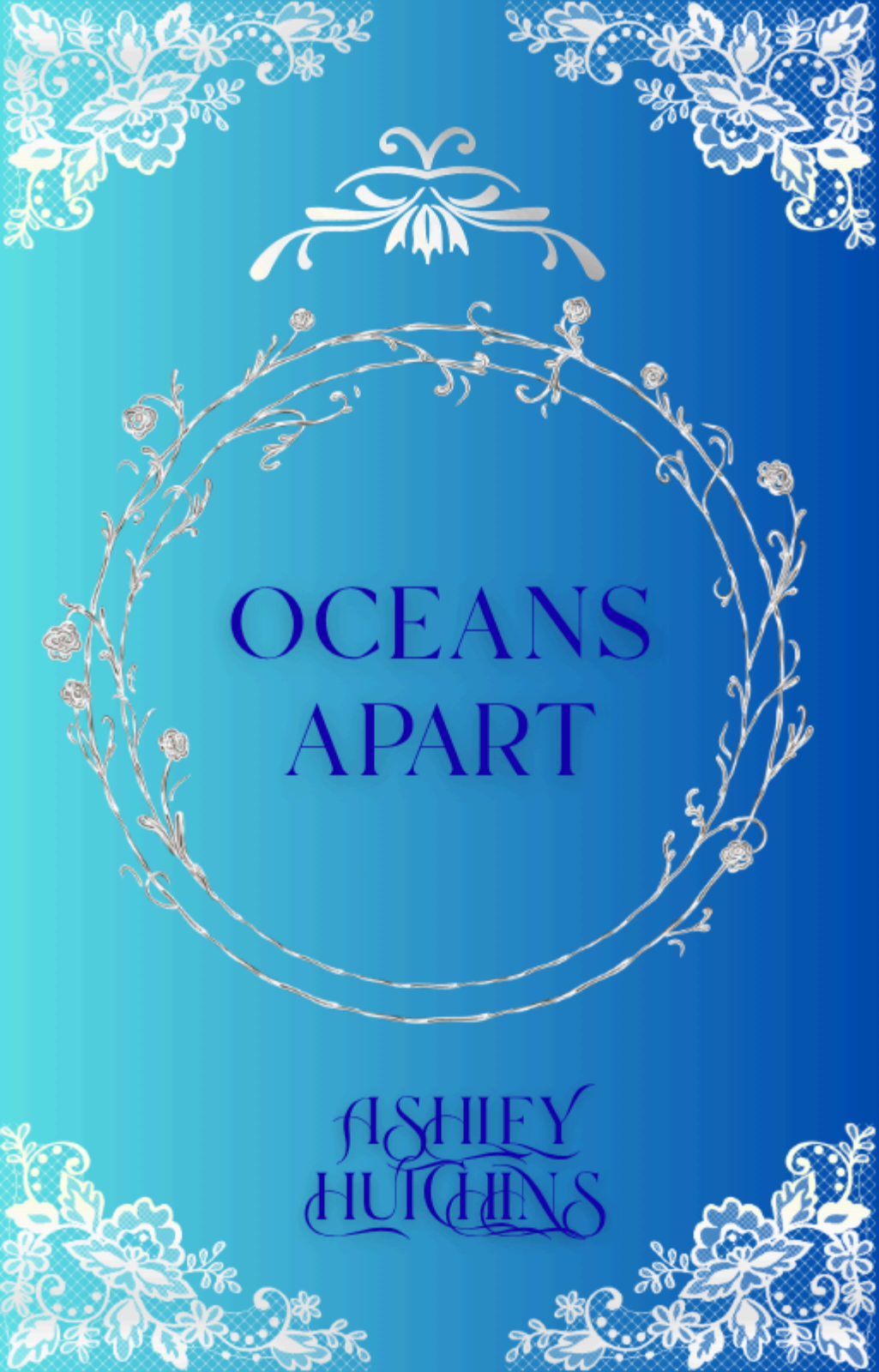


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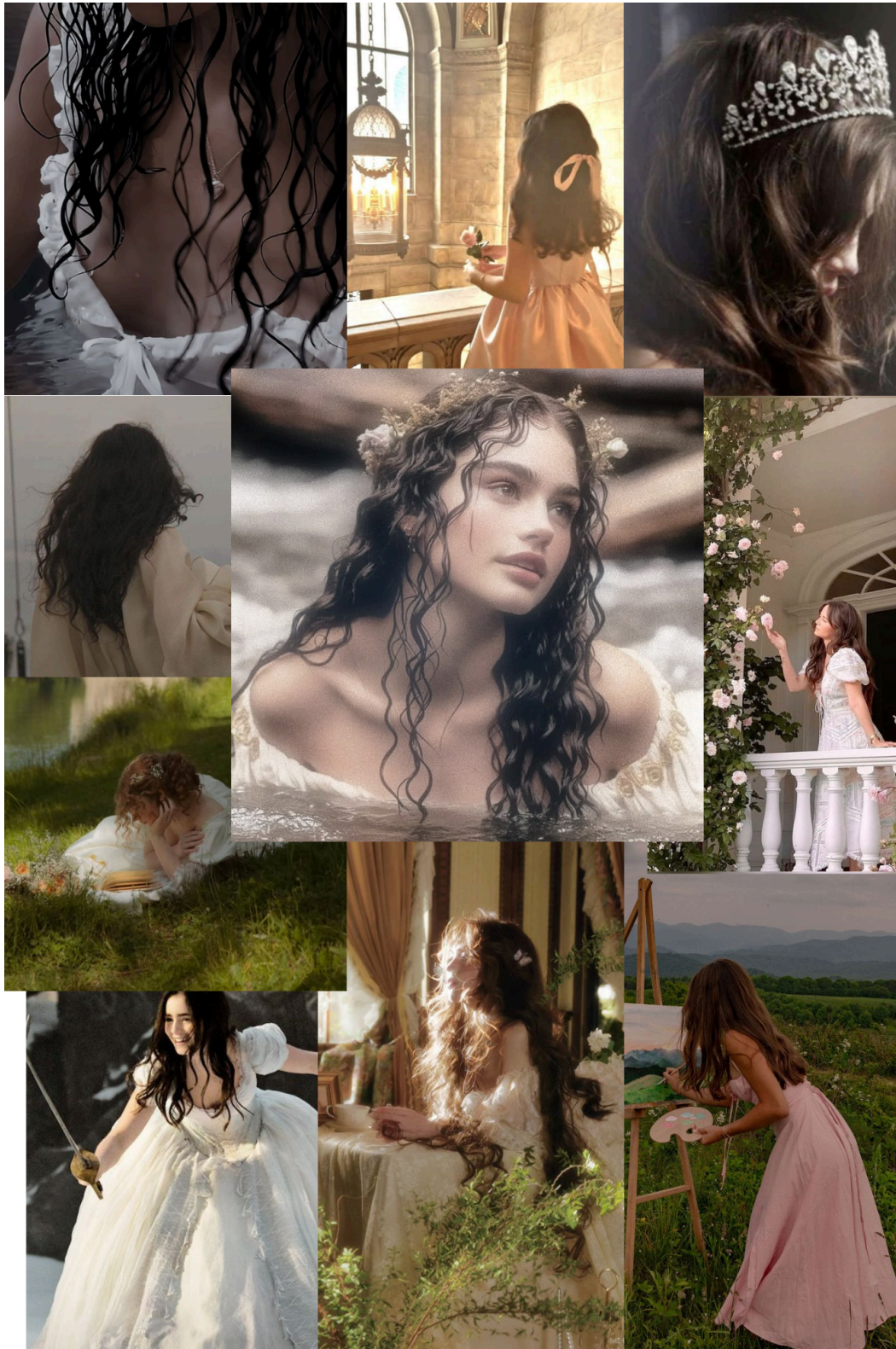


