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THE LIGHTLARK SAGA
BOOK 3



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HOME

Isla Crown watched the man she loved disappear as the world fell away.

The other man she loved gripped her arm with the desperate hope of holding onto a dream before waking. Her stomach dropped; her ears rang—

Clashing swords and howling dreks turned to silence.

“You’re home,” Grim said, his voice breaking in relief; and then she was ensnared in the familiar place against his chest, her cheek below his heart. It was instinct to breathe him in, to hold him close.

Home. Something in her marrow unfurled.

Another part recoiled.

She tore herself away. Looked down. Her armor and hands were covered in blood. Her lips tasted of salt—sweat and tears from the battle.

She considered everything she had done . . . everything she was . . .

She wanted to run. She wanted to tear down these hallways the same way she had the first day they met, she wanted to portal back to Lightlark, back into Oro’s arms—

But she was here for a reason. Isla would kill either Oro or Grim, according to the oracle. It was fated. Now, knowing what she had done in the past, all the people she had killed . . . she didn’t trust herself not to hurt the Sunling king.

Grim approached her slowly, tentatively. His voice was gentle. “Heart.” He offered his hand again, his knuckles raw and caked in what had to be both his and Oro’s blood.



Heart. Hers was split in half. One part wanted him more than anything—*remembered*. Another wanted to stab him through the chest again.

She took his hand.

Grim's wide shoulders melted in relief until she said, "Take me there."

He knew what she meant. As much as she wanted to hate him, as much as she wished her hatred of him would stick, take root in her bones and overgrow like a neglected garden, he knew her. *He really knew her.* "Isla—"

"Take. Me. There." Her voice was a guttural rasp. She could have portaled herself with her device or with his power, but the idea of using any scrap of ability after seeing what she had done with it made her want to retch. Grim studied her for a moment longer before curling his fingers around hers, and then the room disappeared. Her stomach flipped again.

Ash stuck to every surface of the landscape, a layer of poisoned snow. Houses lay in charred piles like pyre wood. Nothing stood tall anymore. The village had been brought to its knees.

Her cry cut through the silence like a scythe. Bodies big and small curled against the ground and hardened into rubble. Some were indefinable shapes against the stone.

You did this, a voice in her mind said. *Monster.*

No. She hadn't meant to, she—

Memories flitted beneath her eyelashes. She saw herself visiting this site, mourning the same action in the past. It hurt. It hurt so much; she was a wound that refused to scab. She wanted to bleed. She *deserved* to bleed. Still, her pain meant nothing—these people were dead because of her.

Because of her power.

She turned to Grim, eyes burning. "You should imprison me. I—I'm a criminal. I'm worse than any thief or murderer, I—" Grim caught her as she began to collapse.



"This was not intentional," he said, steadying her shoulders.

She choked on her breath. "Does intention matter when hundreds of people are dead?"

His eyes were sad. "It does."

She tore herself away from him. "You would say that. Of course, you would say that."

Tears caught in the back of her throat as she thought back to the battle on Lightlark, blood everywhere, dreks shredding the sky with their talons. *Ciel dying, Avel cradling her twin's body.* "They didn't have to die." A sob scraped against her ribs. "Why, Grim? Why did you have to attack?"

"You know why." His words were quiet. He stepped closer, but she walked back, refusing to bridge the gap between them.

She did know. She could almost see it now, the action that had caused all of this death—the uncontrollable power she had unleashed to save Grim, killing her in the process.

He had brought her back, by binding his life to hers, but it was just a temporary solution. Only Lightlark's portal to another world with infinite power offered a permanent one.

"You could have told me. We could have talked about it. We could have told Oro—"

"Oro will die if we use the portal. He wouldn't have agreed to it." He was quiet for a moment. Then, "*You* wouldn't have agreed to it."

Of course, she wouldn't have. Lightlark's portal was built into the island's foundation. Using it would mean the death of Lightlark and Oro, who was bound to it as king.

She shook her head, wincing at the death around her. "You really would have let Lightlark fall? You would have doomed the rest of the realms while leading yours into a world we know nothing about? For one woman?" It didn't make sense.

Grim frowned. "Not for one woman," he spat, like the words insulted him. He stepped toward her. "For my wife."



Wife. The word unlocked a thousand memories of them, a year before the Centennial. Fighting. Falling in love. Marrying. All moments she hadn't remembered, up until recently. She squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. "You know what I mean. *One life* to risk thousands. That is *criminal*. Selfish. Monstrous."

