

Crowns of Sweetgrass

The King's sorcerer dragged his blade across the child's palm, making the same neat slice he'd left on dozens of girls in the last six moon cycles. The little one screamed, and her governess cooed as he caught the blood in his chalice.

"When will we know the results?" The child's father paced, his armor creaking. He didn't spare a glance for his daughter as her governess carried the crying child from the room.

"It could take a few hours." The sorcerer sprinkled a fine powder into the chalice and stirred it with his finger.

"And the betrothal?"

"If she proves to be the strongest ice wielder of her generation, she will marry the prince." The sorcerer dropped a stone into the liquid, dipping his finger into the chalice.

He paused, his breath becoming clouds. Frost covered his body, and he yanked his hand back.

"Argh." He collapsed into a chair, holding his ruined finger. The blackened flesh quivered from where it hung on the bone. "That's never happened before."

#####

Up and up and up. Juniper shaded her eyes as she searched the battlements of the castle of Troms. Soldiers in furs milled about. The sun turned them into black figures, punching holes in the sky as they paced. Her father's hand clamped onto her shoulder.

"Enough daydreaming. Stay sharp while you're here."

Bruises bloomed under his fingers.

"Yes, Father."

“Use concise words. The less you say, the better.”

“Yes, Father.”

Juniper folded her hands into her skirts and followed General Silverneedle. Sweetgrass tickled her ankles as she walked, the vanilla scent calming her. She recited the mantra her governess taught her. The four tenets of being a noblewoman.

Obedience, silence, strength, and... I can't remember. Obedience, silence, strength, and...

She covered her mouth. “Ivy?” she hissed her governess’s name, adding a fake cough to the end. She waved her hand at her side, knowing Ivy would be a few steps behind her. “Ivy.”

“Silence, girl.”

“Yes, Father.”

They joined her father’s men, their procession falling in line. Flanked by soldiers, Juniper marveled when their march echoed off the mountain walls cradling the castle. She worked the velvet of her skirts, her fingers both pale and delicate against the azure fabric.

“Daughter,” the general said after they passed through the grand castle doors. “At my side.”

Juniper tripped and would have fallen if Ivy’s hands hadn’t braced her. She mouthed ‘*thank you,*’ and received an encouraging nod. With the grace of a goose, Juniper stepped into her place.

The Cryoky Royal Guards stood at attention behind a woman dressed in fine brocade and a royal herald.

“General Silverneedle, bless the Mountains you arrived safely.” He bowed low. “The king and queen wish to hold counsel. Can Lady Violet, the King’s niece, escort our future Princess? She is to meet Prince Alder.”

Juniper arranged her face into a mask, holding back the nervous giggle that built in her chest.

Lady Violet's shoes clicked as she stepped forward and curtsied. Her eyes lifted to Juniper's father. "May she take her leave, Lord?"

General Silverneedle nodded.

"Follow me."

Juniper hesitated. "May my governess join us?"

"Mountains, child." Her father blew out a puff of air. "Ivy, see to it Lady Silverneedle does not ruin her betrothal upon first meeting the prince."

"Yes, milord." Ivy curtsied low and fell into place behind Juniper.

####

Juniper took solace in the sound of Ivy's heavy gait behind her. She had no expectations for this introduction, though her lady's maids swooned every time her summons with the prince came up. Ivy often shooed them from the room, reminding them of Juniper's short twelve-summers of life.

"Lady Juniper." Violet's chestnut hair fell in curls down her back, ending at her wide hips. "Are you excited about meeting my cousin?"

"Yes, Lady Violet, I've been waiting seven summers." Juniper traced the silver line on her palm, a constant reminder she would marry the prince and one day be the queen of the Cryoky.

"You must have some incredible gifts to be chosen."

My gifts? Juniper glanced back at Ivy as she struggled for an appropriate reply. Ivy smiled, her corpulent cheeks lifting. "I can't do anything impressive yet."

“I guess I couldn’t at your age either.”

Juniper heard the smile in Violet’s voice.

“Our family matures into their gifts later than yours. My father was fifteen-summers. My mother made it to her seventeenth-summer.”

“I wish I had that problem.” The pearls of Violet’s veil blinked as she shook her head.

“The later your coming-of-age, the longer your betrothal. I would love to put off marriage for a while.”

Ivy’s history lessons came to mind. *Betrothals among the Cryoky are not official until both children survive their coming of age. The more power, the more dangerous their transition to adulthood.* The thought made Juniper’s blood run cold. She didn’t want death or marriage.

####

The sounds of steel meeting steel greeted them as the guards pulled the doors open. Juniper drank in the scene. A teenage boy and a young woman sparred in the room’s center. Their white tunics stuck to their chests as they blocked and lunged. Their bodies showed their discipline with every movement. His, a sum of firm angles and straight lines; hers, subtle curve upon subtle curve.

Obedience. The fighters’ arms moved with practiced thrusts.

Silence. Their lips sealed against any sound.

Strength. Their swords sparked with the power of their blows.

Balance. They followed through with their attacks and fell back in turns.

