

THE
STORM
CROW

KALYN JOSEPHSON



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*To Mom and Dad,
with love.*

PROLOGUE



I was a storm.

Adrenaline ripped through my veins like lightning as I leaned close to the body of my crow, preparing to execute a dive. Iyla's warm, steady heat kept me grounded, even hundreds of feet in the air. Cold wind whipped tendrils of hair free from my braid, nipping at the skin around my goggles and stealing my breath.

The thin, well-worn saddle beneath me was nothing more than a strip of leather to bind stirrups to, the reins trailing from my hands to Iyla's beak, an illusion of control—this ride depended on trust and mutual respect. Anything less, and no amount of leather would keep me seated on Iyla's back.

Years of Estrel's instructions raced through my mind: *Keep your body low and tight in a dive. Give the reins slack. Keep your knees back so you don't put pressure on the crow's wing joints.* I knew it all like my own heartbeat.

I tucked close to Iyla's body, and we dove.

Water misted my skin as Iyla's storm crow magic split apart a cloud a second before we shot through it and plummeted toward the earth. My heart screamed into my throat, pure, unadulterated joy erupting through me with every passing moment. I held my breath as we fell, counting the seconds—we could only gain so much speed before Iyla's wings wouldn't be able to handle the strain of opening.

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen...

We burst through layers of clouds, Aris spread out below us. The city was a blur as we dove, a sea of light and color fast approaching.

Twenty. I squeezed my knees, and Iyla's wings snapped open like the slice of a blade, catching an updraft to send us sailing in a gentle arc. Lightning buzzed at the tips of Iyla's wings as she let out a piercing call.

I sucked in a lungful of cold air and let it out in a laugh, the thrill of the dive resounding through me like a thunderclap. I craved that feeling like starved lungs craved air, letting it fill me until I felt impossibly alive.

We circled wide and low, descending the rest of the way until Iyla's shadow blanketed the city streets.

Aris unfurled beneath us like a colorful map, dense with thick green foliage and spotted with wildflowers. People called up to us, waving from crowded streets as revelers prepared for the festival leading up to Negnoch, the city's yearly hatch night. In a few hours, every single crow from across the kingdom of Rhodaire would put on a masterful display of riding and magic, and the year's crows would be hatched.

One of them would be mine. Tonight, I would choose my own crow and become a rider.

We dipped lower, children chasing Iyla's shadow in the hopes

of catching a stray feather to wish upon. This was my favorite part of flying. Even more than the thrill of diving or the magic of soaring through endless skies, I loved gliding peacefully above Aris, the wind brushing along my skin as the city passed below.

Even on the back of a stolen crow. Well, not quite *stolen*. Iyla belonged to Estrel, my teacher and mother's best friend, and while Estrel had let me ride Iyla alone before, she technically hadn't given me permission to tonight.

Probably because I didn't ask.

A gentle tug on the reins sent Iyla a little higher, and we fell in line over the crystal waters of the canal in the Rynthene Wing. To my left, earth crows helped work the fields, tilling land in huge swaths with the pulse of their magic. To my right, the fading sunlight glinted off an armored battle crow.

All over Aris, the crows and riders integrated into the city's inner workings would be finishing up the day's tasks. Later, they'd join the military pouring in from Rhodaire's outer reaches in preparation for the Sky Dance.

We followed the canal to the castle at the city's heart. The giant gray stone structure stretched into the sky, delladon vines sprawling across its pale face like laugh lines. From each of the four sides of the central tower, a crescent-shaped landing platform jutted out, and I used the nearest one as a marker to veer Iyla right toward the royal rookery. It was a tall, circular tower with wide windows on the third floor for easy landing.

My nerves jittered. Landing was the hardest part, even with Estrel's lessons branded into my mind.

Let the crow do the work; it knows what it's doing. Keep your weight back. Never dismount while a crow's folding its wings, or you risk straining the joints.

We glided easily through one of the rookery's large, open

windows, Iyla as practiced in this maneuver as breathing. Her wings flared back, sending straw swirling across the stone floor as her massive black claws reached out, taking hold of the nearest T-shaped perch. We fell to a standstill, her wings tucking in tight to her muscled form. She was almost reptilian with a lean, muscular body, the proportions a little longer, a little more limber than a normal bird.

I let out a whoop, grinning as I tugged down my goggles and swung off her back, throwing my arms around her. Her long neck straightened as she stiffened, but I'd learned long ago that she'd not only tolerate hugs but secretly liked them.

"Anthia!"

My excitement went cold at my mother's sharp voice. A flurry of black wings filled the opposite window as her battle crow, Tyros, landed effortlessly on the perch across from Iyla, sending a gust of straw-filled wind into my face.

My mother swung down, stalking toward me with the smooth litheness of a jungle cat. With the setting sun at her back, she looked every inch the queen she was, the light making her brown skin and polished flying leathers gleam with an inner fire.

"What in the Saints' name do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Um, talking to Iyla?" I offered. Lying had never been my strong suit. To her credit, the crow let out a low caw, as if she were indeed part of the conversation.

My mother didn't smile. I didn't expect her to.

"Relax, Alandra." Estrel emerged from the nearby staircase at my side, her long, dark curls bound in a thick braid like mine. "I gave her permission."

The only person who could tell my mother to relax without getting eviscerated was Estrel, my aunt in every way but blood.

She and Estrel had grown up together. They even looked like sisters, though my mother was taller and leaner.

My mother frowned, and I straightened beneath the sharpness of her steel-colored gaze. Her eyes always reminded me of knives, forever sculpting me in an endless quest for perfection.

"I executed a perfect dive," I offered, as if my ability to perform riding techniques far more advanced than my seventeen years might soften her gaze.

It only made her eyes narrow. "Taking another rider's crow out for a joyride to perform dangerous maneuvers is not only foolish, it's insulting." I flinched. "If you want to prove yourself capable of being a leader among the riders, you can start by not disrespecting every rule and custom we live by."

I refused to wilt beneath the heat of her words. "Well, maybe if you spent more than a waking second in my presence, I'd know the rules better."

Estrel drew a sharp breath, but my mother went stiller than a shadow crow concealed in darkness. For a fraction of a second, I swore something pained flashed through her iron gaze, but it vanished quickly.

The circlet of silver feathers on her brow gleamed like molten starlight. "I expect you back here before the hatching." She turned to Tyros, who leapt from his perch to the wide window ledge, a perfect tableau of strength against a backdrop of approaching night. With a grace I hadn't yet mastered, she swung up into the saddle. Wings tucked in tight, Tyros leapt. They plummeted from view, gone for barely a breath before they soared up past the window, climbing into the darkening sky.

"That went well," I muttered.

Estrel smacked the back of my head, and I winced, rubbing the spot though the blow hadn't hurt. "Stop stealing my crow!"

Despite the snap in her voice, an easy grin filled her face, and she let out a low laugh when I smiled back.

There wasn't a single other rider or a single other crow I'd ever dream of doing what I did with Iyla. Any other crow would snatch me by the leg with its beak and toss me off, princess or not. That was, until I had my own.

My gaze dropped to the gold and black edges of Estrel's Corvé tattoo that reached up over her muscular shoulders, denoting her as one of Rhodaire's nine crow masters. While the heads of each house saw to their people, each wing's Corvé saw to its crows.

Tonight, I would choose my own crow. I would become a rider. And one day, I would earn the tattoo and become the royal Corvé after Estrel.

