

THE SEASON REBELS

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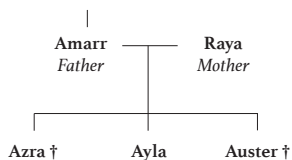
THE
SEASON
REBELS

P E L C K M A N S

FAMILY TREE

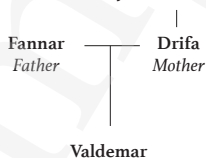
The Summer Kingdom

Abner's blood line



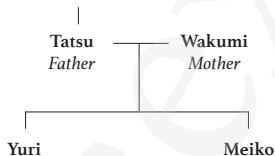
The Winter Kingdom

Tyr's blood line



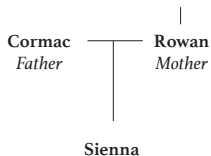
The Spring Kingdom

Neo's blood line, Fiorella's brother



The Autumn Kingdom

Euan's blood line



PROLOGUE

VALDEMAR

His grip tensed. Until mere days ago, the throne room floor had been flooded with water and surrounded by plants. Now, it was completely frozen over. His father had made sure the people knew which Heir now held the title of Ruler, casually ignoring the fact that a sacred celebration in the winner's capital was required to legitimize his enthronement.

His father had always been one to bend the rules. Or find a way around them.

Valdemar wished he could find some connection to the man who stood before him.

'I warned you, didn't I? Multiple times.' His father's voice was cold, frustrated.

In private, King Fannar's mood had worsened after the final Trial. To the court, he was the proud father and Valdemar his victorious son. But without an audience, his true self came lurking. 'And yet, you refused to listen. You helped strengthen her wielding.'

Valdemar clenched his jaw. He knew there was no answer that would please his father, but his patience was hanging by a thread.

'I did no such thing. I *told* you Ayla was powerful and that we shouldn't underestimate what she's capable of.' The thought of Ayla, the uncertainty of her whereabouts, made his insides twist. The fact that no one had seen or heard what had happened to her. Not knowing whether she was alright.

The pain he had seen on her face after finding her in Auster's room – it had almost been his undoing.

His father came closer in an instant, looming over him. 'She tried to *kill* me.' Rage licked his words as he spat them at Valdemar.

'Yet here you stand before me,' Valdemar replied with equal determination.

When his father touched his hands to the throne, ice coated Valdemar's arms, keeping him in place.

'Don't forget, I'm the one who got you this throne.'

A wicked grin appeared on the king's face as he willed the ice to cut deeper into Valdemar's skin.

Valdemar bit the inside of his lip. He had dealt with worse. Much more than the pain, it was his father's words that got to him. He thought of Ayla's numb expression before the Trial. And how she had turned into a rampage of fire after Fannar had spoken to her.

'What did you do?' Valdemar snarled, shattering the ice his father had wielded around him.

Something close to reason flashed across his father's eyes. He replied, calmer now.

'I did what needed to be done.' A smile spread across his face. 'To see us – see you – as the Ruler this Realm needs.' His father took a few steps back. Before Valdemar could answer, Fannar continued. 'Besides, there's something urgent I've come here to discuss with you.'

Valdemar's pulse dropped to a dangerous rhythm. He wasn't going to like this.

'They found her.' His father watched his reaction closely. 'Dead.'

The frozen water around them began to crack as Valdemar's blood turned ice cold.

He asked, even though he knew the answer. 'They found who?'

'Princess Ayla.'

No. This couldn't be happening.

His breath became labored as he rose. Ice and water now swirled toward his hands as his father continued with obvious disdain on his face.

'The rebels killed her. Ripped her apart like beasts.' Fannar sounded pleased, though he tried to mask his delight.

'You're lying.'

Fannar shook his head as he looked up.

'It's a shame we couldn't prevent this from happening, but she was destined to die – too weak to be called an Heir.'

Fannar walked over to the door, his footsteps loud and determined.

Valdemar barely registered it, as white spots blurred his vision.

'Now, I have preparations to return to. I'll see you at dinner.' It was not a request but a demand aimed at the future Ruler of the Realm.

As the door closed behind his father, Valdemar dropped to his knees at the very throne he had come here to win. The blur of white before his eyes intensified and his body began to shake, tremors racking his entire body, even as he tried to contain them.

'No! NO!' he screamed.

Ayla couldn't be dead. The thought of losing her was unbearable.

Water and ice twisted and churned wildly around him, his rage growing as his powers overtook the room. Until something inside him snapped.

It felt as if his rib cage had cracked under the pressure of his wielding. Had his power turned against him?

He roared – but no sound left his mouth.