Yes. Balance. The last value is balance. Obedience, silence, strength, and balance.

A mask covered the top half of the woman's face. Her lips screwed up in concentration. She'd shaved the side of her head in the Pyrona fashion. Two waist-length braids flew about her with each of her disciplined movements.

She's beautiful.

"Is that a Pyrona warrior?" Juniper's heart fluttered, and her temperature dropped as the prince circled the woman with large, sweeping movements.

"Yes, the Royals train with them so they may practice fighting without wielding ice. The female Pyrona specialize in neutralizing our powers."

"Why does she wear a mask?" Juniper's eyes wandered back to the woman's lips.

"To protect her nose and eyes from ice needles and wind." Violet clapped her hands as the prince parried a blow. "Isn't she fascinating? We have two at court this summer."

A groan escaped the boy as a red line bloomed across his shoulder. "Enough." Alder Troms jumped back. He caught Juniper's eye, his pale cheeks pinking. He lowered his weapon. "I have a guest."

They bowed and sheathed their swords. He touched his wound then looked at the blood on his fingers.

The woman remained at attention, her chest heaving as she caught her breath.

The prince glowered at her, wiping his fingers on his shirt as he walked up to the Pyrona. Standing toe to toe, he stood a foot taller. His head bobbed as he traced her breasts and hips with his eyes.

"Filth." He spits on the ground. For a moment, Juniper thought he would walk away. Instead, he pulled his arm back with the speed of a snake and struck her, his fist landing on her mouth.

Juniper flinched at the sound of his ring meeting the woman's teeth. Blood splashed down her tunic, but she held her stance.

Juniper's hands covered her mouth.

"You cut the Prince of the Cryoky." He tilted his chin up. "I don't know how you do things, but we are civilized here." Her blood joined his as he cleaned his knuckles with his shirt. "While in my castle, you will not draw blood during a sparring match." He straightened his shoulders, folding his arms. "Well?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"You're dismissed." The prince waved the woman away.

The Pyrona joined the guards, blood dripping from her ruined lip. She gathered her jacket and other weapons waited on a stool.

Alder does not act like he's fifteen-summers-old. The boy smirked at Juniper as her eyes returned to him. *He acts like my father.*

The prince pulled off his shirt, and Juniper spun around. Her body trembled. She'd never seen so much skin in her life. The way it moved over the muscle refused to leave her head, even as she stared at her governess.

Ivy mimed breathing. Her hands fluttered to her belly, reminding Juniper how low to pull in her breath.

"Cousin," Lady Violet said, "you have no manners. There's a lady in your presence."

"Right." Alder had the baritone of a man.

Ivy made a circle with her finger and pointed forward as if to say: *June bug, turn around.*

With a gulp, Juniper nodded, turning back to her prince. He drank from his goblet, pulled a fur-lined robe over the lines of his torso, and tied back his black hair.

“Better?”

Juniper’s eyes remained low.

“This is Lady Silverneedle, your future princess.”

Alder crossed the room, a smile on his face.

“Lady Silverneedle.” He took her hand. Instead of a chaste kiss on her knuckles, he leaned in and pressed his lips onto her cheek, leaving a smear of sweat behind.

It took all of Juniper’s willpower not to pull away. Her lashes kissed her cheeks as she itched to wipe away the wetness he’d left behind. Her lady’s maids would faint if she described this kiss. Their giggles would fill the room, but Juniper experienced no such elation. Alder’s bigness and the heat radiating from his body turned her stomach.

“I’m so glad you’ve come for the summer.”

“Your Majesty.” Remembering herself, Juniper curtsied.

Alder held her hand captive, taking the other to help her stand; his head ducked as he met her eyes.

“Come, come, no need for niceties here. I want us to be the best of friends.” His moist hands dropped hers. “Now, tell me about your trip. Were there any delays in your travel? I always hear gossip of bandits during these warmer days but have yet to see any.”

####

Juniper resisted his enthusiasm and charm. Her shyness and his boldness became their game. They painted their first summer with watching and waiting. He gave her pieces of his world, and she handed them back with trembling hands.

On their last day together, they stood shoulder to shoulder as General Silverneedle spoke to the king and queen.

“I made you a parting gift.” Alder spoke so low only she could hear. He leaned closer, his eyes still facing their parents, and lifted a braided ring of sweetgrass.

A crown, she realized. “Thank you, my liege.”

“Of course, Princess. One day, I’ll give you a real one.” He placed it on her head, his hand pausing on her cheek. “And then I’ll put some babies in your belly.”

She pulled away, her breath catching when his finger slid down her ribs and poked her stomach.

He laughed.

“Lady Silverneedle, our carriage awaits.” The general waved his daughter forward.

Alder caught her wrist before she walked away.

“I’ll see you next summer, Juniper.”

She spent her ride home praying to the Mountains she would never come of age.

####

Four summers and four sweetgrass crowns later, Juniper dreaded her trip as she packed to see Prince Alder.

“I don’t understand. He’s so kind to you. Why don’t you like him?”

“It’s just, I can’t fight him off anymore, Ivy. He’s always flirting and trying to make me laugh.”

