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## ~SACRIFICE~

Reya Rivers lived in the woods, an unexplored area with dangers lurking at every twist and turn. Sandwiched between the kingdom of Eldoa and the Summerleaf Republic, it proved to be an effective boundary between the two rivals.

Her parents had been killed by a witch. Every night before she fell asleep, she saw the witch's cackling face. *I will find you someday*, the witch always promised just before Reya drifted off.

She could still see the yellow light eating away at their bodies, hear their screams as they were devoured by the hungry power. She could still see her parents reaching for her, like they thought she still had an illusion anyone could protect her—

She blinked. She would learn from her parents' mistakes. Every day, she looked at the hut her parents had built, serving as a reminder of what she had lost and how much learned.

She was thirteen now. Her flowing golden hair and fierce green eyes challenged anyone to approach her, most too awed, or too weak, to attempt it, but she always carried around a weapon.

Starting towards her hut, she heard footsteps. Reya frowned. These were no normal creatures— these were purposely intruding her territory.

She drew out two daggers, preparing for attack. As the stomps neared, her breath quickened, her pulse beating faster and faster. She stood in an attack position, ready to fight. Her eyes narrowed.

Human *soldiers*? She recognized the badge on their clothing— Eldoa. She scanned the rows of soldiers, and her eyes locked on one.

Brown hair, blue eyes. A firm, determined face, with the decorated uniform of a general. He didn't seem much older than her— about a year or so.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“General Ethan Woods,” he replied. “We're claiming this wilderness as our own, and are prepared to fight the Republic if needed.”

She barked a laugh, eyes flashing. “And I suppose you will claim my home?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Evening came. The soldiers set up their camps. Alone, she took out an amulet her mother had given her. Inside, a single shard of mirror with a note.

*Works only once. Calls upon the Eldoan Queen. Look in the mirror and say, “Queen, I call upon.”*

Reya did just that, and soon, a cloudy mist filled her reflection. When it cleared, she could see the queen's face staring back at her.

“Yes?” Queen Elene asked.

“I need help,” Reya gasped, words coming out rushed and frantic. “Your kingdom's soldiers have come to take my home... you can't let them— it's all I have left! My mother left me this to call upon you—”

The queen laughed long and slow. “Girl, I cannot help you.”

Reya stared at the shard. “You... *can't*?”

“Can't, and won't,” Elene replied. “For my own reasons.”

Reya was still in shock. “Mother said you would help—”

Elene laughed. “Your parents were fools. They deserved the witch's wrath.”

Reya stilled. “How did you know how they were killed?”

Queen Elene smiled as Reya watched in horror. Her face transformed into one Reya knew so well, the face that tormented her dreams.

The queen was the witch.

Elene left the mirror, leaving Reya in a stupor. No, this couldn't be happening— *she's the witch*—

A knock on the door. “May I come in?”

Reya snapped awake. “Slowly.”

The door opened, revealing General Woods. Reya glared at him.

He held his hands up. “Calm down. I'm not here to kill you.” He sat down on a chair by the fire. “I never asked your name.”

“Reya Rivers,” she said carefully.

“Look, I don't want to be your enemy. I heard you talking to someone— Queen Elene? Reya, I know what you're going through. I want to make a deal.”

Reya didn't trust him, but something in his tone made her look up. When their eyes met, something sparked between them. She saw sincerity, but most of all, she saw *understanding*.

“What deal?”

Days passed. Ethan visited every night, and Reya grew to trust him. He was much more than what she had assumed.

But time was running out. One morning, Reya woke up to find the queen at the camp. She was saying none were to disrupt her plans. Before Reya could do anything, she began reciting a spell, weaving magic, and a yellow portal formed. Through the swirls, she could see eyes, claws, teeth— and as the queen finished her words, they burst out.

Gasping, Reya backed away. Queen Elene tried to steady the flow of monsters, but one devoured her. The witch was gone, with how to stop the portal.

“Ethan— Ethan!” Reya called frantically. He had been with Elene, and now he was gone. Suddenly, through the dust, she saw him struggling towards her.

She ran to him, but his face was serious.

“To end the portal, one of us has to sacrifice,” he said. “It's the only way.”

“Why—”

“No.” His voice was firm, Reya crying as his meaning sank into her. “I'll go. I aided a witch, and now I pay the price.”

He kissed her, long, slow, devastating. Before she knew it, she was kissing him back. Time seemed to slow, and finally he pulled away.

Reya could only stand by as he rushed to the portal, and as soon as he touched it, a bright golden light shone. It blinded everyone, everything. For those few moments, Reya felt a sense of peace, tranquility— sealing the past, the portal, away.

When the light faded, all the monsters were gone. Reya stared at the sunrise, the sky turning a thousand different shades. She crumpled to the ground and wept, wept for sorrow of all lost, and wept for joy of everything yet to come. A future for all.

She stood, facing the horizon, gazing at the endless mountains and valleys and fields.

*Reya!* For a second, she thought she saw the spirit of Ethan, free.