

# Riven

by

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## CHAPTER 1

### Calling

*If there's one thing to learn from her two warring identities, it's that doors are much easier to open than close.*

**T**HEY SAY THE dark woods entice, promising power and trifold pain. They call those broken-hearted, those who fear the trajectory of their fates more than the dubious gifts of the forest. The risk is never worth the reward. Those desperate enough indulge anyway.

On the night when the sky's sole companion was a crescent moon resembling a perfectly sharpened scythe, the woods called out to the queen-to-be. She would be their latest victim.

The girl had been more than a little woeful, caught in a dark torrent of despair since the death of her parents. She'd lost them at the same time, the great king and queen felled by a strange, unknown illness that not even the best healers in the kingdom knew how to cure. They'd died in their bedchamber, holding each other's hands in their sleep, their faces still aglow with love for each other.

Riven was only eighteen, barely an adult, and the kingdom demanded her leadership, poise, and most importantly, strength. Without her strength, she was nothing, her parents would warn her. It was a Silvyran belief that power equalized worth. Already, in the secrecy of their homes, the people were slandering the queen and king for their inability to conquer their malady. Riven hardly had her parents' tenacity or wisdom of their years when they were still living. She didn't know how she could possibly be strong now.

Her mother named her Riven, meaning "split apart." The girl never understood why she'd done so. She found it bitterly ironic now because she felt that her whole world had indeed been torn asunder.

In an attempt to get her mind off her haunting thoughts, she journeyed to the roof of one of the castle's many towers, where the wind blew freely and her darkness was obscured by the night. Her personal guard followed her, tasked by the royal advisors with making sure the mourning princess didn't try to bring any harm to herself.

The coolness chilled her dark skin and invaded her curls. *Good*, she thought. A different kind of pain. She leaned her arms on the battlements, the cold stone freezing her even more. She didn't stay there for long. A thin sword was at her hip. She wasn't there to contemplate—she was there to duel.

Turning to her bodyguard, she drew her blade.

"Grant me a duel," she said. "That I might relieve myself of this pain for a while."

The guard was not amused. "I will not risk harm to my charge, especially not when it is my own hand that will cause it."

Riven narrowed her eyes and kept her sword raised. “Have I not already been harmed? Am I not already in pain? There is nothing you can do to make me feel worse. And do you forget my skill with the sword? You will not land a single hit.”

Despite her pain, Riven was proud, and it was her pride that motivated her to become the queen. She had something to prove. To her deceased parents, her people, and herself.

Reluctantly, her guard produced his own sword and set it against Riven’s so the two blades formed an X. The duelists nodded at each other, lowered their swords to their sides, and counted down from three.

The castle rooftop was hardly a suitable place for a duel, but it was flat and spacious enough to permit movement. Still, the guard would have to be careful so his princess wouldn’t fall off. The battlements were too low to prevent an accident. Riven rushed at her guard with all her might, set on taking her anger out on this fight. Her guard merely blocked. She aimed again, this time aiming for his side. He blocked again. Growling, she raised her sword for an overhead swing and came down on his blade, the sounds of steel against steel sending a deafening clash into the sky.

Riven’s attacks were fierce and unrelenting, but they were unpolished and brash. The guard, on the other hand, was methodical, each of his steps precise and disciplined. It wasn’t long before he was wrenching her sword out of her hand and pointing his blade at her throat. Surprised, she gazed at him with wide eyes—she hadn’t expected to be beaten, especially not so quickly. The guard lowered his sword, sheathed it, and retrieved Riven’s. Riven continued to stand as if paralyzed. She wasn’t supposed to lose. Not ever. Not even if the fight was only a harmless sparring match. Trying her hardest to swallow her pride, she nodded at her guard.

“Good duel,” she said half-heartedly.

He handed her sword back. “Your Majesty, if I may—it’s very late. Perhaps it is best that we head now.”

But Riven stayed where she was and said nothing. She’d mustered up her manners only to be brushed off, as if to her guard, besting her was a small thing, a cursory thought. How dare he dismiss her so casually? How dare he belittle her? Finally, she spoke, “Again.” Another duel, another chance to prove herself.

Her guard frowned. “Your Majesty—”

“Again.”

He begrudgingly complied, and the two dueled again. Riven lost again. She refused to believe her weakness. Riven Cordelia did not lose. She was just a little tired. Resolving not to make the same mistakes she had in the fights before, she said, “again.” Her face burned with embarrassment now, and her voice came out in breathy pants.

“No more, Your Majesty. You need to rest.”

She would not let her losses stand. She gritted her teeth, a fire catching in her eyes that made her guard take a step back. “I. Said. Again.”

“This isn’t healthy, princess.”

“I am your *queen*, and that is an order! Do not make me repeat myself.”

It wasn’t true. She wasn’t queen, not yet, not until her coronation a month’s time. But in her mind, she already wore the crown passed down the Cordelia bloodline for centuries. The kingdom was as good as hers.

The guard hesitated, unsure whether to correct her or obey. Though she had authority over him, he still had the right to put her in her place. Even if it meant hurting her pride.

“You are not yet queen,” he said, straightening his back. “And it is your duty to take care of yourself. Stop this insolence now.”

