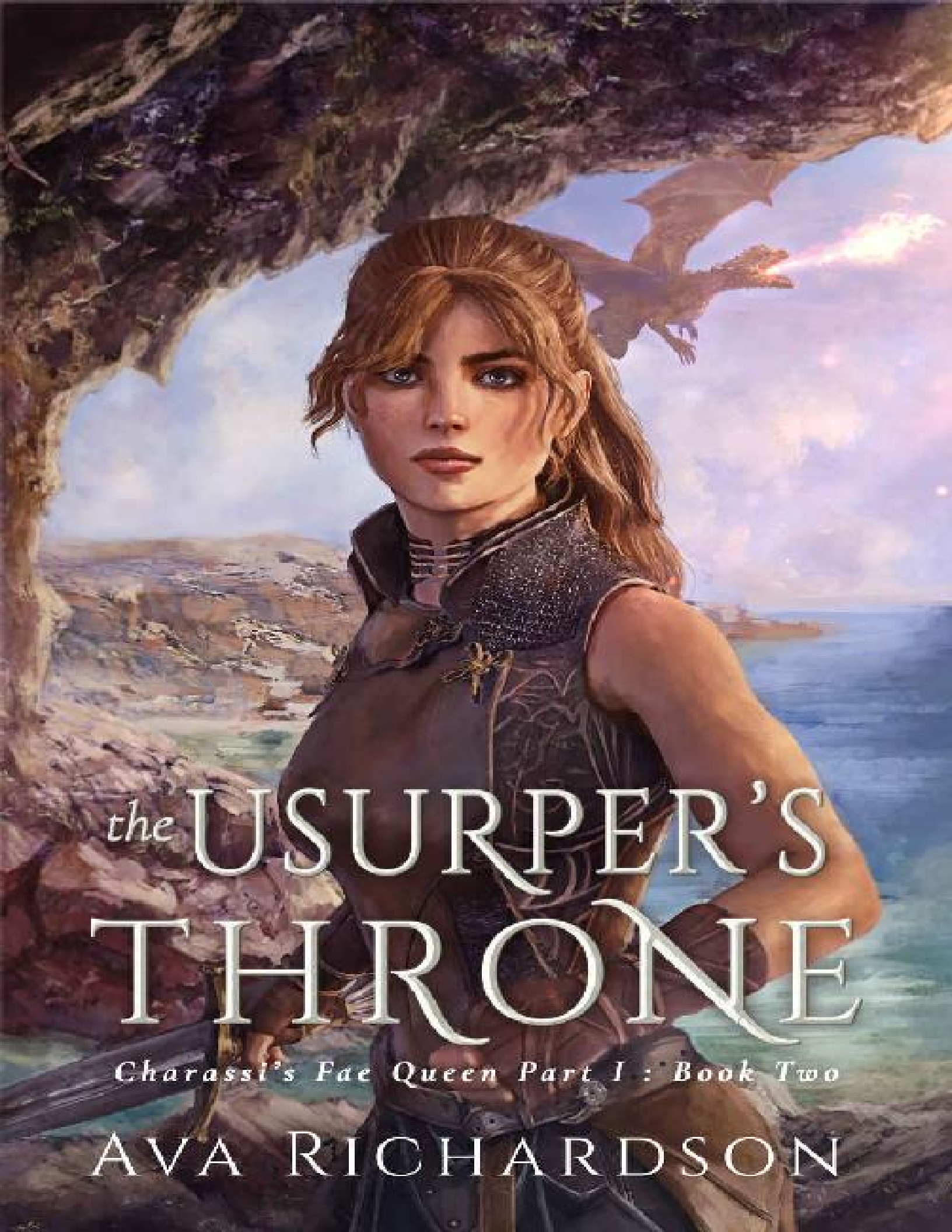

the USURPER'S THRONE

Charassi's Fae Queen Part I : Book Two

AVA RICHARDSON

CHARASSI'S FAE QUEEN

The Bone Crown

The Usurper's Throne

The Stolen Palace

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RELAY PUBLISHING EDITION, AUGUST 2022
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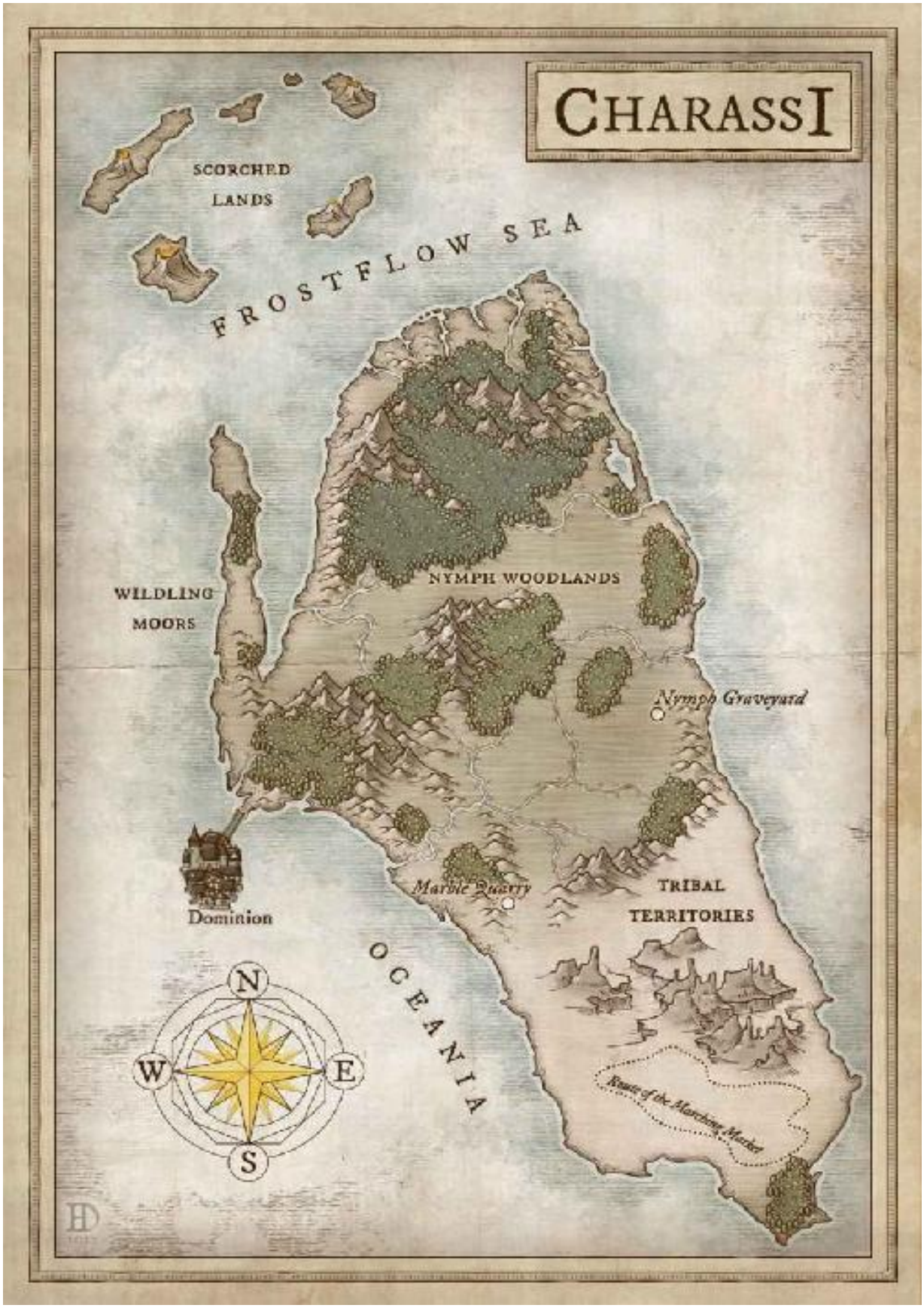
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the USURPER'S THRONE

Charassi's Fae Queen Part I : Book Two

AVA RICHARDSON

BLURB

A dragon bond, a usurped throne, and a realm on the brink of destruction…

Ophelia Monroe had no idea magic existed until a dying dragon crashed near her Texas school, and a Fae prince stole her away to another realm. Suddenly an unprecedented bond makes her Queen of the Fae in Charassi, a magical realm she never could have imagined.

But when Vie, an evil Fae, usurps her crown, Ophelia is temporarily stranded on Earth with Prince Corrin and a dragon named Shadow on the River. When they return, Charassi is a realm transformed. The people live in fear and their allies are being targeted not only by Vie but by his and Corrin's mother—the former queen, Emalda.

Retaking the throne won't be easy, especially with the dark power Emalda wields to Unmake the Fae—draining away their souls and leaving their bodies as puppets under her command.

To make herself even more powerful, Emalda steals the Bone Crown, an artifact that belongs to the rightful ruler of Charassi. With the crown, she would become a nearly unbeatable foe. Ophelia and Corrin must get the artifact back and find a way to protect the palace and their people.

If they fail, all of the dragons and Fae of the realm will pay the ultimate price.

MAILING LIST

Thank you for purchasing *The Usurper's Throne*
(Charassi's Fae Queen Book Two)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Naomi Hughes, who breathed life into Charassi.

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CHAPTER I

OPHELIA

Two weeks! Ophelia had been stuck on Earth for two full weeks now, and she still hadn't found a way to tell her family she couldn't stay.

She glanced sideways. Luis, her sweet—if sometimes overprotective—big brother was walking down the sidewalk beside her. He looked calm, focused. She could tell him now, finally just blurt out what she needed to say: that she didn't belong in Texas anymore, that as soon as she found a way back to Charassi—her kingdom, where her subjects needed her—she would go, and she wasn't planning to come back to Earth at all except for visits. He could handle it. The problem was, she wasn't entirely certain she could say goodbye.

She bit her lip and reached up to readjust the Bone Crown, which was currently hidden under a cowboy hat she'd borrowed from her dad. It had become a nervous habit for her to touch it, as if she was afraid it might disappear, or that the awful Prince Vie might find some way to snatch it from her even across realms.

Luis caught her nervous gesture and raised an eyebrow at her. "You sure you're up for this, little sis?"

He thought she was nervous about their current mission. Which she was. A bit. They were currently walking down an alley that wove behind Tipton's most important buildings: City Hall, the fire department, and their current target, the town museum. It was closed right now. No one would be there

except the security guard. That was the person they'd have to talk their way past—or sneak around—so they could find the item they had come for.

Ophelia put her hand in her pocket and felt the crinkled newspaper clipping there. "Historic Oddity Found," the headline said. The attached photo showed a round, bone-white doorknob with intricate carvings of dragons in flight. The mayor had stumbled on it during one of his daily runs on the nearby state park's trails and had taken it to the museum for examination. The staff historian thought it might be an artifact from the town's founding. They were holding it somewhere in their basement archives until a specialist could fly down to authenticate it.

Ophelia couldn't let that happen.

What they didn't know was that although the doorknob was definitely old, it wasn't from Tipton, Texas. It wasn't even from Earth. It was a capital-A Artifact from the realm of Charassi, crafted from dragon bone by a High Fae Artificer…and with any luck, it might just be able to open a portal that would get Ophelia back to where she needed to be.

Charassi. Her kingdom. Her new home. The place that needed her desperately if it was ever going to be free of the tyrant would-be ruler, Vie, who had stolen her throne and was even now oppressing the Fae who had named her their queen.

Her expression hardened with determination. She responded to Luis's earlier question with a firm nod. "I am absolutely up for this. Let's go steal back an Artifact."

They had reached the museum's service entrance. Luis bounded up the cement stairs and entered the security code on the pad that was mounted there. He'd interned here two summers ago, and security was lax enough in this tiny town that the old door code was almost certain to still be in use. It was why she'd brought Luis along for this little expedition rather than Corrin.

"There is also the fact that the Fae boy-prince sticks out like a sore digit amongst these ridiculous little humans," noted a voice in her mind—the voice of the currently-disembodied dragon to whom she was magically bonded.

“A sore digit?” she murmured back, suppressing a smile. Sun in the Black Sky, or “Sunny” as she’d nicknamed him, had spent way too much time digging through her memories of human idiosyncrasies, English idioms, and pop culture over the last two weeks. He claimed he was trying to help them find ways to better blend in, but she could tell he was secretly fascinated by human culture.

“Indeed,” Sunny replied. *“He is far taller than these puny folk, and there is the fact his accent and way of speaking are all wrong.”*

He’s also way prettier than any human I’ve ever met, Ophelia thought but didn’t say, fighting the dreamy smile that tried to creep over her expression. Sunny caught her emotion anyway and did the mental dragon equivalent of rolling his eyes. He’d lately taken to burrowing deep into her memories whenever she thought of the Fae prince, hiding himself as far away from her fluttery feelings as possible. She’d have liked to think he was being respectful and giving her space as she and Corrin tried to work out their feelings for each other, but she knew Sunny actually just disliked sensing her sentimentality, which in his eyes was mushy and embarrassing compared to “proper draconic courting”—which mostly seemed to involve roasting lots of goats, as far as she could tell. Plus, being on Earth—where the natural forces that powered his magic were weakened by pollution—tended to make Sunny sluggish, which was another reason he’d taken to keeping to himself lately.

Luis interrupted her ponderings. “We’re in,” he said in a low voice, turning the doorknob and peering carefully in through the thin crack. Ophelia’s thoughts crashed back to the mission at hand and impatience whipped through her, sudden and sharp. Almost all of Charassi’s Artifacts had been teleported to Tipton after she’d been crowned queen. Since she and Corrin had been stranded here, they had only managed to find a few dozen—none of which had been of any use for opening a portal to take them back.

The doorknob they were after today was different. Corrin had never seen it before and had no idea what it did, which meant it could be one of the more dangerous or rare Artifacts that the priestesses had kept secret, even from the Crown Prince. There was a chance it could be another portal-opening Artifact. Corrin was convinced that there had been only one of those—the

one that was now broken and useless—but she still held out hope that some kind of backup existed. *It has to. Who would only make one?*

She nudged Luis aside and pushed past him into the dimly lit loading dock of the museum. Her big brother hissed a warning at her but she ignored it, striding toward the stairs that led to the basement storage area. Luis darted in after her with an exasperated sigh. “Please at least try to be careful,” he said.

“You said yourself there’s only one security guard, and he spends most of his time watching *Gilmore Girls* reruns.”

Sunny’s ears mentally perked up at the reference to more human pop culture, and he dove into her subconscious like a submerging whale to find more info about the show.

“Well, yeah,” Luis responded, “but still. Be careful.”

Ophelia took the stairs down two at a time. She almost responded with a sarcastic *Yes, Mom*, but caught herself at the last second. Their mother had been gone for a while now but they still hadn’t quite reached the point where they could make even such a casual, teasing reference to her without remembering the pain of her loss. A hint of grief trickled through Ophelia even now at the memory.

“I will,” she said instead, and pulled her mind back to the mission at hand. The stairs let out into an equally dim hallway with four doors. They looked exactly the same—peeling white paint, old brass doorknobs—but only one of them had a deadbolt. “I’m guessing they’re keeping the item in this one,” she murmured to Luis, who had stopped at the bottom of the stairs and was peering back upward. He was keeping watch, she realized. And judging by that intent look on his face, he was taking his brotherly protection duty very seriously.

A bolt of warmth shot through her. She would miss this when she left. Would miss him. She would see him again, she knew—she’d find some way to return for visits no matter what happened. But she still had to find some way to break the news to him and the others that her home was no longer in Tipton. It was in Charassi. Or it would be if she could ever find her way back.

“You continue to torment yourself over your goodbyes,” Sunny spoke up. *“There is no reason for such dramatics. Is it not humans who came up with the ‘farewell, Felicia’ method of parting ways? Simply tell him your decision and go. It is what a dragon would do.”*

“Well, I’m not a dragon,” she retorted. She turned away from Luis—and, mentally, from Sunny—and lifted her hand to the knob, rattling it to see if it was locked. It was. She sighed, knowing that meant she’d have to use magic to open it. Even though it would only take a trickle, she could only channel it with Sunny’s help, and he was heavily hampered by Earth’s pollution.

She felt a surge of frustration from the part of her mind where Sunny was holed up. He wanted to flex his talons, wanted to bare his teeth. If he had his body, he could’ve smashed this door—this whole building—to splinters with ease. But as things were, his body was lying dead somewhere in the woods near her school, and his mind was trapped within hers.

“Yeah, I get it, I’d like to smash through it too,” Ophelia muttered back to him, sending him a nudge of sympathy. Then she tightened her focus and sent a thin tendril of Death energy through the lock. It rattled slightly but didn’t budge. She glared at it and pulled up more Death energy, knitting it together with a few threads of Dawn energy to give the spell a bit more kick. One of the few benefits to having so much free time while stuck on Earth was that she’d had plenty of opportunity to quiz Sunny about every spell she could think of. She’d learned which natural forces to combine to do all sorts of things, and had found and practiced—when possible—more effective ways to get her magic to do what she wanted without blowing up in her face. Which it had done several times in the past.

She winced, feeling her magic quickly drain, but continued feeding the spell power until she heard the lock click open. Exhaling, she quickly broke the spell off, staggering slightly from the strain of expending nearly a quarter of her current magical energy. But if the Artifact behind this door was the one they needed then it was more than worth it.

She pulled the door open and squeezed through, flicking on the light. The room was about the size of a small garage and was filled with shelves and drawers of all shapes and sizes holding all of the museum’s pieces that

weren't in circulation. Most of this stuff was damaged or of unverified origin, or in some cases simply no longer of enough interest to the public to keep on display. She spotted a dusty bowler hat, a crumbling brick carved with half-disintegrated names, and a deteriorated copper ring, but no sign of what she was seeking.

She closed her eyes and tried to quiet her thoughts. She recalled Corrin telling her that dragons and anyone bonded to them could sense Artifacts in close vicinity. And when she reached out tentatively with her senses, she really did feel something—a sort of faint buzzing in her brain. It felt like it was coming from her left, a bit below shoulder height. She took an experimental step in that direction and the buzzing strengthened. She opened her eyes. There was a drawer in front of her, but it was padlocked shut.

Sunny growled in her head. She agreed with the sentiment, and in a burst of frustration, channeled a thread of Emptiness straight through the lock. It sizzled, burning a dime-sized hole straight through the locking mechanism. Oops.

"Hurry," hissed Luis's voice from down the hall. "I think I hear the guard coming. Must be doing his rounds on time for once."

Ophelia quickly yanked open the drawer and snatched up the bone doorknob within, barely taking the time to look at it before dropping it in the backpack she'd brought along. She flicked the lights back off and quietly closed the door behind her.

Luis was striding toward her. He motioned her toward the far end of the hall, where a glowing red sign read: "E IT". She squinted at it in confusion before she realized that the "X" had burned out and that it was meant to show the exit.

"This door only opens from the inside so you don't need any code for it," Luis explained in a whisper.

She nodded, slung the backpack over her shoulder, and hurried toward the door. That was when she heard heavy footfalls from the stairwell. The guard was coming down. Ophelia's eyes widened and she lengthened her steps. She did *not* want to get caught down here—not when the guard, along

with nearly everyone else in Tipton outside of her family, thought she was still long gone. The generally accepted story was that she'd run off without so much as a goodbye note to "discover herself" on an out-of-state volunteer trip a few weeks ago. She and her family had decided that was the least complicated way to justify her sudden absence—and their panic and the resulting missing-person report—after she'd been taken to Charassi. She hated letting everyone think she would do such a thing to her family, but it was a lot less complicated than telling everyone she'd been sort-of kidnapped and then crowned queen of another realm to which she planned to return as soon as she could open another portal. At least since her return, her family had spread a story about how she'd called and said that she needed some time but that she was safe. That meant she was no longer listed as a missing person, with people worrying she'd been abducted or killed.

Still, getting caught by the security guard now would lead to a lot of awkward questions that she didn't want her family to have to deal with.

Luis pushed her forward, shoving the exit bar with one hand and propelling her out with the other. The door made a loud, creaking complaint as it opened.

"Hey!" called the guard from behind them. "Who is that? The museum is closed, and this area is off-limits!"

"Just go," Luis hissed at her, blocking the doorway, and also blocking her from the guard's sight. He raised his voice to address the guard. "Mack! I thought I'd find you around here somewhere."

Ophelia hesitated, glancing between the twilit alleyway and her brother. She didn't want him to get in trouble, either. Maybe she could muster up enough magic to craft a sleeping spell for the guard. But before she could pull up the threads of energy, Luis stuck an arm out the slowly-closing doorway and waved her off, telling her to go.

"Luis?" the guard said, sounding less alarmed now but still suspicious. "What are you doing down here?"

Ophelia stepped away and plastered herself against the brick wall behind the door. This way she wouldn't be spotted, but she could also be nearby to

extract Luis in case he couldn't talk his way out.

"I was looking for a hoodie of mine. I haven't seen it in a long time and thought I might've left it here when I interned. I would've looked for it earlier, but things have been…well, you know…since Mom got sick."

His voice caught a little, and Ophelia bit her lip. She knew it still hurt him too to talk about their mother, but honestly, Mom would be proud to have her name invoked for this cause.

"Oh," Mack said, with the same hesitant awkwardness most people got whenever they brought up their dead mother. "Um, right. Well, did you find it?"

"Nah," Luis said. His voice grew more muffled as the door slowly, slowly creaked closed. "Must've left it somewhere else. Too bad—it was my favorite. But anyway, it's good to see you again, at least. How've you been?"

Ophelia suppressed a rueful smile. How easily her big brother could turn a worrying situation to friendly chitchat. She'd never been good at that sort of thing. She usually preferred to "bulldoze" her way out of problems, as her dad liked to put it. She had made some progress lately on planning before rushing in as directly—and sometimes violently—as possible, but she definitely wasn't anywhere near as smooth as Luis yet.

"…at the last barbecue. You know, the usual," Mack said, and he and Luis laughed together. Ophelia began to ease away from the wall. It seemed to be safe to leave now—Mack didn't sound suspicious anymore. "But I have been a little worried about Angie," Mack continued then, his voice sobering. Angie was his daughter, if Ophelia remembered correctly, a senior at Ophelia's high school. Ophelia paused, concern flitting through her. She wasn't necessarily friends with Angie, but she knew Luis was.

"Why? Is she okay?" Luis replied.

"She's great!" Mack assured him. "It's just, she's headed off to college next year. Out of state."

"Oh yeah, that's right, I heard she got into her dream school—early decision. Good for her."

“Yeah, I’m so proud I could pop. But I gotta admit, I’m gonna miss the hell out of her.”

Luis was quiet for a moment. “I know how you feel,” he said at last. “It’s hard to see people leave your life. Even if you know they’ll be back to visit, it’ll never be quite the same as it was.”

Happy to know Angie was fine, Ophelia eased the rest of the way away from the wall. She’d have to sneak past the door to get away, but it was only open a crack, and Luis was still blocking her from the guard’s line of vision.

“You’ve just got to remember that family is still family no matter the distance between you,” Luis continued. “I’ve had a hard time with everything that’s been going on with my sister—especially since she’s decided to stay with those out-of-town friends for a lot longer than we’d anticipated—but I’ve realized that you’ve got to free people to fulfill their destinies without holding them back.”

Ophelia froze. Slowly, she turned, looking through the crack in the door at her brother’s profile. His eyes flickered briefly to the side, landing on her, and he gave her a small smile and a nod.

He knew. Somehow, without her saying a thing, he’d understood that she was going to leave, and he was letting her go without an argument. To fulfill her destiny, he’d said. Her heart felt full at the realization that he knew her, and accepted her, so well.

She blinked away tears and gave him a wobbly smile in return before he turned back to Mack, continuing their chat and giving her the chance to get away clean.

Ophelia slipped past the door and darted down the alley, knowing she was safe with her brother guarding her back. She glanced at the sun. It was fully set. It was past time she get back to Corrin, and see whether the Artifact she’d stolen would get them back to Charassi in time to take back the throne and stop the former high queen.

CHAPTER 2

OPHELIA

It was fully dark by the time Ophelia made it to their little camp—or, as Sunny liked to call it, their lair—in the woods. The Texas stars were bright and the moon was full, lighting her path through the trails of the local state park. Leaves crunched beneath her steps and the fragrant scent of pine needles drifted on the slight breeze. A new, fragile sense of hope was beginning to flutter somewhere behind her breastbone. She'd found an Artifact shaped like a doorknob. Surely that indicated that it could actually open another portal. All of the portals she had ever seen—which, to be fair, was only three—had been shaped like doors.

The gleaming orange light of a campfire flickered against the leaves ahead of her. She stepped off the trail and hopped over a gully, dropping the backpack's strap from her shoulder as she scanned the camp for Corrin.

A few paces away from the campfire was what Cricket had named "mission headquarters": a canvas tent the size of a living room, which Luis had bought for them at the local Goodwill. It needed a bit of patching, but it served the purpose of giving them a place to organize and plan. A battery-operated lantern was on in there right now, which meant Corrin was probably studying or working or pacing inside. She sighed. She'd tried to talk him into staying at her house rather than out in the woods, but most nights he insisted on staying where he could work late without bothering anyone else. The buzz of a police scanner—it had been her mother's, needed for her job as a paramedic and abandoned after her death into a forgotten corner of the garage—emanated from the tent's flap. Corrin had taken to monitoring police activity to see where new Artifacts might've

been found and called in. Most people got either spooked or very interested when they stumbled over items made from bone out in the middle of a state park, so the police had gotten quite a few calls in the last two weeks.

Ophelia pulled the tent flap aside and stepped in. Corrin was sitting on a stool, hunched over to stare intently at a map. He was wearing one of Luis's T-shirts—indicating that his own clothing had just been through the wash and he hadn't had the chance to change yet—and artfully faded jeans that looked both attractive and a little bit ridiculous on a Fae prince. He held a pencil between his lips. His dark brown hair was mussed and a little wild-looking, in need of a trim. Ophelia gave herself a moment to take him in—the sight of him all mussed and intent did *things* to the butterflies in her stomach—before she craned her neck to see what was on the map. It was of the state park, with the trails outlined in various colors, and spots circled where they had found Artifacts. Corrin had drawn over several portions of the trails in blue marker.

"What's signified by the blue section?" Ophelia asked.

Corrin flinched and glanced up, his eyes wide and startled. He relaxed a bit when he saw her and spit the pencil into his hand. "I apologize, I didn't hear you enter," he said, his voice rough with exhaustion. The circles below his eyes had darkened even just since she'd last seen him this afternoon.

"You need to get some rest," she told him sternly.

He tried for a smile, which wasn't convincing at all. "I will," he said, "as soon as I finish marking off these trails."

She considered pressing her argument, but decided to let it drop. He was going through a lot right now, and if he wanted to stay distracted to avoid being alone with his thoughts, well, she'd been in a similar place herself after her mom died. She would give him whatever he needed to get through it.

"Which trails?" she asked, stepping closer.

"The likeliest ones, as best I can tell based on what's been found so far. The park is massive. We've both been walking the trails every day, and have only found perhaps a third of the Artifacts that were teleported here from

the storehouse at your crowning. I think we need to risk having River do a flyover in these sections to search more ground."

Ophelia was already shaking her head. "We can't do that, Corrin. People would freak out if they saw her. Especially after what happened at the mayor's house."

As far as anyone else knew, the "fake" bloodstains and debris in the mayor's backyard were the result of an elaborate—and possibly drunken—teenage prank. That was the story that Ophelia had asked her best friend Lane, the mayor's daughter, to spread. Lane's father was suspicious, but since there had been no bodies and no reports of missing people, he had no real reason to believe that an actual murder had taken place in his backyard. He had no way of knowing that the people who'd been killed had been from Charassi, or that their bodies had served as lunch for a dragon—a story no one would believe unless a real live dragon was spotted flying above the town.

Corrin started to run a hand through his hair, realized he was still holding the marker, and sighed. "I know it is a bad idea, Ophelia, but I don't have any others, and I have to do *something.* I can't leave Charassi in the grasp of—" He cut himself off, but the tightness in his eyes and his tortured expression told Ophelia everything she needed to know. *Of my mother,* he'd been about to say.

It had been two weeks ago in this very spot that they had used another Artifact to determine who was behind the Unmaking curse, a terrible disease Corrin had been investigating for some time. He had thought it was a naturally occurring plague—but he'd been wrong. The terrible affliction that turned people into soulless zombies was the result of a deliberate attack from a ruthless villain. And that villain, to Corrin's horror, was none other than his own mother—the banished former High Queen Emalda who'd been long thought dead.

Ophelia put her hand on his shoulder. Her heart ached at the expression on his face. Corrin's grief over the loss of his parent had been multiplied exponentially when he learned she was alive…and that she was the monster causing such devastation. It had to be absolutely heart-wrenching. She felt

useless in the face of his turmoil and wished there was something more that she could do.

Then she remembered the reason she was here, and reached for her backpack's zipper. "If we're lucky, we might not need to search for the Artifacts anymore at all," she said. She dug out the doorknob and handed it to him.

His eyes brightened and he took it gently from her. His gaze went distant as he turned it over in his palms, running his fingers over it as if memorizing its shape. When he was younger, he'd been apprenticed to an Artificer, one of those talented High Fae capable of carving special dragon bones into magical Artifacts. He didn't get far into his training before he'd been called to ascend the throne, but he was still able to sense an Artifact's purpose if he focused hard enough.

His eyes refocused. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he stared down at the doorknob in his hands. Without a word, he stepped past Ophelia and through the tent's flap, headed outside.

Ophelia's heart sank at his reaction, but she struggled to keep up her hope. When she followed him, she saw him stride away from the campfire, toward the hole that had been dug out of the ground nearby and lined with burnt tree trunks and charred rocks. Nearly a hundred Artifacts of all shapes and sizes were heaped up in a loose pile there, and atop them laid a dragon. Even though she was the size of a house, she was curled up like a cat with her razor-sharp talons tucked neatly beneath her chest. When Corrin stopped at the edge of the huge bowl and tossed the latest Artifact at the base of the pile, the dragon—Shadow on the River, or "River" as they called her—cracked one eye open, peering at Corrin. Her scales flickered from sky-blue to a stormy navy, then slowly rippled back again. She grumbled something about *annoying Fae who have no respect for slumbering dragons*, then closed her eye again. Without looking, she stretched out one claw to snag the new Artifact and drag it into the pile she was sleeping on. She had claimed that laying on treasure hoards—especially magical ones made from the bones of dragon ancestors—made for the most restful naps. Once she'd settled the doorknob in its new place, she lifted one wing up and dropped it over her head to shield her from further disturbances and then went back to her nap.

Corrin turned back to Ophelia. “It opens any locked door,” he told her, his voice flat. “Nothing at all to do with portals.”

Ophelia ground her teeth, her frustration welling up again, more sharply than before. Her muscles tensed. She felt so powerless. She couldn’t help her people, couldn’t stop Emalda or her traitorous, usurping younger son Vie. Ophelia couldn’t even find any useful way to comfort Corrin as he went through what had to feel like Hell—doubly betrayed by his family and utterly cut off from his people. *Their* people. While her bond with Sunny, the dragon monarch, had made her instantly the queen of the Fae, Corrin was the one who had ruled for the past century, since his mother’s banishment. He felt his duty to the Charassian people as strongly as anyone could and she knew it ate at him to leave them without his protection. Just like it ate at her.

Deep within her, the threads of magic writhed under the force of her emotions. If it wasn’t hampered by all of Earth’s pollution, that power would likely be blasting out of her now even with the control she’d recently learned. And if her temper got much more heated it might do just that even *with* the pollution.

She whirled around and kicked a nearby tree trunk. It hurt her toes, but it felt good to be taking some sort of action, even if it was a useless one. “Damn it!” she shouted. “We’ve *got* to get back! I’ll find a way even if I have to search every single godforsaken inch of this whole forest to find something that can get us home!”

Her magic began curling up through her, manifesting as sparks at her fingertips. She felt her power begin to drain and she was so angry that she couldn’t quite muster up the will to stop it, even though she knew she needed to conserve it.

Sunny roused sluggishly within her. The less magic she had, the harder it became for him to surface. *“Still yourself, child,”* he told her now as he registered what was happening.

“I can’t be still,” she hissed back at him. “I’ve got to do *something.* I’ve got to save my people.”

"You cannot save everyone," he said, sounding all too reasonable. *"And you cannot will yourself home no matter how angry you are. If you push yourself to try to do the impossible, you will only overextend yourself, and then you will be no good to anyone—Corrin, the Fae, and yourself included."*

She gritted her teeth. She knew what he said made sense. Still, it took her more than a few deep breaths before enough of the tension drained out of her that she could douse the sparks at her fingertips.

Sunny was right about saving her magic for more useful things. She knew that. He was wrong, though, about not being able to save everyone. She refused to believe that. She had a duty to *all* of the Fae, and she would find some way to fulfill it.

"Okay," she said, looking up at Corrin, who'd been watching with concern but staying quiet while Sunny helped her calm down. "We can figure this out. Let's talk it through."

Corrin sighed and sat down on the ground. She followed suit, leaning back against a tree stump.

"What do you want to talk through?" Corrin asked, his voice taut. He tugged at the hem of his jeans, which were too short for him and left his ankles exposed to the night breeze.

"Can you explain Artificing in general?" she said. "Maybe if we start at the very beginning, look at the basics, we can see something we might've missed before."

He pursed his lips. "Very well. You know that Artificers must scour the Scorched Lands for special dragon bones, the ones that hold remnants of the dragons' magic. Then they carve them carefully into a shape that fits that magic and allows it to be channeled by a Fae—or, in your case, a human."

"For a price," Ophelia added. She hadn't used an Artifact yet herself—other than the unique Bone Crown—but Corrin had explained that each of them exacted a cost to activate their magic. The portal Artifact that had been broken required the memory of a sunset. Others might require a drop of blood, or a tear shed in joy, or a year of memory. The greater the magic, the

higher the price. Apparently the most powerful and sacred were even rumored to cost a life.

Corrin nodded jerkily and shifted to glare out at the forest. “Right,” he said. “Which I would be more than happy to pay if we could simply find one that will do what we need.”

“Well, is there any sort of catalog of them, or—”

His gaze snapped back to her and he leapt to his feet, his shoulders tight. “Even if there was, it would be on Charassi!” he shouted.

His frustration stoked the still-smoldering flames of her own emotions, and she curled her hands into her fists, trying to keep herself and her magic under control. “Is there anything that is here on Earth that *isn’t* an Artifact that could help get us home, then? What about…a wormhole, or something?” She was grasping at straws now, but they’d already exhausted just about every other option.

“A worm-what?” Corrin snapped, clearly reaching the end of his usually limitless patience.

“A portal opened with science rather than magic. Or a…tear in the space-time continuum, or something like that.”

Corrin shook his head with a sharp motion. “No. Such a thing has barely been heard of even in our most outlandish myths.”

“Well, there can be truth in some myths,” Ophelia pressed. “What sort of legends are we talking about?”

“Tales from the age of the Exile. It’s said that the Emptiness, the ancestral force of the dragons, ripped a hole through time and the universe itself to save the dragons just as their world was being destroyed. Legend states that some dragons went missing—displaced to other worlds and times.”

Ophelia frowned. “Well, that doesn’t sound like it would be very helpful even if we could make it happen again. We don’t want to be torn out of the world and plopped down in some random place and time. We need to get somewhere specific.”

“I know!” Corrin said, flinging his arms out. “But unless you have some dragon bones lying around that I can carve into—” He stopped speaking, his lips parted, a look of shock stealing over his face.

Alarmed, Ophelia twisted around to see what had happened, but the peace of the night around them was unbroken. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Dragon bones,” he murmured. He pivoted, turning in a circle, scanning the woods. He lifted a hand and pointed west, toward Tipton. “Ophelia. We need *dragon bones.* Bones that are already here, on Earth.”

“You mean…to make a new Artifact from scratch?” Ophelia frowned, not sure what he was getting at. River was a dragon and she was here on Earth, but there was no way she was going to be hacking off any limbs for their benefit.

Then, through the haze of Ophelia’s confusion, a thin beam of trepidation broke through. She realized the emotion belonged to Sunny. *“We know of one dragon who has died on Earth,”* he said quietly. *“Me.”*

A low rumble sounded from behind them. River’s eyes were open, gleaming darkly in the shadows cast by her wing. She was staring straight at Ophelia, and even though River couldn’t hear Sunny in his current state, Ophelia guessed she must have overheard enough of the conversation to guess exactly what he was suggesting.

Ophelia’s mind shot to the memory of the first time she’d met Sunny. His terrifying majesty, the way his landing shook the earth and sky both, the way his soul has nestled within her as his body went lifeless. She’d passed out not long after—overwhelmed by magic and shock—but she knew that Corrin couldn’t have brought Sunny’s body back to Charassi. Not by himself, while carrying an unconscious human. Which meant Tipton had been Sunny’s final resting place. She recoiled, disturbed. “No!” she said immediately. “Absolutely not, we’ll find another way. We are *not* exhuming my dragon’s corpse for our own benefit!” River rumbled again, and this time it sounded more like a growl.

Corrin winced. “I know, I know. I’m sorry to even suggest it. But…I fear it may be our only option. And we wouldn’t truly be ‘exhuming’ the body, since it’s not buried.”

“Really?” Ophelia asked, startled. “How has it not been found by now? I know the woods were searched when I first went missing. If the Artifacts got people riled up, I can only imagine what kind of response there would have been from finding the remains of a dragon.”

“I left a notice-me-not Artifact charm with the body before I took you back to Charassi, so humans wouldn’t stumble on it.”

She had seen Sunny injured, dying, his opalescent blood seeping into the ground. It had been terrible then and she hadn’t even known him. Now his soul was wrapped up in her own, and she felt horrified at the prospect of seeing his dead body—which had surely begun decaying by now.

“It is not like that,” Sunny said, still sounding subdued but not nearly as horrified as she thought he should be. *“Dragons decompose almost overnight once our souls are gone. We do not deign to rot.”*

That startled a half-laugh out of her. “Still,” she said to him, “we couldn’t just use you that way. These are your *bones*.” What she didn’t—couldn’t—say was that some part of her still held out hope that they could find a way to give him his body back. But if they began carving Artifacts out of it, that would surely mean that any chance of restoring Sunny to life would be gone for good. Her heart ached at the thought. Her dragon deserved more of a life than being stuck in her head.

River pulled back her wings and stood atop the pile of Artifacts, giving up all pretense of napping. *“You are right,”* she said to Ophelia. “*They are* his *bones. And it is his decision what to do with them.”*

Corrin looked from Ophelia to River. Then, resolute, he nodded. “That is right, Sun in the Black Sky,” he said. “This can only be your choice.”

Sunny was silent for a moment. Then he said, *“I wish to go home. And I wish to help you stop Emalda, the defiler. Use my bones to achieve this purpose, and I will lend all my will to helping Corrin create an Artifact that can return us to Charassi.”*

Ophelia reluctantly relayed this to Corrin. The prince nodded. “Very well. We should move quickly, then.”

It was a somber group that made their way through the woods toward the edge of the state park. River kept her wings tucked tight against her back, her eyes narrowed to slits with some draconic emotion that Ophelia couldn't decipher. Sunny was quiet in her head, though he felt more tired and muted than ever before.

They came upon the spot of Sunny's landing without warning. One moment, the trees were thick around them, the last few yellow and brown leaves rattling in the wind. The next, there was nothing but splintered branches and destroyed tree trunks, and great gouges dug out of the ground in the exact shape of dragon talons.

Ophelia's heart felt caught, like a fish on a line. She struggled for breath. She spotted a shredded tree trunk and began walking toward it, as if in a dream. She had hidden in this spot when Sunny had landed and upended her whole life. It had been here that she had first laid eyes on him: blazing like a sun-storm, so beautiful and terrifying she'd scarcely been able to take him in.

She took a breath to try to center herself and then turned her head. Corrin had removed the Artifact, and the bones stood before her, as thick as Ophelia's torso and scattered across all of the broken branches and tree trunks. Seeing them didn't feel quite like she'd expected. She wasn't horrified or repulsed. Rather than spooky, this place felt almost…holy. She wasn't really a religious person but it was the only word that fit. This was a sacred place.

A low, rumbling sort of moan emanated from the edge of the clearing. The sound made the fine hairs on Ophelia's arms rise. It was River. Her head was lowered, her snout touching a massive, gleaming white skull. Its fangs were as long as sabers, and the emptiness of its eye sockets looked all the more wrong because Ophelia had seen the luminous golden eyes that used to be there.

River tipped her head back and roared, a deep, mournful ululation. A jet of inky-blue color erupted from her jaws, arcing into the sky and bleeding out above them like ink, winding across the stars until they rippled as if underwater. It looked like a magical version of the northern lights. A feeling swelled within Ophelia at the sight, at River's cry of grief for the dragon

she had cared for, who was lost to her in so many ways even though he was not truly dead. Ophelia swallowed thickly and realized she was crying.

Gentle fingers closed around hers. Corrin stood shoulder to shoulder with her, his own head tipped back as he gazed somberly at the sky. He said nothing, because it was not for him to speak at this moment, but his silent support and the sadness in his gaze spoke volumes. Ophelia squeezed his hand and laid her head on his shoulder. Relief echoed within her at his support. They hadn't truly been fighting with each other earlier—they'd both just been strung out and exhausted—but it was good to know that he was still on her side.

River's roar quieted. The inky-blue lights faded and flickered out. *"It is our tribute to our fallen,"* she said, *"and to the Emptiness that takes them."*

"Tell her that I honor her for her tribute," Sunny said quietly, a deep grief of his own winding through the words.

Ophelia relayed his message. River bowed her head and touched the tip of her snout to Ophelia's head like a benediction. Then, she turned and slipped back into the forest. *"It is not for me to stay and participate in this,"* she said. *"It is for the Fae to turn death into purpose. I will meet you back at our camp."*

Ophelia nodded, wiped her eyes, and looked at the bones scattered all around them. "Okay," she said to Corrin. "Where do we start?"

CHAPTER 3

CORRIN

Back when Corrin had apprenticed as an Artificer, he had imagined what it would be like to craft an Artifact. He had pictured himself traveling across the Frostflow Sea as the moon waxed and waned above his sails. His journey would take him to the perilous and beautiful Scorched Lands where monsters kept their graveyards. He would hide himself craftily from the living dragons and search through the remains of their dead. The bone he needed would sing to him, he'd thought, because that was how his master had described the sensation of locating potential Artifacts. Once he'd found it, he would steal it away back to civilization. There he would spend months or years carefully studying and carving it. It had seemed like a grand and lovely adventure, a way to meaningfully contribute to his people before he eventually took the throne.

Except what he was experiencing now was nothing like what he'd imagined.

He was on his knees, his clothing rent and muddied from his search through the clearing. Laying across his open palm was the talon of a dragon, and it wasn't singing to him—it was *roaring.* The feelings within it had wrenched at him from the moment he had picked it up: rage, helplessness, agony. These were what Sun in the Black Sky had been feeling at the moment his body died.

Corrin tried to pry his mind away, tried to separate himself from the emotions held within the talon's latent magic. But it took much more mental wrestling than he had anticipated, because this dragon wasn't some

unknown monster from a distant isle; he had been, and still was, an ally. And his body was dead because of Corrin's actions.

Corrin gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. He could still picture the beautiful bloom of inky-blue between the stars, the sorrow in River's roar of tribute. How foolish he had been, to think of the dragons as uncivilized and monstrous just because their culture was unfamiliar. And how he regretted it now.

Yet for all that, he would not change the events that had come to pass. If he hadn't pursued Sunny here, he never would have met Ophelia. She would not have magic and would not be the High Queen. His people would have no chance at all in their war against his mother and her Unmaking curse. Still, though—he regretted that his actions had resulted in Sunny's death. That regret kept him from being able to separate his own pain from the pain that resonated within the talon in his hands.

So he gave in to it instead. He bowed his head and let his eyes well up. "I am sorry," he whispered to the claw. "I wronged you, and I am sorry."

The talon's mental roar quieted slightly. Corrin sat with it as the moon rose above them, paying no attention to Ophelia, who was picking through bones on the other side of the clearing. After what felt like perhaps half an hour, the talon's magic had subsided from a roar to something calmer and more open to his senses. Corrin sighed, wiped his face off, and stood.

"I believe this one has the potential to become an Artifact," he told Ophelia, who quickly hurried to him. She looked almost as tired as he felt, but she carried it far better. Her skin was a touch darker than his—inherited from her Latina mother, she had told him—which made the purple smudges beneath her eyes less visible. Her golden-brown hair was pulled into its usual messy ponytail, looking as vibrant and beautiful as ever. Several rebellious wisps had escaped and were falling around her face or snagged in the Bone Crown. She had a runner's physique, lean and muscled and wound tight like a spring, as if she might leap in any direction without warning. His heart lightened just to see her. She always had hope in her eyes and a spark in her spirit, no matter how bad the situation looked. He wasn't sure how he would have fared this last fortnight if she had not been there to keep him steady.

“Really?” she said now, those lovely gray eyes of hers lighting up. She held out her hands, and Corrin carefully placed the talon across her palms. She gently turned it over, taking care with its sharp edge, and then handed it back to him with a shake of her head. “I feel…something, maybe. It’s hard to tell.”

“That is to be expected. Dragons and anyone with a bond can sense Artifacts, but this isn’t an Artifact yet.”

“How long will it take to turn it into one?”

He grimaced. High Fae Artificers took great care when crafting new Artifacts, and it often was the work of months, years, or even a lifetime to finish one. He had far less time than that. “I will go as quickly as I can, but I cannot promise anything. Not even what it will do when it is finished. I’ve not yet been able to sense what purpose lies within it.”

Ophelia’s gaze went distant for a moment, as it did sometimes when she was listening to the voice of her dragon. He felt the slightest flicker of envy but squashed it quickly and ruthlessly. He had no right to feel jealous of her dragon bond. No matter that he had spent the last hundred years trying to win one for himself. He did, however, allow himself to wonder what it was like to have such a close and constant partner—a creature utterly unlike yourself, but wholly a part of you just the same. And the magic; how would that feel inside of him? He’d thought about it so much in the last century, had trained his mind and body to be able to wield magic efficiently, and now that future would never be his. He would never carry the power needed to protect his people, a way to create his own legacy that would finally overshadow his mother’s dark deeds.

He shook himself. It was not his place to worry about his legacy any longer. If his sole purpose was to help his High Queen achieve her destiny and save Charassi, he could be happy with that.

“Sunny says he might be able to help,” Ophelia reported now, her eyes refocusing on him. “You told me that an Artifact’s purpose is determined by the will and personality of the dragon who the bones belonged to, right? Well, he says that he’ll do everything he can to speed the process along, and to make sure this Artifact will be another portal-opening one.”

Corrin felt light-headed with relief. “Truly? That would be…incredibly helpful.”

“And he says I should be able to help too,” Ophelia went on. “I can focus mental magic through the Bone Crown to boost the efficiency of your work.” She made a wry face. Corrin knew that she had been practicing mental magic at Sunny’s behest, but it wasn’t her favorite type of spell. It required delicate and careful focus, and his queen much preferred charging in and blowing things up. He smiled fondly.

“Excellent,” he said. He checked the position of the moon. They should return to camp to update River, and then head to Ophelia’s family home. He would likely need tools they didn’t have at their camp, and he didn’t want to waste any time having Ophelia ferry things back and forth. It would be simpler for them all to go. He related this to Ophelia and she agreed.

Corrin began to follow Ophelia out of the clearing, and then paused. Something was tugging at the corner of his consciousness. It was an odd sensation but an unshakeable one, and he followed the mental nudge back to a pile of dead branches and bone half-buried beneath a fallen tree trunk.

“What’s wrong?” Ophelia asked, pausing to glance back at him.

He knelt down, lay the talon to the side, and gingerly began moving bone fragments and dead leaves aside, looking for whatever was responsible for the nudge. “I’m not sure. I think…maybe I sense another potential Artifact?”

“What, really? I thought there could only be one Artifact per dragon!”

He heaved a chunk of rib bone as wide as his torso out of the way, grunting as his muscles strained with the effort. “That’s typically the case, but it’s not a firm rule,” he replied, panting when he was done. He spotted what looked like a half-buried vertebrae and pulled it out of the ground. It looked to be from Sunny’s tail and was about the size of one of those “basketballs” that Luis liked to play with in the driveway of their home. As soon as Corrin touched the bone, it sang to him. The emotions of urgency and longing twined through him from it. “This is definitely meant to be an Artifact,” he said, brushing dirt off it. “Though I’m not sure what its purpose will be. I feel like…” He paused for a moment, prodding at the sense of urgency

emanating from the bone. “I feel like it wants me to carve it now, though.” He glanced up. “We are in a hurry, but this belongs to Sunny, and if it wants me to craft it along with the portal-opening Artifact, I feel I owe that to him.”

A soft look crossed Ophelia’s face. “I get it,” she told him. “You should do that, then. Hopefully it won’t delay things too much.”

He retrieved the talon and handed it to Ophelia. Then he bent down to lift the heavy vertebrae. They made their way back to the camp, where they told River what had happened. She agreed with them that they needed to return to Ophelia’s home, but refused to stay at the camp and wait for them, asserting that she would give them no opportunity to open a portal and leave her behind. From the way her tail lashed as they walked, though, Corrin suspected she was anxious and didn’t want to create even a moment’s delay in their return home. The same anxiety and eagerness built within Corrin as well, and he found it hard to slow his long strides for Ophelia’s sake as they hurried back toward Tipton.

At last, they reached the edge of town. It was dark enough outside that no one was likely to notice the large dragon-shaped lump hidden amongst the trees behind Ophelia’s backyard. After situating River, they met Ophelia’s father, Jacob, in their living room to explain the situation. As they talked, Luis emerged from a side room. He listened for a moment and then moved into the hallway, where he picked up a rectangular-shaped object—a “cell phone,” Corrin reminded himself—and began speaking into it. Apparently he was calling in reinforcements, because by the time Ophelia and Corrin had finished informing Jacob, no less than four other members of Ophelia’s family had appeared at the house’s front stoop.

“Abuela!” Ophelia said with a surprised laugh as the first woman entered, filling the whole house instantly with the smell of some otherworldly meat-and-cheese dish that made Corrin realize he was famished. The woman set down her enormous pot of food and kissed Ophelia on both cheeks, then gave Corrin an assessing frown and a swift shake of her head.

“Skinny boy,” she said disapprovingly. “Every time I see you, you’re skinnier. How do you expect to do whatever this ‘urgent dragon work’ is if you don’t eat?” The plump woman’s gaze fell on the talon and vertebrae—

which were currently dirtying the carpet at Corrin's feet—and her eyes narrowed even further. She muttered a few choice words in a different language and then scooped up the talon without warning and carried it to the sink. It was far too large to submerge there, but she wasn't stymied in the slightest and got out the sprayer attachment to begin cleaning the dirt off it. She skewered Corrin with another glare over her shoulder. "Take a shower. Eat. *Then* work," she ordered him. "By then this massive dinosaur toenail should be clean."

Ophelia nudged him with a smile. "You'd better not argue with Abuela Lucia," she whispered.

A tall, thin, pale man entered the front door and gave a gusty sigh. "My granddaughter the queen is right," he said, reaching out to ruffle Ophelia's hair and then checking himself when he spotted the crown she was still wearing. "Never mess with my wife, or next time it'll be you she cooks into her stew." He dug in his pocket and pressed a small, yellow-wrapped piece of candy into Ophelia's hand with a wink.

Corrin pursed his lips. He wanted to argue, but the truth was, they were right. He was in no condition to start such careful work as Artificing. He had initially been against Ophelia filling in her extended family on the truth of Corrin's identity and what had happened to them over the course of the last month, but now, he had to admit she'd been right to come clean. Having so many people caring for her best interests—and by extension, Corrin's—had been a boon time and again over the last two weeks. And Corrin had to admit…it was quite wonderful to have a family to watch out for him, even if they weren't his own.

The last two people who had been on the porch filed in: Ophelia's other grandmother, Rose, who was wearing full makeup including bright red lip stain even this late at night, and her husband John, a quiet man who gave Corrin and Ophelia a friendly nod before he retreated to the kitchen to fiddle with the device that brewed the family's coffee. All of the people crammed into the relatively small house made enough noise to wake Ophelia's little sister Cricket, who launched herself out of her bedroom in a blur of bright pink pajamas and got busy setting out plates for the food.

“Is Lane coming too?” Cricket demanded as she tossed a handful of random silverware on the table. “We could do a princess sleepover!”

Ophelia glanced at Luis with a raised eyebrow. Luis shook his head. “Sorry, kiddo,” he said to Cricket, “Lane is still super grounded. She took one for the team, remember?”

Ophelia winced, probably remembering Lane taking the brunt of her parents’ anger over the “stunt” she claimed she’d orchestrated in their backyard. “Remind me to send her another gift and maybe a card with more groveling in it later,” Ophelia muttered to Luis, who laughed. She had of course already sent several apologies to her friend, but one could never overdo groveling where Lane was concerned.

Corrin gave in and trooped off to the bathroom to shower. Luis winked at him as he went, handing him a folded stack of clean clothing—Corrin’s own clothing, which had been cleaned while he’d been at camp. Once Corrin was clean and sated with the delicious Mexican fare, he finally retreated to the garage, armed with the talon and a mug full of coffee that John had given him. Corrin did feel much better-equipped to tackle what would surely be a long night of delicate work now, and was glad that Ophelia’s family had taken such good care of him. He turned to look over his shoulder at Ophelia, realizing anew just how hard it was going to be for her to leave them all behind. When she had first unwillingly come to Charassi, returning to them had been the only thing on her mind. Now, though, she seemed just as determined to leave them again. It seemed that despite her deep love for her family, she had truly decided to make Charassi her home. He was selfishly glad of it. He wanted more time with her. Not as his High Queen. As something more—but at the same time, he wrestled with the appropriateness of it all.

He set the talon and the coffee down on a long work table next to a neat row of tools and got to work.

In the hours that followed, Corrin lost himself in his efforts. He carved into the talon and the vertebrae with Jacob’s carpentry tools, chipped off small bits of them with a jewelry hammer that Jacob had brought, and used several of Rose’s makeup brushes and nail files for the finer detail work. Ophelia stood at his side the entire time, a fierce scowl on her face as she

channeled magic through the Bone Crown and into the Artifacts. Thanks to her and Sunny's assistance, the magic within both bones was eager to be shaped and guided Corrin's hands as he worked. When he came out of his trance at last, the sky had lightened with the coming dawn, and two brand-new Artifacts lay on the table before him.

The talon had been carved into something that looked rather like a pocket watch. It opened smoothly on its bone hinge, and rather than a clock face, an image of the skyline of the city of Dominion had been chiseled inside it. Ophelia reached out to touch it and then gasped, clapping her free hand over her mouth.

"I can feel it!" she whispered. "It's an Artifact now. I can't believe it. Will it —did it work? Will it get us home?"

Slowly, Corrin reached out to touch the finished Artifact. He opened his mind to it and felt its magic bubble up within it. "Yes," he said wonderingly. "It's a portal Artifact. Its cost is a drop of blood."

Ophelia shook her head slowly, her eyes welling up as she stared at it. "We did it. *You* did it. We can get back. We can save them all."

Corrin nodded and started to pick the pocket watch up, but was distracted by the other Artifact, the one he'd made from the vertebrae. It had willed him to shape it into an earring, a diamond-shaped charm that dangled from a curved hook. Ophelia caught the direction of his gaze.

"What does that one do?" she asked.