“What’s wrong with laughing?”

“Nothing, but his jokes aren’t funny. He scares me. The way he speaks. The way he touches me.”

“Touches you?” Ivy’s chubby fingers stopped midway through folding Juniper’s chemise.

“You know. Touch me.” Juniper tightened her grip on her cape, the fabric growing stiff with cold as she twisted. “Sometimes...” She heaved a breath.

“Sometimes he’ll...”

Her teeth chattered.

“Sometimes he will...”

With a crack, the frozen cape broke in half, and pieces fell to the ground, shattering. Her eyes widened as her body shuddered. Static crackled in the air.

“Ivy?” Juniper watched the color of her hands change to blue, crystals forming along her skin. “It hurts.” She couldn’t move.

“June bug?” Ivy’s breath formed clouds. “Juniper, you’re all right.” The governess retreated. One step. Two steps. Her hip met the window sill. “Look at me. Take a breath.”

Agony filled Juniper’s chest as her ribs buzzed. Her jaw popped, and her mouth gaped. Her head and eyes rolled back, back, back.

And then she exploded, like a true Silverneedle descendant.

Her governess put up her hands, blocking her face. Ice tore through Ivy, shattering the glass behind her. Her motherly arms and kind smile erased in an instant. She died before the ribbons of her body splattered on the ground two floors below.

Wind slashed like a whip as it spun around the castle. From the ceiling fell fist-sized clusters of snow. They swirled about wildly before meeting the ground.

Frozen in place, Juniper stared at the window where clumps of Ivy hung from the stone.

“Blasted Mountains!” General Silverneedle shouted as he shoved his way into the room, inches of snow encumbering the door.

Her father's hands flew as he conjured walls of ice around her. Trapping her and her storm inside.

"Someone send a rider to Pyrona!" the general shouted. "We need a warrior."

#####

Between the efforts of General Silverneedle and his best men, they moved Juniper to the north tower and sealed her inside.

A day passed before she could move. She fell to the ground. Her limbs stuttered with pain as they broke through their stiffness. The layers of ice enveloping her tower muffled her screams. Tears froze to her face, fracturing as she called for her governess. Ivy's wide-eyed fear imprinted on the back of her eyelids.

On day two, she found the strength to wander her ice prison. Traversing the spiral staircase once before crying herself to sleep. On day three, her body thawed enough for hunger to grip her. That and boredom sent her experimenting with the constant release of the power rushing beneath her skin.

The mice of the tower grew brave on day five. A whole family scurried across her room. Anger sharpened her senses, and she glared at them. *These little beasts have freedom while I am trapped here, starving to death.* She pointed her finger, and cold jumped from her to the rodents, freezing them into a line. She knelt on the ground. Her face lowered as she studied the little ears and whiskers. The closer she looked, the more she regretted her actions.

Juniper closed her eyes and pulled her cold out of their little bodies. Her hands went to her chest when she discovered what she'd done. Their abdomens had burst open, their organs spilling out. They'd exploded from the quick temperature changes.

Juniper fell back, dragging her bottom on the icy floor. Snow flurries filled the room, and Juniper succumbed as her power exploded from her. The tower moaned, the foundation rumbling. An additional layer of ice spread over the floor, covering her mess.

On day six, she woke to the sound of boots in the snow. The gait carried the measured rhythm of confidence. Juniper lay on the floor, her eyes studying the stalactites covering the ceiling. A face obstructed her view. Even upside down, the face she saw struck her with its charm. Skin the color of pine tree bark covered a broad nose and wide brow. The woman wore her hair in the Pyrona warrior style. Two black braids fell past her shoulder and tickled Juniper's ear.

"Rubies," Juniper said as she reached up and rested a finger on the white scar bisecting the woman's bottom lip. It turned down as her brows rose. "Or cherries. My cold has colored your lips red. You're so beautiful. Are you real?"

"Cryoky." She blew out a puff of air. "They don't know how to keep their hands to themselves." The woman batted Juniper's hand away.

"Wait." Juniper blinked as the face vanished. "Come back. Please."

She planted her elbows in the snow and pushed with all her strength. Her body didn't move. Hunger and exhaustion left her too weak to sit up. She closed her eyes to a rush of dizziness.

"The problem with your people is their greed." Her voice reminded Juniper of the reed instruments the commoners played during celebrations. "The Cryoky marry for power, so they give birth to monsters."

A drop of water splashed on Juniper's forehead, and she looked up. Drips ran down the stalactites as if they were crying. She remembered a story Ivy told her about her

great-grandmother, Willow. At her coming of age, her parents brought home a Pyrona warrior to be her bodyguard. The Pyrona used her fire gifts to counteract the Silverneedle's ice. Willow lived a long life. Her bodyguard held her hand as she left this world for God's Mountain.

"What's your name?" Heat entered Juniper's body, easing the terror of the last few days.

"Balance. That's what your people lack." Boots paced through the slush. "Why filter so much power into one person? This never happens to the Pyrona. We share power among our people." The woman snorted. "Can you imagine a Cryoky coming to our aid if it did?"