The water lashed at his arms, seeping into the cuts from his father's ice.

In excruciating pain, Valdemar dropped to the floor, convinced he wouldn't live to see another sunrise.

In a sudden shift, the water returned to its former stillness, leaving him soaked on the ground at the foot of his throne.

He grunted, unsure of what had just happened. Dazed, he took in the sight of the Council's thrones before him.

The sun rose above the horizon, bringing light to the darkest corners of the room. Once his breathing returned to normal, he moved to push himself up. The moment his palms touched the water, light began to glow from the dark blue veins on his arms.

He felt the water become one with the powers within him, merging in a way he'd never experienced before.

It made the white spots return, until he began to recognize them as shapes drifting before him. As if he could see through eyes that were not his own.

His wielding reacted on instinct and water wrapped around his skin.

That was when he heard it.

Drip, drip, drip.

That was when he saw it.

Saw *her*. Curled up in the darkness.

Ayla.

CHAPTER 1

SCATTERED

The drip of water was slowly driving her insane.

Or maybe the events of the past week had driven her to the brink, slowly cloaking her thoughts in madness. Every hour spent in shadow with only drops of water keeping her company. Every day without news of what was happening above. Her thoughts were running rampant and a darkness had taken root in her mind.

Ayla shifted on her cot, the thin mattress hard and uncomfortable beneath her. But she welcomed the sense of unease. It was the only way to remember she was still alive.

He killed him.

That one phrase had haunted her thoughts since the day King Fannar confessed to Auster's murder.

Ayla had raged in her cell for an entire day after hearing those words. The bars were still charred from the flames she'd thrown at them until even the raging firestorm in her core had died down. Her hand still throbbed from pounding against the bars, black and blue spots now covering her skin.

It had been days since she'd seen anyone, save for the guard who brought down her meals. Ayla tried to reason with him, explaining how the Empress and Fannar were the ones in the wrong here, but the guard never uttered a word and quickly left after dropping her tray on the ground.

They killed my brother.

After Winter took my sister, they killed my little brother too.

Her mind was slowly betraying her, conjuring images like the monsters she'd seen during the second Trial.

Auster lying dead on her floor, a knife stuck in his chest.
Her parents, grieving over the body of their youngest child.

Ayla was the last Heir of Summer and now no one even knew she was still alive. Her parents, Yuri, and the entire population of the Realm believed the rebels had taken and killed her.

Pacing around the cell had eventually grown old, so she had taken to her bed and waited. For what, she didn't know, but she couldn't accept the fact that she'd been left here to rot. They wouldn't have guards bringing her food if they didn't have a plan for her. Her flames licked her insides, as if to offer comfort, but her heart had been irrevocably broken.

A face framed by dark hair appeared in her mind. A lean body, corded with muscles.

Valdemar must also think she was dead.

It was like a festering wound that she couldn't stop prodding. Ayla's walls had been drawn up high and strong ever since she'd entered the palace, still broken from losing her sister to Winter. But the prince of that very kingdom had chipped away her defenses brick by brick and found a way into her heart.

She wished she could have said more to him, spent more time with him. Her feelings for him warmed her almost as much as her flames, even though they both knew it couldn't have lasted. Relationships between Heirs of different kingdoms had been outlawed to avoid complicating ties between the kingdoms.

But their emotions had been strong.

Ayla banished the image of Valdemar with a shake of her head. She had said goodbye to him in her thoughts the second she was thrown into her cell. Fannar and the Empress would poison Valdemar's mind with lies until Ayla was nothing more than an afterthought to him.

The door at the end of the corridor opened and Ayla threw a hand in front of her eyes, shielding them from the light of the sconces.

It seemed too early for her next meal, but time would often escape Ayla as her mind drifted for hours at a time.

Footsteps came closer and since she was the only prisoner along this corridor, it was no surprise to hear them stop right outside her cell.

She could barely make out the shape of a person in front of her, her eyes only slowly growing accustomed to the light. The guard looked smaller and seemed to be lacking the usual bulk of armor. She could only just make out a shock of red hair as a familiar voice rang through the corridor.

‘By the Elements, you look like crap.’

Ayla sprang up and rushed to the bars.

It couldn't be.

‘Sienna?’

The Princess of Autumn chuckled as she moved her hand, shutting the door with a gust of wind to shield Ayla from the blinding light.

Sienna really was standing in front of her, dressed in light leather clothing that seemed padded in certain places. They were fighting leathers that allowed for nimble and unrestricted movement. Compared to the rags Ayla had been wearing since the final Trial, the other princess looked radiant.