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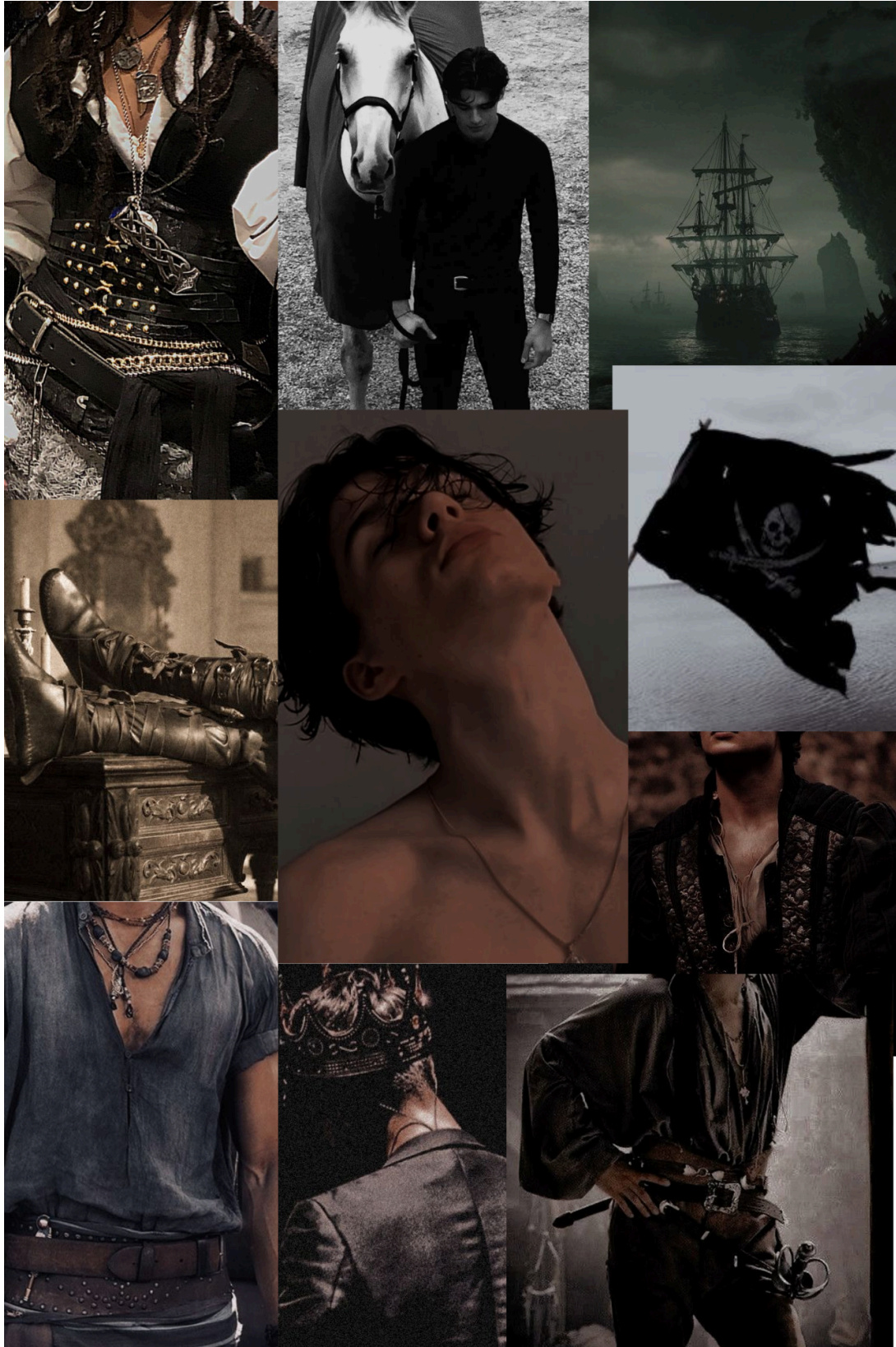
ASHLEY
HUTCHINS

Character Inspo

Wynter Thorne:



Caspian Graves:



Playlist

Oceans Apart Playlist

- Nervous- The Neighborhood
- Self Aware- Temper City
- The Water Is Fine- Chloe Ament
- I Wanna Be Yours- Arctic Monkeys
- i'm yours- Isabel LaRosa
- Missing Piece- John Michael Howell
- Figure You Out- VOILA
- Everywhere, Everything- Noah Kahan, Gracie Abrams
- her- JVKE
- bellyache- Billie Eilish
- Sparks- Coldplay
- Those Eyes- New West
- Lovers Rock- TV Girl
- Summertime Sadness- Lana Del Ray
- Skyfall- Adele
- Stargazing- Myles Smith

- Daylight- David Kushner
- Carry You Home- Alex Warren

Prologue □★°□

Prologue

They say the sea remembers everything, but men are prone to forgetting.

Many years ago, before the maps were stained with the blood of innocents, there were only two friends and the horizon. Cassian was the storm, being bold, restless, and driven by a heart that cared little for the "right" way of doing things if a faster way existed. He lived for the spray of salt water against his skin and the thrill of the unknown. Beside him stood Louis, the anchor. Louis was a man of quiet grace and unwavering morals. He wasn't brave in the way Cassian was, but he was good, and in those days, that was enough.

Together, they found the Great Unknown. They stood on a shore where no flag had ever flown and saw not just a land, but a future. They returned to their dying old country and brought their people across the waves, promising a nation built on trust and loyalty.

For decades, they ruled side by side in the country of Deltora, named after its hidden location. Cassian's fire pushed the boundaries of their new world, while Louis's conscience ensured the people were fed and the laws were just. It was a perfect, fragile balance—until the day the balance snapped.

No one remembers the exact words that sparked the fire. Some say it was a dispute over a harbor; others say it was a betrayal of the very morals Louis held dear. Whatever the cause, the friendship that built a nation became the pride that tore it into two kingdoms. Cassian named his country Roam, while Luis named his Rien. The land was covered with blood and steel. Two flags rose where once there was one, and the bitter resentment of the other replaced the brotherhood of the voyager.

Many generations have passed, and the names Cassian and Louis have moved from the mouths of friends into the chants of war. The two countries have known nothing but the scent of smoke and the sound of drums for longer than anyone living can remember.

But now, the foundations are crumbling. The old hatred has grown so heavy it threatens to bury both kingdoms alive. Deep within the royal halls, the descendants of the two founders look out at their restless, angry citizens and realize a terrifying truth: if they cannot find the bridge their ancestors burned, there will be nothing left of either nation but ash on the wind.

The war is coming to an end, one way or another.

Chapter One □ ★ ° □

Chapter One

I have always felt connected to the ocean. Surprising since I've only seen it in paintings and through my window. I sit on the window frame, looking out at the calming waves, trying to capture their beauty with simple paints.

As I start to blend the turquoise and deep blues, a knock on my door breaks my concentration.