The woman's face returned.

"You are real." Juniper's chapped bottom lip quivered. "What's your name?"

"And why should I give it to you? You're a spoiled princess, throwing the biggest fit I've ever seen." The woman put out her hand. "Come."

Juniper turned away, blinking back tears. "Don't call me that."

"What?"

"Princess. Please don't call me princess." *Sniffles.*

"As you say." The woman frowned. "You can call me Pyrona."

Juniper covered her face.

"Don't cry."

Juniper convulsed with a sob.

"Please."

"Pyrona, I... I killed her." Juniper's fists curled with her body, grief spilling from her lips.

"Let's go." Arms wrapped around her back and under her legs, lifting Juniper from the ground. The Pyrona's glow filled the cracks in Juniper's heart as her head lolled against the Pyrona's breast.

####

“Daughter.” General Silverneedle woke Juniper by tossing a heavy robe on her bed, where she slept. “Get up.”

Juniper pulled her robe to her chest, sitting as she blinked sleep from her eyes.

“I said. Get. Up.” Her father came around the bed, his hand locking around her arm like a bear trap. He dragged her to the ground.

Juniper knew better than to struggle. Her back screamed from the impact. She reached for the bed to drag herself up.

“Dear Mountains, grant me patience.” Her father clapped her ear, and a ringing exploded in her head. “What did I do to deserve a daughter? Now stand.”

She found her feet. Her eyes strayed from the ground to see if the Pyrona watched. The warrior stood at attention, facing the door.

“We are a moon cycle late for our trip to the capital. You should not leave the Prince of Troms waiting.” Her father turned on his heels, facing Juniper’s bodyguard. “We leave in the morning, Firestar. I expect her to be ready.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Her father grunted, and the Pyrona saluted, holding the stance until the door closed behind the general.

“What, am I a babysitter now?” The Pyrona came around the bed. “Don’t cry.” She grabbed Juniper’s chin, tilting her head and inspecting her ear.

“I wasn’t going to.” Juniper wiped her nose.

“Good.” The Pyrona ran her thumb along the girl’s cheek.

Juniper smiled.

“What?”

“Firestar?”

The Pyrona’s hand dropped, and she frowned.

Juniper’s smile became a grin.

“I’m surrounded by fools.” The bodyguard ambled to the door, swinging it open hard enough to slam into the wall. She hung around the corner. “Aye-oh, you.” Her irreverence rang down the hall. “Yeah, you. The Lady needs her lady’s maids.”

“Firestar.” Juniper winced as she sat at her vanity.

The Pyrona returned to her chair, flopping into it sideways, leaving her legs hanging over the edge.

“Yes, Firestar.”

“I want to know your first name.”

“You’re spoiled enough without me giving you everything you want.” The Pyrona closed her eyes, leaning her head back.

“Yes, I’ve been told that I’m spoiled.”

“Good.”

“I’ve also been told I’m a waste of space. Unwanted. A murderer. Evil. My father tells me regularly.” Her voice cracked, and she pulled her hair out of its braid. “These ‘fits’, as you call them. I have no control over what happens.”

“Sweet Mountains, what else should I call them?”

Juniper’s fingers wrapped around the handle of her brush. “I had my first ‘fit’ the day I was born.” She brought it to her hair, her delicate hands shaking with a slurry of emotions. “I shredded my mother to pieces.” The bristles ran through the golden locks. “If I were my father,

I'd hate me too. But you are my guard. I know how this works. You've sworn an oath. And now you are all I have."

Juniper brushed her hair in silence, watching the Pyrona, who lounged in her chair as if she'd fallen asleep. Juniper pulled a ribbon from her drawer, no longer expecting a response.

"My name is Ruby Firestar, but my friends call me Star."

"Star?"

"If I can't call you princess, I'll call you June." The Pyrona crossed the room to stand behind Juniper. Their eyes locked through the mirror. The charcoal gray of the Firestar's met the grass green of the Silverneedle's. "Juniper is so pretentious. So Cryoky. Plus, I think of spring when I think of you." She gifted Juniper with a smile.

"If we get to pick, I'll call you Ruby. It reminds me of your lips in the cold." With bravery burning in her belly, she caught Ruby's hand.

Fingers intertwined, and eyes strayed shyly away.

#####

The prince greeted General Silverneedle and his daughter as they entered the castle.

"General, may I escort Juniper to her rooms?"

"Of course. As long as it's not a burden, Your Highness."

"Your daughter is never a burden, General." Alder put out his elbow for Juniper, and she took it. Once out of earshot, the prince squeezed her hand. "I heard you came of age. Are you well?"

Juniper's heart raced as it always did when the prince pulled her too close. She opened her mouth but could not speak.

“Princess, you know what this means?” He dropped her hand, his arm coming around her shoulder. He left a slow kiss on her cheek.

Juniper froze, but instead of the ice coming, as she flinched away, she felt Ruby’s warmth.

“Juniper?” His hands cupped her cheeks, and his lips came crashing down on hers. His facial hair scratched her, his breath smelled of dead animals.