He touched it and felt its magic, but it didn't respond to him, didn't reveal its purpose. He frowned. "I'm not sure. It may be that it needs a master Artificer to determine what it's meant to do, or perhaps it has a type of magic that will only unlock in a specific situation or for a specific type of person. I do feel like…" He paused to confirm what he was sensing, then nodded and picked it up, handing it to Ophelia. "I feel like it wants to be with you."

She accepted it and peered at it for a long moment, pursing her lips when she was unable to sense what it did either. Then she unhooked its clasp and

threaded it through her right ear. It looked right, dangling beneath the Bone Crown. She looked fierce.

She took a breath. “So now what? Are we going home right away?”

Corrin tilted his head at the door that led from the garage back into the house, where her family was waiting. “Yes, but…you should say goodbye first, right?”

She deflated a little but nodded. “Yes. Would you come with me?”

Touched by her request, he took her hand in his. “Of course.”

Goodbyes turned out not to be necessary, though. When they entered the living room, they found all the members of Ophelia’s family strewn across the furniture and floors, fast asleep. Cricket murmured and snored from where she was curled up on the reclining chair while Luis was facedown at the kitchen table, still clutching a cup of cold coffee. The grandparents had had the presence of mind to grab blankets and use throw pillows before succumbing to their tiredness on couches and reclining chairs. Corrin glanced at Ophelia; she was smiling fondly, putting a finger to her lips. She didn’t wish to wake them. Instead, she gently pried a pencil from her father’s loose grip—Jacob was slumped on a stool at the kitchen bar—and then took one of Cricket’s drawings down from the fridge, flipping it over to write on the back of it. Corrin watched as she wrote.

I love you all, she scrawled, biting her lip. *I didn’t want to wake you, and you know I hate goodbyes anyway. I’ll be back for a visit as soon as I can, I swear. And maybe you can come to Charassi too. Cricket, I’d love to introduce you to the pixies. They’d love you. Dad, I know you would have a great time chatting with all the High Fae artisans. Maybe they could teach you some new carving methods to try out here. Luis—thank you for understanding that I need to go. Could you look after the Artifacts at the camp until we can come back to collect them? I don’t want to risk them getting damaged or falling into the wrong hands.*

Gramps, Abuela Lucia, Nonna and Poppa: Thank you so much for taking care of me and Corrin, and for believing in me. I wouldn’t be able to do any of this without your love and support.

I love you all. I'll see you soon, I promise.

Ophelia

Blinking back tears, she eased the finished note under her father's hand for him to find when he woke. Then Corrin led her back to the garage and through the outside door, the brand-new portal Artifact clutched in his hand. River, having sensed the Artifact, was ready for them. Her teeth were bared in a draconic grin. *"Let us return to the place we belong,"* she said, *"so I can feed that pretentious boy-king usurper to my kin's hatchlings."*

Corrin held up the pocket watch Artifact. "Let's retake our kingdom," he said. His gaze lingered on the etching of Dominion, a deep homesickness overtaking him, chased quickly by foreboding. Home. He was going home—to confront the traitors he'd once called family.

Before he could draw his dagger to provide the drop of blood needed to activate the Artifact, Ophelia was already taking off her crown and quickly slicing her index finger across one of its sharper edges. A bead of blood welled up and she dripped it onto the clock face. The blood trickled through the carved indents of Dominion's skyline as if they were veins, tracing his home city in red.

A burst of light flared before them, golden against the brightening dawn sky. A vast door appeared. Ophelia stepped toward it, her expression fearsome, every inch the conquering High Queen.

"Let's save everyone," she said, and stepped through the portal.

CHAPTER 4

OPHELIA

Even with her eyes closed against the portal's bright light, Ophelia could sense the second she set foot in the realm that was now her home. The air smelled wilder, lovelier, tinged with strange spices and otherworldly incense. The sounds changed from distant traffic and the hum of Texas cicadas to the gentle *tink-tink* of jewelers' hammers, the jingling of street carts pulled by unicycles, the there-and-gone-again buzzing of a pixie's wings. But deeper than those changes was the shift within Ophelia. This place, this realm, tugged at her blood the same way the moon tugged at the tides. It settled within her soul, as if it belonged with her as much as she belonged with it. And her magic—*oh,* it felt so *good* to feel it reawakening, stretching out like a cat in a sunbeam as she finally began to properly absorb power. She kept her eyes closed for a moment longer, allowing herself to savor the simple, blissful feeling of it all, before she had to open her eyes and assess what Vie had done to her city.

The light of the portal's activation had faded, allowing her to make out her surroundings. She was in some sort of backroom workshop, the dimness lit by only a few spotlight-bright lamps whose narrow beams were tightly focused on several scattered tables. As she inhaled, she caught other scents beyond the incense-and-spices aroma: something metallic, as well as the astringent smell of some sort of cleaner. She moved closer to one of the tables, squinting through the beam of light to see what it displayed. It was a fine chain made from woven gold, strung with a trio of charms made from various brightly colored gemstones. As she glanced at the other tables, she saw they all held jewelry in different stages of repair and creation. She

spotted a door and edged sideways to peer through it. It led to a much brighter and sparkling-clean display area, where more jewelry shone in the dim light of a late Charassi evening.

“I think we’ve landed in a jewelry store,” she whispered over her shoulder to Corrin, who had just stepped through the portal. He glanced around and nodded, then turned over his shoulder to whisper something back through the magical doorway. Ophelia caught enough of what he said to guess that he’d told River to wait, that they’d have to open another portal to bring her through once they’d reached a private place with more room. Ophelia nodded in approval of his plan. They needed to lay low at first, to get what intel they could before their enemies caught wind of them. A dragon bursting through the roof of a jewelry shop would put an end to the element of surprise.

River growled her reluctant agreement, and Corrin closed the lid of the pocket watch. The portal shimmered and vanished. He stayed still for a long moment, though, a thin line appearing between his brows as if he was trying to figure something out. Ophelia waited for him to say whatever was bothering him, but when he remained silent she spoke up in a whisper.

“We should probably wait until full nightfall to sneak out—” she started, then broke off as she heard someone shouting nearby. Corrin tensed at her side. Together, they peered out the door to the showroom, where they could just make out the street through the front window. There were several figures out there—High Fae, Ophelia thought, judging by their height. They seemed to be struggling against each other. Worried, she edged closer to the door so she could better hear what was going on.

“—can’t do this!” came the cry of a man. He sounded older, his voice cracking like aged parchment. “You have no reason to arrest me, no cause—”

One of the others—a soldier, Ophelia could see now—grabbed the older man’s flailing arm and bent it behind his back. Something clicked metallically.

“Manacles?” Corrin hissed, his expression set in lines of shock and fury.

A sense of dread and fury began stirring in Ophelia's stomach, but she tried to look at the situation logically. "Is there a chance he was doing something illegal?"

Corrin shook his head sharply. "I know that man. He's a jeweler, a family friend, and a man of irreproachable honor; he wouldn't break the law. And even if he had, he should still be afforded some basic respect. The priestesses and I specifically forged a law that arrested citizens are to be given the opportunity to come in peacefully, not dragged away in the street in *manacles*."

A child's cry sounded from outside then, and a small figure lunged at the jeweler. "Grandad!" the girl yelled. "Don't take Grandad, please, he didn't do anything—"

One of the soldiers pulled the girl away roughly and shoved her back at another bystander, who had to be one of her parents. The two hugged each other, both crying as the soldiers continued to push the elderly man toward the street.

Ophelia's logic fled; her fury blasted any caution to pieces. She could feel her magic recharging, knew she had enough now to go toe-to-toe with a handful of soldiers, and had every intention of doing so—until Corrin caught at her sleeve. "My Queen," he whispered urgently, "don't."

She shook him loose, her gaze trained on the prisoner, who was now shouting at his family to not make trouble and that he'd be back as soon as he could. "I can't just let this happen! He and his family deserve better than this…this *spectacle*, whether or not he did anything wrong."

"Yes, he does, but *look around* before you charge in! It's not just him who needs your help."

His words were a ray of clear thinking that pierced through her anger. She paused, and took a moment to scan as much of the rest of the street as she could make out from her vantage point. And she finally noticed then that something was terribly wrong with Dominion.

No one was on the street. The unicycle carts that sped by didn't slow to search for passengers, and their drivers were hunched and tense-looking,

gazes flitting like rabbits wary of a predator's attack. All of the shops across the street were boarded up, with hastily-scrawled "CLOSED ON ORDER OF THE PALACE" signs strung across their doors. One of them had a broken window and another's bricks were charred from a recent fire. There were no pedestrians, no Fae out for a stroll, no laughter or music on the breeze.

Ophelia remembered the riots that had shaken the city the night they'd found Vie claiming the throne. She'd known there would be consequences from that violence, but she had thought that there would be more of a quiet, tense, standoff sort of atmosphere by this point. Instead, it seemed more like martial law.

She swallowed past a lump in her throat. This was what Vie had done to her city, the place she was responsible for, the people she'd promised to protect. Corrin still had hold of her hand and she felt him squeeze it more tightly. However hard this was for her, it had to be even worse for him. This had been his home for two centuries, and it was his brother who had broken it.

"If you run out there and fight those soldiers now," Corrin whispered, "you may win the fight, but we'll lose the element of surprise against Vie. You will have saved one jeweler but perhaps given up a chance to potentially save many more."

Frustration built within Ophelia. She refused to make a choice between the good of the one and the good of the many—but she did see Corrin's point. Thinking quickly, she settled on a compromise. She squeezed Corrin's hand to reassure him and then let go, edging closer to the display room. Then she took a breath and recalled the threads and the pattern she would need to knit together to create heat. She decided on the simplest and fastest pattern: threads of Dawn magic braided like a rope. She extended it through the window—where it discreetly sizzled and melted a small hole in the glass—and then moved to touch the man's manacles. She held her breath to concentrate. She had to be so careful, had to touch only the lock and not his wrist…There! She felt the braid of Dawn melt through the metal, and withdrew it quickly before it could harm the man's skin.

The manacles clanked to the ground. The man, his family, and the soldiers all stopped and stared at them, confused. Ophelia used the opportunity to

quickly knit together a few more strands of magic into a messy ball, which she lobbed across the street, breaking several windows on the way. The soldiers spun around and drew their swords, thinking they were being attacked, and the jeweler and his family took the opportunity to flee. They got a good ten-second head start, which Ophelia thought would likely be enough—surely the man had friends on this street who would take them in and hide them until the danger had passed.

Exhaling with triumph and relief, she turned to Corrin with a smile. He gave her a small smile in return, but the line between his brows was still in place, just as it had been since he first stepped through the portal—because he had sensed something off here before she had. Her smile faded at the realization. Had it just been his keener hearing and sight that had let him pick up on the clues that something wasn't right, or was it something deeper? Something that she, an outsider, wouldn't have sensed herself until it was too late?

She reached up to touch the Bone Crown on her brow, readjusting it, and then shook herself out of her unhappy thoughts. She was being silly. Just because Corrin had heard the ruckus before she had didn't mean that she wasn't fit to protect these people.

Right?

"We should probably cover the crown again," Corrin whispered to her, picking up a threadbare scarf from a nearby table. He left a coin on the table to pay for it as Ophelia wound it around her head and the crown. The disguise wouldn't stand up to close scrutiny, but hopefully it would allow them to slip through the back alleys unseen. Corrin found a nearby closet and rifled through it until he found a few old coats and pulled one on after handing her the other. The jeweler was High Fae—a species known for its love of fashion—so both coats were artfully patched with a rainbow of different fabric styles and colors, but in a city like Dominion it would only help them blend in better.

They eased toward the front door and peered into the street. The soldiers were gone now, and there weren't even any unicycles or carts in sight anymore. Doors up and down the road were tightly shut and curtains were

pulled tight over every window. The closest signs of life resulted from distant shouting and the clatter of a fight a few blocks over.

“What has Vie done here?” Ophelia murmured, her heart twisting. This was even worse than she’d imagined. Part of her had dared to hope that the people of Dominion might have risen up and overthrown Vie all by themselves by now, but from the looks of things, nothing could be further from the truth. Surely Vie couldn’t have so many soldiers on his side that the entire populace would hole up in their homes for fear of arrest?

As she eased through the lengthening shadows toward a nearby alley, she spotted a figure turning a corner up ahead. The person, whoever it was, seemed to be alone, and had no weapon that would mark them as a soldier. Maybe Ophelia could question them about what was going on. Double-checking her scarf was secure, she sped up and turned the corner behind the person. Corrin kept pace at her side, intuitively understanding what she was doing and keeping watch for potential danger while she kept an eye on the Fae ahead. It was a nymph, she could see now, with antler-like branches springing from his head. The nymph didn’t seem to be afraid, at least—though his slow, shuffling footsteps and slumped shoulders spoke of a bone-deep tiredness. Sympathy stirred in Ophelia. Perhaps she should reveal her identity after all. Maybe it could help the populace to know that she and Prince Corrin hadn’t abandoned them. She reached out to tap on the nymph’s shoulder—and a piece of his bark-like skin flaked away beneath her touch.

Startled, she jerked backwards. The nymph turned. His eyes were a glassy, milky white. His skin was sickly gray and curling away in long pieces. Dark green bruises mottled his arms and face, and the smell hit Ophelia when he turned—like a corpse left to rot in the forest, decomposing and half-consumed. That was when her magic sensed the gaping, yawning emptiness within the nymph: the open wound where its soul should be.

Unmade. The nymph was Unmade. And it was openly walking down the middle of the street in one of the most densely-populated parts of Dominion.

Ophelia had already started backpedaling when a sharp hiss from Corrin caught her attention. He grabbed her arm and drew a dagger, his gaze fixed

on something further down the street. Still dumbstruck with shock and horror, she followed his line of sight.

A dozen more shuffling shapes were approaching down the street, all of them in various states of decay.

Magic and rage bubbled up within Ophelia, and Sunny came roaring to life as well, thrashing with anger at this blasphemy against life itself. The Unmade were deeply unnatural, somehow cursed by Emalda to be drained of their life force and souls until they were nothing but empty, animated husks controlled by one central mind—Emalda's mind. All the dragons detested them and feared what they symbolized, so they hated being within sensing distance of any of them. Sunny was feeling trapped and furious about it. Between his anger, his other feelings, and Ophelia's own, the intensity nearly overwhelmed her.

Magic sparked at her fingertips, raw bits of the Natural Forces writhing out of her in a flash of multi-colored light. As one, all of the Unmade in sight froze in place and turned to look at her.

She curled her hands into fists. How much magic did she have recharged by now? Enough to fight off a few soldiers, maybe. Not enough to take on a dozen Unmade. And certainly not enough to take them all out without anyone else here getting hurt.

They couldn't stay and fight…but maybe they could at least lead the zombie-like creatures away from this neighborhood before they hurt anyone.

She set her jaw and glanced at Corrin. "Run," she told him. And then she turned, and fled.

CHAPTER 5

CORRIN

Corrin's breath came hot and fast. His blood fizzed with a dozen emotions: desperation, horror, shock, fear, worry, anger. He channeled them all into running faster. His feet pounded on the soft dirt of the forest path they'd led the Unmade to. Beside him, Ophelia leapt over a log with the ease of a lifelong runner and then threw a glance over her shoulder. He followed suit. Eleven Unmade still on their trail. None, thank the Ancestral Forces, with wings.

"Are we far enough yet?" Ophelia demanded, barely out of breath. He judged their distance from the city in his mind and then glanced at the skyline to confirm his guess.

"Yes," he said. "This should be good."

"Then let's lose them." Ophelia whirled around and hurled a magical fireball at the Unmade. It sizzled when it hit the chest of the frontrunner but the Unmade man barely slowed down. She made a pushing gesture next and hit them with a gale of wind that sent several of them tumbling. Ophelia and Corrin pulled slightly ahead, but there were still eight Unmade close behind them, and they didn't seem to be tiring at all.

Corrin's lips thinned out as he came to a conclusion he'd been trying to avoid. "We have to split up," he called to Ophelia.

"What? No *way*!" she shouted back, looking outraged. "Haven't you ever seen a horror movie? We are *not* splitting up!"

He wasn't sure what a movie was, but he knew this was their best option. "They share some sort of hive mind, remember?" he said as he skidded around a large boulder. "If we split up, it will split their attention and perhaps slow them down. You have your magic to defend you, and if things get truly dire for me, I can open the portal again and bring River through to help me." They were still closer to the populated areas of the island than he would like—he wanted to preserve any bit of surprise they might have left against Vie—but if it came to a life-or-death situation, he would throw aside subtlety in favor of survival.

Ophelia grimaced. "How would we find each other again?" One of the Unmade began to gain on them and she pulled a big bubble of water from a nearby stream, freezing it as it landed on the Unmade, locking her in place. The ice cracked and the Unmade freed herself after a moment, but she was farther behind now.

"There's a place in the woods," he said, just loudly enough for her to hear but not the Unmade. "It's a clearing full of flowers with petals that detach like butterflies. Just go toward the moon until you hit a river about three times as wide as the one we just crossed, and then follow it downriver for maybe a ten-minute walk. I'll meet you there."

She hissed out a sharp exhalation. "Fine," she said, reaching for him. Grabbing his tunic, she pulled him closer to her. "But if you die, I'll kill you."

He smiled, trying to hide his own worry for her. "What is it you humans like to say? 'Right back at you.'"

They peeled apart.

Corrin had been pursued by Unmade before and barely escaped, but those had been prepared for a fight. They had been faster, purposeful, better equipped. This group felt shambling in comparison—less dangerous, though no less horrifying.

They had been *in his city.* Walking down the middle of the street unhindered, unopposed, while the soldiers who were supposed to protect the Fae focused instead on arresting harmless old men in front of their families.

A snarl ripped from him, and he swept up a fist-sized rock from the ground and whirled to hurl it at the nearest Unmade, putting all his considerable force behind it. The rock hit the creature—who used to be a cat Unseelie, judging by the clumps of orange-tabby fur that were still intact—squarely at the base of her pointed ear. She stumbled and fell and tripped another Unmade in the process. Corrin pulled ahead, squinting back over his shoulder to count how many still followed him. There were two shadows running down the path at his back. Subtracting the two he'd just temporarily felled, that meant seven had gone after Ophelia, a disproportionate amount that might mean she was judged the greater threat by the one who controlled the Unmade's hive mind.

His jaw clenched as he ran. His mother had torn out the souls of the Fae victims and was now using their bodies as her puppets. He didn't know yet what her ends were, what she hoped to achieve, or if she even had a plan beyond continuing the dark experiments on life energy that had caused her banishment in the first place.

He only knew he had to stop her.

He reached a tree that had been blackened by a lightning strike—the landmark he'd been waiting for. It meant he was far enough from the city that the Unmade he'd led here were unlikely to easily find their way back. He sped to a sprint and darted off the path, into the forest. It was even darker amongst the thick trees and underbrush, with less moonlight to guide his steps, but he had an advantage over the Unmade; he'd grown up in these woods. This was where he and Vie had played, once upon a time. This was where he'd trained with his nymph tutors. Where he'd sparred with his mother, when she had first taught him how to wield his daggers.

He tried to shut off the memory before it could start, but his emotions were running too high, and the recollection filled his mind: a bright summer day, sunlight dappled on the grass, the unfamiliar weight of the newly-bestowed weapons in his small hands.

"Mother," he'd called, breathless with joy and laughter. She'd been hiding from him, teaching him how to track, how to defend himself. *"Mother, give me a hint!"*

She'd leapt gracefully down from a tree, snatched him up, and tickled him mercilessly. Her body armor was a solid plate under his back. Her fox's ears brushed against his cheeks. *"I'm right behind you,"* she said in his ear as he shrieked with giggles, flailing out with his daggers, trying to land a strike on the mother who effortlessly evaded his blades. *"Where I'll always be, my little fox kit."*

Corrin tore himself from the memory and used the ferocity of his emotions to fuel his sprint. He quickly pulled further ahead of the Unmade, who were indeed moving more slowly and becoming less responsive now that he and Ophelia had separated, and soon he was deep in the heart of the forest with no sign of any Unmade nearby.

He slowed to a walk, his chest heaving, sweat beaded on his forehead. He listened closely for any sign of Ophelia, kept his eyes scanning the sky overhead for any magical distress beacons she might set off, but there was nothing. He could only hope it meant her run had been as successful as his.

It was a half-hour hike to the meadow he'd told Ophelia about. It was one of his favorite places. Even after he'd become the provisional King of the Fae a century ago upon his mother's banishment and reported death—which, he thought bitterly, he now knew to be falsified—he'd still come here sometimes to get away from everything. It had also become a useful place to exchange the occasional discreet note with some of his ambassadors in cases where secrecy was advisable. He was hoping they had remained loyal, and that they might have left him intel that could help him and the High Queen reclaim the kingdom.

He stepped out of the trees and into the meadow. It was full of lovely flowers in an array of soft pastel colors: yellows and pinks and greens, all of them muted in the silvery tones of the moonlight. They rustled like ocean waves when his footsteps disturbed them, petals flaring before they detached entirely and fluttered up to knee level like butterflies. He reached out a hand to feel one as it brushed past and smiled at its familiar softness. He couldn't wait to see what Ophelia would think of this place. He didn't think he would ever tire of seeing her delight at the wonders Charassi had to offer. Viewing things through her eyes always gave him a different perspective to better appreciate this truly wondrous realm. When he was with her, everything was new.

Anxious at the thought of her, he scanned the clearing, his smile fading. He didn't see her anywhere. How long should he wait before he searched for her? What would he do if she never—

His worried thoughts were broken off when he suddenly spotted an odd shape a few yards away. It appeared to be some sort of tall, skinny bush, or perhaps an irregularly-shaped sapling. The petals of what seemed to be a hundred flowers were all perched on it, draping the shape in gently quivering pastels.

"If you stand very still," the shape whispered, "they'll land on you."

Corrin blinked and then barked out a startled laugh, heady with relief. "Ophelia!"

His outburst startled the petals, and they rose up in a whirlwind. Ophelia—who was, in fact, neither a bush nor a sapling—threw her arms up in delight and twirled with the petals as they rose. For just a moment, she was at the heart of a beautiful, flowery tornado. And then the petals had fluttered back to their respective flowers, and she dropped her arms with a smile. "Man, I needed that," she said.

He strode across the distance separating them and impulsively drew her into a hug. "You are well? You escaped the Unmade without incident?"

Her arms curled around his shoulders, her palms circles of warmth on his back as she squeezed him in turn. "I'm fine," she said. "My magic is recharging much more quickly now that we're here."

They held on to each other a fraction of a second longer than was really necessary and then reluctantly parted. "We should discuss what to do next," Corrin said grimly.

What was left of Ophelia's smile fell quickly away. "Yeah. We should. Is this a good place to bring River through?"

He nodded, pulling the pocket watch out and quickly running a finger over the blade of his dagger before his Queen could offer to do it instead. The doorway—far more massive than before, now that there was space to receive it—shimmered into view. There was an impatient snort that trailed smoke into the air and then a flash of blue scales before River was

launching herself into the clearing. She impacted the ground with a massive *thud* that nearly drove Corrin to his knees. He was concerned for a moment, before she rolled onto her back and thrust her legs into the air, squirming like a puppy in the grass. He smothered a laugh, knowing she'd be offended if she heard it, and closed both the watch and the portal.

"It is very good to be in my home realm," River said with a sigh, lifting herself back up and shaking off the petals, which were fluttering indignantly in a halo around her. *"Even if it is the High Fae's little island and a lukewarm sea rather than the glaciers and volcanoes of my lands."*

"We've missed a few things while we were gone," Ophelia said, and quickly filled her in on what they'd seen in Dominion. When she was done, River had her scales raised like hackles and was growling.

"The Unmade dare to trespass en masse now? They walk through your streets unhindered?"

"We will stop them," Corrin vowed.

"Good," she growled. *"How do we start?"*

Corrin peered around the clearing to get his bearings and then started toward the western end of it. "There's a treehouse hidden under the canopy here," he told them. "It was my hiding place as a child, and when I became ruler, I used it as a place to exchange secret correspondence with some of my ambassadors."

"You mean your *spies*?" Ophelia said in delight. "Oh, this is great. Luis would love this, he's so into spy stuff—"

"They are *ambassadors,*" Corrin correctly her, his lips pursed. "They merely…also report things that they have secretly observed, as well."

"That's the definition of a spy," Ophelia pointed out.

He found the ladder at the base of a tree and climbed up it. "Perhaps," he allowed. "In any case, I am hoping some of them may have left intelligence we can use to plan our next steps."

He reached the top of the ladder and pulled himself into the small wooden room. It was made from driftwood, logs, and branches that had fallen naturally, and as such it was rough-hewn and creaky. He crossed the uneven floor to the crate in the corner that served as his mailbox. Ophelia came up the ladder behind him and snapped her fingers, sending a ball of light to hover overhead. River peered through one of the open-air windows to observe.

Corrin pried the crate's lid open and examined its contents. He did indeed have new mail. There were several scrolls stamped with the seals of a few of his ambassadors, and two scrolls at the bottom that were tied together. He began going through them one by one, narrating their key points aloud for Ophelia and River. As he scanned the letters he began to get a fuller picture of what had happened while they'd been stranded on Earth.

Vie's rule continued. The palace was locked down—no petitioners, no goodwill parades, every wall and bridge bristling around the clock with heavily armed soldiers. Eagle Unseelie messengers arrived and departed at irregular intervals, though no one was sure who he was communicating with or where those spies might be placed. Fears were spreading outside of the island of Dominion; the nymphs had gone even further into seclusion than usual, canceling their seasonal meet for fear of Vie's forces encroaching, and several of the closest pixie habitats had picked up their homes and flown deeper into the marshes. Dragons had been sighted off the coasts, patrolling the borders of the Scorched Lands with unusual ferocity, but they continued merely attacking and/or eating any trespassers rather than interfering in Fae lands.

He came to the last two scrolls, the ones that were tied together. He recognized the seal of one of them—it was from Captain Pelaine, a High Fae soldier who had long served as Corrin's mentor. The captain was one of the people Corrin trusted most. The other scroll had no seal, so Corrin opened the captain's first.

Highness, I was uncertain if the attached scroll should be delivered to you at all, but having read its contents, I feel that to hide them from you would be unjust as well as disloyal. This scroll was given to me by a stranger in the marketplace. I was unable to catch them in time to bring them in for questioning. Thus, I cannot speak to the veracity of the scroll's contents. I

can only advise you to take heart. You and the High Queen still have many friends in the palace, and I will always be among them.

Something like dread stirred in Corrin's chest, his mouth dry when he finished reading aloud. He looked down at the unopened scroll. What could it possibly contain, to trigger such a reaction from his stalwart captain?

Ophelia laid her hand on his shoulder, sensing his distress, and that was enough for him to be able to face the final missive.

He immediately recognized his mother's elegant handwriting.

My son and heir,

Long have I missed you. Long have I wished to see your face again, to tell you that I live, to hold you in my arms and to watch with my own eyes as you ascend to the greatness that I know awaits you. But I fear that there are forces that would keep us apart—forces like the impertinent human girl who stumbled onto a dragon and named herself queen. And, I worry, forces like your own idealistic nature, which I have always found equally admirable and exasperating.

The last time we saw each other, you had stumbled onto one of my experiments. I can only imagine how that must have made you feel, what you must have thought of me to make you turn me in to the priestesses, with the full knowledge that they would send an assassin after me. I have always known you must have been the one to condemn me to the Unseelie life-takers, and I forgave you for it long ago, but I do wish you could see what I see. I wish you could see the truth: a grand and vital goal that I must pursue at all costs. I need your help, my son. I want us to do this together.

But I know that a mother's need alone won't sway you, so I offer you this instead: a cure for the creatures who you call "Unmade." If you come to me, I will give it to you and tell you all.

Meet my emissary at the weekly livestock auction in the town of Bursai. Leave her an encoded missive in the sign-in book using the cipher I taught you as a child, and she will find you and take you to me. Bring your girl-queen. She may hear what I have to say as well, if you wish it.

With love,

Your Mother

Queen Emalda.

The treehouse rang loud with silence when Corrin finished reading. He could hear his breathing. He could hear his heartbeat, loud and frantic. The parchment seemed to come alive beneath his hands, as if the paper was skin and the ink, blood.

"Corrin," Ophelia said softly.

He clung to her voice. It was a rope thrown to a drowning man, pulling him from a nightmare. He inhaled shakily. His heartbeat began to steady. He put both hands at the top of the parchment and pulled, tearing the page in half.

"Corrin!" Ophelia exclaimed, the moonlight and magical light gleaming in her wide eyes.

"It can only be a trap," Corrin said, and was amazed that his voice was steady. "And I will not allow either one of us to fall into it."

Ophelia's expression tightened. "I know this has to be awful for you, and I hate that—but Corrin, if I truly am the High Queen, then shouldn't I get a say in this?"

"No," he said shortly, taking a tone he never would have thought to take with the girl he'd sworn to serve and honor, as he lined up the torn pieces and turned them sideways to tear them again.

"Of course it is a trap, but still, it may win us useful information at the least and bring us straight to Emalda at best." Outside the window, River's scales rippled as she bared her teeth. *"And you have two dragons on your side."*

He tore the pieces one more time. He dropped them into the crate and slammed the lid down on top of it, creating a gust of wind that scattered the other scrolls across the floor. "I think you're vastly underestimating the worst-case scenario. She has the Unmaking curse, and we already know she apparently wants to capture a dragon—and that she doesn't see Ophelia's rule as legitimate. None of us are going to come running to her because of

some empty promises. We will track her down on our own and bring her to justice."

He sat atop the crate, as if his weight was needed to hold down the lid so his mother's letter didn't come bursting out on its own. He refused to meet either River's or Ophelia's gazes. They could tell how deeply this letter had affected him, he was sure, but he didn't want them to know the real reason he was so violently rejecting his mother's offer. A part of him clung to the desperate hope that there truly was some way for her to explain and excuse her actions and be the doting mother he remembered once again…and if he obeyed this letter and went to her, that hope would be utterly and forever crushed, because *of course* it was a trap, and once it was sprung he would finally be absolutely certain that no trace remained of the mother he remembered and loved.

He did not want to give her that chance to betray him one final time. He would rather cling to his childish hope, and never have to put it to the test he knew it would fail.

"What if she really does have a cure?" Ophelia said, kneeling in front of him, staring earnestly up at him. "Don't we owe it to all the Unmade, to all the people that might become Unmade in the near future, to at least follow up on this lead?"

He shook his head, his thoughts darting about wildly. "We will find another way. There has to be another, better, course of action. We could—we could try sneaking you into the castle. The throne is an Artifact; if the true ruler sits on it wearing the Bone Crown, the Guardians will be activated. We could use them to retake the palace and the city."

It was a longshot at best. The throne room was at the very heart of the palace, past hundreds of armed guards who would certainly see past whatever flimsy disguise they could try to use on Ophelia. Such a plan was terribly risky, but it was still better than meeting with Emalda.

Ophelia reared back. "Wait, what? The *throne* is an Artifact too? When were you going to tell me this?" She held up a hand. "More importantly, what exactly are the Guardians?"

“The statues of ancient rulers and their dragons,” he explained. “They’re carved throughout the palace, specially enchanted as a last-resort protection in case of a siege. They can only be activated by a High King or Queen who wears the crown and sits on the throne.”

Ophelia looked excited at the thought, but River huffed a thin trail of smoke. *“It is a foolhardy plan,”* she warned them, *“and not one I can approve of. As the boy-prince knows, there are bound to be far too many soldiers between us and the throne room. The palace was built to withstand an attack from dragons, with the throne room as the most protected location, which means it’s positioned so deep within the palace that even I would find it difficult to bludgeon my way there with my strength and magic. And you know you won’t be able to sneak in. The false king will be expecting that. He is arrogant but he is no fool.”*

Ophelia frowned and sighed. “Sunny is agreeing it’s a bad idea,” she admitted. “And also, even if we did manage to retake the castle now, Emalda has proven that she can disappear into the wilderness for as long as she likes. Retaking the castle wouldn’t fix the problem. She and her Unmaking curse are the greatest threat facing the kingdom right now, and we need any intel we can get out of her. This could be our best chance to find out what she’s up to.”

Corrin swallowed. He could feel them all lining up against him, however unwillingly, and knew he could not sway them much longer. “Please,” he said softly. “Please don’t do this.”

Ophelia put a hand on his knee. “I could go alone, if you don’t want to see her.”

He jerked his head up. “No! That would be *worse.*” He shuddered to think of Ophelia meeting his mother without him there to protect her.

“I’m sorry, Corrin, but one way or another, I really think we have to try this. I have some ideas about how to keep Emalda from springing a trap on us, so we won’t just stumble in unprepared, but right now this is our best lead. And you did sort of swear fealty to me.” She grimaced sympathetically. “I’m afraid I’ve got to pull rank on this one.”

He drooped. He could argue no further. He had indeed accepted her as his monarch, and he could not in good faith oppose her when she'd made her wishes clear. "What is your idea?" he asked at last.

She sat back, her eyes brightening. "A tracking spell. I'll work with Sunny to craft one so I've got it all ready, then I can slap it on the emissary when we meet her. She'll probably try to kill us or something, but we'll be prepared and slip away, then we just wait for the emissary to lead us straight back to Emalda."

"So…you think we may not even meet my mother? That this emissary, whoever she is, may simply be lying in wait to kill us?"

"It's definitely possible."

He blew out a breath. Either way, it appeared he had no choice; his High Queen had made up her mind. "Very well," he said. "Let's prepare."

CHAPTER 6

OPHELIA

The closer they got to Bursai, the more Ophelia doubted both the mission and herself.

She couldn't stop seeing the devastation on Corrin's face when he read the letter—the same devastation she'd seen many times when he thought of his mother, his family, his past. She had no idea how to even begin imagining how it would feel to have a parent betray you in such a way. She couldn't tell if his mother's letter had tempted him and he feared now that he might give in to it, or if it had made him furious at his mother and he feared how he might act on that anger. Either way, Ophelia could tell that he was afraid of *something* beyond simply facing the now-undeniable truth about Emalda—that she was not only the creator of the Unmaking curse, but also that she was proud of her actions. Ophelia vowed to keep a close eye on him and provide any support he might need, even as she continued to worry that she'd made the wrong choice in pressuring him to come.

She glanced up. He was striding along in front of her, his gaze trained on the horizon, his features schooled to stillness in a way that told her he was trying to hide an awful lot of emotions. She wished there was something she could do to make this easier for him.

She chewed absently on a fingernail, an old nervous habit. All sorts of nervous habits were reemerging. Adjusting her crown, biting her lip, tugging up stalks of wheat as they passed through waist-high fields and making some sort of weird grain bouquet with them—she found herself constantly fidgeting as she continued the internal debate that had raged

within her ever since they'd left the treehouse this morning. Her uncertainty over meeting with Emalda had bloomed into a much larger type of doubt.

She had accepted that this realm was where she belonged, and she felt the truth of it with every breath of Charassi's air…but that didn't necessarily mean she was the right person to lead the people through this worsening crisis. Back in Tipton, things had seemed clear-cut, her goal crystalline in her mind. She had to get back here, and she had to save everyone. But now that she was here, saving everyone was presenting unexpected challenges. She couldn't help but wonder…what right did she have to lead these people? These *Fae*, a group that she had thought was nothing more than a fairytale a few weeks ago? Sure, Ophelia had accidentally bonded a dragon, and Corrin had stuck an ancient crown on her head, but that didn't seem like it qualified her to make decisions that would affect thousands of lives. Making just one tough decision last night—the decision that led them to Bursai and the dowager queen against Corrin's wishes—already weighed so heavily on her, and that was only the beginning of her mission. What if she chose wrong? How many mistakes could she make before the kingdom was destroyed?

Still, despite her lack of qualifications, she was the one wearing the Bone Crown. That made her responsible for the welfare of the Fae—the people who were suffering under Vie's illegitimate rule and under Emalda's cruel curse. Whether or not Ophelia felt suited for her role, she couldn't just do *nothing.* So what else could she do, except try to serve those who needed her most—and hope that her choices helped instead of harmed?

She yanked up another stalk of wheat and added it to her bouquet. She wished they could've hitched a ride to Bursai on River. Then Ophelia wouldn't have idle time to dwell on all this. But River had departed last night for the Scorched Lands to update the dragon Convocation and also get any new intel from them to bring back. Ophelia and Corrin both still held out hope that the dragons might ally with them, so it was essential to keep the lines of communication open. Which, in turn, meant Ophelia and Corrin were now stuck walking. River was supposed to return before noon, though, so she'd be present as backup when their meeting with the emissary inevitably went south. Ophelia eyed the bright blue sky; they had an hour or two before then.

“There it is,” came Corrin’s voice. She glanced up and followed his line of sight. They had crested a hill and a town was laid out before them. It was small and quaint, built from whitewashed bricks with sturdy-looking tile roofs. Fields of wheat—and several other more exotic types of grain that she couldn’t name—surrounded it on all sides so that it looked like a small island perched within a golden sea. A mismatched bunch of tents lined most of the streets, and the smell of livestock floated up on the breeze. It wasn’t too unpleasant, at least not for Ophelia, who had been raised in a state famous for its cattle and ranchlands, but there was definitely the unmistakable scent of dung mixed in with the more pleasant scents of fresh hay, fresh alfalfa, and something oat-like.

“What exactly do they sell at the livestock auctions here?” Ophelia asked, peering at the tents, which were definitely too small to contain more than a negligible amount of cows.

“Different types of mounts,” Corrin answered, “along with exotic pets and animals used by the artisans. Goats and hares whose fur is shaved and used for weaving, water-lizards whose shed scales are hard as jewels, that sort of thing.”

Ophelia grinned in wonder, feeling far better than she had just a few moments earlier. “That is *so* much better than a cattle auction.”

Corrin cast her a confused glance. “Cattle auction? As in an auction where they sell *only* cows? Humans must love milk a great deal more than Fae.”

“Oh,” Ophelia said, remembering too late that almost all of the Fae species were vegetarians. “Um. No, they, uh…eat them. For meat.”

At Corrin’s politely horrified look, Ophelia *almost* regretted all the steaks, hamburgers, and fall-off-the-bone beef ribs she’d ever eaten. But, she thought to herself, at least she’d distracted Corrin a bit from his grim mood. She scanned past the tents before her and spotted a row of High Fae sitting behind tables, scribbling on papers. That had to be where the sign-in book would be. They’d have to go through the whole market to get there, a thought that had a smile spreading over Ophelia’s face. She practically skipped toward the auction, excited to see the strange and wonderful animals that were for sale.

The very first tent instantly caught her attention. There were two little birds in there. Their feathers were a dull, unimpressive brown, but their singing voices were so beautiful that Ophelia had to catch her breath. One of them fastened its tiny claws around the bars of its cage and pecked through them at the wheat Ophelia still held. She slid a few stalks in and the birds chirped their gratitude. The next stall was much larger, containing a white riding deer, placidly chewing on its cud. She crooned to it and petted its soft-as-velvet nose.

She lifted her head. Was that *barking* coming from the next stall? Sure enough, just around the corner there were five gigantic puppy-like creatures in an alley that had been converted to a corral. They were all black as midnight with bloodred eyes, fiercely muscled haunches, and mouths that seemed just a bit too small for the two rows of sharklike fangs that bristled within them. Though they looked like they couldn't be older than a few months, they were already the size of full-grown wolfhounds from Earth. As she watched, one of them perked up at the sight of her, his Doberman-like ears standing straight up. He bounded over and threw himself at the corral fence where she stood only to bounce off the gate with a *thunk* that sounded hard enough to break a lesser animal's skull. Unperturbed, the enormous hellhound shook himself and hopped right back up, then curled his front paws over the top of the gate, staring at Ophelia with his tongue lolling and his tail lashing with doggy joy. Ophelia was instantly in love.

"I want him," she told Corrin, reaching over the gate to scritch the hellhound's ears. He closed his eyes in rapture, tilting his head this way and that under her hand. His skin was loose and formed into big wrinkles where she rubbed him—a sure sign that he was going to get even more massive before he was done growing.

Corrin huffed at her, a sound that was almost a laugh, and a few of the worried creases on his expression eased. "They are called shadowlings," he said with a fond smile as another pony-sized nightmare-dog chased one of its siblings around the corral. "Bred by the Unseelie ages ago, back when the different tribes and Fae species were at war. They were initially used as battle mounts, and then, when the dragons arrived during their Exile, they were deployed against them. After peace was made, the shadowlings' use as war dogs was outlawed, and now they are bred merely as intimidating

novelty mounts. They can also be used to track missing people, as they have an excellent sense of smell."

Ophelia planted a kiss on the shadowling's muzzle, careful to avoid the sharklike fangs. "You aren't intimidating, are you, Shadow?" she murmured. "You're *adorable*."

Sunny roused in her head. *"Ugh,"* he muttered. *"What a waste of teeth."*

Sunny's derision only cemented her decision. She rubbed Shadow's ears one last time before she stepped away, promising, "I'll be back for you."

Corrin made a face like he was going to try to dissuade her. She widened her eyes innocently at him as she waved the dogs' owner over and told the High Fae woman, "I'd like to reserve that one, please. Not sure when I'll be able to pick him up, but can you keep him for me until I can pay for him?"

The woman stared at the crown on Ophelia's brow and stuttered out a reply in the affirmative, looking dazed and pleased to be selling an animal to the High Queen. For her part, Ophelia felt an easing of the burdens that had been weighing on her, and a cautious sort of happiness at her daring to plan for the future. In allowing herself to imagine a Charassi where she had won the battles facing her, and come back to retrieve this fearsome and adorable shark-puppy.

"I am not sure now is the best time to be purchasing—" Corrin started, but she turned and marched toward the sign-in area at the front of the market.

"I'll come back and get him once we retake the castle," she said. "Or maybe earlier, if it's practical."

"A shadowling pup is not exactly a *practical* sort of pet. They require a lot of special attention—" he tried again, but she waved him off.

"A dragon isn't a practical pet either, but I've still got one of those," she retorted.

"I am not *a pet,"* Sunny growled, but it lacked the heat of real affront. He knew she hadn't meant to insult him.

“Of course not,” she murmured soothingly. He did the mental dragon equivalent of rolling his eyes.

“Were I in my body, I would teach you both proper respect of dragons,” he grumbled. *“River should be arriving any minute. Tell her I said to give you a good bite for your insolence.”*

Ophelia snorted at that.

Corrin glanced at her. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” she assured him. “Sunny’s teasing me.”

His eyebrows arched in startlement—probably at the idea of a dragon teasing anyone—but he said nothing.

They had reached the sign-in area. Ophelia tried to take a spot at the end of the line, but as soon as she did, the crowd in front of her dissipated like a water puddle in the Texas summer heat. She opened her mouth to protest but Corrin elbowed her discreetly. Probably trying to tell her to act more regal and accept her people’s respect. She sighed and approached the table at the front.

“We just need to sign in,” she told the High Fae man.

His gaze was glued to her crown, and he pushed the sign-in book across to her without a word. She nudged it over to Corrin, since she didn’t know the cipher he was supposed to use. Corrin’s mouth went flat and a muscle in his jaw twitched, betraying his uncertainty and worry, but he only scooped a pen off the table and quickly scribbled out a message.

While he wrote, Ophelia discreetly scanned the sky and then the horizon, searching for any sign of River. She should have been back by now. Ophelia didn’t want to do this without her backup, but they might not have a choice.

“Now what?” Ophelia asked in a low tone as Corrin finished his message and turned away to reenter the market.

“Now we wait.”

It didn’t take long. Ten minutes later, as they were browsing a stall that displayed creatures who seemed to be a cross between a cactus and a

parakeet, a tap came on Corrin's shoulder. Catching the movement, Ophelia turned—and came face-to-face with an Unmade woman.

She was an Unseelie of the horse tribe, centaur-like in her appearance, with the head, arms, and torso of a woman but the body, hooves, and tail of a medium-sized palomino horse. And even though she was the first horse Unseelie Ophelia had met, her unusual body was the least startling thing about her. Ophelia's gaze went from the ugly purple-green bruises where blood had settled beneath her skin once the woman's heart was no longer pumping it, to her gray corpse-like face, to the flies that buzzed around her haunches like she was already carrion.

Ophelia gasped and leapt backwards, crashing into several cages filled with cacti-hedgehogs. Corrin drew his dagger and leaned in front of her in the same movement, shoulders tensed, muscles taut with his readiness to strike, to defend her.

"Be at ease," the Unmade woman said, her tinny voice flat and robotic.

Ophelia and Corrin both froze. So did the booth's seller, who had been inhaling to yell at the people who had upset his cages. No one else was near enough to see anything more than what seemed to be a few clumsy shoppers; the shadows were too sharp in the bright afternoon light, the tent's shade hiding the palomino woman from view.

Ophelia righted herself. Keeping her gaze glued to the Unmade woman, she reached out a hand to wordlessly grab Corrin's arm. Her grip transmitted the shock that she couldn't put into words.

Until this moment, they had believed the Unmade couldn't speak. It seemed certain that they were mindless, their souls evaporated or sucked out or eaten, their bodies left behind as empty shells. But this woman had *spoken*, and her glassy eyes met Ophelia's squarely, and something that might've been a smile flitted at the corners of her mouth.

Ophelia swallowed hard. Then she swallowed again when her stomach began churning with nausea; this close, she could smell the faintest hint of rot.

“Who are you, and how is it that you speak?” Corrin managed at last. He still gripped his dagger tightly. Behind him, the man in charge of the booth was grabbing two cages and hurrying away, eyes wide, half-running as if he were escaping a burning building.

“I am Emalda’s emissary,” the woman said. “I present myself to you in good faith, as evidence that Emalda truly does have a cure for the Unmaking. That cure is being used to restore me to my original self.”

In Ophelia’s mind, Sunny growled a warning. Ophelia didn’t need it. She was already tugging up her magic, quickly weaving the tracking spell she had spent most of the night practicing, getting ready to lay it on the woman. She needed to buy another minute or so before it was ready, though.

“You don’t look all that cured to me,” she said. But even as she spoke, her heart beat a bit faster—she wanted so badly for it to be true, for there to really be a cure, a way to return their life energy to the lost Fae. Or at least release them to the Endless Plains to reunite with their ancestral forces, as was supposed to happen when Fae died normally.

The emissary’s gaze turned to her. Her flat expression didn’t change, but her voice cooled with disdain. “That is because the cure is not yet complete. Emalda is in the process of perfecting it, but she needs your help, young prince, before she can finish it.”

Thirty more seconds. Ophelia did her best to keep her face from giving away her internal focus as she pulled up strands of Death, Dawn, and Ocean to knit into her pattern.

“What does she need me for?” Corrin said stiffly, buying her time, as they had planned.

“She wishes for the return of her most beloved son,” the emissary said, her gaze returning to Corrin. “She wants you to go to her, that you might assist her with your knowledge and your keen mind…and she asks that you bring the Bone Crown with you.”

Ophelia’s eyes widened in shock, and for a moment the almost-finished spell hung in her mind as she froze. “*What?*” she said, pushing Corrin aside

to face the centaur woman squarely. “She seriously thinks Corrin’s going to bring her my *crown*?”

The Bone Crown wasn’t just a symbol of the rightful ruler. It was a legit Artifact itself, able to connect the true High King or High Queen to the land and allow them to more easily perform Royal Rites that reconnected different Fae species to their ancestral forces. Ophelia wasn’t sure why Emalda wanted it—only a ruler bound to a dragon and named the rightful monarch could use it or even wear it, and Emalda didn’t fit either of those criteria anymore—but it couldn’t be for any good reason.

“I was speaking to the prince,” the emissary said coolly, “not to you, foreigner.”

“That foreigner is your rightful High Queen,” Corrin said, steel in his tone.

The emissary made a skeptical noise. “In any case,” she went on, “your mother wishes to explain to you what she has done and why. With your help, she seeks to find a better way forward.”

“Like we’re going to believe *that*,” Ophelia scoffed.

“Focus on your spell,” Sunny growled within her mind. She felt his strain as he fought the urge to bury himself as far away as he could get from the unnatural creature before him.

Ophelia quickly caught the unfinished enchantment before it could fall apart and began knitting the final threads together. All she’d need to do was touch the emissary to transmit the tracking spell, then they could get out of here and wait for her to lead them straight to Emalda.

“I will not give you the Bone Crown, as it is not mine to bequeath,” Corrin said, “and neither will I return to my mother. I ask instead for a true gesture of goodwill: give us what she has of this cure, and I will see if I can finish it on my own.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “This is not possible. She has said she will formulate the rest of the cure with you, or not at all. And the Bone Crown is…necessary.”

“The Bone Crown is staying on the brow of the High Queen, where it belongs,” Corrin practically growled.

The woman sighed and lifted a hand. “That,” she said, “is too bad.”

She dropped her hand—and the market erupted. From out of the shadows of alleys up and down the street, more Unmade emerged, galloping and flying out straight toward them.

The trap had been sprung.

But Ophelia was ready for it. She quickly tied off the last magical thread in the spell and leapt toward the Unseelie woman. The emissary saw her coming and reared up on her back legs, striking out with a hoof that hit Ophelia squarely in the chest. She reeled.

“She is going for the crown!” Sunny roared, and a second later Ophelia saw he was right. The centaur woman swung her haunches sideways to block Corrin and then reached down and yanked the crown off Ophelia’s head.

Panic ripped through Ophelia as strands of her hair tore away with the crown. She jumped to her feet and threw herself after it, managing to latch her fingers around it…but only for an instant before the emissary tore it away. The market was full of screaming and the sounds of terrified, panicking animals as the Unmade continued pouring from houses and alleyways, all of them headed for Ophelia.

Then the emissary toppled to the side suddenly, one hand clutching the crown as the other reached behind her to fend off Corrin. The prince had stabbed his dagger into her haunches and now leaned back to kick her hard in the knee. She stumbled, but her expression didn’t change, as if she didn’t even feel the pain of the blow.

“Ophelia, get back!” he shouted.

She bared her teeth, something feral rising within her. “Not without my crown.” She dove at it again.

Corrin whirled to confront another attacker, an Unseelie with eagle wings. Corrin dodged to the side, rolled, and came up dagger-first, driving the blade into the man’s chest. It didn’t even slow him down. Another Unmade,

this one a tree nymph with mossy bark skin, latched onto his wrist, preventing him from striking again.

There were too many Unmade, and River still hadn't arrived. And Ophelia had not yet developed enough focus to hold the tracking spell at the ready while also weaving a separate defensive spell.

They would have to flee without the crown.

Giving a wordless shout of anger, Ophelia swept up a discarded metal tent stake from the ground and hurled it at the centaur, who was still facing Corrin. The emissary turned, revealing the crown in her grip. Ophelia tried one last time to reach it, but only managed to brush it with her fingers before the emissary reared away again.

But just before she did, Ophelia sent the tracking spell through her fingertips—and into the Bone Crown.

The emissary vanished into the crowd of Unmade, galloping away to wherever Emalda was waiting. Ophelia stared after her, breathing fast, hands in tight fists as a feeling of helpless fury ricocheted through her. Then she whirled and searched for Corrin.

"We gotta go!" she shouted, snagging his sleeve and ducking a blade swung by a dead-eyed Unmade High Fae. Corrin let her pull him away, and together, they darted down the street.

The Unmade onslaught had pulled the market into utter chaos. The sellers and the market visitors were mostly running and screaming, but enough of them were standing their ground and either fighting the Unmade or barricading the streets so that Corrin and Ophelia were able to get away from the worst of the mob. They ran past the Shadowling enclosure, where Ophelia spotted Shadow leaping over the fence to run snarling at the nearest Unmade who was pursuing her. "Good dog!" she called after him, hoping he would stay safe.

They took an escape route they'd mapped out earlier, one that wound close to the grain fields, until they reached a barn. Ophelia scanned for any Unmade who might've tracked them this far while Corrin expertly scaled the side of the building to crawl through a high window. Once he was in,

she knit together a simple air spell that blasted her high enough to grab onto the windowsill and haul herself in, albeit somewhat less gracefully.

And then they climbed into the hayloft and hid.

It took long minutes for Ophelia's heartbeat to calm. She could feel Corrin's, too, given the way his chest was pressed against her back, tucked up against her in their small burrowed-out space between hay bales. As more time passed and the shouting outside began to quiet, she became more aware of the feel of him, and of how safe she felt with him at her side.

Words crowded up through her. She longed, suddenly, to tell him how much she cared for him, that she wanted him to be with her always—but the words stayed stuck in her throat. She couldn't picture his response to them. She thought he might feel the same way about her, but there was a chance he wouldn't, and she wasn't sure she could bear to put any awkwardness between them. She needed him. She couldn't bear to lose anything else right now, didn't want to make her mission harder than it already was.

So she swallowed the words down, and kept waiting.

"Can you sense the tracking spell?" Corrin whispered in her ear. She shivered at the feel of his breath brushing against her skin. "Have the Unmade gone?"

She'd managed to relay to him earlier, during their headlong flight, what she'd done. Now, she narrowed her eyes and focused on her spell. It was no longer held within her, but it was still a part of her, and she could sense it leading outward like a shining string. "Yes," she whispered back. "Or at least, the crown has gone—and probably the emissary with it. I'm not sure if the other Unmade are lingering or not."

"I haven't heard any of them in a bit," he replied, and she remembered that he'd inherited a fox Unseelie's keen hearing from his mother.

Just then, a telepathic voice boomed in their mind, and something heavy *thudded* into the ground not too far away. *"This town is in quite the uproar,"* said River curiously. *"What have I missed?"*

CHAPTER 7

CORRIN

Corrin gripped River's sleek blue scales tightly, trying to focus on the impossible beauty of flying on a dragon rather than on the fact that he might soon come face-to-face with his mother and whatever horrors she had in store for him.

Their mission in the town had not been quite as disastrous as he had feared, but plenty had still gone wrong. The Bone Crown was missing, for one thing. Ophelia, who was pressed against his back, kept reaching up to adjust it before realizing it wasn't there and snatching her hand back down with a glower. He was thankful that she had thought quickly enough to attach the tracking spell to it rather than the emissary, though; it was vital that the crown be retrieved and returned to the High Queen. No one else would be able to wear it without being incinerated, but his mother knew that and still wanted it—which meant she must have another purpose for it.

The crown was a vital symbol of rulership. Perhaps she simply wanted to rob Ophelia of the legitimacy it provided, to weaken her further? Without it, Ophelia would struggle to perform any further Royal Rites and more vitally, they wouldn't be able to enact their plan to waken the Guardian statues in the palace. Not to mention, it would be even more difficult to win more allies to their side if Ophelia wasn't wearing it.

The Bone Crown was the key to taking back the throne and protecting all the Fae. It must be retrieved at all costs.

“So now that we’re in the air,” Ophelia shouted over the wind that blasted around them, “will you tell us why you took so long to return?”

River had listened to their summation of the events in Bursai and then ordered them onto her back without another word. Now, they were following the tracking spell, which was moving quickly across the sea in the direction of the Scorched Lands. An Unmade with wings must be transporting it, or perhaps a sea sprite. Corrin had yet to see one of those as an Unmade, but he didn’t doubt that it was possible. His mother had never shied away from using all tools at her disposal to achieve her ends.

A headache began in Corrin’s temples. He dared to lift one hand away from River’s scales to rub at the spot.

“The Convocation had more updates than I had planned for,” River replied grimly. *“There has been an attempted invasion into the Scorched Lands. It is still ongoing.”*

“An invasion?” Corrin said sharply. “By whom? Emalda, or Vie?”