"Come in!" I sigh, trying to mix the colors to create the correct shade. My head maid, Clara, walks in, closing the door softly behind her.

Clara has been my head maid for four years and my favorite, most likely because she is only two years older than me and seems more like a friend than a worker.

Before her, I had a bunch of different ladies, but none of them were permanent. Hannah was my handmaid when I was a very young child until I turned two.

A little after my younger sister Summer was born, Hannah was mysteriously executed, with no details given out to the public. From my memory and paintings, I remember her being a beautiful lady who would always sing me lullabies.

“Good morning, Princess. How is the painting coming along?” she asks, setting down the dress in her hands onto my bed. I don’t look up as I reply, focused intently on my current painting.

“I’m almost done; give me a few more seconds.” I dip my brush in the white paint, streaking it along to create the image of waves. “Finished.” I hold up the painting, sunlight bringing out the accents.

“It looks beautiful, Highness. Your mother will love it.” Clara mumbles a sad edge softly to her voice. I nod, looking over to the bed where she has set my dress of the day down.

Setting the painting down to let it dry, I walk over and pick up the long-sleeved, butter-yellow dress with only simple gems on the bodice. I step behind the folding screen to change into the garment, and as I finish, I slip on some soft slippers before walking back out where Clara is waiting.

“Could you let my instructor know I’ll be a little late for my first class? I’m going to be in the West Wing for a little while.” I ask Clara while I fix my hair, making sure to pin my white streak back behind my usual brunette waves. I know Father hates seeing the remembrance even if he doesn’t voice it.

“Of course, Princess, anything else?”

“No, that will be all, thank you, Clara.” I smile back at her as she curtsies before leaving my chambers. I look at myself in the mirror to make sure all the

white hair is nonexistent before grabbing the painting I had just finished and stepping out into the hall.

The usual guards are making their rounds, giving me a slight nod of acknowledgement. First, I head downstairs to the kitchen, the cinnamon from the sticky rolls already invading my senses.

I smirk as I see Ellie (the kingdom's finest baker), her back turned to me, giving me a chance to grab the sticky rolls. As I reach for the closest one, a towel whacks my arm, catching me red-handed.

“Wynter, don't you dare touch my pastries. I need those.” Ellie lectures me, hands on her hips. One of the reasons I love her so much is that she is one of the only people who call me by my actual name rather than “Princess” or “Highness”.

“Please, Ellie, I'm starving, and you make the best sticky rolls known.” I plead with her, my voice soft as I ask, clasping my hands together in a praying motion. For a second, her eyes go blank, slightly, as if she lost her train of thought. She blinks fast and looks back up at my eyes.

“Fine. But just this once, okay?” I squeal, hugging her tightly even though I know this isn't the first time nor will it be the last. I steal her food.

“Thank you, thank you, Ellie!” I reach around her and grab a sticky roll, biting down on it before grabbing another and running out with my painting under my arm. I head over to the West Wing, eating the first sticky roll.

Although I hate how dark and cold the Wing is, I try to come at least once a week for the sake of my mother. It must be so lonely being over here all by herself and not even able to talk when she needs to. I step into her room quietly, careful not to scare her, and sit down next to her bedside.

“Hello, Mother.” I softly whisper, waking her up. She looks tiredly over at me and smiles, sitting up before grabbing my hand. “I brought you something, credit to Ellie.” I grab the extra sticky roll, show it to her, then set it in her hands.

She grins, knowing about all the times I’ve snuck food out from the kitchens. As she eats, I catch her up on everything that’s happened this past week, even though it’s the same boring occurrences I always tell her about. I think she just likes having someone talk to her instead of treating her like a fragile doll.

Although she can’t respond to my stories, her facial reactions tell me enough. Ever since that day five years ago, she can’t or won’t talk. The doctors have tried everything to test and see what happened that afternoon, when my younger sister mysteriously disappeared, and my mother became mute, but they found no explanation. That same day was when the white streak grew in my hair after I stupidly touched a white rose.

I look around the ballroom, decorated for my 14th birthday, trying to find my mother and younger sister. They were only supposed to be going on a short walk in the gardens. I push past the crowd of people, tensing as a person brushes my

shoulder. I hate crowds, though I would never voice this to my father, the King. I wouldn't want to upset him, especially after all the time he spent making this day special for me. I break free from the swarm and head outside,

“Mother? Summer?” I call out, walking further into the gardens. I soon see the wishing well, my mother's favorite spot. It's very old, covered in ivy with a rusty bucket hanging. My father urged my mother to let it go, promising to build her newer, better-looking wells, but she made it clear that the well was staying. The closer I get, the clearer I see a figure lying down next to the well. I run over, seeing it's my mother lying on her back with a white shimmering rose resting on her stomach. I call out for her, trying to shake her awake, but there's no use, for she doesn't even move. I look around for my sister, but there is no sign of her. Eyeing the rose more carefully, I see the shimmer, and without thinking, I reach out to grab it. As soon as my hand makes contact with the rose, a jolt of ice-cold fire rushes up my arm. It didn't feel like the usual burn of fire but more magical as it shot up straight to my skull. I quickly drop the rose and yell for anyone around to come quickly. I sit next to my mother, my heart racing until guards race over, lifting my mother and me, taking us to the infirmary. Only later, when a doctor looks me over, do I realize, in the back of my head, lies a piece of snow colored hair.

My mother squeezes my hand, releasing me from my memories.

“Sorry, just thinking again. Which reminds me, I brought you another present.” I put on a smile as I lean over and grab the painting I finished earlier. I lift it and place it in her hands, allowing a better look.

While she admires the painting of the ocean, my eyes drift over to her bedside table, where the white rose from that night lies in a small glass dome sealed off completely but still alive and shimmering.

I quickly look away, back to the painting where my mother traces the waves. I remember her telling me and Summer stories when we were little about the ocean and the feeling of sand in her toes.

For some reason, though, Father and she never let us go out to see it for ourselves. I know they love us and want to protect us, which is why I would never argue about the issue, but I’ve always had a longing to feel the waves. I look over at the old grandfather clock, realizing I’m very late for my classes.

“Looks like it’s time for me to head to classes.” I groan, taking the painting out of her hands and placing it on the wall next to the hundreds of other paintings I’ve done for her. “I’ll be back soon, maybe with one of those cheese danishes you love.”

I place a kiss on her cheek before standing and tucking her blanket to make sure she doesn’t catch a cold. As soon as I close the door, I race down the steps.

Hopefully, Madam Marguerite won't be as mad as the last time I showed up late to her language class.

Chapter Two □ ★ ° □

Chapter Two

A swat of a ruler on my arm jolts me awake. My head shoots up, and I see Madam Marguerite looming over me with a stern look.

“S-sorry,” I mumble, looking down.

“Pay attention, Princess; we both know you aren’t doing well in mathematics.” I groan, looking at the paper below me, seeing all of the complicated and useless equations.

Most girls in our kingdom aren’t educated in mathematics or science, but my father wanted both my sister and me to be educated rulers. Summer was the one who was exceptional with numbers and formulas.

I’ve always been horrible with logic; there are always right and wrong questions, never giving me a gray area.

English was always my speciality, whether it was reading novels or writing essays; it just...made sense.

