

avenge and surpass

THE SUN WAS only just starting to set, drenching the hills in the distances in gold, when Lieutenant Kier Seward finished his perimeter shift. His Hand disappeared as soon as they were released back to camp, and he didn't follow her. Things had been frosty, to say the least, and he didn't think they would improve any time soon.

There were a few others in the armory when he went to return his things, including Barran, a typic officer he may or may not have spent a night entertaining the week before. Barran caught Kier's eye as he came in and started stripping away his armor, handing it back in until the next shift—they didn't have enough resources at this camp in the middle of nowhere for the most valuable pieces to be theirs for the entire assignment.

Kier didn't protest when Barran joined him, his hands going to the buckles of Kier's armor, helping him out of it. It really *was* meant to be a two-person job, and in many cases, one's Hand helped with armor. But Kier had been doing this alone for a while. Long enough that he could handle it on his own, even if it required some awkward wrangling.

"You on watch tonight?" Barran asked, his voice lilting. Southern Scaelan. Near the coast Kier barely knew. "Or are you up for a game of white rat?"

Of course, Kier knew what he was really asking, and tried not to let any of his terrible mood show. If he joined the other officers for cards, there was every chance he would linger, that maybe something more would happen. He was often open to distractions—though he didn't necessarily go seeking them himself, they had the habit of

presenting themselves, a network of two or three mages or typics on each assignment who didn't feel too familiar, who helped him to escape the clamor of his own thoughts if even for just an hour. And he knew where to go looking at most camps, if the thought did occur to him: there were certain areas of the Scaelan army too banal for an allocation of wells to be assigned there, and his single personal policy was that he avoided romantic entanglements with wells at all costs.

There was no point interrogating the reason he had that rule.

But the armories were safe, and the cartography tents, and the places where officers gathered—all were similar in their distinct lack of wells.

Barran was still looking at him—and Kier would've gone, if he hadn't had that feeling, if he hadn't looked out at the storm encroaching on the horizon and thought of the color of *her* eyes, if he hadn't been rifling through his bag earlier and come across her latest letter tucked with a stone she'd sent him, all the way from eastern Scaela, just because it was the color of the sea they grew up beside. If he hadn't spent half the day with the gut-punch ache of missing her.

They were all excuses: he thought of Grey constantly. He couldn't say, for certain, why today was worse. It just happened like that sometimes.

"I think I'm going to rest tonight," Kier said, hiding his feelings with a smirk, leaning against Barran for the barest moment to avoid causing hurt. It wouldn't matter too much to Barran, Kier suspected: they all had second options, after all. Someone else would match his interest, and Kier could spend the night moping guilt-free. He only hoped that Pollara, his Hand, had the sense to avoid him too.

It was probable. Pollara often avoided him—they hadn't been paired for long but he knew her well enough now to know that his particular method of drawing power irked her. He was always pulling too much, too hard, searching for some depth that was suspiciously absent. She didn't like the way he asked her questions, seeing it as a test—she had no way of knowing how Kier had learned to use magic, how his first and favorite well always second-guessed his judgment in a way no one here dared to. Scaelan structures had prevailed: the mage always won. But

gods, Kier wanted that push, that reassurance, that feeling of someone else unmaking or pushing his decisions.

He parted ways with Barran once his armor was away and stopped by the bathing tents to wash away the sweat of the day, or maybe even to drown himself in the spray. He was usually better at dealing with this—maybe, Kier thought darkly as he changed into clean clothes, he *should've* taken Barran up on his offer. An hour free of thought. An hour free of the memory of her hands, and her laugh, and her sharp humor, and all the reasons Grey was across the country in some infirmary and he was here, and he would not cross the invisible line between them.

YOU'RE AN IDIOT, Lot had written him a few weeks ago.

SHE'S GOING TO BE OF AGE SOON, AND YOU KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN—SHE'LL GO ON THAT LIST THAT CIRCULATES TO THE MAJORS THEN CAPTAINS THEN LIEUTENANTS AND EVERYONE ELSE, AND SOMEONE OF RANK WILL WRITE IN FOR HER TO BE THEIR SECOND HAND BECAUSE OF HER HEALER'S TRAINING, OR SHE'LL BE RANDOMLY ASSIGNED WITH SOME NEW CADET WHO HAS NO IDEA WHAT THEY'RE DOING.

