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Thesis: The Worthless Queen

Exegesis: Journey of Self Discovery

2021

Primary Supervisor: Siobhan Harvey

A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

Centre for Creative Writing,

School of Language and Culture

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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Candidate's signature

Acknowledgements

Five years ago, I didn't know what I was doing with my life and I had no strong pull towards any field or career. Then one night I had this dream – the dream that started this story and threw me onto this path of writing and I have so many people to thank.

Thank you to all of my high school friends that read my writing and said it was good. Whether you meant it or if there was something there that actually worked, your belief in me and my capabilities has stuck with me ever since.

Thank you to all the undergraduate students I have met over the last few years and to my post-grad classmates. Your experiences, motivations, and ways of understanding and analysing texts has helped me broaden my mind and see the world in more ways than one. Without you guys, my writing would be very boring, stagnant, and lifeless.

Thank you to my tutors, lecturers and supervisors, especially you Siobhan, for opening my eyes and helping me create my style and voice. The support and feedback I have gotten over the last four years has not only helped shape my writing, but has helped shape me as a person and I am eternally grateful.

Thank you to my friends for dealing with my never-ending talks about writing, books, and all things boring and most definitely not what you want to discuss on your first day off in weeks. You helped keep me sane during my university years and I don't know where I would be without you guys.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to my family. Even though this isn't what you may have wanted me to spend my life doing, you have been there and

supported me on my journey and even supplied some traumatic dinner table jokes to help spruce up my writing (just kidding, but please keep the dad jokes to a minimum from here on out).

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Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Abstract

The Worthless Queen is the draft for the first book in a YA fantasy trilogy, which forms the creative component required to complete a Master of Creative Writing. This book is a high fantasy, dark fantasy book aimed at a YA and NA audience. It has first person narration with multiple perspectives. This novel set in a fictional world whereby the use of magic is normalised. There are three kingdoms each with their own magical abilities – air, water and earth – and people's magic is shown in a different way depending on where they come from. This novel follows three protagonists who must fulfil an ancient prophecy to defeat their common enemy, the Darkness. Each protagonist has their own struggles and trauma they are dealing with which holds them back at times and they must confront and move past them in order to prepare for the task of defeating the Darkness.

The accompanying exegesis, titled *Journey of Self Discovery,* examines the process of creating a YA fantasy landscape and furthermore the development of its creation. This includes the use of multiple perspectives in the narrative, designing an authentic fantasy world and understanding those that already exist as to help structure it and create a world that feels real and believable. This also deals with the exploration of mental health and psychological trauma in a fantasy setting, understanding how trauma impacts one's life and the consequences it has on the human psyche. It is my personal opinion that mental health and trauma are not widely discussed in fantasy due to the reason why people read books – to escape from their real life. In exploring these factors, I investigate whether or not is it possible to create characters who share

experiences with the reader, and if these character journeys can provide support and inform the reader about their own mental health struggles.

Journey of Self Discovery

(An Exegesis)

Author: Anna McLeish

2021

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Primary Supervisor: Siobhan Harvey

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Introduction

Let me preface this by saying yes, the double meaning is intentional. This exegesis is not only examining my characters and how they deal with their mental health and trauma in a fantasy setting, it also details my own journey of self-discovery as a writer.

Journey of Self Discovery details my journey as a writer building my fantasy world, writing a multiple first-person perspective novel, trying to understand where it fits into the scope of YA and NA fiction, and furthermore the realisations I have had while researching and writing my thesis, *The Worthless Queen*. *Journey of Self Discovery* also explore key themes of mental health and psychological trauma and how they impact characters, especially when that trauma is rooted in their adolescence.

Act One – Writing a Fantasy Novel

When this story idea came to me, I had no doubt in my mind that this would be a fantasy series with three books and possibly even a prequel should things go smoothly. Of course, for anyone who has written fantasy or thought of writing fantasy, that wasn't much of a start. Fantasy as a genre is massive, one of the most popular genres in the world. To understand how to write fantasy, you need to understand the possibilities with fantasy:

> "Fantasy is a genre of literature that features magical and supernatural elements that do not exist in the real world. Although some writers juxtapose a real-world setting with fantastical elements, many create entirely imaginary universes with their own physical laws and logic and populations of imaginary races and creatures."[1]

Above is one of many definitions for what fantasy is, though I will make the point that fantasy is an umbrella genre, encompassing many different variations and sub-genres which in themselves have more sub-genre and variations. Labelling your work as fantasy is as helpful as saying an orange is a fruit – it is, but what kind are we talking about? Is it high fantasy or low fantasy? Dark fantasy? Maybe it is a fable or a fairy tale?

In *The Worthless Queen*'s case, I would classify it as a high fantasy with elements of dark fantasy and magical realism. You may still be thinking to yourself 'what do all these labels mean?' and believe me I thought the same thing earlier this year when I first seriously dove into the academic side of creative writing. Let me break this down further by explaining each of these sub-genre of fantasy.

High and low fantasy refer to the fantasy world setting, in this case there are no ties to the real world, so it is high fantasy. Some notable works of high fantasy are the *Lord of the Ring*s trilogy (Tolkien, 2014) and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Maas, 2018). The story worlds of Middle-earth and Pyrianth are secondary worlds. Our world would be the primary world, which is where low fantasy is located. Some notable works of low fantasy are the books in *The Mortal Instruments* series (Clare, 2014) and *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* (Taylor, 2020). These stories are set in various real-world locations and even though there are made up places involved their setting is in the primary world.

Dark fantasy is a sub-genre that is still vague for many writers and readers. There are many ways a book can be dark fantasy, and not all these elements need to be present in order for it to be dark fantasy. An example would be tone:

> "Tone in literature refers to the mental outlook that an author, narrator or character projects into the writing passages. Thus, an ominous tone entails that the literature feels menacing or foreboding because of the manner in which it was written."[2]

Tone is one of the easiest ways to decipher where a novel fits in the fantasy spectrum. Another way is to skew the lines between good and evil. By making it less clear what is morally right and wrong, and by having protagonists choose wrong sometimes instead of right. It helps illustrate how temptations and rash behaviours are not always easy to overcome and, furthermore, the consequences that arise from these decisions may be grim, possibly even violent. This affirms the idea that things don't always go our way and that mistakes are made, leading to dire consequences that we must live with.

Magical realism is generally rooted in low fantasy. Within a work of magical realism, the world is still grounded in the real world, but fantastical elements are considered normal in this world. As I have noted, low fantasy and magical realism can fit hand in hand quite comfortably. By normalising magic and the use of magic in everyday life, the primary world the protagonist is in can be seen in a different light and the lines between reality and fantasy are blurred, allowing for a multitude of possibilities.

Bringing it back to *The Worthless Queen*, it is set in a secondary world, with its own histories and laws and societal norms and customs. Due to the ominous threat hanging over the three kingdoms, and the more serious, intense tone used with my protagonists while they come to terms with their trauma and actions, the

elements of dark fantasy are present. While this is a high fantasy, I use the various kinds of magic and the attitude differences between people in the same kingdom as a point of interest and critique. In the years magic realism became dominant in places such as Latin America, magic realist writers used the genre to express their distaste and critique American Imperialism. I aim to do a similar thing, shining a light on British colonialism and their attitudes towards indigenous peoples, especially Maori during the second wave of colonisation in New Zealand. This is predominant in the King of Air's history and the beliefs of those who can manipulate air versus those who can create it.

Now, this is just the surface of understanding fantasy. Knowing what the sub-genres and specifics of these sub-genres are is necessary before you start writing, however, there is one key thing you need to understand before you get started. Who is your target audience and what is their demographic?

I thought I knew my answer months ago to this two-barrelled question. I thought I would be writing a YA fantasy, Young Adult fantasy for those unfamiliar with the initials. In mid-September, I realised I was wrong. I was naturally gravitating towards NA fantasy, New Adult fantasy, and that caused what I thought to be a big problem in my rewrites and the research for this exegesis.

Anna, what are you talking about? What are these terms? Isn't it all the same thing? The short answer is no. They are very different where it matters and not understanding each of these categories can leave you stuck in a very unfortunate position like I was in.

Young Adult, or YA in short, is aimed at readers in their teenage years, between 13 and 17 though you can get away with being a foot on either side if you're lucky. The protagonists in these kinds of books would be a similar age to the reader, so the reader can live vicariously through these characters and learn about love,

tragedy, loss, making difficult decisions and beginning to find out who you are. The themes echo those found in NA and Adult fiction, however, they don't go into as much detail nor do they explore the more serious, taboo topics such as mental health and trauma on a deeper level than simply acknowledging that you need help. These novels are generally short and fast paced, keeping the young readers engaged and the tone and style of writing is much more fitting for a teenager in terms of language, outlook, and interests.

New Adult, or NA, on the other hand is for those readers between 18 and 25, again the lines are a little blurred so you may have younger or older readers. The protagonists would be within this age range also, perhaps going as high as 30 but no older. As we are now working with a more mature reader who has likely experienced all those things found in YA writing, we are now moving into different territory. Jobs, studying in tertiary education, moving away from home, and possibly living alone. These stories do not have major mentor archetypes as the characters are adult – they shouldn't need a mentor or a parent to tell them what to do. This is where the expectations vs. reality idea comes in. Now that they are adults, reality strikes and the constant pressures of adulthood are dropped on them. Taxes, bills, needing to work so you can buy food, needing to prove to your parents and family that you have made something of your life, dealing with loneliness and lost relationships and then the parental pressure of needing to find someone to marry and have children with before you are too old. The mindset shift is apparent between YA and NA, and that mindset is shown through the protagonist's view of the world. In the topic of mental health and trauma, these characters have addressed their trauma, they know there is something that they need to get help for, and now they are working on moving past it and living their life without it controlling them. Then there is the sex, of course, but that is irrelevant to this discussion.

During my first draft of *A Worthless Queen,* I was under the impression I was consciously writing a YA fantasy. That is what I had planned and I thought my characters were in the right age bracket for it to work. I failed to realise that the subject I was dealing with, mental health and trauma, especially to the degree in which I explore it in the novel and plan on developing it heading into books later on, was not something that YA characters would be dealing with to that extreme. They would barely be acknowledging they have trauma, yet my characters are aware and trying to live with it while they manage their responsibilities outside of themselves. In this moment of writer's block, I revisited *City of Bones* (Clare, 2007), a novel I believe has a perfect YA beginning, and read the first chapter to see the differences in style, tone, and behaviours between the characters and my own. For more context, during 2021, including the lockdowns which I will get into later, I was reading a lot of historical fiction and fantasy spanning YA, NA, and Adult fiction. My writing style and natural voice was far too mature for a teenager. It wasn't until I was prompted to write in a contemporary YA fantasy voice that I saw how drastic the differences were.

Let me show you some examples from my writing so you can see just how different they sound:

> "We head up Port Street. Soon the dirt-trodden ground beneath our feet switches to a dusty, uneven cobblestone stretch of road that has definitely seen better days. For late evening, it is still busy. Drunken sailors wobble back to their ships for a night of heavy sleep. Wives wrangle their gambling husbands and sons back home. Women dressed in black crowd the mouths of alleyways, faces half-hidden beneath tricorne hats, thick curtains of hair, and spare strips of cloth fashioned into bandanas."[3]

You can tell in the use of description and word choice that this is influenced by historical fiction. The language feels more lyrical, less blunt, and the voice has a

maturity to it that doesn't feel like it's a YA protagonist. Comparing it to the following excerpt, the feel is completely different:

> "I look up, finding a few scattered stars in the clear night sky. For mid-autumn, it isn't that bad – strange considering the cold front that swept over the city earlier this week. I look down at my phone. *10.47pm*...
> ...We leave the plaza and begin walking down Wellesley Street. The full moon shines brightly above us, illuminating the gum-covered footpath. Crunched up leaves rustle under our boots and the air continues to warm."

There is still a lyrical feel to the language, but there is more of a direct approach to the writing. The sentences are shorter, focusing less on detailing the surroundings, instead commenting on one or two things. While this voice isn't necessarily a YA protagonist, there's a sense of caring less about what's around them and more on themselves. Which would you say leans more towards YA fantasy? The dusty uneven cobblestone and strips of cloth fashioned into bandanas or the phone and the gum-covered footpath?

In the end, it doesn't matter to a reader if it is YA or NA. If the characters are compelling, the plot engaging and the story world vivid with detail it will be read by readers of both. It's more of a writer and publisher point to consider when it comes to pitching the book.

So, lesson number one; make sure you have a deep understanding of the genres and readership demographics before starting your project. That way you don't suddenly arrive at a crossroad in the middle of your second draft and wonder who you are writing to and what you are going to do.

Act Two – The Multiple First-Person Perspectives Haunting My Dreams

I didn't start this project writing in first-person, it was suggested to me by my supervisor Siobhan during my first major feedback session with her. At first, I was

apprehensive because I wasn't sure if I really wanted to have the reader see through the protagonists' eyes while they dealt with their trauma, but after a while I understood that that is what would make this novel, and furthermore the entire series, stand out.

For those unfamiliar with the smaller differences between perspectives, let me explain. Depending on which perspective you use, the distance between the characters and the reader will shift. There are three perspectives, each taking a step backward from the reader in terms of proximity and emotional attachment. First-person makes the reader the protagonist, using pronouns such as 'I', 'me' and 'we' to detail dialogue, action, and reflection of events. As the reader is inside the protagonist's head, they also get the intimate knowledge of their emotional turmoil and pain. This in turn makes for an intense perspective, however, there is a setback to using first person. Due to the proximity of first person, some readers can feel put out or disconnected when the protagonist does something the reader wouldn't do, therefore making the reader not like the character.

Second-person perspective is a strange one and is the rarest to find in a novel, especially a YA or NA novel. This perspective uses 'you', 'yourself' and 'your', placing the reader in the role of the protagonist while the writer tells the reader what is happening to them. Due to the awkwardness or corniness this perspective can have if done incorrectly, a lot of writers will avoid this perspective entirely.

Third-person perspective has three degrees to it – third-person limited, third-person subjective/multiple, and third-person omniscient or 'the eye of God' perspective. All of these perspectives use pronouns such as 'he', 'she', 'it', 'they, or the character names. Third-person limited follows one protagonist throughout the story. Third-person subjective/multiple follows, as you may have guessed, multiple characters throughout the story though there is generally a cap to how many

characters are focused on. Omniscient can follow anyone and knows everything about everyone that has been, is, and will ever be. The distance from the reader is evident between first-person and omniscient.

The difference with third-person perspectives compared to first-person and second-person comes with the access to the characters' thoughts and feelings. Third-person perspectives cannot break into the characters' heads to understand what they are feeling, instead the reader must use clues found in facial expressions, body language, tone, or wait to be told what the character is feeling or thinking. Third-person subjective/multiple is a favourite for fantasy writers with multiple protagonists as it allows for the reader to follow the activities of multiple characters in different locations. Multiple first-person narratives in comparison can come across as harsh and jumpy when switching between protagonists. One way to get around this, which I have used in my thesis, is titling the chapters with the protagonist's name to inform the reader of the switch in point of view. There is still a need to ensure authenticity of character and accurate detail pertaining to the character's location, mannerisms, etc. but a good writer should be able to manage that.

My natural choice is third-person subjective, sprinkling in some omniscient passages here and there to cause ripples in the tension and vary the pace. With first-person, it's all in the moment and, with action scenes in particular, there is very little time to ruminate and reflect on what's happening. I had to research and find fantasy books in first-person to really immerse myself in the language and outlook of the characters, and still I am not certain it is something I can do without neglecting all other books outside of first-person.

The Worthless Queen has a structure that switches between two of the protagonists throughout the novel, Analia and Cayson, omitting the epilogue which is in my third protagonist's perspective to get ready for the second book. This method

of structuring the story varies from texts that I read with multiple perspectives. In *The Sound and the Fury (*Faulkner, 1995) Faulkner splits his novel into sections and changes perspectives for each new section, not returning to that perspective afterwards. They are full acts through one character's perspective, then the following act is from someone else. This allows pieces of the story to be revealed at different times, and the actions and reasoning of the characters becomes better understood as their secrets and personal stories come to light. While it works well within his story, I knew that I needed to have the perspectives running alongside each other, jumping from one to another, to get a good understanding of the characters and how they act and react towards similar pressures and obstacles.

A big part of first-person is the unknowing – your protagonists won't know everything and if they do then the story is going to fall flat. As writers, we know the fabula – the infinite possibilities and endless histories within our fantasy worlds. We know what everyone's intentions are, their goals and passions and who they hate most in the world. If our protagonists know all the answers, there is no story to be told. I find it difficult to hold myself back and leave things unanswered on the page, and it is something that I will undoubtedly be working on for the rest of my career.

I find third-person perspective stories to be a more interesting read than first-person perspective. Due to there being a wider cast of characters in many of my favourite fantasy series, the third-person perspective is often used to jump between locations and groups of interest that are doing noteworthy things at the same time. In a larger ensemble, I feel like first-person perspectives leave a lot of detail out, hence why a larger cast of characters, or even more than one protagonist, will likely be a third-person perspective story. Such books include *The Dark Artifices* trilogy (Clare, 2019), the *Empirium* trilogy (Legrand, 2020) and *A Gathering of Shadows* (Schwab, 2019). These stories have varying numbers of main characters, however,

the seamless switches between characters and point of view keep the momentum and tension high.

Going into this project, I believed that I would be able to manoeuvre around scenes and characters without solely belonging to one person, giving more opportunities for characters to see something or for the reader to see something the character doesn't. First-person still allows that option, of course, but I feel that it puts more of a strain on my ability to subtly sprinkle in detail for foreshadowing and easter eggs later in the series. Not to mention one of my downfalls is not following the good ol' piece of advice 'show, don't tell'.

In a way, the first-person multiple perspectives have indeed haunted my dreams, but in the best way possible. Actively thinking of first-person narrative and the mind-set in which I need to be in to write these multiple perspectives keeps my brain engaged and looking for ways to really hit home with detail. First-person gives me the ability to show the reader just how bad things feel for the protagonists. It allows me to get in the reader's head and expose the truth of my novel in a very direct way. The emotional responses of the characters have a direct link to the emotional response of the reader, and I can make the readers feel a certain way by putting my characters in a particular position, have them witness a harrowing event or hear something that tugs at the heartstrings. This keeps me up at night and makes me want to write until dawn.

First-person narrative also makes me face the content I am writing about head-on. This is one of the things that I was hesitant about at the beginning, especially when it comes to the mental health and psychological trauma aspect of my research and writing. Over the past two years, with lockdowns and important changes happening in my life much like any NA character would face, I have become hyperaware of my mental state. This project – wearing Analia's and Cayson's shoes

while writing their chapters – has made me really have to think about mental health and trauma. It's a challenge everyone must face at some point in their life, sometimes multiple times, but this intimacy with their thoughts and feelings puts me in a position where I must address my own thoughts and feelings.

So, lesson number two – when writing first person, be prepared for your own experiences and emotions to come to the forefront of your mind, especially when working in the dark fantasy sub-genre. It won't always be pretty, but if you are passionate about your writing and you have a story to tell, the end result can be something incredibly cathartic.

Act Three – Addressing Mental Health and Psychological Trauma in a Fantasy Setting

Now we come to the real research of my work. The topics and details that I find myself meticulously scrutinising to make sure I get them as right as possible, even though there is no definite right when it comes to mental health and trauma. The experiences of individuals can be so broad, with people experiencing things differently to others, having different triggers and ticks and coping mechanisms, and overall, their attitudes towards their mental health and trauma. As to not overload myself with the endless accounts there are across time and space, I have decided to pull from my own experiences and expand on them. These experiences, I found, are the most common in my generation and I believe that in exploring these areas of mental health and trauma, I will create characters and stories with a paraphrasable core that can be understood on a global scale.

I will start by explaining my characters and their situations. A warning as the following contains spoilers; Analia, the worthless queen, deals with anxiety and self-confidence issues, together paired with her impending arrival back in her kingdom where she is meant to be a role model, a leader, a queen, there is a lot of pressure on her shoulders. Pressure which she is constantly adding to herself. This anxiety has multiple causes which are hinted at but not explored in depth in this book. One key aspect of her anxiety is that it is closely tied to how she doesn't want to disappoint people. Having set this expectation for herself and not wanting to fail those around her, she continues to worsen her own mental health unknowingly for the sake of being the person others need her to be. The way she treats herself will reach a pivotal point in the following book, but the signs of her worsening mental health have been dotted throughout this book.

Cayson, the neglected heir, is dealing with PTSD resulting from the mental and emotional abuse he received by his since deceased father and brother. His mind-set is a mix of wanting to prove to everyone that he is better than his family and wanting to do what is best for everyone, especially those who have been ostracised and discriminated against like he was. These aspects constantly butt heads with each other, in turn bringing to life the memories of his treatment growing up. He deals with insomnia, brought on by the trauma and nightmares he has, as well as a developing drinking problem. Cayson has a front he puts up in the public eye, one he sometimes even keeps up with those close to him, to further prove the point that he is capable of being a decent king to his people. As a result, he doesn't talk to anyone about his issues, and he lets them continue to build behind the scenes. Again, this will come to a climax in the second book.

I will briefly mention my third protagonist, Princess Elora, who has the epilogue. By the content found in there, it is clear that she will be dealing with

trauma and mental health issues in later books. Hers will be most similar to the usual strong female protagonist you see in YA and NA books, but there will be more layers to her in terms of mental health and trauma which will be explored.

As you can see, my protagonists are dealing with a lot. It is imperative that I make sure their experiences are unique and remain authentic to the character in question. They have similarities, points they can empathise with and understand each other on, but as I mention in *The Worthless Queen,* "The support of those around you will be part of what gets you through it, but the most important thing is believing in yourself."[4] It cannot come down to other people to help them overcome their struggles, it has to come from them in order for it to mean anything of significance.

One way I have researched this aspect of my novel is by reading others which have characters with mental health issues and trauma. My aim was to understand how these characters are written, how they remain consistent in their attitudes towards their trauma and mental health, and how they overcome it to whichever degree. I didn't just look at fantasy books for this, I brought in contemporary books too as mental health and trauma are a contemporary topic and issue in society.

I will start off with my findings in the fantasy genre; fantasy books are riddled with characters with various degrees of trauma. Most of these characters, in my opinion, simply have these aspects of their character for the sake of making them appear more interesting to the reader. What I looked for were characters whose trauma and mental health weren't there just to further plot – it is a piece of these characters, something that has happened generally off page, and continues to linger with them once the story ends because that is how trauma and mental health are in

real life. It doesn't just go away because it isn't useful to the character plot or relationship line.

Ruby Daly of *The Darkest Minds* Trilogy (Bracken, 2014) wakes with the ability to manipulate people's minds and inadvertently changes her parents' memories, making them forget she is their daughter overnight. She is sent to a concentration camp, one of many across the U.S., along with the kids in her area that show signs of having powers. Ruby is sent to the biggest, harshest camp at the age of ten and uses her powers to convince the processing guard that she is a different classification than she is – Green with the powers of photogenic memory as opposed to Orange with the ability to control minds. This day is never forgotten by her and marks the beginning of her decline in mental health and the origins of her trauma.

Ruby is in this camp for five years, being tortured by high frequency noise deterrents and forced to work morning to night to outfit the guards and keep the camp functioning. This sound conditioning is part of her trauma. She is smuggled out of the camp at fifteen and when she inadvertently uses her powers and finds out what those around her are thinking and what they have done she is traumatised further. Ruby's journey of self-discovery is one where she wants help, wants to understand what she can do and what it means, but gets used by those seeking power and control. In the end, even with a cure to these powers in hand, she knows it won't make a difference because of what she has seen and done.

With Ruby constantly suffering with her trauma her mental health slowly declines throughout the trilogy. I don't want to bring my characters to the same extreme as Ruby in terms of the effects this trauma has on their mental health because they are young adults in a different setting to Ruby, but the cause-and-effect element to it is something I want to replicate, especially in Analia's case.

Kaz Brekker is a key character in the *Six of Crows* duology (Bardugo, 2017). He has PTSD and his trauma has a physical element to it as well as the mental and emotional trauma that comes from the incident. Kaz is always written wearing gloves in public, sometimes in private too. This is because when he was younger, he and his brother got infected by a pox that had swept through the city. His brother had died, Kaz was very ill but alive, and they were both piled onto a barge heading for an island off the coast to be thrown into a mass grave. Kaz escaped, pulling himself and his brother's body overboard, and he used his brother's corpse to stay afloat while swimming back to shore. As a result, he has a phobia of being in small spaces with other people and he can't do skin to skin contact with people, especially not with his hands, so he wears gloves.

One scene that encapsulates his trauma is in *Six of Crows* (Bardugo, 2016), where the gang are headed to infiltrate a city for a special job. In order to get in, they must stop a prison wagon carrying prisoners headed for the city and switch themselves with some prisoners. What Kaz didn't plan was for the whole wagon to be packed full of them, meaning he would have to be pressed up against other people. Their plan still works, but Kaz faints because of his anxiety and hyperventilation. He later reveals to another character why it happened. Kaz isn't one to talk about his past to anyone in general, so this interaction serves as a means of opening up and seeking out support.

Kaz's characteristics, personality and attitudes are a good match to my protagonist Cayson's. I aim to create a similar struggle for him, especially with that moment of vulnerability seen by someone else. Cayson's PTSD will never be directly spoken about by himself to anyone, and it will only be when a character witnesses it that it will begin to be addressed.

A key book that I need to bring up is *The Way I Used To Be* (Smith, 2016), a contemporary book detailing the way traumatic events affect a child's behaviours and personality as they grow older. This novel starts off with the event in question, fourteen-year-old Eden is being raped by her brother's friend. Over the next few years of her life the reader sees how this trauma affects her mentally and emotionally.

The book works in parts, marking each school year Eden has to journey through. As the inciting event occurred during her winter break, part one starts halfway through the school year. With each year comes a different approach to hiding the girl she was when it happened. She drops almost all her extra curriculars and changes her appearance as much as possible to become someone completely different from the girl who was raped. Then she gets into smoking and drinking, attempts a relationship with someone but when it comes to sex she freaks out and doesn't know what to do or how to feel at the end of it. Her relationships with her friends, her family, and the boyfriend begin to deteriorate over the next few years. She begins to address her parents and brother by their names, creating a distance between her and them. She makes her friends cry when they argue, even making the younger sister of the boy who raped her cry when Eden tells her she wishes he was dead.

The climax comes with it being revealed that the brother's best friend, who is flatting with the brother in college at this point, has been accused of raping his current girlfriend. Police investigate and Eden's brother freaks out, not believing any of it is true. She relives her trauma again that night, and when the police come over to ask the family questions Eden has a panic attack when the sister is brought up. Someone knowing, or possibly knowing, what happened to her triggers her and she hyperventilates, passing out. Over the next couple of days, she manages to get in touch with her ex, the only person who had an idea that something wasn't right. She

tells him of all the thing she did wrong during their relationship, how she wasn't a decent person to him and goes on to tell him in person that she was raped.

This comes as a big catharsis for her and marks the beginning of her recovery. Through this acknowledgement, she is able to shine a light on her actions that were influenced by this traumatic event. An important thing I took away from this was the subtleties in character development and change. This occurs over three and a half years, so the window for change is larger than in my book which is only a few weeks or so. Nevertheless, this slowly building change is something that I believe is firmly rooted in how we deal with mental health and trauma, especially my generation. We have become so used to it being a piece of our everyday life that the weight of it is regular, the restrictions are something we live with, and the days where it's bad are almost schedular. I have this window mentally highlighted on a calendar - that's how aware of my mental health dives I am.

My point is in addressing the fact that these things build gradually, that we adjust our lives to accommodate the issues until we cannot take it anymore, I aim to shed a light on this aspect of mental health and trauma through my characters. You will not see things changing in the first book of a trilogy. Things take time to realise, time to work through and time to move on from while you continue to live your life. The seeds have been sewn and the issues continue to escalate for my characters and realistically that's all that there can be in this novel. As I have noted above, it gets worse before it gets better and book two will be hell for my characters.

So, lesson number three – mental health and trauma have no solely correct way of being portrayed, but there are definitely wrong ways. By understanding what characters struggle with, you can piece together a realistic path their journeys will take and make justifications as to why and how that is. So long as there is a reason, an experience to write truthfully to and the means of providing meaningful

connections to the readers who may empathise or relate to the characters, we can all learn more about mental health, trauma and overcoming these struggles we face.

Conclusion

Journey of Self Discovery serves as a means of detailing my researching and writing process throughout the construction of my first novel, *The Worthless Queen*. With this document, you can see how I have developed as both a writer and a reader, understanding the vast options there are when it comes to writing and the importance of keeping your feet on the ground with such a momentous task as writing the beginning of a trilogy, not to mention the beginning of my journey as a writer. I have come to realise things about myself that I didn't know or hadn't yet acknowledged both as a writer and as a complex human being making her way into an even more complex world. This process has helped me begin to craft other ideas into plans as well, expanding my writing to cover other genres and topics of interest. I have learnt a lot, feeling like I have finally made the shift between YA and NA myself as I come to terms with the last few tasks left to do before I officially call myself an adult and not an imposter still learning the ropes.

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The Worthless Queen

(A Creative Thesis)

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2021

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The Attack

This is madness.

Shouts and cries ring throughout the street as the crowd scrambles for shelter. People stumble over me in their frenzy, ignoring my yelps and tears from below. My senses continue to overwhelm me. The itching at the back of my neck ceases to end, the air hot and heavy like inhaling steam from a boiling jug. Fire blazes all around, waves of thick black smoke rolling up into the night sky.

This can't be happening.

I don't know what to do. Where do I go? Where is safe? Is Layla okay?

Another explosion rattles the square, sending glass and chunks of stone hurtling into the frenzied crowd. I duck, wrapping my arms around my head and squeezing my eyes shut.

How is this happening? This never happens. Not here. Not ever.

Tears escape from the corners of my eyes, streaming down my nose and cheeks. Screams continue to fill the air. The scuffles of feet across cobblestone sending rubble flying. Another kick to the ribs, a missing apology in the havoc of flames and destruction.

I'm going to die.

Analia

Half an hour earlier

Stepping out into the evening, the air feels too stuffy. I must be dreaming, overthinking after a long shift. Wouldn't be the first time.

Shifts aren't exactly the easiest or the shortest at The Drunken Fish. We clock in at seven, far earlier than our normal patrons have even broken out of their alcohol-induced slumbers. We start serving shortly afterwards, the night crews rolling in for a meal and a pint before they sleep the day away. We continue serving until ten at night when Mr Douglas locks up the liquor cabinet. No one wants to come in if there's no alcohol so he sends Layla and I home.

The tavern door creaks open behind me, the rush of air blowing a few loose strands in my eyes.

"Do you feel that?"

Layla frowns, pulling the corners of her mouth downward as she looks around, down the rowdy main road to glare at any dodgy shadows who let their eyes linger for too long. She throws her arm over my shoulder, her brown, moth-eaten coat scratching the back of my neck.

"Feel what, Ana?"

"The air." I glance up. The inky night sky is dotted with stars - not as much as last night, but enough to remind one of how small they are in the world. There is not a single wispy cloud to block them, so why are there so few?

“What air? There’s not a damn breeze for miles around. Has Mr Douglas been slipping you ale with your dinner again? I swear the next time I see him, he’s losing his other arm.”

“It’s warm, how is it warm when there’s no cloud cover and it’s mid-autumn? Yesterday it was freezing.”

“Maybe it’s one of those warm spells. It’ll pass by morning so why don’t we make the most of it and stop by Amber’s Pies on the way back home?” Layla starts taking big strides towards Port Street, pulling me along with her. The added weight of her arm on my shoulders causes my already shaking legs to quiver more violently but I haven’t the energy to shrug it off. “I could do with a blueberry custard pie.”

“You can always do with a blueberry custard pie, Layla. I don’t know a single Maxwell that can’t.”

“Like you can talk, Analia Grace. When was the last time you turned down Amber’s chocolate caramel tart hmm? Better yet, when was the last time you paid for one yourself instead of using me for my money or cosying up to Harry to get him to cover it?”

“I never cosy up to anyone, least of all Harry. He doesn’t let me pay - and what do you mean using you for money, I’ve paid for your pies for the last month!”

“And you’ve been a wonderful friend for doing so, but can’t you just start hinting at Harry to add it to your own order so you don’t end up wasting your money on pies? I won’t say wasting your money on me because there’s no possible way to do that, but you could be saving for my birthday present or a new coat that you can share with me.”

A laugh slips out. I prod Layla’s ribs, making sure to tickle her a little for her cheekiness. “I’ll work on it, okay?” For now, let’s just get to Amber’s before my legs refuse to work any longer.”

We head up Port Street. Soon the dirt-trodden ground beneath our feet switches to a dusty, uneven cobblestone stretch of road that has definitely seen better days. For late evening, it is still busy. Drunken sailors wobble back to their ships for a night of heavy sleep. Wives wrangle their gambling husbands and sons back home. Women dressed in black crowd the mouths of alleyways, faces half-hidden beneath tricorne hats, thick curtains of hair and spare strips of cloth fashioned into bandanas. A young woman looks over behind her dusty linen mask, eyes crinkling at the corners as she sees us shuffle by. She hurries over, calling out over her shoulder when one of the older women calls her name.

"Hey you two, the end of your shifts already?"

"Sure is Winnie, I swear I've been on my feet since sunrise." Layla stretches her arms up high, rolling her head side to side. I find myself doing a similar thing, rolling out my ankles and wrists and almost unhinging my jaw as a wide yawn breaks through.

Winnie laughs, rubbing my shoulder nearest to her. "Well you two better head off before you start thinking of using a doorframe as a pillow. I can walk with you if you'd like."

"That's okay, Winnie. We're going over to Amber's first."

Winnie pouts. "She just pulled out the apple pies when I rushed by for work. I would give anything to have had an extra two minutes with one of them in my hands."

"We'll make sure she saves you one tomorrow, okay." Layla gives her a light push back towards the others. "You'd better re-join them, Hardy is giving us the glare."

Winnie waves it off. "Oh, she would never, but I should get back. You two still free for lunch tomorrow?"

I grin. “Free as a fantail.”

Winnie laughs, her mask slipping down her face at the movement, and walks backwards towards her while group bidding us goodnight.

“Winnie looks like she’s enjoying herself,” I note, my eyes following two of the figures as they back further into the alleyway and slip out of sight. “Are you still keen to join after your birthday?” I look back and see Layla nodding, a beaming grin lighting up her weary face.

Like all the other streets near the docks and the beating heart of town, Port Street is poorly lit by gas lanterns strung up in front of establishments, hung from wire-thin rope looping from one rooftop to the next. This ineffective lighting and the mixture of senseless men and weak-tasting but effective alcohol led to the Women’s Brigade starting up a few years ago. Headed by Antoinette Hardy, or the Steel Mistress as many called her, the band of women patrol the streets to keep people, especially young girls, safe. The Men’s Brigade do their part too - they handle the most violent cases and shut down any arguments before they boil over. But they tend to be a little indelicate and brainless with stunned, upset young ladies.

We push through the throngs, Layla’s elbow playing an active role in clearing a path to get to Hatters Way. Here only the light of the moon paints the cobblestones a gleaming silver. A few apartment windows glow a faint yellow but all the rooms remain silent. Though the road is deemed dangerous to travel at night, we take it in stride, continuing to talk amongst ourselves loudly. Layla even cackles into the warm evening air a few times as she recounts her experiences with our usual patrons. At the mouth of the alley, a looming dark figure blocks the way, his heavy steps echoing against the walls.

“Who’s that?” he asks, ambling closer into view. His ginger hair catches the moonlight, as does his beard, giving him away. “Ah, if it isn’t my favourite barmaids, Miss Analia and Miss Layla!”

“Good evening, Mr Hamm.” I bow towards him. “I hope your dinner was up to standard.”

“As always, Miss Analia, but you know there is only one person here who does a fruit tart worth buying for dessert.”

Layla chuckles. “Oh we know, we’re headed there now.”

Mr Hamm grins, flattening himself against the wall the clear the way. “Well, you’d better hurry. Looked like there are only a few of those blueberry custard pies of yours left, Miss Layla.”

Layla gasps, clutching my arm with a dry palms before darting off, calling out thanks over her shoulder.

It isn’t a fun job – being a barmaid. That’s what we are called, but we do so much more than that without the added money. Fifteen hours a day, serving food and alcohol while we also clean the place up. There is little time to rest, even in the middle of the day. Everything has to be in pristine condition for happy hour and evening guests. Clean glasses. Clean dishes. Clean tables. Clean chamber pots. It’s no wonder our hands are as dry and rough as they are given how many times we’re washing our hands each hour.

“Now that we’ve been outside for a bit, I do think it is quite warm,” Layla glances at my face, eyes locking onto the sweat beading at my hairline. “You okay?”

“I’m fine, it’s just the jogging.” I throw my heavy limbs forward to the mouth of the narrow road, sighing once we cross onto King’s Court.

I had felt the air get hotter back when they entered Hatters Way, not dramatically so but enough for the wisps of hair at the nape of my neck to stick to my

skin, as with the beads of sweat on my forehead. Sweat continues to form on my brow, slowly falling down into my collar as Layla yawns.

"I hope Jerimiah isn't throwing a fit when I get home. The boy doesn't sleep, I swear; all night, every night, he's crying and screaming and Mama can't get him to shut up."

"Be nice to him, he's growing his teeth in and he's in pain."

"He's a pain, that's what he is. Dahlia wasn't a crier - neither was I - and Freddie knew to only cry during the day. This boy has no regard for others around him."

"He has no understanding of things to do with other family members, he's a baby. Leave him be and give him time to get used to it - he'll be back to his bubbly, smiley self in no time."

A smile grows on Layla's face, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "He is a cute baby when he smiles and giggles."

I flash a similar grin, "A Maxwell trait, if I recall correctly." We continue up King's Court towards Amber's Pies.

We continue our slight jog uphill, Layla's hand never leaving my arm, until the paint-peeling, flaming orange signboard of Amber's Delicious Pies enters our sights and we both release a sigh of relief.

A stench hits my nose, forcing my back to stiffen and shoulders to lock up. It clings in my nostrils, a thick scent of something burning, acrid and vile. The hairs on my arms stand upright, the scent coating my mouth in a tang like that of spoiled milk. My eyes water as the heat in the air becomes so unbearable that they itch.

