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Thy
KINGDOM
COME

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PROLOGUE

“YOU WERE CHOSEN”

Emberly

SMOKE INVADES MY LUNGS AND SWARMS THE DARK. The little girl standing on a branch from the tree in front of me comes into focus. Her skin and hair blend in with the night. A white sleeping gown hangs from her body.

She shouts at me, fervently motioning for me to come. “Jump! Now!”

Terror sets aflame every nerve in my chest. I make the mistake of looking down past the branch I stand on: the distance from the ground worsens the tremble in my legs. I beg my mind to return sensation to my limbs to no avail. Even the campfire below offers no heat amidst the icy air and my mind’s numbing fear.

My stun swells at the small group of armoured men under me. Their spears and swords puncture the air. Green sashes deck their upper chests, boasting their allegiance to the kingdom of

Vineah. They're shouting at me, the frontmost shaking the tree. Then, they start to climb.

I have nowhere to go—!

“Jump, Ember!”

I look back at the girl. Her curly hair bounces with every motion. The air is growing thicker—dustier. My chest burns. My lungs are locked. My head is throwing me back and forth. The more smoke I inhale, the more my throat closes up.

I—I can't do it!

My body sways.

I can't!

“Emberly!”

My body lulls me forward. I have to jump. I'm going to jump—

With another step, I fall through the flimsy branches.

My throat cages a violent scream as my body hurdles towards the ground. Twigs, grass, and dirt promise to catch me—until a fist-sized rock lands in the centre of my vision.

My heart stops. I squeeze my eyes shut.

A shrill cry jolts me awake.

The familiar cushioning of my bed pulls me out of my nightmare's trance. Elegant cotton sheets and silk covers lie atop me. I gather my rapid breaths, trying to control them. My fingers instinctually rise to the right side of my forehead: the small scar there is as taut as ever. It's my only trinket from that night already half my life ago. Why must that same blasted nightmare visit so sporadically—at all?

Cursed Vineah. Can you at least pick a shade of green that doesn't remind me of vomit?

“Ember!” calls a familiar voice. “It’s open!”

The bitter cold of the morning snow radiates across the room. I look up. The ten-year-old girl from my nightmare—now nineteen and already armoured—barrels through the entry hallway of my cavernous bedchamber. The sheer, white window drapes hardly prevent the morning sunlight from blinding me. Somehow, Zenevieve determines that drawing them open is a good idea.

“Of course they’re open now!” I hiss, falling back on my mountain of waterbird-feather pillows. I trap myself under the warmth of my covers. “The sun is barely awake, so why should I be?”

“Emberly Genesis Whitaker.”

My full name warns me to grant her my attention. She stands at the middle window. There must be extra moisture in the air to cause her shoulder-length, black coils to frizz as chaotically as they do now. She’s yet to apply oil to them.

My eyes narrow in cautious thought, meeting her upturned, black ones. I wait for her to start making sense; she clearly hadn’t meant the drapes when she said “open”.

“Get that fiery mane under control and get over here,” she commands, despite being only a year older than me. “There’s a portal.”

I freeze. *What...? No. No, a portal can only mean that...*

It’s a staring contest until I fling myself out of bed. My bare feet never mind the icy, marble floor as I skitter to Zenevieve’s side and grip the stone windowsill. The silver kingdom of Snowark rests beyond the snow-dipped palace walls. Beyond that—at the edge of the icy wilderness—is a bright, indigo-lined



oval of light.

No... A portal. This is it. This is what the Ancient Mages prophesied about in the Beginning. A portal has opened. But that means...

Not me. It can't be me. I'm not—

"You're the generation running the race," Zenevieve says next to me. "It's you."

I feign a gasp, turning to face her. "You mean—this doesn't happen to everyone?"

She kisses her teeth, sucking air through them, and rolls her eyes. "That won't work this time." Her gaze hardens as she looks down at me. It knows exactly what it is doing as she says, "You were chosen."

I look back out the window. The weight of her words sinks into my stomach: if I've been chosen to run the race to unlock the Last Kingdom, that means I've been chosen to avenge my parents. To avenge all the kings and queens that came before me. If I make it to the end, I will break the death curse that killed them when they bore the next heir—the same curse that will destroy Snowark if I do not bear one of my own.

Someone's made a mistake. The one tainted ruler of Snowark's history? It takes a reserved stupidity to select me for this.

Rest assured: I can throw a dagger and shoot an arrow. I can fight for any other prince or princess to cross the finish line. I can defend. That, however, is the furthest my ability extends; my rule isn't one to be glorified with a crown of ultimate authority.

Ultimate authority... That's right. Whoever does cross that finish line will have reign over all seven kingdoms—including Snowark.

My body tightens with the strain of duty. I must defend. That is why I see the portal at the edge of the kingdom: it is my final call to protect Snowark. Persuade the Last Kingdom's ruler to spare it and care for it. *That* is a destiny I can accept.

