

WHILE IT LASTS

I FROWNED, FINGERING THE WHITE LINE ON MY LIPS ONCE AGAIN, bothered by how it felt beneath my thumb and how different it looked compared to the marking of stars that I had under my hairline not that long ago.

It was not as elegant as the fae mark I had before, that was for sure. Then again, it was from Kristin. I wouldn't expect any more or any less.

It just stung that it was there, right where I could see it. A reminder that I had betrayed Theo and that while I may have loved him, I had also attacked him.

Because of Camden, but Theo would hardly let her take the blame, and Wren would be far from happy if she knew that no part of me wanted to hurt Theo; it had just become necessary. If I could turn back time, I would have lived that moment over a thousand times to find just one reality that let me walk away from him without destroying what friendship we had. If I could salvage just that, I would have been willing to suffer through the rest.

It was hard to get over the regret when you had been in love with someone for most of your life, trust me. I had already tried

the normal route, chasing skirts and indulging in the high-pitched laughter of the ladies of the court. I liked them too, of course. It was just that all of the girls I could see myself loving never really came through.

Case in point; Wren intrigued me at first, but now I couldn't see the loud, outrageous girl as anything but my sister—or someone who belonged wholly to Luka. The idea of loving her in any other sense was madness; how Nikolas managed to do it was sheer insanity. Even when Luka and Wren pretended otherwise, it was more than clear what they thought of each other; a single glance from Luka told everyone that he belonged to her; heart, body, and soul. Wren would be a hellcat if pulled away from him, and Luka had made it clear that he would always come back to her side.

Luka had made sure of it with that mark, the one that I knew had existed from the moment he mentioned tying his life to Wren's. I didn't know where he'd hidden it—but I had my own problems.

"It hardly disfigures you," Kristin said from behind me, and I looked up in the mirror to see him lounging against the door-frame, frowning at me.

Kristin was offended that I didn't appreciate his gift, unknowing that I had already figured him out; Kristin couldn't fool me regarding his intentions that day. Kristin had more than enough magic to place a fae mark with a single sweep of his hand. Kristin had deliberately kissed me.

I'd avoided him afterward; it was probably cruel, but it felt necessary for both Kristin's sake and mine. I was more than certain what Kristin wanted from me; I just didn't know if I could give it.

"You know I loved Theo," I stated, and it wasn't the first time I'd said it.

Kristin sighed, crossing his arms as he sunk into the door-frame. As different as the two brothers were—Luka was a twig

of a man while Kristin was more like a whole tree—Kristin always managed to look like his younger brother when he was annoyed. He probably would have been happy with that, considering the fact that he adored his brother.

Kristin had spent so long convincing everyone that Luka was his brother and not some Unseelie monster, while I'd done little to help him; I couldn't see any reason for Kristin to actually enjoy my company because of that. I didn't fight when Camden and the others mocked him, even when it upset Kristin. Sometimes I helped Camden spread her rumors, humiliating the Kinsley's further despite my claim that Kristin was one of my oldest friends.

The fact that Kristin held any interest in me despite my actions was remarkable. And infuriating. I was a coward, through and through, he was one of the few people daring to admit that, but he still made excuses for me, just like Wren.

I was hardly the hero they wanted me to be.

"I'm not a good person," I reiterated, turning away from the sink and finally facing him. "Surely, you know that already."

I wanted to be a good person, I wanted to be kind and considerate; and yet somewhere along the line, I had waded so deep in Theo's world that I became far from any of that.

"Wren obviously disagrees, as do I," Kristin laughed, shaking his head as he finally stepped away from the doorframe, looking at me with way too much kindness in those blue eyes. I didn't know what he saw in me; I didn't know what anyone saw in me, not after that day on the battlefield not so long ago when I nearly killed my closest friend. "You know if Wren hears that you're brooding, she's going to tear you out of here herself."

"I'm not brooding."

Another laugh, Kristin mirrored my expression and shot it back to me, definitely exaggerating some parts of it. Leave it to him to make jokes; I was always the one stupid enough to chuckle at them.

“It’s more handsome when I do it,” I informed him. “I have far better facial expressions than you.”

“Oh, I agree,” Kristin said, nodding along as I walked past him and out of the washroom, unable to stop the smile on my face as the big dope trailed me. This was it, huh, him and I bound for life? We were currently stuck in the middle of the worst Kinsley estate together with a small, confused Haldian girl, a smelly old monk, the world’s most obvious library seeker, an Unseelie with more height than patience, and Wren.

Dear God, Wren.

Just as powerful as me, but way too much trouble at the same time. She was all too prone to giving in to her temper and chasing Artur across the lawn. Wren was the only person aside from the Haldian without any sort of noble upbringing, and it showed.