“Vie, I suspect.” River gnashed her teeth, likely wishing Corrin’s usurper brother was in her maw. *“They wore the uniforms of Artificer scouts, and those who weren’t immediately incinerated tried to claim that they were merely searching for potential Artifacts. They fought like soldiers, though. In any case, those who remain are being more careful now—scuttling about and distracting the dragons while they get up to whatever they’re there for.”*

“How many of them are there?” Corrin asked, his strategist’s mind already making calculations. “What ships did they come in? Did they fly any flags?”

“I believe the ships were smashed to splinters too quickly to examine their flags,” River said wryly. *“There were several hundred of them to begin with. A few dozen are left now, but more ships were sighted arriving as I was leaving.”*

“What would Vie want with new Artifacts?” Ophelia wondered aloud.

Corrin shook his head. “I truly don’t know. It usually takes a long time to carve new Artifacts—Vie would not gain any immediate advantage, even if his Artificers found bones with weaponizable potential. The only reason I

was able to craft Sunny's bones into Artifacts so quickly was because his spirit and magic were present, willing the process along. And the magic you channeled to me from the Bone Crown gave me the strength to power straight through a process that would normally be too exhausting to complete all at once."

Ophelia reached up a hand to touch the earring Artifact that still dangled from one of her ears. They had yet to discover what that Artifact would do. Perhaps, Corrin mused to himself with the smallest hint of desperation, it might itself be a weaponizable Artifact, something that could help them against their many enemies. That was likely too much to hope for, though.

"So maybe they aren't Artificers at all, just soldiers in disguise?" Ophelia murmured. He could barely hear her over the howling wind. Far below, the Nymph Woodlands blurred into streaks of green and brown like a painting. The sky above seemed limitless—an upside-down ocean that ran to the ends of the universe. Corrin wished he could lose himself in this moment. He wished he didn't have to theorize about his brother's and mother's true intentions in this terrible civil war. Not long ago, flying on a dragon's back had seemed like the greatest thing that could ever happen to him, the fulfillment of his life's dream and the symbol of all he had achieved. Even after he had accepted he would never have a dragon bond of his own, he had still savored the glorious, impossible freedom of flying on River. But now uncomplicated joy seemed forever out of reach. Taking pleasure in anything right now seemed wrong, a transgression against the duties piled upon his shoulders.

He opened his mouth to express some of this to Ophelia and River, and then closed it again. He must not burden them with his problems. They were already giving all they had to this battle that his family had started; the least he could do was to not split their focus with his own complaints.

"It is possible," River was saying now. *"There isn't really a way to know at this point."*

"You could capture some and interrogate them," Ophelia suggested.

River howled with laughter. Corrin shook his head at her and explained to Ophelia, "Dragons do not capture enemies, and I fear they wouldn't deign

to question them either."

River snorted, and a stream of smoke from it blasted back over them as they flew. *"Our conversations with enemies are generally just a lot of screaming and roaring followed by crunching."*

Ophelia sighed, sounding exasperated, and started to say something else—and then jerked as if someone had pinched her. "Stop!" she shouted.

River flared her wings wide, the motion nearly unseating Corrin. As he scrambled for purchase and clung to her scales, he could feel her attention sharpen as she shifted instantly from laughter to fierce attentiveness. *"What is it? Have you spotted an enemy?"*

Ophelia had one hand pressed to her head. Her brow was wrinkled in confusion. "The spell just…stopped. It was leading me like a thread, with one end tied to me and the other to the crown, but it just snapped." Her words were calm on the surface, but he could hear panic brewing in her tone. They could *not* lose the crown.

"Where's the last place you sensed it?" he shouted.

Ophelia pointed to a spot in the vast coniferous forest that rippled into low mountains below them. "Somewhere down there!"

Without another word, River tucked in her wings and dove. The sky turned into a smear of blue and white tearing past them, the ground a growing pool of green. Corrin had to catch his breath. Flying was suddenly a marvelous, impossible thing again, and his heart was briefly full with it.

And then River's wings swept out and she landed like a meteor striking the earth. Dirt exploded around them, catapulting in every direction, before River hopped easily out of the several-feet-deep crater she'd created. When the last clumps of dirt had finished falling to the ground, Corrin swung his leg over and quickly slid down River's side, drawing his dagger, searching for danger.

The clearing they'd landed in was littered with pine needles and smelled of sap and autumn. The peak of several mountains rose up above the tree line. Before them, a High Fae woman was crouched down, shielding herself with

her arms. She had long red hair and wore the tattered, colorful robes of a Holy Priestess.

Liana.

She had been the youngest and newest priestess. The elder priestess had allied with Ophelia but fled Dominion on a separate quest. The second priestess had been publicly executed for refusing to bend her knee to Vie. Only Liana had sided with Vie, who was rumored to be her lover. Once, Liana had been Corrin's childhood friend. Now, she had chosen to be his enemy.

He took three long strides and prepared to launch himself at her. Ophelia was quicker than he was, though, and knitted a blunt air spell that knocked Liana flat on her back and pinned her there. She stared up at Corrin as he continued his now-slower approach. The set of her mouth was belligerent, but her eyes were tight with what he thought might be worry.

"Where is the crown?" Corrin demanded coldly as Ophelia slid down River's side to approach them.

Liana sneered at him. "It does not belong to you."

"Who are you working with?" he snapped. "Vie? Or my—or Emalda?"

A muscle in her cheek twitched. From surprise? Dismay? He wasn't sure. She said nothing, instead turning her head away as much as the heavy blanket of air would allow.

Corrin looked up at Ophelia as she approached. Their shared glance was heavy with wariness. Liana was already a known affiliate of Vie, but her appearance here, in this place and at this moment, hinted at a connection to Emalda. Did this mean that Liana served a new master now? Or, ancestral forces forbid, that Emalda and Vie were working together?

Ophelia crouched down next to him and swept her hands over the priestess, searching her for the crown or any clues, but when she sat back she was empty-handed. Ophelia hissed out a breath. "What did you do with it? Why are you even here?"

Corrin registered then that his knee, which had been touching the ground, was wet, and at the same time he realized there was an odd smell on the air—something that smelled like pine with a hint of something metallic. He stood and looked at his trousers. There was indeed a dark stain spreading across them—something greenish and viscous that caught the light oddly. He found a nearby twig and scraped some off to examine it more closely, unwilling to touch it lest it turn out to be some sort of poison.

When he lifted it to his nose, he scented the metallic scent again. It was coppery like blood and oddly familiar. It took him a moment to place it. When he did, he jerked his head up. "This is a magical potion from the royal storerooms," he said.

Ophelia frowned, standing back up herself. "What was she doing with it?"

Corrin took a step back to examine the wet spot on the ground more closely. A few clumps of dirt had landed here from River's landing, and he nudged them aside to see a pool of the liquid had soaked mostly into the ground—except for a dry circle right in the middle of the wet spot, as if an object had blocked the spill.

"The crown," he said. "She poured the liquid on the crown." Numbly, he realized what the liquid had to have been: a spell-removing potion. His mother had anticipated a tracking spell, and had brought along a rare magical potion to remove it. He explained this to Ophelia, a sense of helpless anger and deepening worry washing over him. If the tracking spell was well and truly gone…the Bone Crown could be too.

Ophelia whirled on Liana. "You *are* working with Emalda, then! You have to be. *Why?* Why would anybody willingly help her? Look what she'd doing to the realm!"

Liana's gaze flickered but then she lifted her chin stubbornly. They wouldn't get anything out of her.

"There is a way you could force information from her," River suggested from behind them, her voice thick with menace.

Ophelia frowned. "If you're suggesting torture, I am not on board with that no matter how bad the situation is."

"Not torture. Magic. You can weave a mental spell that will allow you to wade through this girl's memories and thoughts. It is a very delicate type of magic, however, and requires a great deal of focus and care."

Ophelia considered this, her head tilted, her gaze going back and forth between River and Liana. The priestess's eyes had gone wide, but she stayed silent.

"What's the risk if it goes wrong?" Ophelia said slowly. "Would it hurt her?"

"Unlikely. Mental magic does not harm, only probes. But if the spell snaps or goes wrong, it could harm you.*"*

Corrin was immediately shaking his head. "It is not worth the risk, My Queen. Let me question her."

But Ophelia was considering it, biting her lip. "If we do this," she said slowly, "it can't be here. This spot is too exposed and we don't know how far the others who were helping her have gone, or if they've sent anyone to double back and attack us." She paused for a moment, head cocked as she listened to something only she could hear. "Sunny says we can take her to his home. It's not far from here, right on the edge of the Scorched Lands."

Corrin hesitated. They very much needed to retrieve the Bone Crown, and this was their only lead—not just on the Crown but on other valuable information that could help them gain ground against his mother and Vie. But he knew how Ophelia struggled with anything that required fine-tuning or careful focus. She was much more comfortable charging in and blasting things. If she made a mistake and the spell backfired, what could the cost be to her? Or to the entire realm, if something truly terrible happened and they lost their true High Queen?

He closed his eyes. He feared for her, but he had to have faith in her. Sun in the Black Sky had chosen her for a reason. As her own dragon believed in her, so too would Corrin.

"Very well, My Queen," he said. "Let's take her there."

CHAPTER 8

OPHELIA

Ophelia breathed deeply, trying to slip into that almost meditative state that helped calm and focus her magic. She and Sunny had spent the last few weeks practicing mental magic, so she had at least a general idea of what she was about to do, but this would be the first time she actually *used* one of these spells on anyone.

"Remember to plan each move you make before you make it once you're within her mind," Sunny said. His mental voice was a growl as if he was irritated, but she could sense the concern beneath it. His presence in her mind felt like a fretting mother hen. *"And do not forget that these types of spells are almost alive; they respond quickly to minute changes within your emotions and the subject's mental state. You must monitor it constantly. You cannot just lay it over her mind and then ignore it."*

"I know," she muttered, shaking her hands out and rolling her neck like she was stretching for a track race. Not too far away, Liana was slumped against a pile of yellowed bones, glaring balefully at them but still refusing to talk. They'd landed in Sunny's home—which was basically just a dry lakebed with a few steaming geysers and piles of gnawed-on bones—a few minutes ago. Corrin was squatting next to Liana, talking to her in a low voice, trying to appeal to her using their shared childhood memories. From the look on his face he was having no success, which she knew had to be hurting him.

Okay. Looks like she really was going to do this.

She called up her memories of mental magic. It was an odd type of spell, the most complex she'd learned yet. She had to use every single type of energy for it to work: Ocean, Sun, Dawn, Earth, Death, and the Emptiness. And she didn't have a set pattern to use for how to weave those threads of energy together—she was just supposed to "attune herself to the magic and the situation" and keep her mind focused on the information she needed to find, blanking out all else.

"I will help you," Sunny said, *"but it must be you who weaves the energy together, because it will be you foraying into the girl-priestess's mind. Now, clear your spirit and focus."*

Corrin rose to his feet with a shake of his head and walked over to her. "I could get nothing from her," he said in a low tone. "It seems that Vie—or, perhaps, my mother—has won her loyalty."

Ophelia nodded, took a deep breath. "Thanks for trying. I guess that means it's my turn." She started toward the former priestess, but Corrin caught her arm. He looked like he wanted to say something for a moment but hesitated.

"I'll be okay," she promised him softly, putting her hand atop his.

They stood like that for a moment, only a few inches apart, his skin warm under her fingers. Then he squeezed her arm lightly and let go. "I will be sure nothing distracts you. You can do this, Ophelia. I believe in you."

She smiled up at him. "Thanks, Corrin."

She strode over to Liana and sat down at her side. This type of magic was easiest to focus through touch, so she plopped a hand atop the girl's flouncy red hair. Liana stared at her with narrowed eyes. "Last chance to talk," Ophelia said.

Liana bared her teeth. "You will get nothing from me, false queen, through speech or through magic."

"We'll see," Ophelia said, and then reached into herself and felt for Sunny's magic, which welled deep within her.

She sat with her magic for a few long moments, her focus turned inward, the outside world fading. She thought about what she wanted. She didn't

need all of Liana's thoughts and memories; that would be overwhelming and unfairly intrusive. She only wanted to know whatever the girl knew about Vie and Emalda and the Bone Crown. She held those images in her mind, pairing them with the emotions she felt for each thing or person.

And the spell's pattern came to her.

Slowly, as if trying not to spook a wild animal, she reached for the threads of magic and began knitting them together, following the pattern that was now hovering at the edges of her mind. She couldn't focus on it directly or it vanished, like a mirage. She had to think of it sort of…sideways. Look at it without looking at it.

She pulled up a thread of Earth, green and rich with the smell of fresh tomato vines and garden dirt. She knotted it together with the lovely summer-night darkness of Death and the pink, refreshing energy of Dawn. She focused all of herself on the magic. The pure, sizzling energy of Emptiness. The *shushing* waves and gull-calls of Ocean. Last of all came the fierce, burning heat of the Sun, the ancestral force of the High Fae. She lost herself to the magic, to the beauty of the pattern they made as she knitted row after row, adding a new thread in here and leaving an old one to the side there—until at last, she was done.

The finished spell hovered within her. Carefully, she pulled it out. When she channeled it through her hand and into Liana, it billowed out like a sheet in the wind, suddenly straining her control. She caught it quickly and tucked it in before it could rip away from her.

Distantly, she registered that she was sweating. She felt drained from her efforts, which made it even harder to concentrate. Impatience burgeoned within her, but she fought it down, forcing herself to maintain her calm control.

The spell shuddered and changed shape, morphing from a sheet into a tunnel of sorts. It pulled her down it and into Liana's mind.

All at once, a new world seemed to snap into place around Ophelia with a sensation like a rubber band rebounding. Disoriented, she squeezed her eyes shut and winced. When she opened them again, she peered around herself to see that she was in a circular white room lined with a dizzying variety of

paintings. The art filled nearly every square inch of the circular walls, and the walls themselves seemed to go up into infinity; there was no ceiling at all, as far as Ophelia could see.

Ophelia started to move toward one of the paintings to get a closer look, then hesitated. She was pretty sure she was in Liana's mind, but she wasn't sure what the spell would permit and what could make it backfire. "Sunny?" she whispered. The walls sucked the word in, muffled it, until she doubted whether she'd spoken aloud at all.

No one answered. She distantly felt Sunny's presence, but it wasn't quite *here.* He had said he wouldn't be able to enter Liana's mind with her, she reminded herself. She would just have to be careful and move slowly, which she could already tell was going to be very hard, given the way a deep curiosity as well as urgent need was tugging her inexorably toward the paintings. Also, she was working against the clock. She could feel her magic draining within her. She wouldn't be able to power the spell, to stay within Liana's mind, for long. She had to finish up and get out before her power ran out, or else…she wasn't sure. She'd be trapped in here forever? Shuddering at the thought, she took a breath to re-center herself, and stepped cautiously toward a painting.

It showed several figures sitting at a table. Ophelia reached out to touch it.

The figures moved.

Ophelia flinched backwards, her eyes widening. The figures froze again as soon as she withdrew her hand. She frowned, tilting her head, and then carefully touched the drawing again.

The figures resumed moving. One picked up a bowl from the table and tipped it at his mouth, as if drinking soup. A smaller person—a girl, with long hair—jumped up to stand. The taller person stood up and put his hands on his hips, frowning down at the girl. She wilted, sitting back in her seat and ducking her head.

This was a memory. Ophelia was looking at a memory. Awe swept over her as she stepped back and craned her neck, looking at all of the paintings. How was she ever supposed to find what she needed amidst all this? And

how would she get up the walls to see any of the paintings higher up? There was no ladder or stairs as far as she could tell.

Frustrated, she gnashed her teeth. “I just need to see the memories about Emalda and Vie!” she shouted—and all at once, the floor beneath her bucked, and the paintings blurred as they raced downward.

She gasped, stumbling before she caught herself with one hand against the floor. It was like being in a super-fast elevator, the paintings were moving past at an impossible speed. She closed her eyes against the rising nausea and remembered to take slow breaths.

Finally, the floor jolted to a stop. She squinted open one eye. New frames surrounded her now, but there were no paintings within them—or rather, there *might* be paintings, but they were covered in some sort of black sludgy stuff.

Ophelia grimaced, then swallowed down her disgust and strode quickly forward, swiping her sleeve across the gross sludge to see what was underneath it.

Emalda’s face stared out at her.

The woman was beautiful in the way Ophelia imagined nightshade would be beautiful, or a glacier. She was distant and beautiful—all poison and jagged edges. Two furred Arctic fox ears rose up above her frost-white hair. Her skin was pale and smooth and blemish-free, and her eyes were black and cold.

Ophelia yelped and jumped back in shock at the sight of her foe, heart thudding as the painted Emalda looked down at something in her hands. Bracing herself, Ophelia quickly swiped her sleeve across that portion of the painting, too, and saw that Emalda was holding a vial full of blackish sludge—the same stuff that was coating the paintings. Her mouth moved. Even though Ophelia couldn’t hear what she was saying, she somehow understood it.

Never fear, little priestess, Emalda said with a smirk in her voice. *You won’t remember any of this.*

And then she tipped the black potion at the painting, and it spread outward from the spot until it coated the frame from edge to edge again.

Ophelia shuddered. It was a memory potion. Emalda had given—forced?—a memory potion on Liana. What was she hiding, though?

Ophelia spun around, looking at all the memories Emalda had tried to erase. There were so *many*, and there was no way to tell which were relevant to her. She couldn't risk missing anything. If Emalda had tried to hide these, that meant any one of them could hold vital and sensitive information…but Ophelia didn't have enough magic to sustain such a long search.

She squared her shoulders and wove a quick telepathic spell. "River," she shouted, hoping the spell could extend outside of this space and into the real world, "if you can hear me, please lend me your magic so I can stay in here longer."

She bit her lip, listening for a response. None came but after a moment she felt a fresh wash of strength bolster the spell. *Yes!* She exulted to herself. Hopefully she'd have long enough to look at everything now.

Quickly, she moved toward another painting and swiped it with her sleeve—which, luckily, came away clean rather than coated in sludge each time. She stood before it long enough to see what secrets it held and then moved on to the next. She did it again and again until her eyes felt dry and gritty and her mind was exhausted from trying to catalog all of the terrible things she was seeing, but at last, she had viewed the memory in every potion-hidden painting. By then, her own magic was long depleted, and River's nearly was too. But the paintings were all clean now, the potion's effects wiped away by Ophelia's efforts, their secrets laid bare. Ophelia wondered if Liana would be able to access these memories again now, too.

Ophelia closed her eyes and used the spell like a rope to pull herself out of Liana's mind. She settled back into her own body, a sensation that felt weirdly like pulling on a big, fuzzy, familiar bathrobe. She kept her eyes closed for a few moments longer as she carefully cut the mental-magic spell loose. It unraveled and fizzled away.

She let out a long, shaky breath—she was utterly exhausted, she realized, shaky and starving—and opened her eyes. It was dark out. She had lost all

sense of time while in Liana's mind, but apparently hours had passed. Which accounted for her being starving, she supposed.

She glanced around. River was curled up at her back, her eyes glazed as if she were in some sort of trance. One of her wings was unconsciously extended to drape over Corrin, who was sitting with his knees pulled up and his arms wrapped around them, his expression set in fierce lines of worry. When he saw she was awake, he lurched to his feet and hurried toward her.

"Are you well?" he asked anxiously, his gaze scanning her. Her cheeks warmed at his concern. Self-consciously, she reached up to adjust her crown, only to remember it was no longer there.

"I'm okay," she answered. "And boy, do I have a lot to tell you."

They nudged River out of her trance, made sure Liana really was asleep, and then settled on the ground not far away so Ophelia could relate her findings.

Emalda and Vie were indeed working together. Liana was working with Vie too, helping him maintain his power, but many times when she thought she was acting at his request it was an order that truly came from Emalda. Emalda had frequent "interviews"—which had looked more like interrogations—with Liana about power dynamics in the kingdom, the status of the priestess' spies, who among the guard were corruptible, which merchants were loyal to Corrin, and dozens of other topics, exhausting every bit of intelligence that Liana had access to as the new High Priestess. Each time, Liana grew concerned during the interview and tried to leave it, and each time, Emalda forced the potion on her so she would forget who she was truly working for. Sometimes, Vie helped his mother administer it.

"That's terribly cruel," Corrin said, his brows drawn together as he looked at the sleeping Liana. "She truly loves him, and he is merely using her."

"Yeah, it sucks," Ophelia said. "I think she might remember it all now, though, when she wakes up, since I cleaned the memories. Maybe now that she knows what's really going on, she'll be less willing to be a part of it. Anyway, that's not all I found. I know what Emalda wants with the Bone Crown."

River's scales lifted slightly out from her body, like a porcupine considering throwing a quill. It made her look larger and more fearsome, though as a dragon she was already huge, not to mention plenty fearsome. *"What plans does that desecrator have for it?"* she hissed, her tail sweeping from side to side in agitation. Ophelia had almost forgotten that the dragons had their own beef with Emalda; they had long heard rumors of her dark experiments when she was High Queen, plus there was the fact that she had forcibly bonded the dragon who had been Monarch before Sunny.

Ophelia grimaced, remembering what she'd learned from conferences between Emalda and Vie that Liana had witnessed. Knowing that her mind would be wiped later, they hadn't bothered to hide much of anything from her. "Emalda can use it to reverse the Royal Rites I've performed," Ophelia said. "She can draw energy out of the Fae lands—weaken the connection between the Fae species and their ancestral forces."

Corrin drew back as if he'd been struck. "That is…despicable," he said.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "It is," she said softly, looking at him. "But *you aren't.*" It felt imperative that she remind Corrin of this—that she made sure he remembered that he was good and kind and a wholly separate person from the rest of his family.

Corrin heard what she said and didn't say, and his face softened a bit.

"So she wishes to use the Bone Crown to weaken the Fae?" River asked.

In Ophelia's head, Sunny stirred. He'd been sluggish and quiet since she ended the spell, as if in hibernation while he waited for his magic to recharge again. *"I fear there may be more at play than just that,"* he said.

"I only know what Liana heard," Ophelia answered both dragons. "They probably had other meetings without her, planning who knows what."

They all traded grim looks. "The question is," Corrin said, raking a hand through his hair, "what do we do about it now that—"

All of the sudden, River's wings snapped out, flared protectively around her as her head jerked up and back.

Ophelia scrambled to her feet. “What? What is it?” she shouted, spinning around to search for whatever danger River had sensed.

River growled, long and low and furious. *“Soldiers,”* she said. *“And I can smell Emalda all over them.”*

CHAPTER 9

OPHELIA

Ophelia dug deep into her magic, trying to dredge up enough to make a fireball to defend herself and her friends. A few sparks flickered into her palms and then blinked out just as quickly. "Sunny?" she asked, still scanning the lake's rim.

He snarled. *"I have nothing left. River likely doesn't either; she channeled it all to us for the mind magic."*

Ophelia wished she was the cussing type, as this situation seemed to warrant it, but her mother had raised her too well. She settled for, "Dang it!" and scooped up a nearby arm-sized bone to defend herself with.

There—a soldier! A High Fae man at the top of the lakebed, tossing a coil of rope down over the steep side. As she watched, he began sliding down, using the rope—which must've been tied to an anchor at the top—to guide himself. Other men quickly mirrored his actions. One of them carried a long pole with a sturdy wire loop at the end, the light of the full moon glinting wickedly off it. It looked like one of those tools they used at animal shelters to catch aggressive dogs, only it was much bigger. Ophelia frowned, staring at it.

"They're wearing Artificer uniforms," Corrin said from next to her. "They *could* be true Artificers, but somehow I doubt it."

Ophelia slapped the bone into her palm, testing its heft. She very much hoped it wasn't a Fae bone but tried not to think about that. "Is that pole-leash an Artificer tool?"

“No,” Sunny growled. *“That is something they use to try to capture dragons.”*

Ophelia inhaled sharply. Now she knew why that tool looked familiar; she’d seen it before, in the hands of the Unmade who’d trapped the Convocation dragons in the cavern.

And now they were coming to use it on River, who had no magic left to defend herself.

“Not on my watch, they’re not,” Ophelia said, and related what Sunny had told her to Corrin.

He drew his sword and eyed the probably-not-Artificers grimly. Perhaps a dozen more were coming down the ropes while several winged Unseelie—from both the beetle and the eagle tribes—were flying toward them, too. Half a dozen of them circled over the top of the lakebed, blocking any hopes of a quick escape via flight. “If my mother and Vie sent them…” He didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to. Ophelia could already picture all of the terrible things Emalda would do to an imprisoned dragon. Force a bond on it, use it as a living weapon. Or even worse, Unmake it. Fury and fear rose in Ophelia at the thought of any of that happening to River.

“Then we fight,” she said. “We won’t let them take River.” More soldiers were pouring down the sides of the lakebed now, rows and rows of them, many carrying wicked-looking weapons and shields meant to protect them from a dragon’s fire. If River had her magic, she probably still could’ve made short work of them, but without it, Ophelia worried their little groups’ odds weren’t great.

River peered down at Ophelia. *“You are stout-hearted, little human,”* she said, *“but you are the true High Queen, and you must not perish in such a small skirmish. More creatures than I have need of you.”*

“She is right,” Sunny said reluctantly, though Ophelia could feel his helpless anger at the realization. His emotions washed over her, reminding her how close he and River had been when he was alive. They had, once upon a time, considered becoming mates.

“I’m not going to *run*,” Ophelia hissed. Running wasn’t in her nature. Especially when it meant abandoning a friend.

Corrin stepped up beside River. “If they capture you, they will take you to my mother, and she will use you to do far worse things to the realm than she could do with merely the Bone Crown.”

Something wrenched inside Ophelia at the knowledge that what he said was true. More and more soldiers were still coming down the ropes, seemingly endless numbers of them. Which meant that Emalda must want a dragon—or Ophelia, or both—very badly, indeed.

“Look,” Corrin said to her now, watching the soldiers begin to approach, “you go, and River and I will cover you so they don’t catch you. Then when you’re far enough away we will shake them off and meet up with you.”

He said it like it was easy, but this was not shaping up to be a fair fight even with a dragon on his side. Her whole body felt hot with anger. Rage buzzed in her ear—but…only in *one* ear?

She frowned and put a hand to her cheek. It wasn’t rage that was buzzing—it was her *earring.* The diamond-shaped Artifact made from Sunny’s bone, the one that had some unknown purpose that was supposed to reveal itself at a later point. Apparently that point was now. She unhooked it eagerly from her ear and held it in front of her, desperately hoping it was some sort of weapon they could use to get out of this situation. She felt it pulling at her. It had a cost, all Artifacts had a cost, and although she didn’t know what she was giving, she offered it whatever it needed to activate.

She felt dizzy all of the sudden. Something ephemeral left her. The sensation was disorienting and very strange but not exactly painful.

“An hour of your life,” Sunny said, sounding unsettled. *“You have given up an hour of your life.”*

She shook herself and looked down at the earring. “For what?” she asked. But even as she spoke the earring shook and warmed until it was too hot to touch and she had to drop it. Instead of falling to the rocky ground, it rose up until it was hovering high above them, around the level of River’s chest—and then it *exploded* into a furnace of light too dazzling to look at.

Ophelia flinched away and squeezed her eyes shut. Distantly, she heard River's startled snort and the soldiers shouting. And then came another sound, a roar like an earthquake that thrummed in the space next to her heart even as it rattled her bones.

The light faded. In its place stood Sunny.

Ophelia gaped at him. She had almost forgotten what he looked like in his body. He was…*glorious.* Majestic. Terrifying. He was larger and bulkier than River, and his scales had the blazing brilliance of the sun itself. His eyes glittered a fierce molten gold. Above them rose a crest like a crown, scaled and spiked, with backswept horns rising from it. A row of wicked bone spikes marched down his spine to his tail. His wings flared wide in challenge. He was a creature made for war, and he was *angry.*

"SUNNY!" she shrieked, because he was *alive*—but no, not quite, not exactly. His body was fuzzy and dreamlike around the edges. He…wasn't alive? But then how was he back in his body?

He snaked his head down to her. She shuddered, just a little, at the magnificence of him. This was the creature who had lived in her head for weeks, who was intrigued by *Gilmore Girls* and who somewhat-patiently taught her magic spells—but he was also a timeless, ageless being, a clawed and toothed force of nature.

"Hello, little rider," he said to her, his voice and presence thrumming with pleasure in her mind.

She ran to him. Heedless of the dangerous situation and the soldiers all around, she threw her arms around one of his legs. He stood very still, probably so as not to impale her with his enormous talons. "How?" she managed.

"The Artifact. From what I am sensing, it gives me a magical body for an hour, in exchange for an hour of your life."

"Worth it," she mumbled into his scales, filled with too many emotions to name.

A shadow fell over her. She tilted her head back. River stood next to them, silently touching her muzzle to Sunny's. Something silent and fraught with

emotion passed between the two dragons, then River stood back and the fierce look returned to her eyes. *"Take her to safety, my Monarch,"* she said. *"We will join you in a moment."*

Ophelia protested. "Wait, but there's two of you now—we could probably take them—"

"Maybe so," said Corrin, who was looking a bit paler at Sunny's appearance—understandable, since the last time they'd been face-to-face was when Corrin had inadvertently caused Sunny's physical death. "But with those numbers, the fight would take too long for comfort—likely too long for Sunny to keep his form without activating the Artifact again—and they might harm or capture you during it. We cannot afford to risk you so, My Queen."

"We will fight together another day," Sunny promised. *"When we have* our *magic. For now—shall we fly?"*

A little thrill went through Ophelia at his words. Fly. She was going to fly on *Sunny.*

She glanced back over her shoulder at Corrin, who was watching the soldiers' approach, their weapons and shields held before them. "Don't die," she warned him. "I mean it, Corrin, the realm needs you. *I* need you."

He granted her a small smile. "For you, I will promise anything."

Before she could change her mind, she climbed up onto Sunny's back. He twisted his neck around to help her up, boosting her with his snout. As she settled into the spot just behind his neck—a spot where it felt deeply right to sit, a spot that had been made for her—the first volley of arrows clattered against his scales.

He spread his wings and launched into the sky. As he wheeled around, gaining altitude, Ophelia just had time to notice that Liana was no longer laying asleep where she had been, but was gone—fled, probably, when she'd seen the soldiers approaching. Ophelia hoped she might come to her senses and stop helping Emalda and Vie now that she could remember what they'd done to her. And then Sunny leveled out, and there was no room in her mind to think of anything but flying on her dragon.

The sky opened wide to welcome them. Suddenly, it seemed like nothing else was right in the world but this: the amazing creature who was both below her and nestled in her mind, the feel of the wind on her face, the stars above and the ground far below. She was made for this. She was made for Sunny, and he was made for her. Together, they reveled in it.

The flying Unseelie attempted an attack, but Sunny was too fast, too fierce. He wove between them, shredding one with his claws, twisting sinuously to flick his tail at another who'd nearly come in grabbing distance of Ophelia. One of them had some sort of longbow. The arrows it fired seemed to be some kind of armor-piercing type, because when he shot at Sunny, they splintered right through a scale and drove a good six inches deep into his skin. Sunny snarled in pain and anger—she sensed it as if she'd been the one injured. He could still be hurt in this form, then.

The archer, who was an eagle Unseelie with reddish-brown wings, loaded another arrow and sighted. When this arrow flew, it launched straight at her. Sunny jerked away and the arrow drove into his neck instead, just above where Ophelia sat. Sunny shuddered, and she realized that the arrows must be coated with or made of something toxic to dragons. Furious, she latched her hands around the second arrow and pulled with all her might. She currently had almost no magic to speak of, but she did have enough to smooth the arrow's backwards passage a bit, and it came free without causing too much more damage. Sunny's opalescent blood seeped over his scales and stained her hands, smelling just as she remembered: a mix of gasoline and some sort of fruity alcohol drink. She thought that if this body of his died, it would merely make the earring's magic hour expire early, but there was no way she was going to let him go through dying again whether or not it was permanent. She turned toward the eagle Unseelie and hurled the arrow, adding every last drop of magic she could access to steer the arrow on its course.

The arrow struck true, driving into the shoulder of the Unseelie before it could dodge out of the way. It shrieked and spiraled downward. Sunny caught one last beetle Unseelie in his jaws and bit down hard enough to make an ominous crunch, then dropped the limp remains back to the lakebed, making a hacking noise as if the Unseelie tasted rotten.

And then they were free, soaring into the sky, their pursuers limping back down to the fight with River and Corrin. A large part of her was exulting in the glorious feeling of flying with her dragon, but as they blazed like a comet toward the horizon, she glanced back over her shoulder to the lakebed. “Corrin,” she whispered, “River. Be safe.”

Corrin watched Ophelia leave on Sunny—no, Sun in the Black Sky was his name when he looked like this, ancient and fierce and worthy of a prince’s respect—and smiled grimly at the carnage they left behind. They would not be followed from the air. Now, he would make sure that they would not be followed from the ground, either.

He pivoted, sword still in hand, and faced the oncoming soldiers.

“Ready?” said River, snorting a burst of smoke with the word, crouching down and lashing her tail like a lion about to pounce. Her eyes were bright with a ferocious eagerness. Corrin felt the same wild anticipation thrum in his own veins; finally, something he *could* do.

“I am ready. Which ones would you like?” he asked, eyeing the soldiers as they began to speed up in their advance, sending the Fae with shields to the front.

River tipped her head at a few stragglers, four or five High Fae who were cautiously circling around toward their rear, probably either trying to ambush them from behind or avoid the fight entirely. *“You take the little sneaky ones,”* she said, and flexed her claws. *“The rest are mine. Fight well, prince, and I will bear you out on my back proudly when we are done.”*

He felt oddly touched. “I would be honored.”

“Enough talk. I hunger,” River said, and pounced. It was a magnificent thing to behold, an arc of flashing blue scales and then the ground shaking with her landing. She tore into the soldiers, stomping and biting. Corrin spared a moment to let out a shout of admiration and encouragement before he wheeled around to focus his efforts on the soldiers who were trying to

slip around the back. Two of them carried those abhorrent long poles, probably meant to catch a dragon's talon or the spurs on their wings, both spots that were more vulnerable to injury than the rest of a dragon. Simmering with anger at the thought of anyone trying to maul River in such a way, he hefted his sword and charged at the group.

They were soldiers, but he could tell quickly from their reactions that they were not seasoned by actual battle. They must be new, then, probably recruited by Vie—perhaps even forcibly recruited, judging by the obvious terror on the face of one. Corrin decided to take it easy on that young Fae. When the Fae tried to lash out with the pole in his hands, Corrin ducked beneath the blow, wrapped one hand around the weapon, and used the momentum of the swing to tear it out of the man's hands. Then Corrin hurled it as far away as he could before spinning back around to bring the pommel of his sword down hard at the back of the man's skull.

The other four soldiers had scrambled backwards at his initial attack but had begun forming a loose circle around him while he took down their comrade. One had a massive, clear shield that covered his entire body, with only a slit in it for arrows to be launched through. Corrin dodged aside just in time to avoid a crossbow bolt, then crossed blades with the soldier who'd been to his right. She was a river nymph, with clumpy algae hair and a rainbow of scales for skin. When his sword bit through her sloppy defense, she bled saltwater. She cursed and growled and thrust her blade at him again, still sloppy but with more power behind it, and he couldn't quite twist away in time. A line of pain opened across his arm. Another soldier, one that had been lurking behind him, took the opportunity to strike out with a mace-like weapon while he was distracted. Corrin tucked into a quick roll, and the heavy spiked ball crashed into the ground.

Panting, he leapt back to his feet and quickly dispatched the nymph with a swift stab to her heart, dealing as merciful a death as was possible in war. He hated to kill one of his own people, but it was not possible to be a peaceable prince when someone was attacking you. In this situation, to save River, to save his High Queen…yes, he would do what needed to be done.

He dove forward, wasting no more time on regret as the other soldier—this one a boar Unseelie with long tusks arcing down from his jaw—started to heft the mace back up. Corrin sliced across his wrist, making the man howl

and drop the mace's chain, and then followed it up with a powerful kick to his chest. The blow knocked him back into the soldier behind the shield. They'd been just about to fire another crossbow bolt, and it ended up stabbing their comrade instead.

Breathing heavily, Corrin took advantage of the brief pause in the fight to check on River.

She was reared up on her hind legs, head thrown back, fangs shining in the moonlight. From one talon dangled a pole, its loop caught fast, a High Fae soldier clinging to the tool for all he was worth. River slammed her feet back to the earth with a sound like a great cataclysm. Soldiers went flying and many of them did not rise again. She snaked her head around and snapped at the man with the pole, successfully tearing him away but also injuring her talon in the process. She howled in pain as blood that looked like liquid starlight splattered on the ground. Two more soldiers with poles rushed in toward her back legs, to injure her further.

Desperation and rage rose up tangled within Corrin. He spun back to his own opponents to finish his fight so he could go to River's aid. There were three of them left now. One was on the ground, injured by his friends' arrow and likely out of commission. Two more were behind the shield. Without further thought, Corrin launched himself full-on at the shield, bellowing a war cry as he flew through the air, and brought his sword down on the shield with all the power he had in him.

The shield shuddered and made a crackling noise. It would not be destroyed by such a blow—it had been made to stand against dragons, after all—but the soldiers were unused to carrying it, and were gripping it in all the wrong places, which meant the blow sent painful reverberations through the shield. Both soldiers yelped and involuntarily released it.

One of them was more ready for this than the other. That soldier lunged forward as soon as Corrin's feet touched the ground again and swung his sword like a bat against Corrin's hilt. The prince's sword flew out of his hands. The soldier drew back for another hit, thinking his victory was assured, but Corrin swept his twin daggers out from their sheaths, bringing them up in an X shape to parry the soldier's blow. Sparks flew, metal screeching against metal. Corrin kneed the soldier hard in the stomach,

followed up with an elbow to the nose that made the soldier drop to his knees, eyes tearing and nose gushing blood. The last soldier was dispatched by an expertly thrown dagger to the neck.

Then he retrieved his weapons and ran to help River.

Pebbles and bones and dirt clods skittered under his footsteps. There were perhaps two or three dozen soldiers left alive ahead of him, and many more lying dead on the ground—but the ones left alive had retrieved all of the poles and weapons from those who'd perished, and they bristled with them now, huddled into a mob that River could not penetrate lest she harm herself. As he watched, she snarled and snapped at the group, but one of the soldiers hurled a small bottle of some unknown substance at her when she came close enough. Only when it shattered on her snout and exploded did Corrin recognize it as a potion bomb—designed to detonate on impact. She roared, eyes watering from the smoke and the pain as more blood ran in rivulets across her now midnight-blue scales.

Corrin felt his lips curl into his own snarl. He was going to *end* these soldiers.

While River was distracted, another bottle arced up from the group toward her face. Corrin drew back his hand and threw one of his daggers. His mother had taught him this, he recalled as he watched it spin perfectly toward its target.

Metal hit glass. His dagger fell back toward the ground. The bottle exploded in midair, and rained relatively harmless glass shrapnel onto River's tough scales. The soldiers shouted and lifted their arms and shields to protect themselves. While they were distracted, Corrin ran for River's caught talon.

Her claws drove gashes into the ground. She was still blinded from the first bottle's explosion, shaking her head and howling, and Corrin wasn't certain she would be able to tell him from an enemy. Without time to worry about whether it was proper, he laid a hand on her leg and *willed* her to know him. He took care not to do it too forcefully—he did not want her to think he was trying to force a bond—but he felt her leg and talons go still and sensed the moment when she recognized him.

He withdrew his hand and jumped over her claws until he reached the talon that had been injured.

It had not yet been torn out, but it surely would be if the noose continued to tighten and tangle around it. The pole was half-smashed and mauled, but remained intact enough to do serious damage. Sneering at it, Corrin set to work with his remaining dagger, sawing through the tough cable to free River. It was hard work made slippery by River's blood, and he cut himself more than once, but River shielded him while he worked, lashing out with teeth and tail whenever any of the soldiers tried to get near enough to stop him.

He cut through the last bit of cable and yanked the rest of it away. Then, standing, he drew an arm across his forehead to mop up the sweat, and assessed the situation.

Perhaps fifteen soldiers were left, but they had survived for a reason; they were the best. They dodged each of River's attacks and used every opportunity to lure her into tiring herself while they lashed out with dozens of small cuts. One of her wing spurs had been caught by a pole, and blood gushed from the spot as that wing hung awkwardly, held away from her body. If it was injured much more, her flying might be hindered, removing the possibility of escape.

They needed to go.

But they also needed to be certain that they wouldn't be tracked or followed. Corrin paused for a moment, deliberating, scanning the soldiers and thinking—and then he knew what he needed to do.

"River!" he shouted. "Be ready to fly!"

She grunted in acknowledgement as she swept her claws at a soldier who had come too close. Corrin ran for the spot where his second dagger had fallen and bent to scoop it up, then turned the motion into a roll. He came up right in front of the soldier who had thrown the two bomb-potions. There was another one tied to a cushioned harness on his chest. Quickly, before the man could react, Corrin sliced through the straps and yanked the harness away, freeing the explosive and then swiftly retreating. The glass bottle felt unusually heavy in his palm, the liquid within it thin and viscous like oil.

As he ran back toward River, he scanned the shore above the lakebed. *There.* The spot where the soldiers had rappelled down was already destabilized by all of the activity; it would be susceptible to further destabilization. Keeping the potion cupped tight at his chest, he used his free hand to climb on River's back as quickly as he could. "Fly to the top, there!" he yelled, pointing.

River spread her wings and lurched upward. Her right wing flapped harder than her left, which she held more gingerly due to its injury. *"What is your plan?"* she called to him as she landed hard at the spot he'd indicated. He slid down off her and hefted the explosive.

"Can you punch a hole as deep as you can, right here?" he asked.

She looked at the bottle then and understood his intentions. With a draconic grin, she lifted the claws of her uninjured front leg and drove one talon down as far as it would go into the earth. *"Climb back up, princeling,"* she told him, eyeing the soldiers who were already beginning to scale the shore's walls after them. *"You will want to be in the air when this happens."*

Corrin did as she said. They climbed into the sky, but not too high, and as soon as they had enough altitude River turned and curled her wings close for a blazingly fast dive right over the weakened shore wall.

Corrin aimed carefully. At the perfect moment, he dropped the potion. His aim was true; the potion dropped all the way to the bottom of the hole and exploded with a muffled boom like thunder, its force shuddering through cracks in the earth until the whole wall sheered off in a landslide. The soldiers were swiftly buried, not a one of them moving fast enough to escape.

Corrin sat back and took a breath. "What was it Cricket liked to say? 'Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy.'"

River chuckled, a big booming dragon noise that made the scales beneath him shudder in mirth. *"Nicely done,"* she told him, and they wheeled off to find their friends.

CHAPTER 10

OPHELIA

When Sunny's hour was nearly up, Ophelia landed on a large ice floe and slid off his back to stand in front of him. Silently, he lowered his head to her and she wrapped her arms as far as they could go around his muzzle. His scales lightened to a dull wheat gold with his melancholy as he blew a gentle breath of hot air over her.

"I could give up another hour of my life," Ophelia said, though she already knew he would deny her. "I could share my life with you. It's unfair that you should only have your body for an hour at a time, when others have need of you."

"I would not rob from your life to extend my own. And in any case, this Artifact is expended for now. I sense that it will only work perhaps once each day, so we must be wise with its use."

She pressed her cheek against his scales. "I don't want you to go," she whispered.

"Would that we could have this always, little one," he said, *"but I am glad we got to have at least this hour. It was truly magnificent, to fly with you."*

Ophelia swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut. A tear traced down her cheek. She barely felt the chill in the air, didn't even register the gentle rocking of the chunk of glacier beneath them. She centered all of her senses on Sunny. The feel of his smooth scales beneath her hands. The scent of his smoky breath. The indestructability of him; the way she felt like they were a single being when they flew together.

And then he gave a heavy exhale and faded away.

The only thing left was her diamond-shaped earring hovering in midair before her. It slowly lowered to the ground and dropped with a quiet *clink* to the ice. Ophelia wrapped her arms around her chest and just stood there for a moment, feeling unbearably alone on an ice floe in the middle of the ocean.

"You are never alone," whispered Sunny in her mind.

She smiled a little, but the expression was shaky at the corners. "I know."

"And also," he said, grumbling a little now in the way that meant he was having mushy, un-draconic sentiments and didn't want them to show, *"you should get yourself together. It is unseemly for a warrior-queen to weep."*

She snorted a laugh. "Shut up. I can cry if I want to."

She picked up the earring, put it back on, and waited for River and Corrin.

Ophelia had been relatively confident in their ability to handle themselves against a force of that size, but still, when she saw River's sinuous blue shape on the horizon, she exhaled a sigh of relief. Her magic had not yet recharged enough to send telepathic words to River, but she did have just enough to extend a single thread of Emptiness magic upwards, which was as good as a beacon.

River hovered above the ice floe and then dropped onto it heavily enough to make it rock dangerously. Water lapped over the sides and Ophelia hurried to mount River's back before her boots got soaked. Corrin's smile was pure relief when he extended a hand down to help her up.

"Are you well?" he asked, at the same time she said, "You're both okay, right?"

They laughed, a bit self-consciously. River snorted and lifted off. Ophelia noticed that she seemed to be favoring one of her wings, and frowned.

"Is she injured?" Sunny growled in her head, suddenly very present.

"Sunny is concerned, River. Did you get hurt?"

She huffed, and now she was the one who sounded self-conscious. *"Nothing serious. My wing and two of my talons were injured, but it's nothing that can't be healed by a bit of magic once I've had the chance to recharge. By tomorrow midmorning or so I should be completely recuperated."*

"Good," Sunny said gruffly, and vanished back into wherever he went in Ophelia's mind when he no longer wanted to be present.

Ophelia and Corrin updated each other on how their individual battles had gone. When they were finished, there was a long pause.

"So," Ophelia said at last. "Vie and Emalda are working together. They want to capture a dragon and they've sent soldiers—posing as Artificers, although they may or may not be looking for bones, too—into the Scorched Lands. They've promoted Liana to Head Priestess."

"Which is *illegal,*" Corrin pitched in, sounding affronted. "The royals are not supposed to interfere with the priestesses."

"Right," Ophelia acknowledged. "Lots of illegal stuff going on here, I'm guessing. Anyway, they promoted her, and now they're using the priestess' resources to achieve their own ends. What those ends are, we still don't know exactly. Is the Unmaking a way to punish those who would interfere with Vie's rule? Is it more experimentation? Is it the means to some sort of end we can't yet imagine?" She shook her head and blew out a frustrated breath. The more discoveries and secrets they uncovered, the more questions they ended up with.

"I think we have come to the end of our own resources," Corrin said grimly. "We cannot fight my mother *and* a usurper on our own, especially now that they have the Bone Crown."

"We need allies," Ophelia concurred. "Lots of them. So…I suppose the next question is, how do we get more allies?"

Corrin peered off into the distance. They were out over the ocean now, and the chunks of glacier ice had vanished, replaced by a glassy-smooth ocean. Soon they would be back at Dominion. "There are many who I believe

would be loyal to me even if I am a prince in exile," Corrin said slowly, "but I think Vie is arresting them."

"Like the jeweler?" Ophelia asked, remembering the old man who Vie's soldiers had tried to arrest in front of his family. She could practically feel her hackles rise just thinking of it.

"Yes. The other shops and homes I saw shuttered or broken into…an unsettling number of their owners would likely be considered loyalists."

Ophelia's eyes narrowed. "So if we want allies, we need to go and get them before Vie locks them away. Or hands them over to Emalda." She felt suddenly charged with purpose; clarity flushed through her, driving her to do something, to save those who needed to be saved. "In order to do that, we need somewhere safe for our allies to stay—a base of operations. Somewhere we can get them to quickly without having to ferry loads of them on River."

"Thank you," River said dryly.

"Yes," Corrin said, eyes alight now, his expression much more optimistic than it had been. "After we get them all out of the city and to a safe place, I can help make a plan that optimizes the resources and talents they can offer to help us get the crown back and plan the most effective method of attack."

"And I just got the *perfect* idea for where to put our base," Ophelia said with a grin. The shoreline of Dominion was coming into view, and River veered low, her wings almost touching the tips of the waves to avoid detection. "River, could you set down on the beach?" Ophelia asked.

River did. Ophelia swung down, shucked off her boots and socks and rolled her pants up, and waded into the surf. Corrin watched from the shore, mystified but trusting.

She took a deep breath and stuck her face in the water. She yelled as loud as she could: "Sea sprites! We need your help, please!" The sound was greatly muffled by the water so that no one on land would be able to hear it, but she knew that water was an excellent conductor of sound, plus she thought the sea sprites were probably some of the most attuned to their environment among any Fae species.

Sure enough, a pod of them swam up to her just a few minutes later. Well, they didn't exactly *swim*—it was more like undulating, or drifting on some unseen current. They looked a lot like jellyfish, only lit up from within by a sparkling multitude of colors.

"Hi!" Ophelia said when they'd drawn near. "Thanks for coming. We want to stop Vie and Emalda and the Unmaking curse, but we need a base to do it—somewhere safe where they're unlikely to find us. A sea cave might be just what we need. I thought you might know where we could find one?"

The sea sprites undulated a little more, their colors flickering quickly as if they were conferring. Then, after a moment, they zoomed away down the shore.

Ophelia splashed back to where River and Corrin were waiting. "Follow them!" she said with a grin, climbing up on the dragon's back.

River stayed on the ground to avoid potential detection, her long, loping strides eating up the distance as they traveled along the shore. The beach arched upwards, turning into rocky cliffs where fiercer waves crashed against the rocks below. At a spot where the cliffs were dappled with what looked like some sort of chalky white minerals, the sea sprites slowed to a stop. As River, Corrin, and Ophelia stood at the edge of the cliff peering down, the ocean sucked away as if funneling down a drain, revealing a gaping hole in the cliff's side. A sea cave—one that would be well-hidden and probably uncharted, and therefore safe from Vie and Emalda.

Ophelia raised a fist and quietly cheered. Corrin smiled at her, true admiration in his eyes, and she blushed a little. River, for her part, was far more practical in her reaction.

"Once our magic recovers tomorrow, we can carve some hidden stairs in the cliffside so our allies can get down."

Ophelia nodded and tore her gaze away from Corrin. River flew them all down to the water's surface to thank the sea sprites, who managed to communicate through their strange undulating dance that the ocean would stay back from this spot even during high tide so that it would not flood. And then Ophelia and Corrin spent the next few minutes exploring their new home base.

“This place is huge!” Ophelia shouted, glee humming through her. She finally felt like she could actually do this—could actually save Charassi. This cave was just a starting point but it was a pretty darn good one.

“Large enough to hold our allies from Dominion plus a few dragons, easily,” Corrin agreed with a pleased expression.

Ophelia clapped her hands together. “What now? We go sneak into the city and start rescuing people, right?”

Corrin held up a hand. “Not just yet. First I’ll need to make a list of the people to extract, and then we’ll need to create a map of the safest ways to escort them out of the city, group by group, so they—and we—won’t be caught.”

Ophelia grimaced. Corrin was right, but planning wasn’t her thing and she didn’t want to waste another minute, if it could be helped. They huddled together and began to plot out how they would rescue their allies from the clutches of Vie’s soldiers.

When they sat back about an hour later, Corrin looked more tired than ever, but Ophelia was practically buzzing with adrenaline. Before them was a piece of parchment—because of course Corrin carried blank scrolls on his person—with the names of potential allies to be rescued. They had also drawn a rough map in one of the more muddy spots in the cave, outlining the best routes to direct the people to.

“Great!” Ophelia said, putting her hands on her hips as she looked over their work with satisfaction. “I’ll take the people in the southern half, and you can take the northern half. Let’s go.” She picked up the list and tore it carefully in half, handing the names from the southern side of town over to Corrin.

He looked alarmed. “My Queen, we cannot possibly go *right now*.”

Her brows drew together. “What do you mean? You said we had to make the plan, and we’ve made the plan, so now it’s time to act. It’s nice and dark outside—the best time to sneak in unseen.”

River, who was resting at the mouth of the cave, made a dismissive noise. *“Humans and Fae are too weak and squashy to go anywhere with so little*

protection. You should wait until your magic is recharged, Ophelia, and then go extract these people."

Ophelia could hardly believe what she was hearing. "We can't wait another day to do this! Every hour, Vie is arresting more and more of these people." She shook her half of the list at them. Her mind felt painfully sharp with the need to accomplish something—to prove to herself that she *could* save everyone. They needed to move now.

"I'm afraid River is right," Corrin said, sounding regretful but resolute. "We will go at dawn."

She bristled at his tone of command. Her eyes narrowed. "I'm still the queen, right? I could just pull rank again."

"Not in this, Ophelia," he said, looking sympathetic but not budging an inch. "Going out there too soon, with no magic—that puts you in too much danger. You would overextend yourself, and that could get you and Sun in the Black Sky captured, and if you are captured, you can help no one. Loyal as I am to you, my greatest duty is still to put your well-being first."

She hesitated, torn between the need to act—to save *someone* when so many of her people were at risk—and to listen to what she knew was a solid strategy.

Finally, she threw her hands up in the air. "Fine," she said. "Fine. In the morning."

Corrin's shoulders relaxed, and she realized he had been holding a lot of tension in them earlier—probably because of how he hated to naysay her. She felt bad at that; he had done nothing but support her, even though she had been given the crown that he'd worked his entire life to earn.

They busied themselves with brainstorming a few ideas for what plans might work to find the crown once they had a larger group on their side, and then they found a relatively dry slab of stone to sleep on.

Corrin and Ophelia slept side by side. For warmth, supposedly, and also for protection—but Ophelia truthfully just enjoyed having him near. She felt at ease with him there, and not only because she knew he would keep her safe. For the first few minutes after they lay down, she played with the idea of

scooting just a little closer and seeing if he did too. They would be even more warm if they slept right up against each other. And then that might lead to kissing. And she wanted very, very much to kiss Greater Prince Corrin of Charassi.

But she spent too long turning the idea over and she realized the moment passed her by when Corrin's breathing slowed into the rhythm of sleep. She ruefully closed her eyes and tried to get some rest herself. It didn't work, though. Her mind was very much awake and wouldn't stop tormenting her with new details of what could be happening to their allies even now as Ophelia and Corrin and River all slept.

A slight breeze found its way into the cave. It rustled her half of the list, which was pinned under a rock just a few feet away.

An idea—a terrible one, but the sort of terrible that is also possibly good and definitely irresistible—crept into her mind. She could take her half of the list, sneak past the sleeping Corrin and the meditating River, who was in a trance that would help her heal and recharge. Ophelia could go into the town and start extracting people right now. She could be done by sunrise, and then, with her magic recharged, she could help Corrin extract his half even faster.

She'd be careful. She wouldn't get caught. She'd simply do what needed to be done. She was the queen, and these people were *her* people. She had a responsibility to them—and danger or no danger, she simply couldn't lie here and rest while they could be facing arrest or worse. She remembered the terrible lurching and the empty eyes of the Unmade roaming the streets of Dominion, and the memory sealed her decision.

She silently got to her feet, retrieved the list, and snuck out of the cavern.

CHAPTER 11

OPHELIA

Sunny roused right around the time Ophelia was tiptoeing around River.

"You appear to be sneaking out," he observed. Ophelia clapped both hands over her mouth and barely avoiding shrieking in surprise. She had been so focused on not drawing River's attention or waking Corrin that Sunny's sudden rousing startled her far more than it normally would. She took a deep breath, finished edging around River, and hurried as fast as she dared down the narrow and rocky beach.

"I *am* sneaking out," she replied to Sunny when she was a safe distance away. She let her determination shine through to Sunny, showing him that she wouldn't be dissuaded, that this was something she *had* to do.