I turn to Zenevieve with a hardened resolve. "Get Meredith and Ambrose."

Leo

You can't be too angry with them. They're only following your example, you fool.

At least the rubber adhesive doesn't stick to my fingers as I scrape it off from the metal pump in the courtyard. Covering most of the pipe would have caused the water to spray out in immense pressure when the maids came to collect water. It's an amateur's classic that the castle boys picked up from me.

The same prank that almost killed Ithinor a few years ago. What a fantastic way to thank the man that practically raised you.

A familiar, intense guilt seizes my chest as my fingers freeze. I resist a tremble from them, fighting the same war in my mind yet again. *He forgave you and forgot about it. You were fourteen.*

Besides, the boys didn't even use enough adhesive. The water would have pushed straight through—

Stop that, this is terrible! They shouldn't have done this in the first place.

But they did. And there is no one to blame for that but me. I can barely keep myself in line, forget the castle help. Forget an entire kingdom. Even the scar on my brow is an indelible reminder of that. Not one part of me faults Seavale for its lack of faith in me—but every part of me regrets that I still haven't been



able to change that no matter how hard I try, no matter how many years have passed.

I kneel down on the warm sand to ensure that I'm grabbing all of the adhesive. *At least you're improving...*

You hope. How has Sierra stuck with you for the last five years? Ezra is forced to because he's part of the Guard, but Sierra has a choice—

I close my eyes. Even in my thoughts I'm hopeless.

The morning sun beats through the loose linen on my back as I pull the last piece of residue off the pump. Padded steps sound from behind me as I stand. When I turn around, Sierra is running up to me from the front of the courtyard. She's already dressed in chainmail...

She's either decided to train extra today, or something isn't right.

Her pink-toned face is suspiciously flushed, her messy, chestnut bun holding on for dear life as she slows. "What's this?" she asks breathlessly with an arched brow, her hands on her waist.

"The castle boys," I reply, shaking my head. "I was trying to prevent another disaster—but why are you armored?" A wicked possibility grips my mind. "Is Lavara attempting another invasion?"

"No, but there's..." She tautly exhales, gazing at me carefully. Her native Vinean accent almost seeps through her feigned Seavalen one as she says, "A portal is open on the northwest coast."

I drop the adhesive.

It... No, it can't be. If a portal is open, that would mean that I'm...

But—no, I can't be, not even part of it! I'm not—

I force myself out of my head; I have no time to waste if this is real: “Take me.”

Sierra grabs my hand and pulls me down the bush-lined center path of the courtyard. We dart into the stone castle through the wooden door at the end, where she guides me all the way down on the left.

She’s nimble, even in her armor.

I smile as we advance onto the steps of the spiral staircase of the pillar. “You’re fast in chainmail.”

“Ezra’s trained me well in his spare time.”

A smirk braces my lips. “I’m sure he has—”

“I would focus on your steps before you *trip*, Your Highness,” she simpers as we pass the last window until the top floor.

I stifle a snicker as I take the last step up, trying to maintain a steady breath. At least Ezra isn’t here to smack the back of my head.

Sierra’s soft smile fades as she looks out the window at the top of the tower. “There.”

I follow her eyes. A few of the morning ships surround the large island, some of which are docking at port on the east side. Between the houses, huts, and shelters of the kingdom, people are flocking to the northwest edge of the island, straight ahead. Then I see it: on the coast stands a cyan-lined oval of light. It’s so bright that it’s casting its light onto the sand even in the day.

My stun mixes with my awe, both surrendering themselves. *A portal. It’s true. So that’s what it looks like...*

My heart hammers a symphony in my chest, threatening to skip every other beat. “This... No, this must be a mistake—”

Sierra holds up a hand in the corner of my vision, drawing



my worried gaze back to her. “When has magic ever made a mistake?” She gently nudges me. “You’re the chosen one, captain.”

I exhale shakily. That’s right: according to the prophecy, it isn’t just me who has been chosen to run this race.

That is the only comfort I have as I tell Sierra, “What’s a chosen one to a chosen crew?”

Now her lips stretch into a grin, and she brushes a stray bang behind her ear. “What say the captain of the crew, then?”

I look back out the window. Every time I look at the portal, my heart rams against my chest. If I really have been chosen to run, that means that I have more than my current reputation to offer my kingdom. There’s more to provide, more to prove, more to be. I could be exactly what Seavale needs, show her that my intentions are changed and true. Even if that means walking through and laying myself down for her sake, for her chance to thrive beyond me—so be it. Someone is meant to lead her to prosperity. That portal tells me that all I have to do is give myself the chance for it to be me.

If even the Ancient Mages believe that I have a chance, I must take it.

“The captain says”—I turn around and take the first step down the stone staircase—“rally the crew.”

