

# THE ACID WIELDER

by

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## ABSTRACT

KATHRYN MAIR. *The Acid Wielder* (Under the direction of DR ANDREW HARTLEY)

*The Acid Wielder* is set in a world where magic users are being eliminated. The story focuses on a young woman, Harlow, and the deadly acid magic she developed. She joins the Resistance to fight the Regent of Trevail and stop the systematic sacrifice of the mages. But the Resistance is weakening and Harlow suspects betrayal from the inside. Her choices are limited, and her allies are dwindling as she uncovers the secrets of her magic. The quest for magical freedom is more dangerous and costly than Harlow could have imagined. It will take all of her strength to bring justice to Trevail and find a way to free the land trapped by a tyrant.

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### *The Acid Wielder*: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The concept for my thesis was born out of an errant comment made in a YA Novel Writing class. While the exact wording is shaky, I recall Dr. Hartley advised us to jump into the action and leave your audience breathless for the next page. This was not my forte. I started flipping through YA novels I had taught or used in my classroom for assistance. The ones that stood out to me, such as *The Grace Year* and *Dread Nation*, showed how to hook with the overall concept and then move straight into an action scene. It changed the way I thought about writing and forced me to confront the urge to frontload my writing with explanation. I took this idea to heart, writing a scene where the main character, Harlow, gets into a fight with three guards. It felt foreign, odd even, but brought me closer to the heart of my character. I wrote one more scene for the class, developing a snarky character to banter with Harlow. I didn't think I would continue her story after the class, but Harlow's voice would find me. She was desperate, reckless, and begging to be heard. I couldn't let her down and so I began to write.

The fantasy genre has beckoned me ever since I can recall. I was hesitant to embark on this journey, knowing how much the genre means to me. Most of the books on my shelves, from childhood and up, are some branch of the fantasy genre. While this was comforting to have plenty of references, it was daunting in light of all the fantastic pieces I had read and now had to stand beside. I thought of what drew me to these pieces and why I loved them. Questioning my own enjoyment helped me focus on specific elements that I wanted to include in my own novel. I loved a novel with simple, but effective magic, characters with morally gray objectives, and an enemy that ruled with an iron fist. But it wasn't just the magic I loved, I was enamored by novels that connected real world issues within the fantastical. I enjoyed the novels that reflected on current issues in our own society and veiled it through a magical lens. It is the veil of wonder that

allows for introspection, the chance to focus on real issues that people face daily. The slight removal from the “real world” gives readers that space to process the underlying message alongside the thrill of a magical world. While I’m not brave enough to say I’ve succeeded in integrating all of these elements, I did my best to add what felt important to me and Harlow.

The magic was one of the more difficult aspects of the narrative. I wanted magic that could be beautiful and volatile. When I began formulating the magical system, I decided on individuals being born with magic rather than learning spells. Since they were born with magic, it allowed me to think of magic in terms of issues we face in our own society. My objective was to allude to culturally sensitive issues such as racism with the magical individuals being persecuted by non-magical individuals. While this theme was not overt, the subtle similarities are meant to encourage thought from the reader on why individuals discriminate based on traits that they are born with or cannot control. I took inspiration from Toni Adeyemi for this portion as it mirrors the hatred felt in *Children of Blood and Bone* toward magical users. Her novel explores the mistrust and lies spread that have created barriers between magical and non-magical individuals. Adeyemi paints a beautiful picture of how hatred divides a nation and is learned from one generation to the next. In my own novel, Harlow struggles to find a way to stop the persecution, making morally gray choices that show her humanity, and attempting to free the magical users. While she is able to take down the Regent, the ramifications are yet to be seen as she reflects on the work to be done to repair their society. I did not want to tie the story up in a neat bow because it wouldn’t ring true after decades of learned hatred. There is an intentional unease at the end of the novel to indicate that even when one mission is complete, the true work begins with accepting one another for their differences.



Another important aspect for me was the integration of feminist ideas. I was inspired by women such as Judith Butler and Audre Lorde, their essays opening my eyes to the multifaceted elements of feminism. Within the novel, there is a societal oppression of women and the mistrust of females further propagated by the reign of the Regent. The decision to put a woman in power was difficult because it felt contrary to a feminist reading. However, I wanted to show that ultimately it is humanity that is capable of evil, not a single gender. There is the contrast of Harlow as the reluctant hero and the grasping of the Regent, her inability to accept herself driving her to make devastating choices. Harlow stands as the juxtaposition to the Regent, showing that accepting yourself leads to positive outcomes.

I also used Kim Liggett's *The Grace Year* as inspiration for the societal repression of the female. Her stunning dystopian centers around female issues of repression, sexuality, and autonomy over their decisions. The strong willed female characters have multifaceted aspects that beautifully war with their society and the expectations placed upon them. In similar ways, I wrote from the perspective of a woman fighting with society's expectations of her, both as a woman and a magic user. There are unspoken pressures on Harlow that are similar to the unspoken pressure on women to embody multiple roles simultaneously. Harlow has to be a good soldier, a strong magic wielder, a sacrificial figure and a savior to the society. Her struggles also mirror that of the women in *A Great and Terrible Beauty*, their break from high society found in the magical world they can inhabit. The freedom found in accepting their magical abilities is representative of the acceptance of their bodies and the rejection of societal norms. Each of these female centric novels influenced my own writing and the push for a strong willed female to break the cycle of oppression. In the same way, I wrote Harlow to be resilient and to come into her strength throughout the novel.

All of these ideas were wonderful, but the plot stymied me with the dramatic choices I needed to outline for Harlow. I agonized over these for weeks, wondering what brash choice she might make, before thinking about my own life choices. Big decisions often aren't made on a whim, they come from the accumulation of small choices that eventually lead to a life altering decision. I took this approach with Harlow and gradually brought her to the point of realization as to her path. She tried to avoid the inevitable of being caught, but in the end knew it was the best option for infiltrating the city. I had often read stories with big, rash choices from the main characters that flipped the story on its head. While I enjoy these kinds of plots, it didn't feel natural to do that with Harlow and her more hesitant nature. She seemed to be the kind of hero that needed a push to make decisions. Harlow had seen the outcome of acting rashly and as her character grows, so does her hesitance to make quick decisions.

In terms of approaching characterization, I knew that my best chance was to keep a narrowed focus on three individuals. It was tempting to have a large group, but realistically, I felt it would be an injustice to focus on too many characters in one novel. I created Harlow to be impulsive, indecisive at times, and afraid of the larger implications of her magic. She was harder for me to shape as I wanted to show her as a well rounded individual, but questioned her motives every step of the way. I rewrote her lines many times, taking out indecisive moments to improve the clarity of the novel, and rewriting her thought process. During the first draft, Harlow was without much direction and seemed to be following along with others' plans for her life. I took a hard look at her choices, or lack thereof, and made edits that would force her to make her own decisions. In doing so, her voice stood out when she was stretched out of her comfort zone and put in a position to accept the ramifications of her choices. It brought a gravity to her actions that was missing and in doing so, helped me streamline some of the errant portions of the plot.

When I started to write the novel, I originally assumed that her friend Jax would be a potential romantic plotline. However, when I brought him into the first scene, I had a sense that he was better suited as her found family. Harlow needed a steady individual that was strong, confident, and level headed. Jax fit the bill perfectly, his sense of justice and patience perfectly matched for Harlow's impetuous nature. Even when he irritates Harlow, she realizes the importance of their relationship and the family she has found in him. I intended on increasing her awareness of their bond when Harlow overhears a plan to kidnap Jax. It drives her to make a difficult choice, one of many, that separates her from the perceived safety of the Resistance group. It also was the point where she understood that Jax was family and despite their differences, she cared greatly for him.

Another issue that I wanted to include in my novel was inspired by the novels and essays from my Queer and Transgender Literature course. I loved the stories, the power of their voices, and the visibility given to these individuals. My goal was to be as sensitive to the topic as possible, making it a positive and natural aspect of the story, and creating a space in my novels. When I went to a small conference last year, I met with an individual that gave me advice on integrating LGBTQ+ voices in a way that wasn't a trope. They discussed how it could be subtly included, making it normal as opposed to a big deal. I attempted to do this by having a lighthearted scene between Harlow and Jax, his moment to discuss his new boyfriend, a typical conversation between two young adults. My objective was to not let his sexuality define him, allowing his other qualities to stand out, and integrate it into the narrative as naturally as possible.

The final character put up a fight when I attempted to pin down his motives. I debated if Nyx would ultimately side with Harlow or the Regent for most of the writing process. There

were moments in the edits that I considered switching his motive and letting him double cross Harlow in the end. However, I ultimately kept Nyx morally gray, his motives flawed, but in the end for the right cause. In the final scenes together, I decided that it made the most sense for Nyx to be against the Regent since it seemed impossible for her to win on her own. I wanted to bring the three together despite their differences for the benefit of Trevail. Nyx represented the individuals that are placed in impossible situations, forced to make choices without knowing the truth. I wanted him to be sympathetic, to a degree, but with the weight of his choices brought to light. He has plenty to account for, and perhaps he will face those consequences in subsequent stories.

Morality became a focus the further I delved into the novel. I was aware that each of the characters were acting on their own moral compass. The characters worked together in three different forms of morality. Nyx was able to justify his actions, using his final goal as the justification for his behavior. Harlow maintains her moral compass, but occasionally crosses the line when it seems justified in the moment. Jax on the other hand remains morally upright, his actions mirroring his dedication to fighting for justice. These three forms of morality are set beside each other as examples of the idea of morality being linear. Instead, the novel shows that moral choices are not always perfect decisions. The three all had to make decisions that were difficult and brought them to question humanity.

The novel was ever changing and each day I thought of variations to the characters, plot, and magic that caused me to adapt my writing style. The original vision changed with each edit, the focus narrowing with each pass. I used the time to hone in on what scenes were essential to the plot and learned the pain of cutting away parts that ultimately didn't contribute strongly enough to the overall novel. Throughout this process, the carving of the narrative was the most

difficult as it took a critical eye that I had to develop. It is a skill I continue to develop, and use to focus the subsequent novels in progress. Knowing where to trim and pull back is vital, especially for me.

When reflecting on the novel as a whole, the process itself proved to stretch my writing abilities in ways I had not anticipated. The magic system remained simpler, though my heart still longs for a high fantasy novel with complex magical systems, and encouraged me to focus on the characters. Finishing the novel helped me to redefine the metaphor of Harlow's magic earlier in the story. When viewing her magic as a metaphor, in the end her acceptance of her abilities, confidence to use them, and Harlow's determination to trust her instincts on moral quandaries culminated in the battle with the Regent. She relies on her magic, the family she has created, and the perspective she has gained in trusting a morally gray character. Her magic is metaphorically healed from her previous misgivings, manifesting in the strength she needs to complete her mission.

Writing this thesis helped me to develop my tone as a writer and work with a genre that brings me joy. I believe I built a piece with a fully developed magical world that demonstrated the interconnected nature of humanity. In using Harlow as the main character, I added commentary learned in feminist theory and attempted to subvert the tropes of the fantasy female heroine. Harlow's growth as a character mirrored her strength as both a person and a female, finding her drive in the difficult choices she made. In the subtler parts of the text, I brought in commentary on sensitive cultural issues such as race and sexuality through the persecution of magical individuals. My intention in bringing in these issues was also to enhance the normativity of LGBTQ+ characters within YA novels, giving them a voice and place within the fantasy genre. I strove to develop a novel that was accessible to a YA audience and included topical

content that challenges ideals of morality, family, and what it means to fight for your beliefs. The entire process encouraged me to dive deeper into themes that draw my interest and to utilize the novel to amplify the narrative. Creating this novel has renewed my drive to write stories that I enjoy with characters that push my boundaries. Even if this novel does not lead to publication, it has encouraged me to continue writing the kinds of stories that bring me joy.

## Prologue

Harlow had heard the stories or at least some version that painted a picture of a world she didn't recognize. The truth was shadowed by years of oppression, the work of a power-hungry tyrant to remove all traces of magic.

Trevail was created by four powerful mages that could control fire, wind, water, and earth. They were unique, blessed by the gods with dominion over the elements, and stronger than anything ever seen. They decided to create a haven for their families and the children that were blessed with abilities like theirs. At the center of Trevail, the four elementals created pillars to act as a conduit of their magic. They imbued the land with their abilities, stretching the boundaries of their magic to shelter anyone inside. Each year they would offer their thanks to the gods, placing gifts from their magic on the pillars.

They created a city where magic was celebrated and shared with the people. The land was alive, vibrant, and hummed with the magic invested in the elements. Wind currents would carry people through the cities. The land would sprout trees to shelter people on sunny days and then open their branches to let in the stars at night.

But not everyone was gifted with the magic that lived in Trevail, but the magical and nonmagical worked in harmony with one another. As the city grew, more people arrived, and less were gifted with magic. The nonmagical became jealous of the mages, unwilling to see the good they did in the city. It didn't take long for people to start turning against them, blaming accidents on magic. If there was a storm, it was a water mage's fault. If a tree fell, it was a land mage's revenge on a helpless nonmagical. Soon there was more fear and hatred towards the mages that worked to keep the city together.

Mages went missing, the magic of the city weakened, and the pillars were left unattended. The elementals that had created the cornerstones were not around to offer their thanks and slowly the magic weakened. And with the magic weakened, a champion of the nonmagical rose to power.

The Regent.

She rallied the nonmagical people to her side. There was enough blood between the two sides that the mention of taking over Trevail caused a civil war. The Regent killed countless mages, destroying the once vibrant land with her lust for power. Decimated, the mages went into hiding, their numbers diminished. Their magic was altered, dampened, and mages were only able to wield one form. Any mage that attempted to harness two types of magic was marked, their physical appearance altered to proclaim their sins. Any remaining mages were forced into service to the Regent or sentenced to death. With the Regent controlling the city, she buried the pillars, building her palace above them. Nobody could make offerings and the gods were angered. They sealed off Trevail, nobody in or out. Magic was broken and the mages hid in fear of being persecuted.

No magic has been strong enough to break the cycle of oppression.

But that was about to change.



## Chapter 1

*Three soldiers, I can take them.*

Harlow crouched behind a gnarled oak tree, her hands twitching as she summoned the poison to fill the glands on her wrists. The shortest soldier removed his shield embossed with the Regent insignia, a circle with a spear in the middle surrounded by four pillars, and placed it beside a burly comrade stoking a small fire. A third willowy soldier walked the perimeter of the clearing, a worried expression on his bearded face. She took one more glance at the sparse surrounding woods, making note of possible exits back into the safety of the forest.

“Send word to the Regent that we cleared the first town out,” said the burly soldier

“She’s going to be angry that we are behind,” the willowy soldier commented, stroking his copper beard.

“Just tell her we fought off some mages,” the soldier retorted, running his hand through the fire. “She won’t know that we had a bit of fun with ‘em before gutting ‘em.”

Harlow’s stomach turned. She had seen the wreckages of the little town, houses burned, crops destroyed. Bodies littered the ground, left to be picked over by the birds and foxes hovering nearby. For eighteen years she had been helpless to stop the Regent soldiers from destroying every town they visited, always moving to keep abreast of their attacks. But all of that had changed when she manifested her magic. Now she could fight back. She couldn’t let them go unpunished. The devastation of the town was her breaking point. Her anger overruled the quiet voice panicking about being outnumbered.

She whispered a message to the finch sitting on her shoulder, an emergency code to her partner Jax. She watched it disappear into the forest as the sun peeked through the gaps in the tree, the urge to follow making her pause. Waiting for the right moment, her throat tightened, the

temptation to flee increasing. She wrapped a leather band around her braids to get them out of her face. It's reckless to fight without backup, but letting them go wasn't an option. They would account for their actions. She would make sure of that.

*Gods, guide me.*

Harlow took a deep breath. She felt the familiar tingling in her arms of the poison filtering through her system. It burned beneath the glands in her wrist, the pockets filling painfully as she removed her gloves. She angled her wrist forward, readying the viscous green poison. Harlow winced as the gland opened.

*Release.*

The poison obeyed her command, gushing out of her wrist. The liquid hissed through the air, arcing high through the clearing. It splattered on the bearded soldier's chest, sizzling on impact. The poison ate through his tunic and clung to his chest. It bubbled up the skin, creating tense boils. Harlow sprang from her position to kick the soldier in the back of the knees, his howl muffled as he hit the mossy ground.

"Over there," the shorter soldier yelled.

Harlow charged across the clearing. One soldier ran towards a shield, snatching it up with his sword. The second soldier turned to grab a branch from the fire. Her breath caught in her chest. If he got to the fire, he would burn her alive. She hadn't accounted for one of them being a mage.

She hurled poison at the mage's exposed back. He made a guttural groan, muttering curses as he stumbled toward the flames. He had to be knocked out or this fight was already over. She tried to shoot him again, but the poison arced wildly to the side. She cursed under her breath and kept running.

The willowy soldier reached her first, swinging at her with a club. It swished through the air, nearly catching her in the temple. Harlow dropped to the ground, rolling to the side and knocking him down with a swipe of her leg. She bounded to her feet, kicking him squarely in the jaw. Blood spurted from his mouth as he fell sideways, collapsing into the undergrowth.

*Maybe I've got this.*

She sprinted towards the other two soldiers. She flung poison from the glands wildly to distract the soldier. It seared through the leaves in the canopy above them, eating away at the branches and scattering debris. They shielded themselves from the branches crashing down. Harlow readied both of her wrists and sprayed the front of their armor with poison. The soldiers screamed. The poison corroded and gnawed at the metal, smoking as they threw the armor to the ground. She lost sight of the soldiers in the smoke and choked on the ashy taste.

The shield soldier swung at her through the haze. It caught the side of her hip, tearing her skin. He swung again and she vaulted herself to the side. She urged another gush out of her right wrist. It splattered on their arms and legs. Their skin bubbled angrily from the poison. A rush of adrenaline sang through her veins.

A flame flickered to life in the burly soldier's hands. Harlow's stomach dropped.

The soldiers were nearly upon her. She tossed a gush of green poison. It stuck to the shield, gnawing away at the cracks. The willowy soldier was rushing for , a long sword in hand. Harlow stumbled over a fallen branch and smacked hard on the ground. The panic started to set in as the soldier lobbed a ball of fire at her.

It crackled and spun through the air. Harlow screamed. The fireball burst showering flames over her. The blaze caught grass and leaves on fire, a ring of flames rising around her.

Harlow rolled as the blaze licked across her shirt, devouring the sleeve and burning her arms. If it had exploded a moment later...

The soldier was charging towards her. His right hand held a fireball that grew as it sucked up the flames from the ground. She haphazardly flung a jagged stream of poison into the air. It missed the mark flying uselessly to the side. She was losing control. Another misstep.

He leapt over the flames, fireball in hand. She could feel the tug of her magic, the familiar pit in her stomach telling her there wasn't much left. The soldier chucked the fireball at her chest. Harlow spun to her heels and leapt to the side, moments from being burned.

Her heart beat wildly. The strain was slowing her reaction time and created a thumping headache. Her arms burned as she urged more poison into the glands. *Make it count.*

She flung the poison in a wide arc, praying it would hit the soldier. It covered the fire-wielder's armor, the fear clear in his eyes. The poison ate away at his breastplate making the metal bend and twist. The soldier yanked the last of his armor over his bald head and threw it to the ground.

*Where the hell is Jax?*

As she turned to check the woods, a blunt object smashed into her stomach. The pain radiated out from her abdomen, wrapping around her back in sickening waves. Her vision wavered, the strain of summoning poison causing bile to rise in the back of her throat. The fire-wielder swam into view, a mace in his hand.

She twisted on the ground, barely catching her breath. The soldier stood over her, mace raised over his head.

*Just one more shot.*

She launched the burning toxin from her wrist. It covered his face, bubbling on impact. Harlow stifled a gag. The soldier's face erupted in angry boils as she scrambled to her feet. The man clutched his face, writhing as he sank to his knees.

A cold flush washed through her as poison and blood started to gush out without direction. It sprayed in wicked arcs, spilling onto the men and pooling beneath them, eating through their leather boots.

Harlow stumbled back as it bubbled from her wrist, shooting through the air. Streams of green liquid hissed as it met flesh. She retched as the blood and poison spilled out around her. She scrambled away from the soldiers. Their agonized cries reverberated through the trees as Harlow clamped a hand over her wrist. The bile burned her throat. She begged the glands to close, the overuse causing more blood to drain out her wrist. The blind panic settled over her, clouding her judgement. She ran clumsily, her feet tripping as the cold flush of fear gripped her chest.

She heard another set of feet making a mad dash through the woods, and prayed that it was Jax.

The relief was overwhelming as her hooded partner materialized. He raced through the forest, launching arrows at the soldiers. Harlow started running, pressing both wrists together to stop the poison. The soldiers bellowed for backup. Harlow stumbled through the woods urging her numb legs to keep going.

"Hurry up," Jax yelled. Her chest burned as she tried to catch her breath, panic clawing at her throat.

Jax uttered a guttural curse under his breath as a cloud of pure black smoke enveloped the soldiers. They disappeared, unable to move in the miasma that he had created. An opaque white

haze covered his eyes. His hand twitched, gripping her arm tightly. The near blindness demanded his full concentration as they streaked away from the scene.

The burns on her arms began to pulse. Tree branches snatched at her hair, taking more than a few chunks as souvenirs. Jax's vice grip kept her from tripping as they raced away through the woods. Her heart beat unsteadily, the adrenaline dissipating into a pounding headache.

He slowed marginally as the trees grew thicker, providing safety as they headed back to base camp. The aching in her legs had turned to a scream, the stitch in her side hampering each breath. Jax kept a steady jog, dragging her alongside his freakishly long legs. Her vision was swimming and the rapid pace was making it even worse.

Ignoring the lump in her throat, Harlow mustered the courage to tug away her arm. He checked over his shoulder, slowing to a clipped walking pace. His silence was deafening, his hood pulled firmly over his silver eyes. While she knew it would be right to tell Jax thanks for saving her, she was loath to face his disappointment. Jax would have every right to be upset with her, but she sure as hell wasn't going to give him the chance to say it.

Harlow cautiously checked her wrists, wincing at the angry pulsing up her arms. Her gloves were lost to the woods leaving the glands exposed, cold air nipping at the sensitive skin. The gland wrapped around most of her wrist, and the poison had turned the skin covering it a sickly green, spreading to her palms. It had even started to tint the backs of her hand with streaky green lines. The blood mixed with the green of her skin made for a freakish sight. She tore her gaze from her exposed hands and concentrated on the dense forests of Trevail.

"Strange to see you out during the day," Harlow said. Jax's hand flexed at his side.

"I wouldn't have to come out during the day if you weren't a reckless idiot," he snapped.

Jax pulled his hair from underneath the hood, his warm brown skin a shock against the silver locs cascading down his back. He was pissed and she knew it.

“That’s why I have you to back me up,” she replied.

“You just assume I’ll be there when you make stupid choices but that won’t always be the case. I can’t just drop everything to save your ass,” he said.

“Well, you were there to save me so…”

Jax whipped around to glare at Harlow.

“That’s beside the point! You can’t keep putting yourself into dangerous situations without any plan or even backup! What would happen if you died? Or what if the Regent captures you? Do you want to die like the rest of the magic wielders? Be executed in the arena for all of Trevail to witness? You have to think of the consequences of your actions!”

The dense forest was hushed, a darkness leaking from around his shoulders, the white haze creeping into his silver eyes. Harlow remained still. He was right, but she didn’t want to admit that to him.

“I’ll be more careful,” Harlow responds in a small voice.

Jax sighed, his shoulders dropping as he massaged his eyes, the darkness receding back into him.

“You can’t keep running off like this. Think, Harlow.” His disappointment stung more than the scorch mark puckering on her forearm.

“Alright, I get it,” she muttered.

He snorted, marching ahead of her on the dense path.

“Do you?” he challenged. “The last month would indicate otherwise. You nearly destroyed half of the weekly supplies when you spewed poison on the cargo transport. You lose

control when agitated and injure almost anybody training with you. Don't be a liability. Be an ally."

She rolled her eyes, the shame dissipating in the simmering frustration at being reprimanded like a child. They were silent the rest of the way back to base, Harlow chewing back snarky responses to Jax's reprimand. He was only two years older than her, but sometimes he acted more like a dad than a partner.

The soldier towers of the camp appeared as they walked down the path. Tucked into the base of the Gallder Mountain, the Rebellion Camp buzzed as they passed through the gate. Harlow picked at the dirt under her nails, anxiety squirming the closer they were to camp. She didn't think they had been followed. The soldiers had been injured and they were safe in the camp now.

She massaged her temples, a pounding headache clouding her mind. The poison glands were throbbing, the lightning sharp pain licking up her wrist all the way to her elbows. She rubbed at her arms willing the burning to calm.

Jax glanced at her from under his hood. "Are they hurting?"

She thought about lying, pretending that she wasn't wishing for the oblivion of Healer Winston's sleeping draught, but he already knew. Jax had a second sense for pain, his silvery eyes taking in more than she hoped.

"A little," she mumbled.

"You should see a Healer," he said. She waited for his snide remark.

"What, no quip about me deserving it for using my element recklessly?"

"You've been rubbing at your arms for the last ten minutes, so I figured the burning was enough of a reminder."



She clamped her jaw shut, biting back the scathing responses. It wouldn't do them any good to get into another fight, especially when they were surrounded by people that would back Jax's position.

Harlow hated how easy it was to tell when she overused her magic. Or that hers was far more obvious than the other mages. When the glands appeared, she tried to hide them from her father, but he saw them when she wasn't being careful. His eyes had gone wide, anger flaring. He knew that she was a forbidden, a magic wielder. Then the incident in the woods happened... Living on the streets had been her only choice.

Back then she had wished the acid would disappear, that she could be normal. She left a wake of destruction wherever she went, unable to control the acid. Some night she would wake screaming from the pain of the acid burning in her arms. It was as if her body no longer belonged to her. If Jax hadn't found her, Harlow was certain the magic would have killed her.

She pushed the reminder away, focusing on the present. Her mind circled on the fight, trying to determine where she went wrong and why she couldn't control the poison. While it no longer pulsed angrily, the glands felt swollen, protesting the use. She kicked at the stray roots poking out of the ground, muttering curses under her breath.

Ignoring the pointed stares, Harlow kept her chin tilted up. She knew what some of the other Rebels said, how they complained that she got more attention than wielders that had been practicing longer. It wasn't her fault that they found her ability more useful than the wielders that could make flowers grow faster.

She stared at the ground, knowing that wasn't exactly true. It wasn't that her magic was better. Her magic didn't exist anywhere else. All of her life she had been told that Trevail only had four types of mages: earth, wind, fire and water. Or so she had believed until the day acid

spilled out of her wrists. It changed everything. She had to run away from her home, too close to the Imperial City. Ever since the Regent passed the Mage Removal Act, magic users had been taken left and right. It had been nearly forty years since it was passed, and the only mages left were hidden or in service to the Regent. If Harlow had remained, the Imperial soldiers would have found her and she would probably be dead.

The Regent's hatred of magic users had nearly eliminated them all. She had used her nonmagical status to rally the others to her side, convincing the masses that magic users were dangerous. It had completely changed Trevail and the land suffered from the loss of the mages. The Resistance had formed in the shadows, gathering mages that wanted to fight, and take back Trevail. They liberated towns, rescued mages in the area, and were gathering up old texts to piece together the true history of Trevail. They might not be the biggest group, but at least they were trying to find a way to dethrone the Regent.

"Hurry up. We have a meeting in thirty minutes," Jax said, pulling her back to the present.

He squinted from beneath his hood and rubbed his eyes. Harlow checked over her shoulder, a cold flush when the woods moved. She zeroed in on a deer emerging from behind a tree and let her shoulders drop.

*They didn't follow you. You didn't give up the camp's location. Get a grip.*

"Move it," Jax said, bumping her shoulder.

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"Because, showing up on time means I'm one step closer to being captain. Once I'm captain, then I'll work my way up to colonel and finally general. I'll be the youngest in the camp once I'm promoted."

Harlow rolled her eyes and followed after him. He had an annoyingly upbeat spring in his step.

“Why do I have to go too? I don’t care about ‘rising in the ranks’ here.”

He glared at her from beneath his hood. “Because, I’m stuck with you since I brought you into the Resistance and for some reason, you occasionally listen to me.”

Her wrists pulsed angrily and despite the warnings from the other captains that she shouldn’t miss more intel meetings, her bed was beckoning. She drifted away from Jax with a lame excuse. He argued, but the guilt trip of hampering his chances of being promoted didn’t stop her from leaving. She would deal with the fall out tomorrow when she was certain that her map to the camp hadn’t fall out during her fight and into the hands of Regent soldiers.

## Chapter 2

Harlow wrapped her hair back as she closed the curtain over her bedroom window. She had visited the healers tent, grateful for their kindness in tending to her burning wrists. They were the nicest of the Rebels, their earth magic gifting them with the ability to alter plants' natural effects to heal. She had eaten after, sitting with a few mages that chatted about their old towns, and finally excused herself when the sky started to turn dark.

In her closet of a room, she shucked off her boots and placed them beside the bed. She had a small bed with a little window, an old blanket serving as a curtain, and one chair in the tiny room. She changed and collapsed into her bed. Her body ached and the calming ointments were starting to wear off. The warmth of her bed had her eyes fluttering closed, the stress of the day dragging her into a quick sleep.

She started to dream, another one of fleeing her childhood home when soldiers conducted a raid for mages. It was vivid, the screams shrill, the stench of human's soiling themselves in fear overwhelming. She thrashed in her dream and tried to run, but her legs were too heavy. A soldier turned on her, but her mouth wouldn't open to cry for help. Horrified, the armored figure swung down at her, the blade about to cut her in two. The blade vanished mid swing, dissolved by a shadowy figure above her.

The dream began to morph, the ravaged town dissolving into a brightly lit meadow. Wildflowers sprang up around her, the trees lengthening towards the sky with bright green new growth. Butterflies fluttered by and the distant sound of a brook reached her ears. Harlow took a deep breathe, relaxing back into a sturdy tree trunk.

"Another nightmare?"

"Just like every other night," Harlow replied, smiling up at the figure.

The figure took a seat beside her and the warmth of his presence soothed her. It was a dream mage, a rare gift that hadn't been seen in decades. There were rumors that the only remaining ones were in service to the Regent, but Harlow had a hard time believing that after her own rare magic manifested. New recruits had been warned that there were mages that could slip into your dreams when you weren't on guard. These mages were highly dangerous to untrained minds, or so they had said when she joined. They could infiltrate your dreams, persuade you to betray your best friend, and destroy your sense of right and wrong. She had believed that to be true, until she met him.

He called himself Fenric and even though she knew it was stupid, she enjoyed his company. His wild black and silver hair flowed down his back, loosely curled, and his eyes were black as coal, rimmed with dark lashes. He wore a sweeping cloak that covered his movements when he slipped into her dreams, creating beautiful landscapes to soothe her nightmares.

Harlow was aware that it was dangerous, but the ache of loneliness that swept through her at night was mitigated with him. He let her vent her fears, talk about the pain of losing her mother, the rejection from her father. It was nice to share it with someone that couldn't use it against her. She kept this from Jax, sure that he would remind her that it could be a Regent spy. Harlow had a hard time believing it when Fenric showed up.

"Was that your old home?" Fenric asked, brushing his hands over the grass.

"Yeah, it was burned down when I was ten," she replied.

"I'm sorry, that is traumatic to witness," he said.

"My mom had disappeared by then. My father was never the same," she added.

"You have suffered much," he replied.

She nodded and laid her head back on the sturdy bark. Sometimes they would talk for hours, others just sitting in companionable silence.

“I get tired of fighting,” Harlow said. “It feels like I take one step forward and then I’m shoved back.”

“That is disheartening, but you’ve gotten stronger in the past months. Don’t give up hope just yet,” Fenric replied, weaving flower stalks together.

“I feel aimless, like I’m drifting along with no real purpose,” she admitted.

Fenric chuckled, a light breeze ruffling the canopy of leaves above them. He handed her the petite flower crown, bright yellow and purple flowers twined together.

“You’ll find your purpose and I’m sure you’ll do great things,” Fenric said.

“Maybe once I stop messing up and leaving—”

She cut herself off, careful not to give too much away. While she didn’t mind confiding some fears, she never let it slip that she was part of the Resistance. Fenric could guess she was a mage, but she had kept the nature of her magic a secret. He seemed to notice her pause and cocked his head to the side. Harlow waved her hand and shook her head as if it were nothing.

“Could you conjure up that pond? I could use a good soak,” she said, diverting the conversation.

“Anything for you, my friend,” Fenric replied, closing his eyes.

The ground twisted in front of them, diving down and filling with crystal clear blue water. Frogs began to croak, a few birds chirped above them, and steam rose from the warmed water. Harlow used the distraction of the pond to move away from the conversation. She sank into the pond, her clothes clinging to her skin as the warmth soothed away her aching limbs.

“Thank you, Fenric,” she said, relaxing on the edge of the pond.

“Happy to help a fellow mage,” he said, leaning back into a tree with his eyes closed.

She lounged in the warm water, biting her tongue so she didn’t give away even more about herself. He knew she was a mage, but even she wasn’t sure how she had become one. Her dad was without magic, a fighter, but not a mage. From what she knew, her mother had not been able to wield magic either. Though her memory could be faulty, she had never heard of her mom using magic. Then again, she didn’t hear much, her father tightlipped with his knowledge. Harlow remained in the dreamscape for hours, letting the stress melt away with the calming atmosphere. She remained for longer than usual, needing the peacefulness to recharge after a long day.

“It’s time for me to leave,” she finally admitted.

Fenric cracked one eye open, nodding while she stretched out. The dreamscape began to waver, the tranquil woods vanishing as Fenric disappeared with a gentle nod towards her. Harlow opened her eyes and sighed, the tinge of loneliness hitting her. She didn’t sleep again, sneaking out to grab a tome from the camp. She poured over the texts, soaking in the lore of Trevail while the rest of the Rebels slept unaware of her involvement with a dream mage.

### Chapter 3

Harlow felt out of place the following day, but in a good way. The other Rebels were praising her for taking on the soldiers, asking her for a recount of her journey. It was oddly satisfying to be recognized by them and not because of one of her failures. Sure, accidentally melting the food supply cart had been a bad moment for her, but she had been less destructive in the past month. Jax had been tirelessly running her through combat sequences, saying she needed to catch up on her hand-to-hand skills. Harlow thought it was a ploy to look good in front of the other captains so he would get promoted, but it had been useful in helping her manage her magic.

Jax had woken her up early, dragging her to the training ring to work out her magical endurance. Her wrists burned from the use, and a few spots on Jax's shoulder were burned from the acid when he had been blinded by the sun, but her magical usage felt more consistent with his instruction. They were resting together beneath a massive tree on the edge of the training rings now, exhausted. Jax rubbed at his eyes, shielding himself from the harsh sun while Harlow drained her water container. Her muscles ached and she wondered if Jax was punishing her for not going to the stupid meeting.

A squirrely looking wielder with angry red pimples appeared and thrust a letter at Jax. He scurried away, not even making a comment. Harlow worried at her hands, frustrated that she hadn't recovered the map yet. She had searched the woods after her disturbing nap, but couldn't find anything. Jax poured over the missive over and over again. Harlow elbowed him in the side, tired of waiting for an answer.

"What is it?" she asked Jax.

He handed her the letter. She took it from him, stopping to scan the details.

"You're being reassigned to the Northern border," she said, struck by the orders.



“That’s right and I will be promoted to captain, too.”

Harlow didn’t respond, checking the letter again before handing it back to him. It didn’t mention anything about her joining him or how long he would be gone. He was an ass, sure, but he was her partner. Didn’t that mean she would be going too?

“Wow, congratulations,” she replied. Her throat tightened uncomfortably, the words strangled as she said them.

“Who will be my partner when you leave?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, grabbing a piece of bread from a table behind him. He ripped off a hunk, chewing thoughtfully.

“I’m sure it’ll be someone less annoying,” he said, scanning the letter again.

“You’re not that annoying,” she said quietly.

It felt wrong to say it aloud, but it was the truth, mostly. He was conceited and had a holier than thou attitude, but he was reliable. Jax had her back and that meant something.

“You were about to bite my head off a minute ago so you can’t be that upset,” he said.

“Maybe you’re right. It might be best for both of us,” Harlow snapped.

His smile faltered slightly, the acceptance not what he expected. She knew that he enjoyed arguing with her, though she couldn’t imagine why, and when she agreed it irritated him more than the argument itself.

She whipped around, stumbling forward straight into a firm chest. Her cheeks blazed red as she lifted her eyes. Ryder grimaced at her, his stubbled jaw and curling mahogany hair falling in front of his eyes.

He made a pointed look to where her hands rested.

“Oh, right, sorry,” she replied. Harlow jumped back, an uncomfortable flush rising up her neck.

*Think of something to say. Don't just stare at him.*

She shifted back and forth, the words falling short.

“So, how is-”

“I wanted to know-”

“Sorry, you go first,” Harlow said.

He laughed, nervously running a hand through his hair. She watched as it cascaded back down. Her heart skipped a beat, the anticipation burning in her throat.

“I was actually here to talk to Jax,” Ryder said.

Disappointment flooded her. He side stepped her, pulling Jax to the side. Harlow glared down at her wrists, the gland pulsing on her wrist. She turned away as Jax made a few comments to Ryder, their backs to her. The sting of rejection was fresh when Ryder walked away without a second word to her.

“What did that jerk want?” she asked, bruised by his brush off. It wasn't like she had been pining after him since she arrived at the camp.

“Come on, let's go talk,” Jax said, striding away.

Harlow followed, albeit slowly, to the protection of the woods. They marched in until there were no sounds from the camp, a fallen tree their seat. Jax lifted his hood slightly to give her a piercing look. She averted her eyes before leaning against a tree, refusing to sit near him when her temper was flaring.

“What's going on with you?” he asked, genuine concern in his voice.

His eyes made her feel exposed, as if he could read her thoughts with his silver gaze. The fact that he knew she was deflecting made her uncomfortable. He had known her for six months and already was more perceptive than her own father. The reminder made her want to punch the tree behind her, but the thought of a bruised abdomen and hand kept her still.

“I heard that you defended me when Captain Lin said I should be kicked out because I was useless. If you’re not here, I’m afraid they’ll throw me out for good.”

Jax didn’t snort or laugh, he simply nodded with his lips pursed. “They wouldn’t do that.”

“You don’t know if that’s true,” she snapped. “You don’t get it. I have no friends. People tolerate me, but they don’t really like me. I know what some people call me in the camp. I’m the Plague, cursed to wield a skill nobody would want and everybody can exploit.”

Jax sat quietly. The birds chirped above them as the sun began to dip below the tree line. Harlow focused on the ants marching with bits of leaves and food on their backs.

You’re my only friend,” she said.

Her throat tightened, the truth a bitter draught. The wind whipped at his hood, lifting it enough for her to see the pity in his eyes.

“Give the others time. They aren’t all bad and they won’t kick you out,” Jax replied.

She wanted to believe him, the unease at being kicked out bringing back old memories. She had been captured before, once. That was how Jax had found her, holed up in the bottom of a cell in a far-flung town on the south side of Trevail. She had been running away with a stolen bag of cheese and apples by a Regent guard. He was about to catch her when the acid gushed out of her wrists without warning. The guard had thrashed on the ground, his facing being eaten away, and the smell of burning flesh filling the air. Harlow was too horrified by his melting face to notice the second guard. A fist swung out of nowhere and smashed in her temple. She woke up

in a dirty cell with her wrist and ankles shackled. If Jax hadn't been passing the area, she probably would have been shipped off to the Regent the next day. He freed her and brought her into the Resistance. She owed him her life.

"I thought we would stick together," she admitted.

He sighed, shoulders dropping. "I'll put in a good word, yeah? They can transfer you after I get settled and we'll be partners again. Promise."

She shrugged and went back to inspecting the ground. He may have been assigned to her, but Harlow thought they had a genuine friendship now. He had spent countless hours catching her up on fighting techniques, magic controlling practices, and checked in like an actual friend. She didn't want to lose all of that now.

"I guess they aren't all terrible," she admitted, thinking of the healers.

They were quiet, Harlow letting her temper abate. Jax tapped his foot on the ground and kept glancing back at the trees. She traced his line of sight and raised an eyebrow.

"Are you looking for Ryder again?"

He shrugged, a sheepish look creeping up his face.

"You shouldn't be upset about Ryder. He's just looking to explore new places."

Harlow felt less gracious towards him after the brush off.

"Sure that's fine," she said, "but I thought he was coming to talk to me because he might like me." She groaned with the shame of her words, the stupid crush that had caused her to act like a fool.

"I hate to break it to you, but you're not his type," Jax said, elbows on his knees.

"Are you calling me ugly?"

"No, I'm just saying that-"

“After I told you that you’re my only friend, you call me ugly?”

She started to pace in front of him, letting her frustration out with a nonsensical accusation. Harlow knew he wasn’t calling her ugly, but it felt good to argue instead of acknowledge the ache in her chest.

“You’re clearly not listening to me,” Jax said, throwing his hands up.

“I could be his type. How would you even know?”

“I can tell you for sure that you are not his type.”

Harlow stopped moving and leaned back into the tree, the shadows elongating on the ground in front of them. Jax lowered his hood allowing his silver locs to flow freely down his back. If he wasn’t such an ass, he would be mildly attractive. He was muscular, but in an understated way. His hair was well groomed, his skin soft against his angular cheekbones. He smiled to himself, tapping his feet on the ground knowing full well that her curiosity would end their silence.

“Okay, I give. How do you know I’m not his type?”

Jax grinned, “Because he kissed me after the briefing last week.”

Harlow’s jaw dropped, a mixture of anger and shock muddling her thoughts. She wasn’t sure if she should accuse him first or ask for more details.

“How could you not tell me!”

He shrugged, a smug grin on his face. “You never asked.”

She launched herself off the tree and began pacing in front of him. While it would be gratifying to yell at him again, her curiosity about how this happened took over.

“Fine, fine. Details, Jax. How did this happen?”

“We were talking after the briefing and he asked if I wanted to walk the perimeter with him. I didn’t think much of it until he asked me if I was into you.”

She made a gagging sound, eliciting a withering glare from him. Lightning bugs started to swirl through the air as night swallowed the sunlight.

“Anyway, I told him no and he asked a few more pointed questions. I had guessed, but I wasn’t sure until he asked if he could hold my hand.”

Harlow couldn’t believe how obtuse she had been in regards to Ryder.

“We talked, had a nice time, and the next thing I know we are making out in the woods.” Jax had a smug grin on his face, the memory clearly a good one in his mind. Harlow shook her head and had to laugh at herself.

“You enjoyed watching me fail to flirt with him for weeks,” she said.

“Absolutely,” he replied.

The anger had abated as she relaxed into the conversation. It was a breath of fresh air to talk about something other than training or the efforts to bring down the Regent. Jax wasn’t as bad when he was thinking about something other than earning metals and upcoming promotion.

“Let’s get back to camp,” he said.

“Fine, but you have to fill me in on more details,” she said.

“Only the ones that won’t make you blush,” he replied.

Harlow elbowed him in the side as they stepped over fallen branches in the woods. The lights from the camp weren’t too far away. It felt good to be back on solid ground, the tension washed away.

Harlow wrinkled her nose, the acrid scent of smoke starting to hit her nose.

“Do you smell—”

They heard the massive boom before the sky lit up bright red, flames licking up the trees. Screams echoed as smoke billowed in earnest in front of them.

Base camp was on fire.

## Chapter 4

Stunned, they stared at the fire climbing higher into the night sky, sending pillars of billowy smoke into the air. Screams rang through the air, cries from injuries and instruction as the inferno grew.

“Holy shit,” Harlow breathed.

A dragon made completely of flames rose up above the camp. Harlow choked back a scream as the fearsome creature brought its clawed hand down, crushing buildings. Below it stood a fire wielder flanked by Regent soldiers, his hands contorting as he manipulated the flames. She could hear water wielders conjuring up their best weapons, but even the watery harpoons were not enough to tame the flame dragon.

“What do we do,” she whispered.

Jax stood stock still, his silvery eyes reflecting the beast massacring the camp with a swing of its flaming tail. Deer, rabbits, and mice raced through the trees to flee from the consuming flames. Harlow had a moment of weakness where she wished to be part of the pack rushing for safety. But there were people at the camp that would need their help and more that would need to be warned from coming back to the camp.

“We have to stop them,” Jax answered.

Harlow tried to steady the tremor in her hands. The dragon was raging through the camp taking out more houses, more than likely her own home, and making quick work of consuming everything in its path. The wielder was untouchable as he gathered strength from the flames around him.

“Oh no, let’s go,” she said.



They set out at a run towards the growing inferno. Jax began to chant beside her, conjuring up a beast with wings, its inky arms shaking out to make Jax look like an avenging demon. His eyes glowed silver, his vision impaired, as they made it to the edge of the camp.

Chaos. Pure unadulterated terror swept through the camp as Regent Mercenaries razed the camp to the ground. Armored soldiers used their swords to cut down anyone in their path.

“Surrender the poison wielder, by order of the Regent of Trevail!”

“Give the poison wielder and your life will be spared!”

A knot formed in Harlow’s throat, the shouts from the soldiers chilling her to the bone. Jax grabbed her arm, holding her gaze at the edge of the fire.

“We have your back,” he said.

She nodded, unsure of the others in the camp. Any one of them could trade her over for protection. The hard grip on her arm focused her attention, Jax’s words bringing her back to the present.

“Take out the ones around the fire wielder,” Jax yelled.

Harlow nodded, praying there was enough poison stored up from her short reprieve. She summoned the poison to her wrists and relishing the rush of heat coursing through her arms. The thrill of fighting clouded her panic as she followed Jax into the fray. Her legs hummed as she leapt over fallen swords, charred timbers, and people scrabbling on the ground.

Her sights narrowed on a soldier with a bloody sword, his face scarred from the top of his forehead to the bottom of his left cheek. He raised his sword to a fallen Rebel. Harlow thrust her wrist forward spraying the poison in a steady stream. It splattered across his nose, dripping into his eyes. He dropped, clutching his face as it ate away his skin.

She felt the thrill of battle, the victory in being able to finally do something worthwhile for the camp. Beside her Jax had created wings from the darkness, cloaking two soldiers in utter blackness. He would be pummeling them while their senses were clouded, his fists just as lethal as his elemental skill.

Tearing away from the writhing soldier, Harlow set her eyes on the hole that was slowly being made to the fire user. She heard the scream of Ryland as he barreled forward. His earth magic conjuring rocks to cover his arms, chest, and thighs as he used them to ram a stout soldier. The resounding crack made her wince, the soldier crumbling to the ground.

*Four down, six to go.*

“She’s over here!”

A lanky soldier rushed at her, catching her under the chin with his fist. Harlow stumbled, blood spewing from her split lip. The metallic taste pooled in her mouth, coating her tongue. It stung, the split deep, but she kept her balance. The soldier raised his arms to bring down his fists again, but Harlow dodged to the side. His hands slammed into the ground, weighed down by his armor. She swung her elbow down, smashing into his neck.

He made a nasty choking sound as his neck cracked. Harlow brought her foot up into his gut with a scream, using her rage to fuel the fight. She thought about all the townspeople that had called her a freak, the ones in the camp that whispered Plague behind her back. They wouldn’t be saying those things now if they could see her tearing through the soldiers. Sweat dripped down her face, stinging her eyes as she panted over the fallen soldier.

Satisfied, she turned her attention to the remaining armored man, screaming to his comrades for backup. The chaos muffled his voice, screams and groans drowning out his pleas. He was creating a rock wall to protect the fire wielder, his arms shaking with the weight of the

task. Jax and Ryder were fighting back to back with the other four soldiers, their movements mirroring each other. Jax's shadowed cloaked them while the brutal punch of Ryder's rock clad fist crunched into flesh and bone.

Harlow spit out the poison wildly at the last soldier, his shield beginning to shake. She gathered the poison into both wrists, letting it spray freely as she charged. Bile rose to the back of her throat, burning a warning that she couldn't sustain the pull on her magic. She screamed past the pain, shooting a bloody stream of poison. The soldier's eyes registered the defeat a second before she threw a glob of poison straight at him. It coated him from chest to hip, the sizzling armor melting under the green slime. The strangled cry pierced her ears, mixing with the putrid smell of burned flesh.

*Gotcha.*

The soldier collapsed, his yells becoming garbled. She kept her eyes averted, knowing that the festering skin would trigger her gag reflex. With a crash, the wall crumbled around the fire wielder, tumbling uselessly beside him.

He stood in the middle of the road, clothed in all black armor, a mask covering his face. She could hear the chanting falter as he realized the shield had fallen. The clanking of armor faded as the fire mage squared his shoulders. Harlow grinned, the flicker of hope guiding her forward. The wielder turned, a tight bun holding back his jet black hair, zeroing his eyes on Harlow.

"The Regent thanks you for leaving a map to the Rebel camp," the fire wielder said.

Coldness seeped into every part of her body despite the sweat dripping down her back. He map in the woods. She hadn't gone back to check.

The fire wielder grinned, creating a flame sword from the burning grass. Harlow stumbled back, lost in the smoke billowing up from the ground. She choked on the ash rising up from the charred ground. The soldier raised his flame blade, ready to strike. Harlow flinched as an inky darkness surrounded her. She heard the unmistakable crack of a dagger against bone, cursing as the miasma kept her blind.

“Get up,” Jax ordered.

His eyes were completely white and blood dripped down his forehead. She reached a shaky hand, the weakness at the usage pulling at her. She could smell the unmistakable tang of blood, the cursing from the ground a sign that the Jax dealt with the soldier. Jax hoisted her off the ground, tugging her away from the fight. More cries for her capture echoed around them, a few Rebel eyes following her flight.

“We have to keep fighting!”

“It’s over. We have to go,” Jax cried, yanking her towards the edge of the woods.

The mercenaries let out cries to round up wielders, their army forcing Resistance fighters to flee into the woods. Harlow watched horrified as soldiers shackled fallen Rebels, chasing after the injured ones trying to run. The sight made her sick as bile bubbled up her throat.

“We need to go, now,” Jax said.

He motioned for Ryland and the three of them raced for the safety of the woods. Harlow’s throat burned, her body trembling, and blood oozed from her wrists. The Resistance houses caved in with the weight of the flames, the crashes deafening with the mixture of agonized screams. They leapt over the branches and fallen trees, the shouts growing distant from the camp. The burning nausea made her gag, vomiting yellow into the dirt. Jax and Ryland balanced her between them, moving further away into the woods.

The south camp was destroyed. Wielders were taken captive. The Regent had found them. And Harlow had brought them straight to the Resistance's door.