Isla could feel Grim getting closer. When she opened her eyes, he was right in front of her. "Heart," he said steadily. The spikes on his shoulders made him look like a demon. His blood-slicked armor glimmered in the moonlight. "If waging a war for one woman is a crime, then please do consider me a criminal." Closer. "If killing thousands to keep you alive is wrong, then consider me a villain." She now had to tilt her head to see him clearly. He leaned down. His breath was hot against her mouth. "If loving you this much is my downfall . . . then consider me already on my knees."

Her voice shook. "That's disgusting. You—you're a monster." She said the words and knew it made her a hypocrite. The ground they stood on now, the hundreds of deaths around them . . . she had done it *for him*. To save him.

We are monsters, Hearteater, Grim had said to her, back during the Centennial. He had been right.

But that didn't mean she couldn't change.

Grim had promised to end the battle, if she returned with him. Too many lives had already been lost. Lightlark had been *losing*. "Call back all your warriors and dreks. Immediately."

"It's already done." In his hand, the sword that controlled the winged beasts appeared. "It's over."

It was the same sword they had searched for, in the past. The one she herself had unlocked for him to use.

This was all her fault.

The dreks had killed so many. She had led her friends into bloodshed. Her own husband's forces had cut them down.



The survivors must think her a traitor. They must think she had been lying to them this entire time. That fact *killed* her, but her feelings didn't matter if going with Grim guaranteed their safety. "Command all the dreks to remain underground and put the sword back in the thief's lair. Swear you will never use it again."

She expected Grim to put up more of a fight, but the words fell easily from his mouth: "I swear it."

She pushed her luck. "Swear you won't try to use the portal again."

This time, he said nothing.

"*Swear it.*"

"If I do, you will die here," Grim said. "We all will."

Grim's life was tied to all of his subjects'. Now, all their fates were tied to hers. She looked around, at the bodies. The lives she had already taken. "You shouldn't have bound yourself to me." She closed her eyes again and tears swept down her face.

Grim's thumb traced her jawline, smearing the tears away. "I would do it again," he said, his voice a deep rasp against her ear. "I would do it a thousand times over, heart; you should know that. I will choose you over the world every single time."

Which meant it was up to her to save it.



THRONE

Isla could have locked herself in her room for months, she could have drowned in regret and grief. She had in the past, the first time she discovered what she had done.

But her tears wouldn't keep Grim from using the portal on Lightlark. They wouldn't help her understand the oracle's deadly prophecy. They wouldn't ensure her death didn't doom thousands. Only action would.

So she buried her feelings down as deep as they would go and decided the only way to ensure Grim didn't plan behind her back again was to be part of every meeting. Every event. Play the part of his wife, because it would gain her access.

Starting with the burial ceremony, the next morning, Grim had given her his room—*their* room—and she woke at dawn. Lynx had nearly torn apart Grim's stables in the moments they had been parted, and now he watched her from the corner of the room—his green eyes simmering with worry—as she braided her hair into a crown, in the Nightshade style.

She chose her dress carefully. Here, surrounded by enemies, her image would matter.

That was why, when she was ready, she reached for her golden rose necklace with shaking fingers. It was the only thing she had left of Oro, other than her memories. Tears slipping down her face, she unclipped it and slid it into her pocket.

In the mirror, she hardly recognized herself. The Wildling green and red were almost gone—replaced by a black dress with the faintest

of roses beaded into the bodice. She looked like a Nightshade's devoted wife.

It was a lie, she thought, as she portaled into Grim's store of weaponry. That was where she found their stock of the healing elixir, the one that the Wildlings had been making for battle. Much of it had already been used, but she took the majority of what was left, drew her puddle of stars, and sent them through to Lightlark's infirmary.

It was a risk, but hundreds of injured warriors would die without the healing properties. It was the least she could do to help, after bringing them into battle. Nightshade had endless fields of nightbane, the flower the elixir was made from. They wouldn't miss it.

She closed the portal and was back in her room just before Grim knocked.

"You don't have to go," he said, studying her swollen eyes. He lifted a hand as if to wipe a tear from her jaw; but then, seeing the expression on her face, seemed to think better of it.

Her voice was cold. "I know. I'm going anyway."

On Nightshade, bodies were buried. Warriors were put to rest on a sacred stretch of land overlooking the coast, beneath mounds of ash.

The air smelled of flesh and salt. It blew her hair back, revealing the black pins she'd added. They were tipped in black diamonds to complement her cape. The necklace Grim had given her, with the large glimmering black diamond, was now purposefully visible against her throat.

Some gasped at it. She heard whispers about the stone around her neck. It was a symbol of their marriage. Perhaps they hadn't believed their union was real until they saw the necklace.