Then it hits.

In the black of night, the inferno sparks up out of nowhere, unleashing havoc onto the night. In the blink of an eye, Amber's is ablaze in an alien fire, the flame's

edges tinged black. Or maybe that is from the shadows that fly down after them. Things are burning, screams and cries sounding off all over the place, and the shadows whip out from alleys and from the black sky.

"What the fuck is going on?" Layla cries out, clawing at my shoulder, pulling me so close her hipbone digs into my side. I open my mouth, trying to form a response, but all that escapes is a scream as fire barrels towards us. Layla shoves us down, circling her arms over my hunched form. Glass explodes behind us, shards skittering across broken paving stones, assisted by frantic, semi-conscious people running for safety. Where exactly I don't know.

Layla jumps to her feet, her attention snatched by the commotion several blocks east. The residential district. "Analia we need to go. We need to find everyone and get out of here."

"Layla —"

A bloodcurdling scream rips through the air, cut off by an ear popping explosion. Over the top of caved-in rooftops, a dark cloud of smoke surges into the sky and the bright orange inferno stretches towards the stars, its base engulfing Upper Port Street. In the glow of the flames, dark figures dance over broken wooden supports and cracked tiles, heading straight for the residential district.

Layla tugs me up onto my feet, her hand tightly grasping mine, and we run from the carnage around us. Further downhill, the crowd bulges and makes a sudden surge right, tearing Layla and I apart. She screams my name, but I'm carried away from her, slowly sinking beneath the waves of people. Shoeless feet and wire thin legs streaked with ruby blood rush by. I let out a whimper, followed shortly by a pained grunt as a foot sends my skull into the road.

Screams and explosions ring in my ears with the rapid beating of my heart punctuating each second. Black and orange and yellow smudges of colour paint the

carnage around me as tears fall down my face. The smoke threatens to coat my nostrils with a sickening tar-like stench odorous enough to force up dinner. The heat continues to build, irritating my skin. Sweat mixes with blood and dirt and invades the cuts all over my bare legs and arms. My lungs fight for air, the tightness in my chest getting more and more uncomfortable. I am alone. I need to get out of here.

I stagger to a standing position and let the throng carry me down to Red Roof Junction.

The junction connects King's Court to Havelock Ave, the main route linking the shopping district to the residential district. Its name rings true as the roofs are engulfed in the red flames. The thick smoke accompanies them, leeching all other colours from the area. Scorched wooden stalls litter the streets, the once lush green grass now singed black. The fountain in the centre has bodies hanging over the basin's rim, some floating in the murky water. A body not two feet tall drifts face down, his short blond hair failing to hide the burn marks marring his head

I vomit, choking on the smoke filling my lungs. It goes down my front, soiling my shoes further. Tears continue to stream down my face. I wipe my mouth, sobbing into my sleeve, and I glance around at the hundreds of people around me aimlessly running for their lives. Nothing in hand, barely the clothes on their backs, heading for an exit from this hell that's nowhere in sight.

I grit my teeth, adrenaline taking over. I fight through the crowd continuing to head downhill, launching into a lopsided run towards where I know Layla has gone.

The closer to the residential district I get, the more chaos there is. Shadow-like figures sweep down from the depthless skies, throwing people across the street like ragdolls while others latch their smouldering skeletal talons round heads, shoulders, some even dig in into people's flesh to get a grip on their prey before flying off in all directions. A body falls from above mere inches from where I stand. I choke on my

breath, a scream trapped in my throat. I extend my shaking hands towards the barely alive form of Mr Hamm.

His head has been clawed into. Blood, flowing and deep red, pools from his open wound beneath his skull. The slight view of a congealed, squishy mess inside the hole is enough to make me vomit once more. I spare my shoes this time, twisting to collapse against the scorched remains of the tailor's. My eyes sting so much I can't see. I have no clean material on me to wipe my mouth, having to use the sweat-stained inside of my dress collar. I glance further down the road, seeing more bodies and sobbing people lying in the streets.

"Layla!" Tears spilling down my face as fear and horror fight to the forefront of my brain. She could be dead. My best friend dead. It's a thought that settles like ice throughout my whole body, cementing me in place. My eyes lock onto the butcher's form once more. "Layla! Where are you?"

A hand clamps onto my shoulder, the suddenness of it dislodging that scream from my raw throat. I whip my head around, vision blurry from the tears and the putrid black smoke hanging in the air. A silver-white smudge fills my vision. A man speaks. He isn't an old man, instead his voice is loud, smooth and carrying a mix of irritation and urgency that can't comprehend.

"Who are you?" I sniffle, blinking furiously to clear my sight.

"Wow. We've known each other for seventy years and this is how you treat your brother-in-law?"

Analia

“Brother-in-law?” I splutter, “I don’t have a brother-in-law. Or a husband.”

“Look, I don’t have the time to explain it to you. We need to leave. You need to come with us.” The pale young man extends his free hand, palm up to beckon me to follow his commands. I swat it away, spinning out of his strong grip to heave my body backwards. Does this man seriously think that I’ll just drop everything and go with him? Even without the end of the world going on around us, does he really think I’m that stupid? I turn away from him, glancing over the slouched figures in the street, eyes darting around for Layla’s curly black hair.

Swears and rushed footsteps follow and I make it three doors down before that hand latches onto my shoulder again, this time gripping the itchy material of my work dress to keep me from slipping away again.

“Wherever it is you’re going, you need to forget about it and come with us. You are in danger, okay Analia? I need to get you out of this hellhole and onto the ship now.”

“Let me go!” I do everything I can, punching and scratching and whacking him in the chest with the heel of my palm. “I don’t know you! My friend and our families are in trouble, they could be injured, dying, or worse, already dead! Let go of me and leave me alone!”

“Let her go, Kian. Your narrow-mindedness isn’t helping anyone.” A gruff voice fills the air, tearing my attention from the boy to find a man far older than his grumbling counterpart. The man grabs the hand still clutching at my dress and slaps

it, loosening the hold and allowing me to take a step back, creating distance between these strange men and me. “You have a friend here with you? What’s her name?”

“Layla. Her name is Layla. We were in the shopping district when they-it-whatever those things are arrived.” I spin to point towards the burning rooftops in the near distance. “We saw it start attacking the residential district, over there where all the houses are. Everyone would have been home. She started running and I lost her. I can’t lose her. She’s my best friend-” My words lose their structure, blending into a wet mixture of tears, choking sobs and syllables. My chest aches. The older man nods, taking a slow shuffle forwards.

“Let’s go find her, then we can get you to safety.”

I sniffle, nodding before leading them in an unstable jog towards the Maxwell household. The young man keeps whispering to his friend; “…illogical…more important…dead already…Ryu…” Heavy heart beats drum in my ears, cutting off most of the whining, but it takes everything I have left to not turn around and give him a piece of my mind. My legs burn and ache, adrenaline long gone and the final dregs of fuel not yet vomited up barely keeping me from face-planting.

Everybody I pass, alive or dead, I scan to see if they are recognisable; the two Women’s Brigade members who slunk into the alleyway lie in a crumpled mess of debris, blood soaking through their bandanas. Buildings are hardly standing, walls and roofs collapsed in. Fires scorch all the flammable materials littered across the street. The crowds escaping downhill here are far more scathed than those earlier. Burn victims at every glance. Children wearing nothing but rags their mothers must have dumped in water to prevent them from catching fire. The wailing and screams are not that of terror, instead that of extreme agony. I turn uphill, wiggling through the miniscule gaps between the houses until I reach the right path.

There isn't much activity here. Bodies lie along the side of the path, half-emerged from their ruined houses. At the very edge of sight, hidden in the shadows of the former Maxwell household, a head of curly black hair comes into view. I thrust myself forward, arms so far extended they look like they are popping out of their sockets.

"Layla!"

It is Layla – it has to be – with her tattered brown coat clinging to her frame. She has changed so much in the short time we've been apart. Layla, the strong one with an iron-straight back, sharp glare and fists ready to fly, holds a small bundle in her quivering arms. She hunches over this bundle, rocking back and forth slightly while leaning in close to whisper into it.

"He's stopped crying." Layla's voice falls flat, words clipped at the end as her voice breaks. "He never stops crying."

"Layla, I'm so sorry." Analia chokes out, sinking to my knees next to her, my forehead against her shoulder.

"We've found your friend. Now we need to leave."

Layla sends a scowl at the young man, her brown eyes reflecting the flames around us and hitting him with a piercing glare so powerful he shuts up.

"Miss Layla, Miss Analia, he's right," the older man amends. "It is not safe for you here. The Darkness will destroy this land and everyone along with it. We must get you two to safety and bring you home."

"But this is our home!" I cry, bleary eyes catching his. "These are our people."

"You were sent here to protect your people, this is not where you belong." He extends both hands out towards Layla, bending to rest on his knees beside us. "Miss Layla, I am very sorry for your loss. I know it is very difficult for you right now, but

you need to come with us. If I could do something for your brother I would, but the Magic has taken him in. He is at peace."

Layla lets out a sob, one I feel claw at my heart and strike me in the gut. With great reluctance, Layla hands Jerimiah to the man who takes him carefully into his arms, whispering what sounds like a blessing to him and kissing his forehead. He heads around the corner out of sight. The young man huffs, hands on his hips with one leather-shoed foot tapping erratically against the dust-ridden cobblestone.

I look over Layla once more. Her coat ends are singed, now ending at her left thigh and right knee. Her feet are shoeless, bloody and dusty. Hands shaking just like mine. Her face, physically unscathed, carries wounds in the hollowness of her eyes.

Layla wraps her arms around me, holding me close. "I shouldn't have run off without you. I am so sorry, Ana. I wasn't thinking. I couldn't see you when I turned back but I had to keep going."

"I'm okay. We're okay."

"Who are these guys? Where did they come from?"

"I don't know. They found me on Havelock."

"Do you trust them?"

"I don't know."

"Have they said where they're going to take us?"

"A ship. They have a ship."

"Well, it is better than nothing." Layla stands, urging me to my feet.

"We'll go with you," I swallow, forcing the cough building in my parched throat to remain at bay. "But we want a full explanation of everything when we are safe."

"Oh don't worry, Your Majesty," he smirks. "It would be my absolute pleasure to see your face when you hear it." He grabs me by the forearm, heading back

towards the main road down to the docks. “The longer we’re here, the higher the chances they will find us. Do not stop for anyone. Do not try to help anyone. Do not, for the love of everything good in the worlds, try to escape us. If I have to double back to find one of you, you will have hell to pay - I’ve already put myself in more trouble finding you than I planned to.”

The older man returns empty handed, a light touch against Layla’s shoulder cementing the final brick in her facade. We move together, us girls huddling together and the men forming a thin protective barrier in front and behind us. We rush through burning rubble and thick smoke, choking on the heavy stench lingering in the hot, stale air. Several times the young man forces my head down or shoves me sideways a second before an explosion or fireball hits. His instincts are far sharper than mine and Layla’s, but I can’t imagine why. The older man is a lot gentler as he herds us away from falling debris, streaks of hellish fire and the occasional smoky black figure emerging from the ruins of our hometown.

We arrive at a junction, one so desolate it takes a long while to work out where we are. Hundreds of people are still out on the streets, though now it's less about trying to get away from Te Tai Tapu - these people are broken, bleeding and begging for help. Some have given up trying to get to the docks while others scramble over bodies and hunched figures trying to grasp the chance of survival. All the buildings in sight are nothing more than smouldering frames, a light breeze short of collapsing.

“Get down!”

A column of smoke flies above the road, wispy strands splitting off to pummel through the few buildings on their last legs or to streak down and terrorise those unable to flee. In the havoc, Layla and I split from each other to avoid a hit from the oncoming figure. My body is yanked towards someone, their arms wrap around my

upper back and head, pulling me in so close against their chest every shallow inhale through my nose brings with it the scents of sea salt and leather.

"Stick to the alleys and shortcuts, the main roads are too crowded." The young man releases his hold, taking me by the arm once more and leading us into a narrow alley littered with debris.

"Where are you going to take us?" I trip over my feet trying to keep up with him. He doesn't respond, instead tugs on my arm and takes a sharp turn down a different alley. "Hello? Can you at least answer me if you're going to tow me around?"

"No."

I keep my head down, gritting my teeth and clenching my fists. One of the main roads comes into view, but before we make it out of the alley I trip for yet another time. At least this stranger has the decency to catch me before I hit the ground.

Grumbling under his breath, he weaves us through the backroads of town like a native, sparing a quick glance down multiple routes before choosing one where there is no one to run into. The messes we pass are by no means little – broken tiles and support beams form giant obstacles to climb over, constantly shifting under our weight. Aside from these sections, I don't trip up over any more rubble. Somehow, it has all been brushed to the edges of the path.

There is more noise now. People crying and talking amongst themselves. The occasional cry of a baby. It's quiet enough that the sound of the sea rolling up against the shore catches my attention. We have managed to get through most of the streets uninterrupted by people or the smoke but now that we have reached the bottom of town where everyone who had fled from the upper sections is hiding out. It takes a lot of patience and manoeuvring to leave the tight side-streets. We emerge on Lower Port Street adjacent to The Drunken Fish. A few steps out in the open the young man

releases a shout. Whether it is one of pain or shock I can't tell, but he flies backwards into the front window of the battered butcher's shop. More shouts and screams erupt. Darting around, I see a plume of smoke floating a foot above the ground a few metres ahead. It approaches, joined by others falling into rank behind it, nearing in eerily silence. One last glance towards the butcher's shop reveals no movement. My hands grow clammy and visibly shake.

A warmth develops inside my rib cage. It's a familiar warmth, a comforting one, like a hot chocolate after a brisk walk home. The sensation dances around my heart, radiating throughout my chest, and drifts up towards my collarbone. My body is enveloped in a blanket of calm. A feeling enters my head, something other than my consciousness sharing the same space. It feels strange, yet there's something that tries to fight its way to the surface of my memory. The calm settles my frazzled nerves, but keeps me frozen in place.

My hands and mind are no longer my own.

I feel my arms rise, palms out towards the shadowy figures. Fingers spread out like the thin silk threads of a spider's web. The new feeling in my head urges me to do something and I listen. A strong gust of wind leaves my hands, targeting the central figure, and the force knocks me back a few steps. The connection breaks, focus gone. My hands now limp by my side. I stare up at the space before me and meet nothing but the ruins of Te Tai Tapu and what's left of its hopeless people.

A firm hand grabs hold of my arm, my nerves too highly strung to hide the instinctual jump my body makes. The young man, his clothes singed and white silver hair now a dusty mess atop his head, looks at me with his lips pinched together and his head cocked to the side. He leads us over to the docks, no need for slipping around people as they part way for us as we near. All eyes are on me – on my hands. I

keep my head down, trying not to see the looks of judgement and hostility on their faces.

The man flicks his free hand, tossing up a surge of dust into the air. The crowd gasps, some throwing insults and calling out names. Demons. Freaks. Aliens. The man keeps moving, giving another flick of his wrist. A ship materialises out of thin air, just identifiable through the dust. Its silhouette is large against the black waters and midnight blue sky. As we approach the gangplank, half a dozen people come into sight. The whole ship is a pale colour I can't quite pinpoint. It takes a long while to see Layla, the older man by her side, and the white-silver haired man waiting by the gangplank. I hadn't even noticed he had let go of my arm.

I can't tell who speaks or moves as my body collapses. Before hitting the wood, two pairs of hands grab at me and blurry faces are soon engulfed in darkness before as everything shuts down.

Analia

Waking isn't a peaceful experience. Ideally, I'd feel sunlight kiss my face good morning, a light breeze drifting over my skin, and perhaps birds chirping from the drooping willow tree behind the apartment. The smell of freshly baked bread from down the road wafting through the air coaxing me out of bed. Soft murmuring from the streets as others begin their busy day. I would feel revitalised - ready for the hours of work ahead.

But those mornings no longer exist

This morning, the room lurches to the right. The motion is strong enough that I almost fall out of the tiny bed someone has put me in. Exhaustion hits, a bone-deep exhaustion simultaneously lulling me back to sleep and igniting a radiating ache all through my body which shuts down any hopes of catching more shut eye. Finally, and most startling of all, the events of last night resurface. My heart sets off like a dog on the hunt, pulse loud and heavy in my ears. Shallow, quick breaths fill the salty air. The room closes in on me, wooden walls shrinking down and threatening to trap me inside. I can't fight off the bed sheets cocooning my body fast enough.

The boat throws me across the small room, sending me flying into the wall near the door. A muffled voice speaks from the other side, perhaps calling out my name, but I can't hear over my heavy heartbeat and the conscious effort to talk myself out of vomiting all over the floor. The door opens in one swift motion and through my narrowed vision I recognises the older man.

"Let's get you on deck before Layla's hard work goes to waste." Leading my shaking frame by the shoulders, he guides me to the stairs, coaxing me up the steps

one at a time, over to another flight of steps, setting me down and leaning over me with one hand on my shoulder to keep me in place.

"Head up, back straight, take in a deep breath, okay?" He mirrors me, ensuring I'm following his lead, and breathes with me. It calms me a bit until the ship slams into another wave, my breath catching in my throat.

"Kian, what did I tell you about not fighting the waves? All you're doing is making Miss Analia sick."

"She can suck it up. We'll be off course if I heed your warnings and then we'll be spending the night trying to find the right spot again. Besides, I am the captain - my ship, my rules, my way." His voice booms down from the platform above us, carrying across the whole ship by the sounds of it. "Just make sure that if she turns green you hang her over the side, alright? I'm not dealing with that mess."

The older man rolls his eyes, sighing as he stares off towards the ship's wheel. I raise a shaking hand to his, tapping so gingerly he doesn't notice it until I drops it on his.

"Tell me something - anything, I need to distract myself." I gasp, tilting back to stop from curling inwards. "What's your name?"

"My name is William Tress, I'm a member of the Kingdom of Air's Royal Council. I serve as an advisor to the king and to you."

I blank, jaw dropping like a sack of bricks in the hands of a bank teller.

"The Kingdom— an advisor? To a king? And to me? I -" I shake my head. "What do I have to do with anything? And what is, or where is, this Kingdom? Is that where we are going?"

"Yes, I am an advisor. We are heading somewhere else first, but we will be returning home shortly after that. As for what you have to do with any of that - well,

you have everything to do with it." William extends his free hand out and helps me walk along the deck towards an area free of crew and equipment.

I look over to the back of the ship where the young man stands behind the ship's wheel; his hair looks pale yellow in the fading sunlight but it is still as much of a mess as last time.

"Mr Tress, who is he?"

"He is many things, Miss Analia. First and foremost, he's a pain in my backside on the best of days and a hurricane on the worst." William chuckles. "As he's said, he's the captain of this vessel - a beautiful vessel at that too. Named by the princess of our Kingdom, he has been sailing the Petal Princess for a good many years, well more than you would expect given how long you've been away from us and all that."

"The princess? He knows the Air Kingdom's princess?"

"Well, of course. He is her brother. I would be surprised if he didn't know Miss Effie."

I gawk, making many unintelligible noises as I glare at the prince. "Is the rest of the royal family like him?"

"No, I'm thankful to say Prince Kian is one of a kind. He is the most unruly -"

I jolt, back straight and tense as everything ties together. "Hold on, he kept calling himself my brother-in-law back home. That means -"

"Has Her Royal Majesty put everything together yet or do I have to spell it out for her?"

I jump, hand shooting to my chest to calm my racing heart. Kian's presence was unknown to me and it takes every part of my patience to not swat his shoulder, or better, smack him over the head.

"Stop calling me that."

Kian scoffs. “It’s your title, isn’t it? You’re the Queen of the Kingdom of Air, married to my brother, King Ryu. We are siblings in law - isn’t that fun?”

“No. No. No.” I step backwards, shuffling towards the front of the ship. “You’re lying, this is all just a joke - a big, dramatic, silly joke.”

“Bet.”

Instantly, I’m off my feet. I’m shooting up into the sky. Ten metres. Twenty metres. Fifty. My head feels like it’s in a wind tunnel, the noise so loud and directly ringing my eardrums. Am I screaming? Is that what that noise is? Then I start falling rapidly head first towards the ocean. The screaming gets louder. I halt, my hair brushing the surface of the waves. Slowly, I’m brought back on deck, my knees immediately buckling. Tears stream down my face, blurring my vision, but the smug sneer on his face is impossible to miss. “I’m not some rag doll you can drag around and throw about whenever you want! Never do that again!”

“I admit it is strange to see you being the damsel in distress - the you I know would never let another man so much as breathe wrong in her direction, and here you are crying and snivelling like a child.”

“I don’t know you! I don’t know who you are, who any of you are talking about or what you’re talking about, and I am certainly *not* married to a king!”

I find myself an inch away from the sea very quickly after that. I barely have time to register I’m moving – not moving, being forced to move – when I fly overboard, arms locked to my sides, unable to so much as twitch. Like a blubbering dolphin. Tears leak from my eyes, big ugly tears of hysterical fear, and pleas come out as indecipherable choked sobs.

“Mr Tress, have you seen Analia? She wasn’t in the room when I went to check, I-” Layla’s voice cuts off, the calm before the storm as she works out what is

happening. It isn't difficult to tell given the sobbing and screeching and Kian's carefree tone as he asks if she's looked overboard.

Layla sounds closer the next time she speaks, "Oh my God, Ana are you okay? You idiot, bring her back on board! Can't you do anything normally? Mr Tress, please help her."

"Kian, why don't you go rest, you haven't gotten a second of rest since we got back on the ship. I'll tell them all they need to know and tomorrow we can all be on the same page."

Kian sighs, drawing out his blatant toying around by moving me side to side, setting off another round of crying which Layla tries to appease. Finally, I'm brought back on board and dumped unceremoniously by their feet.

"If I hear one more word from you regarding you not believing in our kingdom, I will launch you into the sea without hesitation. Is that understood?"

"Surely, seeing as I'm supposedly the queen and you are a prince, I could have you court-martialled or imprisoned for what you just did."

Kian lets out a bark of laughter, a smile spreading wide across his face. "Like you're going to do that, I doubt you could even push me from where I stand."

"Kian." William sighs, running a hand over his face. "Please, stop tormenting Miss Analia and go get some rest."

Kian relents, slapping William's shoulder as he trots off. I watch as he climbs the flight of stairs I sat on earlier, stepping onto the deck beneath the ship's wheel and slipping into the room behind a peach coloured door.

"Now, Miss Analia, there is a lot to catch you up on and many questions you will want to ask, so I suggest we talk in my quarters. You're more than welcome to join, Miss Layla - in fact, it would be best that you do."

“Of course, Mr Tress.” Layla nods, looping her arms around my waist and heaving me up off the deck. I clutch Layla in kind, struggling to hide the immense shaking and tears continuing to fall down my no doubt blotchy red cheeks.

William leads us towards the stairs, heading behind it into a secluded corridor leading to two sets of doors. He reaches out for the one on the right, the room closest to the deck, and swings it open. “After you, Miss Analia and Miss Layla.”

“Y’know, Miss Layla is an awful mouthful, not to mention it makes me feel twenty times older than I am, so maybe we can just cut it down to Layla.”

“I will try my best, Miss Layla, but as you are someone close to my queen, similar to that of a lady-in-waiting, I must address you as a noblewoman chosen to assist her.”

Layla scoffs, nudging me slightly, “You hear that Ana, I’m like your gossiping girl. Not too far off from what I do.”

“You are far more than that, Layla.” I sigh, rubbing my face and clearing my throat. “I’d like to understand everything, from the very beginning to last night, and I don’t want anything to be withheld from me. I need to know what it is I’m supposed to be.”

“I understand, Miss Analia.” William motions towards his neatly made bed. “You two may want to sit down, it will be a lot to take in from a non-magic perspective.”

Layla keeps an arm around my waist as we stare across at William who takes a seat at his desk chair on the opposite side of the room.

“I won’t go too far back today, Miss Analia, as your story is long enough to warrant the whole night spent talking about you. I will keep things brief; you were born to a nobleman and his wife, the youngest of three children, seventy-eight years ago. As we are beings with magic bestowed upon us at birth, we age differently to that

of non-magic people. I will suspect you two are roughly the same age comparing the timelines and life expectancies of Air citizens and humans. You went to school with Princess Effie, the younger sister of King Ryu and Prince Kian, and you studied very hard. You became the Head of the King's Royal Guard upon your graduation from the academy, serving as an advisor and leading King Ryu's personal security detail. Sometime after serving King Ryu, you two got engaged and married - this, of course, made you the Queen of the Kingdom of Air. A very strong, experienced, and logical queen, if I may add.

"You kept your position as Head of the Royal Guard, even after King Ryu begged you to step down and let someone else take the role. You see, there is a prophecy - the kind of prophecy many find foreboding and scary and will do anything to prevent from happening. You, along with two other people, are the key to helping us defeat the Darkness."

"The Darkness? Is that what you've named those things that attacked the town?" Layla asks, eyebrows scrunched together as she looks down at the floor.

"Yes, and your town wasn't the first, nor will it be the last. Miss Analia, this prophecy isn't a recent thing - this prophecy is centuries old, spoken by the last prophetess of a great line of firereaders. When it was discovered you were one of the three children of the prophecy, we didn't know what to do. You were the only one who had been labelled. We had suspicions regarding the other two, but many of us didn't believe you were her. The prophecy talks of a 'Worthless Queen', something we could strongly attest you were not. We don't even know who could possibly see you in such a way. Please remember Miss Analia, tens of thousands love and respect you and would gladly support your rule alongside King Ryu."

"Okay," I shudder, wringing my hands. "So this prophecy did what exactly? How did I end up in Te Tai Tapu?"

“When we discovered your place in the prophecy, you were the first. We had no clue as to who the following children were and this was twenty years ago; the Darkness had only just started making itself known, attacking vessels and pillaging remote villages across all the kingdoms. There was a secret council including myself, King Ryu, Prince Kian, Lord and Lady Belmont - the former King and Queen, and you. As the Darkness had yet to attack any of the kingdoms directly, we discussed our options. The question as to whether or not to get you in hiding was our main concern. We didn’t want you to be at risk should they get any wiser and start targeting you. Unfortunately for King Ryu, many of us are tacticians, and we are able to eliminate the emotional side of the issue to focus on things practically. His vote to keep you in the kingdom was outnumbered two-to-four. Instead, we agreed to do what most of us thought was best. We conducted a ceremony, one which we only perform on those who have committed such horrid acts of treason that this form of punishment is the only answer.

“We had two councilmen who specialise in understanding Magic - its origins, how magic is knitted into our blood and body, and how to extract it accordingly - conduct the ceremony which would strip away your magic. In doing so, we believed that it would hide you from the Darkness; they’d only been targeting locations in the magical realm, so by removing your magic and taking you into the human realm we hoped you would be safe.”

“Let me get this straight. Analia is a queen of a magical kingdom, has magic - no, had magic - which did something, you haven’t mentioned what that business is yet, and twenty years ago you took her magic from her and shipped her off to my town in a different realm to protect her?” Layla lets out a low whistle, looking down at me tucked into her side. “And you agreed? You agreed to do something which

sounds like the equivalent of banishing yourself from your own kingdom, yet the you I know can barely say no to someone giving them free desserts."

I shake my head. "That can't be right. There's no way I would have agreed to this."

William gives her a sad smile. "Miss Analia, you were the one who insisted, even after both King Ryu and Prince Kian pleaded with you not to."

"You mean there was a time Kian wasn't an ass to Ana?" Layla laughs. "I don't believe it."

"There was a time Prince Kian and Miss Analia were quite close friends, but I believe the ceremony put an end to that." William levels me with a look, one so full of guilt and pity I have to look away immediately. "There's one more thing, Miss Analia. Perhaps it will make things a lot easier to understand."

"Go on," I mumble.

"After the ceremony, there was one more thing we had to do. You see, you are a very brave person. You fought hard to protect your friends and family, you staying on as King Ryu's Head Guard even after marrying him is a testament to that. In case things got a lot worse in the magic realm, we also agreed to take away your memories. In doing so, you wouldn't suddenly have a change of heart and come back after hearing of an attack close to home. We took all your memories away - all the people you knew, all your studies of magic and the kingdom, all your skills and habits you'd learnt as a Royal Guard - so that you would be as unassuming as possible in the human realm. I brought you to Te Tai Tapu and gave you to an old couple, told them that you were unwell and needed care while your father was out at sea."

"They said he had died after a few years." I whisper. "Mrs Cotton always told me the story of how I came to them, I think she was describing you when she would mention my father."

“Mr Tress, if Lia doesn’t have any magic, then what happened last night? How did she do whatever it was she did to the Darkness?”

William leans back against the wall, nodding as his brows scrunch together, lips pursing shut. “Kian and I were wondering the same thing. There is one thing we can think of that might be the reason, but we won’t get into that now. It’s been a long day, I will leave it at that for now.”

I nod and Layla hoists us up, heading for the door. I pause next to William, face pinched and eyes darting across the floor. “When I get everything to line up in my head and I think of some questions, can I come back and ask them?”

“Of course, Miss Analia. If you would like, I can start to teach you about our history and the nature of magic? It won't be until everyone has had a good night’s sleep and we are fed, but I can start to arrange it to coincide with Prince Kian’s plans.”

“He has plans?”

“He wants to start training you, nothing to do with magic just yet, but he wants you to be able to fight and protect yourself in case there is another attack before we can give you your magic and memories back.”

“Right.” I nod, eyes wide. Layla pulls me towards the door once more.

“Not until you’ve lost that hundred yard stare though, buttercup. Let’s get you back to bed.”

Layla half-carries me from the cabin and down the stairs. Without everything swaying beneath our feet, it doesn’t feel as claustrophobic as before. I look the space over; there are two portholes bringing in light from the afternoon sun, not large but big enough to look through with both eyes. The bed pushed up against the wall doesn’t fit, nor should it be there. At least, it shouldn’t be there with all the blankets and soft fabrics to cushion it. It’s the only piece of luxury in the room, if you could

call it that. The rest of the space contains crates and bins of medical equipment. Bandages rolled up into ready-to-go rounds, stuffed so tightly into a box pulling out one bandage would bring all of them flying out. Several boxes containing jars and vials, no doubt medicine or solutions of some kind, balance precariously over a set of sharp objects. A suture kit perhaps? Beneath the blankets a flash of silver metal – an operating table.

"This is the medic bay."

"Correct." Layla huffs, kicking a stray crate of miscellaneous equipment aside to flop down on the bed. "Our room is the medic bay."

"You're staying here to? Thank Christ, I never want to be alone on this boat."

"It's not like there are many other options. Most of the crew sleep in hammocks below decks, some even take to sleeping outside up in the rigging."

"But that's so dangerous, shouldn't there be some sort of safety net or something in case they fall out?"

"Ana, we're talking about people from the Kingdom of Air. I think their power is to stop themselves from falling out of hammocks."

A half-laugh leaves my mouth, falling flat as I squish in next to Layla on the bed. It's barely a single bed, but when have we ever seen a double bed before in our lives? We've spent so many years hip-to-hip that sharing a bed and a small medic bay on a ship doesn't faze us. At least I hope that's what Layla is thinking too.

"This all has to be some sort of wretched dream. A nightmare of the worst kind."

"I would agree with you if it weren't for the fact that I haven't slept since two nights ago." Layla leans back against the wall, staring at a spot on the white wood. "I keep pinching myself, trying to wake myself up, but nothing seems to work."

"Maybe we have to pinch each other."

Layla smiles, shaking her head. “It won’t work, Ana. We are awake.”

My shoulders sag, chest heavy and sore. “What do you think I will have to do?”

“Training won’t be that bad, though Prince Douchebag might just be more of a prick for the sake of annoying you.”

“I mean with being whoever I am. You know me, I can’t stand confrontation and taking the lead with things. How am I meant to be a queen when I don’t even know what this magic stuff is?”

“We’ll learn, we can get you trained up and teach you the important things until you can get your magic and memories back. I won’t let you take this on alone – you’ve got to deal with me for life.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way.” I struggle to pull my lips up for a smile, the weight of my body and the fatigue pressing down lulling me into a dark embrace. “I’m sorry if I wake you with my crying.”

“I’m sorry too.”

Analia

A loud rattling at the door stirs us from a lacklustre sleep. Groans and popping joints echo off the walls as I climb out of the bed, swiping unruly knotty hair out of my eyes.

"What time is it?" Layla yawns, stretching her arms high above her head.

"I don't know," I glance out the porthole, "but it's sunny outside." I turn back to the door and pull it open.

Two men loom in the doorway, their faces gruff and harsh while their size alone makes me step back. I hear Layla get up and stand next to me, placing her hand on my back before she addresses the men.

"What do you two want? It isn't polite nor wise to knock upon our door and waste our time."

"Captain wants her up on deck," one grunts, throwing his head in my direction. "fighting practice."

"So Captain says, but I reckon it's so he can send her overboard again." The other mutters, a cigar resting between his lips. One lip is recently split, the cut pink and barely healed. I hope it hurts more after talking ill of me.

"C'mon," Layla shoulders the men apart, pulling me along with her. One of them breathes over us as we pass through, forcing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand at attention.

Unfortunately, they aren't the only new company we have watching us.

On deck, a couple of people stand with their arms slightly in front of them. One is focused on the sails, hands extended towards them, while another stands at the wheel. A woman stands next to Prince Kian. She has on a pair of pants as pale as

eggshells, her cream blouse fluttering in the light breeze much like her silver hair. Her pale skin isn't as pale as the Prince's, nor as pale as mine. Instead, there's a touch of warmth to her skin and a rosiness to her cheeks. The longer I stare at the woman, the more tanned the woman looks - in fact, everyone looks tanned compared to this white boat.

"Isn't it better to train with less people around?"

"And make my crewmen stop working, therefore stopping the ship in the middle of the ocean?" Kian scoffs. "Use your brain, Your Majesty. They keep working, and we keep moving."

"Where are we headed?"

"Not important to know for training, maybe if you do well I will let you in on that little secret. Now," Kian claps, startling me, and Layla pats my back to ease my nerves. "First thing we are going to do is sparring, that's something you're bound to have picked up in your lack of travels."

The woman moves from his side, stepping into the cleared space set out for our supposed training, and takes her position while I hang back, unsure where to start. The hesitation, unfortunately, is apparent in its meaning and Kian scoffs once more. "You're telling me you haven't been in a fist fight on that island? No pushing off unwanted men? No wayward hands? Not even a jealous girlfriend or boyfriend?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Very. You would punch me every chance you got, there's no way you don't have some arsenal of defensive moves to protect you?"

"I always had Layla by my side, she would deter the attention before it got bad."

“How heroic.” Kian snaps his fingers, pointing to the centre of the space where the woman waits. “Get in the ring, if I have to teach you everything then you better not drag this on for hours with your dilly-dallying.”

I shuffle into the circle, glancing at the woman and bobbing my head. “Pleasure to meet you, may I ask for your name?”

“Oh my,” the woman blushes, bowing at the waist. “Your Majesty, my name’s Georgia but everyone calls me George. You don’t need to be formal with me – I am your humble servant.”

“Since when have you been humble?” Kian frowns, shoving Georgia off-balance. “Anyway, back to the point. George is the most similar to you in terms of build. The goal is to get you up to speed with what you should already know with someone your size, then you can train with Ciggy, Piggy, or William, and if you’re really good, then you can spar with me.”

I catch the two gargantuan brothers leaning against some crates, muttering under their breath. Now that Piggy’s chewing on something, it’s easy to tell them apart.

“Ready, Your Majesty?”

“Can you stop calling me that?” I huff, snapping my gaze back to Kian and shooting him a glare. “You know my name.”

“But where’s the fun in that?”

Rolling my eyes, I set my focus on George and waiting for her to make her move. How fast will she be? How many times will I have to dodge or duck to get out of the way? The more I think, the tenser my shoulders are and the more stagnant I become, a clear difference to George’s circling and surefooted steps.

I exhale, hands up in front to cover my face. A gust of air pushes me from my spot. I try regain balance by looking down at my feet, a mistake earning another push

backwards, this one harder. I gasp, falling backwards, but nimble hands catch my flailing arms, a foot pressing down on my own feet to keep them in place.

"I didn't know you would use magic."

"We always use magic in every little thing we do," George pulls me upright. "We don't fight without it."

"Well that's not fair, how am I meant to stand my ground if I never start on an even playing field?"

"You do so by evading," Kian notes.

I glance over at him and notice that all conversation on deck has ceased, eyes on us. George pulls me upright and removes her foot.

"Defence is your best offence, especially when starting out. If you try and beat your opponent by overpowering them without practice, then you've lost before you even start the fight. Dodge the attacks, throw her off her path by constantly resetting her attack, and keep doing so until you catch her off-guard. That's when you strike – but that will take several weeks to get to that point."

"So I'm meant to constantly flee from an attack until they get tired?"

"No, that's not the same thing. Fleeing shows weakness. Evading and dodging shows strength. It shows control and practice. You aren't running from a fight, you're controlling their attacks and redirecting them elsewhere. Now go again."

I inhale, tuck stray pieces of hair out of the way and find a stance to stand in.

"That won't work, you're too rigid. Bend your knees slightly, put your right foot back and keep your centre of gravity in between your feet. Don't drop your guard."

I correct most of my stance, nodding to George to start her attack. George flourishes her hands a lot to give me time to see what's happening, but even then I'm too slow, catching the wind on my left side and spinning off balance, tumbling to the

deck. Landing on my back, I see a head poking out from the crow's nest. Shaggy grey hair and black eyes looking down over me.

"Again," Kian orders.

So it continues. Attack after attack, each more obvious that the last, but I can never evade in time. I freeze up, step the wrong way, cross my feet over, or duck too late, all of which end with me upon the deck, body aching and cheeks flushed from embarrassment. After the twentieth failure, having accumulated a crowd now, Kian explodes.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm trying-"

"Trying what? Trying to get yourself killed? What is this? I can't believe you know nothing. You have no instinct or even common knowledge to protect yourself."

"Hey!" Layla growls. "She's trying. I doubt you got this in less time when you were learning."

"I was a child when I learnt this."

"As was she when she first learnt this."

"A child would catch on faster than she is, in fact, a child would actually have lasted longer than she has."

