

THE RULER OF NATURE

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RULER
OF
NATURE

P E L C K M A N S

CHAPTER 1

REMEMBRANCE

Sienna knew her father would have been ecstatic to see her sitting on this throne. Whenever she reminisced about the battle that killed so many magisters and civilians, she always felt better knowing her father had been one of the unfortunates. When she had admitted as much to her mother, the queen had flashed her a private smile.

Queen Rowan was on the dance floor, twirling around with a group of other nobles. Her head was thrown back in a laugh and the people around her seemed to bask in her unrestrained joy. Her mother was finally able to be herself again, to show the world that the Queen of Autumn was more than a puppet to the King who had seized control for so many years.

‘Looks like everyone is having fun,’ Aasim said, standing behind her throne. His gaze never wavered from the dozens of people who filled the throne room.

‘They deserve it,’ Sienna said. Her people were right to cherish this moment after their years of hardship.

The previous Mother Nature had seen the people with weaker wielding powers as inferior, branding them as not enough in the eyes of society. Sienna had been fighting for their cause for years and she finally felt like they were in a good place now, where everyone was accepted for who they were.

Ayla, Valdemar, Yuri, and she had shared the power of the Stone of the Elements with every person in their Realm, granting them the powers they should have received hundreds of years ago. She still couldn’t wrap her head around the fact

that Ayla had died on the battlefield, let alone that she'd spoken with Nature in those moments, but Sienna couldn't deny that Ayla had done the right thing.

Valdemar and Ayla were dancing as well, much to the chagrin of the King of Winter, but Sienna could see the way he was looking at the woman in his arms.

Everyone knew Ayla had him wrapped around her finger.

She could see her brother, dragging Ineka to the dance floor. The woman had been amazing during the aftermath of the war, brewing healing potions and taking care of patients left and right, along with the other healers who hadn't yet left the palace when the battle had begun. Isaak had gotten a nasty gash on his forehead during the fight and Ineka had made sure the wound was properly treated so it wouldn't get infected. Ever since then, Isaak couldn't seem to get her out of his mind, but Ineka had made it clear that her work as a healer would always come first.

'Empress,' Fintan spoke, approaching the throne. 'May I have a word with you about an urgent case regarding the Mountain's crops?'

'Fintan,' Sienna spoke, smothering a sigh that tried to escape her. 'Unless the entire Mountain is on fire, I'm sure it can wait until tomorrow. Have a drink and go annoy someone else.' Sienna lifted her glass to her lips and let the sweet taste of the wine glide down her throat.

Fintan huffed. 'With all due respect, Empress, but I'm sure the problems in the Realm won't wait for something as frivolous as a party ...' He looked out over the throne room, his lips pulled into a sneer. Behind Sienna, Aasim let out a cough.

'We won't have enough vegetables this season to feed the people on the Mountain. A rat infestation a few months ago ruined half of our crops and there was no way to make up for the loss. We need your help, Empress.'

Those last words seemed to pain him, which Sienna found immensely amusing.

‘We’ll contact Spring to see if they have any to spare. I will talk it over with Yuri.’

‘Another thing,’ Fintan said, clearly trying to get her to snap. ‘More and more people are leaving the Mountain to go back to their kingdom. Soon, the place will be deserted.’

Sienna made a face. ‘Why is that a problem? We should be glad people like the changes we’ve made these past two years. We’re doing all of it for them.’

Fintan mockingly shook his head, as if he was speaking to a child rather than the Empress of the Realm. ‘Who will take care of the Mountain when no one is there anymore? Who will—’

‘Fintan,’ Sienna interrupted him, ‘the Mountain was there to help the people who were being oppressed by Fiorella and didn’t see a way out. It was only ever meant to be an escape until things got better, and right now, they are. Trade has improved between the kingdoms, people no longer have to take jobs they don’t want to do just because they have weaker wielding, and everyone has access to their element, just as Nature intended it.’ She pointed at a group of people playing a card game at one of the nearby tables, their cards floating in the air because of the winds they were wielding. ‘Are you trying to tell me those people don’t look happy?’ she asked, daring him to contradict her.

Fintan looked taken aback and lowered his head. The man had never gained her respect in the years she’d known him, but Sienna thought he’d taken a turn for the better ever since the rebels had finally gotten the equality they wanted. Sometimes, though, the old him reappeared.

‘I just don’t want to see the Mountain deserted,’ he muttered, his gaze still on the ground. ‘For some people, it has

been their only home for years and they don't have anywhere to return to.'

Sienna knew Fintan had been a young boy when he'd made the journey to the Mountain. Back then, his mother and brother had been with him, but a fever sickness had taken both of them years ago.

