

certainty

KIER WAS UNABLE to count the number of times he thought he'd die: dramatically, in his youth, when he was ill; then somewhat less dramatically, in his years of fighting with only the weakest threads of power at his disposal; and all over again, as their assignments grew bloodier and bloodier. Many times, he'd closed his eyes, and in the quiet between one breath and another, thought *This is it. This is the end.*

But never before had he been so certain. They were outnumbered, they were surrounded, and they were going to die.

He searched Grey's face—she had a way of facing even the direst situation with an unearthly calm. Sometimes, he wondered if she had been through so much that she was just able to disassociate in the blink of an eye. He wondered, too, if she had so much power that she never felt any fear. He wished that the tether between them would open and bloom, that he could draw on her strength just as he drew her power.

If her hands were not underneath his, he would not be able to stop his own from shaking.

Her eyes were closed, lips parted; at least, if these were his final moments, he would spend them looking at her. His mind skated ahead as she focused her power, racing through all of the other worlds, the other lives he'd imagined for them—when he'd asked for their retirement, he had hoped it would end with them together, and perhaps Grey would finally acknowledge the way they worked. Perhaps they would be able to cling to some sort of future together, when they weren't just a power source and a conduit—maybe, she would look at him someday, and she would accept the love he so desperately wanted to give her.

In another world, another life, they would not die here in this field.

Kier swallowed hard. He found the tether, the rope of it between them thick and golden with power, and he *pulled*. He'd worked with other wells before, a thin trickle of static entering his brain, then transforming into magic as he shaped it to his will. But with Grey, it was always a rush, a torrent, and now, a flood.

For just a moment, the power burned—it was more than he'd ever felt, more than he'd ever taken; he felt the energy of it bursting beneath his skin, each cell a supernova. Kier gritted his teeth, pushing back the confusion—*do not think; if you waste time thinking, you'll be dead*—but there was so much of it, *too much*. So much that she should be dead. So much that they both should.

Did he ever know, until this moment, what it was to bind to Locke?
“Grey—?”

Her face flickered, like she couldn't bear to hear her own name. Like it wasn't her name at all. Her face was fierce, a mask of pain, her teeth gritted against it—and he didn't want to die like this, didn't want to die with her dredging every bit of power out of the universe for Kier to wield it as death itself.

If only he was brave enough to say any of that.

“Take it all,” Grey said.

He could feel the heartbeats of those around him, beating in his mind, a cacophony of life: the cool, blue flares of wells, and the more plentiful, red flames of mages and typics. But as Kier focused, as he aimed his power, imagining the damage in his mind one by one—those blue flares went warmer and warmer, purple then red.

His eyes flew open. Barely a second had passed, but Grey's blood had drained from her face—she staggered forward, her hands slipping from his. He heard the screaming, the job around him half-done; he struggled to separate his mind, to remember his training, to wield his magic even as he watched Grey drop to her knees. A pale blue fire surrounded her, crawling up her spine, charring her clothes away to reveal the luminous pale skin of her back, the knobs of bone on her spine, the strained muscles of her shoulders as she convulsed.

Kier focused even as he, too, fell; he tried to catch her, burning his

hands in the process, but just as quickly as it had appeared, the flame burned away. He made quick work of the rest of the heartbeats, silencing each one, as he felt Grey's power trickle away to nothing.

Kier gripped her shoulders, rolled her onto her back. Grey's eyes were open, unseeing, glowing gold around her irises—a trickle of blood trailed from the corner of her mouth. He gripped the back of her head, pulling her up so she would not choke on her own blood—her skin was so hot, flaming against his hands.

"Grey," he said, his hand cradling the back of her head. Her eyes widened with horror—not unseeing, he realized; just not seeing *now*. "Grey," he said again, insistent—he clutched her closer, her blood spilling across his shirt. She clutched his hand, nails digging in, breaking skin.

She did not stop choking. He surveyed her, running a hand along her body. She could not die now. Not on this field, if he was left living. Not now, not when he'd pulled so much power to finally make them safe.

Her eyes slipped shut. Kier reached out, the tendrils of her power running through him as he turned it back on her. He felt her heartbeat in his mind, in his blood. He felt it slowing.

He felt, with aching certainty, the very moment it stopped.

"*Gremaryse*," Kier hissed, as if that final tether would keep her in this world. He was not a medic; he was absolutely useless when it came to keeping her together. How many times had she looked in his face and watched his life draining from him? How did she deal with that fear, that uncertainty?

He could not let her die. He *would* not.

