



THE BURNING TOWER

PhD Candidate Perry Georgina Wyatt, MA. Swansea University, 2023. Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of PhD in Creative Writing.



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PHD CANDIDATE PERRY WYATT. STUDENT NO. [REDACTED]
SINGLETON CAMPUS, SWANSEA UNIVERSITY, SKETTY, SWANSEA

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The Burning Tower

Synopsis:

After her people lose an ancient war, Princess Bryony of the fallen kingdom of Riach is punished for her father's crimes and sentenced to die via Tower. There she meets the infamous Wraith of the Wastes and tricks him into servitude before she uses blood magic, a secret forbidden skill, to release them both. As her family's sole heir, she plans to rescue her people, now enslaved under the rule of the Fynix Fae, and reclaim her throne. She plans to do this by heading to Wist, where she has an aunt who will support her cause. On her journey, she befriends dragons, fights with pirates, and plans to survive long enough to see her people home once more.

The novel 'The Burning Tower' is an adventure tale set in the fantasy land of Nos which is home to many fantastical races but is torn apart by war and prejudice. The story explores themes of found family, sword and sorcery, feminism, and friendship. This tale is a loose retelling of the Rapunzel fairy tale as penned by the Brothers Grimm, with the only remnant of the tale persisting from the original being the image of a Princess in a Tower. It is the first in a duology that follows Bryony's journey back to her throne and seeks to reshape the original for the older audiences of YA fantasy.

Building The Modern Damsel in Young Adult (YA) Fantasy

Abstract:

Post-millennial Young Adult fantasy exploded in popularity at the turn of the century. As a result, iconic heroines such as Katniss Everdeen from Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010) reshaped female leads in the genre. Despite initial heraldry for a demonstration of female power and advancement towards equality, under modern parameters of feminism, heroines such as Everdeen become questionably admirable. Under the guise of empowerment, these heroines must adhere to patriarchal expectations such as, beauty being imperative; heteronormative unions and childbearing being the ultimate goal; and the overshadowing of female strength by male counterparts. These familiar requirements are reminiscent of the "damsels in distress" of fairy tales from the likes of the Grimm Brothers and Basile. Due to the fantasy genre's roots in these ancient tales, YA fantasy has yet to fully break away from the past and as a result, has impacted many beloved contemporary heroines. Close analysis of popular YA texts such as the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth (2011-2014) and YA fairy tale re-imaginings such as Marissa Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles* Saga (2012-2015), establishes the problematic tropes haunting the genre's leading ladies. The concentration of this study should allow Young Adult authors to become better equipped in their production of "feminist" heroines and offer opportunities for further discussion of adolescent literature.

Declarations and Statements

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed. [REDACTED] (candidate)

Date. 29/11/2023

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed [REDACTED] (candidate)

Date 29/11/2023

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for electronic sharing after expiry of a bar on access approved by Swansea University.

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YA And Fairy Tales: A Love Story

Since its conception, Young Adult Fiction has been and will always be a refuge for readers. Even though it remains largely overlooked by certain spheres of study, I thoroughly believe that there is much we can learn, and further develop within texts aimed at adolescents. The genre occupies a liminal space between childhood and maturity thus offering researchers endless opportunities to study the parameters of learning and the effects of literature during this tempestuous time in personal development.

For myself, reading YA became an escape from the trials of my teenage years. I had always enjoyed stories growing up, the cheerful tales of Daisy Meadows's *Rainbow Magic* series with the likes of *Ruby the Red Fairy* (2003) oversaw my childhood alongside classics like Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970) and *Matilda* (1988). The quiet St Teilo's library had a much larger collection that introduced me to darker, more complex stories written by authors from all over the globe. Due to the overwhelming nature of my home life, I found a quiet joy in this newfound seclusion – with so many fantasy worlds at my fingertips, reading marked a way of stepping away from everything. I could step through the theoretical wardrobe into a Narnia of my own choice and in its way, this felt uniquely empowering. Naturally, I quickly became a very avid reader of Young Adult (YA) Literature, and it shaped me into the reader I am today.

One perk of being a Gen-Z student meant that my reading came alongside the revolution of social media whose novelty was yet to wear off among my peers. The big name at the time was Tumblr, especially for readers. And even today despite growing up, 40% of the Tumblr usership is made up of Gen-Z with users aged between 14-25 with Millennials second with 30% (Finances Online). As it stands today, Tumblr exists as a multi-fandom platform and rogue outlier when it comes to other social media sites such as Facebook and what has become of Twitter due to its commitment to the weird and wonderful people on the internet. But in its heyday, Tumblr was the go-to for YA book recommendations, fandom drama, events, art, and debates – for a time it seemed as if every fandom imaginable was coming together and merging in new and unexpected ways.

In particular, the Young Adult genre thrived with cross-media shipping of characters, fanfiction, art, and even short films. However, among readers, there were a few works that stood alone as untouchable staples for any reader of YA. This was encapsulated in tattoos or logos like the one seen below. The symbol of the multi-fandom has no distinctive origin as it became edited by whoever was posting about it and would be frequently edited to include that user's favourite works. Ultimately it was a figure that showed a person's commitment to loving the main fandoms – and as a symbol from the internet, its origins are entirely unknown. The symbols being shown below are, the trident – to symbolise the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan (2005-2009); the Deathly Hallows stamp from *Harry Potter* (J.K. Rowling, 1997-2007); the Dauntless faction symbol from Veronica Roth's *Divergent* Series (2011-2013); the Angelic Rune from the *Mortal Instruments* saga by Cassandra Clare (2007-2014); and finally, the Mockingjay pin from *The Hunger Games* series (2008-2010). These works were the source of much devotion by young fans most of whom have maintained their status in the present day.



Fig. 1. Multi-Fandom Symbol.

These were the big stories that you simply had to read, and I loved them dearly. Percy Jackson gave me a love for mythology that has never died, while *Mortal Instruments* successfully sold me on the fantasy romance genre. I understood ‘ships’ (when a fan roots for the companionship of one character and another usually in a romantic sense) and felt a part of the conversation. What was great about the site was that once you knew what you enjoyed people were full of suggestions and recommendations for what you could read next. I loved the passion and I still do.

Yet as I got older and my tastes grew with me, I began to wonder about some of the characters in these works. Feminism has always been important to me, so I wanted to see how they measured up upon close analysis, particularly when compared to their male counterparts. Of the “big five” previously mentioned, three of those had a heroine at the helm of the narrative. Clary Fray – the painter of the *Mortal Instruments* series; Katniss Everdeen – the hunter and tribute for *The Hunger Games*; and Tris Prior – the Divergent citizen without a faction.

These were all characters I had fallen in love with– but why? With the exception of Clary who is humorous and fiery, Katniss and Tris are brutal, beautiful, and stoic individuals. Much of their character comes across as blank, subsumed by their ability to hunt or fight and yet brutality doesn’t form a personality. Sure, Katniss and Tris are excellent warriors in their own right but why did other female characters suffer to make them stand out as rogue females in man’s world? I didn’t notice at the time, and yet I found myself wondering why. Was it the desire to see a woman where usually a male character had been? And how can feminism come into all of this too?

Many of the aspects of these heroines have been mimicked and repeated to the point of them becoming tropes in other works, as well as the characters themselves becoming icons. But even now, even though these texts mean a lot to me, I must admit that they don’t necessarily promote female independence, as beauty equates to worth, whilst masculine attributes such as brutality are seen as empowering. These tropes, at its core, still prescribe to a patriarchal vision of femininity.

It seems like the reason these characters were received with such admiration might be because at the time this was a huge step in the right direction. Feminism has always been very important to me and with the recent revoking of the Roe Versus Wade stature that took place in 2022 the issue of women's rights is ever present in my mind. Therefore, I felt a reassessment of popular YA heroines was in order; to see what worked and what I could adjust in my own work. For femininity is powerful in its own right – it doesn't have to be male-adjacent to be just as strong.

Central to all of this is the legacy of fairy tales in YA. Retellings have been always enjoyed within the fantasy genre but even beyond that within classical fiction like the much beloved *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter (1979). This offers authors a chance to reposition power, explore modern ideals, and reimagine tales in unique settings. However, to what extent have the roles been reversed in these tales, and in doing so, can we deem them feminist, or have we further breached problematic inequality?

Frequently in the original fairy tales, women are tied to either a virginal damsel in distress or sensual villainess. The concern is that the core of modern fantasy tales, particularly those of YA, seem to draw upon the same regressive sources due to their magical history being rooted in fairy tales. Thus, I believe that beneath a surface of empowerment, modern fantasy YA and fairy tale retellings, still adhere to the patriarchal goals of suppressing women into secondary citizens through the forms of presenting heteronormative relationships and childbearing as imperative, beauty depicting a woman's values, and female protagonists overshadowed by masculine strength.

In 'The Burning Tower' I try to embody the good from these key heroines in YA whilst avoiding the trappings of gendered fairy-tale-inspired ideas that seem to have evolved into a new form of the "damsel in distress" which I have dubbed the "modern damsel". My protagonist Bryony is a Princess inspired by the Brothers Grimm tale of 'Rapunzel' (36-27). However, the iconic image of the Princess in the Tower is the only motif from the original tale that I wanted to keep in my interpretation of the story. The act of the Tower being destroyed in the opening chapters implies a departure from the original ideologies of being rescued by a man and signals the tale's commitment to modern feminism and equality between the sexes.

Reimagining Fairytales

Fairy tales have garnered a profound reputation and intriguing history for simple stories for children that have been enjoyed across the ages. Many children, myself included, learned through these narratives the importance of caution, friendship, and love through magic-filled stories about far-away places with talking animals. Fairy tales intrigue me to no end due to how they are adapted and edited as they change author. Relics of their day, fairy tales occupy a rare space in modern consciousness as examples of prime acceptable behaviour of the time based on the beliefs of the author. Indeed, fairy tales are meant to provide guidance to young readers and strengthen morals by equipping children with the tools to handle adolescence and adulthood.

Despite popular belief, the Brothers Grimm were not the first people to pen fairy stories; the likes of Charles Perrault and Giambattista Basile were first in this endeavour, and before that, the tales had a profound oral literary tradition among peasants and the lower class (Zipes, *Stick*, 45). The longevity of Grimm's tales, however, attests to their popularity alongside their accessibility since the release of the Grimm's first two volumes in 1812-15 made the tales more widely accessible, they have gained worldwide acknowledgement from multiple editions and global translations (Blamires, 147). The brothers had a profound impact on these stories, with Zipes noting that "the Grimms narrowed the definition of a fairy tale and transformed the tales into stories to educate children," (*Irresistible*, 159). Of course, the pedagogical impact of reading is as old as fiction itself, but the purpose of fairy tales is, above all, to *teach* young people. Furthermore, with this didactic function central to the form, this reveals cause for concern when they evoke the antiquated ideals persistent in them.

However, due to the impact of the Grimm Brothers, the female place in their rendition of the original tales is confined to either the position of the docile damsel or the sexual villainess in a way reminiscent of Freud's Madonna-Whore complex (*On Sexuality*). The Grimm's own contemporary moralistic beliefs surrounding religion and conservative gender roles permeated their tales with unforeseen effects for future readers due to the pedagogical power of the stories. Indeed, despite the reputation of fairy tales as simple children's stories, academics cannot ignore the narratives pertaining to gender and the ideological assumptions underpinning them.

In the planning stage of my novel, I settled on the tale of 'Rapunzel' as the foreground for a new tale. Her story is one of the most well-known from the Grimm literary canon and, thanks to the likes of Disney among others, has seen considerable adaptations since its publication. However, I decided early on that, despite the considerable reimagining, I wanted to go one step further and have my rendition be a comment on feminist ideals and have my Rapunzel be a rebuttal to the original passive heroine established by the Grimms. When considering the pedagogical element of the genre, I wanted to make sure that my work was teaching the right lessons to the reader whilst maintaining the fantastical fairy-tale theming of the original tale.

I decided early in my drafting process that I would use very little of the original plot besides the easily recognisable motif of a princess in a tower. The damsel in distress in the Grimm's 1812 version had to be freed from her obligation to a patriarchal society that was evolving from traditional views of femininity and gender. Thus, uncontrolled, independent women would be evil no longer but liberated to pursue their path and embrace their

femininity and sexuality. And from my research surrounding the original Grimm Girls, my protagonist Bryony was born.

My tale needed to consider all the aspects of the educational qualities of the tales in its reconstruction – particularly when it came to the female presence and the agency of female characters. As Jeannine Blackwell reflected, “Fairy tales are used for introspection, life narration, as a metaphor for dramatic psychosocial events, social criticism, and – above all – entertainment” (74). Though enjoyment is of prime importance, pedagogy is central to the form of these stories and as such Blackwell counts Catherine the Great and Philippine Gatterer Engelhard as two such women who “sought to educate and instruct their children or grandchildren” (74) with the use of fairy tales. These fictions teach the reader to take heed and be careful by providing lessons and warnings about the world in a digestible and accessible manner.

However, as the story I decided to tell contains a lot of more adult themes, I decided that it would best fit a longer narrative within my beloved genre YA fantasy which embodies the perfect liminal space between adulthood and childhood to discuss and reimagine darker tales for a younger audience. Fairy tales monopolise magic settings and fantasy creatures enable the transition to darker and more adult themes to be accomplished with ease. Lieberman agrees, “Not only do children find out what happens to the various princes and princesses, woodcutters, witches, and children of their favourite tales, but they also learn behavioural and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances” (184). These tales offer lessons in the form of an enjoyable adventure full of memorable elements like talking frogs or magic godmothers to make sure these instructions are not easily forgotten. Thus, I believed I could utilise this long-standing tradition to teach modern belief systems of equality and feminism in my work. I desired to join the stream of reimagined work like *Uprooted* (2016) by Naomi Novik and *The Bear And The Nightingale* (2019) by Katherine Arden which reconstitute power to female leads whilst maintaining a fantasy tale that captures the reader’s imagination.

Fairy tales have been frequently manipulated to question or comment on socio-political situations of their time, for example, the fairy tales produced during the Soviet rule in Russia led to tales expressing the regime’s ideologies (Nikolajeva, 171). More recently, McManimon wrote ‘Lily’s Learning’ a fairy-tale that perpetuated “long-standing tropes regarding U.S. schooling, such as education as a way out, an opportunity for fulfilling the “American Dream,” the mechanism for “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” (217). In this sense, the magic mirror is also a mirror of society’s values and strictures at the time: especially in relation to young girls. In my work, I would be questioning the original tale and reconstituting the lessons imbued in the text with feminism in mind as opposed to questionable morals or ideologies pedalled by a regime or the patriarchy. Thus my work would be restoring a sense of equality to fairy tales through my reimagining which I believe I have accomplished through my diverse cast and female characters who are strong, imperfect and have depth.

Intriguingly, female power has been actively removed from fairytales, as the original tales looked very different to the modern rendition. Despite storytelling originally being a female-dominated activity, the tales themselves, read by the “elegant ladies” of Straparola’s time and the “lower-class” who read Basile’s work, enforced social conduct from the

dominant, male perspective (Zipes, *Art*, 22). Regardless of the Grimms allegedly collecting their tales from “female informants” (de Blécourt, 25) the female experience became lost in these versions, overwritten by the male authors to reflect the pair’s religious and social beliefs which enhanced the role of the masculine characters and forfeited the wit and strength of female characters.

The brothers’ bourgeoisie morals changed the form of many of the female-centred original tales, diverting the material from the model laid by the likes of Perrault (Zipes, *Art*, 66). This is demonstrated through their editorial efforts throughout the tales. In reference to the story of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, Zipes explains how Little Red “is no longer a simple village maid but the epitome of innocence (*Subversion*, 66). It is not enough, however, to be innocent. Good girls must demonstrate appropriate gendered behaviour focused on conservatism and meekness. References to sensuality were restricted to inside the realms of marriage, which Blamires highlights through the new rendition of Rapunzel which underwent significant changes after adult readers found references to Rapunzel finding her new clothes tight, suggestive of implied sensuality through pre-marital child conception (161): one reason why later versions see Rapunzel and the prince wed quickly.

Folklorists tracing the original source material, “uncovered the editorial efforts of Wilhelm Grimm in particular to remove references to sexuality and deviant behaviour and reinforce the early nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology of honesty, diligence, and industriousness,” (Norberg, 7). Additionally, women in the Grimms’ tales suffer more than any other character. Forced into a role of servitude, cursed with endless sleep, or shut in a high tower, tale after tale reduces the woman’s role to that of an object or goal. Thus, it is no surprise that Warner mentions that in the post-war period, “Fairy tales were denounced as a blunt tool of patriarchy, the bourgeoisie, cosmetic surgeons, the fashion industry, and psychoanalysts bent on curbing girls’ energies and desires,” (133). Folklorists and cultural historians, however, argue that this was not always the case and that the original function of fantasy could be seen as much more subversive. Initially, female characters could rely on their wits in order to prevail against the villains of their stories. However, this began to change between 1500-1700, during which “the modern fairy-tale heroine – and fictional heroines in general – took shape,” (*Fertility Control* Bottigheimer 48), with male protagonists taking charge of both the narrative and female bodies.

Bottigheimer elaborates,

“As the genre developed towards its modern form, two notable changes occurred in their plots. Men became a danger to women, and newly disempowered women cowered in fear. They had lost their wits, quite literally. The dangers that men posed sexually were generalized into a fairy-tale world in which women suffered with wicked abductors, relentless captors, long captivity, and increasing isolation.”

(*Fertility Control*, 50).

The reasons behind this occurrence developed from several social factors but it is easy to see how the positions of the female character changed from independent woman to trophy and how those efforts of the Grimms took effect. And as Bottigheimer pointed out, “The pen, nearly always held by a male hand, inked directions for what women should and should not

do and what constituted feminine and unfeminine behaviour,” (38). The influence of the storyteller removed female power almost entirely and through the easy-to-digest structure of fairytales highlighted desirable goals for young female readers: companionship and wealth. As Zipes outlines, “Her goal is wealth, jewels, and a man to protect her property rights. Her jurisdiction is the home or castle. Her happiness depends on conformity to patriarchal rule,” (*Art* 70). Divergence from this path is the route to ostracization.

After discovering this through my research, I was hellbent on returning to an older depiction of women in these tales – one where courage, desire, and intuition are all valued in a female form. The Grimm heroine was the target I wished to rewrite and empower. The female Grimm heroines speak a few times, but their domestic-orientated message is universal throughout the tales. Indeed, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz’s interpretation of fairy tales is that they “emphasize such things as women's passivity and beauty, are indeed gendered scripts and serve to legitimize and support the dominant gender system,” (711). The patriarchal tone of Grimm classics such as ‘Cinderella’ (42-45), ‘Rapunzel’, and ‘Briar-Rose (Sleeping Beauty)’ (83-84) frequently positions women as the beautiful rewards for a man’s courageousness. This is a “central problem in many of these classic fairy tales – gender construction,” (Crowley and Pennington, 299) as though time moves on the ideologies do not adapt. Within the Grimms’ tales, women are frequently undermined or objectified; indeed, to hold any agency at all within the text they must be ugly and/or evil. Ultimately, the Grimm’s tales do more than provide innocent enjoyment to the reader, instead offering a gendered framework for appropriate womanly behaviour. Thus, instead, by taking this gendered structure in mind for my new text, I decided to root out the main themes embodied in the Grimms’ heroines and then undermine them in my own text.

Understanding the Grimm Women

I focused a lot of my research on the well-known remnants of the Grimm and started with the much-loved character of Cinderella. When one thinks of fairy tales, the familiar tale concerning pumpkins, magic, and glass slippers comes to mind. As Armando Maggi reminds us, “Cinderella is among the most cherished figures of the Western fairy-tale canon,” (150) – her tale has stood the test of time and its popularity has never dwindled in popular culture, with numerous cinematic renditions and many rewrites within the Fantasy and Young Adult Fantasy (YAF) genres. Two include Ashley Poston’s cosplaying nerd in *Geekerella* (2017) or the historical reimaging in Andy Tennant’s film adaptation *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998). These adaptations change fundamental story elements to make their interpretations stand out, with wonderful effects that make readers fall again in love with the story.

However, when considering the original messages embedded by the Grimms, Cinderella’s tale is condemned for its role in developing the portrayal of the fairy-tale princess as helpless and hyper-feminine (Whelan, 170). Thanks to the brothers, an emphasis on being a good, passive, god-fearing damsel is reinforced with the prize being a heterosexual union where her new role of mother will commence. The villains in question are Cinderella’s stepmother and stepsisters whose malicious intent has dire consequences – acting as a suitable warning against those unlike Cinderella. God-fearing is one of the prime qualities expected in a damsel and in Cinderella’s tale, the power of the Christian interpretation of an omnipotent Lord is ever present. The classic tale sees a young Cinderella instructed by her mother on her deathbed to be “good and pious, and then the good God will always protect you,” (Grimm, 42). A halo is placed around Cinderella’s head from this moment forward in the tale where the young girl pledges herself to goodness and godliness. This role sees Cinderella as the perfect meek, dutiful homemaker; this evokes a dedication similar to religious devotion as if defecting from her mother’s wishes would be going against the wishes of God. I decided early on that my tale would be free from religious ideology apart from the religion present in the books which I based on a combination of spiritualist ideals, common moon and sun imagery, and the inspiration of ancient Welsh paganism I am familiar with due to my Celtic roots. I read *The Mabinogion* (2008) – a collection of traditional Welsh tales that speak of magic and power – and was inspired when constructing the religious beliefs of Bryony.

One intriguing aspect of the original tale that has stayed in my new rendition would be the mortality of Cinderella’s mother and many of the other mothers in the Grimm canon. Naturally, the heroine’s mother passes away early leaving Cinderella to fend for herself until the safety of marriage can be assured. Whitehead reflects on a mother’s place in fairy tales, arguing “It is a mother's destiny to self-destruct,” (104), as hardship presents a simple way of illustrating goodness. Alas, the absent or dead mother in fairy tales has become something of an everlasting trope as we see in *Snow White* or even *Beauty and the Beast*-inspired tales. The lack of a mother is what drives Cinderella’s tale as she takes the opportunity to devote herself to servitude – further driving home the messages of the wisdom of our elders and the gender roles we must commit to.

Interestingly, I found I needed to keep the trope from many fairytales that see the mother of the heroine die early on. I considered this as a way to alienate Bryony from those in her family through her gender and add reason towards her fierce independence. The

dubious nature of the mother's death in the original fairytales was to highlight the protagonist's status as the one lone female and foster misogynistic ideas to teach women the correct behaviour. Yet I believe I have circumnavigated this pitfall by having the tale include a plethora of independent women who are rich in diversity and depth.

However, it is interesting that even in a tale designed to hijack original fairy tale tropes, some still sneak in, which leads to the question of how much from the original tales needs to remain to be acknowledged as a fairy tale itself and how much can we claim to have broken away from the traditional tales if some of these key themes persist.

One of the main aspects of the heroine I wished to contradict was her passivity. As Cinderella endures adversity, she recalls those last words from her mother and continues to be pious and good: she never fights back, but openly accepts her fate. In the tales, "she had to do hard work from morning till night," (Grimm, 42) and she does it without question or complaint. Patriarchal ideologies reinforce ideals of women as submissive and selfless which Cinderella embodies in the story as a paragon of goodness. Zipes refers to Cinderella as "passive, obedient, self-sacrificing, hardworking, patient, and straight-laced," (*Art*, 69), demonstrating Cinderella's personification of the virginal, Madonna-like female whose happiness is tied to conforming to the views of the patriarchy. As such, I wanted the reader's interpretation of Bryony to be uniquely distinct from this original form. She is reckless, curious, and rebellious from the moment we meet her until the book ends.

The question of Cinderella's resistance arises through her acts of defiance when attending the ball. However, ultimately if the tree, the manifestation of her mother, had not given her the dresses, with the implication that she attend, Cinderella would've not joined the celebration. The act itself is passive and though her tears brought this success by helping water the tree as a sapling, the result is not freedom through resistance – it's freedom, if we can call it that, through marriage – freedom from her role of servitude into Cinderella's new role as wife and mother. Indeed, Cinderella does not present herself to the Prince independently either, she has to be brought to him through the Prince's insistence after being disregarded by her family. Ever the passive female, she does not even partake in the revenge enacted on her wicked stepsisters, relying instead on the doves who had been instrumental in exposing their fraudulence when the Prince and his entourage had first arrived too.

Through Cinderella, women are taught that being good, holy, and patient will land you a prince. No other qualities are necessary beyond being beautiful, silent, and fertile. In fact, concerning the original Disney rendition, Robbins declared that "the girl hardly exhibits signs of a brain capacity larger than that of a rutabaga," (103) as the mice and birds wash and dress her each morning too. Additionally, any further independence from Cinderella would divert from the important goals as outlined by Suman in the fairy tales themselves. The narrative structure of "a girl of limited means to a princess who is chosen by a royal male is a common formula in traditional Cinderella-like fairy tales, the financial gain and pragmatic benefits that accompany this rise are carefully concealed by the charm of romantic love and innocence," (Suman, 386). Thus, the sweetened figure of the prince is further romanticised by his representation of stability – an achievable goal, indeed. I used the antiquated ideas inspired by the pseudo-medieval/Victorian gendered society rules of Riach to invert this image. By removing the prince and repositioning Bryony from the power position of royalty, I enabled an active commentary on societal roles that evoke classical

Grimm likeness from their tales. Furthermore, the plot decision to have the kingdom of Riach invaded meant my protagonist would have lots of opportunities for personal exploration within the world of Nos and then also internally as she figures out the person she wants to be.

Another figure that I found key to my research was the tale of ‘Sleeping Beauty’. Of course, arguably next in terms of iconic fairy tales, Sleeping Beauty’s tale remains one of the most well-known. Indeed, the image of the beautiful sleeping princess and her rescuing prince is perhaps one of the most effective when discussing the damsel in distress. During my protagonist’s construction, I played with elements of other fairy tales before settling on Rapunzel, but the comatose aspects of this particular tale are hard to reframe within the high-energy plot I wanted to reconstruct. However, if I ever undertake a similar journey with another fairytale, I think this one is due for a reconfigure – it has slept long enough.

The tale itself has garnered considerable concern from modern thinkers who debated the pedagogical effect of the tales themselves. Maria Tatar writes, “Feminists have targeted Sleeping Beauty as the most passive and repellent fairy-tale heroine of all, and many have done their best to make the story go away” (“Show” 142). Though Tatar’s research questions this, the image of the damsel through the Grimm’s lens cannot be ignored with very few traits within the heroine besides being beautiful and helpless. Thus, Sleeping Beauty, also known as Briar Rose in her original Grimm tale, garnered criticism is justified. As noted by McEvoy, Briar Rose is “the “perfect” fairy tale heroine” (102) setting the precedence for those who follow; with her beauty, silence, and total lack of agency, the figure of the damsel in distress proffers one of its strongest examples through the sleeping royal.

The slumbering Princess embodies many of the patriarchal values of popular contemporary ideology from the Grimms era. Even Kimberly J. Lau refers to her as the “quintessential Grimms girl,” (121) as the Princess represents the ideal feminine form pedalled in the tales. With her outstanding beauty and ability to provide an excellent test of masculine strength and character, Sleeping Beauty herself has very little action in her own story. Rather, her beauty is her sole source of power, thus reinforcing the idea of beauty equating to worth and consequently making them deserving of being saved. After conducting a study of appearance in certain fairytales, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz concluded; “Of the tales that contain younger women, 57 percent described them as “pretty,” “beautiful,” or “the fairest,” and on average there are 1.74 referenced to their beauty (718).” Beauty is paramount to the women of fairytales, particularly, Briar Rose. Yet, if we were to analyse the most important aspects of the male characters in the Grimm’s stories, in order to excel at being masculine you must be brave – a telling comparison with the female equivalent being that you must be beautiful.

This is one of the main aspects of my work that I focused on – the rehabilitation of the Princess. As already touched upon, these qualities of being passive and submissive are reminiscent of the antiquated patriarchal ideals of the Grimms: they have no place in a modern society that accepts equality between all genders. Beauty, a paramount aspect of the female characters in the Grimm tales, sits as the base of all female agency as opposed to having women act with the same amount of determination and bravery as their male comrades. I made sure that even though Bryony is notably pretty, she is androgynous in her appearance enough to pass for a man during her travels with Brenn. Furthermore, I made sure

that she was the antithesis of the passive princess established in her original tale. Bryony is reckless and foolhardy even though she has goals and desires. But most of all: Bryony is brave.

Bryony repossesses the power in her tale that was denied to the original Grimm heroines. The sleeping Princess acts as a trophy to her rescuer, the Prince. As described by Munford as, “A dormant subject on the brink of womanhood,” (30) and being the sole inheritor of her kingdom too, without any previous male attention to soil her, she is an attractive prize indeed to potential suitors. Indeed, this image of Sleeping Beauty awakening to become her new role as wife and mother reinforces the patriarchal ideology behind female expectations of servitude, submission, and passivity. Her powerlessness is consistent during her youth and post-sleep. When she is awake, she is condemned to fall prey to a curse which she cannot avoid, and then she is placed in a marriage she cannot avoid too. There are no choices in the Princess’ tale as all the power is reserved for the masculine heroes who come to her rescue. Conscious or not, Sleeping Beauty has no control over the situations she finds herself in – the power is imbued in the male figures of the tales.

Naturally, the silence maintained through the tale and the act of “sleep” itself possesses ominous connotations for the young Princess. By being asleep, the Grimms’ heroine offers a sinister image of dubious consent as Lau mentions, “She is passive, yielding, available, and— of course— silent, enchantingly incapable of speaking her mind, much less voicing any resistance to the hero’s advances,” (121). This silence further aligns her with the figure of the damsel whose position is purely to be a trophy – passivity is compulsory for the role. In fact, in an earlier version laid out by Giambattista Basile’s 1634– 36 “the travelling king’s “gathering the fruits of love” results in the birth of twins to Talia, the sleeping beauty, who fails to wake even in childbirth,” (Lau 123). This unconscious rape was accepted and even romanticised and though this was changed via the Grimms, the act of the kiss that wakes up the damsel was done without consent under the justification of true love still accepting a consent-less physical experience. Further questioning of the justification behind the marriage too once again reveals a voiceless Princess as she is returned to the Prince who endured trials to save her and thus had earned her. Their power imbalance leaves much to be desired yet is presented as the ultimate act of romance. By being objectified, the damsel is released from her curse and thus won by the Prince. The original Grimm tale ‘Little Briar Rose’ glosses over her response upon being awakened and we skip to the wedding. Her body politic is awarded to the breaker of the curse, rather than the freedom to the subject of it. Princesses exit their trapped sphere to the one made for them: that of housewife and mother. Needless to say, a damsel’s life is one free of choice, power, and sexual liberation.

This historical aspect of nonconsensual activities influenced my opinion when choosing the tale I wished to reframe. The original grotesque nature of the unconscious conception of twins I thought was beyond redemption. The power imbalance here is one I wish to restore through the narrative of my tale. As Bryony goes on her journey for self-discovery and as a diplomat for her people, gender inequality will be a pivotal point in her reconstruction of society for her people.

Male Power and Evil Step-Mothers

The real powerhouses of the original tales are men and evil women. The former enjoys a dominion to showcase their inherent skills blooming under the patriarchy and the latter to shame or frighten readers of the same gender from pursuing a fate outside the realms of passivity. I considered this when forming the antagonists of the story. The Horned King of the Fynix Fae operates the opposing force that invaded Riach at the climax of their ancient feud, however, there is some nuance in my depiction of villains. Particularly, through the genderless Wraith. Due to their historical reputation, Brenn occupies a position as the evil monster from the first page however, I wanted to show that things are far more complex than evil without reason. The Horned King, for example, engaged in this war after his father was killed during one of the Riachian attacks and Brenn, despite once having committed terrible crimes, appears to have the capacity for change.

However, the antagonists of those Grimm tales discussed thus far are all female in gender. The nature of power in fairy tales resides so strongly with men meaning any consequent diversion from this norm is met with revulsion. Subsequently, strong women who display traits of independence or valour are vilified as unnatural or evil. The witches, widows, and stepmothers make up a band of demonised women who meet gruesome ends for their cruel misdeeds against the beloved heroine. The child-eating witch who meets her demise burned in her oven in ‘Hansel and Gretel’ (Hutton 29); the raging uninvited fairy from ‘Sleeping Beauty’; the lentil-wielding Stepmother in ‘Cinderella’; or even the gardening Enchantress from ‘Rapunzel’, suffers at their tales’ close. Fairy tales insist on punishing these women as a warning to the rest of their sex of the result of what happens to those untamed by marriage. These women inhabit a role similar to that of Freud’s Whore – liberated but damned; thus, leaving the damsel as the only option for female readers.

Stepmothers in particular are notably evil and have become a standing figure in modern fairy tale adjacent media too such as Taylor Swift’s ‘Bejewelled’ music video starring Laura Dern as ‘Stepmommy’ (Swift 2023) or even Dame Olga from ‘Ella Enchanted’ (O’Haver 2004) played by Johanna Lumley. Maria Tatar writes that “folklorists would be hard-pressed to name a single good stepmother,” (*Hard Facts*, 411). The depiction of the mother as selfish, cruel, and unmaternal creates an evil antithesis against the ‘natural’ image of a woman as a mother and creates an effective villain. Cinderella notably suffers terribly at the hands of her stepmother, but the stepmother also treats her own daughters cruelly to achieve her ambitions. She goes as far as to urge the stepsisters to cut their toes or a piece of their heel off to gain the Prince (Crowley and Pennington, 304) encouraging the mutilation to benefit herself should they succeed. Cruelty from the stepmother evokes more sympathy for Cinderella, especially after such ugly displays of unfeminine brutality. With little explanation towards Cinderella’s poor treatment, the stepmother’s actions are seen as more unfair leaving her character as undoubtedly evil in comparison to the paragon that is Cinderella.

The presence of the female villainess, much like the fairy who curses Sleeping Beauty, is the only other representation of women thus presenting female readers with two options rather than a plethora. The inherently feminine and docile versus the evil and selfish. In those tales we have already discussed, the damsel needs to be contrasted with a woman of cruel nature to further highlight the goodness of the damsel. The innocence of the damsel is placed at the core of these tales with the punishment being acts of grim brutality to

demonstrate the depths of her resilience and the much-awaited reward, in the form of an advantageous marriage, as the result of being an exemplary conservative woman.

The warning of course comes in the form of acting unwomanly and thus ‘evil’. With Cinderella’s stepmother acting unmotherly, and the wicked fairy being cruel, women are warned to be good lest they be shunned and alone. Sexually liberated women, more specifically, women untamed by men, entice danger which is why they must be warned away from any acts of freedom that are not dictated by the opposite sex. Nightingale argues that “Reaching back thousands of years, the original fairy tales (then told orally as folk tales), warned girls about their precarious existence,” (43). Thus, the only way to avoid such a fate is to be good and married. Of course, teaching the young reader against rejecting men leads to disastrous acceptance of dismal male behaviour. Emphasis should be placed on teaching men against such behaviours in the place of damning women to a fate like it has already been set for them.

In terms of evil women in this tale, there are surprisingly few. The crew aboard *The Siren’s Promise* boasts a horde of morally grey women and Brenn’s genderless nature too contributes to a cast of characters aimed to prioritise highlighting female power and a more even presentation of power between genders. However, this is not to say that all female characters in this tale are good; some of the women briefly mentioned at court are notably sharp and vindictive creatures and in the partnering tale to this narrative, Bryony will be betrayed by her aunt who doesn’t believe she can occupy the throne of Riach. I could have presented an evil character who is the antithesis of Bryony and also female, much like the character of Maeve in the *Throne of Glass* series (2012-2018) by Sarah J Maas who is Aelin’s foil. However, due to the already strong villain in *The Horned King* and the dubious moral nature of her main genderless companion, I asserted early on that Bryony had enough problems to compete with. However, it should be noted that in the next book, alongside the betrayal, Bryony gets to experience/witness life as a Princess respected and valued for her gender through her experience in the Shadow Realms and her time at the Raize Court.

Furthermore, I wanted Bryony’s person to be more human than the domesticated females of the Grimms’ tales. Embracing sexuality is one of the aspects I wanted to make sure was present in my text due to the emphasized lack of it in fairy tales. Sex and sexual liberation for women has no place in fairy tales and courtesy of the Brothers Grimm has been mostly scrubbed from the texts. The lack of female sensuality has permeated some of fantasy’s most beloved works. For example, C.S Lewis’ classic *Narnia* tales follow this tradition by focusing on familial and platonic love. As discussed by Gordon “Lewis’s aim is the construction of an imaginary world for children which has been purged of sex. Jennifer Miller suggests that this is why he chose the form of the fairy-tale,” (67). It seems female sexual freedom comes at the cost of the magical world as Susan’s character is excluded entirely; her brother Peter mentions her as “no longer a friend of Narnia,” (Lewis *The Last Battle*, 83). As Susan has embraced her femininity and is “interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations (Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 84), she is no longer welcome in the fairy-tale land of Narnia. Women who engage in sensual, or feminine acts outside of marriage are non-compliant with the rules of the patriarchy and thus are unwelcome, uncontrolled, and as non-damsels, evil.

The question of audience is usually raised when considering female sexual power in these tales as ultimately the most common contemporary recipients of the tales would be young children thus the question becomes whether or not such talk is appropriate. In modern adaptations, young women showing agency, and desire need not be graphic anatomical discussions. Nevertheless, understanding female strength and love could only help young readers understand more about femininity, sensuality, and themselves as they grow into adolescents. However, to enable a frank discussion of sexuality, I chose the YA genre which offers enough space to talk about matters of sex and love within the borders of coming-of-age. Bryony is forward with her sexuality, having fallen in love and acted upon it with Randall before the time of his death. As with a society with strict rules of gender, sexuality is reserved for the men in Riach as observed through Sorrel and Abel's decadent presentations at court. This was designed to be a replication of British gender roles reminiscent of Georgian-gender values as part of this pseudo-medieval world. As such, Bryony's ascension to the throne will fundamentally change the way gender and sexuality are acted within the Richian country to assimilate a modern, feminist depiction of equality when discussing adult themes of sensuality.

I considered the male presence in fairy tales immensely when constructing the male figures within 'The Burning Tower'. The immediate male figures the reader meets are Bryony's father and brothers who are cruel, selfish, and arrogant characters with varying degrees of influence towards the Princess. However, I wanted to include a variety of male figures in the book to invert the image perpetuated by the original tales of male power being centric. An example is easily proffered in the Grimms' tale of 'Little Briar Rose' also known as 'Sleeping Beauty' (83) where power is inherently masculine, and the figure of the masculine hero is central to Briar Rose's tale. Despite being the heroine, Sleeping Beauty does little within the plot besides her birth, her cursing, and then her wedding. The prince is subject to freedom and independence through his ability to perform - the agency within the plot is strictly limited to the prince. As Roots notes, "Grimm tale 'Briar-rose' focuses primarily on the prince and his journey," (417) despite the tale being the Princess's namesake. The tale is utterly dependent on the male heroes to rescue the Princess and restore the kingdom to its sanity and as a result confines the female heroine to her role as the subdued, grateful prize.

Male characters, though the secured seat of power, offer little in terms of personality or desirability for the readers besides their wealth and connection to a secure future. In the tale of Cinderella, Tatar noted, that besides being handsome, we learn little about the prince as the prince "remains a colourless figure. The tale tells us nothing more about him than that he is the son of a king. Lacking a history, a story, and even a name, he is reduced to the function of prince-rescuer waiting in the wings for his cue" (92). This blankness allows the reader to project whatever image they desire most upon the image of the wealthy heir. However, the impression of his extensive control is prominent throughout the tale. Firstly, the prince gets to shop for a bride, then he hunts down the prettiest one, turns away any other suitors so he can be the only option for her, and then make Cinderella his bride. The Prince turns away other suitors saying, "This is my partner," (Grimm, 44) – already possessing Cinderella like the object she desires to be.

Furthermore, as Jorgensen stated, "Male characters are rewarded for acts of kindness, though the need to be polite and nice does not seem to be as ruthlessly enforced as it is with

female characters,” (342). As seen in *Cinderella*, appropriate patterns of behaviour are far clearer for women than for men as the female protagonists are deeply entrenched with social expectations. Additionally, male heroes seem to “suffer less than their female counterparts, and their trajectory moves from lesser to greater agency, not necessarily the case in classic tales about heroines,” (Jorgensen 342). As the hero rises the heroine succumbs to her natural place among his possessions. As such, the expectations placed upon women in *Cinderella* are harsher than those placed on the men and elevated to a divine expectation.

The patriarchal standards of male power have been an acknowledged issue within the genre thus my work needed to build upon this to reconstitute power between genders with feminism in mind. MacManimon reflected on this, arguing that “Fairy tales, for instance, frequently rely on heteronormative patriarchy, tricksters are nearly always male (see, e.g., Jurich), and physical and social violence are often central to many story genres” (216). Despite her trauma, the *Sleeping Princess* is given away as a wife to her rescuer – even worse, the presentation of the male hero is akin to that of a Christ-like figure (Roots 417) garnering dubious consent connotations of necessary worship and praise. Despite the story being *Briar-rose*’s namesake, the tale “celebrates the prince who seeks out adventure and is rewarded with a passive, silent, and hardworking wife,” (Roots 417). The male rescuer decides her fate from this point on, as she is rightfully his after going through the effort of rescuing her.

The element of rescue is pivotal to denying female heroines their own agency and story. Thus, by removing the rescuing element from my tale I was able to return the power to my protagonist and create an empowered female lead. When considering the original tales and the need for modernisation – much is left to be desired in terms of progress. The question of feminism in *Sleeping Beauty*, for example, has been dismissed under the guise of escapism and pure fantasy. However, knowing that fairy tales have a pedagogical impact on young readers, should we not have more caution when presenting these tales to impressionable audiences?

However, this is not to say there haven’t been some new adaptations of *Sleeping Beauty* in recent years. The tale itself has undergone numerous reinventions too, the most popular being ‘Maleficent’ (Roth and Woolverton, Disney, 2014) in which Angelina Jolie breathes a new life into the villainess Maleficent, giving the character more depth and reason behind her evil deeds that stem from assault and genocide. The character’s wings are cut off early in the film which the audiences speculated was a “metaphor for rape” which the filmmakers were aware of and used to access darker themes and mature questions for the audience (Lee, 2014). Though there is romance in the plot the “true love’s kiss” that wakes Aurora is one of maternal love rather than romantic. This proves the opportunity to reimagine these tales can promote contemporary messages that are not so toe-curling as the original tales.

Another example is proffered in the *Cinderella* fairy tale rewrite *Cinder* (2012), Marissa Meyer has developed these characters more to give them more depth during the series. Prince Kai is Cinder’s main romantic lead who offers far more than the “colourless” (Tatar, “Illusion,” 101) Prince offered in the Grimm version. Kai is driven, ambitious, and, to an extent, clever. The interpersonal relationship between Cinder and Kai is far more complex than the clueless Grimm original. The Grimm original is discussed by Dworkin, “One can

point out in fact that he is not very bright. For instance, he cannot distinguish Cinderella from her two sisters though he danced with her and presumably conversed with her" (44). Rewriting these tales allows us to add depth and complexity to previously simple narratives and re-evaluate these tales critically.

Feminism in particular has anchored many new tales due to its controversial status in popular culture. Nightingale noted that "In the current climate of a heightened awareness around feminist issues, there has been a trend to rewrite female roles in traditional stories so that they provide a sense of triumph," (46). This repositions the woman with more dialogue, choices, and usually a change of scene where, to an extent, her voice can be heard. As Maria Tatar pointed out fairy tales are shapeshifters, "morphing into new versions of themselves as they are retold and as they migrate into other media," (56). This allows for more space to evolve and change with modern ideas. Disney, for example, has remodelled familiar tales of 'Rapunzel' and 'The Snow Queen' (Anderson 156-170) into tales of female power, sisterly love, and independence. Furthermore, as Archer reflected, "From one perspective the introduction of reflexivity and irony in such fairy-tale narratives are precisely the sign of their maturity, as films like *Shrek*, as well as Disney's *Tangled* (2010) and *Frozen* (2013), illustrate their distance from some of the more regressive representations of classical-era Disney," (90). Changes have indeed been made once more to the classic tales to reshape them to cater to modern tastes. As mentioned by Trites, "In rewriting folktales to advance feminist ideologies and to identify female subjectivity, feminist writers are both protesting the powerlessness of women inherent in our culture's old folkways and giving voice to a new set of values (9). Awareness has been raised among writers to discard the old notions of the Grimms and hopefully, authors will continue to re-envision fairy tales the figure of the damsel in distress will cease and power will be a genderless entity – as it should be.

However, when considering published fanfiction or original work we must be vigilant with our application of the term "feminist" when considering fairy tale rewrites due to their pedagogical nature in YA literature. In their discussion on fairy tales evolving, Nightingale reminds us that even though "many of the versions we are familiar with today still fall prey to the assumption that women need rescuing, they do imply that adversity can be overcome," (47). Indeed, positive changes have been made to the role of women in these tales, but the habitual conditions of the Grimms' ideological beliefs remain permeated in this format. As such, problematic tropes persist in new heroines. Despite many texts' positions as claimants of contemporary feminist beliefs, their heroines serve to embody the conservative philosophy of the original Grimm tales. Examples can be proffered in post-millennial Disney Princesses, Anna from *Frozen* (2013), and Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2011). The princesses, both in their own way, perpetuate the importance of romantic heteronormative relationships; recycle the notion of beauty of importance for women; and ultimately swap their desire for freedom in order to marry.

Through the genderless Wraith and Bryony's own skills, I believe I have rejected the strongholds of masculine power in place of a more temperate depiction of equality. Through good male characters such as Hector, one of the healers we meet in *Clawton*; morally grey characters like Captain Bennett and the rest of the crew; and "evil" characters such as the Horned King and the demon army. However, in my work, I have made an effort to stay away from plots derivative of the fairy tale staple of evil without reason. My story contains more

nuance in its discussion of war, gender, and politics than is contained in the gendered behaviour guides that are the original Grimm fairy tales.

The Heroines of Young Adult Fantasy

The fantasy genre within YA had leaned into the reinvention of fairy tales in an attempt to remedy problematic themes such as those regarding the sexualisation of female heroines. However, YA as a genre has been subject to scrutiny regarding its presentation of female characters and whether they are considered detrimental to impressionable readers. Critical conversations concerning gender and gender roles in YA fiction remain in a permanent state of extremes with arguments of the acquisition of equality in works heralded as feminist masterpieces such as *A Girl Like That* (2018) by Tanaz Bhathena leading to declarations of a new age. Versus, the absolute reversal, and a heeding to patriarchal standards in texts declared as setting the feminist movement back decades – the much-loved/much-hated *Twilight* saga (2005-2020) by Stephenie Meyer attests to this movement with a foot in each camp.

Alarming, both in rewrites of fairy tales and across YA fantasy generally, in works circa 2010, numerous Grimm-like tropes have manifested in modern heroines which feed into patriarchal gender roles and concede to traditional ideas of womanhood in favour of male-centric power. By analysing well-known, much beloved YA texts from the last decade including *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth the similarities in female portrayal betray feminist ideology of equality and independence. Specifically, the beauty of female heroines marks the root of their power; female competition to drive a wedge and leads to the specialisation/rarity of the heroine; romance acts as the ultimate goal for heroines; and finally, the concept of “cop-out” and conceding all previous heroism and independence to retire from the role as instigator to a docile status as wife and mother. Despite being a product of progression within literature, these modern damsels of YA, are not the paragons of equality that books aimed at developing young women need.

Once I had established the parameters of YA fantasy heroines that I wished to change, I knew I had to write Bryony’s story to attempt to undermine the pattern of reduced female protagonists and show that YA writers can form a compelling tale without diminishing female power. Thus, by highlighting these residual effects of the original Grimm tales in YA fairy tale rewrites and beyond in the fantasy genre aimed at younger audiences, we can enact change in future heroines and offer a reconsideration of modern heroines and what they inspire younger readers to be.

Making a Contemporary YA Fantasy Heroine

Firstly, when discussing the heroine figure of many popular YA novels – the trope of astounding beauty has become a steadfast element of female characters that is expected of the genre. Beauty, and by extension sex appeal, constitutes one of the primary requirements for young adult fantasy's leading ladies that has consequently raised questions of representation and unrealistic beauty standards. As pointed out by Amy L. Montz, "We are a culture obsessed with beauty and youth," and this fixation extends to the women of young adult fiction (*Rebels* 112). From the quiet charm of Katniss in *The Hunger Games* saga (2008-2010) to the ferocity of Aelin from the *Throne of Glass* series (2012-2018), the sheer volume of breath-taking women in YA has ensured that stereotypical attractiveness has become a reader expectation for all young heroines. Following the rise of social media circa 2000s it is easy to see why physical appearance is valued so highly. Modern culture and online presence are driven around the ideas of self-promotion and beauty with more "influencers" than ever appearing across media channels. Tellingly, the word "selfie" was inducted into Oxford Online Dictionaries in 2013 after a steady rise in the usage of the word online (Brumfield). This couldn't be more resonant with a society still revolving around public image and the importance of beauty. With shows like *Love Island* continually bracing our screens there is no debate when it comes to the public desire to match ever-high beauty standards.

However, the issue of perpetuating high beauty standards for the YA audience has further important implications concerning mental health, body image, and self-esteem. This is problematic due to the brutal digital nature that today's youth are exposed to from an early age. The rigorous contact with social media is stated to have a profound impact on an adolescent's development as reported by Amelia Hill who referenced a study conducted that concerned the presence of children and teenagers online stated that the results of the study concluded that "almost 70%" said that "social media makes them feel stressed, anxious and depressed".

Unfortunately, male beauty standards which face similar scrutiny, particularly with body image, perpetuate similar ideas. But beauty for women has become a whole market based on consumerism, social media, body dysmorphia, and corporate greed. The patriarchy undermines the presence of women by demeaning their power and presenting them in derogatory ways. One of the ways this is established is through perpetuating the ideology that ties a woman's worth to her beauty and setting unrealistic expectations for women to feel insecure and undermined. YA literature notably has issues with maintaining patriarchal ideologies when it comes to adolescent women and socially acceptable standards of beauty. Concerning physical appearance, Johnston reminds us that "the history of young adult fiction plays an important role in reinforcing this perception in the minds of adolescent women" (313). Surprising, as arguably, the prime purpose of literature is escapism and enjoyment – not to be presented with society's ideal body shape.

In one of the most popular YA series of all time, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, the heroine, Katniss Everdeen has inspired countless other YA heroines with her survival skills and brutal hunting style. When discussing post-millennial young-adult literature success, homage must be paid to Collins' series for setting the trend of YA dystopia in the early 21st century. The series "tells the story of one young woman's transformation from child to woman, and from poverty-stricken hunter to revolutionary symbol," (Strong

Hansen, 161) that is still much beloved today. The ramifications of the success of this series meant that Suzanne Collins “popularized the trilogy format along with the YA dystopian subgenre, and the blockbuster series is credited with spawning a wide range of imitators” (Fitzsimmons, 4). Finally, it seemed like young readers had a heroine we could look up to.

The female protagonists of YA had so often been the sweet-as-peach leading ladies with a side dish of backbone reminiscent of Jo March from Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-69) or, more recently, the mild-mannered Bella Swan from the much-admired *Twilight* saga (Stephanie Meyer 2005-2008). Thus, the radical dystopian world of Panem headed by a self-sufficient huntress felt like an evolution in comparison and it caught fire across media, expanding into the world of television and film after dominating literature. Katniss introduced a new trend of YA fantasy heroines following the format of a misfit, female adolescent experiencing growing up in a grim, dystopian world defined by a tyrannical new-world order. This much-beloved trope reoccurs in the worlds of heroines of other popular series such as Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* (2011-2013), *Shatter Me* (2011-2020) by Tahereh Mafi and Kiera Cass’s *The Selection* (2012-2014) all of which are also headed by heroines.

The timing of the piece’s release no doubt contributed to its critical success due to the young readers observing the rapid technological advancement in Western media and feeling their fears reflected in the tales. By tackling change at a crucial point in juvenile development, “*The Hunger Games* trilogy is ostensibly a bildungsroman” (Shau Ming Tan 56) entwining the formative years of adulthood with a plot centred around the complicated dystopian world of Panem changing as Katniss evolves into a full-fledged adult. Readers thus felt a connection and empowerment in our world which, by the day, seems less like a fictional dystopia and more like a grim reality. The release of *The Hunger Games* was an undeniable step in the right direction with our heroic Katniss embodying a feminist message of independence and rebellion. The public response and adoration are a testament to this success.

For the time, the heroine helped mobilise a legion of heroines who all exhibit Katniss-like qualities. From bow-wielding heroine Feyre in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Sarah J Maas 2021), tomboy rebel Lady Katsa from *Graceling* (Kristin Cashore 2008), beautiful debutante Cassie Reyes in *Matched* (Ally Conde 2010), or even truth-seeking Lena Haloway from the *Delirium* (2011) by Lauren Oliver – there is no doubt of the impact of the Collins’ protagonist for female leads. Despite this, looking at Katniss alone raises interesting discourse considering whether you can consider her feminist by contemporary fourth-wave standards.

Collins’ heroine is strong, belligerent, independent and makes an effort to provide for her family – she is admirable in the world of Panem and ultimately helps establish peace and freedom from the tyrannical Capitol. The tale itself is inspiring especially in a world where war and freedom remain ever-controversial topics. However, Collins’ presentation of Katniss and the other women within the book doesn’t necessarily crown her as the epitome of feminist ideals. Collins presents her beauty as the root of her power through romantic support and members of the public she gained through her practised female presentations as part of the Games and beyond as part of the rebellion effort. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the role her beauty plays and the similarity that is established between the heroine in classic Grimm tales and those of post-millennial YA. For the original damsel, her beauty allows her the

power of a man – for the contemporary heroine, like Katniss, her romantic interests allow her their support to establish control or power. The similarity between the two dynamics still positions men as the dominant rule through romance and desire; thus, the modern heroine's authority emanates from her ability to be appealing and thus impose her will on others. Therefore, this new version of the damsel uses beauty to reinforce traditional feminine narratives of romance and, by extension, weakness through dependence on the male gender.

When analysed through the lens of fourth-wave feminism, our heroine doesn't garner the same praise when highlighting the extent her body is weaponised for the battle ahead. The 'girl who was on fire' (*Hunger*, Collins, 70) is frequently reduced to the power generated from her beauty as Katniss's image is key to her survival in the games. Sexualisation is key to the tribute's success as Haymitch points out after Peeta makes Katniss look "desirable" (*Hunger*, 135) despite her achieving the highest ranking among all the other tributes and citing this as the most important attribute for her. Haymitch adds, "You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do," (*Hunger*, 135). Katniss's abilities are irrelevant when considering her sensuality is being prioritised as the only way to achieve sponsorship and financial support. Shau Ming Tan argues that "Katniss's commodification has made her object, animal, and alien: inhuman, or perhaps, posthuman" (60) further reducing her to less of a girl and more of a purchasable item. Katniss's sexualisation is perhaps a reflection of the voyeuristic aspect of the Capitol but even so, this sexualisation, even though sometimes applies to men too as we see through the presentation of Tributes, has women perform in either aspect of womanhood to be either seductive and desired or innocent and pitied.

Additionally, the objectification and maltreatment of the adolescent body are central to the Capitol's all-powerful grip on the districts. As the Hunger Games begins, Katniss reflects on this: "Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you," (*Hunger*, 135). Their bodies are the ground for which the battle for civil rights is fought. However, Katniss' female body is simultaneously empowered through rebellion and disempowered due to her femininity. Nevertheless, her body is the source of her power both within and beyond the Games and she ultimately succeeds because people find her attractive enough to fight for, particularly those interested in her romantically. This occurs either directly through Gale and Peeta joining the rebellion effort or indirectly through citizens of Panem believing the star-crossed lovers narrative pushed by Haymitch to raise Katniss's appeal and thus decided to rebel under her lead as the Mockingjay.

Furthermore, Katniss's versatility concerning her appearance is crucial to her success in the games as "Katniss is represented as both for different purposes, first made to look desirable as "an object of love" (Collins, *Hunger* 165) in a quest for sponsors," (Shau Ming Tan 61). Her appearance is manipulated during the course of the novels for different effects, but all contribute to a narrative which is as essential as Katniss's hunting and survival skills while she is in the arena. Haymitch and Effie consistently point out how important it is to achieve an audience. Katniss, of course, accomplishes this feat with ease – having garnered popularity courtesy of Cinna upon her first entrance to the Capital which earned her the monicker "girl on fire" (*Catching* 95). Katniss is sexualised in a way that her male companion Peeta is not, despite the pair of them wearing the same outfit. As mentioned by Shau Ming Tan "Katniss's use of love for survival comes to reflect the commercialization of

the adolescent, sexualized body,” (64). Katniss’ body is constantly manipulated to present different visions of beauty such as looking stunning at Caesar’s interview and acting “like a girl” (*Hunger* 345) all to achieve her goal through her public image. As a result, Katniss obtains affection and support from the audience in the Capitol and the Districts, reflecting the ideology that her power emanates from her appearance alone. Had Katniss not made a statement as the “girl on fire” (*Catching* 147) she would not have achieved the popularity as an individual to be of use to the rebellion.

Collins’ presentation of Katniss includes both feminine and masculine markers, alienating her considerably from the rest of her sex, but her appealing nature to others is notable from the beginning. Peeta remarks that “They’ll be tripping over each other to sponsor you,” (*Hunger*; 91) in reference to Everdeen being attractive when speaking about garnering support from sponsors. Katniss herself notes “Perhaps some of the merchants were a little generous,” (*Hunger*; 91) when she recalls some of her positive experiences with trading in the Seam, a place known for driving a hard bargain. Despite her disregard for her appearance, Collins makes it clear that Katniss is indeed already desirable before the events of the Games take place. Beyond the obvious affection she has garnered from fellow street urchin Gale, her mother being “very beautiful once,” (*Hunger*; 3) combined with the handsomeness of Katniss’ father, and her sister as “lovely as the primrose for which she was named,” (*Hunger*; 3) all denote this key family trait.

On one level, Katniss’ ‘natural’ allure is contrasted with the gross physical alterations made in the name of beauty in the Capitol. The Capitol values beauty immensely; thus, the manipulation of the body via surgical and cosmetic enhancements is commonplace. Katniss recalls the previous Games’ stylists being “so dyed, stencilled and surgically altered they’re grotesque,” (*Hunger* 63). By way of contrast, natural beauty is highly coveted, and it speaks to lengths about both Katniss and Peeta’s physical appeal when Cinna goes for “minimal make-up” (*Hunger* 70) for the pair of them at their first public appearance. If she had indeed been plainer more effort would have been made to enhance Katniss further.

Montz places blame for our desire for perfect appearance on fairy tales, stating that, “Part of this obsession over perfect appearance comes into play in traditional and contemporary fairy tales, as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and even Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* must be dressed up to go to the ball,” (114). Sexual appeal is intrinsic to the Princesses that build classic fairy tales; both to engage the reader’s support in their plight; to garner suitable romantic interest from suitors to invoke a rescuer; and finally, so the rescuer, usually as Prince, is happy with his reward come their engagement and marriage. A woman is measured by her beauty and her body for her to be objectified and thus sold, rendering her commodified, as summarised by Tan’s analysis of Katniss within the politics of the Games.

Katniss’s attractiveness garners impressive support causing fans to send aid-giving parachutes in the first book, and, in the sequels *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, actively fighting for her. Of course, beauty worth fighting for is at the core of women in fairy tales and one doesn’t need to search far beyond the glass slippers and towers to find Princes fighting for or over the fairest maiden in the land. As discussed by Jack Zipes, in fairy tales “Beauty is the highest value for women,” (6) and given their pedagogical nature it is no surprise that in works of fantasy (the arguable descendants of fairy tales) these ideas have sustained. As discussed by Marcia R. Lieberman “Where there are several daughters in a family, or several

unrelated girls in a story, the prettiest is invariably singled out and designated for reward, or first for punishment and later for reward,” (385). This one female character acts as the exception to her kin – being the most beautiful warrants you a freedom that plainness would not. This suitably accounts for Katniss’s transition from subservient hunter to iconic Mockingjay.

Beauty and power being synonymous for women doesn’t just occur in Collins’ tale. In Marissa Meyer’s Cinderella re-write, *Cinder*, because the two are tied so tightly, beauty is used to set women competing against each other. In contrast to the original tale, Cinder’s mother, Channary is notably sadistic and fights with her younger sister, Levana over this subject. Their conflict was due to Channary permanently disfiguring Levana during her youth by burning her due to concerns that the child would grow to be more beautiful than she was. As queen of Lunar, she must be the most beautiful, a sentiment easily recognised Cinder comes to question, she, like Levana before her, becomes the target.

Furthermore, in the first book of the series, Kai notably takes a shine to Cinder calling her the “pretty new mechanic,” (*Cinder* 120) and even goes as far as to invite Cinder to be his personal guest to the ball. He reaffirms her beauty continuously, but Cinder is torn thinking that she is “Cyborg. Lunar. Mechanic” (*Cinder* 162) and thus she cannot be beautiful. It is only when she is dressed up for royal events does she maintain some semblance of joy over her appearance, and it is through Kai’s own appreciation of her appearance that she does rediscover her own beauty.

Finally, in their discussion on beauty in fairytales, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz established the “feminine beauty ideal” as “the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women’s most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain” (711). As seen in the depiction of Katniss’ worth being so dependent on her appearance, this notion has become integrated into YA fantasy too. Furthermore, Katniss’s impact on the genre of YA and her character’s framework becoming the established standard of leading female character means similarly received works reiterate a patriarchal rhetoric of appearance being the highest priority for women a damning prospect for anyone unconventionally attractive and a potentially concerning concept to developing young individuals.

However, this is not the case for all works of YA heroines. Notably, Kiersten White’s *And I Darken* (2017) reflects on having a non-stereotypically beautiful heroine in Lada Dragwyla and its dark historical reimagining of the movements of Vlad the Impaler. As she cannot rely on her beauty to acquire power – she seeks other brutal methods of training as a warrior to claim her throne. Another example comes from Maggie Stiefvater’s *The Scorpion Races* (2011) in the form of Puck Connolly who is flawed, strong-willed, and kind and whose talent is not derived from being attractive. Author Tamora Pierce is also praised for her presentation of female characters alongside Dhonielle Clayton who penned *The Belles* (2018). Thus, perhaps Katniss’s influence is not as strong as we once thought. Despite this, it is undeniable that she has indeed influenced the way heroines are constructed. Notable examples come in the prodigies in Marie Lu’s *Legend* (2011-2019) series or perhaps the beautiful and brutal Laia from the *Ember in the Ashes* (2015-2020) series by Sabaa Tahir.

When trying to pair Bryony with any female heroines in the YA genre, Katniss is usually the best route to imagine a strong lead whom the populous is familiar with. However, she is far from perfect, and Collins' depiction of her physical appearance undermines her strength rather than empowering her. I wanted this particular aspect of Bryony's story to be something I was clear on as I think representation is important. Yet despite all my research and the development of the heroines in YA, I found the concept difficult.

Beauty is one of the concepts I struggled with in my work. Perhaps my own bias has been developed by reading significant amounts of YA and thus has influenced my thoughts to believe that a Princess cannot just be average-looking. Despite not having any romance in this book I did want to establish that that all beauty has a place and is valued. Therefore, I have conversations that allude to her appearance but nothing to set her on a divine level of beauty that trumps her other qualities overall. She is aware of her beauty, but it is not enough to disallow her plan to masquerade as a man. Additionally, I kept the blonde hair because I thought a reference to her mother here would also provide good allusions to her heritage and the predecessor of the tale.

Beauty as Battleground

A further issue that is highlighted within the prioritisation of beauty is the way it reduces women into competing against each other. As already touched upon, the competition element has been pedalled in many of the most popular YA novels within the last decade. The competition in question is the battleground of woman versus woman to obtain the prize: the hand of the most eligible bachelor. However, to compete at all the female character must first meet the criteria of fathomless beauty. Thus, if the heroine is not already conventionally feminine, an inevitable scene occurs where the 'the dress moment' occurs; a Cinderella-style transformation, retreating from the masculine attire and settling for a ballgown. Even in Meyer's *Cinder* (2012), the cyborg Cinder swaps her oil-stained overalls for a dress. This change is significant even in non-fantasy novels; as Gruner points out, "In *The Princess Diaries* (and its various sequels), we have the Cinderella-like transformation of ordinary girl into princess," (5). Thus, there is the initial element of compulsory beauty to even participate at all. Much like in the Hunger Games, despite scoring an eleven out of twelve Katniss, is forced to depend on her looks and her attractiveness and girlishness to win the crowd over. She opts for a girlishness which jars the reader because it doesn't fit the stoic individual we've become acquainted with. Thresh, another tribute, plays the killer and sits there with "silent deadly power" (*Hunger* 136) the contrast between the two reaffirms Collins' femininity is depicted as weakness, yet here it is paradoxically confirmed as her strength while being performative.