"The Sky Dance starts in an hour," Estrel said. "Then it's back here for the hatching. Are you and Kiva going into the city tonight?"

"To Rua's."

She smirked. "Take a breath. Enjoy the night. You'll have your crow soon enough."

Soon enough felt a lifetime away as I bolted down the winding rookery steps, dodging a rookhand balancing plates of meat, and out into a perfect Rhodairen winter evening. The air was cool but not cold and filled with the possibility of rain. Storm crows would keep it at bay, though I wished they'd let it fall. I'd always wanted to see a Sky Dance in the rain.

The wind buffeted my escaped curls into my face as I shot along the gardens, through the castle gates, and into streets filled with thick green trees and climbing vines trickling down buildings like rivulets of rainwater.

I veered onto the main road between the Caravel Wing and Thereal Wing, then cut right into the Thereal section of the city,

slowing as a wave of music and laughter washed over me. I made for Rua's, a bright-blue building on the corner where a crow had been painted in sunset colors across one side, done by a street artist in the night.

Native brown-skinned Rhodairens walked alongside colorfully dressed, dark-skinned travelers from Trendell, a kingdom far east of Rhodaire. Both were dwarfed by the pale, long-limbed Korovi of the northern kingdom. People came to Rhodaire from all over the world for Negnoch. I even spotted a few revelers from Illucia, the border kingdom to our north, though they were probably only here for festival discounts on Rhodairen weapons. Or maybe they were guards for the visiting Illucian dignitaries.

That was probably what had my mother on edge: their presence, and their queen who threatened war. She'd already taken two kingdoms.

Someone seized my arm, spinning me around. Kiva grinned down at me, her moonlight-colored hair freed from its characteristic braid and down to her shoulders in waves. She still wore her castle guard uniform, making her look older—sometimes I doubted she owned anything else. She even had her sword at her hip.

"I was starting to think you weren't coming!" she shouted above the clamor.

"And let you eat all the orange cakes?"

"Typical. Here for the food."

I nodded at her uniform. "Hoping to impress someone?" She'd been flirting with a girl at Rua's for weeks now.

Kiva's cheeks burned, and she nudged me with her shoulder.

I grinned. "Race you."

We dove into the crowd, dodging flying elbows and swinging hips. Along the sides of the streets, baskets of the last fruits of the season sat waiting to be eaten, from bright-yellow mangoes to

fresh-picked oranges. Overhead, thunder boomed in a near cloudless sky, a storm crow marking the time.

The night passed in patches. I drank *alcé* after *alcé*, sweet juice drinks filled with pieces of fruit, and ate as many orange cakes as I could stomach. We danced and sang, following the street past acrobats and fire-eaters, carts of pastries and fruit pies. Children ran laughing through the streets, kites in the shape of crows tied to their wrists by long, thin strings. Tradition said if your kite made it through the night undamaged, you were destined to become a rider.

Thunder boomed again. The Sky Dance was about to begin.

Crows glided in lazy circles above the castle with riders on their backs, looking like shadows set adrift in the sky. The sun set behind them, painting everything deep mauve and carmine, buttermilk and fuchsia.

The drums started, low and steady at first, matching the rhythm of the crows as they circled. Then the speed increased, and higher drums joined in. The circling crows broke in all directions, some diving straight down, others surging upward in a powerful burst of speed. They twirled and dove, weaving around each other in exact, graceful movements.

A fire crow opened its beak and let loose a stream of blue-tinged flames at a wind crow, which buffeted the fire upward toward a water crow, which doused it into steam with water from its beak. Sun crows lit the sky in ethereal gold, their glow fading into wisps like the light of falling stars. Shadow crows wove ribbons of night around them, creating intricate shimmering patterns.

Each action a crow took was mimicked by another one across from it, one formation molding seamlessly into the next, creating a symmetrical design of beasts, people, and magic, all interwoven in a dance among the clouds.

The drums grew faster. Lightning struck and thunder rolled, keeping time with the beat. Crows dipped and twirled in perfectly timed maneuvers I longed to try. My heart raced with them, imagining the feel of the wind in my hair and the heat of a crow beneath me.

As the music peaked, every crow shot upward, carried by drafts from wind and storm crows. Then they dove.

As the echo of the final drumbeat sounded, the crows shot out in all directions in perfectly executed dives. Their deep, echoing cries filled the sky as the sun finished setting, and the crows blanketed the night.

Still ecstatic from the dance, Kiva and I moved off the main road to find another talcé vendor. The skies had cleared, and the crows had all returned to the rookeries throughout the city's wings to be unsaddled and fed. The images remained seared into the back of my eyelids. Soon, I would be a part of that dance.

"You're going to be late," Kiva warned as we navigated the crowded street.

"It takes at least half an hour for the crows to be unsaddled and fed."

"Which means you'll leave in half an hour."

"I'm not late *that* often—"

"Yes, you are."

"Okay, but—"

A scream ripped through the air. I froze. Kiva's hand went to her sword, and she stepped toward me, shielding. Silence descended like a curtain, sucking the air from the crowded street. My heart rose and settled in my throat, and for a wingbeat, everything stood still.

Then the Thereal rookery went up in flames.

The screams became a chorus, the screech of crows rising like a wave. One by one, the rookeries in each wing erupted with fire.

I stood rooted to the spot, the acrid smoke scorching my lungs, the light of the flames almost too bright to look at. Yet I couldn't tear my gaze away, my mind refusing to process what I was seeing.

The city was burning.

The words dropped through my mind like jagged stones, too heavy and sharp to hold on to.

The crowd closed in, people slamming into carts and each other, all attempting to flee in different directions. Kiva pressed into my side, her sword half drawn. The familiar screech of metal snapped me from my trance, and I seized her wrist. "Too many people!"

Scowling, she grabbed my arm and barreled through the writhing mass. She was head taller than nearly everyone, and the crowd parted to avoid her elbows and snarled threats. We pushed until we broke through the edge, gulping down open air drowned in smoke.

"Come on!" Not stopping to rest, I raced along the street and back toward the castle, Kiva at my back.

Fire fell like rain.

It dripped from buildings, clinging to crumbling stone and smoldering wood, spreading from the Thereal rookery like a flood. The bushes lining the road blazed like torches, trees heavy with fruit turning to ash and filling the air with a sickly, burnt-sugar scent. It mixed with the smell of seared flesh.

A burst of fire cut across our path, forcing us to stop. As an earsplitting scream tore past me, I realized it wasn't a fireball: it was a man, engulfed in flames.

My stomach turned, and I choked on the poisoned air, desperate to get it out of my lungs. Kiva seized my arm, hauling me along. The image of the flaming man cut through my mind over and over, until it felt like I'd never see anything else again.

As we turned up the castle road, I stumbled to a halt. Black smoke billowed from the royal rookery, darker than the night. Fire

writhed, reaching out the open windows with hungry claws. A crow leapt from one of the windows, feathers alight. It barely had time to open its wings before an arrow pierced its heart. Another struck its throat. It dropped four stories to the earth with a sickening crunch.

This didn't make any sense. The eggs were in there, and the crows... My thoughts ground to a halt, unable to venture any further. Unable to think, unable to breathe.

I only became aware Kiva was shaking me when she nearly knocked me to the ground. "Move!" she screamed.

Slowly, I looked at her. She'd drawn her sword, and the firelight cast strange shadows across her pale skin. For an impossibly long moment, my smoke-riddled brain could process only her bright, unbound hair. It was white as bone.