What a mess. I didn’t miss my silk duvet or my goose-down pillows from the palace; I missed the sanity of it all, things made sense back then. I yearned for the life I once knew far too frequently.

When a big, hulking fae did not tie my life to his, forcing me to stay beside him. Oh, what sweet days those were; I was sure that Kristin regretted our bargain from the moment he realized how angry I was about it.

I finally relented, giving in to curiosity and taking a look back at Kristin only to have his chest bump against mine and realize that he was so close behind me that it very well might have been his breath on my shoulders and not the wind.

It was normal in the past, but now? Now it felt strange to look back and be almost nose to nose with him, especially with everything else on my mind as well. If we didn’t get out of Whyne, then surely war would be on the horizon.

“You think too much,” Kristin informed me cheerily, his fingertip pressing against my nose to push me back as his eyes crinkled at the sides, a wide grin spreading across his mouth.

“You don’t always have to be miserable; you know. You can be happy sometimes. Good things still happen in war, and even while you’re on the run. I just had to remind Luka of that.”

“I bet you did,” I relented, finally giving in and letting myself step closer to him, sizing Kristin up. He replied with the same joking posture, standing a little taller as I moved right in front of him, the glint in Kristin’s eyes daring me to do something.

God, he was stupid. I liked him more than any rational person should, but still. Kristin’s sunny disposition and determination to be infallible for the most part— save for the occasional moment that required seriousness— was good, too good.

His optimistic attitude made Wren pale in comparison. As did his willingness to be seen as a fool.

“I bet you won’t kiss me.”

“You’re an idiot,” I laughed, turning my head away from him, finally in higher spirits again as I reentered my designated bedroom, not caring that Kristin followed. That was something else I liked about Kristin; whenever I felt like I was losing part of myself, he found me. “You know, someday your brother is going to walk in on you taunting me, and he is going to be mortified.”

“Luka is already well aware of my interests,” Kristin informed me, still crowding behind me as I walked to the large, floor-length window that looked out to the unkept yard behind the manor. “He told me that the Kinsley line is naturally unlucky when it comes to the ways of love.”

“Then Wren will walk in instead.”

“Wren won’t care,” Kristin laughed, moving to stand beside me. “It’s almost disappointing, I hate to admit it, but I don’t think that she’d congratulate me. I think she’d apologize to you for having to put up with me, the greatest lightweight that Whyne has ever known.”

“That you are,” I agreed under my breath, grimacing at the

memories. “Thankfully, Artur is already drinking us out of house and home, so you can’t as well.”

“Like I’d want to drink with Artur,” Kristin said, sticking out his tongue at the idea as he settled in beside me, obviously wondering what had caught my attention.

Kristin looked where I did—the place where three of our companions gathered. Wren read over Luka’s shoulder as he made notations, and Winry sat beside the two of them, harvesting mandrake roots. Not so far from them, Lindy crouched beside a puddle, messing with the water and trying, as she always did after it rained, to redirect enough of it to douse a sleeping monk not so far away with it. Lindy constantly insisted that Artur needed to be cleaned; people in Haldia were much more hygienic, she assured me.

And being the idiot, sentimentalist that he was, Kristin said, “you know, they’re all good kids. Someday we’re going to look back on these days fondly.”

“And miss being in a war?” I grinned, amused as always by how Kristin managed to look at things.

“And miss being together,” Kristin corrected me with a huff, his shoulder colliding with mine as he shot me a playful look. “You know, someday my brother is going to get tired of me, and he’s going to take Wren and go to God knows where. Then, eventually, Lindy will have to go home too.” He sighed, “not to mention, either you’re going to fall victim to Winry’s charm, or she’s going to grow up soon and marry some fae noble far away from us...”

“I’m hoping she grows up,” I informed him. I enjoyed Winry’s company, but I was far from wanting to marry her.

“These days aren’t going to last forever,” Kristin repeated, and though he said it with such cheer, I also knew that there was just one underlying thought as well: especially not when we’re going into a war.

It rested in the air, unspoken between the two of us as Kristin

clenched his fist behind his back. I pretended not to notice while I touched the window in front of me, looking away from his reflection. We could very well lose everything in one day if we did not leave; we could lose each other.

Had Wren and Luka already had that realization? Had they already said goodbye? Those two had something defined, but Kristin and I?

“They aren’t going to last forever,” I replied, looking at him, “and we’re lucky to have them while they last.”

And because life is short and I, Adam Harlow, am trying to be anything but a coward, I grabbed the back of Kristin’s neck and turned his lips towards mine, claiming him as my own before he could be stolen away from me. I clenched his collar as his lips pressed into mine, the world below remaining completely unaware as the moment passed between two possible lovers. The kiss would stay a secret for then, and perhaps for always.

But I liked to believe that even in the worst possible outcomes, one of us would look back on that kiss and be glad that I did it.

