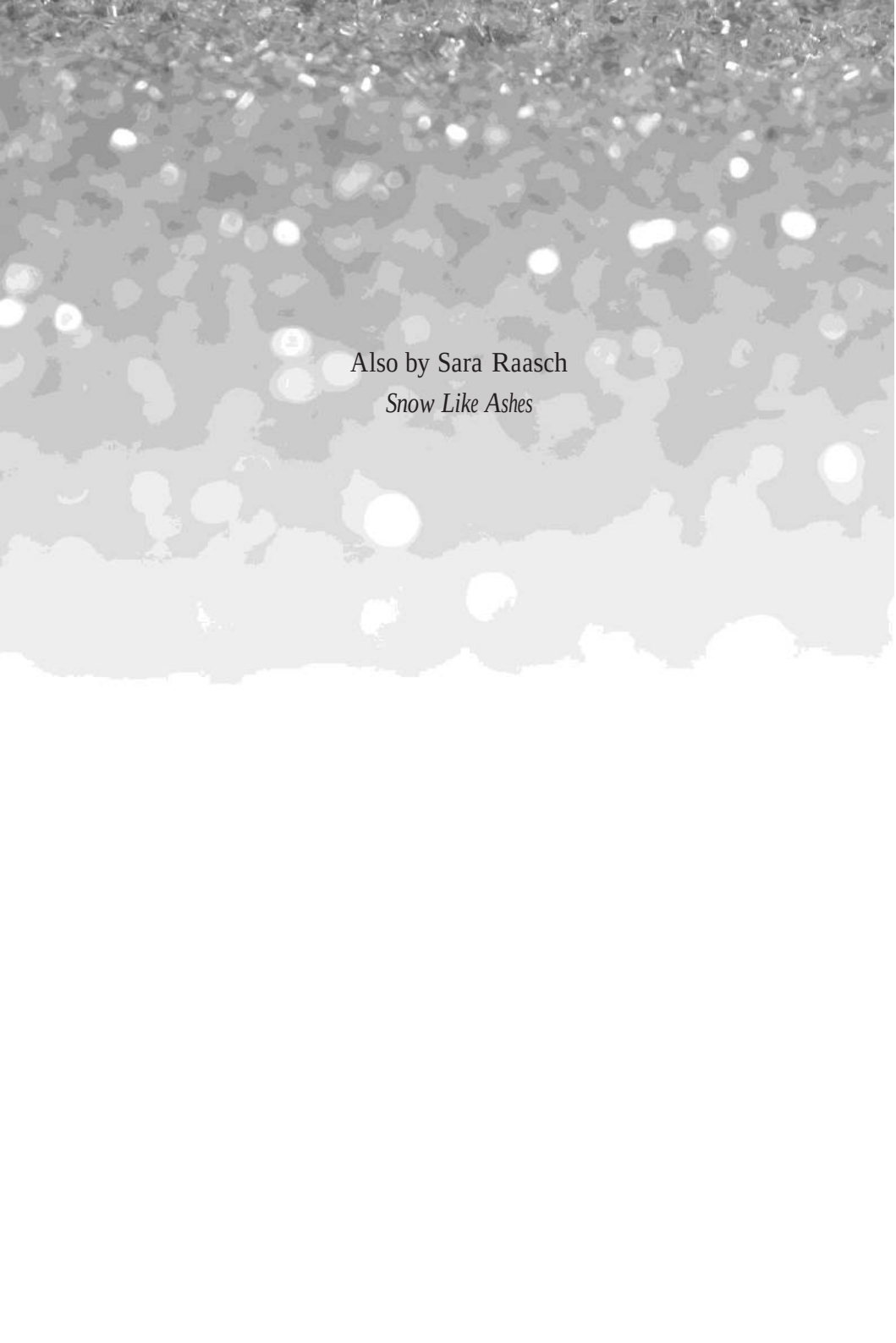


ICE LIKE FIRE



Also by Sara Raasch
Snow Like Ashes



ICE LIKE FIRE

S A R A R A A S C H

BALZER + BRAY
An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

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Ice Like Fire

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www.epicreads.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015943607

ISBN 978-0-06-228695-6

ISBN 978-0-06-242793-9 (int'l. ed.)

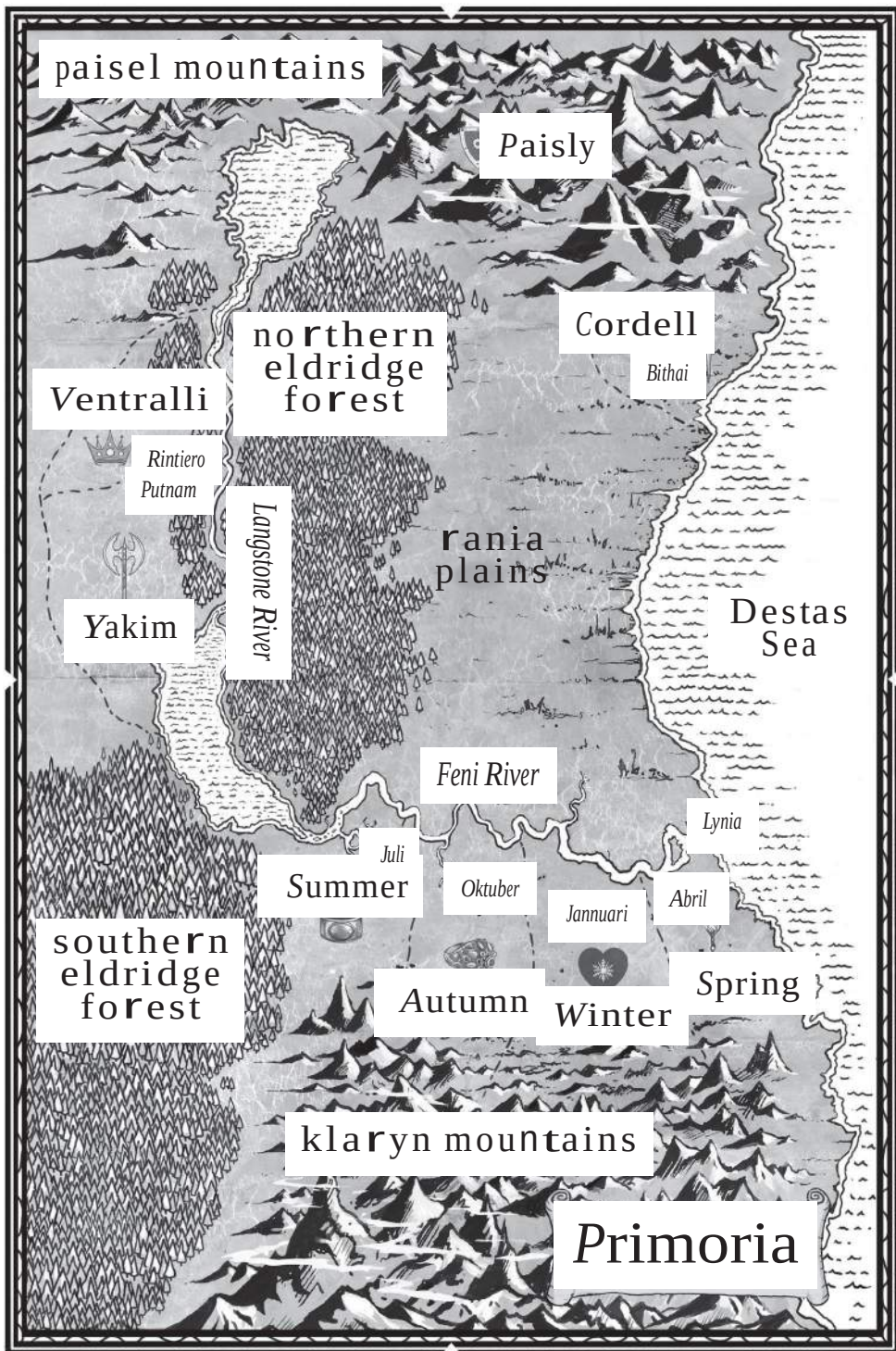
Typography by Erin Fitzsimmons

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First Edition

To Kelson, who embodies the best parts of Mather and Theron even
when I'm the worst parts of Meira



paisel mountains

Paisly

Ventralli

Rintiero
Putnam

northern
eldridge
forest

Cordell

Bithai

Yakim

Langstone River

rania
plains

Destas
Sea

Feni River

Juli

Summer

Oktuber

Jannuari

Abril

Lynia

southern
eldridge
forest

Autumn

Winter

Spring

klaryn mountains

Primoria



Meira

FIVE ENEMIES.

Five dented helmets sit lopsided over five equally dented breastplates; five black suns shine, scratched yet distinct, on the silver metal. More soldiers than I could ever take on my own, but as I stand in the center of their ring, boots planted in the snow, I cock an eyebrow at the closest one, the calm that precedes a fight descending over me.

My chakram already rests in my hand, but part of me doesn't want to throw it just yet, reveling in the feel of its smooth handle against my palm. Dendera thought herself so clever, hiding it where she did—but really, giving it to the Cordellan soldiers was almost too easy. Where else would I go for a weapon if not the weapons tent?

“Do it!” comes a high-pitched squeal.

“Shh, she’ll hear you!”

A deluge of shushing follows when I snap my head toward

the row of boulders outside my ring of mock enemies. A cluster of small heads ducks behind the largest rock.

“She saw us!”

“You’re standing on my foot!”

“Be quiet!”

A smile flutters on my lips. When I face the closest of the soldiers again, the pile of snow within the dented helmet and breastplate sags a little, knocked askew by the same gust of icy wind that beats at my skirt. The illusion wavers.

I’m not in battle gear—I’m in a sleeveless gown of pleated ivory fabric, my hair done up in elaborate braids. My “enemies” are stacks of snow that I hastily kicked together and dressed in the discarded Spring armor that litters my kingdom. My audience isn’t an army, but a group of curious Winterian children who followed me out of the city. The chakram is real, though, and the way my body reacts to it makes this almost believable.

I’m a soldier. Angra’s men surround me. And I will kill every one of them.

My knees bend, hips pivoting, shoulders twisting and muscles knotting up. Inhale, exhale, spin, release—the moves rise from my memory, as ingrained into my body as the act of walking, despite the fact that it’s been three months since I last threw my chakram.

The blade breaks out of my palm with a hiss that punctures the cold air. It whirls into the closest enemy, rebounds

off a rock, knocks into the next soldier, and sings back to my hand.

Every taut nerve relaxes and I exhale, long, deep, pure. Snow above, that feels *good*.

I let the chakram fly again, and again, finishing off the remaining soldiers. Cheers erupt from behind me, tiny voices laughing as snowflakes settle over the fallen bodies of my victims. I stay in the position of my last catch, hips bent and chakram firm in my hand, but the illusion is thoroughly broken now—in the best way.

A grin curves my lips. I can't remember the last time someone laughed in Winter. The past three months should have been filled with such joy, but the only sounds I've heard have been the thuds of construction, murmured plans for crops and mines, soft applause at public events.

"Can I throw it?" one of the girls calls, and her plea encourages the rest of them to demand the same thing.

"Better start with something less sharp." I smile and bend to scoop snow into a loose ball that I let slide from my fingers. "And less deadly."

The girl who first asked to throw my chakram understands before the rest of them. She drops to her knees, mashes snow into a ball, and hurls it at a boy behind her.

"Got you!" she squeals, and takes off, tearing over the field in search of a hiding place.

The rest of them lash into a frenzy, packing snow into projectiles and launching them at one another as they

sprint over the fields beyond.

“You’re dead! I hit you!” one little boy cries.

My smile slips.

We don’t have to fight anymore. They’ll never have to throw more than snowballs, I tell myself.

“Isn’t this a little . . . morbid?”

I whirl, fingers spasming around the chakram. But I don’t even get the blade up before I see who’s entering the little clearing created by the foothills of the Klaryns on one side and rippling fields of snow on the other.

Theron tips his head, some of his hair falling out from behind his ears to swing in a brown-blond curtain. A question hangs in his gaze, the lines around his eyes holding concern.

“Morbid?” I manage half a smile. “Or cathartic?”

“Most cathartic things *are* morbid,” he amends. “Healing through melancholy.”

I roll my eyes. “Leave it to you to find something poetic about slicing off the heads of snowmen.”

He laughs and the air grows a little cooler, a delightful chill that fizzles against my heart. His coloring looks harsh against the perpetual ivory backdrop of Winter—the lean muscles of his body are hugged by Cordell’s hunter-green-and-gold uniform, the material thicker to account for Winter’s chill and the fact that his Cordellan blood doesn’t protect him from my kingdom’s climate.

Theron nods back the way he came, toward the city of

Gaos. If the Klaryns were a sea, Gaos would be Winter's largest port—the biggest city with access to the most mines.

It's a place I've spent far too much time these past three months.

"We're ready to open the Tadil Mine," he says, shifting in what could be a shiver of cold, but could also be a shiver of anticipation.

"We just opened a mine yesterday. And two last week," I counter. I hate how my voice twists. Theron shouldn't be the recipient of my anger.

His jaw tightens. "I know."

"Your father's coming to Jannuari for the ceremony at the end of the week, isn't he?"

He reads my meaning. "The Autumnian royals will be here as well. You shouldn't confront my father with them present."

"Cordell is as involved with Autumn as they are with Winter. Their king probably wants to force Noam out as much as I do."

Theron winces, and I realize too late how callous my words were. Noam is still Theron's father and his king, and no matter how tight my chest gets whenever Noam issues a new order . . . we need Cordell. Without Noam's aid, we would have no army—the Winterians' physiques have just started to go from emaciated to healthy, and as such they've only recently become able to train at all. Without

Cordell, we would have no supplies, since Winter has no trade reestablished, and what crops we *can* grow in our frozen kingdom—thanks to my magic—are still freshly seeded and won't yield for months yet, even with the extra boost from Winter's conduit.

So I have no choice but to obey Noam's demands, because we are so indebted to him that sometimes I can't believe I'm not wearing Cordellan colors yet too.