"Captain!" someone shouted behind him. Kier did not pay attention. He lowered Grey to the ground—*too rough; be careful, be gentle, she is beloved*—and pressed his hands over her heart.

Her skin was still too hot, her clothes in burnt tatters as he started compressions. In his brain, he kept up a litany of prayer like he would otherwise maintain the constructions of his magic: he prayed to Kitalma, to Retarik, to Gremaryse; to her gods, who she only spoke of in hushed whispers, who she rarely told him about, who blessed her line and once kept them safe.

"Don't give up on me now," Kier muttered as he tried to force her heart back to beating. "Don't give up on *her* now."

A hand rested on Kier's shoulder, then pushed him aside. He reeled back, ready to strike—but it was Ola, who knew better than he did.

"Tell me when you sense her," Ola said, all business, as she took over the compressions.

"I have no magic," Kier said. The tether inside of him—he could not confront it. He could not face the fact that the tether was dormant, if it was there at all.

Ola glanced up, her eyes fiery. "Then use your senses, you idiot."

Kier nodded. He searched for a pulse, pressing his hand to her throat.

How much he knew about the heart: the muscle itself was his primary occupation; it occupied his thought, his memory, his study. He knew dozens of ways to stop it. But for all of his practice, all of his artistry, he had no way to make it beat again.

He sequenced the parts of her heart in his mind, the chambers and curves and ventricles, going through the same mental process he did when he performed magic. But there was no power in him—no way for him to take the active analysis in his brain and feed it power, to convert that process into magic, into action. He went through the sequencing anyway—this is what he would do to wake her up, this is how he would keep her stable—as if, by will alone, he could dredge the power out of the very earth to make her whole again.

But he couldn't. Not without Grey.

And there, under his fingers: a flutter. "Ola," he said.

She sat back, breathing hard. Grey's chest moved as she took a gasping breath; her fingers spasmed. Kier laid a hand over her chest, covering her from the cold, focusing on the miraculous beat of her heart.

"I have you," he said, his voice colored with terror at losing her, rage that he could not keep her safe, relief that she was not dead yet. His other hand knotted in her hair, keeping her close. "I'm not letting go."

The fear in her face resolved at his voice, turning into peace. She locked eyes with him for just a second as he saw consciousness return—and then her eyes slipped shut.

Her heart continued a steady beat under his hand. He focused on that, the consistent thudding of her heart, as the realization of what they had done crumbled around him.

It took only minutes for them to grab everything and pack up for the night. At first, Kier carried Grey in his arms—he owed her that much, after she’d spent most of her life emotionally carrying him—before Ola moved to his side and said gently, “Captain.”

“I’m fine.”

“She won’t stop breathing just because you’re not touching her,” Ola said, and the fact that she got to the truth of it burned. Because she was right: Kier was worried if he put Grey down, if he let her out of his sight, he would lose her.

“Ola,” he said, and then his voice was too thick. He swallowed his grief; though Grey lived now, and breathed in his arms, she had *died*. He had watched her take her last breath, the end of her power fizzling through him.

“Brit will ride with her,” Ola said gently. “They’ll take care of her.” She did not tell Kier to ride. Perhaps she knew that he needed the physicality of motion, needed the walk to distract him from the riot of horror unfolding inside of him.

Kier chewed on his lip, indecision ripping him to pieces.

“You can’t fold now, Captain,” Ola said mildly.

He nodded. “Can you just... check she’s stable first?” Kier asked.

Concern flitted across Ola’s face. “It is difficult,” she said, “when I don’t know what ails her.”

Kier wanted to die. “I drained her,” he said.

Ola’s eyes flashed to Kier, then to Grey. She did not say anything as they pulled the group over to the side of the road, but she chewed on her lip as she gently probed at Grey’s abdomen, her chest, her throat, the back of her head.

Kier hovered, guilt knotting his stomach. Grey did not stir during Ola’s ministrations, not even when the well pressed her cold hands to

Grey's bare skin. But Ola declared that she was stable, and Kier went through the extra clothing they had to layer her against the cold. He and Eron carefully hoisted Grey's limp body up with Brit, Sela, and Ola standing by.

After, when they had once again resumed at pace, he was unsurprised to find Ola walking next to him. He wondered if she was able to read his shame, his worry; perhaps it wasn't just Grey who was good at reading him. Maybe every emotion he'd ever had was broadcasted for all to see.

But if that was the truth—well, if that was the truth, then everyone knew he loved her, and where did that leave him?

"She pushed you, didn't she?" Ola asked a little while later.

"She knows her limits," Kier said—too defensive, but it didn't matter.