"She's learning. Stop pushing her so hard, do you know how difficult it is to learn something again when others remember you being able to do it so well?"

"It isn't that difficult to relearn the basics."

"It is if you're already overwhelmed!"

"Overwhelmed?" Kian scoffs, narrowing his eyes at Layla before nudging George out of the way, setting his sights on me. "You think you're overwhelmed. Well, let me tell you this, Your Majesty. When you're under attack and you're faced

with an entity that is neither shadow nor bone, there is no definite form of being to them, how will you defend yourself? How will you win?"

"Well-"

He steps forwards. "When they attack," air hits me, dense as a wall and hard as a punch to the gut. "and attack," another, this time my feet lose traction on the wooden deck, sliding backwards under the force of this hurricane. "They never stop until you're dead, until you're nothing but a charred carcass on a desolate, scorched land. Do you think that's overwhelming?"

This time I get thrown backwards by a sheet of air, the fall winding me, causing tears to well up in my eyes. George immediately comes to my side, extending a hand to hold onto to hoist myself up. I whisper a thank you beneath the uproar of Layla and Kian arguing. The whole ship, it seems, has stopped doing whatever they were doing to watch – their focus transfixed on this disaster of a training session. George squeezes my hand.

"If you come back in the evening, we can start over. I'd be honoured to help you learn to spar once more."

I hesitate, eyes locked on the planks of wood beneath our feet.

"It will just be you and me, I'll make sure he isn't there. A girl's night, if you will."

"Okay."

A sharp, loud whistle cuts through the noise, turning everyone's attention to William. His hands rest on his hips, his face pinched and brows arched like that of a mother schooling her children. I immediately duck my head to the scrutiny.

"Kian Ikana Belmont, what in Magic's name are you doing? How dare you treat Miss Analia that way, she is your queen and you will treat her with respect!"

“She is being childish and isn’t focusing on her training, I was giving her an incentive.”

“Oh, and this incentive so happens to include causing her bodily harm and pushing her already unstable mentality to the brink of collapse, does it?” William steps forward and I glance up to see what he does. Standing chest to chest, William glares up at Kian, his scowl taking over his whole face. “She has given up so much for us and for our people. She has had everything wiped from memory. The hometown she knows was just burnt to ruins. The least you can do is give her the time and space to heal, to grow and to learn instead of forcing it upon her when she is not ready.”

He steps back, arriving in front of me in three easy strides, an arm extended to take. I do so, thanking George once more before allowing William to guide me away, Layla joining as we leave. William halts before the stairs hiding the corridor to his quarters, turning back to Kian.

“And if I see you compare her to who she was before one more time, you’ll be sent so far into the sea you’ll be dislodging water from your ears for the next week.”

With that, William continues to lead us to his quarters. Behind us, Kian bellows at the crew to either get back to work or scurry off to the depths where they were. Upon entering the cabin, we see that William’s managed to find stacks of paper, maps and other diagrams to display alongside lines and lines of information. Books and charts cover the bed, some of the bigger maps lie over the floor, their corners pinned down by paperweights and little ribbons of paper.

“I suppose you’re using magic to keep those in place.” I mutter, letting go of William’s arm and hanging out by the door as he voyages through the mess to his seat at the desk. Layla lingers, a hand brushing against my back.

“I have them there in case it’s windy, wouldn’t want all of these to get muddled up.” William gestures at everything. “The papers merely mark what’s what –

triangles for public records, long strips for royal archives, and squares for secret personal records, like that of your ceremony."

I remain where I am, eyes skipping over the paper markers. Layla collects a map from the ground, shifting it to rest on the bed and nudges me to sit down.

"On behalf of Prince Kian, let me apologise, Miss Analia. He shouldn't have done what he did and he should've known better."

"It's okay."

"But it's not. You're upset and you weren't even given time for breakfast. It's no wonder you couldn't move as fast as he was expecting you to. I'll ask Harvey to bring something up for you two."

William leaves, patting my shoulder as he goes by. Layla elbows me gently, tilting her head to the side.

"You okay, buttercup?" Layla surveys my face and body, brushing her fingers over scrapes and a few bruises that are bound to last weeks.

"I'm fine. It's just embarrassing is all."

"You did nothing to embarrass yourself, nor did you make a fool of yourself at any point on this boat. He's being a dick to you and pushing you when you're not prepared. If you ask me, he's begging for someone to do what William did and put him in his place."

"He's expecting it to be me."

"So let's learn and train so that by the end of this boat ride you can put him on his ass and show him."

"I don't think you can keep calling this ship a boat, Layla. There's a difference."

"He's prideful when it comes to this vessel, so I'll continue to call it a boat just to piss him off."

I chuckle at that. “I’m sure you will.”

“There’s the smile,” Layla jabs my ribs, causing me to roll my eyes and smile a little more. “On the bright side, not everyone in Kian’s employment is like him. George is nice.”

“Yeah. She offered to teach me more in the evening without him there. You should come too, she said it’s a girls’ night so the more the better.”

“I’d be honoured, Queen Analia.”

“Not you. Call me anything else but that, please.”

“Alright, buttercup.”

A knock at the door warns them of William’s return and with him a wiry boy several years younger than Layla – well, he looks several years younger but he’s probably sixty or so, right?

“Ladies, this here is Noah. He’s one of the Sailers on this vessel. Say hello Noah.”

“Hi, Your Majesty – I mean, uh, hello Your Majesty. I am very honoured to be standing here, in front of you – and in front of you, Miss Layla! I’ve seen you shout at Prince Kian, I could never do that but you inspire me to – not that I would, of course. I have no reason to shout at him, in fact, I think if I did I would be dumped overboard. Anyway, it’s an honour to meet the two of you, I’ve been waiting years for this.”

“As have they been waiting for their food, now hand it over you blubbering buffoon and let the ladies eat in peace.”

Noah nods, almost upsetting the plate of eggs in his right hand. He passes them off to Layla while commenting on the cook’s cooking. “He does the best eggs, in fact, everything he cooks is the best. I have never eaten anything bad from him, it’s

always warm and filling and I'm trying to get closer to him so he will give me extra servings, but I don't think it's working."

"Well, you keep trying and maybe one day you'll get there, right Analia?"

I nod, mouth already full of the warm stew William handed me. I wipe the corners of my mouth and give the young man a grin, swallowing down the delicious meal. "Absolutely. If he doesn't, let me know and I will have a word to him and shake him down for you."

"Oh you don't need to do that Miss Majesty - your Majesty, sorry, I get nervous when I get to talk to royals. Huffs has a soft spot for you already, he gave you double the serving size he gives me."

"Alright, you're taking their attention away from their meal. You'll be able to talk to them again later, so go back to doing your duties and following orders, understood."

"Yes, Mr Tress, sir!" Noah salutes, waving goodbye before scurrying off. William rolls his eyes, motioning for us to eat up as he leans back into his chair.

"How many people are on board?"

"Twelve, including you two. There's Kian, myself, George, Ciggy, Piggy, Harvey – Huffs, as he goes by, Noah or Breezy as he's called by the Sailers, Jay, Selena and Alister."

"What, no nicknames?" Layla asks.

"They're new to the crew so they have yet to earn one. This isn't exactly a voyage many know of in our Kingdom. The crew is sworn to secrecy given how important it is that we make it back unscathed. The only reason Breezy boy has one is because he managed to blow himself off the side of the poop deck instead of moving the ship along." William chuckles. "Well, that and the amount of air that comes out of his mouth, he's always talking."

“Moving the ship?” I frown before shovelling down a mouthful of eggs. “Like pushing air into the sails?”

“Exactly that, Miss Analia. Sailers manipulate the air currents around them, focusing them into the sails which propels the ship in whichever direction we are headed in.”

“How many Sailers are there on board?”

“Four. George is Head Sailer, having been on this ship since her maiden voyage, then we have Breezy and two others, though they have other jobs on the ship too.”

“And Ciggy and Piggy? What do they do?”

“They are riggermen. They do what you might picture a human sailor might; climb the rigging, move cargo on and off the ship, and keep the ship moving smoothly. They’re good with repairs too. Of course, like with everyone on the ship, they are able to use their magic to assist them.”

“And there are…” Layla counts everyone off with her fingers, “Four of them?”

“Yes, Ciggy and Piggy are the riggermen leaders, then there’s Alister and Jay. Jay is our little birdie up in the crow’s nest. She keeps watch up there at night while most of the others sleep, mind you she’s been up there during the daytime too recently. You might get to see her if you’re doing some training with George later. She’s a quiet one, but she’s a kind soul.”

“And Huffs?”

“Huffs is our dearest cook, though he is also able to cover as Sailer should the need arise. He may look intimidating when you first meet him, more so than Ciggy and Piggy, but he’s one of the wisest, softest men you’ll ever meet.” William holds his hands up, waving to himself. “After me, of course. And on that note, let’s start learning about Hikawa’s history.”

Analia

“Many centuries ago, all magical beings lived as humans did. Our ancestors had a very close relationship with the land, using the resources available to them in moderation and taking care to keep the land well maintained and fertile. They knew that there was something else to the land, something that gave it life and power, and they dedicated their lives to giving back to the land that fed and sheltered them. The first settlers to our lands could only live in the Pastures. That was where they could build houses with stable foundations, cultivate the land and access the waters coming down from the mountains. The Cliffs and the Mountains were too uninhabitable for them, but over time there were sightings of dragons living in those areas - another reason to stay away. The dragons knew they were there, of course, but as the settlers didn’t encroach on their space and kept giving back to the land, they grew to accept them as neighbours.”

“Dragons! You guys live with dragons!” Layla gasps, clutching my arm. “That’s so cool! It makes complete sense – I mean, they are the masters of all airborne beasts, aren’t they? I never thought they were real – how many are there?”

“By our count, over 500. They live far longer than we do, even with our decelerated aging. Once our ancestors were chosen by the magic of the land, the royal family were the first to approach the dragons and seek a coalition.”

“What do you mean “chosen”?” I ask, frowning down at the maps. “The magic decided itself?”

“Magic is something above and beyond us, even with our studies of it now. It is the life source of our lands, our waters and the very air we breathe. The way in

which our ancestors lived, and we continue to live today, proved to the Magic that we are responsible enough to possess magic. The exact moment we gained this magic was poorly recorded, a shame really because we would be able to understand so much more had we the texts to show us. Nevertheless, our people began to show signs of this magic integrating with us. Our hair changed from black to various shades of grey, silver, and for the royal family near white. Our mortal years began to extend far longer than that of our previous ancestors, some three or even four times longer."

"This magic of life and the magic you were given, you speak as if there's a difference." Layla shifts to face William more, eyes wide with unbridled interest. A similar interest prods from within, but it feels as if it's clutched between a fist and that fists squeezes tight with every mention of the royal family – *my* family.

"Magic continues to inhabit every part of the world we live in, we have not taken any of its power or shortened its outreach. Our magic, bestowed upon us, comes in different capabilities depending on the position our direct ancestors took in society during the Integration. The royal family, being the leaders of the time, were given the most magic to utilise. Those who had important roles such as farm workers, fishermen, builders and so forth were given what's understood to be a lesser amount of magic by most, however, it does not reflect upon their positions. Workers, it is surmised, were given the ability to manipulate the air currents to assist in their crafts, simply aiding them in keeping a symbiotic relationship with the land. Travellers and explorers were given the ability to create air currents to aid in their treks through the mountains and up to the cliffs. In being able to create air currents, they could protect themselves from harsh winds, create bubbles of air when they got high in the mountains, or even serve as shield of air to prevent the caves and tunnels crumbling down upon them as they navigated around the land.

“These travellers and explorers, what is their role now?” I trail my finger over one of the maps, tracing the ink detailing the mountain ranges. “I imagine there’s nothing left to explore unless they take to the seas.”

“Correct, Miss Analia. These people have settled into being nobles. With explorers mapping out the land, the royal family would compensate their hand work with money. The more travelling they did, the more money they earned. Once there was nothing left to do, they switched their lifestyles to own stores and companies, having the means to do so. They earned more money through their chosen paths and now their descendants practically sleep on money.”

“You don’t sound too pleased about that.” I note, seeing the way William’s fist squeezes tight the more he speaks.

William sighs. “Not all those who were travellers and explorers returned to the capital city. There are some who settled in the Cliffs, building shelters there. Their descendants now serve as guardians of those lands, keeping watch on the seas and passing on our weather forecasts. For the many families who returned, they believe themselves to sit at a higher tier than those who manipulate the currents because they perceive the work they did as more important than those who worked the land and fed our population. Teachings began to spread that the act of creation was superior to moulding what was already there. The royal family have tried for centuries to reinforce the idea of equality across the kingdom, saying each had its merits and was specialised for the jobs their ancestors did, but nobles didn’t care.

“What did the royal family do about it?” Layla pries, speaking words on the tip of my tongue. My mouth has grown dry, dreading the topic’s drifting course.

“There have been a few things they have been able to do such as give the working family more opportunities for higher employment, lesser fees for education

and providing solutions for the issues they present to council meetings before that of the so called nobles."

"So pretty much a continual "eff you" to the nobles."

"More or less." William grins, the wrinkles around his eyes and mouth deepening as he does so. "The royal family doesn't tolerate those who try to live lives without service to the land or the crown. It doesn't align with how our ancestors lived and cared for the land, and how in return we were granted the gift of magic."

"You mentioned the royal family made a coalition with the dragons, how is that possible?"

"Dragons are magical beings, they have been since before we ever set foot on this world. When magic was given to us, the royal family received the ability to speak the language of Dragons, Dragonspeech. The first meeting with the dragons was led by King Manaia, and it is said that the way he addressed the dragons, the way he spoke and carried himself, was so well received that a dragon by the name of Vihaska willingly chose to become the King's companion, uniting the dragons and our kingdom."

"Does the royal family now have dragons? Does Kian have a dragon?" Layla perks up.

"Every member of the royal family is taken to the dragons after their birth to be shown to them, a show of our faith in the continual unification of our species, and in return a dragon may choose to become their companion. Even Miss Analia has a dragon."

"What- how? I'm not a royal, how can that be?"

"Upon marriage, part of the ceremony is the royal takes their wife or husband-to-be and presents them to the dragons. The dragons give their marriage a blessing and a dragon may choose to become the new family member's companion. There is

no guarantee they will get a dragon companion, nor is it guaranteed a royal will upon birth. Sometimes it takes a while for the dragons to decide, sometimes they choose not to."

I pause, mouth open to ask more questions, but the tingling in my chest causes my breath to catch in my throat. "What… is their name?" William cocks his head to the side, brows furrowing. I try to speak again. "The dragon who chose me. What's their name?"

"Ah," he nods, a small smile on his face. "Her name is Saskia. She's been impatiently awaiting your return it seems. She's always been rather attached to you."

"Do you think that's what happened at Te Tai Tapu? Do you think the magic I used was hers?"

"Kian and I believe so. When your magic was taken from you, we couldn't take away the bond between your magic and Saskia's for that is a pure magical connection Magic itself created. It is possible that the remnants of your magic alerted her to your panic and distress. Personal connections between royals and dragons is more than just magic and the ability to share each other's magic. It goes deeper than that, but I'm afraid you will have to ask Kian for more on that – it is difficult to describe it if you yourself do you know the feeling."

"Is she alright? When I used her magic, she wasn't hurt by it?"

"No, Miss Analia, she was not. Saskia gave you her magic willingly and helped you defend yourself, and she was more than up for it from what I have seen and heard from King Ryu. It appears that she's now following him and his dragon around to get extra food and affection – nothing she hasn't done before on multiple occasions."

"What's he like?" Layla asks, causing me to stiffen. The fist holding my lungs in a vice latches around my throat, choking me.

“King Ryu is -”

“Please don’t – please wait, I’m not ready to hear about him.” I struggle to speak the words, scrambling to get off the floor and out onto the deck where fresh air can enter my lungs. I see Layla shift to stand. “No, stay Layla – you asked, you want to know, I just need air.”

“Ana -”

Throwing the door open, I rush out into the corridor, using the walls as support. I almost throw myself into the back of the stairs in my attempt to escape the pressure in my chest and the squeezing of my throat. It’s too much. It’s all too much. Dragons and magic and marriages. I grasp the handrails and throw myself up the steps, ignoring the startled shouts of my name. I reach out for the guardrail, gasping for air. Breathe. I need to breathe. Arms wrap around my waist, tugging backwards and throwing both of us onto the deck.

“What in Magic’s name are you doing? Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“Breathe-I need to breathe.” I push Kian away, rolling sideways and crawling towards the guardrail. A deep breath in, rushed and expelled within seconds. I tilt my head back, closing my eyes. My hand rests against my chest, thumb and middle finger tapping against my collarbone. A regular, grounding pattern. The constant tapping against bones, so close to the heart it works to ease it back into a steady, calm rhythm. My breathing becomes deeper, stays inside my lungs for a second longer. Two seconds. Three seconds. Soon I can hold it for five seconds, heartbeat matching the tapping of my thumb and finger, and I open my eyes.

Kian is squatting in front of me, down at my level, hands out in front with his elbows resting on his knees. His eyes are wide, light grey flecked with gold, so glossed over they resemble the sun breaking through the clouds after rainfall. They never leave my face, searching for any sign of lingering distress.

“Tell me about Saskia. Please.”

Kian nods, shifting to make himself more comfortable. “Saskia is like a puppy, in every way but in size. She uses her personality and charms to get extra food from the dragonkeepers and from the family. Ryu and Effie are susceptible to falling for her tricks. She is very friendly and she’s known to sneak away from the castle to visit children during their lunchbreaks at school. We’ve had to tell their teachers not to let the kids feed her no matter how whiny she gets. There is only one time where I’ve seen her get really upset, so upset that she returned to be with her family in the mountains for a few days.”

“My ceremony.”

Kian nods. “She understood why you chose to do it. She’s forgiven you.” he chuckles, a smile growing on his lips. “She’s very excited to see you. Like I said, she’s a giant puppy.”

“I’m excited to see her.” I look down at my hands now clasped in my lap, noting the slight shake remaining. “The kingdom’s history is fascinating, I didn’t realise there would be dragons involved.”

“I take it there’s something else that brought you out here.”

“I’m not ready to hear some things. Not the things to do with the family.”

He snorts. “Because you don’t want to be overwhelmed.”

“Something like that.” The words falling flat in their delivery. Kian tenses up once more. “Can you tell me about the dragon you’re bonded with?”

“Another time.”

“Because you don’t want to overwhelm me?”

“Something like that.” I kick out at him, narrowly missing his shin. “I’m kidding, Your Majesty. Another time, perhaps. It looks like Layla is in need of your attention.”

“Piss away, Prince Douchebag. I’m here to take her to dinner.”

I look up; the sky is beginning to dye itself a pinkish orange, wisps of cloud trailing across the smudges of peach and buttercup yellow above.

“A dinner date, cute. Should’ve invited me instead – she’s a bit of a downer, isn’t she?”

“She’s far better company than you.” Layla holds out her hand, wiggling her fingers. I scrounge up all it takes to coax a small smile, allowing Layla to hoist me up and wrap an arm over my shoulders. “Let’s go get some food, I heard the night shift crew are eating their breakfast – we might be able to meet a few of them before they get to work.”

“Don’t start interrupting my crew’s schedules.”

“We will stop everyone from doing their work and following your instructions, even Huffs.”

Kian scoffs, rolling his eyes and standing up. He shakes his legs out, glancing my way once more before turning and heading to the ship’s wheel. “Good luck with that. I can’t even get the man to take breaks.”

Analia

We head below deck, squeezing past Ciggy and Piggy blocking the staircase, the latter getting an elbow in the gut from Layla when he doesn't move aside further than a hair's breadth. After a few wrong turns, ending up in the cargo hold after a particularly bad one, we enter the galley and spy a few crewmates sitting around a rather battered table.

The first person I see is a woman, her facial features looking in the mid-thirties – how old that is in Magic years I don't know – with her grey bob brushing the shoulders of her white fitted jacket. The collar has silver thread detailing the fabric, intricate loops and swirls trailing all the way down the lapel to the hem. When she lifts her hand to eat, her cuffs show a similar pattern.

Next to her, I realise, is Noah. At first I didn't recognise him as he remains quiet next to the woman and the man currently speaking. He shovels food into his mouth, eye wide and darting between the two whenever the other starts talking.

The man is charismatic, that's for sure. As he talks, he waves his hands around, leans into the group as if to share secret knowledge, and then throws his head back and lets out a deep, rumbling laughter that fills the whole room. The woman chuckles, shaking her head. Noah catches on a few seconds later and starts laughing. He likely didn't understand the joke, but knows to play along – the slightly disconnected look he gives the woman makes that clear. She nods, patting his shoulder before the man continues, oblivious to the action.

The last person at the table remains quiet, watching but not reacting to his grand gestures and booming voice. Her dark grey hair hangs straight over the back of

the chair, a blunt fringe cut over her brows, getting in her eyes often enough that she regularly has to brush it aside. Her frame looks like its hunching forwards, curling in over the leg she has propped up in front of her. Her arms are hugging her leg too tightly for it to be a casual position.

Clattering from a hidden area of the room draws my attention. While Layla drifts towards the table, I take a few hesitant steps towards the gap in the wall where whistling flitters through the air over the sound of the man's baritone voice. Peeking my head around the corner, I brush over benches to the bowls and dishes lining the countertops.

"Your Majesty! I didn't know you were here, would you like some food? You can have mine." Noah's voice startles me resulting in a jump, hand clutching my chest. "Sorry, Your Majesty! I didn't mean to startle you, come sit down – I don't mind sharing."

"I believe the Queen would prefer her own food, Breezy." the woman interjects, causing Noah to fall silent, his cheeks flaming red. "It was kind of you to ask."

"She's right, you're very kind, Noah. You can have the rest of your food, you've worked hard today and you deserve it." I shuffle over to the table, afraid to look back into the kitchen area. The whistling cut off upon Noah's exclamation. Taking a seat between Layla and the woman, I give everyone at the table a smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you all, I'm sorry to interrupt your meals."

"The pleasure is ours, your Majesty." The woman bows her head. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Selena. This here is Alister-"

"A pleasure, your Majesty. I never thought I would be honoured as I am to be sailing on such a fine vessel with royalty. Not just one, but two! My wife will never believe it."

“Nor should she find out. Best you remember the pledge you made to Prince Kian.” Selena lands him a pointed glare, waving him off. “You have met Breezy, it appears. I hope he didn’t cause you any problems. I promised his mother that I would keep an eye on him.”

“Nothing Mr Tress couldn’t handle.” Layla grins, alleviating Selena’s worries. Selena replies in kind.

“And this is Jessie, our little Silvereye.”

Jessie, or Jay as William had called her, simply bobs her head, keeping her eyes on the table top and interlocking her fingers over her knee. I nod at her, whispering a hello before a dish is placed in front of me.

“And I am Huffs, or Harvey as my family calls me. I am the only reason they know what a full stomach on board this ship is like. This crew wouldn’t be standing if it weren’t for me.” he continues to place dishes down before Layla and I. Bowls of rice, plates of meat stew and freshly caught, perfectly filleted fish and even a few rolls of bread – who knows how they ended up with those. My mouth falls opens to respond, brows furrowed and eyes wide, but Huffs shakes his head.

“Your Majesty, I insist. If I don’t feed you and your lovely companion more than I feed the others, at least as much as I feed His Highness, then I will have your husband, your mother-in-law, and my husband to answer to. I don’t know about you, but the last one is a little more intimidating than the others.”

“How will your husband know?”

“William, unfortunately, knows everything.”

“You and Mr Tress are married, how wonderful! All the more people to side with us when the Prince makes things difficult for Analia.”

Huffs chuckles, shaking his head. “Though I’m not supposed to take sides and favour one member of the royal family over another, you are a lot easier to cater to than His Highness is, Your Majesty.”

“I’d prefer everyone to call me Analia. We’re on this ship in the middle of the ocean, far from the kingdom. No one will know, and besides, you were sworn to secrecy for this journey – you don’t have to tell anyone you were on first name basis with me.”

“Can we, Your Majesty? Are you sure?” Noah asks, his face having brightened up with the news.

“Just call me Miss Analia, it’s what Mr Tress does already and I don’t mind it.”

“But he’s a noblemen, a council member and a close confidant of the royal family. He’s earned the right to call you Miss Analia.”

“As have you all for coming on this journey. No one who has risked their lives to return me to the kingdom deserves any less.”

Selena smiles at Layla and I, shaking her head. “We will do our best. How should we address you, child?” she locks eyes with Layla, cocking her head to the side.

“Layla is fine. I have no other title.”

“You’re my bodyguard, remember.”

“‘Layla, the Queen’s Bodyguard’ doesn’t roll off the tongue as easily as ‘Layla’ does.” Layla looks over the group, reinforcing the notion to call her by her name.

Huffs heads back into the kitchen and I scan the table once more, noticing Jay has slipped away sometime during their conversation. I try to hide my surprise but Selena catches it.

“She’s on crow’s nest duty tonight, it’s easier to get up there when it’s still light.”

“I’m just amazed she was so quiet when leaving, I didn’t even hear her get up.”

“She’s a sneaky one, that’s for sure.” Selena nods, “but she’s very sweet, she means nothing bad by her actions.”

“I’m not offended.” I pick up a spoon and begin eating. “If you look after Noah, does that mean you are one of the Sailers?”

Selena and Alister answer all our questions, helping us put names to the remaining crewmates and outlining the general schedules should the girls happen to be on deck during their shifts. Alister is in the middle of telling us about his young daughter, Alessandra, when George arrives at the table.

“How’s it, Georgie?” Alister slaps her shoulder, leaning back into his chair. “Ready for the night shift?”

“Let’s just say I’m ready for the peace and quiet.” George glances over at the remains on my plate, pointing at them with a delicate finger. “Are you finished? Fish is my favourite.”

“It’s all yours.”

Noah lets out a loud yawn, drawing attention to him which he only notices a few seconds after he’s closed his mouth. “Sorry, Miss Analia.”

“Go to bed, Breezy. It’s late and you’ve had a hard day’s work. I’ll follow you out.” Alister replies and the table agrees. Noah and Alister stand, heading towards the door and calling out to Huffs before leaving the room. Selena slowly stands, stretching out her arms and rolling her head from side to side.

“I’ll be heading out too, it was lovely to meet you two. If you have any more questions, or if you don’t feel so well, come see me. I double as the ship’s medic so I’m just a call away.”

“Thank you, we certainly will. Have a good night.” Layla waves as she goes, turning to George currently stuffing her face with food. “I heard it’s a girl’s night. What’s the plan?”

“Well,” she clears her throat. “Prince Kian has retired for the night so on deck is only night crew which is me, Jay and one of the twins on call for any emergencies with the sails or ropes. I was thinking that the best place to start would actually be getting you two to spar. Miss Analia can get used to what sparring entails and you, Miss Layla, can practice anything you already know. Does that sound good?”

“That sounds great, better than what Kian had in mind.”

“You should probably address him as Prince Kian.” George chuckles at Layla who shrugs her shoulders, leaning back into her chair.

“I have other names for him, this is the least offensive of them so he will just have to grin and bear it.”

“You’ll have to teach me them sometime.” George smirks, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “C’mon, let’s not drag this on for too long – you two probably won’t be awake for much longer.”

The girls clear the table, thank Huffs for the meals, and head out to the deck. The stars are so much clearer out at sea without the gas lamps and lanterns blurring the sky. A midnight blue canvas scattered with thousands of glittering gems, constellations of all kinds visible on this cloudless night. A warm air bubble surrounds the ship, fending off the chilly late autumn winds and allowing the hammocks nestled in the rigging and sails to remain undisturbed.

“We won’t do anything too crazy tonight, just find a basic fighting style and play with a couple of different ways to defend and attack.”

“When you say ‘find a basic fighting styles’, do you mean what comes naturally or what is the best thing to start learning from the beginning?”

“Well, both would be ideal, but what is best is what comes easiest to you. There’s no reason to teach you something in a short amount of time that you won’t feel comfortable doing without more practice, but if your first option isn’t going to be effective, then I will need to change a couple of things so that you’re learning what generally works best for us women.”

I shake out my limbs, awaiting George’s instruction. Layla leans up against the centre mast, arms folded in front of her.

“First thing I want you to do is find a way to stand that feels comfortable, is easy to move around in, and gives you the ability to jump in any direction should an attack come bulldozing through you.”

I screw my face up, trying to work out what feels best. Should I have my right foot forward as right is my dominant side? Or does that side go behind for a stronger push forward or backward? And where should my weight be – over the back leg further from the attacker or central?

“Too much thinking, buttercup,” Layla notes. “Try closing your eyes, bounce on the spot ten times, land, and then look at where your feet are.”

“That sounds ridiculous.”

“Only for the moment. It’ll help.”

I do so, making a point to close my eyes and take a deep breath in before jumping. When I touch the deck for the last time, my eyes shoot open and to see the left foot is ahead of the right, but my centre of gravity is between them.

“Would it not be better to have right foot forward as that’s my strong side?”

“If we’re working on your defence first, right side back is better. We will practice on both sides so there is nothing to worry about.”

The training is slow, admittedly my fault as my body refuses to settle into a comfortable position. There’s a fuzziness that settles into my bones like static,

blurring or side-tracking the messages my brain tries to send to my arms, legs, and feet. Glancing over at Layla a few times leaves me even more annoyed as Layla moves fluidly, ducking and dodging while still maintaining posture, poise and most importantly, her guard in front of her face.

All remnants of the day have been snuffed out by the time George calls it. I'm the first to collapse to the deck, a pool of sweat forming around me. Layla follows suit, sitting next to me, swiping stray pieces of sweat-slicked hair out of her eyes.

"Cheer up, buttercup. You're learning well and there is a lot of time on this boat to practice. Maybe you fought with your magic a lot, so your instincts are searching for that strength that you can't connect with right now."

"That is a possibility." George pipes up, leaning back against the centre-mast. "You also used to fight on the offensive from the start using a 'one shot, one kill' mentality. It could be that going about sparring almost the complete opposite way is messing with your ingrained strengths and instincts. Like they're fighting with the new ways to train."

"Maybe I'm just that bad that my instincts are trying to step in but things are going so horribly wrong that they can't even save me."

"Hey." Layla nudges, frowning down at me. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You're learning and adjusting to something unknown while being under a lot of stress. You're doing well."

"She's right, Miss Analia," George nods. "If Prince Kian were to be in your position, I think we would've seen many tantrums and angry outbursts from him."

"I'm not doing well enough though, am I?" I bite my lip, glancing down at my feet. "I know next to nothing about magic, the kingdom's history, politics, relations with other kingdoms – I'm so far from being a royal advisor, let alone a queen, that I feel like I'm letting everyone down."

“We’re with you every step of the way.” Layla places her hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “If you feel nervous, afraid, unprepared or anything of the sort, we will always be there to encourage and support you.”

I sigh, looking up to give them a smile. “Thank you Layla. Thank you Georgia. This means a lot.”

George’s cheeks flush with colour once more and she looks down at the deck. “The pleasure is mine, Miss Analia. You are my queen, whether you believe yourself so or not. Anything I can do for you, I will.”

A long pause fills the air, dancing along the slight breeze in the sails and the swaying of the ship over the waves. Layla reaches a hand out to help sit up when we hear it.

“You are good enough, Miss Analia.”

We jump, glancing around for the culprit. The voice is airy, barely reaching our ears but we know we heard it. George chuckles, pointing upwards to the crow’s nest. Peering up into the star dotted sky, we see her - over the edge of the platform, Jay peers down, her eyes darting between the three of us.

“I’m sorry for eavesdropping,” she continues, “but I felt like I should say something. You trying your best is enough. You don’t need to know everything to show us who you are, to prove to us that you are our queen. We can see that for ourselves.”

“Jay’s right. You need not try and prove that you are our queen when we know you are already. We know what happened. It would be unwise to pretend you know what you knew before.” George adds.

“You already sacrificed so much when you chose to give up your magic and memories for your people, and you have been so kind to all of us even when you did

not know who we were. I'm sorry for running away when you came to talk to us earlier, by the way. I'm not very good with new people."

"Jay isn't much of a talker." George adds, pride evident in her tone. "For her to say all this means she's really trying her best too."

"It helps that I can't clearly see you," Jay mutters, her voice beginning to lose its drive.

I smile, bobbing my head gently. "Thank you Jessie, that's very kind of you to say."

"I think you two have done enough hard work today. Tomorrow will be very similar and there is always more to learn from Mr Tress."

"He certainly knows more than I thought could be possible." Layla rolls her shoulders, releasing a sigh full of weariness. I can tell she will be out like a light the moment she's horizontal. "So, do you want to sleep in our room or in the hammocks?"

My back straightens, "Oh, can we sleep in the hammocks? They don't belong to anyone, do they?"

George shakes her head with a smile, "The hammocks are for everyone and anyone to use whenever they want. If you want, you can take two. I'll be on duty all night, so I can wake you in the morning if you want to avoid the crew waking you up with their morning racket."

"I'll probably wake up from the sun first."

"Same." Layla adds, "Don't worry about us, George."

George nods, bidding us goodnight as we move further down the ship to climb into the hammocks. Once situated, having successfully avoided flipping it over while readjusting myself, I peer over to talk to Layla. Soft snores come from the hammock and I can't help but smile.

Layla looks like she's settling in with the crew well – she's made friends with most of them and there has yet to be an incident where she verbally attacks anyone other than Kian and perhaps the twins. A warmth fills my chest, both a comforting blanket and a burning reminder of my circumstances. I roll over onto my side, letting the tear rolling down my cheek soak into the hammock. Once my eyes have grown sore and red, I let the heavy exhaustion pull me under, stars winking out of sight as I fall into a rough sleep.

Analia

I wake early, far earlier than the sun, gasping for breath. Heart racing, I try remember where I am. How did I get here? Why can't I get out? The hammock feels like it's cocooning me, trapping me in cloth and suffocating me. I wriggle, twisting and turning and almost pleading for the fabric to rip in half and let me fall to the deck.

The hammock upends, tipping me out, and my scream catches in my throat. I stop a hair's breadth above deck and let out a sigh of relief. I glance at my hands, fingers spread out like webs. Did I stop myself? Has Saskia's magic helped me again?

"Are you going to get up or stay there?"

Of course it wasn't me.

"Why are you here? Shouldn't you be sleeping or scribbling over papers?"

Kian releases me, coughing to hide the laugh that escapes his mouth as my head hits the wood. "I'm here because it's time for your training. After what happened yesterday, I have adjusted the schedule to teach during the night shift. We will stop once the shifts switch over." He extends a hand to me.

"Didn't know you could be so courteous." I bat it away, finding my own feet and cross my arms over my chest. "Why bother changing it?"

"Believe it or not, I do actually need to make sure you learn as much as possible on this journey. If this will be beneficial, then the changes have to be made. Besides, this lets us train you in different degrees of light. The better you fight at night and day, the better off you will be."

"Fine." I take in a deep breath. *Just remember what Jay said, what George taught you last night. You're learning, you won't be perfect.*

I bounce a couple of times, ignoring Kian's raised brow, and raise my guard to chin height, staring at him over my knuckles.

"Good. Remember not to drop them over time."

Kian starts off easy – clearly, by how gentle the attacks are and how obvious the build-up is. I misstep once, but right myself quickly and evade the attack nevertheless. After the tenth time of successfully dodging, I turn to Kian.

"Why are you going so easy on me, this isn't even what George did the first training."

"I'm easing you into it."

"You're easing me to sleep. Attack properly. It's life and death, isn't it?"

Kian scoffs, rolling his head and cracking his knuckles before striking again. This time the attacks are faster and stronger, like George's were, and while I don't manage to evade all of them, I get up quickly and get ready to go again without a second to spare. After five minutes, sweat begins to bead at my forehead. Ten minutes go by and I take a particularly strong hit, landing on my elbow. I shake it off and go again, refusing to end on a bad note.

Dawn breaks the darkness with streaks of peach and candlelight yellow, pinks and purples fading in the new light of day. I'm sweating, out of breath, and my joints are aching. Kian straightens up, inhaling the morning air after a series of onslaughts, and wipes his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

"We'll stop here. You've improved, or maybe it's that you've realised what it is you need to do now."

"George and Jay helped last night." I rest against the side of the ship, looking out onto the water. "Was I an aggressive fighter?"

“I wouldn’t say aggressive, more like you were an offensive fighter. You kept control over your opponents, dominating the ring and studying their movements well. You knew when to counterstrike, when to evade, and when to attack while they were off-balance or distracted. Aggressive is different and it generally leads to losing unless you have a huge weight difference and height difference to your opponent. Aggressive is emotional, it’s narrow-minded and slow because of the amount of tension you hold in your body.”

“That makes sense,” I look over at him, watching as he breaks eye contact and focuses on his shoes, hands sliding into the pockets of his pants. “You’re a good teacher, Kian.”

He stays silent for a while before replying, “You taught me.” He starts off towards the sunrise. The air begins to warm and the night crew switches, Selena and Noah taking the reins. Kian’s gaze flicks over to me. “Well, you retaught me the curriculum once you were Royal Guard. You didn’t trust that we had the best personal training and you didn’t want us to rely on you and the other guards should something happen.”

“So you were an aggressive fighter with a little bit of laziness thrown in there?”

Kian laughs, a proper laugh that brightens up his face. “I was. Though I will say, since he isn’t here to defend himself, I was a lot better than Ryu was. Mind you, that could’ve been a ploy to get you to spend more time with him.”

“I don’t believe that, surely the royal family has the best training from the beginning. They wouldn’t risk leaving you guys in danger, would they?”

“You said that the first time you noticed too.” Kian’s smile widens. “Effie was complaining about it and how she didn’t get taught any of the cool moves.”

I feel my hands begin to grow clammy and cold. With how fast my heart has already started beating, I try to find something else to talk about. “Where are we headed?”

“We’re on course for the passage between the human realm and the magical realm.” Kian notes, glancing down at my hands as I rub them dry. “You really don’t like going down that road of conversation do you.”

“It’s difficult to talk about.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why, it just is.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to talk about it?”

“Maybe, I don’t know-” my breathing gets shallower and I shake my head. “Not now. Later.”

“Okay.” Kian pushes off the rail, heading towards the ship’s wheel. “Go eat something before your history lesson. I can’t have William shouting at me again, it ruins the vibe I have going on with my crew.”

