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THE FATE OF HER HEART

By Lisa Gisselquist

Chapter One

“We can fix this together,” President Ryker of the Vatra said. He stood in front of a map of the galaxy at the end of the long council table. Despite the abundance of available chairs, only a few were filled.

Talia looked around at the other Council members. On the left side of the table, Councilor Soile of Erde sat with a derisive look on his face. He had grievances with almost everyone on the council and only attended meetings at the Citadel in absolute emergencies. Talia had only seen him about three times in her twenty-four years of life. His constant haughty expression could not easily be forgotten.

“Fix this?” The scorn in Soile’s voice was so common, Talia barely reacted to it anymore. Unlike the calmer temperament of most earth talents, Soile was angry at the world and had no problem with showing it constantly. “Fix what? There is nothing to fix.”

Ryker turned to face Duchess Sky of Ilma, sitting next to Soile. She was watching Ryker with a respectful but carefully masked face. At only five feet tall, many people underestimated her and her enormous pregnant belly didn’t help. Despite her calm demeanor, Talia avoided

making eye contact with her. One never knew what to expect from the powerful Air wielder. She remained silent and Ryker turned away from her to look at the other side of the table.

Talia followed his gaze to her own parents, King Thames and Queen Mistral of Kastella. As usual, her father was quietly taking notes. Even she couldn't tell what his views were on Ryker's words. Her mother leaned over to whisper something in Thames' ears before returning to an upright position. The serene smile on her face hid the depths of her water power carefully contained. Talia had only seen it released once and it was not an experience she ever wanted to see again.

The only person missing from the council was Adeite, Prime Minister of the only human nation. She wondered why he had been left out. Sure, he didn't have the elemental powers the rest of the council had but humans made up almost half of the total galaxy population. Why wouldn't he have a vote in this discussion?

Her eyes flew back to Ryker as he slammed his fist into the table. His dark hair was shaved tight on the sides and he brushed what little remained on the top back in annoyance. He was every inch the military commander, despite his role as President of the Vatra nation. His steel eyes focused on each member of the Council one after another. Talia looked away as his eyes caught on hers.

"The Kaito army grows in magnitude every day." He pressed a button and the screen next to the map changed to show a graph. "They have almost doubled in the last week alone. If we don't stop them, they will overwhelm any defense we could muster. If we don't act now—"

"Act now?" The mocking derision in Soile's voice smacked Ryker in the face. "Who do you think you are? You were elected less than a week ago. I, for one, am not going to listen to some young brat telling me what to do." He turned to the other council members to back him up.

Sky's face briefly showed agreement before she masked it again. Even Thames was nodding slightly.

“Outright warfare is never the first response,” Talia said. “A good plan of diplomacy is a much better choice. What reasons have we to attack them? So, they grow in numbers. So what? They are a minor cult group on the edges of the galaxy. They pose no real danger to our homes.”

“They have taken over Bradet,” Ryker pointed to a minor planet on the map. “They are rapidly conquering Tothas. In the last few months, they have taken over hundreds of towns. Who even knows what they are doing with the thousands of innocent civilians they have captured in their efforts to take over the galaxy? We can't afford to wait! How many more must be captured or killed before you decide to step in and help them?”

A sphere of fire erupted briefly above his head before shattering into smoke and vanishing again. He was breathing heavily as he struggled to control his anger. Talia flinched backward, her opinion of him dropping slightly. Any good wielder should be able to control his own magic without flare-ups.

“This is exactly why we should lean towards diplomacy,” Talia's father spoke, reaffirming his daughter's earlier argument. Talia tried not to let the pride from her father's approval show too much on her face. “You, like all your people, cannot control your temper. How should we know this is a real threat and not just a case of revenge? Did one of them slight you? If that is the real cause, just say so. We won't judge.”

The room grew perceptively hotter as Ryker glared deep into her father's eyes. Talia reached for her water magic, bringing it to the surface, prepared to use it if Ryker became volatile. To her surprise, he took a step back and a deep breath. He ran a hand through his hair again, trying to regain a semblance of control.

“We cannot afford caution. People are dying!” He threw a hand out towards the window where spaceships flashed by as they flew through the sky around the Citadel. He opened his mouth as if to speak again and swallowed his words again. Talia watched almost hypnotized as his Adam’s apple bobbed. She shook her head, trying to dislodge this strange attraction.

“I motion for tabling this discussion for a future date,” Mistral said. “It is getting late in the day and clearly no agreement is being reached.”

Ryker turned back around, a cold detached look on his face.

“The lives of those lost are on your heads. I won’t be a part of this idiocy. Consider this an official notice of the Vatra’s withdrawal from the Council.” He turned sharply and strode out of the room, his heels clicking on the marble floor.

Talia watched him go, uncertain what to think. As much as his emotion called to her heart, his argument didn’t make sense. The Kaito army was only a minor threat, barely even large enough to be an army. She had seen the reports from her parents’ scouts. There was no reason to scare everyone by calling out the military. Sure, it was a situation to be monitored but leaving the Council over it? It just didn’t make sense. She had never heard of one of the nations leaving the Council since its founding.

Yet, as she watched the door swing closed behind Ryker, she couldn’t help feeling like she was missing something. The sensation niggled at the back of her mind but she couldn’t put a finger on it. It was her father who distracted her.

He gently touched her elbow to get her attention and motioned for her to follow him out of the room. As they walked down the corridor outside the council room, she couldn’t help staring at the statues at the intersection of the hallways in front of her. The Citadel had been carefully split into five sectors and each sector had its own statue.

Her eyes skimmed over the four elemental statues, fire, water, earth, and air. Even though the Council only met once a year, she was familiar with the Citadel as her boredom as a child pushed her to explore. The final statue troubled Talia the most. As she and her father turned past it towards the Kastellan quarters, she could have sworn she saw the faint dust surrounding the statue.

Unlike the other four, this statue was a recent addition. No one was allowed to talk about the one it replaced. The new statue was a scholar to represent the humans. It had no famous person it was based on unlike all the others due to its hasty construction.

Talia could still remember the old statue, the one for the Storm Elementals. She tried not to think too much about the massacre that had precipitated the statue's replacement. Her mind flashed back to the moment everything had gone wrong.

It was hard to believe a misguided apprentice, now calling himself 'The Dark Lord,' was gaining so much power so fast. It had all started so small. He wanted to be placed with the prophetic dragon since his powers were almost nonexistent. *I just want to contribute*, he had pleaded. Talia's parents had seen no problem with the request. Yet, only two months later, he returned with the prophecy and changed the fate of the world.

When the planets began to despair,

There shall arise the dreaded heir.

When the storms show their true power,

And the galaxy is overpowered

Powers of Storms, great and small

Will take the world to its ultimate fall.

Bring it over the brink of the abyss,
Destroyed by the powers all dismiss.

Humans break, and with them the land
Never again to take a stand
Against the broken and wretched
Who will have it shredded.

The Council had been in an uproar about what to do, like today, but the decision was taken out of their hands. The first massacre had happened that night. Thousands of storm wielders were murdered in their sleep by scared civilians. By the time morning had rolled around, no one had slept. Within a few days, all the storm wielders were gone.

Laws were implemented to keep a storm talent from ever being born. Intermarrying between talents was outlawed. All intertalent couples were forced to divorce or be killed by the mob of scared people just trying to survive. And a terrified population will do anything. They were susceptible to the Dark Lord's manipulation.

He had continued to play into their emotions. *The storm talents were too strong. Their excessive power was why the prophecy was given. Who knew what talent would be next.* Instead, he argued people should be equal, and so should their powers. His methods were questionable at best. Downright despicable at worst. Yet, his followers didn't care. *EQUALITY FOR ALL! WIELDERS SHOULD BE EQUAL!* Their cries rang through the streets.

Once in motion, it was hard to stop the growing movement. They had already taken steps to violence and it only continued. Soon, the Kaito fighters were formed and began to slowly take over those who didn't agree as the rest of the galaxy watched in horror.

Now, only a few months later, the Kaito fighters were still gaining power. Talia agreed with her parents; it was dangerous to get involved. The storm talents had been destroyed overnight. If she was honest with herself, the influence of the Kaito army scared her. If her people tried to stand up, who's to say they wouldn't be next? Here one moment and obliterated the next. Yet, as much as it scared her, they were a minor threat. Something to be wary of but no more. Her parents had repeatedly assured her people of that.

“Are you alright?”

She was startled by her father's words and pulled out of her thoughts. While she had been distracted, they had made their way back to the Kastellan quarters and she found herself in her parents' study. Her father moved passed her to sit at his desk, his elbows resting on the mahogany.

He watched her for a long moment before speaking again.

“I wouldn't ask this if it wasn't vital. I am sending you to Ispa. I have arranged it with Ryker's assistant so they will be expecting you. You will be staying there until further notice. Your mission is to convince Ryker of diplomacy before he dooms us all.”

Talia's eyes widened as she stared at her father. He met her gaze calmly as she processed everything he had just said. In all her life, he had only asked her to go on a mission one other time. She opened her mouth to question his decision and then thought better of it.

“When do I leave?”

Chapter Two

Talia stared out of the front window of her ship. She still couldn't believe this was her parents' best plan. They had seen how heated the Council meeting with President Ryker had gotten. Yet, they still thought her traveling on a diplomatic mission was the best choice. A little part of her wondered if she was being punished for speaking out of turn to the Council. As a princess, it was a privilege for her to even attend the meeting. It would make more sense than reality.

The home world of the Vatra came into view slowly. Her breath was taken away at the sheer size of it. In comparison to her home world, Ispa was enormous. As they neared the planet, descending through the dark, smoky clouds, she was surprised to count at least five active volcanoes, and those were just the ones they could see. No wonder Ispa had held out against any invasion.

“Your highness?”

She glanced over to see her assistant, Zeke, watching her with slight concern. Or, perhaps more realistically, he was her handler. Sent by her parents to keep an eye on her. She tamped

down the urge to rebel against his watching. He held out a large water bottle to her.

“The temperatures of Ispa are much higher than we are familiar with. You will need the additional water to keep yourself from completely drying out. Stay inside whenever possible and we might get through this,” he said.

She nodded briefly, taking a sip of water as she turned back to the window. The capital building had come into view. The dark structure was made completely of rock and nearly blended into the landscape. Spires jutted up from the four corners, reaching up like spears into the sky. As they came in for a landing, she was finally able to see the doors in the structure. The one thing she didn't see any of was windows.

“There are no windows,” she muttered and shuddered. She was already wishing for the lush green fields and deep blue oceans of Ossa, her beautiful home. Through the metal shields of the spaceship, she could have sworn she felt the oppressive heat settling into her bones. Even the most humid day on Ossa was more bearable than this burning.

“With the heat of this planet, windows are impossible,” Zeke said. “Any kind of glass would melt before it could even be shaped into a window, much less placed and used.”

An escort was waiting for them as they disembarked. He led them into the dark building. The inside of the building wasn't as dark, which Talia was grateful to see. She also could feel the temperature drop to a reasonable level the further they got into the building. Soon, the sweat on her skin from the short walk had dried.

The escort guided them to their rooms, a simple suite-style set of rooms with separate bedrooms and a central gathering place.

“President Ryker regrets he is unavailable to greet you upon your arrival but looks forward to dining with you tonight.” The escort bowed and left.

