes to relive memories I had of the wretchedly short time I’d spent with Mackenzie. Mostly, I thought of sleepy mornings and how I’d kiss him awake and he’d slowly come to, fingers fumbling blindly for my face, a small smile spreading over his full mouth.

Or I’d think about Fox. It was so quiet down there that I could almost relive them in perfect clarity. I could see him with me in the gardens when I was six or seven, seated on a blanket, throwing raspberries at my face while I tried to catch them with my mouth. I could almost hear him laugh again--a peel of cheerful giggles, his fingers digging into my stomach while I shrieked through a fit of tickling--but the longer it went on, the longer I lacked interaction, the more difficult it became to remember how voices sounded.

I couldn’t remember Emory’s at all, I realized eventually. It had been over a year since I’d last seen my brother. His face was murky in my memories--but all faces were becoming murky. Blurred. Like someone had gone through the portraits that made up the little moments of my life and smeared the paint over the faces.

The hallucinations grew worse.

Sometimes I’d hear music, like the powerful swell of an orchestra in the ballroom, and I could see the dancers in miniature, gliding through my stone and steel prison. My anxiety levels soared through the roof. When my eyes were open, there was a constant fear of seeing something that wasn’t real. I chased a ball around the floor of my cell only to realize it wasn’t actually there. I had full conversations with Lian, who had no way of answering me, and almost convinced myself that the sudden fluttering I began to feel in my stomach was some attempt at speech.

My language skills began to degrade. I noticed that and I started reciting lessons from my childhood, poems that I’d memorized, over and over again to retain the ability to speak.
For a time, everything I touched seemed to deliver a static shock to me--even food--and I knew it couldn’t possibly be real but I could feel it. There were times I thought the room was spinning and I clung to the bars, sobbing uncontrollably, convinced I would fall from the surface of the planet. Sometimes I woke up screaming and I’d thrash, trying to discover the source of the noise, only to realize, with growing horror, that it was me.

My life dissolved and my mind went with it, down there in the dark with nothing and nobody. I realized at some point that I no longer cared about any of it. For awhile, I’d fought to live because of Lian, but when I looked down at how big I’d become, I began to think that maybe Emory wasn’t coming. Maybe he was dead. Maybe they were all dead.

And I wanted to die. I dug at my arms, desperate to find a way to bleed and I failed because I couldn’t see. I couldn’t focus. An opera boomed in the confines of my skull and snow fell from the ceiling.

I’d never seen snow in anything but paintings.

I wailed for my brother, for Cyril, for Nikita--for anyone that I thought might still be alive. I screamed until I was exhausted, until I had no tears left, until I had nothing and I crumpled, finally, into a depression near catatonia. I broke and tore like wet tissue paper and all the spiteful fight and venom that I’d had in me dissolved like sugar in water.

I stopped talking. I stopped reciting. I stopped remembering and I succumbed to the idea that I was going to die down there. At least, I thought, they would throw me to the sea where they’d thrown Mack and maybe some god would take pity on me for how pathetic I’d become and I’d have a chance to see him again in whatever waited beyond the world of the living. It pressed close to me. I could feel it, a choking dread that licked up my spine, cold and insect-like.

I had grown so used to the click of the door at the end of the hall, the squeak of the hinges, and the clatter of the plate of food on the floor, that I didn’t react at all when the person standing on the other side of the bars wasn’t a temple guard at all but someone I didn’t recognize, someone wearing black scaled armor, holding a shining, curved blade in each of his hands. I only noticed something different when the blood from one of those blades dripped onto my hand where it rested near the bars and I looked up.

“Atara Bordelon?” The accent was different, I noted. I should have recognized it, but I couldn’t remember what voices or talking sounded like. My tongue failed in my mouth and he crouched to my level, eyes glittering in the dark. “My name is Sebastian. Your brother sent me. Can you hear me?”

I blinked and he shifted, reaching into a pocket within the leather of his gear, and he held out a brightly colored orange, practically a beacon in the hell that I’d been living in. I didn’t reach for it. I found that I had forgotten, for a moment, how to use my arms. “Can you talk?” he pressed, but I didn’t respond except to finally (finally) lift my fumbling fingers to the fruit he offered me. I took it between my palms, marveling at the softness, at the texture of the skin. All I’d felt for months was rock and stone and dirt, bread and hard cheeses, occasionally dried apples but that had been...a long time ago, I thought.

“Atara,” he repeated and I looked up. That was my name, I realized after a moment. It was like slowly waking up to a sunrise. The room still spun around me. Lights still blinked on the periphery.

“But that orange was not like the ball I’d chased. It was real. “Are you…” I managed to force the words through a throat hoarse from disuse. I coughed and choked on them and he removed a flask from his hip, holding it out with the top already off, and when I drank from it, it was cold, clean
water. I hadn’t had anything not tepid or grimy since I’d forgotten what the sun felt like.

I tried again. “Are you real?”

Sebastian tipped his head and peeled one of his gloves off. It clanged against the stone when he dropped it and I noticed, then, that there were metal bars stitched into the fabric over his knuckles. He held a bare hand through the metal of my cage and I reached timidly, my heart racing in my chest. I’d been here before. I’d seen Mackenzie and Fox on the other side of those bars. I’d seen Cyril pace my cell. I’d seen Emory sit beside me, eighteen years old again and carefree...but when I’d reached for them, they’d vanished...disintegrated like paper left in water.

I steeled myself for inevitable reality...for the real truth that this was just another step in my hallucinations. That the orange was a rock the guard had kicked into my cell when I was asleep, that Sebastian was a figment of a failing mind, but his fingers met my own and they were warm. I could feel a pulse in his wrist and a guttural sob tore from my throat. He clutched my hand, fingers threaded through my own filthy grip, and he squeezed. “I’m here to keep you safe until Emory takes the Keep back,” he explained. “They’re coming through the gate in a few hours. Now, I think the safest thing to do is keep you here but--” He withdrew a set of keys from the inside of his armor where the orange had been and fed them through the bars. “If that’s wrong and they kill me out here, you get out, okay? You hide somewhere until you know he has this place locked down.”

“Who are you?” If my brother had wanted me safe, I thought he would have sent Nikita to do the job. I didn’t know this person. His accent was...familiar, but I still couldn’t place it. So many things had slipped away, filed beneath ‘unnecessary’ inside of my head, tucked into the recesses of my mind to spare my sanity or to spare my feelings. He sounded like someone I knew. Someone I trusted. A friend.

‘Tristan,’ my brain finally fed me and I felt my thinking skills almost stretch like a cat waking up from a nap, fuzzy and disoriented. “Sebastian Brighton,” I whispered for him and he grinned, pearly white teeth in a youthful face. “You’re Tristan’s Sebastian.”

“I really need to chat with him. He goes on far too much about me,” he joked. “How many guards usually come down here?”

I shrugged. “Dunno,” I managed to answer, peeling the skin of the orange back hastily. I wondered how he’d gotten it. Prior to my slow plunge into madness, I’d thought quite a bit on the siege. Food, I thought, was probably getting dangerously low. From outside the wall, of course--because he’d come from outside the wall, sent specifically by Emory. “You talked to Emory? Is he okay?”

“Seemed fine to me,” he answered, sitting against the bars. I held a slice of an orange out to him and he shook his head. “Brought it for you. Tristan said you’d be ‘vitamin deficient.’ No idea what that means, but he’s smarter than I am, so I roll with it. Still got that miniature you kicking around in there? Looks like you do.”

I looked down at the swollen stomach I was wearing, only dimly aware that there was, in fact, a person in there. I’d nearly forgotten, somehow, between the operas and the lights and the screaming. “I don’t know how many guards,” I reiterated, swallowing half the orange in one mouthful. I was voraciously hungry, I noted, like I hadn’t eaten in days. Maybe I hadn’t, in fact. I never knew how much time passed anymore. “I can’t tell if they’re real. Sometimes there’s one. Sometimes there’s twenty and they get smaller down the line until they disappear.”

Sebastian was quiet and I knew, to someone who had not been in there with me, I must have sounded insane and I mumbled an apology, to which he shook his head. “No, I’ve been in isolation,” he answered, waving a hand dismissively. “Start seeing weird shit after a few days. You’ve been in
“Have I?” That seemed right, but I couldn’t be entirely sure. I felt, somehow, like this whole event should have elicited much more emotion from me than it did, but I seemed incapable of processing it or perhaps I believed that I’d wake up, eventually, and find that the juice of that orange hadn’t really run down my fingers like I’d imagined and I hadn’t crushed it between my teeth and been more grateful for that sugar rush than I had ever been for anything else in my life.

He only nodded in response and then, just like that, he began to talk. He told me about the camp at Nikita’s estate, about my brother being the new King, about Tristan and Ridley, Caius and Cassiope, Cyril, Brentlyn, Riordan, Dani—but he never mentioned Mackenzie. I think, in retrospect, he had likely been warned not to. He just knew that I needed the stimulation of someone speaking to me. Sometimes, he lapsed into Immaran, which I understood, but did not speak nearly as well as Emory did. Still, the sound was what mattered.

“Did you grow up in Karinus?” I asked at one point. “With Tristan?”

“I grew up in Karinus,” he affirmed. “But not with Tristan. Tristan left when I was five. When my mother died--Tristan’s stepmother--my father took to drinking. Tristan and I...we were always soft. He wanted to save the world. I only wanted to grow up and marry the girl. We had no interest in slavery or auctions or poaching. Tristan was oldest, so he’d get the beatings the worst because he’d stop Rafael from hitting me, but then he left. Made his way to Paikea, became an alchemist. It suits him. So does Coria, but he’d never admit it.”

“And you stayed in Karinus? For the girl? Cassie?”

“For a time. Rafael hit me in the face with a bottle of whiskey one night.” He indicated the scar on his cheekbone and shrugged. “Cassie made me promise to leave, practically forced me out. I went to Paikea to find Tris, but I ended up in the guild. That’s a very short version of events.”

I leaned on the bars, my back to his, separated only by the steel. “Tell me the longer version.”

So he did. He told me about his mother and how she used to smell of lilacs and fresh bread. She was from Coryth, he’d said, and she’d married Rafael just a year after his first wife died--a woman that he’d been married to through arrangement and convenience. He’d never loved her, Sebastian said. He’d loved Helena and when she’d died, the man that Rafael had been died with her. He’d become a mean-spirited drunk who cared little for the children he had with his first wife and carried least of all for his mongrel bastard--a name he’d given Sebastian because he looked like his mother and it hurt.

I’d listened quietly, intent on believing it was all a dream, and then he’d asked me to tell him about Emory, so I had. I told him about the beach, the aftermath, the asylum...I told him about the attack on the Keep, being locked in the prison, and I spoke woodenly about my father and Mackenzie. I wouldn’t find out until later that Sebastian was a Son of the Serpent and that he’d been schooled to keep emotion out of his face, so he never gave away the things that he knew about Mack.

We must have been there for hours, him providing conversation and me soaking up stimulation I hadn’t had in six months, and then the door creaked at the end of the hall. I grasped the keys from the center of the floor, terror lighting in my heart like an open flame, and Sebastian climbed fluidly to his feet, his gloves back on and his blades in his hands. He slunk, silent as a shadow, into an open cell two down from me, and when the two guards (two? Three? Four? I couldn’t tell--I never could) stopped in front of my bars, he sprang forward, striking like a predator.

One curved weapon hooked at the first guard’s throat and opened it wide, a gaping maw of red that rained over the front of my cage, spraying the floor and the walls while I cringed, huddled in my
corner, my arms around my stomach. The other blade burst through the hollow of the second guard’s neck before the first hit the ground and another arterial arch sprayed over the wall before he dropped, eyes rolling, blood bubbling between his lips.

“Only two?” he complained, wiping his weapons on his pant leg. “Their numbers must be worse than I thought. How disappointing.”

I watched him, eyes wide in the dark, but he never moved back to the relaxed posture he’d had before. He remained standing, hidden in the open mouth of that empty cell. When the door creaked again, I heard him whisper, only barely--I could hardly believe it was real when his voice reached me. “Close your eyes.”

I pressed my hands up over them, my fingers sealing over my sight so that I heard the scuffle of boots. Two sets? Three? I strained to hear--a jingle of keys, clattering armor, my own heartbeat--

“What the fu--” Someone’s breath left their chest in a woosh and another body hit a wall. I felt it through the vibration in the floor. Someone else cracked into the bars and I peeked, fingers spread over one eye. Three guards, all of them stumbling to their feet, Sebastian at the center with only a small knife in one hand. I thought to myself, ‘He’s crazier than me, taking on all three with that.’

“It’s too many,” I protested suddenly, crawling forward and he flashed a grin in my direction.

“No,” he teased. “Now, it’s fun.”

The guard farthest from him stumbled to his feet, a club wrenched from his belt, and he launched himself at Sebastian. The weapon was raised, poised and aimed for my new friend’s face. The other two both climbed, unsteady, and then it was like the world slowed down. I watched, breath hitched and held in my throat, hunched on my knees, as Sebastian caught the first guard--one had on his shoulder and the other seizing the club--and side-stepped him, using the weight of his own run to throw him into the second. They both careened into the bars, rattling the door of my cell while the third jumped at Sebastian’s back.

He remained there for a brief moment while one of the two on the floor crawled to his knees and his face was met with the crushing force of the club, which shattered over his jaw and sent him sprawling, leaking blood from his eye and his ear, his skull cracked down to the brain.

Sebastian brought an elbow back into the one hanging from him and twisted, swinging himself around and out of his grasp, blade in hand, but the blade didn’t slice. Instead, the fist curled around the handle, ringed in metal, crushed into the nose of the assailant and a fountain of red sprayed from his face.

The guard that had remained on the ground finally got up as the first stumbled back and Sebastian turned just as a punch was thrown, grabbing the wrist with one hand and opening the artery under his arm with the blade in the other. A howl echoed in the corridor and he stumbled. The one with the broken nose flailed, sword swinging wildly and Sebastian ducked, bringing the small knife neatly across his throat before spinning and driving it into eye of the one that was already screaming.

It had taken all but ten seconds, though it felt like it had been minutes of agony, and in the end, only Sebastian was standing...utterly unscathed. I let the breath I’d been holding out, dimly aware of how my heart thumped in my throat, threatening quite alarmingly to come spewing right out of my mouth. I was panting, horrified and, on some gross level, elated because I had been waiting for so fucking long for someone to come in and butcher these people. I’d imagined it so many ways--I’d thought about it so many times. I’d daydreamed about hanging Elizabeth from the walls of the Keep, throwing Hiram into chummed waters, dragging both of them behind horses through the streets of
the city until they were dead--

And then Sebastian had arrived and so efficiently put an end to it that-- “Sebastian!”

The door swung open behind him and the assailant there at the end was not a guard, but a Lierian, and he was armed with a wicked sharp, lethally fast mercy blade and leather armor that allowed him to move as quickly as Sebastian did.

The Immaran spun, the long, curved blade at his hip up and in his hand, screaming against the steel of the Lierian’s own weapon. Lights flickered over the metal, sparks sprayed from steel on steel. Sebastian was quick, I noted. He had reflexes like the vipers that sometimes slunk around the coast, wickedly poisonous and as deadly as sharks. They could strike before you even saw them. I’d seen it happen once--watched one snag a seabird with jaws that unhinged and opened wider than what should have been possible.

But the Lierian was fast, too. He danced around Sebastian, weapons singing when they clattered against each other, too quick to really see anything accurately. They were both all offense, like the only good defense was making sure the other was dead first, but it was Sebastian who faltered. He slid in the blood pooled from the previous five guards, slipping forward so that the Lierian rose up and backhanded him, sending him careening into the bars of my cage and I scrambled forward.

“Get up!” I encouraged breathlessly, but I could see in the bright blue of his eyes that he was dazed by the strike of metal against his head. The Lierian grabbed him and Sebastian jolted, driving one fist forward into the face of his opponent just as one mercy blade came down, down, down and I saw it happen. I made a noise, a cry of alarm and warning, but it was too late.

The metal sank through Sebastian’s palm and screamed against the stone when it split through flesh and bone. I heard the Immaran cry out, a strangled noise of surprise and horror, and then he reeled backward. His good hand curled into a fist and drove forward again and again and again, pummeling into the Lierian the way that I had that boy on the beach--blow after blow rained down, bone crunching under his metal ringed fingers, until his arm must have given out and it was good, I thought, because by then he was making wine.

“Sebastian,” I whispered.

He ignored me, grinding his teeth while he examined his hand. The mercy blade had impaled it, split him open from between his ring and index finger all the way down to his wrist so that his hand was nearly severed into two pieces. He pulled the blade free, teeth clenched, mouth turned into his shoulder so that he could scream, and he did scream. I couldn’t imagine how anyone could have avoided it with that squelching sound and the burst of scarlet that cascaded down his fingers and over his arm.

Sebastian tore the shredded glove from that hand and ripped it with his teeth. “Give it to me,” I ordered gently and he glared, pain written in his every feature, but he fed his hand through the bars and I tied the ruined leather into strips to hold the mutilated flesh together. “They put poison on these, usually.”

“Oh, there was definitely poison on it,” he ground out. “Stings like a bitch. Tristan will deal with it.”

If he can, I almost tacked on, but I bit my tongue and the door swung again, clattering against the wall. Sebastian turned, ruined arm tucked against his abdomen, as Hiram himself bore down on us. I scrambled backward again, taking refuge once more in my corner. Hiram was old, but Sebastian was injured badly and bleeding hard. “A snake,” Hiram spat. “Emory sends an Immaran snake to do his dirty work.”
“We prefer Serpent, actually,” Sebastian corrected, his tone flippant and his eyes hard. “At least I’m not a traitor to my own kind though. How does that feel, Hiram? You sleep at night?”

“I’m going to rip your tongue out by the root and feed it to that halfbreed *whore* calling himself a King,” he snarled and Sebastian snorted. In his good hand, I could see what looked like a black crystal held in his tightening fingers. He was pale, though. Bleached of color and a thin veneer of sweat had dampened his skin. The flesh on his other arm was already blackening, slimy looking even from where I was, and I felt my stomach turn. “Or maybe I’ll just leave you here. Let the poison kill you slowly and then have your corpse stuffed and delivered to Paikea.”

Sebastian laughed, but the sound was weak, and Hiram was all bluster. He drew a sword like he intended to cut the Immaran down and Sebastian held the vial in his hand up—and I could see then that it was a vial. “I’m afraid I’ll have to decline,” he whispered and the glass shattered.

A wail filled the corridor and black smoke plumed in through the windows, thick as snow in the north, billowing like the fog over the ocean and collecting in front of where Sebastian stood. Hiram stumbled back, surprised, as it began to materialize and it was, at this point, that I became convinced this entire encounter was a hallucination. Sebastian was my brain’s final defense against absolute insanity and I had lost the battle. This was it. I was absolutely mad, I told myself, watching the smoke churn and froth until it was unmistakable as the figure of a human being and then it solidified.

*He* solidified and I wanted to puke and scream and throw myself from the keep all at the same time because it *looked* like my father. It *was* my father, a picture of youth so that I almost mistook him for Emory, but the eyes were too dark. They were mine, I realized, and he was *pale*. There were dark circles under those eyes and his lips lacked color and I realized, with growing horror and nausea, that he was *dead*.

And he didn’t speak. He looked at me, once, grief in his features and his mouth opened but he had no voice. He just moved forward and Hiram choked. “No,” I heard him gasp. “No, we killed you. I watched you die from on top of the wall!” He fell, landed on his tailbone, and scrambled back, but the...thing...the *thing* that had Fox’s face advanced on him, looming over him, feet not really on the ground, and then it reached down for him like it aimed to grab him but it went through his chest and Hiram made a horrified, garbled noise. Blood bubbled up from his throat. He convulsed, twitching and writhing, vomiting red down his front like a fountain. There was a cracking noise then and he slumped, tipping backward onto the stone, flopping like a rag doll, and then he was dead. I don’t know how I knew it, but I knew he was dead and the creature that Sebastian had conjured or summoned straightened itself up and then, just like, dissolved. The smoke disappeared as if it had never been there, retreating through the windows with crackling lightning, and Sebastian sagged against the wall.

I heaved, the contents of my stomach, bright and acidic, pouring forth from horror and and grief. My father was dead. That was fact. That was real. That had happened before the hallucinations. Hiram had told me about it in detail and I’d screamed about it later, sobbed until I didn’t have breath left. I’d grieved for them already and I’d come to terms with surviving without them. I bawled like an infant, curled on the floor of the cell, and when Sebastian tried to speak to me with a hoarse, wavering voice, I couldn’t answer. I retreated into my head, locked off behind months of isolation, and I became the pitiful creature I’d been before. I wanted to die. I wanted it to be over. I was so fucking tired of all these versions of false reality. Sebastian had seemed so *real*. I’d believed him. I’d believed Emory was really coming and this was really over. I was going to go *home* and Cyril would hold my head in his lap and he’d smell of honey and limes and it would be *home*. Emory would slip into my room and we’d eat pastries together in the dark, laughing about secrets
that didn’t really matter. He’d smell of sandalwood and brandy and it would be home.

This was home, though, down here in the dark. This was my home now. I’d been stupid to ever think I’d get out of there.

“Atara!” I cringed at the sound of someone’s voice again and the scrape of the cell finally opening, of someone turning me over and hoisting me up. I could smell blood and fire. I could feel hard metal under my cheek where someone cradled me like a baby, my face against their chest, and I could hear the frantic sound of their voice calling my name over and over, but I didn’t open my eyes. I didn’t want to see these things anymore.

“I used the vial Caius gave me.” Sebastian, his voice weak and aching. “I don’t know what it was. I don’t know if it was a summoning or if he had someone trapped in the glass. I don’t know if he just lent his power here for a minute. I don’t know, Tristan, but I think it was...I think it was Fox.”

Silence. “Atara, open your eyes,” the first voice ordered again and small fingers brushed my hair from my face, filthy and matted. “Come on, tiny. It’s me. It’s just me!”

I felt lips ghost over my cheek and the warm, familiar fear of small hands on my jaw. “Atara, baby, you need open your eyes.”

I took a shuddering breath, blood and bile welling in my mouth while I chewed on my cheeks. I knew those voices. No more cruel tricks. No more. I couldn’t stomach it again. I yearned for the day labor pains started so that I could just die when it was over. I coughed, suddenly aware that I was sobbing, and the person holding me shifted me so that my head fell on their shoulder and I felt hands rub my back, took another deep breath...and paused.

Beneath the blood and the metal and the fire that clung to him was sandalwood and brandy. “Emory,” I mumbled a name that felt foreign in my mouth and felt him exhale against me, holding me tightly. His arms were around me, crushed against my ribs, and the small ones down my back--“Lheiro?”

My eyes swam when I opened them, glossy with tears, but it was Emory. He leaned back and took me in, mint colored eyes wide and bright, and then he pressed his lips to my forehead and I knew. This was real. Emory was real.

I wept, bitter tears that were laced with overwhelming relief. It was over. “You came for me,” I managed to choke the words and he laughed, pulling me back in to hold me tighter until Cyril wrestled me from his grasp. His arms were tight around my neck and he kissed me all over my dirty, tear-stained face, tucking my head under his chin so that he could rock with me like he had when I was very, very small.

I cried harder on him--like I hadn’t cried at all in the months that I’d been down there, like all the grief just came back up. “Dad,” I heaved the word and Cyril squeezed me tighter.

“I know, tiny, I know,” he whispered. “It’s over now. You’re safe.”

Safe, I thought, was a large stretch and I remembered, then, with vivid detail, the wound on Sebastian’s arm. “Sebastian!”

So he had been real.

I arched my back, wiggling free of Cyril’s grasp so that I could push myself to my feet. I stopped at the gate of the cell, swung wide open for the first time in six months, and I stared at the ground just
outside of it. How often had I imagined this first step? Too many times to count, I figured, and I put my hand forward first as if I expected a pane of glass to be there to bar my advance...but nothing was there.

I felt Emory’s hand at the small of my back before I toddled forward, ungainly and large, to where Sebastian was leaning against the wall with Tristan, blue magic deep into the already necrotic flesh of his hand. “Oh,” I breathed, surprised by the sight of it and by the grimace set in Tristan’s features. “Can you--”

“I’m doing what I can,” the alchemist snapped. “I warned you, Bash. If you’re going to take stupid risks, don’t do it with the Lierians. Don’t get cocky. Don’t be arrogant.”

“I’m seventeen,” Sebastian snarled in response. “Cocky and arrogant are practically requirements! Can you fix it?”

Tristan cast a withering glance at him. “I’ve stopped the tissue decay. Let’s get you upstairs. Caius has some experience with poisons and I need to examine Atara.”

“I’m fine,” I protested. “Well, I mean, I’m not rotting.”

“Atara,” Emory warned, an arm around my middle so that he could walk me away.

Tristan followed, Sebastian limping beside him, and Cyril rushed to keep up with his so that he could lace his fingers through mine. It was slow. My legs weren’t used to walking much anymore and I stumbled up the stairs, my back screaming from the added weight of Lian on my weakened body, and Emory ended up supporting half my weight before we reached the top. “You look good, boss,” I managed to get out, my arm over his shoulders as we hobbled along. Cyril had one around my back, a stabilizing influence more than a source of strength.

“I wish I could say the same for you,” Emory joked, eyes bright. “How you holding up? Seeing anything…weird?”

“Lights,” I admitted. Those never really stopped. “And everything is always spinning. Sometimes, there’s music. It’s like…there was nothing, so my head just made shit up.”

“It’ll pass,” Tristan assured us from behind me. “It might take a few weeks to completely disappear, but it’ll pass.”

Emory stopped at the top of the staircase and shifted my weight to Cyril so that he could heft his axe up into his hand and push the door open. I could hear people talking and I was vaguely aware of my brother putting his arm down and hooking his weapon back into his belt, saying something about that floor already being secured, but my ears were ringing and my eyes were streaming. Sunlight flooded down around me and I winced, cringing backward and sending both Cyril and I stumbling into a wall. I couldn’t see. Everything around me shone white like I was staring into the sun and it made an ache blossom just behind my eyes, exploding outward with a deafening pain that reached my ears.

“I can’t see!” I exclaimed, alarmed, my heart racing, thumping in my chest so that I could feel it through my ribs. I wobbled, frantic, until something dark was draped over my head and I panted, grasping at smooth, worn leather that smelled of ozone and books. Tristan’s cloak. I recognized the scent of him on it.

Emory said something I didn’t catch and the alchemist answered. “Photosensitivity,” he explained gently. “He’ll readjust to light. Relax, Emory. He’s thin and he’s a little jaundice, but honestly, I expected him to be in a much worse state. The fact that he can speak is surprising.”
“He didn’t at first,” Sebastian pointed out. “He touches things to make sure they’re real and Caius’s bullshit little stunt didn’t help. I’m going to wring his fucking throat and squeeze the snark right out of his bloody bones.”

I did not know who Caius was, but, given what I had seen Sebastian do, I did not—even a little bit—doubt that he would do exactly as he said he was going to do. “Can we just...walk?” I asked, my voice muffled under the cloak. I reached blindly and found Emory’s fingers. They laced with mine and he pulled my arm back around his shoulders so that I could hobble with him. “My legs hurt. My back hurts.”

Cyril chuckled. “I think that’s expected,” he said softly and I felt his hand move under the cloak so that he could rub the back of my neck. “We’ll get you back in order, tiny. What matters is that you’re alive. You made it.”

Caius—or, who I thought was Caius—answered with a huff. “I didn’t know who it would summon, Sebastian. Why? Was it some poor prisoner left to starve in a nearby cell?”

“Was it the dead king?” Sebastian hissed and I felt my stomach drop but Emory ignored them while they bickered, leading me with Cyril through another doorway. I heard curtains being drawn and then Cyril pulled the cloak from over my head.

My bedroom was...still my bedroom. The bed was still in the corner, facing diagonally toward a wall of windows that opened up to a balcony over the water. My dresser was still there. One of the drawers was still open, too, and I remembered digging clothes hastily from it the night of the fall. My journals were still in an open trunk, untouched, and on top of them was a pile of drawings that Mackenzie had left there.

My throat thickened and my eyes welled up. I got unsteadily to my feet from where I’d been sat in a chair and I wobbled over to the trunk, my fingers gathering up a handful of the dry parchment—a bushel of flowers, a laundress with her hair coming free of her braid, spilling over her back as she pinned sheets to a line, my bedroom with the bed mussed from the night before when he’d spent hours winding me up and making me plead for him, and me—half a dozen of me—sitting in a chair, asleep, writing, laughing with Emory at my side--

“They pushed him from the sea cell,” I said numbly. It was the first time I’d said it out loud and Emory stood at my shoulder, one hand carefully moving to my elbow. “Right after they took dad. He didn’t even wake me up. I never got to say...I never got--”
“Atara,” Emory began gently and he stole a glance at Cyril, who was moving through my dresser searching for loose fitting linen pants and a shirt large enough to fit over my nearly bursting middle section. “Lheiro, do you…”

Cyril paused, but then he nodded, swapping places with Emory fluidly. He led me to a chair again, the pictures still clutched in my fingers. This was all I had left, I thought. I could go to his flat, like he’d said I could. I could take his clothes and his sheets. Maybe, if I was lucky, the things in his closet would still smell like him. I could buy ginger candies and eat honey in the morning. I could cling to these little things that reminded me of gray eyes and golden curls and how much he’d really loved me. I’d never had to hear him say it. He wasn’t good at saying it, in fact, but he showed me with everything he did. I’d felt it radiate from him like warmth from a flame.

“Sit, baby,” Cyril ordered when I struggled to stand again and he pulled another chair up beside me, shifting a pile of books on genealogy that I’d been studying before the fall. I flicked the first one open and there, inside the cover, was the letter Emory had written to me, still pressed flat, and I added it to the pile of sacred memories that I was holding to my chest.

He took my free hand, the one not pressing papers to my sternum while I fought off tears. Emory was moving around the room again, finding soap in a table by the door. He sat it on the floor beside the metal tub that Caius had heated, steam rising from the surface.

Cyril started with the hard part. “You...you know about your father,” he began, his voice weaving unsteadily and I nodded. “Emory and I were with him. He wasn’t alone. You should know that.”

It didn’t make it easier for me, but it might have made it easier for Fox. That was...better. I thought. Maybe. I shut my eyes while the room spun around me, lights blinking at the corners, music humming in the back of my head, just below the sound of him speaking.

“We found Mackenzie on the beach,” he continued and I felt my stomach plummet.

My throat seized up and I shook my head hard. “I don’t want to hear this,” I choked out. “Please, gods, just let me believe you burned him and it was fine. I don’t want to hear what he was like, Lheiro, I can’t. I’m going to have to do all of this alone and I--”

“Atara, honey,” Cyril tried again and I shook harder, cringing from touch. “Listen to me. We found Mackenzie on the beach and he had a terrible fever. He wasn’t dead. He isn’t dead.”

“No,” I repeated my disbelief. “He already came back once. He can’t come back twice. This isn’t real. He’s not really here.”

Emory stood up and Cyril inched closer, pulling me into his side and I pressed my face into his red-stained leather armor. It hurt. It all hurt down into my bones and into my chest like someone was ripping something out of me. My brother moved to the door and pushed it open, disappearing into the hall a moment later.

When the door opened again, it wasn’t Emory that walked through. I rocked in my chair. The papers fell around me and drifted aimlessly toward the ground while I stared, fingers locked around my seat, at Mackenzie. He took a tentative step forward. “Hey, darlin,” he greeted weakly.

I shook my head, almost violent in my disbelief, biting my lower lip until it bled. I could feel tears sting my face, running in filthy rivers down my cheeks and landing in my lap, unchecked and disregarded. “You’re not real,” I whispered. “I saw you so many times! Almost every day and you were never real. You don’t get to come back twice. It’s all in my head. I’m just...just crazy. I’m going to wake up and I’ll be back down there. Alone in the dark. Just alone in the dark.”
Mack winced, heartbreak visible in his face, and Cyril stepped away from me, moving quietly to the door after he kissed the top of my head. He leaned in to whisper something to Mackenzie, but I couldn’t hear it, and then he was gone. I was well and truly alone with a ghost. Another ghost.