TELL HER, KIERNAN. TELL HER, OR STOP WHINING TO ME ABOUT IT, IF YOU WON'T FIX IT YOURSELF.

ALSO—WRITE BACK TO MUM. SHE'S GOTTEN IT IN HER HEAD THAT YOU'RE GOING TO ASK FOR A HIGHER PAID, MORE DANGEROUS ASSIGNMENT, AND WE WOULD ALL REALLY RATHER YOU DIDN'T.

He'd written back to Mum and to Lot. Then, he hadn't written back to Grey, because what was the point?

He *had*, in fact, applied for a higher-paid assignment. If he could send more money home, then maybe they could do something that would get Grey out.

It was a foolish idea, probably, but one he spent far too much time imagining as he laid awake at night, surrounded by the breathing of others. His favorite slip of fallacy, the easiest imagining to sink into as he tried to turn his thoughts from the blood of battle into something warm and hopeful. How Grey would look on the deck of a ship bound for Lindan or Isbeta, her hair whipping around her face. How it would feel as they both lost what connection to Idistra they had. He could imagine turning to her, reaching out a tether, and finding he could not—and the odd, forbidden joy of knowing that with that emptiness came safety. How freeing it would be, to reach for his magic and her power and to find it all gone.

It always happened, as his imaginings slunk deeper into fantasy, that they would have a shared cabin on this rescue voyage, and she would follow him down the stairs and into the ship, towards their cabin. He would open the door to reveal a single bed, and then—

Then, what? She would say, *oh thank you, Kier, my best friend, the closest thing I have left to a brother! Take the floor.*

Worse: *Oh, Kier, of course you can share the bed—we've been doing it since we were kids, and of course it means nothing to me. Never did then, and certainly doesn't now.*

Or: *This is great, thanks Kier. I can't wait until we reach the mainland. Are you coming with me or going somewhere else? I think I'm going to go looking for a noble Lindle person who doesn't hold on to all the things I represent and doesn't know who I am and will never remind me of everything I lost.*

In his most realistic fantasies of their escape, he couldn't imagine her turning to him, pulling his hand to her lips. Even if she was the only person he thought about, when his tragically lovestruck brain fantasized in other ways.

This line of thought was disrupted as Kier passed through his quarters, shared with six other lieutenants and three hands. He had

the aspirations to read this evening, or spend a quiet evening writing to Mum, or maybe, finally, open Grey's letter. He hung his cloak and scanned the room, nodding to Jer, one of the typic lieutenants, writing at the desk. There was a letter on Kier's cot. He grabbed it, cracking the wax, dully noting it was black in color—

"I'm so sorry, Seward," Jer said, nodding to the letter. "I was waiting for you to get back. So you wouldn't be alone."

Kier's fingers stilled on the paper as he looked at Jer, uncomprehending. "What are you talking about?"

Jer's face softened slightly, their hand reaching out as if to touch Kier's arm before they pulled back. "It's... it's a death notification," he said. "Next of kin. For one of you..." They trailed off.

Kier blinked at him, the words reshuffling in his brain, then felt the bile rising in his throat. It wasn't often that infirmaries were attacked, and he was Seward not Flynn, but he remembered writing one another's names on their forms, the official list of next-of-kin for notification, and if anything happened to Grey they would have to—

Lieutenant Kiernan Seward,

**I am so sorry to inform you that Lieutenant Lotraín
Seward was killed in battle two nights ago while fighting
valiantly against Eprain. The nation of Scaela recognizes...**

There was more to the letter, but Kier didn't see it. He couldn't. His eyes kept skipping over the name, his brother's—no. His heart thudded dully in his chest. He knew that there was something else, that he had been in the middle of a thought. That he had been thinking about—something. Anything.