‘In the flesh,’ she replied with a flourish of her hand. ‘I must admit, I knew you’d look bad after spending days in this pigsty, but you’ve surpassed even my worst expectations.’

Ayla struggled to focus on the words, her mind trying to snap back from the dark haze it had been in.

This couldn't be real.

‘How are you here? You’re not supposed to be here.’

Sienna had outed herself as one of the rebels, trying to

take down Fannar in the battle that broke out right after the last Trial. The rebels had planned their attack meticulously, bombing the arena where the final Trial was held. Sienna had been so close to defeating Fannar with Ayla's help, but Mother Nature had intervened before either princess could land the killing blow.

'Of course I'm not supposed to be here, Ayla. But what did you expect me to do once we realized they must have kept you here in the palace? We looked everywhere, but no one had heard so much as a whisper of what had happened to you.'

'Fannar said he would tell the entire Realm that the rebels had killed me. He wanted to turn everyone against them.'

Sienna rolled her eyes. 'Did you forget that I'm a part of this rebellion? As soon as the message began to spread throughout the Four Kingdoms, I knew he was a liar.'

'But why are the rebels sending you here? I'm useless to them now.'

She no longer had anything to offer them – not now that she wouldn't be Empress. And even though she knew by now that they'd had nothing to do with her brother's death, their motive remained unclear.

Unless Sienna was hoping to tie up some loose ends? Ayla was one of the only ones with any information about the rebels, however little it may be.

But Sienna just looked at her.

'Empress or not, you're still valuable to us as an ally. And regardless, we wouldn't leave you here to rot. That's not what the rebellion stands for.'

Ayla nodded, her thoughts slowly catching up.

'But how did you get in here? The palace defenses must have been raised after the attack on the arena.'

Sienna chuckled again, waving aside Ayla's question as absurd.

'As you well know, I have my ways of getting in and out of this palace. The hard part wasn't me getting inside – it will be getting you out.'

Ayla stumbled back, sinking to her knees.

'I'm really getting out of here.'

Tears blurred her vision before flooding down her cheeks. The days of not knowing what would happen to her had finally caught up to her. Not only that, but the emotions she had tried so hard to contain since finding Auster's corpse were now threatening to spill out. Ayla collapsed.

Auster did nothing wrong, but Fannar still killed him.

Dark shapes began to float through the cell, whispering all of her failures. How she would never make it out of the palace. How she would never feel happiness again. How she deserved to rot in this place.

A metallic click sounded and Ayla heard her cell open. Sienna marched over and dropped to her knees, wrapping an arm around Ayla.

Ayla wasn't expecting the sudden comfort Sienna offered her, but she leaned into her nonetheless.

'The shadows,' Ayla muttered. 'They won't leave me alone. They keep tormenting me.'

She knew she was blabbering, but Sienna's arm tightened only more around her.

'Cry your tears now, Ayla,' Sienna spoke in a quiet voice. 'Let them run free here, where no one can see you. The world has taken so much from you already. I can't imagine how you must be feeling.'

Ayla lifted her head to look at Sienna, but the princess was staring at the ground, a cold look in her eyes. 'But after this moment, you can't show any sign of weakness. You are a princess, the Heir to the Summer Kingdom. You carry the power of fire to burn anyone who tries to get in your way.'

Sienna stood up, pulling Ayla to her feet until she could look her in the eye. 'You *will* rise from this, like a phoenix rises from its smoldering ashes. Do you hear me, Ayla?'

Sienna's look was fierce, but Ayla could see the fear and grief behind her eyes. The two princesses had been through so much already, yet she had the feeling it was only the beginning. She felt her rage and determination seep back in.

'I want them to burn,' she whispered. The faces of the Empress and Fannar appeared before her, cruelty glinting in their eyes. 'I want them erased from this world. They no longer deserve a place in this Realm they're so desperate to keep their claws into.'

Ayla felt her fire roar.

Seeing the flames in her eyes, Sienna cracked a wicked grin.

'Then let them burn, Ayla.'

CHAPTER 2

REUNION

They made their way up the steps and out of the dungeons, Sienna in front and Ayla lagging behind. Her perilous state of mind aside, the food had neither been abundant nor tasteful, so Ayla had grown weak. Her legs were shaking, but she was determined to get out of here.

Sienna kept a brisk pace even when she noticed Ayla couldn't keep up. There was no time to go easy on her.

When they finally reached the closed door at the top of the stairs, Sienna held a finger to her lips, signaling for Ayla to keep quiet.