“I’m real,” he started carefully, inching closer to me while I continued my ritual rocking, nails digging into the bottom of the chair. I could believe the rest. I could even live with the remnants of the hallucinations—the lights and the humming—but this couldn’t be real. He’d already died and come back once.

“It was cruel,” I bit out, my voice shaking. “To give you back to me for a few days and then take you away again! I had to grieve for you twice! I can’t do it again. I can’t.”

He ran his hands over his face and I could see him tremble like this whole encounter was making him as sick as I felt, like he was ready to heave his heart into his lap. He looked real. There was blood on his clothes from the battle. His hair was tangled. He had soot on one of his cheeks and a split lip. When he walked, he limped like he’d fallen and twisted something, but he still made his way over to me and knelt in front of my chair. “I’m so sorry, tiny,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over the humming in my ears. “For all of this. For everything.”

“You’re not real,” I insisted again and he held his hand out the way that Nikita had so very long ago when he’d met my brother—like he was trying to tame a frightened animal and I stared at the palm held out before me.

I would reach, like I always did, and my fingers would fall through him like they always did. My heart would break again—or rather, what was left of it would break again—and this hell would start all over.

But this all seemed so real. Emory had been real. I’d been able to smell him and feel him and he’d half-carried me up to this room. The water in that tub was real. I’d felt the heat from it when I’d walked by it. Cyril had been real and his kisses over my face had left smears of dirt on his cheeks and lips.

I reached, tentative, horrified, and my fingers found solid flesh when I touched his palm.

The world shattered. It gave way beneath my feet and I held my breath, terrified that at any moment, it would all slip away, but his hand only curled around mine and squeezed and I trembled, shaking like a beaten animal, eyes wide. “You’re real,” I breathed, disbelief written in my stunned features. My lips parted, panting and chapped and he nodded quickly.

“I’m real,” he promised.

I fell from the chair, tumbling forward into him, my lips against his face and my fingers in his hair and he laughed. He laughed and it was beautiful and real and it echoed over the humming in my ears while I clung to him. I buried my face in his throat and my fingers moved down to his shoulders, nails digging into the leather of his armor, heart pounding rampantly against my chest. “But you were dead,” I wailed into him, pathetic and distraught and overjoyed because I didn’t care how it had come to be. I didn’t care what miracles had conspired to bring him here.

He was here. He was with me. He was mine.

“Nikita’s Riders found me on the shore with a fever and an infection. It took Tristan over a week to break the temperature,” he explained quickly. “Gods, tiny, look at you. You’re so skinny. You’re so pale. Let me see—”
He held leaned back to look at my face--to the yellowed skin beneath the dirt and the gauntness of my face and then he crushed me back to him, arms locked around my distended torso. “You cut it awfully close,” I complained, one hand on my belly, and he laughed again, kissing my cheeks and then lifting me carefully to my feet.

“We did,” he agreed. “And we have so much to talk about and I promise that we will, but Tristan needs to see you. I want Tristan to see you.” That was new. Prior to the fall of the city, they’d barely tolerated each other. “I’ll examine you myself, too, of course,” he corrected smoothly, stepping toward the door but I held his arm tight.

“Don’t leave me here,” I protested. “I’ve been alone...for...I don’t know. I don’t know how long. I can’t tell time anymore.”

Mack’s eyes softened and I could see something like grief in the tragic turn of his mouth. “I know, darlin. I’m not going anywhere. I promise. Just opening the door.”

And so he did with me tucked under his arm and I stayed there, clinging, trying to re-memorize the sound of his heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

This one was really long. Anyway, the reunion you have all waited for continues tomorrow~
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Mackenzie

Atara looked…better than I had hoped, but he was still bad. The parts of him that weren’t covered in filth and grime had only be washed by tears and he had left a film of dirt on my face when he’d kissed me, tasting of oranges and salt. He had a yellowish tinge to his skin, a result, I knew, of not enough sun, and he was painfully skinny. Not emaciated, not like some of the people we’d seen storming the Keep…they’d been feeding him, if only because Hiram wanted the baby that was still living beneath his skin, but they hadn’t been feeding him enough and I knew that infant was draining everything he had just to stay alive.

His hair was too long, matted in most places in a way that was going to require hacking it off, but he was alive. He was alive and he’d held onto me the same way that he always had, clinging with his arms around my throat while we waited for Tristan and I heard him whispering, ‘Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ over and over again like he was praying to whatever god had delivered him back to me.

I hadn’t the heart to tell them that the gods were all dead. Caius had crushed them under a mountain, evidently, and if anyone had safely delivered me from the door of death, it was actually an alchemist—it was actually Tristan that he owed his gratitude to.

It took the Immaran a few minutes to come in. I imagined he was busy with Sebastian, whose arm looked...less than hopeful. I’d only glimpsed it, discolored and swollen, but those things alone were bad signs so it was no surprise that it took him time to finally come in, sliding into the room and carefully closing the door behind him.

“Alright,” he breathed, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s see what we’ve got.”

“He needs sunlight,” I pointed out and Tristan nodded, stepping forward to carefully take Atara’s face in his hands. That blue glow webbed out from his fingers and sank into the little prince’s jaw, shimmering over his skin while it spread outward. “Food. I haven’t found any infection on him and I don’t think he’s injured.”

“I’m fine,” Atara protested, eyes wide. He shivered at the cold of it and I knew why. Tristan’s magic felt like ice, soothing over any lingering inflammation, chilling mild fevers, sealing bones together. That same magic webbed over his stomach, distended and stretched to capacity, and Atara made a gagging noise.

Tristan wrinkled his nose. “Been sick a lot?” he asked and the prince nodded. “I’ll get you something for that.” At the alarmed look on Atara’s face, he tacked on: “It won’t hurt your little one. It’ll just help you keep food down, which you need to do. He’s just about finished baking in there and he’s much too thin.” Tristan removed his hands and spun him around, lifting his shirt to examine his spine and the spindly arms of his ribs that arched around his body like they were hugging him. “And so are you. Your immune system is trashed. I did what I could to ease it, but you ought to stay in the royal quarters until after you deliver. Mackenzie is right. The best things for you right now are sunlight and food.”
“The sun hurts,” Atara complained, rubbing his eyes with a filthy hand and Tristan reached up to peel his wrists away.

“You don’t want a bacterial infection in your eyes, trust me,” he explained flatly when the prince scowled. “Get a bath, put some clean clothes on, scrub your teeth, and get to bed. Keep your eyes closed so Mack can open the curtains. A few hours in the sun every day for three or four days should solve the jaundice problem. Sebastian sent Commandant out for meat. Hopefully he comes back with fish or rabbit and not someone’s cat again so I can send it in when it’s cooked with something to help you keep it down.”

Atara shifted on his feet, wincing, and I slipped an arm around him. He leaned heavily on me, his legs and back aching from disuse and too much weight. “How is Sebastian?” he asked after a beat and Tristan, poised to walk out the door, turned to look back with an expression of disquiet on his face.

“Honestly,” he started, his voice like gravel. “I think he’s going to lose the arm. Caius is trying to curtail the spread of the poison, but...he hasn’t seen Lierian poison in centuries. I’ve never seen it at all.”

“Mack has,” Atara offered and I jumped, looking down at him, surprised. A moment ago, he’d been begging me not to leave. “He can take a look.”

Tristan hesitated. “Let Caius keep trying. You get cleaned up. If I need Mackenzie, I’ll knock. You...you shouldn’t be alone. Not after all that time.” And then he was gone, as if he’d never been there, leaving me with Atara, the boy that grew in his abdomen, and my own festering guilt.

I tried not to think about the things that I’d considered when I was outside the wall--how I’d tried to bargain with any god that might have existed out there, dead or not, for Atara’s life. I’d offered up anything to have him back, even the life of that baby--they could have it, if I only got Atara back alive. We could try again. We could have more...the timing would be better, safer, and he’d be older and wiser. I had rationalized it that way, but the guilt hit me hard then and lodged in my chest like a blade stuck between my ribs while I peeled him out of his filthy, stiffened clothes. I avoided touching his stomach. I thought, perhaps, I should have wanted to. He was mine, after all. I should have wanted closeness, but I didn’t deserve it and I was afraid if I reached out, they would both somehow know that I’d been ready to beg for one to die to save the other.

I told myself Fox and Cyril never would have made that sort of bargain. Fox had been ready to die before he told them where Emory was and then he’d actually done it. Cyril had butchered people for Emory and I had no trouble imagining him making himself into a human shield for either of those boys.

I was wretched for having not done the same, exactly the sort of person Riordan had told me I was--a gutter rat unworthy of Atara’s affection, but he clung to me while I lathered soap over his skin, scrubbing of six months worth of filth. It was a process, slow and tedious, of soap, scrub, rinse, repeat until he was finally clean and the water was a soupy, black concoction.

“You don’t seem alright,” he eventually pointed out, perturbed, I imagined, by my silence.

I sat him down on the end of the bed and set to drying him off and I remembered that day he’d showed up at my flat in the rain. I remembered running a towel over his head then, too, and how enraged he’d been. He wasn’t enraged now. He was...quiet. Sore and hurting, yes, but he seemed to lack the emotional capacity to deal with any of it--a side-effect of isolation. His social skills had devolved.
That was alright, I decided. That could be worked on. I’d expected something far worse than this--I’d expected someone who couldn’t talk or walk on their own. I’d expected someone who had beaten their head off of the walls of the cell just to feel something.

“Just grateful,” I told him. It was only a half-lie. I was grateful. More than grateful, because he wasn’t any of the things I’d expected him to be except, maybe, softer than he’d been before. Frightened, I realized, that all of this was some vivid hallucination, but that, I knew, would dissolve with time. He’d grow more comfortable with the situation and come to realize it was all very real.

Atara reached up and brushed my hair out of my eyes with cold, thin fingers. “No,” he insisted. “There’s something wrong.” I ignored the statement and stuck a brush in his mouth, coated with that foaming mint soap that he loved so dearly and he took the handle, scrubbing hard while he watched me. I held his pants out for him and he stepped into them, one hand on my shoulder, wobbling a little bit while he scrubbed his teeth, his brow knit in concern. He waddled after me, spitting into a cup and then rinsing his mouth with a pitcher of water that Caius had also cleaned and left on the dresser.

“That’s nothing wrong,” I answered curtly, determined to avoid the subject, at least until he was in a better head space, but Atara had always been doggedly persistent with me. He’d ended up at my place in the rain that day so long ago because he’d been insistent on trying to figure out what buttons he couldn’t press with me. He’d been a child then, I realized, and he wasn’t a child anymore. When I looked at him, spitting water and mint into the basin beside the pitcher, there was something different in his face. The wide-eyed innocence that Emory had loved so dearly was gone. That disarming, optimistic, stunningly beautiful way Atara had of viewing the world had died somewhere in the belly of the fortress. He’d learned that this place was an ugly, hideous reality to live in and he’d learned it the hard way when they’d murdered his family one by one and left him behind to ferment in the guilt and the grief.

He dropped the brush and scowled at me, eyes narrowed, arms crossed over his belly. “It’s been awhile, Mackenzie Rylin, but I still know when you’re lying,” he snapped. “Something is wrong. It’s not Emory or Cyril. I just saw them. So who else is fucking dead? Riordan? Nikita?”

“No, gods, no!” I shook my head at the horror on his face and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “It’s not like that, darlin. It’s me, alright. I thought...some pretty hideous things while you were still down there and I was outside the city. Listen, Atara, I’ll talk to you about all of this. I promise. Just not right now.”

He seemed to debate that, his eyes moving between mine while he pulled a shirt over his head and wiggled into it, stretching it over his distended stomach. “It’s about Lian, isn’t it?” he pressed and I cringed, which only confirmed his suspicions. “You’re avoiding looking or touching. We barely got to talk about it--”

“You didn’t tell me!” I shot back.

“I only found out that day! I was young and stupid and I made mistakes, okay?”

“You’re not much older than you were then.” I realized, just a moment too late, how absurd that was when it came out of my mouth.

Atara shook his head. “Yes, I am,” he protested weakly. “I know, logically, it could have only been months, but it felt like years down there and I--” His voice was cut off when a knock on the door interrupted him and it swung open a second later. It was Tristan, blue eyes locked on me and Atara waved a hand in his direction. “Go,” he ordered. “Help with Sebastian. We’ll talk when you’re done.”
“You shouldn’t be alone--”

“I can send Ridley in,” Tristan offered and Atara sat down with another shake of his head.

“No,” he insisted. “I’m just going to go to sleep. Or try to. Go, Mack, help Sebastian. He kept me alive down there. I owe him that much.”

I wanted to argue that he didn’t owe Sebastian anything. Emory had already paid that debt and given the Immarans everything they could possibly want, but the young prince’s eyes had hardened and I set my teeth. There would be no getting through to him, not immediately, and so though I was loathe to leave him, I couldn’t argue with the healer in me--if Sebastian needed help, it was irresponsible not to provide it.

So I left him and I traveled into the dining room where the assassin was sat upright, though barely, in a chair, leaning heavily into Cassie’s side. His good hand had a half a bottle of brandy in it and he brought it steadily to his lips, over and over again, trying to rid himself of the pain in his other arm, I imagined.

Caius was holding the bad arm in his lap, black magic swirling around it while he cursed in his native tongue. I tried to ignore the surroundings--that the portraits of the Bordelon family as I knew them were no longer on the walls, that the walls in the sitting room were the wrong color, the furniture was wrong in some places--it all felt like some abstract nightmare.

“Why won’t you just pass out?” Caius hissed and Sebastian snorted, his face pressed into Cassie’s midriff, her fingers gliding through his sweat-slick hair. He was a child, I reminded myself. He was a child, younger than Atara, and we’d had no right to put this on his shoulders.

I’d said as much to Emory at some point, but there’d been no real way out of it. Sebastian had been the only person with the skill set to get into the Keep undetected and to hold a position until we could relieve him. Nikita could have done the latter, of course, but it was the sneaking that Sebastian had down to an art.

And of course, he did.

“Let me see,” I ordered, pulling up a chair and Caius held the offending limb out to me. It was...alarmingly bad. The wound had gone necrotic already, a result of the poison, and it smelled of rotting flesh that sort of oozed this black and green fluid. From the initial injury, webbing outward like spider silk, was a network of black veins that laced over his fingers and down toward his wrist. The wound itself had split the bones, I noted, and I clicked my tongue. “It’s in his bone marrow,” I explained flatly.

“I know,” Tristan agreed. “I just don’t understand how it moved so quickly.”

“The Lierians are expert poisoners,” Caius snarled. “I don’t recognize this one.”

I turned the limb over and Sebastian ground his teeth, his pained groan muffled by Cassie’s bodice. “It doesn’t matter which it is. Even if we had an antidote to this, it’s too late,” I pointed out. “It’s in the bone marrow. That’s supplying blood to the rest of his body. If you don’t...handle this...the infection will spread to his organs, shut down his kidneys, his liver, put him in a coma. He’ll die.”

“You are so optimistic, sunshine,” Sebastian shot at me, his tone flippant but grating with what I could only imagine was agony. Anyone else would have been writhing, even drunk. His pain threshold was inhumane and, quite frankly, incredibly alarming.

Cassie hushed him, one hand cupping his face. “Then handle it,” she pressed.

Tristan and Caius were quiet and I knew, then, that they hadn’t told him, and so it felt to me. I
grasped the assassin by the shoulder and he turned his face, eyes glassy with liquor and torment, and he spoke first. “You’re going to cut my hand off, aren’t you?” he asked, his voice thick and then he shook his head. “No, I’d rather die.”

“Sebastian!” Cassie exclaimed, horror in her voice and he tipped his head up to look at her. “No, that is not an option. We didn’t come here for you to die. We came here so you could live. So we could live! Remember? I’d run rosemary and nettle through my hair to turn it dark. We’d stowaway on a ship for Coria so we could see the fish in the harbor and we’d live in a little house. You’d join the guard and I’d plant a garden. We’d get married.”

His free hand groped forward, damp fingers pressed to her lips. “I can’t fight if I don’t have my hand,” he choked. “This is all I am.”

“That’s not true,” she insisted. “Tristan, take his arm.”

Sebastian struggled but she caught him around his shoulders and, weak as he was, exhausted and feverish, he couldn’t properly fight her. He arched his back, writhing in the chair, and my heart broke for him. He was still so young and so full of that vivid energy that only came from youth. This would seem like the end of the world to him, of course, but he had so much more to live for.

“I can’t,” Tristan whispered. “I can’t do it if he doesn’t want me to. Sebastian, please....”

But Sebastian shook his head, teeth clenched, and Cassie’s arms looped around his neck from behind his chair so that they were cheek to cheek and she whispered inaudibly against his ear. He stopped fighting, eyes wide and wet, limbs trembling with fever. His gaze locked on me and I stared back into blue eyes that looked far older than he was, like the innocence he’d viewed the world with had been ripped out from under him years ago the way that it had been done to Atara recently.

It was Caius who eventually spoke. “It’s not about you, boy,” he said quietly and I remembered Nikita telling me about what it was like to lose Milena, about how it got to be over for her but he had to keep going and that was the worst part of it. “You get to be done if you die here, but they don’t. That girl lives the rest of her life with you as a ghost in her nightmares. Tristan lives forever knowing he could have saved you and he didn’t. So you buck up—” He peeled a belt from Sebastian’s armor and folded it, holding it out against the boy’s mouth. “You bite down on this.” His jaw opened slowly and his teeth clenched. “And you let Tristan and Mackenzie fix what they can fix. You’ll adapt. Everyone does.”

Sebastian didn’t answer, but his shoulders sagged in defeat and Tristan took that as enough of an agreement to move forward. “I can’t get him under,” he explained to me. “I’ve tried, but he’s fighting too hard or he’s in too much pain or I’ve over-extended my abilities fighting the infection already. I don’t know. I can hold him down, Mack, but—”

“You need me to cut,” I answered flatly.

And so it was. Tristan and Caius grabbed the arm in question, pinning it down to the table, and Cassie held Sebastian, belt between his teeth, face pressed into her stomach. His other hand groped upward, grasping the fabric at her sleeve and digging into her shoulder, while I plucked up Tristan’s bonesaw from his bag of tools. “You going to deal with the pain?” I asked, arching an eyebrow at both of the alchemists.

“We’ll do what we can,” Caius answered. “But we’re both fairly close to an end of our resources for awhile.”

“Right,” I breathed. “Sebastian, not gonna lie to you, kid. This will hurt like nothing you’ve felt
He huffed in response and I found the end of the black lines on his arm, moved up an inch, and picked a spot three fingers width from his elbow to start the cut. I hadn’t done an amputation since I’d been in training, but nothing about it had changed. He still screamed. He thrashed in his seat until Cassie climbed into his lap, arms around his middle and fingers locked around the back rungs of the chair. She was crying, I noted, and it was odd, because she’d always seemed so...cold. She wasn’t cold with him. She kept talking against his ear, whispering things in Immaran through his screams while I sawed through flesh and bone. Another location would have been ideal, I thought in retrospect, because it would have made it more comfortable for him to be lying down, but the Keep was scrambling. Nothing was in order. Space was limited.

Sebastian went limp three quarters through, his head slumping forward and his eyes rolling back when shock finally took care of the sleep that Tristan couldn’t grant. The alchemists loosened their grip on him and Cassie cradled his head, pressing kisses to his sweat-soaked face until I finally got through the ruined flesh.

It was a matter of cauterizing and wrapping then and Tristan handled most of it, shaking fingers working as quickly as he could. “We need to get him into bed,” he eventually bit out.

“There’s a bedroom in the far back,” I told them. “It’s Emory’s, but I don’t think he’ll care in this case.”

And then they were gone, Sebastian hanging between Caius and Tristan, Cassie rushing after them. I wrapped the limb in the tattered remains of the sleeve it had been in before Tristan cut the fabric off, and threw it out into the water from the window like they’d done to me so many months ago. It was...disarming...to feel so detached from the horror of war, from the casualty that I’d just watched play out and taken part in, but I’d seen horrors beyond the imaginable lately. I’d seen them burn Olivia Bordelon and watched her father descend into alcoholism and despair. I’d seen bodies wash up on the beach missing chunks courtesy of the sharks, orcas, and sea snakes. I’d seen the water turn thick with oil, a result of too many decaying corpses from the plague that rocked Coryth to the foundation.

A lost arm seemed trivial to me, in the grander picture, and I felt my stomach sicken with the thought while I recalled Sebastian doing backflips off the sparring fence while Tristan and Ridley laughed. I remembered the image of him in Tristan’s crystal, a little boy with the bluest eyes I’d ever seen--

Even those of us that had survived this horror had been changed in ways we could never turn back. Emory would never forget Fox dying in his lap. Atara would always suffer for the months of isolation he’d survived. Brentlyn would never get his daughter back. Sebastian would never be whole again.

I walked woodenly back to Atara’s bedroom and pushed the door open without so much as a knock. He was standing at the mirror, a small knife in his hand, hacking away at the matted hair that hung over his face. His eyes were red-rimmed and his teeth were clenched in a grimace while hunks of dark, chocolate colored hair fell like snow onto the dresser.

“Whoa, hey,” I started, coming up behind him, my heartbeat quickening in my chest as I grabbed his wrist and peeled the blade away from another handful of hair. I knew what this was--this desire to change something immediately when everything else was going to require so much time...and it needed cut, but seeing him there, chopping it away with a knife he’d probably gotten off of me at some point, was jarring all the same. I’d done this myself, when I was younger, cut off all of my hair because I couldn’t stand seeing the same person in the mirror all the time and because I could control this. This one, tiny aspect of my person was mine and mine alone and it had been empowering to tear
away at golden curls until hardly anything was left.

“It needs to go,” Atara whispered through his teeth. “I hate it. I want to be me again!”

I managed to pry the knife from his cold, grasping fingers and I kissed the back of his head, my eyes on his in the mirror he was standing in. “Okay,” I agreed. “But let me do it? You’re going to hurt yourself and miss half the back.”

He nodded curtly, but he didn’t say anything when I put the knife down and stripped from the bloodied clothes I had on, rinsed the evidence of Sebastian’s amputation from my arms, and cleaned up the rest of the battle from my person with the water in the pitcher. There were clothes of mine in his wardrobe from before and I pulled those on before returning to him in the mirror. That was when he spoke. “Did you cut his arm off?” he asked quietly. “I heard him screaming.”

“He would have died otherwise,” I told him gently, digging in the top drawer for a straight razor that I’d put there months ago. I found it and set to cutting out the worst of the matting. He’d gotten most of it, and so it was easy work to get on to just evening out what he’d hacked into like a bad butcher.

Atara pursed his lips. “He got hurt helping me,” he mumbled, his eyes downcast and his shoulders slumped. “I should go see him. I owe him that much.”

“He’s out cold and you don’t owe him shit. You think he did this for free? Emory promised him a lordship.” He seemed undeterred by those words, his eyes flashing bright and frustrated in the mirror.

His lips parted and for a moment, I thought he might not say what he wanted, but then he did. He spoke and the guilt cut me down into the bone. “He kept me alive. He kept Lian alive. That’s worth more than a fucking lordship, Mackenzie,” he snapped.

I hesitated, acutely aware of the rage that emanated from him. It was normal, I told myself. It was normal for him to not be in control of his emotions. It was normal for him to lash out. I could take it. I’d prepared myself for months for the inevitable fall out of this and I took a deep, careful breath, running my fingers through his damp, freshly shorn hair. It was almost the same length it had been before—a little shorter, perhaps, but perfect for tangling in and tugging on. “You’re right,” I said after a minute. “That’s not what I meant by it and it doesn’t change the fact that he’s not awake. He won’t be for awhile. Now that Tristan has him under, I doubt he’s going to let him up until his fever breaks. You need to sleep, too, darlin.”

Atara was quiet, lips pursed, and I slipped my arms around him, my palms over his heartbeat, my head on his shoulder, and his back to my chest. He sighed contentedly, frustration melting from his posture when he leaned back and I kissed the exposed skin of his throat. “Tell me how you feel?” I asked gently--a sorry and pitiful attempt to gear his attention away from Sebastian and away from me.

He took the bait though. “Tired,” he admitted. “Hungry. Sick. Afraid. I’m fucking terrified, Mackenzie...that I’m going to wake up any minute from now and this will all be a dream. I’ll be back down there, cold and alone in that wretched dark, and you’ll be dead. You should be dead.”

“I should be,” I agreed. “You’ll get used to this, little prince...you’ll find normal again.”

“I want to,” he breathed. “I want to get used to waking up with you again. I’m just afraid to believe it.” His hands folded over mine and then drifted downward, settling on the swell of his stomach beneath his shirt. “They’ll cut him out of me and throw me over the wall for Emory.”

I cringed. I’d imagined that a dozen times and I’d watched for it--for any strange movement atop the
boundary of the city and every time I thought I saw something, horror would blossom in my chest and reach my throat like a choking vine. Images would flash in my imagination of his little, broken body hurled over the edge of the wall and how I’d lift him and he’d flop, shattered bones in every limb, eyes wide and empty--

‘Stop,’ I told myself. ‘It never happened. It’s never going to happen.’

“You’re safe now,” I promised. “Nobody is throwing you over the wall. Nobody is taking him from you. You’re going to wake up in a warm bed to real food and I’ll be right there, telling you how much I love you, and everything will be perfect again.”

He was hesitant and then he grasped my hand where it settled over his heart, his fingers over mine, and pulled it down to the distended evidence of Lian growing ever larger beneath the wall of his body. I shrank away, fighting weakly to regain my own hand, but I was loathe to separate from him and he pressed my palm there. I felt nothing, but then, I hadn’t expected to. That infant would be weak--too thin, too tired, and every movement would be a struggle for him, but Atara could feel him. Every little stirring, every little stretch.

I didn’t deserve him. Not after the things I’d thought, the bargains I’d been willing to make to save Atara’s life. I’d known when I’d thought them that if Lian survived, I’d spend the rest of my life dealing with that guilt and the rest of my life had started when we’d pulled Atara from that dungeon, still heavy with an unborn child. It was gnawing on me, that horror, and I finally peeled my hand away and stepped back.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” Atara insisted again, his eyes hard as he whirled to face me. “You know I won’t fucking drop it, Mack. It hasn’t been so long that you’ve forgotten that about me. I love you. Don’t fucking lie to me.”

“I don’t want to fight with you,” I protested weakly. “Not right now. Can’t we just--”

“No,” he spat. “Tell me why. You won’t say his name, you don’t want to touch him, you don’t even look--”

I ground my teeth. “Because a fetus is like a fucking parasite!” I finally snapped and I pressed my hands over my eyes so that I didn’t have to look at him while I said it. “It takes everything out of you. It weakens your bones, your heart, your muscles. It drains your nutrients like crops do to soil after too much time and out there, Atara--out there, without you...all I could think was that it would be so much easier for you to survive if he didn’t and I know. That makes me a really fucking terrible human being and a worse father and I’m every wretched thing everyone has ever said about me. I know that and it will eat me alive for the rest of my life, so can we just...can we not do this right now? Please?”

When I looked at him, finally, he was staring. I’d expected livid anger. I’d expected him to slap my face right off of my skull. Maybe he was too muted for it. Maybe he’d spent too long alone without the stimuli to feel anything or maybe he was too tired for it. I didn’t know. I only knew that he stared at me for what felt like a solid minute of agonized silence before he eventually spoke. “It’s a good thing you don’t get to make that choice then,” he said stiffly and when I reached to catch him as he walked away, he shrugged the touch off and climbed into his bed, sitting against the headboard with his legs tucked under him and his arms around his stomach.

“Atara--”

“Shut up,” he snarled it, teeth bared, and I clamped my lips closed at the order. I didn’t often take commands from him. He’d never really been a prince to me, despite the fact that I sometimes called
him ‘little prince.’ The affiliation of power with his title had always been...distant. He’d been my friend first, the only person to ever see value in me beyond that of a warm body. That broke my heart the most, I think, when I considered living without him. He’d been my friend first. My only friend, really.

Atara rubbed his face after another minute of silence. “He was all I had down there,” he hissed. “He was the only thing that kept Hiram from strapping me down and putting me through a Rite.” Oh, he’d be so angry when he found out about that, I thought distractedly. He’d be furious just the way that Cyril had been. “He kept me alive, Mackenzie, because I would have broken the plates they fed me with and found a way to kill myself with the shards if it hadn’t been for him. I wanted to die. I had nothing left. My father was dead. You were dead. Emory was trapped outside the wall or dead. I went months without any contact from anyone, least of all any of you, and if it hadn’t been for Lian, you wouldn’t have me back at all. I’d be a fucking vegetable with a heartbeat or I’d be a corpse!”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, guilt eating away at my insides. “I regretted it the minute I started to think it, I did. I just...you’re all I’ve got, you know that?”

“You have Rylin,” he snarled. “Elizabeth looked for him, surely, and since he didn’t end up down there with me, I can only imagine he either died in the initial fight or he made it beyond the gate. You’d be a bit more upset if he were dead, I would think, or maybe you wouldn’t since there’s apparently some part of you that’s heartless—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I snapped, irritation finally taking over the guilt and Atara’s eyes widened. “Heartless? Heartless, Atara? Maybe just fucking logical! Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I’m at all fucking prepared for this? Maybe you didn’t fucking notice, but I didn’t have parents like yours, babe. I had hell!”

Atara’s eyes narrowed and he picked up a pillow, lobbing it at me because he couldn’t reach anything else and I caught it, throwing it to the side with enough force that it smacked into a table and sent the contents—a handful of drawings and Emory’s letter—fluttering to the floor. “Well, Mackenzie, surely you have enough of a grasp of basic fucking biology to know that babies happen when you have sex and we had a fucking lot of it! Do you think this is ideal for me? I don’t even know how old I am right now!”

“Eighteen,” I bit out and he glared. “You turned eighteen while you were in there.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he tacked on. “When I was down there, he was all I had. You were dead. Mack. Hiram gloated about throwing you over the sea cells with Olivia. He told me about sending Fox out of the gate. I grieved for you already and as long as I told myself that Emory would get me out, I was okay, because it would hurt like a bitch, but I would have some piece of you. That made it tolerable. And you wanted him dead?”

“No—” I groaned and pressed a hand over my mouth, rubbing my face. “No, I didn’t want him dead. I wanted you to survive and it would be easier for you to do that without him. I regretted it, Atara. I talked to Emory about it. He thought the same fucking thing!”

“Oh, is Emory someone you want to sign up to mimic now? Because the last time I saw my brother, he tried to take my head off, remember? And then he punched Nikita so hard that he knocked one of his teeth out. So if Emory is your standard for model behavior now, your standards have gotten really fucking low since I got locked up.” He crossed his arms again, scowling, and I had trouble then, in that moment, even thinking about Emory like that. The Emory I’d come to know in the past months was the boy he’d told me about—the one that had existed before the beach.

And he didn’t deserve that. “That was unworthy of you,” I pointed out and he looked up, eyes wide
with surprise. “He’s been different. He’s been good and I don’t just mean behaved, Atara. I mean, he has bent over backward to make sure the people outside the wall had food in their stomachs and dry places to sleep. If I could be half the person your brother has been these past six months, I’d consider myself a fucking saint.”

He softened then and I continued, undeterred by the way his lips parted and how he looked up at me, surprised and sorrowful. “I told you that I’m sorry,” I repeated. “I regretted it. It was wrong. I know that and I have to live with it, okay? But what is being angry with me going to do now? You couldn’t possibly make me feel worse about it than I already do. So what? You want me to go? I’ll go.”

“No!” he whimpered, scrambling forward. “I don’t. I don’t want you to...I don’t know, Mackenzie. I’ve just...the past months have been...just surviving for him and I can’t...I can’t just undo that. I’m sorry. Can we just...can we just sleep? I’m so tired.”

I felt my heart twist in my chest, aching and sutured, and I dissolved a little bit. “Close your eyes,” I ordered quietly and he obeyed so that I could open the curtains and climb in next to him while the sun warmed his skin. He curled against me, thin everywhere but his belly, and nuzzled beneath my chin the way that he had before with his cheek to my heartbeat.

“You’re real,” he mumbled sleepily after a minute, his finger drumming on my chest.