CHAPTER

“ON YOUR MARK”

Emberly

WELL, IF IT ISN'T THE RAT LORD AND HIS MERRY-RATS. I am sitting on this itchy, indigo-blue velvet in the cold throne room under the cursed weight of this tiara for only one reason: as of early this morning, a matter concerning the kingdom *and* me has finally arisen—and Whiny Winston can do nothing about that.

Unlike how he and his herd rigged the council selection ten years ago. When I was too young to speak up about it. According to this lot, I still am even at eighteen.

The twelve councilmen file into the throne room. Their white shoes echo on the marble floor until they reach the indigo runner in the centre. Even in front of the guards that stand stationed on the sides of the room, Winston doesn't attempt to hide his transparent disdain for the sight of me on the throne. Part of

me feels rotten—improper—for sitting up here. It is spite that allows the other part a sense of satisfaction. Above all is a determination to keep Snowark afloat despite the profound stupidity of the men before me. I won't allow Snowark's people to suffer because of my resentment towards the crown.

Whiny Winston approaches in his long, silver robes. His waste-coloured eyes look up at me on the throne—the only time anyone may ever look *up* at me. “Your Highness,” he begins in a falsely regal voice. He forces himself to bow, but stiffly and with strain. “The kingdom is alive with notice of the portal that's opened along our border with Soilera.”

“So I've been made aware of,” I say, matching his tone.

You don't need to remind me that I'm being forced to enter the most terrifying experience of my life.

The crystal chandelier above him illuminates his brown, bald head as he continues. “According to the prophecy of the Ancient Mages, the portals will open for the generation meant to race for the key to the Last Kingdom, which will be ruled by a strong and worthy leader. With the possibility that you are that future sovereign,”—the corners of his mouth twitch with a mocking smile—“should you win the race, it's time you take responsibility for your people. So have the Ancients evidently agreed.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. As if you've ever believed that I have the capacity to rule. You were the one who rejected my initiatives towards addressing the recession three years ago. Now we're still trying to climb out of it.

“We need you to be prepared,” he says, leaning into the words. “We only know that you will be running against the other



monarchs. As it's unknown precisely what is to be expected, we remain hesitant in our approach towards the matter; but you must represent Snowark in full regardless."

"Which does not include losing your temper," Moody Myron sneers behind him.

I fight the grinding of my teeth. My hands tighten on the silver armrests of the throne. I know exactly what he wants to unlock in me, but I swallow the key.

"You may put your faith in Meredith that she's done well in teaching me better the last decade," I reply rigidly. "Forgive me, Councilman, but I'll hear no passiveness on a day that demands attention and focus."

Myron slithers back behind Winston. Scorn burns in his muted-green eyes. I despise that they're so similar to mine.

"Forgive us—Your Highness," says Winston with the same strain. "We've assembled the most qualified to guide and protect you. According to the Ancients' prophecy, you are to bring the royal advisor for guidance, who will also serve as your physician. You are also to bring a mage and a knight for protection."

If Zenevieve's isn't the first name to leave your mouth—

He steps aside. The herd of eleven behind him follow. He extends a hand towards the hallway on the east side of the room. "Sir Augustus Milford—"

"No," I say as Augustus steps out from the hall.

His metal sabatons pause at my word, echoing through the air. The councilmen and even guards turn their heads to me.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness?" Winston asks, squinting those waste-coloured eyes.

"Then you have been pardoned." I smile cheekily as I stand



from the throne. “Thank you for your endearing concern, councilmen; but I’ve already elected a team of my own. Sir Milford, your services won’t be needed.”

Winston gawks. “I must insist otherwise—”

“So you have. I reject.”

I look at Augustus. He stands in the entrance of the hallway, awaiting instruction. “Take your leave for the day, Sir Milford.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” He bows fluidly, unlike Whiny Winston, and then turns out of the room.

He is a fearsome and admirable knight—but I need Zenevieve more.

The councilmen discreetly glare at me as if I were the vile Princess Luciana of Vineah. Only once Winston steps back onto the runner do the rest of the rats follow. “Then,” he grumbles, “who does Your Royal Highness wish—?”

“Dame Lathrop will be my protector. Spellster Walsh will accompany us and Lady Prim to finalise his position as the royal mage.”

“We agree that Lady Prim shall serve you as usual,” Winston replies stiffly, “but Dame Lathrop and Spellster Walsh are mere children! They’ll only serve minimal protection—”

“Spellster Walsh is only a few months younger than I am, and Dame Lathrop recently turned nineteen.” I fight yet another war to maintain a level tone despite his incompetence. “Her age and experience prove that she is anything but a child. May it also please the council to be reminded that it was her bravery and sword at age *ten* that rescued me from Vineah before she had received any formal training.”

I suppress the urge to sneer. *As if you care about my protection.*

You just want to place whatever pawns you can in this race.