His ears were ringing. Someone was saying something behind him, a hand on his shoulder, but before he could register what had happened his knees were on the floor. He wasn't breathing—and then he was breathing too much, every gasp catching in his chest, and his ears were still ringing—

—*Lieutenant Lotrain Seward was killed in battle*—

—but that wasn't possible because he had just written back to Lot a few days ago, and there was no way it had reached him yet, and Lot couldn't be dead. Not with a letter in the post, on the way to him, Kier's words unread—not without seeing Kier again. When had Kier even last seen his brother? It had to be the festival of light, when they had both been given leave and were too far to travel home but had met in the middle, in a nothing town in the midwest of Scaela, and Lot—

—*Lieutenant Lotrain Seward was killed in battle*—

—had eaten two full lamb pies and gotten Kier so drunk he spent the entire morning vomiting while Lot sat smugly in a corner and ate the best of the cakes they had bought from the festival the day before. He remembered the pub later that night, the smokiness of herby drugs in the air (which both were too weary and felt too old to partake in, despite the fact Kier was barely twenty) as they played hands of white rat. Neither of them had been good enough to beat their mother, but they did well enough against one another. And though Kier was still hungover, he agreed to drink Lot's favorite liquor—

—*Lieutenant Lotrain Seward was killed in battle*—

—and they talked very seriously about what they would do if this war never ended, and Lot told him about a person he had been seeing at his post, and how he was thinking about maybe breaking his “no partners in the army” rule—

“Kier,” someone was saying, not for the first time, and he was still hyperventilating, the letter clutched in his hand—

—*Lieutenant Lotrain Seward was killed in battle*—

And then there was someone on the floor with him, hands on his shoulders then cupping his face, forcing him to look. Someone forcibly took the letter out of his hands and made him focus.

Jer. They were almost friends, after all—colleagues who spoke kindly to one another, who didn't ignore the other's presence. Jer held Kier steady and held his gaze until Kier could almost breathe again.

And Kier felt—he didn't know if the panic existed, or if it had been smoothed over by uneasy quiet.

"Who is it?" Jer asked, moving only when Kier was able to sit on his own, even though his heart pounded his chest.

My brother. Kier shook his head. He couldn't speak the words. He couldn't admit that he hadn't even *thought* of Lot, hadn't considered that harm could befall him—hadn't even had a fraction of an idea that, miles away, Lot was already dead.

Two weeks of leave. No private carriage, but a seat on a convoy heading northeast. If he kept his eyes closed, it was beyond notice. He went through the motions of sitting, changing carriages, sitting more. No thoughts other than the aftershock of pain, the echoes as his brain nearly forgot and then circled again to the grief, like being caught in a trap. He felt the resounding echo of Lot as he tried his best to search for every moment he shared with his brother, every memory. He could not let them go, nor could he fight the fear that the pieces of what made Lot *Lot* were slipping away with every second that passed.

In the moments between, he thought of his Ma, who had borne Lot, who shared his dark eyes and darker hair. There were other people he should think of, should consider, but he couldn't bear it.

It was not Ma waiting for Kier in Leota's square, nor Mum. It was Imarta, standing in the springtime drizzle, wrapped in a shawl over her coat with her chin tucked to her chest. He didn't know what he had expected, but the sight of her, slight and blond and clutching a steaming cider to her chest, was his undoing. She set it aside when she saw Kier, and although she was weeping, there was also a trace of a relieved smile on her face. Imarta threw her arms around Kier, barely coming up to his shoulder, and he held her as close as he could.

"My darling boy," she said like he was still ten, her hand stroking his hair. "My boy. I'm so sorry."

It wasn't the first time someone had said it to him, but she was the first person who had said it who had known Lot.

But Kier was his brother. Kier knew him best of all: he knew every one of Lot's moods, from his sharp happiness to his stormy spells; he knew exactly how to make his tea and what foods he always got at the yearly villages festivals and which vegetables he despised; he knew every person Lot had ever been interested in and why he hadn't pursued it. He knew the shape of Lot's hands, and the look of focus on his face when he fought—after all, Lot was the one who had practiced swordplay with Kier, who had broken his nose the first time and laughed through his apology when it bled.

Lot, who, when Kier had been born, asked when they could give him back. Who had been his best friend before Grey made them into a trio, and his closest confidante even after. The only other person who held her secrets.

Lot, who knew him before Kier knew himself.

"I can't," he said into Imarta's hair, knowing he was crumbling into her—but he could not do this in front of his mothers, who were mourning their son. "I can't do it."