She pushed me again, and I stumbled. "Anthia, move!"

I blinked. Guards were sprinting in every direction, shouting orders. Some had their swords drawn, dueling pale-skinned soldiers in black leather. Still others simply stood and stared at the rising column of fire and smoke. Slowly, I understood. I recognized the golden horse head emblazoned on their uniforms.

Illucia was attacking Rhodaire.

Illucia was killing the crows.

Someone moved behind Kiva. My mother appeared, gray eyes wild and face splattered with blood. She held a dagger in each hand. "Get inside the castle!" she ordered, but I didn't move. She sheathed a blade, her hand falling on my shoulder. "Anthia, you have to go inside. Please."

I felt warm. Too warm, but oddly calm. Like something had reached inside me and wiped away all the fear, the confusion, and the horrible, horrible understanding. My skin hummed, the sound filling my ears, my chest, my bones.

My mother cursed, said something to Kiva, then hesitated a second longer, her fingers digging tight into my shoulder. Something shone behind her eyes, a forgotten emotion threatening to break free—then she bolted toward the rookery. I lurched after her, but Kiva’s strong arms pulled me back. My mother disappeared into the column of flames. Then Kiva was gone, and I forgot to blink. My vision filled with fire.

Swords clashed, metal screaming against metal so close to my ear that I turned. Kiva dueled an Illucian soldier inches away. Had that attack been meant for me? The thought barely registered. All I could think about was the growing heat and dying air, the screams of crows and people indecipherable in the night.

A Rhodairen soldier intercepted Kiva’s fight, and I turned back to the rookery in time to see a shape fall in the doorway.

My body reacted. I sprang forward, screaming for my mother. The shape rolled, crawling toward the exit, the flames moving like a serpent preparing to strike. It wasn’t my mother.

“Estrel!” I seized her arm, not processing that her clothes were on fire, that she was on fire, and pulled with all my strength. The flames leapt onto my sleeve, but I pulled harder, her form toppling out after me onto the damp grass. I rolled her over and over again, then Kiva was there, smothering Estrel with her cloak.

Kiva yelled something at me, but I couldn’t hear her through the blood pounding in my ears. Then she seized me and flung me into the grass, slapping my hand, beating at it with the edge of the cloak to extinguish the flames.

I stared at the ravaged skin, now a patchwork of scalded white and red flesh. Red. Red as the fire raining down around me as it consumed the royal rookery, consumed my mother, consumed everything.

I felt Kiva beside me like one felt their shadow at their heel, an

intangible presence. She spoke, saying so many things. Things that didn't make any sense. Things like my mother was dead, the crows were gone, the Illucian soldiers were coming, there were many were already here.

It took me a moment to realize I was staring at something in the sky. Bright as a miniature sun, a crow blazing with fire from beak to tail soared across the night, wings spread as if the flames had become a part of it, a flickering coat of smoldering feathers. Then the fire seared through feather and muscle and bone, and it plummeted to the earth like a falling star.

It struck the ground before me, erupting like a funeral pyre. Only my raw throat told me I'd screamed the entire time it'd fallen.

"We have to move!" Kiva yelled.

I had just enough of myself left to look at her. To see the tears streaming down her ash-stained face and to feel my own sliding hot against my skin, before my burns flared with pain, and the world went white.

ONE



T*he crows were gone.*

Every day, I said those words to myself, but they didn't feel real. The world didn't feel real. Each breath felt like a lie, as if I'd climbed out of a cocoon into another realm, one of ash and shadowed memories that tore at me like talons.

Without the beat of a crow's wings, the air stood still. Silence smothered the castle garden, the charred royal rookery standing like a headstone in the distance. Even the sunlight looked wrong, rebounding sharply off the castle as if afraid to get too close.

I sat at the patio table, tracing a finger along where the red and white splotches of months-old burn scars met my skin, and tried desperately to ignore the man standing across from me.

The Illucian messenger wore rich, finely cut blues lined in gold, the material too thick for the Rhodairen summer sun. He wasn't a soldier, but he carried a sword nonetheless and would know how

to use it. He'd been allowed to keep it, since asking an Illucian to give up their weapon was akin to asking a wolf not to bite your hand while you pulled out its teeth. As a compromise, two castle guards stood within easy striking distance.

The Saints must hate me. It'd been nearly six months since the Illucian Empire destroyed my life. I'd barely left my room since. I'd hardly gotten out of bed. Even now, I wanted to burrow beneath my blankets and disappear into the darkness. Then the one day I managed to drag myself downstairs, convinced it could be a decent day, I got stuck watching an Illucian.

His gaze bore into me, and it took everything I had not to look at him. I was afraid of what I might do if I did.

A spark of fury rallied against the prison of grief and pain that had grown inside me layer by layer over the last few months. I hated that he'd been allowed into Rhodaire, allowed onto the castle grounds. Hated that we had to hear out his queen's demands, that I didn't have a crow to seize him by his perfectly manicured uniform and lift him high, high into the air...

"Will the queen be here soon?" he asked for the second time, his accent light.

It sounded like a crow's talons on stone, and the back of my neck prickled with a chill despite the sun. We'd been waiting for my sister for nearly ten minutes.

"If you ask again, maybe I'll suddenly know." Not the diplomatic response, but politics had never been my strength.

"Will the queen be here soon?"

My eyes snapped up, locking with his. He smiled, and I gritted my teeth at giving him that small victory. *Ignore him*. Forcing my gaze out across the castle gardens, I exhaled slowly. I'd *promised* myself today would be a good day. I needed a good day. But faced with an Illucian, all I could think about was what they'd taken

from us. What they still took. Terrorizing our borders, attacking our trade routes, sinking our ships.

Looking at the garden didn't help. My eyes naturally found the spots where the flowers had started to droop, stains of brown spreading among the green. Without the earth crows' magic, plants like the bright flowering delladon vine that climbed the lattice-work along the castle were a breath away from dust.

Rhodaire was dying.

I looked away, blinking slowly. Without storm crows to manipulate it, the hot, humid summer weather persisted unrelentingly. The sweet scent of fruit trees hung heavy in the air, pressing in on me from all directions. Only the messenger kept me alert. What did he want?

Voices filtered out through the open door. I straightened as my sister stepped onto the patio, a striking figure with her immaculate posture and dark hair loose to her waist. Kiva followed, the sun reflecting off the metal buckles of her silver-and-green guard's uniform. The tension in my shoulders eased as she slipped to my side.

"Your Majesty." The messenger barely inclined his head.

Caliza's steel-colored eyes evaluated him quickly, her face an impassive mask. "We can speak inside."

I frowned as the messenger followed her into the sunroom at the back of the patio. What didn't Caliza want me to hear?

Kiva dropped into the seat beside me, her hand falling to its natural position on the crow-shaped pommel of her sword. "Sorry it took me so long. She was in a meeting."

"Not your fault. Besides, we were having such a wonderful time." I slumped in my chair, leaning my head back.

Not a day passed where I didn't think about the crows. I couldn't shut out the memories. Scenes of visiting the royal rookery to tickle storm crow chicks until they buzzed with lightning

or walking under the glow of a sun crow in the dusky moonlight played over and over in my mind. Seeing the messenger just made it all worse.

A flash of red made me flinch, but it was only a pair of summer tanagers flying by, their feathers the rich ruby of a ripe pomegranate. *You're fine. Don't think about it.* I rubbed my scarred arm in an absent motion.