Riven scoffed, taken aback at his boldness. “The gall of you. I will overlook it this one time. Come, let’s duel again.”

“I will not argue with you, princess. Please, let this go. We can battle all you want in the morning.”

After a few moments of Riven subjecting her guard to a fierce glare, she relented. The two journeyed back down the tower steps, and the guard escorted her to her bedchamber.

“Good night, Your Majesty,” he told her. But Riven could say nothing. She’d been embarrassed and disgraced, exposed as weak. To the Silvyrans, there was nothing worse. She tossed and turned in her silk sheets, unable to forget how horribly she’d been bested. By some twisted miracle, her pain had multiplied instead of diminished. She could barely stand the thought of her own weakness. When the tears welled up in her eyes, she wiped them away, disgusted at herself.

That was when she heard a voice, deep and honeyed, whisper in her ear. “Come to me.” She at once recognized it from the stories. Shaking her head, she covered her ears with her hands and turned over. Was she really so broken that the Deathless Shade called out to her now? She had to resist. She would not give in to the dark woods’ beckoning.

“Come to me,” it said again. The words were hypnotic, a sugary command Riven would be happy to indulge.

*No, she thought. I must not be weak again. I must fight this.*

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After some minutes of attempting to ignore the voice, she rose from her bed, put on her cloak, and snuck out of the castle. She told herself a walk would get her mind off the dark woods and make the voice go away. But in her heart of hearts, she knew exactly where she was going.

## CHAPTER 2

### Promise

**T**HE DEATHLESS SHADE was the name given to the dark woods on account of its ever-present darkness. The crowns of the trees were so tightly knit together, they never allowed any light between them. It made no difference to those miserable enough to walk in—the voice would guide their steps. And once they’d reached the forest’s heart, they’d lose themselves.

Riven moved quickly, keeping her hood up, periodically checking behind her to make sure no guard was in pursuit. Her lantern provided little help in the stubborn darkness, but even if she’d been walking blind, the voice would tell her where she needed to go.

Finally, she crossed the plain separating the castle from the forest and walked through the mouth of the woods. The trees shook their limbs, welcoming her in as if she were an old friend.

Her lantern went out. The darkness was now complete. She dropped it on the dirt ground, it no longer being of use to her, and continued on. She stepped over roots, avoided bushes, and walked in a straight line—all by the guidance of the voice. It was like she was in a trance she could stir from at any time but chose not to.

Eventually, she reached the center of the forest, a glade lit by a mysteriously glowing lake in front of her. Mist rose from the waters like ghosts.

“Step forward,” the forest commanded. Riven obeyed. The water was cold. Riven didn’t stop until it was at her ankles. “Riven Cordelia, your heart is in so much anguish. I can take your pain away. I can make you strong.”

“Can you bring my parents back?” Riven rasped, hopeful.

“The only unchangeable thing in life is death. It is unmalleable.”

Riven lowered her head, disappointed, and instantly all her unshed tears rushed to the back of her eyes. She held her eyes open wide, refusing to let them fall. She would not be weak again. Then she noticed something about the glowing waters under her. In them shone her reflection, but it was foreign. This Riven was happy, brimming with confidence, knowing neither death nor weakness. A crown looking just like her mother’s rested askew on her head, though it was black instead of gold and asymmetrical in its design.

“What is this?” Riven breathed in wonder.

“This is who you are,” replied the forest. “This is who I can make you to be, if only you do something for me in return.”

Riven knew this part of the story well, hearing it time and time again from the chatter of her citizens. This is where she’d strike a deal with the dark woods and live to regret any blessings she received. She knew she had to step away. The risk was too great. *I will not be weak again.* Before her better judgement left her, she backed out of the lake, away from her reflection, the cool air hitting her ankles as she emerged from the water. Then she ran, not caring if she tripped or stumbled. She had to leave before she made a decision she regretted.

With the voice no longer guiding her, Riven went through a cycle of falling, bruising herself, getting up, and continuing to run. She stepped in bushes and ran into trees, but as long as she was leaving the Deathless Shade, she didn't care. Then she ran right into someone who steadied her by the shoulders. She yelped, unable to see who it was.

"It's me, Your Majesty." Riven recognized her guard's voice. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

The two moved through the thicket, and it wasn't until Riven saw the break of light in the sky that she knew they were out of the forest and that it was early morning. Realizing how terrified she'd been, she was tempted to hug her guard tightly to her and confess to him all her secret fears. Instead, she kept walking, silently shaking. Her guard took her back to her room. Sensing she'd learned her lesson, he didn't lecture her about the dangers of the forest.

Before Riven could settle into bed, she passed her reflection in her mirror. She froze in her tracks. Her reflection was smiling; she was not. Her reflection was the same as the one in the Deathless Shade, wearing both its confidence and the dark Cordelia crown.

"Do not be afraid of yourself, Riven," the voice of the dark woods told her. "Do not be afraid of who you can become."

Riven ran to get her guard who'd barely made it down the hallway. She took him back to her room and showed him her reflection. He tilted his head at the mirror, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. "You have to believe me," Riven pleaded, her voice shaking. "Something's not right."