Talia reluctantly settled in to wait. The sooner she could get this stupid mission over with, the better.

#

The escort returned as the sun was dipping below the horizon. He led Talia through the palace, this time to a large dining hall. The space appeared as if it had been carved out of the rock. The large curved sides of the walls were smoothed by the passage of time. However, Talia could spot the place where hands could no longer reach and the walls grew rough and jagged again. Torches were placed at intervals throughout the room. A small part of her wondered at the archaic lighting instead of the reliable electric power.

At the front of the room, there was a slightly lifted platform. A long dining table was already set up with dishes and food. Talia's nose wrinkled slightly as she saw the abundance of red meat and the general lack of fruits and vegetables. Giant platters of roast lamb, pork ribs, and the largest steaks she had ever seen stretched down the table. A rowdy group of soldiers already waited, watching the meat carefully as if they could eat it with their eyes.

At the center of the long table, Ryker sat with an empty seat to his right. As she walked closer, she studied his face. His red, almost brown hair, cut like most soldiers, was tight against his scalp on the sides, with only a little bit more on the top. His steel blue eyes watched her closely as she made her way to her seat. She could see a slight scruff on his jaw, revealing it had been some time since he had last shaved. As she reached her seat, he stood and gave her a nod of acknowledgment before taking his seat again.

“How was your trip?” He asked.

“Fine.” She wasn't going to make this easy for him. He may have an appealing outside but it could not hide the man inside. How long before his temper would appear again?

Zeke cleared his throat and she reluctantly took a deep breath and started over.

“I apologize, I forgot myself for a moment. The trip was uneventful.”

Ryker nodded and began to eat. Talia looked around before spotting some salmon a few platters down. It wouldn't be quite like her home world but anything was better than nothing. As she served herself and started eating the sweet, honey-garlic fish, Ryker began to speak.

“I hope you aren't under any kind of impression of what our discussions will be like. My opinion is unchanged. Nothing will be solved by more negotiations. The Kaito fighters advance unchecked—”

“Nothing will be solved by negotiations?” She interrupted. “Even as we are talking, my parents are solidifying a deal with the Kaito fighters to protect the remaining planets from invasion.”

“Like it will do anything,” he scoffed. “The Kaito fighters will not be stopped by simple negotiations. All your parents are doing is telling The Dark Lord not to cross a line. It has been tried countless times in the past and still, he advances. Are your people even prepared for an attack?”

Talia rubbed her fingers against her skirt as she tried not to get angry.

“I am not giving away classified information just becau—”

“So, you have nothing! Do you even hear yourself?” He fully turned to her, the anger clear on his face. The torches on the wall behind him flared higher. “The Kaito fighters are coming. Just telling them to stop will do nothing. The Dark Lord has one goal and no amount of talking will stop him. You and your parents sit there in your castle, assuring your dying people you will protect them but you do nothing to show it. I have been on the front lines. The Kaito fighters are powerful. They have more soldiers than any one nation and they are growing

rapidly.”

Talia tried to back away slightly. His voice just kept rising. The flames from the torches had grown until she could only see his silhouette in front of them.

“How much longer can you hold out?” he continued. “How long until the Kaito fighters reach your gates? Invade your inner halls and kill everyone you love? Until the children are the ones massacred in their beds? Do you think this can be solved with words? The time for words has passed.”

He rapidly stood to his feet and grabbed her arm, his fingers clasping firmly but careful not to injure her. She didn’t know what to make of the contradiction in his move. He dragged her behind him out of the dining hall. She tried to plant her feet but there was nothing she could do to stop him. She glanced back to see Zeke and her guards being held back.

Ryker stormed down the halls and dragged her through several doorways, turning and descending deeper into the castle. She could feel the temperature change. Why had she listened to her parents telling her this mission was safe? They claimed Ryker wouldn’t risk further bloodshed by hurting her. Now she wondered if she would even get out alive.

At the bottom of the stairs, he turned and pushed her through a set of double doors. She stopped just inside, shocked by what she saw. The large, rectangular room was divided into several long rows of beds. She couldn’t even count how many there were, at least a hundred, if not more.

Her eyes flashed around the room, overwhelmed by the injured soldiers crying out in pain. Some lay, barely able to take a gasping breath, each appearing as if it would be the last. A young soldier, barely more than eighteen was spurting blood, despite nurses working in vain to stop the bleeding. A section of ten beds was filled with soldiers covered in burns so deep she

could see a glint of white she didn't even want to think of. Everywhere she turned people were dying.

"Help me," the gasping breath came from the bed directly to the right of the swinging doors they had entered through. She looked down at the blond soldier. A large bandage was wrapped around his midsection. She tried to figure out any way to help as he hacked away, struggling to get a clear breath. Ryker motioned for a nurse to help the man but she was struggling to finish with the broken bone she was setting. Talia gently lifted the man's cup of water to his lips for him to sip and was rewarded with a whispered "Thank you, miss."

"Take a good look around, princess," Ryker said, his voice hard. "A few days ago, my men attempted to defend one of the outer planets in my nation from the Kaito fighters. I sent out over a thousand men. These are the few who survived. Out of all my men, less than a hundred survived."

Talia wrapped her arms around her waist, at a loss for words.

"Do you still think he can be stopped with words?" Ryker's voice gentled slightly. "He won't ever stop unless we make him. In the last few days, I have told more families the news I never want to share again. He must be stopped before it's too late."

When she turned to leave the room, struggling to keep her composure, he didn't stop her. The doors were nearly closed behind her when she heard his voice ask a final question.

"Could you even defend yourself, princess, when he comes for you?" The sadness in his voice haunted her as she left the room.

Chapter Three

Talia awoke with a start to her bedroom door slamming open, closely followed by Ryker. She rubbed her eyes as she sat up, vainly hoping she was imagining him standing there. It had taken her forever to go to sleep after what she had seen in the hospital.

“What do you want?” She couldn’t keep the annoyance out of her voice.

“Get up. Get dressed. We have a lot of work to do.” He stalked over to her bags, lying neatly in the closet. He began throwing pieces of clothing out left and right.

“Hey! What are you doing?” She jumped out of bed and was smacked in the face by a flying dress.

“Finding you something suitable to wear.”

“For what?”

He turned, holding up the one pair of pants she had brought on the journey. She much preferred the freedom of a flowing dress or skirt rather than tight pants.

“You need to learn how to defend yourself. I’m going to teach you.” He threw the pants and a shirt at her and stormed back out of the room.

She blinked, not sure what had just happened. He had left her alone after the whole hospital scene the previous night. Had it been foolish of her to believe that his heavy-handed ways would stop there?

She reluctantly moved into the bathroom to change. Her movements become mindless as her thoughts returned to the endless circling around the events of the previous day. Nothing made sense. Why was Ryker still advocating for a direct attack if his people were dying in such magnitudes? Wouldn't it make more sense for him to want diplomacy? It might be the only way his people would survive this war.

And what was with the sadness in his final words from the previous night? *Could you even defend yourself when he comes for you?* Why did he even care? He hated her! Right?

She made her way out of her bedroom. She jerked back, startled to find Ryker waiting for her immediately outside her door.

“Come on,” he motioned for her to follow him and moved towards the stairs. She followed him through a series of confusing turns. His palace was massive. Even from the little she had seen, she already knew it was bigger than Ossa's palace.

They rounded the corner into a large room. He kept moving determinedly through it but she couldn't help slowing to look around. Everywhere she turned, countless cots and blankets were set up. Hundreds of people, if not more, bustled around various little claimed plots of the room. Mothers comforted stressed children. Fathers brought food for the families. There was a subdued atmosphere in the whole room. The children were not running around playing as she would expect. Instead, they sat still with haunted faces. Their eyes conveyed a world of terrors they had seen.

She felt a gentle hand on her elbow and turned to see Ryker standing there. He turned to

look at what she had been and his eyes grew sad.

“You saw the injured soldiers yesterday. These are the refugees from Endor.”

Talia froze. Endor was a massive planet within Vatra. Of the millions of people from the planet, those who remained could fit in one room? It didn't matter if the room was one of the largest ballrooms in the galaxy. She shuddered as her mind tried to process what must have happened to the rest of them.

Ryker gently began leading her across the room.

“Why didn't you mention this at the council meeting?” Her hoarse voice was strangely audible in the unnatural stillness of the room.

“Because it hadn't happened yet. The attack on Endor began two days ago. The capital city fell last night.”

She couldn't speak after his words. How much had her parents been hiding from her? She had thought the Kaito army was still gaining strength. Raiding small towns and villages here and there but no real danger. But to be able to decimate an entire planet in a matter of days? A chill flashed through her core.

She was surprised to feel water gently floating around her fingers as her magic reacted to her emotions. She lifted her hands up to her face, not quite understanding what she was seeing. Her magic, and her emotions, were always perfectly under control. Her parents had drilled this control into her from a young age.

For the first time, she could feel her magic stirring rebelliously in her chest. The usually calm waters wanted out. They wanted to drown the Kaito fighters for all their crimes. They roiled deep within her as she took a deep breath, struggling to keep control.

“What happened to the rest of the Endorians? Are they... dead?” Her voice sounded

distant to her own ears. The water swirling around her fingers grew until a mini stream flowed around her whole body. Not a drop fell to the ground.

“The reports haven’t been confirmed yet. We don’t even know for sure if they are still alive. We believe the Kaito fighters have a system in place for capturing them. Whether for their twisted magic-stealing rituals or something else, we don’t know.”

She was startled as he took one of her hands in both of his, pulling them to a stop. His thumb ran briefly over her own before it stopped as if the move was subconscious. His steady eyes met hers, trying to calm her.

“I know this is a lot of information all at once. We are doing everything we can to stop their advance but all we can do is slow it down. I don’t have an army large enough or powerful enough to stop the Kaito army on my own. They are growing insanely fast. That’s why we need outside help.” He started moving again, letting her hand go as he led her from the ballroom and down a hallway. “The people you just saw will be starting training this afternoon. I won’t put the mothers and children on the battlefield but I cannot just leave them as sitting ducks when the Kaito army reaches Ispa.”

They stopped in front of a metal door and he flattened his palm against it. She watched as his hand grew red with heat, pressed against the palm and magic sensor. The door beeped as the lock clicked and the door swung open. He led her into the room. She glanced around, noting the wall of weapons, the empty space in the center of the room with a ring around it, and the punching bag hanging in the corner.

“What are we doing here?” She asked wearily.

“I refuse to stand by and let anyone face the Kaito army defenseless. Now, let’s see what you can do.” He stepped into the ring, unbuttoning his sleeves, and rolling them up out of the

way. The sleeves caught on his forearms and he gave up trying to pull the sleeves up. Instead, he took his shirt off revealing a sleeveless undershirt. Unlike every other ruler she had, Ryker was surprisingly fit. His muscles weren't obsessively large but they weren't flabby. She tried not to let her cheeks get warm as she watched him. She shook her head, trying to clear her head, joining him in the ring.

He grabbed some tape sitting in a bucket by the edge of the ring and walked back towards her, motioning for her to give him her hands.

“We'll start with some hand-to-hand. Then we can move on to weapons and magic training.” He finished wrapping her right hand and started on her left. “How much experience do you have with close combat?”

