A RIFT IN REALITY

For all the book girlies and their fictional boyfriends, may all your fantasies become reality.

Word Count: 3000 exactly

My heart is broken. Utterly and completely. Rereading my favorite romantasy series always leaves me emotionally devastated, which is why it has become one of my favorite winter break traditions. Every year, I spend the six days between Christmas and New Year's Eve huddled up like a hermit rereading the greatest fantasy trilogy of all time: *The Rift in the Roses*.

The weak winter sunlight is just starting to turn golden outside the window in my kitchen. It must be late afternoon on the… fifth day…? I know I finished the second book this morning in between cups of coffee and am now well into the third and final book, *The Rift in the Stars*. And my beloved Silas Nightbringer has just been killed.

As a high school English teacher, I understand *why* he must die. He is a secondary character, afterall, designed by the author with the sole intention of helping the main characters reach their objectives. His death is tragic, brought about by his friend's betrayal and is integral in the resolution of the main conflict. It is not, however, what he deserves.

The main debate among the Rifter fangirls is always "Alexi or Ryder?", but I've always found those two a bit cocky and suspiciously charming. My heart has and always will belong to Silas Nightbringer, the stoic sidekick with a tortured past and impeccable manners.

With a rush of power, Quagar disarms Silas, driving his Bryndian blade straight through his chest. I roar as I watch Silas, my blood brother, fall to his knees. Despite the blood now flowing from his chest like an undammed river, when Silas's eyes find mine across the throneroom, they are calm. He mouths the words, "Forgive me."

I can't hold back the sob, nor do I want to. I choke and gasp my way through the next several sentences, snot now freely flowing. A fat, salty tear lands on the final line of the chapter: *And Silas Nightbringer, Riftmaker, was no longer of this world.* I shut the book and wipe my face with the sleeve of my cardigan. I close my eyes and a few more cathartic tears slip down my cheeks. I take a deep breath. Then another. God it feels so good to cry like this…

"Uh miss… are you alright?"

My eyes fly open at the sound of a voice- a distinctly MALE voice- in my studio apartment. There is a man in my apartment! I can't get a good look at him because he is backlit by the kitchen window, a hulking silhouette.

I'm only stunned for a moment before I do what any sensible woman who lives alone would do when a strange man breaks in. I scramble to a standing position on top of my armchair and when he advances toward me, I hit him with my book using all the force I can muster.

Now, *The Rift in the Stars* is nearly 800 pages long. Any book lover can picture that and know that it is not an insignificant amount of book. Add in the fact that my copy is the limited edition hardcover and that I go rock climbing twice a week- and it is enough to knock my attacker out cold.

Oh my god I just knocked someone out. What do I do!? I have been pacing back and forth for five minutes now, trying to figure out what to do about the very large, very unconscious man laying face down on my rug. His body fills the entire floor between my armchair and my bed so each lap back and forth involves me stepping over the stranger's legs. I *should* call the police, I think, but something stops me.

His face is angled towards me, dark hair obscuring his eyes. I can tell right away that even unconscious, this man is attractive. And dangerous. And my god I bet his jawline could cut glass! He isn't wearing what I thought a burglar would wear, if anything it's giving medieval assassin. His pants seem to be made of dark leather and are tucked into knee high boots. Over a black tunic he has several belts strapped around him that look like they want to hold weapons but are now empty. Only a pair of black gloves is tucked into a place over his hip.

Something dark and jagged on his forearm catches my eye and I pause to get a closer look. It starts, or rather ends, directly in the palm of his right hand. The lines zig and zag out around his forearm, like a great darkness has split his skin open and is now seeping out. It seems familiar to me but I can't explain why.

Who is this man and how did he get in here? I know for a fact it is snowing outside, but there is not one single flake caught in his long, perfect lashes.

As I am leaning in for a second look at his tattoo, he begins to stir, letting out a deep moan. Shit! I spring away from him, and he pulls himself to his hands and knees,

rotating to a sitting position against my armchair. He looks up at me through that dark mop of hair and his eyes are two different colors. One blue, one almost black. Exactly like-

“Stars above, what did you hit me with?” He rubs his jaw, the whole left side of his face looking painfully red.

“Who are you!?” I demand, trying to look as threatening as one can while wearing reindeer pajamas. “How did you get into my apartment?”

At this, he seems to look around for the first time. He flies to his feet, head whipping around, frantically taking in the four walls of my cramped space. “Where… am I?” His gaze lands back on me and he takes a defensive position. “Who are you? Are you some enchantress working for the King? Where’s Alexi? Answers, please! Now!”

