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CAPITULO 1 LOCK! Where? I can't tell you where, you're supposed to follow my moves! Well, then, slow down. Mather gives him the eyes. You can't tell an enemy soldier to slow down. I smile at his exasperation, but my smile is short-lived as the dull edge of his practice sword slips under my knees. I hit the dusty meadow with a blow to the back, my blade flying out of my hands and disappearing into the tall thigh grass nearby. Hand-to-hand combat has always been my weakest area. I blame the gentleman and the fact that he didn't start training me until I was almost eleven; a few additional sessions with a sword could have helped me catch more than three of Mather's punches now. Or maybe no amount of training would change how uncomfortable a sword feels in my hands and how much I love throwing my rotating circular blade of death, my chakram. Predicting an opponent's short-range movements while a sword cuts my vision has never been a force of mine. The sun's rays prick my skin as I look up at the blue sky, winking at a particularly sharp stone under my back. This is the fourth time in the last twenty minutes I've ended up on the ground, seeing grassy stems from the wave meadow around my head. My lungs shake and sweat will bead in my face, so I stay on my back, enjoying this moment of peace. Mather leans in my line of sight, face down on me, and I hope he gives the sudden warmth on my cheeks to effort. No matter how many times I get on the ground, he never looks more handsome. He's the kind of handsome guy who physically hurts me, makes me trip over chairs when I get caught without realizing it. A few pieces of wintierian's white hair hang down his cheek, the rest of the shoulder-length strands joined by string. The leather shell stretched over his chest highlights the fact that he has spent most of his life using those muscles in combat training, and his arms are thin and bare, but for brassards. Freckles walk along his pale face, his neck, his arms, a testament to the blinding sun of the plains of Rania. Best six out of eleven? The hopeful note in his voice, as if he honestly believes I have a chance to hit him, makes me c**k an eyebrow. I'm staying. Only if the next six events can be remote. Mather laughs. I'm under strict orders to get you to win at least one sword match by the time William and the rest come back. I keep my eyes down and try to swallow the longing that rushes me. Sir left with Greer, Henn and Dendera on a spring mission while the rest of us are left behind: Mather, the future king (who can go on the most dangerous missions because he has been trained from birth in the art of fighting); Alysson, the lord's wife (who has demonstrated the slightest skill in fighting); Finn, another capable soldier (sir's rule—Mather always has to have a fighter capable of backing him up); and I, the orphaned girl permanently in training (who, despite six years of sparring practice, still enough to rely on important tasks). Yes, I've had to use some of my skills in food exploration tasks, to fight the occasional soldier or disgruntled citizen of one of the four Rhythm Realms. But when Sir organizes missions to spring, missions in which we will directly benefit winter rather than simply bring supplies for refugees, he always has an excuse for why I cannot go: the Spring Kingdom is too dangerous; mission is too important; you can't take any chances with a teenage girl. Mather must recognize the way I bite my lip, or the way my focus defrotes, because he exhales in a blunt sigh. You're getting better, Meira, actually. William just wants to make sure you can fight at close range, as well as long distances, like everyone else. It's understandable. I look at it. I'm not horrible with hand-to-hand combat, I'm just not your-levels of good. Lying to the lord; Tell him I finally beat you. You are our future king, he trusts you! Mather shakes his head. I'm sorry, I can only use my powers forever. His face trembles and it takes me a rhythm to realize the unexpected lie in what he said. He has no powers, not really, not magic, and that deficiency has been a struggle all our lives. I sit, ripping leaves of grass to roll between my fingers, if only, I have something to do in sudden tension. What would you use magic for? I ask, my words so weak that they almost float. You mean, besides lying to the gentleman for you? Mather's tone is light, but when I sway at my feet and turn to him, my chest hurts to the strain on his face. No, I'm starting. If Winter had a whole conduit again, a conduit other than female blood, which any monarch, king or queen, could take advantage of, what would you use power for? The question comes out of my mouth like a smooth stone in a stream, its edges are used clean by the frequency with which I roll it in my head. We never talked about Winter's conduit, the medallion that King Angra Manu of Spring broke when he destroyed our kingdom sixteen years ago, unless it relates to a mission. It is always We have the news that one of the halves of the medallion will be in this place right now, never even if we can get our female blood duct back together, how will we know if magic works when our only heir is masculine? Mather changes, batting on the grass with his sword as if he were waging a personal war against the prairie. No matter what I'd do with him, it's not like I'm going to be able to use him. Of course it matters. I frown. Having good intentions, but it shoots an exasperated look at me before I can finish. No, it doesn't, it counteracts. The more he says, the faster the words come, coming out of him in a way that makes me think that he you need to talk about it. No matter what I want to do, no matter how well I carry or how hard I train, I won't be able to force life in frozen fields, or cure pests, or feed forces to soldiers as I would if I could use the conduit. The Winter Winterists rather they have a cruel queen than a king with good intentions, because with a queen at least they have the opportunity that magic can be used for them. It doesn't matter what I would do with magic, because leaders are valued for the wrong things. Mather pants, with his face tight as he heard everything he said, all his worries and weaknesses were laid bare. I bite the inside of my cheek, trying not to look at the way the wink wink and hit the grass again. I shouldn't have pushed him, but something deep in me always ties with the need to say more, to learn as much as I can about a kingdom I haven't even seen. I'm sorry, I breathe and he rubs my neck. Bringing a sensitive subject while you're armed wasn't smart of me. He shrugs, but he doesn't seem convinced. No, we should talk about it. Tell everyone else, growl. They escape on missions and come back bleeding and say, 'We'll get it next time, and then we'll get the other half, then raise allies and overthrow spring and save everyone.' Like everything's so easy. If it's that easy, why don't we talk about it anymore? It hurts too much, Mather says. It's that simple. That makes me stop. I meet his eyes, a long, careful look. Someday it won't hurt. The promise that refugees always make to each other, before going on missions, every time people come back bleeding and hurt, every time things go wrong and we snuggle up together in terror. We'll be better off. . . . Someday, Mather wraps his sword and pauses, with his hand on the handle, before taking two steps towards me and putting his palm around my shoulder. When I start, my eyes masturbate to your own, realize what you're doing and pull your hand back. Someday, he agrees, with his voice clipped. The way he squeezes and mafias the hand that touched me causes my stomach to turn into a spiral of emotion. For now, all we have to worry about is getting our medallion back so that we can stand again as a kingdom and make the Allies fight spring with us. Oh, and we have to make sure you're able to do more than lie down during a sword fight. I'm laughing. Hilarious. Your Highness. Mather's flinting, and I know it's because of the title I used. The title I have to use. Those two words, Your Highness, are the wedge that keeps us separated by the right distance: me, an orphaned soldier in formation, and he, our future king. No matter our terrible circumstances, no matter our shared education, no matter what chill his smile sends on my body, he's still him, and I'm still me, and yes, he needs to have a female heirress one day, but with a proper lady, a duchess or a princess, not the girl who fights him. Mather pulls out his sword again as he hunts through grass for my discarded leaf, refocusing on the task in question rather than the way his eyes follow me through the tall yellow stems. The camp stood a few steps ahead of us, the broad prairie lands camouflaging our pale brown and yellow tents. That and the fact that the plains of Rania are not friendly with travelers has kept us maintained for the past five years in this pathetic home, or as close to home as we've done right now. I stop in my quest, looking at the camp with a growing weight on my shoulders. Far enough from spring not to be discovered, close enough to be able to organize quick exploration missions, it's just a little five tents, plus one horse feather and one for our two cows. Otherwise, the plains of Rania are barren, dry and hot, even by the sweltering standards of the Summer Kingdom, and as such feel empty, a territory that none of the eight kingdoms of Primoria wants to claim. It took us three years to get a handful of scrawny vegetables out of our garden, let alone enough crops to make occupying the plains worth it for a kingdom. So much duct magic would have to be used to make the soil produce crops that would hardly be worth it, and no one can benefit from watching the sunset. But all this is enough to keep us alive. Eight, of the twenty-five who escaped Winter's fall. Thinking about those numbers makes my stomach take over. Our kingdom used to be home to more than a hundred thousand winterenses, and most of them were massacred in the spring invasion. Those who were not now sitting in labor camps all spring long. For few remain, waiting in slavery, it is worth enduring this nomadic lifestyle that we live now. These people are winter, pieces of life that we must lead, and they deserve—we all deserve—a real life, a real kingdom. And no matter how long Sir limits me to minor missions, no matter how often I wonder if getting the medallion pieces will be enough to win allies and liberate our kingdom, I'll be ready to help. I know that the Lord is aware of the dedication that ties within me, I know you understand that I share your desire to get Winter back. And someday, he won't be able to ignore me anymore. On a trip to Yakim, one of the Rhythm Kingdoms, when I was twelve, a group of men cornered Sir and me in an alley, raving about the barbarity and bellicose Seasons. How they would prefer us to kill each other so that their queen could enter and gather among the rubble of our kingdom to find what they blame the Seasons for losing: primoria's source of magic, the abyss on which our four kingdoms sit. Do you really want us to kill each other? I asked the gentleman after we managed to escape. I myself had fought one of them, but as we climbed a wall in the alley to get away from them, my pride crumble into a confused shame. Somewhere below the Kingdoms of the Season lies a giant, pulsating ball of magic, and somewhere in our Klaryn mountains there was once a To her. Only the lands of the four Kingdoms of the Season are affected by the abyss—at the end and consistency of their environments—but each king and queen of Primoria, Rhythm and Season, possesses a share of that magic in his ducts and can use it to help his kingdoms. The four Rhythm Realms hate us for the fact that this is all they have, magic in objects like a dagger, a necklace, a ring. Ring, they hate us for letting the entrance miss age, avalanche and memory, for living directly on top of magic and not destroying our realms to dig and get more of it. Lord stopped and crouched down at my level, then picked up a handful of melted snow from the side of the road. The Rhythm Realms envy us, he told the. Our kingdom remains in winter all year round, in glorious snow and ice, as its kingdoms roam the four seasons. They have to tolerate snow melting and sweltering heat. He winked at me and pulled out his best smile, a rare gift that made my chest cool with happiness. We must feel bad for them. I wrinkled my nose in the brown mud, but I couldn't help but share his smile, enjoying the camaraderie between us. At that moment, I felt more like a Wintierian, plus a part of this crusade to save our kingdom than I had before. I'd rather have winter all the time, I told him. His smile vanished. Me too. That was only the first time I felt—I knew—that Sir saw the will in me. But no matter how often you show me, I'll never be able to push beyond your restrictions, though that won't stop me from trying. That's what we all do: keep trying to live, survive, get our kingdom back no matter what. I find my practice sword resting on a patch of trampled grass. Muscles spasms with effort, picked it up and frowned at Mather, who looks at me beyond the plains. His face is blank, his expression concealed by the veil that makes him a perfect monarch and an enraged friend. What is it? follow his gaze. Four shapes stagger towards us, shaking the heat of their silhouettes in illusions of waves. But they are unmistakable even at this distance, and my breath is relieved. One, two, three, four. Page 2 They're back. All of them. Survived. CAPITULO 2 MATHER BLOWS PASSE ME through the grass. They're here! From the camp, Sir's wife, Alysson, gathers her skirts in a knot and rushes away from the food she's been fixing, and Finn runs out of a tent with a medical bag. I drop the sword and follow Mather, focused on the ways before us. Is this it, sir? Do you lean too far forward in your chair? Did he get hurt? Of course he did. Two of them went outside April, the capital of spring, and the other two infiltrated one of Primavera's coastal ports, Loria. Nyr is it terribly within Spring's borders, but they are still within Angra's domain, and any mission there ends in at least a little bloodshed. Mather and I caught up with them first. Finn's circumference doesn't stop him from hitting Alysson, and he stumbles a couple of seconds behind us, ripping bandages and creavers out of the bag. Dendera collapses from her horse, on the ground. She is in her late forty years, Alysson's age, and her white Wintierian hair hangs over a wrinkled face with the slightest wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. She wraps an arm through her waist and turns to Greer as he gets off his horse. His leg murmurs, pointing to Finn Finn The wound on Greer's thigh. Greer takes him back to Dendera. She is worse, she says, resting her forehead against her saddle while breathing deeply, even. His short, ivory hair clings to his head, reeking of sweat and blood. Most days it's easy to forget that you're the dest in our group, hiding your age behind your unwavering determination to take on any task, any mission. Henn glides from his horse if to Dendera, wrapping one of his arms around his shoulders to keep her standing. The way the cradle makes me want to look the other way, like I'm seeing something intimate. It shouldn't feel any different from the way we all treat each other, a random army with Sir as our commander rather than a family. But I can't help but wonder if, or if our situation were better, Dendera and Henn would want to be a real family. All four bleed from various spots on their bodies, broken shirts and makeshift brown-red bandages with a mixture of dirt, fresh blood. Lord is the only one who relaxes from his horse and stood up straight, imposing and immovable and watches us detach. With all the time I spend with Mather, it should be better to decode emotionless looks. But I stay there, my body frozen with anxiety, unable to move to help Finn and Mather hand out bandages. My eyes travel up and down every horse, every bag. Did you get half the locker? William! Alysson's cry precedes her by a heartbeat as she throws his heses at her husband, injuries are condemned. Watching Sir wrap his arms around her, holding his tiny body from the ground, is like watching a bear grab a rag doll, power and power along with fragility and meekness. They bend together in a rare moment of vulnerability. The gentleman puts his wife. He's in Lymia. The day we left came. Finn lowers the handful of bandages he pressed against Greer's leg. Mather looks up from where he holds a small sack of water for Dendera while drinking. I suck bites out of the hot, heavy air, my mind spinning. We've been looking for the medallion along Primoria since Winter fell, but only a handful of times have we gotten clues as to where one of the halves would be. Angra keeps half moving, bouncing from spring towns to remote settlements in the unclaimed areas of Primoria, the foothills of the Paisel Mountains, the ports at sea, to make it difficult to return both halves. We're close now. My chest swells up with the same emotion that I know everyone is feeling, or feels before they ended up here, broken and bleeding. The gentleman will send someone back for him. Fresh, rested people are the best of the soldiers, so they won't send anyone who just came back. Which means I hurry towards Sir as he looks at up and down, and then I do the same to Finn. You two, go now, you say. They'll move him again soon, as they know we escaped. I'm stopping. They'll need everyone. I'll go too. The gentleman looks at me as if he's forgotten he'd be here. Frown, shake your head. Not now, Mather, Finn, I want you ready to go in fifteen fifteen. Let's go. Finn runs, his lump sways around him as he rushes back to camp. Obedient without thinking, as everyone always is. I stare at the gentleman with his jaw clenched. I can do this. I'm leaving. Sir takes the reins of his horse and begins to walk to the camp. Everyone falls behind him, except Mather, who hangs further, watching us, with his eyes calm. I don't have time to discuss this, sir. It's too dangerous. Too dangerous for me, but not for our future king? The gentleman looks at me as I walk with him. Did you beat Mather at the sparring? He's grimacing me. Sir, read that as my answer. That's why it's too dangerous for you. We're too close to take any chances. Prairie grass pushes against my hips, my boots tearing on the ground with every step. You're wrong, growl. I can help. I can be—You help. Oh, yes, that bag of rice I bought in the fall last month saved our kingdom. You're a big help where you are, amended. I'll grab his arm to stop. He turns to me, his face scratched by dirt and blood through his white beard, frizzy strands of ivory hair protruding around his face. He looks tired, floating between taking it a step further and collapsing. I can do more than this, breathe. I'm ready, William. I called him Father once. In the wake of her stories about my real parents who died on the streets of Winter's capital, Januari, when Spring overcafed it, and how she picked me up my baby and rescued me, it seemed logical for the man raising her to be called Father. But it turned so green that I was afraid I'd start spitting blood, and he growled at me like I'd never done before. He wasn't my father and I would never, ever call him that again. I was just going to call him by name, or a title, or something to show respect. But not Father. Never father. So from then on, I called him Lord Yes, Mr. No, sir. You're not my father and I'll never be your daughter and I hate that it's all I have, sir. Now he ignores me, pulling his horse forward. Your decisions are final, and no amount of discussion will change your mind. Like that stopped me. This is not enough! And while I can't blame you for taking care of you in the most efficient ways to save our kingdom, I know I can do things for winter, too. A few steps behind me, Dendera groans, still hanging from Henn's neck. Meira, he says, with a worn-out voice. Please, my dear, you should be grateful that you are not necessary. I'll give you a whip. Just because you'd rather be patching dresses doesn't mean all women should want that. His mouth opens and I pinch my eyes. I didn't mean that, sigh, forcing me to look at her. She leans more heavily on Henn now, her eyes shining. I just wanted to say you shouldn't be forced to fight when you don't want to, and I shouldn't be forced not to fight when I want to. If the let me go, maybe I wouldn't have to go on missions. Everyone would win. Dendera doesn't look any less hurt, but look at Sir, Sir, tremor of hope hidden behind his pain. She used to be like Alysson, taking care of camping, until Sir despaired, he began to need her for missions just as he started letting me help with food exploration. She has never argued with him, not when he makes his train or when he sends her on missions like these. But a look in her eyes and I can see how much this life terrifies her, how bad she'd rather be back in camp. She's as uncomfortable with guns as I am in a dress. Mather walks towards me through the grass, and I think he might try to offer words to break the tension. But after a few steps, he wrinkles as if the earth sucks him and refuses to release him. Frowned as he grabs his ankle. Oooww, howl. The gentleman crouches in a rapid avalanche of panic. What happened? Mather swings back and forth and you win as everyone else gets closer. Meira beat me in that last fight, didn't she tell you? He knocked me out. I don't think I can go to Lymia. The wrinkles on the gentleman's face relax. Didn't I see you run out and meet us? Mather doesn't lose a rhythm, he keeps wimping and winking. I ran through the pain. I suck a breath until Sir looks at me, and Mather winks at me discreetly over a broad smile. You beat him? The gentleman asks, he doesn't believe. I shrugged. I'm a horrible liar, so I leave it at that. Mather's helping me. A blush warms my cheeks. Sir, you have to know we're lying, but you won't risk sending Mather about the possibility that he actually suffered an injury. Trust him, more than anyone here. A moment passes before Sir rubs his siens and shoots a strong breath out of his nose. Help Mather to camp, then get your chakram. I bite my cry of triumph, but anyway comes a strange whining noise that traps in my throat and bursts into my mouth still frowning. Lord stands up, takes his horse and marches to the camp with renewed determination, as if he did not want to face me now that he has been given. Everybody's still on him, letting me help Mather the cripple. When the others are out of the ear, I fall to the ground and throw my arms around it. You're my favorite monarch in the history of monarchs, babbling on his shoulder. His arms come all around me, squeeze once, shoot cold rays through my body as I realize. . . . we're hugging each other. I fly to my feet and extend my hand towards him, sure that my face will be permanently dyed red. We should go back. Mather takes my hand, but throws himself down as I get up, preventing me from going out. Hold on. He goes fishing again for something in his pocket and I get down at my knees next to him, his eyebrows pinching slightly. When he turns back, his face is solemn, and the ball of nervousness in my stomach expands. In the center of your palm is round piece of lapis lazuli, one of the rarest stones that winter used to extract from the Klaryans a long time ago. I found it when we stayed in the fall a few years ago, Mather begins, his eyes soft. After William's lesson on Winter's economy. Our mines in the Klaryn, Klaryn, coal and minerals and stones. He pauses, and I can see the boy he was then. We moved to Autumn eight years ago, a boy-prince pretending to be a soldier and an orphaned girl who wanted nothing more than to pretend right next to her. I liked to think it was magic, go on, with a severe face. After our lessons about the Seasons sitting in an abyss of magic, and our lands being directly affected by power, and Angra breaking Winter's conduit and taking our power in a quick crush on his fist, he wanted—needed—to believe that we could get magic elsewhere. Our world may seem balanced: four kingdoms of eternal seasons, four kingdoms that run through all seasons; four kingdoms with female blood ducts, four with male blood. But it is not balanced, it will always be tilted in favor of monarchs who have magic against people who do not, like their