“Why can’t you teach about something more interesting? Like sea monsters or sirens.” I remember, as a kid, my mother would read me and Summer books about all of the creatures that lived in the deep oceans and the beautiful sirens that

many wouldn't think twice about until they realized how dangerous they truly were. Madam Marguerite scoffs, shaking her head.

“Those are myths; none of it is real. Besides, you need help in mathematics, you practically got every question wrong last t-”

Before Madam Marguerite can judge my mathematical skills even more, there is a knock on the door. Sharp heels tap on the wood floor as Madam walks across the classroom to open the door.

A guard steps inside the room, looking around until his eyes fall on me. I smile seeing Everett, one of the only people I can call my friend.

“Princess, your father requests to speak with you.” I stand up, getting out of the room as quickly as possible.

“No, no, you still have your equations to finish, young lady,” Madam exclaims.

“By the King's orders, she must come now,” Everett says boldly, saving me from being tortured any longer.

Madam Marguerite shoots daggers at me with her eyes as I leave, but she is not able to protest against the King's orders.

I let out a breath as I head down the hallway, Everett following next to me. “You seem eager, Princess.” I look up, seeing the smirk on his face.

“I hate that lesson so much, and Madam doesn’t help with it; all she does is get angry,” I whine.

“It can’t be that bad, Princess. I’m sure you're exaggerating.” I elbow him in the stomach. He knows from experience how hard Madam Marguerite is.

Everett chuckles, leading me to my father's office.

“Do you know what he wants to speak to me about?” I question.

“No idea, but if I were to guess, it would be something about Roam.” Before I can question him about our rival kingdom, the office door opens.

“Daughter, please come in.” I give a small smile to Everett, who, in return, nods before heading off.

I step inside my father's office, and he embraces me before letting me go to sit down in his chair.

“How are you, Wynter?” He asks, looking me directly in the eyes.

“I’m fine, though I don’t think that is the reason you requested to see me.” I never get called to see him, especially by a guard, unless there is an urgent matter he needs to discuss.

As he hesitates to find his words, I study his frame. More white hairs are coming in, and he looks tired, yet he still holds a certain confidence in the room, showing others he is the King. He passed down his deep blue eyes to my sister, yet his rich brown hair was given to me.

I hum quietly, and once I do, his eyes go blank like Ellie's. My brow furrows as I call for him, but he doesn't answer. Once I finally sit still and quiet the humming, he blinks rapidly before clearing his throat.

"Excuse me, I lost my train of thought for a second. Anyways, you know that for a very long time, our kingdom of Rien and our rivals of Roam have been at war for one reason or another." I nod.

Every young child is told the stories and legends of Rien and Roam and the argument between two friends that started our centuries-old feud.

"Well, the battles have been getting worse. In both kingdoms, more soldiers are dying, civilians are being injured and killed in the midst, and our crops are being burnt. If this keeps continuing, neither Rien nor Roam will have a kingdom left." He pauses, letting me take in the gravity of the situation.

"What can we do about this?" I ask my brain, spinning, trying to find a solution.

"A little while ago, I was sent a letter from King Graves himself offering a proposition to end these wars. After reading it, I stashed it away, not thinking I would ever entertain this idea. But after the latest reports came through and seeing how our numbers have dropped significantly, the only choice we have is to agree." My brow furrows as I scramble for possibilities of what the letter could have proposed.

“What did the letter say, Father?”

“King Graves...has proposed that we arrange a marriage between you and his son Caspian to unite our kingdoms and end the wars and deaths.” My heart stops beating, and a ringing sound is in my ears. “I won’t force you to agree to this, but I urge you to accept.” My father pleads with me.

“I...uh...” I stutter like always when I’m scared or under pressure. Taking a deep breath, I find my words trying to calm my shaking hands.

Although he says he won’t force me into it, I know that I have no choice in the matter. It's selfish the way I don’t want to accept this; it’s my duty as a royal to protect my people at any cost.

“I agree,” I say shortly, not trusting myself to say anything more.

“Amazing, I knew you would. King Graves, along with Caspian, is already on their way here. They should arrive in two days.” My eyes widen in disbelief, but whether it's from the timeline or from the fact that my father knew I would agree, I’m not sure.

“T-two days they’ll be here?”

“Yes, we are going to arrange everything officially. We saw it would be easier to do it in person rather than over letters.” I nod, trying to fight back tears.

“You're excused to go prepare. I will alert the guards to double up just in case.” As

soon as the words leave my father's mouth, I jump up and leave quickly. I run down the hall, bumping past Everett.

“Princess? Princess, what's wrong?” He calls after me, but I don't stop my run.

Tears run down my face, and it hurts to breathe as I continue down the halls, not even realizing where I'm going until I see it.

The wishing well stands in front of me as I finally stop. My vision blurs as the shaking gets worse, so I lie against the well, trying to stay conscious. As my eyes start to close, I tell myself I'm resting for a few minutes, and then I'll get up.

Chapter Three □★°□

Chapter Three

I wake up in my bed, covered in blankets, yet still shaking. I look around, seeing Everett in the corner of my room, talking with Clara in hushed tones.

Everett looks over, seeing me awake, and stops talking, walking over to me.

“How are you feeling, Princess? You had us all worried.” Clara raises the back of her hand to my forehead.

“I’m fine, just a little shaken.”

“What happened with your father?” He asks with concerned eyes. Should I tell them? At this point, there's no reason not to; they'll know when they see the huge pirate ships heading for us in two days.

“I am arranged to marry the pirate prince of Roam, Caspian Graves.” Clara and Everett both gasp, asking a million questions.

“What! Why?”

“That's absurd; you can't!”

“You're only nineteen!” I raise a hand to stop their protests.

“I know, I know, but if I didn't agree, the war would continue, and both of our kingdoms would end up in flames. I can't be selfish.”

“But you have always wanted to marry for love and not for political arrangements,” Clara exclaims.

“Well, that dream is over now.”

“Princess...you don’t have to do this,” Everett adds, but he doesn’t understand the responsibility that I have.

“You don’t understand...” I mumble

“I completely understand if you don’t want this arrangement; then tell your father no.” I clench and unclench my fists while biting my lip to keep the tears in. He has no idea what it’s like to be a royal, and for him to suggest otherwise is infuriating.

“It’s not that easy! King Graves and Caspian are already on their way here. I have two days to prepare, and I can’t deny this offer when thousands of innocent lives are on the line. So stop acting like you understand the situation I’m in because you don’t.” I take a deep breath, calming myself while also trying not to blow up. “I think it would be best if I were alone right now.”

“Princess, I-” I cut off whatever nonsense Everett was going to say.

“Now.” I use my confident voice even though, at the moment, I don’t feel very steady.

Everett opens his mouth like he’s about to say something, but Clara grabs his arm, whispers in his ear, and he reluctantly leaves my room along with Clara.

As soon as the door closes, I let out the suppressed sobs and muffle them with my pillow. Hours go by, and I try to calm myself down, but my thoughts just keep drifting off to the situation I'm in, and the tears reappear.

Once I've cried myself out, I sit up and walk over to my desk to try and fix my appearance. I comb through my hair, which only makes it knotted and frizzy. I groan, throwing my brush down.

"Stupid curls," I mumble, heading over to my tub and drawing a bath. Although Clara always protests when I do it, I like being in control of at least this aspect of my life.

I undress, throwing my dress, corset, and undergarments in a pile before soaking in the bath. Sometimes when I'm desperate for the feeling of being free, I pretend that I'm in the ocean, floating away with no responsibilities.