Her arms went loose at her sides, her eyes squeezed shut, and she clung to the heat at her back, telling her Ruby would not abandon her.

Please, make this stop.

Alder jumped away when the sound of metal on stone clattered through the hall. He pulled Juniper behind him, preparing for an assault.

“Who are you?” The prince had frost in his eyes.

“Lady Juniper’s bodyguard.” Ruby stood at attention, her dagger glinting on the floor before her.

A strange sense of familiarity filled Juniper’s chest as Alder sneered at Ruby. She squinted at the scar on the Pyrona’s lip.

Did Alder’s ring leave that scar?

Juniper rested her hand on Alder’s shoulder. It buzzed with discomfort as she touched him of her own volition. “She is dear to me, Your Highness.” She infused her words with every drop of persuasion she owned.

“You’re dismissed.” Alder’s angry voice made Juniper’s arm hairs stand.

“Sorry, Your Highness, I can’t leave her.” Ruby’s face remained placid.

“That’s an order, Pyrona. She is safe with me.”

“I am not here to keep her safe, Your Highness. I’m here to keep you safe. You and your family, and everyone in this castle. She could turn this place into a blizzard if I step away.”

The prince’s face grew red, his eyes narrowing.

“Bloody Mountains, then give us your back, soldier. And put that damn dagger away. How incompetent are you? Who drops a dagger?”

Ruby bent down for her dagger, acting as though she’d forgotten where the blade belonged. She tried her pant leg, her back, and then—*it’s from your sleeve.*

Ruby slipped it into her sleeve, and only Juniper could see her guard’s half-smile as she turned away from the couple.

“You will not dine with us tonight.” Alder’s glare turned to Juniper. “I don’t want to see her again today.”

“I will retire early tonight. I am weary from our travels.”

“Yes, yes.” His icicle eyes studied her. “We will try this again later. Sleep well, Princess.”

#####

Alone with her bodyguard, Juniper fell into bed.

“*Sleep well, princess.*” Ruby plugged her nose as she spoke, imitating Alder’s accent. “Mountains, that man is insufferable.”

“That man is your future king.”

“He is your future king and my current headache. I’ve disliked him since we were children. He’s spoiled and disrespectful, like the lot of you.” Ruby took off her sword, leaving it by the door. “And you’re welcome, by the way.”

Juniper sighed. “What do I owe you for now?”

“I’m not clumsy. June, you know this.” Ruby checked her daggers.

“Sure, sure.” Juniper touched her lips, her mind elsewhere.

“I didn’t just drop my dagger for fun.”

Juniper sat up. “You mean you distracted Alder on purpose?”

Ruby nodded as she circled the room, checking the windows and the tapestries.

“That was dumb.” Juniper hugged herself. *And so brave.*

Ruby stopped at a chair and pressed against the cushion, testing for softness. She nodded before dragging it next to the bed.

“Did you hear me?”

Ruby rolled her eyes as she circled the room again.

“He has no patience for the Pyrona.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Then why pull such a stunt?”

“You should have seen your face, your body.” Ruby bit her bottom lip. “You looked like you were having your teeth pulled.”

“Mountains, you are rude.” Juniper pulled off her slippers. “It was my first kiss.”

“I could tell.” Ruby spoke with her back to Juniper. “You didn’t like it, either.”

“What is there to like?”

“I’d show you if you weren’t such a child.”

“What did you say?”

“You’re a child.”

“And you are a low-born Pyrona who has no right to advise me.” Juniper climbed under the covers and rolled onto her belly, too much of a coward to meet Ruby’s eyes.

“I’ll call your lady’s maids. You can’t sleep in that.”

Juniper felt the room cool as Ruby stepped out. Her body wanted to freeze the world, while her heart begged for Ruby's warmth to return.

####

Juniper couldn't sleep. *Low-born Pyrona*. Her words woke her every time her eyes fell closed. She didn't think that way.

No! I have to make this better.

She slipped out of bed, her heart pounding. Looking at Ruby, she paused. She lay slumped in her chair with closed eyes. Her bound breasts rose and fell under her tunic, pulling it tight with each inhalation.

You didn't like it either.

Ruby understood her. Juniper did not like the feel of Alder's breath on her face or how his lips insisted on a response she couldn't give him. She didn't like the hard lines of his body pressed against hers.

She looked down at Ruby's natural pout. *But these lips*. She didn't let herself finish the thought as she stopped herself from touching Ruby's scar.

Juniper knelt before Ruby, resting her hands on her knees.

Ruby's body stiffened.

"I'm sorry." Juniper sat on her heels and waited for a response. "I know you're awake. You're always awake."

"Then you also know my job is easier when my ward is asleep." Ruby didn't bother to open her eyes.

"Can you hear me rolling my eyes?" Juniper's hands dropped.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

“When did you last sleep in a bed?”

Ruby’s lips flattened as her eyes opened. “What does it matter? Get back to sleep, Princess.” She gestured to the bed.

“You promised you wouldn’t call me that anymore.”

“Did I?” Ruby raised her brows, tapping Juniper’s nose.