Her guard still saw nothing but tucked a blanket in the frame of the mirror, obscuring the reflection from view. Then he wished her good night once more, this time stationing himself right outside her door. If she needed anything, he'd be right there, ready.

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After she stopped shaking, Riven finally found some peace and drifted into a light slumber. She dreamed of her beautiful reflection in the lake. The promise was too good to be true. She vowed never to go into the Deathless Shade again.

## CHAPTER 3

### Uncrowned

**T**HE AIR STIRRED with ambivalence as the royal court was locked in heated conversation in the castle's grand hall.

“How will we tell her?” asked one of the advisors, a young man who flattened his mustache down nervously.

Another advisor, a middle-aged woman, spoke. “Have her guard share the news. He is the one she associates with the most. He is the most suited for it.”

The others shifted in their seats, silently agreeing but still greatly uncomfortable. This news, no matter whose mouth it came from, would break Riven.

Just then, the door to the hall opened, and another young man flanked by two guards strolled in. His hair, ocean waves of curly dreadlocks, was as dark as the night sky, with a widow's peak splitting it. His sharp eyes were a haunting silver. The advisors gawked at him. After all this time, the resemblance to their princess was still uncanny. He wore a cape over his shoulder; a black, velvet doublet, and the smile of a champion who'd just won a tournament.

“Leave my little sister to me,” he said in a righteous tone once he reached the table. “It’s best that this comes from family. And it’ll be a nice little reunion.”

The advisors couldn’t take their eyes off their beloved prince and quickly nodded their agreement. More than anything, they were elated. Prince Castor had returned.

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Riven awoke to sunlight flooding her room and invading her eyes. Groaning, she sat up. Her mirror stood directly across from her bed, so it was the first thing she saw. Goosebumps populated her skin. Shaking herself, she tried to remove her dread. *I will not be intimidated by a piece of glass*, she thought. *Surely the strange reflection is gone now.*

Cautiously, she removed the blanket. Sure enough, the mirror showed her normal self. Riven exhaled. Perhaps since she had overcome the call of the forest, the voice and its taunting gift had left her. Perhaps she was stronger than her broken-heartedness. Feeling triumphant, she readied herself for the day and went down to the royal kitchens for breakfast, accompanied by her guard.

What she saw, *who* she saw, made her heart threaten to stop beating. She hadn’t seen him in a decade, but she recognized her older brother immediately. Her parents’ favorite child. A prodigious duelist. Prince Castor had been the golden child growing up. He was virtuous, confident, and strong. Their parents were proud of him. He seemed perfect in every way, invincible in every form. The whole court agreed he’d make an excellent king one day.

When he lived at Cordelia Castle, he had been everything Riven was supposed to become, a glaring reminder of her constant shortcomings. Riven loved her brother. She remembered all the times she’d practiced her dueling in secret, trying to be more like the noble, gracious Castor. She’d walk with her chest puffed out like he did, smile like he did, stand like he

did. She studied his movements so she could emulate *whatever* he did—because she loved him, and because she wanted the love her parents gave him for herself.

Despite her affection for him, she had been secretly happy to see him go. He'd been sixteen when their parents sent him away to travel the world and learn all he could. That was a decade ago. Eventually, the court had come to terms with the fact that he'd left home forever and Riven would become the new monarch when the time came. Suddenly, she had her parents all to herself, finally having a chance to step out of her brother's shadow and begin to make a name for herself. But now he was here again, and Riven couldn't help but feel all her hard work over the years crumbling with each passing moment he stood before her. Riven couldn't understand why he was here now, not when their parents had passed, but now that she was to be coronated in just a few short weeks.

“Little sister!” he greeted, smiling and raising his arms wide for a hug.

Castor hadn't ever done a thing to harm his sister. Riven had only fond memories of him. And yet, all her mind allowed her to dwell on was the fact that he had been the favorite child and she had never had the opportunity to change that. She tried her hardest to keep herself together, to appear like she wasn't breaking apart inside. She failed. She ran to him, wrapped her arms around him, nestling her head into his chest, in spite of herself. Castor was the only family she had left.

“Why are you here?” she murmured into his chest, her breaths shaky.

When he pulled away, his smile was gone, and the twinkle in his eyes had dimmed.

“Riven...” he said, “it must be so hard for you these days. I'm so sorry.”

Riven felt the tears welling up in her eyes, and she remembered what she told herself: *I will not be weak again*. “Where were you? Why weren't you at the funeral?”

“I tried to get away, Riven. I really did. But I was two oceans away at the time, trapped behind the Winter World’s border. They wouldn’t allow anyone to leave due to a plague.”

“Why are you here now?”

He seemed regretful. And Castor, Riven remembered, rarely hesitated about anything.

“The court... has decided that you are too grief-stricken to rule.” He paused.

Riven’s eyes widened with realization. “No... no, you don’t mean that.”

Castor closed his eyes and turned his head away. “I am sincerely sorry, little sister. I was told to come back. I was much older than you when our parents passed—this is easier for me. It is best that I rule Silvyra.”