"Fine," I concede. "I'll open this mine. I'll bring Noam and Autumn payment due for their part in Winter's salvation, but the moment the ceremony ends—"

What do I plan to do after the ceremony? Because that's all it is, a ceremony—a pretty performance to thank Autumn and Cordell for their aid in freeing Winter from Spring. We'll pay them with what goods we've mined, but it won't even be a fraction of what we owe. We'll be in the same situation after the ceremony as we are now: at Cordell's mercy.

That's why I've spent so much of the past three months trying to convince Dendera that queens can carry weapons. That's why I found my chakram and staged this moment of normalcy—because even though we have Winter back, I feel exactly the same as I did when Spring owned our kingdom. Enslaved at another kingdom's mercy. Albeit with less immediate threat, which is the only reason I've tolerated Noam for as long as I have. My people don't see Cordell's presence as oppressive—they see aid.

Theron reaches for me, but I'm still holding my chakram,

so he settles for only one of my hands, yanking me out of my worrying. He isn't just a delegate from Cordell; he isn't just his father's son. He's also a boy who looks at me with wanting, the same look he gave me in the dark halls of Angra's palace before he kissed me—a look he's given me a dozen times in the last three months.

My breath catches. He doesn't kiss me now, though, and I can't decide whether I want him to—and if I do, whether it would be because I want comfort, distraction, or him.

"I'm sorry," he says softly. "But we have to keep trying—and the work is good for Winter. If anything, your kingdom will benefit from these resources too. I hate that he's right, but we need—"

"Noam doesn't *need* Winter," I cut him off. "He *wants* Winter—he wants access to the chasm of magic. Why would you say he's right?" I hesitate. "Do you agree with him?"

Theron rocks closer, a cloud of lavender from the scented soap he uses drifting off his body. He moves his hands to my arms, the sleeves of his jacket tugging up, revealing his wrists and their jagged pink scars. Guilt leaves a vile tang in my mouth.

He got those scars while trying to rescue me.

Theron follows my gaze to his bare wrists. He jerks away, pulling down his sleeves.

I swallow. I should say something about it: his scars, his reaction. But he always changes the subject before I—

“I don’t think he’s entirely right,” Theron stammers, steering the conversation back on course, though I don’t miss how he keeps one hand on his sleeve, pressing the fabric to his wrist. “Not in how he’s going about it, at least. Winter needs support, which Cordell can give. And if we find the magic chasm, we’ll *all* be in a better place.”

His eyes hold mine, wordlessly pleading with me to carry on like normal.

I relent. For now. “And how should Noam go about getting recompense for his aid?”

But as soon as I ask the question, I know the answer, and my body flares with a wave of desire that makes me rock toward him.

Theron leans forward. “I want my father to reinstate our engagement.” His words are no louder than the snowflakes that drop around us. “If our kingdoms were joined, it wouldn’t be one dominating the other, one indebted to the other—we’d be united, powerful.” He pauses, exhaling a cloud of condensation. “Protected.”

Icy tingles shoot down my body, conflicting with the parts of me that know Theron and I aren’t destined for what we once were. Noam dissolved our engagement because he saw Winter’s debt to Cordell as a sufficient link between our two kingdoms—and maybe a little bit because he felt cheated by Sir for setting up a marriage between his son, the heir of a Rhythm, and a girl who should have been a Winterian pawn, not a queen in her own right.

Noam wants our mines; he wants access to the lost chasm of magic. He knows he'll have them, thanks to our dependency on him. This way, he can treat Winter like the lowly broken thing we are—not a political equal. And honestly, I'm a little relieved to not have to worry about being married now.

But Theron has made it quite clear, many times, that he isn't pleased with Noam's decision.

As if to confirm my thoughts, his features shift and he angles toward me. "I'll always fight for you. I'll always keep you safe," he adds.

The way he says it is a promise and a declaration and a plea all in one. The words feed tremors that shake down to his wrists, highlighting the fears he doesn't dare breathe aloud.

Protected. Keep you safe.

He's afraid of our pasts too. He's afraid that what happened will happen again, nightmares that keep playing out.

"You don't have to keep me safe," I whisper.

"But I can. I *will*." Theron's declaration is so stern that I feel it cut across my face.

But I don't want to need him—or his father, or Cordell. I don't want my kingdom to need anyone. Most days, I don't even want them to need *me*.

I touch my locket, the empty piece of jewelry that stands as a symbol of Winter's magic to everyone else. They believe that once the halves were reunited, the locket

resumed its status as one of the eight sources of magic in this world—the Royal Conduits. They think any magic I used before then—healing Sir and the boy in the Abril camp, infusing the enslaved Winterians with strength—was a fluke, a miracle, because every other Royal Conduit is an object like a dagger, a ring, a shield. It never occurred to them—or me, before this—that magic could find its host in a *person*.

They have no idea where the real magic is. And honestly, Cordell is the least of my worries—because something else sits inside me that could be far more dangerous.

I press my free hand to Theron's chest. Alone out here, with the snow falling and the cold wind twirling and the feel of his own pulse hammering under my fingers, I let us have this moment. Regardless of what we are now, moments like these, when we can forget politics and titles and our past, keep us both from falling apart beneath the stresses of our lives.

I press into him and lift up, catching his lips on mine. He moans and sweeps his arms around me, curving along the bend of my body, returning my kiss with a passion that undoes me.

Theron runs a hand along my temple, over my ear, and down my cheek, his fingers brushing aside the hairs that curl out of their pins. I tip my head to the side, leaning into his palm, my own fingers encircling his wrist.

His scars are lumpy and misshapen under my touch. My

heart—already beating erratically from the way Theron’s lips are rough yet his touch gentle, and from the pang of need in my gut when he moans like that—spirals out of control.

I ease back, our exhales turning to frost. “Theron, what happened to you in Abril?”

The words barely come, but there they finally are, dancing through the snowflakes.

He hesitates, not hearing me for a beat. Then he flinches, his face awash with horror that he smoothes into confusion. “You were there—”

“No, I mean . . . before.” Deep breaths. “You were in Abril before I knew you were there. And . . . you can tell me. If you ever need to. I mean, I know it’s hard, but I—” I groan at myself, head dipping between us. “I’m not good at this.”

Despite everything, Theron chuckles. “Good at what?”

I look up at him and start to smile back before I realize how he swept over everything I said. “Good at . . . us.”

His lips explode in a smile that only reminds me of everything it covers. “You’re better at us than you think,” he whispers, freeing his hand from my grip to run his fingers the rest of the way down my face, my neck, until he cups my shoulder.

I offer a weak smile and shake my head. “The miners. I should get to them.”

Theron nods. “Yes,” he agrees. A burst of hope brightens his face. “Maybe this mine will be the one.”

Unlikely, I almost say. We've started excavating more than half of Winter's mines, and none of them have yielded anything beyond the usual resources. The fact that Noam believes we'll find the place from which the Royal Conduits originated is infuriating. The magic chasm has been lost beneath the Season Kingdoms for centuries, and just because a Rhythm is now the one searching, he expects to unearth it?

These are Winter's mines, and he's forcing *my* people to use what little strength they have to dig them up. They spent sixteen years in Angra's work camps; they should be healing, not chasing power for a man who already has too much.

My anger flares again and I turn, leaving the carcasses of my mock enemies behind.

Theron walks beside me in silence, and as we weave around a few boulders, Gaos springs up before us as if the Klaryns had been keeping it hidden until my return. It looks much like Jannuari did when we first arrived, but at least parts of that city have been patched together since then. So few people have chosen to repopulate Gaos that we've been able to repair only the area closest to the mines, leaving most of the city in ruins. Cottages dilapidated from disuse line the streets; rubble fills alleys in hastily made piles. Snow coats everything, hiding some of the destruction under pure ivory.

I hesitate, just a twitch of a pause, when Gaos comes into view. But it's enough to cause Theron to thread his arm around my waist, tugging my body to his.

"It will be better in time," he assures me.

I peer up at him, still desperately clutching my chakram. His hand cups my hip, warm against Winter's perpetual coolness.

"Thank you."

Theron smiles, but before he can reply, another voice cuts him off.

"My queen!"

The sound of snow crunching under her feet follows Nessa's cry, which is just as quickly followed by her brothers' startled shouts. By the time I turn to face her, she's halfway across the remaining stretch of snow between Gaos and me, her gown flapping around her legs.

She stumbles to a halt, panting between smiles. Months of freedom are finally starting to show—there's a healthy plumpness to her arms and face and a soft glow in her cheeks.

"We've been searching everywhere for you! Are you ready?"

My face morphs into something between a wince and a grin. "How angry is Dendera?"

Nessa shrugs. "She'll be appeased once the mine is open." She shoots an awkward bow at Theron and grabs my

hand. “May I steal her away, Prince Theron?”

He brushes his thumb over my hip bone in a movement that sends a shiver up my skin. “Of course—”

But Nessa is already hauling me across the snow.

Conall and Garrigan meet us just inside the first street of the city, Conall with a glower, Garrigan with an amused smirk.

“You should have taken us with you,” Conall reprimands me. He realizes who he’s reprimanding and clears his throat. “My queen.”

“She’s perfectly capable of taking care of herself,” Garrigan defends me. But at Conall’s glare he tries to hide his smirk behind a rather aggressive cough.

“That’s not the point.” Conall whips to me. “Henn hasn’t been training us for nothing.”

I almost echo Garrigan’s words, almost lift my chakram for emphasis. But the lines of strain around Conall’s eyes make me tuck my chakram behind my back.

“I’m sorry I worried you,” I say. “I didn’t mean—”

“Where have you been?”

A trembling squeak catches in my throat as Dendera comes storming up the road.

“I leave you alone for *one minute* and you take off like—” She slams to a stop. I try to hide my chakram even farther behind my back, but it’s too late.

The look she gives me isn’t the furious glare I expected.

It's tired, drained, and as she closes the space between us, her forty-some years hang even heavier from her face.

"Meira," she chastises.

I haven't heard her, or Nessa, or anyone but Theron call me that in . . . months. It's always "my queen" or "my lady." Hearing it now is a burst of cold air in a stuffy room, and I gulp it in.

"I told you," Dendera says, easing the chakram from my hand and passing it to Garrigan. "You don't need this anymore. You are queen. You protect us in other ways."

"I know." I keep my jaw tight, my voice level. "But why can't I be both?"

Dendera sighs the same sad, pitiful sigh she's given me way too often these past three months. "The war is over," she tells me, not for the first time, and probably not for the last. "Our people lived under war for too long—they need a serene ruler, not a warrior queen."

It makes sense in my head. But it doesn't make sense in my heart.

"You're right, Duchess," I lie. If I press too much, I'll see the same expression I saw on her face a hundred times growing up—fear of failing. Just like with Theron and his scars, and Nessa too—if I catch her when she thinks no one is watching, her eyes become hollow and glassy. And when sleep brings her nightmares, she weeps so hard my heart aches.

As long as no one mentions the past or anything bad, we're fine.

"Come." Dendera claps her hands, all business again. "We're late enough as it is."



Meira

DENDERA TAKES US to a square that opens mere paces from the Tadil Mine. The buildings here stand whole and clean, paths swept clear of debris, cottages repaired. The families of the miners already deep in the Tadil pack the square along with Cordellan soldiers, most bouncing from foot to foot in an effort to keep warm. An open-air tent caps the entrance to the square, our first stop as we file in alongside tables littered with maps and calculations.

Sir and Alysson bow their heads in quiet discussion within the tent. Their focus shifts to me, a genuine smile crossing Alysson's face, a sweep of analysis passing over Sir's. They're just as sharply dressed as Nessa and Dendera in their gowns—while traditional Winterian clothing for women consists of pleated, ivory, floor-length dresses, most of the men wear blue tunics and pants under lengths of white fabric that wrap in an X around their torsos. It's

still strange to me to see Sir dressed in anything other than his battle gear, but he doesn't even have a dagger at his hip. The threat is gone, our enemy dead.

"My queen." Sir bows his head. My skin bristles at my title on his lips, one more thing I have yet to grow accustomed to. Sir, calling me "my queen." Sir, my general. Sir, Mather's father.

The thought of him seizes me.

I haven't really talked to Mather since we sat on our horses side by side outside Januari, before I fully took up the responsibilities of being queen, and he fully surrendered everything he thought he once was.

I'd hoped he just needed time to adjust, but it's been three months since he's said more than "Yes, my queen," to me. I have no idea how to go about bridging the distance between us—I just keep telling myself, maybe foolishly, that when he's ready, he'll talk to me again.

Or maybe it has less to do with him no longer being king and more to do with Theron, who, even though our engagement has been dissolved, is still a permanent fixture in my life. For now, it's easier not to think about Mather. To fake the mask, force the smile, and cover up the awfulness underneath.

I wish I didn't have to force it away—I wish none of us had to, and we were all strong enough to deal with the things that have happened to us.

A tingle of chill blossoms in my chest. Sparking and

wild, icy and alive, and I stifle a sigh at what it signifies.

When Angra conquered my kingdom sixteen years ago, he did so by breaking our Royal Conduit. And when a conduit is broken in defense of a kingdom, the ruler of that kingdom then becomes the conduit. Their body, their life force—it all merges with the magic. No one knows this save for me, Angra, and the woman whose death turned me into Winter's conduit: my mother.

You can help them deal with what happened, Hannah prods. Since the magic is me, unlimited within my body, she's able to speak to me, even after her death.

I'm not forcing healing on them, I say, withering at the thought. I know the magic could heal their physical wounds—but emotional? I can't—

I didn't mean that, Hannah says. *You can show them that they have a future. That Winter is capable of surviving.*

My tension relaxes. *Okay, I manage.*

The crowd stills as Sir leads me out of the tent. Twenty workers are already deep in the mine, as every opening has gone the same way—they go in; I stay up top and use my magic to fill them with inhuman agility and endurance. Magic works only over short distances—I couldn't use it on the miners if I was in Januari. But here, they're in the tunnels just ahead.

“Whenever you're ready, my queen,” Sir says. If he senses how much I hate these mine openings, he doesn't say anything, just steps away with his arms behind his back.