citizens and . . . other monarchs whose conduits break. And I hated being so. . . . His voice escapes. My eyebrows are wrinkling. You're far from helpless, Mather. His half smile comes back and shrugs. At least this lapis lazuli was a connection to winter. And having to feel stronger, I guess. I bite my lip, not getting lost in the way I brushed beyond what I said. Take my hand and put the stone in the palm of my heart. I want you to have it. Giddiness floods my senses when Mather doesn't let go of his hand, he doesn't look far from me. And the light flashing in his eyes, this is important to him. He's passing me part of his childhood. I throw the lapis lazuli closer to examine it in the dying sunlight. It is impossibly blue, no bigger than a coin, with darker strands of blue running along its surface. Outside the lost abyss, magic has only existed in the royal conduits of the eight kingdoms in Primoria, reserved for the rulers to use as needed. Not on objects like this blue stone, sitting so discreetly on my palm. But I know why Mather wanted to believe that stone has magic: sometimes putting our belief in something bigger than ourselves helps us get to a point where we can be enough on our own, magic or not magic. Not that I don't think you're okay, he adds. It helped me sometimes, to have a piece of winter with me. I squeeze the stone, coldness that accumulates in my chest next to the slow and dull pounding of my heart. Thank you. Nodding to his ankle. For everything. You didn't, he shakes his head. Yes, I did. You deserve to fight for your home as much as the rest of us. I'm buying. We are still alone outside the camp, with only the faint breeze pushing through the grass and a few scrawny trees nearby. I should pack. Mather nods, his face blank again with that crazy, impenetrable nothing. Pretend a limp in camp, my shoulder one of his arms to help the farce. He kept one hand around his waist, the other grabbing the lapis lazuli. As soon as I am able to breathe in full breath, I am so aware of his body against mine, of how when I see myself him, I see the life sir says we're fighting for. Something simple and happy, just Mather and I in a cozy country house in winter. Page 3 But it's not just Mather, it's Winter. It will always be winter first and foremos than all, and there is a palace in its future, not a country house. So I help him to the fire and hurry to pack up what I'll need for the trip, moving and quiet because silence is infinitely easier than talking. And now, finally, I move and do what I have always wanted: to help my kingdom. CAPITULO 3 WHEN I was eight years old, we moved our camp once again to make it difficult for Angra to track us, this time, until the fall. Until then, my life had not been bigger than the perimeters of our sad camps in the Eldridge Forest. We pass the capital of Autumn, Oktober, on our way to its southern forests, filling our carts and loading our horses with supplies. Autumn was as similar to Eldridge heavy foliage as a snowflake to a flame. Eldridge's dense humidity was nonexistent in autumn's dry freshness, its drowsy yellow and red forests and crisp, and warmly colored. Oktober was a labyrinth of unfought-back barns and tents in garnet, blue and orange sun, with the bright crystal blue sky above, a crisp and beautiful contrast to the kingdom's earth tones. But it was the eyes themselves that left me hollow, they were beautiful. Her hair hung on tendrils as dark as the night sky, swaying in the dust lifted from the roads they weaved through the tent towns of Autumn. His skin shone the same coppery brown as the leaves of some of his trees, only where the leaves were wrinkled and dried, the faces of autumns were perfectly creamy. I touched my own skin, as pale as the clouds that were flying over us, and ran my fingers through the cap covering my blindly white hair. All my life, I'd only been surrounded by Wintierian's other fugitives. It had never occurred to me that anyone might look different, but as I looked at black eyes on lush brown skin, I wished my skin was that pretty shade, and that my blue eyes were also a dark mystery. I said my wish to Alysson, who was tasked with keeping Mather and me out of trouble while everyone else was gathering supplies. His forehead pinched as a result of my admission. The world is full of lovely people, Meira. I bet somewhere there's an otofania girl who wants to have snow-colored skin just like you want earth-colored skin. My gaze moves around, but I didn't see anyone looking at us, at least not with the same longing I looked at them with. I took my cap. Then why do we have to hide our hair? Alysson's hand went to his own hair, wrapped in a blue length of cloth. In hiding our white hair didn't do much to keep people from noticing who we were, if anything, it only made them look at us twice, first looking at our hats or hoods wrapped in cloth, then our pale skin and blue eyes and how totally out of place we were. But Mr. never backed down in his that we needed to at least try to disguise ourselves, unless Angra found out about our location. After a deep inhalation, Alysson touched my cheek, her fingers cool. You won't have to hide forever, honey. Someday our features will mix, their won't stand out. I doubt he meant mixing with spring. I put my hands in my pockets under my heavy black cape, the dense wool swinging around the guns tied behind my back and legs. The hood of the cape covers my head, hiding in the shadows as I casually walk the dirt road, the darkness of midnight falling upon me from the crescent sky. I never few seconds I dislught through the hood, looking at the walls of Lymia right in front, the door at the end of this road flanked by flashing torches and a handful of spring guards. A shiver runs down my spine, but I kept my posture high and confident, adding an arrogant influence in my path the closer I get to the north gate of Lymia. The Fé River goes to my left, marking the northern border of Primavera before it turns towards the Sea of Destas. A bridge connects with the front door, linking Lymia with the plains of Rania over the river in a wide scouring of stone and wood. My eyes cast on him, into the darkened field beyond, before swaying forward. An escape route to consider. The Kingdom of Spring extends to my right, drastically different from the arid and herbaceous prairie lands of the Plains of Rania. During the day, rolling hills of lush waterfall vegetation around, cherry blossom forests, wildflower fields in a colorful rainbow. At night, spring looks a lot more like what it really is: layered, all soaked in black. It didn't take long to travel to Lymia, which with the dizzying pace Finn demanded. A little more than two days after leaving, we arrived in the port city. We hid our horses in an abandoned barn and waited until night, then separated to approach Lymia from the north and south. Entering Lymia is the easy part: going out will be the fun part. Another traveler walks down the road in front of me, a man collapsed on his horse. He gets to the guards first, mutters something about finding work on the docks in Lymia the next day, and after a few moments of quiet murmurs, they let him go without. I'm buying. Based on the reconnaissance work Finn and I did, the patrol in Lymia has increased along the wall and doors, making it impossible to sneak unnoticed. But it is possible to pass as a citizen of spring, and waltz in Lymia with the blessing of the guards. Keep my pace steady as I get closer. Stop, order a guard, throwing a hand to block my way. I take a step back, carefully my face out of the direct light of the sconces to my right and left. On my way to the Dancing Flower Inn, I'm sorry, the cover that Finn and I came up with. My voice rumbles low and deep to make me as gender neutral as possible. Meet a man to work with. Which is not a lie. Well, the Dancing Flower Inn is a lie, sir told us and other landmarks in Lymia. Our real brand is the Tower, the seat of the Lymia government and, according to Sir, the location of half the medallion. My eyes pass by the guards, the five of them—to the great circular tower that looms over the other buildings in Lymia. It is in the city center, at least half an hour's drive away. Finn will have the same thing about his end of the city. I look back at the guards. Two studies to me, the rest lit lazily against the wall, their shells shining in the flickering light of the torch: silver armor with a black sun on their breasts. Angra's sun. I'm not sure how much tighter I can clench my fists; my nails are already digging in my palms. A lot of people come to work at this hour. Strange, isn't it? One of the guards bends his head down, his spring blonde hair strips off his scalp, his green eyes translucent in the combination of light from fire and darkness. Exactly what I was counting on. Finally I turn my head back, the hood of my cape slides enough for the light of fire to touch my face. The flames will wash my blue eyes just like yours do, making me see, enough for the guards at least, like a green-eyed spring citizen. The citizens of spring have the skin a few shades darker than the Wintierians, but pale however, and the yellow light should make me look enough like one of them that will let me through, I hope. No number of light tricks could make my hair look more than white, so it stays hidden safely under a black cap, which will also make me look more like a boy than a girl. I hope so. So many I hope. I bite my tongue, keeping my concentration on my guard. His eyes shine on me, a forehead raised in an expression that causes my blood to freeze solid in my veins. And what kind of job are you meeting this man for, girl? Your comrades are adaming each other. Just because they know I'm a girl isn't ideal, but that's the part of my costume that worries me the least, if they know I'm a Wintierian, it's going to be a hundred types of evil. I draw in a soothing breath and draw the most ingesting smile I can handle, tilting my body slightly towards it. The work you can't afford, I answer, giving him a wink and winking beyond them to the city. I hold my breath, waiting for them to yell at me to stop me, waiting for one of them to run after me and try to convince me that he can really afford it. But all I hear is a roar of laughter, and one of the guards applauds. Make our king proud, shout, and I hurry into the city, leaving the donkey soldiers far behind before disgust or fear can frighten me for what I just did. I draw attention to the task in question. The port at the end of the northeast of spring, Lymia is drowsy and quiet and lacks any indication of the usual brutality of spring, mainly because the nearest wintierinuous work camp is a day walk inland. Angra may not have damaged, hollowing out winter slaves looting the image of Spring when the ship trade of other kingdoms docks here. Lymia's peace is just a mask painted so the rest of the world can who cracked and withered Wintierian's hands didn't make the goods they buy. The streets around the door aren't exactly busy, but they're not empty either. Some taverns are found in halos of fire light, the fuss of laughter and music emanating in bursts extinguished from within. A bunch of drunks stumble from tavern to tavern, but that's it. As if the rest of Lymia would rather stay hidden in their beds than participate in night frivolities. I've been to enough cities in Primoria to know that this is not normal, most cities stay strong and bright even after the sun goes down, and sneaking through them is too easy. But in spring, everything is quieter and tighter. If I stand still and hold my breath, I can practically feel Angra's evil. How he uses the magic of his conduit to pour out devotion into his people, so that every spring citizen responds to every situation as the guard: Make our king proud! Other kingdoms use their ducts as they should be used, to improve the existing strengths of their lands and people. Make the fields produce a pletlet of fruit, to make the soldiers strong, so that the sick heal. But Angra uses his conduit to improve the bad, to eliminate anything good unless it benefits him. To make every soul in your kingdom an empty layer of servitude. I crouch down a desert alley, my heart pumping adrenaline into thick rivers through my body, but I don't slow down my rhythm, even when I get to the box pile against a wall at the end. In a burst of motion I'm climbing the boxes, climbing the wall, and rolling over the roof tiles next to me, a handful of stories in the air. Spring soldiers may find the deserted streets of Lymia easier to patrol, but spotting enemy soldiers on rooftops is a slightly more difficult task. Pieces of shingle crumble under my boots as I push towards a sprint, a respite away from the edge of the roof and three floors of night air. I unsave in the void, black cloak fluttering behind me through the bitter cold of a chimney. The next roof slides under me like a field under a horse's hooves, nothing but speed and the jolt of running feet that meet the mainland. I show up in the shade of a chimney and wait a moment, holding my breath. No alarm screams. No armor coming up. Over the city, I have a clear view of the earth beyond the walls of Lymia. The silhouette of the Klaryns paints irregular black teeth across the southern horizon, a quiet, asleep beast that watches all seasons: the Summer Kingdom further west, the following autumn, then winter, and finally the Kingdom of Spring at Sea You're undoing. I wish we could see ourselves as the mountains see us—resting side by side in the arms of a vigilante giant—rather than as separate, divided enemies. If we did, maybe together we could find our way back into the abyss of magic. My fingers run over my pocket, Mather's lapis lazuli ball tucked against my thigh, and I growl at myself. Sir would have slapped me through the back of my head to get to about what I'm doing, rather than what could be done. I clear the next rooftops without any problem, angling my progress towards the Tower under the blue-black sky. The only thing I'm worried about now is the shadow that climbs the western wall of the tower. Finn should be a horrible soldier, but for whatever reason his short, plump patch of Wintierian circumference has surpassed my only stick figure a little higher in winter agility on

every mission we've worked together. Without hesitation I throw myself from the last roof to a horizontal pole protruding from the side of the tower, the Spring flag waving beneath me, a black sun on an yellow background. Random things, these flagpoles, almost as if the architects included them in the design in case enemy soldiers need a quick way in. When we rebuild winter, there will be no flagpole in the buildings. Anywhere. Period. Window, balcony, windowsill, pole—Jump in this pattern until you reach the highest balcony. The warm orange glow of the light of fire pours through a gap in the center of the thick curtains, and Finn is already there, perched on the balcony ledge, smiling at me. I sway in front of him and his mouth, I hate you. Smile more broadly. We cling for a moment, listening to any signs of life inside. According to the lord, this room is the office of the master of the city. There is no noise that resonates again with us, except for the constant creaking of a fire and the gentle hum of the curtains that dusts the stone floor in the breeze. I look over my shoulder, examining the night beneath us. From the balcony, it is a direct drop to the street with some windsoills along the way. Another escape route to consider, at least from the Tower. We relaxed on the balcony floor and sneaked into the curtains. Finn peeks through a hollow, his eyes flickering in the golden glow, before he nods to me. The room is empty. The adrenaline makes me tremble with emotion as I take one of the curtains, decay it and slip inside the office. The fireplace in the back corner roars, full of logs: the city master should plan to return soon. The high back chairs are circled on a lush scarlet carpet before fire, and a desk is located against a wall. On the desk hangs an old yellowish map showing the kingdoms of Primoria surrounded by the Sea of Destas to the east, the endless plains of Rania that extend between the kingdoms and to the west, and impassable mountains to the north and south. A few sconces hang on the walls, but that's it, simple and straightforward. I do the desk while Finn, still on the balcony, guards the closed office door. Page 4 Most drawers are unlocked, filled with feathers and jars of ink and pieces of blank. My fingers fly through the odds and ends, sorting and searching as quietly as I can. The information the Lord gave us just before we left through my mind and helps calm my accelerated heart: We were able to steal a map of the Tower; we think they're hiding it somewhere underneath it, in a basement, basement. Wherever you are, it will be closed, so find the key first, most likely in the city master's office. I repeat those words in my head as I fly through drawers, look under papers, shuffling jars of ink. Nothing. Finn whistles as the voices move towards me from beyond the door, someone comes. Panic leaps through me, dizzing ways that make it difficult to sort everything carefully. I slide the last closed drawer, the voices outside close enough to be able to say a few words—So honored to have you; Welcome, Herod. I stumble across the desk, the body convulsing with fear as I find Finn's eyes on the other side of the room. My mouth forms the question: Herod? Finn asks me to hurry. Nothing about his behavioral changes, his forty-two years, makes him a little more skilled than me to control emotions. But it's not just emotions that swell inside me in the name. Memories took over my head, one after the other, gore and horror and fear are derived from General Herod Montego. I take away the images of our soldiers stumbling again into the camp with bones sticking out of their breasts, delirious in pain, and I take Sir's advice: Focus on the finish line. Don't stray. Don't let fear augh at you, fear is a seed that, once planted, never stops growing. No fear, not now, not here. I scan the desk once again in despair, the sound of laughter coming from just beyond the door. A letter, tucked under a heavy iron paperweight in the shape of a wild flower. I grab the menu without pausing to consider what it says and diving on the balcony, boots that sway on the stone floor. A respite after I am outside, after the curtain flutters back in place, a breath after they had seen my shadow flicker on the stone floor, the door opens, and the barrel voices towards us. Finn looks through the slit between the curtains, raising his hand, blinking his fingers to tell me how many he sees. Five soldiers. Two servants. Four nobles. He dropped his eyes on the paper in my hand and nodded at me, half his focus on the conversation behind the curtain. I change my crouch in front of him and take deep, soothing breaths before I look at the paper. My hands stop shaking enough to hold her in the slit of the light of fire. Report: All spring officials work in the Field Population Statistics April Camp: 469 Bikendi Camp: 141 Zoreon Camp: 564 Edurne Camp: 476 The document continues to describe how many deaths, how many births, what things were built by which camps. But my hands are shaking again, and I can't concentrate on words. These are Winterian's statistics in the fields of The Numbers are . . . People. I touch the numbers, my fingers shaking. Those little dots. Did we know it was that bad? I suspected it was: Sir's lessons about the autumn of Winter were graphic. The way he described how Angra planned the attack, as if she knew Winter would fall that day, how she parked all the soldiers she had throughout the winter, secretly moving them until everything exploded in inevitable sweep of destruction. There was nowhere to flee: Angra blocked any retreat in Autumn, or the Klaryns, or north of the Fen River. He entrenched us in our own kingdom, and when he broke the medallion, when our soldiers had no magic strength to help them face it, we fell. Only twenty-five of us managed to escape. Now I feel the weight of it. Seeing that the statistics showed what Sir has been saying for years: every day, we are reeling on the edge of the Winterians becoming nothing but memories. I trust my king, I do, a voice blooms inside the room. I break my head, all the adrenaline and fear deforms in anger. Finn squeezes his lips in warning, and I push his paper in response. And I know I was programmed to be here longer, the voice continues. But I want him out of my city. Tonight. Before more Winterian scum descends upon us. The master of the city, I'm exhaling. Half the locker's still here, we haven't lost it yet. My relief is short-lived when Finn scans the paper, looks back at me, and the expression he gives is not fear or shock, it's just pain. Repentance. My eyes widen. Did you know how bad it is? I'm the mother. He put the paper in his belt and swings his head once. Yes, I did. Everyone in camp probably knows. It's just one of the things they don't talk about, one of the too painful parts of our past. And I knew it too, I just didn't have exact numbers in my head to feed my anger. Herod laughs, and my nerves swell higher. Killing him is going to feel great. Calm down. He'll be gone in an hour. It's safe here. A different voice. Probably one of Lymia's councillors. I don't care if the Winterians know he's here. Lymia can keep him protected much better than any other city—Silence! shouts the master of the city. But Herod laughs. Ambitious, your man. He's not ambitious, he corrects the councillor. I hear a whisper as someone crosses the room. My heart bounces around my ribs, they go to the desk. Will you notice that the paper is gone? True. The safe we built for her is perfect. The tower above—Excellent: the location of half the medallion. The lord was right, he's under the Tower. A hard movement from within is followed by the crack in the councilman's face that meets Herod's fist. The bodies move, the chairs fall, and amid the voice of the heroly fuses rises. Don't talk about your location! That was our arrangement: you hide it and never utter a word from the location. It's not safe as long as that boy breathes. I'm bristles. Mather will keep breathing as long as I breathe, killer. But the councilman doesn't react. Something shuffles, and I realize they're papers on the desk, the blow of a paperweight. I'll widen Finn's eyes, who grimaces before the councillor Speaks. The, the councilman begins, clearly confused. Something's missing. A pause, then a growl resounds in stillness. I can test Herod's fury in the air as his growl transforms in three words that cause my heart to collapse. We Only. CAPITULO 4 BOOTS POUND ACROSS the room. The curtain flashes as Finn and I jump, falling face to face of the balcony and at night cool. Winter's! Herod screams. Lock him up now! In the seconds of free fall before I fall to the ground, I come up with two options. Continue my fall, fall into a roll in the street, and hurry out of Lymia in the hope that we can come back later, or hold on to the building and find a way inside. Key or not, we're so close to the medallion half that something as small as a piece of irregular metal shouldn't stop us. But the plan was that if any of us got in trouble, Finn and I would regroup out of town. If we leave now, however, re-entering will be impossible. They'll move the half medallion without hesitation, and we'll go back to where we started. My body makes the decision before I do. The rock wall shatters my fingers as I str against it, and two windowsills fly before finding the purchase in one, the body stopped, the wrists screaming for having to bear my weight so abruptly. Flail, arrows just rubbing my legs kicking and tightening my arms as I str against the rock, looking for supports, and I use some chipped mortar pieces to get up and over the window slit. The window appears inwards and I turn inside, blinking in the dark until my vision adjusts. Please don't let this room be anything with soldiers inside. Maybe a kitchen, or a cozy, nice bed, or—I look around wildly—a storage room. It is a storage room, empty but for piles of shaded boxes in the narrow space and without light. Perfect. Outside, Herod's voice carries, shouting about Lymia's failures. I roast myself on a windowsill and see Finn's plump shadow leading down an alley. He pauses, faces a ray of moonlight as he scans the area. He doesn't see me, and I don't want to