“Yeah.” I repeated, knowing with a growing sense of grief that I’d be repeating it for years. “I’m real.”
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Emory

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the Keep, it was easier to be with Nikita. His Riders kept to the barracks, mostly, or they prowled through the city sweeping out pockets of resistance, dragging them back to the dungeons if it was possible. Mostly, however, it wasn’t. The temple guard refused to go down without thorough bloodshed and they took anyone with them who happened to be in the vicinity. They became more like a street gang--a group of thugs whose only goal was to go out as spitefully as possible.

Danica and Nikita took great joy in wiping them out and liberating the peppering of violence that still plagued the streets. ‘We don’t butcher innocent civilians,’ Nikita grumbled when I asked him why he took such pride in this task, which seemed infinitely below his station. To me, it was a thing better suited to Gier while Nikita and Danica delegated. When he put it like that, however, it seemed personal--like the slaughter of innocents was something that he couldn’t and wouldn’t sit on the sidelines for. It seemed absurd to me, all things considered. His culture warred often and without hesitation. It was a land where loving the wrong person could see you beaten to death.

That seemed a greater travesty to me, but if the job was being completed, I could hardly complain.

Cyril took to the Lierians with Hiram out of the way and Atara out of commission for the time being. Any leadership from the factions that had rebelled were judged swiftly and hanged in front of a crowd of his peers. Those who were not leaders were dispersed into the other tribes, separated from any substantial numbers of their own people so that any hope of rebellion from within was exterminated. They would be watched, he assured me, and any sign of lingering loyalty to that old wretch that had sought to kill my brother and I would be dealt with harshly. They were not a people who tolerated mutiny. If those involved could not be rehabilitated, they would terminated.

Tristan and Caius spent their days in the city burning the dead and obliterating the sunken ships in the harbor. Anything that people with the plague had touched was put to the torch. Buildings were bleached and scoured by those that had survived it. Survival, Tristan explained, made them immune to further infection by it and those people became the largest workforce in Coryth. Empty homes were slowly cleaned and families moved back into them. Warehouses were purged of the dead in the makeshift infirmaries and ships began to sail in from Southwatch just three days after the city was open, laden with food. A gift, Riordan had told me, and he’d had architects, sculptors, and craftsmen sent with them.

The walls in the royal quarters were repainted in the colors they had been. The furniture that had survived was put back and what hadn’t was replaced. The portraits, which had been moved to the vault, were placed into their original spots and an artist from Eden set to painting the one of my father that would join his predecessors in the Grand Hall.

“Infrastructure is shattered,” Cassie informed me, sitting down in the office I’d come to occupy. It was adjacent to the royal quarters and the bookshelf to my left swung open into the back hallway of
my family’s living space, hidden by a sprawling landscape painting of Coryth on that side.

She reclined in the chair, a pile of paperwork in her lap. “I know you’ve been stripping titles like they’re candy wrappers to replace the families that took part in the rebellion, but we need to move faster. I’ve put together a list of merchants that helped supply your war effort.” She threw the scroll down on the desk and tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear, legs crossed beneath a gauzy, southern style dress so that the outline of her calves was visible, laced with sandals that criss-crossed up to her knees. “You might consider them for lordships. Riordan’s architect has started redrafting designs for the gate. The Duke requests he be given full control of the project. He has plans.” She made air quotes around the word ‘plans’ with perfectly manicured nails, painted in a sand colored varnish to match her gown.

Cassie had become my shadow recently. She had a mind for politics and government structure the likes of which I had never encountered before. She also terrified people, which was incredibly effective when it came to dealing with rivals. They loathed her accent and her perfectly polished way of holding herself, which was soImmaran it was painful, but that was just about the only thing Immaran about her. Cassie had adapted with charm and grace to our way of life. She took up Corian ideals and beliefs without so much as batting an eyelash.

I pointed it out then. “Give Riordan whatever he wants,” I answered flippantly. “None of this bothers you?” I waved a hand at the room around us and she arched an eyebrow. “Giving up Immara? Acting like you’re Corian? It doesn’t feel like lying?”

She smiled, painted lips spread over perfect teeth. “Emory, darling, this is your culture, your home, and it is your regency. I am a guest here. It would be undeniably rude for me to demand some kind of special treatment for being a Kariner.” She examined her hands, folded daintily in her lap. “Besides...if we are going to call Coryth our home, we need to evolve.”

I pursed my lips, eyeing her carefully. The Immarans, I had come to learn, thought of themselves first as being from the city-state in which they resided. A Kariner, a Paikean, Idrian for those from the Vale—and after they were that, they were Immaran. It was like thinking of myself as being from Coryth before I was from Coria, but that was a foreign idea for me.

What sparked my curiosity most, perhaps, was the way that she never betrayed any of the anxiety that I knew had to plague her regarding Sebastian’s precarious situation. Cassie’s face was a mask, perfectly crafted and expertly honed by the culture she’d grown up in. “How is Sebastian?” I asked after a moment, my eyes keen on her features, waiting for the crack in the plaster...but nothing happened. She was a better player at the game of politics than anyone I’d ever met before, Cyril and myself included. No emotion flickered over her carefully selected expression.

“He is…” she began delicately, pursing her lips. “Recovering.”

“As he woken up yet?” The last time I’d gone to see him, he’d been as white as his sheets. I’d only been there to oversee their move to Tristan’s suite after it had been re-furnished the day after we’d taken the Winter Palace back. Elizabeth hadn’t destroyed much, only moved it around and repainted. Cassie had pointed out that she hadn’t had the resources to really do anything with the city locked down the way that it had been, so she’d made do with what had been available and, according to Cyril, had probably intended to auction off portraits and family heirlooms when she recovered me and effectively defeated the monarchy.

Cassie and Sebastian had been relocated then to Tristan’s apartments, all of his things recovered from a storage room in the lower levels. The boy had looked like paste, slick with sweat from a fever that raged through his body. Red lines spinner up from the mutilated remnants of his arm, wrapped in bloodied gauze and linen. He smelled of antiseptic and that wretched metallic taste that lingered in
the back of my throat and my sinuses when I was sick, turning everything in my mouth salty and ferrous. It was taking all of Tristan and Mackenzie’s combined knowledge just to keep the boy alive. They’d debrided the wound several times, scraping off dead tissue with each turn. The infection, Mackenzie had explained, was so insidious that it had spread to his major organ systems. His heart was dangerously close to giving out, his kidneys were shutting down, his liver was failing...according to Mack, his brain was doing absolutely everything it could to preserve itself, as bodies tended to do, and that meant a systematic failure of every other part of his body. It was a slow, horrific way to die, so I’d been told, and Nikita had leaned and whispered that had it been him, he would have put a knife in the boy’s ribs and called it done. It would have been a mercy because, at this point, even if he woke, it was entirely within the realm of possibility that his brain would be irreparably damaged.

I thought about the girl at Lysander’s that had lived in the chair with wheels, barely able to move and incapable of intelligible speech. I tried to imagine Sebastian like that--Sebastian who did backflips off of fence posts and who ran every morning with that bird soaring high above him...who had often swept into a room that Cassie was in, grabbed her around the waist, and spun her like they were engaged in some waltz that nobody else could hear.

He’d have rather died, in my opinion, than have to face a life where he couldn’t make her laugh like she had when he’d done that.

Cassie looked pointedly down at her hands, the first betrayal of any kind of emotion, but she didn’t answer. That, in and of itself, was an answer. “If he’s not the same…” I started gently.

Her eyes flashed upward, bright and angry for the briefest of seconds like she couldn’t stand to even consider it, but they went almost immediately cool again. She kept a tight leash on herself, tighter even than I did anymore. “Then I will take care of him,” she answered briskly. “As I always have, as I promised I always would. That’s quite enough, Emory. I’d rather not discuss him in this setting. I came here to talk about your city.”

And so she had. I nodded curtly. Had I been in her position, I would have likely felt the same way--adamantly refusing to see the reality of things, making claims I couldn’t hope to fulfill, focusing on tasks that I could control--so I allowed her to focus. “Right, the city,” I agreed.

She shifted the papers in her lap and slid one forward. “A list of craftsmen that survived the siege, both inside and outside of the wall. I wish we had the ability to be picky, because I dislike the idea of hiring idiots to a job that requires vast skill, but we don’t have the time or the numbers for that, so I suggest you hire them all for reconstruction purposes. We’ll weed out the morons as we go on.” She drummed her fingers on the top of the page, leaning forward. “We can assign them to...rebuilding fences or pouring ale while the intelligent ones handle the housing problem. There are several shipbuilders coming in from Southwatch within the week.”

“The food problem?” I asked, pushing aside the list of merchants. Housing was a problem, of course, but my primary concern was the number of gaunt, emaciated faces I’d seen in my walks through the city in the past few days. “People are starving.”

Cassie nodded, lips in a thin line. “Yes, and there’s food arriving, but merchants want money for their goods and services, Your Majesty. They don’t hand out meat and grain for free and the fishermen who survived are having to go further and further out because of the pollution in the harbor--”

“And then buy out the merchants,” I answered flatly, arms folded on my desk. She looked up with eyes like melted toffee, flecked with bits of a warmer, darker brown that reminded me of fresh cinnamon. It was the first time I’d ever seen surprise on her face as a direct result of something I’d said. “What?”
I continued. “Elizabeth hardly touched the vault. I don’t need a golden chalice from the rebel age or the diadem worn by Queen Aurora when she married Tylas. I need people fed. So find someone that will purchase them, I don’t care who, and buy out the merchants. Then give the food away.”

“Emory--”

I pressed my fingers to my temples. “Cass, listen, I made more enemies than friends in this whole fucking crusade to get the city back. I’ve murdered members of a quarter of the families in the lesser court. I need the people of Coryth on my side if I’m going to maintain control here.”

She took a deep breath and I could almost see her thinking, trying to circumnavigate this whole problem and discover an alternative route to the same ending. There wasn’t one, of course. “I understand that this is important to you--”

“I don’t want your opinion on it,” I shot back and she blinked, eyes wide. “Those people are starving, Lady Perondale--”

“Brighton,” she corrected weakly and cleared her throat. “It’s Lady Brighton. It has been for the duration of the time you’ve known me. We kept it a secret...in case you failed and we had to go back to Karinus for a time.”

I felt numb, mostly because it put an entirely different angle on her devotion to Sebastian. She was barely as old as Atara and he was little more than a child. I hardly considered them old enough to have married before they’d left Immara, but I knew marriage at their age wasn’t uncommon. After all, Laila had married Harlan when she was fifteen and had Fox by sixteen. It wasn’t unheard of.

It was just...jarring.

“Lady Brighton, then,” I corrected, my tone a great deal gentler than it had been. “The people in my city are starving. It would irresponsible of me to sit up here with a larder full of food and a vault full of gold while they die down there. I will not sit down to a full table until my people eat. Is that absolutely clear?”

“Of course,” she managed quietly. “I’ll see to it immediately. There’s also a petition for a formal coronation. If you want my opinion on that...” She paused like she was waiting for me to stop her and when I didn’t, she took it as permission to go forward with what she thought. “I believe it would be wise to have one. There are still traditionalists who followed you willingly because they trusted your father and they had people die for that. We ought to honor their service with a formal coronation and a march. It is Corian tradition to tour the length of the kingdom following a coronation, is it not? That’s the story they tell about how you met Fox, after all--that you happened upon him during his march.”

I ground my teeth. The last thing I wanted or had time for was a party but she had fair points on all accounts and the march gave Nikita the opportunity he needed to return to Glacia, visit his mother and his siblings one more time, and then come back south. Preferably with the safety of my contingent at his back. “Fine,” I agreed begrudgingly. “But only after you handle the merchant issue.”

Cassie nodded, curls falling in her face again, and then she grimaced, her teeth visible when she clenched them together. “One more thing,” she bit and I scowled at her, patience thinning. I hadn’t been sleeping. At all. Not since we’d taken the Keep back and I knew what it meant. I knew what the irritation and the bristling way I handled her were precursors to. I needed to find Tristan or Mackenzie and ask them to knock me out for the night. Hopefully a good dose of sleep would stave off the inevitable cycle. I did not have time for a depression.
“What is it?”

She grasped another paper and held it out. “With Olivia Bordelon dead, you have no formally trained Second. Tradition dictates the role fall to your brother--”

I shook my head. “Absolutely not. I found him hiding under the piano yesterday morning, convinced everything was a hallucination. It took Mackenzie an hour to coax him out. Besides, he’s fit to fucking burst any day now. He’s not an option.”

“Of course,” she agreed. “I thought you might say as much. I composed a list of suitable replacements and I suggest you pick before you formally charge Elizabeth Glenning. You still plan to wait until after Atara has the baby? Never mind. Not important. Riordan or Nikita would be my top selections. Riordan is an excellent soldier and a Bordelon. Bit of a pompous ass, if you ask me--”

“If you ask anyone,” I snorted and she grinned in response, real laughter in her eyes.

She continued. “Nikita is the best asset your military arm has right now. He’s a brilliant commander. He’s trustworthy and he’s patient. He is *not* a politician though. Still, he could command your army while you handled the politics. It’s not a bad split.”

“Nikita’s family will disown him when they find out about us,” I explained and she watched me, eyes trained on my expression. “So any tie to the legion he has will be broken. Riordan doesn’t like leadership positions. He would agree if we asked, but he wouldn’t be happy here. He wants to…” I waved my hand, lost in thought as I read down the rest of the list.

“Go to Southwatch and make lots of blonde babies with Danica Novak?” Cassie suggested and I laughed that time.

“Henri Mercier?” I spat, getting halfway down the list and choking on the wine I’d lifted to my lips in the process. “You do know we call him the Dormouse, right? He’s pathetic.”

Cassie pulled her chair in closer to my desk so that she could rest her head in her hand, elbow propped on the surface. “He betrayed his brother for you,” she pointed out.

“Ah, yes, because he would never betray someone again now that he has a taste for it,” I drawled. “No. He’s a hard pass.” My eyes moved down the page and I paused, having reached the end where Lord Belfleur and Josephine Valmont were listed. Joey, in my opinion, was not a terrible choice, especially given that she was slated to marry Meyer within the year, but she wasn’t, to be totally truthful, the *best* option. “You’re not on this list, Cassie.”

“I’m Immaran and I’m married to an assassin whose brother is an alchemist. Can you imagine their faces if you named me?”

I could, in fact, but that didn’t change that she was best suited for the job. I’d known her six months by then and she’d been steadfastly in my corner for the duration of it, come hell or high water. There’d been nobody more dependable outside the wall and, in the three days since we’d had the Keep back, she’d proven to be invaluable. She’d taken immediate command of the reconstruction efforts, organized the staff in the Keep, and provided me with a full inventory of the contents of the vault by the second day. ‘I *couldn’t* sleep,’ she’d said, showing up at my door, bedraggled and exhausted. ‘Tristan was up with Sebastian all night and I felt useless.’

“It would strengthen my ties to Karinus,” I pointed out. “I’ve spent half a year with you and nobody has put as much work into this cause as you without actually dying for it. I know you have your reasons. I know Rafael was breathing down Sebastian’s back, I know your brother didn’t want you
with the son of a slaver lord, but would a bond between our cities not be valuable to both of us?"

“Fox traded with Karinus. We have a bond,” she reminded me.

“It was monetary,” I argued quickly. “ Barely political at all. He visited you for tax purposes, not to legislate arms treaties or to forge an official allegiance agreement. We could offer that. Eventually. When we’ve recovered in Coryth a little bit. You can’t deny that you’re the best for this job, Cass.”

“Be that as it may, I’m still Immaran,” she insisted, exhaling loudly but then she shifted, her eyes narrowed and her bottom lip drawn between her teeth. “However...you know, Emory, we’re related? Your grandmother Laila was my grandmother Lilian’s sister. We’re...cousins, of a sort. Not unlike you and Olivia. If we impressed upon them the importance of our family affiliation…and reminded them that my husband, regardless of occupation, is Corian…”

“Mhm,” I nodded along with her, humming approval.

She leaned back. “Let me consider it,” she finally relented. “And discuss it with Cyril, perhaps? He likely has a better idea of how the Corian gentry will take to another foreign second.”

“When I’m feeding their people out of my own vault, what can they really say?”

Cassie smiled, gathering up her paperwork as she got to her feet. I knew where she would go now—back to Tristan’s apartments where she would sit beside Sebastian and that great bird that perched on his headboard. The door shut behind the click of her shoes and I stood, stretching my arms above my head and making my way for the bookcase that would lead me to the quarters where I was living with Mackenzie, Atara, and Cyril.

When the door swung open, I’d expected silence and emptiness. Atara spent twelve hours at a time sleeping and then he would sit up for something like thirty, staring out the window over the ruined city with his hands on his stomach.

I hadn’t expected him to be occupying the sitting room, perched in a windowsill that doubled as a bench with Nikita, who was still wearing his black armor, bow propped against the wall beside him. They were talking quietly and I lingered in the hall, watching at a distance, because I’d seen Atara interact with nobody but Mack and Cyril since he’d come up from the keep. He kept to himself, solitary and unable to form the same connections he had before. He didn’t carry around a journal anymore, either.

“...went into the city to help Tristan,” he finished the answer to whatever Nikita had asked him and I put together that he was referring to Mackenzie, who was not present. His voice was...different, somehow. Thinner, I thought. Fragile, like he didn’t think he deserved to be making any noise at all.

“Do you know how many people died yet?”

“About a quarter of the population,” Nikita answered gently, one leg swinging from the bench. “How are you feeling, Atara?”

“Like I’m never awake,” my brother responded monotonously and I felt my heart lurch. I would have given anything in the world to take this from him. He’d taken so much from me, shouldered so many burdens that should have been mine...I should have been able to help him. Instead, all I could do was watch while he reached blindly, eyes closed against the midday sun, for Nikita’s arm. When his fingers closed around it, he spoke tersely. “You’re real.”

“I am,” Nikita agreed, leg still swinging. He had an apple in his hand and took a knife out, carefully slicing chunks out of it. He handed one to Atara, who stuck it into his mouth and I could see him
“Tuck it in his cheek to suck on it. “How’s your...passenger?”

“Lian,” Atara breathed the unborn infant’s name, his hand on his stomach, and I hated the jealousy that rose up in my throat. I’d been the one that wanted this, once upon a time. I’d wanted and I’d dreamed about it like silly little girls dreaming about their fairy tale weddings and Prince Charming. I’d wanted to chase children through the sprawling gardens, teach them to swim in the pond like Fox had taught us, have their portraits painted at every birthday--

From the corner of the room, Teilo wobbled to his feet and made his way over to me. Nikita noticed, but he was silent, offering only a smile and a short wave while he continued cutting into the apple--one slice for Atara, one for him, over and over again. “Right,” the Commander agreed. “Mack told me that was his name. It means light bearer, doesn’t it? Suits him.”

“My name is Mack,” Atara said, finally opening his eyes, wincing at the sun he wasn’t quite used to yet. He was better than he had been, even after just three days. The yellow had faded from his flesh and though he was pale and skinny, he looked like Atara again.

Nikita shrugged. “Yeah. He talked about him a lot when we were outside the walls. He’d sit on the sand and look up at the Keep and I’d sit with him some nights. He’d tell me he was afraid of it, but then he’d say things like...like that he couldn’t wait to get the boy a set of paints and canvas. I didn’t know Mackenzie could draw or paint at all, but he really liked the idea of teaching Lian.”

“Hm,” Atara hummed. “That’s odd. He called him a parasite. Said he was leeching everything out of me, that it would have been easier to survive without him, that timing is bad for all of it...”

I stiffened and Nikita caught my eyes, surprise in his face, and I could tell he didn’t know how to answer that. In his culture, producing children was akin to religion. Their numbers were always in danger from the elements, lack of resources, raiding clans of other Riders--repopulation efforts were vital. That was why his relationship with me was so dangerous for him, after all, and so I suppose he couldn’t quite grasp the southern idea that an infant, after birth, was something to be treasured, but that prior to that it was just...it was there and that was really it. There were no legal ramifications for terminating a pregnancy like there was in the north or in Immara--though the two peoples had profoundly different reasons. Glacia’s reason was a numbers game. Immara’s was religious--death was sacred in the old world, but it could only really be death if you’d taken your first breath. The implications of that...the amount of dead children it probably resulted in...that wasn’t lost on me, but it wasn’t my country to run.

I stepped into the room, brushing my fingers over Teilo’s head briefly while I made my way to replace Nikita on the windowsill. He whistled for the dog to follow him and Atara looked up at me, eyes set in black circles, cheeks sunken and thin. He looked nothing like my brother, really. Sure, the features were there, but the personality of Atara’s face was gone. He looked...blank.

“You heard?” he asked, tipping his head curiously to one side while I sat and then he reached forward, fingers pressing to my chest over my heart. “You’re real.”

I didn’t bother confirming that I was. This was his new thing--to touch everything he saw, confirm that it was, in fact, not a hallucination, and to announce it to every person in the room. “Tiny,” I started carefully, catching his hand and threading his fingers through mine. He liked to be held now--by anyone. He craved contact the way that Nikita sometimes did, but that was hardly surprising. They’d both been deprived of affection and care for great chunks of time. Nikita had been around people, yes, but isolation had different forms. Sometimes, a room full of people could feel like the bottom of the deepest, darkest, loneliest pit on the planet.

I tried again, thumbing over the back of his hand. “Tiny, listen,” I spoke quietly. “I know that what
Mack told you seems ugly. I know it hurts. All of this hurts. Dad, Olivia, you...all those people...but trust me when I say this, he only wanted what was best for you.”

“He’s not a parasite,” Atara answered, his voice still flat, but then it wavered toward the end, emotion finally slipping through. “He was all I had.”

“I know,” I agreed and he turned from the window to stare at me, watery eyes locked on my face. “And Mack loves him. I promise, he does. He was terrified out there. You know what it felt like to live with the knowledge that they were going to kill him. You had that for days. He lived with it for months. He watched that wall everyday waiting for them to throw you over the side and if that boy wasn’t with you when it happened, rest assured, little brother, he was going to hunt Hiram like an animal to get him back and I would have been right there with him. He is not all you have anymore. You understand that, right?”

Atara stared, but there was something in his features. Emotion that he wasn’t very good at showing anymore with anyone but Mackenzie. I’d heard his nightmares. I’d listened to him scream through the door of their bedroom, listened to Mack soothe him back to sleep, but there was a pervasive idea in Atara that all of it was fake. This was some vivid hallucination and he was spitefully sealing away his reactions to it so that his captors couldn’t see him cry. “Real,” he repeated, squeezing my fingers. “I understand.”

I wanted to puke. He didn’t understand. He agreed because he believed, in that moment, that I was really sitting there, but he didn’t believe the whole thing. He couldn’t. Gods, he was so broken and I wondered if this was what he’d felt when I was sick. If this was how he’d lived, in this place, with a ghost for a sibling and parents that couldn’t recover from the tragedy of it. Cyril, at least, was holding his own. He came back from the Lierian camp every night and he held Atara against his side like he was a child again. I’d never seen them as close as they were in the days that followed the reclaiming of the Keep. It was as if Cyril was trying to make up for lost time the way that Fox had with me.

“Alright,” I managed to force the words through my teeth. “You understand.”

Chapter End Notes

Another playlist, edited in because I forgot to put it in the first go ’round. Sebastian is pretty much my favorite non-narrating character so he has his own list.

--Sebastian--
No Glory, Skan & Krale ft. Drama B and M.I.M.E.
Everybody Wants to Rule the World, as performed by Lorde
Whatever It Takes, Imagine Dragons
Remember the Name, Fort Minor
Not Afraid, Eminem
Chapter Summary

Narrator: Mackenzie

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: There is childbirth in this chapter. It's not too grossly described, though, but here's your warning.

Cassie treated Sebastian like he hung the stars in her sky. Every moment that she spent not running errands for Emory, she was at his side. She brought her work with her, more often than not, so that she could perch on the side of his bed, engrossed in lists of merchants, craftsmen, and architects, and she would run her fingers through his fever-dampened hair. She was present for every bandage change, willing and able to help. She held his head up during ice baths, his mutilated arm hanging uselessly over the side of an iron tub. She propped him up when Tristan fed honey and broth down his throat to keep him from starving. She slept beside him every night, waking up on the hour to check his temperature and change the cold compresses that were always tucked around his head.

When Emory told me that she had married him before they’d left Immara, it didn’t surprise me in the slightest. He was the world that she orbited, the moon to his planet or, perhaps more appropriately, the planet to his star because there was some fearful part of me that thought if he died, she would, too. Life would not be life for her without him and no grave would keep them apart. I knew that feeling. I’d lived with it for months outside the Keep, imagining myself crawling up from the depths of that chasm in the bay, determined to reach Atara even if the air had long since left my lungs.

Fortunately for both of us, fate didn’t doom us to a fate of crawling from our graves. Atara was safe and though he wasn’t himself, not really, he was still alive and I had him back.

And Sebastian woke up.

It was a week and a half into his fever when I came to check on him that morning, having left Atara in the capable hands of Cyril who would let his youngest tuck himself into his side while he talked about the Lierians. He was trying to gradually ease Atara back into his role and though he took some measured interest in the politics, he still didn’t quite believe everything was really real. He woke up at night, screaming and thrashing, sobbing until I could convince him that he wasn’t back in the dungeons. We had to leave candles burning in the dark and he wouldn’t walk into a room that wasn’t lit. He hated being alone. He craved contact from anyone and anything. I’d even caught him asleep in our bed with Emory’s dog under his arm.

He would be fine that afternoon, though, I thought. With Cyril there and Emory just a few doors over, he would be fine. So I’d come to check up on Sebastian—to change the dressing on his wound, which had finally stopped shedding dead tissue, and see if he needed an ice bath again. Tristan was already there when I arrived, pouring over an ancient looking book he’d read back to front twice in the past week, trying to deduce some way to use magic to boost the function of Sebastian’s organs.
The problem, as it turned out, was Tristan’s age. He wasn’t old enough to have accrued the sort of power Caius had and Caius was no healer, so he couldn’t step in and fix something that bad. Still, he was tireless in his attempts to find an answer and I’d been tireless on my own, attempting even the most obscure Lierian salves, poultices, and draughts.

I pressed my hand to his forehead and Cass looked up from her work, which appeared to be a ledger from the vault, and her eyes stayed on mine when I hesitated. I took my hand away and felt again a moment later, sliding it down his face and to his throat, but he wasn’t burning up anymore. He wasn’t boiling himself from the inside. “Tristan,” I spoke quietly and the alchemist hummed in response, but he didn’t move. “Tristan, I think his fever is breaking.”

That got his attention. Two books snapped shut—Cassie’s and Tristan’s—and he stepped around her to the other side of Sebastian’s bed. His hand replaced mine and that web of blue magic spread between his fingers, sinking into Sebastian’s skull, searching for answers—was this the end of the fever or just the end of the boy?

My heart picked up, hitching in my chest, and Cass leaned forward anxiously. Her lips, perfectly painted clamshell pink, parted slightly and she grasped for Sebastian’s good hand. His fingers groped in response and I heard her breath catch when Tristan drew back and the assassin’s blue eyes flickered open, bleary and red-rimmed.

This, I thought, was the real moment of truth. Tristan had been wobbling back and forth on whether or not he’d done the right thing in taking Sebastian’s arm. On one hand, he wanted the boy to have a chance because he was his brother and he’d only just gotten him back after so many years apart. On the other hand, there was a part of both of us that thought Nikita was right. It would have been a mercy to put him down. Someone like Sebastian could never thrive if he couldn’t be himself. He wouldn’t be able to adapt to a life that confined him inside of his own head.

His lips parted, chapped and pale, and he tried to make a sound but nothing came out. Cassie moved past me, sinking to her knees so that she was at the same level as his face, and she ran her fingers through his dark hair. “It’s okay,” she spoke softly. “You’re okay. Look at me, love. Can you speak?”

Sebastian managed a choking gasp that time, sucking air into lungs that, a few days ago, had barely been wheezing through the hours. It took him several minutes and several attempts to get anything coherent out. Tristan got him water and Cass carefully held the glass to his lips, his head cradled in her other hand. It wasn’t Cass that he finally answered though, despite her pleas. It was Tristan, who had leaned close to ask him, “Are you in any pain, Sebastian?” And he’d coughed out a garbled, “Yes.”

I reached into the bag I carried full of my own medical supplies and produced a vial of poppy extract, my fingers fumbling in my haste. In all the time I’d been healer, I’d never seen a recovery quite as remarkable as Sebastian Brighton’s. Emory had been bad off, yes, but his fevers had never gotten that high. He’d never been totally comatose for days. For hours at a time, yes, but he always squirmed his way to consciousness at least a little bit and I’d worried that he would die. He should have died.

But he hadn’t been cooking himself from the inside out. Sebastian should have looked like boiled meat in my opinion, but he choked down the extract and a few seconds later, he batted at Cassie’s face weakly with his good arm, clearly drugged and not used to the outcome of such a thing. “Look at you,” he slurred, stumbling over each syllable while we watched and she caught his hand, holding it against her cheek. “I like looking at you,” he continued and she giggled, leaning forward to press kisses against his mouth and I could see in her face that she was struggling with tears. It was an odd
look on her—on Cassie, who never betrayed an ounce of emotion for anyone else.

For Sebastian, she was an open book.

“‘M tired,” he managed and then he caught sight of me and his brow knitted in confusion. “You!” He pointed at me with the mutilated remains of his bad arm. “You cut...my arm off!” He seemed angry. Or, at least, he seemed as angry as he could be drugged out of his mind and before I could answer, his head slipped back to his pillow and he was out again.

A shocked silence coated the room like a blanket. I’d expected to be watching them entomb him in a few days, preserved according to Immaran custom, and watching while Cassie finally had her breakdown in front of everyone that showed. It wouldn’t be many, I’d thought. Sebastian didn’t know many Corians, but the few of us that he had known had come to think of him as part of our dysfunctional little family. Atara, in particular, would have been heartbroken to find that he’d died because of a wound he’d sustained keeping the young prince alive. I could only imagine the tears. He asked after the boy every day and I always had to feed him the same answers:

He has a terrible fever. It’s much higher than any I’ve ever seen. His infection is systemic. He’s dying, Atara.

And every day Atara would answer me with something like, ‘He won’t die. He can’t. I still owe him my life.’

“He shouldn’t be alive,” Tristan finally spoke in the emptiness and Cassie didn’t move, her fingers brushing through the black hair that fell over Sebastian’s eyes. “That fever was slow roasting his liver like a pig on a spit.”

“He should have been dead days ago,” I pointed out. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, Tris. He’s alive and he seems to be functioning. Just be grateful you’re not putting your only family to rest like so many others have this past week.”

Tristan made a noise and shot me a look, bristling with frustration. “I am grateful. I just wish I understood. I could help more people if I knew what had helped him.”

“Being too pig headed to die in bed is what helped him,” Cassie finally said, looking up at both of us. “He always says he’s going to die with a blade in his hand. He would be mortified if he died like this, not to mention pissed off. I’m sure he’ll let you study him when he wakes, Tristan.”

I sat my bag down at Tristan’s feet and gestured to it. “And I kept all the things I used on him in there. You’re more than welcome to take a look. Just don’t go telling the Lierians I shared their secrets with a dreaded alchemist.”

I left them there, with their recovering teenager who never should have been crafted into what he was, whose body bore the marks of abuse the same way that Nikita’s did, and who finally had a chance at normal that I’d never expected him to get. I called it a victory when I headed back to the royal apartments to relieve Cyril of what essentially amounted to babysitting.

Atara was...different. He was still the person I’d known before the siege, the person I loved and who loved me in return, who valued me, but there was something...off. He still saw things out of the corner of his eye, he had vicious, unrelenting nightmares that left him curled in a ball in my lap, listening to my heartbeat so that he knew that I was real. He wobbled when he walked because he thought the rooms were spinning around him. He broke my heart in a new way every day that passed and that was only compounded by the guilt I carried over Lian.
That morning found him asleep on a couch, a pillow clutched to his chest and an empty plate of food on the table in front of him. Emory had replaced Cyril at some point for the morning and was staring out the window at the ruined city below.

Emory, I thought, had been the true pillar in their family lately. Fox had been the glue that held them all together and, without him, Emory functioned like stitches. He’d been a rock, steady and dependable, and he’d thrown himself completely into the reconstruction of Coryth, determined to leave the kingdom better than what it had been before the siege. In the streets, among the common folk, people said his name like it was a prayer. They thanked him for the food in their bellies instead of the gods. They left flowers and memory sticks at the broken gates of the Keep, foraged from the forests outside the walls, and they called him the Lion.