I grind my jaw and try to ignore everything else—Hannah, Sir, all the eyes on me, the heavy quiet that falls.

My magic used to be glorious. When we were trapped in Spring and it reared up and saved us; when we first returned to Winter and I wasn't sure how to help everyone, and it came flooding out of me to bring snow and fill my people with vitality. When I had no idea what I wanted or how to do anything, I was grateful for the way the magic always just *knew*.

But now I realize that if I wanted to stop it from pouring out of me, surging through the earth, and filling the miners with strength and endurance, I couldn't. That's what scares me most about these times—the magic sparks and swirls up, and I know, deep in the throbbing pit of my heart, that my body would give out long before the magic would even consider stopping.

Pulled by some unspoken signal, streams of iciness whirl through my chest and turn every vein into crystallized snow. My instinct reacts with a choking burst of need to stop it, to rein it in, but reason clogs my certainty, since I know that my people need the very magic I'm trying to stifle, and before I'm able to breathe, the magic pours into the miners. I stand in its wake, trembling, eyes snapping open to look on the expectant faces of the crowd. They can't see it or sense it, unless I channel it into them. No one knows how empty I feel, like a quiver for arrows, existing only to hold a greater weapon.

I tried to tell Sir about this—and immediately choked it back when Noam came in the room. If Noam finds out that all he needs to do is have an enemy break his Royal Conduit and he would *become* his own conduit, he wouldn't have to find the chasm. He'd be all-powerful, filled with magic.

And he wouldn't need to pretend to care about Winter anymore.

I turn, hungry for a diversion. The crowd takes that as my dismissal and softly applauds.

"Speak to them," Sir urges when I move for the tent.

I curve my arms around myself. "I've given the same speech every time we've opened a mine. They've heard it all before—rebirth, progression, hope."

"They expect it." Sir doesn't yield, and when I take another step toward the tent, he grabs my arm. "My queen. You're forgetting your position."

If only, I think, then immediately regret it. I don't want to forget who I am now.

I just wish I could be both this *and* myself.

Alysson and Dendera stand quietly behind Sir; Conall and Garrigan wait a few paces off to the side; Theron made it here and converses with a few of his men. This normalcy makes it easier to notice how out of place Nessa suddenly looks next to her brothers. Her shoulders angle forward, but her attention is pinned on an alley to my right.

I shake out of Sir's grip and nod in Nessa's direction as I stride forward.

"They're back," she whispers when I reach her. Her eyes cut to the alley, and I can see from this angle that Finn and Greer stand at the edge of the light, motionless until my attention locks onto them.

Finn bobs his head and they move toward the main tent as if they've been in Gaos all along. They left Januari with us but split off soon after, creeping away before any Cordellans could realize that the queen's Winterian council went from five members to three.

Sir guides me to the tent as if afraid I'll refuse to do that too. But I push ahead of him, crowding around the table in the center with Alysson and Dendera. We all try to maintain a relaxed air, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to draw attention. But my anxiety splits into frayed strands that loop more tightly around my lungs with every passing second.

"What did you find?" Sir is the first to speak, his tone low.

Finn and Greer push against the table, sweat streaking through smudges of dirt on their faces. I cross my arms. Such a routine thing—the queen's advisers returning from a mission. But I can't get the gnawing in my head to agree.

I should have gone on this trip to retrieve information for the monarch—I shouldn't be the monarch herself.

Finn opens his sack and pulls out a bundle while Greer

removes one from his waist. “Stopped in Spring first,” Finn says, his attention on the table. Only Conall, Garrigan, and Nessa look out of the tent, watching the Cordellans for any sign of movement toward us. “The early reports that the Cordellans received were correct—no sign of Angra. Spring has transformed into a military state, run by a handful of his remaining generals. No magic, though, and no warmongering.”

Relief fights to sputter through me, but I hold it back. Just because Spring is silent doesn’t mean everything is fine—if Angra survived the battle in Abril and wanted to keep his survival a secret, he’d be a fool to stay in Spring.

And since we haven’t heard a word from him since the battle, if he is alive . . . he definitely doesn’t want anyone to know.

“We passed through Autumn on our way to Summer—both are unchanged,” Finn continues. “Autumn was gracious, and Summer didn’t even realize we were there, which made poking around for rumors of Angra easier. Yakim and Ventralli, on the other hand . . .”

I jolt closer to the table. “They found you?”

Greer nods. “Word spread of two Winterians in the kingdom. Luckily when we said we were there on behalf of our queen, they seemed to soften toward us—but they didn’t let us out of their sight until we left their borders. Both Yakim and Ventralli sent gifts for you.”

He nudges the bundles toward me. I pick up the first

one and pull back the matted cloth to reveal a book, a thick volume bound in leather with black lettering embossed on the cover.

“*The Effective Implementation of Tax Laws Under Queen Giselle*”? I read. The Yakimian queen sent me a book about tax laws she enacted?

Finn shrugs. “She wanted to give us more, but we told her we hadn’t the resources to carry it all. She invites you to her kingdom. They both did, actually.”

That makes me pick up the other package. This one unrolls, spreading over the table to reveal a tapestry, multi-colored threads weaving together to form a scene of Winter’s snowy fields overtaking Spring’s green-and-floral forest.

“The Ventrallan queen had that created,” Finn notes, “to congratulate you on your victory.”

I trace a finger down the twirl of silver thread that separates Winter from Spring. “We were in Ventralli and Yakim before Angra fell, gathering supplies and other such things, and people saw us, and never once did the royal families care. Why now?”

Greer’s age deepens in the way his wrinkles crease, his body slouches. “Cordell has its hands in two Seasons now—Autumn and Winter. With such a strong foothold here, it would be able to take Spring easily too, if Noam chose to do so. Summer has trade agreements with Yakim, but no formal alliance. The other Rhythms know Noam is seeking the magic chasm, and they fear his ambitions.

They're testing Winter's allegiance to Cordell, to see if they can unseat Noam."

"They were both most adamant that you visit them," Finn adds. "Queen Giselle told us you are always welcome. Queen Raelyn said the same of Ventralli—she seems to be the one speaking for the king, though he was just as eager to meet you."

I shake my head. "Did any of those kingdoms show signs of . . . him?"

I can't say his name. Can't force myself to feel it grating on my tongue.

"No, my queen," Greer replies. "There was no sign of Angra. We didn't go to Paisly—the trip through their mountains is treacherous, and after the attitudes we observed in Ventralli and Yakim, we didn't think it necessary."

"Why?"

"Because Paisly is a Rhythm too—they wouldn't host an ousted Season king. Yakim and Ventralli were barely willing to host *us*. I don't think . . ." Greer pauses. "My queen, I don't think Angra is in Primoria."

The way he says that makes me shut my eyes. When I first suggested that someone search the world for Angra, everyone thought I was being overly cautious. He vanished after the battle in Abril, but most believe that the magic disintegrated him—not that he escaped.

"He's dead," Sir says. "He is no longer a threat we should concern ourselves with."

I stare at him, drained. He—and the rest of my Winterian council—still believes Angra was defeated, even after I told them that his Royal Conduit had been overtaken by a dark magic created thousands of years ago, before the Royal Conduits were made. Then everyone had small conduits, but when they slowly began to use the magic for evil, that negative use birthed the Decay, a powerful magic that infected everyone with the strength and need to enact their most awful desires. With the creation of the Royal Conduits and the purge of all smaller conduits, the Decay weakened, but it didn't die—it fed on Angra's power until Mather broke Spring's staff.

If Angra is alive, he could be like me, a conduit himself, unburdened by the limitations of his object-conduit. And the Decay could be . . . endless.

But if Angra is alive, why would he be hidden away? Why wouldn't he have swept through the world, enslaving us all? Maybe that's what makes Sir so certain he's dead.

Everyone watches me, even Conall, Garrigan, and Nessa. My eyes shift past them and open wide. One second, no one watched the Cordellans for one second—

“Trouble?”

A Cordellan soldier ducks into the tent, flanked by three others. The moment their armored frames fill the space, my council yanks to attention, casting off any pretense of ease.

I growl deep in my throat as Theron enters the tent too.

“I’m sure they’re discussing how best to proceed with the Tadir’s spoils,” Theron guesses, moving to stand beside me. He tips his head at his men. “No trouble here.”

The soldiers hesitate, clearly unconvinced, but Theron is their prince. They back out of the tent as Theron tucks his hand around my waist. The chill of magic palpates through me, only marred now—I shouldn’t need someone from another land to sweep to my rescue. Especially to fend off the very men who are supposed to be protecting us.

“Thank you for interceding, Prince Theron,” Sir offers.

Theron bobs his head. “No need to thank me. You should be allowed to gather in your own kingdom without Cordellan interference.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “Don’t let your father hear you say that.”

That makes Theron tighten his grip on me, drawing me closer. “My father hears whatever he wants to hear,” he says. “What were you discussing, though?”

Sir steps closer. My eyes flick to the side, noting Finn and Greer striding down the road, most likely heading to freshen up so as not to appear travel worn.

“We were discussing only—”

But whatever lie Sir might have been about to tell proves unnecessary. Theron unwinds himself from me and snatches the tapestry from the table.

“Ventralli?” he asks. “Why do you have this?”

Of course he would know where the tapestry is from. His mother was the aunt of the current Ventrallan king—Theron's room in Bithai is stuffed with paintings, masks, and other treasures from his Ventrallan side.

I glance at Sir, who holds my gaze. The same emotion coats everyone else—Dendera watches me, Alysson grips the edge of the table. All waiting for my response.

All wanting me to lie.

Finn and Greer's journey was supposed to be secret, one frail act of Winter in the face of Cordell's occupation. Proof that we could do something, *be* something, on our own.

But lying to Theron . . .

Sir's jaw tightens when I hang silent for a beat too long. "The rubble of Gaos," he says. "We found it in the buildings."

I don't realize until the words leave his lips that Theron might find out the truth anyway—if Giselle and Raelyn welcomed Finn and Greer, news will spread. Noam will eventually hear that his Rhythm brethren had Winterian visitors.

I choke, but the lie has been told. Backtracking now would only look worse—wouldn't it? I can't very well ask Sir's opinion on this—besides, he's the one who lied. Maybe . . . it's okay.

No. It isn't okay. But I don't know how a queen would make this okay.

“It’s beautiful.” Theron runs his fingers down the threads. “A Winter–Spring battle?”

He looks at me, expectant.

I actually manage a chuckle. “You’re asking me? You’re the one with Ventrallan blood.”

Theron cocks a grin. “Ah, but I’d hoped some of me had rubbed off on you by now.”

My cheeks heat, inflamed by the group of my advisers still watching us, by the way Theron straightens, tilting his head to me. I can’t tell if he knows Sir lied—all I can see is the look he gets whenever something artistic is around, a softening at his edges. Seeing him like this is such a nice change from his recent tension, balancing on the edge of fear and memories, that I almost miss where else I’ve seen it before.

I jolt with realization. It’s exactly how he looked at me on the fields outside Gaos, and every time he wants to kiss me—like I’m a work of art he’s trying to interpret.

My heart thumps so loudly I’m sure he can hear. If we were standing in his room, he the prince of Cordell, myself a soldier of Winter, I would have swooned without another thought.

But I look around the tent, at Sir, Dendera, Alysson. Even Conall, Garrigan, and Nessa. They all look at me with similar gazes—like they’ve only ever known me as the queen of Winter, a figure owed reverence and worship.

But I’m none of those things. I’m someone who just helped lie to one of her closest friends.

This is what Winter needs. This is who Winter needs me to be.

I hate who I am now.

A deep rumble bubbles up through the earth. The vibration catches me off guard, numbness washing over me while the world quivers in a violent cacophony of tremors and belching thuds. A few abrupt seconds and it all falls as still and quiet as if nothing happened.

But something happened. Something that makes the families of the miners, still in the square, scream in terror:

A cave-in.

Clarity hardens every nerve and I launch away from the table. My skirt tangles around my legs until I bundle it and push faster, but just as I angle across the square, someone grabs me.

“My queen!” Sir’s voice is his familiar tone of command. “You can’t—”

“There are miners down there,” I shout back. The people around me rush toward the mine entrance, crowding against Cordellan soldiers who fight to keep them in the square until decisions can be made. “My people. I’m the only one who can heal them, and I won’t let them stay down there!”

I knew we shouldn’t have opened this mine. And now, if some of my people have died because of Noam’s insistence on searching for something we will never find—I’ll kill him.

Sir’s grip tightens. “You’re the queen—you do not rush into collapsed mines!”

I almost scream at him, but nothing comes. Because over the ridge hurries one of the Cordellan soldiers charged with guarding the entrance to the mine.

“A miner!” he announces over the square to cries for details. “Coming up the shaft!”

Relief springs in my gut. The magic—it gave them endurance and strength. Maybe it let one of them escape to run desperately fast up the mine shaft.

Sir pushes through the crowd, letting me follow a beat behind.

When we make it to the ridge, the hill on the other side curves down before splitting around a path lined with boulders. The path leads to a cave that seems like any other—dark and fathomless. Sir and I sprint for it, and a trail of people—Conall and Garrigan, Theron, a few Cordellan soldiers—gathers behind us. As I focus on the entrance, I beg the darkness to relinquish the miner, for news that the cave-in wasn’t a cave-in, but something else—

Just as we reach the entrance, the miner stumbles out and falls to his knees. He’s so covered with grime that his ivory skin and hair are gray, and he hacks a funnel of dust into the sunlight. I drop before him, my hands on his shoulders. No thought, no chance to reconsider—the magic swells in my chest, a surge of frost that rushes down my arms and slams into the miner’s body, clearing his lungs, healing the bruises along his limbs.

All the air drains from me, leaving me to pant from the

unexpected use of magic as the tension on the man's face alleviates. Does he realize I used magic on him?

"A wall collapsed, my queen," he coughs. "Weren't expecting it, not there, but—"

Theron falls to the ground beside me, his attention boring into the miner in a frantic pull of pure, aching need.

"We . . . found it," the miner says like he can't believe his own news. He blinks at me, and I try with everything I have left to breathe, just breathe, *keep breathing*.