get spring's attention by greeting. He'll be back in camp now, I know, another one of our protocols. If one of us disappears, the other is to leave immediately. Before I realize everything I've done, all I'm in now, Finn's gone. He'll tell Sir I'm vanished into chaos, and Sir will grow something about how he should never have let me go in the first place. I have to prove him wrong. My arms are too elastic from my windowsill to throw my chakram, so I settle for the curved knives hidden in my boots. One in each hand, I crawl through the narrow storage room. The door opens easily enough and come out with the knives ready, the racing of the heart. But the room is empty, illuminated only by a few widely spaced sconces on the walls. The ground tilts to the right and to the left. I run to the left, the sounds of chaotic anger approaching me from above. No doubt Herod is running down the Tower, shouting at the men of I'm going. Too bad I beat him there. A few stories later, I stumble outside the living room in the central reception room, a great adventure covered in gray stone and heavy green curtains. Late night in my favor, there are no men here. They're all with the master of the city. Herod's cries echo from the aisle, getting closer and closer. I scan the room, my throbbing pulse choking any air in my lungs, leaving me panting as I examine every corner. A nearly three-story-high door shoots into the air to my left: the exit, most likely. I do a quick count: four other doors leave the room, two closed, two open. Through the two open I see a long dining room and a small, dark kitchen. That leaves both doors closed. I put one of my knives up my sleeve and attack the first door. It opens without a fight and stumbles upon . . . someone really, really bad. To my left and right stretch two long rows of cots, most full of lumps of sleeping soldiers. A barracks for the Tower guards. The terror makes the sweat wet on my back, the candlelight sprouts behind me from the chandelier hanging over the reception room downtown, and I squeak with surprise, and then immediately tap my hand over my mouth. No one moves for a moment, and just when I think it might happen, Herod's cry yells at me, just a story or two upstairs. To the weapons! he shouts, and that's enough to send every sleeping soldier into instant preparation, whipping his feet and fighting for weapons. I grab the door, take it closed and run to the other door closed. This is close, too close, and by the time the soldiers in the barracks open their door, I'm shaking the last closed door—closed—and spitting out all the curses I've heard. Snow, ice and frost upstairs. Luckily Sir likes to try Mather and me with Inan challenges like choosing the lock on this chest, your dinner is inside. Your tests and the selection of finger length hooks you keep in my gear are finally helpful, although I certainly don't plan to tell you that. I put the other knife under my arm and take care of the lock. Soldiers stumble out of their room. Herod is coming. The lock doesn't move, either because I'm too nervous or my hands are slippery with sweat or I just need to practice more lock selection. My chances of getting out of the tower shrink with every breath I take, each strangled sputter from my heart filling my body. Who needs a key? I growl like a butt and throw all my weight to kick through the lock. He opens, sending the door banging against the wall. A set of stairs curves downwards with the light rising from below, a flutter of yellow. Stop! I turn. Herod steps on the stairs and his large cargo freezes through the room. A perfect chakram stop, damn my shaky arms. But the soldiers fill the space between us, mostly half-dressed, grating guns and blinking the sleep. Too many to take all at once and his face red. Winterian! I dive in the flairs and slam the door behind me, but my kick broke to the lock so the door refuses to close. Although it means I'm going to lose a knife, I jam one of my blades under the lock and I can through the lock and into the wood with my hand, the lock goes out long enough to give me a better lead. The stairs become slippery the deeper I go, the walls wobble. I can't smell like donkey waste. This isn't just a basement, and it's a deep inhalation. I realize exactly where I'm going, where they hid half the locker, the sewers. Oh, no. A few bowls later, the sound of rough voices resonates with me. I test my arms, not so shaky, and draw my chakram, squeezing my hand around the familiar and worn handle. Fast! There's a fuses upstairs. The best thing is that it moves more by others. I stop at the last turn on the ladder, the glare of the strong flashlight light. They're close. Reach Chakram nearby. My favorite guy. I'm not touching that one. You know who it is! You pick it up. Of the sounds of our conversation, it seems that there are only two of them. The other man growls. I'm your support! I'm ordering you to pick up the medallion piece. Smile. Where's my sign. Now, guys, there's no need to argue. I want to pick it up. It emerges from the ladder with my chakram rolled back, ready to rise through the air. In fact, we're in a sewer, a tunnel opens around me, holding a river of murky debris laced with walkways on either side. One man and a few horses wait on the farthest runway, the other man lies deep in Lymia's sewer. Very few men, but anyone else would draw too much attention. Page 5 Behind the men, one of the bricks on the wall has been removed and in the hole, illuminated by flashlights, a blue box shines. Relief fills me. After years of searching, half the medallion is finally within reach. I point my chakram at the captain with his boots in the sewer. His eyes swim over me. The Winterians are sending guys to do their dirty work now, he scoffs. Why don't you leave that thing before someone gets hurt? I push my lower lip and widen my eyes. This? Under the chakram. Now aim at the captain's left thigh. They gave it to me and he told me to throw it away! I don't even know how it works, the soldiers growl, a deep laugh that says this is a fight they're sure they'll win. I let the chakram fly as the captain advances, my body crouches in an arc. The chakram rises through the sewer, cuts through the captain's leg, and continues its turn towards me in an elegant circle of purpose. He screams and falls into the sewage, grabbing his thigh like, well, as if he had cut it. Oh, I run one hand on the flat side of the blade. That's how it works. The other soldier looks at me from the opposite altitude, his hands out like I'm starting to dance. Or running. Probably the most likely option. But then he smiles, and his change from scared to funny is so abrupt that a flicker of restlessness squeezes into my stomach. Magic. The flies through my mind as if I were there all the time, a silent pulse of knowledge that told me everything it felt like. And it was wrong, all, because the soldier lowers his arms and pulls his shoulders straight, his body biting in front of me. Bones Bones and re-formation, muscles stretch with a sick tear. The soldier is not a soldier, at least not an unnamed soldier, nothing, and the captain I shot laughs at his still-fatal position, his pain-laden anticipation. That wasn't Herod before. Of course not. Herod would not waste his time mixing with the master of the city, he'd be here, with the middle locker, waiting to intercept thieves. Herod finishes transforming until the only thing that light on him is his golden hair, green eyes and pale skin: the rest of him is the shadow, a testimony of his master's evil. It's also huge, his head almost rubbed the roof, and thick on his shoulders, the body of someone who was born holding a sword. Which doesn't sound like fun to his mother. I lean forward to launch my chakram but Herod throws himself off the platform, takes a step through the sewer and throws his body at my knees. I walk down the catwalk and go down in the middle of the sewage, my breath knocked down both by Herod's body and by the sudden immersion in faeces. Grab the chakram and slide it over the catwalk, out of reach, before fixing my arms above my head in a painful turn, mocking me as my feet thunder down the stairs. The non-Hero and his men have broken the door. This could have gone better. I move in his hands, something in my pocket digging on my hip, a gun? No, Mather's Lapis lazuli ball. The only thing that's good for now is like a painful reminder of Mather, of Winter, of how he'll never forgive himself if anything happens to me. Herod's fingers squeeze around my arms and I shuddered. His grip is right on top of my only remaining weapon: the knife on my sleeve. Sir! A soldier rushes into the sewer. He's the non-Hero, slowly transforming back into his own form. I've heard stories of the magic for which Angra uses her conduit, beyond controlling her people. The stories whispered as people returned from missions in bloody entanglements of broken limbs, shared memories of the heat of fever and agony. Angra uses her magic to induce visions so real that they drive her people crazy, to break the bones of traitors and rip out organs while their people are still alive, and for transformations like this. As Herod drags me up, the only consolation I find is that we are both covered in sewage. Link it, we take her to Angra, she orders, and she gets too close to me while a soldier gives me a rope around my wrists. Scared, soldier-gir? I force myself to look him in the eye. I don't have the luxury of fear. When we're in camp in the safety of our tents and Sir explains all sorts of horrible deaths possible, I can't show fear. Fear is a seed that, once planted, never stops growing. But I was there when Gregg, one of soldiers, stumbled again into the camp six years ago. He and his wife, Crystalla, had been captured while on a mission in April and thrown into the nearest labor camp. Gregg told us, babbling in the clutches of madness about exhausting work, deprecating living conditions, and the brutal, brutal, how Angra had herod killed Krystalla. Gregg barely escaped with his life, and even lost a day later, when the husbands Herod gave him proved too much for his body to handle. A tremor runs through me, and I know Herod saw it. That seed of fear. I can't die like Crystalla. A soldier takes me to a horse and ties my wrists to the chair. Herod flutters in his chest, they didn't check me for weapons. Whether it's the chaos of my intrusion or the need to get half of Lymia's medallion out as fast as possible, I don't know, but I still have my knife. I still have a chance. Herod makes it easy to box the hole medallion and holds it for a moment, looking at me. That face, that rattled herod around her lips, this is the monster in Gregg's story, the one Angra uses to destroy her enemies in the most brutal way possible. Angra doesn't like to get her hands dirty, not when she can see her puppets dancing in such glorious shows while using her royal conduit to control them. Why be the dog when you can be the master? Herod put the box in the saddlebag closest to me. Before I ride, grab my chakram from the catwalk, throwing it in his hands and staring at me with that mocking mockery. Jump over your stallion and slide the chakram into the saddlebag on the other side of your horse. There's no way I can get it now. You try to escape and you'll be dead long before we get to April, warn. I suck a breath, twisting my wrists as imperceptibly as I can until my knife falls on my palm. And I'll kill you before this is all over. Herod smiles, the thirst for blood on his face shines brighter. Nausea twists my stomach in relentless knots, he likes it when I defend. Something to keep in mind. With a shout, Herod tells the men to leave. He grabs the reins of my horse and pulls me forward, his leg cranking into his saddlebag. I can feel it, the little square box pressing on my shin. The only thing that separates him from me is a layer of leather. I need to keep him distracted, focusing on body parts other than my hands. How are you? The question is swift and sharp. They, the Winterians in the camps, I'm buying. Two of the strings are cut. One more. Herod turns to me. Smile, close my horse so I'm fashionable with him. The backbone of the Kingdom of Spring. Although the Winterians die too fast for my taste. A few more fibers cut, and the rope falls off my wrists. I fight the urge to stretch my poor battered weapons and focus on Herod, to make him believe that I am resigned to my destiny. I turn to him, meet his eyes, and lean a little as if I were sliding towards him in my saddle. Well, there's a Winterian I know who's not dying. Not at all. And it's going to destroy Herod does exactly what I expected him to do: let go of my horse's reins long enough to slap me. The blow raises my hand, the hand I had managed to slide into its saddlebag and wrap around the little blue box. I kick my horse, hard, and throw it down the sewer all so fast that Herod still has his hand in the air before he realizes I'm free, and I've got half the locker. No, scream, grave voice reverberates on the stone walls. I urge my horse, galloping by the mud of the sewer until we escape into the dark, out of the light of the lantern. Arrows fly further, but strike the stone, lost without something to aim at. They leave me behind, follow me screams and curses, and I make a mental note forever, always put a knife up my sleeve when I go on missions. The horse seems to know where he's going, so I urge him faster. He's probably as disgusting as I am by the stench and remembers how he got here, too bad his new rider is covered in sewage. I gag, finally calm enough to feel the smell of faeces above me. I change in the reins, keeping my other hand pressed so tightly into my stomach that tomorrow I'll have a box-shaped bruise there. A mark of my heroics—Meira, the first soldier to retrieve half of Winter's medallion. A well of pride sprouts in me, and I cling to the feeling as strong as grabbing the box. The horse curves about one more lap and we fly to the surface. The fresh, fresh air of the night makes me smile and I kick the horse faster, faster. It's not free yet. We're a few seconds from the north gate when parked guards realize what's going on. They fight for the lever that will close my iron bars, but it's too late: I push the horse, casting a look at the guard who first stopped me on my way. His eyes widen with recognition, so I scratch the black cap that covered my hair as I stroll, galloping across the bridge over the Phoenix River. The white strands are transmitted around me, some matte with sewer sludge, but most get into the wind. A live snowstorm, a vibrant white reminder that all Winterians have not been enslaved. Some of us are still alive. Some of us are still free. And some of us are half closer to regaining our kingdom. Chapter 5 If I had to camp in two days, stopping only for a handful of half-hour breaks. I don't see Finn on the road, but I have to believe it's because he went back to camp with the same ferocity and hit me there, not because he didn't leave Lymia. I jump off my horse, poor smoldering thing, and take him to a narrow stream where the water whips as if I had never tasted anything so sweet. As I drink, I slapping across the creek and stumbling down the hill, grassing the meadow pushing against my thighs. There, under a light blue sky, sits our camp, as I never left. A horse with Lymia's golden L in his live terrace in is the coral. Finn returned safely. I relax, inhaling the earthy grass bunnied by the sun. No other prisoner of Herod will ever stumble again in the bloody, broken camp. Not today, anyway. I pull my shoulders back and walk to the camp with all the dignity I can muster, considering I'm still full of dry sewage. There is no one around, however, no one peeks at a crackling crackling breakfast or scrub clothes in the well. Which means almost everyone will be in the meeting tent, the largest of our yellow and brown structures. I don't bother to alert anyone to my presence! I throw back the lapel and floor, leaving gunpowder lumps on the faded brown carpet. Our five men cluster around a brown oak table in the center of the room. Their faces are scrambled in different states of concern, from silent grimaces to direct screams, so trapped that they don't realize me at first. We have to send someone back for it! Every moment we waste is another time that could be dead, Greg shouts. His deep voice takes further than that of others, but rarely, if ever, does he speak in meetings. The skin on my arms is prickly. If you're worried enough to talk, you must be pretty worried. I should never have let her go, the lord growls. How did you lose her, Finn? The store flap rusts in place behind me, and men become like one, their words dying in their mouths as five impacted faces stare at me. Five faces with eyes in a spectrum of blue tones; five faces aged by war and death and sixteen years of nomadic life. Some of them still have bandages from their last mission tied around their limbs. Don't panic, gentlemen, I'm alive, I announced, forcing arrogance to cover how exhausted I am. I make sure to hit Finn with the most gunpowder-covered part of my cape when I squeeze between him and Henn. The medallion box tears from my palm like a block of ice that stuck to my skin and clumps against a pile of maps on the table. Silence. Shocked, dazed, I have to dream about it. My chest cools down and I look forward to the softest and most delicate touch of pride. Putting the half medallion on the table completed this mission, and now that it's done, now that I've made it, I've finally shown what I've wanted for so long. This. That I can help Winter. That I can use what I am good—thinking about my feet, walking away, stealth—to help my kingdom. But all I feel is . . . Tired. I take a step back. Looking at me is the usual lineup: Sir, Finn, Henn, Greg and Mather. He's the only one whose attention wasn't sucked into the box at the time I put it on the table. His blue eyes of jewelry are illegible as he looks at me, his face enclosed in an expression that is joy or horror. I choose to think it's joy. Meira. I shuddered and addressed the gentleman, who is standing, lifting the box. Yes? He doesn't look at me, just move the lock and lift the lid, his gray face with dream surprise. I can't see the locker here, but I know what you're looking at. Sixteen years of struggle, to hope that once we find the two halves of our conduit, we will be closer to regaining our kingdom. You. . . sir looks at me. Back to the contents of the box. Back to me. I've been left to Sir speechless. Interestingly, that little victory makes me feel lighter than getting half the locker back and surviving Spring. The gentleman begins to ask something, but he breathes deep, deep, while inhaling the stench emanating from me. Alysson, Wheezing. For the love of everything that's cold, will you draw Meira a bath? Page 6 I laugh as Alysson rushes from an adjoining tent. She looks for me, shudders when she realizes what she's going to touch, and settles simply for the beginning of me with a la. And when you're done, Meira, the gentleman says, you're going to tell me everything. Yes, sir, I answer, without bothering to hide my smile. When I leave, Sir's voice haunts me. Snow up. Actually, he did. It's not praise, but it makes me smile the same way. Yes, I did. It takes five buckets of water, two bars of soap and a small fire to get rid of the sewer. Once the last one in my ruined suit is burning in the flames, Alysson goes out to take care of my stollen horse. I put on a clean white shirt (sweet snow upstairs, clean clothes) and leave my wet hair to dry in the wind as I walk back to the meeting shop. I take a deep breath, gathering my remaining strength to face the lord, and I immerse myself within. The giant oak table has been pushed aside to make room for a cluster of pillows, its brown threaded fabric stretching over wool and grass fillings from the meadow. Two bowls, one holding steaming vegetables, the other minting a handful of frozen berries, wait inside the pillow ring. The cushions surround something else that causes my breath to catch in the velvetiness of hot air: a circular iron fire pit, black enough not to burn the pillows, but close enough to let the earthy smell of burning charcoal absorb into the fabric. The steam rises from turnips and wild onions, writhing in an aroma of salty sweetness. But it's the bowl of berries that makes my stomach do a little dance of excitement as I get on a pillow. I haven't eaten frozen berries since my last birthday, seven months ago, and watching the bowl of black and red orbs frosted more than hunger spin through me. Alysson makes them for special occasions, or tries to do so, when you can find enough ice to freeze solid berries. They are a winter delicacy, something that all other refugees eat in revered solemnity. Speaking of Winterian delights . . . The embers change, sending a cloud of heat. Sweat breaks on my forehead and my nose chinks with the smell of heat. It's not because of the heat we have this fire pit, I think I speak for every Winterian when I say we'd rather be frozen than near any kind of spark, it's for memory. It's for the same reason that I have a handful of slowly thawed berries in my palm. Last year, Finn and I bought food at a small market on the outskirts of the Kingdom of Ventralli, one of the Rhythms. While there, he found this pit buried in a pile of iron baubles that a blacksmith was melting. When he spent half our savings, he expected Sir to hit him and make him try to sell it again. But the look on Sir's face when Finn imprisoned him in the camp threw a pang of helplessness through my The soft, sad pull of wanting. Winter did this. Or, rather, the winterers extracted the coal and iron that went to other kingdoms like Yakim and Ventralli, who made the campfire itself. But coal and iron still came from Winter, a part of our kingdom ripped from the mountains and molded away. To improve the economies of their kingdoms, rulers use the magic of Royal Conduit to improve certain areas of expertise that their kingdoms developed based on the geography or natural talent of their citizens. If a certain kingdom showed an interest in education, the ruler used magic to make his people stand out in learning; if another kingdom showed an aptitude for fighting, the ruler used duct magic to make his soldiers more lethal. Winter sat north of the richest part of the Klaryn, so our queens improved our ability to find minerals and gave us strength and courage in the dark, bottomless places of the earth. Spring has its own mines in its section of the Klaryn, but its own produce deadly dusts that feed its cannons, the only mines in the world that house it. That's what war was all about: Spring wanted to expand its mine stocks. But when they won, they didn't go into our mines. They simply approached them all, as if their goal was simply to destroy winter piece by piece, spirit by spirit, making us sit down and watch Winter's most valued possession fall into decay. Once Angra kills us all, she'll probably reopen the mines. But as long as we live, it is more valuable to hang our useless mines on our faces, mock us, and distract us from making mistakes, to get caught, to fall into their open hands. Or at least, that's what we tell each other, so that it feels less like war is all in vain. I put a berry in my mouth and stare at the dusty orange black of the burning embers. The berry numbs my tongue, makes the ice ribbons crawl through my teeth, but its cold sweetness is suddenly not so tempting. I hold a finger and put it on the edge of the campfire, farther from the heat, and hold there until the burning sensation shudders all over my hand. The others established all this because they want me to know that what I did was important, important enough to burn coal. But it doesn't feel important. Not as I should. Now they remind me, watching the embers burn, why I never feel like I really belong to Winter. I want to understand all this, to see as deeply as Sir and Alysson and everyone else, a reminder of a time when everything was as it should be, but all this is wasted on me, someone who only connects to Winter's stories told by others. I thought I had a hand in saving Winter, but I feel like that kingdom that everyone else remembers. I thought I could fill the void left by my purposeless memories. That's what I've always said to me, and I don't care about Winter, winter will matter to me, and I will care about my kingdom. Then why don't I feel nothing