"I was not trying to dissuade you, merely clarifying the situation," he said, sounding utterly reasonable. Suspiciously so. *"Carry on."*

She hesitated as she eyed the cliffside above her. There was no easy place to climb up. That was fine; the city of Dominion was further west from here, anyway. Surely there was a path up from the beach somewhere. She started jogging along the shoreline. "Really? I would've thought you'd be on their side." Sunny had been resting and recharging earlier when she, Corrin, and River had discussed their options, so she filled him in now on their original plan to wait until tomorrow to save the people who needed to be saved *tonight.*

"I see," he said when she had finished. *"I think their plan is better than yours, and I worry that it is indeed unwise for you to go into the city on*

your own before our magic has finished recharging."

She bristled, but before she could speak, Sunny continued.

"However, I understand your sense of urgency, and ultimately you are my rider, not them. If you truly feel this is best, I will trust you and help you how I can."

Relieved, Ophelia exhaled. "Thank you." Then she hesitated. "But…I don't want to make you take sides against River. I know how the two of you feel about each other."

"Dragons don't let sentiment get in the way of necessary action. River may be miffed, but it won't harm our relationship. I will do what I must and she will do what she must. It is simple."

"Human relationships aren't that simple. Or," she added, thinking of Corrin and his family, "Fae relationships."

"Oh, don't misunderstand me. I meant that the logic of dragons' actions are usually simple—our relationships, on the other hand, can be just as complicated as any species'. More, even, with our past."

"Your past? You mean the Exile?" He'd told her a bit about it, the event when the dragons had been swept from their collapsing home world and stranded on Charassi.

"That did rather complicate many things, yes."

She eyed the beach ahead of her. The journey to the city would take a bit of time, and she could use something to distract her from dwelling on the confrontation that she would probably have with Corrin once he discovered what she'd done. "Tell me more about it?" she asked.

"The Exile, or dragon relationships?"

"Both."

"Curious tonight, are we?" he said, but there was an indulgent tone to his voice. Sunny did enjoy acting like a professor at times, especially when his student was willing to listen. *"As you know, the ancestral forces each created their own species. The Sun fashioned High Fae from light motes*

and gave them gifts of creativity and craftsmanship, the Dawn made pixies from dewdrops and gave them intuition into the emotions and mental states of others, and so on. But the Emptiness stood apart from the other forces, and what it fashioned was entirely different."

"It made dragons."

"Yes, but not from anything natural. Instead, the Emptiness made us from the nothingness of the universe. There was nothing in that great space between the stars, and then in a moment, there were dragons. In a way, the Emptiness fashioned us from parts of itself. It made us unique—and it made us much more powerful than other creatures."

Ophelia knew this part. "Because you can wield magic, right? And no one else can."

"Correct. Fae species maintain a spiritual connection to their ancestral forces, and that connection heightens the natural talents they were given—but that is all. Dragons, on the other hand, can absorb the energy given off by all of the ancestral forces and spin it into magic."

"I'm guessing the other ancestral forces weren't too happy about that."

"They were not. Some of our legends say that as we grew more powerful, the forces feared we were a threat to the other creatures of the realms—that we would rise up and overpower them all. They also thought it was unfair that we would have such an immense advantage. Some of our histories say that those forces banded together to destroy us; others say that the Emptiness itself believed us too powerful, regretted creating us, and moved to eradicate us itself."

Ophelia frowned. "That's awful. I'm sorry." She couldn't imagine how it would feel to believe that the person—or force, or whatever—who created you was sorry you'd been born.

Above her, the cliffside became less steep and jagged. Soon she would be able to climb it.

"We are not overly sentimental about it," Sunny assured her. *"And in any case, the story is not over yet. The Emptiness, or perhaps the other forces, caused our sun to implode. It was going to destroy our world, and we had*

no way to escape it. We made our peace and prepared to face our end. Hatchlings nested under their parents' wings, and our Monarch flew out to meet the imploding star, so that he would be the first to die."

Something stirred within Ophelia: awe, she thought. "Wow."

"The Emptiness saw our bravery and nobility in the face of our destruction and, at the last moment, chose to spare us. It ripped open a tear in the realm and sent us hurtling through it. Those of us who survived the journey found ourselves stranded in Charassi."

"Those who survived? Some of you died?"

"Not all of us arrived in Charassi," Sunny corrected. *"We still do not know what happened to the others. There are theories among our scholars that they may have been displaced in space, or time, or both. Travel through a tear in the universe is not without risks, after all."*

"Oh! Hey, maybe that's where Earth gets its legends of dragons from!" Ophelia said excitedly as she scrambled up the cliff, which was now a shallow, rocky embankment. "Maybe some of those dragons ended up on ancient Earth. *Tons* of civilizations on Earth have, completely independently, mythologized some concept of a dragonlike creature—maybe it's not a coincidence. Maybe they were actually present there at some point in the past."

"It is possible. It would be terrible for them, though—to be stranded alone, rather than with the rest of their species."

"That would be pretty lonely," she agreed. She reached the top of the embankment and peered around to orient herself. The skyline of Dominion was not far from here, maybe just a twenty-minute run.

"You also asked about dragon relationships," Sunny nudged, still in his full professor mode. It was Ophelia's turn to be indulgent, smiling as she nodded for him to continue. *"It is rare for a dragon to take a soulmate, as it is a bond that is complete in all ways; any title or property or claim that one dragon has, the other one is entitled to as well, for as long as they both live."*

"And dragons live an awfully long time."

"That we do. More often, dragons have short-term pairings and only stay together until their hatchlings have learned to fly. Afterwards they part ways. The hatchlings, though, maintain a deeper bond—brothers and sisters from the same nest often stay close to each other all their lives. Dragons may not be a sentimental species, but we do put much weight on family. It is part of the reason that the war on Charassi after we arrived during the Exile was so violent; when the Fae attacked any one of us, they attacked all of us. We could not simply brush that insult off."

Ophelia mused on that for a moment. "I would think that the Unmade trapping the Convocation would have more of an effect, then. That was an attack, wasn't it?"

"It has been so long since we were truly challenged by a real enemy that I fear the Convocation has grown somewhat complacent, unwilling to stir from their usual patterns. But if one of us were killed by the Unmade, or Emalda or Vie…I suspect the dragons would bring a reckoning on them as you cannot imagine."

Ophelia sighed, frustrated. "I wish they would help us bring that reckoning now, instead of waiting for a dragon to die first."

"You must remember that we are not human," Sunny said. *"Our lives are so long, our perspectives so vast, that what you might see as interminable hesitation is but the moment between action and reaction for us."*

"By the time the Convocation 'reacts,' who knows how many Fae will have fallen!" She clenched her jaw. "Sorry. I know it's not your fault, I know you can't force them to help us. I'm just frustrated."

"Frustration is one emotion that dragons and humans share," he said, and then they were silent until they reached Dominion's city wall.

It was an easy wall to scale. It hadn't been meant for actual defense, more to simply mark the city's boundaries, and Ophelia was up and over it as easily as if it was a track hurdle. She perched on the top of it for a moment, looking out over the city she was responsible for protecting.

At the moment, it was a dim, flickering, and ominously quiet city. Normally it was lit up by street lanterns, but now many of them were out—several of

them shattered, glass shards lying in the street along with other debris. Nowhere did she see anyone out on the streets, except for a few soldiers on patrol. It would make it both easier and harder to slip through the city without being spotted.

She eased down from the wall and slunk up to a garment shop with a busted front window. She backed up to give herself a running start and then leapt over the window frame without scraping herself on the remaining fragments of glass. Once inside, she searched for a suitable disguise. All of the shop's goods looked intact and undamaged; crime was so unusual in the Faes' realm that it seemed they didn't quite know how to commit it.

She browsed through the racks, realizing with a pang that she wouldn't need anything to cover her crown. No, the real problem was that she could potentially be recognized by her too-short-for-a-High-Fae stature and her very human clothing. She found a long, swishy, midnight-blue coat to wrap around herself. It was too long, but that somehow only made it look regal, like a wedding dress with a long train. Just the sort of whimsical fashion statement a High Fae girl might make. She paired it with a black top hat, mainly because she'd always been partial to top hats but also because it gave her the illusion of a few more inches of height. She left a few of the coins Corrin had given her for emergencies in payment. And then she unlocked the front door and slipped back out onto the streets, her list of names safe in the pocket of her new jacket.

A family of Unseelie were first. They served as funerary priests, Corrin had told her, and were distant cousins to the elder priestess who Ophelia had helped escape. Keeping her mental map of the city in mind, she swiftly followed along the routes she and Corrin had decided on, dodging into alleys and flattening herself against shadowed walls whenever a patrolling soldier came into view. In what seemed like no time at all, she had made it to their home.

She knocked quietly on the door. Silence reigned within for a moment, and then the door just barely cracked open. A single green eye, slit vertically like a cat's and reflecting the light eerily, peered out at her. "What is it?" came the tight voice of a man. "I'm afraid we cannot help you, there are extenuating circumstances at the moment—"

Ophelia leaned in and tugged her top hat back just enough to reveal her face. “It’s me,” she whispered, then added, “High Queen Ophelia,” just in case it still wasn’t clear.

The Unseelie man gawked at her. Her heartbeat sped a bit; she had a brief moment of fear that Corrin had miscalculated, and this family would turn her in to Vie’s guards rather than risk allying with an exiled High Queen. But then the door opened further, and a cat’s massive paws reached out to snag her sleeve and reel her inside. The door slammed behind her.

“Your Majesty,” said the Unseelie man, bowing deeply to her. He had dark brown skin, arms that morphed into lion paws at the wrist, and those eerie green cat eyes. “You honor us with your presence, but I fear for your safety in the city. Why have you come to us?”

As quickly as she could, Ophelia gave him the abbreviated version of the last few weeks’ events. “We need to get you and your family out of the city before Vie sends his soldiers after you,” she finished. “Get everything you can carry with you without raising suspicion, then go at sunrise and wait just outside the city gates. I’ll be sending as many of Corrin’s allies as I can to the same spot, then when I’m finished, I’ll meet up with you all there and take you to our new base.”

The man nodded fervently. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you for doing this. I’ve feared so much for my family’s safety. Three of the families on this block were taken this week for their loyalties to Prince Corrin.”

Ophelia set her jaw. “We will stop Vie,” she promised. “We will stop what’s happening.”

He touched her on the forehead, a gentle gesture that felt like a benediction, then vanished to gather his family. Ophelia let herself out and moved to the next family on her list.

As the moon dipped toward the horizon, she worked her way through the southern half of the city, slipping from street to alley to roof as she went about the job of saving people. She was tired, but a sense of purpose thrilled within her, keeping her awake and alert. Soon, she came to the second-to-last name on her list. *Pelaine,* it read. She squinted at the scrap of paper. The name sounded familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it.

When she knocked on the door and it opened to admit her, she realized immediately why she'd half-recognized it. *Pelaine* meant, in fact, Captain Pelaine, a member of Corrin's royal guard and the one who had brought the scroll from Emalda to Corrin's hiding place. Now that she saw him, she also recognized him as a man Ophelia had met just before her coronation. He had gray hair and piercing, calm gray eyes. He was wearing what looked like a pajama robe, but with his perfect posture and strong bearing, he somehow made it look just as stately and dignified as he'd made his official guard uniform look the last time they'd met. "My Queen," he said, shocked to find her at his door. She slipped inside and quickly explained the situation to him and his wife—a woman with warm brown skin and a beautiful short pouf of black hair, who came out of the bedroom when she heard them talking. At the end of Ophelia's explanation, he dipped his head in acquiescence.

"I will do as you say, Your Highness, and I am very happy to be able to help you and Prince Corrin bring your allies to safety," he said, but his brows were drawn together. His wife reached over and squeezed his shoulder, looking pained.

"What's wrong?" Ophelia asked, pausing. She'd already been reaching for the doorknob, eager to finish tonight's work.

"I worry for your safety. Prince Vie has already had me questioned about you. I gave him no information, of course, but if he went to the lengths of interrogating an elder guardsman such as myself, I worry about what other traps he may have set for you."

Warmed by his concern, Ophelia ducked her head. "I appreciate the warning. I've been careful, and I'm nearly done gathering everyone on my part of the list, in any case. Sunrise is in less than an hour now. I'll meet you at the gates soon."

He bowed again, and she hurried out into the street.

Her eyes burned with tiredness, and she paused, covering a yawn.

"Perhaps you should stop for now," Sunny suggested. *"You have covered a lot of territory, but now you are tired and not at your best. You can finish your list later, with the princeling's help."*

She hesitated. Maybe she *should* stop now. Corrin would be waking up any minute to discover her gone, if he hadn't already. She didn't want to worry him. The families she'd already met with were probably headed to the meeting place at the gate already; she could join them now, lead them to the sea cave, and have them at her back as a sort of boon to show Corrin that her secret overnight mission had all worked out for the best.

She glanced down at the list clutched in her hand. She just had one more stop. And what if this last family was one that would be arrested when the city began to wake up? She wouldn't be able to live with herself if that happened, knowing she could've helped them if she'd just gone to them now instead of waiting.

One more stop. She just had to finish this part of her list, then she would go. "No," she told Sunny firmly. "I'm finishing."

He made a disgruntled sound but didn't try to stop her.

The last family were High Fae. The husband, Corrin had told her earlier, watched over children in a sort of neighborhood daycare facility, while the wife was a talented artisan who crafted clever clockwork toys. They also had a child, a little girl. When Ophelia knocked lightly, the girl was the one who answered.

She stared up at Ophelia with enormous brown eyes and said nothing.

Ophelia crouched down to her level, her heart warming at the sight of the child, who reminded her a bit of Cricket. Not her silence, though—Cricket couldn't even sleep quietly.

"Hi there," Ophelia said, making her voice soft and gentle. "Is your mom or dad home?"

The girl's eyes filled with tears and she slammed the door. Ophelia had to scramble to her feet and hurry backwards to avoid it hitting her in the nose. She frowned at the door, waiting a few moments to see if the girl had gone to fetch a parent. Apparently not, as the door stayed shut and the house stayed dark and silent for a long minute afterwards.

A prickle of instinct made Ophelia twist around and double-check the street for soldiers. She felt Sunny sharpen to awareness within her too. There was

no one out, though, no sign of trouble other than that little voice in the back of her mind that whispered *danger*. Again, she wondered if she should just go—head to the gates, meet the others. But no, not when she was so close to being done with her mission, so close to extracting everyone on her list. She knocked again, just a touch more loudly this time.

This time, a woman opened the door. She stared at Ophelia for several beats before opening the door wider and jerking her head for Ophelia to come in. "Your Highness! Please, come in. I—I wasn't expecting you." Her eyes looked swollen and red, as if she'd been crying. Looking at her torn, shocked expression, Ophelia's heart hurt a bit, and she was suddenly very glad she'd decided to come and help this last family right away. No one should have to go through such turmoil, waiting for help that they weren't sure would come.

"That's fine," Ophelia said, easing inside. "Please don't worry. I'm here to help."

"Oh, that's…that's wonderful. Thank you," the woman said, fisting her hands in her dress, clenching and then smoothing the material compulsively. Behind her, the little girl peered around the doorway. She was in what looked like the kitchen; a lovely dark wood table was surrounded by three beautifully crafted chairs. Seeing the chairs, Ophelia wondered where the girl's father was and had a moment of dread. She hoped she wasn't too late.

"Prince Corrin and I want to help our allies escape the city before they're arrested or harassed by Vie," she said in a low tone, glancing around for any sign of the woman's husband. "We will extract you; I can tell you which routes are safest to travel, and you and your family can meet us at dawn at the gates. I've got a group headed that way already. Together, we will go to a safe place Prince Corrin and I have found. Time is short, though. Is your husband home?"

The little girl stared at her wordlessly, her eyes wide but unfocused, as if she was watching a distant bad dream. The woman wrung her hands some more. Ophelia tried to look reassuring for both their sakes, sensing that something was seriously amiss. Had the husband already been arrested?

“Oh!” the woman said, and her mouth twisted as she seemed to consider what to say for a few long moments before responding, “He’s…he’s not home right now. He is working.”

Ophelia frowned, bewildered by that answer. “Working? I thought his job was to watch children while their parents worked. Wouldn’t that be during the day, not at night?”

Her gaze skittered away. She made a motion like she was brushing away the question. “He’s been trying to do a few extra things for the neighbors before he goes to work, that’s all. I’ll retrieve him shortly. First, though—you mentioned Prince Corrin? Is he out by the gates waiting?”

Now it was Ophelia’s turn to look awkward while she tried to decide how to reply. The question seemed too pointed, and it rubbed her the wrong way. “Um. He’ll…he’ll be there soon, I’m sure,” she said, deciding to keep her answers vague for now.

“Is there anyone else helping you? The, um, the dragon—is it with you?”

Ophelia blinked. The woman was wringing her hands in her dress again, wrinkling the fabric and then smoothing it back out. And although she was smiling, her eyes looked exactly the same as they had when she’d opened the doors. While Ophelia watched, a tear slipped down her cheek.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” Ophelia asked cautiously. The warning instinct she’d had earlier had dialed up even stronger. She checked her magic; she’d recharged some, but not nearly as much as she would’ve if she’d rested rather than run herself ragged all night. Sunny blinked awake in her mind, roused by her building sense of danger.

“Of course!” The woman laughed, high and bright and false. “Lamilla here is just nervous around dragons, that’s all, so I thought I would check—”

“I’m not nervous around dragons,” the girl cut in. She looked suddenly fierce.

Her mother swallowed and waved a hand. “Lamilla, darling, please go fetch some *tea* from the upstairs larder. Our guest could probably use a bracing cup.” She put an odd emphasis on the word “tea.”

The girl didn't move. Ophelia frowned. "I'm afraid we really don't have time for tea. If you can tell me where your husband is, we can go get him and head out right now—"

"Da isn't here," the girl said. Her gaze seemed to bore into Ophelia's, as if she was trying to silently tell her something.

Ophelia's sense of danger heightened even further. She pulled up a few threads of magic and began knitting together a defensive spell just in case.

Something creaked. The woman shifted as if in response and lifted her voice, gesturing with her hands in a rather distracting way. "Lamilla, if you won't get the tea, then go…go pack some of your things from upstairs."

Ophelia's gaze was locked on the child's. When Lamilla turned her head just a touch and looked meaningfully at the dark stairwell across the room, Ophelia followed her gaze. She thought she caught a movement, but it was too dark to tell.

All the fine hairs on her arms were standing up. Setting her defensive spell briefly aside, she knit together the quickest and simplest spell for light that she could manage and flicked it at the stairwell.

The brief flash of light illuminated the faces of three soldiers.

Everything seemed to explode into sound and motion at once. Ophelia lunged forward and so did the two soldiers who were lowest on the stairwell. Lamilla's mother cried out and grabbed her daughter, thrusting the girl behind her for protection. Sunny roared in anger in Ophelia's mind, thrusting a schematic for an air spell into the forefront of her mind.

Ophelia let loose with the defensive spell she'd already prepared—it was a fireburst, a sort of flame-grenade that she lobbed toward the soldiers both to distract them and momentarily blind them—and then followed the instructions Sunny was showing her to weave the next spell. While she did that, she grabbed a chair from the kitchen and shoved it at the first soldier down the stairs like she was a lion tamer at the circus.

The soldier folded over with a pained *oof*. She shoved harder with the chair, driving him against the wall with a hard crack, and then let go of the chair to dive low beneath the second guard just as he began drawing his sword.

As she passed between his legs, she kicked out hard at his knee. He crumpled over.

The third soldier was having none of the fight. He leapt over his fallen buddy and ran for the door. Ophelia felt a moment of triumph.

"He's going to alert others of your position! He'll be back with reinforcements," Sunny snarled in her head, and the triumph snuffed out. She jumped to her feet to go after the errant soldier, but the one whose knee she'd kicked snagged her by the arm. She tried to drive an elbow into his chest but missed, uselessly hitting him in the bicep.

"The air spell!" Sunny shouted.

She was almost finished with it. Quickly, she knitted in the last few lines of energy and then loosed it in the general direction of the man holding onto her.

It was a tornado. It roared into existence, flinging the chairs across the room, knocking the table on its side. It slammed into the soldier behind her with the force of a gale. Freed, Ophelia leapt over the table, ducked a flying chair, and ran after the escaping soldier.

His hand was on the doorknob. He was turning it. She dove at him, reached out to grab him—but the door slammed open in her face, knocking her askew, and the man ran out into the street.

The tornado dissipated. The other two soldiers lay at the bottom of the stairwell, groaning. Ophelia curled her hands into fists and hissed out an exhale.

"He'll be going straight to the palace," Sunny growled. *"He heard everything you said; he will alert Vie, and Vie will send every soldier at his disposal to the meeting place at the gate. All of the families you have helped tonight are in danger, unless you can get to them first and extract them before the soldiers arrive."*

Ophelia let out a wordless shout and kicked at the wall. It didn't help. Anger simmered within her—mainly at herself.

Sunny agreed. *"You should have stopped when you realized you weren't at your best, little queen,"* he told her. *"You should have listened to me, to your instincts when you began to feel something was wrong. You have gotten better at not rushing into dangerous situations, but apparently, you still have some things to learn."*

Chagrined, she let out a long breath and ducked her head. Sunny was right. She could be frustrated at herself later. Right now, she had people to save.

She turned around. The woman and her daughter were cowering in the corner of the room behind a couch-like piece of furniture. When they saw her looking, the woman stood up, weeping openly now. "Please," she babbled, "please don't punish us. They took my husband, they…they did horrible things, and they threatened to do them to Lamilla too if I didn't cooperate."

Ophelia held up her hand. "We have to move quickly, but first, help me understand: what exactly were soldiers doing in your house? What were they trying to get you to 'cooperate with'? I'm not going to punish you," she added when the woman still looked terrified.

The woman buried her face in her hands. "They thought you might come to us, because we've supported Prince Corrin in the past," she wept. "They stationed the soldiers here to wait until you did. They said I had to get any information I could from you, and then alert them as to where you were going so they could arrest you."

Ophelia glanced at the door and then back at the family before her. They had to get to the meeting point before the soldiers did; she'd have to finish questioning them later. She thought she knew enough now to believe that it wouldn't be a risk to at least bring the woman and child with her.

Lamilla stepped out from behind her mother. "Can you save Da?" she asked, those huge eyes of hers serious and unblinking.

"I will do whatever I can, but I have no idea where Vie is putting all of the political prisoners, if they're in the dungeon or—"

The girl stepped toward her. "He's not in the dungeon." She put out her little hand and grasped Ophelia's wrist, pulling her through the kitchen. Her

mother made a wordless noise of protest but didn't stop them.

"Lamilla…" Ophelia said. She wished she could just scoop up the child and run but the girl had clearly been through a lot, so Ophelia tried to gather as much patience as she could afford. "We really must go, we can discuss your father on the way—"

Lamilla opened a door at the back of the kitchen. A set of short stairs led down to street level, to a neat little alley at the back of the house. "He's not in the dungeon," she said again, her voice sounding smaller than before as she pointed into the alley. "He's out there."

Ophelia paused, caught by the strangeness of the statement. "He's out there…in the alley?"

The girl nodded solemnly.

A wordless dread rose up in Ophelia. Why would the woman be so upset if her husband was just out back behind the house? Why would she say they'd done horrible things to him if he was safe at home?

Slowly, she stepped down the stairs. There was a shape at the end of the alley, motionless, a tall silhouette of a person lined by the dim torchlight from the street proper.

"Hello?" Ophelia called cautiously, edging toward him. "Sir? Are you… okay?"

He didn't move.

Ophelia moved a few steps closer. She could make him out in the dim light now, see the hunch of his shoulders, the tilt of his head. She put her hand on his shoulder. "Sir?" she tried again—and this time he turned.

A fly was crawling over his cheekbone. His eyes were white and glassy and empty. His face was pale and bloodless, except where a mottled purple-green bruise extended from his temple down toward his collarbone.

Ophelia reeled back, one hand clapped to her mouth.

Unmade. He had been Unmade.

The man turned and lurched down the street, disappearing around a corner.

“Da!” wailed Lamilla—and something about the sound undid Ophelia. The girl didn’t just sound heartbroken, she sounded *hopeless,* like she knew her protests and tears wouldn’t change anything. Her father had been Unmade, and he could not be brought back.

Unless Ophelia and Corrin could wring the cure out of Emalda. Which they *would*, Ophelia vowed to herself right then. They would find a cure, and this man would be the first Fae to return to himself.

Ophelia was already striding after him before she had made the decision to move her feet. To cure him, she had to catch him—had to corral him and keep him somewhere safe until he could be cured. Otherwise he could vanish into the city or into the forest beyond it, never to be seen again.

She glanced over her shoulder at Lamilla. “Get to the meeting spot with your mother,” she told her. “Warn the others, quickly, and have the captain lead them somewhere they can’t be found.”

The little girl hesitated, half in and half out of the doorway. “What will you do?” she asked at last, plaintive.

Ophelia lifted her chin. “I’m going after your father. And I’m going to bring him back to you.”

CHAPTER 12

CORRIN

Corrin woke up alone.

He registered this fact at the exact same moment that he opened his eyes. It wasn't the sight of Ophelia gone that alerted him. It was the coldness of the stone seeping into his back and sides where she was supposed to be; it was the complete, echoing silence that seemed somehow brittle without her.

He fanned his fingers over the spot where she'd slept. It was not warm. Her half of the list of names was gone. He was immediately certain that she had left sometime during the night to go into Dominion alone, with little or no magic, to save their allies. Without him.

He stood up slowly, waiting for the frustration to hit. Not because she had disobeyed him—she was the High Queen, and beholden to no Fae. But because she didn't *trust* him. He understood her feelings of urgency, and he shared her deep sense of duty to Charassi, but going last night had been too much of a risk for little promise of additional reward. He thought she'd understood, that they'd agreed. But instead of listening to him, instead of leaning on his century of experience in researching magic and his entire life of experience in knowing how his brother operated, she had instead given in to her own impatience.

With that thought, the frustration hit. He bowed his head and balled his hands into fists, taking a moment to let it wash through him and then ebb. There was no point in stoking the emotion; it wouldn't help now. The only

thing to do was help Ophelia however he could and hope she hadn't already gotten caught.

"River," he called, the sound of his voice rebounding off the dull cavern walls. River stirred, blinking sleepily and lifting her head before yawning massively.

"What is it?" she murmured at last. She looked less aware, more fuzzy, than she usually did. He guessed it was because of the restorative meditative trance she'd gone into before falling asleep. That was probably what had allowed Ophelia to slip out without River spotting her, he reflected with some bitterness.

"Ophelia is gone," he told River. "She left sometime last night with her half of the list."

River understood immediately, narrowing her eyes. *"Brave but foolish young queen,"* she muttered, then paused, rustling her wings as her gaze turned inward. *"I have enough magic to make myself invisible for a short period of time. I can fly over the city and search for the signature of Sun in the Black Sky's magic."*

Corrin blew out a breath, sweeping up his sword belt and buckling it on. "Thank you. May I…should I meet you there?" he asked, a bit awkwardly. He knew it was usually considered an indignity for a dragon to be ridden by anyone but their bonded rider except in situations of direst emergency. To reinforce that point, River had once made them walk and then find an alternative mount to get through much of the Nymph Woodlands rather than ride her. It would be much better if he could ride her while she searched for Sunny's magic, but he did not wish to offend her.

River rose to her feet and eyed him. *"Don't be ridiculous, princeling,"* she said. *"You fought admirably yesterday. I believe that has earned you the privilege of a ride, especially in circumstances such as these. Come along."*

Something warm bloomed in his chest, and he climbed up to her back. "Thank you," he said humbly.

She lumbered out of the cave and then jumped up to the top of the cliffside, sending boulders skidding down to the beach as she hauled herself up. She

paused then, probably weaving a spell. Moments later, Corrin felt something silk-like settle over his skin. It was a net of invisibility. When he looked down, there seemed to be nothing but grass beneath him. He held out his arm; it was invisible. His lips thinned out. He knew that invisibility spells took a great deal of magic, and River had likely not returned to her full strength after just a single night's rest. If Ophelia had not gone off alone, this magic could have been put to better use.

River spread her wings and flew toward the city. In no time at all, it was beneath them. *"I'll have to fly in a pattern to see if I can locate them,"* River said. *"I may or may not be able to detect them—it will depend on whether they've used any magic, and if so, then how much and how recently. I will need to remain focused on sensing that, so you can do the job of scanning the streets for any sighting of them."*

So Corrin kept his eyes on his city, while River extended her other senses to find one small girl amidst the chaos that was Dominion.

He had seen so little of the city since their return after being stranded on Earth. When they'd first arrived back, he had seen hints that the state of Dominion had soured, and the written reports he'd read from his spies had further confirmed that. But seeing it laid out before him like this made the changes feel visceral.

The spiraling streets used to remind him of a honeycomb, or the way that apple seeds would look like a star if you cut the fruit just right; there was something natural and lovely about the way Dominion had been laid out, the way that it flowed with the nature of its surroundings. Now, though, everything felt distinctly *un*natural. Broken glass amongst the cobblestones. A mob gathered at the square there, confronting a line of yelling soldiers at the foot of one of the closed-off bridges that led to the castle. Two streets over, what had to be a group of Unmade shuffled in loose formation down the road, sending Fae fleeing from them in all directions. It was chaos. It was *wrong.* He felt like he was watching an ill friend slowly succumb to a terrible sickness, and there was little he could do about it.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to refocus himself. Ophelia. He needed to find Ophelia. He opened his eyes again and looked past the mobs, past the Unmade, past the soldiers who were opposing the people rather

than protecting them. He scanned street after street for any sign of his queen. He didn't think it would be easy to find her—unless something had gone terribly wrong. She was more than clever enough to know she needed to blend in, to avoid drawing any attention to herself. If she was visible, it would likely mean that she had been arrested or caught in a fight big enough to be visible from the air—but it was all he could do at the moment, and so he did it.

River wheeled over the city in narrowing circles, following some grid of her own making. After perhaps ten minutes in the air, they came to the palace. At first, Corrin only cast a cursory glance at it, knowing that Ophelia would avoid it at all costs, but then he caught a glimpse of motion atop the Holy Belltower. It was the tower that held the priestess' rooms, as well as their many secret Artifacts and the tomes filled with arcane knowledge that previous generations had passed down through their ranks. A jet-black banner was being unfurled from its ramparts—that was the motion he had spotted.

"Whose sigils are those?" River asked, slowing to a hover as they both eyed the banner.

The main sigil in the center of the banner was easily recognizable: a white pair of fox eyes. "That one is Vie's," he murmured to River. Three other personal sigils, all of them smaller, were placed at intervals around it. He only recognized one, a simple jagged line representing a mountain range. "The one on the top belongs to Liana's family. I've never seen the other two smaller ones, though."

River veered closer. They were near enough now to make out several figures on the belltower's raised dais. There was Liana, in her colorful robe made from tatters of various fabric. Her expression was cool and distant but she betrayed her agitation in the way her hands were fisted in the fabric of her clothing. He knew her well enough to tell that she was shaken. Probably by the poisonous memories Ophelia had returned to her, Corrin reflected, feeling a bit of hope return to him at the realization. Now that she knew the truth, maybe she could be won to their side, after all.

Two more young women stood to either side of Liana. Their expressions were fixed in lines of awe and adoration, and their gazes were trained on the

young Fae who stood on the other side of the large, ceremonial bonfire that had been lit. Corrin shifted his gaze to see who they were looking at.

It was Vie.

A slash of shock went through Corrin. He felt River rumble beneath him, though it likely sounded like nothing more than distant thunder to the group arrayed on the belltower. Vie was *right there*, wearing some monstrous golden crown that was lined with jewels of every color, smirking over the row of priestesses as if they belonged to him.

The city below clamored for aid. Unmade strode the streets in broad daylight. Fae were being confronted by the guards sworn to defend them—while Vie did *what*, exactly?

"Welcome, Brigani and Tilla," he said, making an expansive gesture at the two younger girls, who immediately dropped into a deep bow. Liana remained upright, but dipped her head coolly. "You are here today because I have chosen you as the new lesser priestesses beneath Elder Priestess Liana."

Corrin did a double take at his brother's words, only now realizing that the two younger women wore the tattered robes of Holy Priestesses too. Anger flushed through him at this new flouting of their ancestral laws and traditions; choosing priestesses was not the role of any ruler. It was the jealously guarded sole right of each priestess to choose her own successor, and if one of them died unexpectedly, it was left to the remaining priestesses to choose their new sister. The decisions as to who would serve as priestesses and the royals were handled entirely separately, the divisions meant to allow the groups enough autonomy to serve as checks on each other's power. That way, in theory, no one person or group could rise to the status of a tyrant. Even a High King or High Queen with their ultimate authority could not chasten or level a punishment against a priestess without the permission of the others.

Which meant that whatever Vie was up to, this wasn't just a usurpation. It was a coup. He meant to be the sole governing authority in Charassi, with no one left in any position of authority to check his power.

Beneath him, River's ribcage expanded. Somehow, he knew what she was about to do. "Don't," he said quickly.

River stopped inhaling, but her body was tense. *"I will end him now,"* she said. *"He is vulnerable and he is cowardly and he is breaking the law of his people openly. Let me incinerate him and finish this war the easy way."*

Corrin couldn't deny that it would be the simplest, most immediate solution. Even as the boy he'd been had shied away from the idea of killing his mother, the prince he was now was clearer-eyed and knew that this civil war Vie had started would almost certainly require his death before it could end. Still, though, they had far bigger problems, and killing Vie now would only complicate them.

"If a dragon kills a prince of the High Fae royal house, it will solve our immediate problem—but then create a dozen new ones," he murmured to River, careful to not lift his voice enough to chance being overheard by his brother. "Because then the war will truly begin. The Exile treaty would break down entirely. The Fae would likely strike at the dragons before Ophelia or I could stop them, and then the dragons would strike back, and many more of my people—and perhaps some of your kin—would die. And in any case, killing him now, like this, wouldn't stop my mother. She would go to ground and we would lose our best lead to finding and stopping her."

River hesitated. *"You think this arrogant little princeling will lead you to Emalda?"*

"Not willingly. But now that we know they're working together, I think we could use him to find her."

River gave a gusty sigh. It grew into a breeze that wailed violently across the black banner, half-tearing it from its post. On the belltower, Vie clutched at his crown as though it might be blown away and paused in the grand speech he'd been giving, glaring at the priestesses like it was their fault.

Liana waved a hand dismissively. "Please continue," she said, her voice still cool.

Vie eyed her. That look on his face made Corrin both glad and worried; glad, because it meant that there were cracks in the relationship between Vie and Liana, and worried, because Vie was more than capable of harming her if he thought she'd outlived her usefulness.

"There!" River said suddenly, jerking Corrin's attention away from the belltower. *"I sense Sunny's magic! They must have been in a fight; this seems to be a trace of defensive magic."*

"Where?" Corrin demanded, anxiety winding through him. "Can you tell if they are okay?"

River wheeled away from the tower and to the east, skirting around the side of the hill where the palace stood. *"They fought in a house in a district near here,"* she related, *"and then moved quickly in this direction. I think…yes, this is where the trail ends."*

Dread swept over Corrin as River navigated a delicate, invisible landing in front of an old temple. This district was mostly cordoned off except for holidays; it was the most ancient part of the city, and much of it had crumbled to ruin. The large building before him had once been a temple to the natural forces.

"Here? This is where the trail ends?" he asked, sliding to the ground. As soon as he broke contact with River, his body shimmered back to visibility. "You mean, she's in there?"

"No," River said. *"I don't think she is inside now. I mean, the trail of magic comes to a point just a bit farther in than the entrance, and then it gets very muffled, and then it disappears. My guess is that something in the environment is blocking their signature, or perhaps she is completely out of magic again and there's none left now to leave a trace."*

The dread strengthened. Corrin strode toward the temple's shadowed entrance and thrust his head in. It smelled like dust and old stone in here, and there was nothing in sight except for old granite columns and crumbling brick walls. But then there, just a few yards from the entrance, he spotted a door-sized hole in the ground. It had rough-hewn stairs that led down into darkness. Scuffed into the dirt, he could just make out the tracks

of Ophelia's boots. He closed his eyes, dismay and worry roping through him.

River poked her head in behind him. *"Where does this tunnel go?"*

"The catacombs," Corrin answered. He had no idea why she would go down there, but besides the castle itself, it was one of the most dangerous places she could possibly go. The catacombs were a labyrinth, a nearly endless maze buried deep beneath the whole island. They were filled with ancient Fae graves…and also with traps to stop would-be grave robbers. The catacombs had been designed and populated in the old days, back when the different Fae species and even factions within the same species were at war with each other. The violent nature of the traps down there spoke to that fact. It was why the catacombs had been declared off-limits centuries ago, why all their known entrances had been sealed off. But everyone had always suspected that a few harder-to-find access points were still out there. This was one of them—and Ophelia had gone into it.

"I am going after her," Corrin said grimly. He kicked around in the debris on the floor until he found a branch large enough to serve as a torch. River blew a small stream of fire over it to light it.

"I won't be able to help you," she warned. *"I can't fit in that tunnel, and even if I could, the deep, dense underground is no place for dragons."* She shuddered.

"I know." He paused for a moment, considering. "If Ophelia succeeded in her mission, or part of it, before she came here, then there may be a lot of people gathered at the gates waiting for someone to lead them to the base. Could you escort them to safety?"

River was already lifting off. *"For you, Corrin of the Fae, I suppose I am willing to be a pack mule. But only for this day,"* she warned. She hovered for a moment. *"Be safe,"* she said at last, and there was a touching worry beneath the words.

"I will be as safe as I can be," Corrin replied, and stepped down into the dark.

CHAPTER 13

OPHELIA

Ophelia had been truly lost only once before, but the experience was seared in her memory. She'd been six years old. It had happened two towns away from Tipton, which had seemed like half a world away at that age. Her mother had driven them out there to visit the giant mall so she and her brother could get some new clothes for school. The massive shopping center had astonished her: bright lights, busy people, too many storefronts and a thousand different smells. She had gotten overwhelmed at how different it all was from her sleepy little hometown. While her mom had been busy trying to drag Luis out of a videogame store, it had suddenly all become *just too much* for little Ophelia, and something inside of her had cracked.

She'd run. She wanted to find somewhere safe, somewhere dark, but no matter how far she ran, nowhere she found fit that description. By the time she realized how far she'd gotten from her mother, she was hopelessly lost.

Luckily, she was found by a kind mall security guard who had bought her a pretzel and took her to the info desk to wait for her panicking mother. It had all ended well then. But now? Now, Ophelia was utterly alone.

Plus, there was the issue of the creepy dead people in the walls.

She was holding a little ball of flickering green light, like the world's biggest firefly. She lifted it now to illuminate the wall closest to her. It was carved out of some sort of hard, clear mineral, almost like diamond but

more reflective. The glassy rock was just see-through enough to let her catch a glimpse of the dead Fae lying a foot or so deep.

The bodies were everywhere in the walls. The most unsettling thing about them was that they weren't skeletons; they were fully-preserved, lying in the walls as if they'd just climbed in for a nap a few minutes ago. They were all High Fae, but the clothing they wore was of a different, more subdued style compared to what most of the High Fae she'd met wore. She had stood in front of one for a slow count of a hundred, straining to see if the man's chest rose, if he was in some sort of cryosleep or magical suspended animation or something, but as far as she could tell they were all actually dead. Sometimes the bodies were stacked four deep, and sometimes she would walk a good few minutes without spotting one. There were enough of them, though, for her to guess these had to be in catacombs of some sort. If she'd known that when she'd first ducked in here following the trail of Lamilla's Unmade father, she wasn't sure if she would've gone down. But down she was, whether she liked it or not now, and she was determined not to resurface empty-handed.

So she ignored the worries gnawing at the corners of her mind—that there were way too many side corridors branching off for her to be able to remember every turn, and that it might be hard to find her way back even with the torn bits of fabric she'd left at the intersections to mark her path—and continued onward. She listened closely for any sign of the man she was following, but she hadn't heard him shuffling ahead of her in a while. He'd been pretty quick when she was chasing him through the street earlier, although she'd had to take a few detours to avoid being spotted by anyone, which hadn't helped matters. In any case, he seemed to be well ahead of her now.

She glanced around, keeping an eye out for more intersections where the Unmade man might've turned off. The mineral in the walls made it hard, though. They were more reflective in some places than others, and in this spot, all the walls she could see were glinting with reflections of her taut, pale face, and reflections of the reflections, and so on, until the whole place looked like the world's creepiest mirror funhouse.

"Courage," whispered Sunny in her mind.

She swallowed, squared her shoulders, and kept going.

The glow from her magical light fell on a strange shape pushed up against the wall. She ventured carefully closer and realized it was a person. She readied a spell that could bind and carry the Unmade man, if this was him—she and Sunny had worked out the pattern for it a few minutes ago. Then she inched forward. “Hello?” she whispered.

The light fell on the person’s face. It was not the man she had been following, but it *was* an Unmade—a woman. Ophelia shied back, but the woman didn’t move, didn’t even seem to notice her. She was leaning up against the wall, her lank hair hanging in strands around her half-rotted face. Ophelia covered her nose with her free hand, breathing through her sleeve. The smell was terrible.

But this woman was still a victim, just like Lamilla’s father, so Ophelia moved just a little bit closer. Maybe she could bring them both out, cure them both. This woman might have a child somewhere waiting for her to come home too—and even if she didn’t, she still didn’t deserve to waste away down here in the dark.

Decision made, Ophelia shifted closer, knitting the spell together. It was clumsy work—she was very tired and had used much of her available magic for the fight against the soldiers earlier—but she thought it would probably work. She would have to touch the woman to best direct the spell, though. Gingerly, watching for any sign of aggression, Ophelia reached out a hand.

The Unmade woman’s head snapped up. She lunged at Ophelia.

Gasping, Ophelia jumped back, nearly unraveling the capturing spell in the process. Tired though she was, she forced herself to stand with her weight evenly spread, ready to run or attack, whichever was necessary—but the Unmade woman didn’t come after her again. And from this angle, Ophelia could see why.

The wall was eating her.

The woman was half-buried in it already, her spine and shoulders lodged in the crystal wall along with one of her legs, trapping her in place. As

Ophelia watched, crystals from the wall closed over the corner of one of her shoulders.

Horrified and enraged, thinking of nothing but how this was a *person* who had had their soul ripped out against their will and was now trapped down here and eaten by a horrifying wall, Ophelia lashed out at the wall with a burst of raw Death magic. It was the energy of transition and change, but it did nothing at all to the wall besides spark against it.

"Do not waste your magic," Sunny said sharply. *"Strategize."*

But the horror was too intense, and her mind too tired. She jumped forward, dropped the capture spell entirely, and grabbed one of the woman's arms to pull her away.

The woman's hand snapped closed around Ophelia's wrist. With an unnatural strength, she yanked Ophelia toward her. Ophelia managed to catch herself against the wall with her free hand—which went half an inch into the wall as if it were made of Jell-O and not crystal.

A burst of pure panic sparked through her. She thrashed to free herself and managed to get her wrist away from the woman, but the wall resisted. The Unmade woman was shifting, trying to wrap her arms around Ophelia's torso and pull her the rest of the way to the wall—trying to trap her too. With a shout, Ophelia lifted one foot, planted it against the wall, and shoved with all her might. She felt a layer of skin on her palm tear, and the sensation was the same as when she'd accidentally gotten her hand stuck to an icicle. Now the wall was sucking in her boot, but it could have that. Ophelia quickly ducked beneath the woman's grasping hands, tore the boot's laces loose, and yanked her foot away.

She backed into the middle of the corridor, panting, shaking. Her little glow-light lay a few feet down the corridor where it had skidded to a stop during the struggle. The Unmade woman went limp and vacant again now that Ophelia was out of reach. She did not resist, or even seem to notice, when the wall swallowed her left arm.

Ophelia shuddered violently. The High Fae didn't bury their dead here. They *fed them to the walls.* She wrapped her arms around herself, and though she tried to think calming things—like how all cultures had different

burial customs, and how this probably was less horrifying and more holy to the ancient High Fae than it seemed to her—none of them worked very well.

She watched, helpless with anger, as the wall began pulling in the woman's head. Would she stay conscious while she was in there? Was there anything left of who she used to be, for her to feel the agony and terror of such a fate? Ophelia had to help her. Ophelia *needed* to help her. But she could think of no spell that might extract her without risking a cave-in, and she'd just demonstrated that she couldn't pull her out with her own bare hands. So Ophelia had to just stand there, arms wrapped around her chest as she trembled, watching while the cloudy crystal closed over the woman's blank eyes.

She didn't have to watch. She could've left. But even if this woman's soul was truly gone for good, Ophelia felt she owed it to the woman to at least witness this, to share the terror of this awful moment with her.

And then the woman was gone, and Ophelia was once again alone.

"Ophelia," said Sunny quietly.

"I'm going to find the man," she told him, just as quietly. "I can't leave him to *this*." She motioned at the wall. "What would I tell that little girl? How could I face her if I let this place have him?"

Sunny sighed. *"You have a brave and noble heart, but I worry that might not be enough to keep you alive."*

She bit her lip. "Me too." But she kept going anyway.

She came across more Unmade. Some were stuck in the walls; others lay on the floor, apparent victims to some sort of poison that had left them with a toxic green glow to their veins. Those didn't move, though she wasn't sure if they were dead or just paralyzed. The source of the poison seemed to be thin metal darts, usually piercing the Unmade in the neck or chest. Ophelia wasn't sure if some sort of vigilante had been down here trying to get rid of the Unmade, or if these were the results of traps that had been placed to keep tomb raiders out. She had seen *Indiana Jones* enough times to be very cautious about grave booby traps.

When she came across the small group of Unmade who were pinned to the ceiling with strange glistening stalactites growing all around them, she walked in a twisted route down the path beneath them, avoiding the puddles of white liquid that were dripping from the stalactites. The Unmade rustled and twitched as she passed, their heads turning to watch her. One or two of them started to struggle and reach for her, but those odd rock formations just tightened around them like some sort of strangling vines.

She was almost through that area when she spotted the Unmade man she'd come here to find. He was just ahead of her.

She caught her breath, pausing for a moment to make sure it really was the same man, and then she rushed forward. At Sunny's nudging she clumsily knit together another capturing spell, but it would take a minute to finish, which meant she had to distract him—and not let him attack her—until then.

She slowed down a few feet in front of him, holding out her hands. "Sir?" she said cautiously, and then remembered his name from her list. "Laughern?"

The man looked up at her. To her shock, his expression seemed lucid. His gaze was trained directly on her. His brow was wrinkled in a way that made him look concerned. "Hello?" he said, uncertainty and caution clear in his voice.

Ophelia's steps stuttered. He was like the centaur woman, the horse Unseelie from Bursai. He was clearly Unmade and yet he was coherent. The emissary had claimed she was a recipient of the half-formulated cure, but this man couldn't have had time to be cured; Ophelia had followed him all the way from the alley, where he had seemed completely mindless. What could possibly have happened in the time between now and then to give him this new presence of mind?

"I'm Ophelia," she said, hands still raised, part of her mind still focused on knitting the capturing spell. "I'm here to help you. I promised your daughter I would keep you safe. Please, come back with me."

The man's eyes widened and he stumbled toward her. "Oh, Your Majesty, please help me—I don't know what to do—" He reached out for her.

Sunny shouted a wordless warning, but Ophelia had felt the same prickle of instinct that he had, and jerked back just before the man reached her. He moved again—much more quickly and with less hesitation than his earlier distraught countenance would've suggested—and lashed out with a powerful backhand that would've knocked her down if she hadn't thrown up a raw fireball spell and dodged backward.

His fist went right through the fire. She could smell the sickening scent of burning flesh, but he didn't seem to register any pain, drawing closer to her with measured steps. The look of concern was still on his face, but it hung there like a forgotten sweater in a closet—there was no life behind it, no flickers of change.

"Ophelia," the man said, "Ophelia, don't you want to help me? Am I not pathetic enough for you to rescue?"

That voice—that voice—

It was not his voice, she realized with a sudden clarity. Or rather it had been his voice, but it had been *stolen*, used without permission just as his body had been—by the one controlling it.

"Emalda," Ophelia said, the word half a hiss.

The Unmade man clasped his hands together in front of him. "Help me!" he said piteously, reaching for her as if he was a petitioner and she was his savior. "Please, help me!"

She wanted to. Desperately, she wanted to. The urge to help, to heal, to show compassion, it was written on every strand of her DNA. It was what made her who she was. But she backed away anyway, because it was not this man who was saying these words.

The look of concern dropped suddenly from his face, leaving it utterly blank like before. "Smarter than you look," he said calmly.

"Emalda, let go of that man!" she said sharply, trying to sharpen her voice into a command, but it quavered too much. The walls that ate people, the booby traps, these undead people with no souls whose voices could be stolen and used—it was too much. It was like the mall all over again: too

much happening, too many thoughts, too much distraction to be able to tell what she should do.

"And if I don't?" asked Emalda with the Unmade man's voice, pulling him to his feet like a puppet on invisible strings.

"I will make you pay," Ophelia said through gritted teeth.

"A spell," Sunny urged, *"quickly, make a defensive spell, the capturing one or one that will tear him apart before—"*

But it was already too late. Preying on Ophelia's moment of uncertainty, the Unmade man leapt forward and hooked his fingers into Ophelia's arm. He yanked her backwards hard, unbalancing her. She stumbled toward him, her glow-light skittering down the path in front of them before it suddenly vanished. Ophelia struggled to free herself, but she was in a bad position for leverage. She was being half-dragged, and no matter how she punched or kicked him or threw fireballs at him, he didn't let go. He didn't even seem to notice her struggles. Sunny was bellowing fury in her mind but she couldn't think clearly enough to knit any more spells.

"Emalda!" she shouted as she scrabbled for a handhold or anything to use as a weapon. "Stop this!"

They were close enough now that she could see what her glow-light had fallen into: a pit. A deep, straight-edged pit, lined with spikes, and there was a chance she might fall in the space between the spikes but an even better chance she'd be impaled by one, and now the Unmade man was spinning her around toward the pit and she was teetering on its edge—

Until something slammed into him hard enough to rip him away from her.

Gasping, Ophelia fell to the ground and clawed her way away from the pit, pushing herself to standing and backing away from it further for good measure before she turned to see what had happened.

Corrin was standing at the edge of the pit. His hands were fisted. His hair hung wild about his face. Every line of his body was taut with some emotion she didn't dare try to name. He had come to save her—but now his focus was on the Unmade shell of a man who'd had his life energy torn out and replaced with the mind of Emalda.

Ophelia edged closer to the pit. Stomach churning at what she might see, she eased over until she could look over the edge. The Unmade man had fallen between the spikes and was picking himself up, seemingly unharmed, staring up at Corrin.

Ophelia let out a shaky exhale. She reached for Corrin's hand, but he pulled away. "Mother?" he said at last, his voice shaking as he stared at the man. He must've heard Ophelia call him by the ex-queen's name, and guessed at what was happening.

"In the flesh," the Unmade man responded. "Well, not exactly."

Corrin's whole body was shaking now. "How dare you," he said softly, and then all at once he was shouting, his voice rebounding off the close cavern walls, off the crystals, off the hardpacked dirt floor. "HOW DARE YOU!"

The Unmade man tilted his head. "How dare I what?"

"How dare you be alive, and not tell me? How dare you curse my people and ruin your own legacy? How dare you conspire with my brother to *take my kingdom from me*?"

"Ah, but it's not your kingdom anymore, is it, son?" the man said, gesturing at Ophelia, who stood by motionlessly, wishing she knew how to help.

Corrin clenched and unclenched his hands. "Traitor," he shouted into the pit. "Murderer."

"Yes and yes, but that's not the whole story."

"Do you hate me so, that you would do this to me?" Now his voice broke, shredded by emotion that had been tamped down for too long.

The man's voice dropped, turning grave with Emalda's own emotion. "I have never hated you. You are my favorite son. I want you by my side."

Corrin's face morphed into something fearsome. "Then why don't you come and say that to me in person?"

"Would you believe me then?"

Ophelia saw Corrin hesitate, and realized he truly didn't know the answer to that question. If it was his mother in her own body, come here to ask him to be with her again, to let her explain herself—he didn't seem at all sure how he would respond.

Ophelia intervened. "Give us the cure," she demanded. "Your emissary promised to trade it for the Bone Crown, and you have that now—so hold up your end of the bargain as a good-faith gesture to your son."

"I cannot."

"Why?" Corrin demanded.

The Unmade man who was channeling Emalda tipped his head up and looked at Corrin. Ophelia had a sudden sense of terrible, inevitable certainty, a premonition of what the answer would be even before it was spoken. She inhaled to speak first but wasn't quick enough.

"Because there is no cure," the Unmade man said. "Not even death."

And then Emalda vanished from the Unmade man's mind, and he stared blankly at the spike next to him, an empty vessel once more.

CHAPTER 14

OPHELIA

For most of the trek back to the entrance of the catacombs, Corrin was ominously silent. Ophelia watched him carefully as she lit their path, waiting for him to address what had just happened with his mother, or say something about her leaving in the middle of the night, but he said nothing. Thinking that maybe he needed time to process everything, Ophelia didn't break the silence either.

It was only when they reached the surface that he finally said something.

He stepped off the stairs into the sunlight and turned to extend a hand, offering to help her up. "My Queen," he said, stiff and toneless.

She couldn't take it anymore. She batted his hand away and frowned up at him. "What are you my-queening me for? Just…just say you're mad. Don't act like you don't even know me."

Corrin's expression sharpened and focused. She winced at the intensity of it, but at least he looked *present* now. "Very well. I am mad."

She stepped out of the tunnel and took a deep breath of mostly fresh, only slightly musty air. "Corrin…"

But he wasn't done. "You *left,* Ophelia." Somehow, the sound of her name in this context was even worse than the stiff "My Queen" he'd hit her with a moment ago. "We talked about it, and you agreed to respect the decision that we made *together,* and then as soon as River and I were asleep you left anyway. You did not even leave a note."

Ophelia felt doubly horrible at the realization that she hadn't even thought to do that. "I'm sorry I worried you," she said miserably.

"But not sorry you left? Not sorry you lied?" His voice was acerbic. She flinched. He had never spoken to her this way before. She wasn't sure if all his anger was for her actions, or if part or all of it was driven by the pain and confusion he felt after his encounter with Emalda, but either way it was a terrible feeling to have him speak so sharply to her.

"I didn't lie!" she protested, even though she knew how weak of an excuse it was. "When we talked the plan over, I really did intend to wait until morning. But when I was trying to fall asleep, I couldn't stop thinking about all those people, and worrying that some of them might be arrested overnight while we were resting…" A sudden thought occurred to her. "Did they get out safely? I sent Lamilla and her mother to warn them. I thought you and River would be there at dawn to escort them." She strode to the door and leaned out, checking the position of the sun. She'd been in the catacomb for *hours.* Panic stirred.

"River went to retrieve them," Corrin said shortly, and she heaved a relieved breath.

They stared silently at each other for a long moment. Ophelia could feel the discord between them, some bloated, invisible thing that seemed to take up more space than was actually available.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, her voice small and sincere. "I should have trusted you."

All the air seemed to go out of Corrin at once. He bowed his head and touched his temple lightly with his fingers, a gesture that made him look strangely vulnerable. "In truth, I am frustrated with you, but not angry. My anger is for…"

"Your mother."

He winced and nodded. "Did you hear what she said? About…about not even death being a cure?"