'We will find a use for the Mountain,' Sienna said, making sure to keep her tone cordial. 'We have been looking for a place to build a new wielding academy in one of the kingdoms – maybe the Dome could be a good place for it? We can discuss this tomorrow at the meeting of the Council.'

Fintan nodded, bowed, and went to leave, but Sienna stopped him.

'Fintan, do stay and enjoy the party. The wine is especially good, imported from the Spring Kingdom.'

Fintan nodded again, then got swept up by the crowd.

'That was exceptionally kind of you, Empress,' Aasim said.

Sienna snorted. 'Fetch me another glass of wine, please. I need it.'

A little while later, Sienna stood up from her throne and began to walk around the room, Aasim trailing behind her. She had told him several times that she would be able to protect herself if she needed to, but the man had been persistent. He had walked into the throne room just a few weeks after she'd been crowned Empress, demanding to be on her royal guard. Sienna had made him work for it, since she hadn't forgotten the time on the Mountain when he'd almost beaten her in a practice fight, but he'd taken the challenge in stride. In the following months, he had stood guard at her chambers for hours without complaining once.

When she looked around, she could see Brigitta, the girl they'd met in Vikün. She was dancing with another girl, their

arms around each other's shoulders and their faces close together. The girl had been working with Ineka and was eager to become a royal healer.

'Sienna!' someone yelled out from across the room. Yuri was standing against the wall, next to a table that held a spread of all the delicacies of the Four Kingdoms. Next to him, holding his cane, was Arlowe.

Sienna made her way over to them. 'I hope you two are enjoying my little party,' she said cooly. Yuri laughed and even Arlowe grinned, but he couldn't seem to look her in the eye, even after all the time they'd spent together.

'Of course, Empress,' he said, lowering into a bow before Sienna could stop him.

'Arlowe, seriously. I have told you countless times you don't need to do that. We have known each other for years.'

'Forgive me, Empress. It's stronger than myself,' Arlowe said with a sheepish smile. Yuri elbowed him. 'Then why don't you ever bow to me anymore? Am I not important enough to you?'

Arlowe laughed and some tension left his shoulders. 'You're the most important person in my life, you big oaf. Wasn't agreeing to marry you proof enough?'

Yuri had created a ring from a branch of the oak his father had planted when he was crowned King of Spring. Instead of a gem, the center held a little rose Yuri had wielded in a way that it would never wither.

'You can prove it to me even more tonight,' Yuri whispered it so loudly that Sienna was surprised the entire throne room hadn't heard. Arlowe's cheeks flushed.

'This celebration has been amazing, Sienna. The people are lucky to have you as their Empress.'

'They really are, aren't they?' Sienna said, with a casual glance at her nails.

Yuri was about to answer when two more people joined their party. Valdemar had an arm wrapped around Ayla, who had a radiant smile on her face. Sienna couldn't help but return the grin.

She and Ayla had grown closer over the years, spending a lot of time together thinking of ways they could improve the Realm. Sienna was proud to have her three friends as her Council.

'I'm surprised to see you're still here,' Ayla said to Sienna. 'I thought you would have left as soon as it was acceptable.'

Ayla wasn't wrong. Sienna loved being Ruler of the Realm and thinking of new ways she could be there for her people, but all the parading and acting cordial at parties was not her cup of tea. She'd rather be out there with her people, to help them rebuild what had been destroyed during the war. Most of it was done by now, but she knew of a few villages where construction was still ongoing.

'I was just about to,' Sienna admitted. 'But I was wondering if the three of you would have one last drink with me in my rooms?'

Yuri looked at Arlowe, but the man grabbed his cane and gave Yuri a kiss. 'I'm going to spend some time with your parents. I'll wait up for you,' he said, before walking over to join Queen Wakumi and King Tatsu, who were sitting with Ayla's parents.

'I hope you have something stronger than wine there,' Valdemar said.

'It's like you don't even know me,' Sienna said, offended.

When the four of them were situated in her rooms and Aasim had taken up his position, Sienna felt like she could finally relax. She took off her crown and carelessly tossed it on her bed.

'The past Rulers are turning in their graves,' Yuri said, jokingly shaking his head at Sienna.

'We burned the last Ruler to ashes; I don't think she'll be doing much turning at all,' Sienna quipped, before realizing what she had said.

Everyone, including Sienna, immediately looked at Ayla, who had a sad smile on her face. 'It's fine,' she whispered. 'I know it wasn't Azra.'

Of all the disgusting things Fiorella had done, this had been the worst. The bitch had taken control of Ayla's sister's corpse and used it when her own body had begun to wither after the Season Trials. Sienna couldn't imagine how it would have felt if Isaak had been the one possessed by Fiorella.

Ayla took Valdemar's hand. 'We visited Summer yesterday, after staying in Winter for the last couple of weeks. We visited Azra's statue and put some flowers on Auster's grave.'

