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## CHAPTER ONE

# ISLA

Isla Crown often fell through puddles of stars and into faraway places. Always without permission—and seemingly on the worst occasions.

Even after five years, portaling still made her bones groan. She held her starstick tightly, her breath bottled in her chest like the rare perfumes on her vanity, the glass room spinning and fractured colors bleeding together, until gravity finally pinned her down like a loose thread in the universe.

And it was safely tucked down the back of her dress, along her spine, by the time the door swung open.

"What happened to your hair?" Poppy shrieked so loudly, Terra came rushing in behind her, the many knives and swords at her waist clanking together.

Her hair was the least of her worries, though she didn't doubt it resembled a bed of moss. Traveling between the realms' newlands with her starstick had the habit of undoing even Poppy's most tightly wound coils and firmly made braids—an unexpected perk, really.

Isla didn't pretend to be an expert at using the device. In the beginning, the puddle of stars took her unexpected places. The snow villages of the Moonling newlands. The airy jubilees of the Skyling newlands. A few lands that hadn't been settled by any of the six realms at all. Little by little, she learned how to return to locations she had been to before. And that was the extent of her mastering of the starstick. All she knew for certain was that somehow the mysterious device allowed her to travel hundreds of miles in seconds.

Terra sighed, hand dropping from the hilt of her blade. "It's just a few loose strands, Poppy."

Poppy ignored her. She rushed over to Isla, wielding a brush and a vial of syrupy leaf oil the same way Terra had taught Isla to brandish weapons years before. Isla grinned at her fighting teacher over her charm teacher's shoulder and cried out as Poppy roughly removed the pins. Poppy shook her head. "Have to start from scratch." She stuck the clips between her lips and spoke around them. "I leave you alone for an hour, and you're a mess. Even locked the door for good measure! How in the realm did you manage to mess it up in your own room, little bird?"

*Own room.* Her room was not her own. It was an orb of glass, the remnants of an ancient greenhouse. But the panes had been painted over. The windows had been sealed. All except one door had been removed.

She was a little bird, just like Poppy and sometimes even Terra called her.

A bird in a cage.

Isla shrugged. "Just some swordplay." Poppy and Terra were her only family—though they weren't family at all. Everyone who shared blood with her was long dead. Still, even they didn't know about the starstick. If they did, they would never let her use it. It was the only key out of the bird's cage. And Isla had been locked inside not just for her own safety—

But for everyone else's.

Terra eyed her suspiciously before turning her focus to the wall. Dozens of swords hung there in a shining row, a makeshift mirror. "Pity you can't bring any of them," she said, a finger trailing across the wall of blades. She had given Isla every single sword, presented from the castle's ancient store. Isla had *earned* them after each training achievement and mastery.

Poppy scoffed. "That's one Centennial rule I agree with. We don't need her reaffirming all the other realms' horrible views of us."

Nerves began to swirl in Isla's stomach, leaves dancing in a storm.

She forced a smile, knowing it would douse Poppy's frustration—her guardian always *was* telling her she didn't smile enough. Isla hadn't met many people, but the ones she had were simple to figure out. She just needed to uncover their motivations. Everyone wanted something. And some things were easier to give. A smile for a charm teacher who had spent nearly two decades teaching her student manners. A compliment for a woman who prized beauty above all else. "Poppy, pretty as you are, all of their horrible views are true. We *are* monsters."

Poppy sighed as she slid the last pin into Isla's hair. "Not you," she said meaningfully.

And though her guardian's words were wrapped in love—*good*—they made her stomach pool with dread.

"They're ready," Terra said. She took a few steps toward the vanity. Isla watched her through the mirror, its edges spotted with age. "Are you?"

*No*. And she never would be. The Centennial was many things. A game. A chance at breaking the many curses that plagued the six realms. An opportunity to win unmatched power. A meeting of the six rulers. A hundred days on an island cursed to only appear once every hundred years. And for Isla—

Almost certain death.

*Are you ready, Isla?* a voice in her mind said, mocking and cruel.

Her fear was only tempered by her curiosity. She had always longed for more . . . everything. More experiences, more places, more people.

The place she was going—Lightlark—was made of more. Before her guardians had discovered it and had it sealed, Isla used to sneak through a loose pane of glass in her room and down into the forest. It was there that she met an Eldress who had once lived on Lightlark, the way all Wildlings used to before the curses were spun. Before most of the realms fled the island to create new lands in the chaotic aftermath. Her stories were fruits in a tree—sweet and limited. She spoke of kings who could grip the sun in their hands, white-haired

women who could make the sea dance, castles in clouds, and flowers that bloomed pure power.

That was before the curses.

Now the island was a shadow of itself, trapped in a forever storm that made traveling to it outside the Centennial impossible, by boat or even by enchantment.

One night, Isla had found the Eldress at the base of a tree, on her side. She might have thought the woman was sleeping, if her tanned skin hadn't become bark, if her veins hadn't turned to vines. Wildlings wielded nature in life and joined it in death.

But there had been nothing natural about the Eldress's passing. Even at over five hundred, even away from the strength of Lightlark, she had died too soon. Her death had been the first of many.

And the fault was Isla's.

Terra repeated her question, dark-green eyes the same color as the leaves and ivy that wrapped around the Wildling palace, a skin over everything. The same color as Isla's. "Are you ready?"

Isla nodded, though her fingers trembled as she reached for the crown in front of her. It was a simple gold band, adorned with golden buds, leaves, and a hissing snake. She placed it atop her head, careful not to interfere with the clips that kept her long, dark-brown hair out of her face.