“I'm... familiar with the principles.” She didn't want to admit how much she did or didn't know. She still wasn't entirely sure what his motivations were. “Do you train with all of the envoys sent to your nation?”

He looked at her strangely before responding.

“You are the first envoy I've had since my election.” He finished wrapping her hands and began on his own.

She tried not to be annoyed him for not answering the question she wanted to know the answer to. Was she special or did he do this with everyone?

For the next hour, he ran her through every type of fighting you could think of. She was decent at hand-to-hand and horrible at sword or any other weapon fighting. Yet, through all her shortcomings, he did not criticize her or berate her for not being good enough, something she was all too familiar with from former trainers. Instead, he paused what they were doing to demonstrate a better method before continuing to test her.

She was a little uncertain how much help he would be with magic training. She was all too aware of how different their magic was. His skin burned hotter than hers every time she brushed against it on accident.

“Here, try this,” he said when her magic once again fizzled out against his fire magic and deeper reserves of power. He set his feet firmly, grounding himself solidly, before throwing out more magic. The flames flew through the air even hotter and stronger than what he had been doing moments before. She reluctantly copied his move and narrowly missed dousing him with the water flying out of her hands. She dropped them with a squeak of surprise, staring at him in shock. He chuckled at her amazement.

“I learned the trick a couple of years ago. My father sent me to spend a year with the earth wielders for a training camp. I thought he was messing with me when he first mentioned it. I was such an arrogant teenager. Anyway, the earth wielders introduced me to the concept of grounding your body. It makes more sense for them to be in touch with the earth they are manipulating but the principles still carry over and assist others. Now, try it again but this time,” he moved to her side, adjusting her hips slightly with her nod of permission.

She repeated the move with the new position and was once again surprised at how much she could pull from her already depleted reserves. He kept working with her for another thirty minutes on that move and others. Eventually, he stepped away to take a quick phone call, and she collapsed to the floor, trying to catch her breath. Magic was nothing like the effortless movements in films of previous generations’ imaginings. It took a lot of physical energy to use properly. She had just managed to settle her gasping lungs back to normal when he turned back to her.

“You aren’t as bad as I had feared but we have our work cut out for us. We only have a

few weeks before you are due to return to your parents.”

He reached a hand down to her and helped her up. She stumbled as she rose and almost knocked the both of them down as she fell into him. She glanced up at him and was rendered motionless by the unexpected tenderness in his eyes. The moment seemed to stretch on forever as she became aware of his warm chest against hers, his arms still wrapped around her to keep her from falling, his slate blue eyes caressing her face. For a second, she could have sworn he was starting to lean in toward her slightly.

His phone rang again and she was jarred back to reality. He let her go and she ducked her head, trying to hide her blush.

Chapter Four

Ryker led her back out of the training room. She didn't pay much attention to her surroundings, too distracted from exhaustion. The heat of the outdoors shocked her out of her thoughts. She looked around, confused as he led her away from the main building towards a smaller building a couple hundred yards away.

Even though they had only gone about twenty feet, she paused, reluctant to leave the shade and be exposed to the harsh sunlight Ispa was famous for. Fire talents might thrive in the warmer temperatures but her water-loving skin felt like it was on the brink of cracking open. Her simple sandals were already starting to sizzle slightly on the hot sands and rock.

"Where are you taking me?" She couldn't help the tiny bit of apprehension remaining. Though he had been a perfect gentleman during training, never taking advantage of her or trying to harm her under the guise of normal training, she couldn't help thinking back to the warnings of her parents. *Fire talents are harsh. They have violent tempers and they will use their magic on any who dares to mess with them. Beware of the President of Vatra on this mission.*

The man in question glanced back at her.

“I need to feed the babies. It’ll only take a minute and then I’ll escort you back to your room.” He continued towards the building that was starting to look like a stable. However, unlike the stables she was familiar with, this one was carefully tucked away from the direct sun and made of gray stone.

“Babies? What kind of babies?”

He didn’t respond.

She reluctantly followed him. She swallowed dryly, hyper-aware of how fast the heat was affecting her. She could already feel the sweat soaking through her clothing and pinning it against her skin. She longed for the free-moving clothing of her people and the cooler temperatures, her hands trying in vain to pull the clothing away from her skin before it started to chafe.

The noticeable temperature drop as they stepped through the large doors into the stable only did a little to lessen her nerves. Her parents hadn’t mentioned any kind of animals Ryker interacted with, though they had warned of almost everything else.

He entered a stall just inside the door to grab a bucket full of supplies. She caught sight of a couple of blankets and some baby bottles in the bucket as he left the stall and made his way down the row of stalls. About halfway down the row, he turned down a cross hallway before turning again down another row. He made his way to the end of the hallway, placing his bucket down next to one of the stalls. He unlatched the stall door and entered, turning as he did so to motion her closer.

She gingerly moved closer to peak over the edge of the stall. To her surprise, the creatures nestled were not any kind of baby camel or even some kind of salamander as she might expect to find in an Ispa stable. Instead, in a small pile in the corner furthest from the stall door

was a mom and five baby creatures that she could only describe as scaly bats.

“What are they?” She wasn’t sure what to make of them as some of them were covered in a fine layer of slime. Why was this worth braving the growing heat of midday?

“They are Firebats. Not many of them remain on Ispa after a large volcano eruption decimated their food source a few years ago. With the war, we don’t have the money or resources to devote to protecting those that remain. I found this mama a couple of days ago,” he gently runs a fingertip over the wing of the mama as she pushes into him for more pets. “Hand me the bucket please.”

“I’ve never heard of Firebats before,” Talia admitted as she did what he asked. The more time she spent with Ryker, the more she felt there was so much she didn’t know about the world. First it was the strength of the Kaito army, then the fighting skills she was lacking, and now the Firebats. The last one was so small but she was becoming overwhelmed. The heat, though cooler in the stables, was still oppressive and she could feel a headache developing as she ran her tongue over her chapped lips. She just wanted to return to her room to cool down and process everything that had happened throughout the day. Her parched throat was starting to become painful.

Before she could withdraw too far into herself, Ryker grabbed her hand and deposited one of the babies in her hands. The little creature was barely more than fluff and wing nubs but she couldn’t help falling in love with it. She ran her finger gently over its belly and wings as her mind slowly settle back down.

“They are still growing. They’ll be in the fluffy stage for a few more weeks before their scales start developing.”

Talia glanced up to see him using one of the bottles to feed the smallest baby. He also

pulled out some dead bugs to feed to the mama.

Together, they played with the babies for a few minutes longer. They were forced to leave to help keep Talia from succumbing to the heat. She could already feel it draining her energy away. He ended up carrying her back across the hot pavement since her sandals were melted beyond use. They no longer offered any protection from the stone.

He made a brief stop to get her some fresh water to drink from the kitchen. Though she could generate the water whenever she needed it, the effort it took in such an unforgiving environment made it almost impossible to use it to remain hydrated.

Her mind kept returning to the gentle care Ryker show the Firebat babies and her as he led her back to her room. As they paused outside her door, she was reluctant to leave him. He seemed to understand her reluctance. His hand reached up towards her cheek before he dropped it again to his side.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” he said. He looked into her eyes one last time, turned, and walked away down the hall. She wouldn’t let herself think about how much time she spent watching him walk away. Right before he disappeared, he turned back, catching her staring. She jumped, embarrassed at being caught but he just called “I’ll send someone up with some sunburn cream.”

She fled into her room to look in the mirror. To her horror, her face was burnt a bright red from the much warmer climate of Ispa and the closer sun. She didn’t want to think how long he had been looking at the tomato color of her face before she realized it. She splashed water on her face to try and cool her burning cheeks as she vowed never to leave her room again.

#

As she sat in her room several hours after dark, she struggled to process everything from the day. Her mind kept returning to the moment when she was pressed against him in the training

room, looking up into his face. Replaying over and over the look in his eyes, the slight lean in. Had he been about to kiss her? Did she want him to?

Her mind tried to replay the scene but with a kiss but every time he started to lean in for the kiss, he would stop just before his mouth reached hers. It played over and over in her mind until she wanted to scream with frustration.

Who was she kidding? This couldn't happen. He was from the fire talent. Ever since the prophecy, relationships between talents were expressly forbidden. No one wanted to risk the danger of having a storm talent kid who would destroy the world. Even those who didn't believe the prophecy were forced to avoid relationships by the new laws. It didn't matter that his kindness towards the people under his care and the Firebat babies was refreshing.

She shook her head. What was she thinking? How could she even be considering the possibility of a relationship from one look and a maybe almost kiss?

The only explanation was she was going insane. Yet, her mind took her back to the moment once again. Finally, she fell into a broken slumber.

Chapter Five

A couple of days after she met the Firebat babies, Talia sat alone in her room at the desk by the window. The sky outside was darkening towards night as she rested after a long, exhausting day of training. The transparent floating screen of her computer stayed blank as the ringing sound filled the air. After several attempts, she was forced to admit defeat. Her parents weren't answering her call for the third time in as many days. She couldn't help worrying as the call screen closed with no response.

Was something going on at home? Had she done something wrong? What other reasons were there for the lack of contact? She hadn't received any written communications since she had left. Even Zeke didn't know anything though he had been kept busy with side tasks from Ryker.

She stood up, pacing back and forth as her mind raced with possibilities. This was so unlike her parents, especially when she was on a mission. She couldn't help wondering if they were trying to keep something from her. Everything from the last few days with Ryker had assured her there was so much her parents hadn't been telling her.

What if something horrible was happening at home? What if the Kaito army was attacking Ossa? Were her parents in a battle of life and death?

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her mind down before her thoughts got too out of control. There was probably a simple explanation for all of this. Maybe her parents had left the capital to visit one of the other nations. They didn't do it often but it wasn't unheard of. Yet, even as she considered the possibility, she knew it was unlikely her parents would leave the capital unattended, especially while she was also away.

A little part of her worried her parents knew she was listening to Ryker. Had they decided she was betraying them by believing in the dangers of the Kaito army? She wasn't trying to break away from the mission she was on but the facts Ryker presented were difficult to ignore. Her heart still hurt every time she thought about the wounded soldiers and the haunted eyes of the children.

She turned sharply from her pacing and hurried back to the desk. Scrolling through her contacts, she selected the one for her best friend, Adria. She forced herself to sit still and tried to regain some of the royal poise her parents had drilled into her from a young age.

"Talia! Hey, girl. It's been forever since we talked. How are you?" Adria's round face popped up on the screen with a smudge of flour on her nose. Talia was relieved to see her friend in her favorite habitat of the palace kitchens.

"Hey, Adria. Is everything going well at home?" She tried to keep the worry from her voice.

"Yeah, everything's fine. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." She considered pressing Adria further but she didn't want to alarm her unnecessarily. If something was going wrong, Adria would be complaining about how she

couldn't cook.

“So, tell me about this President,” Adria’s mischievous smirk was back. Any sign of worry from Talia’s question was wiped away as the young baker pressed for gossip.

“What do you want me to say? He’s okay, I guess.” She tried not to let her confused emotions about him show on her face but as always Adria’s perceptive eyes caught her.

“Now, I know there is more to the story from your look. Come on, give me all the details.”

Talia paused for a moment, not sure how much to share.