Hatred darkens Winston's irises. I know he and his pack wish that Vineah *had* taken me that night. After all, I killed Snowark's true rulers—and they spend every day reminding me as a form of reparation. Unfortunately, that is the one thing I cannot argue them on. The one thing I cannot change nor escape.

I take a ready breath in, my own eyes returning that resentment. “My voice isn't allowed in your council room, Councilman—but we aren't in your council room. We are in the throne room. Here, my voice is what echoes off these walls and seeps into the floor. You rule your kingdom in there. I will rule mine out here. I insist on my chosen three.”

He swallows a gulp that pushes his throat far forward. Finally: I've crawled under his skin and stolen *his* authority.

Now I must appeal to his desires to encourage him in my direction: “And should this be the last time I stand in this room, this will be my final order. I should desire it to be obeyed—as an honorary tribute to the princess.”

These moments, as few and far between as they are, make each day a little more bearable.

“So be it.” He folds his hands and rests them on his distended stomach. “We will send for the members you've requested—”

“Dame Lathrop has already seen to that.” I offer my proudest smile.

His tone drops to a familiar, indignant firmness. “So be it. While we're unsure as to how long the race will endure, you will be readied for a week-long journey and formally sent off on the palace's strongest horses at the front gates.”

I sit back down on the throne's velvet. It feels a little softer now. In truth, I would almost rather stay here with the council than run in a death race. That is precisely it, however: I was only allowed my confidence moments ago by the fact that I will likely never see this lot again. Though I've earned my victory over them today, there is a chance I may *not* stand in this throne room again. The final victory very well may be theirs. Snowwark will be at their mercy.

My glare hardens as the rats turn and file out of the throne room. *This kingdom will never fall into your hands. I will find a worthy ruler before I die.*



“And to think that horses never tire!” Ambrose exclaims in fascination as we trot through the snowy forest. “Though, I suppose the cold eases their strain, such as oil easing the turning of gears, or how water helps us in the same way!”

Zenevieve, Meredith, and I are stuck with the curly red-head's relentless ranting. The journey has already lasted a few hours. I don't know why the portal opened so far from the castle; it's a rather noticeable disadvantage for time.

Zephyr, the palace mage, would have been a wiser choice in terms of capability; but Ambrose is capable enough and also serves my morale relatively well. I've learned how to tolerate his incessant joy over the last five years; he, on the other hand, has almost learned how to fire back when I poke fun at him. The attempts are more amusing than Meredith will allow me to admit.

“What a riveting theory, Rosy.” Zenevieve smiles between



us, bobbing up and down on her stallion. Ambrose's red, freckled cheeks match her nickname for him exactly. "What say your thoughts on the mechanics of the waterwheels at Lake Jenara and how they never freeze?"

"Zenevieve," I hiss. Despite my whisper, her name leaves a cloud in front of me. I take extra caution as I lean towards her; my bow and quiver are heavy on my back. "Let the boy spare us a minute, *please*."

She bites the bottom of her full lips with a smirk. With a quick chuckle, her rapidly blinking eyes fall to her gloved hands. "Fine."

Ah. That's why she's encouraged him: he's distracting her. Her smile says otherwise, but now I know that she is just as afraid of this race as I am. In truth, it's somewhat comforting.

Ambrose gasps on her other side. His wide, round, brown eyes land on something beyond Meredith, next to me.

The three of us follow his entranced gaze: a brown bear is walking off in the distance through the forest with us.

Meredith releases a content sigh. "How beautiful..." A signature soft smile traces her lips. "Majestic, aren't they?"

"Until they bite your head clean off," I say, promptly earning a glare from her.

"Respect them and they will respect you," she tells me. "They sense your energy."

Ginger raises his chin, beaming. "Then that one must be happy."

You would never guess that the boy is about to be eighteen.

From a distance, I can understand why the bear is Meredith's favourite animal. Up close, I wonder how quickly she



would change her mind.

“And you, Ember?” Zenevieve chimes. Her breath blows past her as we continue forward. “What has your mind?”

I lift my head. The padding under my armour and cloak are scarcely enough to keep me warm. I’m thankful for my velvet gloves. “The same thing that has Whiny Winston’s hair: nothing.”

Ginger snorts on Zenny’s other side. He must quickly regain himself before he can fall off of his horse.

Meredith’s voice comes in an all too familiar warning: “Your Highness—”

“I thought we agreed that you’d leave that title in the palace.” I meet her hazel-green eyes. They somewhat remind me of dusk in the palace gardens, how many lessons I managed to convince her to hold there.

“It’s ill-mannered of you to speak that way regarding anyone of the royal council,” she says nonetheless. Her brown skin is spotless despite the scowl, save for the accent marks above her lip and under her left eye. Except for her regality, it’s impossible to guess that she’s twenty-five. “I understand your feelings towards them, but if you’re to become the Last Kingdom’s sovereign—”

I lower my voice to all but her. “That word is banned. Use it again and I’ll turn around, *Merry*.”