Riven couldn’t believe her ears. She felt as though she’d been betrayed. She’d been groomed to rule Silvyra since she was ten years old. The kingdom was supposed to be hers. And now that her brother was here, he was just allowed to snatch it up as if it was a piece of fruit? Angry, frustrated, and embarrassed, Riven left before her brother could know she was crying. Her guard had been standing to the side the whole time, quiet. He was the one who noticed her tears.

“Wait, Riven!” Riven heard Castor call from behind. She wouldn’t turn around. She couldn’t. Her guard silently followed her out.

## CHAPTER 4

### Worth

*A* *MI UNWORTHY of anything at all? Undeserving of a small sliver of dignity? Am I so insignificant to so quickly be replaced?* Riven lamented as she sat at the stone ledge in the castle courtyard. Her tears stained her cheeks, and she cringed at her weakness. She was grateful she'd left before her brother could see her in this vulnerable, unbecoming state.

Her guard approached her. Riven quickly wiped her eyes, trying her best to conceal her unhappiness.

"You don't have to be ashamed of crying, Your Highness. There's strength in your tears," he told her gently.

"I'm not interested in a lecture right now."

"Then come to the city with me. Get your mind off things for a little while."

Riven looked up at him through her curly hair. She hadn't been to the capital in a long time, not since her parents' passing. She always felt better after a friendly sparring match at the arena, or after sampling from the most delectable, fresh seafood restaurants in the kingdom,

made possible by the fact that Silvyra was right next to the ocean. She nodded. Her guard called for a carriage, and the two were on their way to the city.

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By the time they arrived, the city was bustling with people on their lunch breaks. Already the busyness of it all began to put Riven's mind at ease. As the carriage rolled on, they passed by buildings that were adorned with wealth and luxury. All the nobility lived in the city, and the ones who didn't, lived at the castle, being a part of the royal court.

Riven marveled at the sight of the approaching city gardens. Usually, the gates were open to the general public. Today they were closed, meaning it was reserved for private viewing. Incredulous, Riven looked to her guard who was sitting on the opposite side of the carriage from her.

“Did you reserve the garden?” she asked.

He gave a gentle smile. “I know how much you love your quiet.”

Riven felt a swell of appreciation for her guard deep in her chest. He was the reason she hadn't completely fallen apart when she'd lost her parents, though she'd never admit it.

The carriage dropped them off inside, the gate shutting behind them once it rolled away. Riven looked around at the hedge bushes in awe. Though she'd been to the gardens a number of times, the gardeners brought in new flowers every few months, and Riven never had the whole space to herself before. She and her guard spent the whole day looking at flowers, eating at cafés, and relaxing by the city's waterfront. Riven felt immensely better. When they returned to the castle, she flopped onto her bed, happily exhausted.

Her happiness immediately left her when she turned over and saw the crown from her reflection on her nightstand. Unnerved, she gawked at it for a few moments, not believing her

eyes. Fearing the worst, she sat up and lit a candle so she could look in her mirror. Her throat caught in her chest. She felt as though she couldn't breathe. *This isn't happening*, she thought.

*This isn't happening.*

"Alistair!" she cried.

Her guard barged into her room. "What's the matter, princess?"

Riven showed him the crown, trembling. "Please, you have to destroy it. My strange reflection is back, too." She shook her head and buried her face in her hands. "This is a nightmare."

Alistair picked up the crown and inspected it. "I'll take care of this, Your Majesty. I promise." Before he left, he took down Riven's mirror. He then ordered the rest of the mirrors in the castle, along with anything else that showed your reflection, to be removed. When he left Riven, he took his sword and split the crown into two pieces. The deed was done. Hopefully, this would be the end of Riven's troubles.

Shivering, she tried once again to sleep. Paranoia caused her brow to break out with sweat and caused sleep to elude her. What if the voice called out again? What if she were unable to resist it? *No*, she told herself. *I will not be weak again.*

Eventually, she fell asleep.

Once again, she dreamed of the forest calling her name.

## CHAPTER 5

### Fate

**T** MONTH PASSED in relative quiet. No voice bothered Riven, nor an eerie reflection, nor a haunting crown. But now the time for Castor’s coronation—what should’ve been *her* coronation—had arrived. He was crowned on the castle balcony, in front of thousands of citizens, swearing his fealty to Silvyra and his devotion to its prosperity. Riven stood quietly beside him, trying not to look as heartbroken as she felt.

The morning after Castor officially became king, Riven awoke to see the black crown, whole and unharmed, once again on her dresser. She screamed.

Alistair burst in, this time with another guard. They took the crown downstairs. A conglomerate of guards stood in the saloon, and Riven watched as Alistair tossed the crown into the fireplace. She waited until every part of it melted away, watching closely as the hot flames consumed it.

She then spent much of her time trying to find her reflection wherever she could—the shining, marble floor; the fountain water, the diamond glass she’d drunk out of. Each time, her reflection was normal, to her utter bewilderment.

Alistair, in another attempt to get Riven's mind off her woes, challenged her to a duel. She declined, much to his confusion—she never refused a duel. "I'm going back there," she said.

Alistair was filled with dread, immediately knowing what place she was talking about. "You can't."

"I will."