This competitive element is clearly inherited from fairy tales. Competition is centric to Cinderella as through a contest of beauty a Princess will be crowned. In the Grimm's *Cinderella* she is aided by a magical, divine, figure in order to dress her in a way to accentuate her beauty to secure the Prince's hand. The gown is arguably one of the most famous aspects of Cinderella besides the famous glass slippers. Though this is twisted in *Cinder* to be her sister's dress, it does fold to the tradition of the "right dress" as defined by Allen to provide the "magical token of recognition," (286) for Cinderella to snag the prince. However, in Meyer's tale, the competition is for Prince Kai's hand and the role of Empress of the Commonwealth rather than queen with much higher stakes affecting the rest of the galaxy. Despite the subsequent *Lunar Chronicles* following different heroines, they each seek a romantic partner and Kai remains Cinder's ultimate goal while competing against the likes of her aunt, Levana, and stepsister, Pearl. In Montz's discussion of YA, they summarised that "girls do compete, and when they do, it is often seen as a form of rebellion" (107). However, when the prize is to adopt the roles of powerless wife and mother surely any pretence of resistance is contradicted by the patriarchal system the woman is trying to avoid. By donning the dress, the wearer complies with the ideology pedalled in the traditional tale. As such, in Meyer's tale, Cinder acts as both victor in her obtaining the Prince and trophy for the Prince's claiming of her.

The competition, though more brutal, takes a more drastic approach in Collins' tale. The "dress moment" is initially less positive within the plot of *The Hunger Games* as Katniss compares her makeover experience renders her "a plucked bird, ready for roasting" (Collins 61) reflecting the consumable nature in which her body is presented and thus objectified. Yet Katniss finds herself "breath-taking" (*Hunger* 70) at the opening ceremony and then later at Caesar's interview she describes herself as "radiant as the sun" (*Hunger* 121) admiring her newly polished appearance. As discussed by Koenig, "The tributes must submit themselves to the Remake Center to have their bodies embellished for Capitol ingestion," (43). Katniss particularly must be re-feminised despite her distaste for women and to remind the male

figures of her inherent femininity and desirability. This occurrence happens again and again in YA – a reminder that in order to succeed beauty is just as important as it leads to attracting the romantic lead versus the rest of the competition.

After all, it is only after Kai sees Cinder in Peony's dress, bedraggled as she was, that his feelings become clear, (Meyer 154). Additionally, Cinder's inflated beauty is intended to offset her cyborg features rather than present them as beautiful too. It is only when Cinder is dressed to impress does she manage to defend herself as if her newfound femininity is weaponised to help her achieve her goals. As such, it is only when Cinder is dressed up as a lady does she manage to monopolise her own strength and defend herself against Levana and Adri at the Peace Ball (*Cinder*, 330). This is demonstrated again in the final book '*Winter*' (2015) when Meyer describes Cinder's coronation outfit in detail, a traditional gown, despite Cinder's tomboy preference, due to societal expectations of a queen's inherent femininity (459). The futuristic world in which Meyer's tale exists reiterates modern technology's role in perpetuating superficial beauty ideals and, though it attempts to embrace diversity through Cinder's cyborg form, it ultimately conforms to patriarchal ideals.

This reflects the post-millennial standards of beauty as media culture surrounding beauty can be brutal and continues to be valued highly when discussing women. O'Keefe commented on this change, "Even if fictional girls have become stronger, today's real-life girls are often like yesterday's girls know they are objectified and judged by their appearance, which they feel is never good enough," (201). The downside of having an advanced technological culture is demonstrated in *Cinder* as the omnipresent media, much like in our own world, provides scathing commentary that analyses anyone famous to a cruel degree. Cinder's own worries about how she looks around Kai mimic this; it is only when she is dressed up that is she allowed any kind of self-acceptance and appreciation as is shown through her coronation ceremony.

Likewise, in Lexi Ryan's *These Hollow Vows* (2021), it is only after Sebastian sees Brie dressed up for the selection process does he advance his romantic intentions. This moment acts as a reminder of femininity to enhance the sexual appeal of the heroine to set them apart from the rest of their sex and attract strong male counterparts. Indeed, another example would appear in *The Cruel Prince* (2018) by Holly Black; it was only after seeing Jude dressed up at court did Cardan sought courtship of her. A trend of books that were published circa 2010 followed a pattern of their covers featuring girls in great ball gowns regardless of the dark plots that mainly followed dystopia patterns. The dress marks the winner of this battle – the protagonist therefore must don it in order to succeed.

Naturally, a clause of this beauty is that the heroine must be unaware of her splendour and downplays it as vanity is ugly in women and portrayed as such. As previously discussed, Katniss remains clueless about the extent of her appealing nature even when corrected by her peers she remains adamant about her own beauty. Similarly, America, from Kiera Cass's *The Selection* (2012-2016) series, does not view herself as anything remarkable in comparison to the other competitors. As Montz notes, America views herself as "decent," and "nothing special," but not before she slights the other competitors for being "way overdone" (Cass 34-35 qtd in Montz 117). The combination of humility and attractiveness helps the girls stand out, as "standing out "just a little" is enough to get them noticed by boys, their government, other girls, even finally, for some, their parents," (Montz 119). This division is vital as it creates the rift between the female lead and the rest of the 'inferior' sex, making her more of a rarity, an exception, and thus more desirable for the leading man.

This pattern also manifests in Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles* as Cinder has little belief in her appearance. This is reinforced through her self-deprecating inner monologue and mentions of her "metal monstrosities," (*Cinder*, 28) which Cinder actively loathes. Despite Meyer repeatedly pointing out Cinder's "imperfections" this is abandoned as her real beauty is clarified in later books courtesy of her real mother Queen Channary Blackburn. As mentioned in the novella *Fairest* (2015) Channary is depicted as stunning due to her tanned skin and dark hair which were most likely not a glamour (the magic used by the Lunar people to influence how others perceive them) as Cinder bore these traits herself.

Of course, the competition aspect of *The Selection* is something that revolves around winning romance but both Katniss and America's tales rely on the heroines being sufficiently attractive to stand a chance. Katniss, we know is appealing enough to attract suitors everywhere but as Peeta mentions she is also "pure" (*Catching Fire*, 99) referring to internal beauty whilst invoking an image of a paradoxical virgin-like figure. To be beautiful, our heroine must also be oblivious for to acknowledge her beauty would be vain and selfish and give her too much power like the Evil Queen in 'Snow White' (Grimm 87-90) – a true femme fatale. Though meekness is frowned upon, standing out too much is also unattractive; the protagonist herself occupies the lone space as an alien.

Paradoxically, YA authors tend to opt for defeminised terms when referring to their heroines. Femininity is a weakness and thus avoided like the plague. Though some authors dance around with the word beautiful and opt for terms similar, like in *Divergent* Tris's face is referred to as "noticeable," (Roth, 38), there is always a moment, usually expressed by a romantic lead where her attractiveness is assured. Take Edward in *Twilight*; "He called you pretty," he finally continued, his frown deepening. "That's practically an insult, the way you look right now. You're much more than beautiful," (Meyer, 257). Or even Katniss herself, "I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun," (Hunger 121). 'Beautiful' is a word historically associated with femininity, descended from the Latin 'bellus' as being a positive acclamation for a woman but insulting to a man (Audaces). Nevertheless, 'beauty' remains at the heart of these texts and offers the perfect battleground for female characters to fight for male characters.

This trope thus reinstates the importance of stereotypical appeal, unrealistic beauty standards, and, as a consequence, presents problematic ideals to readers, especially when this trope is irrelevant to the plot. In this age of technological pressures, it is more important than ever that adolescents feel supported rather than judged especially when it comes to appearance. It is vital that readers understand beauty is not everything and it is a cruel message to imbue when readerships are usually varied and diverse.

In my piece, I wanted to generate a collective of women who were both strong and supportive and who existed alongside my protagonist. Through the crew of the Siren's Promise, I believe I have filled the book with positive female companionship which will only grow as Bryony's story continues. I believe wholeheartedly that a narrative doesn't need to alienate all other women in the context of the text to make the protagonist stand out as the exception. The companionships between women in YA narratives offer opportunities to speak about issues affecting women and talk in-depth about desires that are often neglected in the place for romance.

I wanted to prioritise the female experience in this narrative that has so often ended up as one giant credit to the heroic Prince as it was in Rapunzel's original story. This contributed towards my decision to not include a romance in this book. I do believe that romance can offer more to a story, especially a fantasy where all our rules are abandoned and subject to the

author's whim. However, during my reading surrounding this piece, fairy tale retelling focuses solely on the romance aspect of the main character and it is during this plight women turn against each other to fight for the respective male lead. By removing this element from my retelling, I believe I have had more of an opportunity to highlight female power and return the power of the retelling to a sole inhabitant.

Representation in YA

The YA genre has come under fire in recent years due to its limited diversity in both published works and within the publishing industry overall. Furthermore, the beauty standards perpetuated in YA have caused concern among readers, parents, and teachers. Outlining the parameters of what constitutes beauty creates a negative outlook for alternative or unconventional beauty standards. As stated by Beth Younger, “In fact, many Young Adult narratives that are *liberating* in terms of sexuality are *regressive* in terms of body image” (45). Younger’s work looks at evidence from YA fiction covering the 1970s to 1990s; yet her argument still applies today with very few non-white, non-thin, or non-beautiful heroines featured in post-millennial YA fiction. Additionally, “Weight appears to function in the same way that white often serves as a default for race; that is, when the race of a character is not specifically delineated, white is assumed” (Younger 47). Presenting one image of perfection across the genre alienates other readers and loses the opportunity to represent other cultures and ethnic backgrounds.

The lack of diversity circa works published at the height of Collins’s fame was cause for concern among readers, many of whom claimed contemporary YA books lacked adequate presentation or representation. Racism cannot be ignored when discussing both the book series and the film adaptations as unfortunately, *The Hunger Games* values beauty the same way it is valued in fairy tales which demonstrates love for the “pure” and most importantly, white saviour, Katniss Everdeen. Concern was generated for the character Rue who in contrast, is a young black girl with, “bright dark eyes, and satiny brown skin,” (Collins, 98) and from District Eleven. Her death in particular helps Katniss garner further support – as one of the few non-white characters her death serves a purpose to fund the white-saviour complex achieved with Katniss.

A reading of the series with racism in mind is particularly damning for Collins as there is a strong sense of the white-saviour complex through Katniss herself, especially by using the characters Rue and Thresh when contrasted with the other tributes. These tributes come “from the same majority Black district, the only one in overwhelmingly White Panem,” (Moore and Coleman, 14) further forcing a distinguishable divide between the pair and the rest of the tributes. Even more controversially, the District’s main industry is “agriculture, and small children are forced into the highest trees to pick fruit,” (Simmons 27) which invokes racially insensitive stereotypes reminiscent of colonial America. As mentioned by Tompkins the epilogue provides a final note “a world where Katniss is the Great Savior who inspires the oppressed masses to act (79)”. The oppressed masses couldn’t be better represented, nor the white-saviour complex; Katniss as the forward-thinking hero and Rue as the child who cannot help herself thus must be fought for. Naturally, this has been contested as Moore and Coleman remarked; “If Collins was attempting a critique of racial discrimination and segregation in the U.S. it is a weak argument: Rue and Thresh’s racial difference becomes highlighted, segregating them on the screen and inviting perception of these characters as markedly different than the White tributes, while providing no clear reason for it” (14). The division between Rue, Thresh, and the other tributes is palpable with Rue’s death marking her as a sacrificial lamb to reinforce Katniss’s heroism. The films did little to curb the stereotyping of Rue and Thresh. As Entman and Rojecki stated, “Media images still contain traces of long-standing cultural presumptions not only of essential race difference but of the hierarchy that idealizes ‘Whiteness’” (57). Through Katniss’s Grimm-heroine-like “purity”

we are shown the example we are meant to aspire to – leaving marginalised cultures shown as lesser than or, even worse, “Other”. Further study on the topic of race alone in Collins’s series can be found in explosive discourse across academic sources and on social media especially recently due to the release of the movie version of *A Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020) which was released as a book during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I am not the correct author to decide whether or not these books can be deemed racist. My research is concerned with diversity and lack thereof in YA before and since. However, the continual discourse concerning race in the books does not bode well when considering the impact that the series has had on the genre overall thus far.

In the study conducted by Koss and Teale in 2009, popular trends in YA were analysed to see what needed to be improved upon within the genre. They deduced that, “The lack of cultural diversity in YA literature indicates that educators will need to make special efforts to seek out and use quality books that include diverse characters, and that publishers should increase their efforts to make available YA books that include multicultural characters and discuss issues related to race and diversity in significant ways,” (570). The didactic function of the YA genre could thus be monopolised to educate young readers on cultural issues besides personal ones conquered in the classic Bildungsroman. Though this study took place in 2009 the more recently published work by Kathy G. Short reviewed books for children and stated, “The continued lack of diversity in children's literature is devastating for children as readers, many of whom rarely see their lives and cultural identities within a book,” (293). Not only does this highlight how, regardless of societal progression, the genre still needs to put more effort into seeking works that highlight diversity and make an effort to understand cultural differences and represent them correctly.

Additionally, poor representation in the fantasy genre beyond YA has led to a denouncement of the genre by some readers as inherently racist. Perhaps most notably, J. R. R. Tolkien has garnered criticism for his use of racially insensitive representation in his Middle-Earth tales. As mentioned by Anderson Rearick III, “It is undeniable that darkness and the colour black are continually associated throughout Tolkien's universe with unredeemable evil, specifically Orcs and the Dark Lord Sauron,” (862). The monstrous races versus a nearly all-white cast in Peter Jackson’s original film version of the *Lord of the Rings* (1954) did nothing to quell this reputation. A recent example is presented in George. R.R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones* (1996—), with a medieval-inspired world that perpetuates racist stereotypes through the varied pseudo-cultures it portrays. For “the Dothraki alongside those shown in Slavers Bay, enslavement and possession are indicated within the collective negativized stereotypical representations of raced, gendered, and sexualized positionalities assumed by people of colour within the narrative universe,” (Bollinger-Deters et al., 8). This saga-like style employs a feudal-era setting to justify racist stereotypes and thus is damning when we must acknowledge that young adult fantasy is undoubtedly influenced by works. Lack of representation and damaging labels cannot be avoided in the ever-popular and ever-controversial *Harry Potter* series. Rowling’s work came under fire for its ‘token’ characters of colour and antisemitic goblins portrayed throughout the series. Horne discussed the nature of the goblins that feed into a damaging social narrative based on prejudiced stereotypes. Horne stated, “Their skin colour, as well as their “dark, slanting eyes” (4.446), mark them as physically other, while their most visible work—lending money to wizards—suggests they are morally suspect, a modern-day embodiment of the stereotype of a Jewish moneylender or

perhaps even an Italian Mafioso,” (Horne 91). Similarly, Emily Duncan’s *Wicked Saints* (2019) was called out for anti-Semitic tropes perpetuating the idea of the Jewish tradition of using blood sacrifices specifically those of children. With YA having considerable influence on adolescent readers, representation is important as beauty is not one size, shape, or colour and in works unless it is centric to the plot, there should at least be justification or explanation if a negative depiction is being monopolised. Furthermore, the use of unfamiliar cultures’ history, language, or social structures should only be used with the appropriate research, respect, and honour towards the source.

When considering the original sources of fantasy, we are directed back to fairy tales which have developed a reputation concerning poor representation. As discussed in Jack Zipes’s work “Fairy tales are implicitly racist because they often equate beauty and virtue with the colour white and ugliness with the colour black,” (Zipes *Myth* 6). Similarly, to whiteness, slimness functions as an unmarked norm within fairy tales unless weight is relevant to the story in question. Modern adaptations struggle to move away from thin heroines as seen through the live-action Disney adaptations, though beautifully stylised, don’t exactly make ordinary girls feel like princesses too.

The lack of diversity shown in physical appearance and body shapes is a major detriment to the genre of YA which in recent years has been pressured into presenting a variety of female leads. For instance, movements such as #weneeddiversebooks (Mootz 77) call out the white-dominated publishing industry and advocate for more diverse characters and authors. Recently YA fiction has featured more varied protagonists, such as the plus-sized Faith in Julie Murphy’s *Faith: Taking Flight* (2021) or non-white heroines such as the Arabian Shahrzad in Renée Ahdieh’s *The Wrath and The Dawn* (2015). The importance of representation in YA cannot be overlooked when it comes to its readers as the “absence of a representative range of characters or creative role models in YA literature has the potential to deter young people from socially marginalised backgrounds from reading and experiencing the associated benefits” (Ramdarshan Bold 5). Thus, the pattern of white, blonde, thin heroines such as Aelin from Maas’ *Throne of Glass* series and Alina Starkov, from Leigh Bardugo’s *Shadow and Bone* series (2012-2014), needs to be questioned.

Diversity is a matter of necessity in all works unless it serves some plot function or is set in a specific period where history is being reflected accurately. I pride my work on making clear attempts to have a varied collection of characters of different cultures and races depicted in non-stereotypical ways. The quest-based narrative works well for the reader to synonymously experience a new culture as Bryony does too; offering a unique interpretation garnered through the protagonist’s eyes and the reflections made on Bryony’s own life to the reader. I introduce characters to further act as points of explanation who offer depth and detail to various corners of the world. The crew of the Siren’s Promise in particular I hope showcased a variety of LGBTQ+ individuals of different races all working synonymously toward a common goal.

Additionally, I utilised the ‘Planet of Hats’ trope within the story and believe it worked well in expanding the fantastical world of Nos and its magical inhabitants. Despite not being a sci-fi novel where the trope is usually found, this helped quickly establish the divided societies within Nos and their complexities. As this magical world reflects our own, I wanted the countries within it to be rich in culture and have a unique way of life. In the

Shadow Realms, in particular, I wanted to portray how warped perceptions can impact someone's view. The Divide is a non-physical barrier between the East and West of Nos that has come to be acknowledged by the West as the barrier dividing civilised society from the East. Due to the Shadow Realms having a reputation for barbarism, the cities of the West have cruel prejudices against their people. This is formed on a lack of knowledge and connections between the peoples and as a result, has led to animosity.

Racism within Nos is an issue, as it is in ours, but hopefully, my novel shows that, as a people we can learn tolerance and kindness through understanding, open-mindedness, and patience. Despite having a tempestuous relationship with her family, Bryony has also fed into much of their prejudice when it comes to thinking of countries unlike her own. It was through this story that I wanted to show how opinions formed can be changed and education helps remove ignorance when it comes to the cultures of other people.

The varied world which Bryony explores through her story is designed to show just how little she knew about it. Despite her continual study of the forbidden books kept in the catacombs under the castle, the truth of other cultures is one decided through understanding and experience. Patience and communication will be strong themes in the companion book to this one which will follow a reconstitution of power within the world to obtain peace. Acknowledging beauty in our differences is a crucial part of understanding each other and making way for a more tolerant and communicative society thus it was important that I create a fantasy world that, to an extent, will represent a foil of our own.

Masculine Women and Feminine Men

One key aspect of gender-based discourse around contemporary heroines of fantasy YA is the idea of masculine and feminine markers embodied in our protagonists. The modern heroine usually embarks on a departure from traditionally feminine traits and hobbies in order to highlight their uniqueness and strength. Usually opting for a hunting/hunter role like Katniss and Feyre – the heroine steps away from femininity and usually has a distaste for those presentations. Thus, the heroine's beauty plays another necessary role, as demonstrated through the course of the Hunger Games: to offset the masculine behaviour they exhibit.

Katniss initially represents a liminality between the genders due to her unfeminine traits that set her apart from the rest of her sex. McGuire claims that "While the books do revolve around state-mandated media revelry of killers, they do so by focusing on a central female character, a dual hero/murderer who embodies a subversion of masculine dominance," (67). But to what extent does Katniss accomplish this? By taking a leading position in the tale – even if it is limited – Katniss defies a tradition of female characters dependent on male rescue. However, this sentiment is revoked by the conclusion of *Mockingjay*, thus one cannot say that male dominance is totally subverted, as most of Katniss's traits are inherently masculine complete with a total distaste for anything feminine which she points out again and again through her hatred of her mother and other female characters throughout the series.

Femininity is undermined in place of a masculinised strength which is occasionally offset by reminders of womanliness which crop up like weeds in the protagonist's way. Green-Barteet reflected on this, stating "Both Katniss and Tris behave in stereotypical feminine ways when called upon to do so, but they also exhibit the typically masculine traits of strength, determination, and anger throughout each series" (35). This questions the agency of our female heroines and whether they make good role models to younger readers. In a sense, gender roles have been repackaged in a woman-shaped figure, so by being sexually desirable one may be afforded the freedom of being a man and thus active and strong. Unlike the rest of her sex, who as penance for not being attractive, are portrayed in a derogative manner and presented as second class. Even Four from Roth's *Divergent* series detaches Tris from the rest of her gender in the line, "She is not like the girls I used to stare at, all bend and curve and softness. She is small but strong, and her bright eyes demand attention. Looking at her is like waking up," (*Free Four*, 14). Thus, can we place these heroines on pedestals if their most admirable qualities are masculine-coded and consequently deem them a rare exception to the rest of their sex?

Masculine traits reoccur in Katniss through her role as breadwinner/protector, and her distinctive hatred for girlishness and sentiment. As mentioned by Strong Hansen, "Katniss's gender identity has been more strongly shaped by stereotypical masculinity than by traditional femininity," (163). Everdeen occupies the masculine role in her relationship with Peeta, which when the emphasis is placed on heteronormativity, fits Katniss better than her role with Gale who is a more dominant personality. The heroine's "rejection of traditional femininity indicates that she believes that the traits she chose or inherited from her father mark her as better than her mother and sister," (Strong Hansen 164 -165). Katniss points out her mother's inability to cope after her father died in a mining accident and even Prim's sensitive nature as a weakness she cannot afford. As a result, Katniss sees herself ostracised by being both unfeminine and faux-masculine – occupying a space of betrayal of her sex in place of stronger, masculine qualities.

Collins repeatedly has poor depictions of the rest of Katniss's sex except for Rue. When she is being hunted in the arena, before she condemns Glimmer to a gruesome death by

“tracker jackers” (*Hunger* 198) the Capitol’s mutated version of wasps, she takes a moment away from the present to mention how stupid her name is. Katniss thinks, “Glimmer I hear someone call her — ugh, the names the people in District 1 give their children are so ridiculous,” (*Hunger* 182). So distinctively feminine is the name, that the mockery of her followed by her grisly death makes her femininity synonymous with weakness and isolates Katniss once more. Another would be Effie Trinket, the ambassador from the Capitol sent to District 12 each year to complete the Reaping. In comparison to the devastatingly bare District, Effie sticks out with “her fresh from the Capitol with her scary white grin, pinkish hair, and spring green suit,” (*Hunger* 17). Later she is referred to as “tiresome and clueless” (*Hunger* 123). This once again sets Katniss apart from women – making her embody an image of “Other” that is both ostracizing to her peers and attractive to her suitors.

Masculine women such as Katniss and Tris present masculine traits in distinctive ways that are meant to demonstrate strength mainly by being devoid of emotion, embodying stoicism, and their disparaging nature towards feminine women. Contrastingly, ‘vigilante feminism’ as discussed by Mattoon D’Amore presents the positives of this image of masculine women (387). She stated, “Vigilante feminism does not dismantle patriarchy but rather uses patriarchal means to undergird its own takeover. It seeks social equality between men and women by reappropriating the tactics of traditionally violent masculinity for feminine ends,” (390). However, undermining the patriarchy by writing heroines in this manner, though an effective way of reworking the system, does not allow for the non-heroines any equality. By possessing masculine traits of violence, the characters are not allowing for the empowerment of female traits, side-lining them to prioritise male attributes once again.

Due to the resurgence of love for the original *Hunger Games* books alongside the release of the most recent movie rendition of *A Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, Katniss remains at the forefront of popular culture. P.L Thomas has questioned Katniss’s role as a heroine, asking her students “Why are strong female characters not enough?” (222) when considering the impact heroines like Katniss have had on the genre. And yet Katniss is not a “strong female character” as she demonstrates that to be strong one must be inherently masculine, voiding her right to this title. Also, in order to be strong, one must be beautiful to both offset non-feminine behaviour; obtain strong masculine male romantic partners who act as your power; and finally concede to the whims of the patriarchy by retreating to heteronormative goals. We need to question this image of brutal womanhood and look at the women in these novels besides the heroines to then decide whether a text can be deemed feminist and to what extent the heroine is or is not.

We must be relentless in our search for equality and embrace all variants of femininity as powerful too. As Adichie argues, “I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femininity. And I want to be respected in all my femaleness. Because I deserve to be. I like politics and history and am happiest when having a good argument about ideas. I am girly. I am happily girly. I like high heels and trying on lipsticks” (5). Though her talk was concerned with societal issues, it applies when considering our heroines who feel pressured to become hardened and masculine to feel strong. It feels like conceding the battle for equality if to be accepted we must become men-adjacent too. Femininity is power too.

Another example manifests in *Iron Widow* (2022) by Xiran Jay Zhao. In their clear attempt to re-empower femininity, consequently, shame fellow women whilst their protagonist operates a polarising position as the only “good” woman within the narrative due to their god-like status and unattainable position as renegade angry female. The line, “He told you not to drink too much!” I hiss, then immediately hate myself for how Hopeless Wife I

sound,” (Zhao 89) showcases this relentless undermining of women and how Wu herself vocalises the will of the patriarchy despite her rage towards the status quo. She states, “Too bad. I am exactly the kind of ice-blooded, rotten-hearted girl that he fears I am,” (Zhao 92). Zhao purposely created a female powerhouse but does not undermine the patriarchal conditions set by her own world through Wu’s own frequent concessions to the masculine powers in control. Thus, the argument of feminism falls flat with a lone angry voice with a lack of conviction when faced with actual societal change.

Despite my analysis outlining the clear problems of modern heroines, I struggled to see the issues when I was writing *Bryony*. Due to the pseudo-medieval world of *Riach* with its corsets and clear gender rules, the natural retort to these gender roles is to have *Bryony* be naturally, by our medieval rules and *Riach*’s, quite masculine herself. This is after identifying the traditional gender roles as female equating to a lack of power, submissive behaviour, and female-centric hobbies and ideals such as sewing, painting or dancing. However, to completely void all of these aspects of femininity is shunning femininity in the same manner the patriarchy does to control women. Thus, to avoid this I had *Bryony* voice and act with markers of both traditional male and female marked behaviours. For example, she enjoys dancing, but also enjoys exploring, fighting, and learning – thus incorporating a mix of traditional gender roles.

By devaluing femininity and making female leads inherently masculine, a book cannot call itself feminist which values all genders equally. Thus, it was important to me to use the social structure of *Riach*, which at one point in history was very similar to our own British culture (and to some extent still is), to reframe femininity as a positive thing alongside masculinity thus depowering the idea of gender behaviour and gender roles. The sequel to this book will put firmer social structures in place to reconstitute power equally between the sexes.

Additionally, I purposely played with gender throughout the novel to add distance and evolution from the original. Instead of an evil woman trapping an innocent child away, *Rapunzel* is a prisoner of war and has to deal with the horrific ramifications of her father’s mercurial nature. I debated the gender of the Wraith of the Wastes but decided that instead of having a set gender, the concept of gender would’ve melted away with time, thus the Wraith should be genderless. Hence the wraith occupies male, female, and genderless forms throughout the novel, and I opted to use a combination of he/him, she/her, and they/them pronouns in the prose to accurately represent this.

Motherhood

The question of motherhood was a controversial subject when considering my rewrite due to the natural close of most fairytales implicating some form of childrearing or parenting by the conclusion of many familiar tales. However, what is more concerning is the pattern of natural motherhood emerging in YA fantasy too that sees the eventual receding of independent women to traditional roles of mother and wife. One example of this would be in Meyer's *Lunar Chronicles*, by the close of the tales, Cinder "emerges from her times of weakness as the strong spunky heroine, but the times of weakness allow her to perform as a traditional female needing rescue by a man," (Didicher, 63). To present a heroine's power, the reminder of masculine power is enhanced through male characters and in comparison, the weaker female position is reinforced as we seem unable to escape this ancient dichotomy. Motherhood has been weaponised as a vehicle in which to depower women and remove their agency.

Despite initial independence and active behaviour, the "dress moment" as discussed before is paramount to this aspect of the modern YA fantasy and the finale consequently meaning motherhood for the lead. This makeover signals an end to the rogue, unladylike behaviour and justifies any active masculine behaviour and the beginnings of O'Keefe's 'cop-out' which sees a young woman recede from being lively and independent only to become submissive and passive (13). This concludes the adventures of the independent woman to conform to the societal rules of the patriarchy and resume focus on traditional roles of motherhood and wife.

Marissa Meyer's Cinder herself, even before her true heritage is revealed is notably reminded of her importance to bear children. Of course, one of the main expectations of a Grimms' heroine was the eventual production of heirs as part of the reward for the Prince upon the rescue of the Princess. Thus, it is disappointing to see this tradition reconstituted in a modern retelling as Dr Erland mentions how lucky she is to still have the ability to procreate (Meyer *Cinder* 86). When Cinder isn't overjoyed by this news Dr Erland mentions how she "should be grateful her surgeons took such care," (86), alluding not just to how cyborgs are devalued by society but to how women are treated as they still do not have control over their bodies – a chilling, too familiar, reminder.

Indeed, the epilogue of *Mockingjay* with Katniss and Peeta's children playing in the Meadow underlines this. Despite her original claim that she would never have children, Katniss has since rescinded those notions to adopt the role of mother – losing the power she had as the heroine as the plot ends. Crucially, Katniss is not immune to the fate O'Keefe's "cop-out" and finishes the tale "ladylike and docile," (13). In a turn of fate, Collins decides that despite all the trauma endured by the heroine, the cure-all comes in a baby-shaped form, despite Katniss's aversion to traditional femininity roles, and her treatment of her mother. As Katniss says, "It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree," (*Mockingjay*, 375) which shows her resistance but ultimately her conceding to Peeta's wishes. It lays the framework for the fundamental ideological cop-out, as she adopts the role of mother in her final moments with the readers – perpetuating the same Grimm ideology that a woman's place is as a mother and wife. As such, now depowered, the tale of Katniss is over.

YA fantasy, particularly those within the realm of dystopia, have created a cliché in the form of a society focused on controlling womanhood and their choices over their bodies.

As Montz mentions in her article, “By offering their young female population limited choices, these societies in novels such as *The Selection*, *Matched*, *Delirium*, *Cinder*, and *Wither* keep the female protagonists distracted with stereotypical markers of girlhood—dresses, boys, shiny things—as a means of deterring individual agency and resistance against the oppressive totalitarian control of a governmental system,” (Montz, 109). Indeed, *The Lunar Chronicles* (2012-2015) by Marissa Meyer also reinforces the perception of femininity being reserved for the strong few otherwise it is a weakness and portrayed traditionally. As such marriage is presented as the next best step for regular girls like Adri’s daughters. Through the ball, Adri mentions how she aims to marry off her daughters – expecting “results” (22) from the extravagant gowns which she bought for Peony and Pearl. The competition is rife between women for the hands of the eligible bachelors at the Peace Ball – Prince Kai being the biggest prize. Once again, beauty becomes a battleground for the women in *Cinder* for them to secure their future as wives and mothers.

The idea of motherhood being the ultimate goal is not one just concerned with fantasy or even YA exclusively. The pattern of motherhood as the paramount accomplishment or even, more concerningly, as a way to better oneself, is something familiar to many shows and frequently serves as the finale for many narrative conclusions, fantasy television show *True Blood* (2008) alongside beloved YA champions *Harry Potter*, or even *Twilight* come to a conclusion having motherhood front and centre as the biggest moment in a woman’s life. I am not undermining the impact that having children has on a person and the phenomenal time and effort exerted by those involved in raising children – however, this is not the only route to personal fulfilment and should not be viewed as such.

Motherhood itself is reviled by Bryony as she sees the concept of becoming a mother under her father’s rule as a shackle. It is not the act of raising and birthing children that the Princess detests, it is the accompanying expectation for her to recede from her goals and dreams to pursue that alone. The lack of choice is what is most crucial here; not the act of choosing the path of motherhood. If in later books she chooses to be a mother it will be on her own terms having accomplished what she wants and when she plans it.

I decided early on there would be no Prince in the story; Bryony’s plot would centre around the idea of female reclamation and power. It is a fair judgement to say that Bryony needs the Wraith to accomplish many of her feats, but she would never have acquired them in the first place had it not been for her wit, self-prescribed education, and fierce nature. The idea of romance and then motherhood would take away from the key elements of friendship and internal power that I wanted to focus on in the novel thus there is no possibility of pregnancy as Randal is long dead and allusions to romance (i.e the possibility of a romance concerning the General in the future) are tentative at best.

Instead of a prominent romantic plot, this tale follows the popular trope of ‘found family’ in which we see Bryony make meaningful connections to help her quest. I wanted to show that this platonic support could be just as strong, if not more so, than romantic love. I claimed this trope due to it being one of my favourites within the YA genre and I believed it comfortably sat with Bryony and Brenn and then later in the course of the novel with the crew of *The Siren’s Promise*. Bryony’s own family has been destroyed but due to her treatment from them, her feelings remain conflicted over their deaths. Arguably her father did care about her enough to want to protect her but had no interest in who his child was and her desire for change. Bryony’s lack of tact combined with her father’s temper meant the pair

were never close – instead, her father favoured her brothers whom he saw as more important due to Sorrel being the crowned prince and Abel being the spare.

As such, Bryony occupies a space of novelty in her family and the public sphere; she gained a reputation for her kindness and grace but is ultimately unmarried. The King's children were thus dubbed Sorrel – the lion; Abel – the cub; and Bryony – the lamb. Inside the walls of the castle, the staff knew her as somewhat of a rogue royal – she knew the airs and graces of her peers but exhibited a keen amount of rule-breaking in pursuit of her own goals. Her kind treatment of others too was a notable quality as the aristocracy was not meant to interact with those “beneath” them. As a result, the Princess was much loved by Riach as she was seen as something of a rebel against the rest of her family and one of the people. However, this must've been isolating for Bryony who then existed in a state of obscurity. Finding kindred spirits within Brenn and then the rest of the crew aboard the Siren must've felt like a sense of coming home that she had missed.

In ‘The Burning Tower’, Bryony's gender has ostracized her from her family due to her desire to learn and practice magic in the same manner her brothers do. As such, she is treated differently and faces societal expectations of being married young to perform her duties as a wife and mother. In Riach, female behaviour is regulated like that perpetuated by a contemporary patriarchal society. Behaviour that doesn't comply with the strict gender roles is shunned, hence Bryony being trapped inside her home by her father. Her lack of ambition to get married and settle down with children places her at odds with society's rules and adds a further element of alienation towards the protagonist.

The patriarchy has deliberately depowered the women in their society; though women can learn magic, besides basic healing, and performative magic, it is forbidden. Magic works here as a metaphor for how society weakens itself by refusing to acknowledge female power in order to emphasize the supposed superiority of the male sex. As such, the invading Fynix forces who kidnap Bryony to place in the Tower, do not think she could escape due to the way that women are treated in Riach. Had Bryony been less determined to learn and develop as a witch, she would've become a Rapunzel in the traditional sense and had to wait for rescue. This is reaffirmed in the tale as citizens, upon hearing the story of how the Tower fell, assume the Princess was simply eaten instead of using her abilities to charm her way out of a grisly death.

Historically, women have been subject to notable witch trials throughout history and as such I wanted to turn that trope on its head in this world and combine the idea of acceptable magic with a world that employs strict gender roles. The reason behind this was to mimic the feeling that women of the past, and unfortunately few of the present, have felt when being left out, disregarded, or overlooked as a result of a patriarchal society. The word “magic” could be replaced with the word “power” in Bryony's story and reimagined in a contemporary setting with the same result and feminist messages throughout. Liberation for the female heroines is what drives the heart of the tale.

I felt it was important to register the pedagogical effect of the genre when shaping Bryony in comparison to someone like Katniss. I concur with Fitzsimmons's summary, “If, as Trites argues, YA novels are meant to instruct or provide moral guidance to teens as they come of age, [the genre] merits serious attention,” (16). Thus, we must shape our leads in a manner which conveys the right message to young readers. Ultimately, one might conclude that Katniss is not the best heroine we could have asked for at the forefront of post-millennial

fantasy YA, but she was the best of her time, and we can use her pitfalls and successes to shape future female leads.

We must make sure our female heroes do not relay the wrong information to young readers: one regurgitating the same image of femininity as weakness and masculinity as strength. Our heroines, fantasy or contemporary, deserve independence, not to be tied to patriarchal norms to become paradoxically considered feminist. Understanding the parameters of feminism, particularly when considering other cultures and feminism beyond the Western interpretation of the ideology will be an important frontier to research to build better heroines too.

The idea of “cop-out” ultimately bloomed the original framework behind much of my research into the heroines of young adult fantasy because the idea stems from an idea that feminism can be quit and by the response following suit in YA, should be quit en masse. This fascinates me endlessly because it not only implies the fading of feminism as one ages and accepts more responsibility in roles such as motherhood and after marriage, but also presents these roles as expected of women who come to maturity. The issue here is not of motherhood, marriage, or reaching old age, it is the expectation that even the most strong-willed of protagonists rescind all notions of their previous desires and change.

It is no secret that modern Western society loves babies and children thus childbearing is continually prioritised and highlighted as the greatest of achievements. I do not wish to undermine the clear wonderful experience that having children can bring, but we must also entertain the idea of other life experiences being pivotal to female enrichment as the idea that our only and greatest accomplishment can be achieved by having children is damning, narrow, and down-right unattainable for some individuals. It also feeds into the patriarchal narrative of motherhood as God and thus exerts control over women’s bodies and shames them for not if that is not what they desire.

The lack of romance in the book contributed a little to the idea that Bryony was still deciding her future. Despite her father’s goals for her, Bryony herself was unsure as to whether the path of motherhood was going to be one for her future. As the writer, I was also unsure, and it will be something I decide upon in future books. However, in our world where women’s bodies are still not globally respected and are used as a political stomping ground for religious advocacy, as was demonstrated in the cruel overturning of Roe Versus Wade which removed safe abortion rights for hundreds of women across the US in 2022, I wish the female-identifying population had the same rights to their own anatomical forms.

Romance

Falling in love and the consequences have become beloved staples of the YA genre and as such have found a home in fantasy YA too. During my research, I noted a few YA fantasy books that didn't interact with romance at all (one might mention *Daughter of the Deep* (2021) by Rick Riordan and *Vespertine* (2021) by Margaret Rogerson) but these are outliers; even some that claim to have no romance at all dabble with elements of flirting and crushes. Of course, one key element of growing up for many people is to experience the first feelings of a more adult nature, thus it is only natural to include that in some works. However, the overall centrality of heterosexual romance in YA is perhaps a little disconcerting, given the widescale acknowledgement of a spectrum of sexual orientations that include non-conforming, non-heteronormative relationships brought into mainstream media within the last decade. It seems YA is determined for a young heroine to be secure in a relationship too and the persistence of heteronormative romance in the genre highlights its reinforced importance for readers.

When considering the element of romance, the similarity between the Grimm tales and YA is remarkable; despite her hard-fought independence, the protagonist becomes dependent, overruled, or overshadowed by her masculine partner. Defined by her radical beauty, the romance narrative allows the protagonist access to the real powerhouse of the tale: the man. We should reconsider the ramifications of exposing young readers to this narrative, question the popularity behind this trope, and develop plots that can redistribute power with feminism in mind.

Despite being a female-headed narrative, the central male figure in YA is ultimately depicted as the main source of power in both the narrative plot and the romantic relationship. Even when the authors try to present the heroine as independent and fearless, the presence of the husband-like partner undermines this. In the second book of the cult-followed YA series by Sarah J Maas *A Court of Mist and Fury* (2016), Rhysand's presence frequently causes Feyre to almost cower in his glory. Significantly, she does not see herself as worthy of him despite her impressive powers rendering her a "new" (*Mist and Fury*, 493) creation after becoming High Fae and possessing the God-like powers of all the Fae Courts of Prythian. Despite being his "mate" – a destined partner and perfect match in the eyes of Prythian lore – Feyre's internal dialogue sees herself as less than him, even in ensuing books. The gendered society in the human realms of Feyre's world follows the same pattern as the historical medieval society in ancient Britain and thus the gender roles are mimicked. The female characters cannot access the same power as the male characters – destined bond or not. This is reflected earlier in the book through the character of Tamlin who rejects the idea of Feyre becoming a High Lady; "there is no such thing as a High Lady," (*Mist and Fury*, 23). Maas does have Rhysand claim the title of High Lady for Feyre come the close of the book but that does not impede Feyre's anxiety of being worthy of the High Lord of the Night Court. Perhaps her concerns stem from her worries about her future but the persistence in which Maas presents Rhysand as overpowered contradicts this theory and only works to contain Feyre's place beneath him, rather than by his side.

Similarly, despite being a contemporary urban fantasy, Bella in the *Twilight* series is filled with apprehension about being worthy of the beautiful individual that is Edward. His monstrosity presents him as almost Other, yet her worshipful approach to love elevates him to a status above her and as a result, she is side-lined during her tale. This problematic pattern seems to depend on the female character's reliance on the partner in her tale to complete her, in a romantic sense, and back her up by offering protection. The second book in

the series *New Moon* (2007) follows Bella's complete deterioration after Edward leaves her. It is only when the second competitor for Bella's heart, Jacob, enters the scene that Bella begins to rebuild her life – unable to do so without adequate masculine replacement, it seems. She acknowledges how her life improves around them too; "I felt much, much healthier around Jacob," (*New Moon*, 162). But in its entirety, *New Moon* focuses on how Bella cannot function without Edward. Arguably, this is due to her all-consuming love for Edward, but it also suggests the pernicious trope of women being dependent on men for life fulfilment. The message is the same as Grimm's fairy tales: dependence on masculine figures for stability and emotional fulfilment.

A further example of this within YA fantasy would be the individual Rowan Whitethorn in Maas' *Throne of Glass* series. The shape-shifter occupies a space of demi-God-like power that, even when the protagonist is full of unnatural divine strength herself, still takes precedence. After Aelin is depowered in the final book of the series the dubious power balance is finally restored. After having lost nothing of his original prestige, Rowan maintains the most power despite Aelin obtaining her heritage and becoming queen. The romance between the pair doesn't equate to being equals – another relationship in the series which has the same issue falls between Lorcan and Elide. Elide's power is her personality whilst Lorcan overpowers her in every capacity. Despite this, the pair are regarded as fan favourites, with fans liking the power dynamic of a small, petite woman alongside a huge hulking man. However, if these heroines are dependent on masculine characters for emotional stability, romantic intrigue, and procuring more power, can we truly claim them as independent? Furthermore, can we argue that presenting them as dependent on men hinders the ability to call them feminist texts? The line is blurred between love and dependence, and the actions of the male characters mimic the prince in the old Grimm tales. The rescue – though not from a tower – still occurs, albeit more subtly than in the fairy tales of yore.

The romance element in my work, if it does develop, will come in later tales. It felt forced to shoehorn a plot line centred on a heteronormative partnership when Bryony's main goal was to live and experience the world in her own way. I consider that in later tales she may find a partner, but my prerogative is that she should focus on restoring her kingdom and providing safety to her people while understanding her world better. The high-stakes fantasy tale is the basis of many of the texts already discussed but in those, the romance is presented as equally important. Katniss and Peeta alongside Aelin and Rowan have world-shattering consequences of their unions, but the aftermath presents the partnerships as vital to the plot and the character's success. I wanted to avoid this in my work and instead focus on the aspect of found family and the platonic relationship between Bryony and the genderless Wraith.

Another facet of the romance is that it also ensures the reiteration of the importance of beauty for the reader. Indeed, one sure-fire way to create sexual appeal is by having our protagonist encounter romantic entanglements and a popular way of showing this is by deployment of a love triangle. This can be seen in classic tales too like *Beauty and the Beast*; as McCallum notes, "Disney uses the love triangle (represented by Belle, the Beast, and Gaston) to schematize two versions of masculinity: the traditional, macho, muscular, hypermasculine (male chauvinist) man represented by Gaston, and the sensitive new man, represented by the Beast" (118). Similarly, this appears through Gale and Peeta in Collins's novel. Both are indeed hardworking, but Gale has a rougher edge from his poor upbringing and cake-decorator Peeta has a sensitive side that leads readers like me to root for his success over Gale for his romantic endeavours for the Mockingjay.

As already mentioned, to be the object of desire through such public and intimate displays of affection attests to Katniss's desirability and acts as a successful tool in building the heroine's appeal. Indeed, the love triangle was at the centre of the attention garnered by Collins' novel even producing vocal opposing teaming who rooted for who Katniss should pursue online and through the purchasing of merchandise. Another popular example of the love triangle in question is the classic *Twilight* triangle between Bella, Jacob, and Edward. When Jacob states, "Well, I'm so sorry that I can't be the right kind of monster for you, Bella," (Meyer, 211) he is primarily reflecting on his competition between himself and Edward for Bella's hand. The commonality of the love triangle in YA means the device appears in other heroine-led series like Cassandra Clare's *Mortal Instruments* (2007–14) and Lauren Kate's *Fallen* (2009–12) (Flynn and Hardstaff 211). It works as an effective method to promote a character's attractiveness by having them pursued by, traditionally, two partners. However, there is no limit on the pursuers in question, as there is "something of a love pentagram in Maggie Stiefvater's acclaimed *Raven Cycle* (2012–16)" (Flynn and Hardstaff, 211). It also restates the importance of a partner in an adolescent's life by going as far as to suggest that a young female needs one to admit to the sphere of adulthood successfully.

I considered playing with the element of romance in this book and early beta-readers of the text believed I would be pursuing a romance between Bryony and the Wraith. As with the likes of the Darkling and Alina in Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* or even Holly Black's *The Cruel Prince* – the darker the villain, the sweeter the chance for redemption and thus romance. The trope of enemies to lovers has dominated the charts for romance readers courtesy of the popularity of social media platform TikTok causing a flurry of viral books to soar to crazy levels of stardom. The impact TikTok has had on the publishing industry could warrant its own thesis, but the ramifications of trope-based searches have been particularly revealing for writers and readers alike. Rebecca Yarros' *Fourth Wing* (2023) garners particular love for its dark romances alongside *Serpent & Dove* (2020) by Shelby Mahurin and *Kingdom of the Wicked* (2020) by Kerri Maniscalco. Though these texts are sometimes not considered YA and have achieved different levels of becoming "viral" in social media, they do follow the pattern of dark and brooding bad boy versus upbeat pretty heroine. Thus, my readers thought I too was following this trend with the Wraith. In truth, the character of the Demon General I believe would make a better choice instead of the Wraith as he can benefit her more, but this is not that story and if they are to fall in love it will be at the centre of a tale about solely that.

I referenced the much-loved *Lunar Chronicles* throughout my research due to its status as being a modern rewrite and each dealing with a romance at the heart of every heroine's story. However, the presentation of the leading men in the *Lunar Chronicles* leaves much to be desired as Meyer perpetuates the gendered ideologies of the Grimm Brothers. In order to offset the number of strong women within the plot, we have a cast of confident men who act as the other hand to their female counterparts – acting as both bodyguard, moral support, and, in Thorne's case, comedic relief. We have "Kai the sensitive guy, Wolf the tough guy, Thorne the rogue underdog, and Jacin the knight in shining armour," (Didicher 64). The strong, undoubted masculine presence of power is another aspect of the modern heroine; presenting the idea that strong women can only exist when matched with stronger men. These men provide support and power in the form of resources (Kai) or brute strength (Wolf) but also an anchor to their femininity through romance. This message is ultimately as pernicious as those ancient beliefs pedalled in fairy tales. As Lieberman suggests, "Not only do children find out what happens to the various princes and princesses, wood-cutters, witches, and children of their favourite tales, but they also learn behavioural and associational

patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances,” (384). Thus, through these didactic tales, Meyer demonstrates the importance of men in adolescent women’s independence: presenting a dichotomy that one cannot exist without the other. Thus, I believed it was important for my rewrite to leave this element out.

Romance as a means for the prioritisation of personal, pivotal development of male characters too, is something I wanted to avoid too – for the reader’s focus to remain on Bryony and her companions. Gouck’s analysis of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) in popular culture revolves around her being “both intriguing and beautiful,” (Gouck 5) in order to perform her role during the narrative. As Gouck summarises, the Pixie “exists solely to enrich the life of the White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class male protagonist, who is often in a state of ennui before the MPDG’s arrival or, at the very least, lives an almost overwhelmingly unremarkable life, (5). This female character is reduced to a function and, similarly to the modern heroine, is dependent on a male character’s direct involvement. As the “descendant of reductive imaginings of femininity that have plagued popular thinking for hundreds of years,” (Gouck 4) the commonality of the Pixie figure further questions a woman’s role in media; placating the female form to a purpose in a masculine tale one that is dependent on her being the fantasy of cis white men. Literature as a form offers the chance to expand and delve into new thoughts and ideas – thus the presence of these tropes remains alarming.

Romance in fantasy YA does indeed seem to generate power for the heroine. Through her masculine partner, the damsel in question, obtains his power too, ultimately suggesting that she cannot access independence on her own. Equality with the partnership is not obtained, however, as the masculine character – regardless of the heroine’s own power – is presented as the force to be reckoned with.

However, I cannot say that my work is free of romance. Bryony’s romance occurs before the course of the narrative through her tragic love, Randall, who, as far as she is aware, died at her father’s hand on the discovery of their relationship. I build some tension between herself and the general of the demon nation of Raize because if she were to have a romantic relationship, I believe they would be a strong pair together. However, before pursuing anything, I wanted it to be clear that Bryony’s choice would be considered when deciding her future. Also, it was imperative to this story that Bryony discover her power before finding love again, lest that love become the reason behind her power as it appears in many well-known fantasy novels aimed at Young Adults.

Colonialism and Empire

The varied cultures within Nos allowed me to discuss deeper subjects within my narrative, war and colonialism becoming integrated into the plot as I developed more of the complicated past of Riach and their neighbours, the Fynix Fae. The war-centric culture developed by Bryony's father reflects the history of the British Empire and the quest for colonial dominance that had brutal, often devastating effects on many cultures across the world. The ruin left behind by colonialism is referenced across Nos, specifically in the Dion regions where the populous was abandoned once their use had run dry. Additionally, I debated making these scenes darker to reflect the horror acquired from colonialist activities after I learned about the atrocities committed in the Belgian Congo; however, after learning about the full damage caused, I decided it was too dark and complicated without much further in-text investigation. Nevertheless, I felt the gravity of the situation needed to have some complexity behind it when discussing the global impact of Riach's former empire.

Riach occupied a prime state at the centre of the magical world and as such, used its power to sway international politics and establish foreign powers that would benefit them. This is symbolised in the catacombs under the palace that is full of foreign treasure that was a result of spoils of war, invasion, and bloodshed. The collection is notably filled with dust to highlight the former power of the people of Riach but also shows how the royal family has not returned these foreign items which mean much to the collective populous of their respective origins. This was inspired by the British Museum and their lack of sympathy when it came to returning stolen property. In particular, the statue of the sixth original Caryatid who remains away from her sisters in Greece and occupies a lonely existence in London instead. The tweet below from @ArysPan (2021) reminds me of the sentiment felt by many, including myself that the statue should be returned to its place of origin to be fully appreciated as part of its original set.



Some details: the original marble ladies are kept in the New Acropolis Museum. The missing spot in the middle belong to the "missing sister" which is kept in the British Museum along most of the marbles of the great temple, STOLEN by the a British Lord when Athens were under 🇬🇷



There will be a return of these items in the following novel or the further series. Indeed, the following book will see the consequences of the Riachian empire come to the fore as Bryony's people come under scrutiny. After my reading of *The Poppy War* (2020) by R.F Kuang, the horrors of war and colonialism were reinstated to me through the brutality of the course of the novel. Though Kuang's work is not YA, it does concern younger characters and has a Bildungsroman element to it which is developed alongside great political turmoil and reconstitution. I used Kuang's work as a benchmark for gauging the darker themes in my work and though there will be opportunities to speak of refugees and develop this further in the subsequent novel, I worried I would impede the tone of the piece if I focused too much on the bloodshed of colonialism.

In a way, because of the strong history of conquest at the heart of Riach, the invasion of the Fynix Fae would've been seen as somewhat ironic. This being because the invaders were getting invaded themselves. This adds depth and complexity to Bryony's quest, as despite her being a kind character, her position as ruler has a problematic past attached to it that I hope would lead the reader to question whether or not this would be the right thing to do for her people and their new situation. Prompting these questions now would be crucial for the next book when Bryony will face these questions from the other leaders across Nos and have to deal with the aftermath of her father's actions.

The concept of consequences runs throughout the novel which provides the baseline for the narrative. The consequences of Bryony's father participating in the war which seems to everyone to just be an extension of his father's mission and his father's before him, results in a great terrible loss for the Riachian people. Had the King made a diplomatic effort to resolve the ancient grudges he could've avoided the war and the subsequent defeat. Now, as a result, Kya, the former capital of Riach has been destroyed, the people displaced, and the monarchy punished. Despite Bryony being a Princess, this action raises the question of ruling and whether there should be a ruler or if democracy should take its place. In particular, I wanted it to be apparent that should Sorrel end up ruling, he would be a clone of his father which was already alluded to in his war-loving manner.

Furthermore, the idea of displacement found an unlikely representative in Brenn, the Wraith of the Wastes. As it is revealed within the narrative, the Wastes were originally the homeland of the Riachian people before they found the lucrative land, which used to be inhabited by the Fae, a more suitable foundation. Thus, all resources were poured into what would become Kya and the Wastes, formerly known as Riachia, were eventually abandoned, leaving the native population of sprites and fairies to fall into obscurity as the magic that used to flow through there disappeared as the people did. The eventual return of the people of Riachia would help restore the former country to prosperity as was visualised in the thriving nature of the land when Bryony returned to it. Understanding where one's people come from and the history that they have been a part of is necessary to understand the future and shape a sustainable life for new generations.

Eco-politics also played a role in the narrative through the depictions of the Shadow Realms and the rest of the world. Nos itself, through its Gods, comments on the state of the world order and the battles that have taken place on its surface. The Shadow Realms exists in perpetual darkness on the East side of the barrier (a non-physical border that exists in the

ocean between the East and the West continents) and as such has developed a reputation of depravity and barbarism. However, these realms were named by the countries of the West, and as such it is their depiction and lack of understanding of culture that has led to this miserable depiction of non-West cultures. Thus, the return of the sun to the Shadow Realms provides a physical marker for change in the world as the truth is going to be revealed and the world as a result is going to change.

However, the road to peace was never going to be an easy one. Nevertheless, I wanted YA's pedagogical role to advocate for peace, tolerance, and awareness of the horrific implications of colonialism.

Fanfiction

There is no doubt that the YA genre would not have developed into the genre it is today without the help of fanfiction. The barrier between a fanfiction and a rewrite of a classic tale is blurred but I believe can mainly be established in the editorial aspects of a work alongside a breadth of themes, characters, and narrative structure. The parameters of common fanfiction are difficult to generalise besides the obvious restructuring of narratives, self-insert texts, and additional character romances. However, fanfiction as a whole has been under fire for some of its works' unashamed usage of taboo themes, explicit language and sexual behaviour, and can contain curiously horrific complications of anatomy and body horror. Such a simplification, however, merely scratches the surface of a complicated, in-depth world of fan-written stories which can range from cosy tales such as the horror-ridden *Attack on Titan* crew who are repurposed into a teen-drama about surfboarding such as 'The Ocean Is Waiting For Us' (jnnln 2021); to disturbing nightmares in the form of the cartoon gems from *Steven Universe* working in a coffee-shop from hell in 'Just a Normal Coffee Shop' (airameg, et al. 2017); to unexpectedly detailed collaborative works with more than one familiar text such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *Harry Potter* coming together to form 'Manacled' (senlinyu 2017). Creativity is at the heart of the fanfiction world and there is a lot we can learn from it, not least in terms of reader response.

Fanfiction as a concept has become widely recognised as a resource online too. This is also reflected in the boom of fanfiction that has taken root in online sites such as AO3, Wattpad, and the likes of the Tumblr archives. Accessing huge audiences, these sites offer amateur writers a platform to indulge their writing skills and offer original content to build upon popular media with new ideologies, narratives, or even genres to produce new tales. Some of these texts have yielded results resulting in book deals and cinematic adaptations. The likes of E.L James's adult romance *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) was originally a fanfiction of Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, originally named 'Master of the Universe,' under the penname 'Snowqueen's Icedragon' (Castle 2015). Since then, it has observed an impressive readership and three film adaptations. Similarly, the Harry Styles/One Direction fanfiction *After* (2014) by Anna Todd, was originally published via Wattpad under Todd's username 'Imaginator1D' and has five film versions at the time of writing. Fanfiction has become a force for readers as writers have the ability and freedom to reshape a familiar world with their views in mind.

However, this also can lead to the production of questionable tropes based on the writer's fantasies. Stories including the exploitation of minors, paedophilia, and necrophilia along with a plethora of darker sexual deviances can be written about, published, and accessed with ease should the reader be searching for them. The dark side of these forums where writing and publishing are easy means there is little in the form of maintenance and quality control. Carolyn Bunting, the CEO of Internet Matters, an organization dedicated to keeping children safe online, commented to Insider regarding their article on Youtuber-centred fanfiction: "We have found that the main risk is inappropriate content such as sexual and violent content and adult themes," she said. "This can be damaging for a child if not dealt with" (Dodgson 2020). Problematic themes need to be considered when work is being reimagined without a publisher's input and as such parents should always make sure what their child is accessing is age-appropriate and safe.

Fanfiction has been acknowledged within published texts too as a notable part of some dedicated fans' lives. In the tale *Fangirl* (2018) by Rainbow Rowell, the writer Cath is dedicated to her fanfiction spin-off, these characters are central to her journey as a writer. Likewise, I too, initially found freedom in writing fanfiction; the practice was instrumental in helping me to develop my craft.

A Fairytale Fanfiction

Fairy tales and their impact on YA remained the core of my research when writing my piece and out of the several I studied Marissa Meyer's series stood out as a prime example of a well-written retelling with an excellent story that also highlights the developments made within modern fantasy heroines. Coste argues that "Fairy tale retellings are already primed to engage active readers. With their familiar beats and characters, fairy tale elements anchor the reader in something known (98). It is for this reason that the form remains popular as we see in literature and across other media. Marissa Meyer's *The Lunar Chronicles* is a series which envisions "a cyborg Cinderella fighting for liberty," (Coste, 95) follows the heroine Linh Cinder, an engineer operating out of New Beijing in a futuristic world ravaged by an incurable plague. Shedding the domestic country-style heroine of the original, this world is intrinsically different to all the beats of the original yet remains true enough to the original story.

Meyer has taken the baseline plot and fairy-tale borne female from the traditional tale and reworked it in a contemporary style which aims to promote modern beliefs concerned with gender roles and eco-politics. Meyer's tales centre around freedom from the situations in which each of the leads find themselves: Cinder's abusive homelife; Cress' entrapment; Scarlet's isolation; and Winter's madness all act as the catalysts of their tales and how they can pursue freedom – Meyer's tales therefore *appear* to reaffirm female power. And indeed, strength in unity is a core message behind the tale along with love, trust, and friendship.

Being a more radical adaptation of the original fairy-tale, *Cinder* is both dystopia and utopia with an advanced modern technology world thriving alongside an incurable plague called Letumosis. Consequently, Meyer's *Chronicles* sit on both romance and sci-fi genres and thus "still has a foot in both camps when it comes to being both a traditional and a revisionist Cinderella" (Didicher, 63). The sci-fi elements of the work offer more opportunities to engage with different social structures in the newfound environment alongside the differences it makes to pre-established relationships. As Jones summarised the genre; "Science fiction is, in effect, giving us predictions about the present and helping us understand the world around us," (236). Indeed, this lends *Cinder* the ability to invent a new future where gender rules are undistinguished, and Meyer could reshape a post-war society.

Meyer attempts a departure from the traditional Grimm throughout the novel by having original quotes from the tales divide *Cinder* into three parts. The first quote used is "They took away her beautiful clothes, dressed her in an old grey smock, and gave her wooden shoes" (Grimm 1); Meyer uses this to introduce the new Cinderella, Cinder, who instead of wooden shoes has a prosthetic foot which she spends the first few pages replacing herself. The opening scene demonstrates the contemporary changes of this modern Cinder who is rather self-sufficient, has notable skills, and is concerned more with her future and freedom than romance. She even has friends: Iko an android with a unique personality chip and another friend in her younger sister Peony, demonstrating legions of advancement for interpersonal relationships between women in comparison to the original where the only other good female relationship, Cinderella's mother, perished early on.

Indeed, when considering the personalities of Meyer's new heroines and their Grimm predecessors, at first glance, they could not be more unlike each other. Cinder is by no means incapable like Cinderella; instead, Linh Cinder is noted as "the best mechanic in New

Beijing” (*Cinder* 10) by the Prince himself, having garnered a reputation for her reliability and skill. Discontented with her life, Cinder has saved up money to buy herself a new prosthetic foot after being forced to wear a foot she’s had since she was eleven, thus already showing how the heroine possesses a great deal more gumption than her Grimm counterpart.

By taking over a traditionally masculine role and excelling at it, Cinder establishes the mettle of her character (no pun intended). Even with the persistence of gender roles emerging in New Beijing when Prince Kai assumes that the mechanic must be a man and asks, “Is he in?” (6) when Cinder is the only person at the booth, she remains undeterred and pleasant. She has personal goals which align with her freedom which will be obtained when she is of age and no longer under the care of her malcontent stepmother. Additionally, Cinder has a unique experience and outlook on the world as a woman and a cyborg. Furthermore, there is optimism within Cinder, along with a sense of humour and sensitivity her predecessor was too blank to have at all.

Similarly, to the original, Cinder holds a servant role as she works for Adri and her stepfamily, her mechanic skills providing the “only income” (*Cinder* 25) to pay for their extravagant lifestyle, in which Cinder is relegated to a basement bedroom and shunned. Despite being adopted by the late Linh-Garran, Adri’s husband, before he passed away, Cinder, like cyborgs in this world, is met with disdain for being part machine. Meyer reminds us by mentioning the baker Chang Sascha “didn’t serve cyborgs,” (5) and treats Cinder like a second-class citizen. However, Cinder, to an extent, does not let this affect her or her treatment of others. Cinder is driven and knows she deserves a better life than the one designated for her. Despite her special body, Cinder “refuses second-rate citizenship and rewires her own destiny,” (Kérchy, 240). It is this desire to live that saves her.

Thankfully, Cinder is not a selfless being like the Grimm version who had accepted her fate. Rather, she is a flawed character and does not have the saintly personality that the Grimm’s tale is notable for. As mentioned by Dworkin about the Grimm women, “Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow-white, Rapunzel —all are characterized by passivity, beauty, innocence, and victimization. They are archetypal good women — victims by definition. They never think, act, initiate, confront, resist, challenge, feel, care, or question, (43). But Cinder has more power and not just physical power due to her technologically advanced body. Meyer’s heroine monopolises violence against the androids who come to take her in for testing and does not hold back when accusing Adri of being a terrible parent. One of the attendants even recognises her as dangerous, disabling two “med-droids” before her capture (*Cinder* 74). Cinder marks a clear evolution from the passive “silent woman” (Bottigheimer, *Allusion*, 116) to a vocal, active participant in her own story, using her wits to escape certain doom.

In many ways, therefore, *Cinder* can be seen as an excellent representation of a modern fairy-tale retelling that twists the original tale into something more fitting of contemporary standards. Fairy-tale retellings within the young adult genre present fantastical solutions to modern struggles especially those burdening young people alongside providing opportunities for escapism. As Coste mentioned, “These retellings acknowledge the complexity of social structures and the personal struggles that can complicate a happy ending, inviting readers to consider their own agency through familiar heroines’ journeys,” (96). Through Meyer’s tales, we are invited to understand a different structure of living through the

ancient tale of Cinderella. *Cinder* offers many opportunities to see the story differently with higher stakes and encouragement that allows us to envision futures for our world. It is positive to see a change in the tale where women appear to have much more of a place in it. There is an encouraging message in *Cinder* concerning inner strength: in order to be a hero she must first believe she is and be accepting of herself, her cyborg body, and her Lunar heritage (Cothran, 148). Meyer's work suggests that anyone can be a hero: it's all a matter of perception.

However, it seems even rewritten Cinderella tales cannot escape the pitfalls of their ancestors. As Didicher argues, *The Lunar Chronicles* still uses "common romance novel tropes which reassert the values of heteronormativity and weakness," (50). Despite being so reversely vocal against girls fawning over Prince Kai and presenting a front as a tomboy while being comfortable in work clothes over dresses – we see Cinder "longing to conform to traditional expectations," (Didicher 51). Thus, Meyer undermines the steps she has taken to distance herself from the original values and breathes life back into them for contemporary readers.