It suited him, I thought.

Nikita was in the windowsill. He’d taken to occupying that spot. They’d been talking, but their attention turned to me when I entered. “He ate already,” Emory started before I even asked. “I made sure he got everything you said he should have. All the protein and vegetables, as per the instructions you left with Cyril, and I got him to put honey in his tea instead of sugar.”

“Quite a feat,” Nikita chirped. “It took a lot of negotiating.”

I hesitated. “What did you negotiate with?”

Emory flashed me a grin. “I told him I’d convince the kitchen to make him raspberry tarts for after dinner. Anyway, he’s asleep, obviously. Cyril had to run out to the Lierian camp. Most of them are packing up to leave and he had some last minute instructions for the new elders and I have some paperwork to read before Cass has that wretched bird eat my liver.”

I looked over Atara, sleeping soundly on the couch, his chest rising and falling with even, comfortable breaths, sun shining from the open curtains down on his pale skin. He was getting better, I thought. There was a fullness to his cheeks that hadn’t been there—not a big change, but something, and the infant beneath his skin squirmed now with a steady flow of food to keep him growing. I’d felt him the other night, pressed under my palm while Atara slept beside me, and a thousand apologies had screamed in my head.

It was stupid and irresponsible and beyond selfish to be dragging him into this. Even if the siege hadn’t happened, even things had been different, I was in no way prepared to parent a child and Atara was hardly more than a child himself.

But then I thought about Sebastian Brighton, who had known what he wanted from the moment he met Cassiope Perondale. Children, perhaps, knew more than we gave them credit for and maybe, just maybe, we’d pull it off without damaging the poor boy beyond repair. At the very least, he would have a better chance than I had. Of that, I was absolutely certain. He would be coddled and spoiled and loved without measure.

It would have to be enough.

“Sebastian woke up,” I informed them as they got up, Nikita stretching his arms toward the ceiling and Emory plucking up a stack of paperwork the size of a small dog. His eyes locked on mine, a question in his constantly tired features. Waking up, we all knew, was only half the battle.

Nikita was the one that asked the question though. “Is he himself?”

“He spoke,” I admitted. “He knew who we were. He even moved his arms. I think he’s...fine,
actually. Or he will be, in time.”

Beneath my fingers, which steadily stroked through Atara’s hair, the young prince squirmed and opened his eyes, bleary and disoriented. He grasped my hand quickly, his mouth moving over the word, ‘Real,’ before I nodded. This was a constant thing. Every time I left a room, every time he fell asleep, every time he touched me—real. He brought my fingers to his lips and kissed.

“That’s good,” Emory said after a moment of hesitation. His eyes moved to Atara, who winced and squirmed as he pushed himself upright. “You good there, tiny?”

“I…” Atara started and then nodded. “Yeah, yes. I think so. I just...ugh my back hurts. My legs hurt. My hips hurt.”

“Is that...normal?” Nikita arched a curious eyebrow as he spoke. “Because I’ve been around a lot of women having babies and that sounds like babies.”

I’d delivered babies. I’d known that this would come. Soon. I’d thought about it, even, but it had always seemed an abstract concept to me. Lian was just a thought—a squirming thing beneath Atara’s shirt who didn’t really exist except there and inside of my head. I’d been so distracted with worry over getting him out of the Keep that I’d never really considered how it might feel to actually hold him and for the briefest of moments excitement outweighed the guilt.

Emory looked at me, his papers forgotten and replaced on the table they’d occupied before. “Let’s...get you to a bed, Atara,” I began, sliding an arm around his back. Emory went ahead of us, pushing the door to the bedroom open with Nikita on his heels, his constant shadow who would turn lethal at the very hint of danger to the young king.

My stomach flipped as if it had grown wings and I heard Emory tell Nikki to fetch Tristan and Cyril while Atara made a noise, pained and low in his throat. His brother built a nest of pillows for him to prop himself up in and hovered, nervous, at the side of his bed. “Should I...should I...do something?” he asked, anxiety trembling in his voice.

Atara didn’t wait for him to speak and he didn’t answer except to grab for Emory’s hand, his other fist driven into the mattress. This was different, I thought. Different than other babies. I’d never delivered a child from Cyril’s line, obviously, and the anxiety in my gut spread upward to my heart. It couldn’t be that different. It couldn’t be. Birth across the animal kingdom was, for the most part, relatively the same in creatures that had live young. Surely, they weren’t such an anomaly that different rules applied and I was certain that if such a thing were true, Cyril would have mentioned it. Instead, he’d only mentioned that birth had been harrowing. Human babies were big—much bigger than Lierian babies, and birthing halflings was, according to the scarce literature on the subject, was difficult for Lierian women. The subject matter was hard to come by because Lierian women were hard to come by and most halflings were born to human women.

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“Deep breaths, tiny,” I cajoled, wetting a towel in the pitcher he kept and tossing it to Emory so that he could mop up the sweat that was shining over Atara’s face, twisted into frustration. “You have a long way to go. Have to pace yourself.”

“Do not patronize me,” he snarled in response, eyes bright and pained. This was going to be long and arduous, I thought, for both of us. I hated to see him suffer, but suffering was part of the process. Anything I had to dull that pain would make him too weak to continue and thus, I was at a loss for those twenty minutes while I did what I could. Emory kept his face cold and let him squeeze his fingers. I stripped him, surprised when he didn’t protest, but I had learned something in my time outside of Coryth when I’d been one of a handful of healers tending to thousands of people: There is no dignity in childbirth. Not one woman I’d ever come across had given the slightest of cares about
anything except the bone-splitting pain in her pelvis and the throbbing, contracting muscles in her abdomen. Atara, it would seem, followed those same rules.

Fortunately, there were two people in the Keep who had experience bringing ‘the Marked Ones’ into the world and Caius was the first to show up, Tristan on his heels. Emory ducked from the room gratefully at that point, his face as white as sheets, and Tristan traded me places so that I could take up what Emory had been doing--running cool fingers through his hair, mopping up his face, letting him squeeze my fingers until I heard the joints pop and crack.

“Well,” Caius announced flatly. “This is progressing quite quickly.” Tristan’s fingers worked magic over his skin, focused on his stomach, which hardened and contracted every few minutes until Atara was actually screaming, head thrown back in his pillows.

“I changed my mind,” he gasped after a particularly awful bout that had him nearly writhing. Not even Tristan could take the edge off completely, though he was keeping him cool. He was excited. I could see it in the brightness of his eyes. He’d been excited about the possibility of witnessing an Infinito birth since his arrival in Coryth. So little was known of them. By the time Caius was an alchemist, only Delior had been left and Caius didn’t have the same abilities Tristan did. What he could do, as far as healing went, was just about what I could do. He couldn’t map a body’s insides from the outside using only his hands.

Atara repeated himself, shaking his head, his eyes locked on mine. “I changed my mind!” he pleaded. “I don’t want to do this anymore!”

“Bit late for that,” I managed, leaning down beside him. “Keep breathing. You’re going to be alright. You’re doing so well, darlin.”

I expected him to do what most other people did during birth--to curse at me and swear off sex and scream until his throat was bloody. He only did the latter. He clung to my arm and there we stayed, stuck for hours in that room while he grew steadily more and more exhausted. Cyril appeared and got down on his knees next to the bed, his lips against Atara’s ear, and he spoke quietly.

“It hurts,” Atara panted. “Gods, it hurts. Why does it have to fucking hurt like this?”

“The pain is an honor,” Caius answered and Atara scowled. “You’re part of the last line of Marked Ones. You get to carry that legacy forward.”

“If I could stand--” Atara bit out. “I would force feed you your own balls right now.”

I heard Cyril snicker, his hand on Atara’s forehead, his mouth still beside his ear. The young prince’s fingers flexed in mine and he scowled at Caius. If looks could kill, that alchemist’s reign as an immortal would have been over. As it were, Tristan just shot his mentor a glare that clamped his mouth shut. “Don’t make me remove you, Caius,” he grumbled. “I don’t need your help delivering babies. I’ve done it a hundred times. You’re here because you’ve seen this before but so has Cyril and I have no problem relying on his knowledge over yours. After all, he did more than just witness it.”

Caius was quiet, appropriately mollified, and Atara’s attention turned back to me. “What if he hates me?” he breathed.

“He won’t hate you,” I assured him. “Nobody could hate you.”

“What if I fail? What if I screw him up?”

Cyril snickered again. “You will,” he drawled. “Just like we did to you and Emory, just like Harlan
and Laila did Fox, just like Ambrose did to me. Messing up is part of the job, tiny. Failing is part of the job. You can only do your best and hope it works.”

“No instruction manual on babies,” Tristan added. “One more, I think, Atara, and we’ll be done. Just one more.”

But one more turned into two more and turned into three more and by the time the clock chimed another hour, Atara was limp in his sheets, his fingers clasped weakly around mine. I’d lifted his head into my lap, cold towels wrapped around the back of his neck. I talked to him. It was all I could do. Tristan had taken over and I was oddly okay with it, all things considered. There was some part of me that felt I didn’t deserve to be the one that delivered this baby. I’d been the one that wished him gone so that Atara could survive. I was the one that had stood outside the wall and bargained with his life as my poker chip, but the longer it went on, the more worried I became and gradually, I started to realize that my fear was not for Atara but for the boy. Atara was living. His breath came in guttering, exhausted gasps, and he was too tired to even sob, but he was alive.

Lian wasn’t. Not really. Not yet. I didn’t dare look. I didn’t want to know because I knew that if something was wrong, I would notice it. I’d delivered babies. I knew what it was supposed to look like--slimy and bloody, head first, arms tucked down--and if something didn’t look the way that I expected it to, I couldn’t promise myself that I wouldn’t panic. Tristan could keep his cool. Tristan had abilities that I didn’t have--he could fix things that were broken.

“Come on, tiny,” he urged quietly, blue eyes flicking up to mine, concern in the downward curve of his mouth. Atara shook his head, groping upward for me, lips parted and cheeks flushed scarlet.

“I can’t,” he whimpered. “I can’t. Please, Mackenzie, don’t--” He trailed off, his words becoming another anguished cry. He set his teeth, bearing down on the tightening muscles in his abdomen, heels digging into the bed while Tristan urged him to keep going.

And then there was...silence. My stomach churned. For a moment, I wanted to puke or to crawl into the darkest part of the world and just die down there. I could feel my sternum crack with the pressure of grief while Tristan moved, a towel wrapped around the little thing he carried, one foot dangling limp and blue from the wrinkled fabric.

The world around me seemed to shatter like fine glass and Atara scrambled, energy suddenly back in his limbs. I was only dimly aware of him speaking, like he was underwater, asking what was wrong with him. I remembered Brentlyn cradling Olivia’s body, all that lost potential, all that horrible knowledge that he would spend the rest of his life without her...that every hope and dream she’d ever had and that he’d ever had for her was extinguished like the flame of a candle neatly snuffed out.

Tristan put the boy down on the dresser and Caius crowded next to him. Cyril was with Atara, speaking quickly, trying to placate him while he struggled, desperate to reach and I was steadily going numb with horror.

This was not an outcome I’d hoped for. This was not the price I’d bargained with. It was different for him to be lost. It was tolerable for him to be just that handful of mutilated tissue I’d pulled from Emory. This was not being lost, though. This was being dead and that was not what I’d wanted when I’d screamed to the heavens for an answer, for a miracle, for any hope to keep Atara alive in that wretched place…

I could see the blue light of magic at Tristan’s fingers, skating over a thin, bedraggled looking little body striped with marks down the right side of his chest and face.

If he died here, the only hope that Atara had been able to cling to in the dungeons, the prince would
not survive the loss. I knew him well enough to be aware of that, at least. He would turn inward and slowly waste away and there would be no save from Lysander the way there had been for Emory. Atara would not want to fight to live the way that his brother had.

‘Breathe,’ I willed the infant, still and ghastly pale under Tristan’s hands and instead of thinking that I would gladly trade him for Atara, I began to think that I would trade for him. I heard myself shout to the gods inside of my head, to whoever had been holding Atara’s hand through the walls of his prison, that they could take me instead. I’d never been anything important. I’d never been worth anything to anyone but Atara. They could take me instead of the boy.

It never got to that.

A thin, watery cry rang out from the dresser and I saw Tristan’s bunched up shoulders relax and Caius glanced at me, offering a brief, curt nod. I let out a breath I hadn’t known I was holding while that thin cry turned to wailing, wet and triumphant and livid.

And so Lian came into the world the way that he would always be--surprising, unpredictable, and perpetually pissed off about something, but fervently adored because in that moment, I understood why Atara had been so vehemently disgusted with what I’d thought outside the wall.

“Look at him,” Atara mumbled, breathless and panting, still sticky and sweaty and bloody from his hips to his knees, holding him up for me, still shrieking like the world’s angriest cat. In time, we would discover that was just who Lian was--a rebel without a cause, a brawler, a boundary-pusher--beautiful and incredible and dangerous.

And ours.
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning: Gore. Execution. If the comments are to be believed, you guys are looking forward to this.

Emory was a rock. A light in the dark, a beacon for everyone around him in the weeks that followed the siege of the city. I had never expected the sort of strength he showed. It reminded me of home—the cold, unforgiving, unrelenting force that was Glacia...a force that refused to be bent or broken. Emory's days of being broken were over and now he stood alone, with the weight of his whole family—no, his whole kingdom—balanced across his shoulders. He was not the boy I'd come to know in the months that I had been in Coria. The frail, unhealthy, unstable, destroyed husk of a halfling that I'd met had been entirely purged.

This was the Emory they knew and loved. The boy they'd thought had died on the beach that day. His confidence was back. He handled himself with poise, kept his chin up, made decisions—he took care of Atara when the younger prince screamed through nightmares that not even Mack could comfort. He spoke in hushed whispers with Cyril about his father and tried to soothe the ever-present ache that Fox's absence caused.

Emory was a King. He had been born to be a King. He had been trained to be a King and watching him from my place in his pillows as he gave orders and made decisions, there was no doubt in my mind that he would be able to fill Fox's shoes.

And the longer he remained like that, the worse his nights became. While Emory played pillar for everyone around him, I played the foundation that held the pillar up. I spent every day out in the city, combing every street for any remnant of a faction still loyal to the false Queen or to Hiram, but no matter how exhausted I was or how many hits I'd taken, I always went back so that he could lean on me. He had nobody else, not really—not personally. Cass could handle policy, but she couldn’t be the balm that I provided.

Lian’s arrival took the heaviest toll, I think, because that boy was beautiful. Small and skinny as a result of Atara’s imprisonment, but otherwise healthy and wearing two horizontal stripes on his right cheek, a long one on top and a shorter one right under it. He cried often, with lungs like an opera singer’s, and his limbs flailed, tiny fists and feet kicking and punching at anyone and everyone who ever tried to pick him up—except Mack. Mack, for reasons unknown to anyone, got a free pass with Lian and could pick the newborn up with casual ease. The wailing would stop immediately.

I could see in Emory’s face that he envied them terribly and it churned in my stomach, a horror I’d always known existed. I hardly cared that he couldn’t give that to me. I’d never been particularly good with children nor I had liked looking after them when I was younger, but Emory wanted them
like he wanted his next breath. According to Riordan, he always had, and so while I didn’t care that he couldn’t give it to me, I cared that I couldn’t give it to him.

And that would be a problem, I thought, because he was a king. He needed an heir and unlike Atara, Emory would never be able to birth a child naturally, not when his bent bones couldn’t open to accommodate an infant the way that they were meant to. It broke my heart to see him with Lian, arms folded on the side of the boy’s cradle, watching him sleep or holding a glass bottle up while he ate, legs kicking frantically. He had personality, that baby. He’d been born with it.

It rocked the stability Emory had grown to represent and left him sobbing into my side deep into the night—about me, his father, his brother, Cyril—even Mack. Especially Mack, who would have to watch them execute his mother the way that he had watched them kill Fox. Mack, who had become Emory’s family, saved his life, and took care of Atara...he was the last person in the world that the new King wanted to hurt.

Yet, the morning of the tribunal to formally charge Elizabeth Glenning dawned with the same strength he always wore in those days. It had replaced the grief he wore like armor—this new facade of being put together and normal. I loved that he was healthy...or, at least, he was healthier than he had been before...but I missed the honesty of his sick days. He hadn’t been able to hide that he was hurting the way that he could after the asylum...and he was hurting.

There were moments—just brief moments—where the shattered, vacant Emory that I’d fallen in love with peeked from beyond the determination in his eyes. He recognized my own anxiety over letting him do this alone...letting him make the decision to send Mack’s mother to the chopping block. I doubted Mackenzie Glenning would care much about what happened to the woman after all that she had done to him and to Atara, who seemed to be the sun that Mack’s world revolved around. Emory would take it far harder than Mack would, if only because he had so recently lost Fox. It would be an ugly reminder for all of them and though Emory believed it would give them closure, I disagreed.

There would never be closure for what had happened to Fox. It would be a gaping, open wound for years and years. Executing Lady Glenning would be a sort of justice, but it wouldn't fix it.

That morning, he pulled on that too-familiar armor with the lion draped over the pauldron and though two crowns sat atop his dresser, his fingers played over the one that I had given him.

“You should wear your father’s,” I advised him gently, pulling my boots on and tightening the buckles at the foot of his bed. It had been nice to be back in the Keep, in the safety of the royal apartments where we could share a bed without worrying about consequences of it. There was no sneaking in or out here. I’d missed that casual feeling more than I’d realized.

He was quiet, index finger tracing the scalloped curves of the crown from Glacia before they moved to the points of the one his father had always worn. I’d never seen him put that one on. I’d only seen him handle it once, in fact, when it had been recovered from Elizabeth along with Fox’s family sword. That, at least, he carried once it was in his possession. He kept it strapped to his hip like a security blanket.

After a time, eyes fixed on the crowns in front of him, he turned away without selecting one and crossed the room to me. I was fussing with the sleeve of my tunic on my right arm, the left still bare to display that tattoos of my rank. Emory’s fingers found the buttons under my throat and he carefully slipped them into the appropriate places to hide the bruises from the night before. “I can do that myself,” I pointed out dryly.

“Mhm,” he agreed softly, tipping my head up. There was a lingering guilt in Emory for what he’d done to me prior to being removed and sent to the hospice. It was a guilt that we didn’t talk about—or
at least, not at length. In fact, since we’d lifted the siege, there hadn’t actually been sex. There’d been a lot of foreplay, but he was exhausted, tottering between mania and depression, and I spent every day in the city fighting insurgents or hacking down half-destroyed houses to build pyres for the dead. It was work better suited for someone that didn’t have a title, but there weren’t enough people to be picky and I didn’t mind labor. It just meant that at the end of the day, I was battered and bruised. I had been perpetually battered and bruised my entire life.

So I didn’t blame him for the guilt or the exhaustion. How could I? Emory loved me. He’d taken care of me that first night after we’d stormed the city and I’d been coming down from that powder. He’d been so tired himself and his hands had been shaking, a direct result of having actually killed people for the first time in his life--killed them with his own hands. He’d climbed into a bathtub with me, arms around my middle, and we’d stayed there until the water got cold. Then he’d coddled and kissed me, climbed into bed, and he’d been whispering that he loved me against my ear ever since.

I could see that guilt when he looked at me like that, my face in his hands and my eyes wide, waiting for him to say something else. Instead, he kissed the tip of my nose and draped an arm over my shoulder. He led me from the room and down to the hall where they held all the tribunals in Coria. The same hall that Fox had been sentenced in years ago, if the history books were correct, only instead of a table at the front, there was Emory's throne.

I’d never seen him in it. He’d confided in me that he didn’t feel right sitting in it. It belonged to Fox but when he sat in it that day, he looked like he belonged there. He looked like his father, all long limbs and tousled black hair. He propped his chin up in his hand and looked on lazily as the court settled in and I settled into a place near his throne reserved for an honor guard.

Emory leaned back and opened his mouth to speak but the door behind his seat opened and Atara wobbled out, Mack’s hand on his arm. The younger of the two Bordelon boys was not recovering the way that everyone would have liked. Every time I saw him, Atara looked thinner and paler. His skin was almost translucent and he trembled with every step until he practically collapsed into the intricately carved wooden seat beside Emory. The seat of the Infinito, where Cyril had been for years. Now, he stood behind him and looked up at the metal animal that adorned the crown of Emory's throne--that polished steel fox with the gemstone eyes. If he thought something of it, he kept it to himself.

Mack occupied a similar seat to mine and he sort of grimaced when Emory stood and practically hopped down the three steps. He made a gesturing motion to the guards at the door and the sound of chains clanking pervaded the room. A hush fell over the court as Lady Glenning was shuffled in. Her dress was tattered, exposing filthy legs up to her thighs. Her hair was a matted blonde mess and she was very obviously hysterical. She wept and whimpered, a pathetic creature compared to the woman I’d met at council meetings who always seemed one step away from Fox ordering her tongue cut out.

This was the woman that had tortured Atara for so many months, left him a frightened husk of who he’d been before, incapable of discerning hallucination from reality. This was the woman that had stuck Emory’s hunting knife in his father’s belly and strapped him to a horse to try urge the new king into the madness he was so renowned for. This was the woman that had condemned Mackenzie to years of literal hell and left him to rot in a brothel. She was the reason it would take years to rebuild Coryth. She was the reason so many pyres burned on the beach and the reason so many Corian families went to sleep with an empty bed nearby or plague boiling in their veins...the reason the temples had fallen and the religious sects were scattered militia groups.

And yet...I felt pity. If it hadn’t been for her, Emory’s ability to stand on his own two feet would have never been put to the test. She had solidified his recovery--been the fire that forged him into the
king he was now and I had come to love this version of him even more than I’d loved the broken pieces he’d been before. My stomach rolled with it and Emory sneered when she threw herself at his feet. Atara flinched backward, hand over his mouth like he might vomit and he reached forward, blindly grabbing Mack’s shoulder. The healer got up and, against all tradition, gathered the youngest prince up out of his chair and sank into it with Atara in his lap.

“The final death toll, Elizabeth Glenning, settles now at somewhere around five hundred thousand people,” Emory informed her, his voice curt and violent. I could see his fists clenching, nails biting into skin. Tonight would be hard for him and, thus, would be hard for me. "And it's still growing,” he continued. “The city is destroyed. The temples are destroyed. The tribes are scattered." The hush grew even more still. What was left of the court after her disaster seemed to hold its breath. Mine caught in my throat and I leaned forward. Emory paced in front of her like a large cat waiting for the moment to extend its claws and strike.

He took a deep breath and stopped directly in front of where she lay half kneeling, half collapsed on the floor at his feet. "The King is dead," he accused bluntly, his voice clear. "You gave the order to execute a monarch, to torture a Prince and his consort who, by the way, is your son." There was a horrified, collective gasp that rippled through the gentry like water in the rain. “You intended to give the Infinito to a rebel sect. You sold him. Like a head of cattle and you would have done the same to me. Do you know what that is, Elizabeth?"

She bawled, trembling and trying to wipe her face with filthy hands. Her tears left dirty streaks on her cheeks and down her throat and she looked up at him with wide, red-rimmed eyes. I swear I thought I heard her mumble something about mercy but Emory spit at the suggestion and she collapsed into loud, desperate weeping again.

"It's treason," Emory answered for her. "It is high treason. It is regicide. The penalty for that, despite all of Coria's misgivings on execution, has always been death. Elizabeth Glenning, your lands and titles are forfeit. Under normal circumstances, these would be awarded to your cousin because your son is base born, but there is only one member of your wretched family that I trust with that amount of wealth. Mackenzie Glenning will be legitimized and awarded the title of Lord and entrusted with everything you leave behind." He turned toward the chair where Mack was staring at him, Atara in his lap, his eyes wide and surprised. "Objections, Mackenzie?"

"I--" the blond managed, sounding rather like he’d momentarily lost his wits. He stammered for a moment, trying to force something out of his mouth but eventually just shook his head to indicate that no, he didn’t have any objections.

The new King looked back at Lady Glenning, who pawed forward and toward the raised portion of the room. "Mack," she whimpered. "Please, please--don't let him--"

"Shut up," Mack hissed, quickly moving Atara from his lap so that he could get to his feet and out of her reach. "You beg me now? After all of these years? Do you even know what I had to live through? They treated me like meat from the moment they could force something into my fucking mouth!" I cringed and I saw Emory do the same. Mackenzie didn’t talk about this, not with us, but Atara seemed utterly unfazed by the words. His large eyes didn’t so much as flicker in his gaunt face. He knew all of it, I figured. All the filthy, torrid details of Mackenzie’s life at the Lantern.

She wept, bitterly, hands clasped together in her shackles. “I’m your mother;” she protested and heaved herself forward to grab for his legs. Mack stepped back out of her reach, disgust on his features like he couldn’t even stand the thought of her touching him.

“My mother? My mother?” His cheeks flushed livid red and Emory’s hand landed on his elbow. Words were exchanged, so hushed that I couldn’t hear them, but whatever was said, Mack won the
argument because Emory retreated, arms crossed. “I don’t have a fucking mother and the only normal family I ever experienced was them!” He gestured wildly to the throne where Atara, Cyril, and Emory were all gathered. “And you murdered Fox. You murdered Olivia. You threw me from the sea cell, mother!”

In the time I’d known Mack, I had come to realize that he was, above all else, logical and level-headed. There wasn’t a single part of him that ever acted out of raw passion. He was calculated and intelligent. He could have been so much more than he’d been given the chance to be and Atara couldn’t have picked a better person to have at his side. Now, however, he was livid. His face was red, his eyes were burning, and I thought he might have actually been shaking with a quiet rage that had been festering inside of him since his childhood. Mack had grown up rough. Far more rough than any of the rest of us had, even me with all my Glacian background. If anyone had a reason to hate Lady Glenning, it was her son and oh, he did. It vibrated in every cell of him in that moment. He was positively comprised of nothing but rage.

Silence fell over the court as people took in the horror of it. These were things the Corian gentry didn’t like to hear about their kingdom and it was compounded by the fact that Emory’s court was crafted exclusively out of people who had supported him. Some of them had even been raised to the level of gentry to fill the void left by families that had died in the siege or been butchered in the fighting for siding with the wrong monarch.

Mackenzie turned to Emory, eyes wild. “Let me do this,” he implored him and I stood, alarm in my bones and on my face.

“It won’t make you feel any better,” I protested. “Mackenzie, listen to me.” I had played executioner so many times and it never soothed the ache. It never took the edge from the anger. It provided a brief adrenaline rush—a shot of victory with horror as a chaser.

But he was beyond listening. “No,” he snarled, turning to scowl at me with bright, livid eyes. “You have no idea what I had to live through because of her. Emory does, so you don’t get to say a fucking word, Commander.”

“Mack,” Emory said his name in warning, like he thought the snarl had somehow offended me or gotten under my skin. It hadn’t. It should have. It probably would have if I hadn’t been northern but my feelings had callouses from years of living under my father’s thumb and, despite what Mackenzie said, I understood that level of hatred. If faced with the opportunity to bury a blade in my father’s belly, I couldn’t say for sure that I wouldn’t be as vehement as him to do it...to right all those horrific wrongs.

I understood the hatred. I didn’t understand the suffering. Being beaten the way that I had been was one thing. Living through what Mackenzie had survived was so entirely different that the two situations couldn’t even be compared. I would have never survived that, I thought. I would have gutted someone with a broken bottle and ended up choked to death with a belt. I could have never laid there and lived with it for the sake of survival. I didn’t have that kind of resilience in me.

Emory continued, however, one hand on Mack’s shoulder. “Don’t talk to him like that,” he said softly and Mackenzie’s eyes darkened. “He’s right. This won’t make you feel better. I’ve been here.”

“I’m not doing it for me,” he snapped back and gestured to Atara, who looked...vacant. He stared down at the pitiful woman on the floor with absolutely nothing in his eyes. It was like he didn’t recognize her or, more likely, he didn’t believe any of this was actually happening. Tristan said it would take weeks, maybe months, for Atara to settle back into normal and though he was gaining weight, even I heard his nightmares. Even I saw the way he looked down at Lian in his cradle and then back at his stomach like he didn’t really think that the infant was real. He couldn’t be left alone
with him, if only because nobody could trust him to actually do something if the boy cried.

How would he know it was real, after all?

“Let me do this,” Mack repeated.

Emory watched him, his eyes clouded with thought. He was trying to forge a monarchy that was different from his father’s—one where scheming and behaving like Elizabeth and Hiram resulted in execution before the kingdom was torn apart...one where respect came with a dose of fear. They loved him, the people of Coryth, and they left flowers at the gates of the Keep and ribbons with his name on them tied to the ruined wrought iron. Emory the Lion.

I knew he despised the idea of the post. It reminded him of the map of scars that crossed his father’s back and hindered his movement, thick as tree branches that spread over his shoulders and down his spine. Emory wanted his executions clean now that he was healthy. He even regretted, to an extent, what I had done to that boy in the dungeons.

He took his father’s sword from his hip and weighed it in his hands. “Emory,” Cyril started softly. “Your father would counsel mercy.”

“I am not my father,” he repeated the words he’d said so many months ago standing in my estate when they talked about shaping him into a duplicate of Fox and I remembered how much it had broken his heart to be crafted into that...how painful it had been to look in the mirror. I cheered for him silently--for finally doing what he thought was right.

When he spoke next, it was clear and audible to the assembled members of court. “Let this be a lesson,” he told them, holding the blade out to Mackenzie. “About the perils of treason and treachery and about the strength of our people. Coria will no longer tolerate the malignancy of people who move against us. We will remove them like the disease that they are.” He sat down in the throne, fingers curled over the arms, that great fox snarling down at the room in front of him. He gestured to the pitiful excuse of a woman on the floor. “Mackenzie, bring me her head.”

Elizabeth screamed, scrambling backward over the marble and Cyril took a step forward but it was Atara who seized his wrist and held him back. “A united front is important,” he sing-songed, betraying the fact that he’d actually been paying attention the entire time and I wondered if he was dissociating the way that Mack did...if he was compartmentalizing himself so that he didn’t have to deal with it directly.

“Corians do not execute!” Cyril hissed.

“We do now,” Emory drawled and Mackenzie advanced down the platform, blade in his hand, too big for a halfling but he was fueled by rage and adrenaline. She wobbled upward, legs bound in chains, and stumbled a few feet before she landed on her hands and knees, sobbing and horrified. The gentry all took a step back, but not a one of them spoke up. They watched, eyes hard, having all lost family to her wretched crusade.

Not a one of them gave a damn when Mackenzie loomed over her, sword gripped in both hands, and he swung.

It moved like we were underwater and I saw it happen second by second. An arc of silver steel and the blood red pommel that stuck out beneath his fists, moving in a perfect downward curve. That blade was wicked sharp. I’d seen to that myself. If Emory was going to insist on carrying such a ceremonial weapon, then it would have to actually be capable of defending him.
I heard the thunk of the blade meeting flesh. Cyril winced, cringing at the noise, but both Emory and Atara were utterly unmoved. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have said there was Glacian in their blood, but it was hate that made them so cold, even when Elizabeth’s head thumped onto the marble in a puddle of crimson that would take the staff weeks to get out of that beautiful stone.

Her body collapsed, chest down, and twitched there for several seconds, fingers spasming in scarlet while Mack stood over her, face white, and then he grasped the filthy head of hair by matted blonde curls. Her jaw was slack and her tongue protruded obscenely. Her eyes were rolled back so that only half the iris was visible.

Mackenzie threw it at Emory’s feet and it bounced, rolling to a stop just before it would have kissed the new king’s boots.

“The money is yours,” he said stiffly. “Use it to rebuild what she broke. Do something with her. Put her head on a spike to discourage people from this shit. Feed her to the sharks. Have her corpse dragged through the city. I don’t care. I don’t want to deal with her anymore.” He leaned forward then and inhaled, his eyes narrowing. “And get yourself back to your room before a mob of angry halflings jumps you again. I can’t put you back together twice.”
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

When Emory wavered, it always made my stomach flip. It brought me back to the ugly days when I'd first gotten to know him and how broken he had been. An anxiety would well up in my throat and constrict there like a tightening noose, blocking the air from my lungs and wringing out the hope that I had so dutifully built up. I was anything but weak. I had been groomed for strength and endurance the way that Emory had been groomed to be a leader, but watching his face turn pale in the wake of Mack's destruction and having to sit idly by while he stumbled from the room with only his guards was just about all that I could take.