Her brother's body had been brought to Summer when Ayla's parents had left the palace after the last Trial. His body had been preserved by some Spring magic, wielded by Tatsu himself, so they could give their youngest child the funeral he deserved. Sienna had attended the service and held Ayla's hand when the tears had appeared.

Eager to change the mood, Sienna produced a bottle of liquor and four glasses from the cabinet next to the couch where they were sitting.

'This arrived from Winter last month. I feel like we could really use it right now,' she said, pouring the first glass and offering it to Ayla. But she shook her head and gave it to Valdemar instead. 'I want to have a clear head during the Council meeting tomorrow,' she explained. Sienna got her a glass of water instead, then filled another glass for Yuri and took one for herself, lifting it into the air.

'I feel like we deserve a toast. Only the four of us know

what we had to go through to get here. There are other people who have had to make tremendous sacrifices, but no one had the responsibility on their shoulders to win the war and take on Fiorella. The four of us saved this Realm and changed it for the better.'

The others nodded and took a sip of their drink. Yuri immediately began to cough.

'It seems we should invite you to Winter more often, Yuri,' Valdemar said. He hadn't batted an eye when the liquor from his kingdom had slipped down his throat.

Yuri made a rude gesture and Valdemar laughed again.

'So, what now?' Ayla asked, directing the question at Sienna. 'Most of the villages have been rebuilt, peace has returned to the Realm, and everyone is feeling safe and happy. What's in store for you now?'

Sienna grinned.

'Oh Ayla – I'm just getting started.'

CHAPTER 2

UNREST

Sienna's body trembled as she tried to contain her anger. 'Try again,' her father hissed. 'You're not weak like your mother, are you?'

He took another sip from his glass of amber liquor. Her mother sat in a chair across the room. She didn't even try to defend herself—or her daughter.

Sienna hated how small her father made her feel, even though he knew well enough what she was capable of. She knew he took a sick pleasure in her suffering.

Her body was pressed against the spiked wall, wielded in place by a handful of soldiers.

The most twisted part was that she'd wanted to please him, wanted to see the slightest hint of pride on his stupid face. But that part of her had ebbed away more each year.

Over the years, the love she'd once had for her parents had turned into disgust. If she couldn't get love from her parents, she would simply have to make them fear her.

The winds pressed her back deeper into the spikes and her father's grin widened, but Sienna knew what she was doing.

Just as her father's condescending voice was about to speak again, she flicked her wrists and tossed the soldiers across the room. She made it seem effortless, even pushing her parents with her strong winds.

Stepping away from the spikes, she tried to catch her breath, but before she could react, her father marched toward her and grabbed her shoulders, shoving her back against the wall.

'Bleed. Bleed until you learn how to control your winds!'

The pain made it impossible to voice that she'd been crafting her powers to perfection. Her control was impeccable.

Sienna's vision blurred as she felt blood soak through her tunic, and the last thing she registered was her mother's stoic face before darkness took over.

Sienna gasped for air as she clung to the blankets on her bed. Her chest seemed too small for the way her heart was thumping. Angrily, she wiped the tears from her flushed cheeks.

The nightmares had lessened over the past few years, but they seemed to be triggered by a feeling she couldn't quite grasp. She wished for a second that she could ask Ineka for a calming draught that would help her sleep. But Sienna wasn't one to overshare, and she certainly wouldn't allow any weakness to show.

She could take on this role as Mother Nature, and nobody needed a reason to doubt that. She knew he was gone and would never come back again.

So *why* was she crying?

All she could do was press a hand to her mouth so the night guard at her door wouldn't hear her. He would barge into the room at the slightest suspicion that something might be happening to her.

She'd rather take part in the Season Trials again.

It was a small blessing that it wasn't Aasim who stood guard at her door at night. Even though he liked to pretend otherwise, the man would have to sleep at some point.

With the hand that wasn't pressed against her mouth, she waved at the door, wielding a shield of air against it before letting out a scream.

A scream that encompassed all the pain she'd had to hide for years, the feeling of being unwanted in her own home, of

not being loved by her own parents, of trying and trying, but never being good enough.

A scream that was enforced with air, tossing the sheets from her bed and making the furniture in the room soar through the air. The pieces of furniture jumbled and twisted around and over each other, jolting around like the thoughts in her mind.

Her screams died and only a raspy sound emerged from her throat. She lowered the furniture to the ground in a jumbled mess, careful not to let anything break, since she didn't want to explain how that could have happened. She would wake up early tomorrow and rearrange it all back to its rightful place.

All she wanted to do in that moment was sleep.

The following morning, with her room back in order, she sat in front of her mirror, trying not to look like she'd barely slept a wink. The dark circles beneath her eyes vanished as she dabbed them with powder, using a finger to blend the substance into her skin. She was about to tackle her cheeks with rouge, when her door opened.

