A VOW SO BOLD AND DEADLY

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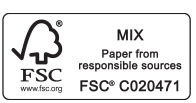
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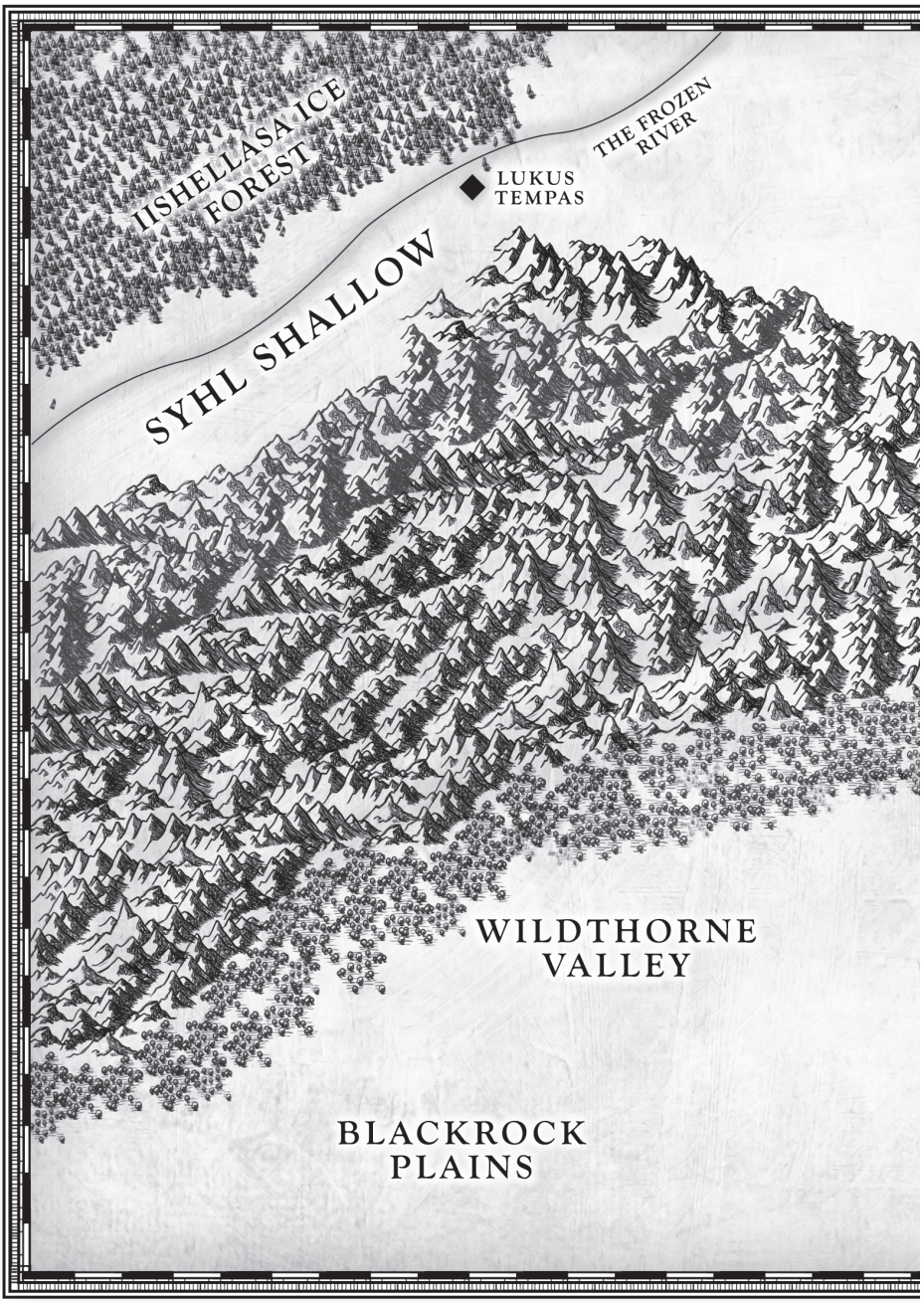
