

A SEVERED KINGDOM

IN
STARFIRE
AND
SMOKE



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A Severed Kingdom

Book I: In Ice and Blood

Book II: In Starfire and Smoke

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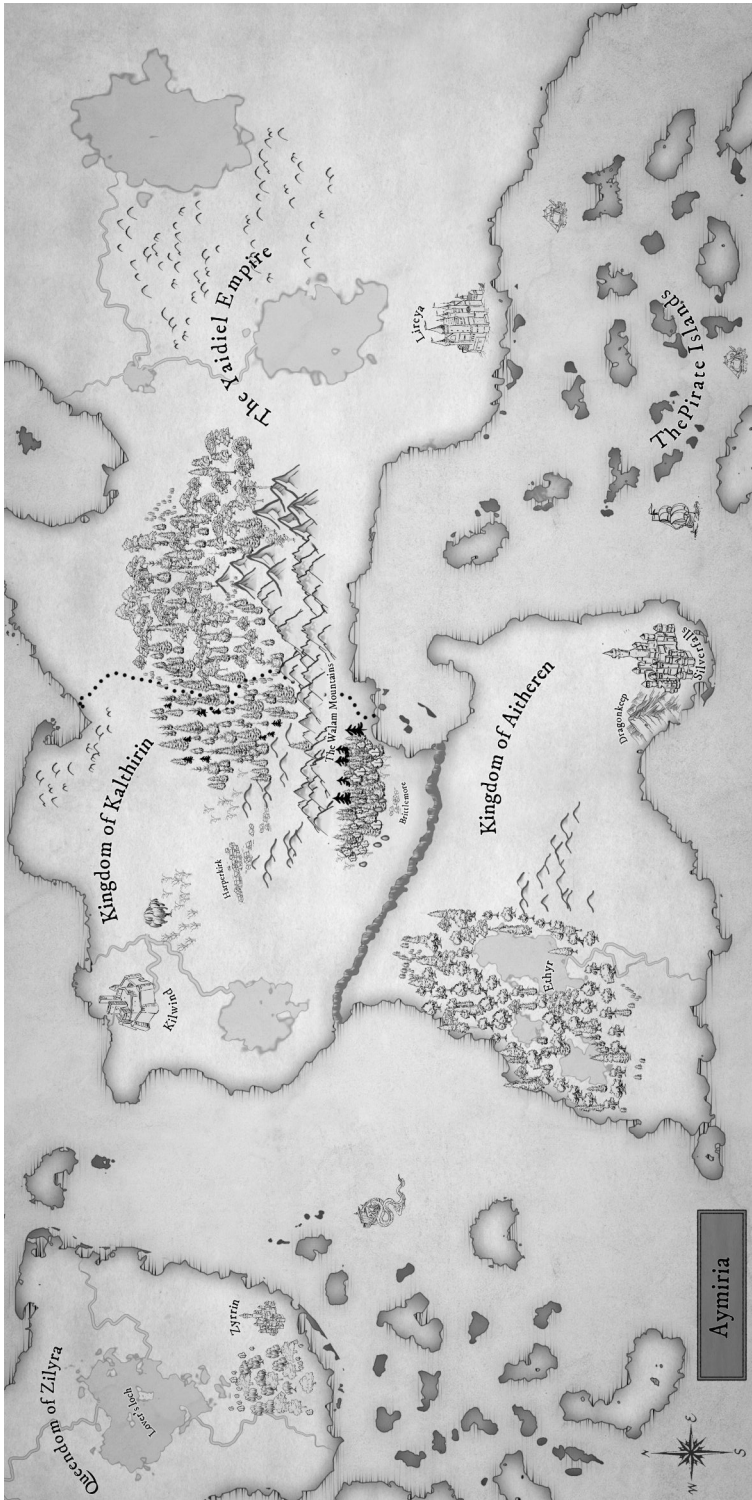
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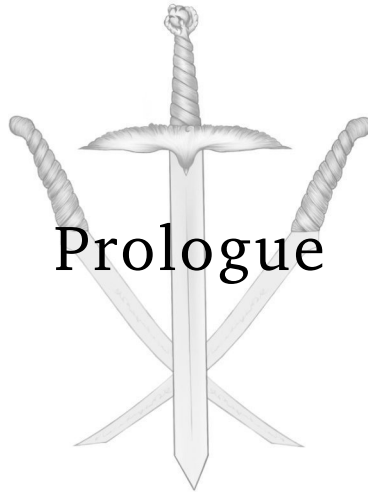
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*To all of you who's struggled to fit in,
Embrace yourselves and dream big*

This book contains violence and homophobia.