Ophelia's brow wrinkled. "I wondered what she meant."

Corrin let out a breath and then reached for her hand. Confused and with a rising sense of dread about how serious he was and what that must mean about whatever he was about to say, she let him take it this time.

“Normally,” he said, “when a Fae dies, an Unseelie priest or priestess performs the death rites according to their species’ rituals. High Fae have their bodies transmuted into dust that rises into the sun, pixies have pyres at sunrise, nymphs are buried with a special ceremony, and so on. The rites help the deceased’s soul reach the Endless Planes, where it reunites with its ancestral force. The catacombs we were just in…” He paused to inhale, as if bracing himself for whatever he would say next. “They were built in ancient times, and they were where the High Fae buried their traitors and prisoners.”

Ophelia tilted her head, confused. “But didn’t you say High Fae have their bodies turned to dust?”

“Yes,” he said heavily. “I did. That is how their souls are reunited with the Sun. If a High Fae is not afforded death rites, it takes longer for their soul to wander back to the Sun, but as long as they are within the sun’s reach when they die, they will eventually reach the Endless Planes. In ancient times, there was a punishment worse than death that some High Fae factions enacted on their enemies. They buried them alive, far from the sun, encasing them in crystal that no natural tool can cut, and leaving them to die. Slowly and without honor.”

The horror of it washed over Ophelia like a tidal wave. When she’d been down there, she’d tried to comfort herself with the thought that whoever had buried those people in the walls probably thought of it as something natural and holy. But to realize now that it was even more horrific than she’d thought… She shuddered. “Can their souls never be freed, then?” she whispered. “They’ll never reach the Endless Planes? They’re just down there forever, lost?”

“There have been initiatives by various rulers over the centuries to begin a project to free the bodies and give them proper rites, but there are many traps set inside the catacombs with the intention of stopping people from doing just that, and we have not yet found any force or tool that can free a person from the crystal once it has been fully encased.”

“That’s *terrible.*”

“Yes. But not as terrible as what my mother has done. When she said there is no cure, not even death, she meant that the victims of the Unmaking…” His shoulders shook with emotion. “I had thought their souls were still present. Robbed of their energy, disconnected from their bodies maybe, but still whole and intact *somewhere*. It is why I hoped a cure might return them to themselves. Or failing that, that if we could do death rites for them, their souls would then be freed. But from what my mother just said—their souls are destroyed in the act of Unmaking. Not corrupted, not disconnected or hidden. Just *gone.* Which means not even death can free them. Not even death can cure the Unmaking.”

Ophelia was falling. Physically, she was standing in exactly the same place as she had been a moment ago, but on the inside, she was falling, and the air was thick with the shock of it, and she didn’t think she would ever land. She tried to suck in a breath. She tried again.

“They will never reunite with their ancestral force,” she said at last, her voice a croak.

She thought of her mother’s death. Tubes and machines and beeping and gasping. She thought of how Sunny’s words had comforted her, how he had shown her that the energy of Death was not cold or dark or lonely, but cool and lovely like a good night’s rest: the element of transition. Except these Fae would never transition. Their souls would not live on in the Endless Planes. Their energy would not rejoin with the ancestral force that had given them life. They were just gone.

Lamilla’s father was *gone.*

They could not be saved. She could not save them.

Ophelia registered distantly that she was shaking. “I told her I would save him,” she whispered. “I told Lamilla I would bring her father back. Instead, I left him in a pit, his soul torn out—”

“No,” Sunny said. *“You left her father’s body in a place where it could do no further harm. Emalda tore out his soul,* not *you.”*

She opened and closed her hands. She didn't know what to do with herself. "If something like this had happened to my mother…to someone I love…" She shook her head. "How can I condemn my people to that? How do we tell them their loved ones are…"

Corrin reached out and folded her into his arms. She buried her head in his chest and let herself shake. All of the anger had gone out of him now, and it was just Ophelia and Corrin comforting each other, and letting themselves be comforted. For long minutes, they held each other.

Finally, Ophelia stood back and wiped her eyes. "What do we do now?" she asked, her voice only a little shaky now.

Corrin's shoulders were slumped and his gaze was tired, but resolute. "I think we need to take a moment to think before we do anything else. There are still mysteries we need to solve, clues to piece together, and we need to do it before we meet up with our new allies in the cave."

Ophelia could feel all of herself straining toward action, toward doing anything she could do to make this situation better. That was always her instinct—to jump in and find something to *fix*. But with an effort she settled herself. She regretted not trusting Corrin last night; she would trust him now. "You're right," she said, and allowed him to lead her deeper into the shaded temple. They sat on a broken column and faced each other. There was something formal and grave about it. They had finished comforting each other, and now they were holding a war council.

"Let's piece together the things we've discovered today," Corrin started. "Firstly—did it seem to you that there were more Unmade in the tunnels than there should be? From what I've seen, they tend to wander mindlessly unless they've been specifically directed. While it seems logical that a few of them could have stumbled on one of the few secret entrances that were never sealed off, sheer chance wouldn't have led that many to take those paths. I believe there are far too many of them for it to be happenstance."

"Agreed. Which means Emalda must've sent them down there for some reason," Ophelia replied.

"Perhaps she is using the tunnels as a secret means of travel around the city for them?" Sunny suggested. Ophelia related this idea, but Corrin

frowned.

“I don’t think so. We’ve already seen several Unmade wandering freely on the streets during daylight hours, without being bothered by soldiers. There is no need for them to travel secretly.”

Ophelia tapped a finger against her lip. “Is there anything in the catacombs besides traps and dead Fae?” she asked. “Like, maybe something Emalda would want to look for?”

Corrin pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes, thinking. “It is possible. There have been rumors of ancient treasure and forgotten secrets hidden in the catacombs, but I am uncertain if those stories hold a kernel of truth or if they are just the type of lore that always builds up around the sites of old ruins.”

“We’ve established pretty solidly that she can use the Unmade as spies and act through them,” Ophelia said bitterly. She gritted her teeth and pushed the memory of the pit and Lamilla’s father away with an effort. “So if there’s something in the catacombs that she wants, but they’re too huge and full of traps for her to search for it herself, it makes sense for her to send the Unmade down there. They’re basically disposable forces for her. Right?”

Corrin’s eyes flashed to hers. “What if that is why she has Unmade so many more Fae lately? The catacombs are huge, labyrinthian. She would need hundreds and hundreds of Unmade to search all of it.”

It was too enormously terrible a thing to comprehend—destroying people’s souls so you could use them to search for something. “It must be something she needs desperately,” Ophelia said, forcing herself to concentrate on the logistics and not the ethics. “However it is she Unmakes people, it seems that it’s something she has to do herself. As far as we know, she can’t farm the job out to her minions—if she could, they’d probably be doing it immediately right out in the open, not kidnapping people to take them away somewhere else to be turned Unmade. So every person she kidnaps and Unmakes represents time and effort. She strikes me as a smart and practical person; she wouldn’t go to so much effort unless there was a potentially big reward. Don’t you think?”

Corrin looked away. “She is certainly smart and practical,” he said, and now it was his turn to sound bitter. “And she only focuses her efforts on ventures that she deems particularly advantageous.”

“Which means…there’s something big in the catacombs. And we can’t let her find it.”

Corrin nodded. “It would have to be something that would give her a large advantage toward whatever her end goal is, and I have to assume it’s something that would give her greater and more terrible powers than she has now. So I concur: we need to find out what it is she’s searching for, and we need to find it before she does.”

“Now that that’s decided,” Sunny pitched in, *“we truly ought to return to the sea cave. That soldier who got away has certainly alerted Vie by now, which means the city is likely crawling with guards searching for you.”*

Ophelia conveyed Sunny’s message to Corrin. “What about your half of the list?” she asked. “Can we stop and retrieve them first?”

Corrin winced. “I fear that Vie will anticipate that now that he’s aware you have been extracting allies. He has likely laid more traps with any of the ones he can identify. We can’t risk pulling anyone else out at this point.”

The words struck deep. Corrin hadn’t meant to hurt her, though—it was her own actions that had caused this. She’d screwed up, and in her impatience to save everyone, she had likely doomed as many people as she had saved. Miserable, she nodded.

Corrin, watching her, hesitated. “Unless…Perhaps I could make contact with one of my spies and give him the other half of the list. He could check in on these families, extract any he safely can this morning, while the soldiers are all searching for us. We’d have to mark a new meeting point, but we may be able to save at least some of them.”

Ophelia’s spirits lifted. “Yes,” she said quickly. “Let’s do that.”

“He’s an ambassador, he lives in the castle,” Corrin warned. “I didn’t include him in our plans earlier because he is too difficult to get to and likely Vie has his own spies watching him. But if you’ve recharged enough magic, perhaps you could cause some distraction that can get him

momentarily out of the palace…a small fire in the kitchens near his apartment, perhaps?"

Ophelia grinned. "Just show me where to point my magic."

Corrin led her out of the temple and pointed at the castle up the slope above them. "See that lowest window there? The one with the drawn curtains? That's the back kitchens. A fire there will trip the charm-alarms—"

"Charm-alarms?" Ophelia interrupted, delighted and fascinated by the existence of such a thing.

"Small, connected Artifacts that chime when evacuation is necessary."

"Of course. Go on."

Smiling slightly now, as he always did at every indication of her delight, Corrin continued. "See if you can catch the curtains alight from here without alerting anyone to our presence."

Ophelia squinted at the distant window, considering. She could easily chuck a fireball through the window, but that wouldn't exactly be subtle, and she definitely didn't want to give away their location or even to make anyone suspect the fire was anything but an accident.

"Perhaps focus your magic on the curtains themselves, rather on fire?" Sunny suggested. *"Cause them to heat until they catch fire on their own."*

"Oh, that's a good idea," she murmured, and paid careful attention as he showed her a pattern that should work.

Two minutes later, Ophelia's forehead was beaded with sweat and her head hurt from concentrating, but the kitchen curtains had caught fire and an urgent chiming was emanating from that area.

"Nicely done," Corrin said. He slipped up the hill with his hood pulled up, taking advantage of the erupting chaos to vanish into the crowd of people emerging from the nearby side door. Ophelia kept her eyes trained on the spot where he'd disappeared, worry gnawing at her until he reappeared a minute later and slipped out of view of the group of concerned evacuees.

“It’s done,” he told her when he arrived, and her shoulders sagged with relief.

“Now what?” she asked. “Should I activate Sunny’s body to fly us back to everyone who’s probably waiting for us at the sea caves? If that’s alright with you of course, Sunny.”

“I think we’d better hike, actually,” Corrin said with a grimace before Sunny could respond. “We should save your magic as much as we can; I know invisibility requires a lot of energy to power it, plus we can only activate Sunny’s body once a day and we may have more urgent need of him later. I know a quick way out of the city from here. We’ll have to hike across the beaches to get to the sea cave from there, and it’ll take perhaps an hour longer than it would’ve otherwise, but I think it’s our safest route.”

“Good enough for me,” Ophelia said. She took his hand, and together they went to find their new allies.

CHAPTER 15

CORRIN

The first thing Corrin did when they reached the sea cave was look for Captain Pelaine. All of the people on the list were friends and allies, but the captain was special; he had been a mentor to Corrin when he was young, and over the last century had served as one of his most loyal and trusted commanders and advisors. The relief Corrin felt upon spotting him standing in the cave was immense.

The rest of the allies, too, were relieved to see Corrin—but part of that may have been due to the fact that they'd been left alone with an unfamiliar and unbonded dragon for the last few hours. River was sitting at the mouth of the cave presently, her wings half-unfurled as she let the sea breeze wash over them. Corrin recognized that she was relatively relaxed, but to anyone who didn't know dragon body language, that posture only made River look larger and fiercer.

Before they entered the cave, he strode over to River. "Could you perhaps try to look a bit more nonthreatening, so you don't frighten the people further?" he requested in what he thought was a very polite manner.

River only gave him a sour look. *"I don't do nonthreatening,"* she said, and folded her wings. *"But fine, if you want me out of sight, I am ready for a nap."* She turned and headed to the back of the cave, followed by shouts of alarm and the sound of people scrambling to get out of her path.

Corrin shook his head. Ophelia breathed a laugh and squeezed his hand. "We can do this," she murmured, and her faith bolstered his own.

They entered the cave. There was an immediate uproar and a rush of people to them as soon as they were spotted. Corrin counted several dozen of his closest allies, along with a handful of their children. One of them, a young girl, stood before Ophelia with her hands neatly folded and her solemn gaze searching Ophelia's.

"Lamilla," Ophelia said, her voice breaking. Her eyes filled.

Her mother, who was standing behind the girl, heard all she needed to in that one word. She let out a ragged cry before she clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle it. Several people gathered around her, drawing her in, murmuring comfort. The woman was shaking with the effort of not screaming—probably not wanting to upset her daughter. The group of friends pulled her more deeply into themselves, surrounding her with their presence even if there was no way to truly comfort her. Lamilla stayed where she was, still staring at Ophelia.

Ophelia knelt down. Wordlessly, she opened her arms. Lamilla ran into them.

The rest of the Fae around them looked on, not fully understanding the situation, but their expressions softened as they watched their human High Queen cry with a little Fae girl.

Corrin stepped to the side to give them privacy. He and Ophelia had strategized on the way here, and had decided that he should be the one to debrief his allies and get their take on what had been happening in Charassi while they'd been gone.

"Friends," he said, "I am greatly relieved you are here and safe. I know we have much to tell each other. I would like to update you on where I and the High Queen have been and what we have learned, but first, I would like to hear from you about what has been happening while we were absent."

Taking turns to speak, the group filled him in. A few of them had been soldiers, and they informed Corrin that the arrested people had indeed been seized due to their suspected loyalty to Corrin and Ophelia. An ambassador told him that most of the dignitaries who had been present at Ophelia's coronation were missing or in the dungeons. The merchants and artisans updated him on what it was like in the city; a curfew had been established

and was being strictly enforced, and unease often turned to riots when the Fae and soldiers clashed. Many Fae had tried to exercise their right to petition the would-be king directly, but all had been turned away. All Artifacts had been recalled by the palace and were being collected in the royal warehouses for some unknown purpose. Nearly a hundred new soldiers had been unwillingly recruited, many of them serving double duty as hostages to insure their families' cooperation with the new royal order.

Grimly, Corrin absorbed all their information and then related his own. He told them how he and Ophelia had been stranded on Earth with River—who was, he assured them, an ally—and how he had crafted new Artifacts overnight with Sunny's help in order to return to them. He told them of Ophelia's and his dedication to retaking the city. Last and most reluctantly, he told them of the true culprit behind all of this.

There was dead silence for a long moment when he spoke his mother's name. Pale, bloodless faces stared back at him. Someone inhaled, a jagged sound in the murky darkness of the cave. Captain Pelaine met his eyes, bracing him, giving him the strength to continue.

Corrin inhaled. "She falsified her death," he told them, "and she created the Unmaking curse—which destroys its victims' souls and life energy, creating a void that can be filled, when she wishes it, with Emalda's will, turning every Unmade into a potential spy and aggressor."

Gasps rippled through the group, and several people—likely those who knew someone who had been Unmade—began to cry.

Quickly, Corrin explained the events of yesterday and this morning: the events at Bursai, the theft of the Bone Crown, the catacombs, the revelation from the Unmade man, and their realization that Emalda was using her minions to search for something down there. "We are uncertain if it's a weapon or some hidden secret entombed down there or something else entirely, but we need to find it before she does," he finished.

The group stared back at him. Hands were fisted in clothing, faces were wet with tears, and many of them looked to be on the verge of a breakdown. Corrin wanted to calm them, but he wasn't sure how; he had been through

too much recently himself, and it was taking everything he had to do what he had already done. He had no emotional strength left to lend them.

Captain Pelaine took the reins. “What of Emalda’s dragon? Is it still alive? If so, we would need to take that into account when we strike back.” His calm, sensible tone worked to steady some of the more frightened people in the group. Corrin gave him a quick nod of gratitude.

“I can’t say with absolute certainty, but all evidence points to the prior dragon Monarch being dead. If it was still alive, I think Emalda would have brought it into play by now. Plus there is the fact that a dragon is a hard thing to hide.”

Ophelia caught his eye. She was shepherding Lamilla back to her mother, who hugged the girl tightly as the two of them cried together. Then Ophelia backed away, wiped her eyes, and came to stand next to Corrin. “Sunny says that Emalda’s dragon is almost certainly dead,” she murmured. “The dragons have found enough proof to be almost positive of it, and to strongly suspect that Emalda had something to do with it too.”

He nodded gravely. It was another crime to add to his mother’s very long list—that she might have taken the life of a creature bound to her so intimately—but at least they did not have to worry about her having such a powerful living weapon on her side.

Ophelia turned to face the people. “I take it you have all been updated?” she said. Her voice was hoarse, but that did not lessen the note of command in it. Everyone quickly straightened and focused on her. Corrin wanted to smile, but didn’t. She was a born leader.

Corrin quickly related the most important details that he’d learned. Ophelia nodded thoughtfully.

“I think our next step has to be retrieving the Bone Crown,” she said at last. “It’s the only real concrete, actionable goal we’ve got right now. We know we need to take back the city, but we can’t do that without the crown to wake the Guardians; and we know we need to figure out what Emalda is searching for in the catacombs, but we don’t yet have a starting point for that quest. So I say we move on the Bone Crown. Do any of you have any leads on where it might be?”

The crowd murmured, various people whispering to each other. Finally one young woman, a High Fae with a soldier's bearing, dipped her head in a slight bow. "I think I may have an idea on that," she told them. "It has not been seen publicly, so I can't absolutely confirm its location, but I can say there have been heightened security details around the area of the Deephold, beginning from the time when you say the Bone Crown was taken."

Captain Pelaine raised his brow. "That would be the ideal place to hide it," he murmured. "The Deephold is beneath the very center of the palace—highly defensible, very secure. And if I recall my legends correctly, it has an entrance to the catacombs."

Corrin had only been to the Deephold a handful of times; during his reign, it had been used mainly to store Artifacts and valuable tomes that didn't see much use. He did know that it had a large, heavy barred door that many said did in fact lead to the catacombs. "If that's true," he said, "it would be the perfect place for Emalda to hide, too. She could direct her Unmade through the catacombs from there, and if they found whatever they're looking for, she could quickly get to it to retrieve it."

Ophelia grimaced. "That settles it," she said. "We need to get into the Deephold."

"I urge caution, Your Highness," Captain Pelaine said, just as Corrin opened his mouth to say the same thing. "The palace is certainly on high alert after today's happenings, and any force we might send would be swiftly overwhelmed. And both of you, My Queen, My Prince, would be recognized and apprehended immediately."

"So we need a spy," Ophelia said.

There was one spy in the group, the one who had helped alert the second half of Corrin's list earlier. He raised his hand now. "I would be honored to go, but I'm afraid my cover is likely blown by this point. I will have been discovered as missing by now; myself and most of the other suspected spies loyal to Prince Corrin were on lockdown in our chambers until we evacuated. When I failed to report back, they likely figured out immediately that I fled to find you, and cannot be trusted."

“And also,” Captain Pelaine mused, “it wouldn’t be enough to merely send a spy and wait for them to return. We need to know what’s happening as it happens. Say the spy spots Emalda, but is caught and killed before they can return; we would never get that vital information, and an ally will have died for no reason.”

Ophelia sighed gustily. “What I wouldn’t give for a drone with a good camera,” she muttered, another one of her incomprehensible Earth sayings.

Corrin didn’t respond, because he’d had an idea. “Emalda can see through the eyes of her Unmade,” he said slowly. “What if there was a way for us to see through the eyes of our spy?” He glanced at Ophelia, then turned to find River, who was curled up tightly at the back of the cave. “River?” he called. She grumbled but lifted her head. “Is there a type of spell you or Sun in the Black Sky could work that can link minds—that would allow someone to see through another’s eyes when they’re far away, and ideally also communicate with them?”

River eyed him, considering. *“I am not sure,”* she said at last. *“I have never attempted any spell similar to that.”*

Ophelia spoke up then. “Sunny says he thinks he might be able to make it work. If our spy is willing, of course. He thinks there’s a mental-magic spell he could tweak and experiment with to let me watch through another’s eyes…but there’s some risk involved since we’ve never done this before. *More* risk, since being a spy’s going to be dangerous, no matter what.”

“In that case,” Captain Pelaine said, “I volunteer for the mission.”

Corrin spun on him, his heart wrenching. He had just gotten his old mentor back safely; he had no wish to send him back into danger. But he respected the man too much to naysay him, and held his tongue. The captain rewarded him with a knowing smile.

“I have spent the last few weeks fearing for my family’s lives,” Captain Pelaine went on, his kind brown eyes darkening. “My grandchildren have had to stay home from school for fear that they would be kidnapped and used as leverage against their parents. My wife was nearly arrested publicly when she went to market. I could not leave the city, because there was nowhere we could go quickly enough that would be far enough from Prince

Vie's reach to ensure our safety. When you, High Queen Ophelia, came to my door last night, that all changed. My whole family is here and safe now, and I can help Charassi's true ruler retake the throne and put the realm back in order. Anything I can do to help you, and to help make my home safer, would be my honor. And of course, I would help young Prince Corrin with anything he needs, always."

Ophelia hesitated. "Would you not be outed as disloyal to Vie too, the same as the ambassador? Wouldn't they suspect you?"

"They may suspect me, but I have been on duty in the heart of the city, not in the palace, so it may be a day or two before my absence is noted. More than time enough for me to return and allay any suspicions. It is a risk I'm willing to take."

Touched, Corrin put his fingers to his chest over his heart and bowed slightly—a gesture of respect and thanks. Captain Pelaine bowed deeply in return, once to him and once to Ophelia.

"Thank you, sir," she said earnestly. "You do me a great honor. After I get some rest and recharge, I'll practice this new magic until I've got it down pat and it's safe to send you in."

"When you are ready," Captain Pelaine told her, "I will submit to this magic, and I will retrieve your crown. And then, if I can, I will find Emalda and gather as much information as possible from her."

With a plan in place, the gathering broke apart. Corrin stayed behind and reached out a hand. The captain smiled and grasped it. "Don't worry," he said, correctly intuiting Corrin's concern for his sake. "I plan to return hale and whole to continue giving you guidance for as long as you'll have me."

Corrin's grasp tightened. "May it be so, Captain. Return safe. Please."

The captain nodded and turned away. Corrin watched him go, and despite Pelaine's assurances, a sinking feeling of dread refused to leave him.

CHAPTER 16

OPHELIA

Ophelia did not want to send a spy into the castle.

She thought this as she thanked Captain Pelaine for his offer. She thought it as she went to find a quiet place to get enough rest to recharge her magic. She thought it again when she woke up, and she continued thinking it as she began practicing the mental magic that would allow her to see through the captain's eyes while he put his life at risk to retrieve something *she* had lost.

She put a hand to her head. It was quiet up here, on the cliff above the sea cave, with only the cries of a few gulls and the soothing waves to keep her company. Her eyes were grainy with tiredness but she had managed to snag as much sleep as was practical; there was such a fine line to balance between getting enough rest to recharge her magic, and making sure the mission moved forward quickly enough to protect the captain's cover. But even as she did her best to achieve that balance, the whole time she was thinking: she did not want to send a spy. *She* needed to go.

It should be *her* risking her life, not asking someone else—someone Corrin respected and worried about, the closest thing to a loyal family member that he had left—to risk theirs for her while she watched from the sidelines. She had thought of using invisibility magic to cloak herself so she could slip into the Deephold on her own, or of activating Sunny's body and just crashing in. But in the end, she had advocated for neither of these plans. She was a queen now. She had to act like it. That meant she had to choose what was best for her people, had to stand behind the plan with the greatest chance of success even if it meant ignoring that urge inside her that insisted

she could handle everything herself. The truth was, Captain Pelaine had much more experience than her, and a stronger chance of getting out with the Bone Crown and without blowing his cover, keeping Vie none the wiser. She would not let her impatience and her overblown sense of duty drive her to do something foolish again.

But oh, she *wanted* to.

"Can you show me those last few threads in the pattern again?" she asked Sunny.

He grumbled. *"If you would just concentrate, you would pick this up much faster."*

A quiet voice came unexpectedly from behind her. "Anything I can help with?"

It was Corrin. He looked tired but fresher than he had earlier; his hair was slightly damp as if he'd just bathed, and he was wearing different clothing. The smell of some sort of woodsy soap drifted over to her. It reminded her, all at once, of the state park back in Tipton. Before that place had served as their secret hideout and Artifact-gathering location, it had been one of the places she loved best in the world, and she had spent countless happy hours running its trails and feeling at home beneath its trees.

Something eased inside her, just a bit. She felt herself lean toward Corrin and arrested the movement before it turned into an embrace. "I'm not sure," she answered Corrin. "This magic is tricky. It's even more finicky than the magic I used on Liana. I'm finding it hard to retain without practicing it."

He peered at her thoughtfully. "Can you not practice it, then?"

She frowned. "Well—I'd like to, but the captain is resting so I can't practice on him."

"So practice on me," Corrin offered, like it was natural and obvious that he would trust her so completely as to invite her into his mind.

Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to be in Corrin's mind. She wanted to bury herself in him, wanted to take refuge in him. Wanted to be able to see for herself if he felt about her how she felt about him.

Sunny made a disgruntled, borderline disgusted noise. She cleared her throat and tried to focus. "Um. That—that would be great, but I'm not sure if I should use the magic it takes to practice. I think maybe I should save it for the real thing?"

Sunny spoke up, sounding somewhat reluctant. *"Performing certain types of magic is like building up a muscle. The more you practice, the better you get and the less energy it takes out of you to perform a certain spell. There is the risk of tiring yourself, but I believe the benefit of being able to practice directing the spell outweighs that. And you can rest a bit more when you're finished practicing, before the mission starts."*

Heart jumping with sudden nerves, Ophelia relayed that to Corrin. He smiled a bit. "Good. I am your willing subject, then."

Ophelia glanced around. They were in a fairly secluded spot, surrounded by knee-high, windswept sea grass, with everyone else safely ensconced in the caves below. That was good. Somehow, this felt like a private moment.

"I am happy to make it so," Sunny grumbled, and dove beneath the surface of her mind, vanishing from her thoughts and leaving one last diagram of the spell's pattern lingering in his wake.

Ophelia tucked her hair behind her ears. She wasn't sure what to do with her hands. Was this like a mind-meld? Was she supposed to put them on Corrin's head? Keep them to herself? After what felt like an interminable debate but was actually probably only a second, she lifted one hand and cupped his cheek. It felt at once completely natural and very awkward.

Corrin gazed steadily back at her. "Let me know if I need to do anything."

"Um, I think you just basically stand there and let the magic in."

He bowed his head. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and then began to knit together the spying spell.

It was a complicated and sensitive pattern, and she had to focus all of her will on not letting any threads slither out of place while she was knitting a new thread in. The whole thing seemed to vibrate, echoing her touch and her mood, ready to fall apart completely if she lost focus. Slowly, surely, she gave it shape. While the spell she'd used on Liana had been like a

blanket, this one was thinner and more delicate-feeling, like a veil. It, too, used all the different types of magic.

When she was halfway through, she momentarily lost track of where she was and what thread of energy came next. The veil vibrated in her mind, ready to shake apart. Then she felt Corrin step closer to her, pull her into him and brace his hands on her back, and her focus snapped back into place. She inhaled, finishing the pattern, and then draped it over him.

Her vision jolted and then doubled. She blinked her eyes open. She could see Corrin's shoulder with her own eyes. And with his eyes, she could see the corner of her ponytail.

The weirdness of it was almost overwhelming. It was like having two television screens on at once, and trying to follow both shows at the same time. She squinted, scrambling to keep focus, but it was already lost.

She fell sideways into Corrin's mind.

Corrin had come home early from a mission. He'd heard a pair of off-duty guards mention that his mother was at work in the Deephold. Curious, and needing to update her with some intelligence he'd gathered, he made a detour.

There were no royal guards stationed at the door to the Deephold, which was odd. Emalda was the High Queen so she had plenty of magic to defend herself with, but that didn't mean she should be lax in her security detail. Corrin made a note to speak to the guard captain about it and tried the door.

Locked. And it wouldn't yield to his key, either, which meant his mother must be working on one of her urgent and sensitive projects that would be disturbed by interruptions. But the intelligence he'd brought back needed to be relayed, and he had to admit he was curious about what she was working on. Surely there was no harm in sneaking inside to watch—then he could see what she was working on, and be present when she was at liberty to talk. He slipped through a secret side door hidden behind an alcove that he'd discovered as a wandering child.

The Deephold smelled…strange. Metallic and acrid like lightning, but with undertones of coppery blood and rotting meat. With his first inhale, something within him coiled up in warning: this was the scent of graves, of death, of something he did not wish to find.

But that same sense of dread propelled him forward. He was a prince of the realm—he would not cower from whatever danger lay ahead. He turned a corner and saw his mother.

Blood. Bodies. Torn flesh, broken bones. Fae-like forms splayed over the tops of pedestals like altars. Magic spreading like a silvery mist across everything, leaving a film wherever it touched.

The body closest to him was that of a child. Her wristband marked her as a resident of an orphanage near the Nymph Woodlands. The next nearest body wore heavy manacles and had rows of tattoos marching up and down both arms. Neither body moved, not even to breathe.

His mother stood at the center of the room. She held a tool, something his eyes wouldn't quite latch onto, but he saw enough of it to know it was sharp and many-bladed and horrible.

"Mother," he gasped out.

She looked up. Her winter-fox ears were spattered with blood. Her mouth, so often before curved in laughter, rounded with shock. She dropped the tool. It clinked when it hit the floor. Corrin turned, and ran.

It was a memory. Ophelia struggled to free herself from it, but her horror and Corrin's remembered disbelief and devastation rebounded against each other, smothering her, gluing her in place. She could not extract herself. She was supposed to be a passive passenger, supposed to only see through Corrin's eyes, not drop herself into his worst memories. But she couldn't get free.

She felt his revulsion at what his mother was doing now, with the Unmaking. She felt his rage and pain at her betrayal. His desperate, shameful hope that she would somehow return to the laughing mother she used to be, and make everything all right again.

Ophelia could not break free. The emotions and memories were too strong. She began to have a hard time telling which thoughts and feelings were his, and which were hers.

Then she felt the hint of a third presence. In her state, she couldn't quite recall who it was, but it felt familiar: something golden and singeing, ferocious and magnificent and *hers.* It whispered, *"Follow."*

She mentally reached out and touched it. It guided her forward to somewhere calm. Somewhere beautiful. It was not a memory this time.

It was her.

She wasn't sure how she could tell that this place in Corrin's mind represented her, but she felt the truth of it as soon as she entered it. She felt *herself*, but through him—she was surrounded by his feelings for her, his view of her. She saw how her delight delighted him. How everything in him wanted to surround her, protect her. He thought she was clever. Ingenious. Magnificent. He believed in her, in the possibilities of her, as he had never believed in anyone else. The feelings thrummed through him and into her and back again, a cycle of something that she didn't dare name—could only feel, true and certain.

She felt herself settle. She found the magic spell, and gently pulled at one of the threads until it unraveled harmlessly and evaporated. Corrin was still embracing her, and the way his chest moved in shudders against hers said that he had felt all of that too, that he was still feeling it, that he would always feel it.

She turned her head and kissed him.

He froze for a moment, still, and then his lips parted and he made a quiet sound that was half a sigh. He wound one hand into her hair and kissed her back. She felt like she was spinning out into the sky, like she was weightless. He was tugging her ponytail loose. The feel of his hands in her hair was astonishingly perfect. She dared to lift one of her own hands and brush the hair at the nape of his neck, the damp, dark brown waves fresh from a wash. He made that sound again and his arm around her back pulled her closer. She was already as close as she could get, legs tangled, chest pressed against chest, one of his hands in her hair and the other tracing a

tingling path down her spine, but she wanted to be closer too, and tightened her own arms.

He was so much taller than her. He had to bend down to reach her, and it put too much space between them. His hands slid further down her back, over her hips, and then his fingers curved carefully under her thighs. He paused, making sure it was okay.

It was definitely okay. She stood up on her tiptoes to give him a better grip and he lifted her, wrapping her legs around his hips. There was no space at all between them now, and that was perfect too.

They stayed that way for an eternity, and for not nearly enough time. Then, slowly, shivering and gasping, they pulled back.

Ophelia registered distantly that Sunny was snickering at her, and all at once she returned to herself. Gravity seemed to reassert itself with a thud. What in the name of all that was holy was she doing? She was supposed to be practicing for her part in a vital, life-or-death mission, one that the fate of an entire realm might depend on. And here she was kissing a Fae prince.

A very kind, gentle, and hot Fae prince, who had some intensely wonderful feelings about her.

She felt her cheeks heat, her ears burn. Corrin was staring at her with a very complicated expression, and she couldn't meet his eyes. Gingerly, she lowered her legs to the ground, straightened her clothing, and stepped away. A chaos of emotions tumbled through her. She couldn't name them, couldn't even separate them—all she knew was that she could not afford to be this distracted right now, when the life of Corrin's beloved mentor was about to depend on her.

"I'm—I'm sorry," she said awkwardly, busying herself with retying her ponytail. "That was a mistake. Though a—a very nice one." She laughed awkwardly even while she inwardly cursed. *Nice* was not a good descriptor for that kiss. *Perfect* and *shattering* and *amazing* might have been closer, but no, she couldn't say those. That wasn't a conversation she could let herself have right now.

“Ah,” was all Corrin said, still unmoving. After another long second, he took a step back and righted his own clothing. “Forgive me.”

His voice sounded so distant, so controlled. She hated it. “No, don’t, there’s nothing to forgive,” she said quickly. “Just—we should probably just practice one more time, maybe. I think I know the threads I knitted wrong, that’s why I fell into your memories like that. I can get it right this time.”

He nodded, still looking distant and far too formal. “Of course. Anything you wish.” The last sentence was a bit warmer, and he didn’t look away from Ophelia when he said it.

Damn her and her terrible timing. She wanted so badly to kiss him again. Instead, she swallowed hard and pulled up the threads of magic she needed. “Okay,” she said. “Let’s practice.”

CHAPTER 17

OPHELIA

The second practice session had much less kissing—which was to say, zero total kissing—and Ophelia came out of it with a bit more confidence in her ability to form and maintain the necessary spell. When she was finished, she and Corrin awkwardly parted ways, and she found a quiet spot in the cave to take another short nap before the mission was due to begin.

When she awoke, she found Corrin talking in a low tone with Captain Pelaine. Corrin looked thoughtful and a bit uncertain, his brow wrinkled, his hair rumpled on one side like he'd been running a hand through it too much while it dried. As Ophelia watched, the captain put a hand on Corrin's shoulder and gave him a warm smile. Corrin's expression eased and he smiled back, then pulled a rolled-up piece of parchment out of his jacket and handed it to Pelaine, who nodded, walked away, and passed the scroll to someone else in turn.

"What was that about?" Ophelia asked with a yawn when Corrin spotted her and came over.

He blushed faintly, which was adorable. She ordered herself fiercely not to blush as well. She was a High Queen, for crying out loud, she did *not* go around constantly blushing because she'd kissed a boy. "Oh, he was just… giving me advice," Corrin said at last, awkwardly.

"And you gave him a note?"

His expression cleared. “I gave him a lot of notes, actually, to disperse to different messengers. I’m calling together all our allies. The pixies from the habitat where we spent the night, Garander and whoever he can bring with him, and some of my other friends who I think can be counted on to come to our aid. Most of the messengers are already on their way.” He hesitated. “The last message was for Liana,” he admitted.

Ophelia stood up straighter, all remnants of sleep clearing from her mind. “Isn’t that risky?” she asked. He’d updated her during their walk back from the city about what he’d seen on the Holy Belltower, and while she too held out hope that Liana could be swayed now, she didn’t want to bet their allies’ safety or that of Corrin himself on that hope.

Corrin sighed. “It is,” he admitted, “and if you want, I could recall the message before it goes out. But I have a hunch that Liana might be willing to help us now. She and I have been friends since our childhoods. Now that she’s seen Vie’s true nature, she could use a real friend.”

Ophelia smiled at him. She felt the depth of his belief in her. She wished she could show him how much faith she had in him, too—and how much she loved that he still thought of Liana as a friend, even after her betrayal. “Don’t recall it,” she told him. “If you think it’s worth the risk, then I trust you.” She caught his hand, squeezed it, then let it go.

She strode into the midst of the cavern. Captain Pelaine was hugging his wife and saying something to one of his grandchildren. When she caught his eye, he gave her a nod and held up a finger to ask for another moment. *Of course,* she mouthed, feeling a pang once again that she was sending him out on a potentially deadly mission while she stayed in the safety of the cave.

She turned away and swallowed, trying to re-center herself, trying to dredge up her earlier certainty that this was their best option. When she turned, though, she spotted Lamilla. The girl was curled up with her face against her knees. Her eyes were squeezed closed as her little back shook with sobs. Behind her, her mother stroked her hair.

Ophelia’s own eyes misted. Her determination firmed. For Lamilla, and for all Fae who had lost a loved one to the Unmaking or to the unrest in

Dominion, she would do whatever she had to in order to make things right. She could let no more orphans be made under what was supposed to be her reign.

Captain Pelaine walked to her side and bowed. “Your Highness,” he told her, “I am ready.”

Ophelia wasn’t sure *she* was, but she worked the magic on him anyway. Sunny had been right about it getting a little easier—or at least, more familiar—with practice. After the span of only a few minutes, the spell was ready and she dropped the veil-like magic over the captain.

That strange double-vision sensation made her dizzy again. She blinked and shook her head, trying to focus on just her own sight for now. “Thank you, Captain Pelaine,” she said.

He stepped away and inclined his head, then walked to where River was waiting for him.

The blue dragon eyed the captain with obvious distaste. It had taken some doing for Corrin to persuade her to carry the man invisibly to one of the palace ramparts, to reduce the chances that someone would see him reentering the city and know that he had left. In the end, River had given in grumpily to Corrin’s wishes, as she was doing more and more often lately. She had even offered to circle high overhead until the captain had finished his mission so that she could serve as backup in case he got in trouble, but Ophelia knew that was more to make Corrin feel better than anything else. If the captain was caught within the palace’s walls, there was little River would be able to do to assist him.

The group of allies watched somberly as the captain climbed carefully up onto River. Her invisibility magic rippled over them both, and then there was a mighty gust of wind as they took to the skies. Ophelia sat down and closed her eyes so she could focus entirely on Captain Pelaine’s vision rather than her own. She would be able to communicate with him through a sort of telepathy, and he with her, but neither of them said anything as River took him swiftly toward the borders of Dominion.

She watched through the captain’s eyes as he flew over the city walls. The palace loomed larger and larger. River slowed to a hover and then dipped

gracefully in a maneuver that put Captain Pelaine within leaping distance of an empty balcony. The captain stood—carefully, lips tight, as if part of him couldn't quite believe he was about to leap off a dragon's back—and jumped to the balcony. He landed on the railing and stepped quickly down, then strode through the adjacent doorway as if he'd been there all along.

Ophelia let out a long, shaky breath. It was starting. "He's in," she reported in a whisper to Corrin and the others. She felt him grasp her hand, and she squeezed back, grateful to have him as an anchor.

She watched as the captain walked swiftly and purposefully down the halls and stairwells inside the castle. Anything she saw that looked unusual, that didn't match up with the way the palace had looked last time she was there, she reported to Corrin. The main thing that had changed was the amount of security. Guards were posted at every corner, at the end of every corridor. They clogged the hallways, the stairs, and even the lifts, which were supposed to be mostly reserved for the disabled. Ophelia's breath caught in her throat every time a soldier looked at the captain, but none of them seemed to notice anything off. Pelaine's air of command, his veneer of officiality, seemed unquestionable.

"He's doing okay so far," she said aloud. "*Good work,"* she dared to tell him through their link, and felt a nudge of acknowledgement back from him—but also a burst of tension.

"It'll be harder to get past the officers on the Deephold, especially if Emalda is in there," he told her.

Nervous but making sure to keep the emotion out of her mental "tone," she acknowledged his words and then relayed them to Corrin and the others.

As the captain reached the stairwell at the corridor's end, one guard gave him an odd look and started to ask him something, but Pelaine brushed it off and continued on. The guard hesitated but then snapped a salute and stayed where he was. Ophelia let out a breath.

The bottom of the stairs led to a massive corridor. Ophelia remembered it from the memory of Corrin's that she'd fallen into. Huge doors, large enough to admit a dragon, stood barred across the hall. A cluster of guards stood around it. They had a different air to them than the other soldiers;

there was more menace in their expressions, and on their chests they wore black enamel pins with Vie's sigil. Pelaine walked past them, moving beyond the doors as if he had business in some area further down the hall. The guards gave him suspicious looks and turned their bodies to bar the door even after he'd passed.

"They must be Vie's personal guard," Corrin said grimly in response to her description. "He would have handpicked them for their loyalty and probably for being bullies like he is. Is the captain going to try the side door I told him about?"

"I think so," Ophelia answered, watching Pelaine take a sharp corner into the smaller hallway that she also remembered from Corrin's awful memory. There was only one soldier stationed there, but his eyes narrowed in suspicion when he spotted the captain.

"Trouble," Pelaine reported telepathically. *"He knows me, suspects my sympathies lie with Corrin, and is ambitious enough to eagerly report or stop me if I give him cause."* Out loud, he said, "Hail, friend. I'm on business from the Elder Priestess Liana."

It was the lie they'd agreed on in advance. It was the only bluff that stood a chance at working even if it was followed up on; Liana might possibly be willing to back up Pelaine now.

But the guard's suspicion only seemed to deepen at this. "Truly? Because I heard that you went missing from your home along with some of Corrin's other allies." He left off Corrin's honorific, as if he wasn't even a prince now that his brother had usurped the throne.

Ophelia's nerves tightened. She reached out mentally to Sunny. Sensing her distress and knowing she was trying to think of some way to help, Sunny took a moment to think and then told her, *"Since the two of you are currently linked by an active spell of yours, you could try feeding another, separate spell through that link, using the captain as a focal point."*

"You mean I could use some magic to help him from a distance?" Ophelia hissed, her heart leaping at the possibility.

"Maybe," Sunny emphasized. *"It may simply drain your magic more without achieving its goal, which is why I did not bring it up before."*

The guard's hand was on his weapon now. With a shout, he could bring the soldiers from the other hallway. "What's this business the Elder Priestess sent you on?" he asked.

"Confidential," Captain Pelaine replied.

The guard made his choice. He drew his sword and inhaled to shout. Captain Pelaine drew back his arm for a punch, but the blow likely wouldn't be enough to silence the man. It could, however, allow Ophelia to help. She quickly wove together the best defensive mental-magic spell she knew—one for knocking people unconscious—and *shoved* it through her link into Pelaine. Through his eyes, she watched the magic flow through his arm and into his fist, and strike the guard squarely in the jaw as soon as Pelaine touched him.

The man crumbled. His sword fell, rescued at the last second by Captain Pelaine before it could clatter noisily to the ground. The captain exhaled. *"Nicely done, My Queen,"* he murmured through the link.

"I'm glad you're okay. Hurry," she said fervently.

He slipped into the alcove and opened the hidden door behind it.

Though she'd seen it in Corrin's memory, the Deephold had changed drastically in the last hundred years. Gone were the terrible altar-like tables where Emalda had experimented. The air still smelled metallic and acrid with a terrible stench of rot underlying it all, but the awful coppery tang of fresh blood was missing. But the biggest change was the most obvious: the room's walls were glazed in the living crystal from the catacombs.

Ophelia only had a moment to gape at the diamond-like crystal before Pelaine ducked sideways into the shadows behind the door. Then she realized why he'd hidden—there were people in the room, and it seemed that two of them, deep in the room and not currently visible to the captain, were talking. Pelaine squinted into the too-bright area, with the crystals reflecting the light of every burning torch. That was why it took so long to recognize that the room was full of Unmade.

Ophelia gasped sharply. She started counting. Three, seven, ten…nearly a dozen Unmade just standing blankly in place like mannequins. As she watched, movement caught both hers and Pelaine's gazes, and they watched another Unmade emerge from a pair of large double doors that were propped open on the other side of the room. Beyond those doors was a deep darkness, and the glint of more crystal.

Frantically, Ophelia tried to give Corrin this information as quickly and coherently as possible, but it was hard with her heart thundering in her ears. "Unmade," she said. "Eleven, no twelve now. They're coming out of the catacombs—and now another one is going in—and the rest are just standing there."

She heard Corrin inhale sharply, but he stayed silent, letting her focus on what Pelaine was seeing. And hearing—the voices sounded again, drawing her attention to the center of the room, still hidden from Pelaine's line of sight. Ophelia listened closely, trying to make out what they were saying.

"…close yet?" asked one voice, sounding careless and impatient. The speaker was wandering around the room and finally stepped into view. It was a boy in a fine black suit, with the ugliest crown she'd ever seen resting on his head.

"Vie," she hissed. "Vie is there."

"I am very close," said the voice of the other person, "and I could likely work quite a lot faster if I wasn't interrupted by children asking for updates every hour." The voice was sharp, annoyed, and female. She stepped over to check something, and Ophelia saw that the woman in question was tall. She wore a simple, elegant dress with a pattern of flowers on it. Her white hair looked shockingly pale against the colorful blooms. Above her hair rose two ice-white fox ears.

Emalda.

Ophelia's breath clogged in her throat. Before she could say anything, though, Emalda shifted her weight, and in so doing, revealed what she was examining. In front of her stood a single slender, tall dais, and at its top rested the Bone Crown.

“She’s there,” Ophelia said in a low tone, emotion choking her. “Emalda is there with Vie. They have the Bone Crown.”

Pelaine spoke up through the telepathic link, sounding calm and collected, grounding her in turn. *“I will listen for as long as I can, but I am not in a secure space. They have to come this way to leave the room and I will be discovered if I linger.”*

“Keep yourself safe,” Ophelia advised. *“Use your best judgment on how long to stay, whether the information is worth the risk.”*

She wanted to yell at him to get out of there immediately. Another part of her wanted to ask him to see if he could cause some sort of distraction and grab the crown. She knew that neither of those suggestions would be wise, though, and so she held her tongue.

Vie was speaking again. “…just don’t see why you’re in such a rush, that’s all.” He sounded sulky now, his hands in his pockets. “You’ve been doing nothing else but experiment on this crown ever since you got ahold of it. There are other matters that could use your attention. I would love for the two of us to work together on—”

Emalda spun to look at him, cutting her youngest son off with the coldness in her gaze. “You don’t see why I am in such a rush?” she said, arching one perfect eyebrow. “Tell me, what is it you think I’m doing here, with this Artifact?”

Vie shrugged one shoulder. “Undoing the Royal Rites.”

She waved a hand, dismissing that. “That has always been your flaw—you think too small.” Vie hunched his shoulders, looking stung by that, as she went on. “The older I get, the further I go past a High Fae’s or an Unseelie’s natural life span, the more energy it takes to keep myself alive.”

“Then just Unmake a few more Fae. That’s what you’ve been doing to get the energy you need all this time, right? I can have my soldiers gather—”

Emalda shook her head, looking disappointed in him. “That can no longer sustain me. Energy that used to give me years is now used up in minutes. But this crown, it links the High ruler of the Fae to the entire realm of Charassi. If I can find a way to manipulate that link, I can reverse it, and use

it to pull energy from the realm itself to buy myself more time to find what I'm after. Tell me, son, do you think continuing to live is a crucial enough goal to put me in 'such a rush'?"

Vie said something sulky in response, but Ophelia couldn't hear it. There was a rushing in her ears, something churning inside her full of shock, terror.

Fury.

The Unmaking didn't just rob Fae of their life energy and destroy their souls. It did those things *in order to extend Emalda's own life.* How many Fae had she Unmade? Hundreds, certainly. Perhaps thousands by now. All to keep her own corrupted soul alive. And now she had the Bone Crown, and she thought its connection could be reversed so that she could steal energy from the entire realm—*Unmake* the entire realm—

"Ophelia?" Corrin asked, his voice sounding faint even though he was inches away. "Ophelia? My Queen? What's happened?"

She was shaking. She couldn't breathe. She was squeezing her eyes shut so tightly all she could see was red, but she had to speak, she had to pass along the knowledge that Pelaine was taking such a risk to obtain.

"Emalda. She's…she's talking about the Unmaking, and about the Bone Crown. She's been Unmaking people so she can take their energy for herself, to extend her life now that she's surpassed the natural limit. She thinks she can use the Bone Crown to steal energy from the entire realm. She thinks it'll buy her time to find something else she's been after."

There was an explosion of sound around her. People were shouting, screaming, weeping. She still had a tight grip on Corrin's hand, though, and she used it to keep herself anchored. She had to keep listening. She had to learn everything she could.

Vie was speaking. He was saying something about the crown. How valuable it was, that she should try not to destroy it in the process of reversing its link to the land, because he wanted to wear it himself once Ophelia was dead, once he bonded the next dragon Monarch himself.

Emalda gave him a cool look. "This crown doesn't matter."

Vie drew himself up. “It has symbolic significance to the people. If I have to keep wearing a lesser crown, some of our subjects will continue to see me as illegitimate—”

“When I have finally found what I need most,” Emalda said coolly, “there will be no one left who thinks we are illegitimate. I will be *immortal.* I will never taste death again.” She set her jaw, a faraway look flashing through her eyes for a second before she refocused. “I will be able to subsume the life energy not just from the land of this realm, but from all living beings and all lands of *every* realm. Then you and I will rule forever and we will punish anyone and everyone who ever stood against us.”

Vie spread his hands. “But how much longer will it take?”

“It took me time to get enough information from your little priestess about the secrets she now has access to in the Holy Bell Tower,” Emalda replied. “I was uncertain which Artifact I would need. But now I know what I am looking for. All I have to do is find it. My Unmade have searched much of the catacombs already. They will find it sooner or later, and then they will spring all the traps on the path to it so that I can retrieve it myself.”

“Very well,” Vie said, and took a step back. “I shall leave you to your work.”

“Go perform a few more executions,” Emalda said. “That always cheers you up.”

He snorted, and turned—straight toward the door where Captain Pelaine was still standing.

“Run!” she urged the captain. *“You might still make it before he gets close enough to see you!”*

“Not without the crown,” the captain said grimly. *“Not after what I just heard.”* He hesitated, an uncharacteristic pause as he gathered words. *“My Queen. If I do not make it back, please tell my family I love them, and that I do this for them and for Charassi.”*

And then before she could tell him to stop, he was running into the room in full view of its occupants.

“No, no!” Ophelia wailed. She knit another spell, the fastest one she knew—the one for fireballs. She shoved them through Pelaine, and the fireballs launched wildly from his chest. She couldn’t aim like this, but it caused enough of a distraction to let Pelaine grab the crown before Vie and Emalda roused from their shock and confusion and yelled for the guards. The Unmade in the room lurched and turned as one toward their maker, following some silent command, and then they all began moving to apprehend Pelaine.

“Ophelia!” Corrin said urgently. “What’s happening?”

Heart in her throat, she told him.

Pelaine spun around, ducked under Vie’s outstretched arm—thank God the prince wasn’t wearing any weapons, too arrogant to think he’d be attacked in his stolen palace—and ran for the open door for the catacombs. He dodged one grasping Unmade, shoved his shoulder into another and sent it flying.

He could make it, Ophelia told herself fiercely. He could. He *would.* She refused to admit any other possibility. From what she recalled, Pelaine wasn’t far from the temple entrance she’d used before. Surely he could get there.

River! She needed to call for her, needed to direct her to help however she could. Dividing her attention was beyond difficult, especially since she also had to keep tabs on the mental-magic spell to keep it active—but she managed to craft a telepathic burst, a simple “danger” signal, and sent it flying out at an angle towards where River would likely be circling. It didn’t have to be carefully aimed; she would sense it if it got anywhere near her.

Ophelia directed all of her focus back to the captain. He was running through the dark, taking the rough-hewn steps down two at a time, the power and speed of his movements reminding her of a charging bull. Behind him, soldiers were shouting, and the Unmade were plunging into the catacombs after him. A crossbow bolt plunged deep into the back of his calf. He staggered but kept going. Ophelia clapped her free hand over her mouth to stifle a cry.

Emalda's voice came from somewhere behind him. "Don't kill him!" she shouted. "I can make him compliant!"

"My Queen," the captain said telepathically as he darted down the hall and up another flight of stairs, *"I will not let them Unmake me. When I die, my soul will go to the Sun."*

"Then keep running! Get away!" Ophelia said desperately. She shoved her mental map of the path to the temple into his mind through their link, trying to at least give him a general direction to run in.

He came to a fork. He took the left one that went downhill. There was an Unmade in front of him, one of the ones who'd already been down in the catacombs. Pelaine didn't pause. He lowered his shoulder and drove it into the rotting woman's chest. It knocked her backward, and Pelaine leapt over her, sprinting down the corridor at full speed with the crown tucked under one arm.

But the crossbow bolt in his leg was slowing him down, and it was very dark in the catacombs, the only light made by his pursuer's torches glinting off the crystalline walls.

"My Queen," he said, his mental voice sounding strained now, *"I fear the bolt was poisoned."*

He glanced down at his leg. The veins closest to the injury had turned green—and the poison was spreading. She quickly described it to Corrin.

He inhaled sharply, and when he spoke, she could hear the tremor he was trying to flatten out of his voice. "That is nettle-weed toxin. It will kill him in less than an hour unless he gets the cure." Corrin let go of her hand and stood up, shouting to the people around him, searching for someone who had the ingredients to make the cure so they could give it to Pelaine the moment he returned.

She dove back into Pelaine's mind. *"There!"* she said, feeling a jolt of relief. *"Those stalactites, I know those! You're on the same route I took. Just a little longer and you'll make it to the temple entrance."*

He made no response, probably because he was spending all his strength on running. She could hear his pursuers behind them. Their numbers were

growing—and they were gaining on him. In the minutes it took him to navigate to the temple entrance, they were nearly within throwing distance—and within crossbow-firing distance.

Captain Pelaine limped up the stairs. He yanked the massive door closed over the entrance and heaved a stone atop it. It wouldn't keep his pursuers down there long, but it might buy him another minute. When he was done, he turned and hurried deeper into the temple.

"What are you doing? Go out the exit, get out of the city," she urged him.

"I wouldn't make it, not injured as I am. I won't risk letting them get the crown. It is more important than my life." He withdrew the crown from beneath his arm and gently tucked it under a fallen pillar, where it would be invisible in the shadows. *"River should be able to fetch it from here,"* he said. *"I will lead them away."*

Tears rose in her eyes. *"Captain Pelaine, no! Please, we'll find a way to save you—"*

"My family," he said gently. *"Tell them I do this for them. Tell them to remember me, that I will be with them always. Tell my grandchildren to live beautiful lives."*

It was a terrible echo of her mother's last words. *Live a meaningful life*, she'd said, brushing Ophelia's hands with her frail fingers. Ophelia choked on a sob, putting a fist to her mouth, trying to keep herself together. If the captain was truly going to sacrifice himself, then Ophelia had to make it worth it. She could not fall apart now. Not yet. She had to remain strong enough to stay with him to the end. He deserved that—and more.

As Captain Pelaine staggered out through the front exit and into the sunlight, Ophelia packed up the memory of him hiding the crown and wound it through with her own urgency and feelings of sorrow, then flung it toward where she hoped River would be.