She allows a second to pass between us. Her words slow, lowered to all but me. “Don’t be a brat—remember?”

I straighten on my horse. The reminder is bitter as always. Nonetheless, it’s the only one I obey.

She continues with a tone more fitting for her motherly voice. “Maintain your dignity outside their presence. Then you

deprive them of even subconscious satisfaction.”

I wish it weren't impossible to be angry with her. Especially when she advises me about stealing joy from the councilmen.

An invisible force pushes back on my horse's next step. The horses are startled, demanding that we quickly regain control of our reins.

“What is—?” I utter.

My mouth shuts at the sight before me. The indigo-lined portal stands metres away. It towers over us and casts a lightning-like beam across the view of the horizon—as if it's barring us from travelling any farther. The blinding brightness of its mouth almost demands that we shield our eyes from it.

“I don't believe it...” Meredith marvels beside me, matching my thoughts. Magic has never conducted something so powerful before; even Ambrose's fireballs pale in comparison to the majesty—and terror—of the portal. I can't help but curse the fact that we are among the prophesied chosen to be the first to travel through one.

Zenevieve's black eyes narrow in thought. She dismounts her horse and cautiously steps forward in the crunchy snow. No invisible wall pushes her back.

“Interesting,” she mutters. When she turns around and tries to pull her horse forward, the animal refuses another step. It's almost as if it *can't* go any farther.

“Wait,” Ambrose says. He slides off his mare and walks to the front. Waving a hand in front of him, a sheer sheet of indigo magic briefly flutters into existence. Ginger nods before turning to us. “Magic won't let anything through. I think Emberly is the key to move forward.”

Lovely. This is where we must dismount.

I feel everyone's eyes, even Zenevieve's, on me as we remove our satchels from the saddles. The weight is almost crushing; I'm the shortest one here. Hence why I enjoyed the horses.

I can't stand this pressure. As if leading them all into a death race isn't enough.

"Is it something I've done with my hair?" I ask in feigned surprise. "I've never worn it completely down before, but surely that isn't so special as to stare."

"It's beautiful, Your Highness!" Ambrose chirps, gripping the brown handle of his satchel over his shoulder.

"Call me that again, Ginger,"—I rest my hand on my dagger—"and Rowena will have strawberries for dessert."

He crosses his arms. "At least strawberries are sweet instead of *bitter*."

I briefly point at him. "Good one."

"Ember," Zenevieve states, her hands on her waist, "he is about to be the least of your concerns."

Her nervous eyes spare a glance at the portal as she nods to it. My thundering heart pounds against my chest. Meredith is the tallest of us, and the portal stands her height and a half.

There isn't any way around it: we can't bring the horses. Meredith reluctantly commands them home. My satchel rests heavier beside me as I watch them leave and then turn to the portal behind me. Each step is firm and tight as I walk up to it.

"On your mark," Zenevieve tells me.

I match her eyes. Meredith rests a gloved hand on my shoulder, turning me to face her. Despite our last conversation, she smiles reassuringly at me. She's already forgiven me for it. She

always does. Meredith knows exactly who I am—I killed her true rulers, too—but at least she forgives me.

An orange glow ignites at the edge of my vision. I turn my attention to Ambrose. His fingertips are ablaze with furious flames. I almost wish I had such power, but mage families are rare; besides, I'm not sure the council would have survived under those circumstances.

“Ready to serve.” Ambrose’s thin lips beam. Even the plethora of freckles on his face seem to glitter with excitement.

Interesting how the palace boys never harassed him about them, I think. Mine are half as much as his and lighter, yet I never escaped such uncreative taunts.

Meanwhile, Arthur smelled worse than the waste in the stables, and Ramses still can't remember how to spell “cat”.

I swallow. *I'm still procrastinating.* Zenny is right: nothing I say can prevent the inevitable this time.

I squint my eyes against the light of the portal. Once I step inside, I begin a sacred race we only know one thing about: the Last Kingdom is at the end. That is a worthy prize for the other monarchs. They won't let anyone take it from them. My life will be in their hands once I step through.

I don't have to win. If I can just survive long enough, I can ensure Snowark's survival.

I decide one thing: for this kingdom.

“Let's bring Whiny Winston back something nice,” I announce. I'm first to step into the blinding light.





CHAPTER 2

“ALL IS GOING SWIMMINGLY”

Leo

I SUPPOSE IT COULD BE WORSE. SPRING JUST BEGAN, IT'S A beautiful season for a race.

If we were actually holding the race in Seavale.

Waiting on Sierra, Ithinor, and Ezra is about to run me into the ground with anticipation. Mostly anxiety. Much anxiety. And it doesn't help that I'm already underground in the cold, humid passageways under the castle.