Prologue

The city unfolded out of thick, grey smog. The harbor was empty and desolate, not a ship in sight. No people either, no one prepared for a morning spent fishing, for market day or an early morning at work. It was as if the city had died, a ghost town.

Skye watched from the prow, trying not to shiver at the sight of her old home, the city she'd grown up in. She'd ducked guards in that one alley that somehow seemed brighter than everything else, she'd snuck over those rooftops on the other side of the harbor, valuable information in hand. And every time she'd left Deep-tide behind, fear had laid heavy in her bloodstream. Kilwind, a city of darkness and stench. Of ashlings on the hunt and the most perilous place in the world for anyone with magic in their veins, and Skye had still found her way back here.

At least Aquila was with her, would stay with her until it was time to return to Silverfalls. The city that

now occupied her dreams. Her future was there, wandering down beautiful, clean streets and passing smiling faces. Strolling over bridges that crossed the glittering silver rivers. With Aquila, her hand twined with Skye's. The sun shining down upon them from a blue sky.

"How are you doing?"

Skye startled at the sound of Aquila's voice, so sudden it was as if she'd summoned her by thinking of her. Her feet so silent on the deck she could just as well have popped into existence for the sake of it. And Skye had been too lost in thought to hear or sense her.

"Better now that you're here," Skye said somewhat smoothly, almost managing to hide her sudden fright. Would have if Aquila wasn't the one standing opposite her. Aquila cocked her head to the side, a small, knowing smile on her lips. Those captivating emerald and honey brown eyes studying her carefully, reading her like words on a page.

"Did I scare you?"

"Never," Skye answered, turning back towards the city and the darkness that seeped out of it. Aquila wrapped her arms around Skye's waist, resting her chin on Skye's shoulder.

"But you are nervous," Aquila whispered, her breath hot against Skye's neck, a stark difference from the frigid winter air. Aquila's hands found their way inside Skye's jacket pockets, fingers twining.

"Aren't you?"

"As hell," Aquila admitted. "I can't believe we're back here."

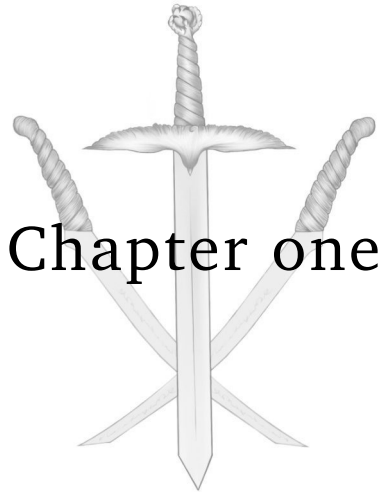
"Exactly where we didn't want to be."

“So true,” Aquila sighed, “at least we’re together.” She pressed a kiss to Skye’s cheek, lips still warm against Skye’s wind-nipped skin.

“At least there’s that,” Skye agreed, not even with the rotten city of Kilwind as her view could she feel bad when Aquila held her.

“And who knows, this could all be over soon. We might be back home in a month.” It was clear Aquila was trying to sound optimistic, voice light and airy.

“I hope so.” Skye really did, so much her heart and soul ached. She leaned into Aquila, stealing some of her warmth, savoring it and the magic that heated her. Everything would be fine.



Chapter one

It wasn't over in a month, nor in two. Winter had come and gone, melted into spring and Skye had started hoping for a return to Silverfalls at the beginning of summer. They didn't. The stifling and rotten summer heat had slammed into Kilwind with a vengeance and Skye was still stuck in the city she despised.

The lock turned in the door and Skye looked up from where she'd been leant over the desk for the last few hours, her body stiff and aching, to see Aquila enter.

"Hello, love," Aquila said softly as she closed the door behind her and hung up her soaking cloak on the peg by the mirror. She brought with her the frowzy smell of Kalthirian rain, the cloak dripping on the floor.

Skye's heart fluttered long before the smile touched Aquila's lips, it did the moment she sensed her walking down the hallway, but it was nothing

compared to the swell of love and relief that coursed through Skye when it finally did. Her heart skipping a beat.