"Beautiful," Poppy said. Isla didn't need to hear the compliment to know it was true. Beauty was a Wildling's gift—and curse. A curse that had gotten her own mother killed. Which only made the fact that she supposedly had her mother's face all the more unsettling. Poppy met Isla's eyes through the mirror and said fiercely, "You are enough, little bird. Better than any of them."

If only that was true.

Isla could feel a jolt of panic breaking her features in half. What if this was the last time she ever saw her guardians? What if she never returned to her room? Her hands acted on instinct, reaching for each of her guardians, wanting to touch them one last time.

Before she could, Terra gave her a stern look that made her go still.

*Sentimentality is selfish,* her stare seemed to say.

The Centennial wasn't about her. It was about saving her realm. Her people.

Chastised, Isla straightened her spine. She stood slowly, the heaviness of her crown far greater than its weight. "I know what I must do," she said. Each ruler arrived at the Centennial with a plan. Terra and Poppy had hammered theirs into Isla since she was a child. "I will follow your orders."

"Good," Terra said. "Because you are our only hope."

The Wildling castle was more outside than in. The halls were bridges. Trees extended their arms into the corridor, branches catching gently on her dress as if to say goodbye. Leaves rustled at Isla's sides as she walked through the endless chambers she wasn't allowed access to, Poppy and Terra right behind her. Vines crept across walls. Birds flew in and out as they pleased. Wind howled through the halls in a breeze that made Isla's cape billow behind her. She wore deep green to honor her realm, a fabric that clung to her ribs, waist, knees, and pooled at her feet. Her cape was made of gossamer, sheer enough to make its traditional purpose for modesty obsolete. And that choice represented her realm just as much as its color.

Wildlings had always been proud of their bodies, beauty, and ability. They had always loved wildly, lived freely, and fought fiercely.

Five hundred years before, each of the six realms—Wildling, Starling, Moonling, Skyling, Sunling, and Nightshade—were cursed, their strengths turned into their own personal poisons. Each curse was uniquely wicked.

Wildlings' was twofold. They were cursed to kill anyone they fell in love with—and to live exclusively on human hearts. They turned into terrifyingly beautiful monsters with the wicked power to seduce with a single look.

Thousands of Wildling men and women had been killed off since.

Love became forbidden. Reckless. Fewer children were born . . . and daughters had always been more common for their realm. Though love had various forms, men were killed more often when the rules were broken, and they had slowly become a small community of mostly warrior women. Feared. Hated. Weak, since fewer people meant less power. The Centennial was the only chance to end their curses, to return to their previous glory again, to regain the power they so badly needed. *Isla* was their only chance.

*You are our only hope . . .*

She heard them before she saw them. Chanting their ancient words, clashing their blades together like instruments. Wildling control over nature was on full display. Flowers bloomed and spilled over the balcony, down into the hall, not stopping until they reached her feet. They grew exponentially, doubling over themselves in a puddle of petals and rising to her ankles. According to lore, a thousand years before, Wildlings had been able to grow entire forests with half a thought, move mountains with a flick of their wrists.

Now, hundreds of years after the curse and just as much time away from the island's power, their abilities had dwindled to barely more than party tricks.

Isla walked carefully over the flowers until the castle walls ended and she faced hundreds of cheering Wildlings.

The trees above bloomed cherries and berries and bloodred blossoms, which fell onto the crowd in a colorful rain. Animals crept from the woods and into the group, sitting beside their companions. Wildling powers varied in their mastery of nature, but they often included affinity with animals—Terra had a great panther named Shadow she spoke to as easily as she communicated with Isla. Poppy had a hummingbird that liked to nestle in her hair.

When Isla nodded, the crowd fell silent.

"It is my honor to represent our realm this Centennial." Isla's pulse quickened, a drum along her bones. She looked across the crowd, at

stunning, hopeful faces. Some Wildlings wore dresses made from bits of fabric woven through with leaves and vines. Some wore nothing at all except for the swords draped down their backs. Some had clearly just fed, their lips stained deep red. Isla looked and tried her best not to tremble. Not to let her voice crack, or stumble, or make them question for a moment why their ruler often hid behind the thick walls of her castle. Why attendants were banned from entering her quarters. She tried not to wonder how many of these Wildlings had heard this same declaration a hundred years before, from a different ruler—how many of them were even left, after the recent string of deaths. She made a promise, because that was what her people were looking for. Reassurance. Strength. "I vow to shatter our curse once and for all."

They would have every right to be worried. Isla's failure would doom them all for at least another century. And there had been four failed Centennials already. Isla clenched her back teeth together, waiting for them to see right through her—waiting for her perception of what they wanted to be wrong.

But the morning air ignited with yells and blades raised high overhead. Birds screeched from the treetops. Wind rustled leaves into a roar. Relieved, Isla walked down the stairs, smeared in petals, nature blossoming at her feet as the crowd parted, making a path toward their most ancient twin trees.

Their roots crested into the air, then braided together, forming a towering archway, round as a looking glass. The other side of the forest waited beyond, safe and familiar. But that wasn't where she was going. Isla swallowed. She had been preparing for this moment her entire life. Terra's and Poppy's hands found her shoulders.

Isla walked through the portal that only worked once every hundred years, her last words to her guardians fresh in her mind: *I will follow your orders.*

And wished they hadn't been a lie.