"I know," Imarta said. "I'm so sorry, love." She was quiet for a moment longer until his breathing turned shuddering and even. "I sent word to Grey. I imagine it's reaching her now. Pia wanted to wait for her, for Lot's ceremony, but..."

She didn't need to explain. Kier knew the way of things—she was at least three days' ride away, and there was no guarantee she'd get leave, even if she asked. Lot wasn't her blood relation and she was needed at her post. They had already delayed things for Kier to arrive, and he couldn't imagine putting his mothers through grief, waiting for closure.

Despite this, he desperately wished they could wait. That she would get leave, and he'd look up and see her walking down the path to his mothers' house with the wind in her hair and the grief written on her face. Because he knew Grey's grief, and how she lived through it—and he couldn't imagine himself living through what she had, how it would

shape him. He was at a loss, desperate for the only person who knew what this felt like and could hold out a hand from the other side.

“I know,” Kier said.

“She loved him so much,” Imarta said. “We all did.”

Kier swallowed hard, uncertain how he would survive the rest of his days with his brother in the past tense.

They buried Lot’s ashes under the tree they used to climb on the endless summer days of their youth.

After, when it was done, the village came to that yellow kitchen, laden with food. They ate and drank and spoke of Lot’s kindness and handsomeness and bravery. Kier accepted their compliments, disguising himself in the man they wanted to see: Lot’s perfect brother, a lieutenant even at his age, a promising mage. The person who would fulfil all the potential Lot had left behind, who would avenge him and become him and surpass him.

All he wanted was to get miserably drunk and sit catatonic, alone; or maybe to sleep forever and ever, if that meant he didn’t have to wake into another day when Lot was gone. It was so crowded in here, in his childhood home, and yet there was not a single person here who knew him.

He missed Grey so much it was a physical ache in his chest.

Kier made sure Ma ate, then stayed up with Mum and cleaned the kitchen, waiting until the last of the mourners left. Her power was thin and wan as she fed it to him, but he made the best of it, using simple magics to lighten the load while slowing Ma’s heartbeat every time he felt it racing, hoping against hope she wouldn’t notice. Then, when Mum too went to bed, he untethered from her and smothered all magelights but one. He took that single blue orb into the back garden.

Carefully, he laid down in the dirt that marked Lot’s grave, his back to the soil. The damp seeped up, spring rain already claiming Lot’s new home for the grass and weeds. Someday, he would come back here and

this slash of dirt would be green and verdant, and it would be like they had never opened the ground and put Lot within.

He closed his eyes, and he wept.

There was a trail of thought he couldn't bear.

The war was because of the death of Locke. Lot had died because Scaelas couldn't forgive what had been done to them.

If they had let Grey claim her seat, when she was young—

No.

If they had convinced Grey to seek Scaelas—

No.

If she had never come here—

It was a thought that never led anywhere besides the ache of realization that he missed them both desperately, fiercely. And if they tried to do anything now, if they tried to *change* anything, it would mean losing Grey, too.

They granted him another week of leave, then two more following. There was no guarantee, the officer close to Leota wrote, that he wouldn't go charging headfirst into battle, and they would lose a powerful mage to his own grief.

Most nights, after his mothers went to sleep, he spent hours on the cold ground as the thoughts swallowed him.

When, finally, Kier was called back in earnest, he was given the harder, better-paid post. He accepted it gratefully and traveled to Scaela's southeastern border with Luthar. There, his new well, Dargan, was

waiting for him. Dargan was a huge boulder of a man, twice Kier's age, but he was kind to him, and his power was clean and cool like water from a creek. He had been offered retirement twice but turned it down—his wife and daughter were killed a decade before, and what was there to go home to? What purpose was there to serve?

They got on well, for the short time they were paired. Three months after Kier's return, he held Dargan on the field, blood spewing from the well's mouth, his eyes wild as he died. In his face, in his death, Kier saw only Lot.

Grey wrote to him. He couldn't bear to read it. When she wrote again, he put the unopened letters in his pack.

At night, when he slept, he dreamt of Lot. Sometimes, Lot was Dargan, dying in his arms on the battlefield. Sometimes, they were boys, in the sea or jumping off the cliffs near Leota. Some nights, Lot was there next to him as Kier laid on his grave, whispering in his ear that Grey would be the death of them all.