“What?” I stammer. Enchantress? The King? Did *I* get hit in the head? “I was sitting there, reading, and you just- just appeared! You’re the one who broke into my home! You owe *me* some answers!”

We stare at each other, the silence creeping like frost between us. He blinks at me, a war playing out on his handsome face. Finally he says, “My apologies, Lady.” He crosses one arm over his chest and dips his head. “I am Silas Nightbringer. A riftmaker for the kingdom of Brynndale. I don’t know how I got here, but-”

“Oh, be serious! You are not Silas Nightbringer.”

“Do you know of me, Lady?” His eyebrows knit together in confusion and when I look at him, really look at him, it all clicks into place. The eyes, the outfit. The Riftmaker’s mark tattooed on his right arm. But what really convinces me is the sincerity in his expression.

“Ok… go back. What is the last thing you remember?”

Darkness clouds his features. “We were in the throneroom. Alexi betrayed us- and the king- he was waiting for us. There was a battle… I feel like someone was calling my name, but then I was here. With you.”

“Jesus fucking Christ”, I mutter under my breath. He really *is* Silas Nightbringer but… how? Why? “You’re really here, aren’t you?”

“Uh… yes? Should I not be?”

“No! You shouldn’t be!” I practically shout.

“And, why not?”

“Because you are a book character.” I point to the book, laying abandoned on my floor after being used as a weapon. “You came from that book.” He gapes at the book, then looks back at me. This man- no, this *character*- who is normally so strong and competent, looks utterly lost and helpless. Sympathy twists my heart.

“Here,” I gesture to the armchair. “Sit down.” He makes my teal, tufted armchair look like furniture you’d find in a child’s playroom. “Are you hungry? I could make you something to eat?” This pulls his attention back from whatever far off place he was lost in.

“I’d like that…?” He trails off, and I realize he is waiting for my name.

“Uh, Elinor. I’m Elinor.”

“Elinor.” He repeats. “Thank you. Food would be nice.” He gives me a self-conscious grin that suddenly has my knees weak. “Do you think I could… read it? The book?”

“No!” I lunge for the book on the floor before he can pick it up. I’m not sure *how* he is here, but I’m almost positive there are rules about a character reading their own death scene. “I mean… It's a trilogy. You can’t start with this one.” I toss *The Rift in the Stars* onto my bed and grab book one from its place on my nightstand. “You have to start here. Well actually you can probably skip most of this and start…here.” I flip through the book until I reach Chapter 35, the first time his character is introduced. He takes the book from me cautiously, as if it might bite him, and I leave him to it.

Opening the fridge, I realize that I have nothing besides a single cheese stick and an open can of La Croix. “Ummm… how do you feel about pizza?” I call over my shoulder.

“I have no idea what that is, but it sounds delicious.”

Thirty minutes later I come back through my apartment door with two steaming boxes of pizza. I set them on the table then remove my coat. Silas’s legs are stretched out before him and he has one arm curled behind him, supporting his head, bicep bulging. As he reads, his lips just barely mouth the words. It is a detail I am certain not

even the author knows about him and I feel myself fall even deeper in love with this fictional man. But is he really fictional if he's sitting right in front of me?

I clear my throat and he looks up at me. "Dinner's here."

He sets the book down, then joins me in the kitchen. We sit across from each other, a pizza box open in front of us. The sound of pleasure he makes after taking his first bite has my toes curling and cheeks flushing.

"While you were gone, I thought about going back home and tried to make a rift to travel through but… nothing. Why aren't my powers working, Elinor?"

"You're in the real world now, there is no magic here."

"Then how did I get here!? Am I a prisoner here or a guest?" His voice rises.

I take his hand, desperate to offer him some comfort. "A guest. I promise I'll help make your stay as brief as possible. And if you want to go back-" my heart squeezes at the thought of having to let him go "-I'll do anything I can to help you."

He nods, "I appreciate that. I'm not used to being so… powerless." He chuckles a self-depricating kind of chuckle.

"So… how far did you get in the book?"

"Orion and I rescued Andonia from Hillsmere."

"Is it weird reading it? Like, do you remember it?"

He takes another bite of pizza and chews thoughtfully. "It's strange. I remember saving Andonia but anything that the book says about me when I'm, for lack of a better word, offpage- I can't recall. Like the abuse I apparently suffered, or the lovers I so frequently have. I have no memory of that."

"Intersting."

He eats four more slices of pizza, asking me questions about myself and about the "real world". I show him how the TV works to which he replies, "And you said there was no magic here." Eventually it is time to discuss sleeping arrangements.

"I suppose if we move the chair, I could sleep on the floor." He says, glancing around the apartment with a look of dismay, every bit the gentleman I imagined him as.