I scoff. “You’re big scary captain vibe?”

“My ‘I most definitely know what I’m doing and most definitely am in control of what’s going on’ vibe. Some people haven’t caught on yet, so it’s best to keep up appearances.”

I shake my head, fighting back a chuckle as he saunters away. I hear Layla groan, her bronze arms stretching over the edge of her hammock. She leans over slightly, showing her unruly hair, half-open eyes and puffy face.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty.” I sing, the pressure in my chest almost gone. “Looks like you slept good. Sounded like it to with your snoring.”

“Shut up, I didn’t snore that much.”

“I beg to differ. It gave me nightmares.”

Layla pokes her tongue out, lying back and tucking her arms back into her bubble.

"I'm going to have breakfast now, I'll come get you when it's time for lessons."

Layla sticks her thumb up for a few seconds before it drops back down, the soft sound of snores filling the air soon after. I bite back my laughter and head down to the galley.

***

I groan as I drop down into an empty chair, rolling my limbs out and rubbing the back of my head for the millionth time today.

Training has picked up over the last few days. To be honest, I can't really keep up with what day it is or how long it's been since we left Te Tai Tapu. Seven days? Maybe nine? As well as our early morning training, Kian has introduced another form of training which is more or less fitness training. Running around the deck, climbing the rigging, getting up into the crow's nest and back down, running from the bow to the stern, cargo hold to the poop deck. It's a lot of running, a lot of climbing, a lot of sweating, and a lot of tripping over the stairs and almost falling from the sky.

I understand why I need to do it – the fighting training needs the basics in fitness to support it. I just don't like the fact that I wake up in agony because my body hurts. I have so many bruises they're beginning to overlap, making it even more painful when I brush up against or lean on something.

"What did you do this time?" George asks, nodding to my head. I frown, slumping into my chair further.

"I slipped on the stairs. Hit my head against the handrail."

“By my Magic, Miss Analia, I didn’t know you were so clumsy.”

“I’m not clumsy, I’m just rushed and my body hurts from all this extra training. I can barely get out of bed now.”

“It’ll get better, I promise. Are you stretching afterwards? That’ll help with muscle tension and tightness.”

“A good hearty meal does wonders too,” Huffs presents a plate of eggs, fish, bread and roasted ripe red tomatoes. “We can’t have you doing all this exercising on an empty stomach, can we?”

“Tomatoes! How did you manage to keep them so well?”

“Ah, that is the blessing of our magic, Miss Analia. I can control the air temperature of my produce and keep them fresh for as long as possible. We don’t bring on a lot of fresh produce, but it cannot hurt to keep something special for our special travellers on board.” Huffs sends me a wink and strolls back into the kitchen, humming a tune as he works.

I take a bite of the fish, slicing up some tomato and shovelling a forkful of it and the eggs into my mouth. Everything melts in my mouth and I can’t help but moan over the flavours. “This is delicious, Huffs! Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Miss Analia.”

George and I chat for a little while longer while I eat breakfast, discussing our imminent arrival at the gateway between realms and the different training I will be embarking on soon. Kian had informed us a few days ago that we were nearing the gate and this morning training was cut off early as he was needed to steer us into the gate. I’ve heard how dangerous the arrival can be so I didn’t question it, instead rejoicing and heading for food.

“We heard Miss Analia was down here,” Ciggy murmurs, his voice rumbling through the galley like thunder. We turn to face them, Piggy standing next to his brother with his beefy arms crossed in front of his chest.

“We heard she had a slip,”

“Or five,”

“Or twenty.”

“Haha, very funny you two.” I roll my eyes and return my focus to my food.

“We wonder what will happen with Miss Analia’s magic training,”

“Will she take another tumble?”

“Maybe fly off the edge of the ship?”

“Maybe blow a hole in the side of it?”

“That’s very possible, that is. Heard Miss Analia’s magic is very strong.”

“Alright, knock it off, boys.” George barks, noting how I’ve started to hunch over my plate, my fork trapped in a death rip. “If you’re not going to be helpful, go somewhere else. Shouldn’t you be on deck helping the captain navigate the shallow waters?”

“Captain said he doesn’t need help.”

“So he says, doesn’t mean you can’t do your jobs and follow orders when they are made. Go.”

They leave, grumbling and keeping their heads down as they do. I let out a deep sigh, placing my fork next to my unfinished food, appetite long gone.

“They mean well, and I know they’ve seen how much you’ve improved with your training. Perhaps they’re just excited to see what you can do?”

“I can’t do anything, I don’t have the magic to do it.”

“You can still control other’s magic without having your own. Wielding it is a form of magic in itself.”

“You think I can do that without blowing a hole in the ship.”

“That was just an exaggeration, you wouldn’t be able to actually blow a hole in the ship.”

“I’ve heard about what I used to be able to do.”

“Yes, but you won’t be given that much magic to wield at a time, Miss Analia. It’ll be little wisps, little tricks to help learn control and fluidity.”

Somehow the words don’t settle me. I remember what it felt like to wield Saskia’s magic, the power and the energy of it, and I don’t know if I would be able to control it without making it worse. What if that connection awakens and I do cause problems? What if I hurt somebody?

“If someone gets hurt because of me, I don’t know that I would be able to continue learning it. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Miss Analia,” Huffs speaks up, having slipped back into the galley at some point, “It isn’t my place to say anything about your abilities or training, but if I may?” I glance up, nodding slowly. He settles down into a chair at the table.

“I come from a noble family. A family known for having a strong grasp on their magic. I was trained from a young age to use all the magic I had and every element of it. When my parents saw how tall I was, how large I was compared to others around us, they wanted to use me as a way to scare others into believing their notions of power.” Huffs pauses, a tear trailing down his cheek.

I reach out, brushing it away with the pad of my thumb. He glances up at me, eyes glistening like diamonds with his smile. He grabs hold of my hand and squeezes.

“I didn’t want to be used for my magic, to be known as the man whose magic precedes him. I wanted to find control, minimalism in my magic. My interests lay in others things – food, learning, serving and helping others, none of which use magic in an aggressive way. It took many decades to learn to control it and use only the

smallest amounts of magic. It took patience, time, and a lot of energy, but I wouldn't have it any other way. I wanted to learn to master it." Huffs gives my hand another squeeze, "The support of those around you will be part of what gets you through it, but the most important thing is believing in yourself. You must have faith in yourself for things to get easier."

I'm speechless for a while, getting a little choked up thinking about it. My chest hurts, my heart knowing the feelings he has gone through. To go through so much, the family influences and societal pressures, to overcome them for his own sake. To frame his own future how he wants.

"I'm honoured to have you next to me on my journey, Harvey. Your words mean a lot and you have no idea how your words have eased my mind. Thank you."

"Glad to be of service, Miss Analia." Huffs grins, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Miss Analia," William calls out from the door. I turn to face him, wondering how long he'd been waiting. "We're about to pass through the gate. Prince Kian would like you and Miss Layla on deck so we can make sure you two don't suffer from any side effects passing through."

"Side effects?"

"You'll notice it feels different as we near the gate and once we travel into the Magic Realm. Everything contains Magic, and that can have an effect on your body for a short period of time."

"I better go find Layla then." I thank Huffs for the meal, hinting at George to finish anything off if she's hungry, and rush out to find Layla. I find her in our room, cosied up on the bed with a book of some sort in her hand.

"Where did you find that?"

“Mr Tress gave it to me to read, when he mentioned the different kinds of people from the Kingdom of Water my curiosity was piqued. Did you know there are people who can permanently live under water?”

“That sounds fascinating, you’ll have to tell me more later. We’ve been called up on deck. We’re about to go through the gateway.”

“About time! He’s be telling us so for the last three days.” Layla jumps to her feet, bookmarking the page with a long strip of paper. She loops her arm through mine, towing me towards the door. “Are you excited? Things are going to be so different.”

“Do you think so? Surely it can’t be that different from here.”

We climb the stairs and find Kian at the wheel, motioning us over with a jerk of his head. Looking ahead, a cluster of rocky isles dot the waters, some nearly scrapping against the hull. A few hundred metres ahead an archway between two isles stands right in our path. Lush foliage and fauna cover the isles. Even the waters beneath the arch sparkle like thousands of gemstones floating under the ripples.

“Neither of you are feeling sick, are you?” Kian asks, sparing a glance at our faces. “No fevers, aches and pains besides any with biological reason, no nausea?”

“I’m alright.” I reply, holding onto Layla’s hand.

“Me too.”

“You let us know at any point things start to feel different, okay? I don’t want you vomiting on my ship.”

I can’t tell if he’s joking or serious. Sharing a confused look with Layla, it seems like she doesn’t either.

Whether it’s seeing how close we are to the gate or nerves bubbling up in my stomach, my hands grow sweaty. All this talk of symptoms and the likelihood of feeling a difference physically going through the gate makes me feel like I’m am

feeling that way. I know it's just a trick of the mind, expectations and all, but there's a pressure in my chest building. Layla grips my hand tighter, her face stoic and back pin-straight.

A similar blanket of warmth begins to shroud my body, like that back in Te Tai Tapu when Saskia's magic took over. There isn't the numbness, the inability to control my limbs, but the presence is there. The air feels fresher, smells sweeter, and I can't stop myself from smiling a little. It feels familiar, coaxing something to arise from the back of my memory.

Layla squeezes my hand again and I turn to face her. She looks the same, there's no fear or anxiety in her gaze, and her hands remain steady. Looking behind her, I see William standing nearby, his eyes moving between us and the gate.

"You okay?" I whisper.

She nods, sparing a brief smile.

"Breathe in nice and slow, don't try holding your breath as we pass through. We don't need any light-headedness or fainting." Kian murmurs, eyes set on the waters. His hands barely grip the wheel, instead they rest on the wood. Any adjustments to the course are made using magic and he lifts his hands off the wheel to move it before returning them to their place.

The gate is right over us, shinning in the late morning sun, and my heart beats loud and fast in my ears. Whether its anxiety or excitement, I don't know but I continue to smile. Awaiting the change as we sail through.

The bow enters the gate.

The wood begins to gleam, the wash of colour painting the ship a pale peach far more appealing than the bleached white under our feet. The colour dances over the masts, over the sails and hammocks, and jumps up the stairs towards us. I can't take my eyes off it as it nears the toes of my boots, a few sparkles fluttering about

before they leap onto the leather and trail up, like shooting stars, until they form a crown over my head. A gasp escapes my parted lips, smile wide and tugging at the corners of my eyes.

Layla smiles in kind, squeezing my hand tight, but her eyes don't get the same wrinkles. She moves her gaze to the ocean, her hand slipping out of mine. My smile shrinks a little and I turn to see what she's looking at.

The sea glistens as far as the eye can see, wave shades of teal, turquoise and sapphire blue. The breaking waves are dressed in white lace, washing away with cream foam and white sand. The landscape on this side of the gate is a wonder in itself; we are at a beach, waters just deep enough to sail through, and the rocky arch above us is far greater than its smaller twin in the human realm. Casting my eyes out to the horizon, the parting between sea and sky is only too clear. Baby blue skies, soft wisps of cloud and the brilliant sun contrast so greatly with the deeper blue shades of the ocean.

"Welcome back to the Magic Realm, Your Majesty." Kian jests, catching my attention for a second before the ocean steals it back once more.

Cayson

The waters of the cove are calm. No ships disturb the seas. The sun blazes high in the morning sky, casting warm rays down upon the golden sand and my skin. The birds in the fire blossom trees sing languid tunes, their notes sailing over the breeze onto the rolling surf. A pleasant reprieve. A short moment of refuge to be savoured before my day is ruined by fat, old men with their heads so far up their own asses they can't see the truth.

I trail a finger along the sand, drawing swirls into the rich grains. The gritty feeling has since shifted into a comfortable scratch over my knuckles. Like the claws of a lover. A pleasing pain. One that doesn't hurt anymore now that I've gotten used to it like many things in my life because after all what's life without pain?

"Your Majesty, they have arrived, Tobias is leading them to the meeting hall."

Ethen, as loyal and hardworking as he is, doesn't follow instructions well.

"I thought I said I'd like a few minutes alone."

"You've had a few. Now you need to do your job."

I scoff, clawing the sand beside me. "My job can be done however I want to do it, at whatever time, and with whoever I wish to do it with. I'm the king, aren't I?"

"Yes, and you know I would have no other king." Ethen shifts, his armour rattling clashing with the sweet songs filling the air. "But you and I both know there are others who feel differently. Others who are waiting for you in the meeting hall."

"Make them wait. They test my patience enough as is. Let's give them a taste of their own poison."

“Tobias won’t be so happy about being left alone with them.”

“And I suppose you want to put him out of his misery?”

“I want nothing but to serve the King of the Water Kingdom, Your Majesty.”

“Stop with that bullshit.”

“What bullshit, Your Majesty?”

I whip my head around, glaring at him. Ethen’s posture remains one of the straightest of any soldier I’ve seen, even when he’s walking on thin ice. I throw the mound of sand in my hand at him, satisfied when it hits him dead centre in the face and he splutters.

“What’s got you in such a good mood anyway? You work for me, nothing can be that great about your job.”

“Am I not allowed to be in a good mood while I do my duty?” Ethen carefully brushes his face clean, kicking up a layer of sand towards me. “If you must know, Nimue visited the healers this morning.”

“Ah, good old Nimmie. Everything’s going well then.”

“As well as can be hoped. She’s no longer sick which means she can be on land for longer without feeling so exhausted.”

“Not that she’ll bother though, seeing as you work all day. She might as well stay with her family where she has people to talk to.” I stand, glancing out into the sea on last time. The water sparkles, thousands of tiny gems gleaming under the surface. “Talk to you later, Mum.”

We walk – I walk and Ethen trails me like a lost puppy – back up the aged wooden walkway into the keep’s outer gardens. The fire blossoms are easier to see here, their oranges and reds burning bright against the lush green leaves. The sundrops have only just begun to bloom, the yellow buds opening up to the world. Those were mum’s favourites.

I throw open the doors, stalking through the corridor, heeled boots echoing against the stone. A warning of what's to come. I veer right once we scale the staircase, using a quiet shortcut to get to the Eastern Wing.

A door has been opened along the usually empty corridor. Peering inside, I see one of the maids dusting the old study. I also see an abomination standing proudly right in front of me.

"Make sure that gets taken down and put in my chambers so I can burn it."

"That's your father's coat of arms."

"My father's. Not mine. I want it burned."

"Cayson, you can't burn your family's coat of arms."

Tobias just has to ruin the fun.

Quiet as ever, he has snuck up behind me and heard my bequest. I twist around to stare down at him, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I'm not burning it because it's his. I'm burning it because it's not the King of the Water Kingdom's coat of arms, nor will it ever be again. My coat of arms is my Mothers, the ancestor of Queen Anahera, and her coat of arms is gold and teal – that brown and red insult to my eyes belongs in the pits of hell."

The maid, bless her, gasps and drops her duster. Ethen immediately steps over to pick it up for her, apologising for my words. Tobias sighs and urges me out of the room, "Best not to keep them waiting for too long, some are more sour than usual."

"They're a rotting pile of feijoas on the best of days, what makes today so special?"

"It appears that there's been a shortage of fruits as of late, including golden berries. Councilman Templeton is especially irked by the news."

I'll give Templeton something to be irked about.

We arrive at the meeting room in a few minutes and I can't help but to make a grand entrance by pushing open the doors and levelling Templeton with a seething glare the second I find his oversized meat sack of a body.

"If you're going to whinge and moan about the implications of your gluttony you can leave this meeting. I'm not going to fix this for you, nor can I when your greed is the problem." I survey the others, noting a few faces are missing from the sorry lot before me. Strolling over to the head of the table, I pour myself a tall glass of rum from the selection available and settle into my chair. "Let us begin. How have the eastern islands adjusted to the building changes? Any more issues I need to know about?"

"The buildings are structurally sound now, Your Majesty. I have yet to hear of anything that has been missed." Councilman Warehou announces. I nod my head, glancing over to Councilman Perna hunched over his glass of brandy.

"And the textiles? They are stored correctly now?"

"As dry as we can make them, Your Majesty."

"What of the southern islands, Councilman Haast?"

"We suffered minor damages during the last storm, our recovery will be complete by tomorrow evening. I will be visiting the men and women to get a better idea of any delays in production, but from what I have heard we are on target."

"Councilman Angler, have you spoken to the weavers from Doubtless Island? Was that man taken to the station and brought to the cells?"

"He slipped into the ocean, Your Highness. I have men looking for him now. He will be in my custody before the day is through."

"Keep me updated on that, should anything change I would like to know." I ease back and swallow a mouthful of my drink, happy that the quickest of the reports

out of the way, and prepare myself for the mindless rambling that is about to curse my ears. “If you have anything of value to say, get to it.”

“Your Highness, there is a larger shortage of produce from the outer islands than usual around this time of year. Not just fruit, but wood and fish also. Perhaps someone should look into it and see if they’re skimming off the top before sending their shipments over.”

“Templeton, for the final time, the only people that I would suspect would deliver below their required level without a valid reason are *your* people. I have talked to the managers and workers myself, and I have seen the plants with my own two eyes. The reason why there is a shortage of produce from the outer islands is because there has been an increase in demand from the capital. I would scratch my head and wonder why, if it wasn’t for the multitude of feasts you and your fellow fat friends have been hosting over the last two weeks. Your pig-headedness and immature need to appeal to the masses prior to council election season is the reason why we are now suffering a shortage of fruit and northern fish. The wood, unfortunately, is a separate issue.”

“Did the storms do that much damage, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, the strong winds caused the northern and western forests some damages, and the landslides took out a few more trees in those areas. We will treat the wood as efficiently and quickly as we can to spare any of the mature trucks. The younger ones we will have to find something else to use them for. See to it that the workers in the treating facilities work on those trunks as soon as possible, Councilman Egret.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Your Majesty, if I may, I have a question about the security measures.”

I turn to see who spoke – the droning begins to sound the same to me when there is no defining vocal features to make them stand out. “Ah yes, thank you Councilman Trevally. Proceed.”

“You mentioned at our last meeting that you would look into the sighting off the shores of the Helena and Maui Islands, but I have heard from my merchant sailors that pass by Coopers that they have spotted something akin to dark clouds not five leagues off the coast.”

“I will look into that further, if you would be so kind as to let me know after this meeting which of them in particular to talk to about the matter I would be very grateful.”

“What will that mean for the security details?”

Councilman Dotterel’s shaky question puts a smile to my face, though I try to hide it the best I can for the poor man’s sake. “Security details will remain as they are until the next graduation. Once the new guards are being appointed to their islands, I will be increasing the security of all our outer islands, including Coopers, Maui and Helena. It looks like they are favouring our northern border, so I will send more guards up there in the coming days.”

“Why take guards away from our islands?” Councilman Halibut booms, his gruff voice ringing in my ears far longer than I want it to so early in the day. “They have the people to spare for training, make them protect their own islands and let our boys stay.”

“We don’t have enough trained guards from the outer islands because our outer islands are production islands. I will not pull them away from their families and their income to train and be guards for their lands. Having said that, I have been to the outer islands and seen the community patrol groups they have set up as an

alternative measure to guards and I believe those patrol groups submit better reports of activity than the trained guards do."

"So why continue to send trained guards to those islands if you are so pleased with the patrols they do themselves?" Councilman Templeton croaks. I cannot help but roll my eyes.

"Because that is their job. They train to serve the crown, protect the borders, and maintain order and control among the islands. If you even cared to pay attention to the basic requirements and deployment choices, you would know."

Councilman Templeton very quickly went from a bright red to a startling purple, much like his own heinous coat of arms. He splutters and gapes like a fish drowning on land and I turn to face the other councilmen, sick and tired of seeing his pudgy face.

"It's a waste of their time, going off to stand in the streets of a common village on an island while those around them work day in and day out. What order is there to maintain? They should be allowed to stay home and work on their islands where they want to be."

"Girls and boys from the inner islands and the capital go into schools and training academies because that's what you push them to do, not because they want to do it. The outer islands are the ones that have a higher threat against them, hence why we deploy guards to those islands to protect them. I cannot and will not fault my people for choosing what they wish to do as employment. If I do, I certainly won't be starting with the outer islands."

"Forgive my lack of knowledge, Your Highness, but it seems that your weekly visits to the islands bring less and less witnesses each time. To ensure we have a better understanding of how many inhabitants are on each island, shouldn't you invoke mandatory attendance at your weekly appearances." the recently appointed

portly man at the end of the table squeaks, the first time I've heard him speak since he stuttered his forgettable introductions weeks back.

"That would interfere with working hours and decrease productivity. I'm not wasting people's time and effort just so I can see them stand in a crowd and wave at me. If you won't say something of substance then keep your mouth shut."

"Your Majesty." the frail wobbling syllables coming from Hasting's mouth give me hope my day won't be ruined. "My contacts in the Air Kingdom have told me our shipments haven't arrived in the volume we have sent them out in. We also have word of debris washing up on the isles east of the trade route. What can we do about this?"

"My dear Councilman Hastings, I am loathe to say I cannot do anything, but it is what I am forced to say. We cannot change our trade route with the Air Kingdom without much planning and trial and error. This route is the quickest, safest, and calmest route we have chartered. Even with the Darkness destroying ships and killing our crews, it is safer to remain with our current route than lose time, efforts, and resources establishing a strong replacement. I have spoken to King Ryu about this very issues and he is in agreement with me."

"King Ryu," Councilman Angler growls, "he sounds more like our king than you are. All we hear at these meetings is "King Ryu this" and "King Ryu that". Grow some balls and make your own decisions."

The room falls silent. Angler, as much as I hate to admit, is a strong contender in a fight, verbal or physical. He knows exactly where to strike his opponents. By the look on Templeton's greasy face and a few others, I can see who else agrees with him. The usual lot.

“King Ryu has been a great help in aiding me to better understand my position as King, Councilman Angler. I don’t see many of you stepping up to guide me in the right direction.”

“We’ve given you plenty of opportunities and told you of many things we wish to see changed, your Highness.”

“Opportunities and changes that would make me give up the throne, yes I am aware of those. It pains me to tell you, but I have no wishes to leave this throne and I certainly won’t give it up to a bunch of self-serving old men who can’t look further out than their noses to what struggles others face in this Kingdom.”

He snorts, hunching over to stare me down from the centre of the table. “You call yourself a king, boy, but you can’t take responsibility of your own problems. When there’s a shortage, you should be establishing practices to limit the access to resources. When security is suffering, you should be upgrading our stations and better equipping our guards to be ready for such an attack. Instead you blame us, blame our children, and you curl up next to your precious King Ryu, wagging your tail like a good little boy. You’re just a dog, a little runt-”

“That’s enough!” I growl, fists banging against the table. Balls of liquor and water float above the cup rims, spheres moving within their invisible containers, waiting for instruction. I drop them back into their vessels, some less controlled than others to spite the likes of Templeton and Halibut. It doesn’t quite quell the frustration though, the need to clench my fists still lingering. “Ridicule me all you want, but King Ryu is a far better king than I, and a far better king than my father was. This meeting is adjourned.”

I stalk out of the room, Ethen trailing me as Tobias’ low, calm voice fills the silence. “Should anyone wish to propose any *useful* ideas or information we should all be aware of…”

The doors thud closed in Ethen's wake. My hands are shaking, nails biting into my palms. I hate them. I fucking hate them. All they do is try and control me to better themselves. I'm fucking over it. Over being used. Over being targeted. Fucking over everything.

Throwing open my chamber doors, I head for my desk, upending the last of my rum into a tumbler. I throw it back, relishing in the slight burn as it goes down, the warmth in the back of my mouth.

I let the empty bottle tip over as I turn, aiming for the sideboard containing the rest of them. I grab whatever bottle my fingers touch first, nearing wrenching the cupboard door from its hinges. Amber liquid sloshes over the rim as I pour, soaking my shirt cuff and burning up the last of my patience. I seethe, setting the bottle and the glass down with a loud thud and head for my wardrobe. I yank the soiled shirt off on the way and throw it towards that bloody red and brown tapestry of shit.

"I should've replaced the lot of them. Angler is a bastard with no morals but his own twisted perception of them. Templeton is a whining, fat, rich old man who craves control. Halibut follows them like an obedient bitch – and they say I'm the runt!"

"Cayson, they're doing it to rile you up."

"They do it every single fucking time!" I growl. I can feel the waters around me are unsettled. The alcohol. The drops at the bottom of the flower vases. The taps in the bathroom. My hands shake so much. "I'm not my father! I'm not some brick-headed prick who cares about money or status or making pacts with nobles. I am the King of the Kingdom of Water – I don't answer to them!"

"Nor should you, Cayson." Ethen takes a step forward, arms twitching by his side, his eyes locked on my hands. "You don't answer to them. But you answer to the people. Your people. You do right by them as a whole." his hand comes to rest on my

shoulder, a light squeeze to pull me back down from the heights of my anger. “We’ve got a meeting with the local board of the outer islands in fifteen minutes. They are people who directly help those around them. You don’t have to deal with that lot for the rest of the week, Tobias can deal with them. Let’s get you cleaned up and ready for your people.”

I release a deep sigh, the tension leaving my body. The waters settle. I rub my face with my left hand, scrubbing away the remaining anger lingering in my eyes and mouth. “You’re right.” My eyes drift to the stained glass window over my bed. The teal and gold shimmering over my sheets like sunlight peering through the ocean. Shifting and dimming with the clouds, only to burn bright once the sun is set free again. “How are the training academies going? Does there need to be any enforcement put into the teachings? The weaponry practices?”

“For what I have seen in passing, the guards are being trained up well – better than how the Academy of Crystalline Waters is handling their lot.”

“Old Gillies finally got a hold on them, did he? I was wondering if he was getting too old to do his job”

“Old, yes. *Too* old, never. Master Gillies is the best guardsman this kingdom has ever known – he’s too wise to be considered too old.”

“I’ll have to pay him a visit later, maybe gift him a bottle of the Keep’s own Anahera vintage.”

Ethen scoffs, the hint of a smile curling his lips. “I’m sure he’ll love that.”

“He’s one of the only men I trust to do their job. I can count you all on one hand - Gillies, Tobias and you.”

“I’m glad you finally acknowledge my hard work, but we really do need to go.” He zips by me, pulling a shirt from my collection and throws it at my chest. “Cover

that up. We don't need your usual plethora of followers to see more than they are meant to."

"What do you mean, Ethen, after all I am only here to serve my people."

"Serve them through security and guidance, not with looks and lack of personality."

"You wound me, Ethen." I shrug the shirt on, striding towards my abandoned glass. Swallowing it in one large gulp, I place it back down and steer myself towards the corridor. "Let's go, I have other things to do once this meeting is over."

Analia

It's a lot harder to keep your focus when the thing you're meant to be focusing on is invisible. My hands have been grabbing at nothing since we started training. I feel pathetic; sweat dripping down my face, cheeks red in the hot sun, and still nothing has happened.

"Kian, I don't know what to tell you. I don't know how to do this and I don't know what I'm meant to be seeing or doing to do it right."

"It's not that difficult when you see the threads, okay. To the untrained eye, they are nearly undetectable-"

"They *are* undetectable. I've been moving my hands like I'm kneading a loaf of bread for an hour and nothing has happened."

"The ghost bread is coming along great." I glare at him, eyes burning with frustration. "You're not looking at the threads, you need to look beyond the surface into the Magic inhabiting the air. That way you can see what it is you're meant to be harnessing."

"How? How do I look beyond the surface? There is no surface, the air has no beginning or end – it's air!"

I thought I'd like training with magic more than the strength and fitness training, but I'm starting to wish I had a circuit to run or climb. Anything real to do so that I didn't feel dumb for standing there plucking at invisible strings for the rest of the day.

Kian sighs, throwing his head back and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Let me see if I can find something to help you, maybe that way you’ll stop complaining and actually pay attention.”

“I have been paying attention!” I seethe at his back, watching him head below deck. Leaning up against the foremast, arms crossed in front of me, I fight the urge to clench my fists.

We’ve been at this for three days; Wake up, training, breakfast, lessons, magic training, break, dinner, training. My breaks are little more than a short reprieve before Layla calls me down to the galley for food. Now that we are in the Magic Realm, heading somewhere I have yet to be told, I have less time to sit down and talk with Layla. The most I see her is when she joins me for William’s lessons.

George has been very kind and patient with me during my physical training, and she tried her best to teach me about magic and how to take control of someone else’s magic, but it all went over my head. Those three hours were a waste of her time and I can’t help but feel bad because of it. I mentioned it to Kian, who gladly stepped in to teach me – though I’m sure it is so he can ridicule me more.

“Here.”

I catch the piece of rope before it hits me in the face, sending Kian another glare as his final warning. “What am I meant to do with this?”

“Watch.”

The rope slips out of my hand, slithering through the air and coiling up around itself before undoing the knots and loops created. It drifts and dives, curling around Kian’s extended arm. Dances over his wrist, slithers between his splayed fingers, and wriggles up his arm only to slide all the way down again and hover over my limp hand still held out in front of me.

“Did you see the threads?”

“I-” I glance down at the rope, feeling the rough fibres under the pads of my thumb. “Maybe, I think I saw something.”

“I’m going to lift up the rope. When you see the threads, I want you to try and manipulate them and take over. Let’s see if you can keep it up for ten seconds.”

The rope rises out of my hand and this time I can finally see the tiny wisps of silver dance around it. Once it’s at eye level, I take in a deep breath, gently extending my hands out to coax the threads. They shimmer a little, perhaps showing they notice me or at least what I’m trying to do, and for a brief moment the rope hovers in the air before dropping to the deck with a dull thud.

“Well it wasn’t ten, but it’s better than before.”

I bend down to pick it up, cradling it in the palm of my hand. “The threads were so obvious this time, what changed?”

“Sometimes it is easier to see something that’s already there by introducing another thing that is almost the exact opposite.”

“Did I tell you that?”

“No, that one I learnt myself through judgement and observation.”

My brows furrow and I tilt my head to the side. “You aren’t talking about learning magic, are you?”

He gives me a look, his mouth halfway between a grimace and a smirk. “It’s a family thing, something you don’t want to talk about, so I suggest moving on and getting back to our magic lesson.”

I roll my eyes, “It’s not that I don’t want to talk about it-”

His volume increases, sarcasm and false sympathy dripping off every word. “You don’t want to possibly remember things and get freaked out.”

“No, that’s not-”

“You don’t want to be a part of the royal family, is that it?”

“Let me talk!” I shout, clutching the rope in a death grip. My heartbeat thrums in my ears, chest heavy and short of breath, but I push through. “I don’t want to talk about family when I know absolutely nothing about them, when I know I should know everything about them but I don’t even know what they look like. Do you know how that feels?”

This time he’s the one to roll his eyes, “That’s just an excuse. You’re not telling me the real reason.”

“I am!”

“You don’t know us, Analia, but we sure as hell know you.” Kian steps forwards, encroaching on my personal space, and stares down at me. “We know everything about you. We know exactly who you are on the inside. You don’t want to talk about it not because you don’t know us but because there’s something else that’s bothering you about it.” My eyes widen, heart thumping in my ears and no doubt my chest is visibly jumping with each beat. “You’re hiding something because you’re scared.”

“Shouldn’t I be scared?” I huff, taking a step back and folding my arms in front of me. “Kian, I am the queen of a nation I only found out about a few weeks ago. I’m seventy-something years old. I am a magical being with no memories or magic. What does that make me? Who am I when you take all of that away from me?”

“Nothing that matters has been taken away from you.”

I throw my hands up, “Everything has been taken away from me! I am nothing without those memories, without the knowledge of the kingdom, of our families and the people I am meant to help lead. I can’t even hold up a piece of rope – that’s something a child could do, right? Something a kid learns within the first ten minutes of them being taught about their magic.”

“No, you don’t get to throw my words back at me. Listen,” Kian grips my shoulders, “You are angry. You are upset about this. I get it. This is part of the reason Ryu and I didn’t want you doing this in the first place. It happened, we are here, we can’t do anything about the past now, okay? We will go over this magic stuff every day until we get back home. I won’t let you be in danger, nor will I let you be seen by anyone but this crew as less than the Queen of the Kingdom of Air. Whatever happens, you have Layla and George beside you, you have Tress guiding you, and you have me ready to put anyone and everyone in their place. That includes you, so knock it off and focus on your training, got it?” he shoves me slightly, throwing my shoulder back, before ruffling up my hair.

“Stop that,” I swat his hand away, kicking out at him, and he shuffles back with a chuckle. I hold up the rope, one hand still squeezed into a fist at my side. “Hurry up and cast your magic.”

“By my magic, is it that time of the month or are you hangry?”

“Piss away, Kian.”

We continue training with the rope for half an hour or so, long enough for my record to hit five seconds and for a sheet of sweat to cover my forehead and neck. No doubt I’ll have a bright red burn across my cheeks and nose before the evening’s end.

Layla finds me nestled in a hammock near the front of the ship in the early afternoon. She prods my ribs to make me move, forcing me to give up my reclining space for her. Once settled in, she nudges my shoulder gently, “I heard you and Kian got into a bit of a shouting match, you alright?”

“Yeah, he just irritates me sometimes. Wish I could throw him over into the sea and get some peace and quiet.”

“You and me both, buttercup. It’s not like you to shout though. Want to talk about it?”

“This magic training is doing my head in. I can barely see what it is I’m meant to be manipulating. When I do get a hold of it I lose it almost straight away. It’s pathetic.”

“I don’t think it’s pathetic, Analia. Magic isn’t easy to understand, no matter who you are. Things are always going to be difficult because Magic isn’t an easy thing to control. It takes time, patience, and a lot of willingness to fail time and time again until you succeed. Preconceived notions on how to control it won’t help either, so you should stop comparing yourself to who you used to be.”

“It’s who I am meant to be.”

“No it’s not. You’ve changed – you can’t return to being a person you were before when you aren’t the same person, nor will you be that person ever again.”

I turn to look at her. Her dark brown eyes stare out into the vast stretches of the sea, distant and guarded as she continues, “Things are different now. You have lived a life in someone else’s shoes, learnt what it means to work day in and day out for your pay. You’ve learnt the importance of community and of helping and caring for others. You’ve seen things. You’ve experienced things. You were there when Te Tai Tapu was attacked. You saw what they did to our people. I bet the Analia from before had none of that knowledge, none of that deeply personal connection to guide her decisions. You are a better person and I will not let you believe that you are not enough. The woman you were before is not who you need to become. You are already above her, you are better than her.”

“You should be the Queen. You deal with things much more logically than I do.”

“Maybe one day I’ll have my own kingdom to rule, with refugees from the attacked villages. I’ll make sure to hold you to your promise of sticking by my side and being there for me whenever I need something.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will.” I chuckle, resting my head against her shoulder. Layla wraps her arm around me, pulling me closer. “Queen Analia’s bodyguard deserves anything and everything she wants after what she’s been through.” Layla hums in agreement, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Being here feels different than being in the human world. The waters are different, the air is different. It’s all different.”

“It is. Does that bother you?”

“No, not bother – maybe confuses is the best world for it. It makes things harder to see when everything contains magic. I mean, you saw what going through the gate did to the ship – everything feels alive now.”

“I feel that too.” Layla shuffle around a bit, her thumbs rubbing against her fingers. “It’s strange. Being in a place you shouldn’t be in.”

“Does it bother you?”

“A little I guess. Magic is everywhere, like you said, but I feel like it’s looking at me. It knows I’m an outsider. I’m not meant to be here. It’s not a hostile feeling, don’t get me wrong, but it’s not exactly inviting. It doesn’t help that things look different here compared to home.”

A tear begins to fall down the side of her nose, silent and fleeting, and I wipe it away with the pad of my thumb and wrap my arms firmly around her waist.

“I won’t see the sand again. Or the trees. The town was a mess, nothing could make that look any better, but the people made it home. I’ll never see them again. Mama. Dahlia. Freddie. Jeremiah.”

“They’re always with us though. They’ll never leave our hearts.”

“Yes,” her lips stretch into a heart-breaking smile. “They will always be with us.”

We sit there in the hammock watching the sun soar across the sky, diving towards the glistening water until our stomachs gurgle and growl, the need for food

too great and the distraction too urgent to hold onto the brief moment of silent solidarity any longer.

Cayson

"Cayson, how many times have I told you that you shouldn't lean back on your chair like that? If you break the legs, there is nothing stopping you from falling back and giving yourself a concussion."

I roll my eyes, setting all four chair legs back on the ground and reaching for a glass of orange juice. "I'm not a child, Tobias. If I fall backwards then it's all my fault and you should be glad that I've learnt my lesson. Until then, I will continue to do what I like and if that includes reclining in my chair while I drink and read my correspondences then I will do just that."

Half of the letters are scattered over my end of the table and slowly invading Tobias's designated section - not that he seems all that bothered about it. The scribbles cover the whole spectrum of handwriting; cursive swoops verging on pompous lines priding themselves with sophistication. Simple, short letters squished together to fit on one page. Thin shaking lines fading away with each pen stroke. Worst of all are the jumbled messes where lines disappear altogether, words falling into others and blending together to convolute the chain of events I need to follow. These are from my local board heads and councilmen alone. Thankfully, King Ryu and Prince Kian have impeccable handwriting – I would use it as samples in the academy if they didn't contain confidential information.

"Has Egret given you an update on the damaged trunks yet?"

"No. If I don't have it in hand by tomorrow, I would like a word with him on punctuality and keeping his priorities in check. There are only so many games of Hermit one can play in succession before you lose your mind."

"I wouldn't be so sure, Cayson. I've seen him play for four hours straight undefeated."

"If you see him do that again, throw his board into the incinerator."

I move onto the next letter, this one sealed with peach wax and stamped with the Kingdom of Air's Royal insignia. I slice it open with a butter knife. Neat handwriting, no slant, downturn at the end of his 'rs – Kian's work.

Apologies for my late reply,
We have passed through the gateway and are on route to you now.
I will message ahead once we are a day away, should we not run
into any problems. Seas are calm, but we sense a storm in the air -
maybe a day or two away.
The party will include four of us and that will include a lady-in-waiting
by the Queen's side during dinners and meetings. She serves as
an advisor to the Queen. I am warning you now, she is rather
defensive and will likely challenge you should you goad either of them.
I would join forces with you in the hopes it would end in a win, but
she can be very logical and articulates her points better than you
may assume. The rest of my crew will stay on board outside of
meals and tending to the ship.
Let me know which bay to anchor in to keep out of the way of
your people's work.
Until then

"Did he elect to sign off this time?"