This time, River answered, though her telepathic voice was distant and fuzzy. *"I am on my way, but I had to let the invisibility spell drop. The soldiers spotted me and have sent flying Unseelie to harry me. I fear I will not reach the captain in time to save his life. I must fetch the crown first."*

Ophelia wanted to argue, wanted to prioritize rescuing the captain, but she knew it would dishonor the captain's request—and anyway, Ophelia only had enough magic to either keep the spying spell intact or to respond to River, and she refused to leave the captain alone in his final moments.

She watched through his eyes as he plunged into the market square. It was sparsely attended, but there were enough people there to cause an uproar when he was spotted bleeding and staggering, followed closely by soldiers and Unmade. He slowed and then sped back up in spurts, letting his pursuers get nearly close enough to catch him before he pulled away again. By the time he made it out the other end of the market, every soldier in a three-block radius was closing in on his position.

He was leading them away from the crown, Ophelia realized. He was using his last moments to draw every eye away from its location so River could safely retrieve it.

"Be steady," Sunny whispered to her. *"I am here with you."*

She mentally clung to him as she watched Captain Pelaine dodge into a tall, steepled tower to avoid the grasping hands of an Unmade. He climbed the stairs. He yanked glass coverings from sconces and shattered them on the stairs behind him to slow his pursuers, even as he continued to slow himself as the toxin worked its way through his system.

He plunged out of the dark staircase and into the dazzling light of the sun at the top of the steeple. He raised his face to it and closed his eyes.

"The Sun," he whispered to her. *"Return me to the Sun."*

And then he jumped.

Ophelia's mind clung to him during the fall. Distantly, she could hear herself weeping, could feel Corrin wrap his arms around her shoulders, could sense Sunny's rock-solid, clear-eyed comfort.

She made herself strong, just for a heartbeat; she owed it to the captain to be at least a fraction as brave as he was in this moment. *"Thank you,"* she told him. *"We will remember. I will remember."*

And then the spying spell rebounded, cut off from its source, returning Ophelia fully to herself with a snap. Ophelia let out a gasp, as Corrin tightened his hold around her.

“The captain is dead.”

CHAPTER 18

OPHELIA

At almost exactly noon, minutes after the captain's death, River returned carrying his body and the Bone Crown. She lowered herself fully to the ground for Pelaine's family to retrieve him. Then she extended a single talon and returned the Bone Crown to the rightful High Queen—who felt like a complete and utter failure.

Ophelia took it, her fingers feeling numb as she gripped the bony edges and spikes of the crown. She didn't put it on. She watched Pelaine's grown children weep over his body as they wrapped it in blankets so his grandchildren wouldn't have to see him in such a condition. She watched as they built an altar of rocks to lay him upon. She watched as they conferred with an Unseelie priest who was with them, and as they began the vigil that would last a full twenty-four hours, as per the time-honored rituals, before they would return the captain's body to the Sun.

The vigil required a different person to stand guard over the captain's body for each of the twenty-four hours. Traditionally, his wife explained in a tone that quavered only a little, these spots were given to family members and friends and the people who had been closest to him. All the members of his family would serve an hour each, as would Corrin and several of the soldiers who had served under the captain. The last shift, his wife said, was to be Ophelia's.

She tried to refuse. She had been the one to send the man to his death; she did not deserve such an important role at his funeral. Corrin had to intervene, had to explain to her that to refuse would insult not only the

family but also the captain's memory. Corrin's own eyes were red-rimmed with grief, and Ophelia didn't have it in her to argue with anything he wanted. She bowed her head and acquiesced.

She slept. She rose. She washed and dressed. She still did not put on the crown.

The time came for her vigil the next day. As she walked out of the sea cave toward the altar on the rocky beach, she felt as though she was sleepwalking, as though she had been drifting through the entirety of the last day. Eventually, she knew, this period of shock would end and it would devastate her. For now, though, she clung to it like a life preserver.

"I would like to be with you," Sunny told her.

"You are always with me."

"I would like to be with you in my body. I would like to honor the captain at your side."

Touched, Ophelia pulled the Artifact earring off her ear. "I thought you weren't sentimental about stuff like this."

"I am not, but I do care about you. The greatest honor any being can give another is the sacrifice of their life. Captain Pelaine has honored you; I would honor him."

So Ophelia activated the Artifact, closing her eyes to that momentary disorientation as she lost an hour of her life, and brought Sunny's body flashing into existence on the shore. Many of the nearby Fae gasped and a few of the children screamed and ran, but Sunny only inclined his head slightly at the captain's wife, whose vigil was ending now. She eyed him for a moment and then inclined her head back.

The woman stepped down from the altar's side as Ophelia stepped up. "Prince Corrin has spoken to you about our funerary traditions?" she asked. Ophelia nodded. Corrin had filled her in on how she, and all the others who had stood vigil, were meant to bring a gift, which they would lay on the altar when their hour ended. The gift was meant to symbolize the role the deceased played in each person's life. When the captain was returned to his

ancestral force, the gifts would remain behind and would be reclaimed by the gift-givers, imbued now with the memory of the man they had honored.

The captain's wife turned back to the altar to lay her own gift on her husband's chest: a small, ornamental dagger made of some beautiful golden metal. Then she stepped away and went to the cave to prepare for the final rites, which would take place at the end of Ophelia's vigil.

Ophelia stepped up to the altar. She held the Bone Crown, worrying it in her hands. She felt like such an imposter. Such a failure. She had vowed to save everyone, had been so *sure* she could do it. How foolish she had been, to think she could put down an insurrection without loss, without sacrifice.

Sunny's breath blew warm on the back of her neck, reminding her that she was not alone.

The sun inched higher in the sky as Ophelia stood vigil. *I will remember,* she had promised the captain, and so she did what she had sworn. She remembered his kind smile from the first time she'd met him, the way she'd found him both intimidating and reassuring. She remembered how closely he'd stood to Corrin, the way he obviously felt a need to protect the prince, and how Corrin had relaxed in his presence. Silently, she thanked him for that—for being such a good friend and mentor to Corrin.

She remembered his honor and courage in volunteering for this mission. She remembered him telling her that he was doing this for his country and for his family. She remembered him leading their enemies away from the Bone Crown to save Charassi, and she thanked him for that too.

The end of her vigil approached; there were perhaps ten minutes before the end of her assigned hour, and during that time the final rites would be carried out. The Fae filed silently out of the cave, arraying themselves around the altar as the Unseelie priest—a man with red and white eagle wings—came soberly forward. Ophelia bowed to him and then turned to leave her gift at the captain's feet: the Bone Crown. He had died to protect it, and it was only right that it be used to honor him now. The priest's eyes widened in surprise and then softened as he looked from the crown to Ophelia, and he bowed back to her.

She joined the Fae at the front of the altar, stopping in front of Pelaine's wife. The woman's usually warm brown skin looked pale and tight with grief even as she gave Ophelia a wobbly smile and bowed low. Ophelia reached out a hand and clasped hers. She wasn't sure what to say and knew from experience that nothing could possibly make this moment better, so she tried instead to simply acknowledge the woman's pain.

"Thank you," Ophelia said. "Your husband gave all he could give to the realm, and nothing could ever repay you for that loss, but please know that I will never forget him or his sacrifice."

Then Ophelia moved to Corrin's side. His face was pale and etched with grave lines. His eyes looked vaguely hollow. She could feel the shock that had been insulating her starting to break down, and she clung to it, trying to make it last at least until the end of this ceremony. Corrin reached out and took her hand. They anchored each other.

As the sun reached its zenith and Ophelia's hour-long shift came near its official close, the Unseelie priest intoned a short speech that sounded ancient and holy, its rhythm almost poetic. The words blurred together in Ophelia's head and she couldn't quite focus enough to catch individual phrases, but she sensed the overall meaning: here lay a man who had lived a great life, and now his body would return to the ancestral force that had borne him. At the end of the poem, the priest raised a small pouch and poured its contents into his hand. It was dust, or sand, colored a lovely orange-yellow like the most vibrant of sunsets. He held it up over the captain's body.

The Fae at Ophelia's sides raised their own hands toward the sun and, as one, hummed a deep note. As more voices joined in and matched the pitch, the vibrations of it seemed to catch at something in Ophelia's chest, to rattle apart the fragile walls she'd put up between herself and her emotions. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She raised her own hands and joined her voice to the hum.

The priest upended his handful of dust over the captain. It fluttered down like snowflakes and settled on him. The wrappings around Pelaine's body sagged as if his form had suddenly dissolved, and then from the seams, more yellow-orange dust rose up in defiance of gravity. Ophelia watched,

breath stopped in awe as the dust—much more than the priest had poured out—wound slowly upward in a beautiful spiral, like a cloud of smoke rising to the heavens.

The pitch of the hum rose. The dust that was the mortal remains of Captain Pelaine ascended toward the brilliance of the sun, and then, when the hum had risen so high Ophelia feared she wouldn't be able to match it, the dust vanished and the hum cut to a sudden, ringing silence.

The Fae remained with their faces turned up. Sunny, who had perhaps only a few seconds left in his body, tilted his own head back and opened his mouth wide. He did not roar, because he didn't want to alert Vie's forces to their position, but Ophelia recognized the beautiful rippling magic that emanated from his maw and formed an aurora over their little beach. It was what River had done when they'd found Sunny's bones—it was the way dragons paid tribute to their fallen kin. River, who had been lying a little further up the beach, tipped her own head back and let her own colorful magic join his.

And then Sunny's time in his body expired, and there was a bright flash and then a quiet tinkling as the Artifact earring fell to the stones. Everyone seemed to exhale at once, reaching up to wipe their eyes.

The priest returned his pouch of dust to his robes, and then gestured to them all. "Let those who stood vigil return to receive back their gifts, blessed now by a life well lived and a death honorably achieved."

Ophelia sucked in a shuddering breath and wiped her eyes. Next to her, she could see Corrin scrubbing the back of his hand across his face before he let go of her hand to go and retrieve his gift—the sheaths for his daggers, which had been beautifully tooled and gifted to him by the captain a century ago. Ophelia didn't feel like she could talk to anyone without shattering into a thousand pieces of grief and guilt, so she kept her gaze faraway and waited while everyone else had filed up and retrieved their gifts, murmuring to each other and walking back into the caves in small clumps of friends and family. Corrin brushed a hand against her shoulder on his way back, but didn't try to speak to her or pull her away, and she was grateful.

At last, she and the priest were the only ones left, and the Bone Crown was the only gift remaining. She walked up to it slowly and lifted it off the now-empty altar. It felt somehow both heavier and lighter in her hands, as if the memory of Captain Pelaine had fundamentally changed it somehow. As it should.

"Your Majesty," came a quiet voice from beside her. It was the priest. This close up, she could see that one of his hawklike wings hung slightly crooked, and all of its long pinion feathers were made of some artificial, slightly shimmery material. He caught her looking and smiled, rustling his wings. "An old wartime injury," he explained. "Captain Pelaine's family crafted the new feathers and a new wing joint implant so I could fly again."

Her shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry for your loss," she managed.

He set a hand on her head, an oddly formal gesture that reminded her of blessings from priests back on Earth. "Child," he said softly, "I am old, and being old, I can see things that young eyes often cannot. I see that you carry a great weight of responsibility on your shoulders. That is commendable for a queen, but in this case, it is misplaced."

She looked up at him, a hint of anger jolting through her. "It's misplaced for me to care about losing one of my people?"

He didn't budge, only looked even more patient than before. "Grief is never misplaced. But your guilt is. If you lay the blame for Pelaine's death at your own feet, you are saying that the captain had no right to choose his own fate—no right to choose for himself what is worth living and dying for."

Ophelia physically felt the words sink in. They felt…right. Even though she wasn't sure she wanted them to be. She realized that there was a part of herself that *wanted* to feel guilty, *wanted* to feel responsible for this death—because if it was her fault, if she'd done something wrong, then that meant she could do better in the future and keep death at bay. But she knew that hope was false. Death couldn't be bargained with, or outwitted, or planned around. It would come when it came—the best you could hope for was to choose how you met it. That was where true nobility lay.

Captain Pelaine had *chosen* to give his life for the crown. For his country. For her. She had no right to take that choice away from him. It would be

like retconning his death, she realized now—robbing it of meaning. It made his death about *her*, rather than about him.

“I understand. Thank you,” she told the priest.

His eyes crinkled in a kind look. He dropped his hand from her head. “May I give you some advice, Your Highness, from an old person to a young one?”

She swiped at her eyes with a strangled laugh. “Isn’t that what you just did?”

“One more piece of advice, then.”

“Of course.”

He inhaled, looking thoughtful, taking a moment to form the words he wanted to say. “You won’t always be able to help everyone. You can’t always save everyone—and in trying to, you run the risk of robbing others of the responsibility to decide for themselves what is worth their potential sacrifice. You are in the midst of a war now, Highness. There *will* be sacrifices. The best thing you can do is honor them, the way you have honored the captain today.”

The words made Ophelia remember what Luis had said so long ago, back at the museum: *You’ve got to free people to pursue their own destinies, without holding them back because of what you want.*

“That will be…hard for me,” she said, looking up at the priest. “But I will try.”

She didn’t think it would ever be easy for her to let other people get hurt for her, or to accept when she was unable to save people who needed her, but she didn’t really have a choice; she *was* in a war now. There would be casualties. She could live in denial and feel crushing guilt with every one, or she could do her best, and remember that other people had the right to choose their own destinies as much as she did.

The priest nodded to her and stepped away toward the cave. Ophelia watched him go. She looked down at the crown in her hands, and thought about what it was imbued with now: a life well lived, and an honorable

death. It was right that those would always be with her now. Not because the captain's memory would forever weigh heavily on her, as she had half-wanted it to earlier, but as a reminder of what she had learned and experienced today.

Choice. Destiny. Responsibility. There was room for them all, and she could not let any of them outweigh the others.

She lifted the crown and put it back on her head.

CHAPTER 19

CORRIN

Corrin was packing when Ophelia found him.

“Where are you going?” she asked, brow furrowed.

He turned to look her over. She looked better than she had earlier—not healed, not yet, but it seemed as if she had at least come out of her shocked state from earlier and perhaps begun to make her peace with what had happened to Captain Pelaine.

Corrin lowered his gaze. He had not quite made his own peace with it, even though, if truth were told, he had known from the moment the captain left the cave that he wouldn’t be returning alive. He thought the captain might have sensed that as well. The man had lived long and well, but he had been a friend, and now he was gone. Corrin would mourn for a long time before he could truly move on. But for now, he would have to compartmentalize his sadness, because there was vital work to be done and he was the only one who could do it.

“I am going to the Scorched Lands,” he told Ophelia.

Her gaze sharpened. “What?”

“With your agreement, of course,” he added. “I have been planning as much as I could over the last day, during the vigils, and I think the first step we need to take to stop my mother and the Unmaking is to remove her and Vie from power as quickly as is feasible and retake the city. We know she’s after something in the catacombs, so we must shut off her access to them.

But first, we need more allies." He put a loaf of bread in his bag and drew the drawstring shut.

"I agree," Ophelia said slowly. "That sounds like a good plan. But it also sounds like there's more to it—such as the reason you're going to the Scorched Lands?"

"I told the messengers that went out yesterday to notify our allies to prepare for a full incursion in two days' time. We must strike as quickly as we can, before my mother gets whatever it is she needs to enact her awful plan. And to have our best chance at successfully fighting our way to the throne room, we are going to need more powerful allies than what we have currently. And *that's* why I'm going to the Scorched Lands; I am going to recruit the dragons."

Ophelia crossed her arms. "You can't. I need you here."

He met her gaze. "Didn't you tell me you would trust me, My Queen?"

Her eyes went bright with unshed tears. "They could *eat you*, Corrin. They made it pretty clear that you're not protected by their laws. If anyone should go to try to win them over, it should be me—they don't like me, but they won't kill me."

"Ophelia, you are needed here. You cannot risk yourself on a secondary mission that may or may not work. River has already agreed to fly me there and back. She is fairly certain they won't harm me."

"Fairly certain?" Ophelia echoed, her eyebrows shooting up.

"I would like to go as your ambassador. I believe I am well-suited to the role. I know dragons better than any other Fae now living; I have studied them and hunted them for a century, after all, and I have extensive training in diplomacy and treaty-writing as well. If I can win them over and make them our official allies, we will have little difficulty taking the palace back."

He waited for her approval. She squeezed her eyes shut and pinched her nose. "Corrin," she said at last, "I can't lose you, too. Please, don't do this."

He dropped his bag and stepped toward her, wrapping his arms around her and gently stroking her back. “I cannot promise that you won’t lose me, but I can promise that we will always find each other again.”

She sniffed and then sighed. “Okay,” she said at last, stepping back. “Not that you really need it, but you have my official approval. As my ambassador, I command you to go forth and make us allies, Prince Corrin of the Fae.” She made a vague, wavy gesture over his torso that she probably meant to look official. He smiled a bit and bowed.

“I will do you proud, My Queen.”

Not long after that, he was mounted up on River, waving farewell to Ophelia as they lifted off above the ocean. As soon as they were out of sight of the shore, River let out a deafening bellow, stretched her wings wide, and flapped so hard she nearly unseated Corrin. She climbed higher and higher into the sky until the air grew cold and thin.

“Skies, it is good *to stretch my wings on a proper journey again,”* she said.

Corrin was shivering, but he barely noticed. The sky above them had darkened from light blue to something darker, and a few stars were even visible. The clouds were far below them, and the sea even further below that. When River settled into a glide, hoarfrost creeping over her wings, the air around them was completely and absolutely silent.

Corrin closed his eyes and let himself rest within it.

After another minute, River took them back down to a lower altitude, explaining that they couldn’t stay that high for long or his “frail Fae body” would asphyxiate. They flew quietly over the ocean for a bit, and then out of nowhere, River said: *“So, you kissed the queen.”*

Corrin went still with shock, and then reddened with embarrassment. “I… that is none of your business,” he managed at last, to which River let out a roaring draconic laugh.

“Please. I could smell it all over you. Fae and human longing have a very similar scent, you know. And if it’s of any interest to you, she smelled as love-intoxicated as you did.”

He reddened further, but couldn't stop himself from asking, "Truly?"

"Truly, little prince." She chortled, but more gently this time. *"It is good that the two of you are finally being honest about your feelings for each other. I thought your courtship would take even longer than a dragon's."*

Curious—and anxious to cease discussing his love life—he asked, "And you know all about a dragon courtship?"

She huffed, blowing smoke over her shoulder at him. *"I do, little Fae. Sun in the Black Sky and I courted for centuries, though we never made a nest together."* Her voice turned a bit wistful. *"A part of me always thought it was because we would become something more."*

"Something more than nest-mates?"

"Yes. Soulmates. It is a rare thing among dragons, as it entails sharing all you are and all you have with another dragon for as long as you're both alive—but if I ever formed that sort of bond with another dragon, it would have been Sun in the Black Sky."

"I am sorry."

"Well, he isn't dead. What is it humans are always saying? Where there's life, there's hope?" She snorted. *"Foolish humans and their foolish sentiment. I fear it is rubbing off on me."*

He smiled. "On me, too."

They flew in companionable silence for most of the day, coming within sight of the first island of the Scorched Lands in the early evening. Chunks of ice floated in the waves beneath them, while on the horizon, smoke from several volcanoes spewed into the clouds. The land here was infertile, rocky and barren, which was just the way the dragons liked it. They passed over several islands where a dragon nest had been created within the calderas of extinct volcanoes. Like Sunny's home, they were full of bones. Corrin kept an eye out for any dragons, but saw none—until they landed on the island where he had once helped free the Convocation from a host of Unmade.

The dragons were waiting for him. He recognized Wilderness of Stars, an older stormy-gray colored dragon, and several others who were in the

Convocation—half a dozen or so of the most powerful dragons, who gathered in the monarch's absence to make decisions that affected all of the dragons. Such as allying with the Fae in wartime.

River landed gracefully before the group and half-flared her wings, ducking her head in a respectful bow. *"Elders,"* she greeted them.

Wilderness of Stars grunted. *"Better than 'horde of aged lizards,'"* he muttered, and Corrin winced at the recollection of River yelling that at the Convocation when they were being unreasonable during their own rescue.

River blinked innocently. Corrin hid a smile.

Wilderness of Stars exhaled gustily. *"We sensed you coming, Fae prince, and truth be told, have been expecting you for some time. Have you come to once again attempt to convince us to ally with your cause? Because you must know you will fail."*

Corrin's heart sank, but he sat up straighter and took a deep breath. "Honorable dragons," he said, "I fear the situation has changed from our earlier understandings. It has grown even more dire—"

One of the dragons, a younger-looking violet one, let out a low growl. *"Shadow on the River, how dare you come to us with a* Fae prince *on your back? Why have you not yet eaten him, or at least dropped him into a volcano? It is shameful. You do not even have the excuse of being bonded."*

River snapped her tail back and forth and rumbled a warning. *"I will carry whomever I wish, and you shall not naysay me. Now be silent and listen. Prince Corrin is correct; we carry grave tidings."*

The dragons growled and shuffled and sighed, but finally fell silent, allowing Corrin to continue. He explained the situation in full, telling them everything that had happened since their last update from River—mainly, what they had learned about Emalda and her goals.

The dragons roared and stomped their feet when he revealed that his mother was still alive. *"Emalda the Desecrator lives?!"* snarled one.

"Desecrator?" Corrin whispered to River, seeking clarification.

"There have long been rumors amongst dragonkind regarding your mother, but the stories vary so wildly I am uncertain what is truth and what is exaggeration," she said. *"But she is called the Desecrator by some because it is rumored that she murdered her own bonded dragon—our previous monarch. It goes against the Exile Treaty as well as every custom and law we keep."*

Corrin frowned, jolted. "My understanding was always that both she and her dragon perished a century ago in the same accident," he said slowly. "But as my mother's death has turned out to be false, I suppose I cannot speak to what truly happened to her dragon."

The dragons were still muttering amongst themselves. Wilderness of Stars, who seemed to have some sort of seniority in the group, turned to Corrin and River. *"We appreciate you bringing us this information,"* he said grudgingly, *"and we will discuss amongst ourselves what we might do about it, but as for allying with you—our answer has not changed. One good turn does not undo generations of bad blood between us and the Fae."*

"It would not be the Fae you would ally yourselves with!" Corrin replied hotly. "It would be High Queen Ophelia. Her kind has never had any quarrel with you."

Wilderness of Stars dismissed that with a flick of his tail. *"Humans are even more piteous and powerless than Fae. Dragons respect strength, not empty promises and allies who have nothing to offer."*

Anger rose up sharply in Corrin. "What if I brought back the High Queen and Sun in the Black Sky? If your own Monarch faced you and ordered you to help us, what then?"

"Sun in the Black Sky cannot face anyone anymore. He is reduced to nothing but a consciousness, thanks to you," Wilderness of Stars growled, and before Corrin could correct him with the fact that Sunny had his body once again—at least, sometimes—the dragon continued. *"And even if he was corporeal, he could not order the dragons as a species to ally with anyone. He does not have the authority to command us so wholly."*

Corrin bit back his anger and frustration with an effort. “Then, if I may ask, is there anything that *would* convince you to ally with us against Emalda and Vie, and the Unmaking?”

The dragons muttered a bit more. Finally, another dragon—a scarlet red one—answered. *“As Wilderness of Stars said, we respect strength, not powerless allies. If we were to ever ally with you—and that is quite a stretch to imagine—your queen would first have to prove herself a capable leader not only of the Fae, but of Charassi as a whole.”*

River narrowed her eyes. *“And what specifically might she do to prove that?”*

The scarlet dragon shook herself with a shrug-like motion. *“I have no idea. Like I said, I doubt such a thing could ever happen in any case. Now, begone with you—your elders have things to discuss, and your own loyalties clearly lie outside of your own kin.”*

River bared her teeth and snapped at the air. *“This is not over,”* she warned them, and then practically threw herself into the air.

Desperation and frustration roped through Corrin. He had taken nearly an entire day for this trip, bet so much of the precious time they had left before the incursion on this outing—and he was left with nothing to show for it.

On a sudden impulse, he shouted to River, “Can you fly to the nymph woodlands? An area that the messengers wouldn’t have been able to reach in their timeframe. I don’t want to return without bringing *some* allies back with me.”

River wheeled, changing direction without a word. She flew furiously, wings beating hard with the force of her simmering rage, until they landed with a heavy *whump* in a snow-covered field. Corrin dismounted, planning to search out any nymphs he could find nearby, but apparently River had a quicker solution.

She threw her head back and roared. *“Nymphs! Come to us, at the order of your Greater Prince!”*

Corrin winced. That was more likely to send the antisocial nymphs running than bring them to him. “At the *request*,” he stressed.

River rolled her eyes. *"At the request of your Greater Prince,"* she amended. *"Join us in the battle against the Unmaking and Emalda the Desecrator, who lives and seeks to destroy all you hold dear! I myself will bear you southward toward the fight."*

Her call had been loud, and apparently a good number of nymphs in the area were interested in her message. They crept up slowly at first, eyeing her and making sure Corrin truly was with her before they edged into the clearing to get more news. When around a hundred of them had come—likely as many as River would be able to carry—he told them all he knew.

Perhaps a dozen of them melted back into the woods, preferring to wait out the fight, but the rest of them asked to fly back with him. He set himself to work sorting them out by their skills. Most of them were untrained for battle—scholars and engineers and hermits—but he quickly spotted two who held themselves like soldiers. Those two looked faintly familiar, as well. One of them was very tall with short-shaven grass for hair, and the other had skin smooth and hard like river pebbles.

He stopped in front of them. "Do you two have combat training?"

They glanced at each other and nodded. "Aye," the river nymph replied. "We have served at the palace."

With a jolt, a memory slid into place, and he suddenly realized why they looked familiar. "I saw you at the palace," he said, feeling sick, "when Vie executed the middle priestess. You were patrolling the crowd."

A look of unease flickered over the grass nymph's face and then was gone. "We were doing our duty, Highness. We did serve briefly under High King—er, Prince Vie, but I promise you we were only following orders."

Corrin's eyes narrowed. His instincts were tingling, telling him something was off here, telling him not to trust *anyone* who would have helped his brother, however briefly.

The river nymph shifted his weight. "We still have a few friends trapped on the inside," he offered quickly. "Guarding the palace for Vie. They could help us infiltrate. If you allow us to slip inside before the fighting even

starts, we could clear the way for your attack—unlock doors for you, mess with the shift rosters, give you an inside advantage."

"And I am very skilled at healing," the grass nymph pitched in. "In war, there are sure to be injuries. I can help with that."

Corrin continued hesitating. His instincts were still nudging him to turn them away…but what if that was his own prejudice at work? Surely there were many soldiers who were helping Vie out of fear of retaliation against themselves or their families, or because they didn't see any viable alternatives. The nymphs hadn't stayed at the palace—didn't that show that they had left as soon as they could? And they did offer valuable advantages for the incursion.

He could not go back to Ophelia without bringing her some sort of help, even if it wasn't the dragons they hoped for. Having these two help could be the difference between Ophelia's defeat and making it to the throne room. Decision made, he nodded.

"Mount up," he told them. "We have little time to gather our forces before the incursion."

CHAPTER 20

OPHELIA

Ophelia spent the day making preparations for battle.

Corrin had left behind detailed notes on several options for strategies and formations, and even though planning had never been Ophelia's strong suit, she had applied herself to them with a vengeance. She conferred with Sunny and spoke with the two soldiers Corrin had told her would be good resources, and then also had the idea to include Verana—Captain Pelaine's widow—as she was likely to have absorbed a lot of strategic information from her long marriage. That proved to be correct, as Verana pointed out several flaws in the incursion strategies and also brought up the issue of supply lines and defense against siege machines if they should find themselves in a stalemate once inside the castle. Her input for how to deploy the Guardians most effectively was invaluable. Ophelia was also secretly glad to see Verana so focused and alive-seeming, apparently glad to have something to dwell on other than grief.

The whole time, Ophelia hoped against hope that Corrin would be returning with a fleet of dragons. If anyone could pull it off, he could, but she didn't know if such a thing was even possible. Dragons were so obstinate—and compared to the losses the Fae had suffered, the dragons didn't yet have skin in the game. They'd had a few close calls with the Unmade, and with capture from Vie's soldiers, but they hadn't lost anyone to them, hadn't had to see their own kin as empty shells of themselves.

Sunny rumbled in agreement. *"I wish him good fortune, but I do not think he will succeed."*

As the day waned, they narrowed down their strategies and finally settled on a plan of action. River would carry large platforms made of driftwood—which everyone from the cave had spent the day lashing together—to bear those with strong combat skills as well as Ophelia and Corrin, and would drop them off in the middle of the palace grounds. Meanwhile two other groups, formed of the rest of their battle-ready allies, would flood into the city in a pincer maneuver, coming from the east and west gates and blocking Vie's soldiers stationed at those gates from providing reinforcements to the castle.

When Ophelia landed at the palace, she would activate Sunny's body, and he and River would provide aerial magical support, picking off the palace's soldiers—with nonlethal magic as much as possible. Ophelia, Corrin, and the soldiers dropped off with them would then focus on getting her into the throne room, where she would activate the Guardians and deploy them to secure the throne room fully and herd Vie's soldiers out of the palace.

As Ophelia and her advisors made notes on the scattered pieces of parchment and debated details of the plan, allies and messages trickled in. The pixies arrived first, having been the nearest of their allies, and put themselves to work sourcing wood for arrows and plotting what distractions they could cause for city guards during the incursion. Next came Garander, the buffalo-like mesa nymph, who brought with him a pack of wolf-like nymphs who seemed to be made of white clay with eyes like chips of onyx. Several dozen sea sprites came up close to the shore, bringing with them algae-covered spears and rusted swords from old shipwrecks. Other allies helped sort out who would be staying behind—children and those unable or unwilling to fight—and who would be fighting. Ophelia snatched a few hours of sleep in between answering questions, mitigating arguments, and coordinating with different groups. By the time the sun rose on the morning of the incursion, she was a strange mixture of energized and exhausted, her mind buzzing and her blood pumping. She stood back to look over the groups she'd organized and nodded in satisfaction. They were ready. They had made a best-case scenario plan to include dragons, if any arrived, but they were prepared to move ahead without them. She was proud of what all their hard work had accomplished, and very glad they were done.

But being finished with the planning part only meant that the fighting part was about to start.

Ophelia shuddered. She had been in plenty of fights, but those were mostly just scuffles, a few punches and some hair-pulling, maybe. Aside from that, her only experience with combat had been fleeing from various Fae who were trying to kill her. But that hadn't been true battle—going into a situation *planning* to attack, *planning* to take lives if she absolutely had to. It made her queasy, but she firmed her resolve.

River and Corrin arrived with the sunrise. Ophelia heard everyone exclaiming and shouting and she quickly came out of the cave, shading her eyes with a hand to check if Corrin was okay. It took her a second to locate him, though, because River was covered in nymphs like a dog with ticks. Perhaps two dozen were seated on her back and neck, and she clutched three or four more in each talon. One unlucky soul, who had probably fallen from his seat midflight and then been caught, even rested uncomfortably in her jaws.

There was Corrin; he was in his usual spot right at the base of River's neck. But why on Earth had he brought her all these nymphs instead of dragons?

Huffing in annoyance, River ungently dropped her talonfuls of passengers a few feet above the beach into the sand, and then landed. Everyone else slid and scurried off her as quickly as they could as she spat her mouthful of nymph out. That nymph man turned and ran straight into the ocean to wash himself off, shuddering.

Ophelia hurried to Corrin and, mindless of who was watching, threw her arms around him. "I'm glad you're okay," she said with an exhale hugging him tightly. Corrin remained stiff at first, then relaxed slightly as he returned her hug.

"I am afraid I could not bring you the allies I had hoped," Corrin said.

She stood back, eyeing the nymphs as they trudged toward the caves. "Exactly what *did* you bring me?"

"Nymphs, willing to fight for our cause."

Ophelia bit her lip, considering her carefully drawn-up plans and groups that would all have to be revised now, with less than an hour to go before the optimal time to begin. And they barely had enough weapons for the fighters they already had. Still, more fighters could only be a good thing, right?

A group of nymphs walked past her, laughing nervously amongst themselves. One of them had a long stick and waved it in a way that showed very clearly he had no fighting experience whatsoever. Internally, she cringed. These weren't fighters. These were cannon fodder. She didn't want to send them to their doom. Maybe she should keep them here, assign them to look after the children or something.

She caught her train of thought and winced. She was doing it again—overriding people's choices about what was worth fighting for. If this was what they wanted, then she owed it to them to let them decide their own destinies. She would just have to have some people help her quickly go through them and sort them into the existing groups, that was all.

"Do you know if any have fighting experience?" she asked Corrin, quickly updating him on their plans.

"Not many, I'm afraid." He hesitated. "There are two of them who have experience as soldiers, though—they may be of use."

A trickle of relief coursed through her. Experienced soldiers she could use. "Great. Let's get them on the platform, and sort the others into the pincer groups." She raised her voice. "Could someone ask the sprites if there are any more weapons on the shipwrecks?"

The next half-hour was utter chaos. Ophelia and Verana went through the new arrivals as quickly and efficiently as they could, assigning them positions and sending them to the beach to see if they could find any useful weapons in the piles of things the sprites had brought up from wrecks. And then, seemingly sooner than Ophelia would have thought possible, it was time to go.

Ophelia strode through the groups one last time. Everyone who was supposed to be on the platforms was there, holding tight to the straps that would keep them from falling. The two pincer groups had formed up at the

top of the cliff above the cave; they would be leaving first, to get in position by the time River arrived. Everything was ready. They were only waiting on Ophelia's signal to go.

She felt the weight of their eyes on her as she strode over to the platforms. Not just the weight of their eyes, she thought to herself—the weight of their lives, of their future, of their families' futures. She had done her level best to give them their strongest chance at success today. But had it been enough?

She stopped before stepping on the platform and placed a reassuring hand on the Bone Crown, which she had tucked into a bag strapped to her body under her clothes. Assuming she made it to the throne room, she'd need the crown to wake the Guardians, and she didn't want to risk losing it now.

Then she turned to look back at everyone. They were quiet, sober. Many looked frightened.

She took a breath. "There is no denying we are headed for a tough fight," she told them, using a few threads of magic to amplify her voice—though she didn't like that it amplified the way her tone quavered, as well. "And there is no denying that we are outnumbered. If you are frightened, know that you are in good company. If any of you wish to stay behind, please know that you can and should do so, and I will see to it that no one faults you for it. But also…know that true courage is not the absence of fear. It's choosing to take action, take a stand for what's right, even when you're terrified." She sucked in another breath and considered the energy flowing through her, the rush of adrenaline, the strength of her conviction that they were all fighting not just for their lives, but for the good of the entire realm. She chose her next words with care, and her voice steadied. "Today," she said, "we stand against those who would steal your very souls to feed their own power. We stand for a just kingdom, where people can't be arrested on the streets because of who they support. We stand for a safe realm, where no one has to fear losing themselves, losing their families, to a corrupt queen's curse. We aren't fighting just to save our own lives. We aren't fighting to seat one ruler over another. We fight for Charassi!"

A roaring cheer swelled around her. "For Charassi!" they shouted, banging their weapons against each other and whistling. She felt borne up by the

sound. She raised a fist. “For Charassi!” she called again to them, and the cheer grew louder and louder. River flared her wings and the wind of it rushed over them all.

It was time. The pieces were in place, the plan set. All that was left now was to go to battle.

Ophelia drove her fist downward. “Move out!” she shouted. And just like that, the war had officially begun.

CHAPTER 21

OPHELIA

Ophelia clung tight to the braided kelp rope at one corner of her platform. Below was the sea, with the shore of Dominion swiftly approaching. Ophelia had to squeeze her eyes nearly shut against the stinging wind; River had circled far out over the ocean, both to give the pincer groups time to get in place, and to build up the speed necessary to give them the greatest element of surprise. With luck, by the time the soldiers even spotted them coming, they wouldn't have time to organize any countermeasures.

"Are you ready?" Corrin whispered in her ear. The wind nearly tore the words away, but she heard them anyway.

"No," she said grimly, because she didn't think that she was. A girl from a small Texas town, raised to help others and dreaming of being a paramedic like her mom, would never be the type of person who was *ready* for battle. "But I'm going anyway."

He dared to slip a hand around her waist and pressed her to him. The warmth of him seeped into her. They shared a moment of quiet as the shoreline slipped beneath them. The skyline of Dominion grew larger. Ophelia fixed her gaze on the castle and took off her earring, rolling it between her fingers.

"Be magnificent," Sunny whispered.

The streets and homes and shops of Dominion blurred past beneath them. River swept her wings back into a dive, and the platform rocked. Everyone held more tightly to their straps and ropes.

“You first,” Ophelia whispered, and activated the earring.

As River dipped down and slowed, approaching the middle courtyard of the castle, Ophelia threw the glowing earring high into the air and took slow breaths as the dizzying feeling of the Artifact’s cost briefly overwhelmed her. A blast of light flared out from it, and then Sunny was there. His scales were a brilliant gold and when his wings snapped open, it created a burst of wind strong enough to knock back several panicking soldiers on the ramparts below. His talons flashed in the sunlight. He threw back his head and roared.

And then it began. River set the platforms down with a thump in the courtyard, flattening several plots’ worth of kitchen gardens in the process, and then lifted up to join Sunny in his roar. Together, they wheeled around the castle, starting their work of disabling any soldiers their magic or their talons could reach.

All around Ophelia, fighters leapt off the platforms. One group streamed toward the exit between the marble columns to their right that would lead to the throne room. Ophelia heard shouting and the clash of steel against steel as they began encountering soldiers. Her heart crashed in her chest, but her hands were steady when she drew the short sword the sea sprites had acquired for her.

The rest of the fighters from the platform formed up around Ophelia, guarding her as she breached the entrance. Servants ran past them, screaming, barricading doors against them. Ophelia caught glimpses of the chaos as she jostled past: a spray of blood arcing over a tapestry, the low buzzing of a beetle-tribe Unseelie’s wings, the animalistic bellow of a boar Unseelie as he lowered his head and rushed tusks-first at their group. The flash of a metal pin on lapels: Vie’s emblem. Vie’s soldiers. There were so *many* of them, too many for her scrappy group to stand against, but at least her fighters had momentum on their side. They careened forward, still formed up around Ophelia, protecting her in a bubble of safety. She gripped her sword but had not yet needed to use it. Ahead, she saw Corrin duck beneath an enemy’s blade and then smash the back of his hilt into another soldier’s spine, sending him slumping to the ground. Her stomach turned over—with worry for him, with fear for all the others, here and elsewhere around the city. She didn’t want them to protect her, didn’t want them to

throw themselves into the worst of the fray so she stayed safe, but she grit her teeth and kept pace with them anyway instead of trying to push out of her bubble. She was the only one who could activate the Guardians, she reminded herself. That was her most important job. She couldn't risk herself unnecessarily when so much depended on her getting this right. But the further they got down the hallway, the more their momentum slowed, and the thinner their forces got.

To her right, a nymph fell, sticky amber sap leaking from a devastating gouge in her chest. To Ophelia's left, a pixie—one who had been acting as a forward scout for them, flitting ahead to check the enemies' positions—screeched when a guard wearing Vie's emblem backhanded him into a marble column. But still, they pushed forward, not stopping for anything.

And then Ophelia spotted the first Unmade.

The woman seemed to come from nowhere. She slithered around the corner, the snake scales on her skin sloughing off with every movement, dead and brown. The way her shoulders moved, the way her belly slipped along the ground, the unnatural way her arms and legs were left to drag along after the rest of her—all the pieces of her didn't seem to function like they should. She was a puppet, and as her blank gaze skated over their group, Ophelia was reminded exactly who the puppet master was.

A jolt of fury pounded through her. Ophelia gathered up the magic within her, all the slippery, buzzing threads of power, and wove together something she had practiced but never used: an implosion spell. She shaped it in her hands, her fingers sliding across each other, the motions helping her visualize what she wanted to do. Then she hurled the spell straight at the viper Unmade.

It hit her in the chest, sinking straight through her breastbone. The shell of a Fae woman disintegrated, collapsing in on herself, until nothing at all was left.

Shaking, Ophelia exhaled. The fury still sang in her veins. She wanted to *end* Emalda for what she'd done, and for what she was making Ophelia do. That Fae viper-woman had been a person, perhaps someone with a family, perhaps even someone honorable and just who had been targeted simply for

being loyal to Ophelia or Corrin—and Emalda had used up her life, and then kept using her, not even allowing her the dignity of death. It was beyond despicable, and it was even worse that there was nothing at all Ophelia could do to reverse it. All she could do was try to stop it from happening any longer.

She charged forward with an incoherent shout. Rallied by her cry, her group of fighters tightened around her, plunging into the massive reception chamber just off the throne room. They were *so close*, the huge double doors that led to the throne room were right in front of her…but the reception area was full of soldiers and dozens upon dozens of Unmade, poised to strike. As one, they turned toward Ophelia's group and charged.

She heard Corrin mutter a low curse. "They were waiting," he said sharply. "They knew we were coming—and that we'd try to enter this way."

Two of the fighters guarding her front fell. Corrin tried to put himself in the opening that created, his sword slicing out and down and out again to fell an enemy soldier, but then an Unmade dove at him and wrapped its burly arms around his knees. Corrin went down.

Everything in Ophelia shrieked for her to save him, *now.* She called on her quickest spell, the fireballs, and hurled them at the Unmade while leaping over fallen soldiers and sliding beneath the arc of a sword to get to Corrin's side. He had managed to tear himself free, thanks in part to the fireball distraction, and threw himself headfirst into the Unmade's chest. The blow knocked the Unmade back into a column, where its spine made an ominous *crack*. Corrin jumped back, scooped up his fallen dagger, and drew his arm across his cheek where he'd been injured by his fall. His wild gaze found hers. Silently, they nodded at each other—they were both okay.

They turned back toward the throne room. Few of their fighters were left now—Verana was there, holding her own, looking like an avenging Valkyrie in her long ivory dress and wielding her husband's sword, and with her were three of the more experienced fighters they'd brought. But even they were getting quickly overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of Unmade. No injury, no matter how serious, could stop the Unmade, short of completely destroying their bodies. The best that could be done was to fend them off.

Ophelia turned, searching for the throne room's doors again. They were only a handful of yards away, but too many Unmade were between her and it, with more of them pouring from every nearby hallway and staircase.

"Go!" Corrin shouted at her. He lunged forward, driving his shoulder into a High Fae Unmade and then whirling to plant his sword in the chest of another. "Ophelia, *go*!"

She had to leave him. She had to get to the throne room if she wanted to save him, save all of them—if she wanted to make this blood-soaked battle worth it.

Summoning up more magic and flinging more fireballs at every Unmade whose path she crossed, she darted forward. Verana and the other fighters tried to move with her, tried to continue clearing her way, but they were separated by far too many Unmade, who were tightening ranks around the throne room. It was obvious now that Emalda knew, or suspected, their plan.

There was no time to make a new plan, though. Ophelia dodged to the left, just out of reach of the grasping claws of a cat Unseelie Unmade. She leaned backwards and did her best home-base slide between the legs of a massive High Fae Unmade, then quickly leapt to her feet, spun, and shoved him off-balance to open a path for the others. When she turned back toward the throne room, she spotted half a dozen Unmade pixies buzzing in repetitive circles overhead—probably reporting everyone's positions back to Emalda. With a snarl, Ophelia sent fireballs crashing toward them. They dodged together, but she made a fist and jerked her magic sideways after them, and they were all incinerated.

The Unmade on the ground paused as one—just for a heartbeat, but long enough for Ophelia to know that she'd been correct, and that in destroying the scouts, she had won her side a brief advantage.

Corrin was at her side in that instant. There were a trio of Unmade barring her from the throne room doors; with quick swipes of his sword, he cut them all down. Together, he and Ophelia lunged for the heavy bronze door-pulls.

The door began to budge, and then an Unmade man's hands clamped around Ophelia's wrist.

She yelped and kicked out blindly, then swiped with her dagger and felt it catch against skin. The Unmade man staggered back a step from the force of her blow. She'd won herself enough space to see his face—and when she did, she froze.

It was Lamilla's father. Someone had taken him out of the pit he'd fallen into.

Her hesitation cost her. The man moved his grip from her wrist to her waist, kicked her feet out from under her, and bore her to the floor. She gasped for air but couldn't drag it in fast enough. His weight was smothering her. She had dropped her dagger and scrambled for it, her fingers spidering across the tile, searching for the hilt. But even when she found it, she hesitated. She saw Lamilla's hopeful eyes. She heard her broken sobs. And Ophelia couldn't bring herself to stab the person who had once been that little girl's father.

She heard a shout. Corrin. He ripped the Unmade man off her, and she rolled to her hands and knees, sucking in a breath. By the time she managed to pull herself to her feet, Corrin was being borne to the ground by Lamilla's father and two more Unmade.

"No!" she tried to shout, but it was only a rasp. She still had to struggle to breathe. She staggered toward him as another Unseelie latched onto him, and the group of them began dragging him toward the throne room doors.

A metallic flash caught the corner of her eye and she whirled just in time to raise her dagger and block an attack from a living soldier with Vie's emblem pinned to his chest. He leered at her. "Where do you think you're going, little human?"

This guy, she had no trouble stabbing. She dropped to her knees, making the soldier stumble in surprise, and then drove her blade upward into his thigh. He screamed and stumbled. She dove around him, still trying to get to the throne room and to Corrin.

There were too many Unmade. They were *everywhere.* They were blocking her route to Corrin, her route to her throne. She spun around, calling for help, but the only other fighter left on her side was Verana.

The door to the throne room creaked open, barely wide enough to admit one person. Corrin shouted, fighting for all he was worth as he was dragged closer to the opening. He threw punches and elbows, kicked out, sliced out with his sword and then, when that had been torn away, with his daggers. But there were too many Unmade, and not enough time for Ophelia or Verana to reach him.

They dragged him through the doors. Ophelia shouted, lunging for him, but two other Unmade blocked her, grabbing for her, heedless of her blows as she tried to get past them. "CORRIN!" she screamed.

Emalda was in control of the Unmade. Emalda wanted Corrin in the throne room, and Ophelia out of it. What would she do to him? Kill him?

Unmake him?

Wild now with fear, Ophelia poured magic into a blunt air spell and hurled it at the Unmade. It sent two of them flying but more took their place.

Corrin was clinging to the open door, his knuckles white, his daggers fallen. His eyes met Ophelia's. Something—she couldn't identify it, didn't want to identify it—passed between the two of them.

And then the Unmade yanked him through, and the door slammed shut behind him.

"NO!" she screamed. With the force of her anger, a great wind blasted out from her in all directions, slamming Unmade away—but it only lasted for a moment and made little difference. They dragged themselves back to their feet immediately, and more were still coming. There had to be hundreds of them by now. Ophelia couldn't do this by herself. She couldn't make it to the throne room, couldn't save Corrin.

She had failed. She had lost him.

No. She would not allow it. She spun around, spotted Verana where she had been backed into a corner. The woman blocked an Unmade's blow with her

sword and then jerked her head at Ophelia. Ophelia knew Verana was telling her to run. And she would.

Just not in the direction Verana meant.

Ophelia whirled around again, scanning for a staircase, and spotted one on a balcony that jutted out above her. Weaving her magic quickly into a burst of levitation—which drained a ton of magic, but she was past caring—she threw herself upward until she could latch onto the railing. She pulled herself up and over it, and then wove a spell for telepathy and aimed it like an arrow upward. *"SUNNY!"* she bellowed. *"River! Help me—Corrin's been taken!"*

Sunny's response was instant. *"I am coming, but we are both being harried by flying Unseelie Unmade. I am unsure how long it will take me to reach your location."*

"I'm coming to you, then!" she shouted, and began climbing the stairs three at a time.

She didn't know what she would do when she reached the top, when Sunny got to her. She didn't think they could bludgeon their way through to the throne room—the palace had been built to withstand such attacks. But she didn't care about strategy or logistics. She meant to get Corrin back, whatever it took.

She heard a clattering and a shouting behind her. When she shot a glance over her shoulder she spotted Verana. The woman had her back—she was lashing out with her sword, kicking at the tide of Unmade and soldiers who were now trying to follow Ophelia.

Ophelia returned her attention to the stairs. Frantic, she ran every spell she could think of. There had to be some sort of magic that could get through those doors, that could free Corrin, that could get her to the throne room. She would think of something before she met up with Sunny. She had to.

Emalda had taken so much already. She could *not* have Corrin too.

CHAPTER 22

CORRIN

Corrin couldn't see. He could barely breathe. His world had narrowed to a tangle of rotting limbs, to the smell of dead flesh, to mottled bruises and empty eyes.

The Unmade had dragged him into the throne room. They had secured the door behind him. They were holding him down. All of this must be by his mother's command, which meant she had some purpose for him in here.

The very thought filled him with dread, but he tried to calm himself. Panicking would provide no benefits. No matter what his mother meant to do to him, he would face it, and her, with as much courage as he could muster.

The Unmade dragged him across the floor. He couldn't see where they were taking him, but he continued kicking out blindly until he felt himself being lifted and laid on some raised surface, until he felt rough chains being looped around his limbs, tightening until he could no longer move. His gasping inhalations got sharper and spots gathered before his eyes. He was trapped. Chained to a table in the palace that had been his home for his entire life. The links were tight against his skin, cutting off all movement and perhaps even his blood supply as he felt his hands and feet turning numb.

When he was fully secured in place, all of the Unmade stepped back as one. With that sudden release of pressure, Corrin felt dizzy, disoriented. The

spots in his vision clustered and grew as he sucked in breath after breath, trying to calm his racing heart so he could make sense of his situation.

“So easily frightened, brother?” came a mocking voice.

Vie. Vie was in here with him. Corrin grit his teeth and didn’t respond, but somehow, the familiarity of that mocking voice settled him just a bit. At least it was familiar.

The spots began to clear. His breaths became more even. He lifted his head and saw the throne room laid out before him, and who was in it.

While he had been collecting himself, the Unmade had melted away. None of them were left in the large room now. There was only Corrin, chained to some sort of table with wheels—a medical gurney?—and Vie lounging on the throne as if he was entitled to it in any possible way, and—and—

And his mother.

She looked just like he remembered, but also nothing at all like he remembered. Her gown was a soft green that clung to her skin lovingly. Her white hair tumbled down her back. White fox ears rose above her head. Her black eyes studied him, her face utterly expressionless.

Aside from a glimpse of her in the Artifact that revealed her role in the Unmaking, he hadn’t seen her in a hundred years. Last time they had looked at one another in person, he had been horrified, and she had been spattered with the blood of her victims. Now she was spotless, her skin smooth and healthy, her hair shining, her posture flawless—and he was even more horrified. She should not still look beautiful. She should not still look so *young*. She had made herself this way by feeding off the life energy of his people, her own people, the ones she had sworn to rule justly when she had ascended as High Queen. She had broken that vow, and she had broken his heart, and now she had the gall to look at him as if he were merely a curiosity and not at all the son she had devastated.

He filled his lungs. “You are a traitor,” he snarled, and then had to pant for more air, having used up what equilibrium he had managed to scrape together.

She raised one brow, an expression crossing that serene face at last. “You said that already,” she noted. “In the catacombs. Do you have anything new to add to the conversation?”

Corrin jerked his head down against the table with a painful thump, hoping the jolt might help ground him. All it did was make Vie chuckle delightedly.

“Don’t hurt yourself, brother,” he said. “I’d much rather be the one to do that for you.”

Emalda frowned and waved a hand sharply at her youngest son without looking at him. “Vie. Leave us.”

Vie’s smile soured. “Why?” he asked petulantly.

“Intruders remain on the castle grounds. You should go and rally your forces to finish routing them.”

Vie huffed a sigh but picked up his sword, which had been leaning against the throne. He slouched toward the smaller private exit that led into the royal family’s private wing. When he opened the door, someone else walked in, shooting a smirk in Corrin’s direction before bowing to Emalda.

“My Queen,” said the person—a nymph with the smooth, pebbled skin of river rocks and a very familiar face. “I have come to you, as directed.”

Corrin stared at the nymph as the pieces fell into place. Corrin remembered how his instincts had told him to reject the man when he had volunteered to come with the others from the Nymph Woodlands, and how he’d brought him along anyway, wanting to ease Ophelia’s burden by bringing her more allies.

He had made the wrong decision. Clearly, this nymph’s loyalties lay elsewhere. Was it a coincidence, or had Vie scattered his spies through the whole realm, seeding them anywhere he thought Corrin might go for aid? How many more betrayals would Corrin face before the end of all this? He closed his eyes in despair.

Emalda spoke. “You did well.”

Corrin opened his eyes. His mother was speaking to the nymph, who preened at the praise. “Thank you, Majesty,” he practically purred. “I am glad my information was able to help you rebuff the invaders.”

Emalda motioned to him with a graceful wave. “Come,” she said, “kneel.”

Eagerly, perhaps anticipating a reward, the nymph bounded over to her like a loyal hound and knelt at her feet. She dipped one hand into the pocket at her waist, and when she pulled her fingers away, they glistened with something slick and purple. “Your information was very helpful,” she told the nymph, laying a gentle hand on his cheek. He blinked as the purple liquid smeared across his skin, looking puzzled. “However,” Emalda went on, “I cannot trust anyone who finds it so easy to lie and betray.”

The nymph’s smile fell away and he stared up at her, uneasy. “My…My Queen,” he started, but then stopped again, raising one hand to the purple on his cheek. He swayed. “What have you…”

But he didn’t finish. As Corrin watched, he went suddenly rigid. An odd paleness swept over him, starting from the spot where Emalda’s hand rested on his face and moving down from there, racing across him like some stain spreading just under the surface of his skin. Corrin felt the presence of something strange in the room, some type of invisible energy, something that charged the air like a bolt of lightning about to strike. He couldn’t see it, but he could sense it—every part of him was attuned to it. He could tell when whatever it was left the nymph man and surged into Emalda. In that instant, the paleness covered every inch of his skin and turned his complexion an unnatural, ghostly white. Though Corrin was across the room, he could *feel* it happening. Could feel the violence of it, the offense against nature. Every inch of him resonated with the utter wrongness of it.

And then Emalda lifted her hand away, and the nymph slumped to the ground, his eyes hollow, empty, and glassed over in a way that was horribly, horrifically familiar.

He was Unmade. She had Unmade him in an instant. It looked *easy*, and that terrified him.

Emalda wiped her hand on a rag and tossed it atop the nymph’s unmoving body. Catching Corrin’s shocked look, she lifted one shoulder in an elegant

shrug. “Sometimes they lay there for a while before they get up and make themselves useful. My theory is that the length of the downtime is related to how much life energy they had remaining in them when they were Unmade.”

Corrin kept staring at the man. He had been an enemy, but he had also been a *person*, and now he wasn’t. And Corrin’s own mother had done this—to someone who had betrayed Corrin for *her* sake. Why? Why do it right in front of her son—did she mean to scare him? Taunt him? Show him what she would do to him?

Despair bloomed somewhere within him. “Will you Unmake me?” he asked, trying to keep his voice level.

He did not want to die. He wanted to live. He wanted to see his realm settled. He wanted to be with Ophelia, to kiss her again, to feel her body press against his. He did not want to die—but far more than that, he did not want to be Unmade, and he did not want his mother to be the one to do such a thing to him.

Fear shuddered over his skin.

Emalda frowned sharply and strode toward him, stepping over the nymph in the process with no more concern than if he was a piece of trash that had been left on the floor. “Of course not. Never, Corrin. I would *never* Unmake you.”

He exhaled with a shudder, the fear shuddering harder, because of course he knew he could not trust a word she said.