“When was the last time you slept in a bed?” Juniper slid her hand onto Ruby’s thigh.

“A long time ago.” Ruby squeezed Juniper’s fingers with her calloused ones. “Now, go to sleep. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“I want to give you something. To show I’m contrite.” Juniper scooted closer, emboldened by Ruby’s touch. “Take my bed. I’ll take the chair.”

“You’re ridiculous. Go to sleep.”

“I won’t.”

“You must.”

“No.”

“You’re such a...” Juniper stopped the insult with her mouth, her tongue finding Ruby’s scar.

Their lips fit together like the God of the Mountains cast them at the same time.

“June.” Ruby lifted her, pulling the girl into her lap. “Mountains, June.”

The breathless way Ruby said her name sent Juniper’s innocent lips exploring. She wanted to be the answer to her prayer. Their bodies found a rhythm.

“This is how a kiss is supposed to feel.” Ruby wrapped her arms around Juniper’s waist, her lips finding Juniper’s neck.

This is what heaven feels like.

Juniper's staccato heartbeats set a tempo for their hands as they wandered.

Breasts and belly.

Hips and thighs.

Ruby was soft and hard in all the right places. Juniper wanted to taste the junctures between all of them.

"We should stop." Teeth on earlobe and then suck.

"Yes." Juniper's back arched, and snow fell. A glittering flurry surrounded them. "I mean, no. I'll die if you stop."

Ruby rested her face on Juniper's chest, her shoulders rising and falling, rising and falling. The flakes swirled around them, evaporating in blinks.

"This." Ruby squeezed her. "Is punishable by death."

Juniper's thumb rested on Ruby's scar. Her breath hiccupped.

Ruby carried Juniper back to bed, tucking her in and laying atop the covers.

"I'll hold you until you fall to sleep."

#####

Ruby's resolve melted over time, her tender touch highlighting the summer. The dangers forgotten when their passions peaked. Juniper recognized the risks and deemed them abstract. Secret kisses peppered her nights, and careful evasions ruled her days. Alder's pursuit became impossible to deflect. He grew ever more creative and unpredictable.

"A sleigh ride, truly?" The vanilla scent of the sweetgrass wafted through the air with each step, their boots crushing the blades.

"He is to show me the view at the east peak." Juniper covered her smile with her hand as Ruby's warmth caressed her.

“More like he wants to show off his money.” Ruby gestured at the sleigh servants horsed on the other side of the courtyard. “Spoiled Cryoky princeling.”

“Oh, you’re just mad we won’t be alone.” Juniper’s smile widened as she looked up at her bodyguard. The sunlight revealed much about Ruby, like the auburn undertone of Ruby’s hair or that her full lips were more coral than dark amber. *She has freckles.* Juniper hugged herself, resisting the temptation to kiss them.

“You’re just figuring this out?”

“I learn something new every day.” Juniper giggled.

“What’s so funny, Princess?” Alder strolled through the grass, his cheeks ruddy from the cold, his hands pulling up the tallest blades as he went.

Juniper stiffened, curtsying. “I’m sorry, Your Highness.”

“Don’t be. I’ve never seen you laugh before.” The prince ran his hand up her back and frowned when she flinched away. His eyes lifted to Ruby. “I’ve been meaning to ask. Have we met before this summer? All the Pyrona look the same.”

Ruby bowed again, lower this time. “I’m sure you don’t remember, sire. We used to spar when we were fourteen summers.” Ruby pulled her leather mask from her cloak and put it on, her gray eyes staring out, a smug set to her jaw.

“Yes, I remember you.” Alder shrugged his shoulders, adjusting his jacket. “Well, I hope you can ride. You will follow on horseback with the other guards. This way, you’re close enough to do your job, but I won’t have to suffer the blight of your visage.” He turned away. “Now, get out of my sight.”

Juniper’s fists tightened as Ruby bowed and pulled up her cowl. Her bodyguard strode away; chest held high.

“Lady Juniper, let me show you the workmanship of this sleigh.” Alder’s alabaster fingers braided the blades of grass he’d collected, unaware of the hatred in the eyes of his betrothed. “I commissioned it as a coming-of-age gift for you.”

“For me?” Her breakfast threatened to return to her mouth. “You’re too kind.”

“Anything for my future queen.” Alder took Juniper’s gloved hand and leaned in close. “How else am I going to get you alone?”

“I-I don’t know what to say, Your Highness.”

“Say nothing.” He lowered his sweetgrass crown onto her head. “There are other ways to repay me with your mouth.”

#####

“If you move further away from me, you’ll fall out of the sleigh.”

“Sorry, Your Highness.” Juniper clung tighter to her armrest as their ride slowed.

“Whoa.” The driver pulled his reins as a man stepped into their path. “Whoa.” The horses whinnied as a second and third man joined the first.

“Who are these fools?” Alder’s hand rested on his sword.

A guard rode to Alder’s side of the sleigh.

“Sire, we must return you to the castle.”

Juniper slid to the edge of her seat as dirty-faced men materialized from the thick woods lining the road.