"And how to surpass them," Ola said.

He shrugged. He could not remain angry for long; any other emotion he had was consumed by worry, terror, and grief. He kept looking over at Grey, cradled in Brit's arms. He knew, too, that he should be the one riding with her, but he was too much of a coward.

He was terrified that if he touched her, he would break her all over again.

"Does she know?" Ola asked, her tone softening.

"Know what?"

"That you're..." Ola stopped, her nose wrinkling. "Well. It's hard to find a word that encompasses all of it."

Kier started to answer. Hesitated. It was difficult to catalogue, all the moments between them that could have ended... any other way. He thought of the glances, the brush of her hands, the way she kissed him in the field before she pushed all the power in the world at him. Like that was the last relief she could give him: an illusion of being loved the way he longed for.

"She must," Kier said, raising a hand to his lips, brushing his fingertips against them as if he could trap the memory of Grey's last kiss.

How many times had he kissed her? All of them, a test—or, gods forbid, *brotherly*.

"But have you asked?"

Kier looked down at his hands. "I worry that, any way she regards me is... familial." He said the word as if it was a curse. "We grew up together. Sometimes, it feels like she's all I have in the world. And I can't risk that on a chance I don't believe in."

It was a simplification, after all. If he made a decision, let himself go where she could not follow... well. He loved her too much to put her in that position, too much to change the nature of their relationship if it meant losing her entirely.

"How can you be so certain?"

Kier snorted. "Why are you so invested in this?" he asked.

Before she could answer, he heard Brit's voice murmuring, then rising, then, "Captain!"

He was running before his brain could form a rational thought. Pigeon was spooked, prancing sideways as Brit awkwardly slid off with Grey in their arms, as Eron caught her halfway down. She was thrashing, he realized, her fists flying. The other two set her down gently, Brit checking her again for injury.

It was only when he got close that Kier realized the true problem.

"*Severin!*" Grey shouted, her voice odd in a way that he didn't initially understand. He crashed to his knees next to her and tried to grab her arms. He only succeeded in taking a hit to his lower jaw before his hands found her wrists. "Severin, don't," she wept. "If they're already gone—if it's already over—"

Her voice, he realized. Her accent—it came out sometimes, when her guard was down, when he was hurt, when they were alone. Kier sometimes forgot the way she used to speak when she was a child, before she knew any better, before she could hide it: with the rounded vowels of the Isle.

"Maryse," he murmured, low enough so the others couldn't hear. He watched as her eyes stopped roving, as her gaze locked in on his. She was hot to the touch, damp with sweat. "It's okay. You're okay."

She stared at him for a second longer, disbelieving, before her eyes rolled back in her head. Kier only had a moment to roll her onto her side, recognizing the way her body convulsed, before she was sick.

“Eron,” he said quietly, holding her steady with one hand as he pushed her hair behind her ear with the other. “Can you find her another shirt?”

Again, he carried her until Ola intervened, harshly whispering that he would exhaust himself. They followed a terrible pattern: Grey rode with Brit or Eron until she was in distress, and then Kier took her, until Ola chided him. They made slow progress, and by the time they found shelter some time in the late afternoon, Kier’s entire body was aching.

He had trouble finding his appetite that evening, as he sat next to Grey’s sleeping form in the back room. It was only him and Sela back there with her, the other girl washing down the sweat and sick and blood from Grey’s skin with a damp cloth.

They had traveled the entire day and most of the night before. All were delirious with exhaustion, yet Kier could barely reckon with it past the sickness of his own fear.

“You need to rest,” Brit said, poking their head in from the front room, where the others gathered. Ola was on watch and Eron resting; he had just barely able to coordinate that through the haze.

He no longer remembered how to be a very good leader, he’d soon realized, without Grey.

“I’ll rest here,” Kier said. Then, after a forced moment of rationality, “Have Eron wake me upon his return. I’ll take watch after him.”

Brit nodded and departed without a word.

When they were alone again, Kier noticed Sela looking over at him. He could not quite read her expression; whether it was one of accusation or pity, he could not be certain.

“You should sleep,” Kier said gruffly.

“As should you,” Sela said, prickling. Kier scrubbed a hand across his face. She was right, but she was also lashing out in the way of teenagers who had no power in a situation. Grey had been particularly good at that

kind of anger, in their youth. Perhaps it was inherited by the high families, that kind of anger—in that moment, he missed her fury immensely.

Shout at me, he thought at nothing. Be cruel to me. Just come back first, and you can fight with me for the rest of our lives.