She stopped in front of him. “I will not kill you now, either,” she said, sounding sad. She lifted one hand out as if to touch him. When he flinched away, she stopped, her fingers—clean of that awful purple potion now—hovering a few inches from his face.

“Now?” he managed.

Her expression flattened. She dropped her hand and turned briskly away. “I need your death to fulfill a greater purpose.”

The words sank into him, or perhaps he sank into them, like quicksand. His defenses were stripped away. He could no longer pretend she was somehow still a good mother, a good person, that there could be any reasonable excuse for the wrongs she had done. She stood before him, fully revealed: his mother, and evil.

His fear gave way to rage. “How could you?” he demanded, his voice hard as iron.

She turned back to him, her eyes narrowing. “This again? Surely you tire of blaming me for all your problems.”

He felt something inside him break. His voice, too, broke when he said, “How long did you know you would do this? When you chose the first orphan child to experiment on, did you intend to Unmake the entire realm? Did you know when I was born that you would plot my death?”

She glared at him, eyes suddenly bright with emotion. “I wanted you at my side!” she hissed. “I would have elevated you above all others! I invited you to join me, Corrin, and you chose a *human girl* over your own mother. If you see me as a traitor, it is only because you know your own kind.”

He twisted in his chains as emotion rose in him like an unstoppable tide. “I chose Ophelia because she is kind, because she cares for others above herself, because she will be the best High Queen this realm has ever had. But you—you have poisoned your own heritage. *Our* heritage!”

She turned fully toward him and advanced, leaning down until her face was close to his. “I am reclaiming our heritage,” she hissed. “I am proving wrong all those fools who sneered when I married your father, thinking they would see me fail. I am showing my superiority to those who overlooked me when he died and there were arguments over who would take his place on the throne. But I will have my revenge. All who mocked me will see the truth. All who set themselves against me will fall.” She hesitated, and her fierce expression briefly softened. “You could still join me, Corrin. The throne could be yours. Vie is useful for now as a figurehead, but he is too rash and unthinking and vain for me to care for him the way I care for you.”

Corrin gritted his teeth. He would never join her, never be complicit in the destruction of the kingdom he loved, but if he could stall, perhaps he could

learn more of her plan—and if there was any chance he could get away and take that information to Ophelia, then he had to try. “What of the purpose you said my death is meant to fulfill?”

A bit of hope filtered into her eyes. “I need to kill someone of royal blood,” she told him, “but it doesn’t have to be you. If you gave up your human to replace you, her death would give me what I need, and then you and I could be a family again.”

Corrin felt leaden, as if his blood had been replaced with something slow and murky and far too heavy. Not even to stall or to gather information could his mouth utter such a lie. He would never forswear his allegiance to Ophelia, even if it cost him his life. “Never,” he said, and he put all the feeling he had into the word. “I will never betray the *true* High Queen.”

A brief flash of hurt blinked over Emalda’s expression, and then she leaned back and shook her head coolly. “In that case, I think it’s best that you go into the crystal for safekeeping. It was quite fortunate I found a mix of potions that can burn through the crystal and extract a person from it whenever I want. This way you won’t be able to make any trouble, or indeed even move, until I need you again. Come along—it’s not far to the Deephold.”

Panic roared into Corrin as she took ahold of the table above his head and began wheeling it toward the doors.

They passed through the doors. Emalda wheeled his table onto a lift and pulled the lever. The lift began to descend. He thrashed against his bonds, but they held fast. Desperately, uselessly, he wished he had magic. He wished he had a dragon bond. If he wasn’t a failure of a prince, if he hadn’t spent a century hunting a dragon and then bungled it all, he would be able to fight back now, would have some way of saving his own life even with his hands chained. But there was nothing to save him now.

The lift came to a smooth stop. Emalda wheeled him down an inclined hallway that curved around and around until it came to the huge doors of the Deephold. Soldiers were stationed there, and they snapped to attention at the sight of Emalda. They pulled the door open for her, not even looking

at him. Had they seen this play out before? How many victims had she brought here?

They entered the Deephold. Ophelia had told him about how the crystals had grown out of the catacombs and into the walls of the Deephold itself, but to see it now was far stranger and more terrifying than he'd expected. He redoubled his struggles, trying to twist his hands around to get purchase on the chains, trying to flip the table over, but none of his struggles accomplished anything. His mother was wheeling him toward the crystal wall. In a moment, he would be swallowed by it.

Then, suddenly, the table stopped moving. He twisted his head around to see what had happened. His mother was standing still, staring up at the ceiling, brow wrinkled and head cocked. Her hearing was the sharpest he'd ever encountered. What had she heard that had stopped her in her tracks? That was when he heard it, too: a roar—distant, but growing louder and closer, like one of those freight trains back in Texas.

"What in the realms…" Emalda started, but then cut off, because the roar burgeoned to something so loud it physically hurt to hear it. The walls began to shake. Bits of rock rained from the ceiling.

And then River burst through the ceiling of the Deephold like an avenging angel.

Corrin's heart leapt as he turned his face away, squeezing his eyes shut as debris shattered across the room. River roared again—that had been the sound from a moment ago—and landed with a thud that shook the floor. He cracked an eye open. One of her wings was stretched over him, shielding him as debris rained down everywhere. River lowered her head, scanning him quickly, her great sky-blue eye close to him. He felt suddenly safe.

"I will end her for this," River snarled, and snaked her head back around to locate Emalda.

Corrin inhaled, coughed at the dust from the debris, then inhaled again to call to River. He needed these chains off, he needed to get free before his mother could push him into the crystal wall, which was only inches from the end of his table. And he needed to get to his feet and fight side by side

with Ophelia and River—with the allies he'd chosen, who he would *always* choose over this monster his mother had become.

Hands curled suddenly around his. "Corrin, Corrin," came a fierce, low voice, and everything in him melted. Ophelia had come for him. He couldn't even imagine the amount of magic it must have taken for her to blast a hole all the way to the Deephold, but she had done it anyway for his sake.

He jerked his head up. If she had punched a hole all the way to the Deephold, then she could get to the throne room. It was a few levels directly overhead. She was still working on his chains, though, her hands shaking as she tried to focus whatever scraps of magic she had left to free him.

"Ophelia," he managed to croak. "Go. You must go to the throne room."

"Not without you!" she said fiercely, swiping at her eyes. "Sunny is guarding the exit, but we don't have long, the flying Unseelie and Unmade will follow us down here any second, and Sunny's hour is nearly over." She took a deep breath and furrowed her brow, and the chain around his left wrist snapped.

A growl and a loud snap echoed through the room. Corrin turned his head, searching for the source of the noise. River, looking absolutely incensed, had his mother backed into a corner. Her scales were raised nearly on edge, each sharp point as good as a blade. Her wings were half-unfurled in challenge. She stalked Emalda like a wolf taking its time hunting a rabbit. She was *angry*, Corrin realized. He was too.

Ophelia was working on one of his legs now. "Damn it!" she burst out. "I can't focus, I—I have enough magic left for this, but I'm too…" She shook her head and ground her teeth, her breaths coming in quick bursts. She slammed her hand against the chains in frustration and the ones holding down both his legs split apart. "Finally!" she growled, moving to the wrist that was still chained.

He sat up, coughing into his hand, trying to clear the dust from his throat. A snarl ripped through the room and he jerked his head back. River was almost upon Emalda. Her jaws were wide open, her head snaking forward.

Emalda was pressed against the wall, easy prey. A number of emotions that tumbled through Corrin too quickly to name—and then he saw his mother withdraw a small bottle from her pocket. The *same* pocket where she'd kept that purple potion that aided or created the Unmaking curse.

Corrin inhaled to shout a warning. Before he could, Emalda drew her hand back and let the bottle fly. River spotted it and tried to jerk her head away, but the ceiling was too low and the room too small, and the best she could do was turn in time for it to hit her on the front leg instead of in her face.

Everything seemed to freeze for a long moment: the debris still pattering down from the ceiling, Ophelia's fumbling hands on his chains, River's rippling snarl. The purple stain splattered over River's talons.

And then an eerie paleness began spreading up and out from the stain, like milky-white ink spilled just beneath River's beautiful blue scales.

River was being Unmade.

Corrin lunged for her. There were no thoughts in his head except *no* and *not River*. He shouted incoherently as the stain spread up her leg, across her shoulder, over her torso. It crept slowly up her neck. She roared and snarled, snapping and scratching at herself, tail whipping wildly.

Corrin couldn't get to her. Ophelia, tears streaming down her face now, was still working furiously on his last remaining chain. But even if he was free, even if he could reach the dragon, what could he do to stop this horror? What power did he have against the Unmaking? None.

A bond. The thought jittered through him like adrenaline, flushed to every corner of his nervous system at once. If he could just get to River, he could try to bond her. Maybe then he could protect her consciousness within him, the way Sunny's consciousness had been saved within Ophelia's mind. Her body might be Unmade but perhaps her soul could still be saved.

"River!" he shouted. "River, come here, let me try—"

But she was wild with rage and pain and fear now, her head whipping back and forth, jets of flame and smoke erupting from her nostrils. Both her front legs were pale now and they were frozen in place as if they'd been turned to

stone. As he watched helplessly, the stain covered her back legs too, and now only her tail and neck were moving.

“Ophelia!” Corrin cried out, the word a jagged plea.

Ophelia shouted a curse, pushed both hands at the chain, and channeled a massive burst of magic into it. The explosion was so strong it sent her flying back in a new cloud of dust and debris. But it had also broken Corrin’s chain. Heedless of the flying debris, heedless of the way his wrist throbbed and hung awkwardly now, Corrin charged toward the dark shadow of River.

Her tail was pale and frozen. She had collapsed fully to the ground. The stain was spreading up her neck now, closing over her head, nearly to her eyes.

She saw him coming. Her gaze connected with his. There was a wordless plea in them, a fire that should burn forever. How could a creature such as her be Unmade? It should not be possible. He would save her. *He would save her.*

He leapt over a cracked, fallen column. He saw his mother standing aside with her arms folded, watching, and he shoved her out of the way.

“Corrin,” whispered River, her voice twisted with emotion, haggard and strained. *“Corrin.”* Then the stain spread over her eyes, turning them from the beautiful blue of the open sky to a blank, glassy white.

He was only a few feet away, but he felt like he was racing against the stain. It was closing over her muzzle. There was only one quickly-vanishing spot of normal scales now, right between her nostrils. Her muzzle was lying on the ground. He could get to it in time. He had to get to it in time.

He reached her. His hand touched the spot. He *pushed* his will at her, searching blindly within her like her soul could be captured as easily as a drowning person in a murky lake.

For half a second, River’s glassy eyes turned the lightest shade of blue. Her gaze met his. He felt something, faintly: a surge of fear, and agony, and—and gratitude. She wanted to bond him. She would accept him. She was trying to finish the bond.

But then the stain closed over the spot where Corrin's hand rested, and her eyes turned empty again. She exhaled one last time and then did not move.

He had failed.

River was Unmade.

CHAPTER 23

OPHELIA

Ophelia was floating somewhere. It wasn't anywhere calm or soothing—but some small part of her knew that it was better to stay where she was, lost and drifting and unaware of the terrible but distant things that had happened to her. Leaving would be worse. She didn't know why, but she was absolutely certain that leaving would be worse.

So she stayed.

She was asleep, sort of. Or at least she was in a murky mostly-unconscious state. Whenever she drifted too close to the surface of her waking thoughts, she had a sense of urgency and of a terrible, unthinkable horror, and she dove back down instinctively to avoid these things. Every once in a while, she caught flashes, images: heavy chains biting into the flesh of someone's wrist. A pained roar. Pointed fox ears spattered with blood and something purple. She thought these things were important but she couldn't remember why. She was pulled deep beneath the surface of herself once again.

After a long time, she thought she heard—sensed?—someone calling her. She couldn't exactly hear the words but there was a feeling of being reeled in like a fish on a line. The voice pulled her upwards.

Images flashed: azure dragon scales going deathly pale, a boy's face painted in hues of terror. She struggled against them—not wanting to see, not wanting to remember—but the voice pulled her up anyway.

"Ophelia," it whispered, and now it was clear enough to be an actual voice. And it wasn't a whisper, it was a shout: *"OPHELIA!"*

With a sudden jolt, she came awake.

She was lying on a floor surrounded by rubble. Dust coated every inch of her skin, and also the inside of her throat. She gagged on it, gasping as she jerked herself up to sitting, coughing up and spitting out a disgusting sludge. But at least she could breathe now. She dragged in a breath and squinted at her surroundings, trying to clear her muddled thoughts.

Close by, a sculpture of a sea sprite was shattered, jagged pieces of glass tentacles lying everywhere. A low couch was covered in dust and debris from the ceiling, which was pocked with small craters and scorch marks. Half of a wall and a good portion of the floor were missing. Through the hole left behind, one floor below her, she could just make out the gleaming crystal walls of the Deephold.

She gasped. The *Deephold.* Corrin. River. Emalda.

She scrambled to her hands and knees and crawled forward as fast as she could, peering carefully over the edge of her crumbling floor. She saw… nothing. The Deephold was empty. There were plenty of signs of the recent draconic struggle, but no River to be seen. Her eyes fell on the table that Corrin had been strapped to. Three chains dangled down from it, empty, and the fourth chain seemed to have exploded, along with a chunk of that side of the table itself.

But Corrin wasn't there. That meant he was free—right? He'd seemed to think he could save River somehow, to stop her Unmaking. Ophelia shuddered and choked back a sob that wanted to escape at the awful memory of it.

"Listen to me!" roared a voice in her head, and she realized then that it had been Sunny's voice that had wakened her a moment ago, and then he'd been trying to speak to her ever since she'd sat up, but she had tuned him out to process what had happened.

She leaned back, away from the hole in the floor. "Sunny! Are you okay? Where are you? Come get me, help me find the others!"

He growled. *"There is no time for this! Can't you hear? Soldiers are searching the castle for stragglers, they are nearly upon you! Get to*

safety!"

As he spoke, she suddenly realized he was right—she could hear footsteps and the noise of many people talking and shouting orders not far away from where she was. Something nearby rattled. She shot a glance at it; the doorknob was jiggling. A heavy part of the sculpture was lying in front of it, but it would only take the soldier pushing a bit harder to budge it out of the way.

She was about to be caught.

Wildly, she scanned the room, searching for an escape route or at least a decent hiding place. The hole in the floor was too ragged for her to get easily down to the floor below, and there were no other doors. There was, however, a fireplace. As the soldier on the other side of the door cursed and kicked at it, Ophelia hurried over to the brick-lined fireplace and ducked inside it. It was cramped, but she'd been a champion tree climber when she was younger, and surely a chimney couldn't be *too* different. In any case, it was her only option, so she wedged herself in as best she could and managed to climb a few feet upward before the soldier finally shoved the door all the way open and walked in.

Ophelia held her breath. There was less dust up here to choke her, at least. She heard the soldier shuffling around the room and coming to a stop right around the spot where the edge of the hole in the floor was.

"Ophelia, the ash." Sunny nudged her mentally, and she looked down at the ash at the bottom of the fireplace. There, clear as day, were her footprints. She cursed herself and scraped together a bit of magic—she had some, but not a lot—to make a gentle breeze that smudged her footprint until it was indistinct.

"Hey, you," the soldier said, and Ophelia froze, wide-eyed until she realized he must be talking to a companion outside the door. "Go get a few more guards in here. It looks like something got blasted up here from the Deephold. We should search it."

Ophelia gritted her teeth. There would be no returning to that room now—not unless she wanted to fight her way through an increasing number of guards. Which meant upward was her only option. Slowly, carefully, she

climbed up, moving as quietly as she could. The chimney was very dark, and at its top it joined up to a larger horizontal tunnel. Judging from the holes spaced at regular intervals in it, this tunnel connected the chimneys from different rooms and funneled the smoke into one large opening overhead. She could just make out daylight from here.

She pulled herself up into the larger tunnel and then collapsed against the bricks, heaving in breaths. Her hands and clothing were coated in soot, but luckily no one seemed to be burning any fires right now, as the air was clear of smoke.

"Sunny?" she whispered. "What's happened? How long was I out?"

"It's been nearly a day," he said grimly, and the words sent a pang of shock through her. She'd been unconscious for *an entire day*? What did that mean for the battle? Sensing the direction of her thoughts, Sunny said, *"My time in my body expired not long after you and River blasted into the Deephold. I have no updates beyond that. From what I could tell, though, your emotional state in the Deephold caused you to weave too strong of a spell to free Prince Corrin, and the resulting blast threw you upward with such force that you broke through the ceiling."* He paused. His tone was brisk and matter-of-fact, but she could sense some deep emotion in him that he was trying to keep contained and compartmentalized. *"I surmise that we have lost the battle, otherwise Vie's soldiers would not now be searching for anyone who got away."*

Ophelia covered her face with her hands, not caring that she was smearing soot all over herself. "What about…" She couldn't manage to speak their names, but Sunny knew who she meant. She could feel him struggling to respond.

"I do not know," he said at last.

The echo of a distant voice emanated from a nearby chimney, and Ophelia stilled for a moment, fearing someone had guessed they were up here—but it was only two men, soldiers probably, joking with a third soldier about her boyfriend in the city.

An idea suddenly came to Ophelia. She crawled on her hands and knees to a nearby chimney connection and listened. She could hear more faint voices

from here. Someone giving orders. They mentioned…Vie. Something about him wanting a defaced banner replaced atop the Belltower. Ophelia grimaced. That meant he'd survived. She crawled to another chimney opening, and another, and another, until she had heard enough chatter to at least piece together some of what she'd missed.

Ophelia's fighters had been routed. The majority of the people in her group were dead, and those who had been positioned in the pincer groups in the city had been routed and scattered—though, thankfully, it sounded as though most had survived. She hoped they had managed to escape and regroup.

Of Corrin and River, there was no specific news, but she kept hearing soldiers speaking about Vie's "special prisoners." And one woman alluded to the "monstrosity" that was "perched on top of the bell tower like an enormous buzzard."

No, Ophelia thought, despair squeezing her lungs until it was hard to breathe. *No. Don't let them be talking about River. Please.*

"If you climb up the large chimney that leads out," Sunny said, his voice tight, *"you may be able to see the bell tower from there."*

Ophelia hurried over to it and found that there was a rough stone ladder embedded into its side, probably for maintenance purposes. She climbed up it as quickly as she could, praying the whole time: *not River. Not River. Not River.*

Because if it *was* her perched on the bell tower, not attacking, not searching for Ophelia, not flying Corrin back to the sea cave…it meant she was unable to do any of those things. It meant she wasn't *River* anymore.

The images of the purple stain and the terrible pale scales flashed again through Ophelia's mind. She pushed them resolutely away…

…until she got to the top of the chimney, cautiously peered out—and saw a massive Unmade dragon with glassy white eyes and scales the palest possible shade of blue perched motionlessly and lifelessly atop the Belltower.

Ophelia needed both hands to hold her position in the chimney. She could not spare one to cover her mouth to stymie the cry that wanted to escape. She had to clamp down on it with her will alone as tears leaked from her eyes, making tracks through the soot on her cheeks, blurring her vision until she could barely make out the shell of a dragon who used to be River.

No. No. No. River was not her bonded dragon, but she was an ally—a friend, someone who had saved Ophelia's life many times, someone she cared deeply about. And now she was gone. Not dead. *Gone.* Because she had helped Ophelia. She hadn't thought twice when Ophelia had asked for help to free Corrin. She had used up every scrap of her power to blast her way into the deepest part of the castle, heedless of what it would cost her, careless of the fact that it would put her in the path of the ruthless woman who had been trying to capture a dragon for weeks.

Ophelia was shaking. Soon, she would lose her grip on the chimney wall and tumble back down into the darkness. She couldn't bring herself to care.

"Do not lose yourself to devastation," Sunny said in a low tone. *"You must live long enough to avenge her."*

Ophelia didn't care about that right now, either. What use was vengeance? It wouldn't bring River back. There was no cure for the Unmaking, not even death.

Sunny growled, a strangled sound that held more back than it let out. *"You must live long enough to let* me *avenge her, then."*

Of course; Sunny and River had cared deeply for each other. "Sunny, I'm so sorry," she whispered. "I can't…I wish I could…"

"I do not fault you for what happened to her. I fault the blasphemer Emalda. There is no fate terrible enough to serve as justice for what she has done."

Ophelia barely heard him. She was swimming in a sea of grief, barely treading water, exhausted already from the captain's death and Corrin's mysterious absence. How much more of this was she to take? What if Corrin had been Unmade, too?

Sunny snarled and mentally charged at her, tearing through her thoughts like a wolf shredding its prey. *"FOCUS!"* he yelled.

Shocked, she sucked in a breath. Then another one. He was right. She didn't have the luxury of falling apart. River was gone, and she didn't know what had happened to Corrin, but there were still people—an entire realm—depending on her. She still had work to do. She used the thought to prop herself up, to infuse her with a shaky thread of determination. She could fall apart later. Right now, she had to save herself, because she might be all the realm had left.

"Thanks," she told Sunny, and her voice sounded a little bit steadier.

"Just do what you must to get to safety," he said, sounding pained, and then burrowed deep into her mind where he could grieve in relative seclusion.

Ophelia took a few more breaths, trying to prepare herself as best she could, and then cautiously lifted her head out of the chimney again. The second glimpse of River was worse than the first, because now Ophelia was clear-minded enough to take in all the terrible details—her staring, unseeing eyes, her unnatural stillness, the way opalescent blood leaked slowly from several minor injuries that she didn't seem to notice at all.

Ophelia choked back another sob and tore her gaze away from River, meaning to search for any potential way out of the castle via the rooftops, but instead she caught sight of Emalda.

The woman was standing on a balcony between River's front talons, peering up at her. She seemed to be doing some sort of examination. At the sight of her, every fiber of Ophelia's being wanted to lash out—to hurl an implosion spell at her, to use fireballs to burn her to a crisp, or to drive a sword into her. But she didn't have enough magic to form a spell that could reliably reach across such a distance with any accuracy, and Ophelia couldn't risk missing, because then Emalda would send River after her—and Sunny was no longer in his body to defend her. In fact, Ophelia realized, if she couldn't find her Artifact earring wherever it had fallen, then Sunny would no longer be able to inhabit his body at all.

She would not be able to exit via the roofs, not within sight of Emalda and River. Ophelia climbed back down the chimney. She would have to find

another way out.

“Sunny,” she said quietly, “do you know where your body expired? I need to find the earring.”

“Above one of the smaller courtyards to the west. I was fending off flying Unseelie and Unmade pixies from entering the Deephold through the hole River punched through the palace.”

Ophelia inhaled and looked down the dimly-lit line of chimney holes. She felt completely unmoored at Corrin’s absence, and utterly undone by River’s fate, and she had no idea how she was supposed to do something as grand as saving the entire realm without them by her side—but she did know that she had to keep moving. If she gave in to her despair, she would drown in it. So she did all she knew to do: she began counting chimneys and moving westward.

She would find the earring. She would get safely back to the sea cave. And then, somehow, she would figure out how to finally put an end to Emalda.

CHAPTER 24

CORRIN

Corrin didn't remember being trapped in the crystal wall.

He remembered the moment River had become Unmade. He remembered her slumping to the ground, emptied out, as Emalda called for the guards. When they had come, Corrin had fought, but he'd been weaponless and outnumbered and heartbroken. The guards had held him down. They had pried his mouth open and his mother, dry-eyed and tight-lipped, had poured some sort of potion into his mouth. He had tried to spit it out but enough of it got into his system to paralyze him.

He remembered her taking him in his arms. She had carried him as if he were still a child, as if he weighed nothing. She was strong—with strength she had stolen from his people and from the dragon who had been his friend.

The catacombs yawned before him. She bore him into the darkness.

He didn't know how far they went into the catacombs, but he did recall the gleaming, hungry crystal all around them. Before he could feel it pulling him in, everything went black.

After a while, he returned to himself. And when he finally opened his eyes, he could not move an inch. The crystals glimmered with some faint internal light of their own and reflected it all around him. Pressure surrounded him on every side. It felt like drowning.

He tried to inhale. He couldn't.

Part of his mind tried to tell him that he had survived thus far without breathing—surely that indicated that he would not suffocate here. Perhaps the crystal replaced the need to breathe, or maybe even provided necessary nutrients to keep him alive. He knew that if he could calm down, he'd probably be fine—but the panic had its claws hooked into him and it was merciless.

His vision began to cloud. His veins thrummed with a terrified, manic energy, but he had nothing he could do with it. There was no way out. He was trapped, helpless, at the mercy of his own traitorous family. He curled his hands into fists.

Wait. How had he curled his hands into fists?

Experimentally, he wiggled his fingers. They moved, where a moment ago he was quite certain that they had been as thoroughly trapped as the rest of him. Could he force his way out of the crystal? This didn't seem like a possibility his mother would be willing to overlook, but he had nothing to lose by trying anyway. He leaned forward with every bit of strength he could muster, pushing outward with his fingers, clawing at the crystal.

That strange, manic energy fizzed through him again. It wasn't panic at all, he realized, but something else. Something…*other*. Like it didn't quite belong to him, even though it also felt somehow deeply right as a part of him.

Beneath his chest, the crystal moved. Or perhaps he was the one who moved. He could feel it sliding across his skin, sucking at him as if reluctant to let him move even a few inches out of its grip.

He heard sizzling. At his fingertips, something sparked with a blink of light that the crystals caught and reflected. He had managed to make enough room now to look down, and when he did, he saw that pops of light were buzzing around his fingers.

He had to stare at it for nearly a full minute before he could make himself understand that they were magic.

He swallowed. He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. The light was still there. *Bigger,* he thought, and they grew into light-bursts the size

of coins, crackling against the crystal, pushing it back.

He was channeling magic. Which meant—what? Could River's soul have survived, and bonded with his? That was what this had to mean, wasn't it? He didn't think he could channel magic through a bond if the dragon's soul was not still intact, but the circumstances were unprecedented so there was really no way of knowing. Perhaps her soul had been transferred to him, the same way Sunny lived now in Ophelia?

But in any case…this meant the bond *had* worked. River had known what he was doing, and she had accepted him as her rider. And not only to save her life, he knew—no dragon would accept a bond only for that. Their pride was too great. She had accepted him, because she had found him worthy.

Emotion swelled in his throat. "River?" he whispered. "Are you there?"

There was no answer. He searched his mind for any hint of her consciousness, of any type of *otherness* at all, but there was only the faintest trace of…something. It didn't feel like a full, separate consciousness, more like a tether whose other end was almost totally lost in darkness. He thought he could feel *something* on its other end, though—a fleeting whisper of hope, a brush of anger.

River *had* survived. Or at least, the bond seemed to have provided safe harbor for some part of her soul, even if her body was still Unmade. Maybe there was a way to reverse the process for her, then, since it was incomplete. First, though, he had to get out of this wall.

He had trained for this. Well, not specifically for *this,* but he had trained and practiced how to focus and channel magic in anticipation of the day when he would bond a dragon. Now it was time to put those lessons to use. He imagined the magic as a stream, and himself as the riverbank. He let it flow through him. He arranged it around himself and channeled it the way he wanted it to go. It was not a proper spell—it did not involve weaving a pattern from the different elements, but it seemed that simply gathering the power was accomplishing what he needed. The light at his fingertips flared, forcing the crystal back and away from him. In this manner, inch by painstaking inch, he moved through the wall and into the dark coolness of the catacombs.

The crystal released him at last. He fell to his hands and knees, taking in great lungfuls of air until he thought he would burst with it. He was free. And his mother was nowhere in sight.

Not giving himself any more time to relax, he pulled himself to his feet, using a nearby boulder as leverage. He focused on the magic within him and searched for a single thread of Dawn energy, then flicked his wrist, producing a ball of steadily glowing light above his palm. He wanted to stay for a moment and marvel at it—at the feeling of it flowing through the bond and into him, at the impossibility of achieving what had felt like an unachievable part of his destiny—but he had to get moving. He had to find Ophelia.

He took one step, and nearly tripped over his daggers. Relief washed over him—of course he would have been disarmed before being put into the crystal, and why shouldn't his captors have left his weapons right outside for easy retrieval? It wasn't as if they would guess he would be able to use magic to get himself loose, after all. He bent down to retrieve the weapons and slid them home in their sheaths, relishing their familiar weight.

He pushed himself into the tunnels. Several times he narrowly avoided being shot by the poison dart booby traps, and once a stalactite nearly speared him, but this section of the tunnels must have had most of its traps already sprung by the wandering Unmade, because there were far fewer than he would have anticipated otherwise. As he walked, he wove a spell to extend his senses as he searched for a way out. He was sweating with the effort—and also with the pain of his injured wrist—but forced himself to keep going. He would acclimate to using his magic soon enough, and in the meantime there was no time to spare.

After he had wandered for perhaps twenty minutes, one branch of his spell sent an amplified sound to him: the scuff of distant footsteps, the faint mewling of a cat. He had found an exit. He hurried in the direction his magic was tugging him. This part of the catacombs looked damaged, crumbling with age, the crystals around him dark and empty. Greenish moss clung to the stone ceiling. One part of the wall here had been broken through, crystals and chunks of rock scattered across the floor. On the other side of the hole was what looked like a decrepit cellar: beams and columns, rows of shelving filled with the dark shapes of barrels of all sizes. He

squeezed through the gap and found himself at the base of a staircase, with a massive slab of a cellar door set above him. He smelled something odd—fruity, almost, and familiar—but was too focused on the door to expend much effort in identifying it. He extended his magic into a curtain of air, panting with the effort, and shoved the door upward.

It creaked but opened. Light flooded in. Corrin threw a hand up to shade his eyes against it, overwhelmed by the brightness after his time in the dark. The yowling of the cat grew louder, but this close, he could also smell the faint acidic, fruity scent of a beverage the High Fae liked to brew. He jumped for the opening of the doorway and clung to it with his good wrist, slinging his other arm up and pulling himself through.

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the sunlight. He had surfaced in one of the small, outlying farm towns beyond Dominion's borders. At his back was a brewery—that was the cellar door he'd come up through. The smell of the fruity-scented drink was so strong because barrels of it had been tipped over, their cargo splashed into the streets and left to soak into the ground.

Frowning, Corrin stood. He glanced around. There were no people anywhere as far as he could see, and there were several smoke trails emblazoned on the sky from places in town. He took a few steps onto the road and peered southward toward the orchards where the fruit was grown; they were burned to stubble.

Dread grew in Corrin. A burst of wind whistled down the street and rustled some papers that were lying scattered on the ground. Frowning, Corrin edged close enough to pick one up. In large, bold letters, it read: "THUS WILL BE DONE TO ALL WHO ASSIST THE FALSE QUEEN AND THE TRAITOR PRINCE."

Corrin dropped the paper, feeling ill. This town had been punished because of *them.* Most likely, the people of the towns had sheltered Ophelia's forces when they had fled after the failed attack.

He had to get back to the sea cave.

Dropping the paper, he strode down the street. He lifted his shirt over his nose to filter out the acrid smoke from the still-smoldering orchards. He had

only made it a few yards when he heard scuffing footsteps behind him and realized he was being followed.

Normally, he would have done something cautious and sensible—ducked into an alleyway and waited to see who it was, perhaps. But he had just been poisoned by his own mother, fed to a crystal wall, and bonded to a dragon who had immediately afterward been Unmade, and his nerves were, as Ophelia would say, shot.

At the thought of her, more of his thin veneer of calm cracked. He didn't know what had happened to her after that magical blast had blown her away from him. She could have been captured. Emalda had said she needed a royal death; Ophelia could already be dead.

Desperation and anger and helplessness choking him, he whirled around and launched himself at whoever was following him. The footsteps had been behind him, just around a corner and into a side street, and he came around the side of the building low and fast. He would not give Vie's soldiers another chance to capture him. He would not go back in the wall. He would *not.*

He came around the corner. His mind registered a short Fae-shaped being there. He tackled them without taking the time to register anything else about them, and so had a moment of pure shock when they flew backwards into the ground and he realized it was not a soldier beneath him, but Ophelia.

She stared up at him, her hair splayed across the dirt, her cheeks stained with soot and tear tracks, her eyes bright and *alive*, and her mouth began to form his name.

He kissed her.

It was less of a premeditated action and more of an involuntary response, like squinting when a shaft of sunlight was too bright. She was okay, she was alive, and therefore, he was kissing her. It seemed like the most natural sequence of events that could exist. The only reasonable response to the situation.

And then he suddenly came back to his senses with a crash, and started to move away. Earlier, when they'd kissed above the sea cave, she had called it a mistake. She might not want to be kissed; it likely didn't feel as right to her as it did to him in this moment.

But before he could disentangle himself from her entirely, she grabbed him, yanked him back to her—and this time, *she* kissed *him*. Really kissed him. Her hands pressed against his shoulders, holding him to her. Her body shook with some emotion too strong for words, so she put it into the kiss instead. She was trembling as if she were going to shake apart, so he held her tightly, and when the kiss was over, he kept holding her.

"You are alive," he whispered at last. Relief was still pouring over him. No matter how terribly the rest of the incursion had gone, at least he had this. At least she had made it out.

Ophelia sat up. She kept him close, though, winding her fingers through his, leaning against him heavily. "And so are you. Thank God. I thought…I thought she…" Ophelia covered her sooty face with a hand as more tears trickled down her cheeks. "Corrin," she whispered. "I thought you were *gone,* that she had you and she would kill you or Unmake you, and I would never have a chance to tell you how I feel about you. Corrin, I—our kiss back at the sea cave, it wasn't a mistake, it was wonderful. Everything was happening so fast, and I was so overwhelmed. I care about you a lot, I want to kiss you *a lot*, and I know this isn't the greatest time but I have to tell you now in case I don't get another chance."

Warmth rushed through him, along with a bubbling feeling that seemed a lot like hope. He wrapped his fingers gently around her wrists, pulled her hands away from her face, and brushed her tears away. He kissed her again—slowly, carefully. "Ophelia," he said. "I feel the same."

She smiled. It was a tremulous thing, heavy with emotion, but it was real. She let out a shaky breath. "We…we have the worst timing."

He laughed a little and rubbed a hand through his hair. "Do you know what happened? Did any of our people make it out?"

She stood up and began pacing, and as she did, she updated him on everything she had learned while he had been trapped in the wall. When she

was finished, she sat back down at his side, and now it was her turn to brush the tears off his cheeks.

He had known River must have been Unmade, at least partially, but to have it confirmed like this was almost more than he could bear. He felt for the threads of her in his head, for the faint whisps of emotion. They were gone almost before he could grasp them.

He told Ophelia all that had happened to him in the last day—had it truly been so long? He shuddered to think that he had been entombed for such a length of time. When he was done, her eyes shone with hope.

"You did it?" she breathed. "You're truly bonded?"

In answer, he held out a hand and formed those pops of light from earlier. She stared at them, marveling.

"If you can feel her emotions, even the faintest trace of them, that has to mean that part of her soul is still intact. She's not completely gone. The bond must have safeguarded her, protected her soul from the Unmaking's effects. Maybe we could restore her."

He let the lights fade away. "I don't know if it's possible, but if it is, I can do nothing but try. She is…" He searched for the words but came up empty. "She is a part of me now," he finished. It was insufficient to explain the bond, but there was understanding in Ophelia's eyes when she nodded.

"I know," she said. "If she can be brought back, we will do it. I swear to you and to Sunny."

He took a long breath and let it out. "What now, My Queen?" he asked at last.

She stood up and started pacing again—a familiar sight, since he knew it helped her think. "You said that nymph betrayed us. That means our secret base isn't a secret anymore. Anyone who went back there afterwards will be in danger. I would say we have to get back to them as fast as we can, but it's been a full day—whatever Vie and Emalda chose to do to them has already happened." She set her jaw, anguish flitting over her expression.

“We had a contingency plan in place,” he reminded her. If the incursion went badly and the survivors feared being followed or discovered, they were supposed to go to the sea sprite allies who were waiting along the coast and be safely transported to a secondary base, a small and isolated island offshore.

A little of the tension went out from Ophelia. “I know,” she said. “We can only hope they got out safely—and that Emalda didn’t think to question the nymph about our backup plans before Unmaking him. Should we go and join them?”

Corrin frowned. He glanced back over his shoulder at the distant city wall of Dominion. Mentally, he went back over the details of Ophelia’s story, piecing it together with his own. “When you saw River,” his voice caught but he plowed onward anyway, “you said she was perched on the bell tower. You had mentioned that earlier you’d heard soldiers discussing a defaced banner. Did you see it? In what way was it defaced?”

It was an improbable hope that was blooming in him now, but he found himself holding his breath anyway, hoping that his suspicions would be confirmed.

Ophelia narrowed her eyes, trying to retrace the memory. “Yeah,” she said. “It was…I think it was a symbol? Painted in white. A bird, maybe, though it was a simplistic one, like a stick figure.”

Joy and relief washed over him. “It was Liana,” he told her. “That’s a symbol we used in our childhood to pass secret messages during tutoring. Once, when her mother grounded her to her chambers, she snuck out to deface one of the smaller banners nearby with the symbol, to let me know that she hadn’t forgotten our playdate.”

Ophelia frowned. “What does it mean? Why would she start using that signal again now? Does this mean she’s willing to ally with us?”

“It could,” Corrin said. “I hope it does.”

Ophelia’s eyes shone with a sudden excitement. “Then we have to extract her! She might have more information by now about what Emalda is searching for.”

“If I know her, she will have gotten her hands on every bit of valuable intel she could the moment she decided to turn against Vie.” He smiled grimly. “What is it you humans say? ‘Hell hath no fury’? That certainly fits the Liana I knew.”

Ophelia nodded decisively. “We have to go and get her. And we need to do it now, while everyone is distracted with cleaning up after the incursion. Everything will be disorganized, and Emalda thinks we’re not a threat at the moment.”

“She will likely discover quite soon that I am missing,” Corrin warned. An idea—a frightening one, one that he didn’t want to acknowledge just yet—tickled at the corner of his mind. “She will search for me. And she has River now, who she can presumably command to do her bidding.”

Ophelia’s eyes darted to his. In her gaze, he saw that she’d had the same idea as him, and she didn’t want to acknowledge it either. He took a deep breath and said it anyway: “The first place she will look for me will be the sea cave. She will likely fly River there alone. She probably does not know that I successfully bonded her; she won’t know I can use River’s magic. I could go there. I could wait for her to come to me. I could use my bond to try to jar River back to herself. And my mother…I could try to kill her.”

The words hung in the air.

Ophelia stopped pacing and stood in front of him. “Then I will come with you. Two of us facing her—no, three, I was able to find the earring and it’s been a day since I last used it, so the Artifact can be activated again—will be more likely to succeed than just you alone.”

But Corrin shook his head. “No. When she comes for me, that means there will be a brief period of time when the palace will be vulnerable. You must use Sunny to extract Liana then. Otherwise, we may not be able to get to her at all.”

Ophelia grimaced but sighed, accepting his logic. “If this is our opening to get into the palace, maybe I should try again to get to the throne room.” But before Corrin could say anything to that, she raised a hand and corrected herself. “No. That would be overextending, I know. Sunny and I haven’t recharged much of our magic, and they’ll likely have put additional

defenses in place around the throne room by now. A smaller mission that's more likely to be successful is the right route. Are you sure that Liana can be trusted, though? The signal could be a trap."

He thought about it. "It could be," he allowed, "but I think it's real. When I watched her during that ceremony with Vie to initiate the two new priestesses, I could see the tension between them—and that couldn't have been an act since she didn't know I was there. I think seeing the truth of what they've done to her and how they have used her has brought her to her senses."

"Okay. Good. But there's one other piece of this puzzle that we still need to know, which is: why does your mother want an Unmade dragon so badly?"

Corrin raised an eyebrow. "I should think it would be quite a powerful weapon to help her achieve her goals. Or perhaps dragons have a greater supply of life energy that could sustain her for longer."

Ophelia considered this for a moment, then shook her head. "I'd guess that that's part of it—but I can't help thinking there must be more. She and Vie sent those boatloads of fake Artificers to the Scorched Lands, and they had dragon-catching equipment. And then when she was at the bell tower examining River…I don't know. I get the sense that there's more to it."

"When I confront her at the cave, I will try to see what I can discover."

Ophelia's face did something complicated. "Corrin, please…be careful. I will get back to you as quickly as I can, okay? The second I've got Liana out safely, I'll head for the sea cave to back you up."

"I know. You be careful as well."

"I'll use invisibility magic and I'll wait until I see Emalda fly out on River," she said. "I'll slip in and out. No one but Liana will know I was even there." She took a deep breath. "You should get moving if you want to beat your mother to the cave. I would give you a ride on Sunny, but…"

"But we aren't sure when my mother will come after me, and you need to conserve Sunny's hour so that you have enough time to fly him to the bell tower and extract Liana," he finished. "I know. I will go now." Even as he

said it, though, he was reaching out, tracing his fingers down Ophelia's cheek, relishing the feel of her and the way she leaned into his touch.

She grabbed his hand, kissed it quickly, and released it. She took a shaky breath and then stepped back. "Good luck, Corrin."

He stepped back as well, and then turned himself toward the sea cave and his destiny, whatever it might be. "Good luck, My Queen."

CHAPTER 25

OPHELIA

Ophelia watched Corrin until he finally disappeared from her sight. Then she found an emptied barrel, turned it over, and sat on it. She watched the sky and waited. She prayed that Emalda would take a long time to discover her son missing, so that Corrin would have long enough to reach the sea cave first and prepare himself for the confrontation. At the same time, she prayed that Emalda would head there right away so that she and Corrin would miss each other, and he would stay safe. She didn't know what to hope for, beyond what was impossible: a bloodless and happy ending to this awful situation.

"Sunny," she said quietly. He roused. She didn't say anything else, just sat with him and was there for him the way so many people had been there for her when her mother had died. She knew what it was like to lose someone you loved. And even though this was different, she didn't know that grief really differentiated itself all that much. When you were submerged in sadness that swept over you like an ocean, it didn't matter if the water's surface was ten feet or ten thousand feet away.

She hoped they could save River. She hoped such a thing was possible. But whether or not the dragon she had come to care about could be returned to herself, at this moment River was lost as completely and utterly as any being could be, and that was a worthy thing to feel grief over. So Ophelia let the sadness in, let its waves batter her and did not try to stand against them. She let herself sob the way she hadn't been able to sob in the chimneys. She held on to Sunny and he held on to her as his own waves of

grief swept over him. Although he did not speak to her, she could strongly sense the direction of his thoughts, and knew he was making vows to River.

He would avenge her. He would fight to return her to herself. And if that was not possible, he would pay such a tribute to her that the whole sky, the whole universe, would light up with his magic, until the Emptiness that lived between the stars saw his grief and honored her for it.

Together, Sunny and Ophelia honored River, and together, they waited for her murderer.

It was nearly sunset when a great shriek went up from the direction of the palace, sending a flurry of birds exploding into the air in response, fleeing instinctively before a predator.

River launched into the sky. Even from this distance, Ophelia could make out the shape of Emalda on her back. The sight turned her stomach. There was no word for the revulsion, the *wrongness*, of an Unmade dragon being forced to bear its curse's originator.

With great beats of her now-pale wings, River soared over the fields. Her shadow fell briefly over them, darkening the sun as Ophelia scrambled to hide in the dark cavity of a doorway before she was spotted. And then they were gone, flying toward the horizon and Corrin.

Ophelia breathed one more prayer. And then she pulled off her earring and activated Sunny's body.

He flashed into existence and she mounted him, barely settling into her spot between the spikes at the base of his neck before he leapt into the sky. He circled once low over the fields, his wingbeats hesitating when he turned the direction River had gone, before he wheeled toward Dominion and pulled a ripple of invisibility magic over them.

"How long can you maintain the invisibility?" Ophelia called to him as they rode over the wall.

"Perhaps twenty minutes," he answered. *"We must hurry to retrieve Liana and be out of sight again before it wears off. Otherwise we risk leading Emalda's reinforcements straight back to the sea cave."*

They were over the palace again in no time. Ophelia spotted the defaced banner hanging from the top of the Holy Bell Tower and eyed it, hoping that Corrin's hunch was correct. Then Ophelia jumped off Sunny's back onto the balcony of the rooms of the High Priestess and peered inside, looking for Liana.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. The sunset was playing tricks of light, sending long, impenetrable shadows arcing across the floor.

That was why it took so long for her to spot Liana, who was gagged and tied to a chair in the middle of the room.

Adrenaline shot through Ophelia. She must've gotten here just in time. If Vie had had his soldiers tie her up like this, he must intend to do her harm later. Probably he had some public spectacle planned, akin to the way he'd hanged the previous middle priestess. Ophelia darted through the shadows and drew the rusty dagger she'd gotten from the sea sprites, quickly using it to slice through Liana's bonds and then pulling her gag off. The whole time, Liana was making urgent, muffled noises. As soon as she could speak, she rose to her feet and pushed Ophelia back toward the window. "Get out!" she cried. "He's here, he figured out what the signal meant, this is a—"

And then Vie stepped out of the darkness behind the curtains, and Ophelia intuited what Liana's last word would have been: *trap.*

The dagger was still in Ophelia's hand, but she had two much more powerful weapons than that. She formed the first—an implosion spell—while she shouted for the second. "Help!" she shouted, and her dragon drove his still-invisible head through the balcony doors to come to her aid.

Vie dove sideways nimbly, rolling out of the way of the teeth that Ophelia could hear crashing together, and came up at Ophelia's feet. Ophelia hurled her spell at him. He dodged that too, and it landed instead on a vase that had been sitting on the floor nearby. It imploded with a pop, leaving Vie unharmed. He sneered at her as he rolled smoothly to his feet, then thrust out with a dagger of his own. She managed to duck beneath the blow at the same time as she called up a fire spell, keeping it in her hands as she grabbed for Vie's arm. This spell landed, and he cursed and ripped off his

jacket, which was catching fire. She saw a singed red handprint on his bared arm and felt a deep, fierce satisfaction.

It didn't last long. Vie ducked quickly behind her, parried her attempted stab, and disarmed her in two fast motions. Then his blade was at her throat, pressed hard enough against her skin to draw blood.

"STOP!" he shouted to Sunny. "Or your rider will die in agony!"

Sunny stopped snapping. His growl made the floor quiver. *"Release her,"* he said via telepathic magic, so Vie could hear.

Instead of obeying, Vie dragged Ophelia backwards, towards the door. Panicking, Ophelia realized that once they got deeper into the castle, Sunny would struggle to find and retrieve her. It had taken River every ounce of her fully-charged magic to blast a hole to the Deephold, and Sunny only had a fraction of his usual magic available after yesterday's fierce battle.

But she still had some magic she could access on her own. She just needed to concentrate enough to weave a spell that would free her from him, so Sunny could blast him into oblivion.

Ophelia struggled, distracting Vie and buying herself time to start weaving a new spell. She tried to twist around and drive an elbow into his gut the way Luis had taught her, but Vie just shifted his grip and inched the blade a little deeper into her skin. He even dared to *laugh,* his voice cruel and taunting as he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "You know what the best part of all this is?" he said in a voice too soft for either Sunny or Liana—who was standing frozen and wide-eyed a few feet to the side—to hear. "It's that you don't know yet that my brother is already dead."

Ophelia froze as the words sank their poisonous roots into her. She tried to shake them off, tried to tell herself he was lying, but she couldn't ignore the terrible ring of truth in Vie's gloating tone. Her control over her magic fumbled, the spell she was weaving paused. "What are you talking about?" she managed.

Vie leaned his face down closer to her ear, smirking when she tried and failed to flinch away. "Mother knows that Corrin managed to partially bond that blue dragon of yours. She's *glad* he did it. Do you know why? It's

because now that the dragon is Unmade, Mother can use her connection to it to spy through my insufferable brother's new bond. She watched through his eyes while you two talked all about how Corrin would go back to the sea cave and try to use his magic to kill her." He chuckled as horror crashed over Ophelia. "As if he could do such a thing. As I said—he's probably already dead."

Ophelia's horror shattered her focus, eliminating her control over her magic. The spell she'd been weaving fizzled into a dozen disconnected threads. She tried frantically to gather them up—she had to finish this, she had to get away from Vie so she could rush to Corrin, to warn him—but she was too panicked and they slithered away again.

"Mother says she needs someone royal to help her with what she's doing," he hissed. The blade bit deeper. "Well, it is not going to be Corrin, and I'll make sure it isn't you, either. *I* will be the only one she needs. I am her favorite now and I will make sure she remembers that."

Ophelia's brain darted all over the place. She remembered Corrin telling her his mother had said she needed a royal *death* to fulfill her purposes. Apparently she hadn't told her younger son that the royal person who was supposed to "help" her would have to die to do it. Maybe she could use that, could distract him or leverage the information somehow—but the muscles in his arm were already tensing to drive the blade fully into her neck, and he was poised in the doorway to run before Sunny could come after him. He was going to kill her. This was it.

And then from the corner of her eye, movement caught her gaze. It was Liana. Her face set in lines of anger and determination, she picked up a jewelry case from the table next to the door and brought it down hard on Vie's head.

His grip on her loosened just enough for Ophelia to manage to drive an elbow into his gut as she'd been trying to do earlier. With that, he let go. She scrambled out of his reach toward the door. She would get to Sunny. They would go to Corrin, warn him, help him.

But now Liana and Vie were locked in a struggle, and Liana was weaponless. Ophelia had to choose: her mission, or Corrin. If she finished

her mission, helped Liana fight off Vie and then extracted her, she would use up precious minutes that she could use getting to Corrin before his mother sprung her trap. Even as she thought it, though, she heard the Unseelie priest's words ringing in her memories, and she recalled what Luis had told her—how people had a right to choose their own fate, and how it was wrong to try to choose their destinies for them.

Corrin has chosen to face his mother, knowing it could be his best chance to defeat her, knowing he might not come out of it alive. He had magic. He had a connection to River that Emalda could never trump no matter what horrors she wrought. And Corrin had thought saving Liana was worthwhile enough for Ophelia to go to the castle instead of staying by his side.

Corrin had made his choice. Ophelia had to honor it. She had to believe in him, that he was capable of combatting his mother, that Emalda's advantage of foreknowledge did not automatically mean Corrin's death. Ophelia would extract Liana as she had promised, and she would kill Vie if she could. *Then* she would go help Corrin.

With that decision made, something settled in Ophelia, and her control of her magic snapped back into place. She ran back into the fight just as Vie got Liana in what almost looked like a wrestling chokehold. Ophelia crafted an ice spell, pulling liquid from the air and spinning it into frost so cold it would burn on contact. As she ran, she honed it into a dagger-like icicle and then threw it at Vie.

He spotted it and tried to turn, tried to yank Liana into position to take the blow, but he was just a fraction too slow and the icicle struck him in the shoulder. He howled and let go of Liana to yank it out, clouds of water vapor hissing up from his hands where it touched the ice.

Liana rolled to her feet and darted to Ophelia's side, giving her a nod of solidarity. "I haven't forgiven you for digging around in my mind," she said, sounding out of breath, "but I'm willing to put that aside for as long as it takes to kill this tyrant."

Ophelia bared her teeth in a grin, scooped her fallen dagger off the floor, and handed it to Liana. "Deal."

They turned back to Vie, Liana wielding her blade, Ophelia quickly knitting together fireballs. Vie eyed them, did some quick mental math, and then turned and opened his mouth—probably to shout for the guards.

Hissing a warning, Liana lunged forward, forcing his focus back on her so he could sidestep her dagger's swipe. Realizing her intent, Ophelia did what she could to assist, throwing fireball after fireball at him so he'd be too harried to call for help. He ran across the room and most of the fireballs splashed relatively harmlessly against the floor and walls, but several of them caught him, and his shouts of alarm were too incoherent to summon any guards. Ophelia was willing to bet that yelling and cursing were frequent enough in this castle under Vie's rule that most people wouldn't think twice about it. And apparently he hadn't brought any soldiers or bodyguards with him to help him spring the trap or they'd be here already. Ophelia snorted. Typical male arrogance.

Vie jumped forward, slashing with his dagger, nearly catching Ophelia's arm. She spun away.

"Bring him out here and I will take care of him myself," Sunny growled through their bond. *"Or say the word and I will tear this wall apart, though that will likely send reinforcements our way."*

She sent him a nudge of acknowledgement. She could distract Vie enough to get him onto the balcony, she was sure of it.

Working together, she and Liana harried Vie with magic and blades. Vie was a skilled fighter, nearly as good as Corrin, and at the end of a few minutes both girls were bleeding from several close calls. But they'd made Vie pay for it; both of his palms sported ice burns, his shoulder was gushing blood, and a cut on his forehead was dripping blood into his eye.

A few more steps. If they could get him to back off just a few more steps toward the balcony, Sunny could grab him, and his reign would end.

But Ophelia was starting to run low on magic, and she wanted to conserve all she could to aid Corrin in his fight against Emalda. She remembered then how Corrin had so easily brought light sparking to his fingertips, and it gave her a sudden idea. She flung out a hand toward Vie and called up her own light, not even using a spell, just flinging bright Sun magic out from

her palms. It was so bright and unexpected in the growing darkness of the room that Vie winced and threw up a hand to shield himself—and when he was off-balance, Liana lunged forward and shoved him hard in the chest.

He teetered backwards. He swiped out with his dagger, catching Liana on the wrist, but it was too late. He was in the doorway of the balcony, and Sunny had already dug invisible teeth into him.

Sunny snarled quietly as he lifted the wide-eyed, sputtering Vie into the air. Then Sunny reared his head back and tossed the would-be Fae King high into the air out over the parapets.

Vie screamed. And then he hit the ground, and stopped screaming.

Ophelia bent over double, gulping in great breaths of air. It was done. Vie the usurper was dead. Liana was free. Now, all she had to do was ensure Corrin's mission went as well as her own.

She grabbed Liana's hand, ran for Sunny, and held on tight as they flew as fast as they could toward the sea cave.

CHAPTER 26

CORRIN

Corrin reached the sea cave at sunset and found it empty, just as he had expected.

The detritus of inhabitation was still scattered over the floor: parchments, some clothing, a few left-behind bags and personal items. There were also a few weapons. Some of them were spattered with blood; that was how he knew the survivors from the battle had initially come here. He searched the very back of the cave using bursts of magical light until he found the sign they'd left behind. A giant chalk-white X was scrawled across a large boulder. It was the agreed-upon symbol that meant the survivors had regathered and gone to the sea sprites for transportation to a safe location offshore.

Corrin blew out a long breath of relief. At least he had this small piece of comfort. At least some of his people were safe.

He stepped over the debris. He did not pick up any of the weapons. He had his daggers, gifted to him long ago by his mother, and he had his magic, gifted to him by the dragon she had Unmade. They were the only weapons that felt right to use against Emalda.

He sat on a boulder and waited.

The sun dipped below the horizon. The sky mellowed to a deep purple. By the time River arrived, the first few stars had come out, twinkling across the sea.

Thud. The cavern quaked with the force of a dragon landing in the field atop it. Pebbles rained down on Corrin's shoulders. He did not move.

A flash of a memory surfaced in his mind. He was young. A toddler. Hands sticky with honey, face upturned to his mother. She swept him up and kissed his cheeks and then they were both sticky. He giggled when she tickled him. *What am I going to do with you, mischievous little fox kit?* she'd said, laughter in her voice.

There was a noise outside the cave. Feet scuffing against rocks. Still, Corrin did not move.

Another memory: the ghost of a dagger's weight in his palm. She'd commissioned it from the city's best artisan just for him. She would teach him how to use them, she had promised; they would train together. They would accomplish anything together.