'The guards are changing shifts, so we've been lucky so far. But we have to be careful in the hallways. We can't let anyone see us.' Sienna dug into the bulging pack that was slung across her body, fishing out two cloaks. 'Put this on and keep your hood up.'

Ayla could only nod, still trying to catch her breath from the climb.

The cloak was a dark blue, made of thick fabric. Once Ayla pulled up the hood, she knew no one would recognize her features if she kept her head down.

Sienna donned her own cloak, hers an emerald green, then slowly opened the door.

The sun was now peeking over the horizon, the light of dawn brighter here than it had seemed in the dungeons. No servants were scurrying around with cleaning supplies or meals for the nobles. Seeing the usually vibrant palace so quiet gave Ayla an eerie feeling.

'This seemed like the best time to get into the palace,' Sienna whispered. 'We could have used the cover of night, but soldiers patrol the castle from dusk till dawn, so we had to get creative.'

Ayla nodded. She didn't recognize this part of the palace, though she knew the soldiers had brought her down here after the final Trial. All she wanted right now was to get out.

Sienna turned left, but when Ayla went to follow, a figure draped in shadows materialized in front of her, seemingly out of thin air. The figure was small, clutching its chest, blood dripping from a gaping wound.

'Ayla.' The apparition spoke in her brother's voice, reaching his hand out to her. '*Help me, Ayla.*'

She clasped her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. The visions had tormented her in the darkness of her cell, keeping her company – no matter how twisted. But now, in the glow of the rising sun, she could do nothing but cower in fear.

'Leave me alone,' she whispered as she opened her eyes.

But instead of vanishing like the monsters usually did after confronting them, this one reached out to touch its hand to Ayla's cheek.

She became paralyzed, the fingers tracing lines over her face. Goosebumps erupted over her entire body.

'*Why didn't you help me, Ayla? I thought I was a good brother, but when I needed you most, you weren't there for me.*'

'I didn't know!' she exclaimed. 'I didn't know any of this would happen to you!' The volume of her voice rose with every word. A small part of her knew that she needed to keep quiet, but the intensity of her grief was all-consuming.

'*It hurt so much when they pushed the blade into my chest. I called out for you, for my big sister to save me. But no one came. I died alone on that cold, hard floor.*'

'As soon as Luca came for me, I ran to you, Auster. But I was too late. You know I would have done anything to protect you!'

'You broke your promise ... You failed me, Lala.'

A wail escaped her. After Azra's death, she swore she would do anything in her power to keep her little brother from harm. But it had all been for nothing.

'Goodbye, Ayla.'

Ayla fell to her knees, sobbing violently, tears and snot running down her face. The pain she had kept so tightly contained in the depths of her heart was overtaking every sense. She forgot where she was, what she was doing, as she curled up in a ball on the floor and squeezed her eyes closed.

Nothing she could do would ever take this pain away. Nothing in this world could give her her brother back.

Suddenly, all the air was pulled from her lungs and a rough hand slapped her across the face, forcing her to open her eyes.

Sienna stood over her, wielding the air around them into a dome from which no sound could escape. Sienna seemed ready to strike again, but Ayla put up a hand to stop her, grasping at her throat with the other, desperate for air. With a flick of her hand, Sienna let the air flow back to Ayla and she could breathe again.

Coughing and choking, Ayla slowly sat up, her head pounding from the lack of oxygen and all the crying.

This time, Sienna didn't bend down to embrace her. Instead, she fixed Ayla with a harsh glare.

'This isn't the place to have another breakdown. I let you have your moment in your cell, but enough is enough. Either you pull yourself together or I'm leaving you here to fend for yourself. I can't have you breaking down in tears all the time, screaming at things that aren't there.'

Sienna crossed her arms, clearly waiting for an answer.

Ayla knew she was right, shaking as she made it back to her

feet. There would come a time when she could allow herself to feel these emotions, but that time was not now.

Ayla nodded, which seemed good enough for Sienna.

They started down the corridor again, the shadows retreating as the sun rose higher above the horizon. Soon, the servants would wake up and start their day. They would have to get out of here before someone caught them.

They took a couple of twisting turns and Ayla began to recognize this part of the palace as she followed Sienna closely.

When Sienna held up a hand, Ayla came to a sudden stop. The corridor seemed perfectly quiet, but perhaps the Autumn princess with her wind powers could hear things Ayla couldn't.

A couple of paces away, a door opened and a servant stepped out holding a basket of dirty clothes. Sienna pulled Ayla behind a suit of armor and they pressed themselves against the wall. It was a relief to watch the person turn the other way and disappear from the corridor.

Peeling herself off the wall, Ayla looked at Sienna.