“Sire, you must take my horse.”

Alder’s crystalline eyes darted about.

“We’ll be taking this sleigh.” The man who first blocked their path unsheathed his sword, pointing at Juniper and then the prince. “And the women.”

The men laughed.

Blades slid from their homes, and the temperature dropped as the bandits and guards eased their powers out.

“What do you think, men? How much will the king pay to get his pretty little daughter back?”

“A lot less after I’m done having my way with him.” More laughs. “Look at him blush.”

An arrow landed in the man’s chest with a hollow thump. His smirk froze on his face as he fell. The world flew into action, Ruby’s heat ripping away from Juniper as the sounds of fighting commenced. Juniper turned to the prince, wide-eyed.

Alder took the reins. “I’ll be back for you.” He spoke over his shoulder as the guard dismounted. The prince climbed atop the horse and locked eyes with Juniper. “Show them what you can do.” He drew his sword, guards flanking him on both sides. He smirked at her before standing in his stirrups and riding toward the castle.

Juniper slid off her seat and onto the floor. Her head tucked into her lap, and she squeezed her eyes shut. Cold spun around her, picking her hair off her shoulders.

Keep it in. Ruby is out there.

Keep it in. She held herself tight and her magic tighter.

Keep it in.

Male hands grabbed her arms and dragged her back. Her heels slid against the wood as he pulled, and she bit her tongue. The iron taste of blood filled her mouth. She screamed, her hands grabbing hold of anything they could find.

“Yes, sweet thing, scream for me.” His hot breath burned her ear, and the control she clung to snapped.

Her heart paused as the monster inside her clawed its way out.

Pain. So much pain.

Male screams joined her own as her silverneedles tore through flesh. Shredding the man who supported the top half of her body. She fell into the snow, landing on her back, her head bouncing off a rock.

####

Is someone holding me? Heat calmed the diffuse ache that came with wielding ice.

Juniper's lashes fluttered as her eyes adjusted to the sun.

Ruby's face. She looked at Ruby's face. Juniper gasped as she saw the bloody lines marring her forehead, neck, and shoulders.

"You're awake." Part grimace, Ruby's smile shined with affection.

They stood at the bottom of a hill, trodden snow before and behind them. Pines lined their passageway.

"Put me down."

The guard winced as she lowered Juniper to the ground.

Juniper's hands went straight to Ruby's face and then searched her body.

"I'm fine." Ruby hissed as Juniper's fingers found gouges in her sides. "We're safe."

"You're hurt."

"Nothing a few stitches won't fix. You should see the man who stood in front of me."

Ruby shook her head. "No, you shouldn't. You're not a murderer. I'm sorry, I couldn't fight and keep your powers at bay." Ruby pulled Juniper to her chest, resting her chin on the girl's head.

"We are a few miles out. I didn't want you to see..."

"Lots of people died today?"

“They did.”

“We could have died too?”

“We could have.” Ruby pulled Juniper closer.

“Let’s run away.” Juniper didn’t wait for a response. She rose onto her toes and pressed her lips against Ruby’s. They melted into each other.

They didn’t hear the lone man crest the hill above nor see his ire as he took in the scene. Alder, disheveled and wet, broke into a run.

“Unhand her.”

They turned at the words.

The prince smacked into Ruby, sending her stumbling back.

“Alder?” Juniper whimpered as he gripped Juniper’s shoulders, a scowl on his face.

“How could you?” He shook her. “I told you I’d come back.”

“And you.” He whirled on Ruby, his teeth gritting as his uniformed men crested the hill. Adler held out a hand. “Fall back!” The men did as commanded.

“It’s not what it looked like.” Juniper took hold of the prince’s sleeve. “She saved me. You left me, and she saved me.”

Alder ignored her, baring his teeth, his eyes locking with Ruby’s.

“Kneel!” Spittle flew from his mouth with the word. He drew his sword.

Ruby nodded. “Please, don’t blame Juniper.” She held up her hands and took a knee.

“No!” Juniper pulled the prince’s arm. “Please, my liege. Please.” Tears streamed down her face.

Alder’s elbow crunched into Juniper’s nose.

She fell to the ground, blood gushing into her hands. She ignored the pain, crawling toward her guard.

“Ruby! Fight back, I beg you.”

Alder lifted his sword.

Firestar gray met Silverneedle green.

The blade found its mark, cutting clean through Ruby’s neck.

Thud.

Thud.

A small impact and then a big one. Her head and then her body. It went rigid when it landed, a leg kicking twice. Ruby’s head rolled into the trees, her eyes forever staring into Juniper’s.

“This is your fault.” Alder wiped his sword on Ruby’s chest before sheathing it.

Juniper fell forward, blinded by tears and wretched.

Alder wasted no time. His boot smashed into her ribs, and she fell flat into her vomit.

“Get General Silverneedle,” he yelled to his men. The prince’s knee landed on the center of her back, his weight pressing her into the ground. “I would have given you the world, Princess.” One of his gloved hands plugged her nose. The other covered her mouth.

Juniper’s muffled cries died as darkness found her.