Modern fairy tales remain haunted by the familiar ideologies emanating from the Grimm tales. Deborah O'Keefe discusses the impact of fairy tales in new literature, stating "The ghosts of old sacrificial storybook heroines are still floating in the air [and on the air-waves], whispering sit-still, look good messages," (201). Though initially, *The Lunar Chronicles* appears to tell tales of bold independent women, Meyer ultimately conforms to patriarchal expectations. The importance of beauty in *Cinder* perpetuates traditional female values of beauty meaning (limited) power. Cinder too feels she does not live up to standards of attractiveness. Initially, she loathes her cyborg limbs mentioning her horror at potentially flashing a "sexy metal thigh" (295) at Kai when he asks her to the ball. But her manner of loathing herself is derived from millennial expectations of beauty. She cannot possibly love any aspect of herself because of how she looks and as such she believes she is not worthy of good things – it's a little too familiar a rhetoric to be pleasant. Even though Cinder shows acceptance of her limbs as she goes gloveless at her coronation, she never shows love to herself. Kai takes the role of telling her she is beautiful, but besides sarcasm, we rarely get any mention of it from Cinder herself.

One exception to the traditional figure of womanhood in *Cinder* comes from the older women in the tale. The lack of maternal support, in any form, haunts the *Lunar Chronicles* with a collection of dead, abusive, or brainwashed mothers. Cinder's mother was a famously psychotic individual who ordered the "infanticide" of shell-children when her parents were murdered by shells (Lunars immune to the glammers). As mentioned by Goldstein, "In the Grimms' "Cinderella," the spirit of the heroine's mother comes to her aid," (54) but the only lasting impression Cinder has of her mother is her evil antics upon Lunar. After being most likely poisoned by her younger "calculating" (197) sister Levana, Cinder is left with Adri, a perfect rendition of the evil stepmother. With Kai and Winter's mothers long dead, Cress's brainwashed beyond redemption, and Scarlett's non-existent too – the presence of older women is notably negative with the focus on evil older women versus younger women. Once again, the element of competition returns over who will control the plot and thus the future of Earth and Lunar.

It appears in Meyer's tales that heroines are tied to either a half-baked modern heroine or the Grimm tradition of the Damsel in Distress. As Didicher reflected "The series ends with two spunky girl protagonists, Cinder and Scarlet, and two from the passive Princess mould, Cress and Winter," (64). It seems to balance the revisionist aspects of this retelling, the traditional female character must be reinforced too. As femininity is presented as strong through the cyborg Cinder and hunter that is Scarlett, it must be presented as weak through the sweet, and feminine, Cress and Winter. This further ties Meyer's retelling to the Grimm ideology she aimed to avoid. Though Princess Winter takes a stand of her own against the rigid prejudice and evil of Lunar and Cress is a talented hacker – the pair act as damsels in being rescued multiple times by their male counterparts both of which seem dependent upon for support. This reliance upon the male characters of the plot echoes the Grimm's presence with the prince still acting as saviour to the Princess.

Notably, in the *Chronicles*, the Moon operates as a focal point for the characters in Cinder particularly for the women. The presence of the moon historically is related to the image of the Divine feminine particularly in reference to the Goddess of the Hunt Artemis and to the menstrual cycle. As rulers of Lunar, the Blackburns are meant to embody beauty and femininity, a rule which Levana abides by with her dedication to keeping up her flawless appearance. Cinder's true birth name is 'Selene' which references the Greek Goddess who was the personification of the Moon. The rest of her family have names with similar connotations. Her mother's name 'Channary' has Cambodian origins that mean 'moon-faced girl' (Campbell), and Levana's references the Roman mythical goddess and protectress of new-borns – it seems the presence of childbirth and the traditional female role is written in the stars for these powerful women. In order to possess this power, their femininity is highlighted – so much so it is an integral part of their personality and a reminder of their roles as mothers.

In Meyer's later stories such as *Stars Above* (2015) which take place in the same world as the *Chronicles*, there is notable expectation for Cinder to marry Kai. Indeed, she takes over the role of Empress of the Commonwealth – one previously occupied by Kai's mother, who remains a nameless entity. Cinder having relinquished her power on Lunar finds herself the wife of power instead of the holder herself. This is not unlike the Grimm's Cinderella's fate as she too ends up as the wife of a powerful man. As Broad pointed out, "It is vital that we push back against popular interpretations of characters like Katniss as feminist agents and icons for young women and call out YA dystopian novels that hinge on gender stereotypes that flatten female characters into passive roles as mothers and wives," (127). Cinder falls into that category completely – having relinquished all her power on Lunar she can no longer enact any of the change she wished for on Earth unless she utilises her husband's resources.

In many ways, powerful single women are not welcome in the *Lunar Chronicles*. The presence of the evil powerful women in Cinder is rife, with both Adri, her evil stepmother, Levana – her evil aunt, and her late mother Queen Channary who was notably a cruel specimen indeed. There is no considerable paternal support to speak of throughout the books leaving a bloody battlefield of woman against woman particularly in the familial field. Without male support in their corner like Cinder, Cress and the rest of the team – the single matriarchs are ostracised and operate alone presenting a figure very much like their Grimm predecessors. When addressing the presence of fairy tales in society Röhrich mentions how

“Negative female stereotypes reveal themselves particularly in the female antagonist roles of wicked stepmother or witch,” (5) and questions the legitimacy of the tales and their place in the world. Röhrich asks if we should be raising children with “unrealistic” expectations of women (5) and the effects this would have long term. In the Grimm canon, single women are relegated to the realm of an outcast as seen through the Enchantress in ‘Rapunzel’ or even ‘Sleeping Beauty’. This tradition continues in the *Lunar Chronicles* for evil women take the helm with Queen Levana and her thaumaturge Sybil as two of the worst. It seems that in Meyer’s tales, the more power a woman has the worse she becomes. Adri has power over Cinder which she abuses – going as far as to deny her prosthetic limbs as she grows up – causing her to live in discomfort (*Cinder* 76). Similarly, Queen Channary, Cinder’s mother, had control over Lunar and as such “had her favourite seamstress’s feet chopped off” (84) so she could sew her more fine dresses. Powerful women are dangerous – even Cinder was referred to as such thus she must give up her power and relegate herself to a more suitable role, as Emperor Kaito’s wife.

Cinder and the *Lunar Chronicles* questions how much the fairy-tale heroine has changed from its Grimm form. As mentioned by Bottigheimer, “In the modern world, the stereotypical fairy-tale heroine rises from dire poverty to privileged status when a handsome and wealthy man recognizes her goodness and virtue,” (3 Framed). Ultimately, how much has really been changed in Meyer’s work? Cinder’s power is still dependent on the men in the tale. Kai was the trigger for Cinder’s whole story otherwise she’d still be Adri’s slave without any hope of reprieve. It seems Cinder occupies the position of passive Grimm princess long before she takes ownership of the title. What is required is a narrative model to retell classic tales in new and wonderful settings without condemning the female leads to the same fates as their predecessors. If that is not possible without editing the main aspects of the tales, then maybe it is time we lay these ancient tales to rest like the relics they are.

Furthermore, in their analysis of the modern rewrite, *Damsel* (2018) by Elana K. Arnold, Spiering and Amato discuss the importance of re-reading the piece with feminist theories in mind. They consider that if “literature is marketed by publishers and critics as ‘feminist’, we wonder what kind of feminism is portrayed in those texts and what types of conversations about feminism those texts can inspire,” (Spiering and Amato 18). The joy of the rewrite is that they are re-opening the conversations about feminist theory and offering opportunities to re-engage with familiar texts with new concepts in mind.

The familiarity between Arnold’s text, Meyer’s *Chronicles*, and my own align when considering the presentation of a feminist reimagining despite the very different circumstances in which the original tales take place. The reimagining of these tales, for me, was not to fix or bring the tales to the modern day. It was a response to the original Grimm tales – a rebuttal.

Why Burn the Tower?

The current working title for my piece, 'The Burning Tower' focuses on the image of a tower being destroyed. The common references to a Tower in fairy tales are associated with the tale of Rapunzel but since then have developed connotations of wealth from ancient castles and even mystic, astrological meanings within the Major Arcana Tarot. In my research, I found that pulling this card upright through a divination reading triggers meanings that could align with the following words for the client: "disaster, destruction, upheaval, trauma, sudden change, chaos," (Labyrinthos). It was this sense of disaster that I wanted to emanate through the beginning of Bryony's story which follows her path to reclaiming her kingdom and as such the image of the Tower needed to be destroyed and further allude to the chaotic, magical route of this tale and its protagonist.

The setting of the Tower has further personal connotations for both the inhabitants at the beginning of the tale. For Bryony, it is another cage she has found herself in after her father kept her world suffocatingly small. Her freedom has always been tethered to the male individuals in her life like her father and her older brother, Sorrel. Now they are no longer present in her life she will finally get to experience the world the way she wants to. The idea of entrapment is explored through the plot as the reader experiences the world of Nos through the cloistered Princess' eyes. This conveniently helped me establish a way to showcase the fantasy world of Nos and all of the wonderful people and races within it.

However, for the Wraith of the Wastes, the tower acts as their eternal prison for their crimes against the people of Nos. They have existed there for centuries with only the food sent from the mainland, vicious criminals, to act as the source of company. This entrapment was meant to exist until the end of time; I wanted to allude to how if Bryony's family had survived, entrapment would've been her fate too. The Wraith's crimes were terrible, but they also offered no chance of redemption for the character – now the creature is free the chance may present itself.

The world of Nos works as a shadow realm of our own with a connection being established between the two in the later tales. Thus, I chose the name 'Nos' meaning 'Night' in the Welsh language to further reference the "Other" nature of this world beyond our own. Historically, Celtic mythology is full of magical beasts and wondrous quests thus I drew upon some Welsh customs when building the magical country of Riach where Bryony is from, especially when it comes to our saints and historical figures. Additionally, it was important for me to establish the issues within Nos early on as, much like our own, different countries encounter different issues. Thus, this world exists as a fantasy realm but not a utopia thus allowing it to balance darker themes with more ease and allow the plot to cover topics such as sexism, classism, and xenophobia.

Misogyny and gender roles are commonplace in the pseudo-medieval world I wanted to create for Bryony to reinforce the importance of retelling these stories with modern feminism in mind. During her journey, Bryony experiences womanhood through foreign cultures, as seen in her adventures in Draig to achieve some validation and possibly alleviate the guilt she feels from being unable to fulfil the role her father so desperately wanted her to have. Bryony's tale seeks to undermine the idea that Rapunzel's story was based on - that women need to be rescued. She is hellbent on women's place in society and filled with a rage reserved for someone who has been denied.

Initially, before deciding on the Wraith, I debated the whole plot singularly following Bryony alone. However, after establishing the Wraith's character I discovered I enjoyed the dynamic and their characters worked well to move the story along. Early readers of my work imagined a romantic entanglement between the Wraith and Bryony, something similar to the work of Anne Rice's *Lives of the Mayfair Witches* (1990-1994) and the connection between Rowan Fielding and the ancient being, Lasher. However, I had already decided that Bryony was not going to pursue a romantic relationship in this book. The plot is too full of personal revelations for Bryony, and I wanted to focus on this tale being both a quest and a journey of self-discovery that I decided a romantic sub-plot would not work to add to the drama at the centre.

I do believe the romantic subplot can be effective in YA but, considering the centre of the tale is concerning female empowerment, I believe a male romantic counterpart would take away the message of what I wish for this tale to be about. This is not to say that I believe romance in YA cannot be feminist – on the contrary, as long as respect is shown to female characters, and they do not simply exist to further the man's story. I believe that in later books, Bryony will fall in love again and marry but in doing so reconstitute the power in her country between partners equally and acknowledge female strength. I alluded to a future relationship through the tension between herself and the demon general, but I left things ambiguous enough for readers to deliberate.

Bryony's birthplace of Riach exists as the current home of the magical witch and sorcerer folk of Nos. Due to the destruction of the city of Kya at the book's opening, we catch a glint of the world Bryony has come to know. However, despite the gory scenes seen at the palace, this ruination was important to fuel Bryony's ambition. Initially, she has a golden view of her country but during her travels, she is offered new, uninfluenced opinions that add depth and complexity to her ideas.

War is central to my plot as it focuses on the rocky path to peace and the results of widespread destruction. Hence the opening follows the first major battle loss involving her people and thus triggers Bryony's tale of revenge. Nos, despite being home to many fantasy races, has been plagued by war, many of which were fuelled or involved the Riachian people. Previously, Bryony's people have been successful in their efforts however, due to the Fynix rebelling against the Riach the country has tumbled into danger in a way that its people cannot ignore with catastrophic consequences. This was inspired somewhat by the decline of the British empire and feuds that transpired as a result of competitiveness with other countries.

Bryony's world needed to work as a key jumping-off point for this series. The world is filled with a plethora of familiar and unfamiliar creatures and monsters that are pulled from mythology and fantasy alike. Much of the narrative follows Bryony's adventure to her throne with the backdrop of Nos providing the ultimate fantasy adventure for the young heroine with all the danger that comes with putting a reckless Princess in the wild, properly on her own, for what is most likely the first time in her life.

Key Characters and Tropes

Darkness is one of the key themes in the novel as many of the events surrounding the plot and before the events of the narrative take place follow murder, betrayal, and abandonment. It also takes on a literal embodiment in the form of the shape-shifter Brenn whose main body is usually a smoke-like mass of movement. Additionally, the world of the Shadow realms within Nos exists within a continual state of darkness at the beginning of the tale. To an extent, the idea of being without the sun relates to a feeling of isolation and monstrosity for what might be hiding there. These ideas of darkness are somewhat subverted by Bryony later in the tale who, upon heading to Quicog realises that there is beauty within the Shadow realms. Hopefully, the message here conveys that despite cultures being different there is beauty and joy in all of them.

I debated the idea of having a Prince in the Tower at the beginning of the book but after outlining the reckless, lovable, and ever-determined Bryony I knew I could not give the tale to anyone else. As I have already established, the inspiration was Rapunzel in the concept of a Princess in a Tower alone – beyond that I wanted the tale to have no similarities. As I have already spoken about the concept of the modern damsel, I wanted to make sure I was not simply reshaping a patriarchal ideal under the guise of feminism. To an extent, I feel as if I have set out to what I wanted to achieve.

Bryony does not view her sex as a hindrance – more she views society's rules as a burden placed upon her; she does not let this hold her back either – she advocates for better treatment of women in her country. Even though this is a shadow realm of our world and takes place in pseudo-medieval times, I wanted the country of mages and sorcerers to subvert from classic connotations of witches being women. When placing a medieval gender role in a magical world I considered that this would provide the best mimicking of our culture when reframed in Nos.

Furthermore, through Bryony's undetermined sexual preferences, I left the concept of her romantic interests vague. I was keen for this book to be without a romantic partner(s) due to the fast-paced nature of the tale and the darker themes undertaken through the narrative. I did not want to detract this tale from the power in Bryony being sourced entirely from her instead of a romantic interest who I was concerned would consume the narrative. In later tales, I am considering a romance for the heroine, but I am undecided about who I would introduce her to marry given her previous love ended in tragedy. In this tale though I wanted to focus on friendship and adventure. Surely enough there are romances present throughout the tale in the form of Sorrel's antics, Randall's love, and the romances aboard The Siren but for now, for Bryony, I wanted to establish she did not need a romance to accomplish her goals.

It was one of my goals to undercut the issue of masculinised strength through Bryony's varied skillset. I was concerned that perhaps I was feeding into the gorier hunters whose only power is to kill but Bryony keeps a range of skills that I make an effort to de-gender. Despite having some more gorier skills that she learned from the catacombs she is still every bit feminine in terms of the performative magic skills she used during dance and instrument playing she was privy to while growing up. The skills she has are tied to her independent learning which is what I hoped would shine through over what she was learning. Also, unlike other "hunter" heroines I wanted Bryony's story to be about exploration and adventure rather than purely survival and bloodshed. I hoped Bryony's own goal to learn

would outweigh the gorier powers she acquired whilst studying in the lonesome state in the catacombs when she was younger. She does not have undeniable skill when it comes to fighting – in fact – she needs far more training and practice to be able to defend herself properly. Through the character of Brenn, Bryony can access far greater powers which she doesn't condone but will accept in order to proceed with her own goals – so perhaps there is a little of her father in her than she wants to believe.

Additionally, I wanted to make sure that Bryony had a personality beyond constant dismay or underwhelming bore. It became somewhat of a trope where the female lead's personality revolves around the trauma she has endured and as a result she takes on a stoic-like personality with little humour or character dynamics. Feyre and Katniss both embody these ultimately shallow personalities. Thus, I decided to introduce both in Bryony first with her relentless can-do-despite-giving-it-no-thought-or-planning attitude which upon receiving feedback keeps the tempo of the plot upbeat despite darker themes. And secondly through the character of Brenn, the Wraith of the Wastes provides ample opportunity for commentary, historical context, and comedic relief. Despite the story starting at a dark time in Bryony's life, I thought it was a positive change to have a diversion from the usually Batman-like figure. Bryony was not going to be the one to have it all together – she is not a paragon – she's just trying her best and sometimes that means losing a few toes along the way.

Brenn, despite maintaining an original position of sinister ghoulishness, ends up acting as a voice of reason for Bryony who acts on her own accord. I was determined to make Brenn genderfluid as when I assigned them a gender, I found myself wondering if there was any point. Being an ancient creature, the character has mostly forgotten who they once were, with the element of the shapeshifter too, who they are must be somewhat of a blur. Brenn in no way represents any romantic interest for Bryony and as such their relationship at the close of the book emulates a close companionship of friends that borders on family.

Final Notes

By establishing Bryony as truly independent, multi-skilled, and with depth, hopefully, we have avoided the main trappings of the modern heroines of YA. If she does decide to marry in a later book it will not come at the sacrifice of everything she has worked for and will be done as equals not as a doorway to masculine power that she cannot access herself.

Bryony's journey is just beginning here as I have further plans for her and the people of Nos. The tale stands as part of a duology following the Princess and Brenn as they encounter problems with society, diplomatic relations, and what will come of the future and their place in it. The second book has the working title is "The Forgotten Court" and it is currently undergoing editing.

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The Burning Tower

Chapter One

All I had here with me was the view of the restless sea, the howling wind, and a monster. The latter seemed to have not made up its mind about me yet.

The Wraith of the Wastes was nothing but shadows and a fierce glare. Moonlight was streaming through a lone arched window, and its inky eyes were the only thing I could see. It had no mouth or skin, existing only as a mass of darkness that moved like smoke. I didn't dare glance away.

Perhaps this was a nightmare. The Tower loomed over my childhood stories as the ultimate punishment - like an ominous shadow for the worst deeds and an evil sentence befitting only the cruellest criminals.

My stomach clenched. I felt myself awaken fully as the spell that had kept me asleep faded away and I felt the cold stones under my palms as I drew my bare legs in close to my body. As memories came back to me, my blood iced over.

It was all real. Kya, the capital of Riach, the ancestral home of warlocks, wizards, and witches alike, my home, had fallen to the Horned King's armies. From where I was confined in my bedroom, I had seen the city burn. The ever-busy market town – deserted; the beautiful temples to Celine – ransacked; and among the fallen so many homes, shops, and buildings lay among the smoke as rubble. Our capital once so full of life: obliterated.

Bile rose in my throat as I thought of my brothers Sorrel and Abel. Had they survived? The war-worn Sorrel would go down fighting, but Abel never had the constitution for battle. Besides the Wraith I was the only one here. Why?

"How strange," the monster said. The face didn't move – I only knew it was a face because of its black inkwell eyes that shone. "I can't remember the last female sent here."

I tried to move forward, but days with barely enough food to keep a rat alive had taken a toll on my limbs. The floor was cold beneath my fingers, the stone black from dirt, time and whatever other gore coated the cell. Still, at least, this one didn't smell as foul as the prison I had enjoyed until I had been dragged here, disease and death reeking through the mouldy bars.

"Well, in that case," I replied, my voice echoing off the stone walls, "I hope I don't disappoint."

My head was reeling as memories of the last few weeks trickled in slowly, making my heart pound.

The attack on the city had been ruthless. I knew it had wiped out our forces. The remaining citizens had fled the Capital and kept running. If they were wise, that is.

"You must stay in here, Your Highness," one of the maids, Hackley, had said moments after the first strike had fallen in the town, smoke rising like an omen from the South. "It's safe in here."

I could see the lie in her smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Nowhere was safe. We all knew it. Yet my protests fell on deaf ears, and I was magically sealed inside as per my father's orders: no one in and, more importantly, no one out. I ordered my maids to get to safety and despite protests, I made it my last demand to them. And to my relief, I finally heard the noise of their slippered feet disappear from the hall. If I was about to die, I was not going to condemn my beloved maids to that fate too.

When I felt the magic dissipate around me, I knew my father was dead. Sorrel too most likely – he'd been fighting on the front lines. Abel was gone too; after fighting broke out he was quick to disappear. He never had the stomach for confrontation.

And what was worse, my father's arrogance about our army's power had surely led to this crushing defeat. No one had expected the Demons to align with the Fae. After that, there had been no hope for us. Yet my father would not hear of it. The possibility of losing was utterly incomprehensible.

After that, everything seemed to flash by. The palace was quickly overrun by figures in onyx-black armour and though I fought back with a poker stick from the fireplace one of them struck the back of my head. When I came round the smell of acrid burning and blood overwhelmed me.

I couldn't decide if it was kindness or cruelty that had led them to enchant me during my incarceration. My head was throbbing painfully now, but then it seemed like reality had no foothold for me. The cries of my people sounded like birdsong; the final battles were like an orchestra tuning their instruments; death turned to music.

I recalled the steel shackles biting into my wrists, the sliver of moonlight through the grimy iron bars onto the dank floor. I remembered the smell of death and ash and the taste of salt on my cheeks. Had I been lucid I would've burned them all down; myself too if it had helped. I guess I was lucky the enchantment hadn't driven me mad. Or perhaps it had.

The cells surrounding me were empty – the Fynix Fae took no prisoners. And even in my state, I hadn't understood why I still lived. I knew they would not grant mercy nor kill me quickly. I knew the Fae were savage in battle, that they made a sport out of death. From my cell, I had seen my father's corpse beheaded, and the head raised high on a spike by the Horned King

I think I remember my last moments in Kya. A scroll was being passed between two guards speaking in low tones. My sentencing was wax-sealed by the King himself. As for me, well, I hadn't expected a trial. With my father dead and my brothers missing, they assumed I was what was left of the Royal family – the last Wryfirth. Their sentence fell to me.

For war crimes against the Fynix Fae, you are hereby sentenced to Death by Tower.

Death for crimes against the Fynix people and the Horned King – it would work well as a warning against whoever stood against Riach's usurpers. And once again, I was paying for the decisions of my father and my brother. Even from beyond the grave, they were messing with my life.

The Tower was so tall you could see it from the coast, commissioned by my great grandfather as a cage for an ancient evil. A monster unlike any other: immortal, destructive, and bloodthirsty – the Wraith of the Wastes. Rumours spiralled around what happened to those sentenced here, but one thing was for certain: no one had lived to tell the tale.

Now that fate awaited me.

What unnerved me the most about the tower was the lack of noise. No cries of despair; no fire magic; no winged beasts pillaging the city: there was nothing. There was only the sound of my heart thundering in my ears as it all came back to me. My plan? My plan was very simple: live.

The creature slid forward, its eyes both hungry and haunted. I forced myself not to turn away, even though my skin itched to be away from it. Its body seemed to be a mass of shadows, of ink floating in mid-air and unending smoke.

The monster was legendary. The stuff of nightmares. A murderer. The Wraith of the Wastes. Even my illustrious, battle-worn brother would have fled from it. Whole villages had been laid to waste, endless families devoured, and ancient clans annihilated until it had been captured and imprisoned here by the head of my family three generations ago.

"Curious," the voice said again, its tone completely neutral. "Most of them would've been begging right about now. Spare me. Help me. *Save me.*" Its head tilted to the side. "They'd faint at the mere sight of their blood at first."

“You can tell they weren’t women,” I replied in as light a voice I could manage. The creature said nothing, but its eyes creased at the corners. I shuffled back onto my heels and leaned against the wall to get onto my feet.

As I stood up straight, I watched the creature pull itself up to my full height. Immediately, the black mass dropped away to reveal a skinny figure in a torn, filthy night gown. I blinked – a shapeshifter. It had turned into the mirror image of me. My blonde hair was dirty with sweat and grime; blue eyes, dark; my cheeks hollow from lack of food; my skin was now pasty white rather than the golden skin I had inherited from my mother.

My stomach clenched, and I suddenly wanted to heave. I watched as its mouth – my mouth - formed a sickly smile but instead of my teeth, sharp canines filled its maw. Each jagged tooth dripped with red.

“Are you afraid?” the monster asked, leaning in close. I could smell its rancid breath and my stomach lurched.

I clenched my fists, seeing myself in the darkness of its eyes. It knew the answer already, of course. It could hear my heart thudding in my chest.

“More like uneasy,” I said crossing my arms and rubbing my elbows. “But I wouldn’t dwell on it if I were you. I don’t scare easily.”

The creature kept the form and moved back. It ran its eyes up and down my figure as I fought to keep myself from shaking from cold or fear, I wasn’t sure.

“I’ll decide that,” the creature said, as it waited for my next move.

“What should I call you?” My knees wobbled terribly so I resigned myself to sitting back on the floor. The wraith watched with curiosity. Sitting on the floor wouldn’t be a good move in a battle – but this place had no weapons, no objects for me to defend with. Standing up wouldn’t make me any less dead.

The move made the corner of the grisly-faced creature’s mouth twitch a little.

“No one has asked my name in over a hundred years,” the creature said. I gestured to the space in front of me and, to my surprise, it shifted its form again. An oily black snake curled in front of me and hissed. “I have been called many things. Perhaps, you should assign me a name from this era,” the creature said amusedly, shifting form again to a huge spider the size of a cauldron with long and furry legs. “Make it good.”

I saw my face reflected in its numerous bulbous eyes before the spider grew smaller, jumped onto my leg, and climbed up my arm. I resisted the urge to swat it hard – spiders were no stranger to me in the catacombs I loved under the castle. Yet the creature’s needles traipsing up my arm made my skin crawl. I ground my teeth together: this was a test. It would kill me before I lifted a finger.

“I am honoured,” I replied. The furry feet of the spider made me shudder and I was glad when the wraith climbed off. “But I have only named the songbirds my father let me keep,” I watched as the shifter became a fat rat with a thick tail like a long and thick finger. “Do you fancy Tweet-Tweet or Flappy-Do?”

“Do *you* fancy dying?” the wraith responded, and I couldn’t help but smile. None of the soldiers spoke to me during my imprisonment – not that I was able to form many words then either.

“Hold on, I can do it,” I said. The wraith suddenly shifted into a giant brown bear in front of me, its maw dripping with blood. It consumed half the space in the room, blocking out the glow of the moon. “Fluffy?”

“No,” the wraith responded. This time I heard it echo through my head and I jumped. That time the wraith actually chuckled in response – a rasping noise that sounded like gravel. Psychic magic was forbidden – not like that would mean anything to something like it.

“Impressive,” I said. “Now I am intrigued to why you didn’t just kill me as I slept? It would’ve been easy with those psychic abilities.”

I would never have come round - it would've stopped my lungs for feeding me air. Cut my brain off. Paralysed me while I was prone. I would've ceased to be without a chance. The reasons for the magic's outlaw were countless.

"Where's the fun in that?"

The monster turned back into the form of the snake.

"And, like I said," it replied. "This was the first time a woman had been given such a sentence. *I was curious.*"

The last words echoed in my mind, and I shivered.

"How about something floral?"

The wraith sidled up to me and curved around my arm, its skin cold against mine, black scales shining in the light.

"Do I strike you as much of a Daisy? Or a Rose?"

"You'd make a lovely Daisy."

"No," the creature said with finality. "Honour your last moments with a good name, young one."

I aimed to stretch out those last moments as long as possible. The snake slid down, pooling its slippery body into a ring, its eyes glowing with moonlight.

"How about Brenn?" I proposed, the snake dissolving back into the smoke-form I had first met. "Once, I had a steed called that."

"Was he a good horse?"

"No, he was a total arse," I responded flatly. "Threw me into a hedge on more than one occasion." To which the wraith actually laughed – a strange, strangled noise that echoed around me.

"Brenn it is," the creature said before changing form once more. This time it took the shape of a young girl. No grisly features or terrifying mouth. Just a dark-haired girl – innocent apart from those soulless eyes staring out.

My heart stammered. This was far more unsettling than the other creatures he had just formed.

"Nice to meet you, Brenn." I extended an arm to the girl. Its eyebrows lifted in surprise before it took it. It clutched my forearm in our traditional greeting - it felt cold and clammy against me. Despite, all the years it had been trapped here – the ancient mark of respect hadn't changed. Its skin felt cold against mine and unnervingly realistic.

"A mark of respect for a monster," Brenn said with a smile too wide for the girl's face but I pressed my teeth together to keep my polite smile still. "Who are you, Name-Giver?"

"Bryony," I replied crossing my hands in my lap. "But surely you knew that."

The girl crossed her arms.

"Indeed, *Princess*," she said with a sarcastic smile. Those soulless eyes seemed to be growing wider, like a whirlpool, fathomless and deadly. Her tone was nonchalant as she continued.

"Such a sad little story of woe – surprising for one so sunny." The girl popped her lips.

"Forgive me if I do not share much empathy – it was your ancestors who placed me here after all."

"And now, here I sit too," I replied. "What irony." Brenn shrugged, no longer changing forms, clearly content with the unease this shape gave me. "I see you gave up on trying to figure it out."

Brenn glared at me.

"A smart Princess - how strange. Humour me – what do *you* fear?"

When I was a child, it had been being left alone in the nursery. The sounds of silence would stretch on for hours. Then I found ways to entertain myself and only one possible figure came forward in my mind. The angry sneer stained on his face.

“He’s dead now,” I replied. I thought of the head on the spike and my stomach curled. I knew Brenn must’ve seen it in my thoughts – this was all to make me squirm. The wraith grinned with triumph.

“Your father. The King,” Brenn replied. It tilted its head. I felt a pressure in my temples like fingers were pressed in deep. Suddenly, the memory of my father’s anger after I’d been caught in the market again rose to the surface in my mind, the roar of my father’s wrath filling the halls of my chamber. He rarely used his fists himself: that was Sorrel’s job. But at least I could hit him back. The memory faded and the Wraith looked complacent – how much had it just seen? Pulling memories from me with expert ease; it was an impressive feat indeed.

“You don’t *seem* much alike.”

“Thank you,” I replied, I couldn’t help but feel relieved. “I can’t think of anything worse.”

My Father had never known how to be more than King or a soldier. Worst of all, he’d forbidden my study of magic. The boys would learn the useful magics like conjuring, manipulating and all manner of school-based spells, but only highly talented girls would be permitted to study healing magic or performative magic for dances, music and the like. To my father, a woman was like an ornament. I was to be a present to a nobleman of our court – a gift to appease.

“He had very traditional ideas of who I should be.”

My father grimaced at the idea of independent women, and we fought viciously over my education. Instead, I had to steal library books about any and all magics I wished to learn, caught only once, after Abel had sold me out. I had been back since, of course: I knew that palace’s secret coves better than anyone.

I recalled my punishment being the murder of two of my birds. He yanked them from their perches and snapped their necks before I could rescue them. After throwing them at my feet I felt my blood rage and overcome me. Before considering it, I summoned a strike of lightning. Too surprised I knew such illegal magic to deflect it, I blasted him back into the hallway. The look of shock on his face was worth the entrapment in my wing for the remaining quart of the year. My meals were all taken there, and I was not allowed out, only permitted to watch the world tick by outside my window.

“And he was a total, arrogant fool.”

I was lucky when I found the catacombs. It was my realm. And the only people there were the souls of the dead and the rats. Neither of which I minded or seemed to mind me.

“*You are fiery*,” Brenn said, I knew it had been in my head watching too. Its smile suddenly widened. “No wonder you are not wed.” It transformed into a handsome man in front of me – I recognised him instantly, my chest tightened, and I froze. “Your heart was stolen.”

I leaned back against the wall – feeling the scratchy stone on my back through the thin cotton of my nightdress. Randall’s face didn’t fit here; it was too good, too full of hope to be in a place like this. The familiar floppy brown hair, the smattering of freckles across his lean face, and those full lips that I loved so much. His head tilted to the left – and the forked tongue of a demon swept his lower lip. Bile rose in my throat, but I clenched my jaw: he wasn’t here – this wasn’t real. The grimace on my face made the wraith snicker and I waved a hand as nonchalantly as I could despite the tugging in my chest.

Randall deserved so much better than to be a memory of mine.

“Go back to being the bear. I have no intention of “wedding” anyone,” I finally said – looking the shadow form of Randall in those familiar brown eyes. Those eyes made me think of home. Of lying in a dimly lit barn with his arms holding me close. Annoyingly, Brenn

seemed to be reluctant to change forms and Randall's features twisted into a dark smile. My heart clenched. "I think I have bigger concerns facing me, don't you?"

"Headstrong women are the fear of all men," Brenn said, then, thankfully, its face changed again. Me again, but younger, my eyes glowing in demonic swirls of black and red. Blood dripped from my eyes against a ghostly pallor of my cheeks.

"Headstrong is a good word for me," I said before using all my remaining energy to get up off the floor. "Now are we getting out of here or would you rather reminisce on every element of my tale of woe?"

The wraith didn't react as I brushed the dust off my hands on my dress.

"Clearly, stupid is another word," Brenn said, its voice deadpan. It changed back into its snake form once more and whipped its long oily tail across the ground. I was careful to step over it.

"You sound like my brother," I replied. I wandered across the cell to the window. It was small but I could easily climb through it. I reached out and felt the magic waiting there for me. An ancient holding hex – I could feel the breeze coming through, though solid air met me, stopping my fingers from going further. "Sorrel stole all of our family's stupid before I was even born though."

Brenn slithered up to me and shook its serpentine head.

"I am afraid there is no use in that, your *Majesty*," it said, sounding increasingly bored. "Hundreds of more powerful, dangerous villains with earth-shattering power have tried and failed to escape here." I frowned at the snake, who looked rather happy about my predicament – as far as snakes go to looking happy that is.

"They weren't me though," I replied drawing my hand back in and rolling my sleeves up, "so there's hope." I pulled the knot from the drawstring of the nightdress and tied up my massive length of hair into something like a bun; it was hard when you didn't have a mirror to work from. "Also don't call me, your Majesty. Majesty is for the king or queen. It makes me think of my father. Your Highness is more correct."

"Anything you say, your Majesty."

I gave it a withering look, "What if I called you Wraith? How would you feel then?"

The snake form instantly vanished, and the original smoke form returned.

"Then you would be correct, and I would feel nothing."

"Yeah, yeah," I replied. "Don't worry, I'll still call you Brenn."

"Thank you, your Majesty."

I ignored it, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath in.

"Ah yes, praying will definitely help you," Brenn said in a sarcastic voice. "It helped your predecessors too."

I listened for the magic and stretched out my arcane senses to search for any weaknesses. My arcane senses were my first mastery – I could learn much from a room from the magic left behind; when I focused on a person their aura would spread from them like ink in a well of water. My father's was a deep plum colour, Sorrel's was all red, and Abel's power, when it was strong enough to show, was a pale blue. Deep rich colours represented power and then changes in those could reveal emotions, or even traits. It was the ultimate truth-teller – unlike people, magic didn't lie.

I could feel the repressed dark magic coming from my companion. Lurking in the darkness, I could hear screams and cries. I could smell the metallic tang of blood against the wisps of dust that came and went with the wind. But the ringing emanating from the window was ancient, familiar magic – which meant I knew exactly how to break it.

Swiftly, I ran my hands around the stones of the window. They were coarse but not enough to do more than graze me. I groaned inwardly. Suddenly a kind of pressure appeared in my head, and I turned to Brenn with a scowl. The wraith looked at me innocently.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t rifle through my mind like a stack of parchment.”
Brenn blinked.

“If you wish to bleed you need only ask,” the creature said, a clawed paw reaching from the shadows before withdrawing.

The next part of my plan was the crucial one. I ran over the steps in my head again.

“I have a proposition for you.” I turned to Brenn. The Wraith of the Wastes seemed to acknowledge this as their shadow form grew to match my height. “A pact I wish to draw.”

“Your Majesty, whatever pact you have in mind I can guarantee it will not delay your death. There is no escaping this place.”

I crossed my arms.

“What if I said I knew a way?”

“I would say you were bluffing – if there was a way it would’ve been found by someone stronger than you.”

I sighed and shrugged. “Then I shall go without you.”

Brenn laughed then, “Go where? To the doom outside the window? I saw your mind. You can’t fly – you know *lightning* spells – basic self-defence at best.” The wraith chortled, “And *they* couldn’t even save you before.”

I bit my lip to stop myself smiling

“I would be out of another cage I have found myself in,” I replied. Most of my life had been cloistered in a tower just like this. Hidden behind gossamer, lace, and satin. Sorrel was the lion; Abel was the cub; I was the lamb. That’s what everyone assumed.

Everyone was *wrong*.

“You’re bluffing,” Brenn said, coming so close I could smell rancid acid on their breath.

“I swear on the Mother of Light *Celine*.” I declared. Brenn bared its teeth at me as I crossed my arms. “What do you have to lose?”

Brenn took a humanoid form of skin, no nose, and a black slash of a mouth. The eyes ever the same soulless pits. My skin prickled on the back of my neck.

“Your Gods mean nothing to me, you Majesty,” it said brusquely. “But you, you intrigue me. What are the terms?”

I clenched my fists tightly by my sides.

Hold your nerve.

“When we get out, you will be my guard, guide, and companion to protect me and keep me safe until I release you from our contract.”

“I thought keeping slaves went out of fashion,” Brenn remarked in a dour drawl. No slaves had been kept in Nos in generations – at least that was one of the things my father had been clear on reinforcing.

“Not a slave, a *guard*,” I replied. “I will pay you if that would sweeten the deal. Once I have funds that is - if money was your issue. Forgive me, but I never thought a wraith would want for money.” Brenn narrowed its eyes. “I am a Princess.”

“Correction – you *were* a Princess before you were invaded. Now you are no one.” It quipped. “Besides, I don’t want money. I want to *eat*.”

My stomach flipped over as I stared into its deep pits of darkness.

“You will eat whenever I say you can,” I replied. Brenn scoffed. “You won’t kill unnecessarily – but I daresay, I have many enemies who want my head. I’m sure you would never go hungry.”

The grim reminder of the Fynix’s Horned King, his army, and my death sentence came back into my mind and filled my stomach with a gnawing unease.

This made Brenn grin and it rubbed its grey hands together greedily. What was it thinking? I resisted the urge to find out.

“Your conditions, then?” it said finally after a minute.

“I saw my brother do this when he bound his guard to him,” I explained drawing my hand up to my lips. I bit into the flesh until my eyes stung. Blood dripped from my thumb.

The wraith extended a sharp pointed finger and drew a deep welt through their palm. Their grin was frenzied; when had its last meal had been? The thought turned my stomach.

Quicker than my eye could see the Wraith had my hand and drew the welt across my palm too. The blood spilled out across my hand, and the cut smarted against the cool air. I hissed and yanked my arm back. Brenn gave me a look of dubious innocence.

“If we want to honour tradition - we need more blood. Your brother must have been a wimp.”

The Wraith licked their finger clean of my blood and its grisly stained teeth were revealed. I tried not to look to disgusted.

“I don’t like to waste anything.”

“I don’t have any paper so the floor will have to do,” I said, getting onto my knees and letting the blood drip from my hand.

As I wrote the passage in the dust on the floor my fingers blackened with dirt. Brenn inspected it, feeling a swell of pride and fear in my chest as its cold, dead hand embraced mine, our blood mingling between our palms.

Our words glowed a deep scarlet as I recited them, and they echoed though the room.

“Thou shalt act as my hand,

Thou shalt honour my command.

Thou shalt trust in my soul,

Thou shalt always bear the toll.

Thou shalt fight my cause too,

Thou shalt never be untrue.

My conditions are that you shall stay,

Until the day I pass away.”

With the last utterance, the spell burned red-hot for a moment before the words turned to ash and the remnants of them covered the floor.

“Well, then, your Majesty,” Brenn said crossing its arms. “I do long to see this plan of yours.” It looked about the room as if they expected a herd of unicorn to materialise. My hand was hot. The newly formed scar resembled two long, thin, black marks, as if I’d had been struck with a poker twice. The ‘x’ felt raw and warm, but relief surged through me. There was still blood on my hand – perfect.

“And you shall, my new companion,” I said. I lowered my mental shields and used my magic to breach the gap between us, diving into its mind. *“I do long for some cheesy bread.”*

Their head snapped up. I pulled out of its mind before it could retaliate and threw my mental shields back up again. I had learned from my mistakes in the past; secrets were precious things indeed.

“You wield psychic magic too, your Majesty?”

“Apologies for the trickery, Brenn. But I rather like living.”

I pushed my hand into the holding hex on the outside; the magic writhed against my palm.

Time to put my theory into practice. Hopefully, for once, my family would be of use to me ; since it *was* my great-grandfather who set the snare. I smeared the blood up my hand with my fingers before stretching it out.

Building psychic walls were some of the first feats I had accomplished successfully in my study of the forbidden magic. I could hide my memories in case any monsters proficient

in the art ever attempted to traverse my thoughts. Like a castle, the mind was large and, could only be explored in parts. Secret rooms and catacombs needed more exploration to be found.

As powerful as the Wraith was, they hadn't noticed beyond the rooms I had shown them. The floors the creature had traversed had been operated by me. Sometimes it paid off to be paranoid; after all, the magic was illegal in Riach but that didn't mean it wasn't studied in secret. But in the Fynix Kingdom, they were part of the retained forces, used in unsavoury activities, no doubt.

I drew the symbol of Destruction, a diamond split down the centre, on the wall of air in a red smudge of blood. "*Break*," I whispered imbuing it with my magic. The zip of magic crackled through me as I felt the hex snap and break as wind flew into the cell. Relief surged through me as fresh air filled my lungs.

"Blood magic!" Brenn exclaimed over the howl of the wind. "Against the law and deeply forbidden, your Majesty." Its face was a picture of glee.

"Apologies, Brenn. I am a royal rule-breaker."

In my defence, it had never been my intention to break the law, but the only magic books down in the catacombs were those whose magic was banned. Blood magic and lightning were not the only two strings to my bow, but they were the most reliable.

I stretched up into the air and stuck my head out of the window. I could see the breadth of the island now. The trees, the boat house, and then nothing but the endless sea. I imagined the lights of Riach in the distance calling me home as the darkness of the horizon met my gaze.

I clenched my jaw as my resolve steeled inside me. This lonely isle would not be the place I died. Not today.

"Time to test that pact out then," I yelled to Brenn over the wind. I climbed up onto the frame. "I command you to catch me!" I yelled, watching their eyes go yellow as the magic of the command washed through them.

"What are you –"

I leapt through into the open air, shrieking in delight, feeling the air on my bare legs. Behind me, I saw the wraith jolt through the air in a mass of wings and smoke.

Freedom at last.

Chapter Two

I only fell for a second before the steely claws of Brenn clutched my shoulders tightly; the great talons didn't pierce me but my heart spiked all the same.

"You are insane, your Majesty," the wraith said, now in the form of a Riach Eagle but with a shadow plumage and pitch eyes. "Do you make a habit out of tricking monsters into your command and follow it up with defenestration?"

With a few mighty flaps, we descended the length of the tower, the tiny window shrunk to a dot above us. I whooped as we dropped – air rushing past my face. The Wraith's eyes glowed.

"How long has it been since you were out of the tower?" I asked as the ground grew closer to us.

"You Grandfathers wouldn't have been born for years to come," it remarked. "It was the third of your line that imprisoned me here." With that it looked far across the raging sea then – as if they could see onto the shores of Riach itself.

"I would say I was sorry about that, but I read about your, um, *adventures*, and one might argue that you brought it on yourself."

Brenn chuckled as my feet touched the grass and a thrill ran through me.

“They were the *height* of fun,” it replied before its eagle form disappeared completely and they turned back into smoke.

I couldn’t knock the smile from my face as I ran across the green, leaving Brenn behind me. The magic here was thin but the air was filled with the salty smell of the sea. Despite the cold wind blowing over from the icy realms of Draig, I wasn’t cold. I was too excited for that. I took my hair down and let the wind hold me in its breeze for a moment.

To the West lay the outline of the icy plateau; it broke off in shards where it met the water’s edge and made the coast look as if it were consuming the sea. To the East a mist shrouded where I assumed the Wastes dwelled in murky obscurity. I squinted but could see no sign of the shore at all. The Tower was too far from civilisation to see anything clearly, but the longing to see it all burned in my chest like a fire that kept me smiling despite what lay ahead.

I flopped down onto the grass and felt the cool tips tickle the backs of my legs and of my neck. The stars shone above me as my breath bloomed against the night. Maybe the Gods were up there too. Celine, the Goddess of the Sun, and the Goddess the Moon, Serena, watching over the horizon with serene expressions. I waved an arm their way – just in case.

Just watch me.

I wondered what lingered beyond the clouds. Then I turned and saw that Brenn had taken to the skies and was flying higher and higher, growing larger and larger, their roar sounding across the isle. I held my breath: it took a dragon’s form.

Giant black wings like sheets of smoked iron and a long, sharp tail descended upon the Tower. Its eyes burned a hot ember orange as its maw bloomed smoke. Its next blood-curdling roar revealed long jagged canines ready to devour. My heart raced. The tales didn’t speak truthfully of the power of the Wraith; Brenn exuded dark magic with every heave of its almighty chest. Had he been free to do whatever he wanted, I had no doubt I would’ve been devoured as so many had been before.

The creature turned its attention to the tower, batting it once with its tail. Then they flapped their wings and struck the tower again. And again. The foundations of the tower began to crack and the rumble echoed around our desolate isle.

In that moment an idea occurred to me. I stepped back and inhaled deeply to stir my magic. I focused on the energy I had become accustomed to and extended both of my hands. I imagined the magic flowing through my arms and felt every one of my cells charge.

I pointed forward and yelled, “*Ignite!*”

The bolt charged forth from my fingertips and struck the roof of the tower with a mighty blow. Simultaneously, Brenn roared once more, summoning its own fiery breath alongside it.

The Tower went up like a beacon, spouting smoke that pummelled the clouds high in the sky. I hadn’t meant to send a message – however, it seemed only decent to provide a warning.

There was no enchantment on me now. I was coming for my crown. And this time I wouldn’t lose.

The tower started to topple, and as the roof caved in, I realised that maybe I shouldn’t be so close. Turning on my heel, I sprinted through the forest to escape the rocks and the dust cloud that would surely follow. The cacophony of the tower crashing to the ground behind me was followed by a wyvern screech – somehow it sounded joyous.

I reached the edge of the island in a matter of minutes. I turned and saw the spot where the Tower now lay destroyed. Brenn was up in the air, the beat of its wings causing the dust to spill outward to the sea. I covered my eyes until it passed.

I had made it to the shore; there was an old boathouse and a small shack, the windows black with age. I peered into the boat house and saw the ashes of a recent fire near water's edge.

Landing with a thud, Brenn appeared still in their dragon form; but a moment later it changed shape once more, the smoke shrinking and forming the familiar snake. It then slithered up and around my leg before ending up on my shoulder. I shivered as its tail curled under my right arm like a snakeskin sleeve. As Brenn spoke, his tongue flicked against my neck.

"That was most fun. The lightning was most helpful, your Majesty. If not a little uncontrolled," Brenn sounded amused. "You need more practice if you aim to make Warlock in that field."

I scoffed as I pushed the mouldy door open to reveal a simple living space.

"Lightning is a difficult to control and I am a novice," I reminded it, investigating the space.

"You chose the worst elemental magic to begin with," Brenn tutted from my ear before resting his head on my shoulders as if the flying had worn it out.

Around the room was a moth-eaten bed and an old set of worn cooking pots. The remnants of an old army uniform were shoved in one of the drawers: a ragged old brown cloak, some stiff cord black trousers and a grey shirt. I picked it up, feeling the tough fabric under my fingers. It would have to do.

Brenn slid across my shoulders to my other ear.

"Should I assume you kept other magical abilities under wraps in order to get me in your service?" Brenn added. I placed the shirt back down. Naturally, Brenn knowing my psychic powers would've put a halt in my plan. If the wraith had known to look for barriers he could've escaped without my pact. My blood would act as a key. My magical abilities, limited as they were, were simply a need-to-know basis.

"Sorry for the trickery. But you were going to eat me."

Brenn sighed dramatically and looked as sorrowful as a snake could.

"I was. And yet I remain denied."

"I am sure we will find some food once we get to the mainland."

"A small village should do."

I ignored him as a quiet wind whistled through the creaky doorframe. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

"I wonder who lived here?" This place had clearly been gutted many times before; there were marks from shoes trod into the wood and marks from many boots.

"The groundskeeper," Brenn said in an upbeat voice. "Nice boy."

"What happened to him?" I asked. Brenn said nothing to respond, and I rolled my eyes. "Of course."

"I am a creature of habit," Brenn retorted.

"Yeah, well, no eating others unless I expressly say so." Brenn stuck their forked tongue out at me. I looked at my gown and accepted the grotty alternatives. "I guess this is what it shall have to be."

I placed my arm on the bed and Brenn slid off immediately.

"Would you rather a gown, your Majesty?" it replied, cocking their head.

"No, I would rather not," I answered, throwing off the remains of my nightdress. I still had cotton briefs on for which there was no alternative, so I kept them, hoping I didn't smell too much. "I believe it is safer to travel as a man in Nos," I confessed. "Women get too much unwanted attention."

Brenn said nothing, watching me closely as I hiked my new attire on and shivered at the cold cord against my skin. The rough scratchy fabric a far-cry then the gowns from home.

"I don't suppose your Majesty knows any glamouring spells? Not many men have chests like yours or hair as long as that."

I grimaced. Glamouring was an art, one I had not mastered in the catacombs below the castle. You needed light and a delicate refined power – Glamour Mages were highly sought after for quick fixes from ladies at court and gentlemen looking to make a good impression. It was an incredibly desirable gift. Once, my brother, Abel, bribed one to make him look more like Sorrel; square-jawed, handsome, with a rugged complexion one could only gain from battle and hard-toil. Yet, it did little to improve his chances with any of the ladies at court, Abel's innate arrogance and lack of self-awareness shooting him in the foot. Sorrel had more hope there – he was handsome enough to woo anyone – but his first love was himself.

"No, I am afraid not," I replied. My breasts were going to be a problem. "It is on my list for what I wish to study – but there were no books on that in the catacombs." Brenn had relaxed and was resting its head on its body, much like a dog would when curled up next to a fire. "Do you know any shapeshifting tricks that could help me?"

"My shapeshifting talents come from me being a wraith – they do not extend outwardly, your Majesty." It sounded bored and sleepy. "Maybe you should've focused less on illegal magic and more on useful ones."

I began tearing off strips of my nightgown for makeshift binding.

"Blood magic only became illegal when murderers started using it to control their victims," I said with a sigh. "Imbuing a liquid with magic and having it perform to your will is no different than water spells."

Brenn tutted. "You're missing the part that blood magic is ultimately more powerful than water magic though."

"I like a challenge," I replied. I wrapped the strips around my breasts and pulled them tightly around my back before doubling back and pressing them against myself. Somehow, I had given myself yet another corset. I grimaced before putting the ragged shirt back over myself. It was considerably flatter than it had been before even though it was uncomfortable.

"Much better," I declared, to which the wraith said nothing, so I assumed I'd done a good job. "Now, I'm already pretty dirty so the face should be fine. But the hair..."

I searched the space for something sharp and found a pair of rusted shears. I pulled my hair free and ignored the gnawing in my gut as I pulled it into one hand.

Brenn opened one eye. "Are you sure you want to do that? It doesn't look like you've ever cut it."

My hair stretched down to my behind. It was one of the things that reminded my father of my late mother – her hair had allegedly grown to the floor so I wasn't allowed to cut mine. It wasn't dead or dry either – long, flowing and healthy, even though it was unwieldy and difficult to contain.

"There is only one thing for it," I declared before taking a deep breath in. "I could use a mirror." I said it without any magic and despite their reluctance Brenn changed into a flat mirror which was propped up on the wall. "That's a neat trick," I said gripping my hair tightly, the panes of my face caked in dirt. I had my mother's rounded face with my father's sharp jaw and nose. The eyes were hers though, soft and blue like the lakes of Arelle. I held my locks tightly at the scalp and chopped through the grimy layers of hair as they slipped through my fingers to the floor.

"*You have no idea,*" chimed Brenn in my head.

I tried to ignore the twang of sadness in my heart – it would grow back. This was only temporary. "Fear not, your Majesty," came the wraith's response. "You'll make a fetching boy."

I grimaced in the mirror as I chopped the back and sides as short as I could go without cleaving the top. It looked as though I had a mop on my head. The hair stuck out at all angles – the air felt absurdly close to my skull and my head felt light. I wiggled my head from side to side and my neck felt bare. I ran my hand up it – a prickly feel that made me shiver. I pushed the hair back, so I had a little side parting to the right of my forehead. I didn't realise how much I would look like a skinnier, blue-eyed version of Abel. I frowned – the blonde would have to go.

"I don't suppose you can conjure up some hair dye can you?" I asked as the mirror changed back into a snake.

"I have not eaten in three decades and have used a great deal of my remaining energy today," Brenn said in a clipped tone. "Cut off an arm of yours and I'll fly to Riach and make you a pot myself."

"How long can you go without eating?" I asked. "Just so I know when to marinate my liver and such."

"A few decades at least. But the less I eat – the less...." It searched for a word through serpentine lips. "*Amiable*, I become."

Hmm, amiable indeed.

"Noted."

I looked in the fire pit and spotted some ancient-looking coal and thought that would work for now. I leaned across the floor and picked up a few lumps, rubbing the powder into my palms until every line in my hands was black. I wasted no time running my hands through the soft, short locks still on my head. Then I worked the stone across the back of my skull and behind my ears. "How do I look?"

"*Ridiculously male.*"

The darkened hair offset my skin and made my eyes shine brightly. Then I set it to a side parting, using the coal to line my jaw as much as I could to make it look a little like I had a shadow of facial hair, at least temporarily until I could sort some make-up or maybe a glamour out. I lined my temples too – changing my face to a narrower, gaunt look. I drew back – thankfully looking suitably less like Abel but more of a homeless street rat than I ever had before.

"Good," I replied. "That's exactly what I was going for."

I got to my feet and brushed the floor's dust from my trousers. The shirt felt airy around my back and clearly had been meant for someone wider than me. The trousers I could adjust with the drawstring at their waist – even though they were still baggy on me. "I will have to acquire a new outfit the moment we come to a town."

Brenn changed back into a snake. "Do you have a plan?"

"Of course," I scoffed. I did not, but I had a vague idea of where I wanted to be – the rest I would figure out on the way. "We are to travel to Wist – my Aunt lives there."

"That's on the other side of the world," came the disgruntled reply. "That will take *months* on foot."

"We better get moving then," I said picking up Brenn so they could wrap around my shoulder again. Brenn groaned.

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The boathouse had one lone vessel waiting sadly in the outhouse. A rusted rowboat with a circle hook on the front as if it were going to be pulled along by a larger boat.

"Come on then, Brenn," I declared pulling the boat away from the wall with effort. It took me a few pulls to inch it closer and closer to the water. Brenn watched me and said nothing. I heaved with my whole body and eventually, it slid from the walkway, plopping it onto the water where it landed with an almighty slap. "I hope you're good at rowing."

“I don’t have any arms”.

“You could get some,” I reminded it as I pulled the two, weather-beaten oars away from the wall. Brenn didn’t reply after that – perhaps all the chat was covering up the fact that really it was exhausted. “Only kidding – I’ve got arms for the both of us,” I declared, throwing the oars in the boat before climbing in.

I placed my hand on the seat in front of me and Brenn slithered down and swayed as the boat bobbed. The unending beat of the waves had us rise and fall with every sigh of the water.

The wobbly feeling under my feet reminded me of boating on the lake by the castle a few summers ago with once with Randall. He had rowed us somewhere quiet where lilies danced on the water and the lake’s pixies came up to sing. The sun warmed my face, and he joked about making poetry for me. Randall had made even the worst days seem bright. My heart grew tight in my chest.

I placed the oars in the divots on the boat’s edges, turning the cool wood over in my palms so the paddles submerged in the water. They were heavy but at least we had them.

“You don’t propose to row to Wist, do you?” Brenn’s onyx eyes narrowed. “I do not fancy being Kelpie chow.” I didn’t admit it, but that had been a previous idea of mine. But without any food and water, there is no way we would survive. Well, Brenn probably would after feasting on my corpse, and then they would be free to devour whomever they felt like. Let loose on the land like a terrifying unstoppable scourge.

That outcome was less desirable.

“No. I propose to row to the lovely land of Draig – then we will travel south via boat and then end up in Wist.”

“You don’t mean to say you plan to go *through* Fynix?” I unhooked the boat and pushed the vessel gently away from its bearings. It emerged from the boathouse slowly, carried along by the tugs of the waves; the wind seemed to be holding its breath as the endless blue unfurled in front of us. “The people that your family were at war with – who murdered your father and probably your brothers?”

“Not if it’s avoidable. We’ll head down through the Shifter-lands. I have friends in the South,” I said. It gawped at me. “If we went the east-ward way we’d be going in completely blind to the Shadow Lands.”

“I don’t think you understand how insane you sound,” Brenn said as I began to row. With a snake and I as the only passengers, I did it with ease. “They will roast you in Mount Dia if they catch you.”

“Let’s hope they don’t then,” I said as I pushed us further into the waves. The sea was dark under the cool night sky. I turned and saw the fire had ebbed away, leaving nothing of the Tower but blooms of smoke joining the clouds above us. It was a strange relief seeing it gone - now the isle was empty once more. “And if they do, then you can enjoy a roast dinner.”

“Suddenly, I am okay with this plan.”

Damn Wraith. It stretched out its long neck and watched as the island drifted into the distance with every stroke. It had been imprisoned for many years, long before I was born. I wondered how the world would look now – through their eyes.

Brenn hissed slowly.

“You need to learn motion magic. Then your weak little arms won’t hurt, and you can have a nap instead.”

It was right: my arms had started to burn.

“I don’t suppose you know how to do that?”

But the wraith had gone to sleep.

Chapter Three

I rowed until my arms ached and then kept rowing. Hours had surely passed as the wraith slept on the bench opposite me. How much energy did Brenn have reserved? Perhaps I had been naïve to assume that such a being would be immortal and unstoppable. It was exhausted.

My next issue pressed into my thoughts: how was I to feed it? I couldn't just let it eat anyone. Yet I had no money on me to buy anything fresh. Theft was my next option. Or grave-robbing, as unsavoury as that was. Still, once the soul was gone the body was left to feed the earth and I was sure Celine could spare a few.

By now, the coast of Draig had snuck into view, a smudgy black line on the horizon. The next problem was how not to freeze to death in the cold air. As the boat edged closer, any sweat I'd mustered from rowing started to evaporate, leaving me with a chill down my spine. I clamped my teeth together and rowed until I found a short, rocky cove to mount the boat.

"Wake up, Brenn," I called as the nose of the vessel crunched against the stones. I jumped out onto the shore as the damp cold sand sunk into my toes. Then I heaved the boat further onto the sand and groaned loudly as it took the rest of the energy in my arms. I wished the old guard hut had spared me footwear of some kind: the night air was frigid, and I worried my toes wouldn't survive the cold. If it had not been the summer season here, I knew I would've died already.

The snake opened one eye and then lifted its serpentine head to inspect the area. Its eyes fell on me and then it curled back up.

"We are not yet in Wist," it said sarcastically. "I can remain asleep."

It closed its eyes once more.

"My toes will fall off at this rate," I replied, but it didn't move. I placed my arm next to it – it lifted its head and gave me a curious look. "Up you come." It slowly slithered over and wound its way up my arm, continuing until it lay along my shoulders with its head resting on my right collarbone.

"Onward steed," it said, tapping its tail twice on my upper arm.

"Dick."

I left the boat where it was. I had contemplated kicking it away, but it could be handy for a quick escape if this all went sour. I cast a look to my weary companion. I knew if I stopped for a rest the exhaustion would hit me too, so I gritted my teeth and started to walk, ignoring my burning limbs.

Wist was our ultimate goal: Aunt Gloria was family and she liked me. She said I had spirit, like her sister, my mother. All we had to do was survive. That couldn't be so hard now, could it?

I trekked up the short beach and climbed the rocky cliff face up and over onto a frosty-grassy hump. Turning my head around I could see the island in the distance. The smoke had subsided, and now it was only an obscure little isle once more. Brenn raised its head a moment and I heard it exhale slowly before it closed its eyes. The frigid air whipped all around me as snow, light as dust, whirled around us. If Brenn was cold, he was being quiet about it – a sarcastic comment had not passed his serpentine lips in a while.

I crossed my arms across myself to keep some warmth but my throat has started to burn. My calves were streaking with pain and my joints creaked on as we kept walking.

Turning back to my path, I could see the snow topped mountains and hills of Draig. If I headed south, I should avoid the clans of the North.

And their dragons.

I knew they had not met with my father or come to our aid as Kya was marched upon. The people of Draig kept to themselves apart from trade. You rarely saw a Rider away from

their homeland. Much to my dismay, dragons were not allowed in Riach. Though our forests were full of animals with just as much rarity and, in some cases, dangerous habits – my father was keen on keeping that Old Law in particular active.

Thus far, I had seen only the one dragon. It was when the delegation from Draig had arrived for the summer solstice celebrations.

I had snuck away from my governesses and seen the leaders arriving in all their leather-clad glory. I was nine at the time when I saw it. A giant silver-scaled beast with wings and a head larger than a carriage. My transgressions earned me a departure the following year. I was sent away to the north of Kya with a horde of governesses. My brothers on the other hand were allowed to attend all of the celebrations and discussions.

I picked up a piece of frosted grass and let the wind take it north, so we knew which way to avoid. It was a couple of hours before the outline of something resembling a town teetered on the edge of my vision, but as we neared it, it turned out to be a collection of trees. Disappointment burned in my stomach. My knees ached and my breath had become laboured. My feet had frozen past numbness and Brenn had done nothing apart from be sarcastic and small.

“Maybe, your Majesty should consider going to the capital of Draig for aid?” Brenn mumbled from my shoulder. “I’d prefer Gortia any day over freezing to death.”

I laughed at that, despite the already ridiculous drop in temperature. Just when would it be morning? I was determined to not be killed by sarcasm alone. My teeth were chattering.

“They would turn us in, Brenn,” I said. The grass on my underfoot was uncomfortably crunchy. “Speaking of turning – I don’t suppose you could turn into a pair of boots for me,” I asked. Brenn hissed a laugh.

“I could turn into *a* boot,” it sighed, “if only I had a body to feast on.” The Wraith was a quick wit and it made me smile despite the cold that seemed to sunken into my bones.

“If you see a bird you can hunt, I give you permission to do so,” I said as I stomped forward.

“How attached to you are you to your fingers?” it mused, raising its head eagerly. I cast a look down at my hands, dirty nails, and skinny bones.

“Very,” I said. It flopped its head back down. “Sorry, Brenn.”

“You don’t need all of them,” it grumbled. Then it raised its head, eyes wide. “Stop!” it hissed, suddenly awake. I stopped instantly.

I held my breath and heard a rustle in the air. Brenn’s head was suddenly poised like an arrow on my shoulder. As the seconds ticked by my heart started to pound before they spoke again.

“Wings.”

I cursed loudly and started to sprint back to the trees for shelter, but immediately my vision became blurry. Heat seemed to stretch to my head from my neck, and I couldn’t move my feet. I fought the exhaustion, but my body refused. I stalled.

Stars started to slip across my vision, blurring into a million eyes watching us both. The white plume of my breath burned my throat. Numbness spread up my legs.

“Highness?” Brenn hissed into silence.

I felt my hands fall to my knees. My eyes began to blot over as a jarring heat spread over my chest. My lips tingled.

“I’m out,” I said, before my knees gave and I fell back into the snow. Brenn slithered up onto my chest.

“Well, it was...interesting knowing you. Brief as it was,” Brenn said, its beady little face hovering above me. “I look forward to eating you once we are captured and you are slain.”

I opened my mouth to respond but then darkness seeped into my vision. It couldn't let me die if there was a way he could save me - surely, the pact would save me? At my silence, Brenn fluttered next to me. I saw a flame of black magic as Brenn changed form one more time - black eyes glowing with power. It had clearly been lying about the magic it had left.

"You suck."

My eyes shut. Darkness claimed me.

Chapter Four

Truly, I didn't dream of anything at all. But I did feel light. Like I was being carried upon the wind. And then I was warm. Toasty warm. Like I was being bathed in the warm glow of an open fire.

Suddenly, I heard a noise like something metal being dropped followed by a bunch of colourful curses. The voice was male, young and bright and it was headed this way.

"Wakey wakey, Mister," he hollered. I slowly opened my eyes. I must've slept for a long time as it was a real effort to let the light in once more. Immediately, warm amber eyes met mine. "There you are!" he said, grinning widely.

I felt soft grey cotton pyjamas on my arms and legs. My skin prickled in apprehension - was I revealed? Was I facing my death any moment now?

The boy had dark ebony skin and long, braided hair lay across his shoulders and down his chest next to braces that hooked into his trousers. Perhaps sensing my discomfort, the boy softened and patted my arm.