## Chapter 5

It took two days to reach the mountain camp. They chose a longer route to stay away from the Imperial City. It had been years since she had seen the city they had once lived in. She felt the sting of their departure even now, the bickering between her parents and the hush of their departure. Harlow had never asked her father why they left, his silence better than his anger. A year after their departure, her mother went missing. She was only six, but the pain remained a dull throbbing scar to this day.

Harlow felt like it took an inordinate amount of time to find the camp and even longer to find the stupid entrance. Hidden by gigantic cliffs, they nearly missed the narrow passage to the camp situated behind the rockface. Harlow was frozen when they ushered the three into the headquarters where a fire crackled in a hearth nearly six feet tall.

The headquarters had three rooms, but they only saw the main hall. It had stone floors, fur rugs on the floors, and a wooden table that could fit twenty men around it with ease. Harlow noted the maps, stone figures placed on top of a large colored outline of Trevail, and a dozen coded letters scattered on the table. She itched to read the plans, her hopes rising as she imagined herself taking on dangerous missions against the Regent.

Before she could take in the maps, they were ushered out of the room to find their lodging. Harlow grudgingly left, her hands fluttering towards the letters until Jax cleared his throat pointedly. She stuck her tongue out at him before following them out into the chilly camp.

There were braziers with crackling fires on both sides of the main road, people milling around them in leather coats warming their hands. On either side of the road were towering mountains with icy peaks. The rebels had built houses, stores and an armory into both sides of the cliff, a bridge running along the tops of the structures connecting the two sides. Harlow

watched as people walked over them, the bridge made of a white marble that blended in with the snowy cliffs. She saw swords being forged, bread steaming inside stone ovens, and a shelter burrowing deep into the woods with horses.

“This place is ten times better than our last camp,” she whispered to Jax.

He pretended to be underwhelmed, nodding at her comment as he listened to the general guiding them, but she could see him peeking from beneath his hood. When they arrived, they were given heavy leather coats, lined with wool and a fur trimmed hood, thick leather boots, two pairs of heavy pants, and sweaters to keep them warm. Harlow was grateful for the gloves with flaps on the wrists to allow her to keep them on when she used her poison.

They didn’t have anything to set up in their rooms, the meager possessions lost in the fire that decimated their home. Harlow took the chance to soak in the heated baths, a luxury denied them at the old camp, and braided back her wet hair. She quickly pulled on her new clothes, took a few steadying breaths, and slipped out into the street.

Harlow felt out of place wandering through the camp trying to find Jax in the milling crowd. The growling in her stomach made a few heads turn as she tried to retrace her steps to the fresh bread. Snow began to fall and she pulled her hood up to keep her wet hair from turning into an icicle.

She craned her neck to see over the people moving quickly through the street. Her stomach made an obnoxiously loud growl that drew the attention of two older women warming their hands by a fire.

“The food is over there,” a tired older woman said.

She had a jagged scar over her left eye and gnarled fingers methodically folding blankets. She gave Harlow a kindly smile and pointed to the opposite side of the street.

“Thanks,” Harlow said, smiling back at her.

She slipped through the crowd, grabbing a hunk of bread. Jax had been given orders to return after settling to debrief with General Shutter, a barrel of a man with a bushy gray mustache that dwarfed his upper lip. He had icy blue eyes, a blank expression, and a permanent scowl on his wrinkled face. He had completely ignored Harlow, talking only to Jax and Rhyland upon their arrival. Her lips had lifted in a snarl at General Shutter’s dismissal, the urge to snap her fingers and make her presence known boiling in her blood. Part of her relished the idea of sparring with him one day and kicking the mustache off his face. She cracked her knuckles, grinning at the image of him knocked out on the ground because of her superior fighting skills.

Harlow examined the crumbled loaf in her hand, tearing into it, and swallowing before she could properly chew. Her stomach groaned loudly. People in heavy coats brushed past her, some carrying weapons, others toting steaming pots with potions snapping from inside. A few people toyed with the braziers making the fire twist and spin, a hazy figure forming in the flames as they tried to control them. Harlow tucked herself into a corner near the middle of the camp to watch for Jax. There were a few alleys that ran behind the buildings, more than likely escape routes, and a perfect place for her to rest unseen.

Finishing the bread, she leaned into the cool stone behind her. There were more people here than she anticipated and with skills she had never seen before. A skinny guy was creating extra fingers on his hands made of clay, another cloaked figure was twisting the wind to create a vortex, and behind them was a group of women manipulating plants to chop themselves up above the bubbling pots between their legs. Magic thrived here, mages letting their abilities manifest without fear of being persecuted.

“Enjoying yourself,” a voice said.



Harlow jumped, spinning to punch the stranger behind her. He swiftly grabbed her fist, sliding his foot under her legs to topple her over. Grabbing her waist, he steadied her before she hit the ground.

“What the hell?” she yelled.

The man grinned, a dimple appearing in his cheek. Harlow had the urge to punch him in his tanned face, wipe that smug smile off his lips.

“Maybe you should be more observant of your surroundings.”

His arm was still around her waist, a flush creeping up her cheeks as she took in their proximity. She moved out of his grip, furious at herself.

“And you can take your sanctimonious judgement and shove it up your—”

“I think I would rather not,” he interrupted.

He leaned back into the stone, one leg propped up to show a dagger peeking out from under his open coat. His lean, muscular frame was outfitted with a leather coat that reached mid thigh, a thick pair of leather boots laced up his calves, and a strap for a sword. She guessed he was close to six feet tall, his black hair falling in loose curls dusting his shoulders. He kept an infuriating smirk, a black brow raised above his hazel eyes. Her instinct said to walk away, ignore his baiting, but the loneliness of the camp kept her frozen.

“Any other degrading comments,” she replied. Trying to avoid looking too long at him, Harlow self-consciously tugged the flaps closed on her gloves to conceal the glands.

“Fiery,” he said, “That’ll serve you well here.”

He gave her a once over, assessing her as she had summed him up moments before. She crossed her arms over her chest. He pushed himself off the stone wall, taking a step towards her.

“I’m Ace,” he said, extending his hand.

There was a moment where she thought of slapping his hand away, but she could hear Jax's nagging voice telling her not to make more enemies among friends.

"Harlow Alessia," she replied, shaking his hand.

He smiled, two dimples softening his grin. "Pleasure to meet you," he said.

"Wish I could say the same," she grumbled.

"You just arrived from the destroyed south camp, right? The infamous fire dragon strikes again."

"How did you know that?" she asked.

"You've been here an hour," he said, leaning back again, propping his foot on the stone behind him, "so naturally everyone knows about the incident. Word spreads faster than the snow soaking your coat."

"Great, it's just like the south camp then," she replied. "They liked to spread rumors just to hear their own voices."

"They say the whole camp was destroyed. Only a few survivors," he commented.

A lump rose in her throat, the thought of all those people dead or captured sickening.

"It was chaotic," she said.

"Lucky you escaped," he replied.

She snorted, "Sure, lucky."

Ace cocked his head to the side, a clear question in his gaze.

*Damnit, I shouldn't have said that.*

"Trouble maker? I like that," he said.

Shifting uncomfortably, Harlow fiddled with her gloves again, the culprit of her ostracization hidden from sight. His eyes darted to her movement and then back to her face. She

felt naked under his gaze, as if he could see her secrets as plainly as the noses on her face. He relaxed, an easy tilt of the head as he watched her squirm.

“I’m waiting on my friend,” she blurted out.

“Yes, and he is not going to be in a good mood when you find him,” Ace said.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“He won’t be making captain anytime soon,” Ace replied.

The information sat like a rock in her stomach, the bread souring as she imagined his reaction. He would be stoic in front of the generals, but he would be a raging monster inside. The last time he was given bad news, Harlow found him punching a training dummy until his knuckles were a bloody mess. The wounds festered, but he refused to see a healer until ordered by his captain. She didn’t know where he was, but she should try to find him before he destroyed his hands again.

“I should go find him,” she said, unease welling in her gut.

Turning to leave, Ace eased himself off the wall to walk beside her.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Showing you the way,” he replied, matching her steps.

“I know where I am going,” she said, turning around a couple of times. A few people bumped into her as she tried to orient herself.

“Sure you do,” he said, turning her by the shoulder to walk the opposite way.

“Why are you helping me?” she asked.

Ace walked at an easy pace beside her, his stride longer than her own even when she was rushing to find Jax.

“You’re interesting and I haven’t found anyone interesting lately,” he said.

He kept close, his hip bumping into her side as they parted the crowd. Harlow swallowed hard, a lump forming in her throat when he grinned at her.

“That’s weird.”

He laughed at her, his hand nudging her to the left when she started to veer the wrong way. She kept her focus forward, ignoring him and the way people turned curious faces towards them. Tugging the hood closer to her face, she tried to put distance between herself and Ace.

“You find me intriguing too,” he replied, leaning closer to her.

“You have an inflated opinion of yourself,” she replied.

Another laugh, more eyes tracking their progress. She had hoped he would leave her alone so she could fumble her way around the camp in peace.

“I prefer self-assured,” he said.

“I already have one ‘self-assured’ friend and I don’t need another.”

“That’s not true. You don’t feel like you fit in here and could use an ally.”

“You don’t know that,” she said, shying away from a group whispering behind their hands.

“You don’t have to be defensive with me. I’m new here too and could use a friend.”

She stopped marching, her curiosity peaked despite her efforts to put distance between them. He looked like he belonged at the camp, the respect clear as people nodded at him passing by them.

“I’m not defensive,” she replied.

He grinned again—“Not at all.”

Her cheeks flamed at his response, the casual way he smiled at her flustered retort.

“I—” she started, but was cut short when Jax stormed out of the headquarters. He had his hood completely lowered, the silver locs spilling from the back of his hood as he marched out the front gate.

“I have to go,” Harlow said.

“See you soon,” Ace said.

She tore her gaze from Jax, her brow wrinkled as she checked Ace’s face for traces of guile. He had a genuine smile on his face or at least a convincing one.

“Why would you want that?” she replied, brow furrowed.

“I told you already, I find you intriguing,” he said, shrugging lightly.

She knew Jax would be out of sight fast and then she wouldn’t be able to find him. Torn between her friend and this odd guy, she felt suddenly tired of the balancing act.

“Sure, we’ll meet again” *when hell freezes over* she added, taking off after Jax.

“I’m counting on it,” Ace replied.

She didn’t respond, jogging to catch up to Jax before he went too far from the camp. While he was familiar with the terrain having grown up nearby, it was all new to her. She ignored the fluttering in her stomach, the buzzing of what if in her mind at Ace’s insistence that she was interesting.

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The snow crunched under her boots as she followed the tracks into a cluster of silver trees, densely packed together on a nearly level area on the mountain. The leaves were gone, the skinny branches scratching against each other as the wind tossed the trees back and forth. Harlow crept between the trees to the small clearing created in the middle. Jax was there, snapping branches over his knee. She could hear him muttering curses, each branch a new vow as it broke in his hands.

“Are you okay?” Harlow asked.

Jax didn’t look up, his methodically snapping of branches taking precedent. She stepped over a log, the rot eating away at the bark. The sun sparkled on the untouched snow around them, the wind tugging at their hoods.

“What happened?” she asked again.

He snapped more branches, his gloves covered in splinters. Harlow didn’t stand too close, careful to give him space in case a stray branch slapped her in the face.

“I’m not going to be a captain,” he muttered.

“What?”

She hoped her response had the appropriate amount of shock and outrage. If he knew that the camp was already aware, or that others knew, he would be devastated.

“Apparently, they weren’t going to make me captain. It was a joke made by some of the guys back in the south camp,” he said, tossing down splintered sticks.

“That’s disgusting,” Harlow replied.

She stepped forward, placing a hand on his shoulder to show her support. Not particularly affectionate, neither of them were much into hugging.

“Yeah and here I am looking like an idiot,” he said, “reporting for a position that doesn’t exist. They were nice enough not to laugh in my face.”

Harlow handed him more sticks to break. They were quiet as he let his anger out on the branches, kindling Harlow justified as she supplied him with more from the surrounding woods. When he finished, they gathered the branches to carry back to the camp.

“You’re not an idiot,” Harlow said, her feet kicking up snow as they climbed over a ridge.

“You are brave, strong, and dedicated. Those boot lickers at the camp were jealous of you so they tried to make themselves feel better about their pathetic lives.”

Jax sniffed, a near laugh in his response. “Did you just call them boot lickers?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You couldn’t have come up with a better insult?”

“That is a good insult! It’s gross and degrading.”

“It’s gross, sure, but isn’t it unavoidable at some point.”

“Now that is gross. I won’t be licking anyone’s boots, ever.”

“Metaphorical, Harlow,” he said.

She bumped him with her shoulder, nearly toppling their pile of sticks as they returned to the camp gate. They deposited the sticks beside the closest brazier, a small effort to contribute to the community.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Don’t let what I said go to your head,” she replied, bumping his shoulder.

She knew he was rolling his eyes even if she couldn’t see with his hood pulled down, keeping the light out. The others in the camp milled around them, almost ignoring their movements as they oriented themselves to the camp.

“So, what do we do now?” she asked as they sat beside the fire, feeding it the sticks they had gathered.

“Wait for an assignment and hope the bad luck didn’t follow us,” Jax said.

While part of her railed at the idea of luck, a miniscule voice piped up that it wasn’t bad luck that had destroyed the camp. It was her.

## Chapter 6

Harlow fell into a fitful sleep after working on combat training with Jax. It had helped to keep her mind from drifting to the guilt that plagued her, the anxiety that someone would find out that she left a map in the woods. Her dream was another nightmare, her old kitchen cluttered with broken cups and dented walls. Her father had thrown things when he was angry and more than once she had been the target of his mighty arm.

A hand wrapped around her wrist, pulling her out of the distorted dreamscape of her childhood home. Her father had been screaming at her, blaming her for her mother's death. It was the same each time, the words piercing.

"You are tense. Come, relax," Fenric said.

The dream mage materialized beside her as the other dream disintegrated. He replaced it with a lovely oasis, a crystal waterfall surrounded by lush green trees, flowers of impossible beauty, and a stone basin to catch the brilliant water. She sat down at the edge, dipping her toes into the warm water, relaxing back as the sun peeked over the foliage.

"You're hiding something," he said, his voice a near purr.

She tried to concentrate on the surroundings, wanting to hold onto the tranquility of the moment.

"I'm always honest with you," she said, closing her eyes.

It was true, to a degree, but the whole truth was that the guilt of meeting with him was eating her up. Harlow was starting to look forward to their meetings and the chance to talk openly about her anxieties. But it was the wrong person to trust and she knew that. She buried her head in her hands, rubbing at her temples.

"Are you about to wake yourself up?" he asked.



Her thoughts had strayed, but the rational side that sounded suspiciously like Jax told her to stop. It wouldn't be wise to allow him to see her in a vulnerable state when she was already compromised in her dreams. She groaned, her time coming to a close with Fenric.

"If I stay any longer you'll lure me into the woods to drink my blood," she said.

"That is a silly wives tale meant to scare naughty children," he said.

The edges of her dream were starting to wave, the integrity of her control slipping. If she didn't break the connection soon, he would be able to take over the dream and keep her trapped. Not that he had ever tried, but she wasn't about to risk it.

Closing her eyes, Harlow blocked out Fenric as she forced herself to leave the dream. She could feel the cold of the night on her skin, the last dregs of the dreamworld disappearing.

"I'll be here when you're ready," he said, evaporating.

Her eyes popped open to see him disappear, the intensity of his gaze unable to mask his frustration. She jolted to consciousness, searching her room for a hidden mage, checking behind doors. Empty, she eased back onto her bed, the disappointment concerning.

Did she want him to be here? To risk him further exposing her betrayal of the rebels? If anybody else knew that she was opening her mind to a dream mage, she would be kicked out with nowhere to go. Her father wouldn't take her back and she didn't have friends outside of the rebel group. She buried herself under the blankets, shame washing over her like every other time she opened her mind to Fenric.

*I have to stop letting him in.*

She couldn't count the amount of times she told herself that and the crushing guilt of seeking his company. Sleep eluded her as she waited for dawn, her berating thoughts the only company left on this lonely night.

## Chapter 7

“You look like hell,” Jax said.

Harlow didn’t bother with a retort and picked up an apple from the table. They were in a debriefing all day, holed up in the headquarters. It was a small room with one window off the main hall, two rustic wooden tables and a handful of stools filled the space. There was a map of Trevail on the wall, a sagging cushion rested on the only chair with a solid back in the room at the front. Harlow kicked at the threadbare rug, her mind wandering as a fire crackled to life in the hearth to the right. The captain explaining the terrain was a fire mage and for once, Harlow was glad to be in a room with a warm fire. The night had drained her and this mindless activity would let her recover.

“Hello,” Jax tried again.

“Yeah, hey,” she replied.

“Well, I see you are as sunny as ever today,” he said.

Harlow rolled her eyes and took a bite of her apple. The skin made a satisfying snap as she channeled her frustration into the fruit. Jax was annoyingly chipper, a grin peeking from beneath his lowered hood. He might be happy to sit through briefs, but it wasn’t enough for her. She was ready to go into the surrounding towns and liberate them from Regent soldiers, show that tyrant that she couldn’t control all of Trevail. The Resistance was all about freeing towns, finding other mages hiding from the Regent, and building an army big enough to take on the Imperial City. And yet, she and Jax, who had the coolest magic of everyone here, were listening to a lecture on fire mage safety.

“I didn’t sleep well,” she said, not up to fighting.

“Maybe if you ran that extra mile yesterday you would have slept longer,” he teased.

She glared, her tolerance for his jokes at a minimum with the dream invasion hangover pounding in her skull. The past few visits from Fenric had given her a wicked headache the following day that made her want to hide in a dark cave. Irritable Harlow was almost worse than giddy Jax.

“Why are you so happy?” she grumbled.

Jax had an annoying grin tugging at the edges of his hooded face. Harlow was certain he would sulk for at least another week after the captain incident, but he had bounced back with a renewed vigor to be promoted. Rhyland slipped into the room, late as usual, a sheepish smile on his face. Jax sat up straighter, his hand smoothing the edges of his hood as Rhyland took a seat beside them. The fire mage, Captain Matthews, ignored the late entrance and started explaining a basic attack formation. Harlow slumped in her seat, too tired to watch Jax and Rhyland awkwardly interact with each other. She wished one of them would ask the other out so they could move past this painful flirting routine.

“Where would you stand?” Captain Matthews asked.

“You would stand at the apex of the team to maximize your shield wielders,” Jax interrupted.

There were times when his overeager desire to please worked in her favor.

Harlow was thinking about the towns they had passed on their journey to the south camp. They were all patrolled by Regent soldiers and that meant there was something worth hiding inside. She wanted to get inside, dig around, and take out a few soldiers along the way.

Jax elbowed her in the ribs, a pointed look at the captain. He was staring right at her, arms crossed, and a grimace lining his wrinkled face. Her cheeks burned and her stomach

dropped. Harlow knew there was a question hanging in the air, but she had no clue what he might have asked.

“Could you repeat the question?” she said.

The room was silent, the fire crackling brighter as the captain’s lips tightened into a thin line. Harlow felt a lump form in her throat, the anxious claws of disappointment digging into her chest. Captain Matthews turned back to the board, ignoring her and nearly putting a hole through the maps as he jabbed at different locations. Jax was stifling a laugh, his shaking shoulders irritating in her peripheral vision.

She tried to listen for the rest of the lesson, the headache worse now, and answer a few questions right. It didn’t matter though as Captain Matthews turned a hard eye on her each time she said something. He dismissed them for lunch without further instructions for the afternoon. She felt the unspoken disregard in the way he swept out of the room, the fire snuffed out the moment he left.

“You coming with us?” Jax asked.

Harlow was still sitting, her back aching from hunching over. Rhyland was standing close to Jax, a hand awkwardly hovering by his side.

“No, I’m going to head back to my room. I don’t feel great,” she said.

The relief on Rhyland’s face was enough confirmation that she made the right choice. He smiled brightly at Jax, staring up a conversation the moment he turned away from Harlow. They bumped shoulders walking through the door, the connection stalling Jax in his response. Harlow shook her head and stood up to stretch out her taut muscles. She didn’t linger in the room, the cold air seeping in with the absence of the fire. Harlow put on her coat, flipping the hood over

her head, and securing her gloves. It was snowing before she came to the meeting and would more than likely be liberally coating the ground now.

Icy shards pierced her face as she stepped out of headquarters. The layers couldn't keep away the bone deep chill that settled over her like a wet blanket. She tugged the hood closer, shielding herself from the biting wind. The growling in her stomach begged for food. She marched down the street, avoiding the groups of mages discussing strategies with each other.

The street was packed today with more wielders than usual, the influx of returned missions and new members cramming the area. She lingered near a cluster of captains, their heads bowed and serious expressions.

"The south camp lost fifty mages, all imprisoned in the Imperial City," one captain remarked, her blonde hair cinched back in a tight bun.

"What about the generals?"

"Hung in the city square and left out at the gate as a warning," the blonde captain remarked, crossing her arms over her heavy coat.

Her heart sank. So much death and for what? All because some people can wield magic and others can't? The Regent was ruthless, her reign stained with the blood of countless mages all in the name of equality.

The group went quiet as more people began to filter through the streets. Harlow picked back up her pace, not wanting to be caught eavesdropping. The streets were overcrowded with anxious mages, some showing off their skills while others fretted about the south camp destruction. Harlow dodged a rock wielder trying to impress a girl with a boulder the size of a boar. He nearly dropped the rock on her foot, shouts of laughter and outrage echoed as Harlow scurried out of the way.

She stopped for a moment in the healer's building, snagging a headache potion from the counter when they weren't looking. Smiling at her skills, Harlow slipped back onto the street to join the rest of the crowd.

"Tsk, stealing from the camp," came a voice.

Harlow closed her eyes, the timber of his voice a dead giveaway. She turned to see Ace with a grin, the smug expression with his raised eyebrow.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied.

She didn't give him the time to respond as she walked towards her lodging. The potion secured in her inside pocket, there was no way he knew that she took anything. She was too tired to deal with him today and just wanted to get a solid twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep. Was that too much to ask?

"You are a good thief, but a terrible liar," Ace said.

Harlow wanted to stick her foot out to trip him. His self-assured manner grated against her nerves and she didn't have the patience for him today. She had avoided him since their first encounter, but felt his eyes tracking her when she would pass him in the training area.

"I am neither of those things," she retorted, gripping the potion in her pocket.

She charged forward, trying to put distance between them. Ace took a few easy steps to catch up, increasing his pace to keep beside her. Harlow ignored him, the burning in her wrists warning her to stay calm.

"I see I've struck a nerve," he said, trying to catch her eye.

The woods were a few feet away and the groups had thinned out. She wanted to get away from him and the reminder that her own failures were around her daily. If one more person called her--

“Which was it, thief or liar, that riled you-”

Her fist went flying through the air faster than he could dodge. Harlow caught him straight on the jaw, a satisfying crack as her knuckles ground into his chin. Ace stumbled, his hand rubbing at his jaw, an odd mix of admiration and pain on his face. A cold flush washed through her seeing the outcome of her anger, the impetuous desire to free herself from the titles thrown at her.

“Don’t label me,” she said, glaring at him.

Her fist shook, the crowd hushed around them, and a few people craned their necks to watch the scene unfold. She stared him down, the fire in her eyes daring him to say something else. The people around them held their breath, a few daring to hope that drama would ensue.

Ace rolled his neck, checking his chin one last time before grinning back at Harlow. He nodded as if approving of her actions.

“Noted,” he said, a smirk on his face.

Harlow felt sick and spun on her heels, fleeing the scene. She could feel bile building up in the back of her throat as the acid pooled in her wrists. Her anger had always been her downfall, the reason she was ostracized even in her hometown, and now it was going to do the same here. She tugged the hood closer to shield her eyes from the icy wind.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

The camp would be talking about her for days, the out of control acid wielder at it again. She couldn’t escape the reputation and didn’t do herself any favors living up to the rumors. Her lodging flashed in front of her and she dodged to the side in favor of a more secluded place. Harlow dashed away the tears on her face, finding a spot a few paces up the mountain where a natural crevice made a barrier against the wind. She settled inside, folding her knees up to her

chest. Her heart was in her throat, the anger at herself, at Ace, and the bitterness of her stupid magic.

The wind whipped around her, snow and slivers of ice swirling through the air. She shivered as the frigid stone bit through her coat. It felt a fitting punishment for punching Ace in the face. Harlow buried her head in her hands, the bitter taste of the other wielder's words circling her. She would never be accepted.

"You have a good arm," Ace said, startling her out of her pity fest.

Harlow lifted her head as he calmly walked towards her hiding place. She hadn't noticed he was following, caught up in her melodramatic thoughts. The lapse in judgement compounded, Harlow scrubbed away the last tears perching on her eyelashes. Ace climbed the few steps up the mountain side, sitting a few feet away from her. He faced out, watching the snow swirl over the tops of the pine trees. Harlow chewed at the inside of her lip. She knew she should apologize, but couldn't find the words stuck on her stubborn tongue. He sat quietly beside her, distant enough to allow her space. She thought of things to say, the words fluttering and falling each time.

*Tell him to leave. Tell him he better watch his words. Tell him something!*

"I had to steal when I ran away from my house," she admitted.

*Why did I just say that?*

The words slipped out before she could stop herself. She had only talked with Jax about her time before joining the Rebels. He had spotted her sneaking away with a small wedge of cheese, a grungy pair of clothes and voracious temper marking her as a vagrant.

"That sounds difficult," he said, adjusting the dagger at his side.



Harlow hated herself for admitting to her past indiscretions. Ace didn't move or say more, running his hand absentmindedly through his hair. He kept his eyes forward, a small privacy for Harlow as she fidgeted with her gloves.

"It was," she said softly.

"Is that why you joined the Resistance?" he asked.

"Somewhat. Jax found me, promised to train me if I promised not to steal anymore."

She smiled at the reminder, the sincerity in his offer hard to resist. It was the first time someone had been kind to her in a long time and she clung to it.

"I used to run stolen goods through the Imperial City," Ace said, taking off his glove.

He held up his hand showing off a jagged scar. It was silvery, an old wound, that wrapped around to his palm.

"I got careless and nearly lost my hand," he said, grinning ruefully.

"That looks like it was painful," she said, wincing as she imagined the injury.

He slipped the glove back on, tucking the edge beneath his coat.

"It hurt like hell," he replied.

Harlow turned slightly to take in a fuller view of his scars. He cocked his head to the side, lifting a lock of hair from his forehead. There was another scar hidden in his hairline that ran across the right side of his forehead.

"This one was for stealing a sword from a guard," he said.

She could see the thin, straight line where the sword cut deep into his forehead. Ace let his hair fall back down over the scar, hiding it from view. He shifted on the rock, throwing his coat over his legs. Harlow bit at her lower lip, stuck for words to articulate her jumbled feelings.

“Thief, to me, is a title of honor,” he said, “especially when it means stealing from the Imperial City.”

He had a devilish grin, one that could cause trouble if not kept in check. Harlow felt her heart rate pick up, the errant thought jolting her from her pity party. The wind picked up, showering snow from the mountain on top of them.

“Old habits die hard,” Harlow sighed.

She couldn’t think of anything better to say as he sat quietly beside her, clearly not fazed by the silence. Her reaction to Ace earlier felt painful, a reminder that her violent magic was an extension of the unwelcome part of her personality. She couldn’t tell if he was being honest with her or why he chose to talk to her after punching him. The idea of apologizing rolled through her mind, but he was standing before she could say the words.

“By the way, you’ve been assigned to a team,” Ace said.

“Oh,” Harlow replied, mildly curious.

“You’ll be on my team, along with your friend Jax,” Ace said.

“What do you mean I’m on your team?” Harlow replied.

Heat bloomed in her cheeks, the shame welling up and choking off a logical response. He had been there to tell her good news and she punched him in the face.

*Oh gods, I’m an idiot.*

He stood up in one swift move, his agility on the rocky terrain evident as he slid easily down to the path. His smug smirk was back on his face, a hint of playful mischief in his eyes.

“We start team training tomorrow at seven,” he said over his shoulder.

Harlow's mouth fell open watching him casually walk back down the mountain. His long strides carried him easily over the jagged edges sticking out of the mountain. He was nearly out of sight, lost to the dense trees, when she stood up.

"What if I don't want to be on your team?" she shouted after him.

"Not an option," he replied.

Harlow stood, dumbfounded, as he disappeared into the woods below. The tangle of emotions vied for precedent as she processed his news. She would finally have a team, but it would be under his supervision. Nobody even knew what kind of magic he wielded, and yet he was leading them? Her stomach did an awkward flip, the nagging thoughts trying to break through her barriers. He was annoying. Prideful. Irritating. *Maybe a little attractive*. And now he was going to be her captain. The wind started to howl, kicking up a fresh wave of snow. Harlow shivered, the cold seeping to her bones, the headache a raging migraine at this point.

She shimmied down the side of the mountain, the snow covering Ace's tracks. The headache potion sat snugly in her jacket alongside a sleeping potion. Jax would have been appalled that she had slipped back into old habits, but his morality could suffer her a night of rest. If she was starting on Ace's team tomorrow, the last thing she needed was Fenric invading her dreams and leaving her frustrated the next day.

## Chapter 8

The camp was buzzing with new recruits and rumors about more towns sheltering mages on the run. The Resistance had made it their mission to liberate more of the towns from the Regent's control. They were slowly destabilizing her hold, showing the nonmagical people that mages were not to be feared. Harlow picked her way through the street, ducking into a side street where Ace was polishing off a plate of dry jerky. She cleared her throat to announce herself, a nervous energy zinging through her body.

"Harlow, to what do I owe the honor?"

"I thought you might be interested in a town I passed coming up from the south camp," she said, forgoing formalities.

He raised an eyebrow. "What about this town?"

"Most of the towns I passed had a few soldiers, maybe ten max. But this other town was swarming with soldiers, at least forty of them. If it has that many soldiers, there must be something of worth inside."

Ace took a long sip of his water, his eyes not leaving her face. She colored under his scrutiny.

"I think we should figure out what they are hiding in there," she added, biting at the edge of her lip.

He contemplated her suggestion, humming thoughtfully while he picked over the remains of his food. The town kept coming back to her, the promise of secrets hidden inside intriguing her. Even if there wasn't valuables there, this would be another town free from the Regent's control and there were bound to be a few hidden mages. It was an easy yes. This was the

Resistance's objective, after all, to free towns and find more mages to stage a revolt. It was the perfect opportunity to make headway.

"What do you think will be hidden inside?" Ace asked.

"Does it matter? If we free the town, that'll give us more supplies and magic wielders. Plus, we can figure out why the Regent put so many soldiers there."

She could see the wheels turning in his mind. There had been moments that she considered going on her own, sneaking into the town, but the chance of being caught kept her back. But, if Ace took the whole team, they could figure out what was inside.

"How far away is the town?"

"It took us about half a day to reach the south camp after we passed the town. It was on the north side of the mountain where there are still paths connecting the towns."

"I'm interested," he said, rising up from a barrel. "but I think we need to do recon first. Let's grab the others and head to the town. We need to know what kind of numbers we are up against before we storm the town."

"Are you serious? Just like that?"

"We were the next team scheduled to clear out a town so this works to our benefit," Ace replied.

Harlow could hardly contain her excitement. This had gone much better than anticipated. She was certain there was something important hidden in the town.

"Meet me at the gate tomorrow morning. Bring layers," Ace said, leaving without another word.

Harlow raced away from the alley, bumping into people as she searched for Jax. He was in the medic tent, training to be the on-mission healer. This was what she had wanted, a chance

to get out of the camp and show her worth. They would get the information needed to free the town, convince more nonmagical individuals that they could be trusted. She would show them that magic didn't need to be feared. It was one small step, but at least it was a move in the right direction.

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The group left early the next morning, their supplies limited to allow them better mobility. There were five of them in total, a small group to keep suspicion lower. It was a risky move going to a town crawling with soldiers. They would have to move quietly, slowly through the woods to keep from being detected. Ace had warned them of the risk of capture. It was a fear that they all lived with, the unspoken terror of being taken to the Imperial City. It was a death sentence. While it scared a couple of her teammates off the mission, the idea of being captured didn't deter her. Harlow knew what it was like to be held captive and while she wasn't up to repeat the experience, it had at least prepared her for the possibility.

She turned her thoughts away from the past, checking on Jax as he checked the area ahead of them. They had been walking for a good two hours. Ace had run ahead to scout out the area, his absence leaving an uneasy feeling in the group.

"I hope we stop soon because my feet are blistering," Thomas said.

His red hair was peeking out of his hood. The wiry water mage had a surly expression on his face and complained more than most about his bodily ailments.

"Stop griping and be glad you were asked to be on this mission," Tess snapped.

Harlow liked her with her sharp brown eyes and quick wit. She kept people in line, calling them out when necessary, and didn't put up with Thomas' complaints.

"I'm not complaining I'm just saying-"

His words were cut short by an arrow whizzing through the air. It landed with a thunk in his right shoulder. There was a second of silence, numb confusion before the air was doused with screams. Harlow rolled to the side, ducking for cover behind a cedar tree. Another arrow zipped through the air heading straight for Tess. She swerved moments before impact and scurried to the cover of trees.

Harlow scoured the woods hoping to find the source of the ambush. There were shouts and howls echoing in the woods. More arrows showered the area, flying at random, Harlow took a steadying breath, collecting her senses before darting to another tree.

She could hear Thomas crying and cursing somewhere in the shadows. Tess was scaling a tree where she would be able to shoot firebolts with her bow. Harlow couldn't tell where Ace and Jax had gone, but took it as a good sign that they weren't visible. Her heart beat heavy in her throat, the itch to fight culminating from the weeks inside the camp.

Crouching low to the ground, Harlow saw a flash of white move between two thick pine trees about thirty feet away. She centered herself, summoning the acid to her wrists. It burned as it licked through her veins, stinging as it pooled under the glands.

*Aim. Don't waste this shot.*

She slipped to another tree, trying to get closer to the movement. A blazing arrow flew through the treetops. There was a strangled yelp that echoed in the woods. Tess had found one of her targets.

Harlow watched the shadowy figure move again, attracted to the sound of the wounded in the woods. They were closer, enough for her to hit them if she strained. She took a deep breath and angled her wrists forward.

*Release.*

The acid arched through the air in a bright green streak. She heard the splatter moments before the figure dropped to the ground with a scream. Harlow sprang from her hiding spot and ran towards the sound. Her breathing was loud in her ears in the quiet forest. The figure clutched at their face and screeched in pain. She smelled the charred skin, heard the popping of the acid as it ate away at the skin. Harlow leapt over a fallen tree; her target closer with each step. She swung her leg around and struck out with all her might. Her boot slammed into the side of the assailant's head, crunching as it dragged them to the ground.

A fierce pride seared through her as she watched them crumble. There were more people in the woods, the shouts and loosing of fire bolts reminding her to stuff the pride for another time. Scared of revealing her position, Harlow darted into the woods and weaved her way towards the most immediate noise. She could see Jax fighting with one person, their cloaks swishing through the air. His eyes were bright silver, the darkness veiling his quick movements.

A second figure appeared behind Jax, arms raised over their head. Harlow reacted blindly rushing forward. She flung the acid at the hooded figure behind Jax. It missed, splattering the tree beside Jax. The momentary distraction was enough to make the figure whip his head. Harlow saw a flash of teeth and puckered red skin. The hood remained over his eyes as he snarled at her.

He bellowed, a guttural roar that shook the trees, and charged towards her. There wasn't time to grab her dagger from her thigh sheath. The massive man spread his arms as if to take both of them out.

His scared face was closer in view, the pounding of his feet closer and closer. Harlow waited for the split second it would take for him to get to her. She tensed, holding incredibly still. He was a few feet away, arms wide, teeth barred. The figure swung his right arm with a roar. She



dropped down, rolling to the side. Her assailant swiped uselessly at the air, crashing into a tree beside her. Harlow leapt up and kicked him in the ribs, feeling the bones crack beneath her foot.

He let out a putrid wheeze, crouching down to clutch his broken ribs. Adrenaline singing through her veins, she fired off globs of acid at the fallen attacker. He roared, thrashing as the acid burned his skin. She caught a glimpse of Jax savagely punching his attacker in the gut and then elbowing him on his exposed back. The man fell without a second word, no sound of protest as he crumbled.

Jax raced over to Harlow, kicking the growling man in the head. He thudded to the ground, silent. The screams in the forest had grown quiet. They stood back to back, surveying the area around them. Harlow's wrists were burning and throbbing with the unused acid. She could feel sweat dripping down her back and coating her hairline.

"Do you think that's it?" she asked.

Jax held up his hand straining his ears. He closed his eyes, focusing all of his energy on his enhanced hearing skills.

"I think we are clear," he said, sweeping his locs out of his face.

Harlow nodded, keeping up her search of the woods. This was enough noise to attract anybody else in the area. They needed to get away, quickly.

"That was crazy, but look at how badass we-"

"Not now," Harlow interrupted, jerking her head to the side.

Jax followed, reaching for her hand to guide him through the trees.

"We need to find the others," Harlow whispered, doubling back through the forest. Jax nodded mutely, blinking heavily as his sight slowly came back. They hid behind a boulder,

checking for more assailants before navigating to their injured teammates. Thomas was gasping on the ground, Tess holding the wound with an iron grip.

“Thank the gods,” Tess said, relief flooding her pinched features.

Harlow rushed over, looping one arm beneath the weakened mage.

“Ace told me where to find him if we got separated,” Jax said once they had hoisted Thomas from the ground.

He had lost a lot of blood, his shoulder a crusty mess, but he would survive. Without hesitation, Jax led them through the woods following the path given by Ace before their journey started. They jumped at the sounds of the forest, fearful of retribution.

“Up here,” Jax said.

They pushed forward, finding a cave hidden on the side of the mountain. He muttered pushing aside the branches and barriers that kept the area protected. It was empty, save for a few cots, but it was a welcomed haven. Harlow collapsed onto the floor while Tess started a fire at the back of the cave. Her head pounded furiously.

She searched for signs of Ace, a smidgen of fear itching at her throat that he wasn't here. Had he been hurt? Was he still out there? She didn't even know where he had gone when the attack happened.

The cave was silent beyond the crackling of the meager fire. Thomas had passed out when Jax removed the arrow, a stick clenched between his teeth. Careful to clean the wound with salves from the healers, Jax secured a bandage and sling to keep him from moving. Tess moved around nervously checking on Thomas, rearranging their supplies, and peeking out the entrance to the cave.

Harlow fought the exhaustion tugging at her eyelids. She wanted to curl up on one of the cots and take a long drag on her sleep potion. It had been an hour, maybe two, and there wasn't any sign of Ace. Jax thought he had gone after one of their assailants, but couldn't be sure. The unease was palpable, each of them wondering why their captain would leave during an ambush. Harlow reasoned that he must have acted for a reason.

They waited at the edge of the cave, Jax making up theories for where Ace had gone, but Harlow's attention was drawn to the cave entrance. The branches rustled as Ace slipped through the barrier. His clothes were drenched, ice was clinging to his hair, and there was blood dripping from a slash in his abdomen.

"Oh gods," Harlow said.

They both stood, rushing over to their captain. Ace put up his hands, a gouge deep in his palm parted with the gesture. He went to sit on an empty cot, hissing as he grabbed the wound at his side. He produced a vial from his pocket and ripped the cork off with his teeth, the other arm still clutching the oozing wound. Ace took a heavy drag on the potion, wincing as it burned down his throat.

Jax didn't waste time standing there and started grabbing the salves they had packed. The haze in Ace's eyes started to fade, the pain receding with the use of the potion. She felt an urge to sit beside him, check for other wounds, and clean the blood from his hair.

"Is everyone alright?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Thomas took an arrow to the shoulder, but we patched him up. We took down three attackers, but couldn't bring them in for questioning because—"

Ace held up his hand, a weary expression on his face. "You don't have to explain. You did the right thing."

Jax's face lit up with the praise. He gestured towards the bandages in his hands. Harlow gingerly removed his coat and pulled the soaked shirt over his head. She expected him to protest, but perhaps she had underestimated the level of his pain.

"Tell me what happened," Ace said to Jax.

Harlow felt awkward standing beside them, her hands uselessly at her side. She stole a glance at Ace, to check his wounds of course, and sucked in a harsh breath. There was a gash running from the left side of his rib all the way to the tip of his right hip. How was he keeping a conversation with Jax with a wound like that?

"Could you bring me the lemongrass oil, Harlow?"

She jolted forward to get the supplies for Jax. He reported every detail possible to Ace while Harlow handed him the oil. He meticulously applied the oil, adding a green sappy binding agent to the wound.

Ace didn't wince or jump as Jax tended to him. He listened intently, nodding along with the report. Harlow clutched the fabric of her shirt between her hands, watching as Jax cleaned up the wounds. She couldn't imagine what had attacked him and how he survived.

"I can take care of the rest. Thank you, Jax," Ace said.

He wiped a gash on his arm with a clean cloth and wrapped it tightly with a bandage. Harlow could see Jax itching to take over, his training screaming procedures in his mind. Both of them wanted to ask Ace what had happened to him. It was clear he had been in a bad fight, but where had it taken place? How did he escape?

"I was ambushed by two mages working for the Regent," Ace said, grimacing as he tied a bandage over his bloody knuckles.

"Really," Jax said.

Harlow shot him a harsh look, reminding him to tone down his excitement. He adjusted his face, less smile and more serious determination.

“I tried to reason with them, but they didn’t care,” Ace said.

“Oh.”

“They felt safer with the Regent,” Ace added, a bitterness in his tone.

“That’s insane,” Jax replied. “Did they do this to you?”

Jax gestured to the huge gash in his side now covered in a sticky bandage. Harlow winced looking at the wound.

“No, they have wraiths,” Ace added, a darkness clouding his eyes.

The air left the room, the mention of a wraith spiking the dire nature of the mission. If they had wraiths, there was no way they could take them alone.

“I thought the Regent had eliminated them, but I was wrong.”

The gash on his abdomen made sense now. Wraiths were horrid creatures, talons for hands, serrated jaws, and screeches to rival the wind. They were cursed. Wraiths were said to be people turned monster for unspeakable deeds. Roaming the earth, wraiths attacked without reason and feasted on dead flesh. Harlow had never heard of wraiths joining up with humans and the revelation sat sour in her stomach.

“How are we going to fight them?” Jax said.

Ace rubbed his stubbly jaw and then ruffled his hair out of his eyes. Thomas grunted in the corner, his presence startling Harlow. They couldn’t keep going with him injured and their captain sporting a heavy wound too.

“First, we send Thomas back to camp. He needs to be tended to in case anything is broken. As for us, we keep going. I have faith in you two to scout out the town.”

“We are going into the town alone?” Harlow blurted out.

“I thought you liked a challenge?” Ace replied.

“Yeah, but I also like being alive,” she replied, frowning at him.

“Then this will make you feel more alive than ever before,” he said.

She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. The nerves were kicking in the closer they came to the town. Yes, it had been her idea, but that didn’t mean she was free from fear.

“You two are capable individuals. I have total faith in you,” Ace added,

Jax went into a full on speech thanking him for his confidence, still angling for a promotion, and left Harlow to contemplate the next move. Tess rustled around on her cot, sitting up with a bleary rub of her eyes. She smiled upon seeing Ace.

“You’re back,” Tess said, rising from her cot.

Harlow used the break in conversation to organize her bag. She stripped off her gloves, beating them against the side of the cave to remove the dirt. She tried to ignore the conversation behind her. Tess and Jax were peppering him with questions about his fight, the fawning making Harlow want to gag.

It was decided that Tess would go back to the camp with Thomas, even though she protested the order. They would alert another team while the other three swept the area in case more assailants were in the woods. Harlow was certain she would have been the one to return, but Ace had insisted that her acid magic would be helpful.

Harlow settled into a cot, letting the hush of night calm her frayed nerves. The surprise attack had upset the team and reminded her of just how dangerous this mission could become. She swallowed the lump in her throat and focused her frazzled thought on one thing, uncovering what those soldiers were protecting.

## Chapter 9

The next morning was met with more negotiations from Thomas and Tess, the latter wanting to remain with the group. Ace was firm and sent the two back to the safety of the camp, Tess glaring at him over her shoulder. His movements were stilted and he winced each time his arm went above his head.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” he said, catching her gaze.

“Are you sure?” Jax asked.

“I’ve had worse injuries,” Ace replied, tapping his forehead.

She thought to protest, but knew it wouldn’t change his mind. If he said he was well enough, then she would believe him. Harlow slung her pack on and flipped the gray hood over her head. They departed without a word, the dull morning sky filled with heavy clouds. The town was an hour away, the terrain changing from rocky inclines to gentle slopes. Dirt paths started to appear, winding trails that went to homes tucked up in the hills. Ace motioned for them to follow into a cluster of trees, branches brushing their shoulders.

“Remember, this is just observation. Avoid confrontation at all costs. We don’t want to alert the soldiers that we are searching the town.”

They nodded, adjusting the extra layers of clothes to cover their features. Jax hid his locs and tugged his hood further down his face. Harlow wrapped a scarf over the lower half of her face. It would have to do.

“Let’s go,” Ace said, tilting a wide brimmed cap.

Adrenaline thrummed through her veins. This was what she had wanted when she joined the Resistance. A chance to uncover the lies of the Regent, to sneak into the places she had taken over by force and reveal the secrets she kept hidden. Harlow was certain there would be

something worthwhile here. There had to be with the excessive amount of soldiers patrolling the tiny town.

The dirt paths grew wider the further they walked and branched off to encompass the smattering of homes clustered together. The squat buildings were weathered from years of harsh winter, the stone worn down. Skeletal tree roots popped up out of the ground and crept along the paths. Harlow watched the soldiers gathered around a building with steam billowing out, the smell of fresh bread making her stomach ache. She kept to the sides, careful not to draw attention to herself. There was a mix of soldiers and towns people in the area today. The gray clouds not deterring them from bartering for cloth, food, and other materials with one another.

It was a sparse town. The civilians kept their distance from the soldiers and cast wary glances their way. Harlow bit her tongue when one soldier struck an older man, her instinct to punch him in the throat nearly blowing their cover. Ace put a hand on her shoulder when she jerked towards the cowering man. She glared at the soldier as they passed him.

Ace went to a stand where an elderly woman was selling bread, her gnarled hands arranging the loaves on a small cloth.

“Might I trade a scarf for a loaf of bread?” Ace asked.

The woman raised her head as if surprised to be asked for payment. She started to speak, but a soldier slapped his hand down on the table. The woman jumped and shrank away from him.

“The loaves are for soldiers only,” the guard barked.

“My mistake,” Ace said, bowing his head to the man.

The soldier crossed his arms over his leather coat, the gleaming Regent insignia reinforcing his words. Harlow watched as the elderly woman went back to adjusting the loaves.



She shifted the pieces around, handing one to the soldier, and deftly tucking another into her blousy sleeve. Ace made a low bow before turning away from the table.

“I hate walking away,” Harlow grumbled.

“I know, but we can’t cause a stir.”

Harlow felt someone tug at her elbow. She turned to see the elderly woman holding out a loaf.

“Please, take this,” she said. “The soldiers can survive without this loaf.”

“Thank you,” Harlow replied, taking the soft bread.

The older woman shuffled away without another word. Jax took it from her and covered it with a clean cloth, tucking it into his pack. Harlow watched the woman disappear into her home. She wished there was something of value she could give her, but her shabby Resistance clothes were the extent of her possessions.

They kept up their exploration of the town and came to rest near a collection of boulders on the edge of the woods. Jax cleared his throat and nodded towards a tall building leaning as if it might tumble down the mountain. There was a concentration of soldiers there, some on guard, others milling around with bits of food in hand. Harlow counted two entrances, one at the front and another on the right side where guards sat eating together. It wouldn’t be easy to get in, but it was bound to house something important.

“I’ll create a distraction so you two can go inside,” Ace said. “If you get into trouble, whistle for me.”

Harlow and Jax nodded, falling back to the edge of the woods. They kept their heads down, pretending to be foraging, and cast cautious glances back at Ace. He kept an even pace as he went towards the gathering of people trading handmade items. One moment he was leaning

over a table of pottery and the next, his arm nudged over a barrel with a crackling fire. The barrel rolled down the lane, straight towards a pile of wood near the soldiers.

Soldiers shouted over one another, scrambling to stop the fire from consuming the entire stock of wood. Harlow grabbed Jax's hand and made a dash towards the dilapidated building. Soldiers were shouting to get more water from the wells. Harlow hugged the wall, checking before sneaking around the back. They crouched down. There was still one soldier holding his spot at the door.

Jax put his finger to his lips. He picked up a stone and tossed it hard into the woods. The soldier turned and Jax bolted out. He had his hand around the man's mouth before he could scream. Jax tightened his hold on his neck, the soldier slumping to the side as he passed out. Harlow rushed out to help Jax drag the man behind the building. They shoved him out of sight and checked for keys in his pockets, but there was nothing there.

They held to the wall, trying to blend in as they slipped inside the building. There was one giant room with a few supplies stacked in the corner. Harlow frowned, confused that it was nearly empty. There wasn't a soldier inside, not a single guard in front of a door.

"Why would they guard this if there isn't anything here?" Jax asked.

Harlow's guts dropped. If there wasn't anything here, they had risked their safety for nothing. She shook her head and started searching the walls, running her hands over the rough surface.

"There has to be something. Keep looking," she said, scouring the nearly empty room.

She checked the floors, stone and a bit of dirt, but nothing out of the ordinary. One table was set near a window with a collection of letters. Harlow stayed low to the ground as she crept

over, pocketing all the missives into her pack. She couldn't return without something of worth and she hoped these letters might hold a few secrets.

She kept scouring for more clues, an indicator that there was more being protected than a few letters. The walls were plain. Despite the rising nausea that this might have been a bust, Harlow ran to the opposite side of the house. She ran her hand over the walls, a ridge near the corner catching her attention.

"Over here!"

Harlow moved over the bumpy surface, finding a small handhold beneath the stacked stones. She gripped the hollowed-out stone and gave it a hard yank. The edges of a door appeared, the stones crumbling as she tugged at the ponderous door. Jax put a boot on the wall and pulled alongside Harlow. They managed to dislodge the entrance enough to slip inside, their clothes catching on the ragged stones. Before them was an archway leading to a set of stairs. The steps vanished into darkness deep into the ground.

"Let's hope this door doesn't close," Jax said.

"Not helpful," Harlow replied, swallowing the unease at being trapped.

Jax pulled out the kindling from his pack, striking a stone to make a small flame. It caught the bundle after the third try and cast an orange glow over the archway.