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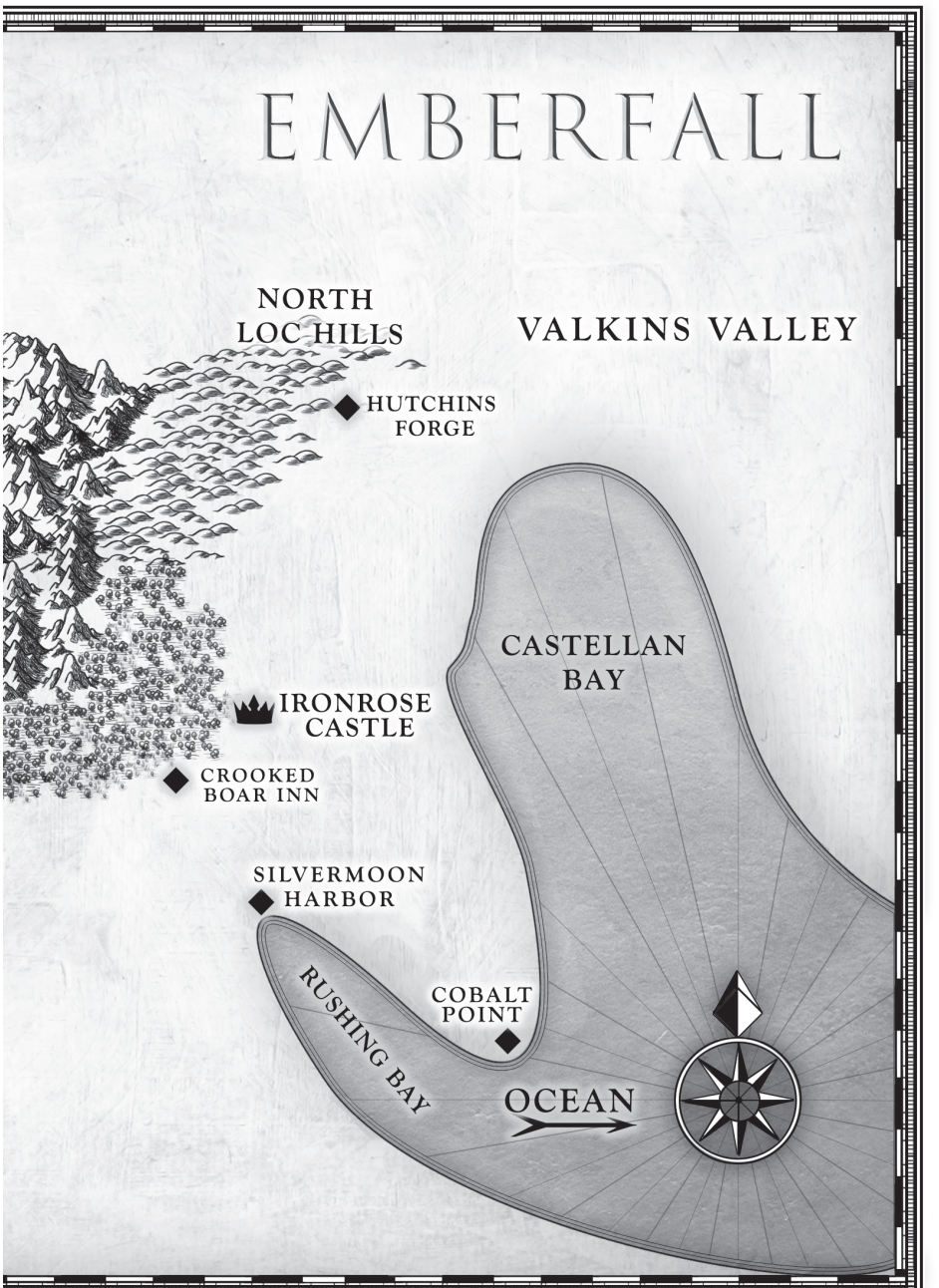
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POINT
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CHAPTER ONE