The shadows outside the cave had grown long. The purple sky had deepened to navy blue. Corrin remembered River's scales turning that color.

His mother walked around the corner of the sea cave.

She stopped at the entrance. She looked at him. Her hair was windblown, swept back from the pointed, foxlike ears atop her head. He remembered playing with them as a child, their velvety feel under his fingers, the way they would flick back and forth when she was listening to something. They were pointing straight forward now, at him. She watched him with those black eyes of hers and said nothing. All the shadows had grown long, and hers was the longest of all, blocking the moon from view and covering him with her darkness.

He stood up. He took a single step sideways, into the light again. He said, "Mother. Have you come to kill me?"

He kept his magic hidden away, deep within where she would not guess at it, but at the same time, he was already weaving together a spell. He had studied magic so much, researched the spells that past High Kings and High Queens had used, and had committed them all to memory. He chose one that would be quick and painless. He did not truly think that she deserved

such a clean end after what she had done, but it wasn't in him to give her any other death.

She tilted her head. Those dark eyes of hers went from expressionless to something solemn and sad. "My son," she said. "My son. Yes. I have come to kill you."

He was already halfway done with the spell. His control of it wobbled along with his focus when she spoke, but he firmed his determination. She was no longer the woman who had kissed honey off his hands, nor the woman who had let him play with her silky hair and fox ears. She was his enemy, and an enemy of the realm. She had chosen to be so. They had both made choices and this was where it had brought them.

But there was still a part of him that was that little boy he had once been, and he couldn't stop himself from asking, "Why?"

She sighed and took a step deeper into the cavern. She was wearing a white silk dress. It made her look like a ghost, ethereal in the moonlight. "I underestimated you," she said quietly. "I did not think you would get out of the crystal. I certainly did not think you would bond my new dragon *almost* in time to save her."

A warning tingled in the back of his mind. His mother knew about the bond—or was she guessing, testing to see if she could provoke a response from him? Mentally, he tested his bond to River. He could feel her nearness, and it amplified the bond, turning the whisps of emotion from her into something nearly solid.

She was afraid. She thought she would be forced to hurt him. She wanted him to run.

He would not run. He wove the spell more quickly. Nearly done now.

His mother came a few steps closer. "Doubtless, you're weaving a spell to use against me as we speak. Tell me, Corrin: could you really do it? Could you kill me?"

"I must," he said, voice hoarse.

She lifted one shoulder. “Therein lies our problem. You see, I am not willing to die. One hundred years ago, when you sent that Unseelie priestess-assassin after me, I tasted death. I thought there was no way out. I have never felt anything like that before, and I *refuse* to ever feel it again.”

He had to keep her talking. She was trying to distract him, he thought, but he let her do it because he needed time to finish his spell. Whether or not she truly knew about his magic, he was still determined to use it against her. It was the only hope he had of ending her, and of him leaving this cave alive. “What happened that day?” he asked. “The High Priestess said you were dead. How did you survive?”

“Oh, I very nearly did die. My survival was pure happenstance. I was carrying one of the potions I had been using in my experiments, and when my dragon and I were nearly crushed by that landslide triggered by the explosion that the priestess set off to kill us, it broke the vial and the potion poured over me and my dragon. As we were dying—as I *felt* us dying—I clung to life like a drowning person clings to a raft. I drew on my dragon’s power, trying to weave a spell that could save me, but instead of magic something else flowed from it into me. Life energy. The potion had had an unexpected effect, you see, allowing me to transfer the dragon’s life energy to myself. It died…and I lived.”

Corrin wanted to close his eyes in despair, but he didn’t. He looked his mother full in the face, knowing what she had done, forcing himself to see her as she was now. “So you did kill your own dragon.”

“Mostly accidentally, but I would have done it on purpose if I’d known how. Afterwards, I hid myself away in the Tribal Territories and continued my experiments with a new sense of purpose. It took me a long time to recreate and then perfect what I had done unintentionally to my dragon, but eventually I managed it. And I even discovered how to turn my experimental subjects into puppets, helpful minions who live—well, in a manner of speaking—only to serve me.”

“The Unmaking,” Corrin realized. “That was how you created the Unmaking curse.”

She lifted one corner of her mouth in a humorless smile. “A bit of potion, a bit of the draconic energy left inside me, and skin-to-skin touch to channel the life energy out—I’ve mastered the process now.”

She waited for him to respond. In that moment, Corrin realized that she was waiting for him to be *proud.* As much as he longed for their past, he thought she might long for it as well—for them to be a team, beloved mother and favorite son, working together again.

When he said nothing, her half-smile fell. She shook her head, looking regretful but determined. “And that is why I have to kill you. I told you that I would not taste death again. I *refuse*. I will do whatever it takes to never again feel that despair—even at the cost of your life, Vie’s life, your little queen’s life, and the lives of anyone else who dares to challenge me.”

He had finished the spell. He needed her to come a bit closer to be able to use it on her, though. He moved forward a step. “I thought you said you needed to keep me, that my death would be to serve a certain purpose.”

“Oh, I wasn’t lying—I do need to kill someone royal. But you have proven too dangerous, as has your queen, who Vie has probably captured and killed by now. Vie himself will meet my requirements.”

Corrin narrowed his eyes at her. She caught his look.

“Yes,” she said, “Vie was waiting for your human girl at the palace, in Liana’s chambers. Or did you not figure out that I could use your new bond to spy on you?”

Above them, the ceiling of the cave thudded heavily. Pebbles rained down and then some stalactites. The shaking didn’t stop, but instead grew in force, like an earthquake but upside-down. A stalactite fell directly between him and his mother, crashing to the ground and shattering apart, pieces of it skating across the cave’s floor.

Fear beat in Corrin like a second heart. This was how she would kill him—she would bury him, as she had once been buried in a landslide.

“My little fox kit,” she said sadly, “you are my greatest weakness, and I can’t have that. Not if I’m to achieve my plans. I must be strong enough to let go of you.”

She stepped back, out of the cave. She tilted her head back to look up the cliff. She was looking at River, he realized—signaling to River. That was what was causing the thumping, the shaking. That was what would bring the cave down on top of him, as soon as Emalda gave the signal.

Then she raised both of her hands and brought them down, and the cave began to implode.

He dropped the spell he'd had ready, feeling its magic rebound back into him, and began crafting a shield spell instead. He was trembling and shaking; he had used too much magic in too short a time, and he was too unused to the exertion of it. Part of the ceiling crashed down in front of him, making him jump back. More rocks and giant clumps of dirt were raining down all around him. The impact was hitting at the front of the cave, forcing him backwards and away from his mother. He did not yet have the magical strength he would need to craft two spells at once; he could not both protect himself and end his mother.

He finally got the protection spell finished and flung the shield up around him. "RIVER!" he shouted. "If you are still there at all, please help me!"

Larger rocks and stalactites crashed into his shield. It flickered and shrank as he strained to maintain it. His entire field of vision was composed of falling debris, and now the floor was shaking too, throwing him off-balance. He stumbled into a wall and struck his head. The shield spell slipped out of his grasp. A rock hit him in the shoulder nearly hard enough to crush bone, and he screamed.

Something answered him.

He felt it expand suddenly into his mind. It was bright, a beacon of consciousness, and although it was already swiftly fading he had enough time to recognize it as River. *"Rider,"* she whispered, and everything within him leapt at the title, *"you are not hers to kill. You are mine, to save."* The cave briefly slowed in its shaking. She had slowed her attacks from above. She was resisting Emalda's commands, fighting to stay with him, but her consciousness was fading again, overpowered by the corruption of the Unmaking. He could feel the two forces straining against each other, River's spirit and the Unmaking, as if they were entirely separate entities.

Just before the Unmaking won out, she shoved a fully-formed spell into his mind and then outward through his body. A new shield, immensely more powerful, slammed into place around him just as the ceiling began shaking violently again.

“River!” he called, feeling as if he was being torn in two as her presence within him faded. She did not answer.

With a terrible shrieking sound, nearly half the ceiling tore away in a massive slab of rock that slammed into the ground. It scraped violently off the side of his forcefield. He had to get out of the cave now, or he would be trapped in here. He ran for the opening of the cave. The protection spell followed him, and he experimented with trying to push it outward, to expand it.

It worked. As he ran, it cleared the space for him, chunks of rock sliding off it and thudding into the ground around him with a deafening noise. The opening of the cavern was already caved in, but he expanded the shield River had given him outward sharply, and it blasted a hole through the rock big enough for him to throw himself through. Just in time—the shield had taken too much of a battering and it flickered and failed.

Corrin sucked in breaths of clean air. Emalda was no longer in front of the cave. He heard a strained snarl and a calm command and spotted her with River on the top of the cliff. They were battling—not with blades and claws, but with their wills. He could sense within him the Unmaking still straining to snuff out the last bit of River’s consciousness. Emalda lifted her hand toward River, and Corrin saw more of that purple potion. She was going to reinforce the Unmaking, use it to renew her hold on River and either bury the bond or destroy it entirely. And then she would come back and kill him, or order River to do it.

Corrin fumbled for a levitation spell, but it was too complicated and draining for him right now, so he settled on a simple air-blast spell instead and lodged it beneath his feet. He set it off. It launched him upward, and he used smaller bursts of air to right himself when he was on the verge of careening into the cliff face. He arced upward until he was just above the cliff, and then he began to fall. He used one last blast of air to propel himself toward Emalda.

She had just spotted him and begun to turn when he bowled her over.

His dagger was in his hand. They were rolling across the grass, a tangle of limbs and blades and long white hair. She had a dagger too—she was the one who had trained him to wield them—and she used it now to parry his blade. Sparks flew. She slashed outward. He evaded it. Behind him, River made an incoherent noise, warning him just as a bolt of sizzling lightning magic blasted the spot where he'd been a moment ago.

Corrin bared his teeth. His mother was making River use her magic against her own rider. The outrage of it fueled his anger, and he managed to catch the hilt of her dagger with his blade and fling her weapon away.

And then they were lying in the grass, panting for breath, with Emalda disarmed and Corrin's blade at her throat.

He hesitated.

He needed to kill her. He *had* to kill her. It was for the good of the people he'd sworn to protect, for the safety of the entire realm—of all the realms. But still, this was his mother. He had meant to kill her with a quick, painless spell. Could he really do this instead, and see her blood on his hands, on the blade she had given him?

He hesitated a second too long. Emalda brought her knee up between them and shoved him away hard enough to drive the air out of him. As he was on his hands and knees trying to breathe, she scooped up her fallen dagger and strode toward him. *She* would not hesitate, but he couldn't move, couldn't save himself.

He knew, in a blink, that he was about to die.

And then a shadow fell over the stars. Something brilliantly golden was diving toward him. Sunny. It was Sunny—then there was a great flash of light and Sunny's body vanished a few feet from the ground, leaving his rider to plummet the rest of the way into Emalda.

Ophelia tackled Emalda much as Corrin had tackled her just a few moments ago. There was barely enough time for Corrin to feel a debilitating rush of relief that Ophelia was alive, that she was here, before she and Emalda had skidded to a stop at the very edge of the cliff. They both began to get up.

Corrin tried to throw himself forward, tried to summon his magic, but he could still barely breathe after his mother's blow.

Emalda's blade was in her hand. She was lurching toward Ophelia. And then Ophelia lunged forward *toward* the blade—and reached out her hands, clamping them around Emalda's head as his mother's blade just began to touch her chest.

The blade froze, and Emalda with it. Ophelia, too. Corrin sensed the spell that held them in place: a mental-magic spell. Ophelia was in his mother's mind, locking her in place, stopping her from issuing any further commands to River and from attacking them on her own. From the way Emalda was beginning to blink rapidly and Ophelia was grimacing, he feared that the experience might be too much for Ophelia.

He needed to pull her out. He finally managed to drag in enough air to push himself forward and grab Ophelia. In the moment before he pulled her away, his magic brushed against hers, and he saw the image that she was reading from Emalda's mind.

"But why do we need a dragon so badly?" Vie was asking. He was playing with his crown, holding it in his lap, turning it back and forth as he frowned at the gems.

Emalda frowned at him, looking exasperated. "Because only a dragon or someone with a dragon bond can sense an Artifact when it's near enough. If I have a dragon, I might be able to narrow down which tunnels the Unmade need to search in the catacombs."

Vie sighed. "Is it truly so vital? You said you're not even sure whether it will work."

"If it does work, I will be that much closer to my goals."

*"*Our *goals, Mother."*

She only smiled.

And then Corrin wrenched Ophelia away, breaking the connection.

Emalda jerked away with a gasp, returning to herself. She stared at them for the space of half a second—and then she smiled bitterly, turned, and threw herself off the cliff.

Corrin's eyes went wide, but before he had time to respond, River leapt off the ground behind him and swooped down the cliffside. Rolling, she plucked Emalda out of the air with her talons and then rose into the sky, carrying her back to Dominion.

Emalda had survived. But so had Corrin, and Ophelia—and, he saw now, Liana too. The priestess was standing a little ways away and gave him a wave when she saw him looking. He nodded at her and then turned to Ophelia.

Without another word, they fell into each other's arms.

CHAPTER 27

OPHELIA

When Ophelia set foot on the island that served as the new base for their little rebellion, a cheer went up. It was a much louder cheer than she had been expecting because there were quite a few more people present than she'd anticipated. Stunned, she swept her gaze over the lush, sandy little beach. There was Verana, smiling brilliantly, with a few cuts and bruises on her warm brown skin but no terrible injuries. And here and there Ophelia recognized other people who had gone into battle with her. But there were more that she didn't recognize. There were several habitats' worth of pixies, and a new High Fae family, and a huddle of beetle-tribe Unseelie.

"Who are all these people?" she asked, marveling.

Verana stepped forward, pulling Ophelia into an embrace. "The newcomers are our new allies," she said proudly. "When our pincer groups were trapped in the city, they made good use of the time and recruited more people who see things from our point of view. They all banded together and overwhelmed Vie's soldiers to get out safely."

Ophelia blinked back tears, happily overwhelmed at the thought that the battle had had some positive effect after all.

"Now," Verana said, "we have all been anxiously awaiting for an update from you. Well, I say we've been waiting for an update—we have been waiting to see if you were even alive, and we are very glad to see that you are. But tell us, why did you arrive via sea sprite rather than on River?"

Grief surged in Ophelia. Corrin and Liana had come here ahead of her while she stayed behind to gather up weapons from the rubble of the sea cave and check the area to make sure no one had been left behind. She had wondered if Corrin would have told the group about what had happened, but apparently he hadn't had the opportunity—or maybe he just hadn't had the heart for it. "I have…some updates," she said thickly. She raised her voice to speak to all those gathered. "Thank you all so much for staying with me. I know that things have not gone as planned. I come with terrible tidings, but also with some good news." She took a deep breath. "First: you should know that River has been Unmade."

Gasps went up. Some of the children cried out, and their parents tried to comfort them.

Ophelia went on. "But before she was Unmade, Prince Corrin managed to bond her, which appears to have protected at least some of her life energy and her consciousness. It seems the Unmaking is, in this case, incomplete, so there is a chance River might still be saved. We will do *everything* we can to bring her back. In the meantime, though, we did manage a smaller victory. Prince Vie the usurper is dead. Emalda was last seen headed back toward the palace, so odds are high that she will now attempt to claim the throne as her own. There is likely an even bigger fight coming—but we have taken away her figurehead, and Emalda herself no longer has any sort of rightful claim to the throne. We also plan to go to the dragons again soon, to take them news of River, and to let them know that the horror of the Unmaking has touched their kin in the same way it has touched all of ours. It is my hope that this will finally drive them to join us. With their help, we can plan a final and successful assault on the palace even with River now being forced to guard it against us."

The people murmured as Ophelia finished speaking and stepped forward. One of them, a pixie, darted forward and hovered before her. The man dipped in a graceful bow. "I would swear my fealty to you officially, High Queen Ophelia," he said.

Ophelia gave him a warm smile. "Thank you. I accept."

As she moved through the crowd, beneath the shade of the beautiful palm-like trees sporting clusters of ripe purple melons, several other Fae came to

kneel before her and pledge themselves. She accepted each pledge with gratitude, even as she stopped to thank those she recognized who had fought in yesterday's battle. Of course, not all the responses were positive. There were some Fae who glared at her when they thought she wasn't looking, and a few who even muttered under their breath when she passed about the doomed battle and subsequent loss of lives being her fault, but she did her best to ignore them. She didn't blame them for questioning her fitness to rule—she herself questioned it all the time. But she couldn't let those doubts prevent her from being the best, most dedicated queen she could be.

Steadily, she made her way toward the center of the island until she spotted a tent made of stitched-together fabric. She ducked inside.

Liana looked up from where she was sitting in front of a little table holding a teapot. She made a rueful face at Ophelia and then stood up to give Ophelia a full bow from the waist. "Your Highness," she said. "I suppose I need to apologize to you. And thank you for having faith in me. I assure you I am now wholly on your side, and will share with you all the information I have—which you haven't already pulled out of my brain," she said with a meaningful look, making Ophelia wince apologetically. "Vie used me and then spurned me. He might be dead now, but the trouble he started in our kingdom continues, and I will remain at your side until it is finished." She raised a hand. "May I remind you, though, that while I am at your side, I am not at your command. Priestesses are rightfully a separate branch of power from royalty, even a full High Queen."

Ophelia smiled. "I have a feeling that you were born to be a priestess, Liana. I accept your offer and thank you for it." She glanced around Liana to seek out the reason she had come to this tent, and found him sitting on the makeshift cot near the back.

Corrin. His injuries had been seen to and bandaged by a nymph healer, she knew, but his spirit would take longer to heal. And there were other costs, as well. His eyes were covered with a scrap of fabric that was tied around the back of his head, and he wore something that looked like beautifully tooled glass headphones over his ears. Now that they knew he could be an unwilling spy for Emalda, they had had to take precautions lest he accidentally give away their plans or the location of their new base. He

understood the need for this safeguard, of course, but he hated it. He wanted no part of his mother in him, and he certainly didn't want to be forced to play a role in her plans.

Ophelia bit her lip, saddened to see him like this. "How is he?" she asked Liana quietly.

Liana waved a hand. "He's fine. Well, not fine, but you know. As close to it as he could possibly be after what's happened. You can speak normally, he can't hear a thing. Those ear covers he's wearing were made for children and people who have problems with loud noises or too much activity around them. The covers can be adjusted to make things a bit quieter or to tune out noise completely or even to play a gentle white noise to help people relax. In this case, we've got them set up so he can't hear a thing. Don't worry, they're amazingly comfortable, and we're working on a better solution for his eyes—something that won't chafe."

Ophelia nodded, feeling a little bit better. She had a few friends who were on the spectrum or had ADHD, who wore noise-canceling headphones for the reasons Liana had described. She hoped that none of their allies had given up this pair when they needed it for themselves, though. She made a mental note to check and see if they needed someone to slip into a shop or warehouse back in Dominion to get more.

"Thank you," she said to Liana. "And now I need to talk to you about the reason I extracted you."

"What?" said Liana innocently. "You mean it was not out of the goodness of your heart?" She smirked. "But yes, I did indeed manage to gather some information you might find useful."

"Good," Ophelia said. Now that they knew why Emalda had wanted a dragon—and that access to River meant that she might indeed be able to more easily find whatever Artifact she was looking for in the catacombs—they needed any advantage they could get against her.

Liana lowered her voice. "You told me earlier that Emalda wants an Artifact, right? Well, knowing her, it has to be some incredibly ancient and powerful Artifact, which means the elder priestess—not me, I mean, the actual elder priestess from before all this started—would likely know the

most about it. You should know that when Vie executed the other priestess, he meant to execute the elder priestess as well, but she slipped away. Well, when Emalda found out about it, she was *livid.* She didn't want the elder priestess dead because there was something she needed from her."

"Information on the Artifact she's after," Ophelia guessed.

"Right. That would be my guess as well. I was too junior to be privy to all the things my elders knew, so I'm afraid I can't begin to guess which Artifact Emalda is after or where it is. However, while I was digging through all the intel I could find before I sent that signal to be extracted, I did manage to find out where Vie and Emalda are concentrating their search for the High Priestess now: the Tribal Territories, out in the deserts."

"They think she's out there?"

"It seems like they are pretty sure she is. There have been several confirmed sightings, but she never stays in one place long, and the Unseelie aren't keen on helping outsiders track their kin."

Ophelia absorbed this information. It was a good lead, and even if it was a bit vague, at least it was actionable. And now they knew which direction to go. "Okay. Thanks, Liana." She glanced toward Corrin and Liana took the hint, pouring herself a cup of tea and then slipping out of the tent to leave the two of them alone.

Ophelia settled on the cot next to Corrin. He straightened and turned his head blindly, knowing someone was there but not knowing who it was. Or maybe he did; his hand lifted and moved hesitantly toward her until his fingers found hers and wound through them. Ophelia leaned into him. She pulled one of his ear covers out just enough that he could hear her, but any island sounds that might give their location away would still be muffled. "Are you okay?" she asked.

He lifted one shoulder. "No," he said with a small, helpless laugh that had no humor in it at all. Her heart twisted. "I want to help. I want to be there for you. But I'm worse than useless for as long as she can see through my eyes and hear through my ears."

“You’re not useless,” Ophelia said hotly. “And Sunny and I already have a few ideas on what we can do about the spying problem. I promise you, we’ll get you back to normal.”

He only nodded, silent and miserable. “Do you…know our next step? Do you have any leads? Squeeze my hand once for yes, twice for no,” he said quickly. “At least she can’t feel through me.” His voice was tinted with bitterness.

Ophelia squeezed his hand once, hoping that might ease his mind at least a little.

Corrin blew out a breath and nodded, then leaned into her and rested his head on her shoulder. She dared to lift one hand and brush it through his beautiful, burnished-bronze hair. She hated that he had been through so much today. The only “wins” they had managed to scrape out of the battle had been trade-offs at best—Vie was dead, but now Emalda would likely take over and be an even worse ruler. River’s soul had been partially protected from the Unmaking, but her consciousness was still mostly suppressed, her body forced to do Emalda’s will. In some ways, River’s situation was even worse than if she’d been fully Unmade, because she remained just aware enough to *know* what she was doing, to realize she was being forced to hurt her friends, while being unable to stop herself. And at the end of everything, Corrin had lost a brother. An evil brother, sure, but family was family and she knew that he was grieving—even if it was more the loss of Vie as he could have been than the loss of Vie as he was.

“We’ll be okay,” she whispered to Corrin. “I swear it. Because we’re together, and we’re *here*, and we’ve got good people at our backs. We will make it out of this.”

And right then, at that moment, even with all the grief and the horror and the pain, she believed it. Corrin’s fingers were entwined with hers, which was deeply right, and he had been bonded to River, which also felt right. With all of them bound together, surely they couldn’t fail.

With hope blooming cautiously in her heart, she laid her head against Corrin’s and rested. She would need all her strength for the battles to come.

EPILOGUE

EMALDA

Emalda strode down the street of Dominion toward her palace. Though the streets were cluttered with soldiers and protesters and gossipmongers, they all swept clear from her path like flotsam before a hurricane when she strode down the street. That was as it should be. She ran her gaze coldly over them as she passed, marking which faces showed fear, the rare ones who displayed awe, and the too many who showed anger or suspicion. She made a mental note of which of them should be the first to be made examples of.

She had once been the High Queen. Now, she would be again. They would bow before her on their own accord, or she would reach inside them—or the ones they loved most—and rip out their souls to *make* them bow herself.

Her newly-acquired asset walked not far behind her. The beast—who Corrin had called River—was glassy-eyed and pale, but did not yet sport the characteristic bruises along her belly and feet from where the blood pooled. That part seemed to be taking longer than she'd anticipated. Perhaps dragon bodies took longer to decompose after death—or in this case, Unmaking—than Fae. How interesting. She looked forward to doing further experimentation on the species.

She stopped at the base of the castle. There was a knot of people gathered here beneath a balcony, huddled around a figure on the ground. Some of the people were shouting. One soldier was dragging a nymph healer to the spot. Emalda strode to the spot and looked down. Her youngest son lay on the pavement, dying.

She raised an eyebrow. Judging from how he must have fallen, she was surprised he wasn't already dead. He had always been a hardheaded boy, though. There was a part of her that wanted to scoop him up and carry him to safety and threaten whichever healer was nearest to fix him *or else,* but she quickly suppressed it. Emalda the mother had been weak, and no weakness could be permitted. The weak parts of her had started to die in that landslide, when her eldest son had sent an assassin to murder her. Surely the last of them had perished on that cliffside, when that selfsame son held a dagger to her throat. No, the mother was gone. Now all that was left was Emalda, the Undying.

She crouched down and looked at Vie, her silky white dress pooling around her. He stared up at her, gasping for breath, blood bubbling from his mouth.

Emalda smiled gently. "Don't worry," she said. "I will save you."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a vial of her Unmaking potion. She smeared some on her hand and then touched it to Vie's brow as if she were anointing him.

He shuddered all over. The paleness spread through him even more swiftly than usual—perhaps because he was so close to death. His eyes, dark and shocked with betrayal, locked on hers in the moment before they went glassy. His energy flowed into her, renewing her, even if it was only a drop compared to the endless-seeming tides she used to receive from this when she was a few decades younger.

She glanced over her shoulder. A crowd had gathered, skittish as they were, milling behind where her dragon had stopped and peering at the scene. *Well,* Emalda thought, *if they have come to see what I can do to them, let them see.*

She stood up. Mentally, she nudged Vie, and he stood up behind her, much more obedient in death than he ever was in life. She looked at the crowd, smiled coldly, and lifted her arms. "Long live Queen Emalda the Undying!" she called.

There were a few gasps and some cries and mutterings, but no one repeated the call. She turned and motioned at her dragon. The beast tilted her head and let out a bellow to shake the sky, a jet of white-hot flame washing over

the heads of the crowd. They screamed and skittered back, but she had the dragon shoot flames behind them too, penning them in.

“I said,” she repeated calmly, “long live Queen Emalda the Undying.”

The crowd stared at her, fearful—just as they should be. Then, a tentative, trembling voice called back: “Long live…Queen Emalda the Undying.”

She smiled. More people took up the call and it gained strength, rolling over the city’s streets, washing them clean, making Dominion hers again. When the cries finally died down, she nodded, as graceful and elegant as ever. Her gaze moved over the crowd and she noted once again which people needed to be made an example of.

“You will all do better next time, or…” She gestured to Vie who still stood beside her, and she felt the crowd shudder en masse. Good. “Now—I have a very long reign to get started. Let us begin.”

END OF THE USURPER'S THRONE

CHARASSI'S FAE QUEEN BOOK TWO

The Bone Crown, July 27, 2022

The Usurper's Throne, August 31, 2022

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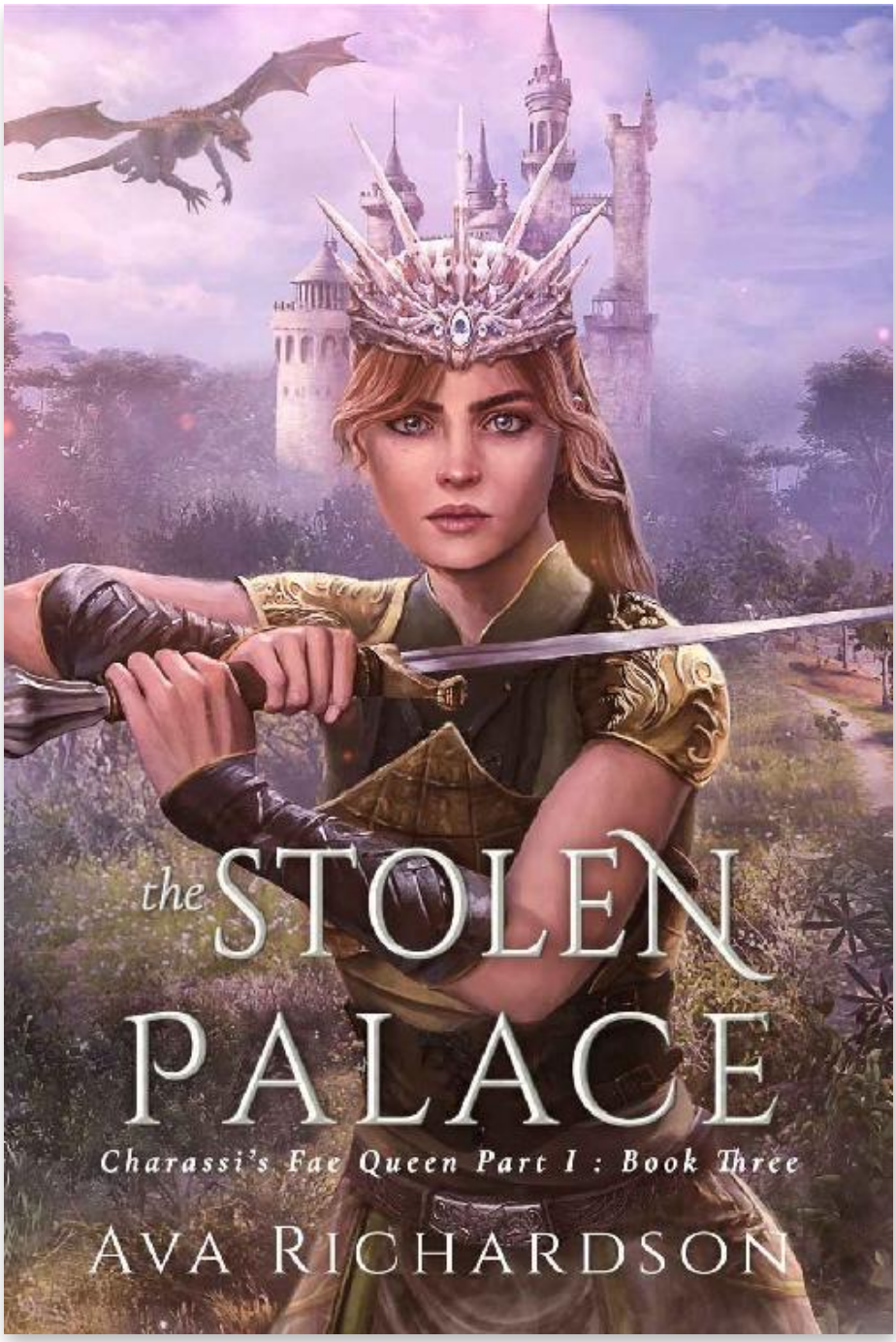
ABOUT AVA

Ava Richardson writes epic page-turning Young Adult Fantasy books with lovable characters and intricate worlds that are barely contained within your eReader.

She grew up on a steady diet of fantasy and science fiction books handed down from her two big brothers – and despite being dog-eared and missing pages, she loved escaping into the magical worlds that authors created. Her favorites were the ones about dragons, where they'd swoop, dive and soar through the skies of these enchanted lands.

Stay in touch! You can contact Ava on:



BLURB

All worlds hang in the balance…

To stop Dowager Queen Emalda's reign of terror, Ophelia, her bonded dragon Sunny, and Corrin will need to uncover the powerful magic of the

First Artifact. The key lies in the Sacred Map, a scroll that must be magically unlocked. No one knows how, and people have died trying. The trials to unlock the scroll are immense and Ophelia will be asked to do terrible things in the name of the greater good—even possibly betraying Corrin.

Meanwhile Corrin is determined to solidify a true alliance with the dragons. With their help, he, Ophelia, and their allies may have a fighting chance against his mother. But the dragons aren't happy to see him, and Corrin will need to prove himself if he's going to survive long enough to form an alliance.

If Ophelia and Corrin can't stop Emalda, she will use the First Artifact to gain immortality. And in the process, she will close every portal and destroy all worlds outside of Charassi for her selfish aims. But can Ophelia and Corrin make the sacrifices necessary to stop her?

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EXCERPT

Chapter One
Ophelia

Ophelia had seen a lot of magnificent and preposterous things during her time in the Fae realm, but the Unseelie's "wandering market" beat them all. She'd say it was like something out of a dream, but her imagination had never been quite this good.

There were the elephants, first of all. Regular old Earth elephants were plenty magnificent and preposterous all on their own, with their grabby trunks and flapping ears and big, sweet eyes. But the elephants in the wilds

of Charassi were on an entirely different scale—and the market's elephants were several light-years beyond even that. They had massive tusks that looked more like antlers, branching out majestically—and formidably—from their jaws. And then there was the fact that each of them was as tall as a ten-story building. When *their* ears flapped, it sent whirlwinds skimming across the reddish desert sand at their feet.

And if the elephants themselves weren't wondrous enough on their own, there was also the cargo they bore atop—and suspended between—their gigantic backs. When she had first heard of a wandering market, she had assumed the name meant that the *customers* wandered from stall to stall. Which they did, of course. But the true source of the name came from the fact that *the market itself* wandered, carried by these magnificent beasts on a predetermined route through the sprawling deserts of the Tribal Territories. An endless series of jointed platforms and colorful tents, all made from canvas and metal and naturally felled wood, were strung together in what looked like a haphazard pattern to create a maze-like bazaar. The call of hawkers drifted down from far overhead, punctuated by the elephants' unhurried, earthquake-like footfalls.

This was what Ophelia and Corrin had journeyed so far to find: the wandering market, deep in the Unseelies' lands, where items were bought and sold that simply could not be found anywhere else.

Ophelia was standing at the edge of the yards-deep and hundred-mile-long rut that the wandering market had worn into the earth over hundreds of years, clearly marking the path beyond even what the ever-shifting sand could cover. As the first of the elephants passed, she leaned out as far as she dared and stretched her fingers to brush against the massive elephant's leg. Tiny, bristly white hairs and leathery gray wrinkles rested warm against her palm for the span of a single thunderous heartbeat before moving on.

Ophelia dropped her hand and grinned, then spun around in delight. "I love them," she declared to Corrin, before she remembered he couldn't hear her.

Her grin fell away. Corrin—the Greater Prince of the Fae, eldest son of Emalda the Undying, and the boy she had fallen for—was standing only a few yards behind her, but it felt like he might as well be a hundred miles away. His light brown eyes were as bright as ever in the harsh sunshine,

their foxlike burnished copper tones glinting, but they were unfocused and blank. Ophelia herself had worked the spell that kept him temporarily blind. His dark brown hair fell in longish waves around the glassy headphone-like contraption that prevented him from hearing anything. Ophelia stepped to his side and took his hand, weaving her fingers through his. A smile curved the corner of his mouth and he turned his head in her direction, his eyes still straining to seek her out even though he knew the spell wouldn't allow it. He lightly squeezed her hand, offering her what little comfort and reassurance he could. During the day, this was the only way they could communicate now.

Anger burned in Ophelia's chest. It was Emalda who had forced this situation. If not for her, Corrin would be free to be a full partner in the uprising that was gaining strength across the realm of Charassi—the uprising that Corrin had helped Ophelia begin, and that she knew he believed in with his whole heart. When Emalda had attacked River, Corrin's newly bonded dragon, with the Unmaking curse, she had gained access to the sacred bond between dragon and rider that allowed them to share their thoughts and experiences. River could see what Corrin saw, hear what Corrin heard—and now that River was under Emalda's thrall, that meant Emalda could spy through Corrin's eyes and ears, forcing River to report everything she observed.

That had been a hard-earned lesson, and one that had nearly cost Corrin his life. In the aftermath, the choice had been clear. Because Corrin had of course refused to be a liability to Ophelia's quest to defeat Emalda, he'd had to be blinded and deafened so they didn't risk handing the advantage to his mother. The only other option would have been to send him away entirely, and that was something that Corrin had refused to allow. But even with the spell and the headphones in place to prevent spying, Emalda had still dealt a terrible blow to Ophelia. Ophelia had lost her most vital confidante, her dearest ally, her partner. It seemed like everything she did now was a struggle without his help.

She turned back to the line of elephants and squared her shoulders, keeping her focus on the path forward. There were two things that her newly minted group of allies had managed to trace to the wandering market: rare Unseelie-formulated funerary powder, and the missing elder priestess. The

powder was an ingredient that Sunny, her own bonded dragon, had told her might be able to help her focus a spell powerful enough to block Corrin's bond with River and thus prevent Emalda's spying. If it worked, then Corrin would no longer be hampered by the sound-blocking headphones and the blinding spell. As for the elder priestess—if they could find her, she might be able to give them vital intel about Emalda's endgame goals, and what steps Ophelia and the others could take to prevent them.

Ophelia tightened her hand around Corrin's and pulled him forward. The last elephant in line had rope ladders dangling down its side leading up to the market's lowest platform. Other would-be customers were jumping across to them and scrambling upwards like it was nothing. The adventurous part of Ophelia sparked with the urge to follow them, to fling herself onto the side of an elephant and risk being stomped flat, but of course Corrin wouldn't be able to follow in his current condition. She scanned the sides of the path next to them. There were several groups of winged, hawk-tribe Unseelie toting big, flat platforms, where the less adventurous customers and those who were unable or unwilling to climb the ladders could wait to be carried upward. Ophelia tugged Corrin toward one of those, taking her place on a platform next to an excited-looking young High Fae with no legs. His torso was strapped with a harness to a steampunk-looking wheelchair that seemed molded to him. The wheels had been replaced with wide, flat tracks that looked handy for getting around in the sandy desert.

"What are you here for?" asked the young Fae man.

Ophelia startled a little, wondering if he recognized her. But no, he wasn't sneaking any looks at her concealed crown, and his eyes held nothing more than polite interest. "Just looking around," she demurred, not wanting to be rude but not interested in an extended conversation, either. "And I'm hoping to catch up with a friend who might be here."

The platform tilted slightly as the Unseelie lifted off. The Fae man absently flicked a little switch that locked his treads in place, while keeping most of his rapt attention on the elephants. "I'm mainly here to look around too. I've been wanting to visit this place since I was a child. If I can convince one of the merchants to trade with me, I want to try to purchase a souvenir for my sister, as well."

Ophelia took a moment too long to respond—she was busy staring at the wonders of the wandering market as their platform rose—and the young man mistook her hesitation for confusion.

He leaned toward her, seemingly eager to impart more information. “You know, the wandering market’s merchants are infamous for refusing to trade with anyone who doesn’t have Unseelie blood themselves,” he explained. “They welcome anyone up to admire their wares, but you would have to be quite fortunate indeed to convince one of them to allow you to purchase anything here. Besides food and water, of course, which they sell to anyone. That’s how they make the majority of their money off the tourists, I suppose.”

Ophelia glanced back at him. “I’ve heard that was the case,” she replied. Liana had warned Ophelia of this before they’d left, which was one of the reasons Ophelia had opted to bring Corrin along—if all else failed, he should be able to trade for the necessary things since he was half Unseelie. That was super risky, though, and Ophelia was hoping she might be able to find a merchant willing to deal with her directly. She was wearing the Bone Crown—though it was mostly hidden by the big hood she had pulled over it—and hoped that it might be enough to prove her worthiness to trade here.

“You could always just steal what you need,” grumbled the voice of Sunny in her head. *“Or simply take it in broad daylight. ‘Requisitioned for the crown’s purposes,’ you could say. What use is there in being Queen of the Fae if you can’t seize necessary goods every once in a while?”*

Ophelia turned away slightly and murmured back to her dragon. “It doesn’t work like that. Or at least it shouldn’t. I want them to trust me. If we play our cards right, we might even win some new allies here.”

As of now, most of her supporters were the High Fae from Dominion who had witnessed firsthand the extent of Emalda’s cruelty. They were strong and dedicated allies, but their numbers were small, and their stories hadn’t fully penetrated out here in the far reaches of the realm. These people hadn’t seen all the atrocities that had taken over the capital. And their loyalty to Emalda, their kinswoman, might override any allegiance they felt toward the interloping human who had ended up with the crown. Ophelia needed to build some support among their ranks. If she could win some

Unseelies over, it would help in so many ways. For one thing, it would give her more options when it came to markets like this.

Sunny huffed. *"Dragons are far more sensible,"* he muttered. *"We respect strength. If one of us is strong enough to take something from another, then everyone accepts that it is ours by right."*

Ophelia doubted that was quite how all of dragon society worked, but she did know that their strength determined their social standing. The eldest and most powerful of them became their leaders, members of the Convocation. If she could manage to get *them* on her side, she'd have powerful allies in retaking the castle and stopping Emalda's nefarious plans.

The platform shuddered lightly as another Unseelie latched an extendable ramp to its corners, reeling it in securely. The High Fae man gave Ophelia a jaunty wave, then steered his chair down the ramp and into the market. Ophelia followed. She laid her hand on Corrin's elbow and guided him down off the ramp and into the market. Then she allowed herself a long moment to take in her surroundings, a desperate hope so tight in her throat that she could barely swallow around it.

She had so much riding on this visit. If all went well, it could bring Corrin back fully to her side, see the elder priestess installed into their group as a valuable ally and advisor, and lead their group of rebels into the next stage of their struggle to overthrow Emalda and restore peace and harmony to Charassi.

If all went well.

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Dragon Tongue

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A legend from the past is a kingdom's only hope…

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Desperate to help her father, Cora becomes a scale scavenger, risking life and limb by entering the territory of the deadly, feral dragons to gather the highly valuable scales. But her first attempt nearly ends in tragedy when she's trapped by an angry dragon. They are both stunned when she unlocks the secret of communicating with him.

As Cora and the dragon, Alaric, grow closer, they uncover more secrets from the kingdom's past. There was a dark conclusion to the dragon rider legacy, brought about by a malicious force that sought power at any cost. That force still holds the kingdom in thrall—and has no intention of allowing the dragon riders to rise again.

Can Cora and Alaric reignite a legend from the past, before it's too late?

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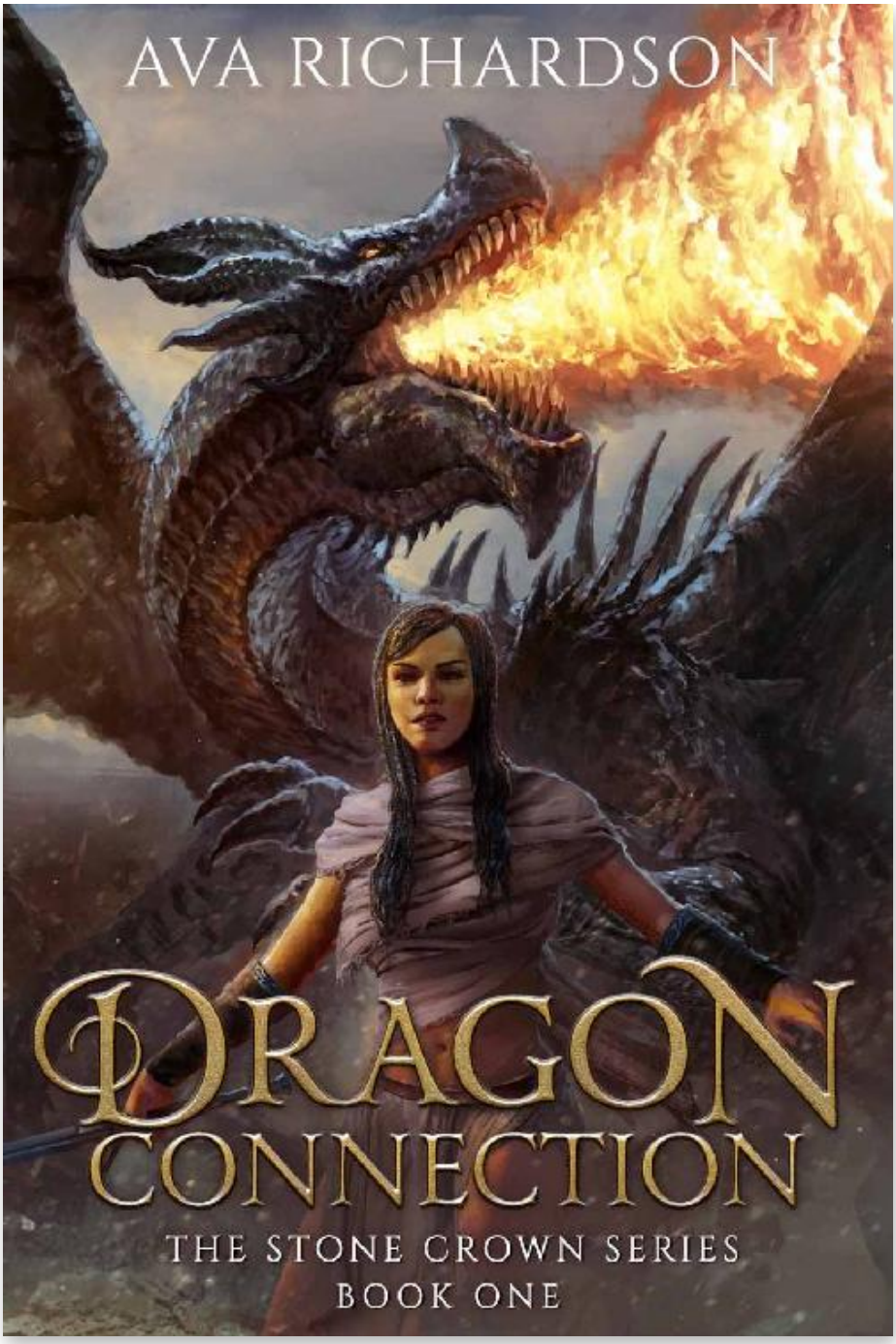

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Narissea has spent a quarter of her sixteen years slaving away in the mines, accused of a crime she didn't commit. When word reaches her of the horrors assailing her village, Narissea knows she must act despite the risk. Already her arm is scarred with four brands signifying previous escape attempts. If she's unsuccessful in her fifth, it will mean death.

But her life forever changes when she stumbles upon an injured dragon, discovers an ancient shrine, and learns the true purpose behind Lady Inyene's mechanical abominations.

Now, Narissea has only one choice: gain Inyene's trust and find a way to thwart her plans, even if it means sacrificing that which she desires most of all.

Her freedom.

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EXCERPT

Chapter One
Wind & Bread

I'm going to remember this day for the rest of my life, I thought to myself.

This was the day that I could no longer remember the gentle caress of the Soussa winds when I closed my eyes. Instead, as I blinked back the tears,

all I could feel was the oppressive heat of the tunnel that I was trapped in, and the bite of the unyielding rocks.

And Dagan's latest gift to me.

My lip curled in disgust and hatred at the thick mark of the brand on my upper right forearm. The three others before it had faded from an ugly red to a darker brown. They had stopped hurting. Sorta. Four branding marks for four failed attempts at escape from my prison beneath the world. There was space for just one more at the very top of my arm – but that would also be my last, wouldn't it?

Dagan Mar was the 'Chief' as he liked to call himself – which was just a fancy term for slave master. All of the others here called him much more colorful names behind his back. I didn't even think that Tozut, which was Daza for horse-dung, was a good enough term for him. He wasn't a tall man, but he was wiry and strong. Fair-skinned like the rest of those Middle Kingdomers, and he seemed to like inflicting punishments on all of us tribespeople brought here to the mines of Masaka.

And what for? I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from screaming in rage. Sometimes the overseers and the Chief waved papers and said things like 'Bonds' or 'Crimes' – although I never committed any crime or signed any bit of Torvald paper!

I had been twelve when I had been brought here. Old enough to remember my mother, Yala, her rough sense of humor that hid a gentle heart. *I wish I could hear you make jokes about the old men of the tribe again,* I thought with a sudden hunger. She was the Imanu, or wise-woman, of the Souda tribe – which meant the Daza of the Western Winds. I was old enough to come here remembering the plains. The smell of the grasses. The caress of the Soussa winds. Bright-colored bolts of cloth rippling in an endless sky.

But all of those memories were starting to fade, weren't they? I tried not to cry as I sat in the dark. The colors weren't as bright in my mind as they used to be, and the scents of the grassland flowers not so strong.

And now I couldn't even remember the Soussa winds anymore. I wondered how long it would take me to forget everything else that came before this place, as well.

“Narissea!” my name went down the line, passed from one Daza mouth to the next. Each of us were spread out along the narrow tunnel that was barely taller than we could crouch, and each of us were working at the holes we had painstakingly driven into the hard rocks.

“Nari?” My name changed, becoming smaller as it came out of the lips of my neighbor. That was broad-shouldered Oleer of the Metchoda tribe – the Daza of the Open Places. He was a few years older than me, and had been taken when he had been older, perhaps fifteen? We didn’t get much time to talk given the back-breaking work, but he sometimes told me stories of the plains.

“They call them the Empty Plains, but they were never empty, were they,” he would chuckle. “I’ve seen horses, deer, gazelle, wild lion, condors. I even saw a flight of dragons heading westwards, once!” He had been trying to cheer me up, I think. I told him he was making it up. Dragons were rare.

“Nari – the overseer wants you,” Oleer was saying, and in the flickering light of the stub of our tallow candles I could see his grimace.

“What does that fat old toad want?” I muttered back. I was in a foul mood today. Hardly surprising, given that my hands were raw from trying to hack and prod at the rock in front of me with my iron bar and my arm was still oozing and sore.

“It’s only the overseer,” Oleer offered gently. For all his size, he had a soft voice. “At least it’s not Dagan.”

“Tozut,” the next Daza slave up from Oleer spat just at hearing our ‘chief’s’ name. That would be Rebec, smaller than me. She had a scar running from her temple to her jaw from when West Tunnel Two had collapsed. She was one of the Daza who had been here the longest and was well into her twenties.

“Ore Count!” This time, I could hear the guttural bark of the overseer from somewhere beyond me in the dark. I’d never bothered to learn his name, if he had ever shared it with any of us. “Ore Count for Narissea!”

“Oh great,” I muttered, as Oleer shared a sympathetic look. “What’s that, third time today?”

They were picking on me of course, their next favorite past time after branding me.

“It’s because you tried to escape this moon just gone,” Rebec called down the line. “You get a brand and an Ore count, and *we* all get half rations!” She was like that. She didn’t mean to be nasty but being down here for so long must have done something to her heart.

I can’t let myself end up like her, I promised myself. *I have to remember the Soussa wind on my face.* If I could just hold on to one memory – just one – then I might be alright. I might be able to keep my heart beating in my chest.

“Narissea! Get out and get up here!” The overseer bellowed down our small tunnel, and his words echoed and repeated. “Get out. Get out. Get out.”

“I’m coming!” I shouted, then, quieter, “Tell him I’m coming, will you?” I told Oleer, who passed on my message as I gave one last crack with my iron bar, slid it out of the hole, and shoved my arm in its place. My carry-basket beside me was woefully light – the seam we were working on was tough as it was, and with all of these Ore Counts I’d already had this shift I’d barely managed to make any headway.

But there, at the end, was a chunk of rock that was loose in my hand. *Aha!* It wouldn’t be much, but it would help avoid any further troubles. I yanked my arm backwards—

For it not to move at all.

“Oh, come on!” I hissed. I was stuck, my arm pinned down in the hole, wedged between the teeth of the protruding rocks. I pulled again, but my arm only gave a little, and I hissed as my skin scraped.

“Nari! What are you doing?” Oleer turned back to face me, and then saw the predicament I was in. “Oh, wait,” he shuffled forward to my spot, reaching out to grab ahold of my branded arm.

“No! I don’t want to break my arm, thank you very much!” I snarled in pain and saw Oleer’s face look as though I had just slapped it. I was going to have to apologize to him for that, I berated myself.

“Narissea! Are you disobeying me!” the words of the overseer barked and echoed down the tunnel towards me. “Disobey. Disobey. Disobey.” I heard a snicker from Rebec, which only made me feel worse.

“I can do it, just everyone give me a moment,” I said, wedging my cloth-bound foot against the wall and pulling. “Argh!” It felt like my shoulder was going to pop out of its socket, but I was rewarded with a *shlooop* as my arm scraped backwards, before getting caught again.

Only this time it was my fist that was causing the blockage, hanging onto that big bit of ore.

“Nari!” Oleer said in alarm.

I had a choice. It would take too long to try and break it down with my iron bar, so I had to get it out by hand. But with the overseer shouting, I had to either drop the rock and leave it or try and break my fingers to get it out of the hole. *Drat.* It was no choice really. Even if I broke my fingers the overseer and Dagan Mar would still expect me to work. That was the kind of people they were, after all. *And* they would probably give me extra shifts or dock my food rations just for having the temerity to get injured.

“Fine. Whatever.” I grumbled, dropping the ore and removing my shaking and battered arm back to grab my carry-basket with its tiny number of rocks sitting at the bottom. Oleer must have seen my look of misery, as he quickly dipped into his own woven carry-basket and deposited a heavy lump into the bottom of mine.

“Here. Just don’t tell anyone,” he said, not waiting for my thanks as he turned back to the rock face and resumed work.

“Thanks,” I muttered anyway as I clambered and squeezed past the line of my fellow prisoners, back towards the waiting ire of the overseer. When I got back, I would have to give him the rock I’d left behind and hope it would repay his kindness.

“Hm,” the overseer said. He was a large, older man, easily twice my size in every direction, with a balding head and a thick set of leather and glass goggles over his eyes. We stood in one of the main avenues that speared down through the mines of Masaka, where it was wide enough to stand up straight and walk three or four abreast. I relished the moment of luxury as I stretched out my fingers and arms.

“Not bad, I suppose,” he had to mutter as he hefted my haul in one hand. “But not any good, either!” he ended with a snap as he dumped my woven and frayed basket onto the cart next to several others, before pulling on the rope that extended from the iron ring of the cart up the passageway. There was an answering jangle of a distant bell, and the cart slowly started to creak forward on wooden wheels. There was a treadmill up there, where a couple of my fellow tribespeople would be endlessly walking as they pulled or lowered the carts up and down the length of this place.

And why all this effort? It was for a woman called Inyene, we had been told – although I had never met her, nor known any slave who had. No one except Dagan Mar, if he was to be believed. He said Inyene owned this patch of highlands – although I didn’t understand how anyone could own a mountain at all, that was as absurd as saying that you owned the air you breathed!

Whatever. This woman Inyene wanted iron brought up and out of *her* mountain, and so here I was.

But that wasn’t all that she wanted.

“You’re to go Up.” The overseer jerked a callused thumb after the cart. “Special orders from the Chief himself.”

“What?” I said, appalled. Every one of us knew precisely what ‘going Up the mountain’ meant. It was possibly the most dangerous work that any of us could do. “But our shift must be ending soon, by the time I get up there.” I started to protest. I could see a few meters away the large collection of cylinders that made up the Work Clock. It had something to do with bags of sand and ticking rings of metal, but I didn’t understand it. Anyway – I could

clearly see under the light of the oil lamps that the large bronze pointer hand was *definitely* not far off a full circle.

That meant that the bell would ring, and the shift would change over.

“It’s not ending for you though, is it?” the overseer croaked with an almost-laugh. “Special orders I said. Now go on, get!” He aimed a smack for the top of my head, but even in my exhausted state I was too quick for him and I jumped back. I didn’t even bat an eyelid at his attempt to hit me – this was just another daily occurrence for those of us unlucky enough to find ourselves down here.

“But what if I collapse up there without any dinner?” I called to him as I backed away. It was true. I would miss my next scheduled meal.

“For goodness’ sake!” the overseer growled, but he plucked a skin of fresh water from one of the stationary carts and threw it at me, then tore a chunk off the round of bread and lobbed it at my face. I managed to duck that one too, and when I recovered the dusty bit of loaf, I realized that he had ‘given’ me the bit that was dusted with white and green mold.

“Wow, thank you so much, toad,” I muttered under my breath.

“What did you say to me, you little—” the overseer shouted.

“Gotta go sir, special orders!” I called back and jogged up the tunnel after the creaking cart before he could decide to throw any bits of rock at me this time.

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