"Now or never, right?" Harlow said, taking a deep breath.

She took the first step towards the stairs, covering her nose with the scarf as the dank smell of wet earth wafted up. It was a steep descent, the tightly stacked steps crumbling on the edges. Jax kept a hand on her shoulder, squinting as the flame flickered above his head. The deeper they went, the cooler the air became, chill bumps covering her arms.

"Last step," Harlow said, tapping the dirt floor in front of Jax.

In front of them was a tunnel carved from earth and reinforced with stone arches. Harlow ran her hand over the smooth stone, tracing the carving of a mountain in the rock. She motioned for Jax to put the fire near the others, finding a symbol for wind, water, and fire on the other arches.

“Do you think it’s for the types of magic?” she asked.

“It could be, but why is it down here?”

They pressed forward, staying close to each other as the packed dirt led them into a solid wall with an engraving over a carved doorframe. Jax put the flame up so she could get a better look at the writing.

“Huh, it says ‘Relinquish the gift to enter’,” Harlow said, frowning at the inscription.

“What gift?” Jax asked, his shoulders dropping.

Harlow began pacing the area, tapping her chin with her finger. She thought of the earth symbols, the shaky connection to their magic. If they had an earth mage with them, this wouldn’t be a problem. They could simply remove the stone with their magic unlike hers which could only burn through the dirt.

“Wait,” she said, pausing at the door.

She stepped up to the entrance and ran her hands over the surface. There were no obvious handles, but there was a carved out spot that fit her hand. Harlow closed her eyes and summoned the acid to her wrists. The heat raced up her arms, a spray of acid coating the indentation in the wall. It hissed on impact, the stone groaning as it bubbled on the surface.

“Why did you do that?” Jax exclaimed, grabbing a scarf to wipe away the acid.

“No, wait!”

The door gave way, opening gradually as the stone absorbed the acid. Jax stared, his mouth wide open.

“What was that?”

“It said relinquish a gift so I gave it my magic,” she said, shrugging.

“But how did you know?”

“I didn’t,” she replied. “I was mostly hoping it would work and if not, the acid might put a dent in the wall.”

“You are the luckiest mage I’ve ever met. I don’t know how you have survived this long,” Jax said, shaking his head as he stepped through the door.

“It worked, didn’t it?” she called, following after him.

They paused to take in the cavern they had found. The walls were solid white granite, the surface covered in carvings. In the center was a dais with three raised platforms. Harlow took a hesitant step forward, running her hand over the carvings. Jax came to her side and held up the flame. She couldn’t make out the depictions, the dimly flickering fire casting a dull light over the wall.

Harlow searched the room for another light source, certain that the creators of this had to need it. Sconces with old were placed around the room. Harlow grabbed the kindling from Jax and went to work, illuminating the underground room. Her feet echoed in the cavern as she went to the dais. Each platform had a symbol etched into the floor. She crouched down, Jax’s soft footsteps coming up behind her.

“What do you think those are?” Jax asked.

“I’m not sure,” she muttered. “Bring the fire closer.”

He moved forward, illuminating the inscription circling the image of a human. Harlow furrowed her brow as she read. She couldn't make out the message and leaned forward, her hand resting on the embossed human.

"Ouch," she yelped, yanking her hand away.

"What was that?" Jax said, turning as if to fight.

"The rock cut me," she replied, scowling at the stone.

Harlow shook her hand, droplets of blood splattering the platform. A rumbling started underneath her, the platform starting to glow as it rose up from the ground. They both leapt back, mesmerized as the stone piece rose up to reveal a hollowed out crevice. Harlow crept towards it. She prayed to the gods that it wouldn't start moving again.

Inside, she found a scroll rolled up tight, the edges mildewed from being underground. Harlow took it out and moved away from the platform. Jax was beside her with the flame again and she put an elbow between them. It would be a colossal misstep to burn the scroll they had worked so hard to retrieve. Harlow gently unfurled it, her hands shaking.

"On this, the first day of winter," she read aloud, her mouth going dry.

"The magic has been stabilized with the assistance of the elemental line. Our magic has brought peace to the earth mages. To honor the gods that created the magic, pillars have been constructed as conduits of our individual magics. We will place offerings each year in accordance with Trevail's customs."

Harlow turned the scroll over, hopeful for more, but it was blank. She read it over again. Jax moved closer and squinted at the scroll, his lips moving as he processed each word.

"If this is true, there are two magical lines in Trevail," Harlow said.

"And this elemental line was not from here," Jax added.

Jax went back to the platform and felt around for more scrolls. He went to his knees and started mumbling to himself. Harlow carefully put the scroll back in its hole, jumping back when it retreated into the earth.

“What did you do to make that open in the first place?” Jax asked.

She looked at the platform and mentally retraced her steps.

“I put my hand on the platform and then it cut me...”

They both stared down at the shallow platforms, the symbols embossed into the stone. Jax crouched down by the second and examined the image. He skimmed his hand over the triangle with an eye inside of it. Jax hissed, taking his hand back as blood dripped on the ground. The platform rumbled just like before, the rise bringing out another hidden scroll.

“It seems to need our blood,” he said, grimacing at his hand.

He took out the scroll and handed it to Harlow. She unfurled it. The writing was different from the first, the slanted letters harder to read.

“On the fifteenth winter since arriving in Trevail,” she read.

“Though our gifts are not of the same origin, we have found that children of two mages are able to manifest either types of magic. We have not yet seen a child able to wield both earth and physical magic, but the mingling of the two brought forth more of the physical line. It appears the earth mages are more prevalent in the unions. Perhaps the pillars connection to the earth increases their influence. ”

The letters swirled in her mind at a dizzying speed. She handed the scroll to Jax and went to the third platform. The last one had a head engraved. Harlow pressed on the cut in her hand to see if it would open, but it remained shut.

“Come try with your blood,” Harlow called, frowning at the ground.

Jax did the same, but there was no movement. It seemed the other magical type wasn't present which meant the final piece was lost to them. They tried to pry the stone loose and ended up with broken nails instead.

"I think I get it," Harlow said, sitting near the first platform.

She put her hand on the spot with the human outline, the magic in her body humming in response.

"If the letters are true, then it confirms that Trevail was founded by four mages with control of land, water, air and fire," she said, "and were made stronger with something called an elemental line."

"A completely different type of magic," Jax added.

"The magic is born from the physical body, not the earth," Harlow replied, her mind whirling with the possibilities. This changed the way she thought of her magic. It was her body that manifested the magic, born from within her very skin.

"Which would mean the acid comes from the bile in your stomach."

The idea of her magic being from the acid in her stomach made her squeamish. It sat better with her when it was still a mystery

"This is amazing! Imagine what could happen if we found more people like you," Jax replied.

At this point Harlow gave him a pointed look, waiting for him to catch up with the implications of her magic and his. His eye widened, shock registering on his face.

"Oh, I'm one of the three," he whispered.

"You aren't an earth mage, Jax. Your magic stems from your body," she said.



Jax relaxed his head against the wall behind him. This was a lot of information to process and Harlow could appreciate just how life altering this was for both of them. The magic in Trevail could be more, they could usher in a new era where mages weren't stifled.

"It makes sense that my magic would be darkness," he said, his voice soft.

"What do you mean?"

"My eyesight," he replied quietly. "I project the darkness I experience with my failing eyesight. It's how I felt much of my life, shrouded in a darkness I couldn't control."

Head spinning, Harlow flicked through her memories with Jax. It made perfect sense now, how his failed sight would dictate his magic. Her heart hurt at his confession. Of course, his altered sight manifested into a potent magic that cloaked his enemies in his daily struggles. She put her hand on his, holding it lightly beneath hers. A tear slipped down his cheek, but she pretended that she didn't see it.

"I'm sorry, Jax," she said quietly.

He didn't respond and simply squeezed her hand.

"The symbols must be for our forms of physical magic. I couldn't open the other two, so my magic must be based on the physical elements in my body."

"And mine is from the five senses," Jax added.

"Then who has magic of the mind?"

The question lingered in the air. It was more than she had hoped for hidden in the town. This revelation meant that the magic in Trevail was more complex than any of them realized. Harlow let go of his hand and turned them to look at the glands. For once, she didn't feel embarrassed by the physical marker of her magic. It was unique and made her, dare she say, powerful.

Harlow needed to think, to process all that she had learned. The Regent had control of the earth pillars, her palace built on top of them. It must be the reason the earth mages were limited. But Harlow and Jax weren't from that line of magic, their potential unlimited. Other mages couldn't hold more than one type of magic, but what if they could?

"If we are able to bind our magic together, we can break the hold the Regent has over Trevail. We can free the other elements so that they aren't being dampened by her control of the pillars," Harlow mused.

It was logical and despite her head spinning, it made her more hopeful than she had been in a long time. The Regent was keeping magic contained, somehow forcing the pillars to bend to her will, and if what the scrolls said was true, they could stop it from happening.

"We need to talk to Ace about this," Jax said, dusting off his pants.

"Agreed," she replied.

Harlow wished she had more time to explore the engravings on the walls, but they were risking being caught as each minute ticked away. The journey back through the tunnels was silent, the revelations rolling heavily through their minds. They pushed on the stone door, hoping the guards weren't waiting for them. The once bright room was now dark. Harlow had thought they were underground for minutes, not hours. Jax held her back, tapping his ears. She held tight to his side as he unfurled his magic around them. Hidden from view, they stayed close to the wall. The soldiers were outside the house, one snoring by the door. They made quick work of their escape. Harlow guided Jax out the door and to the woods, his magic clouding his poor sight. Her mind buzzed thinking about relaying the information to Ace. The mission had been more than a success. It had changed both of their lives.

## Chapter 10

Harlow slept fitfully after the missions. She would begin to dream about being caught, Jax being stabbed, or the occasional mix of the two. It didn't sit well with her. They were successful, sure, but finding out more about their magic made the gravity of her position worse. They were part of a completely different line of magic, one they didn't know much about yet. Ace had listened intently, asking countless questions, and coming to the same conclusions as them. Harlow and Jax were from a completely different magical line.

Slipping beneath her blankets, Harlow thrashed around until she was able to sleep. Her dream was another dungeon, the bars growing closer as the room shrank. She started to scream when the cell stopped shifting. The bars disappeared, the landscape shifting to a mountainside creek. She turned to see Fenric, his hair blowing out behind him and his tanned skin shining in the sunlight. Her shoulders sagged as she sighed, resting on the ground where a thick blanket had appeared.

"How are you?" he asked, his voice a near purr.

"Stressed, clearly," she replied.

He chuckled and the sound filled the air. Harlow hated to admit that she missed the meetings with Fenric. She had hoped he would show up tonight if only to get a few hours of peaceful sleep. He took away the anguish in her unconsciousness, letting her rest in the lush landscapes he created.

"What has you so unhappy?"

Harlow opened one eye. He didn't often ask about her day to day activities. She hesitated on an answer, wanting to tell him about the mixture of joy and fear running through her.

“I found out some interesting information about myself and I’m trying to process it,” she said, hoping it was vague enough.

Fenric came to sit beside her, his bulky frame taking up the rest of the blanket. He motioned the creek to move towards her bare feet, the warm water tickling her toes.

“Tell me more about it,” Fenric said, adding flowers to grass around them.

“I don’t fully understand it yet so there isn’t much to say,” she said.

She shifted away from the water and wrapped her hands around her legs. He rarely pushed the topic and she hoped he caught the message.

“Let’s figure it out together,” he suggested. “I’m guessing it has to do with your magic.”

Harlow felt cold at the mention of magic. He was getting closer to the truth than she wanted and that wasn’t the objective here. She shook her head, trying to dismiss the statement.

“Is it changing? Morphing?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Harlow replied, standing up.

Fenric followed her, his body tense as he towered over her. She had never realized how much taller he was, or maybe it was a trick of the light. The area began to darken and the creek started to rush forward. She stepped back, putting distance between them.

“I’m trying to help you,” he said. “You can talk to me.”

She shook her head. “No, I think it’s time for me to leave.”

His face fell, the easy going smile dropping. She swore there was a flash of red in his light brown eyes, but it was gone too quickly. The clouds were beginning to cover the sky and cast long shadows over the creek bed. This wasn’t the person she had come to know.

“I mean you no harm,” he replied, taking a step towards her.

Harlow leapt back into a defensive position, her fists raised. Fenric smirked, but covered it quickly with a wounded expression. She held his gaze, noting the way the dreamscape started to revert back to the quiet creek he had originally created. The landscape was tranquil again, but the unease pooling in her guts hadn't gone away.

"I have a long day ahead so I need to wake up now," Harlow said.

For a moment they stared at each other, the kindly brown eyes of Fenric turning hard. The fear had drops of sweat pooling around her hairline. She wanted to get out. Now. Every other time he had relinquished her without another word. She raised her chin, not letting him see her fear.

"Of course. Until we see one another again," he conceded.

Relief flooded her as the dreamscape disappeared. Fenric watched her with an unwavering stare, the intensity sending chills down her spine. She woke with a jolt, grateful to be alone in her room. The wind was howling outside, sending a chill through the poorly insulated room. She needed a distraction, something to take her mind off the unease of meeting Fenric.

Harlow blindly walked, her feet crunching the icy snow beneath her boots. There wasn't a person in sight, the guards were probably taking a break in the watch towers to warm their frozen limbs. The ice bit at her exposed face, cheeks burning, as she paced around the camp. She had no direction other than away from her bedroom. The night had no regard for her fears, ignoring the trembling of her limbs.

The doors were locked on every building she passed, not that she would go in them, but the denial was felt in each closed room. She didn't want to be alone. There were bound to be other mages out tonight, people that might be able to help her assuage the fear clogging her senses.

She slowed down when she spotted a fire burning low in the alley to her left. Harlow inched closer to the heat source, hoping there might be a mildly friendly person nearby. Between the mountain and a building, the alley that ran behind was often dotted with people trying to hide away for a few minutes. She had used them to watch the rest of the camp between training exercises and was more familiar with the alley than she was with the camp.

She peeked around the building, spotting a hunched figure standing beside a grate. There was a small fire crackling and a stick over the top with a hunk of meat. Harlow didn't want to frighten the figure. She cleared her throat once and then again more loudly. The person stayed stock still, aware, but not turning to see her.

"May I join you?" Harlow asked.

"Please, come warm yourself by the fire," a kindly voice replied.

A slim figure stepped closer to the fire, horns dotting her forehead and speckles on her face. She had her jaw covered with a scarf and a bulky coat huddled close to her chest.

"I'm Yara," the woman said, extending her hand to Harlow.

"Harlow," she replied, mirroring the gesture.

"Why are you out tonight?" Yara asked.

There was a moment of hesitation where she wanted to tell Yara about the fear gnawing a hole in her chest. They were all on the same side so it shouldn't be a problem, right? The thought fled and she clamped down on the dread pooling in her stomach.

"I couldn't sleep," she replied.

Yara seemed to chew on her words. Harlow broke their gaze, returning her attention to the fire.

"I'm glad to see I'm not the only one out tonight," Harlow said.

The wind whipped through the area dousing the fire. Yara snapped her fingers, a flame igniting on her fingertips. The fire danced, swirling like a ribbon back to the wood in the brazier. It caught without the use of kindling, the heat more intense than the previous fire. Harlow had seen a few people manipulate fire, but not as many that could make it appear from their fingertips.

“I like the night shift. Less people to deal with,” Yara said, watching the fire.

Harlow tried to keep her eyes off the horns. Plenty of people at the south camp had made snide remarks about anyone with a curse mark, whether visible or not. Most hide the markings, ignoring the stares, but others flaunted their altered features. Harlow would quietly listen to the stories, the whispers about how each person was cursed for trying to steal magic. She hadn’t been brave enough to ask for more details. She certainly wasn’t risking that question tonight in front of an impressive fire wielder.

Yara played with the flames, twisting them around her fingers and changing the colors to vibrant shades of blue, green, and purple. It was mesmerizing to watch her manipulate them with ease, her sharp eyes keen to keep the fire away from her gloves. Harlow wished her element were more beautiful, or at least half as controlled. Yara allowed the silence between them, her dance with the flames keeping them both entranced.

“Your element is beautiful,” Harlow said.

Yara’s eyes lit up and Harlow imagined she was smiling under her scarves. She sent the flames twirling up into the sky, the flames morphing into birds as they soared up into the inky night.

“It’s nice to see the element for its beauty and not just the usefulness in battle,” Yara replied.

“I’d never thought of it that way,” Harlow said, a frown creasing her brows.

“Nobody does,” Yara said. She let the flames descend, morphing them into butterflies that neatly fluttered above her head.

“We were born into a war, whether people realize it or not,” Yara said. “We haven’t been afforded the opportunity to see our skills as a gift. All we can do is try to hold on to it before someone steals it away.”

She was right. Harlow couldn’t recall a time when mages were accepted amongst the nonmagical. Everyone she had ever known with an element was either taken to the Imperial City or fled the moment it was discovered. She had done the same, running away from home when her element couldn’t be hidden anymore. There had been a few kind nonmagical individuals along the way, but most had to choose their own families over a run away mage.

“Can it be stolen?” Harlow asked.

The words flew out before she could stop herself. How could she have been stupid enough to ask about that when Yara was marked for doing the exact thing? Her face burned bright red and she hoped the darkness of the night hid her mortification.

“Who knows? It seems impossible, but in Trevail everything is smoke and mirrors,” Yara said.

Harlow wanted to kick herself for asking about stealing elements. How many times had she wedged her foot in her mouth saying dumb things? She could curl up in ball and let the snow bury her so she wouldn’t say another stupid statement.

“My break is over,” Yara said. She took a few steps forward before turning back to Harlow.

“Come with me and I’ll teach you a trick or two for your element,” Yara said.



“You would do that?” Harlow asked, shocked by the offer.

“Of course,” Yara said, “we are on the same side so I would prefer you know a few tricks in case I need backup one day.”

The warmth in her statement was genuine and despite her embarrassment, Harlow accepted the offer. She nodded, following Yara to one of the few lit buildings in the camp. It would keep her awake, distracted, and might even afford her a new ally.

## Chapter 11

Harlow and Jax were holed up in the headquarters sorting through the stolen letters. It had seemed a good idea to steal them during the mission. Now it felt like an exquisite form of torture. Most of the letters were boring, talking about food shipments, moving soldiers from one town to another, or the occasional reminder about meetings. She regretted stealing them with every letter she read. Her eyes started to close, growing heavy in the warm room.

“Harlow, wake up,” Jax said.

He snapped his fingers in front of her face. She startled, jolting upright in her chair. They had sifted through a dozen or more letters and scraps of papers with nothing more than a few papercuts. It was monotonous work that had allowed her mind to drift and the drag of sleep to be even more alluring.

“Sorry, I couldn’t sleep last night,” she mumbled.

“I slept like a log,” Jax said.

She rolled her eyes, returning her attention to the letters in front of her. The trembling in her hands started up as she tried to stay awake. She was exhausted, mentally and physically, but was afraid Fenric would be there if she went to sleep. He had scared her last night and she wasn’t interested in repeating the unsettling incident.

“This was a terrible idea” Jax grumbled, tossing aside letters.

He rubbed at his eyes, the light filtering through the blinds bothering him. The darkened room made it even more difficult to stay awake. She knew Jax couldn’t handle the full sunlight, but the warm, dark room was working against her drooping lids.

“Harlow,” Jax snapped again.

She jerked awake again. Jax was staring at her now, his silvery eyes piercing in the shadowy room. There were letters scattered around her where she had dropped a few of them and spilled a glass of water.

“You can’t get out of helping just because you are tired,” he said.

“I’m not trying to get out of anything,” Harlow replied.

“Sure, that’s why you keep faking sleep,” Jax replied, smiling at her.

Harlow wanted to punch him in his sanctimonious face. She almost missed his awkward flirting with Rhyland for this haughty version. He was back to being like the annoying older brother she never had and didn’t particularly want at this moment.

“I’m not trying to fall asleep,” Harlow said, “and I’m here to help even if it seems pointless. You don’t have to get defensive with me.”

Jax sighed and rubbed at his temples. There was an edge of darkness seeping from his shoulders and wrapping around his chest.

“I was joking with you,” Jax said.

“Oh,” Harlow replied.

“I feel like I can’t even make jokes with you anymore,” he said softly.

The two were quiet for a moment, the guilt gnawing at Harlow’s addled mind. She couldn’t get it right with anyone.

“I’m sorry,” Harlow said.

Jax nodded, Harlow placing her hand over his for a brief moment. The darkness ebbed away and the room was illuminated again. Harlow picked up the fallen letters and tried to scrub off the water that had dripped on them. She sorted through them, combing through for any detail that might be a coded missive. Jax muttered under his breath, reading aloud some of the letters.

“Huh, this one is for General Shutter,” Harlow said.

She held the letter up for his inspection, turning it to inspect the wax seal keeping it closed.

“It must have been mixed in with the other letters,” Jax replied.

He inspected it closely, turning over the paper with a curious expression. Harlow wanted to open it, pretend that she hadn’t seen his name on the envelope. Her curiosity had gotten the better of her more than once as a kid. She thought of her father using the switch on the backs of her exposed legs after she peeked into his room while he was talking with a friend. The image of his red face, the anger flashing in his eyes as he stormed towards her haunted her.

“I guess we should take it to him, but...” she said.

“But?” Jax replied, a question in his raised eyebrow.

“It was given to us for inspection so it would be reasonable for us to open it and check the contents,” Harlow said.

She shrugged her shoulders. Jax pursed his lips, turning the letter over and over in his hands. She waited for him to give in to his own curiosity, to take the bait.

“We probably should give it to him. It was clearly mixed in with the stolen letters from the city,” he said.

“After we make sure it is safe,” Harlow replied.

The anticipation was always better than the reveal. Harlow wanted to know what it said and the curiosity was burning holes in her resolve to listen to logic. She should hand it over, but what fun was that when she could open it instead?

She gently tugged the letter out of his hand. Jax let it go, grudgingly, and watched as she slid a knife under the wax seal. It made a satisfying pop as it released from the paper, still intact

with the red lion embossed in the center. Harlow eased the letter out of the envelope, careful not to rip anything as she dislodged the short note. Jax leaned in as she unfolded the paper. They scanned the letter together.

*Artemís,*

*I hope you are in good health. We are doing well in the Imperial City. In three days, we plan to travel to Widow's Point to meet our newest family members. I hope that my brother will also bring our favorite niece. The family misses you and hopes to see you soon.*

Harlow sat back disappointed. She had hoped for a little more than a nice letter from a family member.

“That was a bust,” she said.

“Yeah and now we have to give it to him,” Jax replied.

The door swung open, and Harlow stuffed the letter into her jacket. A stream of people entered; Ace's dark head of hair visible in the crowd. Some branched off to other rooms while a few talked in the corner of the room. Jax stiffened, pouring over the letters more intently.

“Did you find anything interesting?” Ace asked.

Harlow knew that Jax would cave and tell him about the letter they had found. He was always the first to cave to authority figures.

“Nope, just a bunch of food lists, family notes, and a few love letters,” Harlow said.

“Love letters?”

“No, just trying to break up the monotony,” Harlow replied.

“Yeah, we have been reading each one meticulously and haven’t found many noteworthy things,” Jax said.

Ace looked between the two of them, a frown on his face. Harlow loosened her posture, relaxing so that he wouldn’t ask more questions. She would give General Shutter his letter, eventually. Holding back the letter felt like a small victory with the overbearing general.

“That’s too bad,” Ace said.

Jax made a nervous laugh. He would crack under pressure if Ace stood over them any longer. He clearly didn’t mind the quiet and used it to his advantage.

“May we be excused?” Harlow asked.

Jax jumped up from his seat, the guilt burning a hole through his tongue. He cleaned up the notes, stuffing them into a box, and swung his coat over his shoulders. Harlow hesitated, checking to see if Ace was still nearby. He was examining a few notes, pushing them aside without much care. She stood, putting on her coat, and stifled a yawn. She planned to grab a satchel of food and continue her search for soldiers willing to hand over a bit of information.

“A moment, please,” Ace said, placing a hand beneath Harlow’s elbow.

She shot a wide-eyed look at Jax who shrugged and hesitated before slowly walking out the door. Muttering curses, Harlow reluctantly followed Ace to the corner of the room. They were out of earshot of the others pouring over maps and notes. His hand lingered a moment, the heat coursing up her arm, before letting go.

He pulled a vial out of his pocket and offered it to her. Harlow stared at it, unsure why he would be handing out random potions.

“What is that for?” she asked.

“It’s a sleeping draught,” he said, “I heard you were unable to sleep. This will help, promise.”

Harlow reached out for the vial. Had he been asking about her? Did someone go and tell him she was up all night? And beyond that, why was he worried about her sleep habits?

“Thanks,” she replied.

“Take a half of a spoonful when you are ready to sleep. It’ll knock you out so make sure you aren’t wandering around the camp.”

The thought of sleeping made her stomach turn.

She tried to hand it back to him, scared of the possibilities. “I prefer to sleep naturally.”

Ace wouldn’t accept it and crossed his arms over his chest. He stared at her for a moment before smirking slightly.

“Are you always this obstinate?”

“Are you always this persistent?”

“Only around you,” he countered.

Harlow snorted, the flattery falling flat as her mind swirled with the images of Fenric. She couldn’t tell if Ace was intentionally making fun of her or not.

“Honestly, I’m trying to help you,” Ace said, scratching at the stubble on his jaw. She turned the bottle over in her hand, inspecting the green contents swirling inside. Thanking the gods for earth wielders able to manipulate plants, she stuffed the potion in her pocket.

“Half a spoonful and you’ll have a dreamless sleep,” Ace said, leaning away from her.

Her tongue felt like it was glued to the top of her mouth and instead of saying anything she settled for a nod. Did he know? Ace stepped around her, off to speak with another group. Harlow took a few steadying breathes and slipped out of the headquarters.

Caught in her self-deprecating thoughts, Harlow walked straight into a broad chest. She stumbled back, nearly falling to the ground.

“Sorry,” she said, disoriented by her muddled thoughts.

General Shutter stared down at her, the coldness in his eyes crawling beneath her skin. He brushed off the front of his coat with a dower expression. His gaze went back to the street, dismissing her as if she were a speck of dirt on his boots.

“Did you sort through the recovered letters?” he asked.

“Um, yes, I did,” she replied.

“Anything of interest?”

She thought of giving him the letter, but something felt off. It could be possible the letter was mixed in with the recovered ones from the town, but what if it wasn’t? She shook her head. He grunted before brushing past her, clearly pressed for a more important matter. She continued away from headquarters, the potion warm in her palm.

Harlow hurried to her room and avoided running into Jax. He would want to know what Ace said and he wouldn’t stop until Harlow had spilled her guts. Plus he would pester her about returning the letter to General Shutter. Something about him perturbed her, and she used that inkling to justify holding the letter. She put the vial on her desk, contemplating her options.

The unease in her gut had her reaching for the potion. She took a big swig, settling into her bed. She wasn’t scared of the dream mage, but maybe a night away would give her clarity. The drag of the potion had her drifting off quickly, slipping into a dreamless sleep.



## Chapter 12

“Trouble sleeping?”

She startled, the foggy dreamscape shifting as Fenric materialized, morphing the training ground into a botanical oasis. Harlow found herself standing beside a stream, her feet touching the edges of the water.

“How could you tell?” she asked.

His movements were cat like, creating a lounge chair for her to rest on while he created more flowers to perfume the air.

“You dream about training when you are having trouble sleeping,” he replied. “It’s all you’ve dreamed about lately”

She whipped around, the haze lifted as she took a step away from him. He cocked his head to the side, the amusement clear.

“I haven’t let you into my dreams,” she said firmly.

Fenric laughed, a low growling sound that made the trees shiver around them. He took a step closer, his hand touching her chin. Harlow jerked away from him. For the first time, she was scared of Fenric’s potential. The control she thought was hers was slipping. Was he in control of her dreams, the liminal spaces she felt were safe?

“I can come and go through dreams whenever I please,” he said.

Harlow took a few steps back, her feet splashing into the stream. The angles of his face grew sharper, his eyes more wolflike than human. He followed her, circling her like an animal.

“You opened the door for me,” he said.

“All I need is one acceptance, and I can enter your dreams at any moment.”

Her face flushed, the stupidity of allowing him into her dreams dawning on her. She thought it was hers to control, but it was his all along. Fenric had been the one dictating their meetings, not her.

“You see, I can tell when you wanted to meet with me. So, I waited to show up then, biding my time watching you fret over your lack of elemental control, and swept in when you needed me most.”

Harlow felt instantly sick, the nausea swelling up the back of her throat. She tried to step further back, but Fenric was too quick. He wrapped one arm around her waist, pinning her arms, and the other grabbed her chin. His nails were more like claws, threatening to rip into her face.

“What do you want with me?” she said.

Fenric turned her chin towards him, his face close enough for her to see the cracks in the visage he had presented. He had mottled red skin under the mask he had created to lure her into a false sense of security. There were serrated teeth peeking from his mouth and a hungry look in his eyes.

“I want your fear,” he whispered.

His eyes widened, the massive jaw opening as he jerked her head to the side. He slowly lowered his open jaw, his hand stretching her painfully taunt. Harlow jerked around, fighting to get out of his grasp. She could feel his breath hot on her throat, the fear spiking with his proximity. His jaw smashed down onto her exposed neck, the teeth piercing her flesh. Harlow screamed, the pain mixing with the shock of his gruesome bite. He clamped down, her throat burning from the prolonged cries for help.

She could feel him laughing, his glee from her torment sickening. Fenric lifted his head, the wound pulsating as blood spilled down her throat and soaked her shirt. He let go of her, her

body collapsing to the floor. She grabbed at her throat, panicked to stop the blood flow. Fenric stared down at her, no longer the beautiful creature she remembered so vividly. In front of her stood a monster, a mix of human and animal.

“Delicious,” he said, licking the blood from his lips.

Harlow scrambled away from him, splashing into the stream behind her. The landscape had remained the same, a beautiful canopy benignly watching him tear into her throat. She wanted out, tried to escape, but his hold was too strong. The fear of being bit again, the pain of his betrayal pulsing like the wound on her neck.

“Let me go,” she shouted.

He smiled at her, the edges of his mouth slick with blood. She wanted to retch at the sight. The thought of spending another minute in this hellscape spread the fear through her faster than fire. He inhaled, the grin spreading across his twisted features.

“Yes, be afraid. Feed me your fear,” he said.

Harlow tried to stop the flow of emotion, but the pain in her neck kept fueling the anxiety spinning out of control. She tried to get up, run away, do something to get out of his grips. This was her own creation, accepted by her loneliness. They had warned her and she didn’t listen, thinking she was strong enough. But she wasn’t.

“Harlow,” she heard a voice yell.

She crawled towards the sound, Fenric following closely behind. He stayed just out of sight, nipping at her heels when she slowed down.

“Harlow,” she heard again.

“They can’t save you,” Fenric chuckled.

There wasn't time to get away, the strain on her mental state dragging her down into the pit with Fenric. He was winning, taking her with him to feed on her fears until she had nothing left. He ripped into her body, over and over again. She cried, begged, but nobody heard her. It was just like they said, but they didn't need to lure you into the woods to drain your blood. They drained you in your own dreams.

*Fight back, fight back!*

She didn't think, just acted on blind panic. He was looming over her, having bitten her heels to the bone. Harlow sprang to her feet, the pain lancing up her calves. Fenric stuttered for a moment, confusion flickering through his faltering grin. She balled up her fist, cocking her arm back, and swung at his left hand. There was a satisfying crack as her knuckles slammed into the back of his hand. Bones snapped and Fenric howled in pain.

Harlow felt the edges of the dream wavering and she used his loss of focus to break his hold. He roared as he faded away, the landscape melting away with his enraged face. Harlow jolted up in her bed, heart thumping wildly as she raised her fists. She scoured the room for Fenric, praying he wasn't anywhere near her. The room was still, the pile of laundry wadded up on the floor and a discarded book on the side table. It felt as if the room were shrinking, the edges wavering like the dreams, and begging to devour her.

She took a moment to steady her breathing, the shaking in her hands, and the aching of her body. There were no physical marks on her neck or feet. The wounds were left in the dream, but the pain lingered. Harlow shook, anxiety rippling liberally through her chest. It had been too easy for him to control her dreams and if what he said was true, he had been able to all along. Her fragile control of the dreams was fake. And if he could control her dreams, how could she go to sleep?

The sky was inky black, the wait for morning hours away. Her mocking thoughts circled endlessly. The room seemed to shrink again and she had to get out. She threw on her clothes, an extra sweater and scarf necessary to ward off the chilly night. In minutes she was out the door, breathing in the crisp air in gasping gulps. She had to get away. She wasn't sure where she was going, but it had to be away from her bedroom. His presence was there, tainting the space she felt was safe.

## Chapter 13

Harlow dragged herself through the crowd the next morning, searching for Ace after the officials meeting had released. She had covered every inch of her interaction with Fenric when she wandered the camp last night. The unease had turned into dread the longer she thought about the encounter with Fenric. He had to be stopped, even if that meant revealing that she had let a dream mage into her mind. The lump in her throat grew with each step, the icy roads louder than normal as she paced the alley waiting for Ace. She spotted his broad shoulders and jumped from her position.

“I need to speak with you,” she said, before she lost her courage.

“Sure, what’s wrong?” he replied.

She fidgeted with her gloves, anxiously tugging at the flaps over her acid glands. He had a leatherbound book with an embossed R under his arm, the debriefing notes hidden from sight. She considered diverting the conversation to the meeting, avoid the inevitable shame that would come from admitting her involvement with Fenric.

“I had a—”

“Captain, you forgot this,” a short man said, handing over a map.

“Thank you,” Ace replied, tucking it into the book.

“Is that for us?” Harlow asked.

“Indeed. We will be raiding a Regent soldier outcropping for supplies,” Ace said, shrugging his shoulder.

“I guess that’s a decent mission,” she said, distracted by her hammering heart.

“What was it you wanted to discuss?”

The knot in her stomach made flushes of bile rush to the back of her throat. He observed her, a crease in his brow.

“I overheard Yara saying she was visited by a dream mage. I think there might be one in the area,” Harlow said, not meeting his eyes.

It was mostly the truth, right? Ace’s shoulders went stiff and he checked over his shoulder. They were alone, the faint sound of conversations fading between the stone buildings.

“That is a very serious matter. Dream mages are dangerous. If they are in the area, we must remove them,” Ace said, his insistence sending shocks of panic through her.

She didn’t say anything else, afraid she would tell him the truth. But if they took Fenric out, the real Fenric, then maybe she wouldn’t have to admit her involvement. The mage had to be nearby, infiltrating dreams from a hidden location. They just needed to find him.

“I’ll speak with the others about it,” Ace said, scrubbing at his stubbly jawline.

“We will keep our eyes open along the way, too. If she has seen the mage, that means there is a good chance they are nearby.”

That was her fear.

“You and Jax will be with me. Make preparations and let him know.”

She nodded as he left without another word. The change in demeanor was unsettling, the gravity of the situation sinking in. She had made a mistake trusting Fenric, that was clear, and now it was time to fix it. The next time she encountered him, she would fight back, use her strength to injure herself enough to wake up. He couldn’t keep her trapped if her body went into fight or flight mode.

Rushing to find Jax, she rattled off the command from Ace, skirting over the issue of the dream mage. It didn’t take much for him to be on board, ready to raid the Regent stores to supply

the Rebels with food and basic provisions. Harlow had to admit that her drab gray and brown ensembles were starting to fray, looking worn. They packed their provisions, Jax dropping by the healing tent to restock his emergency healing supplies. By the time they were ready to go, the sun was starting to fall behind the mountain.

Harlow was on edge as they picked through the forest. She shot out a hand when there were slight dips in the terrain or roots sticking up so that Jax wouldn't fall. The darkness pressed in, the ache in her limbs growing with each step.

"I'll scout out the area ahead for soldiers. Jax, you know where to find me if we get split," Ace said, nodding to them.

He was gone in an instant, the wood swallowing him. Harlow sighed and stretched out her arms. She kept checking over her shoulders, sure that Fenric would appear at any minute.

"Are you okay?" Jax asked.

"Yeah, I am being a little paranoid about—"

Her words were cut off as a stone struck her forehead. Her vision swam and her limbs gave way to the shock. She toppled to the ground. Darkness enveloped her vision and she slipped into unconsciousness.

"I knew you would be back," Fenric purred.



## Chapter 14

Harlow's heart dropped into her stomach. She was unconscious.

With Fenric.

Unprotected.

The oasis was back with its grotesquely beautiful landscape. Trees were weeping with overripe fruit, flowers were a garish red that dripped like they were bleeding. Harlow tried to breath, the spasms of fear clouding her judgement.

"Harlow," Fenric said, "I've missed you."

She wanted to vomit as he ran a hand through his hair. Her instincts cried for her to punch, bite, claw him with all of her might. But she was immobile, bound with vines as thick as trees. He wasn't going to let her go and she couldn't hit him like last time.

"You haven't visited me in weeks," he pouted.

She had actively avoided being trapped with a blood thirsty monster in her dreams, unable to free herself. He could keep her captive until it drove her mad. He circled her, the ragged tips of his nails drawing ragged marks over her neck. She whimpered, the blood beading on her throat. His eyes were completely black, the lids rimmed with a sickly red. He inhaled deeply, feeding on her fears at his appearance.

"I guess absence does make the heart grow fonder," he said.

She knew he was looking for a reaction. Every part of her wanted to fight him, resist with her fists, but the trepidation seeping into her mind was sapping her of her resolve.

"I will get out of here," Harlow said, a bravado she didn't believe in her tone.

"Oh, that's sweet. You won't make it out alive. I am sure of that," he said.

She gagged as he sniffed her hair, his putrid breath close to her face. It was worse than she had imagined being back in his dreamscape. All of the things she had confided in him, the times he had listened to her doubts swirled to the front of her memory. She had thought she was in control and that had made her feel powerful. Now it made her feel foolish because he had been in control all along. Being back brought it back to the surface, the anger at his betrayal.

Fenric growled behind her, the emotions feeding him and the power of his hold. She struggled against the vines. He laughed watching her attempts to free herself from the binds.

“Yes, Harlow, struggle. The more you fight, the more you give into your fears, the easier this will be for you.”

She didn’t know what that entailed, but it for sure was not good for her. This was not how she was going to die. There had to be a way to get out. Fenric circled around her again, drawing his nails across her thighs. She tried not to scream, but the searing pain burned even after the claws were gone. The trees were weeping heavily, drops of blood pouring from the leaves and pooling on the ground.

Fenric laughed as the bloody river began to rise, swallowing her feet and creeping up her legs. She struggled, the panic surfacing as the river reached her waist. He was going to drown her.

“Let me go,” she screamed.

“Give into your fear,” Fenric said, a wicked grin on his face.

He kept laughing at her, eating up the torrid emotions like a starved animal. She could feel the water edging up her stomach, soaking her clothes. Her mind kept whirling, trying to tame the fear swelling without end.

“Yes, keep feeding me that delicious terror,” Fenric growled.

Harlow closed her eyes, concentrating on stilling her heart. She breathed in deeply, willing her body to settle despite the chaos around her.

*Five things I can see: feet, leaves, river, nails, tree—maybe that isn't the best right now*

*Four things I can hear: water, wind, my heartbeat, my breathing*

*Three things I can smell; garbage, sewage, and blood – this technique works much better when I'm not about to die by these smells*

Fenric paced towards her with his brow knitted together, a scowl morphing his features into the wolf of Norse mythology. He roared at her, his breath putrid and his teeth horrifyingly sharp in her face. She closed her eyes again, returning to her concentration technique.

*Two things I can taste: fear and vomit*

*One thing I can feel: a dagger.*

The thought stilled her. Chaos reigned around her as the wind picked up, the water rose to her chest, and Fenric roared while cutting her piece by piece. There was a dagger on her hip sheath. She wasn't sure how it was there and she sure as hell wasn't going to question the gift. Despite the pain, the slow fear of being drowned in a river of blood, Harlow focused her energy on dislodging the knife.

Fenric came back with an ax in hand, swinging it slowly in front of her. She let the fear spike, watching as he slowed his movements to drink in her actions. If she could keep him distracted with her fear, the river would cover her removal of the dagger. She prayed that her acting skills were decent enough to pull this off.

“Please, don't,” she screamed.

Harlow amped up her thrashing, hoping it would entice him to prolong the fear of being hit with the ax. Her fingers grasped the dagger, her wails keeping him from seeing the movement. Fenric's eyes widened, pleased with the anxiety he felt rippling from her.

"Oh gods, not that, please," she cried again.

He swaggered around her dragging the ax over her shoulders. Harlow noticed that the river wasn't rising anymore, but was lapping slowly at her collarbone. It was all a game for him. He wasn't actually going to kill her because then she would be no use to him. It was the anticipation of pain that fed Fenric.

*I've got you now.*

Harlow fed into his games, screaming and crying out when he snapped at her face with his fangs. She kept him oblivious to her movements as she sawed away at the vines holding her captive. Fenric's eyes narrowed, his glee dissipating as her confidence grew. She had to think of something that would scare her so that he wouldn't get suspicious.

"I can't take this anymore," she yelled.

He perked up at her words, summoning snakes to slither up the river. Harlow screamed for real as a snake swam around her. She was terrified of snakes, dangerous or not, and the fear fed Fenric again. While she knew they couldn't kill her, the image still sent waves of panic through her chest. She sawed through the last vine, free enough to break out of this prison.

"You cannot escape the fear. Give in, Harlow," Fenric bellowed.

Drinking in her anxiety, the fear of not being free, and the desperation, Fenric threw his head back with a joyous shout. Harlow used the distraction to throw her arms out, breaking the rest of the vines. She leapt to her feet, the bloody river streaming down her tattered clothes.

Fenric's head snapped back. His confusion fueling her anger.

“But how—”

“Rot in hell,” Harlow yelled.

She slashed with her dagger, slitting his throat open. His gargled screams echoed in the oasis, the blood gushing out and mixing with the river. Harlow watched, satisfied, as his hands scrambled at the gash in his throat. She kicked him hard in the chest, grinning as he collapsed into the river.

The edges of the dream waved, signaling her escape. She ran towards the light without a second look at Fenric’s decaying state. Her throat burned, the pain building from the cuts on her body.

She screamed vaulting up from the hard ground. The air was cold and the ground beneath her was dry, no longer the red river. She searched the area for Fenric, even if she knew he wasn’t there, before taking a deep breath. Her hands trembled at her side, a violent shake taking over her whole body.

Jax was beside her, his face pinched with worry. He wrapped her in a hug, crushing her to his chest. Harlow tried to calm her breathing, but the panic was still thrumming through her veins. They sat in silence for a few minutes, Jax allowing her to shake through the distress. The weight of his arms around her started to steady the frantic beast squealing in her chest, the pressure enough to reduce the swell to a gentle tug.

“What the hell happened?” Jax asked.

He let her go, resting back on his ankles. Harlow ran her hands over her braids, checking to see that blood wasn’t flowing from the wounds in the dream.

“He got me,” Harlow gasped, trying to calm her erratic heartbeat.

“Who?” Jax asked.

Harlow swallowed hard, her throat raw from screaming. She wondered how many times she had yelled out for Jax to hear. The woods shook as the wind rippled through the trees. They weren't safe yet, not by a mile.

"I'll tell you when we are safe. He might be nearby and I can't risk him taking me again," she said, her hands trembling.

Jax chewed back his response, the questions burning in his silvery eyes. He stood up, hefting her along with him and let her lean on him. Harlow was weak, weary from the fight and the battle with Fenric.

"Ace told me where to find him," Jax said.

Without hesitation, Jax lead them through the woods following the path given by Ace before their journey started. They jumped at the sounds of the forest, fearful of an attack.

"Up here," Jax said.

They pushed forward, finding a cave hidden in the side of the mountain. He muttered pushing aside the branches and barriers that kept the area protected. It was empty, save for a few cots, but it was a welcomed haven. Harlow collapsed onto the floor. Her head pounded furiously. All she wanted to do was sleep, but that wouldn't be possible until she dealt with Fenric.

Jax started a small fire and grabbed the bandages from his pack. She searched for signs of Ace, a smidgen of fear itching at her throat that he wasn't here. Had he been hurt? Was he still out there? She didn't even know where he had gone.

"He'll be here," Jax said, fake confidence for her.

The cave was silent beyond the crackling of the meager fire. Jax had tended to the gash in her forehead. Careful to clean the wound with salves from the healers, Jax placed a bandage over the area. Jax came to sit beside Harlow on one of the cots. She massaged her temples where a

pounding headache was forming. Harlow wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon and knowing Jax he would wait up until Ace had returned.

"Spill, what was that in the woods?" he asked, brow raised.

The knot in her throat tightened. She would tell him, but that didn't mean it would be easy. Should she tell him everything? Would it be enough to just talk about the incident in the woods? Knowing Jax he would see through her and pry the whole story out of her within minutes.

"I know why the dream mage is here," she said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"I was visited by him back in the south camp. He was kind to me and I thought he was on my side."

She paused for a moment swallowing the shame building in her chest. This was her fault. She had brought Fenric to the camp and he had taken that chance to hurt others.

"I know he followed me here," she amended. "I thought that I was in control of the dreams. It was nice to feel like I had authority over something and that I was powerful if just in my dreams. He listened to me and didn't think I was weird."

The wind howled outside their cave, whipping icy rain through the air. It was only going to get worse as the night darkened. Harlow sent a silent prayer to the gods that Ace would make it to camp before the freezing rain coated the mountainside.

"I was wrong."

Jax was deathly still, his eyes on his hands.

"He was always in control of the dreams from the moment I let him enter. He figured out my location. I exposed the rest of the camp to his terrors. It's my fault," she whispered.

“Gods, Harlow. This is a lot to take in,” Jax said, running a hand over his face.

Harlow expected the lecture that would follow. He would tell her about being more careful, thinking about the consequences, and he would be right. How many times had Jax saved her with his logical thinking? She deserved his ire.

“I figured out his true nature a couple of weeks ago when he attacked me in my dream. That’s when I started taking a sleep potion at night. I’ve been too afraid to sleep or even drift in case he takes over my unconscious.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Jax asked.

His question struck her hard. She had been bracing for a lecture, but not for the hurt she heard in his voice. It was easier to deal with his disappointment when he put on his big brother persona, but this persona? This one cut deep.

“I was embarrassed,” she said. “I knew that I had messed up, again, and I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

Jax rolled his eyes and rubbed at his face, massaging his forehead. The chill from the wind was seeping into the cave. Harlow tugged her coat closer to her chest, the cold creeping into her bones.

“I could have helped you,” Jax said.

“I know, but if I told you then I would have to listen to a lecture and then you would tell a superior. It would be an ordeal—”

“I wouldn’t have done that,” Jax interrupted.

Harlow cocked her head to the side, grimacing at him. He had reported her when she had snuck out to train back at the south camp at least three times.



“You totally would have told on me. You are always the one to follow the rules, do the right thing, and keep to the straight and narrow. Honestly, I’m surprised you stick with me.”

“I’m not going to betray my best friend,” he said hotly.

“I didn’t say betrayal—”

“You all but did saying I would turn you in because I always follow the rules. I have a mind of my own too you know, and I don’t always follow the rules.”

Harlow grunted, a mirthless smile on her lips. “Please, you turned me in multiple times at the south camp.”

“Yeah, because you were going to get yourself killed and you wouldn’t listen to me!”

“So you turned me in,” she said, the anger bubbling under the surface.

“No, I told them that you were lost in the woods trying to find the camp. They thought you were shit at reading maps. I didn’t tell them that you were trying to fight Regent soldiers by yourself.”

Harlow sat still as his words sunk in, hot guilt washing over her. She thought back to the times at the south camp. They had made her study maps more than normal and not once did she hear them say something about soldiers. Oh gods, she had been so stupid.

“I didn’t know that,” she said quietly.

“Because you never stop to ask or think about anybody else. You paint me to be this asshole, but I’m not, and I’m tired of it. I’m just trying to protect you, but you make it really difficult.”

The truth of his words stung. She bit at her lip, worrying away at the frays on the edges of her tunic. Jax was her best friend, but somewhere along the way she let her perceived annoyances overshadow his kindness.

“I’m sorry,” she said, head bowed.

He sat quietly poking at the fire in front of them.

“It’s alright,” he said, touching the back of his hand to hers.

“So, he was in your mind out there in the woods, wasn’t he?” Jax asked.

She appreciated his jump back into the problem at hand. It was easier to concentrate on the problem of Fenric, something she never thought she would say, than to focus on her demonization of Jax.

“Yes, when I was knocked unconscious, he appeared and took over my mind. I had to fight him and break his hold again. It was awful,” she said.

Her throat tightened talking about it, the images flashing through her mind. She could feel his claws digging into her thighs, the hot breath in her hair, and those soulless eyes relishing her fear. Shivers raced down her arms. He was a monster.

“How did you get out?” Jax asked.

This part of the story was where she couldn’t piece everything together. The first time was nearly a blur, the blind panic veiling the events. This time she had known that injuring him would give her an exit, but if she hadn’t been able to, would that voice have come back?

“The first time he took control, a voice told me to injure him to escape. This time, I figured out that Fenric fed on my fear. He drew out the anticipation of pain, and that gave me enough time to break out of the binds. It threw him off guard enough for me to escape.”

Jax pursed his lips running the statements over again. Harlow could almost see the multitude of questions forming in his mind, the catalogue of varying scenarios that could lead to a viable answer.

“How did you figure out the fear aspect? Did you injure him in real life or just the dream? Can he still hurt you?”

“I don’t know and he can’t hurt me in real life. It was all illusion based, but the fear was real. I noticed it when he told me to feed him fear. He must need it to replenish his magic.”

Jax raked a hand over his face and sighed. He put one hand on hers, a sympathetic expression coming over him.

“I’m sorry, Harlow. That must have been terrifying,” he replied.

She bit her tongue to keep from tearing up. His kindness cut her open, the stoic mask she attempted to wear crumbling beneath his warmth. She nodded, unsure if her voice would hold, and gripped his hand in hers.

The wind rustled outside, the branches parting momentarily as Ace clambored into the shelter. Harlow dropped Jax’s hand and took a steadying breathe. She wasn’t ready to tell him about the incident, not now.

Ace raised his eyebrow. The last thing she wanted to do was tell Ace about Fenric. He would know that she brought the mages. And if he knew anything about them, he would be able to guess the way he tricked her. It was bad enough to tell Jax, but it was unbearable to think of Ace knowing too.

“Is everything okay?” Ace asked.

“Yes, I got hit on the way over and it knocked me out for a second,” Harlow said.

She didn’t want Jax to spill the beans, his need to report to authority often clouding his judgement. He pursed his lips and avoided eye contact with Ace.