Unbeknownst to Alis, Riven had been haunted by the voice of the Deathless Shade every night since the first appearance of the crown. It called to her, called *for* her, commanding her to return to it. Riven had fought against its allure all month. She had the strength to no longer.

"Then I'm coming with you," Alistair said, resolution in his gaze.

"No, you're not."

Riven fetched her cloak and left the castle that night in secret. Alistair covertly followed her. While Riven was once again guided by the voice of the forest, Alistair was thrown off her track by the sentient trees so he couldn't pursue so. Riven made her way back to the forest glade, back to the lake where her reflection was.

This time, the Riven in the reflection was wearing a gown as dark and ominous as the crown on her head. She looked like an evil queen. Riven loved it.

"You see who you can be?" the forest asked her.

Riven was unable to resist the temptation anymore. She knew the stories. She knew there'd be consequences. But surely anything was better than living in constant pain. She asked the forest, "What do I have to do to receive such power?"

"There are three things you must do. First, you must betray that which you love. Prove you are worthy of this power by turning away from all you know. Your kingdom. Your knight. Isolate yourself by living here with me for three days and three nights. You must begin again if

you wish to be strong. Second, you must come here, to the Lake of Echoes, every morning and observe your reflection for one hour every day. It will show you your future. Lastly, on the fourth morning, you must swear yourself to me. I can give you what you want, but only if you're mine. When I present my crown to you, you will put it on your head, and we will be bound together forevermore. Only then will you receive the power you seek."

Riven's thoughts ran wild. In her mind, she saw herself standing in front of all the Silvyrans, her rightful subjects, as the true ruler of Silvyra. She would allow the whole of the kingdom to see her majesty that she'd been denied her whole life. She needed this. The wheel of anticipation turned rapidly over and over in her mind, warning her of the dangers of what she was about to do. But the Deathless Shade and the prospect of ruling held her tightly in their clutches, and it was far too late to listen to reason.

"Do you accept these terms?" the forest crooned.

*I'm tired of weakness, of always having everything taken from me,* Riven thought.

"I accept."

## CHAPTER 6

### Coronation

**T**HE FOREST SPENT the next two hours poisoning Riven’s mind until it was early in the morning.

“That little knight of yours only wishes to hold you back,” it told her.

“Only I have your best interests in mind.” It regularly addressed her as its queen. Riven was so enchanted by its words that she had no idea how her greatly judgement was being clouded.

*Betray... observe... swear...* her thoughts repeated over and over.

She looked at her reflection, falling ever more in love with it each time. She spent more than an hour a day observing herself. The Riven in her reflection wasn’t just strong—she was strength itself. *Soon*, Riven promised herself. *Soon I will be you. Soon I will never be weak again.*

She did the same thing every day: wake up, watch her reflection, and speak to the woods. The tasks were easy enough. Why had she ever worried about consequences? Her reward would be better than any repercussions she could face.

The forest took care of her. While she couldn't see anything other than the glowing glade, the woods directed her to a place where she could sleep. Among the trees, she didn't grow hungry, sick, or dirty. Other than needing sleep, she was perfectly healthy.

She thought about her guard and her brother back home. Surely they were worried. Maybe they were even searching for her in the woods right now. They'd never find her. The trees would make sure of it.

On her third and final night, she slept beside the lake.

Finally the morning she'd wished for arrived. Her betrayal was complete. Her observing was done. Now all she had to do was swear her loyalty. She was so enamored with the gift promised to her that she couldn't see how unbecoming it was for a princess to kneel to something so disgustingly beneath her.

"Deathless Shade," she began, letting her legs be half submerged as she knelt in the glowing water. "I swear my eternal loyalty to you. Honor your promise and grant me my crown."

"Very well. Then you are mine, and I am yours."

The lake's waters swirled around until a great whirlpool opened up the lake like a yawning mouth. Then the waters turned an inky black, the force of their movement whipping Riven's hair in her eyes. Slowly, from the center of the vortex, a pedestal of onyx ascended. On it was a black crown made of crystal—the same crown from Riven's reflection. She felt its power pulse even from as far away as she stood.

Riven moved deeper into the waters, her gaze fixated on the crown. When she reached the pedestal, she felt even more intensely the power that emanated from the crown. She felt a beat of affection for the mysterious thing, as if she was being reunited with an old lover. But

before she could take the sweet prize in her hands, another reached out and took it. Riven looked up.

*Another* Riven was staring back at her, placing *her* crown on her head, wearing the confident smile and black gown that was supposed to be *hers*.

“What is this?” Riven demanded the woods. She’d done everything she was supposed to, yet the forest had betrayed her.

“I told you this was who you could become. Behold, your Other.”

Riven’s copy smiled at her. “Join me, Riven.” She outstretched a hand to her. “We can rule together.”

But Riven slapped her hand away, her rage growing by the moment. “I didn’t ask for this!” Her entire body shook with anger.

“I am the Deathless Shade, a sentient, immortal wood. I owe a pathetic mortal like you nothing. Since you choose not to rule by her side, you will return home. Your Other will stay here. I shall be her kingdom and she shall rule over me.”