"All is well, Mister. You are safe here," he said gently.

I noticed the sleeves of his grey shirt had been rolled up to the elbow and the cross-fastening at the top was undone. I recognised the pocket-filled leather belt around his waist and knew he was a healer. I had no doubt that inside were a multitude of liquids, powders, and solutions suitable for healing magic. Even his trousers had extra built in compartments and pockets around the hips and knees.

"When we picked the pair of you up from the border, we were all so surprised that you survived. A pleasant surprise but a surprise nonetheless," he sped on. "Your lips were blue and everything." I opened my mouth but before I could speak the boy held a glass there.

Calling him a boy didn't seem right anymore. His mannerisms were that of someone much older. He was so tall, stockily built, and I assumed he was close to my own nineteen years.

"Time to get some water in your, friend," he said gently as he tipped the glass. I quickly drank the entire thing finding my lips to me dry. "Excellent work, Mister."

From the room it was easy to deduce this was a healer's quarters. The walls were full of jars each one brimming with flowers, herbs, and plants - some of which I didn't recognise at all. A stone-laden fireplace glowed with heat in the corner; beside it the wood stock was stacked with logs of all shapes and sizes.

An arched window sat opposite with curtains held behind two brass hooks. Outside, lay a white courtyard bordered with snow-topped trees. The sky was pale and it was snowing gently.

"My name is Hector, by the way," he added. "Your brother said your name was Aaron but I can call you Mr Noyin, if you prefer," he said in an upbeat voice. Aaron Noyin. A Noyin. Of course.

Calling itself my brother was surely another facet to which the shapeshifter could torment me. A fellow sailor would've suited us better: I needed no more reminders of my family.

“Yes, that is me,” I dropped my voice as low as I could suddenly all too aware of the lack of masculinity in my voice. I thought of how Sorrel spoke and tried my best to channel him. “Thank you, Hector but where am I?”

Hector nodded slowly and his eyes turned to concern.

“Mr Brenn did say you had a head injury that made it hard for you to recall things.” He felt my forehead for my temperature. “I did inspect your skull but thankfully I didn’t feel anything untoward.” He frowned, the lines between his eyebrows deepening, but after catching my eye he softened. “You’re in Clawton, a big ol’ town in Gortia.”

I blinked at him. My innate sense of direction had led us exactly to the place I didn’t want to be. I needed to invest in a compass. Maybe I could make Brenn turn into one. Hector watched me carefully. “Your ship went down off of Rynd after a fire aboard. You two are the only survivors.”

I nodded slowly. It did not surprise me that Brenn was good at lying. I thanked the pact that I had made - surely Brenn was compelled to keep me alive after all. My spell-casting had worked.

“Where’s Brenn?” I asked, rubbing my eyes with the back of my hand. My fingers were still stiff. I tried to push myself up but Hector flailed his hands about.

“You must rest, Sir,” he said placing his hands on my shoulders. “You decided to walk to Gortia – despite the freezing cold. You had been attacked by the frost badly, especially on your feet and the weather can affect the joints too. We had to submerge you slowly in a warm bath upon your arrival but—”

“You’ve lost a toe, *brother*.”

I propped myself up on the bed just as a tall, lean figure turned the corner. The stranger wore a white shirt and a tan jacket with a fleecy lining, and a pair of those trousers with lots of pockets that Hector had been wearing. They were cuffed at the bottom that showed off his laced leather boots.

“Ah, there you are Brenn,” Hector said brightly. “Appetite quelled, I hope?”

His lips quirked. He had a little stubble around his squared jaw and I would’ve considered him handsome if that familiar smug countenance didn’t spoil it. And, of course, if I didn’t know exactly who he really was. Yet perhaps what was most unnerving though was that he looked a little like me. Ignoring the thick brown hair braided back by his temples, it was like looking in a distorted mirror. I saw my eyes on his face; his seemed to be an icier blue though. I was sure he would pass for my brother though he was too broad for Abel’s lean form and too short for Sorrel’s stature.

“I am sated,” he said with his usual airiness.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Hector turned back to me. “The good news is that the rest of your feet seem fine. You might be a little wobbly for a few months but once you get used to it, I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

Hector went on to explain that the effects of the cold in Draig had stolen many toes and fingers – especially of travellers just passing through. He went over and pulled a copper kettle off the fire. It was whistling steam and a small cloud of it went up as Hector prepared us tea.

“We dragon-kin have the fire in their blood that sustains us,” he said as he handed me a terracotta mug. The smell of lemon and chamomile filled my senses and I sipped. “But at least it isn’t winter currently – you would’ve likely frozen through within the hour you arrived.”

I thought of being submerged and assumed Brenn had glamourised me himself. There had been no questions on my gender. But those amber eyes were still filled with concern.

“Take this morning slowly. You will regain full strength but make sure to keep warm and make sure you keep drinking too.” Hector cast a look at Brenn. “Let me get you some

food too. If you did want to get up there are some spare clothes in the chest of drawers opposite you. Your clothes are not suitable for this corner of Nos, I'm afraid."

"If you need anything ring the bell," he added finally before nodding and heading out of the room.

I waited until Hector was out of earshot before properly facing a smug Brenn.

"Good morning, your majesty," he chimed with a mocking flamboyant bow. "How is my favourite toeless idiot, Aaran Noyin?"

I narrowed my eyes as a ball of shadows manifested on my lap and then, just as quickly, dispersed revealing a pile of folded clothes and a bundle of bandages that fell on me at once.

"I see someone is enjoying their freedom," I replied trying not to grit my teeth at his insufferable expression.

"I did warn your majesty about the concerns of the weather but she did not take heed," he added for good measure.

"I didn't see you brimming with ideas either, Brenn," I sighed in a hushed voice. I resisted the urge to pull back the blanket and see what damage had been done. I couldn't feel any difference but perhaps that was due to the tea Hector had given me. It was singing with sweet magic that surely had painkilling properties. I kept my eyes on the door.

Brenn pulled up a chair next to me, resting his hands on his knees as he sat next to me.

"Fret not, majesty. No one can get past my expert hearing – even those proficient in stealth magic." I resisted the urge to look impressed. Brenn's eyes glittered. "How do you think I got away with being such a keen assassin?" I rolled my eyes.

I investigated the pile and saw some Draigian clothes similar to his.

"Are you not going to compliment my new appearance?" Brenn said wiggling his eyebrows.

"Oh, I have no doubt it will haunt my dreams," I replied. He grinned further still, and a long serpentine tongue swept out of his mouth as his teeth elongated like some undead ghoul from the realms beyond. I grimaced as I inspected the outfit.

"I don't care how neat your form is: you're still a slimeball," I told him. "How did you pay for this?"

Brenn shrugged. "I fabricated an illusion when we were rescued and stole some for you when we got here." I glared at him. "I'm a Wraith. I don't have pockets."

"You do now." The loose trousers with all the pockets seemed something of a Northern fashion that I hadn't encountered before. "Does everyone wear those?"

"Anyone who has a dragon does," he said looking bored. "I guess Hector does."

I lowered my voice. "Does he know I'm not a man?"

Brenn leaned in and whispered back, "If I say yes then can I eat him?"

"Still no." Brenn pulled a disgruntled face.

"I glamourised you when they were reviving you – you're all man in their eyes," he grumbled.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"So, you can glamour," I scowled. He must have been laughing away to himself when I was covering myself in the soot from the fire to appear less like myself.

Brenn shrugged his shoulders.

"I am thousands of years old, your majesty," he said in a bored tone. "My speciality is shape-shifting but I have had the time to at least practice other magics. And you never asked."

I flopped back down on the pillow.

"Ever helpful, aren't you, Brenn?"

“Undoubtedly so, Princess.”

I felt the fabric in my hands. A soft cotton shirt and a sturdier leather jacket felt soft between my fingers. Brenn’s eyes were ever-watchful.

“Does her majesty find everything to her liking?”

“She does,” I replied. Slowly drawing my legs over to the edge of the bed. I pushed back the thick duvet to my knees. “Does my brother feel adequately *restored*?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“The breakfast they provided indeed returned my energy to me,” he caught my eye and chuckled. “No corpses just bacon, ham, and these delightful lamb sausages.” He waved a hand at me. “I should be sustained for a time.” He reached into one of the pockets on his legs and pulled out a short cork-stopped bottle.

I picked it up. The label was peeling but on the front were a few notes of application to do with wet hair. “Hair dye?”

Brenn shrugged.

“Your scent is marred in my presence. But I have imbued this dye to restore your masculine features even when I am not present, should the occasion arise. It should last a few weeks.”

“I would like to learn this myself. Glamouring always seems like it could come in handy,” I muttered, stretching my legs for the floor. My right foot had been bandaged up. Suddenly the sensation of imbalance made me stop and breathe. I waited until my vision cleared before moving again. The crawling sensation in my stomach filled me with apprehension. “Remind me to buy a book when I am home.”

I stood up now and was surprised to be met with silence. I turned to see Brenn’s masculine face lit by the sun. His lips pressed together in a prim sort of smile – as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t. Another moment passed.

“Out with whatever you know, Brenn,” I said resting one of my hands on the wooden bedframe. My stomach began to churn as he smiled.

“Only that ‘home’ for her majesty will be rather a long wait,” he said in a morose voice. “Hector was talking about it this morning. Kya will be the new Fynix colony. The much of the old town has been totally razed. Most people have fled to the East or the West. The Wryfirth line has ended – Celine’s people have been scattered across the world to take refuge.”

The new colony was not a surprise. Afterall, it was the Fynix people wanting to take over the Northern Isles had added kindling to the feud between our countries. And yet, it still stung in my heart. The world that had thrived outside my window; the schools, the temples with their domed roofs, and the palace standing over it all. Now every part of it would be shaped into the Fynix image - nothing of my country’s heart would survive. My skin prickled.

“And news of me and you?”

Brenn folded his arms.

“You’re not going to like it.”

“Nothing new then.”

Behind him the snow was falling thick and fast now. When it snowed in Kya the people filled the streets with ice magic; magnificent sculptures and snow scenes appearing across the city. Competitions were held in the artists quarter and the spectacle was truly worth the sneaking out I had to do to join in. My heart ached terribly but it was quashed by a smug grin by the Wraith.

“News has reached here of how the Wraith of the Wastes devoured Princess Bryony Wryfirth and defeated the tower once and for all. Now it’s stalking through the land planning

it's next move." The gleefulness in his voice was grating. "All of Nos is up in arms. I am still the endlessly powerful being of mortal peril and you are as dead as the rest of your family."

My temper flared. Of course, that was the solution they had come up with. Rage burned in my veins as I met Brenn's joyous eyes. I could not forget he was still the Wraith of the Wastes; still a creature of bloodshed and misery. I had forced his hand. The moment I died he would leech upon me, devour all I had ever been, and the world would remain at his mercy. Had we not been rescued I would be a corpse now, perhaps the magic was not as strong as I thought. Brenn could have helped but didn't. Had the dragons not shown up, I would've been his breakfast.

I was no stranger to being trapped, but Brenn had existed years before my parents had even been born. That kind of captivity must eat away at the soul – if he even had one.

I shrugged my shoulders and gathered up the clothes and hair dye.

"Great. Well, if I'm Wraith food no-one will be looking for me," I said. "So, if we keep a low profile, we should be able to get to Wist without any unnecessary damage."

"That would be possible if we manage to evade the onslaught of forces that the Horned King, the Demon King, the Hydrean and Dean Fae forces, and even the Council of Shifters have sent North to hunt me."

I groaned.

"Wonderful," I seethed. "Your reputation clearly precedes you. Meanwhile I am enjoying a peaceful afterlife." Where had Hector said the washroom was? I cast a look down the wall to where an oaken door was.

"Well, the rumours say that you gave me the strength," he added.

"A cow could've done that," I replied.

Brenn grinned with a mouth full of surprisingly normal teeth.

"We both have reputations." He added. "Yours is just awful."

I gave him a deadpan smile. "Says the murderer."

Annoyingly, Brenn didn't look ruffled at all.

"That might fix our money problem?" he proposed in a hopeful tone. "The problem being we don't have any."

I narrowed my eyes. My inheritance had surely gone to the Fynix people. Yet I thought of the catacombs and knew my treasures would be secure, if too far away to be of help to any of us.

"Is murder your answer to everything?"

"Only most things." He rolled his eyes. "Can you sing? Or dance?" Brenn said, watching me closely as I wobbled to my feet. "I daresay a young gentleman would pay for you to take off your clothes."

"A tempting suggestion," I waddled slowly in the direction of the showers that Hector had mentioned earlier. "Can *you* sing?"

"Only the sweet melody of death," he told me. "I've never had any complaints."

I turned back once more.

"See whoever has the worst mind and take what they won't miss," I said.

"On it, your majesty." He feigned a salute.

"Don't get into any trouble," I warned before I left him there.

It took me a moment to understand how to get the water running. Back in the palace I had bathed in a deep copper tub that was filled with warm water and spices. I had used long creamy bars of floral soap and lay among flower petals. After rubbing the suds to foam between my fingers, I would take my time washing my hair and languish in silence where no one could disturb me.

The bathroom was nothing like that here. Water ran out of a wooden pipe over my head when I pulled a hooked wooden handle. I wasn't sure how one adjusted the temperature, so I left it as it was as I washed out the grime that had accumulated on my skin, taking care to rake my nails through my hair and cleanse my scalp from the coal that had stained it.

I traced the lines of the tiles before me with a finger – now the dirt was gone from the nailbeds my hands looked more like mine. I followed the smooth squares up until I reached the wooden pipe – it seemed to be leading in from outside.

How did the mechanism work to provide that never-ending stream? This part of Gortia must've been full of wealth to have hot water running so freely. I applied the dark dye over my head, the smell making my eyes water. I added a smudge of it on my eyebrows too; blonde eyebrows would look strange.

I'd lost weight around my thighs and my chest. I mean, I was never slight like the ladies at court. I would never be a delicate Fae or a sharp Elf whose lean bodies were built like arrows. But now, unlike their elegant forms, I was gangly - my curves lesser. I guessed it was a good thing for my disguise but my body felt strange. I eyed the trousers and white shirt that Brenn had stolen, making a mental note to pay when I had the means to. We would need funds – if only I had access to my savings at the palace. There, I had my own secret stash in the forbidden catacombs. No one knew about the tunnels apart from Randall, and even he couldn't navigate them without me.

I wondered if Brenn could portal like Mages could. Maybe he could teach me? I remember when Sorrell had mastered using a portal, the knob. He rubbed it in my face as much as he could. He used a wand – our family's heirloom – when casting big spells like that. Abel had no interest in learning, but Sorrel wouldn't teach me it despite me all but begging.

I found myself gritting my teeth. I looked down at my bandaged foot. The white linen had darkened with the water. I sucked in a breath before leaning to unwrap it. My hands shook a little as I revealed the warmed pink skin of my foot. There were a few knicks along my sole but my smallest toe had been reduced to a stub. I sighed and wiggled my other toes. My stomach squirmed and I felt a strange sorrow pass through me for the lost toe but I forced myself to look. It looked like it had been stitched up neatly and then a healing spell had been gently applied.

You're still alive. Toe or not. I reminded myself as I spotted the pink scar that had curved around the remaining stub. My balance had been affected which I felt through the wobble in my knees, I wondered if I stood still long enough if I would eventually veer off to the left.

Still, it was only one toe. A foot would've been way worse.

I bound my chest with the bandages and felt the familiar pressure around my ribs. The coat Brenn had stolen was miles too big, cut like his, though the leather was a darker tone and the lining light grey, like wearing a bear hug over my shoulders. I found a pair of worn leather gloves in the pocket too and felt a twinge of sadness for the person Brenn had stolen this from.

I looked in the mirror as the steam had subsided. My hair was not as dark as I thought it would be. Had I left it on long enough? I looked closer and rubbed it dry a little more.

The brown had come up in a mousier colour that matched Brenn's current form. The colour made me look faded, a far cry from my usually radiant complexion, and the dark, heavy handed eyebrows made my forehead stick out.

Then I dried and put the clothes on. The strange cotton fabric felt scratchy and new against my skin. The weight from the jacket too was different to the dresses I wore on a daily basis before the war. I imagined my father's aghast expression at this outfit, his frown so deep it could carve a river into the earth. I couldn't help the grin spreading across my face. I

wouldn't have stepped foot out of my chambers – yet here I was on the other side of the world.

I glanced down at my hand. The cross remained embedded in my palm, leaving a muted red scar behind. I wondered if Hector had tried to heal it when I was brought in.

When I returned, I found that Brenn had also stolen me a pair thick soled leather boots with tight laces going up the front.

"I guessed the size," he said. He glanced at my right foot. "You'll have even more space now."

I sat on my bed as I worked the first boot on. The taut leather was far from the dainty slippers I wore during my lessons in the Palace. Yet I found myself liking the firm feeling underfoot, it would help steady my newfound lack of toe.

"When *did* I lose my toe?" I asked. Brenn was slouched on his chair, picking at imaginary lint on his jacket. He didn't look up.

"A few hours in," he said. "The sun was coming up and you were prattling on about something boring but still it seemed rude to interrupt you."

Then my stomach clenched.

"Did you-?"

Brenn just smiled and I felt a wave of revulsion. Clearly there were loopholes in my pact – I hadn't thought to plan for the possibility of a toe falling off.

"You're going to want to go see Gortia, Your Majesty," Brenn said as I finished lacing the second boot. "Dragons everywhere."

A thrill raced through me, but I steadied myself.

"We can't stay now they know you left the Isle," I replied as Brenn looked pleased with himself. "Feel free to fill me in on everything I missed while I slept."

Brenn pursed his lips.

"We were rescued by three riders looking for the survivors of a ship going down off Dion. I heard their thoughts as they got closer, and they believed my talented portrayal of an unfortunate human."

He crossed his arms as if to say, '*so there*'. I frowned – that seemed too easy.

"Unless you ate the real riders who saved us and you're using your psychic powers to possess everyone," I suggested instead. I'd read the stories about Brenn – his atrocities had haunted my people. Yet, to think that the same being from all those tales was currently rolling his eyes at me seemed beyond my comprehension.

"My reputation clearly precedes me," he crossed his arms. "After destroying the Tower and travelling with you, my power was pretty limited to some close-range psychic powers and shape-shifting," he explained, a smile playing across his lips. "Besides the toe, if I had eaten say, a decade earlier, everything you said would be possible. And, providing you were unconscious, and they were a threat, I would've eaten them, eaten their dragons, turned into one, and then flew us to Wist."

I heard Hector's feet growing closer and I shot Brenn a look and he stuck out his tongue, a forked black thing. I pulled a face before the bright eyes of Hector fell on us.

"Goodness, Mr Noyin," he said his bright eyes landing on my hair. "I could've sworn you were blond."

It took me a beat to remember that was me. I could tell him about the dye but now wasn't the time to arouse suspicion – perhaps the glamour was working a little too well.

"Please, just call me Aaron. Yes, in certain lights I do appear rather bright," I said. Hector's smile wasn't mean – just surprised. "But it's our family's colour," I explained.

Hector nodded and surprised me by taking my face in his hands, as his soft fingers felt around my jaw, and I blinked as he pressed a warm hand against my forehead. "How are you feeling though? Drowsiness? Nausea? Temperature-related illnesses can drive a person to see

hallucinations, become confused, sweat profusely, overheat, underheat, grow dizzy, or make a person feel like they are dying.” He stopped running his eyes over my head. “Any of those apply to you?”

Beside Hector, Brenn smirked.

“Nope just a bit tired,” I said, politely. He tapped my cheeks gently before he removed his hands and nodded, a pleased look on his face.

“You’re very lucky, Aaron. Very few people have braved the cold plains utterly unprepared and lived to speak about it afterwards.” He looked a combination of bemused and impressed. “Your devotion to living is very commendable.”

“My brother wouldn’t die under such circumstances,” Brenn said. “Not when he has so *much* to live for.”

I bit back my grimace at that sarky smile of Brenn and turned to Hector who hadn’t appeared to notice Brenn’s tone. Then I remembered the story that Brenn had relayed about the ship going down. “Did you find any of the others?” I asked. Hector shook his head sadly.

“We can only hope they made it to the other border of Dion,” he said. “I am sorry for your loss.” Brenn nodded, his face the dubious picture of mournfulness. I gave him a respectful nod. “May they find peace,” he said reflectively.

Brenn clapped loudly which made Hector and I jump.

“Right well, we must be off – family, commitment, duties, activities, etcetera –” Brenn said getting to his feet and turning to suss out where the door was. “If you wouldn’t mind showing us the way to your nearest port, we would be most grateful.”

Hector seemed abashed for a moment and was immediately apologetic.

“Yes, yes. You did say you were keen to get home, of course.” Hector grabbed a coat draped over a chair that looked a similar style to my own, but it was longer and had flaring corners at the bottom. “But first at least let me show you around a little. Since the Council pays healers there are a multitude of us, and I never have any new people to converse with.”

I looked towards Brenn with a smile of my own – he narrowed his eyes.

“You see the heart of the city is full of Summer Solstice celebrations – you don’t want to miss it!”

Of course, moving on was of the upmost importance but I couldn’t seem to bring myself to refuse Hector’s charming smile.

“And who better to show us than a local!” I chimed in. Brenn rolled his eyes and Hector threw his coat over his shoulders.

“That’s the spirit! Come on, Noyins,” he said gesturing us to follow. “I’ll show you around our slice of Gortia’s glory.”

Chapter Five

Before I was allowed to leave, Hector further swaddled me with a huge green knitted scarf and a white and brown furry hat that was far too big for me. Brenn, having somehow acquired a black hat and scarf of his own, kept pulling mine down over my eyes when Hector wasn’t looking. Yet however ridiculous I looked I was glad for them when we embraced the cold and my lips stung against the morning air. My words froze on my tongue as I took in the ice-covered world that surrounded us.

The healing quarters that Hector kept were in a grand house made from wood and stone with slanting curved roofs that curved like a fireplace around the reverse of the house. It was full of large arched windows that looked in and ancient masonry that was well-kept despite clearly having been around for a long time. Most breathtaking of all though was the

snow; it waited on every surface in perfect white blooms and my fingers itched to pick up some and lob it at Brenn when he wasn't looking.

As we left the front porch, I noticed a family crest I didn't recognise carved in smooth grey rock. I knew the crest for the ruling clan of Draig – the DuVale clan – was a dragon perched on a crescent moon. But that was the only one I could remember. This one was a Dragon in a ring of fire. Besides the name Athanas there was Draconic written under the plaque – *Heal, Help, Home*. I assumed that was the family's motto. It described our new healer companion well.

Hector led us up a path that had been newly cleared. The grey stones led off onto a forest path from the clearing that the house lay in. Thick sage green trees coated in snow thrived among the blistering cold as sunlight peeked through the falling flakes.

Part of me was desperately sad to leave Draig before seeing nothing much more than the front door but it would be best for us to leave before whatever horrid reinforcements were sent North to capture Brenn arrived. I thought of the Fynix assailants that had attacked me in my room; recalling their onyx armour glinting in the witchlight sent a chilling sensation down my spine. But that wasn't even the worst of it: Dean Fae assassins were infamous, and shifters were some of the most skilled when it came to any works of espionage. Yet, the Demon King's forces were a horror all by themselves: the Reapers; the Clandestine; and the worst of all – Bonekeepers.

They were immortals. Demons who lived past any measure of time and whose sole purpose was enacting the orders of the Royal family. Their work took place in the shadows, but the legends of gore and horror haunted all of their actions. Of course, none of these tales ever compared the terrifying Wraith of the Wastes. My stomach clenched at the thought. The sooner we were out of Draig the better.

For everyone involved.

The grand house seemed hidden by a forest so we carefully followed Hector for the right route out. Snow crunched under my boots, and I pressed my hands into the pockets. Part of me wanted to climb inside his mind and learn more about him. I wondered if he had any dragons himself. If he was a dragon-kin individual, why wasn't he covered in scales? Perhaps that was just myth after all. I knew that dragons had to pick their riders, you couldn't just select one – just the reverse. You either rode or you did not.

"You know, I do not have the prepositions about the privacy of the mind that you do," Brenn said in a lowered voice so Hector ahead of us wouldn't hear. "I spent nearly all my time in Hector's mind before you awoke." He declared, his dark hair shining in the sun. "It's an egregiously sunny place to be for the most part."

I elbowed the wraith in the side. "That is not okay, Brenn." The corner of Brenn's lip quirked as his dark eyes focused on the road ahead of us. Hector was telling us how the wildlife here survived living in such a cold environment, I nodded along but simultaneously opened up our mental link.

"What did you find out?" I whispered.

"Why are you whispering? You're in my mind," Brenn replied, his eyes glowing.

"You're incorrigible," I rolled my eyes. *"He seems nice. Even more than nice really – he took us in without a second thought."* Brenn's lip twitched at the corner. *"Anything I should know?"*

"Can't say. If I did that would be a massive invasion of privacy." Brenn tilted his head and glanced to our sunny companion. I scowled – like that mattered to him; he was just determined to be unhelpful. *"We could just ask him?"* he added, I lurched out to grab him, but my fingers closed on cold air as he zipped on. I sped up to catch up with him, the snow crunching hard under my feet.

“So, Hector,” Brenn said, watching Hector turn. His golden eyes bright in the sunlight streaming through the trees. “Did you always want to be a healer? Draig is rather famous for its extreme dragon-based sports – that never interested you?”

Brenn smiled like he was a human too, it sent a chill of uncanny down my spine. But if Hector was put off he didn’t let it show.

“Oh, always. My parents taught me,” he told us. He slowed his pace so I could walk alongside him too. “They’re the best healers in Gortia, without a doubt.”

“They pretty much raised my brother and I to be healers too,” he added softly, his braids swinging as he walked. “However, my brother had other plans. Mainly, involving him being a jackass.” He kicked some snow on the way. “Every family has their quirks.”

“My brothers are jackasses too,” I say before I could stop myself. My stomach dropped as Brenn sent me a wary look. Hector gives us both a soft smile.

“You have other brothers?” he asked. The resemblance between Brenn’s façade and my face made me nervous. Thankfully, Hector hadn’t questioned it. He didn’t seem the type who would intrude.

“Two, actually,” I said. “Both jackasses in their own ways.” A twinge of something bitter curled in my gut. It was most likely that the pair of them were dead. Sorrel probably went down looking suitably heroic and Abel probably fainted and then passed on when his heart couldn’t take it. My throat suddenly felt tight. I didn’t want to think about it.

“My grandma always says that families are your greatest strength and your worst weakness at the same time,” he added, his voice trailing off at the end. “She also loves to tell me I’m missing out as I’m not married yet but that’s just her way of showing affection.”

I wanted to tell him I understood that particular pressure; had my father got what he wanted, I would have been married off to a boring Duke living in Eilaf years ago.

“*Why would you marry a Duke when you’re a Princess?*” Brenn commented, his voice sliding through my thoughts. “*Surely, he would be below you?*”

I pulled a face.

“*It wasn’t a status thing,*” I replied. “*My father would’ve sold me to anyone who would have me at the end. But I wanted to make the decision myself.*”

Besides, until the end of Spring I had Randall; no-one really stood a chance against a stable boy with the best laugh.

“*Radical,*” Brenn replied deadpan.

Through the path we passed many stubborn flowers poking their heads above the snow. I knew the crocuses but I was unfamiliar with the bright leaves and curling stems of the other blossoms growing. Patterns of animal tracks dotted the landscape, and I spotted a burrow covered dug deep into the earth – the small nose of a white rabbit-like creature emerged briefly. Black-set eyes with perked up ears, a hare perhaps, but it seemed a great deal bigger than the normal burnished-brown hares I saw roaming in the gardens in the mornings.

“The Snow-Hares are everywhere,” Hector said suddenly following my gaze out. The creature disappeared back down beneath the earth. If I looked for the humps of soil, I could see the rest of the warren. “Some people think of them as pests, but they feed the wild ones fine.”

“Wild ones?” Hector looked up and I followed his gaze.

The trees above us were fully flocked. I spotted birds high up in the canopy – their morning song bright and cheerful. Long stretching shadows filled the woodland path and I squinted past the sun breaking through. I heard a quiet rumbling over the chitter. I gazed further up still and saw the silhouettes of bigger creatures. The trees seemed to span into the clouds and every once in a while, a tail or wing would emerge from what looked to be a nest

raised high. My heart stuttered: *dragons*. I tried to focus to see as far as I could, but they were just too high.

“But they’re so close? Why have they not attacked us?”

Hector laughed. “Have you done something to upset them?” He shook his head. “You Southerners know so little about dragons,” he sighed but there wasn’t any sense of malice in his voice. “No, unless you’ve maddened them, you’re pretty safe. Wilder dragons who live in the mountains where food is scarce may attack, if they consider you a worthy meal, that is.” Hector gazed up thoughtfully. “Usually these are pretty friendly, I would’ve thought they would’ve come down and said ‘Hello’, but they seem a little shy today.” He added. “It’s most unusual for this particular clan.”

I glanced towards Brenn who met my gaze with his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He gave me an innocent smile and shrugged his shoulders. Clearly, the dragons sensed the danger that walked among us better than Hector did.

“That’s a shame,” I said.

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We emerged from the forest path and the snow evened out to reveal a new, well-worn stone track. Our route flourished as flowers and ancient stones lined the path, and it became increasingly busy with people heading into the city; merchants, travellers, locals, you name it.

Men and women bundled up in thick coats like ours walked alongside us as traders pulling their stands on wheels made their way into the centre. The kids, in packs, followed our route with eager steps – keen not to waste the day. I noticed that dragon-kin varied wildly in skin and hair colour – neither Brenn nor I stood out among the crowd. We looked rather plain compared to some of the more colourful residents. People wove their hair with braids in ways that I had never seen before. Even the men wore long braided styles under thick hoods. And of course, Hector knew everyone we encountered.

Soon enough, homes started to pop up alongside the road. Many curved rooves gave way to short, rounded houses that had thick stone walls. Shops too – selling everything from bushels of hay to iron ore. Painted signs hung above doorways: Seamstress, Healer Brandon, Butcher, Yarn. I did my best to keep my face neutral, but I couldn’t stop the grin appearing on my face.

Looking up I realised that part of the forest had simply grown along with the rest of the Gortia. Trees filled the sidewalks with homes and cabins built around them. Life was busy and bright under the summer sun despite the snow. Vendors served travellers as they passed by, and locals conversed from their windowpanes with hot drinks steaming from their mugs. Interspersed between posts and trees hung bright banners with all manner of patterns printed on them.

“For the Summer Solstice?” I asked, remembering what Hector had said earlier as we walked through the moss and snow-covered entrance archway. The healer shrugged his shoulders.

“Yes, but not just for the solstice,” Hector said. “People like to decorate the streets with the colours of the clans to show their support and allegiance. It brightens up the place when you have so much snow.”

Folks wrapped in thick cloaks of all colours with fur-lined boots milled about in the street as we walked by. My heart jumped into my throat as we neared people. I couldn’t remember the last time I had walked out in Kya’s city centre. But I tried to look as unphased as I could as Hector led us through the crowd. The smell of freshly baked bread wafted by with the opening of a door. My stomach grumbled and Brenn snickered at me.

Draigians sold fur-lined wares; leather cuffs; wooden tools; ceramics; and pottery in small shops or outside under large, coloured awnings. Many places sold food hot and piping

too so many unfamiliar savoury and sweet scents drifted by as our feet joined the footfall. Huge fires kept in clay pits gave the streets a warmer air. There were wood stacks near every few buildings to keep the fires lit.

A roar behind me sent my skin tingling and I ducked as a dragon flew overhead. It was a burnt umber colour with colossal wings. Another flew by a beat later, green scales glittering against the sun, the air vibrating with every flap of wings.

Even Brenn's eyes were wide as we watched them soar off into the distance. Our faces must've spoken for us as Hector laughed and patted me on the shoulder.

"You'll get used to them," he said with a grin. "Everyone here has one."

"Do you?" I asked, Hector's face didn't change but his shoulders gained a stiffness.

"I did once," he said. "He died a few years ago now. He was very unwell."

The sad tone of his voice sounded foreign coming from him. I offered my condolences but before he could reply my companion piped up.

"That's ironic," Brenn said. "You being a healer too. Very unfortunate." I shot him daggers, but Hector didn't bite. Instead, he sent Brenn a tired look of wariness.

"It is, isn't it?" Hector replied, tucking his hands into the pocket of his worn brown leather jacket. "It's why you must always cherish life – you never know how fleeting it may be."

Life in the city seemed to revolve around communal firepits; people roasted meat, gathered for warmth, and even dried clothes around the pits. The houses too curved around them, like the hearth of a home. The smiling faces and easy laughs of the people here made me feel both warm and cold inside at the same time. I couldn't stop thinking of Kya and comparing the two capitals. One full of life: the other obliterated. I tried to clear my head and focus on this new corner of the world. I couldn't change what was already done, but I could change my people's future.

After a while of ambling through the busy streets, Hector led us through to an open area. There was a plateau space that was empty apart from children using the area to play. It seemed like somewhat of an auditorium space with seats all carved in stone making up the banks around the sides and back. Around the edge, massive mangers of water were built; presumably for the dragons to drink from.

"This is the Core of Gortia," Hector explained. "It's where capital issues are brought before the people to discuss. And we also hold plays here, concerts, and dances."

We walked through the area, arriving in front of a big building with a curved roof, circular like all the other buildings in the city.

"Welcome to the Clan Headquarters – the Summit," Hector said gesturing wide. If I craned my head back far enough then I could see long sweeping scaled dragon tails hanging from a balcony at the top. "They use the building for Clan-related matters like law-making. They're all meeting soon to discuss the borders with representatives from Fynix."

"That sounds interesting," Brenn said, with way too much enthusiasm. He looked to me as if I was going to immediately agree to him eating my enemy. "Can we go?"

I shot him a frown. It was imperative we stay on task, however much my curiosity itched the back of my mind.

Our guide shrugged. "I don't see why not." Hector led us through a wide porch filled with people in fur-lined leathers and dragon-riding boots. Cloaks of all colours and types swept the stone floor that was filled with flakes of snow and mud trekked in from outside. Eventually, we passed a pair of doors that were flung open wide. Inside was a taller version of Gortia's core. The circle space had no roof, but I was certain there was an enchantment that stopped the snow falling in. At the centre, a giant bonfire was kept in a pit lined by

copper stones. Magic radiated here like the embers of the fire - I assumed it was to enhance the warmth given off from it.

There were lines of seats for the first few rows before boxes bordered the sides – much like how a theatre stacked its patrons. People clustered on the balconies, either watching the debates take place or hollering over the bars to the people below. The seats went the whole way round the stage, whilst overhead dragons lay in wait for their riders, their enormous heads lolling through iron bars at the top, tails swishing impatiently. I had to tear my eyes from them, so I didn't lose Hector.

As we followed Hector upstairs, I noticed more individuals go by with draconic features. Scales across their cheeks or nose, even claws extending from one or both hands. I tried my best not to stare as we weaved to the upper floor of the building. So many people from all different walks of life – and they were so close. Brenn and I garnered a few curious looks – sneaking out of here was going to be hard work.

"When do I get to eat?" he yelled down the bond between us making my head throb. *"If you want a dragon, I could eat the rider, and we could fly off to Wist in time for noon tea."*

"How about you just turn into a dragon and fly us there yourself?" I fired back. *"Also, you don't suppose any of these dragon-kin can tell I'm not really a man? Aren't they hypersensitive to smells and such?"*

Hector drew up at a large oak door and knocked.

"The hair dye is a strong enough glamour and the jacket I gave you smells a lot more like Hector than you. So, yes. You smell like a man." I gave Brenn a withering look.

"Besides, I haven't had enough human flesh for that kind of shapeshifting. Plus, I glamour'd you when we arrived here."

Before I could say anything, the door was flung open. A woman slightly taller than me with a warm expression smiled widely in greeting. She wore a thick grey leather jacket too that had been fastened tightly down one side of her chest with dark thick leggings and fur-lined boots up to her knees. Like Hector, she had beautiful golden eyes, long, dark hair plaited across her head on down her left side. All of a sudden, I found myself missing my long tresses and the back of my neck seemed to prickle.

"Hector!" she exclaimed clapping her hands together. Her gaze fell on us. "And your guests! I am so happy to see you both in tip-top shape."

"Ma," Hector said embracing her. "This is Aaron and Brenn Noyin. Guys, this is my Ma, Daphne." She gave us a cheerful wave. "How is Headquarters faring without me?"

"Well, only three brawls have started today and two of them were over mead," she announced putting her hands on her hips. "So that sounds like a win to me!" I could see where Hector had got his sunny disposition from.

"And the dragons?"

"Nothing to report thus far," Daphne rubbed her leather-gloved hands together. "Your father is with them now if you want to go up."

"Thoughts on stealing a dragon and flying to Wist?" Brenn said into my mind.

"That doesn't sound discreet or easy," I replied, though I have to admit, I was thinking the same thing.

Hector gestured to us.

"I need to get these two home," he said with a smile. "As lovely as Draig is I am sure they would love to be home with their own family."

"We can wait a moment if you have errand to run," I offered secretly hoping to see more dragons up close. Who knew if I would ever be in Draig again? My curiosity was eating away at me.

Daphne and Hector looked delighted.

“If you’re sure,” Hector said. “And then I will show you to the port. Brenn was telling me earlier how much he missed home.”

“Ah yes, always been a homebody,” I added.

“Oh yes,” Brenn said enthusiastically. “No place like home.” Hector’s mother looked delighted.

“Dion, yes?” she asked. “Well, then we’ll get you an escort through the Dio pass.”

Brenn grinned, nodding ecstatically, but my stomach dropped. The sooner the pair of us were off by ourselves again the better.

“How did you know?” he added with feigned incredulousness. My smile was stiff but Daphne didn’t seem to notice.

“Oh, most of our trade comes through Dion and Fynix,” Daphne explained. “The chances were obvious. Though you both have more of a refined Riach accent.”

“Being at sea for a while does things to your head,” I said cheerfully with a laugh for authenticity. I gritted my teeth – worrying that I sounded too much like a woman. That damned Wraith hadn’t thought to tell me of the blasted glamour, so I didn’t know how well it hide things like my voice.

“It turns Princesses into men for one thing,” Brenn added in my mind.

“Be inconspicuous please,” I fired back.

“I can imagine it does,” Daphne said happily. She cleared some papers off her desk and pulled a furry hat over her head. “After thirty years here, you think I would be accustomed to the cold.” She headed out of her office, gesturing us to follow, and then locked it behind her. She winked at me. “Just so people don’t mistake my office as a bathroom.” Her voice said it all.

We headed back through to the curving central corridor. The noise of the main chamber was loud enough to be heard from here. Dragon-kin were yelling loudly and occasionally, something or someone roared. Or maybe that was a dragon? I couldn’t decide if the havoc sounded like chaos or more like fun.

“Where are you from, Daphne?” I asked. She smiled happily, tightening the straps of her furry hat under her chin.

“I’m dragon-kin but I was raised in Fynix,” Daphne explained leading the way for us. “I’ve got dragon-sight to prove it.” I had a feeling that if we weren’t there, she would’ve skipped. My heart thudded: dragon-sight must’ve been why her and her son’s eyes were the tone of gold they were.

“Besides, the colour,” I start to say as we go past a whole herd of young men and women in riding leathers, “do your eyes do anything else?” I recognised some of the clan sigils on their clothing and my mouth suddenly went dry. Hector waved as we passed and called greetings to those he recognised. Each time, people were delighted to see him and then their eyes fell on us. I tried my best to embody a confident air but the smile on Brenn’s face filled me with unease.

“Oh, they’re great for detail when it comes to injury and brilliant when it comes to flying – I can see for miles when I’m in full power, as in when I’m not tired. Also, I can see through any illusions and any low-level glammers too.”

I sent Brenn a glare and he frowned at me.

*“You honestly think **I**’m a low-level spellcaster?”* He raised an eyebrow. *“I am offended.”*

“She might be being modest,” I retorted.

“Wow, that’s fascinating,” I replied. “And they’re so pretty too.”

“Thank you, Aaron!” Daphne said happily as we ascended what felt like the millionth set of stairs. “We’ve all got them in our family,” she said, clapping her hands together merrily.

Suddenly we passed through a wooden-framed door that opened up into a massive circular space filled with dragons of all shapes and sizes. A thrill ran through me as I took in the number and sheer size of them, and I couldn't stop the grin taking over my whole face. Brenn remained stoically passive, but I guess you've seen it all if you're ancient.

A massive red one lingered close to us, lying like a cat, sprawled out by the door. We had to be careful stepping over its long tail and then its claws. It had a saddle of some kind strapped to its back, long leather-like bands stretched under its stomach to secure it there.

"Afternoon, Ryser," Daphne called to his head. He opened one amber-coloured eye, huffed a sigh and then closed it again. "Lazy dragons." Daphne added, but her voice was softer.

"I've found, Dad," Hector said. I followed his eyeline and saw a man with dark skin standing next to a curled-up green dragon. His hair was plaited just once down the back of his head, and he had eyes that were soft and green like shoots of grass coming through the snow. Next to him was a slimmer version of Hector with a grimace on his face – he had his hair shorn short, unlike the rest of his family. His face fell. "And Inigo." He turned to his mother with suspicion in his eyes. She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, what a pleasant surprise," she said, unsurprised. "Maybe you two can talk to each other like brothers and not like people about to go to war."

I watched Hector's face become stiff. His demeanour changed and he stalked over to the rest of his family. We dodged the other lounging beasts on the way. Most ignored Brenn, though a few of the dragons with weathered scales or those who wore marks of warfare seemed to regard him strangely.

"Ah, there is my handsome husband," Daphne hollered as we got closer. The husband in question raised his head and grinned as she came over. Inigo's expression didn't change as we approached but after he glanced at his brother, his face darkened. Hector clenched his jaw.

Daphne planted a kiss on her husband's cheek and then did the same on Inigo.

"Afternoon all," Hector's dad said. "I'm Ajax Athanas." He extended a hand to me, and I took it and then he took Brenn's too. "How are you both feeling?"

"Splendid, thank you," Brenn said in an uppity voice that made my skin crawl. It reminded me of the snobs at court who were trying to get on my father's or Sorrel's good side.

"Turns out I may survive after all," I added. "All thanks to the perfect Healer."

Ajax's face became proud, but his green eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Ah like father like son," he proclaimed jokingly. Daphne nudged him in the shoulder. "I'm glad you are feeling well enough to come and see the city when we are celebrating."

The beautiful buildings, the snow-capped landscapes, the communal fires, the colourful banners, and the even more vivid locals of the Clan-orientated city filled my head.

"Clawton is beautiful," I said. "I had no idea how big your capital is. Thankfully Hector is a font of knowledge when it comes to your lovely corner of the world otherwise, we'd be lost trying to find the port." I added truthfully. It seemed to sprawl out in every direction like the many points of a snowflake.

Hector's shoulders eased a little when I said that. He sent me a small smile that warmed my heart.

"*Be careful,*" Brenn said into my mind. "*That boy isn't into women.*"

Brenn was being finickity – I was just being nice.

"*You're only allowed to go into people's heads who might be an enemy, Brenn,*" I warned him.

"*So...everyone?*"

The brother spoke then, his tone filled with dismay as he looked to Hector.

"I didn't think we'd see you until the *Winter* solstice. Maybe you aren't such a wet mop after all."

The healer crossed his arms as a new expression crossed his face: icy displeasure.

"Nice to see you standing upright, I didn't realise you could anymore," Hector responded coolly. "Between spending so much time on your back in the stables with whatever that will have you and drinking away your pay at any tavern you're not banned at - I thought it beyond your current capabilities."

My eyes widened and I thanked Celine that Brenn didn't change his composure.

Daphne and Ajax exchanged a wary look of familiarity as Inigo's cheeks-tinged pink. His gaze fell on me, and his expression turned furious.

"Why did you bring them here?" he said gesturing to us. "They could be spies."

"We'd be pretty bad spies if you thought we could be spies," Brenn responded flippantly. Hector's face flushed.

"And they almost *died*," he added. "Aaron lost a toe!"

I nodded. "It was my favourite."

Brenn snorted as Inigo's face steeled further.

"Have you even investigated it? Why did we find no other survivors?"

I didn't want to dwell on the correctness of his concern. We were not who we said we were, but we were no spies, and it wouldn't matter as soon we would be out of the capital. On our way to the next part of our adventure.

"We're obviously spies," Brenn said in a bored tone as my stomach dropped. "Why else would we walk in the snow for hours just to reach you?" Brenn shrugged. "I knew we should've just died." He sighed dramatically. "Save us all from this confusion."

Hector let out an exasperated groan.

"Ignore my brother, he's a fool. You are welcome here," Hector said firmly. Whirling on his brother, his words had a bite to them. "Do me a favour and go back to the races – drink away your winnings and sleep in a ditch somewhere."

As his nostrils flared and Inigo clenched his fists I gave in and peered into his mind. He didn't have any defences in his thoughts and the feeling of bitter sadness made my tongue taste salty. A wave of anger flooded his head and suddenly I saw my skinny figure through his eyes. Then a memory stirred, and I saw a fight flash in his mind. A dragon lay on the floor lifeless. Inigo had a knife in his hand, and it was bloodied. There was such an array of sadness and anger in his heart that I retreated from his mind immediately.

Inigo muttered a curse as he stormed off past Brenn and I. The family exchanged looks of disappointment and embarrassment. Hector clenched his jaw.

For a moment, the only noise that passed between us were the lazy purrs and growls from the dragons. Then Brenn clapped his hands together.

"Well, he was spirited," Brenn added before I elbowed him in the gut.

"Put a sock in it," I hissed at him.

Hector raised his hands.

"I'm sorry, guys," he said. "Inigo is a piece of work." Ajax and Daphne exchanged a sad look. "The boys want to get back to Dion, Dad," Hector added quickly. "I'm going to show them the way to the port so they can head off."

Ajax frowned. "Hector, the port is closed until the delegations have come and gone. Even dragon flights must be kept in-land."

Hector raised his eyebrows. "Since when was that policy?"

Daphne shook her head. "I assume it's for public safety concerns," she said. "Demons are not exactly known for their predictability and with the Wraith somewhere in Nos – well, the Clan Council are trying to quell public fears." Beside her Ajax nodded.

My stomach swirled as Hector gave me a sympathetic look. I tried my best to not let my disappointment appear on my face. My concerns were offset by Brenn saying.

"Oh, dear that is most unfortunate," he shook his head and put his hands on his hips. "What are we to do now, brother?"

"You are more than welcome to stay at our home," Daphne said. "These are dangerous times and I want to make sure you are safe."

Her eyes glowed with genuine concern, and she looked so much like Hector. The family resemblance was truly uncanny.

"As long as you don't mind," I found myself saying. Brenn would no doubt have something to say in contrary but what could we do? Leaving when it was prohibited would easily get us into trouble quicker than if we snuck out with everyone else.

"In that case, I guess you'll be staying a little longer with us," Hector said, upbeat. "At least I'll be able to keep an eye on your recovery."

"As long as that is okay with all of you?" I asked. Daphne and Ajax nodded eagerly.

"Of course," Ajax said. "Cold sickness can have symptoms that last weeks and we don't want to hinder your recovery by making you do too much too soon."

Daphne smiled at me and despite the concern in my chest I gave her an optimistic smile.

"Have there been any new rumours about what happened?" I asked. "We knew Riach had fallen a couple of weeks ago, but news is scare when you're at sea, fishing."

Brenn's lip twitched.

"Well, after the Wraith of the Wastes somehow escaped the Tower of the Last Isle," Ajax said grimly, "rumours are that it went West so must be somewhere on Draig."

"How terrible," Brenn said, feigning apprehension.

"Quite," I added, sending an admonishing look to Brenn which didn't deter him in the slightest.

"So, do the Fynix plan to kill it?" Brenn said, crossing his arms like a concerned citizen.

"Nothing that old and evil can be killed," Daphne said with a sad smile. "They plan to imprison it. Or at least, that's what I think they should do."

"Do they know how it got out?" I asked.

"No idea," Hector said. "Apparently, the Fynix king sent the Princess of Riach there, and after devouring her the beast managed to escape."

"That sounds plausible," Brenn said with a nod and a sympathetic smile in my direction. It was always sobering to know that if my plan had gone pear-shaped, I would only go down in history as being breakfast for a monster.

Hector's lip curled.

"That's barbaric," he said shaking his head.

"The Fynix King holds grudges." Was all Ajax said, Daphne's eyes flicked up to his – a sombre look in her eyes.

I nodded, a stone sunk in my stomach. Our people had paid enough for this foolish war that could have been solved if my father had swallowed his pride and tried to stop the divide between our people and the Fae. Yet generations later it had finally come to a head – and the archives of our world would note the tragedy of our people's defeat.

My sinking feeling was offset by my theatrical companion.

Brenn sighed, "I hope they catch it. Something like that could cause so much *damage*."

Everyone nodded in agreement. I caught the glint of pleasure in his eyes as they met mine and had to resist a grimace.

Stupid damned Wraith.

Chapter Six

Since we were tied to Gortia a little longer, Hector dedicated himself to showing us more of his city. I caught his concerned glances from time to time - checking we were enjoying ourselves, no doubt. His caring nature made him easy to listen to and, like with every thing I'm sure, he threw himself into the role of tour guide.

It was refreshing to be spoken to just as someone normal; with a normal family, normal job and normal problems. Most people didn't need to deal with war-loving fathers in charge of a nation of people. If I had been born less driven, I could've easily settled for that life; there was beauty in the every-day. But I made a pledge to my people; I would not concede now - not when peace has not been restored and my people returned home. Seeing all these houses here in Draig, though wonderfully different from home, only made me long for it more.

From the headquarters he showed us the realms of small shops and businesses that seemed to curve around its never ending streets. I was surprised to see horses pulling carriages among the swishing tales of smaller dragons. Children made snow sculptures under windows and in potted gardens by the street, men and women collected herbs and traded with each other to fill jars with different leaves.

The colours of the Dragon-kin were as vibrant as dragon fire itself. Many sported patterns on their clothes to represent their clans, wore paint, sported piercings under their noses and ears, and wove their hair into plaited styles much like Hector's. When my hair grew back I made a promise to myself to try a few of them.

Thankfully, Hector didn't seem to mind my endless questions and Brenn said very little.

"Don't get comfy," his warning rumbled in my head. "You said it yourself – staying here would be a bad call. The sooner we get to Wist the sooner we are safe."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard you. But what can we do?"

"Sneak out?"

"That would arouse even more suspicion if we just disappeared."

Of course, we couldn't stay forever, I knew that. But something about the communal fire pits warming the streets kept me toasty inside as well on my cheeks.

On our travels, I met countless dragons and found them the most fascinating creatures. Sure, they were terrifying beasts when they didn't like you – they'd growl deeply, flash their giant teeth, and thrash their tails which were lean and sharp like a whip. Yet many were calm and complacent like overgrown house cats; too aloof to care about us, mere mortals. A few head pats later though and you could win them over easily – even more so if you could rub their tummies.

They seemed happy to see me, but most were wary of the wraith in the human guise. A dragon with white scales and black-tipped toes snarled at him fiercely; thumping its tail and snickering a warning. Fortunately, a few strokes on their muzzle from Hector easily mollified them.

"So, how old are you when you are given your dragons?" I asked as Hector led the way to the next stop on his list. His mother had been insistent about us going to see the younglings now that we had more time on our hands. Hector had been delighted by the request and I agreed straight away. Brenn, of course, followed us around like a bored shadow.

"It's a big ol' ceremony," Hector explained. "When you're deemed responsible by your parents, guardians, or teachers you're allowed to participate." We had come out of the main throng of Clawton, and the houses grew in distance between each other. We took off up a long stone path sheltered by a tunnel of fir trees. "You're taken to the Silvest Mountains

where the newborns will have come of age themselves. The higher the mountain, the better chance of a dragon taking roost there for the season. If all goes well, one will choose you and you begin your journey together as dragon and Rider.”

A curved brick building appeared from between the green, its top extended to a point like a straw hat, emitting smoke like steam from the spout of a kettle. The worn stone path had been recently swept and lanterns glowing with witchlight led to the structure.

“Can only Draigians acquire dragons?” I asked. The temptation of acquiring one for myself lingered on my mind. They seemed like big lizard-like cats. If I could handle a Wraith, I was sure I could handle a dragon.

At that precise moment Brenn gave me a sideways look: *don't you dare*. I sent him back a challenging look.

“Well, our people do know all the ways of the dragon,” Hector explained. “Plus, from what I’ve seen, the rest of the world isn’t exactly dragon-prepared, so Draig is a great place to raise them.” He shrugged as we reached an oak set of double doors. “But, ultimately, it’s up to who a dragon chooses.”

He pushed the doors wide, and the space immediately opened out the circle room. A cacophony of crackles, tiny roars, and gnashing noises met us. The pad of eager feet had me searching for the source. Nests of straw laid around the room and at the centre was a fire pit kept carefully behind a domed cage.

My heart melted: these dragons were no bigger than kittens. There were many sprawled out by the fire, napping in the hay, and coming over to greet us. A grey one, close by with pale eyes mewled softly after it realised who had opened the door. The green one who had been playing with a dragon with yellow scales quickly abandoned his companion to trot over.

“Excellent,” Brenn said warily while looking about the room. A few curious younglings began to able their way forward, “Dragon babies.” His shoulders stiffened as they came closer. Hector crouched to the floor and sat cross-legged as the spindly creature came over.

I couldn’t help my wide smile and immediately joined him on the floor. Over wobbled three different tiny beings; their eyes shone like jewels and their harmless claws were small enough to hold in my hand. They snuzzled up against my shins and a red one rubbed his head against my hand until I scratched under his chin. If I wasn’t on a mission myself, I could’ve easily stayed here forever.

“They seem to like you, Brenn,” Hector said holding a small black scaled beast in his hands. I turned to see Brenn overcome with pocket-sized dragons. After seeming surprised with his presence, they seemed to have bonded with him and a collection of them gathered in his lap, their pointed heads resting on his knees and thighs; one had even climbed up and nestled in the crook of his arm. He smiled for Hector, and this time, the smile in his eyes seemed genuine.

“Are these the new dragons for the riders?” I asked, an ember-coloured one chomping into my hand playfully. It didn’t have any teeth yet, so it didn’t hurt but I bopped its nose to release me. Its red eyes were wide and innocent, but its nose had a cut across it, the scales absent around a slender auburn now-healed gash.

“No, these are all orphans, Aaron,” Hector said, sadly. I felt my face fall. “Dragons can be bloodthirsty creatures, even with each other. Wild ones who have no riders frequently battle for land across the mountains.” His eyes fell to the babies in my lap and then he glanced about the room. “We couldn’t just leave them there.”

There must have been upwards of twenty little bodies here. My heart squeezed in my chest – they looked so helpless.

“Do you release them back into the wild when they are old enough?” Brenn asked, his interest seemingly genuine. I was proud of him for having feelings. He met my eye and glared at me – thankfully, Hector was distracted by the dragons in his lap.

“Most of them, yes,” he explained. “Some, however, become too domesticated and linger here. We have about six who continually fly here and mind the keep for us.” He shook his shoulders. “We call them the Guardians of the Keep, and they get paid in food so it’s not a bad life.”

As we had played with the dragons, Hector set about doing his routine: refilling their water troughs, tidying out their nests, cleaning any of the messier ones, and then nursing the smallest babes. As he worked, I hand-fed them square chunks of what looked like beef from a wooden bowl he’d filled up. Thankfully, I had never been squeamish which was handy as some of the food was rather bloody. However, the hatchlings didn’t seem to mind. In fact some licked my fingers after my bowl had been emptied. Their minute pink mouths chewed with tremendous effort and the nubs of some teeth that had already come through flashing every once in a while.

After eating their fill, many rolled over onto their backs and started to nap. A few took up positions around my legs, enjoying my warmth. Once again, I found myself calling into question the importance of my mission. If I didn’t reclaim my throne and didn’t die in the process – I could raise some baby dragons. Retreating into the wilderness and living off the land seemed like a dreamy way to spend your life.

However, Brenn took my distraction as an opportunity. As I looked up from the crimson babe newly nestled on my lap, I found Brenn devouring some of the dragon’s food – the raw flesh must have been a temptation he could no longer resist. I watched in horror as he ate what appeared to be a lamb leg whole. His mouth distorted through his shadowy magic, stretching uncomfortably wide, and the lips thinned out and those jagged teeth emerged. At once he pushed the whole thing into his mouth, bone and all. My stomach churned as he munched away smugly.

This reminded me to the loophole in our pact. I specified he couldn’t kill anyone to eat without my permission. If he didn’t kill – he could eat whatever came his way. Such as the lamb leg, breakfast meat, or even a frost-bitten toe. That latter still made the skin on the back of my neck crawl. I watched as Brenn smacked his lips together in satisfaction.

Having witnessed Brenn’s greed, a black dragon growled angrily in his direction. Brenn turned to it and gave it a bloody smile. The dragon growled even louder. My stomach fell to my knees as Hector began to turn too but instead, I gasped dramatically and pointed to the water manger.

“He’s drowning!” The blue-scaled dragon in question appeared to be blowing bubbles underwater. Obviously, he was completely fine, but Hector immediately bolted over and scooped the swimming babe in question up into his arms, giving my bloodthirsty companion enough to wipe the red from his lips.

“*You are incorrigible.*” I sent to Brenn’s mind.

“*My terrible owner doesn’t feed me enough,*” he snapped back.

“You need to be more careful, Hernell,” Hector said, pressing a fingertip to the head of the little dragon. After checking him over, Hector set Hernell back on the straw covered floor, the babe waddled off with a surprised expression.

With the babies, time seemed to fly and soon the sky had darkened, the main source of light came from the witchlights hanging around the room. Hector readied himself for outside and at the gesture, the baby dragons climbed off me and went to see him, as if they could convince him to stay.

“Time to go and see who is lingering about,” Hector said, brushing his trousers free of the hay. I got up to follow him, turning to check on Brenn.

I wondered if they could sense what he was. If they did, they didn't seem to fear him at all. Having since devoured one of their snacks, a few of the younglings regarded Brenn with intrigue or kept their distance, but most seemed to think of him as just another human. I left Brenn contently sat on the floor with the dragons. It was a strange sight – to see someone like him be peaceful among the hay.

Hector led me out a side door into something of a storage room, full of wooden drawers and cupboards with food, toys, hay, and kitchen space. There was a worn table, and I spotted a small hatch that I assumed would lead to a pantry below. After opening the connecting oaken door, we went out into the crisp air once more. My skin prickled with the cold breath of wind across my cheeks and sent me hiding into the warmth of my fur-skinned jacket.

The glade was empty besides a few trees standing firm under the weight of the snow. I noticed massive paw pads in the snow. My feet barely constituted a toe in comparison.

"Oh," Hector said, his brows furrowing. "It seems someone is shirking their duties." He crossed his arms. He whistled twice in a high pitch. Silence. "Odd."

Suddenly a nicker over my shoulder made me jump. A green face, longer and vaster than my whole body, stared at me curiously, its eyes deep and green like the depths of a lake. A brush of cold later and I saw Brenn zoom out of the door. He must've felt my shock, and I watched his eyebrows raise as he took in the extent of the dragon. It was one of the biggest ones I'd seen since being here.

"There you are, Astyanax," Hector exclaimed as he wrapped his arms around his giant muzzle. He didn't seem in the least scared and the dragon even lifted his head, hauling Hector off his feet too. He laughed happily as Astyanax put him down. "This was one of my first ever babies," Hector said, laughing. "After Idaeus, my dragon, died, I retreated up here to sort myself out." He spoke sadly, and the round mossy eyes seemed to watch us carefully. The sheer size of him was beyond impressive. "Astyanax was the first one I found."

The dragon too seemed pleased to see him, lowering his head so Hector could scratch between his ears. Of course, Hector was telling the dragon who we were and why we were accompanying him. If he understood, I had no idea, but Astyanax seemed very patient and still so perhaps he did. I caught a few wary glances towards Brenn though that Hector chalked up to curiosity.

While I listened to our healer talk animatedly about Inigo and his stupidity. I couldn't help but think: Hector was so kind and helpful: surely, someone as open and sweet as him would be on my side? I don't know - maybe it wouldn't be such a bad plan trying to recruit him as an ally. He was a healer after all. Those kinds of skills would be invaluable if everything came down to a fight.

"Oh yeah, I think that's a great idea," Brenn drawled in my mind. "You'll be either handed over to Fynix to die or will be eaten by a dragon. And once you're gone, I will rampage through this town and eat everyone I can."

I watched Hector and tried my best to ignore the sadness in my chest.

"Maybe not then."

"Very wise, your Majesty."

"How come he's so much bigger than the others we've seen about town?" I asked, taking in Astyanax's long scaled body; his tail alone was as long as one of the trees around the younglings' keep and as it swished back and forth, it made a pattern in the snow and whisked the flour-soft dust back into the air.

"I can only assume his parents were also massive," Hector replied. He ran a hand down the flank of the marvellous creature. The dragon snickered and nuzzled at his shoulder.

"Earlier, you said dragons chose their riders..."

The dragon was clearly very fond of Hector as he had not moved as Hector had hoisted one of the dragon's wings over his head as he looked for signs of damage. He seemed to be checking him all over for anything unusual. Always the healer at heart.

"When you rear one the traditional way you develop a bond," he explained. "They live, eat and breathe with you. It goes beyond physical ties: it's old magic." He added with a smile. "You can feel them, more than a pet or a companion, they become *part* of you. They never want to leave your side."

If Hector was so close with his first dragon it was no wonder he was beside himself when he died. Though I'd never had a dragon, I knew what loss felt like. It seemed my life up until I had met Brenn had just been a never-ending cycle of me losing. My mother, my freedom, Randall. My heart tightened in my chest.

No, we couldn't tell Hector. This was too important.

Now it was my choice how I went forward, and I had no plans of losing anything again.

As Hector finished his duties at the keep, Astyanax kept poking his head inside the keep to check on the younglings: I now understood the size of the door.

After we laid some more straw down and gave the younglings one last cuddle, Hector led us out of the keep. We left Astyanax taking his role as Guardian very seriously, as he lay in front of the door, his huge body curving round the building. As he breathed through his nose steam rose as white plumes into the night. I patted his muzzle as we passed by, and he whickered softly.

"That is approval," Hector told me proudly. I grinned as we headed back down the path.

"That's made my day," I said, truthfully.

Brenn said nothing. He didn't pat Astynax but instead nodded his way. The dragon watched him as we walked deeper into the woods. Even though I was looking ahead I knew that those deep green eyes were on Brenn's back.

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The dark sky was alight with stars, with not a cloud in sight. The moon was full, but Clawton was far from quiet. Bonfires filled the streets and families gathered outside with their dinners. Riotous laughter flooded the paths between residents and neighbours shared barrels of mead or bottles of wine on haybales left in the street.

"Are parties a regular occurrence in Draig?" I asked as I watched a group of young men carry a half-naked gent shining with what appeared to be some kind of syrup was led to a chicken coop. Drunken laughter came our way filled with the annoyed clucking of the birds.

Hector shrugged, "People always tend to get a bit boisterous during the Summer Solstice celebrations." He explained. "However, the Council tends to lay on celebrations for state guests too." He trailed off as his eye was caught by a swaying elderly dragonkin man dancing dangerously close to one of the street fire pits. "He better be careful if he doesn't want to burn his clothes right off his body."

As we headed through the capital, the auditorium that had been empty earlier was full of people laughing and chatting alongside tapped barrels of beer and mead set up on long wooden tables. Music was beating at a lively pace from a string quartet sitting on the steps. They filled the space with cheery melodies that had men, women, and everyone in between, enjoying a dance together.

Someone passed around a dark rounded bottle of some clear liquid with a fierce cinnamon smell. Hector took a gulp and then passed it to me and I read the label: Dragon's Breath. The sweet fiery kick filled my tongue and I swallowed. Heat scorched up my throat and I coughed which made Hector laugh. Overall, the sensation was pleasant but perhaps next time I would half the drink with some bubbles or juice.

"You're brave, Aaron," Hector said amusedly as I passed the bottle back to him. "Most foreigners would never take so much on their first go."

"Don't imagine bravery from foolhardiness," Brenn said, airily.

"Ever the critic Brenn," I replied as the instruments began their next piece. The band had struck up a merry tune I recognised and a quadrille took place on the beaten snow. I found myself nodding along with the beat and a giddy feeling overtook me.

Of course, dancing was one of the few things my father had allowed me to do. Women of noble birth were expected to keep feminine skills, after all. How well you could dance spoke volumes about a woman's education – in the eyes of my father that is.

Truthfully, I loved to dance but expressing myself in a ballroom was not the purpose of my education at all. Those lessons were to help find me a husband: to show the court the kind of prize I could be. I quickly learned the attention I garnered dancing was not worth the consequences of attempted suitorship and courting offers.

Thus, I danced with every father, solidier, and woman I could, my aim being that my partners had no interest in me whatsoever. It was worth my father's ire. Many dukes, marquises, and lords had been snubbed at my hand in exchange for a dancer with no impressive title or expectations. Most of them would try anyway, if they pleased me and we engaged in courtship they had better chances with my father. It gave me immense joy to politely cast their offers aside and settle for partners who did not see me as a means to impress the King. Of course, word would eventually return to my Father and I would be escorted from the ballroom and sent to bed.