GREY

The weather has begun to turn, allowing cold wind to swoop down from the mountains and sneak under the leather and fur of my jacket. It's colder in Syhl Shallow than it would be in Emberfall, but it's been so long since I experienced the gradual slide from autumn into winter that I've been reveling in it.

The others are clustered around the central hearth that burns in the main room of the Crystal Palace, drinking the cook's first batch of winter wine, but Iisak loathes the warmth, so I'm braving the cold and the dark on the veranda to play dice with the scraver. The only flame burning out here is the lone candle in a glass jar on the table between us.

Iisak shakes the silver cubes in his hands, then lets them rattle out onto the table.

"Silver hell," I mutter as I tally his roll. I'm good at cards, but dice seem to hate me. With cards, there's an element of strategy, of choice, but the dice are moved by nothing more than fate. I toss a coin onto the table to acknowledge his win.

Iisak smiles, and while the darkness paints his black eyes and gray skin in even darker shadows, the moonlight glints off his fangs.

He pockets the coin, but he'll probably give it to Tycho later. He dotes on the boy like an old grandmother. Or maybe like a father missing the son he once lost. "Where is our young queen tonight?" he asks.

"Lia Mara is dining with one of her Royal Houses."

"Without you?"

"They requested a private audience, and she has an obligation to keep them happy." The Royal Houses were putting pressure on the former queen before she was killed, but Karis Luran ruled with an iron fist and she was able to keep them in check. Now that Lia Mara is in power and Syhl Shallow is desperate for resources, the pressure to find trade routes through Emberfall seems to have doubled—especially since Lia Mara has no desire to rule like her mother.

I shrug and gather the dice. "Not everyone is comfortable with magic here, Iisak."

"I assumed as much from the crowd, Your Highness." He glances around the darkened veranda, which is deserted aside from the guards who linger by the door.

"Well," I say noncommittally. "It's cold tonight."

But he's right. It's probably the magic.

I get along with most of the guards and soldiers in Syhl Shallow, but there's a distance here that I can't quite define. A wariness. At first I thought it was because they see me as loyal to Emberfall, and I stood at Lia Mara's side as she killed her mother to claim the throne.

But as time has gone on, that wariness has made itself more apparent every time I heal an injury or drive away an opponent on

the training field. It's become more apparent when I go to the armory to put my weapons away, and conversations draw short or small groups disperse.

A strong wind blasts across the veranda, making the candle gutter and then go out.

I shiver. "As I said."

"We should make use of our privacy," Iisak says, and his voice is lower, quieter, nothing that will reach the ears of my guards.

I put a finger over the candlewick and make a circular motion, letting the stars in my blood dance along my fingertips. What once felt like such a challenge is now effortless. A flame crawls to life. "I thought we were."

"I don't need any more of your coins."

I smile. "Well, that's good, because I only have a few left."

He doesn't smile in return, so my expression sobers. Iisak is a king in his own right, though he's living out a year sworn to my service. He was trapped in a cage in Emberfall, and Karis Luran kept him on a chain. I've offered to release him a dozen times, but each time he refuses. It's a type of loyalty I'm not sure I deserve, especially since I know what he's lost: first, a son who went missing, and then, his throne in Iishellasa. When he asks for my attention, I do my best to give it.

"What do you need?" I say.

"It is not just people in Syhl Shallow who fear magic."

I frown. He's talking about Rhen.

My brother.

Every time I think of it, something inside me clenches tight.

"You once said you did not want to be at war with him," says Iisak.

I look at the dice in my palm, turning them over between my fingers. "I still don't."

"You have begun preparing armies on Lia Mara's behalf."

I close my fingers around the silver cubes. "Yes."

"Syhl Shallow's coffers have begun to run dry. You will likely have one chance to stand against him. The losses in the final battle with Emberfall were already great, due to Prince Rhen's creature. A second assault will not be possible." He pauses. "And you granted him sixty days to ready for battle."

"I know."

"As much as you long to preserve lives, these battles will not occur without loss."

"I know that, too."

Another gust of wind sweeps across the veranda, dashing out the flame again. This time, the wind was drawn by Iisak. I've learned the feel of his magic, how it lives in the air the way mine lives in my blood.

I give him a look and coax the flame back to life.

Another gust, and I narrow my eyes. Iisak always pushes. When I first began learning to control my magic, I found it frustrating, but I've come to enjoy the challenge. I keep my finger there, and the flame struggles to stay lit. Stars fill my vision as I try to keep the magic in place. The wind has grown strong enough that it stings my eyes and grabs at my cloak. Iisak's wings flare, but the flame doesn't die.

"Do you remember me saying I was cold?" I say.

He smiles and lets the wind swirl out to nothing.