'How do you plan on getting us out? I take it we're not walking out through the front door of the palace?'

Sienna snorted and shook her head.

'We're taking the tunnels. The rebels trusted me with the location of several escape routes so we could get out of here without being noticed. But we can't leave just yet.'

'What do you mean?' Ayla asked, tilting her head in surprise. Surely the other princess wanted to leave just as much as she did, seeing as they were surrounded by enemy soldiers.

'There's something I still need to retrieve. Just trust me, Ayla.'

Sienna walked off again, giving Ayla no choice in the matter.

Ayla followed, until she realized which way they were headed – Mother Nature’s private rooms.

She stopped in her tracks. Fiorella’s cruel laugh flooded her ears again. Echoes of the moment when she exposed herself as the real villain. Ayla had trusted the woman, even looked up to her as she held the throne for all those years.

But for Fiorella, that hadn’t been enough.

She and Fannar wanted to use Valdemar as a pawn. He was to be their puppet and they would hold his strings, retaining control over everything in the Realm. And the people would be none the wiser.

Ayla grabbed Sienna by the arm, forcing her to a halt.

‘I won’t move another foot until you tell me what you’re looking for. Why are we about to enter Fiorella’s wing?’

Sienna shook off Ayla’s hand but complied.

‘We need the Stone of the Elements. It will give us the advantage we need to take down the Empress. Our sources have gathered that Fiorella keeps it close so she can keep an eye on it.’

Ayla froze, unsure how to react.

The Stone of the Elements was a shard of rock, rumored to date back to the time of the Wielding Collision. When lightning had hit the battlefield, granting the leaders of the four tribes their stronger wielding, it struck a boulder, cracking off a shard and infusing it with its power. From that day forward, each new Ruler and Council member had to touch the Stone to be marked with their rune and unlock their full potential – complete control of their element.

‘Without the Stone, Valdemar can’t ascend to the throne,’ Sienna explained. ‘He won’t receive his mark and he won’t be able to form a new Council. Of course, that’s disregarding the fact that he won’t even have an Heir of Autumn or Summer to join the Council – with or without the Stone.’

Hearing the Prince of Winter's name made Ayla's heart clench. She shouldn't be thinking about him right now.

She recognized the sense in Sienna's words, but that didn't mean she liked the idea of entering the Empress's wing to get the Stone. It was like walking into a lion's den, hoping the creature wouldn't be there to strike.

'Fine,' Ayla conceded. 'Where might it be?'

Sienna gestured for Ayla to follow her, passing several closed doors before stopping.

'If my sources are correct, the Stone should be behind this door. I don't have any information on how it might be guarded, so be prepared to wield.'

Ayla nodded and with a flick of her hand, she willed a fireball to appear. It didn't burn as brightly and wasn't as big as she was used to, but this would have to do for now.

When Sienna pushed at the door, it came as a surprise to both princesses to find it unlocked.

As Ayla looked inside, her fireball sputtered out and a gasp escaped her.

The Stone of the Elements wasn't in this room. But Valdemar and Yuri were. The princes looked up when they heard the door open, their concerned looks quickly flipping to shock, then relief.

Valdemar rose from his chair and caught her gaze. He had dark circles under his eyes and his hair was a mess of unruly strands.

He marched over to her, stopping with only an inch left between them. He was about to close that final distance when a shadow appeared over his shoulder.

Fannar. He had a cruel smile on his face and a dagger in his hand, but the King vanished just as quickly as he had appeared.

Ayla put a hand on Valdemar's chest, pushing him back.

‘Stay away from me,’ she snarled.

Valdemar looked hurt, clearly confused by the distance she wanted to keep between them. But Ayla couldn’t stand the sight of him right now. He looked too much like his father. She knew Valdemar hadn’t been responsible for any of this, but she couldn’t bear the thought of him touching her with his father’s shadow lurking over him.

A second figure appeared behind Valdemar – a far friendlier face this time.

‘Ayla?’ Yuri muttered.

As his arms enveloped her, Ayla breathed a sigh of relief. She took in his scent and soaked in the comfort and safety he offered.

With a sniff, Yuri stepped back to look at her.

‘By Nature, Ayla. I’m so happy to see you. When the Empress told us the rebels had taken you, I thought you were gone. I thought I’d never see you again.’

Tears filled his eyes, but his words made her freeze. Yuri and Valdemar had no idea what Fiorella and Fannar had done to her. What they had done to Auster ...

‘Yuri, I’m okay. Or as well as I can be, given the circumstances.’

She let out another breath, this time to prepare herself.