Queen Rowan walked into the room, still in her nightgown, hair loose, with locks that reached down to her lower back.

'Good morning, dear. I hope I'm not imposing, but I was wondering if you'd like to break our fast together?'

'Of course. I can send someone to fetch us some food.'

Sienna looked at the servant who was standing in the open doorway, and they nodded before closing the door behind them.

'The party yesterday was so entertaining. It's been a while since I had so much ... fun.' Rowan uttered the word as though it felt strange on her tongue. Sienna could see how much it still surprised her mother to speak so freely, to feel anything but the bleakness she'd been forced to experience for years.

'I'm glad you had fun, mother. We all deserved it. Nature knows we've endured enough hardship in our lives.'

Sienna looked in the mirror to see her mother sit down on one of the couches, her eyes on her daughter.

'You left quite early. I hope nothing was wrong?'

Rationally, Sienna knew her mother hadn't been responsible for the years of distance and neglect, that it had all been her father's fault. But her heart was struggling to forget the countless times her mother had just *watched*.

Watched when her father had berated her for not being the best. For being a disappointment when she couldn't live up to his expectations.

Watched when the man she'd once loved took over her kingdom and made her a puppet, even though she was doing it to protect her daughter.

'I came up here with my friends to have some time alone. We had a few drinks and a little celebration of our own.'

Rowan smiled. 'I'm glad you have such good friends, Sienna. Amarr and Tatsu were a few years older than me when we took part in the Trials, so we never quite hit it off like you all did. Drifa and I liked each other just fine, but then she was gone ... When we heard the news of her passing, it came as quite a shock for the three of us.' The queen seemed lost in her own memories for a few minutes before she rose. Rowan began to gather Sienna's hair to braid it, expertly twisting the locks between her fingers. The braid sat close to her scalp, the way Sienna liked it, but when her mother tried to hide the two white strands among the rest of her red hair, she stopped her.

'No – leave them in the front,' Sienna said.

'Are you sure, dear? Wouldn't you like them to be a bit less noticeable? If we tuck them like this, no one will be able to tell they're there.'

Her mother made another attempt to twist them into a lock

of red hair, but Sienna pulled the strands from her mother's hands. She twisted them to sit right by her face, just several inches above her eyebrows.

'I like them this way, mother. Let the people see the marks that Fiorella left on me.'

Rowan sighed but said nothing more as she started on a second braid.

What Sienna didn't tell her mother was that she *needed* the marks to be seen. She needed people to feel like she was worthy of being Ruler.

The rest of the meal with her mother was pleasant enough. Sienna managed to shake off her dark mood and kept the rest of the conversation light. Rowan was set to leave for Autumn today, as were the rest of the royals. Valdemar, Ayla and Yuri had promised to stay a few days longer, but eventually, they would leave for their kingdoms as well. Ayla and Valdemar divided their time between Winter and Summer, but Valdemar couldn't stay away from his kingdom for long periods of time, since he had become king the moment Fannar had died. He had a regent in place for the times when he was absent, but the court there was still packed with men and women who had followed his father, and Valdemar was having a hard time determining who was sincere and who was not.

'Maybe I should pay the Winter Kingdom a visit. I can talk to the nobles and tell Valdemar who's acting suspicious,' Sienna said aloud.

'You think everyone in Winter seems suspicious,' Aasim quipped from behind her.

'I mean, can you blame me? They might make a great barrel of liquor, but none of the nobles who were invited even danced yesterday!'

She made a mental note not to invite them to the next celebration.

'So they were acting the same way you do when you're in a Council meeting and Fintan is speaking?' Aasim asked dryly.

'At least my frown is warranted,' Sienna grumbled.

Speaking of Fintan, the man in question approached her when she'd nearly reached the Council room. But before he could even speak a word, Sienna raised a hand to stop him.

'Fintan, I swear to Nature, if you're going to bring up crops again, I might just find a carrot and put it in—'

'Not at all, Empress,' Fintan said, interrupting her. 'Although, I will have to bring it up during the Council meeting. The others need to know.'

She just gave him a look.

'I came here to thank you.'

She couldn't have been more surprised if Fintan had told her he'd be taking up pottery in lieu of ruling the Mountain with Nisa.

'Thank me?' Sienna asked. 'Why?'

'I took your advice and tried to ... enjoy yesterday's celebration. I must say, some dancing has done me well.'

Aasim coughed, definitely trying to hide a laugh, but neither Fintan nor Sienna said anything about it.

'I'm glad I could be of help,' Sienna said awkwardly. She didn't quite know how to deal with a friendly Fintan. She was more used to him always pointing out how she was doing the wrong thing in every situation. 'Let's hope this meeting is as invigorating as the party appears to have been.'