"We found it, my queen. The magic chasm."



Meira

HANNAH? I TRY, and my magic sparks the slightest flash of cold. *Tell me he's wrong.*

But the emotion that radiates from her is the opposite of what I expected: amazement. Awe. The same winded shock that descends over everyone else.

We were so close, she gasps. The Tadil, all this time—we were so close. . . .

Her words fade, but I know what she means.

Before Angra overtook Winter.

The miner shoves to his feet, wordlessly leading me on. Sir lets me stumble after him without protest, trudging along behind me as if he's being dragged into the mine against his will. We're trailed by Theron, Garrigan, Conall, and a handful of Cordellan soldiers.

The morning sun lights the first few paces inside the mine shaft, but farther in, when the ground starts to slant

around serrated rock walls, everything is coated in darkness. The miner picks up a single lit lantern, most likely the one he carried as he ran up the mine, and the rest of us take a few from a pile, strike flames to life, and follow him.

The cave flashes into view, tools littering a corridor two arm lengths wide and little more than a full man's height tall. Silence ensnares us the moment we enter the tunnel, the only noise the muted shuffling of our feet as we take cautious steps into the shadows.

Fingers brush my wrist, a delicate touch that grows bolder when I pull up a weak smile for Theron. He doesn't say anything, though I can tell by the way his mouth pops open that he wants to. What is there to say, though, beyond murmurings of disbelief?

I squeeze his fingers and tug him forward, leading him into the darkness.

More shafts open along the way, but the miner at the front of our group leads us past them all, plunging into the deepest tunnel in the Klaryns. The air smells of ancient, musty grime, coating my skin in thin layers that feel, somehow, just as Winterian as snow. That does little to abate the tension coiling in my gut when the tunnel before us ends at an opening.

The other miners' lanterns light up the puckered wall, clearly an unexpected expansion by the way rocks sit in haphazard clusters of debris along the ground. The remaining Winterian miners seem uninjured, which eases

some of my worry. They all stand in the tunnel, gaping at the crack in the wall, too afraid to move inside, too awed to pull away.

When they see us, they step back, all eyes snapping to me. But I'm just as afraid, just as awed, the lantern trembling in my grip, light pulsing in dizzying flashes.

Someone *made* this space. Beyond the opening, perfect diamond cuttings turn the gray-black ground into a marble-like floor. The walls around the room are the same jagged rocks as the rest of the mine—but even that seems intentional, as it draws all focus to the back of the room, where the stone has been flattened into a smooth wall.

In that wall stands something that makes me gasp with astonishment.

I slide forward, past the crumbled heaps of rock, depositing my light at the threshold since the lanterns behind me brighten this new space. The moment I step into the room, the air crackles against my skin, a jolt like the electric charge of a thunderstorm preparing to unleash cascades of lightning. I shiver, bumps rising along my arms.

The air hangs heavy and humid with magic.

And I think . . . I think I'm looking at the door to the chasm.

Theron touches my elbow and I start. I didn't know he'd followed me into the room, but he seems the only one brave enough—or stupid enough—to venture after me. Everyone else remains pinned in the entrance, gaping in shocked

horror at the same thing that draws my attention like a gnat to a flame.

A door towers over us, massive and thick, made of the same gray stone as the rest of the room. Four images are carved in the center of the door—one, a tangle of flaming vines; another, books stacked in a pile; another, a simple mask; and the last, the largest one centered above the smaller three, a mountaintop bathed in a beam of light with words arching over it, *the order of the lustrate*.

I step closer, my boots tapping against the stone floor. A beam of light hitting a mountaintop. *Where have I seen that before?*

And who is the Order of the Lustrate?

Theron hisses. “Golden leaves.” He slides forward a step. “Are those . . . keyholes?”

I grab his arm, keeping us both from going too far into the room. This place feels dangerous, like it’s waiting for something, and I don’t want to find out what.

But he’s right—in the center of each of the three small carvings sits a narrow keyhole.

“Do you think this is it?” I whisper, barely loud enough to stir the air.

Theron’s hand encases mine where I hold his arm and he nods, dazed.

“Yes,” he says, smiling like a piece of him is rising up over the walls of fear within him. “We found it. We’re going to be okay now.” He looks to me, back to the door.

“We’re going to be okay. . . .”

I glance over my shoulder at everyone still clogged by the entrance. Sir’s eyes meet mine, and I wheeze on the choking knowledge of what exactly this means.

The last time our world had more than just the eight Royal Conduits, the Decay was created. People began using their individual conduits for things that harmed one another, murder and theft and evil, and that birthed a dark magic that infiltrated people’s minds, encouraged them to use their magic for evil, and started a cycle of despair.

And when we open that door, if it does guard the magic chasm . . .

We could be wrong. It could just be a . . . room. In a mountain?

What else could it be?

My throat clamps shut. This really is it, isn’t it? I should have stopped Noam long ago. I shouldn’t have let him do this to my kingdom—how did we even find this?

Theron’s face is wide with astonishment. He’s pleased with this find, he’ll want to open that door, and seeing that expression on him makes me reel even more. I didn’t think. I charged in here without remembering who Theron is, who he *really* is—not just a source of comfort, not just my friend. He *wants* this. Cordell wants this.

I back up, farther from him.

Theron reaches out for me. “Meira?”

Biting and sharp, a cold sensation cuts through my body

in a heave of magic. *My* magic, not the spark in the air. I slam to a halt.

Meira! comes Hannah's voice. She's upset. Afraid. Of what?

Theron follows my retreat. His foot hooks on the floor and he teeters forward, arms flailing as he collides with me and sends us toppling down, closer to the carved door.

Meira, get away from here!

So cold, *so cold*—

MEIRA! Hannah cries. *Mei*—

Silence. Utter, aching silence, like a door slamming shut, cutting off all noises beyond.

Fiery, determined heat eats at my body in mad snatches of relentless pain. Just as frigid as my magic is cold, this is hot, spreading in singeing fingers up my limbs and across my chest and neck. It cauterizes my throat into a lumpy, impenetrable knot, intensifying and raging against every nerve so that when I scream, it goes unheard.

Theron's body presses against mine, and all I know beyond the licking warbles of pain that eat up my insides and remain trapped behind the knot in my throat is that we're causing this. Or *me*—I'm causing this, because Theron isn't in pain. His brow furrows only in confusion.

"Meira, what—"

An invisible force launches us through the air, hurling us back at the entrance to the room. Our bodies pop with a chorus of blows against the stone wall before we collapse in

a heap on the floor. Everyone by the door shouts in alarm and dives toward us, but somewhere along the way the knot in my throat released, and the pain comes rushing out of my mouth in a scream that doesn't even sound human. My body throbs and I curl into a ball, head to my knees, arms over my ears, rocking back and forth, trying to find some position that doesn't feel like I'm being burned alive.

HANNAH! I shout at her, at the magic, at anything that could make it stop—

Silence, still. Just silence, that's all I get from her. Dread plummets through me before thick darkness slides into my eyes and down my throat and fills me top to bottom in a prison I know far too well.

"Meira!" Theron's fingers bury in my hair, his arms fold around me. "Meira, hold on—"

A blink, and I'm left alone in darkness, fire, and ice.

Blackness subsides, unfurling in the yellow glow of torches. I'm almost grateful for the light—I'm awake; I survived; I'm okay—until my eyes adjust to the room.

A cell reveals itself in the flickering light, grimy black stones glinting with putrid stains. In the corner sits Theron, staring at the door with a concentration spurred by intense fear.

Because in that doorway stands Angra.

"The heir of Cordell," Angra announces as he walks forward and crouches before Theron, leaning on his staff. "You give new meaning to the word valiant. What was your plan? Sneak into my city and free

my latest Winterian slave?" He reaches out, grabbing Theron's chin and wrenching his attention up. "Or are you expecting your father to sweep in and save you both?"

Theron's stoicism breaks in a gasp that matches my own.

This is what happened to Theron while he was imprisoned in Abril.

Angra cocks his head as if he's listening to an echo. His expression flashes with a look I never thought his face capable of. Eyes relaxed, lips parted: shocked awe.

Angra recovers, stroking his thumb along Theron's jaw. "Do you really think he'll come?"

Theron's brows peak, a spasm of doubt that he might not even be aware of.

Angra latches onto it. "You and I are not so different. Shall I show you how similar we truly are?" He places his hand on Theron's head.

Theron cries out. Whether or not this already happened, I can't let him scream like that—I dive as Angra rips his hand back, letting Theron rock forward.

Theron's shoulders heave as he retches. "No" is all he says, his first muffled word. Then, with more terror, "No! He didn't kill her like yours did. . . ."

Kill her? Who? What did Angra show him?

Angra clucks his tongue. "He did, little prince." He pulls back and watches Theron squirm. "We're the same."

"Meira!"

I bolt upright in a haze of flickering yellow, clenching

fistfuls of fabric that tug against my grip. I'm in my cottage in Gaos, the brown walls misshapen and cracked enough that cold air darts inside. The small room holds nothing more than a cot and a few tables, but on every table, candles burn. Dozens of them, and I blink at the light, my eyes darting from flame to twitching flame faster than my brain can process a reason.

The fabric in my fists tugs again and I start.

Sir is here, his hands braced on either side of my legs, and I clutch his collar as if I might draw him into a fight. Theron is here too, hovering at the end of the cot, an unlit candle in one hand and a match in the other.

Angra. The memory. I cave forward, head to my knees, releasing my grip on Sir. Why did I see that? *How* did I—

“The magic chasm,” I pant, and burst upright. “The door—there was a barrier—”

It all rushes back to me: the stone door, the keyholes in the carvings, the sensation of being burned from the inside out. A barrier prevented us from approaching the door. A magic fail-safe that launched both Theron and me away, but only affected me.

Maybe the chasm reacted like that because I *am* magic. Maybe it collided with the nearest person and dredged up memories, ricocheting my magic out in a frenzy. But Theron isn't Winterian—how did I affect him? Or was it not me so much as the barrier's magic reacting to my own?

Whatever it was, whatever the reason, it's only a spark in the fire of this horror.

"Whatever magic is down there, we can't touch it," I declare.

Theron gapes like it was the last thing he expected me to say.

"Here, my queen. Drink this." Sir tries to hand me a goblet of water, but I shove it away.

"We found the magic chasm," I state, forcing myself to hear it, to feel it. "Something's blocking it—a barrier of some sort. We cannot take down that barrier. If we access the magic, if it spreads out to everyone—"

Theron lurches closer to my cot. "That's exactly what needs to happen."

I hesitate. The sight of Theron before me clashes with my memory of him writhing on the floor of Angra's dungeon. Was what I saw real, though?

Hannah. I stretch out to my magic with tentative, uncertain thoughts. *Was it—*

Cold sparks up my chest. A normal reaction to seeking the magic, but where it usually flares and fades, this time—it doesn't quiet.

It spurs higher, plummeting down my limbs, gathering speed and strength as it races to launch out of my body. I rear back, slamming into the wall beside my cot.

No, I beg it, screaming in my head. *STOP!*

It doesn't listen. Not in time anyway—it leaves my body a beat before I fling my will out to it, spiraling out of me and into—who? Where?

Sir.

He flies to his feet, mouth popping open in a choking huff like someone slammed a sword hilt into his lungs. “What—” He gags. “What did you—”

He stumbles back, boots slipping on the wooden floor, and bumps into the closed door to the rest of the cottage. His hand drops to the knob and he shoves, but instead of twisting under his fingers, the entire thing breaks apart and clatters to the ground.

I leap off the cot, hands out.

Sir ripped the door clean off its hinges.

No—I did it to him.

I drop back onto the bed. I've seen the magic give people strength before—but enough to endure a day of labor, not rip apart planks of wood. And it always reacted the way it should—uncontrollable, but it did what my people needed it to do.

What *happened*?

Sir flexes his hand and shoots a questioning gaze at me. “My queen. Why did you do that?”

I shake my head. “I didn't mean to. The magic down there—that barrier—it did something. I don't feel . . . right.”

My chest is so cold. My heart is ice, my limbs snow, my every breath should be a cloud of condensation. The magic felt awakened before, but now it feels—unleashed.

Sir eases forward. “We’ll figure it out, my queen. We’ll send someone else down there, someone who isn’t connected to a Royal Conduit.”

I launch to my feet again. “No, it’s too dangerous. *No one* can go down there.”

“We found it, Meira.” Theron intercedes, his voice hoarse. “The magic chasm, after all this time, and you don’t want to at least investigate it? The world hasn’t seen such power in centuries. Imagine the good we could do with this!”

“And imagine the evil!” I shout, unable to keep my worry at bay. “Did you see what I just did? My magic could’ve hurt Sir! And you want *more*? Even if we could get to it, the world won’t receive magic the way you want it to. You believe your father would use more magic for good? Maybe in Cordell’s eyes, but how will it affect my kingdom?”

Theron drops the unlit candle and match he had still been holding and steps closer to me. “The world needs this,” he states. “My father isn’t the only one with plans—we could see to it that the magic would benefit everyone. Your people would all have their own magic. They’d have the strength needed to keep anything like Angra’s takeover from happening again.”

“You can’t tell your father we found it,” I beg. “I know why you fear Angra, but we are stronger than him. *You are nothing like him.*”

Theron’s eyes narrow in confusion, darting over my face. I pause, waiting for understanding to clear his memories, but he only cocks his head, perplexed.

Doesn’t he remember what Angra did to him? Wasn’t that real?

A door opens deeper in the cottage and voices slam into us.

“Is she awake?” Nessa asks.

Dendera chirps when they stumble into the room. “What happened to the door?”

While Sir, Nessa, and Dendera drop into quiet discussion, I draw closer to Theron, lowering my voice. “Please don’t tell Noam.”

“My men saw it too. Your people know we found it. He’ll find out eventually.”

“Only a few of your men were down there, and my people will keep it quiet. Please, Theron. Just give me time to figure out what to do.”

My heart knots up in the pause that follows.

“When you were asleep—” Theron finally says. “You sounded like you were scared.”

He didn’t agree to anything. He changed the subject.