As if I haven't spent enough time down here.

I release my mounted frustration in a long, shaky exhale, pressing my hands against the frigid, jagged wall. The torch-lit passageway is wide enough to prevent my panic: I can pace, but just barely.

Sierra, you said that you would hurry.

Reality bangs against the walls of my mind, why I'm down

here: to run and likely die in a race meant to break a curse that will kill me once I bear an heir. It's almost ironic.

And if I never have an heir, the curse will eradicate Seavale from the world... There is no winning.

"Leo?" echoes a sweet voice from around the corner of the passageway.

Finally.

I take myself up from the wall and jog to the end of the tunnel on the right side. Sierra emerges from around the corner in her messy bun, a satchel on either side of her. Ezra and Ithinox come behind her. Thankfully, she has my bow and quiver mounted on her back.

They're all here. I exhale a steadier breath. I can breathe a little more easily down here as long as they're here.

Ezra's and Ithinox's satchels bulge with their resources. Collectively, we resemble a group of knights ready for battle, wrapped in armor with swords on our sides and all. Even Ithinox is dressed like the tall, buff man standing next to him, which surprises me. His cyan-blue mage robes are trying to cover it.

Sierra hands me my bow and quiver. I point at Ithinox and grin at Ezra. "You managed to put *him* in chainmail?"

Ezra's icy-blue eyes flash with humor as they meet mine, a brilliant contrast to his black skin. He teases back in a deep voice, "Wouldn't you believe it? Even the elderly can make it work."

"I'm thirty," Ithinox replies dully. His pitch-black curls do help him look younger. Unamused, his sky-blue eyes glance between us. "My robes hide this well, you needn't worry."

It's already been thirteen years since he took responsibility for me... Being the most talented in his class at seventeen, he came to the



palace to serve as the royal mage—to help provide a stable life for his parents. He shouldn't have had to become one himself in doing that.

Stop—I need to keep my morale higher in front of them.

“You might enjoy it more than you think,” I say, nudging him. “How does it feel to be our *knight in shining armor*—?”

Ezra reaches to smack my head before Sierra hands me my satchel, stopping him. “I don't mean to ruin what may be our last moment of joy for a good while,” she says, scowling, “but Leo's been chosen to run in a race against the other kingdoms to unlock some kind of brand-new kingdom, we're about to be last to the starting line, and you're all making jokes.”

There goes my last chance of distraction...

“Sharpen your minds and weapons, and focus,” she commands. “We know excruciatingly little about this. For all we do know, our weapons will be anything but for show.” She glances at me and Ezra, Ithinor nodding his approval. “We understand that, don't we?”

There's a reason my best friend is my advisor. Unfortunately, she advises a little too well sometimes.

I pray that the echoes of the passageways can't pick up my thundering heart. I nod, the weight of reality returning. I always thought I had more time to give Seavale everything I can offer. Now it seems that the most I'll ever be able to give her is my life.

The walls feel that much closer together. *You could have done so much better.*

You'll be twenty years old in a few months. Act like it.

I clear my throat. I can at least make *these* moments of leadership count. “Then let's leave.” I turn to Sierra. “Are you sure



that you've remembered everything?"

"I've packed as efficiently as I can for the longest journey these satchels will provide," she replies. "Ready whenever you are."

I turn around and scurry down the tunnel. My team follows closely behind, our steps resounding across the stone.

"I must warn you, Leon," Ithinor says monotonously as we reach the end and turn right, "the castle is bound to notice our absence within the next hour."

I quicken my pace as we run down and pass a few more torches. "That is an hour we have to reach the storage basement, run across the beach, and jump into the boat waiting for us on the coast. It should only take us about ten minutes. As long as we're spotted only once we're in the boat, we will be safe."

The sooner we escape, the better. The castle doesn't trust me to be a fitting ruler, and I can't fault them for it—but I definitely do not want those guards to be the ones to escort me to the portal to begin the race. Not only am I all too aware of the kind of "encouragement" they'll try to impart, but I want to show Seavale that I'm doing this of my own accord. The guards will also execute their escort with more patience than we can afford. I don't want to waste time, and I need to run to the start before I can change my mind.

I slow as we approach the middle of the passageway, turning to the wooden door fixed into the wall. It needs a jolt before it opens with a loud scrape, and I motion my team inside.

I know that torches line the pitch-black room; it's foolish to keep them lit when all of the storage material in here is made of wood.



“Ithinor?” I step up beside him, smirking.

He slowly sweeps his olive hand, wrapped with orange waves of glowing magic, over the room. A flame folds to life atop each torch mounted on the walls. With chests lining the perimeter of the room and closed crates scattered across the floor, the four of us focus on the wooden staircase dead ahead.

Ezra steps up first and shoves the doors above him open with a bang. Sierra stands behind him, and he takes her hand to allow her out first. I follow, and Ithinor is last after he commands the torches to rest.