"No. Not that it matters. I know who it's from and there's no need for formalities."

“Others would disagree, but if you two are in the same mind then I suppose it doesn’t matter. Will they be requiring any provisions or assistance?”

“Not that I know of yet. He will likely ask once they arrive and only take what is necessary.” I toss the letter over, pointing at the centre of the page. “There’s another member of his crew in the royal party.”

Tobias skims the news. “A lady-in-waiting and an advisor to the Queen. Perhaps she is more important to Queen Analia than the Prince first thought.” he hands it back, nodding to the new letter in my hand. “And what has King Ryu written?”

Your Majesty,

I trust my merchants arrived on your shores without issue. I have taken into consideration the reports you have sent and the word of my sailers. In due time, we shall discuss the possibilities of more secure trade routes but as I'm sure we both know, they likely won't lead to much change.

I have received word from various sources that the Darkness has been targeting the human realm and the few inhabited isles east of the Lightning Seas one hundred leagues from my borders. I doubt they will linger for long, but it should mean trade for the next few weeks will arrive on time.

As I am sure you are aware, members of the Kingdom of Air's Royal family will be in your waters shortly. I have full trust and faith in you that they will be unharmed and well cared for during their stay. That being said, I ask that you disclose any issues between you and your high council that may interfere with this visit to Prince Kian. If there is any chance that my people could be under threat I would like the forewarning so we can act and prepare accordingly.

Remember, should you find yourself unsure of what to do, I am always here to assist.

His Majesty King Ryu

Guardian of the Kingdom of Air

"He doubts we will find another trade route that serves us better than the Diamond Road. Sightings of the Darkness in the Human Realm and outside his borders. He has asked that we disclose any issues that may impact the visit to Prince Kian so that they can be prepared."

“The Human Realm. If it’s following the vessel, we may need to warn the Prince.”

“I’m sure they would know if they were being followed. There’s nothing going on with the council they need to know, is there? I’ve got it under control.”

“While I do believe you will have it under control, it is still wise to inform them of the possibilities. Hostility from councilmen Angler, Templeton and Halibut could result in unaccounted for attempts to meet with the Queen. We both know how that will play out.”

“By the sounds of it, we can set the lady-in-waiting on them and she should be able to tear them apart.”

“And be accused of the Kingdom of Air attacking our people, not the best idea, Cayson.” Tobias leans back in his chair, throwing an arm over the back of the unoccupied seat to his left. “We need to keep the visit quiet for our sakes. If word gets out there’s a royal visit, I wouldn’t be surprised if they try to create a rally outside the keep’s gates. Perhaps even a scandal about this visit being the reason there’s a shortage of produce. The less they know the better.”

“Agreed. I will post more guards in and around the keep for the visit in case something happens.” I gulp down the rest of my juice, reaching for a bread ring and the pot of cream cheese.

Breakfasts are nearly always a lavish affair with breads, spreads and fish. Juices and flavoured waters and the hot options of tea, coffee, or mulled wine if I’m feeling particularly pissed off. There’s too much food that gets prepared for me alone. Forcing the staff to eat before they do anything else is the only way to stop the cook’s hard work from going to waste. Ethen loves it, and has brought Nimmie in on several occasions to indulge in the decadence.

“Did Ethen tell you about the planned visit to the training academy?”

“He did. I am not sure if it is necessary to change the curriculum of our guardsmen training, Cayson. We have yet to come across any issues with it and from what I have heard and seen there is nothing to fix.”

“There is. It’s obvious isn’t it?” I lean back, shifting my gaze from the food to the window looking out over the courtyard below. The courtyard which currently houses six guards from the Hikiwai and Capers Islands. “Think of all the guards we have and have had. Where did they come from?”

“Well, they come from our islands, both central and outer islands in all directions.”

“Exactly, the islands. What about those who reside underwater? Do they get to become guards? Do they have training academies?”

“No, they do not.”

“So you see why there needs to be a change in the curriculum. We have been excluding our people who inhabit the waters between our islands. They are in need of security and protection too.”

Tobias sits still for a moment, his mouth slightly open as the news settles. “I didn’t know you had a meeting with the underwater leaders too.”

“I didn’t. Mayor Huttoni came to visit me when I was talking to the Coopers Island residents.”

“And how is Mayor Huttoni? He hasn’t been out of the water for months.”

“He’s frustrated, as he should be. He’s been the only voice of support for the underwater community on a large matter of things. Things that I should’ve been keeping on top of. Can you believe how easy it is to forget there’s a whole community of people you are meant to look out for when there’s no representative to hear out?”

Tobias nods his head, “I admit that is a problem, but there is a concern for the health of these representatives. Those who don’t know how to safely ascend and

descend can cause themselves a lot of stress and problems in the long-term. If you're wanting to integrate the academy to include both beings and therefore teach for both landscapes that kind of training will take months to establish and complete. What will we do about that?"

"Easy. We start by training them in their preferred landscape. I can get the academy on land restructured and model it in Tangaroa Plain's city square. Then once each class has completed the stages in one academy, they switch. Part of the curriculum will be on how to manage and control shifting landscapes."

"Will they be required to stay overnight in the other landscape."

"Required, no. Encouraged by the end of the training, possibly."

Tobias nods, mulling it over as he goes in for his third serving of that repulsive avocado on toast. "I see you've put more thought into it than others expected. I see no reason not to and I'm sure after consulting with some architects and builders in the area we can get a solid foundation set up before the month is over."

"I will send a message to Huttoni of our plans and see who he recommends."

"You've made yourself a well-developed case and course of action, Cayson. And you didn't get angry when I kept giving you problems to solve regarding your plans."

"Well, it helps that you won't try stab me in the back when I leave and that you don't care if I misspeak or trip over my words. Having conversation with civilised people makes it easier to remain civilised."

"Now we just need to get you used to looking people in the eye so they know you mean business."

I scoff, almost choking on the last of my breakfast. "Good luck with that." Sliding back from the table, I wipe off the crumbs on my shirt front and throw on my embellished royal coat. With its heavy teal fabric and gold embroidery and

metalwork it's by far my favourite item of clothing and the only piece of royal garb I can stand wearing. "They will be forming up at eight, if we head off now we can watch their drill procession."

"You want to go watch them run their morning drills?"

"Are you kidding me?" I reply, resting my right hand against my heart in mock offence. "It's one of the best feats of this kingdom. Seeing them all, from different islands and social rankings, standing in line side by side and following orders all while acknowledging and never stepping out of formation. If only their fathers could see them."

Cayson

Ethen awaits us outside the training academy gates. Two younger guards stand at attention by the gates, their gazes constantly flicking between the distance where they're meant to be facing and his back. As we near, their eyes drift for a few seconds, long enough to see who is coming, before returning to keep the celebrity among us in their sights. Ethen has certainly made a name for himself.

"Your Majesty," Ethen bows, the others copying after a few seconds of processing. "Glad to see you've made it in time for the morning's activities."

"Would hate to miss it." I slap his shoulder as I pass, nodding to the young boys and saunter forth into the courtyard.

The courtyard mimics the keep's front entrance – the rugged, stone tiles not quite flat, challenging the guards to watch their footing. The surrounding structures give the feel of an observation post more than a training facility, complete with fifteen-foot high walls, round towers with crenels and merlons standing tall at each corner. The training academy used to serve as the fall-back location in the event of an attack on our soil. Citizens would seek shelter within and the guards would then protect from ground level and on the walls above. Now, with so little action going on, it only has one purpose.

The morning roll call has already begun. Master Gillies's voice fills the air as names echo off the stone walls. Acknowledgments and salutes follow, sharp and clear, while the rest of the students stand at attention – alert, heads held high in the hot morning sun, eyes focused on a singular point directly in front of them. No fidgeting. No talking out of turn. No shuffling. Just how it's supposed to be.

We stay off on the side of the parade, waiting like everyone else. Master Gillies already knows we are here. He has the highly valuable ability to sense when people are near but out of sight, something that used to make me anxious and paranoid. He folds the register in half, arms close to his sides as he addresses the whole courtyard.

"Today we have the honour of King Cayson and his party gracing us with their presence. When you have graduated from this academy, you will very rarely get to see the King, so I suggest you take the opportunity given to pay attention, show him you are the best guards that have been trained within these walls, and consider this your first engagement with His Majesty."

"Yes, Sir!"

Gillies nods at us, stepping off centre and giving us the floor. I grin, striding forward with the spotlight on me. Once I'm facing everyone, their sweaty faces failing to hide their excitement and curiosity among other emotions, I cross my hands behind my back. "At ease."

They fall into the same position in one clean, harmonious unit.

"How many of you have come from the outer islands, put your right hand up."

Out of the hundred and twenty of them, a little more than half raise their hands. I nod, beginning to pace a slow, steady path. "Thank you, you may lower your hand. The inner islands, not including this one. Show of hands." Forty or so hands shoot up. "And the rest of you are from this island. Correct."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"How many of you are aware that we have whole cities and settlements below our waters?"

Silence fills the air, some faces turning to glance at a fellow comrade wearing the same confusion as themselves. A few hands slowly rise.

“How many of you can and regularly go underwater, perhaps to visit family or go to the markets?”

Most of the hands drop. Three remain. I nod at the girl on the far left. “Where do you go?”

“Tangaroa’s Plain, Your Majesty.”

“And you?” I look at the boy in the centre back, his long lanky arm shaking in the slight breeze.

“Atlantia, Your Majesty.”

“And you?”

“Tangaroa’s Plain, Your Majesty.”

I nod, turning and pacing back towards the centre. I stop. The air buzzes with Magic, like the sea knows what is about to happen and is anticipating their reactions. I smile.

“Starting next week, you will begin to practice how to fight underwater. You will learn how to breathe freely, getting over any fears you may have regarding breathing underwater. You will learn how to adjust between land and sea. Once I have seen your progress and can firmly say that you have all completed this stage of your new training, you will then be sent to the training academy in Tangaroa’s Plain. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” it could simply be my own excitement, but their response seems stronger, the anticipation of new things stirring up their energy.

“Wonderful.” I turn to Gillies, bowing deeply and stepping back. “The floor is yours, Master Gillies. You may continue with training.”

Gillies nods and grabs the parade’s attention, allowing us to slip away and head for the entrance to the academy’s main building.

“Next week? Are you sure that’s enough time to set everything into place?” Tobias speaks low as we glide through the empty hallways, our steps echoing and voices carrying, easy for eager ears to hear. “You have yet to consult Mayor Huttoni of your plans – we don’t know if there is enough time to establish a building of this size in the city square.”

“We will make do.” My gaze wanders over the walls.

For centuries, this training academy has been creating the strongest, sharpest, most loyal warriors of all the Three Kingdoms. Paintings cover the walls detailing the first guardsmen, different techniques learnt in training and some of the academy’s teachers. It is pleasing to see the memories, the show of strength and leadership on these walls.

We turn right and head up the stone staircase, “Besides, the sooner things are running, the sooner we can get more of our people trained up and serving their communities and preparing for any potential attack the Darkness makes on our islands. The setbacks will be from those who don’t want others to have more opportunities or power than they already do.”

“You believe the councilmen will have word of your plans by our meeting this evening.”

“I don’t doubt it, especially considering where we are going after we are done here.”

We reach the final hallway on our journey. Portraits of the royal line stare back at us on our left, the sunlight shining in through the windows on the right and bringing out the colours of each painting. Anahera, her glistening hair like molten gold, eyes as deep and wondrous as the sea, greets us. Each step brings a new face, some in their youthful days while others look more withered, rugged and worn from the services to their kingdom. The second to last frame I miss completely not wanting

to spoil my good mood, instead I stride an extra few steps to make sure it is out of my peripheral sight before peaking over to the final frame. Me.

It was painted a few days after my coronation. Well, what could constitute as my coronation given how half the steps couldn't be completed due to the former king's crown going down with him wherever his sorry head took it. That and the fact half the people on Haven didn't want to believe their king and future heir were being replaced by the public embarrassment that was the forgotten second son. The painter, I can't remember his name to save my soul, seemed to find that piece of me that was mourning inside and brought it out in my eyes. Not mourning for them but for me. For who I would become.

I turn and stand before a solid oak door, knocking on the odd chance someone is inside. Knowing the study's owner is taking lessons and he doesn't let anyone enter his office without his expressed permission I receive no response. I push the door, grunting when the weight refuses to shift without sacrificing a lot of energy.

Gillies's study is what you may expect; while the room isn't that grand in size, a massive bookshelf lines one wall. The dark wood brings a warm contrast to the cold grey walls and the sizable desk and sturdy chair in the centre of the room share the same grain. The desk's contents is of interest to me. What is of interest is the floor to ceiling windows looking out over the courtyard below. From here, high above the students, I can watch their every move.

They take turns to strike, block, and counterattack. Everyone moves as one and completes the task before resetting, awaiting Gillies's count. It's fairly easy, a warm-up if anything, but the precision and speed of some of these guards is commendable.

“We should’ve done this sooner,” I murmur, “back when I first took the throne. Think of how many guards we would have if we had brought the two groups together.”

“Perhaps it is better we waited until now.” Tobias strolls closer to the windows, crossing his hands behind his back. “Trying to integrate our peoples too soon could lead to problems.”

“You think this is still too soon?”

“I think that we don’t have many other options considering the threat the Darkness brings. In saying that, I believe many will be able to accept the need to bring everyone together sooner than others may have thought suitable.”

“Their prejudice is the least of my concerns. If they can’t drop their egos and come to terms with the fact there are more people in our kingdom than those on land I should send them down to the water cities and see how they act.”

“That would result in a lot of issues, Cayson.”

“But it would be a great lesson, wouldn’t it?” I look back at Ethen, noting how he doesn’t reply but the corner of his mouth curl upwards.

“Let’s focus on the elephant in the room, shall we?” Tobias sighs, staring out into the courtyard. “This academy isn’t the one we should be focusing on. Like you said to Councilman Templeton, these are not the people we need to start on to create change – they are already in favour of it.”

“We will head to the Academy of Crystalline Waters after lunch. If I am going to be on my best behaviour, I need to have a full stomach. Maybe that way I won’t embarrass the noble children so much.”

“I highly doubt you’ll succeed,” Ethen pipes up. I glance at him, a wicked grin on my face. “Something tells me you’ll be more inclined to bully them with your appetite satisfied.”

“I won’t be *bullying* them, Ethen. Merely putting them in their place.”

“By what means, Your Majesty?”

“By whatever means I see fit.”

***

I know as soon as I enter the main foyer I will have to hold back my anger over the course of the next few hours. There aren’t many enrolled in the Academy of Crystalline Waters, maybe three hundred max. In saying that, the number of students ambling through the hallways during class hours is ridiculous. At least most of them have the common sense to be embarrassed and apologetic when they see me glaring at them, running off to class after a shallow bow. I turn to see Tobias giving me a sympathetic look.

Ethen remains stoic, a hint of frustration visible in his narrowed eyes. I roll my shoulders back, head held high, and continue moving through the hallways to the Magic Lore classroom – the room I have no doubt will be dormant in its productivity.

The door creaks open under my palm and it takes every muscle in my body to refrain from slamming it against the wall.

Students chat, sprawled in their chairs with their feet up on the desks. Some sit on the desks, their feet dangling off the sides. It’s a cacophony of noise that grates my ears and stokes the fire within my chest. Paper balls fly across the room, shouts and jeers swallowed up by laughter at their target’s expense. The professor, something beginning with a P or an F, dozes on his chair in the corner feet propped up on his desk – more specifically on the textbook for Magic Lore.

With a flick of my wrist, I douse him in water, causing him to jerk backwards and fall to the ground. “What-Who was that? You’ll pay for that.”

“It was me, you insolent, disappointing waste of space.”

The room falls silent. Chairs squeak as some of the legs return to the ground. I stalk forwards, glaring at every single pair of eyes before me. “Enlighten me. What is so invigorating, so exciting that you need to talk amongst yourself, yet so mind-numbingly boring for your so-called teacher that it puts him to sleep?”

No response. Some are weak and drop their eyes as soon as I meet them. Others, the noble children of the councilmen most notably, point their chins out and dare to challenge me.

“Let’s try that again. What could you possibly find so interesting that you would all shift from the topic of Magic Lore to discuss these more important issues? Do they have anything to do with this class? Are they relevant in the slightest compared to learning the basics of Magic and how we in turn are gifted with the abilities we have?”

“At least what we’re talking about isn’t baby stuff we already know.”

Dead centre of the back row, ashy blond hair and dark blue eyes. Templeton’s son. A toothy grin begins to spread across my face.

“It that so?”

A wave of water unleashes itself upon him, fabricated out of the molecules in the air within my immediate vicinity. The crest of the wave touches the ceiling, barrelling down upon him and only him. Some students scream, jumping out of the way. Others balk, staring at the impossible creation slamming into a student. It throws him out of his seat and into the back wall, completely drenching him. The wave dissipates back into the air unmaking itself.

“Why didn’t you defend yourself, Templeton? This is baby stuff, after all.”

Spluttering and coughing just like his good for nothing father, Templeton stares at me like the drowned rat he is.

“You can’t do that.”

“I’m the King. I can and will do whatever I want, especially to those who treat the education I provide them like a joke.”

I turn on the rest of the class, making sure to pin the teacher in the corner with a particularly lethal glare.

“Tell me, who was the leader of our people during the days before and days after the Blessing?”

Silence. Again with the damned silence. I grind my teeth, trying to fight back the urge to douse the whole classroom, when a shaky hand begins to rise. “Yes?”

“Queen Anahera. She wasn’t the queen in the days before, but she became Queen when her people saw that Magic saw her worthy. Her methods of teaching others about the land and caring for it are why we were Blessed.”

“Good. And what kind of magic do our people possess?”

“We can manipulate water, some can create it, and there are some who can communicate with sea creatures.”

“And.”

The boy pales, stuttering and mumbling, eyes cast on his fumbling fingers. “I-I don’t know, Your Majesty.”

“Does anyone know?” I glance around, even making a show of looking at the lump in the corner and tilting my head. “Do you know?”

“N-No, Your Majesty. I-I-I don’t remember, your Majesty.”

“Pity.”

He flinches. Possibly even squeals. My eyes drift over the class once more, their scared little faces hinting at their ignorance, the severe lack of knowing I know their parents are to be faulted for.

“Some of the creatures in the waters were gifted with magic too, magic so powerful they began to evolve and develop human-like abilities. They could speak to others, and with that they developed the ability to breathe above water. They could breathe in the water molecules we use in our manipulation and so-called “creation” of water and roam about on land for a short period of time. Our people are some of the most diverse, strongest, and widely experienced in all of the Three Kingdoms,” the class begins to brighten up a little, their faces showing their pride, their naïve belief that what was passed down to them they earned. “So why is it that I am looking at the biggest waste of time, money, and resources I have ever seen? Why is it that things you should know already because you’ve supposedly known them since you could barely walk you cannot recall? You are pathetic. You are dumb. You are weak. The guards-in-training work harder than you lot do. They deserve the title of being the strongest, smartest, most diverse lot in all of the Three Kingdoms. What do you have? Do you think you are *entitled* to be here? That you have a spot written into the ledgers for you? Grow up.”

I let that settle, admittedly I have to because I need time to settle my own anger and magic pulsing at my fingertips. I roll my shoulders back, roll my head from side to side, and stare down the class in silence.

“This school is going to go through some changes, as are you. If you don’t change your attitudes, your priorities, and your beliefs about what you are owed by *me,* you will be kicked out of this school and barred from entering the grounds of this school and the training academy. This is the only chance you have to show me that you are paying attention. Is that understood?”

Quiet murmurs of acknowledgement ring through the room.

“IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

I huff, rolling my eyes. “If you don’t want to be here, don’t come back tomorrow. You can tell your parents yourself why you aren’t receiving your education anymore. If you do decide to show up, I want everyone in the main foyer by 7:30. We’re going on a field trip to show you the real pride of the Water Kingdom. If you’re late, you’re out. Got it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good.” I spin on my heel, staring the still quivering pile of shit. “You’re fired. Take what’s yours and leave.” I stride for the doors, brushing by Tobias and Ethen who remain stoic and menacing against the wall. “Class dismissed.”

Analia

"Kian, are you in there?" I knock against his door, knuckles grazing against the pale peach wood. He hasn't arrived on deck for early morning training, something that I actually found myself wanting to do now. After waiting for twenty minutes, the dawn drawing nearer, I started looking around for him. Not in the galley. Not in the cargo hold. Not on deck. I have even snuck over to the hallway leading to William's cabin to listen out for any conversation. William's snores could be heard through the door which left me with one more place to look – the captain's quarters. I knock again. No response.

Perhaps he's sleeping. Considering how many times he's literally thrown me out of bed to train, the urge to seek revenge is tempting. I try the door handle. A soft creak emanates through the room, halting my breath in my throat. I peer inside.

Nothing. His bed sheets are tidy, the grey comforter a little wrinkled. A cup sits on his desk, steam caught under an invisible lid. Papers cover the surface of the dark wood, wax seals broken and ink scribbled over the pages.

I head over and pick up a letter, its scribbles hardly legible.

Captain,
Everything is in order in my kingdom. There is nothing of note that I think needs to be brought up with you, however, my advisor wishes to let you know of a slight difficulty within my council. As you may already be aware, not everyone likes me. I have a handful of my men who aren't very fond of my current plans, and with future ideas being set into motion, he feels that there could be an increase of detest towards me and my actions. In case they catch wind of your incoming vessel, it should be noted that I have very greedy, narrowminded men in high places who may wish to have words with members of the royal family, and as such, may find opportunities to catch you at inopportune moments. I will make sure my personal guard is at your disposal over the course of your visit.
I give you permission to drop anchor in Anahera's Cove. It is the keeps private beachfront and will make disguising your visit a lot easier to manage. C

I return it, eyes set on another piece of paper. More specifically my name.

Brother,

I know that you may not want to hear this but please stop harassing my wife. I am already going to throw you in the ocean the first chance I get, I would advise you not to make it worse for yourself. Analia doesn't need to be constantly humiliated by you or by anyone else. If I get a report from Tress regarding you mistreating your queen one more time Kian I will

“What in the four hells do you think you’re doing?”

The letter drops from my hand, a gasp releasing from my lips. I jerk around. Kian stands in his doorway, a sneer blazing on his face. His eyes are as sharp as steel, cutting through me. He stalks forward.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, “I was just trying to find you.”

“I obviously wasn’t in. You don’t enter someone’s room and look through their stuff without their permission.” he pushes me towards the door. “You wait outside until I return – is that not common sense, Analia? Or do you think that because you’re the Queen of the Kingdom of Air you can just do whatever you want.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have-”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” he spits out, levelling me with a wholly disappointed look. “I don’t want to hear any more excuses from you. Leave.”

I ground myself, not willing to move another inch. “What did he mean by ‘have words’ with us? Is that bad?”

“It’s none of your business. That is a private matters.”

“It is my business, he said ‘members’. That’s plural.”

He stalks forward, looming over me. The air turns frigid. “Until you stop acting like a child who thinks she’s entitled to everything just because you are on this ship, you don’t get a say. That letter wasn’t addressed to you and as the person in charge of making sure you don’t try throw yourself off the side of this ship in a fit of panic I decide what I tell you and what I don’t.”

“I am not acting like a child and I won’t be throwing myself off the ship. I have improved so much since I got on here-”

“Not enough!” Kian roars. A shockwave pushes me backwards, spine digging into the doorframe. “You’re not doing enough! You still can’t manipulate magic for longer than ten seconds. You are the slowest person on this boat. You complain about

your shortcomings more than anyone else I have ever met. You are naïve, ignorant and you still refuse to bring up *our family*. Every time you so much as think about them you start to hyperventilate and it's pathetic. If you can't push past the barriers you've put up in your own mind then how do you expect to even begin to learn how to face what is happening out here in the real word?"

Everything begins to burn. My throat from closing up. My chest from needing more air. My eyes from fighting back tears. But he doesn't stop.

"You are the most infuriating person I know. You are nothing like you used to be. You can't do anything right. The only reason you are alive is because of us, because of *my* crew and *my* efforts. Saskia's magic is the only magic you have and for what? For you to just ignore when it comes to your training?" he scoffs. "Of all the people from our kingdom, the prophecy just had to pick you. And *you*, prideful, arrogant *you*, just had to have the final say in going into hiding. It's fucking bullshit. You are nothing like her and she wasn't going to be enough to stop all this shit."

I back away, blinded by tears. I stumble out onto the deck, feeling my way to the stairs and sniffing every breath. A hand touches mine once I land on the main deck.

"Miss Analia, let's get you to your room." Jay whispers, holding onto my hand to lead the way. I nod, eyes focused on the planks beneath my feet. We arrive at the medic bay after a minute or two – Layla's humming drifting through the gap under the door. Jay knocks and coaxes me to stand beside her.

Layla swings the door open and there's a moment's pause before her rough hands clasp my shoulders and pull me inside. "Oh no, buttercup. What's wrong?"

"I'm nothing." The words come out freely, my mouth working separate from my brain. "He said I'm not enough. That I won't be enough."

Layla sits on the bed, pulling me in close and wrapping her arms around my shaking frame. I'm sobbing so much I can't hear anything else. My whole body aches. Every muscle. Every cell. It all feels like it's turned to stone. Cold, hard, heavy stone.

They let me cry, presumably so Jay can inform her of what she heard. Layla rubs up and down my back, wiping tearstains from my cheeks and rocking side to side. She pats my hair, lays kisses on the crown of my head, and hums the tune from earlier. By the time the door opens again I have calmed down, the hysterics are nothing more. Now I am just a shell with leaks and a hollow core.

"Jay told me what happened." George speaks low, stepping forward closer to the bed. Another set of footsteps follows, these ones heavier but no less careful. "I'll make sure he doesn't come by."

A tray is placed at the foot of the bed. White sleeves with silver details catch my gaze. Selena – our medic.

"Can you sit up for me, sweetheart." her voice is warm and soothing. Layla helps me, keeping an arm around my waist as Selena tucks my hair behind my ears and away from my face. "I want you to forget everything he said, okay? He is a fool. A damned hypocritical fool." Selena leans down to pick the tray up, setting it on my lap. "I want you to eat all of this and to eat this," she pulls something out of her pocket, the wrapping a dull foil. I smell it. Dark chocolate, "and I want you to drink lots of water, okay? It's been a rough morning and we don't want you to be hungry or dehydrated any longer."

The tray contains a different sort of breakfast – a bowl of porridge drizzled with sugar and spices, a selection of fruits, a glass of water, and a mug of dark liquid. The steam rolls up into the air and causes my throat to close up once more, tears pooling in my eyes.

“Hey now, buttercup. No more crying. It’s coffee – you love coffee.” Layla wipes my red cheeks and thanks Selena. “There’s nothing to cry about, buttercup. You’re okay.”

That doesn’t stop the tears from falling. Or the heaviness on my chest to return, squeezing my lungs in a vice. It doesn’t stop the thoughts from rushing through my head. *I’m not good enough. I will never be good enough. I am a disappointment to everyone. I am nothing more than a waste of time and space. I can’t do anything right. How am I the chosen one when I am the worst person for the job? Why couldn’t it be Kian or Ryu or George? Why is it me? Why did it have to be me?*

“Analia. Analia look at me.” her voice is stern. It’s meant to be stern but I can’t hear it clearly. Layla speaks, I can see her mouth forming words but I don’t hear any of it. I hear thumping in my ears. Loud, fast beats that increase in speed, my chest hurting more and more with every loud thud.

“Analia,” Selena leans in, entering my cloudy vision. “Analia listen carefully.” She stares at me. Her grey eyes piercing, latching onto my soul. “Open your mouth and count to ten.”

I can’t. I can’t do it. I can’t do anything. I’m useless.

“Analia. Open your mouth.”

My lips wobble, parting slightly. Only a sliver but it’s enough for her. Air rushes in - barges in is more like it - and my body feels like it’s being soaked in ice water. It’s intrusive, chilling and shocks me to the core. The thoughts halt. Stunned like the rest of me.

Air flows into my lungs, the feeling alien as it remains before easing out. Selena does it again, pushing air into my lungs.

“The next one I want you to breathe in yourself. Same pace.”

Air is coaxed back out and I inhale under the scrutinising gaze of the medic. Her eyes soften, less like a scalpel poised to create an incision, and her hand comes to my face to brush my hair out of the way once more.

"You and I are going to stay in here today. No interferences and nothing else that will remind you of what happened." She lifts the porridge-filled spoon, levitating a piece of red fruit to land on top, and holds it out to me. Out of the corner of my eye, a gust of wind disperses the steam from the coffee, not letting any more wisps leave. "Eat up. Then you can have the chocolate."

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I am in the room for the rest of the day, William's lesson and my other training put on hold. Layla returns every few hours to check up on me, bringing water and more chocolate from who knows where. Brief conversations float in from outside the door – by the sounds of it, Ciggy and Piggy are on guard duty and only let Layla and George enter. Even William has to pass his messages on through a middleman.

It doesn't hold up the following day. Not only is it a bad idea to keep half the crew from doing their jobs properly but I am antsy and don't want to be stuck in the room. I have training to do. Things to learn. I don't want to look like a child having a tantrum. Like someone who is quitting.

Layla never leaves my side once I thank Ciggy and Piggy, her eyes ready to cut a man to shreds.

That man stands at the ship's wheel next to William, with George not too far away. Ciggy and Piggy follow behind us as we climb the stairs and stand in a loose circle, Layla a half step in front of me on my right – the side he's on.

"She finally shows her face."

“Don’t say another word, douchebag.” Layla seethes, eyes narrowing into thin slits. Her muscles shift under her skin, body coiling up ready to pounce.

“Miss Layla, please stand down.” William holds a hand out, palm down, and Layla’s anger is held at bay. “I’ve already advised the Prince on how he should act and aim to improve himself. Your words only serve to goad him on.”

“What’s this meeting for?” I ask, looking over at George, a slight frown tugging down my lips. George shrugs, glancing over to William.

“We will be entering the Water Kingdom’s borders in the next few days.” Kian speaks. “Before we enter their lands, we need to inform the heads of crew and the party visiting the Royal Keep of their roles and what needs to happen.”

“There is word of some disagreements between His Majesty King Cayson and his fellow councilmen,” William continues, “not all of them, but enough for us to be arriving during a turbulent time. We need to make sure all of us are aware of the possible outcomes of our visit.”

“The royal party consists of the four of us,” Kian motions to himself, William, Layla and me, “which means that the rest of you will remain on the ship. Only you three,” he gestures to Ciggy, Piggy and George, “will be permitted to leave the ship to aid in running whatever supplies and resources we are given. We stand out like sore thumbs compared to the Water citizens so I don’t want there to be any gossip floating around about foreigners. Stay hidden whenever you can, talk to the staff in the castle or the royal guards that stand watch if you need something you don’t have. Do not, under any circumstances, talk to anyone else.”

Ciggy, Piggy and George nod, answering “Yes, Captain,” before Kian dismisses them. George squeezes my hand briefly as she passes.

Kian sets his gaze on Layla. “I don’t care what you have to say to me or about me. This isn’t a causal visit somewhere – as soon as we enter their lands, you two

must listen to what I tell you to do. If *anyone* catches sight of either of you on land, there will be no chance this will be a private matter. King Cayson is sticking his neck out enough as is for us, we don't need his people to have more of a reason to side with his opponents."

"Miss Layla, you will be Miss Analia's lady-in-waiting during our meetings with the King." William cuts in, deterring the rebuttal on Layla's lips. "You mustn't talk out of place, only speak when spoken to. This is a formal, high-ranking position and you carry the Air Kingdom's image in such a position. I know I don't need to ask this of you, but please consider what would happen between our two kingdoms should you act poorly or offensively towards the King."

"I won't step a toe out of line." Layla nods at William. "I promise."

"As for you, Your Royal Majesty," Kian starts up again, teasing out the title to spite me, "you will have to be the perfect picture of a queen during our entire visit. Is that understood?" Kian's tone remains the same, however, the scrutiny in his eyes is drowned out by many other emotions. The tension around his eyes dissipates slightly, but there's nothing else to help decipher his mood. "You must act like you know everything, like you aren't hearing new information, and like you actually have something of importance to say-"

Layla seethes. "Kian, I swear to god."

He holds up his hand, silencing her with a quick sharp glance. "Is that understood?"

I nod. His guard drops, possibly not expecting me to be so quiet. Layla squeezes my hand. I return it and turn my gaze to William.

"The King will likely ask you a lot of questions, Miss Analia. It is best to answer as honestly as possible. If you don't know then we can step in and reply for you." William gives me a warm smile. "This will be the first test of your training. If

you can convince King Cayson then you will have done a wonderful job in ensuring our secret is kept between just a few of us."

"I take it these meetings with the king include only a few people." Layla says, eyes darting between the two men. "There won't be any of his councilmen or advisors there?"

"He will have his chief advisor with him and his personal guard. That is all." Kian steps forward, voice lowering to a deadly calm level. "It is imperative that you do not talk to any councilmen. They do not know we are coming and King Cayson wishes to keep it that way. They will use our visit as a ploy to undermine him and we can't have the Water Kingdom being the second nation to fall in on itself." Kian stares at me, his pale grey-gold eyes blazing.

"We will always be beside you. There is nothing to worry about." William adds, bowing with a hand on his heart. "I will protect you both with my life. All I ask is that you don't make trouble for yourselves."

"We'll try."

"Thank you." he nods at me, stepping away. I turn to leave, my back towards the other two when Kian calls me name.

"I need to speak with you." There's a long pause. "Alone."

Layla grumbles, murmuring "I'll be on deck" as she passes. I face him again, folding my arms over my chest.

"I'm sorry for what I said yesterday. I was just frustrated and upset." I don't reply. I keep my eyes on the planks, pupils following the grains of the wood. "It wasn't right to say any of that to you. I should be keeping you informed on the messages I get. I should have told you about the visit to the Kingdom of Water earlier when you first asked me."

I say nothing. There's isn't anything to say.

“We’ll start training tomorrow. It’s best to keep up your fitness and to keep practicing with your magic to get you more familiar with it.”

“It’s not mine.”

Kian stops talking, his mouth empty of his next sentence. There’s confusion in his eyes. Like he doesn’t remember what he said yesterday morning.

“The magic isn’t mine. It’s Saskia’s. I have no magic to use. I use the magic of others, manipulate it and spend it, until I lose touch with it. We can practice all you want but it’s a waste of time. You said so yourself.”

“Analia, that’s not-” Kian sighs, “I didn’t mean it, it isn’t-”

“I’d like to train with George again.” I roll my shoulders back, looking away towards where she and Layla are talking on the starboard side of the deck. “And I would like the second training time to be put towards William’s lessons. I need to learn as much as possible about the Water Kingdom before we arrive.”

With that said I pivot on my heel and walk away, jerking my head to the lower decks when Layla catches my eye. It’s breakfast time and I’d give anything to be as far away from Kian as possible.

Cayson

I nurse the glass of rum in my hand, half-drooped eyes taking in the sight before me.

"How dare you attack my boy! How dare you do such a thing, humiliating him in front of his peers like that! Is that how you want to be known? The boy-king who attacks innocent children, who threatens them and treats them like filth so that they will grow up to be ever loyal to the cause."

"Attacking your son because he talked back wasn't humiliating him, Councilman Templeton. It was showing him reality. Firing the teacher in front of the class was humiliating, yet I don't see him complaining about it."

"You abused my son!"

"I shed light on your son's sheltered world, a world that you have painted for him. Now he has seen what life really is and has begun to take his own path."

"You better go back to the academy and tell them to let him back in, otherwise there will be consequences!"

"You son decided to withdraw his enrolment at the academy, not me. If you want to discuss it with him, you may do so without involving me."

"He's without a proper education!"

"The training academy is an educational facility rooted in practical training. I don't see how that isn't proper education."

"It's slave work! He shouldn't be indentured to you in service for the rest of his life."

“He isn’t. None of them are. As he has experience understanding politics and managing people, he would have the opportunity to become a leader of one of the islands if he so wished. I don’t know what kind of twisted beliefs you have regarding other ways of life, but rest assured there are options and choices they freely make. Perhaps you should talk to your son about it this evening.”

Templeton is fuming. Absolutely livid. I couldn’t be happier.

I didn’t expect the visit to the training academy to turn out quite like it did. Mattias, as I soon learnt, was awestruck when he witnessed the morning activities. He wasn’t alone as many of the students stood wide-eyed and gawking at the displays. Sneak attacks on unsuspecting enemies. Two against one fights. Weapons training. It truly was a spectacle to behold. It’s a shame others don’t share the same appreciation for such fine art.

“Look. The Academy of Crystalline Waters curriculum has been due a remodification for decades now. The overall impression the students leave is forgettable. They are weak, slow, and extremely inexperienced compared to not only those at the training academy, but in the other kingdoms. We cannot be seen with future leaders and future decision makers who cannot put out a fire. The academy will be restructured, it will have classes that require practical and theory based learning that are more challenging than before. There will be more focus put upon wielding magic, instead of learning from an outdated book that has them twiddling their thumbs. There will be more students and more diversity so that we can educate more citizens and more future leaders.”

“You’re not saying you’ll open it to the middle-class, are you?” Halibut narrows his eyes, yellowing teeth exposed.

“No, dear Councilman Halibut. I’m opening it up to everyone.” a gasp cuts through the room, followed by mumbles of scorn and uncertainty. “The middle-class.

The working-class. Those under water. They will all have the opportunity to attend the Academy of Crystalline Waters, as will there be such an academy established in Tangaroa's Field standing beside the soon to be opened Training Academy for those wishing to enrol to become a guard and protect their cities and settlements."

"That's preposterous!"

"That's evolution. The Water Kingdom will not be a place of exclusion and hierarchy. Not anymore."

"And how do you expect to fund these ridiculous plans of yours, hmm?" Angler leans back in his chair, meaty arms crossed over his chest. "You expect us to pay more money to support these runts? You want *us* to support other people's children because they can't do it themselves?"