And some nights, they were at that pub on the last night they were together, and he gripped Kier's head and pressed a drunken kiss to his forehead. "My perfect, evil brother," he said, his laughter full of teasing admiration. "You're going to change the world if you ever get your head out of your ass."

During meetings with his new reports, he thought of her. During sparring practice, he thought of her. Every time he tethered to his new well, he thought of her.

He was being paid more than ever, but it was not enough—it would be years before he made enough to buy out their contracts, let alone get her on a ship away from here.

He couldn't open her letters. How could he expect to save her? What if she didn't even *want* him to?

His new well died, worse than Dargan. A sword straight through their brain, after they were drained, after he couldn't rupture any more hearts to protect them. Kier wished he could use the last of their power to slow their heart, to ease the fear, to let them slip into unconsciousness before the power faded to nothing. He held their hand as the life left them and sat by the pyre as their body burned.

If he took Grey as his own, it would be her pyre he sat by next.

The height of summer came, with its brutal heat. The blood smelled faster after every battle, the bodies rotting in their armor when the killing was done, too many for them to clear in any good speed. His new well did not die, but he heard her as he was coming back to his quarters one night after sparring.

"He is grieving," she said to whomever was there listening, "and that makes him careless. I wonder, sometimes, how he learned to pull like that. Because when he pulls, he *pulls*. It's like I can never have enough power to keep him satisfied. I can't help but wonder..."

"What?"

"If that's why all his wells keep dying." Her voice was tired, like it was a foregone conclusion she would too. "If, fundamentally, he's been trained too early to drain too fast, or whatever he does just uses too much. On the field, when he's pulling like that? It disrupts my concentration, too."

Kier stood, listening, the shame building in his heart.

He went out that night to where the officers played white rat, and sat in the corner as they drank. He laughed when it was appropriate, so no

one noticed nor questioned him. He just couldn't bear to be alone, or in his room, or with his well, whom he knew did not trust him.

And how could she? He barely trusted himself. She was right—maybe he was the reason his wells died. He had been so accustomed to Grey, to the brutal force of her power, that everything else paled in comparison.

And yet... he couldn't do it. When he thought of bringing her here with him, he remembered a blade through a helm, and all of it was twisted by his imaginings of Lot dying in his arms.

When he slept that night, he removed the helm, searching for a way to save his well—and it was Grey's eyes, dull and lifeless, that stared back at him.

But.

But what if she became a master's second Hand? What if she was given to some cadet who had no idea what they held?

She would be someone's Hand the second she turned eighteen—that much was clear. He watched every new shipment of wells to his own company with growing unease as they fought and died and were replaced. His own master at this post kept two wells in operation and one on reserve, just in case there was a time he overdrew, just in case he needed more power in an instant. Each was like her, carrying her power, burning out. At night, he sat against the outside wall of the infirmary, head tipped back against the wood, and listened to the weeping of the dying.

(Had Lot suffered like this? No, Kier knew—he had gotten the information from his Ma late one night; Lot had died on the ground, in his armor. Hadn't even made it back to camp. Was carted back, just a body, a shell, a husk; had anyone held his hand? Had anyone cradled him close? Did anyone else dream of Lot's dying breath?)

She would belong to someone, that much was certain. He had no way to save her, no way to be sure of her safety if he was not by her side.

He didn't know when they were children, when he only tethered to his mother and Grey and maybe one or two others, but anyone who tethered to her would feel the difference in her power. It was intoxicating, the strength of it, the beauty. It was impossible to tether to her and not to see how she was so much *more* than any other well.

And... and he missed her. Gods, how he missed her.

He had thought it would be good for them, at first, to be apart. It would be good for space, for him to find a way to look at her without that ache in his chest. If time and space separated them, when he found her again, he could look her in the eye and kiss her on the hand without that desperate want for *more*.

Because he wanted every single part of her, and that power was only the start of it.

They woke up. They went to war. They carried back the bodies. They washed away the blood.

Every night, he dreamt of Lot. He twisted the ring on his finger, removed from Lot's body before they burned his brother to ash.

He could not let her die on the battlefield, alone.

Two months after Lot's death, he opened her letters.

Kiernan,

Three lines, scratched out. Then:

Gods, how I loved him. We all loved him.