“He’s... not what I expected. I thought he would be rough and demanding but he’s not. He helps in the infirmary, trains regularly with his men, and he’s even got a group of foster pets he is caring for. I’m not sure why Mom and Dad don’t listen to him in the Council meetings. I even regret shutting him down so hard. If this is what fire wielders are like, then—”

“Talia,” Adria’s chiding tone interrupted her. “He’s a fire talent. You can’t trust him. He’s just trying to get under your skin so you’ll be more receptive to his lies. Has he given you any evidence of his claims? Or did he once again just expect you to believe him because he’s the new president of the Vatra? He can’t just rely on the legacy of his predecessors.”

Talia sat back in her chair, trying not to let Adria’s words affect her. Her mind flashed back over everything from the past few days. Had everything been a ploy to get her to trust him? Was she so naive?

“Please tell me you didn’t start falling for him.”

The worry in Adria’s tone grated on Talia’s skin until she was forced to rub her hands along her arms to try and dispense with the sensation.

“Talia, you know better. He’s from a different talent. You can’t fall for him. It’s

forbidden! And he's a *fire* talent! Imagine what he would do if he got access to your heart and started to control you. He could take down everything your parents have worked for!"

Talia couldn't take it anymore.

"I've got to go, Adria. I'll talk to you later."

She shut the screen down before Adria could respond. She got to her feet, pacing back and forth again. Had everything been in her head? Was he manipulating her every step of the way? Her arms wrapped around her waist as she struggled to keep her composure.

Her mind replayed the almost kiss, or what she had thought was an almost kiss. For all she knew, that was just another ploy to get under her defenses. Play with the poor, lonely princess's heart until she had no chance of changing his mind about the Kaito army. What if he was in league with them? How was she supposed to know the wounded soldiers weren't Kaito fighters?

She gave up on trying to do anything more and got ready for bed. Falling into the sheets, she closed her eyes hoping to escape her racing mind. He wasn't going to get through her defenses so easily. She was no helpless princess to be played with.

It was many hours later when her brain finally settled enough to let her fall into an uneasy slumber.

Chapter Six

Talia stared up at the ceiling, unable to sleep again. It had been three weeks since she started training with Ryker. Her muscles ached from the constant practice. Before this, she had thought she was in complete control of her magic. He had proved how wrong that assumption was.

Over that time, they had had countless conversations about the approaching Kaito army. Ever since the call with Adria, she had pushed him harder for proof. Demanding that he back up every claim he made about the danger they were in. It was only when he flew her over the destroyed planet, Dertu, that she believed him. She had stared out in muted horror at the still-smoking empty towns. She couldn't believe this was the same planet she had visited over the summer for the carnival. After that, she believed him.

She began questioning him more about what he needed. What was it that he needed from the council? Was there any way she could help? Between training and visiting the rapidly growing Firebat babies, she found herself put to work in the infirmary, bandaging wounds and feeding the patients who couldn't feed themselves.

She had reached out to her parents again to try and speak to them about it, but they had been strangely distant. They still pushed off her call requests. Part of her was worried about the conditions at home. The other part was convinced they were avoiding her for some strange reason.

Ryker on the other hand was attentive. They had had several long discussions, some deep, others lighthearted. She still couldn't believe he had wanted to be a circus performer as a child. He was so different from everything her parents had warned her about. The famous 'fire wielder temper' was nowhere to be found. She was beginning to look forward to each dinner and training session they had.

She rolled over onto her side, thinking back for the millionth time to the almost kiss. Nothing had happened since but sometimes she would catch him watching her with a gentle expression.

She shoved her blankets off, rolling over again, her nightgown tangling up in the sheets. She shouldn't be thinking about him this way. Though most people were focused on the war effort, the rules against intermarrying between magical talents were still strictly enforced by the Council. The world was enough of a mess without bringing back the risk of a storm talent.

She rose from the bed, unable to sit still any longer. She padded lightly out into the corridor on silent, bare feet. Her water magic buzzed around her, dancing in the air. Every time she considered stopping or changing direction, it would flit ahead and turn back to brush against her cheek before moving forward again.

She followed it out onto a balcony. Looking over the railing, she could see the palace grounds spread out before her. In the sky above, the stars were clearer than any other time she had seen them before. She couldn't help staring up in awe at the beauty above her.

“Quite a sight to see, isn’t it?”

She turned, startled to see Ryker leaning against the wall. He pushed himself upright and walked to her side, his eyes watching her. As he reached her side, he turned to look up at the sky.

“That one there,” he pointed to a bright star up to her right, “is Zamas, the twin planets.” He reached down, grabbing her right hand and pointing it at the star he was referring to, his chest warm against her back. “My father used to tell me about the dragons who lived there. He said that there was one of them, a king named Bate, who searched far and wide for his queen. When he eventually found her, he treasured her and from them, all dragons were descended. Now, the planets circle around each other, empty, flirting closer and closer together. My father believed the dragons would return when the planets passed a full orbit of the star next to each other.”

He returned to staring up at them in silence, still pressed against her back. She tried to process everything he had said but it was much harder with him so close.

“I used to dream,” he continued, “about finding dragons as the stories told. As I grew older, I realized the story was more about my father. He loved my mother dearly and I wanted a love like theirs. I never imagined I would find it.”

He gently rested his chin on the top of her head, placing his hands on either side of her on the railing. She leaned back more fully into him, enjoying the almost embrace. She was too comfortable to move for a long time.

Eventually, she felt her eyes beginning to close and it startled her slightly. She had never been so close to sleep so easily before. Her restless mind often kept her awake for hours, even in the comfort of her own bed at home.

She turned to look up at him. He was a lot closer than she realized. He looked down at her with a tender look in his eyes. Her heart started to pound. He lifted a hand, brushing her hair

off her cheek and behind her ear. His hand lingered for a second before he leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips.

The warmth of his mouth meeting her was better than anything she had felt before. He backed away as if to make sure she was okay with this and she pulled him back for another kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck, one hand going into his hair as they kissed. His hands were wrapped around her waist, supporting her weight slightly.

Eventually, they stopped kissing and just stood there, her head on his chest, his arms around her.

Later, as she made her way back to her room, she couldn't help brushing her fingers over her lips again and again. Her mind kept replaying every kiss excessively. The feel of him. The taste of him. As she neared her bed, she thought back to the story he had told. The final words echoed in her mind. *I never imagined I would find love.* Was he talking about her? Did he love her? It was still so early but she couldn't help wondering. She could still feel his warmth against her as she climbed back into bed, falling asleep almost instantly for the first time since she could remember.

Over the next week, she and Ryker continued to grow closer until she dreaded having to return home. They would find time throughout the day to sneak moments away together. Sometimes they would visit the Firebats and debate over names. She still felt an attachment to the baby he had handed to her that first day,

She loved finding him hunched over in his study or in the war room as he tried to figure out his next steps. She would bring him food or steal him away for a picnic in the stables. She was always careful never to stay too long after the sunburns she had struggled with after the first day in the stables.

Occasionally, when no one was looking, he would press a quick kiss to her cheeks, her lips, or her forehead until she grew accustomed to his gentle touches whenever he was near.

But before long, the dreaded day came. Adria arrived with a summons from Talia's parents, a contingent of bodyguards rivaling a small battalion, and a haunted look on her face.

"We have to leave now," was the first thing Adria said. She glanced around furtively as if expecting fire soldiers to jump out and arrest her.

"Why now? I'm not ready to leave yet. Besides, why are you so scared?"

Adria refused to answer. She grabbed Talia by the arm and began dragging her towards the spaceship.

"Hey. Stop!" Talia began struggling against her strong arm. "I am not ready to leave yet. I at least want to say goodbye to Ryker."

She tried to dig in her heels but Adria was stronger than she looked. Talia made one last attempt to grab hold of the door and prevent herself from being carried away but it was no use. Her grip slipped and the doors slammed shut. She slammed on them in frustration but they wouldn't open. She rushed to the front as the spaceship prepared for takeoff. Ryker was returning from his trip to speak with his soldiers. As she looked out the window, she saw him running towards the ship. She could have sworn he was yelling her name.

"We must stop! I need to say goodbye. I need to tell him..." she trailed off as she realized what she was about to say. *I need to tell him I love him.*

It was too late. The ship lifted off and they were in the dark blackness of space within seconds. She stared out the window at where Ryker's image was still engraved in her mind.

"You don't know what you've done," was all Talia said.

Chapter Seven

Talia was already upset when the spaceship reached her home world. She glared out the window, too angry to speak. After everything that had happened over the last couple of weeks, she had gained independence from her parents. Ryker had pushed her to think through every action and now her parents were calling her back like an errant child.

The door to the ship opened and the ramp descended slowly. She leaped out without waiting for it to finish, stalking across the outdoor landing zone toward the palace doors. A frantic guard barely managed to get the giant, gold-inlaid door opened as she strode through. Her magic swirled inside of her, wanting to break free and cause people to slip so they could feel her anger.

She shoved the doors to her parents' council room open with a bang. Her parents looked up from the pile of papers they were examining. Her mother pushed her archaic reading glasses back on her head. She refused to let the doctors perform surgery to correct her vision, despite the high success rates.

“Now, Talia, was that necessary? You’ll injure the walls and we just had them polished

after the Fire President smoked them up.” Her mother tsked lightly, shaking her head as if remembering the imagined mess.

“Three weeks! It’s been three weeks since you talked to me. And instead of calling me and listening to my report, you summon me back with no notice. You ruined the integrity of my missi--”

“No!” Her father stood, slamming his fists into the table. “You ruined the integrity of your mission. I know how close you’ve been getting to Ryker.” He sneered the name.

“What? What are you talking--”

“Did you think I would send my daughter alone into enemy territory for her first mission? I had eyes on you every second of the way. Zeke wasn’t there for your assistance. You are lucky I pulled you back before you made a dangerous mistake.” He moved around the end of the table, walking slowly toward her, his arms clasped behind his back.

Talia’s mind flashed back to being summoned to her father’s office as a child every time she failed. She dreaded seeing the disappointment on his face.

“What were you thinking?” He stopped directly in front of her, forcing her to look up at his looming figure, silhouetted by the light from the window at the end of the room. “You were supposed to change his mind, convince him of a diplomatic approach. Instead, I get reports that you are spending long hours alone with him, talking about nothing important.”

“We can’t afford a diplomatic approach. Four planets have fallen in the last week alone. The Kaito army is not messing around. They will not listen to reason or diplomacy.” She straightened her shoulders, facing him squarely. “I agree with Ryker on this. Our only hope—”

“Oh, it’s ‘Ryker’ now, is it?” Her mother glared at her from where she still sat at the end of the table. “He’s from a different talent and he outranks you. You shouldn’t be on a first-name

basis with him.”

Talia stared at her parents, shocked. They had never pulled her from a mission before, much less ignored her mission report.

“Why? Why do you hate him so much? What did he ever do to you?” She couldn’t keep the passion from her voice. This didn’t make any sense.

“Young lady! Do not take that tone with your father!” Her mother stood to her feet.

“Then tell me why!”

“Enough!” Her father roared. “You are just a child. There is no need for us to explain every single move we take to you. I foolishly thought you could handle this responsibility as an adult and do your mother proud. Clearly, I was mistaken. Now, go to your room before you bring this family any more disgrace!” He pointed at the door firmly.

Talia shook her head. She wasn’t a helpless child to be sent away unheard.