But he was not here, and I was no longer a Princess.

I whirled on Hector.

"Fancy a dance?" I asked, my excitement made my voice light. Hector looked at me in delight. Brenn did not look impressed.

"Of course," Hector agreed animatedly. We both looked to Brenn.

Brenn's expression didn't change.

"I don't *dance*," he said simply. "But don't let me stop you."

He didn't need to say anything more. I grabbed Hector's hand and led him to the dance floor. The first tune was a raucous number involving lots of jumping about and kicking. As the night drew on, I found I didn't know many of the other dances as they must've originated in Draig. However, Hector was a patient teacher and helped me keep up.

From the side-lines, people were clapping, conversing, or singing along with the tunes. However, when I cast a look back at Brenn, I saw him glowering in the silence on one of the benches. As the lone figure between multiple couples engaged in love-lorn activities, he scowled from his seat beside the tangles of limbs. His lips were pressed together in a thin line.

"Having fun?" I asked him between dances as I tried to get my breath back. The cold temperature made my throat burn, or perhaps that was the mead.

"You look ridiculous."

"Like that is anything new," I called back to him.

Brenn didn't reply but when I turned round I saw that even more couples had joined the bench. Brenn's face had never been stonier.

And yet he refused to move.

Before another song could spring into action, Hector and I stumbled from the dance floor as fresh snow fell began to fall like confetti from the sky. Despite the time, the night didn't seem to be dying out and the weather did nothing to extinguish the activities.

I wiped my forehead and noticed flakes already building up on my gloves. Hector took my hand and led me back over to where a, now frosted, Brenn was laying on a bench on his own. The couples had somehow migrated to the floor.

He must've heard us coming as he sat up immediately, pulling a face at how sweaty and puffed the air of us were. I crashed next to him, Hector following me – my face ached from smiling but I couldn't seem to stop.

"Do you guys do this every year?" I asked, still getting my breath back. "I must make a note to come to your Solstice Celebrations on an annual basis."

"It's the Dragonkin way," Hector said with a shrug.

Just as he said this another cheer went up among the people as a couple of women – one with short shorn hair and the other with skin as dark as the sky started energetically kissing in the snow. The applause caused the pair to spring apart, but it was too late, and the next song began alongside the laughter.

I watched the couple abandon the dancefloor for, no doubt a quieter, more private space. Their silhouettes moved into the dark corridor between some of the houses before disappearing from sight. Despite myself I felt my cheeks flush – Randall skipped into my mind once more. Those times we'd spent in the dark hayloft above the stable rows made my chest tighten. I wondered if I would ever feel such intimacy again. It didn't seem possible now that he was as still as the tombs of the catacombs I loved so much.

Brenn brushed the snow off his shoulders.

"The party is to celebrate the arrival of the Fynix delegation," Brenn said in an upbeat tone. The happiness in my heart was quickly doused with a bucket of iced water. His eyes met mine and there was nothing joyous in there.

Hector's eyebrows shot up.

"They're early," Hector said, a grim expression held his features. "I suppose they were keen to discuss terms while they begin their search."

"Terms?" I asked.

"I guess this could be considered them beginning to sweet-talk us," Hector explained. "The Fynix are planning on dividing the country between themselves and the demon forces. Extending the territory of the shadow realms beyond the barrier of the East and the West."

My heart turned to lead in my chest as Brenn spoke for me.

"Why would they do that?"

Hector grimaced before he spoke in a strained voice.

"Dragian forces helped take Eilaf," he explained. His eyes met mine and I would've sworn those eyes were forlorn. "Our family didn't agree with it, but our leading Clan and the majority voted for it."

Eilaf was one of the larger cities on the edge of Riach, and we never thought it would fall: until it did. There had been rumours that dragons had been involved but the survivors had fled South to Wist or to the Shadow Realms so information was scarce and untenable at best.

My heart thudded in my chest. I looked about at all these happy faces and felt my stomach clench. These people had all been involved in the fall of my kingdom. How had I not known about this? I felt Brenn glance my way and my skin felt cold.

"What about the Wryfirths?" I asked, perhaps there was bite in my voice as Hector gave me a strange look.

"The king is gone and the heir too. The youngest boy fled, and we know what happened to the Princess already."

Suddenly I didn't want to sit on this bench anymore. I was both too hot and too cold – everything felt tight. Maybe I was drunk? Or maybe I was just sad?

I knew that war was inevitable between Fynix and ourselves because after years of skirmishes and battles over territory between us. We were no longer an empire – our colonies had been destroyed and due to my father's and our council's own stubbornness there would be no concession. But for Draig to get involved meant perhaps situations were more dire – what had Fynix promised them?

"I'm going to get mead," I said before quickly jetting in the direction of the table closest. Hector said something but I was too focused on the table to focus on anything else. I couldn't seem to shake the tightness in my throat.

Unfortunately, all that was left was a barrel of dregs that filled my tankard with a sad gulp of foam. The bearded dragon-kin whose job it was to restock it claimed he was too drunk to do his job and from his beery smell alone I was willing to believe him. With a bleary look in his eyes and a slur in his voice, he directed me to the next alley and told me to roll a new one over. Thus, I set off in the direction of the barrels and found them stored behind a rickety looking tavern and opposite a set of stables.

I went to pick the closest one up and immediately discerned my arms were unable to lift it at all. My fingers gripped the smooth panels of the wood with no avail. I hugged it tightly and heaved with all my might, but I could barely shuffle it. To make matters worse, I didn't see anyone around and there was no movement inside the tavern. If Brenn could feel my anger – he was ignoring it. Resolved to edge it forward, I shoved it inch by inch, cursing with every damned shove.

I tried twice more to haul it with my arms but it was no use. I managed to kick it over into the snow, but couldn't push it despite all my effort. I wished I had motion magic to roll it for me or some other kind of propulsion method instead.

I tried using a foot to kick it on but when suddenly I heard something like a *chuckle*. My foot slipped over the top and now I was straddling it with no balance. I slipped back into the snow my legs falling over my head. Great - now even the horses were laughing at me.

I groaned as I rolled over. My fall hadn't been hard due to the cushion of fresh snow, but the cold leaked down my neck uncomfortably. Looking up at the stars I wondered if my father was laughing at me too. At the stupid girl I was. He'd never had anything nice to say to me – only notes on my improvement.

But, maybe now he was up there with my mother he would be the soft soul he once was. That's what Nanny Willow had said. After Mother passed, he had hardened into a crystal with unbreakable skin. One with an ancient grudge on his shoulders. The only father I had ever known, anyway.

I shook my head. Perhaps I was more drunk than I had thought.

There was another whicker from the stables, and I lifted my head.

A dark horse nudged between the sandy mare and the white stallion. I sat up and climbed to my feet. Its mane was black and tipped with white but what really made me stare were its eyes: a scarlet red.

"You're a Shadow-feld, aren't you?" I said abandoning the barrel for now and heading over to the horse. His dark ears flicked forward as if he was surprised at the attention. I lifted a hand and slowly lowered it to the velvet, soft muzzle of the steed. He whinnied softly and I rubbed his nose. Those eyes – deep red – were full of nothing but love. "What's your name, handsome?"

"Coesau," a deep, gruff voice spoke behind me, making me jump and turn round. Coesau sniffed in the direction of the voice: standing in the street was a towering man wearing a long dark cloak. My arcane senses responded to the magic radiating from him – strangely, something about his magic felt warm. The magic of my people was something that

felt fresh, like wind through rushes on a lake. Obviously, this differed from person to person: but this.... this was new. It felt like standing next to an open fireplace.

“Is that your name, Coesau?” I said to the horse and rubbed his nose once more. “He’s lovely,” I said to the man. He drew closer and I could see that he looked different to any other dragon-kin I had seen, with tanned skin and eyes that were a deep scarlet. He had a strong nose and a prominent chin; his jaw was stubbled with dark hair though the rest of his face was hidden in darkness and the high collar covering his neck.

“He doesn’t usually get attention,” the man added quietly. “Shadow-felds scare people this North of the Divide.”

I shook my head and gave Coesau one last nuzzle with my knuckle.

“Nah, not this softie! You couldn’t frighten a mouse – could you Coesau?” I smiled at him one last time and then looked back at the man who hadn’t moved, just tilted his head slightly as my eyes met his. He brought the smell of the forest with him as oak and pine filled my senses – clearly he’d been travelling. Besides that, I couldn’t tell much about him but he did cast an intimidating shape with his broad form. “I don’t suppose you’re feeling strong, are you?” I gestured to the barrel. “Turns out all my muscles are for show,” I joked. He didn’t respond only looked over to the barrel whispered something. Then he waved a gloved hand, and I felt a wave of magic brush past me – red smoke circled the barrel which, to my amusement, began to float.

I walked to it, my feet crunching in the snow. Now free of all weight I was able to push it. I grinned as I was able to give it a tiny shove and it floated off in the direction of the auditorium.

“Thanks, Mister,” I said pushing it on. The man inclined his head, stroking the head of the horse. I wheedled the barrel all the way up the road before I heard him speak again.

“You’re welcome, Miss.”

My blood iced over but the barrel didn’t drop. The magic thrummed through my fingertips, and I felt my heartbeat in my ears. The way he said it was so indifferent I would’ve missed it if the road wasn’t quiet. I slowly turned back to him; to retort; to laugh it off, I would do that. But he was gone - only a print in the snow remained. I stretched my senses and felt the fleeting presence of old magic, but nothing else.

I walked back up the road the snow falling faster now. But it didn’t seem to dampen the mood of the partiers as I pushed the barrel over. The barrel still floated; the enchantment was strong enough to last all the way to the table where it landed with a thump. It woke the Dragonkin who had sent me, he was impressed I was able to carry it. I didn’t correct him as he quickly tapped it, refilled his own and then poured me a tankard and then a second as a thanks.

I spotted Hector chatting animatedly to a snow-speckled Brenn as I headed back to the stables. There was still no hooded gentleman.

I stroked the nose of his horse and placed the tankard in the snow in front of him.

I wrote ‘Thank You’ in the snow before I headed back to the boys, drinking as I went.

Well after midnight, we decided to turn in and retreated back to Hector’s house, Brenn and I taking beds in the healing quarters once more. But I couldn’t sleep; what Hector had said turned around and around my mind. He spoke about it so casually; perhaps, being this North of Riach meant that everything felt like it was happening so far away it was no concern of yours.

What would happen to my people if they were invaded? Where would they go? Demons and Fynix sharing a space seemed like a terrible idea. That was why the barrier between the East and West first established. It was an alignment for peace that stopped the

creatures of the shadow realm invading. Surely, once the barrier was destroyed there would be chaos. Unending war.

"You are thinking too loudly for me to sleep," Brenn called out from the bed next to me.

I scowled into the darkness.

"Wraiths don't need sleep," I replied. I kept my voice quiet in case we woke Hector up.

"That's not very nice," Brenn replied. "I don't sleep but I do meditate. Keep the mind clear and," he took an exaggerated breath in, "*positive*."

"And I didn't think you liked Hector," I replied crossing my arms.

Brenn sighed. "I don't like anyone, your majesty," he said simply. "But I don't hate him."

I gawped at him.

"High praise there."

"Shut up."

I grinned in the silence.

"We leave when the borders reopen," I told myself. If we left now it would be suspicious. This way we could leave in among the masses. "This won't be so bad."

Brenn popped his lips together.

"I guess so. Not that we have any money or edible support."

I ignored him.

"We go through Dion and then through the Dean lands to the South to get to Wist."

Brenn hummed.

"Seems less suicidal than the first plan but still reeks of naïve idiocy."

I was satisfied with that response. My aunt surely had forces we could use and monopolise. From there we could surely gather some kind of response force. Wist was full of refugees – I could help them by calling for peace. And then...well we could figure out that bit when we got there.

"I wish I had your outlook," Brenn added in the silence.

"So, you think it'll work?" I asked.

Brenn shook his head. I heard him pop his lips.

"Hell no, but it'll be fun to watch."

Chapter Seven

The next morning, we found Hector in the kitchen making breakfast. It was a decent size room made of light-coloured wood with brass handles. Colourful plates were stacked on a wash tray and a collection of flowers grew on the windowsill in a copper pot. Warmed by the fire, Hector wore a pair of those brown trousers with all the pockets and a beige top with the sleeves rolled up and a lace-up collar.

Brenn was set on us sneaking away the moment the borders reopened, but my heart sank as I thought about betraying Hector. The healer was living proof that the goddess Celine had favourites: how else could he always be so happy? Brenn, hater of all things, said he found it irritating but, to me, the fathomless optimism was exactly what I needed.

"Do they not dance much in Dion?" Hector said, handing us two plates of sunny yellow eggs, bacon, toast, and sausages. I blinked. "Only you jumped at the chance last night. Even though you knew very few."

Brenn grabbed his fork and began devouring the meal, sating his appetite so he didn't eat Hector instead. Hector couldn't hide the sad look in his eyes as he did so. I knew he must think we come from poverty and that made me feel worse about the lies.

“No, they dance,” I responded between bites, so I had time to forge my response. “But only on special occasions – like Yuletide, the Winter Solstice, Summer Solstice etcetera.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Most of that time we were away at sea.”

Hector nodded understandingly.

“Well, the people of Draig love a party,” he said with a smile. “It’s an unspoken rule that if a party doesn’t have at least three fights then it is a bad party.”

“And there had been six,” I added. “So clearly it was one for the scholars.”

I was resolved to come back here when things were better. Despite their role in my people’s war, it seemed this part of the world was untouched by all of the horrors that came with it. Everything here seemed as fresh and as innocent as the snow on the ground. The riotous Dragonkin way was a belly full of laughs and I don’t know - if I had not been as driven as I was, I could see myself being happy somewhere like here.

I wondered what Randall would have thought about it. He had never been anywhere close to here. It rarely snowed in Riach and the last time it did – he wasn’t there. I wished I could have said goodbye, but his body was never returned to the castle. Of course, my father would have never allowed it.

I brushed the thoughts of Randall aside before the lead settled in my stomach. Hector joked about a party that was so riotous it went on for three weeks before the clan leaders themselves had to come and disperse it because nothing was getting done. As I looked into Hector’s face, my heart ached. He’d only been good to us. He was a good person. He didn’t deserve the drama we would bring him. It was kinder to run. That way we’d just become a weird story shared over eggs.

After breakfast I went back to the healing quarters to prepare for the outdoors, I shrugged on my jacket and did up the laces on the boots. The fire still crackled on and the flowers by the beds had been topped up. Hector’s organised mess was still something to behold.

“I’m going to miss you when you both move on,” Hector said as he came into the room. His golden eyes glowed as he came forward. He’d pulled on his jacket and adjusted his plaits again.

“And I’ll miss you.” Hector’s soft half-grin was a knife in my heart. I ground my teeth together for being so sensitive. Brenn had it easy – the only emotion he seemed to have was hunger. I wasn’t sure if sarcasm counted as a feeling.

Hector came and sat on the bed opposite me.

“You know,” he started slowly, crossing an ankle over his knee. “Our family eyes are pretty good at spotting strange things.”

My heart was in my throat, but I tried my best to keep a calm complexion.

“Oh, really? That’s impressive.”

He tilted his head to the side.

“I can tell when someone is lying,” he said softly. “*Aaron.*”

Our eyes met and I knew there was no point in denying it. My chest went tight and I dug my hands into the mattress. I opened my mouth to reply but found I had to shut it again.

The jest was up. We had barely even left the starting line and we were already finished. My gaze dropped.

“Whatever it is,” Hector started. “Whatever happened to the pair of you, I’m sure I can help.”

I shook my head, gauging how much he knew. He hadn’t mentioned Brenn which was a good sign.

“This is just going to get more complicated, Hector,”

He crossed his arms.

"I'm sure we can handle it together," he said. "The moment I brought you in I knew something was wrong – your glamour is too good. Most people with eyes like mine wouldn't have noticed it but you don't look the way a male human is supposed to."

My words evaded me as he pressed on.

"I know when someone is lying because they almost always show it," he explained. "You don't even realise you are doing it."

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, Hector." His golden eyes made my chest hurt.

"I can help," he offered, something desperate leaked into his voice. I shook my head again, but I took his hand and grasped it.

"I promise I'll tell you," I said, feeling his calloused palms in my hand. "But not now."

Hector nodded and gave my hand a squeeze. His smile was filled with warmth, but I couldn't ignore the flickers of sadness in his eyes.

"I'll be waiting," he added before he got up. "We leave for the Summit in twenty."

"I'll be ready." I called out and he gave me a happier look before he disappeared behind the door.

I sat there a little while longer. Part of me wanted to run back to Hector, but those feelings paled against the worry and heartache that grabbed my throat tightly and wouldn't let go. No, it wouldn't do. Now Hector knew it was only a matter of time for someone less kind to discover us too. Suspicious or not – we needed to leave now.

"*Brenn?*" I yelled through our mind-link.

"*I did hear, your Majesty,*" he said coming round the corner. He lounged on the door frame, dark hair tied back in one long plait.

"*It's time to go.*"

He nodded. I set him to work gathering a pack of essentials for the road to Dion. They could catch us easily on horseback but by foot we could evade by hiding.

My fingers were shaking as my heart started to thrum in my chest. A muddle of feelings overcame me that ranged from regret to fear. My stomach churned uncomfortably as I pulled my jacket on over my shoulders – the weight of it so much heavier now. I noticed there was a spare snippet of parchment left on the side of the table close to the door frame. I checked Brenn was not close by and wrote Hector a letter. I told him everything. Who I was, who Brenn was, and our mission. I apologised for the deception. And I promised I would make it up to him.

Finally, I signed it as Bryony Wryfirth and folded the paper over. I scrawled *Hector Athanas* across the front and left it on my bed where he could find it. Brenn was going to kill me, but I could deal with that. I'd rather have Hector find out from me – we owed him that much.

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The Summit was riotously noisy and flooded with people. Besides the groups waiting in the hall for others to join their parties, citizens were swarming through the door to get to the pit below the platform or traversing the huge stone staircases either side to reach their seats. I recognised the crests of family different families embroidered the back of weathered cloaks or sewn on the pockets of jackets. Callas. Galanis. Zika. Vlahos. I remembered seeing their histories printed in books among the relics of the catacombs. As a symbol of their conquests it seemed my ancestors took history when they couldn't find objects they deemed valuable. I had no doubt these people would want them back if they still knew about them.

Draig, like Riach, had many ancient families with colourful histories but unlike Riach they hadn't expanded their borders. Draig seemed was big enough which was true, it dominated the north of any map. But that hadn't stopped my ancestors from trying. The Draigian artefacts in our treasury were testament to that. My people's attempts at colonies anywhere this north failed miserably.

My stomach churned – perhaps that's why they got involved in the war after all. They were owed their revenge. I doubted my father's dedication to ancient feuds landed him any allies and maybe that had finally sealed his fate. I pushed those thoughts away as Hector led us through – focusing instead on staying out of anyone's way and planning our escape route.

I noticed a few Draigians shared similar features like facial piercings that looked like the work of metal mages in the South of Riach; one had a bar through their nose and the other had the tip of their ear welded with a point. They seemed to like to adorn themselves with piercings through their lips or ears. I had my ears pierced when I was a child but to see so many of them stacked on the ears of the Dragonkin made me consider getting more.

Standing off to one side stood group of people with long hair down their backs but the sides of their heads were shaved or plaited. The spaces where hair could grow had been filled with tattoos of flowers or black clan marks woven into patterns. Tattoos usually made my skin crawl – they were part of demon culture and had been a symbol of barbarity to the likes of my father. However, these designs spoke of art and control – far from the demon ink I had previously imagined. Among them, I spotted a girl who looked younger than me standing by the side of a man with the same style white hair. They both had eyes that were glowing purple and violet scales on the slants of their high cheek bones. The group were not as noisy as the rest and seemed to have kept to themselves in the corner.

"Hector! Hector!" I suddenly heard Daphne holler over the noise. I spotted Hector's parents and a scowling Inigo in the doorframe between this room and the next. Then a short sharp horn sounded three times – making me jump and Brenn chuckle.

The congregations of people started making their way through the foyer and we pressed out backs against the wall to not get caught in the wave of people suddenly making their way to their seats. Eventually, we navigated through the crowd to Daphne and Ajax.

"I'm so glad you made it!" Daphne said embracing her son and then turning to us delightedly. "The DuVales are here too. They are our leaders – they were in Fynix until they flew back a few weeks ago."

My stomach grew tight: perhaps they weren't temporary allies at all. I still wondered how Fynix had convinced Draig to get involved after all this time. Hector's brows furrowed.

"It seemed the Horned King has bought Aegius after all," Hector crossed his arms.

"I guess we're about to find out," Daphne cast a look behind us. The stragglers were sneaking in to find their seat. "There should be some places to stand left in the pit next to the stage," she said, "go get a good spot." Then she turned to her husband and Hector. "Ajax, you're on dragon duty with the boys – I'm sure Inigo is skulking in a corner somewhere. Keep an eye out will you? Before you go Hector, I need to borrow you." Ajax gave us a wave before heading up the stairs with Daphne lingering behind. Her face had misplaced its usual joy and seemed somewhat pensive. However, Hector either hadn't noticed or didn't want to mention it. His friendly smile made my chest ache all over again.

"See you in a moment, lads," Hector said. I returned the smile.

"In a bit," I said. When Hector was out of sight, Brenn turned to me with a feigned look of empathy.

"Feelings are such a burden," he started, "I could always eat your heart."

I gave him a deadpan look.

"Thanks, but I need that."

The foyer was empty: no one would notice us sneaking out now. Yes, we'd be gone before anything more happened. But looking at the door I could hear the thrum of voices and feel the apprehension in the air – whatever that was about to happen here was going to be big. I could feel it – my arcane magic senses, despite their rudimentary form, were still well trained and noticed something of what was about to come. Tensions were at a boiling point, emotions ranged from curiosity to fear: change was in the air like an impending storm.

Perhaps it was just anxiety clawing at my thoughts or just my unruly curiosity, but I found myself unable to move. The people partly responsible for the destruction of Kya were behind that door, plotting their next step. I turned to Brenn; my face must've said it before I voiced it because he was shaking his head rapidly.

"Let's go watch whatever news there is and then leave," I said.

"That's a terrible idea."

"Look, they won't even notice us."

Brenn stuck me with a glare.

"There are many powerful presences in there if it goes sideways," he gritted his teeth. "It could be a bother."

"It's not going to go sideways," I said assuredly. "Besides, if it does then you might get to eat something."

With those words Brenn's jaw slammed shut. The temptation was too strong and a muscle in his forehead appeared to twinge.

"You are awful at sticking to plans," Brenn seethed. He crossed his arms, and I couldn't help but smile. He worried too much.

"All we need to do is listen," I said, steeling myself for the onyx armour of the Fynix forces. "If we do that then we couldn't possibly get into trouble."

Brenn raised one eyebrow.

I took his elbow and dragged him inside.

The noise that surrounded us as we stepped into the sphere was deafening. Where Brenn and I stood in the pits we were pressed right against the back; if the plinth at the centre of the Summit hadn't been on a raised platform, I wouldn't have seen a thing. I mean, I wasn't small, but some of these people were giants or at least had giant blood in them. All the people around us seemed to have pints of mead and or other drinks in their hands. It seemed this meeting was just as important as it was a social gathering – well, Hector *had* said they had come from all over.

A short but stocky young woman with a flame pixie-crop of red hair stamped her foot twice in the centre of the stage. Instantly, people and ceased their conversations. She pressed her jaw shut tightly but there was something of a smile in her eyes and at the corner of her lips.

"Welcome, one and all," she called out. A resounding cheer went out as people stamped their feet on the floor, banging the railings of their balconies. The woman looked on approvingly; upon a closer look I could see one of her eyes was a shade of green whereas the other was brown. She wore those knee-high boots the dragon-riders wore, laced to just under the knee. Her coat was short at the front and long at the back, in a tan hide with a cream fur lining. The family crest, a dragon circling a sword, had been engraved on the shoulders of the sleeves. She wore bronze gauntlets that matched a bronze torque at her neck. Then the woman raised her hand as the place fell silent.

I couldn't imagine anything political being decided in a place like this. My experience (albeit limited as it was) was that everything was decided behind closed doors in my father's study. Important matters were never discussed in such an open way.

“Different cultures have very different ways of keeping the peace, your Majesty,” Brenn said, smugly.

“I know that.” I retorted quietly. *“It is just surprising to see them in practice.”*

“Our leader, my father, Aegius DuVale, has some announcements he would like to share with us,” the young woman said, gesturing behind her.

A giant man with a long red beard and the same mixed eyes stepped up onto the stage. The moment his foot touched the floorboards of the platform the audience lit up with cheers and yells. All around us the people raised their hands and roared in greeting. They banged on the wooden bannisters in front of them or raised their drink or fists in acknowledgement.

The leader cast his hands wide, a wide smile on his face. I noticed two elongated teeth at the bottom of his jaw. So, this was their king, a towering male with a black cloak lined with wolf fur. Two buckles fastened across his chest and under that was a jacket of tanned leather, the same bronze gauntlets as his daughter, and dark breeches with those riding boots that dragon riders wore.

“My people!” he called out, as the noises finally ceased and the whole area listened in attentively. “We have prospered these many years alone, trade has boomed, our borders remain secure: the North belongs to the Dragons!” That was met with more cheers. Behind the man, his daughter stood in the shadows, nodding at every word. “As the world has festered in turmoil, we remain steadfast, like the Mountains of Sivia: unbreakable.”

The noise made my ears ring.

“We have witnessed the great house of Wryfirth fall into oblivion, the Tyrant beheaded, and its people scattered. The ways of the magic folk of Riach are no more.”

I was glad at that moment for the wall behind me. My father’s empty eyes stared at me and nausea overtook me. Back here, no one could see my face. The Dragon-kin’s leader changed his tone.

“But there are calls for us to rejoin the world,” the man said. “Much has changed in recent weeks,” he began. “And with the ineffable threat of the Wraith of the Wastes set to wreak havoc on society once more, we need support from beyond our borders.”

Next to me, Brenn was suddenly looking more engaged than ever. But I couldn’t stop the sinking feeling in my bones as a darkly clad group edged towards the stage.

Aegius gestured to them, and breaking the silence that had now descended, I could hear the familiar *chinks* and *clicks* of their metallic armour as they braced the stage. They received no applause when they stepped onto the platform: instead, almost a shiver seemed to pass through the crowd. I recognised the pointed ears of the Fae and the onyx armour hidden by a fancy cloak tied across one shoulder. One, the leader I assumed, had a sword with a dark blade hitched at his waist. On his head were the jagged horns of the Fynix people. The symbol of the Horned King’s forces.

I saw five other soldiers with similar attire now standing next to the young DuVale and her eyes were wide. I could feel the nerves creeping into my gut – their presence sent chills right through me. A full platoon of Fynix soldiers was here in the North; it seemed the reach of the Horned King had only continued to grow after the fall of my country.

Murmurs broke out among the people around us.

“What is Aegius going on about?”

“Draig is better alone.”

“The Fynix are a bloodthirsty people – look what they did to Riach.”

He raised a hand once more.

“Which is why Draig is to be forged anew,” Aegius declared. “As official allies with the Horned King’s Fynix and their endeavours.”

The response around the room was palpable and behind Aegius, his daughter’s face fell.

My heart tightened. I watched as people turned, plainly conflicted. Some in the crowd outwardly voiced their worries, whilst others cheered, banged on the railings, or threw their drinks at his feet. Or his head. This went on for a few minutes before Aegius could get control of the crowd.

Next to me, Brenn lay back on the wall with his arms crossed. I hadn't looked at him directly, but he leaned in close.

"Well, Fynix did win the war," Brenn said quietly to me. "Of course, Aegius is very frightened of me. But I'm sure he's more afraid of them." He sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. "Oh dear, that's a few more enemies for you then, isn't it?"

"Oh, shut up," I said focusing back on the scene in front of me. If I saw a grin on his face, I would have to punch him. This pushed my hope of forming allies with the dragon-kin swiftly into the Dark Sea. My people had seen enough war but my hopes for a peaceful diplomatic solution were fading fast.

But for the people of Draig? I think we just witnessed their invasion: quiet and unassuming as it was. If the platoon standing on the stage were any indication, the door had been opened for them. Brenn's power was legendary, but I wasn't sure Aegius could pin this extreme political move entirely on the Wraith.

Suddenly the door opened closest to the raised platform. A tall figure entered, and my heart jumped into my throat. I instantly recognised him from last night's festivities but in daylight he looked irrevocably different. The magical power radiating from him was immense – he was a different person entirely.

His hood was still drawn up, but his tanned skin looked lighter in daylight compared to his dark cloak which was drawing shadows across his long face and sharp jawline. However, this time I noticed the savage-looking twin swords hanging at his waist. Across his chest were dual bandoliers filled with what I imagined were knives, mottled steel pauldrons sat on his shoulders, and across his wrists, he sported grey silver gauntlets. Even some of the Fynix soldiers behind the generals looked intimidated and shuffled nervously. Now in daylight, I knew he was no dragon-kin: he was a demon.

Silence swept through the headquarters as people craned to get a look, but everyone moved away from him. Next to me, Brenn raised his eyebrows.

"*This just got considerably worse,*" he murmured into my thoughts. "*A Bonekeeper.*"

The man stood taller than even the clan leader – nearly seven feet. Nothing about this man was the same as last night. His eyes, red as fresh blood, caused my skin to go cold. His expression reminded me somewhat of Brenn when I had first met him – a jaded look of disinterest. But even from where we stood, I could feel the presence of his magic – though this time it was grim, dark, foreboding, and white hot. I glanced to Brenn and saw that he had gone completely still.

My blood iced over. Even with his hood up, I could see the shape of his face – a long nose, heavy eyebrows and defined cheekbones. I knew that high demons or noble ones had two forms rather than just one – this must've been its mortal form.

"My friends," Aegius continued. His face had become pale. "We are honoured to have General Titae of the Demon King's Bone Keepers here with us. He is here ahead of his squadron, to search for the Wraith of the Wastes. As I am sure you are all aware, our world is mobilising against this creature, and we have heard reports of other units being sent from all over the world to help end and to prevent-"

"*Look at the fuss you caused,*" Brenn tutted in my mind, pulling me from Aegius' ill-received explanation. Neither were helping the nerves filling my chest.

"*Sorry, next time, just eat me will you.*"

I glanced towards the door – to leave we would need to do some serious weaving. I turned back to the front; the Bonekeeper said nothing as he surveyed the room. My chest pounded painfully.

“I accidentally did something last night,” I said to Brenn in his mind, allowing him to access the memory of my interaction with Coesau, including the part where he saw through the glamour.

Brenn’s jaw dropped.

“You made friends with his horse?” he hissed at me in a low voice. I couldn’t take my eyes off the general. My stomach went tight –

“I thought he was just a traveller!” I retorted quietly. “And Coesau was lovely.”

“The floor is now open for discussion,” Aegius announced, and the hollers came from above. People yelled questions out, but I couldn’t hear them as the crowd swelled with pent-up fury. I pressed myself as back as I could go.

“How drunk were you?” Brenn snapped. The Fynix unit on the stage looked at the broiling crowd with concern – a few of their hands fell onto the handles of their short swords. The archers moved into defensive positions too, nocking arrows to the string of their bows. “We need to go now,” Brenn’s voice was low as he started to move along the wall, weaving between the dragon-kin with me in pursuit.

Strangely, the Bonekeeper didn’t move at all. Apart from his eyes – they remained wary and alert. But as those red eyes fell on our area of the room: he stopped. Despite the shadows, the crowd, the noise, and our position, I felt his focus.

Those eyes met mine and the General stilled. His gaze slipped to Brenn and then back to me. My blood iced over as the hair stood up on the back of my neck. My heart missed a beat.

He tilted his head.

Whatever Aegius had said caused outrage which I caught the tail end of as Brenn wrapped his hand around my arm as he yanked me from the wall.

“We’re fucked,” he said as we fought through the crowd, I didn’t look to see but I could still feel the chill on the back of my neck. Away, away – we had to get away. “We’re so unbelievably fucked.” Brenn’s voice was tight.

We finally reached the door and thankfully someone was pushing it open from the other side. I caught it and pulled it forward.

“Thank you.” Behind us, the crowd seemed to be rapidly moving away from the entryway. I felt my stomach drop instantly as my blood seemed to have gone still. The dark hood emerged first along with the rest of his imposing figure.

“You’re welcome.” The Bonekeeper said, letting the door shut behind him. Brenn froze behind me. I was tall but he was a tower. The ease I felt at the stables was long gone as I found that I couldn’t move.

Of course, he could portal! Magic like that could only be cast by very powerful beings. It was the kind of level that I would dream about. Jumping from one spot to another – it symbolised a mastery of the sorcery of space. Beside me, Brenn stopped.

Around us, the crowd seemed to have moved aside to form a path from us to the platform at the centre. The voices died down and an uneasy silence replaced it as everyone stared. The Bonekeeper brandished a dagger – a curved, wicked blade with a leather-bound handle in his right hand.

Neither of us moved. The crowd around us had fallen silent.

“What is the meaning of this?” Aegius demanded from the centre. “General, explain yourself.”

The Bonekeeper didn't lift his head to acknowledge him. Those red irises seemed to glow as they took Brenn and I in fully. The questions filled his eyes. I swallowed the heart in my throat and gave him a smile.

"Good afternoon," I said in an upbeat tone. "Busy day?"

The Bonekeeper said nothing as he moved closer to me. I kept our distance and Brenn moved like my shadow beside me.

The Clan leader did not take kindly to being ignored.

"Leave my people alone, General," he bellowed from the stand. "You stand gravely outnumbered if you try anything here."

His eyes narrowed and only then did the general's expression turn icy.

"They're not your people," he said bitingly, in that low voice of his. "You've been harbouring the Wraith, Aegius."

Gasps of horror sounded through the headquarters and the stillness was broken by fear. People pulled away from us, when I saw the Fynix Fae's troops edging forward I knew we had no choice.

"Brenn, I give you permission to protect us," I said quickly, feeling the magic surge through me as if it could sense the danger, "by any means."

I heard the arrow loose before I saw it. It flew with a whooshing sound towards my shoulder, but Brenn caught it easily. I saw his eyes change to a dark gold and my stomach clenched. The movements happened so fast they seemed to become slow.

Brenn's form faded to the shadow monster he was at his core; a storm of gnashing teeth and growls filled the air as the headquarters was plunged into darkness. A long tail whipped around as he lunged for the archer, and I moved back to draw away from the Bonekeeper. Then the rest of the Fynix platoon lunged for Brenn, and his giant form disappeared behind me.

The thunder of panicked feet and voices sounded all around as people ran for the exits or readied to fight. Some had magicked the witchlights to blast the space with bright rays but against Brenn's magic, their beams waned like the moon behind clouds. The din too was muted behind his deafening roars which made the hair stand up on my neck.

I didn't take my eyes off my foe for a moment as the screams of the Fynix filled the air. The grisly sound of bones snapping under pressure and the overwhelming smell of blood were enough to convince me Brenn had everything exactly where he wanted it.

The Bonekeeper kept Brenn in his sights, but he seemed to know I had the Wraith under my power. I wondered if he had seen my hand yesterday during the exchange with his horse. Either way, he drew one of his swords as I readied my magic. I pulled the lightning from my fingers like thread, and as he lunged, I leashed one of them. The lightning flashed between us as he dodged it and swung a sword to my right. He was so fast his blade cut my jacket before I could move; tearing a gash across the shoulder before I had time to leash another bolt. If he was fazed by the forbidden magic, he didn't let it show as he swung a second time that I had to duck for. I felt the burn of the lightning as it left my fingers: my options for offence were limited but I was by no means powerless.

"There I was thinking you were nice," I said as I scrambled over the platform. I had no idea where the clan leader was or anyone else for that matter. All I needed to focus on was staying alive. Brenn wouldn't let me die, he couldn't, the pact would compel him to support me. But that didn't mean I couldn't get hurt, and that didn't mean Brenn couldn't be distracted.

More Draigians had emerged with weapons to attack Brenn who beat them easily in his giant form. Brenn swiped at the demon with his tail, but he dodged it, the Wraith's attention divided between the Bonekeeper and the onslaught of new attackers.

"You're aiding the Wraith of the Wastes," he said, jumping easily up on the platform.

“Technically he’s aiding me,” I said pulling to my feet only to have a hand come up behind me and get me by the neck. I felt a curved blade against my throat. I pulled up against it and felt the bite of it against my palm and cut into his. Blood flowed down my hand as I was pressed against his solid form.

“What do you mean, Witch?” His voice was a growl now.

I threw my hand up in the air. He could see the mark among the blood and all the red gave me an idea.

“Any questions?”

I shook my bloodied hand and splattered us with it. Using the motion to call a bolt of lightning, I threw it back into the demon’s face, burning my hand but making him lose his grip as the stun sent him stumbling backwards.

I escaped his grasp and infused my blood with magic. I drew the symbol of control on my arm, the diamond crossed twice, and reached out as my blood took hold of his body. Brenn’s savagery was all I could hear but I focused on my spell with the precious few seconds I had before the Bonekeeper was on me again.

Blood magic felt different compared to the lightning, it made my bones ache. I watched as the tan skin covered in my blood blotted and leeches out like bites from invisible creatures - marring his face and drawing the colour. He froze and I knew I had him. I saw him try to summon a portal, so I tightened the muscles in his fingers and gritted my teeth. He gasped as the power took over and his eyes darted back and forth as I struggled to hold him.

I hadn’t done this on such a big body before, but I stretched my blood magic out through his veins, holding his form as tightly as I could. I felt his power inflame my own; now I was in his system it was going to be difficult for him to release himself.

I could feel his fury throttling like a flame under my fingers. It travelled up my neck and coursed my heart with unnatural heat. Those red eyes scorched into mine and I knew should I fail, I would die.

I pulled the blood from his knees and made him drop before holding him there.

“Impressive, Your Majesty,” Brenn said as he reached the stage. The darkness was fading and the area around us was disturbingly empty of Fynix soldiers.

“Oh, this is nothing,” I hissed through my teeth as the general fought hard against me. His crimson eyes stared daggers. I could feel his power in my veins, hot like coals; he wouldn’t be caught off-guard again. Luck had been on my side for this battle, but I would need to train seriously to hold my ground properly. I overpowered him with Brenn, and my lightning was intense - but he had years of experience. Not that it would ever stop me from fighting.

“I could’ve taken him,” Brenn said, as if to himself. Then the wraith dissolved into a mass of smoke and morphed into a new beast, a great lizard with a sweeping tongue. It took me a moment to realise he was a dragon – or at least his interpretation of one.

“You were very helpful,” I ground out. Brenn’s expression didn’t change.

“It seems like you had it under control here though,” he said gawking at the general. Brenn opened his mouth wide and kept it open as if I was going to grab the General and haul him in like a sugar cube for a horse.

“Leave him alive,” I said, the strain of the struggling was waning. “If we anger the Demon King, there’ll be no hope of reconciliation.”

“We didn’t show the Fynix such mercy,” Brenn shot back.

“I think we might be past reconciliation.”

I glanced around at the empty auditorium. The sounds of groaning Draigians filled the air, and I felt a deep shame crawl through me. A low voice growled out in the darkness.

“Princess?”

I turned to him, the Bonekeeper had halted his struggling.

“The one and only,” I said as his expression changed. I took this moment of stillness to lower his blood pressure, his eyes flashed once at me before darkening and he dropped onto his back. He was unconscious and with any more blood loss, soon I would be too. The demon’s blade had scored deep between my fingers. I would need to bandage myself up soon but that would have to come next.

“Get us out of here,” I said as I crawled onto Brenn’s back.

“With pleasure,” he said before reaching up high into the sky. A few flaps and we were in the air. The dragons that remained above watched on in curiosity as we passed. Hector’s face was crestfallen among them.

He soon shrunk in the distance, but I could still feel his sad eyes following us as we made our way out of Clawton. The sun was out, and I squinted against the brightness as Brenn glided over the city. The buildings below sprawled out in curved shapes among the trees. My throat felt tight, and I decided to look ahead instead. The endless white space stretched on for what seemed like aeons. The higher we went up the cooler the air became; I wrapped the coat tighter around myself.

“I didn’t kill any Draigians – only disabled those who wanted to harm you.”

I inspected my burned hand – the blood had conducted my lightning and brought the veins to the surface in tangled red strikes.

“I admire your restraint,” I replied, raising my voice over the wind. “That explains why there were so many Fynix left behind.”

“My hunger has no bounds,” Brenn said as we drifted along past the rural houses. I couldn’t resist and glanced back. No one was following us – everyone had dragons and yet no one was willing to attack Brenn. His reputation preceded him before this - what had transpired would surely only grow his infamy.

“You flatter me with your thoughts. But it is just psychic magic, your Majesty,” Brenn added. “They cannot follow, they must flee; it’s a simple command and once they hear it. It’s a very effective deterrent.”

It hadn’t worked on everyone though; the dragons wouldn’t leave without their riders. I remembered Hector’s face and my stomach twisted. I shook my head, thinking instead of the general and how close he had come to victory. My magic only had an advantage over those who were caught off-guard and next time he would be prepared.

“I barely won against him,” I said. “I need to train. And so do you.” Brenn sniffed at that. “You can’t eat all your problems.”

“I definitely can.”

“Where now? The Fynix will be on high alert.”

“Dion is closest.”

“Dion it is.”

Chapter Eight

The wind growled louder as we edged towards Dion’s borders. The snow persisted and fell in powdery flurries; the towns created islands among the endless white that whipped by as we passed them. My fingers had numbed with the cold, and it seemed my heart had too.

I couldn’t stop thinking about that general. The quickness of his movements, his lethal ability with those blades, and his magical power made my heart pound. I would surely be dead now if it hadn’t been for my blood magic disabling him.

I could still feel his muscles constricting under my fingers, his heart struggling against me as I tightened the blood around it; the pain shooting through his nerves like dagger strikes: how easily I could’ve killed him then - but he wasn’t another rat from the catacombs.

Those red eyes had pierced mine, filling my veins with ice. I could feel the power that radiated from him as I forced him to yield to me. It was like a raw flame fighting with an icy wind to stay aglow. It was enough to make anyone tremble: but I refused to fear him. I had endured enough brutal soldiers in my life thus far to concede to one now I was free. Especially not a demon.

I knew if I peered into his head, I would see nothing but darkness. Had I let him, I would be dead now – nursing my ambitions alongside my father in the afterlife. I found myself grinding my teeth together. The Fynix Fae were one foe but the demons of Raize were another feat entirely; our exchange rattled around in my head.

How drunk was I to not notice he wasn't a dragon-born? Perhaps the alcohol had thrown him off too – if he could portal, the chances are that he could see right through the glamour. I cringed at the thought. I guess I had the Dragon's Breath to thank for that.

I hadn't met many demons before – only envoys from Raize who had come to talk trade at the solstice events or public holidays. And most of them passed as Riachians. I knew some could sport horns, serpent tongues, claws, or even fangs – perhaps without the hood the General would look different too.

I wished I had studied more on the demon people then, but the Divide between the East and the West had meant that cultures were utterly estranged. The Shadow Lands: Qicog, Raize, Faytonia, Smotia, Silvia, and of course the Wastes, lived such radical lives in comparison to us as they lived without the sun. I shuddered at the thought – days without light seemed such a miserable way of existence.

Of course, Riachian priests and templars would claim it was due to the unholiness of the people: Celine refused to shed her light upon them. It was the Great Balance that had been upset by citizens turning from her. The Great Balance, of course, was a theory depending on peace – a historically ignored doctrine from even my own people.

My father had always spoken of the Demon people in disgust. But he would happily take their money if he knew he could benefit from it. Half of our trade in the city came beyond the Divide, not that it mattered to my father; his prejudices ruled his mind.

I wasn't my father, but I felt a gnawing sense of guilt in me from the deaths of those Fynix and what I had done to the General. It crept into my veins – perhaps my mercurial nature came from him? I grimaced at the thought.

"They were trying to kill you," Brenn snapped suddenly. "They would have too. And I have to eat." The noise of the wind whistling past filled the silence.

"I don't want their blood on my hands," I said.

"I devoured, not you," Brenn snapped. "You think very loudly, you know that?"

"Sorry, I just don't want to turn out like him."

"I should hope not, he's dead." I rolled my eyes. Brenn groaned then before speaking again. "Are you willing to do whatever is necessary for your people?"

"Of course," I said firmly.

"Then you will have to be comfortable doing far worse, your Majesty," Brenn replied.

I didn't reply after that, instead turning over our exploits in Draig in my head. Hector's horrified face was etched into my mind. I tried to push him out of my thoughts, but then I recalled the letter I had put in his bedroom – well, soon enough, he'd know the whole woeful tale. But the damage had already been done.

"*You know you shouldn't have written that letter,*" Brenn spoke into my thoughts. "*Someone could've found it.*"

"*It doesn't matter now.*"

Brenn was quiet then. For a few moments more there was just the wingbeat every so often and then the wind.

“Might I suggest, her Majesty stops moping?” Brenn added. “Frown lines are not becoming.”

“I’m not moping,” I replied. “I just wasn’t counting on us being discovered so quickly – the foolish part of me wanted us to gain allies in Draig.”

“You are nothing if not stupidly optimistic,” Brenn replied. “But this was never going to be easy.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

“I have a strong resolve about this, Brenn. I’ll do it – or I’ll die trying.”

A moment passed.

“Can I eat you then?”

“How could I possibly say no?”

.....

Eventually, we neared the edge of one of the ports on the east border of Dion. Fishing was one of the main trades this far North of their land so we would hopefully be able to find passage to Wist discreetly aboard a cargo ship. Of course, Brenn was not impressed by my plan - but he couldn’t fly to Wist when we were trying to be discreet. Not now they knew we were together. Brenn had to hide in clouds a few times as dragons, armed for war, barrelled past, no doubt looking for us. He evaded them, of course, but it would only be a matter of time before a rider with Hector’s skill caught up to us. The dragon-kin’s forces, when prepared, could launch lethal airborne attacks. The risks were not worth it, and I wanted to avoid unnecessary bloodshed.

Lights glowed from what I assumed was the centre, though the sky was black as pitch, and I couldn’t see where the land ended and the ocean began. Judging by the sun’s descent, I believed it was early evening – summer meant long days which I was thankful for. The smell of the sea was strong with salt and made me think of the Isle once more.

Brenn had bragged that a normal dragon would’ve needed to have at least four days in total to complete such an arduous journey, but Wraiths were made of sturdier stuff: like souls of the dead.

So, we’d been able to make it within two. Only stopping once for me to sleep in a deserted stable that was home to bats. The temperature had warmed considerably as we headed south which made it easier for me to rest but I found myself missing the picturesque snow-filled scenes of the Northern country.

Hector had filled his jacket for me on the off chance I got hungry between the hefty meals he prepared for us. I found small, wrapped loaves, slices of cake, and hand-sized cookies among the multitude of pockets. Brenn too had stolen odds and ends from the kitchen that materialised on the dragon’s back once every so often. Even though they were delicious, they sat like lumps of stone in my gut, and I found I couldn’t finish them. Instead, I used the cloth they were kept in to bind my hand until I had enough energy in me to cast a healing spell. I was no healing Mage, so it made my palm itch but thankfully the gash looked less fearsome as the heat from the magic melted away.

It was warmer than it had been in Draig, but a chill breeze was enough for me to keep Hector’s jacket on; it still smelled of him, hay, and dragons. It was strange seeing the darkened ground instead of frosted snow even though it hadn’t been that long. We had seen the inside of the tower just over a week ago, though it felt like a lifetime had passed since then. Sounds of life drifted through the summer air; faint inklings of music and laughter were audible, even from this distance.

Brenn landed in a wheat field with a thud; long wispy sheaves crunched under his feet as his tail swept long stretches behind him flat. I slid off his back and landed softly among the beaten rows. Brenn's dragon form swirled back into that familiar black mass of writhing wispy shadows; he emerged, unsmiling, in the tall, lithe form he'd worn in Clawton. He shook his head as he readjusted his hair.

"Your Majesty, I doubt we will find suitable accommodations here," he said giving me an expectant look as he stomped towards me. He sniffed as his lip curled at our new surroundings. "This place is a dump. It smells like fish guts, pipe-smoke, and manure."

I gritted my teeth as I headed to the edge of the field. I hoisted myself over the weather-beaten fence and landed with a grunt as Brenn stepped through it, his body rephasing on the other side. His eyebrows raised at my expression. "If I don't eat soon, I will have to stay in my Wraith form."

I shook my head – Brenn was sneaky when it came to hiding his power.

"Didn't you just eat like twenty people?"

"Thirty-six."

I waved my hand.

"You'll be fine," I replied. Brenn crossed his arms, his footsteps getting louder as we joined a road.

"Surely, I should be the judge of that."

"Find us somewhere to sleep," I said. "And some way to pay."

Brenn nodded and gave me a grin. The road to town was littered with remnants of what looked to be old watch towers and ruins. I recognised them right away– they looked like the ones that guarded the borders of Kya. I wondered why they had been left in such disrepair. A residential area had been abandoned too – what once were once houses, were now a collection of walls; reclaimed by nature, with moss and flowers sprouting across every surface, boards covering up doorways, roofs fallen in.

"I wonder what happened here?" I thought aloud. Brenn shrugged.

"Wasn't me." I gave him a deadpan look. "Like you weren't just wondering that."

The ruins gave way into woodland before we saw some newer buildings grow into view among glowing orange witchlights. The first homes were short and strongly built with carved stone bricks. Unlike Kya's uniform buildings, each here seemed a different size and shape. Some were high with multiple floors with just as many windows, while others were short and seemed to be descending underground. Torches filled the streets with light, couples walked arm in arm, and a group of youths only a few years younger than me ran past us, chasing what looked like a big, shaggy dog. I knew that because of the disruptive weather, shifters wore loose clothing – drawstring trousers and wrap-around tunics that were easy to put on and take off. It didn't seem like dresses were necessary here at all – I saw women wearing tunics and trousers just like the men. As we neared the centre the noise of nightlife grew.

Despite the time, the streets bustled. Many of the taller buildings doubled as businesses and the alleys between them led to even more houses. This space was condensed with people and thriving businesses, not all of it savoury too.

"I believe this place was once called Agriable," Brenn said. "Dion is shifter land – so everyone from anywhere comes from here."

"Why is that?" I asked as we walked through the town – there must be an inn around here somewhere. Brenn stared at me.

"Surely, you know the stories, your Majesty?" he said. "They are part animal the same way the werewolves are, but without the rich heritage. Outcasts tend to clump together."

Shifters only appeared a few centuries ago – no one quite knew how they came to be. Dion – which was originally a lawless territory – became where most of them dwelled. They accepted our rule because they couldn't stand on their own feet. But judging by the state of the ruins outside the town, I wasn't sure if I could say that anymore.

The town centre was livelier. Among the bigger buildings nearer the seafront, there were many repurposed official buildings, some of which had kept a few of the original Riachian stylings like the arched windows and the painted exteriors. One, which I assumed was once a town hall, had been turned into a fighting den, and another, originally destined for sea trade, had been repurposed into a busy inn. But they were not the only buildings that had once occupied very different roles. I spotted what was once barracks of some kind now being used as a house of indulgence.

The town was full: a circuit of taverns, a trading post, a few inns, a few stores that had closed for the night, but several tents with interesting wares ranging from card reading, and fortune telling, to a variety of things you could smoke, remained open. The alleys were full of bright witchlights and signs promising gambling or salacious company with golden signs wrought in iron hanging above doorways.

Kya had always had strict policies on this type of business that kept them away from prying eyes but here they were out in the open. There was a florist who had closed for the night and was sequestered between two massage parlours, and no one batted an eye. Then when I looked up, I saw rows of laundry hung between the houses. People drank on balconies overlooking the square despite the long summer sun receding – enjoying the temperate weather and the busy evening.

I caught Brenn snickering at me.

“Just look at your face,” he chuckled. “Like you’ve never been outside before.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Sometimes it feels that way,” I replied, honestly.

I never saw enough of Kya either. Exploration was coveted. So, when I found the catacombs, it felt like Celine herself had heard my prayers.

Despite the nature of our travels, I couldn't shake the feeling of adventure that still lingered in me. I wondered what Randall would think of all of this. There was no doubt in me that he would've loved it. Randall had family in Wist too – once upon a time I had dreamt of running away there with him. Too easily was that dream destroyed.

The colourful clientele must've been used to newcomers coming to town as they didn't glance twice at us. We found a boisterous inn parked a little way off the centre with stables attached. The planks that built it were made of old wood worn away by time. The sign hung above it rattled with the wind: *The Last Straw*. Men and women wrapped in colourful cotton clothes hung around the door smoking pipes and laughing, their faces red with alcohol. The smell of the sea was strong, and the sound of the waves filled any break in conversation with a lull of water.

I focused inward to summon my magic; as I had suspected, they were all shifters. Their presence wasn't anything to be afraid of – judging the magic surrounding them, I would've assumed they were regular shifters – dogs, cats, rabbits, and the like. Irregulars were the ones we should be concerned about as they were powerful shifters. They couldn't control their powers and, according to Sorrel, it drove them mad. There were stories about them trapped in their forms forever that made my skin crawl.

“Any ideas, Majesty?” Brenn whispered.

“Acquire us funds from whoever has the worst mind while I find us a seat.”

Brenn's lip twisted into a smile, and he quickly side-stepped away from me and headed back into the centre with too much spring in his step. Grimacing, I steeled myself and

headed inside. I kept my face as impassive as I could as I stepped forward and through the porch.

The noise greeted me first: jeering, chattering, laughter, combined with the noise of glass smashing, and a drunken fiddler player swaying on his stool. The smell of mead, candle wax, and freshly baked bread filled the place pleasantly. A huge fireplace roared away making the tavern as warm as a goose-feather duvet around my shoulders.

A colourful mix of all peoples filled the room. Besides the clusters of shifters, a few dragonkin were throwing back spirits like they were water; a woman with a hand covered in blue scales using her tail to hoist a glass bottle high and pour the next drinks. I noticed some dark-skinned figures by the bar with intricate patterns around their eyes and across their faces; it took me a moment to realise they were Hydraen Fae, and I tried to hide my surprise. They must've been used to a much hotter climate than here hence the thick robes and cloaks.

I hadn't realised shifters could sometimes have animal features too, but I spotted a couple making eyes at each other; a dark-haired girl's cat-like ears twitching as she blushed and the tanned girl sitting opposite her looking delighted. As the tanned woman tilted her head to come in closer, I realised her brown hair was actually a collection of feathers growing back across her head.

A lizard and a rat sparred on the bar top before the red-haired barmaid shooed them off and they continued the tiny brawl on the floor. The barmaid pressed her lips together and grabbed the broomstick.

There was a spare table in the corner furthest from the fire, tucked next to a curtain. I made my way over there quietly, shrugging off Hector's jacket which now was too warm to wear. I noticed the table closest to the fire had garnered much attention, people surrounding it with pints of mead in hand. The word "bets" was called out and met with groans or giggles but before I could listen a whoosh of cold air brought Brenn sitting back next to me.

Unnervingly, he had a wide grin on his face.

"I learned a few fun things," Brenn said dumping a full leather skin of coin on the table which I quickly swept off into my lap.

"Do share." Surreptitiously, I opened the bag. Gold coin and plenty of silver filled it – not a bronze in sight. I frowned and Brenn simply shrugged.

"There were plenty of people with bad minds," he said simply. "This town has been claimed by pirates."

I blinked. Suddenly, the boisterousness of the people made much more sense. Brenn wiggled his eyebrows.

"For how long?" I asked, suddenly feeling more aware of wandering eyes that sneaked a look at the pair of us.

"A few years," he said. "The locals renamed this place, Newt," Brenn smiled. "In fact, all of this coast from here to Riach's border has been claimed by pirates."

My stomach dropped. We had signed a treaty with them years before I was born – they were under our protection. How could this have happened?

"What about the Shifter Council?" Surely, they couldn't have allowed this.

"It seems that Dion has been divided for a while now – Dion to the East with Rynd as the capital and the pirate state, the *Republic of the Free* to the West."

My jaw fell.

Brenn chuckled at my face. "Your father was more than willing to kick the shifters to the margin when it suited him. No wonder they let the Fynix invade."

My mind ran back to the scenes of despair back in Kya. I hated the feeling of helplessness – the bloodshed and the smell of fire and magic taking over. And now this? So much for the honour of a pact with a warlock. I shook my head. How could I even call myself a Princess when I knew so little of the world? I'd convinced myself that learning forbidden

magic made me even – maybe even better than them. Outlawed magic gave me an edge but how much more of my education had been adapted for me? I gritted my teeth as I thought of my father – I bet Sorrel knew all of this.

I rubbed my temples. What else had changed while I rehearsed my dancing or did needlepoint? How had hiding the truth from me helped?

“Why did they give up Dion?” I pressed.

Brenn gave a wicked, all-knowing smile that set my blood boiling. Perhaps I should read more minds since the upheaval in Clawton.

“Alongside general prejudice – it seems like they weren’t taking as much money as they were giving the people of Dion anymore. The treaty was adapted to peace and independence.”

I thought of the remnants lurking outside of Newt. Of course, peace meant giving them nothing. Withdrawing support from a country that had depended on it. No wonder it had changed so drastically. I felt shame creep up my neck.

Brenn huffed, clearly having read my mind or seen it on my face. “Oh please. What could you have done?”

“Say something. Do something,” I retorted. Brenn crossed his arms and gave me a deadpan look.

“Of course, your father valued your input intrinsically.”

It didn’t make any of it right.

A riotous laugh went up from the table to the right of us, pulling me back into the room. Now I knew who they were I could see the cutlasses next to the coat stand and the pistols stored under the table. But perhaps they could be of use to us? Pirates knew ways around the sea and land that even the most experienced seafarers would pale in comparison.

We could avoid the General that was now on our tail, and no doubt bypass any Fynix forces sent our way. And then we could head to Wist. Where my aunt, if she still had any faith left in me, would be ready and willing to help muster support.

Everything came into focus: I knew what my plan was.

I glanced over to the loudest table and then back to my companion. Brenn’s smile fell as he shook his head.

“That is a terrible idea.” He crossed his arms. “Pirates are not trustworthy.”

I got up from my seat and went to the bar, leaving Brenn burning holes into the back of my head. I smiled at him as I ordered two pints of mead from the busty redhead behind the counter. She had dark eyes and pretty freckles all over her nose and cheeks; she smiled happily when I gave her a tip.

“Where are you from then, mister?” she asked sweetly as I rested my elbows on the countertop between us. “I haven’t seen you around town before.”

“Just passing through,” I replied. I took a sip of my mead – it had a strong, wheaty taste with a sweet hint of honey that ran through it. It was also alcoholic enough to make me briefly forget what I was saying. “I was wondering who is in charge around here. My colleague has some enquiries to make,” I referenced to Brenn, who looked like he could stab me.

The barmaid looked at Brenn with a smile of amusement.

“Well, Captain Bennett isn’t with us this eve,” she said – she glanced over to the table causing the racket. “But his first mate is here with some of his,” there was a smash of glass, and a cheer went up as the barmaid winced, “crew.”

“Captain Bennett runs this town?” I asked.

The barmaid shook her head.

“Officially, the Pirate Lords do – but I don’t think Bennett sees it that way. Truthfully, I don’t think the Lords do either.”

I thanked her and returned to the table to give Brenn his mead.

“Do you have a death wish?” he hissed, he tried to grab my arm, but I moved beyond his reach. I picked up the other mead as I headed over to the centre of the party. The sodden floor made squelching noises under my feet as I joined the edge of the fray. Burly men and even burlier women were cheering on a group of individuals chugging a bubbly amber liquid at the same time.

In the middle of all this was a woman with beautiful brown skin and short black hair cropped just below her delicately pointed Fae ears. But most arresting were her eyes; a mesmerizing colour that was so blue they looked like the sky at dawn. Wearing a weather-beaten brown leather jacket, white shirt, and breeches that were laced up at the front with her long black boots, she looked every part a pirate; especially given the savage-looking cutlass resting in a leather-bound holster hooked over the edge of her chair.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and slammed her tankard down first.

“And she wins again!” she yelled to a cacophony of cheers and applause from around her. She grinned smugly as she crossed her arms and watched the rest of the crew finish up.

Second to finish was a slender man with a length of long blond hair that went down his back. Parts of it were plaited back but I noticed the marks around his eyes – flowers delicately drawn, as if with a fine paintbrush, circled his eyes and fell upon his cheeks. He had the ears of Fae too – though he looked very different to his companion and those I had seen by the bar. He wore a light blue tunic that was embroidered at the collar and sleeves along with a midnight-blue draped waistcoat tied across his back. I realised the style was that of the Dean Fae which explained the lack of wings but didn’t explain the markings. Despite his speed, he placed the empty tankard down gracefully.

“If anything,” the Fae drawled in a voice as soft as spun silk, “this just proves you have a bigger mouth than the rest of us.”

Suddenly, a belch exploded from the end of the table along with the next slam of the tankard. The blond ground his lips together and looked away. “You are repulsive, Evan.”

“That was a brilliant one. Excellent execution and depth.” The belcher was shorter than the other two, with a rounded, tanned, freckled face and crazed brunette curls. The dark-haired Fae gave a little applause. “I must please my fans, Caden.” His voice had a twang to it I didn’t recognise. His dark eyes glittered as he grinned at his companions’ disgust.

“You’re as bad as Regan,” the giant woman to his left declared. She was very clearly dragonkin with one half of her face studded with dragon scales the colour of embers. They matched her flowing red hair which shimmered in the candle-light as she leaned away from the offending smell. Her broad shoulders looked as if she could crush me easily and she wore a pale green dress in a floaty crepe fabric with an auburn leather bodice laced at the front.

“Where is that damn troublemaker anyway?” the blue-eyed Fae said looking about the bar. Her eyes skimmed past me as she shook her head.

“Probably nursing her wounds in the cabin,” the dragonkin sighed. “You know how her ego is particularly vulnerable when the moon is out.”

“That’s what you get for challenging a legend like me to a drinking contest,” the blue-eyed lady replied. She flicked her hair over her shoulders – I noticed the ends of her hair were a lighter blue. Maybe a Dean Fae too?

“Poor Regan,” the man with curly hair replied, shaking his head. “Losing is not in her vocabulary.”

The dragonkin’s lip twitched. “It wasn’t until she met Aoife.”

The first lady tutted as she looked about the bar.

“Well, this night seems to have reached an impasse.” Her accent was strange, and I didn’t recognise it – well-spoken and refined as her voice was. “Will no one challenge me? Or must I claim my victory once more?”

The crew laughed as people around them shook their heads or diverted their gazes. I had my two pints in hand, so I edged through a gap in the crowd and placed them both down with a small thud. A dribble of mead ran onto my thumb, so I licked it off. This didn't seem to be the kind of establishment that would mind for manners.

"I think I could take that challenge." The room's bustling atmosphere quietened as people craned to get a look at me. No doubt I still looked dishevelled in my Draigian gear but at least I didn't stand out here; this place was a jumble all by itself.

The blue-eyed woman smirked and laced her fingers together ahead of her on the table.

"Oh yeah, kid?" she said. "Are you even old enough to drink?"

"Sure," I replied. She looked older than me by a few years. She started shaking her head – her smile remained unchanged.

"It wouldn't be fair," she said nonchalantly. "It wouldn't be a challenge."

The curly-haired boy snorted into his new pint and the blond fae watched me carefully – my skin prickled. I could taste the searching spells on my tongue, but I knew with Brenn keeping me under his glamours that I was safe, for now.

"Look you've embarrassed yourself now. Well done. Now come back before they decide to stab you," Brenn snapped in my mind.

I crossed my arms and tilted my head, unimpressed.

"I might surprise you," I replied. Those blue eyes didn't move from mine. "Unless you're scared..."

The dragonkin giggled as she shook her head. A few chuckles went about the bar, and I could feel people staring at me. Even though I couldn't see him, I felt Brenn's scowl.

Flashing her pearly white teeth at me the first mate grinned and gestured to the spare seat to her right. Then she kicked its leg, and it jutted out at an angle.

"Well, we can't have that now, can we?" She reached over and pulled the pint across the table to herself, keeping eye contact with me while people around the table snickered.

"On three?" she said. I nodded and lifted my tankard, but before I could move any further, she looped her arm around mine, so we rested in the crook of each other's elbow. She caught my surprise before I could maintain my cool exterior. "It's a duel, isn't it?"

"If you say so," I replied.

"Count down please, Don." She tilted her head to the dragonkin, who still looked bemused.

"One," Don started. Those blue eyes very quickly winked at me. "Two. Three!"

She was quick but so was I. I chugged like I had never chugged before. I was almost impressed with myself with how much I could down the mead. The strength of the alcohol made my eyes burn.

Randall had secretly taken me to parties when we had started courting. Nothing fancy like the family of the courtiers who studied in the Royal Academy; no, parks filled with kids our age drinking and playing in the green fields. We played silly challenges like this, had competitions with cards, and stayed out until the sun came up. No one knew who I was back then – before everything fell apart. But, after having grown up with two brothers, competitiveness was a vice of mine.