"I don't want or need you to do anything, Councilman Angler. There is enough money to do this without your involvement."

"It's already brought in more money than we were receiving with the limited enrolments we had." Tobias adds. "And Mayor Huttoni has set up accommodation for those willing to study in the Academy of Golden Sands."

Majority of the table nods, some earnestly with a twinkle in their eyes. Others, the followers of my opposition, sneer and grumble but ultimately they give in and don't put up a fight. That's what I like to see.

"Make sure that you spread the word around. I don't care if you're for it or against it – this will be the beginning to making our kingdom the smartest and strongest of the three kingdoms and we will be ready for war with the Darkness should it come to that."

"You think we will go to war, your Majesty?" Hasting frowns, his willowy fingers shaking around his glass of brandy.

"I do. And I think we would be foolish to pretend we are not."

“You would be foolish to put your money towards wasteful endeavours like your precious academies.” Angler seethes, pushing himself away from the table and up out of his seat. His hands grip the table, the wood protesting under his monstrous hold. “Your father didn’t waste his time with these meaningless deals. What are these half-trained miscreants going to do against the enemy? We have no weapons, no capable magic trainers nor generals to lead the armies you have yet to convince us we have. How are we supposed to fight an enemy who wreaks havoc and devastation wherever it goes with *children*?”

“Underestimating our forces will not do your reputation any good, Councilman Angler, nor will it have an impact on the outcome. You should learn to be open-minded, see for yourself the strength and numbers we have eager to train, to learn how to fight and protect our people. The traditional routes of kings before cannot help us against our new enemy.”

“You know nothing, boy. This threat isn’t new, it was obliterating cities before you sucked your mum’s teat dry.” Angler lets go of the table, slamming a fist on upon it. “We have been up against this enemy longer than you’ve been on this earth. Far wiser kings than you failed to best it, now you’re rolling over and exposing your weaknesses for them to make your death less painful. Handing the kingdom to them on a silver platter under the guise of ‘building a better army’.”

Angler continues, pointing at me and sneering. “What King Horatio should’ve done before you cursed us is what the Kingdom of Earth did. At least they aren’t giving up their money and resources to those below them.”

My magic vibrates in my veins and down to my bones. The room stills, alcohol near frozen in the tumblers. Various councilmen drop their gazes, staring at their fat fidgeting fingers. Even Templeton stands down, dropping the next argument ready to

fill the air, his face ashen at the insinuation. I guess that's one step he's too weak to take.

"You know nothing of what Lorcan Redmond did." I keep my eyes on Angler, weighing every word down and making sure he know exactly how much more I know than he does on the matter. "He is a murderer and he deserves to be punished for the rest of his life for what he did. Do not idolise him. Do not idolise his actions. Do not, *ever,* tell me that we should be like the torn apart Kingdom of Earth that willingly starves its people to death to appease that monster."

The councilmen lose all colour, aghast at my words. I go on. "Whatever King Horatio told you about the Kingdom of Earth to keep you shut up and unaware was a lie. The Kingdom of Earth is a dead kingdom. They will not help anyone. Not even themselves."

I stand, exhaling and craning my head back, letting myself close my eyes and take a moment. My fists are shaking, finger curled together in a tight ball ready to knock Angler out. "Is there anything else we need to discuss?" I scan the group. They shake their heads, not willing to be vocal or even so much as look at me. I scoff. "This meeting is adjourned. Be gone."

I wait for them all to leave, replying in kind to Hasting's bid goodnight. Tobias watches from the edge of the room, quiet and observant as I stroll to the doorway and address Ethen standing at attention outside.

"You can go home now, I won't be needing your services for the rest of the night."

Ethen nods, bowing at the waist. "Your Majesty."

I turn my head in Tobias's direction. "Make sure Huttoni is ready for me tomorrow morning. I want to go over the finalised plans with him before I talk to the outer islands."

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

I leave without another word, flexing my hands and shaking out the tension.

How dare he say those things about me, about King Horatio, and about Lorcan Redmond. How dare he say I am a worse king than the two of them. That ignorant, selfish waste of space. He deserves to be punished, stripped of his position and sent to the dungeons until he’s begging for a second chance. I am so much better than that piece of filth and that maniac. I have done so much for my people, I have done what he couldn’t and branched out to unite us all – what did he do? Ruin relationships and divide the nation based on his own prejudices.

I shove open the doors to my quarters, the sound of wood hitting stone echoing through the air. The desk is covered in empty decanters, something that should’ve been seen to by a maid by now.

Horatio – King of corruption and greed. Father to one, his golden child Prince Lachlan who does nothing wrong in his daddy’s eyes. Horatio, the man who disowned his second child because his wife fell sick and died. Disowned him because he was sick and his mother cared for him like any mother would. Horatio, the man who blamed a little boy for the death of the Queen.

I rummage through my desk drawers, the sideboard, and the crate under my bed – all empty.

“Dammit!” I seethe, my fingers itching for anything. I don’t care if it’s piss poor wine at this stage, I need to drink.

“Well, well, well. Look at you, boy,” a gruff, sour voice fills the room. “Squandering over bottles to escape the truth.”

“It’s not true, you’re a liar and a hypocrite.” I continue searching – there has to be something. Please, Dearest Queen Anahera, let there be something to drown this man with.

"*I'm* the liar." He growls, footsteps heavy as he stalks closer. "Who's the one who can't tell his advisor why he wants to build these useless schools? Who's the one who can't go anywhere without his precious little guard to watch over him while he sleeps? Who's the one who cries because of the nightmares in his little, boy child brain?" He stops next to me, leaning over me, his breath brushing against the back of my neck. "Because it's not me."

"I am not a boy," I feel myself shaking. I feel the tears begin to come to the surface. "I am a king. I am the King of The Kingdom of Water, of all the Kingdom of Water, and I am loved by my people."

"*Loved*?" he scoffs, the guttural sound shifting to a gurgling laugh, "Nobody loves you, boy. Not even your mother."

"Enough!" I throw the bottle in hand as I spin around, chest heaving. It soars across the room and smashes against the door, shattering into hundreds of pieces. A tear falls down my cheek.

Here's to yet another sleepless night.

Analia

It has been raining for the last three days and it's only been getting worse. It's not that big of an issue, in fact, I rather enjoy being outside in the rain. Sailers have been creating barriers over the ship to stop us from getting wet. Now instead of only one Sailer manning the sails at a time there are always two – well, George is on deck almost every second of the day and the others switch their shifts sooner due to how tiring the added barriers and controlling the sails are in these high winds and heavy rain. Even Huffs has stepped into his Sailer shoes and helped out for a few hours each day to give them more of a rest.

The storm also puts a halt to most of my training seeing as those teaching me are needed to keep us moving in the right direction. Layla and I have studied the books on the Kingdom of Water several times over, as with every other book in William's possession. One thing I have been able to do, though I would never dare to mutter a word of it to Kian, is read all the books with information about the royal family. I didn't get as choked up as I anticipated. If Layla saw me slam a few books shut and throw them across the room she never mentioned it to anyone.

The storm continues to batter the seas, churning up waves and rocking the ship a lot worse than our first day. Layla and I struggle to keep on our feet during the roughest bits and we tend to find ourselves sitting cross-legged in the medic bay, backs against a wall, waiting for it to end.

I haven't spoken to Kian since his apology. Not that it was an apology. It was more of an excuse to allow him to lash out at my expense. Some nights I try and manipulate the air to lift the rope in my hands. Others I just lie in bed next to Layla

winding the rope around my fingers, tying and untying knots as my mind wanders. It all goes back to what he said. What I believe, deep down inside me, that he's managed to yank out with scolding hot tweezers.

I am not enough. I wasn't going to be enough to begin with. The crew has been wasting their time trying to give me everything I need to know when Kian knew all along it was never going to be enough. I was always going to disappoint people. Especially my family.

"Maybe today won't actually be that bad." Layla yawns, stretching her arms far above her head. "William has to be right at some point."

"For our sakes I hope he is." I grimace, looking around at the activity on deck. It is no more hectic than usual; Selena stands by the banister on the poop deck controlling the sails and keeping the air bubble around the ship stable. George stands beside her, calling out to Kian at the wheel. William remains on the main deck, out of the way, and we rush over to join him.

"How much longer now?" Layla asks.

"We'll be at the Kingdom of Water by nightfall, these waters are within the kingdom's borders. He'll know we have arrived and should put the seas in our favour soon enough."

"That's a big feat to manage, will the storm be through by then?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

The ship lurches, pushing us all into the guard rail. Layla locks an arm around my waist, rooting me in place, and William calls out to Kian.

Out of the heavy clouds, plumes of black swoop down. One slams into the shield, a loud crack echoing through the air, and Selena gasps. She drops to the deck, caught by George at the last second. She calls out for Ciggy and Piggy to get everyone

on deck. Rain hits my face, full sheets of it, and with it the Darkness and their heat descend.

William pushes us away, saving us in the nick of time as a shadowy figure extends its talon-like hands towards us, obsidian claws mere inches from our heads. They are easier to see now. Beneath their shadowy cloaks, their bodies are skeletal but their hands and feet are more creature-like than human. Their faces remain shrouded in black.

“Get to William’s cabin and lock yourselves in, now.” Kian shouts and a hand latches down on my upper arm. He hoists us up and pushes us towards the corridor. “Stay down and do not come out of that room until I tell you to.”

“I can help-”

“I can’t let you, Analia. Go.”

Layla squeezes my waist and we crouch-run towards the corridor. Another figure swoops down above us. A gust of air slams into it, forcing the figure to go overboard, and George rushes towards us and urges us to hurry.

“You have to go, you need to stay safe. Please, Your Majesty.”

I nod and allow Layla to lead us to the hallway. Once under shelter, we straighten and run to the room, both slamming into the door to close it as soon as we’ve crossed the threshold. I shove the bolt home.

“Should we barricade the door?” I wheeze, wiping the rain from my face. Layla shakes her head.

“We need to be able to leave as quickly as possible if anything were to go wrong. Blocking it would be worse for us.”

A loud bang comes from out on deck, followed by loud noises and screeches from the Darkness. It happens again, louder, and Layla and I jump. She wraps her arms around me, slowly walking backwards until our bodies are against the wall

furthest from the deck. The noise continues but I feel the heat of the creatures nearing. That familiar acrid smell, like that of burning flesh. The hairs on the back of my neck stand upright and the room feels like it's boiling. *God, what the hell are these things?*

Crackling pops and snaps fill the room and slowly smoke does too. Layla and I stare at the wall to our left with wide, unbelieving eyes. *There's no way.*

A black claw breaks through the wood, ripping the boards from the wall. Layla shakes her head and I can hear myself denying what's right in front of us. Another claw punches a hole into the wood, further from the original one, and this time the hole is bigger. The Darkness looks into the room and a deep, beastly growl fills the air.

Layla forces us up on our feet, but the Darkness flexes its claws, sending a ball of fire at us. We duck, falling to the floor as it hits one of the bookcases nearest to the door. The bookcase falls, books tumbling out over us, and crashes to a stop in front of the door.

I extend my hands towards the Darkness, pleading with the magic inside of me to come out. A thread listens. Saskia's magic answers my call and a jet of air darts through the room, between the exposed planks to slam into the face of one of the figures. It cries out, a loud, pained cry, and disappears from view.

The other figure lets out a growl so full of anger that my whole body goes cold, knees giving out beneath me. Dull banging echoes through the room, muffled voices along with it, but the creature freezes us in place. It yanks at the planks again, tearing the side of the ship open with ease, and I let out a sob.

"Layla." I cry, tears welling up in my eyes. She crawls over to me, covering me with her body. I can feel her cheek rest against my shoulder blade, her warmth cutting through my wet shirt.

The Darkness enters, the heat in the room growing. The smouldering bookcase behind us blazes with its arrival. I'm sweating and shaking so much, fighting to keep from sobbing aloud.

The Darkness doesn't speak, nor does it give time to react. In a second, it's lashing out at us – at Layla – and a cry of agony rings in my ears. It pierces my eardrums, engraving itself into my brain, and I feel Layla's weight drop onto my back.

"L-Layla."

The Darkness lets out a hiss. I tense up, waiting for the next hit which will surely be for me. It doesn't come. A human sounds – a yell, maybe – reaches my ears followed by a gurgling squawk. There's a thud, then the feeling of cool water dancing across my skin.

"I know, I know. You're going to be okay. This will take the pain away."

Layla whimpers, her weight stops pressing down on my back, and a hand helps me up, a pale gold tan spanning the skin.

I glance up slowly, eyes darting around at the chaos surrounding us. I first see the Darkness lying on the floor, its shadows nothing more than a smoky corpse. Then I see Layla hunched over, her back and half her face enveloped in a coat of water but through it I see the burnt flesh beneath. The hole in the side of the ship is enormous, big enough to see the horizon and calmed seas stretching out towards a few stray islands.

The guy's teal-blue eyes strike me, standing out among the rest of him. He is tall, the same golden tan covering his face, but he looks ashen. Sick even. His blond hair sticks to his face, strands blocking his eyes. His hand remains in mine, squeezing after a few seconds.

"You okay?"

“Analia!”

Someone barrels into me. They touch my face and my shoulders, swiping hair out of my eyes. It’s Kian. He’s also very pale and heaving his chest with every rushed breath. His eyes quickly scan the room, landing on Layla’s crumpled form.

“She was covering her when I got in.”

Kian’s eyes soften, something like worry or concern flashing in his eyes. He then looks down at my hand. The hand still holding onto the new guy’s. He drops it and my hand falls limp to my side.

“Analia, talk to me. Are you okay?”

I try open my mouth. I try to say something. Tears form in my eyes again.

“Okay, it’s okay, don’t push yourself. You’re alright. Everyone is going to be alright.”

“I can’t do any more for her here.” The man goes out of sight, towards the hole, and calls out for someone. His friend arrives and is directed to Layla. “I need you to get her to my healers before it becomes irreparable.”

“I’ll take her on the Sailfish.” the man leaves. The lack of whining and crying in the room begins to settle in.

“And how will we get to the cove?”

“I’ll stay with you.” the guy heads for the hole again. “I’ll let your first mate know which heading to go on.”

With a woosh, he’s gone. Kian begins to lead me over to the hole, making sure to hide the sight of the corpse from me. My steps are short, barely making ground. My knees give out by the hole, causing Kian to have to loop my arm over his shoulder. He steps out, feet sturdy on nothing, and I begin to refuse. He then scoops me up and carries me outside, floating onto the deck and walking a few steps until

he's beside George and Selena. He floats me down to the floor, into George's open arms, and Selena begins to check over me.

"She's in shock." she notes. "Give it some time."

My hands shake. I see them do it. George begins to rub a hand up and down my back, whispering while she does it. Someone wraps something over my shoulders. It smells like tobacco.

A mug of dark liquid comes into view followed by Kian's pale bony hand. He crouches down in front of me, head tilted to the side.

"Ryu isn't going to like this."

"What are you going to tell him?" Teal Eyes stands behind him, looking down at me.

"That the Darkness is strong enough to break a hole in the side of my ship, something he'll have to pay me reparations for, and that if it wasn't for you the Queen would be dead."

"Is Layla going to be okay?" the words are quiet, barely heard over the commotion the crew are making around us. Kian's eyes flash and he nods after a few seconds.

"She's going to be checked over by the best healers I have." Teal Eyes replies. "You'll be able to see her tomorrow."

"I want to see her now."

"She's on a different ship, far ahead of us."

"Is she?" I blink. "When did she leave?"

Kian sighs, a small smile tugging up his lips. "Back when we left the room. The Water Kingdom have fast ships, even with all of us throwing wind into the sails."

"The Water Kingdom was here? When did they arrive?"

Kian turns his head to look at Teal Eyes. Teal Eyes is smirking, arms folded in front of him.

"Analia," Kian indicates to him. "Let me introduce to you the King of the Water Kingdom, Cayson du Clare."

Oh.

"Cayson, this is Queen Analia. Unfortunately, you've caught her at a bad time, much like the rest of us. I promise, she's usually a lot more vocal and not so dim-witted as this."

"It's understandable." Cayson nods, dropping his arms and bending in a deep bow. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. I apologise for not getting here sooner."

"You don't need to address me by my title, you and I are the same."

"That we are." Cayson excuses himself and strides off. George continues to rub up and down my back, the motion helping to chase away the numbness lingering in my bones.

"He's single, right?" she whispers, side-eying Cayson as he climbs the battered staircase. Kian scoffs and kicks George in the shins.

"Hate to break it to you, Georgie, but he's not interested in you."

George huffs, leaning forward to snatch the mug out of Kian's hand. She holds it to my mouth, tipping it gently. "It'll make you feel better."

"Not if you drown her with it." Selena mutters.

It takes a while for us to lay anchor at the beach - Anahera's Cove is what Cayson called it. In the late afternoon sun, the golden sands and shifting blues of the ocean tug at my heartstrings. Never would I have thought I'd see a beach like this again. The thought is quick to leave my mind, I can barely stop myself from leaping

overboard and running to find the infirmary. It seems Kian can sense this as he has kept the sleeve of the lent coat on my shoulders between his fingers.

"Remember what I said, we can't let anyone but Cayson's staff see us."

I nod, foot tapping against the creaking deck.

The Darkness really did a number on us. Thankfully, the masts are okay and the sails only suffered minor distress. One has a huge gash from top to bottom but Cayson said he has a sail that should work as a replacement. Wood, for the most part, suffers the most damage. The stairs have a chunk missing, the edges singed black. The banisters on the poop deck and on the starboard side have been completely destroyed. Rickety half-stakes with shattered ends remain, dotting the sides of the decks. Aside from the hole in William's cabin, which he has now evicted himself from and moved any salvaged goods into Kian's quarters, there was one more hole created on the port side of the ship's hull. It hasn't been as much of an issue as I thought it must be; George has been using her magic to keep a barrier over the hole, that way we can move with the added magic from Cayson.

The Petal Princess brushes the sand beneath her, and with the final call the anchor is dropped. Kian keeps his grip, reminding the crew of the plan and encourages them to come in for dinner and lots of it. That is reinforced by Cayson who jumped off the side of the ship, splashing in the water below.

"Stay by me." Kian lets go, heading for land and I follow suit.

Dinner isn't a royal affair, but there is certainly a lot to share around. Once the kitchenhands bring the food in, they take their seats down the end of the table and wait for Cayson to commence eating. Ciggy and Piggy don't have the patience – their hands are grabbing at plates and loading food onto theirs before they even sit down. Cayson starts as soon as his advisor finishes whispering in his ear, taking his own

seat to his right. Kian and I are to his left. As I am higher rank, I sit closer to Cayson, however, that doesn't make me feel settled in the slightest.

"Can I go see Layla after dinner?"

"I'm sorry, but that's not possible, Your Majesty," His advisor speaks up, placing a napkin on his lap, "your friend is still with the healers. It will take a lot longer than we expected to repair the burns."

"But she's going to be okay, right? You got her here in time."

"She will be. She just may be a little shocked for a while until she gets used to her body." he pauses, looking me in the eye, and immediately puts his cutlery back on the table. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, I have not introduced myself. I am Tobias Cerule. I am King Cayson's Royal Advisor and work as his right hand. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mister Cerule."

"Tobias is fine, I don't do take too well to my title."

"Neither do I."

He chuckles, mumbling a 'I see what you mean' to William on Kian's left.

I keep quiet for the rest of dinner, letting the others talk and carry separate conversations as I move around the food on my plate. From down the other end of the table, a bun floats onto my plate. It's drenched in butter. I glance over, seeing Noah grinning and Huffs giving him a warm smile in return. I let out a breath of laughter and bite into it. As I take another bite, I see the peas on my plate slowly skip across the gap and onto Kian's rolling to a stop near his. When Cayson turns to ask Tobias about something I send a perplexed look his way. He winks, scooping the peas into his mouth.

"Is Selena allowed to go stay with Layla? I don't want her to awake up scared and alone."

Kian nods, chewing slowly but tilts his head to Cayson. I turn, seeing Cayson nodding along. “She may stay with your friend. So long as she doesn’t get in the way.”

“She won’t. She’s our ship’s medic – she knows what to do.”

Dinner wraps up soon after that, no one really wanting anything sweet afterward what happened earlier. The crew return to the ship except for Selena who rushes off with a member of the staff to the infirmary. Cayson shows William, Kian and I to our rooms, mentioning that the quarters are his own and he’s down the end of the hall. By the time I’ve washed my face and put on something to sleep in, my eyes are drooping and I barely stay awake to pull the covers back over myself.

***

I cannot tell if my eyes are open or not. I’m surrounded by darkness. Every way I turn the same black curtain suffocates me. Blocking me in. A voice – soft, like a whisper in the night – breaks the silence. I spin around, try to find a light, a blip of movement to spy where it’s coming from.

It gets louder, closer, and the words are clearer.

“Why didn’t you do it?”

“Do what?” I ask.

“You did it before. You didn’t do it again.”

It’s getting closer, becoming less of a whisper. The rasp of her tone sends my heart racing. “Layla! Layla, where are you?”

Footsteps. Heading away from me. I turn, the echoes still fresh in the dark space, and I run. I run to find her. To see her. “Layla, where are you? Where are you going?”

“You used magic to attack the first one.”

“Yes. I did.” I smile a little, proud that something I did helped us.

“Why didn’t you do it again. You left the second one alone.”

“I was too scared. I couldn’t do it.”

“You didn’t want to do it.” Layla’s voice is firm, growing louder with each pause. “You could have saved us, saved me, but you didn’t.”

“I tried. But you’re okay now, you’re safe. We’re all save.”

“Okay?”

Flames ignite around us, encompassing us in a full circle. The heat grows quickly, smoke thick and pungent. Layla is visible now. I wish she wasn’t.

Her whole face is burnt, raw skin warped and blistering. Red and pale brown, ashen skin compared to her natural glow. Her brow on the right side of her face is singed off. Her long black eyelashes too. The burn carries down her throat, under her torn and smoking blouse. Down her arm towards her hand. Her flesh is worse, bone exposed in several spots. Her fingers are nothing but scorched tendons, ligaments and bone. The smoke in the air invades my lungs, coating my throat in a tar-like seal, and the nausea builds in my stomach at the sight in front of me.

“You should have saved me!” she glides closer, “You should’ve saved us. You gave up because you’re weak and pathetic!”

“No, Layla-”

“You did this!” Layla lunges forward, her skinned hands clawing at my face.

“Analia!”

I jolt upright, a scream caught in my throat, tears streaming down my face. I kick my legs out, struggling to get the sheets off. My sobs fill the room, lungs fighting for air. Arms wrap around me, pulling me into a warm body, and I latch onto the shirt beneath my fingers.

“You’re okay. It was just a bad dream.” Kian holds the back of my head in one hand, other arm across my shoulder blades, and pats my hair. I rock forwards, another deep sob rattling my chest. Tears never stop falling and I can’t get a word out. Her face. Her hands. The smoke.

“Deep breaths, Analia. Deep breaths.”

I try. I try to get her image out of my head, the words she said, but when I think I’m okay she snarls and lunges forth and I star crying again. Kian holds me firmly in his arms, a constant voice in the dark. Time passes, so much time filled with tears and panicked breaths, but eventually my eyes dry. I feel so tired. Even with the images still fresh in my mind, imprinted on my eyelids, I fall under night’s spell once more.

Cayson

It seems no one has a decent night's sleep.

The sounds of Analia's nightmare echo through the wing around one in the morning, the clock not long silent of its chiming. The rushing steps of Kian come soon after and I don't hear them again – the poor guy must have found himself stuck in one of the armchairs, legs hanging over one side as his head falls over the other. I have high doubts their lovely companion, the Queen's lady-in-waiting if I'm not mistaken, didn't sleep a wink either. My healers are good but there is pain that cannot be masked by a cooling touch. I may be imagining it, but the sound of a woman's crying flutters through the corridor sporadically, mostly when there is too much silence.

And then there's me.

Sleep doesn't wish to visit me, nor can I bring it forth with any amount of alcohol or reading. At first, I thought it was just nerves or excess adrenaline that had yet to leave my body. Two hours go by. Three. Four. Then the nightmare stirs them up once more. I find myself about to open the door to go see her myself when I hear the footsteps.

So, I spent the rest of the early morning researching, catching myself up to speed on details of the Kingdom of Air's royal family. Who are they really? What are their personalities? Their stances and behaviours? Who do they associate with among their nobility? I don't know why I am driven to look into it, but something doesn't seem right with them. Sure an attack would rattle them a little for a short moment, but for the Queen of the Kingdom of Air to have nightmares?

I manage to exhaust myself around four in the morning, catching a long nap before the sunlight lights up the stained glass and casts my room in a kaleidoscope of dazzling jewels. I crack my joints as I stretch, groaning with a particular satisfying pop of my lower back. Even with the short rest, I feel energised – that may be because morning is my preferred time of day. No doubt I will have a shorter fuse later on in the day.

I rise out of bed, quickly bathing and dressing in a slightly cleaner, more appealing teal button down shirt and black slacks than usual. I catch myself standing in front of a mirror, fingers meticulously fixing stubborn strands of hair into place.

"What are you doing?" I mutter, stepping back and heading for the door.

At the end of the hallway, I find Analia transfixed by a stained-glass window. Her near black hair streaked with silver contrasts greatly with her pale skin and the red around her eyes stands out like a sore thumb.

"That's a rendition of a few market stalls, the baker's stall in particular." I comment and she jumps, a hand pressed up against her chest. "It seems the royal family of the Kingdom of Water can't get enough of those treats."

"They are all so beautiful," she murmurs, "how are they created?"

"I don't know myself. Probably like any glass is made, then add a little extra magic and you get these." I glance down the line of windows, my eyes lingering on the one with a branch of sundrops surrounded by their green leaves. "Can I help you, Your Majesty?"

She bites her lip, dropping her gaze to her hands. "Would you be able to take me to the infirmary?"

"Of course. It's this way."

I lead her down several corridors and a flight of stairs, greeting my staff as we pass, some with the last of their breakfast in hand. We near the far end of the ground

floor, the hospital wing entrance tucked away behind the grand staircase, and I come to a stop a few metres from a door.

"The infirmary is through there. I don't have anyone else in there currently, so there is no caution needed. Do you want me to wait, or will a nurse lead you to the dining room?"

"I'll find my own way, thank you, Your Majesty."

I chuckle. "When it's just you and me, call me Cayson. You are far more experienced than I am, you shouldn't feel the need to address me so formally."

"I'll think about it." Analia shares a small smile before entering the infirmary and closing the door softly behind her.

Something makes me want to stay, to wait and see if I can hear them speaking. I know the walls won't permit it, nor will any of the nurses that come and go. Especially not Madame Myrtle.

With an hour to spend before our breakfast is prepared, I see to some of my tasks around the keep; checks for renovation plans, listing various items to be removed, enquiring with the gardener about the flowerbeds at the front entrance. Things to make me look busy. Professional. In control.

It takes no more than twenty minutes for me to get distracted. By the time I've finished everything, I'm running behind schedule and rushing to get to the dining room. I resort to passing through the kitchen just to wash my hands.

Kian and Mr Tress sit on their side of the table, the former already digging into a plate of eggs and meat. He talks to his advisor through a mouth of food, glasses of water and juice surrounding him.

"Good morning to you two, I see you like what is available."

"Don't tell me you made it," Kian smirks. "I may have to visit your head nurse to check for food poisoning."

“What little faith you have in me that was only *one* time.”

“One time too many for His Highness, I’m afraid, you’re Majesty.” Mr Tress chuckles. “His brother has made the same mistake and Prince Kian still hasn’t let him move on from it.”

I laugh, taking my seat and digging in. Tobias arrives shortly after I do, apologising for the delay. “Templeton.” he mutters, and he need say nothing more. My grip tightens around my knife.

“I hope you don’t mean to use that on any of us today, Cayson.” Kian notes, tone casual but his eyes scanning my face.

“Not you, someone else perhaps by the days end.”

Analia arrives after a few minutes, thanking Ethen as he pulls out her chair for her and pushes it in with one fluid motion. She glances down at the other end of the table where the staff sat for dinner last night.

Tobias catches it too. “They eat before us so that they can get their duties started. We eat together at the end of the day when it’s all done.”

She nods, spooning small amounts of fruit onto her plate. Kian glances over and tuts. Food flies off the platters and piles onto her plate; breads and sliced meats, more fruit, water and fruit juice in two different glasses. A steaming carafe of coffee pours out into a cup on her right. She swats at Kian, scooping things onto his plate.

“You’re wasting the food for everyone else!” Analia frowns. “I’m not going to eat this much.”

“You ate barely anything last night, you have to be starving. Just start eating and you’ll see how hungry you are.”

She shakes her head, picking up the bread ring lathered with cream cheese, topped with several pieces of meat, and puts it on his plate.

“You have the bagel.”

My brows furrow. “What did you call it?” I ask.

She points to it. “It’s a bagel.”

I smile, “It’s a bread ring.”

“What? No, there’s no such thing as a bread ring?”

“There’s no such thing as a *bagel*.” I laugh. “It’s a ring of bread. It makes perfect sense for it to be called a bread ring. Where does ‘bagel’ even come from?”

“I don’t know.” Analia frowns. “I’ve just always know it as a bagel.”

Kian slides the plate over to him, shovelling it into his mouth. “Whatever you want to call it,” he swallows, “it’s the best I’ve ever had.”

“I’ll let the cook know and I’ll see what she calls them.”

The staff begin to clear the table, wiping it down with a wash of their magic. In just a few second, the wood is shiny and clean, with not a speck to be found. I lounge back in my chair, throwing an arm over the side to get comfortable. “So, do you want to discuss things here or in one of the meeting room?”

The doors open, groaning loudly, and I whip my head around to look at the newcomer. Analia’s lady-in-waiting strides in. Her brown skin is still healing, but it’s far from the state I saw her in yesterday. She has on a deep green tunic, light and loose, and a pair of bronze pants. Every step is tense, her body rigid, and her face has a slight pinch in her lips and brow. Otherwise she’s holding her head high, back straight, looking as unaffected as ever.

“Miss Layla,” Mr Tress shoots out of his chair. “You should be resting.”

“I have a job to do.”

“Layla, you don’t have to-” Kian begins to stand but Layla holds her hand up, the scars that spread over her skin halting all of us.

“It’s what I’m here to do. I will do what I am supposed to.”

Layla makes her way around the table, into the seat to Analia's left which a member of the staff pulls out for her, gently pushing it in as to not hurt her further.

"I guess where's having it here." I lock eyes with Layla. Analia creeps a hand towards Layla, their fingers overlapping, and she squeezes gently. Layla responds in kind.

"Miss Layla," Tobias starts. "On behalf of the Kingdom of Water, let me apologise for not responding sooner. We didn't realise the storm was out of our control until it was too late. We came as soon as we could, but we couldn't reach you in time. My sincere apologies."

"You have nothing to apologise for, Master Tobias. Nor do you, King Cayson," Layla bows her head towards me. A warmth pools in my chest, causing my heart to beat faster. "You arrived in time to protect Analia and to stop the burns from being worse. I am grateful for that."

"It's a brave thing, putting yourself in harm's way to protect your friend." I note, cocking me head to the side. "Why did you do it?"

"I owe my life to Queen Analia." Layla squeezes Analia's hand once more. "She has done more for me than you could ever imagine. I wouldn't be alive without her. Even if she wasn't my best friend, I would give everything to protect her. Next to her, my life means nothing. If I may be remembered for such an action, it would be a blessing on my family's name."

"And what of your family? Are they nobles in the Kingdom of Air?" I hold up my hands when their eyes widen, perhaps panicking or astonished I don't know. "Forgive me for the ignorance, but you don't seem to have the same colouring as the citizens I've seen from the Kingdom of Air."

"My family is dead."

"Ah, so you're a stowaway."

“I am a loyal servant to the Queen. Whatever she needs, I will be there to fulfil her wishes.”

I nod, my eyes narrowing slightly. I continue to hold Layla’s gaze until my heart cannot take anymore, flicking over to Kian and leaning forward to interlock my fingers. “I recall you mentioned you had some run-ins with the Darkness in the human realm? Do you think it’s the same group that attacked you? Perhaps they followed you through?”

“It’s a possibility.” Kian nods. “But as we both know, there are more than just a few stray groups scattered around the world. For the sake of hoping less of them have found us, I am believing in the former.”

“And if it’s the latter?”

“Then we better move quickly. There is only so much time left before they find a way to attack closer to home.”

“The trade routes have been targeted for some time now.” I note, picking up a goldenberry and rolling it between my fingertips. “If we continue to lose shipments to our enemy both of us will be at a disadvantage. We should find a way to either improve our chances or work out a different route.”

Kian glances over at Mr Tress before returning his attention to me. “I was not aware of this, have you mentioned it to King Ryu?”

“I have.”

“I will bring it up with him when we return. Perhaps it would be best to hold off on shipments in the meantime. We have enough to support our people – keep your resources within your kingdom. I will see what we can do about our exports.”

“Was this attack the first attack on your vessel?” Tobias asks.

Kian sighs, “On the vessel, yes. On us, no.”

“What happened?” I ask, turning to Analia. She’s been rather quiet, surely she would have something to say about all this.

“When Prince Kian and Master William came to retrieve Layla and me from our post, the town was attacked.”

“And you two survived.” I switch over to Layla who rolls her shoulders back, chin up and refusing to step down.

“As I said, my family is dead.”

“My apologies.” I lean back, returning my attention to Analia. “Forgive me for prying, but why were you there? Surely it is not safe for you to be far from your kingdom under these circumstances.”

“Under my circumstances, it was in fact better.” she counter. “As I’m sure you know, you and I are a little bit…special. We have a job to do but we must all be ready and together to do it. Our scouts noticed that the Darkness was beginning to creep closer to our borders around two decades ago. As you were not yet ready to approach and things were uncertain with the Kingdom of Earth, we decided it would be best for me to disappear from the Darkness’ radar until things were better for you two.”

“Well,” I huff, unable to keep the bitterness from my tongue. “As much as I wish to thank you for that, things haven’t turned out well for me. Neither have they for Princess Eldora.”

“Is there any word about her whereabouts?” Mr Tress asks.

“There isn’t even word about whether or not she’s alive.” Tobias replies, pinching the bridge of his nose. “For all we know, she was killed that night.”

Kian swears under his breath, leaning back into his chair with his hands on his lap. Analia glances over at him, a look passing over her face. He shakes his head.

“Unfortunate that we don’t have more time here,” Kian sighs, “I have heard so much about your training academies. It would have been a pleasure to see them in action.”

I grin. “They are the best, but yes it is unfortunate that your visit must remain a secret.”

Layla shuffles a bit, tension in her voice as she speaks. “Is the state of your council that turbulent?”

“I’m walking on eggshells, Miss Layla.” I stare at her once more, tilting my head to the side. “If I could, I would gladly let you in during a meeting to put them all in their place. It would make my job so much easier.”

“I’m not some dog to use to intimidate those you don’t like, King Cayson. Nor am I at your disposal.” Layla seethes, eyes narrowed.

“Nor did I say you are. You are a serpent, ready to lash out at any second.”

She rips her hand from Analia’s, about to stand, until Analia grabs hold of her forearm. She winces, jolting away, and Analia apologises, hurt flashin in her eyes.

“You’re Majesty, “Kian huffs. “What did I say about goading?”

“My apologies, I did not mean it to come across that way.” I hold my hands up in submission. By the distrust on Kian’s face, perhaps my eyes say otherwise. A sharp smack hits the back of my head and I hiss, pressing a hand against the throbbing as Tobias apologises to Layla.

The longer we sit here, the clearer it is that they are hiding something. Analia barely speaks, and when she does it’s vague and factual. She looks to Kian too much. Even Layla is quick to jump on things to save Analia from speaking. I decide to bite the bullet – they can hate me all they want, but the need to know is beginning to eat me alive.

“It’s been so long since you have visited, Miss Analia.” I swirl a glass of juice in my hand while leaning back into my chair. “Tell me, how have you been? From what I’ve been told, you are one of the Air Kingdom’s best fighters. Your magic and skill must be extraordinary to be titled as such. Care for a demonstration?”

“It would not be wise, given how small the space in here is.” She feints, nestling further into the chair. “Surely you can consider yesterday’s target an example of my strength.”

“Surely, if I were not under the impression that it was not your own magic that you used.”

Kian refutes, trying to build an argument all while Layla contests whether or not I even saw what happened with the Darkness in the cabin. Jackpot. I hold up my hand, silencing both.

“There is no need, nor reason, to hide anything between us. We are on the same side. I have been forthcoming with my own situations regarding my councilmen and me. If there is something that I should know, as a fellow ruler and child of the prophecy, don’t you think I deserve to know of it?”

She glance over to William who has been silently observing the course of this discussion. There’s a hesitation in his face, a pause, but he gives her a short nod.

“As I said,” Analia sighs, “I was sent to the human realm and stationed on an island for a while. Two decades. It gave everyone the time to let things develop and for you to find your place in the world. However, in order for me to remain hidden, I had my magic and memories taken from me. It was to protect us all. Until the time was right.”

“And now it is.” I nod, giving her a small smile. “May I talk to you alone, Miss Analia? One child to another.”

“I don’t think that-” Kian starts but Analia cuts him off, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Of course.” she stands, turning to Layla. “Get some rest and eat something. You must be starving.”

Tobias calls upon a staff member, asking for a plate of food on Layla’s behalf. The woman nods, bowing, and bows towards Layla also before rushing off. I slide out of my chair, setting the glass on the table and stroll around to the grand doors behind the head of it. Analia follows suit, keeping in step alongside me as we leave the dining room.

Analia

Cayson leads me down a few corridors towards his private quarters. We enter a small office along a narrow corridor, his guardsman coming to a stop near the end of the hallway – the sound of clattering armour silenced. Looking inside, a bright teal and gold banner drapes over the back wall. I find myself looking for more of those beautiful stained-glass artworks but there are none in sight.

Cayson indicates to the plush armchair in front of the desk, urging me to sit as he bringas the chair behind the desk. Now both chairs are on the same side.

We settle into our seats, Cayson tapping the ends of his armrests with his index fingers. I find my own hands getting clammy, my nerves highly strung. I have failed to convince him that everything is as it should be, what other things can I say to disappoint?