Riven was dismayed but still under the power of the woods. She had no choice but to obey its voice. Once again wrought with despair, she returned to the castle.

## CHAPTER 7

### Battle

**A**S THE WEEKS rolled on, Riven's life was unchanged. Her brother, King Castor, was as perfect a king as he had been a prince. The people adored him more by the day and celebrated in the streets the return of their treasured royal.

Riven found herself slipping back into her old life of being constantly compared to her older, superior brother. She wasn't sure who she hated more—the court for not seeing her as her own person, or herself for being so insignificant. No, deep down, she already knew the answer.

After another dull day of existing as a trivial speck of dust, Riven found that she could no longer bear how her life had gone backward. She was furious, and she needed someone to take it out on.

Despite all that had happened, Riven was still proud, and it was her pride that spurred her to challenge her Other to a duel. Upon returning to the dark woods, she gaped at seeing a large, black castle piercing through the thick trees. She instantly knew that the forest had built it for her imposter. Riven grimaced. *That's supposed to be mine*, she thought bitterly. The castle doors were open, and it seemed to Riven to be an invitation. The forest remained silent.

Riven found her Other lounging in a throne and polishing a sword. “There you are,” she purred, not bothering to look up from her blade.

Riven pointed her sword at her. “I challenge you to a duel.”

Her Other causally steadied the sword in her lap, stretched, and stood. “It’s about time.”

Riven hated how confident and unafraid she was. *I’m going to wipe that arrogance right off your face.*

They stood face-to-face and raised their swords together, forming an X. Then they lowered them, readied themselves, and counted down from three. As soon as “one” exited their mouths, Riven’s Other rushed at her. The force was so extreme that Riven was tempted to make a fool of herself by turning around and running away. But running away was for the weak, and Riven still had something to prove.

There was no way she could block an attack of that force, so she dodged by rolling over. Sprouting up behind her, she thought to take her by surprise and strike her back. But her Other was ready for her. With ultra-quickness, she turned around and blocked. Her grip she had on her sword was so steady, it knocked Riven back. She barely had time to regain her footing. Truly, she had no time at all.

In the brief moment that Riven was off-kilter, her Other’s sword pierced the armor at Riven’s leg deep enough to go into her skin. Riven shrieked.

She couldn’t move. She couldn’t hear. She couldn’t stop shaking. Her vision is blurry. She was doing everything she could not to fall to her knees because she didn’t think she would be able to get back up if she did.

Her heart pounded in her ears.

Her Other looked almost sad as she advanced.

Riven needed to move, but she couldn't.

It hurt so much.

And something in her wanted to fail.

Her Other swung her sword at Riven's, knocking it out of her hands. As the reality of her actions hit her, Riven suddenly didn't want to fail. Desperate, she looked over her shoulder to see if somehow she could hop over to it, if somehow she could salvage this embarrassment of a duel.

But she wasn't paying attention to what she should've been.

She felt her Other's foot go into her ribs.

All the air rushed out of her.

She hit the ground, her leg searing with pain.

This duel was over.

This was her true reward. And her true punishment.

Riven knew there was little chance of her winning now. The pain was excruciating, but her anger was only directed at herself. She chose this. Now she was facing the consequences.

"I hate you..." she gasped, not sure if she was speaking to her Other or herself.

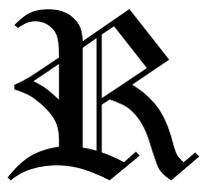
She couldn't think of anything other than the pain.

The tears uncontrollably streamed down her face.

Then everything went black.

## CHAPTER 8

### Infiltration



IVEN AWOKE FEELING nothing at all. For a time, it was relieving. For a time, she believed that everything that had happened was simply a bad dream. A very bad dream. She let herself believe that she hadn't lost her duel and hadn't been made a complete fool. But the bloody bandages wrapped around her leg didn't lie. Riven had fought her Other and lost, and now she could feel her sense of self slipping away. Who was she if she couldn't be strong? The memory of losing hovered over her spirit like the chill on ocean waves. She felt herself drowning under the waters, the outside world muffled in her ears. She was silently suffocating from the pressure of a thousand repressed emotions now washing over her. This loss was another reminder of how fragile she truly was.

Riven saw her Other's smiling face then in her mind's eye, mocking her.

*Awww, too bad, Riven, she said. At least now you've become what you were always meant to be—nothing.*

Riven pounded the gurney she lay on with her fists. The strikes were frustratingly soft, absorbing her force. She needed something harder to hit. Curiously, her leg no longer hurt, and

she wasn't at all sore. But the pain in her heart was as acute as any physical pain she could've felt.

Looking around, she saw that she was somewhere inside the castle. The medical wing. She had no idea how she'd made it back home. She could feel that she'd been stripped of her armor. Her sword was gone. A table beside her had rolls of gauze and a bottle of pain-killing liquid. She ran a hand over her bandaged calf, almost expecting to release some sort of pain, as if all that had healed could come undone with a small touch. But her leg was perfectly healed. She couldn't believe it. It was as if her duel didn't happen, as if she didn't get stabbed—but she wouldn't be fooled. Not again.

Now the medics came into the room to look her over. They were dressed in long, white robes despite the summer warmth.