“I dreamed of Angra. And you.” I hesitate, not wanting

to hurt him, my words hammers and him a porcelain vase.
“In Abril.”

Theron jolts back from me.

I try to wave it away. “It was just a dream—”

He snatches my hand midwave and holds it, every muscle in his body stiff.

“I don’t remember much about it,” he whispers, each word weighted by three months of keeping it inside. “Whole days just . . . gone. But I do remember Angra telling me what he planned to do with you. What he planned to let Herod—” Theron’s voice cracks. “Angra used magic on me in Abril, that much I do know. He shouldn’t have been able to—Royal Conduits can’t affect people not of their kingdom. And if a more powerful magic exists, we need protection.”

My arms twitch to lean forward and wrap around him. But despite his pain, despite the memories throbbing in my mind of Angra’s torture, I can’t agree to what Theron wants.

“Then it’s even more important that the door stay closed. If it’s used wrong, it could aid the very magic you fear.”

Theron grimaces. He’s unconvinced, but Nessa rushes over to me.

“My queen, how are you feeling?”

She doesn’t ask what happened, or anything about the

mine shaft, and I assume Sir filled her in enough. Conall and Garrigan take up their places guarding my room when Sir says something about going to check on Finn and Greer. He doesn't stay to make sure I'm okay; he simply tells Dendera to "ensure that the queen rests."

No help from him—and no help from Theron either, who also leaves. I try to go after him, but Dendera shoves me onto the cot, scolding me to lie down. Theron doesn't notice, vanishing without another word. What did I expect him to say, though? What could he do?

He could help me in this. He could stay, help me deal with . . . everything.

No—Theron is broken because of me. Because he came to save *me*. I saw what he went through—or at least, what he might have gone through. Even if he doesn't remember what happened, there's no way to know whether or not what I saw *didn't* happen. He doesn't need to help me; I need to help *him*. I have other people who can—

Sudden awareness drowns every other thought.

Hannah never responded. The moment I reached out to her, my magic erupted.

I almost call out to her again, but my chest seizes, and I can't tear my eyes away from the splinters of the door that Nessa brushes into the corner. Our connection was always mysterious—maybe the barrier severed it. The coldness inside me throbs as if sensing my dilemma, knowing I'm

moments away from trying to rekindle my magic.

I'm afraid of it. But I can't be afraid of my magic. Now that the chasm has been found . . .

I can't be afraid of anything.





Mather

“BLOCK!”

Mather’s sword cut through the air a beat behind his command, but even as the word left his lips, he knew how this fight would end. His opponent would stumble on the barn’s uneven floor as uncertainty flashed through his eyes; then he would realize his mistake, overcorrect, and end up on his back with Mather’s wooden blade pressing into his collarbone.

Seconds later, the man blinked up at Mather from the floor. “I’m sorry, my lord,” he mumbled, and rolled to his feet, passing his practice sword to the next in line.

Mather exhaled, watching his breath collect in puffs of white in the afternoon air. At least his next opponent, a boy named Philip, was his age. A nice change from the older men, who stared at him with a mix of fear and desperate eagerness.

Of all the Winterians rescued from the Spring work camps, only six hundred had lived in Jannuari. Two hundred had come from western Winter, seven hundred from the center forests, and a mere one hundred fifty from the southern Klaryn foothills. Of those who had formerly lived in Winter's capital, little more than three-fourths of them had chosen to repopulate Jannuari. The rest couldn't bear the sight of their war-shattered homes and had dispersed three months ago into the now-untamed wilds of a new and unknown Winter.

Sweet ice above, Mather couldn't believe so much time had passed. How had it been three months since they'd returned to Jannuari? Three months since the battle in Abril where he had broken Angra's conduit and the Spring king had died. Three months of freedom.

And less than a month since William and Meira and a contingent of others had departed for the southern mines. In hours—moments, heartbeats—they would return, along with Noam coming back from one of his too-short breaks to Bithai. The Cordellan king would amble back into Winter's capital like the stuffed-up, overconfident ass he was, and swipe what riches the Winterians had been able to extract.

The rattle of armor jerked Mather's attention to the door of the barn. A pair of Cordellan soldiers sauntered past on their patrol through Jannuari's inhabited quarter,

mocking grins spreading over their faces as they eyed the scene within.

Mather's grip on his practice sword tightened. But he found he couldn't hate the borrowed soldiers for laughing—what the Winterians were doing was laughable, training people so soon after years of imprisonment, expecting everything to instantly heal and fall into place. Most Winterians had only recently begun looking like people again instead of starved slaves. Making them fight when their eyes spoke of terror and memories still raw . . .

Mather turned to Henn. “This is too soon.”

Henn leaned forward from where he was propped against the wall, observing the training in William's stead. “We've only been at it for a few weeks.” He nodded Mather along. “Spar.”

An order. Mather growled, the sound bubbling in his throat. Orders were all he had now. Orders from William, orders from Henn. Orders from his queen.

A jostling near the door tugged at Mather's awareness again, but it wasn't Cordellan armor. Boots, the rustle of fabric, and a voice Mather knew by heart.

“We've returned.”

William.

No one seemed to notice the way Mather darkened at William's arrival, an event that should have made him fake a smile, at the very least.

Henn launched away from the wall, closing the space between him and William like a man intoxicated. “You’re all back?”

Mather saw the unspoken questions ripple across Henn’s face—*Is Dendera safe? Is she well?*—because similar questions filled him.

If you’ve returned, William, it means Meira is back too—is she safe? Is she well?

Does she miss me at all?

Blotches of red covered William’s cheeks, telling of the cold winds that had chased their party all the way from the mines. He smiled at Henn, dusting snow from his sleeves. It scratched at Mather wrong whenever William looked like that. After sixteen years of William being stoic and hard and unrelenting, happiness looked awkward on him.

“Yes,” William started, one eyebrow rising. After a pause, he waved at the door behind him. “Dismissed. Go to Dendera. She’s just as eager to see you.”

Henn slapped William on the shoulder and darted outside. Which left Mather as the sole person to report on the trainees’ progress, and when William turned to him, Mather found his mouth had dried more violently than the Rania Plains at noon.

“Report,” William coaxed, taking in the Winterians standing behind them.

What did he have to report? The most notable thing the

Winterian trainees had done since they had begun was to eat a full breakfast and keep it all down.

“They’re not physically ready for this,” Mather stated, his voice level.

William’s smile didn’t flutter. “They will be. Training will help.”

“They need to heal first.” Mather angled his shoulders forward, all too aware of how the subjects of their argument stood behind them, watching, listening. “They need to work through what happened. They need to *understand* what happened—”

Mather cut his words short. William’s veil fluttered, a crack that showed whenever Mather pushed too far. Like when William had tried to explain his reasoning for keeping Mather’s parentage a secret as a “necessary sacrifice for Winter,” and instead of accepting that explanation, Mather had demanded why. Because it made sense, yet it didn’t make sense, and while Mather had wept on the floor of the ruined cottage the Loren family had claimed, William had simply stood, told him it was in the past, and left.

But all William said now was “No, they need this. They need to get into a routine.”

Which felt exactly like: *It’s in the past, Mather. Look only to the future.*

Mather panted. He couldn’t breathe, damn it. . . .

He shouted a warning cry and dove at Philip. The boy launched backward with a shocked yelp and caught a few of Mather's rapid blows before he tripped on a lump of straw and smacked onto the floor in an explosion of dust.

Mather wrapped both hands around the hilt of his sword. In one solid push of movement he leaped into the air, dropped down, straddled the boy, and rammed the sword against the floor a finger's width from Philip's head.

Everyone in the barn held silent. Not a gasp, not a cry of concern. Just dozens of eyes watching Mather and Philip and the wooden sword wobbling vertically in the barn's floor.

Philip's eyes wandered down Mather's sword, to the crack in the floor, and back.

"So." His lips relaxed in a smile. "This means I lost, right?"

Mather spit out a laugh. The sound released the tension, and a few of the men waiting in line chuckled as Mather helped Philip to his feet.

But Philip's eyes flicked over Mather's shoulder and the laughter died, an absence of sound that ignited all of Mather's senses.

He only had time to grab his sword out of the floor before William swung down on him. Mather slid to his knees, caught the blow, and danced around until he righted himself. William spun his blade and dove again.

Around them, Winterian voices rose in encouragement, Winterian cheers filled the air, so wondrously different from the life Mather had been living months ago that it saturated his every muscle, easing realizations into his mind.

If they're all happy, maybe ignoring the past is worth it.

Mather threw every bit of his frustration into the fight, letting the cheers dissolve beneath his sudden need to beat William. He sucked the cold air into his lungs. Winter's air. The kingdom he had been supposed to lead, protect, defend.

And it was all on Meira's shoulders now.

He didn't want to need her. But loving her was easy, something that had developed over time, like sword fighting or archery—a skill he had picked up methodically until one day he did it without thought. Needing a family, though? He would never in a thousand winters need it.

He would never be able to forgive William for letting him think he was an orphan.

Mather jerked to a halt. William's blade continued through the air and slammed into his shoulder, knocking him flat on his stomach. Mather glowered and sprang up, sword thudding somewhere behind him as he propelled himself at William. His shoulder connected with William's gut, sending both of them down in a tangled pile of grunts and limbs and punches. It didn't last long—in a few

firm twists, William had Mather's arms knotted behind his back, Mather's cheek memorizing the feel of the rough wooden floor.

William bent down, his mouth to Mather's ear. "It doesn't matter if they fail a hundred times," he said, barely panting. "All that matters is that we're here. This is our future."

Mather grunted, sucking down dusty air. "Yes, Sir."

He knew William hated when Meira called him that, not that William would ever tell her to stop. Mather just wanted to see unease in someone else, so he knew that he wasn't the only one feeling it.

William's grip on him tensed. He held him on the ground for a beat before stepping back, and when Mather burst to his feet, hands clenched, he couldn't bring himself to face the group of now-speechless Winterians.

"That's enough for today," William told everyone as though nothing had happened.

Mather whirled for the door first. William caught his arm in a tight grip, yanking him to a halt as everyone behind them moved to put away the practice swords. "We brought a new shipment of goods. Sort them, and be at the ceremony tonight."

Orders. More jewels for him to sort through, counting out piles of payment to a kingdom that would demand even more. He didn't know why Noam insisted on storing the

goods here and playing through a ceremony instead of shipping everything to Bithai. Maybe he wanted to taunt the Winterians even more, force Meira to hand each jewel to him, one by one.

Mather shot William a curt nod and hung back once he realized William too intended to head out. Returning to Meira and Noam, no doubt.

Mather lingered until the barn emptied, and only then did he let himself fly out the door. He was so distracted that he didn't notice the figure standing just outside until he slammed into it, shoulder stinging from where it connected with armor.

"Watch your—" he started, a mouthful of curses ready. Careless Cordellan scum—

But it wasn't just any Cordellan. It was Captain Brennan Crewe, the man Noam had put in charge of the soldiers stationed in Jannuari. Number two on the list of Cordellans Mather hated, behind both Theron and Noam, who tied for first.

Mather spun away, stomping off before he could register any reaction on Brennan's face. He'd gotten only a few paces when he heard snow crunch, footsteps that trotted after him.

"Hold a moment!" Brennan called. "How goes the training? By your scowl, I can tell it's going as well as I'd expected. My king still wonders why you bother training an

army, when you have all the protection you would ever need from Cordell.”

Mather stopped, boots shredding holes in the snow. The training barn stood to the east of the palace, connected by an expanse of snow and a disheveled path that covered with flakes faster than anyone could clean it. But they were alone, no soldiers pacing by in their patrol. And after his interaction with William, Mather didn’t have the strength to keep his mouth shut.

“It’s going well enough that you should tell your king not to get too comfortable here,” he spit as he pivoted around.

Brennan’s eyebrows rose. “You forget your place, *Lord* Mather.”

Mather bristled but ground his jaw to steady himself. Being dropped from king to lord didn’t bother him, not really—what bothered him was who had all his responsibilities on her shoulders now.

“My apologies, Captain. I did forget my place in relation to your own. I have such a hard time remembering that you aren’t an actual soldier—you’re a gift meant to protect an investment. It would make things so much easier if every Cordellan soldier walked around wearing bows on their helmets.”

Brennan lurched closer. Mather rose up as he neared, but before he felt the sweet vacancy of instinct take over his movements, Brennan smiled.

“Gifts we may be,” he said, “but at least we are wanted. Your queen is back, didn’t you hear? But has she summoned you? No, I’d take it. You’re probably on your way to continue the task of counting out *Cordell’s* wealth. You act so sure of your importance to Winter, though we both know your role in this kingdom is little more than that of a peasant.”

By the time Brennan finished talking, Mather couldn’t see anything but the stars swimming across his vision, his body so hot with rage that he expected the falling snowflakes to sizzle on his skin. He moved, but he didn’t remember doing so—all he knew was a sudden fistful of Brennan’s collar, the fabric pulling taut out of his breastplate as he yanked the man forward.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mather growled.

Brennan’s attention flicked over Mather’s shoulder. His eyes widened. “Queen Meira.”

She was here, now?

Mather released Brennan and spun, his boots twisting on the ice-slickened stones. He plummeted into the snow, his panic fading as quickly as it had come.

The path behind him stood empty.

Brennan laughed. “But you’re right, Lord Mather. I have no idea what I’m talking about.”

Mather leaped to his feet, tearing down the path as

though he could outrun his humiliation.

Did everyone know of his failures, how he was not only no longer the king, but no longer someone Winter's true ruler turned to at all? Did everyone recognize how far he had fallen?

Did no one else see how much stress and hardship were on Meira now?

And tonight Mather would have to see Meira float around the ballroom on Theron's arm, and pretend that watching her was enough for him. Though every part of him screamed to fight for her . . . he couldn't. She hadn't sought him out in the three months since their return. He'd seen her in passing, in meetings—but that was it.

He didn't want to have to fight for her. He wanted her to *want* him, and she didn't.

She wanted Theron.

As much as it pained Mather to admit, Theron deserved her. It was Theron who had saved her from Spring; Theron who had risked his life to draw Cordell's army to fight Angra.