#####

Juniper awoke in the dungeons. Complete silence choked her.

Alder!

She jerked to a sitting position. Her hands came up, blocking her face.

When he didn't materialize, she shook the buzzing from her ears and blinked into the dark. She pushed back the hair that fell from her braids, her fingers tangling with her crown of sweetgrass. She crushed the gift in her fist.

Her father's magic surrounded her, radiating from the glimmering ice walls.

He must be my warden and... Who's that?

Her eyes strained to understand who stood in the room's center.

Ruby?

She moved closer.

Ruby?

Her chest emptied, expelling hatred and sorrow in a shuddering breath. Ruby's head stared up at the ceiling from a pike. The scar Juniper once loved blended into Ruby's now white lips.

And her forehead—Mountains, her forehead.

Hailstones pelted the ground with a deafening fury. Juniper reached forward, tracing her finger over the letters carved into Ruby's skin.

Traitor.

The gashes oozed under her touch.

"Alder." She squeezed her sweetgrass braid as tears trailed through the dirt on her cheeks. "I will kill you for this."

The thick walls of ice cracked and moaned, answering her rage. Her surge of power reflected her grief.

She destroyed her prison with a wave of her hand, shattering the ice. Her father and his men ducked behind glacier-like structures they'd fashioned to use as shields.

“Juniper,” the general roared. “You will stop this now! You are a noblewoman and a Silverneedle.”

“Get out of my way.”

“If you can’t control yourself, you will never leave this dungeon.”

“I said. Get. Out.”

She sent the ice shields flying back at their creators, crushing the men against the stone walls behind them.

I will not be obedient.

The men howled, their bones grinding. Juniper forced the ice to meet stone.

I’ll shatter the silence.

“Fall back!” General Silverneedle’s voice echoed down the stairwell. “Hold the stairs!”

Fury guided her feet as she advanced. She glowered at the ice rising before her, unimpressed by the barricade the men patched together.

It blew apart with a boom. Men flew back as fragments pummeled them.

Screams.

She lifted a finger, and a freezing wind howled, cutting the air as it picked up sheets of ice from the ground. Like blades, they sliced men in half and relieved them of their heads.

I’ll take their strength.

As she came to the landing, doubt flashed in her mind for the first time. Soldiers clogged the grand hall. Snow fell around them.

I’ll have to kill them all to get to the prince.

Armored men loosed arrows. One hit. Blood ran down her arm and over the braided grass still fisted in her palm. Her doubt fell away with her blood.

She lifted her other hand. Splashes of snow rose from the ground in waves, solidifying in time to deflect the projectiles. The swells landed on the soldier's feet, cementing them to the ground.

Madness etched lines across Juniper's face as she reached into the soldiers with her cold, dropping their temperature so fast their blood and organs expanded. She pulled her powers back, and their armor creaked as their innards burst out from their abdomens. She stalked to the throne room, dispatching each rush of men as they came, leaving death in her wake.

There is no balance.

Her father now stood before the great doors. He sheathed his sword and rubbed his hands together.

"I knew you were evil." His stance widened. "I knew you were evil from the day you were born."

Nothing could stop her now. She sucked in an icy breath, pain burning through her as her skin lined with frost. She didn't slow. She didn't block. She walked straight into her father's attack. The silverneedles ricocheted off her body and fell to the ground.

Her hand clamped on his shoulder. He cried out as her fingers dug into his flesh and froze his blood. He fell to his knees, panting. His body solidified.

Juniper stepped past him without a second glance, pushing the doors open.

The queen sat on her throne. Her eyes closed in concentration as she lent her power to her king. King Troms stood beside his son. Their shoulders touched.

Juniper locked eyes with Alder knowing she had something inside her that they didn't. She smiled through the power rolling off of the royal family, unphased. A frozen wind, as sharp as a razor, whipped through muscle and tendon.

Thud.

Thud.

Heads rolled.

The tinkle of crystalized blood striking stone rang in the silence.

The prince lowered his father's body to the ground.

Wild-eyed, he howled, staggering toward Juniper and drawing his sword. Both youths released their power at once. The Mountain trembled. The conical roofs of the castle screeched as they threatened to lift. Juniper's exposed skin became the color of Alder's eyes.

They wielded their icy powers with blows that sent shock waves through the land. Glass broke. Animals fell over and shattered. Blackened frost burns covered the lungs and hearts of their people, sending them to God's Mountain in mass. But neither the lady nor the prince could see past their hatred.

Hail and snow and icicles swirled around them. The projectiles grew ever closer to their targets until Juniper's ice drew a line over the scar Ruby gave him four years before.

Ruby.

Alder's brows rose. He looked at his wound and then raised his sword. With a roar, he ran at her.

Silverneedles hit him from the side. Strips of the prince scattered on the ground.

Juniper stumbled, a moan escaping her lips as the cold fell away.

Is it over?

She looked down at her hand where the sweetgrass braid dripped blood. She shook her head.

“I don’t need your crown.” She dropped it on Alder’s remains and returned to the dungeon, where her lover waited.