Kiva eyed me intently. I sighed, straightening and readjusting the silver bracelet on my right wrist. "I'm not going to climb back into bed, all right?"

"Good. I don't have time to fetch a bucket of water to dump on you." She smirked, and I glared flatly back. She was joking—mostly.

"You would enjoy that entirely too much," I said.

Kiva's smile faltered. "I don't enjoy any part of seeing you like this."

I clenched my jaw but didn't respond. *I'm just sad. I'll get over it soon.* I repeated the mantra in my head, ignoring the quiet voice that whispered it had been nearly six months. While I hid, the world went on without me.

Guilt prickled low and hot in my stomach. I hated knowing Kiva worried about me. Hated knowing I was the cause of her pain. It'd taken me months to confide in her, convinced the moment I told someone how I felt, as if the world had split apart and swallowed me whole, they'd call me ridiculous. Dramatic. Weak. Instead, she'd listened, and then she'd held me while I cried until my throat turned raw.

Kiva leaned back, flipping her braid of white-gold hair over her shoulder and lifting a hand to shield her face from the sun. She'd been born in Rhodaire, but her pale Korovi skin burned easily. "What do you think he wants?" She nodded in the direction the messenger and Caliza had gone.

“Nothing good.”

I hadn't seen an Illucian since Negnoch. Since Rhodairen traitors helped Illucian soldiers set fire to the rookeries, their elite archers shooting any crows that escaped the flames.

Ronoch, people called it now. Red Night.

If the Illucian army hadn't been spread so thin the night they attacked, they might have conquered Rhodaire then and there.

At first, I'd wanted revenge. Deep inside, the part of me that hated the defeated person I'd become still did. Now, I recognized we didn't stand a chance. Illucia had conquered nearly half the continent for a reason—their army was unstoppable. Soon, they would have Rhodaire too.

The messenger's voice suddenly rose from the sunroom. Kiva and I fell silent, leaning closer to listen.

“My queen has given her answer, Your Majesty,” he practically purred.

My head snapped up at the mention of the Illucian queen, and I locked eyes with Kiva. Something flickered in my chest, a spark of anger springing to life. Then Caliza stepped onto the patio. The messenger loomed behind her with a smug look of satisfaction that made my stomach turn.

“We need to talk,” Caliza said to me, then looked at Kiva. “Privately.”

Kiva stood. “I have recruit training. Come see me after.” She bowed to Caliza before sweeping past her. The messenger made to remain, but Kiva looked at him expectantly. Her imposing figure made it clear staying wasn't an option. Wisely, he went with her.

Caliza took Kiva's seat, removing the silver circlet shaped like a garland of feathers from her head and setting it on the table. I eyed the circlet. She took every opportunity not to wear it, claiming the edges got tangled in her hair.

It makes her think too much about Mother.

I understood. Its matching piece—the bracelet of silver feathers on my wrist—had belonged to Estrel. They were both dead now. My mother, they'd ambushed in the rookery, but Estrel... Her death hadn't been swift.

Caliza's voice interrupted my thoughts. "Do you have anything productive planned for today?" My eyes cut to her, narrowing. She sighed. "It's a fair question, Thia. You hardly talk to anyone, and you spend so much time in your room. If you'd try a little—"

"If this is what you wanted to talk about, I'm leaving." I didn't need this lecture again. Feeling this way—it wasn't my choice. I couldn't make it stop. I'd tried.

A vein in Caliza's forehead twitched. She looked so much like our mother when that happened, an impression aided by the thin oval face and high cheekbones they'd once shared.

I looked like her too, except my black hair was curly where Caliza's was wavy. The brown freckles speckling my face were absent from hers, and where she was tall and willowy, my body was hardened by years of rider training. Or at least it had been. Now my figure was a little less muscle, a little more curve.

We had the same eyes though, our mother's eyes. Not the typical dark Rhodairen umber, but bright gray like storm clouds lit by lightning.

"You're seventeen; you're an adult," she said. "You have to pull yourself together. You can't spend the rest of your life in your room."

"Pull myself together?" My voice broke. How could three simple words make me feel so small?

Her hand fell atop my unscarred one. I stared at it, feeling as though mine were someone else's hand. "You're alive, Anthia. Be thankful. Move forward."

I flinched, jerking my hand away. “You don’t understand. I can’t—I don’t—” My throat tightened, locking the words inside. How did I explain something I didn’t even understand myself? This was just like Caliza, to think a problem could be solved with only logic.

This was why I’d hidden in my room, why I wanted to run there now. Alone, no one could make me feel like an ungrateful little girl, rejected and inferior. No one could look at me like Caliza was now: disappointed, impatient, accusatory. As if this were all in my head and it’d go away if only I tried hard enough.

Didn’t she understand that I would if I could?

I swallowed hard. “What do you want from me, Caliza? To marry some foreign prince and pretend to like him so our countries can get along?” She stiffened, and I regretted the words instantly.

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair,” I said. Caliza had married Kuren because Trendell’s support was helping keep Rhodaire alive without the crows. He was the second oldest prince of the eastern kingdom, a good man. Even now, he was in Trendell coordinating aid on Rhodaire’s behalf. “Have you heard from him?”

“This morning.”

I waited, but she said nothing more. The silence stretched. A familiar weight settled on my shoulders, the urge to crawl into bed and spend the day under the covers slowly growing stronger.

No. My hand found Estrel’s bracelet. I pictured the weight as a snake like Kiva had once suggested, imagining it slithering off my shoulders until it was gone. Except it never truly left.

Caliza worried at a few strands of hair with her fingers. She even had our mother’s nervous habits. They’d become more pronounced lately, though she still kept her emotions in an iron grip in front of other people. A skill I’d never mastered. Around me, she’d been snappier and more finicky than ever.

“What is this really about, Caliza?” I asked.

Her fingers stilled, and she met my gaze. Her eyes were silent and strong, but I saw the storm prepared to break behind them. It’d been growing for days.

“Armies aren’t easy to build,” she said. “They take time to grow, to train, to supply. After we lost the crows, what we taught our soldiers had to change. Trendell has been very supportive, and we’ve made progress in the last few months, but not enough. And with the food shortages and loss of jobs, with everything, if Illucia—”

“Are they threatening to attack?”

Caliza’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “Queen Razel doesn’t threaten. She subtly implies until you’re not sure if she said it or if you thought it all up yourself. But whether she’ll say it or not, she’s made herself clear. Our scouts confirmed: half her army is now sitting on our border.”

My breath caught, hands closing into fists. “What does she want?”

“I’ve tried to find another option, Thia. Please believe I would never willingly choose this. But we can’t sustain a war with Illucia. We have no choice.”

“What are you talking about?” My heart stilled. What had she done?

“I’ve agreed to a marriage between you and Prince Ericen.”

The words pierced me like talons, hooking deep. I waited for the pain. Nothing came. Because this wasn’t real. This wasn’t happening.

My throat burned—I wasn’t breathing. Caliza said something, but her words sounded like they were swimming through honey to reach me.

Something touched my arm, and I sprang to my feet, knocking over my chair. Caliza had stood up, her hand outstretched as I stepped back.

“Please, Thia.”

Something like a laugh bubbled out of my throat, except wilder, more dangerous. She hadn’t even given me a choice. She’d engaged me to the son of the woman who’d ordered the destruction of everything I cared about, who’d killed our mother, caused Estrel’s death, and left me permanently scarred.