Long after the water has grown cold and my body has gone numb, I drag myself out of the water, dry off, and collapse on my bed. Tired from the events of yesterday and today, I fall asleep almost immediately into a deep sleep.

"Where's Summer?" I ask my Mother sitting at her bedside. All she does is look up at me, tears in her eyes. "Mother? Mother, why won't you answer me?" She grabs my hand, kissing the top of it before letting it go. Before I can say anything more, guards walk by with the shimmering white rose in a vase, most likely planning on destroying it. My Mother sits up, grabs my arm, pointing at the

rose. "What's wrong?" Of course, she doesn't reply, just shakes me more, gesturing frantically to the retreating guards and the rose in their hands. "Do you want it?" Mother nods urgently. "Guards, stop! The Queen would like the rose to be kept." The guards stop in their tracks, looking at each other before shrugging and setting the rose down. Mother looks at the rose with something I can't name in her eyes. "Is it important?" All she does is nod without taking her eyes off the rose.

I woke up the next day to pounding on my door. I groan, and while trying to cover my ears with my pillow, I manage to tangle in the blankets and fall off the bed. The knocking stops, and someone walks in.

"Princess? Are you in here?" I hear Clara's soft voice ask hesitantly.

"I'm here, just a little occupied at the moment." Clara walks around the bed to see me on the floor, wrapped in blankets. Her eyes widen before she starts giggling. I just groan and try to untangle, while she just laughs harder.

Once I finally get free from the blankets, I sit up smiling. Clara finally stops laughing, but with tears in her eyes, she sets the dress she brought in on my bed.

"Here you go, Princess." I look over at the pink dress with sparkling flowers covering it.

"It's beautiful, Clara. Do you make all the dresses I wear?" I ask, running my hand over the gems.

“I pick out the fabrics and gems since I know how much you love the bright colors, but the other servants are the ones who sew them together.” I smile brightly, complimenting the design.

I get up, take the dress with me, and change into it. I’ve almost forgotten about the pirate kingdom arriving tomorrow. To discuss my future without them having a say. Almost.

Once I go back into the main area of my chambers, I see Everett waiting with Clara.

“Princess...I just wanted to apologize for yesterday. I didn’t have the right to say that, and I understand if you don’t want me to be your personal guard anymore.” He looks down, ready to face the consequences.

Although I was upset, I could never hurt him by doing anything that would make his rank and pay go down. He has had a hard life already and is practically supporting his family now that his father has died in battle.

That’s another reason I felt responsible for agreeing to the arrangement. If I said no, more innocent people like Everett’s father would die because of my selfishness.

“It’s okay, I understand. I wouldn’t want anyone else to be my guard, so don’t worry about it. Besides, I wouldn’t dream of separating you and Clara.” I

smirk, looking over at where Clara is. She gasps and covers her face, a blush growing on her cheeks.

“Oh, come on, I see the way you look at each other. It's adorable, and I love it.” Everett also starts getting nervous, looking down at his boots. I giggle at seeing them act like this.

The fact their two of my closest friends and they're falling in love with each other makes me feel all giddy. “I won't tell anyone, but just know I definitely support this arrangement, and if anything happens, I'm not picking sides.”

Clara and Everett look at each other and smile before quickly looking away. Everett clears his throat.

“Princess, your lessons are starting soon.” He smirks, knowing how torturous it is for me.

“But I would much rather stay here and watch you two with hearts in your eyes.” I giggle as Everett takes my arm, pulling me out of the room so I can't embarrass him anymore. “Aww, Clara and Everett, mwah mwah.” I give air kisses to Clara as I get pulled away, and she just laughs, watching.

Everett takes me to my lesson room, and I groan. “Please don't make me go in there. I'll stop teasing you and Clara if you let me hide.” I plead, trying to give my best begging eyes.

“Nope, it’s too late for that. You should have thought about it before you embarrassed me.” He opens the door and pushes me inside, closing it behind him.

Madam Marguerite looks up with what can only be described as evil intentions in her eyes. Great. Might as well prepare my burial because I know I won’t survive another mathematics lesson.

“Ah, Princess, glad to see you’ve finally learned how to be punctual. Although it pains me to say that today's lesson is not covering maths or science the two subjects you severely need.” I fight the urge to roll my eyes; the only thing stopping me is the news that I won’t have to be tortured today.

I could genuinely burst out in tears of joy. If Madam Marguerite wasn’t standing with her hand propped on her hip right in front of me. “No, today your father has requested a special lesson in learning the history of Rome. While also fitting in the politics of our rival kingdom. How he expects me to teach this in such little time is beyond my comprehension, but I will try.”

Although politics isn’t my favorite topic of discussion, I would much rather listen to her rant about this than to what she had prepared earlier.

I sit and listen, trying to remember every detail about Roam that is possible. Madam Marguerite seems impressed by my asking questions and genuinely engaging in the lesson.

Hours pass by, and the sun begins to set, creating a beautiful sunset with pinks and blues mixing together. My eyes begin to droop, and Madam Marguerite must see this, for she sighs and lets me out for the day.

“Wynter, this may be the last lesson you’ll have with me.” My head shoots up, all tiredness now gone as I process what she just said. Not only did she use my name instead of titles, but she also just said the most unexpected words that I never thought would come out of her mouth.

“Wait, what?”

“Tomorrow the pirates arrive along with your future husband, and I don’t know for sure, but I’ve heard they’re taking you with them back to Roam after the meeting until the wedding.” My jaw drops in shock. There is no way that I am going to Roam. They’re a bunch of savages who think they can get what they want when they want. I’m not usually a judgmental person, but my mother has told me lots of stories about pirates and their tendencies.

“My father didn’t tell me about that. I only agreed to the arranged marriage because I thought we would go back to our own kingdoms with a signed agreement.” Realization hits me like a rock to the head. Of course, I wouldn’t stay here.

Without knowing where Summer has gone and who or what took her, Father deems this castle unsafe, even though we have the best men in the kingdom protecting us.

Whatever happened that night five years ago was a tragedy that no human being could have committed. My only conclusion is that it was pure magic that made Summer disappear.

Nothing else could have taken her without leaving a trace behind. Magic would also explain the sparkling white rose that burned a piece of my hair snow white.

“This is just what I hear the servants saying, so I am unsure if any of it is true.” I nod slowly, biting my lower lip. “You'd better get to dinner; your father must be waiting.”

As I start out the door, a tugging feeling in my heart stops me. Whether it's the guilt for making Madam Marguerite suffer with my dramatics all these years or the fact that she has been a constant in my life since I was a child, it stops me from leaving.

I turn towards her, tears in my eyes, and with matching tears, she opens her arms. I run into them hugging her tightly. The feeling of the embrace just makes me sob more. I haven't been hugged like this since before my Mother went nonverbal. Only now do I realize just how much her hugs had meant to me.

“Oh, Wynter, I’m sorry for being so hard on you. I just saw your potential and knew that I had to push you to get you to be your best.” She strokes my hair as I cry, nodding, knowing no words will describe how I feel.

Only once I’ve run out of tears and her dress has been completely soaked does she drop her arms from around me. Grabbing my shoulders, she pushes me back slightly, looking into my eyes.