Fintan nodded before stepping away, and Sienna swore she could see a smile on his face. She wondered exactly how much he'd enjoyed the party.

Or with whom ...

Sienna threw Aasim a knowing glance.

She couldn't help but feel skeptical about the man's sudden change in demeanor. She did, however, know that war and

oppression tend to change a person, so she'd attributed his behavior to the peace that now flowed throughout their Realm.

Sienna shifted in her seat when her ears picked up on the sound of approaching footsteps. Three people were making their way toward the Council room, and she could tell who they were just by their way of walking.

Aasim, noticing the way she was concentrating, whispered: 'Let me guess, the others have arrived.'

She turned toward him only slightly. 'Just Yuri, Ayla and Valdemar.'

'I wish I had your hearing gift.'

That statement made her look into Aasim's eyes. She wouldn't wish this curse on anyone; it had the power of driving her insane at times.

'Why? To hear all the court gossip, or to excel as a royal guard?' Sienna mocked.

He remained quiet before replying.

'Both.'

A grin formed on Sienna's face, not only from the answer, but because her three friends walked into the room at that very moment.

Yuri and Ayla were in deep conversation, and their giggles filled the room. Valdemar, walking behind them, eyed Ayla with a grin plastered on his face.

Sienna had overheard the detailed story that Yuri was telling them before they'd even entered, and she raised a brow at him.

'I don't know how Arlowe puts up with you,' she said, shaking her head.

Yuri laughed even harder as they crossed the distance.

'I wonder, too, since that man is most certainly sleep deprived,' Ayla added.

Yuri was about to explain when Sienna held up her hand.

‘Spare me your filthy descriptions, Yuri. We have more pressing matters to discuss.’

He winked and passionately told them how he’d spent the remainder of the night. The Council wouldn’t commence until their group was complete, so Yuri took the liberty to fill in their time. It was something they’d gotten quite used to.

Sienna rolled her eyes when her brother and Nisa walked into the room a few minutes later.

‘Finally,’ she sighed.

Both Isaak and Nisa offered her a quick nod as they took their places.

‘Apologies, sister. I was waiting for the latest reports for our meeting, but not all the messengers arrived in time.’

Sienna leaned forward.

The giggles and laughter that had filled the room fell away, and they all went quiet as they gave Sienna their full attention.

‘Fintan has brought to my attention that the Mountain is slowly emptying out after the crop disaster we’ve had. This isn’t a bad thing, since it means that our people feel safe enough to return to the ground, but I’ve been thinking that we might need a new purpose for it.’

Her gaze took in the people sitting around her.

‘It might be an ideal place to train the young wielders, especially since we’ve been planning to build a new wielding academy nearby. That way we could kill two birds with one stone.’

Most of them nodded in agreement, but Nisa looked hesitant.

‘That proposition would indeed solve a lot of problems, but I think it’s also necessary to preserve certain areas on the Mountain, to ensure they don’t get lost over the course of this change.’

Sienna nodded. 'Rest assured, Nisa. I understand your worry, as I do Fintan's, but I have no desire to diminish what has been built there over the years.'

Ayla leaned forward. 'When we first stayed on the Mountain and saw the rebels training and fighting each other, we were in awe of the amount of space. A training camp on the Mountain would be a good way to repurpose the facilities.'

'I agree,' said Valdemar. 'It provides a safe training space nearby and will draw more people into town as well.'

The words she and her Council had spoken seemed to satisfy both Nisa and Fintan.

'It's agreed then?' Sienna asked.

They all nodded and Sienna looked in Nisa's direction. 'We'll discuss this with Ineka and Ofir at their earliest convenience. As heads of the wielding academy, they'll need to be informed first.'

'Of course,' Nisa replied.

'Isaak,' Sienna continued, 'will you send an invitation their way?'

Her brother was already scribbling away on a piece of parchment. He nodded.

'So if that's settled, all that remains to be dealt with is the problem of the crops.'

Yuri replied before she could even ask the question. 'Spring can deliver some fruits, vegetables, and sprouts by tomorrow evening. We have plenty, since our wielding has been improving our harvest.'

Sienna gave him a sincere smile. 'That would be of great help, Yuri, thank y--'

The rapid approach of footsteps made Sienna stop abruptly. Since she was the only one to hear them coming, before anyone else, the others all watched her in confusion.

Sienna wielded air into her hands, ready for whatever was coming their way.

Old habits died hard.

Once her Council heard the same noise, they all rose from their chairs and raised their hands. Aasim moved in front of Sienna, drawing the blade near his hip with one hand, while the other one was already raised, ready to summon his element should the need arise.

Where Sienna had expected people to barge into the Council room, she instead heard a hastened pounding on the wooden door.