I had toyed with the idea of Emory receding back into what he had been before and I had determined that, if I were physically able to withstand it, I would have stood by him for that too but when faced with the idea of it--

That was different.

It wasn't just about me anymore. His entire family had crumbled to dust the way that he had that day on the beach. Their roles had reversed completely and now Emory was the sole survivor in this brutal power struggle. If he went down, the entire Bordelon line was going down with him.

I shook myself out and hurried down off the dias, Atara close at my heels, though it didn't stay that way. He was still so weak and thin and I made it to the door before he did. Mack caught up with him a moment later and wrapped him up in safe arms. My concern was, at that point, getting Emory back into the family's suite where he'd be safe from whatever it was that he was going to have to go through. I was unfamiliar with Lierian biology. I hadn't the slightest idea what this would mean for him, other than discomfort. Mack always took care of Atara. Fox had always taken care of Cyril. Emory had never needed me, not like this.

I chased after him, panic in my chest, through the weaving corridors of the palace. He had such long legs and he was so determined to just get back to his rooms. I could understand why. Being out here, out in the open during this? It had cost him so much already.

He was so frantic in his haste that when he finally reached the royal suite, me close on his heels, he stumbled into the first piece of furniture--a small table by the door with a vase full of clivia and ginger flowers on top of it--and went tumbling into it, cracking his chin off the surface. His teeth went through his lip and I heard him yelp through a mouthful of scarlet. Thank the gods Lian was with Cassie or he'd have set to screaming.

“Son of a bitch,” Emory hissed through teeth slick with blood and I grasped him under the arm to help him up only to have him jerk away like the touch made his skin crawl all over again. “Don’t.” It was a warning. An order. I put my hands up and backed away from him.

“I’m just going to get something to mop up your face then,” I offered quietly and I backed away, crossing the foyer into the dining room where a hand towel was folded neatly on a credenza.
I tried not to think about all of it--about whether or not I could really survive Emory slipping backward into old habits, about whether I wanted to live through that again….I’d been someone’s punching bag my entire life and I’d so loved the way he’d been when we were outside the wall--sleeping pressed against me, climbing into bathtubs with me and blowing soap bubbles in my direction just to hear me scold him for behaving like a child, and the sex that didn’t end with me limping and sticky in bloodied sheets.

I made my way back to him with the towel. He was still on the floor, face turning steadily pinker. His hair was damp with a thin sheen of sweat and when I pressed the towel to his bloodied lip, he didn’t cringe away. That gave me a moment to notice that the marks on his face were radiating in heat in a way that I knew couldn’t be comfortable. They were always much warmer than they should have been, he said, and he rubbed this clear salve into them every morning and twice more throughout the day. Something with aloe, tea, and honey in it. I liked the smell that clung to him for awhile afterward.

I helped him up to his feet then and he took the cloth, holding it to his mouth as we made our way back to his bedroom. I left him sitting on the bed to find that clear paste so that I could press it to those marks for him in hopes of cooling him down but when I came back with the little jar, he shook his head. “It won’t help now,” he said mutely, flopping listlessly into his pillows and I sat it back down. While he stared at the ceiling, I watched him. He had feared this moment. He’d confessed that to me after his nightmares. If Emory could have his way, he’d be done with heats forever, but here it was--this biological drive in him that had ruined his life.

I’d have taken one of his beatings over watching him suffer like this, twisting in his sheets, peeling his armor off so that he laid there in a bloodstained shirt. I knew better than to push him for information, though. When Emory was ready to talk, he would talk. Right now, he even cringed away from the heat of Teilo’s body when the dog jumped up on the bed next to him. He was quickly shooed away and the animal made a disgruntled noise, settling into his pile of pillows on the floor.

So I listened to him breathe. It was shallow and almost ragged and he squirmed every few moments, eventually stripping his ruined shirt off and throwing it almost violently into a corner. I didn't know how to help him and I knew what a sensitive topic this was going to be for him. We had never discussed the possibility of him having heats again. I think, for the most part, Emory had convinced himself that he was too broken to go back to it and had come to terms with living the rest of his life in a more typically 'male' fashion. I had never asked. The last time he'd done this, his entire world had caved in around him.

Cyril eventually knocked on the door and when Emory didn't respond, I pushed myself up from the chair I was sitting in and exited into the corridor. The little blond peered around me for a brief moment and then looked up at me. I was small. I had come to accept that a long time ago, but my mother was small and so it wasn’t entirely unexpected. That, combined with the fact that I was a twin and I'd been born too early to be healthy, made my size just another obstacle for me to climb. I had overcome prematurity, though I’d never quite caught up with the rest of the boys my age. Cyril, however, was diminutive in a way that was almost comical. "How is he?" he asked, wringing his hands in front of him. He always appeared to be on the verge of a breakdown anymore, not that I could blame him. His relationship with Fox was something I could only ever hope to half-fulfill for Emory and the emptiness left by the King's absence was a pain that everyone felt.

Cyril just felt it the most.

Crossing my arms, I leaned against the wall and shrugged. "He hasn't said much," I admitted quietly.
so that Emory couldn't hear us if he had pressed his face to the door like a child. I wouldn't have put it past him, to be totally honest. He was, for the most part, this dark and dangerous entity that lived on the fringe of the family, no longer really a part of it, but not separate from it either. He couldn’t fit the way that he used to, not with Fox’s crown on his head. He was more than just the older brother our the foundation. He was the leader.

"Has he..." Cyril pursed his lips, like he wasn't sure how to broach this subject with me. "Has he explained to you what...uhm..."

"No," I cut him off before he had to finish and raised an eyebrow.

Cyril's shoulders sank in relief that he didn't have to complete the sentence and he motioned for me to walk with him. I did, following him out into the living area where he sat down heavily on the chair that Fox had always occupied. I sank into the couch beside him and waited.

It wasn't that I didn't want to ask. I did. I wanted to help Emory. I only ever wanted to help Emory but if helping Emory meant being the Mack to his Atara...there was no way. He would never allow it. He couldn't. It broke my heart knowing that he would rather suffer through this thing that they all seemed to think was so hideously awful than to let me touch him in that manner when I was so willing to do it. I would have reveled in it...to love Emory the way that he deserved to be loved...

It was all I'd ever wanted for him—to be able to feel that.

Eventually, because I imagine broaching the topic of Emory's sex life was uncomfortable for his father, I did ask. "Is he going to be in pain?"

Cyril flinched. "Yes and no," he admitted gently, getting to his feet so that he could pluck a bottle of wine and two glasses from a shelf. He poured them and handed one to me before settling back down. "He is going to want things from you that I don't think he..." He hesitated and looked me over. "That I don't think he actually wants."

"I had gathered that much from Mack and Atara," I said blandly. I lifted the glass to my lips and swallowed hard. "And there's nothing else I can do?"

He sighed heavily, his eyes cast down the hall toward the door at the end. It led to Emory's bedroom and I imagined him still laying on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. It was better than the self-destructive behavior he had engaged in prior to his visit to the hospice house but it wasn't healthy, either. He’d been so solid. So strong. I'd been so incredibly fucking proud of him since he'd come back and he was on the verge of melting back down because of more of Elizabeth’s bullshit.

Cyril tapped his fingers on his glass and then shook his head. "You can be there for him," he offered softly, giving me an apologetic look. "When I lived with the tribe, that's what Kinnon did. I didn't want any of them to touch me or help me in any real sense so he just...stayed with me. You can stay with him. It won't really get awful until tomorrow evening and the worst of it is only a day or two. I'm sure, if he's too sick over it, we can find someone to sedate him."

"He was sedated for almost two years, Cyril," I deadpanned, getting quickly to my feet. "He needs to feel something and it's not dealing with Elizabeth." That anger I felt in my chest lashed out and I expected Cyril to flinch or to launch into how what he'd had done to Elizabeth was inherently wrong.

He downed the rest of his wine and pursed his lips. "It is his job to make those decisions now, Nikki," he pointed out and I opened my mouth to protest but was stopped by his hand held up in a motion to silence me. "That’s not the point I wanted to make to you. He’s going to get angry. You
can't take it to heart, just like you didn’t take him beating you to a pulp to heart.”

"Except I did," I shot back and he looked up at me, almost surprised by the admission. We didn't talk about this. In fact, Cyril and I didn't talk at all. I'd known Fox because I'd worked with my father on his council but the extent of my knowledge on his consort was shamefully small. I'd been so angry when they'd sent him away--there weren't even words to describe the sort of fury that I stewed in for weeks. I'd done anything I could to escape that rage. I'd cut down every tree on the estate my father had purchased and then chopped them up. I'd gone hunting. I'd gotten so blind drunk that I'd woken up under my bed instead of on top of it and I'd bawled like an infant curled in the back of my closet where nobody could see me.

I had taken what Emory had done to heart because he needed me to. To understand how he hurt, I'd needed to hurt with him and I had. "All of you sat here and you tried to understand but you couldn't. You just wanted him better. You wanted him back to what he was, Cyril, but that's not who he is anymore. I let him do what he did to me because I needed to feel it. He's healthy now, but he's not whole and if today ruined that..."

I expected him to argue. Instead, he sat his glass down and looked pointedly away in an attempt to gather himself back up. My heart was frantic. I'd gotten myself worked up thinking about Emory and I was angry again. Angry at Atara for being so empty, angry at Cyril for being so lost, angry at Mack for being angry himself. I was hurting--physically and emotionally. Emory drained me. He had torn me down to the foundation of who I was and I'd had to rebuild for him. I'd have done it again. I was willing to, if this broke him, but I couldn't forgive it. I wasn't even sure Emory could forgive himself if we lapsed back into it. The only person I thought might have a better chance than me of dealing with him was Atara, but Atara was...decidedly incapable.

So the heat coming back hadn't just been cruel. It was a dagger in the ribs twisted at just the right angle to deal optimum damage.

"You deal with Emory,” Cyril began flatly. “I will look after the rest.”

He waved me away and for a moment, I just watched him. He sank deeper into his chair, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. He looked utterly defeated and I tried to imagine myself in his position.

Even the thought of losing Emory like that made my throat tighten and to avoid any further mentally conjured images of Emory dead on the beach, I strode back to his bedroom. He was curled on his side, his arms wrapped tight around his chest and his legs drawn up. At some point, he had kicked his boots off and slipped into loose fitting linen bottoms. His skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. I couldn't smell him like Mack could smell Atara. I wasn't Lierian. My body didn't react to whatever chemical pheromone or compound his body was producing at the moment. He was still just Emory. Emory with the flu, perhaps, but still Emory.

I sat down carefully on the edge of the bed and he flinched at the weight. "It's just me, kitten," I assured him gently. I didn't touch him. I knew better than to touch Emory without warning and so I waited for him to adjust to the fact that I was there before I did warn him. "I'm going to touch you.”

He made a small, pathetic noise in his throat and I ran my fingers through his hair experimentally. He didn't shrink away. He was far too warm for my taste. If I hadn't had some minor experience with Atara, I would have sent someone for a healer. This was a 'harbinger of plague' type of fever but there wasn't much I could. I went to his dresser, poured water from the pitcher into a bowl, and pressed damp clothes to his neck and down his chest while he shivered beneath the attention.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I eventually murmured the question. I had moved to kneel
beside the bed, the bowl near my knees. I'd dipped my thumbs in the water and run them over the marks on his face. Atara had mentioned to me once that Emory overheated far worse than he and Cyril did. He was a human campfire curled up in a ball in the center of the bed that I shared with him.

Emory's eyes had followed me since I'd come into his line of sight. Wide, mint cream green—they always threw me off. They weren't human and the difference between his iris and the whites of his eyes was minimal. Just a pale, pastel tinge and I should have been used to it. There were other Lierians. Mack's eyes were pale like that, though Atara's were decidedly human. But it was different with Emory. I suppose because he looked so haunted and empty, drained of everything that made him a person. I hadn't seen him like this since before he'd left, but there it was and that was okay. If he needed these few days to just to be broken, I could deal with that. If there were times in his life where he just...wasn't okay anymore...I could deal with that, provided I could bring him back to the land of the living.

I dropped the towel I was holding to his cheek back into the bowl and returned to wrapping damp, dark curls around my fingers. "Emory?"

He took a shuddering breath and that vacant expression vanished from his face. "Did I do the right thing?" His voice was so small. It was like the bedroom had suddenly turned cavernous and the sound of him speaking was so easily lost in the emptiness around us. My heart broke for him, laying there with his busted face and his combustion heated flesh. "In all of it? Was all of this my fault? If they hadn't tried training Atara, none of this would have happened. Did I kill Fox?"

There was no easy way to answer him, either. I wasn't a liar. I never had been. There was no room for lying where I'd grown up. There were only brutal, honest truths but the brutal north had been what killed my sister.

I wouldn't let brutality kill Emory, too.

I got unsteadily to my feet, wincing at the pins and needles that stretched through my legs from kneeling for too long. I stripped down to my trousers, and climbed into the bed beside him. Emory turned toward me, though he didn't sit up, and took one of my hands to examine the web of lines along my palm. He seemed pleased with it and moved on to tracing the scars on my ribs and my shoulders.

"I find it difficult to blame anyone for what happened to your father," I admitted quietly. "In Glacia, we lay the blame for things like this on an entire community. If we had been better, we could have prevented it. If Coria had purged their systemic demonization of the Lierians before your father became King, this could have been prevented. Lady Glenning would have never had an army of zealots to sack your home with. You made a bad decision when you went to the beach that day, Emory, but that doesn't make it your fault. We all make bad decisions and we usually get a slap on the wrist for it and we move on. Not...not this." I gestured to him and let my hand fall back into his hair. He seemed to enjoy it, even squirmed a little bit closer to me at the contact.

"And maybe that day at the beach started a series of events that would eventually end with us here," I continued. "But it wasn't all bad. Atara met Mack. I met you. I never would have if things had been different. I wouldn't have felt drawn to you or inclined toward helping you. Maybe we could have been friends, but I doubt it would have been more than that, considering where I'm from."

Emory snorted. He knew, of course, what my father would say or do about all of this and I realized that I didn't particularly care anymore. My decisions were mine and mine alone and nothing they did or said should have had any influence over them. I had never been what Vasilev wanted anyway and
my attempts to try had only ever given me more compound fractures in both my bones and my heart.

I took a deep breath and shifted my weight, wriggling down into the bed so that I was on my side, facing him, and he blinked at me. I was beyond ecstatic to see that 'checked-out' expression off of his face. He even leaned in and kissed me quickly--chastely. It still tasted of blood, but it was all the reassurance that I needed to know that he would be okay. Emory had pulled himself together and he wasn't about to let go of the pieces he had collected.

I let my fingers skate over the marks on his cheeks and his eyes fluttered shut at the contact, in part because he seemed exhausted and in part because his marks connected directly to the bottom of his eyes and then fanned outward toward his temples. "In the end, kitten, Glenning had a choice. She had the option to do the right thing. We all have that option. She didn't take it. She killed Fox, Emory. Not you...and even if you had wielded that blade yourself...Fox wouldn't have blamed you or your brother for it."

"He’s getting better," he whispered. "I thought he was somewhere else, lost in his head today, but he was paying attention. Mackenzie said the humming in his ears has stopped and he doesn’t see flashing lights anymore."

"That’s good," I assured him, squirming a little bit closer so that I could press my forehead to his and steal another kiss. I felt almost like some co-conspirator in his grand plan, whispering secrets in the dark. It had to end though. I had to get back to the situation at hand because when Emory got too far into this, if I understood correctly, there would be no real talking to him. "You didn't answer my question though, kitten. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Emory shifted uncomfortably and sucked his bottom lip between his teeth again. "Don't do anything I ask you to do," he whispered, almost inaudibly, but I nodded.

"I promise," I told him, gripping one of his hands in both of my weaker, stinging ones. "I'm just going to hold you through it. Is that okay? If you want me to leave completely, I can leave."

"No," he murmured and he closed his eyes, tucking his head beneath my chin in the process. He was a human furnace, radiating heat that I wasn't used to. I grew up in a place where it snows all but a few months of the year. Heat wasn't something I was comfortable with, but that discomfort was something I could deal with to offer him some kind of solace from the hell he was about to endure. "Stay. Just...Kita, please. I can't let you do--I can't stand the thought of--"

I hushed him, blindly finding his lips in the dark so that I could press my fingers over them while the storm outside raged and lightning brightened his room every few minutes, casting long shadows on the walls. "We'll stay just like this," I promised quietly. "No matter how much you beg or cry or plead with me for something else. We're staying just like this."
I still couldn’t grasp the passage of time the way that I should. I noticed that the most. The lights were gone. The humming in my ears was gone. I no longer imagined people when I was sitting alone, but the urge to check if people were real persisted onward. So did the fact that minutes could feel like hours to me. It was an exhausting game to be part of--this wild up and down where seconds beat on forever and the sand in the hourglass seemed almost frozen.

That was why they didn’t leave me with Lian, I think. When he cried, I was never sure how long it was and even then, I sometimes doubted whether or not I was really hearing it at all. It was disorienting to suddenly feel so detached from him. I loved him fiercely. From the moment Tristan had laid him on my chest, wet and finally screaming, I’d been his. My entire world changed and refocused, making him the center of my universe, and I felt that every time I saw him, every time I touched ran my fingers over his little cheeks, tracing the lines on the right side while he slept. When he moved though, I still expected to feel him under my skin. That was what hurt the most--the sudden distance I had from him and the distance that remained between me and everyone else around me.

I had been alone for so long that I no longer knew how to behave with them and they didn’t know how to treat me. I watched Elizabeth’s execution like I was looking through tinted glass, somehow separate from all of them when Mackenzie sliced through her throat like it was butter. I sat beside my brother through his coronation, but I never connected with him. I felt none of the relief that I should have felt when he took up that burden from me officially and truly donned the mantle of Coria’s new king. When Cyril sat beside me, the cadence of his voice was no longer the familiar comfort it should have been and initially I thought that maybe it was because he wasn’t Fox. I’d always been closer to Fox...but it wasn’t that. The Lierian lullabies he hummed from my youth--the same ones that I murmured to Lian at night--the same ones that I murmured to Lian at night--they held no meaning for me anymore.

And Mackenzie…

Mackenzie was supposed to be dead. I’d grieved for him. Twice. I’d shed so many tears that I’d run out and the sobbing had turned dry down there in the belly of the keep. I’d cried until I’d thrown up, face down on the cold stone floor, because a world without him in it wasn’t worthy of saving or surviving in.

It was disorienting to have him with me--to wake up to the smell of ginger and honey soaked into my sheets, to roll over and find him there with Lian asleep, his belly against Mack’s chest, lulled to rest by slow, steady breathing and the cadence of a heartbeat that soothed me, too. It was jarring to stand in the mirror, trying to will weight back to my face, and to feel his arms slip around me from behind and see his face appear, his chin on my shoulder and his lips at my throat. I didn’t quite believe it in those moments, not until I felt him breathe against me, the warm expansion of his chest and the puff of breath against my jaw were proof of life.
It took a lot of time to realize that he was not some nightmare. I wouldn’t look at him in the mirror and see him melt away when I touched him like he had in all of my hallucinations in the keep. Slowly but surely, I came to terms with the fact that this was reality now. We had suffered two horrific losses when they murdered my father and Olivia, but to have only suffered two was, according to Nikki, a much better outcome than most families in the city had suffered.

But it wasn’t just two, I thought when he said that. It had been three. Sebastian Brighton wasn’t dead, but he wasn’t whole, either, and for that, I owed him. It didn’t matter what Emory had already paid him or how terrible I still felt. I needed to see him. I had it in my head that if I could just let go of that...that final incident down in my prison...then I could well and truly tell myself that I was healing. That last day was the only thing that clung to me--the sight of that blade sinking into his hand, the sound it had torn from his throat, that glass vial he’d broken--

Caius had explained that when he’d finally talked to me. That he hadn’t known it would summon Fox. He’d only crafted it to summon someone who was lingering nearby. He’d expected my father to linger with Emory and Cyril on the eve of that great battle, but Fox had been with me, probably through the entirety of it, because I was the only one of them that was alone.

Sebastian didn’t owe me any explanations for the magic he had used. He didn’t owe me anything, in fact, but I wanted to express how grateful I was for his presence down there and so my visit to Tristan’s quarters was the first time I left the royal suite for anything but official business. Lian was asleep in his cot and I left him in Mackenzie’s capable hands. I doubt he would have seemed so encouraged by my desire to walk around if he’d known where I was going, but I didn’t crush his dreams with any word on it.

The palace seemed empty with Emory and Nikita having finally started their long walk north. I’d hated saying goodbye to my brother the day before. We’d been inseparable once--as thick as thieves--but time and trauma seemed to dictate we spend our adult years apart and so he’d gone, Nikita with him, and Caius had boarded a ship to Immara with promises to ‘keep in touch.’ Coria, he said, was nothing but a bad memory to him.

So I weaved through a palace that was empty of the people that should have populated it and I made my way down the set of steps that led to the first floor apartments. It wasn’t Tristan who opened the door when I knocked though, my fingers lingering on the ornately carved wood. There was a mark in one of the swirled indentations, a piercing hole from an arrowhead, a relic of the siege. I wondered if nobody had noticed it or if they just hadn’t gotten around to fixing everything on this level yet. My brother had seen to the repairs on our floor quickly, stripping everything Elizabeth left behind and turning our childhood home back into our home.

But like Caius, this place was nothing but bad memories now. It was still a prison. It would always be a prison.

I put that thought away when seawater green eyes stared at me through thick, dark eyelashes. “Your Grace,” he breathed, sweeping into a bow that was absolutely unnecessary. This was Ridley. I could see it in his face, the same one from that memory of Tristan’s that I’d watched. “Is something the matter? Tristan is out in the city with Lady Brighton overseeing some of the repairs in the market district.”

“No,” I answered hurriedly. “No, no. Nothing is wrong, Ridley, thank you. I came to see Sebastian, actually.”

His eyes clouded over and he stepped back, letting the door swing open completely. It no longer looked like Tristan’s quarters. The walls were the same color, yes, and all of his bizarre diagrams and shelves of pickled specimens were still there, but it was organized. Papers were neatly stacked with
weights on top of them so that the windows could be opened. The books were arranged according to author, carefully placed on appropriate shelves. There was a clean workspace on his desk and the quills he wrote with were color-coded.

I laughed briefly and Ridley turned to look at me, eyebrow up. “So you’re the method to his madness?” I asked, gesturing to the place, and a small smile spread over his mouth.

“Tristan likes organized chaos. I just like…organized,” Ridley admitted. “That’s what I did for him…before. I organized his papers, his books, his tinctures, salves, and potions. I don’t have to anymore. I think he’d prefer that I don’t because it reminds him of…” He lifted a hand to his neck where a pale scar circled his throat, the evidence of a lifetime spent in a collar that had rubbed against his flesh until it tore it open, wore it down, and toughened it into thick scar tissue.

I nodded in response. I didn’t need further explanation than that, but I should have heard it. He was one of mine, after all, and he had suffered. I knew what imprisonment felt like and in that moment, I couldn’t understand how he had survived decades of it. “Someday, when all of this dies down, you’ll have to tell me about Immara,” I offered gently. “I’d like to…to help, if I can.”

“It would take more than willingness to help,” Ridley answered, his voice quiet. “It would take an army.”

“I happen to have one of those…and a Lierian alchemist that would love to break some chains,” I quipped back and his smile widened.

Ridley nodded. “Oh, Caius and Tristan both would, but one war at a time, Your Grace—”

“Atara,” I insisted and he arched an eyebrow in question. “You can call me Atara. Tristan is a good friend. He saved my life. He saved my brother’s life. Any friend of his is free to use my given name.”

Ridley ran his fingers through chestnut colored curls and stepped over a pile of books he seemed to be in the process of organizing, gesturing for me to follow him. “Friends, huh? Is that what he calls us?” he asked. There was enough laughter in his voice for me to gather that at least part of him was joking, but I didn’t know him very well at all and so I hesitated, wringing my hands, before I finally answered.

“Well, I…I assumed you were…more than that, but given your history, I don’t…I don’t…” I stammered and Ridley stopped in front of a door at the end of the corridor of the small apartment Tristan occupied. Eventually, Cassiope and Sebastian would move to the quarters reserved for the Second and their family, but as long as Sebastian’s health was in question, she was adamantly opposed to moving away from the alchemist.

My companion chuckled. “Oh, we are more than friends, but I think you have the wrong idea about Tristan,” he informed me with a grin. “He doesn’t…we don’t…” He rolled his eyes and later I would gather that he was struggling with his clash of cultures. Lierians talked about sex like it was having afternoon tea. It was a form of worship in their culture. Humanity was…decidedly more reserved. “Sex doesn’t do anything for him,” he finally managed. “He doesn’t…ever feel inclined to and I’m…well, I spent years in a collar, so…I mean, we have, but it’s neither here nor there and not really part of…us. I don’t know the word in Corian, I’m sorry.”

“I…” I hesitated. “You know, I don’t know that we have one.”

Ridley nodded quickly, color rising to his cheeks. “I’d prefer if you didn’t mention—”
I shook my head. “Oh, no, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” For a second, he looked confused, eyes clouded, and then he sort of smiled and knocked once on the door before he pushed the handle and nodded toward it.

“He’s in there. Good luck.”

I almost asked why I would need it but he had walked back toward the pile of books he was working on and I ventured carefully into the room. Sebastian had been awake something like a week by then and he was sitting on the edge of the bed, pale and exhausted looking, with bandages from the mutilated end of his arm all the way up to his shoulder so that what remained of that limb was fashioned in a sling against his chest. When he looked up, his eyebrows knitted together in question and I saw his good fist tighten on the end of the bed. “Who--” he started and then he shook his head, the question clearing from his face. “Atara. Didn’t recognize you without the grime and the bump.”

I flinched. “Yeah, well, soap and water work miracles, right?”

He huffed and I realized, looking at him there, how young he was. Emory had talked to me about him in the aftermath and I remembered him calling Sebastian ‘one of those faces you never forget.’ And he was that. My brother had likened him to those delicately carved statues of the gods, but I likened him to poetry. Perhaps because it was a medium I was more familiar with, I didn’t know, but Sebastian was like prose given form. He was made of rigid muscle and though he was peppered with scars the way that Nikki was, none of them were particularly heinous and the one across his cheek gave him a dangerous sort of look and that was more appropriate than beautiful, though they both applied. He looked like the daydream of every fanciful teenage girl in Coryth and that was impressive because I had seen teenage girls swoon over my brother before. They still did. If Sebastian was in the same room as Emory, though, their attention would have been on the Immaran.

“Look, Sebastian,” I started, wringing my hands and taking a step forward. He shook his head, hair falling in his eyes, and then he looked up at me with a grimace on his face.

“Don’t,” he warned. “Don’t start apologizing about this.” He rolled the shoulder attached to his mutilated arm, the lower half of which was missing right below the joint of his elbow. At least they’d saved that, I thought. With a prosthetic, he’d have a much broader range of motion thanks to that.

My stomach flipped nervously. “I wanted to thank you,” I managed to get out and he shook his head again.

“Atara, don’t,” he warned again. “You don’t owe me shit. Your brother paid me for that job. I didn’t do it out of the kindness of my fucking heart or because I’m a good person. I’m not a good person, okay? I’m a murderer. That’s what I do. I fucking kill people.”

“You got hurt protecting me,” I insisted.

“I got hurt because I was reckless,” he snarled. “And I’m paying for it now.” He lifted his remaining hand and pinched the bridge of his nose while my heart stampeded in my chest. I had to keep telling myself that he was in pain. I could see it in the way he ground his teeth and the way his fingers went back to a white-knuckled fist. He was angry and hurting and he had every right to be those things.

So I pushed. It was stupid, really, because even without an arm, Sebastian probably knew seventeen ways to kill me with just his legs or that giant bird that perched on his window, watching us with bright, predatory eyes. Commandant, Mack had told me, who was imprinted on our assassin friend. I’d thought Emory’s massive dog was terrifying. Teilo stood taller than me when he got up on his back legs.
Commandant looked like the stuff of fucking nightmares with talons that could tear my eyes out and a beak designed for ripping flesh from bone.

“You saved my life,” I pressed. “You saved my son’s life. That’s worth more than any lordship or Cassie’s position as my brother’s second or any of it. So thank you.”

He was grinding his teeth and I wondered if it was because that wound still ached or if it was because he wanted to knock my jaw down my throat. He didn’t do the latter, fortunately enough, though I imagined he could have. “You’re welcome,” he bit out.

“And I’m sorry, Sebastian. I’m really, really fucking sorry about your arm and I know that doesn’t mean shit to you.” He chuckled and shook his head as if to confirm that no, it definitely didn’t mean shit to him, but he kept listening. “I know it doesn’t fix anything, but I needed you to hear it from me...I needed you to know that it’s not just my family that appreciates you and I don’t care if they paid you already. If you ever need anything here, you come to me. I’ll make sure you get it.”

For a second he was quiet and then he looked up from his lap, blue eyes locking on mine. “Tristan said Mackenzie built you a brace for your leg,” he said, indicating the very contraption that was strapped around my knee to take the weight off the torn ligament that had never properly healed. “Can he build me an arm? I know it won’t be the same. I know the hand is…” He ground his teeth again. “Hopeless...but I just...I can’t hold her like I used to.”

I felt my heart break in that moment. All over again, for someone else’s pain instead of my own, so it was a different kind of shatter than the ones I’d been suffering and healing from recently, but it still hurt. I’d heard secondhand what my brother’s newest friend was like with her tragically young spouse--how they embodied what a healthy relationship was supposed to look like, how he spun her around and she jumped on his back when he wasn’t expecting her, how they talked and laughed together like they were friends before they were anything else, how they’d planned their future intricately and done everything in the right order--

It was different to see it. My own relationship was...healthy-ish. Lately, Mackenzie had been more caretaker than anything else, but we were slowly stumbling to greener pastures. Emory had told me that Cass and Sebastian reminded him of Cyril and Fox.

And Sebastian looked as heartbroken as I felt, staring down at the spot where his hand should have been. At least I was whole, I thought. I was whole. I could run all my fingers through Mack’s riot of curls and I could pick Lian up and--I hesitated, stopping mid train of thought, because I’d let Cassie hold Lian and she’d cuddled up to him like most people did and exclaimed with bright, brimming joy in her voice that she couldn’t wait to have her own.

Holding a baby would always be a struggle for Sebastian, I figured. Maybe not the holding part, but the picking up part? That required two hands, especially when they were still as floppy as Lian was, like his spine was made of gelatin and incapable of supporting his head.

“I’ll get him to start on it as soon as I get back,” I offered quietly. “He’ll need to come measure your other arm and the width of what you have...left...on the bad one so he can rig up a harness for it, I imagine, but I swear, Sebastian, I will get you the best craftsmen available for this. It won’t be a hand again, but I’ll make sure it’s as close as it can fucking get.”


“Numb,” I provided the word gently and he nodded. “Yeah, I get it, but you know...Mackenzie told me once that recovery isn’t going back to what you used to be the way that everyone says it is. It’s about getting back up when you’re down and finding a new normal. It’ll never be the same, but
Sebastian chuckled. “Oh, I know. It’s not my first trip down trauma road,” he said bluntly. “You spend seven years getting knocked around by your old man, you get used to finding a new normal. This is just...a big new normal.” He scrubbed at his face, still pink with the remains of fever, and I got to my feet.

“I should get back,” I managed quietly. “I...I left the baby with Mackenzie and I--”

“Don’t like being away from him for that long?” he snorted. “Yeah, I know. You gave Cassie baby fever. She’s probably going to start knitting socks.”