‘In fact, I’ve been in the palace the entire time. The rebels didn’t capture me, Fiorella and Fannar threw me in a cell.’

Yuri startled and dropped his arms away from Ayla’s shoulders.

‘Why would Aunt Fiorella lock you up?’

Ayla glanced at Sienna, who gave her a nod. Valdemar inched closer, but Ayla forced herself to avoid his eyes as she told the princes everything. How Sienna was a part of the rebellion. How the rebels had tried to sway Ayla into joining their cause, claiming it would be for the good of the Realm.

She explained how she realized it was Fannar who had killed Auster, when he had mentioned the excruciating details of her brother's death right before the final Trial. How Fiorella had wielded the sand, trapping Ayla's feet so she would lose.

'They came down to my cell and told me everything. They had been planning this for a while and when they caught Auster eavesdropping on one of their conversations, Fannar ... took care of him,' she finished.

Ayla somehow managed to get through the facts by staring at the floor and trying to push down any emotions, but she couldn't stop a tear from escaping.

Yuri was in shock after hearing how his aunt had played them for the entire duration of the Trials. Ayla's heart broke for her friend. She knew how deeply he had loved his aunt.

It was Sienna who broke their long silence. 'The rebellion sent me to help Ayla escape from the palace, but that isn't the only reason I'm here. Before I tell you what I'm looking for, do I have your word that I can trust you? Mind you, if you break my trust, the repercussions won't be pretty.'

Valdemar let out a grunt as Yuri nodded in a daze.

'I need the Stone of the Elements. It's the only way to keep Fiorella and Fannar from getting what they want. Do either of you know where it might be?'

Valdemar shook his head.

'They haven't told me anything yet. I'm barely allowed to leave this wing and they haven't said a word about the Stone. They're busy doing damage control after the rebel attack on the palace. Yuri is the first person I've seen in days.'

Sienna glanced over at Yuri, who was still staring at the floor. Ayla approached him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

'I know this is a lot to take in, but we could really use your help. Is there any chance Fiorella's told you where she keeps the Stone?'

Yuri shuddered, then took a deep breath before raising his eyes.

‘I know where it is. I can show you.’

ARTIFACT CHAMBER

Sienna grabbed Yuri's arm.

'Where are you going to take us?' she demanded.

The tension in the room grew as Sienna watched Yuri closely. He took a step toward her, lowering his voice when he spoke. 'There's a secret chamber connected to the royal bedroom.'

A gust of wind roared around them as Sienna seemed to lose her patience.

'Do you want to get us killed? We aren't stepping foot in Fiorella's chamber. She could still be sleeping in there!'

'She isn't there.' Valdemar's voice spiked their interest, and they looked at him. 'It's my chamber now.'

Ayla tried to ignore his proximity. She noticed how close he kept – despite her harsh words – but never touched her.

While it was customary for the winner of the Trials to take their place in the royal wing, neither Sienna nor Ayla had expected Fiorella to play by the rules. Then again, Fannar was a part of this too, and he would want Winter to claim this wing.

'We must be quick,' Yuri added. 'These halls will soon be filled with guards and servants.'

He took Sienna's nod as a sign to open the door and the four of them sneaked through the royal wing. Aside from a touch of frost on the plants that climbed along the walls, things hadn't changed since they'd been here for their lessons. Sienna wielded the air beneath them, muffling their footsteps. They were headed toward a massive door all the way beyond the staircase – and farther away from their escape route.

This was where Fiorella had resided during her years on the throne. Ayla thought back to the trust she'd had in the once-kind woman, still struggling to process that everything had been a lie.

Yuri scanned the hallway, ensuring no one was around before slowly opening the door and motioning for everyone to get inside. They entered a large bedroom that was mostly dark, aside from the burning fireplace on the opposite side of the bed. The four-poster monstrosity was so huge it could have fit all four of them with room to spare.

'We were put into a treehouse, while this suite is – what – *ten* times bigger?' Sienna snorted. No one answered.

Taking in the grandeur of this place, Ayla noticed how the red color of the sun, now fully above the horizon, filtered through massive windows that reached all the way from floor to ceiling. Ayla felt Valdemar tense as she took in the details of his personal space.

Yuri approached a wall of paintings, many bigger than him, and Sienna followed eagerly. That's when Ayla noticed the books on Valdemar's nightstand – the very same books she had seen after the last feast. Books about the Summer Kingdom. The ones he had kept so he could learn more about Ayla's kingdom and culture. Out of curiosity, she turned to face him. Valdemar was already watching her.

He took in her expression, as if he were checking every inch of her to make sure she was okay. A shiver traveled up her arms and Valdemar gave her a small smile.