A slow, insidious heat spread through my veins. “No.” The word trembled.

“We have no choice.”

“*We*? Are you marrying the son of a psychopath too? Have you heard the rumors about him?”

Caliza straightened. The storm broke in her eyes. “This isn’t just about you. I have to think about Rhodaire too. This kingdom is on the edge of a cliff. We cannot go to war. I know this isn’t ideal—”

“Not ideal?” I slammed my hand on the table. “Are you serious? Don’t try to manage me, Caliza. I’m not some disgruntled house lord you can manipulate.”

“Thia—”

“They set fire to our rookeries. They killed every single crow, nearly all the riders, and our mother!” I didn’t care that I was yelling now. “Our *mother*, and you want me to forget everything and marry that bastard?” I thrust my burned hand in front of her face. “How am I supposed to forget?”

Caliza’s face flushed a deep red. For an endless moment, she stared at my scarred hand. Then she met my gaze and let out a slow breath. “We are the leaders of Rhodaire. Our duty is to our kingdom, not ourselves.”

The adrenaline drained from my body, leaving me hollow. “You’re my sister. Your duty should be to me.”

She looked away, and something inside me threatened to crack. I didn’t know there were still pieces of me left to break.

“This is the only way to keep our people safe. It will give us time to strengthen ourselves, to prepare.” Her words tumbled out in a torrent, her composure fracturing. “*Ardrahan’s Theory of War and—*”

“Your history books don’t know anything about our situation! Queen Razel will use this marriage to take control of Rhodaire. That’s all Illucia wants. You’re not buying us time; you’re sealing our fate!”

Caliza’s chin lifted, an all too familiar expression etched on her face. She knew what was best, not me. “The wedding will take place in Illucia at a date of Razel’s choosing. Prince Ericen will be here tomorrow on his way back from Jindae to take you with him.” She paused. “I’m sorry.”

I seized the table edge for support. Caliza never apologized. The lump in my throat threatened to choke me, and I swallowed hard. She wasn’t going to change her mind.

The urge to flee struck so powerfully, I nearly knocked over a chair bolting down the patio stairs. Caliza called after me, but I didn’t stop. The wind roared in my ears as I raced along the dying castle gardens, choosing direction at random, blind to where my legs were taking me.

Suddenly, I was standing before the remains of the royal rookery, my stomach threatening to return my breakfast, my throat closing when all I needed was air.

The rookery entrance had been blocked off, but there was a hole big enough for me to crawl through on the side. I struggled through the opening, scraping my forearms and tearing the hem of my dress on the scattered debris, but I didn’t stop as I charged up the soot-covered steps to the second level.

The tower went up several more floors, but the circular room had caved in, blocking the stairwell and creating a dark alcove. I huddled underneath it with my arms wrapped around my knees,

not caring that my dress was covered in ash or that I'd scraped my elbow hard enough to bleed.

I felt like I had the night the crows died—like everything was out of my control.

Caliza had promised me to Prince Ericen. She'd bartered me away, and now I would lose everything. My friendship with Kiva, my home, what little normalcy I'd regained—for what? A few more months to prepare for a war we couldn't win even if we had years to recover? The Illucian Empire's soldiers were utterly elite. Nothing less could have destroyed the crows.

Surely, this was all a ploy by Razel. She was like a jungle cat toying with her food. This was probably some sick joke to her. Why else ask for this marriage?

The familiar weight slithered up my shoulders. I didn't even try to make it leave. I was floating in limbo, my future gone, my past all too present. Now, more than ever, I wished for a crow to carry me far, far away. We'd fly straight past Korovi and Jindae to the unexplored wilderness in the east. We'd never stop.

But the crows were gone.

TWO



Golden sunlight filtered in from what remained of the rookery windows. Heat and the scent of smoke permeated the early afternoon air, but my bones had turned to ice. I hadn't moved from my spot on the ground, though I'd drawn several pictures in the ash and dust that a warm breeze gently erased.

Memories swirled around me like leaves caught in the wind: meeting Estrel in the rookery for my rider training, teasing Caliza when the crows ignored her commands, sneaking out in the middle of a thunderstorm to sit with a candle among the birds, warm, quiet, content.

I spun Estrel's bracelet around my wrist. My mother had died not five feet from where I sat, killed by Illucian soldiers. I'd have bet on her over a hundred Illucians, but that night...

I hugged my knees to my chest, trying and failing to imagine what she would do in my situation. Caliza had stuck to her like feathers on a crow, preparing to become queen. I'd spent more

time with Estrel, studying as a rider. People said Caliza and I were our mother split in half: me, stubborn and independent, and Caliza, steadfast with a knack for handling people and politics.

Our mother may have swallowed her pride and married Ericen, like Caliza would. Or maybe she'd have thrown the proposal back in Queen Razel's face. You never knew which side of her you were going to get, if you had her attention at all. Sometimes, I'd struggled to get even that.

For half a second, I considered praying to the Saints, the eight original riders. Legend had it they established Aris with the help of the Sellas, the ancient creatures said to have created the crows. But the Saints hadn't come on Ronoch. Either they didn't exist, or they didn't care.

My thoughts pinned me to the ground. It'd been a mistake coming to the rookery. Too many memories slept inside.

It'd been at least two hours; Caliza would be worried. Some petty part of me found satisfaction in that and wanted to leave her wondering where I was. Controlling my emotions had never been my strength, but it'd been weeks since I'd reacted to anything as strongly as the engagement. Maybe it meant I was getting better, though I'd thought that before. Why couldn't I just be okay?

Sighing, I used the wall to stand. Soot clung to my dress, blood staining my elbow where I'd scraped it. I needed a bath. Besides, sitting here wouldn't stop Ericen from arriving tomorrow.

Today was supposed to be a good day. The words reverberated in the hollow space inside my chest.

As I dusted off what I could of the ash, my gaze snagged on a bit of scorched leather near the edge of the tower. I crouched beside it, running my fingers over the familiar pleats that formed the shoulders of a rider's flying leathers. Had whomever they belonged to made it out of the tower alive?

I stood, letting my fingertips brush along a blackened windowsill, trying to conjure the feeling the rookery used to instill in me. But it was like fighting against the wind; the feeling refused to come. I pushed deeper into the rubble, suddenly desperate for something, anything that might spark that familiar lightness inside me.

The anticipation of flight, the wonder at the power and strength around me, the safety I'd felt, enclosed in these circular walls—it was all gone. All that remained was ash and rubble.

Something sparkled in the corner of my eye. I stopped my search a half a step past it, and it vanished. Sunlight poured in from the window at my back, illuminating a patch of blackened stone. I stepped back, and it glinted again.

I had to duck under a fallen beam to reach the spot, but once on the other side, I could see the sparkle clearly. Something lay buried beneath the stones and months-old straw from the crows' nests. My mind whispered this was foolish, to stop before I was disappointed, but I ignored it.

As I carefully moved aside stones, filling the air with dust and ash, the glint turned to a soft, blue-black glow. Something hummed, vibrating against my skin like lightning-charged wind in a storm. Calming, like a familiar comfort I'd forgotten. It slipped beneath my skin, into my muscles and blood, my very bones, chasing away the ice settled there.

I moved the last stone and stilled.

I knew what I was looking at. Even as I touched the ethereal shell, glittering like the night sky trapped in glass, even as my brain rejected the hulking size, the silklike feel, and the undeniable hum of magic, I knew.