After the last drop was gone, I slammed my drink down just as the first mate did the same. The thud was loud enough that I worried I might have dented the table. People muttered, eyes flicking back and forth between the woman and I.

The dragonkin shook her head and raised her arms. The curly-headed man clapped the table with one hand in glee. The blond fae had quirked an eyebrow.

"A tie, Aoife," the dragonkin said. "I couldn't call it."

The blue-eyed woman, Aoife, as the dragonkin had called her, wiped the corner of her mouth with the tip of her thumb.

“Shall we go again?” she said, a challenge in her voice.

“Are you paying?” I replied.

She grinned.

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After three pints of mead, a purple liquorice fizzy concoction, something bright yellow that tasted fruity, and three tiny black glasses an inch high, filled with something smoky, the room had slowly but surely started to spin. At some point Brenn had moved in closer to watch the proceedings: we had gained quite a crowd before the curly-headed one, Evan, told them to clear off. The dragonkin, Donna, was so impressed I could go toe-to-toe with Aoife she had bought our last round herself.

I waved to Brenn, whose glower was strong enough that even my inebriated self could tell I was in for a scolding later. The drinking finally stopped as the night drew into the early hours of the morning. The tavern was nearly empty beside us and despite my lack of sleep, I felt full of energy. Even the barmaid seemed to have gone to bed, leaving the keys on the side of the counter for us to lockup when we were done. The trust she had for the crew was surely a testament to their reliability – or just how dangerous they were.

“So, kid,” Aoife said looking at me and then glancing at Brenn who was leaning on the counter with a bored expression. He eyed me every so often and demanded in my head that we leave. “What’s his deal?”

I waved a hand. “Nothing – he just needs a nap.”

Brenn scowled at me he bridged the gap between us and sat in a chair close by.

“I don’t remember a drinking contest being on the agenda,” he drawled. He looked at the crew with a wary expression.

“Live spontaneously,” I replied. Aoife grinned at me. Donna’s eyes flicked between us.

“Lovers’ quarrel?” she asked. Brenn’s face didn’t change but I couldn’t stop a laugh from escaping me.

“We’re brothers,” he said snippily.

Evan’s eyes lingered on Brenn for a moment and then he shook his shoulders and took a slurp of his foamy dark pint. Donna seemed to be looking at Brenn with fresh eyes.

“So, what brings you to Newt?” the blond Fae, Caden, said, glancing towards his drunken companions. “I assume it’s not the sterling company.”

“Hey!” Donna objected as Aoife made a rude gesture with her fingers towards him.

I opened my mouth to respond but wasn’t quick enough.

“We are looking for a ship to take us to Wist,” Brenn spoke. “We have business there.”

Evan’s eyebrows shot up. “Wist? You’ll be lucky. Those waters belong to the wolves now.”

My heart jumped. Werewolves being involved was not good news.

“The Syrees?” I pressed. “Since when?”

“Technically it was theirs originally,” Donna said. “The Wisterians just claimed it and thought because their council was run by a Wryfirth they would get away with it. But now that family has been wiped out, they’ve claimed the Blue Pass and the Southern Depths.”

“Who is running Wist now?”

“The Council still is,” Aoife said. “Just they’ve been boxed in from all sides. And the Wryfirth there gave up her position and retreated.” Aoife’s face was quizzical. “How do you not know this? It’s been everywhere.”

I suddenly felt sick.

“We were at sea for a time,” I said, feebly.

“Fishing,” Brenn added, his voice as unconvincing as ever.

Aoife didn’t say anything, but her bright eyes were sceptical. Donna met her eyes, lifting an eyebrow. I held onto the edge of the seat tightly, so I didn’t fall off.

“So, what is your business there?” Donna asked. She had swept up her red hair and was tying it up with a strip of leather. “Wist is crawling with refugees.”

“Our family lives there,” Brenn lied smoothly. “We were fishermen before we shipwrecked outside of Draig. Since then, we have been making out way back there.”

The short one, Evan nodded eagerly. “Have you heard about the Wraith of the Wastes?” Brenn tilted his head. “It escaped and is roaming about in Draig as we speak.”

The blond groaned, “Not this nonsense again.”

“Oh, shut it, Caden,” Evan retorted. “Apparently, the king of Fynix sent the Princess of Wryfirth there to meet her end. And when she died the Wraith had enough power to destroy the tower once and for all.”

Some of the tension eased from my shoulders. The news clearly hadn’t travelled here just yet. I did not doubt that we had hours – if that. People would send hawks, fire messages, or even spell letters back and forth between each other. Enchanted paper wasn’t a rare occurrence.

“That’s all hearsay,” Donna waved him off. “Anyway, the Princess is long dead.”

“Most likely,” Caden said slowly.

The first mate waved a hand.

“Donna’s right,” she said rubbing her head, her words a little slurred. “We’ll get the full story when Cap arrives, I’m sure.”

“Princess, I think we should leave,” Brenn said quickly in my mind.

“We’re getting somewhere!” I replied.

Suddenly Evan’s head snapped up from across the table. His eyes were accusatory, and all softness had gone from his demeanour. He met Brenn’s eyes who had gone still next to me.

“Did you just-” Evan spoke through gritted teeth, but it seemed Donna was the only one who had noticed. Then Caden jumped in.

“Speak of the dog,” Caden said.

A fierce look appeared on Evan’s face, and he moved slightly forward, covering Donna. His eyes had turned dark – all the sparkle had gone. Through my arcane senses, I felt the magic surrounding him change – his aura becoming dangerous and foreboding. My stomach knotted.

“What’s wrong?” Donna said poking her head around to look at Brenn. I turned too. Brenn’s face was drawn tightly and furious. His eyes had gone black, and I couldn’t see the white anymore.

Evan stood up and immediately a pair of long dark talons shot from his hands. His eyes were just as dark, and his lip curled to reveal a set of elongated fangs. He growled lowly and Brenn matched him with a savage growl of his own, now on his feet too.

At that moment, Aoife acknowledged the demon and wraith staring dangerously at each other and sighed. The door creaked open behind us, but I couldn’t bring myself to turn around.

“You couldn’t hold it for another second, Evan?”

“Typical Evan,” Caden said. “Blowing a perfectly good plan by being a hot head.”

My stomach tightened as the realisation hit me. Each of the crew members brandished a weapon. Aoife was spinning two curved blades in her hands. A shining ball of green smoke had bloomed in Caden's hand. Donna held a cutlass of her own and Evan's claws were ready.

I finished my drink before crossing my arms. My thoughts were racing through the murky alcohol swamp so I decided stillness was the best choice for now.

"I leave you alone for less than a day and you acquire a wraith and a royal," a deep masculine voice said. There was the noise of a chair being dragged across the floor. Next to me a tall man wearing a tricorn hat and a long leather coat. He had a sword and a crossbow hooked to his belt and he was smiling. "How do you always bring trouble to my door, Aoife?"

Aoife shrugged her shoulders.

"They found us," she said. Her eyes flicked to Brenn. "You move an inch, and she dies."

Brenn hadn't moved but his eyes flicked over to me. A word and he would go. I know he would. But could he take all of them? The power coming off all of them was intense. But even it paled in insignificance compared to the man sitting next to me. His smile was arrogant, but his magic was beyond anything I had felt in a while. He was easily a Warlock – maybe even a Mage. His eyes were a deep navy with a long scar down his cheek, hooking the corner of his mouth.

"Hello, Princess," the man said. "I am Captain Courtney Bennett – and you are both under arrest."

Chapter Nine

"Can I kill them yet?" Brenn asked as he surveyed the cell once more. Thankfully, dungeons here were cleaner than the ones the Fynix had kept me in. This one had a shabby bed with a simple wooden frame and a couple of thin grey woollen blankets.

The pirates had taken over one of the townhouses looking out onto the dock for their base. The group had escorted us down here, a short-barrelled pistol pressed against my back, accompanied by Brenn's seething sarcasm as they locked us in, leaving the demon, to stand guard.

Opposite us, Evan was leaning against the wall with a scowl on his face – his eyes still pitch, with elongated fangs poking through his lips. "I could do with a snack," Brenn growled at Evan. He hissed back and I saw his tongue was forked.

"No." I reminded him for the hundredth time in that hour. I had a plan, of course. Brenn just needed to be patient – I was waiting for the right moment. I was also waiting to feel less drunk.

"They are going to sell you back to Fynix, your Highness," Brenn said. He turned his back on Evan and leaned against the bars. Evan's hiss filled the air. "Then, the King will cut your head off and dance through the streets of Kya with it – just like he did with your father."

I scowled at him. Brenn could easily tear this cell down – it was warded against magical beings escaping but not something as powerful as Brenn. Or me for that matter. But they didn't need to know that yet. After all, I had to convince Brenn that killing them was a bad idea – they knew the seas and that was exactly what we needed.

But how much did they know? Surely, news had travelled fast but what exactly did they believe? After all, they'd left Brenn down here with one guard, surely his powers hadn't diminished in their eyes. Did they believe I wouldn't fight my way out? My head was swarming but I focused on my plan: surely, I would be able to convince them?

“He didn’t dance, and it won’t come to that,” I start to say before he jumps in.

“I saw inside that tiny Half-Demon’s mind,” Brenn said, and a growl rumbled through the stone dungeon quarters.

“Yeah, and got yourself rumbled,” I crossed my arms. He’d explained on the way over – under command – that he had gone snooping through Evan’s mind. The Half-Demon noticed and was not happy about the intrusion.

Brenn waved a hand dismissively. “We were busted the moment the barmaid slipped the blond one a note about the killer glammers worn by an idiot and an attractive man.”

I smiled at him.

“You’re not that much of an idiot, Brenn.”

His eyebrow twitched.

“Just let me eat them – problem solved!” He whipped round to Evan, Brenn’s face shifted, and I saw the rows of bone-mangling teeth that had appeared in the tower. His face contorted as Evan’s jaw clenched so I elbowed him in the side.

“We need a way to Wist, Brenn,” I returned. “I can’t sail, and you can’t fly us all that way.”

Brenn’s form returned to normal, his teeth straight and mundane. He pressed his lips together and shook his shoulders.

I used the peaceful moment to reach out with my mind to Evan. My escape plan depended on getting into the half-demon’s head. But I had to be discreet, and he had to be distracted. Unfortunately, he was still too focused; if I wasn’t so determined, I would’ve been impressed.

“You could always try rowing again?” Brenn said, deadpan.

“Stop being an ass.”

Brenn frowned.

“Why do I even bother trying to reason with you?”

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I replied.

I went up to the bars where Brenn had been taunting Evan. He hadn’t moved.

“So, Evan,” I started. “Any idea what the next move is?”

His dark eyes turned to me, and he shrugged his shoulders.

“Your Wraith friend hit the nail on the head,” he said, indifferently. “Probably sell you back to the Fynix king.” Evan had pushed the sleeves of his black tunic up his arms and the taut muscles of his forearms moved as he gestured. “It’s nothing personal, *Aaron*.”

My faux name made me smile. There was no chance in hell I would be sold to anyone but that didn’t mean I couldn’t be polite about it.

“You can call me Bryony,” I told him. “Is your real name Evan?”

The Half-Demon nodded.

“I would rather not be sold, Evan,” I told him. “Even though I suppose the coin would be great for you guys, I would much rather have my freedom.” Evan tilted his head to the side. “Brenn is very hungry too,” I added.

Evan looked to Brenn and then back to me. “Do you seriously think you can convince me to release you?”

“*Brenn, do you remember what you did in the Tower?*” I whispered through our mind-link.

I showed Brenn my plan as I opened my thoughts to him. As usual, he said nothing. But then he started shifting into the humanoid white figure he attempted to frighten me with in the tower. Now it just needed to work on Evan.

“When you die, your Majesty,” Brenn said in a horrible, guttural growl, “I will kill them all anyway.”

His bottom half turned to a snake, whilst his arms turned into claws. He paced the floor of the cage, whipping a fierce tail back and forth with a haunting howl. Brenn gauged great swathes of the floor and left jagged marks in the stone.

With my psychic magic, I stretched out towards his mind, I could feel Evan's horror ripple through me as I advanced further in. He feared Brenn, I could feel it, coursing through me like an icy wave. I whispered the words to tighten my grip on his mind and Evan's consciousness suddenly fell under my control. I felt the whoosh of magic siphon through me as I eased into Evan's thoughts. His being was at my command. I clenched my jaw and I saw the darkness in Evan's eyes fade back to just his brown irises. His whole body went slack and relaxed. He wasn't in any pain – I was simply redirecting his thoughts with my own will. Brenn let out a low whistle beside me.

"And you snap at *me* for holding back?"

"How else was I meant to get away with *anything* in the castle?"

I could feel Evan try and resist me, but I was already aggravated by spending an hour in a cell with an irritable Brenn. I felt bad for Evan, but I knew he'd have more hope of surviving the next part if we got out now. Waiting wasn't doing me any good at all.

"You want to let us out, don't you Evan?" I spoke clearly. The magic on my tongue made it tingle, but it felt good to sense it coursing through me once more. I could feel Evan's fears for the future swirling around, Brenn, his crew, and his crewmate Donna for whom his emotions seemed to be a complicated bundle. Those feelings were tied like a thread unravelling on a jumper. Puppeteering was a total invasion of privacy, beyond illegal, and it made me cringe, but I shoved those feelings away and drove him forward. "You want to show us to your friends, don't you Evan?"

I could feel his strength fight against mine, but it was no use. Clearly, despite noticing Brenn's presence in his mind, his talents were outside the realm of psychic magics. I overwhelmed him with a sense of calm and peace.

Evan stepped forward and I willed him to find the key and open the jail. He pulled a bronze key from the lock and turned it – a click sounded, and I pulled the door open. I stepped through the door and sensed my magic restored to its full power in my belly. The cell repressed magic, preventing any magical enhancements from being made to the body and people using it to break out of the cell by changing forms or pulling the bars apart. Not that the bars would've stopped Brenn had I let him rage.

The wraith skulked out behind me, the frown deepening on his face.

"If you had let me kill him," he started to say. "I could fly us out of here."

"I need a crew," I told him determinedly.

"You say that like it has to be this one."

"I like this one. They seem nice."

"They locked us in a cage," Brenn hissed behind me.

"I would lock us in a cage if I were them."

We followed Evan through the underbelly of the house. This time I took a moment to fully take in my surroundings. The smell of wood, polish, and iron filled my senses as we passed rooms filled with barrels of rum, cones of sugar, and unmined salt rocks. Silks of all shapes and colours filled another room. I guessed they must've been for trade – pirates were merchants after all, just with fewer rules.

We headed up some dark wood steps and Evan pushed open a trap door that led us onto a landing. I could hear voices coming from the next room over. This space was much more furnished than the dungeons had been, the walls painted cream and drapes hung across gashes in the wall as if someone had used the place for knife-throwing practice. I noticed the ancient Wryfirth crest carved into the masonry had long been defaced and felt my heart clench, just a little.

Instead, there was a new silver crest painted there: a rotary wheel crossed two swords – a steel longsword and what looked to be an enchanted blade with a twisted handle. The blade was a deep onyx colour. I recognised it but I couldn't pinpoint where from.

Other than that, there was a closet overflowing with clothes and a chest next to it with a varnished oak finish that seemed to be snoring. The door to my right had been left ajar and I could hear the familiar voices drifting through. I still had Evan under my control, and an idea came to me on how to make an entrance.

I sent Evan ahead and commanded my words to his tongue.

"Evan, you didn't let the prisoners go and get your rum again, did you?" I heard Donna say. "I'm not sure I can deal with another rum-based fiasco. It's bordering on stereotype now."

Evan cleared his throat and then spoke in a monotone voice.

"Presenting her Royal Highness, the reigning Sun of the Kingdom of Magics, Princess Bryony Wryfirth of Riach."

The room fell silent as I stepped in. I smiled at the dropped jaws of the crew, and I bobbed a little curtsy. The captain and first mate stood next to each other by the open fire.

The walls were painted a deep green colour, but they were full of items hung up on nails alongside paintings on the wall of impressive landscapes I didn't recognise. Trinkets and ornaments of all shapes filled the mantle including a number of ancient-looking weapons. There was an oval table in the centre of the room where Caden was sitting, alongside a hulking figure of a woman I didn't recognise.

Donna stood immediately, with an axe in her hand. Caden too jumped up, and I saw his green fire muster between his fingers. Aoife's hand twitched toward her blade, but Captain Bennett stayed still.

I swanned over to settle in a free purple armchair near the door. I noticed Brenn didn't follow me and I turned my head to see him waiting. I rolled my eyes and then made Evan say.

"And Brenn: The Wraith of the Wastes." Brenn came in but instead of sitting down next to me he changed his form back into a shadow creature, keeping the monstrous jaws from earlier. I heard the scrape of his long talons on the floor and the sweep of a spiked tail.

He sat next to me, blocking the door.

The room was silent – no one moved. I cleared my throat.

"Sorry about breaking out," I said crossing my arms. "But I have spent far too much time in cages in my life thus far." Next to me Brenn growled deeply, enough for the eyes around the room to widen. "My companion feels the same way." The crew members turned to their captain who stared back at me. "Don't do anything stupid – I just want to talk."

A tense beat passed, and I wondered if this would be our last moments together.

Captain Bennett was the first to speak.

"I did wonder how much you were holding back, your Highness," he said, that familiar Southern accent twanging on every word. He sat down at the table and put his feet up on the surface. Had my governess been here, she would've been aghast. "Not just anyone can escape the Tower with an ancient monster under their control." He glanced at my scowling companion. "No offence."

Brenn said nothing – I was more than sure it still annoyed him enough too.

"I'm surprised the royal court would teach you psychic magics," Aoife said, a little impressed. She joined the captain at the table. Donna and Caden though, hadn't moved.

"I could've sworn that kind of magic was...unlawful," the captain said with a knowing smile. He and Aoife shared a look. "Now if you wouldn't mind freeing my gunner, we can talk."

Donna, who seemed to have been unable to remove her eyes from the still figure of Evan shook her head.

"You need to let him go," she said, her hand tightening on her axe. "Now."

Her face was hard, her amber eyes were blazing.

"Of course," I said, gently releasing my hold on his mind. Magic tingled through my senses as my full control returned. Evan stumbled over breathing hard; then he pressed his hands onto the table and twisted his head to me his eyes turned to horror as he saw Brenn for the first time. "Sorry about that, Evan. But I did ask nicely first."

His eyes darted back between Brenn and I.

"Also, Riach laws prevent women from learning anything besides performative magic and basic healing," I clarified. "That applied to me as well. But I couldn't resist, so I learned other magics in secret."

Evan frowned furiously and his eyes darkened as they set upon us. But this time, Brenn didn't hold back. He swarmed over to him, his dark magic made my skin prickle as the temperature dropped. I watched my breath fanning out in front of me.

"Try anything and I'll consume everyone here and make you *watch*," Brenn seethed.

For a moment, I thought Evan might try. His hands, now clawed in dark tendrils shook at his sides. Then the Captain cleared his throat from the table. Evan's fangs rescinded but nothing about him relaxed. Instead, he moved to where Donna stood and put distance between them and us.

Brenn seemed to consider this a concession and returned to my side.

"Yes, very scary," I said. "But the reason we didn't just escape – as we very easily could have – is because we have a proposition for you."

"Don't rope me into this madness," muttered Brenn.

"Very well then. *I* have a proposition for you."

The captain tilted his head; he had long hair that was tied back at the back of his neck and a shadow formed across his eyes under his hat.

"Proceed, then your Highness," he said. Despite the joking tone, there was a certain grandeur in his voice – he must've been of noble birth, no doubt.

"My Aunt is still in Wist – and she is the last remaining family I have," I began. "We have been trying to travel there but we have run into a few, um, problems along the way." I thought of the Bonekeeper, red eyes glinting like fresh blood on snow. I thought of the Fynix and their war drums outside my chambers. Then, finally, of the Tower and its lone inhabitant.

"We would like passage there. I have supporters in Wist, and I want to be with my people. From there we can figure out our next move." My words were met with blank faces.

"You wish to reclaim Riach?" Donna said incredulously.

"I want peace and safety for my people. By any means."

Evan snorted as the captain raised an eyebrow. Aoife's face showed a flicker of something like sadness.

"Bit late for that, Princess," Evan added – his face still stony.

"Wist is under the control of the Fynix Horned King now," Aoife said. "You'd be walking into a more permanent death sentence."

"Not if we don't get caught," I said. I glanced at Caden, whose face was unreadable. "I thought pirates were good at being stealthy. And if all the bragging I heard is anything to go by – I thought you guys were the best."

At that point, the huge figure sat next to Caden scowled. They'd been quiet this whole time, observing proceedings with an impassive face.

"We are the best," she said, her accent neutral but familiar. Syree perhaps? I noticed the gruff turn of the vowels. "But that doesn't make us foolish."

"You could've fooled me," Brenn rumbled next to me.

“What’s in it for us?” Captain Bennett asked. “Unfortunately, Princess you don’t have many bargaining chips.”

“You won’t die horribly and painfully,” snarled Brenn.

“We have a business to run. We’re not a charity for wayward Princesses on missions of self-destruction,” Captain Bennett said with a shrug. Aoife gave him a flat look. “Especially, when that Princess and her companion are wanted all over the world,”

I glanced up at the flag of the rotary wheel crossed by a long sword and the enchanted blade among the collectibles above the fire. Then the memory came back to me, and I remembered where I had seen that blade before.

“I like your flag, Captain,” I said. “That sword is the Blade of Kazaan, isn’t it?”

The Silvian hero had wielded it long ago – it was said to have only been wielded by the finest of swordsmen and blessed the user with incredible powers. Silvia was the home to ancient magic practices – Mages of all races would travel to study there. At least, that was before it became consumed by dark magic and the shadow realms were born. Now it lay abandoned. “It belonged to the Cavalier of Silvia before it fell.”

An odd tenseness accompanied the silence then. The Captain’s smile sharpened.

“Maybe once, but then it was mine.” Bennett’s expression turned to a grimace. “It was lost at sea.”

Next to him the corner of Aoife’s mouth quirked. The Captain noticed and he clenched his jaw.

I nodded. That was the common knowledge of the item. But alas, the Wryfirth historians knew a little more of what became of it.

“It washed up in Dean,” I said, evenly. “But now it’s in the catacombs under the Sapphire Palace. I know because I used to practice magic down there. Forbidden magical items were my only company. Along with the dead, of course.” Obviously, Randall had been with me sometimes, but they didn’t need to know that. “Should you accept my mission, you can have it back,” I told them. “It might need sharpening though – I’m sure I used it as a doorstep once or twice.”

The captain winced at that, and Aoife giggled. That noise broke the tension in the room.

He whipped his head to her.

“It’s not funny!” She looked away, her shoulders vibrating. “It’s an ancient weapon! The heirloom of my family.”

“Hey, *I* didn’t drop it,” Aoife replied, and the captain pressed his lips together in defeat.

He turned to me.

“You’re sure it’s the one?”

I nodded.

“All the relics in the catacombs are treasures – it’s the safest place for them. Not even the treasury is so highly warded.”

“I didn’t realise the Wryfirths kept a secret store of goodies under the castle.” The larger lady brightened at the thought and rubbed her hands together. She had dark skin with short brown hair that was short on both sides but longer on top. “Perhaps we should pay it a visit.”

I shook my shoulders.

“You need to be a Wryfirth to find it,” I told her. “Even if you destroyed the castle, you’d never be able to access it without someone living with royal blood.”

“And it would seem that you are the last,” Captain Bennett said.

“You can have the sword. I decide what happens to everything else down there.” I spoke. “You will be rewarded though, I assure you.” There were treasures galore down there

but I was sure I would need them to broker any sort of peace. The Captain looked to Aoife who shrugged her shoulders and chuckled.

"You know you want that damned sword back or I'll never hear the end of it," she added.

"Hold on," Evan interjected. "There is no way on this realm that I am going on a boat with that thing."

"I must second the short one's opinion," Caden said crossing his arms. "I grew up with stories about the Wraith of the Wastes. What's to stop it devouring all of us in our sleep?"

Feeling it was his turn to become involved in the conversation, Brenn's form began to shrink. Black glittering smoke transformed into the small, lithe snake once again. He wrapped himself around my shoulder, lifting a serpentine head and tilting it to the side. He innocently stuck out his forked tongue.

I raised my hand to show them the pact scored into my skin. Caden raised his eyebrows.

"Brenn can't harm anyone unless I permit him to or they are going to damage me," I said. "He's the ultimate protector."

"How did you ever get him to agree to that?" Donna said looking at the snake.

"It was just something I thought of while I was in the Tower," I replied.

"Plus, her royal highness is very good at mental magics," Brenn added.

"Thank you, Brenn," I replied, ready for the barb that was sure to follow.

"Terrible at everything else."

"I'm still a novice at many things," I told the table. "Unlike my brothers who had a full education, mine was quite limited to whatever I could smuggle out of the library or what was in the catacombs."

"How do you expect to take back your throne if you don't know much magic?" Aoife said. "I assume that is what you want – eventually."

"I have a Wraith on my side," I replied. "I'm sure we can handle it."

Aoife's blue eyes sparkled.

"So, your ultimate goal is the throne?"

I felt the eyes from the table on me.

"Of course. It's mine and my people need me."

The group stared at me, even Brenn held his forked tongue.

"My country has never had a queen rule alone," I told them. "It's time."

Donna's hard exterior seemed to have ebbed away and she smiled. Aoife too.

It was the giant woman who responded first.

"I'm in," she said crossing her arms. "But we get a reasonable monopoly over the catacombs." I nodded and she seemed satisfied with my answer. "I could use a challenge. And if I get to kill some Fynix bastards that's a bonus."

"For the record, I think it's a bad idea," Donna said. Evan's eyebrows had shot up in surprise. "But I can understand wanting to help one's people. I'm in."

"I'm in too then," Evan added quickly. "Who else is going to put the Wraith down when she dies?"

Brenn snickered on my shoulder.

Caden sighed and threw his hands up.

"Not like I have an option," he said. "I like Wist and I'm down for a little trouble now and then."

"As long as when you get your throne back you accept Newt and the pirate states as new independent democratic cities," Aoife said. Next to her Captain Bennett looked delighted.

“Done.” I glanced at the captain whose dark eyes were still staring at his first mate. “What do you think Captain?”

He took off his tricorn and dumped it on the table – the scar on his right cheek was more visible than ever with the light from the fire.

“I want my sword back.”

Aoife rolled her eyes.

Chapter Ten

After that, it was as if we resumed the earlier conversation from *The Last Straw*. The girls welcomed me over to the table and I made an effort to be lively despite the tiredness nagging behind my eyes. We stayed up a while longer, the warm glow from the fire burning down to the embers by the time we thought about going to sleep. During that time, Caden and Captain Bennett had been speaking about the logistics of the journey to Wist. If we headed south through the Pass of the Fae, the seas that divided the Fae lands from the rest of Nos, we ran the risk of interception from Fynix forces. But the alternative route would take us through the Divide and past the Wastes. A prospect no one other than Brenn found promising.

“There’s also the issue of the Bonekeeper,” I said. I had crossed my knees on the chair and rested the mug of cocoa that Donna had made me on one of the plush arms.

Unlike Donna, Evan remained snappy and never left her side like an angry shadow.

Aoife’s eyebrows shot up.

“An issue, indeed,” she said, her long, dextrous fingers gripped around a red clay mug. “How did you escape? They’re truly wicked fighters.” She looked at my arm – I had a feeling the veins would never lay flat again now. Their colour had faded from the angry red spindles, but I could still feel the ridges if I ran my hand over it. “Did he do that?”

The giant lady with beautiful dark skin, Regan, pulled a face.

“I met a Bonekeeper in Arge when I worked in Qicog for a bit,” she said. “Nasty buggers – I saw her take down a whole fort of dwarves.” She shuddered – her hazel eyes wide. “Came out wearing red.”

My stomach flipped over. I thought of the traveller with Coesau and those scarlet red eyes. Of course, I hadn’t found him frightening at first – though maybe I should have. I had consumed a lot of mead – the Fynix king could’ve been standing right there, and I would’ve probably asked him to dance.

“Avoiding is definitely the best option for us,” Evan interjected. “I could take one,” he added quickly. “I’d just rather not.”

“It’s no secret that the Demon King loves his military,” Donna said. “Let’s not go picking fights unnecessarily. I mean, we don’t want to have to tackle an even bigger force.”

I imagined the demon homeland: Raive. As it was past the Divide in the Shadow Realms, its presence in my education had been stifled. I knew the lay of the land – and its reputation, of course. But my lack of knowledge had been filled with rumour and hearsay. Monsters lurked in the streets. The people worshipped the Night Gods as the sun never rose. Darkness held endless depravity and disorder.

The artefacts in the catacombs from their people were very old indeed. No successful conquests had been undertaken since ancient times. Books lay bound in chains that, no matter what I did, would not open for me. Gems shone in colours that Riachian didn’t mine – and sometimes, in the darkness, I would swear I heard them whispering. My blood chilled.

“What is Raive like?”

Evan shook his shoulders. “I haven’t lived there in years,” he replied. He struggled to find the words. “There is no place I have ever been that is like it.”

“So, it’s not a den of infamy, ill morals, murder, and chaos?” I asked, to which, Evan’s steely expression broke.

“I didn’t say that,” he added with a smile. “Besides, there is a beauty to chaos.”

I saw him rest a hand on Donna’s thigh. A pinkness filled her cheek, and it might’ve been the light but the scales covering the other side of her face seemed to have more of a shine to them.

Unaware, Regan suddenly cleared her throat.

“Tell you what, demons make the best lovers in Nos,” Regan said clapping her tankard on the table. “Let me tell you of some acquaintances I met in Rangathan.”

Regan launched into a tale in which she had accidentally initiated a clan war between two demon families by seducing the daughters of opposing houses. It was so filthy I didn’t think I would ever think of the demon’s forked tongue without blushing again.

“You are traumatising, Her Royal Highness,” Aoife laughed.

“You are traumatising *me*,” Evan groaned.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Regan said. “I’ve heard some royal tales that put all of that to shame.”

“Sorrel had quite the reputation,” I agreed.

The big parties my brothers threw invited every corner of nobility for drinking, gambling, and other such scandal. Of course, Abel was just as bad, but my father didn’t care unless they posed especially big problems. Several times the parties were so riotous the royal guard had to come in and put them down.

I was strictly banned from these events. I had snuck in, of course, but I took no joy in drinking myself to oblivion and being sick in the fountain. My brothers used them to entertain certain ladies too. Of course, there was a fight for the crown and Sorrel had a whole harem harking at the chance to become queen. Abel, who could barely hold a conversation, had numerous lovers too of all genders. People really would do anything for power.

My stomach twisted as I thought of our family halls as I had seen them. Full of death, gore and ruin. I pushed the thought aside. “He was the heir apparent, and everyone knew it.”

“Saying that, your reputation was that you were as pure, meek, and passive as a lamb,” Aoife said. “But now I’ve met you, that doesn’t seem correct.”

Reputation was everything to my father and thus none of my disappearances or trips outside of the castle were ever mentioned. I was a princess of stained glass – an art piece ready for someone’s window. It felt good to be rid of that ridiculous image. I was never passive or delicate; I mean, there was nothing wrong with that, but for me, those words didn’t fit. I was never going to choose to be that person either. That choice had been taken away from me.

“What was real, and what my father told people were different things,” I replied. “He was never happy with how I turned out.”

“Does that mean you have conquest stories too?” Aoife said, nudging my arm. Her blue eyes sparkled. “Please tell me you’ve got some sexy lover tucked away somewhere safe.” She wiggled in her seat.

I shrugged and tried a smile. My stomach had twisted uncomfortably.

“None as vibrant as Regan’s, I fear. But I had a partner for a while,” I started to say. “It didn’t end very well.”

“A Prince?”

“A stable hand.”

Suddenly I felt a cold presence sliding onto my lap. He drew his tail up into a circle, his beady dark eyes looking up.

“You do not control your feelings well, Your Majesty,” he hissed, a forked tongue slithering out. “I could feel the tale of woe bringing down your heart from over there.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“And you came over to check on me?”

Brenn’s onyx eyes looked bored.

“Only to observe your discomfort,” he said, indifferently. I sent him a half-smile: what a strange creature.

Aoife’s eyes were only full of questions now.

“Now I have to know,” Regan declared, rubbing her hands together.

“You don’t have to tell us anything, Princess,” Donna said, elbowing Regan in her muscled arm.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “It was a long time ago.”

It had been years now – even though the wound still stung like had happened yesterday.

“He was called Randall,” I said. “He worked in the stables, but he was actually training to be an alchemist.”

I smiled at the memory, even though my heart was growing tight like spring. “I liked him for years until I said anything.” Of course, a Princess and a servant couldn’t be seen interacting like that. Any level of informality was disgraceful, to both of us. “I was meant to ignore him, and he was meant to ignore me.” Aoife smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Of course, I couldn’t very well ignore the most handsome boy I had ever seen.”

“We used to sneak out into town and explore together. I showed him the catacombs and we fell in love.” I thought briefly of the nights we had spent together. Between the silk sheets of my bedchamber, or underground in a den we’d made from stolen palace blankets. We filled the cavern up with candlelight and the jewels down there would sparkle like stars on the walls.

I bit my lip: maybe I was too tired for this after all. Randall didn’t even look like himself when my father had shown me his body. I couldn’t even bring myself to say goodbye. I swallowed hard. I couldn’t think about this anymore.

“My father didn’t want me disgracing us, so he had him killed,” I finished. “My father’s finest hour.” My chest felt unsteady – perhaps Brenn could feel it as he wound his way up to my shoulder. Their faces were mixed with empathy and sadness, but I couldn’t rid myself of the sick feeling in my belly to say anything more.

“Your father was the worst,” Regan said first. Aoife nodded.

“At least you’re free now,” Donna added.

“Yeah, make a new reputation for yourself,” Aoife said encouragingly. “The renegade Princess who harnessed the Wraith of the Wastes, beat a Bonekeeper, and escaped out of Draig – that’s not a bad place to start.”

I nodded and patted Brenn’s head next to me.

“‘Harnesses’ is a very optimistic word to use,” he grumbled, his dark face frowning.

I yawned. “Mind if we retire? He might not need sleep,” I gestured to Brenn, “but I do and today was too much when I got up this morning let alone now.”

“I’ll lead you up,” Donna offered as got up from her seat, the wooden feet scratching against the floor. She towered over me even though I wasn’t short. I thought of the giant dragonkin in the headquarters and realised it must be a hereditary trait. Evan moved to follow her.

“Oh, sit down, you berk,” she told him. “Unless you want to lose a limb.”

Evan crossed his arms; Captain Bennett had an amused look on his face and Caden smirked. He gave them both a rude gesture with his fingers.

“Goodnight, guys,” I said to them.

“Goodnight, Bryony,” Aoife called as we left the room. A cacophony of calls followed her, and my heart felt a little softer in my chest. “And Brenn!” she added, to which I swear Brenn flicked his tail.

Donna led me up to a small, white-panelled room with a window, a bed, and a wash sink. I spotted a tub tucked into the corner for washing in and found myself longing for a bath. She waved the witchlight on, and it sputtered out a muted yellow glow.

“Sorry, it isn’t much,” she murmured. “Our guest rooms are all full of merchandise now. This one was for the old staff when this place was run by the shifters.”

It had a door that I could close and that was all I needed right now.

“It’s perfect,” I said.

Donna gave me a half-smile.

“Let me know if you need anything,” she said but she paused before she closed the door. “Also, I just wanted to say, I’m sorry for before.” The dragonkin’s orange scales glinted against the rest of her pale skin. She had beautiful hazel eyes that seemed to possess all the colours of autumn leaves. “For pulling an axe on you – and everything before that.” I chuckled.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Trust me, it’s becoming part of my routine at this point.”

She smiled a little then added.

“Goodnight, Bryony.”

“Goodnight, Donna.”

With the close of the door, I flopped down on the bed. The sheets were old but not dirty. The aches I had been ignoring from this never-ending day had been wreaking havoc on my knees. I kicked off my boots and curled my legs on the bed. Brenn slithered up next to my head.

“You ducked out of that chat, your Majesty,” his words were curious. “I didn’t need to read your mind to know how you were feeling.”

I shrugged. Brenn had already seen Randall in my head when I let him in within the Tower. The cavern cored into my heart caused by Randall’s death hadn’t gone away. Only over time, did I learn how to traverse the stones better. My regrets had long been etched into those rocks.

“There are no wounds deeper than those caused by love,” I said.

Brenn tilted his head.

“What about if you lost all your limbs?”

I didn’t reply. “It was a legitimate question.”

“Maybe then it would be a little worse,” I said. Brenn hissed with his forked tongue in response. I eyed the Wraith: a strange being indeed.

“You were a human once,” as I spoke the Wraith stopped moving. “Did you ever fall in love?”

“I lived in a time and the very beginning of your line,” he said indignantly. “If I remembered anything about my life then – I wouldn’t tell you, your Majesty.”

“Why not?” I asked, crossing my arms. “I tell you everything.”

Brenn narrowed his eyes.

“Yes, I know – even though I never ask.” Brenn stretched his slippery body long. “You would never stop asking me questions and would be generally irritating.”

“Rude.”

I could feel my chest getting tight. It was too late. My memories refused to be pushed away. The room was quiet, and eventually, my exhaustion got the better of me.

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The drapes had been changed in my room. The pale pink swathes of chiffon and embroidered satin were now a delicate shade of lilac, the colour of fresh lavender. I was thirteen, Sorrel was teetering on manhood, and Abel had terrible spots across his face.

I was perched on my windowsill. The city was abuzz as any weekend was, but it was extra special this weekend. The castle was busy too – my maids, Emmeline and Frieda, had been hijacked to attend Sorrel's victory party.

The noise emanating from downstairs was enough to tempt me into sneaking away from my bedroom and to the great hall. On many occasions, like the start of the season or one of the hundreds of balls we threw, the palace was dressed to perfection. However, with Sorrel at the helm – the painted walls with the sculpted golden trim looked very different.

Drapes of silk hung over every window, someone had bewitched the chandelier to glow red, and feathers seemed to be filling the floor. I looked about for my father, but he wasn't among the revellers for once. Instead, there were around a hundred aristocratic men in various stages of undress and scantily clad women drinking and dancing to sensuous music.

When he wasn't on the battlefield, bullying Abel into training with him, this was Sorrel's scene, where the ladies of the court would try their luck. Sorrel's handsome face was enough for many a lady to forget their maid's warnings about how my brother treated his ladies. He viewed women in the same manner he viewed his servants: useful at certain times of day but ultimately expendable.

All the talk at court surrounded a band of rogue werewolves who had stumbled across the border. I didn't know much about the extent of them, but rogues were usually dangerous; unaligned werewolves who had lost control of their animal instincts and no longer bowed to an Alpha. Sorrel had gathered an eager hunting party and there were no survivors. My stomach turned over when I saw what he had brought back from the hunt: seventeen pelts. A few of which, were oddly small. I nearly vomited.

"That's vile, Sorrel," I exclaimed when he had presented them to me. Had the Syree Royals found out what he had done, hell, had any Werewolf found out, he would've easily caused a war with our neighbours. Even the worst criminals had death rites – a burial ritual. But stealing a wolf's coat was beyond insult: it was their skin.

Sorrel smacked his lips together before shrugging his shoulders. His embroidered royal blue tunic was hanging open and his white shirt underneath was splattered with wine. At least, I hoped it was wine. He still wore his riding boots, his Crown-Prince coronet at a wonky angle on his head. His ice-blue eyes met mine.

"Father loved them."

Clothes had been abandoned in piles across the floor. The smell of alcohol could've easily emanated from a brewery. It was still early – had I come in later no doubt I would've seen other things that would've turned my stomach further. I spotted Abel, red-faced and languid on a collection of cushions surrounded by women with feathers and flowers in their hair. He loved to be doted on and they loved being paid.

"You better put those away," I told him. The pelts had been stacked up next to the throne. One of Sorrel's right-hand men was lying across it as if it were a goose feather cushion. "I'm not being torn apart by wolves when they find out."

Sorrel waved one hand and used his other to finish his glass of red wine. His face contorted – his ego was already big enough to engulf all of Kya.

"I needed a new cloak," Sorrel replied. Around him, his friends laughed but I wasn't cowed. "They're only *animals*."

"You're the only animals I see," I retorted. I could hear people around us hush their conversations to listen in.

Sorrel's eyes turned nasty.

"You're no fun," he sneered. "Beat it before Father catches you."

Sorrel's friends were all rich snobs – I would've rather had my teeth pulled out than enjoy their company a moment longer. The older I got the more their eyes would linger on me as I walked by. I heard on more than one occasion one of them joke to my brother about taking me off his hands. My skin crawled.

Had nothing changed, I had no doubt I would've been shipped off to one of them. I sighed. At least this story had one silver lining.

I remembered heading down to the kitchen, where great fancy delicacies were being constructed for the feast; I stole a cake shaped like a palm-sized sun and then shimmied out of the stock room window. It was a fast way to get into the gardens after hours. None of the kitchen staff ever ratted me out. I knew they had been around when my mother was here so maybe that played a part of it.

Anyway, back then, I clutched at my skirts and hoisted myself through the grate up onto the gravel. The guards were either at the border or minding the party from the front entrance. No one stopped me as I headed out down the gardens at the back of the palace. The noise from the party drifted away the further I got, replaced by the song of crickets and owls. I went to one of my favourite spots. Its best feature was that it was away from the palace.

There was a glade hidden just behind the stables. Once upon a time, a few members of the Dean Fae had come and blessed the garden for the royals here. They had such excellent green fingers, their gardens were always filled with the most marvellous growth. Such good relations hadn't been seen in generations of my family and yet the flowers always returned.

They had picked this spot too. It was filled with wildflowers and in the evenings, just before dusk, fireflies filled the air, and moon lilies began to glow.

Of course, I shouldn't have been out unsupervised. Princesses weren't meant to go anywhere without a governess. Fortunately for me, my current governess at the time, Nanny Gill, a beautiful blonde woman with a voluminous figure had been won over by one of Sorrel's cronies. And, well, she couldn't very well say no to the Crown Prince of Riach – could she?

Thus, for the next few hours, I was free.

I sat under my favourite tree in the glade and closed my eyes. I could still see the glowing lights of the fireflies behind my eyelids.

Someone cleared their throat, and I glanced up. I recognised the floppy brown hair from the stables; he had his cap screwed up in his hands. He wore dark trousers, boots, a brown loose shirt, and a beaten jacket.

"Your Majesty," he started to say. "Isn't it a bit late for you to be out alone?"

I frowned at that.

"Your Majesty" is my father," I told him. "Bryony will do." The boy looked surprised. "But 'Your Highness' when you're around anyone who it will matter to."

The boy looked back at the stables; the lights had gone out now. The horses had all been put down for the night.

"You can go if you want," I said, sensing his worries. "I'll be fine."

The boy put his hands in his pockets.

"I feel bad about leaving you here," he said.

I grinned at him. Perhaps the boy had not expected that reaction – his brown eyes went wide. "I'll worry."

"If I could come with you, will that quell your worries?"

He opened his mouth but before he could speak, I noticed the emptiness of the yard and I was glad I had brought my cloak for the idea that had risen to me.

"Won't you be missed?"

I chuckled at his concerned expression.

"They won't even notice I am gone."

He realised he was still holding his cap and he put it back on.

"You know the city, don't you?" I asked, climbing to my feet.

"Yes, Bryony," he responded, trying out my name.

I brushed down my dress. And as I looked up, I realised he was smiling back.

"I've never spoken to a Princess before," he said, bashfully.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"That's definitely your loss," I said. "Because this one," I pointed to myself, "is great." His face was the perfect picture of surprise.

I set off in the direction of the gate, pulling my cloak up over my head. When I didn't hear his feet behind me, I turned around. The amusement on his face was lit up by the night lilies that had started to glow.

"Come on then," I called waving him over.

"But, where are we going?" he asked speeding up to catch up with me.

Our feet tapped as we walked along the paved stones of the yard. I turned to check we weren't being followed, but as expected there wasn't a soul around.

"On an adventure!" I replied. "You need to give me your name since I traded mine."

Somewhat baffled by my energy and happy to be swept along, he chuckled.

"I like an adventure. And it's Randall."

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I felt a warm tear run down my cheek before I swiped it away. Meeting him had been the best thing in my life thus far – yet, knowing me, is what doomed his.

"It wasn't your fault," Brenn said quietly next to me. One might have even assumed that was kindness in his voice – if they did not know him well. "You cannot blame yourself for the stupidity of others."

I half-smiled as I sniffed and wiped my face.

"Can one being in love really be called stupidity?"

"I think love is the definition of stupidity."

I sighed, "I think I might agree with you on that."

Brenn raised his head and noiselessly slid off the bed.

"Might I take a moment to investigate this place?" he declared. "I want to see if the whole thing is a dishevelled mess or if that is just the crew."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I'm not sure they would take too kindly to you just wandering about on your own," I couldn't see that kind of behaviour going down very well with Evan in particular. "Can you do it without being seen?"

Brenn closed his eyes and his snake form evaporated. There was no black smoke this time – there was nothing.

I sat up.

"Brenn?"

A waft of cold air floated onto my legs.

"I'm still here, your Majesty," he replied, his voice now a sort of echo.

I guffawed.

"So now you know invisibility magic too?" A rumble chuckle followed soon after.

"How do you think I did all those murders before?" His voice sounded eerily like wind through the gaps in a window. "I didn't knock on the door."

If I was fazed by this, I was too tired to feel it.

"Can you teach me?" I asked. "I want to learn. I want to learn more magic."

Brenn didn't respond for a moment.

"No."

I frowned.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to.”

I looked at the space where I presumed Brenn was.

“I’m sure you’ll be great.”

There was another beat.

“Things are different for me as I’m not human anymore,” Brenn explained. “I’m ultimately more powerful than you, and the process for me is entirely different than it was when I was a human.” He spoke fast.

“So, you do remember then?” I quipped. “That’s interesting.”

Brenn groaned and I couldn’t help my smile.

“Leave me alone, you weirdly curious creature.” I heard a rustle of the sheets as Brenn must’ve flown to the door. “May I go now?”

“Yes, but return if I call you using the link or you see anything that requires immediate attention,” I said. “And get me some books on magic – if we’re going to sea, we will need something to occupy the time with.”

Brenn grumbled as he left. I only knew he had gone when the room was completely silent, traipsing the halls like a strange, spirit guard dog.

I kicked off my boots and the trousers, which were now so muddy they could’ve stood up by themselves. Then I pulled off the bands around my chest. Even though the crew now knew my secret I figured I must keep up the act until we were at sea, and I was settled in Wist. I made myself get up and wash before deciding to just sleep in my shirt and underpants. I could’ve asked to borrow one from one of the other girls, but I didn’t have the energy to move.

Hopefully, Brenn would bring back books on glamouring or shape-shifting then I wouldn’t need to be so concerned with what I looked like. A glamour worked like a smoke-screen for editing appearances. I remembered some of the more, financially well-endowed, paid well for such a service.

If only the practice was forbidden – I would’ve learned it myself then. However, my cluster of talents were illegal at the best of times and deeply unethical at the worst. But, they were still talents.

I huddled myself beneath the blanket. The soft sheets were stiff at first but as I warmed up so did, they. I felt my shoulders finally ease and then I closed my eyes before drifting away into the warmth and the darkness. Randall filled my thoughts once more and I prayed he was at peace.

Chapter Eleven

Aoife made climbing rigging look easy. She scaled the mast with ease, running to the crow’s nest before she launched off onto a rope with the grace of an acrobat and then swung to safety on the deck. I itched to have a go myself, but I doubted I would have the dexterity of the first mate. Of course, Brenn told me that was the worst idea I had that morning. And that, unless I wanted to die, I should stay exactly where I was.

The blue ends of her hair flashed as Aoife moved, and she wore a red leather buccaneer’s coat – just like the Captain’s but in a deep scarlet. With her tan breeches and high boots, I felt like my wardrobe was in serious need of updating for a life on the seas. Next to me, Brenn’s scowl deepened on his face; his new human form, the same masculine face from Draig, had mimicked the outfit the captain wore but seemed to be in better condition and he skipped the tricorne.

We stood at the docks beside *The Siren's Promise* – a great wooden ship with an impressive number of guns and the figurehead of a siren at the bow, her head crowned in a spiked tiara as her peaceful face gazed on at the waves. The dark brown of the wood was weathered with the lower levels carrying barnacles and seaweed in the scuppers.

The carved woman at the front cast an eerie gaze across the water. A strange choice for a figurehead, really. Beautiful women who lured unsuspecting sailors into dangerous waters where they met a watery death. Not exactly a fate anyone would wish to tempt.

I knew from my reading that Sirens were a race that dwelled in the waters of the Shadow Realms among other monsters of the deep. The coves near Silvia and around the Wastes were rumoured to lead to their underwater lairs though few had lived to tell the tales of them and even then, how many of those uttered held any truth to them?

“So, Bryony,” Aoife said calling to me from the deck. “What do you think of her?”

“I think she’s marvellous!” I called back. Her freckled face lit up.

I looked to Brenn whose face hadn’t changed at all.

“It’s a boat.” I elbowed him. “A *big* boat.”

The Promise towered over the rest of the boats and fishing vessels in the dock; its impressive masts casting imposing shadows in the morning sun. The residents of Newt watched the ship prepare to depart. The strong smell of fish and the noise of the morning flow of commerce filled the air as the dock bustled with life. Other vessels had already departed to make use of the good weather, or perhaps just to get out of the way of Captain Bennett’s huge ship.

Aoife and Regan lowered a big wooden ladder down the side of the boat to the dock so we could climb aboard. Brenn went first so he could laugh as I wobbled my way up. I gripped the plaited hemp rope hard, and its hardy fibres dug into my palm. Heights were not something I usually struggled with, but the wind was strong today making the blue frothing waves take height beneath the boat. It made my knees weaken as I climbed the different rungs, feeling the rise and fall of the deck with the waves.

The deck moved a little underfoot as we traversed the ship causing my stomach to hop and sway. Now higher up, the wind whipped the saltwater air across my face, and I was thankful for once at the loss of my hair. Perhaps that explained why both Aoife and Regan kept their hair short, and Donna plaited hers back tightly.

Aoife gave us a tour as we reached the deck, explaining everything from the masts to the helm. As we reached the bow Aoife opened a small wooden door that led down a short flight of narrow stairs. Then she set about showing us the underbelly of the wooden beast. I knew very little about ships or sailing, but I was determined to become a master of all things nautical by this journey’s end. We descended two-gun decks and a galley before reaching the lowest point of the orlop deck just above the hull of the boat. The galley had been full of strange mechanisms with oar-shaped arms attached to the outer case of the bow through strange portholes that somehow kept the water out. I wondered about the purpose of the machines and the first mate explained it would be easier for me to see them in action. I tried my best to not look too surprised by the vastness of the space below the main deck and Brenn said very little while looking unimpressed.

When I asked how such a small crew commanded such a giant vessel, Aoife shrugged.

“The Siren’s Promise is special.” She didn’t elaborate and evaded all my further questions. But even so, I could feel magic running through this place like a lifeline. It was strange though – I couldn’t pinpoint a source.

Aoife concluded her tour by showing us the crew quarters in the forecastle at the front of the ship. Regan and Donna shared a bunk as did Caden and Evan. But Aoife’s room was next to the captain’s at the helm end of the ship. Our bunk consisted of two bunk beds and a

short set of drawers that had latches to keep them shut when the ship was moving about. Everything was nailed to the floor to accommodate any poor weather and Aoife added it was very unlikely that I would fall out of bed but if it was something I was concerned about I should choose the lower bunk.

Bad weather be damned, I immediately hopped up to the bunk on top and claimed it as my own. Brenn didn't test out his, he only remarked that the height of the bed did not make it more or less comfortable, and he didn't accept my answer when I said it was still instantly better. It had a tiny porthole window by my feet and if I pressed my head against it, I could hear the sea rumbling outside.

A knock on the door had me sitting upright. Donna and Regan poked their heads in and Aoife lingered in the doorway.

"I guess this is the first time you've bunked up on a ship," Regan said looking at the cabin. "You're lucky with your height. Poor Donna and I have to sleep curled up like prawns."

"It's a time of firsts," I said delightedly. "This is my first time on a like this boat too." I swung my legs off the side of the bunk before hopping down.

"Ever?" Donna asked. Aoife's eyes had gone wide.

"Pretty much," I replied. "I never went on any big expeditions. This is all new to me."

Brenn just shook his head at that and turned to Aoife, his voice a bored drawl.

"What's the plan? Or are there any sea rituals we must partake in before we can leave?"

I glared at Brenn but before I could say anything Aoife responded.

"We will be departing when the Captain is ready," she said with an unbothered smile.

"In terms of rituals, we dump any deadweight so keep it up and you'll be floating."

Brenn didn't reply.

"Come up for a moment, Bryony. Captain Bennett has something he needs to discuss."

I told Brenn he could stay in the cabin if he wanted to rest but he grimaced and followed me up on deck. Evan was swabbing the planks clean near the bow but stopped to scowl at the Wraith. Brenn walked right over his newly tidied area and went to sit on the ridge of the boat, ignoring the growls that Evan was sending his way.

I followed Aoife to the captain's quarters which lay under the quarterdeck. The two rooms were the only ones above deck: a main wide and long one, with a smaller room to the side. I knew from the tour that the smaller one was Aoife's. Just from the doors, the rooms seemed more grander than the other cabins.

Aoife knocked on a polished mahogany door with a bronze circle window in it.

"Come in," came Bennett's reply.

The room was an oval shape. The walls were full of shelves that were equal parts books and trinkets filling up the space in a gloriously untidy fashion. A wide row of windows behind the desk looked out on the horizon and to the right was a printed folding screen – covering I assumed what were the captain's sleeping quarters.

The hefty wooden desk was loaded with a huge map and tools for, I assumed, drafting courses. The captain had hung up his buccaneer's coat and wore a black waistcoat, a white shirt, and black breeches. He had tied his dark hair back making his scar more prominent in the daylight; his dark eyes flicked up to me and the corner of his lip quirked into a smile. There was a roguish charm about him, something I was sure had not gone unnoticed by the first mate standing next to me.

However, Bennett wasn't focused on mapping our journey; he was fixing the hilt of what looked to be a blunt training sword. The kind I was used to seeing when Sorrel first started training in the militia.

"Ah, your Highness," Bennett said with a smile as he finished fixing the handle in leather binding before laying aside. "I just wanted to run something by you. That Bonekeeper you encountered – do you remember his name?"

How could I forget? Those deep red eyes were burned in my mind.

"Yes, Aegius DuVale called him General Titae," I replied. "Huge man. Dark Hair. Red eyes."

Bennett grimaced and he placed his hands against the desk.

"Blast." He brushed his hair back out of his face. "I hoped we could avoid this."

Instantly my teeth were on edge. I cast a look down at the sword.

"Your Highness—"

"Please just call me Bryony," I told him. "I prefer it." My stomach was sinking.

"Bryony, I have some bad news," he started to say. Aoife narrowed her eyes.

"Our dear Captain has a confession." Aoife chipped in.

The pair shared a look; the captain clenched his jaw, but Aoife didn't back down. Those dark eyes were glinting – flicking between me and the beautiful blue of hers.

"My *bold* first mate has decided that this incident was my fault," he started to say, reluctantly.

Aoife groaned.

"So, it turns out we are already familiar with the Bonekeeper that attacked you," Aoife interjected. The captain threw a hand up. The first mate scoffed. "Oh please. It would've been the next moon cycle before you finished!"

"We were at the new port opening in Hook and there was some nasty business over something being stolen from the Demon King," Captain Bennett went on. "It was very unfortunate."

"Someone shouldn't have stolen a royal diadem..."

"How was I meant to know they would miss it?" Captain Bennett grumbled. "Plus, I thought it was romantic."

"So, it was your fault then?" I concluded. Aoife crossed her arms next to me.

Bennett gave me a flat look and crossed his arms too.

"It was Evan's idea." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, his Royal Demoness was very upset with this and sent the best Bonekeeper for the job, his own son, Prince Kyan." Aoife's expression seemed to have darkened, and the captain had noticed. "And judging by your depiction of his person – and the information I received via my friends on the border of Draig in Delth, I worry that it is the same Bonekeeper that we ran into those few years ago. He doesn't go by his father's name when on foreign missions he goes by his mother's: Titae."

"The Prince?" I asked, perhaps I had misheard. Captain Bennett nodded.

Prince Kyan? My blood iced over. The general I had incapacitated was the Prince of Raize? I remembered the feeling of his core through my magic – the heat and fury. Those scarlet eyes that would haunt me for the rest of my days. Suddenly, I felt very unwell. This was not the way I had ever imagined beginning diplomatic relations. Not only had the Demons sided with Fynix – they had been instrumental in the destruction of my capital.

"The Demon Prince," Aoife said with a sigh before she sent the captain a pointed look. "If only someone hadn't got caught."

Captain Bennett guffawed. "What a ridiculous spectacle that was," Aoife added grinding her teeth together.

"He almost took my hands off!" Bennett exclaimed. "Plus, if we had just given it back, they would've known I nicked it."

“You did nick it.”

“But you look so lovely wearing it.” Captain Bennett finished. Aoife didn’t respond this time. But her cheeks were ever-so pink.

“Anyway,” he continued. “If it is the Prince looking for you, then being with us is just going to complicate things for you. If you want to live that is.”

I shrugged my shoulders. I’d knocked out the heir to the demon kingdom. My infallible sense of courage was straining a little with the thought of the Demon King. Who knows what he would do to us should we be caught?

“Now the world knows I’m alive I have no doubt there will be even more people looking for me,” I said with a sigh. “As for staying alive, Brenn and I are in a pact together. If I were to die, he would be unleashed on the world – free to do whatever he fancied doing. So, killing me wouldn’t be the brightest idea.”

Aoife weighed this with a shrug. “Besides, they have to catch us first,” she said. “The Siren’s Promise is the fastest vessel on the sea. It’s what we’re famous for.” Her voice was full of pride.

Captain Bennett stretched his arms above his head.

“That’s not the only thing we’re famous for,” he added smugly.

“Yes, we’re rather infamous for having a drunken womanizer as a Captain,” Aoife added, Bennett’s jaw dropped. “Very impressive.”

“Then I’m sure we have nothing to worry about!” I replied. “If that’s all, I should probably go check that Brenn hasn’t chewed through Evan.”

Aoife nodded, “Sorry about the extra worry – he’s a turnip.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“It’s okay. If I worried about everyone who wanted to kill me, I’d never get anything done,” I added. “Thanks for the heads up though.” I was doing my best to ignore the wriggling of nerves in my stomach.

A demon prince would surely complicate matters now I had attacked him. Surely that was treason in Raize? Even if it was done in self-defence? Perhaps he wouldn’t have attacked me if he had known who I was.

“Go rest up,” Aoife added as I passed her to the door. “We’ve got a beast of a journey.”

I nodded.

“See you shortly.”

I headed to the door and before it shut behind me, I heard Bennett speak to Aoife.

“You’ll pay for that comment.”

She giggled.

“I’m ready when you are.”

Then the door closed.

.....

I found Brenn lounging in cat-form on my bed when I returned to the cabin. He was covered in dark fur much like a feline shadow and showed no effort to get up once I entered.

“That’s a new one,” I remarked as I came into the room. I clambered up on my bed and was careful to not sit on him. “Would you like your belly rubbed?”

“Would you like to lose a hand?” It was most unnerving to watch the cat’s mouth move and words come out instead of a tirade of meows about being hungry. “This form fits this atmosphere,” he declared.

“So, nothing to do with the long-haired ginger tom roaming around then?”

Brenn flicked his tail. Earlier on deck, the ship’s cat had shown no hesitation towards the Wraith. He walked right between his legs and mewled noisily for attention. Usually,

someone would pick him up for cuddles, and since Brenn had not bent to the cat's whim, the cat decided he no longer wanted to play: he wanted to fight.

"That cat is far too entitled," he ground out. "Plus, in this form, I can eat any mice before that cat does."

"Naps?" I mused. Brenn got up and made an effort to walk across my legs heavily before he dropped to the floor.

"Don't name the beast," he seethed. "I'm going to show it who's boss."

"Don't kill it," I called as I saw his midnight fur vanish off into the corridor.

I lay back on my bunk – you could barely feel any of the waves' movement down here. I doubted I would have any trouble sleeping here. I looked up at the door that Brenn had so thoughtfully left open and groaned.

Then the idea came to me. I'd seen Caden move things upstairs with such ease. Surely it couldn't be as difficult as summoning lightning. I lifted my head and raised my hand. I felt magic grow in my chest – I pulled it to my fingers. I knew none of the spell movements so I adapted my forward bolt into what I thought would be a soft gentle motion.

The magic in my fingertips zipped out and immediately I knew I had made a mistake. The noise sounded like a small cannon going off as it whipped through the air and burned a hole straight through the waiting door.

"What the hell was that?" Donna yelled from down the hall.

"Nothing," I replied getting to my feet and shutting the door. The new hole was no bigger than a bronze coin. Tentatively, I reached out my fingers and my fingers poked straight through.

I swore loudly through my teeth.

"Oo-er, her royal highness has a foul mouth," I heard Regan say from down the hall.

"If you'd had to live with my brothers, you'd end up with one too."

I abandoned the hole – hopefully, Brenn would be able to fix it. Groaning, I flopped onto the lower bed. I looked at my lightning-burned hand – the red strikes seemed to say "Look what a mess you've made." I wasn't bothered about how the veins looked now but when compared to my other hand, the redness looked angry.

At that moment, I wondered if I could glamour it and I remembered the bag that Brenn had stashed under his bed and the books he had collected. He told me that I should wait until we set off for the voyage as I would want something to do.

Bored, I leaned over the side of his bunk and reached out a hand. Upon feeling nothing, I craned my neck and looked under. The sneaky whatsit had pushed it right up at the back. A mewl from behind me made me turn – ginger hair and wide golden eyes watched me. He came up to me and sniffed my leg, his long whiskers twitching in from the light streaming in from the port hole. The cat watched and I curled myself over and pulled the bag forward.

The leather sack was stuffed full of books and as I yanked the biggest one free, the rest spilled out onto the floor with a thud. It was a beaten copy of *Basic Motion: Spell Work* by Angelo Sloe. The spine had been well and truly broken in and I ran my fingers down the ink-blotted pages. The next was a lean purple book with silver lacing work along the cover and the back. Printed on it was *The Art of Masquerade* by H. Ding. It didn't look worn like the other. In fact, it looked brand new.

I sighed. I had hoped he would borrow books that wouldn't be missed. However, I assumed that was my fault for being optimistic. But at least now I had some books...

Glamouring and motion were a good start: perhaps Brenn was listening to me after all. I took the motion book and clambered to my feet. The boat seemed to be swaying side to side now, my shins working harder to keep myself upright.

I tucked the book under my arm as I headed up the wooden stairs to get onto the deck. Over by the forecastle, I saw Regan's massive arms heaving at the capstan as a great silver

chain connected to an even bigger, heavier anchor was raised from the side of the ship. I heard the noise of metal and wood grinding against each other as the device turned slowly. As she moved, I saw that Donna and Evan had joined her in pushing the other bars in a clockwise direction. I went over to offer assistance, but Regan shook her head before I could even offer.

“I’ve seen your arms, Princess.”

“I’m working on it.”

Watching, as he flicked his tail back and forth, was Brenn. He sat at the centre – being slowly turned around and around.

“You know you could always help, Brenn,” breathed Donna in as upbeat a voice as she could manage. Evan’s face scrunched up like it always did whenever anyone spoke to Brenn.

Brenn tilted his head.

“But I am a lowly cat,” he padded across the deck before sitting back on his hind paws and raising his front ones. “No thumbs.”

Regan snorted at that. With a final wrench, I saw the anchor hoist to the side of the ship. It was full of seaweed and rubbed raw with rust. Regan secured the rest of the chain and straightened it back up. Evan and Donna panted with effort but not her. She simply clicked the chain in place and brushed off her hands.

“You should’ve let me help,” I said as she came up to me, realising that I only came up to her shoulder. She and Donna were giants – but Regan was the tallest, even taller than Caden and the Captain. She grinned. Now in the sun, I could see her hair better. She did it in a strange fashion – long down the back but shaved at the sides. Her hair was dark at the roots but fair on the ends, perhaps from long hours in the sun.

“And let you pull every bone in your body? No, thank you.” She wore a white short-sleeved top and sandy-coloured breeches with multiple pockets around the hips. “This is hardy work.”

I frowned.

“I can do hardy work. I am very hardy.”

“I don’t doubt that, darling,” Regan replied. “However, you need muscles if you want to work aboard this vessel.”

Donna’s face twisted.

“You don’t need to do anything, Bryony,” she said kindly. She sent Regan a reprimanding look.

“Thank you but no,” I declared – behind me, Brenn sighed. “I’ll pull my weight.”

“Reason is optional to her Majesty,” Brenn said. “Best save your breath, dragonkin.”

“That’s not true,” I retorted. Regan crossed her giant biceps in front of me. “Besides, I was never planning on just sitting like a plant pot during the voyage. If I don’t keep busy, I’m sure I’ll go mad.”