And it was Mather who had done *nothing* while Meira had fallen unconscious at Herod's feet during the battle. Mather who had paced the halls of Noam's palace until the floors were nearly worn through while she spent months in Angra's prison camp. Mather who did nothing now, again, because he didn't know what he could do for her, and he

couldn't stand being around her when she had . . . Theron.

He wasn't king anymore. He wasn't an orphan anymore.
He wasn't in Meira's life anymore.

None of this was the freedom he thought he'd wanted.



Meira

THE TWO-DAY RIDE back from Gaos was too short. Even these final moments, hiding behind my horse in the frigid afternoon air as everyone else heads toward the palace, are too short, and I inhale the saddle's worn leather scent. My mount snorts away the snowflakes that land on his nose but otherwise remains unfazed by the cacophony around him.

"My king, welcome back to Jannuari!" a Cordellan calls, one of those who had accompanied us to Gaos.

Another whoops. "Tonight will be quite the party!"

I wince, the voices creeping up my limbs like fast-moving vines. Theron never promised he'd keep his men silent—and for all my certainty that I can handle this situation on my own, I can't think of *how*. I have no idea who the Order of the Lustrate is, or how best to keep the chasm door closed.

“You can claim exhaustion.”

I start and whirl to Nessa, hovering beside me. Conall lingers a few paces away, watching the Cordellans with a barely acceptable glare of contempt, while Garrigan watches us.

“He already saw me ride up,” I say.

Nessa shrugs. “It was a long trip. Claim exhaustion and come with us to the palace.”

“Exhaustion wouldn’t be a lie,” Garrigan adds, his attention on my face. No doubt taking note of the circles under my eyes, the sallow color in my cheeks.

A noise pulls me away from Nessa and Garrigan, the steady *swoosh* of a sleigh bobbing over the uneven, icy road. I watch it glide past us, the silver-and-ivory details marred by cracks and chips in the paint. It was a discovery in the rubble of Jannuari, one of our few possessions that is entirely Winterian, not influenced by Cordellan assistance. This one is enclosed like a boxed wagon, meant for transporting goods, not people.

And goods it carries. Jewels, stones, all mined from Gaos, to be added to the other riches we’ve acquired for payment to Cordell and Autumn.

I toss a feeble smile at Nessa and Garrigan and walk out from behind my horse as the sleigh passes.

Noam stands in a group of his men, talking in a low voice to Theron, who seems even more exhausted than I feel. He sees me emerge and turns with a noticeable sigh of

relief, drawing his father's attention.

Noam looks like Theron, only twenty years older, undeniably related and undeniably Cordellan—shoulder-length golden-brown hair going gray at the roots, brown eyes rimmed with lines yet glistening under the cloudy skies. His hip, as usual, bears the holster that cradles Cordell's conduit, the jewel on the dagger's hilt emitting a lavender haze of magic.

"Lady Queen," he calls, closing the few paces between us.

The Cordellan soldiers shift in their conversations, watching with interest. There are Winterians here too, busily fixing the buildings surrounding the square, hauling lumber and supplies. Behind it all, the Januari Palace rises up. The remaining wings sit in a U shape, cupping a wide courtyard with drooping willow trees, the exterior walls embellished by ivory trim and white marble, char marks and gaping cannon holes.

I pull my shoulders back. "King Noam," I start. I've made pleasantries enough by now that I should have one ready to spit out—*So glad to see you've made it back to Januari or I hope your trip wasn't too taxing*—but I'm too tired to pretend not to hate him right now.

"Any news on your progress?" he asks. "I keep hoping for the day when Winter will prove itself to be a better investment than expected."

My mask of political neutrality crumbles away. "We are

not an investment,” I snap.

Theron steps closer to me. “Autumn will be here in a few hours. We should start preparing for tonight’s ceremony—”

But Noam ignores him, his amusement warping into a sneer. “Do not mistake the reason for my presence.” His conduit spikes purple light. “You are as aware as I am that the only worthwhile thing in your kingdom lies in those mountains. You have neither the resources nor the support to harness their use. You need me, Lady Queen.”

“Someday we won’t,” I growl. “I’d fear that day if I were you.”

Noam’s face twists. “A threat? And here I thought you were finally above such things.”

I catch myself. He’s right. *I hate that he’s right—*

A blanket of ice sucks my breath away.

I wheeze on the anxiety that cocoons around my anger, a deadly blend that makes my magic more agitated. It flares up my chest, fed by each word Noam says, each flicker of terror that I’m losing control. Again.

But I should be fine now—I encountered the magic barrier days ago. *My magic should be back to normal, shouldn’t it?*

I almost call for Hannah. But even considering that option makes the magic rise higher, coating my tongue with frost and numbing my fingers into solid tubes of ice. I have to calm down—there are Winterians around me. *Lots* of Winterians, and I’m so cold that I feel like one strong

exhale will send magic spiraling out of me.

Thankfully, Theron takes his father's arm. The movement distracts me, one beat of relief.

Until I hear what he says.

"We found it," Theron exhales, massaging the back of his neck like he has to coax each word out of his throat.

"The magic chasm. We need your help to—"

"Theron!" His name splits my heart.

The magic must have muddled my brain, because surely he didn't say *that*.

But he never actually promised he wouldn't tell his father about the magic chasm. He knows how I feel about it, and I know how *he* feels about it—but I never thought he'd do this.

I didn't realize how desperate he truly was for the chasm, how that spark of hope in his eyes is so anchored to this discovery. Because now, as he stands there, hanging on Noam's reaction, Theron looks more like himself than he has in months.

He needs this.

Noam turns to me. Squints. And smiles. A smile to put all others to shame, cracking across his face like he's been saving it for this day.

"Did you, now?" he asks me—just me, like Theron isn't the one who told him.

No, I want to say. No, *Theron's lying, we haven't found anything—*

Noam steps to the side and waves me toward the palace, his eyes never leaving my face. “I believe we have a few things to discuss, Lady Queen.” His smile hardens. “In private.”

Sir comes up beside me. Too late to do anything, but he reads the aghast look on my face and spins on Noam. “Is there a problem?”

Noam grins. “My son just told me of your discovery. You’re welcome to join the conversation, General Loren.”

Noam nods at his men, and I feel more than see them surround us. They’re not overtly threatening, and the hum in the square continues just the same—hammers pounding, voices buzzing in conversation. Even Conall, Garrigan, and Nessa remain by the horses, wholly unaware of the way Noam beckons us to follow him into the palace like it’s his.

Sir throws Theron a glare when Noam gets a few paces ahead. “You told him?”

The bite in Sir’s voice is the same growl he threw at me so often growing up. But this time, it’s distorted with the smallest flicker of remorse. Not for himself, I realize when my eyes snap to his. For me.

He knows what happened. Understands it more than even I can at this point.

Theron betrayed me.

My lungs hitch.

The Cordellan soldiers urge us forward, and we start walking toward the palace.

“I had to,” Theron says, beseeching, but when I don’t look at him, he clears his throat and roughens his voice. “We have to open that door. We need Cordell’s resources to figure out a way to do so—and I have a plan that will make my father need my help to open the door too.” He leans toward me. “Trust me, Meira.”

“But I asked you not to tell him.” I finally look at him. “I needed time, Theron. I needed to figure—”

“How much time do you think we have?” Theron’s brow pinches, and I know he’s trying not to show his frustration. “How long do you think Angra will give us before—”

“Angra is *dead*,” Sir cuts in. “You did this to fortify us against an evil that isn’t even here?”

Theron’s face sets. “I did it so that no matter what evils arise, we will never be outmatched again.”

The doors to the palace open and Noam leads us through the entryway, down a hall, and into a study. When the door closes behind us, Noam stops in the middle of the room and locks his arms behind his back, not bothering to face us yet. Theron steps forward while Sir presses his fists into the back of one of the couches, caving in on himself as he tries to assess the situation. And I move to the window, the glass smudged and dirty but still showing a view of the palace’s courtyard and Jannuari beyond.

“We found a door,” Theron begins when the silence lingers. “In the Tadil Mine. It was carved with scenes—vines on fire, a stack of books, a mask, and light hitting a mountain with the words ‘The Order of the Lustrate’ around it. The first three had keyholes in the center, but we couldn’t move closer to study them. There’s a barrier that blocks anyone from approaching.”

I know that tone. The slight air of distraction, like his mind rolls through things faster than his mouth can say them. I turn, and sure enough, Theron gazes absently into the air as he talks. He got the same look in Gaos when he stared at the tapestry—and me.

I fall against the wall.

That’s where I’ve seen the Order of the Lustrate’s seal before. In Bithai, Theron got this same look on his face when he helped me decipher that maddening book, *Magic of Primoria*.

The beam of light hitting a mountaintop—it was on the cover.

I find myself dangling on the precipice of asking Hannah about this, but that instinct shatters against my abrupt realization that she still isn’t here. My mind is only mine.

I brace for a flood of missing her, but all that comes is a small, selfish knot of relief. I’m happy to be the only one in my head again.

Shouldn’t I miss her, though?

Noam turns. “Is that all?”

“Yes. I returned once, after we found it.” Theron rubs his shoulder, wincing like it pains him. “The barrier is . . . persistent. Each time someone tries to pass, it throws them against the wall. And there’s nothing else down there.”

I don’t have it in me to be hurt that he went to study the door without telling me.

The Order of the Lustrate wrote the book I read in Bithai months ago. Most of it was cryptic scrawling or riddles, but maybe there’s something in it that could be useful now.

I instantly groan. There’s no way I could get it, not without alerting Noam to its importance. I could send someone to steal it from Bithai, but even when I had it, I needed Theron’s help to figure out any of its passages. Maybe Sir or Dendera would be better equipped at deciphering centuries-old riddles?

“The carvings,” Theron tells Noam, easing around the couches to stand in front of him. “We can’t open the door now, but I think—I think the carvings could lead us to a way.”

I straighten, eyes hard on Theron.

“How so?” Noam asks.

Theron exhales. “The whole place feels like a secret, but I think whoever made it wanted it to be opened. But not easily. Something like that *should* be difficult to open, and

if I had set it up, I would have made it so only the worthy could access that much power.”

Noam stays quiet, his arms folded.

“I think the carvings hold clues.” Theron slides a paper out of his pocket and unfolds it, showing Noam as he talks. “I drew them as best I could. Vines on fire, books in a pile, a mask. On the surface, they seem unrelated—but they do have one thing in common.”

Noam finally loses his patience. “So help me, if you—”

“Each symbolizes a kingdom in Primoria. Vines on fire—Summer, their vineyards and their climate. Books in a pile—Yakim, their knowledge. A mask—Ventralli, their masks and art. What else could it be? I think these symbols are meant to lead us to a way to open the chasm. I propose we put together a caravan to visit these three kingdoms and see if my suspicions are correct,” Theron finishes.

Summer, Yakim, and Ventralli? I keep my face as blank as I can, but inside, unease takes root in my stomach. A Season and two Rhythms? Why would the Order hide the keys in those three kingdoms? Could it be that easy?

Theron certainly thinks so. And he *has* proven rather adept at deciphering cryptic things.

“But *where*?” Noam waves his hand west, in the general direction of Summer, Yakim, and Ventralli. “Where do you propose we begin? What are we even searching for?”

“The keys for each lock, I think. It seems right, at

least—three keyholes, three symbols. Once we get them, I’m hoping the barrier falls—it’s a barrier of magic, so the keys might be magic too—”

“So you propose we search all three damn kingdoms?” Noam’s annoyance flickers into anger.

“Yes—well, in part.” Theron looks down at his sketches of the chasm door’s symbols. “We could start by exploring the areas in each kingdom that are most likely to have what we seek. Areas of value, perhaps, that would have survived the tests of time. It’s at least a start. We could ask—”

Noam jerks forward, one hand jabbing threateningly. “You are not to breathe a word of this venture to anyone. There is no *asking* anything. No questions of keys or mystical barriers or the Order of the Lustrate. If anyone knows anything at all about these things and hears you speak of them, it won’t be difficult for them to figure out what we found.” Noam grinds his jaw. “Leaving at all is risky. If word gets beyond these borders . . . no. There has to be another way to open that door.”

Theron’s brows lift. He seems close to arguing with Noam, his eyes sweeping over his father’s face.

I step forward before Theron needs to say anything.

“Do you have a better idea?” I snap at Noam.

The Order of the Lustrate is out there. They exist; they wrote that book, they made the chasm entrance. They have to be out there still, or at the very least, there has to be

someone in Primoria who knows them or remembers their teachings, and talking to someone would be infinitely more helpful than that mysterious book.

Maybe they can seal the door or tell me what their barrier did to my magic so I can get it under control—or even just reconnect my link to Hannah, so she can help me. However strange it was to have my dead mother in my head, she was useful sometimes.

“You want the door opened so badly?” I continue. “This is the only clue we have. Unless you’d like to go to Gaos and try running into the barrier yourself. I know *I’d* prefer that option.”

Noam scowls. “Careful, Lady Queen.”

“No.” I curl my hand into a fist. “This is what you’ve wanted all along, and we found it. So we’re going to these kingdoms, and we’re going to find the keys or the Order itself or whatever we need to find.” I glance at Theron, hating myself for the half-truths I’m telling.

But he’s the reason we’re here at all.

“We have to at least try,” I say. And it isn’t entirely a lie—I do want to try. But to get answers, not open the door.

They don’t need to know that, though. Theron will go to these kingdoms—his passion won’t let him sit idly by, even if his father disagrees. And if Theron goes, I will too. I’ll be right there the whole journey, searching just as hard

as him, and I *will* find answers. I'll track down the Order, or I'll find the keys before Theron does and in doing so, gain much-needed leverage over Cordell.

Theron seems appeased by my agreement. He looks at me with something like awe, and I shudder. He thinks I've changed my mind about wanting to keep the chasm locked.

Noam's eyes fly over my face. His lips rise in a slow smile again, tinged with condescending amusement, like he remembered something that puts him back in control.

"You propose to visit Summer, Yakim, and Ventralli," he says. "Didn't a few Winterians recently return from such a visit?"