“How are you feeling?” one asked Riven.

“Fine,” was the bleak reply.

“Now, Your Majesty, you were greatly injured. We want you to feel better as soon as possible, but you can't already be feeling ‘fine.’”

Riven didn't want to talk. She sat up, then swung her legs over the side of the gurney, then stood up, despite the protests of the medics. “See?” she said. “Fine.” She ripped the bandages off her leg, revealing perfectly unpunctured skin. Fully healed, she saw no need to stay under the scrutiny of the shocked medics around. She left them in their stupor and returned to her room. There she changed out of her underclothes into something more permitting, took a sword from her wall, and headed outside. She'd lost all track of time while she was unconscious, but she didn't care. She needed to do something with the anger inside of her.

The sun just barely peaked out from the horizon and painted the sky pink and purple. Riven guessed it was earlier morning of the next day. After some minutes of walking around aimlessly, she found herself in the castle's rose garden. Really, it was King Castor's rose garden. Roses were his favorite flower, and on the day of his ninth birthday, the builders made the garden for him. They'd kept fresh roses all over the castle as well since he left. Riven could barely stand to look at one because they reminded her of him.

Rows and rows of red roses lined the cobblestone walkways. Riven walked under a stone arch and made her way to the center of the garden where a marble fountain was. It was a bust of the prince, in all his glory, raising his sword skyward, triumphant. Water spurted from the tip of the sword in twelve directions, making an umbrella around the rock version of Riven's older brother.

She wasn't sure why she was here. This, by far, was her least favorite place at the castle. She was suddenly overcome with the extreme urge to stab the statue with her sword. *Folly*, she thought. The builders ensured that the statue would last forever. If somehow the castle fell on top of it, Riven was almost positive the statue would still stand in one piece. Her gaze moved up to Castor's face. His eyes held a righteous ferocity, even in stone form. Riven wished she had an ounce of his confidence.

*You were never fit to wear this crown*, he seemed to tell her. *I was. I always was.*

Crumbling under the weight of his glaring superiority, Riven took her sword and walked away.

King Castor. It even sounded right in her mind. She thought about her mother giving her brother such a fierce name while giving her such a questionable one.

“Poor Riven,” crooned a voice that sounded an awful lot like her own. She turned. Her Other stood smirking, holding her sword.

Riven immediately braced. Based on the fight they’d had, Riven knew that her Other could easily fell her. “What are you doing here?” she demanded, her voice shakier than she would’ve liked.

Riven’s Other elegantly brandished her sword. “I came to talk to you. About your kingdom.”

Riven’s eyes widened, and she looked from her Other’s sword up to her eyes. “You will not take Silvyra from me.”

Her Other laughed. “Technically, it’s already mine.”

Riven immediately called for the guards.

“They won’t come for you. You notice how they’re not around? Not even your own personal guard? They’re all too busy doting on their king. Who you should check on, by the way.” Her smile was sickeningly sweet. Riven dashed off into the castle, fearing the worst for her brother.

She found a team of knights huddled around a figure. When she approached, they turned to her and drew their swords. Alistair took a step toward her.

“Riven Cordelia,” he said, a deep sorrow on his face as his voice shook, “for assaulting the king, you are sentenced to death.”

## CHAPTER 9

### Imprisoned

**T**HE WORDS HIT her like a tidal wave, wrecking her very core.  
“It wasn’t me! It was an imposter!” she cried as two guards took her by the arms. But she knew they wouldn’t believe her.

The tears streamed down her cheeks, and the guards hauled her away. She pleaded with Alistair, her only friend, the one who knew her best, saying that she would never harm her brother. But Alistair wouldn’t even look at her.

“I’m sorry, Riven,” he said. He walked away, leaving her with the weight of his words.

*I sentence you to death.*

*If you were ever on my side, Riven pleaded the voice of the Deathless Shade, I need you now, if for nothing else than to change my fate.*

Silence was the only reply.

Riven sobbed all the tears she’d never allowed herself to since the death of her parents. Her head throbbed, and her chest heaved with relentless convulsions. She was thrown into the dungeons, the lowest part of the castle.

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That night, she slept on the cold, hard floor. The tears never stopped falling. Her life had completely unraveled in a matter of days, as if it was fragile as the rose bloom in Castor's garden she'd plucked petals from.

It continued to worsen with the sudden appearance of her Other. She held in her hands a small torch, illuminating her frowning face. "How sad." She shook her head.

Awoken from slumber, Riven sat up and wearily looked at her imposter. "Why are you here?" she croaked, exhausted.

"I'm not finished speaking with you yet, Riven."

Riven lowered her head, no longer having the strength to care. "Well, then. Finish it. You've already proven that I'm nothing. Finish me like you wanted."

Her Other's expression was grave, almost sad, and her voice was soft. "That's where you're wrong. You're more valuable than you'll ever know." She looked at her torch and placed one hand around the bar of Riven's cell. "I wanted us to rule together, as equals. All you wanted was to push me away."

"You stabbed me," Riven replied, her anger flooding back into her. "You hurt my brother. Is he... is he still alive?"

"I never touched your brother."