In the sudden absence of his magic, my flame surges high for a moment, sending wax coursing down the sides of the candle, and I let go.

"Maybe it would be good to show Lia Mara's people how magic can be useful," he says.

I think of the people who've been healed by my magic. The way I've been able to keep enemies away from me, and, more slowly, away from anyone fighting alongside me. "I already have," I say.

"I don't mean you should simply strengthen your military force."

I study him. "You mean I should use magic against Rhen." I pause. "It's exactly what he fears."

"You told him you're sending an army. He'll be prepared to retaliate. He'll be prepared to fight from a distance, the way kings do."

But he'll be powerless against magic.

I know he will. He already was.

"Rhen knows you," says Iisak. "He expects violence. He expects an armed assault. He expects an efficiently brutal attack not unlike the one Karis Luran herself sent. You've assembled an army, and you may as well have made a vow."

"Don't underestimate him." I think of the whip scars on my back. On Tycho's back. "When he's cornered, Rhen can be efficiently brutal himself."

"Yes, Your Highness." Iisak makes the flame flicker again, and it glints off his black eyes. "So can you."

CHAPTER TWO



RHEN

Once again, it is autumn at Ironrose Castle. The first cool wind of the season drifts through my windows and I shiver. I haven't needed a fire in the morning in months, but today there's a bite to the air that has me wanting to call for a servant to light the hearth.

I don't.

For a near eternity, I used to dread the beginning of the season because it signaled that the curse had begun again. I would be newly eighteen, trapped in a never-ending repetition of autumn. I would be alone with Grey, my former guard commander, trying to find a girl to help me break the curse that tormented me and all of Emberfall.

This autumn, Grey is gone.

This autumn, I have a girl to stand at my side.

This autumn, I suppose, I am nineteen for the first time.

The curse is broken.

It doesn't feel like it.

Lilith, the enchantress who once trapped me in the curse, now traps me in another way.

Harper, the first girl to break the curse, the "Princess of Disi" who swore to help my people, is in the courtyard below my window, swinging swords with Zo, her closest friend. Zo was once her guard, too, until she helped lead Grey to escape. I won't take away Harper's best friend, but I can't have a sworn guard displaying divided loyalties.

Tensions are already too high.

Harper and Zo break apart, breathing heavily, but Harper almost immediately reclaims her stance.

It makes me smile. Cerebral palsy makes swordplay challenging—some would say *impossible*—but Harper is more determined than anyone I know.

A light voice speaks from behind me. "Ah, Your Highness. It is so *adorable* how Princess Harper believes she can excel at this."

I lose the smile, but I don't move from the window. "Lady Lilith."

"Forgive me for interrupting your ponderings," she says.

I say nothing. I don't forgive her for anything.

"I wonder how she will fare back in the streets of her Disi, if you fail to win against these invaders from Syhl Shallow."

I freeze. She issues this threat often, that she will take Harper back to Washington, DC, where I would have no hope of reaching her. Where Harper would have nothing and no one to rely on, and no way to get back to Emberfall.

Lilith ignores my silence. "Should you not be preparing for war?"

Yes. I very likely should. Grey gave me sixty days to surrender control of Emberfall before he will help Lia Mara take it by force. He is in Syhl Shallow now, preparing to lead an army against me. I'm never sure whether his motivation is for resources—because I know the country is desperate for access to trade—or whether his motivation is to claim a throne he once said he did not want.

Either way, he will attack Emberfall. He will attack me.

"I am prepared," I say.

"I see no armies assembling. No generals plotting in your war rooms. No—"

"Are you a military strategist now, Lilith?"

"I know what a war looks like."

I want to beg her to leave, but it will only make her linger. When Grey was trapped here with me, I took solace in the fact that I never suffered alone.

Now I do, and it's . . . agonizing.

In the courtyard below, Harper and Zo are matching blades again.

"Do not chase her blade, my lady," I call.

They break apart, and Harper turns to look up at me in surprise. Her brown curls are twisted into an unruly braid that hangs over one shoulder, and she's wearing leather bracers and a gilded breastplate like she was born to royalty and weaponry. A far cry from the tired, dusty girl whom Grey dragged from the streets of Washington, DC, so many months ago. Now she's a warrior princess, complete with a long scar across one cheek and another across her waist, both courtesy of the horrible enchantress behind me.