I bite back panic. "What of it?"

"I've been told Yakim and Ventralli extended invitations to you. You already have a relationship with Cordell and Autumn—it will be expected for you to seek introduction to the world, and it will give us cover to search for the keys. And if nothing presents itself in Summer, Ventralli, and Yakim, you'll continue to Paisly. We won't leave a single kingdom in this world unsearched."

Noam's is the kingdom of opportunity. While Winter uses magic for strength and endurance to make its citizens the best miners in the world, Cordell uses its magic to make its citizens the best at analyzing a situation and coming out on top. That's exactly what Noam has done—woven this

into something advantageous to him.

My heart heaves disgust, the same draining sensation as when my magic is used. Like I'm not human, not important, just some toy to be played with at the behest of stronger things.

I may not be Cordellan, but I can manipulate a situation too.

"It would seem that Cordell needs Winter as much as Winter needs Cordell," I tell Noam.

I'll play along, you arrogant pig. I'll pretend to be an obedient little queen until I can crush you.

But with what? I thought I'd have more time to arrange a way to break Cordell's hold over us. I thought we'd at least have a Winterian army, a small gathering of fighters. But even if everything works perfectly—I get the keys before them and find information from the Order about controlling my magic—I have no way of forcing Cordell out of Winter.

Or do I?

Because Noam smiles as soon as I finish talking.

"You're quite right, Lady Queen. Cordell does still have need of Winter, and will until all payment has been issued. Speaking of—do we not have a ceremony to prepare?"

I level a gaze at Sir, whose face rests in the emotionlessness he wears so well. He could be terrified or curious or any number of things, and I'd never know.

What I do know is that he didn't help me at all. Either because he thought I could handle it on my own, or because he's too shocked to intercede, I can't tell.

"I will get ready for the ceremony while you and the Cordellans make the necessary travel arrangements," I tell him, eyes on him in a way I hope he understands.

Keep them here. Distract them.

Sir straightens. "Of course. King Noam, if you please," he says, waving Noam to sit.

I exhale in relief and spin for the door before Noam can say anything else, before Theron can catch me and try to mend the tears in our relationship. I have travel arrangements of my own to make, ones involving our only other hope: our mines.

Yakim and Ventralli don't know that we've found the magic chasm—and if Noam has his way, which he most likely will, they won't find out until he can open it. Which means they still want Winter's mines to search on their own—and maybe Summer will be willing to offer support in exchange for payment, even if they have their own access to the Klaryns. While we search their kingdoms for the keys, I could forge an alliance based on a clearly defined trade, not this open-ended, deadly game that Noam plays.

I have no control over whether or not I find the keys before Cordell, or whether the keys are found *at all*, or whether I'll get answers on how to fix my magic—but even

if the search turns up fruitless, at least Winter will come through this with *something*.

I will not return from this trip without a way to keep my kingdom safe.



Meira

THE CORDELLAN SOLDIERS who escorted us to the palace barely flinch when I dart out of the room. Only two people care, and their presence adds cool reassurance to my racing mind.

Conall says nothing, simply falls in behind me when I turn right, deeper into the palace. Garrigan closes in after him, just as silent, his face strained and questioning where Conall's is stiff and determined. They both probably wonder what happened, but for once, their station stops them from asking.

I gather my skirt into my fists and keep walking, my back straight. I'm the queen, and I'm behaving exactly as a queen would—orchestrating political maneuvers.

Luckily the Jannuari Palace enhances my illusion of being queen more strongly than anything else. The whole

place feels regal—if I focus on what it could be, not on the ruin that it is.

Before I even knew I was queen, Hannah showed me her memories of the palace through our shared connection to the magic. I saw the ballroom, the great square unfolding from the marble staircase in a billowing cloud of such pure white that the entire room gleamed. She showed me the halls, each one taller than the last, lit by sconces that threw light onto the ivory perfection. Everything was white—carvings dug into the walls, sculptures in alcoves, moldings that danced in circles and squares along the ceiling. Everything was beautiful, and whole, and perfect.

All those images conflict with what I see now, creating a collage of old and new, whole and broken. The memories of white statues in every alcove and candles flickering on tables and the white-paneled walls mesh with the half-destroyed palace that exists now, holes gaping in the walls and rubble swept into piles.

A small flicker of longing sparks. Hannah showing me what Winter used to look like was one of the few good memories I have of her. Remembering it now . . .

I'll find a way to get her back. At least, I think I want to get her back.

I yank open a door that leads to the basement. Garrigan and Conall follow me into the even more frigid air, the gray walls a startling contrast to the ivory halls above. We

continue until we reach a corridor, more stones forming a floor and walls that host heavy iron doors.

Like the mines that run under the Klaryn Mountains, a labyrinth of rooms winds deep beneath the Januari Palace, the stone floors worn smooth from years of tread, sconces caked in dust yet still able to hold twitching orbs of fire. These halls once housed offices or storage or even dungeons, but most of the rooms now remain closed and unused.

Except for a few toward the end.

I hurry on, footsteps tapping lightly on the stones. Right, left, right again, until I reach a short hall with three doors, all locked tight.

Or . . . they *should* be locked.

One stands open on my right, catching me in a brief spurt of worry before I compose myself. We just got back from Gaos—the soldiers haven’t yet finished depositing our newest resources yet. It’s only them.

But when I step up to the door, everything drains out of me.

“Mather?”

He doesn’t rise from where he sits on the floor before a crate, a paper in one hand, quill in the other. The stones, still jagged clumps of rock coated in dirt, haven’t yet been polished into the multifaceted, brilliant pieces they’re meant to be. The light from the sconces behind me reflects

orange and yellow onto the spoils: eerie and dancing, touching each piece and darting away.

Seeing him sends ripples vibrating through me, because aside from Conall and Garrigan, who linger down the hall a few paces, we're alone.

Mather looks up at me, his expression pinched as if he expects me to be someone awaiting orders. But when he recognizes me, his face spasms. "You're not a Cordellan."

I frown. "Should I be?"

He collects himself, his eyes sweeping from my head to my feet so fast I could have blinked and missed it. "I—why are you down here, my queen?"

This is the closest we've been to each other in months—and *that's* what he says?

"Why are *you* down here?" I throw back.

"Helping. You shouldn't be here—it's dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"You could be crushed." He gestures to the stacks of crates around him.

None are higher than my hip.

His focus drops back to the paper and he scribbles notes, his hand shaking ever so slightly as he writes.

"Dangerous," I repeat. My jaw tightens. He stays quiet, feigning distraction, and the stillness lets the past hour—the past week, the past months—creep over me.

"You're worried about me?" I snap. "You'll have to forgive

me, since the only interactions we've had in the past three months have been in meetings with a dozen other people. So you can see why I might be confused that you think of protecting Winter's queen, when for the past couple of months, you've acted as though you didn't give a damn about her. But don't worry, I have plenty of other people in my life who have perfected the ability to pretend to care. You don't owe me any favors."

That wrenches his attention back to me. "I didn't—and— *What?*" He gapes, glancing around the room like he's trying to find an explanation in the crates. "I was just sitting here, taking inventory for your kingdom, when you come swooping in. What should I have said? Ice above, do you just need someone to yell at?"

"Yes!"

He flinches and my mouth falls open and all my anger drops away beneath an onslaught of far stronger emotions.

I miss him. So much my chest aches, and I can't believe the ache hasn't killed me yet. All I want is to say the right thing, to hear him laugh and joke about sparring with Sir. I need to talk to him, for us to be the way we were—two children standing together against a war. That's how I feel now, but this time . . . I'm not a child. And I'm not standing with him—I'm alone.

I stagger. "I shouldn't have—"

But Mather's eyes close in a scowl before he sets down his

quill and rises to his feet. Something about his demeanor breaks a little, and he widens his legs as if preparing for a fight.

“Okay,” he says, arms crossed, the paper crinkling in his fist. “Yell at me.”

I squint. “Yell at you?”

Mather nods. “Yes. Do it. I’ve—” He stops, jaw snapping shut with an audible *click*. He shifts away from me, back again, lips pursing in nervous frustration. “The least I can do is let you yell at me. We both know I deserve it. So”—he waves me on—“yell at me.”

I square my shoulders, open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Yes, he does deserve it. But yelling at him won’t undo all the times I searched for him in meetings only to see him slouched in a corner, participating as much as would be expected from a newly titled lord of Winter, but not as much as would be expected from my friend. I don’t even think it would make me feel any better, because he’d end up just as beaten and forlorn as Theron.

Mather lifts a white eyebrow. “You don’t have to actually yell, if you don’t want to. Slightly elevated whispering would be fine.”

I sigh. “You’re not the one I should be yelling at.”

“Someone deserves it more than me?”

He’s trying for humor, but it tugs at my worries.

“How did you do this?” I whisper, my chapped lips

cracking in the room's frigidness.

Mather hardens. He doesn't seem at all confused by what I asked. "I focused on my duty. I put Winter first, above everything." The sudden heaviness in his eyes negates any advice he just gave. "But I think I messed up. Being king. I'd do it differently now if I could."

"What? How?"

He shrugs, his words coming faster. "I wouldn't focus on Winter as much. I'd let myself focus on . . . other things too. Winter isn't everything."

"Yes, it is," I counter. "You were right to focus on your duty. That's what I'm trying to do, but I feel like I'm barely holding everything together."

"Did something happen?"

Mather's expression is familiar—but it isn't what I expect.

There's no fear. No brokenness. Just strength.

I've been waiting for him to heal on his own. Hoping and needing and *wanting* him to somehow resolve the issues of our lives so I could have my friend back.

Has he figured things out? Has he accepted our new lives?

Or is he just hiding his pain like everyone else?

"We found the magic chasm," I tell him, easing each word out in a test of his strength. "And Noam is sending us in search of a way to open it. We're going to Summer,

Yakim, and Ventralli, and I thought I'd—"

"*What?*" Mather gags. "You found it? When? Where?"

"The Tadil Mine. A few days ago."

He pulls back, his eyes distant as he thinks. "Noam wasn't in Winter when you found it."

I shake my head.

"So why in the name of all that is cold did you tell him?"

"I didn't want to tell him," I snap. "Theron—"

Oh, no.

"No," Mather wheezes. "Theron told Noam?"

I say nothing, and my silence confirms it. After a pause, Mather groans, and I ready for a rant. This will be the moment that tells me where we stand now—how he reacts to Theron.

But Mather just pushes his groan into a sigh. "That was wrong of him."

My breath catches and my throat wells at the unexpected comfort he offers.

I cough, pulling out of the daze. "That's not why I came down here, though. I need goods. Separate from the ones we're to give Autumn and Cordell."

He squints. "You want goods? Why?"

"Ventralli and Yakim invited me to their kingdoms before this trip was planned, and I want to take advantage of their interest in us while I'm there. Give some of the jewels as a goodwill offering to symbolize trading ownership of a few

of our mines for . . . support.”

Mather’s face lightens, his brows lifting as he grins. That whole-face, knee-quaking smile that constantly bombarded me as a child.

“You want to take some from the stores we owe to Cordell,” he clarifies.

I nod. “More than you know.”

He barks laughter. “I think I know pretty well.” He steps closer and lifts the paper he’d been scribbling on, only now it’s wrinkled from where he held it. “I’m one of the Winterians helping to sort the resources from the mines. And what we get is supposed to go straight to Cordell and Autumn tonight, but—” He pauses, mischief sparking in his eyes. “Giving them *everything* didn’t seem like the best investment for Winter’s future.”

I cock my head. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been pulling aside resources from every shipment to help rebuild our treasury.”

Shock flows over me. “How . . . how much?”

Mather glances at the paper. “Five crates. Which isn’t a lot, I know, but I didn’t want the Cordellans to realize that some of their precious payment is gone.”

He’s been helping me, helping Winter, in ways I didn’t even know I needed.

I surge forward and lock my fingers around his arm. “Thank—”

His eyes drop to my grip, every part of his body freezing at my touch. I don't pull back and his gaze lifts higher, rising up my arm. My other arm sits tucked inside a tight, ivory sleeve, but this one is bare to my collarbone. I hadn't realized how much more revealing it is than what I usually wear—or what I used to wear—around him. A shirt and pants and boots.

And when Mather's eyes meet mine, his cheeks flush such a deep scarlet that not even the dimness of this room can hide it. A coldness rushes down me, the biting sensation of falling into a pile of snow, every part of my body tingling and alert. I'm swarmed with the feeling of being exposed yet too covered up all at once, and the longer he stares at me, the colder my body grows.

I jerk away from him and coil my fingers into my palm.

He swallows, throat convulsing. "I'm glad I could help. But . . ." He stops. "You're already a better ruler than I ever was."

I shake my head to fight the way Mather looks at me, as if he's studying me, noting how close we are, how much closer we could be. I wanted him back in my life to have support, someone to help me save our kingdom—not another complication.

But my heart says otherwise, knocking against my ribs in deliberate, persistent pulses.

He helped Winter. He isn't dissolving at the mention of problems or trying to avoid issues.

“Five crates,” I echo. “I wonder if that will be enough.”

Mather shakes back into our conversation. “How much are you thinking?”

I smile. The lingering pinkness in Mather’s cheeks deepens.

“More,” I tell him. “A lot more. Enough to send one final message to Noam.”

Mather nods. “I’m a proponent of any plan that irks him.”

I laugh. The sound jolts through me, sharp and bumping, and I clap my palms over my mouth.

“You’re allowed to laugh.” Mather chuckles at my surprise.

The part of me that spent so long missing him sighs, content.

The sound of footsteps echoes down the hall, ricocheting off the stone like pebbles falling down a mountainside. I turn when Sir comes to stand beside me.

“My queen.” Sir glances past me to Mather, who shoots up straight, shoulders rolling back in a sudden stance of alertness. But Sir doesn’t afford him more than a glance, his attention dipping back to me. “We need to speak about the trip.”

“I know—but not just yet.” I turn to Mather again. The idea he planted sprouts roots and unfurls wide leaves, fostering recklessness similar to that of the wild girl I used to be.