more for the world than the slight burn in Finn? Behind me shakes the flap of the tent, a whisper of noise that could almost be dismissed as the hissing of embers or wind. My muscles tighten, the hairs on my arms rise. But I don't shudder, don't react. I just throw a piece of turnip with a fork. A breath later, my fingers touch the base of my neck where a leaf would go if this attacker were really an attacker. I shuddered, but not because of the coldness of my wet hair pressing on my skin. You're dead, Mather says, laughing in his voice. When I started learning to fight, I sneaked into the gun tent or training yard, sneaking around quietly until he touched my neck and whispered that jocosia there to me. And no matter how many times he did it, he still left me screaming like Angra himself had sneaked in. Lord, of course, did nothing to stop him: he just said he needed to improve attention to my surroundings. I look at Mather and stop in the middle. He falls on the pillow in front of me, his face stretched out in a smile. Dead? I let you sneak out of me, you snuff. All these future things-winter king has gone to your head. Your Highness. Mather's face shudders with his title. You always say you let me sneak away from you. Too scared to admit you're not as good as everyone thinks you are? I'm buying. Aren't we all? Mather drops his gaze at the campfire, the orange glow pressing on his blue eyes. William showed me the half medallion, breathe. My hand tightens around the fork, and I open my mouth to say something, but all I can think of is the same questions I asked him never I left. Things that make our veil of happiness evaporate like water droplets on a bed of hot embers. So I'm silent, and in silence he looks at me, a corner of his mouth cocked curiously. It's strange to think that the last time a Winterian saw him, he was around my mother's neck. His eyes focus on something next to my head, something floating in the memories that everyone has told him too. Memories of his mother, Queen Hannah Dynam. Memories of how Angra himself marched to Januarii Palace, killed her and broke the conduit in two. I recognize that look. Mather's face acquires the same aura of disappointment every time he loses a target in practice, or when Sir beats him in sparring, or when I ask him how he would use magic if he could. Disappointment in itself, in his inability to do what he set out to do, even when he is far from his control. He runs a hand over his face to brush, and there's that emotionless veil again, hiding his true feelings behind a smile. I shake my head slowly. You are crazy. His eyebrows pinch at the suggestion of a smile. This is me? Yes. I stab another turnip and leave the fork there. We got half the locker. You should feel nothing but happiness in this real happiness, not your false smiles. Mr. Winter Heir. Mather's face becomes solemn. He pauses, his hands open in his lap as if he were holding all his I felt nothing, he murmurs, a slow and absent thought. When I saw half the locker. That's all I've seen from my mother. I should have felt something. I struggle to soothe my breath, and my eyes fall for a blow to the campfire. Wasn't I worrying about these same things? Sometimes I forget how similar Mather is to me: maybe you're both young enough to feel separated from winter in the same way. However, Mather's lack of feeling is a little more pressing. After all, he's the king of Winter. But I have no way to reassure him, no knew word to calm his fears, if he did, I would also be able to fix my own problems. It's only half a necklace right now, I'm trying. Maybe you'll feel something when it's quite a conduit again. Mather shrugs. I'm not supposed to have any connection to him, though, remember? I'm just his son. His face shines with shame and shakes his head. I am sorry. You're right; this is supposed to be a happy day. You got half the locker. Thank you. He leans forward, with the intention of his eyes. Seriously, Meira, thank you. My face spasms with confusion, but there's nothing I can do to soften it. I didn't know he was going to put so much weight in the middle of the locker, he wanted so much to have a connection with his mother. I don't remember my parents. I don't even know who they were, but it never occurred to me that Mather would hurt so much for the people I hadn't met either. Do you miss your father, too? Hannah's husband, Duncan, was a lord of Winterian before he became king. Does Mather want to meet you if you only talk to someone in the same situation: king of a female blood kingdom? A heaviness sits in my stomach, filling me with a mixture of suffocation of guilt and anxiety, wanting to help Mather, but knowing it's as out of my power as using Winter's conduit is out of it. Fortunately at the time, the shop flap opens to reveal to the gentleman. Take the absent food, my wet hair. Holding his breath, remembering why I'm really here, to tell Sir what happened. The lord sits next to me, silently. Do not rebuke me for being so casual with our future king that I am not rebuked for my informality and poop-covered entrance. Uh-oh. Remove the box from your pocket. So, start. Would you mind explaining? Suddenly I feel like the child who misbehaved and who first begged Sir to let me help with the resistance. The boy who waved swords like uncomfortable steel wings and showed absolutely no promise in the fight until I tried ranged weapons like my chakram, and it turned out that I too could be deadly. The kid who always sees me when he looks at me. The chakram. My heart falls out. Snow up, I have to tell Sir I lost another throwing record. With the decline in Primoria's iron production due to the disuse of primoria's Weapons have become expensive. And being a refugee from Winterian isn't exactly a lucrative race. I grab a berry, avoiding Sir's eyes. Is no one else coming? Finn maybe? Shake your head. Just us. Now talk. That's an order. He's angry. Angry, something, but I have no idea what. My stomach starts to burn, sticking in all the food I've put in it. Sir, you have no right to be angry or disappointed. I got half the locker back. I did what he couldn't do, even after he doubted me. All I should feel is amazement. Is that why you're upset? Because I finally proved he needs me? I look at it. That's exactly where you said you were. In the Tower. That's all. Is he telling me, begins the lord, that he was able to enter the fortress of Lymia and retrieve this piece of medallion without arrows fired, no dead men, no bloodshed? Because that bruise on your cheek and the persistent stench here say otherwise. What happened, Meira? The wrinkles on the gentleman's face deepen. He carries his age more strongly suddenly, his naturally white ivory of his fillies and some years, not his winter heritage. Fingers in the box before you open it and show me half the locker. It's the first time I've seen him. A silver chain meanders about the back half of a heart-shaped medallion, gleaming though it is more than a few centuries old. Half of Winter's conduit. Exhale, with his shoulders hunched over. I still can't believe I'm here, one hand wide from me. The moment the lord opens the box, Mather's whole body trembles. My eyes sway towards him, and I want to continue our conversation a few moments ago. I want to apologize for the old thing, for mentioning the greatest weakness of your life as if it were nothing more than a discussion about the weather. My breath catches against those questions again, the things that no one dares to do out loud. Will that be enough? Will gathering our conduit halves restore our magic, or will Winter always be the only kingdom in Primoria without magic to make it complete? If so, how will we defeat Spring, a kingdom full of magically induced force, when all we have is eight refugees and a nice necklace? Will another kingdom allied with us once we have the entire medallion again, if our only heir is unable to use it? Page 7 It is possible to live without magic. We've been doing it for sixteen years, barely, but we've done it. We cultivated a small garden in the plains of Rania. We train our bodies to be strong. But these things will never be enough when all the other kingdoms of the world have something that transcends human limitations, when spring is able to erase our strongest soldiers, when the Rhythms are able to do the same. Mather was right: Primoria may seem balanced, but . . . It's not. Sir closes the box with an abrupt click and I shudder. I was quiet too long. He stands up, shaking his head, and a heartbeating certainty forces me to stand too. It was too dangerous, he says. When we start looking for the other half of the medallion, you shouldn't your homework, you hear me? You're back on food exploration missions. No! I scream. Sir turns, but I grab his arm. I'm starting to feel the effects of traveling: legs hesitating, turning my head. But I'm not going to let you take this away from me. I'm your today, a hundred times more, and I will be condemned if I push myself aside so easily again. I brought you half the locker! I scream. What else do I have to do? Please tell me what I have to do to feel like I belong. The lord looks at me so severely that I let his eyes fall from his face and my hands from his arm, blood roaring through my head. I'm so tired, tired to the point where I'm not sure this is happening. I can't deal with this right now. I need to sleep; I need to pick myself up and stop feeling that what I did wasn't significant. I'll get out of the tent at the meeting, ignoring what Sir or Mather calls after me, and I run to my own store. However, the size of our camp does not allow dramatic trespassing sessions, and I fly into it in less than a few seconds. But my shop isn't just my shop, so when I subway inside, Finn and Dendera look at me wide-eyed. Dendera refocuses on patching a hole in one of her boots. Only once would I like to see you leave a meeting with William as a lady instead of a gasping bulb. I growl and flop in my bedding. Finn replicates something about me not a lady, which makes me smile, but makes Dendera rant about how there's still hope for me. I'll bury my face on my pillow and tune them. Dendera once told me she had been a member of Queen Hannah's court. She was respected for her opinion and mind, and no woman under Hannah's rule was allowed to feel small. I've asked her, and everyone, about Winter so often and I've heard so many stories that her memories are my memories now, and I can fool myself into feeling like I remember. Frozen berries and iron campfires. The mines of the Klaryn Mountains. The thick, earthy aroma of refining coal that hangs over each city. If I close my eyes and cover my ears and block everything else, I can see the court Dendera described. I can see the city Sir told me about. The great white palace of Januarii lies above me, its extensive courtyard full of ice fountains. It's so cold that foreigners have to wrap themselves in layers of skin to walk from a building to a building, while our natural Winterian blood keeps us warm even in the worst conditions. And the snow is everywhere, always, so much so that the grass beneath it is white for lack of sun. An entire kingdom wrapped in an orb of eternal winter. But this is where my memory always crashes around me. The cold and the snow dissolve into explosions. The screams begin, pushing over the palace complex like a wave, and I'm running through the grey streets drowned by smoke as hordes of people run too, more explosions cornering us in Angra's clutches. That's what they're doing: corner the winterers like sheep so they can lead them into a life of slavery and Except us. Originally twenty-five refugees who kept Angra awake at night, reduced to the seven still living with the future king of Winter. But no matter how terrible our situation is, how desperate Sir gets, he'll never see me as an asset. Only the overexerted child who had misfortune to breed. CAPITULO 6 THOUGHTS OF the destruction of OUR kingdom are not exactly fodder for restful dreams. Just a while after falling asleep, I am shaken by the nightmares of a shadow that envelops the desolate streets of Januarii, a darkness so complete and absolute that all buildings and people disintegrate into oblivion. I fly, panting in my nightmare, though the store for being empty. The only noises come from the fire creaking on the distant edge of the camp. It must be time for dinner. I stand, still fully clothed, and pull my white hair into a braid. The sun is starting to set as I go out, throwing the plains of Rania into the grey-yellow haze of a day about to die. To my left, the flap of the meeting tent shakes, and my muscles tighten. I do not wish to face Sir even unless his face is excused, which is less likely that the Kingdom of Summer will freeze. So as the tent opens I rush away from it, running to the southern edge of the camp and hill ridge. The setting sun clicks directly in front of me, and a touch of relaxation creeps into my muscles. One of the only good things about this place is the sunset. The fiery tones widen in the landscape until the world around me is nothing more than colors: the invasive black night, the flashing yellow sun, the rays coming from scarlet, the grass of the wavy brown meadow. I slide to the ground, my elbows resting on my knees as the campfire creaks somewhere behind me and the whistling of the wind somewhere ahead. In front of everything that has happened, it feels good, very good, to breathe for a moment. So in my mind, I sketch the map I saw hanging over the desk in Lymia, my soothing nerves as I focus on the withered yellow edges, the faded brown lines, something simple when everything around me is so . . . Lol The plains of Rania, a large strip of empty meadows lands among all kingdoms. Seasons—Summer, Autumn, Winter, and Spring to the south, wrapped in the arms of the rugged Klaryn Mountains. The rhythms: Yakim, Ventralli, Cordell and Paisy, extend through the rest of Primoria. Four Season Kingdoms, four Rhythm Kingdoms, eight conduits. Half the locker flies through my mind. I bite my lip, the thin glow of calm I built shattered by a victory that feels more like a failure. Will we always fail, even when we succeed? Get this half of the medallion, get the next half, form an entire conduit, win allies to free the winter, when will you feel enough? Meira? I whip my heart, my heart stuck in my throat until I realize it's not Sir, it's Mather. He looks at me in silence, his eyes fluttering down my face. My heart is tempted against my ribs and not away from him, hating how with a glance he can open me up. Anyone else I can ignore, to hide my fear behind an arrogant smile, but Mather sees everything. I know you see it, because for the shortest moment you drop your mask without expression and the look on your eyes shows me that his feel in the same way. A mirror of every part of myself that I can't stand to my face. He falls beside me and asks, his quiet voice: Was it so bad? I frown. Get half the locker? What makes you think it was bad? I was barely yelling at William before. Either you're sick or Lymia was . . . I went on and on about my own problems when . . . His eyes stay in the bruise on my cheek as if I saw him for the first time. You wouldn't have left if it wasn't for me, and I didn't even realize you'd been hurt. I'm an idiot. No, I broke up. No, I mean yes, you're an idiot sometimes, but don't you dare apologize. You don't need to feel guilty about letting me go to Lymia, I'd do it again, no matter how close I came to being captured. Mather's face falls and I shudder at what I said. Captured. He turns to the sun, unreadable thoughts spinning on his face. I could never tell if his ability to ward off his emotions was something Sir pierced him or whether it was Mather's natural gift. Anyway, when we were younger and convinced him to steal guns or paint the meeting tent in ink, Mather was able to keep a straight face when Sir asked me if we were the culprits. I mean, of course we were, we were the only seven-year-olds in the camp and we were covered in thick black ink. But Mather always stood strong in his unwavering lie, repeating with incredibly believable certainty that he and I were innocent. Until I burst into tears and admitted everything to the lord. But Mather never got mad at me for getting him into mischief or breaking up during Sir's interrogations. He smiled, threw his arm at me and said something encouraging. Mather has always been a king, every moment of his life. I shake my head. I wasn't that close to being captured, I amended. Seriously. But Mather's eyes cast on every part of my face, and when he finally meets my gaze, he raises one of his hands, his callous fingers coming to rest on my cheek. A squirt of pain throws through my face when I touch the bruise there, but I don't move, needing to feel his fingers on my skin more than I care about pain. No one to stand up to Herod is fine, whisper. A refreshing breeze blows in me as night replaces the roaring heat of the plains. I indo the creaminess and try not to move while Mather pulls my fingers off my cheek, his eyes shooting once more on my face, as if he were looking for more injuries. His gaze stops at my lips, floats there, and I am divided between the need to know why and force myself to separate. He stole my chakram, I mean, grabbing anything to lighten my mood. Mather finally smiles. He takes every part of his face, from his eyes to his lips, and ignites the air around us like a candle in a cave. But almost immediately it falls, the light's over. William wake, you know. I unsuck myself, plucking leaves of grass and throwing them into the air. Mather doesn't pick up my sudden distance, or maybe he does, but I need to hear what you're saying. William was one of Winter's highest-ranking generals. Mather waxes his hand through the air, brushing some of the blades I released. And it feels like it's failed. He sees you as someone who

nothing but bright bodies screwed in sleep. When the sun comes, it will reveal the blood, the gore, red stripes covering the grass inside the horse's pen. A stench of spicy iron looms over the area, causing my lungs to burn. It should rain, a thunderous storm, screaming, to wash all this away. The remains of five lives. I stop. One, two, three, four. Four. Not five. There were five soldiers, weren't there? I scan the area. Dendera and Mather straighten the saddles and other supplies that spring soldiers went through. Greer, Henn and Finn go through the corpses, taking guns. Sir crouches over their deaths, cleaning the blood from his knives with one of the men's shirts. And just behind Sir, behind the horse the last man had been trying to ride, a piece of rope hangs from the fence next to the open door. Cut. My arms tremble with fear before I get his name out of my mouth. Sir. He looks at me, show him the knives. I point to the hanging rope and the door open. There were five scouts. The gentleman turns and stares at the rope. His eyes move beyond him and there, already a small speck on the horizon, he is the last soldier to get into a cloud of dust on one of our horses. Man is far enough out of range to be incapable. He'll tell Angra where we are. Anxiety pours into my stomach, filling me with the knowledge of what's going to happen next. Lord pivots to face me, his eyes leaving from me to Dendera to Finn to everyone. No, don't say it, don't -- We're leaving. No. Pack only whatever it comes. Announce Sir, already uncing horses from the fence. Call north of the camp in five minutes. His words hit me. Are we running? Squeaking, holstering the chakram. We cannot simply— Sir approaches me, and even in the dark I can see that his eyes are bloodied. It's the way he shows emotion, in his eyes. I'm not going to take any chances, not when we're finally that close. Start packing or riding a horse. He walks away, taking a few steps through the grass until he reaches Mather, grabs his arm, and whistles something makes the expression on Mather's face mimic the surprised, angry on my own. Sir rushes to the rest, spitting out the rest, spitting out the same orders in then, packing what you can, there's no time to waste. They split up, running into the camp to obey him. The gentleman doesn't see them as he speaks. His eyes are cast across the horizon, stoic, calm. A rock in the ocean, standing strong against the shocking waves. Herod may be big and dark, but Sir is large and light, just as imposing, just as threatening, with strength built on the sheer pull of vengeance. With him guiding us, how did we lose to Angra? Meira. I shudder. My approach was so fixed on Sir that I didn't hear Mather approaching. He smiles, but he's tarnished by sweat pierced by his cheek, by the panic around us. You let me sneak out of you. Guess, trying to lighten. I shrugged. I like to let you think you're good at something. Nodded with assent, lips relax as he watches me with a calm, solemn look. As if we had never had to leave the camp or flee separately until we all met again in a safe place. We've done this at least a dozen times since we were small enough to remember, but now he's looking at the like he never had to leave me before. Mather? It comes out as a question. He swings towards me, stops, stops, dances as if they couldn't muster the courage to do something. My throat closes, crashing into shock, not letting me wait for him to do what I believe: he finally gets in and raises me up against him. A tight, full-body hug as his arms come around my back, holding me on his chest with his feet dangling in the air, his face on my neck. I'll find a way to fix this, he tells me, his words vibrating through my skin, tremors shaking my own base. Slowly, carefully, I relax in it, my arms around his neck. I know, I whispered. When he starts to get up, I hold on tighter, keeping my mouth in his ear. I have to say these words, but I can't look at it while they spill from my lips. We all know, Mather. You'll do everything you can during the winter. No one has thought about you, and I think, I know, that Hannah would be proud of you being her son. He doesn't answer, he just holds me there, panting in the space between us. I want to push my face down to yours; I want to stay that way, running out of kissing, forever. Conflicting desires cause my pulse to accelerate until I'm sure you can feel your rhythm beating in your chest. I can feel his, the quick blow of his heart galloping against my stomach. In a rapid burst of movement it puts me down, slides a hand around the back of my neck, and plants a kiss on my jaw, his lips remaining on my skin, leaving permanent traces lightning in my veins. His chest deflates, the tension in his face relaxes as he walks away from me. I catch a flash in his eyes, the best glow of tears. He doesn't say anything or agree with me or do anything but give my fingers one last squeeze. Then he's gone. Hurrying up at the camp to pack pack ride his horse or what the gentleman ordered him to do. I'm in the middle of the horse's pen, a hand in my jaw. My eyes move upwards, looking for Mather in the midst of chaos. What was that? But I know what it was. Or at least I know what I want it to be, what I always wanted it to be. What I constantly have to tell myself never, ever be. But why now, in the middle of going out, when I can't corner him and make him explain or find some way to ignore what even happened? Because it happened. My jaw feels as if it had been marked by his mouth, and no matter how many times I repeat, He is our future king to me, I cannot get the impression of Mather's lips out of my skin. I don't want to get his impression off my skin. The lord sidles in front of me, dragging two horses already saddled. Pack your things. He left my hand. Mather's words and his lips and arms around me fade to the bottom of my mind, and I will hold them there, anchoring in the face of all this uncertainty. No, snarling at the gentleman. No, we can't leave. We have to stay; we have to plan something better than running. I can't leave them—in a quick move, Sir grabs my arm and throws me at the nearest saddled horse. Jump on yours and take my reins and yours, shooting a glow that tells me not to argue. His flashes have never stopped before me. We can't let them destroy this house too! Alysson and Dendera sway on their own mounts as we leave the horse's pen. We relax to a short stop in front of the tent of the meeting, long enough for Finn, Greer and Henn to wink at Sir eyes, everything will be destroyed before we leave. Sir fires the reins and as we continue to