“I’m glad you are okay,” Ace said, noting the mark on her forehead.

Ace said little else, letting them know there weren't any soldiers in the area head. They were all subdued, Jax grudgingly taking the offer to sleep. While Harlow was exhausted, she didn't dare close her eyes. Jax had gone to sleep, catching a few hours while Ace kept watch. The night continued to howl outside, the thought of wraiths increasing the fear building in her chest.

Harlow was standing near the entrance of the cave watching the inky sky drench the trees in darkness. Ace stood nearby, far enough away to let Jax rest. She thought about using the potion, but even the thought of closing her eyes made her want to jump out of her skin.

"You should sleep," Ace said.

"I'm too wound up from the night," she lied.

"I'm sure," he said, "it takes an incredible amount of strength to break a dream mage's illusion."

She jerked to look back at him, her eyes wide. He had a serious expression, perhaps even concern in his eyes. There was a moment where she wanted to break down, tell him everything that had happened. He was resourceful and could help. But what would he think of her weakness? How she let Fenric manipulate her with affection with placating words.

"How did you know?" she asked.

There was a fine line in his brow, his dark hair swept back from his face. She preferred the cocky version of Ace because this concern was unnerving.

"I had my suspicions when Yara reported your wanderings the other night," he said.

She should have known when he gave her the potion. It was for a dreamless sleep, more complex than the simple brew usually given. Of course he had known, but she had been too stubborn to realize it. There was a quiet moment where she didn't know if she should be mad

that he knew or glad that he had been clever enough to guess. If it hadn't been for the potion, she would have been in a much worse state.

"I didn't think it was real," she said.

"People love to dramatize the narrative, make people curious, and want to test their strength. Instead of telling the truth, we turn dream mages into boogeymen," he said bitterly.

"You sound like you're defending them," she replied.

"Ha, I wouldn't go that far. They are still dangerous, but when people mystify them, it downplays the reality."

"How do we stop them?" she asked.

Ace took a deep breath and ruffled his hair again. She had only ever heard about the danger, never the way to stop them. Every story she had heard ended in the victim being killed by the mage.

"Dream mages need to be close enough to the location of their victims. Their magic is only as strong as their proximity. If you can drive them away, it'll break their connection. The problem is that some mages are more powerful so it's uncertain how far you have to send them."

"Can't we just, you know," she made a slicing gesture over her throat.

Ace laughed at the insinuation, a genuine smile gracing his lips. "You have a wicked mind."

"Perhaps a little violent," she muttered.

"You continue to surprise me with your resilience," he said, "and I like it."

"We'll see if that's the case when we run into the mages," she replied.

"I have faith," he said, leaning against the cave wall.

Harlow smiled, the brief flicker of confidence igniting deep within herself. He believed in her abilities, even if she felt shaken to the core.

“Take some of the potion. I’ll keep watch,” he said.

She wanted to keep talking to him, but sleep was a heady mistress. The weight of the day settled on her putting stones in her limbs.

“Don’t worry, he can’t break through the potion,” Ace said.

Harlow hoped he was right. She grabbed the vial from her bag, taking a small sip, and settled into the cot beside Jax. He was mumbling to himself and tossing back and forth. The effects of the potion dragged at her eyelids, increased by the bone weary need to relax. She snuck a last look at Ace, his profile outlined in the mouth of the cave.

Blinking slowly, Harlow let herself relax. Ace had been much more understanding than she had anticipated. He was kind, caring and knew that the potion would keep her safe. Harlow’s eyes closed, her last thought a question. How did Ace know the dream mage was a guy?

## Chapter 15

There was an uncomfortable silence in the cave when they had eaten, packed their bags, and readied to leave. Ace turned to the two of them. He had a purple bruise shadowing his jaw and bags under his eyes. Harlow guessed he hadn't slept at all, keeping watch over the group.

"There is a good chance that we will encounter the mages along the way," he said. "I know you both are more than capable when it comes to hand-to-hand combat."

There was a lingering rebuttal in the air, a caveat to his compliment. Harlow bit at the inside of her lip. It had to be her frequently unstable element that gave him pause.

"But I need you to know that fighting with these mages will mean fighting them in your minds as well. At closer range the dream mages can start to project ideas into your mind, make you think that you're winning when they have already tied you to a tree. You have to be careful and keep your minds free of their magic, which means no direct eye contact."

The warning was ominous, and she knew that he was thinking about her connection with Fenric. Would she be even more susceptible to him since he had already infiltrated her mind? Jax glanced over at her with a deep frown.

*Be a little less obvious, Jax.*

"How do we protect our minds then?" Harlow asked.

"The most effective method is to have a physical tell. It could be a hard pinch to the arm, stomping on a toe, or biting at the edge of your tongue. In the dream mages world, the pain you feel comes from them, not yourself. If you injure yourself, you'll be able to break their connection for a second. That moment is crucial. When you see the wavering of the vision, run towards it. That's your exit."

Harlow swallowed hard. The thought of being in close proximity to Fenric sent a cold flush through her. He would target her, she knew that, and she would have to escape yet again. But this time she wouldn't be alone and she had a few more tricks up her sleeve. She was scared, if she wasn't it would be foolish, but this was her chance to pay him back.

"You can also try to injure the mage, but it's much more difficult to do inside the illusion," Ace said.

A hint of pride bloomed as Ace's eyes lingered on her, a warmth to them that spoke volumes.

"Be vigilant. Don't let your guard down and communicate if you see something suspicious."

They kept to the shadows as they moved through the mountain. It was a cloudy day, a light mist coated their clothes, and the wind chapped their faces. There were a few signs of the dream mages, a foot print or a burned out fire, but the further they went the clearer it became that they were further ahead. Harlow's body ached from the fight and the arduous trek. Their journey had been mostly silent, meals were comprised of jerky and bread, and the bitter cold had sapped their energy.

Ace powered ahead of them to find the shelter. The sun was beginning to dip far behind the mountain and their visibility would be diminished soon. Jax slowed his pace to step in line with her.

"So, what's going on between you and the captain?" he asked.

Harlow nearly choked on the cheese she was eating. It stuck in her throat as she tried to swallow.

"Nothing!"



“I didn’t seem like ‘nothing’ this morning,” he retorted.

She slowed her pace to put more distance between themselves and Ace, terrified he would hear their conversation.

“You heard that?” she said.

“Come on, Harlow, I have the best hearing in the camp. I hear *everything*.”

He emphasized the last word, a wiggle of his brows. She didn’t appreciate the smug look on his face or the grin crinkling his eyes.

“Don’t do that,” she snapped.

“Do what? You two have been flirting all morning.”

She was going to hurt him. He was asking to be throat punched and that was all there was to it. Jax clearly was here to fight tonight.

“I don’t flirt with him,” she defended.

“Sure, and he doesn’t keep sneaking looks at you,” Jax replied.

There was a coy smile curving his lips, a mischievous glint in his eyes. She wished that she were anywhere else right now.

“He’s just inflating his own ego trying to get me to say I like him,” she said, dismissing Jax.

“I’m not buying it,” Jax said. “He is into you. Not sure why though.”

She jammed her elbow into his arm. He winced, rubbing at the spot, but the grin never left his face.

“There is nothing between us,” she said.

“Well, if you think that’s true then do what I did with Rhyland,” he replied.

“What do you mean?”

“Kiss him, stupid,” he said, rolling his eyes.

The fluttering turned to a straight racing in her chest. Kiss Ace? That was ridiculous and completely out of the question. He was already full of himself and if she did that there would be no end to his cocky manner.

“But you two are together,” she said.

She purposely used the present tense, terrified of acknowledging that they hadn’t heard from him since he left the camp with General Shutter’s group two weeks ago. Jax flinched at the mention, but shook it off with a smile.

“Exactly, and I thought he didn’t like me until I kissed him,” he said.

There was a rustling in the trees ahead and Harlow clamped her mouth shut. Ace appeared from beneath a pine, a light dusting of needles fell to his shoulders. He spotted them and motioned them forward.

“Up ahead,” Ace called over his shoulder.

Harlow prayed to the gods that he meant there was a shelter ahead because she wasn’t sure her legs would carry her much farther. She charged ahead of Jax, determined to put distance between their conversation. They climbed a steep hill, dodging low branches, and ducked beneath a heavy covering of pine trees. Ace guided them around a set of boulders, revealing a canopy hidden between a thicket of trees. It was much smaller than the cave and didn’t have cots for them to use. Harlow shivered knowing they would be sleeping on the ground.

“We can rest for tonight and prepare for the retrieval tomorrow morning,” Ace said.

“Good, I’m dead on my feet,” Harlow muttered.

Ducking beneath the cover, Harlow shrugged off her bag and eased herself to the ground. It was at least dry, though bone chillingly cold, and kept them hidden from sight. There was enough room for two people to sleep, maybe three if they squished together.

“We shouldn’t risk a fire,” Ace said.

A bitter dread seeped into her chest at the mention of no fires. It would have been a blessed relief to warm her frigid limbs in front of a flame. She wished that their teammate Tess was around and could use her magic to bring a small flame into her hands. At least then she could soak in a small amount of warmth before attempting to rest.

“Take the first rest,” Ace said to them.

“But you didn’t get to sleep last night. I can take the first watch,” Jax piped up.

“I appreciate the offer, but I would be a terrible captain if I took the first rest,” Ace replied, the dark circles beneath his eyes even more pronounced.

“It would be worse if your response time was weakened because you were overtired. No offense,” Jax said.

Harlow had never heard Jax rebuttal a commanding officer before. Maybe she was influencing him more than she thought. She waited to see how Ace would respond. He could take offense, or tell Jax to remember his rank. There was a tense moment where the two men stared at each other. Ace slowly nodded his head, a tug at the edge of his lips.

“You’re right,” he conceded.

A ripple of shock went through both Harlow and Jax, the acceptance without debate out of character. She had expected push back, a couple of denials, but he had simply agreed. If she had said that, he would have argued until the sun was up again.

Jax started unpacking the thick blanket to spread on the ground. It was smaller than she remembered and wouldn't put much space between them. Her cheeks heated up and she turned away to unpack a blanket from her bag. Ace had already taken out his blanket and an extra coat. He laid them down on the thickest blanket and took his time removing the dirt crusted boots.

"I can keep watch with you," she said to Jax.

"It's better to have a rested team," he replied.

She gave him a pointed look, her back turned to Ace. He shrugged his shoulders, a bit of a smile playing on his face. This was intentional. He excused himself to the outside of the tent where he could find a better vantage point in the trees. Harlow tried to follow, but he slipped out before she could think of an excuse to go with him.

*Don't think about what Jax said in the woods. This is a mission and that's all there is to it. Now go and get ready to sleep.*

She dug through her bag trying to find more layers to keep out the cold. It would be nearly impossible to warm up with the chill nestling into the dirt below. Harlow could hear Ace stretching out on the blanket.

*He's just a comrade. Nothing different than falling asleep beside Jax.*

The woods were quiet tonight. There were a few hoots, an owl in one of the trees, but the wind had slowed down. Harlow took off her boots and set them near her bag. Her heart was beating quickly, pulse thrumming in her ears.

"Cold night," she blurted.

*Really, that's all you can think to say?*

He responded by pulling out a sleek fur blanket from his bag. "I'm happy to share with you."

*Share a blanket with him? What was he even thinking!*

“Is that standard protocol, captain?”

She emphasized his title, hoping it would bring their status back into focus.

“I think letting you have my blanket would be well within protocol,” he said.

That was it. She should crawl into a hole. Forget that she existed and pretend that her first thought hadn’t been sharing it with him.

“I thought you, but I was—” she couldn’t finish the sentence.

“It’s fun to see you flustered,” he said.

Propped up on his elbow, Harlow couldn’t keep her cheeks from coloring with an angry flush. He had set her up with that comment. There was no way he intended on her taking the comment as innocent.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she asked.

“I thought it was obvious,” he said.

“Well it’s not, okay!”

There was a stillness to the night. She was rooted to the spot, standing as far away as possible. Harlow was tired of the riddles, the veiled comments and uncertainty. He sat up, the blanket pooling in his lap.

“Alright, then I’ll spell it out,” he said. “I think you are interesting, intelligent, and fearless. You have a sharp tongue and wit that keeps me on my toes. I like that you aren’t afraid to fail. I want to know you, be around you, and that hasn’t happened for me in a long time.”

She was dumbstruck, rooted to the spot. Fearless? That was a stretch for sure. Maybe reckless and stupid at times, but witty? He was thinking of someone else or had created a person in his mind that wasn’t her.

“I can say something infuriating if it makes it easier to turn me down,” he said.

Harlow couldn’t think of a retort. He had been honest, for once, and not cryptic with his thoughts. Wasn’t that what she wanted? To know what he was thinking and stop this back and forth between them? He was supposed to be her captain, but did that mean that was all he could be to her?

“I’m sure you’ll say something soon enough,” she replied.

He chuckled under his breath, a throaty sound that made her shiver. The air felt like it was electrified, crackling with the tension she felt between them.

“Well, there it is and to be honest, I’m very tired so I think I’ll turn in for the night,” he said, turning away from her.

Her eyebrows shot up as he laid down, pulling a woolen blanket over his chest. He closed his eyes, the waning light casting shadows over his face. The fur throw was pooled beside him, a peace offering in the wake of his admission. She was conflicted beyond belief, the lingering questions keeping her from being able to still her movements.

The night grew darker, the sound of animals crawling out of their hiding places sending a chill through her. She was exhausted, drained mentally and emotionally, and wanted to rest. The only way that would be possible is to lay down near to Ace and pretend that she didn’t want to keep talking about his confession.

She eased the potion out of her pocket, holding it to her lips for a moment.

“Why would you tell me something like that and then just go to sleep?” she blurted.

One of his eyes popped open, amusement playing across his serene features. She put the potion back and sat down on the blanket.

“How am I supposed to go to sleep now?” she asked.

He sat up and rubbed his hand through his hair. “You could take that potion.”

She wanted to slap him. He was a cheeky bastard and even his sweet words were not enough to cover his pedantic retorts.

“I don’t like you right now,” she said, flustered.

He inched closer to her, his hand landing beside hers. “Somehow, I don’t believe you.”

She leaned closer, instinct taking over and betraying her words.

“You are annoying,” she said.

There was that stupid turn of his head, the light dancing in his eyes. She bit her lower lip, searching his face. He was close enough for her to smell the pine on his shirt, trace the faint scar peeking out from beneath his loose shirt.

“You’ve said as much,” he replied.

She shouldn’t do it. It was stupid and she would hate herself in the morning. But he was right there, beautiful in the darkness. His hair had fallen over his forehead, a slight upturn of his full lips. She slowly moved closer, the magnetism of his presence pulling her in without thought.

“You confuse me, too,” she breathed.

He was close enough to see the gold swimming through his hazel eyes. Harlow felt breathless, reckless, and out of control. He moved slightly closer, their faces inches apart.

“How do I know you’re not lying to me?” she said, trying to gain control of her raging emotions.

“Because you could kill me if I did,” he teased.

“Damn straight,” she said.

There was barely any space between them, her hands planted on the ground as she leaned into him. He turned, his hands gliding up her neck and cupping her face. His touch sent shivers

running down her spine, the anticipation spiking her heart rate. She leaned forward, giving in to his touch, the heat burning between them.

Their lips met, soft, a gentle touch. She kissed him back, reveling in the softness of his lips. He pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. Harlow wanted to be closer, rising to her knees as he followed suit. He kissed her as if he were desperate for her touch, the taste of her lips on his. She wrapped her arms around his back, gripping his broad shoulders as he wound his hands through her hair.

It felt like there was no air between them, each place their bodies touched sparking the flames. She let go of her inhibition, pressing her body flat against his. He tightened his grip on her hair. The tension was delicious, fueling her frenzied kisses. She wasn't sure who instigated the change, but she welcomed the cold against her back, the fire of his body flush against hers.

She ran her hands over his muscled back, drinking in the feeling of him. He broke the connection, trailing kisses down her neck. He was gentle, kissing the tender part beneath her ear, the curve of her neck. The heat radiated off their bodies. Harlow pulled him back to her, claiming his lips. She sank into the moment and allowed herself this break in judgement. She didn't care about rank or that he drove her crazy on a good day. He was beautiful as he lifted himself enough to look down at her. Her breath caught in her throat, the passion smoldering under the surface of his hazel eyes. She felt lost in his touch, reveling in a feeling she had never imagined would be hers.

"You are incredible, Harlow," he breathed.

There would be time to deny his words in the morning, when light put this moment to scrutiny. It was something that couldn't happen again. But for right now, those thoughts could wait. She pushed his shoulders, rolling on top of him.



“Stop talking,” she said lowering herself to kiss the grin off his face.

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Harlow woke the next morning with an arm curled around her, hand resting above her waist. She was buried under the woolen blanket and the fur shrug, every piece of clothing she had brought layered for warmth. Her cheek was resting on Ace’s chest, nestled in the dip beneath his collarbone. They had kissed until the trees rustled, the tent flapping in the wind. Harlow felt the tension coiling in her stomach, the unspoken desire still burning between them. They had agreed that sleep would calm them, put a stop to their recklessness. She curled beside him telling herself it was to stay warm. But it was more than that and a part of her knew it. She wanted to be close to him, to spend more time pretending.

Jax made a warning coo. She hated and loved him for the heads up. Untangling herself, Harlow slipped out of the covers. Jax had ignored the shift change, or maybe he had seen them curled around each other asleep. Harlow put on her boots, waiting for Jax to enter with a smug grin on his face. She knew the “I told you so” was bound to happen and contemplated lying to him. If he had seen them snuggled up together then her lie would be pointless, but she would defend it either way.

She rubbed at her temples trying to stave off a headache. It was time to get back to reality and ignore what had happened the night before. They had kissed, a lot, but that was it.

The tent shivered when Jax entered, the barrier giving way to shelter him from the chilled morning air. His eyes locked with Harlow’s instantly, a devilish grin on his face. She blushed furiously as hot guilt dripped down her throat. Jax had been right about Ace and Harlow. He was going to be riding that high all day long.

“Morning,” he said.

“Don’t even start with me,” she warned.

“I didn’t say anything,” he replied.

“You didn’t have to because your face is a mouthy bitch,” she retorted.

“That’s a high horse to be sitting on right now,” he said. “Especially for someone that was pretty close to the captain last night.”

Harlow turned away from him, rage thumping through her veins. She hated when he was right and even more so when he knew it. Last night was a mistake. It was a lapse in judgement. Ace stirred, the blankets falling down to his waist as he sat up with a bleary rub to his eyes. The air vanished from her lungs. How was she going to face him today?

“Morning, Jax. Thanks for taking an extra shift,” Ace said.

“Extra?” Harlow asked.

“Yes, I rested for a few hours, relieved Jax, and then he offered to take your shift,” he said, a sleepy smile gracing his face.

Great, she had missed her shift and given Jax more reason to be smug today.

There was a moment where Harlow thought Jax would weep with joy at being acknowledged for his work. Their last captain had viciously ignored him, pretending that he didn’t see the extra hours Jax put in for the team.

“Yeah—um yep, just doing my—huh yeah happy to help,” Jax stammered.

He popped up from the ground and Harlow spun around to keep from looking at him. Unbidden memories ran through her mind, the way he grabbed her hair, the strength of his arms around her. The reminders flooded in unwanted and distracting. She shook her head, reminding herself that she had a mission and needed to stay focused.

“Quick breakfast and then we should head down the mountain,” Ace said.

Harlow busied herself picking up the few things laying around the camp, folding her blanket into her bag, She let them talk, discussing strategy and where to begin their search. Harlow let their conversation wash over her, eating the chewy dried fruit and nuts for breakfast.

They left without much ado, the day brighter and giving off a meager amount of warmth. Harlow kept her distance from the others. She wanted to be alone where she could chastise herself for being stupid last night. And to make it worse, Ace had acted like nothing had transpired between them. Maybe he was acting that way for Jax's sake. Or maybe he regretted kissing her. Either way it shouldn't matter to her and she spent the morning trying to convince herself that it didn't bother her.

It was a boring morning as they roamed the mountain. Jax was taking the opportunity to talk until he was out of breath with Ace. They had become chummy and talked about how they had joined the Resistance, Jax's family, the destruction of the south camp, and any other topic Jax could think of in between. Part of her wanted to tell him to stop talking, but being left alone wasn't the worst thing for her disappointment.

When the sun was high in the sky Ace stopped them for a break. They were close to a stream, the crystal clear waters brisk on her face. The trees towered overhead, packed tightly together at the edge of the water. Harlow scrubbed at her oily skin, missing running water acutely, and slicked back the frizzy bits of her hair. Ace knelt beside her, washing his face quietly beside her.

"Is this how it's going to be now?" Harlow asked.

She felt her temper flaring at him. He hadn't done anything and that was the problem. He was kind, checking in on her, and making jokes that didn't cross the line. And that infuriated her.

"You're going to have to be a bit more specific," he said, resting back on his heels.

“You know what I mean,” she seethed.

A grin curled up his face, the sun glinting off his wavy hair. Why was she doing this? She sounded like a jealous idiot! The words had slipped out before she could capture them and do a thorough interrogation.

“In the interest of not being injured by you, I thought it best to let you bring it up,” he said.

She glared at him. “I’ve never tried to injure you.”

“Lies. The first time we met you tried to punch me and then you socked me in the jaw when I called you a thief.”

*Shit, forgot about that.*

“You scared me so it was a natural reaction” she replied.

“Exactly and if that’s your first instinct then I’m not risking your reaction to me bringing up last night.”

“Last night was a lapse in judgement,” she said, avoiding his eyes.

“A lapse in judgement?”

“Yes, a temporary reaction to the cold and the pressure of the mission,” she lied.

“Guess I’ll have to embark on more missions with you then,” he replied, brushing against her shoulder.

Her heart fluttered briefly, traitorous and unwelcome response. There were more important things going on right now and she was getting distracted. How was she supposed to stop the destruction of magic if she let herself be swept up in stolen moments with Ace?

“Even if we went on twenty more missions it wouldn’t happen again,” she said. There was a level of confidence that she didn’t believe driving her to put the wedge between them.

“I doubt that,” he said, “but, I will respect your wishes.”

“Good, no more kissing,” she said.

“Unless you ask me,” he replied.

She clenched her jaw, glaring at him and that damn smirk.

“I won’t ask you,” she replied.

“I’m okay with you just initiating the kiss, too,” he said, eyes sparkling with mischief.

There it was again, that quick turn of phrase that painted her into corners left and right.

He knew exactly what he was doing. Guiding the conversation and making her tongue tied.

“I don’t even want to kiss you again so this is a moot point,” she lied again.

“Your eyebrows raise when you’re lying,” he replied, pointing at her face.

“That is not true,” she shouted.

“See, they just did it again,” he replied.

There was no way to win in this conversation. He was going to keep unraveling her logic, picking apart the barriers that she was trying to put between them.

she muttered.

“I know, you told me so last night,” he said.

She opened her mouth to make a sassy retort sprinkled with enough profanities to make a priest faint. There was a crack in the air, an electric charge making the hairs on her head stand up. A bolt of lightning whizzed through the air barreling towards them. Ace rolled on top of her dragging them behind a boulder. The rock groaned as another bolt cracked down scattering debris through the air.

“Remember your tell,” Ace said, squeezing her hand urgently.

There was a loud crackling sound above them. Ace shoved her to the side, dirt kicking up as she tumbled. The wind vortex hurtled through the air, smacking down where she had been moments before. Ace was thrown to the side, his arms shielding his face from the brunt of the attack.

Harlow scrambled to her feet assessing the area in a glance. Her body tingled, the aftermath of the blow sending a tremor through her arms. A mage and two wraiths were making their way towards Ace. The mage had two cyclones pulsing in his hands. The wraiths glided without feet, their black cloaks sweeping the ground without a sound. Her throat tightened watching their progression, paralyzed by the nightmare materializing on the horizon. Harlow couldn't let the fear take her captive. She had never faced a wraith and if they were as bad as Ace said, she was going to need every ounce of courage available.

Readying herself to charge at the wind wielder, Harlow summoned the acid to her wrists. She saw Ace fly out from behind a boulder, his broad shoulders catching the mage under the ribs. There was a cry that sank into her bones as the wraiths surged forward. She grabbed the dagger from her thigh strap and flung it straight at the mage. She prayed to the gods as it somersaulted through the air and landed with a thunk right in his temple. He crumpled to the ground, his form going limp. There wasn't a moment to wait as the wraiths started towards Ace, him dislodging the knife from the dead mage's temple.

"I knew you would be back," came a silky voice.

Her blood froze. It was Fenric. In the flesh.

"We are going to have fun together," he said, striding out of the trees.

The predatory eyes were worse in person and sent shivers running down her spine. He had to be well over six feet tall and able to lift trees with ease. His thick arms, built chest, and

heavy boots sent a thrill of dread through her. Fenric was just as fearsome in person as he was in dreams. His eyes were almost completely black, dark enough to swallow her whole, and his ragged blonde hair was knotted back in a bun at the back of his head.

Her training snapped into action and she locked down the fear nearly choking her. She whipped out a second dagger from her hip, holding it firmly in her hand.

“You can’t scare me anymore,” she said.

“Let’s test that theory,” he replied.

There was a split second as he lowered his center of gravity to charge towards her. She saw his eyes boring into her hand where the dagger was grasped. Fenric roared as he ran forward, two hundred plus pounds of pure rage charging right at her. Harlow spun on her heels and drove the dagger down his side.

He roared in response. She took the momentum to kick him behind the knees toppling him to the ground. He twisted and yanked at her ankle. She yelped, falling with a heavy, crack as her head hit rock. Fenric rolled on top of her with a hungry grin. Her breath caught at his weight, the fear doubling as she wheezed beneath him.

His breath was foul in her face as he raised a fist. She raised her wrist instinctively shooting a stream of acid across his chest. It hissed as it ate away at his leather coat. Fenric ripped it off, tossing it to the side as he cursed her name. It was enough of a break to wiggle her other arm free. Harlow punched him hard in the stomach and held her breathe as he roared in pain. Her body was frantic with the effort to break his grip, panic and rage mingling together.

Jamming her elbow into his side, Harlow wiggled free and rolled across the rocky terrain. The stream splashed under her, licking at her clothes. She bounced to her feet, ready to bolt. She thought there would be more time to prepare for this fight and the uncertainty was getting the

best of her. Fenric rose in front of her with a murderous gaze. She could feel him tugging at the edges of her mind, trying to find a weak spot, the faint scratching at her skull familiar. She bit at her tongue as she darted to the side, summoning the acid, and putting distance between his ability.

*Not today.*

Heart hammering, she shot acid globs on the low branches as she darted through the woods. If he brushed against any of them, it would burn him on contact. The strain in her arms sent up the familiar burn, hot knives running the length of her forearm. She coated as many spots as possible despite the pain hoping it would catch him off guard, buy her a few moments to ambush him.

She could hear him crashing through the woods, howling when more acid stung his body. Harlow grinned at her work, proud of the practice that taught her the trick. She found a thin space in the woods and used the brief distance to shrug off her bag. It would only weight her down. Fenric roared in the distance, prowling around the area. She knew he was trying to scare her, claws tickling the edge of her mind. Her body flushed cold, panic rolling in waves.

Scrambling up a tree, Harlow crouched low on a branch. Her breathes were shallow, labored as she tried to clamp down on the swelling fear. She clenched her fist, ready with the acid and the dagger in her hip sheath. Howls went up around the woods, or was it just in her mind?

Fenric burst into the clearing swinging madly. He turned round and round, cursing as he stepped in more acid. It gnawed away at his boots and had left pink welts down his arms. Harlow watched him circle, coming closer to her location.

*Deep breathe.*



Harlow leapt down, driving the dagger into his shoulder. It made a squelching sound that had bile rising in her throat. He bellowed, flinging his arms back. His hand nearly missed her face as she hit the ground. Breath leaving her, she gasped trying to regain control of her seized lungs. Her training took over and she rolled to the side, kicking out her leg. It caught him in the ankle toppling him to the ground. Pride surged through her as she grinned, running circles around him with her superior skills.

Buoyed by her victory, Harlow arced a stream of acid over him. It flew through the air and stopped mid fall. How had it missed? The smile faltered on her face. Fenric laughed raucously, slipping out from under the acid. Harlow's heart thudded painfully in her chest.

"Did you really think I couldn't take your mind?" he gloated.

His arm erupted on her wrist, a ragged gash appearing over her acid gland. She screamed, the pain radiating up her arms in sickening waves. Fenric grinned back at her, his teeth oddly sharp in his yellowed mouth. She struggled down the anxiety begging her to give up, run away. There had to be a way out.

Harlow clamped down on her tongue, watching for the flickering of the vision. Nothing moved, the panic sinking icy claws into her chest. She searched frantically, scouring the area. The woods were growing darker, shadows emerging with glinting red eyes. She shook her head to keep the focus on finding the break, the exit from this growing hellscape.

*There!*

She saw the tree bend for a moment and leapt towards it. Fenric grabbed for her, but she twisted out of his reach. The world tilted with her, the ground rippling beneath her. The illusion shattered, but something had followed her.

Harlow looked down at the pool of blood on the ground. He had slashed her acid gland open. The pain registered again. It throbbed, a sickening wave of nausea swelling in her gut. The blood dripped down her arm and mingled with the acid. There was a second before he was behind her, gripping the ripped left wrist in his hand, her right hand behind her back. He wrapped his other arm around her waist, securing her against him. Harlow screamed, lungs burning from the pain.

“This fear is so much sweeter,” he said, inhaling deeply.

She had to ignore the pain searing through her arm, the fear that her magic might be damaged beyond repair. He gripped her left wrist tighter, turning it at an odd angle. Harlow nearly doubled down as the bones started to crack. She couldn’t hold back the screams of agony, the pain blurring her vision.

“What a treat to have my favorite source serving herself up on a platter. Can you imagine my excitement when I saw you wandering the woods?”

Harlow struggled against his grip, nipping at the edges of her tongue to see if this was another vision. Nothing waved in the vicinity. This was reality. Blood dripped heavy from her wrists and her head swam. The acid mingled with it, falling with a hiss to the dirt and scraps of tree bark.

“Real fear tastes like honeyed wine,” he whispered in her ear. Revulsion rippled through her and she felt like vomiting everywhere. He had a putrid smell, sweat and rancid meat, that coated her senses.

“Dreams are tasty, but this, this is the real stuff,” he said, nearly salivating.

The rage was bubbling with the anguish throbbing in her wrist. She wanted to destroy him. The fear clogged her throat, choking off her reason. She had to hold to the anger or the

panic would consume her whole. Harlow took a deep breath and nearly gagged on the stench wafting from him. She felt the dagger at her thigh. The irony was perfect.

She let out a few more screams, feeding him the fear that he craved. Her wrist ached, the bone seconds away from snapping. If she could reach the dagger, there was a chance. She kicked him hard, wrenching her right arm free. Just like before, she grabbed for the dagger while he growled at her throat. There wasn't a moment to think. She chunked it behind her. The dagger tore through his eye, slicing down half of his face.

His grip faltered and she wrenched herself away. Fenric staggered, shocked, before screaming. His face was dripping blood liberally across the dirt floor. Harlow took no time drawing two more lines across his cheeks. The scene was horrific, worse than the dreams. Harlow nearly gagged when his eye dangled precariously from the socket, swinging blood back and forth.

This was a face of terror, broken and bleeding. Her instincts screamed to run now, but she knew that he would find her again. And she was sick of running away. She rallied her strength, screaming as she shoot a glob of acid at him from her uninjured wrist. It gripped onto his clothes eating away at the fabric and working quickly towards his skin. Her blood mingled with his, the acid scorching through her with a volatile hiss.

"You'll regret this," he bellowed, slinging his burning shirt to the ground.

The threat felt empty, the thrill of the fight singing through her veins. Harlow didn't waste a second on his threats as she punched him in the gut. If she let a moment of weakness keep her frozen, he would win. He doubled over and she elbowed him hard in the back. There was a satisfying stream of curses. She watched him writhe for a moment, reveling in her success.

Harlow kneed him in the ribcage, a loud crack echoed, a grin tugging at her lips. Fenric rolled out of the way clutching at his abdomen while he spluttered and coughed out globs of blood.

Fueled by her success, Harlow lunged at him. Anger sang in her veins, victory moments away. Until Fenric rose up with surprising strength. It was too late for her to retreat. He backhanded her right as her fist shot out. Pain exploded in her face as she was rocket backwards. Harlow slammed into a tree, head cracking against the trunk. It left her breathless, her mouth gapping open fruitlessly.

*I have to get up.*

The pain in her broken body nearly toppled her over. They both wheezed for a moment, stunned by the impact. She ran on pure adrenaline, shakily lifting herself from the ground. There was blood everywhere, the ground slick with it. Harlow felt dizzy and focused on the mad man staring her down. He looked like he wanted to eat her, rip her limb from limb, and break every bone. There would never be an escape from him. He would always try to find her.

She had to stop him.

Fenric prowled towards her; his abnormally sharp fangs bared. Harlow threw a gush of acid but missed with her mangled wrist. Her vision narrowed, one thought dominating her mind. She screamed, charging at him with all her strength. He anticipated her move, flipping her over his shoulder. Harlow landed flat on her back, the air rushing out of her lungs. Fenric turned, a grin on his blood-stained face.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” he hissed.

Harlow tried to kick him. He slammed a leg down on her ankle, the bones cracking. A blinding panic swept through her as the bone gave way. She screamed, the pain licking up her

leg. Fenric unsheathed a ragged black dagger from his boot. His face was mangled beyond repair, his eye dangling on his bruised cheek.

Harlow tried to hoist herself backwards, grunting with the effort. Pain exploded in her leg. Fenric had his booted foot on her broken ankle. He smiled as he pressed down on the throbbing wound. Harlow's vision swam, blackness clouding the edges of her mind.

"I'm not going to kill you, not yet Harlow. I'm going to take you back with me and feed on your fear until you're nothing more than a broken husk."

Bile built up in the back of her throat. She thrashed, but his foot ground down again into her ankle. The air rushed out of her lungs; a scream trapped in the utter agony. His foot moved, the brief reprieve shattered as he kicked her in the side. Her broken rib throbbed, the jagged slash on her wrist was weeping into the dirt, and the fear she tried to hide broke free in gushing waves. Fenric towered over her; the dagger raised over his head. He might not intend on killing her, but that didn't mean he wouldn't take her to the edge. There was hardly a breath left in her, the strain of the fight dragging on her depleted resources.

*I can't die here.*

Fenric started to laugh, watching the fear in her face. His enjoyment burned through her, hatred fueling her resolve. Harlow swung her good leg catching Fenric in the tender area between his legs. He doubled for a moment with a guttural roar. She rolled to the side breaking free of his trap. It was enough to inch away from his dagger and the promise of unending pain. He cursed loudly, throwing slurs after her. The boot to her broken rib sent stars across her vision. Harlow toppled, vomiting into the underbrush.

"You'll pay for that, you bitch," he growled.

There was no strength left to raise her arms, to try and protect her mangled body from this beast. He was behind her in seconds, his putrid breath making her gag. He gripped her braids, exposing her throat, yanking her head back. Her pulse thumped wildly, terror clogging her senses. His dagger was in the air, a feral rage on his face. Harlow desperately bit at her tongue, but there was no wavering of the dream.

Fenric gripped the dagger and bellowed a war cry, a bloody smile spreading across his face. Harlow wanted to close her eyes, but she was glued to the harbinger of her demise.

“Tasty,” Fenric said.

The air was sapped of sound, a hollow ringing filled her ears. The dagger started to descend, aimed right for her throat. Her life flashed, the unanswered questions and the adventures yet to be taken. Harlow thrashed again unwilling to go peacefully. Her breath caught as the dagger flew down. It stopped, inches before her throat, an invisible barrier repelling the blade. Fenric growled, his arm quaking as he tried to jam the knife into her throat.

“I wouldn’t do that,” came a voice in the trees.

There was a split second between Fenric lifting his eyes, rage turning to terror. He released her hair, Harlow toppling to the ground. She clawed herself away from him, dragging her leg behind her. The silence was nearly deafening. Fenric was blasted off his feet, spiraling through the air. He smashed into the ground. The air crackled with the power emanating from the figure that stepped out of the woods. Harlow gasped for air, caught between fear and wonder.

Ace.

He strode forward, the trees bending away from the black aura surrounding him. Harlow couldn’t comprehend what she was seeing. He didn’t look human, not in this moment. His eyes gleamed, a halo of black rolled off his body, the lush brown hair waved out around his face.

Harlow had no words for what he was as he brought down his arm, his magic terrifying. A corresponding boom echoed as an invisible force smashed Fenric across the chest. He moaned, a gurgling sound coming from his throat.

Ace turned to Harlow. He was fierce, all sharp angles and avenging rage. She felt the breath leave her as his bright eyes roved over her body. His faced darkened, the angled planes turning him less human by the minute.

“I didn’t know,” Fenric began to plead.

He was trying to get to his knees, begging for his life. Ace didn’t turn, his focus firmly on Harlow’s injured body. She struggled to breath, each inhale sending a ragged pain through her chest.

“If I knew she was your source,” Fenric tried again.

Ace snapped his finger and that same force smacked across Fenric’s jaw. Harlow shook at the sight. He extended a hand to her, that dark glow vibrating around his arms. She extended a shaky hand. The tension in his grip scared her, the raw power she felt coursing through his body.

“What do you want to do with him?” Ace asked Harlow.

Fenric’s eyes flared, a renewed rage seeping from his furious glare. She balanced on her good leg, the pain a background to the shock of what she had witnessed. Fenric glowered as he raised himself up from the ground. If she were honest, she wanted revenge for all the pain he had caused her. She wanted to remove him from the equation so he couldn’t hurt anyone again.

The woods rattled with the howling of more wraiths. Fenric used the moment to lash out with his last reserve of strength. He caught Harlow by the leg toppling her back to the ground. His mouth descended and she had a moment to act. She jammed her wrist forward, acid gushing in furious waves straight into his mouth.

Rage gave way to a blank fear, his mistake registering a second too late. He fell backwards, yanked by Ace. He gagged as the acid seared a path down his throat. Harlow watched, transfixed, as Fenric grabbed fruitlessly at his throat. She felt hollow, drained of emotion as she watched him. His eyes were wild, running back and forth. The acid crackled, caving in Fenric's throat from the inside out. It worked its way down, destroyed the soft fleshy interior. He wheezed, his lungs collapsing and was still.

Fenric was dead.

His limbs stopped twitching. The acid continued to sizzle, dripping into his stomach. Harlow felt numb watching him disintegrate in front of her. The acid had flowed without a command. It had saved her.

Ace crouched down, the aura had disappeared, but the fierceness in his gaze scorched over her broken body. She felt his hesitation as he lingered over the injuries covering her. A moment on indecision warring in his mind. Harlow felt helpless, confused by the magic she had witnessed and the pain clouding her senses.

"You need medical attention, immediately," he said, his jaw clenching.

She nodded, unable to keep her eyes off the corpse in front of her. Countless days fretting over the terror Fenric brought and now he was gone. She was free from him, but the image of his death would remain burned in her brain.

"Please, let me help you," Ace said quietly.

Harlow tore her gaze from Fenric, the tenderness in his voice disarming. She couldn't rectify the man kneeling beside her and the fierce warrior that had been here moments before with an otherworldly power. He looked nervous, as if he were afraid she would reject him.

"Okay," she whispered, too tired to reject him.



He gently gathered her in his arms, careful with her broken rib and smashed ankle. His eyes flashed dangerously at the sight of her torn wrists. She tried to bite back the fear that her element was damaged irrevocably, unable to process the torrent of emotions. Ace stood up, cradling her to his chest. He didn't speak again as he jogged through the woods. She closed her eyes to keep the nausea down from the movement.

Her mind raced. What was he? How had he beaten Fenric back without a single touch? And now? How was he racing through the woods as if she were nothing more than a bag of feathers? She was scared, but not of him.

## Chapter 16

The camp was abuzz with the news that they had beaten Regent dream mage. It had been three days since the encounter and Harlow's mended bones still ached. She had spoken with the other Rebels, recounting the story and detailing the proper way to defeat a dream mage. It was gratifying to be noticed, even if it left her exhausted.

Someone knocked on her door and opened it without warning. Silver locs swung as Jax slipped into the room, his hood resting on his forehead.

"Umm, I didn't say you could come in here. What if I was undressed," Harlow asked.

"But were you undressed?" he replied, giving her a patronizing look.

"I could have been!"

"I heard you adjusting your blankets on your bed, so I knew you were decent," he said shrugging off her annoyance.

"That's terrible logic," she snapped.

"Alright, fine, sorry," he replied, pulling the curtains over the window.

He lowered his hood, a healing gash visible on his temple. There were a few minor cuts, and a thick bandage plaster to the side of his neck. He had fought alongside Ace and drove away the first wraith to attack them before the other disappeared. Harlow worried at her lip, wondering if she should bring up what she had seen in the woods.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, sitting at the bottom of her bed.

"Sore, but better than I thought I would feel," she said, fiddling with the edge of the blanket.

She hated being still for this long, but wasn't given much choice with broken bones. The bandages on her wrists were still in place, the healer had told her not to move them. She couldn't

give in to the fear that her magic was damaged, the source of her acid scarred beyond repair. The healer had been optimistic, but she could sense the hesitation in the turned down eyes around her.

“Ace said that you took out the dream mage.”

She wondered what else he had said about the mage and his death. The image of his corroded throat made her stomach churn. Even if she didn’t regret her actions, the weight of his death sat heavy on her consciousness.

“What else did he say?” she asked, not meeting his eyes.

“He didn’t give many details so I’m going to need you to fill me in,” he said.

There was a wry grin on his face, that mischievous look that she rarely saw anymore. He tossed her an apple, shining one for himself, and settling in for the story. Harlow turned over the bright red fruit in her hand. She didn’t know what version of the story to tell. Jax was her best friend and she trusted him with her life. But would it be a betrayal to tell him about Ace?

“Was it the mage from your dreams?” Jax asked.

“Yeah, it was him,” she said. “Fenric. Monster of a man.”

Jax’s eye lit up ready for the story. He loved a good fight.

“Spare no details,” he said, biting into his apple.

Harlow took a deep breath and rubbed at her temples. She started to recount the story, going blow by blow with as much detail as possible. Jax asked question after question, his arms twitching when she mentioned punching Fenric. She did her best to recall everything, even the parts that made her shudder.

“How did you escape from his grip?” Jax asked, leaning forward as she spoke.

Harlow didn’t know what to say at this point. She could lie and say that Ace knocked him out of the way. Or she could tell him the truth so they could figure it out together.

“Ace stopped him before he could use the dagger,” she said. It was the truth, maybe not all of it, but at least she wouldn’t have to keep her story straight.

“Did you see his magic?”

“I’m not sure. It all happened so quickly,” she lied.

“Really, he didn’t use anything? Then how did he stop Fenric when he wasn’t anywhere near you?” he asked.

Harlow avoided his eyes and curled the blanket closer. It shouldn’t be this complicated.

“There was a lot going on so I probably didn’t notice him,” she said, ignoring the pit of guilt forming in her stomach.

He was not convinced, a suspicious upturn in his eyebrow. She told herself that it wasn’t lying, technically, and that she just didn’t go over every detail. Surely, he would understand that.

“Anyway, he knocked him back and then Fenric lunged for me. That’s when I tore open my other wrist by shoving it in his mouth.”

Jax made a gagging noise. She appreciated the reaction as it took away the focus from her rising panic. Would he judge her for the next action?

“It was awful and then uh--,” she hesitated. “Then my acid released, without being summoned,” she said quickly.

“Without being summoned? Has that ever happened before?” he asked.

Relief swept through her. He didn’t get stuck on what she had done and that made her eternally grateful. It was self-defense, right? She wasn’t a cold-blooded killer.

“Do you think your magic is evolving?” Jax asked.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Does that happen?”

“I’ve never heard of that before, but it could be possible.”

“I don’t think we should tell anyone about that,” Harlow said, feeling self-conscious.

“Not even Ace?”

He raised an eyebrow and grinned at her. There hadn’t been time to talk to him the following day and even if there had been, she would have avoided Jax. He would be smug, obnoxious because he had set her up. He knew that taking the first watch would put them alone together with his nagging suggestion rolling around in her mind.

“No, especially not him,” she said, shaking her head.

“Really, I thought you two were close?”

She kicked at his hip, jostling him from his spot. He gleefully sat back down, turning to face her with his legs crossed.

“There is no we or the two of us, okay? He’s just the captain of our team,” Harlow said.

“You are trying to tell me that you snuggle with all of your captains?” Jax asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

“Jax!”

“What? It’s a valid question since I saw you two curled up together under that blanket. Don’t act like I didn’t know what was going down in that tent.”

“What do you mean you know what was happening?”

“Please, Harlow, it’s not that difficult to put the pieces together.”

There were a swirl of emotions flying through her flushed face. She was embarrassed, confused by why it knotted her guts up each time she saw Ace.

“It’s not what you think,” she said. “We kissed for a bit and then fell asleep. I was cold so I might have moved a little closer to share his body heat.”

Jax’s eyebrows rose at her last sentence. “And?”

Harlow groaned wrapping the blanket over her head. He was putting too much into something that was nothing.

“That’s it, and that’s all there is going to be, too. It was a momentary lapse in judgement that won’t happen again.”

“Can I bet rations on that?”

She uncovered her head to glare at him. That stupid grin was lighting up his eyes, creases forming at the edges. He was ridiculous and was more interested in her nonromance than the more worrisome magic that was morphing inside of her.

“You’re crazy and no, you cannot bet rations on me making out with Ace again.”

“Because you know that I would win,” he said.

“This conversation is over,” Harlow seethed.

“Sure, until you pay the piper,” he replied.

Harlow threw her head back and groaned. He wasn’t going to let her live this down. She would have to hear him making jokes every time they were around Ace. Oh gods, she hoped he wouldn’t say it within earshot of him. If he heard that she had blabbed, there would be a totally different kind of problem on her hands. They hadn’t even talked about his magic in the woods, and she didn’t want to add on the kiss. She had created a mess for herself, again, and didn’t know how to fix it.

“What happened with you?” she asked.

The deflection was flimsy, but she needed to focus on something other than Ace. Jax puffed out his chest a bit, clearly proud of his role in the fight.

“So, I was surrounded by two mages that had to be at least six feet each. They were massive, bricks I swear, but they didn’t have anything on me.”

He jumped into his story, how he punched one guy right in the jaw flipping him over a boulder and down the ravine. The second mage peeled away to fight Ace, but Jax quickly followed using his darkness to veil his actions. Harlow bit at her lip knowing that the moment he started fighting, Ace left to find her. Her stomach dipped thinking about the fierce appearance, how sharp his features were and the simple movement that threw Fenric like a doll.

“You sure that Ace didn’t use his element?” Jax asked.

She wanted to tell him, honestly, but her tongue was glued to the roof of her mouth. Something felt wrong about divulging his secret. He had kept it hidden and she respected that enough not to tell Jax, but not enough to let Ace think she wouldn’t pester him until he confessed.

“I didn’t see him use one and to be honest it was such a blur,” Harlow replied. “I barely had time between my ankle being broken and the near fatal stabbing to check out Ace’s ability.”

Jax didn’t believe her, she could see it in his eyes. His jaw flexed and Harlow knew that he was debating calling her out. There was another knock on the door jolting both of them. If Jax was here, then who would be at her door?

“Come in,” Harlow said, more a question than permission.

“Who is it?” he asked, curiosity lighting his silver eyes.

Harlow had a guess. The door clicked, swinging open gently to a healer with a bag of herbs and salves under her arm. The anticipation dissipated, the slight tang of disappointment settling on her tongue. She had thought it was Ace and felt foolish for entertaining the thought.

“I’m here to check on the progress of your wrists,” the healer said.

She was petite, angular and had a kind smile. Harlow unwound herself from the blankets and held out her covered wrists. The healer swept over, moving like a dancer, and whispered a

few prayers under her breath. Jax didn't move and Harlow was grateful he was here. The wound had been severe and there had been whispers that her ability would be destroyed.

Everyone held their breath as she unwound the bandage. It smelled of honey and chamomile as it unraveled. Harlow looked at her pink wrist, the glands were there, but a puckered line was already forming over her left wrist. Her heart sank.

"Will I be able to use it again?" she asked.

The healer unwound the other wrist and put away the bandages. She turned Harlow's wrists over, inspecting each part of her scarred body.

"It's hard to say right now," the healer said. "I can't say for sure, but it looks like you'll have some use."

Some use, not full use. Harlow wanted to vomit. She had worked tirelessly to get her acid wielding to a better place and now she was being told it was for naught. She felt Jax's hand rest on her ankle, a silent support in his calming gesture.

"I wouldn't take that for the final answer. There is a chance that you'll be fully functional even with the damage," the healer amended.

Harlow didn't want to think about it. She stayed silent as the gentle woman wrapped her wrist again with a heavy salve and perfumed bandages. She didn't stay long, lingering for a moment before disappearing through the open door.

"It'll be okay," Jax assured her.

She nodded numbly. There wasn't much she could do beyond wait. There was still a chance and she had to hold on to that sliver of hope.

"Come on," Jax said, "we are going to get your mind off this. Let's go."



He leapt up from the bed and started throwing clothes at her. The wind rattled at the window, cold seeping through the cracks.

“I don’t know,” Harlow said.

“I didn’t ask. You’re getting out of this room. I won’t let you wallow in self-pity all day.”

She accepted the clothes that he tossed to her. Slipping the pants over her fleece lined leggings, Harlow shrugged a sweater over her top. It was bound to be cold and the more layers, the better. Jax placed her boots beside her.

“And for gods sake, brush your hair,” he teased.

Harlow scoffed at him, tossing her messy knot of hair over her shoulder. This was the side of Jax she enjoyed most. He wasn’t thinking about the next mission or the ramifications of their actions. He was just Jax, goading her like an older brother and getting her out of the gloom threatening to drown her.

## Chapter 17

A week later, Harlow wandered the camp, half heartedly accepting the pats on the back for her take down of Fenric. She gave quick accounts when asked, advising on how to keep safe, but would excuse herself when she started to think about her own magic. While everyone else was excited, Harlow was struggling with the scars forming on her wrists. She hadn't tried to use her element yet out of fear that it wouldn't work. How could it when the glands had been slashed? And with the inability to wield her magic and her healing bones, Harlow had been stuck firmly inside the camp.

Jax reveled in the accolades coming from random comrades and the extra attention from captains. There was a thrill of accomplishment running through the camp that was infectious to everyone but Harlow. She was stuck on the uncertainty she felt towards her magic. Not to mention the elusive Ace. They were told that he had been called away on a mission, something that was classified of course. And that knowledge sat sour in her stomach.