“You cowards!” She yelled. Her water magic erupted into the room. The windows shattered as the nearby fountain burst through. It swirled around her in the air, creating a defensive barrier. It sunk into the floors and walls, ruining the polish job her mother had been so proud of. “You are too scared to admit you are wrong. Ryker is an asset and ally. You are prejudiced against him because he is from another talent. I don’t care. I love him! You are bigoted cowards!”

Her mother gasped, her face turning ashen as she stumbled back into her chair. Talia froze, staring at her mother. Her water defenses fell to the floor, harmless, as tears formed in her eyes. She never meant to hurt her mother. She opened her mouth to take the insult back but was stopped by a blaring siren.

She slammed her hands over her ears as the room flashed red. Her father shoved passed

her and out the door.

They were under attack.

She followed him out at a run to the outlook tower. The room was the base of all their air defenses with countless screens always monitored. Warning signs flashed on all of them.

“Your majesty, we have multiple unidentified aircraft inbound. They will be within firing distance in two minutes. What are your orders?”

Her father wasted no time.

“Deploy the fighters, now! Activate the turrets. Bring my ship to the nearest docking bay.”

“No, you can’t go out there.”

Talia turned to see her mother standing in the doorway. The worried expression on her face made Thames hesitate for a second.

“You and I are the best fighters out there. We can’t let our kingdom be attacked like this.” He moved from the room and Talia watched him climb into his jet. He lifted into the sky, rising to firing range in a matter of seconds.

“Unidentified aircraft, this is your final warning identify yourself or you will be shot down.” The soldier managing the comms had his hand held up, ready to drop it and signal the attack. As his hand fell, the radio crackled to life.

“Hello? If you are receiving this, please respond. This is Foxtrot Delta 84 of the Vatra. President Ryker is aboard and requests a meeting—”

But it was too late. Talia watched in horror as her father’s ship’s guns powered up and a single blast fired out at the three ships hovering just at the edge of the airspace. If someone asked her later, she couldn’t determine if her father knew who he was shooting at or if it was just a

misfire.

“NO!” Talia screamed.

Time slowed down. She watched in horror as the shot flew through the empty space. The shot was perfectly aimed. It would hit the front ship and the flying debris would take out the other two. There was nothing to do. She stretched out her arms in vain, sending her magic flying forward, hoping in vain that it would block the blast in time. Stop the speeding bullet from destroying the man she loved. She hadn't even had the chance to tell him.

The next few seconds happened so rapidly, she couldn't see what happened. A shot came out of nowhere. She could have sworn it came from near the three ships but she didn't see any of them power up. The three ships vanished, her father's shot flying past harmlessly. The other shot had all of her attention. She heard her mother scream as with a blinding flash, the beam of red power hit her father's ship. One moment, it was there. The next, only glittering dust remained.

Talia shook, not able to comprehend what she had just seen. This couldn't be happening. She turned dazed to look at her mother and horror struck once again. Her mother stood, held up only by the blade thrust through her abdomen. Her eyes were already glazing over as the blood rapidly spread to soak her mother's white tunic and blue vest. A gargled sound emerged from her throat as she fell to the ground. No one was behind her. The floating blade was covered in flames and rapidly fell to the floor with a sickening thud.

She rushed to her mother's side, trying in vain to stop the bleeding with her hands.

“No, Momma, no! Stay with me. Momma,” the tears clogged her throat. Her mother's eyes fluttered open one last time, her gaze on something out of sight. Talia watched brokenly as the life drained from her mother's eyes. She pressed a hand to her mother's face, marring it with blood and her falling tears.

“No, Momma. Momma, please! Open your eyes. Help will be here in a minute. Just hang on. Please, Momma. Please,” her voice faded to helpless sobs.

A hand pulled her up and away from her mother’s too still form, the crown lying where it had fallen in a pool of blood.

“Your highness, er majes...” the nervous soldier stuttered as he tried to figure out what to call her. “President Ryker has landed in bay C and wishes to speak with you. General Gibbons would also like to know if he should take the President and his crew into custody for the ... death of your father... and mother.”

Talia blinked slowly. She couldn’t make herself focus clearly.

“I will speak to Ryker.” She said, her tone wooden.

As she stumbled down the corridor, too shell-shocked to walk straight, she felt a hand under her elbow, supporting her and keeping her upright. She barely remembered passing various people, watching with pitying and tearful expressions. She slowly entered bay C, feeling as if all life had been drained out of her.

In the center of the large landing bay, three ships sat. Ossian soldiers surrounded a group of kneeling men and women with their hands on their heads. A soldier stood by with water magic floating, ready to douse any fire magic if it appeared. Another was pressing the barrel of a rifle against Ryker’s head. Even with the death of her parents, all Talia wanted to do was tear the gun away from Ryker and climb into the safety of his arms until it was all over.

Talia slowly made her way to stand in front of Ryker. She waved her hand and the two soldiers stepped back to give her space. Ryker watched her carefully, waiting for her to speak.

“Why?” The word was barely audible.

He stood, ignoring the guns suddenly pointing at his head and chest. He lifted his hands

to her face, framing her cheeks gently.

“Talia, look at me,” he whispered softly. “It wasn’t me. I would never do something this underhanded. You know me.” He brushed her hair back behind her ear. “I will get to the bottom of this, I promise. I won’t rest until the perpetrator is caught.”

She slowly lifted her eyes to his.

“I believe you,” she dropped her eyes again so she didn’t have to see the disappointment in his eyes at her next words. “But I can’t just let you go. Someone has to be arrested until we know the truth.”

He hugged her close, resting his head on the top of hers, pressing her to her chest briefly before releasing her.

“I know and I understand. Do what you need to do.” He turned, placing his hands behind his back for her to place within cuffs. “I am here for whatever you need.”

Talia held those final words close as he was escorted out of the room. The tears dropped silently to the floor as she was left alone. All alone.

Chapter Eight

Talia stared out from her chair on the dais into the mass of dancing people in the ballroom. It had only been a day since her parents' deaths. Since she had been forced to lock Ryker up. Only three hours since the rushed coronation ceremony made her the worst queen Kastella had seen yet.

The swirling confusion of colors on the dance floor in front of her overwhelmed her, but she couldn't look away. Shards of light pierced her eyes and the orchestral music pounded in her ears until she wanted to throw a chair at the ensemble and just scream at them to stop. To shut up and leave her alone to her mourning.

How could she celebrate? Her parents were dead. She was now in charge of a rapidly falling apart kingdom, or at least it felt that way. The Kaito fighters were destroying the galaxy one planet at a time. It was only a matter of when before her home was next. The refugees flooded the city and housing them had become a pressing issue. General Gibbons was waiting for her orders. There was no time to waste but she couldn't even think clearly enough to figure out what to do.

The flash of the bright dresses in front of her sharply contrasted with the ever-spiraling inside her head. The overall volume of the crowd had grown to a low roar as the partiers became more inebriated. Most of the respectable people had retired for the evening, leaving the wild crowd to party. Yet here she sat. Unable to move.

If she stood up, it all became real. Only hours ago, the crown her mother had worn was placed on Talia's head. It had been rapidly cleaned of the blood after her mother's murder, but Talia could swear even now the blood was trickling down over her hair. Only days ago, it had been resting on her mother's curls.

If she didn't move, she could almost pretend the weight of responsibility didn't exist. If only for a few moments. She wished everything could go back to normal. Back when she had met Ryker and they could still be alone without all the social pressures. When they were still pretending they didn't care about each other. When her parents were still alive, and she hadn't screamed those words at them. Those hateful, destructive words.

Now they were gone, and Ryker was locked in her basement. Dungeon. She wasn't sure either word helped the situation. Only a few days earlier, she had been rebelling against his capture. Now the responsibility of dealing out punishment and justice rested on her shoulders.

Bang! The door to the ballroom was thrown open and smashed against the wall. A drunk partier stumbled into the room as she flinched back, a small amount of water swirling briefly in the air in front of her as her hold on her magic faltered. This couldn't be happening. Not again. Her mind struggled to differentiate between the past and the present. When he, the monster who called himself 'The Dark Lord,' had thrown open the doors and strode in like the whole Citadel was his backyard. When everything started to go wrong.

Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it would jump out of her chest and make a

run for it. She couldn't help rubbing at it, trying to get a full breath in. As her knuckles ground into the muscle, she tried to force herself to calm down. To breathe normally.

The lights flashed overhead. The dancers swirled ever faster and closer. One got too close to the dais; her skirts flew up as her mocking laugh rang out. Talia jolted to her feet, backing away. The music came to an abrupt halt; everyone in the room turned to stare at her.

The weight of all their eyes watching her, judging her, dug into her skin until she had to escape. This was all wrong.

The room started to swim in front of her. It was all she could do to stay upright as she staggered to the exit. She waved at the crowd, trying to get them to return to their party, to stop their endless staring. She didn't have any answers. Her parents did and they were gone.

She could feel their questions stabbing into her skin like darts. Where was she going? Why wouldn't she celebrate with them? Her parents would have celebrated. Why couldn't she be more like her parents? What kind of queen was she if she didn't support her people?

“Just shut up!”

The cry rang off the walls, echoing around and around again. Shut up. Shut up. Up.

Her cheeks felt like they could power the whole city with their heat. She pressed her palms to her face, ducking to hide from the endless eyes as she bolted for the door again. She nearly smashed into the door in her haste, only avoiding doom thanks to the automatic system. She fled down the corridor. She could hear pounding footsteps behind her. Following her. Chasing her.

Her brain was operating purely on impulse, and she didn't stop to look behind her. Her vision was blurry, and she couldn't seem to clear it. She narrowly missed crashing over a laundry bot as she careened around a corner.

A door opened at the end of the passageway, and she flew through it. One corner. Another. She smashed into a third, nearly falling down the stairs on the other side. Her breath gasped in her ears as she sobbed. She would give anything for her mother's warm hug. Her dad's hand tousling her hair. Their smiles of approval when she did a job right.

She smashed into another wall and her legs gave out. She crumpled to the floor, unaware of her surroundings. It was all she could do to get a breath in and keep the spots from overwhelming her vision. Her hand kept rubbing that spot on her chest, trying to calm her aching heartbeat. Every part of her rebelled at the idea of returning to any semblance of normal.

“Talía.”

The voice barely infiltrated her panic. She shuddered as if her insides were escaping through her skin. She gagged, trying to get a breath in through the bile clogging her throat. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't breathe. Her arms wrapped her legs in a stranglehold as she tried to hold herself together. She couldn't fall apart. She couldn't.

“Talía, listen to me.”

She knew the voice, but she couldn't place it. It was all she could do to avoid shattering into pieces.

“Take a breath, darling.”

She gasped in a breath, and it didn't help. Her lungs still burned.

“Good, now another. Hold this one for two seconds, love.”

She struggled, barely managed to get the breath in, much less hold it.

“Almost, you've got it. Now again.”

Slowly his words pushed through her panic and her heart rate finally began to slow. She raised her head, groggy. Her energy had been sapped from her limbs until she felt like melting

into the floor, never to move again. She glanced around, startled to find herself in the dungeon.

Ryker stood across from her, his hands pressing against the glass wall of his prison cell. He stared at her with such concern radiating from his eyes she couldn't help the tears welling up in her eyes. How could she leave him here locked up? After all they had been through?