take the weakest crackle of fire from inside the store, bursting flames devouring anything of importance, maps and documents. They probably used the campfire. We won't be able to bring him with us. Angra will find it, the only part of our past that we possess, filled to the edge with ashes. As I grab the knob of something to hold on to a gun, the lord's fist around my reins falls, his hand unfolds long enough for mine. It's so subtle that I can't tell if he's trying to comfort me or making sure he doesn't rip control of the horse. It's not your fault, growl. It's nobody's fault. Page 9 My throat closes and I sit there, numb and small. It's my fault; I took the scouts here. And I know that staying doesn't make sense—Angra will send many more than five men now, and with only eight of us, the odds are laughable. A death sentence. But there's nothing I can do, doing nothing will kill me faster than facing Angra's entire army on my own. The lord stops our horses when we reach the plains on the north side of the camp. A heartbeat later all his horses, every person, all they were able to grasp in the time Sir allowed. As for our livestock, I hope Angra will treat you better than she treats our people. Divide, two riders each. Once it's safe, sure, in Cordell, the Lord announces. He points to Dendera, who sits on a horse next to Mather in his own mount. Go on. He alive. Dendera bows his head and stays that way until Sir shakes in the reins of his horse. It is challenged by a great whinney, filling all the horses with adrenaline. On the noise lord Sir looks at me and nods, making signs for me to follow him. As he slides northwest into the now dark plains like one of Angra's cannonballs, I walk a breath behind. Everyone else follows, a brief stampede before we split up. I look back as Alysson gallops north with Finn, Greer and Henn to the east, and Dendera and Mather go northeast. Mather looks at me, his eyes gazing mine as intensely as before. He urges his horse next to Dendera's, and then they're gone, entering the night. Sir pulls his horse next to mine. The wind whips my cheeks, drying the tears as they fall. It's not my fault. Sir said so, and Sir only tells the truth. After an hour of total galloping, we slow down. Sporadic groups of trees and shrubs are all we see, their dry, dead silhouettes dotted against the night. We keep riding until the sun comes up. Until he gets back on. Until the horses can't go on anymore. Then we disassemble, make sure they have some water nearby, and we leave them. The lord takes off all his equipment first: the saddle, the reins, the blankets and the small plated armor. He hides the useless parts in dry shrubs, keeps what's left in his sack; and with a final pat on its flanks, we continue northwest for two days on foot, stopping only to sleep and scan the horizon in search of Angra's men. The gentleman keeps his food supply rationed enough to make me starving. Small streams of silky water run every so often, edible plants are even scarcer, and the shade is non-existent. There is only sun, sky, yellowish grass and dead, cracked shrubs for hours. I hate the heat. I hate sweat dripping between my shoulder blades, the way the sun's rays bake every bare area of raw skin. But I hate silence more, and Sir doesn't want to talk. Not only his usual silence, he's frankly mute. He doesn't look at me, he doesn't recognize me, for hours and hours of endless walking. Just when I think I'm going to have to face him, he kneels next to something on the grass. A stream, little more than the length of an arm. It's the clearest water we've seen since we started, and the heat mist rises in a burst of relief when I sigh at the small splash of half-live green plants clustered around the banks. It lasts vegetation that is roasted in the sun, but is more edible than most delights of the plains of Rania, such as the crow. The gentleman looks at me as he takes the herd off his shoulders. We camped here this and we're headed for Cordell tomorrow. Nobody follows us. The sooner we get to a safe place, the better. Although the temptation of clean water is felt within walking distance, I kept it frozen. He's talking to me. Why are we going to a Rhythm Kingdom? I thought you hated King Noam? The lord turns to the water, water, showers falling a little, but he does not respond. I can't help until I know the plan. And like it or not, my help is all you have now. The bite in my eyes scares me and I lanjo my arms. I move forward, I doubt, without certain what reaction will come. But when I get up next to him, all I see is the traces of dry blood that swirl from his hands and get into the water. He's been in spring blood for days. Of course he has, when would he have been able to wash it? The face of the soldier I killed blinks in my mind. It's my fault. All the men who died in the camp were also my fault. Sir nodded to his left. Upstairs, he says, ignoring my lack. I shrug my chakram's holster and drop it into the grass before marching left, kicking my way through pieces of weeds. Every part of me feels bloodied, dirty, as if it were covered from head to toe in the bowels of Angra's soldiers. I kneel and sink my head in the water up to my shoulders. The coldness washes a little out of the heat, flowing over me and chasing my panic. I'm sorry. I've killed before. I've seen Sir kill before. I've seen everyone in the camp, including Mather, stained with blood and limping from battle. I wouldn't mind if some spring soldiers died; have killed thousands of our people. My lungs start to burn, but I stay down, keeping my breath trapped inside until the painful need for air is all I feel. Nothing else. I don't have room for anything else. Fingers wrap around my arm. Before I can shake enough to realize who he is, I find it. The water flows into my lungs, the hot panic icy running towards my chest along with the unwanted water, and I free myself from the current, splashing and shaking. The lord drags me to the grass, banging his fist on my back to get the rest of the water poured from my nose in a rush of earthy grimace. As soon as my lungs clear, I ting my feet, shaking dirt and water from my eyes. I am fine. You scared me. I am fine. But the gentleman doesn't seem convinced. None of this is your fault. And you've killed before, he says. Your creepy perceptual general senses finally work on my behalf for once. I'm going to kill again. The trick is not to let it incapacitate you. Not me. I screw my hand into a fist, ground squeezing between my fingers. The rest of me is quiet, careful, forcing every bit of anger in my tight hand. I don't want it to be easy. Not even if it's Angra himself. I want to feel it, always, so I'm never as horrible as he is. Or you. I don't want to end up as hard as you do. It shakes me at all thought, more guilt piling on top of the rest. It wasn't always like that, I remember myself. Alysson told Mather and me about the night Januari fell with the men Angra. Twenty-five of us escaped the night, camouflaged in a snowstorm created by Hannah's last magic pull before Angra broke her medallion in half and killed her. William was the only reason we did it, Alysson told us as we huddled near the fire one night, waiting for our. We could see the flashes of cannon fire and clouds of smoke over the city, and we wanted to go back to save our countrymen, and I'll never forget us moving until we crossed the border, until we escaped. He paused then, stroking a hand by Mather's cheek. It was he who carried you on his chest all of Winter's journey once we freed ourselves from Januairi. Every time one of us begged him to come back and help save our kingdom, he would put his hands on your little head and say, Hannah confided in us, the continuation of her line. That's how we're going to save our kingdom, even though a war broke out behind us, even though we were caught by a chaotic blizzard to hide our escape, even though we wouldn't reach security for days, William was so gentle with you. A warrior with a tender heart. Lord heard the name of the girl, and after Alysson told it to us once, we never heard his name again. But I'd see the gentleman after that, looking for the tenderness that Alysson mentioned. Occasionally he could catch a flicker, a twinge around his eyes when he thought of the sparring, a jolt of his lips when I begged him to learn to fight. But that's all I saw of the gentleman who once took a baby for days every day. As all his real tenderness went gone, but each every often his muscles convulsed by the memory of it. That's how we're all too much for what we should be. We should be a family, not soldiers. But all that really connects us are stories, and memories, of what it should be. Sir, not the asintion. Now it's clean, all the blood stains are gone except the stains on his clothes. Like it never happened. Not wanting to forget how horrible it is to kill someone is part of what makes you a good soldier. Did you just rest? You just called me a soldier. A good soldier. The lord's lips shudder in his version of a smile. Don't let that incapacitate you either. The blood dries the water on my cheeks and starts sinking my skin again. This is a strangely peaceful moment for Sir and me. I fight for the awkwardness that threatens to ruin it. Should we hug or something? Sir gives him his eyes. Get your gun. We're headed for Cordell. CAPITULO 8 Why SIR PICKED Cordell as our meeting place remains a mystery. Granted, it is the kingdom closest to our old camp. But I remember Cordell's offer. King Noam is a coward, hidden behind his wealth, hoarding the power of his conduit like all other rhythms, and again and again. So when we point our course northeast the next day, I have to ask. Even though I've already done it half a dozen times and got no answer. But Sir and I had a pretty anger-free interlude, and he called me a soldier, so that's got to be worth something. By let's go at a pace to ask for help? Sir looks at me, his face half funny, half annoying. Persistence can get you killed. When provoked by torture, you can also get answers. Mr. Snoring. Rhythm or not, Cordell is the closest. And we're in a hurry now. And also desperate, if Mr. to get help in Cordell. Nothing is so simple, and if I can guess the reason for Sir's decision, something is definitely wrong. What's our next move? The lord focuses on the horizon, the endless cream-colored waves of the grass of the meadow and the throbbing sun. Rally support, whisper. Get an army. Free Winter. He says it like it's easy. Just what we've been working on for sixteen years. And now, because we have half of Hannah's conduit, she's finally at your fingertips. My whole life has focused on getting the first half of the locket, I've never seen or questioned beyond that. Wait, we don't have a whole conduit yet. Why would Noam agree to help us? And where's the other middle locket, anyway? The gentleman looks at me, but keeps his lips in a thin line. It's a risk we have to take, because of the location of the other half. His voice is flat, and I can say there's something he's not saying, but he's still asking my other question. If you wanted to do one thing hidden, safe from the world, so you always knew where it was, where would you keep it? With me. I suppose—I flashed him. Lol He shrugs. Does Angra have the other half with himself? In your person? Sir's not responding, letting me fix it. Your puzzles are a little annoying. So Angra kept a half in constant motion around the world, so would we have a horrible time to get it back while he had the other half around his neck all the time? I shake my head. And here I thought getting the first half was an achievement. It is, corrects the gentleman. A corner of my mouth delights and I revealed in those words. It is. Why didn't you go with Mather? The question appears before I realize I've been thinking about it. Not that Dendera is not able to fight alongside Mather too, despite the fact that she would rather not be a soldier, she is our second best short-range fighter. But Sir is still the best, and the best should be with Mather. We can't get caught together. Sir moves his backpack and opens it. We're both too valuable to the cause. He gives me a strip of meat. I look at him, waiting for more explanations, but he sings a square of cheese in his mouth and settles back silently as easily as he left it. That's all. Not because he cares about me, not because he wants to protect me. It has nothing to do with me. He never has. I forge the dry flesh, with my hand flipping the blue stone in my pocket. The carved surface is sandy against my fingers, and I imagine rivers of strength and audacity flowing from it, from my arm and into my body. I imagine it's really a conduit, my own source of inhuman strength tucked into my palm, both a symbol of power and a reminder of winter. I take my hand out of my pocket. I don't need any inventing strength. I'm strong enough on my own, I, Meira, without magic or conduit or anything. But... Not bad. For once, so as not to be so weak. So we don't look at everything we've done and know that we still have so far to go before we can be safe. Para Para Powerful. We stop to camp when the sun goes down. At that moment, the heat along with my persistent doubts about Sir loving me have made me a ball of anxiety. So when you take the first watch, I force the dream to cleanse my thoughts. Surprisingly it's easier and faster than any dream I've slept in a long time, as if the way Sir spoke to me today caused a small amount of stress to lift. I hate how important your opinion is to me. I close my eyes, curl in a ball in the golden waves of the grass, and get into dreams as the stars glide through the black night sky. The cottages surround me on a cobblestone road, dusted fences with snow and ice, frost-deformed windows. A thick cloud of smoke covers the sky, pulling the chimneys of industrial buildings on the edge of the city, Page 10 I'm in Januairi. I know these streets as I know my own heart beating. Scenes I built from other people's stories and memories, stolen images and emotions. But far paralyzes me where I am on the cold stone path, snatking my limbs with violent clamps and urging my pulse faster, faster, faster. I have seen Januairi in my dreams for years, I have listened with great attention to stories about it. Then why am I terrified? A wave of bodies rushes towards me, rising through the twisted streets of Januairi. We're running, running desperately, as the explosions bounce around us. This is Winter's fall night. No, I'm breathing. We can't run. Angra's shepherding us. He'll take us all, imprison us: NO! I yell at him over and over again, grabbing the people around me. But they don't move, they don't hear me, terror encloses them behind impenetrable walls of need. Then I'm safe. It happens so fast—the change—that I fall and hit the wall of the room I'm in now. A small and cozy studio, illuminated by a hot campfire on the left. The earthy musk of burning charcoal instantly relaxes me, the smell of memories that are not mine. The window in front of me is open at night, letting in the occasional snowflake. The people in the room don't notice me. They are too focused on a woman standing by the door, a woman who cannot be over thirty years old, with fluid waves of white hair and the softest, quietest face I've ever seen. Like nothing, not even Angra's cannons, can shake her. He's got a locket around his neck. The conduit. Hannah. I'm sorry, she whispers, tears on her cheeks, I can't tell you—Not Sir, fly up. Sir. And Alysson is by his side, and Dendera is behind him, and Gregg and Crystalla. alive. A scream starts ripping my throat out before a hand bends firmly over my mouth. In the dark Sir me his own mouth was squeezed into a grimace behind his white stubble. Sleep leaves fog in its wake, and flicker in confusion, my pulse settles back to a normal rhythm. I've dreamed of Januairi before. I've even dreamed of Hannah before. Everyone has, I'm sure—Winter dominates every moment of our wake lives, so why our dreams too? This is nothing to worry about. But I can't have the awkward feeling of leaving myself, especially when Sir sits on my right, drawing my attention to the heartbeat of the helmets. Horses thunder across the plains, sending vibrations running down my palms as I lie on the ground. The Lord lowers his hand from my mouth when understanding shudders through me. Spring? I'm the mouth. Shake your head. He's coming from the southwest, whispering. He's heading northeast. I'm sn locking my eyes. It's clear sir expects me to know who the galloping army is, but I'm lost. The kingdoms southwest of us are summer and autumn. Summers only leave their kingdom to send collectors to fill their brothels, but they rarely travel so far beyond their corner of the world, especially when Yakim and Ventrali are much closer and so full of potential slaves. Autumn has its own kingdom problems collapsing; they had been without an heirress for two generations before their present king had a daughter, but she is only one. Due to the nature of the duct magic, carriers are not able to use it completely until they are at least teenagers. They need to be able to consciously push magic here and there, and children are not able to harness the amount of magic within a real conduit, or control what they are able to summon. But autumn has a powerful ally: Cordell. King Noam's sister married the autumn king two years ago. It was his marriage to the autumn king that brought a daughter to his female blood kingdom in the face of Angra's attacks, once Winter was assimilated into the spring, spring turned his greed into the weakened autumn and without heirs. Her attacks increased after the autumn princess' birth in an effort to conquer them before she grows up in her possession. And with Noam linked through blood and marriage to autumn, one of the most powerful rhythms was forced to worry about a station for reasons other than its proximity to the Klaryn. That's why Sir wants us to go to Cordell. Noam has to help stop Spring now, whether he has to help or let his sister and niece be slaughtered by Angra. If those heartbeats are an indication, it's already helping. I hit the ground with emotion. Cordell! Squeak. Are they Cordellan? Riding back since the fall? Sir touches his nose with a disgust. I taught you well before he jumps off the grass and blows a long, piercing whistle into his ear. The sound resonates in the dark and the heartbeat of the helmet, dozens of them, stop. I twisted. I really hope they're Cordellian. And that at least some of them have sympathy for travelers, season or not. Because if they cling to Rhythm-Season's prejudices or if it's spring, but Sir doesn't make mistakes like that. I hope so. Me too stand up. The shadowy mass of the army looms a few steps ahead. A shadow, the darkened figure of a mounted rider, is removed from the dough and the canters forward. As he approaches, his uniform golden twine and green hunter—and the medals that hang from him, marking him as an officer—become visible. He's got a sword in hand, reins in the other, so you can keep riding and impal us if necessary. The officer stops long enough for us to see his face. Identify yourself or—it stops and your eyes open so wide that your whites shine in the dark. Gold leaves, swear, and I start with words. It must be a string reference. Winterians? I run a hand through my white hair, pulling it over a shoulder, and swallow the lump in advance that gets into my throat. This is the moment when he either spits on us and tells us something derogatory about the barbarism Seasons or he'll help us. Sir, step forward. William Loren. Winter General. And this is Meira, she greets me, also of Winter. Our camp was attacked by Angra and we're on our way to Cordell. The officer lowers the blade and my body relaxes a little. Anyone seeking refuge from Angra is very welcome in Cordell. I'm Captain Dominick Rose of cordell's Fifth Battalion. Apparently Dominick lowering his sword pointed a whole-is-good to his men, for they instantly kept their own weapons. They're not going to spit on us, they're going to help us. Smile. Are you offering a warm welcome for us in Cordell? Sir, push. Dominick points to two of his men and obediently pushes through the crowd, both pulling horses without a rider by his side. His face glows with a grimace, though, in the dark, it might have been just a trick of moonlight. All I can really offer is an escort to Bithai. Bithai, the capital of Cordell. We can't ask for anything better; a whole regiment of soldiers led by a captain who clearly doesn't like Angra and doesn't cling to Season-Rhythm prejudices. Sir must have spent your watch making wishes. We accept, says the gentleman. Your generosity will be paid. The two Dominick men pointed out to offer us the horses. I settle into one and catch Sir's eye as he fits into his mount. His shoulders relax and he collapses a little in his saddle, looking relaxed for the first time since I returned from my mission to Lxydia. Because since then my chest hurts and I close my eyes. I can't afford to think about what happened. I can't afford to wonder or worry about who escaped, who got to Cordell. Not until we get to a safe place, or at least as safe as we'll ever be. The waves of creamy grass from the meadow disappear around the middle morning of the next day. I get up straighter in my saddle, my eyes wide open as I take the vibrant change of scenery. I've never been to Cordell. We have had no reason to go to a kingdom that Sir hates when there are others who sell us food and supplies. But now I wish I'd come sooner. It's beautiful. The grass under the hooves of horses is so vibrant green that my eyes hurt. The hills roll around us, soft and sloping, with maple perfectly that begin to turn oranges and golds. We pass a farm and are surrounded by a flowery and airy aroma: lavender, one of Cordell's most popular and precious exports. Some soldiers greet a farmer and his workers, who drop their tools and buckets to greet We continue, leaving the workers to their effortless purple fields. The soldiers, attracted by the green and the sun and the scent of lavender, scream and scream with the joy that comes from being at home. Lord does not seem invigorated by the emotion of men. Examine every farm we pass, every speck in a village, more than likely considering how many luxurious buildings there are, how many fields seem a little too abundant. His face doesn't change and in that I don't change I see the same anger he gets every time he rants about Noam. Just as Winter focused his magic on mining, Cordell focuses his conduit on opportunities, helping his citizens work a situation in his favor to make the most of it. Opportunists, witty, can artists: whatever they are called, they can even make the leaves turn to gold, a Cordelense phrase that Sir explained in for my own lessons, referring to the fact that they are so good at turning a profit is as if they made leaves in a tree become gold coins. That explains Captain Dominick's curse before: the golden leaves. But while Cordell has endless resources, Noam is not known for making political alliances with anyone other than such rich rhythms. Her sister's marriage to the Fall King was a scandal she eventually forgave when she found ways to make her beneficial to Cordell, but getting off to help Winterian refugees? After three hours of meandering through fields of green and lavender, we see an even more magnificent view rising before us: Bithai. The city stretches over a large plateau surrounded by twenty different minipahs, all abuzz with mid-morning activity. The closer we get, the denser the houses, the people, until the regiment gets on a cobble road that connects to a drawbridge and the closed city. As soon as we pass under the door, the city explodes around us in a fass of screaming merchants, carriage wheels rring down the roads, and braying donkeys in the morning wind. The buildings line perfectly symmetrical along gray cobblestone streets, the avenues bend and bend at precise angles across the city. Each structure, whether house or tent or inn, is a mixture of gray stones stacked under curved ceilings of brown shingles. The flags brag in the breeze above us, flags with a stalk of lavender in front of a golden maple leaf on a green background. Everything is clean, deliberate: fountains and vines that decorate random corners as the whole city is supposed to be part of the palace grounds. What makes sense: Bithai is the input of Cordell, Noam's best power display. Of course I'd