Hidden in her spot on the side of the mountain, Harlow slipped off her gloves. She ran a finger over the glands, the ridge running deep. It had felt like a curse, this magic. It ran wild through her system when it manifested, burning through her like lava.

Harlow took a deep breath, steadying herself like Jax had taught her. The sound of the birds calmed her from the uncertainty threatening to choke her. She centered herself, asking the acid to manifest in her body. The heat coursed steadily from her core, reaching to her arms. She could feel the glands stretching painfully against the acid. It made her wince, the nearly healed wounds aching.

*Please work.*

The glands opened weakly. A trickle of acid came out, but nothing more than a sad stream. Harlow's throat tightened, fighting back the tears threatening to flow down her cheeks. Her magic couldn't work if there wasn't a way to let it out. What would she do if she couldn't find a way to use the acid churning inside of her? Would it eventually burn her up, consuming her for not using it properly? The thoughts were eating her alive, pain radiating up the mangled glands.

"No, no, no, no," she said, pacing back and forth.

Sweat trickled down the sides of her face as she tried to stretch the glands. She picked at the opening, biting her tongue to keep down a whimper of pain. The result of her picking was just blood and regret. The glands wouldn't budge. Her eyes stung from the sweat and she swatted it away with the back of her hand.

"What the—"

She paused, examining the sheen of green on the back of her hand. Harlow ran her hand over the beads of sweat again, bringing them close to her face. It was definitely green and getting darker by the minute. The burning sensation was fading, more sweat pouring from her head, her lower back, and any crease on her body. Her clothes started to sizzle, soaking in the acid tainted sweat rolling off her.

"Harlow?"

Jax's voice carried over the woods. Caught between euphoria and panic, she scrambled down from her spot. She sprinted towards him, stripping out of her coat so it wouldn't be damaged.

"Over here," she yelled.

He couldn't be far away now as she leapt down the rocks and dodged a fallen tree. Maybe he would have some ideas about the state of her magic and the apparent change that had occurred. What else could she do if she trained herself to manipulate the acid? The possibilities swirled through her mind as she heard him call her once more.

"Jax, I just—"

She burst through the tree line and paused mid step. Jax wasn't alone. General Shutter was standing beside him, arms crossed over his chest. He looked as if he had eaten a barrel of eels, a sour expression on his face. Harlow swallowed the words ready to tumble out of her mouth. Why hadn't Jax warned her that he wasn't alone? Rude.

"Oh, General Shutter, how are you?"

Truthfully, Harlow would rather ignore him or give him a flippant look before moving forward. He was pompous with a penchant for ignoring the females in the room. He wasn't well liked, by any means, but he also wasn't disrespected.

"Great, great," General Shutter said, "but let's get to the point here."

Harlow bit her tongue, fire blazing in her eyes. She should kick him right in the —

"You are being transferred to a new team," he said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

General Shutter's eyes went dead, the flatness in his icy stare sending a chill down her spine. He took a deep breath, Jax was frozen to the spot beside him. They must have already told him judging by the rigid way he stood. Harlow could almost feel the rage emanating off him.

"You'll join my team tomorrow morning," he said.

"But what about Ace?"

"*Captain Ace's* team has been disbanded," the general replied.

Harlow's eyes snapped to Jax. Why had the team been disbanded when they had been successful? It didn't make sense. And where was Ace in all of this disruption?

"I'll see you at dawn," he said, "and don't be late."

General Shutter turned without a second thought, leaving the two of them in stunned silence. Harlow fought the urge to lob a stick at the back of his head. The euphoria she had felt melted in light of the news. Working with General Shutter? She would rather eat a box of nails.

Jax tilted his head to the side and started walking down the main street. Harlow followed, jaw clamped tight as they wordlessly left the camp. They walked down the embankment, rounded the side of the mountain and found their way to a quiet section of the woods.

"What the hell is going on?" she asked.

Jax kicked a rotted log and then hammered a fist into a nearby tree.

"This is bullshit," he yelled.

"They separated us, didn't they?" Harlow said.

Jax nodded, his hands flexing and gripping into fists at his side. They had been partners for nearly a year, bonded by their unusual magic. Something about his presence, his lack of patience for nonsense kept Harlow from destroying everything. They were good together, despite their differences.

"I tried to convince them that we should be on the same team. They wouldn't listen no matter what I said," he said.

Harlow's loyalty to the Resistance authorities was cracking by the minute. She had stayed for the protection, the efforts to free the towns, and of course Jax, but those options were being stripped away. Her reasons for sticking around were dwindling away, a simmering anger turning her allegiance away from the lackluster commanders.

“Why would they want to split us up?” she asked, clamping down on the edge of her tongue.

“The only reason I could find was to spread the skill across two teams.”

Harlow thought about it for a moment, but it didn’t ring true. Just because they had strong magic didn’t mean it would work on every team. In fact Harlow’s magic didn’t even function anymore for all they knew. They were quiet, both mulling over what to say.

“What are we going to do about it?”

“There isn’t much choice,” he replied, eyes trained on the snowy ground.

It bothered her that the generals hadn’t consulted them about the matter. Harlow felt like a pawn, pushed around in a game she didn’t understand. The team had accepted her, the other mages were starting to ask her for advice. They were freeing towns and increasing their ranks by the day. And yet, there still wasn’t a plan to attack the Regent head on.

“This just doesn’t feel right to me,” she said.

“I know,” Jax replied, kicking at the tree root.

“We are a good team, damnit.”

“Yeah, when you aren’t being stubborn,” Jax replied.

“Oh, yeah, I’m the stubborn one here,” she shot back, crossing her arms.

“Do you ever feel like something is off here?” Harlow asked.

“What do you mean?”

She shifted around to lean against a tree. A couple of drops of water cascaded through the pine needles and sprinkled her hair. The snow had abated, but in its wake was icy rain that kept the area gloomy and grey.

“I don’t know,” she said, “I get this feeling that something isn’t right. They rarely plan attacks or have a definitive plan to take down the Regent. Yeah, we liberate towns, but that’s about it. We were split from Rhyland who is gods knows where. Then when we go on a mission, a successful one at that, they split us up. It doesn’t add up.”

Jax crossed his arms over his chest. The loss of Rhyland had been a bitter moment that Jax hadn’t talked about since he disappeared. They were told he was transferred, but Harlow had trouble believing he would go without saying goodbye to Jax. She had dropped it for his sake, but now it had to be brought up. There was something going on that they weren’t privy to and she wanted to know why.

“Rhyland was transferred, and they are setting up a new camp west of the Imperial City,” Jax said. It was halfhearted, as if he were trying to convince himself.

“But what about us being split up right when we were starting to kick ass?”

He didn’t have an answer and didn’t try the paltry excuse of spreading the strength to other teams. They were strong, but part of that strength came from their ability to trust each other. She knew that he would be there to back her up no matter what danger she faced and that lessened the nerves.

“I don’t know,” he said, his shoulders falling.

They both tightened their stances. Harlow felt something stir in the back of her mind, a nagging feeling that they were being watched. She raised one eyebrow, darting her gaze to the side. Jax nodded, the motion noted, and kept his stance loose. He was listening for footsteps, a twig snapping, or something that would tell them they weren’t alone. Jax raised his right eyebrow. Someone was close to them. Harlow grasped the dagger at her thigh. There was movement behind them. Jax leapt to action throwing a black cloud at the noise. They heard

someone curse loudly, hurried scuffling not far from their hiding place. Jax grabbed Harlow's arm and they bolted through the woods.

Harlow's heart raced as she kept pace with Jax. They checked over their shoulders, weaving between the trails to hide their path back to the camp. She could hear the crack of branches behind them. Grabbing his hand, Harlow guided them over a rocky cliffside. Jax squinted as they stumbled, bits of rock falling beneath their feet. The entrance to the camp wasn't far now, a steep slide down the embankment. They crouched behind a tree on the edge of the slope, Jax straining his ears.

"I think we are okay," he said, clutching at his side.

Harlow nodded, trying to quietly catch her breathe. The area was quiet minus a few deer roaming through the trees. They remained silent; senses tuned to their surroundings. Without a word, the two walked back to camp. Harlow felt eyes prickling on the back of her neck as they walked through the street. She wanted to talk to Jax about the odd manifestation of her magic, but the constant feeling of being spied on kept her mouth shut. They parted ways, a silent nod meaning they would meet up later to talk about what happened. Harlow went to her room, changing out of the clothes that now had holes burned into them. She sat on her bed, chewing away at the inside of her cheek. Something was off, and she would find out why.



## Chapter 18

Harlow left the comfort of her room, her mind racing for a cure to her damaged magic. The unease was growing with each day, the fear that something wasn't right gnawing at her insides. Her guts were squirming thinking of being on General Shutter's team. His note was still hidden in her room. She had read over it multiple times, each time wondering if it had been retrieved by accident.

The scars on her wrists were a bitter reminder that her magic was changed, altered in a way she wasn't sure how to use anymore. She thought about Yara and the horns on her head. Had she really tried to wield multiple magics? Could it be possible? And if so, maybe that was the answer to her problems. Another type of magic, a way to keep fighting against the Regent's mandates. Harlow turned on her heels, making her way to the alcove where she had often found Yara taking breaks.

She could hear voices in the alcove, a flame flickering brightly, and hoped it would be her. Taking a chance, Harlow crossed the street to inspect the area. She heard a female voice and a low laugh from the person beside her.

"You don't have to sneak around," Yara said. "Come join us by the fire."

Harlow stiffened, sure she had been careful not to make a sound. She walked around the corner, grateful for the warmth, and the company. Yara had her scarf over the lower part of her face, but Harlow could see the smile in her eyes.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to creep around the building," Harlow said.

"Don't worry about it. You are always welcome here," Yara said. "This is Gorou."

The other mage was squat, a thick braid circling his neck and a rounded belly. He nodded at her, a genuine smile on his face. Gorou was holding a flower in his hand and making it open

and close. The petals shimmered with the commands, twisting gently and expanding past his fingertips. Harlow watched him manipulate the purple petals, enjoying the magic on display.

“What brings you out tonight?” Gorou asked.

“I couldn’t sleep, per usual,” she said. “Also, I really wasn’t trying to listen in or—”

Yara laughed and held up her hands. She had spots dotting the insides of her palms as well.

“I saw you between the buildings when you were walking,” she said.

That was a relief and she relaxed her stance. She inched closer to the fire, taking in the warmth. Yara twisted a few of the flames creating a tree that had branches reaching towards each of them to provide extra warmth. The leaves would bloom and fall back into the branches, looking as if the tree were pulsing with life.

“Good, I thought you had enhanced hearing like my friend,” Harlow said, smiling sheepishly.

“Interesting, but no, I just have regular senses despite my best efforts,” Yara replied.

Harlow wanted to ask what she meant by the comment, but the meager manners she possessed kept her quiet. She thought maybe Gorou would bring it up, but he was content to play with the flower and watch the flaming tree.

“It would come in handy to be able to develop our magic, make it more than one simple trick,” Harlow commented, hoping it would spark the conversation.

“That’s what we have been told, but that doesn’t mean it’s true,” Yara said, raising her eyebrow.

She unwound the scarf from around her mouth, letting it fall to her chest. The lower half of her face was covered in mottled red skin, puckered as if burned beyond repair. Her lips were barely present, but that didn't stop her from smiling at Harlow.

"I was able to wield a secondary magic, though not for long," she said.

Harlow's jaw nearly dropped on the ground. She had a thousand questions racing through her mind. How did she do it? Was that why she had little horns? Could she not do it anymore? Was she still trying to wield more types of magic?

Yara pointed to the horns on her head. "These are a result of the magic. Tree roots, if you can believe it, and the spots are where the roots didn't take hold."

The urge to stare at the spots on her face was strong. She was basically telling her to look, right? Yara touched one of the horns, a faint smile on her scared lips.

"I'm not ashamed of them, but not everybody feels that way. My fire magic nearly consumed me when I tried to wield land magic."

She unconsciously ran a hand over her puckered skin, the divots showing where fire had probably eaten away the flesh. Harlow had the urge to stand closer to Yara, tell her that she found her to be brave.

"I don't want to be insensitive but..." Harlow trailed off.

"I brought it up so don't be worried. No, I cannot wield the land magic anymore and when I did, the fire magic was out of control. It was as if the two couldn't coexist," Yara said.

Harlow felt her chest deflate, the hidden hope that maybe she could wield a different magic was crushed. Yara had been burned because she used land magic and Harlow didn't even want to think what would happen with her acid magic.

Yara covered her face with the scarf, a sadness clouding her eyes.

“I escaped from the fire,” Yara said, “My family did not.”

*Oh.*

“I live with the consequences of my actions, and not just on my face,” Yara said, lightly touching her scarf.

“I’m so sorry,” Harlow rushed to say.

Gorou’s smile had slipped away, shadows of the flames danced across his face. The flower had fallen, lifeless on the icy ground. They were quiet for a moment as the flames simmered back down to the logs cracking apart.

“I know the temptation to wield more magic is strong, but don’t let it cloud your judgement,” Yara said.

She said it without malice or judgement, just a simple piece of wisdom. It was as if she knew what Harlow was thinking. Maybe she knew about the scars keeping her from using her magic. Or maybe she could sense the allure of the rumors calling out to Harlow.

“I won’t,” Harlow said, nodding her commitment.

Yara’s story sat heavily in her gut, squishing the desire to seek out a new magic to wield. It might be possible, but it wasn’t sustainable. She glanced down hopelessly at her wrists, pain twisting in her guts.

The sky started to brighten, and the others left to sleep through the day. Harlow wasn’t fond of her new team and the thought of joining them made her shudder. She missed Jax, out on a mission now, and the rest of her team. She settled for creeping outside of the camp to a small hill to soothe her frayed nerves. The itch to leave the Resistance was growing every day. Maybe she could fake sick, say that she was unfit because of her acid being damaged. It could work and

it would give her time to process the information she had been given. She curled her legs up, settling her chin on her knees.

*Maybe I should give up.*

But that hope flew out the window the moment she saw General Shutter slipping off into the woods.

## Chapter 19

Harlow kept low to the ground, shielding herself behind trees as she tracked General Shutter. He threw a cautious glance over his shoulder a few times, but mostly remained focused on his movements. The snow had cleared out of the area helping Harlow move quietly through the forest. She kept a safe distance, reasoning that she was following him in case he needed back up. But something in his manner set off the warning bells in her mind.

*This doesn't really concern me so I should just go back. He's probably sneaking off for something I really don't want to witness.*

She stalled for a minute, debating whether to turn back or not. He was a general and there were plenty of things he could be doing that didn't require a whole team of people. But the temptation to follow spurred her back into action. This wasn't official Resistance business and if it could endanger the camp, it concerned her.

Crouching under a fallen tree, Harlow inched towards the voice in the woods. She hid herself in the low sweeping fir tree branches, water droplets falling on her jacket from the morning dew. General Shutter was talking intently to a hooded figure leaning against a tree. Harlow wished Jax were here. He would be able to hear the conversation without needing to get closer.

The two talked in hushed tones, a couple of words floating through the air. Harlow could hear "Resistance", "lists", and "attack" from the two. She felt her stomach drop as General Shutter pulled out a notebook. Harlow leaned closer, parting the branches to get a better look at the notebook. It looked like the ones that were passed out after recon meetings, leather bound with an R embossed on the front. If it was a mission book...

Harlow's heart thumped out of beat. Was General Shutter giving away Resistance information? The thought made her queasy. She adjusted her position, crawling slowly closer to another tree to hear what they were saying.

"You're sure they will be there this time?" the hooded figure asked.

"Yes, I double checked the roster before they left," General Shutter said.

"Your 'lost letter' didn't bode well for us last time. We lost valuable mages when you didn't respond."

This wasn't good. Her mind flashed to the letter still sitting in her room.

"You better be right this time," the figure said. "The Regent was displeased that she lost her dream mages."

*Oh gods.*

The letter she had recovered from the town addressed to Shutter hadn't been a mistake. It was code for a mission location. She couldn't figure it out when she found it, but something in her gut felt off. She had been right. He wasn't working with the Resistance. He couldn't be.

General Shutter was a double agent.

Harlow choked back the bile building in her throat. If he was giving out mission information... Jax was out on a mission. He was in danger.

She tried to keep herself from hyperventilating, the unease flushing through her in sickening waves. If she didn't get out of here it might be too late. Harlow slowly crawled backwards, careful of the twigs on the ground. She held her breath, scared to make a sound. General Shutter kept talking, the mumble of their voices floating through the trees. Harlow kept low to the ground, her chest pressed close to the underbrush. She shifted to her knees, far enough

away from them to risk standing. Rising slow to her feet, Harlow darted behind a thick tree trunk.

She turned to leave, ready to run to Jax. This was why they had split the teams up. Her instincts had been right about the general. He was selling off information to the Regent. *Backstabbing bastard.* She would deal with him after she found Jax.

“I can’t let you leave,” General Shutter said, appearing from around a tree.

Harlow wheezed, knocked flat on her back. She hadn’t seen the general or the fist that had plowed into her stomach. She tried to catch her breath, the shock and growing ache consuming her. General Shutter stood above her, a grim expression on his face.

“Why did you have to do something stupid like that?” he asked, eyes devoid of emotion.

He kicked her hard in the side, a gasp escaping her lips. She needed to get up, run away, do something to protect herself. If she didn’t get out of here, Jax would be taken to the Regent.

“If you had stayed back at the camp like a good soldier, I wouldn’t have to kill you,” he said, his voice steely and calm.

Fenrir wanted to kill her and now General Shutter did too. How did he even find her? She had gotten far enough from their location to escape. He lifted his foot to kick her again. Harlow’s instincts took over and she rolled to the side. She sprang to her feet, black spots coloring her vision momentarily.

“You’re disgusting,” she said, taking a cautious step backwards.

“I’m a survivalist. I do what is necessary to stay alive,” he said, advancing towards her.

That answer was almost worse, as if this was the best way to survive by offering up other people. He was training people just to hand them over to the Regent. There wasn’t a shred of humanity left in his twisted mind if he thought this was acceptable.



“By trading other people’s lives for your own? That’s sick,” she shot back, matching his steps.

General Shutter rolled his eyes and pulled out a dagger from his coat. Harlow broke into a run, keeping herself from thinking about the ways he could kill her. She dashed through the woods, dodging the trees that slapped at her face. General Shutter wasn’t far behind. She could hear his ragged breath huffing as he chased after her. Her body screamed where he had hit her, the pressure building as she fled from him.

A sliver of hope wriggled through her mind as she spotted the opening ahead of her, trees thinning towards the cliffs. She pushed herself harder, begging her body to go faster for a few more minutes. General Shutter grunted as he lunged forward. Her heart sank. His arms wrapped around her waist, the weight of him collapsing her to the ground. She struggled underneath him, twisting frantically. He must weigh at least two hundred pounds and the sheer mass of his muscled torso kept her pinned. She couldn’t let him win, not when others would be hurt.

On her back, Harlow brought her knee up jabbing at any part of him she could reach. His fist went up, her eyes catching the glint of metal moments before he brought it down. The dagger dashed against her forehead, stars popping in her vision. She couldn’t move, the pain exploding in her skull. He grasped her throat between his meaty hands, squeezing until her vision swam. There was no way she could maneuver out of his hold, not yet at least. She went limp, the darkness tugging at her vision, forcing herself to appear unconscious. He released his hold, waiting for a few agonizing minutes.

“Now I have to drag her damn body back to the woods,” General Shutter grumbled.

He stood up, muttering more insults under his breath. Harlow sent a silent thanks to the gods for his lapse in judgement, the time to collect herself and fight back. She reached out to the

acid pooled in her core, begging for a miracle. The warmth rushed through her filling every part of her body. It wasn't just in the glands anymore. Harlow could feel the acid pulsing under her skin, bubbling up to her pores. She focused on her hands, willing the acid to accumulate in her palms.

*Please work.*

General Shutter bent to grab her, his face dangerously close. It was now or never. Harlow sprang forward gripping his face in her hands. The shock registered on his cold face a moment before it was too late.

“Release!”

Acid gushed to the palms of her hands, spreading to the tips of her fingers. There was barely a moment to register the scream building in General Shutter's throat. It coated him in the viscous green liquid, falling to every part of his face as she unleashed the pent up acid. His face was melting, skin falling off in ribbons. The acid kept pumping out of her pores, releasing from every point her hands made contact. It was hotter than normal, curls of steam rolling off her hands. She nearly laughed from sheer disbelief, the warring emotions of terror and glee confusing her reactions. General Shutter's arms thrust out, knocking her to the ground. Harlow scrambled backwards putting distance between them as she fought the fear clawing at her throat.

The gurgling noise he made brought back images of Fenrir, throat melted from the acid. His agony was clear, the jerking of his limbs and gapping where his mouth use to be, now an open wound. The general fell back, crashing to the ground. Harlow stared at him, twitching on the ground, face unrecognizable. The acid dripped from her hands, a vivid green that steamed as it hit the dirt.

He went still.

Harlow stared at the body, disbelief wrapping her in frigid grip. She felt the tremor begin in her hands, working its way up her body. How had this happened again? Now she held the weight of two lives taken by her acid. She didn't mean to kill him. She just wanted to stop him. But instinct had taken over and the acid acted on its own. Right?

The General's body hissed with the remnants of acid working over the skin. His arms were spread out, as if begging to be understood. She didn't know what to do. Cover him? Leave him? She could tell the other generals, but what proof did she have of his betrayal? Worse yet, what if there were more spies like him? Her head started to pound as the possibilities swam through her mind.

The smell of melting flesh made her want to vomit. She couldn't stay here. The acid stopped dripping, her sleeves singed from the contact. There was no hope left her. She took off, sprinting back to the camp. Her heart was beating uncomfortably hard and the panic that was always close by nearly spiraled out of control. She raced through the trees, putting distance between herself and the general.

She felt the scream tearing at her throat. This was wrong. All of this was wrong. Jax was in danger. General Shutter had betrayed them. She was a murderer, again. Her acid had altered, but it worked better than before. The irony of it all was a bitter draught.

Reaching the camp, Harlow slowed her pace. She checked for blood on her clothes before barreling through the gates. Jax. That was her priority. She would focus on finding him. Then she would deal with the other issues. He had told her the basics of their journey, showing her the map for their location. It was enough to get her moving away from the mess she had created. Harlow rushed to her room, ignoring the people starting to empty out of their homes for an early breakfast. She had to get out before the rest of the camp woke up and discovered the body.

The street was beginning to buzz with the sound of shoes scrapping lazily along the ground. She saw steam coming out the windows where food was being prepared. Making note, she promised herself to grab food before leaving. Harlow ran around her room stuffing extra clothes, a couple of knives, and wrapping both her thighs with a sheath. She tightened them in place, spacing them so the leather didn't rub together as she walked. Tossing her heavy coat on, Harlow secured her bag and a pair of gloves on her hands. There was no time to think about what this meant, the safety she was abandoning, the blind step into the unknown. She had to leave, now.

Surely word of General Shutter's absence would spread quickly and when they found him, it wouldn't be a hard leap to figure out who killed him. There wasn't evidence to prove he was double crossing them. It would boil down to her. Harlow tried to block out the thoughts threatening to choke her. She left the room without a second glance. Weaving between the people in the street, Harlow dipped in to grab a packet of dried jerky, a couple of apples, and a pouch for water.

The rush through the camp brought back unbidden memories of her flight from home. She hadn't meant to use her acid magic. The boys had been harassing her, saying her mother left because she was a freak. One threw a stone at her, telling her to leave. Then the others followed suit, pelting her with rocks and jagged pieces of wood. Harlow didn't have control then and the acid spewed as she shielded her face. The boys were covered, possibly alive, but she could imagine the scars they would carry the rest of their lives.

Harlow shoved the images out of her mind. Their screams echoed to this day. Cursed.

Brushing past a couple arguing over sword technique, Harlow bumped straight into Yara. Harlow wondered why she was still awake, her eyes tired and red.

“Fancy seeing you in the light,” Yara said.

“I was thinking the same,” Harlow replied, uneasy with being here any longer.

Her eyes darted towards the entrance, the need to move making her antsy. Yara turned her head slightly, checking the gate.

“Are you in a hurry?”

“No—well, yes,” Harlow said, inching forward.

“Something wrong?”

Harlow wanted to warn her. She had been kind, looked out for her when she told Ace about the sleepless nights. But she didn’t know her, not well at least. She also didn’t know who was on which side and what that even meant anymore.

“I need to get to my training,” Harlow lied.

That was on her schedule for the day, even if it wasn’t possible since General Shutter was... the thought made her sick.

“Ah yes, with the new team,” Yara said, “which is a shame because Ace is a fantastic captain.”

Harlow couldn’t keep talking, her emotions getting the best of her. More people were filling up the streets. The longer she stayed, the more likely she was to be caught.

“I have to go, training and what not. But be safe, okay?”

“That feels a bit like a warning. Is there something going on?”

Should she be honest? She didn’t know her that well and she very well could be part of the problem. Harlow put a fake smile on her face, pretending that it was generic advice.

“No, just always want people to be on guard. Never know who or what you’ll encounter in the Resistance,” Harlow said, walking purposefully towards the entrance.

Yara's brows went up. There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, Yara clearly not buying what Harlow said. It was too late to amend what she had said and the fear of Jax being taken was putting her on edge. Harlow didn't wait to hear her responses, weaving through the crowds.

Outside of the camp, Harlow pretended she was walking towards the training areas. She knew that they had another thirty minutes before training began and probably another hour before people were truly worried about General Shutter. If she were lucky, it would be at least two hours before everyone was aware of her deeds. With that in mind, Harlow veered from the path, disappearing into the woods. She would go quickly, put as much distance as possible from the camp. Her allegiance was towards Jax and she would find him no matter the cost.

## Chapter 20

The throbbing headache peaked as Harlow trudged through the thickly wooded area. The ice crunched under her boots, pine needles hiding the slippery spots. She hadn't stopped, eating little bits on the way, and gathering more water from a clear spring on her path. She would boil it later when she had time to build a fire, even though she was parched from the journey. The sun was lowering, nearing the afternoon and the inevitable darkness that would impede her rescue mission. Her sides ached, her feet felt blistered despite the callouses, and the panic had kept her company with a running dialogue of what if scenarios. Jax had told her where they were going, or at least a rough idea of where, and despite the fear of not finding him, she kept going.

A hawk flew overhead, gliding through the trees and catching her gaze. She imagined how much easier it would be to fly and avoid the cretins hiding in the woods. Harlow was quiet enough to avoid a couple of shady characters cooking squirrels over a fire. Having been on the streets, she naturally assumed any stranger was an enemy.

Harlow shoved the intrusive thought to the back of her mind. It was hard enough to be worried about finding Jax without the painful reminder of the people that betrayed her. Jax had proven himself an ally, standing up for her when she caused trouble in the Resistance, and that was worth more than he understood. She had to save him. If he was taken to the Regent, she could hardly piece together the thought. It would be like losing a family member, one that she actually liked.

The hawk continued to circle, drifting between trees and dipping through the sky. Harlow followed its path, finding a break in the trees that offered fewer branches scraping against her face. She saw the hawk picking at the bones of a cooked rabbit. Maybe the two she had seen earlier had been here. Or it might have been Jax's group. She checked the trees, hoping to see a

sign that they had passed through here or used it as a rest stop. The trees were scraped from natural wear and tear, no distinct markings to suggest the Resistance group.

Harlow's heart sank, the hope she had that Jax might be closer sinking. She chided herself for being foolish. Jax had no reason to leave a trail and even if he did, this might not be where he had passed. The wind picked up, kicking pine needles into her legs. Harlow tightened her hood, continuing despite the desperation building in her chest. What if she couldn't find him? What if it was too late when she did find him?

She took the wind as her sign to leave, forging ahead. The trees were thicker, but more spaced out as she descended the mountain. It would be too dark to keep going in about two hours. She would have stop, set up camp, and try to rest even if sleep would be impossible. Even with the days difference in their journey, Harlow kept her courage hoping that their gathering of intel would have slowed the journey. Jax had said they were going to set up camps along the lower areas, expanding the Resistance's chances of longer missions. She hoped the work had kept them closer.

The sun was beginning to dip, Harlow's stomach growling as she chewed the tough jerky. She didn't want to stop, but there wasn't much choice. The darkness would be more dangerous without Jax to keep an eye out. He was able to detect obstacles faster than anyone she knew, his heightened senses on alert. Harlow scoured the area for a tree large enough for her to perch on for the night. She scoured the bark, the wear and tear more prominent in the area. Her eyes flew to the other trunks, the increased slashes and gouges making her heart flutter. Something had happened here.

Harlow rushed forward, running her hands over the grooves in the trunks, following the line of damage. The more she looked, the worse the battering. Her throat tightened as she spotted



blood on a few of the leaves, broken branches liberally covering the ground. It felt like being in a dream, the increasing damage heightening her fears, each part of the woods worse than the last. Harlow's hands shook a bit and she prayed to the gods that the blood wouldn't lead to a body. She ducked under a battered sapling, bent at an odd angle with splinters spraying from the thin trunk.

Her breath caught. Beyond the trees was a bloody mess. There were abandoned packs, broken arrows, and ripped clothing. Harlow stumbled into the carnage, the pressure increasing in her chest. She saw a slouched body dangling from a branch, blood dripping from their lifeless arms. Harlow didn't want to think how they were slung hard enough to land in a tree. There was another body crumpled behind a bush, arrows protruding from its back. She clamped her hand over her mouth, stifling the urge to vomit. Harlow stepped gingerly through the carnage, careful not to step in a pool of blood. There was another body spread eagle a few feet away from a chipped dagger sticking up from the ground. Harlow didn't want to turn them over, afraid of seeing Jax's lifeless face staring back at her. She wrapped her scarf around her face, shielding her nose from the smell of bodily fluids and waste as the smell grew stronger.

Using the tip of her boot, she turned over one of the bodies. Relief flooded her. It wasn't Jax. The man had a Regent insignia on his chest. She moved away from the corpse, checking the next one. It was a Resistance member, one she didn't recognize, but knew had been in Jax's group. They had been ambushed.

She checked every body, searching for clues. Jax wasn't here, but there was a good chance that he had been through this area. She scoured the trees, hoping to find the three strike marks in the bark. They would put a mark in the trees for each other to find if they were

separated and Harlow was desperate to find it here. She would know he was alive, even if that meant he was captured.

Adrenaline kept her moving, her eyes straining as the darkness started to envelope her. Ripping off her gloves, she ran her hands up and down the trees. It was bitter cold, the bark rougher than usual on her chapped skin. She kept up her frantic search, moving further away from the scene. Hope was slowly leeched from her, the further she went the less she believed that Jax was alive. She ran to a thick oak, the broad branches devoid of leaves.

The weight of the day settled heavily across her shoulders, dragging her to the ground. Sinking against the trunk, she covered her face. The hollowness in her chest kept her still, the reality of what could be digging deeper into her consciousness. Jax could be captured, tortured, dead, or all of the above. She had no way of knowing.

The trees groaned as the wind picked up again, howling in the darkness. Harlow sat up, lowering her hands to her knees. She knew that staying here was a death sentence, but in this moment, she didn't feel as if her legs would move again. Her best friend was gone. She wasn't quick enough to save him.

The trees rustled near the dead bodies, more than wind moving them. Harlow hunkered lower, hiding herself behind the oak tree. She could hear feet, one person, moving through the trees and more than likely inspecting the scene. Her heart was in her throat, the thumping desire to lash out and release her anguish building with each moment. Part of her wanted to run, sneak away in case there were more people, but the anger at her futility overshadowed rationality.

Standing slowly from her spot, Harlow snuck around the tree to watch the figure. Their cloak swished, dusting the ground as they moved from the bodies on the ground to the battered

trees. Harlow gathered her courage, focusing on what she had learned about ambushing an enemy. She readied herself, feet away when the figure turned.

“Ace?”

He had a dagger at her throat faster than she could blink, his body pressing her back into a tree. She didn’t breathe, the panic overcome by confusion. There was a brief pause, a searching gaze over her face. He lowered the dagger, his features smoothing into a familiar smile. Her heart fluttered in her chest, relief and fear warring for room.

“Harlow? What are you doing here?”

She felt heat creeping in her cheeks. He kept her pinned against the tree, his eyes darting through the woods. She cleared her throat, making a pointed look to where his arms held her to the tree. He loosened his stance and took a step back, close enough to keep her near.

“Well—I was looking for—”

Harlow paused, an unwanted fear taking hold in her.

“Are you injured?” he asked, his eyes scanning her clothes.

“No, I wasn’t here when this happened.”

A shiver ran down her spine. What if she had been here? It would have been a wicked fight and judging by the amount of blood, a small chance of escaping.

“Good. Now why you are here?” Ace asked again.

“Shouldn’t we leave the area? What if there are backup Regent soldiers coming to this spot?”

“Nobody else is coming here,” Ace replied. “But the question still stands, why are you here?”

Harlow felt her heart thumping uncomfortably in her chest. This wasn’t going to be fun.

“It’s a bit of a long story,” she said. “I followed General Shutter this morning and found him trading secrets to a Regent informant. I knew they were after Jax’s team and so I bolted. I think they captured Jax and I have to get him back,” she blurted out.

“What happened to General Shutter?”

The color drained from her face. She could see him rushing at her, the savage anger bringing bile up to the back of her throat. It had been self-defense. Ace would understand that, right?

“He heard me in the woods,” she said softly.

His hand rested on her shoulder, the solidarity encouraging her to finish the story.

“He said he was going to kill me and he had a dagger,” Harlow said around the lump in her throat.

“So you did what you had to do,” Ace said, squeezing her shoulder.

Harlow nodded, sickness swimming through her guts. She felt the blood of the general on her hands, the guilty weight dragging her down. How many people had she hurt at this point? How many more was she willing to hurt to protect Jax?

“You’re a lot calmer than I anticipated,” she admitted.

“Death isn’t easy to deal with, no matter how much you see. You need a calm presence right now,” he said.

She blinked back a tear. Acknowledging what had happened in the last twenty four hours was like opening a fresh wound. It had been shocking, disgusting even when General Shutter had died. The fear welled under the surface of her consciousness that she was turning into a monster, someone capable of atrocities at the touch of her hand.

“I have to find Jax,” she whispered. “He’s my only family.”

“We’ll find him, promise,” Ace said.

The grief broke over her and she acted on instinct, laying her head forehead on his chest. He wrapped his arms around her back, pulling her into his embrace. She rested her cheek on his shoulder, grabbing onto the lifeline he offered. The cracks were showing, the exhaustion compounding in her tired limbs. It was one thing after another, no break in the mess she had become entangled with since her magic had manifested. Some days she wished it had never happened, that she was blissfully normal.

Ace put a hand on the back of her head, holding her tighter. She had so many questions for him, but the momentary break from the stress was worth it. He was here, being kind and—why was he here? Harlow moved back, breaking the embrace to look at him.

“Why are you here? The other generals said you were on a mission in the Imperial City,” Harlow asked, taking a step back.

“I heard about the attack and came to investigate,” he said, shrugging lightly.

“How did you hear about it?”

An uncomfortable feeling was spreading through her limbs, an uncertainty that was clouding her mind.

“Secret mission intel,” he replied.

“From a general?”

“Yes, the generals informed me about it,” he said, a bit too quickly.

“Huh, yeah I guess that makes sense.”

They sat quietly for a moment, tension building in the quiet. Harlow felt a shift between them, a distancing that was unspoken. Why did she doubt him? It was logical and very likely that he was told about the mission. But how did he know about the attack and where to find them?

“We should find a place to stay for the night,” Ace said, breaking the silence.

He took a step back, his cloak swishing like an extension of the darkness gathering around them. Harlow furrowed her brow. He was wearing a completely different outfit, one she hadn’t seen before. It was all black, from the smooth cloak to the leather boots. He had a sword on his hip, two daggers tucked into his side, and a tight fitting strap studded with throwing stars. A circle caught her eye, hidden under the flap of his jacket.

Harlow moved towards him, grabbing at the jacket lapel and flipping it up. Ace jerked away, knocking her hand down with shocking speed. It was too late though. She had seen the Regent’s insignia pinned to his chest.

“You’re one of them,” she said, hands jumping to her mouth.

Ace didn’t move. He had his head lowered, the black gloved hands flexing at his side. Harlow felt listless, untethered from the earth. Ace was part of the Regent’s army. How did she not see it?

Harlow thought of running, getting as far away from him as possible. He had betrayed them all. Two traitors in one day felt like a cosmic joke.

“It’s not what you think,” he said quietly.

Her muscles tightened contemplating how far she could logically get before he caught her. She was exhausted from the day, barely standing as it was, and wouldn’t get far enough with him on her trail. The choices were limited and the idea of fighting him made her sick.

“How could you do this?” she asked, a brokenness creeping in her voice.

“Harlow, I know this looks bad, but I can explain,” he said, holding out his hands in a placating gesture.

“Explain what? That you are a Regent spy just like General Shutter? That you pretended so you could get information from us?” she asked, backing away from him.

“That’s now how it is,” he said, taking a cautious step forward.

Harlow felt flush, her flight response kicking in as she backed further into the woods. Her chest ached and her mind was screaming to run.

“Where you in on the attack too?”

*Oh gods, he was here because he already knew about the incident.*

“No, there wasn’t supposed to be any bloodshed,” he said, a sadness creeping into his eyes.

“So, you knew Jax was going to be taken?” she asked, her voice shrill.

Her pulse thrummed, the anger taking over her fear. She could feel the acid building in her system. It was burning through her, raging at Ace for tricking her. He didn’t answer her because there was no reason. Ace knew Jax was part of the group.

“Let me explain, please,” he said, keeping a safe distance.

Harlow’s vision clouded red, the anguish building with his admittance. She balled her fists at her side, furious that he would even try to defend himself. Harlow lunged at him. She swung her right fist hard into his side. He twisted, her fist glancing off his ribs.

“Harlow, please,” he pleaded.

She screamed, running at him. He twisted out of the way, seconds away from her angered charge. Harlow wanted to make him pay. He should feel the pain she felt. Ace was standing still, holding himself tensed for more attacks. She sprang forward throwing punch after punch as she vented her anguish. Ace dodged, blocking her advances. Pushing him back to the trees, Harlow kept up her pace cornering him. His back hit the trunk, a thrill of victory clouding her judgement.

Harlow stomped on his foot, the shock making him pause. She struck hard, burying a fist into the tender flesh under his right rib.

Ace groaned as Harlow reveled in her small victory. She went to stomp on his other foot, but his leg swept out. Harlow stumbled, narrowly avoiding being knocked on the ground. He had slipped away from the tree, his cloak falling to the ground. He raced towards her and the breath held in her throat. Harlow twisted around right as he approached, elbowing him in the back. He jerked forward using the momentum to pivot on the balls of his feet.

Harlow yelled, his hands grasping her wrists and dragging her forward. She tried to headbutt him, but he yanked her arms up. Her feet barely touched the ground, suspended in front of him like a prized pig.

“Would you give me a second to explain?” he said.

“No,” she yelled.

Her legs wrapped around the backs of his legs, one foot dragging him forward. Losing balance, he lowered her arms enough for her to break the grip. She kicked him hard in the stomach, but his reflexes were too quick. He gripped her ankle yanking her towards him.

“I had to make a choice,” he shouted over her anguished grunts.

He pinned her to his chest, her body jerking. Harlow didn’t want to hear it. She stumbled trying to rip herself from his grip.

“Don’t,” she yelled.

She brought her fist down on his wrist. He jerked away, both winded from the fight. Begging the remains of her strength to hold out, Harlow smacked him hard across the face. He doubled down, holding his cheek. She smiled, proud of her work, and the little vindication she felt in knocking him down.



“That’s it,” he said.

Harlow didn’t have a second to register his movements. He gripped her by the waist faster than she could imagine, driving her back to a tree. Jamming his leg between hers, he gripped both of her wrists in his hands, holding them tightly. She struggled, trying to dislodge herself from him and the tree, but she couldn’t get enough leverage.

“Let me go,” she seethed.

“No, not until you’ve listened to me,” he said, brows furrowed.

“I don’t give a shit what you have to say,” she spit back.

“I did what I had to do,” he shouted.

“Yeah, stabbing me in the back,” Harlow said. She didn’t care for his excuses, the lies he was weaving. He had betrayed her, manipulated her and for what?

“It was either your or Jax and I chose you,” he said, voice pitched low.

The forest was silent around them, the animals listening in anticipation. Harlow breathed heavily. Her curiosity was tugged, warring the temper that flared hot under her skin. He was a liar and this was just another ploy.

“I know you hate me right now, but I didn’t have a choice. When it came down to it, I couldn’t let them take you,” he said, his voice a bit shaky.

“Why would you do this?” she asked, jerking against his grip.

“Will you let me explain?” he asked, struggling against her erratic movements.

“Is Ace even your real name?” she snapped, trying to control the conversation.

His lips twitched up in a half grin. “No, my name is Nyx Alexander. I had to change it for the Resistance.”

She shoved against his arms again, furious that she didn't even know his real name until now.

"Are you going to let me go?" she said, fuming at his lies.

He released her hands, moving back enough to keep her tight to the trunk. There was a wicked breeze whipping through the trees, nipping at her face. Harlow wanted to be beside a fireplace, curled up far away from here. She wanted Jax to be safe and Ace to be gone. No, Nyx to be gone.

"I can find out where Jax is being held and help you free him," Nyx said in a rush.

Harlow eyed him warily. He had a sincere expression, but that meant nothing now that she knew he had lied all along.

"Why should I believe you?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Because I can get you into the city and help you rescue him," he replied.

"If you're with the Regent, why would you risk it?"

Nyx kept quiet, his lips pursed and a wrinkle in his brow. Harlow was limited with her options, but at least this way she would go in with her eyes open. No more being blinded by misinformation. She wanted to truth.

"My plans have changed, and it would benefit me for both of you to be alive away from the Regent. She kills mages without remorse. You don't want to become another sacrifice to her reign against magic," he replied, pursing his lips.

"How do I know you'll keep your word?" she said, a shiver working up her arms.

"You know that I have magic," Nyx stated.

"Yeah, so?" she said, calculating how far she could run in the oppressive darkness.

“Nobody knows that I possess a magical ability. If the Regent found out, she would drain me of magic until there was nothing left.”

The realization hit her hard in the chest, her power over him increasing. She was the champion of the nonmagical people, able to overthrow the system and ensure magic wielders were chained to her control. It was said she hated it more than anything and would kill mages to prove her dedication to the everyday man. That’s when the term forbidden became popular. A slur for wielders to drive them away from everyone else.

“The Resistance knows you have magic,” she said, countering his point.

“No, they never saw it. In fact, you are the only person that has seen it,” he said. “Well, the only person that is still alive.”

Her body went rigid. This was a big secret and if she told, he could be killed. Would it be enough to ensure her safety? Would they even believe her if she told?

“How do I know you won’t turn me in the moment we get to the Imperial City?”

“I’ve already told you that I chose to keep you safe, whether you believe me or not. I risked losing my cover to have the teams split the way they were before I left.”

“Well, it was a stupid choice and you shouldn’t have made it at all,” she countered, glaring at him.

Nyx rolled his eyes, frustrating starting to crack his calm exterior. She had gotten under his skin for a moment and that felt damn good. She wanted him to feel the frustration she felt, the anger at being misled for months.

“And I would make it again if I had to, okay?” he retorted.

She clamped her jaw shut. There was no reasoning anymore and the anger that fueled her was waning. Her body ached, the pounding behind her eyes growing in intensity. He could get

her into the city. She could use him for the information he had, get closer to the Regent, and then take that heartless bitch out. If she didn't exist, this magical ban would be lifted. She wouldn't be hunted, ostracized, and could live a normal life.

It was a precarious choice, but she couldn't go back to the camp. The Resistance wouldn't risk it and they probably were hunting her down as she spoke. Nyx was her only choice, until she freed Jax.

"Fine. You take me to Jax and I won't blow your cover." *For now.*

"Agreed," he said, reaching out to shake her hand.

She glared at his extended hand and turned to walk away. He matched her strides, putting a modicum of space between them. Harlow didn't want to look at him as he led her through the woods. It would take them an hour to find his campsite and she wasn't sure her feet could handle it anymore. She ran their conversation through her mind, looping over the sticky parts. He chose her over Jax. What did that even mean? Why did they want Jax? She couldn't reason why he would have flirted with her and kissed her when he knew damn well that he was going to betray her. And for gods' sake, Ace wasn't even his real name! Had it all been part of the rouse? A ploy to lower her guard? Gods, she had been stupid.

She didn't speak to him when they arrived at the camp. There was a tent set up with a fireplace ready to be lit. Harlow grabbed a blanket and curled it around her shoulders. The fire winked to life, her chilled limbs grateful for the warmth. Nyx stayed outside of the tent, setting himself up at the entrance. Harlow vowed to keep her eyes open, but the warmth seeping into her chest made her lids drag heavily over her eyes.

Tomorrow she would get more answers, find out why her world had flipped upside down... again. She would find Jax and free him. He wouldn't become another pawn lost to the Regent's destruction of magic.

## Chapter 21

Harlow startled, shooting up from the ground. A blanket fell to the side. She looked down, a pillow where her head had been and her boots propped beside her bag. Nyx must have taken off her boots. The thought made her sick. If it had been any other time, she would have allowed a small flutter at the gesture, but it was poisoned by his betrayal.

He was the enemy now, part of the Regent's army. How could he be in league with that murderer? He had to know about the trail of bodies that followed her, the countless lives taken to secure her reign. How could he be in favor of her desecration of magic when it meant the destruction of his own heritage? It didn't add up.

Furious, Harlow shoved her feet into her boots. The sores yelped in protest, but she ignored the pain. She unwound her hair, combing through the long threads to remove the tangles. There was a rustling outside and a clearing of a throat. Harlow purposely looked away, knowing Nyx would be entering in a moment.

His black cloak rippled around him as he ducked under the entrance. Harlow stubbornly kept her gaze averted, dislodging a thorn from a knot in her hair.

"Did you sleep well?"

"You don't have to pretend with the pleasantries," she snapped, back turned to him.

"Well, you're sunny as always," he replied.

Harlow threw the thorn at his foot and turned her back on him again. She smoothed her hair back, grease starting to accumulate at the roots, and worked on a tight braid. It was easier to ignore Nyx when she had her hands busy. Otherwise, she might throw a dagger at him for good measure.

“We should reach the Imperial City by midday if we leave soon,” Nyx commented, folding a shirt into his bag.

He moved around the tent, packing away the blanket and a few tools she didn’t recognize. Harlow stood, shrugging on her coat and bundling the scarf in her pocket. It was always cold in Trevail and if you didn’t pack extra clothes, you might as well say goodbye to a finger or toe. It was mildly warmer in the Imperial City, but not enough to knock off the chill permeating the stone buildings.

Harlow checked Nyx’s outfit, the same from last night. It was better material than she had guessed and looked much warmer than anything she had worn. There was a sleek fur trim on the collar of his cloak and a softness to the shirt peeking out from underneath the leather. Harlow looked at her coat, a couple of patches and frays at the bottom of it visible against the dulling color. It was just another barrier the Regent had created, keeping the best materials for the people that licked her boots.

“Let’s get this over with,” Harlow said, ignoring the gnawing in her stomach.

She pushed past him, biting her lip to keep from snapping at him. Nyx followed her out, stuffing the extra blanket into his bag. He handed her a bar with bits of fruit and other ingredients she didn’t recognize. She sniffed it, narrowing her eyes at him.

“Already trying to poison me?”

“If I’m not mistaken, you are already full of acid,” he replied.

Her face colored, the remark catching her off guard. He held the bar out again, his eyebrows raised. Harlow snatched it from him, glaring as she turned away.

“It’s full of protein,” he said, “and it’ll keep you full longer than your jerky.”

For a moment she contemplated throwing the bar on the ground. It would give her a great satisfaction to reject something he had given her, but her stomach growled angrily. The jerky was fine, but it didn't last long.

"Miracle of miracles," Nyx said walking ahead of her.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, keeping up with his pace despite the ache.

"She can be persuaded to make rational choices," he said.

"The only irrational decision I made was trusting you," she retorted, taking a vicious bite of her breakfast.

"You trust me enough to steal my supplies."

"You're gave me the stupid food," she spat back.

He was getting on her nerves, and they had just started their trek to the city. How was she going to deal with him all the way to the Imperial City?

Harlow kicked hard at a pinecone in her way. There were less trees the closer they got to the city. The Regent had thinned them out, using the resources to construct walls around the city. It was odd to see so much sun on the ground, less ice covering the grass the further they walked.

"Nothing you could say would change my mind. You sold out Jax and that's unforgivable."

"I had to make a difficult decision," he said, clenching his jaw.

Harlow didn't care why he made the choice because no matter what he had been the one to let Jax be captured. If anything happened to Jax before she got there, it would be her fault. She should have been more suspicious of Nyx, not let him get close. If she had been vigilant, she would have caught wind of his deception and kept Jax safe.



“It doesn’t matter now, does it? Jax is in the Imperial City and you’re the one that put him there.”

“I told you why I made that choice,” he said, unable to hide his irritation.

“And I told you that I don’t care,” she retorted, the burning growing in her wrists.

Nyx didn’t respond. He pulled his cloak tighter, keeping his face forward as they walked quietly through the woods. Harlow didn’t want to hear his reasons about choosing her over Jax. It was probably another lie. She could hardly juggle the fear running rampant in her mind without the added stress of Nyx’s twisted attraction. The least she could do to atone was irritate Nyx every step of the way. He deserved no less.

They were quiet for most of the journey, avoiding sections of the path that showed heavy footfall. Nyx knew the area like the back of his hand, gliding through the terrain without pause. He attempted conversations, but Harlow kept her mouth shut. It got under his skin, his unease clear with the way he continued to ruffle his hair, and she was proud of the small victory. Harlow had a thousand questions for him, but wouldn’t allow herself to speak again.

He gave her another protein bar along the journey and led them to a river to get more water. Harlow sat by the edge, staring out at the city on the horizon. It was larger than she remembered. The spires spun up into the sky, piercing the heavens with their heavy stone peaks. The wall around the city were layers of heavy stone with turrets for archers to hide inside. A gray sky stretched above the city, casting shadows over the expansive levels of houses and shops. It could be beautiful, but the stone walls chilled the whole area. Harlow never felt welcomed there, even when she had lived there.

“It would be a nice city, impressive even, if it wasn’t ruled by the Regent,” Harlow said, breaking her silent treatment.

“It’s cold now,” Nyx said, “a shadow of its former self.”

“I guess that’s what happens when a tyrant takes over,” Harlow said, anger saturating her every word.