‘Enter.’

She had barely finished saying the word when a messenger from the Summer Kingdom filed into the room, accompanied by two magisters from the palace.

‘What is the meaning of this? We are not to be disturbed during our Council meeting.’

The messenger looked beside himself with fear, his eyes filled with tears.

‘I–I apologize, Mother Nature. But I have grave news to share with you all.’

The man’s eyes drifted to Ayla and goosebumps broke out across Sienna’s arms.

‘What could be so urgent for you to barge in like that?’

‘It’s the m–mist. It happened so fast, we hardly saw it coming.’

The man uttered the words so quickly, the Council could barely make sense of them.

‘What has happened?’ Ayla asked him, calmer and more softly than Sienna had the patience for.

‘We failed to react in time. The mist, it came to our land ... It has killed an entire village.’

CHAPTER 3

THE MIST

‘The mist?’ Sienna replied. ‘How is that even possible? The mist never strays from its place over the ocean.’

The man trembled on his feet as he went on. ‘Something changed. It—it started to move, and before we knew it, it grew as dark as the night and headed straight for Manusa. It has touched nothing else s—so far, but there seem to be no survivors. I came here as soon as I could.’

Of all the things Sienna had anticipated hearing during her reign, she had never expected it to be this. Their ancestors had all feared or praised the mist that had surrounded and trapped their Realm, but after centuries of it just *being there*, they’d become accustomed to its presence.

The mist never moved, never strayed, never changed. The only thing it did was keep them from exploring what lay beyond their Realm.

‘How could something like this happen?’ Ayla asked, her voice breaking. Valdemar placed his hand on her lower back, tracing soothing circles.

The man looked around the room. ‘I—I have no clue.’

Silence filled the space as everyone tried to process what they’d just heard.

‘Tell us everything you know,’ Sienna demanded.

The man nodded, calming down enough to tell his story.

‘I was still sleeping when the first people began to scream. I rushed outside and we could see how a section of the mist seemed to be slithering toward our village. Manusa is at the edge of a cliff. It overlooks the sea, so it’s a popular village

to live in, b—but this is the first time that those people were scared of the sight before them. The mist was fast and all-consuming. Anyone who got wrapped into it or couldn't get away from it, never came back out.'

Sienna wondered if the mist would do more than just trap them in. Was it coming for all of them?

'We need to assess the damage for ourselves,' Sienna concluded, as soon as the messenger had been sent to the infirmary.

'I agree. We must leave as soon as possible,' Ayla said. 'We also need to alert my parents and evacuate the nearby villages; they'll all be in danger, should the mist move again.'

Sienna nodded. 'I'll issue the order immediately.'

'I don't think it's a good idea for all of us to go,' said Valdemar. His eyes darted over Ayla's face, telling a tale of their own.

'I agree,' Sienna said. 'A few members of the Council should remain here, since I feel obligated to inspect these matters myself.' For so many years, the mist had been easy to ignore. But now that it was threatening the Realm, she felt responsible.

A faint whisper floated through the room, silent enough that no average sense of hearing would pick it up.

'Val, you can't expect me not to go ...' Ayla fell silent, watching Sienna desperately.

'I'll go with you,' Yuri said.

Sienna rubbed her forehead. If the mist was coming for whoever was close by, she wanted none of them near it.

'I'll go alone, with my most trusted soldiers and some scholars. I order you all to remain here and oversee the plans for the wielding academy on the Mountain. Nature knows, we might need it sooner than we'd like.'

Ayla walked toward her. 'You can't be serious. Summer is

my kingdom and those are *my* people; I need to come with you.'

She didn't speak those words in defiance; she was simply pleading her case.

'If the mist is in fact moving toward us, we'll need air wielders, since those are the only ones who could even try to push it back toward the sea. We can bring some water wielders, but it's a risk and a liability to bring the three of you and – I don't say this to be harsh – I just need you to be ready for the worst.'

'Someone from Summer should be with you,' Nisa said. 'Someone who knows the area well. It's where I lived before the rebels took me in.'

Valdemar nodded. 'Yes, Nisa, that would be of great help.'

Sienna looked to Nisa, taking note of her rigid posture and the ticking of her jaw.

'It's agreed. Nisa, you'll come with us.'

'I'm coming too.' Isaak and Aasim uttered the words at the same time, and before Sienna could reply, Aasim continued. 'You said you need air wielders, so your brother can help. As for me ... a royal guard follows their Ruler everywhere.'

She rolled her eyes. 'Fine.'

Ayla was still talking to Valdemar in a hushed tone.

'It doesn't make me weak,' she said, loud enough that the entire room could hear.

'I know it doesn't, my flame. I just want you to take care of yourself, and heading to Summer on a mission to investigate the mist doesn't really sound safe.'