I doubted that. I couldn’t see Cass with her perfectly manicured fingers holding knitting needles, but I kept the opinion to myself and headed back to our apartments. I always cringed a little bit when I had to walk in there, my eyes lingering on the column in the sitting room where Elizabeth had chained Mackenzie like a dog, where she’d had me held down underwater until my vision turned black...then my eyes would flick to the dining table. It was the same one we’d had since I was a child, the same one they’d strapped me to when they’d drowned me that way, too, and it nauseated me to sit there. I tried to focus on the good parts of it--on memories of birthday breakfasts, intimate and shared only by my nuclear family, of how they’d let me eat cake those mornings, knowing they’d have to share me with the rest of the gentry later. I tried to remember my father sitting at the head of the table, glasses on, watching me play with toy soldiers on the carpet at his feet.

Gods, I missed him. I missed him so terribly that it took my breath away in that moment and Mackenzie looked up from where he was on the floor, bathing a very angry Lian in a small porcelain tub no larger than an average bucket. The baby wasn’t screaming, not yet, but he was kicking and his face was screwed up in a horrible expression, eyes shut tight, mouth open like he was about to wail but he was saving his breath to make it truly memorable.

“Hey, tiny,” Mack greeted. “You good?”

My eyes moved from Lian back to the table where I’d so vividly imagined Fox a moment before but the chair he’d occupied all my life was empty. It should have been Emory’s, but he adamantly refused to sit in it and so when we’d taken meals together following the siege, it had remained empty--reserved for the ghost in our memories.

I nodded briefly and then sat down with him, cupping my hands over Lian’s face while Mack rinsed soap from his downy blond curls. “He ate so fast that he projectile vomited all over himself,” my consort explained. “He needed changed anyway, so I figured I’d just do it all at once so he can vomit on his next outfit in two hours.”

“Is that normal?” I asked quietly as the wail finally brust from Lian’s extraordinarily large lungs. It was piercing in a way only infant screams could pierce, high-pitched and watery.

“Yes,” he answered after a second, wincing when Lian kicked, splashing both of us with warm water. “The vomiting and the screaming are both normal. He really hates water.”

“He really hates everything,” I deadpanned and I felt Mack chuckle beside me, finally lifting the squalling baby from the water while I gathered up a towel and held my arms open for him. He was delivered to me, wet and slippery and shrieking like a banshee. His arms and legs flailed with little to no direction--he didn’t have the muscle tone required to really give them any--and his little tongue stuck out of his mouth as he screamed. I deposited him carefully in his cot, toweling him dry as gently as he would allow me with all of his fussing and squirming, and then dressed him. All in all, it took substantially longer than it should have because Lian was never (and would never be)
But as soon as he was dressed and dry, the wailing came to a whimpering halt and he blinked up at us with the same reflective gray eyes as his father and stuffed his thumb into his mouth after several attempts, most of which ended with him smacking himself in the face before he finally got his hand where he wanted it.

“He’s so dramatic,” I whispered.

Mack snorted. “Oh, really? I wonder where he gets that. It couldn’t possibly be from you, could it?”

“Shut up,” I grumbled, throwing a pillow at him. We had settled into this...semi-normal ease in the weeks that followed the siege. Lian helped in the most bizarre fashion. He was something to focus on, a distraction from the reality of it all, and he was real. I never had to question if he was when I was actually looking at him. He hadn’t been there in the old keep when I’d been locked in my cage. He’d been an abstract idea, but now he was real. He was new. I couldn’t make that up.

I flopped down onto the bed, more grateful than I had ever imagined I would be that I could lay on my stomach again without feeling like I’d tucked a watermelon underneath me. I’d been so thin following my imprisonment that I barely gained any weight that wasn’t Lian himself and the swollen evidence of his previous living space had all but gone away. There was just a sore, aching feeling between my hips that Tristan assured me would dissipate within ‘six to ten weeks’ during which I was absolutely not allowed to have sex, not that I was lining up to engage in it or anything. Even if I’d wanted to, Lian kept us up all night. There was no real time for it.

Moments like this? Moments when he was quiet?

Yeah, we spent those sleeping.

Mack fell down onto the bed beside me and turned his face so that we were looking at each other. “So, where did you run off to?”

“To see Sebastian,” I answered quietly. “I have a favor to ask.”

“For you?” he teased. “Anything.”

“You mock, but this is a big ask,” I shot back, pushing at his shoulder and he rolled to his back, dragging me with him so that by the time he settled, I was draped over him like a living blanket, my head against his chest and his arms snug around my middle.

“He heaved a sigh before he cut me off. “You want me to build Sebastian an arm?”

I hummed in agreement and shifted, bringing my arms up so that I could fold them over his chest and rest my chin on them, looking up at him. He was staring at me, tousled looking and exhausted, but alive. I marveled at that every time I felt him against me. Real and alive.

One of my arms slid up and I brushed my fingers over his mouth, smiling when he kissed them, but it was short lived. He pulled me up, hands under my arms, and I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from squawking in surprise and rousing the nearly-sleeping infant. Mackenzie swallowed whatever sound I made, his lips slanted over mine, sealed into a scalding, bruising kiss. I gave his tongue access without question and one of his hands tangled in my hair while the other skated down my back to grope at my ass. He stole the air right out of my lungs and heat blossomed in my belly, low and growing steadily, and I could feel him against me, hard already when he finally leaned back to breath.
“Three more weeks,” I murmured against his mouth and he chuckled, his forehead pressed to mine.

“You say that like I have the motivation to fuck you right now,” he laughed quietly. “I would love to, really darlin, but I am so fucking tired.”

I nodded. “Mm,” was the only response from my mouth though as I pressed quick kisses to his lips and his cheeks. “So will you? Try to build something for him?”

“I’ll do what I can,” he promised. “I’m not an artisan though, Atara.”

“No, I know. I thought maybe you could design it and I’d hire someone to do the actual handiwork,” I continued, still kissing at his jaw, down his throat, across his collar to the neckline of his shirt.

He didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. He would do it. He would do it because I asked him to and I knew him well enough to know that. “You know, Tristan said no sex,” I whispered. “He didn’t say I couldn’t suck your cock.”

“Atara,” Mack warned but I lifted a hand and pressed my fingers to his lips again.

“Let me do this,” I pressed, moving down his body and, for once, he actually shut his mouth and didn’t argue.

Chapter End Notes

I think we have like...three or four more chapters to the end!~
I had never particularly looked forward to a coronation. It was all pomp and circumstance—lace gowns and batted eyelashes as every available female in northern Coria proper tried to entice me into some marriage agreement.

I got three proposals that day, sixteen suggestions, and one offer of casual no-strings sex if I promised to legitimize any offspring from the coupling. I felt like Nikita wanted to strangle every woman that approached me, but he remained diligently parked at the side of my throne. Everyone present thought of him as some kind of honor guard. He was Glacian, after all. There was no doubt in my mind that Nikita probably knew sixty-something ways to kill someone with just his hands. He had tried to talk to me about pressure points once—how to debilitate someone in a fight without killing them. How to cripple without shedding blood. How to incapacitate and disarm without a weapon.

I didn't mind having him at my side. Truthfully, I hadn't felt truly safe in years. I'd once fancied myself excellent in martial skills and combat technique but that day on the beach had changed everything for me. Kita's presence at my side was a welcome security blanket. I'd seen Glacians in combat. They were a brutal, dominant group of people and although there weren't many of them, they were the people to ally yourself with during times of war.

It helped that I loved him and being able to smell his cologne from where I was sitting was a sort of calming agent as the evening went on. He was leather and war paint. That jacket thing he often walked around in made my mouth water. It exposed one of his arms and fit tight against his skin elsewhere. What was visible was covered in tattoos or inky war paint. They were tribal designs that he seemed to have memorized and it took days for soap and water to wash the stain from his skin but I liked to trace the edges of the tattoos with my fingertips. They were stories of his Gauntlet and his forefathers—great conquerors, according to Kita, and legendary warriors. Glacia's royal family, for the most part, was dead, but Kita was the closest living family relation. He could have been prince, had my father allowed them to retain a monarchy.

Instead, his family filled a sort of seneschal role. They took care of the land north of the mountain range that divided old Coria from the original Glacian territories. I looked forward to seeing his father again and meeting his sisters at the end of the coronation march, which was extended to his home village.

Because Glacia didn't have cities. The place was too inhospitable to support large communities of life. They lived in little villages, typically tucked between two mountains, on a river, or against the
bay. They survived on diets of fish and gathered roots. In fact, Kita had never eaten real fruit until he'd arrived in Coryth and now devoured apples like they kept him alive. He even tasted like them.

The coronation, however, was a necessary evil and with my father's crown atop my head, we set off on that long, six month journey to the north. If we'd just been walking, it would have taken a substantially shorter amount of time but there were stops we had to make in various towns and settlements so that local lords and ladies could pledge their allegiances to the crown.

It was...uncomfortable. I didn't feel like a King. In fact, I felt like I was sort of perched on the edge of disaster, ready to tumble into the abyss I'd been swimming in for two years. The only thing that held me back was how happy Kita seemed to be with me now. Before, he'd been sympathetic. He'd loved me, yes, but he'd feared me too. That fear was gone and I reveled in the way he slipped into my room or tent at night, crawled beneath my blankets, and fell asleep with his head on my chest. We weren't...physical, but we didn't need it anymore. That wasn't to say that I didn't want it, but having him close was enough. The battle for the keep had left me emotionally raw and the last time we'd been intimate when I was like that had been before the asylum. Every encounter then had ended with him fighting back tears, chewing through the belt between his teeth, or mopping up the bloody mess I'd made of his back.

It was innocent, what we had then. It was sweet and it was pure and it was untouched by the profound grief and hatred I'd felt prior to my stay at Lysander's house where he'd broken me down and rebuilt my mental state from the ground up. I would be eternally in debt to Fox for having the fortitude to do what I needed him to do for me, no matter how much it hurt, and it was slowly eating me away that he never really got to see how he'd changed my life. It was a lingering cancer that metastasized in my heart and crept through my body until it punctuated my dreams and controlled some of my waking thoughts.

I tucked that pain away. As much as I wanted to let go of my father, letting go felt like a betrayal. I had loved Fox, perhaps more than I had loved Cyril, which isn't fair because I was closer to Cyril but Fox...I'd been special to him. I'd always known that. He'd always felt like he owed me something more because he'd missed out on my tender years and I had never once thought to tell him that he'd fulfilled my expectations and then gone so far beyond them that he deserved a title more powerful than father or parent.

Fox had saved my life, at the expense of his own comfort, because sending me away couldn't have been easy for him when he'd already lost me--once before I was even born and then again at the beach. I wanted to hurt for him. He deserved that much and letting go was a wretched sort of betrayal that I couldn't stomach.

And I had lived with that since he’d taken his last guttering breaths cradled in our laps. It was easy to compartmentalize when there was so much going on--when Atara was sick and falling apart, when Mack was losing his mind, when Kita was struggling with the encroaching loss of his family, and when Cyril was more dead than alive but without my family to provide distractions, the fact that I had never told Fox how much I appreciated him and how much I really did love him was gnawing on my bones.

At the edge of the marshes, we reached the Fox and the Hound and I showed Nikita this place where my life as Coria's Crown Prince had truly started. It was where I'd met Fox and learned to do a cartwheel. It was where Cyril had pinched my ear when I'd carved my name into the back of a sturdy wooden bed frame. It was still there, some twenty years later, and we'd laughed about it together. The old innkeep, Kara, remembered me as a rambunctious, jubilant, terrible little boy that didn't listen to instructions or rules--a proper little princeling, if there ever was one, she'd said.
Nikita had pointed out that I was still like that.

He wasn't wrong.

The Fox and the Hound should have brought me peace. I remembered that first time my father had looked at me, knowing who I was and what I was to him, and how he'd held me so tightly that I couldn't breathe and I'd felt his tears in my shirt. I remembered him keeping me close, letting me fall asleep in his lap, whispering apologies into the top of my head when he thought I'd drifted off.

It brought no relief and Kita asked me several times if I was alright but I always gave him the same line. I was fine, just worried about Atara, who still hadn't been himself when we left, about Sebastian and the mutilation he'd suffered for my family, and for Cassie and Cyril, who were in charge while I was away. I worried least of all about them. Cassiope Perondale was a force of fucking nature. She could handle the gentry like she was swatting gnats.

The closer we got to Nikita's homeland, the colder it became. I had to wear furs over my seal skin coat and lace my boots tighter to fend off the snow that grew higher and higher the further north we walked. We stopped in villages and towns along the way to do the customary baby kissing and allow local lords to pledge their allegiances to the new crown. It got out of hand a few times--I had expected it to. To a lot of Corians, I was still a half-breed bastard from the north and my brother was a half-breed heretic aspiring to Godhood.

For the most part though, people respected me because they had respected my father. I had, as Nikita had so endearingly reminded me, very big shoes to fill.

I liked the snow though. It didn't snow in the south. The throne was technically in the northern half of old Coria--where the original borders were, along what the old Immarans called the Coast of a Thousand Colors. It was just Coryth Bay now, but the coral that was visible beneath the crystal clear waves remained 'a thousand colors.' We had a dry season and a wet season, but realistically, both were wet. One was just...slightly more wet and a hell of a lot more humid. I hadn't seen snow since I was a child and I was childishly delighted by the presence of it. I tried desperately not to make that overly obvious, given my station, but I did give in to the temptation to throw snowballs at Kita.

I learned the hard way that his aim was much more accurate than mine. It wasn't fair, really. He'd had a lot more practice than me, which I pointed out, but he didn't seem to think that mattered.

He was quiet. The closer we got to his home, the more that silence became obvious until the snow piled up in drifts along the side of the paths and grew higher than I was tall. It was bitterly cold and traveling was becoming more and more difficult, but we were just a few hours behind schedule, which prompted stopping and camping for one more night before we reached Kita's village on the delta of the Glace River, from which the country derived its name. We were so close to the sea that I could smell it in the air, familiar from all the way back home where tropical birds landed on my shutters in the morning and we didn't have squirrels. We had lizards. Lizards made Nikita wildly uncomfortable.

We had to find some kind of cave system to camp in so that we weren't exposed to the weather but it wasn't difficult. He knew the woods like the back of his hand and led us straight to a coastal cove that would only narrowly miss being flooded by high tide but he assured us that it would stay dry. He'd stayed in it all the time with his siblings.

He waxed nostalgic about them--his mother, in particular, who had been born a Marsher. Females in Coria and Glacia were given the same opportunities as men, although in Coria, married females tended to become mothers and remain just that. In Glacia, women carried their own weight because if they didn't, the family wouldn't survive. Even noble women worked, which was unheard of where
I came from.

"Eerika is her name," he told me when he settled into my tent that night, stretching his fingers while I lay face down on a sleeping roll with my eyes closed, listening to him speak. "She’ll like you. She kind of reminds me of you, you know?"

I opened an eye. "Tall and tattooed?"

"Prone to temper tantrums," he corrected, a smug smile crossing his features and I huffed, pulling my coat tighter around my body. It was warm in the tent--the combined heat of our bodies was sealed in by the skins and furs that covered it, but the chill had seeped into my bones. "Real talk though, kitten?"

And there it was. With that growing silence he’d been exhibiting, I’d suspected there was something weighing heavy on him. Kita didn't share burdens though, he just shouldered more, and I didn't want to pry. I still wasn't entirely comfortable with emotions and my own were so fucking raw already, shouldering my family’s burdens as I was, and I wasn’t sure I could handle another. If he needed me though...if he needed me, I owed him. He’d given me his entire life.

I sat up and he put away the part of his armor he’d been rubbing a faint, lemon scented oil into to keep the leather supple.

Kita took a deep breath while I waited for him to speak. He seemed to be searching for words like his common Corian was failing him, but it wasn't. It was a difficult subject--this thing he was trying to broach with me.

Eventually, however, he began to talk in that lulling, grating accent of his that sounded as harsh as the weather outside. "There's no religion here," he told me flatly and I nodded. I’d known that. Other than the Lierians in the forest--Kinnon's people--nobody in Glacia regarded anything with sense of holiness. "There is just survival. Just honor and upholding your family's name and lineage. It's an expectation. You have your religious rituals in Coria. You worship your gods. We just have a duty to our fathers and our people to carry on our bloodline."

“Nikita--”

He held a hand up. “I can’t give that to you," he finished and I felt my stomach churn, my heart pounding steadily in my chest. We’d never really broached this, not at length. It was so...uncomfortable for me, having to talk about this thing--this one thing that I’d been uniquely crafted for...which I could no longer do. It had been painful to watch Atara with Lian, to know all the while that I would never have that and to feel that longing I’d felt my whole life for exactly that...it hurt.

I’d wanted it badly, but I wanted him more. He was enough to fill all the holes I thought I was missing pieces from him. “I don’t need that,” I insisted.

He chuckled. “But you do. You’re a king.”

“I have Atara. I have Lian, Brentlyn, Meyer, Riordan. I have enough family behind me in the line to fulfill those roles. I don’t need children.” I felt panic clog in my throat, thick and horrifying and I saw him smile softly in the dim light, looking down at his hands instead of me. “I need you.”

He lifted a hand and I flinched, but his motion was steady and careful when he grasped my jaw with gentle fingers. “You have me,” he assured me quietly. “This isn’t about that. Not entirely.”

Facing emotion still hurt. Allowing myself to be vulnerable still hurt. There was a part of me, I
thought, that would always be raw and rejection from him right then would have shattered my heart and then crushed the pieces into sand. "Kita, please--" I began, swallowing the urge to vomit my internal organs, particularly my heart and lungs. Neither of them seemed to be working. I was ready to beg him to stay, to throw myself at his mercy. I'd expected this, of course. Who could possibly want to stay with someone like me?

Nikita moved forward, squirming until his knees met mine. "Hush," he ordered softly, repeating himself. "You have me."

I chewed my bottom lip until he pulled it between his thumb and his index finger and tapped me lightly on the cheek with the back of his hand, mimicking a backhanded blow, and then he smiled weakly. It was genuine, at least. There was some solace in that.

Kita rubbed his hands on his trousers then and exhaled loudly. "My father--my whole family--" He was shaking his head as he spoke and with a sinking feeling, I realized where this was going--to that same place that had caused the fight when he'd had dinner with my family, to that same place that made me feel such insidious hatred when I saw his scars. I'd always known about what my grandfather had done to Fox and Cyril, but I had never experienced any sort of bigotry firsthand. Then again, up until Kita, most of my partners had been female. I didn't steal his confession though. I didn't finish his words. He needed to vocalize them, to feel them out, to know that he was doing the right thing here.

So I waited again and when I reached for his hand, he dug his fingers into his knee and shook his head. I could see him swallowing and his breath was shallow like he was too fucking nervous to say what I knew he needed to say. It took him several minutes of what must have been tortured internal debate before he managed to get out the rest of his speech with a hoarse, strangled voice. "They won't accept this, kitten. Us. You know that already," he admitted quietly. "Even if you were...even if you could...it's just not how things are done here. It's not...a relationship like ours would not add numbers to the village. We have nothing to offer them. So..." He swallowed again and then drew his knees up to his chest so that he could lock his arms around his legs.

"They'll find out afterward...even if you don't tell them and you just leave...." I reminded him softly and he nodded. "I'm not exactly a run-of-the-mill citizen."

"I know," he breathed and his chest shuddered. He sort of rocked on his feet like he was trying to comfort himself and when I moved forward to attempt to touch him again, he declined the silent offer again. "Let me get this out first," he explained. "If you stop me now, I'll never say the rest."

"Alright," I conceded, sitting back on my bedroll. His was in his own tent, so he was just off the edge of mine in reaching distance but I kept my hands to myself. More often than not, he curled himself beneath my blankets because, according to him, having me against his back was like having a personal furnace. I ran hot. I always had.

Kita took a deep breath and then stretched his legs out in front of him so that he was sitting with them extended, his back slouched a bit, and his hands folded up in his lap. He looked more defeated in that moment than I had ever seen him and it took all of my self-control not to just gather him up and drag him under the blanket just to hold him close.

"I'm going to tell them. With you and your people here, he can't touch me..." he informed me, lifting his hands to rub at his face like the very thought exhausted him. I couldn't blame him. It was exhausting me and they weren't my family. I didn't even know most of them. "I just...I want it to be just before we start the trip back. I want to enjoy having them for just a little bit longer so I need you to...I need you..." He choked on the words and I tipped my head.
I knew what he needed and although I had let him get things out on his own up to that point, I did offer this explanation when his own voice failed him. "You need me to keep my distance," I finished for him and he nodded at the words. "To just play the part of your King for awhile. Or your friend? Your father knew we were friends."

He nodded again, rather harshly that time. I had expected that to hurt--knowing that he was trying to hide me from them--but it didn't. I'd have done anything for one more day with Fox.

Anything. Even this.

I couldn't blame him for wanting it. I couldn't even feel as bitter as I should have.
"I'm so, so, sorry," he managed to get out while he was sucking in sharp, painful sounding breaths.

"There's nothing to be sorry for."

Kita stopped. He'd been chewing his fingertips, staving off anxiety and panic with biting pain, and his wide eyes locked onto mine. He'd expected anger. He'd built himself up for it, prepared for it, because he was used to that from me and I hated that he'd taught himself to be ready for the very worst reactions. He was a human fortress, built to withstand the very worst of the ballistae and the battering rams and the Lierian fire.

And I had helped condition him for that.

It was nauseating and, for a moment, I wanted to retreat back into that dark corner of my personal hell where I'd caged myself for years. It was easier to be numb in the dark than it was to actually feel things but Lysander had broken me down. He'd had to reduce me to dust and rubble and then rebuild me entirely. Part of that had been forcing me to use my voice instead of my fists. It was dragging what hurt me into the light and dealing with it in the moment because you can't get the past back and the future is never promised. Everything should be dealt with as it happens.

So instead of retreating, I had no choice but to stumble forward into the unknown with him. "You're afraid of me," I said flatly.

Kita blinked and without hesitation, he answered. "Yes." It was that simple. What Lysander had taught me about living in the moment had been drilled into Nikita since birth. It was part of his culture. He was nearly incapable of lying and when he did lie, he was absolutely horrible at it. I always knew. Literally everyone always knew.

"You expected me to lash out at you for this."

"Yes. I keep waiting for it. You've been under...an incredible amount of stress and I can see you breaking down. I thought this might be...the last thing you could stomach having to do again. It was hard for you during the siege. It will be harder now." I wasn't stupid. I knew what a handful I'd been and how terribly I'd treated him. He had reasons to be terrified of me. Good reasons.

That didn't make it less heartbreaking. Knowing that you deserve pain doesn't make it easier to withstand. The whip still stings, whether you expect the blow or not.

I rubbed my face and combed my fingers through my hair while he watched me carefully, waiting for the inevitable outburst but I wasn't angry. I was aching. It would pass. My gut reaction in the past had been to make someone else hurt with me because misery loves company, especially if the company is an unwilling participant.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Not again. That's over, Kita."
"You were singing a different tune when your father died," he reminded me, blowing blond hair out of his eyes. "You couldn't do it then. That doesn't mean you won't be able to later, kitten. I expect you to slip...have fallbacks. You're human."

"Not entirely," I answered bitterly. "And just because I wanted to doesn't mean that I will. I didn't because I know better. My moral compass is a little left of fucking center, Nikita, but it's not entirely broken. I know what I did to you. It eats me alive."

"It should." He gathered himself up. His backbone seemed a little bit stiffer then, a little bit more like he usually was. Strong, stoic, Nikita. Typical Glacian, with the physical and mental fortitude to withstand an army's worth of assaults. "If it didn't, you would forget. If you forgot, you would fall into the same habits. You would be just as broken." His tone turned then, dripping sarcasm when he spoke next. "Stop the pity, Emory. Your insecurities are showing."

I glared. It wasn't often that Nikita took a harsh tone with me. Blunt, yes, but not harsh. "Pity? That's what you think this is? Just a fucking self-pity party? Maybe you're right." I didn't like him like this. I understood the necessity of it, but it hurt more than I wanted it to. Pain is the hammer of a blacksmith. It gives shape to the hunk of metal beneath it and Nikita had shaped me more than anyone else had.

"I know I'm right," he answered flippantly, lifting a lazy hand to flick a lock of hair out of his face. "You're not healthy, kitten. You never really will be, but maybe that's okay. Maybe being a little bit broken, a little bit used...that makes you who you are. That makes you who I love. You keep trying to separate yourself from what you did, what you became. That's not us, Em. And, you know, I liked it a little bit. I just would have liked you to stop before it felt like you were flaying me alive."

I couldn't help but snort, a laugh escaping my throat and a smile spread over his face. The tension shattered. Still...I needed to get the things that I thought out of my head. He'd come to understand the necessity of it for me and he waited for me to break the silence while he closed the short distance between us and settled against my side, his head on my shoulder.

I took a deep breath. "You know the last thing I said to Fox before the siege?" He nodded, because I'd told him on the way back to Coryth, but I repeated it anyway. "I told him that I hated him." Kita stiffened. I could feel it in his torso where it pressed to my side and he slipped an arm around me as if it could offer some comfort. "He spent my entire life trying to make up for the time he lost with me and I just...I could never get close to him like I was to Cyril. He was completely, entirely devoted to me, Kita, and I don't know if he ever understood how much I appreciated everything he did for me and he never got to see me get any better. He'll never know that he saved my life....so I get it. Hiding this. Wanting your family just a little bit longer....I get it. I would raze this country to the ground for one more day with him, just to tell him that he was every bit the father I had hoped he would be and more."

"He knew." He said it like he'd heard it from Fox's own mouth. There was no doubt in Kita.

He shifted, pulling me down into the bedroll. He slung one of his legs over me and straddled my hips, his hands flat on my chest. Whenever he laid on top of me, it was because I pulled him there. This--him doing it on his own--this was new. He read it in my expression and the way my chest seized up. "Breathe, Emory," he commanded quietly. "It's just me. You know I'd never do anything to hurt you. You know I'd stop the minute you said the word. Let me just..." He lifted his fingers to my face while I struggled not to hyperventilate but the touch was nice. The pads of his thumbs swept under my eyes and he traced my jawbone and my cheeks.

It felt...normal. Right, even, to not be bending him over something and making him shriek...to just be there, with him, engaged in this slow, exploratory process.
"Talk," he ordered again. "Words, kitten. Tell me what you're feeling so I can get you through this."

He pressed kisses to my mouth while I tried to find them, his lips brushing just over my bottom one and then my chin and my jaw and back to my mouth. "I uhm...it's not...it's not bad," I managed breathlessly. My fingers were knotted in the blanket though, white-knuckled, and I could barely get air in. I kept expecting to hurt. My mind kept trying to fly back to that day at the beach and the body-splitting agony I'd felt when they'd snapped my pelvic bone down the center. They hadn't intended to...there was that. They'd thrown me down awkwardly and the weight of them on top of me had split it. "I used to tell myself that if I hadn't fought so hard, it wouldn't have been as bad."

"Physically, maybe not," he agreed. "But if you hadn't fought, they would have moved on to your brother. They wanted a fight. You gave them one. I'd call that a victory, of sorts. You saved Atara. He wouldn't have survived what you survived."

"Atara is stronger than people give him credit for," I argued and Kita snorted.

He kissed me again, sweeping his tongue over my mouth in an effort to convince me to part my lips and I let him in. He tasted of apples, bright and sweet. He always fucking tasted of apples, even in the dead of bloody winter in Glacia. Once upon a time, he'd been salt and leather from tears and gags. There were no tears now, just his hands cradling my face and the weight of his body across my hips making me desperately uncomfortable in my clothes. He felt that, because he rolled his hips back against it and grinned into my mouth. "Keep talking," he insisted.

"I never thought I was good enough for you." I was grasping for confessions, for things I'd kept from him, for the most part, all while trying to fight the urge to flip us over and take what I wanted from him. There were no excuses left and I wanted him so badly that it was manifesting in a physical ache—a burning, twisting in my stomach like a coiled spring.

He grinned again. "Stupid boy," he whispered into my mouth. "You're beautiful, Emory. What's not to love?"

I felt like every muscle in my core constricted. "Shit, Nikita," I mumbled back into his lips. He wasn't quite kissing me anymore. He was just sort of pulling at my bottom lip, caught between his teeth, and making my words slur in the process. His hands inched down my face to my throat and my collar. They dipped beneath the coat and felt over skin and bone, paying careful attention to the searing marks beneath my clothing that were making me wickedly hot. There was no part of me that was comfortable in that moment and he was taking full advantage of it with slow, tentative movements of both his hands and his hips. His fingers fell to the straps of my coat and he peeled the buckles away with careful, deft motions.

I could feel in the atmosphere between us that I was supposed to keep talking—it was charged with a sort of understandable energy. He was trying to help me. He was always trying to help me and perhaps he needed this, given the viper's nest we were apparently walking into. For all I knew, this was the last I would touch him for the two weeks we were supposed to be staying in his village. I'd contemplated staying longer, loathe to return to the responsibilities I'd left behind. Now though, I was torn. Staying longer meant giving Nikita more time with a family he knew he was going to lose. It also meant treating him like he was just a friend and advisor and I wasn't sure how long I could keep that up. I needed to know he was with me like I needed air in my lungs anymore.

"Kitten," his voice was a whisper against my ear while his fingers moved over the marks on my chest—dark blue slashes like something incredibly large had slashed its claws over my body. Mine were all haphazard nonsense—across my eyes like the winged war paint that Nikita wore on his face
sometimes, down my chest like mutilation marks, and over the tops of my arms like the thick bracelets that Corian women sometimes wore over their biceps. My brother's, at least, had some semblance of uniformity.

I tried to find my voice while I shivered under the heat of his mouth behind my ear, kissing and sucking gently. "I want..." I knew what I wanted, but I was having trouble concentrating with him squirming on top of me. The weight had been uncomfortable at first, but I had slowly desensitized to it and he felt warm and normal after a few minutes...like he was supposed to be there. He had all the power to end my suffering, he always had, and I turned away his help each time that he offered it and instead took what I wanted from him and left him the way that I'd been left on the beach. How Nikita had survived what I'd done to him intact when I hadn't survived what had been done to me was a marvel that I didn't know I would ever understand.

"I can guess what you want," he teased. "It's fairly obvious, but I'd rather you tell me."

He was cute. He always had been. He had a look about him that exuded harmlessness until you heard him talk and realized where he was from. Any hope of being harmless went out the window with the accent and when Kita was around, people gave him quite a lot of room.

This flirting thing though...that was new. We hadn't started with teasing and flirting. He had just adamantly wormed his way into every aspect of my life and provided me with the undivided attention that I had so desperately needed. Hearing him tease me was like getting to know an entirely different person.

I couldn't help but laugh. It was short and ended in a kiss that swallowed most of the sound but I could feel him smiling against my mouth. "You liked that," he eventually said when he broke it, his tone accusatory.

"You're adorable," I shot back and he mocked a frown, providing an extra layer of false guilt to his pout. He turned serious again when I spoke next. "I'll miss you."

Kita's eyes softened. "I'll make time for you every day, Em. I'd go crazy if I didn't. Glacian isn't your first tongue. Nobody is going to fault you if you hang at my shoulder like the lost little lamb that you are."

"You're not adorable anymore," I amended, feigning a glare that made him laugh again. He stopped only to press kisses against my throat and then down the marks on my chest, his body sliding from my hips to my legs.

That coiling feeling in my stomach turned scorching again and I squirmed in the skins and blankets that made up my bed. The urge to flip him over and fuck him until he screamed was almost too much for me to control. It had been so long since we'd done...anything.

Kita's tongue traveled over the line where my pants met my stomach and I exhaled loudly through my teeth, fighting the urge to tangle my fingers in his hair. "You wanted something," he prodded. "Before you were distracted by how 'adorable' I am." He looked up at me, his chin resting between my hipbones, his eyes wide. His pupils nearly swallowed the colors until they were just a thin ring of blue and green.

I swallowed hard and licked my lips. My mouth kept going dry, like I was trying to swallow wads of cotton. "I want you--"

"ObVIOUSLY." He looked pointedly down and then began unlacing the front of my trousers. "And you'll have that. Keep going. What else do you want?"
He looped his fingers in the fabric at my hips and began rolling it down one inch at a time as I tried to speak, choking on words. An anxiety started rising in my chest, smothering that heated, needy sensation that coiled low in my stomach. I rarely let him undress me. I rarely let him touch me unless I specifically ordered him to do it. I was so far out of my element and it infuriated me because believe it or not, I'd been normal once. I'd been just like Fox, according to Cyril. I'd fucked kitchen girls behind the doors of the pantry in the palace and stable boys in the loft above the horses. I'd even let them fuck me, once upon a time.