That night, long after the camp was dull and quiet, long after he had tried to start at least four different letters to her and burned them all away in mageflame, he went to the infirmary and listened to the cries of the dying.

I love you, he wanted to write back, if only he could say it in such a way for her to understand the context. Not just, *we grew up together, and you are enmeshed in the fabric of my soul*, but *I want to know your mind and body as I know my own. I want to be your first and last thought every day. I want to sleep tangled up with you.*

There weren't words for it, but he also knew every truth that laid on the other side of each confession:

I love you, but I will keep it to myself, for your safety.

I love you, but it is not conditional—if you don't love me back, I will not take offense, nor will it change anything.

Without Lot, who else was there who knew the reality of her? If he ruined this... if he confessed something... there was too much to lose. He could not allow her to think that his care for her was rooted on this, that he would turn from her if she did not feel the same.

Kier closed his eyes. Leaned his head back against the wood. If he went for her... that was it. There had to be a hard line, one he could not cross. There had to be an iron box for his feelings. Her safety and comfort was so much more important than any of that.



Time passed. He did not realize he was reading the well manifests every morning, crawling with anxiety, until the squires started bringing him the manifests directly without posting them first.

He got no further on the letter to Grey, but what was there to say? He traced the words *I loved him* until the ink wore away.

Then, one morning, after he had spent half the night on watch and felt half-dead himself, he was skimming the manifests when he saw it.

Flynn, Grey. Well. Inactive auxiliary, up for transfer. Current position: Healer...

He was at his captain's door before he had even processed half a plan. By the end of the day, he was on a carriage bound for her post.

Kier shifted uneasily from foot to foot as he waited with the officer. Any second, she would open the door. Any second, she would know of his selfishness, that he couldn't live without her. He had no idea what he was going to say.

His well—his *former* well—had seemed almost relieved when Kier had told her of his decision to seek a new power source. She had muttered something about retraining as she packed, readying for her new assignment, but Kier had chosen to ignore it. He knew his faults.

He could not let her die alone on the battlefield. He could not allow her to be discovered. He could not lose her. He could not keep going without her.

And now he was here, exhaustion still prickling as he waited.

"You've got quite the record, Lieutenant," Pickett said as Kier stood by. "Are you sure you want my healer?"

"Positive," Kier said.

"Any reason in particular?"

Kier opened his mouth, but he had nothing to say that wasn't, *Because she is the person I care about most in this world. Because if I'm going to die, I want it to be in her arms. Because I can't hear of something happening to her via letter, when I'm still so certain she is okay.* So he only closed his mouth. Shook his head.

They didn't have to wait long. A moment later, the door opened, and his heart caught—

Because it was Grey. Weary, that look on her face that he knew well, like her mind was a thousand miles away. He wasn't even sure she saw him at first—and then her eyes scanned the room, and locked on him, and she stopped moving entirely.

Grey, who *never* stopped moving.

She had blood on her apron, and that probably explained the ghosts of splotches on her arms as well. Her hair was pulled up on top of her

head in an untidy knot, tendrils slipping free. Dark circles marred the skin under her gray eyes.

She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. In the two years of their separation, she'd lost some of her girlishness, and she'd come into some new self-possession. She stood straighter. She no longer seemed to hide the intelligent power of her gaze. He often wondered how much of her remained from her childhood, and how much she had been shaped by Imarta and his mothers, but now...

Looking at her, like this, he could imagine her on a throne, commanding her own Isle—and he pushed that thought away, because to be in command was to be in danger, and putting her in danger was not allowable.

He had never loved another person more. And he had never been so certain that he had to take that truth to his grave—because as she looked at him, that new certainty was growing iron-clad.

Lot was gone. Imarta and Laurella and Pia did not know the truth of her. Kier was the only person in this world who knew who—and *what*—she was, and he refused to put her in danger for something as trivial as his heart.

“Healer Flynn, you’ve been reassigned. An officer has requested you as his Hand.”

Kier winced, because that wasn’t—that wasn’t it at all. But it was as if time picked up again, as if Grey had come unfrozen. She curtsied, the motion short and out of obligation rather than care, and came closer to shut the door.