Siena knew Valdemar would never stop Ayla from doing what she felt was right, even when it wasn't always the safest choice. Yuri also seemed surprised that Valdemar would be so adamant that Ayla couldn't join.

Ayla hesitated, but Valdemar caught her eye and a few seconds later, she nodded at him.

'It would be unwise for her to go,' he said. "... given her condition.'

Sienna was about to ask what he meant by that, when she noticed that Ayla had placed a hand on her stomach.

Oh.

'You're joking!' Yuri exclaimed, before bounding over to Ayla and wrapping her in a hug.

'You're having a baby? How did that happen?' Sienna asked, trying to keep up.

'I'm sure you know how babies are made, Sienna,' Valdemar said it with a straight face, but he had a twinkle in his eyes.

Sienna felt happy for the two of them, even though the concept of having a child of her own made her shiver. She thanked Nature that the Ruler was meant to be married to the Realm and wasn't expected to produce any Heirs. Once the time came for her to step down as Ruler – hopefully not for many years – it would be Isaak's oldest child who would compete in the next Season Trials. Even though he didn't belong to Rowan's bloodline, he was still family, and that would have to be good enough.

'You and Valdemar should concentrate on the wielding academy and Yuri can oversee the other daily responsibilities of the Realm while I'm away.'

Ayla still didn't seem entirely satisfied, but she nodded.

'Thank you, Sienna,' Valdemar said.

Yuri was still talking to Fintan about whether the baby would be a boy or a girl.

'Now,' Sienna said, 'before something else happens, I think we should conclude this meeting.'

'When will we leave?' Isaak asked.

'Soon,' she replied. 'There's just one more person I need to ask to join us.'

‘They seem promising,’ Aasim said, eyeing some of the more competent wielders in the classroom Sienna had set up as part of her inclusive rule. ‘They would make a great addition to our army once they’re ready.’ A lot of soldiers had died during the battle against Fiorella, and most people had been hesitant to join the army.

‘I won’t force anyone to join, but we can offer them a position once they’re done with their training,’ Sienna said, before looking at the students again. ‘But I don’t suppose that will be any time soon.’

‘Oh come on,’ Aasim scoffed. ‘They’re not all bad. Don’t you remember what it was like, trying to get your element under control?’

Her father screaming in her face that she needed to be better.

The spikes digging into her skin.

Holding back her screams when a lashing went on for too long.

‘I was always the best at wielding the winds,’ she just said, ending the conversation.

Aasim looked like he wanted to say more, but he nodded and took a step back before scanning the room.

‘Help!’ someone yelled.

In a corner of the room stood a large basin of water for the wielders from Winter to practice, but the people had scattered when a whirling cyclone of water rose up. One man had his hands in the air and seemed to be controlling the twisting water, but he didn’t seem to have any idea how to release it.

‘I don’t know what to do!’ he yelled, with fear in his voice. Orbs of water began to shoot out of it, emboldened by the panic the man must be feeling. They were crashing into people and furniture left and right. Sienna barely managed to duck out of the way in time before getting hit in the face. Aasim had drawn his sword, but since he didn’t have control over water, there wasn’t that much he could do.

The man dropped to his knees, desperately trying to lower his hands, but the water seemed to have taken control of him. The top of the cyclone now covered the entire ceiling, and raindrops were pelting down, making everyone duck and cover their heads. Sienna tried to get to the man so she could stop him, she tried to lift her hands to wield her air and protect her people, but the rain was hitting her hard and she couldn't keep her eyes open.

'Enough!' sounded a voice, the word carrying authority that was fit for a queen. The whirlpool began to shrink and the rain began to fade, until all the water had slipped back into the basin. The man had fallen to the floor, sobbing tears of relief now that he had control of his body again. Everything was drenched – Sienna and the others in the room included – but there didn't seem to be any grave injuries or damage.

Sienna wiped the water from her eyes and could finally see the person who had taken control of the tempest and banished it.

Ineka was crouched down next to the man, wiping his hair from his eyes and muttering words to him that were too quiet to hear, even with Sienna's hearing. She seemed to be the only person that wasn't soaked to the bone; her navy robes looked as pristine as ever.

Attuning her hearing to the conversation at the other end of the room, she listened to what Ineka was saying.

'We've talked about this, Mervor. You shouldn't attempt a wielding technique you're not ready for, or the consequences might be grave. In fact, they almost were ...' She didn't sound like she was angry at him, but the words carried an undertone of disappointment. Ineka motioned for two other students to come closer and instructed them to take Mervor to the infirmary. As she watched him go, she noticed Sienna and

Aasim standing near the door, and she made her way over to them.