It didn't seem to make a difference to the Nightshade families who eyed her with hatred as she walked through the rows of the graveyard, toward the newest mounds. She couldn't blame them.

"Traitor. You don't belong here," she heard someone mutter. They were right. She belonged on Lightlark, mourning the deaths of the





people who fought alongside her. Now, she pretended to honor the same warriors that had cut them down. She felt disgust, and hatred, and anger alongside families that cried out in grief.

Also, guilt.

Flashes of ash and bone had filled her dreams. Lynx had woken her that morning with a nudge of his head. The sheets had been on the floor. There were scratches down her arms, as if she had clawed herself. Her ribs still hurt from her racking sobs.

Now she buried those emotions. This was not the time to feel anything. Not when that same ruinous power prickled just beneath her skin, waiting to be unleashed.

As Grim spoke in remembrance of the dead, she clung to every word, searching for indication of a veiled plan or threat against Lightlark. All he offered were condolences. A line of warriors stood behind them, their heads bowed, and swords dug firmly into the dirt. When Grim's speech was over he waved his hand, and some of the ash that coated the graves rose toward the sky.

"My court will meet in the throne room tonight to discuss our plans," Grim told her, after meeting with every family.

She kept a vise around her emotions, lest he wonder why he'd piqued her interest. "Is there a place for me?" She studied his face, scanning for any irritation at her request.

She found none. "There is always a place for you," he said. "I made your throne myself."

He had: She remembered it now. Grim had crafted it with his own shadows.

Hours later, she walked toward that throne like a ghost. Memories blurred, past and present bleeding together until they were one.

She remembered the outrage when Grim had announced her as his wife to his court—as his equal—right before they left for the Centennial. Grim had made it clear that anyone who didn't respect her didn't



have a home on Nightshade, and so the dissent was not erased, not pulled out by the root and banished, but permitted to grow like a weed in secret.

This room . . . these thrones . . . She recognized these faces that stared her down, the space filled to the brim with high-ranking soldiers and nobles.

They bowed for her because Grim would have gutted them if they didn't. Only he remained standing. He watched her walk toward him with an admiration typically reserved for the gods. But there were no gods here.

"Your ruler has returned."

No one dared protest.

A woman watched from the corner of the room, one palm resting at the intersection of the curved swords that formed an "X" on her chest. Isla felt a vestige of recognition from her past. It was Grim's general, Astria. Her long black hair was tied back into a single braid. Her high, pale cheekbones made her face seem even more severe.

Her dark eyes slid back to Isla's, after sweeping across the room for any threats against Grim; and they narrowed, as if spotting the greatest threat of all. From the first moment they had been acquainted, Isla had known that Grim's general didn't dislike her . . . she just didn't trust her.

Astria would be a problem. Being here, in her enemy's land, would mean lying to Grim. Isla would need to hide her true purpose as she sought to identify her options. Grim's sense of reason was clouded by his feelings for her, but his general would see things clearly.

Isla reached the end of the aisle, and Grim took her hand. He helped her onto her throne.

Shadows moved curiously beneath her skin like extensions of Grim himself, but she didn't dare flinch as the crowd rose to their feet.

Isla had the sudden urge to unleash her power. She was surrounded by enemies. Some of these faces she recognized not from the past, but from the battlefield.

For Oro, she would sit among them. She would learn their plans. And, if they put him and Lightlark at risk, she would stop them.

“What now?” A voice dared break the silence. Isla knew of only one soldier foolish enough to speak so boldly. She found the source immediately, a hulking man who was difficult to miss. He wore armor shaped for his great stature. His hair was a single long patch down the center of his head. No one dared stand too close to him, even with his hands covered. It seemed no one wanted to be caught touching him. He was a powerful Nightshade who could control a person by touching them, an ability in their realm that had become rare over the centuries. Grim didn’t acknowledge the man, who continued talking as though he had a death wish.

“We were winning. Don’t think we don’t know why we retreated.” He stared pointedly at her, gaze fixating on the stone resting between her collarbones. “That necklace. It is an abomination for—”

“Tyman.” Grim’s voice was as cold and cutting as the shadows that stilled beneath her. No one dared move a muscle. “My father was known for taking the tongues of his soldiers, you’ll remember. Following orders doesn’t require speaking, isn’t that what he used to say?” He frowned. “It’s a wonder he let you keep yours. Perhaps that needs to be rectified.”

To his credit, Tyman stood tall, though his metal-encased fingers clashed together in anger. He was dangerous. But not to Grim. Grim’s power was as undeniable as the tide. The force of him was felt in the room. He could kill every one of them without leaving his throne, and they all knew it.