Brenn mumbled something about how he was sure it couldn’t get any worse than it already was.

“I want to be useful.”

Regan eyed me for a moment before shrugging her shoulders.

“Sure,” she said. “Maybe then you won’t look so weedy.” Donna looked mortified.

“Oh please, Don. She’s a Princess, not a Priestess.”

“Werewolves have no tact,” Evan said, leaning back on the banister. A growl sounded from where Regan was standing – her eyes flashed dangerously. “It makes them so easy to mess with.”

“You’re a werewolf?”

Regan turned to me, a strange expression on her face.

“I thought it was obvious.”

Donna’s eyes flicked between us – a colourful history had befallen our two kingdoms – even before the war. We were natural enemies.

“My observation skills clearly need work,” I said. “Maybe if you rolled in the mud some more and let me scratch behind your ears – then I would’ve noticed sooner.”

Evan chuckled next to them, and Donna’s eyes widened as Regan, after a beat, laughed the loudest.

“Cheeky witch,” she laughed.

“See, at least your observational skills are better than mine,” I replied.

She wiped her eyes and clapped a hand on my shoulder which nearly sent me flying.

“We’ll make a pirate out of you yet, Princess.”

The action took the wind out of me and made my book clatter to the floor. I ducked to pick it up as Regan walked to the helm.

“Please don’t tell me Donna has convinced you to join her smutty book club,” the wolf hollered from the top. She groaned at the dragonkin, gesturing with a hand to me. “She’s only been here for five minutes.” She stamped the floor twice – I realised then the helm was right above the captain’s quarters.

Donna flushed furiously.

“I have done no such thing!” She fumed. Regan raised an eyebrow and the moment her back was turned Donna mouthed ‘Later!’ to me. I grinned. I had never been part of any club before besides a sewing circle and dancing lessons which were part of my education as a woman of the court.

“This is a spell book,” I explained as I showed the battered cover. “Brenn picked some up for me when we were in town.”

“I love shopping,” Brenn added.

“Motion magic, yeah?” Evan said next to me. “I haven’t seen books like this since I was a fledgling demon.”

A small part of my chest sunk a little, but I wasn’t to be deterred.

Donna swatted his arm which made his face fall. Before he could say anything more, a door was flung open and the Captain, in his leather buccaneer coat, strode into view. His black waistcoat and white shirt that seemed a little dishevelled but were all fixed as he took his place at the helm.

“Right, trouble-makers, get your asses in gear,” he called. “We’re off.”

Finally, we pulled away from the dock with Regan at the helm.

The great white sails were let loose by Evan and Donna who climbed the rigging on either side, and we took to the water as the white lungs filled with wind and pulled us from the dock. The creaky boards that made up the walkway above the water drifted far from us as we took a new course.

The town of Newt started to shrink into the distance as the Promise sailed easily over the waves, leaving the smaller vessels rocking in her stead. The tall stone buildings on the front started to shrink before my eyes as the wind picked up the air in our sails. The flags from the Shifter nation and some I didn’t recognise waved between the old and new buildings surrounding the sea front. Perhaps the Pirate Lords were looking after this place better than my father had after all?

I suddenly felt myself overwhelmed by the feeling that I was leaving something unexplored. I made a mental note to come back here and just explore once things were right again. When I had my throne. When my people were safe – whenever that may be.

The water streamed behind us before the ripples resumed the pattern of the waves. I looked down and saw the churning of the water under the boat. In the glassy reflection I could see my dark hair merge with the wood of the Siren's Promise.

"I hope you aren't thinking about jumping in, your Majesty," came the familiar drawl of my immortal companion.

I looked down to see the black cat form of Brenn, his onyx eyes looking up at me. He hopped up onto the railing beside me.

"I wasn't going to."

Brenn looked at me in disbelief.

"I don't fancy getting wet right now," I told him. He didn't look convinced. "Plus, I don't feel like that would be the wisest thing I could do."

His whiskers wrinkled. "Surprising that logic came from you, your Majesty."

"Insubordination! I'm full of logic."

Brenn lay flat, padding black paws in front of his body. He seemed appeased by my answer.

"You do strange things."

I frowned.

"And I can't swim." Brenn's eyes snapped open but as he began to speak – Regan boomed over him.

"Come here then, Princess! You're getting a crash course in sailing!"

Chapter Twelve

The boat seemed to be flying through the sea as it leapt through the waves. My tongue tasted of salt and, even though it freaked out Brenn, I loved to stay close to the edge, watching wild kelpies appear – all shimmering aquamarine and just as beautiful as they were dangerous. The fish below danced in all colours, and I swore I saw the tails of some bigger creatures swirling in the currents below.

Donna and Evan scaled the rigging like pros as they looked after the masts. They took me up to the nest at the top and I got to see the sprawling countryside that surrounded Newt. The houses seemed to shrink until there was nothing left but long swathes of green. Brenn watched from the ground; his tail sweeping across deck with impatience. He didn't seem keen on me being up so high, or himself for that matter.

I helped them tighten the thick hemp ropes which made my hands burn; Donna had showed me the hard calluses she had on her normal hand. Her other was covered in impenetrable amber scales and I recalled Astyanax's hardened scales under my palm.

Donna and Evan swung back to the deck using the mast's holding lines. At the bottom they would secure the lines with great wooden rods. Evan told me it was called a belaying pin and used to keep the rope taut which in turn stabilised the masts. I took the slower route down the rigging after being yelled at by Donna for not being careful enough on the top beams. Fearing her wrath, I descended with as much care as I could.

Despite his hesitation with me initially, Evan seemed to have eased up even though his smiles seemed a little forced. On more than one occasion I caught Donna sending him a stern look, to which he would throw his hands up in the air or send back a glare of his own.

At least we seemed to be set on a definite course. Aoife explained to me that if we could avoid the Eastern Isles that would be a wise decision. Last time the Siren's Promise went there they were caught in a spot of bother with the Vampire Princess, her dwarf-half-brother, her werewolf love, and seventeen warlocks who had pledged their loyalty to her. When I asked about it, Aoife just sent a fierce glare to Captain Bennett, who began whistling a merry tune.

It seemed though the Captain was at the helm, Aoife was the navigator. She carried what looked to be a leather-bound parchment roll case up to the deck, then she knelt down and pulled out a swathe of light-coloured fabric. She rolled it out like a mat next to the captain and immediately, small yellow and blue lights glowed from the centre; like fireflies, they started to dart about the map, outlining the land and waters ahead, as well as our current alignment.

I joined them up on the top deck and knelt beside her. A tiny compass figure in the corner pointed North-East. The magic emanating from the object was immense. Whoever had enchanted it must've been very powerful indeed.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, letting my fingers run above the glowing lines of the Hook from where we had just passed, a curved piece of land that was been reclaimed along with the rest of the coast as the Free realm. But this map didn't look like the maps I had seen growing up. This map was bigger than I had even expected. I recognised Riach and the Wastes but so many islands and provinces I had never heard of. The Shadow Realms were far vaster than I had realised.

"Is this real?" I asked, gesturing to the expansive countries that made Riach look ever so small in comparison.

The first mate quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Of course," she said. "Riach and the West keep to themselves and don't teach about the rest of the world. But it is far bigger and more dangerous than they would like to believe."

Then Aoife gave me a private smile and glanced a look at the captain who kept an even gaze ahead. I tried not to seem dumbfounded, as if my world hadn't just grown exponentially.

"This was a gift from a most notorious pirate lord," she replied.

"Who are the other Pirate Lords?" I replied. "I didn't realise that the land of the free had rulers."

Aoife opened her mouth to reply but before she could the Captain spoke. "Lousy beggars, the lot of them," he said with surety. "They'd chop your hand off for your rings and use it to wave to you." He was grinning at the idea.

"They control different areas and waters," Aoife must've noticed my confused expression. "There are six of them in total."

"Let's hope we don't run into any on our journey," Bennett said. "I don't like to play by the rules."

Aoife didn't look impressed.

"If I recall," she began. "Stealing from the lords is, in fact, a serious crime."

Bennett didn't take his eyes off the horizon.

"I don't recall you complaining when I brought Naps back."

"I'm not talking about Naps," she retorted.

Before I could press on, I saw Brenn sauntering up the deck – he held the book I had brought to the deck curled in his tail.

"Your royal majesty needs to not leave her possessions lying around for just anyone," he called from the bottom of the steps that up to the helm.

Aoife didn't look up from the map. "I don't suppose he gets less annoying as time goes on." Her fingers ran along the fabric. A new stream of blue magic joined the map and I realised that she was plotting a route.

"I think he gets more confident," I replied.

The dark cat somehow managed to maintain a perfectly bored expression.

"A little politeness wouldn't go amiss."

Brenn didn't even blink.

“Forgive me, your gracious, righteous, divine, Majesty,” he drawled. “I thought you wanted to learn motion magic.”

Opposite the Helm was the bow where there were a few storage boxes that were bolted to the floor. I went and sat on the widest one; if I really leaned back, I could see the waves just beneath me. Brenn sat opposite me and cleared his throat.

“Motion magic is —”

But before he could continue, I spotted Regan with Donna on her tail. A grim-faced Evan followed them.

“Aoife said that you were learning magic,” Donna said excitedly. Regan had her arms crossed and observed me and the book. “I know I have some capability, but I never had a chance to learn.”

“Mind if we watch?” Regan added.

Brenn narrowed his eyes. The pair of them sat on the boxes next to us – thankfully the wind was peaceful. “You are a werewolf – you cannot perform magic if it’s not in your blood,” he spoke decisively.

Regan pulled a face.

“Oh dear,” she said, deadpan. “That never even occurred to me.”

Brenn remained unswayed. “Don’t you have jobs to attend to?”

Donna twisted to the helm.

“Captain?”

“Go ahead,” he called back between quibbling with Aoife over the course.

Donna turned back and grinned. “We’re a very efficient ship.”

I waved off Brenn. “Let them stay – it’ll be fun.”

He scowled. “I didn’t join this boat to be a teacher, your Majesty.”

I gave him my best optimistic smile. “Please.” After a moment he quietly used his two front paws to open the book and lay it in front of us.

Evan joined us too – the deep scowl now permanently etched on his face it seemed. He did not need lessons, he easily manipulated magic from years of practice. Brenn’s eye twitched but he said nothing.

“Ready, Majesty?” he pressed.

“Born ready.”

Brenn read slowly through the first chapter of Sloe’s book. The forms used for spell casting seemed simple enough and the terminology was clearly made for younger ears. It was shape-based magic and all about channelling a pull or a push through magic currents.

Initially, it seemed to be going well. But unfortunately for him, Brenn demonstrated the motion magic with Evan who was not very happy about it. Soon the gunner was sliding around the deck like a banshee on a string. The girls and I tried to catch him, but Brenn seemed to be enjoying flexing his magical muscles at Evan’s expense.

The continuous swearing brought Caden up from the kitchens. He had a black apron tied around his middle with his long blonde hair swept up behind his head. His face was thunderous.

“Someone better be dying to warrant all that noise,” he yelled. “We only just left port and I have a headache!”

Evan was upside down now and scrambling.

“Brenn! Let him go!” I snapped; the pact pulsed on my hand. My command was clear, but it made my insides feel strange with an unfamiliar, unwelcome sensation.

Brenn let go of the screeching demon and dropped him near the Captain and Aoife. The Wraith shot me a filthy look. It was easy to forget the nature of power in our relationship, but my use of the pact clearly infuriated him. For him it must’ve felt like I leeches his power

but for me it felt like my senses had been submerged in darkness. I could feel his emotions better and it was all rage.

Evan stormed back over.

“You try that again Wraith I will have fun pulling you apart,” he snarled, his fangs peering through his lips once more.

Brenn tilted his head to the side.

“Is that supposed to frighten me?” Brenn hopped off the cargo and immediately transformed to the Wraith’s copy of Evan.

“Tiny demons like you – noble, higher, or lesser – *I ate them all.*” The real Evan’s face did not change but Brenn’s was enough to make the steeliest person quake. He must’ve been mad because the sky began to darken around us, and the temperature dropped. “I ate you all – I decimated villages, towns, cities all for my own amusement and you,” he met his eyes, “wouldn’t have a hope in hell.” Evan growled now openly, his eyes black as Brenn finished.

I didn’t even see Captain Bennett move as he joined the pair on the deck and got between them. We seemed to have picked up a gale and the Captain had to yell to be heard.

“Evan walk it off, and Wraith shut your face or you can swim to Wist,” he shouted over the wind.

A chill had overcome me and on the top deck Aoife frowned.

“Turn the lights on, Brenn,” I said.

Brenn looked up and cold pellets began to fire on the deck, making my hair stand on end.

“The weather isn’t my doing,” he retorted. The clouds had become blotted like someone had just spilled black watercolour paints over the soft sheets of the sky.

“I think I’ve found who it was,” Donna spoke. I turned to see her flaming hair getting soaked by the pouring rain, her jaw tight. I followed her eyes to see a trio of red-masted ships growing larger upon the horizon.

“Stations!” the captain shouted, making me jump. “We’re under attack.” Evan immediately backed away from Brenn, his face still furious as he rushed to join Regan downstairs. I rescued the book from where Brenn was still standing in Evan’s form. When I caught his eye, he scowled but stayed. My shoulders eased at once. At least he’d forgiven me for using the pact to command him, though, I had no doubt that once I was alone, he would have something to say about it.

“Can I help?” I said to Donna as she wound a large rope that had secured a cannon nearer the front.

She gestured to the other cannon, and I started copying her movements, she quickly showed me that the mechanism the cannons sat on enabled them to change direction and to be turned quickly.

“Hopefully, we can outrun them or it’s going to get bumpy!” she called over the wind, which had begun to howl. Already waves had made the deck rock alarmingly. I gripped the railing tightly as Donna continued. “They must have a Sky Magic Warlock, or if we’re super unlucky, a Mage!”

Warlocks were commonplace in the capital – half of my life had been surrounded by the stuffy voices of men with beards that travelled past their stomachs. But Mages – they were on another level. They had obtained total mastery of one or many sources of magic; indeed, their talents were highly sought after in the Capital and in the ranks of the army. So, people practiced in secret to avoid it conscription, much to Sorrel’s dismay. Thus, naturally, it was one of my dreams to be a Mage.

At the centre of the world, my tutors had always told me that Kya turned out the best wizards, warlocks, and mages. We had the best schools, the best universities, the best

colleges, and the crown funded it. However, it was true that the Royal Academy of Magic wasn't the only school that taught magic at a higher level.

"Who's chasing us?" I yelled to Donna.

"They're wearing Fynix colours – either they know our reputation and want to sink us or someone at Newt sold us out," she replied. "Probably the first."

My mind was whirling – we'd only been on the Promise for a number of hours! Was this an omen of things to come? How exciting!

The sea seemed to be whipping itself into a wild frenzy, the water rose up the sides of the ship and crashed over the deck. Brenn let the water pass straight through him and the water soaked me, making my skin prickle all over. He smiled.

"The pact says nothing about a little water."

My shirt and trousers were now soaked through – thankfully I had left Hector's jacket downstairs. But the rest of me was now freezing. I heard a giggle from Donna as she took in my expression too.

Of course, she looked perfectly ferocious and beautiful, even while soaked. After I pushed my hair out of my face, I spotted droplets of brown coloured dye on my fingers that I wiped on my trousers.

"You'll get used to being wet," she said cheerily.

Now they had gained on us, I recognised the Fynix flag, a red gold flag divided by two flaming golden swords under a crown. I heard noises of feet running about below deck. I realised there was another flag under that one: no decoration just red.

"What does the second flag mean?" I said, my voice straining over the gale. Donna glanced back at the ships.

"All red means no prisoners," she replied.

I heard the Captain stomp his foot hard from the helm. Beside him, Aoife was gripping the railings of the quarterdeck as she watched the incoming fleet.

"Brace yourselves!"

Suddenly, the ship seemed to start to thrum underneath us. I assumed the mechanisms in the galley were at work – but for what purpose? I looked to Donna who had stopped preparing the cannon.

"You might want to hold onto something," she yelled. She knelt by the cannon, and I joined her on the other side with Brenn tucked in behind me in his human male form. A great cracking noise filled the air and for a moment I thought the boat was being broken by the waves. Then we lurched forward like a whip across the waves. If it had it not been for Brenn catching me, I would've smashed my head against the iron casing of the gun. I thanked him in my mind and he simply nodded.

Magic was coursing through the vessel now as the boat picked up tremendous speed as if we had just caught a current. The ship groaned under the force before it eased into the action. I climbed to my feet, the motions from the lower decks making the wood vibrate. I looked over the railing and a fierce wind whipped at my face. We climbed the waves with ease, surging forward at a hardy and unstoppable rhythm.

"We're the fastest vessel on the seas." Donna was grinning at my expression. "Go have a look downstairs. You might not get another chance."

Donna didn't need to tell me twice. I immediately shot towards the stairs before descending the ladders to the galley.

It was truly a sight to be seen. The mechanisms inside had started to spin, no doubt causing the arms on the outside to spin too. No wonder we had picked up such a pace – there was much power being generated right under our feet.

Regan was standing among the arms next to another device that looked like a capstan. Her chest was heaving and there was a sheen across her forehead.

“Don’t touch any of them, Bryony,” she said between breaths. “The mechanisms will crush you.”

“How does it work?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” Regan said, putting her hands on her hips. “The warlock whose ship this was originally packed in a lot of surprises you don’t find on other boats.” She cleared her throat and made her way back to me, careful of her path. “These machines need a little spin to get going but after that they’ll work until we stop them.”

I watched in awe at all the wooden rods working in unison. If I focused, I could see the enchantments tangled around some of the machinery but most of it was beyond anything I could decipher. “They’re amazing!”

Regan slapped me on the back as she passed, a wide grin on her face.

“Come on kid,” she said. “We’re not out of the woods yet.”

The distance between the Promise and the Fynix had started to grow but the rain to hammered down all the same. Whoever was casting the magic aboard their ships truly had an incredible amount of power. I wondered how hard it would be to learn. Lightning had taken me a few years to truly master – despite how dangerous and unruly it could be. How different would rain be?

“Very, your Majesty,” Brenn said in my head. “You have years of study ahead of you if you wish to accomplish anything to that scale.”

“Then you think it’s possible?”

Brenn gave me a deadpan look.

“As if you would listen to me if I said otherwise.”

The speed of the Fynix ships was still impressive despite the new pace set by the Promise. They loomed in the distance, their dark ships like blots on the ocean. I had no doubt that we would soon lose them among the waves, but who knows how long that would take. Normal vessels would’ve had no hope in catching us, but we had been very unlucky with the magical support in their crews, Donna explained to me. The Captain’s brow was furrowed in thought.

“Aoife?” Bennett called, a hopeful smile on his face. The first mate turned her head and immediately her face soured.

“We’re outrunning them,” she replied. “There is no need for *that*.”

“Aoife.” The first mate didn’t even look at him. “One less unit to worry about?” She gave him nothing. “Aoife, please.”

Aoife groaned before shrugging off her coat and tossing it over the Captain’s head.

“Only because you said please so nicely.”

I watched in confusion as the first mate took off her boots and belt before stretching her arms out and heading down the stairs to the main deck. She shot daggers at the Captain who gave her a merry little wave as she quickened her pace to a run to where there was a gap in the rails for the ladders. Then, with all the grace of a bird in flight, she jumped off the boat.

I couldn’t hold back the gasp as the splash sounded from the waves. However, the next second, a tremendous watery howl sounded like a great machine whirring. I sprinted over to the other side of the deck to see the head and body raised of a giant sea serpent, its wet scales glistening in pearlescent tones of blue, as it moved with an ungodly speed. Slippery flouncing gills surrounded its neck like a ruff, and it had pointed ears atop a long sinuous face. And above a terrible mouth of needle-like teeth, its eyes were the colour of moss.

I stared, open-mouthed, as it twisted and turned in the water, churning the sea white as it made its way towards the first ship. A different noise howled from its mouth – sharp enough to make me press my hands to my ears and wince.

Even from our distance, you could hear the screams of the men aboard. The serpent had sprung out of the water and mounted the boat. I noticed it had two sets of webbed feet along its lithe body which it used to climb and a great whip-like tail which bashed everything behind it.

I watched as it tore the red masts into ribbons with its powerful claws before using its body to snap the supports which caused an almighty crack to sound. I watched as the mast poles went down one by one, but the serpent was far from finished. From the deck it dove back into the water, its head rearing on the opposite side. Its body encased the entire deck of the ship and then the serpent squeezed, pulling its muscles tight. As it did so, the boat was crushed under it and the hull cracked away in chunks. The boat, guns and all, took on water and started to sink rapidly. The crew that hadn't already dove into the sea jumped for their lives and frantically swam away from the wreckage.

The beast unhooked itself from the sinking vessel and headed to the next. The guns were heavier on this one – forty of them if I were to guess – but it did nothing to deter the serpent.

Having seen the way the creature had annihilated the first ship, the second had already prepared cannons. They aimed and fired but the cannons beast weaved through their attack with ease and speed.

Instead of climbing this boat, the serpent dove beyond view under the water. For a moment I thought it might've fled, having been spooked by the cannon fire, and then I saw it: the ship had started to rock. First it was slow, but it sped up until the crew aboard were thrown off and the vessel capsized. Now immobilised the serpent clambered upon the downward deck and tore holes in the hull as great swathes of wood came away under blue jagged claw. Throwing its head back it released another howl that had the crews in the water clutching their ears.

It darted through the water until the final ship was in its reach. It did not take long for the creature to climb aboard and claw down from the deck to the hull and sink it. Pieces of wood and metal floated away or sank as the serpent dove under once more. The wind had finally died down letting us move at full speed away from the wreckage. The rain too had pattered to a stop as the sun returned to our sky.

Their fearsome reputation made sense as the Captain hollered our victory and the crew gave a cheer. The serpent then returned to the side of the boat and shot a beam of water up onto the deck.

I turned to the captain who looked on with a proud smile.

"That's my girl."

Even Brenn had a face full of surprise.

Another screech went up from the serpent.

"It is always so handy to have a siren on board," Evan said, something of a chuckle in his voice. He had returned to deck as was leaning over the side.

"That's a siren?" I asked. Evan nodded. "I didn't know sirens could do that. I didn't think sirens even looked like that."

"Not all of them," Evan explained. "They vary depending on waters."

I thought of the drawings I had seen in the books in the catacombs. Beautiful women, aquatic, breathless, and utterly ruthless. I recounted this to Evan who frowned.

"Why were they in the catacombs? It's not like their existence is a secret."

I shrugged.

"I guess they didn't want women getting any ideas," I replied. Before Evan could reply there was the noise of someone climbing up the side of the boat. I saw a bare arm reach the rope near the top of the railing but before she fully emerged the captain was there, her

coat ready. I glanced to the helm to see Caden manning it. I assumed he came up during the stormy weather I just hadn't noticed due to the incredible ship or surprise siren.

Aoife was soaked but her eyes were as wide as her grin.

"Mother, that was fun," she beamed. "I love frightening men."

She wrapped the coat around her tightly as the captain smiled back at her.

"I love you frightening men too."

She looked to him and breathed through her teeth.

"You owe me new clothes," she reprimanded.

"If I owed you clothes every time we destroyed some I wouldn't have any money left."

"That sounds like a 'you' problem," she said slapping his waist-coated chest as she passed and headed to her quarters.

Barely a moment later he followed her in.

I heard a low chuckle emanate from Regan. "You get used to the lovebirds," she said.

"I don't think I have, and it's been *years*," Evan retorted with a grimace.

"A siren and a human," I wondered aloud. "I want to know *that* story."

A raspy sort of laugh came out of Brenn, and I wondered what I had said. Donna opened her mouth, but Regan shot her a look.

"Get the Captain a couple of bottles of rum and I'm sure he'll tell you," Evan jumped in. "If Aoife doesn't beat him to it."

"I love it – it's really romantic," Donna said clapping her hands together. "Book-worthy."

Evan pulled a disgusted look.

"Hopefully not one of your books. No plot, just sexual dalliances by moonlight—"

Donna flushed furiously.

"You wouldn't know romance if it hit you on the nose, Evan," she snipped.

"I'll have you know I was the most romantic at the academy," he said coolly. "I had three dates to the Royal Lunar Dance."

Donna waved a hand with an unimpressed expression.

"Being romantic and being available is not the same thing, pint-size." Regan laughed.

Caden who was manning the helm in the Captain's absence hummed in agreement and nodded. Evan whirled on him with a fierce expression.

"You can't say anything, Caden," he snapped. "You're about as romantic as a dead fish."

Regan raised her eyebrows at this, and Donna shook her head.

"No, I think Caden wins – I remember Friderick," she said. "And Quentin, Fuegi, Dylan, and Bill."

Caden looked impressed with himself. "Don't forget Will, Haden, Aaron, and Litus."

Donna nodded.

"Prolific lover," she said to me.

"A Master at romance," Caden finished. "And I think you'll find that I am undefeated."

Evan rolled his eyes at this and flapped a hand.

"Just because I haven't been playing," he declared.

Regan sent a look to me, casting her eyes between the demon and the dragon-kin. The werewolf took over the helm so Caden could go and prepare dinner for the crew. Evan followed the Fae down the stairs and their raised voices disappeared below the deck. Donna and I sat at the railings at the bow, watching the boat begin to slow to its usual knots.

Brenn however was restless. He changed back into his cat form and paced.

"We have barely been travelling a few hours and we seem to have half of the Fynix fleet already on our tail," he snipped. "We would have been better off walking to Wist."

"Don't be dramatic." My hair was still damp, so I slicked it back quickly with one hand to get it out of my face. "We're alive, aren't we?"

"I told you we should've taken a more subtle form of transport."

Regan called a reply from the helm.

"I doubt those ships even knew you were on it," she said in an upbeat voice. "The chances are they just saw the colour and assumed we were coming to them."

Brenn scowled deepened even further if such a thing were possible.

"Our work has varied," Donna said. "But our Captain is rather notorious. Pirate Lords always get this kind of reception."

I frowned.

"I didn't realise Captain Bennett was one," I confessed. "It certainly makes our voyage more special."

Brenn scoffed.

"I'm having a nap," he snippily, as he stalked away from me.

"Brenn!" I called, knowing full well that Wraiths don't sleep.

He ignored me and walked faster.

I sighed as he disappeared to the lower decks. I decided to leave him be a moment – my stomach was all nerves and adrenaline. I needed to ride this one out.

After we'd dried off, Donna suggested we keep reading on about the basics of motion magic.

This magic was nothing like anything I had learned before. It started with drawing strings of magic into a circle. After an hour or so of me trying and failing to make a bottle wobble, I couldn't do anymore and lay on the deck like a beached whale. The feeling reminded me of how it had been to practice the lightning first in the catacombs, the tiredness aching from my very bones. Donna seemed to be feeling it too and joined me in laying down.

It had turned dark as we headed north but the cold wasn't bothering me like I thought it would. Perhaps the ship was enchanted.

Captain Bennett had come up later and he looked positively ruffled. He greeted us politely before resuming his post. I couldn't believe he was a Pirate Lord. I imagined such Lords to be ancient, bearded creatures with hooks for hands and missing legs. Not spry handsome gentlemen.

As the night drew on, Regan noticed my yawns.

"Go to bed, Princess," she said before yawning too. She shook her head fast. "No, no, no. I don't go to sleep at this time." She rubbed her eyes. "I am one with the moon; a child of the night; a beast in nature..." she trailed off before pinching the space between her eyes and releasing an almighty yawn herself.

"I'm exhausted," I said before rolling up and stretching my hands over my head. My back clicked as my shoulders relaxed. Donna gave me a half-hearted wave as she rolled to sit up too.

"Don't worry, Princess." She swept her red hair to one side and began to plait it down her right shoulder. "Your stamina will get better on a journey like this one. After a few weeks at sea, you'll get used to things."

"Yeah, in the hot countries we barely use the bunks – we just sleep on the top deck," Regan said, getting to her feet. "Fynix is hot enough to melt your skin off."

"Last time we headed there, Evan wouldn't wear clothes for four days," she added. She pulled a disgusted face. "That mission left more than physical scars."

Donna turned to her.

“If I remember correctly, you were wearing a skimpy swimming costume during that entire time too!”

Regan shrugged.

“I’m a wolf! My blood runs hot.”

Yawning, I followed Brenn downstairs. The calls of goodnight came from all over the deck.

Chapter Thirteen

I woke up to the sound of many feet aboard and someone yelling. I turned over to see if I could feel for the fluffy soul that was now Brenn. I found the fluff and patted his head.

“Good to see it’s not you causing trouble.” Maybe he was maturing – could wraiths mature? Maturity surely came with age, but Brenn was ancient. Perhaps he was just learning to be more considerate?

A pleasant meow sounded from next to me and I opened my eyes. The warm bristly tongue of Naps was affectionately licking my fingers, his soft whiskers brushing against my hand.

I heard another yell sound from upstairs and then a bang like one of the cannons.

I groaned. Naps’ wide golden eyes blinked at me. I rubbed his head and he purred. Clearly the only well-behaved cat aboard the vessel was this one.

I climbed down from my bunk and quickly put on the clothes that the girls had lent me. I had a fondness for the green trousers and the loose white shirt was better than anything I had been shoe-horned into in the palace. Regan had also lent me a woollen jumper of hers that was made out of a collection of orange, red, and brown wools. I pulled that on over my head too before heading up.

The boat continued to be abuzz as I ascended the steps into the brisk morning air.

“I can’t believe you want to take us back to the Wastes,” Donna said – a surprisingly solid note of fury in her voice. “What happened to going West?” She saw me and her voice softened but her face did not. “Morning, Bryony.”

“You saw what happened, Donna,” Captain Bennett said in an unaffected voice. “My bet is that the Fynix didn’t even know who we were carrying then – they saw the colours and wanted to attack.” Donna ground her teeth together. “Now we haven’t pissed off anyone on the East for a long time, and, with the war now over and the hot season taking place over there – we could easily slink past and end up in Wist in a few weeks. Only a couple extra if all goes to plan.”

“I for one don’t mind the East,” Caden said decidedly. “I could use a more relaxing journey – and we could always stop in Qicog for supplies.”

Regan’s eyes brightened at this.

“Oh yes,” she rubbed her hands together. “Time to trick some engineers into making us more trap balls.”

Aoife, who was dressed in a short blue shirt, dark trousers and boots, shrugged her shoulders towards the captain.

“We will probably need to stop for supplies anyway,” she said. She noticed Donna’s expression continuing to sour. “Obviously, we’ll be careful around Raize.”

Donna nodded. Evan sent her a look of gratitude.

“Do we really need to fear the demon homeland?” Brenn suddenly spoke and then I spotted him. He was sat at the top of the stairs, near Aoife. His expression looked stern as if to ask where I had been.

"You could've woken me up when you got up," I sent to him through our thought link. *"I didn't mean to sleep in."*

"You're no use to anyone tired," Brenn replied. *"Plus, you were snoring loudly, and it amused me greatly."*

"We do when there is a Bonekeeper after our Princess, yes," Aoife said. "If they spot us – there is no way we can defeat a demon fleet."

She sent a smile my way. "Go get some breakfast, Bryony," she added.

Caden blinked at me, as if he just remembered something.

"Yours is the blue plate with a bowl over it to keep it warm," he said. "Don't break anything."

Evan who seemed oddly bristled by this conversation stepped forward.

"I'm going to steal a sandwich," he announced as he headed off.

Donna shot a sharp look at the Captain but Aoife crossed her arms.

"For the record, I think this is a stupid idea," she announced.

The Captain clenched his jaw as he locked eyes with her.

"I don't see any other way around it," he said and then waved a hand. The conversation was done. I noticed Donna's shoulders ease as Evan, and I descended the stairs.

"Thank you," I heard her say before I heard her footsteps too.

The kitchen was quite a small room; oak cabinets ran from floor to ceiling on one side and then what seemed to be a stove; a tap and sink; and a collection of cooking implements filled up on the other side. A porthole, like the one above my bed, looked out onto the rolling waves and let in the sunshine. There was a table big enough for six tucked in at the end.

Evan found my food behind the stone stove's door. It was still steaming hot, and I could smell the floral scent of Caden's magic lingering behind like perfume. He found me some cutlery too and told me to have a seat.

The food smelled divine. Thick slabs of crispy but tender bacon, a huge helping of beans, a tiny army of mushrooms, two whole fried tomatoes, toasted doorstep bread, three sausages, and a weird circular black looking slab.

"Goodness me!" I exclaimed as I headed to the bench. This loaded dish way heavier than anything I had expected. "Did Brenn eat this morning? Maybe some of this is meant for him?"

Evan snorted.

"Brenn had double that and then some." Evan pulled a plate from under the sink. It had flowers decorating it in a delicate pattern. "Caden is a total feeder – he thinks you're too skinny."

"That's what prison does to you," I joked. Thanks to Hector's feeding, I had been slowly getting back to my regular shape. But I was still bony when I took my clothes off. My breasts had come back first though – my body clearly had its priorities in order. I nodded and sat down at the table, "I won't be able to finish this though. I'm not Brenn – he's a pit."

Evan knew his way around the kitchen well enough to find a butterdish and a box of cheese labelled '*DON'T YOU DARE EAT THIS EVAN*'. He helped himself as he found a rounded cob loaf and carved into it.

"What was that all about?" I asked. Evan sliced the butter and then the cheese into generous proportions. "Did something happen in Raize?"

"Donna is a total hot head," he said affectionately. "She's just worried about me that's all."

I started on my mountainous meal as he took a breath. He sat down opposite me and tore into his sandwich.

“I used to be in the demon army – the higher one – not quite a noble yet but my parents were in court enough,” he confessed. “This was years ago now; I was still a fledgling – I didn’t even have my full demon form yet. Things had just started kicking off with your father and the Fynix Fae, about five or six years ago, I guess. I was part of a unit that was collecting information.”

“So, you were a spy?” I asked. Then I remembered something my brother said about the East having a force of their own. “Part of the Brigade of Shadows?”

Evan smiled and I gawped.

“That’s wild! Your lot were a massive problem for our court,” I said scooping beans onto my spoon.

“I didn’t realise our rep had reached the West,” he said. “That’s not very good for spies.”

I waved him off.

“Everyone has spies,” I said. I knew very little about our own secret service. That was reserved for my father and only my father: red cloaks who lived in the shadows. That was all I knew about any of them. Only Sorrel had managed to elbow his way in there. Abel, despite his whining, never accomplished it. “But you guys had stories about you – I’m sure I saw a few romances in the bookshops when I went.”

Evan stopped eating then, a bashful red climbing up his neck as he blushed.

“People romanticise everything,” he said quickly. “The real shit was brutal and not at all book-worthy.” However, something about his expression looked pleased. “Anyway, I was sent to Draig to spy on the leader, Aegius DuVale,” he continued. “At that point in time he wasn’t a spineless fool and actually cared about protecting his people.”

“Still, I can’t believe they’ve been invaded. Moving forces into a place is a pretty direct way about going about it. It’s a bloodless way of going about it too. Unless the Draig people rebel – but clan culture up there is pretty strong and the DuVale’s have been in charge forever.”

Evan had nearly inhaled the rest of his sandwich.

“Anyway, being up in Draig, away from court had been the best experience of my life,” he said with a grin. “I met the Captain and Aoife who were on a ‘holiday’ excavating some ancient, buried treasure. And Donna was travelling with them.” His shoulders eased a little.

“Defection was the easiest decision I had ever made. And the best one I have ever made. Despite some of the ridiculous missions the Captain gets us tied up into.”

It was my time to look bashful then.

“Sorry about that.”

Evan shrugged.

“Believe it or not, you’re not the weirdest mission I’ve ever undertaken.” He brushed the crumbs off his lap. “Just wait until you hear about the Elves.”

Elves? Real Elves?

Before I could question him further though, a more relaxed looking Donna entered the kitchen. “Cooled off now?”

She shot him a sharp smile.

“I have a plan, it is all under control.” She seemed to be telling herself this. “You’re not scared, are you? The East is just like the West really – just with more monsters and the fact that it’s dark all the time.”

“I’m not scared. Just excited, I guess,” I replied. “Should I be?”

Evan shook his shoulders.

“If you can befriend the Wraith of the Wastes, I doubt anything over there would scare you.”

I smiled.

“When I met Brenn, I was stunned rather than scared,” I put my knife and fork down. My appetite had been well and truly sated. But my plate was still over a quarter full. I offered it to Evan who took it immediately and even used my knife and fork. Donna didn’t look surprised to any of this. “He was in his original form – smoke and teeth.” The thought of our first meeting made me shiver – being back in the tower. “But once he started speaking, I knew I had a way in.”

“How did you escape the Tower?” Donna asked as Evan hungrily devoured all of the food next to her. “It was meant to be inescapable: a cruel and awful way to go no doubt.”

I explained about the blood and how the original spells were placed by my own family. The Fynix King must’ve not known that when he sentenced me there. Donna’s jaw dropped when I said I had learned blood magic and even Evan looked impressed.

“I don’t remember you telling us about that when you first arrived,” he said, poisoning a fork with a sausage loaded on it to me. “Blood, physic, lightning...anything else?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I feel like my magic skills are a need-to-know basis.”

Donna smiled, “You know when we get to the catacombs and see all these forbidden books – we’ll be able to figure it out ourselves.”

I sighed, “Probably.” But my heart felt warm in my chest. That Donna had faith that we were going to get there. Sometimes it felt like a pipe dream. “But until then – I think it is best that I keep those to myself.”

Donna and Evan went on to muse to what other forbidden skills I might have. Necromancy was bounced around, along with a few other crazier suggestions like mutation magic or shapeshifting.

“Shapeshifting isn’t illegal magic,” I started to say. “It’s just hard – you have to be very powerful to change and keep a new form.” It was why Brenn liked to do it a lot during the day. He loved to show off.

“Speaking of magic, my new plan involves that fancy pink book of yours,” Donna said with an excited gleam in her face. I had shown her my new books yesterday – she was just as interested in learning magic too.

“Glamouring?” I asked.

“I thought we could come up with a suitable disguise!” She said unbeatably and smiling over at Evan who was focusing intently on his food.

Evan looked between her and I.

A look of realisation dawned on his face.

“Absolutely not.”

.....

There was talk of taking one of the through rivers to Wist but being so close to the Fynix homeland and their new occupancy in Riach seemed unwise thus we resigned to travelling via the open sea. There was talk of islands and ports that I hadn’t even heard of but, oddly enough, I didn’t feel in any great hurry.

A few weeks had passed since we climbed aboard in Newt, and I had found myself at ease with life on the Promise. Many of my days were spent practicing motion magic until I could move bottles around the deck with ease and then, after what felt like an eternity, I could move larger objects like cargo crates or people. Now I had nothing but time to practice, I felt my magic change form easily inside of me – ready to be used at a moment’s notice.

Being on the ship too, besides the occasional outrun of a potential foe, I found to be relaxing. I helped where I could with jobs on board, but most of the time the crew were so

efficient in their roles didn't need extra support. Leaving me somewhere on deck either practicing new magic variations or enjoying the view.

I couldn't help but love to watch the waves lap at the side of the hull as we crossed the ocean. Occasionally, a kelpie tail or serpent nose would rise among the rippling surface but disappear again as quickly as it came. I wondered what creatures the foreign waters would hold and if I would know any of them.

"Princess, keep that up and we'll have to fish you out," Regan spoke dryly from the floor next to me. "Come tamper with my face some more – it was actually a pleasant sensation."

Donna was lying next to her. Dusk was fast approaching and after a day of studying *The Art of Masquerade* by H.Ding, we were all conked out on blankets near the top.

Unlike drawing magic in threads, as was the way with motion magic, it was concentrated into the fingertips and the features that you wanted to manipulate were gently tugged, pushed, or coloured anew. You could make hair grow or disappear. There were sheet glamours like those Brenn had cast on me – a subset of illusion style casting and base glamours which were temporary physical adjustments. This was another level of difficulty – even Caden, who had always wanted to learn despite his own astounding Fae beauty, struggled with the more complicated manoeuvres. Evan resumed his usual spot, watching the proceedings and making the occasional sarcastic comment though initially we had tried to rope him into being a model for our practice attempts.

The practice required a great deal of energy to move the features and a great deal more to keep them all in place. Donna successfully gave me a long nose like a woodpecker, so in return I gave her a pointed chin. We looked at each other before we realised how ridiculous we looked and started howling with laughter.

They eventually wore off and the skin fell back in place accompanied by an itching sensation.

"Oh, thank the Gods," Donna yelled as she felt her chin. "I have missed this chin!"

The next few days followed the same pattern. Eventually I could conduct base changes for hours and now I was trying to master hair.

I practised giving myself all the trappings that Brenn had given me. Bristly eyebrows, stubble, sideburns, thinner lips – I even practised giving myself a moustache. Firstly, it was short and stubby, like a teenager trying hard, then it was full like a cat's head, then it was long and wispy enough for me to twirl in my fingers. It came out blonde like my natural hair.

"You were so fair," Donna said peering at it. "Not that I don't love the brown – but I think one day I would like to see it its natural colour."

I smiled.

"It's already coming through if you look closely," I dipped my head down so she could see. Close to the scalp the fair hairs had grown from the root. "When it's long enough to cut I will cut the dark off."

I felt the magic tickle under my nose as my moustache receded.

Regan had closed her eyes a moment and I grinned to Donna who nodded eagerly.

I pulled my magic into the tip of my finger, feeling it fill with heat and pressure. Quickly I tapped just under her nose. She didn't react as a magnificent curly moustache grew, matching her dark hair. She opened one eye and gestured for Donna to hand her the hand mirror we had been using to practice.

She pursed her lips as Donna, and I giggled.

"Damn," she said, impressed. "I make a fit bloke." She nodded at her reflection.

"Nice one, Bryony."

Donna decided to try and add a beard. Then later we discovered if we both focused, we could make a little mat of curled hair over her chest.

I turned to Brenn, who was watching the proceedings with a bored expression. I gestured to Regan with a proud smile.

“Well?” I said, smugly.

“A hairy werewolf? Ground-breaking.” Was all that he said.

“Don’t mind the wraith,” came Evan’s voice. “You guys are doing great.”

Donna looked up at Evan like she was seeing him for the first time. Then she turned to me - eyes glittering.

“The answer is still no.”

I joined Aoife up on the quarterdeck as she explained the next few days of the journey. The map was incredible now I knew how to use it. Aoife explained that it was connected to the leylines that ran throughout Nos so it could pick up the incoming storms, high and low tides, dangerous waters, and occupied territory. She explained that the map had picked up Brenn’s presence too – she directed me to a small red dot on the page.

“That is a vicious killer currently pretending to be a cat,” she said, hovering a finger above it. A line of magic grew from the page, stretching out like a cord of wool – the same shade of red that Brenn was on the paper. It travelled off the leather, ran along the deck, down the steps, all the way up to where Brenn was watching Donna attempt to change the scales on her right side.

It stopped as it reached him, and the magic seemed to go taut.

“Usually, people can’t tell if they are being tracked. The magic line is only shown to the map’s users.”

Brenn, however, seemed to sense it and turned around from where he was sat. He looked at the line and then at us. “Usually, anyway.”

I guess that didn’t apply to ancient Wraiths.

“I didn’t realise it had such strong tracking abilities,” I said, as with a wave of Aoife’s hand, the magic dissipated. “Did the map pick up Brenn when we left the island?”

Aoife shook her head.

“It is tuned to the wayfarer’s whims, and I wasn’t looking for the Wraith of the Wastes then,” she replied. “However, the Captain sensed that something was afoot the day you escaped.”

“Really?”

Aoife shrugged.

“We just thought he’d eaten too much fried eel again,” she went on to say. Blue eyes glanced to where Caden and the Captain were. “Maybe it was a coincidence.”

But before she could continue Brenn strode up onto the deck. He looked down at the map; the red dot glowing brighter than ever.

He sat down, his tail sweeping the floorboards behind him.

“We’re getting closer,” he said. “I can feel it.”

There was no cynicism in his voice and no sarcasm.

“To the Wastes?” I spoke. Brenn looked up at me – onyx eyes shining in the afternoon sun.

“Home,” he stated. And with that he came and curled up next to me on the floor. He didn’t speak another word for the rest of the evening.

Caden made us chicken dumplings with vegetables for dinner which we all ate at the helm. The Captain and Aoife were going to sail through the night for us. Evan was relieved to have the night off as it was his turn. Caden secretly told me as we headed downstairs that it was only because last time, he had fallen asleep at the wheel and the boat had sailed into infested waters with wild kelpies.

“Since when has a demon had trouble staying awake in the dark? The whole of the East is under shadow,” he finished as we reached our quarters. Brenn had been perched on my shoulder and hopped off onto my bunk, his paws padding around in a circle until he was settled. Right in the middle.

Evan and Caden had stopped in the doorway as I climbed up to bed.

“Look, I was still feeling the aftereffects of that Fae wedding. I had a whole barrel of fae wine,” he said shuddering at the memory.

A look of equal horror passed over Caden.

“I do recall you dancing naked on an altar to their star Goddess with a hollow pumpkin on your shoulders and a rainbow painting on your ass,” he said with a grimace and then gagged.

Evan grinned wide and then said to me.

“Best night of my life.”

A violent sky. Darkness all around – a storm raging on with flashes of gold and white as rain poured. Before me, waves crashed onto a beach of black sand. But I wasn’t wet – I was warm. Like I’d laid in a sunbeam behind glass.

And there I was on the beach. Standing with my toes in the sparkling black sand as the moon’s glow made everything glitter. Somehow, the rain hadn’t disturbed the shore; like the sea had trapped the thunder within it.

I looked behind me and saw the edge of a lush green forest, plants with leaves that bloomed the colours of gems and glowing roots painting patterns across the floor. I could hear voices coming from beyond, echoes of laughter and music filtering through the air like windchimes before they seemed to disappear as if it had been taken by the breeze.

I noticed there was a pathway of pale stones that seemed to be reflecting the moon, verdant shades of sapphire and purple.

The leaves seemed to whisper as the storm raged on.

Come here. Come.

Come here. Come.

It went on and on like a heartbeat. I matched it with my feet pacing forward, the forest seeming to beckon me forward.

Come here.

Come.

As I walked, I saw all manner of wildflowers I didn’t recognise blooming at the feet of the ancient trees. I spotted some silver blossoms bordering the path with long slender leaves that filled the air with a delightful musky and calming fragrance. Besides all the unfamiliar blooms, the smells, lavender and jasmine filled the air pleasantly.

As I walked, I tilted my head up and realised some of the trees were not trees at all: they were towers. Homes built among the tallest trees, some curving around them, and others surpassing them in height. And as I ducked under a roping chain of carnations, a short burst of light flashed in front of me, and I saw a figure so small I could’ve missed it.

Carrying a light so small it was barely the size of my littlest finger’s nail, was a tiny spirit. Her eyes were wide and green, but her face was forlorn.

“You’re too late.” Her voice was soft as the petals among her red hair.

I wanted to ask what I was too late for, but the sensation of longing grew inside of me. I couldn’t even open my mouth to reply. Something was pulling me forward – my feet were moving but I didn’t know where I was headed.

Come.

I walked on, the spirit, dressed in what seemed to be a collection of leaves woven together, flew beside me. Her face didn't change but as she flew faster, I was running to keep up with her.

Suddenly, we came to a clearing – the storm had ceased and only the rays from the moon and her companion stars filled the sky. The trees here seemed to be alight with spirits alongside the tiniest of winged fairies no bigger than a feather. Their light-as-air voices seemed to cease as they noticed me – many faces fell, and I felt a deep pit start in my stomach. This place was fit for the gods – how could they possibly be unhappy?

Come.

The voice spoke again and the spirits that filled the glade seemed to gasp, and exchange looks of delight or surprise.

The fairies parted to reveal a pool at the centre of the glade, the surface of which was shimmering gold. Above the pool was an altar of sorts, a stone table with a round top. From this, a small golden waterfall cascaded into the waters below. Behind that stood a great tree, it bore scarlet red leaves and small white blossoms. A sheen covered the trunk. Blood-red stones seemed to be growing from it – as natural as any of the leaves. It seemed to come from a gap in the wood, like part of it were missing.

As I moved closer, I could feel the magic in my chest embracing me like a breath of fresh air. Strangely enough, the air tasted like home.

I stepped forward and saw my reflection – my old self stared back. Long blonde hair, oval face, blue eyes, golden skin: my mother's daughter looked back at me. Then the scene changed, and I could see beneath the surface of the water – a face as big as a house – eyes wide with horror, hair that was wild, a mouth caught in a scream. Immediately, my chest seemed to tighten – the pull pushed me forward and before I could stop myself, I felt myself submerge me. Water filled my lungs, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from hers. Her open mouth was ready to swallow me. I was drowning.

Gasping I shot up in my bed. I could feel my mouth opening and closing, but my heart was racing so hard I could feel my magic heating up in my chest in response. I was heaving and felt myself fall forward as my body shuddered. Brenn looked up at me – his eyes were wide.

I touched the wall next to me and looked out the window – still aboard the Siren's Promise. Not drowning and choking on water. I scrambled forward to the window and loosed the screw under it to let in a slice of air. I took deep breaths until my heart slowed and my magic stopped humming like an engine inside of me.

Finally, I felt my shoulders ease. Brenn hadn't said anything – he had only watched and now was sat up.

"Usually when one experiences a sex dream the response doesn't leave the dreamer in such a state of panic," he said, factually.

"No, it was a nightmare," I said. "There was a glade..." I let my voice trail off. I opened my mind to Brenn and showed him the dream. The green sprite and the tiny fairies. The altar – the tree of red and white blooms that seemed to be growing rubies between its bark. The face at the bottom of the pool. "Who was that?"

Brenn's brow furrowed.

"How strange," he said. "That was an ancient depiction of Celine – the all-seeing." There was a pensive tone in his voice. "Before she was just the sun-goddess, she was the patron of many things – the truth being one of them."

I stared at him.

"But what does this mean? I've never seen that place before," I thought back. There was an ancient temple in Kya for Celine – every surface glowed with gems. A white marbled

statue of her looking north. She wore a diadem – her expression was peaceful. “I had never even left Kya before the invasion.”

Brenn seemed to be debating something as he didn’t immediately reply. But then he rolled over and stretched out like he was done with this conversation.

“Perhaps she wants to talk to you,” he said.

“A goddess wants to talk to me?”

“Surprising. Considering how dull your usual conversation is.” I frowned at him, but he’d already closed his eyes. “Perhaps she had something to reveal to you.”

I had heard of the Gods' involvement before, but not since before I was born. Yet, every folktale had some piece of divine intervention at its core. And there were whispers of miracles among my people. Unlike the Priests of Kya who kept the temples clean and helped worshippers, I was not the most devoted servant to our Pantheon. It was hard to pray to a God or Goddess who you debated the existence of.

I looked out on the waves – the face still burned into my mind.

“I wonder what she has to share?”

“Well, hopefully, it’s more interesting than this conversation.”

Chapter Fourteen

The following days were blissfully uneventful until we really started to reach the Eastern oceans. As we drew closer to the edge of the Wastes the waters became ever more turbulent. Powerful waves threw us about the deck and on more than one occasion I had found myself hanging off the rigging. Caden crashed into the mast and needed to bandage up his wrist. It was hard not to think of Hector back in Draig and how easily he could’ve patched him up. Regan helped me knot the cables of the masts while Evan and Donna ran up and down the rigging to adjust the sails and provide a lookout.

Brenn had decided that helping was beneath him and that he was going to stay with the Captain at the helm as he wrestled the ship back onto its course. We’d come into rocky waters and that combined with the weather required concentration. A storm had really picked up within a matter of moments and I found myself clinging to the cables with all my might. Aoife was beside me too after she’d come to help.

“Couldn’t we have gone around the storm?” I yelled over the whistling of the wind. “Why didn’t it show up on the map?”

“I don’t know!” she screamed back over the howl. The boat lurched forward, and we bumped into each other. “The storm I saw earlier was way past our trajectory.”

Thunder cracked and suddenly a yell came from above.

“We’ve got company!”

I looked around for any ships but all I saw was the raging grey sea. But being up so high I wasn’t surprised they had spotted ships on the horizon that I couldn’t see. But Aoife’s expression wasn’t the determination I had seen before. She looked horrified. Suddenly, water exploded from the right of the ship, a great geyser of grey fury shot upwards and drenched the deck. Regan didn’t react as she got soaked – her feet firmly planted on the floor as white water crashed aboard and swept me and Aoife off our feet. Immediately, the same thing happened on the left of the ship too and I gasped.

The noise of cracking filled the air as a tremendous wave swept across the floor. I struggled to find my footing and slipped to the ground. A gleaming metal hook wrapped around the mast, and it crunched as it embedded itself in the wood. Demon warriors, in bronze armour or battle leathers descended upon us from above.

“Battle formation,” I heard Aoife scream from somewhere nearby.

I wiped the water from my eyes and suddenly the boats aside us came into view. I was near the hull at the front of the ship, and I saw how the boats had us wedged between them. We couldn't escape without damaging ourselves.

The ships were adorned with towering masts and the black and gold flags of the Raizian people. Just as I thought it could not get any worse, figures dressed in black abseiled aboard the ship.

I saw Donna slide down the rigging with her axe in hand, her red hair stuck to the side. Evan's claws and fangs were out, and his eyes looked filled with a dark rage.

Given the talons and teeth they possessed, I knew our attackers were lesser demons. But the familiar brush of scalding magic still filled my blood with icy dread. Everything seemed to be happening too fast for me to comprehend.

If we hadn't been a moving vessel, I guessed he would've portalled aboard but instead he came via the railing of the ship. The Bonekeeper I had met in Draig was now aboard the Siren's Promise and this time he had not come alone. Two other hooded figures flanked him; one with striking red hair like spilled blood, the other seemed to have no hair at all, but was covered in tattoos, his eyes a ghostly white. The bottom of each of their faces were masked. My heart was racing.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" I yelled over the footfall but around me the crew of the Promise seemed to have sprung into action.

The deck quickly became a battleground between the crew and the invaders. I couldn't keep track of how many there were among the weather and the fighting. I heard the sound of cotton tearing like paper and then an animalistic growl. I thought for a moment that it might be Brenn but then saw a flash of black fur patched with brown around the face and flanks. Regan had changed into her wolf form – tearing into the first soldiers she had seen with ease.

Donna and Evan worked back to back as they fought. I couldn't see the Captain and Aoife on the quarterdeck only figures moving quickly. I felt my magic stir inside me – no way was I not being involved in this battle!

"Stay back, Princess," I heard Caden yell from the Hull. He had a grimace on his face but brandished his magical threads between his fingers. I felt Brenn beside me, in shadow form.

"For once I agree with him," he hissed as he swarmed around me. As I went to move forward to join with the fray, I felt his scales dig into me. Then a demon with a long sword ready for me hurtled towards the mass that was Brenn. With a joyful hiss Brenn's serpentine mouth took the demon's head in one swoop motion. He was more than a snake or lizard: his body formed a great length of scales ridged with sharp tusks along his spine. A shadow-feld wyrm – I remembered seeing it in one of the books in the dark of the catacombs.

The weapon the demon had been using clattered to the floor. I retrieved it – a long blade with a leather-bound handle and onyx edged blade. Then I heard a cry that made the blood in my veins ice over. Donna was becoming overwhelmed, and I couldn't even see Evan. Caden's vantage point from the hull had been overrun with demon soldiers. Even worse, the Bonekeepers seemed to have disappeared.

"Brenn! Attack them!" I yelled. "I can protect myself."

Brenn eyed me dubiously. "Free food!" I added.

"Don't do anything stupid," he snapped, before I saw his wyrm form slide dart forward, mouth wide at the incoming fighters from the right. I turned before I saw their blood spill on the decks. I pulled my new magic from my core into my hands, and a circle with glowing thread spilled over each of my fingers.

Breathing in, I outstretched my hands and felt my magic reach out like ropes, wrapping around two demons closest by. I heard a cry behind me, but I had my hands bound

in magic before me. I focused hard and lifted the pair of them into the air, the threads holding their weight well. Then I flung them forwards off the ship and into the waters below.

I surged forward to find Donna wrestled to the ground. With a yell, I grabbed the soldier above her, feeling the magic surge down my arm like a breeze. Then I yanked him up high and threw him overboard. Donna saw me do this and gave me a look of approval before using her axe at one short-haired demon's knee.

To one side of me, I could see Evan using his claws to tear into a demon twice his size, black blood spilling all over his face. Meanwhile, Brenn was decimating the soldiers near the helm. I saw more than one rogue limb strewn across the deck between us.

Donna slumped as she swung her axe twice more into a lanky intruder, kicking his body over the side.

Suddenly, red hair materialised in front of me. The Bonekeeper was much taller than I was but still I met violet eyes glowing around tanned skin. I lunged back and positioned the sword in my hands. The Bonekeeper wielded two short-swords, the ends of which were curved and savage-looking. I had no experience with swords thus far beyond a couple of lessons – I had prioritised learning magic. But that wasn't going to stop me trying.

I saw the Bonekeeper move towards me, but Evan got between us and went in for a slashing attack. He moved like a blur but then so did his opponent. I looked for the other Bonekeepers, the Captain was locked in a brawl with the white-eyed individual. The other, who I knew was the general, was fighting Regan nearer the bow. There were only a few soldiers left on board besides from the Bonekeepers but I noticed reinforcements on the opposite ship and my heart sank.

It happened so fast.

A swish of a silver blades and blood splashed across the deck. Evan had dropped to his knees, crouched over, dark blood spilling from his guts. His forearms were covered, the gore pooling on the floor in front of him. Donna screamed.

The red-haired Bonekeeper appeared back in front of me only to be attacked next by a furious Regan.

"He asked for you alive," a deep voice said sharply, "but it wasn't essential."

Hot rage coursed through my veins, and I gripped my sword. The Bonekeeper's red eyes were dark. I saw Donna bent over Evan as he bled out.

I saw Caden bloodied at the bottom of the stairs, Aoife and the Captain fighting like hell at the helm. My magic wasn't strong enough to fight like them. But that didn't mean I wasn't going to fucking well try.

I aimed the sword and lunged.

The Bonekeeper easily dodged it, so I used my magic to shove him backwards. He hadn't been expected the sudden wave of motion magic which made him stumble and I swore I heard something like a chuckle. He zipped forward, this time he had his curved swords at the ready. I couldn't use my lightning here without frying everyone else too, so I needed to stick to my threads for now. He swung his left sword which I was able to block with my own. He forced his blade against mine and my muscles strained against him as he swung his right.

I jumped up and planted a foot in his solar plexus and he stepped back. I took his moment of instability to shove him hard. All I had to do was hold him off until Brenn returned to me, but the reinforcements had started to climb aboard from the opposite side of the ship.

He regained his footing, and I moved back to strengthen my stance. But as I stepped back, but my foot caught, a bloodied demon body no doubt mauled by Regan. I tripped backwards and felt myself slip over the railing. I waved my arms to catch myself, but my fingers closed in on air as I fell off deck. And hurtled towards the sea.

The noise of the battle instantly faded around me and was replaced with the whoosh of water and then silence. I was lucky I hadn't been impaled on a rock in my descent and I opened my eyes to see endless blue before closing them. My head was dazed with the impact, and I tried to remember, kick legs, kick legs, swim, swim, swim. I commanded my body to get me back to the surface, but my arms were useless, and I seemed to be sinking deeper.

The surface above was blurry. Where was Brenn? How come he hadn't seen me fall?

The boats seemed to be shrinking – I needed to breathe. I tried to rise up through the water, but it was useless. Terror seeped through me – I was going to drown. I was dying.

I choked a sob and tried to get myself up. I'm not dying here.

I'm not.

My vision blurred some more as dark spots edged their way into the rest of my vision. Then a shadow filled everything, and I knew this was it.

Suddenly, hands grabbed my arm then waist and pulled me tight. I didn't realise death had such a strong grip. I had the weird sensation of air on my wet head as someone placed me down on the deck. Someone was breathing close – voices drowned by the seawater in my ears and the gradually heaviness of my chest eased. Someone was beating on my chest hard and a split second later I felt water at the back of my throat.

I could feel the ache in my shoulders once again. My heart raced and my lips tasted of sea salt. Then I felt a lurch in my stomach and turned to vomit onto the floor.

The noise was coming back to me. I opened my eyes and saw the frothy puddle of my own insides.

"You can't swim." The Bonekeeper next to me stated. His long hair had come loose from where it had been tied before – every inch of him was soaked. He was standing above me.

I wiped the water from my eyes. I realised I was on a different ship. This boat was grander than the Siren's Promise, the deck was massive and instead of the two masts – this boat had four. A black and gold flag waved from the crow's nest. Our boat, the Siren's Promise, seemed to be drifting away.

Brenn...Brenn. Where was he?

The screams had followed me to this boat. I saw Brenn in his Wyrms form devouring the crew of the demon's ship. The red-head and the one with all the tattoos had whirled on him now – I could feel the bloodlust aching through him with his terrible power.

"You can't swim," he said again. It wasn't quite a question.

"Are you going to kill me?" I asked him, my arms and legs ached from trying to tread water.

"My father wants you alive."

"Ah, so Captain Bennett was right," I said, coughing until my breathing evened out. "You are the son of the Demon King." His jaw seemed to clench. "Prince Kyan."

"Princess Bryony," he said, in his low timbre.

I laughed despite my raw throat.

"Please, introductions are saved for the dancing part of the evening," I replied. His expression didn't change, those red eyes fixed on me.

"Call the Wraith off and we'll let the crew live. If you don't, I'll send Jasper and Rion over there to finish them off." His voice was quiet and threatening. The deep timbre didn't make me doubt his sincerity. I thought of the bloodshed over there and immediately called Brenn. No fucking way were any of them dying for me.

Water spilled over onto the deck from the waves that were slowly dying down now the battle had ended. I had no doubt the weather was due to a storm mage on board. I watched

the Promise gain ground between us. As I climbed to my feet, Brenn appeared next to me. Baring his fangs at the General who stepped back at the Wyrms enveloped me.

The demon said something, but his words were lost in the great boom that tore through the air. The ground shook under us, and the crew stumbled. The next few bangs sounded like breaking wood and the smell of acrid gunpowder burned my nose.

The Siren's Promise was firing back.

"We need to get off this ship!" I said to Brenn as the incoming cannons tore into the boat. On deck the crew were readying their own cannons once more. The other two Bonekeepers had sprung into action to help. But the general had regained ground and squared off with Brenn.

The Wraith lunged first, leaving me pressed against the railing as debris flew over onto the ship. A chunk of it sliced my shoulder as I raised my arms to protect my face.

In wyrm-form Brenn moved like a deadly snake, his tail swept at the general's feet and his fangs were sharp and ready to tear into him. Brenn's attacks were too fast for me to fully see but he moved in blurring jabs at any opening the demon had.

However, what was more impressive, was that the General held his ground with forms unparalleled to those I had seen from the soldiers at home. He moved like a shadow with all the grace of a deadly panther that roamed the forests near the mountains of Riach. Brenn finally landed a clean hit at the demon's wrist, his teeth locking on. Black blood dripped onto the deck, but it didn't slow the demon at all. In fact, his momentum didn't slow as he sliced into the Wraith's serpentine stomach. Brenn growled and let go but only to change shape into his male form once more, his fingers dark onyx claws.

"I have a plan," I said quickly. *"Is there any alcohol on this vessel?"*

Brenn didn't slow down as he and the Bonekeeper slashed at each other. Blood had splattered the deck between them.

"Now is not the time for a drink," he snapped back.

"Brenn!" I showed him my idea briefly and after a beat he replied.

"A barrel of spirits in the stock bay by the smell of it."

"I need it." I went to run past them, but the General leapt back and turned his sword on me.

"Stay there!" Brenn's voice echoed in my head. Immediately, he summoned the brown barrel above the deck. It floated above the heads of the crew, but no one seemed to notice. Perhaps he had glamourised it too. That tricky Wraith keeping all his skills to himself.

"When I say, drop the barrel and change form to that Eagle you were before," I said, I could feel the power of the pact hard in my head. Perhaps my adrenaline had summoned it.

"Sorry we can't stay," I said quickly climbing up onto the railing. *"You know how busy royal schedules are, right Kyan?"*

I pulled my magic up into my core – the temperamental nature of it filled my fingers instantly. No motion magic now as I felt the familiar burn of my beloved lightning. I saw the crazed look of approval in Brenn's eyes.

"Now!" I yelled, launching myself off the ship.

The barrel smashed against the deck and coated it in brown liquid. Brenn instantly let Kyan go, dodging a deathly sword swing, as he too jumped off. His form became a mass of smoke as his great wings met the air.

Instantly, I leashed the bolt and sent it onto the deck. For a brief moment I was worried it was just water but then the heat took, and the flames sprouted rapidly. The bolt was far from finished though, it zapped outwards, the water aboard carrying it to the rest of the crew and the Bonekeepers. Loud cracks emanated as the bolts hit the soldiers with many of them dropping to the deck or falling overboard. Spider webs of lightning ricocheted through

the ship among the flames, I saw the general throw his sword to the ground as it lit up with electricity.