Her bitterness was tangible, an acidic taste on the back of her tongue. The Regent had torn apart countless families, hers just one of the many broken. Harlow never found out what became of her mother, knowing she was as good as dead when she was taken. It had destroyed them. Her father becoming a cold, shell of a man.

There was a tightness in her throat thinking of her mother. It was more common than not to see kids with only one parent, the other taken as a danger to Trevail per the Magical Removal Decree. The town Harlow grew up in was all single parents or blended families, bonding together over the loss of spouse and parent. She barely knew her mom, unlike some of the others, and it felt wrong to mourn more than the kids that had known their parent longer.

“She’s a piece of work,” Nyx commented, tearing up a blade of grass.

“But yet you work for her,” Harlow retorted.

“I never said I work for her,” Nyx replied, frowning at her.

She thought about what he said, wondering if he was being honest. There was no way to tell if he was lying to her or not. It very well could be a ruse to keep her compliant. She bit the edge of her tongue, measuring the weight of her words.

“Then explain,” she said.

“Oh, now I get to explain. How generous of you,” he replied with a sardonic laugh.

She glared at him and started to stand. If he didn’t want to talk now, then so be it. He would probably be lying to her anyway.

“Calm down,” he said, grabbing her hand. “It’s fun to get a rise out of you.”

The option of ignoring him was still on the table and she worried at her lower lip. She could storm off, letting him know that his words were worthless, but that wasn't entirely true. Some part of her hoped he wasn't lying about choosing her and that he wasn't part of her plans. She should shrug him off, push him away, but she needed him long enough to free Jax. At least that was the justification she sought as she waited for him to speak.

"I don't believe in destroying magic, but I don't have much of choice," he said.

Harlow's interest was piqued. She wanted to know more and he knew that about her. Naturally curious, perhaps to a fault, and the allure of a secret past had her roped. She sat back down, turning to him.

"She caught me trying to steal from the armory. It was either join her or be executed. I didn't have anywhere to run, she had me surrounded, and I wasn't ready to die. It didn't leave me with much choice," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"But you could have left after some time passed. Now you are a spy for her and setting up captures of innocent mages. How is that any better?" she asked, recalling the scars he showed her.

"I've never set up a capture," he replied, "and it's not as easy as you think to leave Trevail. Have you ever tried to go beyond the borders? You can't pass the mountains no matter how hard you try."

Harlow frowned, a crease in her brow as she contemplated his suggestion. She hadn't tried to leave Trevail, but then again, she never had a reason to go further than the mountains. Had she known of anyone that left? The thought sat uneasy in her gut.

"Why can't you leave?"

He adjusted his bag, dropping it to the side. She edged a bit further away, the pebbles crunching beneath her feet. The woods were hushed, listening to their conversation. She raised an eyebrow waiting for him to respond.

“Because she has control over the magical pillars of Trevail and with that control, she can keep everyone inside.”

Harlow felt her stomach drop.

They were all trapped because of the Regent’s jealousy and hatred. The land could be so much more, vibrant and alive, but now it was cold, barren. She wondered if the chill was part of the curse they were under. Had Trevail seen true sunshine since the Regent took power?

“So why are you still part of her army?” Harlow finally asked.

Nyx took a deep breath, watching the river carry bits of ice downstream. Maybe he was being honest. It would take away the guilt crippling her as she grabbed onto the hope that he wasn’t a bad guy.

“Better to be close to the enemy than far away,” he said, plucking a blade of grass.

It didn’t feel like much of an answer. She wanted more, something in depth and profound that would tell her for sure that he was decent. Why couldn’t he be straightforward and say exactly what his plans were rather than veiling it in tropes?

“I need more,” Harlow said, the malice gone from her voice.

Nyx sighed, plucking at the strap on his boots. She raised an eyebrow, making it clear she would leave in a minute if he didn’t come clean.

“My family died when I was young, and I was sold to the Regent. I was raised in the city, trained to be a weapon in her army. She took an interest in me, started working individually with me, and teaching me lies about magic wielders.”

He took a deep breath and rolled his shoulders back. Harlow couldn't imagine the Regent helping to train a young kid, determined to spread her vitriol to an impressionable mind.

"When I manifested my elemental skill, I did everything I could to hide it. I knew that she would have me executed if she found out. That's when I started running stolen goods through the city."

"So, the scar you told me about from the soldier was real?"

"It was punishment dealt by the Regent. She doesn't tolerate disobedience, especially not from a teenager."

Harlow felt sick thinking of a young Nyx being brutally slashed by the person that had half raised him. The hatred she felt towards the Regent tripled, a tangy metallic taste filling her mouth as she clamped down on her cheek.

"I knew there was no escaping her so I did what I could to survive," he continued.

The position made sense to her, and a modicum of compassion seeped past her barriers. She could relate to the measures taken to stay safe, not perish on the streets.

"She trained me to be her assassin, the go to spy that can infiltrate any place without suspect. I am not proud of what I've done, but I did what was necessary to get close to her plans. I need her to trust me so that I can figure out how she controls magic."

Silence descended upon them.

"I didn't know the depths of her depravity, raised to think that magic was evil. I was terrified when my own magic manifested, and I did everything to hide it. The spell she had used would allow her to detect mages if they used their magic, even something simple. I didn't risk it, afraid that by revealing myself she would grow impossibly strong."

He was quiet, his hands gripping at his clothes.. Each breath seemed to cause him pain. Or was it the memory? Harlow felt the tug to bridge the gap, to see him completely.

“She took me to the arena, saying it was the final test for my position in the army. But it was something worse, the first of a long line of horrible choices,” he said softly.

Was it wrong to ask what had happened? A morbid curiosity burned through her, and she hoped he would continue his story. Maybe it was cathartic for him to tell someone, get the weight off his shoulders. She stayed still, waiting for him to continue.

“I had to kill four mages,” he said barely above a whisper, “in the middle of the arena. Their blood ran down into the ground, soaking through to the pillars. I didn’t know that by killing them I had made an offering, securing my life to the pillars. It’s what prolonged our lives.”

Her instinct was to be near him, put a hand over his to offer some comfort, but her legs wouldn’t move. Nyx’s jaw went rigid as he paused staring at the water.

“I bonded myself to her without even knowing it,” he said.

He stopped, looking down at his hands as if he could see the blood on them. She waited, letting the quiet surround them.

“Nyx, what is your magic?” Harlow asked.

She gasped as his face morphed, a beak and sharp yellow eyes replacing his human features. Harlow reached out a tentative hand that slid right through the beak. His face came back into view and the bird like features were gone.

“You’re the third type of magic,” Harlow said, rising to her feet.

She started to pace, calculating the odds in her head. If Nyx was the third type, they had the three necessary to take on the Regent. They could combine their magic, overpower her, and free Trevail.

“Why have you waited to make a move?”

“The only way to destabilize her is from within and I couldn’t do that if she suspected me. I have done things I’m not proud of, but I can’t change that. The closer I grew to the Regent, the more I found out about her plans to kill every mage in Trevail. I’ve been trying to find a way to break her control, but I couldn’t make any plans work until you manifested the missing piece: physical magic.”

It was logical and despite her head spinning, she could see a plan forming. The Regent was keeping magic contained, somehow forcing the pillars to bend to her will, and if what he said was true, they could stop it from happening.

“So where does that leave us?” Harlow asked.

“We have to be careful. I have to retrieve Jax and bring him back to the Regent. If I don’t, it’ll be a dead giveaway. Our window will have to be once he’s back in the city.”

“That’s bullshit. I’m going with you.”

“I’m not sure where he is being held yet,” Nyx said.

He didn’t look her directly in the eye, his hands playing with a piece of thread on his jacket. His usual confidence was gone, replaced with a reservation that had alarm bells going off in her mind.

“Then we find someone that does know,” Harlow said.

Her intestines squirmed and her heart thumped uncomfortably hard. She knew what her plan meant, capturing a highly trained officer. They would figure out who knew about the transports and bring them in for questioning.

“This is extremely risky,” Nyx replied, anxiously combing through his hair.

“I know, but I don’t see many options.”

They were silent for a few moments, the unspoken fear choking her.

“We have to free Jax. If we don’t keep him safe, it could mean the complete destruction of magic,” Harlow reasoned.

He was silent, head lowered.

“You’ll be in danger, too,” Nyx said.

“I can handle it,” she replied, pretending she believed it.

“But your magic was damaged,” he said, one hand reaching as if to take hers into his own.

She held out her hand to him, looking at the glands that no longer worked. He cradled her hand in his palm, one finger brushing over the puckered scar on her wrist. Harlow closed her eyes, imagining the bile morphing and flowing over her veins. She could see it pooling beneath her fingertips, the pores widening to let small bits of acid to leak out.

The familiar burn surged through her body, lighting up her arms and resting in her hands. Harlow opened her eyes, willing the acid to pool up in her pointer finger. The fire licked through her right hand, a bubble of green leaking out. It had worked, just like it had in the woods with General Shutter.

Nyx’s eyes were transfixed on her hands, watching as the acid spilled into her palms and then melted back into her body. Harlow imagined it retreating, the acid swimming through her



system. Knowing the origin made the magic real, her body a weapon even in a weakened state. It was miraculous, a completely new way to view her magic. She glanced at Nyx, his lips upturned as he marvel at the magic.

“Now let’s find the bastard that took my best friend.”

## Chapter 22

The trek down the mountains was interminable, a dusting of snow welcoming them as they crept along the edges of the city. Nyx snuck Harlow through a series of underground tunnels, the musty smell overwhelming her nose. They would stay in his home for a day or two, at least until Harlow could get a shaky understanding of the city layout, and narrow their list of targets.

When they emerged from the tunnels, the darkness swallowed the houses bunched up against the stone wall. Nyx moved like a shadow, guiding her to a nondescript house with an overgrown vine creeping up the side of it. He unlocked the door, ushering her into the darkened house. There was a petite couch, a sparse kitchen, and two windows in the living area. A blanket was crumpled up on the floor, a few bandages strewn across the table in the kitchen area.

Nyx locked the door behind them and busied himself with a fire. It was slightly musty, clearly uninhabited for an extended period of time. The room was bitterly cold and Harlow clutched her coat closer, a shiver starting in her limbs. The house was plain, boring in fact, but it was a place to rest. It offered a bit of safety that meant she might be able to sleep for more than two hours at a time.

She winced as her feet stung with each step, the tightness in her muscles complaining. The fireplace was crackling, heating the rooms enough to knock out the bitter winds racing through the city. Snow packed in around the doors, icicles rattled on the windows, and a constant flurry of ice shards whipped through the air. They were effectively stuck until the storm calmed enough to shovel away a few paths.

“I will report to the Regent tomorrow,” Nyx commented, handing her a blanket.

Harlow wrapped it around her shoulders. She pushed down the urge to storm the castle, demand answers, and vent her rage on the inhabitants. It was her plan after all that they were operating on right now. Capture a Regent officer, find Jax's location, that was the goal. She paced the room as the fire slowly heated the area. Nyx busied himself within the house, leaving her to gnaw at the inside of her cheek.

"You should rest," Nyx said, handing her more blankets.

"It feels wrong to sleep when I could be searching the city or fighting off some soldiers," Harlow said.

"It's tempting, but it'll get you caught faster than a rabbit in a snare. You have to think long term. Jax isn't in the city yet, I'm sure of it, and that means we have time to think this through."

She hated when he used logic. There wasn't anything to be done at this moment, but that didn't assuage the guilt. Jax was out there, probably hurt, and she was doing nothing.

"I'm tired of waiting. I want to fight back."

"I know and you will, but for now, sleep. You're of better use rested."

He tossed a pillow and blanket on the couch behind them. Harlow thought to sit, but he was already settling down on the cushions. She sighed, marching back to the bedroom where a bed waited. It would do for now.

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Nyx was gone the next morning, a note left to tell her when he would return. Harlow peeked out the window, a gray morning, and set about dressing. She pulled on a heavy pair of boots, commandeered a few knives, and wrapped a scarf around her hair and chin. Stuffing a fruit bar in her mouth, Harlow left the house to scope out the city.

It was mostly silent, a few birds chirping, and the distant sound of people talking. She tugged the hood over her head, shielding her face as much as possible. The street had a fine dusting of snow that showed a few boot prints. She followed them, keeping her eyes on the palace at the apex of the city. That was her goal, find a route to the Regent.

The city was larger than she anticipated and filled with squat houses, shops, and milling nonmagical people. Harlow shied away from the guards dotting the streets, noticing how the civilians seemed to give them a wide berth as well. She clung to the walls of the buildings until she found a square with a tiny gathering. There were stalls with fabrics, spices in ornate jars, fruit on display, and people bartering for better prices.

She moved closer to the cluster of people in the center of the square, jeers and protests mixing together. There were guards forming a semi-circle around three figures on their knees. Harlow wiggled her way through the spectators until she could get a full view of the scene. Her heart dropped. This wasn't a gathering. This was an execution.

Three sobbing people in ragged clothes were kneeling in front of the soldiers. Their swords at the ready, another soldier read out their list of crimes. Harlow couldn't focus on the words as the pitiful faces of the sobbing crowd overwhelmed her. A portly man was mopping up his tears with a rag, another woman clung to her children to hide their eyes, and a young man wept openly.

"By order of the Regent of Trevail, these three individuals are sentenced to death by beheading for crimes against the city. They have been found guilty of disseminating libel against the Regent and planning to incite a riot," the soldier said, as if he were bored.

More people gathered, the disgusted expressions and tears unbearable. Harlow held her breathe as the soldier with the scroll nodded to a man with a heavy axe. He leered as he walked

forward, one soldier lowering a crying man to the block. The prisoner looked up, eyes rimmed with red.

“I love you,” he whispered to the young man in the crowd.

His head was shoved back down. The guards standing around kept their eyes on the crowd. Harlow couldn’t pull herself away, sweat starting to bead on her forehead.

“Not today,” Harlow breathed.

Harlow shoved the man beside her, screaming at the top of her lungs. She stamped on another woman’s foot, elbowing her way through the crowd and causing the group to stir. The guards shouted to stop her, but the others in the crowd were jostling each other, shouting as feet were trampled. Soon the whole square was full of shouting, the ruse working to distract the guards as they tried to calm the crowd.

Slinking beneath a man about to throw a punch, Harlow found the prisoners. There were two soldiers keeping them in place while the others quelled the mob fighting with each other. Harlow didn’t dare release her poison lest she be caught. She ducked behind a fruit cart, skirting the edge of the square to place herself behind the soldiers. They were fifteen feet away, far enough to be noticed if she didn’t move quickly.

“Breathe,” she whispered to herself.

Harlow darted from her hiding spot and rammed straight into the first soldier. He dropped with a shout, his armor clanking on the stone. Harlow pivoted and kicked the second guard in the knee, the bone cracking as he crumbled sideways. She yanked the keys from his belt, tossing them to the sobbing young man that had crawled forward.

“Unlock the chains!”

He nodded, his thin face streaked with tears. The first soldier rose up and punched her square in the stomach. Her breathe went out in a harsh exhale, the pain radiating up to her head. She ducked when his fist came at her head. His flank exposed, Harlow punched him in the side. The soldier groaned and tried to cover himself. Harlow used the distraction to kick him hard between the legs. He crumpled in an instant, tears welling in his eyes.

“Go, quickly,” Harlow shouted.

The two older prisoners ran to their families, escaping into the chaos of the mob. The young man cradled the head of his partner, kissing him briefly before lifting him up. Harlow winced at the odd angle of the prisoner’s leg. Broken and partially set in a way that would cripple him for life.

“Thank you,” the young man said, slinging the arm over his neck.

“Who did this?” Harlow asked, kicking the guard in the head.

The soldier wheezed, then slumped over on the ground without another word.

“General Hou, he’s just as bad as the Regent,” the young man said, eyes wild with fear.

“Thank you. No run, as far as you can,” she urged.

The two men disappeared, limping through the streets while more guards swarmed the crowd. Harlow knew this was her exit and she ran for an alley. One soldier yanked at her ankle, toppling her to the ground. She kicked out with her other foot, crushing his nose with her boot. He grabbed at his face while she bounced up off the ground. Harlow barreled through the rest of the squabbling masses. She vaulted over fallen crates, weaving through the alleyways in a blind run. There were voices shouting behind her, but she didn’t let up her relentless pace.

Up ahead there was a mass of people gathered for food. She bolted straight into the crowd, elbowing people out of her way as the sound of soldiers stirred the people. Harlow ran

into the first dark sidestreet she could find, scanning it for a hiding spot. She saw the mass of crates and bolted towards them. Ducking behind the wooden boxes, Harlow hunkered down and pulled herself in tightly against the wall.

She calmed her breathing, forcing her shaking limbs to relax. The area was oddly quiet. The heavy footfall of feet went past her, time inching by until the quiet descended in earnest. She popped her head up, checking to see if anyone had been waiting to ambush her. The only movement was a stray cat leaping on a windowsill, licking its paws. Harlow slipped out of her hiding spot and started walking in the opposite direction of the square. She didn't know where she was, or where she was going, but she had to get out of here. She shivered thinking about the would be execution, the anxiety fueled adrenaline wearing off as the cold seeped beneath her clothes in shivering waves.

Ducking behind a simple house, Harlow perked her ears to the increased chatter ahead where the street opened up to a large square. She could see lights twinkling in the windows, steam rolling from the roofs, and people milling through the buildings. Her stomach clenched as the smell of roasted vegetables and fresh bread rolled through the air.

She kept to the edges, resting her back near the stone belly oven just far enough away from the crowds. Peeking around, she could see maybe twenty odd people layered with thick coats and scarves ordering food. There were no children, perhaps from the cold, and a few birds landed on the ground to nibble on crumbs. No guards either, or at least easily identified ones.

A door beside her opened up and a man with a bushy mustache dumped a bucket of dirty water. The guards would be swarming soon and without a clear plan, she didn't stand a chance. She eyed the clothing shop across the street, quickly passing through the square and into the alley behind the building. Scouting the walls, she located the back door and tested the handle. It

wouldn't budge, but she guessed a swift kick could take it down. Harlow scoured the surrounding alley, making sure she was alone. She snapped her leg out crunching the wood frame near the lock. With a rough yank, Harlow dislodged the lock and slipped inside the shop.

She listened carefully, but didn't hear shouts of outrage from the broken door. There were piles of clothes in boxes along the wall, a row of boots and impractical heels. Harlow shimmied out of her dirtied clothes and yanked on a pair of pants similar to Nyx's with a sturdy woven fabric. She quickly piled on layers with different colors that would disguise her in the alleys. Better to blend and blunder back to a safety with more layers to cover her face. She couldn't go back out there without a different look in case anyone noticed her.

Stifling a groan when she put on the shoes, Harlow took stock of her new outfit. It was completely mismatched, but it would do to let her sneak back to the house. She melted back into the alley, closing the door with a whispered apology. Soldiers were shouting for people to go back to their homes. There were cries of protest quickly silenced. Harlow didn't want to see the brutality having witnessed it moments before in the square.

It took her long than anticipated to arrive at Nyx's house. She nearly collapsed on the couch when she arrived, groaning at the headache pounding through her skull. At least the day had yielded something of worth. The name of the man she would capture in order to find Jax.



## Chapter 23

Harlow slept fitfully that night, her dreams infused with the cries of the crowd. She saw the anguish over and over again. She tossed in the bed, half away before drifting back to sleep. The square appeared again and then began to vanish, morphing into a lush oasis. Harlow went still. It was just like the places Fenric had created in her dreams. But she had killed him. He was gone.

Harlow waited, listening for movement in the dreamscape. A shadow drifted over the sun, blotting out the dappled sunlight peeking through the canopy of trees. Her heart beat faster and she started to pinch herself to wake up.

“It’s not real,” she said over and over again.

The landscape grew more lush, flowers sprouting and growing to an impossible height. The hairs on her neck stood up when she heard a low chuckle.

“Fenric is gone. This is a dream” she said, scrunching her eyes closed.

The wind rustled the leaves and with it came the whispered laughter. Harlow wanted to wake up, to escape this dream. It was just a nightmare, but it felt more real by the minute.

“You’ll never escape me, Harlow,” a voice whispered.

Her eyes popped open and her mouth parted on a silent scream.

Fenric stood before her, body mangled from their fight. His hair was matted with blood, the burns on his body were puckered and red. Harlow gasped, racing towards the tree line. She heard the pounding of steps behind her, the ragged breathing.

*This isn’t real. This is a dream.*

But her body didn’t get the message as pure adrenaline coursed through her veins. She smacked straight into one of the trees, nose spurting blood. Harlow groped around at the ground

and grasped at a heavy branch. She could hear Fenric behind her. With a scream, she swung the branch behind her, sure that it would topple him to the ground. But when she looked up, there was nothing.

She jolted up, clutching the branch. The streams continued to bubble, the trees swayed gently in the breeze. She was alone.

Harlow pinched at her arm, but instead of seeing a waver at the edge of her dream she woke up in Nyx's room. Her body was covered in sweat, the blankets twisted around her legs. Had it been a normal nightmare? She ran a hand over her head and extricated herself from the bed. It was dark out and even though she was tired, she couldn't go back to sleep yet.

She went out into the living room to where Nyx was softly snoring. It would be rude to wake him. She would get something to drink, calm her nerves, and try to rest. That would be a decent idea and she could calm herself down. She crept over to the kitchen, holding herself as still as possible. A cup clanked on the other and she winced.

"Harlow?"

He was behind her in a moment. She sighed, placing the cup down on the counter.

"I'm sorry. I had a bad dream," she replied.

Nyx rubbed at his eyes and stretched his arms up. She pulled down another cup and set to making some tea for the two of them.

"I'm sorry," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"It was Fenric, even though I know he's dead."

"That's still traumatic," he replied, grabbing a kettle.

He took over preparing the tea, boiling the water and placing the bags in the cups.

"Come sit with me," he said, taking the tea.

She went without a fight, needing a small comfort tonight. It had been a nightmare, just a regular one, but it was enough to keep her awake. They sat on the couch, Harlow curling her legs under her and letting Nyx place a blanket over her. She sat quietly sipping her tea, not sure if she wanted to talk about the matter or pretend it didn't exist.

"Tell me about the mental magic. I need to understand," she said quietly.

He observed her over the rim of his cup, tendrils of steam curling around his face. Finally he nodded, placing the cup on a side table.

"My powers are limited by distance from my targets. If I am far away, the persuasion magic is nothing more than a fleeting thought. I can persuade, but I can't control the mind. If I am allowed into someone's subconscious, I can create powerful illusions that feed my magic. The more they believe the illusion, the better it restores my ability."

"You mean like the illusions from Fenric," she replied.

His eyes snapped to her face, a searching look that hinted at the uncomfortable truth waiting to be addressed. She had guessed at his association with Fenric, but had been too fearful of the answer to bring it up.

"He chose to feed off fear," Nyx replied.

"He knew you," Harlow said, not questioning the connection apparent in his shifting away from the topic.

"Yes, he knew about my ability when I showed up in the woods," he said.

"That's not all, is it?"

Harlow drank her tea to give herself something to do. She needed to understand, to be able to rationalize the magic that Fenric had used against her.

"I trained him, before he turned to the Regent," Nyx admitted.

He had the decency to look embarrassed, ashamed of the part he played in the creation of a monstrous being. An image of Fenric tearing into her flesh blinked into her mind, the acute fear and pain more real than the physical damage he doled out in the woods.

“How did he not recognize you working with the Regent?”

“He only saw me in an altered state, working at a distance where our identities couldn’t be compromised. Fenric was supposed to be part of the downfall of the Regent, but her offers were more alluring. She could protect him, offer him all the willing minds to feed on, and place him in a gilded cage. It was more than I could offer and he took it without a second glance.”

Harlow wanted to blame him for training Fenric, but the despondency creeping over his features glued her tongue in place. She had to stop jumping to the worst conclusions if she was going to work with him.

“The real source of the magic is the emotions elicited from the illusion. Fear, anxiety, anger, and lust are the most sustainable emotions. Joy and happiness are harder to maintain. The stronger the illusion, the more likely you are to get the intense emotional reaction.”

Harlow colored thinking of the different emotions Fenric had produced in her dreams. She didn’t want to remember the way he had made her feel, the power she had assumed was hers. He had just been using her as an energy recharge and she had let him.

Nyx leaned forward, placing a hand over hers. Her head snapped up, a threat of tears welling at the edges of her eyes.

"You didn’t do anything wrong, Harlow. Fenrir forced his way into your dreams, used illusions to manipulate you. It wasn’t your fault,” Nyx said in a soft voice.

“But I let him in,” she whispered.

“That doesn’t mean he had any right to do what he did to you,” Nyx said, “You didn’t ask for any of this. He was a monster, preying on your vulnerability, and the blame rests on him, not you.”

She felt her throat tightened, the pain of the memories clogging her senses. Harlow leaned into Nyx, taking the comfort that she needed as the release of emotions flooded her. He wrapped her in his arms, hugging her close as she swatted at the tears trickling down her cheek.

The guilt she had carried broke, the allowance to see herself as the survivor of Fenric’s manipulation freeing her from the shame. She knew it wasn’t an easy fix, the pain would continue to surface, but the narrative could change. Harlow wasn’t responsible for the pain Fenric had inflicted on her. She didn’t ask for him to brutally torture her mind with his games, feasting on her emotions for his personal gain. She hadn’t allowed him to control her mind and she wouldn’t let the memory of him haunt her future. The fault was on him, and he had paid for his crimes. She was a survivor, and nobody could take that away from her.

Harlow let Nyx hold her, a steady hand stroking her back. He could be gentle and kind when he wasn’t arguing circles around her. It felt like being with two different people, one cocky and infuriating, the other understanding and kind. Harlow couldn’t piece the two together, wondering what made him switch.

She took a shuddering breath and pulled herself into a sitting position. There was concern etched in his furrowed brow and she thought he might say something else to her. What did she want him to say? Of course, she couldn’t have found an easy person to be attracted to, normal and not an ass at times. But Nyx was proving to be more than she expected, a strong companion with a slightly skewed moral compass.

“I want to end this,” she finally said.

“As do I.”

Harlow adjusted the blanket on her lap. “I know who we need to capture.”

Nyx raised an eyebrow and waited for her to continue.

“Tomorrow, we take General Hou.”

## Chapter 24

Harlow adjusted the thin veil over her face, jewels clinking along her forehead. The gauzy material brushing her skin felt out of place. She tugged uncomfortably at the dress, slit up to her thigh and falling loosely to her ankles. The skinny straps over her shoulder barely held in place, the immaterial shawl wrapped tightly around her arms.

*This is ridiculous.*

The tavern she had entered was dimly lit, the smell of smoke and liquor permeated the air. It was a den, devoid of outside lights and raucous with laughter. All the other women in the place were floating around like ghosts, flirting with ease. They stuffed their pockets with gold coins, delivering drinks to hopeful patrons. Harlow could hardly stomach the looks from the men in the tavern. They were hungry, ravenous for the slips of skin showing with each movement through the dingy room.

*I should have come up with a better plan.*

She also should have argued harder with Nyx on where she would find her target. How was she supposed to get General Hou alone with all these other beautiful women? She could hardly move without trying to hide her exposed calves and thighs. How was she supposed to be as ethereal as the other women? She was out of place, the awkward movements and jerky reactions drawing unwanted attention.

A pasty-faced boy stumbled past her, raising an eyebrow before turning to puke in a bin. Harlow slipped to the side, dodging an intertwined couple shifting towards a shadowy alcove. A burst of laughter and shouts kept her moving, trying to escape the card tables and piano pumping out a steady stream of music. They would have to try something else. This wasn't going to work when she couldn't even find General Hou.

“Excuse me,” a gruff voice said, hands landing on her back before she stepped on his feet.

“I’m very sorry I—”

Harlow paused, her eyes roving over the man behind her. He had a medium build, skin weathered from the sun, and a salty gray beard. It seemed fate interfered. General Hou turned his head, forehead wrinkling as he leisurely examined her from head to toe.

The blood drained from her face. Fate was on her side tonight.

“You’re new,” he said.

*What do I say? What do I say?*

He tugged at her veil, a lazy grin spreading across his face. She hadn’t thought this through well enough. Everything in her screamed run, but her feet were rooted to the ground. Harlow snapped the veil back down before he could reveal her face. Nyx had made it clear that she should keep it hidden.

“Oh, she has some bite to her,” he said. “I like that.”

Maybe this would work in her favor. Harlow placed her hand on her hip, awkwardly tilting to the side to exaggerate the curves of her body. She was grateful for the veil hiding the ugly pink splotches blooming on her neck. General Hou’s gaze went straight to her hip, focusing on the way the dress hugged her thighs and fell loosely at the slit.

“How much for a room, kitten?”

*Kitten? Really?*

Harlow nearly gagged on his words. There was no preamble to it, no dancing around the subject. Then again, this was the plan she had come up with, however terrible it seemed now. This was the one place the high-ranking generals could blow off steam, away from the general



rabble, and relax amongst comrades. It was a perfect place, even if it made her want to bath for two days straight.

One of the other girls caught her eye, barely shaking her head. Harlow could feel the anxiety rippling out from her, the kindness she conveyed by warning her away from General Hou. She wanted to listen, or at least let the other girl know she was able to fight, but she had to stay in character. A misstep meant consequences she wasn't ready to pay.

She contemplated talking, but the words were stuck in her throat. Stifling a shudder, she reached out for his hand and guided him to the beaded door where the private rooms were kept. He didn't protest, following her as a few wolf whistles carried over the music. Harlow parted the beads, the clinking piercing her nerves. The hallway was even darker, covered in velvet curtains, and full of sounds that made her blush.

The last door on the hall was ajar, candles burning around a plush red bed. Harlow led him inside, closing the door behind them. Her fingers jumped to the lock, clicking it in place. She didn't dare turn her back to General Hou, knowing his dark taste for beatings. Nyx had made a few points clear and keeping out of reach when in a closed room was one of them.

General Hou wasted no time stripping off his boots, the stench of unwashed feet hitting her square in the nose. He shrugged off his coat, throwing it on the floor, and hung his sword on the edge of the bed. Harlow eyed it wondering how often that had been used in a room like this before.

"Let's play a game," he said, sliding off his belt.

He snapped it by his side, holding the metal buckle firmly in his hands. Harlow jumped, allowing the fear to play into the moment. General Hou grinned at her reaction, snapping the belt again to see her jump.

This was his thing, fear. He enjoyed scaring the girls first, a bit of pain, a bit of humiliation to make him feel powerful. Harlow leaned into the damsel in distress motif, allowing herself to express her nerves through her reactions. He would see what he wanted, and she would see the end of this vile pig.

“The game is cat and mouse,” he said. “I’ll be the cat; you be the mouse. If I catch you...”

She didn’t want to hear the end of his sentence. It was certainly something involving pain and while she wanted to keep in character, she wouldn’t allow him to hurt her.

Harlow kept herself close to the wall as he crept closer, snapping the belt out in front of him every few steps. Her slippers slid over the tiled floor, throwing her off balance. General Hou seemed to enjoy it, crouching before he lunged out with his belt. Harlow narrowly escaped when the belt snapped at her veil, nearly hitting her in the eye.

“You’re faster than the others,” he growled, showing his crooked teeth.

General Hou put down the belt, unsheathing a dagger from his jacket. He was changing the game again. The dagger whizzed through the air, pointed at her arm. Harlow swerved to the side, rolling on the ground and ripping the dress up to her waist. The dagger strapped to her thigh peaked out. She tried to cover it, but General Hou was already on top of her.

“She has claws.”

His breath was hot on her face, his hands pinning her wrists to the floor. Harlow kicked at him, but he jammed his knee hard into her stomach. She wheezed, trying to catch her breath as he bracketed her legs between his. His tongue ran down her neck, the revulsion at his touch bucking her forward. She registered his hand moving away from her wrist, but couldn’t move in

time. Star danced in front of her eyes, the pain blooming along her cheek from his heavy slap. Harlow tasted blood in her mouth and prayed that her teeth were still there.

General Hou hoisted himself up and threw her over his back. She reared up, kicking him in the sides and swinging herself down when his grip loosened. She was rapidly losing control of the situation, her mind screaming for her to run away. Harlow punched without thought, catching him in the jaw. He doubled back, a wheeze escaping him. There was blood coming out of his mouth and the split in his lip that oozed with each pulse of his heart.

“You bitch,” he hissed.

She was getting tired of being called that for protecting herself. Anger took over her trepidation, the words of Fenrir mingling with his and countless others that felt threatened by her. General Hou charged again, swiping at the air with his fists. Harlow hunkered down, sweeping her leg out. It caught his feet, tripping him as he tried to swing again.

She danced around the room, putting the bed between them. The potion Nyx had given her was hidden under the pillow. Three drops in his drink would knock him out. Then Nyx would help her drag him out the window. But that plan was dissolving as the seconds ticked away, his fury clearly taking over any desire that might have lurked in his mind. How would she get him to ingest it now?

“You think a bed can protect you?”

He prowled along the edge of the bed, blood coating his teeth and dripping off his chin. The bed shook under his hands, the candles shivering along the shelves on the wall. Harlow thought about using the flames, but he was one step ahead. He snuffed out the ones beside him with his fingers, pinching out the flames with his eyes drilled into hers. The room went dark, only a small flicker of light filtering in from the curtain.

“Do you even know who I am?” he bellowed.

Harlow wanted to bite back a retort about him being a worthless sack of dung, but his hand snapped out at her veil. She yanked backwards, but his fingers grasped the bottom. Ripping it from her face, Harlow reasoned that he would be dead before he could tell anyone what she looked like.

“I’ve seen you before,” he said, standing back from the bed.

Her heart thundered in her chest. How could he know what she looked like? The grin spreading across his face was disgusting, a predatory lust coating his face.

“You were the one spying on General Shutter in the woods,” he replied.

*Oh, gods.*

“I remember seeing you sneaking away, thinking you were being so quiet.”

That must have been how General Shutter knew she was there. She had been spotted, and he had been sent to deal with her. That meant Hou was the one that took the information to the Regent about Jax. He was behind the ambush. Cold fury sang through her head, a chant for his head on a platter overthrowing her logical plans.

“You were the reason my friend was captured,” Harlow said, her tone even despite the anger bursting to the surface.

“I’m the reason hundreds were captured. Your one friend is insignificant,” he spat back with a gruff laugh.

He didn’t see the dagger loosened from the thigh holster. It whizzed through the air, lodging firmly in his thigh. Hou screamed, blood spurting from his lips. Harlow didn’t waste any time, bolting towards him. She brought her fist up under his chin, doubling him back onto the bed. Grabbing the knife, she twisted it in his thigh, eliciting another scream.

She jammed part of the sheets into his mouth, loosening a few teeth in the process. He tried to kick her, but she leaned on the knife. Hou twitched, his arms grabbing at the blade. Harlow pinned his hands to the bed, putting all her weight into holding him down.

The urge to release her acid on him grew with every thrash of his body. She wanted him to pay for his crimes. The fury built in her chest, the all-consuming rage burning through her body. He was a monster.

“You’ll pay for what you’ve done,” Harlow hissed. “Now tell me where Jax is!”

He jerked beneath her, trying to scream around the gag. She reached for the sleeping potion. His free leg swept at her feet and she collapsed on his chest. He used his head to smash into her face, blood pouring from her nose. Harlow scrambled over him, grabbing the potion. He thrashed under her, screaming through the gag. His hand shot forward and knocked the potion from her hand.

He threw her off him, punching her square in the chest. Harlow’s head cracked on the floor. White lights popped in front of her eyes. Hou was rising from the bed, her chance to capture him slipping away. She had to get back up, try something else to capture the beast of a man.

Hou screamed as he yanked the dagger from his thigh and lunged towards Harlow. She ducked down, kicking up at his wrist. It happened as if in slow motion, her foot snagged the outside of his wrist, propelling it sideways. His eyes went wide a moment before the impact. The dagger slid jerkily through his chest, catching on the rough fabric of his shirt.

Harlow sank to the floor as he made a choked gasp, his hand drifting to the place he had impaled himself. His eyes rolled, the whites the only visible part. It was eerie watching him tumble backwards, the strangled groan as he tried to breathe through the pain. Hou collapsed on

the bed, twitching until he stilled with his arms spread wide. Harlow panted in the corner, dress torn to shreds, and blood splattered all over her skin.

She needed to leave this place. The plan had gone all wrong. He was supposed to be alive, give her the information she needed. Her eyes were stuck on the dagger in his chest. Nyx had given them to her with clear instructions to leave them at the scene. They were from the Resistance and would send a clear message. But this wasn't the message she had meant to send.

Her steps were stilted as she edged towards the bed, removing the bag from below. She stripped out of her bloodied clothes and shrugged on the trousers. The dress was beyond repair, tattered and stained. She scoured his body for papers, anything that might give her information. When she located a small notebook, she shoved it into the pocket of her trousers. Harlow saw the smashed potion bottle on the ground and bent to pick it up. It didn't matter anymore, but somehow she couldn't handle the broken pieces remaining on the floor.

Without a sound, she cleaned up the shards, sucking in a sharp breath when it sliced open her finger. She had to go, leave this behind her. If she waited any longer, guards would find her and then it would be over. She stashed the broken pieces in her pocket and gently opened the door. The girl from before gave her a curious look as she stood in the doorway across from her, one dainty hand resting on the wood. Harlow had a fleeting moment where she wanted to tell her to run, get away from this place.

Or it least it should have been as a heavy blow to her head sent her spiraling forward.

## Chapter 25

A surly guard stood before her with a solemn expression. Harlow's heart sunk, despair threatening to consume her. This definitely wasn't part of her plan. Not that any of the plan had gone as expected, but being captured was far from it. Her whole objective was to find Jax and being caught in the process was a slap in the face.

"You're under arrest," the guard said, leering down at her.

"But I'm not—"

Her words were cut short when he smashed his open palm across her cheek. Blood spurted out of her lips and onto the muddied ground. A second guard clamped shackles to her ankles, dragging her hands forward to bind her wrists. She frantically searched the area for an out, a reason to be here, but her woefully simple knowledge of the city meant she was lost.

The guard threw her into the back of a wooden carriage, the bitter cold biting at her exposed neck. Doors slammed shut and the damp wood cooled her burning cheeks. The wheels groaned as the carriage moved slowly through the street. Jostled with each movement, Harlow couldn't get a handle on where she was being taken. The shackles on her feet bit into her skin, rubbing them raw. She bucked against them, the extra set on her hands chaffing with each bump in the road.

When the carriage stopped, Harlow squirmed to get in a sitting position. The guard with the ruddy complexion and thinning hair flung the door open, glaring at her before he gripped her jaw in his hands.

"Seems we have ourselves a murderer," he said, a mirthless smile revealing missing teeth.

She jerked against his hold, frantic to get away.

“Wonder what the Regent will pay for your pretty head.”

Her stomach dropped and a cold flush had goosebumps covering her skin. It would be over the moment she was taken to the court. The Regent would execute her for her crimes.

“Can’t wait to see that head of yours roll,” he added, lifting a gray brow.

Harlow focused her efforts on the chains, forcing a stream of acid to leak onto the metal. This couldn’t be her end and while she was loathe to reveal her magic, it was better than being taken. The chains began to sizzle, the metal twisting as rivers of steam rose.

“What the—”

His words were cut short as the chains dropped. Harlow cocked her arm back and rammed her fist straight into his throat. He gagged, his trachea crushed, and crumpled to the ground. Frantic, she dropped more acid on her ankles and prayed the metal would corrode faster, the sound of footsteps dangerously close.

*Where the hell was Nyx when I need him?*

Another guard rounded the corner, his slight build more agile than the rounded guard on the snowy ground.

“You there! Stop! By order of the Regent!”

Her eyes went wide, kicking at the manacles around her ankles. The chains clamored to the ground with a hiss, but his baton swung right as she ducked. It smacked across her forehead, flinging her backwards with a sickening crash. She smacked her head on the floorboard. He dragged her forward, a nail ripping along her back. Harlow’s head jerked, her teeth clamping down on her tongue. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth.

“You’re a feisty one,” he said, wrestling with her flailing legs.



She spit out a bit of the blood, disgusted by the metallic taste. It splattered on the ground, sprinkling the dirty snow with crimson droplets.

“Sit still,” the guard yelled, trying to secure her legs.

Harlow acted without thought, spitting the blood at the soldier. It jettisoned forward, morphing into slender needles and imbedding themselves in the guard’s cheeks. Shocked registered on both of their faces seconds before he yelled, swiping at his bleeding cheeks.

Harlow couldn’t believe it.

Her blood had turned into metal.

Real metal.

*Oh gods, what the hell am I?*

But now wasn’t the time to freak out over what had transpired. She used the distraction to free herself from his grip. She darted down the road, adrenaline aiding her flight. The shouts from the guard followed her as she weaved over broken boxes and heaps of trash covered in snow. Her lungs felt like they might burst, but she didn’t let up her pace. The night had turned into a nightmare, her hands soiled with blood and dirt, and a new form of magic that sent shivers down her spine.

Vaulting over a crate, Harlow burst through the alley and slipped behind a wooden barrel. She heard the slender guard rush past her, barking out order as if she would willingly surrender. Her hands were shaking, and her breath came in sharp stabs, but she didn’t dare move.

The street was mostly quiet, a few people milling through the houses, but the guard had disappeared. She fell back on her heels, steadying her breathing. The loop of distressed thoughts clouded her, wondering where to go, and just what the hell had happened moments ago. She hid herself in an old crate, waiting for the soldier’s footfalls to disappear. It wasn’t ideal, but getting

back to Nyx's house was her best option. She hated to admit it, but in the end, they needed one another.

## Chapter 26

The morning light flickered over her eyelids, the steady headache thumping on the back of her skull. She must have drifted off waiting for Nyx to return, her body exhausted from the fight and subsequent dash through the city. It would be a wonder if she could get her feet to heal before tearing them up again.

Harlow rubbed at her closed eyes, massaging her forehead before cracking open one eye. There was a thick slice of bread, two boiled eggs, and a pat of butter sitting beside her on the table. She pushed herself up, twisting to see if Nyx was waiting in the kitchen, but the room was empty. Without prompting, she rose to take the food. She was grateful he wasn't here to see her scarf down the eggs, possibly ingesting a piece of shell in her haste to quell the gnawing in her stomach.

She yanked the stolen notebook from her soiled clothes, pouring over the hastily scrawled notes. There were encoded messages, more than a few dates scratched off. Harlow combed each page, begging for one piece of information that would lead her to Jax. When nothing jumped out, Harlow threw the notebook down onto the floor.

Harlow shucked her clothes, washing quickly to remove the grime from the night, and braided back her hair so she wouldn't be tempted to cut it off. The sun was nearly at the top of the sky when Nyx appeared. He had on his Regent guard attire, black boots laced up his calves and knives studding the straps across his chest. Harlow grabbed the notebook and thumbed through the pages once more.

"Did you find anything?"

"Nothing that I can decipher," she replied.

He rounded the corner, a steaming cup in his hand, and offered it to her. The tea was sweet and had a tangy taste to it. She took a sip, tapping on a page with a hastily scrawled map.

“Could this be a drop location?” Harlow asked.

Nyx took the notebook from her, examining the rudimentary drawing. He turned the notebook sideways and then walked over to a desk in the corner. Pulling out a map, he placed the drawing alongside the mountain range. Harlow stood up and peeked over his shoulder to examine the terrain.

“There!” she exclaimed.

The cursory drawing lined up with a town not far from the city. It just might be the place they went with captured mages before bringing them into the Imperial City.

“We go tonight,” she said, squaring her shoulders.

“Tonight? After you were nearly captured last night?”

She shrugged and went into the bedroom to fish out a small pack.

“I’m not wasting any time. Either you’re with me or you’re not,” she called over her shoulder.

Nyx didn’t respond, but she heard him huffing as he made his way to the room. He quietly picked up his own supplies, food, extra socks, and a warm blanket. Harlow kept her back to him as she contemplated the next question that had been buzzing in her mind. She knew there was no easy way to ask so she kept her hand busy so she wouldn’t lose the nerve.

“If I can produce needles with my blood, would I be able to make larger weapons with a large stock of blood?”

“Needles with your blood? Beside the fact that it might kill you, it’s possible,” Nyx said.  
“I wouldn’t advise it though.”

“Fair point,” Harlow said, grabbing for an assortment of dried fruits.

“And when did this happen exactly?”

“Last night,” she replied, not giving up more information.

He stared at her, but she ignored his shocked expression. She felt her hands tingling, the desire to test her limits making her antsy. This opened up more possibilities that she could have imagined. All her life she had heard that wielders could only do one thing with their magic, but it had been a lie. The Regent’s control of the four earth pillars limited those wielders and dampened their scope of abilities. Without control over the three physical pillars, Harlow had been able to expand her magic. If more wielders were aware of the possibilities, they would come out of hiding and fight back.

“What are the limits of your ability?”

Nyx shifted and stared at the doorframe. She yelped when a rabbit poked its head around the frame. It hopped twice, tail bobbing, and then disappeared.

“I can create illusions that feed my magic, but I can’t control the mind.”

“Good, we can use that to free Jax,” Harlow said matter of fact.

“It would be—”

“Dangerous? I know. Everything we do is dangerous, Nyx. But it’s worth it if we can break the barriers on magic.”

He nodded even though she could sense the rebuttal in his furrowed brow. She turned to him, putting her bag over her shoulder.

“Nyx, before we go, I need to know something,” she said.

“Ask,” he replied, propping his leg up to lace his boots.

“Can I trust you?”

His movements ceased and he stood up straight. Taking a step towards her, Nyx took Harlow's hands in his.

"I promise, you can trust me. No matter what you hear outside these walls, know that I am on your side."

Harlow squeezed his hands, the earnest expression melting the reservations she had held. He had proved himself in the past days, kept her safe inside the city. If they were to take down the Regent, then she had to trust him.

"I believe you," she replied.

They stayed for a moment there, the relief washing over Harlow. The wind rattled the door breaking them apart. She finished packing her meager provisions, sending a prayer to the gods for this poorly planned mission. When the sun had fallen and the city quieted, they snuck out of the house. Harlow's heart hammered an anxious tune, the fear of being caught heightened with every sound. But she had to do it, or else all hope was lost.

## Chapter 27

The town was teeming with soldiers, their dark armor reflecting the flickering fires. Nyx couched beside Harlow at the outskirts of largest building. They waited behind a cluster of trees, keeping low to avoid being seen. It had taken them two hours to get here, the moon lighting their path. Harlow hoped the late hour would benefit them; the guards tired from a long day.

“That has to be the place,” Harlow whispered.

There was an old stone building with soldiers patrolling back and forth. She watched as one guard escorted a man in chains, shoving him back into the stone wall. Her instincts begged her to take him out, but she couldn’t risk it yet. If she made too much noise, it would raise the alarm. The rest of the town was quiet, the inhabitants tucked away. Harlow squinted, trying to find any additional entrances.

“We need to get inside, free as many people as possible,” Harlow said, taking off her bag.

She turned to him, her heart hammering hard in her chest. There were options, but none of them pleasant. He wasn’t going to like this plan, but she had to give it a try.

“I need you to create a distraction,” she said.

“I can’t risk someone figuring out I possess magic,” Nyx replied.

“It’s the best chance we have of freeing Jax. If we don’t risk it, then we might as well admit defeat.”

He sat back on his heels, his hands flexing at his side. It was high time he faced his fears, just like she had done. They were helpless with Jax’s magic to combine with their own. If he was out of the picture, they wouldn’t be strong enough when the time came to fight.

“This is what you’ve been working for, Nyx. You can’t let it go to waste.”

“You’ll be the death of me,” he muttered.

She smirked, shrugging off her pack and hiding it back in the woods. Nyx tucked himself behind the tree, hiding as best he could, and shut his eyes. She wasn't sure what he planned on showing, but she hoped the signal wouldn't be subtle.

“How will I—”

Screams pierced the night while soldiers frantically ran around the town. They ducked and hid beneath carts. Some hammered on doors, begging to be let inside. Harlow darted out from behind the tree, racing to the iron door on the side of the building. She wrenched the door open, praying she wasn't seen in the imagined chaos outside.

Harlow swallowed hard as she opened the door. She hated this next part. Two guards grabbed at her. She summoned acid to her fists and smashed her hand into the closest soldier. He screamed, dropping to the ground to writhe back and forth. Harlow shot another glob of acid at his armor, letting it sizzle on impact. He gasped, jumping up and rushing out the door. The second soldier raised a sword to slash at her. She ducked, using the acid on her hand to grip his other wrist. The man bellowed out a curse, but she jammed her other fist straight into his mouth. Crumbling to the dusty floor, Harlow kicked him hard in the head. He went still, slumped into the stone corridor.

Harlow breathed heavily, shaking with the adrenaline singing in her veins. The room was dark, a solitary hall leading to a set of stairs. She moved forward, walking down the tight stone stairs. It was miniscule, the ceiling uncomfortably close. The air was thin, and Harlow wanted to crawl out of her skin as it grew tighter in the hall.

When it felt like she would scream, the stairs ended on a small landing. A soldier walked back and forth in the narrow corridor, patrolling a couple of cramped cells. She could see mages shackled to the wall, wrists bound in tight metal cuffs. It was dark and bone chilling in the cell.



Harlow took a few steadying breaths to keep from panicking. She wanted to vomit; an enclosed space, and a whole mess of guards waiting for her outside wasn't her favorite pastime.

One guard was dozing off in the corner, his helmet tipped low over his face. The other kept up a steady pace, his long legs covering the cramped area quickly. She needed to take him out quietly. The other soldiers outside were bound to sound the alarm and bring more soldiers to assist. Which meant she didn't have much time to free the mages. Harlow envisioned the pins she needed, letting them flow out of her right palm. She winced as one snagged on her index finger. She coated the metal with acid and flung the first one straight at the soldier. It pinged on his armor and he frowned as it started to smoke.

Harlow sprang from the stairs and leapt onto the man's back. She covered his mouth before he could scream, increasing the pressure on his throat. He thrashed trying to toss her to the ground, but she clung with all her might. She put more pressure on him grunting with the effort to take him down.

"You- can't- it- won't—"

His words were cut off as he sank to the ground. Harlow held tight to ensure that he had passed out. She crouched over him and listened to the heavy breathes pushing dirt away from his mouth. Faces appeared at the cell walls, dirt smudged and stricken. She put her finger to her mouth to make sure they didn't speak. Freeing the keys, Harlow crept to the cell. She watched the other guard, wary to wake him as she jiggled the key in the lock. At last, it sprang open with a dull echo. People flooded out the open door, some nodding to Harlow as they rushed past her. One mage thumped the sleeping soldier over the head, his body slipping off the stool to the cold ground.