“What’s wrong, love?”

His endearing tone only made her feel guiltier. And sad. She hadn't believed she would hear someone speak to her as he did again. She hadn't thought he ever would.

“You don't hate me?”

“Hate you? I could never hate you, love.” His hand pressed up against the glass and a moment of irritation crossed his face as he was again reminded of his imprisonment. Of the distance between his cell and where she lay, crumpled on the floor.

“I-I locked you up.” It took everything she had not to break into sobs again.

Chapter Nine

Ryker looked at her, a brief moment of hesitation crossing his face. He pushed himself off the wall and walked towards the locked door. He touched the metal surrounding the lock and it melted into pieces on the floor as the door swung open.

“What?” Talia stared at him, incredulous before tears filled her eyes again. “I don’t understand.” She didn’t move from her position on the floor near the door out of the dungeon.

He crossed the room to her side and slid down the wall to sit next to her.

“Come here,” he whispered gently as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her head to his chest. She hugged him, unable to move for several minutes as the tears flowed down her face. The events of the last couple of days had finally caught up with her and she was exhausted.

Her parents were gone. There was nothing that would change that statement. She was now in charge but all she wanted to do was remain here, hidden away from the rules and demands of the world, safe in Ryker’s arms. Why couldn’t love be enough?

She didn’t know how much time had passed when she finally lifted her head to rest more

on his shoulder than his chest. Her eyes caught on the pieces of the melted lock lying on the floor.

“Why did you stay? If you could have escaped this entire time?” She didn’t look up at him. She felt numb. The only warmth was his body against hers.

“Because you needed me to.” His hand gently ran through her hair. “If I had vanished and run, your people would have created a witch hunt. How would you ever be able to trust me if I ran at the slightest trouble? I’m not leaving you.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that. She closed her eyes, content to just sit. She was almost asleep when he spoke again.

“We can’t stay here. The guards will find us eventually.”

She groaned as she slowly pushed herself into an upright sitting position. Her muscles ached from the stone floor. He stood next to her and pulled her to her feet. She looked up at him, at the face she had come to love.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

He leaned down, one arm around her waist, one hand on her cheek, and kissed her sweetly. She sighed gently into his kiss. She could feel his heart beating under her hand resting on his chest.

After a long moment, he pulled back again. Releasing her, he reached into his pocket and knelt on one knee, pulling out a ring.

She gasped, her hands flying to her face. She blinked several times, trying to make sure this was real.

“Talia, we’ve had our rough patches. Things won’t get any easier from here on out. But the one thing I am sure about is that I love you. I never want to spend another moment apart from

you again. Will you marry me?"

She stared into his eyes, the love flowing from their endless depths.

"Yes."

#

Talia felt like she was floating for the rest of the day. She found herself gently rubbing her hand over the ring hidden on a leather cord beneath her clothing. A part of her wanted to skip and shout for joy. To climb to the highest towers and cry out "I'm getting married!"

The rest of her wanted to curl up on the floor, her arms wrapped around her knees, and cry for the parents she had lost.

She forced herself to keep a calm, steady presence as she addressed her people later that day. The reports had confirmed the truth. Her parents had not been killed by the Vatra or by Ryker.

Instead, the tech analysis had tracked the shot to a Kaito army ship cloaked behind the Vatra ships. Her mother had been killed by one of their operatives. As she spoke to her people through the cameras, she knew it wasn't this simple. They wouldn't let it go so easily.

"I know it's easier to hold a grudge against the Vatra and blame them for my parents' deaths. For the deaths of your beloved rulers. But we need to bring the murderer to justice.

"As of tomorrow, our forces will be preparing for battle. We will be working with the Vatra and the Erdese to take down the Kaito army for the last time. I refuse to let their evil and violence threaten our world any longer!"

She took a breath, watching until she got the thumbs up from the broadcast crew. Her message was out there.

She stole out of the room and stopped abruptly when she saw a contingent of guards

awaiting her.

“Can I help you, gentlemen?”

The head guard saluted.

“Your Majesty, we are your personal protection detail. Wherever you go, we go, ma’am.”

She frowned. She couldn’t remember her parents having such a group of guards. She shrugged. She had other, more important things to worry about now.

She walked sedately down the hallway. Turning the corner, she lifted her flowing skirt and bolted away.

“Your Majesty! Wait up!”

She flew around the next corner and hid behind the long curtains beside the two-story tall windows. The soldiers flew around, their feet sliding on the polished floors as they rushed to try and find her. She smirked as they vanished from view.

She moved the curtain out of the way, making her way to the dungeon. She was just in time to see Ryker released. She shared a small smile with him as he moved to her side.

Over the next couple of weeks, events progressed rapidly. The Vatra soldiers arrived almost immediately and Ryker began training Talia’s soldiers. In addition, whenever they had a spare moment, they would sneak away for a moment together. Sometimes, he would grab a picnic basket and they would eat dinner under the stars. Other times, she would bring him to the garden to stroll along the pathways with her or dance in the gazebo. The hardest part was ditching her guards so they could have a moment alone.

Talia hated hiding her relationship. She wasn’t ashamed of her love for him. Why did they have to hide from society’s rules? Yet, even as she questioned it, she knew the real reason. Their focus must be on the Kaito army’s attacks. When they were defeated, she and Ryker could

be together in public.

Until that day came, they took whatever time they could together. Within a week after his proposal, they had set a wedding date. One of the advantages of no one being allowed to know about their relationship was she didn't have to plan a wedding date around others' schedules. However, it wasn't without its struggles.

Ryker found her almost pulling her hair out as she tried to find someone to marry them. She was sitting hunched over a computer at a desk. She could feel a headache growing rapidly. He gently began messaging her shoulders.

"I never thought it would be this hard," she admitted. "I have looked everywhere I can think of but either the person doesn't have the qualifications to officiate the wedding, he isn't willing to risk it, or he refuses to come to the separate location I chose."

"What if we didn't tell him?" Ryker pressed into a particularly hard knot and she winced slightly.

"What do you mean?"

"Instead of trying to find someone who would consider breaking the laws about marrying between talents, let's just get married without telling the official. He can have plausible deniability and it should be easier to find someone."

He's not wrong, she mused.

"I guess. I just feel a little guilty lying to him."

"We won't have to lie if he doesn't ask. I think I know of just the person with discretion. I'll take care of this for you." He rubbed her shoulders one last time and left the room.

Within a few weeks, she found herself staring up into the eyes of her groom as she said her vows. The official didn't ask any questions and she didn't volunteer any additional

information. He left as soon as the ceremony was over and Talia was happy to slow dance in her husband's arms.

“What did you end up telling your guards this time?”

She could hear the smile in his voice.

“I just told them it was my time of the month and I didn't want any company for a few days. I may have had an emotional breakdown and eaten some extra chocolate to sell the story.”

He laughed as he spun her out in a circle.

Later that night, she covered his eyes with her hands as she half-led, half-pushed him into the room she had prepared on a spaceship hovering, cloaked above Ossa. She slowly lowered her hands and waited anxiously as he looked around.

Her eyes scanned the room as she tried to see what he was seeing. To her right was set up the blanket they had used for picnics on the roof. She had even purchased some stars that she had taped to the ceiling. As her eyes moved towards her left, they rested on the music player playing their favorite song to dance to. Her eyes flicked past the door to the bedroom directly in front of them and rested on the training equipment to her left. There were even a couple of pictures of the Fireboat pinned on the walls.

Every piece of the room held some memories from their time together. She wanted to lock the door and never leave. To shove a chair under the handle so the real world couldn't break in and ruin her bliss.

“Love,” he turned to face her. “It looks amazing.”

He pulled her into his arms gently. She pressed the hidden button by the door as she went to him. Her back was to his chest as they looked out over the galaxy of stars spread beneath them, now visible through the glass floor. She gently rested her hands on his as they wrapped

around her waist. Nothing could be more perfect.

Chapter Ten

Talia was starting to get worried. She sat in her room, checking yet again for a message from Ryker. Things had been going so well after the wedding. They had a quiet honeymoon away from the public. Those golden days had been glorious. Just the two of them, hidden away. For once they didn't have to worry about being caught.

But that was almost two months ago now. Just a week ago, Ryker had pulled her aside to tell her that he was following up on a lead about the Dark Lord. Something that could change the outcome of the war. Something that they desperately needed as the Kaito fighters were still gaining momentum.

Normally, Talia wouldn't think much of Ryker's mission. He often went on missions with his men. He was that kind of guy. A leader who led by example. Yet, he usually kept in contact with her.

His last message had been four days ago.

Hey, I'm going to be undercover for a few days. I'll talk to you as soon as I can. Love you!

She tried to push through her fears. She was probably overthinking things. Ryker was a powerful warrior and wielder. He would be fine.

#

Well, now she was worried. It had been three whole weeks since that message and nothing. No communication. No contact. Nothing. She discretely tried to reload the message system just in case a new message had come in within the three seconds since she had last looked. The Council meeting couldn't take priority over finding her husband.

She had even resorted to asking his second in command and the Fire Nation ambassador. Neither of them had any information, or if they did, they weren't sharing it with her.

“Your Majesty.”

She looked up, startled, to see Zeke, her assistant watching her with worried eyes. She silently scolded herself for not paying attention. She forced herself to look around the oval table where everything had started a few short months ago when she had met Ryker.

“Sorry about that, ladies and gentlemen. Where were we?” She spoke up quickly, trying to distract from her blunder as soon as possible.

“As I was saying,” Sky, the duchess of Ilma had a slight tinge of annoyance in her voice. As she continued, a young soldier hurried into the room. He made his way to Talia's spot at the head of the table and she could tell even before he spoke that this was not good news. He leaned down to her ear.

“Your Majesty, we have located President Ryker,” he whispered.

Her eyes widened slightly as she took in this news. His tone of voice was not encouraging.

“Where is he?” She kept her voice low.

“That’s a long story. General Gibbons would like to debrief you on everything we know so far.”

She turned back to the people in front of her.

“I must apologize, ladies and gentlemen. I have been called away. Let’s reconvene this meeting later.” She stood to her feet and moved to follow the young soldier out of the room, ignoring the angry hisses and whispers flying around in her wake.

It was all she could do not to run down the hallway to where General Gibbons was waiting. Finally, there was news about her husband, not that anyone knew he was her husband.

She stopped just in front of the general, trying to regain her poise.

“General, you have news?”

The look on his face was not promising. He grimaced, and her heart sank to her stomach.

“Your majesty,” he started, before pausing to take a deep breath. For a normally calm general, he seemed to be struggling to get his words out right. “I wish I had good news. Unfortunately, President Ryker has been spotted leading the charge on the most recent Kaito fighter attacks.”

She shook her head, not wanting to believe it.

“What do you mean?”

“He has joined the ranks of the Kaito fighters. His vice president informed me of this information. The Vatra will transfer leadership away from him. Many have labeled him as a traitor and—”

“No. No!” She wrapped an arm around her waist, her stomach swimming as she tried to process the news. “The reports are wrong. You must be mistaken. He wouldn’t — couldn’t. This isn’t him.”

The general's face softened and his arm briefly reached toward her before he pulled back. He motioned to another soldier standing by. The soldier handed him a tablet and the general pressed a few buttons before turning the screen to her. There, on the screen, was Ryker. He was wearing armor but she could still recognize him. As she watched, he fought his way across the field, bringing down Erdese soldiers left and right. The Kaito army was at his back.