The very thought of that was nauseating now and yet...that hideous discomfort of heats came roaring back. Kita had dealt with several of them with me by then and he only ever let me scream into his stomach while he ran his fingers through my hair, adamantly refusing to touch me in any way that could be misconstrued as more than comforting or platonic. It was as hellish for him as it was for me, I'm sure. I'd have hated watching him suffer the way that he had to watch me and he'd watched me for so long...for years.

"I want you to be able to help me the way that Mack can help Atara," I mumbled and he stopped what he was doing to look at me. His fingers fell still, perched atop my hips.

His silence was almost as bad as rejection, a fact he must have known, because after a moment of stunned silence he conceded. "We can...work on that," he offered. I could see his mind working behind his eyes. "Let me have a little control, yeah?"

My stomach churned, nervous anxiety finally swallowing that desire I'd felt for him. I could feel my lungs pick up so that hyperventilation became an imminent fear. It wasn't...terrible. I could deal with it. It wasn't consuming me yet, at least, and I managed a nod.

Kita went back to my hips, kissed until that heat returned and the nervous panting became desperate for more contact. He finally got my pants down my legs and leaned forward, sliding his tongue down the length of my cock while he stared up at me, waiting for a reaction. I hissed and dug my fingers into the skins beneath me, grinding my teeth. He was liquid heat when he finally slid his mouth over me, scorching hot compared to the outside world. I swore in both of the languages I knew. I knew what he could take. I'd had him tied up on his knees before, unable to stop me from making him gag if I wanted to.

When my hips lifted as he sucked harder, he placed his palm between them and pushed down. He was going to do this at his pace, it seemed, and that was slower than I wanted it to be. "You're killing me," I choked, my voice hoarse and his eyes flicked up to meet mine as he swallowed around me. I couldn't stifle the groan that escaped my lips and my fingers curled around the wrist that was responsible for the hand holding my hips down.

He let me have that for a little while. He even let up on the pressure and let me move when my other hand tangled in his hair. He was squirming like he was uncomfortable in his own clothes and that pin straight mop of blond atop his head turned damp in my fingers.

My focus narrowed entirely to what he was doing to me--the feel of his mouth and how his tongue slid over me every time he moved his lips, the heat of his breath against me when he took one and exhaled through his nose, the way his fingers curled against my abdomen and his nails scraped my skin...I was losing my mind. My arms would have been trembling if I hadn't been squeezing his wrist and holding his hair. I was grinding my teeth, breathing his name through them as they clenched down to muffle any noise I was making. He kept looking up at me with those incredible, heterochromatic eyes. Blue and green, the only pair like it I'd ever encountered.

Eventually, his fingers flexed free of my grasping hand and he seized my wrists, pulling them down to my sides. For a moment, it was fine. He was letting my hips move and the real constraint of it
didn't register until I tried to move my hands.

It was all downhill from there for a minute.

I could smell the sea again. Salt and heat, like it had manifested directly from memory or from my living nightmares. I could almost feel the sand on my back and smell the liquor that permeated his breath when he'd leaned over me, sickly sweet and bitter. I could taste that blood and I remembered feeling so out of control. Too hot, too exhausted, boneless and incapable of fighting a biological drive. Kita called me human, but I wasn't that. Not really. I hadn't fought them as hard as I could have and in part, that was because I wanted them to hurt me instead of my brother.

But in part--and I'd never dealt with this or even allowed myself to think--it was because there was some part of me biologically programmed to need that during a heat. I'd wanted to fight...and I hadn't, at the same time. I hadn't.

I couldn't breathe. I knew where I was and what was happening, but that didn't make it any easier. My entire body stiffened and Kita felt it. He must have, because he released my arms and I pushed at him, trying to put as much distance between him and me as humanly possible without running naked from the tent. "Stop!" I didn't recognize my own voice. It felt foreign as it clashed against my teeth. The moment I said it though, he willingly moved away.

In fact, before I'd even finished the word, he had ceased all contact and was sitting back on his haunches while I scrambled into a sitting position, my hands tight over my face, my fingers splayed so that I could still see him. I wasn't there, not really. I hadn't had a flashback in so long and, for the most part, they'd always happened at night when I was alone in my bed. Tielo would have curled up beside me and waited it out, but Tielo was at home with Cassie, unequipped for the cold, and Kita had witnessed very few real flashbacks. He'd seen a lot of tantrums.

This was decidedly different.

I couldn't get air in. My lungs were screaming for it but my mouth wouldn't open and I could feel my head spinning.

"Breathe, Emory," I heard him order me. There was no comfort in his voice. Just overwhelming concern. It was almost a plea and a moment later it turned into exactly that. "Kitten, please!"

I was shaking my head. I could feel their hands on my face and my hips...wrapped around my wrists. I remembered not being able to breathe with their weight against me, how I'd been suffocating between them, split in half, incapable of getting enough air in to scream and trying to focus on Atara's panicked pleas and sobbing.

I was choking. Literally choking to death on nothing at all. The anxiety attack constricted around my throat. I could feel it tightening more with every second while I tried to fold myself into the smallest possible ball with my knees to my chest and my head tucked between them. I locked my fingers around the back of my neck. This was how I'd spent most of my nights in the beginning...incapable of screaming or really breathing.

I could hear Kita, but it was distant. Almost like being underwater. I was burning up. I could feel the marks on my chest igniting from the inside and I swore, there was a fire in my chest that was going to consume me like living fuel. My head was pounding, my vision swam, and I tasted blood in my mouth as I chewed the inside of my cheeks.

Kita had to have been terrified or horrified. Maybe both. At first, he seemed intent on not touching me but the longer it went on, the redder I turned from lack of air and eventually, he must have
decided that keeping me alive was more important than catering to my nightmares.

He crossed the tent and grabbed my face, his palms on my cheeks, forcing me to look up from the ground. “Look at me!” he ordered, his teeth clenched. One of his hands left me, moving to my own, and I fought him, but he had the upper hand. He wrestled my fingers out of their fist and pressed them to his chest where I could feel him breathe, feel the heat that moved in his skin, count the beats of his heart beneath his sternum…. “Breathe, Emory. With me. It’s not real. It’s not really happening.”

I knew that, of course. I knew it. I could feel his lungs expand and contract under my trembling palm and my own chest screamed for oxygen. I choked when I opened my mouth, like I’d swallowed something wrong and my throat was closing and stingng in response, and it took everything I had to force my lungs open for that first, gasping breath.

“There it is,” he cajoled quietly, still holding one hand laced with mine against his chest while the other threaded gently through my hair. “In and out. You’re okay. It’s just me, kitten. I’d never hurt you.”

I was still on that wretched beach, a busted up rag doll with torn limbs and a shredded body. I was shaking so hard that I could hear my teeth rattle despite my best efforts to clench them. The terror that gripped me was soul-rending. I wanted to scream but couldn't find the air to do it. I pulled at my own skin, my fingers digging into my shoulders like I could tear myself apart. I should have known better than to push that hard for something I wasn't ready to have. I may have wanted to relinquish control, but the monster that had been bred into my mind two years earlier would have none of it.

I was broken. I would always be broken.

That knowledge only made it worse.

But he kept at it until the hammering of my heart slowed and I could get breath in...until I could see him, his face finally swimming into view beyond the horror show that played in my head.

"Say something," Kita pleaded. "Keep fucking breathing, Emory, or I'll drag you out into the ice like this if that's what you need."

I nodded. I couldn't get enough air in to talk, but it was considerably more than I had been getting. The headache that bloomed for a minute or two behind my eyes was blinding. I didn't know he was sitting in front of me for awhile. My vision swam and turned into doubles.

But the flashback was over. That ugly terror that had seized my chest slunk back to wherever it had come from and while I choked on oxygen and clawed at my throat in an attempt to get it to open wider, I came to realize where I was. Still in Glacia. It was fucking freezing.

Nikita was kissing my cheeks, both of his hands cradling the back of my neck, and I wasn’t sure when he’d released the one against his chest, but my palm remained where he’d put it, focused on the steady thumping of his heart.

"I'm so sorry," he kept whispering, like it was his fault. Like how fucked up I was related back to him somehow. I knew he carried guilt over his sister, but I wasn't his sister. I hadn't even known him when all of this happened to me and it wasn't his fault that I couldn't control myself.

I was shaking my head, trying to convey to him that he shouldn't have been sorry while I worked on regaining the use of my tongue. Eventually, it came around like the rest of me did and the blistering heat of the marks, combined with the lack of him blanketed over me, made the cold so much more obvious. "S-stop," I whispered, my teeth chattering in the chill. "It's n-not your fault, Nik--" I cut off
halfway through his name and clenched my jaw over the obscene temperature. He seemed utterly at ease with it.

He was still dressed in that leather he wore and he had come to stand in front of me, almost pacing, chewing on his thumb. His cheeks were flushed red and his hands were scarlet from having gathered up that snow with bare fingers in the frigid weather of the north. "I shouldn't have pushed," he argued, shaking his head. "I didn't think about it. I just...I wanted you to trust me." He swore in his native tongue and then vanished from the tent before I could respond.

For a moment, I just held the skins draped over my shoulders tighter in an attempt to get warm and to calm the rolling in my stomach.

Kita was back a moment later with a cup of something piping hot that he pressed into my hands. I knew, of course, that there were still guards awake. Someone was always awake and in Glacia, we had learned that you had to keep something hot steaming over a fire just to keep from feeling the cold into your bones. Kita had shown us how to peel the bark off of one of the native trees and make a tea out of it. It was hot—both to taste and touch—almost like cinnamon, with a somewhat bitter aftertaste.

He apologized again while I forced myself to drink it. "Sorry," he mumbled. "For pushing. For holding onto you during it."

I snorted. "Yeah, apologize for stopping me from choking on my own tongue."

Kita cast a withering glare in my direction and then sat back down. "Are you alright, kitten?" he asked, scooting closer so that we were sitting knee-to-knee.

"No."

"People are different," he pointed out, fussing with the edge of the bedroll. "Where I grew up, suffering and pain...being able to withstand it...that is honorable. It's glorified. I was conditioned to take it. Mackenzie was, too, in his own way. You never were. It didn't happen to you a little bit at a time like it did to us. It happened all at once. That's overwhelming for anyone."

"Your Gauntlet was torture," I reminded him bitterly. "And what they do to you here? The way that they treat you...the way that they treat all their children? That's fucked up."

"So is tying someone to a post and flaying the skin off their back in the public square," he shot back. I couldn't argue with that logic and so I pursed my lips while he kept going. "We're a warring culture. We fight other tribes and villages for resources. It's how we survive. Being captured and tortured is common in Glacia. How do you think we survived the Immaran invasion before your father showed up to save us? Have you ever been hungry, Emory?"

I had. I remembered abject hunger that clawed at my belly when we'd been running from the Immarans. It was distant though and it had only been a day or two, but to a five-year-old, that was starving. Cyril had been too terrified to stop—with good reason, of course. We were being followed. His decision to press on despite my pleas that I was hungry had saved our lives. Still, I shrugged. "Sort of," I admitted. "When they burned my village during the invasion...I barely remember it though. Just that it hurt."

"I have," he told me, his voice stiff and his expression deadened. "It's part of the ritual. To starve. To survive a beating. To win a fight. Every member of the village is permitted some torment against you
for the duration of it. It's slow...starving. First it's pain, then it's torment, then it's weakness so profound that getting to your feet is like climbing a mountain, but you learn something growing up the way that I did. No matter what abuse they hurl at you, they can't take your mind unless you let them in. What you think, what you feel, what revenge you plot inside your head is yours and yours alone. I survived because I didn't let them in, Emory. You did. You did because you didn't know how to keep them from breaking you. You had to learn this way." His fingertips lifted tentatively and brushed over my cheek. The touch was warm, comforting...it lacked any of the sexual tension that had been there before.

I understood him. I didn't like that he'd suffered through whatever his village had done to him, but it had kept him alive and so I was grateful for that, at least. "So you survived with your honor intact?" I asked dryly and he shook his head. Another no.

"My sister killed herself," he reminded me darkly. "There was very little honor left after that. It is among one of the worst things you can do in Glacia...but we recovered. There were raids and it helped that I was already Commander." He shrugged. "Then Danica took her Gauntlet, we fought in the south. Whatever we lost, it’s surely returned. For now."

He always turned so heavy when Milena was mentioned. I couldn't imagine it...the pain he must have felt trying to cut her down. I knew now, on the other side of it all, that she'd hurt them more doing that than watching her suffer to survive would have ever hurt them but once upon a time, I had understood Milena's desire for it to end. I'd wanted it to end too and so I couldn't fault her.

But I couldn't fault him for the very obvious anger he harbored against her.

I moved forward, caught his chin to hold his face, and kissed him. He didn't touch me. He just allowed himself to be pushed back into the little nest of pillows and blankets that was my bed. I needed physical contact. Even after all of that, I craved him.

That was the difference in me now. Touch had sickened me once. Now, for the most part, I needed it just to know that he still loved me. Still wanted me...didn't think I was too broken to be with.

I ran my fingers over his body without breaking that kiss, palming over his hips and his chest through that leather before I started working at the buckles that held it. He was still careful not to touch me. His hands lifted like he wanted to but he let them fall back down to rest beside his head while my lips moved to his throat. He whimpered my name and parted his legs, letting me sit between them while I peeled him out of the top half of his leather clothing.

"You can touch me," I told him quietly, tugging his ear between his teeth. "Just don't keep me from moving."

Nikita nodded and his fingers lifted, tangled in my hair while I left mouth shaped bruises on his collar and his throat. That coiled heat reappeared in my stomach with none of the anxiety. I needed him quickly.

So quickly that I was fumbling with his clothes in an effort to get them off faster and he helped me with the buckles eventually, removing that vial of oil from his pockets. He pressed it into my palm and caught my bottom lip in his teeth, his eyes locked on mine. "Don't go easy on me," he goaded. "Going to be awhile before you can touch me again."

I was hot and hard and he was so willing to give me anything that I wanted. I felt such incredible guilt for stealing him away from his family and the only life he'd ever known but I wanted to be selfish. I wanted to keep him. He was mine. I needed him.

His fingers moved between us and grasped my cock again, pumping leisurely as I struggled with that
Eventually, I pressed the cork to his mouth and he took his between his teeth while I pulled. It still took too long, but we got it open eventually, and I seized his wrist and pulled it up between us to douse it in the warm liquid, the same temperature as his body from being tucked against his hip all day in his pocket.

Nikita grinned against my desperate, biting kisses that tasted of apples, snow, and blood. His palm went back to my cock and he used both of his hands to coat me in that oil before he let go and smeared the rest of it over his thighs and his belly.

"You're going to burn in hell," I breathed into his mouth, sharing air with him while I shifted his hips and pressed against him. It was easy...we'd been here before. I knew his body. There was no fumbling or searching for entry. He let me in smoothly and hissed at the sensation, his back bowing up. His eyes rolled for a moment and his breath caught.

He was used to being in pain by now and so being able to really feel without the ache of being beaten was a novel concept for him. He had to re-experience the entirety of it and he squirmed, panting and slick with sweat and oil from his hands while his body tightened around me.

I remained still, though it was taking every ounce of self-control I had. I wanted to pin his hips down and fuck him until he begged me to stop.

He eventually caught his breath and raked his nails down my shoulders, clutching at me with slippery fingers when he answered me. "I don't believe in a hell," he reminded me, fighting the urge to smile. It pulled at the corners of his mouth anyway. "Besides, you're going too."

I snorted and moved once, eliciting a moan from him that made my stomach clench. "Have I ever told you how good you feel?" I murmured, nipping at his jaw while I picked a slow, almost painful pace. I used my weight to keep him from moving much, though he tried desperately to push his own hips up toward mine.

"Only every time we do this," he whimpered, breathless and digging into my back with sharp little nails. I delighted in the feeling of it. The sting was firmly in the present, a new sort of pain that I could equate only to him. "But I like to hear it."

I licked along the shell of his ear and he cried out into the half-dark of the tent, tightening his legs around my hips. He did feel so fucking good--searing hot and agonizingly tight. I could feel his lips at my collar, his breath on my throat, his nails on my spine..."Well," I began. I would have to remedy all of the things I'd ever said to him and I was going to start in that moment. "It's worth repeating for you."

He groaned and his back arched against me. He was trembling. I could feel it in his arms against my ribs and I reached between us to grab his cock. His breath seized in his throat and his head fell back at the sensation while I picked up the pace. His hands curled and his nails really cut down into my skin that time, dragging down my back so that I hissed his name against his ear and then bit down on his collar.

All bets were off then and I drove into him hard enough to choke the breath from his lungs. He made a desperate, almost guttural noise. "Fuck!" His voice was hoarse and thick but he laughed with the word. "There you are. Don't turn sweet on me just yet, Emory."

Gods, I was so lucky to have him. He understood. He loved unconditionally and in that moment, I wanted to be so much closer to him than I could ever physically be. I pinned his hips down with one hand and grabbed his jaw with the other, forcing him to look up at me while I fucked him hard enough to elicit a wince every now and then but he was panting and thrashing with each motion. I knew exactly where I was hitting him and where he needed it. He was sweat-soaked and clinging to me. His eyes fluttered shut.
"Em--" he choked. When he managed to get any words out, they were slurred and only half-lucid. "Em, please!"

"Please what?" I demanded and he shuddered, his body twisting under me in an effort to get closer and further away at the same time. He was over-stimulated and desperate to finish but he fought it for me. To make it last longer, to revel in this closeness.

He sucked in a harsh, gasping breath and shivered with it. "I'm gonna..." He cried my name then and I nodded, caught his bottom lip between my teeth, and pulled. He was coming, thrashing and spilling onto his belly while I thrust into him with enough force to drive him up toward the top of my pillows. His body tightened around me, convulsing and shuddering, his legs opened wider and his eyes rolled.

He was perfect. Beautiful and perfect and I absolutely owned him in that moment.

That thought drove me over an edge I hadn't felt in months and I bit down on his collar when I finished, filling him while he whimpered my name and cradled my head. His small body squeezed me, took me for everything that I was worse, and then held me when I fell limp against his damp chest but it was a struggle for him to breathe like that and eventually I rolled off of him.

Nikita sat up and for a moment, the gesture confused me. He was looking for his clothes and I realized, perhaps a second later than I should have, that following that flashback, he'd slipped back into our old habits, too. I had always needed space then and he was used to leaving after sex...to just listening to me talk while he dressed and then disappearing.

When he reached for his boots after blowing out my candle, I grabbed his wrist. "Stay with me?" I asked quietly and I couldn't see his expression in the dark but I saw the outline of his shoulders sink with some kind of desperate relief and he brought my hand up to his mouth to kiss my palm in what seemed like the sweetest gesture he could have come up with considering the situation.

He sank back down into the blankets beside me and rolled so that he faced me. He was just a set of glittering spots in the dark where his eyes should have been. "You're certain?" he whispered, still pressing my fingers to his mouth in sweet, soft kisses.

"There's a limit to my time with you right now," I reminded him and he squeezed my hand in response. "I'd like to capitalize on it as much as I can."
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

I thought that by setting boundaries and building myself up for the inevitable break, that it would be easier. I told myself that I could walk away from my family. I had another one now. I had prepared myself for it. I was ready for the hurt and the betrayal and the fury when they found out I was gone. I convinced myself that it would be easy because I could make anything seem easy. I could suffer without flinching. I had proven that much to myself and I thought that I could do this without flinching.

It was stupid.

I was stupid.

I had watched Emory lose his father and I knew how much it had hurt him. I'd seen the way it had torn his family apart. I'd watched my own family split at the seams when we had buried my sister and still, I told myself that it would be fine. I would spend this time with them, cement them into my memories, and then be ready to face their turned backs when they inevitably found out.

When my mother leapt from her horse as the entourage from my village greeted the King's own, my resolve trembled a little bit. Her voice called my name, a relic from my childhood that I hadn't heard in years and she stumbled in the snow that reached nearly to her hips. She batted at it, trudging and sloughing through it like a machine, wrapped in furs and black leather. Strands of red hair escaped the hat and scarf wrapped around her head and face and her fingers were hooked into claws as she waded through the ice.

Emory looked over at me from where he was leading his own horse nearby, suspiciously feeding it frozen carrots from his pocket. "Well, don't look at me," he ordered, waving his free hand dismissively. "I'm not the one calling your name."

I let go of Anikka and took off for her. I’d missed her more than I’d realized. She’d never held the same opinions about me as my father and they’d differed greatly on their opinions regarding children, but he was lord and, ultimately, he overruled her. I think, in some aspects, she was afraid of him. It hardly mattered then when her arms locked around me and I remembered the way she smelled--of firewood and pine--and it hit me like a punch in the gut.

"Nikki," she breathed into my throat, warm breath on my skin as the rest of the Glacian entourage finally caught up to her. "We got a bird from the city. It said--" She stepped back to hold me at arm's length, her eyes bright and glassy. They were both green, a perfect match for one of mine. She knew better than to cry. The moisture would chap her face in the weather and she sucked in a sharp breath to stifle the urge. "It said Coryth was in ruins...that there was a great battle for the Keep..."
"I'm fine," I assured her softly, wrinkling my nose at her concern.

My father hopped from his horse near me and shot the both of us a look before he approached Emory, as was appropriate. My mother swore in our native tongue and when my father took the knee, so did she, followed shortly by the rest of the group. It was never going to get normal—this submission people showed to him but in that moment, what bothered me more was the loss of contact from my mother, who I hadn’t seen in so long.

This was going to be more difficult than I had imagined.

Emory very grudgingly accepted the show of dedication before he urged my father to his feet. I hadn't seen him in something like nearly a year and it still surprised me how he towered over Emory. Emory with his long, long legs and his frame built just like Fox's on a slightly smaller scale. He was all lean muscle pulled taut and rigid. Finding a soft spot on Emory Bordelon was like trying to find a needle in a haystack, not that you could tell without his clothes off. Dressed, he just looked lanky.

Naked was something entirely different and I felt my face flush as the thought crossed my mind while we all stood there. My mother was fussing with her hat, trying to wrap her braid back up into it and she shot me a look like she wanted to know what had caused my sudden, intense humiliation but I cleared my throat and busied myself with checking on my horse.

"You look much better than you did last I saw you, my King," my father told my clandestine lover and I hadn't anticipated how utterly awkward it would be to be near both of them. I had a hard time not thinking lewd thoughts about Emory when my family wasn't around. Now, with the looming reality of my absence in the near future, the last thing I wanted was to be imagining him bending me over something the way that I wanted him to so fucking desperately.

Emory managed a limp smile. "Emory is fine," he protested weakly. He was wilting under the attention. He still hated it and I was used to fielding interactions like this for him but he was on his own here. I was just his friend. Just his advisor.

"Ah," Vasilev agreed. "But you weren't a King last I saw you." His expression turned sad and he took Emory by both of his shoulders. "My deepest condolences, Emory. Your father was the best of us."

There was a moment I wanted to fly out between them and peel him away from my father, tuck him away, and make sure he was safe from the rest of the world. Particularly from Vasilev, who still parked a deep, aching hatred in my chest. It was the same moment that the familiar haunted, lost expression crossed Emory's face but it was a second. Just a lapse. A brief weakness and it was over. That shuttered 'monarch expression' closed down over his face and he squared his shoulders, nodded, and stepped away. He looked pointedly at my sister then. "Thank you, Vasilev, but there will be time for grief later. I don't believe I've met your wife."

My father laughed. He had a loud, boisterous laugh that echoed in his chest and boomed through the hills around us. "Of course!" he chuckled loudly and then waved my mother over. She waded through the snow again and did her best to curtsy like a proper southern lady but it was nothing like what he was used to seeing. I could see the twitch in the corner of his mouth when he had to bite his tongue to keep from teasing her. "King Emory, this is my lady wife, Eerika Novak, formerly of the Rosewood family."

She was smiling at him like he'd hung the moon for her and I could tell in Emory's mannerisms that he noticed it. He was weary of kissing her offered hand, as was southern custom, and his eyes flicked up to me like he was asking for my permission and I offered him nothing in return. I wondered if it was about his own hatred for my family and the horrors I’d suffered growing up. We’d only ever
spoken briefly on my mother, who had done her best to shield me from what she could and hidden a lot of my transgressions that would have made the beatings even worse, if that was imaginable at all.

She talked incessantly to him on the remainder of the short distance to the village. She told him about my sisters and the new baby—a boy, despite what she had assured me before I'd left. I was absolutely sure that he wasn't keeping up with the names and that belief was cemented in fact when all of my sisters mobbed him upon arrival. I could see his jaw working through all of the contact and my father, knowing how unstable Emory had been before he'd left Coryth, peeled them away as quickly as he could, apologizing in the process. The King had gone pale, but he shrugged it off and managed a weak smile as his guards and several workers from my village took the horses.

My father led us through the great oak doors of the longhouse and into welcome warmth while my sisters all clamored for Emory's attention.

During the day, most of the village piled into the lodge where my family lived to escape the sweeping, bitter cold that rolled down off the mountains through thin, frigid air that shook the great pine trees. It was tradition. All of the children in the village were, for the most part, raised together and I had more mothers in my life than I could keep track of. None of them were as important to me as my own, but I had loved them all for various reasons and they'd cared for me the way that they now did for the children.

The lodge was enormous and warmed by a long, rectangular fire pit that ran up the middle. There was always bitter Glacian tea stewing over it and it was elevated in a stone basin to keep the smallest of the babies from crawling into it. Herbs and dried flowers hung from the ceiling with bones of hunted animals—all superstitions and luck charms that some of the women liked. Mostly they were tokens of solidarity and appreciation from the minor Glacian lords to my father or things that the children had made him as their leader. At the back, there was a leather divider that separated my family's actual living quarters from where the rest of the village spent the day and in front of that, a raised dais where my mother and father sat when they sorted out issues with the local folk.

Once there, my mother scooped up a toddler from the group of children that milled around the fire, warm and full looking. They'd had a good year, I thought, if the babies had full faces and round, red cheeks.

The boy she cradled was a redhead like her, dressed like a tiny adult as he pulled on her braid, her hat hanging loose around her neck again. She hugged me again with the boy in her arms and that time, in the heat of the lodge, I could feel the tears on my throat and the squirming baby between us, struggling to reach the floor. He was...three years old then? Four? I couldn't even remember how long I'd been gone and it hardly mattered, not when she was whispering in my ear that she loved me, she loved me, she loved me.

Eventually, the boy managed to wriggle his way to the floor and promptly made his way to Emory, as if he knew that this man was the source of all the commotion and the reason why Ravndal was in such a state of flurried motion.

The boy was tugging on his arm and staring up at him with eyes as blue as the sea and as wide as saucers. For a moment, my breath caught in my throat and my heart stopped. I knew the ache that children induced in Emory and how badly he wanted this for himself. I knew how much he deserved to have it—after everything he had suffered, he should have been able to have this one thing that he wanted so terribly.

I couldn't draw breath. I wanted to scoop the baby up and push him back onto my mother and away from my kitten. I felt suddenly possessive but Emory just looked at him, bent down, and lifted him up like it was the most natural thing he'd ever done. Nobody else in the room understood the
significance of it and he didn't even look at me. I hated feeling trapped in this lie and for a brief moment I wanted to say 'fuck it' and offer him whatever he needed in this moment, even if it was just the knowledge that I was there for him.

That moment didn't last long.

The toddler reached out and ran his fingers over the marks on Emory's face experimentally, tenderly balanced against the King's hip, and then he leaned forward and gave him one of those sloppy baby kisses.

"Latham!" my mother admonished and she stepped forward like she might take the child from Emory but the King took a quick step back.

"No, he's fine, Lady Novak, really," he promised and my mother pressed her lips together, her brow furrowed like she wasn't quite sure.

Still, her arms dropped. "Eerika is fine, my Lord King."

"Emory," he corrected again. "King suited my father but it doesn't quite fit me yet." He made a face at the baby in his arms and the child, Latham, squealed and threw his head back to laugh.

I should have laughed with him. Everyone else did.

But I couldn't. The grief that choked me blotted out my voice. I could never give Emory this and he had been so...okay with it, but I knew that beneath the stoic exterior, he wasn't. Emory wasn't entirely incapable of having a child. He could still father one--just not with me. I was the hurdle. He could have this...this thing that he wanted so terribly and he could be happy. I wouldn't have to leave my family, which I was starting to think would be harder than I'd anticipated. The way my mother had held onto me and how my sisters had greeted me had shattered the belief that I would be okay to do this. I could walk away. It was sick and I knew it. This place had been nothing but a horror for me and it would never become anything different. If I stayed, I would suffer. I would live wrapped in lies, screaming inside my own skull, crushed under the brutal thumb of my father who could play pretend so nicely when Emory was around, but Em knew the truth. He'd kissed and touched each scar and he loved me.

And I loved Emory. I loved him with every fibre of my being and my heart broke just thinking about letting him go but at the same time...

The way he spent the rest of the evening with my brother in his lap made me think that maybe my heartbreak was worth it. He didn't fuss when Latham led him around our living quarters and showed him his toys--a horse on wheels with a string to pull, blocks, a stuffed toy that my father had bought for him from Coryth, and Lierian memory sticks. He didn't promise 'later' when Latham sat down and insisted he build blocks with him around his stuffed toy. He didn't give him back to my mother when the toddler climbed into his lap at the table and insisted on eating with him, mostly from his plate.

He didn't even argue when, halfway through the night about a week into our stay while I sat up with my mother, listening to her retell the past two or three years, Latham toddled from his little bed and across the hall to Emory's door. We watched him struggle with the handle and then vanish inside and both of us got up to investigate, peering through the crack in the door as the boy climbed the trunk at the end of the bed like it was a mountain, heaved himself over the footboard, and wiggled beneath the blankets next to a sleeping Emory. I could tell when he woke up--I had spent so long waking up with him. I saw the shift in his body and he sat up just a little bit, realized what was happening, and then flopped back into the furs with the baby cuddled into his side.
And it broke me.

I had survived torture--at his hands and the hands of my father--and I had fought and struggled and clawed my way through all of his baggage and his issues to get where we were and none of that had broken me but this did. It shattered what I had left and when my mother shut the door as quietly as possible, I sank against it and landed hard on the floor.

"Nikky?" she asked quietly. It was a nickname from the earliest days of my childhood, one that she had given me, but I didn't respond. I was trying to focus on keeping myself together but I was failing. I could feel all the little pieces peeling away. When she cupped my chin and tipped my face up, it was like she'd pinned me to a butterfly board, flayed open for dissection.

I took a long, trembling breath and her expression softened while she pulled me to my feet and led me out of the living quarters and into the deserted front of the hall. She poured us each a cup of bitter tea and sat down with me at a bench near the window. In the daylight, you could see where my sister was buried from that window. For awhile, it had been my favorite place to sit because I felt closest to Milena there but I felt utterly out of touch with everyone now. Isolated...like I was lost alone on an island of my own making.

She stared out the window when I did, almost like she was looking for the pillar of stone that marked Milena's resting spot. "I see the way you look at him," she whispered, her voice barely audible. Her face was distorted behind the steam of the cup in her hand and I shook my head, staring down at mine.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Nikki," she warned, and I looked up at her, fear registering in my face. I'd never thought about what my mother would think. My concern had been my father. She'd always fallen in line with him out of fear of her own. She’d stood by while he brutalized my sister, but something in her had hardened after that. I remembered it, because in the days that followed when I'd been incapable of functioning, she had stood immobile outside my bedroom door and adamantly refused to give him access. I remembered them fighting. 'I lost one because of you, Vasilev, I will not lose my only son. You stay the fuck away from him!'"  

After a moment of me staring down at the cup in my hands, terror and anxiety in my stomach, she continued. "You love him. It's not hard to put together, considering what he is and the rumors out of the south about how you never leave his side. Your father call sit Glacian loyalty and he talks like he's proud of you because he doesn't want to see it but I see it, Nikita. I'm your mother. I saw it with Gunnar and I see it with Emory."

I was silent for a long minute and then I shook my head again. "I can't tell him," I mumbled, my shoulders slumping in defeat and my throat thickening with that anxiety that spread up from my stomach and settled in knots in my muscles and a fist around my windpipe.