“Hundreds were lost,” Tyman continued, his voice shaking in fury. “Over a woman, over—”



Grim raised his hand, and Tynan froze. The Nightshade made a gurgling sound. “That *woman* is my wife,” Grim said clearly. “And your ruler. You serve her.” He released his hold, and Tynan staggered forward. “Now bow.”

“Ruler, I—”

“I said bow.”

Isla watched the man, his eyes flashing with hatred, as he sank to his knees.

“Lower.”

The man placed his hands on the floor, gauntlet clashing against the stone.

“Lower.”

Tynan’s shoulders shook with undeniable rage as he pressed his forehead to the floor.

“Now,” Grim said, leaning back in his chair. His voice turned almost casual. “We might have retreated . . . but we did not lose Lightlark.”

Isla stilled.

She turned her head very slowly to face Grim. He didn’t even look at her. Panic spilled like poison through her chest. “Quite the contrary,” he continued. “We have reclaimed our greatest chance at overtaking the island. Three rulers founded Lightlark, including my ancestor.” Only then did he turn to her. “And hers.”

Isla wasn’t breathing.

“The king of Lightlark is in love with her,” Grim said, as if it were a joke. As if she had been a spy sent in to make Oro, King of Lightlark, fall in love with her to gain access to his power. The court laughed. The soldiers began to murmur. Her rage turned into a wildfire. Isla’s hands gripped the side of the throne, the shadows’ sharp edges digging into her palms, nearly drawing blood. She wanted to silence them all. She wanted to drown them with the power that

surged like a rogue wave within her. She wanted to strangle Grim. Especially as he said, smirking, “Now we have everything we need to take Lightlark.”

Isla watched every soldier and member of Grim’s court file out of the room, her blood boiling to such a degree, it was a wonder she didn’t catch fire. Finally, the doors closed behind the last of them.

Her blade was at his throat in an instant. She pinned him to his throne. Her words shook with anger and betrayal. “You manipulative, villainous—”

“As much as I would love to hear the end of that sentence,” Grim said, seeming unconcerned by the blade beneath his chin, “do save your barbs for a different time, when you actually have reason to hate me.”

She bared her teeth. Everything he had just said—

“I’m not planning on invading Lightlark, heart.”

She blinked, incredulous. “You *just said*—”

“I know what I said. I told them what they wanted to hear, to buy some time.” He searched her eyes. “The portal would have saved you . . . and it would have also saved my people.”

She lowered her blade the slightest bit. That, she hadn’t expected. “Saved them from what?” The dreks were their biggest threat in the past, but they were gone. Grim had banished them below, and hidden the sword again, just as she had asked.

“Storms,” he said simply. “The deadliest you can imagine.”

It was the first she was hearing of this. And she had explored Nightshade for a year before the Centennial.

He must have sensed her confusion, because he said, “They used to happen every few centuries, on and off, then decades, then every few years. They are unpredictable, and every one has gotten worse. Hundreds die during the storm season.”

Hundreds? She frowned, and he nodded.



"It's not just the weather. They bring sickness. Creatures. Entire villages have been razed by beasts in the night. The tempests are deadlier than the curses, even. The dreks appeared during one of them, and never left."

"How do you know there will be a storm season?"

"There are signs," he said. "The tides change. Certain animals burrow themselves. It lasts about three months. The whole winter this time, if I had to guess."

Isla swallowed. Hundreds of Nightshades were in danger, then.

Perhaps they were already doomed. Her own lifespan was uncertain . . . if she killed Grim to fulfill the prophecy, all of them would perish . . .

No. She refused to accept that fate. The oracle had made it seem like her future was etched in stone, but if there was a way around it, she would find it.

"I'll help you. I'll help you stop the storms."

He raised a brow at her. "You don't think I've tried?"

"You've never tried with me." They had worked together before. The memories of it blinded her for a moment. Her breath became unsteady. "Work with me. Buy us more time, enough for us to find another solution that isn't the portal."

Buy *her* enough time to change her fate.

He hesitated. Then, nodded.

She sighed, leaning back, only to realize she was still pinning him with her legs.

Grim's gaze slowly slid down her body, catching on the hem of her dress, riding high up her thigh. Her skin prickled with cold.

For a moment, she imagined his hand curling around her hip, dragging her forward against every inch of him. She imagined arching her back, pulling her dress over her head and—

It wasn't her imagination, she realized. It was a memory of something they had done, and her cheeks burned. Grim watched