She was barely aware of the general continuing to talk, unable to look away from the screen.

“The new President, Alston, is doing everything he can to avoid war with the Erdese”

On the screen, Ryker was killing one soldier after another. Talia couldn't watch any longer. She turned away and rushed to a nearby trashcan and puked. Her stomach rolled over and over as she kept seeing Ryker's fire roaring out and killing the soldiers. Every time her stomach started to settle, the image returned. It was burned into her retinas.

Finally, she stumbled away from the can and slumped to the floor. She was vaguely aware of the general setting up a perimeter of people to give her privacy. Her stomach lurched again and she barely made it back to the trashcan.

She felt a cool hand on the back of her neck, holding her hair away from her face. As her stomach settled briefly, she felt something pressed into her hand and lifted it to her face. She gratefully took the anti-nausea meds and backed away from the trashcan.

Adria gently brushed her sweaty hair off her face. Her knees pressed against Talia's back as she tried to control her stomach. She never wanted her friend to see her like this but she reached up blindly to grasp her hand, refusing to let her go.

“It'll be alright. We'll figure whatever it is out,” Adria whispered.

Talia clung to these words as the next couple of weeks passed. Ryker continued to march

with the Kaito fighters. She couldn't resist watching every video they captured, searching for his face. She tried not to think too hard about the immense relief she felt every time she saw him, uninjured.

She was watching a video of him when she learned she was pregnant with his baby. She was watching a video of him a month later when she learned she was having twins. She just stared at his image on the screen, numb. She tracked his movements, finding it easier to try and prove that he wasn't acting under his own control than it was to think about how she was going to raise twins by herself. As the months passed, she was forced to retreat into hiding to keep the news of her pregnancy secret. She could only imagine what the Kaito fighters would do if they knew she was vulnerable. Or the questions that would circulate among her people about the babies' father.

She was five months pregnant when Erde fell to the Kaito fighters. She continued to rule from behind closed doors, only speaking to her general, her assistant, and Adria. As Ilma fell at seven months pregnant, she argued with her general to keep the gates open to accept refugees. When Vatra crumbled beneath the advancing Kaito fighters when she was eight months pregnant, she was on bed rest, struggling to keep her stress levels down while preparing her army and her kingdom for an all-out stand against the Kaito fighters.

When her twins were born two weeks early, she counted her blessings, spending a precious hour with them in her bedroom. She couldn't help running a fingertip over their rosy cheeks and counting all their little fingers and toes.

The little boy, Cobalt, or Cole, was slightly bigger. He had been born first, having spent the entire pregnancy wrapped protectively around his sister. The baby girl, Sapphire, or Safi, was more energetic than her brother. Talia smiled gently at her little fists beating the air, tugging on

one of them before pulling herself out of bed. Ryker and the Kaito fighters had just landed on the planet and her people needed her. She would defend her kingdom, and her children, against the man she called her husband.

Chapter Eleven

General Gibbons poked his head through her bedroom door. Talia wiped away the tears forming in her eyes as she stared down at her two gorgeous babies one last time. If everything went right, she would see them again soon. But as the Kaito army drew closer, the chances of everything following the plan grew slim.

“Is it time?” She asked, trying not to let her voice tremble.

He nodded gravely. She turned to Adria and reluctantly passed her children over. She gave each of them one last kiss.

“You have the necklaces?”

Adria nodded. Talia could only hope the simple technology in the necklaces would help her children find each other one day.

Talia slowly and painfully pushed to her feet. She had given birth only hours ago but there was no more time for delay. Even now, the refugees were boarding the carriers, preparing to evacuate as soon as the diversion happened. She just hoped that the protective necklaces would help her children find each other again if everything went wrong.

She made her way out of the room and down the hallway as every instinct screamed at her to turn around. How could she abandon her own children? Yet, she was their best chance of survival. She tried not to think about how she was sending them to the far edges of the galaxy.

She turned into the electronic lab before she could change her mind. Dr. Staven was waiting for her. He was a crucial part of her plan. With the memories of her children removed, there would be nothing to hold against her if all failed and she was captured. Though they still didn't understand how Ryker had been brainwashed, she couldn't risk someone searching through her memories and finding the children.

“Are you sure this will work?” She couldn't help her uncertainty.

The doctor nodded.

“All testing has been promising. The insertion of the chip is painless and simple. From there, it will identify the desired memories and block them from your mind. These memories will appear to be gone if anyone goes looking for them. When you defeat Ryker, the memories will return,” the doctor reassured her as he began hooking her up to the machine.

Talia prayed that this would work. This was her one chance to protect her children. If she was captured, every memory of her children and their location would be gone. There would be no way for anyone to track them down and use them against her. Her one reassuring thought was knowing that she would remember her children after she was safely away from Ryker. If by some slim chance, she managed to escape him, or he left her on the ground alone to die, her memories of the existence of her children would return. She may not be able to find them, but she would have something to fight for.

The doctor moved around the chair to face her. Talia could feel each individual electrode stuck to her head as he looked directly into her eyes.

“Your majesty, I need your verbal confirmation. Do you want to go through with the removal of all memories of your children from your mind via the MEMChip implant? They will only be returned upon the defeat of Commander Ryker of the Kaito army.”

“Yes,” her voice was firm. She tried not to be too distracted by her husband’s new title. She didn’t like it. She wanted him here, by her side, or at least leading his people.

Through the months that had passed since he had joined the Kaito army, she had analyzed and poured over every video that she could of his. She watched every move he made. Watched how he fought. After seven months, she was confident that the person controlling her husband was not the man he knew. Something had happened.

She had one shot. She needed to get close to him. Maybe then she had a chance of returning his memories. Maybe.

She watched as the doctor flipped several switches. Moments later, she winced as something stabbed into her head in multiple locations. *Painless, yeah right.*

She tried to think back to what memories were being removed, but there was nothing there. Just an empty void. It was a strange sensation. If she thought about it too much, she felt as if she would tip over the edge and all her consciousness would vanish forever. She shook her head. She didn’t want to think about it too much.

#

She stood on the wall of her city. Around her, her soldiers were stationed, preparing for a final stand. As she looked at each of the faces, the faces of the mothers, wives, sisters, and children who would lose their family members if her plan failed filled her vision.

Movement from in front of her pulled her attention away before she could dwell on it too long. The Kaito army appeared over the ridge in the distance, spreading out to the right and left

as far as the eye could see. Their black uniforms were overwhelming any color in the landscape.

Even at a distance, her eyes caught on Ryker's form and halted. Though he was leading the opposing army, there was a sense of comfort that flooded her body as she looked at the man she loved.

She took a deep shuddering breath. This was her only chance to protect her family.

She turned to the soldier next to her and gave the signal. Moments later, a message robot flew out of the city towards the Kaito fighters, carrying a white banner.

The anticipation was agonizing. They had no hope of fighting off the Kaito army. They were massively undermanned. Their only chance was a risk. It was reminiscent of the old ways of fighting. The leader of one army was allowed to challenge the leader of the other army to a duel to the death. The winner of the challenge would win the battle.

The practice had long been forgotten by most. Many considered it too risky. Better to try and fight with the whole army rather than risk it all on one person.

Yet, as Talia watched the robot land next to Ryker, she was relying on parts of the man she loved still being there. His confident arrogance would believe he could win anything. His humanity would attempt to spare unnecessary death if possible. If the man she knew was at least in there somewhere, he would accept the challenge.

Finally, the robot lifted back into the air, flying back towards the city. It appeared to be going so slow she was almost tempted to give the signal for the refugees to start evacuating. Surely, they would be able to fully escape before the robot returned. When it landed a few feet away from her, Talia nearly tripped over her own feet as she hurried to view the message.

Challenge Accepted

She tried not to cry in relief. This wasn't going to be an easy battle. She turned the robot

over to General Gibbons as he negotiated the final terms: when, where, and what weapons were allowed. She made her way down from the wall, exchanging her simple circlet for a helmet.

Gibbons met her on the ground.

“Magic only. We have ten minutes to prepare. The duel is to take place in the center of the field.”

She nodded her understanding, donning the rest of her armor as she listened.

“Don’t let him get too close to you. He’s big. He’s got a long reach and he’ll easily overpower you if you let him. Focus on tiring him out but don’t take too long.” He paused briefly, examining her face closely. “Are you sure you’re not too exhausted?”

She wasn’t sure what he was talking about. She shook her head.

“I’ve got this. This is our only chance. As soon as the battle starts, begin the evacuation. Each of the cruisers knows their destinations. Keep the fighters around them as much as possible to protect their retreat. We just need to get them out of firing range before we are noticed. If I win, I’ll join you shortly.” She pulled on her wrist guards.

She carefully avoided talking about the most likely reality. They had already covered repeatedly what would happen if she didn’t survive. Her only goal was to keep the Kaito fighters distracted long enough for her people to escape safely.

Even as she spoke of the possibility of her survival, she knew it wasn’t going to happen. She had fought Ryker before. There was no chance she was going to beat him. This was a suicide mission. Her only hope was to remind him of who he truly was. Then, even if he killed her, maybe his return to normal would be enough to change the outcome of the war.

Her armor on, she slowly took stock of her emotions. She felt unusually calm. She tried to ignore the uncomfortable ache in her stomach. She didn’t know what it was from. She

couldn't let it distract her.

As the gates lifted, she looked around at the people gathered around her one last time before striding towards the opening.

Time to do or die.

Chapter Twelve

The walk out to the center of the field was the longest walk Talia had ever made. It wasn't the actual distance. She had walked across her country in years past. But each step she took towards the center of the field and the final battle against her husband was endless. It felt as if she could see new blossoms and fruit growing on the trees as she watched.

The location set for the battle used to be an athletic field before the war. It sat outside the city with clear visibility in every direction. The field sat level amongst the rolling hills. It was lower than both the city and the hilltop where the Kaito army was gathered.

How had it come to this? If someone had asked her two years ago if she thought she would be married and about to fight her husband for her life and the life of her people, she would have thought they were crazy.

Was she crazy? How did she think she even had a chance of defeating him? Even before he had joined the Kaito fighters, he had been one of the most skilled fighters she knew, with or without magic. There was no chance she was surviving this battle.

Her mind flashed back to the countless training battles they had fought against each

other. Out of the hundreds of fights, both on Ispa and after their wedding, she had only won once.

She tried not to let the tears drip down her face as she remembered the sweet comments he would make after. Gently massaging her sore muscles and whispering in her ears.

She shoved the memories out of her mind. Now wasn't the time to reflect on the past. She needed to focus on the battle ahead. She had one goal. Give her people time to escape.

A little voice in her head whispered, *Try to save him.*

She so wanted to listen to that voice. To believe that there was a chance that he was still in there. But she had no time for false hope.

As Ryker's face came into view, she took stock of her magic. Though she didn't use it often, her father ensured that she knew how to control it from a young age. Ryker's additional training had also helped to expand her control. She was only slightly reassured to feel her magic hovering below the surface, ready at a moment's notice. From her experience, it wouldn't do much good against the might of Ryker's fire.