When she looks at me, her eyes always search my features, as if she suspects I am hiding something. As if she is *angry* with me, even though she doesn't voice it.

Lilith waits in the shadows at my back. There once was a time when Harper invited me to her chambers to protect me from the enchantress. I wish she could do that again.

I haven't been in her chambers in months. There is too much unspoken between us.

"I didn't know you were watching," Harper says, and she sheathes her sword as if she's displeased.

"Only for a moment." I hesitate. "Forgive me."

As soon as I say it, I wish I could take it back. It sounds like I'm apologizing for something else. I suppose I am.

She must hear the weight in my tone, because she frowns. "Did I wake you?"

As if I ever sleep anymore. "No."

She stares up at me, and I stare down at her, and I wish I could unravel all the emotion that hangs between us. I wish I could tell her about Lilith. I wish I could earn her forgiveness—and win back her trust.

I wish I could undo so many things.

"I don't know what you mean," she finally says. "About chasing the blade."

"I could come show you," I offer.

Her expression freezes, but just for a moment. My heart stutters in my chest. I expect her to refuse. She's refused before.

But then she says, "All right. Come down."

My heart leaps—until Lilith speaks from behind me.

"Yes," she says. "Go, Your Highness. Show her the *power* of your *weapon*."

I whirl, glaring. "Leave here, Lady Lilith," I whisper furiously. "If you are so concerned about my preparations for war, I suggest you find some way to make yourself useful, instead of tormenting me whenever you need a childish diversion."

She laughs. "As you say, Prince Rhen."

She reaches out a hand as if to touch my cheek, and I jerk back, stumbling into the wall. Her touch can be like fire—or worse.

Lilith's smile widens. My hands curl into fists, but she vanishes.

From the courtyard below, I hear Harper call, "Rhen?"

I draw a tense breath and return to the window. The sun has begun to lighten the sky, painting her dark hair with sparks of gold and red.

I'm supposed to be preparing for war, but I feel like I'm already in the middle of one.

"Allow me to dress," I say. "I'll be down in a moment."

CHAPTER THREE



HARPER

I'm surprised Rhen is coming down. I'm surprised he was watching at all, honestly. Since Grey gave him an ultimatum, Rhen has been tucked away in meetings with Grand Marshals from far-off cities, with military advisors, or with his Royal Guard.

Which is fine. When *I'm* with him, a tiny ball of anger burns in my gut, and nothing ever seems to douse it.

The anger makes me feel guilty. Everything he does, he does for his kingdom. For his people. Being a prince—being a *king*—requires sacrifice and tough choices.

No matter how many times I remind myself of that, I can't forget what he did to Grey and Tycho.

I can't forget that I came back here instead of going with my brother.

Instead of going with Grey.

I turn back to Zo, but she's sheathed her sword. Her eyes are tense. "I should return to my quarters."

She doesn't want to be here with Rhen. I hesitate, then frown.

Zo came to the castle months ago, when Rhen was trying to rally his people to defend Emberfall against the invasion from Syhl Shallow. She'd been an apprentice to the Master of Song in Silvermoon Harbor, but she had skills in archery and swordplay, so she applied for the Royal Guard—and Grey chose her, then assigned her to be my personal guard.

We became fast friends—a first for me, after the chaotic life I left behind in Washington, DC. She's clever and strong, with a dry sense of humor, and sometimes I'd stay up well into the night when she was stationed outside my door. We'd wonder what happened to Grey after the curse was broken, or we'd whisper about the rumors over a missing heir, or we'd muse over what would happen to Emberfall if Syhl Shallow attacked again.

But then Grey was found hiding in another city, and he apparently knew the identity of the missing heir—but he refused to tell Rhen. Rhen tortured him to get the information, and he got it—but not in the way he expected. Grey knew the identity of the missing heir, because *he* was Rhen's older brother. He was a magesmith, with magic in his blood. He was the heir to the throne.

He'd never known it. Neither had Rhen.

I helped Grey escape after Rhen tortured him.

Zo helped *me*.

It cost her a position in the Royal Guard. Grey once told me that his guards forswear family and relationships for exactly this reason. She was sworn to Rhen—but she acted for me. Rhen is never cold to her; he's too political for that. But there's an edge between them now. Like the ball of anger in my gut that won't go away, I'm not sure it will ever soften.