keep it as perfect as possible. Citizens greet as we walk, encouraging soldiers, encouraging long-term men. Some women drop baskets of products and practically hit horses in their attempts to kiss their husbands. More often than not, civilians walk away from Sir and I, with their mouths twisting confusion when they see two Winterians in Bithai. But the soldiers are too distracted to worry about prejudices, and fall into turmoil and applause with enthusiasm, their faces illuminate with relief being at home. The feeling makes me smile. Loyalty. Pride. I can feel it in the air, the way men shout greetings at passers-by and ask for word from Cordell. These men love their kingdom. These men have what I see missing every day from Sir's eyes, Finn's grimace, and Dendera's distant gaze, a home. The regiment slows down to a gentle jog and becomes a last wide path, maple branches arching over us. The light seeps through the canopy, a few leaves drifting down and dancing around the wrought-iron fence that follows both sides of the golden brick road. The gentleman is s stopping next to me. I try to get his attention to get some clue about what we plan to do next, but he just looks forward. So I do the same thing. Oh, sweet snow. Seriously? The regiment stops, and I have to bite my tongue so as not to ask if Noam is trying to make up for anything. Because I can understand wanting to have an exuberant kingdom, and want to have an impeccably pristine capital. . . . But this? A door cuts the main grounds of the palace from the entrance road. This door is made of gold, which rises at least three times taller than me, and is covered with green metal vines. Scarlet metal roses bloom along the vines, blue birds perch on the metal limbs. But, worst of all, a couple of looming maple trees, one on either side of the door. Completely golden, its leaves cling in the wind with a beautiful—and completely excessive—melody. The heart of his kingdom whispers Sir. It is his sudden tranquility that makes me realize that the enthusiasm of men has been replaced by a deeper air of solemnity. It's not, I catch it and I drop into a whisper, real gold, right? The gentleman gives a guide. My mouth hangs open. No wonder Sir hates Noam, used enough gold to run a kingdom to make two trees. The regiment dismisses, leaving Sir and me to go on. When we're all in front of the door, the twine men fall into the waist ties and stay for a moment, their hair swaying in the breeze, before a captain murmurs rises from his bent shape. I feel closer to the gentleman. Are they singing? Sir, not the asintion. He doesn't seem happy. But it's not an unhappy -to-punch—am-in-the-toat. It's melancholy and a little evanescent. It's Bithai's Poem. The soldiers end their non-creaky murmurings to the two golden trees and collect their horses. Captain Dominick moves among his men, all now occupied carrying their mounts to the right by a separate path that wraps around the back of the palace grounds. Page 11 Dominick approaches the door. General Lady Meira—Ma'am. My nose curls, the title ringing down my spine. I'm not sure I want to be a lady if you follow me. But I'm sure I want to be a lady if you follow me. The gentleman's neck is red. This journey is going to destroy him from the inside out. Not that I'd bet on that, but most of the experiences I've had with Rhythms left me seelss as a less than human way. Meers as we walked the streets, rotten vegetables flung out of our mouths, the one has been cruel so far, so I walk better as Dominick takes us through the door to a luxurious garden. A fountain spits water in the air in the center of a small stone walkway, all lined with bright red azaleas shrubs and lavender shrubs. Pieces of pollen float in the air, circling like insects chasing each other through sun rays. On the right, a stone walkway winds in a maple forest, a hidden path for midnight attempts or assassination attempts. In front of us is a palace of the same gray stone, as the rest of Bithai. This building dwarfs everyone else, however, gleaming with four floors of bright windows, ivory balconies and thick velvet curtains. Just as Dominick shakes us in the palace, a scream spins me. The gentleman stops too much and relaxes enough to smile, a gentle and truly relieved pull that fills me with comfort. Meiral! I'm heading into the woods like a white-haired, blue-silk blur coming out of the green darkness: Mather. A smile bursts on my face, racing all the persistent remnants of exhaustion from the trip. He rushes forward and gets me into a hug with his back, nailed to his body. I don't even care that my ribs just burst. CAPITULO 9 MATHER BEAMS UP on me with that blinding smile and don't throw me away. I'm trying in vain to fight the blush I'm sure is turning my pale face red. She's definitely been to Bithai a little longer than us: her hair is pulled back with a ribbon, she wears a sky blue shirt over clean ivory pants, and Hannah's locket shines halfway around her neck. Noam has a point in my book I won't Kill You: He took care of Mather. Mather laughs in the throat. It took you long enough to get here. His words vibrate through his neck and make me painfully aware of the fact that I'm clinging to his neck at all. My fingers tremble but I can't get away from him, and I laugh at him, feeling his muscles tighten. I didn't realize it was a race. I managed, the memory of our last hug shining in my mind. His face red, a slight pink dye. Are you thinking about it, too? It was, and you lost, that's all he says, his laughter washing on Sir. Sir clears his throat. Mather squeezes me one more time and puts me back in the stoness where I find it hard to balance. Who shook the world? Who else is here? The gentleman asks. Straight to the point. Mather doesn't seem as upset about the lord's abruptness as ever. Everybody, I'm exhaling. We're all here. We all survived. A little bit of me unrolls: we lost our camp, but none of our party. I couldn't have recovered if one of us had died because of me. The gentleman also exhales. Excellent. Have you met with Noam? Mather nods. Yesterday, Dendera and I have been here for two days—He looks at me, then back to the lord, and he doesn't continue what he thought he had. Had. Suddenly it looks like someone punched him in the gut, and all my senses are on alert. Something's wrong. Sir nods once more and heads to Dominick. Show us your king. Dominick pivots on his heels and jumps down the stairs to the palace. Two guards stationed there swing the doors, staring at our vibrant winter hair. Well, sir and mine are not vibrant right now; our heads, like the rest of us, are full of dirt and travel sweat. But I guess from Sir's determined march behind Dominick, we're not going to take a bath before we meet Noam. A bath. I fight for a squeak of longing as we stop in the lobby of the palace. The only light source is the chandelier over us, which leaves a soft white glow. The rest of the décor is dark: polished wooden walls, black marble floor. Comfortable but expensive through and through. Rectangular panels align walls. I don't know if it's doors or just decoration. One, on our right, opens. Dominick rushes forward and stops at a loud greeting to a man inside the room, out of sight. My king, I have—More Winterians. Yes, I assumed the same thing. The deep voice coincides with the warm darkness of the environment. Almost a voice I'd expect from a grandfather, not a king. Lord approaches forward, almost pushing Dominick away. Noam. Once, when he convinced Mather to steal a bottle of Summerino wine from Finn and we'd get a little nervous, Sir sensed me two weeks away from scrubbing dinner plates because it was disrespectful of our future king's position. But Sir has no problem breaking King Cordellana's name as if he were a little boy who misered. Noam enters the lobby, arms crossed. He's big, not as big as Sir, but he's still in charge. Her golden-brown hair hangs loosely on her shoulders, bordered with gray around her face and even greyer on her beard. It has deep, mysterious eyes that make me feel both na**d and invisible at once, as if I can read all my secrets with just one glance. And his conduit, Cordell's dagger, sits on his belt, the purple jewel on the handle shining so faintly in the dark. Noam, impassive face, turns his dark eyes to the lord. His gaze travels over Mather before stopping at me, and he smiles. That can't be good. That's all, Dominick. Thank you. Dominick retreats as he expected more. But then he leans over, mutters something about re-reporting in the fall later, and walks out the front door. William, says Noam, even though he's still looking at me. So glad you did. An unpleasant matter, dealing with the Shadow of the Seasons. Stations can be quite—stops—volatile. Retention of a snort. Volatile. And he hasn't met me yet. But my snort gets caught up in what he called Angra, the Shadow of seasons. I had forgotten that this way they called the Rhythms. As if it were nothing more than a gray haze thrown by the rest of us, and maybe if we move the right way, it will disappear. The gentleman enters Noam's line of sight and I suppose a sigh of relief. I was hoping we could discuss it, a more private environment. The gentleman looks at Mather. My king said I had already spoken to him, but I have some issues that I would like to discuss as well. Sir has never called Mather king before. Future king, yes. Royalty, yes. But I never king, King Mather Dynam. A flutter of restlessness rushes through me. I know he's our king, and I knew this would happen. I thought I'd have more time, until we found half the other locket, at least. No... Now. Noam greets two servants. May Lady Meira settle down. We need it to look better for tonight. Sir and I bleached. Sir, bleaching. I don't think I like Bithai anymore. Excuse me? Mr. Growl. Noam smiles. The ball. My court has been waiting in Bithai for two days, waiting for a celebration. Now you can start. Surely your king has told you. The way he says the word king makes my skin crawl. I look at Mather, whose face is as red as the azaleas outside, and his jaw so strong that his teeth have to be completely flattened. The servants are coming at me. Come this way, please, say one. The gentleman's roasting me. But there's something behind his eyes, something he barely clings to, that makes me want to put my chakram to work ruining Noam's pretty lobby. The servants begin and, after another pause, I continue. This should be what the sheep feel before cutting off their heads and roasting them over open fires. Noam's voice carries when we leave the lobby. Like everything else in Bithai, it's intentional. Yes, he says. We can still come to an agreement. I go around, but Lord, Mather and Noam have already entered what I can only assume is Noam's study. The door closes, cutting off anything else I can hear. Lady Meira, this way, please. Lady, Really? I give up on following the servants. The lobby ends up in a ballroom, the ballroom, I'm sure, where any party Noam has planned will happen tonight. It is large, opulent, with marble and chandeliers and lush green plants and lots of gold. I'm a little sick of Cordell's wealth. Two stairs envelop the room, one on each side. The servants take me to the left, circling, so I have a 180-degree view of the ballroom. I make a point so I don't look at it, focusing instead on the mud on my boots. We go to the second floor and started knitting through so many identical corridors that I'm beginning to think Noam's plan was to get lost in a maze of annoyingly expensive finesse. Wood panels so polished that I can see my dirty reflection as we pass, crystal chandeliers that throw changing points of light through the mud, garnet carpet so plush and velvety that my boots leave slits. The same dark accents and expensive but comfortable feel like the lobby. Finally the servants stop in front of a door. Its polished surface allows me to see my expression swing inward as it opens, and behind the door is, I hate to say, exactly the bed I would design if I had endless resources and nothing more to worry about than the furniture in the room. It's simple and beautiful. Where to I expected it to be as exaggerated as Noam's door, it's just a four-poster bed (a very nice four-poster bed), a closet (a very nice closet), and an intricate lavender carpet stretched over a wooden floor. The balcony doors open in front of me, heavy white curtains waving in the wind as I enter the center of the room. Both servants are only a few years older than me, dressed in simple but simple dresses made of fabric in Cordell's green hunter. The blond-brown hair hangs on smooth strands on her back and one of them, her broad brown eyes giving the illusion that she sees everything, she enters me. Is this to your liking, Lady Meira? Meira. Yes, that's what I said. Mrs. Meira. I frown. No, just Meira. No lady. I'm afraid I don't do that, Lady Meira. I squeak my teeth and go back to the servants. Not bad. What are their names? Mona. Rose. Well, Mona and Rose, what can you tell me about what Noam is planning? Mona keeps her head bowed meekly and Rose simply shrugs. We don't know anything except that we have to have you dressed and ready at eight. I'll sn lock your eyes. What if I refuse? Mona's eyes widen. Rose, clearly the one in charge, puts a hand on Mona. I hope not. King Noam made it clear that our future in his service depends on you being at the dance. One of my eyebrows goes off. And you always do exactly what your king demands? Rose is slowly addressed as if she were not sure why she would ask such a question. I expect the same thing from Mona, but when I notice her hesitating, writhing her hands, I can't stop a curious smile. Rose sees my sudden change of expression and confronts Mona, who raises her hands and nods so violently that I fear her hand will shake from her head. Of course I obey you! Mona declares. I'd just, be good, wouldn't I? If we, I don't know, had our own magic? Rose's face turns as red as her euphonious flow. No Cordellan wants nothing, and you stand here in front of a guest, and you say those things? It gives me a whipl. I apologize, Lady Meira—Mona is new to her position. Mona gives in, dropping her hands and tilting her chin against her chest. But she doesn't answer Rose, she turns to me, her eyes on the ground. Forgive me, Lady Meira. I almost forgot to stop by to be called Lady when I see her little flicker of fire extinguished. I can't get the surprise out of my face, the only time he spoke was at the thought of having his own magic? Not being in debt and being linked to Noam? I'm minding the idea, trying to figure out how to put it in my mind. They remind me of the lapis lazuli ball in my pocket, the little circular stone pressing on my thigh. Mather wanted to believe it was magical, that anyone could pick him up from the ground. It would make the world much simpler: no one would have to rely on their king or queen to help them. Nobody you stay within the limits of your kingdoms to participate in the magic of your bloodline. We'd be much less. . . Caught? That's not what I don't like the right word, at least as someone who's been fighting his whole life to get this kind of magic. But perhaps in other kingdoms, kingdoms that have had magic for centuries, they ask these questions. They wonder what it would be like to be free of the strict lines of our world. I shake Mona's head. Don't apologize. It's okay to ask questions. Even if I'm not sure who my answers to those questions are. All I know is that Winter needs magic to be free. That's all I can see right now. Rose shoots me. It is certainly not right when such questions contradict our king's clear orders. Raise an eyebrow and finger simultaneously, ready to turn your threats towards me. I go back to the canopy bed and collapse on it, arms pulled away. There's no need to be angry. I'm going to the prom. Page 12 When Rose starts talking again, I can hear the smile in her voice. Excellent. There's a bathroom prepared for you through there, Lady Meira. My head appears in time to see Mona point to a door to my left. We'll be back after you've rested, Rose says, and get Mona out. When I close the door, I sit down. The ball of lapis lazuli pushes against my hip, making me think of Mather, sir, not magic and that I should or should not have it. I move the stone out of my pocket and roll the little blue ball over my palm, repeating it calming my nerves. Noam loves me for some reason. Stranger is still the fact that a rhythm king sees something in a refugee season worth using at all. And Mather and Sir know what it is, but they're in a magic right now with Noam, so my current options are to sneak around the palace in hopes of finding answers in one of these many rooms or taking a bath and nap. As if my body had already made its decision, I let go of a yawn, my eyes fade as the tears rush. I took off my travel clothes and piled up all the mess of things in the corner with my chakram protecting on top. The ball of lapis lazuli comes out of the pile, hitting the wooden floor and getting to rest on the thick carpet. I pick it up and put it on the bedside table, looking at its blue surface. I know it's ridiculous, but a small part of me relaxes, knowing that a piece of winter is there if I need it. Scented soaps and bubbling water quickly ease any persistent concerns, filling my senses with lavender and steam. My god. I could get used to this. After spending too much time spinning wrinkles, I get up from the bathroom and frown like the fog of the relaxation elevators. Something's wrong. I scan the room twice, my mind blurred, before my eyes fall to the ground and see—Nothing. My things are gone. My chakram, my boots, everything. Only the lazuli pencil ball is still on the table. A nightgown is now spread over bed, a shiny ivory garment that was probably meant to be a fair trade for my clothes. It should be disturbed, except that the nightgown is softer than rabbit skin. I relieve it on my head and the fog of relaxation falls on me. And when I slip between the silky sheets and the feather quilt, I forget why I should have been disturbed. Or why he should have gone back to Noam's studio and demanded answers. Or where Noam's studio was even because all these rooms look the same, and their trees are ridiculous, and, sweet snow, this bed is comfortable. . . . CHAPTER 10 I'M SORRY. I don't know what else to do. He'll be here in a matter of hours. I'm in the study of my previous dream. The hot campfire, the musk of the burning embers, the window open letting in snowflakes. The twenty-three who escaped that night and would come to live in the plains of Rania with two babies, all huddled together in preparation to leave. And Hannah, your silent force hesitating as you kneel next to. . . Alysson? Why am I dreaming about this again? Alysson sits in a chair in front of Sir, who leans over the back of it with his head on his chest. The two are gloomy, half crying and half not, trying to stay strong before their queen. Alysson's arms are cut around a small bundle of blankets. I don't know what else to do, Hannah whispers, stretching out her long, pale fingers to touch the package in Alysson's hands. A small hand shoots and Hannah takes it, wraps her two hands around her. Mather. You don't have to go, Hannah says. You don't have to obey me. The queen of Winter, wooing before her general and his wife. Alysson looks at his queen, one hand still around Mather and the other moving to grab Hannah's. My will, whisper. Of course we will. For the winter. We all will. Sir. Now. Look up, alert and focused. You can trust us, my queen. Hannah topples, her fingers lying in absentia to her son. She nodded, or bowed her head, remaining silent for so long that when a distant explosion crashes, everyone jumps. I'm so sorry I did this to you all, Hannah whispers. I am sorry... Lady Meira? For I fly up waiting for explosions, ready to grab that little baby and run. It takes a couple of deep breaths and a few moments of focus in the canopy before I think I'm not in that studio, I'm in Cordell. I'm at Noam's palace with Rose leaning over me, emotion spreading over his face. It was just a dream. Another dream about Hannah. But why did it feel so real? Are you ready to be beautiful, Lady Meira? Rose asks, with a view to my constant flicker in the canopy. C**k an eyebrow. Are you saying I'm not already beautiful? Rose's face is collapsing. No! Of course not, I mean it's okay, Rose. I'm kidding. I swing my legs on the bed and evaluate the situation before me. Three additional servants have tagged along with Mona and Rose, each holding a bag of clothing. This is part of what sir's planning, I guess, by giving me, like chicken-skinning me before I cook it. I can't go to dance with my travel clothes, and I put my head on that I didn't realize this before. I've never worn anything more fanciful than the same clothes decorated as usual. I'm not sure whether or not I want to be more elegant, every time they described me dance dresses,