Finally, she reached the agreed-upon meeting place. Ryker was calmly adjusting his wrist braces. He glanced up at her, before returning to his task. Talia tried not to let it get to her head. The lack of recognition in his eyes told her everything she needed to know. As she had long suspected, the man she loved wasn't there. He wasn't in control. There were thousands of possibilities of what could have made him this way,

She took a deep breath. She couldn't get lost in her head. Couldn't get lost in the memories of who they used to be. She checked over her armor before turning to the rough circle of dirt that had been drawn out in the center of the athletic field. It was about twenty feet in diameter. Two officials, one from each army, stood to one side ready to referee the fight. As she

and Ryker both turned to the officials, they began to talk.

“As you both know, this is a fight to the death,” the tall woman from the Kaito army announced. “To ensure everything is fair, you both will stand back-to-back, take three steps, and then the fight will begin.”

“Each round will last five minutes,” the younger man from Talia’s kingdom said. “At the end of each round, fighting will pause for two minutes. At the end of that time, the next round will commence. We will continue until one of you has defeated the other.”

“Please make your way to the center of the ring now.”

Talia stepped forward, carefully examining her hus— no, she couldn’t think of him that way anymore. Carefully examining Ryker for any signs of weakness that might help her in the fight. He did the same to her.

“Now, back-to-back,” the male official said.

Talia tried not to flinch as her muscles touched the warm back of the man she loved. As she looked out over the fields, she could see her people standing ready on the walls. She could see the faint plumes of smoke rising from the ships, preparing to take off. She forced herself to focus on the coming battle. Just distract Ryker long enough that her people could escape.

“One!”

She took a step, forcing every memory into a mental box and destroying the key.

“Two!”

Another step. This time she reached for her magic, letting it simmer below the surface of her skin, ready to explode out.

“Three!”

She took one last step, whirling around, her hands forming a blade of pure water. She

forced more water into the blade, honing it into a sword. The pure water pressure alone would make any strike painful. It may not be able to kill, but it could easily incapacitate even the strongest of men.

Ryker's own blade of fire grew out of his hands, faster than any she had ever seen. Before her blade was fully formed, he was already on her, swinging it above his head and bringing it crashing down toward her shoulders. She briefly diverted some of the water flowing into her blade to cover her body as she rolled away from his strike.

The fire hissed as it hit the water covering her skin. She pulled away from him as her blade finished forming. He lifted his blade again and she met it with hers. Back and forth the strikes went. Overhead, undercut, a thrust towards her right side, and a feint towards her left. Her muscles strained as his blade bore down on hers from above, barely being kept back by her own blade. The fire rapidly was turning her water to steam. She could feel the heat of the blade on her face. She dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way, narrowly avoiding his blow.

Standing to her feet, she forced herself to wait, to ground herself as he had taught her. As he charged towards her, she whirled to the side, lifting her blade, and smashing it over his shoulder blades as he grimaced. He recovered faster than she expected, throwing out a dagger of fire at her side. She dodged but still had to divert some of her magic to put out the small fire that caught on a stray edge of her shirt.

A bell rang from the side of the field, announcing the end of the first round. She stood up straight, stepping back to the sidelines as he did the same. She watched him closely as she tried to figure out her strategy. As Gibbons had warned, he was stronger than she was. Only her speed kept her from burning to a crisp.

She was hesitant to pull from her magic more than necessary. She had to save her

reserves long enough for her people to escape. If her magic became depleted too soon, they would be captured before they left the local airspace.

A little part of her was reluctant to truly try and hurt Ryker. Her mind kept replaying over his grimace when her water blade had smashed into his shoulder blades. Even now, as she watched him across the circle, he was moving his shoulders as if trying to work out the stiffness.

The two minutes ended and she returned to circling in the middle. She feinted to the right and threw some water at his feet, trying to turn the ground to mud. The heat radiating off his body turned most of it to steam. The small amount that reached the ground sank in harmlessly.

“You think a little water is going to stop me?” He taunted. “Everything you throw at me will turn to steam. Your blade will glance off my skin if you even manage to get close enough to hit me. Give up already.”

She ignored him. As he opened his mouth again to speak, she struck, thrusting the full might of her water talent toward his face, letting her blade melt into the jet of water. The water surging from her hands became a river and he spluttered and gagged, trying to get a breath in. His blade vanished as he tried to summon his flames to destroy the water. It barely made a dent in the rapid stream. He was forced to pull back, turning away from her to try and regain his airway. As she saw a hint of blue crossing his face as he started to drown under her waves, she was thrust back into memories of their moments together.

His smiles as they played with the Firebats. Her laughter when he told her about wanting to be a circus performer. Him standing at her back as they looked out over a galaxy of stars.

She flinched and the flow of water ended. He lay on the ground, gasping and spluttering for breath. She felt as if she were lying on the ground beside him, feeling every drop of water flooding her lungs as they did his. Every breath burned as she tried to recover. She couldn't force

herself to end this. Her feet felt as if they were cemented into the ground as her heart screamed at her that this was all wrong.

As the bell rang to signal the end of the round, she tried in vain to wipe away her tears.

He sat up slowly and seemed surprised to see her crying.

“Are you so weak that you cry when you strike a blow?” He jeered.

The officials looked as if they were about to step in and remind him that the round was on break but she waved them away.

“I’m not crying because of that. I’m crying for the man you were once. You were my husband! We shared a home and a bed. And you remember none of it! You stand here, prepared to annihilate me, all for a cause you hated. So yes, I’m crying.” Her shoulders shook as she struggled to control herself, to regain some distance from everything that she could not forget.

She was vaguely aware of the shocked stares from the officials as they realized the gravity of everything she had said. She had broken every rule and married the one man she couldn’t. The one man who could give her children that would bring around the prophecy and the end of the world as they knew it.

She didn’t care what anyone thought. Her eyes were focused on the man in front of her. Her words had hit him like a blow and she could see his mind racing as he tried to process everything she had just said.

“Y-you’re lying!” His face was ashen. The slight stutter in his face was so unlike the calm, commanding presence he usually expressed.

“Think, Ryker! There must be a little part of you that knows I’m telling the truth. I refuse to believe that they have destroyed you completely. Come back to me!” She took a step towards him, vaguely aware of the ships carrying her people leaving behind her. “Remember standing on

the balcony at Ispa? You stood behind me, your arms wrapped around me, telling me about Zamas. You took me out on picnics and played with the Firebats with me. You held me when my parents died.”

She could see his rising panic but she pressed on.

“And when everyone thought you were to blame for my parents’ murder, I was the one who believed you. I showed everyone the man you are. Strong, kind, trustworthy. The man I love more than life itself. My husband!” Her voice rose as the emotion overwhelmed her. “You are my hus—”

“ENOUGH!”

Flames shot out of every inch of his body. The light was blinding, and she barely had enough time to throw up a shield of water. It was scarcely thick enough to protect her and she could feel the water around her starting to boil as his power demanded entry. She struggled to try and ground herself again but her feet kept sliding on the ground. The force of his magic was pushing her back as it fought to destroy her. Finally, just as she could no longer hold it at bay, her arms starting to burn in the hot water crumpling in on her, the flames died.

She lifted her head to look around. The grass around them for hundreds of feet in every direction was gone. All that remained was black, charred soil. She barely had time to realize that the officials hadn’t survived before Ryker was on her, his blade flashing faster than ever before.

“Why are you so cruel! To taunt me with false memories. I never thought you would have it in you. Trying to get in my head won’t work!” His blade swung first at her right side, slicing through her armor as if it was made of butter before flying around again to hit her left side. Yet, despite his anger, the blade barely kissed her skin as if he couldn’t bring himself to go through with it. “You are not my—”

His words cut off as his blade struck down at her head. She rolled away but her narrow escape cost her. The blade struck her right shoulder, biting deep into the muscle. She screamed in pain, cradling her now useless arm to her chest. So much for not hurting her.

She tried in vain to reach for her magic but the wall of pain blocked her. All she got was a small dusting of water drops across her fingers.

“You are not my—” He threw his helmet away and she could see the tears pouring down his cheeks. He stalked towards her. She looked around but there was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

The fire of his blade was reflected in his eyes as he stopped in front of her. He lifted his blade and she knew this was the end. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw another of the ships carrying her people take off. She sent up a prayer of protection for them as the blade descended.

“YOU ARE NOT MY WIFE!” The tears were gone and only anger remained. His fury fueled more power into the blade until she was certain her skin would burn before it even struck her.

As it flew towards her head, she whispered her final words.

“I love you.”

She closed her eyes, waiting for the pain. For the coolness of oblivion. She hoped it would be quick.

Seconds passed and nothing. The blade didn't strike. She cautiously opened her eyes to see it hovering inches above her. It trembled in the air as Ryker shook. His face was pale. She could see the sweat glistening on his skin.

The blade vanished and he crumpled to his knees, tears pouring down his cheeks.

“I don't understand,” he whispered, his voice breaking. A droplet hitting her hand made

her aware of her own tears. She longed to reach out and touch him, to hold him in her arms.

As her good hand reached towards him, a loud shout came from the Kaito fighters. One of the lieutenants had stepped out of line and was moving at a run toward the dueling ground. As if he was the first drop in a flood, the rest soon began to follow.

“You have to go.”

She turned, shocked to hear Ryker’s voice, not quite comprehending his words.

“What?” Her voice had an uncertain note that surprised her.

“You have to go. Now!” He stood up, pulling her to her feet. “They’ll kill you.”

He pushed her towards the city. As her eyes landed on the walls for the first time since the battle began, she was relieved not to see any of her soldiers. All her people must have escaped safely.

“Go! I’ll hold them off as long as I can.”

She turned to glance at him one last time but he was already striding toward his men. Any sign of the broken man she had seen was gone. She cradled her arm tight to her chest and ran as fast as she could.

In her ears, she could hear the yells of fury from the Kaito fighters and knew they wouldn’t be far behind. Though the walk to the duel had seemed to take forever, the run back was over too quick. She rushed through the gates and nearly crashed into General Gibons. He wrapped his arm around her good side and half supported, half carried her to a waiting ship. A few soldiers stood at the open door and helped her in.

As the ship took off, everyone’s eyes turned to her, reluctant to ask the question everyone needed to be answered.

Finally, Gibons spoke.

“What happened?” He asked.

“Did we win?” A young soldier interjected. Everyone shushed him.

Talia tried to come up with an answer but the only option was the bare truth.

“No. He let me go.”

The soldiers were quiet after that. As she stared out one of the side ports at the field below, she swore she could see Ryker’s eyes following the ship’s escape. She struggled to hold back her tears. She wasn’t ready to give up yet. There was a part of the man she loved in there.

Even as the pain of her arm throbbed in her head, she vowed to come back. She would rescue him. She would keep trying until it succeeded or they killed her.

“Take us to Inoree,” she said to the pilot.

“What are your orders?” General Gibbons asked.

“We continue. This was just a battle in the war. It’s time to regroup and prepare for the next one.”

As Ossa faded from sight, her memories of her children returned and she gasped at their intensity. She could see their chubby faces and their beautiful eyes as if she was standing in her bedroom where she had last seen them. Even as their little faces comforted her, she couldn’t help the tears of hopelessness that dripped down her face. The battle hadn’t gone according to plan. She had failed. She didn’t know where her children were and she wasn’t dead. The worst of the three possibilities had happened.

She could only pray they were safe and start planning for the next battle.

This wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

The End