“Kier?” she said, turning her face to him, as if she couldn’t quite believe he was really here.

Of course she couldn’t, he thought, the shame twisting in his gut. He’d ignored her letters. He hadn’t spoken to her in months, and now here he was, ready to cart her away into danger.

For a second of awful anxiety, he wished he could take it all back—but he could not let her die alone. If she was under his watch, gods, maybe they could find a way to run. Maybe they could avoid dying at all.

“That’s Lieutenant Seward. You won’t be warned again, healer.”

It took all of his effort not to say something sharp—he hated this. But Grey only shook her head, reconfiguring, and said, “I’m sorry, I...” She stood up straighter, searching for words. “Lieutenant. I... Sorry. Your hand. Me?”

She sounded so uncertain—possibly even unhappy with this development. He swallowed hard. This was the moment he had to prove himself, to tell her of the dangers, to do *anything* to prepare her—or to let her go. He desperately wished that they could be alone, that Pickett would go away and he could speak with her truthfully. But all words caught in his mouth, and all he could think of was holding his wells as they died.

“If you wish,” he said. *Tell me no. Turn me away.*

“She does not get a choice, Seward,” Pickett said. Kier winced—he wanted Grey to have a choice. *Needed* it, like he needed air.

But Grey was brushing right past that, and he wondered how many of her own choices she’d been able to make since they parted years before, how much she’d been ensconced in duty. “Of course,” she said, then again, “of course.”

The rest of it was a whirr as they finished the conversation and were dismissed; Kier to lead her and Grey to get her pack.

But he had to know. He had to know it was her decision, that he wasn’t just going to end her, that he didn’t want to die and couldn’t let anything happen to her, and the only safety was when they were together.

He found a closet and dragged her inside. Grey didn’t even seem to notice until he whirled around, and then the space between them was too much. He tugged her hand, pulling her close against him, Grey banging into his chest, and a panicked heartbeat when she was frozen—

Then, she was hugging him back just as fiercely.

“You’re alive,” she said, speaking the words that had been echoing in his head since he saw her walk through the office door. That feeling as the tether snapped into place, and he didn’t even think she *noticed* reaching out, locking him in. “*You’re alive.*”

"I'm alive," he said, grappling for the words as he held her as tight as he could. "A near thing, but I'm here. I'm alive."

A turn in her voice accusation: "You didn't write back."

But how could he? How could he remember the dirt of Lot's grave under his hands and say *anything* to her? How could he be covered in the blood of his last wells, the blood of power that she could control, and put any of that into a letter?

"It's been difficult. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I just haven't been able to think, let alone write." As if that was any excuse. She, too, bore the loss of it all. She, too, probably ached with the news that Lot was gone. He looked away, cheeks heating, ashamed. Lot had been hers, too.

"And you want *me*?"

I can't let you die, alone, on a battlefield. I can't hear of it in a letter. I can't let you go.

"I didn't mean to pull you from safety." But he thought of those manifests, and how quickly the names vanished, how quickly they emptied. "But when I saw you listed as a well, for reassignment—" He was a selfish fool, and he didn't know how she would ever forgive him for this, or how to make her understand what he had seen. What he knew would happen, if he hadn't spoken for her first. "Oh, Grey, I shouldn't have, and you must think me selfish."

But then—she grabbed his shoulders. Pulled away, so she could see him. Then she cupped his face in her hands, her fingers rough but warm and so familiar he nearly wept. Everything about her was that familiar, so heart-wrenchingly beautiful, and so deeply *his*, even if she never knew it.

"I'm so sorry," she said, and she could see right through him. She knew it, even if he had not spoken nor written a word of it. "I'm so sorry about Lot."

Kier couldn't look at her anymore. He closed his eyes and turned his head, kissing her palm—he ached to pull her closer, but he had to draw the line for himself now. It would be too much, a confession and a comfort and he could not bear it. He could not let her think that his

protection for her was conditional, that she owed him anything at all.

Of course she knew what he was really asking, what he was really doing. *Please*, he wanted to beg. *Don't die. Don't let me die. I can't keep doing this alone. I can't keep doing this without you.*

"Don't," he said, because he couldn't say any of it without saying the rest: *I love you, and I cannot bear it, and I cannot bear to lose you too.*