But then he looked at Sela again, and saw the firm way she clenched her jaw, the wet sheen to her gaze. “What is it?”

Sela shook her head. Kier sighed, looking at Grey’s body, wrapped in coats, then back at the girl. “I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

Sela nodded. She did not look at Kier for a moment, until—“Will she live?”

Kier sucked a breath through his teeth. “Yes,” he said, too quickly.

“How can you be so certain?”

Because she has to, he did not say. He watched her for a moment, the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the stillness she never mastered when she was awake. He’d spoken to Ola that evening, more in-depth—this illness was nothing worse than the last time he’d drained her, years ago. It would not be permanent. It was only her body shutting down temporarily, regenerating.

If he kept telling himself that, it would be true.

“I’m not certain of many things,” Kier said, tucking his good knee to his chest, straightening his aching leg. “But I’m certain of her.”

He was coming back from his watch shift when he heard the commotion. Kier had just shut the door behind him when Ola called, “Captain. She’s stirring.”

Eron glanced at him from where he rested against the far wall. “She’s been calling out again,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “For... them.”

They exchanged a glance. Eron did not ask, which was good, because Kier would not answer him truthfully.

His heart kicked into overdrive. Kier crossed the front room in five strides and pushed through to the bedroom, the sickroom, the living

tomb where Grey slept. "Our fucking luck to lose the medic," Brit muttered, hovering over Ola as they fought to hold Grey down.

"Go be unhelpful somewhere else," Kier said. He pushed past both of them, shooting a glare that sent the pair scurrying away, dragging Sela along with them.

He turned his focus back to Grey: her face was wrenched with pain, her hands knotting in the coats. He knelt, careful of her arms, cupped her face, running one thumb over her cheekbone.

Grey's face changed, calming. One of her hands went to her stomach, to the place she always told him she felt her power most prevalently. Her fingers dug in, nails clawing at her own clothing, and he laid a hand over hers. Grey made a noise of pain, back arching against it.

"You take as much time as you need," he murmured. She was so rarely still, so rarely incapacitated, he found himself without words to say. He swallowed hard, watching the agony settle on her face. "I will be here. I'm not going. I will not let go of you."

Her expression smoothed. Evened. Kier leaned close, kissing her forehead.

Grey's hand stilled in his. Her breathing smoothed out, back to restfulness. Kier sighed, keeping her hand in his, his thumb skimming her knuckles.

"I love you," Kier said, speaking it into the stillness of the room like he never could say it to her face. How many times had he said it to her back, watching her go? How many times had he whispered it into the rooms that she had just left?

Her house's motto was *power in bravery*, and he could not even find the bravery within himself to be honest.

"When you wake up," he said, his voice strained and unfamiliar even to himself, "I will tell you. Do you remember when you first told me of Retarik and Kitalma?"

No answer. Of course there wasn't. But he remembered the first time she'd spoken it, her voice high and reedy, still bearing an accent. When he closed his eyes, he could see her as a girl, her trousers ripped at the knees and her tunic stained with dirt from an earlier garden game, her

hair divided into two messy braids that hung down over her shoulders, down to her belly button.

“You told it to me as a warning, about what could happen if I relied on you too much. If I let you have my heart, if I fell too deeply in love with my power, then I would lose myself. But there is no me without you—and yes, that is codependence, and you’d probably tell me that I should learn to stand on my own. But I don’t want to.” He looked down at her hand, fingers twined with his. Even after two days, how desperately he missed the sound of her voice.

A knock sounded on the door. Kier coughed, unsurprised to feel the heaviness in his throat. “Come in,” he said.

It was Eron and Sela; Brit and Ola were probably already heading off on watch. Kier had decided earlier that afternoon that they were best off waiting here until Grey woke up, rather than risking travel.

“Can we sleep in here?” Eron asked, his eyes lowered. Kier wondered, for a moment, if he’d heard him—but then, he didn’t care.

Let them hear. Let everyone. If Kier came to be known for loving Grey, then let it be so.

“Of course,” he said, shifting over. He repositioned himself to lay down, Grey’s hand still caught in his.

What if she does not follow? that ever-present voice whispered in his head.

But he thought of the way she’d looked at him, at the end. The flash in her eyes just when they had separated, when he still felt the phantom press of her lips on his. What if she died, never knowing the way he cared for her?

If she did not follow, they would work through it, and he would keep treading the line he had walked his whole life. But if she *did*...

He knew he had to sleep, that he would take the next watch—but as he stared at the ceiling, all he could think of were the words he would say when he finally had the chance.