‘Empress, I’m sorry you had to see this,’ she said. ‘I promise it’s usually not quite so chaotic. But accidents still tend to happen.’

‘That’s understandable,’ Sienna said, brushing it off. She looked around at the students still gathered in the classroom, all doing their best to look like they weren’t eavesdropping on the conversation. Sienna could have summoned an air bubble to contain their voices, but she felt like she would need her full strength for when they made it to Summer.

‘Can we speak somewhere private?’ she asked instead.

Ineka was only caught off guard for a second. ‘Of course,’ she muttered and she motioned for Sienna and Aasim to follow her, heading for Ineka’s office.

‘Something has happened in Summer,’ Sienna said. ‘I feel we might need your help on this journey.’ She explained what had happened during the Council meeting and how they’d learned that the mist had invaded the land.

‘Of course we should go investigate the matter. I can get Ofir to cover my lessons for me, but may I ask why you specifically want *me* to join you? There are other scholars you can take and I’m confident they could help you as well as I could, perhaps even better, Empress.’

Sienna smiled. Ineka still insisted on calling her Empress, even in private, no matter that they’d become friends over the years, and Sienna had insisted on multiple occasions that Ineka could use her given name. ‘Since my advisors are staying here, I want to have some way of letting them know what has happened in Summer as soon as we find out. A messenger bird might take too long, so we might have particular need of your abilities.’

Ineka had the unique ability to move her mind through

water and find someone's exact location in order to communicate with them. It had been a great help to speak with her Council when they were each in their own kingdom and Sienna had needed their advice. Ineka had been showing Valdemar how to do it, but he still couldn't really seem to wrap his head around how it worked. So for now, Ineka was the only person in the entire Realm with this skill.

'Also, while the other scholars might be of help as well, you're the one I trust the most. I know I can count on you.'

Ineka smiled again and leaned back in her chair. 'You don't need flattery to convince me to travel to Summer, Empress. I'd be happy to join you.'

Sienna smiled as well and nodded.

'We leave this afternoon. Can you be ready by then?'

'Of course. I'll start packing,' Ineka said, standing up.

Sienna left for her own chambers to get ready. One of the servants could pack a bag with clothes and other necessities, but she needed something else.

She entered her room alone, leaving Aasim in the corridor. She walked over to a painting she had commissioned just a couple of days after her coronation, which had hung here ever since.

Yuri, Valdemar, Ayla, and she were standing next to each other, dressed impeccably and with their crowns on their heads. Sienna was wearing the one her Council had crafted for her at the start of her reign, and the others wore the crowns they'd received once they were king or queen of their kingdom. They were all smiling, even though their features still held traces of the battles they'd fought together.

Sienna loved the piece of art, and she had paid the painter more than they'd agreed on. But right now, what was *behind* the painting was more important.

She pressed on the left side until a mechanism clicked,

swinging the painting aside to reveal a passageway. Folded in a neat square, lying on a table she had put there, was her old balún. The use of this kind of transportation had only increased in the past two years, especially in Autumn, and balún designs had greatly improved since then, making it safer for everyone to fly them.

But Sienna's intuition was telling her she was facing something big. The mist had been quiet for hundreds of years and now it was suddenly invading her land. The mystical clouds formed a wall around the Realm, closing them off from the rest of the world, making Sienna wonder what was beyond them. The Mountain was close to being deserted, but they might still have need for it. They needed an evacuation plan, and a place to relocate the people who made it out.

'I hope you're ready for this,' she muttered to herself, as she grabbed the fabric of her balún and blew away the dust.

CHAPTER 4

MANUSA

Sienna wasn't used to sweating. Sure, she was used to intense physical labor and endless practice sessions, but it had been years since she'd felt like this. The heat that stuck to her skin was something else.

Only Nature knows how Ayla had survived living in this burning hellhole. Although, it would be unfair to call it that, because this particular hellhole was disguised as a lush, thriving kingdom with mesmerizing views.

Although their balúns swiftly transported them above the land, the wind at their faces carried none of the breezy cold it had offered in her Autumn Kingdom.

'Look at those lakes!' Ineka shouted. The woman had never been to Summer; her work ethic hadn't allowed her to, since the academies had been flooded with new students. She seemed to be enjoying the warmer temperatures.

Sienna noticed quaint villages – little green patches in the otherwise sandy land. This far inland, the people were still living their unbothered, everyday lives.

Carriages arrived with fresh fish. People were roaming the markets, taking a swim in the ponds, and basking in sunlight.

Even though it was a lovely sight, Sienna couldn't refrain from looking further ahead, at the impending horizon that crept closer every minute. She still couldn't see the looming danger they were making their way toward, but she needed to be ready for anything.

Her muscles tensed and she was surprised at how fast her body jumped back into survival mode. It seemed her instincts hadn't left her yet.