puts the letter on his father's desk. He didn't know, promises when it's just us, Alysson and some soldiers down the hall. I indo it, astonished at how hollow I feel. As if the chaos of the last few seconds has emptied everything to me. It doesn't matter much now, does it? Theron looks at me, something that works behind his eyes. A quick through the studio and he bursts into the hallway, holding my hand. Mrs. Alysson, would you please join us? I'll put you under the watch of my personal guards. Alysson's glow to take part in him. Your Highness—begins, but Theron is walking, crawling down the aisle. She goes on, but the soldiers come from the corner to fall behind Theron and I, apprehending us from Sir's wife while they stand guard on his heir. Theron brings me closer to him and we stop at the entrance to the ballroom. Are we going to the army? he asked. His voice is low enough to be blocked from Alysson by his wall of soldiers. I look at it. He keeps his eyes on me, a strange light shining behind them. But sir—My voice falls from beneath me as the glow in Teron's eyes intensifies. After everything that's happened, in the midst of everything that's going on, it's such a warm relief that I smile again. Theron shakes his head. You want to stay at the palace? You and I both know that's not where you're going to do the greatest good. I stare at him, letting his words go over me. You'll let me fight? Once we get to the door, whether you fight or return to the palace is up to you. But I'm not going to hold you, if that's what you mean. Why? Theron's mouth shudders. Because I've been at my father's disposal all my life, whisper. And I will not tolerate this game monarchs play. These are our lives. I won't let my father or General Loren or even Angra follow us. I'll say they're not. His poem rushes back to me, his lyrics on the parchment of the wall. Theron lies in a corner of his mouth, studying me in a way that doesn't feel possessive or condescending. It feels the same way. The heat gathers in my stomach when I smile again. This is not the time for smiles and persistent looks, but I can't help it. It takes away a little of the anxiety of facing spring, as if having Theron by my side kept me safe through this. Not as a protector, as equal. I'm not the only one caught up in this. I'm not alone. My mind blinks until the last time someone helped me like this, when Mather faked an injury so I could be the one to go to Lymia and take the medalion in half. Mather did it because he knew I wanted him, but Theron's doing this because he knows he'd want it. I look at Theron. They're so similar. And yet, no. Theron nods to the soldiers behind him. Escort Lady Alysson to a safe place. Yes, my lord, one of them says and turns around. Alysson starts going with them, assuming we're somewhere in the men's dodge. The moment his back is turned, Theron and I glided in the opposite direction, diving through a door and into the servants' room. I know what I have to do to show that I can be useful as a future twin queen and for myself: to fight in this battle. Protect this city and the Winterians. The lord will hate you. At this point, I wouldn't care less. We wait for Mather, Greer, Hen, Finn and Dendera to get their gear and leave before entering the army. But it turns out Cordell doesn't have armor suitable for my little stature as well. an extra layer of padding later, I'm marching next to Theron out of the army with one of the beautiful metal crossbows tied behind my back. It also of Cordell's soldiers use the otoñal weapon, and I would excel in the ranks of the army. The longer I leave without Sir nodding, the better. You don't look ready for battle. Don't lie to me while Mather runs next to us. It's equipped with armor that matches Theron's, from a shell to chicharrones, chaining mail under everything. He also has so many weapons, a sword and knives and even an axe tied behind his back, and the bruise on his cheek is now purple red on fire. Mather looks at me, but I refuse to look at him. You've never heard of William, have you? Not when we were kids and not now. I don't answer, even when I realize that Theron is on my left, Mather on my right. Both are rolled as tight as I put on before throwing my chakram through the air, and shooting looks as sharp as knives at each other. We'll take care of that later. I hope it's not later after Bithai has been looted by spring and we're ravaging the rubble. The closer we get to Bithai's main entrance, the more hectic things are. Soldiers run to the door as citizens flee from it, dragging carts or cattle loaded with any item of value they may have. Residents of the outer villages of Bithai, come to take refuge within the stone walls of the city. There's a tower by the door. My father will be there with your general, Says Theron. Look at Mather as if he's trying to decide what else to add. How many men do you have in town? Five thousand. Not most of our army, but enough. Conduit? Theron beams, letting out the little smallest of pride. My father may be known to pour his conduit magic into opportunity, but he also gives much of his power to defense when necessary. I think you'll be happy, King Mather. Theron's smile does nothing to relieve One of Mather. He looked at Theron, through him, and nodded with the nod. I hope for Bithai's sake that you're right. The streets leading to the front door may be busy, but the door itself is chaotic. Citizens pour from the earth beyond, cattle bled, babies mourn. Some soldiers try to instill some kind of order, but the general feeling of the area is to enter as quickly as possible, in any way possible. The aforementioned Theron Tower looms to our left, spiraling over the wall to give to those within a view of the south. A few captains stay around the door and as we approach, the dull cries of their intrepid leader make even the air feel nervous. Captain Dominick is one of the few by the door. Her dark hair hangs in sweaty strands and when she turns to us, her tense face relaxes almost imperceptibly. My prince, a messenger that the current speed of spring puts them on our door in the late afternoon. Thank you, Captain, Theron said. Take a look at Mather, tough and daring. Shall we? Finally, Mather finally lets his mouth move in a little smile. Your kingdom, you first. Theron bows his head and darts in the tower, his armor ringing as he twists spiral staircase. Mather starts to keep going so I trot behind him, almost hitting him when he stops. You can't come like this, you'll turn me off. My lip trembles in a growl. I was prepared to hide somewhere in the tower to avoid the lord, and Mather owes me at least his silence, doesn't he? If you send me to the palace, I'll sneak out and you won't know where I am, and you won't be able to track him down. Believe me, this option is better for everyone. Page 23 Mather cocks an eyebrow. I know. What? Sigh and greet a soldier in the race. Your helmet, please. The man takes off his helmet. Mather takes it in one hand and wraps my braid around a knot in my neck in order to slide the helmet over my head. The visor is still up and I feel like I'm looking at it, misty and distant, through a tunnel, memories superimposed on this moment with all those times I fought him. All those practice fights when it was just us, two kids pretending to be soldiers. Or two soldiers pretending to be children. Don't talk, Mather says. Don't draw attention to yourself. If William realizes it's you, you're alone. Nothing I haven't dealt with before. That makes him pause, one hand on either side of the helmet. I think he might want to say something else, but he drops his visor with his thumbs. When I start, stay close to me or help me, Meira, I'll go back to Bithai myself. Nodding, the hollow core of the helmet that gets tangled back and forth. Smells like sweat and old iron here. Iron that was probably extracted from the Klaryn, which makes me feel a little more at home. Mather disappears into the tower without saying another word. I hope my disguise is quite convincing, the threat of spring distracts enough, that Sir doesn't notice the soldier a little skinny in the room. I'm not sure what I'm afraid of anymore: the wrath of Mr. or Angra's. I snk my narrow eyes and walk to Mather down the stairs. Seven floors later, Noam's screams fly us through an open door. The large circular room is the highest of the tower, allowing views in all directions of the lands beyond Bithai. High-ranking generals scatter through them all, lean over maps, or unsuccessfully try to keep their eyes on their crying king. Spit flies out of Noam's mouth, his arms wave, his armored body rucks nervously. Your conduit sits on a metal belt on your hip, your usual place of honor. Damn you, William! Damn you and each of your white-haired annoyances. I knew I should never have let you cross my borders, let alone sacrifice my son in all this. Damn stations. Good barbarians for nothing to refuse to surrender to stronger forces: I present along the wall with two other guards. They nodded to me like I was there. So far so good. Its species is too indelle of reason to negotiate, Noam continues. I should have seen him sooner. But no, I tried give him mercy, degraded my kingdom by joining a season, and this is Did I get paid? Now Angra marches on me! Give me one good reason why I shouldn't deliver them to spring right now. The tantrum I threw out hours ago seems nothing compared to the way he stumbles, again speaking and babbling his reasoning. Doesn't Noam really think he was doing us a favor? He thinks we should be grateful to him. That none of what he did brought us this, as if it weren't him who tried to negotiate with the Shadow of the Seasons. Lord does not react to any of this, leaning against the distant wall and massaging the skin just above his nose. He's never come down to respond to screams or threats, or have first-hand experience with that or something. Theron walks in the middle of it, already tired though the real battle is hours away. Father, stop—Noam whip towards him as if he had forgotten that his son would be here. Yes! Of course, son. Stop it now. Stop it now. We're done with Winter. The commitment dissolves. No, Theron growls, a low noise that shakes everyone's conscience in the room. Noam frowns. What? No, repeat Theron. I meant to stop making you look like an idiot, Father. Lord turns his head up, his hand still held absent in front of him, his eyes wide open in a shocked amazement. Noam backs off. Don't tell me—Spring comes, they did, they brought them here—No, you brought them here. When you wrote that letter, you told Angra exactly where they were. What did you think would happen? As Theron screams, madness blinks in his eyes, something waxes up after years of seeing his father silently. The men around him look in amazement, clearly surprised to see their prince shout at his king. That Angra would bow before you? That he would negotiate, trade and act fairly? Angra wants to kill them. He won't stop at anything to get what he wants, and negotiating has never worked with him. You think Winter didn't try to negotiate before he fell? You think Autumn hasn't tried to reach an agreement with him since spring turned against them? You'd know how truly vengeful it is if you ever bothered to go to fall. I frown. Noam hasn't even been to Autumn, his sister and niece's house, the place where he sends thousands of his men to fight? You can't talk to me like that. Noam throws a hand to silence him, but Theron pushes her. I can. You've wasted too much time. Our men need a leader right now, someone to tell them how to survive the approaching army, not an idiot. Your big plan failed, Father. Own even him. Noam's mouth opens. Looks like mine. Just like every mouth in the room. From the shaky light in Theron's eyes to the way his hands tremble slightly beside him, he seems to be realizing how far he's gone. You have to do this. His voice falls into a whistle. I'd take that dagger off now. If I could, but you're still Cordell's oldest living male heir. So act like one. Noam looks every little at the cornered dog, lost lost savage, desperate to escape. After a few long minutes, he relaxes, pulls his shoulders back, and looks his son in the eye. You're going to make a good king. Someday. Add the last word as a threat. Theron bows his head. Noam turns to the nearest general and puts a hand on his dagger. Your regiment will be our left flank. Keep them ready. And you, right flank. Spit out orders like nothing happened. As if he had purposely organized his little outburst as a strange pre-battle ritual. Theron's shoulders collapse as his father walks away, but Sir rises beside him and mutters something that makes Theron straighten. Mather's coming up too. That was brave. Theron wipes a hand in his face. He seems exhausted, as if he could fall and sleep for a week. But there's something else in his eyes now, something roaring beneath the surface. And it should have been unnecessary. Theron's addressing Mr. I'm sorry. For everything. Cordell is much better than—His eyes move toward Noam. I apologize, King Mather. General Loren. Sir greets you. Behind them, Noam points the field further and shouts an order to one of his generals. I agree with one thing you said, the gentleman offers. You're going to make a good king, Prince Theron. Praise from Sir and Mather within five minutes. If it were me, I'd faint gratefully, but Theron just stares at the stone floor. Sir gets over it too. I'll never understand how. For now, Mather and I are needed with our people. Theron nods to the inject. Of course. Sir jogs down the stairs, Mather a blow behind him. When Mather passes me, he meets my eyes, and mouths, he tries to stay here. It's one of the safest places to be. Unless Angra's cannons attract the tower, in which case it is a long and slow fall to the ground. Swallow and I'll get a little straighter. Noam is busy channeling power into several regiments by wanting the magic of the conduit to be poured into the men here, officers there. The hum of the tower has changed drastically, it is no longer full of worry or anxiety. Incredible what a quiet leader can do to a group of men. But it's not just Noam's magic that's calming them down. The tower moves around the room, talking to each general, sending some to prepare his soldiers. Their serenity makes it easier for them to submission, while their father uses brute force. Theron's firmness, his certainty, remind me of someone. Reminds me of the gentleman. They have the same solemn security when faced with life-or-death situations. Same rock posture in the ocean. Halfway through the room, Theron looks at me. Do you recognize the overloaded armor in which you helped me force myself? One moment in which you helped me force myself? He looks at me with a small smile that says, I'm taking care of you too. I even if I can't see. CAPITULO 18 AS the SUN looms a few hours after noon, I find myself with my back to Bithai's oldest buildings; those who citizens were frantically fleeing from, seeking refuge within high stone walls of the city, while the soldiers occupied their stations in the green fields. Noam. Theron and some high-ranking generals stayed in the tower by the door while the rest of the men, including me, were removed to add numbers to the field. The sea of soldiers extends so far around me that I can't see the green bithai grass, only silver armor and dark weapons and ready and waiting bodies. The cavalry occupies the outer flanks, the infantry ranks and ranks fill the center, and two long rows of archers stop at the back on the sloping edge of the Bithai Plateau. Which is where I am, the metal crossbow loaded into my grip. The last few hours have been filled with preparations, lined up and making sure everyone had the right equipment. Now that everything is ready, everything has time to catch up with me. Inhale, exhale, my breath warms the hull, my pulse hammering in my ears and echoing around the metal that envelops my head. Waiting is the worst part: with food-seeking missions. I never had a chance to get nervous. They were so fleeting that by the time they were done, I hadn't even realized I had to feel more than an adrenaline rush. But now, listening to my heartbeat and looking at the horizon and waiting, waiting for battle, it's horrible. The rest of the winterers are behind the archers in their own group. Noam cannot help us with his conduit, he cannot pour strength or will into us because we are not twins and, therefore, is not affected by his magic, just as we could not affect any of his people if our conduit was whole. And we are the reason why Spring is attacking: if we all die, it becomes a lost cause, regardless of Noam's ability to surrender to Angra. Mather made sure to position himself a few steps back and right, riding a horse in case he needed to get in. Nor has he moved to do good with his own threat, and I breathe a little easier every time I see that he has not disappeared to surrender to Angra. I look back, desperately wanting to rip off my helmet. Smells like iron or doesn't smell like iron, this thing is just an airless metal oven, and no Winterian likes dead. Mather changes horses, eyebrows come together in a question. Are you ok? Nodding with the nod. He changes again, says something to the lord, who shakes his head fiercely. My body is wistfully tee. I should be there, back with them, not hiding among Noam's archers. When Noam wants his regiments to move one way or another, I'll be at a loss as to the way forward. If Noam wants his archers to shoot to the left and let one fly to the right, he'll give me away. I shake my worries, in the weight of the metal crossbow in my hands and the energy that lies around it. Captain Dominick sits three rows ahead in the infantry, supervising his men on horseback. Nobody says a word, nobody shouts orders, nobody breathes too hard. We are all waiting in the daunting anticipation of marching towards us. The sun falls lower. Even lower. It is at this moment, when the afternoon heat is barely playing with us, that a wave runs through the men. They stop straighter, all eyes sweeping south. The army of spring has been seen. I've never seen a battle led by Royal Conduit. The lord told me about them, of course, he reiterated the spring-winter battles with such epic details that he could almost smell the cannon fire in the air. Through the conduit, rulers can move as one, moving people as if they were fixing objects on a table. It is not a blunt push; rather a subconscious suggestion: soldiers may choose not to follow the channeled instructions through their leader. But it is usually in the best interest of the soldiers to follow the will of their leader. The lord's history lessons roll through my head next to what I read in the magic book. Every real conduit is like a horse; use it too much or too fast and get tired, and leaders have to wait for him to rest before they can use it again. Use it too often, too aggressively and, well, we don't know what might happen, no one has been stupid enough to let it dry completely, if possible. Monarchs can feel when magic gets low, a pull on their instincts like that uncomfortable feeling of something bad. And it's passive magic, only when the wearer consciously chooses to draw it, does it work. If Noam uses his conduit constantly, he could give Cordell a big advantage. Angra never leaves his palace in the spring, and Herod, who is most likely leading this charge, will not have the same control over his men. Angra's magic can numb their minds with a devotion to spring that lasts beyond the borders of spring, but will not be able to tell them how to move, where to attack, when to retreat. For everyone's sake, I hope that advantage is enough. When the Twin soldiers get up, so do we. I risked one more look behind me, pointing out who's here and who's not. Alysson's the only one missing, which leaves us seven. The archers raise their crossbows and I fumble to match their rhythm. The crossbow is much heavier than my chakram, bulky and dense, but I can do this. I've done this before. I've never done this as part of an army, wearing a constriction helmet. Page 24 I keep my finger on the trigger, my breaths come slower and slower. Nobody shoots yet, we just keep our crossbows pointing at the sky. Come on, the man beside me whistled. His anxiety pushes me, a flame that traps and spreads like a wildfire through the group. Soon everyone is shaking for the battle to begin. So the sound that everyone was the vibration that sends everyone's anxiety raising higher. Cannon fire. A single shot comes from somewhere distant, too far to hit anyone. A warning intended to announce the arrival of Spring. The shot fades into an echo and the spring army rises over the horizon in the faded afternoon sun, its soldiers nothing but a black black sweeping over the distant hills of Cordell like a plague. Another cannon fires, then two more, closer and closer. Thwack. Archers release the first round. I'm apprehended to shoot with them, throwing my arrow into a bow over the infantry. Are they within range yet? They're close enough to -- Yes, they are. Spring is so close, in fact, that before our arrows complete their bows, three cannonballs rip holes in the front lines of Noam's infantry. The black mass of spring soldiers is close enough now that I can see them running towards us, weapons raised, raucous war cries ripping from their throats. Five seconds. Four seconds. Three. Two. One. The strength of the two colliding armies sends a shock wave through the men. Spring's war returns with their own screams, howling in the air as the family focus of the fight spreads over me. I shoot three more bullets along with the archers before realizing that the group has split in two, half running down one path and half running down the other, stoking to extend Cordell's strength. I pass to my right, second guess, then I step to my left as a line of infantrymen recoils, hitting me and throwing me to the ground. I roll to one side, I turn around, avoiding shortly stepping on boots and hitting hoses as Dominick's men move in a giant mass to the left. Noam's throwing them away, why? One hand grabs my arm and before I can process who it is, I cling to a saddle and stick my leg in to snuggle up to the horse. I trained you to mix better than that, the rider gives me back. I congelo, arms around Sir's waist, hot cheeks in shame and frustration at being caught. On the plus side, I can take off my helmet now. As I removed the metal furnace from my head and threw it to the ground, Sir urges his horse to a job behind Dominick's regiment. They keep pulling behind the rest of the infantry, moving left and back. The rest of the infantry closes to fill its gap. Are you going to take me back to the palace? Dominick's men sway to the right, aligning behind the left-most cavalry. You'll stay with me, si whistle Sir. He's making moves to my crossbow. Cut the nearest ones first. Whatever you do, whatever happens, don't stop shooting. I throw an arrow at my crossbow while Sir kicks his horse in a gallop. We shoot Dominick's soldiers, circling around the cavalmen until we line up with the front row of riders. Three counts, the cavalry captain tells Mr. His mark. The captain raises his sword in the air. I lean toward Sir, looking on the horizon for what we're going to fight. And there, from the lush green hills Bithai, a wave of nightmares rises. Angra's cavalry rides a hill in front of us, armor-coated horses, soldiers lifting crossbows or swords or axes. More infantry soldiers in black sun armor run through the hooves. That's why Noam pulled Dominick's regiment here. On the far left, if that cavalry makes its way, they're going to able to work his way between the rest of Noam's army and Bithai's gate. Another rider gallops next to us. Mather. He meets my eyes, firm and confident, as the spring riders approach. Just one more hill, and they'll be within range of the arrows. One, the captain yells, breaking Theron's eyes. Two. I lift my crossbow in the air. This is. I've been in hand-to-hand combat with small groups of spring soldiers, but never a battle. A strange calm sits upon everyone, something that is not installed from Noam's conduit. A deeper instinct that blocks everything else. Three! Lord and I advanced with Noam's cavalry. The world slows down until there is nothing but the pounding of our horses' hooves, the screams of soldiers, the wave of arrows that rises from the archers of spring and paints the sky with violent stripes of black. I shoot my crossbow, shoot again, slowly lowering my bow as we get closer and closer to Spring riders. In those last seconds before he crashes, Sir bends down and touches my leg. Mather turns to look at me, his eyes wide open in calm before the storm. I feel everything going on around me like I'm watching from a dream. Years of training take over. Our horses melt smoothly into the spring cavalry and arrows fly, swords cut through the air and into throats, knives lodge in their breasts. My crossbow sings the hum of flying arrows, a symphony that ends in satisfying blows to shoulders and knees and other weaknesses in Spring armor. My crossbow is not a weapon I'm holding, it's me, and I am, and we both shot down soldier after soldier as if they had made us do nothing else. Sir lifts his horse and I will get out of my stupor long enough to notice that we have crossed the entire cavalry of Angra. At the first I am inundated with the sweet and pure explosion of relief, there are so few of them! But then I see what awaits us behind the cavalry. Mather! The lord's cry makes holes in my body. I turn around to see Mather approaching us. He's almost here too. I don't have time to finish the idea. The cannons are waiting for us. Dozens of them, pulled by oxen over the hills. The soldiers stand by the monstrosities of iron, and even from so far away, I can see, feel, test their joy as they ignite the explosives that will send death to us. That's all I have time to absorb, the horrible weight of the soldiers' imminent joy at our death, and just as my eyes record that the black balls that crash into the earth around us are cannonballs, an invisible force hits me off the horse and breaks me like a rag doll against the ground. Spears of red fire pain through my radiating from a solid rupture in my chest. He sounds dead against the roar of agony that fills my head, and something under me stinks of iron, wet and warm. But it's not the comforting smell of iron extracted from the Klaryns. It's blood. The muted noises rise to a horrible bell. I push up, one of my ribs screaming with anger, but I don't care more cannons fire, more of Noam's cavalry is thrown into the air. It was a trap, and now there are more spring men running at us around the cannons, and the remaining spring soldiers we didn't kill from the initial charge fly back to surround us. Here and there some groups of string riders stay awake, hacking enemies, shooting blindly. But it's no use. We are too isolated from the bulk of our army, impotently lost in our stupid rush to destroy Angra's cavalry. I'm scrambling. The extra armor and padding block my broken rib in a pathetic improvised mold and I am able to stumble forward, debris clouding the air, bodies filling the way. The stench of blood and sweat clogs my lungs, growing with every explosion, every cry. Mather. I think I'm yelling at him, but I can't hear myself. Maybe I'll just ingest it, a faint cry in the dark. William! A cannonball hits the ground nearby, knocking me down with its invisible force. I collapse into a body that spreads, a bloodied hand grabbing my shoulder. Panic numbs everything in me for a beautiful, horrible second when I see who's grabbing me, how bloody it is, shattered it into the filth of battle. Sir. Every time I described situations like this before, the stage seemed like a distant, foreign thing I would never have to face. Injuries on a battlefield. Excessive blood loss, broken bones, torn flesh—This is not real. This can't be real. Not now, not him. A spring soldier laments in front of