It was a storm crow egg.

Careful not to touch the remaining unstable stone pile, I reached in and pulled the egg toward me. It was nearly as large

as my torso, and the more I touched it, the stronger the humming became. Bending deep with my knees for leverage, I hoisted the egg into my arms.

Something cracked, and everything happened very fast. The stone shifted, and I tugged the egg back just as something seized my dress and flung me away from the crumbling stone. The ground shuddered as the stone collapsed, crushing wood and broken glass. Dust and ash erupted into the air as debris swallowed the hole, burying the spot I'd been standing in.

I lay blinking at the floating specks in the sunlight, the crow egg clasped to my chest. My heart drummed against it. Kiva stood next to me, her hands on her knees as she caught her breath. Her pale eyes stared down at me accusingly.

Then she saw the egg. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"I know you're fine. I just saved your life." She helped me to my feet.

I started to dust myself off and gave up. My dress would need a proper cleaning. Sighing, I held out the egg. The sunlight rippled around it, as if being drawn in and absorbed by the celestial shell. The thrumming had quieted but still resonated along my hands like the hum of a plucked string.

"Do you hear that?" I asked.

"That's the sound of your stupidity ringing in your head."

"Quieter than that—the egg."

"I don't hear anything." She pressed her ear to the shell and drew back with a shrug. "Maybe you hit your head. What were you even doing up here?"

All at once, I slammed back to reality. "Illucia's threatening to attack, and Caliza's idea of solving the problem is agreeing to their demands for a marriage between me and Prince Ericen."

Kiva's lips parted and closed several times. She swallowed hard, set her jaw. "I'm going to kill her."

"That's treason."

"Seriously injure her."

"Still treason."

She threw up her hands. "Hasn't she heard the rumors about him? He's as vicious and cruel as Illucians come. Has she lost her mind?"

"Yes." Even as I said it, guilt swept through me. "No. She did this to protect Rhodaire." She'd probably fretted about it for days, poring over books looking for another way until her vision blurred, but in the end, she'd chosen the most logical solution to an impossible problem, like she always did.

Meanwhile, I'd done nothing.

Six months ago, no one would have dared threaten our kingdom. The riders were fierce, and the crows fiercer. A battle crow could take on six cavalymen at once, and an earth crow could open a sinkhole beneath an army. Now, Razel threatened to conquer us like she had Jindae and the Ambriel Islands. She would destroy our culture, level our cities, and funnel our children into her army until everything we were had been forgotten.

"All this because those soldiers chose power over their kingdom." I clutched the egg closer, seeking its warmth. It still seemed impossible that some of our soldiers had betrayed us. They had sold their loyalty to Razel, providing vital information and allowing Illucian soldiers to slip through their ranks. They'd helped butcher the crows that trusted them.

Illucia had planned everything perfectly.

They'd known that at the end of the Sky Dance, every single crow from across Rhodaire would return to their rookeries. They'd known all the eggs would be gathered in the royal rookery.

Instead of facing an army, all they'd had to do was destroy nine towers.

And they'd had help from our own people.

"Those soldiers deserved what they got." The derision in Kiva's tone was sharper than a blade.

Executed.

Razel had used the soldiers, making promises she would never keep, and then had them killed.

Scowling, I shifted the egg in my arms and kicked away a chunk of rubble, relishing the solid contact even as my foot ached. "What I want to know is why Razel offered this. Why promise us peace in exchange for this marriage? We're not in a position to deny them anything. What do they gain?"

"It gives Illucia a foothold in Rhodaire. She can't take it by force easily. Nearly a quarter of her army is running Jindae, another chunk is in the Ambriels, and now I hear she's threatening Korovi. Why squander men attacking Rhodaire if she can take it some other way?"

"Marrying me to Ericen won't give her control of the kingdom. There has to be another step to her plan."

Or another motive altogether. But what?

I ran my fingers over the egg, and it hummed against my skin. The feeling was both exhilarating and comforting at once. "I have to hatch this egg. If we had even one crow, Illucia would think twice about what they're doing. It's the only chance we have of protecting Rhodaire and my only chance of not marrying that bastard."

Kiva stared at me like I'd sprouted wings. "Be careful. You're dangerously close to sounding like this girl I used to know. Tongue as sharp as a crow's talons, menace to authorities everywhere, about this tall." She held a hand to her chest, a good few inches shorter than my actual height.

I glowered but couldn't suppress my smile. Kiva had a way of pulling me out of myself, perfected over a lifetime of friendship. I couldn't remember a time without her at my side. She filled my memories: sneaking into the riding school to watch the riders train, stealing orange cakes from the kitchens before dinner, hiding Caliza's books whenever she left her study table unguarded in the library.

Kiva had been there every minute to say what a bad idea it was, but she had always stayed. She was always there for me, like she had been for every day of the exhausting cycle of despair that had imprisoned me since Ronoch. I didn't have the energy to get out of bed, and lying there made me lethargic until my limbs became weights holding me down. My head would hurt, turning my thoughts slow and difficult, each one taking more effort than it was worth, until all I wanted was to fall asleep again. But sleep made it worse.

Without her, I'd never have started getting out of bed. I never would have left my room today, and I might not have ended up in the rookery.

Kiva grinned at my feigned annoyance. "Anyway, it got buried under rubble and nearly incinerated. Whatever's inside is probably dead."

"Crow eggs are filled with magic. It could have survived." The egg hummed in my arms as if agreeing.

Kiva looked doubtful but held out a hand. "All right. Let's crack it open and find out."

I hugged the egg against my body. "You can't just crack it open! It has to hatch naturally."

"How?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it, brow furrowing. How *did* the eggs hatch? They weren't like normal bird eggs. Something

else happened to them, because every year on the winter solstice, they all hatched at once. For some reason, this one hadn't, despite surviving Ronoch when no other eggs had.

Maybe it couldn't. Maybe Kiva was right, and the egg was nothing but an empty shell. I shook the thought away. However small the chance was the egg could hatch, I had to try.

Problem was, I'd never seen it done.



We climbed out of the rookery together and returned to the castle. Kiva gave me her cloak to wrap the egg in, and I hugged it against my chest, still not fully believing what I'd found. The egg's humming settled deep into my bones, resonating like the echo of a thunderclap. It felt so familiar, so alive. Like a piece of me had returned.

Something fluttered in my stomach, a feeling I'd almost forgotten. Something I hesitated to name, lest it disappoint me. Still, I clung to the rising hope, feeling as if I balanced on a glass precipice, waiting for it to shatter and send me careening into the nothingness like so many times before.

After Ronoch, we'd searched the rookery for surviving eggs and found nothing. When the third floor collapsed, nearly killing two riders, the search was put off until we could stabilize the rookery. But in the face of starvation and mass destruction, it had been forgotten.

We'd decided to ask Caliza about the egg. She'd shunned the crows most of her life and probably wouldn't know a thing, but we had no one else. Most of the Corvé were gone; they'd been targeted on Ronoch, just like the crows. Those that remained had never helped my mother with the hatching.

I looked at my feather bracelet. Only Estrel had.

We stopped by my room, where I hid the egg in a drawer of rarely worn sweaters in my closet armoire and changed into a clean dress. My elbow had stopped bleeding, so I wiped away the dirt and left it be. Then we sought out Caliza.

What would she say to me? Would she apologize again? I snorted at the thought, then crushed the tiny voice that hoped maybe she'd changed her mind. That never happened.