She ran to the other cells, unlocking them as quickly as she could. There were some mages chained to walls, their bodies limp. She tossed the keys to a fair haired kid with a gash over his face. He nodded, going to work freeing the rest of the inhabitants. Harlow scanned the wall for Jax, but he was nowhere in sight. Panic started to rise, the possibility that she might have been wrong sending shocks through her system.

“Over there,” the kid called, pointing to a door hidden at the back of the cell.

She rushed over, placing her hands on the stone. The cell wall felt slick, and Harlow didn’t want to know why. She felt around for the door hinges, trying to ignore the chills running down her spine. The wall gave way to metal, and her hands met with the heavy hinge. She released a gush of acid, swiping away the smoke as it slowly ate away at the door. She held her breath as the first hinge cracked, the acid slowly eating away at the metal. When the door gave it made a horrible groaning sound that echoed around the halls.

She searched the smaller room and spotted the huddled mass in the corner. It barely moved, the darkness overwhelming.

“Jax, is that you?”

The mass moved, the chains rattling. A silver loc flashed from beneath the ragged clothes. Harlow gasped, rushing over to him. She felt for the chains and burned them away with the acid.

“How did you find me?”

“I’ll explain later. We have to go. Now.”

He nodded, shakily rising to his feet. Harlow shoulder his weight, helping him limp out of the room and into the bigger cell. She heard the unmistakable shout of outrage, the cry to round up the detainees.

“I’ll distract the guards. You run like hell.”

Jax nodded, his face pinched with pain. Panicked, Harlow wrenched open the cell door and bolted out into the hallway. A guard was ready, built like a tank with a ring of fire around his arms. He started running at her, fury in his eyes. She shot a gush of acid, but he burned it with a ball of fire. Harlow ducked to the side as the flame licked out in front of her.

“Run!”

His feet pounded and panic flushed her face. He was a foot away, arm up with a sword made of flame. Harlow summoned metal to her hands, catching the blade in palms plated with iron. She could still feel the heat and it burned the metal on her palms. A strangled cry ripped from her throat as she struggled to hold back sword. The guard looked stunned for a moment and raised his sword again. Harlow acted without thought. She released the burning metal from her hands, throwing it forward. It smacked into his wrist and the flame sword flickered out. The other metal piece caught him in the neck, sizzling on his skin. The yelps of pain bounced around the walls, mingling with her rapid breathing. Harlow used the moment of shock to elbow her way around the guard and holding her nose as the smell of burning flesh wafted in the hallway.

She didn’t look back, lunging up the stairs two at a time, while the guard cursed behind her. The guard was hot on her heels, his eyes strained as he shouted profane things at her. Harlow urged the door open enough to budge herself through. She turned to close the stone door, the guard inches away. She slammed her body against the iron, a crunching sound echoing as she imagined a fingertip lodged in the door jam.

Harlow couldn’t stop to contemplate what happened, rushing out of the small building. Jax was panting at the wall, clutching at his side. The town was in an uproar, soldiers shouting and chasing down fleeing mages.

Alarms started to wail through the town. Her stomach dropped.

The mages and nonmagical in the town flooded out of their hiding places, fleeing to the woods. The freed mages rushed past her, not giving her a second glance as guards poured into the streets. Harlow whirled out of the way as a fire mage sent a flaming boulder down the center of the lane. It licked at cloaks, setting them on fire, and sending shrieks throughout the area.

Her heart stuttered.

“Shit,” she whispered, fear clogging her throat.

The Regent guards were quick to act, shooting arrows at the mages, using their swords to cut through the escapees. It was mayhem.

Jax was slumped over in the corner, clutching at his leg. She ran to him, hoping the others would run away instead of trying to take on the soldiers. She grasped his hand and dragged him towards the woods. He groaned in pain, trying to get his footing. Harlow tugged at him trying to make him move quickly.

“We have to go,” she urged.

A guard rushed at them. Harlow flung a dagger from her thigh sheath without thought. It hit him straight in the eye and he dropped without another movement.

“Holy shit, Harlow,” Jax said.

There would be a time later on to brag about her skills, but her focus was on that dark forest. She gripped his hand tighter, dragging him behind her. Jax scrambled with her, tripping on loose stones. Another smaller explosion went off behind them as they tumbled down a slight hill, the roots sticking up from ancient trees.

Harlow knew that he couldn’t go far, certain he was injured. Once the shock wore off, he wouldn’t be able to move well enough to escape. He tried to slow them down with a tug of her

arm, but Harlow kept running forward. She had a vice grip on his hand and wouldn't let him speak as she weaved through the pandemonium.

They emerged from the trees and found a path lit with small stones. Harlow felt her heart jump to her throat. Nyx was sending her a message, she was sure of it. She raced off after the lit path and didn't let the shouts of panic stop her.

"Where are we going?"

"I have to get you out of here," Harlow said, a stitch searing through her side.

"We can't leave," he said, "not when there are people still fighting."

Harlow shook her head. "You don't understand. We have to get out of here before they realize what kind of mage you are, Jax."

"What are you talking about?"

There was a rustling in the trees beside them. Harlow gripped Jax's hand and started running again. He followed, a slight limp as his leg bled. They made it to a building constructed into the town's outer wall, the fighting reduced to a low rumble. Harlow searched the area, finding more lights to follow through the wooded area.

"Jax, I promise I'll tell you everything, but you have to trust me right now."

He started to respond, but just nodded instead. Pain clouded his eyes and Harlow knew there wasn't much time left.

"Can you keep walking?"

"I'll make it. Let's go," he said, a grim determination in his tone.

Harlow focused on the path Nyx had laid out. She kept Jax close, darting to the other side of the stone street and up a narrow alley in a half abandoned town. It was a steep climb, both of

them panting in their haste, but it led to the stone wall where a handle was hidden. Harlow wrenched the stone away and opened the secret tunnel. Jax's mouth dropped open.

"How did you—"

"Later."

They stepped into the tunnel and kept moving while the door snapped close behind them. It was damp, musty and even worse at night. She could barely see and relied on Jax's hypersensitivity to keep her from tripping. Harlow's heart hammered when they made it out of the tunnel, her only thought about getting to Nyx.

Harlow could tell that Jax was struggling to keep up. He dragged with every step they took, but she didn't allow him to slow. The town was far behind them, but the shouts could still be heard. Harlow turned her back on the chaos, determined to keep Jax safe. It took longer than she had hoped to find the abandoned outpost. Jax was paling with each movement. Harlow wrapped her arm under his shoulder and let him lean on her.

Ushering him into an old house, she let him sag down in one of the remaining houses with a door. He was breathing heavily and had his eyes shut tightly. Nyx would have to come find them. He had to be nearby if she could see his magic at work. There was no time to waste with Jax's failing health. Harlow wished she knew how to fix his wounds, but healing had never been one of her strong suits.

"Where are your injuries?"

"My leg is the worst," Jax said through clenched teeth.

Harlow crouched beside him and gently moved the fabric away from the wound. It was nasty, deep and pulsing with fresh blood every few beats. Harlow wasn't sure how he had made

it this far. The shock and adrenaline must have kept him on his feet. It would wear out soon and he would be in trouble.

She wracked her brain for a way to close the wound. He was panting hard, sweat breaking out across his forehead.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she whispered, pacing.

His eyes were hazy, a little delirious as he stared at her blankly. Harlow had to act quickly. She searched her pockets and found one potion inside. It was a stabilizer that would work in a pinch, but mostly calmed down the side effects of the wound. She ripped the stopper out and tipped it into his mouth. He coughed at the peppery taste. The heavy breathing eased a bit, his heart rate steady with the slight sedative working through him.

Harlow found a thin bit of twine in his pockets, standard for making animal traps on extended missions. She was grateful he had it with him and took it out. The wound looked angry and she needed to clean it.

“I need you to hold still because this is going to hurt like hell,” she said, trying to keep the shaking from her voice.

Jax nodded, gripping a broken stool leg. Harlow peeled back the soaked cloth from the wound. She took the vial and carefully poured the peppery contents onto the wound. Jax hissed and groaned, jerking as the potion bubbled up on his raw flesh. Harlow held down his legs as the potion burned through the infections on his skin. Jax was shaking, his hands gripping the chair, biting his tongue to keep from screaming.

The potion fizzled and popped until Jax’s eyes rolled into the back of his head. Harlow caught him before he slumped to the side. She took off her coat and wadded it under his head, adjusting him so he would be more comfortable. In some ways it was easier to do the next part if

he were unconscious. The wound stopped bubbling and Harlow waited for the solution to slosh off his leg. Wound clean, Harlow settled her shaking hands for the next part.

She unwound the string, careful not to touch anything but the very end of it. Her blood hummed as she thought about the sewing needle she needed to stitch him up. The palm of her hand grew warmer as she imagined the needle manifesting. One of the red spots on her hand opened, a needle sliding out into her palm. Harlow threaded it quickly, her queasiness overwhelming each time she looked at the wound.

“I’m really sorry for the scar you’re about to have,” she said, plunging the needle with trembling hands.



## Chapter 28

Harlow rested against the wall of the abandoned house. She let her eyes wander the space, taking note of a broken-down table, chipped pottery, and a bed that had been taken over by a gnarled vine. The door at least kept the chill out of the house for the most part. Even with a thin plank floor, it was warmer than the outdoors.

The cracked pots she found the night before glowed with a dying fire. It had given some warmth, but not enough to stop the shaking. The wind whistled outside, the never-ending cold shivering through the house. She checked the placement of their fire and relaxed into Jax a bit. The familiarity was calming. It had been a week since she had seen him and she missed the comfortability they shared.

She kept her ears open to the sounds outside, distant crashing, a few barked orders, but for the most part the night.

Jax stirred, groaning in pain.

“Good, you’re alive,” Harlow said as Jax cracked open his right eye.

The left was swollen shut, an ugly crust forming over the top of it. He rubbed at his forehead, avoiding his eye, and gently sat up.

“Hey,” he rasped.

Harlow placed the back of her hand on his forehead. “No fever. That’s good, but we should get you a cleansing potion to be sure.”

He winced as he tried to move to rest against the wall.

“My memory is a little fuzzy. What happened?”

“I played healer and stitched up your thigh,” she said.

“Oh great, did you at least do a mildly straight line?”

Harlow rolled her eyes as he grinned back at her. She missed the banter, being able to joke with him.

“But seriously, thank you,” Jax said. “I know you saved my life.”

The wind rattled the flimsy walls and sent a chill through the room. It drew her attention to the door, a flicker of worry crossing her face.

“You would have done the same for me,” she said, turning away.

“To be fair, I have saved your ass a lot,” Jax replied.

“Like two times,” she said with a smirk.

“There was the time in the forest with three guards, the fire mage that you offended, then with—”

“Okay, okay I get it. You have saved my ass a lot,” Harlow interrupted, smiling despite her stupidity.

He must be feeling well enough and that made Harlow relax a bit. She had been worried that something would become infected, the trauma was too much, or she missed a wound. Jax checked the gouge on the side of his thigh, pulling away the scarf Harlow had placed over it. He didn’t touch the puckered skin, his fingers lightly grazing the sides.

“You did a decent job,” he said. “Glad my hunting thread could be useful. How did you do it?”

“I used a needle,” she said evasively, not wanting to jump into the conversation now.

“Yeah, I get that part. Where did the needle come from? Did you have a repair kit stashed away here?”

He checked around the area with a mild curiosity. Harlow felt an awkward squirming in her stomach. She had hoped to avoid this conversation for a few hours, waiting for the right

moment to unload the massive amount of information she had gained. It would be easy to lie, but she thought better of it since he would know eventually.

“I made the needle,” she finally said.

Jax raised an eyebrow, “You mean you made it from wood because that doesn’t seem sanitary or sharp enough.”

Harlow held out her hand, imagining a simple band to slip over her finger. The tingling went through her body, a little worse for wear after the night, but able to produce the desired product. The ring slipped out of two of the glands, the two halves fusing together when they landed in her palm.

Jax’s jaw dropped. “What the hell was that?”

“I have a lot to tell you,” she replied.

“Damn straight, spill,” he said, an eager smile on his face.

A trilling whistle drifted through the air, carrying through the house. Harlow knew that sound. Nyx was here. She responded with a similar tune. Jax’s brow wrinkled, and he tried to raise himself up. Harlow put out her hand and steadied him as three knocks sound on the door.

Nyx slipped inside, closing the door as his cloak fluttered down around him. Harlow felt her pulse increase, his features warm as he looked at her. His face changed back the instant he saw Jax, an aloof mask replacing the relief she had seen moments before.

“Him? What the hell is he doing here?” Jax shouted.

There was hostility crackling between the two, a clear hatred permeating the air. Harlow sat between them, pushing Jax a bit behind her.

“That bastard is a traitor,” Jax spit.

Nyx leaned against the back wall.

“Ah yes, please tell her everything about me,” Nyx replied.

Why did he choose to be an asshole at this moment? She could feel Jax’s rage, the heat radiating off his face as he glared at Nyx.

“He’s the one that put me on the team to be captured!”

“You were already on that list,” Nyx replied.

“So, you just let it happen? Sent me off to be hung in the Imperial City by the Regent?”

Nyx inspected his nails, infuriating Jax with his dismissive manner. “She wasn’t going to kill you quickly.”

“Nyx,” Harlow snapped.

“It’s the truth,” he said.

“He’s a backstabbing, asshole, Harlow. He isn’t worth our time. Let’s go,” Jax said, struggling to stand.

“How sweet, you’re going to let me off the hook while you scurry off to hide in the mountains,” Nyx said.

Jax tried to swing at Nyx. He stumbled as his leg buckled beneath the weight. Harlow gripped him before he tumbled to the ground, both of them sliding to the floor. Jax hissed in pain, clutching at his throbbing wound.

“You shouldn’t aggravate that wound,” Nyx said,

Harlow glared at him. “You’re making it worse.”

“Stop moving,” she said slapping Jax’s hands down.

“I won’t stay here with that snake,” Jax replied, throwing a filthy look towards Nyx.

This was ridiculous to have them fighting, especially when they were both on the same side. Harlow studied the wound, happy that most of the stitches had stayed in place. She didn't want to stitch him up again and guessed they might be able to get away with it if he stayed still.

"You don't have much of choice right now," Harlow said. "This needs to heal a bit before you can move."

She shoved Nyx back and placed herself firmly between the two of them. It was like watching children bicker and she was too damn tired to deal with it today.

"Can you both calm the hell down and listen for a minute?" she asked, a pointed glare at Nyx.

His features softened ever so slightly, a glimpse of the man she had come to know slipping through his visage. Harlow clamped down on the flutter in her chest and turned to Jax. He had a pained frown and the edges of his eyes were cloudy from his magic.

"Please, Jax," she whispered.

"Fine," he muttered.

Harlow relaxed her shoulders and scooted back against the wall, keeping herself firmly between the two.

"I don't know what went on between you two, but you're going to have to find a way to work together. Nyx helped me free you, Jax. He's on our side. We all want to see the Regent dethroned and that means working together."

Neither of them agreed, but they also didn't start fighting, so she took it as a win.

"Fine. What do we need to do to stop the Regent?" Jax asked.

That was the question. How did they take her down?

"The Regent isn't going to be easy to access.," Nyx said.

Jax had a soured expression on his face. The magnitude of the problem sat heavily on each of them. They couldn't take on an army, even if the three of them had unique abilities. They needed an army to go with them, enough to take down the troops.

"We need to bring in the Rebels, have them create a disturbance in the city. Once they do, the three of us go beneath the palace. If we can liberate the mages feeding the four pillars, we can take away her defenses," Harlow said.

"And where are these mages?" Jax asked.

This is the part that made Harlow go green in the face. She knew where they were being held and it made her sick.

"Beneath the city, hooked up intravenously to the pillars," Nyx said.

He put it lightly. They were constantly being drained of their magic, fed by the guards to keep them alive, but too weak to move. Their bodies gaunt, depleted of magic for decades. Harlow shuddered aware that they must have gone crazy from being trapped without any hope of escape. Nyx had guessed that their magic was part of what extended the Regent's life and her control over the pillars.

"Great," Jax said finally.

"It's not going to be easy to access them," Harlow said.

"We don't have much of an option though," Jax replied grimly.

They sat silently for a few minutes letting the situation sink into their addled minds. Harlow knew the plan, but it didn't sit well with her no matter how she framed it. Sure, they would release those mages, but surely the Regent had other means of protection. Otherwise, she would have been assassinated by now.

“We need to inform the Rebels. Get them ready to attack. In the meantime, Jax needs to rest. If he’s not ready to fight, it ruins the plan,” Harlow said.

Jax grudgingly nodded, the strain evident as his eyes started to cloud over in pain. Nyx pulled out two vials and handed them to Harlow. One was for pain and the other could be applied to the wounds.

“You need to rest. Take this, please,” Harlow said.

She handed Jax the pain one, letting him take a quick sip and then applied the other to a rag. He tensed as she patted it onto his ragged thigh, thick bruising surrounding the wound. His body slowly released the tension held in his shoulders, his head lolling to the side in a gentle tilt. Harlow used her wadded up coat to cushion him as she laid him down. Within minutes he was out cold, the potion dragging him under.

“He’s easier to deal with like this,” Nyx said.

Harlow whipped around to glare at him. “Why were you being an asshole to him?”

“A thank you would have been nice after risking my life to save him,” Nyx replied, shrugging.

“Stuff your pride. Who knows what lies he was fed when they captured him. We need him on our side, Nyx.”

She was on her feet now, pacing the house as her frustration bubbled to the surface. Nyx was beside her in a moment, his arm wrapped around her waist. She felt her pulse kick up and she stiffened against his touch.

“I was worried about you,” he asked, his breath tickling the back of her head.

“Sure, as you left me to fight on my own,” she replied.

“I knew you could take care of yourself, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t distracted the entire time.”

She rested her head back on his shoulder.

“You know that once the Rebel’s attack, there will be no turning back. One of us will have to take on the three elemental magics.”

She couldn’t imagine draining another mage of their magic, the brutality it implied. But she also couldn’t fathom knowing that action would end the tyrannical control of magic.

“Is that still your plan?” Harlow asked, chilled by the conversation.

“I have been trying to find another way. Whoever takes her on must be able to hold three magics, even if for a brief time, in order to combat the earth elements shield. I don’t know how else to make this happen...” he trailed off.

They stood silently, soft snores coming from the corner where Jax slept. Harlow couldn’t rectify the man standing before her and the one she had come to know. This version was cracking, beaten by years of deceit.

“Do you think I’m strong enough to wield the three magics?”

“Yes, I do,” he said, voice low and uncertain. “But I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

The idea had her stomach churning, knowing the implications of his answer. If she wielded the three elements, she would likely die. No matter which way she looked at it, Harlow would be sacrificed when the time came to fight the Regent.

Harlow felt hollow inside.

“I need to think about this,” she said, stepping further away from him.

Nyx nodded, his eyes flicking to her face. She swallowed the lump in her throat, going back to check on Jax.



Jax stirred beside her, his eyes fluttering briefly. Nyx left to return to the city, keeping his ruse with the Regent. They needed him on the inside, even if it scared Harlow to trust him. She knew that it would come down to her, the sacrifice hers to make. Her chest ached with each lonely moment. Settling beside Jax, Harlow waited, listening for the owls to serenade the moon.

## Chapter 29

Morning light peaked through the window, an icy wind battering the sides of the building. Harlow gently nudged Jax awake, giving him one more swig of the potion to ease his pain. His leg was rapidly healing with a puckered pink line rising up half his thigh. They ate in silence. Each bite was an effort as her throat clenched up thinking of the next step in her plan. She handed Jax a heavy coat she had brought along with them and sat down beside him.

“We have to keep mages from being killed. This can’t continue,” Jax said.

“I know. It’s time we make a move, and I mean a big one against the Regent,” Harlow replied, taking a deep breathe.

“You’ve been in the city. What can we do? Do we lure her out of the city or go in with fires blazing?”

Harlow leaned forward and rested her forearms on her knees. That was the question that circled her mind, day and night. The Regent was protected, the city her personal fortress, and the place where earth magic was being repressed. If they were going to free the earth magic, they would have to get underneath the palace. There was no guarantee that they would be able to get the Regent out of the city.

“I think we have to take the fight to her,” Harlow said. “The Regent won’t leave the pillars unprotected. It’s going to come down to us infiltrating the palace.”

“That’s incredibly risky, Harlow,” Jax said.

“I can’t think of any other way to free the earth magic. We have to release those pillars. Magic can be so much more and we are the only ones strong enough to do it.”

He winced and rubbed at his thigh. The wind was rattling the house again and sending a chill through the room.

“We can’t do this alone,” Jax said.

“We need the Resistance,” Harlow replied with a grave nod. “If they create a distraction in the city, I can get into the palace. Nyx has given me the basic layout so I know that I can navigate my way to the pillars.”

“You can’t seriously think I’ll let you go alone,” Jax said with a disappointed frown.

“I think it would be wiser for your to stay out of the palace. I know I can’t stop you from fighting, but you should stay with the Resistance. Sound the retreat and stick with them so we have another elemental mage on the outside. It would be chaos if she captured both of us.”

Jax grumbled under his breathe, but Harlow knew her logic had landed. There was no guarantee that she would be successful and since they hadn’t found other mages like themselves, it was reckless to risk both of them being eliminated.

“I don’t like the idea of you going in alone,” he said.

“I won’t be alone. Nyx will be there too, playing his part as the Regent’s assassin.”

Jax scowled at the mention of his name. He started tugging at one of his locs and wouldn’t met her eyes. Harlow could understand his misgivings, her own still simmering, but she had decided to trust Nyx. He had proved himself to her and if she believed that he wanted to stop the Regent, then she had to trust him.

“He could turn on you,” Jax replied.

“It’s possible, but I believe in him. He’s risked his life to keep us safe and he could have turned me in at any point in the past week. I understand you might not be able to trust him, but you can trust me.”

“I trust you,” he said. “So, what do I need to do?”

That was the question. While Harlow wanted him to stay with her, to ensure he was safe, she knew he was needed with the Resistance.

“Go back to the Resistance and get them ready to attack in two days. I’ll be in the city, mapping out the terrain and memorizing the palace layout. You’ll have to convince them it’s the best plan,” she said, chewing at her lip.

“I’ll do my best,” Jax said, his expression changing.

She had seen it before, the sheer determination that meant he wouldn’t stop trying to get them to attack the city. It gave her a sliver of hope that the plan could work. She stood up and went to her pack on the broken table. Inside was a map of the city she had taken from Nyx’s home. She circled a spot in the middle and went back to Jax.

“This is where we need to go when the attacks begin. It’ll be the easiest way to get into the palace and has the least amount of barriers.”

“I’ll meet you there,” Jax replied, reaching for her hand.

Harlow helped him up and winced when he gripped his thigh. She wanted to say more, but her tongue felt too big in her mouth. There were hundreds of words left unspoken, the bond she had formed with him evident. He believed in her plan and that meant more than she could express. The walk back to the city would have to wait until dusk, but Jax would be better off leaving now for the Resistance camp. She gave him the pack she had brought, fitted with extra clothes and food to aid his journey.

When he was at the door, Harlow put her hand on his shoulder. He clasped hers beneath his. They didn’t need to speak as he nodded and walked out the door. They would meet again when the Imperial City was under attack.

## Chapter 30

The last day with Nyx was stilted and Harlow couldn't stay still in his house. They fell asleep talking over the plan, sleeping fitfully on and off, and waking to stress over the maps on the table. The Resistance would attack and they would have to separate. Nyx was still with the Regent and if he didn't keep up the role, the plans would crumble. Harlow knew there was a chance of being captured and if that happened, she wanted Nyx on the inside.

It was late and the city was quiet as they waited for the Resistance. Her hands shook, the anticipation curdling the meager meal she had eaten. Nyx held out a cup of water, Harlow draining the glass to give herself something to do.

The floor begins to tremble. There is a silent moment right before a resounding boom shakes the house. Screams follow, horns signaling an attack on the city.

Harlow looked to Nyx, the moment arrived. They parted for their gear. Harlow slipped another dagger into her thigh holster and wadded a scarf in her coat pocket. He reached for her, kissing her hard. She grabbed on to him and kissed him back. It would be their last honest moment, a chance to remind him that she trusted in him. The house shook and they broke apart. Nyx had the door open, ready to respond to the ensuing shouts and cries resounding in the city.

Fire was everywhere. Tops of houses were aflame, buildings groaned under the weight of lobbed boulders, and a stampede of feet both fleeing and fighting met them as they stepped outside. Nyx had his Regent gear on, the pin visible on his lapel. His face was a harsh mask, reality descending on them.

"Be safe," he said.

"You too."

An arrow whizzed through the air and lodged itself in the door behind her. Harlow's head snapped to the spot where a bit of her coat was embedded on the end of the arrow. She glimpsed the second arrow and rolled to the side. It thunked heavily into the spot she had just vacated. Nyx whipped a thin dagger from beneath his cloak and flung it with alarming precision. There was a strangled scream as the target collapsed, a body falling from its hiding place in the bushes.

Harlow saw Nyx forming words, but a thundering crack ripped through the sky. Lightning branched from the tops of the towers surrounding the city. The lightning bolts crackled and shot through the city, pounding into the streets without mercy. Harlow saw one racing towards her. She jerked sideways, screaming as the heat from the strike licked up her back. The pain echoed through her body. She wheezed and lifted herself from the stone streets. Another bolt was following in its path. Harlow leapt out of the way, fleeing from the intensity of each of the following strikes.

Nyx nodded, taking a deep breath as the flames morphed into snakes biting at the people fleeing from their reach. He raced away and vanished into the smoke billowing up from the decimated buildings.

Her breath was shallow, the throbbing pain in her back clouding her judgement. The city was on fire and lightning was striking out from the towers. It was a nightmare.

She strained her ears to the source of the loudest cries, turning her feet to follow a dimly lit path between the crumbling houses. There were shouts, flashes of light and fire brushing the darkening sky. Inhabitants elbowed their way through the street, jamming her up against stone walls as they scrambled to escape.

The echoing shouts of battle drifted through the smoking streets, the tingle of fear threatening to stop her dead in her tracks. The Resistance had come, willing to put their lives on

the line. She raced forward before she lost her nerve. The plan was in motion and no matter how much it scared her, she had to be captured.

The lightening in the sky calmed down, smoke rising from all the places it had touched down. Her head throbbed, the clawing dread that something worse was about to be unleashed as she begged her legs to move faster.

Harlow hurtled past a burning cart careening down the street. The metal clashes, harsh cries, and burning flesh met her as she rounded the corner to the decimated plaza. It was chaos. Regent guards with sleek black metal armor swung swords with an otherworldly grace, cutting down anyone in their path. Fire mages summoned javelins, spears, and bows from their hands, using them to combat the well-trained guards. Land mages created stone barriers to protect their ranks, catapulting stones at incoming troops. Harlow stuttered to a halt as a massive boulder rolled down the alley, bowling over an archway where guards were about to flood through to the square. The archway crumbled on top of them. Some of the guards escaped, but more were left wailing under the weight of the stones.

Another crackling sound stopped her in her tracks. A fierce bolt of lightning stabbed the ground, scattering the people like ants, and burning through countless bodies. Guards and Resistance fighters fell alike, burnt to cinders in the center of the square. The buildings around were charred, some caving in from the burning roofs relinquishing their fight. Mangled bodies crawled out from beneath boulders, torn down beams, and other corpses. Nobody was fit to fight in the square, either burned to death or wounded beyond fighting capacity.

Harlow frantically searched the area for a sign of silver locs. She felt her pulse kick up as more guards shouted from another alley. Harlow navigated around the bodies, ignoring the

squelching sounds beneath her boots as she slipped on the crimson street. She had to meet up with Jax so they could break into the palace.

The lightning struck twice more, screams wrenching the air. Harlow could see boulders flying, flaming birds swooping down, and the unmistakable gust of wind from the few mages able to manipulate the wind. They had brought their best fighters, but it wasn't enough. Harlow couldn't breathe as she burst through another dark alley Nyx had shown her. She stumbled to a halt, a ragged sob begging to be released.

Jax was in the midst of the fight swinging a sword with a wicked grace. He had a bloody leg and one of his eyes was swollen shut. The rest of the fighting faded around her as she raced towards him.

"Jax," she screamed, leaping over a fallen guard.

He whipped around, bringing the sword through the crease in the guard's armor. The guard yelled as he doubled back trying to lift his nearly severed arm.

"Harlow," Jax bellowed.

They raced towards each other, Harlow throwing a punch at one of the guards trying to grab her leg. There wasn't much room left on the ground, broken spears, arrows, and bodies littered the stone path. Jax hurtled over a barrel burning from a fire mage standing on top of a leaning roof. There was chaos everywhere, but Harlow was determined to get to Jax.

She plunged one of her daggers into the neck of a guard about to shoot at the fire mage. He crumbled and she kicked him to the side. Jax kicked fiercely at another guard strangling a frightened land mage. The mage rubbed at his throat and disappeared into the alley to the side of the war zone.



There were three more pairs of fighters between them. Harlow scoured the area, they were walled in by tall buildings, most on fire or newly put out. There was an open alley to her left, if she could get past the tower or rocks with legs sticking out of them.

Jax burst through the fighting groups. He gripped her in a crushing hug, the stench of sweat and blood filling her nose. Harlow buried her head in his shoulder, relinquishing the anxiety she had shouldered. They didn't linger and broke apart.

"Follow me," Harlow said.

They ran up the street, leaping over fallen soldiers and bloodied limbs. The putrid smell of death coated her tongue, ash filling up her nose. It took every ounce of her strength to move past the fights, to not help the Resistance mages fiercely battling. They had come, trusted in her plan, and she couldn't keep them safe.

"Watch out," Jax yelled, yanking her to the side.

A volley of arrows peppered the ground.

"Find the acid wielder," a Regent guard screamed.

Her breath caught. They knew she was here. She turned as if in slow motion. She saw the soldiers running towards her, their swords held high. Mages leapt out to defend her. She screamed as they were thrust aside.

"Tell the Resistance to retreat," she said to Jax, gripping his arm in hers.

He started to argue but she had already stepped away.

"I'm the one you want," she yelled, her voice muffled in the chaos.

"I'm the acid mage!"

She shot a glob of acid at the soldiers coming towards her to prove her point. They bellowed, rallying more to their side. Five more Regent soldiers turned to her, moving in tandem

to chase her down the street. Harlow ran, adrenaline surging through her limbs, trying to lure them away from the retreating Resistance fighters. They shouted, gathering more guards for the chase and rounding up fallen mages. She dodged the fallen crates, pushing past anyone in her way.

A horn blew behind her, then another as the retreat signal was issued. She thanked the gods that Jax had listened for once. Harlow rounded a corner, dodging a man with a slice through his neck. She stumbled and cursed as she jumped back up. She dodged the swords clashing, ducking beneath a barrel when a flame sword swung out at her.

Bursting out near the palace, Harlow ran full tilt towards the gate. If she could get to the entrance, then the other wielders would have a chance to escape. She urged her legs to move faster. It wasn't too far and if she made it to the entrance, she could finally get to the pillars beneath the city. This was her chance.

The sky exploded over her head. She blinked, the stars winking at her, the icy ground soaking her back. When did she end up on the ground? Her heart dropped, a shadow creeping over her.

"I've been waiting for you."

Harlow couldn't catch her breath as the armored woman moved into the light. Her silky black hair was braided to the waist, an assortment of daggers and swords covered her all-black ensemble. Harlow shook herself, ready to fight. The woman stepped closer, gripping Harlow's hair. She saw another person behind her, none other than Nyx. Harlow struggled but the woman kicked her hard in the stomach.

"Goodnight, Harlow."

Another shattering blow hit her head from behind. The lights flickered out and Harlow succumbed to the darkness. The last face swimming across her vision filling her with dread.

The Regent.

## Chapter 31

Harlow had woken up to find herself trapped in a cell, a dingy place where the walls scratched with hidden rats. The chains around her wrists and ankles were icy cold. They had them flush to her wrists, a metal band over her palms, and a tight gag keeping her mouth shut. If the chains weren't enough to make her sick, the stench of urine and feces was a close second.

She hadn't been given food or water since she woke up an hour ago. Her head pounded, the tender spot on the back throbbing with each movement. Her body ached more than she thought possible. The rigid angle kept her upright with her arms pinned to the wall at her sides, her legs bent away from the door, and a collar holding her neck close to the wall. It was humiliating.

Heavy footsteps went past her cell a few times, but nobody made a move to open her door. Harlow half wished someone would come in even if they were there to taunt her. It would remind her that she wasn't alone, that this wasn't a hallucination. Her stomach growled, knotting up with each snarl it made. Surely, they would feed her at some point?

Dread sank into her, the plan not as smooth as she anticipated. She thought going back to the Resistance would keep Jax safe and give her a few days gather her resources. She was going to give herself over to the guards, hiding weapons along the way, and leave a contingency plan for Jax. While she had intended to infiltrate the city, this wasn't exactly how she imagined it happening. The plans were foolish, she should have known that, and now she was trapped.

More feet pattered outside her door and stopped, the handle creaking as the small cell opened. A figure stood in the doorway, the light blocking out their shape.

"The infamous acid mage," Nyx said.

Harlow tried to lunge at him, but was jerked back by the chains. She glared as he walked into the cell, leaving the door open.

“No response? Shame, I like to hear you snap back at me.”

He crouched down. His posture was relaxed, the casual tilt of his head making her stomach turn.

“You know it didn’t have to be this way.”

Harlow furrowed her brow and gave him a pointed look.

“But you made your choice. So, I had to make one of my own. You, in exchange for my own protection.”

Her eyes narrowed. She wanted to see the man that had kissed her before the fight, not the assassin that stood in front of her. She bit at her tongue, hoping that their truce was still intact. If she trusted him, then she had to believe his taunting was for a reason.

“By the way, Jax is here, too,” he said. “Poor guy made quite the effort to save you, but that darkness just wasn’t enough.”

Stomach dropping, she stared at him in horror. That wasn’t part of the plan. She had known it might come down to her being captured, but she had never meant for Jax to be taken too. Nyx left, slamming the door behind him.

Darkness shrouded her and with it the gravity of the situation. She couldn’t escape and it was only a matter of time before the Regent sacrificed Harlow’s magic. The thought swirled angrily in her mind, the darkness ebbing into her crazed imagination. She saw herself tearing apart the Regent, ripping out her black braid, releasing every ounce of iron from her blood to bury her in metal. The thoughts ran hot through her until she couldn’t see anything beyond the blood lust coating her consciousness.

She was left alone, stewing in her anger, drifting in and out of consciousness as the hunger dulled. She felt a hollowness inside, as if the hope had withered, and her mind was a dirty puddle on the ground. Time was lost to her and when a guard opened her cell, she shrank away from the light.

“Your turn,” a guard said.

Two men entered, a rod between them that shackled her wrists in place. They raised her up, legs dangling between them until they bound them tightly together. She could barely move, the massive guards bracketing her between them as they marched down the hall. Eyes squinted, she could see rows of cells filled with prisoners. There had to be hundreds of people languishing in them. She heard screams, maniacal laughter, and the retches of countless individuals driven mad inside the dank prison beneath the city. Even in the dimly lit hall, Harlow had to shield her eyes after being in inky darkness.

She swayed listlessly, saving her energy for whatever awaited her in the next room. There were odd sounds, and more than a few shouts as the hall opened up into a wider stone corridor. There were sconces burning down the hallway, alcoves with padlocked entrances, and an imposing set of double doors at the end of the hall. The guard’s feet smacked hard against the stone, each step jostling her and making the shackles bite deeper into her wrists.

Once they reached the end, the guards unhooked her feet restraints. She dangled a bit, still suspended between them, blood flowing back into her numb feet. They swung open, creaking at the hinges. Inside was a massive room with a domed ceiling, stone walls and a set of stairs winding up into the wall on the far side. There were other guards in the room, standing over mages that were strapped into rigid chairs. There had to be a dozen or more in the area, each one siphoning out blood from the victim.

Harlow winced as she was dragged past them, some of the mages pale and gaunt from being drained each day. She scoured them to see if Jax was there, but his face didn't jump out at her. Her observation was cut short as they slammed her onto a metal table and strapped down her feet and bound her arms out in a t shape. She felt completely exposed, even fully clothed, as they lifted her up into a sitting position.

The guards left without a word, their job finished. Harlow focused on the room, taking note of the mad scientist set up with bags of blood, jars lining bookshelves with squirming contents, and what she figured might be human remains. It was a room of horrors. The side to her right had rows of gurneys where remains were kept, some dissected and others still holding a pinkish hue.

She felt sick looking around. How many mages had been killed in here alone? The Regent was a monster, worse than she could have imagined. Harlow fought the powerlessness that threatened to overwhelm her. If she couldn't get out of these restraints, there was no way she had a chance at defending herself or anyone else.

The click of boots caught her attention. She saw the black and white mane first and bile flushed up her throat. Fenric stood before her, amber eyes glimmering as he flexed his completely healed body. Harlow's body went cold, flushing with fear as she stared at the man.

"I've missed you," Fenric said.

Harlow thrashed around, trying to break free of the restraints. This couldn't be happening. She had killed him. She was sure of it. How could he be standing in front of her now, completely healed?

"Shocking, I know," Fenric replied, taking a step towards her.

He put his head right against hers. Revulsion rippled through her.

“I have a little secret for you,” he whispered.

Harlow jerked her head away, disgusted by the proximity. Fenric stepped back with that predatory smile. Everything in her screamed to run, to get to safety. If he was here, they were all in more danger than they realized. Fenric laughed at her struggling, his body beginning to ripple like a mirage. Harlow stared, transfixed as the man disappeared and was replaced by a woman.

The Regent.

All the breath left her lungs. She stared, unable to process what she was seeing. One moment Fenric had stood before her. Now the Regent had taken his place? No, it couldn't be...

Fenric was the Regent.

Every time she found comfort with Fenric, it had been her.

“It's been too long since we've spoken,” she said. “I've missed our late night chats.”

Harlow wanted to shout at her, bellow in rage, and throw every bit of acid she possessed at the woman. She had betrayed them all. A mage, enslaving other wielders and brainwashing nonmagicals to believe in her wicked cause.

“I have been searching for you for a very long time,” she said.

Harlow stopped assessing her as Nyx appeared beside her. She felt his presence as he stayed behind the Regent, a solemn look on his face. She couldn't look at him any longer and focused instead on the chilling woman in front of her. She wanted to warn him, but what if he already knew?

“Your mother did a good job of hiding you,” the Regent said.

She started to circle Harlow, running her hands over Harlow's greasy braids. If she could have jerked away, she would have as the Regent took her time inspecting her body.

“I killed off countless children, all descendants of former physical mages.”



The Regent laughed and it was dangerously sweet. Harlow knew why people followed her now. She had an effortless grace, the kind of dominance that people naturally ceded to without question. Her touch was gentle, even warm, but all Harlow felt was spiders crawling up her skin with each caress. The Regent slowly moved around her, drawing the attention to her. Harlow jerked forward, shaking at the restraints holding her back.

“You won’t get far doing that,” she said, casually walking back to Nyx.

The room began to spin as the rush of blood flooded her mind. She was dangerously weak and that outburst was a sharp reminder. She couldn’t even summon the acid to her skin, the overwhelming hunger clouding her mind.

“It’s going to be fun figuring out how to tease out your magic,” the Regent said, twirling a knife between her fingers.

“Everyone is a little different. Some must be scared, others have to be fighting in order to get the strongest results. Or you might be like those pathetic excuses who simply give up their magic for the promise of another day.”

Harlow’s face burned as the Regent gestured to the victims in the chairs. Her breathe caught at the wilted frame of Yara, her face drawn. Beside her was another familiar face that broke her heart. Rhyland, his once strong build emaciated. She was draining them, ounce by bloody ounce, and didn’t even care. That promise was probably false, and they knew it too, but it was easier than fighting. She had broken their will, but she wouldn’t break Harlow’s will. If anything, this made her ready to fight even more.

The Regent brought out a long knife, the handle glimmering with emeralds on the hilt. It had a wicked point that Harlow knew was going to tear through her flesh with ease. Nyx stood silently and Harlow couldn’t let her gaze go to him.

There was no warning as the blade sliced at her forearm. Harlow groaned against the gag, her eyes watering as the pain welled up. She watched the Regent gather her blood in a tray, sifting through it with her bare fingers. It was disgusting and Harlow wanted to get away from the sadistic woman.

“Hmm, no magic,” the Regent said, disappointment and amusement mixed in her tone.

She raised the dagger again, ready to plunge it deeper when a hand shot out. Harlow’s face jerked up to see Nyx, keeping the dagger from going any further. The Regent narrowed her eyes, the gesture chilling.

“If I may, she has never responded to basic pain. Perhaps something a bit more dramatic will get the magic flowing?” he said, avoiding her face.

Harlow glared at him. For a moment she thought he was going to help her, but he was just setting her up for more pain.

“What did you have in mind?”

Nyx kept his tone even as he placed a hand on Harlow’s outstretched arm. He traced the line up to her elbow, over the ragged shirt sleeve, and rested at her neck where her pulse hammered.

“Harlow functions on fear. Scare her and that magic will bleed out,” he said.

The Regent circled around to where his hands rested on her neck. She leaned in as if she were going to bite her neck. Harlow didn’t like that she couldn’t see her, and that moment made her heart beat faster. A trickle of blood seeped out of the wound, a thin golden strand coiled inside of it.

“I think you’re right,” the Regent whispered inches from her face.

She grinned as she circled her fingers in the blood, wrapping the golden strand around her finger.

“This is going to be fun,” she said, searching the tray for more magic.

“We could put her in the ring, let the fear of being beaten drive the magic out of her,” Nyx said.

Harlow’s eyes went wide. The ring? Who else would be in there? Or better yet, what else would be in there? She felt her pulse jump again and the cold flush wash through her face.

“You have a beautifully twisted mind,” the Regent said, running her bloody finger down the side of his face.

He barely flinched, just enough for Harlow to catch his discomfort.

The Regent contemplated his suggestion, a dark black eyebrow raising as she tapped her finger against her chin.

“Get her fed, three proper meals, and keep her under strict watch.”

“But what will—”

She smacked Nyx across the face. He jerked back, but kept his expression blank. Harlow would claw her eyes out for touching him.

“I need her to last in the ring, you fool.”

Without a second glance she turned away, taking the bowl of Harlow’s blood with her as she ascended the spiral staircase. Nyx waited for her to disappear, his back turned to Harlow. She wanted to see his face, to decipher the blank stares.

He finally turned and unshackled her feet. She watched him with a sharp eye, her senses overwhelmed by the simple touches she had received.

“We will carry her,” a guard said.

Nyx waived them away as if they were flies. “I’m perfectly capable of handling her.”

The guard's mouth snapped shut, a hard glimmer in his eye as he backed away. Nyx unchained her wrists and clicked them together in front of her waist. He gently eased her to the edge of the bench, letting her feet touch the cold stone.

“Bring her shoes,” he snapped.

The same guard could be heard mumbling under his breathe, but despite his irritation, he reappeared with a large pair of cloth shoes. Nyx bent down and slipped them on her feet, keeping one hand firmly on her opposite leg.

“She’s unpredictable,” the guard said.

“You are dismissed,” Nyx replied, a bite in each syllable.

The guard stomped away, a few choice curse words floating back to them. Nyx straightened and helped her to her feet. Harlow tried to put weight on her legs, but her knees buckled beneath her.

“Three days shackled to a floor is rough on the body,” Nyx said, catching her beneath her shoulders.

Without a second thought, he hoisted her up by the waist. She was brushing the ground with her feet, but most of her weight was supported by him. They went quickly through the chamber, Harlow aching to unshackle Yara and Rhyland. Nyx guided her past two closed doors and took a sharp turn into a door hidden behind a tall bookshelf.

Inside was a squat table with two chairs, one with a metal ring secured to the floor and the table. He placed her on the seat, securing her hands and feet. Without a word he disappeared around a corner, coming back with a helping of cold chicken, a braided loaf, and something slimy and green. Her mouth watered and the gag felt even worse as it kept her lips sealed.

“I know that you are planning your escape right now and it’s not going to work. If you knock me out, you’ll possibly get out of those chains by breaking the table. Let’s say it works, and then you’re out of the room. If you leave this room, there are six guards outside ready to tackle you. Maybe you take two of them out, but with the lack of food and rest over the three days, you won’t have much reserve left to use.”

Her faced flushed. She knew he couldn’t use his magic in here or else the Regent would know the third pillar was active. He knew what she was thinking simply because he knew her and that made her blood boil.

“Beyond the obvious, if you escaped you would be leaving behind Jax and countless other mages. You saw what she did to them. Imagine what she would do if she found out you escaped.”

He gave her a pointed look and put the bread close to her nose. She inhaled the yeasty scent, her stomach yawling like a cat.

“Think before you act,” Nyx said.

There was a hard look in his hazel eyes. Harlow wanted to wipe it away. She knew his words were for show, that their interactions had to be without fault. Harlow nodded her head, accepting his offer.

He unlatched the leather strap keeping her silent. It was a welcome relief as her lips parted on a sigh. Nyx offered her a drink of water, pulling it back so she didn’t drink too much. He fed her slowly, keeping her from woofing down the food. She felt every piece dropping into her gut like a rock. The taste warred with the pain of digesting food after days without it.

Nyx remained quiet, feeding her bits of chicken and what she assumed was spinach. It was fairly bland, but it didn’t matter as she ate as much as he would give her.

“How is your stomach?” Nyx asked, offering her water.

She gulped it down, past being embarrassed that he was feeding her like a toddler. The water traced icy cold down her throat and into her chest. She couldn’t get enough of it.

“Why do you care?” she retorted.

“If you vomit later with a gag on then you might choke,” he replied.

*Oh, that’s gross.*

“It feels heavy,” she replied in a clipped tone.

“And your head?”

“You mean the spot where she hit me or the headache from being chained to a wall?”

His eyes flickered, but it was probably the light behind her that was playing tricks on her. Nyx looked as if he might break down, forget the part he had to play. Harlow glared at him to reinforce their positions. They needed him on the inside, free to pull the strings as best he could.

“You’ll get one more meal today,” Nyx said, “and don’t forget what’s at stake.”

It would be appropriate to say the same thing to him, but she settled for an eye roll. He swallowed hard as he placed the leather strap over her mouth. It was stale tasting and left dents in her cheeks. Nyx lifted her from the table, her legs steadier under her weight now. Without another word, he took her to the cell. She maintained eye contact with him as he shackled her to the floor and then the wall. It felt marginally looser, but even then, it wasn’t enough to help her out.

“Be good,” he said before disappearing.

Darkness cloaked her yet again and she wanted to scream. Why had she been cursed with this magic? If she was normal, none of this would be happening right now. The dark thoughts bombarded her. The magic that made her feel powerful now felt like a snake constricting the air

out of her lungs. She rested her head against the stone wall and drifted in and out of consciousness.

A new guard opened her cell sometime after she had fallen asleep. He had a scruffy beard, beetle black eyes and a chest as round as it was wide. His beefy hands gripped her wrists without much regard, and he dragged her along the path to the table she had shared with Nyx. This guard didn't take his time shackling her to the table and thumping down a stale piece of bread and a dry bit of chicken that looked as if it had been sitting out for hours.

"Don't do anything dumb," he growled, taking off the gag.

Harlow contemplated her options, but she still didn't feel strong enough to fight back. One meal wasn't enough to replenish her worn down system. This guard shoveled in the food, barely giving her time to swallow before shoving more food in her mouth. She had to ask for water more than a few times just to manage the dry chicken. It was clear this guard was uncomfortable feeding her, his eyes darting to the door every few minutes.

She used her begs for water to chart out his build and what he was equipped with when she was eating. There was a dagger hidden beneath his left arm, too far to reach easily. He had a single key that was stashed in his belt and kept close to his hand. There were a few other pieces, but nothing she could really use. Before she could finish her assessment, he slapped the mouth piece on her. She was ushered down the hall, allowed an extremely uncomfortable bathroom break, and then shackled back to the floor.

Her mind clicked through the possibilities. Now that she wasn't starved, her mind could work a little better. All she needed was to get a key and then she would wreak havoc.

Harlow woke the next day to the same guard she had nicknamed Beetle, but he looked odd. His face was paler than normal and she thought he might be feeling ill. He fed her even

faster, if that was possible, and kept his nose turned away. Harlow even noticed him getting squeamish at the sight of the spinach on her tray. Nyx's words rushed back to her and she smirked beneath her restraint.

Beetle guided her down the hall, his legs a bit shaky, and forwent the bathroom stop. He toppled her to the ground and started adjusting the shackles. Harlow bugged out her eyes and starting retching.

"By the gods," he grumbled stifling his own gag reflex.

Harlow started flailing around the vomit sitting heavy in her throat. Beetle kept dry heaving to the side before finally ripping the gag off Harlow. She retched all over his chest, the fresh contents covering him and splattering his face. Within seconds he was heaving to the side throwing up everything he had eaten.

She acted quickly, making more retching sounds at him while she slipped the key from his pocket. Before he could feel her movement, Harlow was back on her side pretending to throw up more. Beetle doubled over again, and Harlow kept up her ploy for a few more seconds.

When he finally was done, he placed the leather back over her mouth. He was a sickly green color and wasted no time clamping the locks in place.

"Last time I ever drink with Nyx," he grumbled.

Harlow frowned at the mention and watched him scurry out of the room. She grinned beneath the gag, the key secured in her hand. Tomorrow the Regent would pit her against something fearful, thinking she would topple, but she wouldn't go down without a fight. And now she could level the playing field.



## Chapter 32

Harlow's hands were steady, the tremors hidden from the Regent's sharp eyes. They had brought her to an arena deep beneath the surface of the city. It had the dusty smell of disuse, mold and dead vines hung from the columns. The ground was solid stone, and there was a design that had been worn down beyond recognition after years of natural decay. Harlow felt as if she were about to face a bear or perhaps a lion as they shuffled her into the middle.

There were iron grates built into the walls surrounding the arena, dark pits where Harlow was certain monsters lurked nearby. The area itself was cavernous, even larger than the domed experimentation room. She tried to ignore the slithering sounds echoing across the chamber, the scratch of critters best left unidentified.

It was spooky and despite her best efforts, a shiver of fear ran down her arms. This was exactly what she had wanted, to heighten her fear and anticipation. Despite knowing that, it didn't take away from the invisible hands clawing at her chest.

While Harlow stood in the middle of the arena, a couple of guards moved at the edges. They took up a place above the grates and donned heavy armor over every inch of their bodies. Harlow shook a bit at the precautions and ripped her eyes away. She reminded herself that everything was intended to scare her right down to the guard's attire.