Unfortunately, as I was still soaked from my unwanted swim, I felt the bolt snake its way up my arm too. My skin burned like iron needles piercing my veins, but I gritted my teeth. Surely, now we could escape. Despite the pain, I couldn't shake the smile as I found myself falling towards a watery death for the second time in a matter of minutes.

I didn't look as I felt Brenn pull me upwards, claws of his Riach Eagle form digging into my shoulders. The flames had taken over the enemy ship, but I was happily flying back to my own boat. From my height, I spotted the General storming his way to the helm to take over before the burning ship crushed into the rocks. The red-head Bonekeeper let out a shriek of anger but Brenn above me let out a loud laugh.

"You're crazy, Princess," he laughed. Smoke was billowing from it now, but I focused on landing as we reached the Promise once more. I noticed the vessel on the opposite side was in far better shape and my stomach twisted at the thought of the fight continuing.

Brenn dropped me on the ship, and I landed with a thump. My arm was still killing me, but I was content in the knowledge that all those demons felt that way too. It was an oversight that I had done that to myself, but the buzz in my head was making me giddy.

Brenn began devouring the last poor souls left on board. Regan and Evan had been laid out at the hull with Donna defending them.

"Nice of you to come back, Princess," called Captain Bennett from the helm which he was defending with Aoife. He still had his tricorn on, but his shirt was soaked in blood. Slices had torn at his chest and his arms – how was he standing? Aoife, looking as bedraggled but less bloody, was suddenly tackled from behind by a demon ready to slit her throat with a curved dagger. The Captain's face changed instantly and quicker than I had ever seen him move, he drew a dagger. Then the air around him seemed to ripple – even from where I stood, I could see the remnants of magic.

The weapon zapped through the air, and I saw the soldier fly off Aoife with an unexpected force. He clattered to the floor, and I saw the dagger had gone straight through the man's eye. Aoife's eyes were wide but before she could respond the captain had extended an arm and pulled her tight against him.

I ran up to where they were on the deck. Brenn was finishing up those that had left. The boat that had been on the left had pulled away but not retreated. But the stupid Bonekeeper's vessel was gaining speed again despite the fiery wreck it was. I saw a dark shadow at the helm and knew the General hadn't given up yet.

"Can we lose them?" I asked, breathless. The sea was getting riotous again – no doubt an attempt to slow us down.

Aoife dropped from the Captain's arms and instantly had the map out.

"Fuck! We're headed towards rocks," she growled. "Head North – that is our best bet." The Captain shook his head, his expression was resolute.

"They will catch us that way," he ground out – the muscles in his forearms were straining as he fought to keep the boat going onwards.

"Those rocks will end us – you won't be able to navigate." Aoife retorted shaking her head. "She won't survive the journey, Bennett."

North and we get caught or continue East and we die.

Suddenly, an idea popped into my head. A stupid, reckless and ridiculous idea that would surely be brilliant.

"Keep going straight," I called as the winds started to howl again. They both turned to me. "I have an idea."

I pulled my magic into my chest.

Come for me. You've waited long enough to be let out. This is your time.

I felt the whoosh of magic flood my senses as I stretched my fingers in front of me. The threads shone like silken moonlight as I kneeled on the deck. I drew a magic circle on the base of the helm; because it was so big the magic seemed to want to grow, to explore, and tiny strings of magic stretched out like roots around it.

I shut my eyes tight, my arcane senses flaring off on their own so when I opened them, I could see my magic stretching out like a blanket over the deck. In my mind's eye I saw it run to the sides of the hull and cradle the boat. My heart raced as my magic poured out of me.

I caught eyes with Brenn who was slithering up the deck, once again a wyrm.

"Don't you dare!" he yelled.

I grinned at him and doing what he had told me, I held my ground, keeping my stance even, slowly raising my hands.

Instantly the weight of the boat hit me – it was more than a bottle, a book, or even one of the crates. Trust the magic to do the work – I breathed deeply. Deeper than I ever had before. I felt some of the pressure lift – it was still agonisingly heavy on my shoulders, but my hands felt soft, like I had put them in a pool of warm water.

I kept raising my hands gradually and I heard Aoife let out a sound of surprise behind me – I didn't trust my focus to turn and look at her, so I kept on looking straight. The noise of the water whooshing out of the lower decks as we started to lift out filled me with confidence.

Slowly, we rose into the air – my arms were shaking with the effort, and I could feel the sweat starting to form on my back.

We were up – I leaned forward taking all the magic with me. And slowly initially, but surely, we started to move. Taking to the air like a swan to a lake we moved steadily onward.

Brenn had appeared next to me – he was in his human form again.

"You're a crazy idiot," he said but he extended his own arms. I felt the familiar surge of his dark magic next to me and the weight dropped immediately on my arms, but I didn't give. I used my magic to push forward as we moved the boat together. I felt his magic flood through mine making my chest burn with the effort of breathing.

The rocks that Aoife had been so worried about sailed away under us as we soared up into the clouds. The ships hounding us turned small as we flew. No doubt if they could've portalled up, to us the Bonekeepers would've joined us. Thankfully, you couldn't portal onto a moving object and they didn't know where or when we would be stopping. There wouldn't be any unexpected surprised anytime soon.

"Guys we're fucking flying!" came Evan's voice. He was alright? I dropped my gaze to see a bloody Evan being carried by Donna below.

Her own face was covered in blood, her red hair streaked with death. But the marvel that passed her expression filled me with such joy that I laughed.

"You do realise if I hadn't been here to help you your arms would have burnt off," Brenn reprimanded in a short voice next to me.

I just laughed – the pain had turned to an ache but as we charged forward, I saw nothing but open sea. Not a jagged rock in sight.

"Do you think we're in the clear now?" I forced out in the lightest voice I could muster. Then I turned my head – their faces were in such a state of shock it made me giggle. I felt something cool drip from my nose, it tasted metallic. My nose was bleeding.

"Captain?" Brenn snapped in a stern voice.

Instantly the shock seemed to wear off and the Captain cleared his throat but Aoife spoke.

"You've done more than enough," she said amazement.

I turned to Brenn who nodded, and I copied his movements.

“Slowly,” he said as I lowered my arms. The boat started to gradually sink through the air – the storm had been passed through entirely and the sky was clear and blue. We landed with a splash – the boat rocked from side to side as it met the familiar waves once again. The magic coursing through my veins made the boards crack around my feet a little as I struggled to keep upright.

My hands were vibrating now as I let go of the threads of magic holding the boat. The ache seemed to grow as I let the magic dissipate in my core. Relax now – you deserve it.

As if that command applied to every part of my body, I felt the weight on my shoulders depart. I dropped to my knees and then lay with my back on the helm’s floor. My fingers still seemed to be throbbing with magic despite me letting go of my concentration.

Aoife and the Captain instantly went to help me up, but I waved them off.

“No, no,” I said as I regained the breath I didn’t know I had lost. “Let me be.”

The sky was glorious and blue, and the sheer craziness of what I had just done seemed to be dancing along every one of my veins. So, I laughed and pumped a fist.

“Fuck yeah,” I said as my breathing turned to a kind of breathless laughter. The faces around me were smiling too. Even Brenn had a look that wasn’t disdain – something that was not entirely horrified. But maybe it was impressed.

The sun was out and despite all the pain, all I could do was laugh.

Chapter Fifteen

The medical wing was a short stub of a room with a collection of beds. Laid out on three beds were a grim-faced Evan, a green-looking Caden, and face-planted the wrong way was Regan. She wasn’t in her wolf-form and was buck naked on top of the sheets. Her ebony limbs were sprawled everywhere – I noticed a few tattoos across the small of her back before I looked away. I wasn’t sure she would appreciate me gawking. Donna dutifully placed a sheet over her behind.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay enough to do this?” Aoife said beside me. Donna was spoon-feeding Caden something that was glowing on a silver spoon. She’d explained that he’d been hit by a demon using toxic magic – she was administering the antidotes. Donna worked away like she’d done this a hundred times before. Even though Regan would heal fast like werewolves do, Donna was going to apply balms and stitch any of the bigger ones to prevent scarring. Were all dragon-kins just natural healers?

“I can do it,” I said determinedly. Aoife gave me a grim-face smile before handing me a silver needle and some copper-coloured thread. Evan groaned as I sat down on the bed next to him.

I gave him my best smile despite the fact my hands were shaking. “Any preference on what stitch I should use?”

“If you don’t use some fancy-ass stitch I will be disappointed.”

I lowered myself to where the gash was. The skin was still viciously torn. Donna was certain that he was going to be fine – but judging by everyone in the hospital wing, we could barely say that we escaped unscathed.

I threaded the needle with more ease than I thought was possible. But then as I lowered to the cut – so diligently cleaned with rubbing alcohol from Donna, my hands started to shake. The cut would heal normally but the blade had been enchanted against any fast healing. Thank the Gods it had missed anything important.

I felt Brenn’s presence appear behind me – his presence was ebbing power, no doubt from eating all the corpses of the dead.

“I could always do that,” he said. “I’m good at sewing,” I don’t even know how he managed to make that sentence threatening. Evan’s jaw clenched.

“I would rather bleed.”

Brenn snickered before he turned back into his snake form. He opened his mouth to reveal his long fangs.

“I am sure we can arrange it.”

“Guys, please. *Please.*” I lowered the needle and went for the first stitch. The skin was ragged but I steeled my breath and pinched the two sides together before gently pressing the needle through.

Evan hissed and instantly I felt terrible. “Do you want me to try to distract you?”

“What’ve you got?”

I shrugged.

“How about something funny?”

Evan gritted his teeth in response.

“Once upon a time, back before war was a massive problem,” I started. I felt Brenn slither up my back and rest on my shoulders as he liked to do in his cat form. “There was a ball. A tradition held every year for Princesses – the Blossom Dance. When the leaves from the trees around the city of Kya would first go into bloom.”

I had to keep the stitches evenly spaced but to work as quickly as I could. I couldn’t help but think of my Governesses – how is my stitch-work, Lady Grimsby?

“The point of the ball was to find me a husband,” I told them. I knew Donna was listening too; the only person who wasn’t was Regan who was happily snoring away on her bed. “Most balls were after I reached the ripe old marrying age of twelve. Even those thrown in honour of when Sorrel killed something viciously.”

“However, I had no interest in finding a husband – especially those my father favoured,” I could still recall them all now. Lined up around the ballroom that had been decorated in golden and white draped with ribbons ties between all the witchlights. Flowers on every surface imaginable and beautiful floral sculptures that the earth-based mages had made in the shape of deer, rabbits, wolves, or even one year, a dragon. “You could tell which ones had spoken to my father. They were always blanched white – having your life flash before your eyes will do that. But anyway, those my father chose were always awful.”

We were getting somewhere now.

“Anyway, this one boy, a prissy, rich kid, far up his own behind was so wealthy it was enough to make him rather popular among the ladies in court. An heir to a great fortune – despite being the son of a Baron.” I went on. Evan snorted at this. “Money speaks – even to royalty. And thus, the donkey was top of my father’s list for my potential husband.”

“However, this particular ass-wipe of a man was so determined to win me over he stuck beside me the entire night. He was exactly my father’s kind of man. And he left this boy with me while he abandoned the ball – as he liked to when he was suitably drunk. Don’t get me wrong – I gave him a shot. I asked how he was, and his reply was – ‘When we are married, you will learn to speak when you are spoken to. Or not at all’.”

Donna made a retching sound. “My sentiments exactly.”

“I was about sixteen at the time,” I added. Wearing a dress that was made from the palest pink fabric. The skirt gathered around me like they were petals, and I was the bud. “The guy was at least eighteen.”

“I digress. Anyway, the dancing had started but this stuck-up twit would not dance no matter how much I hinted or told him. He looked very affronted I had spoken to him at all – so I kept at it. But as he had made himself my companion that evening no other partner dared approach.”

“Thankfully, eventually he excused himself to gather drinks for us, so I went to make my escape. Then I noticed the tables of girls near the back. Usually, I was kept nearer the

front so my father could keep an eye on me. “I realised that these were all the sisters. All the sisters of the boys my father had invited to come and try and woo me.”

“The dance floor was filled with couples but usually, same sexes don’t dance with each other. It is seen as common.”

“But alas, my father was not there,” I said. I grinned at the thought. I went to the back and after a little persuasion I had the girls all pair up and we headed to the dance floor. We danced the Quickstep together. However, then that turd from earlier came back. Turns out *I* had abandoned *him* to dance with his sister – who was far better company, by the way. He was furious and grabbed my wrist.”

“Naturally, I pushed him into a table of desserts! Pie and cake went everywhere. Cream cakes were launched into the air. And my dress was ruined. A food fight commenced immediately, but I had underestimated my arm power as he knocked over one of those sculptures when I pushed him.”

“And it went through an ancient stained-glass window.”

Evan snickered and Donna gawped. Brenn shook his head.

“Once the disaster child always the disaster child.”

I finished up my stitch. It was ugly but at least he was now back together.

“Did you get punished?” Donna asked. Caden looked less unwell now – a colour had flushed back into his cheeks, and he had drifted off into a deep sleep. I nodded.

“Banned from balls or family events for a whole year,” I told her. “But my father didn’t like the idea of me having an unruly reputation – so he said I was away practicing my dance in Hydraen. In truth, I wasn’t allowed anywhere visitors could be. The dessert fiasco had been brushed aside with the explanation that I was not able to handle the physical affections of a man in public.”

Evan pulled the shirt off over his head. He had other picket-like scars dotted around his torso that had healed, leaving pale patches of skin in jagged marks. Alongside them, he has several tattoos too of various creatures of red and black.

“A year in solitude sounds like some kind of hell.” Donna said to me.

I thought of all the secret picnics Randall and I would have. We’d stay out until late when my father was away and wait until the night was upon us and all the lights of the forest would glow. Randall taught me how to paint and I taught him how to sew.

We explored every inch of the catacombs and all the treasures they had to offer. Time moved too fast when I was in love.

“I had plenty of fun.”

.....

The cold sheets covered my body as I lay down face first into my pillow, but I didn’t feel any sense of relief. Instead, I saw Evan cut open and bloody – an exhausted Regan – Donna bruised badly – and Caden poisoned.

This was all because of me.

They were all hurt badly because of me.

“They knew what they were signing up for, your Highness,” Brenn said, boredly.

“You are not responsible for their actions.”

“I practically blackmailed them into joining this quest – they hardly had a choice.” My voice was muffled, but I didn’t move my head.

Brenn climbed up onto my back and sat.

“Princess, you managed to pick the friendliest group of idiots in all of Nos, I have no doubt that even if you hadn’t suggested the sword, they would’ve joined us for the adventure anyway.” I still didn’t move. I was letting the pillow absorb the tears before I rolled over. It was good to cry sometimes – it felt like a release.

“It was your mission – one you had to make through no faults of your own. Your family landed you in this mess long before you entered this world.”

I wiped my face with the back of my hand as I turned over onto my side. I thought of Kya. My city and home ravaged by the army that swept through our defences like they were nothing. I was just imprisoned – I had no doubt that many of my people would’ve suffered worse fates. Many texts about the Fynix had been banned for years but down in the catacombs I had ready about ends worse than death at the hands of them. Their history was as colourful as ours, but it seemed like this war had lasted so long now history had ceased to recall what happened before.

It wasn’t just the Fynix. Across the Divide, the Demon King had established a country so formidable people would add the weeks of travel around it instead of passing through. I felt the hatred curl in my gut like a venomous snake.

The way the Bonekeepers swept across the deck. My senses tingled when they were around – something sharp, dangerous, and formidable was close. And then there was all that *power*. The stories I heard through my maids or gossip from the kitchens didn’t compare. I hadn’t even felt the full force of it yet, but it sent shivers up my arms.

“We can do this, Brenn,” I spoke softly.

“No one else would dare to,” Brenn said, “so it has got to be you.”

It wasn’t scathing or anything like his usual barb. When I looked at him, he’d closed his eyes. Curled up by my side.

“Now go to sleep. Humans need rest too, I understand.”

“Goodnight Brenn.”

“Goodnight, your highness.”

Chapter Sixteen

The next day, Donna, Brenn, and I gathered at the helm as the Captain and Aoife explained the plan.

“We will stop at the Northern coastline,” Captain Bennett announced. “These lands have been deserted for hundreds of years so there is no risk of us running into anyone –”

“Apart from the hordes of monsters,” Brenn said, flicking his tail from where he was delicately perched on my shoulder. He had been unusually reserved at breakfast. I thought perhaps it was a sour mood brought on by my lack of cooking skills, but I didn’t know how to use the strange magic-fuelled stove and Brenn didn’t say anything as I helped myself to the bread, cheese, and butter. A cheese sandwich seemed a strange sort of breakfast, but I didn’t want to disturb Caden’s recovery to ask.

“I’m sure you would know about that more than I would, Brenn,” the captain replied before continuing. “We will make repairs using whatever we can find. Hopefully Caden and Regan will be up soon to help with this process.”

Despite his seeming good health, Donna had explained that Evan was going to take a little longer to heal. The blades, demon-made, knew just how to stall the healing process. It was a grim tactic, but Evan had assured me that they were special blades and not everyone had them. He was sure he had a pair of daggers with that ability somewhere in his quarters.

Caden, whose icy eyes kept flickering open and closed had groaned and then reminded him that he used them to clean his nails, so they were in the bathroom. He then told him to shut up so he could sleep. His blonde hair was unkempt for the first time in his life.

Donna suggested, when we were out of earshot, that the added vocal nature of his recovery was most likely to be a response to the oak roots and jasmine blossom healing potions he was ingesting. More than once he claimed there were three of me; that Naps was

secretly plotting his demise; and then he found the very idea of milk hilarious and laughed nonstop for over an hour.

“We will be there a matter of days and from there we shall make headway along the Northern border of Silvia, stopping in Qicog for supplies, praying we don’t get stopped crossing Syree’s borders, and boom – we’re in Wist.”

“Sounds plausible,” Donna said optimistically. She looked my way. “I’ll take you out in Qicog – don’t let Regan hijack you for an evening. You’ll lose all your money, probably half your clothes, and end up drunk in a tavern full of dwarves trying to wife you.”

“Wife me?” I asked, laughing.

“Tall women,” Aoife explained, “it’s a very popular fetish.”

I pulled a face.

“Let’s get moving,” the Captain said, signalling to Donna to lower the foremast sails so we picked up more speed. He smiled at me. “At least now you’ll get to see where our favourite Wraith comes from.”

“You’re going home, Brenn,” I said as the wind whipped the mainsail as we caught the wind to herald us left.

“My home died a millennia ago,” he said shortly. “I’ll be visiting a graveyard.”

The following day marked the time we would cross over into the Shadow Realm. The idea of a country with no sun seemed awfully sinister to me, not that I ever minded the dark: but sometimes you couldn’t beat the sunlight on your face to begin your day.

I stood on the deck as the sky began to darken. The sun snuck behind the horizon and a chill travelled across my skin and brought goosepimples to my arms. The darkness didn’t absorb us instantly; the sky faded from a midday blue, to a dusky grey, to a deep navy, and finally to a pitch shade of black. It took an hour until we had truly entered the Shadow Realm and by that point, I already missed the sun.

The coastline appeared too – a dark crust creeping into view like soot on the horizon. We headed North – but everything seemed oddly quiet. The only noise came from the familiar creaks from the Siren’s Promise.

I peered over the side of the ship and the dark sea greeted me. I couldn’t see much below besides a faint reflection of myself. But I was certain that more than enough creatures lurked below in these inkwell waters.

Captain Bennett had to carefully manoeuvre us around a great number of jagged rocks that protruded out of the ocean like fingers clawing at the sky. Aoife kept her eyes focused on the horizon and called out directions from the bow. She’d tied her hair back into a bunch at the back of her neck. The wind kept a steady gale as we headed North, travelling along the coast until we could find a suitable place to lower the anchor.

Finally, Aoife found a cove and called to us to prepare for berth. My heart pounded involuntarily when I saw the long stretch of black glittering sand. Suddenly, the dream had come back into my memories.

But this place was a husk. There were no living trees left, only rotting stumps and dry branches that looked like they had survived on dirt alone. Here there were no flowers or forest, it was as if a dreary death sentence had been placed on the land.

“How long has it looked like this?” I asked no one in particular.

“As long as I’ve been alive,” Captain Bennett called from the helm.

“And he is *ancient*,” Aoife added with a nod of affirmation that made the captain roll his eyes.

Brenn spoke then, his voice was low. There was something unusually soft in his tone – something nearly vulnerable or perhaps I was imagining it.

“It used to be the best place in Nos.”

I looked at the rotting wasteland that stretched as far as the eye could see. It was hard to imagine it.

I looked to Brenn and had an idea.

“Show me?”

Brenn raised one furry eyebrow but then he released something like an exasperated sigh.

“Close your eyes and relax.”

I did so and felt the presence of his smoky magic waft by my nose. I knew if I opened my eyes now, I would see the streams of glittering black. “Now open them.”

My eyes adjusted to the bright sun that seemed to be beaming down on a lush forest of greens of varying colours.

The trees and bushes were full of flowers of varieties I had only ever seen in books. Small glowing orbs floated around, and it took me a moment to realise that those were the fairies I had seen in my dream. People lazed on the black sand – nymphs, pixies, and lingering in the back was that spirit, the one in green, a kind smile on her face. My magic seemed to bubble inside of me. I could taste it on the back of my tongue.

“This looks just like what I saw on my dream,” I told him. “Even the feeling.”

I felt Brenn lose concentration and the scene in front of me glowed in vivid colours before blurring and then turning dark once more, as if a shadow had overtaken the sun.

Captain Bennett had activated the witchlights along the boat to give us more visibility as we landed on the beach. The anchor was moored and before I could say anything more, I saw Brenn materialise into his shadow form and leap off the boat.

“Brenn!” I called but he seemed to be swarming up the waters and to the sand. I shared a look with Donna who shrugged but then she gasped.

“We thought we better come upstairs to get some good air,” Evan said weakly.

“As opposed to Evan’s gas,” Regan said as she strode over to the forefront of the deck and brought him a chair to sit on.

“Evening all,” she said back to her big, bold, and beautiful self. “Glad to see in my absence, all reason was abandoned, and we made all the stupid decisions.”

She gave me a proud smile.

“Proof they need my intellect.”

“If we relied on your intellect we would’ve already died,” the familiar drawl of Caden came aboard. He seemed to be wearing the contents of his bed and then some, bundled up in at least five different blankets and a woollen hat, scarf, and gloves.

I was happy to see them, but Donna raged about them leaving.

“Sorry D, but if I had to share one more minute alone with that blithering idiot, I was going to stab myself all over again,” Evan said from across the deck. He’s managed to pry one of Caden’s blankets off him and was now lying at Donna’s feet.

“Yes, Donna, it was quite hellish having to hear that brute snore his way through the afternoon like a pig was stuck in his throat and breathing for him,” Caden replied with a similar note of dissatisfaction. “How am I meant to heal if I will end up mentally damaged afterwards?”

Donna threw the pair of them an exasperated look. She got their pillows from downstairs and made them lay at the base of the centre mast.

She turned to Regan shortly after, but the Werewolf wouldn’t hear it; no matter what Donna tried to edge in about healing on the inside and mental healing.

I turned to see Brenn waiting for me on the shore. He was back in his male human form that he had used in Draig and was waving both his arms.

“I think he wants to show me around,” I said to Aoife who had joined us on deck along with the captain as the anchor had been dropped.

“You’ll be fine with him – but try not to run into any monsters,” Captain Bennett said. “And look out for anything useful.”

I nodded and headed to where I knew the climbing ladder was on the side of the ship. “Donna and Regan, help us hunt for good lumber in case we run out of lead patches before we hit Qicog,” I heard the captain go on to say. “We need to be able to survive another full-frontal attack and right now the old girl needs serious patching up.”

Donna lowered a small rowing boat from the rigging on the side of the ship and we stepped into it before descending to meet the waves. To the dragonkin’s dismay, Regan ignored the rowing boat completely and dove off the deck into the sea. Landing with a great splash she swam to shore and bowed from the beach. Cursing loudly, Donna rowed furiously, churning up the water in her wake, and soon we mounted the beach.

My feet landed on the sand with a crunch and instantly water welled up, making the black sand look like inkwells around my boots. It seemed to shimmer like crushed onyx under the torchlight from the ship. From where I stood, I could still see Aoife and the Captain at the bow, making plans to restore the ship and fix the worst of the battle damage, no doubt. Despite us sealing the patches torn in the hull by the cannon fire with lead, it was only a quick fix, and the ship would need sturdier fabrics to travel further once more.

Donna furiously herded Regan along the brush to find lumber leaving me with Brenn once more. The noise of wind rustling through the dead wood made the hairs on my arms stand upright and for the first time in a while I felt a sense of cold overcome me.

I found my immortal companion at the edge of the trees. Thankfully, the persistence of the moon meant my eyes had adjusted to the light. The tiny form of his feline shape had gone, and he was massive. I recognised the form from my books on monsters: a manticore. A beast with the body of a lion, wings of a dragon, a tail from a scorpion and horns coming out atop his head. The head originally looked like it belonged to the lion too but as he turned around to look at me, those onyx eyes wide and watchful, it didn’t look right.

“Wait for me!” I called hauling myself through the sandbanks as quickly as his giant form began to disappear into the vast brush of dead, draping plants. The sand turned to curled leaves that crunched under me and the smell of damp, rotting seaweed, and dust filled the air.

I finally caught up with him and a root caught my foot. I stumbled forward but caught myself upright before I hurtled over into a hedge. My boots skidded to a halt as I caught up with the giant rear end of Brenn.

He didn’t say anything but sniffed in my direction.

“Where are we going?” I asked, looking around, chills travelling down my back like long spindly fingers. I shuddered. Brenn’s giant eyes flicked back to me and something like a chuckle emanated from his lips.

“Just a little exploration,” he said. “Unless you’re scared...”

I clenched my jaw. It was just some trees and a creepy forest in total darkness. What else could possibly happen? Brenn was here. I was safe.

“Trees don’t scare me,” I replied.

Something snapped underfoot and I nearly jumped out of my skin. The wraith chuckled.

The trees seemed to be swaying sideways, the eerie moonlight shining down on them. What happened here to make this place seem so devoid of life? It seemed that all was left was the soggy mud and the skeletons of the leaves left behind.

“There’s nothing here,” I said. I hadn’t spoken loudly but the absence of all other sound made my words ring. Brenn stalked off ahead of me.

“Not anymore.”

I looked back; the path that had led us here, the path back to the black sands of the beach, somehow had disappeared, as if it had been eaten by the stretching trees, their roots

clawing up from the ground. But if Brenn had noticed he didn't say anything, he just kept on walking. This land was dead. There was nothing.

My heart jumped into my throat. Every tree looked like the same corpse of its neighbour but Brenn didn't seem to be slowing down.

"Are we lost?" I asked. I couldn't shake the feeling the ghosts who roamed this land were listening in and watching.

"Not at all," Brenn said. "I traversed this land years before your parents had even been conceived."

I grimaced.

"Thanks for that thought."

Brenn stopped a moment, his lion-like ears pricked up. I froze behind him. He twisted around and closed the distance between us, curling me inside his strange body. He looked one way and the next. "What is it?" I whispered. I couldn't see anything beyond fifteen feet at the most, my heart was pounding.

Brenn seemed to ease a little. He shook his giant head.

"I thought I heard something," he mumbled. "Perhaps it was just these lands playing tricks on us."

I wriggled out of his grasp. "Let's not stick around to find out."

Brenn paused a moment before he sniffed and turned around. I stuck close by to him this time.

We returned to the beach as if the path had been there all along. The crew had gathered lumber from the carcasses of the dead plants closest to the bay. Caden and Evan were not allowed to help due to their recovery, so they were dictating the actions of the others from the railing on the ship.

"Start stacking it in a pile, Regan," Caden called, rubbing his forehead, a pained expression on his face.

"This is a pile!" Regan called from the nest of trees, twigs and whatever tufts of dead plant she had been able to gather from the brush grew up around her.

"You look like you're about to start laying for winter," hollered Caden's response. Regan's eye twitched.

We joined the fray, gathering what we could from the dusty dry beds on the front. Shards of old tree trunk could be salvaged to reveal slats of malleable wood; old, rubbery vines could be doubled as something that would work well as rope. After a suitable amount had been gathered, we regrouped on the Promise. The moon seemed to glow brighter as we all sipped soup in mugs on deck.

I had seen no such creatures thus far, but the captain assured me that they were there; lurking in the darkness, keeping their distance because of Brenn's powerful aura. However, after our experience in the forest, I wasn't so sure we were alone after all.

"If only my presence didn't keep idiots away too," he said. He was still staying in his manticore form. It had been a bit strange to get used to, but I soon realised being his new size he couldn't sleep on my bed. However, later after the captain had set the wards up on the ship so we could sleep in peace, Brenn did attempt to sidle next to me on my bunk.

It did not end well for him.

He grumpily allocated himself to under the bunk.

"You could change back to the cat," I said, hanging over the edge of the top bunk. Brenn's dark face did not look impressed. My hair had grown considerably since getting aboard here. I could even see it hanging next to my eyes as Brenn sniffed.

"I have no intention of being quite so vulnerable while we are here," was all he said. The magic was strong here, it could feel it in my chest. Yet it filled me with a cold sense of

familiarity and unease. When I tried to ask Brenn about it, he would tell me to put on a jumper.

However, for once I would have the bunk to myself and I decided I would cherish it. Soon, the images of the dark waves outside my window mulled me to sleep.

I slept deeply. I was filled warmth I hadn't felt since being home in Kya: a night crouched by the fire at Randall's apartment, held in his arms, an embrace from Sorrel from when times were good, the summer sun streaming through one of the ancient stained-glass windows – a woman in my peripheral vision. Long, blonde hair streaming down her sides – she looked happy...

"Bryony?" I looked down to see the green spirit at my hand. In less than a blink she had grown to the size of a candle. Her cheeks were pink and rounded. She was covered in freckles, dark ones that patterned along her cheeks, nose and down her neck. Her dress was made of long leaves that had been embroidered with beads. There seemed to be something regal in the angled panes of her freckled neck as she gazed up at me.

Her face was shaped like a heart; her full pink lips parted like she was going to speak but she shut her mouth as if thinking better of it. Her deep green eyes flicked behind me but before I could turn back, she led me forward.

I was back in the dream. This version of the Wastes seemed just like Brenn's vision, full of life and beauty. So beautiful that I couldn't wait to tell Brenn about it when I woke up. I felt so happy like my soul was radiating heat through me like the sun.

The colours were so bright and beaming – everything around me seemed to be glowing.

What a lovely dream was the world of the Wastes before it fell into darkness! Before the plants ceased to grow and the golden stretch of the sun failed to reach the dusty shores. The beach was busy! Filled with souls; nymphs, spirits, and sprites gathered on the sand. Not one turned to look at me – it was if I was invisible, or not really there.

I saw the green light flash in my vision. The path was open again. The smell of lavender, bergamot, and salt from the sea filled my senses and I instantly felt calm; then the green spirit stepped forward, letting go of my hand. She walked through the gap in the now blossoming brush.

"Highness," came a voice. It sounded so soft. Was the green spirit calling me? I heard it again. She must really need me. The path emerged from the brush; trees moving aside to let me through. "Highness!" This time it was more insistent. She needed me!

"I'm coming!" I mumbled, heading forward. It seemed the further I headed down the path the more the scene seemed to darken. I was holding her hand as we ran but I never tired. The overgrowth stretched above, consuming me in a tunnel of leaves and green.

The lights of the forest, shining greens and bright sunshine yellows seemed to flash by as I dashed forward. The glade formed around me, and I couldn't seem to wipe a strange smile from my face. Everything was so beautiful, and I was nothing but joy.

Then my heart stuttered in my chest.

I saw him, Randall, standing there smiling, in the bright light of day. I let go of the spirit's hand and raced towards him, wrapping my arms around him tightly. He smelled like the wood from his cabin, like hay. I felt tears spring to my eyes.

I pulled back and reached for his face. I could feel the soft stubble around his jaw and the soft skin under his neck.

"Princess," came a feminine, wistful voice.

I turned and saw that the pool, once shimmering with gold, was now filled with murky black liquid, the altar covered in dust. Suddenly the voices ceased around me. Something was watching me.

I kept Randall's hand tight as I moved to the green spirit.

Leaning over the pool I stared down, only a pit of darkness awaited me, her face was gone.

"Princess." Someone was saying. "*Bryony*." Brenn? He could wait another five minutes surely.

"This is all gone now, Princess," the spirit said, sadly. "Remnants of a life I once led. This spell shows the desires of your heart," her voice went soft. "This is mine."

Her eyes flicked over to where Randall stood.

"I assume who you're seeing is yours," she said sadly. I smiled at Randall – she was wrong. He was here. Flesh and blood – my promised – my boy – my Randall.

I looked around. The glade had emptied apart from the three of us. No longer did the stones around the bottom of the pool glow. Instead, the tree that had glistened in the sunlight was dull and withered.

"This place used to run with magic – our magic," the spirit added. With a flash of green, she returned to being no bigger than one of my fingers. When she spoke, her voice seemed so sad. "I was sent to you, Princess."

She looked down in the pool. I couldn't see the face at all. Celine – the all-seeing now confined to darkness.

"You have to help us restore magic to this land," her voice was a plea. "Come home, *Bryony*."

I felt a brush of magic whip past me – a cool breeze, one I knew so well. Magic from warlocks, mages, wizards, sorcerers, and witches. My people's magic. I could feel it here.

"Kya..." I started to say.

She shook her head.

"When your people left, the magic here withered." Speaking about this made the spirit's face crease in pain. "The sun disappeared for us. The days had always been short here but then they eventually ceased to be."

The shadow realm...

"How do I help you?"

"This land is part of you, you must return part of yourself to it," she said. Pleading. "You can have it all back."

There was a noise and then everything snapped back. I felt myself rush back into reality - the moon was bright and startling. The green spirit still lingered ahead of me. Her face real and bright like one of the stars.

I was awake!

The coolness of the night made me shiver. The colours around me faded back into bleak normality. I looked down and saw my feet were ankle-deep in mud.

I turned and saw the magic fade away on where Randall had been standing. As his face faded into someone else entirely. I felt like someone had landed a punch in my gut. Gone was my stable boy; instead, a looming figure towered over me, dressed in darkness once more. His red eyes met mine and I felt my breath catch.

The Bonekeeper, Kyan was standing there, holding my hand. I couldn't read the expression on his face, but I couldn't stop the feeling that the floor had slipped away from me.

All the happiness I had felt returned fizzed away as I found myself struggling to breathe. I let go of the demon's hand and felt myself fold forward. I felt like my head was spinning fast. I pressed my hands on my thighs and breathed in deeply.

He seemed to be stuck – magic was at work here. He couldn't be here. Could he? Why? What were the spirits trying to tell me?

“You must help us,” came a feeble voice. I turned to face the spirit, but she was gone. Instead, the Bonekeeper and I both stood next to the altar – I looked between the pool, the tree, the altar, and him.

I did my best to wipe my face and then I cleared my throat.

My heart was racing but he was still and made no movements. I cast a look around the glen. Brenn wasn’t here. I called out to him using our pact, but the demon prince still did nothing.

“Illusion magic,” I said, both to myself and to him. I suddenly felt the realisation dawn on me. “Sorry, I grabbed you.”

The Bonekeeper looked at me incredulously – his scarlet eyes wide. I couldn’t help the nervous giggle that slipped from me.

“Just be glad I didn’t kiss you,” I added – the tension right now was too much. My hands were shaking, and I could feel it going up to my shoulders. I clenched my jaw, but my teeth started chattering. “It could’ve been way worse.”

I couldn’t stop envisioning Randall’s face. It had been so real. I tried my best for an unperturbed expression. I felt like I might bring back up my soup. I gripped my hands together hard.

“The spirit - she spelled you – your pupils were massive,” he suddenly said next to me. His voice was low in timbre the same gruffness I had met in that alleyway. Perhaps it was the shock, but I didn’t feel frightened. “She was speaking Archaic Riachan.” He clenched his jaw. “I haven’t heard that dialect in many years.”

I blinked hard then released the breath that seemed to be bundling up in my chest.

“Strangely enough I understood her,” I said. It seemed like my mother tongue – I hadn’t even noticed. Usually when I switched to another language it felt like I had to concentrate hard so I didn’t muddle the bunch of them in my head.

“You did more than that – you spoke as fluently as she did,” the Bonekeeper went on to say. Everything still seemed to be catching up with me. Yet the general still made no movement – all was still.

I looked at the altar. The dry stone that had been worn smooth with time was covered in dust. No glowing red stones and the pool was empty. No face. Just dirt.

“She kept saying I should help them, but I don’t understand how I can,” I sighed. Looking back at the general who was watching me carefully. “Maybe you frightened her off.”

I ran my finger along the top of the font, which shone like silver at the tip. The stone grazed me, and I felt a cut nip, barely anything, at the top. A zap of pain, as quickly as it appeared, evaporated.

The red dot fell on the rim. It had cut me across my right finger.

“I don’t see how I even came to be here,” the general said, crossing his arms. “We’ve been searching the Wastes for days but haven’t found anything. Then I felt the spirit’s enchantment and portalled to shore. She must’ve used me in her spell.”

That brought me back to reality. I looked down at my palm and saw the little cross there our pact remained strong. The ability of the green spirit to put Brenn to sleep was something that made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Had she been a malevolent spirit I could’ve died. Or had we simply not got to that part yet?

I was in the bed shirt that Regan had lent me and besides my pants, I had nothing else on. The cold instantly made me shiver all over again.

I met the flaming eyes of the demon opposite me my face felt stiff from the tears, but I raised my chin.

“What happens now?” I asked him. “I know I’m in pyjamas, but I can still punch you in the face.”

The general narrowed his eyes.

“You want to fight me?” he asked in a voice filled with disbelief.

I didn’t lower my hands.

“Are you going to let me go?”

“No.”

“Then I guess I am going to have to,” I said. I changed my stance to give me a better posture.

I saw his jaw clench in the darkness. His hood was up but the moon still caught on the tanned panes of his face.

“Why start a fight you can’t win?”

“Who says I can’t?” I replied I felt the magic stir in me.

A moment later I felt a quick whip of wind. Then he was right in front of me. Looming over as if he expected me to cower.

“I do.”

My breath caught in my throat, but I stared right back, sticking my chin up.

“There is a reason why lightning magic is banned,” he said shortly. His hand grabbed my wrist and turned it to face the floor. The lines that had come up from the shock had never receded. I doubted they would. “You keep it up I won’t need to kill you.”

“I didn’t really have much of an option, your Highness,” I said yanking my wrist out of his hand. He narrowed his eyes a little. “Wouldn’t you rather be doing something of value instead of getting in my way?”

I stored up my magic in my chest and then in my hands. But what could I do? He was too close!

“It is foolish to start something when you are at a disadvantage.”

I released the magic in my hand and sent a smooth bolt out of my fingers. He easily dodged it and I stepped back to make space between us.

“It is more foolish to gravely underestimate your opponent,”

I felt my magic travel up my arms and to my neck. It came to me with ease – my practice must be paying off.

The Bonekeeper met my eyes once more. His lips were pressed together. I charged up my arcane senses and focused on him. He glowed with power – it came around him in red flames never quite meeting the colour in his eyes.

I sent a bolt in his direction. He jumped back to avoid it but then I sensed him move to come forward. My arcane senses easily picked up on his movement and I dove to the left. He pulled out the same onyx dagger from Draig.

He swung it right at me, but I ducked and sidestepped it.

“Don’t do this, Princess,” he growled in a low voice. “The Demon King is merciful when things go his way.”

I kept the distance between us. I could feel the electricity in me build. My arms flooded with power - it seemed to be behaving well today. Perhaps all my practising was paying off, or perhaps it was down to this place.

“I have no intention of meeting the King. After his forces helped butcher my people, I doubt I would have much to say,” I sent out charges around me. He came quickly towards me blade swinging to the left and then the right. He seemed to be going to destabilise rather than kill me.

I went to charge again but then he beat me in speed. Lunging downward he nicked the outside of my thigh before I could fully dodge it. My bare legs did little to protect me from the slash. I hissed but quickened my attack which I was happy to see kept him busy.

I thought about the healing book I had briefly looked at. My idea was that if I was the best at fighting, I would never need to heal. However, I could now understand why Brenn had not looked impressed.

The sharp slice in my leg must've shown on my face.

"Stop this, or I won't hold back," the general said. His back was to the dark pool that was still as quiet and dead as night.

I grinned at him, feeling the bolts gain more power along my arms. I felt my hair start to fizz with electricity. Suddenly the force of the electricity hit me in the chest. My heart was racing, I could feel it in my mouth and along my tongue.

Everything rushed back to me – Kya – the tower – Hector – it all filled me with a feeling so intense I couldn't deny it any longer: rage.

"Then neither will I."

I let loose my bolt quickly, the light was blinding as it shot like a cannon through the glade. Perhaps I had been too quick for even him as it smashed into his shoulder. The light faded and I saw that it had pushed him back to one of the watching trees.

It happened a moment later.

He charged forward with inhuman speed, but I moved aside. He tried to tackle me from behind I used the opportunity to jab him in the stomach. He grunted but it didn't slow him in the slightest.

I had no idea how I was moving so fast, but I didn't dare stop. He moved so quickly that I could barely follow him. But as he landed another cut across my shoulder blade, I used my elbow to hit him across the temple. The girls' combat practice was paying off.

That seemed to stun him – the electricity gave the blow an extra sting. I took the opportunity to kick him in the knee and tackle him down. I loosed a final bolt into his chest which seemed to finish the job.

He fell backward and I pulled the blade from his hand and followed him down. I pressed it against his throat. I pulled my magic back in. I felt the heat of it recede into me. My magic had never felt more alive. I could call it at any moment – it didn't feel quite as skittish in my chest.

The dazed look in his eyes faded as he lay on the mud.

I kept the blade right against the bob of his throat. My right hand was muddy and now my knees were as I straddled his torso.

"Give up. Stop following us." The feeling of the bound leather hilt in my hand made me feel powerful. The general under me did too. His glare steeled and he ground his teeth.

He raised his chin a little and I had to be careful not to nick him.

"I'm done playing with you, Princess," he said through gritted teeth.

One hand of his went to grab the knife and the other clasped around my throat. Instantly I was void of breath, but I didn't drop the knife.

"That's cheating," I wheezed, trying to pry his solid hand from around my neck.

"Give up."

"Never."

I pressed the knife forward, but it did nothing to loosen his grip. Any further and it would cut right through the skin there.

"Are you going to kill me, Princess?"

My throat was on fire.

"I'm seriously considering it, jackass."

Suddenly I felt a rumble in the ground. I saw in my peripheral vision that the trees had swayed to the side. Their roots rippled through the sodden mud like it were nothing. A snake I knew well joined my side in an instant.

Brenn's ink-black scales glistened in the moonlight as he darted forward. Nudging my hand out the way he wrapped his long, lithe body around the demon's neck.

"What time do you call this?" I forced out – despite Brenn's form. Brenn did not look impressed.

“The forest is alive, your Highness,” he said in a bored drawl. The Bonekeeper’s grip didn’t loosen. “It kept me running round in circles.”

I shrugged my shoulders; his fingers shook around my neck.

“Don’t kill him – we don’t want another war,” I croaked out.

I saw Brenn squeeze around the Prince’s neck and then, thankfully, the fingers loosed from around my neck as the demon passed out. His head thumped to the floor, his hood falling backwards – that intense face of his strangely peaceful for once. I heaved a breath – and started breathing as deeply as I could. I rubbed the space around my neck – it felt tight and hard to breathe for a moment – and I wondered if I would bruise. I felt a wave of nausea at first but that quickly passed, and I drew myself up slowly.

Brenn released the general’s neck. Slithering free he finally took in the surroundings.

“You saw this in your dream,” he said taking in the tree, the pool, and the altar.

“Probably not looking this dire.”

I nodded, climbing to my feet, careful not to tread on the general.

“The spirit brought me here – the green one,” I told him. Her crestfallen eyes made my stomach fall. “She wanted me to fix it.”

Brenn tutted which sounded strange when it was primarily made of hissing.

“She said that my people came from here.” Brenn paused right next to the pool.

“That’s true, isn’t it?”

He turned back and blinked at me.

“Why ask questions when you already know the answers?”

The magic felt so familiar. I’d thought that when we came. It felt strong but this place was a graveyard.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Brenn slithered forward, climbing up my leg he landed on my shoulder.

“This was before, back before your family imprisoned me in the Tower,” he said dejectedly. “I don’t remember much of it, but I know your family was keen to distance itself from the uncivilised ways of the forest folk who dwelled there. Even though, they are in fact, your kin.”

My kin.

My people.

“How did it become like this?”

The trees parted again, forming a new path ahead. As we walked, I turned to see the demon prince stirring as the glade disappeared behind us. These lands were more living than our bleak surroundings would imply. Everything moved on its own accord and the glade where both the general and the altar lay were gone from view; the only evidence I had of him even being present were my wounds.

Questions filled my thoughts as we seemed to climb down a rooted path to a more even forest floor. I kicked away the dusty leaves to reveal stone that was worn smooth underneath.

“You’ve forgotten my real name, your Highness.”

He spoke quietly. The trees pulled away to reveal ruins. What used to be houses, had been laid to waste. There were barely any foundations left.

A stray wall. Burned rubble. Ruins upon ruins upon ruins.

The Wraith of the Wastes.

I stopped walking.

The forest laid out the plains in front of us. The lay of the land was stained with history. Desolation had won here: death reigned. And everything fell into place.

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

The world had gone quiet again. The Wastes seemed to absorb all the sound and I could hear my heart thundering in my ears.

Brenn nodded.

I felt my stomach clench hard. All I could think was what happened to Kya happening here. Bloodshed, flames, the smell of death and destruction, and then nothing. I felt my hand clench around something hard – it was the onyx dagger. The one from the general. I tucked it away in my pocket – there would be no more use of it today.

“Why?”

I looked down at the Wraith whose face was tense. He evaporated from my shoulder – in his shadow form once more. The same Wraith I had met in the Tower.

I knew it all. A part of me must have known that this was him. He wasn’t even a he – he was a they, an it, a creature, a monster.

“Your thoughts are louder than ever, your Highness.”

I couldn’t stop the emotions flooding through me. The sadness; the bitterness; the rage.

“Why did you do it? This place was beautiful,” I heard myself say. Brenn bared his teeth – his eyes were wide and dark.

“It’s who I am, your Highness,” he snapped. “Even before I destroyed it your people had claimed Riach as their own. They *abandoned* their people for their own selfishness.” I started walking forward – leaving Brenn behind me. The forest showed me the despair he had caused, my heart shuddered in my chest. How could I fix this? “Stop walking away from me, Bryony – I had no choice! It’s who I am.” I couldn’t stop and I couldn’t look at him. “Wraiths devour and wraiths kill – that’s what we do.”

I pressed forward – the desolate scene in front of me receded until eventually, I was back on the shore. The trees that had guided us in seemed to have returned as they showed me the way out.

Instead of climbing aboard the ship I looked at the water. It was all so peaceful – moonlight glittering off the surface as the waves lapped lazily. It all kept going blurry, so I sniffed hard. Looking up and down the beach – remembering the souls that had laid here enjoying the sun.

Now there was no joy.

The cut on my leg and shoulder were savagely sore and it couldn’t be a good idea to get mud in them. Thankfully, I had a great deal of saltwater to hand.

Ignoring Brenn’s glare I waded out until the water was around my waist. My teeth chattered before I let myself drop. The impact slapped my back for the briefest of moments before I submerged. The chill went right up my back, but I needed the shock. I quickly climbed up to my feet – the sand was soft under my toes.

I ignored the cold sting coming from the cuts as I cleaned them and then my hair. I was filthy all over. I wondered how long I had walked with the spirit. I had a go at trying to swim by flapping my legs about. I remembered pictures of the sea and people using their arms.

I nearly drowned myself twice so settled for just floating on my back. I found myself sending a prayer to the moon Goddess, Serena. And then to the star Goddess Elektra, you couldn’t possibly ignore them when they shined so brightly on you.

I thought of the dreams I had, so many smiling faces on the glittering black sand. When did my family decide to abandon them? Why did no one speak about it? Why didn’t I learn any of this? In that moment I wished for Sorrel so I could annoy him into telling me everything I wasn’t taught.

I got up and checked I was all clean.

Hopefully, I would be able to heal myself or if not, at least I knew how to give myself stitches.

I climbed aboard the Siren's Promise. It seemed everyone was getting up. I spied Evan languidly lying across the banister by the Helm.

"I wondered where you two had gone," he said grinning. But his grin faltered as he saw my face and then the gash. "What happened?"

"It's complicated but I will tell you later. I need to sleep," I said in quickly but hopefully not too rudely. However, my powers for dealing with people were low today. Evan's brows raised but before he could say anything else I quickened my step and flew below deck. I was in our quarters in a matter of moments.

I threw off the sodden clothes and hung them over the pipes that kept our room warm. Dabbing myself dry with a towel, I wrung my hair out and then climbed into bed.

"Are you going to see to that wound?"

I turned over.

I heard everyone start to get up next door. I had a feeling Brenn had told them to stay away as no one knocked. I heard him warn the Captain of the General's presence on the shore, but Bennett was sure the cove we were hiding in was well hidden. I wondered if the Wastes themselves were hiding us too: who knew the depths of this land's power? My head was spinning from tiredness and I was unable to sleep as I churned over everything in my head.

The day remained dark. Endless night. It was all connected – I could feel it. However, I couldn't bring myself to look at Brenn. It felt like something of a betrayal asking him.

Eventually, I drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

I awoke when the moon was full and high again. I headed back to the glade to investigate further. The Wastes guided me along the path once more. And I found the glade empty of all life, no Bonekeeper, no spirits, not even grass. Brenn lurked at the centre of the glade as I pored over the altar.

I cleared the dust away on the top of the stone rim. There were runes written there but I didn't recognise them. I spotted where my blood had dried last time and was careful not to snag my fingers on the sharp rim anytime soon.

I investigated the tree and pulled away a chunk of bark to see if any of it was still living. It crumbled in my hand, and I shook the splinters of bark away. I checked the pool too, but even when I dug with my hands my fingers met more mud.

I heard him hiss lowly. "You can't be mad at me forever."

"Hearing you butchered my people's homeland and drove them out would be enough for some people," I replied. He slithered next to me.

"Don't be so naïve," he snapped back. "It's not my fault you look at me in the same stupid light you look at everyone. Stop acting like I lied to you."

I sat upright, shaking the mud from my hands. The gash on my shoulder stung a little at the action. I ground my teeth together.

"I think the Goddess wanted me to know what happened," I said. Brenn scoffed at that. "That's what the dreams were."

Brenn didn't reply.

"Isn't it ironic how you only cared about the Wastes when you realised they were your people? If they were demons, would you have felt anything at all?" He said flatly.

My blood boiled.

"Of course, I would," I retorted. "The wound is deeper for my people too – what happened out there – it's desolation."

“I had no choice,” he spoke through his bared fangs. “It’s who I am. I kill and I enjoy it.”

“You should have told me,” I replied.

“I thought you may have figured it out,” he admitted.

“You knew. You knew I was standing on the graves of my people,” I snapped.

“That’s what made the spirit flee – she feared you.” Brenn scoffed. “The forest remembered you. You didn’t just come from the Wastes – you *made* the Wastes.”

There was a moment of quiet between us. Brenn’s face was completely unreadable in this form. He kept his eyes low and slithered next to me.

I felt a muddle of things. But I couldn’t bring myself to yell anymore.

Perhaps Brenn felt the same way as he just looked at the ruined pool for a while.

“I did come from the Wastes,” Brenn spoke with finality. “So, I remember when the children of magic decided to abandon the nymphs, spirits, and sprites that made them.” He looked up at me.

“I have snippets of my memory from back then. Before I was, who I am today,” his voice softened.

Everything fell into place.

“You’re Riachian, aren’t you?”

One of my people.

“I was. I lived here. Back then it was Riachia. I don’t remember much about who I was before I changed but I remember how our society fell apart.” He spoke sadly. “Then one day the sun didn’t rise – thus the shadow realm was born.”

“It was falling apart before I destroyed it,” he added. He seemed like the recollection was a difficult one – perhaps it was so far back.

I felt a weight grow on my chest. One of sadness that wrapped around my heart.

My eyes welled up.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He changed back into a feline, four paws standing next to me.

“For keeping it from you.”

“I’m sorry for yelling,” I said. “And everything my ancestors did.”

He let a laugh as he launched into my arms.

“If we are doing apologies for that you’d be here all day.”

I rolled my eyes as he twisted into a circle in my arms.

“Don’t ruin the moment, wraith,” I told him.

“Your Highness is warm – that is the only reason I am here,” he said as I stroked his head.

“And I need protection.”

“Obviously.”

“Of course.”

Chapter Seventeen

The following day we remained undisturbed. The forest was as empty and dead as it had been, yet I didn’t see the darkly-clad figures of the Bonekeepers stalking through to ambush us. Was the forest still keeping them at bay? It showed no sign of life as the moon hung low on the drying branches that reached over the dark sands.

I told everyone what happened over breakfast the next day – including the dreams and last night’s adventure. Regan was staring open-mouthed at me. Caden, now on his feet once more looked impressed as he fired up the stove, filling the cabin with heat. Soon the smell of frying bacon and eggs wafted around the room.

Captain Bennett sat at the head of the table, eyebrows raised.

"Only you would go against a Bonekeeper alone," Aoife said in a voice light with disbelief.

I shook my shoulders.

"He seemed unnerved by the forest," I thought aloud. I explained that my magic seemed to be even more charged up than usual. I raised my damaged hand and willed my lightning. Instantly my fingertips were aglow and the veins down my arm had sparked to life.

Evan spoke with a mouthful of yesterday's leftover egg as he hadn't been able to wait until today's breakfast had been served. Donna, who was sitting opposite him, looked disgusted.

"Your Goddess wanted to show you the truth," he said, bits of egg going flying. "Maybe she just wanted to drive the message home a little louder."

I sighed, Caden placed two plates in front of me – threads of magic had been spun from his fingers and carried the plates on feather-thin tracks around the table. Evan had another plate placed in front of him which landed on top of the previous one.

He grinned wider.

I let the lightning fade on my arm.

Brenn, who had decided not to occupy a seat today was on my lap. I pushed his plate closer to us and used my knife and fork. As the others continued to speak, I saw Brenn's soft, clawed hand swipe out and stab various bits of the breakfast before they disappeared into his mouth. Being a shifter, no food was too big for him. He would change his mouth so they could consume anything – thankfully everyone around the table was used to it by now.

"But I didn't accomplish anything. Nothing has happened since," I sighed. I stabbed a sausage as the only noise around the table was that of cutlery scraping on plates.

"Maybe she couldn't tell you because she didn't know," Donna suggested.

"Or maybe she wanted to, but the Bonekeeper put her off," Regan offered up. She ate her breakfast with as much ferocity as she battled. Thus, she had already finished and looked at Caden expectantly.

Caden's nose wrinkled.

"We are on our last few loaves," he said shaking his head. "Through our diversions; the cargo we lost in the demon attack; and people helping themselves to the cupboards whenever they feel like it," surprisingly, he cast a glare at the Captain and Evan. Evan looked comically offended at the accusation. The captain took up his cup of tea and sipped whereas, surprisingly, Aoife looked suitably bashful. "We are understocked until we reach Qicog. As it stands, we might have to have a few meagre meals unless we start getting creative."

Evan loosed a dramatic sigh, letting his hand smack the table with a thump.

"I for one, am very disappointed in some of the people in this room."

"Shut your face, Evan," Caden snapped back.

Aoife looked at Caden with an apologetic look. "I will go fishing."

"We can all help," Regan said crossing her arms.

"It'll be a challenge who can get the most fish," the Captain said.

"I still can't swim but I can forage," I offered. Brenn didn't say anything to oppose my suggestion, so I assumed he was in as well.

Round the table, the faces stiffened.

"And today we teach Princess Bryony how to swim," Captain Bennett added.

Everyone agreed instantly.

After breakfast, we all descended the ship onto the damp shore. The glow from the ship's lanterns made it easier to see the dark waters. Suddenly a surge of light started to glow from

the shore. I turned my head and saw Brenn had cast a large orb of light. No longer a cat – he was wearing a different skin I had not seen before.

Short-haired, pixie-faced, with a pointed nose and a prominent mouth of pink lips. She was tall and wore a loose-fitting, blue-bagged dress that hung off her shoulders. Her skin was a cool neutral tone, her hair light brown but her eyes – as ever were the same onyx black.

I gave Brenn a questioning look but he – she simply shrugged her shoulders.

“It felt right,” she said through our link. Her voice hadn’t changed like I thought it would have. It was still, low, bored and unimpressed with everything when I asked if Brenn was going to come in the water.

If anyone else noticed Brenn’s change they didn’t mention it.

After arguing for a moment on how it would be best to show me the ways of the water Aoife had me wade out until I was waist-deep. The water now glittered under the orb that Brenn had set above us, and I was thankful as now I could see past just the surface and see nearly down to my ankles.

“I think first it would be a good idea to float for a minute,” she said. She came beside me and slowly lay on the water’s surface. I copied her.

She moved her arms a little to help herself stay upright. I copied the movement, moving back and forth.

“I’m still surprised your father never wanted you to learn,” she said. “My father practically took me from the womb and dropped me in.”

“You are partly aquatic though, Aoife,” Captain Bennett called from further down the bay.

I raised my head a little above the water to see the rest of the crew floating too. Heads bobbing on the water.

“I can’t decide if my father cloistered me away so badly because he was afraid of what would happen to me or maybe it was just because I was bad at being a Princess,” I told her. She laughed.

“Being your own person did not make you a bad Princess, Bryony,” Aoife said. “Parents do strange things in the name of protecting their children. But you’re a progressive, Bryony. And, it sounds like, your father wasn’t quite ready for you.” I couldn’t help the sigh that escaped me.

“He never treated the boys like that.”

Aoife didn’t say anything – she didn’t need to. The truth was sharp and as salty as the water around us. The cut on my shoulder stung.

I was surprised the Bonekeepers hadn’t tried again. There was no way that they had just given up. There was no chance of that. Perhaps he was sent back to his ship after all.

Brenn had said something of the forest changing. Maybe, even though we couldn’t see it, it was holding them back.

Aoife had me start moving my legs, the water pleasantly streaming between my toes, and I started to move. Next came my arms.

She stood up and showed me two ways of swimming – with small fast paddling at my front, like a dog and one with longer arm strokes that cut through the waves neatly. Of course, she was an amazing swimmer. I managed to do the first paddling one after a while, but I couldn’t do it for very long before having to stop.

Soon enough I was paddling about like a pro. I kept to shallow waters but despite the burn in my arms I could feel the water moving under me, I tilted my head back as far as I could without straining myself.

There was something liberating as I gained more confidence and swam around the others. Once everyone was sure I was not going to drown if I fell from the edge of the boat,

they commenced the hunt for fish. I saw Aoife abandon her clothes on the shore and the briefest emergence of her scales before she disappeared under the waves.

Regan did the same; nudity was something all of them seemed too comfortable with each other to worry about. Having been aboard with each other for weeks on end had meant that all of them were as open with as family were. I had also seen Regan naked more times than I had fingers and toes. She claimed she was averse to clothes.

In her wolf-form she sprinted up the beach, black and brown patches zipping up the beach, no doubt to find a stream of some kind to find the most fish.

We split up, Brenn following me as I paddled along in the sea. Her new form sauntered forward, blue dress whipping in the wind. She looked over at me with a poignant look – her eyes were wide.

“Get out of the water!”

Instantly her new form sprouted wings, long and black but I couldn’t see for a slimy arm had wrapped around my foot. I gasped but the next thing I knew I was submerged, and I was being dragged backwards. Water rushed up my nose and down my throat as bubbles streamed past me.

I opened my eyes for a minute and saw it was dragging me down and down – a creature with multiple legs, its skin a dark brown and its eyes big and bulbous.

“*Hang on, Bryony!*” Brenn’s voice rang in my head.

The creature swam deeper and deeper, but it seemed to be getting brighter behind my eyelids. I felt the rush of bubbles hitting my face slow to a halt. My head was still spinning but I opened my eyes – the clearness of the water must’ve been due to magic – it was like looking through glass.

The underwater world sprawled out in front of me, plants I had never seen before flourished outwards, some with leaves as wide as a barrel. And the roots connecting them all were glowing.

In front of me, the creature and its many legs receded, leaving me on the base of what seemed to be a thriving reef. It looked back at me as it disappeared into the pitch waters – for the briefest of moments I felt like it might’ve wanted to stay. A look of longing in its eyes.

Now I was upright, I envisioned a circle for motion magic. Perhaps if I moved the water, I may be able to create a sphere for air for me to breathe. Brenn flourished beside me, now a long and grey eel that glowed like a piece of witch stone with the familiar onyx eyes.

I saw the threads glow in the water, I strengthened them determinedly, watching them go a bright white colour in my hands. The magic caught a bubble – I focused and pulled the bubble wide and then wider still. I kept my focus, trying to ignore the burning need to breathe. It was big enough now. I placed my head in it and found myself coughing as I raked the air back into my lungs.

Brenn glanced back at me before resuming scouring the land over the reef. His long tail was flicking back and forth as he cut through the water like a knife.

“*Krakens do not come so close to the shore,*” Brenn said into my mind, he didn’t need to worry about the air. “*Well done on not dying,*” he said diving lower into the reef below.

I kicked my legs at a steady pace like Aoife had shown me. I used my hands to flap in front of me to keep myself upright the best I could.

“*Why did it steal me? What do krakens eat?*” I replied.

“*Big fish,*” he replied. “*But if they’re hungry enough they will eat anything.*”

I thought of how the Kraken had looked back for me.

“*It didn’t even try and eat me,*” I said. I checked over the place where the tentacle had wrapped around my ankle. Nothing was damaged.

Brenn rose from the seabed; his eyes were glowing an even brighter yellow.

"We thought everything here was dead," Brenn started to say, we looked around. There didn't seem to be anything more to say.

Life existed in the Wastes.

Here, at the root level, things still grew – life was thriving. Brenn was not the only fish here – I spotted a school of silver-backed fish heading off in the distance. And when I peered closer to the shell, I could see the smaller sea habitants – wobbling jellyfish, snails with heavy loads, and starfish that shone with a brightness that rivalled their family in the sky.

Then I thought of the Kraken.

"It showed me the truth."

Brenn hovered next to me.

The truth – Celine.

A joy filled my chest like a bubble had just blown there. I couldn't help the smile that bloomed across my face.

The Wastes weren't doomed after all.

It could still come back – the seabed was proof of this.

The eel zipped through the water. *"Hold my tail – I'll take us back."*

I kicked my legs indignantly.

"I'm swimming."

Brenn narrowed his eyes.

"Not drowning is not swimming, your Highness."

I gave him my best saccharine smile.

"That's exactly what it is."

I realised then we were down quite far.

Brenn looked at me with a pleased expression.

I reached for his tail; a slippery rubbery surface greeted my hand. Brenn easily wove us through the water and back to the surface in a matter of moments. I let the bubble pop just before we emerged so I could enjoy the feeling of fresh air on my face.

I couldn't wipe the smile from my face as Brenn and I waded out onto the shore. The female form appeared next to me – just as sodden as I was. Yet in a blink, she was as dry as the rest of the sand above the shoreline.

The Wastes were empty and dead as we had seen during our stay. But Brenn returned to the ship with me later and had a whole horde of dead fish. Many patterns and breeds must've been native to the area as I had never seen them before.

"Lily Fish," Brenn explained laying them out before me. The fish was fat and had a strange fin across its eyes – it was big and pink.

"Tiger's Eyes," she explained showing me an orange fish with black and red stripes on its scales. But it had four eyes at its front.

There was a huge silver one next.

"And that one? Silver fish?"

Brenn blinked once.

"That's a salmon."

One by one the rest of the crew returned to us. Each with a considerable catch of many fish of great shapes and sizes. I thought Regan had clinched the win with a huge cod-like fish that had one too many fins that glowed a bright yellow.

But then Aoife appeared in her serpent form next to the boat. There was a huge white fish in her jaws. She dumped it on the deck with relish as Regan's face fell and Evan began to chortle. Caden clapped everyone and proclaimed Aoife the winner.

Brenn didn't complain once about not winning; though later that night before we went to bed, she changed back into a cat, she grumbled something about if it were judged on quantity then she would've won.

Suddenly, I had a feeling wash over me all at once. A tingling sensation started at my feet and seemed to grow up my bones like a shiver but filled with warmth. I reached for Donna to steady me, but Brenn had already changed back and caught my shoulder.

"Woah," I said, feeling it spread across my spine and down my shoulders. It felt warm – it was magic. I could feel it coursing through me like a wave sending my senses reeling. I looked up at Brenn's face and could see his eyes were wide. Everyone had stopped now around us.

"Are you alright, Bryony?" Donna asked.

I could feel the magic – warm and inviting like an embrace washing over me.

"Can you feel that?" I asked Brenn, he had gone still. I looked at the others.

Donna shook her head. But it was the Captain who spoke next.

"How is this happening?" his voice was soft, and I looked at him. His head was looking upwards. Everyone did the same.

Silence fell across us, because across the shadow realm, the sun was coming up.