But while that girl made mistakes, she is the reason I have a kingdom to rule. I owe it to myself to at least try to be her again, in some small way.

“Where did you put those five crates?” I ask Mather.

His stance relaxes and he waves his arm out for me to follow him.

Down another hall, up two rooms, Mather stops, leading the party of Sir, Conall, Garrigan, and me. He digs a key out of his pocket and unlocks a door, swinging it wide to reveal a grime-covered space even smaller than the rooms we were just near.

But in the back stand five crates, each stuffed with lumpy pieces of Winter’s future.

I pivot to Sir. “At the ceremony tonight, bring only these five crates.”

Sir blinks. “My queen, Cordell is expecting far more than this.”

“They will get what they deserve in time. But for now . . . we have a greater need.”

Sir’s veil of formality lifts, showing a flash of his worry. “Cordell is our only ally, my queen. It is not wise to anger them.”

I know, and I almost tell him that, almost break through my fragile certainty. What I’m doing is purely the old me, something rash and careless, the part of me that snuck away to find my chakram. The part of me that wails in fury whenever I have to use my magic or Noam tightens his grip

on Winter. The part of me that wants to *matter*.

“Which is why I’m going to get us more allies,” I tell Sir.

It’s dangerous, but we need these resources to gain allies so we can get some leverage.

Noam will be *furious*.

And right now, that sounds wonderful.



Meira

DENDERA GIVES MY hair a final pat. “You’re ready.”

Nessa squeals and claps her hands over her mouth. My eyes flick to Dendera’s reflection, heartbeat hurtling back and forth in my throat. Her enthusiasm is almost as palpable as Nessa’s, if not as vocal.

I close my eyes, back straight, face impassive. When I look, I will see someone capable and composed, a warrior and a leader all in one. I can be both Winter’s queen and the orphaned soldier-girl, as my act of defiance tonight against Noam will show.

I open my eyes.

My hair, half pulled behind my head in an array of braids, half curling around my shoulders, shines the most radiant white. My gown has silver clasps at the shoulders that leave my arms bare and a belt that curves tight around my waist. At my throat, nestled against the ivory of my collarbone,

sits Winter's Royal Conduit, the silver, heart-shaped locket with the single white snowflake etched on the center.

I smile, trying out an expression the same way Dendera made me try on different gowns. The pretense cracks and my stomach tightens with the ever-lingering knot of worry that this is a mistake. That I'm wrong for what I have planned, that I need to not be reckless or impulsive or do things I *know* are dangerous.

But I hold that smile on my face until it aches.

I smooth the pleated skirt and follow Dendera and Nessa out of my room.

Conall and Garrigan drop in behind us, along with Henn, who takes Dendera's hand. I sneak a grin at her, but she's too absorbed in Henn to see.

My entourage and I weave our way through the palace, looping around to enter the ballroom through the door closest to the rear. I know what awaits us beyond it—a dais, along with Cordellian soldiers, Noam, Theron, the Autumnians, and my people, all excited for the ceremony.

I should be excited too. But a sudden surge of music makes everyone around me stiffen, as if no one is sure they're hearing what they think they're hearing. I tell myself to move through the door linking this hall to the ballroom, but I can't.

This music. It's airy and delicate, bouncing off the walls around me in a swell of unassuming perfection. If I could put notes to the sound of flakes falling, of water

crystallizing into ice, of snow gusting on the wind, this would be it.

This is what Winter sounds like.

Dendera squeezes my arm, a dreamlike smile on her face. “The instruments are lyres, a discovery salvaged from the palace. It appears Angra did not destroy all of our treasures.”

Yet, comes my instinctual reaction, shattering the trance of the music. But no—he’s dead. Finn and Greer brought back no news of him. And even if he comes back somehow, I’ll have allies united to stand against him. He can’t hurt us anymore.

A door opens on our left, letting a flurry of musty air waft up from the stone halls below. Sir emerges, trailed by Greer and Finn, each with at least one crate in their arms. The goods I designated for Cordell and Autumn.

Sir narrows a look at me. “My queen, are you certain you wish to go through with this?”

I teeter on the brink of changing my mind. “Yes.”

He shifts the crates he holds, his uncertainty reeling on his face. “I trust you, my queen. We all trust you to make the best decisions for our future, but I—”

I put my hand on his arm. “Please, William. Let me do this. Let me just try.”

That silences him, and he holds my gaze in the stillness like he’s searching for something in my eyes. But he says nothing more, and Nessa takes my hand to lead me toward the end of this ivory hall. I’m dragged back to all those

times in Abril when she held on to me for strength or out of some dire need to make sure I was there.

My fingers tighten around hers, and Dendera opens the door.

The celebration unfolds around us, cupped inside a half-destroyed ballroom. The south side of the ceiling is completely gone, only a fraction of the wall remaining, which lets in snowflakes and the gray evening sky. A marble staircase against the far wall leads to the wing that houses my room and a few dozen more. The other walls tower three stories in the air, lined with the same ivory moldings and silver accents as the rest of the palace. Cracks run like jagged snakes through the walls; bits of mortar crumble from the broken ceiling in bursts of shattered rain.

But as I step inside, I couldn't have guessed that the ballroom had ever been anything but whole.

Everyone is here. Every resident of Jannuari, the Autumnian visitors, a few Cordellan soldiers, all mingling under the lyre music and snow-cloud sky. And every Winterian has managed to find at least some small piece of white clothing to wear in honor of our kingdom—a shirt or a scarf or a gown with white patterned over gray. Hundreds of white-haired heads in white outfits, twisting and moving like so many flakes of snow. Winter's blizzard.

The dais sits to the right of the hall I just exited, adorned by tufts of white silk and bundles of Winterian plants, evergreen sprigs and milky snowdrops. The fresh scent of pine

and the honey-sweet floral aroma mix with the crispness of the air drifting through the ceiling, creating an atmosphere that saturates my every nerve with thoughts of Winter.

The atmosphere cracks a little when I see who waits on that dais: Noam, Theron, and two Autumnian royals.

I've managed to avoid Theron since our meeting earlier, keeping to my room or the basement. Now I meet his eyes, and I see there a question laced with concern wrapped in need.

My attention leaps from him to his father, both of them straight-backed in their green-and-gold Cordellan uniforms. Entirely normal, as if we didn't find the magic chasm's entrance at all.

Focus. Breathe.

Unlike Noam, the Autumnians have had the decency to remain in their own kingdom since Winter's rebirth to give us time to collect ourselves—which means I haven't met them yet. King Caspar Abu Shazi Akbari, whose line holds the connection to Autumn's female-blooded conduit, stands beside his queen, Nikoletta Umm Shazi Akbari, Noam's sister, whose marriage produced the female heir Autumn needed after two generations without a daughter.

Caspar watches me so intently that I'm worried about tipping over backward. He has the shoulder-length black hair, warm umber skin, and deep, black eyes of Autumn. His tunic of glistening gold over ruby-red pants seems too simple for a king, but the thin strand of interlocking gold

leaves in his hair proclaims his station.

Nikoletta, by contrast, beams at me. Gentle waves of dark blond hair ripple over her shoulders, far lighter than the black-as-night hair of her Autumnian subjects. On her head sits a crown of rubies that hosts an array of dangling beads. Red fabric pours out of the back of the crown, blending into her bloodred gown, which is overlaid with golden flowers and more rubies.

“It is my deepest honor to present . . .”

I jump. Dendera has moved to the dais, her voice urging a hush over the music and chatting voices. Everyone turns to face us.

“ . . . the savior of Winter . . .”

Nessa tugs on my hand, bouncing in her excitement, but I can't join her. At the edge of the crowd, on the other side of the dais, Alysson grins up at Dendera, one arm tucked into Mather's. But he stares straight at me, eyes unblinking. His mouth opens like he wants to say something, but he catches himself in the heavy silence of the ballroom and hesitates. Trapped between those three months we went without talking and our interaction earlier.

Before anything can happen, Dendera's voice bursts out into the ballroom with such force that I expect the rest of the ceiling to crumble.

“ . . . Queen Meira Dynam!”

The crowd switches from watchful to cheering, a frenzied explosion that overwhelms the lyres as they start up

again. Nessa eases her hand from mine and I move toward the dais with cautious steps, the cheers of the crowd ringing in my ears. My people, *applauding*.

No matter what happens, this ceremony was worth it, if only to hear my people so happy.

I draw their voices into my heart, lock them away deep inside me, and climb the dais, putting Noam, Theron, Nikoletta, and Caspar on my right. They're close enough that I know they can see me trembling, can probably hear me gagging on air.

The crowd's excitement ebbs until silence hangs heavier than any cheer. All eyes on me.

"We are here today . . ." Mouth dry, I push out loud words. "We are here today to pay our thanks for the brave acts of Cordell and Autumn."

I wave Sir, Greer, and Finn forward, each still carrying the crates. "These past months have allowed us to reopen our mines, signifying that Winter is a viable, living kingdom again."

The last part I say to Noam, staring at him though my voice carries around the room. His eyes flicker as my men flank me on the dais.

I motion Finn and his two crates forward. "To Autumn, the first of much that is owed."

The crowd breaks into a reverent applause as Finn lays the goods at Caspar's feet. Caspar bows his head in wordless thanks and Nikoletta applauds softly. Neither of them

seems put off by the small offering—in fact, they simply seem grateful to be here at all.

I wave Sir and Greer forward. “And to Cordell. The first of many payments.”

Noam eyes the three crates that they lay at his feet before glancing at me, at Sir, and even farther back, at the hall door. No one else moves to bring forward the rest of the payment.

His face twists. The glow around the dagger at his hip wrenches from delicate lavender to heavy indigo. “You must be mistaken.” His words are soft, just for those on the dais.

Sir and Greer back away, joining Finn at the edge of the stage. I smile as serenely as I can, ignoring the way Theron watches me, silent, evaluating.

“Winter owes Autumn and Cordell much,” I say, keeping my voice elevated. “And we will continue to pay both until our debts are cleared. We thank these kingdoms for their service and sacrifice.” I start a heavy clap that catches and spreads, signaling the end of the ceremony.

The din of cheers and applause rises again, as does the lyre music, kicking up in a post-ceremony celebration. The guests turn into it, swaying in chatting groups, everyone pleasantly distracted as Noam grabs my arm before I can duck off the dais.

“This is far from over,” he growls, his fingers bruising my bare skin.

I look up at him, but I don’t see him. The stronger pull

of conduit magic living in my body connects to Noam's magic through skin-to-skin contact, and memories pour from his head into my own, the same I've seen before: Noam, at his dying wife's bedside, but something about his remorse is . . . off.

A flood of violent emotions hits me, overpowering everything else.

I will destroy her, Noam thinks. I will not be denied what is mine by a child.

Sir pushes Noam back. "None of that here," he growls through clenched teeth.

A movement on the edge of the dais says the Cordellan soldiers have readied themselves, waiting for Noam to give the order. Beyond them, the laughter and music of the party doesn't dwindle, no one besides us noticing the tension.

I lean close to Noam. "We will repay what we owe you, but Winter never agreed to the things you demand."

Noam eases forward, his hot breath bursting across my face. "You cannot win against me, child-queen. I will raze this kingdom as brutally as the Shadow of the Seasons if I have to."

Theron grabs his father's arm. "You don't mean that?"

Noam doesn't turn away from me. "I do." He tips his head, his anger lighting in a new expression: scorn. "What do you intend to do with the resources you kept? Go ahead. Use this trip to negotiate aid for your pathetic land. But know this—" He jabs a finger at me and I lurch back,

shock making me pliable. He knows what I intend to do? “No number of allies will save you from my wrath. You think I fear the other Rhythms? No, Lady Queen—this is the final act of impudence I will tolerate. I will stay in Winter while you search the world, and if you return without a way to open that door, I will forcibly take your kingdom. No more games, no more stalling; Winter will be *mine*. Prove to me that you are useful. Make me glad I let you live.”

Theron shoves his father back, teetering him toward the edge of the stage. “Stop.”

But Noam is too far gone for intervention. His top lip flickers in a snarl and he catches Theron’s arm in an unrelenting grip. “Don’t think I don’t know where your heart is, boy. This trip isn’t just a test for Winter—prove to me that you are worthy to be my heir. I will tolerate no more games from *any* of you.”

My mouth closes, muscles cramping so all I see, feel, think is a pulsing, reverberating panic that starts in my gut and spreads through my body. The magic rises up into a swirling, threatening gale, pushing higher and higher for the surface.

I swallow, choking. *No, not now—*

Before I can add more proof of my weakness to Noam’s crusade, I rush off the dais, hand against my chest, trying and failing and begging the magic to compress back inside me.

I did this. Of course Noam would figure out my plan—it was stupid to think he wouldn't. And we have a deadline now.

Should I have let him bleed my kingdom dry? Should I have not fought back? No, of course not. But not like this. Not like . . . me.

The magic sputters, knocking the air from my lungs. I stagger through the door and dump myself back into the hall, the noise of the celebration muffling in the high, narrow walls. Someone says something to me, distant and fogged, and my knees crack as I drop to the ground. But I will not use my magic—I am not weak, I am not afraid, *I am the queen*.

“My queen!” Sir kneels in front of me.

I brace myself against the floor, gritting my teeth. “I . . . I did that. . . .”

Sir's face softens. *Softens*. “You tried, my queen. You understand now, though.”

I blink at him. His words sink into my mind like stones plummeting into a pool.

He let me do this. And he isn't angry—he's expectant. Like he allowed me this one flash of who I used to be as a test of my growth. Hannah would have done the same—let me plunge ahead, knowing I'd realize my folly and come limping back to what was right.

I do understand. I always understood, but I thought—I hoped—that I could handle this as *me*.

But only a queen can handle running a kingdom, not an orphaned soldier-girl. No one else can deal with their past; why did I think mine would help us?

Around me, Nessa, Conall, and Garrigan hover, faces twisted with concern.

Sir remains kneeling beside me, expressionless. “Are you all right, my queen?”

“No,” I growl. I hate him for not believing in me; I hate myself *for* believing in me. “But I swear, I will be.”