“Wynter, you have so much more power than you know, and when the time comes, remember to keep your spirit. Don’t lose that kind-hearted nature, no matter what happens and what is revealed. Stay you and don’t let anything change that. Promise me you won’t.” I nod, though not knowing what she means by it.

“I promise.”

“Good, now clean up for dinner. Roam will be here tomorrow, and we must all look our best. Show no weakness and stay out of the water. When you get to Roam, don’t swim or even touch the water.” Madam Marguerite smooths my now frizzy curls and shakes the wrinkles out of my dress before nodding.

I give her one last small smile before leaving. Although I spent most days hating the lessons she taught, I could never hate her. Yes, many times she was tough, but she never left me, even after the incident. And that's something my family can't say for themselves.

I fell asleep that night thinking of Madam Marguerite's warning about the waters and wondering why my eyes were an even brighter green than usual once I got back to my room.

Chapter Four ★

Chapter Four

The next day, I woke up feeling amazing. I always get a deep sleep after crying. Birds chirp near my window, and the sun shines very brightly.

The only thing that is off than usual is the horns that are blaring, signaling the arrival of another kingdom. Very rarely are these horns used except for trade ships that come four times a year.

Urgent knocking sounds, and when I open my door, not only does Clara walk in with her hands full, but so do three other maids.

“Whoa, what’s all this for? It’s not like I’m getting married today.” All four ladies look up, their eyes wide.

“Princess, you meet your future husband today. Not only that, but Rien and Roam have not met on civil terms in hundreds of years. This meeting is making history.” Only after Clara explains the reason for the urgency do the maids set all the supplies down and look me up and down.

Clara claps once, and they sit me down at my desk to get to work. While one maid works on my makeup, the other two move to the back to mess with my curls. Clara sits on my bed and busies herself with my dress, though I can’t see it yet with my back to her.

Pink blush gets dusted over my cheeks, and a dark green shadow is put on my lids. They brush my lashes with a black cream, making them longer and darker. For the final touch, they give me a sharp wing in the outer corner of my eye.

My curls are tamed and then twisted into a half-up braid, making sure to hide my white streak. An hour later, they finish up with my hair and makeup, and I stand to get into my dress.

“Here, Princess, I made this dress myself. I know you prefer the lighter colors, but I felt like a darker green would fit the occasion.” Clara hands me one of the most beautiful gowns I have ever seen.

It is a dark green, the color of the corset with emeralds sewn on the bodice, while little silver gems cover the skirt of the dress. With off-shoulder straps and a slit that only adds to the beauty of it.

“Oh my...I have no words. Clara, this is absolutely gorgeous.” She smiles, hands behind her back, shyly.

Without knowing what else to say, I head around the dressing walls to change into the gown. It slips on easily with silk on the inside and fits around my curves perfectly.

I walk back out, and all of the girls gasp.

“Princess...it fits you perfectly.” I grin, spinning in a circle, watching the green float around me.

I look at the mirror and see a powerful-looking woman. Something I definitely don't feel like. I hold my hands, trying to calm my nerves and stop the shaking.

"Whoa..." They all smile as I admire the dress.

"Wait! One thing is missing." Clara reaches into a box, pulling out a crown.

The crown is silver with emeralds that shimmer in the light. It matches perfectly with my emerald earrings and necklace.

Clara places it delicately on top of my head, careful not to mess up the intricate braid. The sun from my window hits the gems perfectly, making them shine even brighter than usual.

Before I can stop myself, I blurt out the questions that have been swimming in my head all day.

"Have you heard anything about Caspian? His age or what he's like? What if he's an old fat man who is nasty! Or what if he drinks and hits me?" My worry finally shows through the mask I've built. I don't think I would survive an abusive man. Especially not if I'm living in his kingdom with his rules and guards.

The maids look at each other, searching, before slowly shaking their heads.

"Sorry, Your Highness, we haven't heard anything. All details on the pirates and their Prince have been hidden well." I sigh, looking out the window, figuring that this would be their answer.

My head pounds, and I feel horribly nauseous. “Princess, we should probably head out to the dining hall. We will be having breakfast with the pirates, and you can meet with Caspian at this time. Remember, you haven’t signed anything official, yet this is just a meeting.” Clara’s soft voice soothes my worries slightly.

I nod and slide into the heels one of the girls put in front of me. They’re silver with tall heels, making my 5’7 frame more like 5’9.

A knock sounds before Everett walks in wearing his dark green suit coat with white accents and his sword buckled on his side.

“Ready, Princess?” He asks, holding out his arm for me. As I hook my arm around his, I see him in the corner of my vision giving Clara a wink.

I act like I don’t see this gesture since the other maids are still in my room watching intently, and instead grip onto his arm, using him to try and calm my nerves.

Clara and the others give me farewells and waves as Everett leads me out, walking downstairs to the dining hall.

“How are you feeling, Princess?” He whispers since other guards are lined up in the halls. I’ve never seen this many workers in the palace at once.

“Horrible. Do you know anything about Caspian yet?” I ask, needing some kind of reassurance, that I’m not about to meet an old, creepy man.

“I’m sorry, Princess; no one here knows anything about him.” I sigh, feeling even worse than I did before I left my room. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Besides the fact that you’re my closest friend, Clara would have my head if she found out I let pirates take you against your will. Then I’ll never be able to marry her.” He quietly says the last part, and I gasp, my eyes wide.

“You’re going to marry her?!” I whisper-shout, trying to contain my excitement.

“No. Not anytime soon, but I’m hoping I will in the future.” I groan, punching his arm.

“You were just trying to distract me, weren’t you?” He laughs, nodding.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Surprisingly, it did. You and Clara deserve each other. I promise to change the law so you don’t have to hide anymore.” I say, smiling as we almost reach the back end of the dining hall.

“I’ll hold you to it,” Everett says, opening the door for me before leaving to stand in line with the others.

I take a deep breath and walk into the hall, stopping once I get to my father, who is sitting at the head of the table as usual.

“Ah, daughter, finally. The pirates have arrived and are currently waiting.” I nod and take a seat next to him, fidgeting with the fabric on my dress.

“What am I supposed to do?” I ask, needing some kind of plan to get through this.

“Our guards will call the pirates in, and we will have a civilized conversation that hopefully will end in a signed agreement of peace and marriage.” All I can do is nod again. I know that if I say anything, I’ll completely freak out and run.

Father signals to the two guards standing at the front of the hall, and the guards give a stiff nod before opening the doors.

I hear muffled words being exchanged before an older man walks in.

My heart drops.

I was right.

This man is a complete pirate from the stories my mother told me as a child.

Old, practically my father's age, teeth missing and rotting, a round belly, and dirt covering him like he didn't have the decency to clean up before attending an important meeting.

“Oriel!” The man's loud voice echoes in the practically empty hall. “Long time no see, though I notice you haven't changed a bit since the last time we met.”

“Mavros. Welcome to Rien.” Mavros? I thought his name was supposed to be Caspian.

“Son, come in.” The man commands, looking back at the door he entered. Son? What is going on right now? He already has a child, and no one had the guts to tell me.

A tall, dark-haired boy walks in. Scratch that, this is no boy. He is fully grown, looking my age or slightly older.

“Daughter, this is King Mavros and his son, Prince Caspian of Roam.” My father explains, and I let out a breath, completely relieved.

I really need to calm down and not jump to conclusions. If I keep this up, I’ll die of a heart attack.