Cayson clears his throat, glancing up at the door.

“Do you think there will be eavesdroppers?” I ask, lowering my voice.

He shakes his head. “No, my guard won’t allow it.” He then sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Miss Analia, I asked for this private meeting to discuss things that Tobias does not know of. Things your own people may not know of.”

“Go on.” I attempt to dry my hands on the material of the dress. Cayson’s leg begins to bounce, and I immediately stop, instead clasping my hands together on my lap.

“Do you know what you’re doing?”

I freeze up, eyes wide, mouth dropping open a little.

“Because I don’t. I don’t know what I should be doing, who I should trust, what choices I make will have an impact on the Darkness and our role in what seems to me like an impossible task.”

I try and compose myself, looking down at my fidgeting fingers. “I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing. I don’t even know who I am, Cayson.” A sigh passes my lips. “My memories are not real. I have none of *my* magic. Who I am completely changed about a month ago. Everything I knew was destroyed and then I found out that none of it was important, that the people I thought I had known my whole life weren’t important. What do you do about anything after finding that out?”

“Do you feel like you’re being used?”

Do I? I shake my head after some thought. “No, it’s more like they’re trying to shape me into who I should be. All with good intentions, because of course I am supposed to be the Queen of the Kingdom of Air – if I don’t look or play the part, everything turns to ruins.”

“So you don’t have magic?” Cayson frowns. “You said it was taken from you?”

“All of my magic was removed. I have a dragon, well, I’m bonded through Magic with a dragon. My dragon’s magic is what I have been using when I’ve been attacked.”

He nods. Another question forces itself up in his mind, I can tell by the way he immediately shuts his mouth and locks his jaw. I motion for him to ask and after some coaxing he relents. “Who is Layla to you? How did she come into the picture?”

A smile begins to grow on my face. “Layla is my best friend, that isn’t wrong. We somehow managed to become friends in the town I was sent to. I’m not too sure how that ended up, I still don’t quite understand the aging differences between us. She and I have been working together for years, I knew her family and I know her. When the town was attacked, I was with her. She ran back to her home to try find her

family. I found her with her baby brother in her arms." My hands begin to work on their own, a thumb circling my knuckles. I wait a bit, try to find the thread of composure to continue the story.

Cayson takes the initiative. "Was he…?"

I nod. "There was nothing we could do for him. William and Kian had found me before I found her. William said the Magic had taken him. She feels like the only family I truly know right now."

He nods, dropping his head and leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "What…what have you been told you need to do?"

"I was told to convince you that I wasn't plagued with issues."

He chuckles straight away, an instinctive reaction he apologises for, but I wave him off with my own laughter before continuing.

"I was taught by Kian, William, and the rest of the crew how to fight again. How to manipulate magic. I was taught the history of the Kingdom of Air, and read up on your kingdom's history as well. I didn't quite get to the Kingdom of Earth's history – there weren't many books concerning them."

"It's a difficult position we're in with them." I shuffle around, eyes focusing on his face. His teal eyes hold so much pain in them as he dwells on it. "There was an incident a few years after your self-banishment. Queen Keitha was killed by her husband, Lorcan Richmond. Who knows what he was thinking when he did it, but ever since Princess Elora has been missing and he's taken the throne completely for himself."

"And you think that the princess is dead?"

"For our sake, I hope not. She's meant to be the third child of the prophecy."

I frown. "I don't know much about the prophecy. How do you now it's her?"

Cayson glances around to the bookshelf behind us, scanning the spines. He jumps to his feet, stalks over to the shelf with his eyes set on a particular area. It's quiet for a while, a patient silence, until he wipes a thin, poorly bound book to get a better read of the title. Nodding, he slides it from its place, flicking through the pages until he finds what he's looking for.

"Here is our most accurate recording of what was spoken."

Handing the book over, I lean in to read the script.

The ashes of evil will stir once more
shrouding the world in darkness so cruel and violent
it will threaten the safety and survival of us all.
Only Three,
separated by many years and experiences
can snuff out Evil's poison before it suffocates the world.
The Worthless Queen
The Forgotten Prince
The Neglected Heir
They must unite
sacrificing blood and bond
to find an end to what we started
and rid the world of our remains.

"We believe this is what the firereader said, but we cannot be certain. Oral histories, especially those whose original narrator dies soon after it's spoken, can be very difficult to remember."

"The Forgotten Prince," I tracee the words with the pad of my finger, "you think that pertains to you?"

“The King and Queen of the Kingdom of Earth never had a son, if they did he would’ve been the only thing his father could ever speak about.”

“Are you sure this is the correct interpretation? You could also be the neglected heir from what I’ve seen and heard.”

“And who would end up with the Forgotten Prince title?”

“Kian, maybe? Or perhaps there was a son born to a different mother in the Kingdom of Earth. Or in any kingdom.”

A grin pulls itself up onto his face. He bites his lip, struggling to hold back the bark of laughter in his throat as he shakes his head. “The prophecy was spoken centuries ago and has been carefully scrutinised by hundreds of elders from all the kingdoms. You are the Worthless Queen, I am the Forgotten Prince, and Princess Elora is the Neglected Heir. I will give you a creativity point for coming up with those paths of logic. Finding out there is someone else in this world with ties to any of the thrones would certainly make things interesting.”

I roll my eyes, handing the book back to him. “God, you’re just like Kian.”

“I’m not surprised. He’s helped me a lot, serving as the royal voice from your kingdom for almost half a century. He’s got a lot of influence and he has played a big hand in how I manage my politics.”

“What exactly is going on with your councilmen?” I ask, my brow furrowing as I try to recall the situation. “Are they trying to form a coup or something?”

He rolls out his neck, releasing the tension that has built up with a crack. “I have broken them down into three categories; those in favour of me as the king, those who don’t quite see me as the king but know that I hold that title and will behave and act as they should, and those who contest me and my title and strive to strip me of it or form a democracy as to override my authority.”

“And you’re having issues with the last lot.”

“Yes, and unfortunately they hold power over their islands and their noblemen. I’m trying to restructure a lot of different areas, including the council and the schools, but there are adamant to keep things are they are because they have more power this way.”

“What do your people feel about this? The non-noble ones?”

He pauses for a moment, thinking it over. “They’re don’t get to tell me much. The king before had a system that favoured the nobles and pushed everyone else to the side. You know that I have citizens in my kingdom who dwell underwater, don’t you?” I nod. “Well, he cut them from the council. He had the academies exclusively for land-dwellers. Slowly, he started treating the outer islands like working islands and stopped listening to their pleas for better income, easier access to education, stronger shelters – the basic requirements.”

“What about now? Have you been able to open this back up for them?”

“I’m working on it. We’ve got academies being built in one of the main squares underwater. We have exchange-style programs lined up. I have plans, many plans, but Tobias thinks it’s too soon to put them all into play.”

“Too soon for who? If it’s what is right than it shouldn’t matter.”

He straightens up, eyes widening a fraction. “That’s what I thought too. He thinks I’m pushing the nobles too far too soon.”

I frown, tilting her head to the right. “If action is necessary for positive change, then shouldn’t that action be done sooner rather than later? Those with their own power will contest it and try slow it down regardless of when it happens. I don’t think there is a lot of time to sort everything out.”

He nods, returning to his seat and leaning forward. “What have they told you about being ‘The Worthless Queen? It’s always puzzled me because you have such a strong reputation. You served the royal family before you became one of them, not

only that but you single-handed deal with the nobles and their complaining. How could you be worthless – the head of the Royal Guard is one of the most useful, important positions there can be."

I feel my face flush red, dropping eye contact and returning it to my hands. "They haven't told me much and I…don't really want to become that version of myself again."

"Why not? Your skills and presence are exemplary."

"It's not me. I can't step into those shoes again. It's like my feet have shrunk."

He lets out a huff, brow furrowing at the saying before clarity washes over his face. "You're not so sure you belong in such a position as queen, do you?"

I shake my head. "I don't feel prepared. I don't know if I will ever be prepared. I'm…I'm scared. I'm scared of who I will become, if the person I become will be good enough. I don't want to disappoint people. I don't want to let anyone down because of what I chose to do."

"How can you let anyone down when you chose to save them from being attacked?"

"Well, we don't know if the Darkness would've attacked the kingdom, do we? We don't know if what I chose really did anything." My fiddling begins to worsen as I wring my hands together. "Sometimes I think about it and wonder if it did anything or if I just made things worse for us."

"What you did was brave. You sacrificed yourself for your people. You may not think it was worth it now, but you don't know that. You don't know what could have happened. None of us do."

I purse my lips, almost winces at my next words. "How…" I cut off, shaking my head. Cayson leans in, focusing on me and waits for me to continue. "How do you live up to something that has been set for yourself when everything is different about

you? How do you live up to the expectations others set for you? That you set for yourself?"

His expression shifts, his eyes a sea of emotion. "We just have to do our best. Even when others don't want us to."

I nod, taking a deep breath. I dry my hands on my dress again, giving him a brief smile. "We should get back to the others. I need to make sure Layla has eaten."

We stand, Cayson following me out. Ethen meets us at the end of the corridor as expected and hangs back a little to talk to him.

"You're growing lazy with your duties, keeping a wide reach."

"Private conversations only remain so if others are out of range. It is not my business to know and I stationed myself as I saw fit."

I can't help but smile, staying quiet as they continue.

"Like you're going to go and spill my secrets to people like Angler and Templeton. Perhaps next time you should be outside the door, maybe then you'll have more dirt on me to blackmail me with."

I walk a few steps ahead of them, remembering the way back to the dining room. The final corner comes into view along with a loud commotion from the main quarters of the keep. I slow a little, my feet still carrying me forward, and peer around the corner.

My eyes take in all the ruckus in the main entry chamber; a portly man pointing a chubby finger at a guard, his baritone vocals echoing off the stone walls around us. Another few men stand a few steps back, arms crossed and eyes narrowed at the young guard who has yet to back down. The taller one's head begins to turn towards me.

A hand yanks me backwards, out of sight and into a hard chest. The scent of sea salt and rum fill my nose as Cayson pulls me back further, turning me around

and putting an arm over my shoulder. His guard takes to my left, keeping in stride with us as Cayson seethes.

“What the hell are they doing here?”

Ethen lets out a sigh. “I’m not sure, Tobias never mentioned expecting them.”

“That’s because they invited themselves in.”

“Who invited themselves in?” I ask, looking up towards Cayson. His eyes are more guarded now, something akin to anger swimming beneath the surface and his grip on my shoulder tightens.

“Those nobles I was telling you about. The ones that refuse to acknowledge me." he turns down a thin corridor, less ornate than the main passages, and his guard falls behind a few steps to keep an eye out. “We have to get you all out of here.”

“But we hardly got to see you. There’s still so much more to talk about.”

“It’ll have to be all for now.” Cayson opens a door, the warmth that comes with it blowing hot air into my face.

The cook continues to work, preparing for lunch and maybe even getting a start on dinner. Unlike Huffs, Cayson’s cook is a wiry old woman, her long, curly hair a starling shade of green. A pale green like that of a child about to be sick. Cayson continues forth through the steaming pots and pans, towards a door on the other side of the room. He throws it open just in time to call out Tobias’ name, halting the man whose hand rests on the door knob leading out to the main foyer.

“We have unwanted company.”

Tobias immediately drops his hand, taking a step back.

Cayson turns to Kian. “Apologies, my friend, but we will have to cut your visit short. We have to get you back to your ship as soon as possible.”

Kian nods, holding a hand out to Layla who pulls herself up from her seat. William helps her along before his head whips up to look at Kian. “I must go find Selena.”

“Five minutes, no more.” Kian notes.

William nods, passing by us to sneak into the kitchens and out of sight. Kian and Layla arrive at our sides, Layla’s scarred hand reaching for me. Cayson grabs her other hand and begins to pull her into the kitchen.

“We have to move fast. If it begins to hurt, tell me. I can use some magic to ease the pain but we cannot slow down.”

Kian grabs my upper arm, nudging me in front of him. I look back at Tobias, a nod of thanks sent his way before we disappear into the stuffy air. Cayson leads us back through the kitchens, this time heading the opposite way to where we came from.

He makes us wait in the corridor outside of the kitchens, waiting for his guard to give the all clear further down the way. A few seconds pass. Layla’s grip tightens as she shifts, a sharp intake indicating her discomfort. Cayson then heads off, pulling Layla along with him. We go down narrowing passages, the wooden doors looking less magnificent each with each one that goes by, and even instructs us to go down a trapdoor at one point, all while keeping an ear out for any other footsteps.

The ground beneath out feet turns to rock and sand, the walls dim and windowless. The air smells musty, the sound of water nearby a constant accompaniment as we venture forth. We pass through dark corridors and over uneven paths, Kian’s hand helping me keep my balance and letting me know he’s still next to me.

After five minutes of walking through the cold and dark, a light begins to brighten our path. We emerge onto a beach, the sand a brilliant gold. I glance behind

a find a cave at our backs – we must've gone completely underground, a secret escape route.

Kian lets out a sharp whistle. A figure hangs over the side of the ship, looking at us. Kian waves them over and turns to Cayson. "Thank you, Your Majesty, for your accommodation and hospitality. It was an honour to see you again. If you ever need help, let me know. I will be over as soon as I can."

"Thank you for the visit. It was a shame we had to cut it short." Cayson looks over at Layla, his hand still holding onto hers. "Again, I am terribly sorry that you were hurt in our waters, Miss Layla. Please forgive me for not reacting sooner." he brings her hand up to his mouth, kissing the back of it. Layla snatches it from his grasp and glares at him.

"Stop that!" Layla steps away from him towards our newcomer – George. George gingery takes her hand and they float over the water towards the ship. Selena and William are already flying onto the deck.

Cayson turns to me, a small smile on his face. "Thank you for our chat. You have helped ease some of my worries. If you ever find yourself needing a friend, know that you can write to me and I will listen."

"Thank you, Cayson. I will." I give him a small nod. "You can do the same. I may not know much, but I think I can be of help on most things."

He chuckles, nodding his head. He takes a step backwards, hand gesturing to the ship. "It's best you go now. I cannot control where my people look – if they see a pale pink ship sailing off in the distance they'll know it's my fault."

"It's peach, thank you very much." Kian replies before taking hold of my hand and leading us over to the Petal Princess. Once my feet touch the deck, I rush up the newly redone stairs and over to the banister next to Layla. Cayson's teal jacket stands out against the golden sand and deep green leaves of the trees behind him. His blond

hair rustles in the breeze. We begin to set sail, the crew calling out orders and acknowledgments. I peer over at Layla and see her gaze is set on the beach. On him.

Cayson

I wait until the ship is far from shore before I head back up through the gardens and into the main hall.

Since last setting eyes on the crowd, another half dozen councilmen have showed up. Templeton, Angler and Halibut lead the charge, engaging Tobias and Ethen in an argument I know nothing of. The others hang back, not siding with anyone. They don't look like they even know why they are here. My fists squeeze tight and it takes everything I have not to swing.

"What is the meaning of this?" My voice cuts through the noise, silencing everyone. Even the staff pause in their steps, glancing over to see how things will pan out. "I have not called a meeting, nor have I given you permission to enter my property."

"We have called a priority meeting." Halibut replies. His chin is up high, snobbish and condescending. I take a step closer and scowl.

"I decide what is a priority and what isn't."

I scan the faces around me, making sure they see the fire burning in my gaze. Some shy away, others repositioning themselves. Some blatantly contest me, sneering and grinning menacingly with their yellowing teeth and oversized eyebrows.

"Fine." I turn back to Halibut, putting on my most wicked of smile. "If you want a meeting, then we will have your fucking meeting."

I lead the pack to the eastern meeting room, on the other side of the keep to my quarters. Even though this is the meeting room I always use with this sorry lot, I

cannot help but feel on edge. I doubt any trace of the royal entourage remains, but one cannot be too careful around these vultures.

I slam the doors open, making sure to put extra force into it to try rid myself of the pent up anger simmering in my veins. I stand tall behind my seat, shoulders pulled right back and head held high, my mouth unable to hide my disgust as these fat, oversized sacks of fish innards take their places at the table. Templeton does his best to appear superior, with his curled moustache that looks more like a prickly scab on his upper lip, but as soon as I tilt my head and smile he's sweating bullets.

"Enlighten me, would you. Why. Are. You. Wasting. My. Time."

"You Highness-"

"Address me correctly."

Templeton clears his throat, forcefully swallowing. "Your…Majesty. We cannot agree to your decision to change the academic institutions that we fund. As stakeholders of the Academy of Crystalline Waters, I must insist that you revoke your plans and reset the curriculum to how it was. You are spending too much of our money on something that didn't need-"

"I'm not spending a leaf of your spoiled, inherited money, Templeton. I have already told you all the leaf that is being put towards the academic reformation is from my pockets and as such I will do what I like."

Tobias steps in, "Councilman Templeton, the reformation of the academic institutions has been a plan for decades, since King Horatio was in power. It is for the betterment of our entire kingdom that we establish these academies anew and open the doors to more pupils. More pupils will give us more money to put towards other community-based projects, as will it increase the average intellect and skills of our people. There is nothing negatively impacting us with this project and as such we will continue to develop our academies."

“King Cayson,” Halibut sneers, “why is it that these plans are being put into action *now?* You’ve had fifteen years to get this going – is it because you have more of a reason to appeal to those scum under the water?” he pulls back is lip in a slimy smile. “A lover perhaps?”

I furrow my brow and narrow my eyes, my teeth clamped tight from the suggestion.

“Early today, I saw you flee from us with a girl under your arm. She’s not a land-dweller, not with that hair. She must be a whore you’ve brought into the keep? Someone to warm your bed as well as that stone cold heart of yours.”

“She is none of your business, nor does she have anything to do with this situation.” I ground out. “Regardless of what she was doing in the keep, it is not your place to say things about the people around me.”

“I can say and do what I like, I am my own person. You have no authority over my freedom.”

I slam my hands on the table, leaning forward to level him with a glare. “I have authority over your life.”

Halibut blinks, thrown off course. I lean back, starring down the bridge of my nose at him. “You think I can’t just order your life to be ended right now? You don’t think I’ll do it?”

The room goes eerily still. Silent. Waiting for my next move.

“You are expendable, Halibut. You mean nothing to me. The more issues you cause me, the more I want to cut your head off and feed you to the sharks. Don’t. Tempt. Me.”

“He isn’t the only one who saw it.” Angler says. My stare lingers on Halibut for longer than necessary. I watch him squirm, the sweat beginning to bead at his

forehead and down the nape of his neck. After a few more seconds I relent and cast my gaze to Angler.

The man is comfortable, confident in his delivery and posture. “The girl was here. As were others.”

My heart jumps up into my throat.

“You had a ship lay anchor in Anahera’s Cove, away from our main ports as to not be seen. You then smuggled people in and smuggled them out as to not be seen, however, like one would expect from a runt like you, you failed.”

I seethe, standing and gripping the table between my thumb and index fingers. “I did no such thing!”

“You refusing to acknowledge it just goes to show how pathetic you really are. You cannot hide from us, little boy, no matter how hard you try.”

Tobias cuts in, “King Cayson has done nothing-”

“Exactly.” Angler stands too, cocking his head to the right. “He’s done absolutely nothing. He hasn’t established order among his so called troops. He hasn’t establish the basics in education for his people. He has let our kingdom fall, failing us in supporting our economic and social hardships. Instead, he sucks up to other kingdoms, sucking their tits until they give him the resources that he fails to provide us with from our own lands. He’s scheming against his own people. He wants this kingdom to fall just to spite us all, to spite his father who raised him and-”

“He didn’t do shit for me!” I shout, red tinging my vision. “That man was a fucking disgrace of a father. He neglected me and abused me for decades, blaming me for something *I didn’t do,* and he facilitated an environment of abuse and humiliation just to spite *me*. He treated me like shit and you are telling me that *I’ve* failed to establish order? That I’ve failed to provide basic education for our children? I am that child! I was oppressed in my own household. My education was poor

because of him! If you want to point fingers and blame people for misgivings, blame him for how I turned out!"

Angler's mouth pulls into a smirk. My anger increases threefold.

"I'm here because I survived it, and I can dish out the exact same fate he gave me on you. You men who think things won't change because you are too important to be booted. You who believe that you will continue to spend your lives in luxury and extravagance, pushing your agendas onto me. You who pretend you are special and have a purpose in this world. You're dead wrong. I can make your life a living hell. I can take everything from you. Abuse you and overwork you and underpay you and make your day by day life endless misery."

I stalk around my chair, heading towards him. With every step, others shrink in on themselves, my magic radiating off me in waves. "You will tremble under my foot like a fucking fly caught in a spider's web. You will wish you never crossed me. I am your king. I can burn your house to the ground, flood it out and destroy every single thing you own. I can send your families away, imprison them on an island in the middle of nowhere, and force you to watch as they starve and beg for their lives. I can do whatever it is that I want to because *I am your king*. I can tear this city down and build it anew, standing over the ashes of your former false empires, and I will laugh at you. I have control over you. Every single one of you." I bend down so we are face to face, watching the spark in his eyes slowly burn out. "If you think you can best me, you're fucking wrong. I own you. I rule over you. No secret alliances, no impromptu meetings or revolts for change will alter that. You are my servants. You are *nothing* compared to me."

I stand up straight, stacking my vertebrae on top of each other one by one. With a click of the neck and tilt back of my head I ground out the final words. "Leave. Now. This meeting is over."

Ethen moves inside the room as the others go, some lingering in the doorway. With a flick of my wrist, all the remaining drinks soar towards them, scaring them off or leaving such a stench on their expensive gowns they must go before it sticks.

Tobias shuts the door in their wake, “All is well, Cayson.” Tobias states, ensuring it is securely in place under his hand. “We knew things weren’t going to all go smoothly – this is the easiest thing to appease. We are lucky.”

“We shouldn’t even have to appease them.” I feel my mouth curl into a scowl. “We are at a time of war. We have every right to meet with our allies and discuss the issues at hand. They only want to cause a fuss because they weren’t invited.”

“I understand,” Tobias affirms, “but you are beginning to enter dangerous territory. You need them on your side publicly for the academic reformation to go smoothly. They need to be informing their islands, their regions, of what we have planned. It would only take one ill-rumour about you to turn things on their heads.”

“I know.” I sigh, sinking back into my seat and resting my head against the back of it. “I know, Tobias. I do. It’s just…”

“It’s just that human girl has you thinking of all the social injustices going on within your kingdom.” Ethen comments. I glance up at him, my heart beating a little faster in my chest. “I saw how you looked at her, Cayson. How you treated her. That’s the first time you’ve looked at anyone that way. It was difficult to miss.”

“And difficult to hide when the idea of you sneaking a girl in from underwater was raised.” Tobias adds. My heart drops.

“You think they know?”

“There is no way to know for sure, it could be they simply think you were trying to hide the royal party. Either way, we need to be careful.” He pins me with a look, one oozing sympathy and bitter misfortune. “If they find out, they will use it against you like so many other things. But this time, I think it would break you.”

I nod, mouth dry and heavy. I stand, brush myself off and take in a deep breath. “I’m going to the beach. I need to speak to her.”

***

The cold sand swallows my feet as I trudge towards the water. Only once the glistening water laps at my feet do I stop, fall backward and exhale. The moon is high, lighting up the entire beach. Crickets sing from the fireblossom trees, the lulling sound of the waves their only accompaniment.

“I need to talk to you, Mum.” I stare out into the ocean. “You too, Queen Anahera, if you have time for me.”

There is no reply. The night remains oblivious to my presence.

“I wish I could say that I’m out here because of what has happened over the last few days – the fighting, the Darkness, the meetings and impending future, and I am. But I am also not. It’s not because of the fighting, the Darkness, the meetings or the future, but they all play a part because she was there.”

The air picks up, a warm breeze drifting over my skin.

“Her name is Layla. She’s not like anyone I have ever met.” The corner of my mouth begins to tug upward. “She’s brave and loyal and extremely stubborn. She says what she wants and holds her ground. She is so beautiful.” Her face resurfaces in my memory. The molten brown eyes and curls framing her face. The scars marring her skin. “She’s so beautiful. So strong. I need to know more.”

The crickets quieten, listening as I continue to bring her memory to life. “She is from a completely different world, one full of strange names for things and different customs and language. She’s a mystery and I feel like one of those crewmates bewitched by sirens at sea.” My smile begins to fade. “But she’s different.

She looks different, even to our underwater citizens. Her skin is dark, more than just kissed by the sun, and her features are different – a good different. They suit her perfectly."

The air stills. Waiting. Anticipating. The waves continue to wash over my feet.

"If I can't get everyone to accept each other - underwater citizens, the working class, the middle class, and the nobles – how am I going to introduce her to them? How are they going to react to an outsider next to me?"

A rustling in one of the trees breaks the silence. The creature in question darts through a few branches, shaking a few leaves free before jumping up into the gardens.

"I don't think I will ever come across a woman like her again. I don't even know if I'll see her again, Mum. What do I need to do? How can I make this kingdom accept her?"

I stay there for a few more minutes, waiting for some sign. A guiding light or a bud of warmth to form in my chest. Neither come. It's just the waves, the crickets, and the light of the moon.

Analia

I sigh, rolling onto my back and staring up at the early morning skies.

Our escape back to the ship set my adrenaline pumping yesterday afternoon, but it soon dried out once we had set sail and Layla needed assisting to the medic bay. There were some on ship that didn't know what happened to her, either they weren't nearby when it happened or they hadn't seen her before she was taken ashore. Ciggy and Piggy had seen Tobias take Layla and go, but they hadn't seen the damaged the Darkness' burns caused. Now, having seen it with their own eyes, all teasing and jeering towards her has vanished. She has them at her beck and call, or more accurately Selena and George have them at Layla's beck and call, day and night. To them she has earned herself a spot on the crew. She has earned her title as 'The Queen's Bodyguard'.

I relinquish my portion of the bed so that Layla can feel more comfortable in our room. She needs the bedrest and the privacy. I visit often, ready to help dress her burns and get her food. Every time I see her though, it feels like I'm getting soaked in freezing waters. She did this for me. She sacrificed herself for me.

I sit up, gripping the hammock between my fingers. After sleeping here for so many nights, I have finally learnt how to control the descent. Manoeuvring around, the fabric snug in my hold, I roll myself out and drop to the ground, bending my knees on impact. I'm not yet graceful but I no longer face-plant.

The deck remains fairly quiet this time of day. Shift changeover should be happening soon - Jay's steps in the crow's nest suggest as much.

George hasn't been able to talk much, too busy managing the sailers and adjusting to the damages the ship still wears. With how short our stay was, there was little time for rebuilding and only the most essential tasks have been completed. Perhaps that's something I can do - to keep out of the way for the rest of the journey – rebuild William's cabin and try to salvage the books that got scorched.

The man himself steps out on deck, shaking his arms out and rolling his head side to side. He launches himself into the sky, soaring on air currents fashioned out of stillness.

My eyes follow him swooping side to side, dancing through the sails and even calling out good morning to Jay, her grey head poking up further from her cocoon. He floats around a little more, dipping down to brush the ocean waves beside the ship, washing his face with the water. He returns to the main deck, flexing his hands and dispelling the air around him with a smile.

"Good morning, Miss Analia. Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough. What's on the cards for today?"

"Well, as we have crossed the stage in our journey where physical strength and a grasp on magic were most important, we will be beginning something different."

"Like what?"

"Etiquette. Protocol. Appearance."

I frown. William laughs at me, shaking his head. "Miss Analia, it is time to teach you the intricacies of being a royal, more specifically, the Queen of the Kingdom of Air."

"How long do we have? I feel as if having the whole of eternity won't be long enough."

“We have a few days.” My eyes widen. “Have faith, Miss Analia. There is little to teach you. We just need to run you by the social standards and remind you of how to interact with others. Bring the formalities back into your daily life, as it were.”

I nod, tapping my thumb and forefinger together. “Let’s begin then.”

***

“Why are there so many conditions and things to remember about people?” I sigh, shifting to lie against the side of Kian’s bed. Our teachings moved into Kian’s private quarters to keep us as removed from the crew as much as possible during our lessons. William leans up against the desk, arms folded over his chest. For the last hour or so, I have put him through the wringer – unintentionally, of course. None of it is his fault, but the customs and protocols of the kingdom are really doing my head in and the more I learn about how to act and react to certain people, the more frustrated I become.

“Unfortunately, we have many customs and there are people who must be acknowledged above others of their specialty.”

“But even the smaller details are so varied. Why is it that if I am introduced to a man of noble background I must present my hand with the ring on it for them to bow to but with women they have to bow to me. Why can’t it all just be the same?”

“As you have been married into the family line, things are different than what Princess Effie must do. Your people bow to the crown and to you-”

“No, men bow to the family title. They don’t bow to me or my position. It is women who must bow to me as a person – as a female of higher position. I don’t see why everyone can’t just do one or the other. Either bow to the family title or bow to me as Queen of the Air Kingdom.”

William nods, “It is a strange tradition. Perhaps you could ask about changing it when we return.”

“And ruin the tradition?”

“Well, it obviously treats people differently. If you want to change it, you can. You are the Queen. You are allowed to make those changes.”

“If it was that simple, why didn’t I change it before?”

“Because you yourself serve the King.” Kian states, announcing himself from the doorway. He continues, “You were first and foremost the head of the King’s personal guard. You worked to protect the King and you swore an oath to dedicate yourself to the role and not waver from it until your death or eviction from the position. You didn’t want people to bow to you because you didn’t see yourself worthy of the title.”

I mull that over in my head. “But that sounds to me like I would want women to bow to the crown and not to me, why was that not made the same?”

“Because even with you being married into the family, you are still a royal. You must be respected and shown loyalty.”

“So only the women must show loyalty?”

Kian opens his mouth but nothing comes out. He then narrows his eyes, tilting his head to the side. “Ah, I see the predicament here. So change it so everyone bows to you, not to your ring. You yourself deserve the loyalty, not because you married into the family, but because you have earned it.”

“Is it that easy though? To demand a change to the customs.”

“I don’t see why it shouldn’t be. It makes total sense.”

“Who created this thing in the first place?” My nose wrinkles. I want to have words with this person.

“It was likely my great-grandfather. He was a misogynistic bastard. Didn’t want his wife to receive the same treatment he did.”

I nod, not surprised by the idea. Clearing the train of thought, I turn back to William. “Walk me through the procession one more time, please.”

“Our procession starts outside of the city’s gates. The entire royal guard will meet us and will serve as our buffer between us and the crowds. You will lead us, with Kian a step behind, and the rest of us will follow in order of our social ranking. This is mandatory for all formal procession such as this. You recall the layout of the city, right?” I nod. “As we pass through each level, there will be checkpoints. It is very important you remember what I tell you. These are double gate, two gates with a few meters between them. You mustn’t separate yourself from the guards or Kian at these moments. There will be little space to move around and we have to make sure that we don’t get any additions to our parade in these times. It takes a while to get all of us through each checkpoint. You cannot rush ahead. You must stay vigilant and stick with Kian.”

“Don’t worry,” Kian says, “I’ll loop our arms together. It’ll be like we’re best friends getting ready to go out on a picnic. Nothing to worry about.”

“That thought alone is enough to worry about.”

Kian rolls his eyes.

“The higher up we get, the more likely there will be hostility or issues with the crowds. The lower tiers love you. They will be glad to see you and may try to reach out for you and give you things. We cannot risk taking these items and we do not know what their true intentions are, especially when we reach the tier below the castle. That’s the noblemen’s tier. Rich families with more people who are less likely to be happy about your return.”

“So this tier will be a little more intense than the others?”

“A little more unpredictable is more accurate of a statement.”

I nod, my gaze dropping to the legs of the desk chair. Kian takes a step further into his room.

“There won’t be any security issues or attempts on your life, don’t worry. There’s no way anyone would try it. Not with him and Saskia watching over the whole thing.”

My attention jumps back up to Kian. “Saskia will be there?”

“You think she’s going to miss out on your return? She’s literally been wagging her tail around since word was sent we left the Water Kingdom.”

The thought pulls a breath of laughter from my lungs. The insinuation from his statement earlier cuts it short.

Kian notices, telling William to go get himself some breakfast and shuffles to sit down next to me. Once William’s left, Kian starts talking.

“You are going to have to do something to stop this reaction from happening each time. We are coming down to the wire on this, Analia.”

“I know.” I bow my head, letting out a deep sigh. “It feels so stupid to still act this way.”

Kian nudges my arm. “If it is overwhelming you-”

“I need to know.” I cut him off. He falls silent. “I can’t keep acting like this. With everything else that’s going on, I need to stop encouraging obstacles and start pushing past them. Tell me about him. Everything.”

“Are you sure?”

I nod.

Kian pauses. I glance over to see if he’s actually going to speak. “My brother is an idiot.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes, but a smile begins to form on my face.

“I’m serious. He’s such an idiot. He once tried to test out how fast his dragon is by jumping off him mid-flight. Tawhiri almost bit his head off after he saved him from body-slamming into the mountains. He’s a jokester, always ready to do something dumb or entertaining for the children in the city. For a month straight, he gave you midnight orchids from the cliffs, only accessible by foot. They grew in this little cave too far off the beaten track for the locals to get to, so he flew there early morning before dawn, crawled into the cave to get them, and flew back to leave them on your bedside table. This was after you were already married, may I add, so he wasn’t doing it to make a good impression on you. He was just doing it because it was a Ryu thing to do.”

I turn my head to look at Kian, seeing the little gold sparkle in his eyes as he continues. “Ryu is a great leader. The best. Even dad says so, and he was a great leader too. He can walk into a room and immediately read the atmosphere – he knows how everyone is feeling, if there’s tension, how to approach a situation. He can also jump from being soft and easy-going to straight forward, no questions asked in a second. You never liked that though. You would always do everything you could to make sure he didn’t have to act that way because you knew he didn’t like to. It’s why you would deal with the nobles and let him answer to the other citizens in the city. He could never deal with the petty politics of nobles as you have seen yourself in King Cayson’s case.”

“What about schooling? William said we met in school.”

“Really you met through Effie. Effie immediately clung to you in entrance testing. She sat with you through all the papers, sat with you at lunch, and even cried when you had to go home at the end of the day. She didn’t know if she would see you again. Ryu found her when she got home and she immediately started crying more because he asked her what was wrong. She told him everything and as soon as he

found out your name, he looked up the test results to find out if you would be in the same stream as Effie. He says you were, but I have a feeling he changed Effie's results to bump her up a stream so that you would end up together."

"Surely, I would've been the one switched to be with Effie."

"No, you were top of the class. You always got high marks in literally everything – even Magic Lore which is the worst class ever created."

I shake my head, chuckling at his distaste for it. Truth be told, I thought it was quite an interesting thing to learn with Layla and William.

"Ryu has pretty much had a crush on you since you defended Effie from some of the older noble-born boys. You punched one of them in the face. Jokes on him because he went into the royal guard program and became your subordinate."

"What about you and him?"

Kian smiles fondly, looking off out the door. "Ryu has been the best brother I could possibly ask for. He's a dumb, lovestruck idiot, but he's an amazing brother. He always had the pressure of being the heir on his shoulders, but he never treated me poorly or anyone else for the matter. He was a kid like the rest of us, he loved exploring and climbing trees and flying out of them. Broke a few bones but that never really stopped him from living his life to the fullest. I think he knew that at some point he would have to give it all up to be a stable king. To be reliable and strong for his people. He has granted me many things that I never believed I would get, especially with my own title. I can never thank him enough for the opportunities he has given me and the secrets he has kept. There was a time that I thought I'd lose him forever because I said horrible things to him. He forgave me. He shouldn't have but he did. He read me like a damn book and spoke what I didn't say. What I so desperately needed someone to hear, to acknowledge. He was always good at doing that."

Kian drops his gaze, fiddling with his hands for a moment before turning his head to me. “Except with you. He could never read you.”

I frown. “Why not?”

“You have a skill at hiding your feelings. Well, at least you did. I think it came from how you were raised. How you managed through school. You were always the strong one, the stoic one, the one who always held firm to their beliefs and actions. It’s strange to describe how exactly you were. I suppose you had this ‘it is what it is’ mind-set – things would happen and that would never change, so why put your energy into trying to correct it or come out on top in a situation when in the end it didn’t matter. It’s a no brainer why you were so blind to his feelings for you.”

“How bad?”

“Try thirty years of unrequited feelings bad.”

My whole body winces. It’s second-hand embarrassment on the largest scale possible.

“God, I am a horrible person.”

“Was. You’ve changed.”

My brow furrows. “That’s a fundamental part of who I am, I doubt I could change that about me.”

“I’ve seen it in how you engage with Layla. How you speak to the crew. You never take them for granted. You always thank them and treat them as your equals. You care for them, support them and feel horrendous when something happens to them. That’s more action and reaction from you than I have ever seen you display around the family. Perhaps you thought it was understood how you felt about us, seeing as you cut communications with your family almost as soon as you were married. You’ll have to discover that one yourself.”

I sigh, my lips pressing together. “The last bit of the procession. I don’t understand what I’m supposed to do.”

Kian nods. “When we enter the castle grounds, there will be thousands of people waiting. In front of the castles entrance there is an elevated balcony of sorts. Ryu will be standing there with the rest of the family. There is a mosaic on the ground before the balcony and you will stand within it. Very difficult to miss. Ryu will say his big speech because he loves to hear himself talk, he will welcome you back and make up a big story about how you were off researching in other lands about the Darkness and finding answers. He will finish up by welcoming you to take his side, fingers crossed he doesn’t make it sound more cheesy than it already is. You will then walk up onto the balcony. You are not required to speak, so don’t worry yourself about it. Once we are inside, you will be shown to the lower chambers for the ceremony.”

“The-” my jaw drops, face paling in seconds. “I have to go through the ceremony again?”

“It’ll be to return your magic and memories to you. It won’t be painful.”

I take in a deep breath, wringing my hands. Kian watches without speaking, glancing between my hands and my face.

“Why are you so worried about it? It has to do with why you feel overwhelmed, doesn’t it?”

Do I tell him? Will it even make sense if I do? I shuffle around, turning my whole body to face him. He mimics me, an expression of shock or caution on his face.

“Do you ever feel like you disappoint people?”

“All the time, it is a part of my title.”

“I mean the people that matter to you. The people who know you for you.”