Now Riven looked up, staring her Other straight in the eye. "Nonsense! I saw him on the floor."

"All I did was put him to sleep. A harmless little drink. I'd told him I thought he'd like it. I had the room emptied so the guards wouldn't know I wasn't attacking him."

Incredulous, Riven stood up and walked up to the bars. She was both relieved for her brother and upset for herself. “You framed me! I’m set to be executed!”

“I had to do something to get your attention. You refused to talk to me.”

But still Riven would not listen. She clutched the bars tightly. “Fix this,” she gritted out. “I am innocent.”

“Not until you hear me out.”

“No! You have no right to put me here! Let me out this instant!”

Her Other’s face fell, and she produced a key from her pocket. She unlocked the door, and Riven pounced on her.

“You ruined my life!” Riven cried. “I hate you! You’re not even supposed to exist.” She clawed at her Other’s face. Her Other wouldn’t fight back.

“You hate yourself?” she asked, blocking her face with her arms as Riven continued to attack.

Once again, Riven’s tears began to fall. “You took my crown. You framed me for treason. I can’t get the guards to believe my story. You’ve ruined me forever.”

Now her Other was in tears and shoved her off. “Fine! You want a proper fight? Get your sword. We’ll duel in the morning and settle this once and for all.” She stormed off. Riven watched as she went before sneaking up to her room. *I will not be weak again.* This time, she’d make sure she’d win her duel. Everything was riding on this.

## CHAPTER 10

### Apology



IN THE MORNING when shades of pink and orange made up the sky, Riven stood face-to-face with her worst enemy on the castle rooftop where she'd first fought Alistair. This time, she wouldn't be made a fool.

Her Other's cheeks were tear-stained. "We don't have to do this. We don't have to fight. You don't need to prove yourself to me, of all people."

Riven's nostrils flared. "Don't talk. Let's end this right now."

The two raised their swords together, then lowered into their stances.

"Three..." they said.

"Two..."

"One!"

The steel against steel sent metallic melodies into the sky. Riven's imposter's sword was unrelenting—but so was Riven's. They moved as if dancing to a lively waltz, each step precise, graceful, and spirited. With each successful hit, Riven's confidence grew. She was going to win this if it was the last thing she did.

There was a brief moment when her Other's leg was completely unguarded. Riven took the opportunity to kick it as hard as she could. Her Other shrieked and buckled over. While she was down, Riven used her sword to slip her Other's out of her hand. It made a soft clank as it hit the ground.

"I hate you," her Other choked. "You're worthless."

Riven's eyes widened.

"It hurts to be on the receiving end of such hate, doesn't it? Are you happy now? Happy that I hate you? You put all of this on yourself. I never wanted to be your enemy."

"You must be lying," Riven counted, growing increasingly unsure of her own words. "You've been against me since I met you."

"I wanted us to rule together!" She pounded the ground with her hand, frustrated. "I didn't know the woods would send you away. I wanted you to stay. I have only ever wanted to be your friend."

Riven couldn't believe her ears. Could what her Other was saying possibly be true? As Riven thought back to every encounter she had with her Other, she realized there'd never been malice in any of her actions. For the first time, Riven saw her Other for who she truly was—an expression of her own deepest secrets and fears, bringing light to the darkness in her heart of hearts. At the same time, she was the hope Riven had for herself that she could one day extend the love that she had for her brother to herself.

"All this time, I've only been putting you, putting myself down," Riven marveled. She cried as she gingerly made her way over to her Other.

"Stop! What are you doing?" her Other gasped. "What are you—"

Riven knelt and wrapped her arms tightly around her.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Her Other sobbed and hugged her hard, burying her head into her chest.

“I’m so sorry.” Suddenly, Riven felt incredibly warm. From her fingertips to her toes to the top of her head, she felt embraced by a profound healing. Wind from nowhere whipped around her and her Other, and their skin began to glow as they rose into the air.

“I want to be your friend,” Riven told her Other, told herself.

Her Other gave a beautiful smile. “I’ve waited my whole life to hear you say that.”

Riven closed her eyes. She’d never felt so out of control and yet perfectly safe. All the pain she’d felt in her chest was replaced with an intense, thorough peace. And she felt love—for herself.

A moment later, her Other vanished. Shimmering, black wings sprouted from Riven’s back. Pumping them powerfully, she soared high into the air. She bent, twisted, and dove all on pure instinct. The cool wind whipped through her hair and her new feathers. The freedom was a feeling she’d never known before. She moved in front of the rising sun, her frame dramatically backlit by its soft glow.

Below, her guards appeared and watched in stunned awe, Alistair with them. Their princess had wings. King Castor stood beside them, smiling with pride. It was almost as if he knew she’d turn out this way. The drink had only knocked him out for the night, and once he woke up, he told the guards that Riven hadn’t harmed him. The charges placed on her were dropped.

*My love makes me strong,* Riven mused as she continued to fly. *I don’t need a crown.*

When she descended, her brother hugged her. “I’m so proud of you,” he said. More importantly, Riven was proud of herself.

Sarahjoy Ndoria

*I am set free by my love, she told herself. And I am whole with all my pieces.*

END