“Princess Wynter, a pleasure to meet you.” I look up at Caspian, who has strode over to me and taken my hand. He raises my hand to his lips and presses a kiss to it.

This action shocks me as I struggle for words, not expecting this from a pirate. Although he looks nothing like his father.

While King Mavros is short and chubby, Caspian is the exact opposite, being tall and definitely not chubby. Though he isn’t a twig either.

He has dark hair with slight curls at the ends and stormy blue eyes. I can’t tell if it’s gray or blue, so I just decided on a mixture of both.

Wearing black breeches and a dark blue, loose-fitting shirt that is rolled up on his arms. Well, loose everywhere but his arms. The linen shirt stretches around his biceps, showing off huge muscles.

Stop it, Wynter, stop staring at the muscles of the guy you're supposed to hate.

I look back up at him, though I have to tilt my head back slightly to meet his eyes. I would not consider myself to be short, but standing next to Caspian, I definitely feel like it. He has to be around 6'3, much taller than my father and his own father.

The corner of his mouth tilts up in a small smirk, and I narrow my eyes, not trusting it or him at all.

“What’s wrong, Trouble? Cat got your tongue?” My breath hitches.

“What did you just call me?”

“Trouble.” He states calmly, clearly, not seeing my glare that is directed right at him.

“Don’t call me that,” I state, but his smirk grows even wider.

“Why? I have a feeling that trouble will follow you.” Before I can argue with him more, my father claps his hands, signaling for us to sit so we can eat.

Caspian finally steps away, but only to pull my chair out for me, gesturing for me to sit.

I huff but sit down in the chair. Ironically its the chair between my father and Caspian.

This is going to be a long day.

Chapter Five ★

Chapter Five

Once everyone is seated, the servants rush out with platters of breakfast foods. My eyes wander around searching for the sticky rolls and fruit, my two favorites.

“Looking for something, Trouble?” Caspian asks with the same infuriating slight smirk.

I ignore his question and scoop some strawberries onto my plate along with a sticky roll. “Come on, you can’t ignore me forever.”

“Really? Because that’s exactly what I was planning on doing.” I bite into a strawberry, fighting the urge to moan as the sweetness hits my tongue.

“What do you recommend?” Caspian must notice my confusion at his question. “What foods do you recommend?”

“Oh, um...” I look around the table that is covered in bunches of different types of food, including sausages, cheeses, fruits, tarts, and eggs. “The sticky rolls.” Caspian raises a brow at my suggestion.

“Sticky rolls?” He asks, completely clueless. My eyes widen, realizing he doesn’t know what a sticky roll is.

“You must be joking. You’ve never had a sticky roll?!”

“Well, pirates don’t usually eat these kinds of foods,” Caspian states looking slightly disgusted as he waves a hand around, gesturing at the platters full of food.

“No one in Roam eats this.”

“Then today will be your first.” I grab the sticky roll from my plate and place it on his. “Eat it. Now.”

“Hm, very demanding. Say please.” He catches me off guard with his request.

“W-what...” I stutter, a nervous habit.

Stop stuttering your not a child anymore, you need to control your nerves.

“You heard me. Say please, and I will eat your glorified sticky roll.” His smirk grows wider as my cheeks flush.

“I am not saying please.”

“Fine Trouble. Then I’m not eating it.”

“Your loss, Graves,” I reply as I snatch the sticky roll and bite into it.

I genuinely have no idea where all of this confidence has come from. Whenever guests come over, I’m always quiet and never speak unless asked a direct question. But something about Caspian makes me feel comfortable.

What are you talking about?! He’s a pirate and dangerous. You have to stay away from him.

I finish the sticky roll and go back to my strawberries. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Caspian grab a sticky roll off the platter and take a bite.

I smirk to myself as I watch him finish it and grab another. Gotcha. I knew he would like it. There's no way anyone could not like Ellie's sticky rolls.

After Hannah, my childhood maid, was executed, which I didn't know at the time, I hung around the kitchens most of the time, making Ellie feel like a second mother to me.

Although I love my mother, she wasn't always present in my life. She would be gone for days at a time, and whenever I asked my Father about it, he just shook his head and told me not to worry about it.

Whenever she was present, she would tell me and Summer crazy stories of the oceans. Summer never believed them, saying they were just childish stories, but with the way Mother told them, I always felt like they had some truth.

"How is Ivelle? I haven't seen her in forever." Mavros' words break me out of thought, and my head snaps up to look at him. Although his question sounds innocent, I can tell by the cruel look in his eyes that it definitely is not.

While asking he takes a hidden knife out and stabs a piece of meat off the platter before bringing it to his mouth, chewing very loudly. Guess pirates really don't have manners.

"She is fine." My father says bluntly, clearly ignoring the disgusting action.

“Hm...is she still not talking? Curiously, the day your youngest went missing is the same day your wife went mute.” He pauses, seeming to wait for a reaction from my father, who gives none, so he continues. “Now my question is whether she chooses not to speak or if it was taken from her.”

“Father...” Caspian warns in a voice deeper than usual.

My brows furrow processing what Mavros just said. Why would Mother choose not to speak? “I know it's magic stopping her.” Is what I want to say, but of course I don't.

For one, I don't know for sure if magic is even real; it could just be me trying to find some sort of hope in this broken world. But for two, Mavros seems terrifying, and I want to talk to him as little as possible.

“I don't know what you're trying to infer, Mavros, but whatever it is, I advise you to keep it to yourself. I have no wish to speak about my wife and youngest with you.” While my father stays calm, the tone of voice he uses shows he is completely serious about this matter.

“Easy, old friend. I'm just trying to make conversation with you.” Mavros smirks, a familiar one that Caspian wears, though much more menacing.

He takes a teacup, inspecting the contents before his nose curls. “What in the Scurv-Rot is this?” Everyone in the room, including servants, gasps, horrified by his language. Well, everyone except King Graves and Caspian, that is.

“Mavros! You will not use that sort of language in a setting like this.” My father lectures him, which makes Caspian chuckle slightly.

“It's tea...” I say quietly, hoping that he won't be angered by my father's useless demand.

“By the sirens she speaks!” Mavros chuckles, leaning back in his chair and putting his mud-covered boots on the table, crossing his legs. “Aren't you a pretty little thing. My son lucked out that he got arranged with you.”

I can't tell if I'm flattered or weirded out. I give him a small smile, trying to seem polite as I run my hands down my dress, smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles.

I absolutely hate when people say things like that. Of course, I talk; I just choose not to, so I don't embarrass myself in case I say something stupid.

Which, unfortunately for me, happens a lot.

“You are a spitting image of your mother. Besides the hair, of course, which reminds me of something. Your sister Summer had the brightest red hair I have ever seen. Confusing because your father here has brown hair like yours, and your mother has dark black hair, so that makes me wonder where Summer gets her color from?” Mavros phrases this like a question, but it seems he already has his answer.

This is a question I had thought a lot about when I was a child, wondering why Summer and I looked so different, until my father informed me that he had a

great-grandmother who also had fiery red hair, and her genes must have skipped a few generations before hitting Summer.

As a child, this answer made no sense to me since I had no comprehension of genes and how they worked, so I made my own conclusion that Summer was secretly a fairy.

Now, of course, I know how ridiculous that was. I have now realized how bloodlines work and understand why Summer was born with red hair.

“Mavros...don’t start. We came here to talk about the arranged marriage, so let’s talk about the marriage and stop with this useless chatter.” Father ends the conversation, saving me from having to answer the question.