I want to beg Zo to stay, because every moment I spend with Rhen feels prickly. But asking Zo to stay feels selfish.

Asking her to help Grey was probably selfish, too. Zo and I are friends, but she was my guard. Did she help me out of friendship, or out of obligation? I'm not even sure if it matters. She helped me, and now she's out of a job—a job she loved.

Rhen isn't heartless. He gave her a year's worth of pay and wrote her a letter of recommendation, both of which she keeps in her quarters—but she hasn't left, and he hasn't forced her out.

She wanted to be a guard. She gave up her apprenticeship. She says she doesn't want to leave me alone while everything is so precarious, but a part of me wonders if she doesn't want to go home carrying the weight of the choices she made. Of the choices *I* made.

I've hesitated too long. Rhen comes through the doorway to the courtyard, trailed by two of his guards. He's tall and striking, with blond hair and brown eyes, and his clothes are always finely detailed, right down to the ornate hilt of the sword at his hip or the silver hand-tooled buttons of his jacket. He moves with purpose and athletic grace, never a hesitation in his step. He moves like a prince. Like a king. A man born to rule.

But I can see the subtle changes. The shadows under his eyes have grown slightly darker. The edge of his jaw seems sharper, his cheekbones more pronounced. Unease has taken root in his eyes over the last few weeks.

His guards take a place by the wall while he strides across the courtyard toward us. Zo sighs.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to her.

"Nonsense." She curtsies to Rhen, even though she's in breeches and armor. "Your Highness."

"Zo," he says coolly. His eyes shift to me. "My lady."

I inhale to try to say something to ease the tension between them, but Zo says, "If you'll forgive me, I was just about to return to my quarters."

"Of course," says Rhen.

I bite my lip as she moves away.

"She is running from me," Rhen says, and there's no question in his gaze.

I bristle immediately. "She's not *running*."

"It certainly seems like a retreat."

Wow. Someone certainly seems like a jerk. "Zo is allowed to be mad, Rhen."

"So am I."

That stops my mouth from forming whatever words I was going to say. I didn't know that he was still angry at Zo. I wonder if he's still mad at me, if I'm not the only one with this burning core of anger in my belly.

Before I can ask him, he draws his sword. "Show me what you've learned."

I put my hand on the hilt, but I don't draw it. I'm not entirely sure why—especially since I told him to come show me. Maybe it's because he said it like an order. Maybe it's because his mood feels belligerent. Either way, I don't want to face him with a weapon.

I glance away. "I don't want to do this anymore." I turn toward the door he just came through. "I should go get dressed for breakfast."

I hear him sheathe his sword, and then his hand catches my arm gently. "Please."

It's a broken word. A desperate word that cuts the tiniest hole in my anger.

"Please," he says again, and his voice is so very soft. "Please, Harper."

He has a magical way of saying my name, his accent softening the edges of each *r* to turn a couple syllables into a growl and a caress all at once, but that's not what gets my attention. It's the *please.* Rhen is the crown prince. The future king. He doesn't plead.

"Please what?" I say softly.

"Please stay."

He means right now, but it feels bigger. Broader.

A memory flickers into my thoughts, from a year ago. Mom was already sick, cancer invading her lungs, and Dad had blown through our family savings trying to cover what insurance wouldn't. He made bad choices to get money, choices that put our family in danger. When Mom found out about it, she told me and Jake to pack our things. Dad was crying at the kitchen table, begging her to stay. I remember my big brother shoving things into a duffel bag while I sat on his bed and stared with wide eyes.

"It'll be okay, Harp," Jake kept saying. "Just get your stuff."

It wasn't okay. None of it was okay. At the time, the thought of leaving was terrifying. I remember being relieved that Mom relented, that we stayed. That *she* stayed.

Later, as things got really bad, I remember wishing she hadn't.

I stare up into Rhen's eyes and wonder if I'm making the same choices. Jake left with Grey. My brother will be on the other side of this war.

I take a breath and blow it out. "I don't want to fight."

I'm not talking about swords, and I think he knows it. Rhen nods. "Shall we walk instead?"

I hesitate. "Okay."

He offers his arm, and I take it.