We found her in her office talking with a tall, broad-shouldered woman with pale hair. Larisa Mirkova, Kiva's mother and captain of the royal guard. They paused as we entered, but I still caught the tail end of their conversation. They were talking about the failing crops again.

Kiva saluted her mother, only relaxing when the captain nodded. Caliza met my gaze. Her expression remained impassive, but I knew what she was thinking: had I accepted my fate?

I held her gaze without blinking: not even close.

"Sakiva," Captain Mirkova said, her Korovi accent heavy. Unlike her daughter, Captain Mirkova had lived half her life in Korovi. "You should be helping with afternoon training. This is irresponsible of you."

Kiva stiffened beside me, but she didn't rise to her mother's bait. She'd always had more discipline than me.

I faced Caliza, getting straight to the point. "What do you know about hatching crows?"

She frowned a very specific frown, the one she'd used since we were children whenever I talked about the crows. "Why do you want to know?"

"Humor me."

Caliza's eyes narrowed. "I don't know anything more than you. They're all born on Hatch Night, on the winter solstice, but Mother said that was ceremonial."

“But what makes them all hatch at the same time? And why did they never hatch where we could see them?”

“I don’t know, Anthia. And it doesn’t matter. I’m very busy right now. I don’t have time for this.”

There it was. *It doesn't matter.* She rarely said anything else to me about the crows. *They're gone. It doesn't matter. Move on.* I could tell her about the egg, but she wouldn’t care. She wouldn’t believe one crow could save us. She’d never believed.

“The least you can do is answer a question or two,” I said. “You owe me that.”

Something flashed behind her eyes that had her turning her face away. “I really don’t know more. Let it go.”

Disappointment filled me, weighing me to the spot. Caliza had been a long shot, and now even that hope had been crushed.

What if the secret to hatching was lost forever?

Swallowing against the tightness in my throat, I stormed out of Caliza’s office, Kiva on my heel. With the need I had to *do* something suddenly left without an objective, I felt untethered, my motivation leaking from me like blood from a wound.

I slowed to a halt in the middle of the entrance hall, my energy all but gone.

“Thia?” Kiva asked cautiously.

“I don’t know what to do.” I buried my face in my hands.

Kiva laid a hand on my shoulder. “Let’s go for a ride. Some fresh air might help.”

THREE



It felt strange being outside the castle grounds. I'd barely left my room since Ronoch, and I'd never once stepped into the city. I hadn't yet found the energy, the strength, to see what had become of Aris.

I already wanted to leave.

The Brynth Wing, once home to the earth crows, looked nothing like its former self. Managing the huge fields had become too big a task without the crows, who had been responsible for most of Rhodaire's farming. We had no system for the water, once delivered by water crows, and many of the crops weren't native to Rhodaire's humid climate, only surviving thanks to the storm crows. Nearly half of the wing's crops had failed. Without as much to tend and harvest, the farmers had to let workers go.

The broad streets built for massive crows seemed lined with beggars, hidden in the dark spaces between shops or else pressed against buildings with cloths laid out before them. Signs advertised crow

talons and singed feathers recovered from the flames. A dog dug through trash in the shadows of an alley, more skeleton than animal.

Gone were the deep cries of earth crows and the shouts of children as the earth rumbled at the whim of the crows' power. Gone were the feathers that would drift from the sky like fallen leaves, snatched from the air by young couples to wish upon.

Gone was the world I knew, and I'd let it be taken.

Shame burned my cheeks, and I slowed my horse outside the charred remains of a row of shops. They stood like ancient tombs, forgotten in the face of war and starvation. The streets, once bustling with people and lined with tables of glass figurines and brightly colored pottery, now echoed with the sound of our horses' hooves as they kicked up dust.

A cloud hung over the kingdom, like the one that haunted me. The void inside me slowly filled with the black emotions that shone in every pair of eyes around us: despair, anger, apathy.

Kiva moved her horse closer to mine. "Put your hood up. I don't like the looks we're getting."

"No one's going to hurt—" I stopped at the look on her face, nausea turning in my stomach. I lifted the hood of my cloak, swallowing against the tightness in my throat. I'd never felt unsafe in the city before, but I'd be a fool not to recognize that a portion of the wing's growing resentment was aimed at the crown.

At me, for abandoning them.

I met the eyes of a little girl half my age and watched as first recognition, then anger took turns in their brown depths.

Illucia had done this, and Caliza wanted me to marry Ericen.

My hands tightened on my reins as Kiva and I neared the Kessel Woods on the outer edge of the wing. The summer afternoon was mild, warm in the sun and comfortable in the shade. A perfect afternoon for a ride—except I hated riding horses, whose rocking

gait was nothing like the smooth flight of a crow, and the images from the wing clung to me like burrs.

I had to hatch the egg, before Rhodaire passed the point of saving.

Yet even as I had the thought, it felt distant and detached, as if it'd come from another person. Trying to hold on to it was like trying to hold smoke with my bare hands. I knew what I needed to do, but working up the will to do it felt like trying to fight my way above water in a depthless ocean.

It was so hard not to drown.



Kiva and I stopped outside a small tavern in the Brynth Wing to get a late lunch, leaving our horses tied out front. It was small and cozy, with rosewood tables built into alcoves along the walls and carved figurines atop a mantel that encircled the room's edge. The low murmur of voices filled the air, and I leaned back against the bar with my hood up while we waited for our food. I didn't feel like eating, but I wouldn't hear the end of it from Kiva if I didn't.

People talked, even laughed, huddled over tables of cheese and bread, fruit and cakes. Glasses of fruit juice and jugs of beer sat interspersed among the food, and in one corner, a group of girls played a game of dice.

This was the Aris I remembered, the one Illucia had nearly destroyed.

As the barmaid set two large goblets of mango talcé on the counter, the sharp whinny of a horse cut through the genteel atmosphere. I stiffened, and Kiva's hand went to her sword hilt. Through the front window, I saw a man pulling my horse out of view.

I shot for the door, Kiva on my heel. We stepped out in time to see him disappear down the alley beside the tavern.

“Stop!” I shouted, bolting for the alley.

He did.

I froze a few steps into the alley. The man released the horse, slapping it on the rear to send it trotting to the next street over. Then he faced me, a slim knife in hand. My mind tumbled, expecting pale Illucian skin and black fighting leathers. But the man was Jin, from the eastern kingdom of Jindae.

Kiva stepped between us. “Go back inside. I’ll cover your back.”

I started to argue, but she shot me a sharp glare, and I fell silent, nodding. The shrill ring of Kiva drawing her sword followed me as I bounded for the mouth of the alley. Metal clanged, and I glanced back as Kiva swung her sword at the man. Snapping my head forward, I ground to a halt.

Another Jin man blocked the exit.

My mind raced to remember my rider training. I was a good fighter, but it’d been months since I’d practiced.

“What do you want?” I demanded, backing away slowly.

The man stepped into the alley, and the sound of the fight at my back kept me from retreating any farther. I never should have stopped carrying the bow that used to be constantly strapped to my chest. The man didn’t respond, his expression set in a grim mask as he pulled a dagger from his belt. He lunged.

I dodged, twisting so I slammed sideways into the alley wall. He recovered quickly and blocked my escape, knife raised. I stepped forward, catching his forearm with mine. But I was rusty and remembered too late my block should be followed by a counter-attack. The man drove his fist into my exposed stomach, and I stumbled back, wheezing. He brought his knife down, and I flung myself aside, hitting the ground hard and rolling to my feet.