I hear Ezra close the doors with a liberating click. Something is freed in my chest: *No matter how this race ends, I will never be stuck down there again.*

A brilliant-blue sky stretches above us, the air carrying specks of the sea on its breeze. It’s a comforting scent, especially when Ezra verifies that we have no tail. We step off of the stone ground surrounding the basement entrance and onto soft, fine sand.

“Brilliant plan, captain.” Sierra’s smile reaches her green eyes as she looks up at me.

I shrug. “I suppose you could say that all is going *swimmingly*.”

Ezra smacks me on the back of my head. “My father would take offense to that,” he teases, resting his large hand on the golden pommel of his sword. “That was his favorite pastime, and you’ve turned it into the worst joke I’ve ever heard.”

“I wouldn’t celebrate yet when the boat stays in our sight and not at our sides,” Ithinor remarks flatly next to him, gesturing to the coast.

I scoff as we trudge onward, the sand gradually stiffening the closer we draw to the boat. “Do you even know of the word ‘fun’, Icky?”

His sky-blue eyes meet my own, and I can practically see the orange of fire threatening me. At least he can’t *really* shoot fire from his eyes. I hope.

“You can’t leave that insufferable nickname behind in your childhood?” he says.

I run my hand through the top of my hair, the only part that’s growing out because Ezra somehow managed to convince me to keep only the sides trimmed. “Until I’m legally old enough to drink ale with Ezra, no.”

Ithinor rolls his eyes. “At least the legal age actually matters to you now.”

I keep my gaze forward. My mind can’t help but add to that sentence: *Unlike a few years ago*. Back when I used the tavern to skip lessons—none of the barkeeps dared to serve the underage prince alcohol in fear of punishment, but I was obnoxiously persistent.

Sierra’s words repeat in my head: *That is not who you are anymore*. The fact I’m on this sand right now willingly walking into a race I know next to nothing about proves that.

The tan of my skin comfortably absorbs the sun’s warm rays. Twigs stick up from the sand more frequently the farther we walk. Closer to the halfway point, I need to start scouting for hermit crabs buried—or not buried—in the sand. I’m almost tempted to stop; grab an arrow off my back; and fire at the ripe, yellow coconuts growing on the trees on the east side of the beach. I wonder how often I’ll have to hunt during this race—



whatever it has prepared for us.

“Aye! The prince has made his way to the south coast!”

My fists clench, my heart dropping at the faraway voice calling from the top of one of the castle’s scout towers. He’s far away, but not far enough away. To worsen matters, he continues shouting that same announcement to whoever didn’t hear him the first time.

“Leo?” Sierra urges next to me, as if she’s asking what my mind is deciding: surrender or risk.

No, it won’t end like this. I have more to give to Seavale. I’ve yet to change my mind about that, which means I must do this.

I offer Sierra the same smirk she’s seen for the last four years when we’re about to break royal boundaries: “Race you.”

“And I you,” Ezra says in a brilliant grin, sprinting toward the boat with me and Sierra inches behind.

My feet kick up sand with each step I take, my bow and quiver on my back threatening to slow me. It isn’t until I crack a twig underneath me that my right side feels empty. I stop and turn around. Ithinor is running with a clan of guards running faster behind him.

I take his hand once he catches up and drag him along with me, which forces his legs to move a little quicker.

“Leon—I can’t—run this—fast! The—armor!”

His breathlessness is the most emotion I’ve ever heard from him.

“Just a little farther!” I shout as I watch Sierra and Ezra jump into the wooden boat on the edge of the shore.

“Your Highness!” a guard calls. He sounds mere yards away, but I refuse to interrupt my stamina and look behind me to verify.

“Stop in the name of the royal court!”

On the bright side, when you die, you won't have to worry about them anymore.

I force my thoughts away as I estimate the distance left with our speed and Ezra's strength. I lock eyes with him. “Push the boat out!”

He turns back around and grips the bow.

“We can't exactly leave without you!” Sierra calls with cupped hands. She gestures furiously for us to move faster.

“L—Leon—!”

Ithinor's gasp erupts the second we step onto wet sand. I finally stop and turn. The guards, even in their armor, have matched our pace. If Ithinor and I don't jump into the boat within the next ten seconds, we'll be captured. But he can scarcely breathe, let alone run.

“Ithinor,”—I grip his arm—“fire!”

With sweat glistening across his forehead, he heaves down a gulp of air before his hand rises against the nearest coconut tree, ten feet away from the guards. Fire climbs its trunk in milliseconds, and Ithinor throws his hand sideways. The flaming tree falls in the guards' path.

I wrap my arm around his waist and his arm around my shoulders. He limps quickly until we're ankle-deep in the tepid sea. Ezra swoops him up and sits him down in the boat, then jumping in and pulling me with him.

