



I woke with sand beneath my cheek, blood on my sleeve, and no memory of how I had gotten there. I spat my sand-filled saliva onto the baking grains. The first thing I noticed was that my sword was gone. The second was that I was in the middle of the Scalds. All I knew was that someone had drugged me, and I had an idea of exactly who it was.

I pushed myself up, my knees threatening to buckle. After all my years of training, you would think standing after being drugged would be easy. Think again.

I pulled my dagger from my boot and tied my chestnut-brown hair into a braid. If someone had left me here without my sword, they had made one mistake. I still had a weapon.

I walked until I reached a small village at the edge of the Scalds. Stalls lined the dusty streets, displaying colorful rugs, perfumes, fruit, and shoes. I bought a mango from a sweet old woman. The juicy fruit soothed my scratchy tongue, and for a moment, I felt relief.

Then I heard a faint cry. I raced through the streets, letting my instincts lead me to a dark alley. A golden-blond boy with ocean-blue eyes had a dagger pressed to his neck.

“Boys, boys,” he said. “No need to get hasty. I’m sure we can work out the stolen cinnamon rolls. No need to kill the innocent, huh?”

I laughed. The other men tightened their grip. “Whoa-whoa, guys, what do you want? I have gol—” I moved before he could finish. A moment later, the alley was silent.



He stared at me. “You’re—you—”

“Yes, I am Princess Elowen. But you can call me Wren.”

“Wren.” He smirked. “Well, Wren, I’m Rowan. And you, Princess, just earned yourself an associate.”

“An associate?”

“A traveling companion. A guide. A rescuer, should you find yourself in another unfortunate situation.”

“You were the one who needed rescuing.”

“Details.”

“And what makes you think I need a traveling companion?”

He pointed toward the Scalds. “A princess wandering through the Scalds alone? I’d say you need all the help you can get.”

“I’ve survived this long.”

“Clearly.” He glanced at my dagger. “But you did save me from being killed over cinnamon rolls, so I suppose I owe you one.”



“You stole cinnamon rolls?”

“I prefer to think of it as borrowing.”

I laughed. “Fine. You can come.”

“Excellent decision, Princess.”

“Call me Wren.”

“Yes, Princess.” I sighed. This was going to be a long journey.



The sun was setting over the Scalds as I made camp. Rowan hummed behind me.

“Will you stop?”

“Stop what?”

“That indocent humming.”

He gasped and placed a hand over his heart. “You wound me, Wren. You know, for a Princess, you do not have very good manners.”

“For a thief, you’re remarkably hard to get rid of.”



He smirked. “Details.” I shook my head, but a small smile tugged at my lips. I didn’t know it then, but that evening would become one of the memories I wished I could return to.



Later, beneath the stars, Rowan turned toward me. “Do you want to be queen?”

“Of course. It would be my duty.”

“But do you want it?” His question stumped me. I was the firstborn, even if only by a few minutes. I had always been told I would be queen. I had trained for it, studied for it, prepared for it. Being queen was never presented as a choice.

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“Goodnight, Princess.”

“Goodnight, Thief.” But his question stayed with me.



We traveled for days through the Scalds, the Hollow, and the Drift. The forest was cool and refreshing before our two-day journey across the harsh waters.



Afeld

I sighed, not knowing what would meet me when I arrived home. My sister had always been the perfect princess. I had always been the warrior.

Then I remembered the night before I woke in the Scalds.



“Father?” My voice was quiet through the halls, thick with tears I refused to let fall.

Evangeline met me in the hallway. Her raven-black hair was nothing like my brown, and her blue eyes were nothing like my greenish-gray ones. But it was the dagger in her hand that frightened me. Its blade was stained red.

“Eva? What have you done?”

Her eyes were cold. “Something you never could have done, Wren. If you want anything in this world, you have to go and get it. Take what you want and never look back.” My heart pounded. “Our father was only holding us back.”



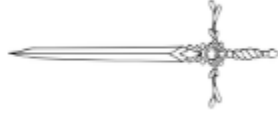
I knew facing her would be hard, but I never expected her to commit murder. Rowan sat beside me and pulled me into his arms.

“When we get you back to Elaris, I won’t leave until I know you’re safe.”



“Thanks, Thief. I owe you one.”

“Can I get that in writing? The Princess owes me!” He shouted it toward the water, and I laughed. Laughing with him was one of the most beautiful moments I’d had in a long time.



We docked at the royal harbor. Elaris was vast and lush, exactly as I remembered it.

“Ready, Wren?” Rowan asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

In the castle courtyard, my sister waited. “You should’ve stayed in the Scalds when you had the chance, Wren.”

“And you should know killing our father was treason, *Eva*.”

“Says the princess who brought a *thief* home.”

I stood in front of him. “He stays out of this.”

Evangeline laughed and raised her hands. A shimmering dome formed around me, separating me from Rowan.



“Wren! Ellowen!”

I pressed my hand against the barrier. “Rowan, remember me, okay?”

“Wren—”

I gave him a small smile. “And remember, I owe you.”

I turned to my sister. That hungry look was still in her eyes. I dropped my dagger.

“What are you doing? Fight me, sister.”

“I will not fight you. I will not kill you.” I looked into her eyes. “Can you say the same?”

Her smile disappeared. The dagger flew. Blood spread. Everything went dark.



I know now that most would say this was the worst week of my life. Honestly? I think it might have been the best.

I saw the Scalds beneath a sky full of stars. I tasted the sweetest mango I'd ever had. I watched the sun disappear beneath the horizon, and I laughed with a thief who became one of the most important people I'd ever met.



Afeld

I hope Rowan made it back safely. I hope he remembers me. I hope Eva learns how to be a good, kind ruler. But I doubt it. Still, one can hope.

Being a warrior taught me something I never learned in the castle: you never truly know someone's story. I didn't know Rowan's. Maybe he stole those cinnamon rolls because he was hungry.

And I don't know where Eva lost her sense of morality. But I love her. She is my sister. My corrupt, power-hungry, terrible sister. And I suppose I'll always love her.

I spent my entire journey trying to get home. Now I understand that the castle was never what I was searching for.

It was the mango. The stars. The laughter. The people. The memories.

Maybe life was never meant to be measured by where we end up. Maybe it is measured by what we carry with us along the way.



One Year Later

It has been one year since I watched Princess Evangeline kill Wren. I still think about the boat. The Scalds. The Hollow. The way she made me promise not to forget her.



I haven't.

The kingdom has changed. Eva has commanded wars against countless innocent kingdoms, becoming the queen she always wanted to be. Just not the queen Wren would have been.

I wish Wren were still here. We could have left together. I loathe Eva for killing her when Wren wouldn't even raise her dagger against her. I hate that she made me watch helplessly.

Wren would have wanted me to move on, but I couldn't. Not when our time together had become some of the most precious memories I had.

I fled to Aurelia because I couldn't live in the kingdom where Wren was killed. People say the journey is better than the destination. Maybe anyone could say that. But not everyone knew Wren. And knowing her? That was the best week of my life.