Calm down calm down calm down. I forced a sharp breath in and flexed my fingers as the man squared up with me. I had to get that knife away from him.

He lunged. I sidestepped his strike, driving my elbow into his sternum, then slammed my arm into his. His hand and the butt of the knife struck the alley wall, knocking the weapon from his grasp.

Footsteps sounded, and I barely had time to step back before the hilt of Kiva's sword struck the man in the temple. He crumpled against the wall.

I panted, heavy breathing mixing with Kiva's. Blood stained her arm scarlet to the shoulder.

"It's not mine," she said in response to my horrified expression. "Get inside. I'll send someone for the guards."

I stumbled out of the alley and into the tavern, collapsing into the first booth I reached. Sounds and colors blurred, and I blinked rapidly. Movement at my side made me flinch, but it was only the barmaid setting a glass of water on the table. She muttered a quiet, "Your Highness," with a swift curtsy.

I felt my head with numb fingers, distantly registering my hood had fallen. Then I gulped down the water.

As the adrenaline faded and understanding struggled to settle, an aching in my stomach and shoulder took its place. Two men at the table beside me subtly shifted their chairs, placing themselves between me and anyone who might come through the tavern door. Some deep, raw part of me glowed at the gesture.

The tavern door swung open, and Kiva entered, pale skin flushed and glistening with sweat. The men let her pass, and she dropped into the seat across from me, her eyes dark.

"The man I fought escaped." Her voice quavered. "The other one is in custody."

"Who were they?"

“I don’t know, but I don’t think they were thieves.” When I only stared, she hesitated, then paused as the barmaid brought her a glass of water. She pulled it toward her but didn’t drink. “I think they were trying to kill you, Thia.”

A chill jolted through me, and I wrapped my arms around my middle. “Why?” My voice barely crested a whisper.

Kiva shook her head. She hadn’t touched her water, though she was squeezing the glass hard enough to crush it. “The guards I met are sending men for us. We’re to wait until they show.”

I nodded numbly. Her words felt distant, like a story someone told about a friend. Only the chill clinging to my skin despite the room’s warmth hinted it had even happened.

The guards brought fresh horses when they arrived, and we rode back surrounded by people. My mind churned with every step. Could this have something to do with my engagement to Ericen? The news wasn’t public yet, but that didn’t mean no one knew, and there were likely to be a lot of people who disagreed with Caliza’s decision. But to kill me to prevent it?

Sighing, I slowed my horse and dropped back to ride beside Kiva. Her hands gripped the reins so tightly, she looked like she was trying to strangle them. When I spoke, she jumped in a very un-Kiva-like way.

“What is it?” I asked.

Her head snapped up, eyes focusing on me with such intensity that I drew back. When something was wrong, the last thing Kiva wanted was to be asked what it was. Especially not when it could make her look weak in front of someone. But the guards were far enough away that they couldn’t hear us, and I couldn’t stay quiet when something so clearly weighed on her.

Her gaze softened, and she let out a quiet breath. “Sorry. I’m fine.”

It was what I'd expected her to say. I didn't push her. Rather, I laid a hand on her arm, feeling the tension in her body break. It lasted all of a second before she sucked her emotions back inside, straightening. She wouldn't let someone report back to her mother that she'd broken down.

We rode in silence the rest of the way back, but I stayed beside her the whole time. She'd talk to me when she was ready.



The chair I sat in was rigid and uncomfortable. My stomach was already a little sore from the punch I'd taken, and the sudden absence of all the adrenaline had left me hollow.

A dark oak desk stood before floor-to-ceiling windows across from me, two glass doors flung open behind it to let in the evening breeze. A guard stood on either side of the entrance, and Caliza paced behind the desk, the circlet glinting on her head. The vein in her temple was on full display.

Behind her stood Captain Mirkova, her arms folded. I sat in one of the chairs on the other side of the desk. Kiva hadn't been allowed in.

I wished Caliza would yell already, but she seemed to have forgotten I was there. When another minute passed and she still hadn't spoken, I stood. "Well, this was a wonderful talk. I'll just—"

"Sit down." Her voice was like a thunderclap.

I sat.

When I'd first gotten back to the castle, she'd hugged me like she hadn't seen me in years. But her joy had given way to a stone-cold fury I knew too well.

"What were you thinking?" she demanded at last. "You were nearly killed."

I crossed my arms. "I've gone into the city a thousand times and no one's ever bothered me. How was I supposed to know today was the day someone would attack me?"

"You're not. That's why you should have taken sufficient protection."

"I had sufficient protection. I had Kiva."

Captain Mirkova snorted. "My daughter, while skilled, cannot defend you against an entire city."

I leveled the captain with a sour glare. When we'd returned, instead of asking how her daughter was, Captain Mirkova had started demanding answers, criticizing, and yelling.

"Do you understand what you almost cost us?" Caliza asked. "You jeopardized more than your own life; you jeopardized our chance at peace with Illucia, at securing this kingdom's safety."

"At least I wouldn't have had to marry Ericen."

"This isn't funny, Anthia!"

I surged to my feet. "I am *not* laughing. Has it occurred to you that maybe whoever tried to kill me wanted to stop me from marrying Ericen? That your decision to ship me off to another kingdom is what nearly cost me my life?"

Caliza stiffened, drawing upright, but it was Captain Mirkova who answered. "You've been much removed from Aris lately, Your Highness. Your city has changed. There are people in it who would not find delight in seeing your face."

I swallowed hard, collapsing back into the chair. "You think they did this because they're angry?"

"It's very possible," Caliza said. She sat down across from me, her shoulders rounded. The sight of her with anything less than immaculate posture made my throat tighten. She looked so small.

I thought back to the cold, hard faces of the men. No one had ever looked at me like that. I'd walked freely through Aris's streets,

visiting the canal market in the Rynthene Wing or the weapons masters of the Turren Wing. People had smiled and waved. But that was before Ronoch, before Illucia took everything from us.

“They have to know we’re trying our best.” The words stuck in my throat. Because I knew they were a lie. By their silence, Caliza and Captain Mirkova did too.

Caliza was doing her best. I was hiding.

Caliza straightened. “I’m forbidding you from leaving the castle without my permission.”

I started. “You’re joking.”

“We can’t risk this not being an isolated incident. I mean it, Anthia. I’ll post guards if I need to.”

I almost laughed. For months, I’d hidden in these walls, and now that I wanted to leave, I wasn’t allowed?

I stood. “What a time for you to take an interest in my well-being.”

Her lips parted, but I didn’t wait for a response before stalking from the room. Kiva fell into step beside me. The blood had dried on her shirt and skin, turning a muddy brown. She looked as exhausted as I felt.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor. “What did your mother say?” I asked.

Kiva’s expression turned grim as it always did when we discussed Captain Mirkova. “The usual.” Her voice changed as she mimicked her mother’s Korovi accent. “*Here I thought you were good enough to work alone, Sakiva. You need to train more. Perhaps I shouldn’t have you teaching my new recruits, Sakiva, if you’re going to make mistakes like that. You should know better than to go alone.*”

“You nearly sounded like her that time,” I said with a small smile.

I returned to my room, where my bed sat warm and inviting with the promise that if I climbed under the covers, everything

would be okay again when I came out. My people wouldn't hate me, Ericen wouldn't be arriving tomorrow, and the crow would hatch and protect us from Illucia.

I didn't try to fight it.