me, a twin swim through his chest. The sound of his dying cry deflaminis in my ears as Sir's lips move. They lower him so loudly, screaming, causing the bell to slow down enough to be heard through screams and explosions. His lips move again. Meira. Blood, dirt and sweat cause your fingers to bend while I grab your hand. What should I do? I scream. Tell me what to do! The lord smiles through the bloodstains on his cheeks. Lips is drawn to show its source, an open wound to his belly, opening half his chest. Dark blood comes out of the pulse, brittle white bone protruding from the cavity. Meira, he says again. His hand approaches the cheek, his thumb rubbing in my sien. What should I do? I scream again. Another cannonball strikes somewhere nearby; are getting closer and closer. They'll hit us soon. We're still within range. I have to move him, get a doctor, I'm sorry, wheezing. The lord's eyes are attic and he stares into a space next to my head. When he looks back, his gaze is distant and cloudy as if he were seeing through me. No, he growls. I shake his shoulders, trying to get his focus back on me. No! Listen to me, William Loren. You don't deserve this! Sir the nod. I served the winter. Another cannon. A spring soldier howls above me, with his sword raised, and I reach my crossbow. It's not there, it broke with the cannon explosion. Before he can fight for another weapon, a string arrow comes out of the ashes, and the soldier wrinkles next to Sir's legs. So many bodies, Spring and Cordellian. So much death and blood accumulated so fast—the Lord's thumb moves over my temple again. I lean over him, protecting him from the rubble, the blood, all this. No, I'm mumbling. That's all I can do, all I can say, blurry eyes with dust and hot, pulsating tears. No, no, William, no, Sir wheezing. He looks at me again, and one last ray of clarity gives recognition to his eyes. Meira, he whispers. You have to save them. Of course, creek. I will, I promise I will. But you have to help me. I can't do it without you! The gentleman shakes his head. Did you hear Bithai's poem when we first arrived? Nodding with the arones, and Sir moves on. No, he says. Words. Did you hear the words? When I shake my head this time, Sir inhales, closes his eyes and lets the memory say so. The soft poem unfolds, beyond Sir's wheezing breath, beyond his pain. Cordell, Cordell, today we come to kneel before your blessed throne. May all who find refuge rejoice that they hide behind their stone walls. Cordell, Cordell, if we must go into battle, to travel or to die, may those who do not come again forever in your presence lie. His eyes open again. Winter needs that, scrape. Winter must have that. I shake my head again, tears pouring down my cheeks. No, William—Winter needs you! Sir smiles. The smile catches when your thumb stops moving, everything in your body hardens like an icy pond in winter. The sudden, terrifying pause resounds through me. He's not moving. He's not breathing. He's not alive. He's not alive anymore. Slowly, so slowly, his hand falls and collapses against his chest. Meira! Someone calls my name, an uneven voice of fear. I grab Sir's face, my dirty fingers digging in his hair. Look up at the sky, with absent, empty eyes, an expression that gave me a horrible meaning to my mind a long, long time ago. A candle without a spark, a sky without sun, the look that people get when they cease to be people, they begin to be bodies. But he is too strong for this expression, his face too hard, too wise, to support the nothing that cascades out of him. I refuse to let him go, no like that, not as long as I always need it. William, I solozed, and I shook it, with blood crushing between my fingers. Look! Please, I beg you, look at me. . . . All I ever wanted was for you to look at me. Meira! Mather slides to the ground next to me, throws his arms around my shoulders. No! I whip him, pushing him, but he fought me to the feet. No! We stumbled again, stumbled upon another corpse. Like Sir, looking at the pockets of the blue sky through holes in the rubble, just another victim in the Angra War. I crawled with Mather, furious fresh in the name of Angra. This is your fault. All this, his greed and his conduit and winter being weak, so. . . . Mather's arms leave me long enough to return to the lord and reach out to him in one last hand. Please, you can't die too. The coldness gets in my arm, it flies out of my fingers. I can feel it feeling it across the battlefield and over the lord's body, spreading like frost on the ground. He touches all the blood vessels, all the nerves, turning everything around me into an ice field. Is that how shock feels? Is that how it feels to have a piece of who you are ripped from your life, cold and desolate? Mather pushes me away like nothing happened. Meira, we have to run! It's not safe! I stare at him. Don't you feel cold too? How can you not feel it? But his panic, the way he drags me through battle, tells me he felt nothing. Page 25 Cannon fire pierces the air, spinning and whistling in the dust, and reacting without thinking: I put my shoulder in Mather, throwing it to the ground as the earth next to me explodes. The weightlessness returns, weeping up and up, hitting me again on the blood-soaked ground. Something else appears in my chest, and the pain becomes inflamed. I try to get up, see where I landed, but I only manage to get to my elbows before the darkness gets over me in the form of twisted agony. As he descends I see Mather too far, screaming, being dragged towards Bithai by some of Noam's men. Meira. A shadow falls on me. At first he seems sir, but he can't be a lord, he can never be a lord again, and I complain about the terrible turn of fall. The six tower crouches. He mocks me, a sickly vomerment that clashes with the men crying for their lives behind his back, against Mather being absorbed into a safe place. Against my great avalanche of terror when I recognize that face. Herod. You stole something from me, whistled. It's about time I got it back. As he bends down, pain and fear, and exhaustion take hold of me, throwing everything into darkness. CAPITULO 19 SNOWFLAKES DRIFT AROUND ME, turning the air over the white and cold ivory field. I'm in winter. I thought I'd have more time. Hannah is by my side in a white silk cloak, the light shining from her neck. His eyes are glazed, either by tears or by the cold I can't say. What I feel is an alarm flicker. It shouldn't be winter. The last thing I remember, I was somewhere else, turning the air over the white more time. Who? I thought I'd have more time. Herod? The connection the magic of the conduit never breaks, but it was too soon before. I've been trying to give him time, but time has run out. She confronts me, and now I know that these are tears in her eyes, tears that crest over her eyelids and fall down her cheeks. She steps forward, extending a hand towards me. Hold on. I walked away. I can't remember. Nothing. Why am I here, in a dream again, why my stomach hangs with a painful weight. Why—. The gentleman's dead. And I've been captured by Herod. I kneel, panting on snowflakes. No. . . . Hannah's coming. Once you reach spring, Angra will use her dark magic to see you as if she had been seeing since Winter fell. His face softens. I'm sorry I can't explain what I'm going to show you, but I don't have time for more than this now. She puts her hand on me I stay in protest, but the moment your skin touches mine, the scenes fill my head, images and images of—. the past. Hannah's showing me the past. I don't know how I know, but the truth is as true as images, and I'm in uneven breaths to keep me from panicking. Dozens of people stand in a dark lane, holding stones and pendants and sticks in relentless fists. Objects glow faintly, soft pulses of light under the deep black sky. People turn as a different group approaches, also holding bright objects. The two groups do not doubt it, with a cry and a bellying attack. The cuffs divide the bones as if they were nothing but fragile pieces of wood; bodies fly through the air, thrown like straw fists. Normal people shouldn't be able to fight like that. But it's not just about normal people, it's about ducts. Did people ever have their own conduits? But only the royal ducts were created before the abyss disappeared. . . . Or was that wrong? A shadow rises from the light, coming out of every punch cast, every growl of hate. The bigger it grows, the more angry the crowd gets, as each feeds the other. Anger for more anger, wickedness for stronger wickedness—From the light came a great decline. More black clouds of decline appear, coming out of villages, villages, all from people who use ducts to do terrible things. Murder, robbery, a woman cowering while her husband beats her. Every time someone uses a conduit for corrupt extremes, the decline grows; and every time the decline grows, it finds people, it filters into them, and it makes them do even more corrupt things. And to those who had no light. Eight people are in front of me on the edge of a cliff in a large underground cavern. A brilliant ball of light from the endless depth beyond anything but blinds me, and realizing what this is, everything I've felt evaporates, leaving only a gentle amazement. The lost abyss of magic. They pleaded, so the lights formed. The eight people stack stones and pendants and sticks on the edge of the abyss. Ducts, still glowing softly in eight separate piles. At the top of their stack, each person places an object that does not glow. A medalion, a dagger, a cane, an axe, a shield, a ring, a bracelet. I passed my eyes again above eight people. Four men, four females. All four created the lights; and all four created the lights. The snapping fingers of energy hit the eight batteries one at a time, unstoppable waves of power drawn to the new ducts like a lightning bolt to the metal. Magic fills the royal ducts, connecting with their rulers, their bloodlines, their genders. The scene changes again, blinking for me. The clouds of decay now dissipate, dividing under power the royal conduits as rulers pursue the decline of their lands. People rejoice when the fog of decay leaves them. Then I see something I recognize too well: spring. The cherry trees stretch out in a sea of pink and white around a man with curly curly hair, almost translucent green eyes, and pale skin. It is located at the entrance of your city, with a cane. And around him floats the last black cloud in Primoria, pressing faintly. You're a real force, man says to the cloud, and he opens his arms. I scream, needing someone to hear me, to need someone else to see that they didn't destroy everything. Decay still exists, and it's in the rule of spring. Tell me how to save them. The scene changes. Centuries pass. I'm in a bedroom at Hannah's palace, Januairi visible beyond the open balcony doors. The decline has faded to a distant and forgotten legend, and the only thing anyone in Winter fears now is spring. Hannah crouches at the foot of a four-poster bed, tears on her face. Tell me how to save my people from him, beg. Who are you talking to? Then I see it. The little white glow in his hand where his fist sits against his chest. He's holding the locket, begging him to tell him what to do. Has any other monarch done that before? Did you use your conduit as more than just a source of power, but as a source of authority? Hannah's medalion responds to her plea, a radiant white cold that comes out of her hand. The magic pours into it, and through that pour comes. . . . This. All this knowledge. The past, why the Royal Conduits were actually created, what winter is really facing in the spring. I fight the urge to snuggle up in a ball and never get out of this place. It's safe here, there's no decomposition, there's no evil, and my chest hurts with everything that awaits me outside my sleep. You'll understand how to use all this when you're ready, Hannah says, and I jump. I thought this was a memory of her, not her, but she sways my eyes with tears as I release a sough that burns my throat. It's you now, Meira. Wake up. Now, I have to focus on finding out where I am. Step by step, breathing with breath, I open my eyes and examine the world around me. I'm in a cage. Wooden bars keep me trapped while a big piled ox drags me. Men are still together their shells showing Spring's black sun. I'm Herod's prisoner. Gregg's story comes to me, every clear, clear detail of when he returned to camp all those years ago, a battered soldier who had just seen his wife die. The way the words fell from his mouth like he did they even know I was telling them, I just kept coming and going, telling us every detail about how Herod killed Crystallia. . . . Nausea and I turn around, barely reaching the edge of the cage before my stomach expels the few pieces of food I haven't digested yet. I cling to bars, waving and fighting tears as an overly familiar shadow crosses over me. Good morning, Meira. It's Lady Meira now, isn't it? I haven't had a chance to congratulate you on your engagement. One season managing to catch the rich prince twin. I don't know the rhythms were leaning towards charity now. I focus on the grass rolling under the wooden wheels of the cage, on the smells of earthy dead plants and sour vomit. Not at Herod's feet, keeping up with me by my side, his fingers screwed around one of the bars. I'm moving up in the world. I stirred again, coughing up air. At least I have nothing left to throw up. My ribs, silent under my need to vomit, are yelling at me now until I'm on my back. Even that doesn't appease them at all. I need medicine, a splint better than my stuffing and armor. I doubt he'll get any of that here. Herod laughs. How fast the mighty fall. I close my eyes, sunlight throwing red and gold into my eyelids. I won't give Herod the satisfaction of seeing me break up. I'll be strong. People had ducts once to make them strong. I saw them, ducts like stones, pendants and sticks. I put my dream away, refusing to let it poison me more worryingly, but something catches me and won't let it go. People had ducts like stones. The stone in my pocket, the one Mather gave me, that I wanted to believe was magic when I was a kid. A piece of lapis lazuli that undermined the winter. It could be. . . This is crazy. But I have nothing to lose for trying, do I? I close my eyes harder, focusing on the ball of lapis lazuli, as far as I can be inside it. I imagine the strength of the stone flowing into my body, spinning through the cavity of my chest, and filling my ribs with vitality and health. It's okay. I do it again, squeezing my teeth, begging the blue thing to do something, please, to help me somehow—cure only one rib, just one—something hits my side. Hard. I gasp in the sudden shock of pain and swallow a wave of nausea, my approach shattered by the grip of Herod's sword. You've had enough sleep, he says. Angra will want you conscious when we get there. I closed my mouth firmly once my stomach calmed down, the body curled away from Herod and ribs well beyond the point of screaming pain. The stars beat my vision, threatening me with a long, slow sleep, and I try to hold my chest in a way that would make the pain stop. There's no relief. There's no help from magic. The hollowing out of that flicker of makes me feel even more hollow, but I can't think of that. I have to be awake. I have to know what dangers are ahead. As the most powerful and powerful magic we ever knew, a great destructive force contained in a man. If you entered Angra's ancestor. . . has been transmitted, generation by generation, like the real conduits themselves? Why hasn't it spread all over the world again? Now, however, there are only a handful of magical sources, and decadence grew when people used magic for evil. Perhaps there is not enough for it to extend beyond the monarch of spring, so he stays in it, secreating the power of him and him alone. I shudder. No, it's just Angra. He's just the man we've been fighting for years, an evil, sadistic monster who uses his royal conduit for evil. Just his royal conduit. Nothing else. However, Angra is never anything. The wheeled cage clumps together, constantly rolling the wheels through the grass giving way to the clomp-clomp of the wheels on the stone. We have passed a bridge, one of many that join the plains of Rania with Spring over the Fení River. The narrowness of this bridge tells me that we are no longer with most of the Spring Army. We should have broken up to get to April, the spring capital, faster. As the cage hits the grass on the spring side of the river, the empty expanse of the Rania plains changes to flowering trees, of the type with white and pink shoots that throw floating petals into the air. The spring forest is beautiful, honestly. But a nice, tarnished one, a mask. Herod hits me on the back with his sword again. Sit down. We're almost there. Sitting down is easier said than doing it right now, creaking, but one more blow of his sword grip and I move in a semi-erect position, black dots spinning through my vision. April is located at the northwest end of spring, near Winter. There are no outdoor villages nearby, no signs of life outside its huge stone walls other than the occasional field of crops that traverse the forest of eternally flourishing trees. Laughably peaceful representations of a kingdom that has been anything but. The small army of men around my cage descends from a side road to a wide main road that runs through the trees. The walls of April rise before us, casting the surrounding earth in the shade, which loom rows of black behind the pink and white trees. After a few moments of shuffling, we passed through a door and into the city itself. I cling to the details around us, forcing my mind to stay active instead of getting lost in the dreaded pulse in my stomach hole. Page 26 The flag of Angra, the black sun on a yellow background, hangs from four- and five-story buildings, the tall structures that envelop us in a creepy shadow. As we pass, the heads come out of the stained windows, the eyes look through the broken doors, but I don't see people on the streets and I can't hear about city life. As they would have been suffocated so long under Angra's sweltering use of amphiscience of her magic that they have forgotten how to be alive. We crossed a bridge and the buildings get a little nicer, cleaner windows, painted walls and everything. People also stay around, smiling at another winter prisoner, another sign of their king's dominion. Fear is a seed that, that planted, never stops growing. The voice of the lord whispers that phrase in my memory, keeping fear at bay. A black iron gate is located at the end of one last road. The soldiers march on the wall above it and look at us from the towers, a reminder that spring is a war-created kingdom. When we pass through the door, a large green courtyard rolls around us, leading to a black obsidian palace. Even from as far away as we can see colorful etchings on the rock, green ivy vines, butter yellow flowers and pink sunset: spring in the dark. It is both poetic and sad how well this earth embodies. The door closes behind us, and Herod nods to the men, who near the cage. I suffocate a cry as they drag me, my bones cracking, outrageous bursts of pain as I collapse, helpless, hanging from two men. Dry sweat and pieces of vomit clinging to my skin, creaking as I move, and a few cuts along my leg burn. But I am here, covered among the soldiers of Angra, totally at your disposal. Helpless and useless and alone. The piece of lapis lazuli is still in my pocket. A piece of winter. I straightened up a little, winking a little. I may be alone, the stone may not be magical, but I'm not weak. We are start advancing and something gets to my right, a shovel hitting stone. It makes Herod shudder enough to shake my head towards her. I wish I hadn't. I wish I had kept looking forward, letting my concerns about Angra suck me into a numb insert. On the right, in a garden, a group of spring guards watch a pile of gray bricks, a deepening hole, and. . . The winter ones. Everything about me falls, insa lot and without weight. Three Winterians, their matte white hair with sweat and mud, their emaciated pale faces, stand up to their waists in the dirt. It's wonderful that his dry arms can hold a shovel, let alone dig with one, they're so fragile, so thin, they could be mistaken for ghosts. The tension cuts the air into my lungs. I want to yell at them, run towards them, fight the guards, take them to safety. But I can do nothing but sing faintly in his direction. One of the Winterians stops digging. He raises his head, his face full of mud, and when his gaze meets mine across the lawn, the light dawns on his face. A lightning bolt in the shadows of spring that makes me feel heavy with guilt—can't be greater than me. Go back to work, one of the guards screams, and prepare a whip. She screws around the girl's forearm and drags her forward, but she keeps her eyes on me, her face lights up in amazement. No, I whisper while the guard lifts the whip again. Stop! Herod between me and the Winterians. The cracks, and Herod bends over so that all I can see is his face. Keep moving, growl and push the soldiers who support me. We sink into a set of bright black steps as the whip cracks faster and faster. Stop! I scream as I enter the shadow of Angra's palace. Stop! I approached her, for all of them. As I do so, a mortal will rises in me to help them. As hard and fast as the whip, as bright as the girl's hope. But soldiers drag me into the palace, making me go from doing more than hurting. CAPITULO 20 ONCE THE DOORS closed, all links to the surrounding city disappear, sealing the palace around me like a tomb. The entrance hall is a gleaming obsidian cave with sconces throwing yellow light on the reflective surface, an endless echo bouncing off the walls that play with it just for entertainment. The only breaks in the light are portraits of the ancient rulers of spring hanging at perfectly spaced intervals on the walls. A woman, her long blond hair lying on one shoulder in a tangle of curls, beams on the painter. A boy with pale green eyes looks in the distance, his blond curls exploding from his head in disorderly rebellion. The same two people are in at least a dozen portraits, posing in front of the cherry trees or spring rivers or light blue backdrops. The color disturbances in these paintings do not belong here; this place should be nothing but darkness. Who are these people? When I see the artist's signature in the bottom corner of a painting, my body falls loose. Angra Manu. If Angra really painted this, then the exterior of her palace makes more sense. Embrace art in a way that would make Ventrilli proud. I turn my gaze down, looking at the black ground instead of the bombardment of life and color and happiness painted by the king who has brought nothing but death to winter. The doors at the end of the room moan as a soldier opens them. I am not allowed a moment to gather my wits before entering the throne room, wide and dark and filled with the poetic collision of sun and shadow. A number of windows have been cut into the high ceiling, circles of sunlight that create a path to the daisy at the other end of the room. In that daisy, the largest beam is poured directly onto an imposing throne of obsidian, the rock that absorbs light in a subtle but daunting show of power. But it is not the throne that absorbs the greatest amount of light, it is the figure strung into it. The figure that protects his eyes as if the sun hurt, grabbing a cane as high as me. All these years of fearing him, and I've never seen Angra. Rarely, if he ever leaves his palace, never bothers to lead his army or get his hands dirty. From this distance, I can see the cascading blond curls over her head, so similar to the man who joined the decline in Hannah's vision. They're undeniably related, and it makes me make a stump. I still don't want to believe that the vision was real. We get to the center of the room and stop. I'm sure Angra can hear my heart humming in my throat. I could smell my fear as soon as we set foot in her palace. It's so quiet here, there's no distant shuffling of courtiers, there's no gentle hum in the next room. This false calm is scarier than if Angra were furious with anger. It's the eye of a storm, all around him waiting with increasing anticipation for his madness to break. You're one step ahead. My king, king, says, voice

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