The shackles on her wrist chaffed her skin, the constriction keeping her hands in a constantly tingling state. It was going to her head, telling her that at some point her fingers would lose all feeling. Harlow swallowed down the intrusive thoughts, focusing on what she would encounter next.

An attendant rushed out to stand next to her, brandishing a needle with a bag attached to the end. She whipped Harlow around, pulling up her tunic to strap the bag around her stomach. A

flush spread across her face and she kept herself from letting her embarrassment show. Once she finished securing the bag, the spindly woman gripped Harlow's arm tight. A vein popped out in the crook of her arm. The woman scrubbed it before shoving a needle roughly into her arm.

Harlow winced, jerking away from the pain, but the pressure from the woman doubled. She tried to remain still as the woman tapped over the port, securing a thin plastic tube to the bag that ran from her arm to the contraption around her waist.

It was a sickening sight as a trickle of blood ran into the tube. Harlow saw a sliver of gold morph with the tube and clamped down on her emotions. The woman disappeared, and in her place two shadowy figures appeared at the center of the arena. Harlow adopted a dour expression, letting her defiance shine in the face of the Regent and Nyx.

Nyx had the decency to look down when she made eye contact. It was a bitter pill to swallow, and she didn't let her eyes linger on him. The Regent stood in front of her, a few inches taller than Harlow, and smiling without a hint of sympathy.

"Let's see how much magic we can drain today," she said sweetly.

And with that, the Regent swept off to the side, climbing a set of stairs to a dais where she could watch the events. Nyx lingered for a moment, his face impassive as he pretended to check the blood bag.

"I heard you were sick earlier," he whispered.

Harlow glared at him, still unable to respond with the gag tightly in place.

"The guard was dismissed after losing his key," Nyx commented.

She caught his eye and looked away, her expression blank. His hand lingered on her wrist for half a second and then he was gone, his cloak floating out around him. There was a shiver of

energy running through the arena, the ground shaking as a grate was wrenched open. A sound like a herd of horses pounded the ground, the stone trembling as the guards backed away.

Harlow sucked in a deep breath. Water gushed out of the entrance, roaring as it tumbled over itself. It flooded the arena, soaking the ground and washing up towards her feet. Stuck to the ground, Harlow trembled as the icy cold water rose rapidly over her ankles, swallowing her knees, and rising higher. She jerked forward as it hit her thighs, covering her belly in frigid water.

The Regent watched from the sidelines, an amused smile on her face. Harlow kept breathing, holding herself still as the chills covered her body. Surely the water would stop before she drowned? The tide grew stronger, flushing heavily up her chest, brushing her neck. Panic seeped in and she couldn't stop the fear permeating her body. She swayed with the water, knocked off balance as she stumbled in the rising tide. The water was gushing without control, splashing against her face, soaking her hair and whipping her back and forth.

She tried to scream, but the sound was drowned out as another wave of water submerged her beneath its icy grip. Harlow couldn't think as the cold permeated every pore, sinking into her body, numbing her reactions. She could hardly breathe, the waves battering her over and over again.

Harlow spluttered as water rushed up her nose. She started to gag, breathing in more water with each attempt to steady herself. Another wave smacked into the side of her head and her consciousness waivered. She felt herself floating, drifting away as the water swirled above her. Blood rushed out of her veins, pooling in the bag with her magic inside. There was no steadying the battering of her body.

A hand plunged into the water, bringing her head to the surface. She felt the chains release, the waves slowing as a strong body carried her back to the edge of the arena. The water continued to swirl around her, ebbing down to circle her waist and then slosh at her ankles. Nyx had a tight grip on her waist, dragging her to a safe position. For a moment she flashed back to him holding her in the woods, the kiss they shared in his house, and the last moments in the abandoned ruins. She wanted to go back, but the reality of her present hit her as the icy water chilled her skin.

He shouldered her weight until her legs stopped trembling. She was standing now, holding the edge of the stone wall. Nyx's warmth was gone, replaced by the greedy grasp of the needle woman. She snatched the bag from her stomach, ripping the adhesive without much regard. Her hands worked quickly, replacing it with another bag before the blood started to drip again.

Head swimming and limbs trembling, Harlow shook where she stood soaked to the bone. The Regent inspected the bag, a grin on her face. The water had receded, but the chill remained in her limbs. This was going downhill quickly and the plan she had made was all but dissolved. She didn't know how she would escape, break the bonds with the stiffness in her limbs.

"To her cell," the Regent called. "Switch the arena setting."

Shock rippled through the guards, but they moved without question. Harlow's legs dragged behind her and the blood bag was removed, the valve shut off. She fell on the floor of her cell, out of breath and beaten by the water. She had to act faster next time, not allow the anticipation to build. Harlow shifted and felt the key secured beneath the slim margin of space in her shackles.

The reprieve was short and within minutes she was back in the arena, blood bag in place, and a forest in front of her. Massive stones dotted the terrain, trees brushing the tops of the ceiling, and dips in the floor that hinted at pits. Harlow glanced over, seeing the drained land mages fearfully watching the Regent. She had amassed an audience, mages of all type and guards with their gleaming armor. Harlow's heart skipped a beat and she tried to keep herself from stumbling on the rocks.

She was allowed to move her legs and arms, but the shackles were still encased over her wrists and palms. The most degrading was the gag on her mouth, silencing her, making her seem subservient. Eyes tracked her every move, some hostile and others carefully blank. The other mages were yelling out obscenities, trying to gain favor with the Regent.

Harlow curled her hands into fists, the metal biting into her raw skin. Blood dripped creating a trail behind her as she was guided towards the entrance of a dense forest. There were shadows moving amongst the trees, a dense fog rolling through the underbrush. It was massive, the trees towering high and blocking the light.

"Your task is simple," the Regent said, "survive."

Harlow met her mocking smile, the fury she felt burning in her eyes. She didn't acknowledge the guards slipping away into the safety of the balcony. Harlow strode into the mist, letting the sounds wash away. She heard people screaming as she entered, something driving them mad. Whatever had spooked the crowd in the woods would come for her soon and when it did, she would be ready.

## Chapter 33

She took one last look at the balcony before plunging into the gapping maw of the treeline. It was oddly silent inside the forest. The dismal mist curled around her legs, chilling her damp clothes. Harlow didn't know where she was going, but she had to get away from prying eyes to remove the key. Her feet crunched something brittle. She felt it stab at her foot and doubled down to remove the obstruction.

A wave of sickness hit her as she held up the snapped bone. It was too large to be from an animal. She surveyed the area, her fists clenching as she took in what she had mistaken for rocks. Littered across the floor were remains, human remains, stripped down to the bones. There were skulls, some cracked open, and countless ribcages scattered throughout the mist. Harlow rested on her ankles, a numbness spreading at the sheer number of bones covering the ground. The Regent was sick, sadistic, and knew this would trigger any decent human being. Harlow clenched the fear that tried to surface, adopting rage to maintain her magic.

*Gods guide them.*

She crossed her forehead and rose from the ground. She turned her eyes away from the sight, focusing on her task.

Her movements were lithe, the training kicking in as she scaled a tree. She fished the key out, unlocking the chains from her wrists, palms, and ankles. Without a second thought, she ripped the leather strap from her mouth and stuffed it into her boot. It might come in handy later, even if that was just a ritual burning of the hated item. She rubbed at her chaffed wrists, flexing her hands, cracking her sore knuckles. The blood bag sat limp on her chest, and she ripped it with a disgusted snarl. They wouldn't get another drop of her blood.

Harlow leapt down from her hiding place, keeping her face hidden. She could feel the magic in her singing, the pillars growing closer with each step. Harlow leapt over the bones, keeping her movements quick and silent. A branch snapped behind her. She turned to see what creature would emerge and doubled over as a heavy object smashed into her.

Her guts were burning, aching in sickening waves. The mass hit her hard in the back and she smacked down into the boneyard. She rolled to her back and came face to face with a hideous creature with hooked nails, fangs protruding from its mouth, and eyes black as coal. It had a massive, fur covered chest and an elongated snout.

*Shit. A wolf. A massive wolf.*

She blanched as a guttural growl rumbled from the beast's chest, a howl piercing the air as it threw its head back. Lurching to her knees, she summoned acid to her wrists, the scared glands tearing open. The wolf lunged at her, teeth snapping through the air. It raised a paw, aiming for her throat. Harlow sprang up. She coated her hand in acid, dipping beneath its outstretched arm. The wolf narrowly missed her face, digging its claws into the ground. Saliva dripped from its open maw, the ferocity in its eyes chilling her.

It snapped at her, the sound making her muscles tighten. Harlow whipped around and punched the wolf in the side of his head. The acid spilled off her hand, splattering the wolf's muzzle. He howled again, clawing at the burning flesh. She scrambled backwards, taking a few steadying breathes. Harlow opened her palms and summoned a slender curved blade, careful not to overuse the magic. The wolf slashed out, wildly clawing at the air. His body arched forward and she ducked beneath the beast. Harlow brought the knife up, slicing through flesh and bone. He howled, lashing out at the empty air.

Dancing behind a tree, Harlow watched as the beast turned to sniff at the air. She clamped a hand over her mouth to cover the gasping pants of her aching lungs. One of his eyeballs was hanging from the socket, blood dripping in sickening pools in his matted fur. His snout turned directly towards her. She swallowed, reading herself for his attack. The impossibly long arms reached out tearing the tree to the side. Harlow bolted out of the way, a branch scratching her back, as she came to a shaky stance on the dirty ground.

They were face to face, his breath putrid. The slash of his claws ripped at the thin shirt, grazing over her stomach. Harlow screamed, the jagged scrap on her skin burning. She jabbed the knife forward, impaling the paw that was reaching for a second swipe.

The wolf snarled and Harlow backed away from his reaching grasps. She knew running was out of the question, his speed triple hers, and fighting was not going well. Her heart hammered as she scrambled over a tall rock behind her. The wolf had ripped the blade from his hand, spitting it on the ground. Harlow acted quick, gathering the acid into her hands. The wolf howled before leaping up the side of the rock, his eye flopping grotesquely to the side.

His paw reached the top and Harlow held her breath. She saw his face, the bloody muzzle licking his yellowed fangs.

“Up here,” she called.

The beast turned his head to look at her. Harlow closed her eyes and released the acid filled needles into every inch of his snout. He screeched as he tumbled backwards off the rock, his arms flailing as he fell. The beast thudded into the ground, crunching bones beneath his massive weight. He twitched, scratching at the needles, but the acid was already doing its job. His flesh bubbled up, the acid eating through the soft tissue. Harlow summoned a dagger and



flung it straight down into his chest. The beast made a few whimpering howls before going silent.

She stared down at the beasts and felt a touch of pity for the captured creature. It was another casualty, a piece to be moved around the board without regard. Her resolve firmed, knowing the path forward was worth her life.

Harlow heard movement in the trees, shouts from guards, as she leapt from the rock. They had underestimated her. Good.

The mist was growing denser the further she went into the forest. Her stomach was bleeding, soaking through her dirty tunic. She hid for a moment to check, superficial, and kept moving. Ripping the bottom of her shirt, she tightly bound the scratches on her arm where claws had caught her unaware. It pooled with blood, slowly clotting against the fabric. She felt dangerously close to passing out, but their plans were clearly going awry. This was her opportunity, and she would die before letting it go to waste.

Harlow ducked behind a thick tree when a branch cracked beside her. There was movement and a low groaning ahead of her. She crept through the underbrush, keeping herself hidden in the mist. The hum of magic felt stronger, her senses guiding her forward. She made a move, darting across an open patch in the trees. A vine snapped across her face, toppling her to the ground. A woman dropped down from a tree. Harlow glared at the mage in front of her with her braided back ashy blonde hair. She had the same spots as Yara, hungry brown eyes, and olive skin.

“Stupid,” the woman said, circling her.

Harlow raised her wrists, spraying the canopy above with acid. It rained back down, bringing debris along with it. The earth mage created a cover over herself, and Harlow dashed to

the side. She jerked when another vine wrapped around her leg. Harlow dropped a glob of acid on it.

“Why are you working with her?”

The mage smirked at Harlow, her hair burned in places where the acid rain had seeped through her barrier.

“It’s better to be at the devil’s right hand than in her way,” she replied.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Harlow said.

Without warning a branch smacked into Harlow’s stomach. She doubled over feeling the bruises from the wolf aching all over again. This was how it was going to go, so be it. Harlow wiped the blood trickling from her mouth and flung it at the woman. It spun through the air, turning into a star with razor sharp edges. The metal whizzed as it hurtled forward.

The star ripped through her thigh, gashing through the muscles as it careened forward. The woman screeched, grabbing at the wound. The idea of fighting a fellow mage made her sick, but she couldn’t risk her emotions clogging her mission. Harlow ran towards her, creating another dagger with the blood dripping from her waist. The trees reached out, their branches scraping across her face. She grit her teeth against the pain. Harlow leapt over one of the branches, groaning as another jabbed her thigh.

She focused on the woman in front of her, amassing vines around her body. The acid rushed to her hands without direction, aiding her as she leapt over a branch. She came down hard, tearing through the vine wall, acid searing the flimsy cover. The momentary victory had her smirking until her chin snapped back, the boot catching her jaw. Harlow tumbled to the ground. The vines wrapped around her faster than she could catch her breath.

The earth mage was over her, a heavy branch in her arm. There wasn't time to register the frantic hammering of her pulse or the absolute agony ripping through her body. This was war, and Harlow fought for more than herself. She fought for all the mages, even the one standing above her.

Harlow bit down hard on her tongue and spit the blood out with a silent prayer. It morphed into two thin blades, sinking into the mage's throat. Shock registered on her face, eyes wide as blood started to trickle down. A tear tracked down her face, the regret weighing on Harlow's chest as the moment settled.

Harlow burst free of the vines, jerking to the side. The other mage dropped the branch, stumbling on her feet. Her hands clutched at the metal, ripping it out, but it was too late. Blood bubbled out quickly, silvery strands of magic intertwined as it gushed down her chest. She tried to mouth something, but her vocal cords had been slashed.

The woman teetered on her feet and Harlow rushed over to her. She wrapped the dying mage in her arms, cradling her as she sank to the ground. Tears splattered her face, mixing with the blood gushing from her wound.

"I'm so sorry," Harlow whispered, her voice trembling.

The earth mages brown eyes found Harlow's; the malice washed away as she blinked up at her. She took a ragged breath and exhaled, eyes glossing over. She lowered the woman gently to the ground, placing the vines over her body. Her hands shook as she left her in the forest. If this was the Regent's game, then Harlow needed to change her tactics. She couldn't blindly run for the pillars. It was time to take the fight directly to her.

## Chapter 34

A steely resolve cloaked the anguish in her heart. She was going to make them all pay. Harlow didn't bother sneaking through the woods at this point. She wanted to make a statement. It was time to face the real monster in the room.

"Regent," she shouted. "If you want my magic, come claim it!"

Her voice echoed in the woods, bouncing off the trees. There was no response. The silence was absolute. Harlow stomped through the area, crunching bones beneath her feet. She didn't hear anything, but that didn't mean there weren't spies hiding in the trees.

The air became colder, a chill running to her fingertips. She could hear a faint moaning, a screaming cry penetrating the silence. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up. Something was approaching. Harlow backed up into a tree, her senses on high alert. She felt them before her eyes registered what had emerged from the shadows.

Two wraiths glided over the mist, their ragged cloaks hiding the physical dimensions of their skeletal bodies. Harlow tried to catch her racing heart. Nyx had said they were dead, but the Regent must have more hidden within the city. She chided herself for not asking Nyx how he had killed them.

They circled the air, using their horrible moans to spike the fear building in her chest. Harlow crept behind the tree, holding herself still as they drifted past her. She felt their presence circling her. Hiding wasn't an option, but defeating them felt impossible. Her mind raced over the options, a tremor running down her arms. She released four small needles filled with acid. Her breath raced as she stood up, spinning to throw them at the figures.

It pierced their sides, a bone chilling wail rising from their hoods. They lashed out, knocking her back into another set of trees. Stars danced around her head, the trauma

compounding in sickening waves. She felt the drag of their invisible mouths, the pull of the magic as they descended on her.

*“Move back.”*

A rumbling shock wave rippled across the ground, the wraiths tumbling over themselves. Harlow whipped around, heart in her throat.

Jax emerged.

Relief and fear warred inside of her. She wasn't alone, but that came at the price of Jax. He was fighting inside the forest too. Which meant, the Regent knew about his magic.

The Regent was draining him too.

The halo of darkness surrounded him. He strode forward, using the inky cloud to strike out, battering the wraiths as they tried to right themselves.

“We have to find the pillars,” he said, sending the wraiths tumbling.

Harlow didn't question him and jumped to her feet. He gripped beneath her elbow as she swayed, sending another tentacle of darkness at the advancing wraiths.

She hesitated, looking at her friend as he wielded his magic without hesitation. He was incredible, confident in his ability, and the pang of sadness hit her. If the Regent was allowing them to use their abilities like this, what control did she have to be unphased in light of such magic? Jax gave her a push, his eyes completely white and glowing as he let the darkness lash out in front of him. Harlow darted through the woods, finding a narrow path that led to a lighter section of the maze. She didn't let herself stop, the burning in her lungs nearly unbearable.

Clambering up a tree, Harlow grappled with the bark crumbling beneath her hands. She wedged herself in a tall branch, hoping for a small reprieve. The woods were quiet again, the

lack of natural sound chilling. Her heart was racing and the wound on her stomach was still seeping. The magic inside of her felt weaker and she wasn't sure how to replenish it.

A faint whistle carried through the trees. Harlow adjusted herself, tense to fight if it were another mage sent to hurt her. The darkness grew stronger, and she held her breath. Jax parted the branches, standing beneath her. Harlow choked back a desperate sob, the rush of the past week hitting her in the chest. She dropped to the ground, wrapping him in a tight hug.

"Not so tight," he wheezed.

She moved back, checking him for injuries. There was a gash along his cheek, a few of his silver locs looked shorter, and something must have hit his chest based on his hitched breaths.

"Why are we in this forest?" he asked.

"The Regent is trying to drain my magic, but it doesn't appear unless I'm afraid."

Jax wrinkled up his nose. "She's horrible."

"Why are you in here? What happened to you? How were you captured?"

There was a howling sound off in the distance that made her stomach flip. Without word, they started moving away from the noise. Jax expanded his darkness, enveloping Harlow in an opaque cloud.

"I didn't make it out of the city. They got everyone, Harlow. It was a blood bath."

She kept her eyes averted, knowing she was the reason they were attacked. This wasn't the time to deal with that transgression. They had to be focused, get their asses out of this maze.

"What have they done to you?" she asked.

His eyes met hers, the ghost of remembered pain crossing his face. It must have been worse for him. She almost wished she hadn't asked.

"Isolation cells," he said softly.

The utter darkness, the lack of interaction must have taken him to the edge. She didn't press him further, grabbing his hand in solidarity. They walked quietly through the woods, avoiding the ribcages that crackled loudly beneath their feet. It was difficult to say where they were going, but Harlow let the light guide her forward.

"I wonder why they put us in here together?" Jax said, checking over his shoulder.

"She must know," Harlow replied, raising her eyebrows.

Jax chewed over the thought, tightening the cloak as a shadow moved to the far right of them. It seemed to work, the movement settling, and allowing them to start walking again. She had to know that Harlow's fear would be tripled with Jax in danger, their magic at stake.

The pull of the pillars was growing stronger with each step. They were close, uncomfortably so, and it heightened the unease coil in her gut. She didn't want to spook herself or Jax, but this didn't feel right. They were quiet, brooding over the possibilities as they walked towards the light source. Jax paused, the ground shaking lightly beneath their feet. He dragged Harlow to the side, moments before a stampede of horses trampled them. Her heart raced, the fear of being caught on their hooves drawing her closer to the trees. The branches scratched at her exposed arms, drawing more bits of blood to their outstretched limbs.

The path cleared, light spreading out from where the herd had thinned the underbrush. They rushed down the path, certain that this would lead them out. If they were out of the maze, they had a better chance of finding the pillars.

"Alright, we get to the opening, find an exit, and get the hell out of here," Jax said.

Harlow nodded, hope flickering as the woods began to clear. They burst out into an open stone circle, the trees stopping abruptly. It was flanked by four tall towers radiating a power that sank into her skin. Surely the Regent wouldn't allow them access to her prized secret?

Jax held back, keeping to the edges of the woods. He grabbed at her hand, but Harlow had already taken a step out of his cloaking magic. She hesitantly moved, putting a foot on the stone. It rumbled beneath her, shaking the earth, and toppling her to the ground. Her body was battered around, pushed further into the circle until she was right in the middle.

The trees parted above her and the haughty smirk of the Regent. She did a slow clap for Harlow, infuriating her with the mock praise.

“Well done,” she said, “You have survived.”

Harlow stood to her feet, clenching her fists at her side when the tremors ceased.

“What does that matter? You lost all the magic that spilled out.”

The Regent held up a vial filled with blood and golden bands swirling inside. She cocked her head to the side, smiling with lips painted black.

“Someone didn’t take in their surroundings,” the Regent cooed.

Beside her the trees slowly peeled back their layers of bark. Beneath them were mechanical pumps, siphoning the bits of blood left from the drip on her clothes. The floor cleared to reveal a web of tubes, drains sucking in anything that fell to the ground. Harlow felt sick. The whole forest was a collection tank, right down to the floor.

She had thought she was safe from being tapped with no way to collect the blood, but that was just a decoy. Harlow shook as she saw the amount of magic gained, the contents of the jar glowing bright even from a distance.

“The best part is that you are still here to make more of that delicious magic,” she said.

“We can keep doing this for years,” she added, the malice clear in her eyes.

Harlow’s mouth went dry. Years of this torture? She felt a tremor move through her hands. The Regent didn’t want her to die, she wanted her to believe she was so that she would



fight harder, making more magic with her struggle. She had been played. There was never going to be an escape from this maze, only slow withdrawal of the magic that the Regent craved.

“Others have lasted decades in here,” the Regent said casually.

Decades of fighting? The world tilted and the contents of her stomach begged to be released. The Regent sauntered off her throne, a spiky black chair with metal vines twisting through the air. She descended from the protection of her guards, the crowd pretending to agree with her every word. The Regent kept herself at a safe distance, halfway down the stairs that led to the stone slab.

“I do enjoy drawing out the power, using it to sustain myself,” she said.

With a wave of her hand, the other mages disappeared. Ushered out by guards, the only ones left were Harlow, Jax, and her lapdog Nyx. They went without a word, clearly aware of the horrors conducted within this chamber.

The Regent drew closer, two swords strapped to her back. Her hair was in that tight braid again, this time held high on her head where a crown rested. It was black, the same spindly metal and spikes of her throne. Harlow thought it would look better jammed into her throat.

“Just between you and me, your magic is more potent than any I’ve collected before.”

Harlow went to swing at her, but an invisible barrier had sprung up between them. The Regent grinned, staying inside the circle that protected her. She tapped on the invisible wall, pleased with her work.

“You can try to hurt me, but it’s only going to make this harder on you.”

In the corner of her vision, Harlow saw Jax slip from the trees. He made quick work of the distance sprinting with the darkness curling out around him. His shadow arm reached up and

swiped at the Regent. The resounding shockwave knocked him back, his body crashing to the ground. The Regent didn't even flinch, a smile curving her cruel lips.

"I told you," she replied.

Harlow rushed to Jax, helping him stand back up. He was shaking, his nose broken and bleeding. There was a wet patch on the back of his head. Harlow pressed her hand to the spot. He whimpered at the pain, gripping her hand for support.

"You aren't the first plucky group of mages to try and take me down," the Regent said. "I've been around, paid for this power with my own blood, and made this land what it is today. You have no idea what sacrifices have been made to keep *your kind* from ruining Trevail."

She circled around them, rebuffing them with the barrier. They shuffled around the circle, unable to attack without having their magic thrown back at them.

"I've drained countless mages to ensure Trevail is safe," she said.

"But Trevail isn't safe," Harlow replied.

At this the Regent gave her a patronizing smile. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"How could you say we are safe when mages are killed just for existing? We live in constant fear," Jax retorted.

"The loss of the few is worth it for the safety of the many," the Regent said, shrugging her shoulder.

Harlow wished the barrier were down so that she could slash through that careless attitude. How could she say their deaths were worthwhile? Mages could live together with nonmagical individuals. It was wrong to kill the magic wielders.

“You’re insane and you won’t be taking any more of our magic,” Jax said, squaring his shoulders.

“That’s sweet that you think you have a choice,” the Regent replied.

She snapped her fingers and the whirling beneath them started up again. Jax lost his footing, falling down as the stone slab shook. His head smacked into the stone, blood splattering the area, and coating the ground. Harlow screamed, outraged as the blood was siphoned into the pinholes of the stone. She tried to sop up any of the magical blood, coating her hands in it. The magic called to her, a reedy voice begging her to taste the power. She ingested it without thought, shoving her hands into her mouth.

“That’s not going to work well for you,” the Regent said, her brows raised.

Harlow stopped her frenzied retrieval, mortified by what she had just done. Her only thought had been to keep his magic away from the Regent, stop her from taking it. The remnants of Jax’s magic curdled in her stomach. She lurched forward, nearly vomiting as dry heaves consumed her.

“It’s not wise to try and take another mage’s magic,” she said, circling Harlow again.

The world was spinning in front of her, and she tried to rationalize the burning in her veins. It was as if she could feel every nerve ending firing off in tandem. The backs of her eyes were on fire, her throat raw, and the pounding in her ears was nearly unbearable. Jax’s magic assaulted her senses, and she couldn’t stop the onslaught.

“You see, it doesn’t hurt me,” the Regent replied. “But you, well, you have a different kind of magic.”

Her body stopped trying to vomit up the magic, the integration rapidly evolving as his magic coursed through her body. She felt her own magic unfurling, swirling around the strands

foreign to her own. Harlow closed her eyes, focusing on this intangible thing working through her. If she could contain Jax's magic with her own, there might be a way to stop the destruction of her body.

The Regent crouched near her, watching as Harlow writhed on the floor. "You are going to be my source. I'm going to drain your magic over and over again. Then I'm going to use your strength so that no other physical mage can manifest like you did."

Harlow knew what she meant and the thought of being trapped to a pillar, slowly going insane while her body was drained didn't factor into her plans. She let the Regent's inane chatter wash over her, focusing on the magic burning through her. The tendrils of her magic reached out, grasping onto the places Jax's magic didn't belong. She thought about how she had encapsulated the acid in metal balls, combining her magic to push it outside of her body. Harlow imagined the metal vines trapping the silver strands. It encased the foreign magic, holding it within a wall of her own. She screamed as it burst from her hands, a simple metal ball swirling with a silver glow. The shaking slowed, the burning ebbing away.

The threats from the Regent stopped. She had stood up, her eyes wide as Harlow lifted herself from the ground. A ball of white light orbited around her, casting out the shadows of the cave.

"That shouldn't be possible," the Regent said, a crack of trepidation shining through her cold exterior.

Harlow watched as the orb whirled around her, the traces of Jax's magic swirling inside of it. She felt the ground tremble as the Regent's shield was hit. Her eyes went wild, and she took a shaky step back.

Harlow had found a way to wield Jax's magic.

## Chapter 35

“Nyx, seize her,” the Regent shouted.

He was down the stairs in a flash, his swords flying out from his sides. Harlow surged forward, using the orb to crash into the Regent’s shield as she tried to put distance between them. The Regent stumbled, falling to the ground.

A sword slashed through the air and Harlow dropped to a crouch. The metal whizzed above her head, narrowly missing the fly away hairs. She kicked her leg out, missing Nyx by an inch. He sprang forward with his sword out, aiming for her chest. Harlow threw up her hands, coating them in metal. She caught the sword in her palms, grunting as it sent shock waves up her arms.

She gripped the metal with a scream and dented it with her armor-plated hands. Nyx tossed the sword behind him. Worry flashed in his face before his eyes went blank, his hands struggling as they formed into fists. He lunged forward, punching her in the shoulder. Harlow groaned as pain blossomed in her battered body. She stuck out her right hand, glancing off his chin. Blood splattered on the ground, the sharp metal slicing easily into his skin.

Nyx ran his hand over the cut, inspecting the blood before glaring at her. She felt her throat squeeze, the blankness in his eyes cutting into her. Harlow caught the Regent moving in the corner of her eye. She abandoned her fight with Nyx, racing after her. There was a second advantage on Nyx that kept him behind her. Panic flashed over the Regent’s face, her bravado wavering. Harlow rammed into the shield, letting the orb swing heavily around her. It toppled the Regent with its force, her body skidding back to the middle of the stone circle.

There wasn't a moment to revel in this victory as a heavy body slammed into her. Harlow rolled on the ground, her arms scrapping the loose stones. Nyx was above her, his body rigid as he came face to face with her.

"I trust you," he whispered.

His eyes were clear, the blank stare replaced with an earnest expression. His face morphed again, a wall descending as he raised his fist. Harlow jerked the orb sideways letting it hit him full on in the ribs. He wheezed, rolling across the floor. He stilled as a ragged breath echoed in the ring. Jolting up, Harlow scoured the area for the Regent. Her heart thudded wildly. Dagger at his throat, the Regent held a semiconscious Jax in her grasp.

"Surrender or he dies."

Time slowed as she turned to see the Regent panting, her arms banding tightly across Jax's chest. This was her fear, the inability to save the people she cared for most.

The shield was weakened, but not enough to allow Harlow to shoot through it. She couldn't risk it, not with Jax at her mercy. He was half lidded, barely holding to consciousness. Harlow stood still, her breath catching heavily in her chest.

"Let him go," Harlow said, gritting her teeth.

"You have no authority here," the Regent replied.

Nyx hadn't gotten back up yet, his body rigid with pain. There weren't many options left and the panic started to edge through the adrenaline pumping in her veins. She couldn't let her kill Jax. He was the only sense mage and without him they couldn't restore the magic. There was no winning in this situation. How could she have been blind enough to leave him unprotected?

Harlow slowly put up her hands, the shaking increasing with each inch.

"Please, don't hurt him."

The Regent had a wicked smile as she nicked Jax's throat. A trickle of blood ran out, falling to the floor. She wiped her finger along the cut, raising it to her mouth.

*"Drop it."*

Jax's voice boomed around them. The Regent's body shook, her grip loosening as tremors seized her. His magic pitched the sound higher, a keening that overwhelmed their senses. It was now or never, even if it felt like her ears would bleed out from the awful wailing.

Harlow stumbled forward. Relief swept over her as she ran towards Jax, grasping his arms and dragging him away before the shields rematerialized. He collapsed beside her, the exhaustion more than he could manage. His eyes were clouded completely, blood trickling from his ears, and his breaths coming in sharp stabs.

"Stay here," Harlow said frantically.

He nodded, sliding down against the stairs. Harlow narrowed her eyes. The Regent had risen, taking out the swords on her back. Nyx appeared beside her, holding himself still as she reinforced her shield. He moved first, darting straight at Harlow. She matched his movement. There was a brief moment when he nodded, opening his stance to let her attack.

Harlow created a blade in her hand, coating it in acid. She raced towards Nyx, holding his gaze. The Regent wasn't far behind, rage fueling her into combat. Harlow slashed at Nyx. The blade raced over his chest, burning a line through his armor. He gripped her around the shoulders, rolling her to the ground.

The next second a sword smacked into the ground. If she had been standing, it surely would have sliced through her arm. She was trapped beneath him, her body aching at every point. Harlow kned Nyx in the stomach. He grunted and thrust her to the side, taking the brunt of the Regent's heavy boot. He let out a ragged breath, the acid slash on his chest creating a pink

line through the corroded armor. The Regent didn't stop as she stepped over Nyx. Harlow struggled to breathe as the pain started to break through her adrenaline-fueled flight.

The Regent's swords hissed beside her, slicing the air. Harlow bounced up to her feet with a shaky scream. She rocketed the orb forward, flinging it out without direction. It narrowly missed the shield, glancing uselessly off the side. The Regent was upon her faster than she had anticipated. Her sword angled down dashing the side of Harlow's left arm. Blood spurt out, spraying the front of the Regent's shirt.

Harlow screamed as the pain swelled. The wound pulsated, blood soaking her shirt sleeve. The blade was moving again, aiming for the other arm. Harlow doubled down, the hissing blade right above her. She imagined a swarm of bees, their stingers filled with venom. The magic inside of her quivered, the ask straining her depleted sources.

The gap in her arm opened wide, metal bees bursting out. They circled the shield, dive bombing and creating a diversion long enough to jerk away from the Regent's sword. Harlow knew this would hurt more than she wanted to acknowledge, but the wound needed to close. She imagined the metal wires tying her flesh together. The reality was worse, red-hot pain lancing her at every pierce of the metal. She yelled in agony as the wound closed. It was haphazard, but it would have to suffice. Better a scar than a lost arm.

Nyx was back on his feet a heartbeat away from her, the Regent slashing down the bees swarming around her. Her was breathing heavily as he ran towards her. He bellowed as he barreled into her, cradling Harlow as they tumbled to the ground. On her back, she watched as he slashed at his wrists, catching the wound before his blood spilled.

"Please, take it," he whispered urgently.



Harlow knew what she had to do now. His other hand was out, holding a shimmering black liquid. It swirled as if blown by an invisible wind. This was Nyx's magic. She didn't stop to question it, lifting his hand to her face. Drinking it down, she felt the cold liquid dripping through her system. Where Jax's felt like fire, Nyx's magic was frigid.

It made her tremble and jerk as it raced straight to her mind. She shook uncontrollably. The racing in her brain wouldn't stop. Her past thoughts hit her. She saw her mother snuggling her as a child, felt the wraiths breathing down her neck, the brush of Nyx's hands on her waist, and the pride in Jax's eyes the first time she controlled her magic. It was as if his magic was infiltrating her mind, pulling at all the cords keeping it together.

There wasn't much time to create another orb, and she had to focus the scrambled thoughts. Harlow summoned up the memory of Nyx teasing her, teaching her to create weapons, the last kiss they had shared. Each one popped the net encasing her mind in his unstable magic. Harlow caught the strands, imaging them coming together, morphing into a tangible ball.

The orb sprang to life, knocking Nyx away from her as it glimmered like the night sky. His head lolled to the side, his body limp on the ground. Harlow fought the urge to run to him. She turned around, facing the Regent.

"It won't be enough," the Regent breathed, eyes flickering to the second orb.

Harlow's small victory with the bees buoyed her determination. The power hummed in her veins, the manifestation of the other bodily magics orbiting around her. She took a step towards the Regent, the stone cracking beneath her feet. The Regent stumbled. Harlow took another step, pounding the ground with the orbs.

"Stop it!"

Another fissure opened up in the stone. Harlow shot out the black orb, cracking the shield once more.

The ground split open, steam hissing up from the earth. Harlow felt the tingles of the magic rumbling through her, a buzzing forming in her mind.

A dagger sliced across the distance. Harlow released the orbs again as the blade tumbled over itself. It happened in a blink, the dagger lodged in her thigh, the orbs cracked open the shield, and the earth gave way beneath them. Harlow tumbled down, pinwheeling through nothingness.

## Chapter 36

She smacked into water, icy cold tendrils curling around her body. It stole her breath away as the blind panic tried to drag her beneath the surface. She struggled against the sucking weight, propelling herself forward.

The air stung as she gulped in heavy breaths. She saw a swatch of land ahead of her, seven pillars jutting out of the ground. Her leg burned and she grit her teeth, ignoring the pain radiating out of her. Her heart hammered heavy in her chest, the swirling of fear spurring her forward. She struck out for the land, slipping as she made it to the glossy black rock.

Harlow stared at her leg, the dagger run through the very edge of her thigh. She held her breath as she wrenched it out. A whimper escaped her lips as she pressed her hand tight to the spot. Blood trickled through her fingers and her stomach sank seeing the magic slithering out. Clamping down on the panic building in her, she focused on her surroundings. She let her eyes quickly run over the area, checking that the orbs were still in her control.

They had fallen into a cavern surrounded by inky water, the light from above bouncing off the slick cave walls. The center had three tall pillars, two of them pulsing with light, while the third remained inactive. Surrounding them were four stout pillars, engravings for the element they represented covering every surface. Each was made from a shiny black stone that reflected the waters to create the illusion of movement. Harlow knew what she would find if she stepped closer, blood filtering in from the countless captives above them.

The source material was worse than Nyx had explained, instead of one there were hundreds of mages being drained of their magic to feed the gluttonous pillars. There were hundreds of thin tubes above the pillars, red liquid pumping furiously. The ache in her throat tightened, the urge to scream building at the horror in front of her.

She would destroy them. Then the Regent couldn't keep up this sick game. Harlow stumbled forward, the ache acute as she slid over the wet surface. She felt a pair of eyes on her and whipped around. A fist jammed into her gut, knocking her back a step.

"Look what you've done," the Regent seethed.

A boot smashed into her hip and Harlow cried out. The Regent didn't give her a moment to breathe, the edge of her heel cracking into her wounded arm. She screamed, tears springing to her eyes. Harlow gripped at the pulsating gash, hoping her wires had held despite the agony ripping through her. She pushed herself away, rising to an unsteady crouch.

"You think this is going to be enough to stop me?" the Regent cried.

She punched Harlow again, the blow sending her stumbling towards the pillars. Her screams were turning to sobs, the pain nearly unbearable. Harlow desperately crawled forward, gripping the smooth ledge connecting the pillars. The Regent appeared as if part of the night, her face twisted as she leapt down. Harlow scrambled over the shallow wall, chest heaving. The Regent's sword sank into the ground where Harlow had been, the metal twanging against the stone. She yanked, but the sword didn't budge.

Harlow hid behind one of the pillars, the intricate swirls mimicking the water lapping the edge of the outcropping. She was breathless, terrified, and couldn't stop the blind panic that was settling over her broken body.

"Even if you have two of the elements, you can't control them without all three."

She brushed against the pillar, finding the tube that sent the red liquid pouring down into the base. Her eyes caught the thin stream of blood oozing from her thigh. Harlow begged her magic once more to aid her, creating a razor thin blade. It popped out of her thigh, falling to her

shaking hands. She sliced through the tube, severing the magical feed. The blood continued to run down the sides, pooling around the bottom.

“Sever them, but it won’t matter. I control them,” the Regent sneered.

Even if she did, the rage that had filled her at seeing the mages drained propelled her forward. Harlow jolted to the fire one, slicing the tube. Then the earth and wind, doing the same. The Regent watched her, a grin on her face. She allowed it and dread started to sink in as Harlow stood between the last three pillars.

“You don’t get it, do you?”

Harlow waited, her hands clenching as she kept the orbs rolling around her. The grip on them was loosening, their power fading from use. She had to be careful, use it at the right moment. The Regent walked out of the shadows, a javelin in her hands. Her eyes tracked the orbs, knowing full well that if she moved, the orbs would attack.

“What do you mean?” Harlow asked.

They circled each other, both holding the last dregs of their strength. One wrong move and it was over for both of them. Nobody was coming to help them. They were alone.

“If you throw that at me, I’ll release the orbs straight into your chest,” Harlow growled.

“Doesn’t matter, girl. You don’t have the third orb so even if you do attack me, the power of the four will protect me.”

Harlow’s mind went wild as four light orbs appeared around the Regent. They were faded, as if they weren’t fully there, but their power pulsed in a steady wave. Blue, red, green, and yellow, each representing the earth elements in their opaque orbit around her.

The first one shot forward, pelting Harlow in the side. She twirled through the air, crashing into a pillar behind her. The next started to hum, glowing red hot before chasing after

where she had fallen. Harlow rolled quickly to the side, narrowly avoiding the smash of the fire ball.

“I control the pillars and as long as I do, you can’t win,” the Regent said.

There wasn’t a reprieve as the orbs bashed into the ground, pummeled her chest, and scraped over her back. She couldn’t catch her breath as she dodged one after another. The black orb hummed beside her and she rocketed it out. It smashed straight into the pale green one, shattering it on the spot. The Regent stumbled back, her eyes going wild.

A crack appeared in the pillar, the coating starting to chip off. Another green ball appeared beside the Regent. She flung it towards Harlow, screaming as it pelted forward. Harlow rolled behind the earth pillar. The orb smashed into the pillar and shattered the rest of the coating. It crumbled to the ground revealing a vivid green pillar that thrummed with power.

“You brat,” the Regent screamed.

The Regent summoned even more, eyes narrowed on Harlow. She sent the rest of the orbs flying, some scorching her clothes. Harlow threw her arms over her head, imagining the last orb that she needed. It was her own magic, the third in the triangle, that could complete the trifacta. The Regent ran at her, knocking her to the ground. It was too quick to summon the orbs to her. She punched at Harlow, using her rage to fuel the fight.

Air hissed painfully out of her lungs, the black edges of unconsciousness growing around her eyes. Harlow blindly kicked at her, trying to hold on to the thread of consciousness. She needed the last orb, but the pain was almost more than she could stand. Her eyes started to close, the hurt driving her mad. A loud splash echoed around them, and Harlow knew it was over. The guards must have come running. The Regent rose, placing her boot on Harlow’s throat. She ground down, taking her breath away.

“Lucky for you, I need you alive,” she hissed.

A figure emerged from the water, climbing to the surface. Harlow grabbed at the boot cutting off her air supply. She couldn’t think to summon her magic, the loss of oxygen removing conscious thoughts.

“Finally, come finish your job,” the Regent snapped.

Her boot moved a fraction as Nyx came into view. He stood over Harlow, a wild look in his eyes. She wanted to scream, tell him not to act, but it was too late. He twisted around, swinging at the Regent. The shock was brief, but it wasn’t enough to stop the orbs from smashing into him. He was lifted into the air, suspended by the orbs.

“I made you,” she said. “You’re mine.”

Nyx glanced down at Harlow, nodding as the air was sucked from his lungs. Harlow closed her eyes, shutting out the panic, the fear, the defeat threatening to cut her off. She imagined the source of her magic, that hard knot of energy in her chest. It pulsed, battered and drained from use. She saw what she needed, that tangible light that could liberate them. It hummed and glowed, the vibration shaking out of her chest.

“I never was yours,” he rasped.

The final orb clicked together.

The cavern flickered to life, light bursting out of the pillars in a blinding glare. Harlow opened her eyes, rising with the power surrounding her. She levitated, buoyed by the magic, floating up as power crackled like lightning around her.

“No, your magic already manifested,” the Regent cried, panic flaring in her eyes.

Harlow’s golden orb shot out, crashing into the remaining three orbs. They shattered, releasing Nyx, and crumbling the dark magic that had kept the pillars in bondage. The four

towers glowed, light spilling in waves as the magic twirled into the air. Harlow stared down as the Regent trembled, her eyes wide.

“It was mine,” Nyx growled, jolting to his feet.

The Regent screamed, flinging a dagger straight at his stomach. Nyx swore, his body turning enough to show the dagger lodged in his flesh. Harlow roared, the magic flaring to life around her.

“Your reign is finished!”

The three orbs bursts forward landing straight in the Regent’s chest. They carried her into the air, illuminating her horrified face before dropping her to the ground. The orbs rose, pounding down again and again. Her ribs cracked, the ragged gasp the only sound from the fallen Regent. Harlow fueled her anger, the overwhelming loss that cloaked her soul, and the justice she sought to bring into the world. She screamed as the magic burned through her, the last dregs draining as the orbs dissolved.

All three pillars pulsed as Harlow floated down, her feet touching the smooth surface. The humming grew louder, the shaking of the pillars tossing the water around them. Each one lit up, a beam of light shooting forward and twisting together.

Harlow was awestruck as the black, white, and gold beams created an endless loop, fitting seamlessly in the middle of the four bright beams. The ground gave a final shake before the lights flew out of the cave, bursting through the walls around them. Finished, the seven pillars returned to a gentle glow, the magic free from the Regent’s grip.

A rattling breath came from the edge of the stone and Harlow carefully limped over. The Regent lay bleeding out, her chest nearly caved in from the magic. Her wild eyes met Harlow, a trickle of blood leaking from her mouth.



“You have no idea what you just released,” she rasped. “The magic will kill you all.”

Chills ran down her arms as the Regent took a final stuttering breath. Her head fell to the side, eyes lifelessly staring out. Harlow felt hollow, the fight taking every ounce of her strength and will. She wanted to fall to her knees, but the gasping behind her jolted her to action. Harlow moved as quickly as she could, kneeling beside Nyx.

The dagger was firmly placed in the right side of his chest, blood bubbling out with every attempted breath. Harlow took his hand in hers, the coldness seeping from his grasp.

“You did it,” he whispered.

“Not without you and Jax,” she replied.

“Harlow, I’m sorry,” he tried, but a cough choked out the rest of his words.

“Later,” she said, unable to process the warring emotions.

“I couldn’t until—I never meant,” but the words fell silent as his eyes slid close.

“Nyx,” Harlow yelled.

She checked for a pulse, the light pump keeping him alive.

“Help, please,” Harlow screamed, staring at the hole in the ceiling.

The racing in her heart speed up, her need to save him taking over. He had kept his promise, playing his part till the very end. Her hands shook as she held the dagger in place, careful not to remove it lest he bleed out.

“You have to hold on,” she said.

The last word broke on a sob, tears falling down her cheeks. She called out again, begging for help. If they didn’t get out soon, there was no hope. The severity of the situation sank in, and she willed him to stay alive. There was nothing left of her magic, tapped from the prolonged fight. Panic clawed at her insides, an icy flush shaking through her body.

“Harlow, hold on,” Jax called from above.

Relief blossomed, tears springing to her eyes. Her heart hammered and she nodded vigorously. Nyx was pale, his pulse weakening with each passing moment. Another mage appeared, vines reaching down through the cavern. They wrapped gently around the two of them, pulling Nyx up first and then Harlow. She was weightless, floating away from the magic that sang through the pillars. Her feet touched down, eyes going wide.

A room full of mages stood before them, some worse for wear, holding back the guards crowding the area. She looked for anger, distrust, but for once her magic wasn't met with resistance. They were stronger, liberated, and their magic flowed without restraint. Some of the guards gave up, running away, while others were chased around the room with gusts of wind.

Harlow stood beside Jax, their bodies shaking as mages circled them. They rebuffed the guards, terrifying the ones brave enough to remain. It was disorienting and her eyes travelled to the mage rushing Nyx away. Harlow watched the mountainous man running up the stairs and disappearing without hesitation. Shouts rang around them as the earth mage brought up the Regent's body, circling it in tight vines. It would do for now.

“Please, come with me,” a woman said urgently.

Harlow didn't have any fight left in her. She let the woman tug them by the hand, guiding them through the skirmish. Warmth spread from her palms, soothing the throbbing trembling through her body. It must be a healer, the heady scent of honey and lavender coating her senses. The woman kept a tight grip on them, her wiry build hiding the strength of her skill. They climbed the stairs, vanishing into a narrow hallway. Mages flanked them as the healer kept up her steady pace, pumping the numbing agent through their bodies.

Harlow barely felt her wounds and for a moment it felt like she was watching herself from above. She could see them turning down unfamiliar halls, rushing past guards, and emerging from the chaos. Did she see more guards fleeing the city or was that her imagination? It was hard to tell as a heaviness clouded her senses. She was lowered into a cart, resting beside two other familiar bodies, before it jolted forward.

The sky was bright blue, clearer than she had witnessed in years. Birds flew high, singing sweetly, and the pain in her body didn't feel so bad. Part of her knew that she should question where they were going, but then the sun peeked through the clouds. Harlow relinquished control. She closed her eyes, exhaustion sweeping heavily over her.

It was done.

## Chapter 37

It took the healer two days to mend the three bodies, replenishing the depleted magical stores that begged for attention. Harlow felt groggy much of the time, her body at war with the desire to talk to Jax and Nyx. She had been allowed to visit with Jax, his eyes covered with bandages. The overuse of his magic had damaged his retinas and without proper rest, he might lose his sight all together. His voice was gravelly, but the new ability to send shockwaves from his throat brought a grin to his face each time he mentioned it.

Harlow inspected her body, noting the puckered skin on her arm where she had mended it on the spot. It would leave a deep scar, nearly half the length of her arm, but at least she could still use it. There were other marks, bruises that were rapidly turning to a light green, and the gashes leaving pink lines. She turned over her palms, the red dots morphed into a thick red band beneath her fingers. The acid gland was mangled, the skin a mess of old scars and new ones. Later, she would deal with it later.

For now, she wanted to see Nyx. Her heart hammered uncomfortably, a tangy coating of fear clogging her bravado. Harlow moved to the room where he was kept, the house offered by a pair of nonmagicals to shelter them on the outskirts of town. The room was modest, a single bed and one chair beside a desk. It had a soft blue rug on the floor and trinkets on a high shelf.

Harlow pushed away the ache, the simple domesticity making her long for stability.

Nyx was perched on the edge of the bed, watching out the window. They could see the Imperial City on the horizon, smoke billowing out of the war torn remains.

She cleared her throat, even though he already knew she was standing there.

“How are you feeling?” Harlow asked.

“Better,” he said. “A collapsed lung isn’t fun.”

Her lack of social skills was apparent as she chewed on the inside of her lip. Why was it difficult to talk to him?

“I’m sorry for the part I played in all of this mess,” Nyx said softly.

“You did what you had to do,” Harlow breathed.

He lowered his head, avoiding her as she stood in the doorway. The sun danced on the bed, little bits of dust floating through the sunny patch. Despite the warmth creeping through the air, Harlow shivered.

Harlow closed the door behind her, walking towards the bed. His hand was curled into the blanket, bunching it in his fist. She leaned against the window and let the sun bath her back. The warmth was welcomed, the grips of winter releasing to spring.

“What do we do now?” Harlow asked.

“We rebuild or run away and leave it to someone else to clean up,” he said.

“We have a lot of work ahead of us,” she said.

Nyx looked out at the land stretching in front of them. There were smokestacks rising steadily from the Imperial City, more burning in the towns around the city. Trevail had descended into mayhem, magic free for the first time in nearly a century. The ramifications were unknown. Would the mages rise, take over the nonmagical world in retribution? Harlow liked to think it wouldn’t happen, but the anger she had witnessed in the Resistance made her pause.

“It’s going to take a strong leader to guide Trevail,” Nyx replied.

Over the horizon a new cloud of smoke rose, an explosion lightly shaking the house. It wasn’t going to be quick or easy, but someone had to rein in the chaos in Trevail. She reached her hand out, lacing their fingers together. Harlow didn’t look over, the simple touch enough for

right now. Tremors raced through her wondering when they would have to leave the haven they had found, this moment of solidarity that didn't need words.

She let the silence stretch, watching as the sun warmed the ground. It had been far too long since spring had been around and she wished it were on a lighter time, not the brink of civil war. Nyx rubbed his thumb over hers, reminding her that she wasn't alone.

Magic was free, but the fight had just begun.

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