"No, you can't," she agreed. "Well, you could. Emory’s people here would protect you, but that wouldn’t be the end. Slight him like that and you know he’ll need to punish you somehow to redeem himself in the eyes of his men." Her own voice trembled and she sat her mug down on the lip of the window, took mine from my hands, and then caught my palms with hers. I hadn't realized how much I missed this with her. It was easy to set aside when there was no frequent reminder. Emory and Atara had no mother and by the time I was close to Emory, he was in such a bad state that I’d never really seen the relationship he’d had with his parents the way that it was supposed to be.

She lifted her fingers from mine to wipe at my face and I grimaced, betrayed by own weakness. "I can't lose you," she pleaded, her voice hoarse, her own tears evident in it. "I already lost Milena. I
can't lose both of you so if you insist on doing this...if you're going to pick him...."

"I'm not," I said thickly.

She looked at me, her eyelashes soaked, huddled close to me in the dark with damp cheeks and trembling lips. "Not what?"

"Picking him," I choked on the words and stole one of my hands back to press it over my mouth like I might vomit. My heart shattered and clawed at the inside of my chest and I wanted to howl like an injured animal. I couldn't have gotten to my feet in that moment even if I wanted to.

My mother wriggled closer on the bench and looped her arms around me, squeezing me tightly while my chest shook and I fought back violent sobbing the likes of which I hadn't felt since that evening in the Crown's Tower when Emory had tried to tell me that I should leave for my own good, for my own safety. The pain that had hit my chest cavity when he tried to push me away had been otherworldly. My whole being--mind, body, and soul--rebelling at the idea of being without him in any sense.

Eventually, she pressed a kiss to my face just beside my ear. "Why not?"

"Look at him with Latham," I groaned, rubbing at my face until the skin felt raw and red. "I can't give him that. He can't...do what Atara and Cyril can do anymore. His pelvis was broken. They'd have to gut him and even with the alchemist in the south, that's dangerous. He deserves to be happy. He deserves to be complete. He deserves everything that he wants and I can't be that for him...and I can't leave you again. I can't lose all of this. You're here. Mila is here. It would destroy our name. I owe you more than that."

"You owe us nothing," she argued, sitting up straight and grabbing me by the shoulders to force me to look at her. "Nikita Novak, you owe us nothing. Your father is a tyrant who would sooner crush you than see you be any different than him. You wear scars all over your body from him. If you can escape this, baby, run."

But I couldn't. "I lose either way. If I stay, I lose him. If I go, I lose you." I pointed out, turning suddenly numb. "But he doesn't. Emory is strong. He'll be fine without me. He was when they sent him away."

"Nikita--"

"No. I'll tell him that I'm staying here tomorrow and break it off. It's better for everyone that way."
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Nikita

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I couldn't tell him, not the next day. Not when I wanted to. Every time I opened my mouth to try to spill the words from beyond my lips, they faltered on my tongue. I couldn't look at him and know that I was about to destroy whatever hope he'd had for me and despite my belief that he could stand alone--because I really did believe that--I wasn't sure that he wouldn't need help getting off of his knees when I swept his legs out from under him.

And I was selfish. I wanted to absorb every one of those stolen kisses he gave me when nobody was watching and when he caught me alone. I wanted to remember his face and how his hands felt with his fingers threaded through mine. I wanted to commit the way he smelled of sandalwood and bourbon to my memory so that I could wake up every morning and convince myself that he was still beside me.

I was in hell.

I felt like the worst kind of traitor. I'd made him so many promises that I would stay with him, that I was his, that I was going to take care of him when he needed me to and I was about to shatter those all for the sake of a family that had done nothing but destroy me and because as much as it hurt to lose Emory, losing all of them was somehow even more unbearable. Not because it hurt me, but because I knew it would hurt my siblings. Latham and Anya and the rest...they didn't deserve to lose me because of some archaic tradition that shouldn't have mattered anymore. We weren't Glacia anymore. We were a Corian territory. Our King was no longer a blond or a redhead like the rest of us were and he didn't wear tattoos down his arm--though a woman in the village did end up giving Emory some over his right shoulder and down to his elbow. Not a Commander's sleeve, but one of our traditions all the same. It still didn't make him one of us to the rest of them.

Our King was Corian and he was the reason for my heartbeat.

When I could no longer put it off because we were destined to leave the next morning, I gathered the resolve that I had left--which wasn't much--and sat down beside the pillar that marked Milena's grave. I traced her name with my fingertips and wished that we believed in some afterlife. Usually, I was comfortable with the certainty of death and the peacefulness of the idea that it was just...over. It was just an endless sleep, but in that moment I wanted to cry out to her and believe that she would answer from the underwater halls where Corians spent their after-years or from the Between where Lierians waited for rebirth. I wanted her to tell me what to do, to promise me that if I left with Emory that they would all still be okay without me.

I was met with silence until I heard the crunch of Emory's boots behind me. Latham wasn't attached to his hip for the first time in two weeks and he surveyed me carefully with those unsettling mint colored eyes. I was clammy, pale, and fidgeting. I felt like I was about to choke on my tongue. Emory gave a short nod to one side and disappeared around to the other side of the pillar. I had no
choice but to follow, though I felt like my feet were made of lead as I moved.

"You look terrible," he finally admitted when I leaned against the grave marker and looked up at him. He said it with a shrug, his hands buried in the pockets of his fur lined coat.

I wanted to throw myself at his feet and beg him to forgive me before I even spoke but I swallowed the urge and rubbed my hands down the front of my clothes. They were clammy inside of my gloves and the action didn't help, but I still tried. I'd grown used to wearing less than this in the south.

My tongue turned thick in my mouth and I nodded. His expression clouded over with confusion and concern. He loved me. Gods, he loved me and I was going to destroy him knowing exactly what it would do to him. My stomach churned in my gut and for a moment, I was fighting the urge to vomit. My mouth watered from it and my eyes stung. Emory reached for me and, like a frightened rabbit, I ducked out of his grasp.

The confusion in his features cleared suddenly and he stepped back. "You can't do it," he told me and his voice held none of the accusatory tone that I would have expected. In fact, it almost sounded like he pitied me.

I stared up at him silently, my arms tight around my abdomen. I felt like my legs were going to buckle and I wanted to crawl down into the dirt with my sister or trade places with her. Anything but this...anything but sympathy from the man whose heart I was about to walk all over.

"Kitten--"

"Please don't call me that if you're doing what I think you're doing," he cut me off as the words started tumbling from my mouth and when I looked up from where I was staring at the snow, he did look hurt. He wasn't hysterical. In fact, he was rather grounded looking. Stable. Stoic. He chewed his bottom lip and kept his eyes focused on the stone marker, but he wasn't crying. He wasn't screaming at me...and to be honest, I wasn't sure what to do with that.

I swallowed hard and my legs did finally fail me. I sank into the snow, grateful for the weight off of my knees and despite how cold it was, I felt better there than I had standing. I tried again, struggling to find my voice. "Emory, I'm so sorry," I choked and for the second time since this decision had come to light, hot tears spilled from my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. I felt rather like something was ripping me apart and I wanted to cling to him, to breathe him in one more time, to press kisses to his face one more time, to feel him hold onto me one more time..."I'm so sorry. I'm so--s-s-sorry."

He stood over me, my kitten, like he had so many times before he'd gotten better only there was no cane in his hand this time. No whip. No belt. No measuring stick or willow switch. There was just Emory, dressed in red and black like his father, and in that moment I wanted him to hit me. I ached for the release that being in physical pain would have brought...the distraction from the internal agony that I was suffering and the worst part of it was that I had no right to feel the way that I felt. This was my fault. I was doing this to us. He should have been the one writhing like this but instead, he was keeping his head. He stayed on his feet and he looked down at me for a long minute, arms crossed, face unreadable.

And then he sat. He let himself down slowly onto the base of the marker while I rubbed violently at my face until the skin was raw and swollen, trying to wipe away any evidence of tears but creating more in the process. I couldn't stop them. It was a torrent of everything I'd felt in the past two years being ripped away from me. I couldn't catch my breath. Every time I inhaled a choking, gasping noise escaped my lips. I wanted him to comfort me and I knew, at the same time, that he wouldn't. I didn't deserve it.

"Why?" he eventually asked quietly and I looked up. He searched my face for an answer and found
nothing. He flinched though. It was a brief grimace that crossed his features and he twisted his hands in his lap.

I hiccuped and struggled to find enough air in my lungs to force it past my vocal chords in order to form the words that he so needed to hear. "I can't--" I started, stuttering and coughing and shaking my head. He waited patiently, his legs outstretched and his hands in his lap, his head tilted to one side like we were discussing fucking tea cookies.

"I can't leave them!" I finally bit out. "I can't lose them. They're my fam--"

"No," he stopped me again and shook his head. His hood fell down and his loose, messy curls tumbled in his eyes. He blew them away and I wanted so badly to plunge my fingers into them, feel them silk-soft below my palms just one more time while I kissed him but I only dug my nails into my knees and waited for an explanation. "Why are you sorry?"

For a moment, I couldn't believe what I'd heard and I stared at him, startled by the question itself. Gods, he was beautiful—all dark hair and bright eyes against the contrast of the snow and his black coat. I loved him. I loved him so much more than I had ever loved anything in my life but he needed more than I could ever give him. I knew that I was breaking him and still, all he displayed was subtle understanding and a desire to know why I felt so terrible about it.

If it was possible, my heart broke even more and I scrambled forward. I didn't care that I had denied contact and that I didn't deserve comfort. I threw myself into him and he caught me, his breath leaving his lungs at the force of my weight falling against him. I buried my face in his chest and I sobbed like an infant. I shouldn't have. If anyone should have been allowed to make his suffering known, it should have been him. He hesitated to hold me, his arms sort of hovering over my shoulders but eventually they settled around me and I felt him sigh while I dug my fingers into his clothes.

I breathed him in, urged myself to remember while I mumbled apology after apology between chest wrenching hysterics. Sandalwood and linen, mint on his breath, the steady thump-thump-thump of his heart in his chest and the swell of his lungs behind his ribs, the shape of his body beneath my hands, long and lean--all taut skin stretched over sinewy muscle--

Remember. I urged myself. Remember him.

I shoved my fist into my mouth and screamed and he squeezed me tighter. I could hear his heart pick up. "Gods, Kita, you're in pain," he breathed into the top of my head, brushing my hood back so that he kiss my hair. He was right. I was in more pain in that moment than I had ever been with him or even under the thumb of my father. This was abject suffering and Emory knew what it was like intimately.

"I'm sorry," I choked again and I tried to push away from him. I didn't deserve the comfort and he allowed the distance so that he could look at me, soaked and swollen from tears.

"Why?" he demanded. "I know what it's like to lose a parent. I know what it's like to lose everything you ever loved. I can't blame you for this. I can't--" He shook his head and pressed his hands over his face in the first sign of weakness since this conversation had started.

I wanted to see his face, to remember the way his bowed mouth curved along the bottom of his lower lip and how long his eyelashes were. I wanted to remember the way that he looked at me and so I reached forward and curled gloved hands around his wrists so that I could pull them down.

His eyes were bright, damp, but nothing spilled over. His bottom lip trembled and he was quick to
bite down on it hard enough to draw blood. I saw it bead beneath his teeth and he sucked it away.

I took a deep breath. "I'm sorry because I know this is hurting you," I mumbled. "I never...I never wanted to hurt you, Em. I love you so much. I want to see you happy and fulfilled and healthy and you're so close. You're so fucking close to it, but I can't give you all of it. I swear, I didn't want to hurt you."

"Little late for that," he answered thickly, twisting his hands to escape my grasp. It broke my heart and I fell forward, grasping at his clothes, desperate to get as close as possible before I kissed him.

He tasted of blood and tears. Metal and salt. He didn't kiss me back. He just allowed me that moment before he leaned away. "No amount of begging is going to change your mind, is it?" he asked almost inaudibly. "Because I'll beg, Nikita, if that's what you want. I'll do anything. Please, don't do this to me." It was the first evidence of a break. The tears in his bright, Lierian eyes finally spilled over and fell down his cold cheeks. It destroyed me, but I shook my head anyway. No. No begging would change it. Nothing would.

I tried to kiss those tears away, to offer some last comfort, but he abruptly disentangled himself and got to his feet. He dusted the snow from his clothes, wiped at his face with the back of his sleeve, and looked down at me. "Clean breaks heal faster, Nikita," he informed me, his tone grave.

"Emory--"

"I'll be fine." He cut me off again and shook his head. "I'm capable of standing on my own two feet without you now and I understand. Really. I do."

"Please don't hate me." It was a plea that I hadn't expected to escape my lips...one that I hadn't even thought about. He deserved to hate me. He deserved to hit me. To do whatever he wanted. He could. He was the King.

Instead, he sucked in a sharp breath and then managed a weak smile. Weak, but genuine. "Gods, Kita, sweet thing. I could never hate you. I do need to leave though or I'm going to throw myself at your feet and beg you not to do this. It will blow your cover and ruin it for you." He reached out when I stood up and tucked a loose strand of blond hair behind my ear. "Don't forget me, yeah?"

I flinched. "Never."

And that was the last I saw of the King.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter ;-; Also, I'm sorry this is so short.
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

Narrator: Atara

Chapter Notes

We started with Atara and we end with Atara. Thank you all so much for coming along on the ride with me. I hope you enjoyed it and I hope you stick around for the third installment, the first chapter of which should be posted tomorrow. <3

In my brother’s absence, Lian grew. First, he learned to hold his head upright and his watery, infantile sobbing became more robust. Then, he lost the shaky, jarring motions of limbs that lacked refined movement skills. His motions became purposeful. He held his bottles and he held his toys, shaking them above him. He learned to smile, wide and toothless, and he did it anytime someone looked at him. I loved that the most, I think--leaning into his cot, my arms resting on the rails, so that I could watch him smile and laugh, fingers reaching up toward me.

Then he rolled over. He scooted and crawled. Mack and I would sit on the floor and he would wiggle his way between the both of us, from me to him and back again, a mop of blond curls atop his little head that bounced while he moved.

He had a birthday. He walked.

And while Lian learned, I healed. The hallucinations stopped completely. The nightmares ebbed away, replaced by new fears and fresh horrors. What terrified me most stopped being the dark, dank cells beneath the palace, but the idea that Lian bore marks on his face the way that Emory and I did. He would grow up. He would have heats. What happened to my brother could very well happen to him, and I became viciously protective of my little boy. The idea of letting anyone near him that wasn’t my immediate family or our inner circle became abhorrent. I didn’t even like the idea of him leaving the palace walls.

And so maybe I didn’t heal completely. Maybe I transferred my fear and my anxiety. Mackenzie kept warning me that Lian would grow up. He would develop his own personality. He would need room for that and I would have to give it to him, but that was all so far away--for now, I could keep him safe and when he slept between his, I could press my ear to the spot between his tiny shoulders and listen to his little heart tap-tap-tapping in his chest.

Life settled down. Life became...normal. Cassie handled the gentry with practiced ease, so eloquent, thoughtful, and beautiful that they almost forgot she was an Immaran. She tightened her noose around the temples and with the political clout she wielded with the other noble houses that had supported my brother, she carefully maneuvered the playing pieces like Coryth was her personal chessboard until the leadership of the priesthood were almost entirely comprised of younger sons and daughters from those very houses. With Cass pulling strings, they were rededicated to charity, volunteering their services to feed the hungry with food purchased by the money Mackenzie and
Emory had allocated for the cause. Their power was effectively hobbled with such subtlety that it was almost unrecognizable.

‘Nightingales,’ Sebastian had told me when I mentioned it to him. ‘Less deadly than the Sons, but twice as frightening.’

The Lierians, too, were handled, though not by my brother’s political savant of a Second. With Kinnon’s help, the faction within the Nation that had supported Hiram was dissolved. Any of them who survived the reclaiming of Coryth were promptly put to death and their bodies were entombed in the earth rather than burned as was our custom. They would rot in the dark, consumed by insects and decay. Those who were left—innocents among that faction—children, teenagers, and those who refused to fight, were dissolved among the loyal tribes where they would be disallowed from holding any position within our people until loyalty was proven without a doubt.

It was not...easy. There was fighting. There were rebellions, none of which had even an iota of success, but in time, that grew quiet. Defectors were discovered, weeded out, and removed. An unsteady peace descended over our people, who retreated to their homes to lick their wounds.

I remained in the keep, in this place that was more prison to me than home. It never was comfortable again, not for me and not for Mackenzie, even when we left the royal quarters for a private apartment. Quietly and with little debate, we came to the decision that when Emory returned, we would leave for the Glenning estate to the west of Coryth. A small city already existed around it, funded by the mineral-rich mines in the mountains where it sat, and we would turn that place into the seat of the Infinito’s power. It would give us distance from this place that had taken so much from us and it would give the Nation a bit of the separation they needed from the Crown. My brother would not be happy. Cyril was not happy the moment we told him, but he’d conceded the point—if we felt it was necessary and healthy for all of us, then it was not his place to stand in the way. After all, in my brother’s absence, he had moved out of the Keep into a property that our family owned on the far side of the wall, just inside the tree line of the forest, and he called himself retired from court life.

And I had thought everything would be okay.

Until Emory returned.

We’d expected him. Rumors had spread down the coast that he was on his way back and the envoy had sent a bird ahead to let the city guard know that the King was returning. Part of me was excited. I missed Emory. For most of my life, he’d been my best friend. He hadn’t seen my son in close to a year, hadn’t heard Lian’s first babbles or witnessed his first toddling steps. We would stay for awhile longer when he came back, let the news sink slowly, enjoy the bittersweet taste of our childhood in its dying throes, and then Mackenzie, Lian, and I would leave.

Lian’s weight was heavy in my arms then, but when I’d sat him down, he’d proceeded to whine and hold his arms up and open for someone to lift him. Mackenzie had taken his turn until his forearms were weak from the weight and then he’d handed him off to me until he regained feeling in his fingers. Now, he stood behind me, rubbing my shoulders, assuring me that everything would be fine. Emory could stand on his own and, after all, he had Nikita.

It was unnerving, seeing Emory. He looked so much like my father that it almost flipped my stomach. He was built the same, shared his facial features, and wore the same colors. I had been closer to Fox than I was to Cyril and in that moment, I missed him so profoundly that it manifested in a physical ache that split my chest. I shuddered and Mack squeezed again, leaning forward to press a kiss to the top of my head. "He looks like my dad," I mumbled thickly.

"He always has. You know that," Cyril interjected. "Even as a child, he looked like Fox. Acted like
him too, stubborn little shit. Always had to have the last word."

Humor. It broke the tension and I giggled nervously, stealing a glance at the remaining parent that stood beside me. Cyril had...recovered, somewhat. His scathing humor had returned and he no longer broke down into tears at random intervals. I think having Lian around helped. He was a fresh start, a new beginning--someone that hadn't suffered through the past few years with us. He was a precious and welcome breath of fresh air.

The gate swung open and Emory, sans his entourage of people, hopped down from his horse and immediately swept Cyril up into a hug.

It was the first sign that something was wrong. The second was the noticeably empty space beside him that Nikita Novak had always filled but the force that was my brother didn't leave any space to question it initially. He grinned widely and when he let go of my laughing father, he turned his attention to me and the toddler that I was holding. "Look at you," he breathed, catching my face between his hands and smiling. "Fatherhood suits you, Atara...and look at this little one." He brushed his fingertip down the line on Lian's cheek. The boy looked up, all wide eyes and a grin with a few pearly white baby teeth visible along his gums. "I'm afraid he looks almost entirely like Mackenzie, little brother."

It was surreal...this happiness. It wasn't forced. I could see in his face that he was truly happy for me and happy to be back, even. He looked healthy, if tired. His eyes were a little dark and his face a little bit pale, but his laughter was genuine.

"Emory, where is Nikita?" Mack eventually braved the question and Emory shrugged as he walked toward the palace doors with his family in tow like we were little ducks following our mother.

My brother shrugged. He didn't even hesitate. "At home," he answered simply.

"Home is here," I interjected, taking two steps to each one of his in order to keep up with him. I looked up at him and a shadow crossed his features. He seemed to steel himself for the upcoming storm.

Emory shook his head. "Home is in Ravndal."

I stopped. He did not, and so I had to half-shout after him. "When is he coming back?"

And then Emory stopped. His shoulders sagged a little bit and he turned. He shook his arms out and I felt Mack physically deflate beside me. Emory had come so far, climbed so high out of the pit he'd been trapped in...watching him lose his footing was like watching a tragic accident. You don't want to see it, but you can't look away.

"He's not," he finally said stiffly. He approached me then and held his arms out. "Can I hold him?"

There was a large part of me that wanted to say no. I remembered the Emory that had held an axe to Mack's throat and had a psychotic break in the courtyard. I remembered the Emory that had beaten Nikita mercilessly and without regard to what the other man actually wanted or needed...but he was my brother. He would always be my brother and he had asked with such desperation in his voice that it almost cracked.

So I nodded and I handed Lian over, the toddler squawking indignantly and staring back at me with big, gray-blue eyes as reflective as still water. Then he turned to Emory, bowed lips parted, and he lifted his hands to both of them on his cheeks. For a moment, he stared and then Emory wrinkled his nose and Lian mimicked the gestured, throwing his head back to laugh a moment later.
It wasn’t fair, I thought. It wasn’t fair that Emory would never have this when he’d wanted it so much more than I ever had. I’d spent my life telling myself that I didn’t want children. I wanted to travel. I wanted to see the world and write it down so that others could witness it through my eyes, but those dreams were all gone. Emory held my entire world in his arms, every bouncing curl of it.

It was Cyril that pressed forward. "What do you mean, he's not coming back, boss?" he inquired gently, taking a step closer so that he could put his hand on the curve of Emory's arm.

And that was when he broke. "This was a bad idea," he choked and he pushed the child back to me hurriedly so that he could rub at his face and spin on his heel, making a fast retreat for the safety of the suite.

Lian blinked, surprised before the tears started at the sudden loss of Emory, who had made him laugh so quickly that it was almost like Lian remembered him.

For a long second, there was stunned silence between the three of us left standing there and the blissfully unaware toddler who could have never understood the gravity of what was happening, despite his tears. I couldn't breathe. The world seemed to have frozen around me and my heart broke for him. Emory had been through too much already. Beaten and broken down to the foundation and then built back up into something entirely different. He'd been strong since his return--so strong that it made watching him rush away from us all that more painful. I'd expected him to be upset over Lian, but he'd seemed...more at ease holding him than he had trying to explain Nikita.

I had accepted what had happened to Emory as part of fate's decree. There was something tragic and beautiful in my brother that hadn't been there before--something that separated him so completely from Fox that even though they looked the same, they were fundamentally different. Fox had never hurt like Emory had hurt. Nobody ever should have, but it had carved and crafted the King into someone strong and far more sympathetic than my father had ever been. Someone--some deity or ancestor or universal karmic force--had put Emory on this journey the moment that he was born and it had torn him down. It had made him suffer exquisitely and it stripped away all of his pride and his dignity with surgical precision.

Kita had been a crutch. He'd been a tool used to keep Emory on his feet when all else failed, so of course he had to go. My brother had to prove he could stay off of his knees without help and considering the fact that he had seemed...relatively put together...he was succeeding.

That didn't make me worry less.

I handed Lian off to Mack as Cyril started forward and I stopped him. "Let me," I pleaded. "I owe him this much."

My Lheiro looked up at me with those unreal blue eyes, his brow furrowed, his tiny hands curved into nervous fists, and he nodded. I kissed his forehead and started for the suite, leaving my son in the capable hands of his father and my own. I could hear Mack humming to him as I disappeared down the hall, limping on my braced leg.

I found Emory in Fox's old office. My father's things were gone. They had been taken to Cyril’s home because we’d all agreed that they belonged with him. I think he'd needed that distance from his childhood home--a place that reminded him of the years and years of memories they'd made together. He still spent most of his days in the palace with us, but he had a safe spot that could hold the memories of his time with Fox without making him relive them in painful detail every time he entered the royal suite.

Em was leaning heavily on the desk, shoulders slumped. His hands were planted in fists, knuckles
first, against the wood and he was taking deep, steady breaths like he was trying to control himself and not really gaining any footing in that department. "Boss?" I asked quietly, letting the door shut softly behind me. He didn't acknowledge me, but I knew that he'd heard me. It was always better to let Emory know that you were near him, lest you sneak up on him. His startle response was still drastic.

Watching him there, I realized how much I took Mack's presence for granted. It was simple, being with him. He was just always there, fulfilling whatever need that I had in that moment. He stretched my bad leg out and rubbed my busted knee joint until the ache went away. He held me through nightmares. He loved our son with such a ferocity that Cyril had called him 'mama bear' just the day before when he was fussing over Lian in his basket, checking every twenty seconds to make sure he wasn't tangled in his blankets. What I had with Mack was sacred and beautiful the way that I had thought what my brother had with Kita was sacred and beautiful. I had come to think of the little Glacian Commander as Emory's shadow, dressed in black, there to keep him grounded.

But if Nikita wasn't there to keep him grounded, I would. I had before his accident. I had always looked out for him, despite him being the older one. I had been Emory's moral compass once upon a time. I could return as his current support system, uniquely manipulated for his special circumstances. It would mean staying in the Keep, but after all that Emory had suffered...after coming back from that asylum, holding it together, raising that army, saving my life...I could do this for him. I would do this for him.

I took a deep breath and tried to recall the times I'd seen Kita with him when he was on the verge of one of those breaks. "I'm going to touch you, Emory," I warned gently and though he stiffened, he didn't refuse the contact when I placed my hand over his and squeezed his fist. "You're safe here, you know that. You can get angry. You can lose it for a minute. Yell at me, Gods know I've done enough to deserve it in the past few years."

"Then what are you?" I had learned the importance of getting him to talk from watching him with Nikita. There was a line you had to walk with Emory. Push too hard and he shut down completely. Don't push hard enough and he was liable to lose his mind for a few minutes. My brother was a strong leader and he was going to make an excellent King, but even Kings have weaknesses. This was his.

Emory exhaled loudly, his cheeks puffing out in the process, and he pushed himself off of the desk so that he could stand up. He ran his fingers through his hair and then over his face. "Hurt," he offered weakly. "I loved him, Atara. I still love him."

"What happened?" I couldn't imagine a scenario where Nikita Novak left my brother willingly. I had been in those torture chambers. I had seen what he’d done to that halfling boy for my brother. I had seen what he looked like the night that they sent Emory away to the asylum...like badly butchered meat, bloody and bruised and broken, and he'd still come crawling back. If what Emory had done to him hadn't driven him away, I couldn’t imagine anything that would except maybe death.

So I braced myself for that and what I got was...unexpected. "Fucking Glacian honor and owing shit to his family and heirs," Emory spat, his eyes suddenly turning wild like they had been before. His fists curled and he spun away from me. I heard his knuckles crack when he hit the bookshelf. Trinkets and books alike toppled and thumped against the carpet. Emory seemed unaware of the pain, or perhaps he relished in it. He just hit the case again, leaving a smear of scarlet across the dark wood.
"Emory." I got to my feet and he hit the shelf again, finally whimpering on impact and drawing his fist back to his abdomen. He doubled over it, his good hand wrapped tightly around the wrist of his bloodied one like he could somehow seal the pain off before it hit his knuckles.

I had known Nikita’s family would sooner butcher him than accept his relationship with my brother, but I had also known that he loved Emory fiercely. I hadn’t ever thought it would come to this—to falling in line with the idea that he owed Ravndal children, that Emory owed Coria children. I’d come to terms with the fact that my brother would never have children. He’d name Riordan or Meyer as his heir. It wouldn’t have been the first time the crown passed to a lesser brother because a King had failed to have children. Life would go on.

It seemed I had underestimated Nikita Novak’s loyalty to his vicious father, but then again, if someone had beaten me into submission over and over again until I knew nothing but blind loyalty, I would have probably fallen in line, too.

Emory made a growling noise and stood straight again, holding his busted hand in front of him. The fingers refused to move, even when he tried, and he swore in Lierian under his breath. "He told me he was going to wait until the end of our visit there...spend that last bit of time with his fucking family," he explained to me, speaking through his teeth as he shrugged his coat off and wrapped his hand in it to keep from bleeding all over the carpet. "But he couldn't do it. And I get it, Atara, really. I saw dad die. I put him on his pyre. I took his bones out into the bay. I know they did to you--" He bit his lip and shook his head.

So did I. I remembered it vividly—Hiram leering into my little hellhole, informing me gleefully that they’d butchered my father and that they’d thrown Mack, blistering with infection, over the side of the Keep from the sea cells. Family was important and we’d both lost so much….

"The point is," he continued. "I know what losing your family is like. I lost all of you for awhile. I won't ever get dad back and the last conversation I had with him whole was just me screaming that I hated him." I hadn't known that and he must have noticed my expression fall and he scoffed. "Right? How do you fucking live with that, Atara? How am I supposed to live with that?"

"He loved you, Em," I offered weakly, wringing my hands as I spoke. "You know that."

Emory shook his head. "No, I know," he agreed. "I know, I just...I wanted Kita to pick me. I wanted him to come home with me. Because I'm a selfish prick."

"You know that's not true," I argued and I reached for him without warning. He side-stepped me, careful to remain out of my reach while he shook his head again but I kept right on arguing. "Stop it, Emory. You know it's not true. I idolized you my whole life. I thought you hung the stars for me and you did everything you could to make me happy. You worried over me. Before I could walk, you pulled me around on a blanket. You smuggled me sweets when I wasn't allowed any. When we fought over toys, you always gave it to me in the end. We went to the beach that day because of me!" He opened his mouth like he was going to deny it and I did catch him that time and I pressed my fingers over his lips. "Don't. You took me out there because you wanted me to be able to see the world like you did. You risked your life to make me smile and you paid for it dearly. Don't think that for a second I don't know that you suffered for me. I know it, Emory. I think about it every day."

I had never talked to him about the day at the beach, I realized. We had spent so long dancing around it that by the time he was healthy enough to have a discussion, it never happened. I'd been content to never bring it up because I preferred keeping it tucked away in the back of my head where I didn't have to live it again and watch him flop helplessly between those two monsters after they'd broken enough bones to render him helpless.
I could see his jaw working. He swallowed hard and looked down at me with bright, glassy eyes. "I mistook your silence for sadness," he admitted quietly. "But it was just who you were. I wanted you to be happy, Atara and now I'm...I'm this." He held his arms out and gestured to himself, scoffing at the indication and making a face that conveyed disgust. "And he's gone."

"Fuck him," I snapped and I grabbed Emory's shoulders, forcing him to look back at me again. "Look at me, Emory. It's his loss. You don't need him. You have me and you can lean on me as much as you need to and I will always be here." I let my fingers leave his shoulders so that I could hold his face and his own hands curled over mine. "Do you understand me, boss? I will always be here. You're my brother and my King. Aside from my son, you come before everyone else. I love you. Unconditionally. Regardless of what anyone's fucking family thinks. He doesn't have to be your happy ending."

He laughed then. It was short and weak, but it was real and it reached his eyes. He stepped forward and threw his arms over my shoulders clumsily and for the first time in far too long, I felt like I had Emory back. The real Emory. The Emory that I'd missed. The Emory that had been lost on the beach, buried in the sand...forgotten.

"He was never my happy ending," he managed, speaking into the top of my head before he held me at arm's length and I stared up at him, confusion in my face. "You were, tiny. You alive and happy and healthy with a husband and kids and grandkids, watching babies play on a carpet until you’re old and fat and bald. That was my happy ending...and you did it and he’s beautiful."

I blinked at him, my throat tight and my eyes glassy, before I choked out something with humor in it to keep myself from crying. "Psh," I mocked. "Have you seen his parents? Of course, he’s beautiful."

"Yeah, you're lucky he looks like Mack," he teased and I elbowed him when he dropped an arm over my shoulder and started for the door. "You remember that list Cassie made of all the women that made marriage offers at my coronation?"

I looked up at him and nodded as he pushed the door open. "Think that's still around somewhere?"

"I mean, probably? I’m sure Cass memorized it anyway."

He hummed and smacked his lips. "I'm thinking a blonde. Maybe a redhead. Or maybe both?"

"You're incorrigible."

And he laughed.

And I knew then...Emory would be okay. We all would.

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