“Hi, how was your day?” Skye asked as she crossed the room, took her in her arms and kissed her. She didn’t care that she was dripping wet, that the sour smell of Kilwind rain clung to her skin and hair. A spark shot through Skye when lips touched lips. It was so sweetly casual, an ordinary greeting yet every kiss felt as new as that first one back in Deep-tide all those months ago. Like something was breathed to life within her. In those moments, when they were intimately connected, no matter how long or short they were, everything was perfectly right with the world. No crushing responsibilities weighed on their shoulders, no trauma chafed on their souls and no home sickness tore at their beings.

“You know, the usual, cursing and yelling, calling us demons and monsters. Followed by some more cursing.” Aquila shrugged, defeated. Her eyes were downcast, a slight gleam of annoyance simmering beneath the surface. “I just hope this actually makes a difference.”

“I’m sure it will,” Skye traced Aquila’s cheek with gentle fingers, comforting. Aquila’s breath hitched, as she leaned into Skye’s touch. “We’ve only been at this for six months. Real change should take time.”

“I know,” Aquila sighed, her brows knitting in frustration. “I just wish it didn’t.”

Skye said nothing, just pushed a stray lock of black hair behind Aquila’s ear. Her hair was soft as silk between her fingers. A reassuring smile touched her

lips.

“Enough about my depressing day,” Aquila muttered, shaking her head as if trying to forget. “Did you find anything?”

Skye shook her head, shoulders slumping. “Nothing, not even a clue to where that bastard took them. Finley always was meticulous, but I guess I thought he’d left something behind at least.”

“I’m sorry,” Aquila whispered, voice cracking.

“The chances of them being alive at all are so ridiculously small, but I just want to give their parents some type of closure.”

“It’s not your fault, you know that right?”

“I didn’t say that,” Skye muttered.

“You didn’t have to. You tensed, right here.” Aquila gently touched her thumb on the spot right between Skye’s eyebrows. She pressed down, gently at first, then with a bit more pressure, sliding her thumb across Skye’s eyebrow. Skye exhaled heavily, a tingling wave of relaxation bursting through her body. She melted into her touch.

“Of course you did.” The flicker of annoyance from a few short moments ago vanquished. As if Aquila had blown out a flickering candle flame.

Aquila grinned, left side of her lips rising further into a cocky tilt, eyes glittering. From that look alone Skye knew Aquila was entirely aware of what she had just done, erasing mountains of tension from Skye’s shoulder with nothing but a simple touch. Skye rolled her eyes fondly, smiling too. For a few lovely moments, Skye wasn’t hundreds of kilometers away from the place they both wanted to call home. It was

right there in front of her. An insufferable, but so damned lovable, look on her face. This was her home. Aquila was her home.

Skye cleared her throat, distracting herself, suddenly remembering.

“A letter arrived from the Queens today.”

“Oh, thank the Gods,” Aquila exclaimed, relief clear on her face. Her shoulders relaxed. They hadn’t heard anything from them in nearly two months, which wasn’t that unexpected but still frustrating. The wind whispering didn’t work in Kalthirin, and that didn’t seem to be changing anytime soon, all messages ended up lost as they crossed the border. Not many mail carriers were that willing to cross the border either, even with the temporary crossing that had been erected over the rift, resulting in long waits for the ones who dared to return. Even worse if they missed them.

“Have you read it yet?”

“I waited for you,” Skye said, hand sliding into Aquila’s and pulling her along to where the dusty old pillows lay before the fireplace. Skye reached behind her, and grabbed the letter from the small, rounded coffee table. Their names were scrawled in shining black ink on the cream-colored envelope.

“Can you read it for me?” Aquila whispered, with her eyes downcast. “Even bad news is easier to handle falling of your lips.”

Aquila’s fingers trailed expert lines down Skye’s bare arm, soft and a little teasing. Lips slightly parted, just waiting to be kissed. Skye cleared her throat, again.

“Sure,” Skye said, her voice choked and her cheeks



The war was over, or so they said. The battlefield had gone quiet, left desolate as a marker of grief. The smell of smoke and death was long gone, but ghostly whispers still clung to the wind.

But for Skye and Aquila, the fight truly never ended. Far from home and behind locked doors, they tirelessly struggled for freedom and lasting peace.

When their daily routines are shattered by a clue, leading them to a horrifying discovery, they are thrust back into the unforgiving darkness of Kalthirin, with all its danger still lurking around every corner and in deep shadows. Will the girls, along with their friends, stop tyranny once more?



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