Kian thinks for a moment, gaze drifting as he mulls it over. “Sometimes, but they reassure me that I am doing nothing wrong. That I’m learning, growing, and that failure isn’t a bad thing.”

“But what about expectations? Have you set yourself expectation, had expectations set for you, and you fail to reach them time a time again until it’s more than a small lapse? It becomes what you are known for. For failing everyone. For being a disappointment to everyone.”

“You could never be a disappointment, Analia. You do everything you possibly can to do right by everyone. You have never disappointed us a day in your life.”

“That’s the thing,” my hands begin to shake. “What if I do? What if I get my magic back, my memories back, and I do no better than I can right now. What happens when people start getting hurt, *dying*, because I can’t do better? When it’s on me to make things right but I just can’t do it?”

“You have us with you the whole way. You can talk to us – talk to me. You and I are more alike than you think. It never is easy to deal with these kind of thoughts, but you are never alone in this.” he places a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently. “Is this coming from somewhere in the back of your mind? Did you deal with these things back then too and not tell anyone?”

“I don’t know.” I clench my hand into a fist, trying to halt the shaking. “Maybe.”

Kian grabs my hands, holding tight. “Look at me,”

I do. His eyes are wide open, focused solely on me. “You are not alone. You have me. You have Ryu. You have all of us here on this ship. You have Effie. Four hells, Analia, you have Cayson du Clare you can talk to. You are not alone.”

I nod, take in a deep breath.

“Good.” he pulls us up, lightly shoving me out the door. “It’s time to get breakfast. Then we can continue with overloading your brain with laws and customs.”

A breathy chuckle passes my lips. “Spare me, please.”

Cayson

"The courtyard is already full, they will have to start putting people atop the curtain walls," Tobias speaks the moment I emerge from the bathroom. He has cleaned up nicely – his polished teal attire and groomed beard are the tidiest I've seen on him for a long while. Everything is sharp, from the angles of his badges adorning his chest to the crisp lines of his dress pants.

I, on the other hand, have yet to do most of what I need to do in preparation for my public speech. My hair is in disarray, shirt unbuttoned and only half tucked into my pants. My jacket hangs over the back of my desk chair and who knows where my makeshift crown is, I certainly haven't found it.

He looks over to me and lets out the deepest sigh known to man. "Some urgency would be greatly appreciated, Your Majesty. You are meant to make your appearance in ten minutes."

"There is no need to stress, Tobias. I have everything under control."

Ethen hums from his posting, levelling me with an unnerving look.

"What? Everything will be fine." I reaffirm, tucking the rest of my shirt in and fixing the collar. "I know what I'm doing, what I'm saying, and I need not linger once all has been said and done. It's a simple address."

"But is it a necessary one," Tobias replies, turning his back to the balcony – to the crowds waiting below. "Do you really need to drag them into this? This is a monumental announcement, Cayson. They have been waiting for this for decades, centuries even. You don't need to add another layer to this."

“He’s right, Cayson.” Ethen notes. “You are doing a great thing for your people, don’t tarnish it for your own satisfaction.”

“What I have to say about it is just as important as the news about the academies.” I grit my teeth, feeling my frustrations bubble up inside me. I don’t want to get angry at them, they are my family, but the more they question my intentions the more I feel they don’t understand how vital it is for everyone to know. “This affects everyone. What has been happening has set everyone behind for far too long. We need to bring it to light and tell the public, give them the agency to make their own decisions and opinions about it.”

Tobias strides forwards, hands grabbing the jacket and helping my arms into it. “What good will it do?” he asks, coming to stand in front of me, brushing off my shoulders and fixing the badges. “What benefit will the people receive?”

“The benefit of enlightenment.”

“Is that a benefit,” he pauses, looking me in the eye, “or a misfortune?”

I back away, heading for the sideboard and grabbing a drink. My hands are shaking, nerves refusing to be forgotten. I hear Ethen mumble under his breath, his embellished armour clattering alongside the pop of a cork. I take a long sip, welcoming the burn as it goes down. The aid in dissolving the lump in my throat. I stroll over to the other side of the room, nursing the drink in my hand, staring out into the gardens below my chamber. My eyes sting, dry and itchy. My left hand drums a beat into the window frame, the rough mimic of a resting heartbeat. Anahera knows it’s not mine.

“Are you sure this is the best idea, Cayson?” Tobias repeats for a third time. I sigh, draining half my glass before exhaling and forming my response.

“Either I do it, or they do. If I lose either way, at least it’s on my terms. If I win, I can finally begin to place doubt in their public image. I can begin the cleansing.”

“It’s a risky play, even for you.” Ethen pipes up.

I turn my head to look at him. He’s stood as always by the door, his facial features pinched, and concern evident in his gaze.

“You do this and they will put bounties on your head. I’m not kidding, this is public execution for them. They will never forgive you.”

“I will never forgive them. Not even for a second.” I turn back to the window, watching the fire blossoms and the sun drops blow in the breeze. “This discrimination has to end. If I have to bring myself down with them, so be it. We are on the brink of war. Sacrifices must be made for the greater good. If these actions will have a positive impact on the people, it is only right to do them sooner rather than when it’s too late.”

I finish my glass, leaving it on the windowsill. Pivoting on my heel, I face the others. I roll my shoulders out, cementing my plans in my mind.

“It’s time to expose everything.”

Tobias relents, his head dropping and shoulders sagging along with it. It takes no more than a second for him to straighten up, his face now stoic and guarded, before he heads for the balcony and opens the doors with one firm push.

The noises from the crowd rise up to meet us. Chatter and murmuring of all tones layer over top of each other, the occasional peal of laughter or cry of a baby cutting through the cacophony.

I stand on my balcony, looking down over the courtyard. All citizens of the Water Kingdom have been called to attend if they are not otherwise ill or indisposed. I stand tall, shoulders back, hand firmly gripping the banister before me. Beneath me, tens of thousands of faces look up at me, their conversations coming to a halt. They wait, staring at their king. I take in a deep breath, a smile growing on my lips.

“Today marks the day of a new beginning. It marks the change the Kingdom of Water will be known for centuries from now, immortalised in books and through oral histories. On this day, the final day of the summer season, I have called upon you all to witness this moment.” I pause, my grin widening. “Consider it a birthday gift, from me to you.

“Today, the Academy of Crystalline Waters opens its doors to everyone. You are all citizen of the Kingdom of Water, you are welcome regardless of your background, your upbringing, and your race.”

The crowd gasps, excitement churning in the air. “I encourage you to go forth and discover new things, learn how to harness your abilities, and understand where we are in this world.”

“If that is perhaps not your taste, then you may wish to attend Haven’s Training Academy. Perhaps you want to learn how to protect yourself, how to protect others around you.” The crowd settles, hanging onto every syllable. “Well, I have good news for you. Not only are you welcome to join Haven’s Training Academy, but Tangaroa’s Training Academy welcomes you as well. Underwater.”

The crowd awes, some cheers and clapping erupting from different edges of the swarm.

“We will be the Kingdom of opportunity, of diversity and of strength. What we should have always been, as Queen Anahera sought after so many years ago.” I take a breath, fingers flexing as a bubble of doubt rises in my throat.

Do I say it?

“There is one more thing.” I announce, fighting off the urge to look back towards Tobias. I need to do this on my own. This is what a King does, making his own decisions and standing behind them.

Let them know.

“Since King Horatio stood in my place, Anahera’s Council has remained the same. The same representatives from each of the chosen islands, regardless of whether or not they are fit for the job or care for the people they are supposedly leading. They have been part of the problem you as civilians have faced for over a century. They are players in the game which limits your children’s ability to receive education. Restricts them for finding a job they can thrive in. Segregates them based on were they come from. That will end today.”

The crowd buzzes, heads turning left and right.

“My council will face changes over the next few days, bringing in new voices. New representatives. If you wish to be considered for the council, please inquire with your local boards and put your name forth. I will be making my decisions by the end of the next week. This will not be the only change.”

I let silence fall for a moment, my words hanging in the air. The thumping of my heart lessens a fraction, the most stressful information now out in the world. “For too long, we have shut ourselves away from our fellow brothers and sisters living below. We are together citizens of this kingdom – should we not act like it? Should we not be living our lives side by side, above and below sea, as our ancestors did?”

The crowd cheers. Loud, glorious cheers. My smile grows, chest bursting with energy.

“Why should we be limited to one space or way of life because of the ideals and beliefs of a traditionalist, supremacist group of individuals? We all are people of the Kingdom of Water. Let us stand tall, stand proud, together.”

The roaring of the crowd sets my cells alight, and I feel everything become lighter. I am thriving off this adrenaline. I want more of it.

“Together, we will become one united nation, strong and versatile and able to withstand anything that comes our way. We will fight our enemies together, as

unrelenting as the current. We are the Kingdom of Water, and we will thrive once more!”

The crowd grows ecstatic, cheering and chanting. My grin covers almost my entire face, and with a rise of my free hand, a fist high in the sky, they explode in noise and excitement. I glance over at Tobias behind me, keen to see his attitude change. It hasn’t. He’s out of sight from the crowd, but that doesn’t stop him from trying to hide the concern in his eyes. His expression is almost pitying. I turn back to the ground, eager to get it off my mind. This is a victory. This marks the beginning of my reign, unofficially. The beginning of the golden age of the Water Kingdom. One last ‘fuck you’ to the man who once stood in my place.

How does it feel to see me now *father*?

Analia

It feels strange. The scenery is so different to the Kingdom of Water; Kian guides us along a river about five ships wide. On either side of us grassland stretches far along the horizon. The landscape is full of lush shades of green, yellow, and pink. Tall trees scattered across the plains, houses dotting the hills and valleys. People. So many people.

I didn't realise that the Kingdom of Air's signature when it comes to their magic is their hair. George takes the title of lightest shade of hair on the ship after Kian, but she talks about the others and what they can do with their magic so often. Most of the ship have medium to dark grey hair and with the magic I've seen them do, I'm at a loss as to how much magic the average citizen has.

The longer we sail down the river, the more people that stand on the banks, waving their arms and calling out to us. Hair of all shades – some even strikingly silver, making me flick between Kian's overgrown head of hair and their own. He catches me doing it the third time and shakes his head.

"Time away from the kingdom dims the hair. The Magic within the land and air is separated from us outside of the borders. Don't worry, you'll be blinded by it by the time the procession ends."

I look down at the gown on my body. It had been stowed away on the ship underneath a pile of medical supplies the entire time and I was none the wiser until George pulled out the box from the corner and dropped it on the bed.

The full skirt has some weight to it, the pale cloud grey draping beautifully yet not losing its elegance and softness. The corset is a thing of fine craftsmanship – the

faux sheer grey and more opaque grey ribbing serve as a simple yet beautiful backdrop for the silver embroidered scales layered from bust to hips. These decorative elements serve also as extra protection, I learnt, having cut my finger on a part of the arrangement covering my right side. It's a fine as silk, but sharp as a dagger's point – "It mimics dragon scales", George smiles. "and it makes you look so powerful."

There are no sleeves, but that doesn't matter as to top it all off I have a massive silver white cape, the material heavy and thick but shaped in a way that I still have most of my arm mobility. The material is similar to Selena's own coat, however, the embellishments along the edges are far more detailed. Iridescent pearl thread is woven in between a stark white, the swirls and loops look like they're shifting under the light of day, dancing along the hems. To keep my hair out of the way, George braids it back off my face, a few stray pieces finding freedom but otherwise it is all maintained. Now fully aware of the importance of hair colour, I feel extremely self-conscious with the dark strands hanging down at the edge of my vision. The finishing touch, the most daunting of all, is the crown now sitting atop my head. The jewels glisten, almost as much as the metal itself, and I hate wearing it so much. Nothing this fine should be anywhere near me.

"You'll be alright." she appeases. "There really isn't any way this will go terribly wrong. Everything is secure, there will be guards with us the entire time, not to mention hundreds of people that will go to the ends of the earth to keep you safe. You're home now. Relax."

I glance further down the river. The dock is nearing, flags flying high on the ends of poles. I look away, heart racing, and take careful steps down the staircase to get to Layla's side.

Layla, an honorary member of the crew and person of great importance on the ship, is set to walk with Selena. George offered to hang back and walk with her, but even Kian has to be a stickler for the rules. George will walk behind William, William behind Kian and I. Selena and Layla will be near the centre of the group.

"You okay, buttercup?" she asks, dipping her head to try catch my downset eyes. I nod, not completely sure of myself, and she gives me a brief smile. "It's just nerves. We'll be with you the whole time."

"I wish you really were with me, I feel safer standing next to you."

"You and me both." Layla brushes my cape with her good hand, feeling the material between her fingers. "When you remember you'll have to get me an appointment with this seamstress of yours. This is exquisite."

"For Queen Analia's Bodyguard, anything."

Layla rolls her eyes, bringing her hand up to cup my cheek. She smiles, the scarred skin around her eyes and mouth twisting. "Look how much you've learnt , Analia. How far you've come. Who would've known the girl who couldn't stand someone not charging her for pies would be the strongest, smartest queen I have ever met."

"I'm the only queen you've met, Laylabug."

She nudges me in the ribs. "For now."

The men on the dock call out, their words lost to me among the flurry of commands Ciggy and Piggy give to the riggermen. We ease to a stop, only the slightest of shudders as the speed decreases.

"You ready, Your Majesty?" Kian asks. He stands next to me, his own regal attire beginning to look darker than his hair, the strands slowly bleaching of all the grey.

“You’ll be fine, buttercup. I promise.” Layla lets her hand drop, making her way to Selena whose current goal is making Noah look presentable. The gangway is set down, and as we approach the guards on the dock stand at attention. It’s wide enough to walk comfortably but the stress must be written on my face. Kian takes my hand and begins walking backwards on the plank, facing me to give me stability. I thank him quietly once we touch ground, walking forward a little more to give the rest of the crew space to stop in.

In the distance, hundreds of people crowd the stretch of dusty road between the dock’s entrance and the main road. I lean forward to look around the observation post, spying more of them leading up to the city’s gates.

Kian pats my hand, pulling me back to our immediate surroundings. Ciggy and Piggy, the last in our group, have landed ashore and the gangway has been taken away. “Remember everyone, keep moving and keep together. This is our home, but that doesn’t mean our journey is over just yet. You can talk to your families later.” A low “Aye, Captain” sounds through the party and we all settle into rank. Kian jabs me in the back, pointing up towards the city with his other hand. “Look there, that purple shimmer by the top right tower.”

I crane my neck, eyes searching for a while until I see it. The flash of purple followed by a mint green against the white castle. My heart beats louder in my ears. I hesitate to try, but I reach for the place in my mind where we are linked. The feeling welcomes itself in and a warmth fills my body like a hug.

“You have to start us off,” Kian nods to the path ahead of us. I pause. Take in a deep breath. Then it begins.

The guards march alongside us, encasing us in a protective bubble as we pass by the people standing outside the gates. Hundreds of them call out my name, call out Kian’s name, and some even call out for others in the party. Alister mentioned

during dinner once his family lived outside of the city's gates, and the shrill voice calling out 'Dadda' brings a smile to my face. That will be his little girl.

I keep mostly to myself, smiling and nodding at faces, waving here and there. As we near the gates, the guards on top of it call down for it to open, the doors parting just a few metres before the leading guards hit it.

Once inside, the city is something else.

It feels like Port Street. A bigger, more well-lit version of Port Street. Lanterns hang from string looped between buildings, along with plants and flowers sitting in window boxes and balconies. The white stone looks so bright and clean. The doorways different shades of orange and yellow, decorated with bells and white feathers shaped into wreaths. The streets are absolutely packed but it's organised and calm. There's no pushing, no fighting, and no drunken figures slumped over in the alleys. It's a beautiful sight.

The crowd bows at the hips as we pass, whispering words of welcome and happiness at our return. Up ahead I spy something on the path, the lump a little trampled and dirty but otherwise intact. I bend down, picking it up in my hand. It's got a small round face, beady black eyes and a stitched mouth. The body is small, arms and legs carefully sewn with not a single thread loose. A teddy.

"Who is missing their teddy?" I ask, stopping in the middle of the cobblestone road. Those around me glance up from their deep bows, looking at each other. A little girl, not even as tall as my leg, pops her head up and gasps. "Is it yours, little one?"

She nods, rosy cheeks standing out against her lavender grey hair. She shuffles forwards, hesitating when her older brother halts her in her tracks. I smile, walk over to her, and squat to match her height. I hold the teddy out to her. "What's its name?"

"His name is Buttons." She replies, her voice a soft whisper in the air.

My smile widens, "And how long have you had Mr Buttons for?"

She looks down, counting on her short fingers. "…Eight, nine, ten. Ten years."

"Wow, he must be a trustworthy friend to have." I brush some of her wispy hair out of her face, giving her one last smile. "You keep an eye on him and he will keep an eye on you, okay?"

She nods, grinning, and I move away. We continue our way through the lower tier. The more people I see bowing and saying kind things to us the more I feel like bowing and thanking them.

We arrive at the first gate, a quick look backwards shows a few of the crew are spread out and conversing with some of the crowd. Kian steps up next to me, bending his head to talk, "That was awfully kind of you, returning Mr Buttons."

"The poor bear's life was flashing before his eyes, it's the least I could do."

"What was that about her looking after the bear and the bear looking after her?"

"Sometimes when things get difficult and you get anxious the best thing to do is to talk to someone about it. Talking to people can be difficult – talking to your beloved pets or toys isn't so hard."

"You have experience with that, do you?"

I shake my head, hiding a smile. "It's just something I picked up back in Te Tai Tapu. Layla's younger brother Freddie struggled to talk to people when he was a kid, he could barely talk to me even though I was around him nearly as much as Layla. Their mother suggested that he should try talk to someone about what troubles him and when he didn't know how she held up the family's well-loved teddy. Within a week, he was so much happier and could start a conversation with me and almost anyone he came across."

"Funny how something like that works." Kian replies, glancing back at the crew. "You may continue, we're all here."

The second tier is a lot like the first with so many kind people, though they seem to be a little finer dressed. The buildings are shops rather than residential blocks and the displays are full of toys, garments, books, equipment and other miscellaneous goods. I crane my head once we enter a wider section of the road, catching sight of some tents and carts in the city's square. Pastel greens and blues, warm yellows and reds, with signs and smells wafting through the air. Fresh breads, sweets, chocolates and more baked goods that make my mouth water. *I wonder how much trouble I would be in if I went over to see what there was?*

We reach the second gate without any further surprises. The walking feels great for my legs. After having been at sea for so long, feeling the firm ground beneath my feet feels so good. It takes a while to get to each gate, the procession slow and careful. On a normal day I would say maybe fifteen minutes of uninterrupted walking between them. Today, if feels like hours.

This stop is shorter than the previous one. Perhaps we are all in agreement now that the sooner this is done the better. Before I step forward into the final tier, the noblemen's tier as Kian referred to it, he grabs my wrist.

"You'll want to prepare yourself for this one."

I briefly nod, straightening my back and shaking out my arms a little. I stride forward, firmer in my footing, and continue.

Kian is right. This crowd is a lot different to the former two. There's no words of welcome, in fact, there's hardly any movement at all. Even their bows are shallow, ending once their shoulder have only just begun to dip down. I can't help but feel annoyed, not for me but for the royal family. Kian, their prince, deserves more than this. Is this the treatment they give to Effie as well? To Ryu, their king?

I step past a group of men, merchants or maybe minor councilmen, without a peep from them. It's when they see Layla that they begin to talk to each other.

“What’s a girl like that doing in their crew, you can see her from a league away.”

“She looks like she’s lost, or maybe she’s a prisoner.”

“She’s an ugly thing with a face like that.”

I stop. Everyone stops. Eyes look to me, the air unsettled around us, as I turn my head and glare at the men. I backtrack so I am in front of them, staring them down, fists clenched and ready to fly into their noses.

“You want to say that again?”

The man in question pales, bowing his head and apologising. The others remain upright, eyes watching me intently.

“Disrespect my people one more time. We’ll see where that gets you.”

“She’s not one of us, Your Majesty.” The head of the group replies. I step closer.

“She is more important to me than you will ever be. Nothing you say or do will ever beat what she has done for me. I suggest you keep your mouth shut and bow before I give you another reason to.”

He looks down at my fist, pales, and falls into a deep bow from the waist. The others follow. I turn around, nodding at Layla and return to the front of the party. Kian nods when I pass him, a smile tugging at his mouth. He purses his lips, fighting against it.

We reach the final gate shortly after, no need to stop as the party is close and we have to pass through the Guards’ Quarters before we reach the palace grounds. The Guards’ Quarters separates the nobles from the palace – in order for them to get to the palace, they must go through the Guards’ Quarters and be checked multiple times. For us, we are simply meet with one person, an old man decked out in his armour and holding his head high.

“It’s an honour to welcome you back, Your Majesty.” He bows, his armour rattling and helmet almost coming off. He straightens up, a hand on his head so it doesn’t slip off. “We have greatly missed you.”

“Thank you, I am happy to be back.” I smile, hoping that’s a good enough response. The guard bows again once I shuffle aside, greeting Kian in a similar fashion. By the sounds of it he bows to all the crew and welcomes them all back. He notices Layla and adjusts his greeting, but continues to bow to her.

“Are you ready, Your Majesty?” he asks.

I nod, my mouth drying up. This is it. This is where I finally meet them.

The guard pushes open the gate, assisted by two armoured men on the opposite side. The sight in front of me takes my breath away.

The cobblestone is a beautiful arrangement of white, cream and grey stone, the darkest shade serving as the edges of the walkway. The path splits at the mosaic, both sides leading up marble stairs onto the level where the balcony is. Beneath it a small garden of purple and blue flowers thrives, the dark greens and muted browns of the leaves and branches fading into the background. Climbing up the rail of the staircases are vines with delicate little white buds on them. Everything else in the courtyard is hidden from sight as those gathered take up every possible square of space. The clothes are similar shades of cream, grey, and pastels. The only people wearing white are me, Kian, and the Royal family standing on the balcony.

I do my best to look confident, lengthening my stride in case my nerves cut it short. When my feet reach the mosaic, I shuffle to the centre of it. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kian smirk, his shoulders moving. He’s laughing, or at least trying to hide it. I glare at him.

I force myself to take a deep breath, closing my eyes for a little bit before looking up. I first spot the girl who can only be Princess Effie, her blonde-tinged

white hair and peachy silver eyes making her the personification of dawn. Effie looks as if she's about to leap from the balcony and never let me go. Her mother stands next to her, gripping her daughter's sleeve. Her face, so alike Effie's, has few wrinkles, but her years are reflected in her grey-gold eyes. On Effie's other side, the former king stands tall. There is no question that Kian and him are related, they are near mirror images of each other. He stands closest to the last person, his nearest hand twitching, half expecting to have to stop his son should he also throw himself at me. I take a moment to collect myself before shifting my gaze over to him. There he stands, hands gripping the marble railing, looking more like an angel from heaven than a king.

His hair is the almost pure white, a cool undertone visible at his roots. His eyes, a cool tone silver, have tinges of blue to them. His skin looks like its glowing, a warmth to it unlike his hair. His lips the colour of cherry blossoms. I look him in the eyes again and he winks. My face grows warm considerably fast.

The courtyard falls silent, eager to hear Ryu's address.

"Today is a glorious day indeed. After twenty long years sailing the worlds, searching for answers to the imminent threat which hangs over us, Queen Analia has finally returned. It has been a long twenty years, a time in which we haven't felt whole I am sure, but no longer. Now we will be stronger, both in mind and body, and we will be an immeasurable force to contend with against the Darkness. The Kingdom of Air has never been more ready."

The crowd cheers and with a flick of his wrist, a nearly imperceptible wiggle of his fingers, he beckons me up the stairs. I look over to Kian to make sure I'm following the right orders and he nods, gesturing to the stairs. 'I will follow' he mouths.

It's a slow process, mainly because I don't want to make an absolute fool of myself in front of the whole city. I bunch up my skirts a little, allowing me to see where my feet tread as I ascend the steps. Once on the level ground, I look up. Ryu has stepped away from the balcony, a hand extended for me to take. I am taken aback by how fast my body reacts, placing my hand in his almost instantaneously. Ryu grins, a real smile that creates wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, and leads me to the balcony. He places a hand on the balcony, the other firmly holding my own, thumb rubbing up and down the back of it.

"Today is a day of celebration. A day to rejoice. Go forth and enjoy the festivities in the city square."

"Your Majesty," a voice pipes up from the crowd. The courtyard falls silent, some stepping away from the person who spoke out. It's a woman, her grey hair tied up in a bun. She looks frail, but her voice is loud. "I'm sorry, but can you tell us of what you have learnt. Are we safe now?"

I glance back at Ryu, eyes wide and mouth parted. He squeezes my hand, nodding his head. I return to face the woman, the whole courtyard, and keep my head up.

"You need not apologise, for you have every right to want answers. All of you do." My voice sounds too quiet, shaking with all the attention on me. I try and clear my throat. "At the start of this journey, we knew nothing about the Darkness. It seemed to be chaotic and unpredictable, attacking where it liked and moving how it wished. As time went by, we began to understand it a little more."

"I have learnt so much and changed beyond what you may expect of me. I have seen things and experienced things that you would never imagine. Things I hope you never have to witness in your lives. Without these experiences, I wouldn't be able to stand here and tell you all this. I wouldn't have the conviction to tell you. There is no

certainty that we will be safe until the Darkness is gone. The only way we are going to get through this is together. Not only do I mean that in terms of siding with one another as a nation, regardless of your specialities, but I am also referring to our neighbours."

"Along the way, we made a stop in the Kingdom of Water. Not only did King Cayson prove to be a reliable ally, but he has made a great contribution to the discussion at hand. We cannot win this fight unless we are united as one. The Kingdom of Air, the Kingdom of Water," I pause, gauging the reactions of the crew. William knows, remembers me talking to him about it after we left the Cayson's waters. He nods. "and the Kingdom of Earth."

A wave of noise rolls through the courtyard, murmuring and gasps filling the air.

"We are all under attack, regardless of where we stand and how well-prepared we are. If we do not support one another, there will be weaknesses. What I ask of you all is this – be kind to one another. Offer help to one another. Lean upon one another in tough times and be the crutch for others when they do the same. A kingdom is only as strong as the comradery between its people."

The woman nods, thanking me, and the crowd looks up, eager to hear more. I give them a smile, "Today is a happy day. Go eat. Go dance. Have fun."

The crowd cheers, laughs and chatter begins to rise throughout the courtyard. Ryu squeezes my hand, pulling my attention to him. His smile is bright, spread across his entire face. "Let's go inside."

As he leads me past Effie, she reaches out for my free hand, clutching onto it. Kian chuckles behind us, complaining to Effie that she never acts like this with him when he's gone for long.

We enter the castle's main doors and this time I cannot help the shock and awe that arise. The architecture is stunning; high ceilings, fluted beams along the walls, velvet purple carpets heading up the grand staircase and along the hallways all around us. In my distracted state, Effie finds her time to attack.

She latches onto me, kissing my face and squeezing me so tightly it's painful. I groan, my laughter cutting off as she jumps up and hugs me with her arms and legs. "Oh my."

"Never leave me again! Do you know how difficult it was to go through every single day without you? I could've died, I was so heartbroken!"

"Dearest Effie, I don't think you're meant to be the one saying that." Kian smiles, laying a hand on his sister's shoulder. "Now let her go, she's exhausted and has more things to do yet."

Effie is reluctant, but she puts herself back on the ground and wraps her arms around one of mine. "But I miss her, she was my best friend before she was yours."

"Regardless, I think someone else has dibs."

"Effie, Kian, stop pestering each other." their father speaks. The two back away a bit, Effie gravitating towards Lady Belmont. Lord Belmont bows his head towards me, a smile on his face. "Welcome home, Analia. I understand things will be strange for you and that you won't remember us. My apologies for Effie's excitable demeanour."

"It's okay." I bow, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. "I hope I didn't say anything wrong. I wasn't quite sure how to answer."

"It sounded alright to me." He waves his hand in a sweeping gesture. "Don't worry about it."

I nod and turn to face Ryu, my cheeks already burning up once more. He's still grinning. He takes my hand once more a lays a delicate kiss on the back of it, still looking at me.

"Hello darling. I know you won't remember me, and while your blushing is extremely flattering and I would love to have our first meeting all over again, I ask that we get the ceremony done as soon as possible. Help you feel a bit less anxious."

"Sounds good." I squeak. Kian throws his head back in a loud rumble of laughter, and barely escapes a kick aimed at his knees.

Effie steps away, along with their mother, and gives me a sad smile. "Come see me when you're out. We have a lot of catching up to do."

"You're not coming down with us?"

She shakes her head. "I can't. I don't want to remember the first time."

I nod, sensing the mood drop a little. I turn back to Ryu, giving him what I hope is a reassuring smile. "Let's go then."

He leads me through the ground level of the castle, Kian and Lord Belmont in our wake, and we pass by many rooms. A ballroom. A few meeting rooms and studies. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a library on the other side of some glass doors, shelves near overflowing with books, and beautiful gold accents on the marble walls. I hope past me loves them as much as I do now.

We descend one level near the back of the castle, down into the mountain a little. The feel of the rooms are different – there isn't natural lighting anymore, but the lanterns and candelabra on the walls give more than enough light. The passages become a little narrower, less polished and more of the natural rock. It's not cold, though that's likely because the air is controlled to be warmer. That or the Magic does it itself.

We emerge in a small, round room. In the centre of the room, a stone chair protrudes from the ground, no cuffs or straps in sight. Surrounding it are men in cream coloured cloaks, six in total. Their hoods cover their faces, casting shadows over their features. They bow to us slowly and the middle left one speaks.

"Welcome, you're Majesties. Welcome, Your Highness and Lord Belmont." he extends an arm towards me, the sleeves cloaking it entirely. "If you could, Your Majesty, sit here." he gestures to chair and I swallow forcefully, wiping my clammy hands on my dress skirts. Ryu takes my cape from my shoulders, bundling it up in his arms. I take my seat, watching as Kian grabs Ryu by the arm to pull him outside of the circle.

"We will be giving you your magic and memories back together, Your Majesty. It takes less time and there shouldn't be any issues. You may feel a little lightheaded, maybe some nausea, but it will be gone in a few minutes.

I nod, hands shaking a little. I grip the armrest and try to breathe normally. The circle lift their arms from their sides, their palms towards me, and the one in front of me continues. "Let us know when you are ready."

I shuffle around a bit, taking a deep breath in. "I'm ready."

The room lights up. Each of the figures emitting wisps of starlight from their hands. The strands dance around in the air, soaring up and diving down and creating swirls, joining together in one fluid ribbon. It circles me but never touches me. It begins to focus itself near the leader, fluttering in the air, waiting.

Then it shots forward into my chest.

My whole body flushes with heat, the magic seeping into my veins, my bones, my cells. Then images begin to surface. Faces, symbols, scenery, spaces. Like photos flicking in my mind. The burn gets worse, makes it harder to breathe.

Then the pain arrives.

It's like being stabbed in my head over and over again. It never ends, never dissipates. It just keeps building. The burning in my body turns scorching hot, frying me from the inside out. I can't breathe. My ears ring, body stiff and unable to move. Still it continues. More burning and more images and so much more pain. I just want it to end. Please. Let it stop. I feel like I'm about to die.

Spots start dotting my blurry vision. Dark spots against the bright white of the magic. My chest aches, my eyes sting, and I feel like I'm combusting. There's a rawness in my throat, like sandpaper has rubbed it to the point where it bleeds.

Everything is too much. Then there is nothing.

Epilogue

Elora

18 years earlier

Lady Ingemar wakes me with her hand over my mouth.

My gut instinct is to tense up, to fight and scream and alert someone. But who would come? Besides, Lady Ingemar is like an aunt to me. Her daughter is my best friend, and she's always been there for me, protecting me and making sure I still get to have a childhood. Her expression tells me that that time of my life is all over now.

"Listen very carefully, Princess." she whispers, coaxing me up into a sitting position. "Something very terrible is happening. I need you to listen to everything I say, to follow all my instructions, and to not think twice about them, okay?"

She lowers her hand and I immediately open my mouth "What's wrong? What's happening?"

"You are in danger. We need to get you out of the castle."

A loud bang echoes out in the hallway, footsteps getting closer and louder. She pulls me out of bed, places a pillow under the blankets and rearranges the bedding before leading me into my wardrobe, easing the door closed behind us.

She begins to stuff items of jewellery into a small linen pouch, my christening bracelet and some of my ceremonial necklaces.

"What about my tiara?"

She shakes her head. "That will be too difficult to hide, you must leave it here."

She tucks the pouch away and scans my clothes, pinching her lips. “These won’t do.” She takes my hand and leads me to the secret door mother said only to use in emergencies.

We pass through the hidden corridor that travels alongside the hallway, hearing heavy, familiar footsteps pass by and stop before my bedroom door. Rowan’s mother holds a finger up to her lips, her eyes locked on me. The footsteps head inside, quieter and slower this time. She drops her hand and gently pushes open the secret door, urging me to tread lightly as we head down the corridor and turn right.

“But the main halls are in the other way.”

She looks back at me, giving me a sorrowful smile. “We can’t go that way.”

I don’t know why she’s not leading us to where guards would be stationed. If we were under attack, wouldn’t it be best to find them and stay where we are protected?

We stop outside the big double doors marking the main chambers – mother and father’s chambers. Rowan’s mother turns to me, placing both hands on my shoulders and bends down to be level with me.

“Now, Princess, I need you to promise me you won’t open your eyes. I’m going to lead you from behind, but you must promise me you won’t open your eyes for anything.”

I nod, my mouth beginning to feel dry. She motions for me to close my eyes and repositions me to be in front of her. With a hand, she pushes open the door and we head inside. She inhales sharply.

“We must use this exit, it is the only one he wouldn’t suspect you to use.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“My dear, I think you know who.”

Goosebumps travel down my arms and back and a chilling weight settles in my stomach. “He’s finally gone mad, hasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s coming after me.”

“Yes. But he won’t get you. I won’t let him.”

She stops guiding me, leaning over my right shoulder to touch something ahead of me. With a dull thud, something shifts and she helps me forward inside the fireplace, lowering my head so that I don’t hit it on the mantel.

A few meters inside, she stops and releases her hold on me. “Elora, I need you to keep facing this way and keep your eyes closed. I need to grab something. I won’t be a moment, okay?”

I nod, hearing her shuffle backwards and step into the bedroom once more. My hands begin to grow clammy, fingers itching to move about. The goosebumps spread down my legs and to the back of my neck. I try my hardest to stay still, to do what she has said, but there’s one problem. I’ve never really been good at following instructions.

I turn and look over my shoulder.

Mother’s body is in bed surrounded in a halo of dark red. Her chest is painted the same, the centre of it almost black. Her normally tanned skin is a pasty white, and her hazel eyes remain vacant as Rowan’s mother whispers a blessing under her breath and closes her eyelids. I return to my intended position as she straightens up and after a few seconds there’s a dull thud and her hands are on my shoulders once more.

“You can open your eyes now,” I do so, the picture of mother’s body vivid in my mind. “Now, we don’t have much time so we need to move quickly. You know where this passage goes, don’t you?”

“Yes, Lady Ingemar.”

“Good. We won’t be able to take any horses, but the stables are our best bet for a quick escape. I’ve already sent word to Rowan to meet us there.”

I relax a bit. “Rowan’s coming with us.”

She gives me a look. “Yes, now let’s hurry so we don’t keep her waiting.”

We manage the passage with little light, Rowan’s mother’s air magic keeping the path as clear as possible for us. With little disturbances, we reach the exit and emerge from under the hay reserves.

A dark figure stands nearby, their hooded cloak obscuring their face. They turn to us and let out a sigh of relief.

“Mama, you said you’d only be ten minutes. I thought something had happened to you.”

“My child, we are only a few minutes off schedule. No harm done.”

Rowan huffs, handing over a stablemen’s cloak. Without it in hand, her silhouette looks far more familiar. “Now what?” she turns to her mother. “You didn’t say anything but to meet you here.”

“The two of you need to leave the city.” she leads us to the entry of the stables, keeping a hunched over form as we look over the grounds.

“Why? What’s going on, Mama?”

“The Queen has been killed and the Princess is in danger.” Lady Ingemar hands Rowan the pouch of jewellery. “Rowan, I need to you repeat every word I say, do you understand me –”

“But Mama -”

“Rowan.”

Rowan closes her mouth, tears glistening in her eyes. “I understand.”

“I, Rowan Ingmar, Daughter of Grecian Ingemar,”

“I, Rowan Ingemar, Daughter of Grecia Ingemar,”

“Take on the responsibility of being the Princess of the Earth Kingdom’s advisor, personal guard, and lady-in-waiting.”

“Take on the responsibility of being the Princess of the Earth Kingdom’s advisor, personal guard, and lady-in-waiting.” Rowan begins to stutter, her tears falling down her face. I grab her hand, clutching onto it.

“I will do everything in my power to protect her, to guide her, and to tend to her needs, every day until I either am let go or die.”

“I -” she squeezes my hand tightly.

“Say it, my darling.”

“I-I will do everything in my power to protect her, to guide her, and to tend to her needs, every day until I either am let go or – or die.”

“In the name of the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Air, King Ryu and Queen Analia, and the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Earth, Queen Keitha Conwyn.”

“In the name of the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Air, King Ryu and Queen Analia, and the Royal Family of the Kingdom of Earth, Queen Keitha Conwyn.”

Lady Ingemar nods, giving her daughter a small smile. She points out into the night, “See that cart over there, moving down by the edge of the garden.” She waits until we’ve nodded, the moonlight catching the cart driver’s bald head. “That will take you into the outskirts of the city and you will be able to find your way out from there.”

“You said you’d be coming with us.” I frown, looking over my shoulder to see her face in the light. It is written in her eyes now. I don’t know how I didn’t see it earlier.

“You don’t have much time. Go, quickly.”

I nod, needing to tug Rowan along with me as she fights to question her mother. We reach the cart before it dips down along the brook's edge at the bottom of the gardens. The clattering of the wheels helps hide our noise as we hop on and hide under cloths and blankets.

The last I see of the castle is its immense silhouette and the green and bronze banners hanging from my parents' balcony set alight.

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