'I found the entrance,' Yuri said.

One of the large paintings opened to reveal a door-shaped hole, the branches surrounding the painting receding because of Yuri's wielding.

'She's one sneaky bitch, but I've got to give it to her: this is genius,' Sienna admitted.

'I've underestimated what she's capable of,' Yuri mumbled.

Ayla saw the pain etched onto his face. It had to be hard for Yuri, coming to the realization that the aunt he'd loved his entire life was nothing like he'd always believed. Even Ayla was struggling to carry the hurt of the Empress's betrayal. She couldn't even begin to imagine how Yuri must be feeling.

'I think we all did,' Valdemar replied, breaking the silence.

'She once told me that her chamber held a secret passage,' Yuri continued. 'One that I would need when I became Ruler. She told me about the Stone and how it's been stored in this artifact chamber since the Collision. But I'm not sure what we're about to find in here.'

'Well, let's find out.' Without hesitation, Sienna stepped through the opening. Ayla followed, Valdemar and Yuri close behind.

The air was moist here, with drops of water sliding down the earth walls and plants absolutely everywhere.

Ayla willed her fire to light their way, but soft sunrays already illuminated the room at the other end of the passage. They entered the small space, where even more plants draped down around them. Old mirrors hung throughout the room and a big oak tree stood in the middle.

'Let's get what we need and leave this place,' Ayla said softly. She'd been running on adrenaline this whole time and felt it fading quickly.

'Easy for you to say.' Yuri whispered the words under his breath, but Sienna's wielding meant Ayla could still hear him.

She reached for Yuri's hand. 'You could come with us.'

'I-I can't. My parents, Meiko, Arlowe ... They're all still here and I can't just leave them.'

The mention of Yuri's younger brother – Auster's friend – made Ayla's chest ache.

'Their titles will offer them some protection, at least for the time being,' Sienna said. 'But *you* could come. We need to stick together if we hope to stand a chance against Fiorella and Fannar.'

'Protect them?' Ayla whispered. 'Like being a prince protected my brother? Like my status protected me?'

They all stared at her. They knew she was right.

'They put me in a cage as if I were nothing more than a dog. They gave me just enough food and water so I wouldn't die, but I can't even begin to imagine what they had planned for me. Being a princess, the Heir to the Summer Kingdom – none of that has kept me safe. My title was worthless down there ...'

'Ayla's right,' Valdemar said. 'They would do anything to hold onto power. We can't take any more risks. Believe me, I've tried, but they keep forcing my hand.'

Sienna moved closer to Ayla. 'Don't you see? They will keep on destroying anyone who stands between them and the throne. The four of us must leave now, so we can come back with an army of our own.'

The rebels. She was talking about the rebels.

Yuri nodded.

'You'll ... take me with you?' Valdemar sounded surprised, as though the thought had never crossed his mind.

Sienna watched him for a long moment. 'I've heard the whispers, Valdemar. So yes, I will.'

Ayla had no clue what Sienna was talking about, but when she glanced her way, Ayla realized Sienna was waiting for her approval.

The fire in her palms burned brighter as her pain and the hatred for Valdemar's father roared within.

He killed him.

He killed him.

He kill – No, Fannar killed him. It wasn't Valdemar.

'Maybe it's for the best if I stay here and manage the situation ...' Valdemar began.

Ayla noticed the slight tremble of his hands. She noticed the pain in his eyes, the worry they carried. Worry for her well-being.

'You should come with us,' Ayla uttered.

Surprise laced his expression as his eyes lingered on her. His entire body was angled toward her and she could see the tension in every muscle. Despite the frown creasing his eyebrows, the ghost of a smile appeared on his lips. They stood there for a moment, simply watching each other, until Yuri broke the silence.

'There's so much I still don't understand, but we do need to hurry if we hope to get out of this place.'

Nerves and adrenaline set Ayla into motion and she moved swiftly with quiet steps. She was already halfway to the tree when Sienna answered. 'Sounds like a plan.'

The tree was strange. It was tall, much taller than Ayla, with branches and leaves that reached high up to a ceiling that she could barely make out. But something about it felt off. It was missing large pieces of bark, the leaves were riddled with giant holes, and its strange smell overwhelmed Ayla as she moved closer. The tree was rotting – as if tainted by the magic inside of it.

As she stood before it, the branches started to twist and turn. Gently at first, before the movements became faster and more aggressive.

'Ayla, look out!'

Hearing her name, she looked over at Valdemar, just as a sharp pain exploded in her back. It took a few seconds for Ayla to realize the branches had knocked her to the ground, keeping her there, forming a cage around her.