"Don't be ridiculous. We can share the bed. I am definitely not an innocent maiden and you've shared your bed with plenty of women. It doesn't have to be a whole thing."

He nods his head a few times, looking like he is trying to make up his mind about something. He sits down tentatively on the free side of my bed. “Could we… make it a whole thing?”

“What do you mean?” I laugh nervously.

“I mean… like Chapter 41. Ryder and Louinia stay at that inn and there’s only one bed and…” He trails off, looking at his hands.

“You read Chapter 41?” I crawl over the bed to his side, intrigued. “And?” His ear tips turn slightly pink.

“Well… there are some things about my friends’ sex lives I never wanted to know,” He glances at me but quickly averts his eyes. “However, it did make me think about… it… and I realized that…I’d like to try it for myself…”

“And you want to, with… me?” Is this really happening?

“Only if you want to, of course.” His eyes flick up to meet mine, and then he reaches over to tuck a stray curl behind my ear. “I do think you are quite beautiful.” His voice is exactly as I pictured it, deep and soft like shadows. “May I kiss you?” I only nod in response, not trusting myself to respond vocally. He closes the distance between us and I could die right now. This is my literal fantasy come true. His kiss starts out soft and gentle, but gradually turns more ravenous. My cardigan comes off as he pulls me onto his lap. When I drag his shirt off, it is not his muscles that cause my sharp intake of breath, but rather the long, jagged scar that lies directly in the center of his chest- his deathwound.

“What? What is it?” He asks, concerned.

“You’re just… so much more handsome than I ever imagined.” It’s not technically a lie but it’s definitely a diversion.

He quirks an eyebrow at me. “So you’ve imagined this before?” I shrug coyly. “Well. Let’s see if I can live up to your imagination then.” In one easy motion he has me on my back and my reindeer pajamas are history. For a man who has never *really* been with a woman before he certainly learns quickly, demonstrating a few tricks I know for a fact came straight out of Chapter 41.

We spend the next few days alternating between reading and reenacting some of the more… spicy… chapters. We go shopping and find him a more modern wardrobe, complete with a winter coat. He insists on keeping his gloves, which he uses to keep his tattoo hidden.

On New Year's Eve I take him to a party my friend is hosting. When people ask who he is I say, "A guest." We both drink a little too much and laugh together at nothing the whole walk home. Right before the stairs to my apartment, he stops.

"I just had a fantastic idea." He places his gloved hands on either side of my face and kisses my forehead. "Why don't you come with me? Back into the story. My friends would love you. We could go back together."

All at once I feel sober. "*We* can't go back. And besides, even if we did go back we wouldn't have long together anyway."

"What? Why? We will win the war and then-"

"- you die." He looks like I just hit him over the head with a book again. Shit. "Your character doesn't get to see the end of the war because… Quagar kills you…"

"Oh…" Is all he says. We walk up the stairs in sober silence. When we enter the apartment he asks, "What do I do?"

I find my copy of *The Rift in the Stars* and hand it to him. "Read for yourself. Afterwards is up to you."

When I wake, the bed is still empty. I expect to see him asleep in the armchair, only the chair is empty too.

"Silas?" I call out. But it is useless. I can see every square inch of this place and he is not in it. Something buttery soft finds my fingers under my pillow and I realize it is one of his gloves, left behind. I am once again emotionally devastated by Silas Nightbringer.

Then, my apartment door opens. Frantically, I wipe my snotty face and sit up, not daring to hope. But there he is, standing in the kitchen, removing his coat.

"Silas?" He looks at me and immediately rushes to my side.

"Elinor? What's wrong?"

I wrap my arms around him. "I thought… you'd left."

“I just needed some air.” He strokes my hair a few times then pulls away. “I finished the book last night.” I hold my breath, too afraid to say anything. “And… you’re my mate.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. “Those don’t exist here.”

“Well maybe not in the same way, but a Riftmaker- in times of great need- can make a rift to their mate, no matter where they are, even if they haven’t met yet.”

“But that’s… impossible…” He gently cradles my face.

“Maybe, maybe not. I remember now, the moment right before Quagar killed me, I thought ‘this is it, this is my only chance at survival’ and I made one last rift. To you. It is why I looked at Ryder and apologized, because I knew I was leaving him and there would be no going back.”

“So… you’re staying then?” I ask, hopeful. He nods. “But your friends, won’t you miss them?”

“I can always visit them by rereading the books.”

This is real life then, he is really going to stay. I embrace him again, this time happy tears dampen his shirt. “I guess you’ve been upgraded from guest to resident.”

He tilts my chin up toward him, kissing me deeply, and I know from this moment on we will spend the rest of our lives living in perfect reality.