I turn my head, breathless. The castle guards have just reached the damp part of the sand. They watch in defeat as we float away, each soldier stopping one at a time.

I turn back around and rest my head against the bow.

“Well—at least our *shipment* will be on time.”

Ezra smacks me on the back of my head again. “I pulled you in and I won’t hesitate to toss you out.” He slaps my shoulder with a heavy hand as though in congratulations, and then he takes an oar from Sierra and begins to row.

“If you made that,” she says, exhaling as she briefly takes her oar out of the water, “I have hope for us, after all.”

My breaths pause for only a second as I gaze at her pink face, which is flushing under the sun. Then her words land in my stomach, and I realize exactly what we’re rowing to: the portal on the northwest coast of the kingdom.

The realization finally strikes me: what if I’ll actually need my bow and sword?

“I won’t be able to do this with the armor.” Ithinor still pants furiously, taking off his cyan mage robes and revealing the chain-mail underneath. “If I’m to have any chance of surviving, I must take it off.”

“It will be too dangerous,” Sierra tells him, pushing the oar through the calm waves of the sea. It ripples with soft gurgles. “Your armor is all you have to protect you since you have no weapons.”

“With all due respect, Miss Cathridge, you aren’t understanding the entirety of the situation.” Ithinor’s robes drop to his feet, and he leans back in his spot. The sun highlights every gleam of sweat rolling down his skin. “The armor is too heavy for me to run in and *live*.”

Reluctantly, I reach over and help him slide off his gauntlets. Sierra sighs disappointedly.

Ezra joins her. “I did my best,” he says, rowing calmly.

A minute later, Ithinor's armor sits at his feet in the row-boat. Our destination sits a few hours away. I can't help but wonder if, for whatever reason, Seavale's portal was the only one that opened so far away from the castle... Do the other kingdoms already have a time advantage over us?

I swallow. *This is happening.* Out here, we've no choice but to realize where we are going. It takes every fiber of muscle in me to force away the anxiety of us being last to the starting line like Sierra said. The weight of the situation falls like an anchor onto my chest. By the silence and downcast eyes of everyone else in the boat, I'm assuming that my team feels the same way.

Take their minds off of it. Distract them.

"If only we had our poles." I look out at the sea. "I'd love to enjoy a local meal before we go."

"With what fire, captain?" Sierra teases, snickering.

"Ithinor's!"

He only manages to roll his eyes as he continues gathering his breaths.

I look back at Sierra, chuckling with her, and notice again the intensified pink of her cheeks. I lean forward across the boat and reach for the oar. "Let me take—"

She sticks her tongue out at me before sticking the oar back into the water.

I hold up my hands in mock surrender. "I offered."

"Well,"—Ithinor's breath finally slows as he looks at me, a hand resting on his chest as if to calm his heart—"there's your answer, Leon: I do know about 'fun'. And *that* is precisely why I don't like it."

Just as I saw early this morning, practically the entire kingdom has arrived and gathered along the edge of the beach to marvel at the portal. Even upon noticing our boat in the distance as we arrive along the coast, no one steps forward to overwhelm us. They all stay fixed at the invisible barrier between plant life and sand, calling to and shouting at us while we dock. I can't determine if they're thrilled that I'm about to walk into the portal or furious that I'm leaving them with the reputation that I am. And I don't intend on finding out which one it is.

"This is... unsettling," Sierra notes, fixing her messy bun as we walk farther onto shore. "Why aren't they moving forward?"

Ithinor extends both arms, barring us from walking onto the dry sand. He crouches down and waves a hand over it, a translucent wave of cyan-blue that resembles the surface of the ocean glowing underneath.

"This territory is guarded by magic," he says. "It senses Leon and is allowing him by. We're permitted through with him."

"Well, aren't you special?" Sierra nudges me with her elbow. "You're our personal escort."

I internally grimace; should anything take a turn for the worst, I may not be escorting these three to *just* the race.

"But as Sierra warned before we left," Ithinor states, standing, "we've lost too much time to procrastinate any further."

"Let's go," I say before I can hesitate. Ezra smiles in the corner of my vision. "We have everything but time."

We approach the cyan-lined oval of light. It's almost two feet taller than Ezra, which is a terrifying aspect on its own. The shouts and unintelligible chanting of what I know is most of the kingdom erupts twofold as we draw closer to the portal. A border



of blue light crackles in a horizontal line as if to prevent anyone from trespassing.

With another ambiguous uproar from the crowd as I step forward, my body freezes. All those people. If I don't win this race—if I pay its ultimate price—Seavale will fall with me. If I don't survive, it will condemn the fate of my entire kingdom.

I don't even know what will happen once I walk through. I don't know for certain what *could* happen. What is on the other side?

“Leo?” Sierra asks. I hear a dozen questions with it.

Right. I don't have a choice.

Don't turn around. Don't turn around.

I step into the portal before I can change my mind.



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