Imprisoned, yet again. But not defenseless.

Ayla's flames resurfaced, spreading until she was engulfed in them. The branches pulled back as some of them caught fire.

'These fucking trees,' Sienna screamed. Strong branches pulled her arms upward, preventing her from wielding. Valdemar was busy fighting off multiple attacks as he tried to get to Ayla.

'This is my aunt's doing,' Yuri's panicked voice echoed around them.

It was then that Ayla saw him there, standing alone, untouched by the vile magic that surrounded them.

'She would never have accepted any other winner but me,' Yuri whispered, lowering his arms toward the ground.

He closed his eyes and shifted his bare feet deeper into the earth. His hands made big pulling motions, as if trying to wrangle every single root from the dirt and destroy the tree entirely. Ayla got up, watching in awe as the roots obeyed Yuri's wielding instantly. His eyes found hers and Ayla saw them burn with intense green light – a sign of his immense power.

Valdemar dropped his hands as the attacks stopped and Sienna was released from the firm grip of the branches.

'Get away from the tree,' Yuri commanded, a note of authority in his voice.

The Heirs followed Yuri's order, making room for him to reach the tree.

It was mesmerizing to witness how in control he was.

As he got closer to the tree trunk, a hollow appeared before him. He reached into it.

Ayla thought back to Sienna's earlier statement – there was no denying that Fiorella was a twisted genius. She had made sure the room could only be entered by an Heir of

Spring. Someone who could wield the power of earth. Ayla wondered how Fiorella would have explained herself to the other rulers if they had gotten wind of this scheme. It was, after all, forbidden for Mother Nature to show any kind of preference to her own.

‘We’re too late,’ Yuri said. He slowly turned toward them, giving them a perfect view of the empty trunk. ‘There’s nothing here.’

Sienna screamed in frustration. ‘That fucking bitch.’

They rushed out of the hidden chamber, realizing just how much time they’d wasted.

‘I don’t know when she could have removed the Stone,’ Yuri stammered. It was obvious he felt responsible for their fruitless mission.

‘We’ll find another way, but we need to get out of this wing,’ Valdemar said, his voice urgent. ‘The guards are starting to make their rounds.’

‘Wait,’ Sienna whispered. She held up a hand to stop them in their tracks.

‘This is extremely draining, so I can’t do it for very long, but I will cloak us until we’ve left this wing. Nobody will be able to see or hear us – just make sure you don’t touch anything or anyone.’

They all nodded and moved closer together. Sienna twisted her hands, creating a shield of rapidly wielded air around them.

It was almost laughable how easily they made their way out of the royal bedroom, through the hall, and out of Fiorella’s wing, until they were suddenly in a random corridor.

Being cloaked by Sienna’s wielding felt like walking through an open field with heavy winds racing by. Their footsteps didn’t make a sound and all of the noises around them sounded muffled, as if they were coming through thick

glass. Sienna wasn't lying when she'd told them that cloaking was extremely draining. Her entire body had tensed and beads of sweat were forming on her forehead. The hallways were eerily empty. Not a single soldier was standing guard. Ayla was just about to mention it when she heard the sound of heavy boots. Two guards rounded the corner and the group held their breath instinctively, despite Sienna's shield.

'I just think it's suspicious. He's barely left his chambers,' the red haired guard said.

His younger companion rolled his eyes. 'You heard Empress Fiorella. He's in mourning.'

Ayla froze, feeling Valdemar wrap his hand around her arm. 'We need to go. Sienna can't keep this up for much longer.'

It wasn't long before they slipped into the royal library. The space appeared to be empty and the bookcases offered them some refuge.

When Sienna dropped her cloaking, she staggered backward. Yuri and Ayla caught her, holding her until she'd regained her balance.

'You're welcome,' she smirked, a sheen of sweat still marking her brow.

'I didn't even know you could do that,' Yuri said in awe.

'That's kind of the whole point,' she explained. 'Not all of us wind wielders can do it. It's only very recently that I learned that if I bend the winds fast enough, I can create a shield to protect a small group of people.'

'Now – how do we get out?' Valdemar asked.

Ayla glanced around, ensuring no one was there to overhear. 'Sienna knows about the hidden tunnels that can take us outside the palace grounds.'

'That's right,' Sienna said. 'The closest one is--'

Yuri held up his hands, cutting her off.

Out of nowhere, roots sprang from the ground, wrapping around them, pinning the four Heirs against the far wall.

‘My dear Yuri, what is all of this? Conspiring with traitors now, are we?’