It's not that I don't enjoy talking; I truly do. When it's with the right person. Put me with Clara, Everett, or Ellie; I'm completely fine with chatting their ears off until they get annoyed.

However, put me in a room with anyone I don't feel comfortable with, and I could go the whole day without saying a word.

In my head, I talk with them, but when it gets to the part where I actually have to voice my words, that's when it gets hard. The words get stuck in my throat, and I feel like I will completely embarrass myself and scare myself out of saying anything.

I much prefer sitting and watching others, analyzing their body language, and playing True or False. As a young child, I learned the telltale signs in a person's mannerisms that show their true feelings.

For instance, with my father, whenever his eye twitches, it's a sign that he is either on the verge of a rage fit or lying.

My younger sister would always bite her nails when I caught her in a lie, usually when she was trying to hide sweets in her room or climb out of her window to go to the gardens. This happened a lot, even though she was only twelve.

“Fine, let’s discuss it. But perhaps one-on-one?” Mavros looks around the room where many guards and servants are standing.

“Wynter, why don’t you show Caspian around the palace. Perhaps the gardens?” My father looks at me expectantly, most likely a warning to keep Caspian in my sights at all times. I nod and stand.

“Yes, Father.” I head out the back doors of the hall, not looking back to see if Caspian follows.

If he wants to face the impending argument, then he can suit himself and stay in the hall. I, however, do not wish to face an angry king, let alone two.

Chapter Six □ ★ ° □

Chapter Six

I walk into the gardens feeling relieved as the fresh air hits me and floods my senses. I almost forget what's going on until footsteps walk up behind me and I tense right back up.

“So marriage?” Caspian catches up with me quickly and walks beside me.

“I don't wish to speak about this. Not now and not here.” I say quietly, not looking at him.

“Why not? Are these gardens special or something?”

“No...it's just a place I run to when I need to get away from everything.”

From the corner of my vision, I can see Caspian looking at me, but I don't dare look back. Not only can I not hold eye contact, but it may spark some questions I'm not prepared to answer.

For all I know, his father could have asked him to uncover secrets from me. There's no way I can tell him about my mother or the incident. No one besides my father and a few servants who swore to secrecy has the full details of that night.

“Fine, we won't talk about it.” Caspian states, and I nod gratefully. We continue down the cobblestone path, passing thousands of varieties of flowers and plants.

I fidget with my necklace, not knowing if I should say something or stay silent. Is he the kind who likes to stay quiet or always be talking?

But even if he did want to talk, what would I say? “So how’s the pirate life lately? Find any buried treasure lately?” Yeah, I think not. I would much rather walk in awkward silence than say something stupid.

“I have to admit, Princess, I’m not used to walking on ground that isn’t rolling under my feet. It’s a beautiful place you’ve got here, though. Truly.” He stops to grab a fallen flower off the pathway. “Back on my ship, it was blue sea for days, no plants or anything living. Unless you count the sea creatures, of course.”

I look up at him until I see his eyes already staring down at me, so I quickly look away and clear my throat.

“At least you have the freedom to go where you wish. Besides, the ocean is very beautiful in its own way.” Most of my paintings can say the same.

My mother's walls are covered in paintings I did of the ocean. When I made her a painting of the gardens instead, I could tell she didn’t like it as much. So, from then on, only ocean paintings.

“True...have you ever been to the ocean?” Caspian asks, still looking down at me as we walk. How he doesn’t trip is one of the endless questions that will never leave my mouth.

“No, but I truly want to. My father has never let me say it's too dangerous for a princess to visit.” I look down at my shoes as Caspian scoffs.

“That's ridiculous. I'm dangerous, and yet he is marrying you off to me. If danger stopped you from doing things, you'd have to be locked away forever.”

“Well, that's practically what he has done to me,” I mumble, and Caspian raises a brow.

“Have you ever left the palace grounds?” He asks warily, and I shake my head slowly. “Wow. Okay, then you actually are sheltered. No wonder I couldn't find any information on you.”

My brows raise as I finally look up at him. “You were trying to find info on me?”

Caspian shrugs, now looking out at the flowers. “Well, yeah wanted to make sure I wasn't getting myself into trouble. But it seems like I did.” He smirks now, looking down at me, meeting my gaze.

“I don't understand why you call me that.” The last thing I see is his smirk before my foot hits a rock on the pathway, and I stumble forward. This is exactly why I don't take my eyes off the ground. I am truly one of the unluckiest people on this earth.

I cover my face as I fall, but no impact occurs. Instead, a huge arm has snaked around my waist, holding me up while an equally huge hand has gripped my hip.

“That is exactly why you are Trouble.” He pulls me back up to face him, but his hands rest on my hips.

I huff, crossing my arms. “It’s your fault I fell.”

The corner of his mouth turns up into that infuriating smirk again as his brows raise. “Oh, is that so? Last time I checked, I didn’t force you to trip over that rock. Seems like you’re just a bundle of Trouble waiting to be set loose.”

I roll my eyes, and my gaze falls to where his hands are still gripping my hips, not painfully but firmly. When I look back up at his eyes, it seems as if the blue has taken over the gray when he looks down at me.

“Well uh...I can show you the rose garden now...if you want.” I stutter, quickly looking away from him.

“Hm...sure.” His smirk widens, though, as he sees my flustered state.

Scenes To Add

Leaving the ship:

I wake up to the crew yelling above and the sun shining through the small window. I get out of my bed reluctantly and look outside to see land, more specifically, Roam. I try to see farther out, but the crowd that is waiting outside for us blocks my view. Groaning, tired from the night before, I grab a dark red gown, slide it on before lifting the small bag I packed and heading upstairs to the deck. The crew excitedly lowers the gangway, running to their families as I slowly drag my surprisingly heavy bag. I reach the end of the gangway, looking at the wide, muddy puddle waiting for me at the end. I hesitate, not wanting one of the few dresses I packed to get dirty. Before I can move, a strong arm wraps around my waist, lifting me off the ground effortlessly. This surprise has me dropping my bag, looking over at the owner of the arm. Caspian looks down at me, smirking, grabs my bag with his other hand, and walks through the puddle, not letting his grip loosen until we're through the mud.

“Careful, Trouble wouldn’t want one of your pretty little dress to get dirty.”

Corset:

I lean over the edge of the boat, putting my hand in the water. Before I even realize what's happening, the boat has tipped on its side, and I fall in. My scream is cut off by the water that floods my lungs. I thrash, trying to grab onto the boat, but I can't see anything with the deep blue surrounding everything. I try staying above water, but the waves crash into me from all sides, making it impossible. My panic only makes the situation worse, and I start sinking even faster. I hear muffled shouting and then a splash impact next to me, but I don’t even process what it could be from. My eyes eventually start to blur until I feel a strong grip on my waist from behind. In little time, I’m dragged back up and set on the boat, sputtering out water.

“Caspian! Caspian!” I cry out, shaking.

“Shh, you're okay. I’m here, don't worry.” He soothes by wiping wet hair out of my face. I struggle to breathe as my heart races, gripping his arm. Reaching behind me,

I try to untie my corset, which is restricting my breath. I curse as my fingers fumble with the lace. Before I can say anything more, my hand is being gently moved aside as Caspian takes out his knife and cuts right down my corset.
“There. Is that better?”